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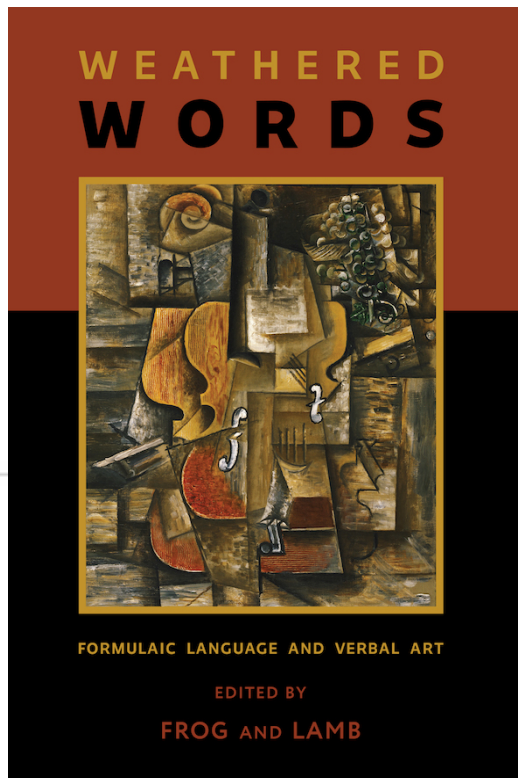
## Newsletter

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### **Weathered Words: Formulaic Language and Verbal Art**

Frog (University of Helsinki) and Lamb (University of Edinburgh) (eds.)

*Edited volume in the series Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature 6 (Cambridge, MA: Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, Harvard University, published by Harvard University Press); the open-access digital edition is available at: [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:Frog\\_LambW\\_eds.Weathered\\_Words.2022](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:Frog_LambW_eds.Weathered_Words.2022).*



Formulaic phraseology presents the epitome of words worn and weathered by trial and the tests of time.<sup>1</sup> Scholarship on weathered words is exceptionally diverse and interdisciplinary. This brand-new volume focuses on verbal art, which makes Oral-Formulaic Theory (OFT) a major point of reference. Yet weathered words are but a part of OFT, and OFT is only a part of scholarship on weathered words. The chapters in this book are wide-ranging, and the introduction offers an orientation to both the different primary branches of discussions of

formulaic language, centering on the lexicon, on language situated in discourse, and on OFT and language in verbal art, respectively, and to the chapters that the book contains.

Each of the book’s eighteen chapters brings particular aspects of formulaic language into focus. No volume on such a diverse topic can be all-encompassing, but these essays highlight aspects of the phenomenon that may be eclipsed elsewhere: they diverge not only in style, but sometimes even in how they choose to define ‘formula’. As such, they offer overlapping frames that complement one another both in their convergences and their contrasts. While they view formulaicity from multifarious angles, they unite in a web of intersecting perspectives on which the reader can reflect and from which they can draw insight.

#### ***Oral-Formulaic Theory and Beyond***

In “Formulas in Oral Epics: The Dynamics of Meter, Memory, and Meaning”, Karl Reichl opens Part I of the volume with perspectives on formulaic language going back to Parry’s seminal work on the topic, and explores its dimensions through more recent understandings. He then grapples with several issues that run through the book; namely, the relationship of formulae to meter, the role of memory in performance, the significance of formulaic language in practice, and the possibility for long stretches of text to be more or less fixed even in an otherwise highly variable form of

verbal art. Reichl provides valuable insights into these topics by considering poetry and song in the Kirghiz epic tradition.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, scholarship on Old English alliterative poetry has discussed formulaic language and has been an important nexus for advancing formula research. OFT's foundations are situated upon studies of Homeric and South Slavic epic poetry. Both poetic traditions are organized by similar metrical systems based on counting syllables or syllables and their quantities. In contrast, Old English verse uses a stress-based system where the number of syllables can vary. Furthermore, the meter requires alliteration, which drives variation in word choice. Parry's definition of formula was not transferrable to this poetry without adaptation, which produced rich discussions about how to define and distinguish concepts like formula and how different concepts of OFT relate to it. In "Of *Scopas* and Scribes: Reshaping Oral-Formulaic Theory in Old English Literary Studies", Steven C.E. Hopkins elucidates the history of this rich vein of research, which exemplifies how OFT was adapted to one poetic tradition after the next. Hopkins introduces the reader to a vital arena of OFT research, one that also provided an abundance of valuable perspectives on oral-written interaction – some of the most significant insights produced to date.

