



## Red Sky At Night, Sailors Happy

Recently I came across a research report\* with the evocative title **BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK CONJOINTLY (?)**: **Rhyme as Reason in Aphorisms**. The question mark is not mine; it was in the original title. I like that question mark. There aren't enough research studies with question marks in parenthesis in their title. But also, since this study dealt with rhyme, it interested me as a so-called lyricist.

The study was conducted and the report written by Matthew S. McGlone and Jessica Tofighbakhsh of Lafayette College in Easton, PA. The abstract of this report begins with this line: *"We explored the role that poetic form can play in people's perceptions of the accuracy of aphorisms as descriptions of human behavior."*

(In Wikipedia, this "rhyme-as-reason" effect is also called the "Eaton-Rosen phenomenon," though I can't find any other reference to this name for it. Maybe someone made it up who had trouble spelling Tofighbakhsh.)

A lot of papers like this are a slow slog for someone not up on the area of discussion or of the conventions of research reports in general. This one is pretty clearly written for the lay person (me), though it does have lines like *"This experiment employed a 2 x 2 x 2 design with aphorism type (extant rhyming or non-rhyming) and version (original or modified) as within-subjects factors and instruction condition (control or warning) as a between-subjects factor."* This may be crystal clear to folks in the know, but to me it took a bit of parsing.

If I understand the setup correctly, they started with 30 rhyming aphorisms and 30 non-rhyming aphorisms. For each of these 60 aphorisms, they created a version that was identical but had one word replaced by a synonym. For the rhyming aphorisms, the resulting version had the same meaning as the original, but did not rhyme. For the non-rhyming aphorisms, the resulting version had the

same meaning as the original, and still did not rhyme.

Their examples:

Original rhyming aphorism:  
*"What sobriety conceals,  
alcohol reveals."*

New non-rhyming version:  
*"What sobriety conceals,  
alcohol unmasks."*

Original non-rhyming aphorism:  
*"Benefaction is the most difficult weapon  
to conquer."*

New (still non-rhyming) version:  
*"Benefaction is the most difficult weapon  
to overcome."*

These *"Benefaction is..."* originally non-rhyming aphorisms were used as a sort of control, to help show that the results of the study were not skewed by mere word-replacement, but were indeed based upon rhyme vs. non-rhyme.

To make a long story short, they divided up a bunch of volunteers and gave them selections of aphorisms. They were asked to rate each aphorism as *"an accurate description of human behavior on a scale from 1 (not at all accurate) to 9 (very accurate)."*

Half of the volunteers were given no particular instruction at the outset. The OTHER half were told in boldface type, to base their judgements *"only on the claim that the statement makes about behavior, not the poetic quality of the statement's wording."*

There are more details to this study than I'm representing, but the upshot was, those WARNED to NOT be swayed by the rhyming of the aphorism were much more likely to judge all aphorisms to have about the same accuracy. In contrast, those NOT WARNED about the influence of the rhyming component were much more likely to say that the rhyming aphorisms were more of an *"accurate description of human behavior"* than the non-rhyming aphorisms.

IN OTHER WORDS (mine), if you aren't WARNED to take into consideration the subconsciously convincing effect of rhymes, you may be giving a rhymed statement more credit than it deserves, truth-wise. The example they give of the power of rhyme and its bearing on ap-

parent truth is the effectiveness of the statement "If the gloves don't fit, you must acquit," in the O.J. Simpson trial in 1995 (this paper appeared in 2000, so the memory of the trial was pretty fresh). This is conjecture, of course, but it is interesting to think about.

McGlone and Tofighbakhsh wrap things up by suggesting that the results of their study might be due to the "enhanced processing fluency" afforded by rhymed phrases when compared to non-rhymed but similar phrases, and that this increased fluency has the effect of making something seem more true. Could be.

Anyway, moving on, it's not Simpson's lawyer Johnny Cochran who first used rhyme to bump up the perceived accuracy of a statement. Advertisers and politicians have known this forever. Consider "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should," "You'll wonder where the yellow went when you brush your teeth with Pepsodent." "Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is." "I like Ike." "All the way with LBJ." "See the USA in your Chevrolet."

Then there are the scads of advisories like "An apple a day keeps the doctor away," "Haste makes waste," and my favorite, "Liar liar pants on fire."

And maybe it's because of that "enhanced processing fluency" that rhymed aphorisms work well as mnemonic devices. I'll always remember my high school chemistry teacher Gus Ediger's advice, "Do as you oughta, add acid to water." Then, on to English class: "I before E except after C." Not to mention "Thirty days have September, April June and November..."

All this makes me wonder if -- taking "aphorisms" out of this quote and replacing it with "lyrics" -- there may be a *"...role that poetic form can play in people's perceptions of the accuracy of [lyrics] as descriptions of human behavior."* Whether this is because of the "increased processing fluency" of rhymed language or not, and whether other esthetic considerations, like meter and melody, also increase this fluency and, as a result, the perceived truthfulness of a lyric, is a whole 'nother Whither Zither.

*\*Psychological Science, Vol. 11, No. 5, September 2000*

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