



# Footsteps in the Dark

*Versification in Indic Languages  
Through the Centuries*



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# Versification

*between*

## Language *and* Culture



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*Versification* means “making verse.”

- ❖ it involves arranging *phonological units* of language (moras, syllables, prosodic feet) into structured patterns
- ❖ it is one of the defining and foundational features of certain kinds of literature



# Versification

*between*

## Language *and* Culture



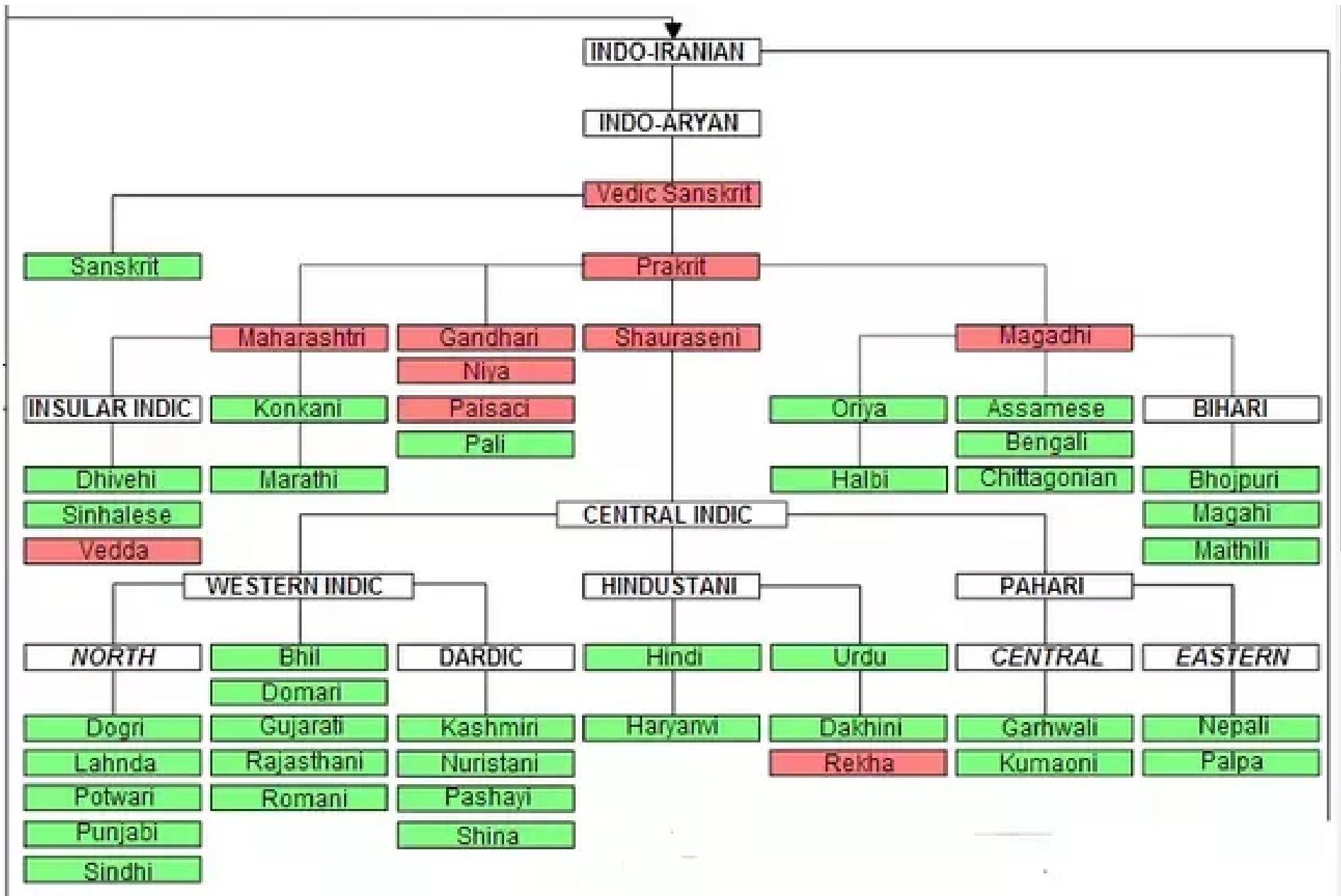
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In *South Asia*, versification tracks important phenomena in linguistic and cultural history.

I Systems of versification evolve with language:

- ❁ new forms and principles are introduced; others become obsolete.



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:IndoEuropeanTreeDielli1.svg>



# Versification

*between*

## Language *and* Culture

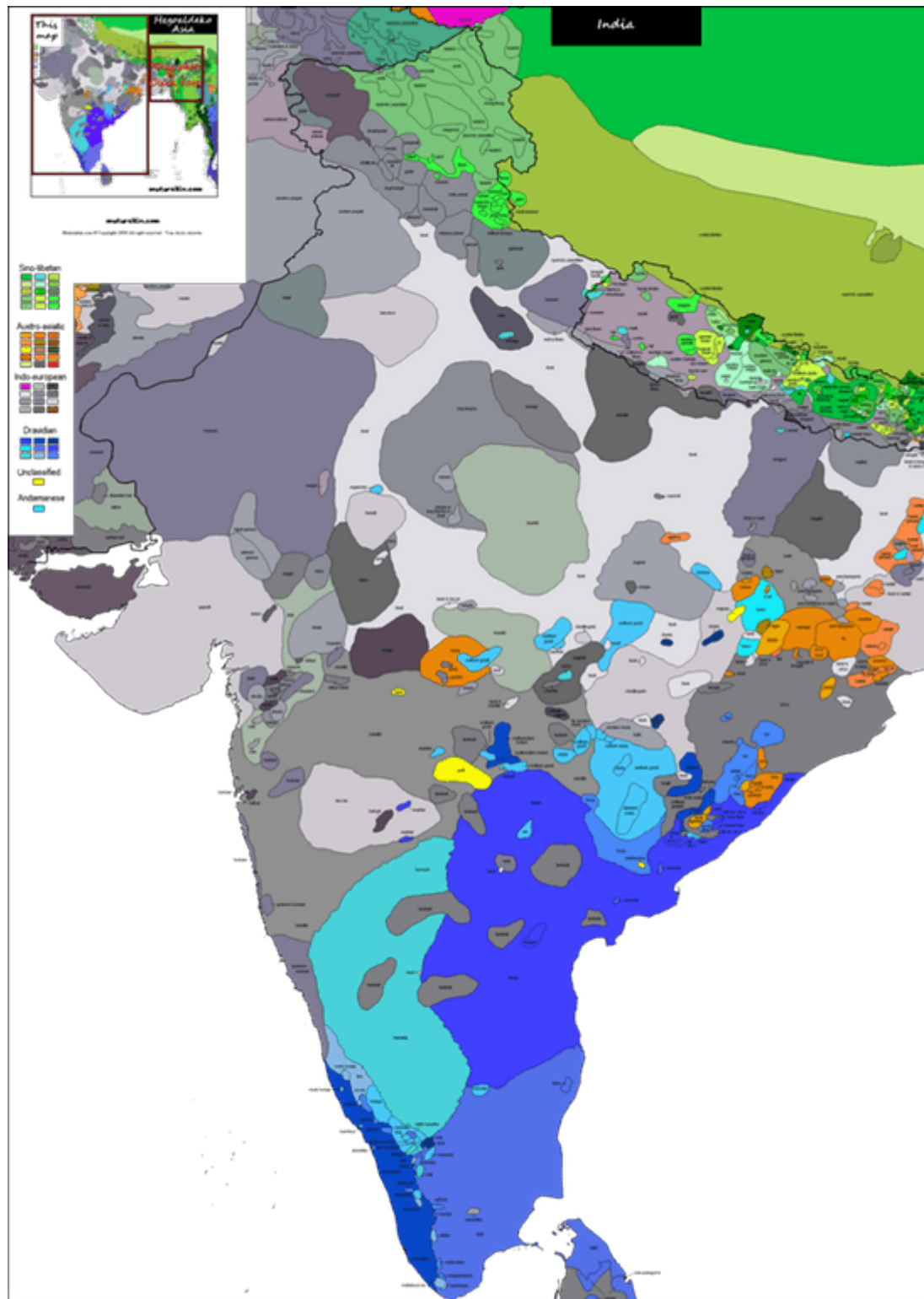
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In *South Asia*, versification tracks important phenomena in linguistic and cultural history.

2 *At the same time*, they reveal patterns of mutual influence among literary cultures:

❧ these interactions take places *across* linguistic boundaries.



<https://i.imgur.com/3Tnxs6.png>



# Versification

*between*

## Language *and* Culture



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- 
- ❖ Systems of versification from Sanskrit literature might have inspired the “Recent Style” versification of Chinese poets in the Tang Dynasty.

Victory Mair and Tsu-Lin Mei, “The Sanskrit Origins of Recent Style Prosody,”  
*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51.2 (1991): 375–470.

- ❖ They were enthusiastically taken up in places like Java: there are more “Sanskrit metrical forms” in Javanese than there are in Sanskrit!



# Versification

*between*

## Language *and* Culture

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Versification provides a perspective onto the connection between two general ways of thinking about language (*natural* and *cultural, evolutionary* and *ecological*, etc.).





# *The Indic Languages*



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Die indische Sprache hat drei Entwicklungsstufen durchlaufen:

- ❖ *Altindisch* oder *Sanskrit*, vorliegend in drei Varietäten als vedisches, episches und classisches Sanskrit;
- ❖ *Mittelindisch* oder *Prâkrit*, bekannt in vielen zeitlich und örtlich unterschiedenen Dialekten teils durch Denkmäler der Litteratur, teils durch Inschriften und Münzen;
- ❖ *Neuindisch* oder *Bhâshâ*, etwa neun Sprachen mit vielen Dialekten umfassend.

