

Rhyme in Contemporary Estonian Popular Poetry

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to examine the structure of rhymes in different genres of Estonian popular poetry since the 1990s, that is, from the same period in which rhyme began to disappear from literary poetry in Estonian while surviving and even developing in popular poetry. The analysis derives from the approach proposed by Jaak Pöldmäe, which takes into account the characteristics of the prosody of the Estonian language. On this basis, we have distinguished four levels: phoneme, prosody, stress pattern and word ending, and analysed these aspects in the rhymes of poetry texts by four authors from different areas of popular culture, including one songwriter (Mait Vaik), two hip hop artists (Genka and Metsakutsu) and the most popular Estonian Instagram poet Lauri Räpp. The results are compared with data from literary poetry from different periods.

1 Introduction

While free verse has reigned in Estonian literary poetry since the last decades of the 20th century, where instead of the regular rhyme patterns only occasional euphonic rhyme occurs, in popular poetry rhyme has continued to play an important role. The aim of the present study is to examine the occurrence of rhyme in different genres of popular poetry since the 1990s, that is, from the same period in which rhymed poetry became increasingly marginal in literary practice. Our material includes, on the one hand, orally performed popular poetry—the lyrics of rock and hip hop music—and, on the other hand, Instagram poetry, which has emerged in the second half of the 2010s. The method of study is comparative-statistical analysis: rhymes in popular lyrics are analysed in comparison with literary rhyme culture in order to highlight their specific features, with attention paid to the characteristics of the different styles.

2 Definition of Rhyme

Since the beginnings of Estonian literary poetry, issues relating to rhyme have played an important role in discussions of poetics and poetry, and different rhyming strategies have been one of the important defining features of various literary schools and periods.¹ Until the last quarter of the 20th century, in the theory of rhyme, views favouring full rhyme prevailed, according to which only rhymes with the main stress syllables (disregarding secondary stress) could be considered rhyme (Bergmann 1878; Visnapuu 1932; Maantee 1959; etc.). There were also a few authors (e.g., Adams 1924) who, on the contrary, insisted on moving away from the traditional full rhyme canon and called for a variety of imprecise rhymes to enrich the worn-out rhyme repertoire. What was common for these views was that they were both normative: theorists are the ones to determine the correct or valued rhymes that poets should use in their creation.

The present study is based on the approach by Jaak Pöldmäe, the eminent Estonian scholar of versification, who laid the foundations for a descriptive view of rhyme: according to Pöldmäe, all of the phonemic repetitions that poets use as rhyme must also be regarded as rhyme by literary scholars. To this end, Pöldmäe extended the definition of rhyme, including for the first time in Estonian rhyme research phonemic repetition carrying a secondary stress: “We consider as rhyme the correspondence fixed in particular verse positions between certain stress groups or parts of their phonemic compositions”² (Pöldmäe 1978, pp. 255–256). However, Pöldmäe’s definition does not explicitly include rhymes in which the nucleus falls on an unstressed subsequent syllable, despite the fact that such rhymes have been present in Estonian poetry at least since the 19th century, and that Pöldmäe’s own survey includes examples of this type (e.g., Aleksander Suuman’s “Kaugelt meenutab vast *hane*. / Kujult küll pole sarn*ane*”). Thus, there is a practical need to expand the definition of rhyme to accommodate this possibility, and so in our analysis we have considered the concordances of unstressed final syllables as rhymes.

On the basis of the material sampled from poetry of different Estonian genres and periods, for the purposes of the present analysis the range of phenomena considered as rhyme has been further extended to include cases of phonemic repetition at given positions rhymes involving totally unstressed syllables which have been conceived as rhymes in Estonian poetry, at least from the 19th century onwards. Therefore, in this study, rhyme is considered to be any fixed phonemic repetition with artistic intention. A rhyme can consist of the repetition of syllables, feet and words carrying a primary and/or secondary stress, as well as unstressed units; different stress groups can also rhyme with each other, as can stressed and unstressed phonemic groups.

¹ For Estonian theories of rhyme and the development of rhyming practices, see M.-K. Lotman and R. Lotman 2022, 2024.

² In this and other quotations from Estonian, the translations are by the authors of the paper.

3 Methodology: A Four-Level Analysis of Rhyme

Although, in addition to broader theoretical approaches, the question of rhyme has also been addressed specifically in poetry criticism (compare, for instance, [Aavik 1921](#)), no comprehensive statistical analyses of the rhyme structures actually used in Estonian poetry have been carried out so far. For the present study, we have developed a methodology that will help describe and systematise the formal aspects of Estonian end rhyme by means of statistical analysis. Based on Põldmäe's approach ([Põldmäe 1978](#), pp. 256–260), which takes into account the characteristics of the prosody of the Estonian language³, we have analysed all rhymes on four levels: phonemic, prosodic, stress pattern and word ending.

At the first, phonemic, level, we analyse the degree of precision of rhyme partners according to their phonemic composition. Here we distinguish between exact rhymes⁴ in which all phonemes coincide from the vowel of the (first) rhyme nucleus to the end of the rhyme, and inexact rhymes with various phonemic deviations. Thus, the analysis of phonemic composition leaves aside the prosodic features (primary and secondary stress, quantity) and focuses only on phonemic correspondences. A similar definition of full rhyme was first introduced by Harald Rajamets, who emphasised the important role of rhymes with secondary stresses in Estonian poetry, while at the same time being excluded from the theoretical level. “Rhymes with secondary stresses do not form a stock of formal devices that are isolated or need to be kept separate, but in practice occur together with and alternately with rhymes with primary stresses; nor do they belong to a different stylistic domain as near rhymes in relation to full rhymes; theoretically, however, the same standards, laws and requirements apply to them in general as to rhymes with primary stresses” ([Rajamets 1959](#), p. 1576). In this study, following Rajamets's and later Põldmäe's understanding, rhymes with the exact phonemic correspondence from the rhyme nucleus onwards (for instance, *algus* : *valgus*) are considered to be exact on the phonemic level. In the case of near rhymes, we have distinguished between rhymes with different vowels—also determining whether the vowels differ in the stressed syllable or the unstressed part of the rhyme—and rhymes with consonant differences, again ascertaining whether the difference is on the boundary of the stressed syllable or the unstressed syllable.

At the second level, which focuses on prosodic features, we examine the quantity degrees and word stress in the rhyme units. Here, exact rhymes are those where both the quantitative and accentual structure coincide. In terms of stress structure, differences can occur when syllables or feet carrying a primary and secondary stress are rhymed. Occasionally, we have also found completely

³ On prosodic issues of rhyming in Estonian see [Lotman, M.-K., Lotman, R. 2022: 135-136](#); on quantity in Estonian versification see [M.-K. Lotman and M. Lotman 2013, pp. 245–248](#); on primary and secondary stresses in Estonian verse see [M. Lotman and M.-K. Lotman 2018, p. 99](#); on the application of this model to Estonian rhyme culture see [M.-K. Lotman and R. Lotman 2024, pp. 245–248](#).

⁴ A subtype of exact rhyme is identical rhyme, yet their semantic impact differs entirely. In one case, opposition or parallelism arises between two distinct yet maximally similar sounding words, whereas in other case there is repetition on both levels. Therefore, they are treated separately in statistical analysis.

Author	Number of verses	Number of rhyming units
M. Vaik	521	226
L. Räpp	500	202
Genka	535	218
Metsakutsu	523	206
Total	2,079	852

Table 1: Sample sizes and rhyming units by author

unstressed rhymes, which we have analysed as a separate group. Deviations on the prosodic level can also occur when units with different quantities are rhymed: Estonian verse generally has rhymes of first and second quantity or second and third quantity; rhyming with units of first and third quantity is exceptional.

At the third level of the analysis, we looked at stress patterns as a whole, with the aim of identifying the rhyming units in the samples. Here we distinguished between, on the one hand, units carrying primary and secondary stress and, on the other hand, unstressed units and their combinations.

At the fourth level, we have taken into account word boundaries, distinguishing between single word rhymes and compound rhymes, i.e., rhymes consisting of several words. In addition, we also distinguished here between isosyllabic rhymes and semi-rhymes in which the syllable counts of the rhyme partners do not coincide. Here, divergence from exact rhyme occurs mainly when rhymes are asymmetrically divided by word boundaries (for example a compound rhyme with a single word partner).

We are the first to apply such a detailed four-parameter model of rhyme analysis in Estonian verse studies; in fact, as far as we know, thus far there have been no detailed rhyme composition studies at all. It should be emphasised that our analysis is limited to the sound structure of rhymes, issues of the semantics of rhyme are beyond the scope of the present study.

