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Kennings, metaphors, and semantic formulae in Norse *dróttkvætt* (Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi, 120 (2005), 123-147)

The past quarter century has witnessed a remarkable proliferation of monograph-length studies of skaldic poetry, ranging in scope from the general introductory surveys by E. O. G. Turville Petre (1976), Roberta Frank (1978), Klaus von See (1980), and Régis Boyer (1990) to the magisterial and highly technical study by Hans Kuhn (1983), the detailed investigation of *dróttkvætt* rhythms by Kristján Árnason (1991), and the recent work by Kari Ellen Gade (1995). Edith Marold (1983) and Thomas Krömmelbein (1983) have also published book-length studies of aspects of skaldic verse. These monographs lead their existence against a backdrop of substantial articles by such scholars as John Lindow (1975), Frederic Amory (1982, 1988, 1997), Bjarne Fidjestøl (1974, 1979; translation 1997), Peter Hallberg (1978), and the critical bibliographical survey of recent scholarship by Roberta Frank (1985). Of central concern in any investigation of skaldic verse is the treatment accorded to kennings, which, after all, are the single most striking feature of skaldic verse. And within the treatment of kennings, the role played by metaphor is perhaps the single most complex and controversial feature.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the role of metaphor in the functioning of Old Norse kennings has also received a fair amount of attention during the same period. Much of this attention, however, has been focused on definitional issues, with scholars arguing variously that kennings are metaphors or that they are not. A principal reason for denying the metaphoricality of kennings appears to have been aesthetic: since kennings do not have the same aesthetic effect as metaphors in the western poetic canon, they cannot be metaphors. Hence, scholars have attempted to differentiate kennings from metaphors. In contrast, I will argue that most literary definitions of metaphor are simply too narrow. Much recent linguistic work on metaphor, especially that by George Lakoff and Mark Turner (Lakoff 1987, Lakoff and Turner 1989) shows amply that metaphor permeates the cognitive structures reflected in everyday language in much the same way that it does in poetic language. Hence, the difference between everyday language and poetic language is one of degree, not of kind: 'Poetic thought uses the mechanisms of everyday thought, but it extends them, elaborates them, and combines them in ways that go beyond the ordinary' (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 67). Furthermore, insights gained from the study of image-metaphors are directly applicable to the study of skaldic verse.

I will also argue that because scholarly discussion and debate have focused on the specific properties of kennings and on the difficulties inherent in their interpretation, an important function of kennings has often been overlooked. A consideration of their production or generation and their functioning in the metrical schemes of the helmings or half-stanzas in which they are found leads to the conclusion that they are the equivalents of formulae in other oral poetic traditions. The principal difference between kennings and other formulae is that because of the metrical requirements of skaldic verse (principally the alliterations and internal rhymes), kennings are formulaic *solely* on a semantic level rather

than on *both* a semantic *and* a surface-syntactic level, as are the formulae in other traditions.  
[NOTE 1]

A consideration of an Old Norse *dróttkvætt* stanza will illustrate both the formulaic nature of kennings and the blend of metaphor and metonymy inherent in their composition. The stanza I have chosen is a popular example in expositions of skaldic verse (cf. Lakoff and Turner 1989: 104-105, Amory 1982: 76-77); it is dealt with thoroughly in Roberta Frank's excellent *Old Norse Court Poetry* (1978). The poem is by Markús Skeggjason, an eleventh-century Icelander (d.1107). I repeat Frank's text, literal translation, and analysis of the poem:

Fjarðlinna óð fannir	Of the fjord-snake waded through the snowdrifts
fast vetrliði rastar;	firmly the bear of the current;
hljóp of húna gnípur	jumped over the peaks of the mastheads
hvalranns íugtanni;	of the whale house the bear;
björn gekk framm á fornar	the bear went forward on the old
flóðs hafskíða slóðir;	of the flood sea skis' tracks;
skúrörðigr braut skorðu	the storm breasting broke through of the prop
skers glymfjötur bersi.	the skerry's clashing fetter the bear.

(subject: ship-kenning) : (verb of motion) : (object: sea-kenning)

the bear of the current : waded firmly through : the snowdrifts of the fjord snake

the bear of the mastheads : jumped over : the peaks of the whale house

the bear of the flood : went forward on : the old tracks of sea skis

the storm-breasting bear of the prop: broke through : the clashing fetter of the  
skerry

(Roberta Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry*, 46-47.)

Striking in this poem (and for that matter, in the remainder of the skaldic corpus) is the large number of kennings. Within the confines of eight six-syllable lines Markús has fitted eight kennings: four for the ship, four for the sea. In each case, the ship-kennings have the same structure: a word for bear is collocated with a word associated either with ships or with the sea. The four words for bear, *vetrliði*, *íugtanni*, *björn*, and *bersi*, can be also be analyzed: *vetrliði* means 'one who has passed a winter' (so Frank in her glossary, s.v.) [NOTE 2]; although the etymology of *íugtanni* is unclear (cf. Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon s.v., de Vries s.v.), it clearly contains the tooth word, and is some sort of *heiti* for a bear; *björn* is the ordinary word for bear, but originally a color word, hence a metonym; *bersi* is apparently a derivative of *björn* (cf. Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989: s.v., de Vries 1962: s.v.). The bear word can be further modified, as it is in the final ship-kenning. A noteworthy feature is that there is no *a priori* reason for a ship to be equated with bears. Yet this metaphor (and the equation of a ship with a bear must be either a metaphor of some type or, conceivably, a metonymy; see below) serves as the basis for the composition of the poem. Presumably, the appropriateness of the bear-kennings in this context have to do with bears as large, fierce animals that break through obstructions and obstacles, here those characteristic of a sea voyage from Iceland to Norway. And of course there is always the possibility that the ship was named after a bear, that it was associated with a bear because of its color, or that it carried a bear-ornament. The sea-kennings are

slightly more elaborate, having to do with the ice-floes in an Icelandic fjord, the roughness of the open sea, and then the rough water around the skerries of the Norwegian coast, but as in the case of the ship-kennings, the basic structure is maintained. In essence, then, what we have is "the bear went over the mountain" transferred to a maritime context. However, the fact that skaldic verse so often distills into a series of static nominal phrases has inhibited its appreciation as poetry and has led to a dismissal of the metaphoricity of kennings. Frank herself, however, refers to the *dróttkvætt* poets as 'construct[ing] entire systems of interlocked kennings, devising a separate syntax or language of metaphoric expression that usually depended as much on previous knowledge and training for its comprehension as on a feeling for or observation of nature' (1978: 44-45). [NOTE 3]

