Chapter 11

A Text in Speech's Clothing: Discovering Specific Functions of Formulaic Expressions in *Beowulf* and Blogs

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Introduction

In this paper, we consider the functions that formulae perform in two genres which exist in written format as texts, but maintain close links to oral forms, namely Old English (OE) verse, specifically the epic poem *Beowulf,* and weblogs, or 'blogs'. We identify five important functions of formulae found in common across OE verse and blogs, classifying these functions as *discourse-structuring functions, filler functions, epithetic functions, gnomic functions,* and *tonic functions.* In addition, a sixth type of formulaic function necessarily tied to the written medium, the *acronymic function,* is identified in both genres.

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that the formulae found in the Beowulf and blog samples fulfill certain functions which alternately (1) link these emergent text genres to analogous oral forms, in the case of the first five functions mentioned above, and (2) mark the genres as written forms, in the case of the sixth function.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows: to begin with, we survey previous work on formulaicity and discuss several formal characteristics of formulae identified in the literature. Then, we briefly introduce the blog and Beowulf samples from which we take data for the present study. Next, we introduce the five functions of formulae found in our samples through the discussion of specific excerpts. Finally, we summarize our findings, indicating directions for future research.

Characterizations of Formulae and Their Functions in Previous Work

For the purposes of the current analysis, Wray and Perkins' (2000, p. 1) characterization of formulaic sequences offers a useful starting point. According to this, a formulaic sequence is:

> a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar.

This definition can be considered a processing-based definition as it does not identify specific formal properties of formulae, but rather resorts to the notion of holistic storage and retrieval.

Despite the psycholinguistic flavor of the above definition, Wray and Perkins (2000) nevertheless engage the notion of function with regard to formulaic expressions, offering what is ultimately a descriptive model reconciling two main functions of formulae: to compensate for the limitations of memory, e.g. as processing short-cuts, time-buying devices, or mnemonics; and to function as identity-marking devices in social contexts. These two functions are unified in a speaker-hearer model, with the compensatory function serving to ensure felicitous production on the part of the speaker, and the socio-interactional function serving to ensure felicitous comprehension on the part of the hearer. Wray and Perkins draw data from various descriptions of formulaic language use in multiple populations, making their type of broad approach useful in making high-level generalizations about formulaic language use. However, while several functions they identified are also found in the samples analysed in the present study, the functions we identify here are more specifically linked to the registers of written and oral texts, and emerge from a close engagement with the texts in question. Our study thus has the advantage of picking out functions which are intimately related to the genres in question, thereby enabling us to comment also on the function of formulae as stylistic devices delimiting different genres.

Data and Methodology

This study involves two corpora falling under different genres: the first is a sample of approximately 300 lines from the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, and the second is a blog sample of approximately 800 lines.

For the present analysis, the annotated corpora were examined with a mind toward the functions of these formulaic expressions – keeping in mind the following questions: what are authors *doing* with formulae, and what are formulae *doing* for authors?

The Old English sample

Beowulf is an heroic epic poem written in alliterative Old English verse.[1] The date of its composition is much debated, but on the basis of linguistic and palaeographic evidence, it must have been composed sometime between the late seventh and early eleventh centuries C.E.[2]

Albert Lord, John Miles Foley and others developed oral-formulaic analyses, which ultimately derive from Milman Parry's research relating traditional poetry (such as the Homeric epics) to modern orally-composed verse (such as that found among largely unlettered poets in the former Yugoslavia). Parry (1928, 1930) argued convincingly that the Homeric epics were composed by poets working within an oral tradition, shown by repeated use of formulae.[3] Analysis of unlettered Yugoslavian poets (cf. Lord 1991 and the references therein) demonstrated further that epic poems (of up to 12,000 lines or more) could be composed in real time using 'ready-made' phrases established within their poetic tradition.

This use of formulae by modern Yugoslavian oral poets in what Lord (1991:77) calls their 'composition in performance', that is, their real-time composition of poetry, and the appearance of similar formulae in 'traditional' poetry like *Beowulf* suggests that it too was composed through the use of 'ready-made' formulae (cf. Magoun (1953)).

