The Varieties of Formulaic Diction in Turkic Oral Epics

Abstract: This article tries to show that the formulaic diction on the level of verse line and formulaic patterning in the composition of scenes are closely related and must be studied together. The analysis is done on the example of Turkic epics. Of the formulaic patterns the most prominent one is the variety of use of the attribute ak (white), which appears to be one of the most common epithets in Turkic epic poetry. It is usually connected with cloth (e.g. caftan, yurt), different parts of body (face, bosom), antelope, the lumps of gold given as bride-price and various kinds of arms (sword, spear) etc. It is usually denoted evaluatively as purity and beauty. In this matter Turkic epics share its position with many national epics of the middle ages including Serbian, Old English, Old German etc. The same role is analyzed for the opposite pattern “dust of earth”, and for the two themes: preparation of the hero for his journey and council scenes which are also mutual to many medieval epic traditions such as aforementioned Serbian and others.

Key words: Turkic epics, formula, formulaic diction, pattern, composition

Formula, meter, parallelism

Martin P. Nilsson, in a book on Homer, writes that “[t]he singer is able to improvise because he has learnt the epic technique or, to quote Goethe: eine Sprache, die für dich dichtet und denkt” (Nilsson 1933: 202). The main reason why the language of oral poetry can be described as “a language that creates poetry and thinks for you” is doubtless its formulaic nature. There is, however, no agreement in the many studies devoted to formulaic style and diction on what is to count as a formula. A case in point is Old English. Serious scholarship on the formulaic nature of Old Germanic poetry began in 1889 with the publication by R. M. Meyer of a collection of “formelhafte Elemente” [formulaic elements] in Old Norse, Old English, and Old High German poetry, running to over 500 pages (Meyer 1990). Today, more than a hundred years later, our notion of the formula has been sharpened and Meyer’s all-inclusive use of the concept has been discarded. But even so, the work of the various scholars who have done research on the formulaic character of Old English poetry embodies widely diverging and sometimes mutually contradictory views. Despite disagreement and controversy, most scholars today will concede, however, that their point of departure is Milman Parry’s definition of the formula with regard to the Homeric epics, and that this definition should indeed be the basis for any definition of the formula, however much a particular tradition might call for adjustment and refinement. According to Parry (1971: 272), a formula
is defined as “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.”

For Parry the metrical conditions governing the “group of words” were those of the Greek hexameter, just as they are those of the South Slavic deseterac for Lord or those of the alliterative line for scholars in the field of Old Germanic poetry. When we look at the formulaic character of Turkic oral epic poetry, we find a close relationship between meter and syntactic structure on the one hand, and between syntactic patterning and parallelism on the other.

The verse of Turkic oral poetry is syllabic; two types of verse-line are most widespread in the epics, a line of 7 or 8 syllables, and a line of 11 or 12 syllables. The shorter line is typical of heroic epics, in particular in Kirghiz and Kazakh; the longer line is often found in “romances,” i.e. in oral narratives of a more lyrical character, generally love-stories that often have an unhappy ending. In Kirghiz and Kazakh heroic epics are as a rule in verse, while in other traditions (Uzbek, Karakalpak, Turkmen etc.) they tend to be performed in a mixture of verse and prose. Here the verse parts are sung, while the prose parts are spoken. This “prosimetric” form is typical of the oral romances.

Parallelistic structures in Turkic are first found in the runic inscriptions of the eighth century; the earliest records of parallelistic lines in Turkic oral poetry occur in the eleventh-century Divân lugât at-Turk by Mahmûd of Kashgar. In epic poetry, the formulaic beginning is frequently in the form of parallelistic locative constructions (suffix -da), as for instance in the Karakalpak epic Qïrïq Qïz (Forty Maidens):

- Burïn ğï ötken zamanda,  
  In the days of old,
- sol zamannïŋ qädiminde,  
  in the days of yore,
- qaraqalpaq xalqïnda,  
  among the Karakalpaks,
- ata jurtï Turkstanda,  
  in the homeland of Turkestan,
- Sarkop degen qalada,  
  in a town called Sarkop,
- az noğaylı elatïnda...  
  in the small Noghay tribe...

