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ON THE FORMULAIC CONTEXT OF THE AURAL EXPERIENCE VOCABULARY IN MIDDLE ENGLISH POETRY

Abstract

The essay is concerned with the most important words encountered in the Middle English dialects which were used to describe the aural sensation and the cognitive impact of the sonic stimuli. The argument traces the way in which this particular lexical group functions in the formulaic, as well as habitual collocative structures in both the alliterative and the rhymed poetry of the English later Middle Ages. The analysis of the particular lexical items seeks to relate the semantic nuance which reflects the medieval cognitive specificity to the patterns of systemic distribution of lexical material in the two distinct poetic traditions which relate in various degree and ways to the legacy of the oral culture which was prevalent at the dawn of the medieval period.

Keywords: aural, formulaic, alliterative, rhyme, Middle English

The present argument is concerned with the distribution, function as well as the semantic context and range of the most common lexical material which was used to account for the aural sensation as it was experienced and conceived of during

the Middle English period. The aim of the analysis is to discuss the issue in question in the context of the methods of poetic composition related to the use of mental grids and prosodic systems of formulaic distribution of lexical material which reflect the specificity of the partly oral cultural environment of England throughout the later Middle Ages. The underlying idea is thus to provide a short overview of the way in which this specific semantic group of vocabulary functioned in the various dialects and poetic tradition existing during the Middle English period. The aim of the argument is to describe and classify the different types of stimuli related to the sense of hearing which operated within the patterns of systemic distribution of formulaic material in both alliterative poetry and rhymed poetry.

As regards the alliterative tradition the argument will focus on the evidence for formulaic patterns of lexical distribution in six alliterative poems: *William of Palerne, The Wars of Alexander* (otherwise known as *Alexander C* – the most complete variant of the Middle English renditions of the story), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Patience, Cleanness*, and *Gest Hystoriale of the Destruction of Troy*. The choice is here determined by the fact that the selected items constitute a fairly uniform body of texts in terms of their literary tradition and cultural environment. All were composed during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century in the West Midland, North Midland, or Northwest Midland dialects which places them at the geographical centre of the late fourteenth century revival of alliterative poetry (PEARSALL 1982: 37–53). The other, more immediate reason for the selection is that the rate of the appearance of the lexical items chosen for the present analysis is significantly higher than in other compatible body of verse (i.e. any other group of texts to be selected from what is collectively treated as representing the Alliterative Revival).

Consequently, the selected poems may be expected to share a common method of formulaic composition which is the

result of their relatively recent emergence from centuries of functioning in the oral, or partly oral, cultural environment into the realm of literate culture.[1]

Secondly, the relatively high frequency of the use of uniform lexical material automatically indicates the possibility that it functions as part of the formulaic structures which may be relic from the times of the predominant oral composition of the alliterative verse. These would have been undergoing a process of being transformed into habitual collocations which fulfil the role of conventionalised stylistic devices used with the view to answer to the cultural and literary decorum of oral delivery.[2]

Subsequently, the argument seeks to augment the analysis by taking a contrastive look at the distribution of the same semantic items in the poetic work of Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower in order to account for the possible evidence of formulaic patterns in the rhymed poetry composed

[1] The terms "oral" and "literate" are used here in the classical Lord/Parry sense as is current in oral formulaic studies. The argument developed in the course of the present article assumes the pattern of coexistence of the oral and literate cultures throughout the Middle Ages to consist in a dynamic process of a gradual evolution whereby the consecutive stages of composition, transmission, and delivery are gradually transformed by the steady introduction of the literate modes of cultural interaction and the introduction of writing. This model represents the current critical consensus and has been convincingly articulated in the work of DUGGAN 1977, 223–247, AMODIO 2004, 3–18, 79–128; BRADBURY 1994, 39–64, HARTLE 1999, 13–24, and in Pascual's refutation of Weiskott's argument (PASCUAL 2017) where the argument is in favour of an oral transmission of the art of alliterative composition between the Old English period and the Alliterative Revival. A theoretical framework for the analysis of the process itself has been developed by FINNEGAN 1992, 113–134. The transition from oral performance to oral delivery is acknowledged by Joyce Coleman with her concept of aurality (i.e. COLEMAN 1995, 66, or COLEMAN 2007, 66–85), which corresponds terminologically to oral delivery and implicitly supports the scholarly consensus on the XIV c. cultural context. Coleman, however, does not seem to be familiar with the evolutionary model proposed in oral-formulaic studies and she likewise creates her own definition of "orality", which implicitly confuses "oral delivery" with "oral performance" (COLEMAN 2007, 69).

[2] Compare Lawton's polemic with Duggan's argument (LAWTON 1982, 6).

contemporaneously in the East Midland dialect.[3] The selection of texts is meant to reflect the fact that we have here the most substantial sample of East Midland rhymed verse composed by the individual poets would be accomplished enough to incorporate the full scope of the nuances of poetic decorum forged within their resident cultural environment.

Needless to say, the perceptibly formulaic character of much of the English rhymed verse (i.e. poetry which metrically belongs to the category of accentual-syllabic verse) of the later medieval period does not constitute a testimony to elements of oral performance being employed at the stage of the composition of the verse, but merely reflects a regressive tendency to rely on habitual collocations with a view to perpetuate the traditional poetic decorum. The use of these collocations is primarily a proof of the continued appeal of conventional aesthetics which had originated in the more oral environment of the early Middle Ages, and it also mirrors the norms and customs still valid for the stages of the transmission and delivery of the poetic text, which were still largely oral in the XIV c. (VITZ 1999, 165–189; AMODIO 2004, 93–98; BRANTLEY 2007, 1–25).

