

# Thai Poetry: A Metrical Analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

Thai poetry is traditionally categorized into five major types: *k<sup>h</sup>looŋ*, *tɕ<sup>h</sup>ǎn*, *kàap*, *klɔɔn*, and *râaj*. The meter is described with fixed number of syllables and rhyming scheme, most preferably given in the form of a template. In addition, first and second tones are prescribed for *k<sup>h</sup>looŋ* on certain syllables, and fixed positions for heavy and light syllables are designated for *tɕ<sup>h</sup>ǎn* (cf. Appendix).

Variations on the subtype for each category are due to differences in the number of syllables and lines required, and also the number of tones prescribed for *k<sup>h</sup>looŋ*, and different heavy/light syllable patterns for *tɕ<sup>h</sup>ǎn*. For every type and subtype, the designated template has to be learned.

These seemingly diversified templates are in fact, analyzable with a set of metrical rules, which conform to the natural metrical structure of the language itself. This paper attempts to arrive at such phonological generalizations for Thai verse.

## THE PROSODIC CONSTRUCT

The prosodic construct of Thai poetry in traditional description consists of *k<sup>h</sup>am* 'word' as the smallest prosodic unit. A number of *k<sup>h</sup>am* are organized into a *wák* 'phrase,' and one or more *wák* make a *bàat*, and a number of *bàat* make a *bòt*, which is comparable to a stanza. For example, (1) below is a template for *klɔɔn* 8, a subtype of *klɔɔn*.

In general a *k<sup>h</sup>am* is either a monosyllabic word or a syllable of a polysyllabic word. Hence, its equivalence is a phonological syllable. It is noted that this paper treats a *wák* as a poetic "line" consistently. As such, the complicated rhyming scheme for each type and subtype is reducible to a minimal pattern of line-end rhyming with or without an internal rhyming pattern. Also, the rhythmic pattern can be analyzed as right-headed feet X-meter line (discussed in the next section).

In (1), when a *wák* is taken to be a poetic "line" despite the template, the rhyming scheme can be easily seen with a beautiful end-rhyme pattern of *a b b c*. An octave of two quatrains shows an *a b b c d c c e* end-rhyme pattern in (2). Ignoring the internal rhyme, the *a b b c* end-rhyme pattern is found to be most prevalent in all other types of Thai verse except *râaj* where end-rhyme does not occur. Slight variations of end-rhyme on major subtypes are mainly due to deletion of line *a*, i.e., the first line, or adding line *b* to the couplet yielding *b b b c* pattern. For example, *k<sup>h</sup>looŋ* 2, *kàap tɕàbaŋ* 16, *malinii tɕǎn* 15, and *sàtt<sup>h</sup>ulwikkiiilit tɕǎn* 19 (Figures 4, 8, 14, and 15 in Appendix) are the same case of missing line *a*, and *b b c* end-rhyme pattern is found. *kàap sùraaŋk<sup>h</sup>ánaaŋ* 28 and 32 (Figures 9 and 10 in Appendix) are both an octave-stanza with *a b b c d c c e* end-rhyme pattern, although line *a* is missing for *kàap sùraaŋk<sup>h</sup>ánaaŋ* 28, leaving it with an overt seven-line stanza, and *a = b* in *kàap sùraaŋk<sup>h</sup>ánaaŋ* 32, yielding *b b b c d c c e* end-rhyme pattern.



- d. The metrical word is also right-headed and is built as a leftward spreading unbounded word.

