Verse semantics of some metres in Uku Masing's poetry

Aile Tooming

Tallinn University
e-mail: aile.tooming@tlu.ee

Abstract. The article introduces the results of a semantic analysis of Uku Masing's (1909–1985) early poetry (1926–1943). The metres analyzed are syllabic-accentual trochaic tetrameter, trochaic pentameter, iambic pentameter and dactylic, logaoedic and polymetric hexameters. In each text the textual communicative perspective as well as motifs and tropes of each verse line were examined. The semantic differences and colourings of the metres are most evident in the way of expression, in the viewpoint.

Introduction

Uku Masing (1909–1985), a famed theologian, translator and philologist, was also one of Estonia's greatest religious poets. Masing's poetry is elaborate and contemplative, displaying his great erudition and religious sensibility. The common denominator in the metres used in Masing's poetry is his preference for long lines (although, seen against the background of his other poetry, his short-verse poetry has its own semantics as well) as well as the fact that over half of his poems employ more free-form or untraditional verse forms – free verse, various polymetric variants, and different logaoedic patterns. There are, however, also syllabic-accentual trochaic, iambic, dactylic, amphibrachic and anapaestic metres as well as individual cases of accentual-syllabic metres (the classification of verse systems is based on Mihhail Lotman's article; cf. Lotman 1998). Although Masing began writing poetry already earlier, the peak in his career as a poet occurred in the 1930s – starting, more specifically, in 1935 with his début collection, *Neemed Vihmade lahte* [*Promontories Into the Gulf of Rains*].

The following will introduce the results of the analysis of some metres of Masing's early poetry (1926–1943). The following metres are taken up for

comparison: syllabic-accentual trochaic tetrameter (T4; 193 verses, 15 texts), syllabic-accentual trochaic pentameter (T5; 625 verses, 33 texts), syllabic-accentual iambic pentameter (I5; 1356 verses, 68 texts of which 26 are sonnets), and syllabic-accentual dactylic, logaoedic and polymetric hexameters (Hex; 408 verses, 9 texts)[1]. The analysis covers a total of 125 texts and 2580 verse lines. The texts examined originate from the following poetry collections and cycles: *Roheliste radade raamat* [*A Book of Green Paths*] (Masing 2000: 5–87), *Neemed Vihmade lahte* [*Promontories Into the Gulf of Rains*] (Masing 2001: 5–85), *Aerutades hurtsikumeistriga* [*Rowing with the Shedmaker*] (Masing 2000: 215–293), *Ehatuule maa* [*Land of the Evening Breeze*] (Masing 2001: 137–212), *Roosikrantsi palved* [*Rosary Prayers*] (Masing 2001: 119–136), *Udu Toonela jõelt* [*Fog from the River Styx*] (Masing 2000: 89–213), *Gudea ja Hoosea* [*Gudea and Hosea*] (Masing 2004: 67–106), *Lohe vari* [*Shadow of the Dragon*] (Masing 2003: 5–105), *Džunglilinnud* [*Jungle Birds*] (Masing 2001: 213–340) and some individual poems published in the journal *Akadeemia* (Masing 1991). The analysis extends to the year 1943 that marks a change in Masing's published poetry. During the first years of the 1940s, Masing finished his collections *Lohe vari* and *Udu Toonela jõelt* which contain mostly poems written in, and displaying the tonality of, the 1930s – this is one reason to choose 1943 as an end point. The other reason, based on the results of analyses of Masing's poetry written in the 1940s, is that during the first half of the 1940s his poetry gradually started to change. That said, the choice of metres and the general mentality during the first years of this decade were more similar to his poetry of the 1930s than to the poems deriving from the second half of the 1940s (cf. Tooming 2011).

