

Dactylic hexameter isn't dactylic
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Latin is well-known for dactylic hexameter, a meter with six feet of the form HLL or HH:

(H LL) (H L L) (H H) (H H) (H L L) (H H)

Arma virumque cano:, Troiae quī: p̄rimus ab oris

arms man-and I.sing Troy's who first from mouth Vergil, *Æneid* 1.1

Based on a full count of the 59,202 feet in Vergil's *Æneid*, I show that the meter is more spondaic (HH) than dactylic (HLL). It is generally assumed that HH is somehow derived from a basic HLL. This traditional assumption leads to empirical problems.

First, there are significantly more spondees (55%) than dactyls (45%) in the *Æneid*. This is clear evidence for the meter being spondaic. Second, despite much variation within lines, the sixth verse foot is invariably HH; the fifth is usually HLL, but only the sixth foot is invariant and it is spondaic, not dactylic. A common claim in metrics is that meters are looser early on in the line and stricter later on: e.g., "left edge rules specify metrical freedom and right edge rules metrical strictness" (Hayes 1989:255). If this is true, the fact that the rightmost foot is always HH suggests this is spondaic hexameter. A dactylic analysis has to explain why HLL usually shows up near the end but the derived foot always shows up at the very end. Third, if the meter were really dactylic HLL, the ratio of L/H should be close to 2/1. But my examination of the ratio of H/L in the *Æneid* reveals a 63/37 ration in favor of H (Fig. 1). To check if the skewing in the meter towards HH could be due to a surplus of heavies in Latin words, I randomly sampled 1000 words and found that the language has no surplus of heavies (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1

Fig. 2

If Vergil's goal had been to make the ratio of H/L equal in *Æneid*, to facilitate use of the whole vocabulary (= FIT, Hanson & Kipsarksy 1996), he would have needed twice as many dactyls as spondees: $\#(H)/\#(L) = (2x + y) / 2y = 1 = 2x = y$. Thus, a skewing by the 50/50 ratio of H to L in Latin would yield twice as many dactyls as spondees in *Æneid*. But we find significantly less dactyls than spondees (40/60), showing that the meter cannot be based on HLL.

If Vergil's hexameter is basically spondaic, it is basically arrhythmic, perhaps even clashinducing. This questions the claim that meter is inherently rhythmic (Halle & Keyser 1968, et alii multi) and supports the contentious claim that rhythm is not fundamental to poetic meter (Fabb & Halle 2008; Golston & Riad 2000, 2004).

Fabb & Halle 2008. *Meter in Poetry*. Cambridge. Golston & Riad 2000. *The phonology of Classical Greek meter*. *Linguistics* 38.1, 1-69. Golston & Riad 2005. *The phonology of Greek lyric meter*. *Journal of Linguistics* 41, 77-115. Halle & Keyser 1971. *English stress: its form, its*

growth, and its role in verse. New York. Hanson & Kiparsky 1996. A parametric theory of poetic meter. *Language* 72.2, 287-335. Hayes 1989. The prosodic hierarchy in meter. In Kiparsky & Youmans (ed.), 201-60.