However, Benson (1966) demonstrated that obviously lettered poets (like Cynewulf) also used formulae and thus that appearance of formulae is no guarantee of 'orality'. For this reason, Foley (1991) discusses Anglo-Saxon texts as being 'oral-derived'; that is, composed using the traditional 'oral' style, even if the extant texts themselves were produced as written documents.[4] The fact that lettered poets continued to employ traditional poetic formulae strengthens the case for the importance of poetic formulae in Anglo-Saxon society, since composition-by-formula clearly survived the development of literacy. Interestingly, O'Keeffe (1987, 1990) has shown that Anglo-Saxon scribes commonly substituted one formula for another (usually one that is grammatically and semantically equivalent) in the process of copying, suggesting that such formulae were salient even for non-poets. In other words, such oral-derived texts persist in utilizing what Foley (1991, p. 6–9) calls 'traditional referentiality'.

Traditional referentiality is similar in some ways to literary allusion, except that, rather than making reference to some particular scene/image in a particular text, traditional referential elements 'reach out of the immediate instance in which they appear to the fecund totality of the entire tradition . . . bear[ing] meanings as wide and deep as the tradition they encode' (Foley 1991, p. 7). Thus, unlike literary allusion, a listener/reader need not be familiar with any particular text to understand the deeper meaning of a passage; rather the deeper (connotative) meanings of traditional referential elements are accessible simply through being part of the traditional culture. Put another way, if the formulae are stored (and learned) like lexical items, simply by speaking the language one has access to the meanings (connotative as well as denotative) of the formulae, since the formulae are common to the culture and not embedded in any one particular text. And this is why poets in traditional cultures, even after the advent of literacy, continue to compose texts using the traditional referentiality of poetic formulae, not 'out of a misplaced antiquarianism or by default, but because, even in an increasingly textual environment, the 'how' developed over the ages still holds the key to worlds of meaning that are otherwise inaccessible' (ibid.).

To investigate the functions of formulaic sequences in Old English epic verse, 323 randomly selected lines (1,757 words) of *Beowulf* (Klaeber 1950) were scanned for formulae: ll. 1–52, 189–240, 499–661, 1506–1572, 2538–2583a. Formulae in this sample were identified with the help of the following four heuristics:

1. list of repeated verses in *Beowulf* drawn primarily from the formulae lists of Orchard (2003) and secondarily from Hutcheson (1995);
2. recurrence of sequences/collocations, determined through search of the Internet-based corpus of the *Dictionary of Old English* (Healey et al. 1998);[5]
3. the presence of verse-internal alliteration;
4. non-literality of a sequence.

Any potentially formulaic sequence had to exhibit at least two tokens somewhere in the OE poetic corpus in order to be considered a formula (essentially heuristics (1) and (2)). The last three heuristics served primarily as guides for identifying possible additional formulae not present in the lists of Orchard or Hutcheson. Some recurrent sequences were excluded if their frequent occurrence was expected given the nature of their components, for example, sequences of modal + verb.

Since we are here considering poetic formulae from the standpoint of what is considered formulaic in the linguistics literature (see also above), sequences which are to be considered the 'same' formula are taken to be those which have the same essential meaning/function. So if one formulaic sequence can be substituted for another, they are considered to be tokens of the same formulaic type. For example, 'X under the clouds' and 'X under the stars' are taken to be tokens of the same formulaic type, since they have the same basic meaning and can be substituted for one another (under the right alliterative conditions). Our criterion for categorization is thus akin to Keller's (1981, p. 100) 'loose substitutability', proposed to deal with conversational 'gambits'. Overall, our system of evaluation is similar to that used in oral-formulaic analysis by OE specialists (esp. Fry 1967, 1968a, 1968b; Niles 1981; Riedinger 1985).

The blog sample

Weblogs, or 'blogs', are texts written by one or more authors and posted to a specific Internet address. The blog is a diverse medium with several subgenres, and the format can be used for many purposes: popular blogs are often topical,[6] and feature links and commentary. Blogs can also function as photograph repositories, news commentary,[7] records for collaborative projects, or advertisements. A survey by Herring et al. (2004) found that the vast majority of blogs are single-author personal journals.

The blog excerpts analysed here were automatically collected in May 2006 for the ICWSM dataset[8] by Nielsen Buzzmetrics from blogs published on the Internet. Only blog entries written in English were used, and while there is no way of being certain about the dialect region or even the country of origin of bloggers, those entries that were clearly written by non-native speakers were discarded. Surnames included in the text were changed to 'NAME'.

The dataset obtained in this way consisted of 7,178 words in 34 blog entries, each entry from a different blog. Due to the anonymity of the medium, specific and accurate demographic information is impossible to assert, but both purported males and purported females are represented. The blogs were hosted at three different blogging sites: Blogspot,[9] LiveJournal,[10] and Wordpress,[11] with the majority of the texts being from LiveJournal.

