Kennings as Abstractive Oral Structures of Play

By

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INTRODUCTION

0.1 - Introduction

This dissertation focuses on kennings and, to a lesser extent, MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, two distinctive forms of figurative language found in early Germanic poetry. "Kennings" are generally defined as formulations of two (or more) nouns, which together express another, unspoken concept. Examples include the Old English *hronrad* ("whale-riding")[1], a kenning for SEA, or the Old Norse *jastrin* ("yeast-Rhine"), a kenning for ALE.[2] The kenning will be the main subject of this dissertation. MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, a term coined by Karen Sullivan,[3] designates a technique whereby one member of a semantic category can stand in for another. This process sometimes occurs on its own, such as in the *Þórsdrápa*, where the SEAS are referred to as *myrar* ("moors")[4], but it generally occurs within kennings. Although MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy is worthy of study in its own right, it will primarily be discussed as a kenning-internal process for the purposes of this study. The interplay of these two poetic structures often yields formulations which have little denotative semantic value but require significant cognitive effort to interpret – consider *Nirði valbrands landa sunda* ("the Njörðr of the lands of the straits of the slaughter-flame"), a five-noun phrase that refers simply to a WARRIOR[5].

[1] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 10.
[2] Ögmundarson, "Sigurðardrápa," s. 1, l. 4.
[3] Karen Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," *Language and Literature: International Journal of Stylistics* 17, no. 1 (2008): p. 22.
[4] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 4, l. 1.
[5] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s.6, l. 5.

Kennings and (far less explicitly) MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy[6] have received much scholarly attention, the majority of which has been purely philological in nature. In this dissertation, I take an interdisciplinary approach to these poetic structures, integrating methodologies drawn from sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, and anthropology. I also take a cross-linguistic approach, working with kennings found across the Old Norse, Old English, and Old Saxon poetic traditions – this approach differs from past scholarship, which generally studies the kenning specifically in an Old English or Old Norse context. In doing so, I hope to address three broad questions about kennings and thereby come to a new understanding of the kenning that a) emphasizes its societal and aesthetic function, in addition to its linguistic one; and b) is applicable to the kenning in each of the poetic traditions in which it occurs. My intent in taking an approach that is both cross-linguistic and cross-disciplinary is to better understand kennings as early oral structures, which evolved differently in different poetic traditions, rather than taking them as literary structures within the poetics of a single language and culture. The single-language approach has been tremendously valuable but, as I will argue in the coming pages, has also led to certain misconceptions about kennings and the reasons they were used.

0.2 – Structure

This dissertation poses three main questions.

The first of these three questions is that of the role of kennings (as well as any embedded MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy) in a primary-oral[7] context. As has often been noted, aspects of these structures, in particular their formulaicism and metrical flexibility,

[6] Although instances of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy are often discussed, study of the phenomenon has often been subsumed into the study of the kennings in which they frequently appear.

[7] The term "primary-oral" is drawn from Ong (1982) and refers to the state of a culture that has not been exposed to the written word.

make them very useful in the production of oral poetry. However, they also have attributes that would seem to make them less useful in the production of oral poetry, such as their interpretive difficulty – how, for instance, would a skald's audience have the time to work their way through the multiple semantic layers of "the Njörðr of the lands of the straits of the slaughter-flame" (i.e., a WARRIOR) without missing the next several lines of a performance? In answering this question, I will draw on Koch & Oesterreicher's 1986 framework of "language of distance" (*Sprache der Distanz*) and "language of proximity" (*Sprache der Nähe*)[8] to argue that kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy could indeed function effectively in a primary-oral context, and that those traits that seem to contradict this conclusion can be attributed to the demands exerted by the "language of distance" (poetry, in this case) in which they occur.

Having established that kennings (and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy) are oral structures, the second question concerns their figurative structure. There has been little consensus on this count, with previous studies characterizing kennings variously as "metaphor",[9] "metonymy",[10] both,[11] or neither.[12] Much of this dispute is rooted in the use of rhetorical definitions of "metaphor" and "metonymy", which are often disputed and carry certain literate assumptions that are not entirely applicable in an oral context. In order to circumvent these difficulties, I instead use cognitive linguistic definitions of metaphor and

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[8] Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," *Romanistisches Jahrbuch* 36 (1985), pp. 15–43.
[9] Roberta Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry*, Islandica, XLII (Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 43; R. D. Fulk, John D. Niles, and Robert E. Bjork, eds., *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. cxv.
[10] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," p. 22.
[11] Edith Marold, *Kenningkunst*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Sprach- und Kulturgeschichte der germanischen Völker (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1983), p. 31.
[12] Margaret Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, The Viking Collection 4 (Odense University Press, 1987), p. 51; Bjarne Fidjestøl, "Kenningsystemet. Forsøk på ein lingvistisk analyse," *Maal og minne*, 1974, p. 28.

metonymy put forth by Radden & Kövecses[13] and Lakoff & Turner.[14] Using this framework, I conclude that kennings are not specifically metaphoric or metonymic, but rather seem to perform an abstractive function, intentionally rendering familiar concepts as unfamiliar as possible through a range of cognitive processes, including metaphor and metonymy.

Having established that kennings function as abstractive structures in a primary-oral context, the final question I address is that of their purpose: why would early Germanic poets create and use structures that served primarily to make their poetry more difficult to understand? In answering this question, I use Stephen Miller's socio-anthropological definition of "play" as a process characterized by "complication of process".[15] In considering kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy as examples of play, we bring the human context of such language into focus - kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy are not, after all, just oral-mnemonic formulae, bloodlessly used to fulfil the metric requirements of a verse. They are innovative and surprising structures, which found widespread use because real people found them compelling, entertaining, and meaningful.

These three arguments correspond roughly to the second, third and fourth chapters of this dissertation. They are preceded by another chapter, which will discuss key terminology, methodological frameworks and background literature. This dissertation is also supported throughout by evidence and examples from a corpus I built, which consists of roughly 800 kennings and 200 instances of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy. In assembling this corpus, I chose to identify and record data from early Old English, Old

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[13] Günter Radden and Zoltán Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy," in *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, ed. Kaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden, vol. 4, Human Cognitive Processing (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 17–60.
[14] George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
[15] Stephen Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing: Some Leitmotifs of Play," *American Anthropologist* 75, no. 1 (1973), p. 92.

Norse, and Old Saxon poetry, rather than from a single poetic tradition, which is the approach that most scholarly treatments of the kenning take.

It is worth noting that, although this dissertation draws from a large database of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy instances, all of it carefully arranged and machine-readable, this dissertation is of a more qualitative character than a quantitative one. In *Old Norse Court Poetry*, Roberta Frank writes the following:

> "However much we might like to be literary anthropologists, we end up as speculative archaeologists, devising precarious, oddly hollow reconstructions on the basis of chance remains."[16]

Frank, however, is speaking of written poetry – the problems she mentions are doubled in this study, given that its focus is the poetic language of an oral society, a society that, per definition, left no manuscripts behind. Accordingly, we are forced to not only engage in "speculation [...] on the basis of chance remains", but to extrapolate from these speculations. We can certainly make assumptions on the basis of the data we have but given how distant the data we have are from the realities of pre-literate society, a clean table of percentages and values will often communicate only the illusion of accuracy. I have used quantitative data when it seemed to me that they express something useful or concrete – otherwise, much of this dissertation's evidence remains qualitative. I have also attempted to be explicit in addressing ambiguity. When discussing primary orality, the only approaches available to us are oblique ones – there is no real opportunity for direct study. Accordingly, I will endeavor to be clear when the conclusions are not. The spoken word appears and disappears simultaneously, and accordingly, the data that would be most valuable to us is gone. I hope that

[16] Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry*, p. 12.

the reader will bear this in mind, and bear in mind also that just because a subject is difficult to study does not mean it is unworthy of study.

0.3 – Miscellaneous Notes

Before jumping in, a brief note on the typographic and citational conventions of this project:

This dissertation follows Sullivan in her use of "SMALL CAPS to represent semantic concepts such as categories, category members, and metaphoric domains, *italics* to represent lexical items, and 'quotes' to indicate translated or paraphrased items."[17] Kennings are printed in their nominative forms. without the diacritics conventionally used to indicate vowel length.[18] In Old Norse, the o-umlaut (*ö*) is used to render the more common o-caudata (*ǫ*). All kennings are cited by line number (for Old English and Old Saxon poetry), or by stanza and line number (for Old Norse poetry).

Unfortunately, the formatting conventions of this dissertation make it impossible to include my complete corpus (which would have been far too long for inclusion in any case). If you would like a copy, please feel free to contact me at carstenhaas@gmail.com, and I would be more than happy to send it to you.

[17] Karen Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," *Language and Literature: International Journal of Stylistics* 17, no. 1 (2008): 21–36.

[18] Editors of early Germanic poetry conventionally mark long vowels using an acute accent (e.g., *é*) in Old Norse, a macron (e.g., *ē*) in Old English, and a circumflex (e.g., *ê*) in Old Saxon.

CHAPTER 1 – TERMINOLOGY & METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 – Introduction

This chapter introduces the terminology, preexisting literature, and methodological frameworks necessary for this dissertation. Kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy will first be defined, along with any relevant terminology. Afterwards, I will identify certain gaps in our understanding of kennings and suggest how three methodological frameworks (those of Koch & Oesterreicher[19]; Lakoff &Turner[20] and Radden & Kövecses[21]; and Miller[22]) will be used to fill these gaps. Finally, I will present my corpus and discuss its structure and primary sources.

1.2 – An introduction to kennings

Although there are multiple interpretations of the particulars of the kenning system, scholars agree on their basic attributes.[23] A kenning is a type of poetic structure which consists, in its most basic form, of two nouns. These two nouns are linked to one another, either via compounding or via the genitive case, and together refer to a target concept (the meaning of the kenning). An example is the Old English kenning *sæhengest* ("sea-steed"),[24] which means BOAT. One of these two nouns of a kenning, often called the "base word" (*Grundwort* in German, *stofnorð* in modern Icelandic), refers to the target concept as "something which it is not, although it must in some way resemble."[25] In the above example, the base word is *hengest* ("steed") – although dissimilar in many ways, both BOATS and

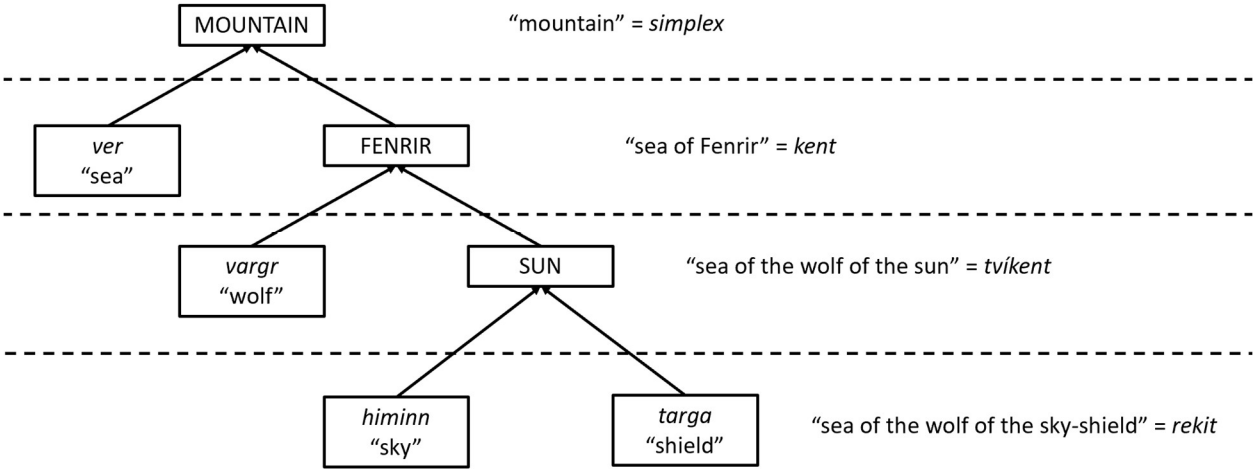
[19] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz."
[20] Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*.
[21] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy."
[22] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing."
[23] Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1976), p. xlv.
[24] Brooks, Kenneth R., *Andreas and the Fates of the Apostles*, l. 488.
[25] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. xlv.

STEEDS are things that carry people and objects. The second noun is the "determinant" (German *Bestimmung*, modern Icelandic *kenniorð*), which clarifies the exact meaning of the kenning. In the above example, the determinant is *sæ* ("sea"), which indicates that the kenning refers to something maritime in nature. By parsing the base word and determinant together, the audience is able to come to the correct target concept - something that in some manner resembles a horse, but is associated with the ocean, must be a BOAT.[26] Narrative context would also play a role in this interpretive process – *sæhengest*, for instance, is also attested as a gloss for "hippopotamus,"[27] but an audience hearing the Old English *Andreas* would presumably infer that the *sæhengest* Andreas traverses the ocean upon is a boat rather than a hippopotamus.

1.2.1 – Types of kennings

Sæhengest represents a prototypical kenning, but Snorri Sturlusson mentions additional varieties in his *Skáldskaparmál.* In addition to the usual *kent* kennings (i.e., a kenning that consists of two nouns), there are the *tvíkent* or *rekit* kennings, in which the base word or determinant of one kenning is itself replaced with a kenning, a recursive process that can occur again and again. *Tvíkent* kennings are those in which there exist two layers of kennings, while *rekit* kennings refers to those with three or more layers:

[26] This particular kenning pattern is common in Old Norse parallel as well – an example would be *unndýr* ("wave-beast"), a kenning for SHIP (*Hákonardrápa* (Hallfreðr Óttarson)*,* s.2, l.2).
[27] *Bosworth-Toller,* s.v. "sǽ-hengest," https://bosworthtoller.com/26206.



The above graphic breaks down *varg himintörgu vers* ("sea of the wolf of the sky-shield"), a kenning for MOUNTAIN[28]. Its most basic layer, "sea of FENRIR", represents a standard of *kent* kenning. However, FENRIR is instead referred to as the "wolf of the SUN", giving us the *tvíkent* kenning "sea of the wolf of the SUN". In turn, SUN is referred to as the "sky-shield", making the entire kenning *rekit*, because it consists of a kenning within a kenning within a kenning.

The *Skáldskaparmál* also notes the existence of circumlocutory kennings (often referred to as *viðkenningar* in the Old Norse), which use the kenning's two-noun structure to refer to something literally. A PRINCE, for example, may be called a *laðvörðr* ("protector of the land") and THOR may be called *Oðins burr* ("Odin's son").[29] Linguistically speaking, these literal kennings could be considered endocentric, which is to say that the meaning of the compound corresponds to the meaning of the compound's head.[30] For instance, the kenning

[28] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 5, l. 3.
[29] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. xlvi.
[30] William J. Frawley, "Compounding," in *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Oðins burr ("Odin's son") does refer to an actual SON, namely THOR, and is thus endocentric. Prototypical kennings, which designate their referents figuratively, are exocentric rather than endocentric – although designated as "raven-wine" (*hrafnvin*), BLOOD is not in fact a type of wine. The question of whether literal circumlocutory kennings should be considered kennings at all has received some discussion and will be addressed below.

Kennings are a distinguishing factor of Old Norse poetry, particularly in the hyper-intricate *dróttkvætt* meter, where their composition and interpretation often rely on a firm understanding of myth and legend. They are also a prominent feature of Old English poetry, although they occur with less frequency and fewer recursive layers. They are less prominent in the Old Saxon *Hêliand*, with the exception of circumlocutory kennings, which occur often.

1.2.2 – Defining the kenning

Although there is broad consensus on the basic definition of a kenning, there is still dispute regarding its particulars. The earliest in-depth treatment of the kenning is Rudolf Meissner's 1921 "The Kennings of the Skalds" (*Die Kenningar der Skalden*), where Meissner defines the kenning as "a bipartite replacement for a noun from the standard vocabulary" (*ein zweigliedriger Ersatz für ein Substantivum der gewöhnlichen Rede*),[31] although notes also that kennings must be members of "the typical kenning groups" (*den typischen Gruppen der Kenningar*).[32] Meissner catalogues 106 of these "typical kenning groups", organizing them by referent (e.g., kennings for ICE, WIND, RAVENS, WOLVES, BATTLE, etc.). He also states that kennings ought to "have something universal, typical, variable" (*etwas allgemeingültiges, typisches, variables hat*) to them.[33] "Universal" and "typical" here indicates

[31] Rudolf Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, vol. 1, Rheinische Beiträge und Hülfsbücher zur germanischen Philologie und Volkskunde (Bonn und Leipzig: Kurt Schroeder, 1921), p. 2.
[32] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, p. 12.
[33] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden,* p. 12.

that interpretation of a kenning cannot be contingent on its textual context – its meaning must always be recognizable, at least by anybody with the requisite knowledge of the kenning system. For example, the kenning *hrafnvin* ("raven-wine")[34] recognizably refers to BLOOD, irrespective of context. "Variable" suggests that the individual parts of a kenning may be altered, so long as they recognizably align with the kenning's general structure. "Raven-wine" could thus instead read "eagle-wine" or "crow-wine", because both birds are carnivorous, and thus the structure of the kenning as a metaphor for BLOOD holds. This notion of variation as a defining factor of the skaldic kenning was championed by Krause,[35] who regarded it as the central criterion for the structure. Quotidian phrases like *clothes horse*, which resemble kennings in their structure, are thus differentiated from kennings because they cannot be varied in this way[36] – nobody would refer to a "clothes horse" as a *pants donkey,* and they would not be understood if they did.

Meissner's definition was contested by Andreas Heusler in his subsequent 1922 review of Meissner's work.[37] Heusler took a more restrictive view of the phenomena, admitting only as kennings those structures that could be construed as having a metaphoric base word, schematizing the underlying structure of a kenning as "A = B:C".[38] Within this schema, A (the referent of the kenning) is not B. However, in the context of C, A resembles B.[39] Heusler would, for example, consider "raven-wine" a valid kenning for BLOOD. Blood (A) is not wine (B), but in the context of a raven (C), blood (A) resembles wine (B), because the

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[34] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 8.
[35] Wolfgang Krause, *Die Kenning als typische Stilfigur der germanischen und keltischen Dichtersprache*, vol. 1, Schriften der Königsberger Gelehrten Gesellschaft (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1930), p. 5.
[36] Marold, *Kenningkunst,* p. 26.
[37] Andreas Heusler, "Heusler über Meissner, die Kenningar der Skalden," *Anzeiger für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Litteratur* 41 (1922), pp. 127–34.
[38] Heusler, "Heusler über Meissner, die Kenningar der Skalden," p. 130.
[39] Heusler, "Heusler über Meissner, die Kenningar der Skalden," p. 130. Note that this dissertation uses a different operational definition of "metaphor", which is discussed in §1.5.

raven consumes it. On the other hand, Heusler's definition would not accept one of the circumlocutory kennings, such as *Sefgrimnis magr* ("kin of Sefgrimnir"), a kenning for GIANT.[40] Sefgrimnir (C) himself is a giant, and thus his kinsman (B) does not *resemble* a giant (A) – any kinsman of Sefgrimnir simply is, by definition, a giant.

Most researchers have since aligned themselves with Meissner's broader definition of a kenning, regarding Heusler's as too restrictive.[41] The two most recent studies (to my knowledge) that have attempted to more clearly define the kenning system have been Bjarne Fidjestøl's *Kenningsystemet*[42] and Edith Marold's *Kenningkunst*.[43] Fidjestøl comes to essentially the same conclusion as Meissner, although he also specifies that a criterion of the kenning is "semantic incongruity" (*semantisk inkongruens*),[44] meaning that neither the base word nor the determinant of the kenning can be synonymous with the kenning's referent. Marold's definition also cleaves broadly to that of Meissner, although she recognizes Heusler's metaphoric definition as a subtype of the kenning.[45]

There is less consensus on a definition of the kenning in Old English. Studies of the Old English kenning generally also takes the work of Meissner and Heusler as a starting point, and accordingly there exist two main strands of thought: those scholars that regard the kenning as necessarily metaphorical, and those that tend to take a broader view, admitting any binomial circumlocution as a kenning. Gardner takes the former, more restrictive view, and in doing so finds only 122 "true" kennings in the entirety of the Old

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[40] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 5, l. 8.
[41] Marold, *Kenningkunst,* p. 26.
[42] Bjarne Fidjestøl, "Kenningsystemet. Forsøk på ein lingvistisk analyse," *Maal og minne*, 1974, pp. 5–50.
[43] Edith Marold, *Kenningkunst*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Sprach- und Kulturgeschichte der germanischen Völker (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1983).
[44] Fidjestøl, "Kenningsystemet. Forsøk på ein lingvistisk analyse," p. 8.
[45] Marold, *Kenningkunst,* pp. 30-36.

English poetic corpus.[46] Molinari objects to approaches such as this on the grounds that relatively few of the Old English structures that have historically been referred to as kennings contain an actual metaphor of the type proposed by Heusler.[47] Hertha Marquardt, who composed a catalogue of the Old English kenning in 1938, takes Meissner's view instead, accepting as a kenning any binomial phrase that refers to another concept via circumlocution.[48] However, she regards the poetic character of the kenning as paramount, discounting kenning-like words such as *hlaford* ("lord", historically "loaf-warden") because they occur reliably in prose as well. She cites Meissner and Krause's concept of variation in support of this decision – although attested variation within kennings is rare in Old English, Marquardt argues that any compound where variation is not possible must be disregarded.[49] Prose words like *hlaford* are thus not considered kennings, because the term has been lexicalized as a single word, and variation of the individual morphemes is no longer possible. However, circumlocutory kennings like *yðlida* ("wave-traveler", a kenning for BOAT)[50] are considered kennings, despite the absence of Heusler's metaphoric relationship. Circumlocutory kennings of this type also represent the overwhelming majority of kennings in the Old Saxon corpus – there have been no studies, as far as I am aware, that offer a specialized definition of Old Saxon kenning.

My intent in summarizing the above studies is not to arrive at a finalized definition of the kenning, but rather to discuss the larger trends in defining kennings. Even Snorri

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[46] Thomas Gardner, "The Old English Kenning: A Characteristic Feature of Germanic Poetical Diction?," *Modern Philology* 67, no. 2 (November 1969), pp. 109–17, https://doi.org/10.1086/390147.
[47] Maria Vittoria Molinari, "Per Un' Analisi Tipologic Della Kenning Anglosassone," *Annali* 26 (1983), pp. 29–52.
[48] Hertha Marquardt, *Die altenglischen Kenningar*, 1st ed., Schriften der Königsberger Gelehrten Gesellschaft 3 (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1938), p. 112.
[49] Marquardt, *Die altenglischen Kenningar*, p. 112.
[50] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 198.

Sturlusson's *Skáldskaparmál*, from which the term "kenning" is drawn, is itself not particularly consistent in its definition of a kenning. As Fulk notes, at some points Snorri seems to distinguish between metaphorical and non-metaphorical kennings as Heusler does, while at others he designates terms like *konungr manna* ("king of men", a kenning for KING) as kennings,[51] a classification that goes against even the most liberal modern definition of the kenning. Absent any historical source with a clear definition of the term, any modern characterization of the kenning is, to a certain extent, a matter of personal preference. This is doubly true in a study such as this, which aims at a cross-linguistic approach to the kenning as opposed to the language-specific approaches discussed above. In gathering data, I have defined kennings as broadly as possible, in order to encompass the kenning as it appears in Old Norse, Old English, and Old Saxon – accordingly, this dissertation broadly follows Meissner in taking a kenning as "a bipartite replacement for a noun from the standard vocabulary" (*ein zweigliedriger Ersatz für ein Substantivum der gewöhnlichen Rede*).[52] The specifics of this definition with regard to data gathering are discussed below, in §1.7.

1.3 – An introduction to MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy

Although often integral to kennings, MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy has occasioned much less attention. This is partially because MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy was only formally defined by Karen Sullivan in a 2008 article on the subject[53] (although Snorri Sturlusson does appear to refer to it in his *Skáldskaparmál*),[54] and partially because the process generally occurs within kennings, meaning that any discussion of the subject is

[51] Robert D. Fulk, "Kennings in Old English Verse and in the Poetic Edda," *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* 51, no. 1 (April 26, 2021), p. 74.
[52] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, p. 2.
[53] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry."
[54] Sturluson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 220.

subsumed within a larger discussion of kennings. Another contributing factor may be that the process has been identified only in Old Norse poetry, although it does appear within Old English[55] and even, sporadically, within Old Saxon. Before I define MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, it is worth briefly defining metonymy in general, as well as metaphor, with which metonymy is often confused. Note that the definitions of metaphor and metonymy used here are cognitive ones – the decision to use cognitive definitions rather than rhetorical ones is discussed below in §1.5.

1.3.1 – Metonymy and metaphor

In any instance of metonymy, there are two concepts at play – a "vehicle" concept, and a "target" concept.[56] In a metonymic utterance,[57] the "target" concept is the concept that is "meant", while the "vehicle" concept is the concept that is actually uttered. Consider the following example from a *New York Times* headline[58]:

[55] Carsten P Haas, "The Word for Sea Is Ford: Member-for-Member Metonymy in Old English," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Forthcoming.
[56] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy," p. 21.
[57] While metonymy and metaphor are cognitive processes, they often manifest themselves linguistically and will be considered in their linguistic capacity for the sake of this definition.
[58] Somini Sengupta, "White House Announces Strategy to Keep Edible Food Out of Landfills," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/12/climate/white-house-food-waste-strategy.html.

Naturally, the White House did not "announce" anything – it is a building. But in this case, *White House* does not mean WHITE HOUSE – rather, the term is serving as a metonymic vehicle which provides access to the target concept, namely the U.S. EXECUTIVE BRANCH, which actually announced the new food waste guidelines. There are many varieties of metonymic relationship – common examples include PLACE FOR INSTITUTION (*White House* for U.S. EXECUTIVE BRANCH, *Langley* for CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY), MEMBER FOR CATEGORY (*Kleenex* for PAPER TISSUE, *Advil* for PAINKILLER) and PART FOR WHOLE[59] (*wheels* for CAR, *ass* for BODY, as in the phrase *move your ass*). But despite this range of potential metonymic relationships, the underlying metonymic structure remains the same – a vehicle concept is used to refer to an unspoken target concept with which the vehicle concept is associated.[60]

Metonymy is often confused with metaphor, a similar structure that is more familiar to most language users. Metaphor and metonymy share certain key similarities – Lakoff & Turner note, for example, that both metaphor and metonymy are "used to extend the linguistic resources of a language," and that both are often "used automatically, effortlessly, and without conscious awareness".[61] But despite these similarities, a metaphoric relationship is substantially different from a metonymic one.

One crucial difference is that metaphor expresses similarity between two things, whereas metonymy expresses association.[62] In our previous metonymic example (*White House* for U.S. EXECUTIVE BRANCH), there is no suggestion that the vehicle and target are similar - one is a subdivision of the government, and the other is a physical building. The

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[59] PART FOR WHOLE metonymy, as well as its inverse (WHOLE FOR PART metonymy) are sometimes referred to as "synecdoche".
[60] Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, p. 103.
[61] Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, p. 103.
[62] Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, p. 103.

metonym functions not on the basis of any similarity between the two entities, but rather because the two entities are associated with one another. An example of metaphor, on the other hand, is the Old English *sæhengest* ("sea-steed") kenning, which has the meaning of BOAT. Here, the connection between metaphoric vehicle ("steed") and target (BOAT) is not one of association, but rather one of similarity. The metaphor suggests an analogy between boats and horses, namely that both can be ridden.

A second difference between metaphor and metonymy is that in metaphoric relationships, one thing is understood in terms of the other, with the logic of the source concept applied to the target concept.[63] If we return to the "horse" for BOAT metaphor, it is easy to identify multiple logical links between the domains of HORSE and BOAT. BOAT corresponds to HORSE, because both are ridden. SEA corresponds to LAND, because the former is traversed by a BOAT and the latter by a HORSE. SAILOR corresponds to RIDER, RIGGING corresponds to HARNESS, PROW corresponds to HEAD, etc. Here, the concept of a BOAT is represented and understood in terms of the concept of a HORSE. No apparent logical mappings are possible in a metonymic relationship, like that of *White House* for U.S. EXECUTIVE BRANCH, and it is thus not possible to "understand" the U.S. EXECUTIVE BRANCH in terms of the concept of the WHITE HOUSE. This idea of understanding one concept in terms of another is central in differentiating metaphor from things like MEMBER FOR CATEGORY metonymy. If we refer to PAPER TISSUE as *Kleenex*, logical links between the two entities are obvious, given that KLEENEX is a type of PAPER TISSUE. However, these logical links are also tautological (the PAPER of the KLEENEX represents the PAPER of the PAPER TISSUE, the SNEEZE that one covers with a KLEENEX represents the SNEEZE that one covers with PAPER TISSUE, etc.). As such, one does not *understand* PAPER TISSUE in terms

[63] Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, p. 103.

of KLEENEX, because KLEENEX simply is PAPER TISSUE – the relationship is thus not a metaphorical one.

1.3.2 – The specifics of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy

As the name indicates, MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy is type of metonymic relationship, generally found within early Germanic poetry. In MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, one member of a semantic category functions as a metonymic vehicle, which refers to another member of the same semantic category (the metonymic target). For example, a SEA could be called a *river*, a *lake* or a *ford*, given that all are BODIES OF WATER, and BEER could be called *blood, dew* or *water*, given that all are LIQUIDS. Although it closely resembles MEMBER FOR CATEGORY metonymy, the two processes are different. In MEMBER FOR CATEGORY metonymy, an entire semantic category is designated via one member of that category – we might, for example, refer to both cows and bulls (i.e., the entire category of CATTLE) as "cows" (one member of the category of CATTLE). In MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, however, a *single* member of a semantic category is designated via a different *single* member of that same category. If MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy were used in reference to cattle, this would mean using the term "cow" to refer *specifically* to bulls (but *not* to cows, or to CATTLE in general).

On its face, MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy seems a very ineffective mode of expression – if, for example, a skald refers to a *svanr* ("swan"), are we to interpret the word as meaning SWAN, or RAVEN, or DUCK, or STARLING, or any other BIRD? Fortunately, MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy in the German poetic tradition is delimited in two ways, which makes it easier to parse. First, MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy occurs only in a small number of semantic fields: GODS, BIRDS, BODIES OF WATER, LIQUIDS and MAMMALS.[64]

[64] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," p. 23.

MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy does not seem to occur exterior to these fields, and thus a skald's audience would not have needed to wonder whether, say, a *flet* ("bench") referred to a CHAIR or TABLE or WARDROBE, because MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy is not active within the domain of FURNITURE. Second, each of these finite categories has only a small number of possible metonymic targets, and a far larger number of permissible vehicles. For example, within the category of BODIES OF WATER, there are only three possible targets – SEA, LAKE and RIVER.[65] These three targets may be designated by the names of any other BODY OF WATER (fjord, pool, stream, waterfall, etc.), but a FJORD could not be referred to via MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy at all. Those concepts that are permissible metonymic targets seem to be concepts that are either poetically common or culturally important. For instance, BLOOD, which crops up frequently in skaldic poetry, is a metonymic target within the category of LIQUIDS, whereas DEW is not. Accordingly, when confronted with an instance of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, a skaldic audience would know roughly what to expect, despite the confusion inherent in referring to something by the name of something it is not.

Although MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy does occur on its own, generally only within the category of BODIES OF WATER,[66] it occurs more frequently within kennings, where it often participates in the process of variation (see previous section). An example of such a kenning is *skautjalfaðar* ("sail-bear"), which refers to a BOAT[67]. An audience member unfamiliar with MEMBER FOR MEMBER would find the kenning difficult to parse, but somebody familiar with MEMBER FOR MEMBER would recognize that a "bear" is a MAMMAL, one of the semantic domains in which MEMBER FOR MEMBER is active. Although there are

[65] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," p. 23.
[66] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," p. 24.
[67] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 4, l. 2.

an unusually high number of possible metonymic targets within the category MAMMALS (WOLF, OX, BULL, GOAT, MOUSE, FOX, HORSE and BEAR[68]), a clear solution presents itself: HORSE. Interpreting HORSE as the metonymic target of *jalfaðar* ("bear") gives us the kenning "sail-horse", which neatly aligns with the common "horse of the sea" kenning pattern, which refers to a BOAT.

Like kennings, MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy is most present in skaldic poetry and occurs to a lesser extent in Old English verse. Isolated instances of MEMBER FOR MEMBER are also found in the Old Saxon *Hêliand*. Because MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy has only recently been recognized as a structure that is discrete from the kennings in which it generally occurs, it has received little scholarly attention. Explicit discussion of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy consists, to my knowledge, only of Karen Sullivan's article,[69] which identified and defined the structure, and my own article, which demonstrates the occurrence of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy in Old English poetry.[70]

Above, I have presented MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy and the kenning, defining both terms and summarizing the general scholarship on both topics. This next section will discuss the ways in which this dissertation builds on these earlier definitions, offering new perspectives and tools in our consideration of kennings. As stated in this chapter's introduction, the figurative language of early Germanic verse has generally been approached philologically. My intent in this dissertation is to take a more interdisciplinary approach, applying frameworks drawn from sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics and social anthropology to bring new perspectives to the topic of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy. Accordingly, the following section is subdivided into three parts, which

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[68] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," p. 24.
[69] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry."
[70] Haas, "The Word for Sea Is Ford: Member-for-Member Metonymy in Old English."

correspond to the three subsequent chapters of this dissertation. Each part will identify certain gaps in the previous research on kennings and then propose and explain a new theoretical framework I use in the following pages to analyze them.

1.4 – Kennings and orality

The study of kennings (and, by extension, MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy) has often taken an "all or nothing" approach to orality. "Orality" (as opposed to "literacy"[71]) refers to the modes of expression and thought in a society that has not been influenced, or has not been significantly influenced, by the written word. Certain studies, particularly those approaching Germanic poetry through an oral-formulaic lens, tend to regard kennings, first and foremost, as mnemonic structures designed to enable recall and poetic production in oral cultures. While this is a crucial aspect of kennings and their usage, an overwhelming focus on this aspect can also mispresent kennings as exclusively mnemonic in character, deemphasizing any aesthetic or social value they might have had. Other approaches, including a number of literary and philological ones, do not address kennings' relationship to orality whatsoever. A literate approach to kennings is valuable, particularly in that these approaches often foreground the artistic role and structure of the kenning, but such an approach cannot fully address kennings in their earlier, oral stages.

My intent in this dissertation is to take a middle road between these approaches, recognizing kennings as oral mnemonic structures, but focusing also on the socio-cultural

[71] It ought to be noted that "literate" is a less than ideal word for a culture that has access to writing technology, implying as it does a capacity to read and write (which, in many "literate" cultures, is limited to a very small portion of the population), and carrying with it also an implication of general ability (consider phrases like "tech literate"), which by extension is implied not to exist in "illiterate" (i.e., oral) societies. Unfortunately, there does not seem to yet be an alternate English term for such a culture that has gained acceptance, as opposed to German, which describes such cultures as *schriftlich* ("scripty; scriptish"). Other English alternatives (e.g., "lettered"; "literary") are even more fraught, and as such this dissertation apologetically makes use of the term "literate" to describe cultures significantly influenced by the written word.

roles they played. Such an approach is particularly important because it allows us to consider the apparent contradictions that kennings seem to possess as oral structures – despite their much-discussed mnemonic value, kennings have traits that seem to undercut their value as mnemonic structures. In order to navigate this middle road, this dissertation uses Peter Koch & Wulf Oesterreicher's 1985 *Sprache der Nähe – Sprache der Distanz* ("Language of Proximity – Language of Distance"),[72] which provides framework for discussing kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy as structures at a point of tension between the cognitive-mnemonic demands of orality and the cultural-aesthetic demands of formal linguistic expression.

1.4.1 – Why is orality important?

Orality is an important theme in kenning research because kennings were originally oral structures. Encountering kennings, particularly the more intricate versions of the formula found in skaldic verse, one might be inclined to question the orality of these structures – could they not have simply been literate innovations, shoehorned into textual reworkings of earlier oral works? There are a number of reasons to doubt such a conclusion: The oldest recorded kenning is found in a runic inscription on the Eggja Stone in Norway, which has been dated to c. 650-700 AD.[73] While it is impossible to say how long kennings were used before this inscription, we can at least be certain that the period was, effectively, an oral one. Even if kennings only emerged after the emergence of the runic alphabet among the Germanic people, the society remained essentially oral for the reason that runes represent an epigraphic tradition (i.e. limited to inscriptions), making widespread distribution of text impossible. Barnes, for instance, notes that "Runic writing in the period

[72] Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," *Romanistisches Jahrbuch* 36 (1985), pp. 15–43.
[73] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. liv.

A.D. c.175-700 was marginal to society".[74] Also speaking for the orality of the kenning is the structure's presence in three Germanic daughter languages (Old Norse, Old English and Old Saxon), which suggests a common Proto-Germanic ancestry for the structure, a period firmly in a state of orality. The long history of the kenning is also something that medieval commentators had an awareness of – Snorri Sturlusson, for example, discusses the changing standards of kenning use in the commentary to his *Háttatal*, noting that extended (*rekit*) kennings in excess of five constituents ought not to be used by poets, despite the fact that ancient poets frequently did so.[75]

In such an oral context, kennings would indeed have been mnemonically useful. Individuals in a primary-oral culture have no way to store information in a format other than human memory and correspondingly must "think memorable thoughts".[76] In *Orality & Literacy,* Ong lays out the strategies that these societies use to create these memorable thoughts:

> [...] you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions [...]"[77]

Kennings possess many of these qualities. They are rhythmically and alliteratively patterned, given that they occur primarily in poetry, particularly in the hyper-complex *dróttkvætt* meter. Tarrin Wills points out that kennings may have been used to make these metric forms possible, noting that more complex Old Norse meters tend to have statistically

[74] Michael P Barnes, *Runes: A Handbook* (Woodbridge ; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2012), p. 34.
[75] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. xlviii.
[76] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 34.
[77] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 34.

higher numbers of kennings.[78] Kennings are also, in a sense, repetitive – although kennings' recursive nature allows certain concepts to be expressed in a near-infinite number of forms, the number of concepts that can be expressed via kennings is extremely limited. As mentioned above, Meissner lists only 106 referents in his catalogue of kennings,[79] and a number of these referents would not even have been present during the primary-oral period of kennings' inception – an 8th century Scandinavian poet has little occasion to refer to ANGELS or APOSTLES.

Kennings are also memorable in that they tend toward vividity: *imunlaukr* ("war-leek") [80], for example, is a far more evocative image than "sword". Finally (and tautologically), kennings are mnemonically structured because they are structured – Ong makes this point with reference to Old English kennings:

> Putting experience into any words [...] can implement its recall. The formulas characterizing orality are more elaborate, however, than are individual words, although some may be relatively simple: the *Beowulf*-poet's 'whale-road' is a formula [...] for the sea in a sense in which the term 'sea' is not.[81]

In *Immanent Culture,* John Foley also articulates how formulas like the kenning might aid memory. In analyzing *Beowulf*, he claims that these structures serve as "phraseological pathway[s] to inherent meaning", which evoke "the entire mythic figure for which the nominal description metonymically stands".[82] Per Foley, kennings act as a sort of tether – a recognizable linguistic structure drags the cultural item to which it is connected into the narrative present.

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[78] Tarrin Wills, "The Development of Skaldic Language," in *Á Austrvega : Saga and East Scandinavia*, vol. 2, 2 vols., Papers from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences 14 (Gävle (Sweden): Gävle University Press, 2009), p. 1035.
[79] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, p. x-xi.
[80] Diana Whaley, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1 (Brepols, 2012), p. 226.
[81] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 36.
[82] John Foley, *Immanent Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 197.

1.4.2 – How can orality mislead us?

Approaches like Ong's and Foley's center kennings (and, concomitantly, MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy) as oral-mnemonic devices. However, these approaches do not address those attributes of kennings that undermine their value as oral mnemonic structures. Some of the most glaring contradictions are the so-called *rekit* ("driven") kennings, which use at least four nouns to refer to a target concept, and in some cases reach as many as eight: in *Þórálfs drápa Skólmssonar*, the skald Þórðr Særeksson refers to a WARRIOR as the "fire-slinger of the storm of the troll-woman of the shield moon of the horse of boathouses".[83] Irrespective of the vividity of the image, it is difficult to imagine that expressing a single familiar concept via eight discrete words offers any sort of mnemonic advantage, given that the skald must now recall eight words where one would suffice. MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy presents other problems. While it might be metrically expedient for a poet to describe a sea as a "ford", it also is not necessarily mnemonically effective to do so – generally speaking, it is easier to remember to call something by its own name, rather than by the name of something it is not.

Studies like that of Wills,[84] which suggest that kennings may exist to give the poet the necessary flexibility to compose in more restrictive meters, are also not entirely convincing on their own. While kennings are clearly an asset in the use of complex meters, Marold is correct in pointing out that „Because either one or two alliterative staves and two internal rhymes need to be distributed within each *dróttkvætt* line,[85] it is to be expected that

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[83] Diana Whaley, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1 (Brepols, 2012), p. 237.
[84] Wills, "The Development of Skaldic Language."
[85] Because it implies a visual "line" of text, which would not have existed in an oral context, the term "line" is somewhat fraught in discussing oral poetry. However, I am not aware of a more appropriate term, and accordingly the term "line" will be used in this dissertation with the caveat that in an oral linguistic context a poetic "line" is distinguished prosodically, rather than visually.

the overwhelming majority of nouns, whether kennings or not, are involved in this metrical scheme“ (*Da in der Dróttkvættzeile ein, resp. zwei Stabreime und zwei Binnenreime zu verteilen sind, ist zu erwarten, daß ein überwiegender Teil der Substantiva, ob Kenning oder nicht, an diesem Reimschema teilnimmt*).[86] The idea that kennings' purpose is that of a metrical crutch also implies that they emerged as a response to more complex meters, which leaves us with the improbable conclusion that early Germanic poets created meters that they were nearly incapable of working with, then developed the kenning to make those meters feasible. Framing formulae like kennings as solely mnemonic structures can also be a reductive approach in that it tends to obscure any other role that formulaic language might play. The idea that kennings are calibrated specifically to retain information reliably erases any cultural or social value they might have. Foley begins to address this issue by indicating the way formulaic language is linked to culture and performance, but he still appears to largely regard language of this type as an information storage device.

1.4.3 – How can literacy mislead us?

On the other side of the divide are those studies that do focus on kennings in their aesthetic and socio-cultural roles, but in doing so often focus on the kenning system as a literary phenomenon, rather than one that emerged in an oral milieu.[87] That this is the case is unsurprising – naturally, we have access only to those kennings that were preserved in writing, and the terminology we apply to the kenning stems primarily from Snorri's Sturlusson's *Skáldskaparmál*, which was written in a period where the transcription of skaldic poetry made a literary study of the structure possible. However, the assumptions

[86] Marold, *Kenningkunst,* p. 43.
[87] Examples of this approach include Edith Marold's *Kenningkunst*, which focuses on the poetic function of the kenning, and studies such as those of Lindow (1975) and Burrows (2021), which consider the kenning's relationship to Germanic riddles.

inherent to a literary conception of kennings do put us at a disadvantage when attempting to understand kennings, not only in their earliest forms, but also during their use in the period of incipient literacy, when poetry may have occasionally been transcribed but was still exclusively performed orally.

An example of the kind of distortion that inattention to oral context can cause can be seen in our understanding of "variation" in the structure of kennings. As noted above, one of the defining qualities of kennings is held to be the interchangeability of certain components within a kenning, an opinion held by Krause[88] and Fidjestøl.[89] For example, a standard formula for a GIANT kenning is "animal of the mountains",[90] but because components of this kenning can be varied, we come across kennings like *stophnisa*[91], which refers to a GIANTESS as a "cliff-porpoise", with *stop*[92] standing in for MOUNTAIN and *hnisa* standing in for ANIMAL. Catalogues like those in Meissner,[93] which list attested replacements for certain other words in kennings, give us the illusion that there exists a finite and fixed set of options from which a skald may draw in the construction of the kenning. It also suggests that there is a semantic substructure to a kenning, and that any given form of a certain kenning will be understood as a variation on the underlying "animal of the mountains", which is a metaphor for GIANT. In an oral context, however, this is far from the case – a poet does not learn their craft by memorizing a fixed list, or even necessarily via instruction. Rather, they come into their craft by observing and mimicking other, more experienced poets,[94] and so come into

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[88] Krause, *Die Kenning als typische Stilfigur der germanischen und keltischen Dichtersprache*, p. 5.
[89] Fidjestøl, "Kenningsystemet. Forsøk på ein lingvistisk analyse," p. 9.
[90] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, p. 258.
[91] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 10, l. 7.
[92] Although unattested as a simplex, Marold argues that the sense of "cliff" can be inferred from both the context of the kenning and from the word *stopall* ("uneven") (Þórsdrápa 96).
[93] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, pp. 258-9.
[94] Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, ed. Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 21-26.

their own understanding of the poetic register. As such, there is no guarantee that one poet has the same sense of underlying structure as another– a skald may regard "porpoise of the cliff" as a variant of "animal of the mountain," but they may also regard it as a variation on "snake of the peak" or "person of the ridge" or any number of potential variations. Alternately, they may not perceive any underlying structure at all – they may simply be aware of a set of phrases that mean GIANT. Such an understanding of kennings is at odds with the way in which we tend to conceptualize them, as a finite corpus with certain permissible variations. Because they do not receive explicit instruction or study, each poet develops their own poetic idiom by way of observation, an idiom that may or may not be reflected in the limited number of kennings that have been handed down to us.