The thrust of the argument pursued throughout the present discussion is that the late Middle English alliterative poetics are rooted in the relatively recent tradition of oral, or partly oral, composition and functions in the continuing environment of oral delivery, which presupposes the continuation of the aesthetics of the oral formulaic composition. Given this fact, one may expect formulaic patterns of lexical and syntactic distribution to retain their relevance to the methods of poetic composition prevalent during the period in question. For the purpose of such discussion the analysis adopts here the concept of the formulaic "mental grid" as defined by Carruthers (1994, 80–155),

[3] The issue of the oral roots of medieval rhymed poetry has been extensively discussed in QUINN & HALL 1982 and in VITZ 1999, 1–138.

and the analysis stems from the premise that the reliance on inherent systematisation evident in medieval mnemonic techniques is evidenced in the systemic nature of the distribution of lexical material in the context of contemporaneous methods of poetic composition. Hence it is the underlying assumption of the following argument that the collocative and syntactic patterns which have the effect of binding a particular lexical item to a specific metrical position in a line of verse echo the formulaic structures which once determined the distribution of poetic phrases in the conditions of oral composition. This metrical and syntactic regularity is still evident in the metrical status, alliterative rank, and stylistic effect of the vocabulary of poems committed to manuscript in the course of the Alliterative Revival.

Evidently, the relation of the late fourteenth century rhymed poetry to the oral cultural heritage is less immediate and the continuum between composition and delivery more decisively defined by the literate habits of mind. Yet a juxtaposition of the distribution patterns of selected items from the same semantic group in the two respective traditions of verse composition may offer some insight into the extent to which the composition of late Middle English rhymed verse exhibited regularities in the distribution of lexical material which may have reflected a continued reliance on aesthetics rooted in the heritage of the oral culture.

One may begin here with a brief account of the semantic range of the most common Middle English words used to describe the most basic acoustic phenomena as they were understood and classified during the period. The first crucial thing in this context is the prevalent tendency in medieval cognitive model to perceive both the visual and the acoustic space as a series of two-dimensional planes, without recourse to the notion of perspective and thus all manner of acoustic phenomena will be construed of within a basically two-dimensional cognitive model (ZUMTHOR 1983, 1–47, 51–55; MARTIN 1977, 154; GUREWICZ 1973, 37).

In such a context the word "noyse" was used most frequently to denote any continuous loud sound which either does not contain a rationally comprehensible component, or its potential existence is less relevant to the listener than is the emphatic expansive formation of an acoustic space that it entails. The chief feature of this kind of acoustic phenomenon is its negative, intrusive character which causes it to expand by imposing itself unduly upon the person's attention, to the effect of obscuring, or obliterating, other sonic stimuli. This semantic propensity is to a large extent reinforced by the fact that frequently this relatively common word had its potentially loose semantic field reinforced by the addition of strongly pejorative adjectives which tended to amplify the negative connotations which are frequently contextual. Thus the *Middle English Dictionary* defines *noyse* as a "loud and unpleasant sound". Consequently, according the *Middle English Dictionary*,[4] of the 191 recorded cases of the use of the word, 158 cases carry a pejorative sense and only 33 evoke a positive connotation.

By contrast, the word "soun" was mostly used for the articulate form of expression, which in practice means primarily human speech. When applied to animals it is opposed to noise, containing no idea of brutishness. Consequently, the word was used to denote the vocal sound of a rational human utterance concentrating on its acoustic quality. The second sense in which the term is used in Middle English is connected with cases when one speaks of the sense of a rational judgement, and it consequently directs the focus of attention to the semantic content of the utterance.

According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, of the 145 recorded examples, 28 convey a very generalised, semantically

[4] Based on 3,000,000 quotations from textual sources spanning the period between the XIth to the XVth c., the *MED* remains the most comprehensive corpus available for quantitative studies of lexical material. Hence the hope that an argument which is valid for this corpus captures some vital part of the reality behind the available manuscripts.

neutral sense, 106 connect the word with the idea of harmonious music or rational utterance (human or divine), while only 11 cases of the word's use connote pejoratively.

Another lexical item is "stevene" which usually denotes loud, collective, articulate, rational and non-invasive expression, used primarily of the tonal specificity of human expression. In such meaning it is used in the 147 cases recorded in the *Middle English Dictionary* (and we disregard here, obviously, the other sense of "command/order" in which the word also sometimes appears).

Thus, although "stevene" is routinely translated into Modern English as voice, the word did originally possess a distinct semantic specificity, because it is used more frequently in relation to the semantic import of a rational utterance, and its official sonorous quality (hence it is very commonly used in reference to the speech of a divine agent). This may, however, be the simple reflection of the fact that "stevene" is, in fact, the direct, poetic equivalent of the word "voyse", or such was, at least, its function in the poetic decorum of the time, and this is consequently the reason for its disappearance after the Middle English period.

In contrast, the word "rurde" is far less common (for MED records only 30 cases of its use) and occurs most often in the context of a loud collective noisy sound, and indeed, as shall be demonstrated in the course of the following argument, it may be effectively treated as the high alliterative rank equivalent of "noyse".

Finally, another compatible case of a less frequent lexical item denoting a form of sound is the word "murmur" which describes loud, inarticulate sound made mostly by crowds of people. It is used almost exclusively in pejorative connotations, and its primary semantic function is to imply menace.

Now, what one needs to bear in mind while embarking on the analysis of the prosodic characteristics of the various types of verse forms adopted for the composition of poetics texts

which make use of systemic distribution of formulaic material is that the density of the formulaic structures varies within the metrical construction of the poetic units.

Specifically in the case of the Middle English alliterative poetry, the aspect of formulaic distribution is intimately related to the issue of the metrical patterns used in composition of the alliterative line and the question of alliterative rank.

The present argument accepts the model for the basic pattern of the Middle English alliterative line as defined in the 2007 study by Putter/Jefferson/Stokes (2007, 145–216). Within this approach all varieties of the Middle English alliterative line conform to the basic pattern of four-beat accentual rhythm, with the a-verse containing two lifts marked by two alliterating staves made of stressed syllables separated by a more flexible pattern of dips made of a number of unaccented syllables. Conversely, the b-verses are composed upon a two-accent frame[5] whereby the alliterating syllable in the first lift staves with the two lifts of a-verse, while the fourth stressed syllable does not stave and does not, usually, alliterate.

