

# Formulaic Spacing and Communal Ideation

## Distributed Reading of Networked Tensions between Narrative Patterns and Their Instances

The goal of the project is a new methodology of reading communal narratives, whether traditional oral and orally derived or contemporary web-based and massively collaborative. By leveraging cutting-edge computational methods of “distant reading” (Moretti 2005 & 2007) along with the sensitivity and rigour of close reading, the proposed practices of distributed reading and annotation will bring into focus narrative patterns that I have recently found (in my work on Icelandic sagas and South Slavic epics) to reveal networks of latent tensions between the community’s evolving sense of identity and its inexpressibly experimental heterogeneity (Rankovic, forthcoming in 2013).

The patterns in question, partly captured by the term “traditional formula”, are also these narrative’s most ubiquitous (and sometimes most conspicuous) feature. Ever since the inception of modern folkloristics, scholars of oral literature have endeavoured to dispel popular misconceptions about formulas as empty clichés. Beyond the emphasis of early theorists on formulas as mnemonic devices and their role in the mechanics of oral composition (Parry 1971 [1928] and Lord 1960), there is now a growing appreciation of formulaic instances as aesthetically potent, semantically charged places that, for the informed audience, weave complex webs of association spanning the entire tradition (e.g. Foley 1991, 1999; Sigurðsson 2004; Rankovic 2009 and forthcoming in 2012).

In my own work, I am increasingly aware of the sheer diversity among the instances of the same formula (Rankovic, forthcoming in 2013). While some evident similarity constitutes them as narrative patterns to begin with, their effect on the audience is fully contingent on their varied narrative contexts. Instead of the emptiness of a cliché, distributed reading practices will regard each formula instance as a clearing of a stage and the formula itself as a site of communal identity formation where alternative social attitudes can be imaginatively played out and their consequences implicitly compared. The proposed practices of distributed reading and annotation involve explicit pairwise comparisons of instances in view of mapping the differential network of latent “tensions in distancing” or spacing (Derrida 2005) that internally divides the formula. Custom-built software will enforce bottom-up, instance-driven development of the differential vocabulary, minimise the number of comparisons that have to be made by readers for the mapping to be complete, as well as computationally analyse and visualise the resulting close reading comparative data.

The computer aided analysis and visualisation of the distribution of formulaic diversity across the reader-generated differential space can reveal principal fault lines (or latent Bakhtinian tangents) along which the community experienced the most divisive social forces. Studies of formulaic spacing would thus constitute a new research field that would contribute important complementary perspective to the transdisciplinary scholarship on communal identity, memory, justice, and decision making.

I have conducted a preliminary study with Milos Rankovic ([PhD in Fine Art & Computing](#)) where such continual insight into the tension in distancing between narrative patterns and their instances proved highly motivating as it led to frequent interpretative revelations even with narratives the reader feels expertly familiar with.

By implementing the Semantic Web standards both the annotated formulaic networks and the co-evolving vocabularies (semantic ontologies) will be made available to direct and indirect collaboration and crowdsourcing, opening entirely new avenues for comparative literature. For instance, this would enable comparative analyses of formulaic networks of different traditions, or of the same tradition but generated by different readers, or even of different modalities (e.g. textual and visual – from rune stone carvings to Japanese manga, visual traditions are often just as formulaic). As learning resources, moreover, online formulaic networks would afford students of ancient communal narratives a unique experience of traditional referentiality.

The project will develop this methodology on the basis of a series of case studies. The initial R&D, testing and workshops (months 0–6) as well as the concluding analysis and dissemination (months 48–60: presentations, workshops, open standard for the annotation of formulaic spacing and a book with accompanying online distributed reading histories) will be conducted by myself (PI 100%) and Milos (post-doc 50%). Once the software is in place and stable, additional PhDs will join the team to study formulaic spacing in a range of corpora. The PhDs (who may well have attended the workshops in the first stage of the project) will be recruited in view of maximising the opportunities presented by the host institution as well as for the interest their chosen narrative corpus brings to the project (at least one of which is envisaged to be on Old Norse literature).

In addition to PhD projects and the PI's own study of Icelandic sagas and South Slavic epic, the PI and the post-doc will conduct smaller-scale case studies with the goal of testing the applicability of the proposed methodology to web-based narratives and ongoing creative practices. For the latter, we shall use our own collaborative art practice as the test case (see my CV for our exhibition history and the list of joint publications). For the former we shall explore the possibility of collaborating with the Digital Culture Research Group at Bergen.

## References

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