Kennings were thus not pieces of a fixed, catalogued system that was uniformly understood by a monolithic poetic community. Rather, each kenning must be regarded as a single crystallization of a poet's own poetic idiom, shaped by their personal exposure to other poets' performances and by audiences' reactions to their own performance. When we forget that kennings were part of a diffuse oral tradition and instead consider them through the lens of a centralized literate one, it distorts our understanding of these structures in very real ways. Consider, for example, the kenning *tungls brasolar*[95] ("moon of the suns of the brow", a kenning for HEAD) in the *Þórsdrápa*. In editing the work, Edith Marold emends this kenning to *tungls brasali* ("hall of the moon of the brow"), stating "*tungl* 'moon' cannot be the base-word in a kenning for 'head'".[96] It is true that the majority of HEAD kennings do not characterize the head as a heavenly body, but rather as a "support" (for a hat or helmet) or

[95] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 15, l. 4.
[96] Edith Marold, ed., "Þórsdrápa," in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics Part 2*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 3 (Brepols, 2017), p. 110.

as some sort of location, whether geographic or man-made.[97] However, in emending the kenning we not only discard the evidence of all three extant manuscripts of the poem, which are unanimous in their rendering of the kenning as "moon of the suns of the brow",[98] but also ignore the obvious metaphorical possibility of referring to a HEAD as a "moon". Meissner also notes that the HEAD is often designated with the base-word *himinn* ("sky").[99] The reference to the head as a "moon" could be, in part, a metonymic nod to this kenning formula, with "moon" referring to SKY via PART FOR WHOLE metonymy. It could be an entirely new formulation on the part of poet. It could also be a portion of an established kenning formula that eventually passed out of fashion, or that was simply not passed down to us. These possibilities are interesting ones, and all of them are lost if we forget that the kenning system was a living, fluctuating, oral phenomenon and *not* a fixed literary system, under which certain kennings can simply be considered invalid and discarded.

1.4.4 – Reconciling orality and literacy

As stated above, we see here two main trends in the approach to kennings – those studies that focus on kennings as oral structures, but underplay their aesthetic or socio-cultural role, and those that focus on kennings' aesthetic or socio-cultural role, but do not address their orality. This dissertation attempts to bridge this gap by using the framework of Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher's 1985 "Language of Proximity – Language of Distance" (*Sprache der Nähe – Sprache der Distanz*), which situates different genres of linguistic expression, such as poetry, within in an oral environment.

Koch & Oesterreicher schematize linguistic expression as occurring along a spectrum, with "language of distance" (*Sprache der Distanz*) at one pole and

[97] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, pp. 126-9
[98] Marold, "Þórsdrápa," p. 108.
[99] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, p. 128.

"language of proximity' (*Sprache der Nähe*) at the other.[100] Language of distance tends to have attributes more associated with formal communication – monologue, clausal subordination, advance planning, etc.[101] Prototypical examples of language of distance would be an academic essay or a legal document. Language of proximity, on the other hand, possesses traits more commonly associated with intimate, informal communication – freer thematic development, shared cultural context, dialogue, lack of compactness, etc.[102] A prototypical example would be a conversation between friends. The spectral nature of this model also allows for genres such as diary entries or letters, which sit somewhere in between the formality expected of language of distance and the intimacy expected of language of proximity.[103]

Many aspects of the language of distance and of the language of proximity tend to be associated with written and spoken communication, respectively. Language of distance, for example, is generally monologic – think of a speech, or a newspaper article. The same is generally true of written communication, because it is often distanced from its producer – you cannot respond dialogically to the writer of a scholarly article, because they are not present. Spoken language, on the other hand, is broadly dialogic – the overwhelming majority of the words we say occur in conversation or some other exchange, where we have interlocutors who can respond to us. Koch and Oesterreicher, however, represent language of distance and language of

[100] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 23.
[101] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," pp. 19-23.
[102] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," pp. 19-23.
[103] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 18.

proximity as occurring in both the graphic (i.e., written) and phonic (i.e., spoken) modes of communication.[104] This gives us the framework to understand things like an exchange of text messages between lovers (written, but language of proximity) or a conference presentation (spoken, but language of distance). Crucially, it also highlights how the *type* of linguistic expression (language of proximity or distance) and the *mode* of linguistic expression (written or spoken) can be in tension with one another – because a conference presentation represents language of distance, it is planned in advance, it is public, it has a specific theme, etc.[105] However, it also displays certain aspects characteristic of language of proximity, such as face-to-face interaction and a shared situational context.[106] A conference presentation has these characteristics not because it represents language of proximity, but rather because it is conducted in the spoken medium and is thus subject to certain exigencies that most (written) formalized language of distance is not.

Koch & Oesterreicher is key to this dissertation because it allows for a much more nuanced understanding of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, as well as the contexts in which they occur. Previous research takes these structures, essentially, as either oral mnemonics or formalized poetic expression. However, using the framework of Koch and Oesterreicher, we can view kennings as they actually are – formal poetic expression (i.e., language of distance) occurring *within* the spoken mode of a highly oral culture. Accordingly, they exist at a point of tension between the mnemonic demands of orality and the

[104] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 23.
[105] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 23.
[106] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 23.

stylistic demands of language of distance. Recognizing kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy as such accounts for many of their seemingly contradictory features, which will be treated in the second chapter of this dissertation.

1.5 - Kennings and figurative language

Scholarship on the semantic function of kennings has often defined the kenning (as well as any internally embedded MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy) using the concepts of metaphor or metonymy. But despite the common use of these terms, there is very little consensus as to whether kennings actually represent metaphor or metonymy. Frank[107] and Fulk et al.[108] take them as metaphoric, while Marold sees both metaphoric and metonymic kennings.[109] Clunies Ross[110] and Fidjestøl,[111] on the other hand, suggest that they are neither. I believe that this disagreement is due, in part, to the use of rhetorical definitions, which have certain disadvantages when used to discuss oral linguistic phenomena like the kenning.

In order to circumvent these disadvantages, this dissertation uses the cognitive-linguistic definitions of Radden & Kövecses[112] and Lakoff & Turner[113] in order to discuss metaphor and metonymy. These cognitive-linguistic frameworks, which were roughly defined above, are rooted in rhetorical ideas of metaphor and metonymy, are more clearly defined and better represent the role of figurative language in an oral context. This section will briefly present the rhetorical definitions of metaphor and metonymy and then suggest certain difficulties these definitions pose for our treatment of kennings and MEMBER FOR

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[107] Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry*, p. 43.
[108] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. cxv.
[109] Marold, *Kenningkunst,* p. 31.
[110] Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 51.
[111] Fidjestøl, "Kenningsystemet. Forsøk på ein lingvistisk analyse," p. 28.
[112] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy."
[113] Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*.

MEMBER metonymy. Afterwards, it will investigate the cognitive definitions of these terms more closely and suggest certain advantages they have in the consideration of oral or orally-influenced linguistic phenomena.

1.5.1 – Rhetorical definitions of metaphor and metonymy

Rhetorically speaking, the general definitions of metaphor and metonymy are as follows:

> *A metaphor (Lat. translatio) is a metasememe that is constituted by a substitution of similarities.*[114]
>
> *Metonymy (Lat. denominatio) is a metasememe that is constituted by a substitution of contiguities. Contiguity can be defined in terms of a causal, a local, or a temporal relationship.*[115]

These are, at surface level, quite similar to the cognitive definitions of metaphor and metonymy that were presented earlier – metaphor represents a relationship of similarity, in which one concept is understood in terms of another, while metonymy is a relationship of contiguity, in which one concept designates another via association or adjacency. However, when we look closely at these terms, certain shortcomings for the discussion of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy emerge.

The first issue here is the idea that metaphor and metonymy represent "substitution[s]", or that they are "metasememe[s]".[116] In describing metaphor and metonymy as a substitution, these definitions suggest that a process of replacement is at work here, with the metaphoric or metonymic vehicle simply taking on the value of the

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[114] Richard Nate, "Metaphor," in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O Sloane (Oxford University Press, 2001).
[115] Richard Nate, "Metonymy," in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O Sloane (Oxford University Press, 2001).
[116] "A metasememe is a figure that replaces one sememe by another" (J. Dubois et al., *Rhétorique Générale* (Paris: Larousse, 1970), p. 34; quoted from Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 186) – a "sememe" is a unit of meaning.

metaphoric or metonymic target. A metaphoric or metonymic phrase is then simply a hollow container, the literal meaning of which is effaced and replaced with an underlying figurative meaning.

This idea of replacement fundamentally misrepresents the ways in which figurative language is used, both artistically and on a quotidian basis. Consider the metaphorical phrase *My dogs are barking*. This is not simply a matter of replacement, with *dogs* taking on the meaning of FEET and *barking* taking on the meaning of IN PAIN – rather, the phrase evokes a sort of compound semantic structure, with the familiar concept of SORE FEET being overlaid with the image of a pair of hard-worked dogs who are barking with dissatisfaction – the semantic values of the metaphoric phrase (DOGS, BARKING) are just as present as the semantic values of the denotative value of the phrase (FEET, SORE). The relationship here is not substitutive, as the rhetorical definition suggests, but rather palimpsestic – one sememe rests upon the other, and both are visible. If this were not the case, metaphor and metonymy would serve no aesthetic purpose whatsoever – consider one of our better-known literary metaphors (Romeo & Juliet, Act II, Scene 2, ll. 5-6):

> But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
> It is the East, and Juliet is the sun.

Here, we have a metaphor of SUN for JULIET. However, if we regard metaphoric language as simply being a rhetorical substitution, this would suggest that a reader in fact takes the scene as follows:

> But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
> It is the WINDOW, and Juliet is JULIET.

Transparently, this is not how a reader takes the scene. It is the combination of the metaphorical image and its literal referent that gives the scene its weight.

This simultaneity of meaning is doubly important in oral cultures. Ong notes, for example, that a key component of oral expression is the need to "conceptualize and verbalize all [...] knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings".[117] When the *Beowulf* poet refers to one's CONSCIENCE as a *sawele hyrde* ("shepherd of the soul"),[118] the metaphor is effective specifically because it sets an abstract concept (CONSCIENCE) in terms obvious to an oral audience that is broadly familiar with the practices of animal husbandry.

Another issue with rhetorical conceptions of metaphor and metonymy is the idea that these structures are somehow unusual or "literary", that they occupy a position external to that of "proper" language. Plett, for example, describes rhetorical features as being "deviant units of speech",[119] while Quinn similarly calls them "an intended deviation from normal usage".[120] Such a conception of rhetorical figures like metaphor and metonymy is problematic because it suggests a fundamental border between literary or poetic language and so called "standard language" or "everyday language",[121] a border that does not exist now, and certainly did not exist in an oral context. This assumption of a hard border between these genres of expression in turn obscures our understanding of metaphor and metonymy as essential linguistic resources, which may be used in different ways in different linguistic genres but are certainly common to all of them.

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[117] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 42.
[118] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1742.
[119] Heinrich F. Plett, *Literary Rhetoric*, trans. Myra Scholz and Klaus Klein, vol. 2, International Studies in the History of Rhetoric (Leiden: Brill, 2010), p. 65.
[120] Arthur Quinn, *Figures of Speech: 60 Ways to Turn a Phrase* (Davis: Hermagoras Press, 1993), p. 6.
[121] Plett, *Literary Rhetoric*, p. 65.

Consider, for example, the TIME IS MONEY metaphor. We often speak of being *out of time*, of *saving time*, of *spending time*, etc. These are all phrases which nobody would regard as "deviant" speech, but they are metaphoric. TIME is not a physical resource – it is a fourth dimension, the abstract notion of an irreversible and unstoppable progression of events. As such, it cannot be *spent* or *saved* or *lost* – it is constant, omnipresent and inevitable. And yet, we are remarkably resistant to discuss TIME in anything other than metaphorical terms. In what way are we to consider such a metaphor for time, which crops up far more frequently in day-to-day life than any literal characterization of time, a deviation? Again, recognition of the essential presence of metaphor and metonymy in all human expression is doubly important in the characterization of highly oral cultures, where language of the type that we might regard as "poetic" (and thus, in a rhetorical model, "deviant") was even more present in day-to-day exchange. As noted in the previous section, oral expression tends to occur "in epithetic and other formulary expressions".[122] If we take the rhetorical approach to metaphor and metonymy, we assume that metaphoric and metonymic formulae (such as kennings) are inherently atypical, that they somehow represent a misuse of "standard" oral expression, when the evidence would seem to indicate that the opposite is true, that metaphor and metonymy are essential resources of human expression that are used in a range of contexts and manners.

Rhetorical conceptions of figurative language also often take as granted an awareness of categories such as metaphor and metonymy on the part of the creator of any work. Lausberg, for instance, states in his *Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik* ("Elements of Literary Rhetoric") that a philologist ought to use the "rhetorical forms used by the poet as tools for recognizing the intention of the poet" (*Er (der Philologe) wird so auch die vom*

[122] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, Ong 34.

Dichter verwandten rhetorischen Formen als Werkzeuge der Wirkungs-Intention des Dichters zu erkennen suchen).[123] However, an awareness of rhetorical forms cannot be assumed in a contemporary literate culture, let alone a historical oral one. When a person says *My phone is on its last legs*, the speaker does not use metaphor with conscious intent, first conceptualizing the phrase *likely to break soon* and then substituting it with *on its last legs* – they simply choose one phrase of many that refers to the target concept (in this case metaphorically, rather than literally). We can see evidence that this is not the case in the sheer number of figurative structures that have become lexicalized in English, phrases that are metaphoric or metonymic, but have been used for so long that their figurative quality is obscured. We, for instance, "understand" an idea or "grasp" it, despite the fact that an IDEA is an intangible – it cannot be literally grasped, and we cannot literally stand beneath it. That these metaphors, which represent abstract mental processes in concrete sensorimotor terms, were ever lexicalized and separated from their metaphoric weight tells us that the use of rhetorical figures need not always be conscious or intentional in the modern day, let alone in oral cultures that existed before the concepts of "metaphor" and "metonymy" had even been articulated. Accordingly, when we use rhetorical assumptions of intent to discuss kennings in societies in which the very concept of "rhetoric" did not exist, we are effectively beginning our inquiry with anachronistic assumptions of what kenning users were attempting to accomplish. This is a little like trying to decide whether *Beowulf* is "fiction" or "non-fiction" – either designation will misrepresent the work, not because there is necessarily anything wrong with the terminology, but rather because the terminology simply is not applicable to the social environment in *Beowulf* emerged, where concepts of historical fact or fabulation were much different than they are today.

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[123] Heinrich Lausberg, *Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik*, 4th ed. (München: Hueber, 1971), p. 15.

Finally, rhetorical definitions of metaphor and metonymy pose difficulties for this study simply because there is limited consensus on any such definitions. This is a practical, rather than a theoretical concern. Certainly, I am not the first person to make many of the above criticisms. The idea of figurative language as a "deviation" has been challenged on occasion,[124] and Lausberg's attitude towards rhetorical forms has received its share of criticism.[125] That these rhetorical definitions are disputed is a sign of healthy scholarly debate, but it also makes it difficult to find rigorous terminology with which to evaluate the figurative character of kennings. The rhetorical division between metonymy and metaphor is a blurry one – early rhetoricians disagreed on whether the two were discrete categories, or whether the former was a subset of the latter.[126] Similar confusion exists between synecdoche and metonymy.[127] Although the terms have solidified somewhat, confusion about the borders between these categories still exists. Marold, for example, differentiates between *synekdochisch* ("synecdochic") and *metonymisch* ("metonymic") kennings in Old Norse,[128] despite the fact that synecdoche (the Greek term for PART FOR WHOLE metonymy) is broadly considered to be a type of metonymy.[129] In the realm of Old English, Fulk et al. refer to the Old English *hæðstapa* ('heath-stepper', a kenning for STAG) as a metaphor,[130] despite the fact that the 'heath-stepper' is not something a stag resembles, so much as something it literally is (this is a little like calling *guitar player* a metaphor for BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN). I am not suggesting here that the analyses of Marold or Fulk et al. is flawed,

[124] Plett, *Literary Rhetoric*, p. 65.
[125] Plett, *Literary Rhetoric*, p. 3.
[126] Nate, "Metonymy."
[127] Richard Nate, "Synecdoche," in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O Sloane (Oxford University Press, 2001).
[128] Marold, *Kenningkunst,* p. 30.
[129] Nate, "Synecdoche."
[130] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. cxv.

but simply that we see a range of rhetorical definitions at play, and that this range can make it difficult to put different treatments of the kenning in conversation with one another. In this dissertation, which stresses the purpose and function of kennings across several different corpora, clear, rigorous definitions of metaphor and metonymy are necessary.

1.5.2 – Cognitive definitions of metaphor and metonymy

The cognitive-linguistic definitions of Radden & Kövecses and Lakoff & Turner fulfil this requirement and offer a number of advantages over rhetorical definitions in addressing metaphoric or metonymic language in oral cultures. Although I have already briefly defined metaphor and metonymy above in order to orient the reader, I would like to present a more detailed definition of both structures here in order to highlight their benefits. Radden & Kövecses define metonymy as follows:

> Metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same idealized cognitive model.[131]

Their definition offers several advantages. First, the definition is a cognitive one. In other words, it takes metonymy (and, by extension, metaphor) as fundamental mental processes theoretically common to all of humanity, rather than the conscious, literary process suggested by Lausberg, which cannot effectively be applied to primary oral cultures. Correspondingly, a cognitive definition is much better suited to any consideration of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy as primary oral structures in cultures which would have been unaware of "metaphor" and "metonymy" as abstract rhetorical structures.

The above definition also states that metonymy occurs within an "idealized cognitive model". An "idealized cognitive model" (generally abbreviated "ICM") is an idea based on earlier theories of frame semantics[132]. Unlike earlier theories of frame semantics, it argues

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[131] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy," p. 21.
[132] George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

that an individual's conceptualization of a certain semantic domain consists not only of encyclopedic knowledge of that domain, but the cultural associations and assumptions one has of the domain in question.[133] For example, an individual's idealized cognitive model of the domain of SNAKES can include semantic concepts like SCALED or REPTILE, which represent encyclopedic knowledge, but also concepts like EVIL or MANIPULATIVE, which are non-accurate and culturally motivated.

The notion of an idealized cognitive model is a crucial one because it allows for an interface between metaphor and metonymy as cognitive structures, which appear to be essential to human thought, and their realization within specific socio-cultural contexts, where they are subject to culturally motivated pressures. It thus gives us a framework for this dissertation's cross-linguistic approach to kennings, as metaphoric or metonymic structures that have at their root a similar essential structure but manifest themselves in vastly different ways within the cultural environments of Old Norse, Old English and Old Saxon poetry.

Another advantage of this definition is its nuanced portrayal of metonymy as an additive process, rather than a substitutive one. As noted above, rhetorical definitions of metonymy tend to portray it as one word replacing another. Earlier cognitive definitions of metonymy also took the process as one of replacement, generally using the notation X STANDS FOR Y.[134] According to such theories, when a speaker says *We're waiting on word from Washington,* the word *Washington* is simply a stand-in for THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. However, under Radden & Kövecses's definition, "one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target". Accordingly, *Washington* is

[133] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy," p. 20.
[134] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy," p. 19.

not just a hollow word standing in for a related concept – given that it is the term actually uttered, it conjures a range of associations of its own by which the target concept of THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT is accessed. Thus, the meaning of a metonym is not simply that of the target concept, but rather a merging of the vehicle and target concepts. Radden & Kövecses argue that notation of the type X PLUS Y is likely more suited to expressing this.[135] This better accounts for the peculiar role metonymy often plays in oral poetry, what Gillian Overing refers to as its "dual impact"[136] - the metonym simultaneously evokes its immediate associations and those of the target concept.

Radden & Kövecses' definition builds on the borders established by Lakoff & Turner between metaphor and metonymy, allowing for far clearer divisions between the two categories than those afforded by rhetorical definitions. The three primary requirements of metaphor are as follows, from most general to most specific:

> In *metaphor,* there are two conceptual domains, and one is understood in terms of the other. In *metaphor*, a whole schematic structure (with two or more entities) is mapped onto another whole schematic structure. In *metaphor*, the logic of the source-domain structure is mapped onto the logic of the target-domain structure. None of this is true in metonymy.[137]

These requirements can be demonstrated by returning to the conceptual metaphor of TIME IS MONEY. In TIME IS MONEY, the conceptual domain of TIME is understood in terms of that of MONEY. Accordingly, it passes the first condition of metaphor: one domain is understood in terms of another. Within this metaphor, multiple entities are mapped from one domain onto the other. For example, MONEY is mapped to TIME, BUDGET is mapped to PLAN FOR USING TIME, and WASTE is mapped to USE OF TIME WITHOUT PURPOSE (note that the TIME

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[135] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy," p. 19.
[136] Gillian Rose Overing, "Some Aspects of Metonymy in Old English Poetry," in *Old English Shorter Poems. Basic Readings*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe' (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), p. 87.
[137] Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, p. 103.

IS MONEY conceptual metaphor has become so fundamental to human expression that it is difficult to concisely express time-related concepts in non-financial terms). This fulfils the second condition of metaphor: multiple entities from one domain are mapped onto multiple entities within another. Finally, TIME is understood using the logic of MONEY. We know, for example, that money can be invested, which means it is expended in hope of a future payoff. Correspondingly, when we speak of "investing time", it means that time is being used now in the hopes of saving time later. Thus, TIME IS MONEY fulfils the third condition of metaphor: the logic of the source domain is applied to that of the target domain.

Two other aspects of metaphor, noted by Lakoff & Johnson in 1999, are worth noting – they tend to be unidirectional,[138] and they tend to map concrete concepts onto abstract concepts.[139] "Unidirectionality" means that metaphor tends, in practice, to work one way but not the other. For example, a common metaphor is LOVE IS A JOURNEY – phrases such as *they're going through a rough patch* and *they've been through a lot together* are familiar to us, and function metaphorically because they represent the trials of a relationship as impediments while travelling. However, the metaphor works only one way – a speaker would not, for example, refer to a difficult portion of road as *a separation* or call the end of a journey *a divorce*. Metonymy, on the other hand, often functions bidirectionally. For instance, we can use PART FOR WHOLE metonymy to say *nice wheels* in reference to a car. We can also use WHOLE FOR PART metonymy to say *my car went flat* in reference to the wheels of a car going flat.

Metaphor is also generally used to express abstract concepts in familiar, sensorimotor terms. Examples are numerous: LOVE IS JOURNEY, ARGUMENT IS A WAR, TIME

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[138] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 57-8.
[139] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, p. 73.

IS MONEY, etc. In those cases where a concrete domain is mapped onto another concrete domain, it is often because the latter domain is so unfamiliar as to be effectively abstract. An example of this is OUTER SPACE IS AN OCEAN (evidenced by phrases like *space **marines**, space**ships**, astro**nauts**,* etc.) – although OUTER SPACE is entirely concrete in a way LOVE or ARGUMENT is not, the average speaker has no experience with it as a concrete environment. Metonymy is not subject to this limitation. The above example of referring to a car as *wheels* is an instance of concrete-to-concrete metonymy, and metonymy can even be abstract-to-concrete, such as in the phrase *I live near the CIA* – here, INSTITUTION FOR PLACE metonymy occurs, and an abstract institution (THE CIA) is used to access a concrete location (LANGLEY, VA). These attributes (unidirectionality[140] and concrete-to-abstract mapping) are aspects of prototypical metaphor.[141] Correspondingly, failing to meet them does not mean a structure is not metaphoric, provided it meets the other conditions of metaphor.

In sum, these advantages make the cognitive frameworks of Radden & Kövecses and Lakoff & Turner crucial to this study. Unlike previous studies, Radden & Kövecses also defines metonymy as occurring within an idealized cognitive model, which allows for the influence of culture on the structure. They also define metonymy as an additive process, rather than a substitutive one, which allows for both the vehicle and target concepts to play a role in an instance of metonymy. This brings the cognitive definition of metonymy in step with cognitive definitions of metaphor, to which the idea of the idealized cognitive model has already been introduced. Together, these definitions are crucial for the study of primary-oral phenomena like the kenning and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy because they are rooted

[140] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, pp. 57-8.
[141] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, p. 73.

in cognitive linguistics, which is theoretically applicable to both primary oral and literate cultures, as opposed to rhetoric, which assumes a certain awareness of its forms on the part of a poet and tends to privilege metaphor and metonymy as literary structures rather than general linguistic ones. Finally, these definitions are tightly defined in a way that rhetorical definitions are not, which allows for a clearer picture of the underlying structure of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, which in turn illuminates their poetic function.

I want to quickly stress that my intent is not to disparage rhetorical definitions of metaphor and metonymy, or to suggest that they should be discarded in considering kennings – they begin to much better reflect conceptions of kennings in later, more literarized periods, particularly in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, which Margaret Clunies Ross argues is strongly influenced by Latin and Medieval poetic thought.[142] These rhetorical definitions are also fundamental to the cognitive ones – it is not coincidental that the field of cognitive linguistics also uses the terms "metaphor" and "metonymy". However, in a cross-linguistic analysis of these structures with a focus on their oral status, a cognitive approach is preferable for the above reasons. The status and implications of kennings as metaphors and metonyms will be treated in the third chapter of this dissertation.

1.6 - Kennings and play

In the previous two sections, I have suggested new frameworks that I will use a) in establishing that kennings are oral structures; and b) in determining the figurative structures that undergird the kenning. In other words, the previous sections are concerned with *where* kennings come from and *what* they are. In this final section (and, correspondingly, this dissertation's final chapter), I want to consider the actual purpose of the kenning – *why* is it

[142] Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*.

that early Germanic poetry made such extensive use of a structure like the kenning, despite its unwieldiness and opacity? In particular, I want to consider an aspect of the kenning that is often downplayed or unmentioned in scholarly discussion, namely their entertainment value. There is an unwillingness to consider a very simple fact, a fact that I imagine has been noted by any given enthusiast of skaldic or Old English verse: kennings are *fun*. To address this aspect of kennings, this dissertation draws from anthropological characterizations of play, specifically Stephen Miller's 1973 article *Ends, Means and Galumphing: Some Leitmotifs of Play*.[143]

1.6.1 – What role does entertainment play in kennings?

As previously noted, many scholars have suggested that mnemonics represent the central motivation for the use of kennings. This argument suggests that the kenning's primary purpose is to establish vivid formulae that aid in the recollection of culturally significant information and to allow poets enough flexibility to negotiate the metric and alliterative demands of Germanic verse forms, which themselves are also used to mnemonically encode important information. This is true in part, as demonstrated by the correlation between the frequency of kenning use and degree of metric restriction,[144] as well as the attested importance of fixed formulaic structures in oral societies.[145] However, it is also clear that mnemonics cannot represent the sole rationale for kennings' use. For one, if kennings were developed in response to more restrictive poetic meters, then why did these restrictive poetic meters emerge at all? For what reason would an oral society develop a complex poetic meter if it lacked the necessary structures to compose within it? A solely

[143] Stephen Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing: Some Leitmotifs of Play," *American Anthropologist* 75, no. 1 (1973), pp. 87–98.
[144] Wills, "The Development of Skaldic Language," p. 1035.
[145] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 36.

mnemonic rationale for the kenning should also be discarded because it entirely eliminates any aesthetic role the kenning might have played in an oral context. If we take kennings as purely mnemonic devices, it suggests that the creation of oral art is purely mechanistic in nature, that oral societies create art solely to encode information as effectively as possible, and that the innovation of the written word freed humanity to focus on higher things. Such a technologically deterministic standpoint has been criticized, particularly in Ong's work on orality,[146] and rightly so - it implies that oral cultures create art solely for functional reasons, when in fact oral cultures, like literate cultures, are composed of human beings who have a need for aesthetic stimulation. The aesthetic sense of oral cultures may differ from that of literate ones and is certainly subject to different societal and environmental exigencies, but an aesthetic sense exists all the same.

Certain studies do focus more on the aesthetic dimension of kennings, often focusing on their social role. Lindow, for instance, aligns kennings and riddles, arguing that the purpose of both structures is to reinforce in-group solidarity.[147] He claims that kennings function as a sort of "secret language", created to exclude those who were not members of the *drótt* (a lord's retinue).[148] Marold echoes this conclusion as well, suggesting that the impenetrability of kennings enhanced their value in laudatory poems.[149] The idea of kennings and riddles as exclusionary structures can be supported by the prevalence of riddling or wisdom tests in Old Norse Eddic texts, such as the *Vafþruðnísmál,* and the existence of

[146] Stephen Best, "Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy (1982)," *Public Culture* 32, no. 2 (2020), pp. 431–39; Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).
[147] John Lindow, "Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry," *Scandinavian Studies* 47, no. 3 (1975), pp. 311–27.
[148] Lindow, "Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry," p. 323.
[149] Marold, *Kenningkunst,* p. 39.

verse in which skalds brag of their ability to understand poetry at all.[150] Burrows builds on Lindow's research into riddles and kennings but interprets their societal role differently. She argues that they served a more recreational purpose, indicating "a vital interest in poetic play almost for its own sake".[151] However, her research focuses primarily on the 13th century and thereafter, a period where the distinction between the *drótt* and the rest of society was believed to be much more permeable.[152] The question of the kenning's role in earlier Scandinavian society is left open. Edith Marold mentions that the kenning can be considered a form of "adornment" (*Schmuck*),[153] while Frank suggests that the "extraordinary language" of a kenning was intended to underscore the importance of the events they described,[154] and that a kenning represented an instance of poetic double vision in which both the concrete occurrence of the narrative and the figurative manner in which it was depicted were simultaneously visible.[155] These are all valuable perspectives, although like most kenning research, they focus specifically on the skaldic tradition rather than the kenning in a cross-linguistic context. I would also suggest that these viewpoints (with the exception of Burrows' analysis of kennings' use in 13th-century Scandinavian courts) struggle to address the actual entertainment value of kennings. Whichever perspective one takes (kennings as mnemonic devices, riddles, secret language, metrical crutch, metaphor, metonymy, etc.), the question of why generations of poets and audiences actually *enjoyed* these structures is left open.

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[150] Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 2 (Brepols, 2009), pp. 39-40.
[151] Hannah Burrows, "Riddles and Kennings," *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* 51, no. 1 (April 26, 2021), p. 65, https://doi.org/10.1515/ejss-2020-2017.
[152] Burrows, "Riddles and Kennings," p. 64.
[153] Marold, *Kenningkunst,* p. 40.
[154] Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry*, p. 42.
[155] Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry*, p. 43.

It is not entirely surprising that the entertainment value of kennings has not received much consideration in the discussion of kennings' purpose. Fun is unquantifiable, it is incredibly subjective, and it feels lazy to simply suggest that kennings, one of poetry's strangest and most complex structures, emerged and persisted simply because they were "entertaining". But it is also true that the desire for entertainment represents something of a human universal, and that it is exceedingly unlikely that a desire for entertainment did not play some role in the emergence of kennings and the verse forms with which they are associated. Entertainment may be difficult to measure and difficult to treat objectively – Marold, for example, refers to theories of kennings' "not reconstructable aesthetic value" (*nicht nachvollziehbar äesthetischer Wert*)[156] – but this does not mean that it does not exist, or that it should not be addressed.

1.6.2 – Kennings as linguistic play

Drawing from the field of anthropology, Stephen Miller's 1973 *Ends, Means and Galumphing: Some Leitmotifs of Play* provides a framework under which kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy can be understood as structures of entertainment and why that role might be important. While many philological sources veer away from considering the role that fun or enjoyment might play in the development or origin of such structure, regarding the subject as immeasurable and subjective,[157] Miller's article lends structure to a discussion of how kennings, MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy and "fun" or "play" might fit together.

Stated briefly, Miller defines play as an organizational frame for activity rather than a finite list of specific activities.[158] He notes that in non-play activities, the ends (or goals)

[156] Marold, *Kenningkunst,* p. 212.
[157] Marold, *Kenningkunst,* p. 212.
[158] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 92.

determine the means (or processes). For instance, in an actual fight, two dogs will attempt to disable one another as rapidly as possible – this is the goal of the fight. In play, however, the goals of an activity are suppressed in favor of the means by which those goals are achieved. Two dogs play-fighting will roll around, snap at one another, and generally put on a rough facsimile of combat without attempting to give their "opponent" any injury more severe than a slight nip. The emphasis here is on the process of fighting, rather than on its actual purpose. Even in forms of play where there remains a clear "end" that the players are working towards (say, victory in a game), the emphasis on the means is visible. Miller gives the following example:

> To clarify further, imagine a clerk who considers his job purely business miraculously given his paycheck without having to execute the usual means to it, and a chess player miraculously handed a checkmate without having to play the game. The pleasure of the worker will be diminished far less than that of the player.[159]

Miller describes the manner in which the means of an activity are elaborated during play as "galumphing", an onomatopoetic term he first uses to describe the "flailing, bobbing, exaggeration, and indirect, ineffective action" in the body language of playing baboons.[160] He later clarifies this term as referring to "patterned, voluntary elaboration or complication of process, where the pattern is not under the dominant control of goal".[161] Behaviors typical of galumphing and its complication of process include repetition, exaggerated or uneconomic action, and the use of familiar behaviors in novel contexts or sequences.

It is not difficult to see how these attributes correspond to the kenning and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy systems. Kennings are extremely uneconomic structures, using two (and often far more) words to express that which could be expressed with a single

[159] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 93.
[160] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 89.
[161] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 92.

term. MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy also represents uneconomic action in that it inverts the standard cognitive advantages of metonymy, using a metonymic vehicle to draw attention *away* from the entity with the greatest salience. Both processes are also repetitive – the formulae occur again and again, often with slight variation, and the ability to repeat kennings involving the same semantic theme is in fact regarded as a mark of strong poetry.[162] Finally, they represent the use of an extremely familiar behavior (expressive speech) in unusual sequences, recombining and varying terms in ways that are unwieldy and creative in equal measure.

Miller not only gives us definitions by which to identify play but also identifies the potential purposes for which it emerges. Some benefits of play are transparent, deriving from the activity itself which occurs during play[163] – dogs play-fighting learn to fight, children passing a ball back and forth develop motor skills and strength, and skalds employing and interpreting complex kennings sharpen their verbal and mental acuity. However, Miller suggests another set of advantages that emerge not from the *content* of play, but rather from the galumphing quality of play, the inefficiency and variability in patterning that occur when activities are transposed into the frame of play. When a player, be it human or animal, engages in play, it is not only practicing those concrete activities that make up that particular instance of play, but also combining different behaviors and faculties that would otherwise have no obvious utilitarian purpose.[164] By galumphing, by imposing unnecessary complications, by pursuing unnecessary goals, the player is essentially fabricating novel problems, and in solving those novel problems is developing their own ability to adapt to any new demands they might face. Miller refers to the example of a child playing with a marble,

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[162] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. liii.
[163] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 95.
[164] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 96.

who is essentially asking two questions: “What can be done with this marble besides what's supposed to be done?" and "What can I do with myself as a user of objects?”.[165] In identifying kennings with Miller’s definition of play, we can see that the early-Germanic poet is asking two similar questions when they use these structures: What can be done with language besides what’s supposed to be done? What can I do with myself as a user of language?

When we consider the role of play, we do not cheapen kennings but rather illuminate additional advantages that they may have. Experimental linguistic play may have expanded the vocabulary of the languages in which it occurred, introducing terms like *hlaford* and *lichama* that are essentially kenning-like in nature, but seem to have become lexicalized within their respective languages[166]. This sort of play may also have prepared its users for the arrival of the written word and the various linguistic challenges it posed. Throughout *Tools of Literacy*, Guðrun Nordal explores the ways in which kennings (and skaldic verse more generally) were useful in the adaption of Icelandic culture into literate culture.[167] In a sense, however, preparation for the written word may have begun far earlier, in that poets were already experimenting with the expressive and abstractive capacity of their language. This was not “preparation” in any directed, teleological sense – rather, just as physical play gives other organisms the “combinatorial flexibility”[168] to adjust to unforeseeable physical circumstances, so linguistic play gives humans the capacity to adjust to unforeseeable

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[165] Miller, “Ends, Means, and Galumphing,” p. 96.
[166] Both of these words do not seem to enjoy kenning status any longer, cropping up incredibly frequently both in and out of poetry. However, they resemble kennings structurally – *hlaford* (“lord”) derives ultimately from *hlaf* + *weard* (“loaf-ward”) (*Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. “hlaford”), and *lichama* (“body”) derives from *lic* + *hama* (“body-clothing; body-skin”) (*Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. “lichama”).
[167] Guðrun Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).
[168] Miller, “Ends, Means, and Galumphing,” p. 96.

linguistic circumstances. These circumstances, in this case, turned out to be those of incipient literacy.

Play and its implications will be covered in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

1.7 - Data methodology

In its investigation of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, this dissertation will focus on their use in three languages: Old Norse, Old English, and Old Saxon. Comparing three languages will allow not only for a cross-linguistic analysis of these structures, but a cross-cultural one – the texts available to us in each language represent a range of performance contexts, as well as different degrees of societal literacy.

1.7.1 – Corpus selection

Old Norse is a crucial language for this dissertation because it demonstrates the kenning system at its most intricate. The scholarly attention that kennings have received has focused overwhelmingly on their use in Old Norse, and it is in Old Norse that MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy was first identified.[169] Within Old Norse, this dissertation focuses on skaldic verse. Skaldic verse (as opposed to Eddaic verse, the other main type of Old Norse poetry) is generally written by a named author (as opposed to the anonymous authorship of Eddaic poetry), concerns a specific historical event or figure (as opposed to the legendary content of most Eddaic poetry), and tends to be written in meters with tightly-controlled syllable counts (as opposed to the looser requirements of Eddaic poetry).[170] Crucially, skaldic poetry is also characterized by an unusually broad vocabulary,[171] and it is here that the systems of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy are at their densest and most intricate.

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[169] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," p. 21.
[170] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, pp. xvi-xvii.
[171] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. xl.

Skaldic verse offers a key advantage in addition to its concentration of figurative language. The tradition spans at least five centuries, with the earliest extant poems ascribed to the 9th century and the tradition continuing into the late 14th century.[172] This, in addition to the size of the surviving corpus, makes it the only poetic tradition where diachronic analysis of the kenning and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy is feasible. The earlier end of this time span is particularly interesting. Beginning with the verse of Bragi Boddason the Old, the earliest named skald, in the 9th century, we have roughly three centuries of skaldic composition that predate the 12th century, which is believed to be the point that skaldic poems were first put to parchment.[173] This means the earliest skaldic compositions contain some of the few surviving kennings that may have been created in a primary oral milieu. In the case of Bragi the Old, for example, we have a skald who was active in the mid to late 9th century in either Sweden or western Norway,[174] a period during which Christianization had only just, if at all, begun. In either case, the period certainly predates any significant clerical presence, and by extension, any significant spread of literacy. However, great care must be taken in the treatment of early skaldic poetry as "authentic". There is some evidence that the preserved verse is as old as claimed – scholars have pointed to lexical, phonological, and metrical factors that indicate earlier composition dates,[175] and verbatim oral repetition is an attested, if uncommon, phenomenon.[176] Even so, we must account for up to three centuries of oral transmission, not to mention subsequent textual transmission – although transcribed earlier, much early skaldic verse is available to us only in manuscripts dating

[172] Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*, p. 3.
[173] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. lxvi.
[174] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, pp. xxii-xxiii.
[175] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, pp. lxvii-lxvix.
[176] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 62-64.

from the 14th century or later.[177] Correspondingly, the earliest skaldic verse represents a valuable resource if taken with a grain of salt.

The skaldic corpus for this dissertation comprises five poems, all from the 9th and 10th centuries: Guthormr Sindri's *Hákonardrápa*,[178] Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa*,[179] Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson's *Hákonardrápa*,[180] Kormákr Ögmundarson's *Sigurðardrápa*,[181] and Bragi Boddason's *Þórr's fishing*.[182] All five poems are composed in the *dróttkvætt* verse. These specific texts were selected a) for their high density of kennings[183]; and b) to include poetry on both mythical and non-mythical subjects. For a detailed treatment of each individual poem, see their entries in the Skaldic Project (footnotes 159-163).

Within Old English, this dissertation focuses on *Beowulf*. Old English poetry is valuable in that it provides a middle ground between skaldic poetry, which preserves the kenning and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy systems at their most complex, and Old Saxon, which preserves only the smallest vestiges of the system. Kennings in Old English texts tend to comprise only two nouns, as opposed to the multipartite kennings found in Old Norse, and these nouns tend not to be of the mythological or legendary character.[184] There has been no scholarship identifying MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy in Old English poetry,

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[177] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. lxvii.
[178] Guthormr Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, ed. Russel Poole, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1 (Brepols, 2012).
[179] Eilífr Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, ed. Edith Marold, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 3 (Brepols, 2017).
[180] Hallfreðr Óttarsson, "Hákonardrápa," in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, ed. Kate Heslop, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017).
[181] Kormákr Ögmundarson, "Sigurðardrápa," in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, ed. Edith Marold, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017).
[182] Bragi Boddason, "Þórr's Fishing," in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017).
[183] My thanks to Tarrin Wills of the Skaldic Project for supplying me with data on the 9th- and 10th-century skaldic compositions with the highest numbers of kennings per line.
[184] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. xlviii.

but the process does seem to still be active in the category of BODIES OF WATER, where the process is at its most robust in skaldic verse.[185]

Beowulf may also represent a middle-ground in terms of the relationship between orality and literacy. Although there has been a great deal of dispute over the dating of its composition, with estimates ranging from the 7th to the 11th centuries, two points seem clear.[186] The first is that the poem stems, at least in part, from early medieval English oral tradition.[187] Evidence for this includes numerous parallels to other Germanic folkloric motifs,[188] the text's conformity to Germanic metrical rules,[189] and the existence of actual bodies of water in early medieval England named after the figure of *Grendel*.[190] The second is that the poem is, at least to some degree, a literate composition.[191] Evidence cited in favor of this includes the unity of style found throughout its 3182 lines,[192] which indicate a unified composition by a single, presumably literate poet, and the poem's obviously Christian influence,[193] which is often held to indicate a monastic (and correspondingly literate) context for the poem's composition. Even the earliest suggested dates put the poem at least a century after the advent of literacy in England,[194] and it even in the unlikely event that *Beowulf* represents a transcription of an oral performance by a non-literate scribe, the processes of textualization and patronage would inevitably have created an opportunity for editing and emendation.[195] Accordingly, the Old English *Beowulf* shows kennings and

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[185] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," p. 24.
[186] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. clxii.
[187] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. clxxxi.
[188] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. xxxvi.
[189] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf,* p. clix.
[190] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. clxxxi.
[191] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. clxxxiii.
[192] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. clxii.
[193] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. lxvii.
[194] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. clxii.
[195] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. clxxxiii.

MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy at something of a crossroads, a point where the oral tradition that created them is still very much alive, but increasingly coming to interact with a new, literate culture. The corpus for this project was drawn from the first 25 fitts of *Beowulf*, comprising ll. 1-1816.[196]

The final primary source for this dissertation is the Old Saxon *Hêliand*, which represents the kenning and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy systems in their most truncated forms. In terms of kennings, we see only the simple circumlocutory kennings, which use the two-noun structure of a kenning to designate something in literal terms[197] – an example might be the Old Saxon *godes sunu* ("son of God").[198] There are also possible vestiges of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy in, for example, the interchangeability of different alcoholic liquids in the *Hêliand*.

Of the primary sources considered, the *Hêliand* appears to be furthest removed from the primary-oral context in which kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy originated. The work is clearly intended to be performed orally for an audience steeped in Germanic oral culture (although the precise nature of that audience, whether clerical or laic, is disputed).[199] This is evidenced by its use of native Germanic metrical structure[200] and its preference for language drawn from pre-Christian Germanic culture.[201] However, despite its oral cant, the work's composition is highly literate.[202] The *Hêliand* is based not only on the gospels in general, a genre with a long literary history, but on a specific, pre-existing text,

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[196] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*.
[197] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. xlvi.
[198] James E Cathey, *Hêliand: Text and Commentary*, Medieval European Studies, II (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2002), p. 62.
[199] Cathey, *Hêliand: Text and Commentary*, p. 16.
[200] Cathey, *Hêliand: Text and Commentary*, p. 16.
[201] Cathey, *Hêliand: Text and Commentary*, p. 13.
[202] For a more extensive treatment of the literate and oral influences on the *Hêliand*, see Somers, Katerina. *How to Create an Early German Scriptus*. Open Germanic Linguistics 9. Berlin: Language Science Press, 2024, pp. 135-43.

the earlier *Tatian* gospel harmony.[203] In addition, the *Hêliand* was written in a monastery, perhaps Fulda,[204] putting its composition in a firmly literate context[205]. Correspondingly, the *Hêliand* may provide interesting insights into kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy as they were fading out of existence. This dissertation will use the *Hêliand* to investigate the forms of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy that survived the longest. Corpus data was drawn from a selection of excerpts, namely: The flight to Egypt and the massacre of the innocents (ll. 699-779), the appearance of John and Christ's baptism (ll. 859-1019), the commissioning of the twelve apostles (ll. 1121-1278), the wedding at Cana (ll. 1994-2087), Jesus calms the storm (ll. 2231-2283), the death of John (ll. 2698-2799), the feeding of the five-thousand (ll. 2799-2898), Jesus walks on water (ll. 2899-2973), judgement day (ll. 4294-4451), and the last supper (ll. 4628-4701).[206]

1.7.2 – Data gathering

In gathering data, I defined kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy as broadly as possible. A broad definition was important for two reasons. The first is that this dissertation takes a cross-linguistic approach and thus required a definition general enough to be consistently applied to the kennings used in Old Norse, Old English, and Old Saxon, which can be quite different from one another. The second is that any attempt to analyze or describe the kenning system inevitably runs into a certain circular logic – to define kennings, we need kenning data, and to gather kenning data, we need to define kennings. In order to

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[203] Cathey, *Hêliand: Text and Commentary*, p. 17.
[204] Cathey, *Hêliand: Text and Commentary*, p. 17, although see also J. Knight Bostock, *A Handbook on Old High German Literature* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 180, who concludes that it was likely composed at Werden on the Ruhr.
[205] With this said, Haferland has argued that the *Hêliand* was in fact a collaboration between a liturgically learned clergyman and an illiterate, Saxon poet (Harald Haferland, "Was the Heliand Poet Illiterate?," in *Perspectives on the Old Saxon Heliand*, trans. Pakis, Medieval European Studies, XII (West Virginia University Press, 2010), 167–207.).
[206] Otto Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, 9th ed., Altdeutsche Textbibliothek 4 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1984).

break out of this cycle, it is best to define kennings broadly to maximize data and then subsequently refine that definition of a kenning, rather than defining kennings narrowly and possibly discarding good data.