What this entails for the study of formulaic patterns is that, within the four-beat accentual scheme of the most standard form of the Middle English alliterative line, the specific character and construction of formulaic structures used in the composition of the line will inevitably differ, because of the divergences in the pattern of alliteration, and consequent different syntactic structure used.

The key question in this context is the issue of alliterative rank. This particular aspect of alliterative composition was discussed in Borroff (BORROFF 1962, 52–90) and, more recently, by Cronan (CRONAN 1986, 145–158), and Roper (ROPER 2012, 82–93). Borroff' recognised the continued high alliterative frequency of archaic words attributing the fact to their usefulness in the technical composition of alliterative verse. The studies

[5] See also RUSSOM 2004, 275–304.

by Cronan and Roper extend the scope of analysis by discussing the phenomenon in the context of the stylistic effect of the lexical material and also their high poetic, "heroic", register, as well as the tendency for the more figurative sense of a given word to possess a higher rate of appearance as an alliterating stave (CRONAN 1986, 154), as well as the mutual reinforcing connection between the alliterative rank and semantic stretch (ROPER 2012, 91).

The importance of this aspect of alternative composition for oral-formulaic studies is that the question of alliterative rank constitutes one of the most evident correlatives of the issue of the distribution of possible formulaic structures. Thus, the average higher alliterative rank of the a-verses will customarily make their exhibit a greater density of formulaic phrases, while, in the post-caesura b-verses, formulaic phrases will incorporate more conventional low rank expressions into the context of the high rank poetic words which belong to the formulaic alliterative cluster used for the composition of the particular line of verse.

Conversely, in the context of the various forms of rhymed poetry, the most distinctively formulaic characters will be visible in the context of the rhyme-words in the line-final position, or, secondly, in the syntactic make-up of the three-beat "wheel" lines which are routinely used to provide a reiterative backstop for the sequences of four-beat narrative lines of varying number and rhyme pattern (as is the case in the many varieties of tail-rhyme). Hence, this last pattern is most ubiquitously used in the various types of the tail-rhyme stanza which was in widespread use in the composition of the popular form of courtly romance (FEWSTER 1987, 6–13; ZAERR 2012, 151–140).

Now with the above in mind, one may look consecutively at the way in which the nouns used to account for the variety of the contemporaneous aural experience function in the context of the different kinds of formulaic systems which may still be traced in Middle English poetry.

Let us first consider the word "noyse". The initial observation to be made here is that within the group of alliterative poems commonly associated with the phenomenon of the Alliterative Revival there are a number of longer poems in which the word does not appear at all (i.e. the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, *Joseph of Arimathie*, *Wynnere and Wastoure*, or *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*). If we now take a look at the poems where "noyse" is part of the poet's vocabulary and appears more than once, we shall observe that, within each particular poem, the metrical distribution of "noyse" is strictly determined by the word's function within the formulaic collocations and syntactic patterns, and these determine the word's alliterative rank and its stylistic import.

Thus, if we look at the word "noyse" in the poems where it appears most frequently, we shall see that its prosodic function is decisively determined by its uniformly low alternative rank. Thus, the word is by far most frequently used as part of the fourth lift in the b-verse, typically as the fourth non-alliterating stave. This as may be observed in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:[6]

> Braches bayed þerfore and breme noyse maked (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 1142),
>
> Þat buskkez after þis bor with bost and wyth noyse (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 1448),
>
> Bi3onde þe broke, in a bonk, a wonder breme noyse (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 2200),
>
> Wylde wordez hym warp wyth a wrast noyce; (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 1423),

[6] The examples used in this study ware generated with the help of the corpus of Middle English verse at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/ and https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary. Additionally, critical editions of the texts were consulted and thoroughly double checked for spelling variants.

> Wreȝande hym ful weterly with a wroth noyse (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 1706),
>
> And woried me þis wyly wyth a wroth noyse (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 1905).

The metrical position of the word "noyse" determines here its low alliterative rank, but it does not mean that the word remains outside the poem's formulaic patterns because the fourth lifts are here composed on the basis of adverbial phrases (within which "noyse" is always accompanied by a qualifying adjective) which connect the word to the alliterative pattern determining the staving of the first three lifts. This, in turn, connects "noyse" with the specific alliterative cluster which is utilised in the composition of the particular line. An additional circumstance here may be the usefulness of "noyse" for maintaining the obligatory line-ending of a lift followed by one unstressed syllable.

Although the majority of lines where "noyse" is used conform to this uniform pattern, in the other three lines where "noyse" appears in *Sir Gawain*, the word functions as part of the a-verse:

> An other noyse ful newe neȝed biliue, (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 132),
>
> For unethe was the noyce not a whyle sesed (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 134),
>
> Nwe nakryn noyse with þe noble pipes (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 118).

At the first look it might seem justifiable to classify the three lines as more characteristic of the literate poetic composition, for none of them includes any recognisable formulaic structures, or patterns of syntactic or lexical associations which would have been repeated anywhere else in the poem.

Yet, we may find an evident formulaic variant of the last of the above lines being "recomposed" in *Cleanness* and *The Siege of Jerusalem*:

> And ay þe nakeryn noyse, notes of pipes, (*Cleanness*, l. 1413).
>
> With nakerers & grete noyce neȝen þe walles (*The Siege of Jerusalem*, 1179),
>
> & þe nakerer noyse alle þe nyȝt-tyme (*The Siege of Jerusalem*, 852).

The conclusion must here be that, within its own "native" alliterative [n] cluster the word "noyse" may be used as the second alliterating stave in the second lift of the a-verse, because now the fact that it conforms in alliteration with its formulaic adjective causes the whole noun phrase to become a natural metrical candidate for two alliterating staves of the a-verse.

