

THE FORMULA: MORPHOLOGY AND SYNTAX

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[T]he formula is the offspring of the marriage of thought and sung verse¹

The most important task of the singer in the process of reproducing an epic text is to arrange a song, line after line, in order to convey the contents of the song in its own language²

IN TODAY'S USAGE, the term "formula" describes several "essential ideas." One, "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions," is central to the Parry-Lord theory, not coincidentally called "formulaic."³ It would seem that the emphasis on metrical conditions must restrict the term to poetic texts. In practice, however, it is employed widely enough outside the realm of poetry, as in "fairy-tale formulas," "Indo-European formulas," etc.

The most popular dictionaries of different languages define the word "formula" either as (1) "a rule or principle expressed in (algebraic) symbols" (mathematics) or (2) "an expression of the constituents of a compound by means of symbols and figures"⁴ (chemistry) or else (3) "an established form of words or symbols for use in a ceremony or procedure."⁵ Clearly, (1) and (2) are variants of one and the same statement corre-

1 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 31.

2 Putilov, "O zvukovoj oranizaciji epičeskogo stixa." The quotation is from the posthumously published book *Ekskursy v teoriju istoriju slavjanskogo* (*Essays on the Theory and History of the Slavic Epos*) by the eminent Russian folklorist Boris Putilov. In 1993, Putilov started a series of Albert Bates Lord memorial conferences, which he co-chaired with John Miles Foley (Ronelle Alexander and Yuri Kleiner as secretaries). It was at this conference in St Petersburg that I met John Foley. The last time I saw him was in 2000 at the conference *Les Enjeux théorique des débats sur la formule homérique* in Lille. I was fortunate to be among the audience of his paper, "La Formule et ses implications," and I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to discuss with him my "Formula: Ambiguities and Possibilities" during and after the conference. For many years, the paper has remained "forthcoming"; revising it for the present volume, I have done my best to reflect John's comments as much as possible.

3 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 30.

4 *OED Online*, s.v. "Formula," accessed June 27, 2016.

5 *Free Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Formula," accessed June 27, 2016. So in *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Collins English Dictionary*, etc. s.v. Cf. "Formule," in *Grand Larousse*, 1977, 1.2: "Forme précise et invariable de paroles destinées à être présentées en certaines occasions"; (1.3) "*formule de politesse* [...]"; and (2) "Expression concise, généralement symbolique, exprimant soit la relation qui unit des entités mathématique, logiques, etc., soit la composition d'un corps au point de vue physique, chimique, biologique [...]. *Une formule algébrique. La formule chimique de l'eau est H₂O*" ("Precise and invariable form of words intended to be presented on certain occasions"; [1.3] "*Form of courtesy* [...]"; and [2] "Concise expression, generally symbolic, expressing either the relation that unites mathematical, logical entities, etc., or the composition of a body from the physical, chemical, biological point of view [...]. *An algebraic formula. The chemical formula of water is H₂O*"). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

sponding to the terms that denote (1) a rigid scheme (principle), an abstract invariant, and (2) its variable material content. Both are opposed to (3), which is a stereotyped expression used in a certain situation.

Coexistence of two homonymic terms inevitably leads to contradictions in methodology and evaluation criteria when applied to different types of texts. The above notions obviously belong to non-overlapping spheres and are mutually exclusive. Yet, the “everyday” usage of the term did not fail to influence both the humanities generally and, in particular, the oral-formulaic theory, leading to the confusion of epic formulas and clichés. Hence, criticism of the theory for reducing traditional (oral) singers’ art to the ability to use a kit of memorized set expressions exaggerates the difference between oral and written literature by, among other things, identifying “formula-density” with orality. It should be remarked that much of this criticism dates from the time prior to the publication of *Singer of Tales*, when the oral-formulaic theory was known (to the Germanists in particular) in the version articulated by Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr., or results from the inertia of that period, as exemplified by Adrien Bonjour, H. L. Rogers, and especially Larry Benson.⁶ As Alexandra Hennessey Olsen has noted in connection with Rogers’s work, he “attacks Magoun’s definition of the formula [...] as a way to attack the oral-formulaic theory itself.”⁷ To her exhaustive analysis of the revolutionary period in epic scholarship and its controversies, one can add only that at least some of the blame for the confusion of the two terms (and notions) lies with the authors of the oral-formulaic theory.

The confusion manifests itself, among other things, in the opposition of “formula” and “formulaic expression,” the latter being “a line or half line constructed on the pattern of the formulas.”⁸ The difference is not clear-cut.⁹ Roughly, it can be (and was, in fact) understood as verbatim vs. non-verbatim repetition. On the other hand, analyzing a passage from *Beowulf*, Lord marks “Beowulf maðelode, bearn Ecgþeowes” (1473) (Beowulf said, the son of Ecgþeow) as an undoubted formula (indicated by an unbroken line), the supporting evidence including “Hroðgar maðelode, helm Scyldinga” (371) (Hrothgar said, protection of the Scildings), “Unferð maðelode, Ecglafe bearn” (499) (Unferth said, the son of Ecglafe), and “Wiglaf maðelode, Weohstanes/ Wihstanes sunu” (2863; 3076) (Wiglaf said, the son of Wihstan).¹⁰ Here proper names constitute a variable part of the “formula,” the expression of this variation being “X said, Y’s son,” which is applicable to all such structures in the corpus of Old English poetry. This representation meets definition (2) above of the formula (“an expression of the constituents of a compound by means of symbols and figures”).

