
BATTLE AS A SACRED GAME

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Abstract

In my research, I propose a linguistic approach to skaldic praise poetry pursued and explained in the framework of Eugeniu Coseriu's text linguistics. My study aims to demonstrate the different degrees of integration of *battle*'s proper meaning, from a calculated strategy in pre-Christian poems, to performing a sacred game in later Christian skaldic poems and eventually to the insertion in a ready-made structure as a unit of repeated speech. Considering kenning metaphors as sequences of repeated speech, I will also investigate to what extent the idiocultural class of *battle*, employed in some biblical circumstances (1 Corinthians 9:24.26; 2 Timothy:2-5; 2 Timothy 4-7, etc.), suggests a cultural model engaged in a semantic tension with the old Norse setting of the eleventh century. In my study, I will identify and discuss the sequences of repeated speech (kennings) which designate the *battle* and I will clarify these tensions. Taking the theory of repeated speech as a point of departure, the discussion of these issues will be structured around three types of kennings for battle: *battle is storm*, *battle is senna* (fierce verbal duels), *battle is a game to play*.

Keywords: Text linguistics, skaldic praise poetry, repeated speech, kennings, semantic tension

1. The conceptual framework

The theory of language created by Eugeniu Coseriu provides all the main elements for analysing a language at all its levels. The foundation of Coseriu's theory on language is given by the tripartition of the planes of language and it includes three theories: of speaking, of the particular language, and of text (Kabatek and Murguía 1997:159). The linguistics of text is of great interest for the linguists who studied Coseriu's theory on language. The specific object of linguistics of text, as a hermeneutics of understanding, is this superior level of meaning.

The starting point of Coseriu's integral linguistics lies in the insufficiency of the Saussurian dichotomy between *langue* and *parole* (Coseriu 2004/1962:44), instead of which Coseriu proposes a three-part approach to

language/speaking: (a) *designatum*, which constitutes the reference to reality; (b) *significatum*, which represents the content of a sign or expression in a given language; (c) *sense*, which defines the content of a text, meaning what the text expresses beyond designation and the signified. These three linguistic aspects converge simultaneously within the same act of speech, forming together the semantic content that is usually termed as proper meaning.

The units of the repeated speech have been classified by Coseriu, in order to render the possibilities of their varied combinations in accordance with the structural level at which they combine with one another, and according to the levels where they are commutable: the equivalence of words (which can be combined at the level of the discourse but they can also be replaced by more appropriate words); the equivalence of syntagma, which can be combined during acts of speech. They are commutable with other expressions, for example, 'early starts make easy stages' which is equivalent to 'the early bird catches the worm'); and the third category, equivalence of discourse, which contains metaphorical expressions and proverbs, units of the repeated discourse which are compatible with other discourses or whole texts only at the level of the discourse or text (Coseriu, 2013:122).

2. What is a kenning?

I will address this problem with reference to literary examples from Old Norse skaldic poetry. The metaphors in question are called *kennings*, a poetical periphrase such as a *battle* being described as a *storm*. Roberta Frank (1978) underlined that only taken together do the two components of a kenning reach the full force of the concept they are to replace. As Bergsveinn Birgisson (2012) explained, pre-Christian examples within this classification are ingrained with an aesthetic concept independent of the Greco-Roman aesthetic tradition, thus rendering the oldest corpus of skaldic poetry a unique theoretical value in terms of metaphor theory. Understanding the nature of a kenning is a central task of anyone who wishes to achieve an understanding of the textual sense of a skaldic poem. As might be assumed in the case of a skaldic praise poem, the kenning metaphor for *battle* is an overwhelming presence. In approaching the subject, we are immediately confronted by the challenge of the nature of language and the context in which talk about battle is found.

Assessing the poetical nature of the kenning starts with an understanding that the text of the poem is an expression of a particular

historical and cultural context in time. Any skaldic poem participates within this kind of a context but does not depict it all. It presents arguments and positions, but it does not provide the reader with the full vision of the mythical, religious, and cultural context. Our task becomes one of looking at the symbolic language used in speaking of battle. In dealing with expressions, we reflect upon the way in which concepts are captured in language in a form that is necessarily symbolic due to the use of language itself.

