Unit 16

Rhyme and sound patterning

In the process of reading words on a page, we translate visual marks (letters) into mental representations of sounds (phones, or phonemes). English uses a 'phonetic-alphabetic script' in which letters stand for sounds, or serve to represent particular patterns of sound. For example, the letter 'p' in 'pin' stands for a single sound (which we write phonetically as [p]); the two letters 'th' in 'thin' stand for a single sound (which we write phonetically as [θ]); the letter 'i' in 'time' stands for a combination of sounds called a diphthong (which we write phonetically as [a ɪ]). We can represent the way a word is made up of sounds using a phonetic script, and so can compare the letter-spelling of a word with the phonetic structure of the word:

letter-spelling:	thing	queen	come
phonetic structure:	θ ɪ ŋ	k w i n	k ʌ m

In this unit we are interested in the phonetic structure of words rather than their spelling. Because of the relatively small number of distinct sounds used in a language, the sounds of a text inevitably occur and recur as we read. and make up a kaleidoscope of repetitions and permutations. In casual conversation and most kinds of written texts, this repetition of sounds occurs for the most part apparently randomly, ordered only by the historical accidents governing which sounds make up which words. However, it is also possible for speakers and writers to organize the sounds of utterances in more systematic ways – ranging from motivated but irregular instances through to fully predictable patterns – in order to achieve certain effects. Many different types of discourse employ such sound patterning: poetry, jokes, slogans, proverbs, advertising copy, sound-bites in political speeches and interviews, pop lyrics, rapping, etc.

16.1 The structure of the syllable

In **Unit 17** we will see that the metrical form of a poem involves control over the syllables of the line, and syllables are also relevant for the organization of sound patterning. Rhyme and alliteration, the two basic kinds of sound patterning, involve different parts of the syllable. A syllable is divided into three parts (of which only the nucleus is essential): the onset, the nucleus and the coda. Table 16.1 illustrates this division of the syllable into three parts, using monosyllabic words.

Table 16.1

Onset	Nucleus	Coda	
b	a ɪ	t	bite
f	a ɪ	t	fight
pl	a ɪ	t	plight
spl	æ	t	splat
p	e ɪ	st	paste
p	e ɪ		pay
	æ	t	at
	a ɪ		I

This table shows us several things about syllables and sounds.

1   An onset can have anything from zero to three consonants, while a coda usually has between zero and two consonants. But there is always a nucleus.
2   The number of written letters before or after the nucleus is irrelevant; syllable structure is a matter of sound and not spelling and so both 'bite' and 'fight' have a one-consonant coda.
3   While the nucleus of a syllable is almost always a vowel, there are some written vowels that are not syllable nuclei because they are not pronounced as vowels: thus 'paste' is a monosyllalic word based on the nucleus vowel [a], and the final written 'e' is irrelevant to the syllable structure.

The nucleus of the syllable is usually a vowel. Sometimes the nucleus of the syllable is a diphthong, which is two vowels pronounced together as in 'wheel', which is a single-syllable word with a two-vowel diphthong as its nucleus (in phonetic representation it is [i ə]). The nucleus can also be a highly 'sonorant' consonant; sonorance is a vocal quality of vowels, but some consonants such as [r] and [l] and the nasal consonants [m] and [n] also have sonorance and so they can be syllable nuclei. For example, the word 'bottle' has two syllables, the second of which has [l] as its nucleus.

16.2 Types of sound pattern: types of rhyme and types of alliteration

We can group the various kinds of sound patterning into larger groups, which we can call types of rhyme and types of alliteration. Types of rhyme involve the end of the syllable, while types of alliteration involve the beginning of the syllable.

Strict rhyme involves the [nucleus+coda]. Thus 'bite', 'plight' and 'fight' (from Table 16.1) could all rhyme, because they have the same nucleus and coda. Where just the [nucleus] is repeated, and the coda varies, this is 'assonance'. While 'I' does not rhyme with 'bite' because the coda is different, the identity of nucleus makes this an example of assonance. Where just the [coda] is repeated, and the nucleus varies, this is 'consonance'. Though 'at' does not rhyme with 'bite' because the nucleus is different, the similarity of coda makes this an example of 'consonance'. Various issues relating to rhyme can be examined by using the following stanzas.

> Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
> Bird thou never wert,
> That from heaven, or near it,
> Pourest thy full heart
> In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.
>
> Higher still and higher,
> From the earth thou springest
> Like a cloud of fire;
> the blue deep thou wingest,
> And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.
>   (Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'To a Skylark', 1820)

In the first stanza there is an exact repetition in 'heart' and 'art', which is a rhyme (because nucleus+coda are the same in both words). Is 'wert' part of the same rhyme? One question we might ask is whether Shelley *pronounced* this word as he pronounced 'heart': vowels have changed in the course of the history of English, and a pair of words might once have rhymed even if they do not rhyme now. (However, a check of a contemporary edition of Walker's Pronouncing Dictionary shows that 'wert' and 'heart' are listed at that time as having different pronunications, at least in one standard accent of English.) If he did not pronounce these words alike, then we could describe this as an example of consonance with 'heart': consonance is the repetition of just [coda], here the final consonant [t] (or [rt] if the r is pronounced as it is in some accents). It is often the case that a consonance is 'upgraded' to count as a rhyme, if there is supportive evidence. If we look at the rest of the poem – including the second stanza quoted here – we find that the second, fourth and

fifth lines characteristically rhyme with each other, and this gives us some reason to think of the 'wert'/'heart' match as a slightly defective rhyme rather than as a true consonance. In this way we see that – just as in metre – the abstract description of the form as 'rhyme' conceals some variation in actual pronunciation. We might similarly allow 'spirit' and 'near it' to count as rhyme; here we have a shared sequence of nucleus-onset-nucleus-coda, thus involving two syllables. This kind of rhyme, where two syllables are involved and where the first syllable is stressed and the second is unstressed is called a **feminine rhyme**. Rhymes involving just a final stressed syllable are called masculine rhymes. Rhyme is often used systematically in English verse, and we say that a poem can have a 'rhyme scheme', which for this poem would be written down as ABABB for each stanza, showing which lines rhyme in each five-line stanza. Some types of rhyme scheme have their own names: AABBCC, etc. patterns are called 'couplets' and AAABBB, etc., 'triplets'. Combinations of specific metres with specific rhymes also have specific names: the combination of iambic pentameter with (rhyme) couplets is called 'heroic verse', while the use of iambic pentameter *without* rhyme is called 'blank verse'. Special types of stanza also have specific rhyme schemes, and poetic genres such as the sonnet have specific rhyme schemes. Finally, remember that sounds (not spellings) produce rhyme, so 'cough' rhymes with 'off', not with 'plough'. Words like 'cough' and 'plough', whose spelling suggests they ought to rhyme, are called 'eye-rhymes'.

The second major class of sound patterning is **alliteration**, which in its prototypical form involves repetition of the onset, as in 'paste' and 'pay', or 'plaster' and 'plight'. For the most part in English, we can say that there is alliteration if just the first consonant in the onset is repeated. This is the kind of alliteration we see in Shelley's poem: 'pourest' and 'profuse' and 'blithe' and 'bird'. In a stricter variant the whole onset must be repeated, so that 'blithe' and 'bird' would not alliterate with each other, but 'blithe' and 'blood' or 'bide' and 'bird' would alliterate. In a third variant, the onset must be in the first stressed syllable of the word, which can be seen in the notion of the 'three Rs': 'reading, writing and arithmetic'. Here the 'r' in each word is the complete onset of the first stressed syllable in the word (in 'arithmetic' this syllable is the second actual syllable in the word). A fourth variant of alliteration involves not only the onset but also the nucleus, as in 'cash' and 'carry'. Leech (1969) calls this 'reverse rhyme'; it is the standard type of alliteration (or reverse rhyme) in, for example, Finnish and Mongolian poetry (but is not common in English poetry). If we look at the alliteration in Shelley's poem we see that, although it is quite widespread, it is not systematic: we could not talk about an 'alliteration scheme' to parallel the rhyme scheme in the poem. In fact, English poetry has not had systematic alliteration since the medieval period (it is the rule in Old English poetry, was revived in the Middle Ages, and is occasionally imitated in later poetry). In analysing alliteration it is particularly important to remember that you are analysing sounds and not letters: 'seek' and 'shape' do not alliterate with each other because they begin with different sounds (even