6 Magoun, “Oral-Formulaic Character”; Bonjour, “*Beowulf*”; Rogers, “Crypto-Psychological Character”; and Benson, “Literary Character.”

7 A. Olsen, “Oral-Formulaic Research II,” 143–44; emphasis mine.

8 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 4; emphasis mine.

9 This has been demonstrated by Sale’s analysis, “In Defense,” 380–82, of the seven meanings of the term “formula” in Parry; cf. 380–81: “Set a. The most general definition: a repetition of some sort—whether of one word or more than one” and “Set c. Formulaic expressions: word-groups with common meter and similar syntax and one shared word, but not necessarily more than one.”

10 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 199. *Beowulf* is cited throughout from Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*.

Lord discusses a similar variation in connection with “davor đogo” (a grey horse) from *The Song of Baghdad*. One way to change the status of “davor đogo” is to go “beyond 12,000 lines”¹¹ or even include “material from other singers.”¹² As if having doubts that the expansion of the corpus will inevitably yield “repeated phrases that without any hesitation can be called ‘formulas,’” Lord suggests another method to achieve the same result: “[a] number of the formulaic expressions could very easily have been classified as formulas, had we relaxed our established principles and standards. For example, *davor đogo* [...] misses being a formula because the evidence lists only *davor šturán* [a lean horse] and *davor doro* [a bay horse]. But *đogo*, *šturán*, and *doro* are all terms for horses. We could thus have easily increased the number of formulas.”¹³

In reality, this approach does not imply any relaxing of “principles and standards,” but, on the contrary, it relies on stricter criteria for selecting phrases from the corpus by taking into account the three aspects of the definition of the formula, viz. *syntactic structure* (a formula is “a group of words”), *metrical structure* (a formula is “regularly employed under the same metrical conditions”), and *meaning* (a formula is used “to express a given essential idea”). Since “davor đogo” is identical to “davor šturán” and “davor doro” in its meaning [a horse], as well as its syntactic and metrical structure, the three phrases can be described by one and the same formula:

[horse[two-syllable epithet]epithet [“horse” = two syllables]horse] horse.¹⁴

It should be noted that “to be described by a formula” is not synonymous with “to be a formula,” the former corresponding to the textual implementation of a certain scheme and the latter to the scheme itself.

Another notion allowing for different interpretations is a “system,” either a “substitution system” as

au	{	kuli
		dvoru [in the tower/castle/house]
		kući ¹⁵

or the “system of formulas.”¹⁶ The idea itself goes back to Milman Parry, who has defined the system as “a group of phrases which have the same metrical value and which are enough alike in thought and words to leave no doubt that the poet who used them knew them not only as single formulas, but also as formulas of a certain type.”¹⁷ This defini-

¹¹ The corpus of Lord’s supporting evidence.

¹² Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 47.

¹³ Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 47.

¹⁴ Here the method of “labelled brackets” is used, the indices signifying the boundaries and the meaning of the formula and its constituents, while the brackets reflect its inner structure.

¹⁵ Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 35.

¹⁶ Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 144.

¹⁷ Parry, “Epic Technique,” 275.

tion almost coincides with that of the formula; the difference is but one word (“a group of *phrases*” instead of “a group of *words*”). Magoun quotes this definition, describing Old English traditional formulas, which are “sometimes more than mere repeats and form part of larger formulaic systems used to express the same, or *almost the same*, idea or used to fit some larger rhythmical-grammatical pattern.”¹⁸ One of Magoun’s examples is Old English “on x-dagum” formulas, where *x* can be “gear” (year), “eald” (old), or “fyrn” (ancient). As in the case of “davor đogo,” “davor šturán,” and “davor doro,” all these groups of words represent one and the same formula that describes all possible *substitutions* (as does the formula), should the term be used in a “less relaxed manner,” that is, as in chemistry, H₂O signifying the ratio, “two parts hydrogen to one part oxygen,” rather than a certain quantity of both (for example 2 and 1 litres in a concrete volume of water).¹⁹

In connection with the system in (3), Lord remarks that “such a substitution system expresses graphically the usefulness and the relationship of a group of formulas.”²⁰ The word “group” is unnecessary, for each formula determines all possible substitutions, and conversely, the substitutions, collectively, represent a formula. The phrases of the “au kuli/dvoru/kućí” type represent a certain scheme (a monosyllabic particle + a monosyllabic preposition + a disyllabic noun/adverbial modifier), meaning “at a certain place.” Another scheme is that of “davor šturán,” “davor doro”; in principle it could be used for creating “davor đogo,” which will thus become part of a singer’s repertoire, or, vice versa, “davor đogo” could become the pattern for creating similar phrases (for example “davor šturán” or “davor šturán”) by other singers. (This does not indicate borrowing from or into singers’ repertoires; synchronically, they all are a “common property.”)