As Viktor Zhirmunsky has argued, the predilection of parallelism has led to the creation of rhyme in Turkic oral poetry (Zhirmunsky 1985: 320-352). The Turkic languages belong to the agglutinative type of languages, which means that the various grammatical morphemes expressing case, number, tense etc. are suffixed to the word-stem and remain comparatively fixed. These suffixes vary only slightly according to the rules of vowel har-

---

1 For a recent survey of the oral-formulaic theory, see Foley and Ramey, 2012: 71–102.
2 For a discussion on this form, see Reichl 1997: 321–348.
mony. In the quotation above the locative suffix is found in the forms –*da* after dark and –*de* after light vowels (as after *i* in *qädimin-de*).

A Turkic epic might also begin with some maxim or gnomic verses, arranged in parallelistic fashion, such as in the Kirghiz *Kökötöydün aşı* (*The Memorial Feast of Kökötöy-Khan*) from the *Manas*-cycle:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Altïn iyernïŋ kašï eken:</th>
<th>A golden saddle has its pommel:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ata yurtmun bašï eken.</td>
<td>a people has its chieftain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kümüš iyernïŋ kašï eken:</td>
<td>A silver saddle has its pommel:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tün tüškön kalï köp Nogay yurtmun bašï eken.</td>
<td>the Nogay teeming as shadows at nightfall have their chieftain.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here the parallelism of the lines can be analysed as Qualification + noun + genitive + noun + possessive + *eken* (is):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>gold</th>
<th>father</th>
<th>silver</th>
<th>the Nogay teeming as shadows at nightfall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>saddle-land</td>
<td>saddle-land</td>
<td>-OF</td>
<td>pommel-head-pommel-head-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Formula and formulaic system**

In order to illustrate the formulaic patterning of Turkic oral epics, I will take a short passage from the Kazakh heroic poem *Qambar*.*Äzimbay*, a rich man of the Noghays, has six sons and a daughter. When his daughter, the beautiful Nazïm, comes of age, she is allowed to choose a husband from the men who have flocked to *Äzimbay’s* encampment as prospective husbands. But none of the suitors passing in review finds favour with Nazïm. One young man had, however, not been invited to this gathering, *Qambar* of the impoverished clan of the Tobïr, and it is precisely with this young man that Nazïm falls in love when she first hears of him. *Qambar* has to prove his valour before he can marry Nazïm, and it is his heroic deeds that form the substance of the narrative. In this passage Nazïm is reviewing her suitors:4

4 Quoted from M. O. Auezov and N. S. Smirnova, eds., *Qambar-batïr* [*The hero Qambar*] (Alma-Ata 1959: 38).
Altïn tuğïr üstinde
Nazïm otïr qonaqtap
105
aq tuyïnday erikken.
Qara men töre talasïp,
forïmïna qarasïp,
aldïnan ötti körikten.
Qïz Nazïmnïn maydanï
är toptïn boldï bazarï,
tïsedi köpke säwlesi
qagazday kïrsïz äzârï.
Ösïnïïa žurtïnï artïnan
awmadi žangï nazari.
110
Žerdiïn žüzin şandattï
žiylgïn qorïş adamï.

On a golden perch,
Nazïm was sitting
105 in boredom like a white hawk.
Ordinary people and noblemen argued with one another,
looked at her stature,
and passed in front of the beauty.
The maydan5 where Qïz Nazïm was sitting
turned into a bazaar, teeming with people of all kinds.
Her brightness shone on the many people.
Her complexion was spotless like paper.
Among so many peoples
her gaze did not settle on a single person.
The people who had gathered and surrounded her
raised the dust from the earth.

