
A Study of Rhymes in Pope's Poems: A Historical Perspective

Raden Roro Rieta Anggraheni

Hospitality Study Program, Tourism Department, Politeknik Negeri Bali, Badung, Indonesia

Email: rororietaanggraheni@pnb.ac.id

Abstract

Rhyme is a poetic device that can be studied to know the poetic style of certain writer. The rhyme which was used in historical poetry will also provide a clue of the word pronunciation in certain era in the past. This study investigates the rhymes used by Alexander Pope in the late seventeenth century (early eighteen century), an era called Modern English which is interesting for its in-between characteristics, meaning that the language is similar to and different from current English. Accordingly, this study also aims at identifying the distinctive phonological feature in the form of vowel shift and unveiling the historical background of Pope's rhyme choice. In order to achieve the purposes, the researcher analyzed fifteen poems written by Pope. The result shows that the rhyme scheme mostly used by Pope is the couplet aabbcc, even though the pattern varies. Some of the rhyming words give a clue on the pronunciation through the vowel shifts, by comparing them to the current English. Some of the vowels were more likely the result of the Great Vowel Shift effect in Renaissance era. Historically, the type of rhyme used by Pope shows that poems, as satirical verses, were used as an ideal vehicle to criticize the situation of English language development and the authority.

Keywords: *Rhymes, Rhyme Schemes, Poems, Phonological Shift, Augustan Poetry*

INTRODUCTION

Rhyme is a poetic device that mostly appears in poems (Lethbridge & Mildorf, 2003; Lea et al., 2021; Sykäri & Fabb, 2022). Jacobson (as cited in Obermeier et al., 2013) suggests that meter and rhyme are two of the most crucial and defining elements of poetry. According to Lethbridge and Mildorf (2003), poetry makes use of aspects like sound patterns, verse and meter, rhetorical devices, style, stanza form, or imagery more often than other genres of literature. Those kinds of poetic devices including rhymes can be used to produce artistic effects and help readers look back to the earlier part of the poem (Lea et al., 2021). Thus, the choice of poetic devices employed by a writer or a poet must never be a coincidence. The language used by a poet is always intentional and purposeful so that it creates certain effects. Verdonk (2002) states style is a distinctive method of utilizing language for a particular purpose and impact.

Other than creating certain effects to readers, a poetic style can be a prominent clue of the English language development. In each period of English, appeared a number of literary figures who were then renowned around the world such as Caedmon in the seventh century (Old English), Geoffrey Chaucer in the thirteenth century (Middle English), and Alexander Pope in the seventeenth century (Modern English). Rhymes in Chaucer's poems and Pope's poems, for example, can demonstrate how Middle English and Modern English were significantly different, particularly due to the transformed pronunciation

known as the Great Vowel Shift (GVS) (Xenia, 2015; Avdiu et al., 2021). Although there has been a long debate on its status and history (Prichard, 2014), the Great Vowel Shift has explained the phonetic displacement of all poetry and prose written before the early modern era, the obvious yet orderly differences between our language and that of Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, or John Gower (Giancarlo, 2001). The phonological change has been argued to be caused by the enhancement of a duration cue involved in the signaling of phonological contrasts involving the opposition between long and short vowels (Gussenhoven, 2017).

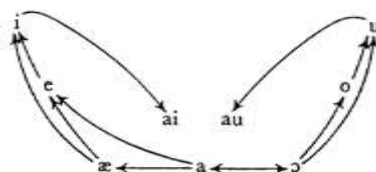


Figure 1. The diagram of the English Great Vowel Shift

This picture shows that all phonemic long vowels were "raised" in their places of articulation, and those that could not be raised any higher were "pushed out" and became double-vowels or diphthongs, and this occurred from the end of the fourteenth century until about the eighteenth century (Giancarlo, 2001). This, he suggests, symbolizes a literal revolution in English phonology. Some examples are the words "three" and "see" which were pronounced as /thre:/ and /se:/ before the GVS and changed into /thri/ and /si/ after, as well as the words "do" and "room" which were pronounced as /do:/ and /ro:m/ before the GVS and shifted to /du/ and /rum/ after the GVS (Avdiu et al., 2021).