Lord stresses that “the formulas themselves are perhaps less important in understanding this oral technique than the various underlying patterns of formulas and the ability to make phrases according to those patterns.”²¹ The opposition of “formulas” and “patterns” is somewhat misleading, as well as that of “abstract patterns” and “fixed formulas.”²² Patterns are fixed, as patterns should generally be. The same is true of formulas. In other words, “patterns *are* formulas,” while phrases based on them are textual manifestations of formulas rather than formulas themselves.

This is concordant with the main idea of *Singer of Tales*: the principal incompatibility of orality and fixity. Fixity is excluded because the number of possible substitutions on the basis of each formula is unlimited, at least theoretically. It should be stressed that coinciding textual stretches of any length in several performances (“verbatim repeats”) do not violate the non-fixity principle. Since a singer does not memorize a song but composes it each time anew when he performs it, verbatim repetitions are also reproduced,

18 Magoun, “Oral-Formulaic Character,” 450; emphasis mine.

19 I am grateful to Vladimir Belyakov, Doctor of Science at St Petersburg State University, for confirming that this understanding of the term and notion does not run counter to that accepted in chemistry and the sciences generally.

20 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 35.

21 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 44.

22 See Kellogg, “South Germanic Oral Tradition,” 67.

as it were, each time on the bases of the respective formulas (rather than produced, readymade, from a toolkit). The same applies to entire texts: a singer may repeat a song verbatim in several performances,²³ but at any moment (any performance) he can make a substitution, which will change the text without affecting the pattern. To quote Lord, the singer “employs a set phrase because it is useful and answers his need, but it is not sacrosanct. What stability it has comes from its utility, not from a feeling on the part of the singer that it cannot or must not be changed.”²⁴ In other words, it is up to the singer whether to use the possibility that tradition offers or not.

Most important in this connection is Lord’s comparison of substitutions in oral poetry with the processes that take place in natural language.²⁵ Grammatical substitutions comply with rules of combining certain elementary units. Nobody would call the resulting combinations “formulas,” but the rules that underlie them definitely are. To quote Lord again, “in studying the patterns and systems of oral narrative verse we are in reality observing the ‘grammar’ of the poetry, a grammar superimposed, as it were, on the grammar of the language concerned.”²⁶ Lord, in fact, postulates the existence, within a given natural language, of a special poetic language with its grammar and lexicon, distinct from those of the natural language used by the tradition in question. In this context, the word “grammar” can be used without inverted commas and it can (and must) be described and analyzed in terms of linguistics.

If “poetic language” is not simply a metaphor, it must have its own functional units, as well as some sort of morphology that determines their structure, plus syntax for combining these units into a text and segmenting the text into them. According to Lord, “the formulas are the phrases and clauses and sentences of this specialized poetic grammar.”²⁷ This would imply that formulas belong to the realm of syntax; in this case, they, in turn, must consist of smaller units, presumably words. The same follows from the definition of the formula as “a group of words.”²⁸

But let us turn to another substitution system:

- a. *U Prilipu* (first half-line)
- b. *U Prilipu gradu* (second half-line)
- c. *U Prilipu gradu bijelome* (entire line)

(In {the white [town of]} Prilip.)²⁹

23 Lord’s goal, *Singer of Tales*, 9, in criticizing those scholars who “call in to their help the ‘fantastic memories’ so ‘well attested’ in illiterate people” is to stress that the belief that “a text could remain from one generation to another unaltered” is a myth and that the singer relies on a “special technique of composition.” But it does not mean that it has to be altered and, *Singer of Tales*, 17, that a bard who “can sing at the rate of from ten to twenty ten-syllable lines a minute” is not a “virtuoso” or does not have memory much better than that of average individuals, illiterate or literate.

24 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 53–54.

25 See Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 35–36.

26 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 35–36.

27 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 36.

28 Parry, “Epic Technique,” 272; emphasis his.

29 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 35; emphasis mine.

In all these modifications, the meaning conforms to one basic principle: “the formula means its essential idea; that is to say, a noun-epithet formula has the essential idea of its noun. The ‘drunken tavern’ means ‘tavern.’”³⁰ It follows that “Prilip” is “grad” or “grad bijeli,” either explicitly (“Prilip grad bijeli”) or implicitly (“Prilip {grad [bijeli]}”); Kiev, too, is invariably “stol’nyj grad” (the capital city) in Russian bylinas; and any hero is X’s “beorn” ([son]) in Old English epic. Syntagmatic additions, such as the appositional “gradu” in b above, and the apposition + epithet, “gradu bijelome,” in c, do not change the essential idea of the whole phrase ([being at a certain town]). The meaning of such “phrases” is not equal to the sum of the meanings of their constituents which, strictly speaking, cannot be regarded as full-fledged words, at least from the point of view of natural language. The semantic deficiency of the traditional epithet had been paid attention to even before it became an argument in favour of orality of a certain poem or poetry. It is only natural, since this phenomenon is present, in various degrees, in most traditions, if not all.