This particular passage describes a fairly individual scene. The passage is certainly not a theme in the sense of oral formulaic theory; this explains the low “formulaic density” of these lines as compared to that of a type-scene. The formulaic density of a particular passage is not only relative to the degree it is a typical scene or part of one, but also to its length and to the size of the referent corpus. The longer an extract is and the more numerous the random passages selected for formulaic analysis are, the greater is the likelihood that the analysis will be representative; and the larger the referent corpus is, the more clearly the formulaic nature of a passage can be shown. The following formulaic analysis is based on a concordance of somewhat over 8,000 lines of Kazakh epic poetry, the epic Qambar in the version from which I quoted, and the epic Qoblandï in Šapay Qalmağanbetov’s version.6 Hence it must be stressed that a larger referent corpus may substantially change the percentage of formulaic lines, although it would not, I believe, give a radically different picture of the nature of Kazakh formulaic diction.

Looking at the referent, we find that parallels can be cited for only six out of the fourteen lines quoted (these lines are underlined in the quotation above). The first line in our sample having a parallel in the referent is line 105:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>aq tuyïnday erikken 105</th>
<th>white hawk-like being-bored</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aq tugïnday quntïydï 1726</td>
<td>white hawk-like he-hunched-up-his-shoulders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 The word maydan (from Persian) means both “square” and “battlefield.”
Aq, “white,” is one of the most common epithets in Turkic epic poetry. In Qambar not only the hawk (tuğïn) is white (105, 1726), but also Nazïm’s face (81) and bosom (539), the various types of yurt (416, 799, 1774), the antelope (228), the caftan (1317), and the lumps of gold given as bride-price (1819). More important for formulaic diction is the use of aq as an epithet for arms. The sword has the epithet aq (665), and five out of six occurrences of nayza, “spear,” are modified by aq, either as aq nayza, “white spear” (1007, 1574, 1735) or in the collocation aq saptï bolat nayza, “white-shafted steel spear” (836, 1680; compare 1123 aq bolat, “white steel”). The latter is formulaic in the strict sense that the same metrical unit is repeated with identical words, differing only in grammatical morphemes such as case endings, postpositions, or possessive suffixes.

The epithet aq has in these lines three ranges of meaning. In collocations like aq tuğïn the adjective denotes a physical quality, the actual colour of a material object. When modifying parts of the body, as in aq žüz, “white face,” or aq tös, “white bosom,” the adjective not only denotes a colour, but is also used evaluatively. “White” suggests here purity and beauty; this is brought out by line 112 Qaġazday kirsiz ažarï, “her complexion was spotless like paper.” We might compare to this the use of the adjectival epithet λευκώλενος, “white-armed,” in the Homeric epics, the epithet of Hera and women in general. When aq is, however, used as an attribute of weapons, it denotes brightness and radiance. Here, too, we find parallels in other epic traditions. Beowulf’s helmet, which he dons before descending into Grendel’s underwater den, is described as hwît, “white-shining” (se hwîta helm, l. 1448). Shining armour and weapons are, of course, a common motif of heroic poetry. Hector is described in the Iliad as with a shining helmet (κορυθαίολος), and the various epithets used for weapons in the Homeric poems include a fair number of adjectives denoting a bright and radiant quality.

A more detailed analysis of formulas in the passage from Qambar quoted above than can be given here leads to a distinction between four types of formulaic line. The first type can be termed “formula in the strict sense.” This type of formula comprises lines which are repeated in the referent corpus without changes that affect its lexical composition. An example of this type of formula is the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>aq saptï bolat nayzamen 826</th>
<th>with the white-shafted steel spear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aq saptï bolat nayzändî 1672</td>
<td>your white-shafted steel spear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These lines only differ by their grammatical morphemes (possessive suffixes, case suffixes).

A second type of formula is more variable than the first insofar as variation within the line is not restricted to grammatical morphemes or
minor parts of speech. An example is line 115 of the passage, žerdiŋ žüzin šaŋdatti, “they raised the dust from the earth.” To capture the parallels to this line, we must have recourse to the notion of a formulaic system. Parry had defined a formulaic system as “a group of phrases which have the same metrical value and which are enough alike in thought and words to leave no doubt that the poet who used them knew them not only as single formulas, but also as formulas of a certain type” (Parry 1971: 275; cf. Lord 1960: 47ff.) This somewhat loose definition has not remained unchallenged, and various competing definitions have attempted to make the notion of a formulaic system more precise. In relationship to Old English A. Riedinger has proposed a threefold distinction between system, set, and formula, which is also helpful for Turkic oral poetry (Riedinger 1985: 294–317). According to Riedinger, a particular formula belongs with other formulas to the same set, if they all share at least one constant word and if the relationship of their variable elements can be semantically specified, i.e. if the variable elements are synonyms or belong to the same semantic field.