This sharp transformation of vowels between Middle and Modern English makes Modern English poems (especially Renaissance and the following era) interesting for the in-between characteristic, in which, to some extent, the language is similar to current English, but they apparently have some differences. Alexander Pope (1688-1744) dominated the poetic style in Modern English, around the Renaissance era. He is even said to be in the third place after Shakespeare and Tennyson who are frequently quoted in Oxford Dictionary. Pope is said to be famous with couplet style, rhyming *aa bb cc* (Bradford, 1997). This study aims at identifying the rhymes in Pope's poems by taking into account the historical relevance of the poem writing. This study gives an emphasis on word pronunciation reflected through the rhymes due to the strong presumption that phonological features change more rapidly than the other language features such as grammar (Xenia, 2015; Avdiu et al., 2021). Furthermore, Reddy and Knight (2011) states clearly that linguists frequently belittle the fact that a word's rhymes in poetry from a certain time period or dialect region can give hints about how to pronounce that word in that context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study refers to the theory of rhyme forms by Lethbridge and Mildorf (2003). The first form of rhyme is *full rhyme* which is obtained when the consonant preceding the last stressed vowel of the two words is different, for example *night/delight* or *power/flower*. The second forms are the rhymes that deviate from the observance of the full rhyme. This includes *rich rhyme* which occurs when the consonant before the last stressed vowel is also identical (*lap/clap*, *stick/ecclesiastic*), *identical rhyme* occurs when the two rhyme words are exactly the same, and the last one involved homonym which means that the two rhyme words look and sound similar but have different meanings.

The third form is called as *half-rhyme*, *slant rhyme*, or *pararhyme* which occurs when only the consonants or the vowels are identical – consonance (*rider/reader*), assonance

(*forever/weather*), and eye-rhyme (*home/come*). Based on the position, there are end-rhyme and internal rhyme. End-rhyme is the most noticeable rhyme which occurs at the end of a line, while internal rhyme occurs in lines within lines.

I've a head like a concertina; I've a tongue like a button-stick
I've a mouth like an old potato, and I'm more than a little sick,
But I've had my fun o' the Corp'ral's Guards: I've made the cinders fly,
And I'm here in the **Clink** for a thundering **drink** and blacking the Corporal's eye.
(From: Kipling, *Barrack-Room Ballads*)

Leonine rhyme is when a word in the middle of a line (commonly before a caesura) rhymes with the word at the end of the line.

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea
In a beautiful pea-green boat.
They took some **honey**, and plenty of **money**
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.
(From: Lear, *The Owl and the Pussy-Cat*)

Based on the number of syllable, rhyme forms can be classified into masculine rhymes which consist of only one identical syllable (*street/meet, man/ban, galaxy/merrily*), feminine rhymes which consist of two identical syllables (*straining/complaining, slowly/holy*), and triple rhymes which consist of three identical syllables (*icicles/bicycles*). The terms “feminine” and “masculine” were taken from French, and in English they mean rhymes whose linguistic stress is on their penultimate or last syllables, respectively (Tsur, 2013).

Rhymes can be arranged into different patterns. For instance, it can be continuous rhyme (*aaaa bbbb ...*), rhyming couplets (*aa bb cc ...*), alternate rhyme (*abab cdcd ...*), embracing rhyme (*abba cddc ...*), chain rhyme (*aba bcb cdc ...*), or tail rhyme (*aab ccb ...*). Rhyme can help to divide a poem into different sections. The sections can help, for example, to mark various stages of thematic development in a poem such as the movement from despair to hope, or from description to moral application. This function can notably found in sonnets, where the octet and the sestet or the quatrains and the final couplet often form a contrast.

