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From prose syntagms to verse formulas

What follows is a draft of some pages of a book on Old English poetics I intend to write — only a draft because 1) I must check my data against the whole corpus of Old English prose, and 2) some of my paragraphs are sketchy or even blank.

1- Syntagms in prose and in verse

1.1- Definition of the syntagm

It is a fact of common experience that a listener to (or the reader of) a text in which there is no word separation has the greatest difficulty in analysing a stretch of such a text in an unknown language — hence the inaccurate division of words, a phenomenon called ‘metanalysis’ by Otto Jespersen (1914),¹ as in *an apron* < French *napperon*, *an orange* < French < Spanish *naranja*; hence also the tricks played on more or less long segments of text by Joyce in *Finnegan’s Wake* or Raymond Queneau in *Zazie dans le métro*.

The analysis of ancient forms of languages is helped by that of their present-day reflexes. Old English is interpreted in accordance with what we know of Present-Day English. We feel entitled to analyse an Old English text into sentences — into clauses — into syntagms — into words — into morphemes — into phonemes. Such a reconstruction may prove questionable where the identification of grammatical functions is concerned (e.g. the status of relatives, see below).

¹ Otto Jespersen, *Modern English Grammar*, II, V, 141.

A syntagm is a sequence of elements (one or several lexemes) in the spoken or written chain, forming a grammatical and semantic unit.

English-speaking linguists use the term 'phrase' rather than 'syntagm', but 'syntagm' indicates clearly that the linear sequence of elements takes place on the syntagmatic axis.

1.2- The spoken and the written chains

Are these two chains identical? They are essentially the same, but the spoken chain has prosodic features (unequal stresses, intonation contours, pauses) which may be ignored in written texts. The written chain has conventions of its own (shapes of letters, punctuation marks, grouping and spacing of words, paragraphs) which may or may not reflect the prosodic reality. Syllables in Old English manuscripts are often grouped two by two (e.g. *ingear dagum* 'in days long ago', in the manuscript of *Beowulf*, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A xv). The grouping may represent the rhythm of the language, alternating stronger and weaker stresses (*in 'gear 'dagum*), but it may just as well correspond to the rhythm of dictation or the pace of the indicatorium, arbitrarily cutting the material into disyllabic segments. (And the spoken delivery often breaks the syntactic pattern into unexpected units, due to hesitation, emotion, haste.) The handwriting often gets more densely packed as it approaches the outer margin of a manuscript page.

1.3- Analysis into syntagms

The prose text of the Old English translation of *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyrii* and the poem of *Beowulf* are here chosen as representative samples. They were written within half a century of each other: *Beowulf* between 997 and 1016,¹ and *Apollonius* about 1050.²

¹ David N. Dumville, 'Beowulf come lately: some notes on the palaeography of the Nowell codex', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 225 (1988), 49-63.

² Peter Goolden (ed.), *The Old English 'Apollonius of Tyre'*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (Oxford English Monographs), 1958, p. xxxiii.

Apollonius is a translation, but the original text possesses a lively tempo and many passages of dialogue, and the Old English translation is likely to render them in an appropriate style. The Cotton Vitellius version of *Beowulf* may represent an older exemplar, or the poem may be deliberately archaizing, but these assumptions only increase the value of the poem as a paragon of Old English traditional poetry.

Here is the opening of *Apollonius of Tyre*:

An Antiochia þare ceastre wæs sum cuningc Antiochus gehaten: æfter þæs cyninges naman wæs seo ceaster Antiochia geciged. Pises cyninges cwen wearð of life gewiten, be ðare he hæfde ane swiðe wlitige dohter ungelifedlicre fægernesse.

Latin: In civitate Antiochia rex fuit Antiochus nomine a quo et ipsa civitas nomen Antiochia accepit. Hic habuit ex amissa coniuge filiam [...] speciosissimam incredibili pulchritudine.

(‘There was in the city of Antioch a certain king called Antiochus: the city was called Antioch after the name of the king. The king’s queen, by whom he had a very beautiful daughter of incredible loveliness, had departed from this life’).¹

The first clause consists of three or four syntagms. *An Antiochia þare ceastre* = an adverbial complement governed by the preposition *an* (on, ‘in’); *þare* is the definite article. *Wæs* = verb. *Sum cuningc Antiochus gehaten* = a noun phrase consisting of determiner + noun + dependent syntagm (a proper name, the predicate of the following past participle).

