The Oral Style of the *Rgveda*

George E. Dunkel

1. The Study of R̥gvedic Repetitions

In the second volume of his 1877 edition of the *Rgveda*, Theodor Aufrecht collects about three thousand repeated verses and phrases from that text. Beginning with the paired Vālakhilya hymns 8.49-52, which he describes as “two versions of the same material . . . like two school-essays” (1877:II, vii), Aufrecht then lists, over twenty-five pages, 176 sets of formulaic verses and variants which “express the same ideas in a somewhat different style” (1877:II, xi). At the end of the volume he appends over 150 double-columned pages of verse-beginnings and parallel passages, along with their variants in the other Vedas (1877:II, 514-666).

From their plenitude he concludes that the *Rgveda* is the remnant of a long poetic tradition, in line with the Vedic belief in “an oldest or original Veda, of which the present ones are just relics.” He considers that “only few hymns are still in the form in which they were originally composed; . . . only a remnant of the ancient hymns of India survives” (1877:II, xii). This attitude is crystallized in his calling a rṣi (a Vedic singer or oral poet) an epigone (1877:II, xxiv).

In his epochal *Rig-Vedic Repetitions* Maurice Bloomfield reckons that about one-fifth of R̥gvedic verses can be considered to be repetitions (1916:4). The total of repeated whole verses rises to “not far from a third” when the variants of the other Vedas are taken into account (Bloomfield and Edgerton 1930:11).

Bloomfield of course sees that shorter phrases of noun and adjective, of verb and subject or object, and of local particle and noun are even more frequent than the repeated whole verses: “Set phrases, groups of two or three words—what Bergaigne used to call formulas—are, as every Vedist knows, the commonplace of Vedic technique” (1916:xiv); “It will be seen that

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1. This sketch arose from the research project “Familiengrammatik des Rgveda” at the Indogermanisches Seminar of the University of Zürich, funded from May, 2006, to August, 2009, by Merbag AG, Zug, and by the Swiss National Science Foundation, Bern. I thank both of these far-sighted organizations for their support. The complete version, with full material, will appear as Chapter 6 of my *Rgvedic Family Grammar* (forthcoming). R̥gvedic translations are those of Jamison and Brereton 2014.

2. Bloomfield similarly notes, “They read like two essays on the same theme, written by the same author, in two slightly differing moods” (1916:12).

3. Abel Bergaigne frequently did use the term “formula” in the general sense of “text-passage” or “statement,” but without regard to repeated word-groups (1878-83).
repetition of two or more consecutive words is an established feature of R̥g-Vedic composition” (4). He therefore distinguishes between “important, word-for-word repetition,” that is, of entire verses, and these “partial, less important repetitions” (4-5, 8-12). Of the latter he is remarkably scornful: “mere collocations of two or more consecutive words,” “merely consecutive words,” “mere groups of words or set phrases” (3-4); “unimportant, formulaic, and hap-hazard . . . expressions” (9); “conventional thought and mechanical utterance” (21); “A great many of the repeated passages consist of commonplaces, or are mere formulas” (22). He sees the inflection of a formula as an “unimportant stylistic or metrical accident” (9).

Bloomfield’s disdain for the “partial repetitions” follows naturally from his focus on repeated whole verses. This disinterest keeps him from rigorously analyzing these shorter repetitions, so that he has no way to decide whether the ten variants of 8.56.5c, agníḥ śukrēṇa śociśā (“Agni with (his) blazing flame”), are modifications or different formulas (1916:9).

Of a R̥gvedic reverse concordance that Bloomfield created using the original cut-and-paste technique (1916:xvii, 2-3, 11), only the collection of 1,675 repeated cadences ever saw print (1916:653-74). This did suffice to prove that repetitions are far more frequent at the ends of verses than at the beginnings (1916:11). Bloomfield saw that in order to study the “partial repetitions,” that is, the formulas, even ab initio and a tergo concordances together would not suffice; instead something far more laborious, a “word-for-word concordance,” would be necessary (1916:3-4, 13); with Lubotsky’s work (1997), this dream has now become a reality.

2. Formulas in Homer and the R̥gveda

Less often cited than Milman Parry’s classic definition of the formula, “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (see A. Parry 1971:xxxii), but perhaps a better summary of his viewpoint, is the following: “The diction which is needed for making verses orally . . . is made of a really vast number of word-groups each of which . . . expresses a given idea . . . and fills just the space in the verse which allows it to be joined” (M. Parry 1971d [1930]:270). Both versions hold up well for the repeated noun-epithet formulas on which they are based, but less so when it comes to other types of repeated word-groups. A description of Parry’s work on formulas and oral poetry must be omitted here, but two general characteristics which he ascribes to formula-systems do need to be addressed.

2.1 Formular Economy

The avoidance of metrical doublets, known as formular economy or thrift, comes about because alternatives are needless in oral poetry. Parry admits openly and often that formular economy entirely obviates meaning (as regards the epithets at least): “one expression is useful in

4 Since Bloomfield is so insistent on this point let it be said that R̥gvedic poetic formulas are often split and over a fifth is inherently discontinuous.

5 A condition which holds true for Homer as well.
composition; equivalent expressions add no further advantage” (1971b [1928]:175)—except, of course, the advantage of differences in meaning being possible.

However Parry does in fact find a great many metrically equivalent formulas (1971b [1928]:173-89). A few he is able to explain away by analogy with other formulas or by truncation. But outside of the name-epithet systems, the doublets or “breaches of economy” are even more frequent. Friedrich concludes that between a fifth and a third of formula-systems present such breaches, and sometimes more than half. Formular economy is thus reduced from a principle to a tendency (2007:65, 140).

For the Rgveda the notion of formular economy is utterly otiose; in its simpler measures the choice of metrically equivalent epithets is considerable, as for the two main deities:

Indra: śatakratu = śacīpati-, kratumant = harivant-, gopati = satpati-, pārbhid = vajrīn-, šakra- = šūra = ugra-.

Agni: viśvavedas = jātavedas-, ūrjām pāti = vaiśvānara-, havyavah = viśvavid-, subhaga = atithi-.

2.2 Formular Extension or Density

Parry’s teacher Antoine Meillet taught that Homer was entirely formulaic (1923:61), and Parry implies this as well (1971b [1928]:80, cf. 8-9, 21). Based on an analysis of fifty verses, and having loosened his definition of the formula to include parallel phrase structures, he concludes that formulas occur “one at least to every verse or so” (1971d [1930]:312). Reducing the sample to fifteen lines and using the same liberalized definition of the formula, Albert Lord reckons with “well over 90 per cent” of that text being formulaic (1960:144). Exiguous as they are, these samples have given rise to a “dogma of the 100% formularity of Homer” (Finkelberg 2004:245, cf. 236).

It took decades for objections to be raised. Arie Hoekstra opines that “the supposition that Homeric poetry is wholly formulaic is at all events unprovable (if not entirely unsound)” (1965:16). Joseph Russo notes the “surprisingly limited scope of these analyses . . . on which Parryan orthodoxy of 80-90 per cent is based” (1976:40). Although Brian Hainsworth agrees that only one verse in ten may be totally free of formulas (1968:16-17), he still finds the frequency of non-formulaic material to be “disturbingly high” (1962:66) and that “a large part of [the Iliad’s] diction is not formular in the strict sense” (1993:4, 17), estimating total formulaicity to be no higher than “from one-third to one-half of the total” (1964:164 and 1968:16-17, 131; 6“A formula contained in a more complex formula . . . , formulae preserved because of their presence in more complex formulae” (M. Parry 1971b [1928]:180-81).

7See Hoekstra’s index under “equivalents” and “thrift” (1965:167, 171); surprisingly skeptical is Hainsworth 1968:7 and 1993:24-26.