Rooted in Meissner's definition of a kenning as "a bipartite replacement for a noun from the standard vocabulary" (*ein zweigliedriger Ersatz für ein Substantivum der gewöhnlichen Rede*),[207] this study records as a kenning all expressions with the following two traits:

1. The expression is composed of two or more nouns, connected either via compounding or the genitive.
2. The meaning of the expression cannot be understood from the base word (i.e., the head) of the expression alone.

Some aspects of this definition are worth clarifying.

First and foremost, it should be noted that this is an operational definition for the purpose of data gathering, *not* this dissertation's ultimate definition of a kenning.

Second, this definition specifies that it is only nouns that may make up a kenning (although not in his brief definition above, Meissner makes the same stipulation in his text).[208] "Noun" is to be taken as broadly as possible – some kennings, for example, employ substantive present participles as their base words (e.g., *lindhæbbende*[209] ("linden-having ones") or *heaðoliðende*[210] ("battle-travelling ones"), both kennings for WARRIOR). This stipulation is made for practical reasons rather than theoretical ones – while the parallels between adjective-noun circumlocutions and kennings are worthy of more attention, their inclusion in the corpus would make it unworkably large.

Finally, the specification that "the meaning of the expression cannot be understood from the base word (i.e., the head) of the expression alone" is intended to exclude any phrases that would otherwise fit the definition, but do not actually seem to serve any

[207] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden,* p. 2.
[208] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, p. 3.
[209] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 245.
[210] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1798.

manner of circumlocutory or figurative function. An example of such a phrase can be found at ll. 381-384 of *Beowulf*:

> *Hine halig God*
> *for arstafum us onsende,*
> *to **West-Denum**, þæs ic wen hæbbe,*
> *wið Grendles gryre.*
>
> "Holy God, by his benevolence, has sent him to us, the **West-Danes**, as I would hope, against Grendel's horror."

There is no indication in the text that by *West-Denum* anything other than DANE is intended – indeed, elsewhere in the text they are characterized as "East-", "North-" and "South-Danes" without any clear variance in intended meaning. This is not necessarily to say that the inclusion of these different prefixes is simply an alliterative crutch – as Fulk et al. point out, the use of all four cardinal directions may be intended to underscore the breadth of the Dane's dominion.[211] However, a clear line can be drawn between *West-Denum* and even very simple kennings like the aforementioned *lindhæbbende* ("shield-having ones"). The sense of *West-Denum* is quite clearly DANE, or something close to it, whereas the sense of *lindhæbbende* cannot be taken simply as HAVER or HAVING ONE. The determinant, *lind* ("linden; shield"), is necessary to understand the full sense of WARRIOR. Judgements of this type are essentially semantic ones, and as such are to some extent subjective – accordingly, this dissertation errs on the side of inclusion when in doubt.

In recording instances of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, on the other hand, this study follows Sullivan's definition of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy as occurring "when the name of one category member is used to refer to another member of similar centrality within the category".[212] Under this definition, instances of ambiguity often arise when it is

[211] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, cxvi.
[212] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," p. 22.

unclear whether a word is being employed via MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy or some other form of metonymy. An example may be found at ll. 212-3 of *Beowulf*:

> ***Streamas*** *wundon*
> *sund wið sande.*
>
> "The **streams** eddied, the sea against the sand."

Here, it seems that *streamas* ("stream; current") stands in apposition to *sund* ("sea; water") and as such refers to the SEA. However, it is unclear whether this represents MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, with one BODY OF WATER (*stream,* "stream") standing in for another, or an instance of PART FOR WHOLE metonymy, with a part of the sea (*stream,* "current") standing in for the whole. As with the operational definition of kennings, this dissertation interprets MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy as broadly as possible so as not to prescriptively limit data.

1.8 – Conclusion

This chapter began with an introduction to the key themes of this dissertation, as well as a summary of the current definitions and conceptions of the kenning, as well as those of the adjacent structure of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy. Afterwards, it suggested three new frameworks that I apply to kennings in this dissertation. The first of these is Koch & Oesterreicher's framework of Language of Distance/Language of Proximity, which will be used to demonstrate how kennings fit into the oral context in which they were created and used. The second is the cognitive framework of metaphor and metonymy, as defined by Lakoff & Turner and Radden & Kövecses, respectively. This framework will be used to evaluate the underlying figurative structure of the kenning and to determine the actual characteristics of the kenning as a formula. The third is Stephen Miller's anthropological framework of play, which will be used to establish exactly why kennings were used and enjoyed by generations of early Germanic people. Finally, this chapter

presented the operational definitions, sources, and data methodology I used in the creation of cross-linguistic corpus of early Germanic kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy.

Broadly speaking, my intention here is to take an approach to the kenning that is cross-linguistic and cross-disciplinary, an approach that has not previously been taken to this structure. Discussions of the kenning tend to focus on its use in a single poetic tradition and tend also to reside firmly in the realm of philology, linguistics, or literary studies. These are all good approaches, but my desire here is to try something different.

The next chapter will establish that kennings are essentially *oral* structures, which emerged within and are characterized by oral culture. The following chapter will establish that kennings are *abstractive* structures, characterizable not by metaphor or metonymy or any specific poetic form, but rather by their ability to take a familiar concept and render it abstract and unfamiliar. The final chapter will establish that kennings are structures of *play*, motivated not only by mnemonic or formal demands, but rather by an essentially human need to experiment with available resources and to find pleasure in that experimentation. The dissertation will then end with some closing thoughts, as well as several suggested avenues of future research.

CHAPTER TWO – KENNINGS & ORALITY

2.1 – Introduction

This chapter considers kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy in their capacity as oral structures which emerged and were used in cultures that had little to no knowledge of the written word. In particular, it will consider how effectively the orthodox understanding of orality, as exemplified by Ong's *Orality and Literacy* and Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, can explicate kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy. The chapter will first present the ways in which kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy adhere to the characteristics of oral expression as they are generally understood from an Ongian perspective. Subsequently, it will challenge this theoretical framework by identifying several aspects of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy that appear to contradict it. Finally, this chapter will suggest a new framework for approaching kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy based on Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher's 1985 theory of "language of distance" (*Sprache der Distanz*) and "Language of Proximity" (*Sprache der Nähe*).[213] This framework suggests that kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy represent examples of language of distance (i.e., monologic, formal discourse) used in a heavily oral context. The apparent discrepancies between kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy and the general character of oral discourse are thus not atypical or unusual, as Ongian theories of orality would suggest, but rather a sort of compromise between the cognitive-linguistic demands of orality and the stylistic-pragmatic demands of language of distance.

[213] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz."

I want to underscore that the purpose of this chapter is not to evaluate whether or not kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy represent essentially oral structures – this fact is already well established (§1.4). Rather, the purpose of this chapter is to investigate the degree to which kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy actually conform to our expectations of poetic production in oral cultures and, more specifically, to consider the reasons for which they often *do not* conform to those expectations. In doing so, I hope to arrive at a fuller understanding of what role kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy play in the production of Old Saxon, Old English and Old Norse poetry, as well as to push back against a frequent assumption of scholarship on the subject of orality, namely that in an oral society, linguistic expression is driven primarily by mnemonic necessity, the need to express all information in a manner that is conducive to easy recall. Such theories[214] rest on an assumption of technological determinism, that the emergence of the technology of writing alters human societies in a universal and uniform manner. There are thus oral societies and there are literate societies – the former do things one way, and the latter do things another way. I hope to demonstrate here (and throughout this dissertation) that oral-poetic structures like kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy are more complicated than this, that they are not bloodless devices for the encapsulation and storage of information, made necessary by the absence of some "higher" technology. Rather, they emerge from a point of tension between a fundamentally human desire to express ideas in beautiful and surprising ways and the exigencies of orality, which demands different linguistic tools than we might be accustomed to.

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[214] I am thinking in particular of Ong's *Orality & Literacy*, as well as Lord and Parry's *Singer of Tales*, which takes a similarly totalizing view of oral art. In a more modern context, McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* also falls into this camp. See Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 1-14 for a good overview of different attitudes towards technological determinism.

2.2 – Orality and literacy as a spectral phenomenon

As noted above, an "oral" culture is a culture which has not developed or been exposed to the technology of writing. Such a culture thus faces greater difficulties in the preservation of information that literate ones, for the simple reason that without writing (i.e., a codified system to render linguistic information in a visual, rather than aural, format), a culture has a limited capacity to externalize information for later retrieval. Any information generated by such a culture must be remembered, or it is lost – there are no texts, reference works, transcripts, etc. to preserve that which has been said or learned.

Accordingly, such cultures make use of a range of techniques to render information mentally retrievable. As noted in the previous chapter, to retain information in such a culture, one must "think memorable thoughts"[215] – Ong continues:

> [...] you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions [...]"[216]

By fixing linguistic information in established patterns like those above, a speaker in an oral society is able to recall and repeat information again and again, thus preventing it from becoming lost. One of the clearest examples of this sort of patterned expression is oral poetry, like the alliterative verse in which kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy occur.

In *Orality and Literacy,* it is often unclear whether Ong regards orality and literacy as a binary distinction or a spectral phenomenon. At times he refers to a clear distinction between oral cultures and literate ones,[217] while at others he mentions that a culture can be

[215] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 34.
[216] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 34.
[217] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 1.

"fully literate"[218] or contain significant amounts of "oral residue,"[219] implying that a culture can exist on intermediary stages between the complete absence of writing in a primary oral culture and the near omnipresence of writing in, say, the modern U.S.A. While these two extremes do exist, it is more useful to regard orality and literacy as two poles on a spectrum, an approach championed by Ruth Finnegan, who rejects the binary distinction of "oral" and "literate" on the grounds that it leads us to "generalize before we have the detailed evidence,"[220] and by John Foley, who points out that poets tend to use what we regard as oral techniques of composition and expression well after the advent of writing.[221] The mere presence of writing within a society cannot dictate that that society is essentially "literate" in character, for the reason that innumerable cultural, social and economic factors affect the degree to which writing plays a role in any given culture. Under a binary distinction (sometimes referred to as the "Great Divide" theory)[222], we would be forced to regard 4th century Scandinavia (which sporadically used runes), recently contacted Amazonian tribes (who have only just been exposed to writing), and the modern U.S.A. (where digital literacy is in many ways usurping analog literacy) as essentially equivalent – all three have writing systems. Of course, the modes of thought and expression in all three cultures are drastically different from one another. These differences are due to many different causes and to simply designate all three cultures as "literate" obscures these differences rather than elucidating them.

The three corpora discussed in this dissertation (early Old Norse skaldic poetry, the Old English *Beowulf*, and the Old Saxon *Hêliand*) are all, in a binary sense, literate – indeed,

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[218] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 31.
[219] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 36.
[220] Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 145.
[221] Foley, *Immanent Art*, p. xv.
[222] Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 12.

these corpora are only accessible to us because they were preserved in written format. However, in a spectral sense, all three exist at different points between the two poles of primary orality and deeply entrenched literacy. The most "oral" of the three is likely the skaldic poetry – although generally preserved in written records from the 12th and 13th centuries, this dissertation draws from skaldic poetry composed in the 9th and 10th centuries, a period in which the Christianization of Scandinavia (and, correspondingly, the spread of Latinate literacy) was still in its infancy. It is difficult to gauge how closely the skaldic poetry attested in surviving manuscripts actually corresponds to the original compositions they purport to record, but it is possible that the unbelievably strict metrical and alliterative requirements of the *dróttkvætt* meter in which they were composed served to solidify these works, preventing the kind of drift often associated with long periods of oral transmission. Although early theories of oral transmission, especially the influential oral-formulaic theory of Lord and Parry,[223] generally asserted that verbatim repetition was impossible in oral cultures, more recent scholarship[224] has noted examples of verbatim oral repetition, in particular among cultures using hyper-intricate meters like the Old Norse *dróttkvætt*.[225] It is, of course, impossible to demonstrate that verbatim repetition occurred in the skaldic context, but the existence of verbatim repetition in contemporary oral cultures, as well as the numerous early Scandinavian portrayals of the composition and memorization of larger works,[226] suggests to us that there is a strong possibility that skaldic works could have been

[223] Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, p. 36.
[224] Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, pp. 86-109; and John William Johnson, "Orality, Literacy, and Somali Oral Poetry," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2006): pp. 119-36.
[225] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. lxxiv.
[226] Notable examples include the 61st chapter of Egil's Saga, in which Egill Skallagrímson composes the entirety of his *Höfuðlausn* ("head-ransom") in a single night, or poems such as the *Bergbúa þáttr* ("Tale of the Mountain Dweller"), in which a pair of travelers are forced to memorize a poem or face punishment.

transmitted over several centuries with very little distortion. Skaldic poetry also appears, in comparison to Old English and Old Saxon poetry, to have a far higher density of those aforementioned features (formulae, alliterative and rhythmic patterning, etc.) that appear to be associated with modes of oral performance.

The two other works from which I have drawn data, the Old English *Beowulf* and the Old Saxon *Hêliand*, exist closer to the literate end of the spectrum than skaldic verse, although both are still very close to the oral pole. Of the two, *Beowulf* is probably the more "oral" – while it is believed to be a literate composition,[227] and was certainly transcribed after the advent of Latinate literacy in the British Isles, it draws heavily on pre-Christian Germanic legends and tropes,[228] and is composed in Germanic alliterative meter. Accordingly, it appears to be a written work that was either a reworking or a retelling of a story (or, less likely, of a cluster of stories[229]) that had great currency in the earlier, oral Old English society. The Old Saxon *Hêliand*, on the other hand, does not deal with material from pre-Christian Germanic society, although it does take great pains to retell the Gospels using autochthonic Germanic themes and meter, in order to make the story appealing to the pagan Saxons.[230] The *Hêliand* is definitively a literate composition, and indeed appears to be based on the earlier Old High German gospel harmony of Tatian.[231]

Even the above rendering of these three corpora, which conceives of them as neatly ordered along a two-dimensional spectrum, is dangerously simplistic. The contexts of orality and literacy manifest themselves in innumerable ways, and exist in competition with

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[227] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. clxxxiii.
[228] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. xxxvi.
[229] See Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, pp. lxxxviii-xci for a discussion of the compositional unity of *Beowulf*.
[230] Cathey, *Hêliand: Text and Commentary*, pp. 12-15.
[231] Cathey, *Hêliand: Text and Commentary*, p. 17.

innumerable other factors, and to reduce them to a spectrum is barely a lesser injustice than to reduce them to a binary. Indeed, as we shall see, many of the aspects of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy that most seem to contradict our expectations of oral expression are found most frequently in skaldic verse, the corpus which appears to be the most "oral" of the three. Accordingly, my intent above is not to make any definitive statement about the degree of orality or literacy inherent in any of these three corpora – rather, I hope that the above description provides a very rough outline of these corpora with respect to their oral and literate influences in order to contextualize the following discussion of the ways in which kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy fit into paradigms of orality and literacy, as well as the ways in which they do not.

2.3 – Oral Features of Kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER Metonymy

Below, I have identified four traits of kennings and (to a lesser extent) MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy that correspond well to Ong's theory of orality and literacy. Those traits are 1) Repetition and Formulaicness; 2) Metric Embeddedness; 3) Concreteness; and 4) Redundancy and Copiousness. These aspects may be considered the "orthodox" view of such formulaic structures with respect to orality and are often cited (not necessarily in the same terms) in discussions of Ongian and oral-formulaic theory.

2.3.1 – Repetition and Formulaicness

One of the most apparent aspects of kennings that make them advantageous for an oral culture is their tendency towards repetition, specifically the repetition of formulae. As Ong notes, repetitions are an essential feature of oral expression, because the more frequently an idea or phrase is repeated, the more firmly it embeds itself in a culture, entrenching it against being forgotten.[232] Repetition most frequently takes the form of fixed

[232] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 34.

formulae, set phrases that carry some sort of important cultural knowledge, which are repeated again and again in a wide range of contexts and thus become a fundamental part of the lexical substrate in which any linguistic exchange occurs.[233] This tendency towards formulaic repetition in oral cultures often manifests itself as set epithets,[234] stock figures[235], and proverbs.[236] Even in heavily literate cultures, the ability of such repeated formulae to calcify linguistic information for repeated recall can be seen in the continued use of phrases like "champing at the bit." The verb "champ" has long since lost any currency, being completely usurped for most speakers by "chomp," and a significant number of speakers likely are not aware that a "bit" is a portion of a horse's harness. But even so, the phrase "champ at the bit" has endured as an employable idiom by virtue of its repetition and formulaic structure.

Kennings fit very much into the category of repeated formulae. This is most apparent in the *Hêliand*, where *viðkenningar* used in reference to the gospel's various figures are used again and again. JESUS, for example, is designated via kennings 62 times in my corpus – of these, 28 (45%) kennings are either *barn godes* ("child of God") or *godes barn* ("God's child"). If this tally is expanded to include essentially synonymous phrases (*godes sunu* ("God's son"); *drohtines sunu* ("the Lord's son"); *waldandes sunu* ("the Wielder's son"); *waldandes barn* ("the Wielder's child")), then such kinship designations comprise out of the 62 kennings for JESUS (73%). The remaining kennings for Christ consist of a series of other repeated phrases including *manno drohtin* ("lord of men," 2 occurrences), *thiodo drohtin* ("lord of the peoples," 3 occurrences), and *hebencuning* ("heaven-king," 6 occurrences).

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[233] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 35.
[234] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 39.
[235] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 39.
[236] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 35.

Within this corpus, the only JESUS kennings that do not occur more than once are the unusual *managoro mundboro* ("protector of the multitudes")[237], and *lamb godes* ("the lamb of God")[238], a term drawn from the Gospel of John that has the structure of a kenning. Interestingly, even when JESUS is referred to directly (i.e., without the use of kennings), the composer of the *Hêliand* still demonstrates a significant preference for formulae. Of the 200 odd references to JESUS that do use a proper name[239], the overwhelming majority also include some sort of formulaic epithet (e.g., *hêlag Krist* ("holy Christ"); *craftag Krist* ("mighty Christ"); *neriendo Krist* ("saving Christ")).[240] In nearly all of the few instances in which Christ is not referred to via a formula, his name is being used as a qualifier (e.g., *te fuoton Kristes* ("at the feet of Christ")).[241]

In the Old English and Old Norse corpora, a tendency towards formulaic repetition is also pronounced, although these poetic traditions tend to make greater use of variation, which varies the components of a kenning while still reflecting consistency of formula. In this dissertation's Old English corpus, for example, we see 20 kennings for BATTLE. Of these, 8 (40%) designate BATTLE in terms of a kind of "rush" or "pressure" – we see compounds like *heaþoræs* ("war-rush")[242], *mægenræs* ("might-rush")[243], *wælræs* ("slaughter-rush")[244] and *heaðowylm* ("war-whelm")[245]. A further 5 kennings refer to battle as a form of hate or fear – we see *ecghete* ("edge-hate")[246], *billa broga* ("sword-terror")[247] and *searonið*

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[237] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 2938.
[238] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 1131.
[239] *Krist* is much preferred to *Iêsus*, which is only used five times.
[240] Edward H Sehrt, *Vollständiges Wörterbuch zum Heliand und zur altsächsischen Genesis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1925), p. 732.
[241] Sehrt, *Vollständiges Wörterbuch zum Heliand und zur altsächsischen Genesis*, p. 733.
[242] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 557.
[243] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1519.
[244] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 824.
[245] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 82.
[246] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 84.
[247] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 583.

("gear-hate")[248]. A further 5 (25%) characterize battle as work or play (e.g., *lindplega* ("linden-play")[249]; *guðgeweorc* ("war-work")[250]). Similar patterns are apparent in the Old Norse corpus, where of 16 kennings, 7 (44%) designate BATTLE as noise or speech (e.g., *stala mal* ("speech of steel")[251]; *Valþagnar hlym* ("din of the receiver of the slain")[252]) and a further 5 (31%) designate BATTLE as a storm or shower (e.g., *geirveðr* ("spear-storm")[253]; *meilskur* ("arrow-shower")[254]). Although variation appears to be used in the Old English and Old Norse traditions to create kennings that are, at some level, novel, their underlying formulaic structure remains constant, and we see kennings that share the same figurative structure repeated again and again.

This repetition is also evident in the semantic categories in which kennings are active, which reflect concepts of primary concern to heroic (or in the case of the *Hêliand*, Christian) culture. Although the *Hêliand* corpus contains 35 discrete referents, 62 out of 166 kennings (37%) refer only to one of these referents, namely JESUS. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the Old English and Old Norse corpora. Of the 253 kennings in the *Beowulf* corpus that refer to something other than a proper noun,[255] 29 (11%) have LORD as their referent, a further 21 (8%) refer to WARRIORS, and another 20 (8%) refer to BATTLE. Despite the fact that there exist 85 (proper nouns excepted) separate kenning referents in the corpus, nearly a quarter of the actual kennings refer only to LORDS, WARRIORS and BATTLE, core concerns of a pre-Christian heroic society. This tendency is slightly less

[248] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 582.
[249] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1073.
[250] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 981.
[251] Óttarsson, "Hákonardrápa," s. 8, l. 4.
[252] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 6, l. 4.
[253] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 4, l. 4.
[254] Óttarsson, "Hákonardrápa," s. 2, l. 8.
[255] Proper nouns (e.g., BEOWULF, HIGELAC, HROÐGAR) were excepted from this tally because their incidence is determined primarily by the specific work in question (i.e., *Beowulf*), rather than general concepts of cultural importance.

pronounced in the Old Norse corpus, although still notable, with WARRIOR kennings accounting for 29 (11%) of the 259 kennings (proper nouns again excepted), and LORD and BATTLE kennings accounting for 13 (5%) and 14 (5%) of the total kennings, respectively.

There is a degree of circular logic here – if an oral culture is concerned primarily with heroic feats and the bonds between a LORD and his WARRIORS, then that culture compose poetry on those themes more frequently, and if there is more poetry on those themes, then there also exists more opportunities to create kennings on those themes. However, this logic is likely circular because the process of repetition in kennings itself represents a circular process in an oral culture. The more frequently kennings with a specific referent are repeated, the further that referent is reinforced in that culture's consciousness, which in turn conditions repeated composition on that subject, which then creates space for further relevant kennings. Thus, even in cases where kenning formulae are varied, or new kenning formulae are invented, the concentration of the kennings within certain culturally central semantic groupings allows an oral culture to reiterate, again and again, the societal importance of those groupings.

2.3.2 – Metric embeddedness

Also crucial for kennings' utility in an oral culture is their metric and alliterative potential, their ability to support the mnemonic need for "heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns" and "alliterations and assonances" noted by Ong.[256] Kennings are useful in this respect in two ways. First, many oft-repeated kennings serve as ready-made metric units that can be slotted in at need.[257] This is most readily apparent in the Old English and Old Saxon corpora, because their smallest compositional unit is the alliterating half-line, which

[256] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 34.
[257] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. cxiv.

can more readily be filled with a single kenning than the poetic lines of Old Norse *dróttkvætt* verse, which require specific rhyme schemes in addition to their alliterative requirements. Although there are many examples of this application of kennings, one of the most transparent are the various *viðkenningar* used in reference to BEOWULF. Within this dissertation's corpus, 19 references are made to BEOWULF via kenning, out of which he is referred to 6 times as *bearn Ecgþeowes* ("child of Ecgþeow"), 4 times as *mæg Higelaces* ("kinsman of Higelac"), and once as *sunu Ecgþeowes* ("son of Ecgþeow"). Each of these kennings scans as a Sievers D1 half-line, and all eleven kennings bear alliterative stress on their first word (*bearn*, *sunu* or *mæg*). The utility of such a system, which was described in great detail by Lord and Parry,[258] is readily apparent – with an internalized store of such metrically modular kennings, the Old English poet need only determine whether alliteration on an a "b" (as in *bearn*), "s" (as in *sunu*), or "m" (as in *mæg*) was necessary, before slotting in the appropriate half-line.

Independent of such modular formulae, kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy appear to have also been crucial for the oral poet by providing necessary metric flexibility. Metric and alliterative patterning is useful for recall, providing a set framework for linguistic expression, and mnemonically speaking, the stricter the meter the better. Instances of verbatim oral memorization are rare, but it is not coincidence that in those cases where it seems to occur or have occurred, it is in unusually strict meters like the Old Norse *dróttkvætt* or the Somali *gambay*.[259] Of course, the more strictures a verse form possesses, the more difficult it is to use – verse forms thus appear to evolve at a point of

[258] Lord, *The Singer of Tales*.
[259] John William Johnson, "Recent Contributions by Somalis and Somalists to the Study of Oral Literature," in *Selected Papers of the International Symposium, Somalia and the World* (Mogadishu, 1979), pp. 4-6.

tension between the need to be mnemonically useful and the need to be compositionally viable. Structures like kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy help to lessen this tension, by affording the oral poet more options to fulfil any given metric context. If a *hrafn* ("raven") does not alliterate, it is possible that a *gagl Hanga* ("gosling of the hanged")[260] will.

Metric context appears to be an extremely important factor in the use of kennings. Tarrin Wills, for example, uses the Skaldic Project database to demonstrate that Old Norse kenning use and complexity appears to increase in tandem with the complexity of the verse forms in which they are used.[261] This dissertation's data appears to support this conclusion in a comparison of Old Norse *dróttkvætt* to the less complex Old English and Old Saxon meter. The Old English corpus consists of 345 kennings found across 1816 lines of poetry (one kenning per 5.26 lines), while the Old Saxon corpus consists of 165 kennings found across 1046 lines (one kenning per 6.34 lines). The Old Norse data, on the other hand, shows 319 kennings across a mere 316 lines, with an average of roughly one kenning per poetic line. Across each individual corpus, the overwhelming majority of kennings appear to be fulfilling some sort of alliterative requirement (or, in the case of the *dróttkvætt*, rhyme or cadence requirement). Only 3 (1%) of the 345 Old English kennings do not contribute to alliteration, as compared to 8 (5%) out of 165 in the Old Saxon corpus. Only 10 (3%) out of 319 kennings in the Old Norse corpus contribute to neither alliteration, rhyme, nor the required cadence at the end of a poetic line. Similar rates are seen in the use of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy in all three corpora. Only 8 of 98 (8%) MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy instances do not contribute to alliteration in the Old English corpus, although the number is higher in the Old Saxon, with 12 out of 44 (27%) not alliterating. In the Old Norse,

[260] Óttarsson, "Hákonardrápa," s. 3, l. 2.
[261] Wills, "The Development of Skaldic Language," p. 1035.

11 out of 46 (24%) instances contribute to neither alliteration, rhyme, nor the line-ending cadence. Taken together, these numbers indicate that both kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy represented invaluable tools in the composition and performance of oral poetry, enabling poets to readily adapt any given semantic concept to a range of metric environments by altering the terms in which that semantic concept was referred to.

2.3.3 – Concreteness

A third valuable aspect of kennings in oral recollection is their tendency towards concreteness. Ong notes that oral cultures appear to prioritize minimally abstract expression,[262] preferring to render concepts verbally in terms of the familiar human lifeworld.[263] This is, to some extent, a universal human desire – Lakoff & Johnson note, for example, that a key cognitive advantage of metaphor appears to be that it allows us to conceptualize abstract concepts in concrete or sensorimotor terms (e.g., LOVE IS A JOURNEY, TIME IS MONEY)[264] and Radden & Kövecses note that a key principle of metonymy is a preference for concrete metonymic vehicles over abstract ones (we might refer to the U.S. EXECUTIVE BRANCH as *The White House*, but would not refer to the physical WHITE HOUSE as the *U.S. Executive Branch*).[265] However, this tendency appears more pronounced in oral cultures, where the impossibility of externalizing information via writing means that sustained abstract thought must be rooted in concrete associations and operational frames of reference.

Kennings display a marked tendency towards this concrete terminology, particularly in reference to abstract concepts. This is readily visible in Old English kennings like *sawele*

[262] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 49.
[263] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 42-3.
[264] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, p. 73.
[265] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy," p. 44.

hyrde (“the soul’s shepherd”)[266], which refers to the relatively abstract idea of CONSCIENCE, or *modes brecþ* (“breaking of spirit; thought”)[267], which designates GRIEF. In both situations, concrete metaphor is used to render intangible concepts or sensations in a manner readily accessible to an audience with a preference for physical concepts. A similar tendency is visible in the *Hêliand* poet’s attempt to effectively render the abstract Christian notion of SIN for a pagan, primarily oral audience. SIN is repeatedly rendered not as it is liturgically conceptualized, as an essential state of humanity or as inadherence to a set of divine laws, but rather as specific, damaging action – it is called *harmuuerc* (“harm-work”)[268], *firindadi* (“crime-deed”)[269], or *firinuuerc* (“crime-work”)[270]. Skaldic verse appears to refer to abstract concepts less frequently that the Old English or Old Saxon corpora, possibly due to its lower degree of literarization, or simply to its subject matter. However, POETRY, likely the most abstract concept designated in the skaldic corpus, is also framed in extremely concrete terms, generally with respect to the legend of the mead of poetry, which Odin steals from the giant Suttungr. Poetry is thus referred to in terms of a physical liquid or body of water, as the *dia fjörðr* (“ford of the gods”)[271], as *granstraumr Grimnis* (“moustache-stream of Grimnir [ODIN]”)[272], or as the *Syrar fentanna aurgreppa jastrin* (“yeast-Rhine of the mud-men of the Sýr of fen-teeth”)[273], an extremely complex kenning that still renders poetry in extremely physical terms. Examples such as those above demonstrate the ways in which the kenning structure, particularly those kennings that consist of condensed metaphor,

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[266] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, l. 1742.
[267] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, l. 171.
[268] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 1140.
[269] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 1141.
[270] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 4356.
[271] Ögmundarson, “Sigurðardrápa,” s. 3, l. 2.
[272] Goðrúnarson, “Þórsdrápa,” s. 3, l. 5.
[273] Ögmundarson, “Sigurðardrápa,” s. 1, l. 4.

allow the oral poet latitude to characterize abstract concepts in the concrete terms preferred by oral cultures.

2.3.4 – Redundancy and copiousness

A final valuable trait of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy for oral expression is that of redundancy. Redundancy is a crucial aspect of oral expression because of the transient nature of sound, which "exists only when it is going out of existence."[274] Unlike a written text, where a reader can revisit previous portions of a text at their leisure, if a segment of an utterance is missed or misunderstood, a listener is unable to revisit that lost portion. This issue can be partially mediated in oral exchanges like conversations, where an interlocutor can ask for repetition or clarification, but in a monologic oral context like that of poetry, redundancy is a crucial tool to ensure that an audience is following along – if a listener misses something the first time you say it, they will probably catch it the second time, and almost certainly by the third time. This variety of redundant repetition (or *copia*) was particularly encouraged by early rhetoricians, who recognized it as a fundamental tool in monologic oral performance.[275]

Kennings embody this redundancy both in their structure and in their use. Structurally speaking, the recursive nature of the kenning allows certain sub-kennings to be repeated within a larger kenning structure. This is most visible in skaldic verse, with its preference for kennings with multiple layers. The aforementioned *Syrar fentanna aurgreppa jastrin* ("yeast-Rhine of the mud-men of the Sýr of fen-teeth")[276] is a perfect example of this kind of structure. The sub-kenning *aurgreppa* ("mud-men")[277] refers to GIANTS, while the

[274] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 32.
[275] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 41.
[276] Ögmundarson, "Sigurðardrápa," s. 1, l. 4.
[277] Ögmundarson, "Sigurðardrápa," s. 1, l. 3.

sub-kenning *Sýrar fentanna* ("Sýr of the fen-teeth")[278] refers to a GIANTESS. These two kennings together comprise another sub-kenning, namely "GIANTS of the GIANTESS." The GIANTS of the GIANTESS are, unsurprisingly, GIANTS – the kenning is not useful because it expresses new information or provides a new way to conceptualize GIANTS, but rather because its redundant structure gives the audience multiple chances to recognize that GIANTS are being referred to and thus parse the larger kenning which follows the established POETRY kenning formula of "liquid of the giants/dwarves."

In the Old English and Old Saxon corpora, kennings are used to add redundancy to the poem not via their internal structure, but rather by way of their use in appositional structures, where they often crop up as near-synonyms or supplementary characterizations. It is no problem if, at l. 34 of *Beowulf*, a listener does not hear that Scyld was a *þeoden* ("lord"), because in l. 35 it is reiterated that he was a *beaga brytta* ("distributor of rings," a kenning for LORD)[279], and if it is not understood at l. 40 that his funerary ship was bedecked with *byrnum* ("byrnies"), then it may have been understood at l. 39 that it was filled with *heaðowædum* ("battle-garments")[280]. This intentional redundancy is even more prominent in MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, which often creates strings of near-synonymous terms in reference to categories like BODIES OF WATER, where this metonymic process is active. Consider ll. 541b-546a of *Beowulf*, in which the SEA is designated via MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy four separate times:

[278] Ögmundarson, "Sigurðardrápa," s. 1, l. 1.
[279] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 35.
[280] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 39.

No he wiht fram me
flodyþum feor fleotan meahte,
hraþor on **holme**, no ic fram him wolde,
ða wit ætsomne on **sæ** wæron
fifnihta fyrst, oþ þæt unc **flod** todraf,
wado weallende.

(He could in no way swim far from me in the **flood**-waves, swifter upon the **holm**, nor would I go from him. Then we two were together on the **sea** for five nights' time, until the **flood** drove us apart, the welling **fords**.)

Kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy are thus useful for the oral poet in that they give the poet an expanded vocabulary, one that allows them to be redundant while still varying their diction and accommodating a range of metric environments.

2.4 – Unexpected features of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy

In the previous section, I presented four key aspects of kennings (and, to a lesser extent, MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy) that make these structures useful for oral poetic expression, particularly as conceptualized by Ong. I want now to present several features of these structures that appear *unsuited* to primary oral expression. My intent here is to challenge the theories of Ong and Lord & Parry, which appear to take the necessity of oral recollection as the driving force behind the style and structure of oral poetry. Rather, I hope to demonstrate here that oral cultures, just like literate ones, do not mechanistically create art in the manner most suited to the media available to them, but rather push the boundaries of those media, experimenting with novel modes of expression that may not always gel perfectly with the linguistic resources available to them.

There are four key traits of the kenning and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy systems that appear to contradict the ostensible demands of orality. They are 1) Novelty; 2) Recursion; 3) Non-contiguity; and 4) Oblique Reference. Interestingly, these traits are most

in evidence in skaldic verse, the poetic tradition that seems, historically speaking, to have the greatest degree of oral character.

2.4.1 – Novelty

As noted in the previous section, kennings often demonstrate a repetitive bent, with different formulae repeated either word-for-word (as in the multiple occurrences of *godes barn* ("God's child") as a kenning for JESUS) or as variations on a set formula (as in the multiple kenning depictions of BATTLE as a "rush" or "pressure" in Old English, or as a "storm" in Old Norse). But while many kennings exhibit some degree of repetition, there also exists a significant number that appear to be entirely novel. The presence of such novel kennings goes against orthodox understanding of oral cultures, which are, per Ong, "highly traditional or conservative" to the extent that it "inhibits intellectual experimentation."[281] While oral cultures certainly exhibit conservatism in certain areas, such as the constant repetition and maintenance of fixed phrases like maxims and proverbs, the theory that effective "intellectual experimentation" is somehow essentially literate crumples on impact with the reality of kenning composition. In fact, the only corpus that appears, as far as I am able to determine, to exhibit no evidence of novel kenning structures is that of the *Hêliand,* which is also the work that seems to have been composed in the most literate environment.

In *Beowulf*, this kenning experimentation is best exemplified with respect to the portrayal of GRENDEL – he is portrayed as a *mearcstapa* ("march-stepper")[282], a *dædhata* ("deed-hater")[283], a *sceadugenga* ("shadow-goer")[284] and a *cwealmcuma* ("murder-visitor")[285].

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[281] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 41.
[282] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1348.
[283] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 275.
[284] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 703.
[285] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 792.

His fearsome claw is a *handsporu* ("hand-spur")[286] or a *beadufolm* ("battle-hand")[287]. Each of these kennings is a hapax, attested nowhere else in the Old English corpus, and although some of them do resemble other attested kennings, their reference to a figure like GRENDEL is novel. There is no other *mearcstapa* ("march-stepper") in the Old English corpus, but there are *hæþstapan* ("heath-steppers") – however, elsewhere in the corpus this figure refers to animals, either a stag or a wolf.[288]

It is more difficult to tabulate novel kennings in the skaldic corpus because skaldic kennings tend to be recursive, consisting of kennings-within-kennings, which makes a large proportion of the kenning corpus unique even if they consist of very familiar sub-kennings. However, a drive towards novel phrases is clearly exemplified in a cluster of kennings from the *Þórsdrápa* ("The Poem of Thor") that refer to a PIECE OF IRON, a kenning referent not listed in Meissner's catalogue.[289] In stanzas 16-19, which portray Thor's battle with the giant Geirrøðr, a red-hot PIECE OF IRON is hurled into Thor's mouth. Thor then removes this PIECE OF IRON with his hand and throws it with such force that it kills his assailant. The PIECE OF IRON is referred to by four kennings – it is a *segi tangar* ("morsel of tongs")[290], a *þang tangar* ("seaweed of tongs")[291], a *sylgr siu* ("swig of the spark")[292] and a *nest meina* ("provision of harm")[293]. These four kennings show formulaic repetition amongst themselves – all four designate the PIECE OF IRON using a word for food or drink ("morsel", "seaweed", "swig", "provision") as the base word. However, the fact that kennings for a PIECE OF IRON are

[286] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 986.
[287] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 990.
[288] *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. "hæþ-stapa," accessed August 21, 2024, https://doe.artsci.utoronto.ca/.
[289] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*.
[290] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 16, l. 6.
[291] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 17, l. 2.
[292] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 18, l. 3.
[293] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 19, l. 8.

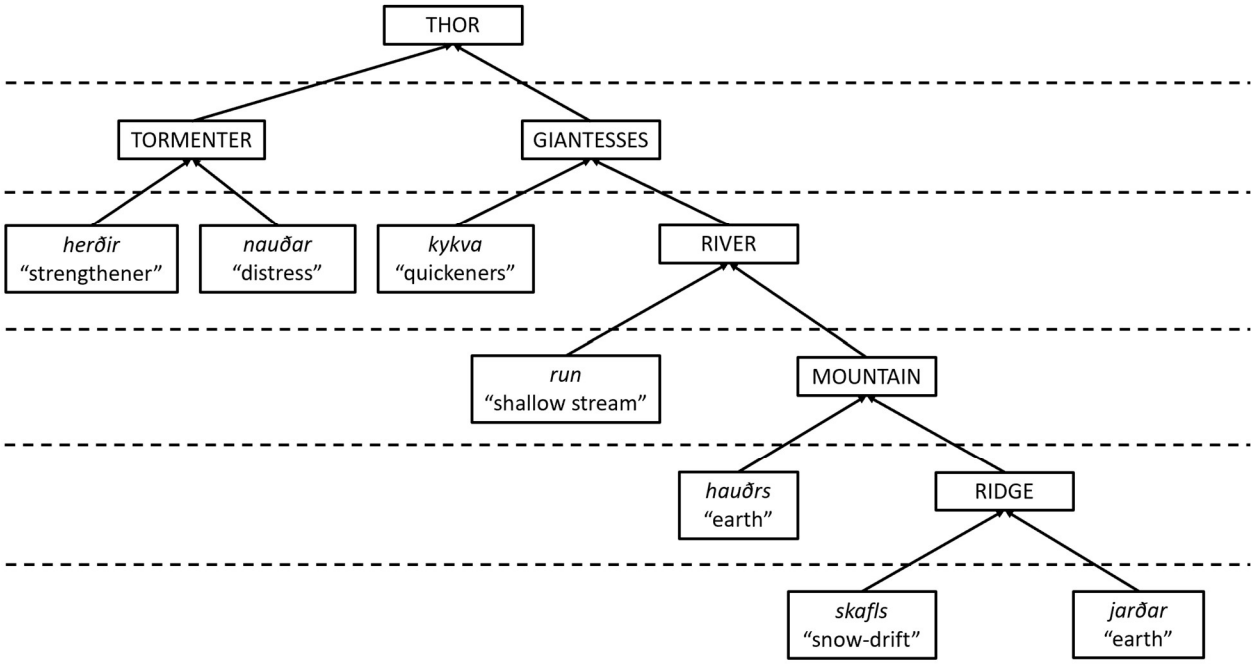
unattested outside of this poem indicate that somebody, whether the author of this poem (Eilífr Goðrúnarson) or an earlier skald, saw fit to create an entirely novel kenning category for the purpose of this poem. That such a category was ever created challenges not only the notion that oral cultures shy away from experimentation, but also the usual conception of the skaldic kenning as a manifestation of an underlying fixed system, from which new terms are generated only via variation of preexisting formulae.

2.4.2 – Recursion

One of the most befuddling aspects of kennings, at least for the modern student, is their recursive structure. As noted in the previous chapter, a kenning consists of a base word and a determinant, both of which are nouns, and which together designate a referent, which is also nominal. Accordingly, the determinant or base word of a kenning can itself be a sub-kenning, which in turn can be constituted of further sub-kennings, and so on and so forth. This recursive process rapidly creates kennings that exert a remarkable interpretive demand on the listener, who must successfully interpret each sub-kenning before the kenning entire can be parsed. This process is most marked in skaldic verse, which takes full advantage of kennings' recursive potential. In my Old English and Old Saxon corpora, there are only isolated instances of kennings that display recursion (6 in the Old English, 4 in the Old Saxon), a result that aligns broadly with current scholarship on the role of recursion in these two languages.

The presence of extensive recursion contradicts two key tenets of Ong's characterization of oral cultures, namely their preference for syntactic addition rather than subordination, and their preference for aggregative rather than analytic structures. Consider the skaldic *herðir hauðrs runkykva nauðar jarðar skafls* ("The increaser of misfortune of the

quickeners of the stream of the land of the snow-drift of the earth")[294], a kenning that refers to THOR, diagrammed below:



Ong states that oral societies tend to avoid subordinative syntactic structures, preferring instead additive modes of syntactic organization like polysyndeton, arguing that subordination becomes desirable only with the increased development of more "elaborate" grammar that writing enables.[295] However, kennings like the above example, in which nearly every noun phrase is nested within another, are dizzyingly subordinative, to the extent that it strikes us, members of a highly literate society, as obtuse and confusing. Just as subordinate clauses must themselves be interpreted before the entirety of a sentence can be understood, each subordinated kenning must be processed for the kenning as a whole to make sense. Ong also claims that oral cultures are aggregative rather than analytic,

[294] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 9, l. 5.
[295] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 37-8.

preferring to cluster phrases or concepts together rather than to take phrases or concepts apart. He cites certain stock phrases ("wise Nestor", "clever Odysseus", "capitalist war-mongers") as examples of this tendency.[296] But recursive kennings like the above example require an incredible degree of analysis - without analyzing the kenning, breaking it down into its component parts, it would be impossible to either compose or understand such a structure. It cannot be simply taken as a whole, as a single fixed unit, as Ong's aggregative phrases can. Indeed, the entire process of kenning variation, whereby individual base words or determinants are swapped out for analogous terms, suggests that both performers and audiences were intimately aware with the kenning as an analytic structure, one that is composed of separate parts that can be individually considered and altered.

2.4.3 – Syntactic Non-Contiguity

A third aspect of kennings that renders them problematic for oral expression and recall is their tendency to be broken up within a sentence, with the individual nouns that make up a kenning phrase being separated from one another, sometimes by individual words, sometimes by entire phrases. This feature is apparent only in skaldic kennings. Consider the first stanza of Guthormr Sindri's *Hákonardrápa* ("The Poem of Hákon"), in which the kennings are bolded:

[296] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 38-9.

Bifr**auknum** trað **bekkjar**
bláröst konungr órum;
mætr hlóð mildingr Jótum
Mistar vífs í **drífu**.
Svangœðir rak síðan
sótt Jalfaðar flótta
– **hrót Giljaðar** hylja –
hrafnvíns at mun sínum.

(The king trod the blue trail in
shuddering **draught animals of the rowing-bench** with oars; the
excellent generous one heaped up the
Jótar in the **snow-storm of the woman of Mist**. The **benefactor of the swan of raven-wine** then pursued those who
fled with the **illness of Jölfuðr** at his pleasure; **the roofs of Giljaðr** conceal [them].)[297]

There are five kennings in the above stanza (although two consist of several subkennings). Of these, two are entirely contiguous: *sótt Jalfaðar* ("the illness of Jölfuðr", i.e. SPEAR)[298] and *hrót Giljaðar* ("roof of Giljaðr", i.e. SHIELD)[299]. A further two are largely contiguous, with only a single word standing between the various kenning components. The first line contains the kenning *rauknum bekkjar* ("draught animals of the rowing-bench", i.e. SHIPS)[300], although the verb *trað* ("trod") is interpolated between the determinant and base-word. A more syntactically faithful translation of the first two lines would then read "In the shuddering **draught-animals** trod **of the rowing-bench** the blue trail the king with oars." In the fourth line, the kenning *mistar vífs drífa* ("the snow-storm of the woman of mist", i.e. BATTLE)[301] is non-contiguous as well, with the determinant sub-kenning *mistar vífs* ("woman of the mist" [VALKYRIE])[302] separated from its base-word, *drífu* ("snow-storm") by the preposition *í* ("in"). The third and fourth lines, with no syntactic adjustment, then read "The excellent one heaped the generous one the Jótar **of the mist of the woman** in **the snow-storm.**"

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[297] Translation drawn from Whaley, *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, p. 157.
[298] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 6.
[299] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 7.
[300] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 1.
[301] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 4.
[302] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 4.