Hermann Jacobi, *Ausgewählte Erzählungen in Mâhârâshṭrî* (1886)



# *The Indic Languages*



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## DEVELOPMENT:

### [Old Indic]

Vedic Sanskrit

Classical Sanskrit

[unattested languages]

### [Middle Indic]

Pali

Prakrit

Apabhramsha

Epigraphic Languages

[unattested languages]

### [New Indic]

Brajbhasha

Hindi

Marathi

Bengali

Odiya

Marwari

Gujarati



# *The Indic Languages*

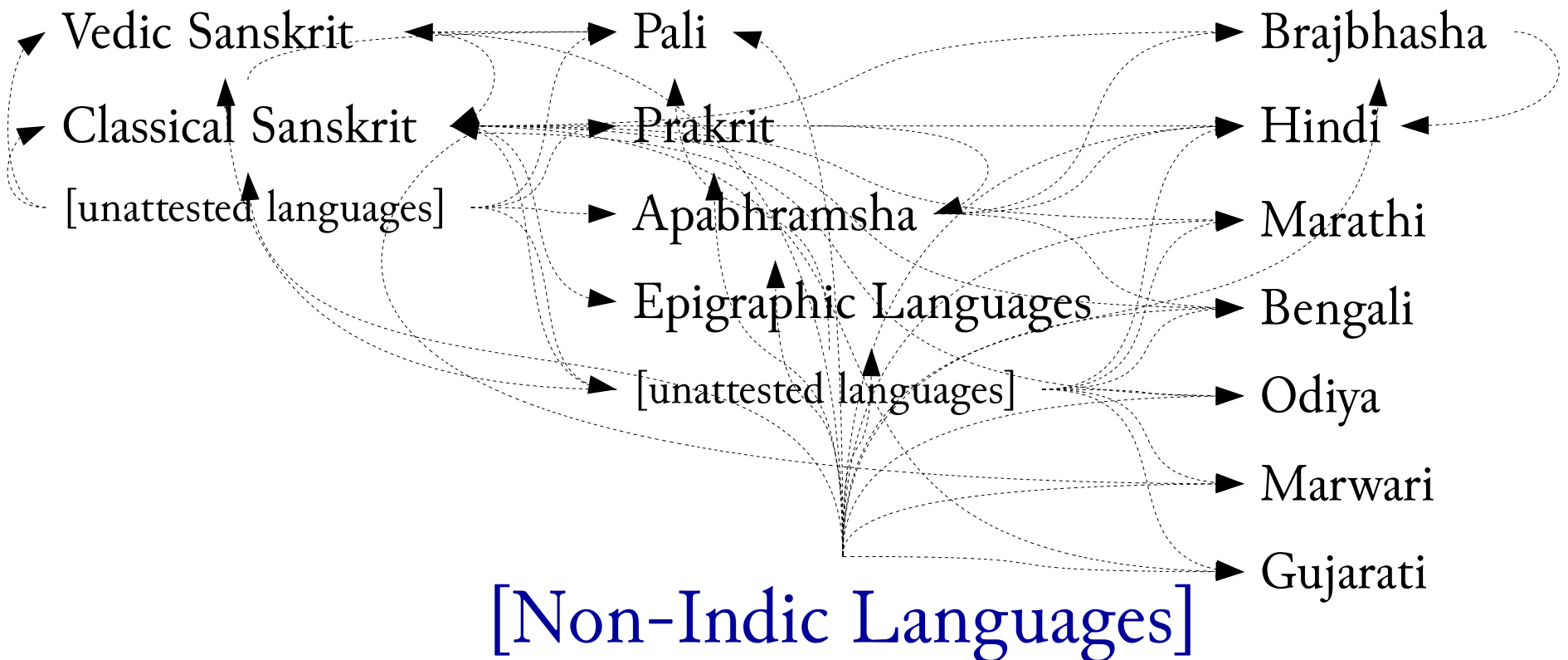


## DEVELOPMENT:

### [Old Indic]

### [Middle Indic]

### [New Indic]





# *The Indic Languages*



## ATTESTATION:



[Old Indic]

*Vedic Sanskrit*

*Classical Sanskrit*

*Ardhamāgadhī*

[Middle Indic]

?

*Epigraphy*

*Pali*

*Prakrit*

*Apabhramsha*

[New Indic]

*Avadhi*

*Braj*



# *Systems of Versification*



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South Asian authors recognized two main systems of versification in their various literary traditions:

## I *Vṛttam*, or “syllable-counting.”

- ✿ Any given metrical form has a *fixed* number of syllables.
- ✿ The *weight* of a syllable in a given position in the verse line may also be fixed.



# *Systems of Versification*



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South Asian authors recognized two main systems of versification in their various literary traditions:

I *Vṛttam*, or “syllable-counting.”

This is the most commonly used system in *Sanskrit* literature.

The oldest Sanskrit literature (the Vedas) employ this system *exclusively*.



# *Systems of Versification*



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South Asian authors recognized two main systems of versification in their various literary traditions:

## 2 *Jātiḥ*, or “mora-counting.”



The mora rather than the syllable is the basic unit of counting.



In the Indic languages, a given verse form always has the same number of moras.



# *Systems of Versification*



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South Asian authors recognized two main systems of versification in their various literary traditions:

## 2 *Jātiḥ*, or “mora-counting.”



The mora rather than the syllable is the basic unit of counting.



In Dravidian languages, weight is less strictly regulated, and a given verse form doesn't always have the same number of moras.





# *Systems of Versification*



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South Asian authors recognized two main systems of versification in their various literary traditions:

## 2 *Jātiḥ*, or “mora-counting.”

- ❁ Moras are always gathered into “groups” (*gaṇa-*, *aṁśa-*) of syllables.
- ❁ Syllables never cross the boundary between groups.



# *Systems of Versification*



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The most common meters in...

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Sanskrit

Prakrit

Apabhramsha

Bengali

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VR̥TTAM *anuṣṭubh*

*paṇḍar*

JĀTĪH

*gāthā*

*dōhā*

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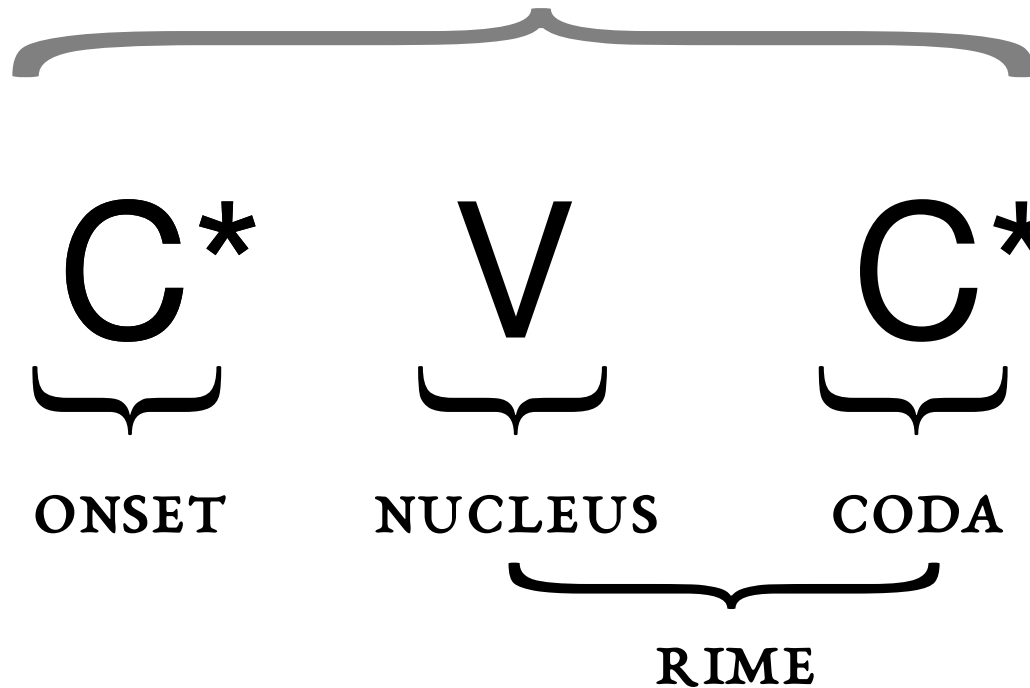
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# *Basic Principles*



## 1. The Syllable ( $\sigma$ )





# *Basic Principles*



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## 2. Syllable Weight

A syllable is classified as *light* or *heavy* depending on the number of *moras* ( $\mu$ ) it contains.

- ✿ A short vowel contributes *one* mora.
- ✿ A long vowel contributes *two*.
- ✿ A syllable-final consonant contributes *one*.



# *Basic Principles*



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## 2. Syllable Weight

$\mu = 1$   $\longrightarrow$  **Light**

$\mu > 1$   $\longrightarrow$  **Heavy**

Syllables at the end of a verse  
line are also counted as heavy.



# *Basic Principles*



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## 2. Syllable Weight

$C^?V$  (e.g.: *khu*)  $\longrightarrow$  **Light**

$C^?VC$  (e.g.: *taṁ*)  $\searrow$   
 $\nearrow$  **Heavy**

$C^?\bar{V}$  (e.g.: *sō*)



# *Basic Principles*



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## 2. Syllable Weight

$C^?V$  (e.g.: *khu*)  $\longrightarrow$  **Light**

*(open syllables with short vowels)*

$C^?VC$  (e.g.: *tam*)  $\searrow$  **Heavy**

$C^?\bar{V}$  (e.g.: *so*)  $\nearrow$

*(everything else)*



# *Basic Principles*



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## 2. Syllable Weight

	<i>Indian Conventions</i>	<i>European Conventions</i>
Light	┘	◡
Heavy	ς	—
(Either)	×	×





# *Vṛttam: Anuṣṭubh*



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**NAME:** *Anuṣṭubh*, or just *ślōka* (‘verse’)

**STRUCTURE:**

1. Four lines (*pādaḥ*) of eight syllables each (= 32 total).
2. The *odd* lines (1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup>) generally end with the rhythm ISSS.
  - ❁ Other variants, however, are possible.
3. The *even* lines (2<sup>nd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup>) always end with the rhythm ISIS (i.e., an iambic rhythm).