Clearly from (3) Thai is predominantly a right-headed language with right-headed phonological feet and words. This natural characteristic of the language is relevant in Thai meter. The most obvious cases are the *tɕ<sup>h</sup>ǎn* where heavy and light syllables are prescribed. Although the subtypes of the heavy/light syllable pattern differ one from another, one thing all have in common is that for each line the meter is accounted for by consecutive right-headed feet of some kind. For example, *todòkkà tɕ<sup>h</sup>ǎn* 12 (Figure 12 in Appendix) is an anapest dimeter, with - - | - - | rhythmic pattern. *int<sup>h</sup>ráwítɕ<sup>h</sup>ian tɕ<sup>h</sup>ǎn* 11 (Figure 11 in Appendix) is a spondee/anapest-bacchic meter, with a rhythmic pattern of | | - | | alternating with - - | - | |. Most interestingly, *malíni tɕ<sup>h</sup>ǎn* 15 (Figure 14 in Appendix) consists of an unbounded right-headed foot and a degenerated foot in one line, and a degenerated foot and a cretic in another, and the stanza ends with a bacchic monometer. Caesuras will certainly assist the rhythmic flow in such case.

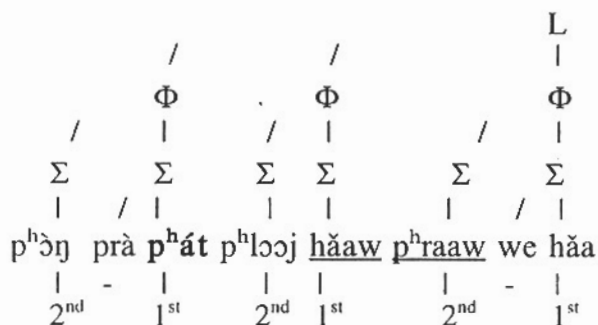
For all other types of poetry without the prescription of heavy/light syllables, iambic-cretic/anapest di/tri-meter is dominant. This is witnessed by the choice of words used and the rhythm read. This too bears evidence on the analysis into right-headed feet and words. For example, *klɔɔn* 8 is a cretic-iambic-cretic meter, a trimeter line, *klɔɔn* 6 is an iambic trimeter, *klɔɔn* 9 is a cretic trimeter, and *kàap sùraaŋk<sup>h</sup>ánaaŋ* 28 and 32 are both iambic-dimeter. (4) is an example of a *bàat* in *klɔɔn sùp<sup>h</sup>âap*, which includes *klɔɔn* 6, 7, 8, and 9, from *krommamíin p<sup>h</sup>ít<sup>h</sup>ájaalonkɔɔn*'s *sámkruij*.

- (4) A cretic trimeter in which a diverted bacchic is noted, and a cretic-spondee-cretic meter.

	-			-		-		
sǔaŋ	sà	wǎn		tɕ <sup>h</sup> ǎn	kà	wii		rú tɕii rátt
	-						-	
p <sup>h</sup> ɔŋ	prà	p <sup>h</sup> át		p <sup>h</sup> lɔɔj	hǎaw		p <sup>h</sup> raaw	we hǎa

- (5) This is metrical structure of (4).

	/		/		L
	Φ		Φ		
/		/		/	
Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ
	/		/		
sǔaŋ	sà	wǎn	tɕ <sup>h</sup> ǎn	kà	wii
	-			-	
2 <sup>nd</sup>		1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>		1 <sup>st</sup>



For each foot (Φ), the syllable at the right-edge of Φ is the most prominent. The second most prominent syllable is the heavy syllable at the Σ level which is not Φ-prominent. And the ultimate prominence is the Φ-prominent syllable at the right edge of the line L, the L-prominent syllable. As such, the degree of prominence is established. This serves as the basis for internal rhyme as follows:

(6) Internal Rhyme:

- a. between adjacent lines (L): The L-prominence rhymes with a Φ-prominent syllable to its right in the adjacent line.
- b. between adjacent feet (Φ): A Φ-prominence rhymes with a Σ-prominent syllable to its right in the adjacent foot (Φ).