3. What is repeated speech?

According to Coseriu all languages are historical techniques of discourse, and they belong to the tradition of each distinctive culture (Coseriu, 2013:120). Tradition also includes language already spoken – fragments of ready-made discourse that can be re-used, often as idioms distinct from the formal usage of the language. By approaching the repeated speech from a semantic perspective, I want to explore the creative potential of kennings for *battle*, as well as the procedures and functions on the basis of which these units contribute to the creation of meaning in skaldic poetry.

The steady point of any analysis regarding a cultural pattern is the axiom that in the deepest meaning of a text there is a stylistic matrix which represents an imprint of a complex vision. As Wilhelm von Humboldt asserted, sounds do not become words until a meaning has been placed into them, and this meaning encapsulates the mental map of a community (von Humboldt 2000/1836). In the broad field of Coserian linguistics, a text represents the product of the individual level of speech (Coseriu 2013:121; Teoc 2013:147). Referring to the text linguistics as a hermeneutics of sense, Coseriu suggested that there is no universally valid technique for interpreting a text, since we are never capable of foreseeing what sorts of sign-relations are activated:

If we want to consider a particular text in its individuality, we can never know in advance what kind of sign-relations can be established within it. It is really possible just to draw up a list of the general possibilities at the disposal of the one who produces a text in order to make sense. But we are talking about an open list. We will always be able to record in our list completely new possibilities of semiotic articulation in interpreting a new text, for there is no mechanical method to enumerate or predict all imaginable possibilities of achieving the proper meaning. (Coseriu 2013:163)

Coseriu distinguishes two subcategories of repeated discourse: repeated speech and proverbial words. Repeated speech concerns all that is communicated as phraseologisms (recurrent lexical idioms such as sayings, proverbs, catch phrases) within the linguistic community and is a form of communication appealing to previous contexts. Proverbial words are small fragments from literary or non-literary texts that are extremely familiar within the linguistic community and can even be reproduced by heart. As for proverbial words, Coseriu holds that the allusion is achieved by relating to famous quotations from historically identifiable authors. What is relevant for the purpose of this study is the possibility to create a new meaning by introducing, in a new text, a reference to already existing texts. In this case, the very familiar texts represent the basis for evocations, while frequently resorting to those texts allows speakers to create new meanings. Manifest in the language as discourse, a kenning substitutes itself for the class of famous quotations, which are framed by certain speech circumstances they evoke when the poetic sense is uttered. The fact that a kenning appears in different macro-texts, which generate multiple interpretations, represents, each time, an act of re-creation. Due to the reinsertion processes which can be applied to them, the kennings make possible the creation of sense materialised through the change of their ordinary textual functions and the acquisition of new semantic functions (relations), despite their conventional (repeated) nature.

4. *Battle is storm*

My argumentation will focus on an examination of the metaphors for battle, as presented by Snorri Sturluson in *Skáldskaparmál* (Brodeur trad., 1916), and it will develop to the study-case when the *battle* is periphrased as a *game to play*. Contemporary thought has come to recognise that, in considering the application of language to kenning metaphors, Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál* (The language of Poetry) reveals a pagan vision of the world expressed in kennings in which the terms mirror the knowledge of the Viking world and the general principles of its thought. As we know, in various parts of *Skáldskaparmál* narratives are also included to account for the origins of some of the kennings by recounting the myths and legends that were thought to have given rise to them.

In *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri Sturluson is perfectly clear about what is a *battle*. The kennings collected by him under the heading

Orrostukenningar are based on the notion of stormy battles and contain such terms as *veðr vápna* (storm of weapons), *gný* (din), and *glym* (clashing). Therefore, “*battle* is Storm of Weapons or of Sheltering Shields, or of Odin or the Valkyrs, or of Host-Kings; and Din and Clashing” (Sturluson 1916:44).

According to this reading, what makes the poetic meaning of the kenning is the way in which the skald elaborates the mapping of the metaphorical structure: *battle is storm*. By exploring the proper meaning of each term – *battle* is a hostile encounter between opposing military forces and, as *storm* is a heavy fall of rain, snow, or hail, or a violent outbreak of thunder and lightning, we are able to account for the emergence of the metaphor as being analogous to the experience of a routine in the Old Norse world.

One example adduced by Langeslag (2002), regarding the storms and winters in Old Norse literature, may be considered to illustrate the point. He acknowledges that Old Norse literature employs storms and winter as being closely related to the dangerous supernatural.