# *Vṛttam: Anuṣṭubh*



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apragalbhapadanyāsāḥ I

jananīrāgahētavaḥ 2

santy ēkē bahulālāpāḥ 3

kavayō bālakā iva 4

Trivikramabhaṭṭa, *Nalacampū* (10<sup>th</sup> c. CE)



# *Vṛttam: Anuṣṭubh*



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There are some poets who are like babies.

They don't know how to put one foot in front of the other.

(They aren't confident of their word placement.)

They inspire a mother's love.

(They inspire aversion in people.)

They make a lot of noise.

(They're all talk.)

Trivikramabhaṭṭa, *Nalacampū* (10<sup>th</sup> c. CE)



# *Vṛttam: Anuṣṭubh*



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apragalbhapadanyāsāḥ      1

santy ēkē bahulālāpāḥ      3



# *Vṛttam: Anuṣṭubh*



ṣ   |   ṣ     |   |   ṣ   ṣ   ṣ

apragalbhapadanyāsāḥ     1

ṣ     ṣ   ṣ   |   |   ṣ   ṣ   ṣ

santy ēkē bahulālāpāḥ     3



# *Vṛttam: Anuṣṭubh*



ṣ   |   ṣ     |   |   ṣ   ṣ   ṣ   = 8 σ

apragalbhapadanyāsāḥ   I

ṣ     ṣ   ṣ   |   |   ṣ   ṣ   ṣ   = 8 σ

santy ēkē bahulālāpāḥ   3



# *Vṛttam: Anuṣṭubh*



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---

jananīrāgahētavaḥ 2

kavayō bālakā iva 4



# *Vṛttam: Anuṣṭubh*



| | S S | S | S

jananīrāgahētavaḥ 2

| | S S | S | S

kavayō bālakā iva 4





# *Vṛttam: Anuṣṭubh*



| | S S | S | S = 8 σ

jananīrāgahētavaḥ 2

| | S S | S | S = 8 σ

kavayō bālakā iva 4



# *Vṛttam: Anuṣṭubh*



apragalbhapadanyāsāḥ I

jananīrāgahētavaḥ 2

santy ēkē bahulālāpāḥ 3

kavayō bālakā iva 4

Trivikramabhaṭṭa, *Nalacampū* (10<sup>th</sup> c. CE)



# *Jātiḥ: Gāthā*



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**NAME:** *gāthā* (Prakrit), *Gāthā* (Sanskrit)  
*Āryā* (Sanskrit)

## **STRUCTURE:**

1. One line of *30 moras*, organized into 7 and a half *groups*.
2. Another line of *27 moras*, also organized into 7 and a half *groups* (one of the groups being smaller than the others).