8Such as, in an extreme example, δῶκεν ἑταῖρῳ and τεῦχε κύνεσσιν. These have been called “sentence or phrase patterns” (Hainsworth 1968:16-7, 41-42, and 1993:9-10) and “structural formulas” (Russo 1966:217-40). This definitional shift has not escaped criticism; see Hoekstra 1965:11-2, 15-16, 24-25; Hainsworth 1968:16-17; Russo 1997:242-46, with n. 19.
followed by Finkelberg 2004:245). Naturally the formulaic density can vary from place to place: Hainsworth (1968:110-12) contrasts the higher formulaicity of a battle scene with the lower formulaicity of a lament.

For the *Rgveda* the question of formular density has been asked only in terms of the repeated whole verses. Bloomfield found these to constitute a fifth or more of the text, whereas the *versus iterati* that have fascinated Homerists since Aristarchus of Samothrace make up a third.9 The higher frequency of repeated whole verses explains why the Homeric type-scenes tend to pale in a way the *Rgveda* never does. Conversely, due to its shorter verses and more limited subject matter, repetition in the *Rgveda* can at times approach a hypnotic incantation in a way that Homer never does.

Although Homer repeats more whole verses, the *Rgveda* preponderates in a specific type to which Parry (1971e [1933]:376-90) drew particular attention due to its usefulness in oral-poetic composition: verses containing exactly one sentence, that is, whose metric and syntactic borders coincide. In the *Iliad* such coterminous verses are one in ten, in the *Rgveda* one in four (Dunkel 1996:206). The lesser use of one-verse sentences makes Homeric poetry flow more continuously.

The *Rgveda* and the Homeric epics, both at least half formulaic, are quite comparable in bulk as measured by lexemes and syllables:

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<th>Verses:</th>
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<th>Lexemes:</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Rgveda</em>:</td>
<td>39,67610 (8-12 syllables)</td>
<td>164,76611</td>
<td>9,89112</td>
<td>395,91513</td>
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<td><em>Iliad + Odyssey</em>:</td>
<td>27,850 (12-18 syllables)</td>
<td>198,83714</td>
<td>9,893</td>
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Of course, the non-formulaic (Parry’s “untraditional” and “unschematized”) language is no less important than the formulas, as its underived and unique expressions are crucial for the investigation of poetic originality.

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9 Schmidt (1885:viii) counts 9,253 *versus iterati*, including minor variants, out of the total of 27,850 verses; see also M. Parry 1971b [1928]:8, n. 2.

10 This is based on the text of Van Nooten and Holland 1994.

11 As counted in the “Familiengrammatik des Rgveda” project (see above, footnote 1).

12 This is the number of entries in Grassmann’s *Verzeichnis der Wörter* (1873:1690-1739), including the particles (358 of the total).

13 In the metrically restored text of Van Nooten and Holland 1994, as counted in the “Familiengrammatik des Rgveda” project (see above, footnote 1).

14 This and the number of lexemes are according to the *Thesaurus linguae graecae*, available at [https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu](https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu).

15 Estimated by reckoning 27,800 x 14.5 (the average between 12 and 17).
3. Formular Flexibility in Homer

Parry’s definition of the formula does not expressly exclude nominal and verbal inflection, but these concern him only insofar as they lead to hiatus or brevis in longo (1971b [1928]:68-74 and 1971c [1928]:197-201). The idea that Homer’s poetic formulas are basically fixed in form was rejected by Bryan Hainsworth (1962, 1968, and 1993) and Arie Hoekstra (1965) in favor of the view that the Homeric formula was flexible in various ways. Hainsworth’s final panoply of modifications includes change of word order, movement, inflection and suffixal variation, expansion, and separation (including enjambment); these can apply concurrently. He estimates between a third and a half of formulas to be flexible (1968:118-19, 122). In spite of all these types of modification, “the word-group persists” (Hainsworth 1993:26).

The effect is to break Parry’s intimate link between form and meter. Far from being the ultimate explanation for all formulaic usage, the meter is now just a framework over which the supple formulas disport themselves.

The reaction to this development has varied from acceptance, active or tacit,16 to “a confused state” (Russo 1997:250, cf. 242, 252), “general bewilderment,” and even to “a major crisis . . . and a defensive, if not apologetic, attitude” so extreme that publication in this field has “sharply decreased” (Finkelberg 2004:244-46).

As regards the R̥gveda there is no such controversy, since no overly stiff definition of the formula—or any definition at all—exists to react against. When one is put in practice, the formulas turn out to be even more mobile and flexible than Homer’s.

4. The Advent of Writing

In India writing remained unknown until long after the completion of the authoritative samhitā-text (perhaps around 600 BCE). Its first appearance there in any form was the Aramaic script, brought by the Persian Achaemenids after 500 BCE. Over the centuries this served as the basis for the Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī scripts, first attested in King Aśoka’s Prākrit rock inscriptions of c. 250 BCE (see Salomon 2003:87-89, 92-93). Given this chronology, the R̥gveda cannot possibly have been composed, collected, and edited in any manner other than orally. The earliest preserved manuscripts of the R̥gveda date from about 1350-1450 CE; they are practically irrelevant as regards its transmission.

While Parry’s guslarī mostly still “re-created” orally, as they were illiterate (Lord 1960:20; Kirk 1962:84),17 in Greece the earliest rock graffiti and vase inscriptions are practically contemporaneous with the time assumed for “Homer,” about 750-700 BCE. Homer’s ignorance of writing has been the communis opinio since Friedrich Wolf’s 1795 Prolegomena ad Homerum, but since the 1950s the possibility has repeatedly been suggested that the proto-Iliad might have been written on skin or papyrus, either by a scribe (“oral dictation”) or by the singer

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17 In fact becoming literate notably worsened their style (Friedrich 2007:138 n. 223).
himself ("oral autography"; Lord 1960:124, 129). This does not change the fact that Greek epic reached the level which made Homer possible over many generations without the use of writing.

The delay between the end of composition and the advent of writing was centuries long in India, but practically nonexistent in Greece. The period from the end of composition until the use of writing to record our texts differs even more between the two societies. Despite this, the oral styles of both the Rgveda and Homer are still recognizable as such.

5. The Process of Canonization

Whatever "Homer himself" may have done, in Greece writing was early on felt to be necessary, whether due to continued poetic creativity or to less-than-perfect memory; acceptance was quick. Within two centuries Peisistratos not only needed, but was able to collect numerous official or approved texts from other municipalities. But after Śākalya’s samhitā the Rgveda was not transcribed in writing for over a millennium.

The reason for the indifference to writing in India is the sheer quality of the brahmanic oral transmission, which prevented any variation. To this day the Vedic-Hindu tradition rejects any dependence on writing, just as did the Roman pontifices and the Gaulish Druids (Watkins 1976:107-08). Yet in contrast to the almost total loss of the latter’s hymnals, brahmanic misography has not affected the text of the Rgveda in the slightest; as the most important possession of the priestly caste it has been transmitted with a rare exactitude, providing what has been called “a tape-recording of what was first composed and recited some 3,000 years ago,” a “snapshot of the political and cultural situation” which is “faithfully preserved, equivalent to inscriptions” (Witzel 1995a:91; see Bronkhorst 2002:797-99 and 2016:163-67). Due to this flawless mnemonic transmission the first written text, whenever and wherever it was made, was practically an irrelevance.

6. The Genesis of the Texts’ Present Form

The present forms of the texts were affected by both political and philologic factors in both societies. The earliest pre-Rgveda, consisting of the kernels of the family books (2-7) and the Soma book (9), was created at the time when the latest Rgvedic hymns were being produced, during the linguistic period of the Atharvaveda and the non-Rgvedic mantras, perhaps around 1000 BCE. Witzel ascribes this to the mythologized King Sudās (or his successors), standardizing the text in order to consolidate the Pāru and Bharata peoples after his victory in the

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18 The pro-writing arguments of Lesky and Erbse are summarized by Heubeck: “The Iliad and Odyssey . . . could not have been created at all without the aid of writing” (1988:12). See further Hainsworth 1968:2 n. 2; Burkert 1995:147-48; West 2011:9-11.