These two non-contiguous kennings strike us as relatively unwieldy, but may still be parsed with relatively little effort. However, the final kenning of the stanza is broken up to such an extent that it is difficult for us to imagine how it could be interpreted by any audience. The kenning is *svangœðir hrafnvins* ("benefactor of the swan of raven-wine", i.e. WARRIOR)[303], and is separated by two entire poetic lines, which themselves contain two kennings. A more syntactically faithful translation runs:

Svangœðir rak síðan	(The **benefactor of the swan** pursued
sótt Jalfaðar flótta	then those who fled with the illness of
– hrót Giljaðar hylja –	Jölfuðr; the roofs of Giljaðr conceal
hrafnvíns at mun sínum.	[them], **of raven-wine** at his pleasure.)

The kenning *hrafnvin* ("raven-wine" [BLOOD])[304] is in l. 8 of the stanza, despite the fact that it serves as the determinant for the base-word *svanr* ("swan of BLOOD" [RAVEN])[305], which is positioned at l. 5. The kenning's overall meaning ("benefactor of the RAVEN" [WARRIOR]) can thus not be interpreted until three poetic lines after the kenning actually begins.

The interpretation of non-contiguous complex kennings like those above are difficult even in a literate context – it is on account of syntactic "irregularities" like those above that the first step in the translation of skaldic poetry is often to reformulate the entire poem into "prose order," so that kennings can be more easily be parsed. But even without the support of prose reordering, literate interpretation is feasible. As Ong notes in his discussion of oral redundancy, a reader is able to "backloop"[306] – they can reach the end of the stanza, find the missing determinant, and then reread from the kenning's base-word, now equipped with the knowledge of what the overall kenning means. This is not possible for an oral audience – by

[303] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 5.
[304] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 8.
[305] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 5.
[306] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 39.

the time a skald has uttered the stanza's final line, the kenning's base-word and its sentential context is gone.

With this said, it is difficult for us to say how much of an obstacle such orderings would have posed to a contemporary oral audience. While we may have our own well-established theoretical conceptions of how kennings were created and processed, we lack the practical familiarity that kenning audiences would have had with the structure, which may have made the process of interpreting non-contiguous kennings far simpler than it seems to us. It should also be noted that discontinuous constituents do occur frequently in language – what is remarkable about the non-contiguous nature of kenning constituents is not *that* it occurs, but that it occurs so *frequently*, at least in skaldic verse – within this dissertation's corpus, a staggering 105 (33%) out of 319 kennings are non-contiguous, with at least one word standing between the base-word and determinant. This process does *not* occur in Old English or Old Saxon kennings. If, as Tarrin Wills argues, unusual syntax of this type is employed in order to accommodate the unusually complex metrical constraints of skaldic verse,[307] this could represent an interesting compromise – the mnemonic advantages of rigorous meter may have outweighed the potential disadvantages of unusual word-order.

2.4.4 – Oblique Reference

A final unexpected trait of oral expression is the reference to certain concrete entities in oblique terms. By "oblique" I mean any form of reference that requires some form of active analysis or interpretation. In many cases, the analysis required to interpret a kenning is significant, such as when THOR is referred to as the *hneitir fjalfrs alfheims bliku*

[307] Wills, "The Development of Skaldic Language," p. 1035.

kalfa (“defeater of the calves of the hiding place of the gleam of the elf-world”)[308], a four-layer kenning that uses metaphor, metonymy and circumlocution to express its referent. In other cases, this “oblique” reference may be literal and relatively straightforward, such as when HROÐGAR is referred to as *sunu Healfdenes* (“Halfdan’s son”).[309] This form of oblique reference is a fundamental aspect of kennings, which per definition use two (or more) words to refer to another unspoken concept (§1.2.2).

Although oblique reference is essential to all kennings, it is especially apparent in the adjacent structure of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, which occurs both within kennings and in the simplex. MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy often designates familiar things using words that are semantically adjacent to the target concept but are not specifically “accurate”. Simplex examples occur most frequently in the Old English corpus, where the SEA is referred to as a *ford* (“ford”)[310] or *wæd* (“ford”)[311], and terms for different kinds of ALCOHOL are used interchangeably. This tendency is present in the Old Norse and Old Saxon corpora as well, although it is less pronounced. However, all corpora exhibit non-simplex examples, where such oblique metonymic reference occurs within a kenning (e.g., *floðrif* [“flood-rib”] for STONE, which uses MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy of BODIES OF WATER to denote the SEA via the word “flood”).[312]

The use of oblique terminology contradicts Ong’s assertion that oral cultures prefer to use concepts in “situational, operational frames of reference”[313] and try to avoid categorical semantic concepts like TOOLS or CIRCLES.[314] The use of MEMBER FOR MEMBER

[308] Goðrúnarson, “Þórsdrápa,” s. 21, l. 1.
[309] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, l. 1699.
[310] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, l. 568.
[311] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, ll. 508, 546, 581.
[312] Goðrúnarson, “Þórsdrápa,” s. 13, l. 6.
[313] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 49.
[314] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 51.

metonymy is thus surprising, because it consists of the intentional use of one member of a semantic category to refer to another member of that same category – within the MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy system, *ford* is a feasible vehicle for SEA only because both poet and audience understand that both FORDS and SEAS fall into the semantic category of BODIES OF WATER, exactly the sort of abstract categorization that Ong suggests oral cultures attempt to avoid.

The use of oblique reference can be taken as a necessary sacrifice in many cases, particularly in kennings. NIGHT is not literally a *scaduhelm* ("helm of shadows")[315], but the phrase has clear oral utility. It creates required alliteration on /sc/ and helps the half-line scan as a Sievers E-type, enabling the kind of alliterative and metric patterning Ong suggests is necessary in oral expression.[316] Additionally, it establishes a formula, which also seem to be useful in oral recall.[317] Finally, although the designation is non-literal, it is indicates its referent (NIGHT) via metaphor, an analogic process – it thus engages in Ong's operational frames of reference because an audience knows what a HELM is and how it works, and thus can easily draw a connection between the way a HELM covers a head and the way NIGHT covers the land.

These advantages are not always present in uses of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, particularly in instances of alliteratively unmotivated MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy. An example is found in ll. 565-569 of *Beowulf*:

> Ac on mergenne mecum wunde
> be yðlafe uppe lægon,
> sweordum aswefede, þæt syþðan na
> ymb brontne **ford** brimliðende
> lade ne letton.

[315] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 650.
[316] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 34.
[317] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 36.

> (Instead, in the morning, wounded by swords, they lay upon the wave-leavings, put to sleep by swords, that since, none hindered the journey of sea-farers around the high **sea**.)

Here, the word *ford* is used metonymically to designate the SEA. It does not, however, contribute to the line's alliteration on /b/, and although the half-line requires a stressed final syllable to scan as a Sievers B-type, there exist multiple terms that refer specifically to the SEA that could fulfil this requirement, not least the word *sæ* ("sea"). Furthermore, *ford* does not stand in apposition to any other word for SEA, so the usage does not contribute to an oral desire for redundancy either. The word *ford* can be used to designate the SEA only because of the recognition that FORDS, like SEAS, are members of the same abstract category, in apparent contradiction to those traits that Ong suggests are central to oral expression. Non-alliterating use of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy is not common, given that nouns generally bear alliterative stress, but examples exist not only in the Old English corpus, but also in the Old Saxon and Old Norse, where the SEA is often designated as a "river." Of course, this is not to say that the use of *ford* in the above passage is unmotivated – rather, it indicates the usefulness of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy as a poetic tool. A FORD is a body of water that can be easily traversed, and by referring to the SEA as a *ford*, the *Beowulf* poet overlays this quality of a FORD onto the SEA, implying that Beowulf's eradication of the sea monsters makes the SEA ford-like, in that it can now be easily traversed by seafarers. MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy thus allows a poet not only metrical flexibility, but semantic flexibility as well.

2.5 – Kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy as oral language of distance

In the preceding sections, we have looked at several aspects of kennings (and, less frequently, of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy) that either align with or seem to contradict theories of orality, as put forth by Walter Ong. In some ways, kennings and MEMBER FOR

MEMBER metonymy are well suited to our conceptions of oral expression, where recall is key. They are repetitive and formulaic, contributing towards the establishment of fixed, memorable phrases. They contribute to poetic meter, giving a performer the ability to compose and recite off-the-cuff. They are extremely concrete, which links them to the human lifeworld and makes them more cognitively salient. Finally, they tend towards redundancy and copiousness, which allows audiences to pick up the sense of a performance even if they miss certain words or phrases.

While these attributes are in line with expectations of orality, we also see traits that seem to contradict those expectations. Kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy instances are frequently novel, which undercuts their mnemonic value as repetitive structures. Kennings are also recursive structures, a subordinative tendency out of line with the ostensibly oral preference for aggregative structures. They are also sometimes non-contiguous, which makes them difficult to parse when uttered. Beyond kennings, MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy tends to refer to familiar concepts obliquely and non-literally, which pulls poetry further from the human lifeworld Ong suggests is crucial to oral expression. Interestingly, these orally "problematic" traits are unusually pronounced in the skaldic corpus, a genre produced in a more oral societal context than that of the Old English or Old Saxon corpora.

At first glance, these two groups of traits seem to contradict one another in the context of orality. However, the relation between them is not one of contradiction, but rather of tension. Kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy are influenced on the one hand by their societal context – they are linguistic structures within an oral society, where patterning of discourse is important for ensuring recall. But on the other hand, kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy are *poetic* structures – they belong to a formalized,

performative genre of expression, which has different demands and purposes from quotidian discourse. This tension, which exists between the exigencies of oral expression and the demands of formalized discourse, is best understood using Koch & Oesterreicher's 1985 framework of *Sprache der Nähe* ("language of proximity") and *Sprache der Distanz* ("language of distance"). This framework gives us the tools to not only identify where these stress points exist, but also to suggest potential reasons for these stress points, which will be treated in the subsequent chapters.

2.5.1 – Language of proximity and distance

Koch and Oesterreicher's framework highlights two main types of language, which are represented as poles on a spectrum. At the one pole is the kind of language generally associated with writing, which includes examples such as news articles or legal documentation.[318] At the other pole is the kind of language associated with speech, which includes examples such as an intimate discussion or small talk.[319] Language closer to the "spoken" (*gesprochen*) pole tends to be characterized by factors such as spontaneity, physical proximity of interlocutors, dialogue, and freedom of topic, while language closer to the "written" (*geschrieben*) pole is often planned in advance, conducted at distance, monologic, and focused on a single theme.[320] These conditions, in turn, lead to certain verbalization strategies (*Versprachlingungsstrategien*) which are associated with each pole. For instance, Koch and Oesterreicher characterize "spoken" language as using a smaller lexicon, coordinative placement of ideas, and repetition, whereas "written" language tends to exhibit a larger lexicon, subordinative placement of ideas, and less repetition.[321]

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[318] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 18.
[319] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 18.
[320] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 23
[321] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 27.

Characterizing these two language types as “written” and “spoken” is misleading, given that typically “written” language can be spoken and vice versa. A conference presentation is spoken out loud but is also characterized by an extremely “written” style of discourse, whereas two friends chatting via text message are engaged in a textual exchange but will exhibit typically “spoken” language. Accordingly, Koch and Oesterreicher designate the “written” and “spoken” poles as “language of distance” (*Sprache der Distanz*) and “language of proximity” (*Sprache der Nähe*), respectively.[322] Language of either type may be either phonic (spoken) or graphic (written). Koch and Oesterreicher represent this framework using the following schema (which translates *Sprache der Nähe* as “language of immediacy” instead of “language of proximity”):[323]

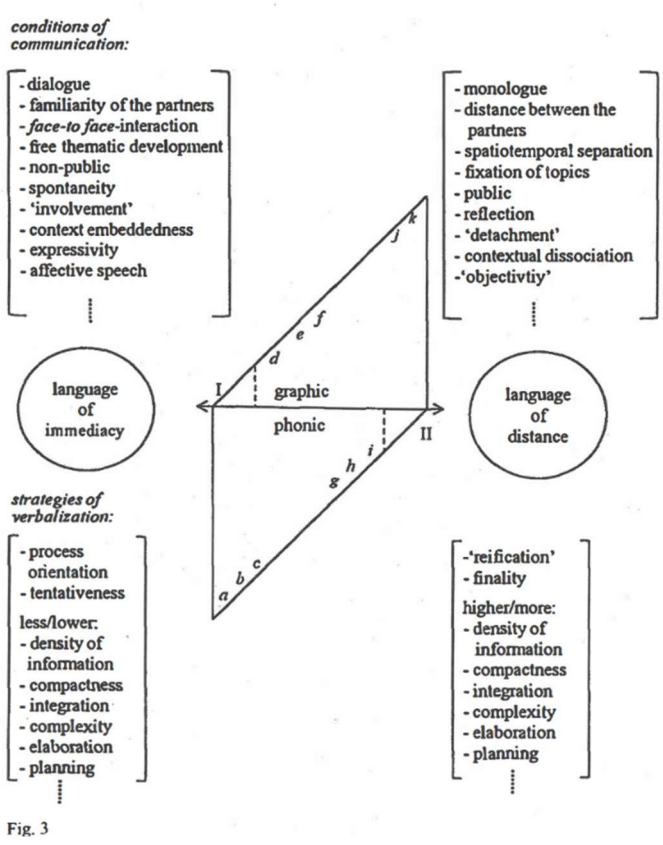

Fig. 3

[322] Koch and Oesterreicher, “Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz,” p. 19.
[323] English translation reprinted from Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher, “Language of Immediacy - language of distance: Orality and Literacy from the Perspective of Language Theory and Linguistic History,” in *Communicative Spaces* (Peter Lang, 2013), p. 450.

While the advantages of this framework in approaching kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy will be discussed below, one benefit is worth noting immediately. Koch and Oesterreicher's model considers linguistic output along two dimensions. One of these dimensions is binary – language may be expressed either phonically (spoken) or graphically (written), but not both.[324] The other dimension is spectral – language may display features tendentially associated with dialogic, informal discourse (language of proximity) or with monologic, formalized expression (language of distance). It may also display innumerable combinations and degrees of these features. From a theoretical perspective, this approach offers a clear advantage over an Ongian viewpoint. By decoupling language of distance and proximity from the graphic and phonic modes (respectively), and by presenting a spectral model of language (rather than Ong's totalizing division of societies and their linguistic output into the mutually exclusive categories "oral" and "literate"), Koch and Oesterreicher's model alerts us to the existence of different genres of linguistic expression, genres that exist in both oral and literate societies. Koch and Oesterreicher suggest several genres typical of primary-oral societies, including daily conversation (*Alltagsgespräch*), narration (*Erzählung*), riddles (*Rätsel*) and legal formulae (*Rechtsformeln*).[325] Each of these is subject to a different set of cultural and aesthetic demands and thus exists at a different point between the poles of proximity and distance. Koch and Oesterreicher's framework thus allows for a more holistic understanding of linguistic expression, one that considers the cultural, aesthetic and pragmatic demands of different kinds of language, rather than just the graphic/phonic divide that Ong presents as definitive.

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[324] Naturally, this binary ought to be slightly expanded to include visual (e.g., sign language) and tactile (e.g. *Normen*; tactile signing; braille) modes of expression, but for ease of reference to the source literature I have maintained the phonic-graphic distinction here.
[325] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 29.

2.5.2 – Orality and language of distance

Under Koch and Oesterreicher's schema, kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy are best understood as representative of language of distance within an oral context. Accordingly, they are subject to conditions of communication (*Kommunikationsbedingungen*) drawn from the poles of both distance and proximity. It is proximate in that it occurs face-to-face, is emotionally involved, and takes for granted an audience with shared cultural knowledge and expectations. On the side of distance, oral poetry is generally performed publicly, rather than in private, and is essentially monologic in nature. It also tends to exhibit fixity of theme, focusing on a single subject. In yet other respects, oral poetry is neither particularly proximate nor distanced. Koch and Oesterreicher note "expressivity" and "affectivity" as characteristic of proximate language, with "objectivity" as typical of distanced language.[326] Oral poetry fits cleanly into neither category. It seems sensible to assume that most oral poetry, which generally describes historical or mythical subjects, would exhibit less emotional involvement than, say, a conversation between friends, but oral poetry certainly isn't "objective." Koch and Oesterreicher also note that proximate communication is contextually embedded (*Situationsverschränkt*), in that it occurs within a shared physical context, while distanced communication is contextually dissociated *(Situationsentbunden)*, in that the audience of a text will generally read it in a different context from that in which it was written.[327] Oral poetry is performed in person, which lends it a certain degree of shared context, but its themes generally have relatively little to do with the physical context of the performance.[328]

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[326] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 23.
[327] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 20.
[328] A key exception to this would be praise poetry, which would likely have been performed before a lord or patron.

Given that the communication conditions of oral poetry sit at a midpoint between language of distance and language of proximity, it is unsurprising that kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy seem to exhibit characteristics (or "verbalization strategies") of both modes of expression. Koch and Oesterreicher note that language of distance is distinguished by greater information density (*Informationsdichte*), compactness (*Kompaktheit*), integration (*Integration*), complexity (*Komplexität*) and elaboration (*Elaboriertheit*), while language of proximity is characterized by a lesser degree of these characteristics.[329] These terms leave something to be desired – they are thinly defined and difficult to operationalize (when determining "information density", for example, how does one quantify how much information is in a text?). However, Koch and Oesterreicher do clarify some of the grammatical/lexical features associated with these qualities, noting that language of proximity is marked by syntactically coordinative constructions, lexical "poverty" (*Armut*) in most semantic fields, a higher tendency towards expressive formulations (e.g., hyperbole, coarse language), and a tendency to use *passe-partout* words (terms like "thing" or "whatchamacallit" that function as meta-syntactic variables, capable of replacing any given referent).[330] Language of distance, conversely, is characterized by a larger lexicon, syntactically subordinative constructions, as well as fewer expressive formulations and *passe-partout* words. Ágel and Hennig, who attempt to further operationalize and define the verbalization strategies noted by Koch and Oesterreicher, mention several other attributes that characterize the languages of distance and proximity. In particular, they note that language of distance is distinguished by "well-formed" (*wohlgeformte*) structures, lack of repetition, and integrative clarification (i.e., the use of

[329] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 23.
[330] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 27.

subordinate structures to clarify meaning). Language of proximity, on the other hand, is marked by repetitive phrasing, "ill-formed" structures, and aggregative clarification (i.e., the clarification of meaning via additional synonyms and descriptors).[331]

Three further attributes of language of distance/proximity are particularly interesting in an oral context. Koch and Oesterreicher state that as a result of characteristics like monologue and fixity of theme, language of distance tends to be heavily planned[332] - the absence of interlocutor and the foreknowledge of the topic make this possible, unlike in language of proximity. Koch and Oesterreicher also suggest that language of distance is distinguished by a greater degree of "reification" (*Verdinglichung*) and "finality" (*Endgültigkeit*)[333] – that is to say, language of distance tends to produce language we are more inclined to think of as an immutable, definitive "text", while language of proximity does not. These notions interact with orality in interesting ways. Oral-formulaic theory, as espoused by Lord and Parry and Ong, would suggest that oral performance of this type cannot be planned in advance (although, in their years of practice, an oral poet has certainly *prepared*).[334] Absent the written word, language of distance also cannot be reified (i.e., turned into a physical, lasting object) the way it can in a literate society, and as such cannot achieve the degree of finality that literacy enables – each oral performance, even on the same theme, thus remains as transient as any oral utterance, although certain pieces of that performance (formulae, metrics, etc.) may have some degree of permanence. However, as

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[331] Vilmos Ágel and Mathilde Hennig, "Überlegungen Zur Theorie Und Praxis Des Nähe- Und Distanzsprechens," in *Zugänge Zur Grammatik Der Gesprochenen Sprache*, ed. Vilmos Ágel and Mathilde Hennig (De Gruyter, 2006), p. 191. The terminology "well-" and "ill-formed" is less than ideal, based as it is on the prescriptive conceptions of grammaticality that emerge only from a literate understanding of language. However, the observation that language of distance is generally more prescriptively "well-formed" than language of proximity does appear to be accurate.
[332] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 21.
[333] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 23.
[334] Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, pp. 21-6.

pointed out by Finnegan and Johnson, there exist examples of oral performance that *do* appear to manifest planning and finality, perhaps not to the extent that literate societies might conceptualize it, but of a far greater degree than oral-formulaic theory would suggest. Traditional Somali poetry, for instance, is composed in advance without recourse to writing, and exhibits a remarkably low degree of variance across performances.[335] Skaldic poetry may also be characterized by pre-planning and memorization – there are certainly contemporary accounts of skalds composing and memorizing their own poems, and the skaldic meters, unlike those of Old English or Saxon poetry, parallel the hyper-complexity of those traditional Somali meters used for verbatim recall.[336] In such highly-planned performance contexts, a poem would have a degree of finality far closer to that of a written text, existing as finished product in the mind of the performer, if not in physical space. The degree of planning (and concomitant reification and finality) in skaldic verse is difficult to judge and an indisputable answer is, in all likelihood, impossible. However, the possibility of planned and finalized oral poetry in the skaldic context, as opposed to in the Old English and Saxon context, could illuminate the unusual prevalence of Old Norse kenning features that seem incompatible with Ongian conceptions of orality, but do closely align with Koch and Oesterreicher's conceptions of language of distance.

Defined by the above verbalization strategies, language of neither distance nor proximity adequately describes kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy – rather, they exist at a midpoint on the spectrum between the two. As noted above, kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy are distinguished by redundancy and copiousness. This

[335] Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, pp. 101-2; Johnson, "Orality, Literacy, and Somali Oral Poetry," p. 133.
[336] Johnson, "Recent Contributions by Somalis and Somalists to the Study of Oral Literature," pp. 4-5.

reflects aggregative clarification (typical of proximity), with the poet zeroing in on a concept by referring to it again and again in different terms. We also see a tendency towards repetition and formulaicness in kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, with the same terms or formulae being used again and again. Such a tightly focused set of vocabulary represents, in some respects, the lexical "poverty" that Koch and Oesterreicher suggest is endemic to language of proximity, and also clearly aligns with Ágel and Hennig's assertion that language of proximity is tendentially repetitive. Certain of these repeated terms, especially instances of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, can even be taken as a form of specialized *passe-partout* word. While not so broad as conventional examples like *thing*, which have an immense range of possible references, the structure of the MEMBER FOR MEMBER system essentially establishes a range of *passe-partout* words for each semantic category, which can be slotted as made necessary by the alliteration. The *Beowulf* poet, for instance, uses the word *beor* ("beer") eight times, although in no case is it actually clear that "beer" is the intended referent – the term is used in the same semantic contexts as the words *win* ("wine"; 8 occurrences) and *medu* ("mead"; 10 occurrences). These characteristics represent common ground between the theoretical perspectives of both Ong and Koch and Oesterreicher, representing hallmarks of orality and the language of proximity, respectively.

On the other hand, we see several kenning features that do not fit within Ong's conception of orality but *do* correlate to Koch and Oesterreicher's language of distance. The structure of larger kennings, which feature recursion, is an inherently subordinative structure – rather than the aggregation of multiple (near-)synonyms, which are all considered together in order to arrive at a referent, a series of kenning structures are placed within one another like nesting dolls. Each of these layers must then be correctly

interpreted before the next can be approached. Such recursive structures are a clear representation of the subordinative tendency of language of distance but are incompatible with Ong's assertion of the aggregative character of oral expression. The frequency with which novel kennings appear also seems to indicate language of distance, which is characterized by a larger lexicon than language of proximity. In fact, the tension between kennings' novelty and their repetitive tendencies is something of a microcosm of the larger tension between language of proximity and distance in kennings. A kenning must be repetitive enough, in its structure and its fields of reference, to be orally viable – this pulls it towards the pole of proximity. However, this repetition appears to give the kennings sufficient stability to serve as an arena for lexical variety and experimentation, which pulls it towards the pole of distance, undercutting Ong's claim that oral expression is maximally conservative and traditionalist.

Other qualities of kennings are more perplexing, yielding apparently contradictory conclusions when approached from different theoretical standpoints. One such example is the metrical embeddedness of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy. As discussed above, these structures are often used to give a poet expressive flexibility – because a referent can be referred to in many different ways, the poet can express themselves freely while following alliterative and metrical requirements. In these terms, metric embeddedness is a textbook example of Ongian orality. But simultaneously, the embedding of these structures in an established meter clearly represents language of distance in Koch and Oesterreicher's model, a mode of expression aligned more with writing. The use of poetic meter (as opposed to its absence) would constitute greater

"elaborateness," one of Koch and Oesterreicher's verbalizations strategies of distance,[337] and the apparent purpose of poetic meter (in a primary oral context) is to help solidify information for recall, making metrically embedded structures far closer to the idea of "finality" (*Endgültigkeit*) that characterizes language of distance.[338] The use of non-contiguous kennings is similarly problematic. From an Ongian perspective, the scattering of kenning components across a stanza is a nightmare, making the interpretation of the kenning unnecessarily difficult (if not impossible) without recourse to backlooping and rereading, which requires a physical text. However, such non-consecutive elements are more representative of the pseudo-oral language of proximity in Koch and Oesterreicher's reckoning, resembling the occurrence of spontaneous "additions" (*Nachträge*),[339] as well as the incidence of ostensibly "ill-formed" grammatical structures that lack "syntactic coherence marking" (*syntaktische Kohäsionsmarkierung*).[340] This disjoint between the two theories lends credence to the critique of theories of orality levelled by Koch and Oesterreicher, namely that many mnemonically-motivated structures ascribed to orality, including rhythm, meter and melody, are not in fact markers of orality, but rather of language of distance in an oral context.[341] To arrive at an accurate reckoning of those features that constitute primary orality in its entirety, we would need examples of oral language of proximity as well. In the case of Old Saxon, Old English and Old Norse, such examples are irrevocably lost.

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[337] On page 30, Koch and Oesterreicher in fact refer to oral poetry of this type as an example of "elaborated orality" (*elaborierte Mündlichkeit*).
[338] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 23.
[339] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 27.
[340] Ágel and Hennig, "Überlegungen Zur Theorie Und Praxis Des Nähe- Und Distanzsprechens," p. 191.
[341] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," pp. 30-31.

2.6 – Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to consider kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy in their capacity as oral structures, and to consider the extent to which they do or do not conform to theories of orality, especially those of Ong, which suggest that mnemonics are the dominant determiner of primary oral expression. I first described several characteristics of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, noting several that aligned with Ong's psychodynamics of orality, as well as several that did not. Afterwards, I presented an alternate theoretical framework, namely that of Koch and Oesterreicher, which suggests that various forms of linguistic expression exist on a spectrum between "language of proximity" and "language of distance." This spectrum of expressive modes exists in both graphic (written) and phonic (spoken) media, although the former is more associated with distance and the latter is more associated with proximity. This framework accounts for the aforementioned kenning characteristics much more clearly. An Ongian perspective takes oral expression as a monolith, suggesting that each linguistic (and even psychological) product of a primary oral culture is determined primarily by the need for information recall. On the other hand, Koch and Oesterreicher suggest that oral cultures, like literate cultures, exhibit a wide range of expressive modes. These expressive modes, which range from friendly conversation to highly formalized poetic performances, are governed partially by the exigencies of oral expression (necessity of a physically present audience, reduced ability to plan in advance, etc.), but also by different stylistic demands and contexts. This framework, with its attention to the variety of discourse genres present in oral societies, was much more effective in accounting for those aspects of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy that were problematic from an Ongian perspective. Under Koch and Oesterreicher, kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy can best be

viewed as instances of oral language of distance – they thus exist at a stress point between the demands of spoken language and the demands of language of distance.

This comparison is important for two reasons. For the first, it serves to undercut the technologically deterministic assertions of theories like Ong's, which suggest that certain modes of expression and thought emerge only with the advent of writing. Before writing, per Ong, oral production is concerned primarily with the business of remembering information.[342] Anything else – culture, aesthetics, experimentation, play – comes second. When viewed through the lens of Koch and Oesterreicher, it is clear that this is not the case. Kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy aid recall in some ways but hinder it in others – this tells us that mnemonics cannot be the sole purpose of such oral structures. This raises further questions – if mnemonic efficacy is not the main goal of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, what else is at play in these structures? Why were they used at all, if they test the very boundaries of oral expression? These questions will be treated in this dissertation's final chapter, where I argue that this tension is due to exploratory play, whereby early Germanic poets intentionally experimented with the expressive capacity of their language.

Second, this comparison is useful because it illuminates weaknesses in Koch and Oesterreicher's theory. Although the proximity/distance paradigm is demonstrably more effective in pinpointing the socio-linguistic role of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, it still fails to account for two characteristics mentioned in this chapter: the tendency towards concreteness and the tendency towards oblique reference. These attributes are contradictory per Ong, who argues that oral expression is minimally

[342] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 36.

abstract.[343] Concrete phrasing is thus conducive to orality, because it remains as close as possible to the human lifeworld and situational modes of thought,[344] while oblique reference (e.g., calling a RAVEN a "goose") is not, because it relies on awareness of abstract semantic categories (BIRDS in this case).[345] The language of proximity/distance model, however, has nothing to say on this front – Koch and Oesterreicher do not discuss the role of concreteness or abstraction.

Accordingly, I would suggest an additional verbalization strategy for Koch and Oesterreicher's model: Language of proximity is characterized by a greater degree of concreteness, whereas language of distance is marked by abstraction. Kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy straddle this line, using maximally concrete vocabulary to render familiar concepts highly abstract. This additional verbalization strategy will be discussed in the next chapter, where I argue not only that this distinction is an important one for understanding kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy on the proximity/distance spectrum, but also that abstraction is of central concern when we make any attempt to define these structures.

[343] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 49.
[344] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 42-3, 49.
[345]Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," pp. 26-7.

CHAPTER THREE – KENNINGS & ABSTRACTION

3.1 – Introduction

In the previous chapter, I approached kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy using Koch and Oesterreicher's framework of "Language of Distance" and "Language of Proximity." This framework proved valuable because it allows us a more nuanced view of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy as oral structures. Whereas technologically deterministic theories of orality like those of Ong[346] or Lord[347] consider mnemonic efficiency to be the primary purpose of all oral art, Koch and Oesterreicher's theory[348] also considers the demands of certain genres of speech within an oral society. Under this theory, kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy would be considered "language of distance", which tends to be prepared, formalized, monologic discourse. Recognizing kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy as examples of language of distance within an oral context elucidates many of their more unusual attributes, which technologically deterministic theories of orality struggled with. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, these structures owe much of their strangeness to the tension between the demands of orality and the desired characteristics of elaborated, performative speech. These are structures that must be sufficiently mnemonically encoded to be recalled in societies without access (or with very limited access) to writing, but as language of distance they also exhibit features of language (e.g., subordinative structures, lexical novelty, etc.) that is often at odds with efficient recall.

Although this compound approach was successful in explaining most features of

[346] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*.
[347] Lord, *The Singer of Tales*.
[348] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz."

kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, it failed to account for two key attributes: these structures' tendency towards *concreteness*, and their tendency towards *oblique reference.* Kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy overwhelmingly prefer concrete to abstract vocabulary, but ironically also express their referents in oblique or non-literal terms, which require some familiarity with abstract categories to be understood. When the *Beowulf* poet calls the SEA a *ford* ("ford"), they are using vocabulary that is very concrete – a FORD is a physical, familiar, tangible concept. However, to understand that SEA is the intended referent, a listener must understand that both SEA and FORD fall into the abstract category of BODIES OF WATER. Per Ong, the use of concrete vocabulary is expected, but the familiarity with abstract categories should not be occurring – he states that oral expression and psychodynamics are minimally abstract.[349] Koch & Oesterreicher, on the other hand, have little to say on this front. Their theory brushes up against ideas of concreteness and abstraction but does not approach the topic explicitly.

Accordingly, the first half of this chapter will closely consider the relationship between concreteness and abstraction and Koch and Oesterreicher's Distance/Proximity framework. It will first develop a working definition of "concreteness" and "abstraction", concepts that can be very difficult to define operationally in the context of language. It will then reconsider Koch & Oesterreicher's framework with this definition in mind and argue that concreteness and abstraction ought to be viewed as verbalization strategies (*Versprachlichungsstrategien*) of language of proximity and language of distance, respectively. My goal in doing so is a) to suggest an addition to Koch & Oesterreicher's framework; but more importantly b) to demonstrate that we should expect the early

[349] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 49.

Germanic kenning system (as an example of language of distance) to exhibit abstract expression.

This theoretical expectation will then be demonstrated in the second half of the chapter, which proposes that "abstraction" be considered a defining characteristic of the kenning.[350] Earlier definitions of the kenning have described the structure as necessarily metaphoric,[351] metonymic,[352] both[353] or neither.[354] I argue that these terms are too narrow to encapsulate the range of figurative language we see in kennings. Kennings use a range of cognitive techniques to express their intended referents – what unites these various strategies is an effort to render the kenning referent highly abstract. As with most kenning traits, we see an interesting tension here between the exigencies of orality and the demands of language of distance – kennings must render their referents highly abstractively by way of highly concrete language. To demonstrate this claim, this chapter will apply the concept of abstraction to kennings drawn from the dissertation corpus, before concluding with some closing thoughts on how and why such abstractive language might have been valued in oral cultures, a topic that will be addressed in greater detail in this dissertation's final chapter.

3.2 – Defining abstraction

Before arguing for abstraction as a defining characteristic of kenning structures, it is worth stating what is meant by the term "abstract" and its antonym, "concrete". Unfortunately, this is easier said than done – the concept of "abstraction" is itself an

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351 Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry*, p. 43; R. D. Fulk, John D. Niles, and Robert E. Bjork, eds., *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. cxv.

352 Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," p. 22.

353 Marold, *Kenningkunst*, p. 31.

354 Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 51; Fidjestøl, "Kenningsystemet. Forsøk på ein lingvistisk analyse," p. 28.

abstraction, and one that can be difficult to come to grips with. This is doubly true in the context of language, which is inherently, at least to some extent, abstract. As Ong notes:

> So 'concrete' a term as 'tree' does not refer simply to a singular 'concrete' tree but is an abstraction, drawn out of, away from, individual sensible actuality; it refers to a concept which is neither this tree nor that tree but can apply to any tree. Each individual object that we style a tree is truly 'concrete', simply itself, not 'abstract' at all, but the term we apply to the individual object is in itself abstract.[355]

Ultimately, my intent here is not to come to an airtight, universally applicable definition of the term, but rather to define the term clearly enough that my subsequent argument is clear.

Concisely defined, abstraction is the "The act or process of formulating a general concept by identifying common features from specific instances or examples, or a concept formed in this way."[356] I am arguing here that kennings are linked directly to this process, in terms of both construction and comprehension. To understand a kenning, an audience member must be capable of recognizing and using general concepts and relations drawn from specific, concrete concepts. Consider, for instance, the kenning *hjörva rödd* ("voice of swords"; BATTLE).[357] To parse such a kenning, abstractive thought is critical. VOICE is a sound produced by humans, but it is not a sound produced by SWORDS. The kenning interpreter must thus ask themselves: what is a sound produced by SWORDS, just as a VOICE is produced by a HUMAN? The kenning is resolved by leveraging this abstractive relationship – the sound that a SWORD makes is the clang of its impact against shield and weapon in conflict, making BATTLE the appropriate solution. The creator of a kenning must engage in this process as well, albeit in the inverse direction. In composing and employing a kenning, a poet must work backwards from the intended referent – what set of abstractive

[355] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 49.
[356] Andrew M. Colman, "Abstraction," in *A Dictionary of Psychology* (Oxford, 2015).
[357] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 8, l. 1.

relationships can be leveraged to articulate the concept of BATTLE via exclusively concrete entities?

This notion of concrete and abstract entities is also a crucial one, since kennings overwhelmingly use concrete entities and refer to other concrete entities. Stated broadly, a concrete entity is something that is observable or tangible – it can be perceived sensorily. Examples might include ROCKS, DOGS, THE SUN, WIND, or FLOWERS. Conversely, an abstract entity is something that is not observable or tangible – examples might include DEMOCRACY, MATHEMATICS or IDEAS. This misleadingly simple binary breaks down quickly when we apply it to more complex examples. EXCITEMENT, for instance, might be regarded as abstract – it is a general term for an emotional reaction. However, an excited person certainly feels EXCITEMENT sensorily (quickened pulse, epinephrine rush, unsettled stomach, etc.), which might suggest that it is concrete. Accordingly, it is best to regard the abstract and the concrete not as a binary, but rather as a spectral phenomenon, with entities being more abstract or more concrete, but not definitively one or the other.

Also complicating this basic conceptualization is the subjectivity of abstract/concrete judgements. For a modern office worker, a COMPUTER is a very concrete concept, a tangible object that is physically interacted with on a daily basis, but for an office worker over a century ago, a COMPUTER would have been a far more abstract notion. By the same token, many modern humans likely think of a MILL fairly abstractly, as a vague, unseen facility that flour comes from – our understanding of a MILL is thus rooted primarily in abstraction – we understand the broad functions associated with a MILL (grain goes in, flour comes out), but have no concrete knowledge of the process. But for a 10th century farmer, the idea of a MILL would be closely tied up in specific sights, sounds and smells. The subjectivity of this phenomenon is particularly important in evaluating historical language –

we cannot simply assume that historical populations have the same familiarities and assumptions that we do. All this is to say that, in the discussion of abstractive thought in kennings, we must be attuned to the slipperiness of such ostensibly firm categories as "abstract" and "concrete" entities, which are not so easily differentiable as one might think.

3.2.1 – ABSTRACT and CONCRETE as cognitive categories

Given the wishy-washiness of the concept, it might be worth asking whether the terms "abstract" and "concrete" can have any utility at all. However, there do seem to be indications that ABSTRACT and CONCRETE are cognitively real categories that exert some effect on the ways in which we think and reason.

Langacker, for instance, argues that concrete entities are more cognitively salient than abstract ones[358], making them more valuable as referential tools. This notion is expanded by Radden and Kövecses, who demonstrate this preference for concrete entities as a referential tool in the tendency for metonymic expressions to use concrete, rather than abstract, vehicles.[359] To return to an earlier example, there is a reason that the CIA and the U.S. EXECUTIVE BRANCH (two abstract, impersonal organizations) are metonymically referred to as *Langley* and *The White House* (two concrete, visible locations), and not the inverse. As Radden and Kövecses note, this phenomenon is particularly visible in metonymic structures where body parts stand for more abstract qualities – examples might include the phrases *good eye* and *good ear*, which express the concepts of VISION and HEARING.[360]

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[358] Ronald Langacker, "Reference-Point Structures," *Cognitive Linguistics* 43 (1993), p. 30.
[359] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy," pp. 45-6.
[360] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy," pp. 46.

This preference for the concrete is evident in metaphor too, which tends to use a concrete semantic domain to understand an abstract one. A previously mentioned example of this phenomenon is the TIME IS MONEY metaphor.[361] MONEY is familiar to us as a tangible, possessable object (although this is changing), whereas TIME is a more abstract notion. Accordingly, we tend to speak of *spending, saving* or *budgeting* time. TIME cannot be spent, saved or budgeted - it is an abstract non-spatial dimension that continually progresses irrespective of our actions. However, it is far easier to think of TIME as a concrete resource (like MONEY) than it is to discuss it in more accurate abstract terms.

Ong, who argues that the psychodynamics of oral cultures privilege "situational" (i.e., concrete) thought over the abstract,[362] cites A.R. Luria's research on literate and oral Uzbek farm laborers[363] in support of this claim. He notes one study in which subjects were asked to identify geometric figures - whereas literate subjects identified the figures by their categorical names (circle, square, etc.), oral subjects identified the figures by the names of objects – a circle was variously designated a plate, a sieve, a moon, etc..[364] He also notes a study in which oral subjects were presented with a drawing of four different objects, three of which belonged to the same category (TOOLS, ANIMALS, etc.). When asked to group three of the four items together, subjects did not group in alignment with abstract semantic categories but rather based on concrete situations. For example, when given images of a HAMMER, SAW, HATCHET and LOG (three tools

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[361] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, p. 73.
[362] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 49.
[363] A.R. Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, trans. Martin Lopez-Morillas and Lynn Solotaroff (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1976).
[364] Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations,* pp. 32-9.

and some raw material), oral subjects would regularly omit one of the tools from the final grouping, stating that three tools would be superfluous without any wood to use them on.[365] Literate subjects, on the other hand, tended to group the tools together.[366]

A similar phenomenon may be observed in Werner Herzog's *Die fliegenden Ärzte von Ostafrika* ("The Flying Doctors of East Africa"), a 1969 documentary on the Flying Doctor Service of the African Medical and Research Foundation.[367] Towards the conclusion of the movie (38:25-42:55), a series of illustrated instructional posters used by the Flying Doctor Service are shown to workers at a Tanzanian coffee plantation. These posters, which were designed to educate locals on the prevention of eye infections, included an illustration of a large eye (pictured below):[368]

[365] Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social* Foundations, p. 56.
[366] Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, p. 74.
[367] *Die fliegenden Ärzte von Ostafrika*, Documentary (Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, 1969).
[368] *Die fliegenden Ärzte von Ostafrika*, 39:21.

When shown this image, non-literate locals were unable to recognize it as an eye, instead offering interpretations such as “fish” or “sun” (39:25). However, semi-literate or literate observers were able to recognize the image as a human eye. As with Luria’s subjects, it was only after exposure to literate education (or possibly literate modes of visual representation) that individuals were able to process something like an EYE as a discrete entity abstracted from its concrete frame of reference (i.e., as part of a human being). Ong’s suggestion that these results demonstrate how literacy rapidly reforms human thought processes[369] should be taken with a grain of salt, but they do seem to indicate that there exist both concrete and abstract modes of thought and expression, and that individuals may differ in their preference for one or the other.

3.2.2 – Previous attempts to define abstraction

Despite the apparent reality of the concrete and abstract as conceptual categories, efforts to objectively measure or categorize abstraction in language have proven difficult. Scholars have attempted, for instance, to develop tests to measure the level of abstraction in writing,[370] but absent an indisputable definition of the abstract/concrete spectrum, the actual accuracy of these tests is impossible to gauge. As Gillie concludes: “There are no precise and objective criteria for validating a measure of abstraction”.[371]

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[369] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 50.
[370] Joseph A. DeVito, “Levels of Abstraction in Spoken and Written Language,” *Journal of Communication* 17, no. 4 (1967): pp. 354–61; Paul J. Gillie, “A Simplified Formula for Measuring Abstraction in Writing.,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 41, no. 4 (1957), pp. 214-17; Rudolf Flesch, “Measuring the Level of Abstraction.,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 34, no. 6 (1950), pp. 384–90.
[371] Gillie, “A Simplified Formula for Measuring Abstraction in Writing,” p. 214.

An interesting study undertaken by Carroll takes a different approach, applying the notion of factor analysis to literary style.[372] In this study, eight English professors were asked to read a range of 150 prose texts – for each text, they gave their subjective rating on 29 adjectival scales (e.g., "meaningful-meaningless", "vivid-pale", "abstract-concrete" and "good-bad").[373] Various linguistic characteristics of the texts, such as the number of proper nouns, number of articles, and proportion of transitive to non-transitive verbs were also recorded[374] (methodological information on the exact definitions of these categories is not included). Analyzing the adjectival metrics, Carrol notes that texts rated highly for abstractness tend also receive high ratings for subtlety, profundity, complexity, haziness, originality, elegance and remoteness.[375] Conversely, texts rated highly for concreteness tend to (subjectively) exhibit high obviousness, superficiality, simplicity, clarity, triteness, uncouthness and intimacy.[376] On the objective front, these "abstract" texts are categorized by a higher proportion of noun clauses,[377] whereas "concrete" texts are marked by a high number of "numerical expressions" (this term is left undefined), "determining adjectives and pronouns like 'this,' 'each,' etc.", and "participles".[378] These data, both subjective and objective, seem to align with our general definition of the concrete as tangible or sensorily familiar, and the abstract as intangible and

[372] John B. Carroll, "Vectors of Prose Style," in *Style in Language* (The Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960), pp. 283–92.
[373] Carroll, "Vectors of Prose Style," p. 286.
[374] Carroll, "Vectors of Prose Style," p. 287.
[375] Carroll, "Vectors of Prose Style," p. 290.
[376] Carroll, "Vectors of Prose Style," p. 290.
[377] Carroll, "Vectors of Prose Style," p. 290.
[378] Carroll, "Vectors of Prose Style," p. 290.

sensorily unknowable. When dealing with the concrete we would expect, presumably, an impression of “obviousness”, “clarity”, or “intimacy”, while the abstract would prompt an impression of “subtlety”, “haziness”, or “remoteness.” Similarly, a tendency towards determiners and numerical expressions seems likely in more concrete texts dealing with physical specifics. However, this study is focused on literary style rather than linguistics and, given the small and homogenous sample (eight English professors), the results of this analysis can only be generalized so far.

More recently, studies have attempted to identify neurological markers for concreteness and abstractness via measurement of “event-related brain potentials” (ERPs). An ERP is a small voltage that occurs at the neurological level in reaction to certain stimulus.[379] One particular type of neurological reaction, referred to as the “N400 ERP”, appears to be associated with the abstract-concrete dichotomy. Studies such as Barber et al.[380] and Forgács et al.[381], for instance, seem to indicate that subjects exposed to concrete vocabulary tend to exhibit higher amplitude of the N400 ERP than those exposed to abstract vocabulary. However, beyond concrete language the N400 ERP also seems to be associated with language that is novel, unexpected or unfamiliar. Such neurological metrics may one day offer a more accurate understanding of the type of language humans cognitively regard as abstract or concrete, but for now

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[379] D. H. R. Blackwood and W.J. Muir, “Cognitive Brain Potentials and Their Application,” *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 157, no. S9 (1990): 96–101.
[380] Horacio A. Barber et al., “Concreteness in Word Processing: ERP and Behavioral Effects in a Lexical Decision Task,” *Brain and Language* 125, no. 1 (2013), pp. 47-53.
[381] Bálint Forgács et al., “Metaphors Are Physical and Abstract: ERPs to Metaphorically Modified Nouns Resemble ERPs to Abstract Language,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 9 (2015).

such methods are still far from being able to conclusively identify the "abstract" or "concrete" at the neurological level.