# Units of Structure



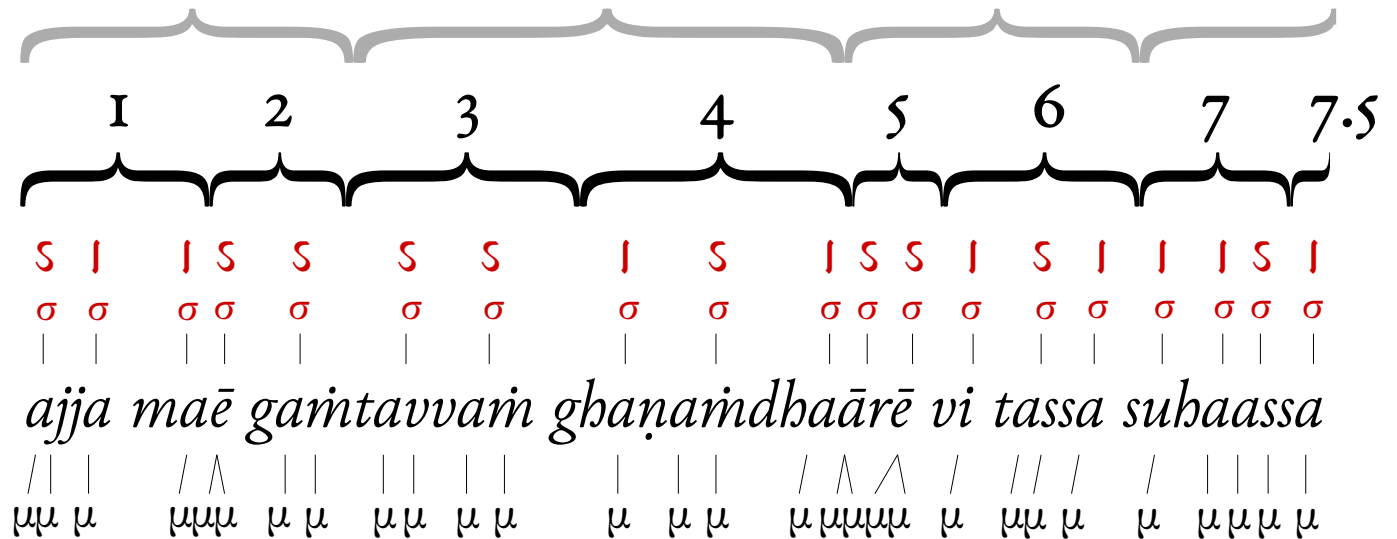
LINE

GROUPS

SYLLABLES

*akṣarāṇi, varṇāḥ*

MORAS





# Units of Structure



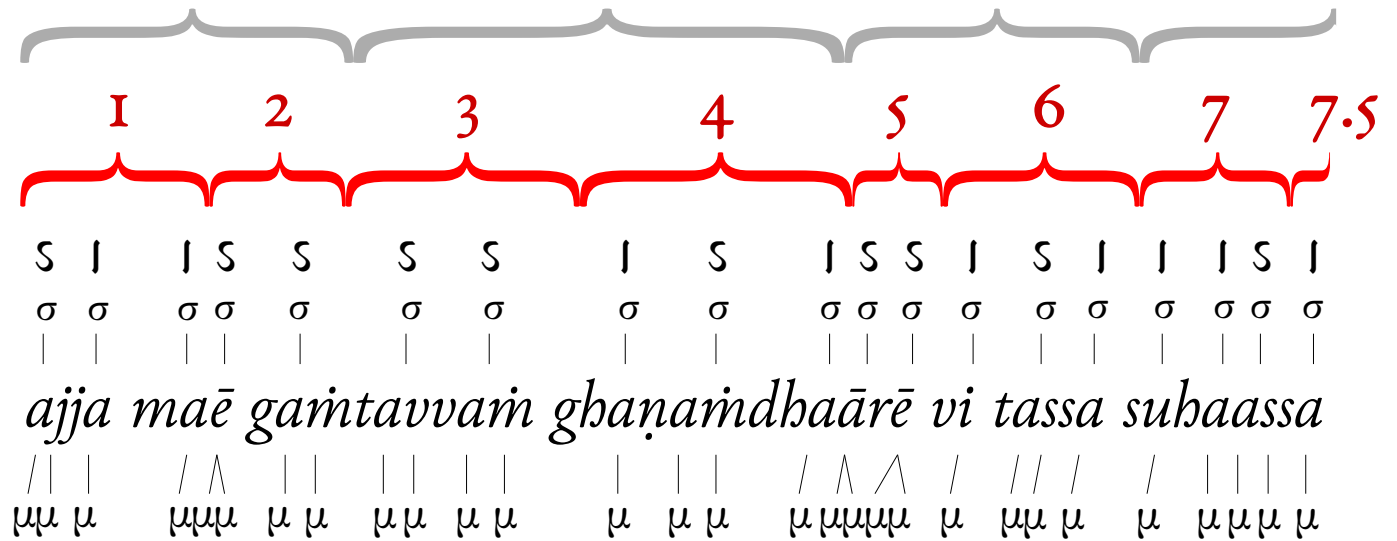
LINE

GROUPS

*gaṇāḥ*

SYLLABLES

MORAS





# Units of Structure

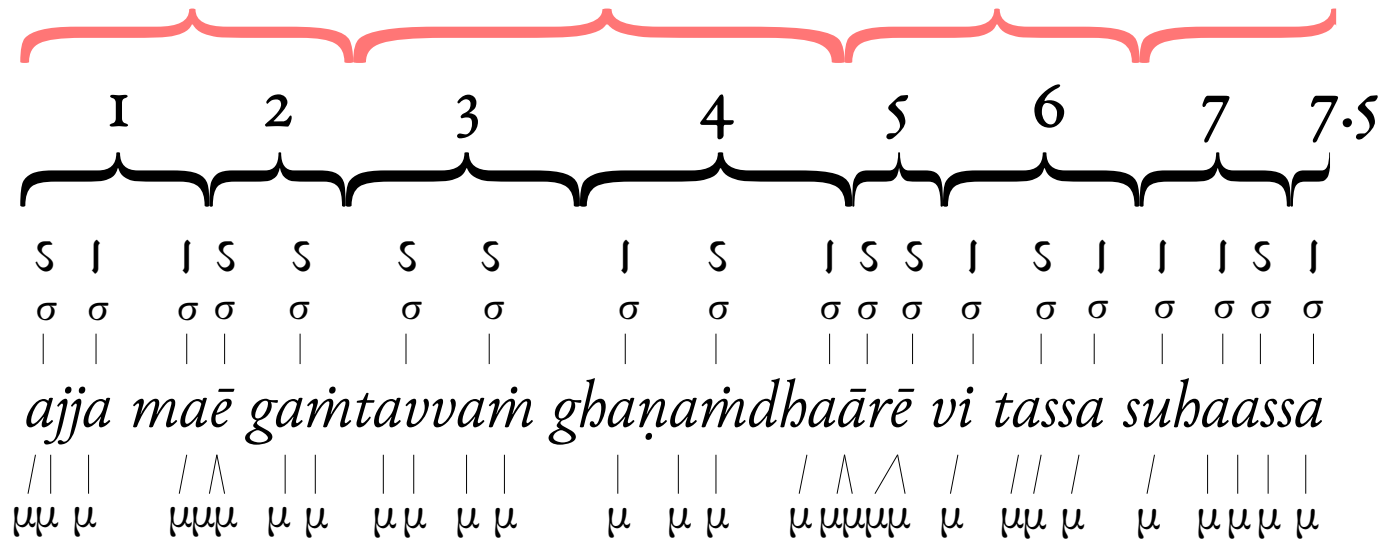


LINE

GROUPS

SYLLABLES

MORAS







# Units of Structure



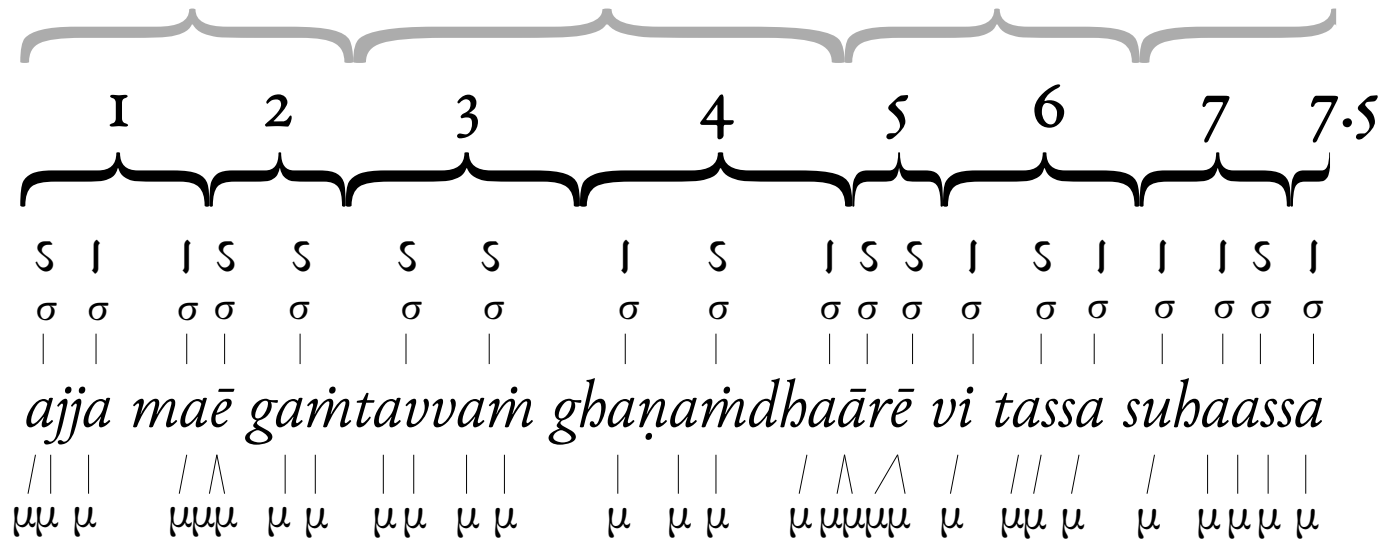
LINE

*pādayugam*

GROUPS

SYLLABLES

MORAS





# *Gāthā*



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## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

The most important level of structure for the *gāthā*, which is why it and related meters are referred to as *gaṇacchandaḥ* (“group-counting meters”).



# *Gāthā*



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## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

Any group of syllables that adds up to *four moras* (*mātrās*) in total.

μ μ μ μ



# *Gāthā*

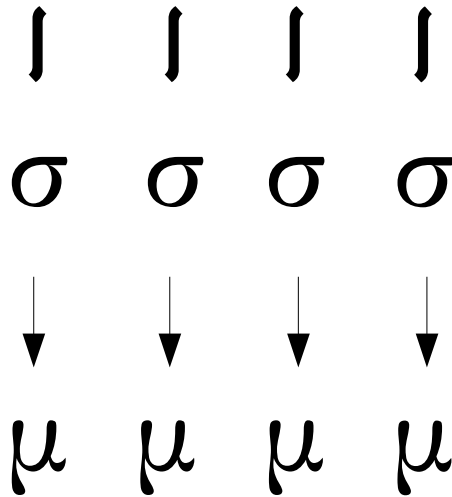


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## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

Any group of syllables that adds up to *four moras* (*mātrās*) in total.



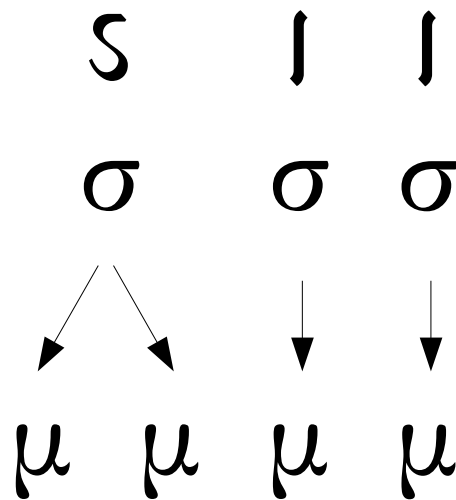


# *Gāthā*



## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

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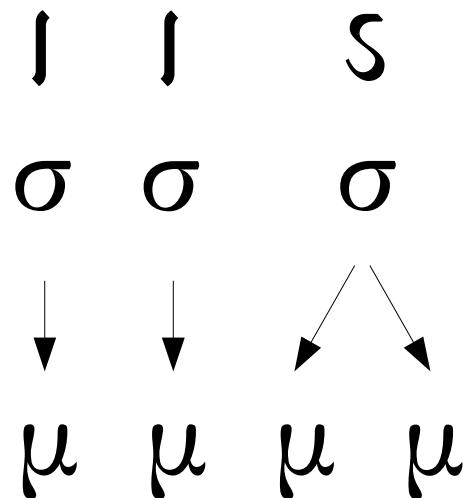


# *Gāthā*



## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

Any group of syllables that adds up to *four moras* (*mātrās*) in total.



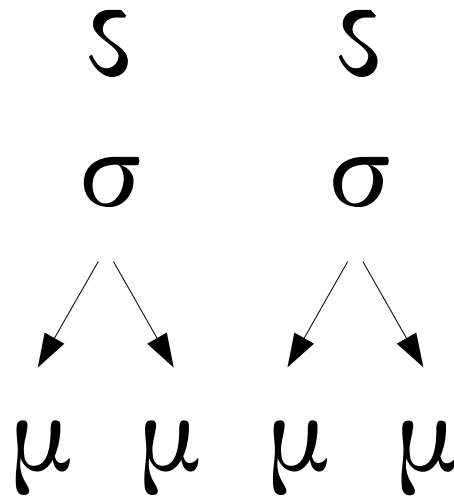


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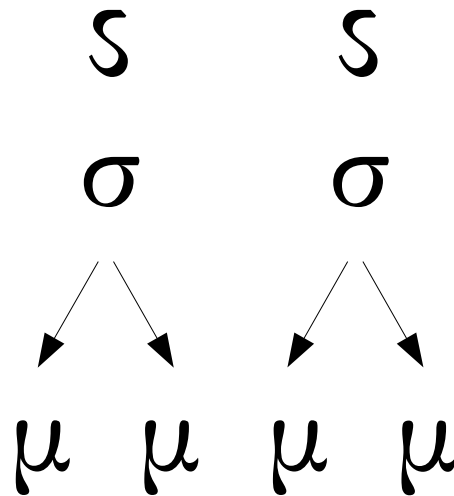


# *Gāthā*



## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

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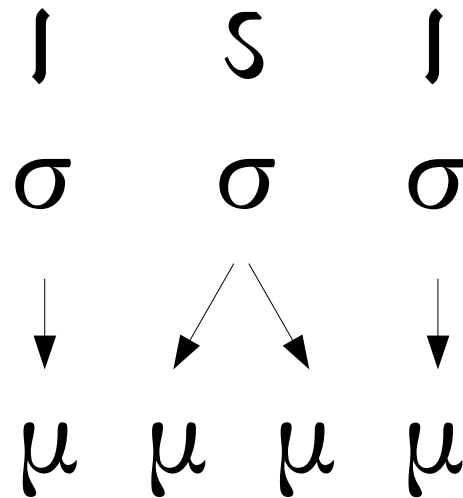


# *Gāthā*



## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

Any group of syllables that adds up to *four moras* (*mātrās*) in total.