Relying on Marina Tarlinskaja's definitions (cf. Tarlinskaja 1993: 130) the analysis distinguishes between a text's vertical (paradigmatic) structure – in this case the textual communicative perspective; and the horizontal (syntagmatic) structure – i.e. the motifs and tropes that are incrementally expressed line by line. The interpretation of the results of the analysis rests mainly on the historical understanding of verse semantics according to which the connection

---

[1]   Dactylic, logaoedic and polymetric hexameters have been analyzed as one group because of the rhythmic and semantic similarities and to obtain a larger corpus of verse lines for analysis. The scheme of the metre of logaoedic hexameter is: X x x X x x X x X x x X x x X x, where X – ictus and x – nonictus. In polymetric hexameters the main corpus of text is in dactylic hexameter, but there are a couple of verse lines that are not in hexameter, denoting some special meaning.

of a metre and its semantic colouring has developed historically and is conventional (cf. Gasparov 1996, 2000; Tarlinskaja 1993).

Motifs

There are several different possibilities of dividing large numbers of motifs into groups. As Masing was a religious poet, it is natural to look first of all at the motifs related to God, religion, and the divine. The second group incorporates motifs of death, transience and mortality. A third group in the context of Masing's poetry encompasses all earthly (in contrast to the first group) positive human emotions and relations: love, friendship, joy, tranquillity, etc. Contrary to the previous one, the fourth group of motifs reflects negative emotions and relations (excluding those connected to death and transience which formed the second group): disease, dirtiness, hatred, violence, cowardice, tiredness, etc.

Motifs of God, religion, and the divine

Table 1. Motifs of God and the divine in T4, I5, T5 and Hex (percentage of the verses of the respective metre).

	T4	I5	T5	Hex
God, divine	32.2	30.3	32.9	35.1

In the chosen metres motifs of God and the divine have a rather similar distribution as measured by percentage. In hexameters these motifs occur slightly more often than in the other metres. This is connected to the larger philosophical and religious viewpoints expressed by these metres.

Motifs of death and transience

Table 2. Motifs of death and transience in T4, I5, T5 and Hex (percentage of the verses of the respective metre).

	T4	I5	T5	Hex
Death, transience	28.9	21.2	15.4	32.9

Motifs of death and transience can mostly be found in hexameters and in T4. The colouring and tone of these motifs is quite different and proceeds from a different relation to death – in T4 the mentality is that of resignation, in hexameters an active relation to what will be within the afterlife. T5 has a smaller percentage of death motifs (15.4%), which is to be expected due to the fact that about one third of T5 is love poetry. I5 expresses more active, social attitudes and is less connected to the contemplation of transience.

Motifs of positive emotions, relations

Table 3. Motifs of positive emotions, relations in T4, I5, T5 and Hex (percentage of the verses of the respective metre).

	T4	I5	T5	Hex
Positive emotions, relations	47.7	44.5	51.8	37.1

As can be expected, the highest percentage (51.8%) of the motifs of positive emotions and human relations is in T5. There, the greatest part of texts is love poetry intertwined with religious connotations. In T4 there are also many motifs of positive emotions; however, here they are connected with pleasant reminiscences within otherwise quite pessimistic texts. Poems in T4 often consist of two parts: a sad view at the bright (ecstatic) moments of life that have passed, and the tiredness and hopelessness of the present connected with contemplation of transience.

Motifs of negative emotions, relations

Table 4. Motifs of negative emotions, relations in T4, I5, T5 and Hex (percentage of the verses of the respective metre).

	T4	I5	T5	Hex
Negative emotions, relations	46.2	55.0	49.8	51.0

The highest percent of the motifs of negative emotions and human relations can be seen in I5 (55.0%) and hexameters (51.0%) where the texts are most critical in their attitude toward life and society. The lowest percentage in T4

(46.2%) shows a pessimistic viewpoint. Here, a passive attitude towards the world does not require as many motifs of negative emotions when compared with the other metres with more critical and active attitudes.