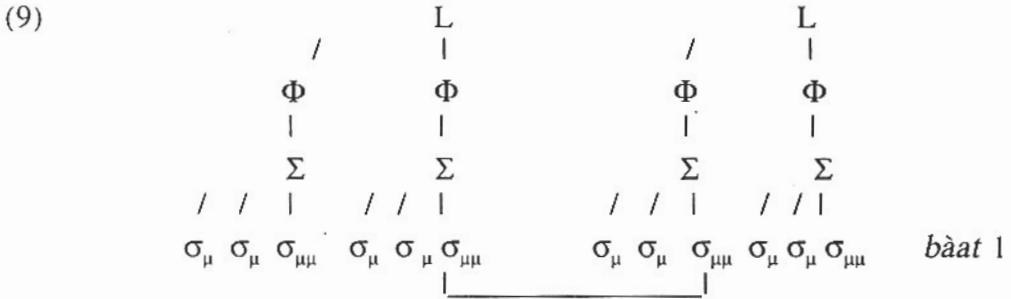
For example,

- (7) From (5), L-prominent *rát* rhymes with Φ-prominent *p<sup>h</sup>át* of the adjacent line and Φ-prominent *wǎn* rhymes with Σ-prominent *tɛ<sup>h</sup>án* of the adjacent foot (Φ), so does Φ-prominent *wii* with Σ-prominent *tɛii*, and *hǎaw* with *p<sup>h</sup>raaw*.

(6) is consistent with the predominant internal rhyming patterns across types in which the last syllable of one line rhymes with either the second, third, fourth, fifth, or sixth syllable of an adjacent line to its right (cf. Appendix). The rhyming possibilities seem to be dependent on the right-headed metrical constituents of the adjacent line. For an example, in *klɔɔn* 6 as an iambic trimeter; the last syllable of the first line rhymes with either the second or fourth syllable of the second line, for these syllables of the second line are Φ-prominent and (6)a is satisfied as shown in (8).