3.2.3 – A basic definition of abstraction

I have demonstrated two key points above: a) that abstraction and concreteness in language cannot readily be measured; and b) that although measuring abstraction and concreteness is difficult, the categories seem to be real ones, and people are readily able to identify the abstract or the concrete. As Stephen Miller (from whom we will hear more in the next chapter) puts it: "[…] if recognition is taking place, there should be something being recognized."[382] Until neurological ERP techniques like those mentioned above are more developed, any definition of linguistic concreteness and abstraction must boil down, at least to some extent, to Justice Potter Stewart's ostensive definition of pornography: "I know it when I see it." However, certain throughlines can be discerned, ones that I think are fairly uncontroversial.

First, concrete language tends to be *physical*, while abstract language tends not to be. Anything that has some physical presence (ROCKS, DOGS, CHEESE) is generally regarded as concrete, as opposed to things that are not (VALOR, FAIR-MINDEDNESS, THOUGHT).

Second, concrete language tends to deal with the *familiar*, while abstract language tends not to. SNOW, for instance, is a more concrete concept for the inhabitants of a temperate region than it is for people who have never seen SNOW before. Similarly, the SOUND OF A DOG WHISTLE is an abstract idea for

[382] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 88.

humans, who cannot actually *hear* it. For dogs, on the other hand, the SOUND OF A DOG WHISTLE is a concrete sensation.

Third, concrete language tends to be *specific*, while abstract language tends not to be. As Ong notes, even the most specific language is somewhat abstractive, given that it will always refer to a general class of item rather than a specific, physical entity[383] – even so specific a word as *greyhound* refers to all GREYHOUNDS, a group that shares a number of very significant features but also contains significant variation. As categories become broader, this abstraction compounds – the broader a category is, the more we are dealing with bundles of abstract qualities rather than specific attributes: WERNER HERZOG is more concrete than FILMMAKER, which is more concrete than HOMO SAPIENS, which is more concrete than MULTICELLULAR ORGANISM, which is more concrete than ENTITY.

This idea of categories and abstraction is also connected to Ong's suggestion that oral thought tends to be aggregative rather than analytic.[384] An aggregate is a single, inviolable whole – it is specific. But when people think analytically, breaking these conceptual wholes into their component parts, they begin to think categorically, that is to say abstractly. Analyzing Ong's TREE, we come up with many traits – TREES are SESSILE, they are ALIVE, they are GREEN and BROWN, they are made of WOOD, etc. When we analyze a TREE, we abstract it – it becomes a category within which different attributes are housed. Simultaneously, the recognition of these attributes creates additional categories – LIVING THINGS, GREEN THINGS, WOODEN THINGS, etc. Such abstract-analytic modes of thought are so commonplace today, particularly among those of us engaged in knowledge work, that it may seem ridiculous to describe something so simple as characterizing a tree as

[383] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 49.
[384] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 38-9.

"abstract". But this is a result of our familiarity with abstract-analytic thought – a counterexample can be found in Luria's research on Uzbek farmers, in which subjects repeatedly struggled to describe concrete objects. In one particularly illustrative example, a subject was asked to explain what a TREE was and responded, "Why should I? Everyone knows what a tree is, they don't need me telling them."[385] Ong notes this study as well,[386] suggesting that it demonstrates an inability to think analytically in oral milieux. But despite Ong's assertion to the contrary, we will see below that abstract analytic thought is alive and well in the oral world.

Finally, concrete language tends to be *literal*, while abstract language is often *figurative*. As noted above, language must always be to some extent abstractive – the relationship between a word and its referent SNOW is a symbolic one. However, concrete language minimizes the legwork required for interpretation, making this symbolic relationship as direct as possible. Abstract language, on the other hand, will often be figurative. This renders this symbolic relationship less simple, because figurative language is not a direct X REPRESENTS Y relation. Rather, it is grounded in abstract relations – in our *hjörva rödd* ("voice of swords"; BATTLE) kenning,[387] *rödd* does not represent VOICE – it represents BATTLE. The relationship is not of the type: X REPRESENTS Y. Instead, the kenning can only be parsed via a recognized abstract relationship of the type: BATTLE IS TO SWORD AS VOICE IS TO HUMAN. This intentional abstraction using figurative language is especially prevalent in euphemisms, where the goal is to minimize the visibility of a taboo idea or object. It is, for instance, more abstractive (and more polite) to metonymically refer to somebody's *rear* than it is to discuss their *butt*, and the metaphoric *I have to take a leak,*

[385] Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, p. 86.
[386] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 53-4.
[387] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 8 l. 1.

while still a little earthy, is not so offensive as *I have to piss*.

Identified individually, these criteria seem relatively straightforward, but in practice they often interact with one another in unexpected ways, making judgements of abstraction or concreteness difficult. Consider the following sentences, the first literal and the second metaphorical:

1) *My heart is heavy.*
2) *I'm sad.*

Which of these sentences is more abstract? The latter could be argued to be more concrete because it is literal – it references sadness directly. However, it could also be argued that the second is more abstract because it designates an intangible (SADNESS), while the former uses tangible, concrete sensations as a metaphor for SADNESS. As amply demonstrated above, actual *measurement* of concreteness and abstraction is not possible, even with specific criteria. However, the ideas of *physicality, familiarity, specificity,* and *literality* function as good general criteria for the discussion of concrete and abstract language. Accordingly, this dissertation adopts the following working definition for the discussion of concreteness and abstraction in kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy:

> Concrete language tends to be *physical*, *familiar* and *specific*. It designates entities *literally*. Abstract language tends to be *intangible*, *unfamiliar* and *general*. It also tends to refer to entities *figuratively*.

Despite difficulties in defining abstract language, I think this definition is one that most people would broadly agree with. It is also one that seems to align with the limited conclusions on the subject that we can glean from the cognitive, neurological and linguistic research mentioned above. Below, I will further argue for the validity of this definition by

showing how it maps onto Koch and Oesterreicher's framework of language of distance and proximity.

3.3 – Abstraction and language of proximity/distance

In the previous chapter, I identified several attributes of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, some of them more unusual than others. Afterwards, I argued that these features could be accounted for using Koch and Oesterreicher's idea of *Sprache der Distanz* ("language of distance"). Kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy appear to be irregular oral structures from an Ongian standpoint, which does not allow for stylistic or artistic demands in the context of oral poetry. However, these structures are much more logical when viewed as oral language of distance, occupying a stress point between the challenges of oral recall and the expressive goals of elaborated language of distance.

However, two aspects of kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy could not be addressed by Koch and Oesterreicher's framework – their tendency towards maximally concrete language, and their preference for non-literal designation (i.e., calling a RAVEN a "goose"). These two aspects seem to exhibit the same tension as the others, between the exigencies of orality and the demands of language of distance. On the one hand, oral societies seem to prefer concrete, operational terminology. This point, which Ong argues,[388] cleanly explains the tendency towards concrete language in kennings and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy. On the other hand, kennings and (especially) MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy designate their referents non-literally, in ways that require understanding of abstract categorization. When the SEA is called a *mere* ("lake"),[389] or a RAVEN is referred to as a *svanr* ("swan"),[390] an understanding of abstract categories is required by both the

[388] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 49-57.
[389] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1130.
[390] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 5.

composing poet and the receiving audience. The very mechanism of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, in which concepts within the same abstract semantic groups (BIRDS, BODIES OF WATER, MAMMALS) can stand in for one another, hinges on the existence of developed abstract thought in these oral populations.

That oral peoples regularly exhibit developed abstract thought, despite Ong's suggestion to the contrary,[391] is already well established.[392] What is less clear is *why* early Germanic poets, operating in an oral milieu, would intentionally render familiar concrete concepts in such an abstract manner, particularly given that there is also a bias towards concreteness within kenning and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy structures, at least with respect to vocabulary. I believe that this apparent discrepancy, like those mentioned in the previous chapter, is the result of tension between orality (which prefers the concrete) and language of distance (which prefers the abstract). Although abstraction does not explicitly appear in Koch and Oesterreicher's definition of language of distance, I argue below that it ought to. "Abstraction", as I have defined it above, is a logical addition to the verbalization strategies (*Versprachlichungsstrategien*) typical of language of distance. Not only is it associated with the genres that Koch and Oesterreicher designate as "distant", but it also follows logically from many of the typical conditions of communication (*Kommunikationsbedingungen*) associated with language of distance.

[391] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 49.
[392] Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, pp. 45-59.

3.3.1 – Applying abstraction to the proximity-distance continuum

As discussed in the previous two chapters (§1.4.4; §2.5.1), Koch and Oesterreicher present a framework for understanding different genres of linguistic output, pictured below:[393]

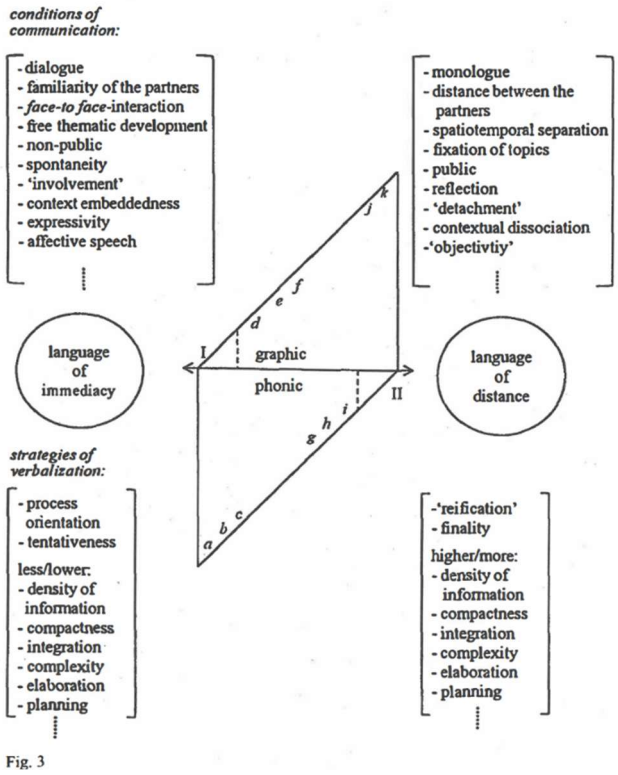

Fig. 3

Per this schema, linguistic output (whether graphic or phonic) can be evaluated on a spectrum, with one pole being "language of proximity" (translated as "immediacy" in the above diagram) and the other being "language of distance". Language of proximity is the kind of linguistic output we associate with intimate, informal exchanges, whereas language of distance tends to represent more formalized, presentational contexts. Each of these poles is associated with

[393] English translation reprinted from Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher, "Language of Immediacy - language of distance: Orality and Literacy from the Perspective of Language Theory and Linguistic History," in *Communicative Spaces* (Peter Lang, 2013), p. 450.

certain “conditions of communication”, which tend to occur in association with each pole. Language of proximity, for instance, tends to be dialogic, whereas language of distance is often monologic. These conditions of communication in turn determine a series of “verbalization strategies” that are associated with each pole, which represent the linguistic tools that speakers or writers use within a certain linguistic genre. For example, language of distance tends to be monologic, and also tends to have a fixed topic – these are conditions of communication. These conditions then lead to the verbalization strategy of “more planning” – because the speaker/writer in a language of distance context is likely to a) be aware of the topic they will be discussing; and b) be the only speaker/writer, they are able to plan out what they will say/write to a far greater extent than somebody in a language of proximity context (say, a person having a chat with a friend over drinks). Although “abstraction” is not one of the verbalization strategies explicitly mentioned by Koch and Oesterreicher, it is a concept that their schema brushes up against several times, and one that follows from a number of their conditions of communication.

One of the first conditions of communication associated with the abstract-concrete dichotomy is that of “context embeddedness” (*Situationsverschränkung*) in language of proximity and “contextual dissociation” (*Situationsentbindung*) in language of distance.[394] Language of proximity tends to be linked to the immediate physical context of the exchange, which gives it a tendency towards concreteness. This is partially due to the fact that language of

[394] Koch and Oesterreicher, “Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz,“ p. 23.

proximity is generally face-to-face[395] – two people communicating in person may (and often do) comment on their immediate physical surroundings, making the concrete a frequent topic of conversation. As Carroll notes in his study, those texts rated as more "concrete" tended to have a higher incidence of deictic words like "this" or "that"[396] – we would expect deixis like this to occur more frequently in a face-to-face interaction, where interlocutors can physically point at concrete items. This connects directly to the definition of concrete language as *specific,* while abstract language tends to be *general*. It is both difficult and conversationally impractical to create a description of something that is more specific and accurate than simply *pointing* at that object, as one can in a face-to-face language of proximity setting.

Conversely, language of distance is often defined by "spatiotemporal separation" (*raumzeitliche Trennung*)[397], which is much more conducive to the abstract. When texting somebody, for instance, one's immediate physical surroundings are a difficult subject, given that they are inaccessible to one's interlocutor. Naturally, actual spatiotemporal separation cannot occur in an oral context, where all (or most) exchange is in the phonic medium. However, although an early Germanic poetic performance represents a face-to-face interaction, it is still characterized by some degree of contextual dissociation. Language of distance is characterized by "fixation of topic" (*Themenfixierung*),[398] and in a

[395] Ágel and Hennig, "Überlegungen Zur Theorie Und Praxis Des Nähe- Und Distanzsprechens," p.189; Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," pp. 19-20.
[396] Carroll, "Vectors of Prose Style," p. 290.
[397] Ágel and Hennig, "Überlegungen Zur Theorie Und Praxis Des Nähe- Und Distanzsprechens," p.189; Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," pp. 21.
[398] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," pp. 21.

poetic performance, this fixed topic is not always something immediately present. It is likely, for instance, that Earl Hákon was present for the first performance of Hallfreðr Óttarsson's *Hákonardrápa*, but probably not for most of the succeeding performances. The poet may still take advantage of this physical presence in ways a writer would not be able to – they may read their audience, use deixis, make off-the-cuff changes to their performance – but there remains a degree of abstraction from the present situation that is not common in primary oral cultures. Together, these attributes suggest that language of proximity is more likely to refer to the *physical* than language of distance, which is more likely to refer to the *intangible*.

Some of the abstraction inherent in language of distance can also be attributed to its level of planning, which tends to be higher than in language of proximity. The higher level of planning is the result of two conditions of communications: the aforementioned fixation of topics (*Themenfixierung*), and monologue (*Monologizität*). Because a speaker in a language of distance context (e.g., our hypothetical poet) knows a) what they will be discussing; and b) that they will be the only one speaking, they are able to plan their speech to a far higher degree than a speaker in a language of proximity context. This is relevant for two reasons. First, the process of planning increases the spatiotemporal separation of language of distance, which is tied to abstract, intangible language. Although a poet may be spatiotemporally present when actually *performing* their work, when planning (i.e., choosing what they will say) they will certainly be temporally distant from the actual linguistic event, and likely be spatially distant as well. Second, a language user engaged in planning has more time to prepare

language that is “elegant” or “complex”, two attributes associated with abstraction according to Carroll[399] - these attributes are echoed in the higher levels of complexity (*Komplexität*) and elaborateness (*Elaboriertheit*) that Koch and Oesterreicher find in language of distance.[400] The apparent higher cognitive salience of concrete entities[401] also suggests that they are easier to come to terms with mentally than abstract entities – it is thus reasonable to expect that the planning afforded by language of distance gives a speaker/writer the necessary time to express more challenging abstract concepts.

In my definition, I also noted that the concrete tends to be more *familiar*, while the abstract is often *unfamiliar*. This division is paralleled in the tendency of language of proximity to exhibit familiar conversational partners (*Vertrautheit der Partner*), while language of distance is characterized by less familiar interlocutors (*Fremdheit der Partner*).[402] Again, this is a less significant divide in the oral context discussed here – we can likely assume a greater degree of mutual socio-cultural understanding between an early Germanic poet and their audience than between, say, the author of a novel and their readership. However, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of a poet’s audience would not be well known to them, particularly given the tendency of medieval poets to travel. Accordingly, even oral language of distance is characterized by less shared knowledge between speaker and audience, resulting in less familiar (i.e., more abstract)

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[399] Carroll, “Vectors of Prose Style,” p. 290.
[400] Koch and Oesterreicher, “Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz,” pp. 22.
[401] Langacker, “Reference-Point Structures,” p. 30; Radden and Kövecses, “Towards a Theory of Metonymy,” p. 44.
[402] Ágel and Hennig, “Überlegungen Zur Theorie Und Praxis Des Nähe- Und Distanzsprechens,” pp.189-90; Koch and Oesterreicher, “Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz,” pp. 21.

subject matter. To return to a previous example, while EARL HÁKON is certainly a very concrete, specific entity, he was doubtless unfamiliar to many audiences of the *Hákonardrápa.*

Finally, language of proximity tends to be more affective (*Affektivität*), while language of distance has a tendency towards (ostensible) objectivity *(Objektivität)*. This divide parallels the "remote-intimate" adjective pair noted by Carroll, which is statistically associated with the abstract and concrete, respectively.[403] The tendency towards affectivity also creates more space for certain linguistic tools, like gesture, facial expression and intonation, that are less common amongst "objective" language users (consider the difference in personal affect between a conference presenter and a friend describing an argument). Affective tools like volume, imitative gestures and onomatopoeia are often used to lend greater physicality to language, which renders it more concrete. In this respect at least, early Germanic poetic performances may have looked more like language of proximity, but we cannot know how much poets made use of these resources.

Beyond the conditions of communication discussed above, the association of the abstract with language of distance can be seen in Koch and Oesterreicher's list of associated genres:[404]

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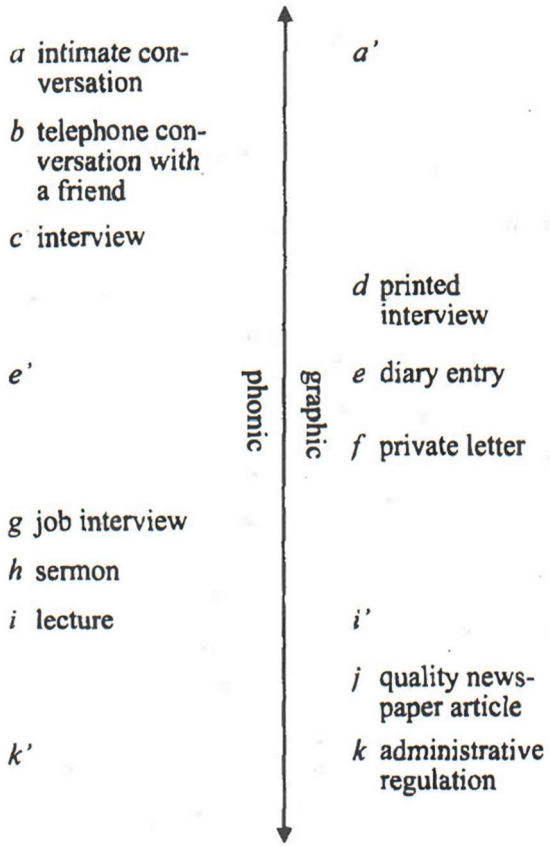
[403] Carroll, "Vectors of Prose Style," p. 290.
[404] English translation reprinted from Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher, "Language of Immediacy - language of distance: Orality and Literacy from the Perspective of Language Theory and Linguistic History," in *Communicative Spaces* (Peter Lang, 2013), p. 444.



These genres are arrayed on a spectrum ranging from language of proximity (top) to language of distance (bottom), but the two poles could just as easily be "concrete" (top) and "abstract" (bottom). This representation is, of course, prototypical – a telephone conversation with a friend is tendentially concrete but could be highly abstract if the conversation deals with theoretical physics. Similarly, newspaper articles can be quite concrete if they are clearly written and address concrete subjects. However, I suspect that this ranking of linguistic genres with respect to language of proximity/distance maps quite closely onto our understanding of concrete/abstract genres, with respect to both content and language. It certainly maps onto most of the adjective pairs that

Carrol associates with the concrete-abstract distinction, including obvious-subtle, simple-complex, uncouth-elegant, clear-hazy and intimate-remote.[405]

3.3.2 – Abstraction as a novel verbalization strategy

Taken together, the above evidence speaks for the validity of an additional verbalization strategy within Koch and Oesterreicher's framework: that of abstraction.

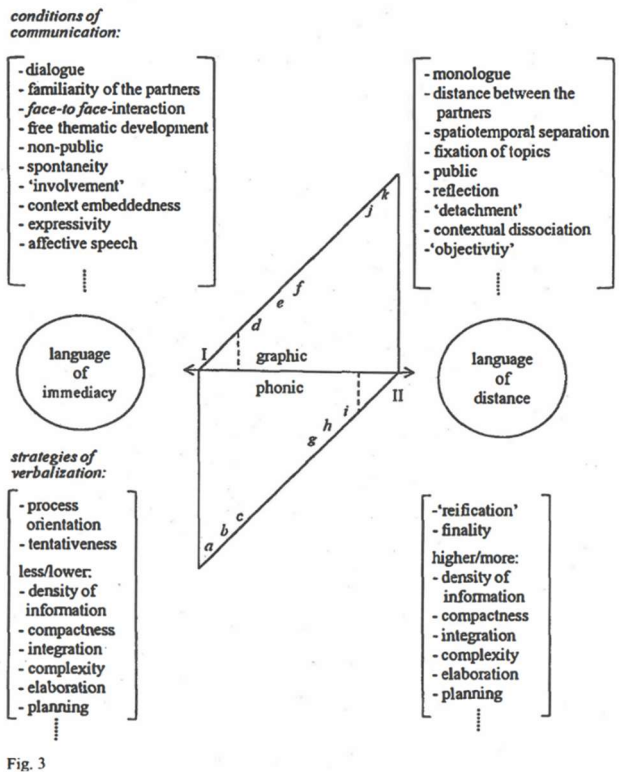


Fig. 3

In their schema,[406] Koch and Oesterreicher note that language of distance generally displays more "density of information" (*Informationsdichte*), "compactness" (*Kompaktheit*), "integration" (*Integration*), "complexity" (*Komplexität*), "elaboration" (*Elaboriertheit*) and "planning" (*Planung*), while language of proximity generally displays less.[407] We can now add

[405] Carroll, "Vectors of Prose Style," p. 290.
[406] English translation reprinted from Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher, "Language of Immediacy - language of distance: Orality and Literacy from the Perspective of Language Theory and Linguistic History," in *Communicative Spaces* (Peter Lang, 2013), p. 450.
[407] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," p. 23.

"abstraction" to this list. As demonstrated above, increased abstraction is a logical result of the conditions of communication (seen at the top of the diagram) associated with language of distance, just as increased compactness and planning are.[408] It is worth underscoring again that these are *tendential* relationships. Abstraction *can and does* occur in language of proximity, just as concreteness can be readily found in language of distance. However, language of distance is more likely to exhibit abstractive language than language of proximity.

Having established abstraction as a reasonable verbalization strategy, it is now possible to fully reconcile Koch and Oesterreicher's framework with the aspects of the kenning system discussed in the previous chapter. As noted (§2.3.3), kennings tend to be very concrete in their vocabulary, overwhelmingly preferring words that refer to tangible, familiar concepts. However, they also tend to be non-literal in their language – kenning vocabulary, although generally itself concrete, is used figuratively. As defined above:

> Concrete language tends to be *physical*, *familiar* and *specific*. It designates entities *literally*. Abstract language tends to be *intangible*, *unfamiliar* and *general*. It also tends to refer to entities *figuratively*.

We see an obvious tension here – consider the Old English kenning *wæteres hrycg*[409] ("water's spine"), which refers to a WAVE. WATER, SPINE and WAVE are all concrete concepts – they are physical, familiar and specific. However, these concrete concepts are used abstractively. The kenning *wæteres hrycg* is abstract because it is figurative, and also because it is unfamiliar. WATER and SPINE may be conventional concepts, but the concept of a WATER'S SPINE certainly isn't. Furthermore, WATER'S SPINE is non-specific. Although I think WAVE is the likeliest sense of the kenning, SEA or HORIZON are also entirely

[408] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," pp. 21-3.
[409] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 471.

plausible, and while contemporary audiences may have been more confident in their interpretation of the kenning, this cannot be taken for granted – the frequently noted parallels between kennings and riddles[410] suggest that some degree ambiguity was a given in the interpretation of these structures.

We thus have a structure that is highly concrete in its vocabulary and highly abstractive in its use of that vocabulary. This tension can now be read as another instance of oral language of distance. As explained above, language of distance tends to make use of abstraction. Simultaneously, as Ong argues, orality seems to prefer the concrete to the abstract.[411] When we reconcile these ideas as language of distance occurring in an oral context, the simultaneity of concrete and abstract language in the kenning system ceases to be a contradiction – rather, the kenning represents a compromise between the pressures of orality and those of genre.

3.4 – Abstraction in the kenning system

Thus far, this chapter has focused on the theoretical side of my argument, which required both a workable definition of "abstraction" and a discussion of why we might expect to see abstraction in the context of oral language of distance. Accordingly, the first half of this chapter has often strayed from the actual subject of this dissertation, the kenning. However, now that the theoretical parameters of this question have been defined, the second half of this chapter will highlight specific examples of abstraction in the kenning system. My intent here is to demonstrate the appropriateness of "abstraction" as a defining aspect of the kenning, especially as an alternative to earlier definitions that, I believe, misrepresent kennings by defining them as "metaphoric" or "metonymic" rather than

[410] Lindow, "Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry"; Burrows, "Riddles and Kennings."
[411] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 49.

"abstractive".

This segment will begin with a brief reiteration of these earlier definitions (discussed in more detail in §1.5.1) before diving into a variety of different kenning types, all culled from the Old Norse, Old English and Old Saxon corpora. These different types of kennings, which use a range of strategies to express their referents, have in common that they render these concrete referents in abstract terms. Finally, I will summarize my findings before suggesting some lingering questions, which will lead into this dissertation's final chapter.

3.4.1 – Abstraction as a defining attribute of the kenning

In the previous chapter, I argued that orality is a fundamental criterion of the kenning. Here, I want to demonstrate that another core aspect of the kenning is the abstractive relationship between a kenning and its referent – kennings take familiar, concrete concepts, and render them in obscure, abstract terms. This process of abstraction has been noted before, although under different names. Kennings have frequently been compared to riddles,[412] another genre that takes the familiar and expresses it abstractly, and it has also been suggested that kennings represent a sort of "secret language" intended to exclude outsiders via its impenetrability.[413]

However, most attempts to define the relationship between a kenning and its referent have focused on rhetorical figures, particularly metaphor and metonymy. This approach has resulted in a range of definitions - Frank[414] and Fulk et al.[415] state that kennings are metaphors, while Marold sees both metaphoric and metonymic kennings.[416] Clunies Ross[417]

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[412] Lindow, "Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry."
[413] Marold, *Kenningkunst*, p. 39.
[414] Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry*, p. 43.
[415] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. cxv.
[416] Marold, *Kenningkunst,* p. 31.
[417] Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 51.

and Fidjestøl[418] suggest that they are neither metaphoric nor metonymic, while Schulte[419] suggests that they are both metaphoric and metonymic in some cases and purely metonymic in others.

As discussed in chapter one (§1.5.1), much of this disagreement seems to stem from the use of rhetorical definitions of metaphor and metonymy, which I argue are not well suited to the discussion of linguistic data. Instead, this dissertation uses cognitive definitions of these terms drawn from Radden & Kövecses[420] and Lakoff & Turner,[421] which I argue are more applicable to linguistic data in general, and oral linguistic data in particular (§1.5.2). In the early stages of this project, I had assumed that cognitive definitions of metaphor and metonymy would lead to a clear figurative definition of the kenning, decisively identifying the structure as either metaphoric or metonymic. This is not the case. We see examples of kennings that are metaphoric, metonymic, both metaphoric and metonymic, and neither metaphoric nor metonymic. Furthermore, even with the advantages that cognitive definitions of these terms provide, there exist numerous edge cases where the presence of metaphor or metonymy is arguable.

Ultimately, the relationship between a kenning and its referent is best described as a generally abstractive one. Although metaphor and metonymy are both figurative tools that are frequently used to render this relationship more abstract, both terms are too narrow to encapsulate the entirety of the kenning system. I will demonstrate this below, where I will present specific examples of that are metaphoric, metonymic, metaphoric-metonymic, or

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[418] Fidjestøl, "Kenningsystemet. Forsøk på ein lingvistisk analyse," p. 28.
[419] Michael Schulte, "Kenning, metafor og metonymi - Om kenningens kognitive grunnstruktur," *Edda* 101, no. 1 (2014), pp. 17–31.
[420] Günter Radden and Zoltán Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy."
[421] George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

neither. Although these kenning categories uses different figurative tools to express their referents, in all cases the referents are expressed abstractly. I will finish this section by presenting several examples of edge cases, in which abstractive language is clearly present but the role of metaphor and metonymy are ambiguous. These edge cases are important because they demonstrate the value of abstraction as a defining feature of the kenning when metaphor and metonymy fall short.

A brief note regarding statistics – I have included several percentages below, which are intended to give a *rough* idea of how well-represented certain kenning structures are in this dissertation's corpora. These percentages are broadly accurate but should not be taken as exact counts. While some kennings fit cleanly into certain figurative categories (metaphor, metonymy, etc.), many do not, and the sheer number of edge cases makes it impossible to definitively state the distribution of metaphor or metonymy in these corpora.

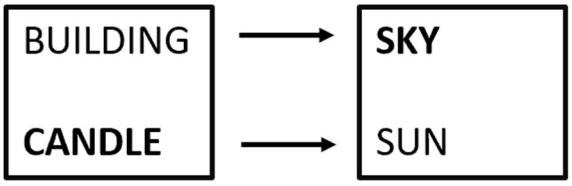
3.4.2 – Abstraction in metaphoric kennings

Of all kenning types, metaphoric ones are the most visible – many well-known examples fit into this category, including the Old English *hronrad* ("whale-road"; SEA)[422], and those scholars who prefer more restrictive definitions of the kenning (§1.2.2) have centered those definitions around these structures, often describing them as "prototypical kennings."[423] Examples of this type of kenning are frequently found in the Old English and Old Norse corpora, where purely metaphoric kennings comprise 10.72% (37/345 kennings) and 16.61% (53/319 kennings), respectively. Old English examples include *scaduhelm*

[422] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 10.
[423] Michael Schulte, "Kenning, Metafor Og Metonymi - Om Kenningens Kognitive Grunnstruktur," *Edda* 101, no. 1 (2014), p. 17.

("shadow-helm"; NIGHT),[424] *banfæt* ("bone-vat"; BODY)[425] and *folces hyrde* ("folk's shepherd"; LORD).[426] Examples from the Old Norse include *greipar brjost* ("breast of the hand"; PALM),[427] *farmr arma* ("cargo of the arms"; LOVER)[428] and *vignestr* ("war-needle"; SPEAR).[429] Such structures are present in the Old Saxon corpus, but they are vanishingly rare – the only unambiguously metaphoric example of a kenning is *lamb godes* ("lamb of God")[430], which has the structure of a kenning and may well have been perceived as such, but is in fact drawn from the Gospel of John.

As discussed in chapter one (§1.5.2), cognitive metaphor occurs when one semantic domain (the target domain) is understood in terms of another (the vehicle domain). [431] Modern examples include TIME IS MONEY (*I wish I had budgeted more time for this dissertation)*, LOVE IS A JOURNEY (*They're going through a rough patch*) and SPACE IS AN OCEAN (*The astronauts boarded the spaceship*). Metaphoric kennings express such a relationship in an extraordinarily compact way, with the base word indicating the vehicle domain and the determinant indicating the target domain. Consider *rodores candel* ("sky's candle"; SUN), which seems to equate the SKY with a BUILDING:[432]



[424]Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 650.

[425] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1116.
[426] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 610.
[427] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 18, l. 8.
[428] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 3, l. 2.
[429] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 6, l. 2.
[430] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 1131.
[431] Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, p. 103.
[432] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1572.

Here, the base word (*candel*, "candle") represents the vehicle domain, which seems to be BUILDING something similar. In turn, the determinant (*rodor,* "sky") indicates the target domain, which is itself the SKY. This establishes a metaphoric relationship, through which the kenning's referent must be intuited. The "sky's candle" must be something within the target domain (SKY) that fulfils the same role that a CANDLE does in a BUILDING. The SUN produces illuminates the SKY just as a CANDLE illuminates a BUILDING, so the kenning's referent is thus the SUN.[433] The intuitive leap from "candle" to the semantic category of BUILDING might seem like a stretch to a modern reader, but this appears to a more specific example of the THE WORLD IS A BUILDING metaphor, which seems to have been fairly widespread. This is demonstrated in other metaphoric kennings, such as the Old English *windgeard* ("wind-dwelling"; SEA), which equates the ocean with a DWELLING,[434] or in the Old Norse kenning *halla gallopnis* ("halls of the shrill-crier [i.e., eagle]"; MOUNTAIN).[435] Other examples of metaphoric relationships that frequently manifest in the kenning system include THE WORLD IS A BODY (Old English *foldan bearm* ("lap of the world"; LAND)[436], *wæteres hrycg* ("water's spine"; WAVE or HORIZON)[437]); Old Norse *floðrif* ("flood-rib"; STONE)[438], A BOAT IS AN ANIMAL (Old Norse *unndyr* ("wave-animal"; BOAT)[439], *viggr byrjar* ("horse of the wind"; BOAT)[440]; Old English *sæhengest* ("sea-steed"; BOAT)[441]), and THE BODY IS A VESSEL (OE *banloca* ("bone-lock"; JOINT)[442], *banfæt* ("bone-vat"; BODY)[443], *bancofa* ("bone-coffer";

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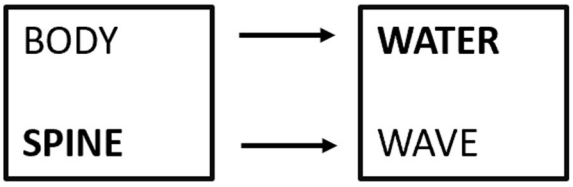
[433] This typical metaphoric relationship was first noted in kennings by Heusler, "Heusler über Meissner, die Kenningar der Skalden," p. 130.
[434] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1224.
[435] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 3, l. 6.
[436] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1137.
[437] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 471.
[438] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 13, l. 6.
[439] Óttarsson, "Hákonardrápa," s. 2, l. 2.
[440] Óttarsson, "Hákonardrápa," s. 5, l. 2.
[441] Brooks, Kenneth R., *Andreas and the Fates of the Apostles*, l. 488.
[442] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 818.
[443] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1116.

BODY)[444]). The aforementioned HEAVEN IS A KINGDOM metaphor also falls into this category, although as noted this metaphor originates not in the kenning system, but rather in the Gospel of Matthew (this would presumably have been known to the composer of the *Hêliand*, but not to the pagan audience at which the poem was directed.

There are many ways in which metaphoric kennings function abstractively, the first of which is their figurative nature. As noted above, the concrete is tendentially *literal,* while the abstract is tendentially *figurative*. This is because literal language simplifies the symbolic relationship between sign and referent, whereas figurative language requires additional steps. If a poet refers to a WAVE as a "wave", the audience must simply recognize the literal sense of the word "wave". The interpretation of the kenning *wæteres hrycg* ("water's spine"; WAVE)[445] is much more complex:



Interpretation of this kenning cannot occur without understanding of two semantic domains, that of the BODY and that of WATER. Here we see another aspect of abstraction – concrete language is usually *specific*, but through metaphor the audience must interact with two *general* categories, that of the BODY and that of WATER. To interpret the kenning, the audience needs to consider the members of the WATER semantic domain (FOAM, CURRENT, RAIN, SPRAY, etc.) and settle upon one that appears correlate to WATER as the determinant

[444] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1445.
[445]Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 471.

(*hrycg*, "spine") correlates to the BODY. As mentioned in chapter one, this is a central aspect of metaphor – the mapping of logical relationships from a source domain to a target domain (§1.5.2). The audience must consider the logical relationship between a SPINE and a BODY (a spine is long and raised) and map it onto the relationship between a WAVE and the WATER (a wave is long and raised). This connects to another aspect of abstraction, namely that of *familiarity*. BODIES and WATER may be familiar concepts, but metaphor forces the use of these familiar concepts in *unfamiliar* ways – the logic of a BODY is used to interpret the movement of the ocean. A metaphoric kenning thus uses *figurative* language to force audiences to engage with *general* categories (rather than *specific* concepts) in *unfamiliar* ways.

It might be noted that, for all the abstraction evident in the relationship between the kenning and its referent, we are still dealing with very concrete entities here – while their figurative interrelations may be abstract, the two categories in play here are quite concrete. However, even this is somewhat unusual in metaphor. In most cases, metaphor maps a concrete domain onto an abstract one – TIME (abstract) IS MONEY (concrete); LOVE (abstract) IS A JOURNEY (concrete); SPACE (abstract) IS AN OCEAN (concrete). As Lakoff and Turner note, this seems to be the value of metaphor in general – it allows us to use concrete concepts, which are much more cognitively salient, to understand abstract concepts, which are more cognitively challenging.[446] This is not the case here – the use of metaphor to designate one concrete entity by way of another concrete entity is cognitively superfluous, offering no clear advantage. It demands abstract, analytic thought from the audience in order to understand a concept that the audience already understands. If this process of abstraction is superfluous in the case of kennings like "water's spine", it is

[446] Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, pp. 63-5.

gratuitous in the case of what I term "redundant" kennings, for example the Old Norse *vægja kind* ("child of swords"; SWORD).[447] Here, the semantic domain SWORD is evaluated via the semantic domain HUMAN - such anthropomorphic metaphors for SWORD seem to be fairly common in early Germanic poetic production,[448] but this one is remarkable in that, cognitively speaking, it is useless. Just as the child of a HUMAN is another HUMAN, the child of a SWORD in this metaphor is a SWORD – redundant kennings like *vægja kind* ("child of swords"; SWORD) thus represent an incredible example of abstraction for abstraction's sake. They take a familiar, physical concept and ask the audience to evaluate it figuratively via abstract semantic categories, only for the answer to be the exact concept the kenning began with.

3.4.3 – Abstraction in metonymic kennings

As we will see in the next section (metaphoric-metonymic kennings), metonymy occurs very frequently in the kenning system. However, purely metonymic kennings are relatively uncommon, although they do exist within all three corpora. They are also a very diverse category, structurally speaking, and use a range of metonymic strategies to express their referents. The Old Saxon and Old English corpora have similar shares of metonymic kennings, at 10.91% (18/165 kennings) and 9.86% (34/345 kennings) respectively. The Old Norse corpus, which makes significantly higher use of metaphoric-metonymic kennings, has only one purely metonymic kennings in a corpus of 319 (0.31%).

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[447] Ögmundarson, "Sigurðardrápa," s. 6, l. 6.

[448] See, for example, Exeter Book Riddle 66 ("Exeter Book Riddle 66: Edited Text & Source Details", ed. Kyle Smith, in Old English Poetry in Facsimile 2.0 (Madison: Center for the History of Print and Digital Culture, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2019-), accessed Feb 02, 2025, https://oepoetryfacsimile.org.). Interestingly enough, Riddle 66 specifically highlights the *inability* of a sword to create its own offspring.

As discussed in chapter one (§1.5.2), cognitive metonymy occurs when "one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target [...]."[449] It also occurs within a single cognitive domain.[450] These are the two key differences between metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor establishes a relationship of resemblance or similarity between two semantic domains. When we use the TIME IS MONEY metaphor, we do so because we perceive a resemblance between these two groups and can apply the logic of the vehicle domain (MONEY) to that of the target domain (TIME). We thus speak of TIME as being *spent*, *saved, budgeted*, *wasted*, etc. Metonymy does not necessarily suggest a relationship of similarity or resemblance, but rather one of adjacency or association. When we say *White House* to refer to the U.S. EXECUTIVE BRANCH, there is no suggestion of a logical similarity between vehicle and target. THE WHITE HOUSE does not resemble the U.S. EXECUTIVE BRANCH – one is a physical building, the other is an organization consisting of physical locations (including THE WHITE HOUSE), employees, bureaucratic standards, etc. At its most basic, metonymy is simply a referential tool – its advantage, cognitively speaking, is that it allows us to use language that is highly salient to refer to less salient entities.[451] THE WHITE HOUSE is a building that is concrete, distinctive, and well known, making it much more cognitively salient than the U.S. EXECUTIVE BRANCH, which is an abstract organization that cannot be easily visualized. Use of metonymy in this case thus "[...] allows an efficient reconciliation of two conflicting factors: the need to be accurate, i.e., of being sure that the addressee's attention is directed to the intended target, and our natural inclination to think and talk explicitly about those entities that have the

[449] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy," p. 21.
[450] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy," p. 21.
[451] Langacker, "Reference-Point Structures," p. 30.

greatest cognitive salience for us."[452] This relationship holds for most examples of conversational metonymy, but like all linguistic processes it is shaped by cultural as well as cognitive demands - in contexts like language of distance, metonymy tends not to be so cognitively useful.

Early Germanic poets use a variety of metonymic relationships in their kennings, some more familiar to us than others. One of the most common ones is PART FOR WHOLE metonymy (often referred to as *synecdoche*), where a part of an entity is used to designate its whole (the classic modern example would be using the term *wheels* to refer to a CAR). Examples include the Old Saxon *seostrom* ("sea-current"; SEA)[453] and *lagustrom* ("sea-current"; SEA)[454] and the Old English *hilderand* ("battle-rim"; SHIELD)[455] and *þrecwudu* ("might-wood"; SPEAR)[456]. The Old Norse corpus yielded no examples of PART FOR WHOLE metonymy, although I suspect examples could be found elsewhere.

In PART FOR WHOLE kennings, the base word expresses an entity that is a part of a larger whole – this "whole" is the kenning's target. The determinant generally serves as a metonymic reference point, allowing the audience to infer the semantic domain that is being referenced. Take Old English *þrecwudu* ("might-wood"; SPEAR) – the base word, *-wudu* ("wood"), is a part of the whole (SPEAR). However, it could be quite challenging for an audience to intuit SPEAR from the word *wudu* alone - many things are made of wood. Accordingly, the determinant *þrec-* ("might") is used to suggest a general semantic domain that the spear is associated with, which we could interpret as PHYSICAL STRENGTH, BATTLE,

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[452] Langacker, "Reference-Point Structures," p. 30.
[453] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 2947.
[454] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 2955.
[455] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf,* l. 1242.. PART FOR WHOLE references to a SHIELD as a *rand* appears to have become so common that *rand* became a poetic synonym for a SHIELD (*Bosworth-Toller*, s.v. "rand," accessed February 7th, 2024, https://bosworthtoller.com/25570)
[456] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf,* l. 1246.

etc. This allows an interpreter to resolve the kenning – a SPEAR is something made of wood associated with BATTLE.

We also see a number of MEMBER FOR MEMBER kennings, in which MEMBER FOR MEMBER replaces PART FOR WHOLE as the metonymic process. The clearest instances of such kennings are found in the Old Norse corpus, examples of which include *mava mœrr* ("marsh of gulls"; SEA)[457] and *gagl Hanga* ("gosling of the hanged one"; RAVEN)[458]. Although both Old English and Old Saxon exhibit MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy in the simplex, instances of MEMBER FOR MEMBER kennings are uncommon and often ambiguous.

The structure of MEMBER FOR MEMBER kennings is much the same as PART FOR WHOLE, with the only difference being the metonymic process used. As in PART FOR WHOLE kennings, the determinant is used to designate the semantic domain in which the kenning's target is situated. For instance, in *gagl Hanga* ("gosling of the hanged one"), "the hanged one" is used to designate ODIN, who is associated with hanging - alternately, "the hanged one" could be taken as a reference to a CORPSE or the GALLOWS. The kenning's base word, *gagl* ("gosling"), is then assessed via MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy. Because a gosling is a member of the BIRD category, this MEMBER FOR MEMBER kenning must then refer to another member of the BIRD category that is associated with ODIN (or CORPSES or GALLOWS).[459] A RAVEN fits these criteria.

Like most kennings, metonymic kennings generally use concrete language – base words and determinants tend to be recognizable, tangible entities like BIRDS, MATERIALS or PEOPLE. But as in the case of metaphoric kennings, this concrete language is employed abstractively. Metonymic kennings are, first of all, *figurative*. A kenning like *mava mœrr*

[457] Boddason, "Þórr's Fishing," s. 6, l. 4.
[458] Óttarsson, "Hákonardrápa," s. 3, l. 2.
[459] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," p. 23.

("marsh of gulls"; SEA)[460] may use concrete vocabulary, but it is abstractive in the sense that it does not designate its referent (SEA) by a literal term - the audience must break down the expression via abstract, analytical thought to arrive at the target.

Furthermore, the interpretation of metonymic kennings is based on *generality* rather than *specificity*. This is most evident in MEMBER FOR MEMBER kennings, which rest on a familiarity with abstract semantic categories (BIRDS, MAMMALS, BODIES OF WATER, etc.) – without active knowledge of these categories, instances of MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy cannot be interpreted. The same is true in PART FOR WHOLE kennings, which force the audience to interpret the target as both a general category and a specific entity. In the kenning *hilderand* ("battle-rim"; SHIELD)[461], the target (SHIELD) can only be arrived at because the audience recognizes it not only as a discrete object, but as a composite – there is the specific item (a SHIELD), but also the more general category (SHIELD), which includes such things as RIM, BOSS, WOOD, NAILS, COVERING, HANDLE, STRAP, etc. A capable interpreter or composer of kennings must be able to engage in this abstractive process, which transforms tangible things into semantic groupings. It is also worth noting that, from a cognitive salience perspective, people generally prefer to use "wholes" rather than "parts" as metonymic vehicles[462] – PART FOR WHOLE kennings do the opposite, demanding that an audience work against cognitive preference in the interpretive process.