If we now consider the second poem where "noyse" enjoys a high rate of occurrence, i.e. *William of Palerne*, we shall observe a parallel distributive tendency:

> For fei fat misseden here mete wold make gret noyse, (*William of Palerne*, l. 1827),
>
> & ran l forf for al fat route wif so rude a noyse, (*William of Palerne*, l. 2375),
>
> & sewed him sadly wij so selkouf noyse, (*William of Palerne*, l. 2388),
>
> & darked stiile in hire den for drede, boute noyse. (*William of Palerne*, l. 2543),
>
> & grisiliche gapande with a grym noyse, (*William of Palerne*, l. 4343),
>
> buskes in to fe baf boute more noyse, (*William of Palerne*, l. 4453).

The above sample represents all but one example of the use of "noyse" from the poem and, as may be easily seen, we have here an exact repetition of the pattern we encountered in *Sir Gawain.* Both the metrical position and prosodic function of the word are here strictly determined by the formulaic structures which channel the vocabulary of each of the alliterative clusters into the composition of the consecutive lines of verse. This demonstrates the extent to which the distribution of the lexical material and parallelism in syntactic structures relies on a preconceived formulaic grid which is uniform for the various poets of the period and must consequently descend from an original environment of some form of oral composition.

Again, the line which constitutes the sole case when "noyse" is used in the a-verse is composed on a different alliterative cluster and it does not bear any formulaic similarity to other lines of the poem (i.e. no syntactic, or lexical patterns of association are repeated elsewhere):

> whan be noyse was slaked of be semli hurnes, (*William of Palerne*, l. 4568).

The uniform nature of this tendency for "noyse" to function within strict patterns of formulaic distribution may be further confirmed by a look at other contemporaneous alliterative works. Thus, in the *Gest Hystoriale of the Destruction of Troy* we shall again find the same sort of regularity in the distribution of "noyse" within the prosodic pattern of the line. Of the four lines where the word is used, three conform to the already familiar pattern:

> And he gird him agayne with a grym noyse (*Gest Hystoriale of the Destruction of Troy,* l. 3.097),

> As þe welkyn shold walt, a wonderfull noyse (*Gest Hystoriale,* l. 3.909),

> And lay gronond on ground with a grym noyse (*Gest Hystoriale*, l. 27. 10981).

Again, the sole line with "noyse" used to compose the a-verse outside the [n] cluster does not contain recognisably formulaic material:

> Made an ugsom noyse, þat noyet þe pepull, *Gest Hystoriale*, (l. 35. 13734).

Indeed the uniformity of the tendency to treat "noyse" as a lexical item carrying low alliterative rank and also one confined to the position of the fourth lift in the b-verse may be further testified by looking at the remaining poems where the word makes an appearance:

> Þe god man glyfte wyth þat glam and gloped for noyse (*Cleanness*, l. 849),
>
> Þenne þe rebaudez so ronk rerd such a noyse (*Cleanness*, l. 873),
>
> Symbales and sonetez sware þe noyse (*Cleanness*, l. 1415),
>
> For þai hadd herd neuire of how ne of mans noyse (*Wars of Alexander*, l.2.4732),
>
> Is Þis ryghtwys, Þou renk, alle Þy ronk noyse (*Patience*, 490).

Although the syntactic patterns appear to be relatively looser in the two poems in terms of their formulaic nature, still the metrical template remains essentially unchanged. Another observation which needs to be made in this context is that it is quite apparent from the examination of all the above examples that it is the repeated association of the noun "noyse" with the various adjectives with which the word comes into contact in the numerous lines composed on different alliterative clusters that is the reason for the development of the

habitual collocation link between the adjective and the noun in the noun phrase of the fourth lift. Moreover, the resultant connection between "noyse" and mostly pejorative adjectives like "grym", "ronk", "rude", "wroth", or "breme" has the corresponding effect of reinforcing the negative semantic connotations of the word. Thus the formulaic patterns immanent in the art of alliterative composition have the effect of reinforcing the semantic range of a word and creating habitual collocation well beyond the advent of the literate culture (as the continued presence of collocations like "grim noise", or "rude noise" testifies). Thus "noyse" is, on the whole, more pejorative when used in the low rank position.

If one turns now to the way "noyse" is employed in the realm of rhymed poetry, one shall discover that, although the word exhibits a high frequency of use, it never becomes a part of any rhyme cluster and is consequently not used in the line-final, rhyme position, as the selection from Chaucer will plainly illustrate:

> The noyse vp ros whanne it was first aspied. (*Troilus and Criseyde*, l.85),
>
> Þat with þe noyse of hire he gan a-wake (*Troilus and Criseyde*, l. 70),
>
> Heren noyse of reynes nor of þondre. (*Troilus and Criseyde*, l. 662),
>
> The noyse of peple vp stirte þanne at onys (*Troilus and Criseyde*, l. 183),
>
> And with a sorwful noyse he seyde þus (*Troilus and Criseyde*, l. 374),
>
> I nylde sette at al þe noyse a grote (*Troilus and Criseyde*, l. 586),
>
> And þer-with-al he sholde a noyse make (*Troilus and Criseyde*, l. 257)

Of hors and harneys noyse and claterynge (*The Knight's Tale*, 2492),

Ffor he by noyse of folk knew hire comynge (*The Clerk's Tale*, 912)

Ne neuer sweete noyse schul ȝe make (*The Manciple's Tale*, 300).