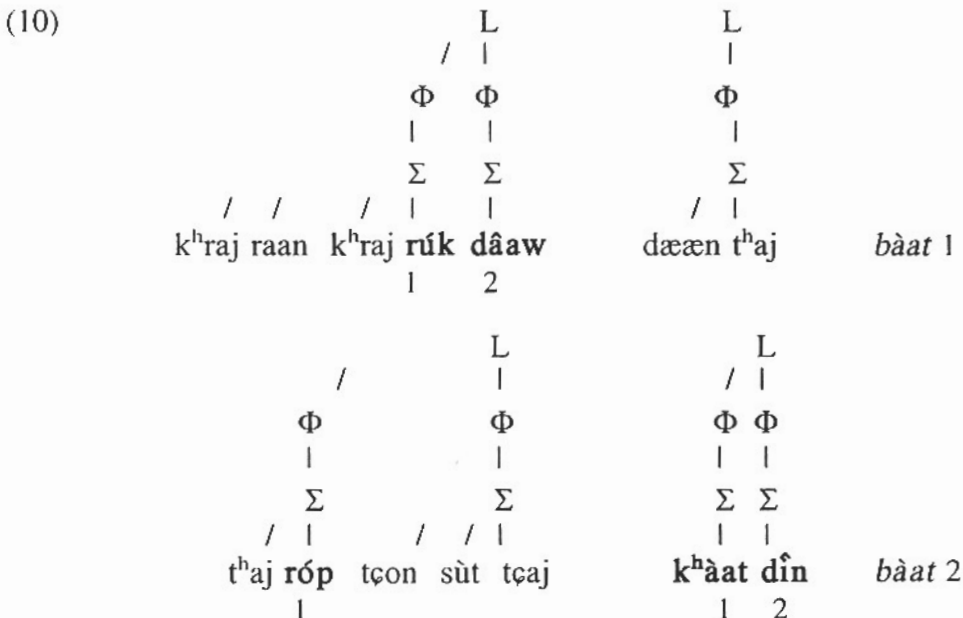


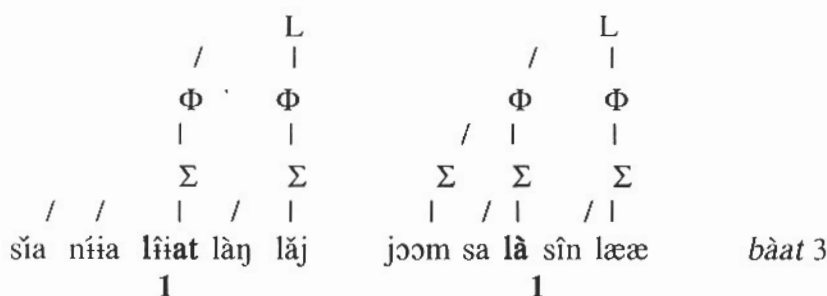
In another example, *todòkka tɕʰǎn* 12, an anapest dimeter, the last syllable of the first line rhymes with the third syllable of the second line, satisfying (6)a as shown in (9).



One interesting thing that has to be accounted for is the tones prescribed for *kʰlooj*. It is noted that the first and second tones required are, at present, phonologically Low or Falling, and High or Falling tones respectively. Historically, however, the first tone is postulated to have been falling and the second tone, rising, having developed from different laryngeal finals (Li, 1977). Phonetically, it is well studied that Thai contour tones require a longer syllable duration in production as well as in perception (Abramson, 1962; Tumtavitikul 1992). The inference is that the first and second tones required, in spite of their phonetic development, may possibly serve to indicate prominent syllables, hence the metrical structure of the poem.

For example, a stanza from King Rama VI's *sàjǎam manúsàtī?* highlights the syllables in the tonal positions prescribed by the template for *kʰlooj* 4 (Figure 6 in Appendix) as having Φ-prominence as shown in (10).





Σ-Percolation is noted in (10) whereby non-right-edge degenerated strong syllables become metrically weak at the Σ-to-Φ level.

### SUMMARY

The analysis in the preceding section has shown that Thai meter can be accounted for by a set of metrical rules conforming to the phonological constraints of the Thai language, in which a right-headed metrical constituent hierarchy is predominant. Moreover, the analysis also has predictability with respect to the types of right-headed foot structure permitted in each type and subtype of poetry, given the template.

While heavy/light syllables in *tɕ<sup>h</sup>ǎn* overtly define the foot-structures and the tones prescribed in *k<sup>h</sup>looŋ* designate the Φ-prominent syllables, the numbers of *k<sup>h</sup>am* indicate possible numbers of feet and their types in a line such that the following tendency applies:

- (11) 2 *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a line indicates an iambic/spondic monometer.
- |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | " | " | a cretic/anapest/bacchic monometer.   |
| 4 | " | " | an iambic-dimeter.  |
| 5 | " | " | an iambic/spondic- cretic/anapest/bacchic line.   |
| 6 | " | " | either an iambic trimeter or a cretic/anapest dimeter.                                      |
| 7 | " | " | either an iambic-anapest/cretic-iambic line, or a trimeter of comparable right-headed feet. |
| 8 | " | " | either a cretic-iambic-cretic line, or a trimeter of comparable right-headed feet.          |
| 9 | " | " | a cretic trimeter.  |

In brief, I summarize the generalizations governing Thai poetry in (12).

- (12) a. The prosodic construct observes the natural metrical structure of Thai as given in (3).  
 b. The end-rhyme is the most-to-most prominent-syllable rhyme and its canonical pattern is *a b b c*. Most deviations can be traced to this canonical pattern.  
 c. The internal rhyme depends on the metrical constituent hierarchy as given in (6).  
 d. The meter is always right-headed X-meter with a tendency as given in (11).

In all, it seems that the goal of arriving at the phonological generalizations of Thai versification has been achieved. What this analysis implies seems to go beyond that goal. These generalizations argue for the creative use of the underlying linguistic competence of the native speakers of Thai.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The kind comments and contributions of Prof. Dr. Niyada Laosunthorn, Assoc. Prof. Yuporn Sangtaksin, and Assist. Prof. Dr. Yada Arunaveja are gratefully acknowledged. All errors are my own.