Frank defines the kenning as 'a periphrasis, consisting of two or more substantive members, which takes the place of a noun' (1978: 42). This definition has a long history; in essence, it goes back to Rudolf Meissner, who defined the simple kenning as follows: 'Die einfache Kenning ist also ein zweigliedriger Ersatz für ein Substantiv der gewöhnlichen Rede' (1921: 2). Meissner further specifies that '[w]esentlich für die Kenning ist, dass sie als Ersatz empfunden wird und als solcher etwas allgemeingültiges, typisches, variables hat' (1921: 12). To this broad definition a narrower one was opposed by Andreas Heusler, who wanted to restrict the term kenning to those associations of nouns that have a metaphorical sense and a further ludic twist ('ein Metapher mit Ablenkung'), and unfavorably compared the feeble attempts found in Old English alliterative poetry (1923: 131-2):

Das Rezept der Kenning ist hieraus zu ersehen. Sie ist eine Spielart der Metapher, und zwar eine mit dem Rätsel und dem Witze geistesverwandte, weil sie eine Auflösung heischt und eine Ähnlichkeit des Ungleichen erspäht. . . . Der deutschen Stabreimdichtung sind Kenninge fremd. Bei der englischen redet man zwar immerzu von Kenning, aber da nimmt man solche Allerweltsausdrücke mit wie Erdbewohner für Mensch, Eschenholz für Speer; also gar keine Metapher, geschweige eine abgelenkte. Die spärlichen Kenninge der Engländer sind von der treuherzigen Art wie jenes 'Wogenroß' für Schiff, 'Knochenhaus' für Leib.

Heusler further stresses the frequency of kennings in Old Norse poetry: 'Was bei anderen Menschen, auch den Iren, Gelegenheitseinfall bleibt, daraus haben die Skalden Plan gemacht' (1923: 132). It should be explicitly noted that Heusler's definition of the kenning is as much aesthetic as formal, insisting on a certain degree of complexity and lack of transparency. Wolfgang Krause (1930: 5), on the other hand, elaborates Meissner's definition:

Unter der einfachen Kenning verstehen wir den einer typisch poetischen Sphäre entnommenen zweigliedrigen Ersatz für ein Substantiv der gewöhnlichen Rede. Die in der Umschreibung verwandten Begriffe können nach bestimmten Mustern beliebig variiert werden und sind vom Zusammenhang der ganzen Stelle unabhängig. [in Sperrdruck in Krause's text]

More recently, John Lindow has defined the kenning as a multiply expandable nominal compound (1975: 317), while emphasizing the similarities between kennings and riddles, thus anchoring himself firmly in the tradition of Heusler's approach, including the ludic

aspect. Lindow further reminds us that this verse must have been composed for a highly sophisticated audience, one fully capable of puzzling out and appreciating its complexities. Another approach is taken by Frederic Amory, who in the context of a general discussion of kennings as nominal compounds has defined the kenning as a transformation of a relative clause (1982: 74). Amory takes as his point of departure E. V. Gordon's statement that '[t]he kenning had the meaning of a subordinate clause in briefer space and with less emphasis' (1957: xi) and develops further this observation, incorporating into his argument insights derived from contemporary linguistic theory. In two later articles Amory is more interested in questions of referentiality and metaphor, but maintains his linguistic perspective (Amory 1988, 1997). Amory highlights the distinction between metaphor and metonymy in his discussion of specific kennings in the 1997 paper. This distinction has not usually been made even by recent skaldicists, because kennings often comprise a blend of metaphor (on the base-word level) and metonymy (on the determinant level).

In *Kenningkunst* (1983), Edith Marold has reverted to Meissner's broad definition, while providing an elaborate taxonomy of the different kenning types. Important for our purposes, and worth quoting at length, is the statement that Marold makes in her summary:

Bei den tropischen Kenningar war es notwendig, das problem der "metaphorischen Bedeutung" aufzurollen, wobei dem Verstehensmodell der Vorzug gegeben wurde, das von einer "Bedeutung" im strengen Sinn absieht und von der Bezeichnungsfunktion der Metapher ausgeht. Die Funktion der Tropen liegt dann in der Zuordnung verschiedener "Weltbereiche"; dadurch wird der Unterteilung in Metapher, Synekdoche und Metonymie zu einer Möglichkeit der Beschreibung der Wirkweisen der so klassifizierten Kenningar, die man im weitesten als Gestaltung eines Gegenstandsaspekts bezeichnen kann. Dabei ist für die Kenningar charakteristisch (und zugleich befremdend), daß der durch sie gestaltene Aspekt nicht auf den Kontext Bezug nehmen muß, ähnlich wie beim Epitheton ornans der Epik. Mit Hilfe der Barokliteratur, in deren Bildsprache ähnliche Prinzipien zu herrschen scheinen, und einer Stelle der Snorra Edda, gelangten wir zu dem Vorschlag, in den Kenningar nicht sophistische Wortspielerei sondern Gestaltung eines logische strukturierten Weltbildes zu sehen. Damit käme man auch zu einer anderen Deutung des Kontrastes als der bisher gegebenen ästhetischen (als nicht nachvollziehbarer ästhetischer Wert) oder magisch-religiösen: nämlich als einer dem Rätsel verwandten Aufforderung zur Interpretation und Auflösung eines Kontrastes, der von den Kräften des Verstandes bewältigt ein Bewußtsein der Einheit und Geordnetheit der Welt trotz aller Gegensätze schafft. (Marold 1983: 212)

Marold's comparison of kennings with Homeric fixed epithets (*epitheta ornantia*) is certainly valid, but it limits the functions of kennings, and her assertion that there is no relation between kenning and context needs rethinking. Furthermore, Homerists are divided on whether *epitheta ornantia* have local contextual relevance or not.

