

# Rhyming with unstressed syllables: demonstrating English prosodic foot in verse

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## Abstract

In English poetry, a proparoxytone-word last unstressed syllable can behave like a stressed one line-finally (not only in terms of prominent positions but of rhymes as well). This is not the case for closely-related poetic traditions (e.g. Dutch). The peculiarity of English poetry, I assume, reflects and is evidence of an aspect of English unstressed syllables: those syllables are “weak” (Burzio 1994) and can either be metrified or extrametrical.

iambic poetry  
(wonde)ring -> [...]won)(dering)  
(oefe)<ning> -> [...]oe)fening

## Proposal

*The possibility for “weak syllables” to be either metrified or extrametrical allows a weak syllable to be the head of a line-final foot and rhyme material in poetry. Testing how natural this kind of rhyme is for native speakers proves that this practice is consequence of phonological characteristics and not simply due to poetic style.*

## Line-final unstressed syllables in poetry

- Iambic metrical template: the last prominent position is *strictly* (following SEH) filled by a stressed syllable
- Rhyme: between two stressed syllables + what follows
- (Usually) line-final proparoxytone word: the stressed syllable is placed in prominent position and the following unstressed syllables are extrametrical.
- Rarely, secondary stress could take the prominence

## In English poetry

The last unstressed syllable of a proparoxytone word:

- can fill the last prominent position in an iambic template
- can rhyme with a monosyllabic or oxytone word

(1) Omschaduw't Maurits niet met wapens van zijn **vaderen**  
En heerschappij-en, een vergangelijcke pracht,  
Maer met de deughden, die in eenen helt **vergaderen**,  
(Vondel, *Op Joan Maurits*)

(2) Thou art more lovely and more **temperate**:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a **date**:  
(Shakespeare, Sonnet XVIII)

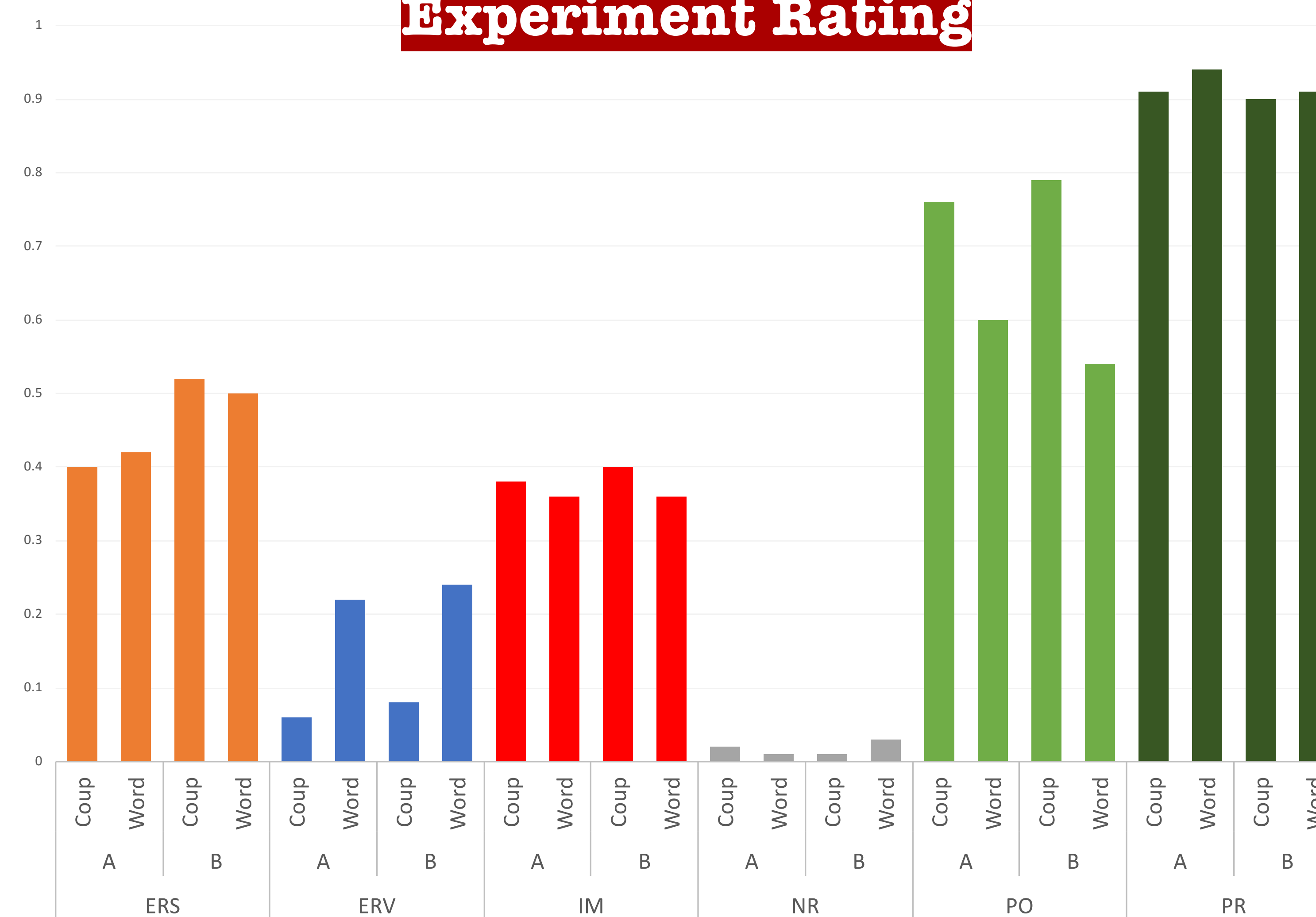
*'I miss the shiny sun in spring  
I miss your constant wondering'*