In the bylina about Ilya of Murom and Tsar Kalin,³¹ for example, the tsar’s insulting appellative, “sobaka” (a dog), is used not only by the narrator, as in

I vospylal-to tut sobaka Kalin-car’ na Kiev-grad:
I xotit on rozorit’ da stol’nyj Kiev-grad (25–26)

(And then blazed the Dog Kalin-Tsar against Kiev-town,
And he wants to devastate Kiev the capital town),

Prince Vladimir speaking to Ilya,

Obošel sobaka Kalin-car’ naš Kiev-grad (143)

(The Dog Kalin-Tsar has encircled our Kiev-town),

and Ilya speaking to the *bogatyrs*,

Kak pod našim-to pod gorodom pod Kievom
A stoit sobaka Kalin-car’ (266–67)

(Near our town Kiev
Stands the Dog Kalin-Tsar)

Kak sobaka Kalin-car’ on razorit da Kiev-grad (297)

(And the Dog Kalin-Tsar, he will devastate the town of Kiev),

but also in Prince Vladimir’s humble letter to the pagan czar,

A sadils’ja-to Vladimir-kn’jaz’ da na červlenyj stul,
Da pisal-to ved’ on gramotu povinnuju:
Aj že ty, sobaka da i Kalin-car’! (77–79)

(And prince Vladimir sat on a dark-red chair
And wrote a humble letter:
Hey, you, Dog Tsar Kalin),

³⁰ Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 65.

³¹ Propp and Putilov, *Byliny*, 150–65, cited by line numbers.

by the Tatars when addressing Tsar Kalin,

Aj že ty, sobaka da naš Kalin-car'! (457)
(Hey, you, dog, our Tsar Kalin!),

and even Tsar Kalin, about himself, in his letter to Prince Vladimir, ordering to prepare the space in Kiev,

Čtoby bylo u čego stojat' sobake car'ju Kalinu
Co svoimi-to vojskami so velikima (61–62)
(So that the Dog Tsar Kalin had a place to stand
With his great army),

and in a direct speech to Ilya,

Ne služi-tko ty kn'jaz'ju Vladimiru,
a služi-tko ty sobake carju Kalinu (478–79)
(Don't serve to Prince Vladimir,
But serve to me, the Dog Kalin Tsar.)

In this connection, Alexander Veselovskij speaks about “oblivion of the real meaning of an epithet” which occurs, for example,

when a French *trouvère* does not hesitate to call one and the same horse arabi, aragon, and gascon [...]. We could call this phenomenon *petrification*, when in Russian, Greek and Old French epics it grows beyond the epithet per se, when a certain evaluation is used for different phenomena, hostile or opposite in meaning, for instance, when Tsar Kalin is called “a dog” not only by enemies, but also by his own ambassador or when Helena calls herself κυνῶπις [...]. The habitual definition of a hand, “white” in a Serbian song is applied to a Blackamoor.³²

Such examples are too numerous and obviously systemic to be explained by *lapsus linguae* of some “nodding Homer”³³ or outweighed by more logical combinations, such as “swift-footed” (ποδ-ώκης) Achilles, “resourceful” (πολύ-τροπος) and “cunning” (πολύ-μητις) Odysseus, or “Sige-Scyldingas” (victorious Danes) in *Beowulf*. The later epithet (“Sige-”) is used in a somewhat ambiguous situation, when *Beowulf* reproaches the Danes for their inability to defend themselves, saying that Grendel

fæhþe ne þearf
atole ecgþræce eower leode
swiðe onsittan, Sige-Scyldinga (595b–97b)
(does not have to dread the terrible sword storm
of your people, of the glorious Danes.)

In the notes to the third edition of his *Beowulf*, Klaeber explains this as “a mechanical use of *sige-* as a general commendatory word without regard to the specific situation,” adding “Or was irony intended?” with a reference to William F. Bryan.³⁴

32 Veselovskij, “Iz istorii epiteta,” 81; emphasis his.

33 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 10.

34 Klaeber, *Beowulf*, 151. The commentary by Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 154, is

The German translator of *Beowulf*, Martin Lehnert, resolves the ambiguity in favour of irony by adding the epithet “weak,” to “people,” cf. “er nicht fürchten muß euer *schwachen* Leute, // Der *Schildinge*” (he does not have to fear your *weak* people, the *Scyldings*).³⁵ At the same time, “Sige-” is omitted both here and in the translation by Kevin Crossley-Holland, who has “the Danish people.”³⁶ Lehnert has rendered “Gar-Denum” as “Gerdänen” in the same episode, “*secce ne weneþ / to Gar-Denum*” (600b–601a) ([Grendel] does not expect battle with [Spear-] Danes), as “Gar-Dene” in lines 1856a and 2494b,³⁷ and “Gar-Dena” as “Dänen” (Gar-Danes) in line 1a, while Crossley-Holland opts for “Danish kings.”³⁸ It may seem natural to translate compounds of the “Gar-Dene” type literally, as “Speerdänen” or “Spear-Danes,” as Seamus Heaney does.³⁹ On the other hand, comparing this method of rendering with respective Russian equivalents, M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij⁴⁰ remarks that they “demonstrate the inadequacy of such translations, since it is clear that relative adjectives (which substantive attributes are in Modern English and German) are not adorning epithets, but logical attributes, restricting or specifying, in some way, the meaning of the second element.”⁴¹ Indeed, unlike German “Goldring” (a ring made of gold), and similar English compounds, “Spear-Danes” are not those “Danes who fight with spears,” but simply Danes. Nor are “Guþ-Geatas” those Geats who fight (OE “guþ” [war]), since war is a normal occupation of an epic people, victorious by definition. Therefore “here” (army) in combination with “sped” (success) does not mean “success in battle,” because no other success (for example financial) is possible in epic.

