Rhyme and Rhyming in Verbal Art, Language, and Song

Edited by
Venla Sykäri and Nigel Fabb

Studia Fennica
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Finnish Literature Society • SKS • Helsinki • 2022

STUDIA FENNICA FOLKLORISTICA 25

The publication has undergone a peer review.

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Cover Design: Timo Numminen
EPUB: Tero Salmén

ISBN 978-951-858-587-2 (Print)
ISBN 978-951-858-588-9(EPUB)
ISBN 978-951-858-589-6 (PDF)

ISSN 0085-6835 (Studia Fennica. Print)
ISSN 2669-9605 (Studia Fennica. Online)
ISSN 1235-1946 (Studia Fennica Folkloristica. Print)
ISSN 2669-9583 (Studia Fennica Folkloristica. Online)

DOI https://doi.org/10.21435/sff.25

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A free open access version of the book is available at
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BoD – Books on Demand, Norderstedt, Germany 2022

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Preface

Rhyme as a major form of sound parallelism is found widely in the verbal arts of the world. After becoming established in many different languages all over the world from early to late Middle Age periods, it appears in all kinds of poetries: those composed orally as well as by pen; poems memorized, improvised, sung, recited and read. In research, rhyme is abundantly addressed in literature studies, linguistic and metrical analyses, and recently, after the bloom of rhyme in rap lyrics, increasingly in studies of popular song. Song writers' manuals typically provide extended rhyme typologies. Individual rhymed oral traditions are documented extensively. However, explicit, comparative research on rhyme chiefly concerns written verse. Moreover, authority and appeal to the literary canon over a significant but limited historical period has sought to constrain what rhyme is, despite a previous history in which practices varied and the persistence throughout of several kinds of alternative aesthetics. This is still well-established in such value-laden terminology as pure vs. impure rhyme and perfect vs. imperfect rhyme.

Neither the problems of terminology (discussed in Brogan & Cushman 2012: 1190; Scherr 1986: 198) nor the multiplicity of aesthetics have passed unnoticed. For example, the major reference on poetics, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* notes that the literary canon is challenged by alternative aesthetics established (1) in oral and popular traditions, (2) in song lyrics, and (3) in literary verse itself (Brogan & Cushman 2012: 1184). However, the availability of research that would explicitly focus on this variety of aesthetics is poor. Today, many literary scholars, folklorists, musicologists, linguists and others focus with new interest on practices which bridge between oral and literary cultures, and there is an ever greater need for access to knowledge of different poetries and poetics, historical and current – in general: how different traditions and trends are appropriate and aesthetically pleasing to those of whose culture, language, and practice they are part.

With this challenge in mind, and the goal of proposing a language- and tradition-sensitive approach to rhyme, this book offers perspectives on different kinds of rhymed traditions and practices. After an introductory discussion on rhyme's aspects in research, the book's chapters make

excursions to the development, forms, aesthetics, methods, and contexts of rhyme and rhyming. The geographical areas discussed are varied, yet there is a clear focus on Europe and several contributions come from the Northern countries, in particular Finland. This reflects the scholarly collaborations and mental landscape from which this book emerges.

The book grew out of the conference 'Rhyme and Rhyming in Verbal Art and Song' held in Helsinki in May 2019. The initial impetus for an international conference on rhyme came from Venla Sykäri, who from the late 1990s has focused her research on rhymed registers of oral poetry and the process of oral composition with end rhyme. The need for cross-disciplinary discussion on the forms, terms, and meanings of rhyme first arose from the apparent conflict between the informants' ideas of rhyme in a vital oral culture and literary-oriented research literature. Further, the need for new, more varied perspectives on poetics emerged as the fuzzy boundaries of oral and written in early writings became a central interest in two recent research currents in Finland and the Nordic countries: the study of the long 19th century's literacy and self-taught authors (e.g., Laitinen & Mikkola 2013; Kuismin & Driscoll 2013; Anttonen et al. 2018; Droste & Salmi-Niklander 2019), and in particular, the poetics of the 16th and 17th centuries' hymns and other ecclesiastic texts (e.g., Kallio et al. 2016; Lehtonen & Kaljundi 2016). The conference was realized in collaboration with colleagues working in the Academy of Finland -funded research project *Letters and Songs: Registers of Beliefs and Expressions in the Early Modern North*, led by Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen in the Finnish Literature Society (SKS) in 2016–2020. This project also secured the conference's funding. Among its research lines, the project focused on analysing and reinterpreting questions of poetic aesthetics related to the valorization, practice, and interaction of the two Finnish metrical systems: rhymed and stanzaic vs. non-rhymed, alliterative, and iterative (Kallio, Bastman, Frog in this volume).