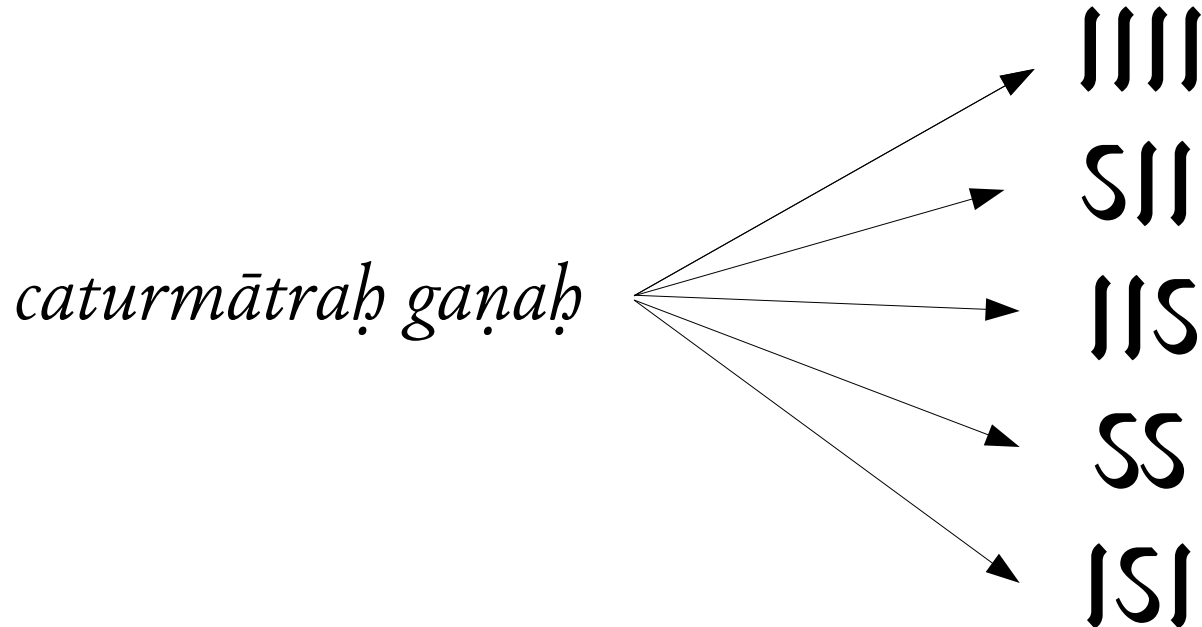


# Gāthā



## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

Any group of syllables that adds up to *four moras* (*mātrās*) in total.





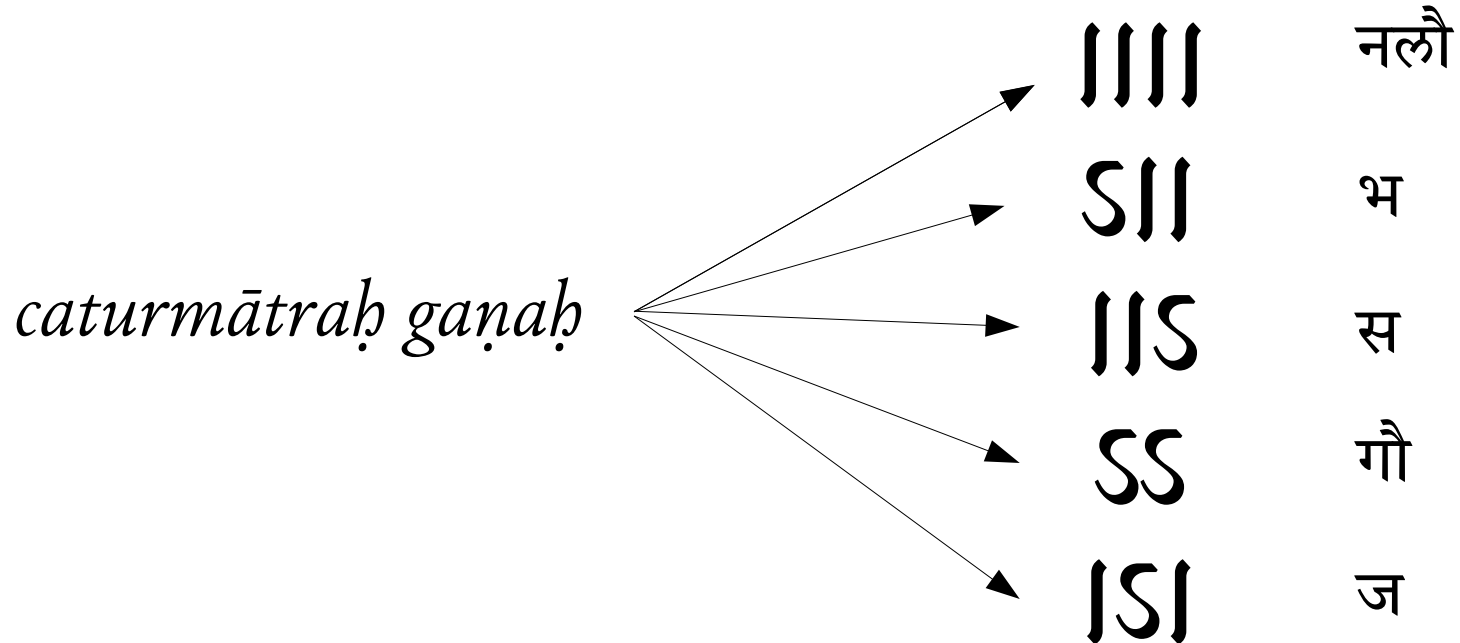
# Gāthā



## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

Any group of syllables that adds up to *four moras* (*mātrās*) in total.

*trika* names





# *Gāthā*



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## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

Groups can be classified as *syncopated* or *unsyncopated* depending on the location of the stress.

UNSYNCOATED       $\left[ \underset{\times}{\mu} \quad \mu \right] \left[ \underset{\times}{\mu} \quad \mu \right]$



# Gāthā



## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

Groups can be classified as *syncopated* or *unsyncopated* depending on the location of the stress.

	ṣ		ṣ
ṭ		ṭ	ṣ
	ṣ	ṭ	ṭ

UNSYNCOATED

[	μ		μ	]	[	μ		μ	]
	×					×			



# *Gāthā*



---

## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

Groups can be classified as *syncopated* or *unsyncopated* depending on the location of the stress.

SYNCOATED

$\mu \left[ \underset{\times}{\mu} \quad \mu \right] \mu$



# Gāthā



## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

Groups can be classified as *syncopated* or *unsyncopated* depending on the location of the stress.

SYNCOATED

      |      S      |  
      μ [ μ   μ ] μ  
          ×



# *Gāthā*



## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

Four light syllables can be parsed either way, and hence the location of a word boundary (*yatiḥ*) is important.

UNSYNCOATED		[	μ	μ	]	[	μ	μ	]
			×				×		





# *Gāthā*



## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

Four light syllables can be parsed either way, and hence the location of a word boundary (*yatiḥ*) is important.

UNSYNCOATED

[	μ	μ	]
	×		

SYNCOATED

	⋮			
μ	[	μ	μ	]
		×		



# Gāthā



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## GROUPS (*gaṇāḥ*)

### UNSYNCPATED

### SYNCPATED

*caranāḥ*

SI

ISI

*narēndraḥ*

*karaḥ*

IS

I,III

*vipraḥ*

*karṇaḥ*

SS

*vipraḥ*

IIII



# *Gāthā*



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The boundaries between *groups* always coincide with the boundaries between *syllables*.



# *Gāthā*



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The basic principle of the *gāthā* family of meters is an alternation between unsyncopated and syncopated groups of syllables.



# *Gāthā*



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The last “half group” is always a single syllable, because any syllable at the end of the line is counted as heavy, and therefore as two moras (half of a four-mora group).

(This is a metrical phenomenon called *catalexis*.)



# *Gāthā*



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## First Line

I	2	3	4	5	6	7	7.5
SS	SS	SS	SS	SS	SS	SS	S
SII	SII	SII	SII	SII	SII	SII	I
IIS	IIS	IIS	IIS	IIS	IIS	IIS	
IIII	IIII	IIII	IIII	IIII	IIII	IIII	
ISI	ISI	ISI	ISI	ISI	ISI	ISI	



# *Gāthā*



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---

## First Line

I	2	3	4	5	6	7	7.5
SS	SS	SS	SS	SS	SS	SS	S
SII	SII	SII	SII	SII	SII	SII	I
IIS	IIS	IIS	IIS	IIS	IIS	IIS	
IIII	IIII	IIII	IIII	IIII	IIII	IIII	
	ISI		ISI		ISI		

- ❁ No syncopated groups in the even positions.



# Gāthā



## First Line

I	2	3	4	5	6	7	7.5
SS	SS	SS	SS	SS	I,III	SS	S
SII	SII	SII	SII	SII	ISI	SII	I
IIS	IIS	IIS	IIS	IIS		IIS	
IIII	IIII	IIII	IIII	IIII		IIII	
	ISI		ISI				

- ❖ The sixth position *must* be syncopated.  
(If it is IIII, there must be a word boundary after the first syllable.)





# *Gāthā*



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## Second Line

I	2	3	4	5	6	7	7.5
SS	SS	SS	SS	SS	I	SS	S
SII	SII	SII	SII	SII		SII	I
IIS	IIS	IIS	IIS	IIS		IIS	
IIII	IIII	IIII	IIII	IIII		IIII	
	ISI		ISI				

- Identical to the first, but with a single light syllable in the sixth position.



# *Example*



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*ajja maē gamtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa  
ajjā nimīliacchī paaparivāḍiṃ gharē kuṇai*

“I have to make it to him tonight  
however thick the darkness may be.”

The girl practices her footsteps  
at home with her eyes closed.



# Example



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*ajja* maē gamtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa  
*ajjā* ṇimīliacchī paaparivāḍiṃ gharē kuṇai

“I have to make it to him tonight  
however thick the darkness may be.”

The **girl** practices her footsteps  
at home with her eyes closed.

= *āryā*

(the name of the meter)



# *Example*



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*ajja maē gamtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa  
ajjā nimīliacchī **pa**parivāḍiṃ gharē kuṇai*

“I have to make it to him tonight  
however thick the darkness may be.”

The girl practices her **footsteps**  
at home with her eyes closed.