There is also a seasonal mythology describing an eastern Scandinavian dynasty headed by an individual named Fornjótr, whose descendants – the sea, the fire, and the wind – are said to have ruled the forces of nature referred to in their names. A comparative approach on the affective level regarding the *battle as storm* can be of some significance: courage, bravery, and heroism are all linked to the battle, while the feeling of being defenceless in front of a blind force of nature establishes a relationship between the hero himself and the dramatism of a fierce battle in which he is already engaged. In this view, the metaphoric process is oriented towards the semantic specification of some concrete aspects of Old Norse experience, and thus the functional principle within language does not contradict the established cultural pattern.

5. *Battle is senna*

A kenning cannot be presumed to be only analogical or only in respect of the principle of likeness: there is always an additional meaning or a new quality to be revealed. Thus, for our purposes here, we may observe that the image of a *battle as storm* introduces the idea of battle as a blind force, without any spatial logic, where the main characteristics of the warrior as power, strength, or a calculated strategy are often overthrown. And as we

will indicate further, in the expression of a kenning, the Viking ruler, due to his sacred status, is believed to have a certain control over the blind forces of nature. Kingship has, in the Viking world, a sacred posture, where the king is directly responsible not only for the abundance of the harvest but also for the peace of the kingdom (Simek 1996:270).

Correspondingly, when referring to battle as *din*, by exploring the proper meaning of the term as a loud and violent sound, we are able to account for the emergence of the metaphor as being analogous to *senna*, the verbal duels generally assumed to originate in the real practice of discourse similar to some modern abuse-games. *Senna* refers precisely to the harshness of this type of verbal duel, well known in the Viking world. The image of a *battle as din or senna* introduces the idea of *battle* as an angry linguistic dispute, where the main characteristics of the warrior are a high voice and the ability to make weapons shout.

6. Battle is a game to play

What happens in the skaldic poetry starting with the first Christian concepts introduced in the skaldic verse is an unexpected change, which transforms the poems from otherwise fairly analogous to the Old Norse world to one that is more problematic. We could interpret this kind of change as a specific mark of Christian poetry and as a result of a tension. Furthermore, I would emphasise that what Christian skalds do in their poems is to replace the kennings *battle is storm* and *battle is din or senna* with the kenning *battle is game*. When the skalds make use of the metaphor *battle is storm*, they use it only as a departure point in building up a new poetic vision.

In my opinion, the kenning for *battle* expressed in the metaphorical structure *battle is a game to play* is loaded with meaning by association with the Christian battle between good and evil, when the Kingdom of God has to triumph over all the kingdoms – “The war between good and evil was not over after Satan's defeat in the premortal life” (Revelation 12) – and, despite the violence of this game, it connotes a perfect, blissful state of existence, attainable by men while they are on earth: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4-7). There are also different degrees of integration of the sense from the earlier poems composed by converted skalds to the Christian skalds who composed poetry when they were safe as Christian believers.

The Old Norse texts I refer to are: *Óláfsdrápa* (the praise poem for the missionary king Tryggvason), poem composed by Hallfreðr Óttarsson; *Erfidrápa Óláfs helga* (Memorial drápa for Saint Óláfr) by Sigvatr Þórðarson; *Magnússflokkur* (a poem addressed to Magnús Ólafsson, better known as Magnús the Good at some point between 1044 and his death in 1047) by Þjóðólfr Arnórsson; and Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonarkviða*, composed after the death of king Hákon.

7. Analysis of Old Norse texts

7.1. *Óláfsdrápa*

In the last stanza of *Óláfsdrápa*, the praise poem for the missionary king Ólafur Tryggvason, we find one of the earliest occurrences of the kenning *battle is a game*, where the Norse skald describes Óláfr's Viking exploits before he challenged for rule in Norway.

If we consider the line: “The generous man made sword-game (*sverðleik*) in Man” (Whaley 2012:387), we must imagine a competitive activity or sport in which players compete with each other according to a set of rules. In this context, the most obvious generic features are a calculated strategy or approach, a schema, or a pattern.

