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MTO 26.2 Examples: Adams, Harmonic, Syntactic, and Motivic Parameters of Phrase in Hip-Hop

(Note: audio, video, and other interactive examples are only available online)

<https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.adams.html>

Example 1a. Kurtis Blow, “Basketball” (1984), verse 1, 0:25–0:35 (borrowed from [Adams 2009](#))

Rhyme structure is 2+2; syntactical structure is 1 + 1 + 2:

Basketball is my favorite sport.
I like the way they dribble up and down the court.
Just like I’m the king on the microphone,
so is Doctor J and Moses Malone.

Example 1b. Eric B. and Rakim, “Paid in Full” (1987), 0:46–1:10

Syntactical groupings override rhyme groupings (rhymes are in bold):

I used to roll up: this is a hold up, ain’t nothin’ funny, stop smilin’.
Be still, don’t nothin’ move but the money.
But now I learn to earn ‘cause I’m **righteous**.
I feel great, so maybe I **might just** search for a 9 to 5.
If I strive, then maybe I’ll stay alive.
So I walk up the street, whistlin’ this.
Feelin’ out of place, ‘cause man do I miss a pen and a paper, a stereo a tape or...

Example 3. Danger Doom, “Sofa King” (from *The Mouse and the Mask*, 2005), 1:12–1:48
(produced by Danger Mouse [Brian Burton])

Musical score for "Sofa King" showing parts for Violin, Bass, Drums, Vln., Bass, D. S., Flute, Vln., Bass, and D. S. in 4/4 time with a key signature of four flats. The score consists of six staves of music, each with a different instrument. The instruments are: Violin, Bass, Drums, Vln., Bass, D. S., Flute, Vln., Bass, and D. S. The music is divided into measures, with measure numbers 1, 5, and 9 indicated above the staves. The Violin and Bass parts are primarily rhythmic patterns, while the Drums, Vln., Bass, and D. S. parts provide harmonic and rhythmic support. The Flute and Vln. parts provide melodic lines. The score is set against a background of a repeating eighth-note pattern on the Bass and D. S. staves.

Example 4. Repetitive beat: De La Soul, “The Grind Date” (from *The Grind Date*, 2005), 0:28–0:49 (produced by Dave West)



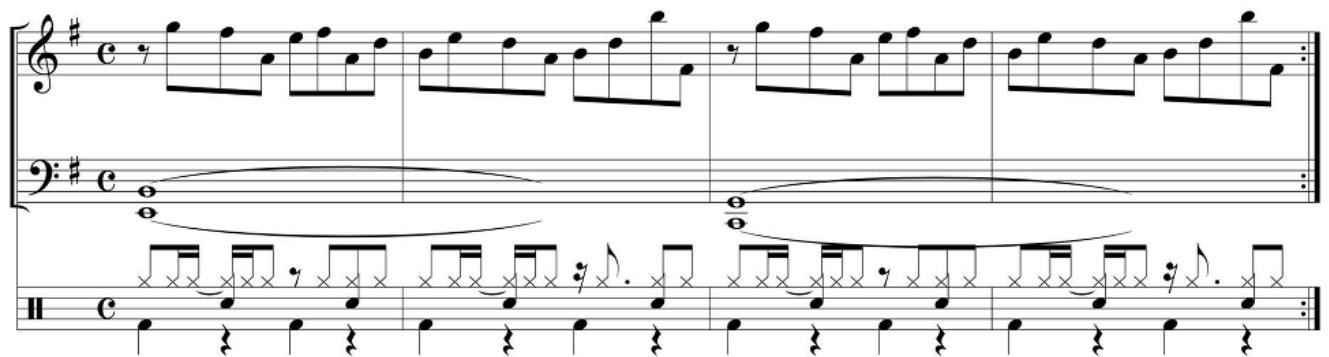
Musical notation for Example 4. The top staff is in treble clef, 4/4 time, and A major (two sharps). It shows a repetitive pattern of eighth-note pairs. The middle staff is in bass clef, 4/4 time, and A major. The bottom staff is in bass clef, 4/4 time, and C major (one sharp). It shows a repetitive pattern of eighth-note pairs with a bass drum on the second beat of each measure.

