Oral epic singers compose lengthy and intricate poems not by remembering a fixed text, but by improvising their song as they perform (Parry 1971; Lord 1960). This technique is based on the mastery of *formulae*, fixed expressions regularly used under certain metrical and discursive conditions (e.g. “swift footed Achilles,” “he/she spoke forth winged words”) and *themes*, typical scenes that structure the narrative (e.g. the assembly, the contest, the message). Formulaic diction in oral poetry is analogous to idiomaticity in everyday language. It requires the acquisition of communicative skills (Lord 1960: 13-29) similar to those described by usage-based approaches to language and cognition (e.g. Tomasello 2005).

Research on *constructions* and *frames* (Lakoff 1987, 462–585; Fillmore et al. 1988; Fillmore 1982) shows that pieces of discourse are assimilated as form-meaning pairs depending on both their frequency and their emergent properties in form or function, and that their patterns are learned through repetition and structural priming (Goldberg 2006). To be consistent in cognitive terms, oral formulae have to be learned, understood, and created in an analogous way, so that they can be remembered as effectively and rapidly as grammar and lexicon. The full meaning of a formulaic expression depends on how its semantics combines with its function as a building block in the traditional story, while at the same time it fits a metrical slot in the melody that is being sung. For the first time in oral poetics, we apply construction grammar to the comparison of formulaic systems in Homer and traditional epic in Serbo-Croatian, the primary materials of the Parry-Lord theory of oral composition-in-performance.

Singers could perhaps acquire individual sentences in a “generativist” fashion, by applying innate principles of syntax, but they cannot just “generate” their performances based on a set of predefined formal rules. If this were so, almost all such sentences would have to be novel, that is, sentences they have never uttered before. What rather happens is exactly the opposite: oral singers *repeat* smaller or larger chunks of previously-used linguistic structures, with quite fixed form and semantics. Individual creativity arises not by producing unprecedented expressions, which are rather infrequent, but by recombining and varying formulaic systems. The mere existence and nature of oral composition in performance provides very relevant, ecologically-valid evidence in favor of a usage-based approach. At the same time, given that the cognitive pressure in meaning negotiation is much higher in oral composition-in-performance than in everyday language, idiomaticity is enhanced, and thus both constructions and frames are better exposed. Polished throughout the centuries by the high cognitive demands of performance, composition-in-performance is usage-based communication in a bigger-than-life version. Oral poetry works like language, only more so (Foley 2002).

References


