VERSIFICATION AND LANGUAGE IN MOTHER GOOSE NURSERY RHYMES

UDC 821.111-1(02.053.2):801.6

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Abstract. This paper presents a metrical and language analysis of Mother Goose nursery rhymes. Its aim is to establish to which extent the development of English versification system is reflected by the rhymes because they, although simple in form, due to their diversity and antiquity contain features that range from those characteristic of the accentual verse of Old English to those characteristic of the accentual-syllabic system of Modern English. The conclusion to be drawn from the language of the rhymes is that, although most of the rhymes are fairly literal in meaning, there are some that make use of various poetic devices, such as simile, metaphor, metonymy, personification, apostrophe, hyperbole, paradox, and oxymoron. Another conclusion regarding the form of the rhymes is that repetition is an important feature, whether it is the repetition of sounds or the repetition of words or phrases.

Key words: Mother Goose, nursery rhymes, versification, metre, language, figure of speech

1. INTRODUCTION

Nonsense jingles, humorous songs, character rhymes, lullabies, infant amusements, nursery counting-out formulas, riddles, tongue twisters, nursery prayers, singing games, rhymes of divination, magic spells, toe-counting rhymes, feature naming rhymes, alphabet rhymes, 'catches,' incantations, proverbs in verse, weather lore in doggerel, self-evident propositions, 'taunting' rhymes, and many more, are all offered a welcoming wing by Mother Goose, and, despite their diversity, all go under one broad term of 'nursery rhymes' (Prošić-Santovac 2009: 9). Due to this diversity of the rhymes in Mother Goose collections, it is difficult to establish a unified pattern in their structure. "Being the legacy of oral tradition, their origin cannot be traced with certainty to any particular point in

Submitted February 2011, accepted for publication in November 2011.

* This paper is the unpublished part of the author's M.Phil. thesis (Nursery Rhymes and Acquiring English at Preschool and Early School Age), defended in July 2008, supervised by Vladislava Felbabov, PhD, at the time an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, Novi Sad.
history" (Prošić-Santovac 2007: 427); as a result, they present us with a wide variety of metrical forms that were favoured at different times in the history of the English language; thus, Mother Goose offers an insight, although only an incomplete one, into various stages of development of English versification, from the accentual verse of Old English to the accentual-syllabic system of Modern English.

2. Versification in Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes

The traces of Old English versification, in the form of the remnant of caesura, are still visible in some rhymes. The following rhyme contains all three possible positions of caesura – initial, medial and terminal:

Diddle diddle dumpling, | | my son John  
Went to bed | | with his breeches on,  
One stocking off, | | and one stocking on,  
Diddle diddle dumpling, | | my son John (OTMG 2004: 20).

It also exhibits the example of an end-stopped line, in line four of the rhyme, with the pause at the end of the line "where the sense and meter coincide" (Cuddon 1999: 260), whereas the first line presents the example of a run-on line, "which runs into the next line without any grammatical break" (775). These features, characteristic of oral tradition, make the rhymes easy to remember and pronounce, which is, in fact, one of their purposes.

Alliteration, one of the main features of Old English verse, enriches many a nursery rhyme, though not in its initial form and purpose of linking two half-lines and with a completely different rhythm. Repetition of phonemes greatly enhances the quality of the sound of a rhyme, creating multiple effects and serving various purposes; for example, the opening line of a rhyme, "One misty, moisty morning" (Opie 1997: 370), sets the atmosphere at the very beginning for the rest of the rhyme. Alliteration is also much exploited in tongue twisters:

Swan swam over the sea,  
Swim, swan, swim!  
Swan swam back again,  
Well swum, swan! (Opie 1997: 477)

The impact of alliterative verse is "deeply significant for the history and cultural continuity of medieval English literature" (Lightsey 2002: 37). However, after the Norman Conquest in 1066, Romance languages flooded the linguistic scene, with their inclination towards rhymed poetry which, consequently, "displaced the native alliterative verse" (37). Therefore, the use of alliteration tends "more to be reserved for the achievement of the special effect" (Cuddon 1999: 27), whereas rhyme took over as a major structural feature, and it is also dominant in the realm of nursery rhymes.

