

**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.

## Formulaic creativity:

### Oral poetics and cognitive grammar

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#### 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 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; Foley 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), Radical Construction Grammar (Croft & Cruse, 2004), or Embodied Construction Grammar (Bergen & 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 teeth or limbs do, independently of the rest of cognition; (2) grammar, mainly syntax, is a generative mechanism for producing new sentences, based on a set of largely innate, abstract, formal rules (such as "[to make a question, insert the question word, put the auxiliary before the verb and leave an empty slot for an object behind]"). Apparently, this formal structure has little to do with meaning: it may provide some guidance as to the interpretation of the truthfulness of sentences ('logical form'), but it says virtually nothing about how meaning is organized in individual words ('lexical items'). Words are viewed as mere tokens to fill in abstract syntactic slots, while the fact that we know their meanings is a matter of our intuitive knowledge of the world, the study of which remains largely outside of the scope of the theory.

While sharing with the generativists the idea that language is a species-specific psychological capacity, cognitive grammarians reject the notion that there is a separate genetic endowment for language and consequently a clear differentiation between syntax and semantics. Rather, they insist on connections between the language grammar and other human cognitive capacities, and argue that the human cognitive system is essentially domain-independent. This entails that the same basic mental operations underlie all human activities, and that no specialized modules are required for explaining the different products of human cognition. Therefore, language too is part of our general cognitive capacities, which are acquired through experience, though of course there are some general principles which must be inborn. Language works as a tool to help us interact with the world, and incorporates our encyclopedic knowledge about the world. Its grammar is constructed through a long acquisition process, based on hearing, repetition, pattern finding, joint attention, or statistical inference, that is, on cognition, perception, and action taking place directly during *usage*.

Therefore, all linguistic activity is inextricably intertwined with its own communicative and semantic functions.

In terms of language acquisition, cognitive grammarians reject the notion of Universal Grammar as a genetically triggered biological program, but rather propose a combination of the general cognitive skills of *intention reading* (“theory of mind”) and *pattern finding* (categorization) as the most instrumental mechanisms in children’s acquisition of language (Tomasello 2003). According to this view, language is acquired through its use in communication and social interaction. Having learnt the words and phrases as “whole chunks” (*Gestalten*), children start using them in new situations through trial, error, and improvement, adapting the newly-learnt structures to new communicative purposes, separating the more from the less important constructs by means of statistical inference. Language is thus “constructed” as the product of a usage-based process. This leads cognitive linguists to propose that syntax, semantics, and pragmatics cannot be separated. There is always some meaning to the form, and some structure to the meaning. As a result, form templates paired with semantic and pragmatic content, known as *constructions*, have become the central entity of the cognitive linguistic approach to grammar. In this methodological system, constructions are the building blocks of language, both in use and in acquisition.

For instance, when one says “John kicked the ball out of the room” a generativist would hold that the structure (NP + VP), further analyzable into (S + V DO Adv) has nothing to do with the meanings of words ([male agent] [move by kicking] [def] [a round object for playing] [prep] [def] [section of a house]). A cognitivist, on the other hand, would say that the structure itself is all about meaning, i.e. that it presents a token of the *caused-motion construction*, where the very choice of the syntactic elements implies an interpretation in which *something is moved away from something else by the use of force*. The meaning of this construction seems even more important than word senses. Compare the use of the same structure in “They talked me out of my decision”. No sense of *talk* typically relates to caused motion, and no sense of *decision* typically relates to a location in space. Yet the meaning of the construction makes such uses possible. Thus, in the cognitive grammar approach, traditional grammatical units (morpheme, clause, sentence...) are not adopted. Rather, the term *construction* is used to relate to any cognitively plausible grammatical entity that binds form and meaning.

Cognitive grammarians also contend that constructions should be generally interpreted within *frames* (Fillmore 1982), functional constructs providing semantic points of reference within networks of related concepts. Frames are background scenarios from our

“encyclopedic” knowledge (of the world) which we need to share with our interlocutor in order to negotiate the same meanings. For instance, an idiomatic expression such as “Did you have a nice lunch?” is introducing a frame, let’s call it “the EAT frame” (of which LUNCH would be a subframe). Various culturally-acquired assumptions about what lunch is and how we go about it constrain the conversation from that point on. Frames can have various degrees of complexity and abstraction, and a great variety of lexical items can be associated to them.