These data were annotated by three annotators, who identified formulae according to a quasi-naïve definition: if a stretch of text sounded like a common saying or expression, or functioned in context in a way comparable to

a common saying or expression, it was marked as formulaic. Inter-annotator agreement between two of three annotators sufficed to identify the sequence as a formula.

Functions of Formulae in OE Poetry and in Blogs

In this section, we present the major findings with regard to the textual functions that formulae serve in our data. We find six major categories of functions: the first five, namely *discourse-structuring functions*, *filler functions*, *epithetic functions*, *gnomic functions*, and *tonic functions*, link the texts in question to oral analogues. The remaining category, *acronymic functions*, serve to situate the texts firmly in the written register by exploiting specific properties of written texts. In the examples given in the following analysis, bold typeface indicates stretches of text identified as formulaic by the previously introduced heuristics.

Discourse-structuring functions

Formulae with discourse-structuring functions serve primarily to organize discourse, either as (1) instructions allowing the author and reader to organize sections of text, or (2) instructions which qualify the manner in which the text is to be taken; hedges, for example would fall into this latter category. With regard to previous work on formulaic language, discourse-structuring formulae would include most of Keller's (1981) conversational gambits, particularly those which introduce the frame of the conversational topic and identify the social context of the conversation.

Discourse-structuring formulae in the **Beowulf** *sample*

In the sample from *Beowulf*, discourse-structuring formulae appear less often than in the blog sample, but occupy especially salient positions in the poem. One prominent discourse marker occurs as the first word of the poem: *hwæt*. *Hwæt* literally means 'what', but in this context it is usually rendered in Modern English as 'listen', 'lo', 'well' and so on. In order to understand the function of the introductory *hwæt*, we discuss the employment of *hwæt* elsewhere in the poem.

Hwæt is a marker employed in the representation of spoken discourse. It occurs a total of five times in *Beowulf*, once as the first word of the poem, where it occurs as part of the 'narrator's' text. The other four instances all

occur in the discourse of the characters, twice as the opening of their speech (l. 530, 1652). When it occurs as the first word of a character's speech, *hwæt* signals the character's intention to begin a dialogue or a narrative, as in *Bwf.* 1652, where it is the first word spoken by Beowulf to King Hrothgar when he triumphantly returns to the king's meadhall after slaying the she-troll who had murdered one of the king's retainers. More interesting perhaps is the use at *Bwf.* 530, where it indicates the speaker's intention to take the floor. Here one of Hrothgar's men, Unferth, has been verbally challenging and disparaging Beowulf, and *hwæt* is the first word Beowulf speaks in his reply (perhaps interrupting Unferth).

(1) '**Hwæt**, þu worn fela, wine min Hunferð,
beore druncen ymb Brecan spræce;
sægdest from his siðe . . .' (*Bwf.* 530–2a)[12]

'**Hey**, Unferth my friend, drunk on beer, you've had a lot to say about Breca, talked about his adventure . . .'

However, *hwæt* may also occur in the midst of a character's speech. It then serves to focus the addressee's attention to what follows, as in the midst of Hrothgar's long speech to Beowulf.

As the poem's opening word, *hwæt* serves a different function: it signals to the audience that the poet is about to *speak* (rather than, say, *write*).

(2) **Hwæt**! We Gardena in geardagum
þeodcyninga þrym **gefrunon**;
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon. (*Bwf.* 1–3)

Listen! We **heard** of the glory of the Spear-Danes in days of yore,
of those clan-kings: how those nobles performed courageous deeds**.**

The orality of *hwæt* is further emphasized by the choice of verb in the following sentence, namely *gefrunon* 'heard'. The story of the Danish kings is not something to be *read*, but something to be *heard* – notwithstanding the fact that this occurs in a written text. The use of *we* 'we' is also noteworthy, implying the collective of poet/'speaker' and audience/'hearers' and their joint knowledge of the tradition within which the following discourse is embedded (discussed above on 'traditional referentiality').

The use of *hwæt* as the opening word is not unique to *Beowulf*: eight other OE poems begin the same way,[13] testifying to *hwæt*'s formulaic character in this function. The importance of these examples is not simply that they are

formulaic, but that they unmistakably invoke an 'oral' setting. In other words, above and beyond its discourse-structuring function, the use of the *hwæt*-sequence marks the text as spoken.

Discourse-structuring formulae in the blog sample

Discourse-structuring formulae are quite common in the blog sample. This is not unexpected, given Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright's (2004, p. 1) characterization of 'journal' blogs as 'internal (the blogger's thoughts and internal workings)'.