Tropes

Table 5. The main tropes (and irony) in T4, I5, T5 and Hex (percentage of the verses of the respective metre).[2]

	T4	I5	T5	Hex
Metaphor	62.9	57.2	65.2	69.3
Metonymy	20.0	16.9	18.4	22.5
Epithet	39.2	38.2	38.4	36.4
Simile	2.4	3.4	4.2	5.5
Irony	1.0	14.1	7.0	10.7

Masing's poetry is metaphor-centred.[3] Being a typical characteristic of his archaic style, many metaphors occur in each metre. The frequent use of metaphors is also associated with religiosity, recalling the mystical traditions written about by Janet Soskice (1987: 95–96) as attempts at "describing human experiences, which few have had and for which, consequently, there is no established set of literal terms". Masing was always interested in reaching the limits of human experience and would sometimes refer to himself as a mystic.

Some of Masing's metonyms are very expressive, especially as regards God or ecstatic experience. The percentage of verses containing metaphors is, however, higher than that of verses containing metonyms. The comparison of the essence of metaphor and metonymy – "A metaphor should if it is a good one, suggest just that cluster of ideas which a good metonymy ought not to. A good metaphor may not simply be an oblique reference to a predetermined subject but a new vision, the birth of a new understanding, a new referential access" (Soskice 1987: 57–58) – seems to be essential in Masing's religious poetry, too.

---

[2]   A maximum of two tropes (metaphor, metonymy, epithet, simile, and one figure – irony) were selected from each line of verse. Even though there may be more tropes in a given verse, the programme allows to pick two at the most; thus a selection had to be made based on the principle that always metaphor and metonymy were selected first of all.

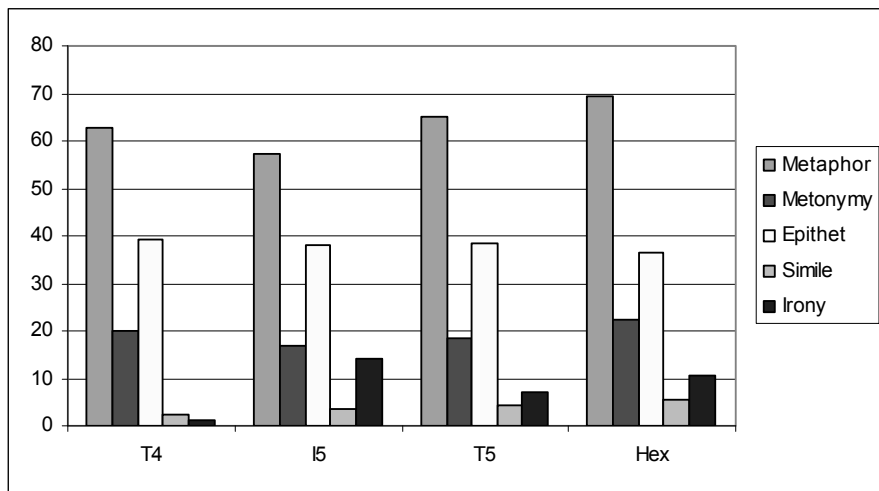[3]   Symbols have been taken into account within metaphors.

Figure 1. Main tropes (and irony) in T4, I5, T5 and Hex (percentage of the verses of the respective metre).

Metaphors and similes have the highest percent in hexameters due to Masing's powerful, monumental mode of expression and his archaic style. As could be expected, in T5 there are also more metaphors and similes than in T4 and I5, as his religious love poetry employs a more figurative and archaic style. Similes are associated with older poetry traditions that had a great influence on Masing, he had translated several archaic texts (verse parts of the Old Testament, Ash-Shanfara's qasida, etc.).

Unsurprisingly, irony is more used in the metres with the greatest critical attitude towards life and society – I5 and hexameters, while in T4 irony is almost absent – the passive, pessimistic attitude toward life without hope does not need irony. In T5, irony is not associated with love poetry, instead it is associated with a smaller group of socially critical poems published in the collection *Lohe vari.*

The communicative perspective of text

The analysis of the communicative perspective of text originates from Mihhail Lotman's discussion of the issue (1989). The characters in the text[4] (the "I" of the poem, the beloved, God, the surrounding people or society, etc.) are denoted as being in the first (1), second (2) or third (3) person respectively. The role of each person in the text is also determined, and there are the following possibilities: an active character (A); a passive character (P); and an object (O) – a character, to whom or with whom something is performed[5].

