

Alliteration Requires Adjacency

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This is proposed as an absolute universal in Fabb ("Verse"): *When regular alliteration holds between poetic sections, the poetic sections must be adjacent.*

Regular alliteration is alliteration which conforms to a particular pattern for a large part of a text or for all of the text. Regular alliteration is quite a rare poetic form. A poetic section is defined as follows (from Fabb, "Verse"): in effect poems are differentiated formally from non-poems (prose) by having some kind of additional sectioning. (Note that if this were not true, then all language would be poetry.)

A poem is a text made of language, divided into sections which are not determined by syntactic or prosodic structure (see Fabb, *What is Poetry?*). Such sections are called "poetic sections."

For the purposes of regular alliteration, the relevant poetic section which contains the alliterating word can usually be called a half-line or a line. In Old English (e.g., *Beowulf*), alliteration holds between words in adjacent half-lines (verses) in the long-line. In Somali *gabay* songs, every half-line in the poem has a word which repeats the same alliteration throughout. In Mongolian poetry, adjacent lines begin with the same alliteration, in pairs or longer sequences; alliteration is more regular in stanzaic verse, where every line in a stanza may alliterate, and less regular in strophic verse, where alliteration can continue for variable numbers of lines.

What is ruled out by this universal is a tradition in which alliteration holds between poetic sections in an ABAB pattern or any other intersecting pattern. Such patterns are common with rhyme.

It is worth noting that in some Irish meters alliterating words cannot be separated by a stressed word (a rule which can sometimes hold across lines), which is another kind of adjacency requirement (Knott 13-22).

An apparent but not real counterexample comes from Welsh poetic patterns of repeated sounds (types of *cynganedd*) where a sequence of sounds in the first half of the line is repeated in the second half (Rowlands). This is a parallelism of sound-sequences and not alliteration.

Another apparent counterexample is "A Kodiak Poem," by William Meredith (suggested by a reviewer of this article), in which the final stanza has alternating alliteration on l and r. On the one hand we might see this as an isolated innovation characteristic of modern poetry (perhaps deliberately breaking a rule), but on the other hand it is worth noting that l and r are closely related sounds (both are in the class of liquid consonants).

Alliteration is sometimes wholly within a single undivided poetic section, as for example the line-internal alliteration which is found in the *Kalevala* meter or within the lines of some of the classical Irish metres. These alliterative patterns are irrelevant to the universal (though they do not violate it).

Why might the universal arise? One possibility is that intersecting patterns are more demanding to create, and require the relevant sounds to be at the end of a section such as the end of a half-line or line, in positions which enable them to be more easily remembered. Section-final positioning is possible only for rhyme which can be word-final, and not for alliteration which cannot be section-final because it is word-initial.

Future Research

Look for more traditions with regular alliteration, to see whether universal holds.

Works Cited

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