Many frames have an inherent narrative structure. For example, the frame for having lunch in a restaurant not only has items such as waiter, customer, table, chair, food... or actions such as ordering, eating, drinking, paying, chatting... It also comes with a story: we choose the restaurant, we enter the place, we are told where to sit (or choose a seat ourselves, depending on the type of restaurant), we order, we eat, we request the bill, we pay and tip, we leave... These smaller events or parts of the story, including their variants, constitute a more or less fixed sequence and create a number of expectations about what is going to be said and done in each moment. The activation of any single part of the frame, by means of associated vocabulary or phrases, immediately makes the whole narrative available to anybody in the culture. The narrative nature of many frames is congenial with the notion of *script*, developed in artificial intelligence and other areas of cognitive science (Minsky 1975; Schank & Abelson 1977).

Both frames and scripts are theoretical constructs for representing dynamic knowledge structures as they are stored, developed, and manipulated in the mind. These structures are largely independent from language and start to form before language is acquired, although of course language soon becomes the major tool for building frames, remembering them, and using them in thought and action. The interplay of constructions and frames creates two large, albeit finite, repositories of built-in patterns that combine form, meaning, and function: a *constructicon*, or repository of linguistic constructions, linked to a network of frames (see <https://framenet.icsi.berkeley.edu/>). These mental structures are formed through a dynamic process of generalization and adjustment to context, shaped by usage as well as by our general cognitive capacities. According to cognitive grammar, mastering a language consists of both: the set of knowledge structures and the “online” skills to deploy, adapt, and make sense of the entrenched templates.

### **3. Formulaic creativity: Connecting oral poetics and cognitive grammar.**

#### 3.1. The connections.

As we saw, formulaic diction in oral poetry is essentially based on the skilful and agile manipulation of traditional phraseology and *clichés*, in the service of the tale. Therefore, the functioning of oral formulaic style is analogous to that of idiomaticity in everyday language, and thus requires the acquisition of similar communicative skills. The idea of form-meaning patterns with slots that are filled in through lexical selection is central to the process, which, far from mechanical, is highly creative, just like everyday speech is. Therefore, the way in which singers acquire formulas and themes cannot be accounted for by a generativist model, that is, by applying innate principles of syntax. Oral epic singers cannot simply “generate” their performances based on a set of predefined formal rules. If this were so, almost all such sentences would have to be new, that is, sentences that the singer has never, or only occasionally, uttered before (see MacKenzie 2000 for the argument that “institutionalized utterances,” against Chomsky’s proposal, are all-pervasive in language and verbal art).

Instead, what happens is exactly the opposite: oral singers repeat smaller or larger chunks of linguistic structures that have been previously used by themselves and other singers, and that are reused within the same performance as well as in other performances, of the same song as well as of other songs. These formulas have quite fixed form and semantics, interconnected with thematic units and with pragmatic and narrative intentions. Individual creativity arises not by producing unprecedented expressions, which are rare, but by recombining and varying formulaic systems: “The method of language is like that of oral poetry, substitution in the framework of the grammar. Without the metrical restrictions of the verse, language substitutes one subject for another in the nominative case, keeping the same verb; or keeping the same noun, it substitutes one verb for another. In studying the patterns and systems of oral narrative verse we are in reality observing the “grammar” of the poetry, a grammar superimposed, as it were, on the grammar of the language concerned. Or, to alter the image, we find a special grammar within the grammar of the language, necessitated by the versification. The formulas are the phrases and clauses and sentences of this specialized poetic grammar. The speaker of this language, once he has mastered it, does not move any more mechanically within it than we do in ordinary speech.”(Lord 1960, 36).

