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Formulaic creativity: Oral poetics and cognitive grammar

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to rethink the study of oral performativity in the context of modern cognitive science. To that end, we list a number of so-far unrecognized parallels between the Parry-Lord theory of composition in performance and what has come to be known as "usage-based" approaches to grammar and language acquisition in the field of Cognitive Linguistics. We develop these connections into an integrated whole, opening up the way for a research program in the new field of "cognitive oral poetics", and relating it to a number of very topical questions in present-day cognitive science (creativity, language acquisition, multimodality). The conclusion vouches for a closer collaboration of literary theorists, linguists, and cognitive scientists in the establishment of cognitive oral poetics.

1. Oral traditional epic as composition in performance

Initially intended only to prove the hypothesis on the oral nature of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the Parry-Lord theory of oral formulaic composition (Parry, 1971; Lord, 1960) in fact revolutionized the field of oral poetics. In the 1930s, Milman Parry and Albert Lord ran extended campaigns of anthropological fieldwork in parts of the former Yugoslavia, recording and writing down hundreds of performances of traditional oral epic. This fieldwork was completed by Lord in the 1950s. The result of their data gathering is the vast Milman Parry collection of *oral literature* (a meaningful oxymoron commonly used in the field), hosted by Harvard University and partially available online (http://chs119.chs.harvard.edu/mpc/). The initial goal of this work was to provide a corpus for comparison with Homer, in order to examine the parallels between the Homeric texts that have reached our hands and the way oral epic poetry is composed in a living tradition.

Based on this comparison, Parry and Lord formulated their theory of oral formulaic style. Its essential idea is that singers in oral epic traditions compose their poems as they perform, without relying on a fixed text and without verbatim memorization of long stretches. Instead, they work with a stock of partially fixed expressions, acquired by listening and singing. These formulas are shaped throughout a collective process constituted by innumerable performances across the long diachrony of the epic tradition. They are designed to meet metrical constraints, they are clustered according to thematic criteria, so that they can be easily remembered, and their peripheral elements or lexical slots can be varied, in order to produce further formulaic patterns.

Soon it became clear that the Parry-Lord research was not only providing a new view of Homer but also a new way of understanding oral traditional poetry in general. By connecting this body of research with cognitive linguistics, this article

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proposes to extend the boundaries of this paradigm shift even further, to the general study of language, creativity, and the human mind. What gives the Parry-Lord theory this great potential is that it approaches oral formulaic poetry as a cross-cultural phenomenon, resulting from the interplay between certain universals of human nature (both cognitive and communicative) and the sociocultural particulars of each tradition, which arise from lengthy historical developments. This has produced not only new insights into how oral poetic performance works, but also a new appreciation of its aesthetics. Oral formulaic style is indeed very different from the techniques of written composition that we find familiar, and practically unavoidable, today. But this does not make oral performance less creative, a mere repetition of fixed phrases. Those fixed, traditional expressions are the building blocks needed for putting together the tale within the demanding conditions of performance. How an oral singer accomplishes this is in fact a great feat of the human imagination, which requires superb cognitive skills. Parry and Lord called this process *composition in performance*. The notion of composition in performance allows us to understand not only how oral poetry works, but also how "natural" or "original" verbal art is made possible by the natural capacities of human beings for adapting stable, culturally transmitted patterns (tradition) to the here-and-now of a particular speech act (performance).

As Parry and Lord showed, oral epic singers can compose lengthy and intricate poems not by remembering a fixed text, but by improvising their song as they perform. The term *improvisation* in fact provides an incomplete definition, since it only refers to one side of the phenomenon. Long hours of learning, rehearsal, and planning are indispensable for these performances. Indeed, the oral poet does not rely on material cognitive tools such as writing, but he does need the immaterial building blocks of the tradition to shape his style. The technique of the oral poet is based on the mastery of *formulae*, predominantly fixed expressions that are regularly used under certain metrical and discursive conditions ("swift-footed Achilles," "he/she spoke forth winged words," "he then mounted his [optional epithet] horse and…"). With some degree of variation, these traditional utterances constitute almost 100% of the language used in the oral epic performance. There is very little in it that is not formulaic, if anything at all. Due to the high demands that performance poses on memory and the organization of the narrative, the particular speech act of oral poetry needs to rely on idiomaticity even more than does everyday conversation, perhaps more than any other linguistic usage. It is this enhanced idiomaticity that creates the aesthetics of oral poetry, which is not based on the novelty of expressions, motives, or tales, but on the mastery of the stories and formulaic systems established by innumerable prior performances (Foley, 1991, 2002).

As highlighted by Lord's work (1960, 68–98), formulas are necessarily linked to *themes*, typical scenes that structure the narrative (e.g. the assembly, the contest, the battle, the sacrifice, hosting a guest, description of a gift, treasure, or weapon). The learning and use of formulas would not be feasible if they were not clustered thematically. A central part of the oral singer's skill is to be able to elaborate a particular theme, taking it to the highest degree of ornamentation while keeping a balance between its most relevant parts. Thematic expansions of the utmost excellence are the privilege of a few singers of particular creativity and skill, and are reserved for occasions and audiences that guarantee a full appreciation. Homer's *Catalogue of the ships* (*Iliad* II, 494–759) and *Making of the shield of Achilles* (*Iliad* XVIII, 468–607) are examples of these practices.

Themes mediate between the level of utterances institutionalized by the tradition (formulas) and a discrete number of plots or story patterns (Lord, 1960, 99–123) that recur not only across performances but also, to a great extent, across traditions and periods (Propp, 1928): the return of the hero (derived from the death and resurrection of a deity), the abduction and rescue of the maiden, the search for a magic treasure, and others. Story patterns usually combine in the same tale, but there are rules (unwritten, of course) that guide their integration, telling the poet which parts must be prevalent, at which points he needs to return to the main plot, and how to resolve conflicts (or not) between clashing narrative structures.

Thus research on oral composition in performance provides a picture of oral traditional poetry as a fluid, multiform creative process that constantly reuses formal-semantic-metrical templates, working simultaneously at the three levels that structure the narrative: formula, theme, and story pattern. The result is an integrated experience in the here-and-now, in which both poet and audience negotiate meanings thanks to their shared traditional background. Every performance is a unique event, and at the same time a constitutive part of a tradition that spans many generations. The meaning and structure of the song entirely relies on the enhanced idiomaticity that results from tradition and performance. As we will now see, this view of verbal art is very congenial with the theory of language proposed by cognitive grammar.

2. Cognitive grammar and usage-based linguistics

Descriptions of grammar in cognitive linguistics initially appeared as a reaction to more formal approaches in the study of language that had prevailed for almost half a century. All relevant schools in this movement today, e.g. Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 1987), Construction Grammar (Goldberg, 1995, 2006), Radical Construction Grammar (Croft and Cruse, 2004), or Embodied Construction Grammar (Bergen and Chang, 2005) start from assumptions radically opposed to the most dominant formal approach to linguistics of the present day, Chomsky's Generative Grammar (e.g. Chomsky, 1965, 1986, 2002).

The view of language as a psychological faculty has of course been standard since at least de Saussure (1916). However, the "cognitive revolution" started by Chomsky in the sixties gave rise to a strongly nativist view of the human language faculty, which represents the main starting assumption of the big school of Generative Linguistics. Its epistemology is based on two central theses: (1) language is acquired according to a genetic, biological program, a *universal grammar*, which works as a "module" (a specific bio/neurological network in the brain), fully separated from all other cognitive faculties (memory, intelligence, vision, social cognition…). Language in children is thus said to "grow" according to this program, pretty much like