In translation, qualitative adjectives can be used, for example “valorous (Danes)” for “Gar-(Dene),” “glorious (Geats)” for “Guþ-(Geatas),” “victorious (Scyldings)” for

more categorical in their 4th edition: “Although arguably there is here no more than a mechanical use of *sige-* (victory) as a general commendatory word without regard to the specific situation [...] irony may well be intended seeing how helpless the Danes have been.” This probably reflects the opinion of Klaeber’s opponent more than his own point of view, cf. Klaeber, *Beowulf*, lxiv, n1, “one of the two elements [of a compound] may be more or less devoid of a distinct meaning.” For a discussion of the problem in a historical perspective and a somewhat different interpretation of this passage and irony in *Beowulf* generally, see DeGregorio, “Theorizing Irony,” 173–74.

35 Lehnert, *Beowulf*, 43; emphasis mine.

36 Crossley-Holland, *Beowulf*, 89.

37 Lehnert, *Beowulf*, 86, 107.

38 Lehnert, *Beowulf*, 23; cf. Crossley-Holland, *Beowulf*, 71.

39 Heaney, *Beowulf*, 1.

40 Steblin-Kamenskij (1903–1982) was the founder of the Department of Scandinavian Studies, the first in the USSR, at St Petersburg (then Leningrad) State University. He was the author of the “theory of unconscious authorship” (see Steblin-Kamenskij, *Saga Mind*; and Steblin-Kamenskij, “Some Considerations”), very close in many respects to the Parry–Lord theory, but based mainly on Scandinavian material. Steblin-Kamenskij was the first to support the publication of the Russian translation of *Singer of Tales* (see Lord, *Skazitel*). The article quoted, “Substantive Epithet in Old English Poetry,” is a chapter from his PhD (“Candidate of Sciences”) dissertation, “Formation of Old English Poetic Style,” written during World War II in besieged Leningrad and defended in absentia at the session of the USSR Academy of Sciences evacuated to Tashkent.

41 Steblin-Kamenskij, *Trudy po filologii*, 501.

“Peod-(Scyldingas),” etc.⁴² Collectively, such first elements of compounds are regarded as having positive connotations, while “beadu-” (battle), “hilde-” (war, battle), “gryre-” (terror), “gealga-” (gallows), etc. add the idea of hostility and evil to the meaning of the second component; hence, “beaducwealm” (*Andreas*, 1702a) is understood as “violent death,” rather than “death in battle.”⁴³ To this group, Steblin-Kamenskij adds “mægen” (might) (“mægen-byrden” [heavy load]), “þryð-” (force) (“þryð-weorc” [glorious deed], “þryð-ærn” [beautiful dwelling]), etc.⁴⁴ However, in traditional poetry, epithets do not add meaning to the kernel, but are implied by it (cf. “Kiev” above).

As in the case of “swift-footed” Achilles (above), in some such compounds first elements may seem absolutely logical, for example “beado-grima” (battle-mask, helmet), “beado-hrægl” (war-dress, coat of mail), “beado-mece” (battle-sword), “beadu-folm” (battle-hand), or at least, metaphorically logical, for example “beadu-lac” (battle-play = battle, war), “beado-leoma” (battle-ray = sword). At the same time, in other compounds, such as “beado-rinc” (battle-warrior), they make the combinations tautological, inviting questions about the function and linguistic status of these elements.

In natural language, both are deduced from the oppositions, in which the element in question participates, hence *a black board* (= “a board that can be brown or green”) versus *a blackboard* (“what colour is this blackboard?”), belonging to syntax and morphology respectively. From the point of view of the (natural) language a singer uses, “a drunken tavern” is a “group of words,” but this is not the case in the language of traditional poetry, where it cannot become “sober” (for example ironically). In it, such “structures” should be regarded as elementary units, similar to words (rather than sentences, clauses, etc.). Discussing “‘larger words’ composed of smaller, individual words” in Homeric phraseology, Foley remarks, “[o]nce admitted as larger groupings, such *amalgams* function as unitary word-types.”⁴⁵ The term “amalgam” seems to be the most appropriate designation of such units, reflecting both aspects of the formula, viz. its structure from the point of view of natural language and its functioning in traditional poetry.⁴⁶

Paradigmatic oppositions in which different poetic constructions participate show to what degree poetic grammar depends on that of natural language. For example,

42 Steblin-Kamenskij, *Trudy po filologii*, 502.

43 Kock, “Old West Germanic and Old Norse.” *Andreas* is cited from Krapp and Dobbie, *ASPR* 2.

44 Steblin-Kamenskij, *Trudy po filologii*, 510.

45 Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, 144; emphasis his. See also 135, 145. Cf. Steblin-Kamenskij, *Trudy po filologii*, 505, on the meaning of traditional epithets: “such an epithet is incorporated into a compound, rather than expressed by an independent adjective as in Modern Russian.” At the same time, 505, he regards such compounds as syntactic combinations rather than real words with a whole lexical content. Very important in this context is the singer’s concept of the “word”: see Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 25, who notes that “[m]an without writing thinks in terms of sound groups and not in words, and the two do not necessarily coincide.” See further, Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, 44 and 219n42.