The most commonly utilised form of the rhyme, end-rhyme, appears in a great majority of nursery rhymes, as it appeals to young children who most readily respond to rhymed poetry. It makes use not of the quality of the sound, as in cases previously discussed, but of the identity of the sound at the end of a line; the rhyme scheme is usually represented by letters that indicate the lines with recurring rhyme.

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1 From this point onwards, the abbreviated form OTMG will be used for The Only True Mother Goose Melodies.
Little boy blue, come blow your horn, a
The sheep's in the meadow, the cow's in the corn, a
What! is this the way you mind your sheep, b
Under the haycock fast asleep? (Fisher Wright 1916: 11) b

Full, or perfect, rhyme is not always easy to accomplish in English, especially if it is to be followed by the visual rhyme, as in the example above. Therefore, imperfect rhymes, with their incomplete phonetic identity, also contribute to the liveliness of a rhyme:

Little king Boggen he built a fine hall, a
Pie-crust and pastry-crust, that was the wall; a
The windows were made of black-puddings and white, b
And slated with pancakes – you ne'er saw the like (OTMG 2002: 32). b

Often, rhyming one word with two can make an even more powerful impact:

A duck and a drake, a
And a halfpenny cake, a
With a penny to pay the old baker. b
A hop and a scotch c
Is another notch, c
Slitherum, slatherum, take her (Fisher Wright 1916: 104). b

Furthermore, it is not always the case that words rhyme at the end of the lines; sometimes rhyming words occur within a single line, forming an internal rhyme, as in the first lines of the rhymes 'Doctor Foster went to Gloucester' (Opie 1997: 203) and 'Lucy Locket lost her pocket' (328).

Creating a pattern according to accentuation is yet another way of organizing a poetical composition. In a stress-timed language as English is presumed to be, the rhythm of speech, as well as of poetry, is "based on the idea of a strong beat or accent which recurs at regular intervals of time" (Hawkins 1992: 178), and its basic unit is the foot, with the obligatory element being an accented syllable, usually marked by ‘ in versification analysis, and optionally preceded or followed by one or more unaccented syllables, marked by ”. For example, iamb, or iambic foot, consisting of an unaccented syllable accompanied by an accented one (‘ ”’), can be found in many nursery rhymes:

Ás Í | wás gójíng tó Dé | hý ű pó n | á márk két dá y,
Í mét | þe fín | é st rám, | sír, thát é v é r f é d | ón há y,
Ôn há y, | ón há y, | ón há y,
Í mét | þe fín | é st r á m, | s í r, th á t é v é r f é d | ón há y (OTMG 2002: 30).

However, variations within a line are not uncommon, and it is possible to find a foot of a different kind interjected into an otherwise regular pattern in a rhyme, as in the example above, where anapaestic foot is inserted, with the pattern ” ”’ . The prevailing foot in the following rhyme is trochee (’ ”’), the second most common foot in children's poetry in European languages, with an addition of dactyl (” ”’ ) and a spondee (” ”’):

Cóld ánd | rá w thé | Nórth winds | bló w
Bléak in thé | mór ning | é arlí y,
Áll t hé | hílls á re | cívér éd | wíth sn ów,
Ánd wíntér's | nó w có mé | fár lí y (19).
The number of feet in a line is also an important factor in creating the pattern of English verse. In analysing Mother Goose nursery rhymes in metrical terms, we encounter various types of line, beginning with monometer, a "line of verse consisting of one metrical foot" (Cuddon 1999: 518):

One's none;
Two's some;
Three's | many;
Four's a | penny;
Five's a | little | hundred (Opie 1997: 392).