In addition, two levels of the communicative perspective have been delineated. The informative level shows the real persons in the fictional world of the text (Table 6[6]). On the more variegated communicative level (Table 7), persons may be expressed who need not be real characters of the fictional world of the text, but stand as symbols or metonymical expressions of one or another character.

Table 6. Informative level of the communicative perspective of text in T4, I5, T5 and Hex (percentage of the texts in the respective metre).

	T4	I5	T5	Hex
1A	8.4	70.7	94.1	66.7
1AP	86.1	0.0	0.0	16.7
2P	8.4	27.1	49.6	53.3
2=God	8.4	21.2	38.5	46.7
3A	0.0	7.1	5.6	56.7
3P	8.4	32.6	24.9	13.3
3APO	0.0	12.4	4.2	33.3
3=God	8.4	7.2	5.9	16.7

---

[4]   Unlike the motifs and tropes that were selected from each verse line the communicative perspective is determined in the whole text.

[5]   There is one more possibility – the observer, who does not participate in the activity, but in the selected metres this was not so frequent. In this analysis the first person of the poem who thinks, feels, complains, etc. has been regarded as an active or passive character, but not an observer who should be neutral.

[6]   The tables show not all, but only the most frequently employed roles of the persons of the communicative perspective occurring in Masing's early poetry.

Table 7. Communicative level of the communicative perspective of text in T4, I5, T5 and Hex (percentage of the texts in the respective metre).

	T4	I5	T5	Hex
1A	33.4	60.0	51.2	36.7
1AO	11.1	18.3	24.4	53.3
2AP	8.4	21.8	38.5	30.0
2=God	8.4	19.4	42.0	46.7
3P	25.0	36.0	3.5	16.7
3AP	38.9	24.5	29.7	6.7
3APO	0.0	46.0	39.7	70.0
3=God	19.5	28.8	5.9	33.3

In T4 on the informative level, the 1st person – active as well as passive – is the main person and the others represent a very low percentage (Figure 2). This means that the "I" is the person who is complaining, recalling something, reflecting a subjective philosophical viewpoint.
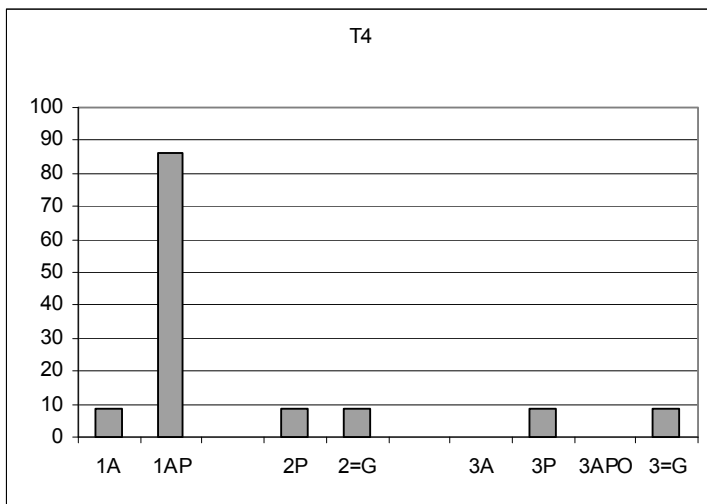
Figure 2. Informative level of the communicative perspective of text in T4 (percentage of the texts).

