Ling 51: Oral Theory and Indo-European Epic
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  

**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
Bosnian Epic 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 | Kraljeviću Marko
   drink wine | Prince Marko
Sultan Selim | rata otvorio
Sultan Selim | declared war

(5) Govorio | Kraljević Marko
Said | Prince Marko
Pa zasede | svojega dorata
Then mounted | brown horse

(6) --------- | rata otvorio
opened war
--------- | knjigu napisao
wrote a letter
Kniju piše | --------------
writes a letter

(7) Kad je zora | krila pomolila
When dawn | (its) wings put forth
Kad je zora | i bijela dana
When dawn | and white day (it was)
Kad je sunce | zemlju ogrijalo
When the sun | the earth had warmed

(8) U Prilipu | --------------
In Prilip
--------- | U Prilipu gradu
In Prilip city
A na kuli | -------------
In the tower
------- | na bijeloj kuli
In the white tower

Na bijeloj | od kamena kuli
In the white | tower of stone

(9) a u + ⟨2 σ Noun⟩
to express place
and at NOUN

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 Stamolu | --------------
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 bujruntija
Prepare | new documents

Ti nachini | sitne telegrafe
Prepare | new telegrams

**Formulas that stop fitting**

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

a. some ‘old’ non-scanning formulas that haven’t yet been adjusted
b. some ‘adjusted’ formulas, which do scan
c. 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
Beowulf:
Preservation of formulae rendered unmetrical by sound change.

1. 'Anyptictic' vowel inserted $\bar{o} \ C \ _ \ R \ #$
   (R = sonorant, # = end of word)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>âtor</td>
<td>'poison'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cumbol</td>
<td>'banner'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ealdor</td>
<td>'age, life'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hleahtor</td>
<td>'laughter'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hlêoþor</td>
<td>'hearing, sound'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hlûtor</td>
<td>'clear'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hrôþor</td>
<td>'joy'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>morþor</td>
<td>'murder'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sundor</td>
<td>'apart'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tâcen</td>
<td>'sign'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tungol</td>
<td>'star'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wæpen</td>
<td>'weapon'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>winter</td>
<td>'winter'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wuldor</td>
<td>'glory'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wundor</td>
<td>'marvel'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Loss of *h between vowels, contraction of the newly adjacent vowels into a single syllable. Oldest OE glossaries of 7th and 8th cent. still have *h written in some forms. Contraction must not have begun to take place before early 7th cent.

flēon 'to flee' < *fleuhan
fōn 'to seize, to take' < *fōhan
hēan (inflected form of hēah 'high') < *hēuhan
nēan (inflected form of nēah 'near') < *nēhan
oftēon 'to withdraw, take away' < *afteuhan
sēon 'to see' < *sehan
slēan 'to slay' < *slēhan
þēon 'to thrive' < *þēhan

Example half-lines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Read as before contraction</th>
<th>Read as after contraction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>man ġeþēon &lt; man ġeþīhan</td>
<td>man ġeþēon sceolde &lt; ġeþīhan sceolde ‘should thrive’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[A]</td>
<td>[C] 910 b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nēan bīdan &lt; nēahan bīdan</td>
<td>nēan bīdan ‘remain near’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[A]</td>
<td>[A]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Đār was hāleþa hléahtor</td>
<td>Đār was hāleþa hléahtor ‘there was there the laughter of warriors’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[B] 611 b</td>
<td>[B] 611 b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wūndor-sīona féla</td>
<td>wūndor-sīona féla ‘very wonderful scenes’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[E] 995b</td>
<td>[E] 995b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wīg ofer wǣpen</td>
<td>wīg ofer wǣpen ‘fight over weapons’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[A] 685a</td>
<td>[A] 685a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. a pre-anptictic lines  b. post-anptictic lines  
   c. pre-contraction lines   d. post-contraction lines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>c</th>
<th>d</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beowulf</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>Genesis A</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Daniel</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exodus</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynewulf poems, 750-900</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alfred corpus, c. 900.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
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