METHODOLOGY

Although this study gives a huge attention to the occurrence of phonological shift, this is not necessarily a phonological study as it attempts to describe the choice of rhymes viewed from a historical perspective, where the context or era in which the poems were created is significantly considered. The methods of conducting this study consist of several steps. The first step was collecting the data. In order to obtain the desired data, 15 poems written by Alexander Pope were chosen randomly. The second step was analyzing the data. The fifteen poems were then analyzed to identify the rhymes used, followed by the categorization of the types of rhyme. In this step, the researcher referred to the theory of rhyme by Lethbridge and Mildorf (2003). After identifying the rhymes, the researcher looked for the possibility of any phonological change seen from the rhymes. The changes were seen by comparing the pronunciation of the words in the poems with their pronunciation in current English. Afterwards, the changes were listed and used as an exemplification of the pronunciation in the era when the poems were written (1700s). The last step of analysis was unveiling the historical reason behind the choice of rhyme by Pope. To achieve this purpose, the researcher referred also to the historical backgrounds and situations in that era. The result of the analyses was presented descriptively.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis Result of the Poems' Rhyme Schemes and Forms

The result of the analysis includes the rhyme forms used in the poems and the rhyme schemes of each poem. They are all presented in Table 1. In rhyme schemes, the space indicates different stanza.

Table 1. The rhyme schemes and the rhyme forms used in Pope's poems.

No	Poem	Rhyme Schemes	Full Rhyme	Half Rhyme	Rich Rhyme
1	<i>Argus</i>	aabbccdee ffgghii	6	2	1
2	<i>Celia</i>	abab cdcd	3	0	1
3	<i>Farewell to London</i>	abab cdcd efef ghgh ijij klkl mnmn opop qrqr stst uvuv wxwx yzyz	19	5	2
4	<i>Chorus of Youths and Virgins</i>	aabbccdefef gghhijjklkl mmnnooppqrqr ssttuut	17	2	0
5	<i>Ode on Solitude</i>	abab cdcd efef ghgh ijij	8	2	0
6	<i>On Certain Ladies</i>	aabb	2	0	0
7	<i>On Mr. Gay</i>	aabbccdeeff	6	0	0
8	<i>Phryne</i>	aabccb eeff ghg ijkkj llmnm	11	2	0
9	<i>Sound and Sense</i>	aabbccdeeffgg	7	0	0
10	<i>Summer</i>	aabbccdeeffgghhijjkkll mmnnooppqrr	17	0	0
11	<i>(From the Essay on Man) The Riddle of the World</i>	aabbccdeefgghhii	7	2	0
12	<i>You Know Where You Did Despise</i>	aaaab aaaab	4	0	0
13	<i>Untitled</i>	aabb	2	0	0
14	<i>On A Certain Lady at Court</i>	abab cdcd eeee	4	0	1
15	<i>(From Lines) To A Young Lady on Her Leaving the Town after the Coronation</i>	aabbccdeeff	5	0	1

The result shows that most of the rhymes in the Pope's fifteen poems are in the form of full-rhyme, followed by half rhyme. Rich rhyme also appears in the poem insignificantly. The examples of full rhyme found in the poem can be seen in the following part.

Hence guilty joys, distastes, surmises,
Hence false tears, deceits, disguises,
Dangers, doubts, delays, surprises;
Fires that scorch, yet dare not shine
Purest love's unwasting treasure,
Constant faith, fair hope, long leisure,
Days of ease, and nights of pleasure;
Sacred Hymen! these are thine
(Chorus of Youths and Virgins, last stanza)

This last stanza clearly demonstrates how full rhyme is used in a poem. The last words in the first three lines are rhyming, the last word of the fourth is rhymed with that in the

eight lines, and the last words in line 5-7 are also rhyming. All the eight lines are combined to make a rhyming scheme, which is *aaabcccb*.

Most of the half rhyme forms in Pope's poems are assonance in which the vowels are similar. The following excerpts are the examples.