In connection with composition in performance, it seems that the three central concepts of cognitive grammar (linguistic patterning through constructions, organization of knowledge through frames and/or scripts, and general cognitive capacities needed for language acquisition and use) can be applied to the way epic singing skills are acquired, developed, and used. Parallels between *constructions* and *formulas*, between *frames* or *scripts* and *themes*, as well as between *instance-based language acquisition/use* and *composition-in-*

*performance* are striking and very relevant to the programmatic goals of both fields, oral poetics and cognitive linguistics. These parallels arise from the usage-based nature of both approaches, which have sought to identify commonalities across linguistic/poetic traditions by looking at how the human mind faces the challenges of performance. And both approaches conclude that these challenges can only be met by building on both universal cognitive capacities and the conceptual equipment provided by a particular culture.

Lord puts it very clearly in this passage: “Each theme, small or large – one might even say, each formula – has around it an aura of meaning which has been put there by all the contexts in which it has occurred in the past (...) To any given poet at any given time, this meaning involves all the occasions on which he has used the theme/formula, especially those contexts in which he uses it most frequently; it involves also all the occasions on which he has heard it used by others, particularly by those singers whom he first heard in his youth, or by great singers later by whom he was impressed. To the audience the meaning of the theme involves its own experience of it as well. The communication of this suprameaning is possible because of the community of experience of poet and audience” (Lord 1960, 148). If we replace formula, theme, and poet by *construction*, *frame*, and *speaker*, the passage becomes congenial for any cognitive grammarian.

These connections lead us to propose that cognitive grammar, in its double manifestation as construction grammar and frame semantics, does capture the central ideas of the oral formulaic theory as originated by Parry and Lord and developed by others (with metrics as an additional constraint to the pairing of linguistic form and semantic/pragmatic function):

- The acquisition and use of the traditional epic style is based on the flexible repetition and creative reuse of formulaic and thematic patterns.
- The full meaning of an oral poetic formula depends on how its semantics combines with its function as a building block in the traditional story, while at the same time it fits a metrical slot in the melody that is being sung.

At the same time, the mere existence and nature of oral composition in performance provides very relevant, ecologically-valid evidence in favor of usage-based approaches such as cognitive grammar and its various construction grammars. Moreover, given that the pressure for a fast negotiation of meaning is much stronger in oral composition in performance than in everyday language, idiomaticity is enhanced, and thus both verbal and

thematic patterns, constructions and frames, are exposed potentially even more clearly than they are in everyday speech.

### 3.2. Formulaic creativity.

Given these shared interests, both oral poetics and cognitive linguistics have individually led to complementary accounts of the unique human capacity for building infinite, novel, ad-hoc meanings from a discrete set of established templates. The ideas about meaning construction shared by these usage-based approaches could be summarized with another apparently self-contradictory term: *formulaic creativity*. Constructing every new meaning in every unique performance is not a fill-in-the-blanks process independent from the rest of cognition, but an imaginative manipulation of dynamic patterns that makes the most of our higher-order cognitive capacities (memory, conceptual integration, pattern identification, instance-based generalization, and several others), while never losing sight of the cultural background and its affective and social connections with the here-and-now.

As a result, both everyday speech and oral composition-in-performance are inherently idiomatic. Without relying on a vast and rich set of patterns, fixed at a generic level but also flexible, neither conversation nor oral poetry could take place. We would simply be unable to cope with the great performative demands that the communicative here-and-now poses on cognition. These demands are greatly enhanced in the context of oral epic performance, thus exposing the idiomatic nature of language even more clearly. Oral epic singers seldom produce any utterance that does not fit a formulaic pattern. At the same time, their activity results in a unique, extremely creative performance, meant for that particular moment of the tradition in which the poet is telling his tale.

Themes and story patterns, just like the parallel notions of frames and scripts, are as idiomatic in nature as constructions and formulas. Frames and scripts indeed arise from our general capacities for establishing generalizations over recurrent patterns, for projecting event structure and agency roles onto concepts that lack them, for retrieving schematic information from long-term memory, and others. But, at the same time, the mental structures that result from framing or scripting are organized sets of encyclopedic knowledge, or knowledge about the world, whether social or material. Frames and scripts, and this of course also applies to themes and story patterns, are therefore inherently cultural. They are formed through a process of cultural sedimentation, constantly evolving, quite often across long diachronies, and disappearing as well as re-appearing. Specific stories (e.g. the myths of Achilles' anger or

of Odysseus' travels) as well as generic narrative templates (e.g. the return of the hero) are deeply entrenched not only in the poet's mind but also in the minds of the audience.