On the communicative level, the 3rd person has a more important role than the 1st person: that may be "path", "sense", "heart", etc. that are all expressed as the 3rd person, but meaning the life of "I" within the poem (Figure 3). God (G) is mostly the 3rd person. The 2nd person – "You", denoting a confidential relationship to someone – has much lower percentage (8.4%) in T4 than in the other metres.
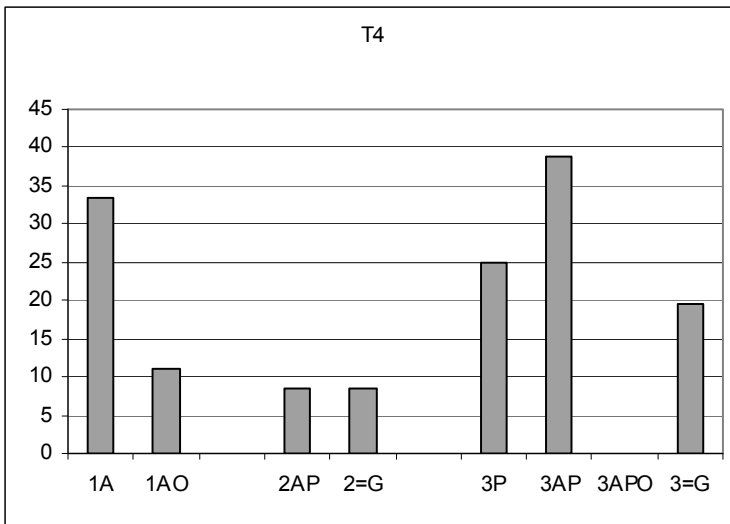
Figure 3. Communicative level of the communicative perspective of texts in T4 (percentage of the texts).

In I5 the active 1st person is dominant on both levels (Figures 4 and 5). The 3rd person – surrounding people, society – is also quite important, mostly in a passive role. The 2nd person has a lower percentage (27.1% on the informative level and 21.8% on the communicative level), although it is used much more than in T4.
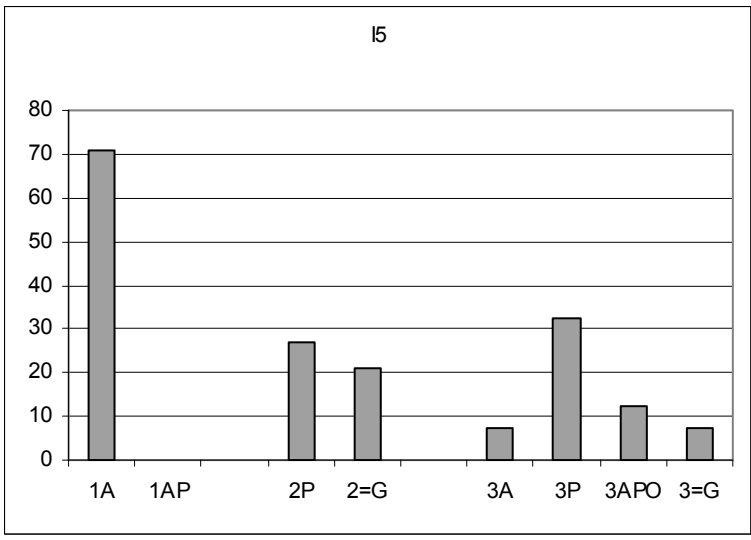
Figure 4. Informative level of the communicative perspective of text in I5 (percentage of the texts).
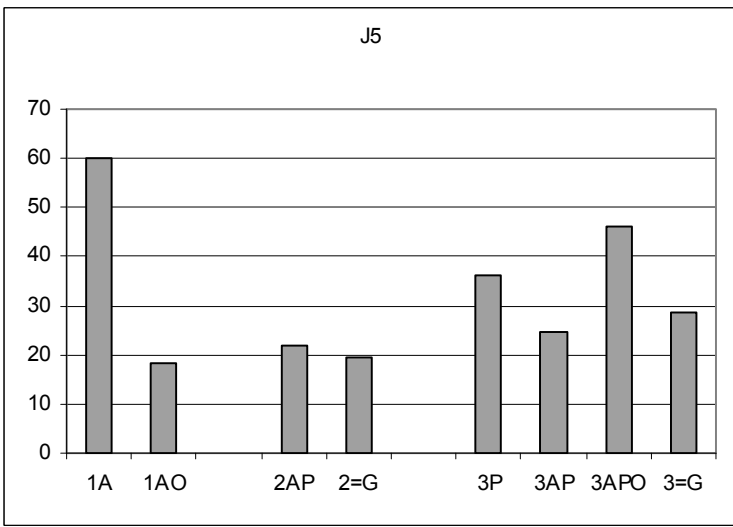