Second clause. *Æfter þæs cyninges naman*: again a prepositional syntagm straddling a dependent syntagm, a genitival nominal group (*þæs cyninges*). *Wæs [...] Antiochia geciged*: the two constituents of the periphrastic passive enclose a proper name, which is predicative. The structure is therefore different from that of the preceding clause where *wæs* is not an auxiliary but the existential verb ‘(there) existed’. *Seo ceaster* = subject, with *seo* the definite article.

¹ Translated by Michael Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Prose*, London: Dent / Toronto, N. J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975 (Everyman’s University Library, 1809), p. 158.

The third clause, *þises cyninges cwen wearð of life gewiten*, consists of a nominal group subject (genitival modifier + head noun) and of the verb, a periphrastic past of the ready-made syntagm *of life gewitan* ‘go out of this life = die’.

Fourth clause: *Be ðare he hæfde ane swiðe wlitige dohter ungelifedlicre fægernesse*. The clause is linked to the preceding one by *Be ðare*, preposition + anaphoric pronoun. *He*, masculine, is the pro-noun, the pro-form of the noun in the preceding clause, *þises cyninges*. *Hæfde* = verb. *Ane swiðe wlitige dohter ungelifedlicre fægernesse* is the object. The head of the syntagm is *dohter* with pre- and post-modifiers. The pre-modifier is part and parcel of the *dohter* syntagm: *ane* is the indefinite article (not the adjective ‘one, unique’ which should be in the definite, ‘weak’, declension, *anan* feminine accusative), *swiðe* is an adverb modifying the adjective *wlitige*. The post-modifier is a syntagm (adj. + noun), in the dative.

The clauses in this short passage are juxtaposed and, at the same time, tightly linked by anaphoric pronouns or adjectives. Relatives as such do not exist. Such features betray a syntax typical of oral composition and delivery. On the other hand, syntagms tend to compactness by enclosing or framing their modifiers (*æfter þæs cyninges naman; wearð of life gewiten*) or passive verbs their subject (*wæs seo ceaster Antiochia geciged*); the head word may be surrounded by modifiers (*ane swiðe wlitige dohter ungelifedlicre fægernesse*).

The opening of *Beowulf* is no less instructive.

Hwæt! We Gar-Dena in gear-dagum
 þeod-cyninga þrym gefrunon,
 hu ða æpelingas ellen fremedon.

(‘Lo, we have learned of the glory of the Spear-Danes, of the kings of the people, in days long ago, how those princes put their fighting spirit into action.’)¹

¹ Translation from Peter Clemoes, *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 12), 1995, p. 3. I have replaced Clemoes’s ‘power’ (*þrym*) by ‘glory’.

Nearly every half-line is a syntagm. The exceptions are 1a and 3a. *Hwæt!* is extra-metrical: the first two lines are octosyllabic, like the last two lines of the poem. The first words of the clause introduce, as they do in many other instances, the main actants: *we*, subject, and *Gar-Dena*, genitive modifying *þeod-cyninga* or / and *þrym* (ambivalence of function is not infrequent in Old English poetry). If *þeod-cyninga* takes up *Gar-Dena* with the same idea and the same function, it is a ‘variation’, in the technical sense given to this word by specialists of Old Germanic poetry (see below, § 3.2.3). In 3a *hu* introduces a development of *þrym*, and the clause is a kind of variation of that key-word. The clause is linked to the preceding one not only by *hu* but also by *ða*, the anaphoric determiner modifying *æþelingas*, or the anaphoric temporal adverb, ‘then’, i.e. *in gear-dagum*.

The poet has expanded a fairly simple statement — *We Gar-Dena þrym gefrunon* — by adding new information (*in gear-dagum*, i.e. the heroic past) and variations, but his variations are not superfluous. They emphasize the high status of the characters (*þeod-cyninga*) and give the other key-word of heroic poetry, alongside *þrym*: *ellen*, which Clemons, in the quoted translation, comments upon rather than translates (‘put their fighting spirit into action’) because it is one of the main themes of his book, *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry*.