This also applies to themes and even to many of their specific realizations, such as the descriptions of weapons belonging to the most relevant heroes. In our cultural environment, all of us have many times gone through the frame-script for having a meal at a restaurant or for requesting directions in the street. We have also become familiar with plots and characters from a given genre in literature or film. Similarly, the audience of oral epics has heard the same themes and stories (and formulas) many times, and this also includes the same individual stories and episodes. This creates a series of constraints and expectations, which press the poet to adhere to the "less negotiable" aspects of a knowledge structure. At the same time, meaningful variation of the most flexible parts is expected from a skillful singer, but this variation always requires the background of shared themes and story patterns as a constant reference. This use of thematic and narrative structures is also central to what we term formulaic creativity.

Formulaic creativity is therefore equally opposed to the mechanistic generation of grammatically acceptable sentences (e.g. as they can be produced by a computational algorithm) and to the verbatim repetition of fixed texts or expressions. Cognition and communication proceed in neither way. They rather emerge from the opportunistic reuse of what is already there, which is familiar for speaker and listener alike, and therefore easy to manipulate and transmit. This formulaic view of verbal creativity makes traditional verbal art (for oral poetics) or natural language use in general (for cognitive linguistics) an act of guided, situated, and planned improvisation (yet another oxymoron...), in which saying what is best for the here-and-now is always about adapting what has been said for similar occasions in innumerable moments of the past.

### 3.3. The semantic turn.

To exploit the full potential of the connections between the two research traditions, cognitive grammar could benefit from paying more attention to the diachronic aspects of a construction's meaning, and oral poetics would need a stronger focus on the semantic and pragmatic value of formulas. Metrics was the touchstone of Parry's argument in favor of the formulaic nature of Homer and oral epics in general, mainly because it provided a clear-cut differentiation from written composition. The importance of Parry's foundational work, which cannot be exaggerated, has caused his definition of the formula to be still the common currency in oral poetics nowadays: "A group of words which is regularly employed under the

same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (Parry 1930, 80). Within the immediacy of performance, the need to fill in a metrical slot with a given idea results in texts (if the performances are transcribed) that are much more formulaic than the *Aeneid*, the *Argonautika*, or any other written, “literary” epic.

In the early days of the Parry-Lord theory, assigning a rich semantic value to formulas was connected to the arguments in favor of the “literariness” of Homer. The writer, having time to reflect on his own words and seeking to create sophisticated poetic effects, chooses between a variety of options for the same metrical slot, while the oral singer must be subject to a strict expressive economy if he is to meet the demands of performance, which include producing a metrically valid line every few seconds. But such a sharp dichotomy between written and oral aesthetics is no longer necessary. First of all, in the initial stages of its evolution, writing does not depart from the spoken word so dramatically, but is rather meant to be read aloud or “performed”, and therefore does not completely eliminate the major features of oral composition. Moreover, cognitive and performative – or communicative – principles already underlie the metrical and rhythmic structures that arise within oral traditions (divisions into *cola* and verses, intonational units, melodic patterns). Autonomous metrical – and, where applicable, also rhythmic and melodic – sequences generally match information units that are active within short-term memory (Bakker 1997: 50-53). This synergy between the verbal and rhythmic or musical modalities ultimately results in oral epic discourse proceeding through the incremental concatenation of sequential units that are manageable in cognitive terms, a phenomenon that can be observed across traditions (Bonifazi and Elmer 2012: 103-106). On the other hand, there is of course much more to formulas than just their metrical function, as Lord himself says in his text on the traditional suprameaning, cited above. At the same time, Lord’s ideas also point into the right direction for the enquiry about how grammatical constructions acquire their meanings through (usually lengthy) cultural processes.