Thus, although the question of poetic rank is not nearly as much of a prominent factor in determining a given word's prosodic value in the case of rhymed poetry, yet the nominally common quality of "noyse" seems to be reflected in its poetic status within the line of verse. Admittedly, all the poems quote above share the same meter, but the situation will remain the same if one considers poems which, instead of the iambic pentameter line, are composed in either octosyllabic or four-bear accentual pattern:

Who it was that the noyse made. (*Guy of Warwick* [XIV c. version], l. 4867),

the noyse anone arosse in the Citee. (*Guy of Warwick* [XIV c. version], l. 2897),

Noyse, weping, and grete cry.(*Guy of Warwick* [XIV c. version], l. 4864),

And herde gret noyse & gret cry (*Bevis of Hampton,* l. 65),

And harde moche noyse & great aray, (*Bevis of Hampton,* l. 2682),

This noyse aros, the lord it herde, (John Gower *Confessio Amantis*, II. 3239),

The whiche of so gret noyse craken (John Gower *Confessio Amantis,* VII. 305).

Interestingly, when the author of the later, 15th c. version of the romance of *Guy of Warwick* uses "noyse" in the line-final, or rhyme position for five couplets he is not able to develop

a rhyme cluster, but achieves merely a collocative rhyming pair by rhyming "noyse" with the proper name of "Gormoyse". This in itself is a testimony of the transition from the more oral based methods of rhymed verse composition to the more conventional forms of literate versification. While it has been described as a mark of the accomplished oral-derived style of poetic composition to seek for variation of rhyme pairs within one rhyme cluster, it is typical of the later, conventionalised literate style which is frequently reliant on habitual pairs of rhyme words.[7]

All in all, one may conclude that the low register, pedestrian quality of "noyse" may be perceived as the result of its relative lack of prominence in the metrical structures in both alliterative and rhymed verse of the period.

Turning now one's attention to the word "soun" one will observe the opposite situation, for the word is now routinely used in the metrically prominent position in the alliterative poetic line, i.e. providing the staving syllable in any of the first three lifts. It is also a frequently used component part of the [-oun] rhyme cluster in the case of rhymed verse.

In the case of alliterative poetry, as may be gauged on the example of those poems where the word is used, it becomes visible that the inherently positive semantic range of "soun" is definitely a factor here, and it is likewise to be noticed that in the alliterative poems where the word is part of the poet's vocabulary, "soun" is used exclusively in one of the alliterative staves in either of the two lifts of the a-verse, where it denotes the act of human speech:

> Þe soun of oure Souerayn Þen swey in his ere, (*Patience,* l. 429),
>
> The grete soun of Sodamas synkkez in myn erez, (*Cleanness,* l. 689),

[7] Compare the argument presented by Quinn and Hall (QUINN & HALL 1982, 111) that the evidence of fixed pairs of rhyme words is a sign of the inferior poetic skills of the *trouvere*.

Þe segge herde þat soun to Segor þat ȝede, (*Cleanness*, l. 973),

And sothely sende to Sare a soun and an hayre. (*Cleanness*, 666),

Moni semly syre soun_, and swyþe rych maydenes, (*Cleanness*, 1299),

Þat all þe soile of þa sidis of þe sound ryngis. (*Wars of Alexander*, 3867).

It may also be important in this context that the word "sound" understood in the other of the senses current in Middle English, i.e. "a body of water" and as the adjective meaning "safe and secure" is used with a relatively high rate of frequency (25 times) in the course of *Gest Hystoriale*. In these cases the word remains in a strong bond with other words of the [s] alliterative cluster – most predictably, of course, with "saile". "Sound" is there used in the same pattern of distribution as in the examples above. Although this semantic change relegates these examples from the scope of the present argument, the phenomenon may still be significant in the case of orally delivered poetry.

Now, in the case of rhymed verse, one may observe that, although the word is frequently used in the rhyme, line-final position, its meaning is, in the overwhelming majority of cases, different, for it now denotes the basic quality of the neutral sonic impulse which is divorced from the automatic connection to human speech. Similarly, it customarily functions in pejorative connotations and does not possess the formulaic sonority of expression it normally has in the case of alliterative verse:

The rumblynge of a fart, and every soun, / Nis but of eir reverberacioun, (*The Summoner's Tale*, l. 2233–4),

Sche leyde hyre mouth to þe watyr adoun / Be-wrey me not þou watyr with thyn soun (*The Wife of Bath's Tale*, l. 973–4),

ffulfyld of dunge & of corrupcioun / At eythyr ende of the foul is the soun (*The Pardoner's Tale*, l. 535–6),

That myȝt a lete a fart of swych a soun / The frere vp-stirte as doth a wood lyoun (*The Summoner's Tale*, l. 2151–2),

But fyrst I make a protestacyoun / That I am dronke I knowe it be myn soun (*The Summoner's Tale*, l. 2233–4),

Bot tho sche ran so up and doun, / Sche made many a wonder soun, (John Gower *Confessio Amantis*, V. 4098),

Which hath the vois of every soun, / The chiere and the condicioun (John Gower *Confessio Amantis*, IV. 3045),

That of the noise and of the soun / Men feeren hem in al the toun (John Gower *Confessio Amantis*, III. 453).

Now, to a large extent, this change in semantic range is dictated by the fact that this is the standard sense of the word in the East Midland dialect of Gower and Chaucer, which approximates much closer to the modern meaning of the word "sound", while the northern dialects in which the alliterative poetry would be primarily composed preserves more directly the Old English semantic context of the word. This also remains the decisive factor which determined the word's survival into Modern English in the latter sense. It will duly account for the common feel that "soun" has in rhymed poetry and this, in its turn, results in the high percentage of cases when "soun" appears in non-rhyme position in the line as in the examples below:

Or soun of belle whil þat þey ben I-runge (*Troilus and Criseyde*, 2. 805),

The blisful soun and in þat yonder place. (*Troilus and Criseyde*, 5. 580),

That equally þe soun of it wele wende (*The Summoner's Tale*, l. 2273).

What is also interesting is that some influence, or echo, of the status of "soun" in alliterative poetry may be behind the tendency for the word to appear in alliterative pairs which embellish a number of lines in Chaucer:

That hereth soun whan men þe strenges plye. (*Troilus and Criseyde*, 1.732),

As of þe soun or sonour of a fart (*The Summoner's Tale*, l. 2152),

And manye a soun of sundery melodye (*The Clerk's Tale*, 2712).