46 Similarly, Niles, “Formula and Formulaic System,” 399, views the formula in Anglo-Saxon poetry as “a *rhythmic/syntactic/semantic complex*” (his emphasis). One should bear in mind, however, that rhythm and syntax belong to two different spheres, viz. poetic language and language generally, which in turn makes the formula both poetic- and (natural) language-specific.

Beorht : *Gar* : *Hring*- *Dene* or *Gup*- : *Sæ*- : *Weder*- *Geatas*, on the one hand, and *secga* : *eorla* : *hæleða* : *æþelinga gedryht* ([a troop] of [noble]men), on the other represent a compound and a phrase, and different types of boundaries (morphological and syntactic, respectively). From the point of view of poetic grammar, however, both are integral entities, but described by different formulas. The integrity of Xgen.pl. “gedryht” manifests itself, among other things, in the role the variable component plays in the verse. As John D. Niles has observed, “the poet speaks of *secgas* rather than of *eorlas* or of *hæleþas* not because of a desire to fit the precise connotation of a word to a particular context, of course, but in order to satisfy the alliteration of the line.”⁴⁷ Connotations will appear in translation only. Likewise, the “Dene” epithets can be translated as “terrible” for “Gar-” or “bright” for “Beorht.”⁴⁸ There are other examples, however, convincing enough to support Niles’s conclusion above, such as “East-” (*Beowulf* 392a, 616a, 828b), “West-” (383a, 1578b), “Norð-” (783b), and “Suð-” (463b, 1996a) “Dene” [East/West/North/South Danes], which leave no doubt as to the function of epithets either in compounds or within phrases.

Again, comparison with natural language may not be out of place, in particular with two types of meaning: lexical and grammatical. The analogue of the latter in poetic language can be found in those properties of an element which determine its belonging to a certain “class” and, in this way, its function in poetry, on the one hand, and dependence on natural language, on the other. Like grammatical meaning, these properties are abstract and obligatory, forming the basis of categorization of the elements in question in poetic language. In different types of versification, they may include, for example, the number of syllables in a word (syllabic verse), its accentuation (syllabo-tonic verse), syllable structure (quantitative verse), etc. Alliteration, too, belongs to such “categorical properties”: the alliterating syllable (syllabic complex) can be either within a simple word form—“*eorla*” (431b: alliterates with “*ana*”), “*hæleða*” (662b: alliterates with “*Hroðgar*”), “*secga*” (1672b: alliterates with “*sorhleas swefan*”), which is similar to an inflectional paradigm—or within the first element of a compound; it has a lexical meaning of its own in natural language, but from the point of view of poetic language it is closer to “semi-bound morphemes” (for example auxiliaries) in analytical forms.

The formulas that such substitutions follow can be complex. For instance, “*sæmanna searo*” (329a) (sailors’ wargear) is a combination similar to “*secga gedryht*” (above), but its first element, too, admits substitutions, like “*fyrdsearo*” (232a, 2618a).⁴⁹ This implies a more complex formula that would take account of both paradigms within one “amalgam” or two separate formulas, that is, the choice between (poetic) morphology and syntax. A similar problem arises in connection with “*U Prilipu gradu bijelome*” (see above) or “*stol’nyj grad Kiev*,” where the meaning is identical to the essential idea

⁴⁷ Niles, “Formula and Formulaic System,” 396. Cf. Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, 219, regarding “*manna cynnes*” (of mankind): this phrase—perhaps best understood as a single word—offers the poet a metrical element that is highly adaptable contextually and therefore useful in any number of compositional situations.

⁴⁸ Cf. Steblin-Kamenskij, *Trudy po filologii*, 501, on Schemann’s “literal” approach to epithets.

⁴⁹ Cf. “*guðsearo gumena*” (328a).

expressed in the kernel element (“Prilip,” “Kiev”), but the metrical conditions are different. If the formula can be understood as “exact repetition,” “grad Kiev” and “stol’nyj grad Kiev” represent two different formulas. But it can be one and the same formula if “Prilip”/“Kiev” alone can be regarded as the core element with a vacant position at left, with the possibility of unfolding.⁵⁰

The situation is even more complicated in the following from, respectively, *Cædmon’s Hymn* (West Saxon version) and *Genesis*:⁵¹

Nu sculon herigea heofonrices weard (1)

(**Now** we **should** praise the guardian of the heavenly kingdom);

Us is riht micel ðæt **we** rodera weard,

[...] wordum herigen (1–2)

(**To us** (it) is a great right that we the guardian [acc.] of heaven

... with words praise.)

