



HAL
open science

Formulaic Language

Françoise Letoublon

► **To cite this version:**

Françoise Letoublon. Formulaic Language. Georgios K. Giannakis. Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek Language and Linguistics, Brill Online, p. 608-613, 2014. hal-01965616

HAL Id: hal-01965616

<https://hal.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/hal-01965616v1>

Submitted on 26 Dec 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Formulaic Language

Françoise Letoublon

1. Background

In History, the question of repetitions holds an important place in the debates about the authenticity of epic texts, since Alexandrian scholars and the birth of philology, particularly in Homeric commentaries. It reappeared in the French "Querelle homérique" about 1715: the so-called Moderns (Terrasson, abbé d'Aubignac: see Fumaroli 2001) wanted Homer to be abbreviated in the idea that the traditional version entailed too many unnecessary verses and words, whereas the so-called Ancients wanted the whole text to be translated because of its literary quality. However, Madame Dacier, the most fervent defender of the Homeric excellence, herself dropped some formulas as showing too high a degree of repetition, in an attitude that seems parallel to Antoine Galand's edition in French, in the same period, of *One and a Thousand Nights*.

The rediscovery in 1781-87 of the famous manuscript of the Iliad called Venetus Marcianus A with the greatest amount of Alexandrian scholia, by Alexandre d'Ansse de Villosion, who published and analysed it just before Revolution, opened the way to Friedrich August Wolf's *Prolegomena ad Homerum* and to the development in Germany of the Analytic movement. The sole defense of "Homer" against this Analysis was then on the basis of Aesthetic quality, which did not appear scientific, whereas the German analytic school had the bright halo of science, leaning on the authority of the Alexandrian critics.

In 1928, the American scholar Milman Parry defended in Paris a doctoral thesis that completely renewed the question - though several specialists did not accept it. He respectfully quoted German scholars who had some intuitions of the formula before him, such as Düntzer for instance.

2. The Formula and Formulaic Language/ Style

Parry's definition of the formula reads thus: "In the diction of bardic poetry, the formula can be defined as an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea. What is essential in an idea is what remains after all stylistic superfluity has been taken from it. Thus the essential idea of the words ἡμῶς δ' ἠριγένεια φάνη ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἥως is 'when day broke'." A majority of Homeric and later poetic repetitions (actually the whole corpus of hexametric poetry in Greek, and still further in the lyric and choral poetry) can be defined as more or less formulaic. Therefore it was no longer possible to reject the repetitions as mistakes of the manuscript scribes. One had to admit them as an intrinsic feature of this kind of poetry: there appears the notion of formulaic style or even formulaic language. Archaic poetry appears as relying largely on formulas. Later, Eric A. Havelock (1963) showed how this formulaic language directly corresponded to the archaic state of mind and knowledge defined as the "Homeric Encyclopedia".

For his part, Milman Parry not only noted and defined formulas, but distinguished several types: generic/special epithets, important for characterising the heroes. Thus whereas *dîos* appears as well with the name *Odusseüs* or *Akhilleüs*, or δουρικλυτός

(Parry 1971: 65) with a significant amount of heroes' names, always in the same metrical position, the main heroes, though they may be referred to with generic epithets, also receive special "reserved" epithets: Parry (1971: 88) listed 40 of them, for instance 6 for Achilles (πόδας ὠκύς, ποδαρκής, ῥηξήνορος, ποδωκέος, θυμολέοντα, θεοῖς ἐπιείκελ'), 7 for Odysseus (πολύμητις, πολύτλας, πολύφρονα, ταλασίφρονος, ποικιλόμητιν, τλήμων, ἐσθλός), only one for Ajax, Patroclus, Nestor, Amphiarus, Orestes, Aegisthus and Polydeuces (1971: 92). Parry concluded his chapter on the "Meaning of the Epithet in Epic Poetry" saying that the fixed epithet is purely "ornamental".

Parry's model includes the declension of the words of the formulas, from which comes the notion of grammatical variation, further developed by other scholars like Michael Nagler (1967, 1975), who linked those variations to the movement of Chomskyan "generational grammar": we applied this idea to the formulas for the idea "to reach the age of youth", where a kind of paradigm can be traced back (ἦβης μέτρον ἰκέσθαι/ ἰκοντο/ ἰκάνει, and when metrics does not allow ἰκετο at the same place ἦβης ἰκετο μέτρον: Létoublon 1992). A similar paradigm with variants is found for the idea "to reach old age", or rather in Homeric Greek "old age reaches one", cf. Il. 4.321 αὔτε με γῆρας ἰκάνει, Il. 1.29 πρίν μιν καὶ γῆρας ἔπεισιν, Od. 13.60 εἰς ὃ κε γῆρας ἔλθη καὶ θάνατος.