4 Material of the Study

Our analysis is based on the poetry texts of four authors. These authors are representatives of different areas of popular culture, including one songwriter (Mait Vaik), two hip hop artists (Genka and Metsakutsu) and the most popular Estonian Instagram poet Lauri Räpp. The texts created by the first three authors were first and foremost written for oral performance.

We selected at least 500 verses from each poet (since we consistently included complete poems, most samples are somewhat bigger, with a total of 2,079 verses altogether). All rhymes in the samples were annotated by the authors of this paper, relying on the model described above. The data was then processed and analysed. To minimise potential subjectivity, all samples were double-checked by both authors of the article. Table 1 shows the sample size and the number of rhyme units for each author analysed separately.

The results are compared in the discussion section with data from literary poetry from different periods, the samples of which, 2,208 verses in total, were

analysed following the same principles as that of popular poetry. For this study, the representative of the mid-19th century is the Estonian National Awakening era poet Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (624 verses). The late 19th and early 20th century is represented by the outstanding poet Anna Haava (538 verses), while from the mid-20th century we included both Ain Kaalep (555 verses), a representative of the purist school in rhyme theory, and Artur Alliksaar (491 verses), who had a more liberal approach to rhyming canons.

5 Results of the Analysis

5.1 Rhyme in Estonian Rock and Punk Music Using Mait Vaik's Lyrics as an Example

Mait Vaik (b. 1969) is a poet, musician and songwriter. In the 1990s, he did not publish his poems in separate books but wrote lyrics for the Estonian rock bands Vennaskond and Metro Luminal, and, later, also for Sõpruse Puiestee, Kosmikud and other groups. Starting out as an alternative punk band in the 1980s, Vennaskond became a pop punk band in the 1990s and topped the music charts. Mait Vaik's lyrics, like those of frontman Tõnu Trubetsky, expressed the decadent and nihilistic mood of the youth of the time and were written in regular meters and rhymed verse. The sample for this study consists of Vaik's lyrics written for different Estonian bands in the 1990s and 2000s.

The distribution of phonemic correspondences in Mait Vaik's rhymes is shown in [Figure 1](#).

The phonemic composition of Mait Vaik's rhymes shows clear preference for two structures: about one third of the rhymes used are exact rhymes (*ärkan* : *märkan*, I wake up : I notice), with an even higher proportion of rhymes (over 35%) having different end consonants in the stressed syllable (*värvavad* : *tänavad*, gates : streets). Some other license is taken as well, such as deviations in the border consonants of unstressed syllables (*väheks* : *tähed*, scarce : stars) and in the vowels of stressed syllables (*öid* : *vaid*, nights : just). The rhyme can also deviate in this way in the poem in consequent lines, even throughout the entire stanza. Compare the following lines from Mait Vaik's song "XX sajandi lapsed":

Oleme teel oma eelmisest sajandist autoga seisma mis jäi
ja keegi ei peatu, meist keegi ei hooli, teeperv koduks nii sai.
On lõppenud kütus ja otsas on lootus, tagaistmel on kivine kõrb.
Kui üldse minna, siis sihiks saab olla vaid asfaldil värelev tõrv.

We're on the road with our cars from the last century, stuck
and nobody stops, nobody cares about us, the side of the road has become
our home.

Out of fuel and out of hope, in the back seat is a stony desert.
If we go at all, the destination can only be the tar shimmering on the asphalt.

No deviations of vowels in the unstressed syllables occurred in Mait Vaik's sample. In occasional cases, there are several deviations at the same time in one rhyming unit (presented together as "other deviations" in [Figure 1](#)). In most

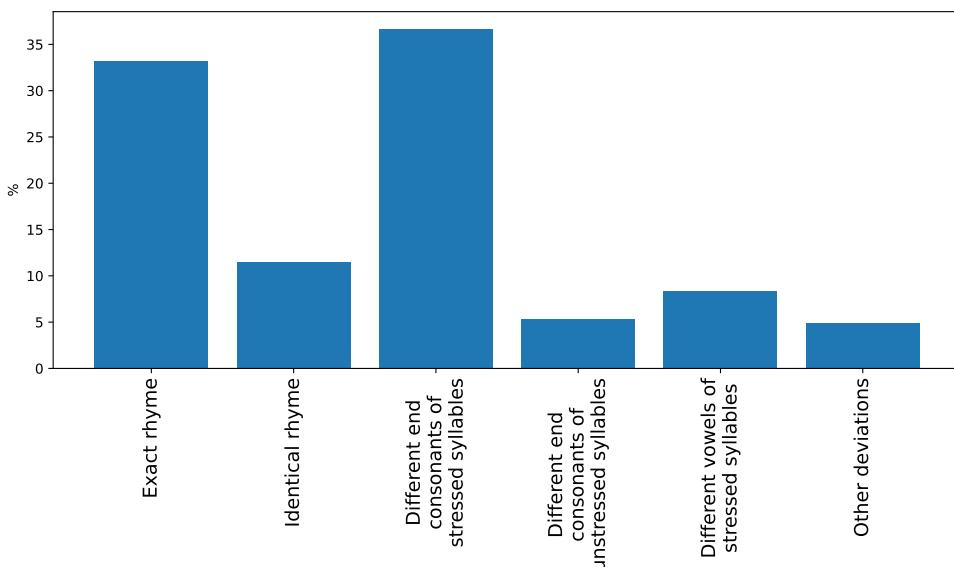


Figure 1: Phonemic level in Mait Vaik's rhyme structure: percentage of rhymes per rhyme-type in Vaik's lyrics from the 1990s and 2000s

of these cases, the deviations in vowels of stressed syllables are combined with deviations on the boundaries of either stressed or unstressed syllables. The statistics presented exclude orphan rhymes that do not have rhyme partners and therefore cannot be considered rhyme units; they account for about 12% of the verses.

Figure 2 shows the data of prosodic correspondences in Mait Vaik's rhymes.

The analysis reveals that Mait Vaik prefers prosodically exact rhymes, which can be seen in nearly 90% of the rhyme units in his sample. The deviations mainly occur when syllables with primary and secondary stresses are rhymed (*tikk* : *igavik*, *lumi* : *hommikuni*, match : eternity, snow : until the morning), while divergences in quantity are very rare in Vaik's rhymes.

Figure 3 shows the proportion of primary and secondary stresses in Mait Vaik's poetry.

The data show that Mait Vaik's poetry is dominated by rhymes carrying the primary stresses; that is, his rhyme unit is preferably a lexical rather than a morphological structure (*palve* : *talve*, prayer : winter). In about 10% of cases, however, he also allows a unit carrying a secondary stress to partner the primary stress rhyme, although in such cases the correspondence is usually formed with the second component of the compound word, that is, again a lexical unit (*öö* : *käsitöö*, night : handcraft). The correspondence of two units carrying a secondary stress occurs in his poetry only as rare exceptions (*jäädagī* : *kaitsagi*, stay : defend).

As for the word boundary structure of rhyming units, Mait Vaik does not take any liberties here and compound rhymes are not found in his sample.

