

The Oral Style of the *Ṛgveda*¹

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1. The Study of *Ṛgvedic* Repetitions

In the second volume of his 1877 edition of the *Ṛgveda*, Theodor Aufrecht collects about three thousand repeated verses and phrases from that text. Beginning with the paired Vāṅkhyā hymns 8.49-52, which he describes as “two versions of the same material . . . like two school-essays” (1877:II, vii),² 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 *Ṛgveda* 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 *ṛṣi* (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 *Ṛgvedic* 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 formulas³—are, as every Vedist knows, the commonplace of Vedic technique” (1916:xiv); “It will be seen that

¹This sketch arose from the research project “Familiengrammatik des *Ṛgveda*” 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 *Ṛgvedic Family Grammar* (forthcoming). *Ṛgvedic* translations are those of Jamison and Brereton 2014.

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

³Abel Bergaigne frequently did use the term “formula” in the general sense of “text-passages” or “statements,” but without regard to repeated word-groups (1878-83).

repetition of two or more consecutive words is an established feature of Ṛg-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 consecutive⁴ 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, *agnīḥ śukrēṇa śociṣā* (“Agni with (his) blazing flame”), are modifications or different formulas (1916:9).

Of a Ṛgvedic 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).⁵ 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 *Ṛgveda*

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

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

⁵A 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.⁶ But outside of the name-epithet systems, the doublets or “breaches of economy” are even more frequent.⁷ 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 *Ṛgveda* 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-*, *pūrbhid-* = *vajriṇ-*, *śakra-* = *śūra-* = *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,⁸ 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 Parry’s 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, *δοῦκεν 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 *Ṛgveda* 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 *Ṛgveda* never does. Conversely, due to its shorter verses and more limited subject matter, repetition in the *Ṛgveda* can at times approach a hypnotic incantation in a way that Homer never does.

Although Homer repeats more whole verses, the *Ṛgveda* 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 *Ṛgveda* one in four (Dunkel 1996:206). The lesser use of one-verse sentences makes Homeric poetry flow more continuously.

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

	Verses:	Words:	Lexemes:	Syllables:
<i>Ṛgveda</i> :	39,676 ¹⁰ (8-12 syllables)	164,766 ¹¹	9,891 ¹²	395,915 ¹³
<i>Iliad</i> + <i>Odyssey</i> :	27,850 (12-18 syllables)	198,837 ¹⁴	9,893	403,000 ¹⁵ (?)

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.

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 *Ṛgveda*" 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 *Ṛgveda*" 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>.

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 *Ṛgveda* 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 *saṃhitā*-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 Prākṛit rock inscriptions of c. 250 BCE (see Salomon 2003:87-89, 92-93). Given this chronology, the *Ṛgveda* cannot possibly have been composed, collected, and edited in any manner other than orally. The earliest preserved manuscripts of the *Ṛgveda* date from about 1350-1450 CE; they are practically irrelevant as regards its transmission.

While Parry's *guslari* 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

¹⁶ See the surveys by Windelberg and Miller 1980:29-50; Russo 1997:238-60 and 2011:296-98.

¹⁷ In fact becoming literate notably worsened their style (Friedrich 2007:138 n. 223).

himself (“oral autography”; Lord 1960:124, 129).¹⁸ 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 *Ṛgveda* 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 *saṃhitā* the *Ṛgveda* 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).¹⁹ Yet in contrast to the almost total loss of the latter’s hymns, brahmanic misography has not affected the text of the *Ṛgveda* 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-*Ṛgveda*, consisting of the kernels of the family books (2-7) and the Soma book (9), was created at the time when the latest *Ṛgvedic* hymns were being produced, during the linguistic period of the *Atharvaveda* and the non-*Ṛgvedic* *mantras*, perhaps around 1000 BCE. Witzel ascribes this to the mythologized King Sudās (or his successors), standardizing the text in order to consolidate the Pūru and Bharata peoples after his victory in the

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.²⁰ 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."²¹ All the books received further additions during the period of Brāhmaṇa prose.²² After a spell of anonymous editorial activity²³ at the start of the Sūtra period (perhaps around 600 BCE) emerged the grammarian Śākalya's *saṃhitāpāṭha* 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 Homer²⁴ 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

²⁰ Witzel calls this the "Bharata collection" (1995b:337-38 and 1997a:290).

