

# RHYMING PHENOMENA IN ENGLISH WORDS

IRIS M. TIEDT  
Santa Clara, California

Investigations of English words and phrases have led scholars to the discovery of several rhyming phenomena as in such words as CRISSCROSS, POWWOW and BONBON. These types of rhyming were noted by Jespersen in his Modern English Grammar as well as Marchand in Categories and Types of Present-Day English Word-Formation. The words fall in three groupings: consonantal rhymes, vowel rhymes, and repetition of the same syllable (or tautonyms). It is a real challenge to see how many of each you can discover.

## Consonantal Rhymes

The use of consonantal rhyming is common in English poetry. It is enlightening, however, to note the rhyming within the following words:

powwow	boohoo	willy-nilly
harikari	pell-mell	shilly-shally
silly billy	roly-poly	namby-pamby

All of these examples are sufficiently non-esoteric to be listed in the College Edition of The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1968.

Further investigation reveals the origins of some of these intriguing words. NAMBY-PAMBY, for instance, was the title of a poem written by Henry Carey in 1726 as he ridiculed Ambrose Phillips' poetic endeavors. The word remained in English to indicate something weakly sentimental, or a person who is indecisive. WILLY-NILLY was derived from the phrase will ye, nill ye. It has the meaning of "willingly or unwillingly" as in the sentence: He'll have to do it willy-nilly. The word also carries the meaning of vacillating, which is the meaning also for a similar example, SHILLY-SHALLY (discussed in the next section).

This type of rhyming is not a thing of the past, for there are many examples of coinage in contemporary slang, la langue verte, and some of these have already entered the dictionary. One such example is JET SET which is defined in the Random House dictionary as "an ultrafashionable social set composed of people reputed to spend much of their leisure time in intercontinental jetting from resort to resort."

Another is HANKY-PANKY which is labeled informal with the definition "unethical behavior; mischief; deceit." Reference is also made to the British use of the term to mean "sleight of hand; magic"

which is similar to HOCUS-POCUS and has the alternate spelling, HANKEY-PANKEY.

Other contemporary examples which are equally interesting are:

palsy walsy	wheeler dealer
hi-fi (high fidelity)	rich bitch
T-V (television)	fuddy duddy
walkie talkie	ding-a-ling
mumbo jumbo	lovey dovey

Children's literature has made use of this type of rhyming extensively in the old English fairy tale, HENNY-PENNY, which appears in English Fairy Tales by Joseph Jacobs (Putnam, 1892). This story is also called Chicken Little or CHICKEN LICKEN. The characters all bear rhymed names: COCKY-LOCKY, GOOSEY-POOSEY, TURKEY-LURKEY, FOXY-WOXY.

Additional examples of this type of consonantal rhyming are the following:

Hell's bells	hubbub
plain Jane	hokey-pokey
to-do	hodgepodge
ill will	hotchpotch
backtrack	harum-scarum
hully gully	tutti-frutti
hugger mugger	true blue
funny bunny	nitwit
fuzzy wuzzy	teepee
higgledy piggledy	helter-skelter
voodoo	four-door
hobo	claptrap
raggle taggle	kiwi
lazy daisy	humdrum
silly willy	teeny-weeny
hoity-toity	teensy-weensy
nightlight	swap shop
itsy-bitsy	teeter-totter

A particularly interesting word is hullabaloo which appears to have some relationship to this group. Closer study reveals that this word comes from HALOOBALOO which was based on the Scottish word ballo, meaning lullaby. Another interesting rhyming phrase we have borrowed is DON JUAN. STUM(BLE) BUM represents an imperfect rhyme.

Some words in this category are associated with babytalk, that is, words that adults use in speaking to young children. Examples are TEENY-WEENY (with its spelling variations TEENSY-WEENSY, TEENIE-WEENIE, TEENSIE-WEENSIE) and ITSY-BITSY (or ITTY-BITTY). It is certainly incorrect to consider all examples in this category as associated with babytalk.