19 Farmer et al. (2004:44, 48) suggest that the Indus Valley culture deliberately embargoed imports bearing the marks of this pernicious practice.
Ten Kings’ Battle. The kernels of the composite books (1, 8, and 10) were added during the period of Yajurvedic prose; Witzel ascribes a pre-Ṛgveda with ten books to the mythologized King Parikṣit, wanting to unite the “first Indian state.” All the books received further additions during the period of Brāhmaṇa prose. After a spell of anonymous editorial activity at the start of the Sūtra period (perhaps around 600 BCE) emerged the grammarian Śākalya’s samhitāpātha or “connected text” of 1,028 hymns and almost 40,000 verses, unchanged by a syllable since.

In Greece the creation of an unprecedentedly long and excellent proto-Iliad, perhaps about half of its present length, is ascribed to an Ionian Homer of around 750-700 BCE. This beloved text was subsequently expanded in various ways, leading to controversy at the competitive recitations of Homeric poetry at the Panathenaic festival. As a result, the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus of the sixth century BCE is said to have made a first standardization, collating the various texts κατὰ πόλεις, and to have produced an authoritative, translocal edition written in the Old Attic alphabet. In the following centuries new additions continued to be made (Atticisms, wrong word-divisions, and variants favoring particular groups), and the transliteration into the Ionic alphabet introduced metrical irregularities. As a result, textual criticism was found to be more necessary than ever, and the work of generations of grammarians of the third and second centuries BCE culminated in the Alexandrian edition of Aristarchus of Samothrace with its 28,000 verses. This text underwent considerable distortions in late antique and medieval times.

In sum, the canonizations of the Iliad and the Ṛgveda involved surprisingly parallel processes:

- An unknown agent collected the favorite oral compositions of a long poetic age into an unprecedentedly massive text (the kernels of books 2-7 and 9; the proto-Iliad).
- The largely anonymous compositions were ascribed to specific males, partly invented (the traditional ṛṣis of the Anukramaṇī; “Homer”).
- The beloved text was expanded in various ways, leading to local differences (composite books; expansions of the epics).
- An ambitious leader codified the collection so as to reduce controversies (the early ten-book Ṛgveda; the Peisistratean recension).
- Additions continued to be made as orality began to give way to simple reproduction.
- The continued variation and increasing difficulties of comprehension called into being dedicated

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22 Namely 10.85-191, the Vālakhilyam, the maṇḍalar intrusions of books 3-5, and Oldenberg’s Anhänglieder.

23 Oldenberg’s “orthoepic diaskeuasis” was a misometric modernization, which transformed verse into prose by an inconsistent application of the much later sandhi rules of classical Sanskrit (whence samhitā), as if the goal were a “Zusammenpressen des vedischen Textes auf die möglichst geringe Silbenzahl” (Oldenberg 1888:461).

24 This has been suspected of being a professional or stage name, as seems to be the the case with Hesiodos, Stesichoros, as well as other Greek poets, and probably with Ṛgvedic ṛṣis such as Brhaduktha (“Having high songs”) and Śrutavid (“Tradition-knower”).
philologists (the orthoepic diaskeuasts; Alexandrian grammarians), who eventually produced a definitive edition (Śākalya’s saṃhitāpatha; Aristarchus’ text).

7. Rgvedic Repetitions: Non-Oral Approaches

Theodor Aufrecht’s explanation for the innumerable repetitions is epigonality: that they are mere remnants of a vanished poetry, “mere relics of an older or original Veda (jyeṣṭhām brāhma), . . . attributable less to direct imitation or unconscious reminiscence of the actual thing, than of what used to be” (1877:II, xii).

Maurice Bloomfield champions the epigonal point of view even more strongly. The repetitions he judges by modern literary standards, and his judgment is far from approving: “Vedic literary production is often in a high degree imitative and mechanical. The poets or priests, more or less consciously, fell into habits of expression such that entire lines . . . and considerable sequences of words . . . show much similarity” (1916:vii). Most of the repetitions are “literary or historical in nature” and indicate an “imperfect sense of literary proprietorship” or “plagiarism” among the ṛṣis (19). The high degree of repetition is the result of “reciprocal assimilation” (20): “Rgvedic repetitions are often due to more or less conscious imitation” (634). He does not speak of ṛṣis imitating ṛṣis, but of hymns and stanzas imitating other hymns and stanzas: “A pāda, stanza, or strophe . . . may imitate another without directly repeating its words, but in the manner of a paraphrase” (12). The Vālakhilyas are “entire hymns that are consciously imitative” (13). Correspondingly Bloomfield faults the Anukramaṇī for “find[ing] it in its heart to assign, with unruffled insouciance, one and the same verse to two or more authors, or to ascribe it to two or more divinities” (634). Of course, nothing is more fundamental to oral poetry than a common stock of formulas.

The term “orality” he uses only in reference to transmission, not composition, having “little doubt that this oral tradition [of transmission] was supported at a comparatively early time by written tradition (see AV 19.72)” (1916:vii).

Pavel Poucha puts a positive spin on the repetitions: “The old poets considered quoting from others to be honorable rather than a lack of originality” (1942:250). He thinks that the repeated verses’ assonant figures of style make them easier to learn and thus more frequent (257-69). At the same time, the fact that only 11.2% of hymns are free of repeated whole verses shows the “lack of proper literary training of the composers” (250).

In a surprisingly influential footnote, Albert Lord briefly dismisses any relevance of “sacred texts which must be preserved word for word, if there be such” for the study of oral poetry (1960:280 n. 9), on the ground that the Vedic hymns have long been fixed and not “re-created” in performance. Lord is using the Ṛgveda’s mode of transmission as a straw man to avoid the question of its method of composition. He does not deign to mention that text’s extremely high degree of repetition as established over 40 years earlier by Bloomfield. But this sentiment was to keep research on Ṛgvedic orality in the closet for a quarter century.

Jan Gonda (1975:193-97, 221-30) discusses formulas, repetition, refrains, similarities, parallelisms, and variation in the Ṛgveda at considerable length without suggesting anything new. He accepts everything anybody has previously said except for those denying the presence
of alliteration (224). However his brief mentions of oral poetry and formulas show no understanding of its improvisational nature (28 n. 26, 74-75, 221), as in his reference to “the works of predecessors which they had memorized” (193). Like an oral poet himself, Gonda repeats his predecessors’ literacist formulations, speaking of “an imperfect sense of literary proprietorship” (193) and of “the stereotyped literary form of the Rgveda and the problem of recasts and borrowings” (28), and averring that “the earlier poets had exploited these themes so thoroughly that nothing was left for their successors but to follow in their habits” (194, approximating Parry’s view on originality). Despite his oft demonstrated interest in linguistic repetition, he does not mention its connection with performance in public. This is a distinct step backward from his earlier position (Gonda 1959a), perhaps due to Lord’s portentous footnote.

Jack Goody (1985:7-17 and 1987:110-21) thinks that the Vedas are too vast and too consistent to have been composed and transmitted orally, since oral poetry from all over the world is characterized by widespread textual inconsistencies. Once again: the perfect transmission has no implication for the method of composition.

Michael Witzel (1997a:258-59) uses the term “oral” only in the sense of non-written, not in that of formulaic and improvisational composition. Elsewhere he states that the Rgveda was “composed in a traditional and complicated poetic language like the Iliad” (Witzel et al. 2007:477, cf. 448, 475), but still speaks of the Vedic rṣis’ “shamelessly copying” each other (448) and characterizes many Vedic hymns as “stereotyped” (451). He uses the term “formula” only in an untechnical, pre-Parry sense: “traditional formulas, figures of speech, epithets”; “pre-existent formulas, mobile components, epithets and kennings”; about the repetitions he says, “the poets often borrow even from their predecessors” (446-48). For Witzel, as for Aufrecht, the Rgveda is only an “afterglow” of Proto-Aryan and Proto-Indo-European poetry (449).

Jared Klein has devoted over twenty-two articles (listed in Klein 2012:191-201) to stylistic repetition in the Rgveda without ever mentioning oral-poetic formulas.

The striking paucity of work on Rgvedic orality is shown by the lack of a single paper on this topic in the thirty-four previous volumes of Oral Tradition.

