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Spanish versification: syllables

Spanish poetry is typically based on the number of syllables (*sílabas*) per line (*verso*), and not the number and type of “feet” per line as in English poetry. In order to know how to count syllables, you first must know:

1. The “weak” vowels in Spanish are **i** and **u**; the strong vowels are **a**, **e**, and **o**. Whenever a weak vowel occurs immediately before or after another vowel in a Spanish word it merges with that vowel to form a single syllable (unless it is made a separate syllable, as indicated by a written accent mark). Thus **Dios** and **Juan** are one-syllable words, but **dí-a** and **pú-a** contain two syllables. When strong vowels occur next to each other inside a Spanish word, separate syllables are formed: **po-e-ta** = three syllables.
2. The stressed syllable in a correctly-spelled Spanish word is: a) the syllable indicated by the accent mark, if one is used [exceptions: adverbs formed by adding **-mente** to an adjective which requires an accent mark, e.g. **rápidamente**]; b) the next-to-the-last syllable if the word ends in a vowel or **-n** or **-s**; c) the last syllable if the word ends in a consonant other than **-n** or **-s**. Obviously, if the word consists of only one syllable, that syllable is the stressed one.
3. When a word ends in a vowel and the following word begins with a vowel, the two vowels are normally joined into a single syllable for purposes of counting poetic syllables. This linking of vowels across word boundaries is called synalepha, or **sinalefa** in Spanish. For example: **la_od-a** = two syllables; **va_a_ha-cer** = two syllables. Note that: a) the letter **h** does not prevent synalepha; b) this phenomenon affects strong vowels as well as weak ones; and c) that more than two words may be involved.

The basic rule for determining the number of syllables in a line is (after noting any cases of **sinalefa** or **poetic license**): **Count up to and including the stressed syllable of the last word and add one more.** It doesn't matter if any other written syllables actually follow that last stressed one for the poetic syllable count. (An [alternate method](#) of counting syllables is given below.) Here are some examples of lines of Spanish poetry.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 + 1 = 8 (eight syllables, NOT seven)
la mañana de San **Juan**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 + 1 = 8 (eight syllables)
todas las aves del **cielo**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 + 1 = 8 (eight syllables, NOT nine)
Inés estaba la **brándolo**

Here are examples of lines containing synalepha:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 + 1 = 8
va_a dar agua_**a** su caballo

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 + 1 = 8
la nave vuelve_**hacia**_allá

Poetic license: Occasionally, a poet will use poetic license (*licencia poética*) and disregard the normal rules so he/she can come up with the appropriate number of syllables in a line (“It’s my poem, so I’ll

decide whether or not to follow the rules”). Three examples of poetic license are dieresis, syneresis, and hiatus:

1. **Syneresis** (*la sinéresis*) is the joining of two vowels within a word to form a single syllable instead of two syllables:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 + 1 = 11
 Héroes sin redención y sin historia (The **o** and **e** of “Héroes” are merged into one syllable instead of the usual two.)

2. **Dieresis** (*la diéresis*) is the separating of two vowels within a word which would normally form one syllable, a diphthong. Remember that **i** and **u** are weak vowels in Spanish and normally form diphthongs when they come in contact with other vowels unless they bear a written accent or dieresis mark:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 + 1 = 11
 con su cantar süave no_aprendido (The **u** of “suave” is made into a separate syllable instead of forming a diphthong with **a**.)

3. **Hiatus** (*el hiato*) is the separating of two vowels at word boundaries which would normally form one syllable because of synalepha:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 + 1 = 11
 Una | ola tras otra bramadora (“Una” and “ola” are separated into four syllables instead of three: Una_ola.)

Note that the safest way to determine the number of syllables in the lines (*el cómputo silábico*) of a Spanish poem is to pick lines where there is no chance for synalepha, dieresis, syneresis, or hiatus, and count the number of syllables in them.

Special case: Lines with caesura: If a very long line is involved (14 syllables or more), it will normally be divided into two half-lines or hemistiches (*hemistiquios*), divided by a pause or break called a caesura (*cesura*). In this case, to determine the total number of syllables for a line, you must count the number of syllables for each hemistich and then add those two numbers together.