²¹ Witzel calls this the "Kūru collection" (1992:616, 1997a:261, 264-65, 286, and 1997b:35-36, 38, 40).

²² Namely 10.85-191, the *Vāḷakhilyam*, the maṇḍalar intrusions of books 3-5, and Oldenberg's *Anhangslieder*.

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 *saṃhitā*), 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 case with Hesiodos, Stesichoros, as well as other Greek poets, and probably with Ṛgvedic *ṛṣis* such as Bṛhaduktha ("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. Ṛgvedic 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 bráhma*), . . . 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): "Ṛgvedic 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 Vāḷakhilyas 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 *Ṛgveda* 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 *Ṛgveda* 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 *ṛṣis*’ “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 *Ṛgveda* 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 *Ṛgveda* without ever mentioning oral-poetic formulas.

The striking paucity of work on *Ṛgvedic* 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 *Ṛgveda* 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 *Ṛgvedic* 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 *Ṛgveda* 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 *Ṛgveda*, 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 *nāvyaśā vācas* (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:I, 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 *saṃhitā*.

Outside of the Veda, Indology has long since recognized elements of oral composition in the classical epics,²⁵ and its traces have also been found in the *Ṛgveda*’s closest linguistic and cultural relative, the *Gāthās* of Zarathustra (see Skjærvø 2012).

²⁵ See the Purāṇic and Epic Bibliography at <http://www.indologie.uni-goettingen.de/index.php?id=120&L=0>.

9. The Ṛgvedic Poetic Formula

Since Bloomfield's 1916 work much has been accomplished in Ṛgvedic 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 *Ṛgveda*. 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 *Ṛgveda*" 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 Ṛgvedic 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 *Ṛgveda* 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.²⁶ 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).

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.

-“The word-group persists in spite of declension or conjugation, changed localization, expansion, or shortening. . . . The formular link may even survive enjambement . . . ” (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 cooccurrence 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 *Ṛgveda*

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.²⁷ While synchronically the formulas seem tailored to fit the meter, historically they may have played a role in creating it.²⁸ The transfer of formulas between meters often induces reduction, extension, enjambment, new boundaries, and so on.

Metrical pressure is weaker in the *Ṛgveda* 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.²⁹

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).

10. Formulaic Flexibility in the *Ṛgveda*

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”:

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 *ásua-* for *ásva-*, and the first singular active subjunctive ending *-āni*.

6.16.29c	<i>jahí ráksāmsi sukrato</i>
9.17.3c	<i>vighnán ráksāmsi devayúh</i>
9.49.5b	<i>ráksāmsi apajāñghanat</i>
9.63.29a	<i>apaghnán soma raksáso</i>

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

8.48.4d	<i>prá na áyur jīvāse soma tārīh</i>
8.48.7c	<i>sóma rājan prá na áyūmsi tārīr</i>
8.48.10cd	<i>ayám yáh sómo ní ádhāyi asmé / tásmā indram pratíram emi áyuh</i>
8.48.11cd	<i>á sómo asmāñ aruhad víhāyā / áganma yátra pratiránta áyuh</i>
9.80.2cd	<i>maghónām áyuh pratirán máhi śráva / índrāya soma pavase vīṣā mádaḥ</i>
10.107.2d	<i>vāsodāḥ soma prá tiranta áyuh.</i>

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.