The point I wish to make concerning the kenning sword game (*sverðleik*) is that even if it seems textually unproblematic, semantically it is somewhat enigmatic. *Leikr* does not actually denote only a game to play but also a competition that brings happiness. Anthony Faulkes (2007) underlines that, apart from a game to play, *leikr* also means pleasure and happiness. Whatever the case may be, the compound *sverðleik* remains unusual because it contains an image in which the battle – defined in pagan poems as a blind storm or a fierce *senna*, known as the clash of swords and arrows – is mapped now onto the image of a happy game. The genius of this kind of metaphor can be appreciated if we analyse the position of the king regarding the battle.

If we take a look at the first line: “the generous man (set as the diminisher of gold) made sword-game (*sverðleik*)” we observe that the king is the prime mover, the inducer, the one who provoked the battle as a game to his pagan enemies. We could also assume in the kenning *sword game*, that battle is a superimposition of the image of a game onto the image of a battle by virtue of their rules. But what presents difficulty for our understanding of this metaphor is our conventional knowledge of the kings

of those times. If we were to see those kings in the way the pagan Vikings did, we would probably create with less effort a mental image of a king inducing the battle – not only being the leader of it. The idea of the ruler having a sacred status in a pre-Christian Scandinavia already mentioned above was still active at the time when this poem was composed, despite King Olaf Tryggvason's conversion to Christianity. The verses are composed by Hallfredr vandredaskáld Ottarsson, a skald who seemed to be most dramatically affected by the conversion: "We must renounce many an anciently-held decree of norms" he complains to the missionary king, Olaf Tryggvason; but the two religions cannot ultimately be reconciled, as Diane Whaley (2000) observes, and the skald makes it clear that one cannot serve Christ and Odin. A closer glance at the other five stanzas of the poem will serve to introduce an additional three kennings for battle: *a storm of spears*, *a storm of the missile-shower*, and *spear-breeze*. In the two last cases, the kennings are double kennings, *tvikent*, in which the source is either a warrior or a raven; therefore, they are not active as kennings for battle. The first case reveals a passive participation of the skald, in a situation when he learned about the battle, and the battle was described to him as a storm.

I would call this the first stage of integration of the kenning *battle is a game to play* when the Christian king is inducing both a battle as a storm and a battle as a game to play.

7.2. Erfidrápa Óláfs helga

A quarter of a century after Hallfreðr's death, Sighvatr Þórðason – of whose work nothing survives prior to his acceptance of Christianity and who almost totally renounced mythological allusions in his verse, making him perhaps the first skald to have worked only in a Christian milieu – creates the kenning *ísarnleiki*: the iron-game in *Erfidrápa Óláfs helga* (Memorial drápa for Saint Óláfr) (Jesch 2012). The poem covers Óláfr Haraldsson's accession to power, his bringing of order to Norway, and it concentrates on his final battle at Stiklastaðir. Several stanzas remind us of his miracles and the effects of his sanctity. The kenning *the iron-game* is identified in the second stanza of the memorial poem, when the battle gets fiercer and the king presses forward in the hand-to-hand fighting. Within this context, the contestation between the traditional pagan *vedr* (storm) and the incoming *leik* (game) as being at the conceptual heart of a Christian vision of the battle hereby commences.

While one of the most intriguing yet complicated aspects of this issue is the mental adaptation of Christianity by these northern pagans (what did the Vikings know of Christianity, how did they appreciate Christian teaching *per se*?) the context of this happy game provides several elements regarding the unicity of the Norse perception of Christianity during the period of conversion. By assessing the image of a Christian king involved in the happy game of a fierce battle, the opposition between happiness and death is solved by the new metaphorical structure that emerges. The additional meaning, or the new quality to be revealed in the newly emergent metaphor, is that King Olafr himself – as a ruler and as *saint to be* – is involved in the happy game of death, the only gate to the endless and heavenly afterlife.

If we are to find such a metaphor explained in a prose verse, Thorleik Fagri provides an example in his praise poem for Svein Ulfsson – “Yet God can decide again which one will deprive the other of life or lands” (Gade 2017:484) – where he acknowledges that the outcome of the battle is a result of a collaboration between the bravery of the hero and the grace of God, thereby creating the image of a battle as a sacred game. A new mythology of the afterlife, much more potent and formalised than the old beliefs related to battle as a storm controlled by the king, had captured the imagination of Scandinavian poets. This clash seems to gain more contrast-tension if we examine other parts of the network.