The meaning is “praising” in both cases expressed by “herian” (infinitive and optative), plus “imperative” created by “is riht” and “sculon.” Whether the two different metrical patterns conveying the same essential idea represent one or two formulas (and, again, whether we are dealing with *poetic* morphology or syntax) remains arguable.

The problem is further complicated by the “metrical conditions” aspect. In alliterative poetry it has a certain specificity, although the difference between it and other types of poetic diction is not so great. As, invariably, one of the ictuses, that is, possessing a certain structure⁵² and carrying metrical stress, the alliterating syllable is connected with verse organization and, in this way, also belongs to “metrical conditions,” which, in this context, can be understood in a broader sense. Alliteration, in turn, is most closely linked to variation. Steblin-Kamenskij very appropriately calls the latter “semantic alliteration,”⁵³ consisting

in the repetition, at the beginning of the line, of what was said at the end or in the middle of it; variation connects individual lines, as does alliteration connecting two half-lines into one long line, although less consistently. [A] variant, as a rule, carries the first metrical stress of the following line, being its first alliterating word, determining, as it were, another alliteration and becoming the point of departure of a new line. In short, in alliterative poetry variation is the simplest method to keep up with the meter, when developing the theme.⁵⁴

50 As in natural language, where nouns and verbs, for example, presuppose a determiner (*city = a/the/this city*) and an auxiliary respectively, with potential left unfolding.

51 *Cædmon’s Hymn* and *Genesis* cited, respectively, from Krapp and Dobbie, *ASPR* 1 and *ASPR* 6; emphasis mine.

52 An alliterating syllable is always long, either by nature, /c̄v/ “fus” (“ofer fægum fela reordian,” *Beo* 3025), or by position /c̄vcc/ “wundenstefna” (“gewaden hæfde,” *Beo* 220a) or else being represented by a /c̄vc̄v-/ sequence, “fela.”

53 Steblin-Kamenskij, *Trudy po filologii*, 499.

54 Steblin-Kamenskij, *Trudy po filologii*, 494–95.

This description takes account of both aspects of formulaic diction, viz. semantics and metrical conditions (as defined above).

Natalia Gvozdet'skaya illustrates "the semantic role of variation in the metrical and syntactic organization of the text" by the following passage in *Beowulf*,

Byrnan hringdon,
guðsearo gumena; garas stodon,
sæmanna searo samod ætgædere,
æschoft ufan græg (327b–30a)

(Coats of mail rang,
Armour of men, spears stood,
The sailor's equipment, all together,
Ash-tree grey at top),

suggesting that the first variation element normally occupies the b-line, while the a-line is occupied by the second element. In this way, "[t]he two half-lines perform different functions in the narrative: the new and more important part of information being concentrated in the second half-line, the first half-line normally containing an additional or even optional portion of it."⁵⁵

In this scheme, which is fairly intricate, the choice of epithets does not have to be dictated by the alliteration of the line alone. One cannot exclude that it is not by chance that *Beowulf*'s men anticipating a battle are "guðmod" (306a) (of warlike mind) or that Heremod is "bolgenmod" (1713a) (swollen-minded) when killing his own comrades. It is less likely, however, that the connection with Gothic "airzeis" (in error) was still present in "yrre" (rage), both Grendel's own (768b) and the rage that he "bore" as God's punishment, "Godes yrre bær" (711b). Rather, the originally negative connotations of the adjective are applicable to Grendel because everything associated with the monster is perceived as "wrong by definition." The association may be intuitive, but so is the alliteration that the *Beowulf*-poet keeps to faithfully, cf. "guðmod grimmon. Guman" (306), "breat bolgenmod beodgeneatas" (1713), "eode yrremod [...] eagam" (726), even to the detriment of the sense (but not to the essential idea, as in "East/West/North/South Danes"). The different strategies that take place within traditional poetic grammar demonstrate that substitutions are in no way "mechanical"⁵⁶ (although they can be,

⁵⁵ Gvozdet'skaya, *Jazyk i stil' drevneanglijskoj poezii*, 39–40.

⁵⁶ As follows from Magoun's comparison, "Recurring First Elements," 78, of the diction of *Beowulf* and the *Edda* and his somewhat unexpected conclusion that the *Beowulf*-poet "repeats, I believe, his stock-in-trade of first elements only because he is less skilful, less resourceful in this regard, than his Scandinavian fellows. Therefore, although his audience, probably knowing nothing better in the way of alliterative verse, may have been uncritical on this point, let us not fail to recognize that, in respect to the use of the very prominent feature of recurring first elements of different nominal compounds, the style of *Beowulf* is inferior to, or at any rate quite different from, that of the Eddic lays." Cf. Steblin-Kamenskij's comment, *Trudy po filologii*, 494–95, that "from Magoun's conclusion it will follow that Old English poets who relied on the themes of oral heroic songs and undoubtedly knew oral heroic poetry better than imitators of Christian models and translators from Latin, were inferior to the latter in the use of alliterative diction and that the *Beowulf*-poet, for example, whose creative individuality can hardly be doubted, was less skilful a poet than the author of the cumbersome first part of *Christ*, translators of psalms or authors of imitative didactic poems."