Finally, metonymic kennings function abstractively because they render their referents *unfamiliar* instead of *familiar*. Certain kennings perform this role more than others. An audience familiar with armed conflict, for instance, would probably not find "battle-rim" much more unfamiliar than "shield" (at least conceptually – the phrasing "battle-rim" is

[460] Boddason, "Þórr's Fishing," s. 6, l. 4.
[461] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf,* l. 1242.
[462] Langacker, "Reference-Point Structures," p. 30.

certainly unfamiliar). However, what would the audience make of a *gagl Hanga* (“gosling of the hanged one”; RAVEN)? RAVENS are familiar things – they are numerous, prefer to live around humans, and have a distinctive call. A “gosling of the hanged one”, on the other hand, is a deeply strange image – the individual components (GOSLING, HANGING) might be familiar to an early Germanic audience, but the composite image must have been an unfamiliar one indeed.

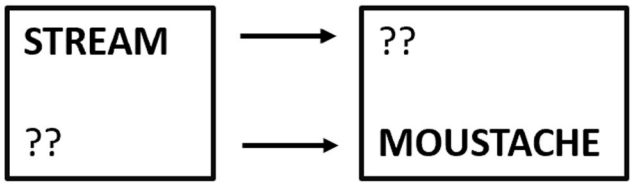
3.4.4 – Abstraction in metaphoric-metonymic kennings

Beyond purely metaphoric or metonymic kennings, we also see a significant number of metaphoric-metonymic kennings, in which both processes are active. Metaphoric-metonymic kennings closely resemble metaphoric kennings, but the presence of metonymy does add an additional interpretive step that is not present in metaphoric kennings. Metaphoric-metonymic kennings are typical of the Old Norse corpus, where they comprise 22.88% (73/319 kennings). They represent approximately 10.14% of the Old English corpus (35/345 kennings) and are essentially absent from the Old Saxon corpus, with the exception of several disputable edge cases.

Metaphoric-metonymic kennings resemble metaphoric kennings because they exhibit the same basic structure. Consider the kenning *granstraumr* (“moustache-stream”; SPEECH)[463]. Semantically, this is a metaphor in which SPEECH is understood as a STREAM that flows from a person’s mouth and, as in a metaphoric kenning, the base word designates an entity in the vehicle domain (STREAM). In a purely metaphoric kenning, we would expect the determinant to then designate an entity in the target domain. However, the determinant

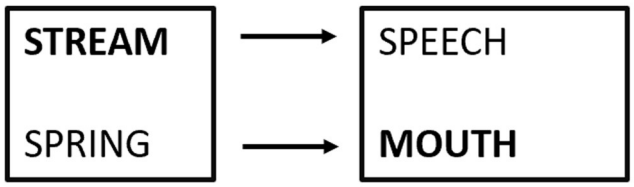
[463] Goðrúnarson, “Þórsdrápa,” s. 3, l. 5.

in this kenning is *grön* (“moustache”), which does not allow for a clear mapping between the vehicle and target domains:



In cognitive metaphor, the logic of the vehicle domain must be mapped onto that of the target domain. But if the vehicle domain must contain STREAM and the target domain must contain MOUSTACHE, it is difficult to think of logical mappings (SOUP perhaps?).

In cases like this, it seems that the determinant must be read metonymically. Via PART FOR WHOLE metonymy, *grön* (“moustache”) can be taken as standing in for MOUTH or FACE. Alternately, it could be interpreted as standing metonymically for the LIPS, which a moustache covers. Whichever of these options is used, the metaphoric mappings are far more obvious, leveraging the SPEECH IS A LIQUID metaphor:[464]



Successful interpretation of a metaphoric-metonymic kenning thus requires an extra interpretive step – to parse the metaphoric sense of the kenning, one needs to understand the metonymic relationship between the determinant and the semantic domain it

[464] SPEECH IS A LIQUID seems to have been an established metaphor with a mythic connection in the tale of Odin and the mead of poetry. This metaphor also has modern currency – consider phrases like *torrent of words* or *word-vomit*.

designates. These kennings are abstractive in the same manner that metaphoric and metonymic kennings are abstractive but leverage *both* metaphor and metonymy as abstractive processes.

Metaphoric-metonymic kennings are most frequent in the Old Norse corpus – examples include the aforementioned *granstraumr*, as well as *Endil's Mo* ("Endil's Mo"; SHIP)[465], in which *Mo* (a famous steed)[466] stands in for the HORSE domain via PROTOTYPE FOR CATEGORY metonymy. Examples may also be found in Old English, such as *lindplega* ("linden-play"; BATTLE)[467], in which *lind* ("linden"), a common wood for martial gear, must be parsed as SHIELD or SPEAR via PART FOR WHOLE metonymy. Another potential example is the famous crux, *ealuscerwen* ("ale-dispensing"),[468] which appears to refer to Beowulf's conflict with Grendel. Recognition of this structure as a metaphoric-metonymic kenning gives us a potential solution, with *ealu* ("ale") standing in for BLOOD via MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy (both ALE and BLOOD are LIQUIDS, an active category in MEMBER FOR MEMBER).[469] The kenning entire can then be taken as having the sense of "dispensing of blood", a metaphor comparing the spilling of gore to the serving of ale (such a metaphor also parallels the narrative context of the fight, which occurs within Heorot, an ale-hall).

3.4.5 – Kennings in circumlocutory kennings

Of all the different kenning types, circumlocutory kennings are the most ignored. are the most ignored. Scholars, particularly in the Old Norse context, frequently exclude this category from discussions of the kenning, and even studies that consider these circumlocutions to be kennings often give them short shrift (§1.2.2). This is presumably due

[465] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 3, l. 8.
[466] Marold, "Þórsdrápa," pp. 82-3.
[467] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1073.
[468] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 769.
[469] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," p. 23.

to their structure, which is less obviously "poetic" than that of other kenning types. They express a concept obliquely through characteristics, actions or descriptions, and they follow the determinant/base word structure of kennings. However, the relationship between a circumlocutory kenning and its target is not metaphoric or metonymic – it is literal. Circumlocutory kennings include what Snorri Sturlusson refers to as *viðkenningar*, which refer to specific individuals through their distinguishing characteristics or familial ties,[470] but circumlocutory kennings also refer to things or locations as well.

Circumlocutory kennings are the most common type. They represent a remarkable 58.18% of the Old Saxon corpus (96/165 kennings), followed by the Old English at 49.28% (170/345 kennings) and the Old Norse at 31.03% (99/319 kennings). Old Norse examples include *faðir Magna* ("father of Magni"; THOR)[471] and *fleygjanda auðs* ("flinger of wealth"; LORD)[472], while Old English examples include *sunu Healfdenes* ("son of Halfdan"; HROÐGAR)[473] and *laðgeteona* ("harm-doer"; FOE)[474]. In Old Saxon, where circumlocutory kennings represent the overwhelming majority, examples include *thiodo drohtin* ("lord of the people"; JESUS)[475] and *uuepanberand* ("weapon-bearer"; WARRIOR)[476].

In some ways, circumlocutory kennings exhibit a lesser degree of abstraction than metaphoric or metonymic kennings. First, they are not figurative – referring to THOR as *faðir Magna* ("Magni's father") may be oblique, but it is also an entirely literal designation. Second, the tendency towards defamiliarization does not seem as pronounced in simple

[470] Sturluson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 188.
[471] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 22, l. 2.
[472] Óttarsson, "Hákonardrápa," s. 6, l. 1.
[473] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 344.
[474] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 974.
[475] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 1994.
[476] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 2779.

circumlocutions. In calling a LORD a *fleygjanda auðs* ("flinger of wealth")[477] or a *baggebo* ("ring-giver")[478], the poet is referring to a familiar entity (that of a LORD) by way of one of their most typical societal functions (the distribution of wealth). Similarly, circumlocutory kennings often employ kinship terms (e.g., *sunu Healfdenes* ["son of Halfdan"; HROÐGAR][479]), which may refer to the kenning's referent in an oblique manner, but also serve to socially embed that referent in the larger fabric of kinship. In these senses, circumlocutory kennings lack much of the abstraction typical of other kennings, which often designate their referents by way of strange images and cognitively demanding figures of speech. This difference is frequently noted, and likely accounts for many scholars' hesitancy to include these structures in the same category as metaphoric and metonymic kennings.

However, circumlocutory kennings also exhibit abstraction in ways that metaphoric and metonymic kennings do not. For one, they seem to use the most intangible language of any kenning type. Terms like Old Norse *auðr* ("wealth") and Old English *laþ* ("harm"), which are not well-represented in metaphoric or metonymic kennings, occur with some frequency. WEALTH and HARM may not seem like excessively abstract concepts to us, but it should be noted that they are quite abstract in comparison to the concepts generally used in kennings, which tend to be concrete specifics (RAVEN, SEA, SWORD). WEALTH and HARM do not refer to concrete entities, but rather more general intangible categories or qualities. This abstractive language is also evident in the verbally derived nouns that often serve as base words in circumlocutory kennings*,* which include nominalized participles (e.g., Old Saxon -*berand,* "bearing one") or agentives (e.g., Old English -*geteona,* "doer"). Such terms deemphasize the concrete or specific quality of their referents, instead creating large

[477] Óttarsson, "Hákonardrápa," s. 6, l. 1.
[478] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 2738.
[479] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 344.

abstract groupings based around actions or qualities. As a category, DOER includes any entity that "does" anything (anything animate, essentially), while BEARING ONE includes anything capable of bearing something. Abstract language of this type is very rare in metaphoric or metonymic kennings.

The referent of a circumlocutory kenning is also rendered more abstract because it is presented not as a specific entity, but rather as a collection of traits or associations. A DEER is a specific, tangible figure, but the *Beowulf* poet instead refers to it as a *hæðstapa* ("heath-stepper")[480]. Even as a literal, rather than figurative, designation, this circumlocution is abstractive because it presents a DEER as a confluence of two broader categories – things that walk and things that are found on a heath. Abstract thought is thus demanded from both audience and composer, who need to think of a DEER not just as a familiar "thing", but as a concept that can be analyzed, broken down into certain categories and traits by which it can be recognized. Such modes of analytic thought may seem barely abstractive to a modern audience, which I suspect is part of the reason that circumlocutory kennings are often excluded from the kenning category by modern scholars. However, it is important that we remember the social context in which these kennings were used, one in which literacy was either rare or absent. Modern highly literate populations familiarize themselves with abstract categorization and analytic thought from a fairly young age, particularly in a classroom context.[481] What seems like a fairly straightforward circumlocution to us ("something that has legs and lives on the heath") could have still represented a significant challenge to an early Germanic audience that, unlike modern individuals, was not trained from early on to engage in abstract analytic thought (consider, for example, the ubiquity of

[480] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1368.
[481] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 58.

abstract questions of the *X is to Y as A is to B* format in many standardized tests administered to children). In much the same way, it is possible that the metaphoric kennings we now find so difficult ("bone-vat"?[482] "lynx-ocean"?[483] "acorn of the deep"?[484]) would have been comparatively easy for an early oral audience, raised on riddles and wordplay.

3.4.6 – Abstraction in edge cases

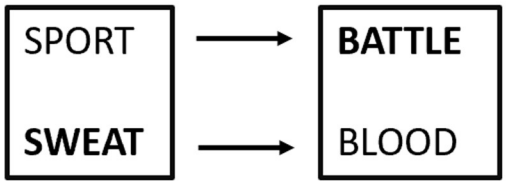
Above, I have presented four categories of kennings: *metaphoric*, *metonymic*, *metaphoric-metonymic*, and *circumlocutory*. These types are not new – they correlate roughly to the subdivisions frequently found in earlier studies of the kenning system, and I have generally used paradigmatic examples that best represent these categories. My intent in addressing each of these categories has not been to propose a complete taxonomy of kennings, but rather to demonstrate the presence of abstraction in each of the categories that kenning studies frequently identify. In fact, the above taxonomy is far from complete, and necessarily so – even with cognitive definitions of metaphor and metonymy, which I have argued are more clear-cut than rhetorical ones, any attempt to treat the kenning system taxonomically creates as many problems as it solves.

There are several reasons for this. First of all, any of the figurative categories we might use to sort kennings (metaphor, metonymy, etc.) are essentially literate terms, resulting from the sort of intensive metalinguistic study that literacy enables.[485] Accordingly, they are conceptual categories that did not exist as the kenning system came into being, and we have no way of knowing whether kenning users subscribed to a similar understanding of different "types" of kennings, at least until literate metalinguistic treatises

[482] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1116.
[483] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 6, l. 4.
[484] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 11, l. 1.
[485] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 8-9.

like the *Skáldskaparmál* came into being. Second, these categories struggle to identify longer kennings, in which poets appear to be perfectly satisfied mixing instances of metaphor, metonymy and circumlocution. In order to identify a three-, four- or five-layer kenning as "metaphoric", it is necessary to consider each sub-kenning within that kenning individually, an analytic process that, again, cannot be readily performed without a physical text to repeatedly refer back to. Finally, beyond the paradigmatic examples I have used above, we see innumerable edge cases that cannot be definitively said to belong to one specific category. Numerous kennings can be interpreted metaphorically *or* metonymically *or* circumlocutorily, and any attempt to create a taxonomy that accounted for every nuanced combination of these expressive strategies would result in categories so granular as to be unusable. Of course, this is a fundamental characteristic of categorization in general – any abstract model, be it economic, linguistic, scientific, or otherwise, sacrifices accuracy for workability. This is generally a necessary sacrifice, but in the case of kennings such categories give us a false impression of uniformity and consistency, one that is predicated on our retroactive interpretations of a system that is very rarely uniform or consistent.

Consider, for example, the Old English *heaþoswat* ("battle-sweat"; BLOOD)[486]. I believe this represents a MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymic kenning, with SWEAT standing in for another member of the LIQUIDS category, BLOOD. However, this kenning could just as easily be taken as cognitive metaphor, with mapping occurring between the domains of BATTLE and SPORT:



[486] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ll. 1460, 1606, 1668.

Such a metaphor functions well, presenting a clear analogy. BLOOD flows off the body in BATTLE just as SWEAT pours off the body in SPORT. BATTLE IS SPORT is also a well-demonstrated metaphor, as attested by the number of kennings that equate war with physical play (e.g., Old Saxon *uuapno spil* ("play of weapons"; BATTLE)[487], Old Norse *skalleikr Heðins reikar* ("bowl-play of the Heðinn of the parting"; BATTLE)[488]). Alternately, one might wonder if this is even a kenning at all – if it weren't for the textual contexts of this compound, which make it quite clear that BLOOD is the intended referent, we would be fully justified in interpreting "battle sweat" as SWEAT SHED IN BATTLE. Furthermore, the word *swat* appears in certain contexts to refer to BLOOD directly,[489] allowing the structure to be taken as a literal compound for BLOOD SHED IN BATTLE. The structure *heaþoswat* ("battle-sweat"; BLOOD)[490], is thus a remarkably rich interpretive opportunity for the audience – it can be parsed as a metaphoric-metonymic kenning, a metaphoric kenning, a literal reference to SWEAT, or a literal reference to BLOOD. None of these readings are "correct" or "incorrect" – they are simultaneously present, creating a poetic phrase rich with layer upon layer of densely compacted denotative and connotative meaning.

Consider also kennings like *skautjölfuðr* ("sail-bear"; BOAT)[491]. To me, this is clearly a metaphoric-metonymic kenning. *Jölfuðr* ("bear") seems to refer to a HORSE via MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy, while *skaut* ("sail") metonymically refers to the domain of the SEA. Together, this gives us a standard A BOAT IS A HORSE metaphor:

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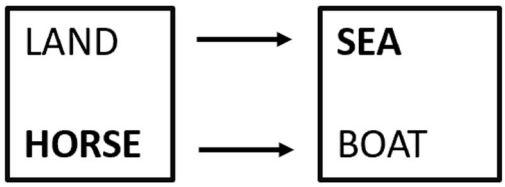
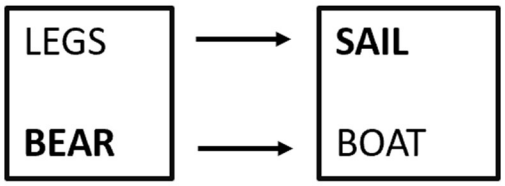
[487] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 4686.
[488] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 12, l. 8.
[489] *Bosworth-Toller*, s.v. "swát," accessed May 6th, 2025, https://bosworthtoller.com/029562)
[490] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ll. 1460, 1606, 1668.
[491] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 4, l. 2.



But are we justified in ascribing metonymy here? Perhaps this kenning was meant to be taken as a direct metaphor, with a BEAR being compared directly to a BOAT. This produces acceptable cognitive mappings as well – a SAIL could be read as the bear's LEGS (both are means of propulsion), or perhaps as its HIDE (which covers a bear as sails cover a ship):



Is BOAT even the correct reading of this kenning? This is a sub-kenning in a larger *tvíkent* kenning, *skyldir skautjalfaðar* ("commander of the sail-bear"),[492] generally taken as meaning SAILOR. But why not read *skautjölfuðr* as a metaphor for a SAILOR instead of a BOAT? Comparisons between people and bears are certainly common enough in early Germanic verse. The larger kenning *skyldir skautjalfaðar* ("commander of the sail-bear") then would mean CAPTAIN or LORD (a commander of sailors), a perfectly valid reading.

Abstraction is clearly at play in these two examples – although both have concrete, familiar referents (BLOOD, BOAT), those referents are expressed via figurative, defamiliarizing language ("battle-sweat"; "sail-bear"). What is not clear in these two

[492] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 4, l. 1.

examples is the role of specific figurative structures like metaphor and metonymy. This illustrates the difficulty of defining kennings using concepts like these. To claim that all kennings are, metaphoric, metonymic, or some combination of the two is not only unnecessarily narrow – it is also a claim that simply cannot be demonstrated with respect to numerous edge cases. These kenning categories may make use of different strategies to express their referents obliquely, but in each case an entity is abstracted from concrete, familiar reality.

3.5 - Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have often criticized metaphor and metonymy as defining criteria of kennings. However, my point here is not that the action of metaphor and metonymy in kennings should be ignored – these concepts are useful tools, and they allow us to pick up on trends and tendencies in the poetic corpora, as evidenced by the sub-categories discussed above. Rather, my point is that when we discuss metaphor and metonymy in an oral, early Germanic context, we are discussing underlying thought processes in populations that existed roughly a millennium before us, thought processes that are only partially understood even today. Accordingly, when we attempt to define all kennings as “metaphoric” or “metonymic”, we are making an extraordinarily prescriptive claim, essentially asserting that these structures, interpretively rich and ambiguous though they are, have a single, “correct” method of interpretation.

Instead of metaphor or metonymy, I have attempted to define kennings through “abstraction”. There are certainly issues with this interpretation. Some difficulties stem from the partial unknowability of “abstraction” in an early Germanic context. Certain aspects of my definition of abstraction are fairly objective. For instance, most objects that we consider *tangible* were almost certainly considered *tangible* by early Germanic poets – ROCKS, I

suspect, are more concrete than IDEAS, wherever, whenever and whoever you might be. Criteria like *familiarity* are more difficult to gauge. We can make educated guesses, but no more. Also problematic is the difficulty of defining "abstraction" operationally, which makes it an essentially broad term.

With those caveats, I do think abstraction, as I have defined it here, is a process we see in all kennings, and thus a sound criterion for defining the structure. Furthermore, the abstract-concrete dichotomy is one that aligns with other theoretical frameworks mentioned above, including Ong's arguments about orality and literacy, concepts of cognitive salience expressed by Langacker, Lakoff & Johnson, Radden & Kövecses, and Koch & Oesterreicher's proximity/distance model. At minimum, I hope I have clearly demonstrated two things in this chapter: a) that attempts to define all kennings through the lens of metaphor or metonymy do not quite hold water; and b) that all kennings appear to perform *some* process which takes that which is basic, familiar and clear, and renders it complex, foreign and obscure.

This process is reminiscent of the "dual impact" that Overing speaks of in Old English kennings, by which a reader simultaneously perceives the referent of a kenning and the tools the poet used to express that referent.[493] Abstraction, I believe, is what enables this sort of double vision. Kennings demands abstract thought for interpretation – they refer to concrete things, but those concrete things must be conceptualized abstractly, in terms of categories and attributes, in order to understand the kenning. In a sense, kennings seem to offer an "exploded view" of their referents, one that maintains the visibility of the concrete referent while also highlighting its qualities, its associations, its contexts. Consider one of

[493] Overing, "Some Aspects of Metonymy in Old English Poetry," p. 87.

the edge case kennings we have just discussed, *skautjölfuðr* ("sail-bear"; BOAT)[494]. To call a BOAT a "sail-bear" is to conjure innumerable connotative connections – we see a BOAT, to be sure, but we also see a clumsy BEAR thrashing through the waves. We may also see a HORSE, metonymically designated via MEMBER FOR MEMBER, bearing its riders across the sea. We think of a SAIL and the members of the semantic domain it conjures, of RIGGING and WIND and WOOD. We might ponder the metaphoric mappings (does the SAIL in the kenning represent the LEGS of the HORSE? Could the RIGGING be the REINS? The BENCHES the SADDLE?) or we might try to solve it metonymically – is it PART FOR WHOLE? Does "sail" stand for BOAT? Is it a "boat-bear"? A SAILOR? A WARRIOR? Does "sail" stand for BOAT and "bear" stand for HORSE? What would a "boat-horse" be? A ROWING BENCH, which is ridden as a person rides a horse? Kennings contain metaphor *and* metonymy *and* circumlocution, but to my mind it is reductive to define kennings narrowly as "metaphoric" or "metonymic" or "circumlocutory" or some combination thereof, because when we lose sight of the multiplicity of potential interpretative techniques, we also lose sight of what likely made kennings compelling. A kenning, ultimately, demands that you *think*.

This chapter has left one question unanswered: why? Why would early Germanic poets take concrete concepts and render them as abstractly as possible? What benefit is gleaned from forcing audiences to think obliquely? How is it rational to use such language in an oral context, where it is already difficult enough to reinforce poetry against being forgotten? I have mentioned several times in this chapter that the structure of kennings often contradicts even basic principles of cognitive salience – why then do we have these structures, structures that actively push back against what we understand to be our essential cognitive preferences? I suggest that kennings in general, and their abstractive

[494] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 4, l. 2.

tendencies in particular, are motivated by “play”, as understood anthropologically. “Play” of this type is not simply leisure – rather, it represents a form of training, one that equips players to navigate unforeseen situations and ideas. Play, its purpose, and its implications for the kenning system will be the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR – KENNINGS & PLAY

4.1 – Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I have demonstrated several ways in which kennings appear to function counter to our expectations. In chapter two, we looked at kennings as oral structures, discussing certain attributes of the kenning system (novelty, recursion, syntactic non-contiguity and non-literal designation of referents) that seemed to clash with technologically deterministic theories of orality. The chapter concluded that this apparent contradiction could be reconciled by viewing kennings as oral language of distance – kennings exhibit characteristics of both typical oral expression and of formal, elaborated language of distance.

In chapter three, we looked more closely at one specific attribute of the kenning: their tendency to refer to their referents in non-literal or indirect terms. This quality was of particular interest because it did not seem to fit readily into Koch and Oesterreicher's definition of language of distance, which does not make specific claims about figurative or indirect language. The chapter thus argued that Koch and Oesterreicher's framework ought to be expanded to include "abstraction" and "concreteness" as verbalization strategies of language of distance and proximity, respectively. The integration of this abstract-concrete dichotomy into Koch and Oesterreicher's theory not only allowed us to better understand kennings' tendency to refer to their referents figuratively but also served as a springboard towards defining kennings more accurately. Studies of the kenning generally define the structure using concepts such as "metaphor" or "metonymy", which are difficult to apply consistently. The second claim of the previous chapter was thus that "abstraction" represented a better way to define the kenning, given that the concept encompasses a wide

range of strategies (including metaphor and metonymy) that kennings use to express their referents in unusual, unfamiliar ways.

Fundamentally, the previous two chapters paint a picture of tension in the kenning system. On the one hand, kennings function under the pressures of orality, which demands that language be mnemonically coded. We see this in kennings' repetition, formulaicness, metrical embedding, redundancy, and concreteness (§2.3). On the other, kennings bear many hallmarks of language of distance, which tends to privilege language that is elaborated, abstractive and complex. We see this in kennings' novelty, recursive structure, syntactic non-contiguity, and abstract reference to concrete entities (§2.4). We have considered *how* kennings represent a stress point between language of distance and orality, but the question of *why* remains. What is the point of the kenning? Why did early Germanic society develop such language, particularly in the context of orality, with which many hallmarks of the kenning stand in competition?

This final chapter proposes an answer to this question, suggesting that the creation and use of kennings was motivated by the process of *play*, as defined by anthropologist Stephen Miller in 1973.[495] At first glance, play may seem a lazy way to rationalize the apparent contradictions between the kenning system and its oral context, but as we will see, play is not simply a loose category of idle actions. Rather, play is a specific way of approaching certain tasks (language use, in this case) that helps players experiment, build flexibility and develop competence. Play is also a fundamentally human act, and a seemingly universal one. But surprisingly enough, particularly for a structure that bears such similarities to riddles, kenning researchers are often hesitant to consider play as a factor (§1.6.1).

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[495] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing."

I argue that this is an error for two key reasons. The first of these is that, when we do not pay attention to play in the kenning system, we also ignore play's result – *fun* or *enjoyment*. We then find ourselves attempting to study a poetic system while ignoring the ways in which that poetry might have been enjoyable to its composers and its audiences. Oral societies may, as Ong argues, create and consume poetry because it is societally useful – it encodes linguistic information in a mnemonically useful format.[496] Individuals, however, create and consume poetry because they enjoy it. When we lose sight of this, we come to conclusions like the hard mnemonic conception of kennings, which suggests that these structures are simply a mechanistic response to maximize recall. But as we have seen in previous chapters, this conclusion does not match reality.

The second reason that we ought to consider play in kennings is simply that it works. As we will see below, Miller's framework meshes cleanly with the kenning system, not simply in terms of what play looks like, but also in terms of what purpose play serves. Viewed as play, the contradictions between the structure of kennings and the demands of orality melt away – these are not contradictions after all, but examples of experimentation. In the kenning system we see an effort to test the boundaries of orality, to see how oblique and abstract language can become while still remaining comprehensible and mnemonically viable. At the end of this chapter, we will consider some potential instances in which this experimentation seems to have paid off, helping early Germanic populations expand their linguistic resources and adapt to incipient literacy.

This chapter will begin in a discussion of Miller's theory, with particular emphasis on the qualities of play and its supposed evolutionary purpose. Afterwards, we will return to the distinctive qualities of the kenning discussed in chapter two (§2.3; §2.4), demonstrating how

[496] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 33-6.

these attributes represent clear examples of experimental play. Finally, I will discuss some of the ways in which the experimentation inherent in kenning-based play benefited early Germanic societies, preparing them for the new linguistic demands of literacy. The final segment of this chapter will also consider how literacy slowly undermined kennings as structures of play, before addressing some lingering theoretical questions and concluding.

4.2 – Defining play

I have already briefly discussed Miller's theory in chapter one, largely with respect to its relation to the broader literature on kennings (§1.6.2) – here, I will focus primarily on the theory itself.

In certain ways, a discussion of play resembles the discussion of abstraction in the previous chapter. In both cases, we are presented with a phenomenon that is easy to recognize but difficult to define. Miller notes, for instance, the readiness with which people can identify physical play not only in other humans, but in animals as well[497] - it represents a behavior "of which everyone has a good intuitive grasp but little or nothing in the way of concepts that lend themselves to articulation".[498] As with Carrol's subjects, who could confidently articulate which texts were concrete and which were abstract, we find ourselves in another Justice Potter Stewart situation: we know play when we see it.

The difficulty in defining play stems primarily from the sheer variety of activities that constitute play, which include "gamboling puppies, little girls pretending to be their mothers, older children playing organized games, and adults immersed in hobbies or gambling".[499] These activities share very few obvious similarities, and yet all of them we regard intuitively

[497] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 88.
[498] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 87.
[499] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 87.

as play[500]. Miller, however, circumvents this issue by approaching play not as a specific *activity*, but rather as a "context" or "mode of organization of behavior".[501] Put simply, play is not an action that we perform – rather, play is a collection of attitudes and behavioral tendencies that we bring to a wide range of actions. When playing, there is no end to the range of activities we might perform – an individual might on the same Saturday *play* catch with their child and *play* six hours of a torturously detailed board game. What makes these activities play is not that they resemble one another (for the most part, they do not), but that they are approached in a similar way. In particular, two approaches seem to characterize play – a focus on ends over means, and what Miller calls "galumphing".

4.2.1 – Ends and means

In defining play, Miller places emphasis on "ends" and "means". "Ends" here refers to the result or goal of an activity – in a game of chess, for instance, the "ends" would be checkmating the opponent's king, whereas when cooking at home, the "ends" might be feeding oneself. "Means", on the other hand, refers to the various processes that lead to those ends. In chess, this would be the movement of various pieces, attempts to control the center of the board, and so on. In cooking, this would be chopping, peeling, rinsing, simmering, etc. – all the various actions necessary to break ingredients down into a digestible meal.

Miller argues that the "mode" of play is characterized by the subordination of ends and the prioritization of means. When we are not playing, "activities are under the control of goals – means are marshalled at the service of ends."[502] The reverse is true in play, where

[500] With the possible exception of gambling, which has taken on more the color of a disordered or addictive activity in the decades since Miller's article.
[501] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 92.
[502] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 91.

"[…] the means are given much freer sway. […] The process becomes play when it becomes interesting in itself."[503] When we work, we attempt to achieve our goals as efficiently and effectively as possible using the means at our disposal. When we play, the result becomes secondary – the actual enjoyment of play is derived from the process of achieving the result, not the result itself.

Let us return to our two previous examples – the chess player and the home cook. Chess is a game – it represents play, and indeed the fun of chess stems from the *process* of playing the game – strategizing, attacking, defending, etc. A checkmate may be the desired outcome, and it may be one that both players work efficiently towards, but it is "[…] by itself meaningless". Miller demonstrates further:

> "[…] imagine a clerk who considers his job purely business miraculously given his paycheck without having to execute the usual means to it, and a chess player miraculously handed a checkmate without having to play the game. The pleasure of the worker will be diminished far less than that of the player."[504]

Similarly, there are many people who would be thrilled to have a hot meal on the table without needing to shop and chop – for these people, cooking is a task. But there are also people for whom cooking is a hobby. These people do not necessarily want a casserole, but they do want to cook a casserole.

These examples reiterate the importance of thinking of play as a mode rather than an action. This is a key distinction not only because it highlights how the same activity (e.g., cooking) can be a chore for some and play for others, but also how the same activity can be either a chore *or* play for the same person. I myself enjoy cooking, but there are nights when my only goal is to put together a meal as quickly as possible. Similarly, the incidence of cheating scandals in the upper echelons of chess emphasizes that the game of chess is not

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[503] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 91.
[504] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 93.

a game for everyone – for some players, particularly those with a significant reputational or financial stake in the game, the ends take priority over the means, and chess ceases to be play.

This distinction is important in the discussion of kennings because, in certain early Germanic contexts, kennings were the purview of a professional poet class, who earned their keep through composition. It would be absurd to suggest that such individuals *never* engaged in play via kennings, but it would also be absurd to suggest they always did - poets need to eat too, and presumably much of their production was oriented not around the process of composition, but rather around the goal of getting paid. I argue in this chapter that kennings are structures of play, which is to say that they likely emerged through play and were broadly used with play in mind. I am not attempting to argue that all kennings were used playfully for *everyone* at *all times*.

It is also worth taking a second to clarify what is understood by "fun" or "enjoyment" here. Miller connects the kind of pleasure derived from an activity's means to *Funktionslust* ("functional pleasure")[505], a term coined by Karl Bühler[506]. Miller characterizes this as "a pleasure of doing, of the act of producing an effect, not of attaining the effect or result itself."[507] Fun of this type is more subjective. Unlike "gratification pleasure", which results from the fulfillment of universal or near-universal human drives (eating, drinking, sex, comfort, etc.)[508], individuals differ vastly in their taste for one form of play or another. Additionally, enjoyment of this type is not always obvious,[509] particularly in adult play. A child may well laugh and grin as it builds towers of blocks and sends them tumbling to the

[505] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 91.
[506] Karl Bühler, *The Mental Development of the Child* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1930).
[507] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 91.
[508] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 91.
[509] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 91.

ground, but an adult building a Civil War diorama in the basement may not display the same joyful affect. Both are engaged in play, as demonstrated by their deep engagement with the means or processes of their respective tasks, but their behavior might seem very different to the external viewer.

4.2.2 - Galumphing and metaplay

The second approach that appears characteristic of play is what Miller describes as "galumphing."[510] Initially, Miller cribs this term from Lewis Carrol in order to distinguish play fighting from real fighting in baboons. When actually in combat, baboons act in a way that is "quick, efficient, and clearly purposive."[511] When playing, on the other hand, their motor patterns: "[...] involve much flailing, bobbing, exaggeration, and indirect, ineffective action. In short, the appearance of baboon play has a unique 'galumphing' quality."[512] Similarly inefficient motor patterns in play can be readily observed in birds, humans, and in any animal that engages in play.

As described above, "galumphing" is a very physical process, and it is difficult to see this "galumphing" exemplified in our examples of chess or hobby-cooking, where despite evidence of process-oriented enjoyment, our "players" are still behaving (or at least doing their best to behave) efficiently and effectively. However, Miller extends this notion of "galumphing" beyond the physical, using the word "as a shorthand term for 'patterned, voluntary elaboration or complication of process, where the pattern is not under the dominant control of goals'."[513] As we have discussed, in play the focus is on the process, not the end goal – Miller is here arguing that when we focus on process in play, we elaborate

[510] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 92.
[511] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 89.
[512] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 89.
[513] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 92.

those processes in specific ways, intentionally placing obstacles and complications in our path, obstacles and complications which are *patterned*, not random.[514] The complication of process is varied, but often incorporates repetition, exaggerated or uneconomic action, and the use of familiar behaviors in novel contexts or sequences.[515]

Galumphing, in the sense of "patterned, voluntary elaboration or complication of process," is evident in all forms of play. In the example of baboon play fighting, we see this voluntary complication of process in the intentional use of inefficient movements, the unnecessary repetition of specific movements, and the incorporation of motor patterns from other activities (e.g., acrobatics, mounting, chasing, etc.).[516] These complications are patterned in that they are consistent – baboons in play fights may vary the kinds of complications they use (between the aforementioned chasing, acrobatics, inefficient movement, etc.), but a single approximate set of complications defines "play fighting". We do not, for instance, see a baboon complicate a play fight by only using its feet. Baboons are capable of this, and using only the feet would certainly complicate the fight, but this simply does not belong to the pattern of complications associated with play fighting.

We also see patterned complication of process in our hobby-cook, who elaborates the process of cooking in innumerable ways. They might experiment with novel ingredients, techniques, or dishes, and will often cook inefficiently (simmering longer, marinating in advance, etc.) for the sake of presentation or flavor, which are themselves "complications", at least with respect to the creation of the final dish. If galumphing were not a factor and play was defined only by a focus on means rather than ends, this would not be the case – a hobby-cook would simply be somebody who had a really good time baking unseasoned

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[514] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," pp. 92-3.
[515] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 89.
[516] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 89.

chicken breasts in the oven every day (conversely, if galumphing were the *only* factor in play, then anybody putting a modicum of effort into cooking would be a hobby-cook, even if they regarded the task as a chore). The complications of cooking are also "patterned" as in baboon play – if they were not, a cook would complicate their cooking entirely randomly (cooking with a blindfold, making pasta in milk instead of water, etc.). Hobby-cooking and baboon play are both "practice" play – they are predicated on specific, real-world activities (cooking and fighting). However, galumphing presents differently in the abstract realm of rule-bound play (e.g., chess). In rule-bound play, the "patterning" of galumphing is much more obvious – there exists an explicit set of agreed upon rules, which are fixed. These rules are complications – they make it harder to achieve the game's goal and prolong and elaborate its process.

Although Miller does not make this point, it is worth noting that galumphing allows us to understand the phenomenon of metaplay or "playing-with-play". Examples of recursive play are particularly common in video games, including speed runs (where individuals attempt to complete a video game in the minimum number of turns, seconds, etc.) or "ironman" runs (in which a player allows themself only a single life – if they die once, the game is over). This indicates that galumphing can be applied to things that already represent "play", in essence creating a new game with additional complication and elaboration. Metaplay of this type is interesting because it appears to be an example of practice play (in which the complications are individual and self-imposed), where what is being practiced is play, rather than non-ludic skill like cooking or fighting. Because metaplay is rooted in a synthetic rule-bound game (and not a basic necessity), that game can often adapt to these forms of metaplay – many video games, for instance, now incorporate "ironman" options or requirements. The process of metaplay seems to be cyclic. Once new

complications are introduced, they are slowly adapted to. They may ultimately lose their value as "galumphing" because they have become part of the furniture – the game thus ceases to be a game. Individuals may then begin imposing complications and elaborations themselves – they are now galumphing again, which makes the game "play" once more. These self-imposed complications, if they become popular enough, may then become codified in the original game, and the process begins anew. The process of metaplay, which we will touch on later, gives us a way to understand how structures of play (such as the kenning system) may evolve cyclically, becoming vastly more complex and intricate over time.

4.2.3 – Why play?

As stated above, play is defined by two traits. The first of these is an emphasis on ends over means. When we engage in task-oriented work, means are subordinated to ends – we take those actions that we believe will lead to a desired outcome most efficiently. In play, on the other hand, the journey is the destination. Ends become of secondary importance to us, and we derive enjoyment not from the fulfilment of those ends, but rather from the process of attempting to achieve them. When we focus on these means, we tend to do so in a particular manner – we "galumph". As described by Miller, galumphing is the "patterned, voluntary elaboration or complication of process, where the pattern is not under the dominant control of goals."[517] This is the second trait of play. In play, when we approach a task, we make that task more difficult to achieve – we do this by deliberately imposing obstacles or complications on ourselves. These complications may be extremely elaborate (as in many rule-oriented games) or they may be comparatively simple (as in the token motor movements of play-fighting). However, they are always patterned in some way and

[517] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 92.

are always self-imposed. They also often incorporate repetition, exaggerated or uneconomic action, and the use of familiar behaviors in novel contexts or sequences.[518]

Having defined play, Miller is left with a lingering question: what is play actually for? We have touched on process-oriented enjoyment (which Miller connects to Bühler's idea of *Funktionslust*), and enjoyment is motivation enough for individuals to engage in play. However, this practice is questionable at the population level – if play occurs when people perform activities inefficiently with a lessened focus on their outcomes, what benefit could this behavior possibly have for a species as a whole?

Miller emphasizes two. The first benefit is obvious – practice. When individuals perform a skill repeatedly, they become more proficient in it, which is beneficial.[519] A hobby-cook may fritter away hours playing in the kitchen, but when they need to cook in a task-oriented manner, they will do so in a highly efficient manner, much more so than somebody who *only* cooks in a task-oriented manner. The hobby-cook simply has more experience. Practice is especially relevant in forms of play like hobby-cookery or carpentry, which despite the subordination of ends remains very closely tied to a specific, quotidian task (unsurprisingly, Piaget terms these types of play "practice play")[520]. However, practice also plays a role in more abstracted forms of play. Chess, for instance, does not directly remember any human activity apart from chess. However, a chess player must draw on certain capacities (long- and short-term planning, reading an opponent, abstract thought) that are beneficial in innumerable other tasks.

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[518] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 89.
[519] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 95.
[520] Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, trans. C. Gattegno and F.M. Hodgson (New York: Norton & Co., 1962), pp. 110-113.

The second advantage of play is less obvious but no less important. Play, Miller argues, is important because it develops "recombinatorial freedom",[521] the ability to piece together established behaviors and information a) in novel combinations; and b) in response to novel challenges. Play, essentially, is experimentation – when we galumph, we create new hurdles and complications for ourselves and then try to overcome them. When we play, we practice adaptability, which gives us a significant advantage when we encounter new "real" (i.e., not self-imposed) challenges. As Miller states: "The organism that plays is more capable of coming up with novel behavior; the organism that is efficient and flexible is more adaptable than the one that is more efficient but unable to experiment with useless, 'unproductive' activities."[522] This is, according to Miller, part of what separates organisms that are sometimes thought of as "programmed" from those that are not, citing the example of water shrews, which become so rigidly accustomed to known pathways that they will "change only with the greatest of difficulty. They may, for example, break their necks by jumping into a familiar pond that has recently been drained."[523] In play, we apply *known* abilities to *novel* tasks, and in life, we are often called upon to do the same.

4.3 – Play and Kennings

In the preceding section, I summarized Miller's definition of play in general terms. Now, I will apply this definition to the kenning system in particular. First, I will discuss Miller's notion of "means and ends" in the kenning system, where we will see clear evidence of a focus on process over outcome. This is particularly evident in the "inefficient" structure of kennings, as well as the difficulty of their interpretation, which together indicate that the usual "ends" of linguistic expression (i.e., the communication of information) are being

[521] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 96.
[522] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 96.
[523] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 96.

subordinated. Afterwards, I will focus on the ways in which galumphing is realized in the kenning system. In doing so, I will return to those aspects of the kenning that were mentioned in chapter two: novelty, recursion, syntactic non-contiguity and oblique reference. As discussed, these aspects seem at odds with kennings' status as oral formulae but make much more sense when we consider the role that language of distance and abstraction play in the kenning system. As we will see below, they are also clear examples of galumphing. After establishing that the kenning system represents an example of play as defined by Miller, we will turn to some potential benefits of this system. As we discussed above, the advantage of play is that it equips us to marshal our behavioral resources in response to new challenges. Below we will look at some ways in which the kenning, as an example of experimental linguistic play, may have helped oral populations to adapt to novel linguistic situations.

4.3.1 – Ends and means in kennings

Per Miller's definition, if kennings represent structures of play, then we ought to see evidence of a focus on means rather than ends. It should be clear that the enjoyment associated with kennings is process-oriented, not centered on the attainment of a specific goal. In many ways, this is a difficult claim to generate – joy leaves no fossils. However, there are reliable signs that the pleasure of kenning was deeply process-oriented.

First, what are the "ends and means" of kennings? Kennings are, fundamentally, language, and language has innumerable functions. However, the most basic goal of language is the transmission of information – language allows us to communicate with one another, and every other role that language plays (be it cultural, aesthetic, social, political, etc.) is predicated upon this capacity. Kennings are linguistic structures and accordingly share this goal – the "end" or "goal" of a kenning is the communication of its referent.

The "means" of language are slightly more complicated because communication is a two-way street. Generally speaking, these "means" are the processes that are necessary to make information transfer successful. In the case of the speaker this is the *production* of language, while in the case of the listener this is the *processing* of language. In the context of kennings, this also translates to a bifurcation of means – for the poet (i.e., the "speaker"), the means are the creation of a kenning, while for the audience (i.e., the "listeners"), the means are the interpretation of the kenning.

The clearest evidence that kennings subordinate ends to means is likely their length. In every case, a kenning is longer and more complex than it needs to be. This is a result of a kenning's fundamental structure – it combines two nouns to express an unspoken target concept. If the focus were on the "ends" (i.e., communication), then why leave the target concept unspoken? It is far easier to express the concept of a RAVEN by calling it a "raven" than it is to call it a "blood-goose". As Fidjestøl notes, when a poet uses a kenning they functions as "the opposite of the normal language user, because his expressive needs are of a very specific type. Despite the fact that he is a professional user of language, he has very little that he wants to say" (*Skalden opptrer sä ä seie som antipoden til den normale språkbrukaren, fordi Hans uttrykksbehov er av saereigen art. Trass i at han er ein profesjonell språkbrukar, har han nemleg lite han skal ha sagt.*).[524] Consider the first stanza of Guðormr Sindri's *Hákonardrápa* (kennings have been **bolded and underlined**:[525]

[524] Fidjestøl, "The Kenning System. An Attempt at a Linguistic Analysis," p. 28.
[525] Whaley, *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, p. 157

Bifr**auknum** trað **bekkjar**
bláröst konungr órum;
mætr hlóð mildingr Jótum
Mistar vífs í **drífu**.
Svangœðir rak síðan
sótt Jalfaðar flótta
– **hrót Giljaðar** hylja –
hrafnvíns at mun sínum.

(The king trod the blue trail in
shuddering **draught animals of the rowing-bench** (BOAT) with oars; the
excellent generous one heaped up the
Jótar in the **snowstorm of the woman of Mist** (BATTLE). The **benefactor of the swan of raven-wine** (WARRIOR)
then pursued those who
fled with the **illness of Jölfuðr**
(SPEAR) at his pleasure; **the roofs of Giljaðr** (SHIELDS) conceal [them].)

Despite the intricacy of this poetic stanza, the actual information communicated is fairly limited – essentially, all this stanza is saying is: "The king sailed and killed many Jutes, then pursued the survivors." Kennings play a significant role in expanding this stanza far beyond the point of necessity, taking simple concepts (BOAT, BATTLE, SPEAR, etc.) and expressing them in lengthy terms. If this were not play, kennings would be viewed as unnecessary obstructions to the goal of comprehension and nobody would use them. But people did use them, which tells us that the process of interpretation was intentionally prolonged, presumably for the sake of enjoyment. The presence of process-oriented enjoyment is also reflected in the similarities between kennings and riddles, with which they are often compared.[526] In both cases, enjoyment is derived from the process of gleaning an answer from an oblique description or characterization. Without this process, a riddle (or a kenning) is pointless: "I am a raven. What am I?"

[526] Lindow, "Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry," p. 311.

4.3.2 – Galumphing in kennings

We have established that, in kennings, enjoyment must have been derived from means rather than ends. The next aspect of play is then the manner in which those means are elaborated, namely galumphing. As stated above, galumphing is the "patterned, voluntary elaboration or complication of process, where the pattern is not under the dominant control of goals."[527] This is often characterized by repetition, exaggerated or uneconomic action, and the use of familiar behaviors in novel contexts or sequences,[528] and examples of these qualities are easily found in the kenning system. In fact, many of the clearest examples of galumphing are also examples of those kenning attributes discussed in chapter two (novelty, recursion, syntactic non-contiguity and non-literal designation of referents) that appeared to be surprising for structures in an oral context. This section will discuss galumphing in kennings with particular reference to these attributes.

