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A Psycholinguistic Investigation of Old English Poetic Composition

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ABSTRACT

The conventional hypothesis of Old English poetic composition assumed that poets used a limited number of formulae which were tacked together to generate the texts now extant. Old English poetic composition is a combination of natural 'spreading activation' and acquired poetic skill, with one constantly reinforcing the other. This study tests whether the spreading activation theory is correct by investigation into the formulaic properties of selected Old English texts, not including *Beowulf*, and compares these texts with *Beowulf* to see if that poem has any special non-formulaic qualities. High rates of collocation may be predictable in the abstract, but need to be established on a quantitative basis. Scholars have widely maintained that *Beowulf* has special qualities which give rise to the expectation that its language is inherently non-formulaic; that the *Beowulf* poet was a more original craftsman than the composers of other poems. Some scholars, myself included, have an intuitive feeling that the composition of *Beowulf* is special and superior. The proximity surveys completed for this study do not prove the hypothesis that Old English poetry was composed by a combination of natural spreading activation plus learned poetic routines. The expected outcome of patterned recurrences has not been demonstrated. The surveys suggest that poets actively suppressed the tendency for a given word to associate on to other alliterating words. This tendency is especially marked in *Beowulf* as poet allows one word to lead to another over a somewhat longer word-span, which results in the poet being freed to use the same basic collocation more frequently. *Beowulf* is shown to demonstrate a distinct and impressive lack of formulism.

RESOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The mixture of sources used include Old English poetic texts and technical literature on poetic composition. I also consulted analytical and critical commentaries on the poetry and poets' style, and the concordance of Old English. Much of the technical literature on Old English poetic composition is printed in international journals; access to these was made possible through library interloans. I acknowledge the assistance of Massey University Extramural Library Service. Consultation of the concordance of Old English allowed me to make a comparison between the recurrent collocations disclosed against the total picture derived from all extant texts. Hence this put in train a test for one aspect of the working hypothesis.

The texts were all sourced from Georgetown University's Labyrinth Library (see Appendix). The study would not have been feasible before the invention of the personal computer, and the 'word-search' facility to locate all instances of each word. I acknowledge my husband Richard for assistance with technical aspects of data-processing and computer functions.

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HYPOTHESIS

Many previous treatments of Old English poetic composition have proceeded upon the assumption that the poets composed by using a limited number of formulae. According to this conventional hypothesis, such formulae were tacked together to generate the texts now extant. Although such a hypothesis is obviously excessively mechanistic and reductive, when compared with actual Old English textuality, scholars have encountered difficulties in refining it. I hypothesise that the patterns of lexical and phonological recurrence to be found in Old English poetic texts may be found consistent with the expected outcome between two processes. The first is the involuntary and unconscious process termed 'spreading activation' by which all speakers generate utterances. The second process is the poets' trained acquisition of a repertoire of poetic diction and prosodic devices, notably alliteration.

Old English poetic composition is a combination of natural spreading activation and acquired poetic skill, with one reinforcing the other all the time. By testing this belief, the expected outcome would be patterned recurrences. One objective of the study is to test whether the spreading activation theory is correct. This is based on a study of the formulaic properties of selected Old English texts not including *Beowulf*. A second aim is to compare these texts with *Beowulf* to see if *Beowulf* has any special non-formulaic qualities. High rates of collocation may be predictable in the abstract, but need to be established on a quantitative basis.

There have been no other tests undertaken on the composition of Old English verse similar to these detailed in this thesis; the analysis undertaken has covered ground hitherto unexplored by commentators. This may perhaps be due in part to a noticeable reduction in interest in the composition of Old English verse. It has become a less fashionable topic in the last couple of decades, with little new research worldwide.