1 Introduction

The title *Rhyme over Reason* is based on the common English idiomatic phrase *neither rhyme nor reason*. Modern-day dictionaries provide the meaning of the phrase as 'expressing lack of good sense or reasonableness' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, henceforth *OED*).[1] The phrase was popularized by Shakespeare in *As You Like It*, where Orlando uses the following words to express his unbounded love for Rosalind:

ROSALIND: But are you so much in love as your rhymes speak?
ORLANDO: Neither rhyme nor reason can express how much.

Orlando's devotion to Rosalind is so profound that it cannot be articulated – neither by poetic language (or *rhyme*), nor by logical reasoning (*reason*). From a linguistic perspective, this distinction between *rhyme* and *reason* has typically been referred to as the 'poetic' versus the 'referential' function of language use, as was established by Roman Jakobson (1960). In essence, the former is dominated by a focus on the *form* of the message, and is represented by expressive, playful language use, which can range from the repetition of sounds within a single word (e.g., the repetition of the [l] sound in *mellifluous*, 'pleasant-sounding, flowing, musical'), through the repetition of sounds across multi-word units (e.g., alliterating idioms such as *neither rhyme nor reason*), all the way to the formal discipline of poetry itself.

The referential function of language – the most clearly delineated opposite of the poetic function (Waugh 1980: 58) – is dominated by a focus on the *content* of the message. It is the referential function that we rely on when we communicate information – i.e., when we describe things in the world or state facts. While Jakobson (1960) did emphasize that any particular verbal message typically fulfils a variety of functions, contemporary linguistics has been inclined to concentrate exclusively on the referential aspect of language, considering it as the unmarked one as compared to the other five functions (the emotive, conative, metalingual, poetic and phatic functions) that Jakobson

[1] Examples and definitions throughout the book – unless otherwise specified – come from the *OED*.

identified.[2] In fact, a number of philosophical and linguistic investigations have even claimed the referential function to be the *only* function of language; if any other functions were acknowledged at all, then these were regarded as either 'deviant' or 'unusual'. Over the decades, the referential function has become equated with 'ordinary language' (Waugh 1980: 58). In this view, language is nothing else but 'a drab model of encoding and decoding with no time for frills such as exploration of the expressive resources of a language' (Hall 2001: 72).

Yet such an emphasis on the referential aspect of language use – and the disregard of the poetic function – is a dead-end street, for the simple reason that it has nothing to do with what language actually looks – or sounds – like. Many linguists have noted the importance – and ubiquity – of the 'poetics of everyday talk' (Jefferson 1996: 4). Drawing on data extracted from the CANCODE corpus of spoken English of the University of Nottingham, Carter (1999) claims that what we think of as 'common' or 'everyday' language is very far from being common or everyday; it is, in fact, 'pervasively poetic' (p. 201).

What exactly, however, does this 'poetic function' encompass? On a very general level it can be defined as a preoccupation with the sounds of words. Linguists who have studied its manifestation in language have focused on a diverse range of phenomena, ranging from puns and rhymes to speech errors, to name but a few (for an overview, see Jefferson 1996; see also Carter 2004; Cook 2000; Crystal 1998; Norrick 1993). Toolan (2005), for example, noticed the spread of jokey shop names involving a play on language in Selly Oak, a neighbourhood of Birmingham, in the early 2000s, such as *The Selly Sausage* (as the name of a café serving sausages) and *The Selly Soak* (for a laundrette). What is quite intriguing, however, is that joke shop-names (as Toolan refers to them) could be found especially rampant among a particular group of services: aside from cafés and laundrettes, hairdressers, novelty shops, drain de-clogging services, liquor stores and tanning salons were more prone to choosing a name that had a funny or jokey character (while health-related services, financial institutions or funeral services for that matter seldom if ever have a name that is a play on or with language). This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that laundrettes, cafés or liquor stores do not operate in areas of high seriousness, but are rather businesses that provide everyday, routine services that are also used often; therefore, the services do not require further interpretation on the part of the customer and no particular adaptation to serve individual needs on the part of the business. The jokey name, however, serves an important function: it grabs our attention and individualizes the service from among a host of

[2] Harris (e.g., 1982, 1996) has routinely criticized the separation of form from meaning, whereby form is simply viewed as an enabler for the effective communication of information. Instead, he advocates a more holistic, 'integrationist' approach to language, according to which language – and communication – is a creative process, where form and meaning are inseparable and highly context-dependent.

other – very similar – ones. By doing so, it communicates to the customer the competence of the service provider as well: they 'are competent . . . to the point of having spare capacity which they can *display* in "doing verbal humour"' (Toolan 2005: 173, emphasis as in original).

