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EPITHET OR IDIONYM: A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE OLD ICELANDIC 'KENNING'

Abstract. A cognitive linguistic approach is applied to Snorri Sturluson's rhetorical categories to demonstrate how prototype theory can explicate the motivation of Snorri's types *kenning*, *sann. kenning* and *viDr. kenning*. While Snorri's categories were more apt to historiographical applications, his employment of these same techniques in mythography appears less sound. Straying from a strict adherence to the scalds' prototypically metonymic mode of hermeneutic, Snorri may well have ahistorically generated a host of mythological figures (JǫrÐ, Mímr, ÓÐr, rúÐr, Magni).

Snorri Sturluson's attempt to define the Old Norse rhetorical figure he termed *kenning* has gone much discussed and poorly understood. In privileging a systemic over a taxonymic analysis, Bjarne FIDJESTØL's structuralist studies remain the most significant modern exposition of this rhetorical figure, yet he dismisses Snorri's opening definition as "lite typiske for dei gu-dekenningar vi faktisk møter" (1974:17). Margaret CLUNIES ROSS considered the atypical pattern chosen to demonstrate Snorri's "first working definition" of a kenning as an artefact of his mediaeval encyclopaedism (1987:43f., 102-06) and thus unlikely to have been intended as "a definition of the kenning that was valid for all kenning types" (43). By applying prototype theory (LAKOFF 1987:12-57), however, I have come to see Snorri's categories as conducive to an enhanced interpretation of scaldic poetics.

While the applicability of cognitive linguistics to the Norse kenning system has been recognized (CLUNIES ROSS 1989:274-76), prototype theory has gone underutilized (cf. Amory 1988: 96-98). Rather than attempt to provide typical exemplars, Snorri succeeds in defining the prototypical (FINNUR 1931:86.1-10):

"There are three distinctive classes of poetic diction". "Which [are those]?" "Thus: to denominate each referent by employing an appellation; the second division is that which is termed '*fornafn*'; and the third class of diction is that which is termed '*kenning*', and that class is thus employed if we denominate ÓÐ inn or órr or Týr or any particular member of the Æsir or Alfar, and to any particular one of the aforesaid I construe a term attributive to another Óss or I refer to one of his deeds. Then the latter [Óss] becomes the referent for the name, and not the former [Óss], whose name was expressed, just as we say

‘victory Týr’ or ‘hanged-man’s Týr’ or ‘Týr of cargoes’, that [name, i. e. ‘Týr’] is then an appellation for ÓÐ inn, and we call that [name] a ‘*kent heiti*’ [i. e. a determined appellative], just as we denominate [him, i.e. ÓÐ inn] ‘Týr of the wagon’”. [modified from CLUNIES ROSS 1987:39]

Formally, the kenning divides into two parts, with the determinant marked syntactically for subordination, so that Snorri’s examples can be represented schematically as follows:

[[determinant] ^{SUBORDINATOR} [determinand] ^{HEAD}]	
[[<i>kenni-nafn</i>] ^{SUBORDINATOR} [<i>kennt nafn</i>] ^{HEAD}]	
[[<i>sigr</i>] ^{CONSTRUCT} [<i>týr</i>] ^{HEAD}] ⇒ ÓÐ inn	(cf. <i>Vsp</i> 45 ²)
[[<i>bange</i>] ^{GENETIVE} [<i>týr</i>] ^{HEAD}] ⇒ ÓÐ inn	(<i>Hál</i> 1 ⁶)
[[<i>farmar</i>] ^{GENETIVE} [<i>týr</i>] ^{HEAD}] ⇒ ÓÐ inn	(<i>Hál</i> 11 ⁵)
[[<i>reiÐa</i>] ^{CONSTRUCT} [<i>týr</i>] ^{HEAD}] ⇒ ÓÐ inn	(<i>Haust</i> 20 ²)
[[<i>karmr</i>] ^{GENETIVE} [<i>týr</i>] ^{HEAD}] ⇒ ÓÐ inn	(<i>dr</i> 19 ⁵⁻⁶)

Prompting recourse to idealized cognitive model schematizing elements corresponding to both determinant and determinand, modifiers trigger metonymy “from the general cognitive principle that special cases take precedence over general cases” (LAKOFF 1987:74), but metonymy towards more central members of a category prototypically distinguishes scaldic determinants from those employed in other pragmatic contexts, where metonymy typically operates centrifugally within categories.