1.4- Prose syntagms in poetry

Most of the syntagms in the first clauses of *Apollonius* can be paralleled in our poetic corpus. We may cite :

- in þære ceastre / *Commedia (Juliana 21)*
- Hælend gehaten (*Menologium 4a*)
- fæder gecygyde [preterit] (*Psalms 88 24, 1b*)
- cyning [...] cwen (*Beowulf 923, Elene 1169*)
- þa he of life gewat (*Beowulf 2471b; Death of Edgar 8b-9*)
- swiðe gesælig; swiðe hludne (*Genesis 1286a; 2409b*)
- ungesæwenlica (*Metres of Boethius 20, 6a*)

Fægerness is not found in our poetic corpus.

2- Differences between prose and verse syntagms

2.1- Definition of the formula

The basic unit of Old English poetry is the half-line. The half-line consists of major elements which are the particular realization of a general abstract pattern, the poetic formula. The formula has three components: semantic, syntactic, and metrical. The metrical parameter is twofold, concerning alliteration and syllabic volume. The major elements of the second half-line of *Beowulf* are *gear-dagum*. Their alliteration is <g> noting /j/ and taking up the <g> /g/ of *Gar-Dena* in the front half-line — a legacy from the Proto-Germanic state of the language where the two phonemes now written <g> were one and the same spirant /ɣ/, later differentiated into an occlusive before a velar vowel, and a palatal spirant (the latter then merged with the semi vowel /j/) before a palatal vowel. The syllabic volume of *Gear-dagum* is insufficient to fill a half-line, and calls for some minor elements. The minor elements are usually linking, grammatical words — here the preposition *in*. The preposition may be considered part and parcel of the formula; in *Phoenix* 384a we have *æfter gear-dagum*. The formula would be:

- semantic component = ‘in the past’
- syntactic component = preposition + noun
- metrical component = <g> (/g/, /j/) alliteration
- weakly stressed elements + 2-2’¹

¹ 2 = heavy syllable (underlined = alliterating); 2’ = a stressed light syllable followed by a weakly-stressed syllable.

2.2- Lexical differences

Some simple lexemes are found in poetry and rarely in prose. Compounds are far more frequent in poetry than in prose, some of them being nonce-words coined to fit their particular contexts.

2.2.1- Simple lexemes

We can evaluate the frequency of a word only from the written texts that have survived. Our deductions are therefore tentative.

Some lexemes are preferred in poetry: nouns such as *bearn* rather than *cild*, *snyttru* rather than *wisdom*; adjectives like *soð-*, *wis-fæst*; verbs: *gefrignan* rather than *ascian*, *gefeon* rather than *fægnian*; adverbs: *gen*, *gena*.

Gefrignan ‘learn by asking’ (the preverb *ge-* indicating the result, hence its use in past participles) is particularly important as a keyword in the technique of traditional poetry. Traditional transmission rests on a series of questions and answers, an exchange between those who know and those who learn (*we*). Who were the heroes? — *Gar-Dene*. What did they achieve? — *þrym*. What does that mean? — *Hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon*.

2.2.2- Compounds

Compounds consist of two (very rarely three) elements, which follow one another on the syntagmatic axis and can easily be changed by commutation along the paradigmatic axis.

The second element is the head. Both *wuldor-cyning* (*Andreas*, etc., but not *Beowulf*) and *kyning-wuldor* (*Beowulf*) refer to God but the former means ‘the king of glory’, the second ‘the glory of kings’. (Here we have an example of permutation.)

Compounds are of two types according to the function of the first element, although the first type can be considered a sub-category of the second.

In the first type, confined to poetry, the first element reinforces the meaning of the head. It may be a descriptive modifier but more connotative than denotative, or a synonym of the head: for instance the connotative *ær-* ‘ancient’ (*Andreas, Beowulf, Genesis*), the pair of near synonyms: *deað-cwealm, wæl-deað* (both in *Beowulf*).

The second type of compound, found in prose as well but less frequently, consists of a first element modifying the second.

For instance, compounds with *bana, bona* ‘slayer’ as basic element display several first elements denoting the instrument or the object of the slaying. These elements are selected according to the requirements of alliteration and the volume of the half-line.