The present corpus consists solely of 'personal journal' type blogs, which function to capture the author's internal dialogue. This stream-of-consciousness style is characteristic of personal journal blogs, and discourse-structuring formulae help arrange and organize each text into a coherent whole. For this reason, blog authors commonly use formulae with discourse-structuring functions.

A formulaic introduction to a blog post is generally a one-word formula which can be considered formulaic because it consistently appears at a specific position in the text:

(3)   [Beginning of post] **Okay**, I need help.

The use of *okay*, a very frequent element in spoken discourse, serves a discourse-structuring function when introducing a blog post. Condon (2001, p. 492) discusses *okay* and *well* as discourse markers which 'orient to a default organization that contrasts unmarked, routine sequences and marked, nonroutine departures from expected events'. In our data, *okay* in turn-initial position enacts a transition – for both the author and the audience – by directing attention from unknown previous engagements to the blog author's text.

Another common formula with a discourse-structuring function is *I guess*. This hedge, which softens the impact of the following statement, can function to display apathy about a proposition. *I guess* also distances the text from more formal genres of writing, for example, academic texts or news – linking the text to oral forms and informal written forms, such as personal diaries.

(4)   he is turning me into an uber nerd. **i guess** it's ok

The third type of discourse-structuring formula presented here from the blog corpus is *speaking of X*. This formula links a newly-introduced topic to

a previously-mentioned item by pointing out a relation (however tenuous) between them. By linking the two discourse items, this formula indicates a topic change while maintaining discourse coherence between the old and new topics.

(5) Yeaah. I shall pick Joci up and amuse her, then fall asleep. **Speaking of** sleeping, i'm exhausted[. . .]

These three types of formulae are representative of the broad range of discourse-structuring formulae found in blogs.

Filler functions

We define fillers as words or phrases which do not significantly advance the discourse or introduce new information. Wray and Perkins (2000, p. 16) mention fillers as one of several subtypes of time-buying formulae which ensure 'planning time without losing the turn'. Examples given include '*If the truth be told*' and '*If you like*'. In our analysis, where the notion of 'turn' is problematic due to the nature of the texts, we posit two functions for fillers: fillers can buy time, when composing texts in real time, or serve to acknowledge and reinforce the oral conventions of each genre through reference to real-time composition. In OE verse, fillers can additionally be helpful in satisfying metrical constraints, and in blog texts, fillers serve to 'pad' entries which might otherwise be considered too short.

Filler formulae in the **Beowulf** *sample*

Some frequent formulae in OE verse appear to be employed solely in order to satisfy metrical requirements. One especially frequent formulaic type of this sort is *X beneath heavens/clouds/skies/stars.* All of these essentially mean 'on earth' and do not add any propositional content as they do not typically occur in contexts where there is any doubt that the action is taking place on earth. Examples in *Beowulf* include 714a *wod under wolcnum* '(he) waded/ advanced under the skies/clouds', and *Bwf.* 505a *gehedde under heofenum* '(he) heeded under the heavens'.

Another type of filler formula is the alliterative bridge, a verse whose primary function is to fulfil the metrical requirements of OE verse by providing an alliterator for another verse which would otherwise lack alliteration.[14] Such bridges often involve what is known in Old English

studies as 'variation', that is, the repetition of a concept or term present in the preceding verse or line, usually in the on-verse[15] of the following line. *Bwf.* 231–3, which describes the Danish coastguard's curiosity about the unknown men he observes approaching the kingdom, displays two 'bridges' in swift succession (232a *fyrdsearu fuslicu* 'eager war-devices', a variation on 231b *beorhte randas* 'bright shields;' and 233a *modgehygdum* 'mind-thoughts', a variation on *fyrwyt* 'curiosity'):

(6) beran ofer bolcan beorhte randas
fyrdsearu fuslicu; hine fyrwyt bræc
modgehygdum hwæt þa men wæron. *(Bwf.* 231–33)
(They) bore over the gang-plank, bright bossed shields,
ready war-gear; in him (the coast-guard) curiosity rose up,
the thoughts of his mind (about) who these men were.

Both 232a, 233a are formulaic, and here it appears that these formulaic alliterative bridges are used solely as fillers, as they simply paraphrase nouns of the preceding *b*-verses. However, without these formulaic fillers, the lines would violate the alliterative requirement of OE meter (as there would be no stressed alliterator in common between the two verses).