A still different pattern of formulaic distribution may be traced in the case of the word "voyse". In the context of the alliterative verse, the distribution of this particular lexical item appears to be a little more elusive, because whenever the word forms a part of the poet's vocabulary, "voyse" appears to be consistently used in two positions only. It may be used for the first lift in the b-verse, being part of the alliterative cluster:

His vertuse & his vysage, his voise he remenbris. (*Wars of Alexander*, 2958),

Says þaim hys vision & as þe voyce biddes; (*Wars of Alexander*, 1508)[8],

Alternatively, it may become the second short dip, being the head of the noun phrase where the adjective provides the second staving syllable:

Dryues vp a dede voyce & dymly he spekis, (*Wars of Alexander*, 718),

[8] Compare also the alliterative *Morte Arthure*: Brothely in the vale with voyce he ascryez (*Morte Arthure*, 2046).

Syne kestyn vp a clene voyce & cried all at onys, (*Wars of Alexander,* 2345).

Although such a pattern of metrical placement makes the question of the word's alliterative rank more difficult to ascertain, yet, at the same time, it provides a clear testimony for the rigid nature of the mental grid which determines the placement of a particular lexical item.

If one looks now at the way "voyse" functions in the rhymed poetry of the period, one will observe that, although the frequency of the word's use is very high, it does not achieve any greater prominence in the structures of poetic composition. Thus, while, in the course of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* the word "voyse" is used 23 times, it never once appears in a rhymed position:

Þat it an heuene it was hire voys to here (2. 826)

An chaunged voys right for his verrey drede. (3. 92)

And after syker doth here voys out rynge. (3.1237)

Þat swych a voys was of hym and a steuene. (3.1723).

Moreover, there appears a distinct tendency throughout the poem to use "voyse" for the construction of lines built around adverbial qualifying expressions which seem to echo the three-beat tag lines, which provide the complement ending for the main narrative flow, and which are so characteristic of the tail-rhyme stanza:

So wommanly wiþ voys melodious (5.577)

with soft voys he of his lady dere. (5. 636)

With sterne voys and myghty lymes square. (5 .801)

With petous voys and tenderly wepynge (1.111)

With brokyn vois al hois for shright Criseyde (4.1147)

with sorwful vois and herte of blisse al bare (4. 1168).

Now, the interesting thing is that, whenever "voyse" is used within the tag-like adverbial phases its semantic range appears to be confined to the expression of the idea of specific kind of the acoustic quality of the sonic phenomenon, i.e. to describe the tone, intonation and the emotion conveyed by the person who produces the sounds described. In other words, it concerns the physical characteristics of the utterance. Contrastively, whenever the word "voyse" is not tied to any sort of syntactic conventionalism, the range of its meaning seems to widen so as to concern more the semantic content of the speech produced, or the effect it has on the environment. This would constitute more evidence that the syntactic parallelism, which is in itself an ornamental device which functions in literate poetry as a relic of the formulaic style, has a perceptible impact upon the semantic range of its component words. Consequently, it may be expected that the meaning of a given word will remain more focused if the word functions within fixed syntactic phrases coined around a traditionalised semantic range,[9] even if no systemic use of formulae forms a part of the verse's composition.[10]

Generally, as one may observe that, in Chaucer's verse, the word "voyse" never loses the pedestrian quality of a low register lexical item. While in the whole of *The Canterbury Tales* the word is used 28 times, it is rhymed on only once. The fact that its semantic range fluctuates in correspondence to the syntactic construction it appears in constitutes further testimony to its relatively weak register position in which it routinely appears despite its regularly positive semantic connotation.

[9] On this aspect, see also LESTER 1996, 127.

[10] On the impact of the oral tradition on Chaucer see PARKS 1994, 149–173.

Needless to say, the most immediate circumstance, which may be the most mundane reason for the absence of words like "noyse", or "voyse" from the line-final position, is the relative scarcity of rhyme words which could have been used to create a rhyme cluster. Nevertheless, potential Middle English rhyme pairs, such as "choice", or "crois", were at the disposal of the poet. Anyhow, regardless of whether it was the result of the lack of a wider array of rhyme words, or matters of taste, "voyse" did not enjoy the kind of prosodic prominence that the line-final position bestows on a lexical item in the context of rhymed verse.

If one now considers the function and distribution of the word "stevene", a very different picture will emerge from the analysis. The word makes a regular appearance in both alliterative and rhymed poetry. Commenting on the word's position and function in the realm of alliterative poetry, we must again state that in each poem where the word is used its metrical position appears to be subject to strict prosodic regularity. Nevertheless, this time the mental grid which governs the rank and distribution of this lexical item varies with each of the particular poems in which the word "stevene" appears. Among the poems selected for the present study "stevene" makes the most frequent and pronounced appearance in *Cleanness.* There the word is used most frequently and, in the clear majority of case, it is treated as a word carrying high alliterative rank, and providing one of the alliterating lifts:

> Never steven hem astel, so stoken is hor tonge; (*Cleanness,* 1542),
>
> At a stylle stollen steven, unstered wyth syȝt, *(Cleanness,* 706),
>
> Þay stel out on a stylle nyȝt er any steven rysed, (*Cleanness,* 1202),
>
> Er al wer stawed and stoken as þe steven wolde (*Cleanness,* 360),

Stelen stylly þe toun er any steven rysed. (*Cleanness*, 1778),

Sturnen trumpen strake steven in halle, (*Cleanness*, 1402).

It is only in two lines of the poem that the word is not part of the line's alliterative cluster, but is relegated to a low rank position within the fourth lift:

And sone ȝederly forȝete ȝisterday steven (*Cleanness*, 463),

Ȝet he cryed hym after wyth careful steven: (*Cleanness*, 770).