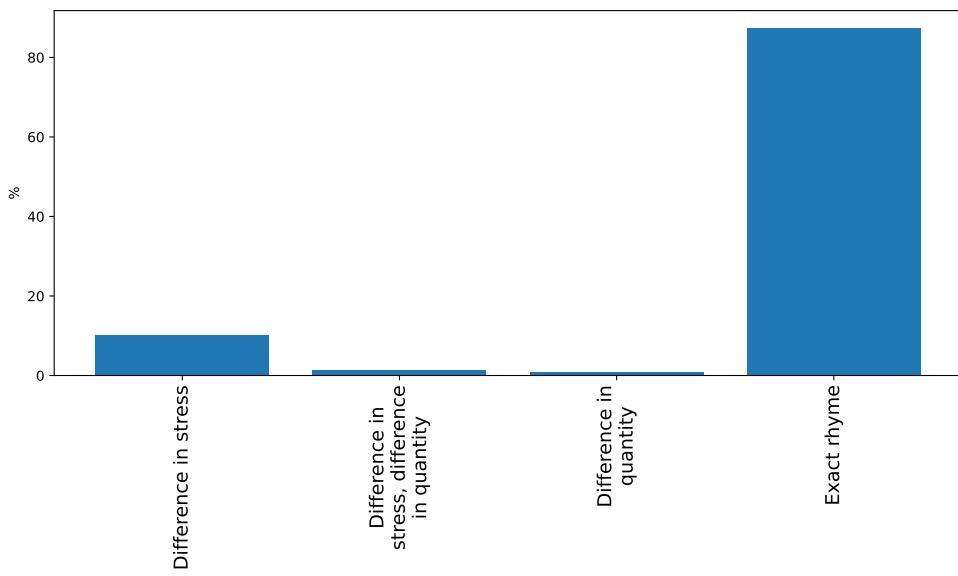


Figure 2: Prosodic level in Mait Vaik's rhyme structure

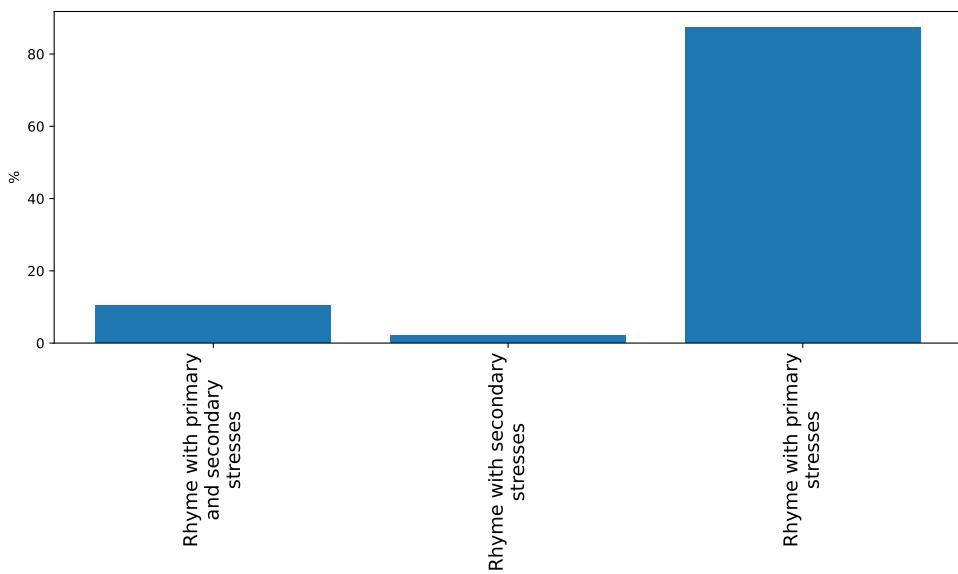


Figure 3: Stress patterns in Mait Vaik's rhyme structure

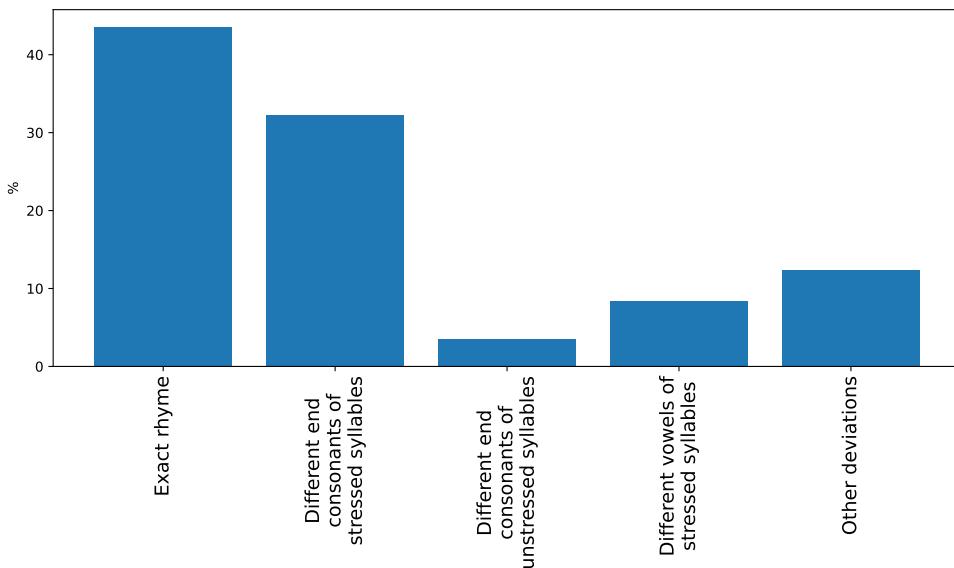


Figure 4: Phonemic level in Lauri Räpp's rhyme structure

5.2 Rhymes in Lauri Räpp's Instagram Poetry

Similar to the English-speaking world, social media poetry has gained popularity in contemporary Estonian poetry; in particular, that of Instagram, although this culture arrived in Estonia with some delay.⁵ Today the most popular Estonian Instagram poet is Lauri Räpp (b. 1977), who started publishing poetry on his profile in 2018; as of the end of 2025 he has 29,500 followers. In 2021, Räpp published his social media poems in a book, and for two consecutive years this poetry collection has topped the book sales charts not only in the category of poetry but in all genres. He is indisputably one of Estonia's best-selling poets of all time. His poems can be divided into two categories: free verse texts that resemble motivational quotes, and rhymed poetry in various meters, mainly depicting the moods of the lyrical self and images of nature. The poems belonging to the latter group are the subject of this study.

Data on the phonemic correspondences in Lauri Räpp's rhymes are shown in Figure 4.

Similarly to Mait Vaik's rhymes on the phonetic level, Lauri Räpp also has two main preferred rhyme types: exact rhyme, and the rhyme with differences in the end consonants of stressed syllables. However, the proportions are different: exact rhyme (*valu* : *paljajalu*, pain : barefoot) occurs more frequently, comprising almost 45% of the rhyme units, while rhymes with deviations in the end consonants of stressed syllables make up about one third of the rhyme units. Compare, for example, the following verses:

⁵ For Estonian social media poetry see R. Lotman 2021.

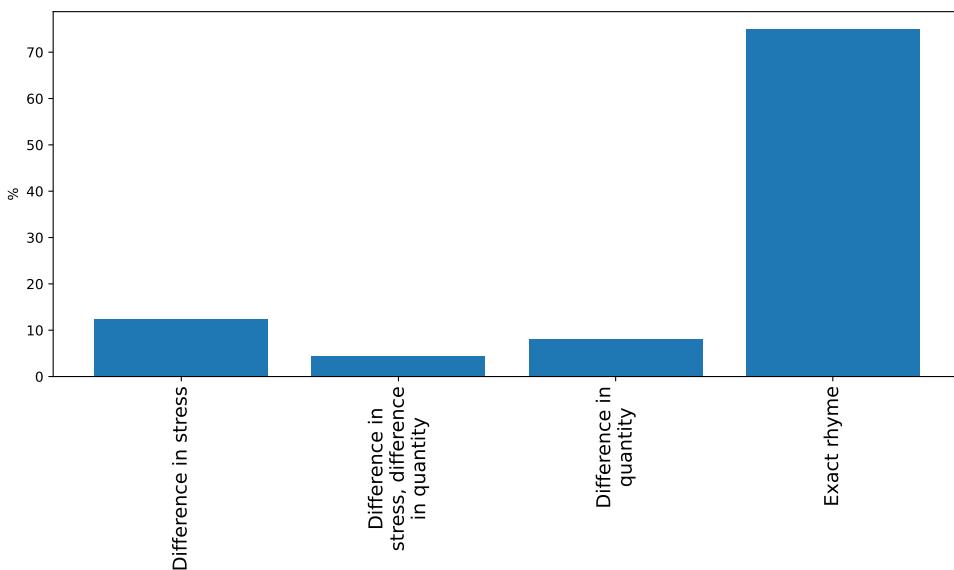


Figure 5: Prosodic level in Lauri Räpp's rhyme structure

on linna jõudnud südajuuli
ja lumest näeb vaid **und**
kerkib plikadel naeratus **kuuni**
lööb tantsides silmist neil **tuld**

mid-July has come to the city
and the snow is but a dream
the smiles on the girls' faces rise to the moon
when they dance, their eyes light up with fire

In Räpp's rhymes, deviations both in the end consonants of unstressed syllables and differences in the vowels of stressed syllables (*võlu* : *valu*, charm : pain) can also be seen, while there were no rhymes with differences in the vowels of unstressed syllables in his sample. In more than ten percent of his sample, several deviations occur simultaneously. In the majority of such cases, different end consonants in both stressed and unstressed syllables are allowed at the same time (*kurbus* : *tulnud*, sadness : come), while in the rest of the rhymes we see joint incidence of different vowel and consonant deviations in both stressed and unstressed syllables (*midagi* : *sedasi*, something : like this). The proportion of orphan rhymes is even higher in Räpp's than in Vaik's poetry: about 19% of the selected verses are unrhymed.