While conceding that such patterns are attested, CLUNIES ROSS notes that Snorri’s consistent determinand *týr* could function as an appellative rather than as a proper name (1987:97-102). Indeed, *Lokasenna* (38¹, 40¹) offers the best evidence for *týr* serving as an idionym during the pre-Conversion period, but its non-alliterating position within a formulaic phrase (cf. 17¹, 20¹, 22¹, 26¹, 30¹, 32¹, 34¹, 46¹, 48¹, 56¹, 57¹, 59¹, 61¹, 63¹) gives it all the look of a class variable serving as syntactic place-marker even there. In early scaldic poetry, nonetheless, unequivocal idionyms do support Snorri’s definition:

[[<i>kenni-nafn</i>] ^{SUBORDINATOR} [<i>einkar nafn</i>] ^{HEAD}]	
[[<i>berr</i>] ^{CONSTRUCT} [<i>Gautr</i>] ^{HEAD}] ⇒ ÓÐ inn	(<i>Rdr</i> 5 ⁸ , <i>Glúmr</i> 1.2 ⁸)
[[<i>fet</i>] ^{CONSTRUCT} [<i>Meile</i>] ^{HEAD}] ⇒ Hónir	(<i>Haust</i> 4 ²)
[[[<i>fen</i>] ^{CONSTRUCT} [<i>tennr</i>] ^{HEAD}] GENETIVE [<i>Sýr</i>] ^{HEAD}] ⇒ Gefion	(<i>Korm</i> 1.1 ¹⁻²)
[[[<i>berr</i>] ^{CONSTRUCT} [<i>ruma</i>] ^{HEAD}] GENETIVE [<i>Gautr</i>] ^{HEAD}] ⇒ ÓÐ inn	(<i>dr</i> 1 ⁶)
[[[<i>bimenn</i>] ^{CONSTRUCT} [<i>targa</i>] ^{HEAD}] GENETIVE [<i>FríDr</i>] ^{HEAD}] ⇒ Sól	(<i>dr</i> 4 ³⁻⁴)
[[<i>sef</i>] ^{CONSTRUCT} [<i>Grímnir</i>] ^{HEAD}] ⇒ Freyr	(<i>dr</i> 4 ⁸)

By restricting his exempla of scaldic metonymy to within a narrowly defined range of possible referents, the *Æsir*, Snorri highly constrains the determinant: since members of exclusive categories share by definition many traits, a clearly diagnostic characteristic of the referent's individuality must be chosen to trigger scaldic metonymy.

Moreover, given the cultural conditions under which pre-Conversion cult practice developed in Norway, such kennings would have been highly useful. Pre-Viking-Age Scandinavia was maximally decentralized in Norway, fostering local variation in all aspect of culture, including the language of cult. Hence a poetic composition of mythological character with any pretence at extended circulation would have needed to emphasize those characteristics which identify mythologems typologically. Such inclusive rhetoric would have become especially critical in Iceland, as new communities needed to create social cohesion through dialogue among settlers hailing from across Northwestern Europe. Similarly, in Old Norse anthroponymy the individuality of the name bearer was much more likely to be conveyed through *kenningar nqfn*, with their implied anecdotal origin stemming from the referent's personal history, than by names received at birth, whose morphological componenets were drawn from a more limited linguistic pool, and, as even the earliest genealogical evidence demonstrates, were likely to recur within kinship groups. Nicknames were like personal property.

Scaldic diction was further conditioned by its use as an esoteric code (LINDOW 1975:323f.). As a poetic genre, scaldic verse made little use of *Variation* (PAETZEL 1913):

[[determinand]^{COORDINATOR} [determinant]^{COORDINATOR}
 [[*kennt nafn*]^{COORDINATOR} [*kenningar nafn*]^{COORDINATOR}
 [[*Sig-vorDr*]^{DATIVE} [*iar*]^{DATIVE} (Korm 1.2⁴)

Scaldic interbraiding of clauses hampered the functionality of paratactic, co-referential modification governed by the identity principle and so struck at what KLAEBER termed "the very soul of Old English poetical style" (1905-06: 237) and indeed that of most Old Germanic alliterative poetry. Snorri's second rhetorical category, *for-nqfn*, appears symptomatic of scaldic innovation (FINNUR 1931: 188.10-12):

There are further those appellatives which one may have stand before/in place of the names of men. We denominate that [type of appellative] as '*viD (r)kenningar*' or '*sann-kenningar*' or '*for-nqfn*'. [modified from CLUNIES ROSS 1987:64]

Snorri's use of *ganga fyrir*, signifying both "to go ahead of" and hence "to go in place of", marks *for nafn* as essentially elliptical figures, and, insofar, as most of the kennings in *Beowulf* occur within *Variationen*, Snorri's unmarked *kennningar* may equally be viewed as archotypically elliptical.