though their spelling makes them look similar). There is, however, a tradition of using line-initial (or stanza-initial) letters as an organizatory device; while this is not a kind of alliteration, because it uses letters and not sounds, it is worth noting. The Latin poem *Altus Prosatur* (written in Iona in the sixth century) has each stanza beginning with a different letter of the alphabet, and is called an 'abecedarian' poem.

Thus we can broadly distinguish between rhyme as the repetition of the end of the syllable (and usually the end of the word) as opposed to alliteration as the repetition of the beginning of the syllable (and usually the beginning of the word). It is technically possible to have both the beginning and the end of the syllable repeated; this is called 'pararhyme' (and sometimes also called 'consonance') and is seen in 'send' and 'sound', or 'beat' and 'bite'.

16.3 The significance of sound patterns

So far, we have simply identified possible patterns and presented ways of describing them. In order to investigate how such patterns work as a stylistic resource, we need now to consider what kind of significance or function they might have. Five alternative possibilities are presented below. Each possibility should be considered for each case of sound patterning identified in a text:

(1)   Patterning may serve no particular function, and be simply the accidental result of a random distribution of the small number of distinct sounds that make up the language. This is especially likely in spontaneous conversation. It is also likely where there is some closeness in the text between instances of the sound taken to create the effect: functional sound patterning depends on proximity between the words involved, since readers (or listeners) are unlikely to recognize sounds repeated far apart. Moving to a more formal type of description (see Fabb, 1997), we can express this another way by saying that a closeness constraint seems to operate on some or all kinds of sound patterning, and that this closeness constraint seems required in order to ensure that such patterning is noticeable or perceptually 'salient'.

(2)   Patterning may serve a 'cohesive' function, bonding words together as formulaic, fixed phrases or units. This extra bonding at the level of sound can enhance the memorability of an utterance, as in riddles, catch phrases and proverbs ('action-packed'; 'a stitch in time saves nine'; 'be Indian, buy Indian', etc.).

(3)   Patterning may have the effect of emphasizing or 'foregrounding' some aspect of the text. Sometimes patterning that involves repetition serves to make a passage seem as though it expresses great feeling, as is often the case in political rhetoric. Sometimes the physical existence of the utterance as a linguistic

construct is emphasized, as in the case of tongue twisters such as the allitera-tive 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppercorns'. Notice incidentally that the alliteration here is set against a kind of counter-alliteration (the [p] sound and the [k] sound are made at opposite ends of the mouth), which is what creates the tongue twister.

(4)   Patterning may have the effect of creating or reinforcing a parallelism. In this case, words that are linked together on the basis of shared sounds will also be linked in terms of their meanings (they typically have similar or opposite meanings). This technique is common in jokes, advertising and some types of poetry (e.g. Augustan verse). Consider, from this point of view, such phrases as 'chalk and cheese' and 'cash and carry'; or recall Blake's 'marks of weak-ness, marks of woe', for an example of this effect in Romantic poetry (see **Unit 3, Analysing units of structure**).

(5)   Patterning may contribute **sound symbolism**. Such effects are based on a belief that the sounds that make up words are not arbitrarily related to their meaning, as most linguists think, but are motivated in some way by being loaded with resonance or connotational value.

A number of points are worth noting about the notion of sound symbolism:

(a)   The linguistic view that the sounds of language are arbitrary is supported by evidence such as the fact that the same meaning is expressed in differ-ent languages by words with very different sounds ('tree', 'arbre', 'Baum', etc.), and that the sounds of words change over time. Such evidence suggests that sounds are merely conventional aspects of the formal system of a language.