As regards the prosodic level in Lauri Räpp's rhymes (Figure 5), here again prosodically exact rhymes prevail, although in comparison with Mait Vaik's rhymes the incidence of such rhymes has diminished to 75%. Räpp also allows for deviations in stress (vesi : kahekesi, water : the two together) and quantity (jättes : kätes, leaving : in the hands), and sometimes combinations of these (üleval : all, up : down).

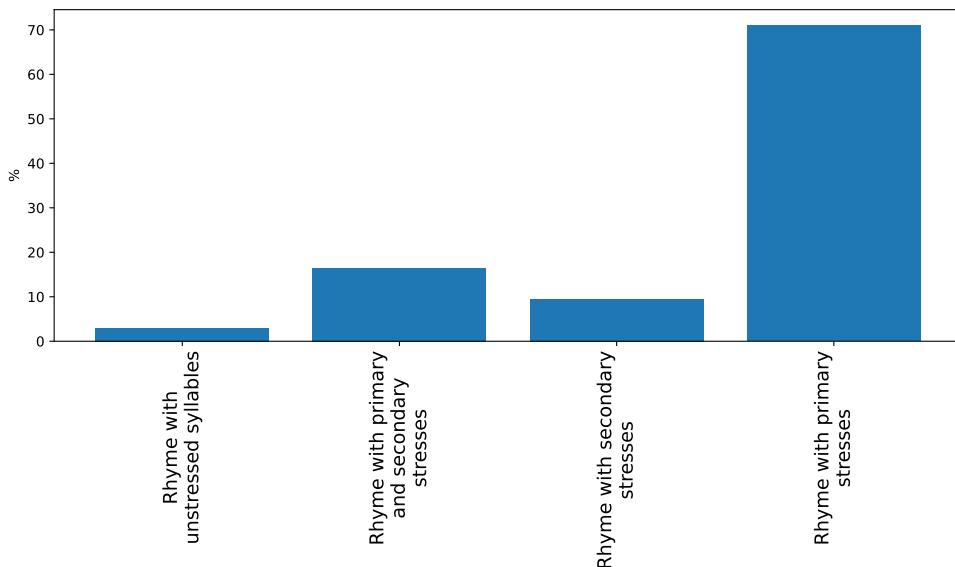


Figure 6: Stress patterns in Lauri Räpp's rhyme structure

In Lauri Räpp's poetry, rhymes carrying the primary stress also prevail, but with a much lower incidence than in Mait Vaik's poems (Figure 6). Almost 10% of the rhymes carry only secondary stress, and even more—about 16%—combine segments with primary stress and secondary stress. A few of the rhymes in our sample have no stress signal at all. Compare, for example, the correspondence accordance of the unstressed end syllables in the following rhyme: *mustad* : *silmad*, black : eyes).

At the level of word boundaries, Räpp avoids splitting rhyme units with word ends almost as strictly as Vaik; in our sample there is only one compound rhyme (*vaikus* : *paik, kus*, silence : a place, where).

5.3 Estonian Hip Hop Rhyme

Estonian hip hop culture started to develop in the 1990s and became mainstream in the early 21st century. This is due largely to rapper Genka (Henry Körvits, b. 1974) and his lyrics, through both his solo projects and the groups Toe Tag and A-Rühm. The first hip hop album to top the music charts was Toe Tag's collection “Legendaarne”, released in 2004. This album had a major influence on the poetics of the lyrics of subsequent Estonian rap artists, among other things due to its innovative approach to rhyming. This is the album we selected for our current study. Figure 7 shows the proportions of different rhyme types on the phonemic level in Genka's verses.

As compared to the other genres in our study—rock lyrics, literary and social media poetry—, hip hop lyrics present a very different picture: the range of types of deviation from exact rhyme is much wider, with several deviations often

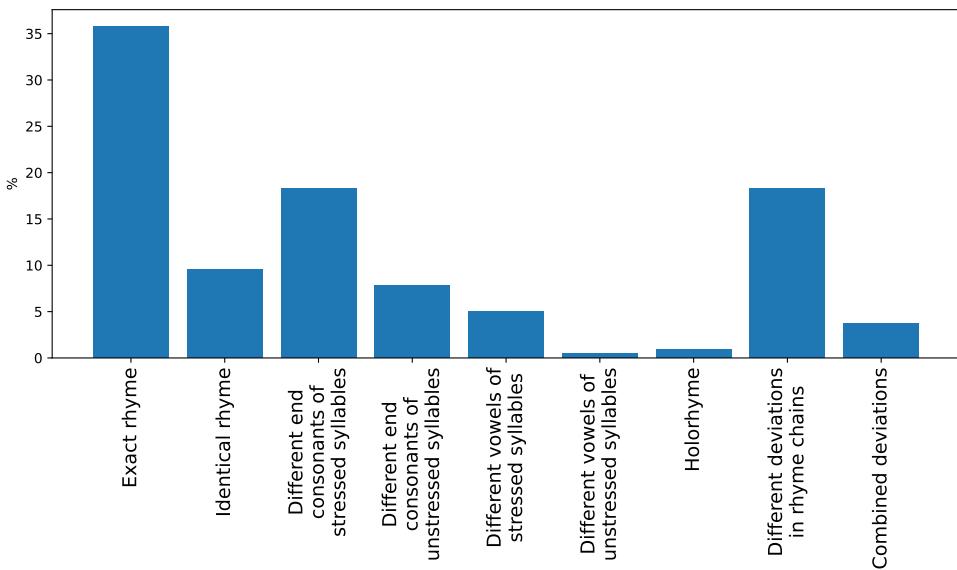


Figure 7: Phonemic level in Genka's rhyme structure

occurring simultaneously in the same rhyme unit. In the sound arrangement of these texts, the functional role of internal rhyme is just as important as that of end rhyme, which is why we included internal rhymes in our analysis.

In Genka's lyrics, the proportion of full rhyme on the phonemic level is only slightly above 35%, and the most common of the deviant rhyme structures is difference in the end consonant of the stressed syllable (*kumin* : *tulin*, din : I came). The proportion of identical rhymes is even higher than in Räpp's poetry, taking up nearly 10% of Genka's rhymes. There are quite a few instances of admittance of different end consonants of unstressed syllables (*usun* : *rusud*, I believe : the ruins), and, somewhat less frequently, different stressed vowels in the rhyme structure occur (*sondides* : *sundides*, in the probes : forcing). As regards the incidence of different deviations in the same rhyming pair, here a distinction has to be made between the two separate cases: deviations that occur simultaneously in the same rhyme pair (for instance, *tüüne* : *füürer*, placid : Führer, where there is a deviation of end consonant in both the unstressed and the stressed syllables), and deviations occurring in different rhyme components in a longer rhymed chain. Compare, for example, the following example, where we see both identical and full rhymes, as well as the deviation of end consonants in the stressed syllables:

Tüdruk pliis, las ma vaatan sind **veidi**
 sind ei puutu vaid vaatan sind **veidi**
 silmadega hoolikalt triigin su **kleidi**
 küll endaga hakkama hiljem saan, **beibi**

Girl please, let me look at you a little bit
 I won't touch you but I'll look at you a little

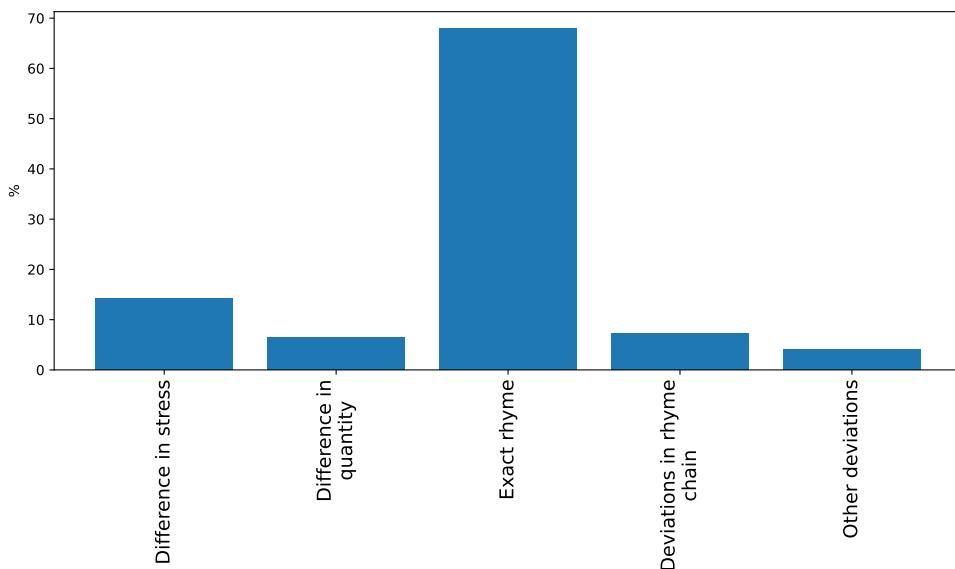


Figure 8: Prosodic level in Genka's rhyme structure

With my eyes I will carefully iron your dress
I can handle myself later, baby

The latter type of deviation is fairly common in Genka, comprising almost 20% of his rhyme units. Orphan rhymes make up about 11% of the sample selected from Genka's lyrics.

