Enjambement as a Criterion for Orality in Homeric and South Slavic Epic Poetry

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One of the most conspicuous consequences of the adding style of oral poetry is a strong tendency for the end of the sentence to coincide with the end of the verse. In other words, a relatively negligible number of overrun verses is to be expected. As in other aspects of the true nature of oral style, Milman Parry here too was a pioneer, comparing the frequency of various kinds of enjambement in Homer, Virgil, and Apollonius of Rhodes (1929).

Obviously, Parry considered enjambement a self-explanatory term and did not offer a formal definition. Subsequently, G. S. Kirk, in his elaboration of certain aspects of the problem of enjambement in Homer, defined it as “the carrying over of the sentence from one verse into the next, involving an overrunning of the verse-end” (1976:147). Admittedly, Svetozar Petrović objected recently that this definition does not agree with what is usually called enjambement in general versification because it ignores the existence of a strong sentence stop in the middle of the latter verse (1982:10n), a feature which is essential according to the majority of versification experts. There is, however, no doubt—and Petrović did not deny this—that Parry’s and Kirk’s concept of enjambement is wholly appropriate for their purposes.¹

Parry divided enjambement into two main groups that he called “unperiodic” and “necessary.” We have unperiodic enjambement when the sentence, in Kirk’s formulation, could have ended with the verse, but in fact is carried over into the succeeding verse by the adding of further descriptive matter (adverbial or epithetical) or, as Parry wrote, of “a word or phrase or clause of the same grammatical structure as one in the foregoing verse” (1929:207). This type of enjambement was considered by Parry as characteristic of oral style; he derived the term “unperiodic” from the ancient Greek critic Dionysius of Halicarnassus, but Kirk proposed instead the term “progressive” as more convenient. Necessary enjambement comprises cases in which, as Kirk explained, the sentence

¹ Cf., for example, the definition of enjambement in Preminger (1974:s.v.): “The completion, in the following poetic line, of a clause or other grammatical unit begun in the preceding line.”
cannot be considered complete at the end of the verse and must be carried over into the following verse. Parry further introduced a distinction between two subtypes of necessary enjambment without, however, giving special names to either of them. The main distinction is that in the first, weaker subtype a weak punctuation mark is possible at the end of the former verse, which is not the case with the second subtype. For example, the first subtype would consist of a subordinate clause in the former verse, such as “when he had gone,” and of a main clause in the latter one, while in the second subtype the verse-end divides the sentence without allowing even the weakest sentence stop at the point of enjambement (Kirk’s example is: “when he” in one line and “had gone” in the following one). Kirk supplied suitable denominations for both of these subtypes: “periodic” and “integral,” respectively. It is evident that this last group of enjambed verses is by its very nature contrary to the oral adding style, since it is inconceivable that a singer should be able to plan in advance sentence periods extending beyond the verse-end of several verses, at least not in the sense that every single verse should not contain a semantic and syntactic whole. If the thought of the first line is continued in the succeeding one, then it would be accomplished by adding a supplementary participle (the oulomenēn type in Iliad I.2) or an adverbial phrase, but not (or at least extremely rarely) so that the verse-end separates the subject from the predicate (or vice versa: the type hos mala polla / planghthē in Odyssey I.1-2), a transitive verb from its object (when the object is indispensable), a verb of incomplete sense (e.g., the Greek tugkhanein) from its verbal complement, and so on. Kirk added a third subtype of necessary enjambement, which he called “violent.” It covers instances in which the verse-end comes between a preposition and its noun, for example, or an epithet and the noun described or determined by it; in short, it separates words belonging closely together by semantic and/or syntactic criteria. However, this is a very rare phenomenon and he himself found only three instances in his entire corpus of 867 verses of Homer. Besides, he admitted that there is always a certain degree of subjectivity in distinguishing violent from integral enjambement. Therefore, he counted them together in his tables, as I have also in my analysis.