Dimeter is present in all but the last line of the "catch which, when said quickly, appears to be Latin" (263):

In fir | tar is,
In oak | none is,
In mud | eels are,
In clay | none are.
Goat eat | ivy;
Mare eat oats (263).

The subsequent nursery rhyme represents an example of trimeter, with three feet to a line, with the exception of the third line which is a sample of tetrameter:

Jack Sprat | could eat | no fat;
His wife | could eat | no lean;
So 'twixt | them both | they cleared | the cloth,
And lick'd | the plat|ter clean (OTMG 2002: 42).

Both pentameter and hexameter are illustrated by the following lines:

I'll trip | upon | trenchers, | and dance | upon | dishes,
My mother sent | me for | some barm, | some barm;
She bid | me go | lightly, | and come | again | quickly,
For fear | the young | men should | do me | some harm (Baring-Gould 1962: 53).

Organizing a rhyme requires grouping of single lines, of which the simplest form are two successive rhyming lines, or the couplet, frequent in the nursery rhymes corpus, either as a basic structural unit of a rhyme or as an independent form:

All work | and no | play makes | Jack a | dull boy;
All play | and no | work makes | Jack a | mere toy (290).

Stanzas consisting of three lines, tercet or triplet, are not often found among nursery rhymes, but they do exist:

What is | the rhyme | for por|ringer? a
The king | he had | a daughter fair, b
And gave | the Prince | of O|range her (8). a

By far the most frequently occurring are quatrains, stanzas of four lines. The following example uses the pattern of alternate rhyme and is composed of tetrameters, lines of the same length in terms of the division into feet.
3. LANGUAGE IN MOTHER GOOSE NURSERY RHYMES

The abundance of forms, whose simplicity is spellbinding, testifies on the centuries of effort invested in the creation of the nursery rhymes that exist today. It is, however, accompanied by an equally fascinating straightforwardness of language. Monosyllabic and disyllabic words, often in association with uncomplicated poetic devices, appeal to the primary audience. Especially entertaining to small children are the rhymes enlivened through the use of onomatopoeia – "a figure of speech in which the sound reflects the sense" (Cuddon 1999: 466). Words invented to echo the sounds of nature are customary in Mother Goose nursery rhymes, most often representing the sounds made by domestic animals, such as that of a rooster – 'Cock-a-doodle-do!', a dove – 'Coo, coo,' a wren – 'Pooh, pooh,' a dog – 'Bow-wow-wow!' or kittens – 'Mee-ow, mee-ow, mee-ow' (Opie 1997: 149, 181, 177, 301).

Noun phrases in the rhymes typically contain simple epithets, such as 'dusty miller,' 'greedy man,' 'lazy Tom,' 'naughty boy,' or 'poor pussy cat' (Willcox Smith 1914: 11, 45, 53, 103). There are, however, rhymes within the corpus which are adorned in a much more complex way than the ones listed above:

"Will you walk into my parlor?" said the spider to the fly;
"Tis the prettiest little parlor that ever you did spy.
The way into my parlor is up a winding stair;
And I have many curious things to show you when you're there" (110).

Imagery in Mother Goose nursery rhymes is mostly literal, which is appropriate for the age of children that the rhymes are intended for and is in accordance with their cognitive development. Thus, we come across many rhymes that tell a plain story, unembellished by complex figures of speech; however, there are also some rhymes that do employ more rhetorical figures of speech. Explicit comparisons, for instance, are present in the form of simile, as in the example of the rhyme 'Mary had a little lamb,' where the lamb's fleece is "as white as snow" (68). Implicit comparisons, on the other hand, are more difficult to perceive in nursery rhymes, but there are metaphors which are used in riddles, as "[g]ood riddles do, in general, provide us with satisfactory metaphors: for metaphors imply riddles" (Aristotle 350 BC). For example, the metaphor for 'a glove,' as the solution to a riddle, is "a cart full of fingers and thumbs," while 'a walnut' is presented as "a little green house" (Willcox Smith 1914: 116, 79). Some riddles contain metonymy, a "figure of speech in which the name of an attribute of a thing is substituted for the thing itself" (Cuddon 1999: 510):
The calf, the goose, the bee,
The world is ruled by these three.
The answer: parchment, pens, and wax (Willcox Smith 1914: 68).