8. Vedic Orality: Scholarly Acceptance

Parry’s ideas were accepted by Jan Gonda. He states that both Homer and the Rgveda are “traditional” in nature, and “improvised” by “oral poets” who were “neither free in their choice of words nor original in their invention: these very formulas and fixed expressions set them bounds and forbade them the search for an individual style” (1959a:254); the traditional oral-poetic formulas exist “to make it easier for the poet to compose as well as for the audience to listen” (1959a:29, 31, 254). But for both texts he rejects Parry’s idea that the epithets serve only metric purposes (see below, section 13.4).

But Lord’s dictum against Rgvedic orality the following year caused Gonda to abandon his acceptance in 1975, and in fact stifled any discussion of this topic until 1976, when Paul Kiparsky finally dared to contradict him: “Lord excluded the Vedic literature from oral poetry by fiat, in reserving the term ‘oral poetry’ for poetry composed during performance. This would make the most important thesis of Lord’s book true by definition” (Kiparsky 1976:101).
Kiparsky sees the genesis of both the *Rgveda* and Homer as “the collective elaboration of a fixed text out of a tradition of oral poetry . . . [by] a bardic guild” by means of “a gradual fixation of the text over several generations of continuous recitation by a family or guild of singers,” “a fluid oral tradition ‘freezing’ into an absolutely rigid shape,” “a gradual jelling of an initially loosely connected body of poetry which was gradually added to and reorganized” (102-04). In charmingly idealistic contrast to the usual view of Vedic society as riven by tribal jealousy and feuds, Kiparsky suggests that “what the singers probably did was to sit together and perform things for each other . . . and gradually a stable version was worked out” (in Stolz and Shannon 1976:116), that is, the collection arose as the result of Vedic Woodstocks. These would have fostered mutual borrowing and thus contributed to the homogenization of the Ṛgvedic poetic language.

In his response Calvert Watkins felt free at last to admit that “the formulaic character of the composition of the Vedic hymns is apparent in virtually every mantra” and, one imagines with a sigh of relief, to “welcome Kiparsky’s principled inclusion of Vedic poetry within the universal discourse of this conference [on oral poetry]” (Watkins 1976:107-08). He went on to reject Parry’s phrase, “regularly employed under the same metrical conditions” (109). In 1995 Watkins sees the formula as “a verbal and grammatical device for encoding and transmitting a given theme . . . . Theme is the deep structure of formula” (1995:17). He repudiates Lord’s dictum again (18), and also the phrase “group of words” in Parry’s definition of the formula by accepting single words as formulas (17). He operates as a matter of course with formulaic modification and lexical renewal (10, 15).

Applying Parry’s statistical measures of relative orality—frequency of enjambment as a whole, frequency of coterminous verses, and frequency of necessary and violent enjambments—to the *Rgveda*, George Dunkel finds its style to be distinctly more oral than that of the *Iliad* (1996:204-06). Elsewhere he uses formulaic theory to resolve some longstanding syntactic controversies. The alleged deletion or “gapping” of repeated preverbs and verbs in Vedic and Homer is often due to the reuse of formulas outside their original environments (1978:14-26). Formular truncation has led to oddities such as the seemingly conjunctive use of emphatic and local ā and missing endings as in návyasā vácas (1982a:89-102) and to the so-called inverse *ca* (129-43).

Stephanie Jamison allows that the *Ṛgveda* was “composed entirely orally and transmitted entirely orally” but still follows Lord in taking it as “a type of oral composition very different from” Homer’s because “it was not an anonymous body of infinitely variable verbal material (re-)composed anew at every performance” (Jamison and Brereton 2014:1, 14). But neither is our *Iliad! And hers is a perfect description of the long period of free oral composition which preceded the fixation of the *samhitā*.

Outside of the Veda, Indology has long since recognized elements of oral composition in the classical epics, and its traces have also been found in the *Ṛgveda’s closest linguistic and cultural relative, the Gāthās of Zarathustra* (see Skjærvø 2012).

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9. The Rgvedic Poetic Formula

Since Bloomfield’s 1916 work much has been accomplished in Rgvedic linguistics, mythology, and society, but no more large-scale research on its poetic formulas has been undertaken. Here we shall apply the methods of formulaic analysis developed in Homeric studies to the notoriously repetitive Rgveda. The need for this became clear during an investigation of linguistic differences between the six great book families. We defined a familectally distinctive feature as one which recurs at least thrice in one family book and nowhere else. The “Familiengrammatik des Rgveda” project (see above, footnote 1) collected over a thousand recurring pairs of designators of possible interest, which I then filtered so as to arrive at the 177 candidate formulas for familectal distinctiveness that are analyzed below. However the following discussion is not limited to these, since during analysis countless related formulas were also examined in the same way.

9.1 Definition

A Rgvedic poetic formula is a repeated, semantically unified word-group. The words’ position, form, function, and syntactic relation are irrelevant.

By “repeated” is meant occurring in the Rgveda thrice or more. Repetition is the first criterion of formularity. But although necessary, recurrence is not a sufficient condition; this is shown by the recurring chance collocations, that is, word-groups that are repeated without being formulas.

By “word” or “element” is meant “designator” (noun, adjective, or verb): as is traditional, we ignore the formators (particles, primary adverbs, pronouns, and the like).

“Group” reflects the fact that cooccurrence is the second criterion for formularity. Single words cannot be considered to be formulas. Although the project originally searched only for recurring designator-pairs, analysis showed that many of these belonged to longer formulas, so that our candidate formulas can be six words or even an entire stanza in length; only 44% of the candidate formulas are limited to two words.

By “semantically unified” is meant that despite all formal modifications the elements continue to “express a given essential idea” (so Parry; cf. Aufrecht’s “express the same ideas in a somewhat different style”; 1877:II, xi). However defined, this unity or identity is the third and final criterion of formularity. Hainsworth speaks of a high “degree of mutual expectancy” between the elements:

-“The use of one word created a strong presumption that the other would follow” (1968:35-36) in a “certain formulaic word association” (61).
-“Formulas are simply groups of two or more words that are associated with each other” (1993:18).
-“The word-group persists in spite of declension or conjugation, changed localization, expansion,

26 On the stylistic repetition of individual words see Gonda 1959b and the twenty-two articles mentioned by Klein (2012:191-201), which have since doubtless been joined by others. Neither author mentions poetic formulas.
or shortening. . . . The formular link may even survive enjambment . . . ” (1993:26-27).

Of course, “mutual expectancy admits of infinite gradations” (1968:41).

A more formal way of saying that the meaning remains unchanged is distributional: since the modifications preserve the coocurrence restrictions (or privileges of occurrence) of the formula’s elements, they can be seen as transformations of the formulas (Harris 1957), as paraphrases of their reports (Harris 1970:612-92).

Since a formula’s identity is not syntactically defined, its variants need not always be construed the same way, but they will talk about or mention the same thing. If the formula’s elements should happen to cooccur without expressing the same essential idea, this is considered to be not a repetition, but rather a chance collocation or a different formula.

9.2 Formula and Meter in the Rgveda

A formula can fill a whole verse, be shorter, or be longer. A formula’s boundaries practically never differ from the metric ones, both between the verses and within them. While synchronically the formulas seem tailored to fit the meter, historically they may have played a role in creating it. The transfer of formulas between meters often induces reduction, extension, enjambment, new boundaries, and so on.

Metrical pressure is weaker in the Rgveda than in Homer, since only the number of syllables is crucial; except for the cadence, their quantity is less important. This is illustrated by the relative rarity of completely artificial formations when compared with Homer, who has numerous forms which are found in no real dialect. Little dialect mixture can be registered and very few hyperforms.