The logic of scaldic metonymy evokes ellipsis, insofar as the lack of an idealized cognitive model incorporating both modifier and head triggers a metonymic connector between the expressed head and its categorical congeners which do share models with the modifier. Were the uninitiated to model cognitive schemata using the scaldic metonym according to its field of reference proper, this new model would be out of harmony with the encyclopaedic system of cognitive models which the scalds cryptically guarded. Linguistic constructions not in keeping with recognized truth were termed *auk-nefni* in Norse, and as such constituted the basis for the crime of libel, *yki*, in contrast with *sann-nefni* as appropriate naming practice (CLUNIES ROSS 1987:58f.). Given the harsh penalties for actionable *yki* (FINLAY 2001:21-28), the scaldic metonym was a perilous tool to wield.

Language is ubiquitously metonymous, so that modification was in no way a prerequisite for scaldic metonymy (BRODEUR 1952:130). Given the expertise of his intended audience (BRODEUR 1952:137), Snorri's cursory treatment of the *for-nafn* and its subclasses may be due as much to consideration of their intuitive accessibility at this point in the treatise as to any want of analytical machinery for linguistic description. The common denominator for those examples labelled *sann-kennningar* is modification which permits the accurate establishment of reference without itself triggering class-centripetal metonymy: adjectives represent the prototypical syntactic manifestation of this marking, as Snorri points out (FINNUR 1931:216.10-11):

A *sann-kennning* is that which upholds an utterance through the use of evident matter, such as to denominate wounds as *stinnr* ["stiff"] in that severe wounds weigh inexorably upon one. [modified from CLUNIES ROSS 1987:69]

Snorri's most diagnostic example for this interpretation is that cited by his nephew Óláfr órðarson (ÓLSEN 1884:170. 138-40 [ib. 35]): *ham · dokkr Hlakkar havkr* (*Ht* 5⁵⁻⁶). For it is not so much the syntactic headword *havkr* as the intended referent, the raven, which is prototypically "dark-coated" (MALM 1990:117-20). As FIDJESTØL concedes (1974:12), scaldic metonymy can be prompted through adjectival determinants alone: (e.g. *blá-serkr* [Rdr 6³]), but like *Variationen* such remain marginal to the hermeneutic system. In that headwords are prototypically metonymic, modifiers of all sorts, not just the prototypical nominal modifiers of unmarked

kenningar, are instrumental to all levels of scaldic hermeneutics (KUHN 1978).

Not every nominal construction is suitable to scaldic metonymy, however. Snorri's illustration of *sann·kenningar* through examples morpho-syntactically headed by the deutertheme *-maDr* or nominalizing suffixes (FINNUR 1931:189.8-10) indicates categories so cognitively basic that no higher-level categorization may be logically possible. In this respect, such nominal formations resemble adjectives, which can be logically parsed as consisting of a desinential head (mapping a governing noun's gender, case and number) and a morpho-syntactically subordinate lexical stem functioning as its modifier.

Snorri's final category, *viDr·kenning*, has instead been taken to be of functional, rather than logical, salience, insofar as Snorri saw scaldic poetry as prototypically panagyric (FAULKES 1994:170). Like *sann·kenningar*, prototypical *viDr·kenning* are insignificant in terms of metonymy. In all cases, reference is made to a named individual though the following structure (cf. FINNUR 1931:163.16-20):

$[[\textit{einkar nafn fyrra}]^{\text{SUBORDINATOR}} [\textit{kennt nafn}]^{\text{HEAD}}] \Rightarrow \textit{einkar nafn qnnor}$

$[[\textit{Har-valdr}]^{\text{GENETIVE}} [\textit{sann-reyner}]^{\text{HEAD}}] \Rightarrow \textit{Sig.vorDr iarl} \quad (\textit{Korm 1.1}^{2,4})$

Snorri thrice sub-classifies this permutation, according to whether the determinant is an anthroponym (FINNUR 1931:188.12-15) or any other named item subject to possession (189.6-8), while female referents call for a redefinition of the typical determinands available (190:10-13). As historiographer, Snorri would have had special recourse to *viDr·kenningar*, insofar as they can be used to establish cognitive models involving exemplars rather than classes of referent. Through the systematic interpretation of such *viDr·kenningar*, relative chronologies could be established so as to permit historical analysis on the basis of scaldic source material.

