



Poetic rhyme reflects cross-linguistic differences in information structure

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ABSTRACT

Identical rhymes (right/write, attire/retire) are considered satisfactory and even artistic in French poetry but are considered unsatisfactory in English. This has been a consistent generalization over the course of centuries, a surprising fact given that other aspects of poetic form in French were happily applied in English. This paper puts forward the hypothesis that this difference is not merely one of poetic tradition, but is grounded in the distinct ways in which information-structure affects prosody in the two languages. A study of rhyme usage in poetry and a perception experiment confirm that native speakers' intuitions about rhyming in the two languages indeed differ, and a further perception experiment supports the hypothesis that this fact is due to a constraint on prosody that is active in English but not in French. The findings suggest that certain forms of artistic expression in poetry are influenced, and even constrained, by more general properties of a language.

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1. Rhymes, identical and other

Rhymes can be defined as a pair of words that are phonologically identical from the last accented vowel to the end of a word (light/night); they typically occur at the end of a line in poetry (Fabb, 1997, 118). Identical rhyme—a rhyme in which the syllable onsets preceding the accented vowels are identical (write/right, attire/retire)—is commonly used in French poetry, while in English poetry it is considered to be “unconventional and even unacceptable” (Small, 1990, 141) and to “fall ridiculously flat” (Hollander, 1985, 118).

Poetic devices such as rhyme and alliteration (words beginning with the same onsets) have been argued to not just enhance aesthetic experience but also to affect comprehension and recall (Lea, Rapp, Elfenbein, Mitchel, & Romine, 2008). Allopenna, Magnuson, and Tanenhaus (1998) found that rhyming competitors are activated in word recognition, suggesting that rhyme plays a role in the organi-

zation of the mental lexicon. Steriade (2008) presents evidence that rhymes are relevant for the phonology of a language even outside of poetry. None of these extra-poetic functions of rhyme, however, have been shown to explain the cross-linguistic differences between what counts as a good rhyme.

Hollander (1989, 14) employs an instance of a rhyme consisting of two homophonous words—a special case of an identical rhyme—in order to advise against its usage:

- (1) The weakest way in which two words can chime
Is with the most expected kind of rhyme—
(If it's the only rhyme that you can write,
A homophone will never sound quite right.)

Holtman (1996, 187) and Small (1990) argue that the scarce uses of identical rhyme attested in English generally reveal an awareness that they violate an expectation. This is similar to a conscious violation of a metrical expectation in order to convey a poetic effect, which is sometimes seen in poetry with a fixed meter (Halle & Keyser, 1971). In other words, both the scarcity and the nature of use of identical rhyme in English poetry reflect its stigmatized status. An antipathy for identical rhyme in English may have existed

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as early as 1584, when King James issued a treatise proscribing the practice: “That ye ryme nocht twyse in ane syl-labe. As for exemple, that ye make not prove and reprove rhyme together, nor hove for hoveing on hors bak, and behove.” (see [Rait, 1900](#) for the original text).

Identical rhymes have to be distinguished from repetitions of the same word, since repetition obeys quite different regularities (and has different poetic effects) from rhyme ([Abernathy, 1967](#)). We will consider only identical rhymes of words that differ in meaning.

Interestingly, it is only identical rhymes, i.e., those rhymes preceded by identical onsets (right/write, called ‘rimes très riches’ in [Hollander, 1985](#)) that are considered weak, while rhymes that merely extend into the onsets but do not have identical onsets (‘rimes riches’: train/rain) are unexceptional and quite commonly used in English:

- (2) I have looked down the saddest city lane.
[...]
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.
From: Robert Frost, *Acquainted with the Night*

In French, in contrast to English, identical rhymes are unexceptional and often said to be even superior to simple rhymes. [Aroui \(2005\)](#) notes that identical rhymes do not seem to be used for a particular effect or with a particular pattern of recurrence, suggesting they are considered normal rhymes.¹ It is easy to find identical rhymes in French poetry, for example they occur quite frequently in the poetry of Émile Nelligan, a poet from Québec:

- (3) [...] vocalise d'une voix d'eau d'or
[...] Soupire et rit dans la nuit qui dort.
From: Émile Nelligan, *Vasque*

The first part of this paper aims to establish that indeed the languages differ in their rhyming repertoire, first by looking at the usage of identical rhymes in English and French, and second by using experimental evidence that native speakers of the two languages sharply differ in their intuitions about the quality of identical rhymes. This difference is surprising given the persistent influence of French poetry on English poetry. The second part of this paper proposes a novel account that relates the difference in identical rhyme usage to a difference in how prosody reflects information structure in the two languages ([Ladd, 2008](#)), and presents supporting experimental evidence for this explanation.

2. French and english poets differ in their use of rhyme: A natural experiment

How different are the usages of rhymes in English and French? Since the poetry produced by individual authors varies along many dimensions, it is not easy to assess whether and to what extent these two languages differ in

their overall use of rhymes, especially since modern poetry often does not employ rhyme at all. In order to quantify the difference in a more controlled way, we looked at translations of a German children's book, Wilhelm Busch's *Max und Moritz* (first published 1865), which comprises 208 couplets, all of which rhyme and none of which are identical rhymes. In German, identical rhymes are considered weak, just like in English.

We chose this particular book because we assumed that the genre of a humorous (albeit a bit gruesome) children's book would allow for a playful use of rhymes, so we expected substantial variation in rhyme usage across different translators. Also, we were confident that there would be a sufficient number of translations into both languages to compare the variability of rhyme usage within a language against the variability across language boundaries. The corpus of translations of this book constitutes a natural experiment in the usage of different rhyme-types.

2.1. Materials and methods

We were able to obtain 6 translations into English and 5 into French (listed in the [Appendix A](#)). Almost all translations were rhymed and consisted of a comparable number of couplets. One French translation was very loose and used hardly any rhymes, so we excluded it from analysis. The other books were scanned, and the text was hand-annotated for rhyme types by the authors and double-checked by a research assistant.

2.2. Results and discussion

The distribution of rhyme in our mini-corpus confirm that there is a dramatic difference in the usage of identical rhymes between the two languages. [Table 1](#) summarizes the usage of rhymes in different translations. In English, many translations have no identical rhymes, like the German original, one had 1 (0.5%) and another 3 (1%). In French, on the other hand, identical rhymes account for 16–36% of all couplets.

This consistent difference in identical rhyme usage between all English and French translators contrasts with the usage of ‘rimes riches’ in the same translations. Rimes riches are used with comparable frequency across all three languages (an average of 3.5% of the rhymes in the English translations and 2.8% in French, compared to 3.4% in the original), while poets within languages vary quite a bit in their use (e.g., between 1.9% and 7% in English).

Given the small and unequal sample size and possible difference in variance, we used Welch's *t*-test (independent, two-tailed, two-sample) in order to test for significance. The average proportion of identical rhymes in English vs. French were significantly different ($t(df \approx 3.01) = -4.8, p < 0.02$). The difference in proportions of rimes riches, however, (on average there were slightly more in English) was not significant ($t(df \approx 7.9) = 0.85, p < 0.42$).

The analysis of our mini-corpus of translations confirms that there is a dramatic difference in rhyme usage between English and French in that identical rhymes are avoided in English but are used quite frequently in French; however, the same is not true with respect to rimes riches are used

¹ Repetitions, on the other hand, are considered a banal form of rhyme also in French ([Elwert, 1965, 88](#)). According to Elwert identical rhymes that are morphologically related are also considered weaker by some.

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