

Ling 103: Language Structure and Verbal Art

Oral culture and verbal art

A. The Homeric 'problem'

In the 19th century classical scholars began to try to understand certain peculiarities of Homeric verse: Homeric verse is unlike all other classical literature, yet was venerated mostly highly by the ancients.

- a. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are full of **repetitions** and **fixed expressions**.
- b. People and objects are quite often accompanied by **epithets**, descriptive phrases which not only are redundant to the narrative but often are used in a seemingly indiscriminate way. Most of these are **clichés** which lack the originality usually demanded of fine poetry.
- c. The language used shows a peculiar **mixture of dialects**: Ionic, Aeolic and Attic Greek dialect forms are interspersed.
- d. Some lines are **unmetrical** for no apparent reason.
- e. **Linguistic disparities**: The grammar and vocabulary of the *Odyssey* suggests a later form of Greek than that of the *Iliad*.
- f. The narrative structure of the poems **meanders** with many **digressive episodes**.

There was also a debate concerning **authorship**:

- a. **Unitarian Hypothesis**: Homer was a single individual of extraordinary genius.
- b. **Combinatory Hypothesis**: Homer was not an individual but a mythic personage. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are compilations of different poems cobbled together later. Each fragment was written by a different earlier author.

B. Oral Culture

Oral culture: a culture in which writing is not in use.

Walter J Ong
Orality and Literacy 1982. Routledge, London.

a. What is it like to live in an oral culture?

1. No one has ever 'looked up' something.

Words can be 'recalled' to memory but there is nowhere to 'look' for them. Words are merely occurrences, events, they are dynamic. Homeric 'winged words': constantly moving by a powerful and free locomotion.

2. Linguistic expression occurs only as **sound** and is thus perishable and evanescent
3. Language is a **mode of action** rather than a record of thought.
4. Words are frequently considered to have **magical powers**.

Names confer power over things, without learning the name one cannot understand.
6. What you know is only what you can recall. What can be recalled then must be **memorable**, '*shaped for ready oral recurrence*'.

Memorable expressions:

- a. highly **rhythmic**
 - b. **balanced** or antithetical
 - c. **patterned**
 - d. **repetitive**
 - e. **phonologically structured**: alliterative, assonating
 - f. **syntactically structured**: formulaic
 - g. **standardized thematic settings** (meal, duel, assembly, hero's 'helper' etc.)
 - h. **kinesic**: rhythmicity may draw on bodily properties such as breathing, gesture, body symmetry, manipulation of beads, rocking back and forth
7. Analytic thought takes the form of **dialogue**.

Analytic thought usually requires an interlocutor, since lengthy and sequential lines of thought cannot be sustained or held in memory as such.
 8. **Sayings**, rhythmically balanced expressions that everyone knows, are *incessant* in oral culture.
 9. *Law* is expressed in formulaic sayings and **proverbs**.
Judges use proverbs as justification for decisions.

b. What is the verbal art of an oral culture?

Traditional **stories, proverbs, prayers**, and longer **formulaic** epics.

c. How do people learn in an oral culture?

1. **apprenticeship**: activity with more experienced individuals
2. **discipleship**
3. **listening**
4. **repeating**
Recitations were the standard method of evaluating students.
Written exams were invented only a few generations ago.
5. **memorizing proverbs**
6. **mastering formulaic material and methods of combining them**

C. Bosnian Epic Poetry and Formulaic Structure

(1) What is ORAL POETRY like?

- a. Thoroughly *formulaic*: formulas constantly in use
- b. Composed *on-line* (spontaneously): each poem is different
- c. Thematic units are *pre-fabricated*

Corresponding to different melodies used in different thematic sections

opening melody / melody for sustained narrative / melody for stopping before a rest / melody for a 'reprise'

There are prefabricated units for episodes of various themes:

writing letter / army approaches / young girl is stolen

- d. Style is *discursive*: the 'action' or 'story-line' can be interrupted at any time and a digression into another story may occur; then the singer/poet returns to the main story. The poem can be as long or as short as needed since this technique allows episodes to be expanded or contracted indefinitely.

(2) What is meant by **FORMULA**:
a phrase that recurs:

- (i) in the same meaning
- (ii) in the same metrical position
- (iii) contains 'empty' material

'The most stable formulas will be those for the most common ideas of the poetry'

- (a) the names of actors
- (b) the main actions which take place
- (c) times
- (d) places

(3) Bosnian Epic line
4 σ | 6 σ

With formulas of 4 or 6 syllable lengths
(S W) (S W) | (S W) (S W) (S W)

Initial 'inversion' possible in each half-line,
if an unstressed 'clitic' stands there

- | | |
|--|--|
| (4) vino pije Kraljeviču Marko
Sultan Selim rata otvorio | drink wine Prince Marko
Sultan Selim declared war |
| (5) Govorio Kraljeviču Marko
Pa zasede svojega dorata | Said Prince Marko
Then mounted brown horse |
| (6) ----- rata otvorio
----- knjigu napisao
Kniju piše ----- | opened war
wrote a letter
writes a letter |
| (7) Kad je zora krila pomolila
Kad je zora i bijela dana
Kad je sunce zemlju ogrijalo | When dawn (its) wings put forth
When dawn and white day (it was)
When the sun the earth had warmed |
| (8) U Prilipu -----
----- U Prilipu gradu
A na kuli -----
----- na bijeloj kuli

Na bijeloj od kamena kuli | In Prilip
In Prilip city
In the tower
In the white tower

In the white tower of stone |
| (9) a u + [2σ Noun]
and at NOUN | to express place |

a u kuli | ----- in the tower
a u dvoru | ----- in the castle
a u kuchi | ----- in the house

(10) u + [3 σ Noun]
at NOUN

u Stamololu | ----- in Stamol
u Prilipu | ----- in Prilip
u Travniku | ----- in Travnik
u Kladushi | ----- in Kladush

(11) 'New' uses of old formulas

--- | moskovska kraljica the Queen of Moscow
--- | bagdatska kraljica the Queen of Baghdad

Misir dashe | *ingliskoj* kraljikca
they gave Egypt | (to) the Queen of England

(12) Ti nachini | sitne bujrunija
Prepare | new documents

Ti nachini | sitne *telegrafe*
Prepare | new telegrams

(13) **Sound Change as evidence for formulas**

Stage I: Formula in use, formula scans properly in meter

Stage II: A sound change occurs that alters the metrics of the formula, so that it no longer scans properly

Stage III: Tradition validates use of formula EVEN though it does not scan properly. Apprentices continue to learn it by rote and use it their spontaneously produced verse

Stage IV: Apprentices abandon non-scanning formulas, or adjust them to suit contemporary pronunciation, but do so ONE-BY-ONE in a haphazard manner

Result: At any given time, text will show

- some 'old' non-scanning formulas that haven't yet been adjusted
- some 'adjusted' formulas, which do scan
- perhaps a mixture of adjusted and non-adjusted instances of the same formula.

'Carbon-dating' by the number of 'old' formulas still in use — older texts or portions of texts should, on average, have more instances of 'old' (non-scanning) formulas