Hopper (1992) has pointed out the poetic value of everyday speech errors, such as when a flight attendant, after a particularly rough flight, says the following on the intercom: 'I hope you've had a good *fright*' (example from Hopper 1992: 114). The substitution of *fright* for *flight* is based upon the simple sound association between the two words, but at the same time it is also rooted in semantic categorization – errors represent an 'incorrect' option from an otherwise apt category. The existence of such phenomena suggests that the influence of sound on meaning is pervasive throughout language, but that it often goes unnoticed. For example, such 'poetically-conditioned' (Hopper 1992: 116) language choices determine the expletive use of *Jesus, God, damn* and *gee* (the selected lexical item is dependent on the degree of its phonological similarity to the surrounding words) – or even our use of *cause* or *because*. Consider, for example, the following two utterances, coming from the same speaker within the same interaction (Hopper 1992: pp. 116–7; italics added):

> *Cause* it *comes* from *cold* water.
> Yer gonna *be* You *better* eat stump'n *because* yer gonna *be* hungry *before* we get there.

What both examples clearly demonstrate is that the use of either *cause* or *because* in the utterance is dependent on the phonological environment – the sounds in the words either preceding or following the respective conjunctions. This phenomenon is referred to by Hopper as 'phonic parenting'.

The basic question that can be raised at this point is whether it is justified to continue to emphasize a distinction between the poetic versus referential function of language, i.e., between rhyme and reason. This book will take the position that it is unnecessary to do so, because there is no such thing as common, everyday or ordinary language, 'not unless it is understood as an extraordinary range of creativity and varieties' (Hall 2001: 73). In his monograph on conversational joking, Norrick (1993) also observes that language play, such as spontaneous joking, is such a central characteristic of everyday communication that 'conversation tends more toward performance and entertainment than to the expeditious exchange of information' (p. 131). Thus, everyday language use, as Hall (2001) elaborates, is 'playful, metaphoric, *focused on form* and the linguistic code, not arbitrary but typically motivated' (p. 81; emphasis added).

Form – understood here as the sound shape of words – is especially important as an element of meaning. Over a century ago, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1915/1959) established the doctrine of the arbitrariness of the

linguistic sign, meaning that the relationship between a signifier (i.e., the form – the sound shape of a word) and the signified (i.e., the meaning or concept that the word refers to)[3] is mostly arbitrary; there is nothing about the sequence [tri:] that would allow a non-English speaker to figure out the concept that it denotes ('a perennial plant having a self-supporting woody main stem or trunk … growing to a considerable height and size'). While the Saussurean notion of the arbitrary sign has been a constant in linguistic theorizing, the past few decades have seen a substantial increase in linguistic research that downplays arbitrariness and highlights motivation as an organizing principle in language. Form does carry meaning for language users, and speakers in everyday acts of communication routinely show an interest in and enthusiasm for linguistic form (Hall 2001: 72).

A very similar line of reasoning is expressed by Duranti (1997: 16; quoted in Hall 2001: 80), who refers to language users' focus on form as the 'aesthetic dimension' of language, which is inseparable from everyday communication:

> [I]n the most ordinary of encounters . . . social actors exhibit a particular attention to and skills in the delivery of a message … [I]n speaking there is always an aesthetic dimension, understood as an attention to the form of what is being said … We are constantly being evaluated by our listeners and by ourselves as our own listeners.[4]

This 'particular attention' – verging on even perhaps fascination – that language users exhibit towards what language sounds like is made evident in the countless lists on the Internet dedicated to gathering together the most beautiful words of various languages. One such list (Dalton 2015), focusing on words in English, listed *aquiver* ('quivering, trembling'), *mellifluous, ineffable* ('too great to be expressed in words'), *hiraeth* ('a homesickness for a home you can't ever return to, or that never was') and *nefarious* ('wicked, villainous, despicable') as its top five selection. Looking at these words, it is easy to notice that some of them have been selected by virtue of their meaning (such as *hiraeth*), but most of them have most probably been deemed 'beautiful' for the way they sound (after all, there's nothing 'beautiful' about *ineffable, nefarious* or *aquiver*). *Mellifluous* most probably have ticked both boxes; the ease with which the nasal and liquid sounds glide off the tongue bring back the 'sweetness' and 'smoothness' that its meaning conveys. What the selections highlight is the duality of the linguistic sign – that it consists of a form (the signifier in Saussurean terms) and a meaning (the signified), and that speakers are aware of this duality. Contrasting attitudes exist as to which of these aspects of the

[3] Both the signifier and the signified are mental entities that reside in the mind of the language user (Taylor 2002: 41–2).