(b)   The view that sounds in language may have symbolic meanings or expressive effects, on the other hand, is based on a musical belief that sound itself carries meaning, as well as on the idea that individual sounds are felt differently because the way we make them with the voice differs for each sound. Consider three types of much-discussed evidence for this:

(i)   Here are three imaginary but possible 'words': 'la', 'li' and 'lor'. If you had three tables of different sizes to label with these words, which would you call which? Research has shown that most people – across a wide range of different cultures – label the small table 'li', the middle-sized one 'la' and the largest 'lor'. This tendency probably reflects the fact that sounds are made differently in the mouth: 'lor' is a 'big' sound (mouth open, tongue back, large mouth cavity); 'li', by contrast, is a 'small' sound (mouth relatively closed, tongue up and forward, etc.).

(ii)   Some groups of words have both their sound and their general area of meaning in common (this effect is traditionally called 'onomatopoeia'): 'clatter', 'clang' and 'clash' all suggest one thing striking against another; 'sneeze', 'snore', 'snooze' and 'sniffle' are all to do with breathing through the nose and might be considered to sound like the actions they refer to (though consider 'snow' and 'snap' as counter-examples).

(iii) Consider the hypothesis of a gradience of linguistic sounds, from 'hard' through to 'soft'. The so-called hardest sounds include [p], [b], [t], [d], [k] and [g] (these are technically called stops or plosives and all involve completely stopping breath coming out of the mouth, then releasing it suddenly). The so-called softest sounds are the vowels (which do not impede the air-flow out of the mouth at all, but simply reshape it), plus sounds like those commonly produced from the letters 'w' and 'l'. The idea that words contain hard and soft sounds is sometimes then used as the basis for making an equation between sound and meaning.

(c)   Sound symbolism involves attributing conventional meanings or resonances to sound patterns. In Keats's famous line in 'To Autumn' (1820), 'Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours', the repeated 's' and 'z' sounds are often taken to represent the oozing of cider in the press. In an equally well-known line from Tennyson, 'The murmuring of innumerable bees' ('The Princess' [1853]), the repeated 'm' sounds are taken to represent the sound of bees. These associations of sound and meaning are not fixed, however: the sounds 's' and 'z' could equally be taken to stand for the buzzing of bees if they were in a poem about bees. Meaning thus contributes significantly to the apparent effect of sound symbolism in a poem.

16.4 Making interpretations on the basis of sound patterns

Having looked at how sound patterns may function, we need to consider how the identification of sound patterning can be used in ways of reading, and to assess some of the possibilities and problems involved in doing this.

Understanding the conventions of many idioms or genres requires that we recognize aspects of their use of sound patterning. Contemporary rapping involves rhyming as one of its main organizational principles; and headlines and advertising slogans have characteristic ways of using sound patterns. Many texts written within established literary traditions draw on conventions of sound patterning (and sometimes sound symbolism) as a conventional compositional resource. Traditions of interpretation of these texts also draw on the same network of conventions.

The conventional register of poetic language has itself fluctuated throughout its history in terms of its use of sound patterning. Some periods and poets have preferred highly complex effects, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose sound patterning is evident in the opening lines of 'The Windhover' (1877; published 1918):

> I caught this morning morning's minion, king
> Dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
> Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
> High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
> In his ecstasy!

Such complexity of sound patterning contrasts strongly with, for instance, Wordsworth's aspiration for poetic language (or 'diction') to approximate to the ordinary language of speech, famously presented in the 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*' (1802) roughly half a century earlier. We should nevertheless be careful about generalizations about the contribution made by sound patterning to poetic styles. This is partly because sound patterning intersects in complex ways with rhythm and other aspects of register; it is also partly because writers are not always consistent in their practice.

Wordsworth's co-authorship of the *Lyrical Ballads* with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for instance, did not stop Coleridge less than two decades later producing one of the most celebrated instances of intricate sound patterning in English verse – the first lines of 'Kubla Khan' (1816):

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
>   A stately pleasure-dome decree:
> Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
>   Down to a sunless sea.