Line 115 consists of two phrases and hence two ideas: (1) “surface of the earth” and (2) “raised the dust.” If we take the first phrase as the constant element, we get the following parallel in Qambar:

| žerdiŋ žüzin šaŋdatti 115  | of-the-earth its-surface he-caused-to-be-dusty |
| žerdiŋ žüzin sel aldï 1359  | of-the-earth its-surface the-torrent took away |

If we take the second phrase as the constant element, we get the following parallels:

| awïldïŋ üstin šaŋdatïp Qambar 1158  | of-the-village its-top causing-to-be-dusty |
| köšeniŋ awzïn šaŋdatïp Qoblandï 1926  | of-the-street its-mouth causing-to-be-dusty |

There is strict parallelism in all variants of the first phrase; furthermore, all phrases are semantically related in as far as they are all geographical terms of some kind (earth, village, street) and specify a location (surface, top, mouth). The semantic affinity between the variants of the second phrase, however, is less tight. According to the oral-formulaic theory, we have here a formulaic system:

represented by the sets:

(1) | žerdiŋ žüzin  | šaŋdatti  |
| awïldïŋ üstin  | šaŋdatîp  |
| köšeniŋ awzïn  | sel aldï  |

(2) žerdiŋ žüzin  sel aldï
In a third type of formulaic line the semantic constraint on the variable elements of the line is dropped. It consists of a fixed phrasal unit in the first part of the line and a slot, with metrical and possibly also grammatical constraints on the lexical units filling the slot. An example of this type of formulaic line is *Qız Nazım-niŋ maydan-i* (*Qambar* 109). Here the line begins with a genitive (*-niŋ*) and continues with a noun ending in a possessive affix (*i* or *iı*). The latter is caused by the preceding genitive (of-the-NOUN its-NOUN):

| Qız Nazım-niŋ maydan-i 109 | of-Qız Nazım her-place |
| Qız Nazım-niŋ zaman-i 125 | her-time |
| Qız Nazım-niŋ awil-i-niŋ 412 | (of) her-village |
| Qız Nazım-niŋ iš-i-ne 445 | (to) her inside |

There is finally a fourth type of formulaic line, exemplified in one of the occurrences of the epithet *aq* in *Qoblandi*. In this epic the word *mata*, “cloth, material,” is qualified by *aq*. This collocation invariably occurs in the following two lines:

| Bazarda bar aq mata, oynaqtaydï žas bota 485-86, 693-94, 2583-84 | At the bazaar there is white material; the young camel foal is frolicking. |

Lines like these punctuate the epic at irregular intervals. They often contain nature images, but also proverbial and gnomic lore. These cliché-like lines are similar to the repeated couplets in Serbian and Croatian heroic poetry as described by A. B. Lord:

Just as formulaic lines with internal rhyme or with a striking chiastic arrangement have a long life, so couplets with clearly marked patterns persist with little if any change. For example:

| Bez edelja nema umiranja, Od edelja nema zaviranja. (II, No.24: 631–632) | Without the fated hour there is no dying, From the fated hour there is no escape. |

or:

| A zečki je polje pregazio, A vučki se maši planinama. (II, No. 24:41–42) | Like a rabbit he crossed the plain, Like a wolf he ranged over the mountains. |

It seems preferable to keep such couplets in a class by themselves and not to call them formulas, reserving that term for the components of a single verse (*Lord* 1960: 57).