[4] In Sherzer's (1987) view, the study of verbally artistic forms can significantly contribute to the study of cultural symbols and the relationship between language and culture (see also Chapter 7 herein).

linguistic sign speakers consider to be important in their decisions as to what counts as a 'beautiful' word. Yet this is just one example; countless websites exist for the 'ugliest words', 'most favourite words', 'best new words', etc., as well as for debating what rhymes with *orange*.[5] Speakers are thus evidently preoccupied by and interested in what language sounds like.

Phonological Motivation

Not only are we fascinated by what words sound like, their phonological make-up can also influence language use. One proponent of this view was Bolinger (1950a: 128), who claimed that a 'magnetic attraction' existed between words with a more-or-less similar form and meaning. This attraction might be quite distant, as when *renounce* is felt to be more 'vigorous' than *abjure* – which Bolinger attributed to the influence of *bounce, pounce* or *flounce* (forms which are phonetically similar to *renounce*). To support his claim about the phonological – and conversely semantic – influence of words upon one another, he cited a study of the word *literally* that he carried out with twenty-five undergraduates. He hypothesized that *literally* would attract the phonologically similar *litter*, and would thus influence the goodness-of-example ratings of sentences that contained *literally* in different contexts. He gave students ten sentences with *literally* in them, and asked them to rate the sentences as 'good', 'fair' or 'not very good'. Three sentences were marked significantly as 'not very good': (a) *The dog was literally mad with excitement*; (b) *We were literally awed by the sight*; and (c) *His head was literally crushed by the blow*, as opposed to (d) *The floor was literally covered with paper*, which got the highest percentage of 'good' ratings. Bolinger argued that the relatively high dissatisfaction with sentences (a) to (c) could be explained by the fact that the idea of 'covered' or 'filled' was missing (notions that were brought into the comprehension of the sentences via the phonological similarity of *literally* to *litter*). In a further study, Bolinger presented twenty-eight undergraduate students with the verb *desticate* (coined by him) in two contexts: (a) *We were hungry because our provisions had been completely desticated*, and (b) *We liked the picture because the colors were so nicely desticated*. Bolinger hypothesized that the students would rate sentence (a) better than sentence (b), because *desticate* phonologically resembles *decimate, castigate, devastate*, etc. (and thus would bring forth a negative meaning). Twenty-two students preferred sentence (a), and only six students opted for sentence (b).

[5] According to a popular language myth, there is no word in English that rhymes with *orange*. The official view, however, is that there does exist one such word, *sporange*, 'a very rare alternative form of *sporangium* (a botanical term for a part of a fern or similar plant)'; https://en.oxforddictionaries.com (accessed 10 November 2016).

A further example of Bolinger's (1950b) was the American regionalism *shivaree*, denoting a mock-serenade for newlyweds. It won out from a multitude of near-synonyms, such as *serenade, tin-panning, skimilton, belling* and *horning*, despite the fact that its stress falls on the final syllable, which is atypical in American 'folk speech'. What could have been *shivaree*'s secret of success? Bolinger accredited it to the final, stressed [i:], which placed the word into a family of words with an identical ending, all of which have some kind of a 'festive countenance': *jamboree, corroboree, jubilee, whoopee, yippee, glee*, etc.

Bauer (2003: 159) has also noted that relationships between words may rest on so-called 'resonances', which can be phonological, semantic, syntactic or etymological (or even a combination of these). What happens in the case of phonological resonances is that '[s]ome words remind us of others because they share some phonological similarity' (pp. 159–60), a feature that is also referred to as 'clang association'. Thus, phonological similarity can be detected in the number of syllables or the stress pattern (when *provision* attracts *visual*), in alliteration (when *petty* attracts *politics*), in assonance (when *goose* attracts *food*) and rhyme (when *intense* attracts *pretence*). These phonological similarities are close to what it is like to have a word 'on the tip of one's tongue': while '[the tip-of the-tongue phenomenon] does not always accurately reflect the sought word, it shows the kinds of phonetic (and orthographic) categories which are familiar to us and by which we can judge similarity to other words' (p. 160). Nevertheless, the various kinds of resonances often overlap. For instance, it is difficult to say whether *automaton, krypton, phaeton, phlogiston* and *photon* are similar purely on a phonological basis, or whether the relationship among them enters into the morphological realm as well.