Figure 8 shows the prosodic structure of Genka's rhymes.

Although once again the prevailing type is prosodically exact rhyme, in Genka's lyrics these are less prevalent than in Mait Vaik's and Lauri Räpp's poems, making up less than 70% of his rhyme units. He allows deviations in stress (*torm* : *kloroform*, *storm* : *chloroform*) and in quantity (*meloodia* : *viia*, *melody* : *carry*). There are also discrepancies in the prosody of the components of longer rhyme chains; several deviations can occur at the same time in a rhyme pair (*jalgratta* : *kolgata*, *bicycle* : *Golgotha*).

Figure 9 shows the data of stress patterns in Genka's rhymes.

In contrast to the authors studied above, in Genka's lyrics, the proportion of rhymes with primary stresses is lower, comprising only about 60% of the rhyme units. More than 20% of the rhyme pairs consist of components of which one carries a primary and the other a secondary stress (*kõlarite* : *vitte*, *speakers* : *cunts*); in more than 15% of rhymes both rhyme partners carry only secondary stresses. Occasionally, one or both of the rhyme partners lacks any stress signal at all (*valesti* : *hästi*, *wrongly* : *well*).

On the level of word boundaries, Genka's poetry showed considerable diversity, distinguishing it from the works of the authors previously analysed in our study.

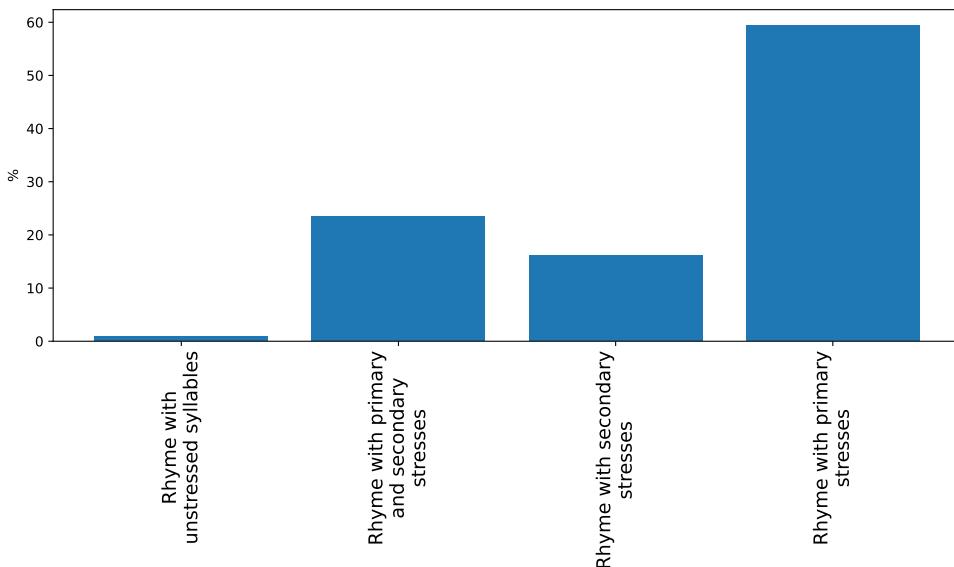


Figure 9: Stress patterns in Genka's rhyme structure

Although Genka strongly prefers to rhyme unbroken units, about 7% of his rhymes are compound rhymes (*pliatsid* : *liialt siin*, pencils : too much here). There is also one instance of semi-rhyme in his sample (*tants* : *pantzer*, dance : armour).

Among the next generation of artists, Metsakutsu (Rainer Olbri, b. 1987) stands out. In his early years Metsakutsu collaborated with Genka and then continued with his own solo career. In 2010, he released his debut album “Testament” on Genka’s label Legendaarne Records, followed by “Kelmiküla Unistus” (2013) and “Kuhu Koer On Maetud” (2016).

Figure 10 shows the data of the phonemic correspondences in Metsakutsu’s rhymes.

Compared to Genka’s poetry, the proportion of phonemically exact rhymes in Metsakutsu’s lyrics is clearly lower, comprising even less than 10% of the rhyme units. The preferred near rhyme type in Metsakutsu’s sample is with different end consonants of stressed syllables, which he uses more frequently than the rest of the authors in our study, using these in more than 25% of his rhyme units (*samme* : *kange*, steps : stiff). Quite often, in nearly 15% of cases, he allows deviations in the end consonants of unstressed syllables (*vedand* : *seda*, has carried : this). Deviations in vowels are rarer, and identical rhymes also occur less frequently than in Genka’s lyrics. Sometimes several deviations in both rhyme chains and rhyme pairs occur at the same time, both types taking up slightly more than 15% of the sampled rhyme units. The proportion of orphan

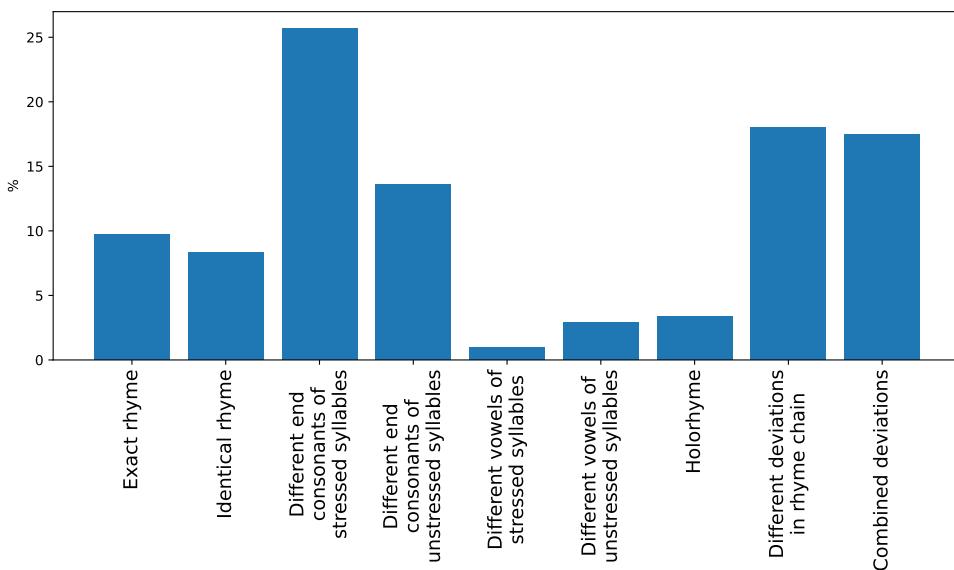


Figure 10: Phonemic level in Metsakutsu's rhyme structure

rhymes in Metsakutsu's lyrics is much lower than that of the other authors studied: unrhymed verses account for only about 5% of his sample.⁶

In Figure 11, data on the prosodic structure of Metsakutsu's rhymes are presented.

When we compare the data from Metsakutsu's lyrics with those from other samples, it appears that in Metsakutsu's rhymes the proportion of prosodically exact rhymes is lower, comprising only about 60% of the verses. The most common deviations are the ones with differences in stress structures (for example *psühholoog* : *toob*, psychologist : carries), but there is also a fairly similar incidence of mismatch in quantity (*bändi* : *fänniks*, band : fan) and several simultaneous differences in the prosody of components of a longer rhyme chain (*ruttu* : *Metsakutsu* : *salajutud*, quickly : Metsakutsu : secret talks) and in a rhyme pair (*magamata* : *matta*, sleep-deprived : bury).

Figure 12 shows the data of stress patterns in Metsakutsu's rhymes.