Arrived at last, poor, old, disguised, **alone**,
To all his friends, and ev'n his Queen **unknown**.

(*Argus*)

Farewell, Arbuthnot's raillery
On every learned sot;
And Garth, the best good Christian **he**,
Although he knows it not.

(*Farewell to London*)

The use of half rhyme is also usually combined with full rhyme in each stanza, and sometimes with internal and rich rhymes as well. The examples of the few internal and rich rhymes are given below.

Not warped by passion, awed by **rumour**;
Not grave through pride, nor gay through folly;
An equal mixture of good-**humour**
And sensible soft melancholy.

(*On A Certain Lady at Court, second stanza*)

Lintot, farewell! thy bard must go;
Farewell, unhappy **Tonson**!
Heaven gives thee for thy loss of Rowe,
Lean Philips, and fat **Johnson**.

(*Farewell to London, fifth stanza*)

From all the rhyme forms, the researcher can infer that most of the rhymes are masculine rhyme, in which the rhyming words consist of only one syllable. However, some of them are also feminine rhyme such as the rhyming words *rumour/humour* and *Tonson/Johnson* in the example above. In addition, in the fifteen poems, Pope does not seem to use internal rhymes, and therefore, this study does not take account such form of rhyme.

The rhyme schemes used in the poems vary. Out of the fifteen poems, there are six schemes used.

1. aabbcc ... (*Argus, On Certain Ladies, On Mr. Gay, Sound and Sense, Summer, The Riddle of the World, Untitled, and To A Young Lady on Her Leaving the Town after the Coronation*)
2. abab cdcd ... (*Celia, Farewell to London, and Ode on Solitude*)
3. aabbccdefef gghhijjklkl mmnnooppqrqr ssttuut (*Chorus of Youths and Virgins*)
4. aabccb eeff ghg iijkkj llmnnm (*Phryne*)
5. aaaab aaaab (*You Know Where You Did Despise*)
6. abab cdcd eeee (*On A Certain Lady at Court*)

The dominant pattern is the couplet *aabbcc*. However, the function of each pattern is, as suggested by Lethbridge and Mildorf (2003), remains the same; that is more likely to mark various stage of thematic development.

Phonological Shift

The phonological shift here means the indicated change of word pronunciation in the late 17th century to the current English, which is provided by the clues seen from the rhymes. The rhyming words are indicated from the similar vowels they bear. The frequent occurrence of certain rhyming words helped validate the inference about the word pronunciation. From the presented data in Table 2, it can be seen that *coast* was pronounced with /ɔ/ instead of /ou/ like in the current English usage. The vowel of *live* in

any forms was pronounced as /aɪ/; in current English live can be pronounced as either /laɪv/ or /lɪv/. The bold words are the words whose vowels change, compared with the current English pronunciation.

Table 2. The indicated phonological shift in the rhyming words of Pope’s poems

Source (Poem)	Rhyming Words		Modern English	Current English
<i>Argus</i>	toss’d	coast	ɔ	ou
<i>Celia</i>	five	live	aɪ	ɪ
	try	galantry	aɪ	ɪ
	hence	reverence	e	ə
<i>Farewell to London</i>	farewell	meal	e	ɪə
	alone	none	ou	ə
<i>Chorus of Youths and Virgins</i>	reproves	loves	u	ʌ
	eye	progeny	aɪ	ɪ
	move	love	u	ʌ
<i>Ode on Solitude</i>	bread	shade	e	eɪ
<i>Riddle of the World</i>	rest	beast	e	ɪ
<i>On A Certain Lady at Court</i>	Sir-aver-her	hear	ə (weak) ɜ: (strong)	ɪə