The more developed notion of the formula offered by Lord (Lord 1960, 30–67) is already similar to that of the construction in cognitive grammar: form-meaning pairings with a relatively fixed structure, further constrained by metrics, prosody, melody, and any other particularities of the oral poetic performance. Just like in construction grammar, there are formulaic systems, that is, abstract schemas such as [2/3-syllable epithet] + [name of the warrior in nominative or accusative]. These generic patterns admit formal variation, as in the Serbo-Croatian phrases for shifting narrative focus: “kad eto ga”, “kad eno ga”, “a vidi ga”, “a onda će”... which translate into English as “when here he was”, “when there he was”, “and

then he was seen”, “and then he would”.... Just like in first language acquisition, a proficient singer is characterized by his increasing mastery of these abstract generalizations in relation to narrative and pragmatic functions, as well as by the decreasing role of mere verbatim repetition of the chunks (an important resource for the apprentice) in his ever-evolving singing style.

Therefore, a strictly formal view of oral formulaic style can now be superseded by a more meaning-centered approach, which takes into account not only metrics but also meaning and function, as well as multimodal information such as prosody, melody and rhythm, or even gesture and bodily expression. Many oral poetics scholars have rethought Parry’s initial idea of formulas as limited in meaning, and particularly his emphasis on the metrical and repetitive aspects (see Edwards 1988, 24–30 and Bakker 1997, 10–14). This has led to a more complex view of idiomaticity in oral epics, which includes a diachronic perspective by examining the constant reference to the traditional universe beyond the individual performance. For example, Mirjana Detelić has proposed a distinction of layers of traditional meaning, specifying Parry-Lord’s “essential idea” for the Serbo-Croatian tradition, and showing that the functions of formulas in story segmentation, built-in by the traditional practices, are central to their meaning, form, and collocation (Detelić 1996).

This shift towards semantics is congenial with the meaning-driven proposal of cognitive linguistics, and in particular with construction grammar’s attention to both frequency and emergence of meaning, within a usage-based approach. For example, experimental research shows that pieces of discourse are psychologically identified as constructions depending on both their frequency and their emergent properties in form or function, and that their patterns are learned through repetition and structural priming (Goldberg 2009). To be cognitively plausible, oral formulas have to be learned, understood, and created in an analogous way, so that they can be remembered as effectively and unconsciously as grammar and the lexicon are. This suggests a balance between the two views on oral formulae: their “statistical”, strictly metrical nature, based on repeated appearance under the same metrical conditions, and their treatment as semantic units with emergent meaning beyond that of their constitutive elements.

Moreover, as was also emphasized by Lord (1960, 68–98), oral formulaic theory does not consider formulas in isolation, but views them as verbal patterns reused within thematic units (trip, departure, arrival, prayer, threat, assembly, battle, messenger, etc.), which follow larger story-patterns, rooted in ritual and myth. We also saw that, in cognitive grammar, constructions are generally interpreted within *frames*, functional constructs providing

semantic points of reference within the network of related concepts. Frame semantics, where verbal expressions are understood in terms of meaningful experiential gestalts, is an appropriate approach for examining the interplay between the storage of themes and formulae in composition in performance.

A theme, such as the arrival of the messenger or the celebration of an assembly, is constituted by its own set of formulaic patterns, which each singer develops throughout his career, according to his own dialect, style, and skill. Themes therefore perform the conceptual framing that is so indispensable for oral composition in performance. Frames are indeed necessary for everyday conversation to take place and for constructions to be selected and interpreted correctly. These constraints seem to be even stricter in oral poetry, since they are highly conventional, so that there seems to be much less room for misunderstanding than in ordinary conversation.

When a performer introduces a theme (say, the banquet), this causes quite a restricted set of expectancies with the audience that define what comes next (probably a battle in the morning, rather than a love affair) in the terms prescribed by the tradition. Also, the theme activates a repository of formulas in the mind of the performer. For example, epic in Serbo-Croatian often announces the arrival of a messenger with lines alluding to a cloud in the horizon, or a similar image. Then there is a stock of formulas for the cloud becoming bigger, for asking questions about what it might be, for finally identifying the messenger, for describing his arrival, etc. The skill of the poet and the situation of performance will condition to what extent the theme is developed at a particular point of the narrative. For instance, the singer might perceive that the audience is attentive and enthusiastic, and use ornamentation at the best of his capacities, or sense a lack of interest instead, and consequently dispatch the messenger theme with just two or three lines.