*'I miss a warm sincere caress  
I miss my faithful gloominess'*

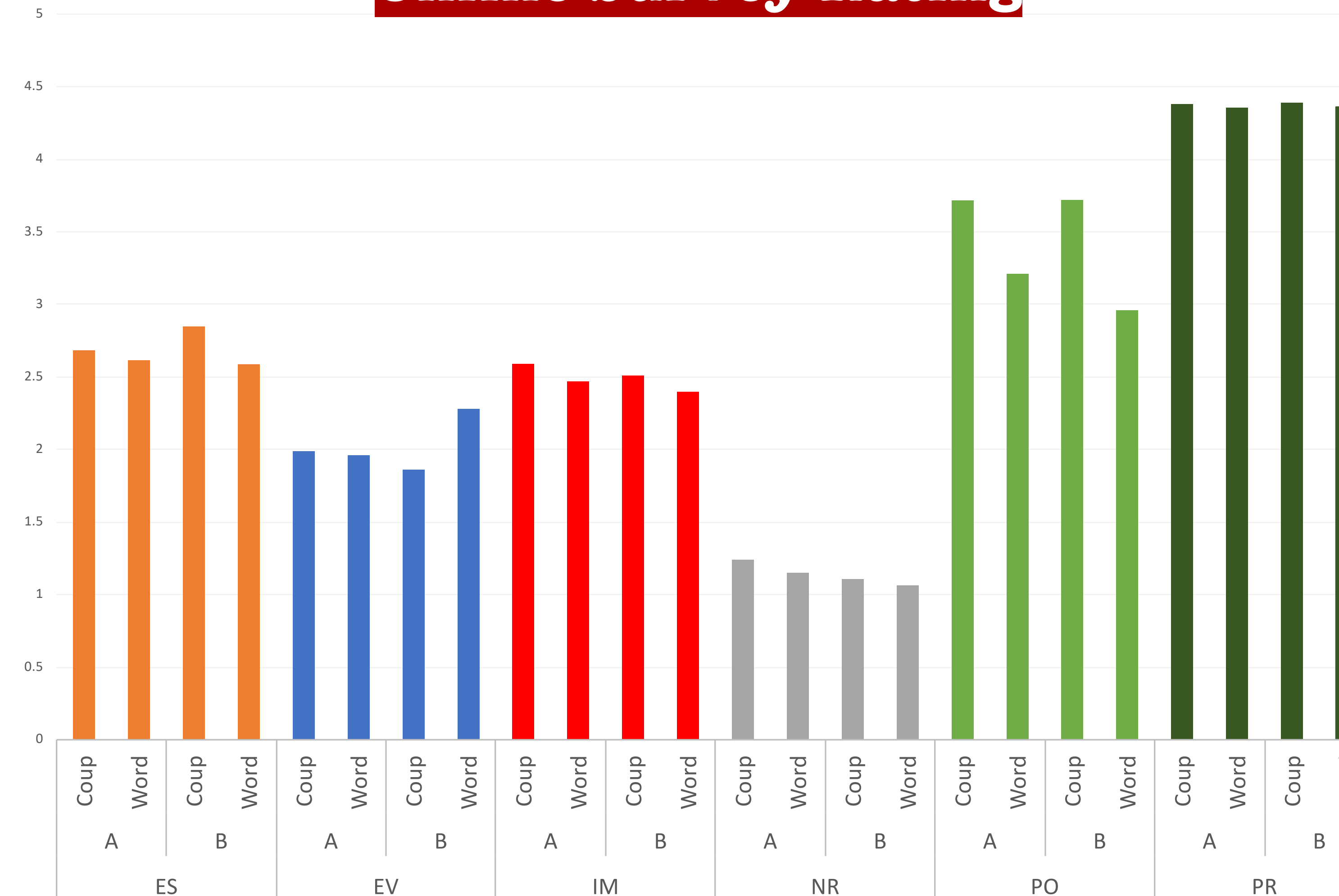
## Stimuli

- No rhyme (NR)
- Perfect rhyme (PR)
- Imperfect rhyme (IM)
- Eye rhyme (ERV)
- Eye rhyme + stress clash (ERS)
- Proparoxytone/oxytone rhyme (PO)

## Experiment Rating



## Online Survey Rating



## Two experiments

- 100 stimuli: newly-written couplets and word pairs
- 2 parts, 2 orders:
  - Group A: Couplets first, then Word Pairs
  - Group B: Word Pairs first, then Couplets
  - Initial training depending on the group
- Couplets: iambic tetrameters
- British English native speakers
- Experiment: 20 participants + binary answer
- Online survey: 56 participants + 1-5 Likert scale

## Results

- Proparoxytone/oxytone (PO) rhyme:
  - The highest ranked after Perfect rhyme
  - Couplets rating much higher than Word Pairs
  - No significant difference between monosyllables and bisyllabic oxytone words
  - No significant difference between presence or absence of secondary stress on the proparoxytone last syllable
  - Priming: when Word Pairs are displayed first, Couplets are rated higher
- Eye rhymes are rated higher than Imperfect rhymes but much lower than Proparoxytone/oxytone rhymes

## Conclusions

- High acceptability of the last unstressed syllable of a proparoxytone word rhyming with a monosyllabic or oxytone word both in Couplets and Word pairs
- Its difference of rating with Eye rhyme excludes the hypothesis that eye rhyme might be playing a role
- The proparoxytone-oxytone type of rhyme is evidence of the possibility of these unstressed syllables to group in some kind of defective prosodic foot.

## References

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