Filler formulae in the blog sample

The blog sample, which can be characterized by an overarching stream-of-consciousness style, displays two primary principles at work with regard to fillers. First, blog authors are under a compulsion to post at regular intervals, and furthermore produce sizeable chunks of text. Because of this, the author in each case is searching for further topics of discussion. And second, bloggers often type as they think, in which case items like *Um . . .* function as quasi-time-buying devices, despite the editable written format.

(7) [. . .] **Well yeah** and then on sunday me and chelsey went to kmart that was fun. **Yeah i have nothing else to say.** [End of post]

(8) First entry . . . **nothing to say** really . . .

The last part of (7) above may be considered a formulaic closing, which would fall under the set of discourse-structuring functions, but the repeated *yeah* here does fill space as well. In this sense, (7) is an apt reminder of the frequent complementarity of functions displayed by the formulae in this

paper. (8) is an example of a formula serving a filler function occurring at the beginning of the post. Together, these serve as examples of space-filling text as well as evidence that blog-writers do in fact search for things to 'pad' their entries. Even though there is no concrete deadline for submission of a blog, and the author theoretically has an unlimited amount of time to revise their text, the established oral-like conventions provide an impetus to produce this style.

Epithetic functions

Epithets are words or phrases conventionally associated with certain characters or people. Formulae with epithetic functions serve to evoke entire characters or personalities by reference to some prototypical characteristic attribute. In typical spoken discourse, the participants share a great deal of background knowledge, and it is infelicitous and inconvenient to repeat lengthy descriptions word-for-word. By exploiting prior knowledge of characters or personages under discussion, formulae with epithetic functions refer to these characters or personages by way of their most salient characteristics, additionally reinforcing the characterization of the subject in those terms. In contrast, epithets are less useful in most written texts, which are prototypically aimed at broader, possibly unfamiliar audiences, who may not share the relevant background knowledge.

Epithetic formulae in the Beowulf *sample*

Foley (1991) analysing epithets like 'swift footed', as characterizing Achilleus in *Iliad* XXIV.559, argues that the use of this epithet (in this case, while Achilleus is not in motion), is a traditionally established method of bringing the full image of Achilleus to the minds of the audience (Foley 1991: 142f.). In our terms, this involves the formula's *Relation to a (Culture-Specific) Frame*– namely the figure of Achilleus and his characteristic attribute of being 'swift footed', whether or not this attribute is directly relevant to the immediate context of use of the formula.

   Likewise, when Beowulf is referred to at 2539a as *heard under helme* 'hard/fierce under [his] helmet' it does not seem to be because the poet is trying to convey that Beowulf was unusually fierce (or unusually wearing a helmet) due to anything in the immediate context of this verse. Rather, *heard under helme* is a characteristic phrase applied repeatedly to Beowulf (and in fact solely to Beowulf within the entire OE corpus) and invokes a

distinctive image of the character. Arguing that *heard under helme* is simply a metrical filler in this case blatantly ignores this character-identifying function. Consider the context of the verse[16]:

(9) Aras ða bi ronde rof oretta
heard under helme, hiorosercean bær
under stancleofu strengo getruwode. (*Bwf.* 2538–40)
Then the bold warrior(=Beowulf) arose with his shield, **severe under his helm**; he wore a battle-shirt, under the stone cliffs, trusted in the strength . . .

The employment of epithets in Old English verse can be seen as a 'short-cut', a way of summoning up the essence of a character by way of a short phrase referring to one of the character's defining qualities, something which sets him/her apart from others. Epithets are thus a 'low-cost' device employed by poets to create a narrative which is readily comprehensible to an audience who share the same system of traditional referentiality (observed above).

Epithets, at least in OE verse, may sometimes serve an additional function, that of a (metrical) filler, discussed above. In other words, the use of an epithet can be used to 'buy time' for the poet so that he can use his processing resources for other purposes, such as the composition of the next line. The formula may thus fulfill both goals: its use eases the processing burden (speaker-oriented), while at the same time it invokes an easily identifiable and traditionally-licensed image of the character (hearer-oriented).