Prosopopoeia, or personification, is inherent in a number of riddles, as well, with the "first-person voice highlighting the dire plight of the objects as they speak of their suffering" (Igarashi 2002: 341):

I'm in everyone's way, yet no Christian I stop.
My four horns every day horizontally play,
And my head is nailed down at the top.
The answer: a turnstile (Baring-Gould 271).

Yet another way of breathing life into the rhymes is using apostrophe, a "figure of speech in which a thing, a place, an abstract quality, an idea, a dead or absent person, is addressed as if present and capable of understanding" (Cuddon 1999: 51). The instances of apostrophe can be found in the rhyme 'Mirror, mirror, tell me' and the lullaby 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star' (Baring-Gould 1962: 135; Willcox Smith 1914: 120). Probably the best-known example is that of addressing rain in the following rhyme:

Rain, rain, go away;
Come again another day;
Little Johnny wants to play (65).

What makes the rhymes especially engaging to young children is the use of poetic devices that create seemingly illogical and impossible descriptions of situations, such as hyperbole. Therefore, in the rhymes, we have exaggeration for emphasis: a man who can eat 'more meat than fourscore men,' 'a cow,' 'a calf,' 'a hog and a half,' 'a church,' 'a steeple,' 'the priest and all the people,' as well as the cow who "jumped over the moon" (Opie 1997: 443, 240). Sometimes, even whole rhymes are based on a hyperbole:

Jerry Hall, he is so small,
A rat could eat him, hat and all (286).

Also, the use of paradox, "an apparently self-contradictory (even absurd) statement which, on closer inspection, is found to contain a truth reconciling the conflicting opposites" (Cuddon 1999: 634) captures children's attention effectively.

Wasn't it funny? hear it all people!
Little Tom Thum has swallowed a steeple!
How did he do it?
I'll tell you, my son:
'Twas made of white sugar – and easily done! (Willcox Smith 1914: 58)

An even more elaborate example of this type of rhetorical figure is offered by the rhyme 'I had four brothers over the sea.' The four brothers in question send presents, the first being 'a chicken, without any bones,' the second 'a cherry, without any stones,' the third 'a book, which no man could read,' and the fourth 'a blanket, without any thread.' Logical explanations do not come until the very end:
When the chicken's in the egg-shell, there are no bones,
When the cherry's in the blossom, there are no stones [...] 
When the book's in ye press no man it can read; 
When the wool is on the sheep's back, there is no thread (156-7).

Closely related to paradox, oxymoron "combines incongruous and apparently contradictory words and meanings for a special effect" (Cuddon 1999: 627). The sheer incompatibility of utterances contributes to the humour of the situation that 'the man in the moon' found himself in, when "he burnt his mouth, / With eating cold pease porridge" (Willcox Smith 1914: 121). Again, there are rhymes that are based completely around one figure of speech, as in the example of oxymoron below:

Awake, arise, pull out your eyes,
And hear what time of day; 
And when you have done, 
Pull out your tongue, 
And see what you can say (87).

What also contributes to the attractiveness of nursery rhymes is repetition – of any kind. It is appealing to young children, because for them, sense and sound are inseparable. Repetition makes memorizing much easier and the cadence of the lines lighter. Basic effects in children's poetry are created through the use of sound repetition, as in the case of assonance and consonance. Assonance, or 'vocalic rhyme,' which is the repetition of similar vowels, is exemplified by the first line of the rhyme "How many days has my baby to play?" (Opie 1997: 68). On the other hand, repetition of consonants, i.e. consonance, is more frequent in the nursery rhyme corpus and much easier to perceive, in view of the fact that the spelling of consonants is more consistent in comparison with the spelling of vowels. The example of initial consonance is found in the first line of the rhyme 'Around the green gravel the grass grows green,' of the internal consonance in Dickery, dickery, dock,' while the final consonants are repeated in 'Bat, bat, come under my hat' (Fisher Wright 1916: 88; Willcox Smith 1914: 67, 53).