Example 5a. Oscillating beat, alternating by second: A Tribe Called Quest, “Excursions” (from *The Low End Theory*, 1990), 0:28–0:52 (produced by Ali Shaheed Muhammad)



Musical notation for Example 5a. The top staff is in bass clef, 4/4 time, and C major. It shows a continuous eighth-note pattern with a bass drum on the second beat of each measure. The bottom staff is in bass clef, 4/4 time, and C major. It shows a continuous eighth-note pattern with a bass drum on the second beat of each measure.

Example 5b. Oscillating beat, alternating by third: Aesop Rock (Ian Bavitz), “None Shall Pass” (from *None Shall Pass*, 2007), 0:15–0:34 (produced by Blockhead [Tony Simon])



Musical notation for Example 5b. The top staff is in treble clef, common time, and C major. It shows a continuous eighth-note pattern with a bass drum on the second beat of each measure. The middle staff is in bass clef, common time, and C major. It shows a continuous eighth-note pattern with a bass drum on the second beat of each measure. The bottom staff is in bass clef, common time, and C major. It shows a continuous eighth-note pattern with a bass drum on the second beat of each measure.

Example 5c. Oscillating beat, alternating by fourth: People under the Stairs, “Montego Slay” (from *O.S.T.*, 2002), 0:20–0:44 (produced by Thes One [Christopher Portugal])

Example 5d. Oscillating beat, sequential: Cunninlynguists, “Lynguistics” (from *Will Rap for Food*, 2001), 0:18–0:46 (produced by Kno [Ryan Wisler])

Example 5e. Oscillating beat, uneven: Migos, “Bad and Boujee,” (from *Culture*, 2017), 0:15–0:30 (produced by DY and Tre Pounds [Dwan Avery and Jeffrey LaCroix])

Example 6a. Expansional beat, I → iv: Atmosphere, “The Best Day” (from *To All My Friends, Blood Makes the Blade Holy: The Atmosphere EP’s* [sic], 2010), 2:17–2:41 (produced by Ant [Anthony Davis])

Musical score for Example 6a. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of seven sharps. It features four staves: Piano (top), Guitar, Bass, and Drums. The piano part consists of a continuous series of eighth-note chords. The guitar part starts with a single eighth note, followed by a rest, then a sixteenth-note pattern. The bass part has a single eighth note followed by a rest. The drums provide a steady eighth-note pattern. The score includes performance instructions: '(end)' under the guitar's first measure, '(2x)' above the guitar's second measure, '(2x)' above the bass's second measure, and '(2x only)' above the drums' second measure.

Example 6b. Expansional beat, i → v: The Pharcyde, “Passin’ Me By” (from *Bizarre Ride II the Pharcyde*, 1993), 0:23–0:39 (produced by J-Swift [Juan Martinez])

Musical score for Example 6b. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of two sharps. It features two staves: Bass (top) and Drum Set (bottom). The bass part consists of eighth-note chords. The drum set part features a pattern of eighth-note strokes on the hi-hat, with 'x' marks indicating specific strokes. The score shows a continuous sequence of these patterns across the measures.

Example 6c. Expansional beat, complete progression (i → iv → II⁷ -> V): Danger Doom, "Sofa King"



Example 6d. Expansional beat, closed: Atmosphere, "Godlovesugly" (from *God Loves Ugly*, 2002), 0:39–0:50 (produced by Ant [Anthony Davis])



Example 7a. The Chicharones, “Blessing in Disguise” (from *Boss Hogs*, 2007), 1:30–1:43
(produced by Josh Martinez [Matthew Kimber])

Musical score for Example 7a. The score consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle staff is in bass clef, and the bottom staff is in a clef that looks like a bass clef with a '2' in it. The time signature is 4/4. The first two measures show eighth-note patterns in the treble and bass staves. The third measure shows sixteenth-note patterns in the treble and bass staves. The fourth measure shows eighth-note patterns in the treble and bass staves. The bottom staff has 'x' and 'x' marks above the notes, indicating specific drumming patterns.

