
The caesura in Baudelaire's and Verlaine's 12-syllable poetry*

1 Orthography → pronunciation

The literature was downloaded from the Project Gutenberg site.

How do you read French poetry of the 19th century, given the modern transcriptions in *Lexique* (New et al. 2001)?

1.1 Schwa management

- Lexically, potential schwas need to be reconstituted from the spelling:
Spelling ⟨jette⟩ + Lexique [ʒɛt] → [ʒɛtə]
- Post-lexically, delete pre-vocalic schwas:
Spelling [povə amə] → [pov.ə.mə]
- Some lexical items block post-lexical deletion (*h aspiré*)
⟨notre héros⟩ + [nɔtvə ɛvɔ] → [nɔ.tvə.e.vɔ] (no deletion)
⟨La reine, hélas!⟩ + [la vɛnə elas] → [la.vɛ.ne.las] (deletion)
- The word ⟨encore⟩ can be read as ⟨encor⟩ when the poet feels like it
⟨J'arrive tout couvert encore de rosée⟩ — encore reading
[ʒa vi və tu ku vɛʁ tã kɔ vɔ də vɔ ze ə]
⟨Toute sonore encore de vos derniers baisers⟩ — encor reading
[tu tã so nɔ vã kɔʁ də vo dɛʁ nʒe be ze]

*Thanks to Kevin Ryan for excellent comments and suggestions. I reluctantly accept responsibility for any remaining errors.

1.2 Glide management (diaeresis, diérèse)

High vowel + vowel — variably treated as one syllable or two.

Partially poetry-internal, partially a reflection of the spoken language.

- Certain combinations (<ui>, <oi>) are protected: <bruit> → [bʁɥi], *[bʁy.i]

- Complex onsets block glide formation:

<ouvrier> [u.vʁi.e], *[u.vrje]

- Mostly glides in the initial syllable, mostly vowels otherwise:

Glide: dieu, cieux, lieues, lieux, vieux, mieux, **but**: milieu, adieux, Monsieur

Vowel: glorieux, religieux, insoucieux, furieux, **but**: pieux

- Glides in nouns, vowels in verbs: (even in the same environment)

Verbs: <humilier> [y.mi.li.e], <envier> [ã.vi.e]

Nouns: <familier> [fa.mi.lje], <clavier> [kla.vje]

1.3 Liaison management

Doesn't matter for syllable count, may matter when it's time to look at rhymes

- Lexically, liaison consonants need to be reconstituted from the spelling

<rêves> + Lexique [ʁɛv] → [ʁɛvə(z)]

<rêvent> + Lexique [ʁɛv] → [ʁɛvə(t)]

- Post-lexically, liaison consonants are only kept pre-vocalically

<tu rêves en silence> [ty.ʁɛ.və.zã.si.lã.sə]

<rêvent en marbre> [ʁɛ.və.tã.mar.bʁə]

2 Implementation: stanza-level optimization

Lexically:

- Take spelling, transform to approximate pronunciation

⟨rêve⟩ → “ $\varepsilon v e$ ”

⟨insoucieux⟩ → “ $\tilde{\varepsilon} s u s i \emptyset x$ ”

- Align improved spelling with Lexique transcription

improved spelling: $\varepsilon \quad \varepsilon \quad v \quad e \quad \rightarrow \varepsilon \varepsilon v (\emptyset)$
Lexique: $\varepsilon \quad \varepsilon \quad v$

improved spelling: $\tilde{\varepsilon} \quad s \quad u \quad s \quad i \quad \emptyset \quad x \quad \rightarrow \tilde{\varepsilon} s u s \{i,j\} \emptyset (z)$
Lexique: $\tilde{\varepsilon} \quad s \quad u \quad s \quad j \quad \emptyset$

- Mark lexical exceptions manually (h aspiré, encore)

Post-lexically:

- Look up each word in the dictionary, concatenate improved spellings:

⟨Dans un rêve sans fin, flottent insoucieux⟩

$d\tilde{a}z \tilde{\varepsilon} \varepsilon v (\emptyset) s\tilde{a} (z) f\tilde{\varepsilon} f l \emptyset t (\emptyset) (t) \tilde{\varepsilon} s u s \{i,j\} \emptyset (z)$

- Adjust schwas and liaison consonants:

$d\tilde{a}z \tilde{\varepsilon} \varepsilon v \emptyset s\tilde{a} f\tilde{\varepsilon} f l \emptyset t \emptyset t \tilde{\varepsilon} s u s \{i,j\} \emptyset$

- Generate candidates when needed, count vowels:

$d\tilde{a}z \tilde{\varepsilon} \varepsilon v \emptyset s\tilde{a} f\tilde{\varepsilon} f l \emptyset t \emptyset t \tilde{\varepsilon} s u s j \emptyset$ (11 vowels ☹)

$d\tilde{a}z \tilde{\varepsilon} \varepsilon v \emptyset s\tilde{a} f\tilde{\varepsilon} f l \emptyset t \emptyset t \tilde{\varepsilon} s u s i \emptyset$ (12 vowels ☺)

At the stanza level:

- If all the lines in a stanza have 12-syllable candidates, the stanza is declared to be made of alexandrines.

This is what I think humans do.

- If a line has more than one 12-syllable reading, select at random.

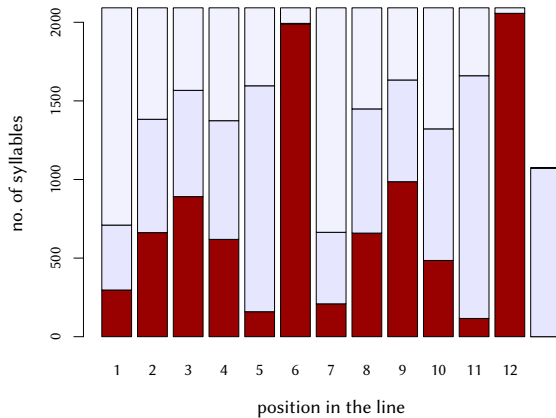
I am sure humans do not do this; area for future work.

All scripts, etc.: <http://becker.phonologist.org/projects/frenchpoetry/>

3 Baudelaire, ~1845–

The 6th position is obligatorily strong; never cuts a word in half.

The 3rd and 9th positions are preferably strong: (σ σ σ́) (σ σ σ́) | (σ σ σ́) (σ σ σ́)



Sample stanza shows the preferences for ternary rhythm:

⟨La sottise, l'erreur, le péché, la lésine,⟩
 ⟨Occupent nos esprits et travaillent nos corps,⟩
 ⟨Et nous alimentons nos aimables remords,⟩
 ⟨Comme les mendiants nourrissent leur vermine.⟩

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
la	so	ti	zə	lɛ	ʁœʁ	lə	pe	ʃe	la	le	zi nə
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
o	ky	pə	no	zɛ	spɛi	ze	tʁa	va	jə	no	kœʁ
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
e	nu	za	li	mã	tõ	no	zɛ	ma	blə	ʁə	mœʁ
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
kɔ	mə	le	mã	di	ã	nu	ʁi	sə	lœʁ	vœʁ	mi nə

Listen to excellent readings of this stanza, and thousands of others:

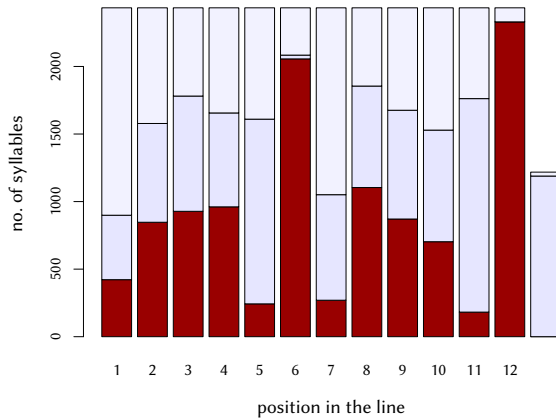
<http://auguste-vertu.overblog.com/charles-baudelaire-1821-1867-p-1>

<http://www.auguste-vertu.com/>

4 Verlaine, ~1863–

The 6th position is still strong, but no longer obligatorily strong.