Not only sounds can be repeated in order to achieve greater melodiousness; different figures of speech offer a variety of ways in which words can be repeated to attain diversity and freshness of the rhymes. Epanados, for example, or, in Greek, "a repeating of words," is a "figure of speech in which a word or a phrase is repeated at the beginning and middle, or at the middle and end of a sentence" (Cuddon 1999: 264), and it can be exemplified by a nursery rhyme which contains both combinations in its lines:

Wash the dishes, wipe the dishes,
Ring the bell for tea; 
**Three good** wishes, **three good** kisses, 
I will give to thee (Baring-Gould 1962: 322).

A second, similar figure of speech, "in which each sentence or clause ends with the same word," is epistrophe (Cuddon 1999: 279):
For want of a nail the shoe was lost,  
For want of a shoe the horse was lost,  
For want of a horse the rider was lost,  
For want of a rider the battle was lost,  
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost,  
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail (Opie 1997: 383).

Not necessarily at the end of a line, words can be repeated "emphatically to produce a special effect," using a figure of speech called epizeuxis (Cuddon 1999: 283):

There was a crooked man,  
And he went a crooked mile,  
And he found a crooked sixpence  
Against a crooked stile;  
He bought a crooked cat,  
Which caught a crooked mouse,  
And they all lived together  
In a little crooked house (Willcox Smith 1914: 71).

4. CONCLUSION

Oral tradition has given nursery rhymes the flavour of centuries. Repetitive patterns, characteristic of oral tradition, make the rhymes linger in the minds of people well into their old age. However, "[t]he creative interplay of language and thought is particularly evident in figurative language" (Katz 1998: 3), which can be found here and there among nursery rhymes, though most of the rhymes retain literal meaning expressed via literal language. "Traditionally, figurative language […] has been considered derivative from and more complex than ostensibly straightforward literal language. A contemporary view […] is that figurative language involves the same kinds of linguistic and pragmatic operations that are used for ordinary, literal language" (Glucksberg 2001: v). This means that the complexity and subtlety of Mother Goose nursery rhymes is by no means diminished by the relative lack of complicated structures. Poetic devices that do embellish the rhymes survived the refinement of time, and are skilfully spun into their thread. The sheer wealth of metrical forms serves as a reminder of their antiquity, although the remnants of Old English are extremely scarce, if not almost non-existent, which leads to conclusion that the most ancient rhymes date back to medieval times and by no means earlier.

REFERENCES


VERSIFIKACIJA I JEZIK U PESMAMA MAJKE GUSKE

Danijela Prošić-Santovac

Ovaj rad predstavlja metričku i jezičku analizu tradicionalnih anglo-američkih pesama za decu iz korpusa Majke guske. Ima za cilj da utvrdi u kojoj meri ove pesme odslikavaju razvoj engleskog sistema versifikacije, s obzirom na činjenicu da se one, uprkos svojoj jednostavnoj formi, usled starosti i raznolikosti, odlikuju karakteristikama koje se kreću od staroengleskog akcentualnog stila do modernog engleskog akcentualno-silabičkog sistema. Iz analize jezika pesama može se zaključiti da, iako je većina pesama prilično bukvalnog značenja, neke od njih sadrže i stilске figure, kao što je poređenje, metafora, metonimija, personifikacija, apostrofa, hiperbola, paradoks i oksimoron. Takođe, forma pesama navodi na zaključak da je ponavljanje nihova važna odlika, bilo da je u pitanju ponavljanje fonema ili reči i fraze.

Ključne reči: Majka guska, pesme za decu, versifikacija, metar, jezik, stilска figura