Bjarne Fidjestøl (1974; English translation 1997), in an analytically sophisticated article (itself in certain respects an extended metaphor because of its emphasis on the parallelism of the kenning system and various structuralist linguistic subsystems [NOTE

4]), proposed a six-part "descriptive" definition of the kenning: 1) circumlocution, i.e., a kenning is a replacement for an ordinary noun; 2) two components, base word and determinant, with the base word in whatever case is required by the syntax of the clause and the determinant in the genitive (or as the first element of a compound); 3) semantic incongruity, i.e., neither the base word nor the determinant is synonymous with the semantic content of the noun that is replaced; 4) domain limitation, i.e., in Meissner's catalogue of kennings 106 different concepts are recognized, but the overwhelming majority of kennings are assignable to fewer than twenty of these; 5) kenning variation, i.e., both base word and determinant are open classes; 6) *rekit*, i.e., the possibility of replacing the determinant by a kenning. This optional process is recursive, with the limit established theoretically by the maximum number of syllables in a helming, and practically by the need for a finite verb. Fidjestøl draws a clear distinction between metonymy (and synecdoche) and metaphor in the structure of the different figures that have been labeled kennings. He maintains that points 4-6 in his definition serve to differentiate kennings from metaphors in that these points refer specifically to the kenning system and are to some extent quantitative (1974: 10-11, 34 = 1997: 28-29, 50). It is precisely these points, however, that are crucial to my argument, in that they highlight the limitedness and the productivity of the kenning system. In fact, Fidjestøl gives as example the set of possible kennings for gold of the type 'fire of water'. He calculates that there are 2496 possibilities for the instantiation of this kenning type, all with the same semantic structure, 'fire of water' = 'gold'; the high number of possibilities arises simply from multiplying the number of attested (i.e., in Meissner's corpus, 39 words) base words for 'fire' by the number of attested (again in Meissner's corpus, 64 words) determinants for 'water' (Fidjestøl 1974: 18 = 1997: 31). Although Fidjestøl does not make this point explicitly, the practical limits would be established by the local requirements of alliteration, internal rhyme, and syllable count. After this insight, Fidjestøl turns his attention to the structural similarities between kennings, Saussurean signs, and phonemes.

While Fidjestøl concentrates on rhetorical theory and Saussurean analogies, Régis Boyer stresses the associative nature of kennings, implicitly bringing out their metaphorical nature:

. . . le but de la kenning est de provoquer des associations entre le domaine concerné par le sujet traité à proprement parler, et tout autre registre . . . La bataille, "tempête des épées", ouvre des perspectives sur des images maritimes ; à l'idée du prince, "briseur d'anneaux" s'associe l'évocation de l'or et le thème indo-européen de la liberalité : il brise les anneaux d'or pour les distribuer à ses fidèles. De la sorte, le poète parvient à dire deux ou plusieurs choses en même temps, son inspiration évoluant sur divers plans en interférence. L'imagination du lecteur ou de l'auditeur ainsi constamment sollicitée de s'arracher à un seul type d'interprétation, enrichit comme spontanément le simple contenu factuel du message. (1990:141)

Whether viewed as metaphors or not, kennings have been characterized as a 'typische Stilfigur', a typical stylistic figure, of early Germanic (and Celtic) poetry (Krause 1925, 1930). And, in fact, kennings are found in greater or lesser numbers in all the older Germanic poetic traditions: Old English, Old High German, Old Saxon, and Old Norse

(among the older literature cf. van der Merwe Scholtz 1927 and Mohr 1933). Old Norse court poetry differs from these other poetic traditions in that it exhibits a substantially higher density of kennings than do the others; that is, a feature which might be regarded as decorative in these other traditions is so all-pervasive in the Norse that one is tempted to look for a structural function for the kennings.

Scholars such as Roberta Frank have demonstrated that the kennings in Norse court poetry are far more than mere ornamental devices. The contextual appropriateness of the bear/ship kennings in the Markús Skeggjason stanza cited above has been lucidly brought out by Frank, who turns her analytical skills to forty-nine other *dróttkvætt* stanzas in her textbook. In an earlier paper Frank pursued elements of 'onomastic play' on the name Steingerðr in Kormak's verse (1970). Marold, too, in a different way, insists that kennings are not merely ornamental, stressing the fact that kennings tend to cluster in introductory stanzas and in the refrains of long poems, and that kenning density can signal essential points in a poetic narrative. She notes further that kennings for persons honor them and characterize them in accordance with the narrative in as much as they emphasize situationally appropriate aspects of the person. It is in these ways that the skalds used kennings as a 'Gestaltungsmittel' for their verse. Thomas Krömmelbein, in a published dissertation, characterizes the kenning as a 'konstitutives Merkmal der Skaldendichtung', differentiating his work from that of Marold by stressing that

. . . Kenningsetzung nicht willkürlich-ornamental im Dienste der Variation resp. einer lediglich überhöhenden Funktion erfolgt, sondern weitgreifenden Sinn einzuholen instande ist, der wiederum auf die Klartext-Ebene zurücklenkt, diese akzentuiert und interpretiert oder auch übersteigt im Aufschließen von *Bedeutungsräumen*, die über den Kontext der Dichtung (Handlungs-Ebene) hinausgehen. (1983: 24)

Yet in spite of this expenditure of scholarly energy, in many ways the modern analysis of kenning types is still reliant on that provided by Snorri Sturluson in his handbook on poetics, in part because of Snorri's insight and first-hand knowledge of the tradition, but in part too because of the insistence on the importance of taxonomy and the difficulties of interpretation by modern authorities. In view of this situation, a quick recapitulation of Snorri's analysis will not be out of place here.