Here, as was the case above with "noyse", "steven" is attached to the alliterative cluster through its adjoining adjective. It may be yet important that "stevene" is much more emphatically attached to the b-verse than was the case with other high rank items.

If we consider the word's metrical distribution in *The Wars of Alexander*, we shall also find "stevene" in the two respective positions, and the ratio of the lines is similar:

Steryn steuyn vp strake, strakid þar trumpis. (*Wars of Alexander*, 1386),

His steuyn stiffe was [&] steryn þat stonayd many, (*Wars of Alexander*, 611),

Sa stithe a steuyn in þe stoure of stedis & ellis, (*Wars of Alexander*, 1251),

"Sir, anec," quod all men with a sterne steven, (*Wars of Alexander*, 1131),

(as against:)

And þai him swiftly swarid with a swete steuyn, (*Wars of Alexander*, 4192),

> "Sire Alexander, athill kyng" quod all with a steuyn, (*Wars of Alexander*, 1831).

Nevertheless, if we take a look at *Gest Hystoriale*, we shall find that the poet's mental grid does not include the possibility of "steven" functioning in a position of a high alliterative rank, and, consequently, the word functions throughout the poem only as the fourth non-alliterating lift, forming the adverbial phrases in which the line terminates:

> A faire man in feturs & hade of furse steuyn. (*Gest Hystoriale*, 3865),
>
> And the tyde men of Troy, with a tore steuyn, (*Gest Hystoriale*, 6505),
>
> Þan Þantasilia the pert with a pure steuyn, (*Gest Hystoriale*, 10898).

The conclusion here must be that, while "steven" appears to be uniquely flexible in terms of its alliterative rank, it is, nevertheless, invariably subject to definite regulations governing metrical distribution within each particular poem.

Now, in the case of rhymed poetry, "stevene" is likewise invariably employed as a word which fulfils an active role in the prosody of the verse. Thus if one looks again at Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, one will observe that "stevene" is a frequently used word, which, moreover, is used exclusively in the rhymed position in the poetic line:

> It is ful fair a man to bere hym evene, / For al day meeteth men at unset stevene. (*The Knight's Tale*, 1523–4),
>
> The voys of peple touchede the hevene, / So loude cride they with murie stevene, (*The Knight's Tale*, 2562),
>
> Ther is no fowel that fleeth under the hevene / That she ne shal wel understonde his stevene, (*The Squire's Tale*, 149–50),

> That it was pryme, and crew with blisful stevene. / The sonne, he seyde, is clomben up on-evene (*The Nun's Priest's Tale*, 3197–8),
>
> For trewely, ye have as myrie a stevene / As any aungel hath that is in hevene (*The Nun's Priest's Tale*, 32291–2).

As one may notice, the relatively narrow lexical choice which offers itself within this particular rhyme cluster (for one basically has to make do here with four basic words, "swevene", "sevene", "hevene", stevene", and the semantic variations on "evene") has the effect that, in the majority of instances of its use, "stevene" appears in a rhymed couplet with "hevene" which further strengthens its positive semantic connotations.

Indeed the closeness of this conventional link may be further proved when one looks at John Gower's *Confessio Amantis.* In this particular work the poet's system of conventional collocations is so tight that, as the word "stevene" appears 7 times in the course of the long poem, it does so always in a formulaic rhyme pair with the word "hevene":

> Thei ben, that with so swete a stevene / Lik to the melodie of hevene (1, 493–4),
>
> And wailende in his bestly stevene / He made his pleignte unto the hevene. (1,3025–6),
>
> And thanne hire handes to the hevene / Sche strawhte, and with a milde stevene (2, 11055–6),
>
> Ayein his trowthe brak his stevene?" / And tho hire yhe up to the hevene (4. 847–8),
>
> And criden alle with o stevene, / "Ha, wher was evere under the hevene (5. 3765–6),
>
> Begunne with so loude a stevene, / That thei were herd unto the hevene; (5. 5933),

> Whan I here of hir vois the stevene, / Me thenkth it is a blisse of hevene. (6. 873–4).

Although the link between the two rhymed words is an important element in defining the conventional character of Gower's manner of verse composition, it is also visible that, unlike in the case of the alliterative verse, the use of rhymed collocative pairs does not necessarily entail the use of a rigid syntactic pattern, or imposed any specific limitations upon the semantic range of the words used. Thus here one may see that "stevene" appears in a whole variety of meanings, sometimes referring to the acoustic quality of a speech act, sometimes denoting the specificity of tone and emotion expressed, sometimes being used in the sense of the semantic content of an utterance. In fact, the variation within the syntactic patterns of the couplets which are generated with the use of the conventional rhyme collocation is much wider than would be that case in formulaic verse, for both poets make use of such typically literate features of style as enjambment and hypotaxis. It is thus visible that the use of fixed rhyme pairs is here more a poetic device providing a sense of a poetic decorum reminiscent of oral style to an otherwise literate composition.

Another vital circumstance in this context is that the juxtaposition of the examples from Chaucer and Gower proves that the syntactic flexibility of lines generated with the help of the formulaic rhyme pairs allows making use of them to compose verse composed in different meters. Hence, with the use of the rhyme pair, a large number of syntactically varied patterns could be generated for both the iambic pentameter lines of Chaucer's verse and the iambic tetrameter lines of Gower. This would, of course, be impossible if the more rigid formulaic patterns were employed in the composition of the verse, and it is this flexibility that emerges as the primary advantage of the way in which formulaic elements function on the composition of rhymed verse.