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## APPENDIX

## Traditional Templates for Thai Poetry

(Adapted from Tonglaw, 1987, and Sukhothai Thammathiraj University  
Textbook Series. (1984) กวีนิพนธ์ ๕)

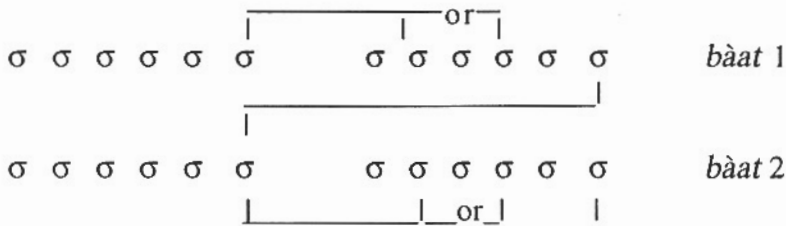


Figure 1. *klown 6* consists of six *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*, two *wák* in a *bàat*, and two *bàat* in a *bòt*.

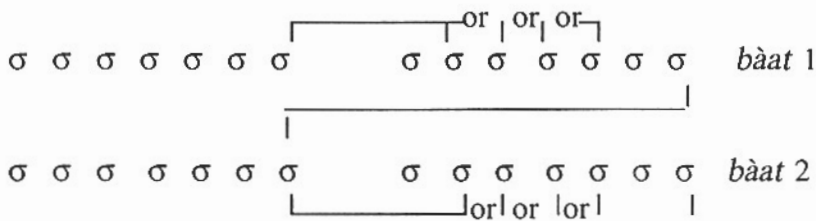


Figure 2. *klown 7* consists of seven *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*, two *wák* in a *bàat*, and two *bàat* in a *bòt*.

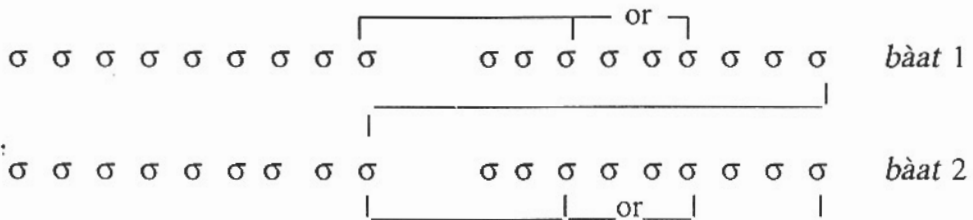


Figure 3. *klown 9* consists of nine *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*, two *wák* in a *bàat*, and two *bàat* in a *bòt*.



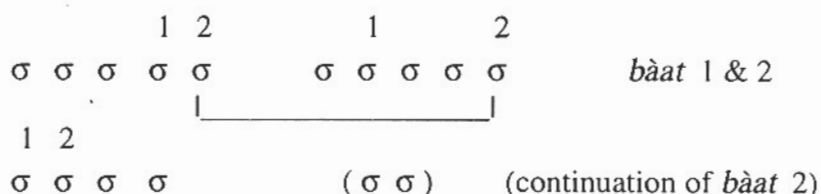


Figure 4. *k<sup>h</sup>looj* 2 consists of five *k<sup>h</sup>am* in the first two *wák*, and four *k<sup>h</sup>am* in the third *wák*, with three *wák* (or 14 *k<sup>h</sup>am*) in a *bòt*. (Numbers 1 and 2 represent the first and second tones respectively, and the parentheses imply optional extra syllables.)