10. The Types of Formulaic Modification in the *Ṛgveda*

10.1 Inflection

Within a paradigm the number of syllables may remain unchanged:

<i>ahan—hanti—hanas—jahi—hatam</i>	<i>jaritā—jaritar—jaritús;</i>
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it may be increased:

thematic nom. pl. <i>-āsas</i> beside <i>-ās</i>	thematic instr. sg. <i>-ena</i> beside <i>-ā;</i>
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or it may be allowed to vary:

<i>śrudhi, śṛṇudhi</i>	<i>yaja(śva)</i>	<i>piba(ta) ṛtūna</i>	<i>paramé vyòman(i).</i>
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Derivation within an inflectional category, that is, the production of new stems, belongs here as well. It usually involves suffixes:

-Suffixal variation:

Dadhikrá(van)-, Médh(y)ātithi- (personal names)
ṛjipyá-, ṛjīpín- (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 *udyántaṃ tvā . . . sūrya* (thrice) or the locative absolutes *sūra údite* (9x) and *sūrya udyatí* (once).

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

9.63.29a	<i>apaghnán soma rakṣáso</i>	beside the causative
9.49.5b	<i>rākṣāṃsi apajāṅghanat</i>	

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

4.8.4c	<i>vidvāṃ āródhanam diváh</i>	beside
4.7.8d	<i>vidúṣṭaro divá āródhanāni</i>	

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	<i>úpa tyā váhnī gamato <u>viśam</u> no</i>	but relativized in
7.69.2c	<i><u>viśo</u> yéna <u>gáchatho</u> devayántīḥ</i>	and causal in
7.74.1cd	<i><u>viśam-viśam</u> hí <u>gáchathah</u></i>	

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	<i>ayám <u>dyāvāprthivī</u> ví skabhāyad</i>	beside
6.70.1cd	<i><u>dyāvāprthivī</u> váruṇasya dhármanā / <u>viśkabhite</u> ajāre bhūrīretasā</i>	

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

1.12.1ab	<u>agnīm dūtām vṛnīmahe</u>	beside
8.102.18bc	<u>agne dūtām várenyam</u> / <i>havyavāhaṃ ní śedire</i>	

10.2c Nominalization

Verbs can be transformed into abstract nouns and infinitives, as when pan-Ṛgvedic *sutām piba* / *piba sutām* (“drink the pressings!”) (7x, 4x) appears as *sutásya pītāye* (8x) and *sutásya pītīm* / *-īṣ* (“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. *somapā-* (12x)). A change of mood can cause another verb to be inserted:

8.84.3a	<u>nṛm̐h pāhi</u> # <i>śṛṇudhī girāḥ</i>	
	“Protect the men! Hear the songs!”	but
2.20.3b	<i>sákhā śívó</i> <u>narām astu pātā</u>	
	“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	<i>ā puramdarām cakṛma</i> <i>vīpravacasa</i>	and
8.61.10a	<i>ugrābāhur mrakṣakṛtvā</i> <u><i>puramdaró</i></u>	and
8.1.7c	<i>ālarṣi yudhma khajakṛt</i> <u><i>puramdara</i></u> .	

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 (*āroháyanti divi*); the compound *śucipā-* occurs five times, but is verbalized only once (*piba śúcim*, “drink (it) pure”). The pan-Ṛgvedic formula *ádribhiḥ sutá-sóma-* (“Soma pressed with stones”) occurs fourteen times, but it is verbalized only thrice:

4.45.5d	<i>sómam suśāva mádhumantam</i> <u><i>ádribhiḥ</i></u>
9.34.3b	<i>sunvánti</i> <i>sómam</i> <u><i>ádribhiḥ</i></u>
9.107.1d	<u><i>suśāva</i></u> <i>sómam</i> <u><i>ádribhiḥ</i></u>

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 *dviśó ámhāmsi duriṭā tarema*
 6.2.4d *dviśó ámhó ná tarati*

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

- 8.7.19b *ghṛtām ná pipyúsīr*, 8.12.13c *ghṛtām ná pipya*, but
 8.6.43b *mádhor ghṛtásya pipyúsīm* (“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 kaváye # tā́ juṣasva*
 6.5.6d *tāj juṣasva jaritúr # ghóṣi mánma*
 6.47.10d *tāj juṣasva # kṛdhí mā devávantam*
- 1.45.8c *brhád bhāh bíbhrato havír*
 4.5.1b *kathā́ daśemāgnáye # brhád bhāh*