A crucial aspect of formulaic creativity is that, during performance, the negotiation of meaning never stops. For themes to guide the conceptual framing of the audience and help them navigate the story, they must be easily recognized and shared. As we saw in our summary of frame semantics, a conceptual frame, culturally and experientially constructed, is usually triggered by minimal grammatical cues, often by just one construction. For example, the term 'waiter' can activate the whole *restaurant* frame, a well-organized set of knowledge. Frames structure thought and constrain the semantics of constructions, which are always connected to our general knowledge. In the restaurant frame, for example, a well-delimited set of constructions can be expected, dealing with different aspects from ordering the meal to paying the bill. These cognitive practices necessarily precede any metrical constraints.

Metrics then adds a dimension that combines with the natural semantics to produce the further constraints needed by oral composition in performance.

So themes seem to play a role with respect to formulas that is analogous to the frame-construction relation, and this puts meaning at the center of our analysis of both everyday speech and verbal art. A meaning-centered approach combining the two research traditions would help us understand, in cognitive terms, the minimal prompts needed by the oral poet to introduce these typical scenes and settings, relying on the detailed knowledge of conceptual frames that he shares with the audience. Grammatical constructions provide minimal, underspecified cues that are nonetheless sufficient to activate complex frames, and many oral formulas seem to trigger themes with the same cognitive efficiency. We can also reach a better understanding of the way in which themes impose a conceptual framing that influences the final shape and function of formulaic expressions. In order to fully understand the idiomaticity of a formulaic expression, besides its metrics and its constructional meaning, we need to study its frame semantics in relation with the theme(s) it is associated with. Just like in the case of everyday linguistic constructions, there are further layers of meaning on the form-meaning-metrics patterns of oral formulaic style.

#### **4. Developing the connections: Possibilities for the study of formulaic creativity.**

The connection between cognitive grammar and oral formulaic theory can create many new opportunities for research, on both language and verbal art. The analysis of formulas and themes as semantic and conceptual units, in terms of constructions and frames, can provide fruitful insights not only into the way constructions are clustered, but also into how the narrative mind works in general terms. So far there is no frame semantic work in this area. Some pioneering research in cognitive oral poetics has been carried out by applying *scripts* (Minsky 1975), schemas, or story-grammar to story patterns and their relation with themes, particularly as resources for memory (Mandler and Johnson 1977; Johnson and Mandler 1980; Mandler 1984; Rubin 1995; Minchin 2001). But, beyond Lord's empirical research and detailed analyses, we do not have a unitary account of how cognition operates simultaneously at these three levels: verbal-formulaic, conceptual-thematic, and narrative (in larger plans for structuring stories), within the great demands that composition in performance places on memory and verbal creativity.

Throughout their lives, singers develop a repertoire of formulaic templates for each theme and a combination of themes for each story-pattern, instantiating them in an orderly

way, according to the circumstances of each particular performance (Lord 1960, 78–98). Is this the way in which constructions, frames, and scripts interact in general terms? When we learn constructions, do we learn them associated to frames, to typical scenes of interaction, as well as to larger narrative structures? The discovery of the closely interconnected triangle of oral epic (formula, theme, story-pattern) now becomes an invitation to investigate its counterparts in the constructionist framework and the underlying cognitive operations that make the narrative mind possible.

4.1. The formulaic acquisition of constructions: cognitive stylistics and phraseology.

Recent constructionist research shows that verbatim repetition of phrases and larger chunks plays a much larger role in verbal communication and memory than previously thought (Gurevich, Johnson, and Goldberg 2010). In everyday language, speakers identify formulaic expressions statistically from corpora of usage, and the usage-histories of these expressions make them salient in linguistic processing (Ellis and Simpson-Vlach 2009). This concurs with what oral poetic research has taught us about how singers learn their technique. Moreover, these data suggest that language emerges from statistical generalization across form and function in language use, and confirm Lord's theory of the learning sequence, viewed as a process that goes from repetitive formulas to more creative patterns or formulaic systems, with "formulaicity as a variable reflecting sequential dependencies in usage and degree of entrenchment in the learners' mind" (Ellis 2012, 37). Moreover, research in cognitive stylistics has shown that even quite fixed formulaic expressions are used creatively in discourse (Naciscione 2010). These combined insights of phraseology and oral formulaic theory can shed light on linguistic creativity, in both everyday and poetic discourse, and lead to a view of language acquisition more focused on idiomatic use than many previous approaches.

