

What *is* prosody, anyway?

Bob Ladd, University of Edinburgh

Widespread use of the term *prosody* in linguistics dates only from the 1970s. Up until then, the term's primary meaning concerned rules of poetic metre and other aspects of text-setting and poetic well-formedness. The shift from the poetic sense to the term's current meaning began in the late 1960s and was more or less complete by about 1985. Yet the shift was not based on any explicit terminological proposal or clear theoretical innovation – everyone just sort of thinks they know what prosody is.

To cover what is now generally referred to as *prosody*, the usual term before 1970 was (and still is, for the IPA) *suprasegmentals*. This suggests the implicit definition 'any phonological phenomena that are difficult to accommodate in the segmental idealization of phonetics' – that is, *prosody* is defined by phonetic transcription and, ultimately, alphabetic writing. In a curious historical parallel, the word *prosody* was coined in the 6th century BC to designate specifically the Classical Greek word accents, but within a few centuries it had extended its meaning to refer to anything (like vowel length, initial aspiration, and cues to phrasing) not indicated by an actual letter in the Greek writing system.

I will review several attempts at explicit definition, starting with Trubetzkoy's 'rhythmic-melodic' features. All of them struggle to treat 'rhythmic' (= metrical?) and 'melodic' (= autosegmental?) phenomena together under a single conceptual heading. Somewhat reluctantly, I conclude that *prosody* doesn't yet really have a clear definition, except as a by-product of the segmental idealization.