It may be concluded that the notion of formula concerns not only nouns and adjectives, but also verbs, and possibly any parts of speech. Therefore we would prefer Formulaic Language rather than Formulaic Style as the title of this entry for EAGLL.

3. Formulas and typical scenes.

Some years after Parry's discovery and accurate study of the formula, a German scholar, Walter Arend (1933) remarked the return in the epics of scenes that he called Typische Szenen, "typical scenes", for instance the departure for fighting or the hospitality or welcoming scene. In his review of this book, Milman Parry seemed to regret that Arend did not take into account the formulas. Parry unfortunately died soon thereafter, too soon to be able to join the notions of formula and of typical scene himself, but several scholars -mostly English speaking like B. Fenik (1968, 1978) actually saw how typical scenes usually use formulaic style for the expression of repeated events, that often consist in ritual actions. Therefore it becomes easy to look at instances of fighting in the Iliad as a suite of descriptions of the equipment of the hero, beginning the battle either by killing several minor fighters in a catalogue or by facing another hero in a singular fight, eventually claiming victory: a number of formulas correspond to each of those successive steps. We agree with the tenants of "Oral poetry" that the process of oral composition "in performance" does not allow us to say that the *aoidos* drew his verses from a given stock of formulas, but he probably had in mind a general scheme of the story to tell, and a capacity for combining traditional formulas together while telling this story.

The study of some typical scenes of battle using more or less the same formulas with significative variations may throw some light on this process.

The Iliad contains four arming typical scenes:

- 3.330-333 successively shows Paris putting on his greaves, breastplate, sword, shield, helmet and spear (in Greek κνημίδας, θώρηκα, ξίφος ἀργυρόηλον/χάλκεον, σάκος, κυνέην, ἄλκιμον ἔγχος): epithets are attached to the sword and the spear, with a visible "ornamental" function, as Parry would say.

- for Agamemnon, 11.16-46, we see the same elements in the same order, with a variation for the breastplate: instead of the simple θώρηκα, it is said to be a gift of Kinyras, king of Cyprus, orned with sculpted snakes; a second supplement concerns the shield, said to contain an emblem, namely a Gorgon.

- Patroclus, in book 16, puts on the same generic arms in the same order as Paris without any particular emphasis on the fact that those arms are Achilles' property. A very surprising variation occurs when the poet devotes no less than 5 verses (16.140-144) to an arm which Patroclus does not take, the spear, since only Achilles is able to hold it (πάλλειν, with a word play on the aorist πῆλαι and in the following verses Πηλίαδα and Πηλίου, which might refer to Achilles' father Πηλεύς: the missing proper name in the text could be a kind of enigma coded through the word-play, and thus the fixed epithet Πηλίαδα, reserved to this sole spear, would appear a proper name.

- the last variation met concerns Achilles. The arming scene begins in 19.369 and ends in 391, with the usual wording for the cnemids (369), amplified with a rich detail in verse 370, while no precision at all concerns the breastplate (371); the sword receives in 372 exactly the same formula as Paris' one in book 3. Some emphasis is found for the shield, from 373 to 382, with formulaic epithets (σάκος μέγα τε στίβαρόν τε) but almost with a developed simile concerning its brilliance, like that of the moon (6 verses and a half). The helmet called here τρυφάλειαν ... βριαρήν (380-1) also receives a comparison to a night star (381-383). Two verses (384-5) are devoted to trying on the arms, of course because Achilles wears them for the first time, and the "original" verse 386 assimilates them to wings: πτερὰ γίγνεται on the edge of a metaphor. Then, in 19.387-392 reads a couplet on the spear, with in 387 a variation on the usual formula for the expression meaning "he took his spear". The four following verses appear a mere repetition of 16.141-144. Shall we call this repetition a formula? In this repeated suite appear the expression Πηλίαδα μελίην which seems a fixed formula reserved to Achilles' spear, and also some rare words or word association with an Aeolian dialectal look as the second hemistich of 391 φόνον ἔμμεναι ἠρώεσσιν which gives the impression of a very old formula quasi frozen in a piece of the epics concerning the Thessalian rooting of Peleus and Achilles (think of the first hemistich of the same verse: Πηλίου ἐκ κορυφῆς).

The arming scene concerning Achilles is made of the same formulas as other arming scenes in the poem, but it is enriched by some special details justified by the situation, and comparisons added constitute a precious ornamentation, through which Achilles himself is prepared to become a star, when he leaves the place where he took on his arms; we think of the similes following the arming scene: in 398-9 he is compared to brilliant Hyperion. The comparison will be darkened by his horses' prediction, but the clair obscur effect may be all the more striking.

This example well-shows, to my opinion, that the repetitions in the Iliad, rather than an awkward clumsiness, is an actual poetic feature, that enhances Achilles as the main hero, the "Best of the Achaeans".