4.2. The constructicon

Linguistic knowledge is formed by the integrated network of constructions, interconnected through inheritance hierarchies, categorization, and instance-based memory. Rather than a set of transformational rules, it seems that what speakers "carry around" in their heads is a mental corpus (Taylor 2012), or *constructicon*, a collection of constructions analogous to the singer's repertoire of formulas, along with the knowledge of how to recombine and reuse these constructional/formulaic patterns during performance. The

construction is as indispensable a notion to construction grammars as the repository of formulas is to oral formulaic theory. Both corpora develop throughout a lifetime, adapting to a variety of situations and reflecting the experience of individuals and groups. A detailed computational model would be needed to study the construction effectively. At present, construction grammar cannot produce a complete model of language acquisition and use, because of the vastness, dynamicity and flexibility of any single speaker's construction (Bod 2009). Since the grammar of traditional epic is a fully autonomous subset of the construction, the living laboratory of oral composition in performance provides a more manageable set of data to study the mental network of form-meaning patterns, which at the same time would be rich and complex enough to observe constructional creativity fully at work. Many opportunities open for the study of formulaic creativity through constructionist corpus research on oral poetry.

#### 4.3. Multimodal construction grammar.

Favored by new digital resources for the study of audiovisual collections developed by the Red Hen Lab (<https://sites.google.com/site/distributedlittleredhen/>), recent research is showing that grammatical constructions can be associated with mental imagery reflected by various multimodal information co-occurring with speech, ranging from gesture to television production effects (Steen and Turner 2013; Zima 2014). This integration of word with multimodal communication seems to be intimately linked to performative aspects that serve to structure the narrative or the argumentation. In parallel to this research, oral poetics have recently shown that performative aspects are crucial in the final shaping of traditional epic (Bonifazi and Elmer 2012a, 2012b; Elmer 2010) and that mental imagery prompted by multimodal expressive resources plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning during performance (Bonifazi 2008; Bonifazi 2012). In particular, Bonifazi and her team have found visualization effects prompted by discourse markers and deictic elements in Homer and oral epic in Serbo-Croatian: zoom-in and zoom-out effects, viewpoint shifts and integrations, and several others. These phenomena suggest complex simulation across mental entities, seeking to connect the narration of the traditional past with the here-and-now of the performance (Bakker 1993; Bakker 2006). In parallel, construction grammarians have found visual effects that co-occur with temporal deictics such as the now+past construction as well as with other form-meaning patterns (Nikiforidou 2010; Dancygier 2012; Steen and Turner 2013). These efforts seem to call for yet another point of convergence between the study of oral epic and cognitive approaches to grammar.

In the present paper, we have outlined a methodological parallel between two apparently very different fields – the study of oral poetics, in comparative literature and folk studies, and the research of cognitive principles underlying human knowledge of language, in linguistics and cognitive science. A close reading of the principal contributions to the two research traditions – Parry and Lord’s theory of oral composition-in-performance and a number of studies in cognitive linguistics, especially construction grammar and frame semantics – has shown that Parry and Lord and modern cognitive linguistics seem to use only slightly different terminology to discuss very similar phenomena. In particular, oral poetic *formulae* are very reminiscent of cognitive linguistic *constructions*; *themes* in epic poems bear similarity to *frames* in Fillmorean semantics; and the process of *usage-based language acquisition* may work on a set of principles almost identical to that by which oral singers progressively acquire their skills for *composition in performance*. These parallels can in turn open a further set of questions that are quite topical in modern cognitive science – from the problem of human creativity to the study of multimodal communication, to name but two. We thus hope that this article has provided a first step in the establishment of the new interdisciplinary field of “cognitive oral poetics”, to the benefit of literary scholars, linguists and cognitive scientists alike.

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