Epithetic formulae in the blog sample

In the blog sample, no convincing examples of epithets were marked as formulaic by the annotators. This is perhaps unsurprising: epithets serve to summarize particular 'characters', and in a hypothetical blog-genre epithet, this would refer to the summary of a person's characteristics in a way that would be formulaic only within the frame of reference to that particular person. As the corpus contained at most one blog post for any given blog, there was simply no chance for annotators to identify characters built by blog authors through successive posts, for example, through the use of a catchphrase. However, we expect that examples like this exist, and a different kind of analysis involving multiple successive posts from the same blog would be more likely to yield such data. The following examples from blogs

found through Google searches provide some encouraging preliminary data in this direction:

(10) **Miss 'I'mqueenofthehouseoratleastIactlikeIam'** Madison started school this year.[17]

(11) 'I rely on the NRA because I'm too god damned lazy to do it myself and rather use my time to bitch from the sidelines.,' said **Mr. 'I'm not comfortable with McCain.'**[18]

(12) Aaaaanyways, the real blog prompt today is a certain person's blog. **Miss 'I-don't-give-a-fuck-about-what-people-think-about-me'** (Miss Idga) says at one time, 'I don't fucking care', then says [. . .][19]

This *Miss-X/Mr.-X* is a formula which would be expected in spoken discourse, or in informal written texts. It fulfills an epithetic function in that it summarizes a character (in this case most likely a real person) with reference to either previous actions (*I'm the queen of the house or at least I act like I am*) or an attributed quote (*I'm not comfortable with McCain.*) The incidence of this epithetic function thus further links the blog genre to oral forms.

Gnomic functions

Formulae with gnomic functions serve to express the speaker's conceptions of general truths about the world. These conceptions are not idiosyncratic to individual speakers, but instead must have a broader socio-cultural currency.

Gnomic formulae in the Beowulf *sample*

Gnomic expressions in *Beowulf* include the example in (13), spoken to Hrothgar by Beowulf, when Hrothgar is grieving for his lost friend:

(13) selre bið æghwæm þæt he his freond wrece
þonne he fela murne . . . (*Bwf.* 1384–5a)
it is better for every man that he avenge his friend, than mourn over-much . . .

Here perhaps it is not surprising to find such an expression, since it is part of the cited discourse of the poem. But the narrator frequently makes such gnomic comments as:

(14) . . . **Swa sceal** mæg don. . . (*Bwf.* 2166b)
So should a kinsman act . . .

Often these gnomic statements take the form *swa sceal/sceolde* Noun Verb 'So ought N V' or *swylc sceal/sceolde* Noun Verb 'Such ought N V'. Plot-elements of *Beowulf* conform to gnomes found in other OE verse:

(15) . . . þyrs sceal on fenne gewunian
 ana innan lande . . . (*Maxims II* 42a–3b)
. . . A troll shall dwell in the fen, alone in the land . . .

(16) . . . Draca sceal on hlæwe,
frod, frætwum wlanc . . . (*Maxims II* 26b–7a)
. . . A dragon shall be in a barrow, old and wise, proud in treasure . . .

The *þyrs* 'troll' Grendel lives in a fen, and the dragon of *Beowulf* lives in a barrow, guarding treasure for over three hundred years.

Gnomic formulae in the blog sample

In personal journal blogs, formulae with gnomic functions are also quite common, in the form of truisms that further illuminate or reinforce a certain point with respect to the blogger's life. The following excerpts from the blog sample provide evidence of these kinds of expressions:

(17) **Taking a stand** takes too much effort. *Standing aside* hurts just as much. **Fucked either way.**

(18) It became quite a party and of course there are cupcakes, signage, boxes and foil laying around. DISHES too . . . Fun **always has its consequences.**

As Sorrell (1992, p. 33) remarks, '[t]he sententious expression of wisdom is a hallmark of oral cultures' (cf. Frye, 1969, p. 7; Bloomfield and Dunn, 1989, p. 106–49, esp. p. 135–37). In other words, the fact that gnomic

formulae appear in OE verse and blogs reflects the oral-derived nature of both genres.

Tonic functions

Formulae with tonic functions deal with emotional impact and tone along several dimensions, for example, seriousness versus levity, irony versus earnestness, and so on. Perhaps one of the most oft-discussed formulae in the literature, *kick the bucket,* serves this sort of function by backgrounding the event of death, replacing the more serious alternative expression with a non-serious and light-hearted euphemism. However, formulae with tonic functions do not always lean toward the non-serious pole; the opposite is also possible. As will be seen below, while the examples of formulae with tonic functions from Beowulf impart a darker, more serious mood, the blog examples generally serve to distance the speaker from his subject emotionally, making the overall tone more light-hearted. Tonic functions must then be broadly understood as serving to alter the type or degree of emotive tone.