The table below shows the relationship between Parry’s terminology and Kirk’s as represented in the latter’s article (1976:148), the only difference being that the columns with Parry’s and Kirk’s terms have been given in reverse order. The numbers in the first column are Kirk’s symbols for various degrees of enjambement:
Table: Parry’s and Kirk’s Terms for Enjambment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Parry’s Terms</th>
<th>Kirk’s Terms</th>
<th>Possible Punctuation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>(no enjambement)</td>
<td>(no enjambement)</td>
<td>(actual) strong stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>unperiodic</td>
<td>progressive</td>
<td>(conceivable) strong stop, (actual) comma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>necessary (type 1)</td>
<td>periodic</td>
<td>comma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>necessary (type 2)</td>
<td>integral</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>violent</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For his statistical sample, Parry chose the first hundred lines from six books of the *Iliad* and from six of the *Odyssey* (selecting them by the formula \(1 + [4 \times n]\) where \(n\) stands for 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5), the first hundred lines from each of the odd-numbered books of the *Aeneid*, and the first hundred lines from all four books of the *Argonautica* plus lines 681-780 from the first book and lines 889-988 from the last book. Given in percentages and counting both types of necessary enjambment together, his results are as follows (1929:204):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No Enjambement</th>
<th>Unperiodic Enjambement</th>
<th>Necessary Enjambement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Iliad</em></td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Odyssey</em></td>
<td>44.8%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Argonautica</em></td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Aeneid</em></td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is striking in these results and what Parry himself particularly emphasized is the proportionately higher percentage of verses without enjambment in Homer (approximately every second verse), the considerably lower percentage of unperiodic enjambment in Virgil and Apollonius, and the appearance of necessary enjambment in almost every second verse of epic poems known to be written as compared to only every fourth in Homer. Parry attributed this frequency of unperiodic enjambment in the presumably oral style of Homer to an interplay of formulas and took it as a most significant mark of the adding style of oral poetry.

Soon after the war, Parry’s procedure was applied to South Slavic oral poems from Parry’s collection by Albert B. Lord (1948). On the basis of a sample of 2,400 epic decasyllables—600 from each of two songs by Salih Ugljanin and 600 from each of two by Avdo Međedović—he established the absence of enjambment in 44.5%, unperiodic enjambment in 40.6%, and necessary enjambment in only 14.9%. Lord analyzed this last type into six sub-categories. The first contains an apostrophe at the beginning of a speech, consisting of a noun in the vocative case plus some
word or phrase, frequently in apposition, to fill out the line; for example:\textsuperscript{2}

\begin{center}
\textit{Sultan Selim, od svijeta sunce} \quad \text{Sultan Selim, light of the world.}
\end{center}

As Lord noted, this is the most unnecessary type of necessary enjambement. The second sub-category involves a subordinate clause in the preceding line:

\begin{center}
\textit{Da nijesu ovaki junaci,} \quad \text{If they were not such heroes,}

\textit{Ne bi za nji znale kraljevine.} \quad \text{The kingdoms would not have known}
\end{center}
\begin{center}
\text{of them.}
\end{center}

“These two types cover the largest number of cases,” Lord notes (117). The third is similar to the second of the first two, involving an adverbial phrase in the initial line:

\begin{center}
\textit{No u jutru prije zore rane...} \quad \text{But in the morning, just before dawn...}
\end{center}

In the fourth category an explanatory clause in the latter line completes the meaning of the main clause in the former line:

\begin{center}
\textit{Bog će videt', a videt' Krajina,} \quad \text{God will see, and so will the men of}

\textit{Šta će Luka Pavičević radit'}. \quad \text{the Border,}
\end{center}
\begin{center}
\text{What Luka Pavičević will do.}
\end{center}

There are, in addition, cases of parallel grammatical constructions in the upper and lower lines (“either . . . or . . .,” “not only . . . but also . . .,” and so on); for example:

\begin{center}
\textit{Al nam valja Bagdat prifatiti,} \quad \text{Either we must take Bagdad,}

\textit{Al Stambola zemlju jostaviti...} \quad \text{Or leave the country of Stambol . . .}
\end{center}

But, as Lord remarked, in all the preceding instances there is not to be found “a single case of an adjective in one line modifying a noun in the next, or the subject in one line separated from its verb in the following line, or of any integral part of the sentence structure separated by the pause at the end of the line from another integral part” (117-18). In fact, as Lord noted, there do exist some rare cases of this type of enjambement in his sample: only one instance was found in the 1200 verses of Salih Ugljanin, and twenty-two in the same number of Avdo’s verses; for example:

\begin{center}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{2} I draw on Lord (1948) for the descriptions and examples.}

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\textit{306 ZDESLAV DUKAT}
All the horses of the imperial agas
Were tied by their halters before the inn.

However, as Lord indicated (119), with Avdo it is often a question of a “variation” of a more regular type (one of the preceding five sub-categories); for example:

Husejine, ja sam jutros, sine, Husein, my son, this morning I
Kod hanume mrku kahvu pijao. Drank black coffee with my lady . . . 

instead of the more usual and more correct

Husejine, moj milosan sine, Husein, my dear son,
Ja sam jutros mrku kahvu pijao I drank my black coffee this morning
Kod hanume u šikli odaji. With my lady in our beautiful room.