The 4th and 8th positions are stronger than 3rd and 9th: $\sigma \sigma \sigma \acute{\sigma} \mid \sigma \sigma \sigma \acute{\sigma} \mid \sigma \sigma \sigma \acute{\sigma}$



Rimbaud characterizes Verlaine as “occasionally [taking] great licenses” (*parfois de fortes licences*), giving this lack of 6th syllable caesura as an example:

⟨Et la tigresse épouvantable d’Hyrcanie⟩

1 2 3 **4** 5 ⊕ 7 **8** 9 10 11 **12**
 e la ti gʁɛ se pu vā ta blə diʁ ka ni ə

The sonnet “le poète et la muse” starts with caesuras at the 6th position:

⟨La chambre, as-tu gardé leurs spectres ridicules,⟩

⟨O pleine de jour sale et de bruits d’araignées?⟩

1 2 3 4 5 **6** 7 8 9 10 11 **12**
 la fã bʁa ty gaʁ de lœʁ spɛk tʁə vi di ky lə
 1 2 3 4 5 **6** 7 8 9 10 11 **12**
 o plɛ nə də zuʁ sa l e də bʁɥi da ʁɛ ʁe ə

But culminates with this tercet:

⟨Seule, ô chambre qui fuis en cônes affligeants,⟩

⟨Seule, tu sais! mais sans doute combien de nuits⟩

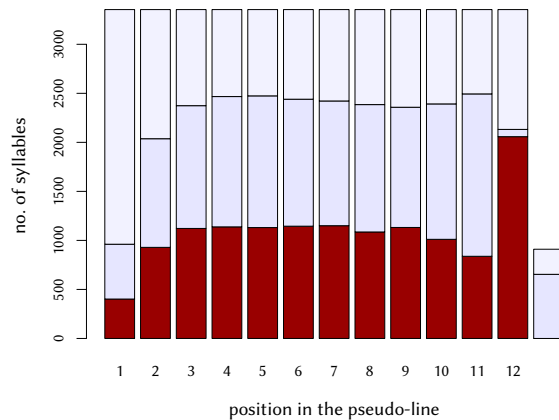
⟨De noce auront dévirginé leurs nuits depuis!⟩

1 2 3 4 5 **6** 7 **8** 9 10 11 **12**
 sœ lo fã bʁə ki fɥiz ã ko nə za fli zã
 1 2 3 **4** 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 **12**
 sœ lə ty sɛ mɛ sã du tə kō bjɛ̃ də nɥi
 1 2 3 4 5 ⊕ 7 **8** 9 10 11 **12**
 də nɔ so kō de viʁ zi ne lœʁ nɥi də ʁɥi

5 Prose: Zola's *Germinal*, 1885

How much control can poets have over the distribution of strong positions, given general principles of French morphology and syntax?

These are all the sentences from Zola's novel "Germinal" that have a left-aligned stretch that can be read as a 12-syllable line:



Positions 3–9 are all equally strong in prose = poetic caesuras are intentional.

The edges are weak:

- The weakness of the 11th syllable is actively enhanced.
11th/12th: 41% (Zola) vs. 6% (Baudelaire) and 8% (Verlaine)
11th/10th: 83% (Zola) vs. 24% (Baudelaire) and 26% (Verlaine)
- The weakness of the 1st syllable seems unintentional, resulting from the need for function words phrase-initially.
1st/2nd: 43% (Zola) vs. 45% (Baudelaire) and 50% (Verlaine)

References

New, Boris, Christophe Pallier, Ludovic Ferrand & Rafael Matos (2001). Une base de données lexicales du français contemporain sur internet: Lexique. *L'Année Psychologique* **101**. 447–462.