It often happens that the opening and the cadence of a trimeter verse are filled by four- or five-syllable formulas. The intervening break can then be filled either by expanding one of the formulas or by inserting a link-word (by definition not a formula).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Link-word</th>
<th>Formula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.100.4a</td>
<td>ayám asmi</td>
<td>jaritaḥ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9.4a</td>
<td>ayám hötā</td>
<td>prathamāḥ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5.6d</td>
<td>tāj juṣasva</td>
<td>jaritūr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.11.1a</td>
<td>śrudhi havam</td>
<td>ind(a)ra</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

27 That is, between the opening, the break if there is one, and the cadence. In Homer, on the other hand, “the relation between colon and formula is so obscure that as an element of composition it may well be irrelevant” (Hainsworth 1968:20).

28 According to Gregory Nagy “predictable patterns of rhythm emerge from favorite traditional phrases” and “formula generates meter” (1976:251-52; see 1990:18-35).

29 The only hyperforms due to metrical pressure are unjustified disyllabic ā, anti-Sievers forms like āśua- for āśva-, and the first singular active subjunctive ending -āni.
10. Formulaic Flexibility in the \textit{Rgveda}

Although Bloomfield considered the inflection of a formula to be an “unimportant stylistic or metrical accident” (1916:9), only one-sixth of our formulas are completely fixed; the rest are flexible to some degree, as illustrated by the formula, “to smash the demons”:

6.16.29c \textit{jahi ráksämsi sukrate}
9.17.3c \textit{vighnán ráksämsi devayúh}
9.49.5b \textit{ráksämsi apajiñghanat}
9.63.29a \textit{apaghán soma ráksáso}

or by the formula, “Soma lengthens (our) lifetime”:

8.48.4d \textit{prá ṇa āyuṛ jiváše soma táriḥ}
8.48.7c \textit{sóma rājan prá ṇa āyuṃsi táriṛ}
8.48.10cd \textit{ayám yáh sóma ni ádhāyi asmé / tásmā indram pratirām emi áyuḥ}
8.48.11cd \textit{ā sóma asmáḥ aruhad vihāyā / ághanma yátra pratiránta áyuḥ}
9.80.2cd \textit{maghónāṃ āyuḥ pratirān máhi śráva / indṛāya soma pavase vṛṣā mádaḥ}
10.107.2d \textit{vāsodāḥ soma prá tiranta áyuḥ}.

Bloomfield classified the types of variation among repeated verses under two headings: “Metrical variations as results of addition or subtraction or verbal change in repeated pādas” (1916:523), involving changes in meter, and “Verbal variations of repeated pādas: lexical and grammatical” (548), involving inflection and lexical substitution. This is a useful first step, but when we change the focus from repeated verses to formulas, it proves inadequate. Expanding Hainsworth’s system we have arrived at the following nine types of modification which have proven to be both necessary and sufficient to account for the flexibility of all formulas we have seen.

Flexibility is of two basic types: formulaic modification and lexical substitution. “Modification” encompasses any change in a formula’s shape or structure, but not its word inventory. Any number of modifications can apply concurrently.

\begin{center}
\textbf{The types of formulaic modification in the \textit{Rgveda}}
\end{center}

\begin{tabular}{|l|l|l|}
\hline
Change of form & Change of meaning \\
\hline
Change of position & Lengthening & Shortening \\
\hline
1. Inflection \\
\hline
2. Syntactic transformation \\
\hline
\hline
\end{tabular}
10.1 Inflection

Within a paradigm the number of syllables may remain unchanged:

ahan—hani—hanas—jah—hatam  jaritā—jaritar—jaritūs;

it may be increased:

thematic nom. pl. -āsas beside -ās  thematic instr. sg. -ena beside -ā;

or it may be allowed to vary:

śrudhi, śrṇudhi  yaja(sva)  pība(ta) ṛṭūna  paramē vyōman(i).

Derivation within an inflectional category, that is, the production of new stems, belongs here as well. It usually involves suffixes:

-Suffixal variation:

Dadhikrā(van)-, Médh(y)ātithi- (personal names)
rjipya-, rjipin- (epithet of an eagle)

-Conversion to paradigmatic participles and verbal adjectives, as when the thrice-attested formula úd eti sūryas (“the sun rises”) is transformed into udyāntam tvā . . . sūrya (thrice) or the locative absolutes sūra údite (9x) and sūrya udyati (once).

-Change to verbal secondary stems, as in the formula, “to strike the demons”:

9.63.29a  apaghnān soma rakṣāso  beside the causative
9.49.5b  rākṣāmsi apajāṅhanat

Inflection and derivation occur together in “to know the ascent of heaven”:

4.8.4c  vidvām āroḍhanam divāḥ  beside
4.7.8d  vidūṣṭaro divā āroḍhanāni

10.2 Syntactic Transformation

This category encompasses diverse types of modification.
10.2a Subordination

This occurs in the formula, “the two go to the clan”:

7.73.4a  úpa tyá váhní gamato visám no  but relativized in
7.69.2c  visó yéna gáchatho devayántíh  and causal in
7.74.1cd visám-visám hi gáchathah

10.2b Passivization

Passivization of active verbs often involves the verbal adjective, as in the formula, “to prop apart heaven and earth”:

6.44.24a  ayám dvávpṛthiví ví skabhāvad  beside
6.70.1cd  dvávpṛthiví váruntasya dhármanā / viskabhite ajáre bhúrireśasā

It may also involve the gerundive, as in the formula, “to choose Agni as messenger”:

1.12.1ab  agnīṁ dūtāṁ vrñīmahe  beside
8.102.18bc  agne dūtāṁ vārenyam / havyāvāham ni śedire

10.2c Nominalization

Verbs can be transformed into abstract nouns and infinitives, as when pan-Rgvedic sutám piba / piba sutám (“drink the pressings!”) (7x, 4x) appears as sutásya pītāye (8x) and sutásya pītīm / -īs (“a drink of the pressings”) (2.11.17d, 4.35.2b).

Verbs can also be transformed into agent nouns by suffixation or composition (with the above cf. somapá- (12x)). A change of mood can cause another verb to be inserted:

8.84.3a  vṛṣṇiḥ pāhi śṛṇudhī gīraḥ  “Protect the men! Hear the songs!” but
2.20.3b  sákhā śivó narāṁ astu pātā  “Let him be a benevolent companion and protector of the men”

10.2d Stem Composition

This is another type of nominalization, which obscures the first element’s syntactic relation to the second. The verb of the formula, “the stronghold-splitter . . . to make,” is adverbialized and nominalized, respectively, between:

8.61.8c  ā puramdarāṁ cakrma vipravacasa  and
8.61.10a  ugrābhuh mrakṣakṛtvā puramdaró  and
8.1.7c  álarsi yudhama khajaṅṛi puramdara.
10.2e Verbalization

When a root-compound occurs in variation with a finite verb, the nominal form need not necessarily be secondary. The phrase āródhana- divás (“the ascent of heaven”) occurs five times, but it is verbalized only once (ārohāyanti divī); the compound śucipā- occurs five times, but is verbalized only once (piba śucim, “drink (it) pure”). The pan-Rgvedic formula ādrībhiḥ sutā-sōma- (“Soma pressed with stones”) occurs fourteen times, but it is verbalized only thrice:

4.45.5d   sómam susāva mādhumantam ādrībhiḥ
9.34.3b   sunvánti sómam ādrībhiḥ
9.107.1d  susāva sómam ādrībhiḥ

10.2f Simile

A formulaic element may be transformed into a simile by the addition of a particle meaning “like” (ná, iva, yáthā) without affecting the formula’s unity, as in the formula, “to cross hates (and) straits”:

6.2.1 = 6.14.6d   dvisó ámhāṃsi duritā tarema
6.2.4d    dvisó ámho nā taratī

An element is shifted out of a simile in the formula, “to be swollen like ghee”:

8.7.19b  ghrāṃ nā pipyūsīr, 8.12.13c ghrām nā pipyā, but
8.6.43b  mādhorr ghrāṣya pipyūṣīṃ (“swollen full of honey and ghee”)

The next three modifications involve change in the elements’ position.