Interestingly, when compared to Genka's rhymes, Metsakutsu has a slightly higher proportion of rhymes with both partners carrying the primary stress, reaching 70%. Almost 30% of rhymes combine the components with primary and secondary stress, while the proportion of rhyme structures carrying only

⁶ There are interesting cases where we see orphan rhymes on the phonemic level, but the verses are still united with the semantic rhyme. Consider the following lines: Ei taha näha, et inime on inimesele **hunt** / Kus kasu saab, on kohal iga kuradi **krants**. I don't want to see that a man is a wolf to another man / where there is profit, every bloody mutt is present. In these verses, the words "hunt" wolf, and "krants" mutt/dog at the end of the verses rhyme with each other semantically and also refer to the artist's own name, which contains the semantics of both ('metsakutsu' means the dog of the woods).

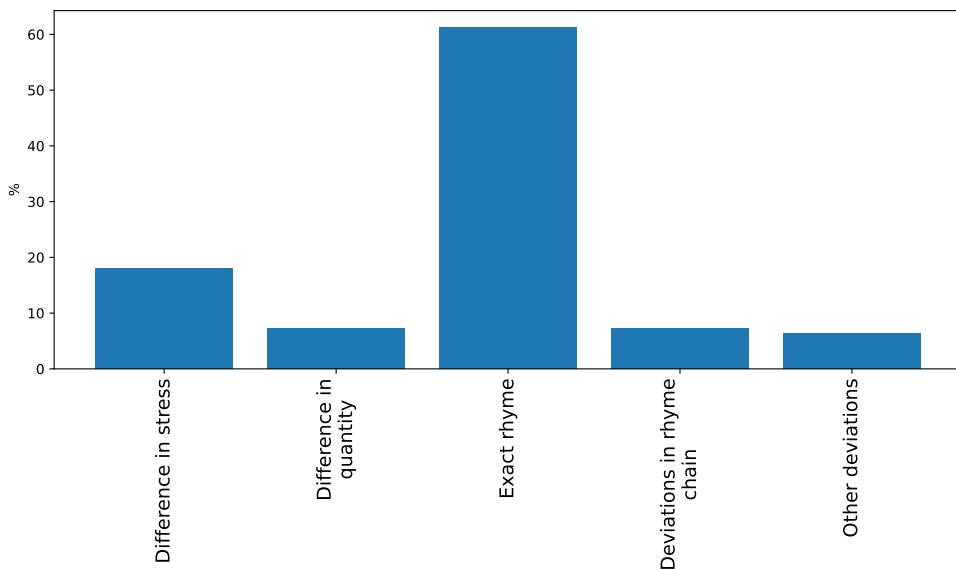


Figure 11: Prosodic level in Metsakutsu's rhyme structure

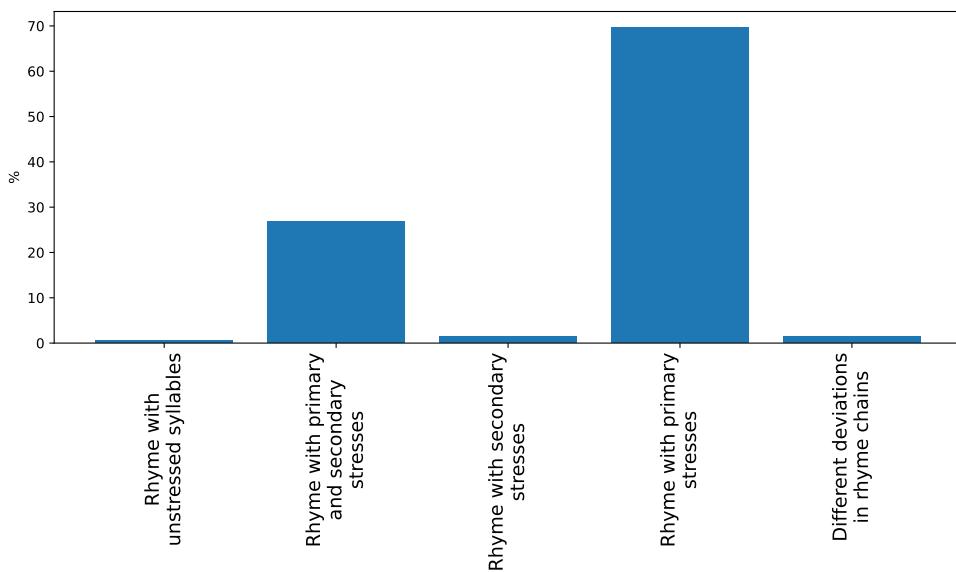


Figure 12: Stress patterns in Metsakutsu's rhyme structure

the secondary stress is significantly lower than in Genka's rhymes. In a few cases, both rhyme partners might lack any stress signal altogether.

With regard to the word boundary patterns, Metsakutsu has even higher proportion of compound rhymes than Genka: the incidence of such rhymes in his sample is about 15% (*mine na : minema*, go like this : go). On one occasion we observed a semi-rhyme (*leid : leidma*, finding : find), and as one of the more interesting cases we came across a rhyming device that can be considered a type of hidden or euphemistic rhyme. Consider the following verses:

Jeesus, mine v,
kui sul on bensiini, siis minul on **tikku**, ei? okei,

Jesus, f off,
if you have gasoline, I have a match, no? okey

The “v” at the end of the first line, expressly pronounced “ve” by Metsakutsu, is an abbreviation of an obscene word for female genitalia (“vittu”, cunt) that rhymes with the word “tikku”, match. This accordance is not instrumented in sounds, but is nevertheless semantically present in these verses.

6 Discussion

To interpret the obtained results in the broader context of Estonian rhyming culture, we will include in this part of the study the data we have received from the analysis of Estonian literary poetry. We have sampled texts from Estonian poets of different literary periods and analysed their rhymes using the same method as for popular poetry.

First, let us consider the phonemic level and compare the proportion of exact rhymes in authors from different periods and different genres.⁷

In Figure 13 we can see the distribution of phonemically exact rhymes⁷ from a representative of the early Estonian poetic tradition Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803-1882) to contemporary Instagram poet Lauri Räpp. The other literary poets are Anna Haava (1864-1957), one of the most brilliant representatives of the late 19th and early 20th centuries; Ain Kaalep (1926-2020), a representative of the purist school of rhyme theory, from whose poetry we have samples from the 1950s and early 1960s; and Artur Alliksaar (1923-1966), who takes a more flexible approach to poetic canons and represents the alternative culture of the same era.

The results show rather clear-cut tendencies in the studied material: in Kreutzwald's poetry phonemically exact rhymes account for just over 70%, a little later in Haava's creation such rhymes have already reached 90%, while in Kaalep's poems they reach almost maximum precision on the phonemic level. In Alliksaar's poems, on the other hand, these standards begin to crumble, although they still prevail in his poetry.⁸

⁷ The data include identical rhymes, which Jaak Pöldmäe (1978, p. 260) regarded as a subtype of exact rhyme.

⁸ Ever since Modernism, the dissolving of rhyme norms is rather universal in European poetic cultures. Russian verse researcher Mikhail Gasparov notes that “the weakening of rhyme was a

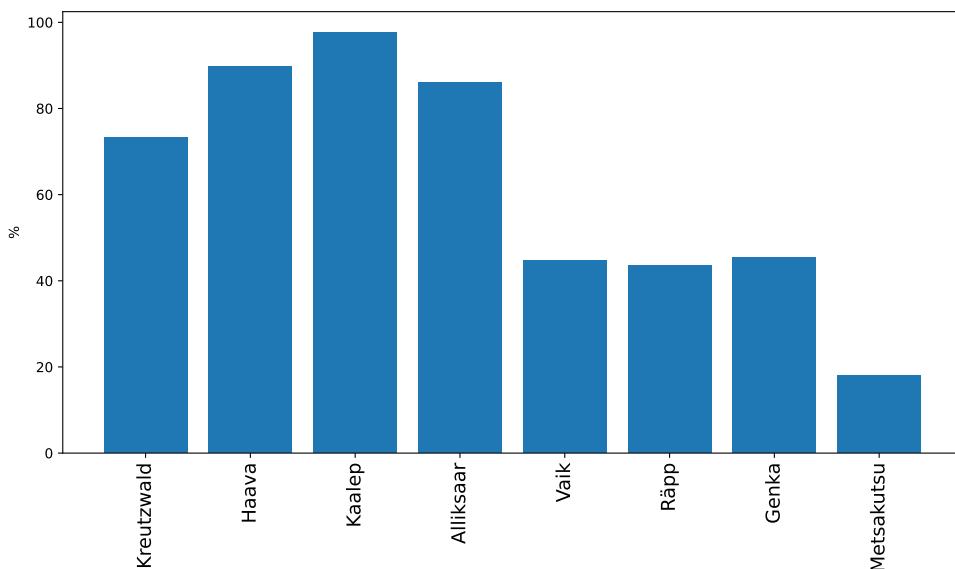


Figure 13: The proportions of phonemically exact rhymes in different Estonian poets

The data regarding the popular poetry of the last decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century indicate a clear change in rhyming practices. In Mait Vaik's, Genka's and Lauri Räpp's poetry, the phonemically exact rhymes make up less than half of the rhyming units, around 44-46% in all of these authors, despite them being representatives of different decades and different subcultures of poetry. When compared to Haava's, Kaalep's and Alliksaar's poems, the incidence of exact rhymes has thus dropped almost a half. Metsakutsu stands out from the others, with the percentage of exact rhymes being even less than 20%.