Snorri Sturluson's handbook on Norse poetics articulates three different levels of skaldic diction that have been accepted as canonical ever since (Snorra Edda. Skáldskaparmál vii):

1) 'to name every thing the way it is called'. Here the (*ókennd*) *heiti*, that is, poetic vocabulary substitutions for man, poetry, horse, fire, etc., are used. As noted by Boyer, metonymy is the principal source for *heiti*. [NOTE 5]

2) 'the second branch is what is termed substitution for names [*fornöfn*]'. It seems clear that the *viðkenningar* (e.g., *Burs / Bestla sonr = Óðinn; Baldrs faðir = Óðinn; Óðins barn = Baldr; Fáfnis bani = Sigurðr; Jarðar burr = Þórr*) and the *sannkenningar* (*stinn sár, sárin þróask stórum*) are subtypes of this branch. The *viðkenningar* are by definition metonyms. [NOTE 6]

3) 'the third branch of diction is what is termed kenning, and the branch is so set up

that if we denominate Óðinn or Þórr or Týr or some one of the gods or elves, and to each of them I give a name, I then transfer with an appellative the property of another god or mention some of his deeds, therewith the first becomes the possessor of the name and not the one who was named for him; thus when we allude to Victory-Týr or Týr of the Hanged Men or Týr of ships' cargoes, these are Odin's names. . . ' Snorri specifies this class as *kennd heiti*. [NOTE 7]

(*Ókennt*) *heiti* is the term used for those words for ordinary objects which are found in poetic usage. There are many hundreds of these terms, preserved in the poetic corpus and in the versified alliterative lists known as *pulur* [NOTE 8], but a few examples will have to suffice. For 'horse', *hestr* or *hross* in prose usage, such *heiti* as *jór*, *blakkr*, *fákr*, are found, respectively 'horse', 'dun-colored horse', and 'sturdy horse'. For 'battle', *örrustr* in prose, we find among many other terms *róma*, *dynr*, *gnýr*, *morð*, *vig*, *dolg*, the first three *heiti* referring to the noise of battle, the next two to the killing, and the final *heiti* to the hatred that engenders battle. For 'ship', *skip* in prose, *heiti* such as *kjölr* 'keel' and *rá* 'yard-arm' are used. For 'fire', *eldr* in prose, the archaic *fýrr* and *funi* are found. It is clear from even such a short list that some of the *heiti* are simply archaic inherited words for the objects they designate (*jór*, *funi*), while others are metonyms (*gnýr*, *dynr*) or represent the results of synecdoche (*kjölr*, *rá*). *Heiti* differ from kennings in that they consist of only one element. Nonetheless, the *heiti* that are metonyms show some of the semantic structure of kennings.

It is universally recognized that the *heiti* are used for their metrical convenience in addition to the heightened or charged effect that they create on the lexical level. As E. O. G. Turville-Petre puts it: 'The choice of the *heiti* may be determined by the exigencies of alliteration, rhyme, or metre ...' (1976: xlii). I suggest that it is necessary to take the next logical step and to assert that kennings, too, are used for their metrical convenience. In part, this is a consequence of the fact that *heiti* participate in kennings.

Kennings proper (Snorri's third branch) are clearly metaphorical; in fact, in the stanza cited at the beginning of this paper, they seem to be what Lakoff and Turner call image metaphors. Image metaphors differ from other metaphors in that they "map" (in Lakoff and Turner's terminology) images rather than concepts from one domain onto another:

Metaphoric image-mappings work in just the same way as all other metaphoric mappings -- by mapping the structure of one domain onto another. But here the domains are mental images. Image structures include both part-whole structure and attribute structure. In images, part-whole relations are relations such as those between a roof and a house, or between a tombstone and a grave as a whole. Attribute structure includes such things as color, intensity of light, physical shape, curvature, and, for events, aspects of the overall shape, such as continuous versus discrete, open-ended versus completed, repetitive versus not repetitive, brief versus extended. (1989: 89-90)

Noteworthy in Lakoff and Turner's description is that an initial metaphor gives rise to a further series of complex metonymic associations. This mixture of metaphor and metonymy is characteristic of virtually all types of kennings, and it is this mixture of

stability (the basic metaphor, no matter how far-fetched) and variation that makes it possible to regard kennings as formulaic, especially when one takes into consideration the highly limited number of concepts replaced by kennings.

There can be little doubt that much early Germanic poetry is oral poetry, at least in the broad, common-sense meaning of the term as it is used, for instance, by Ruth Finnegan (1976, 1977). At the lowest level, there are many clear examples of formulae (in the narrow sense of repeated collocations of words) in the Eddic corpus, even if it is possible to assert, as Lars Lönnroth does, that these formulae 'serve as ornaments and as poetic padding rather than as the basic building blocks of composition' (1971: 2). Joseph Harris, however, takes a somewhat different perspective on orality in eddic verse. 'This is still our basic assumption: eddic poetry flourished in a milieu in which writing did not play a major role in the conception, creation, performance, preservation, and transmission of poetry' (Harris 1985: 112). This statement is unexceptionable and can of course be extended to include skaldic verse as well. On the subject of oral poetry and formulae in skaldic verse, Frank brings up the essential difficulty:

For although dróttkvætt is oral poetry, it is dependent on the concept of a fixed text; and although it is highly patterned poetry, it is not formulaic in the manner of archaic Chinese song, Homeric epic, or even Old English verse. Not one stanza of the fifty in this collection shares six consecutive syllables with another; indeed, poets enjoy playing upon their hearers' expectation of a formula such as "hawk on hand" ... only to mislead and disappoint them. (1978: 27)

In an unpublished dissertation, James Spamer utilizes Milman Parry's (1928/1971, and Albert Lord's 1960) notions of economy and scope in discussing the functions of the abstract structures underlying kennings (1977: 36). Spamer asserts that

The system of a periphrasis (whether kenning, *kend heiti*, *viðkenning*, or *sannkenning*) is its underlying form, the theoretical abstract structure which determines the choice of words, their precise derivational forms, and their case endings, according to metrical demands. We may use as example a line from *Gísli*:  
*oddflaums viðum draumi* (100, 19, 2)

The kenning in this line, *viðr oddflaums* ('tree of the spear eddy'), simply means "warrior." A closely related kenning would be *viðr oddgnýs* ('tree of the spear-tumult'), which would also mean "warrior." The difference between the two kennings is simply that in *Gísli*'s line the kenning with *oddflaums* for its keyword meets the requirement of internal full rime (*aðalhending*), while that with

*oddgnýs* does not. ... Both kennings mean exactly the same thing. The underlying system can be characterized, for the moment, as [tree of battle]. (1977:33)

Although it should be evident from my exposition so far that I agree with Spamer's basic point, it is worthwhile to observe that in spite of his use of the terms economy and scope he sidesteps the question of the orality of skaldic verse, nor does he take up the topics of metaphor and metonymy. Furthermore, Spamer and other Scandinavianist scholars are operating with a fixed definition of formula that is no longer current, at least among Homerists.