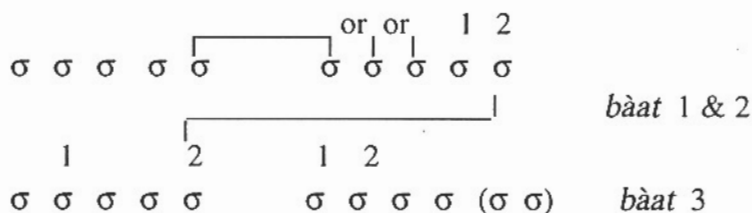


Figure 5. *k<sup>h</sup>looj* 3 consists of five *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*, with four *k<sup>h</sup>am* in the last *wák*, and four *wák* in a *bòt*. A *wák* makes a *bàat* for the first two *wák*.

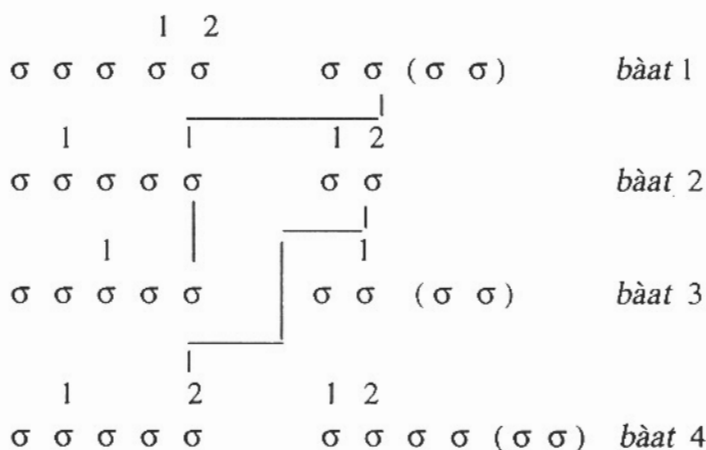


Figure 6. *k<sup>h</sup>looj* 4 consists of five alternates with two *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*, with four *k<sup>h</sup>am* in the last *wák*; each pair of *wák* makes a *bàat*. There are four *bàat* in a *bòt*.

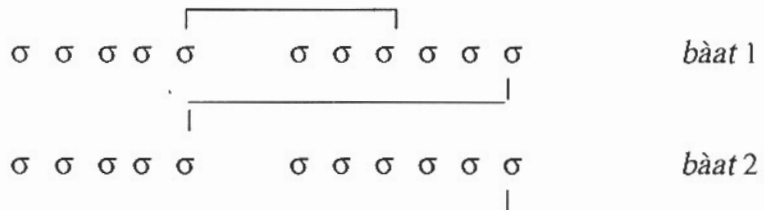


Figure 7. *kàap jaanii* 11 consists of five alternates with six *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*; each pair of *wák* makes a *bàat*; two *bàat* make a *bòt*. There are 11 *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *bàat*.

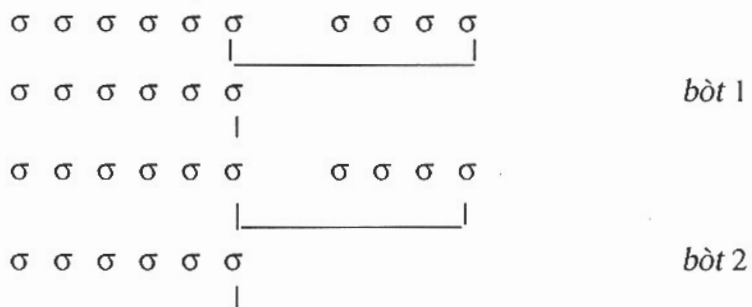


Figure 8. *kàap tc<sup>h</sup>àbaŋ* 16 consists of six alternates with four *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*; three *wák* make a *bòt*. There are 16 *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *bòt*.