Although OFT research was built especially upon South Slavic epic as a living oral tradition, this has not been the only approach to that poetry. The turn from detailing the formal operation of language units to how their meanings and associations are constructed is also not exclusive to OFT. In "*Vlach Paupers*: Formula and Layers of Meaning", Sonja Petrović pursues these issues across several genres of South Slavic traditions. She offers a fresh and innovative perspective that complements Classic OFT research. Conducting a case study of one particular formula, she traces both its connections to historical social environments and its uses in different genres.

Anatoly Liberman brings the discussions of this section to a close by looking at formulaicity as a broad and fundamental phenomenon. In "Humans as Formulaic Beings", Liberman offers a wide, comparative context for the emergence of OFT, and he reminds us that

formulae can be explored in diverse forms, rather than exclusively as a linguistic phenomenon. His learned discussion provides nuanced perspectives on how and why people engage with formulaic language, and significant observations about how patterns in idiom may change over the course of history.

### ***Methodological Approaches***

Methodology is another key focus of formula research. Relevant scholarship has encompassed not only the theories that underpin analyses and interpretations, but also the strategies and procedures that form methods proper. Both concerns are advanced in Part II, "Methodological Approaches". Discussion is launched by Frog, who takes up *multiform theory*, which was initially formulated by Anneli and Lauri Honko (1998) as part of an alternative to OFT. The Honkos felt that their theory of linguistic multiforms could better account for certain phenomena of variation and flexibility in verbal art. In "Multiform Theory", Frog introduces this theory and its history, proposing that it reflects a basic linguistic phenomenon – one not limited to poetry. He distinguishes the multiform from the formula in its complexity and polysemic capability, arguing that it is a complementary type of unit, and also compatible with OFT.

In a similar strand, Raymond F. Person, Jr. considers the theory of *category triggering* presented by Gail Jefferson (1996). Category triggering concerns how the production of language in discourse activates networks of association in vocabulary. Jefferson's theory accounts for patterns and variation in conversational language, such as using a wrong word that is linked by sound or sense to the one intended. In "Formulas and Scribal Memory: A Case Study of Text-Critical Variants as Examples of Category-Triggering", Person combines this theory with OFT and its expansions through John Miles Foley's work (e.g. 1995; 2002), offering valuable insights into variations made by scribes in copying ancient biblical texts and Greek epics. This chapter illustrates the importance of balancing approaches to flexibility in language use with the sources for particular traditions, as well as relevant questions that the sources are equipped to answer.

The rise of meanings in formula research on verbal art has given little attention to how formulaic language may be used to structure relationships between the performer and what is referred to, reflecting the performer's stance toward it – i.e., stance-taking. Koenraad Kuiper and David Leaper investigate stance-taking in sports commentators' formulaic epithets, referring to players and the feats of local and foreign teams. In “*We Don't Support; We Observe: Epithets and Modifiers in a Vernacular Formulaic Genre*”, they offer a sophisticated quantitative analysis of formulaic language in sports commentary, situating their discussion in relation to OFT research on epic. This chapter introduces the valuable concept of *formulaic genre*. Whereas Classic OFT's methodology was built on statistical surveys of formulae and used formulaic density as a litmus test for orality, formulaic genre is a descriptive term for a verbal genre characterized by a high density of formulaic language, irrespective of whether it is oral or written (see also Kuiper 2009). Kuiper and Leaper illustrate how quantitative methods can be used to determine whether structures of social relations are built into formula usage.

Statistical methods are also at the forefront of William Lamb's “From Motif to Multiword Expression: The Development of Formulaic Language in Gaelic Traditional Narrative”. An issue widely debated in Classic OFT research was the relationship between formulaic language and so-called themes; that is, units of narrative content. Lamb takes up a corresponding question in prose narration. Using a corpus of traditional tales featuring motif annotation by Stith Thompson (MacKay 1940), Lamb explores how formulaic language links to international tale motifs and how these relations vary by genre. In this way, he attempts to provide an empirical basis for two proposed factors underlying the development of formulae: recurrence and semantic distinctiveness.