The notion of formula has evolved and developed since Milman Parry's definition



of it as 'an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea' (Parry 1928/1971: 13). Parry's definition was intended to include such fixed expressions as: *polÚtlaj d<oj* 'OdusseÚj 'much-enduring divine Odysseus' (= *d<oj* 'OdusseÚj = 'OdusseÚj), *pÒdaj çkÝj* 'AcilleÚj 'swift-footed Achilles' (= 'AcilleÚj), *·ododfktuloj °èj* 'rosy fingered dawn', or *™ n^ oþnopi pÒntJ* 'on the wine dark sea'.

Forty years later, J. B. Hainsworth (1968) advanced the notion of the flexible formula. The flexible formula dispenses with Parry's 'same metrical conditions', and replaces this with a notion of expected collocation of words. According to Hainsworth, the basis of the formula is a 'repeated word group' (1968: 35). This definition is maximally general, and includes many collocations that would not have been recognized as formulaic by Parry or by Lord. It allows word-groups to occur in different metrical contexts, to be split up across lines, to be broken up by the insertion of prepositions and particles, to occur in different word orders, and to be expanded. Hainsworth justifies his procedure as follows:

In fact the only datum the scholar has is the text of the poems. There the occurrences of word-groups can be counted, and it is obvious that some groups are very frequent. Even if the text were in an unknown language, it would be natural to call such groups formulae. In doing so we should not be committing ourselves to any evaluation of the author's mental processes, but stating only that the use of one word created a strong presumption that the other would follow. This degree of mutual expectancy I choose as the best differentia of the formulaic word-group. (1968: 36)

It is very clear that Homeric studies have witnessed a progressive shift in the definition of formula from the rigidity of Parry's original formulation (which was intended in the first place to cover the *epitheta ornantia*) and Lord's less rigid approach through Hainsworth's notion of the flexible formula, namely expected collocations of words, to more abstract units. Lord himself accepts these modifications and developments of the basic theory (1991: 74). In particular, Edzard Visser (1988) has investigated the occurrences in the Iliad of the so-called "killing-verses" of the type 'X killed Y', for example,

E 43 'IdomeneÝj d' Ýra Fa<ston ™ n»rato, MÇonoj ufÒn  
'Idomeneus slew Phaistos, Meion's son'

O 332 A,,ne...aj d Mšdonta ka^ ™ Iason ™ xenfrixen  
'Aineias slew Medon and Iason'

X 514 MhriÒnhj d MÒrun te ka^ `Ippot...wna katšкта  
'Meriones killed Morus and Hippotion'

Z 12 ™Axulon d' Ýr' œpefne bo¾n çgaqÕj Diom»dhj  
'Diomedes good at the war-cry struck down Axulos'

and concludes that each of these lines is formulaic, in spite of the fact that different verbs are used for the notion 'kill', and that the verbs, the connective devices (), and the names must be considered 'semantically functional'. Furthermore,

These verses represent perfectly the entire scene-type 'killing in battle': the active persons (the grammatical subjects) belong to both opposing sides (three Achaeans and one Trojan), the four subjects represent three different prosodic schemes, the four predicate-forms vary prosodically, and finally, every object shows a different

prosodic scheme. (1988: 29)

Egbert Bakker and Fabrizia Fabbri (1991), while they accept the orality of Homer, make a parallel distinction between nuclear and peripheral elements in formulaic expressions, using as their test cases the words for 'spear' ( *αἰγείοι, δόρυ*) in the dative, in order to demonstrate the flexibility and variability of Homeric diction. And Bakker, in later work (1997, with references), has applied a discourse analysis approach to Homeric formulae, concluding that

. . . 'formulas' are not what separates epic style from other poetic styles and what makes epic style 'oral.' Formulas derive from the very nature of spoken language, as a regularization of its basic segment, the cognitively determined intonation unit. Once this regularization has resulted in a fixed metrical form, one of the functions of the formula is obviously the one highlighted by Parry and Lord: facilitating composition in performance. (Bakker 1997: 304)

The net result of these scholars' work is to blur previously rigid distinctions between poetic and everyday language, to force a broader and less formalistic definition of the formula, and to shift the focus of such a definition from the surface syntactic form of an expression to the semantics of the expression. [NOTE 9]

Perhaps the most influential comprehensive definition of the formula from a linguistic point of view has been that of Paul Kiparsky (cf. Watkins 1995: 165). Maintaining Hainsworth's distinction between fixed and flexible formulae, Kiparsky asserts that fixed formulae 'must be listed in the lexicon in their surface-structure form' and may have non-compositional semantics, in the same manner as idioms do. In Kiparsky's phrasing: 'Fixed formulas are treated as ready-made surface structures' (1976: 83). These formulae can be used to help fill the line in every metrically appropriate context. Flexible formulae, on the other hand, are transformationally derived, and cannot have non-compositional semantics. Thus, fixed formulae are fixed both on the level of surface syntactic structure and on the level of semantic structure. As useful as Kiparsky's definition is, however, it must be broadened to include other elements; above all, it must be expanded to include semantically and not syntactically fixed formulas, as I will show below. Furthermore, Old Norse kennings are far less flexible than they seem at first sight. In fact, they are as semantically fixed as Homeric Greek *· odod£ktuloj °ej* 'rosy fingered dawn' or *™ n^ o:pnopi pÖntJ* 'on the wine dark sea' are syntactically (and semantically) fixed. Kennings of course do not have compositional semantics.

Although Roberta Frank is undoubtedly correct in saying that no 'stanza . . . shares six consecutive syllables with another', some means must have existed to enable the poet to compose and, conversely, the hearer to interpret this verse. According to the sagas, some skaldic verse was improvised, while other skaldic poems were composed beforehand (without the aid of writing), memorized, and performed. Whether the verse is improvised or memorized, very few formulae appear. The principal reasons for this state of affairs inhere in the meter of the court poetry: if the systems of alliteration and internal rhymes are taken as part of the meter of the poems in addition to the syllable and line counting and the requisite cadence pattern, no two *dróttkvætt* poems will have precisely the same metrical structure.[NOTE 10] This fact in itself is sufficient to account for the absence of traditional

fixed or flexible surface formulae in skaldic verse.