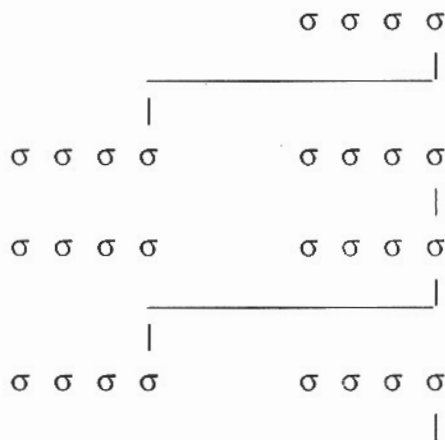


Figure 9. *kàap sùraaŋk<sup>h</sup>ánaaŋ* 28 consists of four *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*; seven *wák* (or 28 *k<sup>h</sup>am*) make a *bòt*.

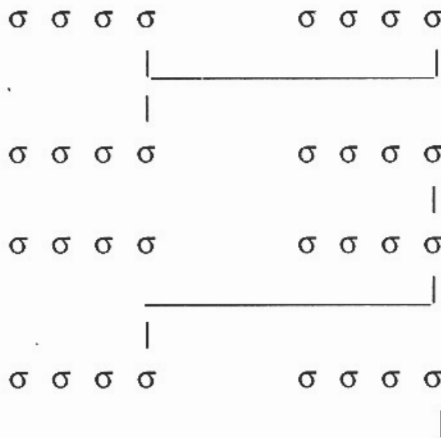


Figure 10. *kàap sùraaŋk<sup>h</sup>ánaaŋ* 32 consists of four *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*; eight *wák* (or 32 *k<sup>h</sup>am*) make a *bòt*.

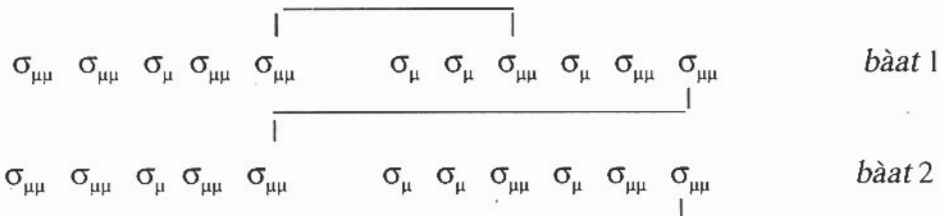


Figure 11. *int<sup>h</sup>áráwítç<sup>h</sup>ian tç<sup>h</sup>ăn* 11 consists of five alternates with six *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*; each pair of *wák* makes a *bàat*; two *bàat* make a *bòt*.  $\sigma_{\mu\mu}$  and  $\sigma_{\mu}$  represent heavy (*k<sup>h</sup>árú*) and light (*láhù*) syllables respectively.

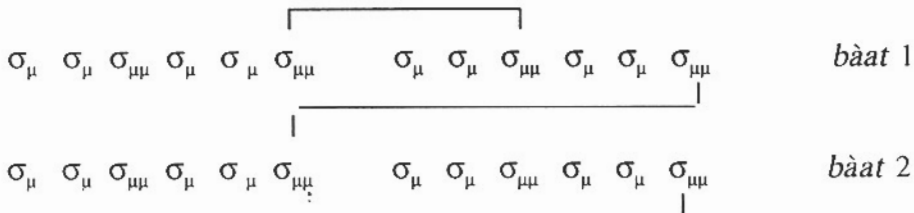


Figure 12. *todòkkà tçhăn* 12 consists of six *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*; each pair of *wák* (or 12 *k<sup>h</sup>am*) makes a *bàat*; two *bàat* make a *bòt*.

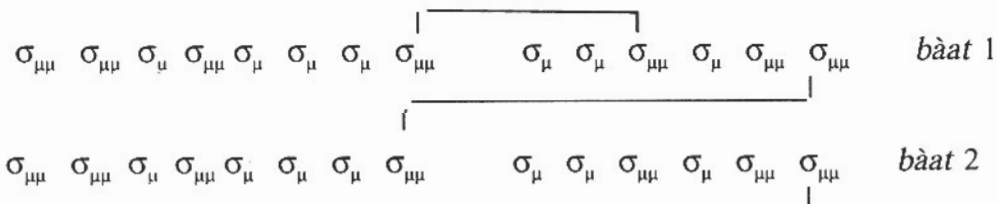


Figure 13. *wásăntăđilòkà tç<sup>h</sup>ăn* 14 consists of eight alternates with six *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*; each pair of *wák* (or 14 *k<sup>h</sup>am*) makes a *bàat*; two *bàat* make a *bòt*.