10.3 Movement

A formula can move within a verse, as with “enjoy that!” and “lofty light”:

4.2.20b   avocāma kavāye # tā jūsasva
6.5.6d    tāj jūsasva jaritūr # ghoṣī mānma
6.47.10d  tāj jūsasva # kṛdhī mā devāvantam
1.45.8c   bhrād bhāh bhrārato havīr
4.5.1b    kathā daśemāgnāye # bhrād bhāh
10.4 Inversion

Inversion of words has been recognized as an element of high style since the Greek Sophists; for the Rgveda see Bloomfield 1916:7, 552-53. Limiting ourselves to contiguous words, we may cite as examples the formulas, “I invoke Agni” and “Drink of this!”:

1.1.1a  agníṃ īḷe purohitam
3.27.2a  īḷe agníṃ vipaścitaṃ
3.35.6  śasvatamāṃ sumānā asvā pāhi
5.43.3c  hōteva naḥ prathamāḥ pāhy asvā

The formula, “go home!,” exhibits inversion combined with movement:

10.95.2c  pūrūravaḥ pīnar āstam pārehi
10.95.13d  pārehy āstam ḥ nahi mūra māpaḥ

The formula may contain more than two words, as in, “Deliver the singer from narrow straits”:

1.58.8c  ágne grnātam āmhasa urusya
1.58.9c  urusya agne āmhaso grnātam

10.5 Enjambment

The running on of a sentence into the next verse, that is, its continuation over a verse boundary, is one of the two fundamental deviations from coterminosity (the other being verse-internal placement of a sentence boundary). 16% of the candidate formulas are inherently enjambed, their elements never cooccurring within a single verse. The formula might be said to contain a verse boundary—which, like any other formulaic element, can be mobile. About the same proportion of our formulas are enjambed in more than one way, as in, “to convey the gods who wake at dawn toward”:

1.44.1cd  ā dāśīse jātavedo vahā tvām / adyā devāḥ usarbudhah
1.44.9cd  usarbudha ā vaha sūmapītaye / devāḥ adyā svardīśaḥ
1.14.9  ākim śūryasya rocanād / viśvān devāḥ usarbudhah / vipro hōteḥa vaksatā

Maximal enjambment means continuing over an entire stanza, as in, “to call (on) Indra of a hundred resolves with praises”:  

8.52.6cd  vāsūyāvo vāsūpiṭāṃ śatākratum / stōmār indram havāmahe
8.52.4  yāsa tvām indra stōmesu cakāno / vāje vājīṇ chatakrato
tāṃ tvā vayām sudāghām iva godūho / juhūmāsi śravasyāvah
The next two modifications involve changes at the formula’s margins.

### 10.6 Extension

The extension of a formula is its lengthening by inflection or by adding elements.\(^{30}\)

#### 10.6a Juxtaposition

The simplest type of extension is juxtaposition or concatenation, that is, adding a word or a phrase at a margin, as in, “your most delightful favor”:

\[
\begin{align*}
7.70.2a & \quad \text{sīṣakti sā vām sumatiś cāniśthā} \\
7.57.4d & \quad \text{asmē vo astu sumatiś cāniśthā} \\
7.70.5d & \quad \text{asmē vām astu sumatiś cāniśthā}.
\end{align*}
\]

#### 10.6b Overlapping

Overlapping is the combination of formulas sharing an element (“word association”; Hainsworth 1962:65), as when the formulaic variants \(bṛhād arca\) (“to chant aloft”) and \(bṛhatē arca\) (“to chant to the lofty one”) are combined:

\[
\begin{align*}
1.9.10bc & \quad \text{bṛhād bṛhatā ēd ariḥ / ēndrāya sūsām arcati}
\end{align*}
\]

A new overlap may itself become formulaic, as when the following verses:

\[
\begin{align*}
5.41.16a & \quad \text{kathā dāśema nāmasā sudānūn} \quad \text{ (“how should we do pious service?”)} \\
7.14.1d & \quad \text{vayām dāśema agnāye} \quad \text{ (“we would do pious service for Agni”)}
\end{align*}
\]

are combined and the combination then reused:

\[
\begin{align*}
1.77.1a & \quad \text{kathā dāśema agnāye # kāsmai} \\
4.5.1b & \quad \text{kathā dāśemā agnāye # bṛhād bhāh}.
\end{align*}
\]

Three formulas overlap when \(dūtā- pāti- agne\) (“the messenger, the lord, O Agni”) (three times), \(vīśām pāti-\) (“lord of settlements”) (10x), and \(vīśām asi\) (“you are of the settlements”) (three times) are combined in:

\[
\begin{align*}
1.44.9ab & \quad \text{pātic hi adhvarānām / āgne dūtō vīśām asi}
\end{align*}
\]

and again when the formulas \(han- rākṣāṃsi\) (“smite the demons”) (7x), \(sedha- rākṣāṃsi\) (“keep

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\(^{30}\) This is unrelated to the Parryan sense of “extension” (section 2.2).
away the demons”) (thrice), and sėdha- āmīvās (“keep away the diseases”) (twice) overlap and recur as a hymn-internal refrain:

8.35.16-8b  hatām rákṣāmsi # sēdhatam āmīvāh.

10.7 Insertion of a Split

A split into a discontinuous formula occurs when additional words are inserted. A short interruption can nonetheless be important, changing “I exist” to the copula “I am”:

8.100.4a  ayām asmi jaritaḥ # pāṣya mehā
10.83.5  ayām te asmī # úpa méhy arvān

Longer ones can be banal, as in, “the cooked within the raw”:

2.40.2c  ābhyaṁ indraḥ pakyām āmāsv antāḥ
1.62.9c  āmāsu cid dadhiše pakyām antāḥ

10.7a Maximal Split

Maximal split of a formula, that is, over an entire stanza, often coincides with maximal enjambment, as when the inherently enjambed bisentential formula, “Come to [place-name], drink Soma like a thirsty [animal name]”:

8.4.10ab  īśya nā trṣyam avapānam ā gahi # / pība sōmaṃ váśāṁ ānu

is split further into

8.4.3  vāthā gaurō apā kṛtāṁ / trṣyam ēti ávēriṇam
āpitēvē nah prapitvē tāyam ā gahi # / kāneṣu sū sācā pība.

10.7b Inherent Discontinuity

Over a fifth of the candidate formulas are inherently discontinuous;31 here any previous contiguous version has fallen out of use. Even fixed formulas can be inherently discontinuous, as in, “great in might”:

8.6.1a  mahaṁ indro yā ójasā, 8.6.26c  mahaṁ apārā ójasā, 8.33.8d  mahaṁś carasi ójasā, and
1.9.1c  mahaṁ abhiśīr ójasā

---

31 Hainsworth calls these “discrete formulae” (1968:91, 104).
Of course, inherently discontinuous formulas can be enjambed as well, as in, “Indra along with the Maruts drinks the Soma”:

3.51.7a  \textit{indra marutva} ihā pāhi sómam
3.47.1ab marútvāṁ \textit{indra} vrṣabhó rāṇāya / pibā sómam amusvadhám mādāya
3.50.1ab \textit{indrah} svāhā pibatu yāsya sóma / āgāyā tūmro vrṣabhó marútvān
8.76.4 ayām ha yéna vā idām / svār marútvatā jitām / \textit{indrena} sómapitaye
8.76.6 \textit{indram} pratnēna mānmanā / marútvantaḥ havāmahe / asyā sómasva pītaye

10.7c Inherent Contiguity

Formulas may also be inherently contiguous, that is, unsplittable, as in repeated whole verses. But inherently contiguous formulas can also be enjambed, even in various ways, as in, “Viśṇu strode out three steps”:

8.52.3c yásmai viṣṇus trīṇi padā vicakramā
1.22.18ab trīṇi padā vi cakrame / viṣnur gopā ādāhyah
1.22.17ab idām viṣnur vi cakrame / tredhā ni dadhe padām

and in, “Indra puts the pressed Soma into his belly”:

3.35.6cd asmin yajne barhiṣi ā niṣādya / dadhiṣvēmām jathāra indum indra
3.22.1ab ayām só agnir yāmin sómam indrāh / sutām dadhē jathāre vāvasānāh
3.40.5 dadhiṣvā jathāre sutām / sómam indra vārenyam / táva dyuṣāsa indavah.