10.4 Inversion

Inversion of words has been recognized as an element of high style since the Greek Sophists; for the *Ṛgveda* 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 *agním íle puróhitam*
 3.27.2a *íle agním vipascítam*
- 3.35.6 *śasvattamám sumánā asyá pāhi*
 5.43.3c *hóteva naḥ prathamáh pāhy asyá*

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

- 10.95.2c *púrūravaḥ púnar ástam párehi*
 10.95.13d *párehy ástam # nahí mūra mápah*

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

- 1.58.8c ágne grnántam ámhasa urusya
 1.58.9c urusyá agne ámhaso grnántam

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 dāsúṣe jātavedo vahā tvám / adyā devāṁ ūsarbúdhah
 1.44.9cd usarbúdhā ā vaha sómapītaye / devāṁ adyā swardṣāḥ
 1.14.9 ākīṁ súryasya rocanād / viśvān devāṁ ūsarbúdhah / vípro hótehá vakṣati

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

- 8.52.6cd vasūyávo vásupatiṁ śatákratum / stómair índram havāmahe
 8.52.4 yásya tvám indra stómeṣu cākāno / vāje vājiñ chatakrato
 tām tvā vayāṁ sudúghām iva godúho / juhūmāsi śravasyávaḥ

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”:

- 7.70.2a śiṣakti śā vām sumatís cániṣthā which is extended into
 7.57.4d asmé vo astu sumatís cániṣthā and then reused elsewhere:
 7.70.5d asmé vām astu sumatís cániṣthā.

³⁰ This is unrelated to the Parryan sense of “extension” (section 2.2).

10.6b Overlapping

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

1.9.10bc *bṛhád bṛhatá éd ariḥ / índrāya śūṣám arcati*

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

5.41.16a *kathā dāśemā námasā sudánūn* (“how should we do pious service?”) and

7.14.1d *vayám dāśemā agnáye* (“we would do pious service for Agni”)

are combined and the combination then reused:

1.77.1a *kathā dāśemā agnáye # kāsmāi*

4.5.1b *kathā dāśemā agnáye # bṛhád bhāḥ.*

Three formulas overlap when *dūtá- páti- agne* (“the messenger, the lord, O Agni”) (thrice), *viśám páti-* (“lord of settlements”) (10x), and *viśám asi* (“you are of the settlements”) (thrice) are combined in:

1.44.9ab *pátir hí adhvarāṇām / ágne dūtó viśám asi*

and again when the formulas *han- rákṣāmsi* (“smite the demons”) (7x), *sedha- rákṣāmsi* (“keep away the demons”) (thrice), and *sédha- ámīvās* (“keep away the diseases”) (twice) overlap and recur as a hymn-internal refrain:

8.35.16-8b *hatám rákṣāmsi # sédhatam ámīvāḥ.*

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 *ayám asmi jaritaḥ # páśya mehá*

10.83.5 *ayám te asmy # úpa méhy arvān*

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

2.40.2c *ābhyám indraḥ pakvám āmāsv antáh*

1.62.9c *āmāsu cid dadhiṣe pakvám antáh*

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 *ṛśyo ná tṛsyann avapānam ā gahi # / pibā sómam vásāṃ ānu*

is split further into

8.4.3 *yáthā gauró apā kṛtām / tṛsyann éti ávériṇam*
āpitvé naḥ prapitvé túyam ā gahi # / káṇveṣu sú sácā piba.

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 *mahāṃś indro yá ójasā*, 8.6.26c *mahāṃś apārā ójasā*, 8.33.8d *mahāṃś carasi ójasā*, and
 1.9.1c *mahāṃś abhiṣṭír ójasā*

Of course, inherently discontinuous formulas can be enjambed as well, as in, “Indra along with the Maruts drinks the Soma”:

3.51.7a *indra marutva ihā pāhi sómam*
 3.47.1ab *marútvāṃ indra vṛṣabhó ráñāya / pibā sómam anuṣvadhám mādāya*
 3.50.1ab *indrah svāhā pibatu yásya sóma / āgátyā túmro vṛṣabhó marútvān*
 8.76.4 *ayám ha yéna vā idám / svār marútvatā jitám / indrena sómapītaye*
 8.76.6 *indram pratnéna mánmanā / marútvantam havāmahe / asyá sómasya 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, “Viṣṇu strode out three steps”:

8.52.3c *yásmai vísnuṣ trīni padā vicakramá*
 1.22.18ab *trīni padā ví cakrame / vísnuṣ gopā ádābhyaḥ*
 1.22.17ab *idám vísnuṣ ví cakrame / tredhā ní dadhe padám*

³¹ Hainsworth calls these “discrete formulae” (1968:91, 104).