Alliteration in:

/zero-glide/	aldor- (<i>Genesis</i>) ecg- (<i>Beowulf</i>) ord- (<i>Genesis</i>)
/b/	broðor- (<i>Genesis</i>)
/g/	gast- (<i>Beowulf</i>), = the Devil
/f/	feorg- / feorh- (<i>Beowulf, Genesis, Whale</i>) ferhð- (<i>Exodus</i>) fugel- (<i>Gifts of Men</i>)
/h/	hand- (<i>Beowulf</i>)
/s/	susl- (<i>Christ and Satan</i>)
/m/	muð- (<i>Beowulf</i>), = l’ogre Grendel

The underlying syntagm is often {modifier in the genitive + head}: *woruld-candel* (= the sun, *Beowulf* 1965) / *rodores candel* (*Beowulf* 1572a). We find both *hilde* (= genitive) *freca* and *hild-freca* in *Beowulf* (2205, 2366). In compounds the first element has no case ending. The second element, the head, has the case ending demanded required by the function of the compound in the clause: *in gear-dagum*.

The distinction between syntagms and compounds is not watertight. A sequence with a lighter syllable between two heavy syllables or their equivalent (lift, drop, lift) may be preferred to the succession of two heavy syllables (lift, lift): *hilde freca* rather than

hild-freca. This rhythmic tendency would explain the compound *Hildeburh* (*Beowulf*), and *hilde freca* might be considered a compound, alongside the canonical *hild-freca*.

2.2.3- ‘Variation’

In the poetics of Old Germanic verse a ‘variation’ is a syntagm repeating the idea of a previous syntagm, in different words but with the same grammatical function, within the same clause. It is a semantic and syntactic, but not a metrical, repetition. The variation usually adds a relevant shade of meaning. In the first lines of *Beowulf*, *Gar-Dena* is taken up by *þeod-cyninga*: the latter is the variation of *Gar-Dena*. It insists on the princely status of the protagonists in heroic poetry. In this particular example, *þeod-cyninga* could be interpreted in another way, as a noun modified by *Gar-Dena* (see above, § 1.3). Variation is a stylistic feature of poetry, explained to a great extent by the needs of alliteration.

2.3- Grammatical differences

There are two main grammatical differences between verse and prose: the absence of articles and the word order in the structure {verb + object}.

2.3.1- Articles

In the opening of *Apollonius*, we find two unquestionable occurrences of articles, the definite article in *An Antiochia þare ceastre* and the indefinite article in *ane swiðe wlitige dohter ungelifedlicre fægernesse*. The city of Antioch has not been mentioned before, since the syntagm stands at the very beginning of the text. *Þare* can only refer to the contiguous proper name *Antiocha*. It is a weak anaphoric, in the same way as ‘the’ is a weak cataphoric in ‘the city of Antioch’. It is a definite article. *Ane* in *ane swiðe wlitige dohter ungelifedlicre fægernesse* is the indefinite article issued from the

numeral. The indefinite article does not seem to occur elsewhere in *Apollonius*, whereas the definite article *se, seo, ðæt* is regularly used.

In traditional poetry, the pronoun or adjective *se, seo, ðæt* is an intratextual connector, strongly ana- or cata-phoric. *Da æþelingas* (*Beowulf* 3) refers to *þeod-cyninga* in the preceding line, it is translated ‘those princes’. There is no article, either definite or indefinite, in traditional poetry: *þeod-cyninga* does not require *ðara*.

2.3.2- Word order

The final position of the verb is found in prose and in poetry in subordinate clauses: *hu ða æþelingas / ellen fremedon*. In poetry it can be found in other clauses as well: *We Gar-Dena [...] þrym gefrunon*.

The syntagm {object + verb} in a final position (*þrym gefrunon, ellen fremedon*) is very frequent in verse.

In *Beowulf* 870b *word oper-fand* (cited below, § 3.1.3), the {modifier + noun} order is inverted to place the alliterating word in the head position of the half-line. Elsewhere inversion is due both to alliteration and to rhetorical figures: e.g. *steape stan-hliðo, / stige nearwe* (*Beowulf* 1409, ‘steep rocky slopes, narrow paths’) has zero-glide alliteration and chiasmus (adj. + noun, noun + adj.).