Another example of a word which originally derived from Old English is "rurde" [OE *reorde*] In this case the link with alliterative poetry is even more emphatic as the word appears almost only in the northern alliterative tradition and, moreover, it is used exclusively as a high alliterative rank word providing the staving syllable in the first three lifts, which is the same prosodic function its etymological parent word had in Anglo-Saxon verse. Thus, from among the poems under consideration in the present argument "rurde" is used most consistently in the high rank position in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Gest Hystoriale*:

> Rocheres roungen bi rys for rurde of her hornes (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 1698),
>
> Ȝet he rusched on þat rurde rapely a þrowe. ((*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2219),
>
> And wyth a rynkande rurde he to þe renk sayde (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2337),
>
> Þe rich rurd þat þer watz raysed for Renaude saule (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 1916),
>
> the ruerde wax ranke of þat rught fare. (*Gest Hystoriale*, 13902),
>
> The rewerd & the russhyng of þe ranke sorow (*Gest Hystoriale*, 11949),
>
> Þan the ruerde wax ranke of þat rught fare, (*Gest Hystoriale*, 13902),
>
> Herd þe rurde & þe ryfte of þe rank schippis (*Gest Hystoriale*, 32. 12697).

It is only in *The Wars of Alexander* that the poetic gird allows also for the occasional use of the word outside the alliterative cluster, to provide the fourth lift (and the last short dip). Thus we get:

And with a renyst reryd · þis reson he said, (*Wars of Alexander*, 3870),

With slike a rowste & rerid · þe romance it wittnes, (*Wars of Alexander*, 488),

With slike a reryd þan it rynnes. (*Wars of Alexander*, 2900),

against:

Artaxenses is at hand & has ane ost reryd, (*Wars of Alexander*, 81),

When he hed tight vp þis trame · & þis teld reryd, (*Wars of Alexander*, 1373).

Also in poems which make an occasional use of the word, "rurde" is thought of as a word of high alliterative rank, as may be seen in the examples below:

Þe rurd schal ryse to Hym Þat rawÞe schal haue; (*Patience*, 396),

With a roghlych rurd rowned in his ere. (*Patience*, 64),

Rwly wyth a loud rurd rored for drede. (*Cleanness*, 390).

The fact that "rurde" is so deeply rooted in the practice of formulaic composition of alliterative verse may be seen in in strong collocative connection functioning here between "rurde" and its qualifying adjectives from the same alliterative cluster, like "ranke" or "rynkande". This connection continues to function after the high rank alliterative vocabulary comes into contact with the accentual/syllabic pattern brought in by contact with the rhyme verse, as may be seen in *Pearl:* Wyth a rownande rourde raykande aryȝt (*Pearl*, l. 112).

Interestingly, however, the semantic context is here different than the original context in Old English. Whereas in Old English poetry "reorde" referred to human speech, here we

have "rurde" function as the high rank equivalent of "noyse", adopting all its pejorative connotations. These are emphasised by the formulaic connection the word develops with adjectives like "ranke", or "rynkande".

Turning one's attention to the final item in the present overview of the palette of words which served to the medieval aural experience, which is "murmur", one encounters a still different case as regards the question of formulaic function and distribution. Within Middle English, "murmur" appears most typically in the negative sense of voicing a clandestine, seditious dissent. As such, it is invariably used as a high register poetic word, but the only alliterative poem in the present corpus which makes use of it is *Gest Hystoriale of the Destruction of Troy:*

> Made murmur full mekyll in the mene tyme, (7196),
>
> Made myche murmur & menit hom sore, (7612),
>
> The murmur was mykill of his mayn knightes 910662),
>
> The murmur was mykell of þe mayn pepull, (11903).

As one may observe, the word appears only in fixed syntactic structures of limited semantic range. The defining formulaic link to the adjective/adverb "myche/mykell" limits the word's semantic function to descriptions of crowd annoyance, and it also appears to strictly determine the word's place in the prosodic pattern of the verse, for "murmur' is used here exclusively in the first of the three alternative accent positions within the line.

The word "murmur" is also occasionally used in rhymed poetry, although it never appears in the end-line, rhymed position in the corpus that we discuss here. The interesting thing about the word's use in the context of rhymed verse is that it frequently appears in the company of other words which are linked to it by what would be classified as ornamental

alliteration as it functions in literate poetry (i.e. not staving, or related to a beat pattern[11]):

> The murmur sleþ myn herte and my corage (*The Clerk's Tale*, 628),
>
> Swich murmur was among hem comunly (*The Clerk's Tale*, 726),
>
> As by continueel murmur and grucching (*The Wife of Bath's Tale*, 406),
>
> Here name is Murmur and Compleignte: (John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 1.1345),
>
> With many a Murmur, god it wot, (John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* 1.1389).

This is indeed a unique example of a situation when a word with a potentially high poetic rank and function in alliterative verse seems to, as it were, attract, alliterative embellishment whenever used in the context of the rhymed poetic tradition. Although it has no prosodic function in the context of rhymed verse, it nevertheless contributes to the effect of extra sonority bestowed on "murmur" in the context of oral delivery of the particular poems, for which they were anyway meant in the cultural context of the epoch. Thus it comes as no surprise that Murmur becomes the name for the personified abstraction signifying ill-favoured grumpiness in John Gower's moral allegory.[12]

In the course of the above argument we have thus traced the prosodic context of the variety of words which collectively defined the range and specificity of the late medieval aural perception. It could be observed that each of the expressions functioned in a uniquely specific way in the prosodic context of the alliterative and the rhymed verse tradition during the Middle English period. One could also notice how the individual

[11] On this see LESTER 1996, 107.

[12] This well in accordance with the implicitly moral contexts in which the word most routinely appears in Gower, see CRAUN 1997, 113–156.

semantic range and context of each of the words discussed during the analysis evolved under the metrical conditions of any particular poetic tradition. The presented analysis was indeed designed not only to present how the medieval specificity as regards the aural cognition translated itself into the contemporaneous lexical variety, but also to demonstrate the extent to which the specific prosodic context of a given poetic tradition, especially the question of poetic register, could play a decisive role in modelling the mutual semantic relationship of the group of words the above discussion was concerned with. Thus the argument hopefully contributes in its small way towards the understanding of the multicausality which characterises the determining factors which condition the art of poetic composition in the unique context of the residual orality characterising much of the later medieval culture.

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