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

- 3.35.6cd *asmín yajne barhiṣi ā niṣādyā / dadhiṣvémām jathāra indum indra*
 3.22.1ab *ayām só agnir yāsmín sómam indrah / sutām dadhé jathāre vāvaśānāḥ*
 3.40.5 *dadhiṣvā jathāre sutām / sómam indra várenyam / táva dyukṣāsa indavaḥ.*

10.7d Sentential Split

The most extreme type of formulaic 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 *éndra yāhi háribhir / úpa káṇvasya sustutím*
 8.8.6cd *ā yātam aśvinā+ # ā gatam / úpemām sustutím máma*

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

- 7.17.3a *ágne vīhi haviṣā # yáksi devān* beside
 3.17.2c *evānéna haviṣā yaksi 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 *indra sómam imám piba, 3.32.1a indra sómam somapate pibemám* but
 8.17.1ab *ā yāhi, suṣumā hí ta / indra sómam # pibā imám*

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 *prā ṇa āyur jīvāse soma tārīh* and
 8.48.7c *sóma rājan prā ṇa āyūmsi tārīr* beside
 8.48.10cd *ayām yāh sómo ní ádhāyi asmé / tásmā indram pratíram emi āyuh* and
 8.48.11cd *ā sómo asmām aruhad víhāyā / áganma yātra pratiránta āyuh*

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

- 9.107.1ab *pārītó ṣiñcatā sutām / sómo yá uttamām haviḥ*

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

- 7.5.6ab *tvé asuryàṃ vásavo ny ṛṇvan / krátuṃ hí te mitramaho juṣánta*
 5.3.10ab *bhūri náma vándamāno dadhāti / pitá vaso yádi táj joṣáyāse*

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 índraṃ, tám grṇīṣe* beside
 8.65.5a *índra, grṇīṣé u stuṣé³²*

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 *asmábhyaṃ sú maghavan bodhi godāḥ* beside
 8.45.19c *godā íd indra bodhi 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 maximal reduction down to the minimal two words is not infrequent, as when the inherently enjambed, six-word formula *prāti váraṃ jaritré / duhīyád indra dákṣiṇā* (“May the honorarium yield milk for the singer according to his wish, O Indra”) (attested seven times) is reduced to *dákṣiṇā 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 samrāje bṛhád arcā gabhīrám / bráhma priyám váruṇāya śrutāya*

and the second singular imperative in:

³² The first passage contains far-deictic *u*, the second, conjunctive *u* (see Dunkel 2014:II, 822).

5.25.7ab *yád váhiṣṭhaṃ tād agnáye / bṛhád arca vibhāvaso.*

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

7.86.6c *ásti jyāyān kánīyasa upāré*
 “The elder exists within the misdeed of the younger,”

and the accusative plural in:

7.32.24ab *abhí śatás tād ā bhara+ / indra jyāyah kánīyasah*
 “Bring this greater (good) to those who are lesser.”

10.9b Semantic

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

8.52.3cd *yásmai viṣṇus trīṇi padā́ vicakramá*

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

6.59.6d *triṃśát padā́ ny àkramīt*
 “he trampled thirty with his foot.”