If we study the phonemic level in the rhyming strategies of different authors in more detail, we see that in Kreutzwald's poetry the next largest group is made up of rhymes with different vowels in stressed syllables (*ära* : *terä*, *meid* : *rändajaid*) [away : grain, us : travellers] which occur in as many as 17%, while assonance rhymes with differences in the consonants of the rhyming partners (*ripul* : *widewikul*) [hanging : twilight] are found in only six instances in his

reaction to the cult of exact rhyme that had dominated European literature since the Renaissance.” According to him, “[a] renewal of rhyme became an obligatory point in the literary manifestos of French Symbolism and Post-Symbolism”. Gasparov points out that while in English poetry, probably due to the abundance of vowels and diphthongs, imprecise rhyme moved more towards dissonance (or consonant) rhyme, in Russian poetry dissonance rhymes remained scarce, whereas assonance rhymes became frequent (Gasparov 2002, pp. 278–279). However, because of the official literary policy of the Soviet Union where socialist realism became the ruling theory of writing literature, these processes did not proceed in the same way in Estonia as in free Europe, where liberation from strict rules proceeded more linearly. Socialist realism stipulated not only transparent content but also rules of form, bringing back after the Second World War the dominance of exact rhyme and regular verse meter, while in Western Europe there was a movement from exact rhymes to free verse after the Modernism of the 20th century.

sample. Leaving aside Haava, Alliksaar, and Kaalep, in whose poetry the exact rhymes have high prevalence, we will discuss more thoroughly the samples gathered from popular poetry, where they account for less than half, and see at the expense of which rhyme types this decline results from. Our data revealed that rhymes with differences in consonants play an important role in Genka's and Metsakutsu's texts, being found in more than a quarter of Genka's rhymes and in as much as 40% of Metsakutsu's rhymes.⁹ However, the proportion of rhymes with differences in vowels (*tōestama* : *äestama*) [prove : harrow] is considerably lower in their poetry than in Kreutzwald's texts, at less than 10%. It should be noted, however, that rhymes of this type are almost absent in the samples of Kaalep and Alliksaar.

As for other deviations, about half of them are rhymes in which there are deviations both in the end consonants of stressed and unstressed syllables. In a few cases there are deviations both in the vowel and in the consonant part of the syllable, and the remaining cases concern chains with several different rhyme types (almost always an exact rhyme together with the one with a deviation in the consonants).

In the sample from Instagram poet Lauri Räpp, the picture is less varied. Assonance rhymes are found in more than a third of his verses, mainly with different end consonants of stressed syllables, with the proportion of consonant rhymes, as in Genka's sample, being just under 10%. As for the other near rhymes we found in his poetry, more than half of these are rhymes with several differences in consonants at the same time. Almost all the rest have simultaneous differences of consonants and vowels; there is just one case with two different deviations in vowels at the same time.

Thus, the most exact rhymes on the phonemic level in our material are those of the literary authors, occurring in increasing order in the samples of Kreutzwald, Haava, Alliksaar and Kaalep. However, the picture changes when we look at which parts of words and feet were rhymed by these authors.

On the prosodic level, an exact rhyme is the one in which both stresses and quantities coincide. [Figure 14](#) gives an overview of the proportions of prosodically exact rhymes by author.

It can be claimed that in all our studied samples, both the accentual and quantitative coincidence in rhyme units is one of the most reliable criteria for rhyming. It is the only parameter in which the proportion of exact rhymes is more than 50% in all the samples. Somewhat surprisingly, Kaalep and Alliksaar have the lowest indices here, being lower than both the popular lyrics and 19th century poetry. It should be noted, however, that in their case the main reason for these deviations is the fairly frequent use of compound words, resulting from the distinction in our study between primary and secondary stress. Thus, when a simple word is rhymed with a compound word, it eventuates in the difference in stress. The prosodically exact rhymes by Kreutzwald and Haava are rhymes carrying a secondary stress in almost half or slightly more than half of the cases. However, the biggest share of prosodically exact rhymes is

⁹ Compare with Finnish freestyle, which is characterised by systematic vowel rhyme, where in the phonetic section constituting the rhyme, all vowels are of the same quality and appear in the same order, although consonants can vary ([Sykäri 2017](#), p. 140).

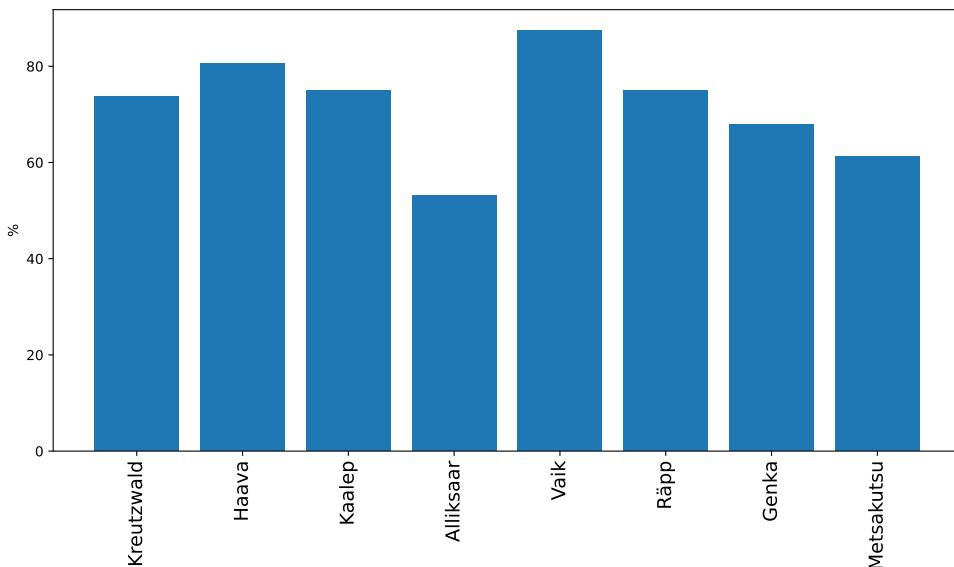


Figure 14: The incidence of prosodically exact rhymes in different Estonian poets

found in Mait Vaik's poetry, where the largest number of rhymes with both partners carrying primary stresses also occurred: both these and prosodically exact rhymes account for about 90% in his sample.

As for the differences in the quantity of rhyming partners, special mention should be made of rhymes of different quantities, which are found in nearly 5% of Kreutzwald's sample (*wahutes* : *mees*, foaming : man). Their proportion is only 2% in Haava's sample and they are practically non-existent in the texts of Kaalep and Vaik. In contrast, the 21st century authors Genka and, especially, Lauri Räpp have used this type of rhyme quite extensively, with proportions of 7% for Genka and Metsakutsu and 8% for Lauri Räpp. It is important to note that in orally performed rap lyrics, rhymes with different quantities are often prolonged in pronunciation in order to be quantitatively equal, a striking example being *saagi* : *vajaagi* (can : need) from one of Genka's songs.

Figure 15 indicates the proportions of rhymes carrying primary stresses in the studied authors.

In Kreutzwald's sample, the proportion of rhymes with only primary stresses is only 38%, while in Haava's poetry, the share of such rhymes is considerably higher, reaching 56%, and in Kaalep's verses even more so, reaching 75%. The highest proportion of rhymes with primary stresses is found in Mait Vaik's verses, where they reach almost 90%; that is, there is a strong preference to rhyme words rather than inflectional parts of words, as is characteristic of Kreutzwald's poetry.

