

Jarai Formulaic Sayings: Where Three Lines Make Two Couplets

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Binarity has been key to the analysis of poetic constituents in folk verse (Burling 1966, Hayes & MacEachern 1998), as well as to the analysis of linguistic structure more generally. This paper sheds new light on the nature of binarity in folk verse, looking at formulaic sayings in Jarai, a Malayo-Polynesian language (Chamic sub-branch) spoken in Vietnam and Cambodia. In previous analyses of folk verse in other languages, each couplet comprises a unique pair of poetic lines, and each line is dominated by only one couplet (figure 2a below). In this paper, I argue that a single poetic line can be dominated by two couplets (2b). This argument is grounded in the rhyme structure of Jarai formulaic sayings, where each line has a backward- and a forward-linking rhyme (see pairs of rhyming words in 1). My analysis of Jarai couplet structure adds to our understanding of how binarity can be instantiated in metrical forms, in addition to making a typological contribution by adding a novel study of a Non-Western meter.

The Jarai formulaic saying is a poem consisting of two or more 2- to 4-beat lines, typically delivered in an oral narrative. The total line-count can be even or odd. Adjacent lines are linked by *hook-rhymes*: the final word in one line rhymes with a non-final word in the next, as shown in 1 (line-breaks indicated by ‘ / ’; rhyming pairs co-indexed with subscript letters).

(1) Jarai formulaic saying (Plei Ku, Vietnam, dialect) collected by author

tʃuʔ p^ha ra_i / ʔia_i p^ha nao_j / plao_j p^ha doʔ_k / ʔnoʔ_k p^ha
 mountain different / water different go / islet different stay / residence different

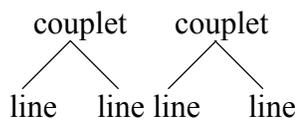
ŋui_i / pui_i p^ha daŋ_m / saŋ_m p^ha ʔdi_n / ʔnih_n p^ha ra klah
 visit / fire different make.warm / house different climb / place different divide

‘Different mountains / Walking along different waters / Living on different islets / Visiting different residences / Different fires warming us / Ascending into different homes / Curtaining off different quarters.’

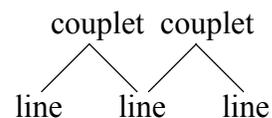
This study is based on a corpus of about 100 lines of formulaic sayings, 80 of which were collected by the author from speakers of Jarai, with the remainder coming from Dournes (1976).

In my analysis, each line in the Jarai formulaic saying (other than the first and last) belongs to two overlapping couplets (as in 2b). A text like 1 is clearly not amenable to a traditional couplet analysis (as in 2a) for two reasons: first, any pairing of lines into couplets would be arbitrary, ignoring the hook-rhymes at the beginning and end of each couplet; and second, in poems having an odd number of lines, one line would be unparsed by couplets, again arbitrarily. Although the Jarai formulaic saying might be analyzed as an unstructured string of lines, the poem’s minimal size of two lines suggests the existence of a hierarchical constituent with a binarity requirement (a couplet). Additionally, if all lines are immediately dominated by the poem, the pervasive hook-rhymes would serve no structural purpose.

(2) a.



b.



Like other generative work that analyzes apparently non-binary structures as fundamentally binary (e.g., Hayes 1995), my analysis of Jarai employs a binary couplet requirement to derive a poem having an odd number of lines. This analysis also provides a

theoretical account of the hook-rhyme, a phenomenon found elsewhere in Southeast Asian verse (Cooper 1973, Gregerson 1991).

The Jarai facts – the odd-numbered lines and interwoven hook-rhymes – present a challenge to traditional binary analyses of folk verse. This approach resolves that challenge, while also adding data from an understudied Chamic language to the typological literature in generative meter.

References

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