On prosody and semantics in readout-poetry

Burkhard Meyer-Sickendiek
Freie Universität Berlin
bumesi@edat.fu-berlin.de

Hussein Hussein
Freie Universität Berlin
hussein@edat.fu-berlin.de

What new insights can be gained about the relationship between prosody and semantics, if one listens to audio-recordings of poets reading their poems? How do metrical, rhythmical or rhetorical patterns change when we not just read but also hear them? How does an enjambment, an alliteration, or a cadence change its meaning, when it is emphasized by the poets in their reading? And how does a stressed enjambment differ from an unstressed one?

In our paper we will answer these questions by applying digital pattern recognition techniques to a corpus of modern and postmodern poems as read aloud by the original authors. We are a team of computer scientists and literary scholars from both the FU Berlin and Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Our partner is "lyrikline", the world's most important internet portal for international readout-poetry. Making use of the vastly improved prosody detection available in speech processing technology today, we will identify rhythmical features through methods including phrase break prediction, prosodic phrasing, spoken document analysis, and fluency/disfluency modeling.

So far, we have taken the following steps: first, the philological sub-project defined rhythmical patterns based on a comparison of the textual line arrangement with the prosodic phrasing of the poet's voice. These patterns where mainly taken from an US-american theory on rhythmical patterns, the so-called free verse prosody. In a second step, the digital sub-project now developes an automatic pattern recognition tool, based on machine learning techniques, that is capable of analyzing further material. Having classified the corpus mentioned above, we will compare in our paper each of these patterns by its two versions: The stressed one and the unstressed one. This will enable us to answer the questions raised above: What difference does it make, when the poet emphasizes rhetorical or metrical patterns during his/her performance?