4.3.3 – Novelty

As discussed in chapter two (§2.4.1), early Germanic kennings (with the notable exception of the Old Saxon corpus) are frequently novel – in both Old Norse and Old English, we see numerous examples of kennings that are otherwise unattested. This fact challenges Ong's assertion that oral cultures are so "highly traditional or conservative" that it "inhibits intellectual experimentation."[529] However, the composition of novel kennings represents a clear example of galumphing.

As noted, repetition is one of the most common hallmarks of galumphing.[530] Repetition may seem an unusual concept to mention in the discussion of novel kennings, but

[527] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," pp. 92-3.
[528] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 89.
[529] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 41.
[530] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 89.

most novel kennings are, at least at a structural level, quite repetitive. As noted previously, Grendel is referenced by innumerable hapax legomena, among them *mearcstapa* ("march-stepper")[531], *dædhata* ("deed-hater")[532], *sceadugenga* ("shadow-goer")[533] and a *cwealmcuma* ("murder-visitor").[534] All of these kennings are novel – they are also all patterned identically. Each is a circumlocutory kenning, designating GRENDEL literally, if obliquely, and each also uses an agentive as its base word (-*stap**a*** ("stepp**er"**); -*hat**a*** ("hat**er**"); -*geng**a*** ("go**er**"); -*cum**a*** ("visit**or**", literally "com**er**")). This structure is well attested beyond Grendel as well – a LORD may be a *beaga brytt**a*** ("giv**er** of rings")[535] and a DEER may be a *hæðstap**a*** ("heath-stepp**er**")[536]. This repetition is typical of galumphing, where a player will perform an action again and again and again, often with slight variation. Miller gives the parallel example of object-oriented play in young children, who will take objects and use them repeatedly in slightly different capacities.[537] Kennings appear to be used in a similar manner. Once a general kenning structure has been established, it is used repetitively, essentially testing its capacity and adaptability.

These repetitive kenning structures are not only used repetitively – they are applied to new kenning targets, demonstrating another common facet of galumphing, namely the use of familiar behaviors in new contexts.[538] In chapter two, I mentioned the PIECE OF IRON kennings, a cluster of four kennings from the *Þórsdrápa* ("The Poem of Thor") that refer to a red-hot piece of iron that Thor must eat. This PIECE OF IRON becomes a *segi tangar*

[531] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1348.
[532] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 275.
[533] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 703.
[534] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 792.
[535] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 35.
[536] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1368.
[537] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 91.
[538] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 89.

("morsel of tongs")[539], a *þang tangar* ("seaweed of tongs")[540], a *sylgr siu* ("swig of the spark")[541] and a *nest meina* ("provision of harm")[542]. In chapter two, we simply looked at these four examples as an idiosyncratic category. However, we are now equipped to see them as an example of metaplay.

Given both the number of attested kennings (only the four listed above) and the infrequency with which rough chunks of iron play a significant role in early Germanic poetry, it seems probably that PIECE OF IRON was not a kenning category that emerged early on – Meissner certainly doesn't list it in his catalogue of kenning referents.[543] Presumably, kennings initially became more common in reference to entities central to early Germanic culture (BOATS, WARRIORS, LORDS, etc.). These are also the kenning referents that are most frequently attested. However, like any game that has been played too long, such kennings became a little stale – they had been used so frequently to refer to certain referents that they were no longer uneconomic or exaggerated. Essentially, they stopped being play. It then became necessary to use the process of kenning, which had at this point become a familiar behavior, in new contexts – poets began coining kennings in reference to more niche categories, beginning the process of galumphing anew.

4.3.4 – Recursion

Recursion is another odd tendency of kennings, primarily those in the Old Norse corpus. Recursion (described in more detail in §2.4.2) refers to the placement of a kenning inside another kenning (and another, and another) – a relatively simple example would be

[539] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 16, l. 6.
[540] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 17, l. 2.
[541] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 18, l. 3.
[542] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 19, l. 8.
[543] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*.

meiðr morðteins (“pole of the murder-stick”; WARRIOR)[544]. The first kenning here is *morðtein* (“murder-stick”)[545], which refers to a SWORD. Once this kenning has been solved, it may then serve as a determinant in the next kenning layer. *Meiðr morðteins* (“pole of the murder-stick”) is thus read as “pole of the SWORD”, which refers to a WARRIOR (in Old Norse poetry, people are often characterized as “poles” or “trees”). This two-layer recursive kenning is, in fact, a comparatively simple one – this dissertation’s corpus contains four-layer kennings such as *fjarðeplis mœrar legs menn* (“men of the grave of the moor of the fjord-apple”; GIANTS)[546], or *hneitir fjalfrs alfheims bliku kalfa* (“defeater of the calves of the hiding place of the gleam of the elf-world”; THOR)[547], as well as a single five layer kenning (which will be discussed below)[548]. The larger skaldic corpus includes examples of six- and seven-layer kennings.

The contradiction between these poetic structures and Ong’s conceptions of orality are readily apparent. Ong suggests that oral populations shy away from subordinative structures.[549] However, recursion of this type is not only subordinative, but subordinative to the point of near absurdity. Although it does not mesh with Ong’s conception of orality, it reads readily as an example of galumphing, one of the characteristic features of which is behavior that is “exaggerated or uneconomic.”[550]

Kenning recursion is indisputably uneconomic. A kenning is already an essentially uneconomic structure, given that it always uses two words to express a concept that could be expressed in a single word. When a poet uses recursion, they deepen this basic

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[544] Ögmundarson, “Sigurðardrápa,” s. 2, l. 1.
[545] Ögmundarson, “Sigurðardrápa,” s. 2, l. 2.
[546] Goðrúnarson, “Þórsdrápa,” s. 16, l. 4.
[547] Goðrúnarson, “Þórsdrápa,” s. 21, l. 1.
[548] Goðrúnarson, “Þórsdrápa,” s. 9, l. 5.
[549] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 37-8.
[550] Miller, “Ends, Means, and Galumphing,” p. 89.

inefficiency, using three or four or five words to express a concept that could be expressed in one. This playful lack of economy makes good sense as galumphing – the poet is placing obstacles in their own way, attempting to coherently express a basic concept using more words than is necessary. If, as Ong suggests, subordinative structures do actually pose a problem for oral expression, this only makes these obstacles greater. By using subordination of this type, especially unnecessary subordination, the poet is testing the expressive capacity of the language.

It is clear that recursive kennings are uneconomic, but are they actually exaggerated? Would contemporary audiences have perceived something unusual or comical in the use of this recursive structure again and again and again? This is more difficult to determine, but it seems likely. For the first, the recursive subordination of so many nouns is unlike anything seen elsewhere in extant early Germanic corpora, whether poetry or prose. Absent any other examples of such a structure, it seems probable that recursive kennings would have represented an intentional exaggeration. Furthermore, the behaviors that are exaggerated in play are generally behaviors that are seen in non-play contexts (where they are not exaggerated). Recursion is certainly evident in non-play contexts – it is a basic capacity of language. Consider the phrase *my wife's brother's friend*, in which one noun phrase (*friend*) is a part of another (*brother's friend*), which is a part of another (*my wife's brother's friend*). This phrase may be a little unwieldy, but it is not uneconomic or exaggerated (i.e., it is not "play"), because it is necessary – if I use the phrase *my wife's brother's friend*, it is because my interlocutor does not know the person in question. However, when a poet mentions the "defeater of the calves of the hiding place of the gleam of the elf-world", their audience knows perfectly well who THOR is. Such phrases exaggerate recursion, taking a feature of the Old Norse language and highlighting its

function via its superfluity. This exaggeration seems also to have been an example of meta-play, meta-play that ultimately became stale. Writing in the early 13th century, hundreds of years after the kennings discussed here were composed, Snorri Sturluson specifically advises against the use of any kenning with more than five recursive layers, while conceding that earlier poets did often exceed this limit.[551]

4.3.5 – Syntactic non-contiguity

Another attribute that reflects Miller's idea of galumphing is the syntactic structure of kennings, which is often non-contiguous – despite the fact that a kenning constitutes a single noun phrase, the components of that noun phrase is often strewn across the poetic stanza. This phenomenon occurs only in the kennings of the Old Norse corpus, where it is very common – as discussed in chapter two (§2.4.3),
a full third of the Old Norse kennings in this dissertation's corpus exhibit non-contiguous structure.

A good example of a non-contiguous kenning (also listed in chapter two) can be seen in the first stanza of Guðormr Sindri's *Hákonardrápa*:

Svangœðir rak síðan	The **benefactor of the swan** pursued
sótt Jalfaðar flótta	then those who fled with the illness of
– hrót Giljaðar hylja –	Jölfuðr; the rooves of Giljaðr conceal
hrafnvíns at mun sínum.	[them], **of raven-wine** at his pleasure."

Here, the kenning *svangœðir hrafnvins* ("benefactor of the swan of raven-wine"; WARRIOR)[552] is split in two, with the first half (*svangœðir*; "swan-benefactor") separated from the second (*hrafnvins*; "raven-wine") by two entire poetic lines. Again, we see a direct parallel to galumphing, particularly in galumphing's use of "novel sequences". In play, per Miller, familiar

[551] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. xlviii.
[552] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 5.

behaviors "occur in combinations and permutations seldom possible in the non-play context in which the behaviors often occur."[553]

Any discussion of "correct" syntax is fraught, doubly so in the discussion of oral societies that have been minimally affected by the standardization that goes along with literization. However, there is reason to believe that syntactic discontinuity of this type would have represented something unusual. To my knowledge, there is no evidence of discontinuity of this type occurring in any other genre of Old Norse poetry or prose, and it also seems that discontinuity of this type would represent a significant obstacle to the successful interpretation of a kenning. In the stanza above, an audience is given the first half of the kenning, "swan-benefactor". They then must process two further poetic lines, which themselves contain two *other* kennings (*sott Jalfaðar*; "illness of Jölfuðr" or SPEAR[554] and *hrot Giljaðar*; "rooves of Giljaðr" or SHIELD[555]). Only after these two additional lines, and two additional kennings, is the audience presented with the kenning's second portion, *hrafnvins*. Crucially, the audience receives this information orally. They cannot backloop and check the first half of the kenning again, and accordingly they must remember the kenning's first half, while interpreting and processing two *additional* kennings, before finally being able to complete and parse the full structure. This would have made interpretation difficult, which is the point – by shuffling a familiar linguistic structure into a novel sequence, the poet galumphs, voluntarily creating challenges for themselves and for their audiences.

4.3.6 – Oblique Reference

The last of the four puzzling kenning characteristics discussed in chapter two is that of oblique reference – although kennings refer to known concepts, they never refer to those

[553] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 89.
[554] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 6.
[555] Sindri, "Hákonardrápa," s. 1, l. 7.

concepts directly (i.e., by name). Instead, they refer to them using periphrastic structures and figurative language (such as metaphor and metonymy). As noted (§1.2.2), this is one of the most fundamental aspects of a kenning - even the earliest definitions of the structure stipulate that a kenning must consist of two elements, which together refer indirectly to a third concept. In some ways, this process makes sense from the standpoint of orality – kennings may refer to concepts obliquely, but they are also formulaic, which Ong notes can represent an advantage from a mnemonic point of view.[556] However, they also contradict several of Ong's proposed psychodynamics of orality. In particular, these circumlocutory references are grounded in abstract-analytic categories, challenging Ong's assertion that oral populations minimize abstract thought and expression in favor of concrete, situational frames of reference.[557] Because this process of oblique reference is universal to kennings, it is found across all three of this dissertation's corpora.

Although kennings use a range of techniques to designate their referents obliquely, these techniques all bear hallmarks of galumphing. Specifically, they are "uneconomic"[558] – in the practical calculus of ends and means, a kenning is a fundamentally inefficient structure, using two (or more) words where one would suffice. This is readily apparent in periphrastic kennings, which occur frequently across all three corpora but dominate the Old Saxon corpus in particular – kennings like *helmberand* ("helm-bearer"; WARRIOR)[559], *baggebo* ("ring-giver"; LORD)[560] and the omnipresent *barn godes* ("child of God"; JESUS)[561] all

[556] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 36.
[557] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 49-57.
[558] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 89.
[559] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 765.
[560] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 2738.
[561] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, ll. 760, 983, and many, many others.

designate simple concepts via periphrastic language which hinges on an understanding (both on the part of the poet and the audience) of abstract semantic categories (§3.4).

Periphrastic kennings of this type are, at minimum, literal – a WARRIOR really does wear a helm, and a LORD really does distribute rings. Accordingly, the lack of economy in periphrastic kenning structures is relatively minor in comparison with metaphoric and metonymic kennings, which designate their referents figuratively. There is nothing inherently uneconomic about figurative language – in fact, it is frequently the opposite. We do not, for instance, perceive inefficiency in any discussion of *astro**nauts***, *space**ships*** or *space**ports***, language which leverages the SPACE IS AN OCEAN metaphor. Metaphor of this type is useful to us because it expresses SPACE, an environment that is unfamiliar and abstract to most, using the OCEAN, a comparatively concrete semantic frame – a great number of people have seen or been on the ocean, and those who have not will often at least have some general understanding of SHIPS, SAILORS and the SEA. Most conversational metaphor exhibits a relationship of this type – it expresses an abstract domain via a concrete one.[562] Concrete concepts appear to hold greater cognitive salience than abstract ones,[563] and using the former to express the latter seems to be cognitively economic.

Kenning metaphor does not follow this trend, because it tends not to deal with abstract domains at all. In calling the SEA a *windgeard* ("wind-yard")[564], the *Beowulf* poet uses one concrete domain (LAND) to refer to another concrete domain (SEA). Audiences thus must navigate a metaphor that is being used "superfluously" – a basic, familiar concept is being used as a lens through which to understand... a basic familiar concept. For

[562] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, pp. 49-54; 73; and Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," pp. 28-9.
[563] Langacker, "Reference-Point Structures," p. 30.
[564] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1224.

comparison, we might imagine a modern-day COWS ARE DOGS metaphor, whereby COWS were conceptualized through concepts associated with DOGS. We might call COWS "bovine dogs" that make a certain noise (a "cow bark") and eat hay (which, of course, we now call "cow kibble"). Such a metaphor is, on its face, ridiculous. However, it is not ridiculous because of some essential incompatibility of COWS and DOGS in a metaphoric relationship – in fact, COWS and DOGS are very similar (much more similar than Earth's OCEAN and OUTER SPACE), and it is not difficult to make clear logical mappings between the two semantic domains. This metaphor is ridiculous because it doesn't *do* anything – it portrays one concrete concept using an equally concrete concept, thus adding an interpretive challenge where one need not exist. Of course, this is what galumphing is – the placement of unnecessary challenges.

This process is present in metonymic kennings as well, with the distinction that metonymy is subject to different principles of cognitive salience. Metonymy is generally a referential structure – it is efficient because it lets us highlight those things that are relevant while still being accurate.[565] An example (using CONTROLLED FOR CONTROLLER metonymy[566]) might be a phrase like *The trains are on strike*, where *trains* are metonymically used to refer to TRAIN OPERATORS. This metonym highlights what is relevant to the speaker – not that the train operators are striking, but that the speaker cannot take a train. Metonymic kennings invert this relationship of relevance. When a RAVEN is referred to as a "gosling of the hanged one"[567], there is no GOSLING present in the narrative at all – they, unlike RAVENS, are entirely irrelevant. As in the case of kenning metaphor, we see a familiar figurative structure being employed in a novel context where it is not actually useful.

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[565] Langacker, "Reference-Point Structures," p. 30.
[566] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy," p. 40.
[567] Óttarsson, "Hákonardrápa," s. 3, l. 2.

Metonymy in kennings thus contributes to the general challenge of interpretation – they demand additional cognitive resources while offering none of the cognitive benefits of conventional metonymy.

4.3.7 – Concluding thoughts on kenning-play

In the examples above, we have reviewed several examples of play in the kenning system. We first discussed the prioritization of means over ends in kennings, which is most readily demonstrated by the sheer number of words used by poets to express a fairly small amount of information. When kennings are used, the results (conveying information) play second fiddle to the process (expressing that information), which is extended far beyond what is necessary. As Miller notes, when players focus on the means of an activity, they engage with those means via “galumphing”, which he defines as "patterned, voluntary elaboration or complication of process, where the pattern is not under the dominant control of goal.”[568] Above, we have also looked at several examples of galumphing in the kenning system, in which the process of kenning interpretation is intentionally complicated via the coinage of new kennings and kenning categories, the use of unwieldy recursive structures, the shuffling of kennings into unusual syntactic structures, and the intentionally oblique reference to familiar entities. These examples not only fit the general definition of galumphing as the creation of self-imposed obstacles, but also directly reflect several common characteristics of galumphing behavior noted by Miller, including repetition, exaggerated or uneconomic action, and the use of familiar behaviors in novel contexts or sequences.[569]

[568] Miller, “Ends, Means, and Galumphing,” p. 92.
[569] Miller, “Ends, Means, and Galumphing,” p. 89.

As noted above, the clearest examples of galumphing in the kenning system are also examples of those kenning characteristics that seem most at odds with the oral context in which kennings emerged: novelty, recursion, syntactic non-contiguity and oblique reference (§2.4). This is not a coincidence. Galumphing occurs when we place obstacles in our own path, but what actually constitutes an "obstacle" varies from person to person and from context to context. Here, we are discussing an oral context, and we have seen that those aspects of kennings that represent galumphing are the selfsame aspects that seem most incompatible with orality. According to the calculus of practicality, obstacles are to be circumvented. Kennings, however, are not practical – they represent play, and play demands obstacles. Novelty, recursion, syntactic non-contiguity and oblique reference are all problematic for oral expression, and it is precisely this that makes them the best possible avenue for the intentional complication of process.

It is worth briefly noting here that this notion of play touches on far more than simply kenning structures – indeed, it seems to be a useful way of considering poetry in general. I have framed this as experimental play, but it also could perhaps be taken as "ornamentation", which kennings are often considered - there are some parallels here. An ornament is also "unnecessary" and "difficult", but results in some sort of pleasure. We generally consider pleasure derived from play and beauty to be different, but it could be that there is some overlap. In any case - the two are not mutually exclusive, and many of the things that make kennings effective from a standpoint of play could also make them effective from a standpoint of aesthetics, and vice versa.

Recall the reasons that play is important, from an evolutionary perspective. By intentionally placing obstacles in our own way, we train ourselves to respond to new circumstances – we take whatever resources we have at our disposal and recombine them

to overcome new challenges, practicing adaptability and experimentation.[570] Miller frames this advantage broadly, suggesting that general flexibility seems to be the central advantage of play. However, the example of kennings in an oral context is a demonstration of how play may naturally "target" certain phenomena. Users of the kenning are playing with language, and in an oral context, certain linguistic structures (e.g., recursion, non-consecutive syntax, etc.) may be more challenging to engage with. If humans did not play, these structures would be avoided, but humans do play, and the difficulty of these structures makes them compelling obstacles for galumphing. Play does not only train us to adapt in general – it forces us to engage specifically with the things that are difficult for us.

Below, I will present several potential benefits of kennings as play, specific arenas in which the experimentation inherent in galumphing appears to have "paid off". In particular, I want to consider the onset of literacy, and the ways in which kenning-based play may have given oral Germanic societies certain tools to approach this novel linguistic environment. As we have seen above, poets and audiences seem to have used kennings to push the boundaries of what could be efficiently expressed in an oral context. Many of the skills exercised by pushing these boundaries are also valuable ones in the context of literacy.

4.4 – Galumphing into literacy

Throughout this dissertation, I have repeatedly highlighted situations where kennings do not appear to behave as expected in an oral context. I have suggested above that this is due to galumphing, by which poets engaged in play intentionally use techniques that are more difficult to employ in an oral context. Certain of these techniques, although orally demanding, ended up being extremely typical of more textual cultures. Examples of this phenomenon, in which kenning-play appears to have inadvertently created practice

[570] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," pp. 95-6.

scenarios for a culture of incipient literacy, are found in areas such as metalinguistic thought, grammatical subordination, and the generation of abstract vocabulary. For the sake of space, this dissertation will focus on a single prototypically literate skill trained by kennings - sequential abstract analysis, or as Walter Ong terms it, "study."

Per Ong, what we now think of as "study" is an inherently literate practice. He writes:

> "All thought, including that in primary oral cultures, is to some degree analytic: it breaks its materials into various components. But abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of phenomena or of stated truths is impossible without writing and reading. Human beings in primary oral cultures, those untouched by writing in any form, learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom, but they do not 'study'."[571]

Ong suggests that this is the case for several reasons. As discussed previously, he suggests that analytic thought of the type necessary for creating abstract categories is not readily possible in oral cultures.[572] He also appears to later suggest that sequentiality is, to some extent, a literary creation – human thought tends to be loosely episodic (as is generally reflected in the episodic nature of oral narratives), whereas the permanence of writing allows a string of events or concepts to be pinned down in a fixed order.[573] Finally, he notes that without this permanence of writing, it is difficult to have an "object" of study, something durable that can be carefully analyzed again and again and again. Ong gives the example of the early study of rhetoric, which was possible only because literacy allowed a speech to be transcribed – without a written record, any given speech remains evanescent and thus cannot be fully remembered, let alone studied.[574] The inability to keep durable records also poses difficulties from the standpoint of sequentiality. Literate study is sequential because it builds on itself. This dissertation makes a fine example – the

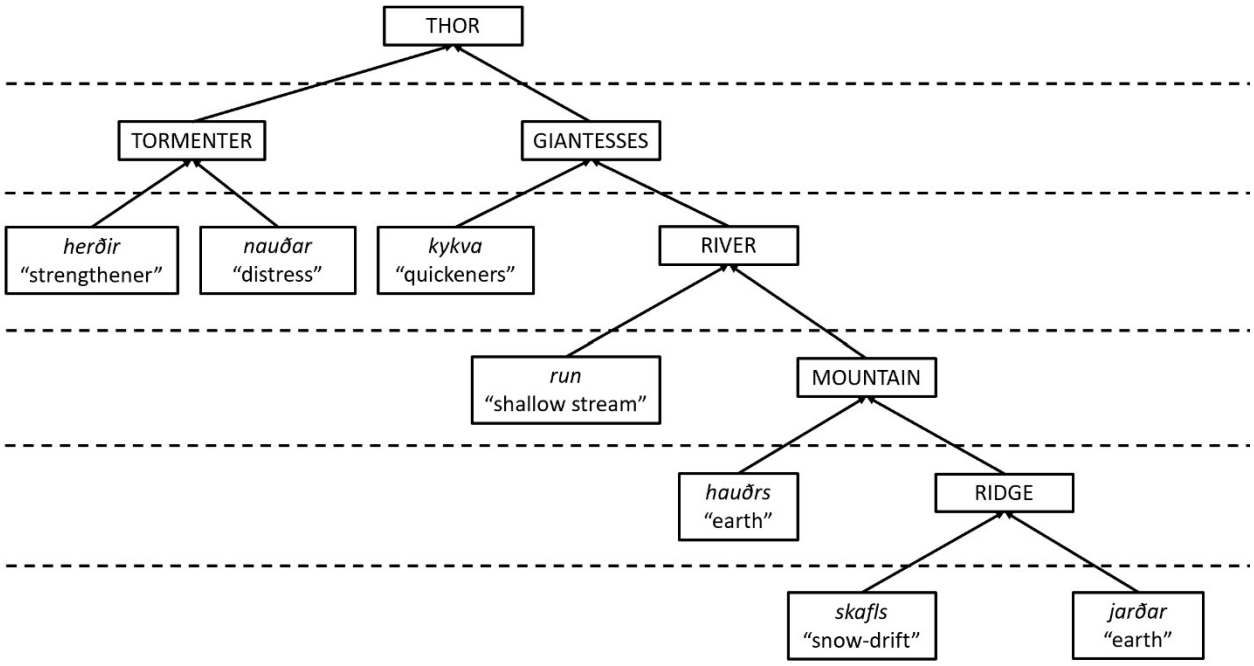
[571] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 8-9.
[572] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 49.
[573] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 145-7.
[574] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 9.

arguments I have made here are contingent upon arguments made by others, which in turn are predicated on earlier arguments, and so on and so forth. All of this information is recorded textually, and necessarily so – it would be impossible for any one person to recall every study that contributed to this dissertation alone, let alone the innumerable concatenation of all the studies those studies were predicated upon, *and* the studies that spawned those studies, and so on and so forth.

Ong is generally correct in his argument – "study", as it is conceptualized by modern, literate societies, is not something we find readily in primary oral societies. But, as we have repeatedly demonstrated, Ong's more totalizing claims must be taken with a grain of salt. Without the technology of writing, which allows for the durable encoding of vast amounts of information, sequential abstract analysis may not be possible, at least on the scale possible in literate cultures. However, sequential abstract analytic *thought* is very possible – indeed, kennings cannot be created or interpreted without it.

Consider this kenning, which is the longest in this dissertation's corpus: *herðir hauðrs runkykva nauðar jarðar skafls* ("increaser of misfortune of the quickeners of the stream of the earth of the snowdrift of the earth"; THOR)[575]. The kenning stems from the *Þórsdrápa* ("Poem about Thor"), a poem written by the skald Eilífr Goðrúnarson, who was active around the close of the 10th century.[576] It is diagrammed below:

[575] Goðrúnarson, "Þórsdrápa," s. 9, l. 5.
[576] Ellen Gade and Marold, *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics Part 1*, p. 68.

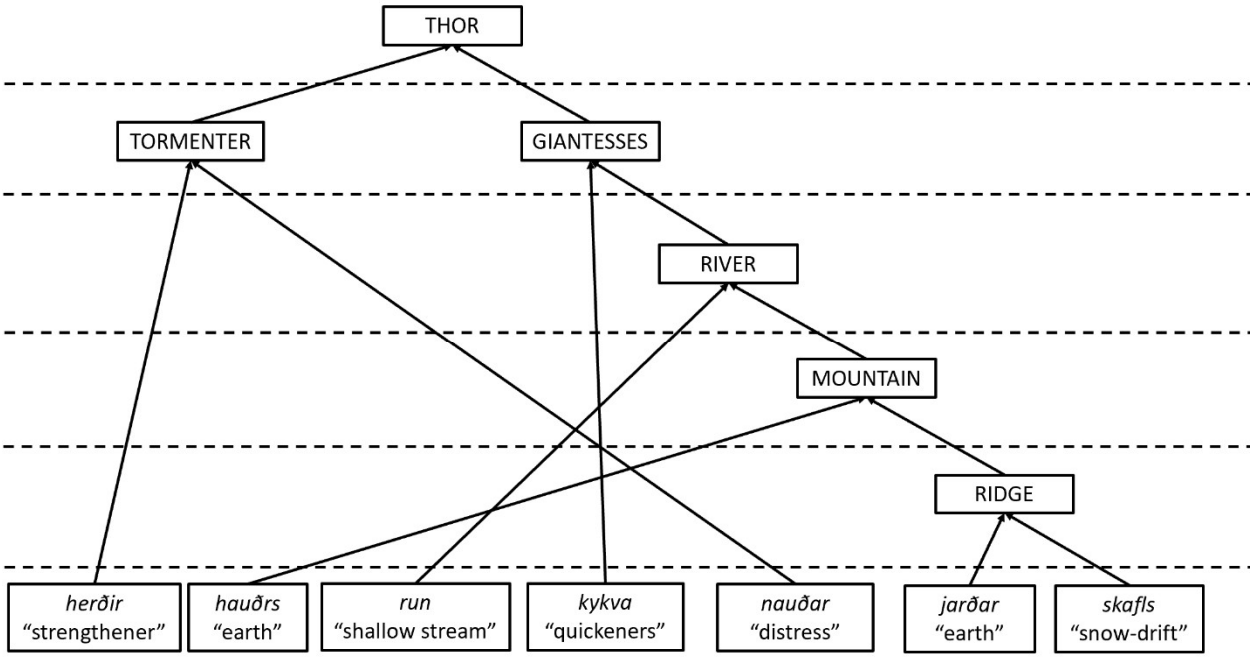


The kenning is an incredibly complex one and is easiest understood from the top down. At its uppermost level, this kenning refers to THOR, who is referred to as the TORMENTER OF GIANTESSES. This is a straightforward periphrastic kenning – Thor is known for his innumerable conflicts with giants and giantesses, and throughout the *Þórsdrápa* he torments more than his fair share. However, this is a recursive kenning, and both the determinant (GIANTESSES) *and* the base word (TORMENTER) are themselves referred by kennings. This is relatively unusual – in most recursive kennings, only the determinant or the base word is designated recursively. The first of these two recursive chains (that of the base word, TORMENTER) consists only of a single additional layer – the idea of a TORMENTER is expressed as a *herðir nauðar* (“strengthener of distress”), another fairly simple periphrastic. THOR is thus designated as the “strengthener of distress of GIANTESSES”.

The second recursive chain (leading to the determinant, GIANTESSES) is much more complicated, comprising a remarkable *five* recursive layers. Moving downwards: the "quickeners of the RIVER" are GIANTESSES – this refers to an episode of the poem, where several giantesses cause a river to flow rapidly in an attempt to hinder Thor. Again, this is a simple periphrastic – giantesses literally quicken the river. In the next layer, the RIVER is referred to as the "shallow stream of the MOUNTAIN". *Run* ("shallow stream") is an infrequently attested word – it appears to designate a very narrow watercourse connecting two larger bodies of water.[577] Accordingly, this would seem to be a MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymic kenning, with MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy occurring within the semantic category of BODIES OF WATER.[578] The MOUNTAIN in "shallow stream of the MOUNTAIN" is referred to as a "RIDGE of the earth", which could be argued to be metaphoric, metonymic or periphrastic. The RIDGE, finally, is designated as a "snow-drift of the earth", a metaphoric kenning that terminates the recursive chain.

Interpreting a kenning, as we have just done, requires us to think in very specific ways. First, we must think *analytically*. A complex kenning is not neatly divided into its various sub-kennings, as in the table above. It is instead a string of individual words that may not even be syntactically contiguous. Determinants and their corresponding base words are often non-adjacent, and much of a kenning's word order seems to be determined more by alliterative constraints than by syntactic tendencies. The diagram above is structured with visual clarity in mind. When structured by *actual* word order, we get the following:

[577] Ellen Gade and Marold, *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics Part 1*, p. 96.
[578] An argument for metaphor could also be made, with mappings occurring between SHALLOW STREAM and RIVER. This is not a particularly satisfying metaphor given the similarity of the two domains, but defined cognitively, it is possible.



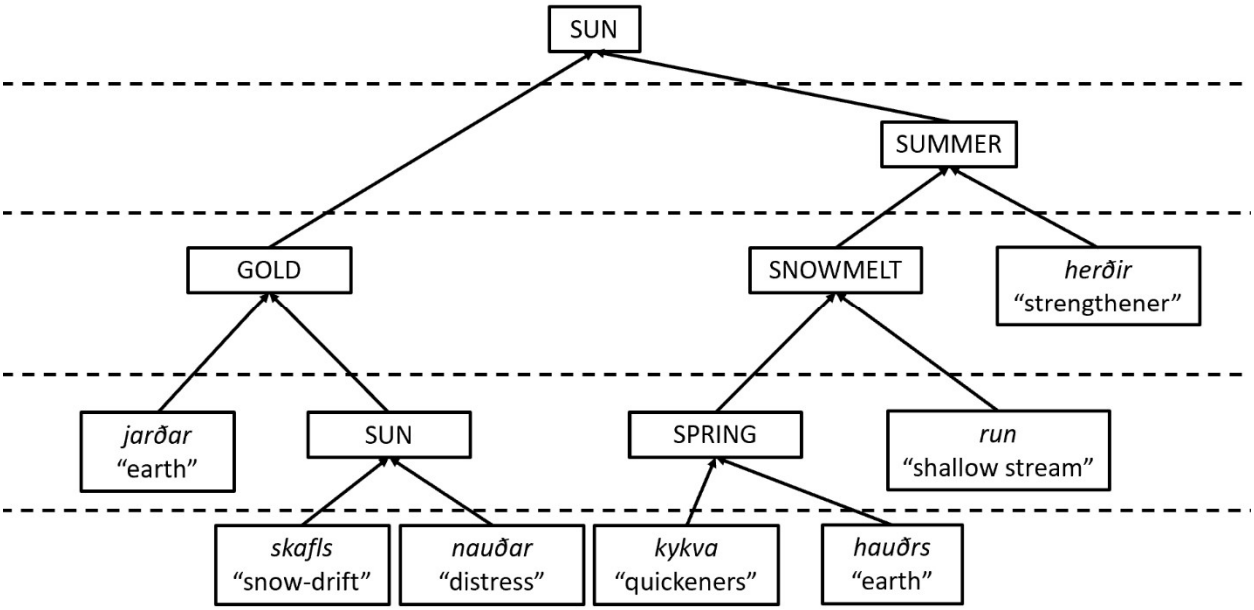
Careful analytic thought, by which a string of words is broken into its various pieces for processing, is thus crucial for understanding complex kennings.

Of course, not all kennings are this complex – indeed, most are not. But, as discussed in chapter three (§3.4), analytic thought also plays a significant role in thinking *abstractly,* a second aspect of Ong's "literate study" that is targeted by all kennings, irrespective of length. The various sub-kennings that make up the kenning above use a variety of techniques to designate their referents, techniques that also crop up in simple kennings throughout the three corpora. They function periphrastically ("strengthener of distress"; TORMENTER), metonymically ("shallow stream of the MOUNTAIN"; RIVER) and metaphorically ("snowdrift of the earth"; RIDGE). The use of these cognitive structures indicates an advanced grasp of both abstract and analytic thought. It is analytic in that it requires the breaking down of whole concepts into their component attributes – "snowdrift of the earth" cannot be processed as a metaphor for a RIDGE without considering the various qualities of

a SNOWDRIFT. A SNOWDRIFT is COLD, it is WET, it is TALL, it is LONG, it is WHITE, etc. Only by analyzing the concept and isolating a single attribute that makes sense in context can the metaphor be cracked. In this case, TALL and LONG seem to be the key attributes – a RIDGE is something TALL and LONG that pertains to the determinant (EARTH). In addition to this analysis, abstract thought is necessary for processing kennings, both simple and complex. The role of abstraction has already been discussed (§3.4), but the clearest example of abstract thought in the example above is the MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymic sub-kenning, "shallow stream of the MOUNTAIN". Without an understanding of BODIES OF WATER as an abstract semantic category, of the type that MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy operates in, this sub-kenning cannot function.

Finally, recursive kennings like this demand *sequential* thought. This is because recursive kennings are semantically hierarchical – unless the sub-kennings are processed in the correct *sequence*, the kenning entire does not produce a contextually coherent referent. The composer of a recursive kenning must think in a sequential manner, structuring a complex kenning block by block. For the audience, even more intricate sequential thought is demanded. Because the audience does not actually *know* the correct sequence, they must experiment, actively reordering the kenning components and trying out different sequences in order to find the right one. The more sub-kennings a kenning has, the more challenging this process becomes – because kennings can make use of so many different expressive strategies (metaphor, metonymy, periphrasis, wordplay, tmesis, etc.) the kenning system is extraordinarily flexible. This means that most kenning components, whether base words or determinants, can be sensibly recombined with almost any other kenning component to create a comprehensible referent. As the number of individual words in a complex kenning increases, the number of possible interpretations increases exponentially. Let us return to

the kenning we have broken down above: “increaser of misfortune of the quickeners of the stream of the earth of the snowdrift of the earth.”[579] The referent of this kenning is THOR. However, with only a couple minutes’ thought, it is possible to suggest a different meaning:

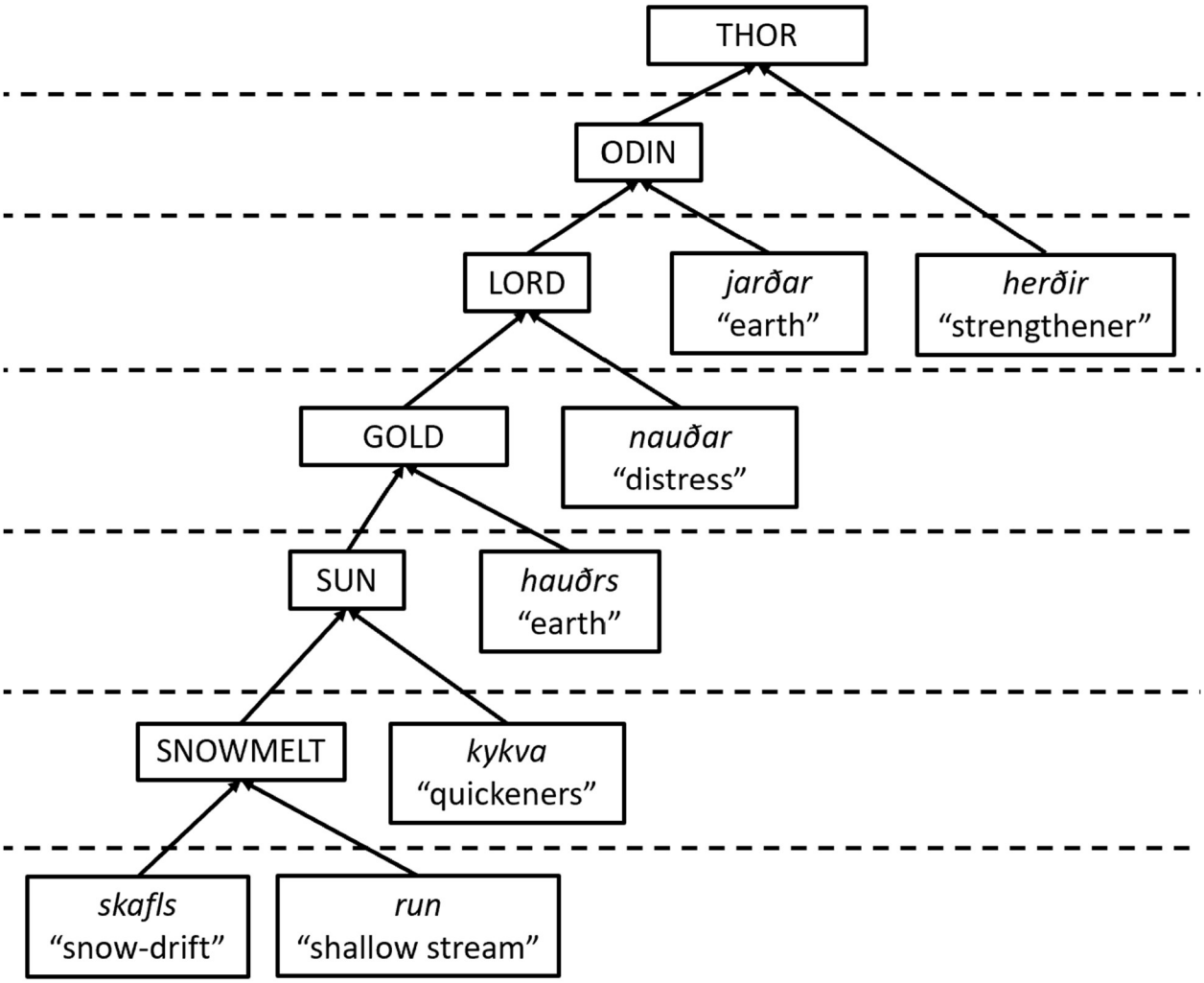


With *precisely* the same components, it is possible to create a complex kenning that means SUN. Beginning with the right-hand side, which gives us our base-word: the “quickener” of the “earth” is the season SPRING, which brings the earth to life, and the “stream” of SPRING is SNOWMELT, which is a form of waterflow characteristic of the season. The “strengthener” of SNOWMELT is the season SUMMER, which speeds snowmelt by way of its heat. On the left-hand side of the chart, leading to our determinant, the “distress” of the “snow-drift” is the SUN, which melts a snow-drift, and the SUN of the “earth” is GOLD, something shining found within the earth. Finally, the GOLD of SUMMER is again the SUN, a golden thing associated with the season. Given these sub-kenning components, this is a perfectly valid

[579] Goðrúnarson, “Þórsdrápa,” s. 9, l. 5.

sequencing of the kenning entire – it even maintains a thematic throughline (the seasonal cycle of snowmelt), which is not required in longer kennings, but is considered desirable.[580]

The only problem with this kenning is that it does not function in the larger context of the poem, which describes a river rushing at THOR (a river rushing at the SUN makes little sense). But even this does not preclude additional sequential interpretations. With another few minutes' tinkering, the entire kenning can be resequenced without changing its overall referent:



[580] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. liii.

The “stream” of the “snow-drift” is again SNOWMELT, and its “quickener” is the SUN. The SUN of the “earth” is again GOLD, and the “distress” of GOLD is the LORD or GENEROUS MAN, who casts it away. The LORD of the “earth” is ODIN, a kenning that functions not only as an expression of ODINS dominion, but also as a play on words – *Jörð* (“earth”) is the female personification of the EARTH and a sexual partner of ODIN. The “strengthener” of ODIN is then THOR, who serves him (in the same poem, THOR is also referred to via a kenning as the “distress-thief” of ODIN[581]). These alternate orderings are only two of many – these seven words (“snow-drift”; “stream”; “quickener”; “earth” [*hauðr*]; “earth” [*jörð*]; “distress”; and “strengthener”) can be resequenced in innumerable ways, making sequential thought a basic requirement of solving complex kennings (however, unlike abstract and analytic thought, sequential thought does not appear to be so important to simple kennings – more on this later).

All this is to say that kennings seem to have been generally “successful” as structures of play. Kennings are governed by galumphing – they contain multiple obstacles to easy creation and comprehension, obstacles that are engaged with voluntarily. These obstacles (recursion, oblique reference, novel structures, etc.) in turn demand patterns of thought that are abstract, analytic and sequential. These modes of thought are central to forms of study that emerge in literate cultures, and kennings thus seem to be an example of play that has, in a sense, “paid off”. Poets and audiences engaged with kennings not for any practical reason, but simply because they enjoyed them – they were playing. However, kenning-play inculcated skills that ultimately proved very useful in the linguistic environment of literacy. Significantly, this appears to be something that kenning users recognized, a point made in great detail by Guðrún Nordal, who discusses the use of kennings as tools for

[581] Goðrúnarson, “Þórsdrápa,” s. 16, l. 6.

teaching grammar and literacy in the 12th and 13th centuries.[582] As she notes, this is especially evident in one of the most significant metalinguistic works produced in medieval Iceland, Óláfr Þórðarson's *Third Grammatical Treatise.* This work is deeply influenced by the Latinate, literate study of *grammatica*, and is generally held to be based primarily on the third book of Donatus's *Ars maior*.[583] But despite these work's grounding in Latinate metalinguistic thought, the *Third Grammatical Treatise* does not translate the Latin examples of the *Ars maior* – instead, Þórðarson replaces them kennings and poetic excerpts from the vernacular skaldic tradition.[584]

With all this said, it is important to avoid the trap of teleological thinking here. Literacy may be the linguistic environment that succeeded the kenning, but it is fallacious to assume that all of the experimental possibilities of kenning play were directed at this fast-approaching linguistic context. Above, I have discussed patterns of thought that are both important for literate study and developed by the use of kennings, but it is sheer happenstance that these things coincided. Kenning-play also develops innumerable skills that are not especially useful for literacy – good examples include alliterative flexibility and memorization, both of which become less critical in a literate environment as text allows linguistic information to be stored without recourse to human memory. This is not to say that these are "wasted" skills – in the world of play, everything is grist for the mill. The specific skills developed in play may sometimes be more useful, sometimes less. But the skill of adapting to new challenges is *always* developed by play, and it is always a useful skill to have.

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[582] Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*, pp. 199-236.
[583] Kari Ellen Gade and Edith Marold, eds., *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics Part 1*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 3 (Brepols, 2017), p. 536.
[584] Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*, p. 199.

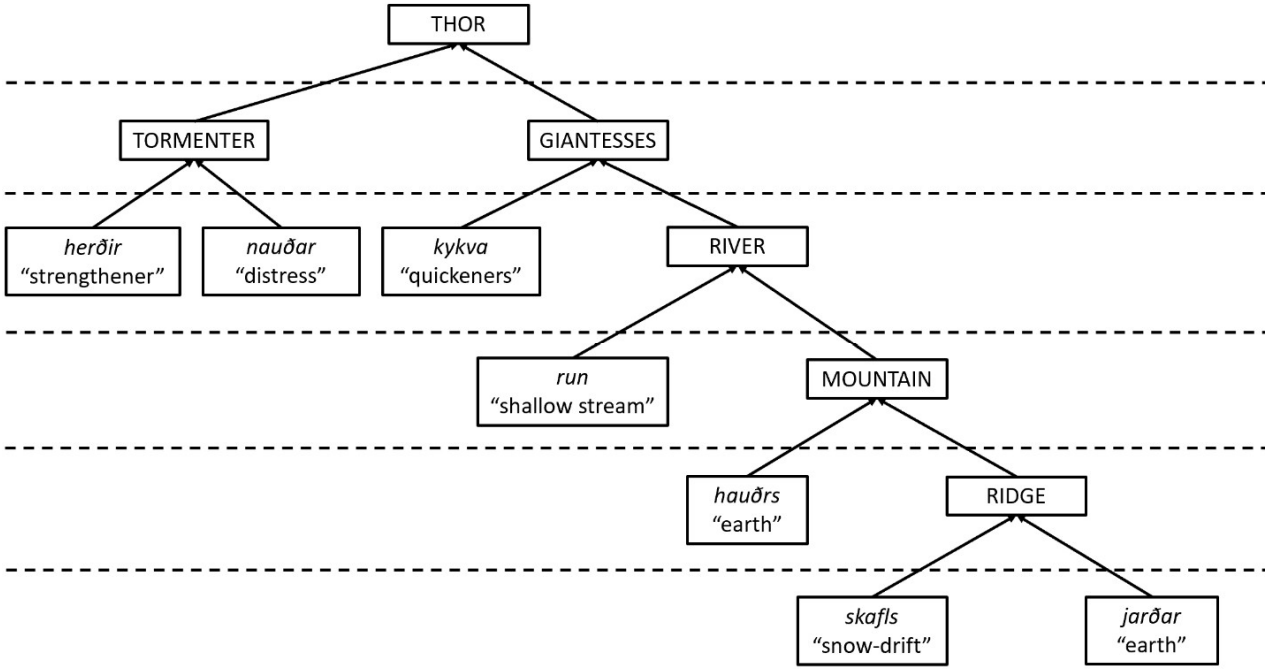
4.5 – This game isn't fun anymore

Throughout this chapter, I have favored examples of kennings from the Old Norse corpus for the simple reason that they represent the best examples of kenning-play. They demonstrate the greatest degree of complexity (both semantic and syntactic) and the greatest range of expressive strategies (metaphor, metonymy, periphrasis, etc.), indicating that the process of galumphing is at its most active in the Old Norse corpus. This might seem a surprise – as noted in chapter one (§1.7.1), the Old Norse kenning corpus seems to be much more oral than the Old English and Old Saxon kenning corpora. The Old Norse kennings treated in this dissertation are drawn from skaldic verse originating in pre-Christian Scandinavia, which possessed a very low degree of societal literarization. On the other hand, the sources from which our Old English and Old Saxon kennings are drawn, *Beowulf* and the *Hêliand*, originated in areas in which Christianization and literarization were well progressed. This begs an important question – why do kenning phenomena like recursion and syntactic non-contiguity, things that appear to be particularly challenging in an oral context, appear overwhelmingly in the Old Norse corpus? Would it not be much easier to use such structures, structures that we have repeatedly seen in tension with the exigencies of orality, in a more literate societal context?