The Rhyme Conference inherited a well-working model: it completed a series of international cross-disciplinary conferences on poetics and verbal art organized from 2011 by the Folklore Studies of the University of Helsinki in collaboration with the Finnish Literature Society. Close ties between these two institutions, and the generous support provided by their leaders, professor Lotte Tarkka and secretary general Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen, secured the practical organization and scientific ambition of these events. All earlier conferences and symposiums were generated and guided through by docent Frog. They focused on the notion of Register (2011; 2013), Parallelism (2014), Versification (2016), and Formula (2017). The results have in each case been worked into publications, pre-prints and books, forming a significant inspiration and channel for recent output of the scholarship in related fields (Frog 2014; Agha & Frog 2015; Frog 2017; Frog & Tarkka 2017; Frog et al. 2021; Frog & Lamb 2022).

Similar to these earlier events, the goal of the Rhyme Conference was to discuss rhyme's forms, poetics, and aesthetics in different oral, written, and popular cultures and involving scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds. An additional aim of this event was to focus on history: in particular, to bring the research on rhyme in the Latin and Arabic languages

within one event, which appeared not to have taken place before. Papers were presented by altogether thirty speakers from Europe, U.S. and South Africa, including keynote lectures by folklorist and ethnomusicologist, professor Dwight Reynolds from University of California, Santa Barbara, U.S., literary linguist, professor Nigel Fabb from University of Strathclyde, UK, and specialist of early Latin poetry, docent Seppo Heikkinen from University of Helsinki, Finland. The cross-disciplinary interaction in the intimate and conversational atmosphere was characterized by heuristic moments; since rhyme had in many cases not been the central focus of research but simply a central feature of the material, new connections were found. This made obvious that the results should also be offered to a wider public. The preparation of an edited volume became feasible as professor Fabb agreed to bring his literary-linguistic expertise into the process and share the editorial work. A selection of conference papers were hence thoroughly revised to become the chapters of this book.

Chapters in the book proceed in a loose historical order. The first six focus on the historical development and forms of rhyme in Arabic and early Latin cultures, in the early modern and modern periods in the Finnic languages Finnish and Estonian, and comparatively in old Germanic and Finnic alliterative cultures. All these chapters make visible how forms of rhyme develop in relation to language, and the chapters on Finnic languages examine how rhyme was employed in cultures relative to the impact of another parallel poetic model and its aesthetics. The second cluster of chapters tackles rhyme's specific psychological and aesthetic characteristics and its role as an established, primary device in recent and contemporary oral poetry, rap songs, and literary poetry. These chapters take up questions of end rhyme's role in oral composition and sung ornamentation, and rhyme's placement within the line in regular and irregular patterns. The last chapter provides an experiment-based analysis of German students' expectations of literary poetry, pointing out the strong mental connection of rhyme with the notion of poetry even in times when free verse reigns.

Authors have been free to use a terminology related to their research areas and traditions. We have however asked each contributor to prefer the term 'line' for poetic lines and only use the term 'verse' as an opposite to 'prose', in order to avoid misunderstanding, unless the term is fundamentally tied to a research tradition, as is the case with respect to the study of indigenous traditions, where 'verse' is equivalent to 'stanza'. We have also asked the authors to avoid, if possible, the use of value-laden terminology. During the process, we settled on the terms 'identical' and 'nonidentical' to be the most neutral terms to discuss whether the final sections of the words which create the parallel sound effect we hear as 'rhyming' are exactly the same or based on partial correspondence. This overlaps in some cases with the term 'identical rhyme' as used for two *words* that are identical, including their onset, and thus commonly regarded as not being able to be rhyme partners. It may also be noted that when we speak of rhyme 'words', the notion 'word' also includes sequences that can contain several words or are parts of longer or compound words. Inconsistency in terminology cannot be avoided when dealing with a phenomenon that has become established during the last 1500

years in the different local languages and cultures discussed in this volume.