## Vowel Rhymes

The words and phrases in this group reduplicate the same syllable with only a change in vowel, as in CHITCHAT. This word, a gradative compound based on chat, means light conversation or small talk. The form CHITTERCHATTER is also used. Other vowel rhymes include:

flipflop	tiptop
tick tock	Ping-Pong
shilly shally	singsong
dilly dally	seesaw
flimflam	riffraff
crisscross	hippety hoppety
tittle tattle	mishmash
bric-a-brac	rickrack
knickknack	pitter patter
nicknack	shipshape
jingle jangle	wiggle waggle
hi ho	wigwag
hee haw	zigzag
pish posh	King Kong
telltale	jim-jam
wishy washy	whim-wham
clipclap	dingdong

There is a very definite tendency to move from the high front vowel /i/ as in bit or /iy/ as in beet to a mid or low vowel /a/ as in bat or /ɔ/ as in hot. Examples displaying this tendency are ZIGZAG and MISHMASH as well as SINGSONG and CRISSCROSS.

Semantically, these words frequently bear a gradative quality that belittles the object described. CHITCHAT is clearly inconsequential talk. BRIC-A-BRAC and KNICKKNACKS are inexpensive little trifles. RIFFRAFF constitutes the worthless element of society.

Of particular interest is SHILLY-SHALLY which was referred to in the preceding section. Probably originating in the repetition of shall I? shall I? in an indecisive manner, SHILLY-SHALLY is related to DILLY DALLY which may be more commonly used today.

The origins of many of these examples prove to be fascinating. PING-PONG, for instance, is an example of a trademark that is widely used as a synonym for table tennis. It may have been intended to represent the sound of the ball striking the table; however, the reversal GNIP-GNOP is a somewhat truer representation. Few people would use capital letters for the word as shown in the list.

RIFFRAFF is an ancient word coming to us from Old French in the expression rif et raf, derived from the verbs rifler (to spoil) and raffler (to ravage or snatch away).

WHIM-WHAM means "any odd or fanciful object or thing; a gimcrack." WHIM-WHAMS, however, in informal English, means the jitters or nervousness.

TOPSY-TURVY is a word that doesn't quite fit this category because in addition to the vowel change there is a consonant change. It appears to be a variation of top syd turvye from Old German, with a loss of d before t. The meaning, of course, is topside down, or (in more general terms) confused and disorderly.

TIT FOR TAT is an expression that uses the inner rhyme as does HEM AND HAW with the addition of /m/. PICKPOCK(ET) shows the same inner vowel rhyme with the addition of a final syllable.

### Repetition of the Same Syllable

The third grouping of a type of rhyming involves reduplication of the same syllable as in DODO, MURMUR or PAPA and MAMA. (Recreational linguists call them tautonyms.) Other examples include:

cancan	Bora Bora
hula-hula	Pago Pago
hubba hubba	Sing Sing
pooh pooh	Berber
beebee	Mimi
beriberi	Lulu
gaga	Fifi
cha-cha-(cha)	Bobo
dumdum	bonbon
tutu	so so
tomtom	sensen
booboo	ha ha
too-too	muumuu
frou frou	wee-wee
twenty-twenty	tut-tut

In all these examples, the first and last halves are spelled and sounded the same. However, the former requirement is not necessary, as demonstrated by the word CUCKOO. (Strictly speaking, this is no longer a tautonym.) A number of these words are imitative of sounds. This is probably true of TOMTOM which comes to us from tam-tam, of Hindi origins. The name of the Cuban dance, CHA-CHA-CHA, is also likely to represent imitation of the musical instruments.

BERIBERI is simply reduplication of the Singhalese beri, or weakness. GAGA is a French imitative word that means silly or foolish.

Contemporary coinages indicate that reduplication is still popular. A DUMDUM is obviously a stupid person, although not listed in a dictionary. DODO is extended to stupid persons as well as the extinct bird. Perhaps the association is with the meaningless repetition of a monotonous sound. CANCAN, the French dance characterized by high kicking, supposedly originates in can, a derivation of canard, meaning a duck. To POOH POOH something is certainly to belittle it. In modern slang, a BOOBOO is a gross error which might have been made by a DUMDUM.

Summary

This discussion of rhyming phenomena in English words and phrases is clearly not exhaustive. It does, however, suggest a fascinating aspect of the English language that is still functioning in contemporary linguistic development as the users of the English language have a direct impact on their language.

## QUERY

William Sunners of Brooklyn, N. Y. is anxious to determine the longest anagrams in Webster's Unabridged and in the Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary. In Webster's Second, the longest anagram is almost certainly HYDROPNEUMOPERICARDIUM - PNEUMOHYDROPERICARDIUM, although others of this length may also exist. What is the longest in Webster's Third? In the Pocket Webster, he conjectures that the longest is CONSERVATION - CONVERSATION, but he feels confident that this can be surpassed.