### ***Language and Form***

Part III focuses on relationships between formulaic language and the organizing principles of poetic discourse. The organizing principles of many traditions of oral poetry diverge from Homeric and South Slavic epics far more than Old English verse does. James J.

Fox begins the section with “Form and Formulae in Rotenese Oral Poetry”, in which he introduces formula constructions in a tradition of canonical parallelism that lacks periodic meter. In canonical parallelism, lexical pairs regularly recur in parallel lines. Fox elucidates how this type of lexical pair functions as a unified formula and reveals how sets of such formulaic pairings can develop complex patterning across a series of lines. Fox connects with the preceding section on methodology by presenting his system for mapping pairs through stretches of poetry. He then situates the operation of these formulaic pairings in relation to Roman Jakobson's approaches to poetics.

Naming formulae were central to Milman Parry's (1928) early theorizations, in which he coined the definition of ‘formula’ later propagated by Albert Bates Lord in his formalization of what is now distinguished as Classic OFT (1960: 4). Parry explored naming formulae in terms of their fixity and variation, semantics, and patterns in their metrical structures. In “Formula and Structure: Ways of Expressing Names in the Northern Runosong Tradition”, Jukka Saarinen takes up this classic topic in his study of how naming formulae are structured in so-called Kalevala-meter poetry. This poetry's short epic form led poems to be remembered and performed as ‘texts’ rather than as compositions improvised in performance. It has a regular syllabic rhythm with often only two to four words per line, which stabilizes its phraseology. Saarinen shows that naming follows formal patterns in this poetry and outlines a typology of syntactic-metrical types, each of which he describes as a *formula system*, thus adapting a concept initially outlined by Parry (1928; 1930; cf. Lord 1960: 35, 47–48; see also *syntactic formula* in Russo 1963). Saarinen considers how the dominance of particular metrical-structural formulae led to new formulations on the same pattern – i.e., they were generated within the framework of an established syntactic type.

To understand the relationship between formulae and poetic structure, it is valuable to examine what happens to them when they move between poetic systems. Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir examines this phenomenon in

“Formulae across the North Atlantic (from Continental Scandinavia to Iceland)”. She traces the movement of formulaic language across genres and closely related languages, which may sometimes allow etymological translation and other times require alternative phrasing. Her study offers valuable insights into how language interacts with the organizing principles of a poetic form. She describes how the loss of a poetic feature like alliteration or rhyme in the movement of a formula to a new poetic system may be “compensated” by another poetic feature, revealing that such compensation may occur even when it is not necessarily required by the new metrical environment.

### ***Explorations at the Boundaries***

Part IV, “Explorations at the Boundaries,” carries discussions of weathered words to the peripheries of formulaic language. Ian Brodie leads the section by investigating formulaic language in stand-up comedy. He focuses on the ways in which language crystallizes in stand-up performance routines and how situationally motivated variation for such language works in the genre. In “*I Am a Fan of Hilarity: Possible Directions for Oral-Formulaic Theory and the Study of Stand-Up Comedy*,” Brodie illuminates the process of choosing between competing phrases as strategic choices for humorous effect. Bringing choice and variation into focus leads formulae to be framed as units in the lexicon that are used like non-formula units. This highlights the fuzzy boundary between whether particular units are or are not formulae.

Classic OFT was built on an idea that poets use phraseology pre-fitted to metrical positions in order to produce metrically well-formed lines at the rate of performance. Hans Nollet reveals that such recycling of weathered words can also occur in quite different traditions. In “Formulas in Neo-Latin Poetry as a Means to Language Enrichment and Self-Representation: Language Tips and Sociolinguistics in Justus Lipsius’ Poems”, Nollet shows that a corresponding motivation of ensuring the metricality of lines is found among Neo-Latin literary poets. Such practices were directed both towards displaying erudition and obviating metrical mistakes. Neo-Latin poets composed

in Classical Latin meters, which included rules related to syllabic quantities that were no longer distinguished in spoken Latin; this made the reuse of tried and tested turns of phrase from earlier poets the surest means to avoid an acoustically – but not analytically – unperceivable metrical error. These weathered words operate as formulae, but are not the formulae of an *oral* poetic idiom. This chapter situates some of the most basic perspectives on recurrent phraseology in oral poetry in relation to a formally identical phenomenon in literate compositions, which Nollet situates in contradistinction to contemporary ideas of plagiarism.