We realize that the rhyme's many faces in terms of aesthetics, language-/tradition-/culture-related forms, history, practices of oral and written composition and performance, should be addressed in the future in a dedicated series of publications. We hope that the excursions provided by this book can serve as an inspiration for more research and presentation of the diversity of rhyme.

Acknowledgements

Our warmest thanks are due to all the contributors who enabled the organization of the above-mentioned conference during which the first versions of most of the following chapters were presented and discussed. It has been a great pleasure to continue those conversations during a process of writing with all the authors of the present volume. On behalf of Sykäri, the editorial work was enabled by a three-year (2020–2023) research grant provided by the Kone Foundation (201906994). We are grateful for the kind decision of the Finnish Literature Society's (SKS) publishing committee to support the inclusion of this volume into its academic series Studia Fennica Folkloristica. The series editor-in-chief Karina Lukin has warmly and proficiently guided us through the process of preparation. We are also grateful to the two anonymous peer reviewers for their generous encouragement and many insightful comments. We thank the staff of the SKS scholarly publishing for their dexterity in taking care of the final layout of the book.

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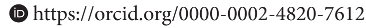
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Rhyme in the Languages and Cultures of the World

An Introduction

Rhyme is found in verbal arts throughout the world. In the appendix to this introduction, we offer a partial list of languages whose associated verbal arts sometimes have rhyme.

Rhyme is most commonly found in texts which are poems, including sung poems (songs). Poems are defined as texts which are divided into lines, where lines are a sectioning imposed on the oral or written text which is distinct from the syntactic and prosodic structure (Fabb 2015). However, there are also examples of rhyme used in prose, for example in Latin and Greek (McKie 1997), and Arabic (Fabb 2015 citing Beeston 1983). It is common for rhyme to be found specifically in metrical poems, these being poems whose lines are measured by counting out the elements which comprise them. But rap songs may have nonmetrical lines and nevertheless have rhyme. Where rhyme is found it can be systematic, in the sense that it is possible to predict that a rhyme will appear in a particular place, which is often at the end of the line, but sometimes line-internal. Rhyme can also be non-systematic or emergent or 'sporadic' (Tartakovsky 2014; 2021). And there are intermediate cases where rhyme is both frequent and fairly predictable, but not entirely predictable. The distinction between systematic forms which arise across many texts and non-systematic forms which might arise in one text only is generally important in literature, and particularly in literary criticism which has a particular interest in non-systematic forms and their relation to meaning; it is the distinction which Klima and Bellugi (1976: 57) call 'Conventional form' vs. 'Individual form'. Finally, if we count as 'verbal art' word-games and invented words, for example reduplicative words such as 'hurly burly' (Sherzer 2002; Minkova 2002) then we might find rhyme as an everyday type of verbal art in the language outside poetry, and indeed in this extended sense rhyme may be found everywhere in the world.

Are there languages in which the verbal arts entirely lack rhyme? The entry for Rhyme in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* thinks so: 'it is a thundering fact that most of the world's 4,000 languages lack or avoid rhyme in their poetries altogether' (Brogan & Cushman 2012: 1182). We are less certain about this, and take the view that the most we can say is that for a specific language, we know of no description of its verbal art that it has rhyme. Sometimes an exhaustive analysis of a literature explicitly says

that there is no rhyme, so for example Dell and Elmedlaoui (2008: 61) say that 'rhyming is unknown in traditional Tashlhiyt Berber singing'. But it is always possible that for some language, rhyme might have existed in a now-lost oral form, or it might exist in an unnoticed children's verbal art, or in a poetic form such as the sonnet imported into a language whose literature previously had no rhyme, or in contemporary verbal arts such as rap.

Rap is now an important place for rhyme in many languages whose literatures traditionally do not have rhyme. For example, Korean and Japanese are languages whose known traditional literatures are described as not having rhyme, but rhyme is used in Korean rap songs (Park 2016) and Japanese rap songs (Kawahara 2007; Manabe 2006). Analogous examples of languages where perhaps it is only rap and related genres which have rhyme include, from Central and South America, Tz'utujil-Mayan (Bell 2017), Yucatec Mayan (Cru 2017), Qom (Beiras del Carril & Cúneo 2020), Aymara (Swinehart 2019), and the Quechua songs of Renata Flores or Liberato Kani. We know of examples from Africa including Akan (Shipley 2009), Rhonga (Rantala 2016), and Guinea-Bissau Creole (Lupati 2016). We suspect that there are many more languages whose rap traditions differ from traditional songs and poetry in having rhyme. (The papers we have cited often do not specifically comment on rhyme, but rhyme is clear in the quoted examples, sometimes involving words from two languages.) We note that there is a tension in our discussion between talking about the language as 'having rhyme' in its verbal arts, and the individual composers who are responsible for using rhyme, and indeed may be unusual or innovative in using rhyme: the individual uses rhyme but the tradition does not. We focus however on the general here, and assume that if one author is able to use rhyme in the language, then it is a possibility in the verbal art more generally.