In this aspect, it is interesting to compare the rhyming patterns of 19th century author Kreutzwald, and 21st century popular author Lauri Räpp. While the rhymes of the other authors studied are divided into rhymes carrying

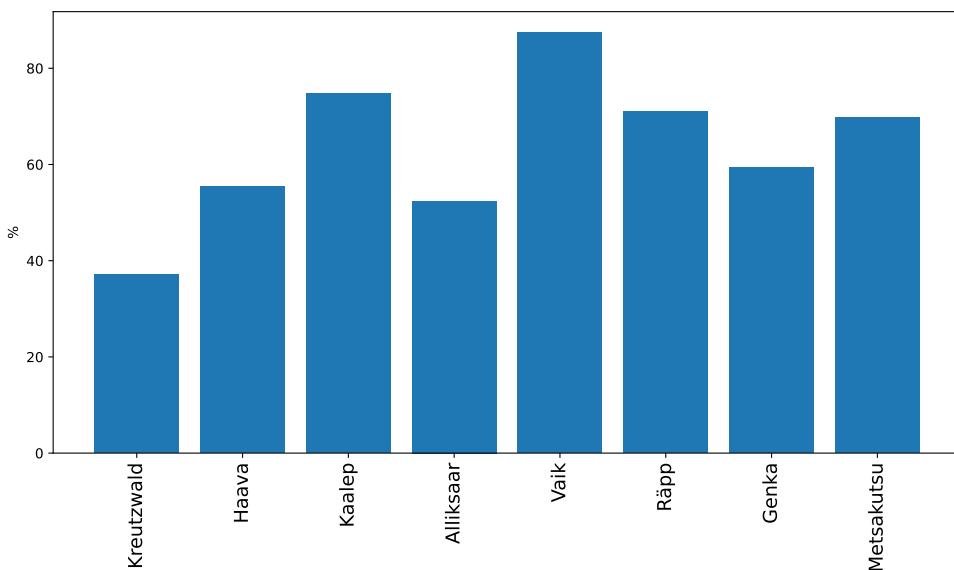


Figure 15: The proportions of rhymes carrying primary stresses in different Estonian poets

primary stresses (*algus* : *valgus*, beginning : light), rhymes with secondary stresses (*õitsedes* : *kallates*, blooming : pouring) and rhymes combining primary and secondary stresses (*eks* : *alguseks*, indeed : for a start), Lauri Räpp revives a rhyme type that was still used by Kreutzwald but is no longer found in Haava's rhymes, i.e. rhymes where no stress occurs in the rhyme structure at all. Our analysis revealed that in Kreutzwald's rhymes, one percent of the rhymes belong to the type where the unstressed non-initial syllables are rhymed with syllables carrying a secondary stress (*teretades* : *kahvates*, saying hello : turning pale). In more than 8% of his verses, he rhymes unstressed non-initial syllables with each other (*põrmu* : *lindu*, *warjud* : *surnud*, *lahkelt* : *kiirelt*, dust : bird, shadows : dead, kindly : quickly) and in Lauri Räpp's sample the proportion of such rhymes is a little over 4%. There are also quite equal proportions of rhymes with primary and secondary stresses in both samples, but there is a divergence in the use of rhymes carrying the main stresses: in Kreutzwald's sample, the incidence is similar to that of the rhymes carrying the secondary stresses, while Räpp clearly prefers rhymes carrying the main stresses.

We conclude the discussion with a few remarks about the last level, the structure of word boundaries. In the studied material, word boundaries turn out to be unexpectedly strong markers of rhyme boundaries. For example, there are no compound rhymes at all in Kreutzwald's and Haava's samples, and there are just a few of them in the samples from other literary authors. The only authors in our study whose rhyming devices definitely include compound rhyme are rap poets Genka and Metsakutsu, while the other representatives of

the popular genres, Mait Vaik and Lauri Räpp, do not use compound rhymes. Thus, a rhyme unit is generally also a lexical unit or part of a lexical unit.

7 Conclusion

While in the last decades of the 20th century regular rhymes started to disappear gradually from literary poetry, in popular poetry the tradition of rhyme continued. This played an important part in the lyrics of the rock bands of the late 1980s and 1990s, which were written in regular rhymed meters. These lyrics soon became mainstream in the popular culture of the time. However, the peak of rhymed pop lyrics came with rap artists, who, influenced by Western hip hop culture, began to create lyrics in which rhyme—not only end rhyme as well as internal rhyme—was the main device of sound arrangement. In addition, we see the emergence of rhyme culture in written pop genres, especially in Instagram poetry. As our analysis has revealed, the resurgence of rhyme in social media and pop music has led to the expansion of its scope. Clear departures from the standards of literary rhyme can already be seen in the lyrics of rock poet Mait Vaik from the 1990s and 2000s. Although in some respects his rhyming principles are even stricter than those of the literary poets of the 20th century; specifically, he overwhelmingly prefers rhymes carrying primary stresses. Starting from his poetry the main feature of rhyme in popular lyrics starts to take shape: the proportion of phonemically full rhymes decreases sharply, accounting for only a third of the total, while assonance rhymes, that is, rhymes in which consonants differ and vowels coincide, become predominant. In addition, Vaik's lyrics contain a small amount of dissonance rhyme, where consonants coincide and vowels differ. A similar picture can be found in the rhymes of Instagram poet Lauri Räpp, where full rhymes and assonance rhymes are strongly preferred. Thus, both authors expand the repertoire of rhyme words by allowing for differences primarily on the phonemic level, mainly in the consonants of rhyme words. While in the literary poetry of this study phonemically full rhyme is with a few minor deviations strongly prevalent, in Lauri Räpp's and Mait Vaik's lyrics there are two main types, full and assonance rhyme, with occasional incidence of dissonance rhyme.

In hip hop lyrics, however, we see an even more varied picture: a style with not just rhyme as the main device of sound arrangement, but the mastery of a particular rapper lies in the uniqueness and originality of his or her rhymes. Thus, in rap lyrics, different new types of near rhyme are introduced to create surprising rhyme effects. While the rhymes of Genka, a first-generation Estonian rapper, contained about a third phonemically exact rhymes, a proportion comparable to that by Mait Vaik and Lauri Räpp, the rest of his rhymes are much more diverse, belonging to different subtypes of near rhyme. Both Räpp and Vaik extended the variety of rhyme usage mainly by using assonance rhymes, the difference being mainly in the stress consonants, whereas in Genka's case the differences in the sounds of rhyme partners are more evenly distributed; that is, there are no longer two main rhyme types but a much more varied picture. We also see combined deviations in about a fifth of the verses; that

is, there are several different phonemic deviations in a chain. The same tendency is reinforced even more strikingly by the next-generation hip hop artist Metsakutsu, in whose lyrics phonemically exact rhyme occurs in less than a tenth of the verses.

It is also interesting to note that, on a prosodic level, contemporary popular literature revives rhyming devices that were in use in the 19th century, but which have since become a literary taboo. Rhyme with unstressed syllables as found in Kreutzwald's poems were completely absent from the works of subsequent poets until they sporadically started to occur in Genka's texts, and then to an even more considerable extent in Lauri Räpp's poetry. We can thus see how the popular poetry of the last few decades in both hip hop lyrics and Instagram texts has adopted a number of strategies that were also present in 19th-century poetry, which can be seen as either impure rhymes or, on the contrary, as a richness of rhyme that helps avoid monotony, depending on one's taste.

By comparing the four levels analysed for the different periods—prosodic, phonemic, stress and word boundary patterns—we can see that the first of these has been the most stable over the different periods. While the proportion of phonemically exact rhymes varies from Kreutzwald to modern popular lyrics from 18% (Metsakutsu) to 98% for all the authors studied, the proportion of prosodically exact rhymes is over 50% for all of them, with the proportion of prosodically exact rhymes exceeding 60% even in the poetry of authors who take great liberties on the phonemic level, such as Genka and Metsakutsu. The second constant, however, has its origins after Kreutzwald, who is the only author in whose work pure main rhymes do not predominate. That is, one or both rhyme units are usually non-initial syllables carrying the secondary stress or no stress at all, whereas in the work of all subsequent authors, rhymes carrying the primary stress account for more than half of the rhyme units in the sample. In the work of Metsakutsu, in whose lyrics the proportion of phonemically inexact rhymes is the highest, they account for as much as 70%. There is thus a clear tendency on the one hand to extend the possibilities of rhyming and, on the other, to form sound repetitions primarily between lexical units rather than smaller sound compositions.

Acknowledgments

The writing of this paper was funded by Estonian Research Council grant no. PRG1106 (The Factor of Lyrical Poetry in the Formation of Small Literatures) and by the Ministry of Culture's Estonian Culture Research and Development Programme 2023–2026 (KUM-TA75). The study was supported by base funding from the University of Tartu (grant nr PHVLC21924 and PHVFIARENG22).

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