7.3. *Magnússflokkur*

It is not possible to decide, on the basis of one metaphor, whether the skald Þjóðólfr Arnórsson knew Þórðason’s *Memorial drapa for Saint Óláfr* or not, but the third occurrence of *battle* as a *happy game to play* is found in his poem *Magnússflokkur*, a poem addressed to Magnús the Good, the son of Saint Óláfr. The stanza depicts the action in the sea-battle at Aarhus (Áróss, in 1043). In this context, the king Magnús urged his men to clash their shields in the biting sword game. Apparently, the *happy game of the biting sword* (Whaley 2009:70) is also a unique metaphor in his time, although there is a conceptual rule that a sword is biting. At first glance, the metaphor makes no sense: a battle is likened to a game in which the warriors are happy to be bitten. What we rather sense is the material contrast of happiness and pain bringing forth the association of being cut with a sword. The analogy emerges when we visualise movements of

elements. Compressing the two situations into one emergent structure – the swords are biting, and the warriors are happy to play the game of life and death – would inevitably reveal both the meaning and the intended emotional target of the kenning. In my opinion, the perceived allegorical intent behind the naming of the battle as *a happy game of the biting sword* is to denominate a common action of the king and his warriors. There is a progression from a reconstruction of battle as a happy game, provoked by a converted Viking king, to a sacred game played by a saint and eventually to a happy game played by the king and his men – all of them sharing Christian beliefs.

These three occurrences together imply that the kenning metaphor *battle is game* takes hold only as the Vikings grew accustomed to a Christian vision over battle, taking into consideration that there are relatively few references of any kind to *battle as game* before the eleventh century.

7.4. *Hákonarkviða*

The example of *leiki hjarar*, the game of the sword, from Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonarkviða*, works in much the same way: “The frightful corpse-lightnings (SPEARS) flew (...) in the game of sword (BATTLE)” (Gade 2009). Sturla Þórðarson composed *Hákonarkviða* ‘*Kviða*’ about Hákon after the news of Hákon’s death, on 16 December 1263. The context creates the scene of the battle when Hákon’s men were defending themselves in a churchyard, throwing rocks and spears and shooting arrows at their enemies, many of whom were wounded. The poem is composed in a new literary trend (Gade *ibid.*) having emerged in skaldic literature during the twelfth century, when authors were, as I mentioned above, secure in a Christian ideology.

Moreover, being the fourth occurrence in a skaldic poem, we step on the steady ground of the repeated speech. When the skald used a settled kenning in a new context, they effectively increased their wisdom in a two-fold process: first, they allowed themselves to understand a new situation in the context of a previous one; and secondly, since the kenning will not exactly match the new situation, the kenning’s meaning will have to be revised and semantically expanded.

Due to the reinsertion processes which can be applied to them, the kennings make possible the creation of sense through a change in their

original textual functions and through new semantic functions, despite their conventional or repeated nature.

The kenning *battle is a happy game*, then, is less about itself than about its application to different contexts. Being aware that these kennings demand and characterise an audience that plays a productive part in the interpretive process, these metaphors represent a community's ideals; and these ideals, by their nature, create, according to Humboldt's theory, a new vision.

8. Conclusions

Although the terms *weapon* and *storm* so often seem to go together in skaldic poetry, the kenning metaphor *battle is game*, already articulated in some biblical circumstances (1 Corinthians 9:24.26; 2 Timothy:2-5; 2 Timothy 4-7, etc.), suggests a new cultural pattern engaged in a semantic tension with the pagan corpus of kennings for battle. In this framework, the kenning *battle is game* becomes the ground for a new cultural pattern in which the warrior mirrors the fight between good and evil, a pattern built upon the already established cultural model *fighting a battle is surviving a storm*.

Even if it is easy to identify the common characteristics of the terms that give rise to the kenning *battle is a game*, the schemas involved reveal different images from within: a Viking king provokes the battle, a Christian king is fighting the battle hand-to-hand, the subjects of a Christian king are playing the game of life and death together with their king, and, finally, the kenning *battle is game* is repeated as a poetic stereotype or as an allusion to an already existing sequence of known facts. It can also be repeated in a more or less identical form, as a piece of ready-made discourse; and, as a unit of skaldic poetry, it will always evoke a sacred text with a history which belongs to a Christian cultural tradition. By approaching the repeated speech from a semantic perspective, I have explored the creative potential of kennings for *battle*, as well as the procedures and functions on the basis of which these units contribute to the creation of meaning in skaldic poetry.

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