3- How much traditional?

[3.1- Insistence on the past

3.1.1- Explicit references to the past

3.1.2- Archaic elements]

3.1.3- Oral composition

A passage in *Beowulf* describes the process of composition. *Beowulf* has just killed the ogre devastating the palace of the Danish king and the warriors celebrate his victory by improvising horse races and songs of praise.

Hwilum cyninges þegn
 guma gilp-hlæden, gidða gemyndig,
 se ðe eal-fela eald-gesegena
 worn gemunde, word oper fand
 soðe gebunden. Secg eft ongan
 sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian
 ond in spel wrecan spel gerade,
 wordum wrixlan. (867b-74a)

(‘At another time a thane of the king, an eloquent man, mindful of songs, who remembered a very great many old traditions, found other words truly bound. The man began again skilfully to rehearse Beowulf’s venture, and successfully to tell a fitting tale, varying his words’ [Clemoes’ translation, slightly modified]).

The emphasis is laid on the creation of a new narrative from the stock of traditional ones (*worn gemunde, word oper fand*). The thane is going to tell the story of Sigemund and the dragon before that of Beowulf and the ogre, the old story providing, as it were, the mould of the new song.

3.2- Proto-Indo-European heritage

Some formulas are inherited from Proto-Indo-European narratives. Such is {*to banan weorðan* + dative}, ‘turn into a slayer for —’, examined by Calvert Watkins in *How to Kill a Dragon*.¹ The same formula is found in Old Norse (*at bana verða* + dative), Old High German (*ti banin werdän* + dative) and Old Saxon (*to banon uwerðan* + dative). ‘This periphrastic verb phrase is regularly used of more than ordinary killings: it is semantically marked. It is found characteristically in narration of killing of or by a dragon or other monster, of fratricide or other kin-slaying, of awesome exploits of the hero, or of awesome victims’.²

¹ *How to Kill a Dragon, Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 2nd ed. 2000.

² Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, p. 419.

To banan weorðan constitutes a b-verse in *Beowulf* 587 and 2203. Compounds with *-bana* as their head allow alliterations other than /b/ (see supra § 2.2.2). They constitute whole half-lines and *weorð* is separated from the adverbial phrase which is placed in an adjacent half-line:

	ecg			1262a (wearð 1261a)
To	hand	-banan	<i>Beowulf</i>	460b (460a), 1330b (1330a), 2502a (2501b)
	muð			2079b (2078b).

Watkins's research can be carried further. The syntagm {genitive + *banan folgian*}, 'become one of the followers of the slayer of So-and-So', is a formula found both in prose and in verse. In the episode of Cynewulf and Cyneheard in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *sub anno* 755 (*recte* 757), the companions of Cynewulf, murdered by Cyneheard in an act of revenge, refused to follow the murderer, and *þa cwædon hie þæt him nænig mæg leofra nære þonne hiera hlaford and hie næfre his banan folgian noldon*, 'then they replied that no kinsman was dearer to them than their lord, and they would never serve his slayer'.¹ The phrase is found in the 'Finnesburg Lay' in *Beowulf*: The Danes should stay with Finn and his Frisians who killed their chief *ðeah hie hira beag-gyfan / banan folgedon* (1102 'although they would be following the slayer of their ring-giver'). The formula {genitive + *banan folgian*} is used in a context of duties in conflict.

According to Watkins the formula *to banan weorðan* is the Germanic variant of the PIE formula. The PIE verb represents the root **g^{wh}en-*; in Germanic the root is **wert-*. If the other formula *banan folgian* was found in other Indo-European languages, it would extend the domain of the myth, no longer confined to the slaying of a serpent by a hero. If the formula is restricted to Germanic languages, it adds information about the social institution of the *comitatus*.

¹ Translated by Dorothy Whitelock, *English Historical Documents* I, 2nd ed., Eyre Methuen, 1979, p. 176.

3.3- Christian poetry

Our whole corpus of Old English traditional poetry, composed or at least written down in monastic or official scriptoria, is Christian. It is fairly easy to reconstruct the christianization of pagan formulas and, conversely, the adaptation of biblical phrasing. The same process is to be applied to larger structures: motifs and themes.