10.7d Sentential Split

The most extreme type of formular split is that into two sentences. The mechanism is the insertion of either an additional verb (26x), as in, “to drive toward the good praise”:

8.34.1ab ēndra yāhi hāribhir / ūpa kānavasya sustutim
8.8.6cd ā vātām aśvinā+ # ā gatam / ūpeśmāṁ sustutim máma

or of a verse-internal sentence boundary (32x), as in, “to sacrifice to the gods with this offering”:

7.17.3a āgne vihi havisā # váksi devān   \textit{beside}
3.17.2c evānēna havisā vakṣi devān.

Another mechanism of sentential split is the syntactic reassignment of an element to a preceding verb in, “O Indra, drink this Soma!”:

10.24.1a \textit{indra sómam imám pibā}, 3.32.1a \textit{indra sómam somapate pibemāṁ} but
8.17.1ab ā yāhi, suṣumā hi ta / \textit{indra sómam} # pibā imāṁ
None of these syntactic splits affects the formula’s unity; if it did, the repetition would be invalid as a dissolution.

10.7e Subordination

Formulas can be split into subordinate and main clauses. Only twice is this by means of a particle (concessive *hi*); the others are by relativization, as in, “Soma lengthens (our) lifetime”:

- 8.48.4d *prá na áyur jíváse soma tārīḥ* and
- 8.48.7c *sáma rājan prá na āyāmsi tārī* beside
- 8.48.10cd *ayám yāḥ sáma ní ádhāyi asmé / tāsmā indram pratirām emi āyuh* and
- 8.48.11cd *á sáma asmāṅ aruhad vihāyā / ághanma yátra pratirānta āyuh*

Even two-word formulas can be be split by relativization, as in, “pressed Soma”:

- 9.107.1ab *párítō śiṅcatā sutām / sómo vá uttamam havih*

The formula *vásavo juṣanta* (“the good ones enjoy”) occurs thrice contiguously and twice split into subordinate and main clauses: once by *hi*, once by both relativization and vocativization.

- 7.5.6ab *tvé asuryām vásavo ny ṣvan / krátum hí te mitramaho juṣánta*
- 5.3.10ab *bhūri náma vándamāno dadhāti / pitá vasa yádi tāj jósávāe*

10.8 Truncation, Reduction, and Ellipsis

When longer and shorter variants coexist, it is not always clear whether this is due to extension or to reduction, as with, “to praise and sing to Indra”:

- 2.20.4a *tám u stuṣa indram, tám grūṣe* beside
- 8.65.5a *indra, grūṣe u stuṣé*

When a variant loses marginal elements, we call it truncation; when it uses shorter allomorphs, we call it reduction, as in, “Become for us a giver of cows”:

- 3.30.21d *asmáḥhyam sú maghavan bodhī godāḥ* beside
- 8.45.19c *godā īd indra bodhī naḥ*

When a variant lacks some of the formula’s elements, we call it ellipsis.

In order to keep the assumption of ellipsis within reasonable bounds, we insist that a variant retain at least two elements of the full formula in order to count as a valid repetition. A

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32 The first passage contains far-deictic *u*, the second, conjunctive *u* (see Dunkel 2014:II, 822).
maximal reduction down to the minimal two words is not infrequent, as when the inherently enjambed, six-word formula *práti váram jaritré / duhīyād indra dáksinā* (“May the honorarium yield milk for the singer according to his wish, O Indra”) (attested seven times) is reduced to *dáksinā duhīta* in 2.28.8b.

10.9 Metanalysis

This category of modifications involves change in structure without change in form.

10.9a Morphologic

Morphologic metanalysis involves ambiguous endings. The formula *bṛhád arca-* (“chant aloft”) shifts between the first singular subjunctive in:

5.85.1ab * prá samráje bṛhád arcā gabhīrām / bráhma priyām vārunāya śrutāya*

and the second singular imperative in:

5.25.7ab *yād vāhiṣṭham tād agnāye / bṛhád arca vibhāvasa.***

The form *kānīyasas* (“younger”) shifts between the genitive singular in:

7.86.6c *āsīt īvāvān kānīyasu upārē*

“The elder exists within the misdeed of the younger,”

and the accusative plural in:

7.32.24ab *abhīṣatās tād ā bhara+ / indra īvāyah kānīyasah*

“Bring this greater (good) to those who are lesser.”

10.9b Semantic

This form of metanalysis involves homonymic words. For example, *padā*, the nominative-accusative plural of *padām* (“step”) in the formula, “Viṣṇu strode out three steps” (7x), as in:

8.52.3cd *yāsmai viṣṇus trāni padā vicakramā*

shifts to the instrumental singular of *pád-* (“foot”) in:

6.59.6d *trīṃśat padā ny ākramit*

“he trampled thirty with his foot.”
10.9c Metanalysis of Syntactic Boundaries

Sentence boundaries are not marked in the samhitā. This is usually innocuous because they almost always occur at verse end; in only two percent of verses are sentence boundaries shown by an accented verse-medial verb to be internal. Passages which contain the same words with and without an internal sentence boundary, such as:

3.17.2c

\[ \text{evānēna havisā yaksi devān} \]

“So sacrifice to the gods with this offering”

7.17.3a

\[ \text{āgne vīhi havisā # yaksi devān} \]

“Agni, pursue them with the offering, sacrifice to the gods,”

raise the question whether the sentence boundary has been inserted or lost—whether a formula has been split or two formulas have been merged.

It is also possible for a sentence boundary to change its position without being formally marked, this being a true metanalysis:

10.27.24a

\[ \text{sā te jīvātur # utā táśya viddhi} \]

“This is your means of life. And know this!”

7.72.2cd

\[ \text{yuvōr hi nah sakhyā pītṛāṇi / samānō bāndhur utā # táśya vīttam} \]

“For in you two are our ancestral companionships and common kinship. Be aware of this!”

10.9d Metanalysis of Phrase Structure

A loss of congruence need not affect the unity of the formula. This may be brought about by:

-Vocativization, as in udyāntam tvā . . . sūrya (10.37.7cd) beside sūra uditē (9x) and sūrya udyatī (8.27.19c), or in tvāṃ citraśravastama (“thee, O with brightest fame”) beside tvāṃ . . . citrām (“thee, the bright”).

-Inflection of an element: etāvat- (“so much”) is attributive to sumnā- (“goodwill”): in:

8.5.27 etāvatād vāṃ vṛṣṇivasū / . . . / grñāntah sumnām īmahe
8.49.9 etāvatās ta īmahe / indra sumnāsya gōmatah

but possessive (“the goodwill of such a one”) in:

8.7.15ab etāvatāś cid eśān / sumnām bhikṣeta mārtyāḥ.

-Transfer of an element to a neighbor: the parallelism of “accompanied by horses, cow, heroes” with shared referent in:
The modifications discussed above affect the formula’s form or structure, but not its constitutive elements. Fundamentally different, therefore, is the other basic type of flexibility: the replacement of an element by another word, a synonym or plesionym. I follow Hainsworth in separating this process from the modifications *sensu stricto*: “I do not consider the important technique whereby flexibility is obtained by using synonymic words: for a different word means a different formula” (1968:60; see also 1993:5, 13-15). Bloomfield had already done the same with his dichotomy between inflection and verbal variation of repetitions. But Watkins makes no such distinction, accepting the “renewal of one, two, or more members of a formula . . . under semantic identity” as a part of formulaic flexibility (1995:15, cf. 10).

In the following we shall keep substitution by synonyms manageable by insisting that at least two elements of the original formula remain unchanged, as for “the Aśvins mount onto the chariot,” usually:

7.41.7ab āśvāvatīr gōmatīr na uśāso / vīrāvatīḥ sādam uchantu bhadrāḥ

7.75.8ab nā no gōmad vīrāvad dhehi rātam / úso āśvāvad purubhōjo asmē

is broken up in

9.63.18 ā pavasva hiranyavad / āśvāv at soma vīrāv at / vājam gōmantam ā bhara.