**Thematic patterning**

According to Parry and Lord a theme is a “group of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song” (*Lord* 1960: 68).
This term corresponds basically to what German scholars call *typische Szene* (type-scene) or *Erzählschablone* (narrative template), although the emphasis is somewhat different within different scholarly traditions. Lord begins his discussion of themes in Serbian and Croatian epic poetry with the opening scene in the *Song of Bagdad*, a council at the sultan’s court in Istanbul, and draws attention to the similar council scene at the beginning of the *Chanson de Roland* (Lord 1960: 68). The Uzbek version of the heroic epic *Alpāmiš* in Fāzil Yoldāš-ogli’s variant also begins with this theme (Zhirmunsky 1960; Reichl 2001). When Bāysari is told that he has to pay an alms-tax (*zakāt*) to his brother, Bāybori, the ruler of Qonġirāt, he summons his tribesmen to a *madžlis* (council) to deliberate what to do. Bāysari opens the council with the following words:

```
Ah urganda kozdan āqar selāb yās,
maslahat ber, on miŋ uyli qarindās,
Barčināyim boy yetgandir qalamqās,
zālim bilan hargiz bolmanlar yoldās.
```

5 Qonġirāt eldan mālga zakāt kelibdi,
maslahat ber, on miŋ uyli qarindās!
Qursin Hakimbegi, mulla bolibdi,
bezkāt māllarni harām bilibdi,
Qonġirāt eldan mālga zakāt kelibdi,
maslahat ber, on miŋ uyli qarindās.

10 Dardli qul dardimni kimga yāraman,
ayrāliq otiga bagri pāraman,
muna elda sigindi bop turaman,
oz akamga qanday zakāt beraman?!

```
Maslahat ber, on miŋ uyli qarindās!
Xazān bolib bāgd gullar solibdi,
šum fālak bāšimga sawdā sālibdi,
Bāyboridan mālga zakāt kelibdi,
maslahat ber, on miŋ uyli qarindās!
```

15 Amid sighs, tears flow from (my) eyes like a stream,
give advice, tribal companions (relations) of the ten thousand yurts!
My Barčin-āy with black eyebrows has come of age.
Don’t ever associate with a tyrant!

```
From Qonġirāt came (a demand for) tax on (our) cattle (property).
```

---

7 The phrase *typische Szene* is associated in particular with Arend 1933; compare Parry’s review, reprinted in Parry 1 971: 404–407.

8 The *Song of Bagdad* is No. 1 in Parry and Lord, eds. 1953–54.

9 On *Alpāmiš*, see Zhirmunsky 1960; for a German translation of an Uzbek version of the epic, see Reichl 2001.

Give advice, tribal companions of the ten thousand yurts!
May Hakimbeg (Alpāmiš) be cursed! He has become a mullah.\(^{11}\)
According to his knowledge cattle without tax is against the law;
from Qonģirāt came a demand for tax on our cattle.

As a sorrowful slave (of God), to whom can I tell my grief?
My heart is burning in the fire of separation,
among this people I have become a stranger (poor relation).
How should I pay tax to my older brother?

Give advice, tribal companions of the ten thousand yurts!
When autumn comes, the roses wither in the garden.
Crul destiny has brought woe upon my head.
From Bāybori came a demand for tax on our cattle:
Give advice, tribal companions of the ten thousand yurts!

The passage continues for another 34 lines in the edited text. It is in lines of 11 syllables with a fairly loose sequence of rhymes. As can be seen, the passage is punctuated by the line “Give advice, tribal companions of the ten thousand yurts!” A wise old man (āq sāqāl), called Yartibāy, replies to Bāysari (in a passage comprising 50 lines in the printed edition), repeating twice the couplet: \(^{12}\)

| Maslahat bermaymiz Bāysaribiyya, | We will not give advice to Bāysari-biyy, |
| āsilmaymiz Bāyborinin dāriga... | we will not hang on Bāybori’s gallows... |

and adding the four times repeated line:

| Maslahatni, šāhim, oziŋ bilasan. | You yourself, my shah, know the advice. |

Bāysari then suggests (in a passage of 64 lines) that they migrate to the land of Kalmucks, to which proposal Yartibāy (in a passage of 64 lines) agrees.