Snorri represents Norse mythology as radically anthropomorphic (CLUNIES ROSS 1994:42-84), with idealized cognitive models based on human experience being mapped onto a wide variety of metaphysical domains. Indeed, Snorri's pantheon is so anthropomorphized that the frontier between his mythography and historiography is often blurred. In *Skaldskaparmál* particularly, Snorri lays out the scaldic evidence for his deductions, that being heavily skewed towards *viDr·kenningar*. This material has been chronically neglected in the study of skaldic rhetoric: most modern classifications ignore the category altogether. FIDJESTØL's apology for them as "[i] og for seg den minst interessante" class of kenning is likely a repre-

sentative attitude (1974:37), being based on such judgements as:

T. d. i slektskapskenningane er det stort sett tale om reine, problemfrie synonym, så som Odin og hans mange namn i /K/ [i.e. the determinant] eller ein serie som *sonr*, *burr*, *mogr* i /G/ [i.e. the determinand]. I slike tilfelle misser *kenning-typen* noko av sin psykiske røyndomseffekt, og blir ståande meir som eit teoretisk postulat. Dette er kenningar som verkar «sanne» eller «naturlege». (1974:33)

Yet there is a logical flaw to this argument to which Snorri himself may have contributed through his promiscuous blending of historiography and mythography.

Within *viDr-kenningar* there is no necessary pragmatic obstacle to the operation of scaldic metonymy. Social experience, in both its biological and cultural aspects, is a prime source for cognitive mappings (LAKOFF 1996). Norse mythology forms in some ways a higher degree mapping projected from those idealized cognitive models which governed Norse society (CLUNIES ROSS 1994: 85-102). Yet are such kennings as

ÓDens *burr* ⇒ *órr* (Haust 19⁶) historically reliable attestations of a pagan cosmogony or merely rhetorical conceits misconstrued as theological *yki* of the type lampooned in *Lokasenna*?

Within his quadripartite classification system, EINAR ÓL. SVEINSSON cites *JarDar burrr* as emblematic of his category *sérkenning*, the self-evident type (1962:145). A simple comparison with an Old Irish term for 'wolf' may help to revive this pattern with some of the psychological impact that Fidjestøl found wanting in such *sérkenningar*:

[[earth]^{SUBORDINATOR} [[lad]^{HEAD}]

iarDar sonr ⇒ *órr* (Haust 14⁶)

grundar sveinn ⇒ *órr* (Haust 19⁴)

iarDar konr ⇒ *órr* (dr 15²)

O. Ir *mac(c) tíre* ⇒ wolf

In Old Irish, where the inherited reflex of the Common Indo-European lexeme for *canis lupus* survives only as an onomastic element, an analogous formula to a genuinely archaic denotation for *órr* is attested in laws and glosses. Cognitively, one may note that just as *órr* embodies many aspects of the Viking-Age warrior ideal, so the wolf did in the Norse, perhaps even Indo-European, cultural construction of this predatory creature.

Insular Celtic productively exploited analytic syntagma formally com-

parable to kennings as derivational types (ADAMS 1975:240-42). Within such primary cognitive models as agency, these could be used to impart nuances not otherwise available through synthetic morphological derivations. Determinands like *macc* 'boy, son', *fer* 'man', *aes* 'folk' or *aithair* 'father' could be combined with abstract nominals to signal degrees of agency:

macc légingd 'son of reading' \Rightarrow (clerical) student

fer légingd 'man of reading' \Rightarrow monastic official

aes dala 'folk of meeting' \Rightarrow advocates

aithair dala 'father of meeting' \Rightarrow ambassador

míms syner (Vsp 45¹)

míms vinr (St 23⁵, VSt 1²)

míms hqfoD (Vsp 45³, Sigdr 14³)

While the meaning of *mím(r)* remains to be explained, some significance can be gleaned from the distribution of its determinands along a social scale of authority. For if *míms vinr* signifies ÓÐ inn, *míms hqfoD*, with whom he is said to speak, may well represent his superior with regard to the mysterious *mím(r)*, if a further, contextually determined, metonymy is intuited whereby the organic structure of a physiological body is mapped onto corporate social groups.