= ‘sequence of words’

# The Essential **ISLEY BROTHERS**





# *Example*



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*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



# *Example*



I  
┌───┐  
S I I

*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



# *Example*



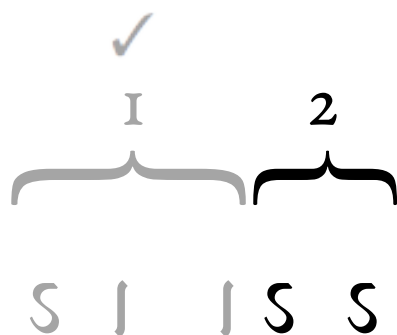
✓  
I  
┌───┐  
S I I

*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*





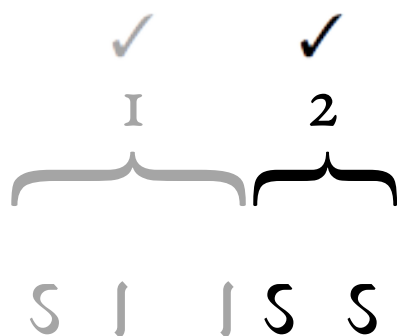
# *Example*



*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



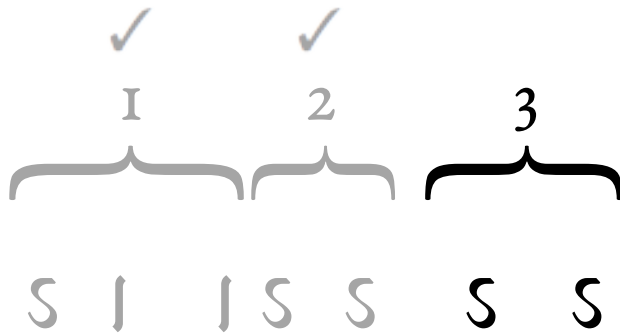
# *Example*



*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



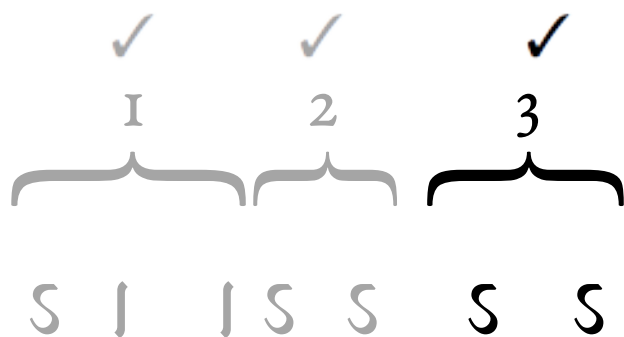
# *Example*



*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



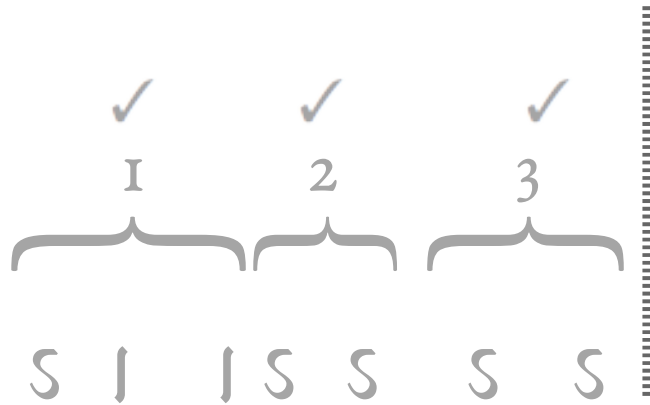
# *Example*



*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



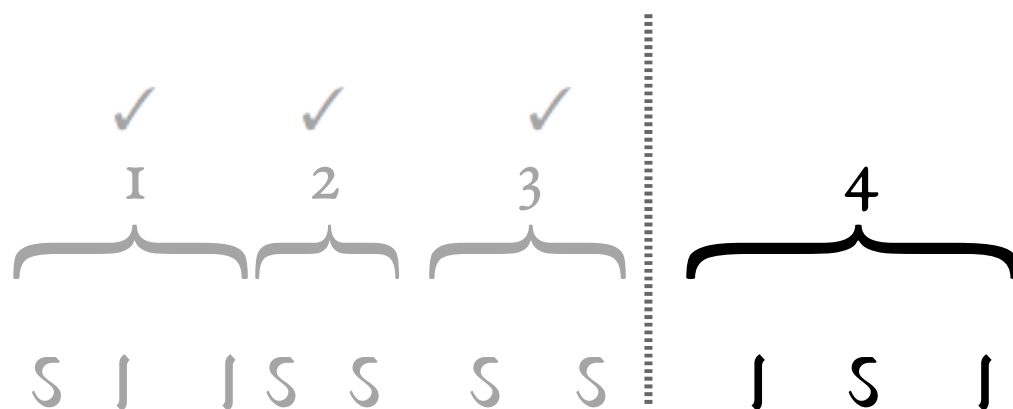
# *Example*



*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



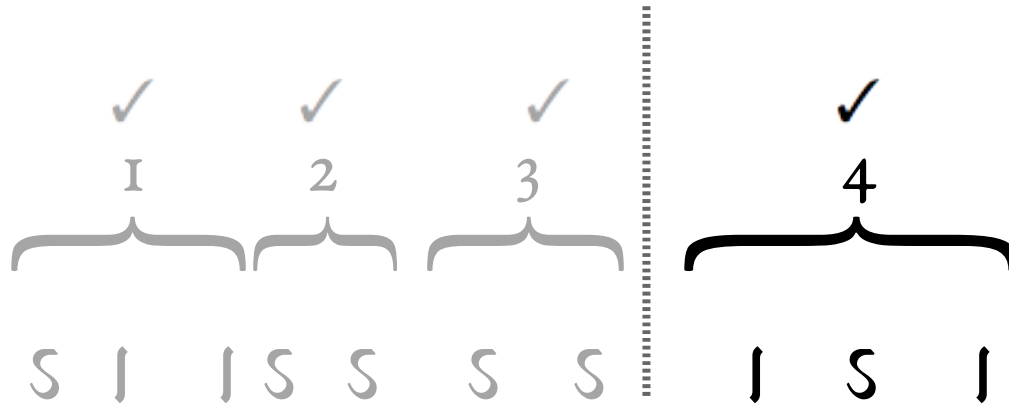
# Example



*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