There is a second type of repeated line in this passage:

| Xazān bolib bāɡda gullar solibdi | When autumn comes, the roses wither in the garden. |

This line is repeated in the other speeches, with slight variations such as:

| Xazān bolsa bāɡda gullar solmaymi | When autumn comes, do not then the roses wither in the garden? |

Such stock lines are very common in Uzbek oral epic poetry; they are of the same type as the cliché-couplets discussed above in relation to Kazakh epic poetry. These cliché-lines emphasize a certain tone and, by evoking natural phenomena, underline the mood of a passage. This particu-

\(^{11}\) I.e. “he has become proficient in reading and writing”. Alpāmiš suggested that such a tax be levied, as this is part of Muslim tradition.

lar verse is often used in contexts that suggest distress, unhappiness, or grief, just as the corresponding line occurs in situations of joy and happiness:13

| Yana bahār bolsa āchlar gullar | When spring comes again, the roses open up. |

The council scene consists of four verse-passages, distributed over two speakers and connected by prose-passages. It is highly patterned, but it is not stereotyped to the same degree as the council scene in the *Song of Bagdad*. The receiving and sending of letters as in the *Song of Bagdad* is one of the most common ways of beginning a heroic song; about 30% of the songs collected by Vuk Karadžić begin with this theme (Kravcov 1985: 260ff). In Turkic epic poetry, on the other hand, council scenes like the one opening Fāzil’s variant of *Alpāmiš* occur with far lower frequency and are furthermore, despite their patterning, far more closely linked to the matter of deliberation. There are, however, typical scenes in Turkic oral epic poetry which show a high degree of formulaic patterning both on the level of expression and that of content.

To conclude I will give a brief example of one such theme, namely the arming of the hero before he sets out on a war-like expedition or a journey. This theme is one of the invariant elements of Turkic heroic epic poetry. A very short version of this theme, combined with the theme of the hero’s ride, is found in one of the Kazakh variants of the Alpāmiš-story:14

725 Saymandarïn saylanïp, 725 He prepared his gear,  
altïnnan kemer baylanïp, bound his golden belt round his waist,  
abžïlanday tolganïp, turned about like a water snake,  
gizïl nayza qolga alïp, took his red spear into his hand,  
Šubarq qargïp mïnedi, jumped onto Šubar,  
730 qudaydan medet tiledi 730 asked God for his help;  
qargïp minip ŋas bala the young man jumped up,  
ašûwi kernep žonedi, rode along, filled with wrath.  
Lâšker tartïp keledi, He went to war,  
awîzdiqpen ališïp, pulling his reins tight,  
735 ušqan quspen ŋarišïp, 735 racing with the flying birds,  
key ŋerde bala šoqïtïp, where the young man was galloping,  
key ŋerde basïn tõgedi, where he was heading for.  
Bir kïn şapsa Šubar at 732 When the horse Šubar had galloped for one day,  
ayliq ŋer alïp beredi. he had covered the distance of a monthly journey.

In lines 725–729 (–732) the preparation of the hero for his journey is briefly described, while the journey itself is the subject of the following

13 Mirzaev, Abduraximov 1999: 79 and passim.  
Just two or three strokes suffice to paint the hero’s arming: he fastens his golden belt round his waist (726), speedily swings himself round (727), and takes his red spear into his hand (728). His psychological state is no more than alluded to when his anger is mentioned in line 732. The hero asks God for his help (730), swings himself on his horse (731), rides along as fast (or faster) than a bird (735), and covers the space of a monthly journey in one day (739). All these motifs and images belong to the inventory of the theme of the hero’s arming and ride. In Qambar the hero’s preparation-and-parting is slightly more elaborate, consisting of the same basic motifs: the donning of his armor, the invocation of God’s help, the hero’s anger, and his ride on his horse, galloping as fast as a flying bird:

15 Auezov and Smirnova 1961: 71.
This is not the place to embark on a comparative analysis of this theme, however attractive a task. In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that formulaic diction on the level of verse line and formulaic patterning in the composition of scenes are closely related and must be studied together. Their analysis takes us to the core of the singer’s art.

Bibliography


On the theme of the hero’s putting on his armour in the *chanson de geste*, see Rychner 1955: 128 and 132 ff. For a more detailed analysis of formulaic diction in Uzbek oral epics, see Reichl 1989b: 94–120.