It might be the case that resonances do indeed overlap most of the time, as evidenced by the following example, in which a teacher complains about his rough day at work: 'I had a very difficult preaching – *tea*ching – clinic today' (Hopper 1992: 117; emphasis as in original). The substitution of *preaching* for *teaching* is associative on a number of levels – not only are the two words phonologically similar, but they also share an element of semantic resemblance; *preaching*, however, also reflects the 'speaker's moralistic stance' (p. 117) and can thus be regarded in Hopper's view as a slip of the tongue. Such slips of the tongue, however, shed light on the structure of the mental lexicon, where near-neighbours are most probably very similar in sound – such an arrangement would support comprehension (though not necessarily production; see Fay and Cutler (1977) and Chapter 2 herein for an elaboration).

Whatever we might call it – magnetic attraction, resonance, association or similarity – the point is that the sound shape of words does influence language use; it is this influence that is referred to as *phonological motivation* in the present work (and hence the subtitle of the book), despite the difficulty that the definition

of *motivation* implies. Within linguistics, the term has been applied in a variety of ways to various levels of linguistic analysis, and linguists have assumed its meaning to be somehow self-evident (Radden and Panther 2004: 2).[6] Even *phonological motivation* is not a particularly novel term in linguistics, although it has been used with a slightly different meaning – in phonology, for instance, it is used to describe the assimilation of sounds (e.g., Lass 1984). As a starting point, we can, however, consider the Saussurean interpretation of *motivation*, according to which it refers to a non-arbitrary relationship between form and meaning. Thus, phonological motivation will be understood as the phonological conditions that lead to a non-arbitrary relationship between (1) form and meaning; and (2) form and form. These relationships will be discussed in more detail below. For the sake of simplicity, Radden and Panther's (2004) semiotic approach will be adopted for analysis.

Motivation between Form and Meaning

With regard to the motivational processes between form and meaning that can affect the linguistic sign (Radden and Panther 2004: 14–23), two of these are of relevance to the present book as well. In the first of these motivational processes, the content of a linguistic unit (the signified in Saussurean terms; i.e., meaning) motivates the form (the signifier); see Figure 1.1. Such cases have been regarded as the most typical examples of motivation, as, in essence, the linguistic unit is felt to 'reflect' its content.

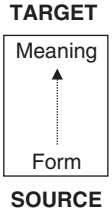

Figure 1.1 Meaning motivating form (after Radden and Panther 2004: 15)

This relationship has been sometimes referred to in linguistic theorizing as 'iconicity' (see, for example, Haiman 1980; Radden and Panther 2004). Similarly to most terms in linguistics, *iconicity* has also been used rather ambiguously. Some researchers understand it more generally, as the opposite of arbitrariness, as in the following passage from Waugh and Newfield (1995: 189):

[6] See Radden and Panther (2004: 2–4) for a discussion of the interpretation of 'motivation' in the linguistic literature.

While in much of modern work in linguistics there has been the assumption that form and meaning are only directionally connected with each other and that, in particular, there is no relation between the meaning expressed by a word and the mode of expression it takes, work on iconicity has had the salutary effect of showing that, on the contrary, there is a strong correspondence between form and meaning and that similarity (resemblance) can be the basis for such a correspondence.

However, iconicity has also been used in the literature to refer to a special type of relationship between form and meaning: when form is motivated by content (e.g., Haiman 1980). Following Peirce (1902/1955), this relationship has been sometimes further categorized into imagistic, diagrammatic and metaphorical iconicity. Iconicity will be elaborated on in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Turning back to meaning motivating form, the most typical examples are onomatopoeia, such as *cuckoo* or *miaow*. The phonetic form of both words is felt to resemble the sound that we hear (*cuckoo* licenses a metonymy as well, by which the sound stands for the thing that produces that sound). The other process that is a manifestation of the motivational relationship between form and meaning is cases where the form of a linguistic unit motivates the content (see Figure 1.2). Typical examples are so-called 'phonesthemes', submorphemic segments that can be loosely associated with a particular meaning. One such example is the [sp] phonestheme in English; note that many [sp]-initial monosyllabic words, such as *spew, spit, spy* or *spank*, have negative connotations.