4. Formula as a landmark in a text

From a former paragraph, it may be concluded that the special formula, as it characterises the main heroes, has for the audience of the epics —an oral genre par excellence— the function of a landmark, reminding who is acting or speaking at every moment of a very long development of the plot. Some other formulas also play a role of landmark in the text, we are thinking especially of two cases:

- nights and days, eating and sleeping

The formulas for the arrival of "rose fingered Dawn" (... φάνη ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἥως) is among the best known in Homer. Perhaps it is less well known that there are some variants (Létoublon 1997). The formulas give a rhythm to the narrative —without falling systematically at the beginning or end of a Book. Other formulas occur for the falling of the night (ἦμος δ' ἠέλιος κατέδυ καὶ ἐπὶ κνέφας ἦλθε or ἐπὶ τ' ἦλυθεν ἀμβροσίη νύξ), for the meals of the fighters (αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πόσιος καὶ ἐδήτυος ἐξ ἔρον ἔντο) and their falling asleep, or sometimes their insomnia.

- narrative and discourse

As Plato well remarked, Homer makes extensive use of direct discourse, which results in the epics being very lively. It has been well noted that direct discourse is regularly introduced and closed by formulas, the best known of which are ... ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα and ὣς ἔφατ' ... Scholars more seldom ask the purpose or function of these formulas. We think that they function precisely as markers of discourse: in oral epics, the alternation between proper narrative in the third person and discourse held directly by the characters compels the narrator to signal the discourses: these formulas thus replace written punctuation, they are landmarks for character discourse. Therefore the epic narrative may both use the same repeated formulas and at the same time advance the plot without giving the impression of standing still.

5. Formulas and hapaxes

Milman Parry defined Homeric epics as "entirely formulaic", which seems to exclude any possibility of non formulaic expression, hence of renewing language and thought. It does not seem justified to ask whether this wording is to be taken accurately or not. We could rather use linguistic data, especially the dialectal ones, to distinguish in the Homeric text several phases in the development of the epic language (Ruijgh, Haug).

If we accept (Meillet, Parry, de Lamberterie) that some formulas, though they show the usual features, occur only once, the absence of repetition could be explained by pure chance. This might be case when the poet evokes Achilles' spear in action: this object then receives very rare qualifications that seem to make it an animated being, with feelings and sensations of hunger and thirst:

In Il. 21.69-70 ἐγχείη δ' ἄρ' ὑπὲρ νώτου ἐνὶ γαίῃ
ἔστη ἰεμένη χροὸς ἀμεναι ἀνδρομέοιο.

and 21.167-8 Ἥ δ' ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ

γαίῃ ἐνεστήρικτο λιλαιομένη χροὸς ἄσαι.

Several words appear as hapaxes or near hapaxes in Homer: the present infinitive ἄμεναι occurs once, the adjective ἀνδρομέος has 4 ex. in the Iliad, 2 in the Odyssey, the association

χροὸς ἀνδρομέοιο met here also occurs once (Il. 17.571). If it is a formula meaning 'human flesh', let us remark that it is absolutely never occurs elsewhere with a verb meaning 'to eat', even less with this rare verb meaning more or less 'to eat one's fill of something', much stronger than the usual verbs. In the second example, the spear is Asteropaios': both spears seem to 'feel' the same sensations. We do not deny the formulaic status of the verb λιλαίομαι (see, for instance, with a complement in the genitive, λιλαιόμενοι πολέμοιο (Il. 3.133), λιλαιόμενόν περ ὁδοῖο (Od. 1.315), with an infinitive ἦσθαι ... λιλαίομαι (Il. 13.253), λιλαιομένη πόσιν εἶναι (Od. 1.15). But it is then used for humans, whereas the hemistich λιλαιομένη χροὸς ἄσαι qualifies the spear. One variant in Il. 11.574 and 15.574 shows the neuter qualifying arrows in a formulaic verse:

ἐν γαίῃ ἴσταντο λιλαιόμενα χροὸς ἄσαι.

As well as ἄμεναι, those occurrences are the sole Homeric uses of the aorist infinitive are Homeric near hapaxes (ἄσαι occurs once with a genitive complement αἵματος in Il. 5.289, in the first hemistich, as well as the optative form ἄσαιμι in 9.489):

Therefore the aorist infinitive seems closer to a formula than the present ἄμεναι, but the etymological kinship between both of them and the place of the same complement χροὸς shows that the poet knows this formulaic variation as the present and aorist of the same formulaic expression, the more common aorist ... χροὸς ἄσαι and the exceptional present χροὸς ἄμεναι ἀνδρομέοιο: the present is thus probably much more expressive.

The poet uses formulas and repetitions for a poetic purpose, making the variations all the more suggestive. Their function as a landmark is important for the audience of a very large epic plot as the Homeric epics, where people need to know when the poet tells events or when he leaves the word to one of the characters.