Earlier in this unit, we named various types of sound pattern that can emerge in a text. These labels are useful if they help us to describe sound patterning; but in the actual analysis of texts it often seems that there are no clear-cut boundaries between sound effects. Rhyme, assonance and consonance are mixed together not as a repertoire of separate devices but in a texture of complex and interconnected patterning. Consider the lines from 'Kubla Khan' above in this respect. If you try simply to list instances of sound patterning, you quickly run into difficulties (including difficulties that are the result of language variation as well as language change). Does the vowel in 'Khan' in the first line, for instance, assonate with 'Kubla' (and possibly with 'Xanadu')? Or does it rhyme with the first vowel in 'Xanadu'?

In attempting to interpret sound patterns, it is useful to distinguish between fairly systematic and predictable patterns that serve to define a form

(such as rhyme schemes and local kinds of ornamentation), and patterns that have locally marked effects and seem to have expressive or symbolic functions (such as extra memorability or special suggestiveness). One problem with trying to interpret this second kind of pattern is that the expressive or symbolic significance of sound effects cannot simply be read off from a text in a series of mechanical equations between sound and sense (see the examples from Keats and Tennyson on p. 201). A sequence of words beginning with the same sound may suggest one thing in one context and quite a different thing in another. The context and meanings of words that appear to create local, expressive effects should therefore take priority. Only after considering these is it safe to suggest ways in which the sound might support (or perhaps undercut) the sense.

More generally, it is rarely, if ever, possible to prove an effect of sound patterning or sound symbolism. Caution is therefore needed in putting forward interpretive arguments based on the connotations or symbolic qualities of sounds. Arguments regarding the expressive or symbolic qualities of sound in a text are persuasive only when they are based on some mutual reinforcement that can be shown between properties of the text at different levels (between its sounds, grammatical structures, vocabulary, etc.), rather than when appeals are made either directly to fixed symbolic values for sounds, or to a reader's personal sense of a sound's resonance.

Finally, when writing about a text, there is little point in simply listing aspects of its sound patterning (e.g. its rhyme scheme, or the fact that two words alliterate). Comments along these lines only become interesting when linked to one of two kinds of argument: either as a contribution to the identification of a genre or form, where for some reason this is in question or worth establishing; or else to support a case for some local interpretation, where the evocative effect of the sound connects with other indicators of what is meant.

ACTIVITY 16.1

These are the final two stanzas of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1609):

> When I bethinke me on that speech whyleare,
> Of *Mutability*, and well it way:
> Me seemes, that though she all unworthy were
> Of the Heav'ns Rule; yet very sooth to say,
> In all things else she beares the greatest sway.
> Which makes me loath this state of life so tickle,
> And loue of things so vaine to cast away;
> Whose flowring pride, so fading and so fickle,
> Short *Time* shall soon cut down with his consuming sickle.

> Then gin I thinke on that which Nature sayd,
> Of that same time when no more *Change* shall be,
> But stedfast rest of all things firmely stayd
> Upon the pillours of Eternity,
> That is contrayr to *Mutabilitie*:
> For, all that moueth, doth in *Change* delight:
> But thence-forth all shall rest eternally
> With Him that is the God of Sabbaoth hight:
> O thou great Sabbaoth God, graunt me that Sabaoths sight.

1 Identify the rhyme scheme of the stanzas. Identify masculine versus feminine rhymes, and say whether you think there is any significance or pattern to the choice of one or the other.

2 Identify the examples of alliteration in the text. Is a specific type of alliteration used here, or a mixture?

3 Which key words in the stanzas participate in alliteration (or rhyme), and which key words do not? Can this be explained?

4 Discuss the ways in which the author uses sound patterning (rhyme and alliteration) to indicate that the last few lines of the poem are indeed the final lines of the poem.

Reading

Fabb, N. (1997) *Linguistics and Literature*, Oxford: Blackwell.
Furniss, T.E. and Bath, M. (1996) *Reading Poetry: An Introduction*, London: Longman, Chapter 4.
Leech, G. (1969) *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*, London: Longman, Chapter 6.