Chapter 10

From Proto-Indo-European to Italic Meter*

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1 Introduction

In his monumental 1995 work, Calvert Watkins articulated the formal system of poetry as a grammar with three components: metrics, formulaics, and stylistics. This poetic grammar was transmitted across generations in tandem with a language’s grammar proper. As one language becomes differentiated into dialects, and as these language varieties move further away from mutual intelligibility, so poetic grammar diversifies into systems that eventually diverge completely. This vision is very attractive and likely correct.

Watkins’ study of Indo-European poetics treated mainly formulaics and stylistics. On the side of diachronic metrics, he accepted Meillet’s (1923) reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European meter from Indic and Greek correspondents, to which R. Jakobson added Slavic in 1952 and Watkins himself Celtic in 1963. Subsequent scholars operate within this established framework, being preoccupied with describing the development of the daughter systems from Meillet’s PIE. M. West, who in 1973 proposed a likely inventory of meters that participated in a derivational system, stands out from these. In light of what a Generativist theory of synchronic and diachronic metrics can add to the conversation, the place of Italic within Indo-European metrics, apart from stylistics and formulaics, warrants a fresh look.

In this paper, after brief general discussions of synchronic and diachronic metrics, I recapitulate my 2012 proposals for the archaic Italic metrical system. I then examine possible scenarios whereby the syllabo-tonic Italic meters can have arisen from the reconstructed quantitative-syllabic system of Proto-Indo-European. The likeliest mechanism for the metrical changes in PIE

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that led to Italic and in Italic itself was reanalysis, targeting different elements and taking place in different domains.

1.1 Synchronic Metrics

We can refine our synchronic descriptions of metrical forms proceeding from P. Kiparsky’s componential view of the phonology-metrics interface (1977; recast in simpler terms by Kiparsky in the present collection of papers). Kiparsky graphically represents this interface in Figure 1.

We have the generator of abstract rhythmic patterns on the upper left of the figure and phonology on the right. These produce respective outputs that are processed as intermediate inputs by metrical rules on one side and paraphonology on the other, meeting in the middle at the comparator, a component that oversees the alignment of linguistic content to rhythmic templates. The phonological component on the other side (along, of course, with the lexicon, syntax, and morphology) produces a linguistic utterance, which passes through the paraphonological component that contains familiar processes like elision, hiatus, synizesis, and so on, and which enumerates the pronunciations of the utterance possible under these rules. Where meter and phonology meet, the comparator comes up with the optimal alignment of one to the other.

Such a complex view furnishes some benefits for our own analyses. Synchronically, beneath the surface forms of verse that we can encounter, as in the case of problematic Italic fragments, we can more successfully find regularities and sub-regularities if we understand that these are the outputs