Children's verbal art sometimes has distinctively different characteristics from the adult verbal art in a culture (Campbell 1991). It is possible that children's songs have poetic characteristics not found in the adult verbal art of the same culture. For example, Brăiloiu (1984) and Burling (1966) thought that there was a universal type of rhythmic structure in children's song. (However this is probably not correct, as noted in research summarized in Fabb 2015: 118–120.) We might ask whether children's songs have rhymes in cultures where the adult verse lacks rhyme. In fact, data on this is hard to find, and we do not know of any general surveys of rhyme in children's song, or of specific instances of clearly rhyming children's songs in these otherwise rhymeless traditions; for now we treat this as an open question. There is one specific point to make about rhyme in children's songs, which is that counting rhymes show an interesting function for rhyme, partly because nonsense words are more freely used in children's songs. This relates to the use of rhyme in counting-out games (Marsh 2008), where each word identifies a different individual in a circle of children, such that the final individual is identified by the final rhyme: an English example begins 'eeny meeny miney more / put the baby on the floor'.

While noting hesitations about what we may not know, we now nevertheless make some area-based generalizations about rhyme. European and Western and Northern Asian verbal arts often have rhyme, at least from

the mediaeval period onward, though their older verbal arts as preserved in the written tradition do not, except sporadically (Reynolds, this volume). Colonialism and emigration brought these rhyming traditions into other parts of the world such as the Americas. Verbal arts which have been influenced by Islam often have rhyme: Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Urdu, Swahili, Hausa – but notably not Somali which has alliteration instead of rhyme. Northern Indian verbal arts tend to have rhyme; some Southern Indian verbal arts have a distinctive use of rhyme on the second syllable of the line. South East Asian verbal arts often have rhyme, with 'hook rhyme' a particular areal characteristic, in which the same line can include both an internal syllable rhyming back into the previous line and a final syllable rhyming forwards into the next line. Chinese verbal art has rhyme, but traditional Korean and Japanese verbal arts do not. Where Pacific verbal arts have rhyme, it tends to involve only the vowels. Rhyme appears in some songs in Central Australian languages. The editors of this volume know about only a few of the large number of verbal art traditions of Papua New Guinea, but none of these few have rhyme. Many African languages have verbal arts which appear to lack rhyme, but rhyme is found in traditional poetries in African Arabic poetry, in Ethiopian poetry, in some Berber poetry, in Hausa, Swahili, and others (sometimes as a result of the influence of Arabic poetry). Perhaps the most striking gap is that we know of almost no accounts of rhyme in the indigenous languages of the Americas, outside of rap; however, we know of unpublished proposals that there is rhyme in some traditions, and Prieto Mendoza (in prep) argues that there is rhyme and alliteration in songs in the Amazonian language Kakataibo.

Verbal arts which do not have rhyme may nevertheless have formal devices which are like rhyme. For example, Yoruba is generally considered not to have rhyme, but Babalola (1966) argues that there is deliberate line-final tonal dissonance, which is a kind of anti-rhyme based on tone. Javanese *matjapat* songs fix which vowels have to come at the end of specific lines in the stanza, depending on genre (Fabb 2015 citing Kartomi 1973). In Hawaiian, final rhyme is usually avoided, but there is repetition of a word or word-part from line end to next line beginning, called 'linked assonance' by Elbert and Mahoe (1970). Black (1988) says that '[a]lthough neither Sumerian nor Akkadian verse is based on rhyme, it can be shown that comparable effects were sometimes exploited.' Indigenous peoples of the northern Russia and Siberia do not have rhyme in their poetry, but for example the Nenets researched by Niemi (1998; Niemi & Lapsui 2004) add a song syllable '*ngey*' in the ends of the lines of their narrative poems thus producing a kind of pseudo-rhyme. Klima and Bellugi (1976: 63) discuss the literary linguistic forms of American Sign Language (ASL) poetry or 'art-sign', in which there is no exact equivalent to rhyme, but where there are similar kinds of signed form such as shared handshape similarity, noting that this 'patterning of linguistic forms in art-sign is by-and-large Individual rather than Conventional.'