Tonic formulae in the Beowulf *sample*

As discussed above, *X under wolcnum* 'X under clouds' usually appears as a filler. However, one particular instance of *X under wolcnum* acts to signal a particular tone. This formula, discussed by Riedinger (1985, p. 299–303), is *wan under wolcnum* 'dark under clouds', and always occurs signalling 'ominous darkness accompanying supernatural events' (Riedinger, 1985, p. 300). It occurs at *Bwf.* 651a, describing the monster Grendel's approach.[20] Similarly, *Bwf.* 528a *nihtlongne fyrst* 'the space of a whole night' is formulaic, found in other OE poems, and is another example of a tonic formula which 'always signifies a terrifying period of time prior to a battle' (Riedinger, 1985, p. 296).

Tonic formulae in the blog sample

Tonic formulae are fairly prominent in the blog sample, and this is perhaps expected: as noted in Herring et al. (2004, p. 1), blogs of the personal journal type reflect the blogger's internal thoughts and workings. In the following cases, as in the prototypical case of *kick the bucket*, the formulae

serve to bring some measure of levity to what might otherwise be considered overly serious.

(19) Hah, I wonder how many times this has been asked but it does seem relevant. How is it I can **'spill my guts'** to strangers but not to my closest of friends.

(20) I'm going to have a big overdraft fee before too long. Then **shit will really hit the fan.**

Acronymic functions

The final category of functions of formulae found in our texts is a special case among the categories: acronymic functions rely on writing systems, calling upon knowledge of alphabets and other written systems to concisely represent a larger item. We argue that these formulaic functions, in contrast to the previous five, necessarily situate these texts in a written register. Crucially, the combination of the acronymic function of formulae and the five earlier functions related to oral form mark these texts as transitional or hybrid genres.

Acronymic formulae in the Beowulf sample

In contrast to the gigabytes of server space afforded to bloggers (see below), the technology available to Anglo-Saxon scribes was somewhat more limited, as the production of vellum for manuscripts was a costly process. Therefore scribes employed a number of abbreviating devices in order to conserve vellum. Some of these are unremarkable, such as the omission of the *-m* of dative *-um* endings, where the omitted *m* is indicated by a line over the *u*. However, such abbreviating devices – amounting essentially to little more than spelling conventions – remain distinct from the type of formulaic sequences we are concerned with in this paper.

A more interesting abbreviating device is the use of runes. The runic alphabet(s) were used to write Germanic languages prior to and for some time after the Christianization of the British Isles and Scandinavia. The runic symbols have acrophonic names, thus the symbol used to represent /m/, ᛗ, is called *mann* 'man'. In a number of OE manuscripts (which are written primarily in roman characters), runic symbols are not intended to

be read as their phonetic values but instead as their acrophonic names. For instance, in *Beowulf*, the rune ᛟ *eðel* 'homeland', used in the Anglo-Saxon runic alphabet to represent /œ/, is used three times in its acrophonic value *eðel*, 520b, 913a, 1702a.

The OE poet Cynewulf (ca. ninth/tenth c. C.E.) employs runes with both acrophonic and phonetic values. In the poems themselves the runes must be given their acrophonic values, but given their phonetic values they also make up an acrostic signature spelling out the name of the poet.[21] The fact that Cynewulf can put runes to this dual purpose reflects the written side of the character of the extant OE verse. Read aloud, the runes would have to be given their acrophonic values (otherwise both meter and sense would be violated), and thus could not be given their phonetic values. Cynewulf's acrostic signatures work only when the runes are given their dual acrophonic-phonetic values.[22]

Acronymic formulae in the blog sample

Internet-specific acronyms like *lol* (laughing out loud), *wtf* (what the fuck), *btw* (by the way), are by their very nature formulaic – what they refer to must be well known in order for them to be correctly interpreted. While example (22) below, from the blog corpus, makes clear that *wtf* can stand in for '*what the fuck*' as part of a sentential unit, *lol* in (21), generally accepted as '*laughing out loud*', cannot occur in a construction like **I'm lol*. This suggests that *lol*, in particular, has become lexicalized as a separate unit from *laughing out loud* possibly along the lines of an uninflected discourse marker.

(21) **lol** I made a site today**.**

(22) Thought bolt through my hollow dome as I think about **WTF am I gonna do**. Well not so much **wtf am I going to do** as [. . .].

In other genres of computer-mediated communication like text-messaging, where message size is limited, these acronyms function as space-saving devices. In the blog genre, however, there is a theoretically unlimited space for the conveyance of a message, so acronyms instead serve to position the text as a written genre, more specifically as a subgenre of computer-mediated communication. We suggest that these acronyms have been conventionalized to serve as markers of group membership among Internet users, exemplifying the function of identity-marking observed above.