Petrović (1982) objected that there was not a single instance in these twenty-three exceptional enjambements where a comma would be impossible at the verse-end. Though this is generally true, however, as we have seen it is not always the case.

Parry’s procedure was re-examined on the basis of the Greek material by Kirk (1976). His results differ considerably from those obtained by Parry, although at least part of the deviation could be due to his different sampling and still more, perhaps, to the fact that his definition of the sentence was not so restrictively grammatical as that of Parry. The differences are not easy to account for, since Parry did not provide tables showing how he classified single verses but gave only the sum total of various degrees of enjambement. For his sample, Kirk chose one entire book of the Iliad, the Patrokleia, Book XVI. His reasons for this choice were that it is one of the longest books in both Homeric poems (the fourth longest, in fact), that it occupies a key position in the action of the Iliad (the death of Patroklos as a turning point in the plot), and that it contains various types of scenes typical of both the Iliad and the Odyssey: arming and preparation for battle, divine scenes, speeches—both calm and excited—exhortations and taunts, fighting scenes of all kinds, and many extended similes. While it is doubtful that this judgment is valid in regard to the Odyssey, there is no question of the soundness of Kirk’s conclusion that the Patrokleia “is untypical of the style of the Iliad only in that it is too typical of it” (155). Taken as a whole, the Patrokleia with its 867 lines is a somewhat larger sample than Parry’s 600 lines of the Iliad, but considerably smaller than his 1200 lines from both poems taken together.

The results of Kirk’s analysis are 248 verses with progressive enjambement, 106 with periodic, and 181 with integral and violent, while
the rest of the 332 verses are unenjambed (182, Table B); in percentages this distribution amounts to 38.2% without enjambement, and 28.6%, 12.2%, and 21.0%, respectively, for the various kinds of overrunning verses.

If we add the percentages for periodic and integral (plus violent) enjambement, the result is 33.2%, which is substantially higher than Parry’s figures for necessary enjambement (for the Iliad alone, the increase is nearly 7%), but it is still much lower than Parry’s 49% for the Aeneid and the Argonautica. Furthermore, Kirk’s progressive enjambements are more frequent than Parry’s unperiodic enjambements. But most striking is the deviation in the number of lines without enjambement: in Parry’s Iliad sample we find 48.5% against Kirk’s 38.2%, a notable difference exceeding 10%. In fact, the number of such verses in Homer, according to Kirk’s count, agrees with the percentage Parry had established for Virgil and exceeds that for Apollonius by a small margin. Thus there remain the considerably higher number of progressive enjambements and the considerably smaller number of “necessary” ones as distinctive features that would differentiate Homer from writing poets.

I made a similar count along Kirk’s lines in the Patrocleia, but independently of his tables. Since I probably used somewhat broader and looser criteria, I arrived at a somewhat higher percentage of integral enjambement: 222 instances, or 25.6%, against his 21.0%. I have, for example, counted as integral the enjambement in the following lines: 7 (kourē / nēpīē, noun/epithet), 119 (gnō d’Aias . . . / erga theōn, verb of perception/direct object), 194 (meteprepe . . . / egkhei, “he excelled / with his spear”), as well as all cases where the verse-end separates the subject from the predicate (or vice versa) regardless of a possible interpolation of a part of speech that allows for a comma at the end of the former verse (Kirk assessed such cases differently, and Petrović would probably agree with him). There appear, of course, several lines on which I disagree with Kirk the other way round, which is further proof that he was right in stating that a certain measure of subjectivity is unavoidable in such analyses (Kirk 1976:150). For example, I consider it inconsistent to classify the enjambement in lines 617 and 620 as integral but that in lines 770 and 831 as periodic: all four verses end with a participle after which a comma is possible.3 But these are trifles, and what is important is that both Kirk’s stricter criteria as well as my looser ones yield a relatively high proportion of integral enjambement in a supposedly oral text. But, as we shall see later, the same point is valid also for Parry’s percentages.

The most severe critics of Parry’s methodology until now have been

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3 In my text of the Iliad (H. Färber, ed., Munich, 1954), there is, in fact, a comma at the end of ll. 617 and 620, but not after ll. 770 and 831.
Dee Lesser Clayman and Thomas van Nortwick (1977). They disagreed with him on his sampling technique, lack of proper statistical tests to determine the significance of his results, and assumption that the conclusions, reached on the basis of a study of only three poems, were valid for all Greek hexameter poetry. Therefore, in their opinion, his final conclusion was unreliable (Barnes 1979:1). However, Harry R. Barnes, in a re-examination of their work, showed that the deviation in their statistical findings is the result of the application of a different definition of enjambement, that their figure for Aratus is erroneous, and that their own sampling in the case of Theocritus is incorrect. His conclusion (9) was that Clayman and Van Nortwick “are correct in objecting that Parry overemphasized this one type of enjambement,” that is, unperiodic, “as a distinguishing characteristic of oral poetry,” but that they are wrong in denying a correlation between the degree of enjambement and the oral or written form of composition of the respective songs, as asserted by Parry.