In virtually all discussions of kennings the role of meter is ignored (Spamer 1977 is an exception). Kennings are of course treated as a characteristic feature of the verse, but they have traditionally been regarded as primarily ornamental devices that only in origin were contextually and pictorially relevant, thus Meissner and Krause. The emphasis in more modern scholarship has been on the typical, general, and conventional aspects of kennings, and on taxonomies of kenning types, thus Fidjestøl and Marold. Frank and Krömmelbein have the merit of looking for local relevance (in their very different ways) in the particular kennings chosen.

Although the number of kennings appears to be unlimited, the number of kenning types is highly limited. In her taxonomy of kenning types, Marold, a determined splitter, establishes thirty-three separate categories, taking into consideration such features as periphrasis of the concept by means of acts and deeds, periphrasis by means of characteristic relations to various things, periphrasis by relations to people, periphrasis by kin relation. Within these categories there are subdivisions based on metaphor, synecdoche, antonomasia, tree-names, the use of specific personal names, and grammatical function of the base word (Marold 1983: 31-36). These categories are defined on the basis of both structural and semantic criteria.

Furthermore, in more than four hundred years of composition of *dróttkvætt*, only 106 nouns are replaced by kennings. I arrive at this figure simply by counting the classificatory headings in Meissner (1921). Of course, the kennings are generally applicable to this restricted set of culturally (and poetically) important nouns; thus, there are kennings for men, women, animals, weapons, battle, ships, the sea, gold, poetry, and so on.

It appears that within each of these semantic categories there exists a limited number of kenning systems. For example, horse words are by far the most frequent base words in ship kennings. These horse words may themselves be *heiti*:

blakkr 'horse' < 'dark'                      nausta blakkr 'horse of the boat houses' = 'ship'

brunn 'horse' < 'brown' (in a *pula*)

drasill 'horse' [NOTE 11]

sunda drasill 'horse of the sounds' = 'ship'

faxi 'horse' < 'mane'

sævar faxi 'horse of the sea' = 'ship'

sunda faxi 'horse of the sounds' = 'ship'

jór 'horse' < 'horse' (< IE \*ek'wos)      landa bands jór 'horse of the bond of lands' = 'ship'

As determinants to these horse base-words are added expressions for sea kings, for the sea, for waves, etc. Kennings for ships consisting of a horse word and a sea or a wave word must all be treated as approximately synonymous, and the appearance of one or the other horse-*heiti* or sea-*heiti* (or for that matter horse-kenning or sea-kenning) will be conditioned by the meter and the demands of the alliteration and internal rhyme systems. The kennings for ships consisting of a horse base-word and a sea king determinant could be viewed as belonging to the same kenning system, with the sea king used metonymically for the sea.

Each of these kenning systems constitutes a ready-made semantic structure with indefinitely many surface realizations. Viewed in this manner such semantic structures as [horse of sea king x] or [horse of sea] function exactly like (oral) poetic formulae, but these are not fixed *surface* expressions with fixed semantic structure as Kiparsky and a host of

earlier scholars of the Parry-Lord school would have it; rather, they are fixed *semantic* structures with variable surface structures, that is, semantic formulae. From the point of view of the composition of skaldic verse, the poet would presumably have at his disposal a highly limited inventory of such semantic formulae (as evidenced by the 106 categories in Meissner), an extensive vocabulary, and an oral version of the *pulur* which would allow the instantiation of the semantic formula in a given metrical context. Thus, it is the kennings, with their formulaic, fixed semantics and their metrically conditioned instantiations that bridge the gap between the requirements of a fixed text and oral composition.

Kennings are not a peculiarity of Old Norse verse or of early Germanic verse; they must have occurred in the Indo-European parent language (cf. the examples presented in Watkins 1995: 44-45 and those given by Bader 1989: *passim*); and they occur in everyday colloquial language. Here I can call attention to such contemporary American English expressions as *rug rat* (= child), *mall rat* (= suburban adolescent), *clothes horse* (= overly fashionable dresser), *nose candy* (= cocaine), *ear candy* (= lush, non-demanding music, presumably patterned on the preceding), *straphanger* (= commuter), *tree-hugger* (= environmentalist), or *the savior of Carnegie Hall* (= Isaac Stern). I observe that these expressions correspond exactly to classic kenning types.

To return to the issue of the blend of metaphor and metonymy observable in the semantics of many kennings, it will be useful to turn to the notion of semantic frames as formulated by Charles J. Fillmore:

By the term 'frame' I have in mind any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any one of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits; when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text, or into a conversation, all of the others are automatically made available. I intend the word 'frame' as used here to be a general cover term for the set of concepts variously known, in the literature on natural language understanding, as 'schema', 'script', 'scenario', 'ideational scaffolding', 'cognitive model', or 'folk theory'.

(Fillmore 1982: 111)

Further, Fillmore's case grammar incorporates the notion of 'frame' in much the same manner that 'frame semantics' does: 'In particular, I thought of each case frame as characterizing a small abstract 'scene' or 'situation', so that to understand the semantic structure of the verb it was necessary to understand the properties of such schematized scenes' (115). To take one example, the schematic scene 'commercial event' includes such elements as BUY, SELL, PAY, SPEND, COST, CHARGE, all of which focus on different aspects of the scene. Fillmore continues: 'Using the word "frame" for the structured way in which the scene is presented or remembered, we can say that the frame structures the word-meanings, and that the word "evokes" the frame' (117).

The applicability of this approach to semantic analysis to the kennings in skaldic verse should be immediately apparent. All one need do is to substitute such culturally appropriate scenes as 'battle' or 'generous prince' or 'ship voyage' for Fillmore's example to call up the relevant elements. Furthermore, it seems clear that the stories contained in the Snorra Edda or in other mythological sources not only provide typical scenes or scenarios

(directly comparable to Fillmore's semantic frames) necessary for the interpretation of kennings, but also for the formation of kennings. [NOTE 12] That is, any reference to any part of a known mythological scene or a cultural topos automatically calls up all the remaining aspects of the scene. The difference between everyday scenes and mythological ones is in some respects a continuum, with both general cultural attitudes and real world knowledge, e.g., generosity of princes, boldness and steadfastness of warriors, swiftness of ships, colors of horses, women's dress and ornament, etc., supplying the material for kennings, *kennit heiti*, and *heiti*. [NOTE 13]

An examination of a stanza by Egill Skallagrímsson will illustrate the relevance of Fillmore's semantic frames.