10.9c Metanalysis of Syntactic Boundaries

Sentence boundaries are not marked in the *saṃhitā*. 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 *evánéna haviṣā yakṣi devān*
 “So sacrifice to the gods with this offering”
 7.17.3a *ágne vīhí haviṣā # yákṣi 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 *sā te jīvātur # utā tāsya viddhi*
 “This is your means of life. And know this!”
- 7.72.2cd *yuvór hí naḥ sakhyā pítṛyāṇi / samānó bāndhur utā # tāsya vittam*
 “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 *udyāntaṃ tvā . . . sūrya* (10.37.7cd) beside *sūra údite* (9x) and *sūrya udyatí* (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 *sumná-* (“goodwill”) in:

- 8.5.27 *etāvad vāṃ vṛṣaṇvasū / . . . / grṇāntaḥ sumnám īmahe* and
 8.49.9 *etāvatas ta īmahe / indra sumnāsya gómataḥ*

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

- 8.7.15ab *etāvataś cid eṣāṃ / sumnám bhikṣeta mārtyaḥ.*

-Transfer of an element to a neighbor: the parallelism of “accompanied by horses, cow, heroes” with shared referent in:

- 7.41.7ab *áśvāvātīr gómātīr na uṣāso / vīrávatīḥ sádām uchantu bhadráḥ* and
 7.75.8ab *nū no gómād vīrávad dhehi rátnam / úšo áśvāvad purubhójo asmé*

is broken up in

- 9.63.18 *ā pavasva hīranyavad / áśvāvat soma vīrávat / vājam gómantam ā bhara.*

11. Lexical Substitution

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 Ásvins mount onto the chariot,” usually:

8.9.8ab *ā nūnām raghúvartaniṃ / rátham tisthātho ásvinā*

but also:

10.41.2ab *prātaryújaṃ nāsatyādhi tisthathah / prātaryāvāṇam madhuvāhanam rátham.*

However for “to prop apart heaven and earth,” as in:

6.44.24ab *ayám dyāvāprthiví ví skabhāyad*

the semantically equivalent:

8.41.10de *yá skambhéna ví ródasī / ajó ná dyām ádhārayat*

is not similar enough to count as a formulaic variant.

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 *píba sómam* (“drink the Soma”) beside *jáhi rákṣas* (“smite the demon”), leads to “phrase patterns” and “structural formulas” (see above, footnote 8).

12. Formulaic Flexibility and Unity

Unity Preserved: Variants of the Same, “Flexible” Formula				Identity Lost: A Different Formula	
Basic formula:	Expanded:	Inflected:	Substitute a synonym:	Substitute an allonym:	Substitute two allonyms:
<i>jáhi rákṣas</i>	<i>jáhi rákṣas viśvāhā</i>	<i>jaṅghanat rákṣāṃsi</i>	<i>bhindhi rákṣāṃsi</i>	<i>paśya rákṣas</i>	<i>píba sómam</i>
<i>tásya viddhi</i>	<i>viddhí tásyas nas</i>	<i>tád véda</i>	<i>tád jānīhi</i>	<i>tásya píba</i>	<i>vānād éti</i>

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.³³

	Two:	Three:	Four:	Five:	Six:	More:	Total:
2. Gṛtsamada:	2	1	2	1	2	0	8
3. Viśvāmitra:	12	3	3	3	0	2	23
4. Vāmadeva:	7	3	0	1	0	1	12
5. Atri:	5	0	1	1	0	1	8
6. Bharadvāja:	6	2	3	1	0	0	12
7. Vasiṣṭha:	16	6	6	1	1	2	32
K Kaṇva:	30	26	19	4	2	1	82
Total:	77	41	34	12	5	7	177

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 *śunām huvema maghāvānam indram / asmīn bhāre nṛtamaṁ vājasātau / śṛṇvāntam ugrām ūtāye samātsu / ghnāntam vṛtrāṇi saṁjītaṁ dhānānām* (“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 divó 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 *Ṛgveda* 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.

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.

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: *rayí- suyáma-*, *Agní-sudīti-*, *kumārā- Sāhadevyā-*, *śyenā- ṛjipyā-*, *Agní- dhartār-*, *rayīm rayivánt*, *vāmā- bhūri-*, *sákhi-pratná-*, *hotar purvaṇīka*, *Índravāyū suṣṭutí-*, *Vāyū- śucipā-*, *Agní- rakṣasvīn-*, *Índra-somapātama-*, *giri- párvata-*, *mártāya ripāve*, *rādhas- áhraya-*, *havyavāhana- yájiṣṭha-*, and *hótāraṃ viśvávedasam*. All of these are flexible in one way or another except for the fixed vocative *hotar purvaṇīka*.