Example 7b. Bahamadia, “Spontaneity” (from *Kollage*, 1996), 0:21–0:46, (produced by “Da Beatminerz”)

Musical score for Example 7b. The score consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle staff is in bass clef, and the bottom staff is labeled “Drum Set”. The time signature is 4/4. The first measure shows eighth-note patterns in the treble and bass staves. The second measure shows sixteenth-note patterns in the treble and bass staves. The third measure shows eighth-note patterns in the treble and bass staves. The fourth measure shows sixteenth-note patterns in the treble and bass staves. A curved line with two dots at the end points from the top staff to the “Drum Set” staff, indicating a direct correspondence between the two.

Example 8. Jurassic 5, “Jurass Finish First” (from *Quality Control*, 2000), 0:18–0:39 (produced by DJ Nu-Mark [Mark Potsic])

Drum Set

(2x only)

Example 9a. Change from open to closed expansional beat: Jemini, “Medieval” (from *Ghetto Pop Life*, 2003), 0:42–1:15

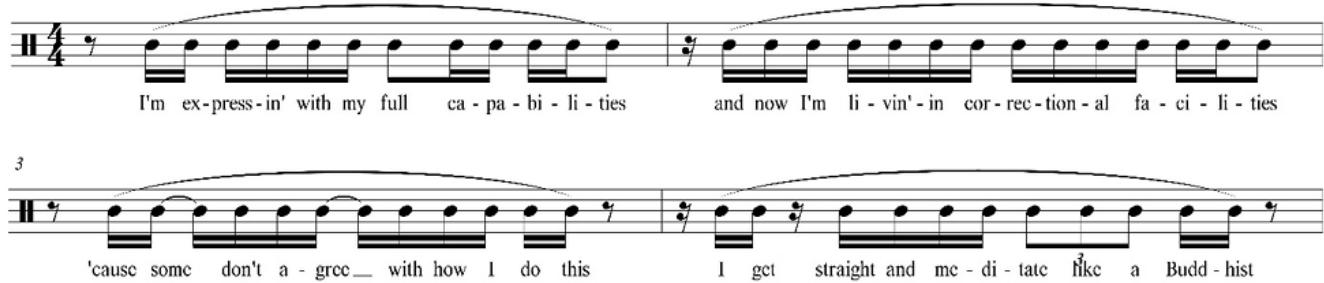
- First part of beat = open (i → V)

- Second part of beat = closed (i → i)

Example 9b. Expansional beat, closed (a a' b a''): Noname, "Self" (from *Room 25*, 2018), 0:22–1:03
(produced by Phoelix)



Example 10. Syntactical alignment: N.W.A., "Express Yourself" (from *Straight Outta Compton*, 1988), 0:10–0:31 (rapper: Dr. Dre [Andre Young])



Example 11. Syntactical misalignment: Andre Nickatina + Equipto, "Lost Hawks" (from *The Gift*, 2005), 0:58–1:20 (rapper: Andre Nickatina [Andre L. Adams])

4

You know I spit tech - nique to the fresh-est freak give me a call you'll see re-sults in just a week with the
(grammatical units and accented syllables are misaligned with measures)

7

soul of a lost hawk: Is there a hea-ven for a rap cat let's talk? Be-cause it's hell for a rap cat, let's walk. Watch your spi-rit get
knocked out the ball park. Gold dig-gers they af - ter me— it's a cat-as - tro - phe, talk-in' shit in the Cheese - cake Fac - to - ry?!