in the same way as hackneyed rhymes in modern poetry), giving an idea of traditional aesthetics' priorities and their hierarchy, as well as the role of "an accomplished poet who brought an inherited form to a fine stage of fulfillment."⁵⁷

Variation reflects various degrees of desamentization, hence, Grendel's mother is "galgmod" (1277a) (gallows-minded), rather than "giomormod" (2267a) (sad of mind, mourning), as in:

eald æscwiga, se ðe eall ge(man),
 garcwealm gumena —him bið grim (se)fa—
 onginneð geomormod geong(um) cempa
 . . . higes cunnian (2042–45b)

(the old warrior; the one who remembered all,
 spear-death of people—grim is his soul—
 begins, sad of mind [...] to test the spirit of a young warrior.)

The latter example recalls the scene of the funeral of Scyld Scefing: "him wæs geomor sefa, / murnende mod" (49b–50a) (Sad was their soul, mourning [was] the mind). Here the variation, "grim sefa" ~ "geomor sefa," "geomormod" ~ "murnende mod," is combined with the mutual attraction of the kernel words, "sefa" and "mod," conveying the essential idea of loss and sorrow. In terms of the oral-formulaic theory, the two passages represent one and the same theme, that is "a structural unit that has a semantic essence but can never be divorced from its form, even if its form be constantly *variable and multiform*."⁵⁸ The stress of variability and multiformity is necessary, because they are inseparable from the formulaic style (and vice versa).⁵⁹ Earlier Lord defined the theme as a "subject unit [...] regularly employed by a singer, not merely in any given poem, but in the poetry as a whole."⁶⁰ But various "subject units" may recur in any tradition, not necessarily oral. As a unit of oral narrative, a theme must be recognizable. The traditional tools used to discern them from other similar units can, first of all, be markers of their boundaries, for example the end of a theme:

þæt wæs god cyning!
 (that was a good king!)—(characteristic of Scyld Scefing)
 oð þæt
 (until)—(voyage).

To quote Jeffrey Alan Mazo, "[i]n traditional poetry the significance of a particular element would not be a function of its immediate context, but of the theme, the type-scene, the entire poem, or the tradition itself."⁶¹ Indeed, the function of each element of traditional poetry can be regarded as part of its (grammatical) semantics, themes being its context, both minimal and necessary.

⁵⁷ Niles, *Beowulf*, 151.

⁵⁸ Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 198; emphasis mine. Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 68, also observes of themes that they are "groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song."

⁵⁹ As Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, 137, notes, "[t]he phraseology [in the *Odyssey*] does not merely present the possibility of multiformity; it actively is multiform."

⁶⁰ Lord, "Homer and Huso II," 440.

⁶¹ Mazo, "Compound Diction," 86.

The context can include an entire text. For example, Old English “hwæt” (lo, behold) is interpreted as an interjection. This is correct, of course, but only from the point of view of (natural) grammar and vocabulary, which do not take into account its poetic function as an introductory element, first of all, of an entire poem, for example *Beowulf*, *Exodus*, and *Andreas*. The last, although placed under the heading “Religious poetry” in Old English anthologies, together with *Caedmon’s Hymn* and *Genesis*, is closer in many respects to heroic epic.⁶² In this context, “hwæt” acts as a genre marker. But “hwæt” can also introduce a theme (“speech”) within a larger text (*Beowulf*, 530a, 1652a) or be used for making an emphasis within a speech (*Beowulf*, 942b, 1774a, and possibly 2248b).

Similarly, the adverb “þa”/“ða” (then, thereupon), is regularly used as a marker of a new episode, for example:

Him ða Scyld gewat to gescæphwile (26)

(Scyld then departed at the fated time)—(after his life as king)

Gewiton him ða feran; flota stille bad (301, etc.)

(They started then to go. The ship lay still)—(after the voyage.)

The function can be minimal, for example reduced to syllable filling, as that of “-da” and “-to” in bylinas (see above), homonymous with the particle “yes” and the demonstrative pronoun. From the point of view of metrical conditions, however, the role of connecting elements in making rapid composing in performance possible is significant enough. Their proportion in traditional texts is also considerable. This may help in resolving the paradox resulting from Magoun’s analysis of *Cædmon’s Hymn*, where “[e]ighty-three plus per cent of the language [...] is demonstrably traditional,” that is consisting of formulas and formulaic expressions.⁶³ The question must arise in this connection, “What constitutes the remaining seventeen per cent?” In terms of “fixed formulas and nearly fixed formulaic expressions” the answer will be “non-formulaic elements,” which implies a mixture of two languages (and traditions). But within the system of “traditional rules,” all the elements conform to one basic principle once formulated by Lord: “[t]here is nothing in the poem that is not formulaic.”⁶⁴

⁶² Foley, *Singer of Tales in Performance*, 183, calls *Andreas* “heroic hagiography.”

⁶³ Magoun, “Bede’s Story of Cædmon,” 54.

⁶⁴ Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 47; emphasis mine.

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