Ölvar mik þvíat Ölvi  
 öl gervir nú fölván;  
 atgeira læt ek ýrar  
 ýring of grön skýra.  
 Öllungis kanntu illa,  
 oddskýs, fyrir þér nýsa,  
 rigna getr at regni,  
 regnbjóðr, Háars þegna.

literal translation

It intoxicates me, since Ölvir  
 the ale makes now pale;  
 of the spears I let of the aurochs-cow  
 the drizzle over lips pour.  
 completely are you able badly  
 of spear-point cloud for yourself find out  
 to rain it gets with rain  
 bidder of rain of the Half-blind one of the  
 servants

Egill Skalla-Grímsson (d. ca. 990)

Turville-Petre's translation:

I am getting drunk, for (and indeed) the beer is now making Ölvir pale; I make the drizzle of the spears of the bison cow pour over my lips. You, warrior, cannot at all find your way about; and now it begins to rain with the rain of the servants of Óðinn (i. e. poetry begins to flow). *Scaldic Poetry*, 18.

This poem about the composition of poetry illustrates the blend of real-world and mythological knowledge that is required for its interpretation. At first sight, the first kenning (the drizzle of the spears of the aurochs-cow : spears of aurochs-cow = horns; drizzle of horns = ale) appears merely to be a constituent of the statement that Ölvir is getting drunk. The second kenning (bidder of rain of cloud of spear-points : cloud of spear points = shield; rain of the shield = battle, bidder of battle = warrior) is highly appropriate in context, simply because it continues the liquid metaphor. The third kenning (rain of servants of half-blind one : half-blind one = Óðinn, servants of Óðinn = poets, rain of poets = poetry) makes possible a reinterpretation of the first kenning as a reference to the mead of poetry, because it is an unambiguous reference to the mead of poetry theme. Carol Clover (1978: 75-76) has pointed to the possible double entendre of the first kenning, and in her discussion of an entire range of skaldic verse that makes reference to the basic 'myth of the etiology of poetry', makes a telling point:

As brilliantly as the skalds ply and prettify this primary metaphor by their complex system of varying language and figures of diction, recombining the parts, organizing images in new arrangements, and creating new ambiguities, the fact remains that there lies at bottom a single, primitive frame story whose general

limits are observed. (1978: 80)

Her point is entirely consonant with the argument advanced in this paper. To paraphrase Fillmore, any reference to one constituent of a basic frame (or theme) guarantees the automatic availability of all the other constituents of the frame.

Although it is usually stated that skaldic poets treated a wide variety of subjects in their *dróttkvætt* verse, I feel that the opposite is true, and that the restrictions on what was considered a proper subject for this meter shed some light on the nature of Norse poetic composition. To illustrate this point, I will turn to a stanza by the eleventh-century poet Þjóðólfr Árnórsson (d. 1066):

	literal translation:
Sigurðr eggjaði sleggju	Sigurd egged on of the sledge
snak váligrar brákar	the snake of the dangerous (tanner's) implement
en skafdreki skinna	and the scrape-dragon of skins
skreið of leista heiði;	crawled over the heath of lasts;
menn sásk orm, áðr ynni,	men feared the dragon before attacked
ilvegs búinn kilju,	of sole-way equipped of covering,
nautaleðrs á naðri	of ox-hide the adder
neflangr konungr tangar.	long-nosed king of the tong.

Turville-Petre's translation:

Hammer-Sigurðr (the smith) incited the snake of the dangerous tool (the tanner) and the scraping dragon of hides crawled over the moor of shoe-soles (i.e. over the floor); men feared the dragon dressed in his shoes, until the long-nosed king of the tong attacked the serpent of the ox-hide. (*Scaldic Poetry*, 101).

The story accompanying this stanza (as related in *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, Íslenzk Fornrit IX) is that King Haraldr Harðráði was walking with two of his skalds and saw a brawl between a smith and a tanner. Haraldr requested that the poets compose a poem about the fight, but they demurred, saying that the subject was not appropriate, whereupon Haraldr suggested that the smith could be represented as Sigurðr and the tanner as Fáfnir. This story is usually interpreted as showing that the court poets (or at least Þjóðólfr: 'eigi samir þat, þar sem ek em kallaðr höfuðskáld yðvart') did not like to treat 'low' subjects in their verse, but this interpretation does not seem convincing in view of the fact that many of these same poets were also highly skilled at lampoons and invective (*níð*). On the contrary, it seems to be the case that what the poets were objecting to was not the subject matter, but rather that they did not have the appropriate language to deal with the subject in the particular genres of verse represented by *dróttkvætt*. What Haraldr's suggestion did was to place this particular fight solidly within the North Germanic heroic tradition, and thus make it possible for the ingenious poet to improvise his stanza by using locally varying kennings derived from the traditional semantic and thematic stock. This stanza is also treated in Turville-Petre (1968: 12), where the narrative context is given and stress is laid on the '... ability of a poet, with myth, diction and metrics at his finger-tips, to turn strophes like these at a moment's notice. The story may well be true, but even if it is not, it shows what was expected of a court poet.'

The metaphors involved in kennings have typically been seen as essentially

culturally and mythologically determined. This much is undoubtedly true. However, many scholars have drawn the further conclusion that these metaphors have nothing to do with ordinary linguistic structures in the language. Yet it seems that too strict a dichotomy here has led to a multiplication of the difficulties inherent in the interpretation of kennings and to an obscuring of the relationship between poetic language and ordinary language. This paper has attempted to demonstrate that kennings and the metaphors that they represent in fact constitute formulae, and that the means for their creation and interpretation are symmetrical.

#### NOTES

[1] I have previously presented the basic argument of this paper very briefly in Holland and Lindow (1996: 58-59). In preparing this paper I have benefitted from discussions with Frederic Amory, John Lindow, Mary McGarry, Thomas R. Walsh, and Kendra Willson.

[2] 'One who has passed a winter' is a further point of comparison between bears and ships, since both are inactive during the winter: bears hibernate, and ships are pulled onto land, propped up, and covered during the winter. Thus, *vetrliði* is especially apt in the context of beginning a voyage in the spring.