Example 12. Rhythmic/melodic motive aligned with rhyme: Cunninlynguists, "616 Rewind," (From *Will Rap for Food*, 2000), 0:27–1:05 (rapper: Tone Deff [Pedro Rojas])

Motive: cseg <2 3 1 0>

scene's back-lit or seems sta-tic we'll wreak ha-voc we'll beat bat-ter to keep rap-pin' a leech bat-tle a dream shat-tered for three na-no-sec-onds

Lyrics (motivic phrase italicized):

First I sprinkle the verse
By addin' words, rhymes
Flippin' 'em in a verse with lines
Then I'mma hit 'em disperse rhyme
Venom and then I'mma split 'em in half
Feelin' my wrath
Venturin' through parts of the South so dirty
You'll want to be given a bath
It's livin' a pathological lie to deny that I'm nice
And the truth hurts
Wearin' a blue shirt the Best Buy for the price
To get six guys this live and nice on the mic
So don't diss us because we're fly
It's a good try but it's like

I'm liable to slice at these emcee bastards
Leaving their knees fractured
Needin' every piece of their teeth re-crafted
So don't front cause I see past it
You're harmless like Wolverine's adamantium claws
When they're retracted
If the scene's backlit
Or seems static / we'll wreak havoc /
We'll beat batter / to keep rappin' /
A leech battle / a dream shattered /
For three nano/seconds [damn]
Count your paces, one step to Tone Deff
You're Gone in Sixty Seconds like Nicolas Cage is

Example 13. Motive reinforced by pitch contour: Cardi B, "Bronx Season" (from *Gangsta Bitch Music Vol. 2*, 2017): 0:46–1:02

Music notation for Cardi B's "Bronx Season" in 4/4 time. The lyrics are: "and don't be talk - in all that sor - ry shit don't flip the script", "I see the lights I hear the hype I hit the mic", "I kill the show I get my dough I catch a flight", "I see a hat - er I'm run - nin' down it's on - sight", "I throw my hands I hit 'em left I hit 'em right", and "they sleep - in on me just be - cause I used to strip but it's". The notation uses vertical lines to indicate pitch contours.

Example 14. Verse subdivided by the use of two contrasting motives: Run the Jewels, "Oh My Darling Don't Cry" (from Run the Jewels 2, 2015): 1:29–1:42 (rapper: Killer Mike [Michael Render])

Music notation for Run the Jewels' "Oh My Darling Don't Cry" in 4/4 time. The lyrics are: "I fuck and rap, I tote the strap, I smoke the kush, I beat the puss, I", "read the books did the math don't need a preach - er preach - in on my be - half, No", "teacher can teach my arr - o - gant ass I'm blow - in on 6 crip - py while read - in in 6 scrip - tions that's", "writ by E 6 gyp - tians and sip - pin on 6 whis - key", and "3 hey ba - by you 6 with me?". The notation uses vertical lines labeled 'x' and 'y' to indicate two contrasting motives.

Example 15. The Chicharones, “Blessing in Disguise” (2007), 2:43–3:23 (rapper: Josh Martinez [Matthew Kimber])

The image shows a musical score for two parts: 'REPETITIVE BEAT' and 'EXPANSIONAL BEAT'. The score consists of four staves. The top two staves are for 'REPETITIVE BEAT' and the bottom two are for 'EXPANSIONAL BEAT'. The 'REPETITIVE BEAT' section features a treble clef, a common time signature, and a dynamic of $\frac{3}{4}$. It includes a instruction '(repeat 8x)' and a 16th-note pattern. The 'EXPANSIONAL BEAT' section features a bass clef, a common time signature, and a dynamic of $\frac{2}{4}$. It includes a 16th-note pattern and a 32nd-note pattern. The bottom two staves are for 'EXPANSIONAL BEAT' and feature a bass clef, a common time signature, and a dynamic of $\frac{2}{4}$. They also include a 16th-note pattern and a 32nd-note pattern.