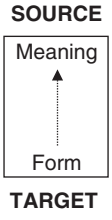

Figure 1.2 Form motivating meaning (after Radden and Panther 2004: 15)

Such an outline of the two motivational processes between form and meaning implies that making a distinction between the two is relatively straightforward. However, this is quite far from what the picture actually looks like. As will be pointed out countless times hereafter, form–meaning motivation is quite often a bidirectional process, where a more-or-less accidental resemblance can come to be felt to be a natural link, with the added possibility of creating a feedback loop of other form–meaning pairings. This view has been put forth especially with regard to phonesthemes – see, for example, Bergen (2004), Otis and Sagi (2008) and Smith (2014). Thus, it might be more accurate

to depict the motivational relationship between form and meaning as in Figure 1.3. This notion was already introduced by Bolinger (1949), who argued that even so-called 'arbitrary' forms become so tightly integrated into the system of signs that the relationship between the phonological shape and the meaning will eventually be felt to be as natural as onomatopoeia. This has happened in the case of *slalom*, for example, which originated from the Norwegian *slalåm* (a compound formed from *sla* 'sloping' and *låm* 'track'); it has been, however, reanalysed as containing the [sl] segment, present in other words associated with the meaning of 'sliding movement', such as *slide* or *slope* (Reay 2009).

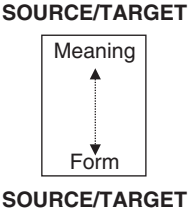

Figure 1.3 Bidirectional motivational relationship between form and content

In essence then, phonological motivation between form and meaning can be understood as a non-arbitrary relationship where meaning is reflected and shaped by form. In other words, form carries meaning in the sense that there is some sort of 'relation between the sound of language and the world referred to' (De Cuypere 2008: 107). It might be claimed that such an understanding does not specify the exact nature of the motivational relationship (as, for instance, laid out by Radden and Panther above): is meaning thus reflected or shaped by form? However, the benefit of this approach is that it leaves the *direction* of the motivational process open, and thus the issue of whether form reflects or shapes meaning is consciously left unresolved.

Motivation between Form and Form

Motivation between form and form is understood here to refer to the influence of the phonological shape of one word over another. This relationship (following Radden and Panther 2004: 15) is depicted in Figure 1.4, where the form of one word, acting as the source, influences the form of another word (the target). Such a relationship is exemplified by alliterating compounds, such as the highly conventionalized *belly button*. As Benczes (2010: 222) explains, it can be reasonably assumed that the reason why *belly* was selected in *belly button* to stand as the modifier, and not *tummy* (which is not only synonymous with belly

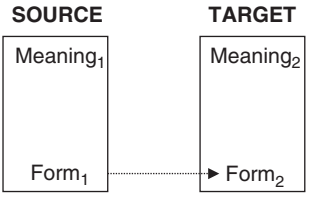

Figure 1.4 $Form_1$ motivating $form_2$ (after Radden and Panther 2004: 15)

but is also similarly informal in style), is due to the phonological similarity of the initial consonant. Compare, however, *tummy trouble* ('stomach pain'), which is not **belly trouble*[7] – most probably due to the same phonological factors.

Yet alliterating compounds are just one of the many manifestations of form-to-form motivational processes. Rhyming compounds, such as *snail mail* (for 'surface mail') also belong to this group: in these cases the constituents of the compound share an even tighter phonological similarity, and it can be reasonably assumed that the selection of the constituents was influenced by the rhyming component (Benczes 2013). A similar effect can be detected in *grass ceiling* ('a set of social, cultural, and discriminatory barriers that prevent or discourage women from using golf to conduct business'),[8] which was coined on the analogy of the more established *glass ceiling* ('an unofficial or unacknowledged barrier to personal advancement, esp. of a woman or a member of an ethnic minority in employment'). However, the phonological resemblance of *grass ceiling* to *glass ceiling* serves an important purpose; it helps to untangle the meaning of the former by evoking the latter. The novel coinage of *grass ceiling* ties into the meaning of the source compound, as it also refers to the limited opportunities in business for women as opposed to men (although it assigns this limiting factor to the golf course, through use of the metonymical modifier, *grass*). In such cases the phonological motivation also results in semantic motivation (see Figure 1.5; and Benczes 2012a and Chapter 5 herein for an elaboration).

Thus, form-to-form motivational processes will be understood in the book to encompass phonological similarities *across* words – such as consonance, assonance, alliteration and rhyme, which will be defined as follows (Preminger and Brogan 1993; Wales 1989):

- consonance: repetition of identical or similar consonants in neighbouring words (e.g., *fiscal cliff* 'a situation in which a particular set of financial factors causes or threatens sudden and severe economic decline');

[7] The asterisk indicates that this is an example that would not be used in natural language.
[8] *Grass ceiling* comes from an online collection of neologisms: www.wordspy.com; henceforth Wordspy.