Figure 5. Communicative level of the communicative perspective of text in I5 (percentage of the texts).
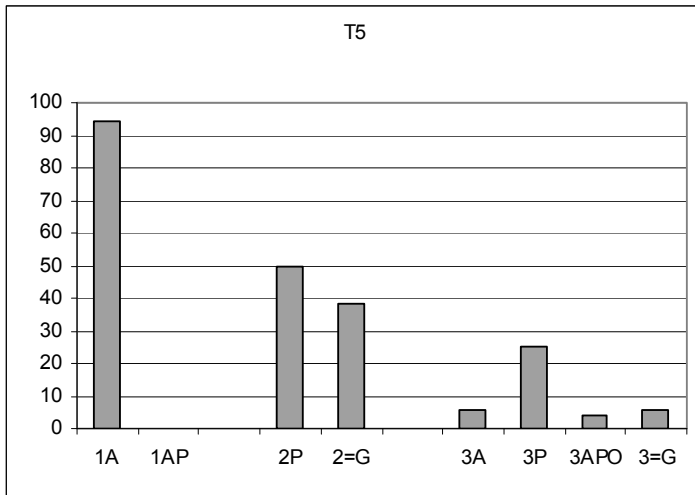
Figure 6. Informative level of the communicative perspective of text in T5 (percentage of the texts).
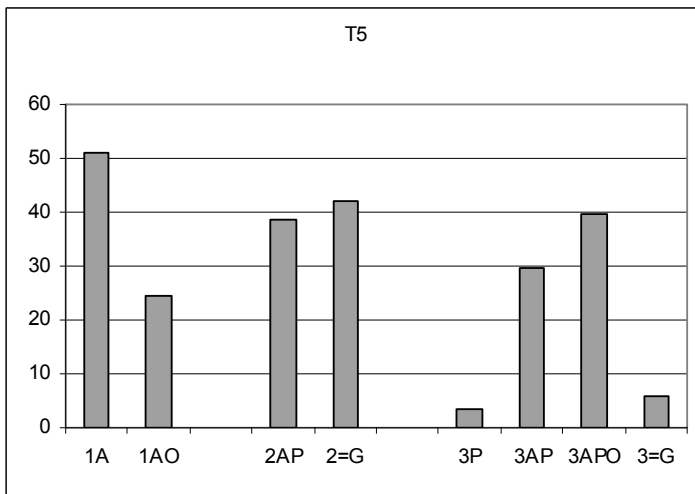

Figure 7. Communicative level of the communicative perspective of text in T5 (percentage of the texts).

In T5, the 2nd person is most characteristically very important, and, as can be expected, because a large part of the texts in T5 is religious love poetry (Figures

6 and 7). On the informative level, a confidential relationship between the "I" of the poem and "You", that can be God or the beloved, is predominant; meanwhile, the 3rd person who denotes the world, other people, society, is of less importance.
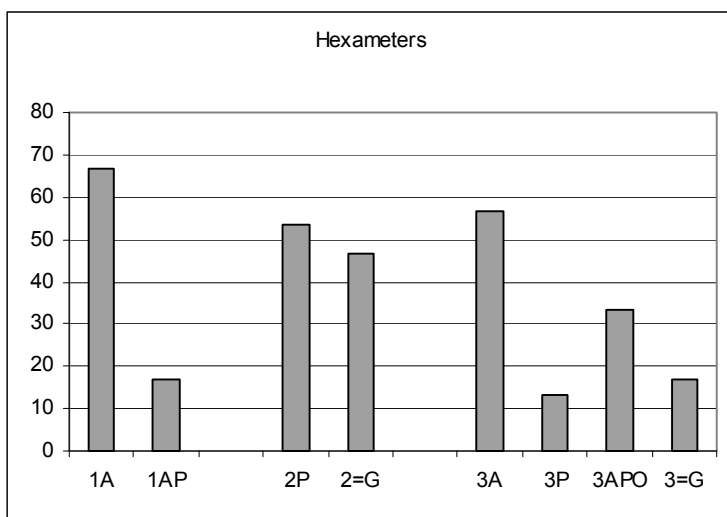

Figure 8. Informative level of the communicative perspective of texts in hexameters (percentage of the texts).