These are difficult questions to answer, given our reliance on textual attestation – we cannot truly know what the earlier, primary oral stages of the kenning system sounded like. However, it may be that the compatibility of certain structures (recursion, non-contiguity, etc.) with a literal context made their use undesirable. Those aspects of kennings that seem incompatible with orality are compelling because of that incompatibility, at least from the perspective of play - they are challenging in an oral context, and good challenges make good play. However, as kennings move into the realm of literacy, they begin to lose this

cachet. The technology of the written word slowly begins to trivialize kennings, and the most complex examples of the form cease to be challenging and become merely inconvenient. Where there is no challenge, there is no galumphing, and where there is no galumphing, there is no play. This may also be borne out in the larger skaldic corpus – Lindow states (without any evidence, unfortunately) that skaldic kennings become significantly less frequent after the year 1000, a time period during which Christian literacy became increasingly ubiquitous in Scandinavia.[585]

It may seem strange to suggest that literacy could "trivialize" complex kennings, but the gulf in difficulty between oral and literate apprehension of a kenning is significant. Let us return, one last time, to our THOR kenning:



Above (§4.4), I presented this kenning from an essentially literary viewpoint. Firstly, I began with the kenning's referent (THOR) and worked backwards. This would not be possible in an

[585] Lindow, "Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry," p. 324.

oral performance context, where the audience does not know the referent in advance. Second, I reordered the words of the kenning so that determinants are adjacent to base words. In an oral context, these words would not have been so ordered – the audience would have heard them in their poetic order, with determinants and base words ordered in accordance with metric requirements, not structural consistency: *herði hauðrs runkykva nauðar jarðar skafls* ("strengthener of the earth of the stream-quickeners of the distress of the earth of the snowdrift"). Thirdly, I presented the kenning in the form of a tree diagram, which allows something so abstract as a recursive linguistic structure to be visualized concretely. Diagrams of abstract concepts do not appear to exist in oral cultures and, as we have discussed, oral populations do not parse symbols in the same manner as literate populations.[586] Finally, and also most importantly, I have presented this kenning textually. This gives the reader the opportunity to backloop as needed, revisiting confusing points in the text and reading the kenning (or any piece of the kenning) as many times as necessary for comprehension. In an oral context this is an obvious impossibility.

Even with the support of literacy, a kenning like the one above feels challenging for us. However, this is nowhere near the challenge that it would have represented to an oral audience, who must process a kenning after hearing it a single time, in non-contiguous syntax, in the midst of a longer string of poetry which is itself replete with additional kennings that also must be processed. In such a context, the ability to understand such a complex kenning is a very high stakes game. A capable connoisseur could likely parse such a kenning on the fly, but for those less capable the sense of the kenning would have simply been lost in the stream of poetry. This ceases to be the case in a written context, for the simple reason that backlooping is made possible. Even without the aid of diagrams or

[586] Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations,* pp. 32-9.

syntactic reordering (which are more modern literate contrivances), any literate person encountering the above kenning textually could parse it given enough time (provided they knew what a kenning was). They might need to reread it repeatedly and think their way through different possible recursive structures, but it would certainly cease to be the challenge it once had been.

Thinking about kennings in this way, as oral structures of play that lose their cachet in literate contexts, elucidates a number of the disparities between this dissertation's three corpora. As noted above, we see the greatest evidence of orally incompatible/ludically valuable kenning traits in the Old Norse corpus. A Scandinavian skald, working in the 10th century, is still functioning in a society outside the ambit of Christian, Latinate literacy. Accordingly, recursion, novelty, syntactic non-contiguity and oblique reference make excellent challenges, both for kenning composers and consumers.

The composer of *Beowulf*, on the other hand, is pulled between the old linguistic order and the new – the poem's subject matter is drawn from pagan Germanic legend but appears also to have been composed by a literate writer in a Christian milieu (§1.7.1). Correspondingly, we see significantly less of certain features. Old English kennings still exhibit a great deal of novelty and still designate their referents obliquely via a range of expressive strategies (metaphor, metonymy, periphrasis, etc.). However, they exhibit very little recursion (only six apparent instances in this dissertation's corpus)[587] and no syntactic non-contiguity. There has been a great deal of dispute regarding the purpose of *Beowulf* as a text.[588] However, it seems clear on the basis of its source material and relatively (particularly for Old English) intricate kenning usage that this is a text with one foot still in

[587] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ll. 164, 329, 1044, 1276, 1319, 1623.
[588] See Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, pp. clxiii-clxxx, for a summary.

the realm of orality (see §1.7.1), and it seems that these kennings may still have been regarded as playful.

The Old Saxon *Hêliand* presents a very different picture. It is certainly the most Christian of this dissertation's three corpora, and also the most literate (§1.7.1). It is also interesting because its kennings are not intended to be playful at all. The *Hêliand* was written in order to convert the Saxons to Christianity, and saving souls is a very serious business. Here, the ends determine the means, and the kennings of the *Hêliand* reflect this. They seem to be used in a highly utilitarian manner – they are minimally novel, highly repetitive, and overwhelmingly use periphrasis to express their referents, with sporadic instances of metaphor or metonymy. There are no examples of recursion of syntactic non-contiguity. In the *Hêliand,* kennings were likely included for the same reason that the text was composed in alliterative verse and that the text portrays Jesus and his apostles as a lord and his thegns: in order to appeal to the pagan Saxons, who still enjoyed such old-fashioned things. It is difficult to determine whether the simplicity of the *Hêliand* kennings is more a result of literacy undermining kennings' value as play-structures, or a result of a Christian coopting of the structure – both factors likely play a role. It is, however, a fantastic example of what happens when a play-structure like the kenning ceases to be playful and is used for other purposes. This is precisely the benefit of play, according to Miller – it trains adaptability, flexibility and the creative recombination of existing resources.

4.5 – Conclusion

This chapter began with a presentation of Stephen Miller's 1973 theory of play.[589] Per Miller, play is not a specific, definable behavior, but rather an "organizational frame", a set of

[589] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing."

approaches that people can bring to any variety of behaviors.[590] Two criteria define play in particular, the first of which is a focus on means over ends. In task-oriented behavior, individuals focus on a desired end goal and attempt to achieve that end goal as efficiently as possible with the means at their disposal. Pleasure is then derived primarily from the fulfilment of that end goal. This is not the case in playful behavior, where individuals focus primarily on the means by which they achieve a certain end goal. Pleasure is not derived primarily from this end goal, but rather from the means by which that end goal is sought.[591] The second criterion of play is the "patterned, voluntary elaboration or complication of process, where the pattern is not under the dominant control of goals," a process that Miller refers to as "galumphing".[592] Via galumphing, players challenge themselves by establishing obstacles for themselves, which they then must work to navigate. These obstacles can be simple, such as the intentionally ineffectual motor patterns observed in play-fighting primates, or they can be baroque, such as the rule systems of tabletop wargames. Miller ultimately argues that the purpose of play, from an evolutionary perspective, appears to be the training of adaptability. Through galumphing, players fabricate novel hindrances for themselves and then do their best to overcome them. This practices flexibility and resourcefulness, the ability to use preexisting skills and abilities to navigate new difficulties in task-oriented contexts.

Having presented this framework, this chapter then applied it to the kenning system. First, we noted that the kenning exhibits a focus on means (rather than ends), as demonstrated by kennings' use of excessive verbiage to express simple semantic concepts. Second, we noted that many aspects of kenning structure appear to be characterized by

[590] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 92.
[591] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 91.
[592] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 92.

galumphing, both in their general complication of process and in the incidence of specific traits, including novel contexts and sequences, uneconomic action, and repetition, that appear to be associated with galumphing.[593] Galumphing in the kenning system seemed to be most prominent in those kenning traits that seem to be at odds with the strictures of orality, such as recursion and syntactic non-contiguity. This lends further credence to an argument I have made throughout this dissertation, namely that "non-oral" aspects of kennings are not "non-oral" at all. Rather, they represent the result of a give-and-take between the expressive boundaries of orality and an effort to push at and experiment with those boundaries.

After examining the role of play in kennings, this chapter discussed several ways in which kenning-play may have partially prepared early Germanic cultures for the advent of literacy. In doing so, we focused on one central aspect of literacy, the phenomenon of "study", which Ong defines as the "abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of phenomena or of stated truths."[594] This form of "study" appears to be impossible without the written word, because it is reliant on large amounts of information that must be preserved for later recall. However, we also witnessed how the galumphing-heavy structure of a kenning in fact trains analytic, abstract and sequential reasoning, skills that would prove invaluable in examples of literate study. We also looked briefly at the role of kennings in the Old English and Old Saxon corpora, where literacy appears to be further advanced and the galumphing aspect of kennings appears to be correspondingly diminished. This supports the idea that kennings are essentially oral play-structures, which lose their cachet as the shift towards literacy begins to trivialize certain forms of

[593] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing," p. 89.
[594] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, p. 9.

galumphing in the kenning.

There is a great deal more to be said on this topic, far more than could be fit into this chapter. For one, the phenomenon of literacy is characterized by far more than simply the presence of sequential, analytic study. How else might play have prepared early Germanic cultures for literacy's other demands? We might also ask what role galumphing plays in a larger poetic context. We have specifically looked at galumphing in kennings, but kennings are themselves embedded in other poetic structures, including intricate metrical and narrative systems. These systems could also represent instances of galumphing, and it may be fruitful to approach them through Miller's frame as well. This in turn prompts interesting questions regarding the interaction between different forms of galumphing. If, say, the alliterative requirements of early Germanic verse also represent a play-system, does this play-system exist in competition with kennings? Do both systems contribute to one another? Or are kennings perhaps an instance of meta-play, a new iteration of galumphing applied over another (alliterative verse) that had become conventionalized and stale?

Miller's framework also raises some interesting theoretical implications. We have, for instance, spent a great deal of time with Koch & Oesterreicher's spectrum of language of distance and language of proximity. How does this phenomenon interact with Miller's theory of play? Linguistic play certainly occurs in both proximate and distant contexts – does it manifest itself differently? Can play be reconciled with a proximity-distance spectrum, or is it a different phenomenon entirely, one that must be overlaid on Koch & Oesterreicher's schema? The concept of galumphing is also an interesting one in the discussion of cognitive structures like metaphor and metonymy. Lakoff & Turner note that standard metaphor is often "elaborated" or "extended" in poetic contexts,[595] while Sullivan discusses how

[595] Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, pp. 67-72.

MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy overrides principles of efficiency for the sake of "aesthetic considerations"[596] – could these instead be examples of galumphing, where cognitively-efficient salience and relevance patterns are intentionally flouted for the sake of complication?

These are tantalizing questions and there is no space left for them here. However, I hope that this chapter has at least demonstrated the value of this perspective, particularly in the discussion of oral cultures. As I have noted *ad nauseum*, historical orality is a difficult thing to study, and historical oral play is even trickier. It is difficult enough to define play in a modern context, let alone amongst people long dead who approached communication in vastly different ways than we do now. Despite this, it is crucial that we consider the phenomenon of play, if for no other reason than because play is a fundamental human behavior. When we lose sight of this, we begin to lose sight of the humanity of our subjects. We fall into the trap that Ong often does, viewing oral artistic production as a mechanistic phenomenon, one driven only by the need to reinforce the maximum amount of linguistic information against oblivion. This is, of course, an extremely important part of the picture, particularly at the societal level. But language is not produced by societies – it is produced by people. These people operate under certain societal conditions, such as orality, and they may need to adapt to those societal conditions. Still, an oral poet does not compose in order to encode information, and an oral audience does not listen to poetry in order to serve as a receptacle for that information. These societies consisted of people, and like all people, they spent much of their energy just trying to have a good time.

[596] Sullivan, "Genre-Dependent Metonymy in Norse Skaldic Poetry," pp. 29-31.

CONCLUSION

5.1 – Conclusion

This is the end, but before closing I want to do two things. First, I will briefly summarize the larger arc of this dissertation, in order to reiterate the key points of this project. Second, I want to briefly highlight some potential applications that research of this type has. In order to do so, I will present two avenues for future research – the first concerns a novel type of kenning, while the second deals with the role of abstraction in modern artificial intelligence.

I will treat these themes below, but before diving in: Thank you very much for reading. With some inevitable exceptions, this work has been a pleasure to write. I hope that it has been a pleasure to read as well.

5.2.1 – Chapter one – terminology and methodological framework

The first chapter of this dissertation contains a breakdown of key concepts, theoretical perspectives, and the existing literature on the subject of the kenning. We first discussed general definitions of the kenning (§1.2) and MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy (§1.3), two unusual poetic structures typical of Old Saxon, Old English and Old Norse poetry.

Afterwards, we discussed the relationship between kennings and orality (§1.4), noting that kennings emerged in a context of primary orality (i.e., in societies with little to no familiarity with the written word). We also addressed the ways in which our understanding of kennings can be distorted by our understanding of orality and literacy. Frameworks like those of Ong[597] or Lord[598] tend to view formulae like the kenning as mechanistic phenomena, geared primarily towards the encoding of information in a mnemonically useful

[597] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*.
[598] Lord, *The Singer of Tales*.

format. I argue (§1.4.2) that this mnemonically-focused viewpoint does not account for some of kennings' stranger features (especially their tendency towards extreme length and intricacy), and that it also effaces the socio-cultural value of these structures. On the other hand, if we give our own literate assumptions free reign when discussing the kenning, I argue (§1.4.3) that we arrive at a distorted understanding of the kenning system, viewing it as a fixed taxonomic system under which certain types of kenning are "correct" and certain are "incorrect". This is not the case – in an oral context, kennings (like any oral structure) are not set to paper. Each kenning is simply the individual product of an individual poet, and there is no textual "authority" in such a culture to determine whether a structure is or is not a kenning. Afterwards (§1.4.4), I introduced Koch & Oesterreicher's theory of language of proximity and distance,[599] which allows us to reconcile the oral nature of kennings with their social function in an oral culture.

Next (§1.5), I touched on discussions of the figurative role of kennings, specifically the tendency to define kennings as examples of "metaphor" or "metonymy". I argued (§1.5.1) that difficulties in consistently defining the role of metaphor or metonymy in kennings are partially due to a reliance on rhetorical definitions of the two terms, which are deeply rooted in literate conceptions of language and portray such structures as "deviation" from normal language, a characterization that does not square with either historical or modern language, in which metaphor and metonymy are constantly used across all registers. In order to circumvent this issue, I presented and argued for cognitive (rather than rhetorical) definitions of metaphor and metonymy, as defined by Lakoff & Turner[600] and Radden & Kövecses.[601] These definitions have the advantage of being grounded in theories of

[599] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz."
[600] Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*.
[601] Radden and Kövecses, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy."

cognition, which are more orally applicable than rhetorical definitions, which are grounded in the literate study of language.

Subsequently (§1.6), I introduced the idea of play and entertainment in kennings. Entertainment clearly played a significant role in the creation and use of kennings – kennings are poetic structures and poetry is consumed because people enjoy it. But past studies (§1.6.1) of the kenning tend not to address the role of entertainment and enjoyment, and not without good reason – "enjoyment" is a nebulous concept, especially when we are discussing "enjoyment" in cultures that no longer exist. Accordingly (§1.6.2), I presented Stephen Miller's framework of play[602] as a potential tool for understanding how kennings might have functioned as playful, entertaining structures. Per Miller, play can be defined as behavior that is characterized by intentional inefficiency, complication and reorganization, all attributes that can be recognized clearly in the kenning system. He also suggests that play of this type has a purpose – it is experimental, and when individuals play they develop adaptability, preparing themselves for unforeseen circumstances.

Finally (§1.7), this chapter closed with a discussion of the dissertation's data methodology. This dissertation is based on a corpus of approximately 800 kennings and 200 MEMBER FOR MEMBER metonymy instances, drawn from the Old Saxon *Hêliand*, the Old English *Beowulf*, and a selection of Old Norse skaldic verse. This cross-linguistic approach to the material is not common, but it is used in this dissertation to ensure understanding of the kenning as a complete oral phenomenon, which manifests differently in the various textual corpora of the three languages in which it survives.

[602] Miller, "Ends, Means, and Galumphing."

5.2.2 – Chapter two – kennings and orality

The second chapter of this dissertation discusses kennings as oral structures and argues that their position in an oral society is best understood using Koch & Oesterreicher's framework of proximity and distance. The chapter begins (§2.2) by discussing orality and literacy as a spectral, rather than a binary phenomenon – this is an important distinction, because it allows us to recognize that works like *Beowulf* and the *Hêliand* were created under the influence of both literate and oral modes of thought.

Afterwards, this chapter presents four aspects of the kenning system that align clearly with an orthodox understanding of oral structures, which suggests that they are governed primarily by mnemonic considerations. These four features are 1) repetition and formulaicness (§2.3.1); 2) metric embeddedness (§2.3.2); 3) concreteness (§2.3.3); and 4) redundancy and copiousness (§2.3.4). All four of these traits correlate logically to the psychodynamics of orality presented by Ong[603], psychodynamics that appear to be governed by mnemonic efficacy. In the following sections, I presented four further aspects of the kenning system: 1) novelty (§2.4.1); 2) recursion (§2.4.2); 3) syntactic non-contiguity (§2.4.3); and 4) oblique reference (§2.4.4). These traits *do not* align with Ong's psychodynamics of orality and appear to actively render kennings more difficult to remember. We are thus left with a dilemma. There is good evidence that kennings were oral, mnemonically driven structures, but there is also good evidence that they were not.

In order to resolve this discrepancy, I argue (§2.5.2) that kennings are best understood as examples of oral language of distance. Per Koch & Oesterreicher,[604] language of distance is a formalized linguistic register, often associated with writing. It

[603] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 31-77.
[604] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," pp. 19-24.

tends, among other things, to be monologic, public and contextually disassociated. Language of proximity, on the other hand, is an intimate, informal register generally associated with speech. It tends to be characterized by dialogue, expressivity, and face-to-face interaction. Although language of distance and proximity is associated (respectively) with writing and speech, in an oral society both modes would have occurred in a solely spoken context. Thus, as examples of oral language of distance, kennings are subject to both the exigencies of orality (especially the necessity of mnemonic language) and the tendencies of language of distance (especially a preference for lexical diversity, subordinative structures, and intensive planning). By viewing kennings as oral language of distance, we arrive at a coherent understanding of the structure in an oral context. A kenning is a product of both mnemonic necessity and generic convention. They are memorable enough to function in an oral milieu but are also governed by attributes of language of distance, a register that is often at odds with the mnemonic demands of orality.

5.2.3 – Chapter three – kennings and abstraction

The third chapter of this dissertation focuses on the role of abstraction in the kenning system. Specifically, I argue that abstraction is a defining characteristic of the kenning, and one that characterizes the structure more accurately and reliably than previous attempts to define it as a specifically metaphoric, metonymic, or circumlocutory phenomenon. This chapter began (§3.2) with a discussion of the difficulties of defining the "abstract" and the "concrete", touching on evidence that CONCRETE and ABSTRACT represent cognitively real categories (§3.2.1), as well as previous attempts to rigorously define abstraction and concreteness. Ultimately, we arrived at an operational definition (§3.2.3), which states:

> Concrete language tends to be *physical*, *familiar* and *specific*. It designates entities *literally*. Abstract language tends to be *intangible*, *unfamiliar* and *general*. It also tends to refer to entities *figuratively*.

Using this definition, I then argued (§3.3.1; §3.3.2) that abstraction and concreteness ought to be incorporated into Koch & Oesterreicher's distance-proximity model. Specifically, abstract language appears to be a logical result of distance-related parameters, especially fixation of topic, contextual disassociation, unfamiliarity with conversational partners, and monologicity.

Having demonstrated that abstraction is typical of distance, I then argued (§3.4) that it should also be taken as a defining attribute of the kenning. Previous definitions of the kenning (§3.4.1) describe the relationship between a kenning and its referent using the concepts of metaphor, metonymy, and circumlocution. However, the kenning system contains innumerable examples of metaphoric *and* metonymic *and* circumlocutory kennings, to say nothing of the many kennings that use a mixture of these referential tools. Abstraction, on the other hand, seems to be a uniform characteristic of the relationship between a kenning and its referent. At its most fundamental, a kenning takes a concept and expresses it in more abstract language. The increase in abstraction may be minor (e.g., "son of Halfdan" for HROÐGAR) or it may be significant (e.g., "water's spine" for WAVE), but unlike metaphor, metonymy or circumlocution, it always appears to be present. I demonstrated this by discussing four of the most frequently noted types of kennings: 1) metaphoric (§3.4.2); 2) metonymic (§3.4.3); 3) metaphoric-metonymic (§3.4.4); and 4) circumlocutory (§3.4.5). For each category, I highlighted a number of example kennings and then explained how those examples showed abstraction at work. Before concluding, I also presented several "edge case" kennings (§3.4.6), which could conceivably be interpreted in different ways using different figurative tools (metaphor, metonymy, circumlocution). However, even if the

metaphoric/metonymic/circumlocutory character of these edge cases cannot be decisively determined, they all show clear evidence of abstraction. I ultimately argue (§3.5) that the interpretive ambiguity of kennings, an interpretive ambiguity that abstraction enables, was part of what made them compelling.

5.2.4 – Chapter four – kennings and play

This dissertation's final chapter discusses kennings with reference to the process of play, as defined by Stephen Miller. Specifically, I claim that kennings appear to be structures that emerged via the process of play, and that their playful nature explains many of the apparent "contradictions" that seem to exist between the structure of kennings and the mnemonic needs of their oral context.

The chapter begins (§4.2) with a discussion of Miller's definition of play, with a focus on two traits of playful behavior. The first of these is the relation between ends and means (§4.2.1). Per Miller, play is characterized by a prioritization of means (or processes) over ends (or goals). When people play, they focus on and derive pleasure from the *means* by which they achieve their goals, rather than simply deriving pleasure from attaining that goal. The second trait of play is galumphing (§4.2.2), which refers to the intentional complication of process. When players focuses on the means (rather than the ends) of an activity, they tend to intentionally add complications to those means. These complications, which are characterized by unusual sequences, novel contexts, and uneconomic action, actively make the task at hand more difficult, which in turn appears to render play more compelling for the player. Miller suggests (§4.2.3) that play thus has a clear purpose – via galumphing, species that play (such as humans) are able to experiment with the resources at their disposal, fabricating entirely novel problems and then trying to solve them. By playing, people are thus "practicing" for the unknown.

Having discussed Miller's framework, we then turn to identifying play in the kenning system. To do so, we returned to the four aspects of the kenning system (discussed in chapter two) that seemed most incompatible with the demands of orality: novelty (§4.3.3); recursion (§4.3.4); syntactic non-contiguity (§4.3.5); and oblique reference (§4.3.6). Equipped with Miller's definition of play, these four aspects no longer read as "incompatible" with orality – instead, they can be recognized as examples of galumphing, by which poets *intentionally* used language that was orally-demanding for the purpose of play. These four traits not only parallel the general complication typical of galumphing but are also marked by the specific patterns of behavior (unusual sequences, uneconomic action, etc.) that Miller identifies in galumphing.

The chapter finishes with a discussion of the potential advantages of kenning-play. As Miller notes, play appears to be useful because it trains people in the flexibility necessary to react to unknown challenges. In the case of oral Germanic societies, one of these new challenges proved to be literacy. I focus on one aspect of literacy, that of sequential, abstract study,[605] and argue that certain patterns of galumphing used in the kenning system developed skills that would have prepared oral populations to engage with this new demand (§4.4). I also argue that the framework of play makes good sense when we evaluate the decline of kennings (§4.4.1). Many of the challenges associated with creating and interpreting kennings are challenging because they use linguistic patterns that are difficult in an oral context. When this context disappears, so too does any compelling challenge.

[605] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 8-9.

5.3 – Kennings and descriptivism

I have made a number of different arguments throughout this dissertation, but reading back through the above recapitulation, I feel that all these arguments boil down to a single idea, which I have touched on repeatedly but perhaps not yet made explicit: When we approach kennings (or indeed any linguistic phenomenon), we need to do so descriptively and holistically.

This is not a novel idea. The importance of descriptivism (as opposed to prescriptivism) is a basic axiom of the field of linguistics, and the idea that phenomena need to be understood holistically is essentially tautological – if something is not understood holistically (i.e., in its entirety), then it is not understood. With this said, I have also mentioned innumerable instances in which our approach to the kenning system has been prescriptive or partial. Driven by literary assumptions, we sometimes make prescriptive judgements on the "validity" of the kennings found in our corpora, emending repeatedly attested kennings out of existence (§1.4.3). Driven by rhetorical assumptions, we sometimes make prescriptive judgements regarding the structure of kennings, asserting that they are uniformly metaphoric, metonymic, etc., when (even under rhetorical, rather than cognitive, definitions of these terms) there exist innumerable kennings that do not fit cleanly into these categories (§1.5.1). Driven by oral assumptions, we sometimes make prescriptive judgements regarding the purpose of kennings, reducing them to information storage devices rather than compelling artistic creations which, of course, *also* perform important mnemonic functions (§1.4.2). Finally, we often approach the kenning in partial terms, generally by focusing on the structure in a single literary tradition, rather than as a common Germanic structure that has changed and evolved into fascinatingly disparate forms in the Old Saxon, Old Norse, and Old English contexts (§1.7.1).

None of this is to say that preceding work on the kenning is fundamentally "incorrect" – it is not lost on me that different studies have different purposes that demand different approaches. An article on the Old English kenning does not necessarily need Old Saxon data, and an article on the later, literarized stages of the Old Norse kenning certainly stands to benefit from rhetorical conceptions of metaphor and metonymy, which (at that point) many Old Norse poets appeared to actually be aware of. Rather, my point is that we need to be very careful in the application of these assumptions to the early, oral stages of the kenning. What is good sauce for the goose is good sauce for the gander, but unfortunately the oral kenning is not a goose, but rather some sort of Archaeopteryx. It will evolve into a goose, given time.

5.3.1 – Two-determinant kennings

In order to make the above claims, my argumentation has remained fairly general throughout this dissertation, focusing on larger theoretical concepts and their interactions with a broad range of Old Saxon, Old English and Old Norse kennings. As proof of concept, I want to suggest a more specific insight that is enabled by the more open, descriptive approach I have championed here. When we take a step back and relinquish some of our basic assumptions, we not only better understand the kenning, but are able to recognize potentially novel forms of the structure.

We have looked at innumerable examples of the standard kenning structure. This consists of a base word and a determinant, with the base word being connected the kenning's target in some way (frequently via metaphor or metonymy) and the determinant defining an approximate semantic domain to orient the audience.[606] To repeat an earlier example: in the Old English *sæhengest* ("sea-steed"; BOAT), *-hengest* ("steed") is the base

[606] Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. xlv.

word because it metaphorically represents a boat – both are ridden for the purpose of transport. *Sæ-* ("sea") is the determinant, because it represents the semantic domain in which this metaphor is occurring, namely the OCEAN. We are looking for something that *resembles* a HORSE but is associated with the OCEAN, and a BOAT fits the bill.

However, the Old English and Old Saxon corpora contain a number of binomial phrases that resemble the kenning in many significant ways, but do not actually share this structure. Instead, they appear to consist of two determinants, each of which describes a semantic domain. Accordingly, their interpretation requires a sort of metonymic triangulation, by which the two available data points (the two determinants) allow the listener/reader to intuit a (frequently abstract) referent. An illustrative example is the Old English *deaðcwealm* ("death-violent death"),[607] which both the Dictionary of Old English[608] and Bosworth-Toller[609] define as SLAUGHTER.

Transparently, *deaðcwealm* does not submit to analysis via the orthodox kenning structure. Broken down into a base-word ("death") and a determinant ("violent death"), we look in vain for a sensible referent: what *resembles* VIOLENT DEATH, but is also *related* to DEATH? VIOLENT DEATH, we can only assume, but the word seems to carry a more abstract sense than this, namely SLAUGHTER. Other examples include *modsefa* ("spirit-mind"),[610] which Bosworth-Toller defines as THE INNER MAN,[611] *holtwudu* ("copse-wood"; FOREST),[612] and *eagorstream* ("tide-current"; OCEAN).[613] Old Saxon examples include *megincraft* ("might-

[607] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1670.
[608] Cameron, Amos, and Antonette diPaolo, "dēaþ-cwealm."
[609] Bosworth and Toller, "deáþ-cwealm."
[610] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 349.
[611] Bosworth and Toller, "mód-sefa."
[612] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 1369.
[613] Fulk, Niles, and Bjork, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, l. 513.

strength"),[614] which seems to refer generally to POWER, as well as *druhtfolc* ("people-people"; CROWD).[615] The relation between these two-determinant couplets and their referents is similar to that of a number of modern English couplets, including *slap and tickle* (AMOROUS PLAY), *cloak and dagger* (MELODRAMATIC SUBTERFUGE), and *hammer and tongs* (INTENSITY).

Received knowledge would not admit these structures as kennings. They do not have base words, and they do not contain the types of metaphoric or metonymic relationships that are generally cited as characteristic of kennings. But as I have stated *ad nauseum*, these prescriptive criteria are freighted with literate assumptions. It is significantly more fruitful to approach these structures with an eye to the more descriptive attributes of the kenning we have already observed. Let us consider:

First, these structures fulfil the mnemonic demands of orality just as much as the garden-variety kenning. They largely use concrete language. They are metrically embedded. They are formulaic. Second, they appear to function abstractively. Compounds like *eagorstream* ("tide-current") or *holtwudu* ("copse-wood") express their more general referents (OCEAN and FOREST) via their constituent parts or subtypes, which as we have established, indicates an awareness and use of abstract categorization. Others, like *modsefa* ("spirit-mind") seem to use two relatively abstract terms to express an even more abstract concept (THE INNER MAN). Notably, a word like *modsefa* appears to stand in opposition to *lichama* ("body-covering"?), another far older example of this structure which Bosworth-Toller notes often refers to the "the corporeal, in contrast to the spiritual, part of man". This is not to say that the constituent parts of these compounds cannot have this

[614] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 2268
[615] Behagel, *Heliand und Genesis*, l. 978.

same sense – *mod*, for instance, can certainly refer to THE INNER MAN, but it also carries innumerable other senses (COURAGE, PRIDE, SPIRIT, HEART, etc.). But a compound like *modsefa* appears to exclusively carry this more abstractive sense. Potentially, we are also looking at a new reference strategy in this case. I have suggested that these two-determinant structures appear to be generally metonymic, but in some cases this may not be the most logical reading. A structure like *deaðcwealm* ("death-death") might instead be an instance of intensive duplication, where the use of two words for "death" together indicate LOTS OF DEATH (i.e., SLAUGHTER). This is not metaphor, and it is not metonymy, and it is not circumlocution. Rather, it leverages iconicity to express its referent – when you say a word more, you mean more of it. This linguistic strategy is well attested – Indonesian, for instance, frequently uses reduplication to mark plurals (*anak* = CHILD; *anak anak* = CHILDREN). This would represent an interesting, unusual referential strategy in the kenning system, but adherence to a prescriptive kenning model that only admits the referential strategies of metaphor, metonymy or circumlocution would force us to discard it. Finally, these compounds represent potential examples of metaplay. Like any other aspect of the kenning "game", it could well be that the base-word/determinant structure became a little stale over the years. It seems very possible that a poet, dissatisfied with the same old kenning structure, might have decided to try something new. In any case, we have no reason to believe that oral populations would have conceptualized kennings using the base-word/determinant framework. The explicit recognition of this framework, much like the explicit recognition of metaphor and metonymy, comes only with literacy. Do these structures also appear to train recombinatorial flexibility, as we expect play to do? Could they inadvertently help pave the way for literacy? Sure thing – the two-determinant structure is an excellent avenue for articulating the abstract concepts typical of literacy (or

language of distance, for that matter) using the concrete language typical of orality. Indeed, it is possible that something like *modsefa* could have emerged intentionally in a literate Christian milieu, likely as an orally accessible circumlocution for the abstract notion of THE INNER MAN, an abstract notion that is incredibly important for Christianity.

So – are these kennings? I would certainly say so. They appear to perform essentially the same societal, linguistic, and ludic functions that kennings do, and the few arguments against accepting these structures as kennings rest on *post hoc* judgements that do not appear grounded in the oral creation and application of the kenning. One could perhaps make a "slippery slope" argument here – if we allow two-determinant structures into the kenning category, what else might we start adding? But I would point out that a descriptive, usage-oriented approach to kennings has its limits as well. Consider the various FATHER AND SON compounds found in the Germanic languages: we have the Old Saxon *gesunfader* (*Hêliand,* l. 1176), the Old English *suhtergefæderan* (*Beowulf*, l. 1164), and the Old High German *sunufatarungo* (*Hildebrandslied*, l. 4). Although these have a similar two-determinant structure (often referred to as "coordinative compounds", or by way of the Sanskrit synonym, *dvandva*), they do not appear to serve any sort of abstractive or playful purpose. These compounds of "son" and "father" simply mean SON AND FATHER, which does not a kenning make.

Before closing the door on this example, I want to make one final note. I have already spoken at length of the necessity of a cross-linguistic approach for understanding the kenning as an oral structure. The recognition of the two-determinant kenning owes a great deal to this approach, not because this structure is common across the Germanic languages (it is not), but because it is common in classical Mayan poetry. Examples include

"stick and stone" (VIOLENCE),[616] "throne and mat" (AUTHORITY),[617] and "well and sky" (WORLD).[618] These structures are referred to as "diphrastic kennings". Mayanists, it would seem, have already been looking to Germanic oral structures to inform their understanding of Mayan analogues. If we are to come to a real understanding of Germanic oral structures, we would do well to return the compliment.

5.4 – The importance of kenning research

I am certain that there are many people who, upon reading the previous sentence, would wonder: "Why on earth would we want to come to a real understanding of Germanic oral structures?" Any such uninterested parties would presumably not have picked up this dissertation in the first place, but the question is a reasonable one. The Germanic kenning is a niche subject within a niche field, and while most of this dissertation's readers will perhaps consider the value of this project as self-evident, I would like to take a moment to justify the importance of the last couple hundred pages (to say nothing of the two and a half years I spent putting them together).

Let's begin with the kenning – why is it worth studying? There are many reasons, but to my mind, one reason stands out in particular: the Germanic kenning allows us unusually clear insights into not only orality, but the transition to literacy as well. As I have noted, the study of orality is difficult – data is hard to come by, and any data we have comes with caveats. We can, for instance, take the approach of Luria,[619] whose data is drawn from interviews with non-literate contemporaries. This approach has the advantage of gathering

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[616] Kerry M. Hull, "Poetic Tenacity: A Diachronic Study of Kennings in Mayan Languages," in *Parallel Worlds*, ed. Kerry M. Hull and Michael D. Carrasco, Genre, Discourse, and Poetics in Contemporary, Colonial, and Classic Maya Literature (University Press of Colorado, 2012), p. 93.
[617] Hull, "Poetic Tenacity," pp. 104-5.
[618] Hull, "Poetic Tenacity," pp. 107-8. Note also modern Finnish *maailma* ("ground-air"; WORLD).
[619] Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*.

direct oral data, but the interviewees in such a project remain embedded in a society with a significant degree of literization. Accordingly, even if they are not themselves "literate", they possess a familiarity with and awareness of the written word that members of primary oral cultures do not. There do exist contemporary cultures that *are* in states of primary orality – the NGO Survival International puts the number of uncontacted tribes at roughly 100, scattered primarily across the Amazon and the Indonesian archipelago.[620] But this number is declining, and the idea of contacting any such peoples for the sole purpose of data gathering is so ethically fraught as to be, simply speaking, a non-starter. Children who have not yet learned to read and write may also represent a fruitful avenue for investigating orality, but there too we are looking at a population that has a significant awareness of literacy (at least in the abstract). We can also look, as I have here, to historical data – but of course, all of our historical primary oral populations are gone, and all that is left is the later, textual incarnation of their words and work. All this is to say that the study of orality is rooted in extrapolation – we do not have the luxury of unambiguously oral data and we must take what we can get.

But among these limited data, kennings represent a remarkably useful tool. First, kennings have the advantage of being a single, (relatively) well-defined structure. This allows us to focus our inquiry on a single phenomenon, minimizing (but not eliminating) other variables. Second, the kenning is a common Germanic structure that is attested in the textual corpora of three distinct poetic traditions. In turn, each of these poetic traditions is marked by a differing degree of apparent societal literization. This allows us to consider the structure diachronically, comparing the specific changes that the structure underwent over

[620] "Uncontacted Tribes," Survival International, accessed March 30, 2025, https://www.survivalinternational.org/campaigns/uncontacted.

longer periods in a wider range of linguistic contexts. Finally, kennings seem to exhibit a comparatively high degree of stability. This is particularly evident in the Old Norse corpus, where the extremely demanding requirements of *dróttkvætt* meter appear to minimize the variation that typically occurs in the course of oral performance,[621] but the number of specific kenning formats (e.g., "game of weapons" to refer to BATTLE, "sea-horse" to refer to a BOAT) that have been preserved across all three corpora also speaks to some degree of stability. Accordingly, kennings seem to maintain qualities of their earlier oral character, which is not always a given. Together, these qualities make kennings a strong (if imperfect) candidate for the investigation of orality.

5.4.1 – The importance of orality and literacy

So far, so good. But why study orality and literacy at all? What salience could this possibly have for our modern society, distanced as we are from our oral roots? Again, I think there are innumerable reasons that orality remains a relevant topic, but one looms particularly large: our society is in the midst of its own technological sea-change, driven by ubiquitous computing, artificial intelligence, and the exponential growth of individual access to the internet and all of the (mis)information it contains.

Naturally, there have been other significant developments in the way our species manages and distributes information – the printing press, audio recording, and film spring to mind, to say nothing of less obvious (but incredibly important) textual innovations such as spacing or lower-case lettering. These technologies, while certainly revolutionary, are all technologies of access and distribution. The printing press gives more people access to certain texts, the audio recording gives more people access to certain utterances, the film

[621] John William Johnson, "Recent Contributions by Somalis and Somalists to the Study of Oral Literature," in *Selected Papers of the International Symposium, Somalia and the World* (Mogadishu, 1979), pp. 4-6.

camera gives more people access to certain sights. In our current age, I would argue, we are in the midst of something else, a shift in the way we receive, produce and interpret linguistic information that has no obvious historical parallel, with one exception: our shift from orality to literacy.

Per Ong, the most fundamental change that literacy allows is the decoupling of the "speaker" and the "spoken" – textualized language can stand on its own, permanently, making its point again and again as long as there are readers to read it.[622] Pulling from Olson,[623] Ong refers to this type of language, which has been decontextualized from its creator, as "autonomous discourse." This no longer seems novel to us, but the decoupling of speaker and speech was certainly a shock to oral populations. One of the typical examples of this is the *Phaedrus*, in which Plato rails against the written word and elucidates the damaging effects it will have on society.[624] We are deeply embedded in our literate culture, which has carried on well enough despite Plato's warnings. But if we want to taste that same cocktail of fear, excitement and alienation, we do not need to look far. If literacy creates autonomous speech, we have gone ahead and taken the next step – we have created autonomous speakers, non-human programs capable of processing and producing language.

A discussion of the parallels between the advent of writing and the advent of autonomous language-producing programs (of which generative AI is the most emblematic, but certainly not the only, example) would be a dissertation in itself. But to further justify this line of questioning, I want to note one insight that work of this type allows us, namely:

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[622] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, pp. 78-9.
[623] David R. Olson, "On the Language and Authority of Textbooks," *Journal of Communication* 30, no. 4 (1980): 186–96.
[624] Plato, *Plato's Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), pp. 156-162.

Generative artificial intelligence, like literacy, drives us towards increasingly abstractive language use.

5.4.2 – Binaries, spectra and linguistic abstraction

In chapter three (§3.2.3), I highlighted several characteristics of abstraction, one of which is *generality* – the abstract is *general*, whereas the concrete is *specific*. This notion connects to another idea that has come up in this dissertation (§2.2), namely the distinction between spectra and binaries. A spectrum is continuous – it is not a collection of specific individual values, but rather a range in which an infinite number of infinitely granular differentiations can be made. A binary is non-continuous – it offers a finite number of values. A good example of a binary structure would be a scale of one to ten, the type that frequently appears on questionnaires. Within this scale, we have ten options: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. This is a binary.[625] Physical quantity, however, is spectral – between the lower limit of 1 and the upper limit of 10 we see an infinite number of increasingly precise numbers. A spectrum is thus concrete in a way that a binary is not – it contains infinite gradation, nuance, possibility and variance, as indeed the real world does. A binary contains only a limited selection of points, reducing the infinite possibilities of a spectrum to a set of general, pre-defined options. The abstractive capacity of a binary has its advantages, especially when we need to process data. While the "7" on my customer satisfaction survey may not fully represent the rich emotional experience I had while purchasing a coffee, it does allow somebody in the Dunkin' Donuts customer service division to easily add my opinion to a far larger data set from which general insights may be drawn. This would not be possible if feedback was provided in the format of, say, a descriptive paragraph.

[625] As the name indicates, a **bi**nary usually just consists of two values – I am using the term in an extended manner here.

This is intriguing because, in shifting from oral modes of exchange to textual ones, we sacrifice many spectral modes of expression for binary ones. Examples of spectral modes include gestures and facial expressions, which can be infinitely varied and are an important factor in oral expression.[626] If somebody asks me how I am feeling, I can respond: "alright" [smiling, rising intonation], "alright" [rolled eyes, grunt], "alright" [curt tone, no facial affect], and so on and so forth. Each of these subtle paralinguistic variations carries subtle semantic variations, none of which are present in the autonomous, textual *alright*. We can add some of the missing information through, for instance, modifiers (*mostly alright, just alright,* etc.), but the full spectrum of expressive possibility is no longer available. Even words themselves appear to lose some of their spectral possibility in a literate context. Words in an oral culture are not externally fixed in dictionaries and equivalent reference works, but rather derive their meaning from the concrete, real-world contexts in which they are used,[627] thus retaining a spectral semantic flexibility impossible in a literate culture.

This same transition is occurring today, in even more fundamental terms. No matter how abstractively binaric the language or thought of a human being is, we operate in a spectral world. We look, listen, feel, smell, taste, grieve, tire, hurt, rejoice, fear, yearn, and itch. All of our varied sensory and emotional apparatus perceives the world concretely and spectrally. When we feel the cool morning breeze we do not think: "Yeah, that's a 6." None of this is true of programs, and not simply because they lack our sensory apparatus. Any piece of information carried within a computer must, in its most basic form, be representable in binary code, and binary admits no ambiguity – a bit (the word itself is a blend of *binary digit*) may be a 0, or it may be a 1.

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[626] Koch and Oesterreicher, "Sprache der Nähe - Sprache der Distanz," pp. 22-23.
[627] Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 29.

We are thus entering a world in which much of the language that is produced and processed each day is produced and processed by machines, machines for which concrete, spectral information is not only foreign, but axiomatically impossible. Some results of this may already be apparent – I am thinking here of the various AI-produced "essays" I have seen students submit. These papers are instantly recognizable as the product of AI, not because of any errors in grammar, wording or spelling – the prescriptive regulations of "correct" writing are binaric themselves (X is right. Y is wrong.) and are in fact far better suited to a digital brain than an analog one. What makes these AI-produced papers recognizable is their unbearable generality, their inability to make a single specific point. My understanding of computation is limited, and I leave it to better-informed readers to correct me, but it seems logical that any language produced by inherently abstractive processes will itself traffic only in generalities.

As for the broader results of this shift – how we ourselves will change in response to the exponentially increasing ubiquity of machine-generated language – only time will tell. There are many, many more topics to discuss here. AI, for instance, cannot play – it cannot decouple means from ends, and it cannot create challenges for itself, from which it can learn. What can this tell us about the language it produces? We have also noted that humans, at a fundamental level, seem to have a cognitive preference for the concrete[628] - this is why conversational metaphor is so useful. If we innately prefer concrete concepts, how will we be affected as our linguistic environment becomes increasingly abstract? These questions will have to linger for now. But if we want to answer them, if we are to understand the changes that our current technological shift will entail, there are few better places to look than the transition from orality to literacy, the closest parallel in our species' history.

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[628] Langacker, "Reference-Point Structures," p. 30.

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