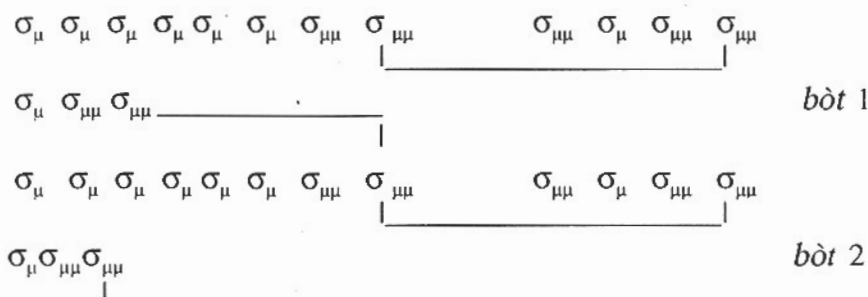


Figure 14. *malinii tčǎn* 15 consists of eight, four, and three *k<sup>h</sup>am* in the first, second, and third *wák* respectively; the three *wák* (or 15 *k<sup>h</sup>am*) make a *bàat* that is also a *bòt*.

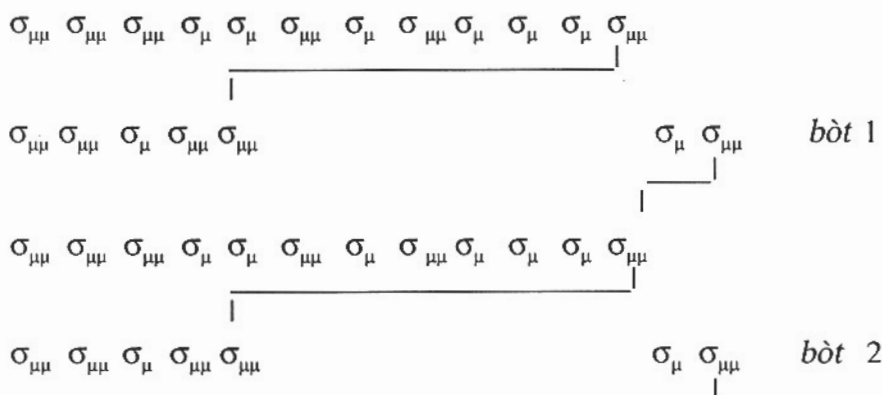


Figure 15. *sàtt<sup>h</sup>unláwikkiiilità tčǎn* 19 consists of 12, 5, and 2 *k<sup>h</sup>am* in the first, second, and third *wák* respectively; the three *wák* (or 19 *k<sup>h</sup>am*) make a *bàat* that is also a *bòt*.

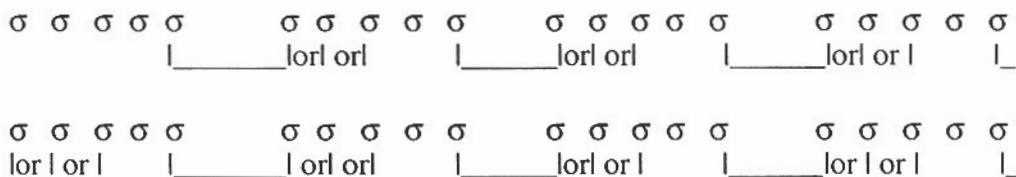


Figure 16. *râaj booraan* consists of a minimum of five *k<sup>h</sup>am* in a *wák*, and a minimum of five *wák* in a *bòt*. A *bòt* may end with a *wák* that contains only two *k<sup>h</sup>am*.