

New perspectives on Formularity

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This paper addresses the phenomenon of Homeric formularity in the light of recent developments in the fields of Corpus Linguistics and Cognitive Linguistics - particularly Language Acquisition and Construction Grammar.

The paper shows the relevance of the body of such research to Homeric formularity, and fleshes out how these new views could help to situate such issue against a broader linguistic backdrop. It tries to build a theoretically up-to-date framework in which to insert and discuss previous work on Homeric formularity and traditional phraseology in the context of contemporary Linguistics. Starting from a short recapitulation of the problem, the paper will focus on the following points:

a) *Formularity and Corpus Linguistics*: Far from being exclusive to some kinds of traditional poetry, formularity (in its wider sense) is a widespread *corpus* phenomenon [Sinclair, Hoey]. Recent studies show that the percentage of fixed expressions in large enough language corpora, both written and spoken, is much higher than normally perceived; namely, a study by Ermann & Warren [2000] shows that over 50% of studied texts can be shown to be made up of “prefabricated sequences”. Since similar (though not formally comparable) formulaic percentages, in Homer, have been used as proofs of orality, a re-thinking of the matter is required. If high levels of “formularity” are a normal state of a language, what are we measuring when we measure formularity in a literary work, and what do lower levels of formularity mean?

b) *Formularity and Language Acquisition*: Studies in language acquisition show how the building of a native-like linguistic competence takes place through the memorization and later *flexibilization* of fixed phrases [Tomasello, Wray, Ellis]. Such common observations can be compared with Lord’s account of the singer’s apprentice. This perspective gives a cognitive account of how the individual singer acquires and employs its own formulaic system (ontogenesis of formulas); Wray proposes, for first language acquisition, a model in three phases where formularity plays different roles depending

on the advancement of language competence. This model as well can be compared with Lord's observations on how individual singers developed their "personal" formulaic systems.

c) *Formularity and Construction Grammar*. Construction grammar [Goldberg], together with Grammaticalization theory, can describe the "external", diachronic development of a formulaic system (phylogenesis of formulas), in terms that Hainsworth has indicated. In such a perspective, a given formula is a *construction* that becomes diachronically fixed in function of its usefulness and frequency (meter can have a role in this). In doing so, the formula can absorb a considerable quantity of pragmatic –and thus *thematic*- information, which makes it even more precious (ex: poetry, myth, religion). Once the formula becomes so fixed so as to escape modifiability (and thereby escape language evolution, so conserving an earlier stage of the language), it becomes more difficult for the speakers to analyze, and thereby starts its decline. A new, transparent expression can then arise and take its place (although cultural reasons can keep an obscure formula alive for the longest time). This process is exactly the same mechanism by which grammatical analogy operates to reshape older "aberrant" forms after transparent ones. This approach permits us to go beyond the pure surface level of the formula, and see how traditional themes (along with important cultural metaphors) are conveyed through ever-renovating surface material [Watkins, Campanile, García Ramón].

The conclusions are that formularity has to be viewed as a wide-spread and central phenomenon in both language production and acquisition, and that Homeric formularity is different from "ordinary formularity" only by means of specific *cultural* parameters (such as meter and tradition). During the exposition, a set of examples from the Homeric corpus will be discussed to illustrate the aforementioned points.

Formularity, mainly in the form of traditional phraseology, is a part of comparative poetics studies. The paper aims at providing a better understanding of both the synchronic (formulas in the mind of the *singer*) and diachronic (formulas inside the *tradition*) development of what we call formulas, by bridging the gap between "formulas" and ordinary grammar [Kiparsky].

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