While most approaches to formulaic language stress the expression as forming a unit of meaning, Sergei Klimenko’s contribution brings *rhythmic fillers* into focus. These have functional roles in regulating the flow of language in performance, but, because they do not communicate propositional meaning, they were sometimes omitted from early transcriptions of oral poetry. In “Rhythmic Fillers in Ifugao *hudhuds*”, Klimenko applies a sophisticated linguistic approach to the operation of language in sung performance and reveals the importance of these fillers for realizing verse form. A filler of this type does not correspond to an “integer of traditional meaning” (Foley and Ramey 2012: 80) or to a “morpheme-equivalent unit” (Wray 2008: 11–12) or their equivalents in other prominent approaches for formulaic phraseology current today, yet Milman Parry (1928) argued that the epithet ‘swift-footed’ could equally be used as a formulaic metrical filler, accompanying the name ‘Achilles’ to complete required line positions without contextual meaning. Like the preceding chapters in this section, Klimenko’s study explores weathered words at the boundaries of what is commonly addressed as formulaic language in verbal art.

### ***Constructing Worlds of Discourse***

The final section of the volume, Part V, considers what formulae do and how they operate, both formally and at the level of texture. In “Formulaic Expression in Olonets Karelian Laments: Textual and Musical Structures in the Composition of Non-Metric Oral Poetry”, Viliina Silvonen explores how linguistic and musical units are combined

during composition in the performance of a regional form of Karelian laments. These laments are a form of sung, non-metrical poetry. Formulae may be structured through alliteration, but their length is flexible: such flexibility operates in tandem with the different durations of melodic units. Silvonen's investigation leads to the valuable observation that formulaic density and verbal regularity vary considerably between expressions that are personal to the performer and those that are ritually required in every lament of a particular type.

Formulaic language in genres of prose storytelling has been widely acknowledged but rarely received concentrated attention as a broad phenomenon. The density and use of weathered words in such genres vary, but they are particularly prominent in the Russian tradition. Tatiana Bogrdanova explores how translators have engaged with the highly formulaic quality of these folktales by comparing multiple translations of a particular collection. In "Folklore Formulas in Arthur Ransome's *Old Peter's Russian Tales* (1916)", Bogrdanova reveals how different renderings of formulaic language can manipulate a reader's experience of the text, and she considers how translators encode cultural differences in narration.

Although weathered words in folktales may be less researched, some – such as *Once upon a time* – have vast resonance for the genre. This section, and the book, ends with Jonathan Roper's investigation of key formulae in English fairytales. In "Opening and Closing Formulas in Tales Told in England", Roper reveals the functional differences of common formulae in structuring narration, as well as their potential to evolve along the oral-written continuum. He shows that a single complex formula may travel between very different cultural environments, and maintain features belonging to one, but not the other. In addition to variation through elaboration and simplification, Roper makes the important observation that, even when formulae originate in prose, they may exhibit poetic structuring at a phrasal level, a point of note that underscores the false division between 'poetry' and 'prose'.

### **Warp and Weft**

The five sections of *Weathered Words* move through general overviews, theoretical discussions, and case studies to explore the limits of what might be considered formulae and the broader discourses constructed through them. Some of the threads of the individual chapters may be self-evident, yet others may escape view in the course of reading, especially when a particular chapter is read in isolation. In each chapter, the object of weathered words is taken up in different materials, bringing a particular aspect of a phenomenon, theory or method into focus, making a valuable contribution to the topic of formulaic language. Together, these diverse and juxtaposed representations form a portrait of *Weathered Words*.

*Weathered Words* is available for purchase from Harvard University Press at: <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674278394>. The open-access digital edition is available at: [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:Frog\\_LambW\\_ed.Weathered\\_Words.2022](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:Frog_LambW_ed.Weathered_Words.2022).

### **Notes**

1. This text is reproduced with minor adaptations from the introduction to *Weathered Words*, "A Picasso of Perspectives on Formulaic Language" (pp. 1–21), with kind permission from the publisher.

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