1 2 3 4 5 6+1=7 1 2 3 4 5 6+1=7 7 + 7 = 14
 nunca_una sola vez, || jamás era_olvidada (14 syl. line)

Most frequently line lengths: In theory, there may be any number of syllables per line, as long as it’s more than one. The most frequently occurring ones are lines of 6, 7, 8, 11, 14, and 16 syllables. Except for modern free verse, all the lines in a poem normally have the same number of syllables; however, some poems may include lines of both 7 and 11 syllables.

Practice

Determine the number of syllables per line in the following selections. [[Answers](#) are given at the bottom of this page.]

1. From “La mozueta de Bores”, by el Marqués de Santillana:

Señora, pastor
seré si queredes;
mandarme podedes,
como a servidor.

Number of syllables: _____

2. From “Soneto X”, by Garcilaso de la Vega

¡Oh dulces prendas por mi mal halladas,
dulces y alegres cuando Dios quería!
Juntas estáis en la memoria mía,
y con ella en mi muerte conjuradas.

Number of syllables: _____

3. From “Noche serena”, by Fray Luis de León:

¿Quién es el que esto mira,
y precia la bajeza de la tierra,
y no gime, y suspira
por romper lo que encierra
el alma, y de estos bienes la destierra?

Number of syllables: _____

4. From the anonymous “Romance de la mora Moraima”:

Yo me era mora Moraima,
morilla de un bel catar;
cristiano vino a mi puerta,
cuitada, por me engañar.
Hablóme en algarabía
como aquél que la bien sabe.

Number of syllables: _____

5. From *El libro de buen amor*, by Juan Ruiz, el Arcipreste de Hita:

¡Oh María
luz del día
sé mi guía

toda vía.

Number of syllables: _____

6. From *Los milagros de Nuestra Señora*, by Gonzalo de Berceo:

Dieron gracias a Dios de buena voluntad.
a la santa Reína la madre de piedad,
quien hizo tal milagro por su benignidad,
por quien está más firme toda la cristiandad.

Number of syllables: _____

7. From “El Cuervo y el Zorro”, by Félix María de Samaniego:

En la rama de un árbol,
bien ufano y contento,
con un queso en el pico,
estaba el señor Cuervo.

Number of syllables: _____

8. From *El libro de buen amor*, by Juan Ruiz, el Arcipreste de Hita:

Todos cuantos en su tiempo en esta tierra nacieron,
en riqueza y cualidades tanto como él no crecieron;
con los locos se hace loco, los cuerdos le enaltecieron,
es manso más que un cordero, pelear nunca le vieron.

Number of syllables: _____

[Answers](#)

Alternate Method of Counting Syllables

In case you're interested, here's the other way of determining how many syllables are in a line of Spanish poetry, although it's a little more complicated to explain. First, you should know some more terms:

Agudo: A **palabra aguda** (or a **verso agudo**) is stressed on the last (**última**) syllable, for example **habló, reloj, Dios**.

Llano: A **palabra llana** (or a **verso llano**) is stressed on the next-to-the-last (**penúltima**) syllable, for example **hablo, cárcel, dioses**.

Esdrújulo: A **palabra esdrújula** (or a **verso esdrújulo**) is stressed on the third-from-the-last syllable, for example **hablándome, propósito**, and the word **esdrújulo** itself.

Sobresdrújulo: A **palabra sobresdrújula** (or a **verso sobresdrújulo**) is stressed on the fourth-from-the-last syllable, for example **diciéndomelo, páguenselas**. [This is extremely rare at the end of a verse, but it is possible.]

The alternate rule for determining the number of syllables in a line is (after noting any cases of [sinalefa](#) or [poetic license](#)): **Count all the syllables in the line and add one if the verse is *agudo*, or subtract one if the verse is *esdrújulo* (or subtract two if the verse is *sobresdrújulo*).** If the verse is **llano**, you don't add or subtract anything to the count. Here are the same examples given above for the [simpler rule](#):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 + 1 = 8 (add one to a **verso agudo**)
la mañana de San **Juan**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 = 8 (**verso llano**)
todas las aves del **cielo**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 - 1 = 8 (subtract one from a **verso esdrújulo**)
Inés estaba la **brándolo**

Answers for the [practice](#): 1: 6. 2: 11. 3: 7 and 11. 4: 8. 5: 4. 6: 14 (7+7). 7: 7. 8: 16 (8+8)

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