Why Do We Have Typologies of Rhyme, and Other Kinds of Poetic Form?

Rhyme is one of the verbal art forms which are often divided into subkinds or types; that is, it is subject to typologies (or taxonomies, the term preferred in the *Princeton Encyclopedia*). In this section, we consider some reasons for formulating a typology of rhyme or of any type of verbal art form.

One way to think about rhyme typologically is to fit it into a formal hierarchy. As part of a larger hierarchy which contains it, rhyme can be considered a type of sound patterning along with alliteration and possibly other types of sound patterning, which are differentiated by which parts of the word they involve. Sound patterning in turn can be considered a type of parallelism (as Jakobson 1960 claims) in which similar linguistic elements are distributed relatively close to one another in a text. Rhyme can be classified by its own internal hierarchy and can itself be divided into types. Relevant criteria include prosodic prominence (e.g., whether a syllable is stressed), whether the rhyme involves just the final syllable, whether the sounds must be identical, and if nonidentity is allowed what kind of nonidentity (including where vowels are similar but consonants unrelated), whether homophonous but nonidentical words rhyme, whether homophonous but nonidentical suffixes rhyme ('grammatical rhyme', e.g., Opara 2015), whether words are visually similar (eye-rhyme), and so on.

There are various motivations for dividing poetic form into types.

First, the poetic tradition may have its own authorial poetics, where the division of sound-patterns into types is adhered to by authors as part of the rules for composition. For example, alliteration is systematically deployed in Old English metres, and as another example, rhyme is a form systematically deployed in English sonnets. These reflect an 'authorial typology'. Another example can be found in the different named kinds of rhyme which are explicit in mediaeval Irish poetics, where for example rhyme between stressed and unstressed syllables is used in the *deibhidhe* genre of poetry (Knott 1994). The authorial practice may be fully explicit, such that the authors can describe what they do, with a terminology, as is true for the Irish poets. Or it may be implicit but still adhered to as a systematic practice. There are no limits in principle on authorial typologies, and indeed an author can invent a new formal system for each text, as is the practice of some avant-garde writers, such as those in the Oulipo group (Mathews and Brotchie 2005).

Second, the literary critic may divide the form into types in order to produce a critical poetics, and then apply this in a close reading of the text, or in a stylistic analysis, perhaps claiming that each specific type of form has a specific function, such as expressing or supporting a meaning, or producing some response in the reader or listener. This is a 'critical typology', and it need not correspond to the authorial typology. There are no limits in principle on critical typologies. Critical typologies of rhyme can have a large number of types. An example of a large critical typology is presented by Harmon (1987).

A third type we might call a 'convenience typology', which is where we assign types to kinds of poetic form as a shorthand way of referring to them.

So for example instead of saying 'rhymes which share the same vowels but end in different consonants' we might say 'nonidentical rhymes', thus creating a type without necessarily wanting to make any particular theoretical claim that these are in any important way different from rhymes which share the same vowels and end in the same consonants.

Literary linguists find a fourth reason to divide poetic form into types. This is in order to explain and predict how poetic forms are deployed, and we might call this a 'theoretical typology'. Theoretical typologies have to be justified, and are likely to be small, given general principles of theoretical parsimony. A theoretical typology captures generalizations, where a specific type manifests two or more generalizations at the same time; these generalizations can be absolute, or statistically significant. For example, we can justify a distinction between alliteration and rhyme because they are used in quite different ways, and have different characteristics. The first characteristic is that alliteration is more local than rhyme and the second characteristic is that alliteration does not generally involve intersecting patterns such as abab (Fabb 1999, and Fabb this volume): these two differences converge on the same partitioning of sound patternings, and so justify the theoretical typological distinction between 'alliteration' and 'rhyme'.