R Slinkin' through the night on the brink of something great,
I've given up everything for this one second
and I'll never make a list where I state all my nevers,
cause some things for me need to be forever.

E You can't kid a kidder, you can't yoke the joker,
I'm an entertainer and a secondhand smoker.
Been a center focus, my inner child opus rises
Hope is eye to eye with truth, no surprises

E I'm a *Vanna White* letter turner | *Better Ted Turner, letter* |
| writer book burner had a | matchbook ready
Knight Rider sleeping bag with matching bed and I got
Flowers on my pillow, pull the t-shirt on my head, and when I'm

R sleepin' (I'm thinkin') I'm dreamin' (no dreamin')
On the brink some days, and goin' crazy in ways.
Some succumb with age in the dumb day's mind
I don't sleep 'cause sleep is the cousin of wasted time

← four-measure sentence in the lyrics overrides repetitive beat; defines a four-bar phrase.

← 1 + 1 + 2 organization in the lyrics supports new 4-bar expansional beat

← sudden acceleration in the lyrics created by 2-beat motive takes control from the beat, defines 1.5-bar phrase

← beat and lyrics realign, one-beat lyrical repetition matches one-beat repetitions in the music

Example 16. Mos Def, “Auditorium” (from *The Ecstatic*, 2009), 0:14–0:48 (produced by Madlib [Otis Jackson, Jr.])

- 1.1 The way I feel, sometimes it's too hard to sit still.
- 1.2 Things are so passionate, times are so real.
- 1.3 Sometimes I try and chill, mellow down, blowin' smoke.
- 1.4 Smile on my face but it's really no joke.
- 2.1 You feel it in the streets, people breathe without hope.
- 2.2 They goin' through the motion, they dimmin' down the focus.
- 2.3 The focus gets clear and the light turn sharp
- 2.4 and the eyes grow teary, the mind grow weary.
- 3.1 I speak it so clearly sometimes y'all don't hear me.
- 3.2 I push it past the bass, know nations gotta feel me.
- 3.3 I feel it in my bones, black I'm so wide awake
- 3.4 that I'm hardly ever sleep. My flow forever deep,
- 4.1 and it's volumes or scriptures when I breathe on a beat.
- 4.2 My presence speak volumes before I say a word. I'm
- 4.3 everywhere: penthouse, pavement and curb.**
- 4.4 Cradle to the grave, tall cathedral or a shell,**
- 5.1 universal ghetto life, holla black you know it well.**
- 5.2 *quiet storm*|*vital form*|*pen pushed it right across*
- 5.3 *mind is a vital force*|*high level right across*
- 5.4 *soul is the lions roar*|*voice is the siren (...)*
- 6.1 I swing round, ring out and bring down the tyrant.
- 6.2 Chop a small axe and knock a giant lopsided.
- 6.3 The world is so dangerous, there's no need for fightin'.
- 6.4 Suckas trying to hide like the struggle won't find 'em,
- 7.1 and the sun bust through the clouds to clearly remind 'em its
- 7.2 everywhere: penthouse, pavement, and curb.**
- 7.3 Cradle to the grave, tall cathedral or a shell,**
- 7.4 universal ghetto life, holla black you know it well.**

← Beat defines a four-bar phrase.

← Two-measure sentence begins to undermine the beat, but still ends at the same time as the hypermeasure.
 ← Overlapping rhyme scheme combined with single-bar syntactical units helps destabilize the hypermeter.
 ← Two 1.5-measure sentences displace the syntax against the beat.

← As a result of the earlier displacement, three-bar refrain is now misaligned with the beat.

← Italicized rhythmic motive strongly defines a three-bar phrase, bringing the lyrics back into alignment with the beat.

← Return to single-measure sentences supports the beat again.

← Three-bar refrain now properly aligned with the beat.