### 11. Lexical Substitution

Lexical substitution by non-synonyms leads to the loss of a formula’s identity, that is, its change into a different formula or its dissolution.

Replacing all the elements by allonyms while leaving the syntactic and metric structures unchanged, as in *pība sómam* (“drink the Soma”) beside *jāhi rākṣas* (“smite the demon”), leads to “phrase patterns” and “structural formulas” (see above, footnote 8).
12. Formulaic Flexibility and Unity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unity Preserved: Variants of the Same, “Flexible” Formula</th>
<th>Identity Lost: A Different Formula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic formula:</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Expended:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflected:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitute a synonym:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitute an allonym:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitute two allonyms:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jāhi rákṣas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viśvāhā</td>
<td>jānghanat rákṣāmsī</td>
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<td>bhindhi rákṣāmsī</td>
<td>paśya rákṣas</td>
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<tr>
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<td>tāsyā viiddhi</td>
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<td>viiddhi tāsyānas</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>tād vēda</td>
<td>tād jānthī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tāsyā pība</td>
<td>vānād ēti</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. General Properties of the Candidate Formulas

13.1 Length in Words

Although the original search was limited to recurring designator-pairs, subsequent philological examination has shown that well over half of the formulas were actually longer.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Three:</th>
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<th>Five:</th>
<th>Six:</th>
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<th>Total:</th>
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<td>34</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>177</td>
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</table>

13.2 Fixed versus Flexible Formulas

Only one-sixth of the candidate formulas are fully fixed—a far lower proportion than in Homer, where this is thought to hold for half to two-thirds (see above, section 3). Fully fixed formulas range from entire stanzas, such as Book 3’s family-refrain śunāṃ huvema maghāvānam

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33 It should be noted, with regard to the column in the table entitled “More,” that of the seven formulas with more than six words, five are fixed whole stanzas, and two are three verses in length.
For blessing we would invoke bounteous Indra, most manly, at this raid, at the winning of the prize of victory, the strong one who listens, (we would invoke) for help in battles, him who smashes obstacles, the winner of prizes”) (occurring first in 3.30.22, repeated fifteen times); over whole verses, like Book 3’s pātyamānas trīr ā divō vidāthe (“being master at the rite three times a day”); down to the minimal two words, as in Book 5’s āgre āhnām (“at the start of days”). The distinction between fixed and flexible is far from absolute, since some of the flexible formulas are fixed in part, for example, as to two words out of three or as to word order. But five-sixths of the formulas are modified in one way or another, in addition to which comes lexical substitution.

In the Rgveda much formulaic flexibility arises due to the transfer of formulas between the different meters, leading to reduction, extension, enjambment, new boundaries, and so on. Within Greek epic this could not happen, but it did when Homer was cited in lyric poetry and tragedy.

13.3 Adjectives and Epithets

Among the seventy-seven two-word formulas, the noun-adjective and name-epithet combinations so influential in Parry’s work make up only one-fourth: rayī- suyāma-, Agni-sudīti-, kumārā- Sāhadevyā-, syenā- tjīpyā-, Agni- dhartār-, rayim rayivānt, vāmā- bhūri-, sākhī-pratnā-, hotar purvanīka, Índravāyu suṣṭūti-, Vāyu- śucipā-, Agni- rakṣasvin-, Índra-somapāṭama-, girī- pārvata-, mártāya ripāve, rādhas- āhraya-, havyavāhana- yājīṣṭha-, and hótāram viśvāvedasam. All of these are flexible in one way or another except for the fixed vocative hotar purvanīka.

13.4 Epithets and Meter

In his pioneering application of Parry’s ideas to the Rgveda, Gonda rejects the idea that the epithets serve only metric purposes. While admitting that metrics do play a role (1959a:253-57), he finds that the epithets are primarily used to “suit the context” (63 and passim), “conditioned by sense and versification at the same time” (254) to achieve a “harmony between epithet and context” (175) so that “the epithet fits the context perfectly” (66), and that “places are very few where no motive whatever can be discovered for the occurrence of an epithet” (254). Gonda finds the Homeric epithets to be “in wonderful harmony with the situation” (30) as well. The approach seems circular.

The link between a name and its epithet is very loose in the Rgveda. The two are rarely contiguous, occurring in the same verse only 113 times in the 1,064 occurrences considered below, so that most of these theonym-epithet groups are inherently split and enjambed. Some epithets have distinct preferences as to position within a verse, but the groups of theonym and epithet are so free that they cannot possibly serve any metrical function in the Rgveda.
### Positions of some divine epithets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Verse-initial</th>
<th>Medial</th>
<th>Final</th>
<th>Total:</th>
<th>In same verse as theonym:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agni:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>sāmih sāhasas</td>
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<td>havyavāhana-</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>jātāvedas-</td>
<td>13: voc. 11x</td>
<td>21: voc. 20x</td>
<td>95: voc. 34x</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>dhūmāketu-</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>draviṇodas-, -dā-, -dā-</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11*</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9*</td>
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<td>vaisvānara-</td>
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<td>sādīti-</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>havyavāh-</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>64</td>
<td>69</td>
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<td>śacāptāti-</td>
<td>9*</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>adrivant-</td>
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<td>6x, all voc.</td>
<td>43, all voc.</td>
<td>49</td>
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<td>46, voc. 33x</td>
<td>117</td>
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<td>hārivant-</td>
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<td>50x, all voc.</td>
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<td>52</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>22</td>
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<td><strong>Āśvins:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>vájijnīvasu-</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>20x, all voc.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>divō nāpāt-</td>
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<td>śubhās pāti-</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>20x, voc. 15x</td>
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<td>purudāṃsas-</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

34 The occasional use of these epithets with other divinities is ignored here; no distinction is made between meters.
14. Conclusion

The \( \text{Rgveda} \) is formulaic oral poetry. The great majority of its formulas is flexible and can be described using Hainsworth’s approach to Homeric modifications. In fact, a higher proportion of the \( \text{Rgveda} \)’s formulas is flexible than the \( \text{Iliad} \)’s; this agrees with its higher overall formulaicity and shows that stylistically, the \( \text{Rgveda} \) is in fact more oral in style than Homer—a conclusion strengthened by its higher frequency of unenjambed and coterminous verses and its lower proportion of necessary enjambment (Dunkel 1996:205-07).

| dhíṣṇya- | 2 | 8 | 2 | 12 | 1 |
| dasrá- | 14 | 21 | 4 | 39 | 0 |

*Seven times in a single refrain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures of the relative orality of the ( \text{Iliad} ) and the ( \text{Rgveda} ):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formulaic overall:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed formulas:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible formulas:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unenjambed verses:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coterminous verses:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necessary enjambment:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. Beyond Vedic and Greek

The \( \text{Rgveda} \) is in fact not the only ancient Indo-European\(^{35}\) text to surpass the \( \text{Iliad} \) in orality of style. As measured by modes of enjambment, the Roman comedian Plautus (\textit{floruit} c. 200 BCE) considerably outdoes the \( \text{Iliad} \) and is very close to the \( \text{Rgveda} \) in stylistic orality (Dunkel 1996). This is also true, to a lesser extent, of Terence two generations later.

The relative orality of Plautus, Terence (\textit{senarii}),\(^{36}\) and Menander (trimeter) as measured by types of enjambment:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unenjambed verses:</th>
<th>Plautus:</th>
<th>Terence:</th>
<th>Menander:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{35}\) Much Hittite poetry is more formulaic still, as is true of Sumerian and Akkadian.

\(^{36}\) That is, the meter of spoken dialogue; the values are even higher for the long verses spoken as recitative.
This cannot be ascribed to his main literary model, the Hellenistic comedian Menander (floruit c. 315 BCE), since he is by these measures far more literary in style than any of the texts considered here. Furthermore all three ancient comedians without question used writing to compose and are not formulaic in the least. The reason for the Romans’ oral style of enjambment might have been aural: for success in show business their dialogues had to be readily comprehensible by their public, which was far less literarily sophisticated than Menander’s.

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