13.4 Epithets and Meter

In his pioneering application of Parry's ideas to the *Ṛgveda*, 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 *Ṛgveda*. 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 *Ṛgveda*.

Positions of some divine epithets:³⁴

	Verse-initial:	Medial:	Final:	Total:	In same verse as theonym:
Agni:				453	58
<i>sūnūḥ sāhasas</i>	5	39	0	44	5
<i>havyavāhana-</i>	0	0	17	17	3
<i>jātāvedas-</i>	13: voc. 11x	21: voc. 20x	95: voc. 34x	129	12
<i>dhūmāketu-</i>	4	0	3	7	0
<i>draviṇodas-</i> , <i>-dā-</i> , <i>-dā-</i>	9	10	11*	30	9*
<i>vaiśvānarā-</i>	59	2	0	61	9
<i>ūrjó nāpāt-</i>	17	0	1	18	1

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

<i>sūditī-</i>	6	3	4	13	4
<i>havyavāh-</i>	19	5	9	33	4
<i>dūtā-</i>	21	71	2	94	11
Indra:				509	51
<i>vājrahasta-</i>	1	9	9	19	2
<i>śatākratu-</i>	3	2	64	69	2
<i>śacīpāti-</i>	9*	1	6	16	2
<i>adrivant-</i>	0	6x, all voc.	43, all voc.	49	1
<i>vr̥trahán-</i>	19	52	46, voc. 33x	117	17
<i>suśíprā-</i>	0	15	5	20	1
<i>hárivant-</i>	0	50x, all voc.	2	52	3
<i>pūrbhíd-</i>	1	5	2	8	5
<i>śakrá-</i>	3	68	4	75	2
<i>vajrín-</i>	5	57	22	84	16
Aśvins:				102	4
<i>vājínīvasu-</i>	0	0	20x, all voc.	20	1
<i>divó nápāt-</i>	6	0	0	6	1
<i>śubhás páti-</i>	0	1	20x, voc. 15x	21	0
<i>purudáṃsas-</i>	0	3	1	4	1
<i>dhīṣṇya-</i>	2	8	2	12	1
<i>dasrá-</i>	14	21	4	39	0

*Seven times in a single refrain.

14. Conclusion

The *Ṛgveda* 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 *Ṛgveda*'s formulas is flexible than the *Iliad*'s; this agrees with its higher overall formulaicity and shows that stylistically, the *Ṛgveda* is in fact more oral in style than Homer—a conclusion strengthened by its higher frequency of unenjambled and coterminous verses and its lower proportion of necessary enjambment (Dunkel 1996:205-07).

Measures of the relative orality of the *Iliad* and the *R̥gveda*:

	<i>Iliad</i>	<i>R̥gveda</i>
Formulaic overall:	1/2 to 2/3 (?)	2/3 to 3/4 (?)
Fixed formulas:	1/2 to 2/3	1/6
Flexible formulas:	1/3 to 1/2	5/6
Unenjambmed verses:	39%	57%
Coterminous verses:	11%	26%
Necessary enjambment:	19%	12%

15. Beyond Vedic and Greek

The *R̥gveda* is in fact not the only ancient Indo-European³⁵ text to surpass the *Iliad* in orality of style. As measured by modes of enjambment, the Roman comedian Plautus (*floruit* c. 200 BCE) considerably outdoes the *Iliad* and is very close to the *R̥gveda* in stylistic orality (Dunkel 1996). This is also true, to a lesser extent, of Terence two generations later.

The relative orality of Plautus, Terence (*senarii*),³⁶ and Menander (trimeter) as measured by types of enjambment:

	Plautus:	Terence:	Menander:
Unenjambmed verses:	55%	48%	28%
Coterminous verses:	18%	12%	4%
Necessary enjambment:	15%	26%	37%

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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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.

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