Theoretical typologies are hard to establish. For example, despite their being given different names, it is less easy to theoretically justify a distinction between (i) a 'full rhyme' in which vowel and final consonants are involved and (ii) a rhyme in which just the vowel is involved, this being a type of rhyme sometimes called specifically 'assonance'. For a theoretical typology, the distinction between full rhyme and assonance is justifiable only if it can be used to form a generalization which cannot otherwise be made. For example, if a genre has stanzas in which all rhymes but the last are full rhymes and the last is assonance, then this would justify the typological distinction, because we could use the difference between the types to formulate a generalization. It would also be justified to create this typology to distinguish a genre in which there is only ever full rhyme and another genre in which there is only ever assonance. And the typological distinction would be justified if we found that full rhyme was capable of rhyme patterns (e.g., abcabc) which assonance was not capable of. If however the distribution of assonance vs. full rhyme were not subject to any further generalization, then it is not clear that the typological distinction is justified, as part of a theoretical typology. The distinction between assonance and rhyme might therefore exist in a critical typology (and indeed it is used in many critical typologies), but not in the theoretical typology.

As another example, consider the distinction constituted by (i) rhyme between words which have final stress, or 'masculine' rhymes, and (ii) rhyme between words with penultimate stress, or 'feminine' rhymes, a distinction investigated by Tsur (2013). This distinction clearly exists in authorial typologies, as noted earlier. But for this distinction to be part of a theoretical typology, it would be necessary to show that some further generalization can thereby be captured; for example, we might find that masculine rhymes more easily allow mismatched vowels than do feminine rhymes (this is invented to give the example; we do not know if this is true or not). If we could show

this then we would be moving towards a theoretical justification for the distinction between masculine and feminine rhyme.

Theoretical typologies usually demand some deeper explanation, perhaps in terms of psychological aspects of linguistic form. One of the implications of theoretical typology is that it might help explain why a particular form is used in a particular language. This hypothesis that the forms of the language particularly enable specific literary forms is called 'the development hypothesis' by Fabb (2010), and discussed in the next section.

Linguistics and Rhyme

Theoretical linguists have focused on two questions about rhyme. The first is to what extent rhyme depends on the language having certain characteristics. The second is whether linguistic form can play a role in allowing nonidentical rhyme, between certain sequences of sounds which are not on the surface identical but might have some deeper linguistic similarity.

There is a widespread view that a language offers 'affordances' which make rhyme, or a particular kind of rhyme, possible in its verbal arts, and that languages differ in their affordances. Fabb (2010) calls this 'the development hypothesis' (but does not endorse it – in fact his article argues that it may sometimes be true but not always).

> The Development Hypothesis: Literary language is governed only by rules and constraints which are available to ordinary language, and which refer only to representations which are present (at some stage in a derivation) in ordinary language. (Fabb 2012: 1220.)

A version of the development hypothesis is stated by Sapir in his 1921 book *Language*:

> Study carefully the phonetic system of a language, above all its dynamic features [prosody], and you can tell what kind of a verse it has developed – or, if history has played pranks with its psychology, what kind of verse it should have developed and some day will. (Sapir 1967.)

The development hypothesis can take various forms when it comes to rhyme.

One manifestation of the development hypothesis is the view that the possibility of rhyme depends on the language having words with stress, such that the rhyme includes a stressed syllable. One of the major reasons for this claim relates to the correlational observation that when the Latin language developed word stress, so rhyme appeared in Latin verse. However, this correlation does not always hold: Indonesian is a 'stressless language' (Athanasopoulou et al. 2021), but it does have rhyme in the poetry, in traditional *pantun* and in modern sonnets, for example.

Arguments in the mode of the development hypothesis sometimes correlate a distinction between the linguistic forms of two languages and the poetic forms of the same two languages. One such argument is presented

This interdisciplinary collection explores the forms and aesthetics of rhyme in a variety of languages and from a variety of perspectives. A wide-ranging introduction that ends with a list and associated bibliography of rhyming traditions of the world is followed by thirteen chapters. These explore the history of rhyme, including Arabic and medieval Latin and the older Germanic languages, as well as literary and folk traditions in Northern Europe where rhyme plays a complex role alongside alliteration. Literary rhyme is explored from a psychological perspective, and oral composition with end rhyme is addressed. Discussions of modernist poetry, rap lyrics, and other rhyming traditions shed new light on the possibilities of rhyme. The book will be of interest to literary scholars, folklorists, and anyone interested in written, oral, and song traditions. Students, poets, and songwriters will find insights into the functions and aesthetics of rhyme.

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FOLKLORISTICA 25
ISBN 978-951-858-587-2
86.01; 81; 82
www.finlit.fi/kirjat