My intention here is not to question the basic soundness of Barnes’s criticism of Clayman and Van Nortwick, but rather to call attention to the first part of his conclusion referred to above. It seems to me that there is a tendency among oralists to overemphasize the role of unperiodic (Kirk’s progressive) enjambement in oral poetry. In my opinion, necessary (type 2) or integral enjambement is more indicative of the way in which a certain piece of poetry came into existence. If we accept as valid the maxim that in oral poetry the verse-end and the sentence-end naturally tend to coincide, then integral enjambement should not be expected to occur to any significant extent, since it is by its very nature contradictory in oral traditional improvisation. Lord’s analysis strongly supports this point: in his sample of 2,400 incontrovertibly oral verses, a mere twenty-three instances of his sixth subtype of enjambement were found, that is, less than 1% of the total sample, a figure in clear disagreement with the percentages established for Homer by various scholars.4

To test Lord’s results, I have analyzed a certain number of oral traditional poems from the collection of Vuk Karadžić. Admittedly, some adherents of the Harvard oral school often object that Vuk did some editing before he published the collected songs and thereby spoiled (or falsified) their documentary value. However, Petrović (ms.) showed recently how negligible his interventions had been: apart from some minor and unimportant points, only occasionally did he attempt to bring the songs into accord with what he established as the norm of the singer. After all, Parry’s Yugoslav assistant, Nikola Vujnović, also intervened during the

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4 I have made random tests on various oral or “oral-derived” poems (see n. 6, below) either in the original (Song of Roland) or in translation (Manas, Alpamys); the findings seem to confirm the thesis of this article, but before such results can be quoted as evidence more extensive analyses are needed.
composition of the songs recorded by Parry: Lord informs us that Vujnović drew
the attention of the singers to patent mistakes, metrical irregularities, blunders in
the subject matter or plot of the songs, and so on. Therefore, I believe that the use
of Vuk’s collection as a corpus of authentic oral poetry is fully legitimate.

It is well known that Vuk published his heroic (muške) songs in volumes 2-4
of his collection. They comprise, respectively, 100 songs (with 18,696 verses, not
counting a small number of variants here and elsewhere printed in notes), 87 songs
(with 16,606 verses), and 62 songs (plus four in an appendix, all together 15,347
verses), which total 253 songs with 50,649 lines. I have used for my analysis all
the songs in the second volume and songs 24-43 from the fourth volume (1932).
My sample was chosen in order to include the songs of Vuk’s best singers (Tešan
Podrugović, Filip Višnjić, Starac Milija, Starac Raško, Stojan Hajduk, Živana,
Stepanija, and Jeca). I have, therefore, analyzed enjambment in 120 songs with
24,575 lines, which is approximately half of Vuk’s entire corpus of epic poetry. I
restricted myself, however, to counting only those instances of enjambment that
could be classified as Parry’s type 2 of necessary enjambment, or Kirk’s integral
overrunning, that is, those that are in most patent disharmony with the oral adding
style: separation of the subject from the predicate by verse-end and all similar cases.
As mentioned earlier, strictly formal criteria are difficult to establish and some other
count might yield different data. However, the general impression would hardly
change substantially.

To clarify my method of classification, I cite below some examples
illustrating what I consider integral enjambment:

Vuk 2, No. 68, ll. 98-99, p. 386:

Kako j’ proklet Arap isekao
Sedamdeset i sedam junaka,

How the accursed Arab cut down
Seventy-seven heroes,

(The direct object in the second line is indispensable to the meaning of the
subordinate clause in the first line.)

Vuk 2, No. 94, ll. 312-14, p. 561:

Ne bih ti se mlada pokrstila
Ni za kakvo blago od svijeta
Do za tvoju na ramenu glavu.
I, young one, wouldn’t become a Christian
For any wealth in the world
Except for your head on [your] shoulders.
Vuk 4, No. 33, ll. 64-65, p. 208:

Šestu posla [knjigu], brate, 
na četiri
Na četiri sandžak-alajbega.

The fourth [letter] he sent, my brother, 
to the four 
To the four sandžak-alajbeys.