The added rhetorical complexity of *míms hqfoD*, with its grammatically neuter determinand, could be motivated by the need to represent an agency idealized as feminine, in that Old Norse morphology lacked grammatically feminine *nomen agentis* derivations. Presumably presiding in some way over *míms brunnr* (Vsp 45¹), this figure may refer to one of the *vqlor* who narrate *Vqluspá* itself.

In Old Irish, syntagma analogous to that of the kenning were used to form grammatically feminine designations for various classes of female referent around such headwords as *bé* or *ben* 'woman' and *ingen* 'daughter'. Similar constructions with abstract determinants occur in Old Norse prose, as well as poetry:

bé togu 'woman of will' \Rightarrow woman entitled to choose

O. N. *ráDs kona* 'woman of rule' \Rightarrow female counsellor

óDs mærr 'maiden of intellect/poesis' (Vsp 21⁸)

Again, *óDs mærr* may refer to one of the *vqlor* who narrate *Vqluspá*. In any case, the determinand points to a link with Hónir, who endowed the primeval human couple, Ask and Embla, with *óDr* (Vsp 18⁶).

Agency is considered a source of action, so that markers of agency are often related to ablative grammaticalization, while the result of an action is typically grammaticalized as illative. Mapping from the schema of parent and child generates syntagma in Old Irish comparable to Norse mythological epithets:

<i>macc saele</i> ‘son of spittle’	⇒	salve	
<i>macc alla</i> ‘son of rock’	⇒	echo	
<i>aithair níme</i> ‘father of poison’	⇒	serpent	
<i>faDer < rúDar</i> ‘father of puissance’	⇒	órr	(Evald 2 ⁴)
<i>faDer magna</i> ‘father of powers’	⇒	órr	(dr 21 ²)
cf. <i>faDer galdr</i> ‘father of incantation’	⇒	ÓD inn	(Bdr 2 ³)

Insofar as *neim* could denominate both a concrete referent, ‘poison’, and the more abstract ‘bale, malific power’, the connotative potential of this syntagma would have found fertile soil in the Christian mythology imported with the Conversion of Ireland.

With these examples I have continued along a trail blazed by Roberta FRANK (1981) in her analysis of the scaldic evidence for Snorri’s mythologem of the genesis of poetry: Snorri’s characteristic response to opaque determinants in mythological kenning constructions is to reify the determinant, so as to generate a superabundance of named entities (JqrD, Mímr, ÓDr, rúDr, Magni...) with no clear theological functions or systemic relationships. Frank’s methodology is complimentary to my own, and *macc saele* may well open a path towards explicating Snorri’s mythologem of the genesis of the prototype of poesis, whom Snorri names Kvasir (FINNUR 1931:82.3-83.14). I have argued (2003:82) that this entity would eventually come to form a liquid which could be referred to as *elli·lyf ása* (Haust 9³).

While a menagerie of supernatural beings are attested as determinants to kennings referring to the poetic arts, Snorri gives pride of place to ÓDinn as the divine patron of *skald·skapr*. Yet a closer look at Snorri’s own exposition of scaldic technique reveals a further weakness in his choice of exempla for his prototypical kenning type. Scaldic metonymy favoured kennings whose base words did not count the referent among their members directly, to the point that epithets like *farma·týr* (Hal 11⁵) or *brafn·óss* (Haustl 4⁴) strongly implied that ÓDinn was neither to be considered among the *tívar* by Eyvindr skaldaspillir or even among the *ésir* by ióDólfr or Hvini, practically our earliest sources for Norse mythology. Snorri’s contention that ÓDinn was a man of old who eventually acquired the status of a god is often taken as a learned Christian intellectualization

of indigenous cult practice. However, a more systematic examination of the kenning system may well show Snorri's theological invention to lie elsewhere.

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[citation from Norse poetic texts follows WYLY 2003:83]

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