The ending -y was pronounced as /aɪ/, which can be seen from the words *gallantry* and *progeny*. Meanwhile, in both words the ending -y is pronounced as /ɪ/. The vowel of *meal*, *shade*, and *beast* was also more likely pronounced as /e/ since *meal* is rhymed with *farewell*, *shade* with *bread*, and *beast* with *rest*. In current English, *meal* bears a vowel /ɪə/, *shade* bears /eɪ/, and *beast* bears /ɪ/. Similarly, the words which ended with -ence seem to be represented by the vowel /e/ as well, as seen in the rhymed words *hence-reverence*. The pronoun *none*, on the other hand, was pronounced with vowel /ou/ while in current English it is pronounced as /nən/. The word which frequently appears is *love*, making the pronunciation easily predicted. Unlike the current pronunciation of *love* /lʌv/, in the seventeenth century it was pronounced as /luv/. The last is the pronunciation of *hear* which is rhymed with *Sir*, *aver*, and *her*, meaning that they bore vowel /ə/ or /ɜ:/. It is now pronounced with the vowel /ɪə/.

The vowel pronunciations in the era of Pope might still be influenced by the phenomenon of Great Vowel Shift in which the vowels were raised or changed into diphthongs (Baugh and Cable, 1993). The examples of this are *progeny*, *gallantry*, and *none*. Besides, most of words with *e* were pronounced with vowel /e/, as the one in the word *there*.

Historical Background of the Rhyming Choice

The analysis in this study shows that Pope was not stuck only on one style, even though couplet turns out to be the majority. Furthermore, Bradford (2013) argues that heroic couplet, the characteristic of Pope’s mostly poems is used to control and regulate the relation between style and meaning since it shows a consecutive and progressive form, which is related to cohesiveness. This idea has proven that Pope’s rhyming choice is not without meaningful purposes. If I may say, one of the examples is the poem *Farewell to London* which consists of thirteen (13) stanzas and has twenty six (26) rhymes. When the rhymes are represented by English alphabets, it takes A-Z. This might reflect the meaning of the poem itself, in which a farewell is an ending, a sign that a time has been undergone completely and that is the time to say good bye. Another example is the poem *Chorus of Youths and Virgins* which has a more dynamic rhyming pattern, especially for the

‘chorus’ part. It represents the characteristic of song, which emphasizes the chorus as the peak and the most dynamic part.

Historically, Pope’s poems belong to Augustan writing (Bradford, 1997). Augustan writing is a movement which informs the style of most English verse written between the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and the mid-eighteenth century. Since the name was taken from the Roman Emperor Augustus, the style of the writers in that era, including Pope might be influenced by the culture, politics and ideology of the Augustan Rome. Furthermore, Bradford argues that the heroic couplet as a consecutive unit is able to be an ideal vehicle for satirical verse, an appropriation with a much broader political and cultural ideas in that period. Besides, it is also a vehicle for a more comprehensive range of poetic operations such as elegies, narratives, love poems, and landscape poems.

This idea is in accordance with the statement from Baugh and Cable (1993) saying that the first half of the eighteenth century is the Augustan Age in England. This century, which is conscious of its superiority, is the period of the attempt to refine or even ‘fix’ English language. In that era, the people were concerned about the purity of English tongue to make the language perfect. Triggered by the issue of refining English language and dissatisfaction of the authority, the writers seemed to find their way to convey their ideas through satirical verses which were well-accommodated by heroic couplet, one was also used by Pope.

CONCLUSION

The rhyme schemes used by Pope in the fifteen poems are various, yet the couplet *aabbcc* turns out to be the majority. This is closely related to the historical background, when the first half of the eighteenth century was called as Augustan age. It was the period when the people in England desired to refine their language, making it away from imperfection. The heroic couplet was, therefore, used by the poets to convey their ideas about the situation and to criticize the unsatisfying authority. The rhymes in Pope’s poems also indicated the word pronunciation in Modern English or Renaissance era which has experienced a phonological shift if compared to the pronunciation in the present era. The changed vowels might still be affected by the Great Vowel Shift phenomenon where the vowels are diphthongized.

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