# Example



*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



# Example

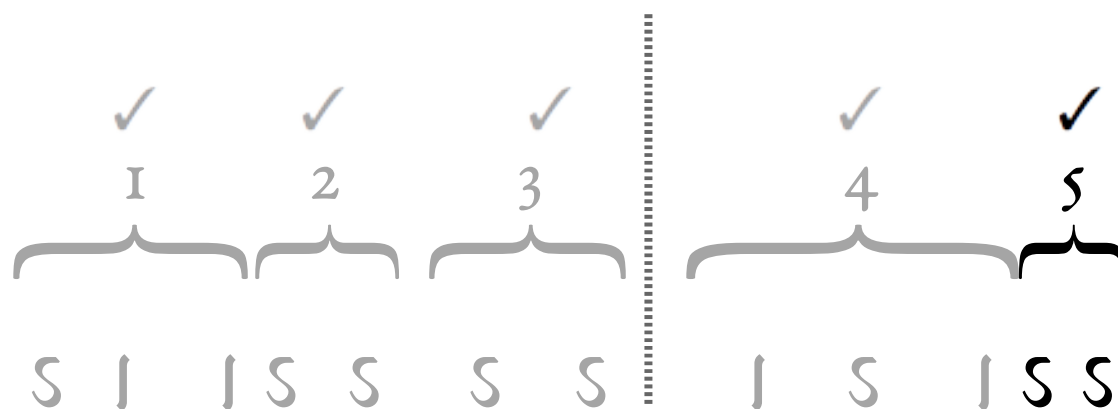


*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*





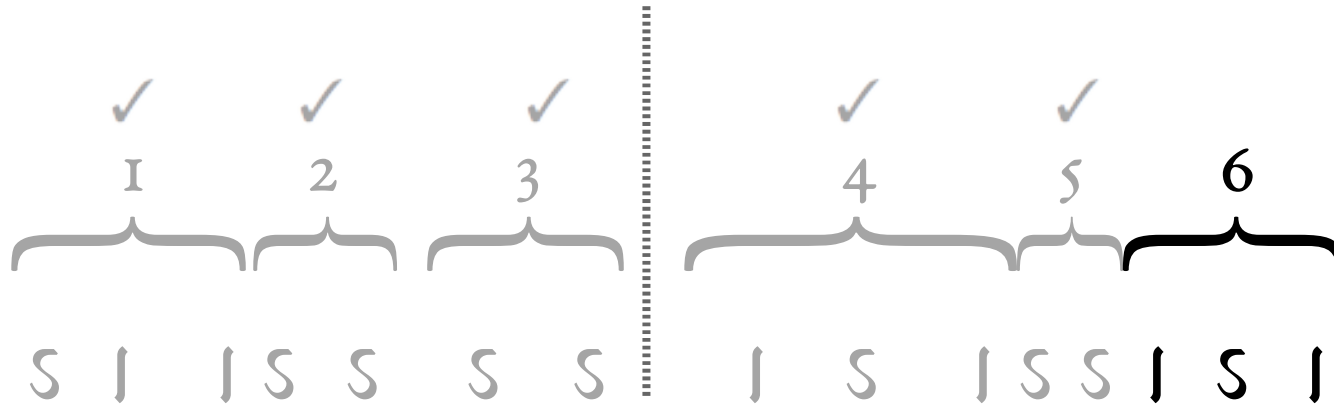
# Example



*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



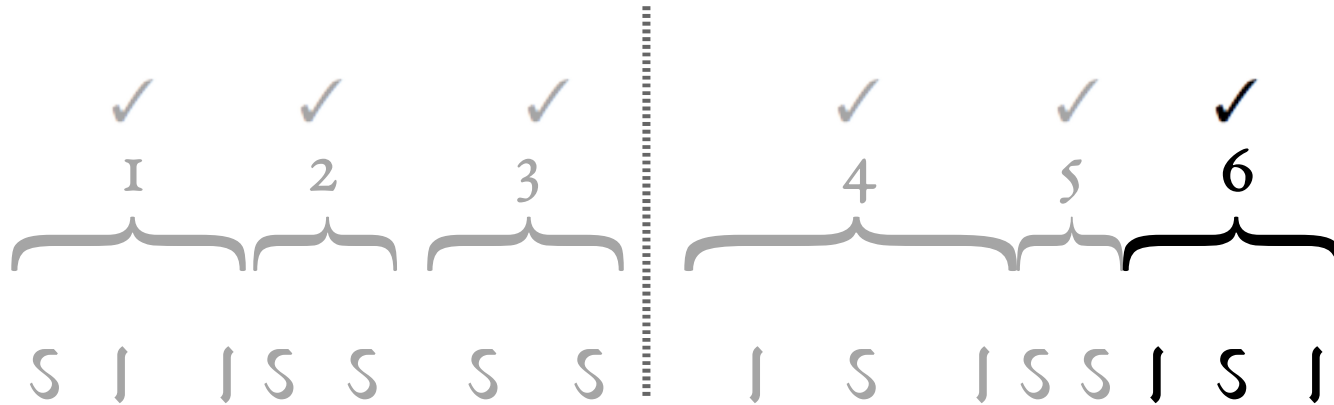
# Example



*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



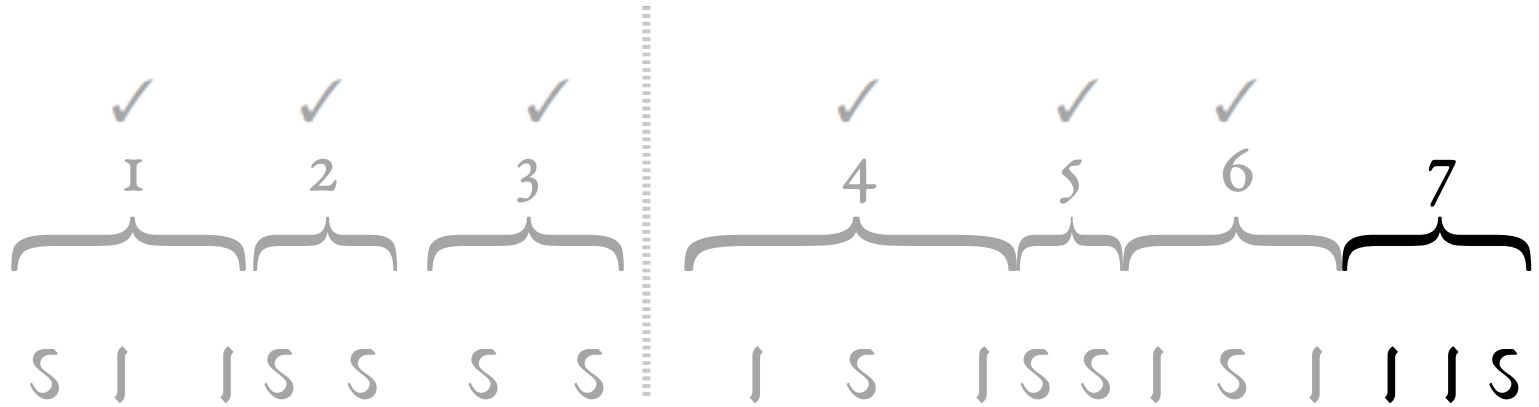
# Example



*ajja maē gaṁtavvaṁ ghaṇaṁdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



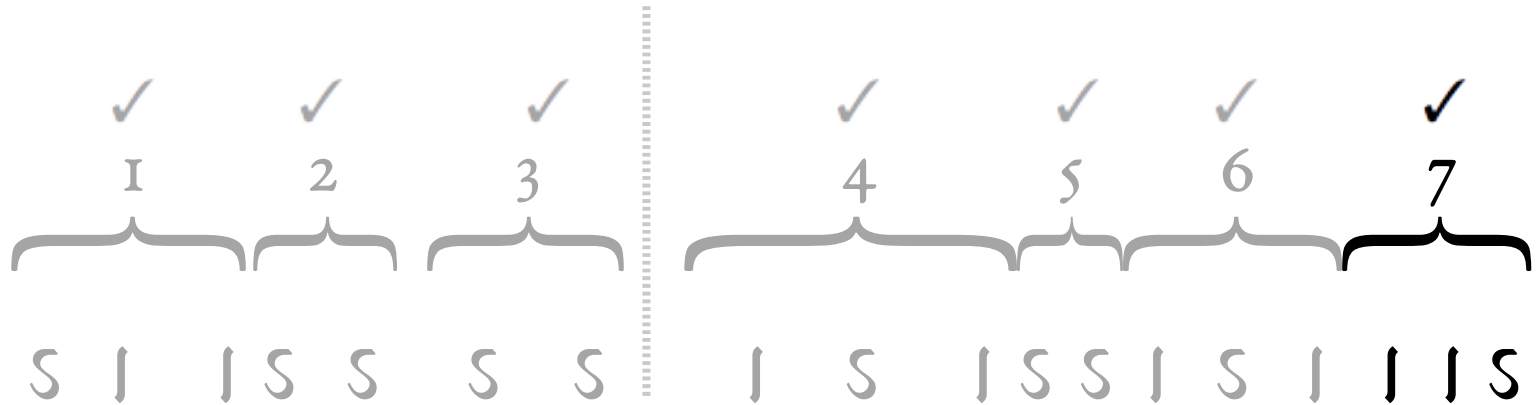
# Example



*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



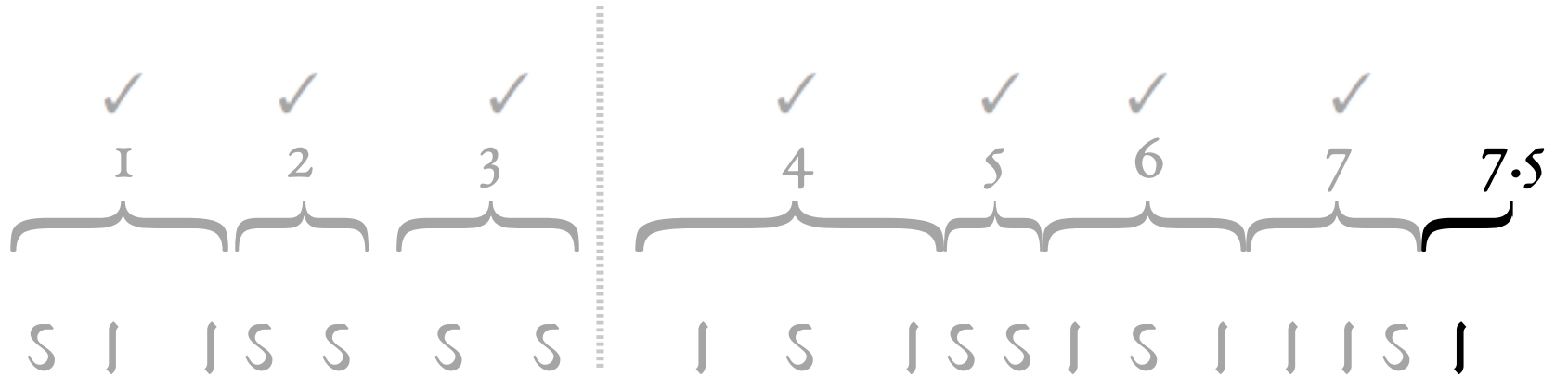
# Example



*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



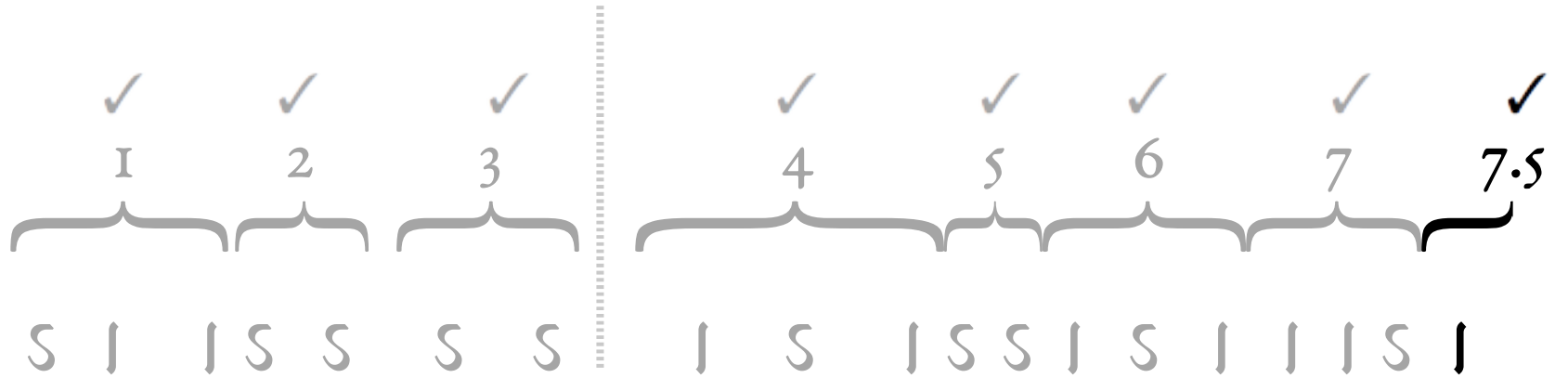
# Example



*ajja maē gaṁtavvaṁ ghaṇaṁdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



# Example



*ajja maē gaṃtavvaṃ ghaṇaṃdhaārē vi tassa suhaassa*



# *Example*



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*ajjā ṇimīliacchī paaparivāḍim̐ gharē kuṇai*