In hexameters, all three persons are frequently used on both of the levels and in all three modes of activity. Presumably, the reason for their use is because of the broader treatment of themes in these metres (Figures 8 and 9). What is notable is the importance of the 3rd person denoting surrounding people and society.

When comparing the two levels, it must be said that on the informative level the "I" is usually active (and sometimes passive), but on the communicative level the "I" sometimes appears as an object. This means that there are moments in the flow of verse lines when the "I" is suppressed or a victim. So, from the perspective of the whole text, the poem is a prayer, or some other kind of expression of the thoughts and emotions of the 1st person.
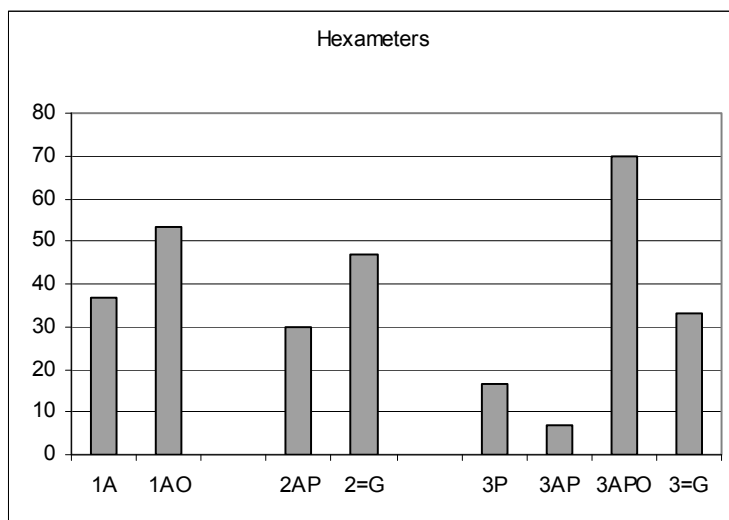
Figure 9. Communicative level of the communicative perspective of text in hexameters (percentage of the texts).

As concerns the distribution of roles in the case of the 1st person, the active state is predominant. Only in T4 is the 1st person predominant in both active and passive states. On the other hand, the 2nd person primarily occurs in the passive role in most of the metres – both in the case of God as well as love the 2nd person role tends to be very important in the consciousness of the 1st person; yet it is silent and non-interventionist.

Conclusions

In conclusion, certain semantic colourings can be seen in the metres analyzed.

T4 has been regarded as semantically almost neutral and is associated with Estonian and other folk songs – consequently, it is mainly the metre of simple themes. In the poetry of Masing, T4 is the metre that reflects resignation of the 1st person: philosophical in thoughts of impermanence and minimalistic self-expression.

I5 is the metre of European high poetry, of sonnets. More than a third of Masing's I5 in his early poetry are sonnets. I5 is considered to be the most neutral metre semantically. This is true in Masing's poetry as well. On the other

hand, and in light of Masing's more freeform and unconventional metres with their otherwise long lines of verse, the sonnets written in I5 have a strong semantic association with the European tradition of the sonnet: they contain an indexical allusion to one of the most conventional verse metres in European poetry. In Masing's poetry the semantics of I5 is "colder", more critical and ironical (most of all in the poetry collection *Lohe vari*), less religious and confessional than that of the other metres. Sonnets (most of them published in the collections *Neemed Vihmade lahte* and *Ehatuule maa*) form a group that stands out to a degree – about two thirds of Masing's sonnets are about love or yearning for God beside the motifs of transience.

T5 is a recent metre in European poetry, originating from early German romanticism. In this respect, Masing was presumably influenced by the German metre. What is predominant in Masing's T5 is his love poetry, which is closely intertwined with a deep Christian spirituality (e.g. in the collections *Roosikrantsi palved* and *Ehatuule maa*). In Masing's religious poetry the semantic associations of the German T5 with love (Gasparov 2000: 262) have also been added motifs of God and prayer. About a third of the poems in T5 are socially critical texts, forming a semantic group different from love poetry.