Conclusions

In this study, we identified common functions of formulae in Old English verse and blogs, in both cases simultaneously linking them to oral and written genres. Thus both the *Beowulf* and blog samples appear to occupy a transitional position with respect to the macro-level genres of oral and written communication.

With regard to the broader field of study of formulaic language, we have demonstrated that the majority of the functions identified in our samples from OE poetry and blogs – despite their physical graphic encoding – link the respective genres with more prototypically oral texts, though one of the functions identified the texts as belonging to the written register. Examination of formulae and their functions thus emerges as a useful tool for the study of genres. This line of research could be fruitfully extended to other genres in order to determine the types of functions formulae may fulfill therein, adding genre studies to the long list of disciplines that stand to profit from an in-depth study of formulaic language.

Notes

[1] Alliterative verse uses alliteration as its main structural device for unifying lines, rather than, for instance, rhyme. Two words alliterate when they begin with the same consonant (all vowel-initial words alliterate, as they all begin with no initial consonant). In OE poetry, each line is divided into two verses. The first is called an on-verse or *a*-verse, the second is the off-verse or *b*-verse. The first stressed word of the off-verse of a line must alliterate with a stressed word of the on-verse.

[2] On the controversy surrounding the date of composition of *Beowulf*, see the collection of papers in Chase (1997). For persuasive linguistic arguments for dating *Beowulf* between 685–825 C.E., see Fulk (1992).

[3] Cf. Nagy (1996, 2004a, 2004b) who continues the oral-formulaic analysis of Homer.

[4] Such 'oral-derived' texts may then exhibit some characteristics of literary texts as well, since they occupy a position on the boundary between 'oral' and 'written'.

[5] This corpus contains all extant Old English text, including all OE verse, prose and glosses.

[6] See, e.g. the Language Log <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/> for an example of a well known linguistics blog – Google lists nearly 6,000 links to this site.

[7] TIME.com, for instance, the website of the newsmagazine TIME, has several high-profile blogs.

[8] ICWSM: http://www.icwsm.org

[9] Blogspot: http://www.blogspot.com

[10] LiveJournal: http://www.livejournal.com

¹¹ Wordpress: http://www.wordpress.com

¹² All quotations from *Beowulf* follow the text of Klaeber (1950), with macrons and underdotting removed. Citations from *Beowulf* are referred to as *Bwf.* followed by a line number. All other Old English poems referred to can be found in Krapp and Dobbie (1931–53), and are referred to by the accepted title followed by line number. All translations from Old English are ours.

¹³ These are: *Andreas, Exodus, Fates of the Apostles, Dream of the Rood, Juliana, Vainglory, Solomon and Saturn, and Judgement Day II.*

¹⁴ On alliterative bridges in OE verse, see, for instance, Creed (1959:448–49) and Foley (1990:230).

¹⁵ See fn. 1 above.

¹⁶ Of course this verse alliterates (on *heard*) with the following verse (on *hiorosercean*) in accord with the metrical requirement of OE meter, and if it were removed the structure of the poem would be compromised, likewise if it were a verse without an *h*-alliterator since something must alliterate with *hiorosercean* in 2539b. So one might argue that it is simply an (essentially meaningless) metrical filler used to fulfil the requirements of the meter. Yet *hiorosercean bær* is likely also somewhat redundant, since at 2523b–24a we were already told that Beowulf has armour and shield. So in fact all of line 2539 is propositionally redundant in terms of the audience's knowledge, and nothing would be lost in plot or sense if the entire line were missing. Hence the formula may be used to invoke Beowulf's full (traditional) image.

¹⁷ http://www.kylieclark.com/blog/ Accessed 7 April 2008

¹⁸ http://michaelbane.blogspot.com/2008/03/butt-alligators-etc.html Accessed 10 April 2008

¹⁹ http://draco8876.com/personal/blog.html Accessed 7 April 2008

²⁰ The same formula is found in the *Dream of the Rood* 55a, where it describes the darkness that covered the earth in the hours of Christ's crucifixion; in *Guthlac B* 1280a, as the sun sets on the dying saint's last day; and in *Andreas* 837a, before Andreas is eaten by cannibals.

²¹ An acrostic is a piece of writing in which some recurrent feature (e.g. first letter of the line) spells out another message. Here acrostic refers to the fact that the runes in with their phonetic values spell out Cynewulf's name.

²² See Das (1942) on Cynewulf's poems.

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