[3] Frank's discussion of metaphor, however, is primarily a means of introducing magic and religion into her discussion of kennings:

Óláfr Þórðarson treats the kenning under "metaphor" in his Third Grammatical Treatise and calls it the "origin of all poetic diction." When a poet describes his fallen comrades as "trees of battle" and calls battle "wind of the lightning of the shield," an image is brought forth of warriors tossed about violently, like trees in a storm, struck down by flashes of lightning in the form of hostile swords. But his language is not imagistic in the modern sense; he is not simply prettying up the poem or trying to say something ordinary in a roundabout way: for him, there are moments when men really are "trees of battle," able to inflame the gods to vengeance. ... But the tree as base word in men- and women-kennings is also reminiscent of cult language; it recalls perhaps an earlier time, when forests dominated the natural landscape of northern and central Europe, when groves were worshiped as emanations of divinity, and when trees were perceived as animate beings. (Frank 1978: 43)

[4] Hallberg (1978) offers a general criticism of Fidjestøl's approach, although not of this point.

[5] Boyer very clearly identifies metonymy as the source of most *heiti*:

La catégorie la plus riche, conformément à ce que nous avons déjà entrevu, est d'ordre métonymique pur. On peut prendre l'effet pour la cause et appeler la bataille róma, dynr, gnyr (idée, partout, de vacarme, de fracas), ou mord, víg (proprement: meurtre); ou bien la partie pour le tout: kjölr, la quille, sera le bateau, ainsi que rá (la vergue). Il arrive même qu'en vertu du principe de l'insidieuse provocation des sons, tel heiti appelle, par contraste, une opposition qui finit par créer une atmosphère antithétique. Tel poème dit fraendr (les parents) pour kyn (la parentèle) et fraendr appelle son antonyme fiendi (ennemi), loft (l'air, pour ciel) suscite lögr

(l'eau, le liquide), ljúfr (suave, pour mildr: doux) engendre leiðr (détestable, laid) et ainsi de suite, ces couples étant, on le voit, allitérés. (1990: 135)

[6] I accept Halldórr Halldórsson's argument 'that *viðkenningar* and *sannkenningar* are subclasses of *fornöfn*' (1975: 24). *Sannkenning* is the term used to describe appropriate collocations of adjectives and nouns (as well as appropriate collocations of verb and adverb): *blue sea, dry land, strong sword, heavy wound, sharp edge*, will do as examples. Collocations of this type must have been widespread in early Indo-European verse and in fact in ordinary spoken language; phrases such as heavenly gods, earthly men, mortal men, dry land, have left their traces in everyday Sanskrit and Latin words, as well as elsewhere: Sanskrit *deva-* 'god' originally meant 'heavenly'; Latin *homo* 'man' is connected with a word for 'earth, ground'; Sanskrit *martya-* 'man' originally meant 'mortal'; Latin *terra* 'earth, land' is an adjective that originally meant 'dry', and so on (see Watkins 1985: introduction).

Analogous formal metonymic meaning shifts are responsible for the creation of many *heiti*.

[7] My presentation of the more controversial points in Snorri's exposition is an amalgam based on Einarr Ólafur Sveinsson (1962: 142-150), Arthur G. Brodeur (1952), Margaret Clunies Ross (1987: passim), and Halldórr Halldórsson (1975: 24).

[8] See Elena Gurevitch (1992) for a recent appraisal of *pulur* both as collections of traditional *heiti* and as incorporating vocabulary innovations on the part of their compilers.

[9] For more discussion of shifts in approaches to formulae in Homeric Greek see the articles by John Miles Foley and Joseph Russo in Morris and Powell 1997. Foley 1988 gives a useful survey of current research on oral poetic theory. Harris (1985: 111-126) offers an evaluation of 'eddic poetry as oral poetry'.

[10] *Dróttkvætt*, the usual meter for court verse, is composed in eight-line stanzas with an obligatory syntactic break between lines four and five. The resultant half-stanzas are called *helmings*. This meter requires six syllables per line, with a trochaic cadence defined both by stress and syllable weight. In its most developed form the odd-numbered lines of *dróttkvætt* always contain two stressed alliterating syllables (*stuðlar*); these alliterating syllables 'prop up' the alliterating first syllable in the corresponding even-numbered line (*höfuðstaðr*). The alliterations should not be repeated within a stanza. Furthermore, there are two types of internal rhyme. Full internal rhyme (*aðalhending*) requires the repetition of a vowel or a diphthong and the following consonant(s) within the even-numbered lines, while imperfect rhyme (*skothending*) is characterized by the repetition of the postvocalic consonant(s), but with obligatorily different preceding vowels or diphthongs within the odd-numbered lines. The earlier poets are not as rigid in their observance of the distribution of the full and imperfect internal rhymes as are the later poets.

[11] 'Etymologie unsicher' de Vries 1962: s.v., 'Uppruni umdeildur, en líklegast að orðið sé sk. *drasa, drasin, dræsa* og *drösla* og merki taumhest e.þ.h.' Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989: s.v.

[12] Margaret Clunies Ross in fact states that '... indeed, I will show that the frame-narrative is utilized here as an exemplary justification for what Snorri presents as the underlying process for forming kennings with inanimate referents' (1987: 140). In her contribution to the Guðbrandur Vigfússon centenary volume, Clunies Ross also makes appeal to Fillmore's notion of semantic frames and related notions of prototype



categorization: 'As a result of this work we can see that scaldic kennings and other figures are categorised according to the same principles as more general knowledge systems' (1989: 275-276). She further relates the constraints on kenning formation to 'the major criteria of human categorization: part versus whole; part(s) correlated with functions; parts correlated with shape; interactional properties of the referent with respect to human motor activity and contrastiveness with other categories' (1989: 277-278).

[13] In a converging vein Frederic Amory observes:

To get at the root of the meanings of those kennings demands of us both extralinguistic and linguistic knowledge of their form and content. The extralinguistic covers everything from shipbuilding, clothing, and weaponry to

Old Norse mythology, and the proper term for it is 'encyclopedic' ..., while the linguistic ... is confined to the compounding of the kennings, their figurative semantics, and their referential grounding in the lexical 'kenning system'. (1997: 3-4)

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