Dactylic, logaoedic and polymetric hexameters are united by an abundance of comprehensive (above all philosophical and religious) themes and the use of a more archaic style. These metres, imitations of the hexameter[7]of classical antiquity, or at least as referring to the antique hexameter, are associated with large epic works of the literature of classical antiquity. In Masing's poetry, hexameters are not used in epics; however, they convey grandeur and activeness together with an emphatic Christianity and a powerful mode of expression.

Throughout his poetry, Masing was searching for something reflected also in his translations and discussed in his essays: human striving towards God, an endeavour to surmount limits or limitedness, to grasp the eternal. Most of Masing's early poetry is like a prayer, a yearning for God. Yet differences, colourings of the metres, occur in tone, in the mode of expression of the endeavour: resistance to limitedness, contemplation of transience or expression of inseparable love for God and the beloved.[8]

---

[7]   In Masing's poetry the imitations of hexameters rhyme with the exception of one poem.
[8]

References

Gasparov, Mikhail 1996. The semantic halo of the Russian trochaic pentameter: thirty years of the problem. *Elementa* 2: 191–214.

Gasparov 2000 = Гаспаров, Михаил 2000. *Метр и смысл (Об одном из механизмов культурной памяти).* Москва: Российский государственный гуманитарный университет.

Lotman 1989 = Лотман, Михаил 1989. К семантической типологии русского стихосложения. In: Бернштейн, Самуил (ed.), *Славянское и балканское языкознание. Просодия.* Москва: Наука, 76–98.

– 1998. Värsisüsteemidest (peamiselt eesti ja vene värsi näitel). *Akadeemia* 10: 1846–1874, 11: 2058–2078.

Masing, Uku 1991. Luulet. Sõja aegu. *Akadeemia* 8: 1684–1691.

– 2000. *Luule, vol. 1.* Tartu: Ilmamaa.

– 2001. *Luule, vol. 2.* Tartu: Ilmamaa.

– 2003. *Luule, vol. 4.* Tartu: Ilmamaa.

– 2004. *Luule, vol. 5.* Tartu: Ilmamaa.

Soskice, Janet Martin 1987. *Metaphor and Religious Language.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Tarlinskaja, Marina 1993. *Strict Stress-Meter in English Poetry Compared with German and Russian.* Calgary: University of Calgary Press.

Tooming, Aile 2011. Uku Masingu luule 1940. aastatel: värsimõõt ja teema. In: Kõvamees, Anneli (ed.), *Uurimusi 1940. aastate eesti kirjandusest.* Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 115–123.

Стихотворная семантика нескольких метров в поэзии Уку Мазинга

В статье представлены результаты семантического анализа метрического репертуара ранней (1926–1943) поэзии Уку Мазинга (1909–1985). Анализируются следующие размеры: силлабо-тонический 4-стопный хорей, 5-стопный хорей, 5-стопный ямб, а также дактилический, логаэдический и полиметрический гексаметр. Каждая стихотворная строка рассматривается с точки зрения ее коммуникативной перспективы, репертуара мотивов и тропов. Такой анализ позволяет выявить семантическую специфику и экспрессивный ореол рассматриваемых стихотворных форм.

Mõnede värsimõõtude semantika Uku Masingu luules

Artiklis tutvustatakse Uku Masingu (1909–1985) varasema luule (1926–1943) semantilise analüüsi tulemusi. Analüüsitud värsimõõdud on silbilis-rõhuline trohheiline tetrameeter, trohheiline pentameeter, jambiline pentameeter ning daktüliline, logaöödiline ja polümeetriline heksameeter. Iga teksti puhul uuriti selle kommunikatiivset perspektiivi nagu ka motiive ja troope igas värsireas. Semantilised erisused ning värsimõõtude värvingud ilmnevad kõige selgemalt väljendusviisis, suhtumises kujutatavasse.