(This is an instance of violent enjambement attenuated by the repetition of the final words of the first verse at the beginning of the second one.)

Vuk 4, No. 33, ll. 600-01, p. 222:

Turci daše pleća, pobjegoše
Drini vodi ladnoj na obalu.

The Turks took to their heels, 
they fled 
To the bank of the Drina, the cool stream.

(The complement in the second verse is necessary in the sense that the verb pobjegoše ["they fled"] otherwise remains to some extent dangling; perhaps this example is the least convincing.)

Vuk 2, No. 35, ll. 145-46, p. 189:

Tvoga starca, stara Jug-Bogdana
Na muke sam udario teške.

Your elder, old Jug-Bogdan, 
I have submitted to painful torture.

Vuk 2, No. 36, ll. 2-4, p. 192:

Kada slavni srpski knez Lazare
Posla zeta Miloš Obilića
U Latine da kupi harače,

When the glorious Serbian
Prince Lazar
Sent his son-in-law Miloš Obilić
To the country of the Latins to
collect poll taxes,

(This is again one of the most violent cases of enjambement.)

Vuk 2, No. 81, ll. 111-12, p. 455:

Slušaj čudo: Todor Pomoravac
Odveo mi snahu isprošenu.

Hear about a wonder: Todor of Pomoravlje
Abducted my daughter-in-law already
promised in marriage.
But tomorrow I intend at Kosovo
To die for the Christian faith.

(The second verse contains a necessary complement to the verb of the first verse.)

So the servants and the maids started
To give presents to the wedding guests at the door.

In my sample of 24,575 lines I have found a total of only 271 instances of integral enjambement (some of them open to doubt, as I have illustrated), which amounts to no more than 1.1% of the sample. This result shows great similarity to Lord's percentage for the songs of Salih Ugajanin and Avdo Međedović, and a remarkable deviation from all figures obtained in analyses of Homer (either by Parry, Kirk, or Clayman and Van Nortwick).

Perhaps one might object that such a low percentage of integrally enjambed verses in South Slavic oral poems has something to do with the nature of its decasyllabic meter. Anticipating this objection, I undertook an analysis, along the same lines, of the written poem Gorski vijenac [The Mountain Wreath] of Petar II Petrović Njegoš, who was himself the author of folk songs preserved in Vuk's collection (1967). There are many examples of most violent enjambements in this written poem; for example:

ll. 583-84:

Several times, on account of the hero, would the serene sky roar with laughter.

ll. 1522-23:

that once the policemen and spies slandered a doge.

ll. 1680-81:

What a lot can in a year
Enjambments so violent in nature are rare in truly oral songs. The frequency of enjambed verses is also considerably higher in Njegoš: in the first 800 verses, I have counted 53 instances of integral enjambement, or 6.6%, that is, six times as many as in the songs from Vuk’s or Parry’s collections. Of course, this is still far below Parry’s 49% for Virgil and Apollonius, and even substantially less than in Homer. If we now consider together the results obtained by Lord and by me in analyzing South Slavic oral poetry, those of Parry and Kirk in their studies of Homer, and Parry’s percentages established for Virgil and Apollonius, and if we compare them with one another, the surprising fact is that the figure for necessary/integral enjambement in Homer is considerably higher—moving in the direction of written poetry—than those found as valid for poems composed by oral traditional improvisation (see note 5). How should this unexpected result be explained? In my opinion, there are two possible answers: either the principle of verse = sentence is to be abandoned, or Homer is not a poet of the same kind as Tešan, Milija, or Avdo. In my view, the second alternative is more persuasive. This would not mean, of course, that Homer was another Virgil or Njegoš, but only that writing had played some role in the production of what we now read as the Iliad and the Odyssey. While not to be classified either as an oral singer or as a literate poet, he should be taken as someone in between those types. The most apt and convenient designation for that category that occurs to me is John Miles Foley’s “oral-derived”: this does not negate his deep indebtedness to the oral tradition, but does offer an explanation for certain features in his poems that are difficult to reconcile with oral character. If this article is not completely mistaken, enjambement is one such distinctive feature strongly pointing in the same direction.

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5 Why the percentage of integral enjambement in a written poem is, after all, relatively low is another problem requiring a separate discussion. With regard to Parry’s figures, we must recall, of course, my earlier remarks, namely, that his figures for necessary enjambement include both of Kirk’s periodic and integral types, but this difference has already been taken into account for my conclusions, which are based on the strikingly low figure for integral (plus violent) enjambement in South Slavic oral poetry (about 1%) as compared to Kirk’s 21% and my 25.6% in the Iliad.

References


Preminger 1974