# *Example*



I  
└───┘

S S

*ajjā ṇimīliacchī paaparivāḍim̐ gharē kuṇai*



# *Example*

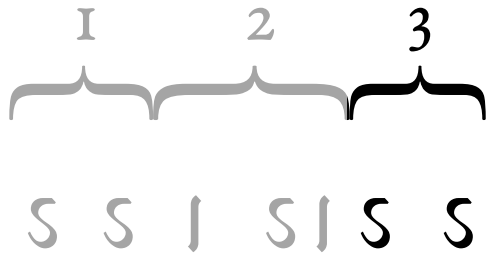


I 2  
S S I SI

*ajjā ṇimīliacchī paaparivāḍim̐ gharē kuṇai*



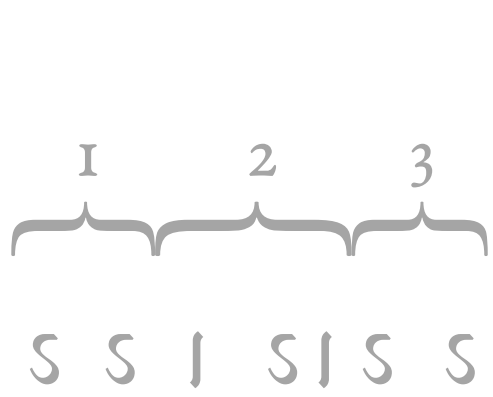
# *Example*



*ajjā ṇimīliacchī paaparivāḍim̐ gharē kuṇai*



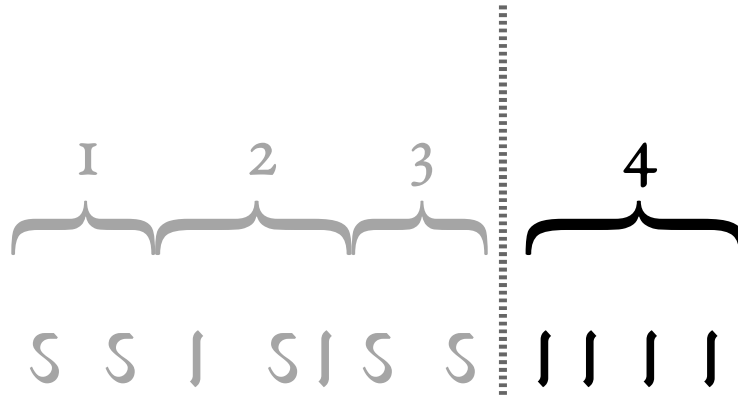
# *Example*



*ajjā ṇimīliacchī paaparivāḍim̐ gharē kuṇai*



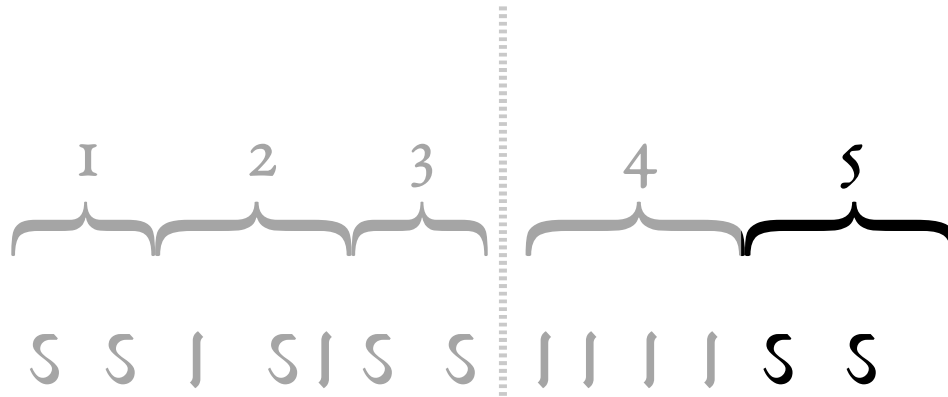
# *Example*



*ajjā ṇimīliacchī paaparivāḍiṃ gharē kuṇai*



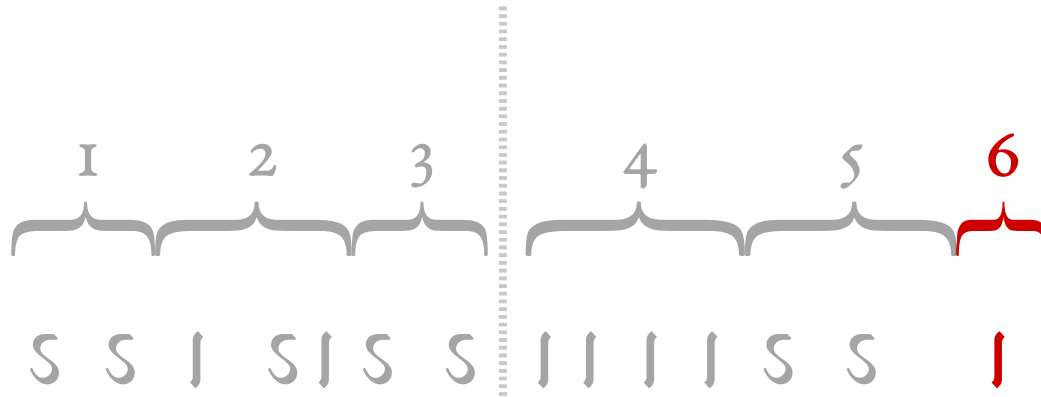
# *Example*



*ajjā ṇimīliacchī paaparivāḍim gharē kuṇai*



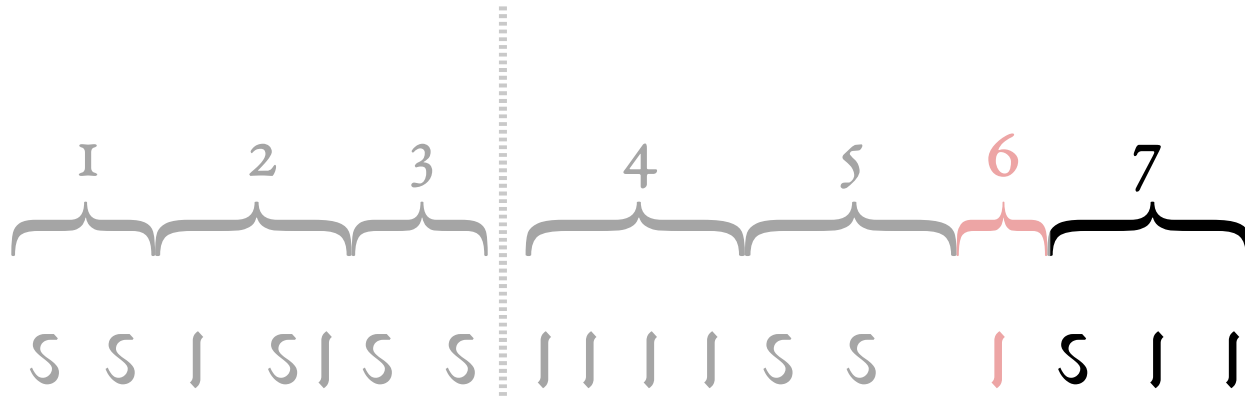
# Example



*ajjā nimīliacchī paaparivāḍim̐ gharē kuṇai*



# Example

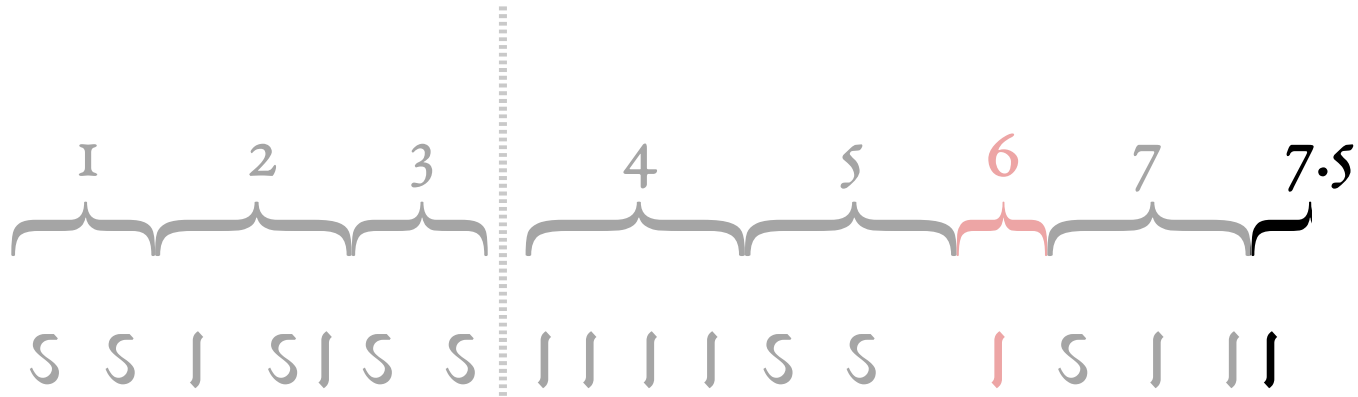


*ajjā nimīliacchī paaparivāḍim̐ gharē kuṇai*

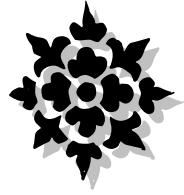




# Example



*ajjā ṇimīliacchī paaparivāḍim̐ gharē kuṇai*



समते

