

Kenning Morphology: Towards a Formal Definition of the Skaldic Kenning, or Kennings and Adjectives

Ilya V. Sverdlov
(Moscow State University)

Kennings have attracted the interest of scientists for many centuries, yet no satisfactory definition of the kenning has been produced. Arguments as to the nature of kenning seem to be more about the semantics of kennings than about their morphological status. However, the latter ought to be considered fundamental as to the development a) of a formal definition and b) of a method which will allow us to distinguish between true kennings and other related constructions. This paper traces some formal morphological path that may lead to attaining both goals.

1. The definitions of the kenning¹ that have appeared hitherto have been of two types. The first group are those which have been concerned with the semantics of the kenning's components; thus, Heusler proposed his famous 'Metapher mit Ablenkung' [Heusler, 1969], while Steblin-Kamenskij declared 'demotivatedness', i.e. lack of visible interdependence between the meanings of a kenning's elements and the meaning of the overall kenning, as its principal property [Steblin-Kamenskij, 1947, p. 142 ff.]. Other definitions have been what I call 'metaphorical' in that they were descriptive (i.e. described the phenomenon in an intuitively correct way) but hardly linguistically precise, such as Meissner's famous 'ein zweigliedriger Ersatz für ein Substantivum der gewöhnlichen Rede' [Meissner, 1921, S. 2]. I propose to use another approach and try to see if we can at least define the *morphological* status of the kenning, so as to have a firm formal linguistic base for further discussion.
2. If we do so, the main question would be – is the kenning a compound word or a word combination? The classical answer is, again, metaphorical – the researchers use the phonological analogy and tell us that the distinguishing property of the kenning is that it 'neutralizes' the opposition between the two alternatives, because, as we know well, the same constituent element (*heiti*) may enter the same kenning in either form – as an unmarked, or *bare*, stem, or as a marked word-form in the Genitive case (either singular or plural). However, researchers such as Ye.A.Gurevich have developed Steblin-Kamenskij's argument and declared that those *heiti* that are parts of kenning ('constituent *heiti*' or CHs for short henceforth) are in a way analogous to morphs that make up our normal compounds. Yet these scholars have always stressed that such declarations are nothing more than a scientific metaphor, just as Meissner's definition is. I now propose to try to get rid of the metaphor here; it would hardly seem unfitting, as we know that kennings are decidedly non-metaphoric. It follows naturally that if we were to prove that CHs are morphs then the issue

¹ By 'kenning' I always mean *skaldic* kenning, as the eddaic variety pronouncedly *does not* have the properties that I argue the skaldic kenning has, but I won't discuss the eddaic one here. I thus omit the word *skaldic* for brevity. I also use 'case marker' for 'case and number marker' for the same reasons.

of kenning status would be resolved immediately: they would become compounds.

3. But how can we declare a marked word-form a morph? At first sight, it is impossible by definition – the property of being marked is that very morphological criterion that distinguishes between bare morphs and fully fledged word-forms, and the property of being marked just once is the very criterion (first introduced by Smirnitsky, see also [Mel'čuk 1997-2006, v. 1, p. 204]) that puts up a frontier between word combinations and compounds. The mere fact that we marked CHs and bare-stem CHs as in some sense 'equal' in the kenning does not give us right to remove that frontier, because a marked CH appears to be, well, marked – it has a stem and an ending. Thus, in order to declare the kenning a compound we must
 - a) demonstrate that, contrary to appearances, it is marked only once (so that the ending of the root CH actually marks the whole compound), and
 - b) demonstrate at the same time that the other CHs that make up the kenning are morphs, again, contrary to appearances.
 In fact, a) and b) are equal, that is, once we have proved one we automatically prove the other. So, in order to do that, we should first remember what types of compounds exist.
4. We know that there are two types of compounds, and they differ from each other in the form in which the stems that make them up appear in them. Thus, in Old Norse we clearly see these two types – in words like *dag-setr* both stems enter as bare, so that only the whole compound gets the marking in the form of the ending *-r*, while in words like *dags-ljós* or *daga-tala* the non-root stems look as if they are marked too, by the Genitive case marker. And yet both are unanimously considered to be compounds – and we should in no way be misled when the revered Messrs. Cleasby and Vigfusson occasionally allow themselves such liberties as to call the former-type words 'proper compounds' to the detriment of the latter (see e.g. the article for *skip*, cf. [Cleasby, 1962, 547] versus [Cleasby, 1962, 548, section B]). The latter are, of course, as proper as the former. But why?
5. This is because in fact what we took for Genitive case markers are *not case markers* at all, but *interfixes*. I think we should discuss this issue in some detail, and I shall have recourse here to the axiomatic general morphology of Prof. Igor' Mel'čuk of the University of Montreal, as it is represented in his *opus magnum*, *The Course on General Morphology*, the final volume of which has just been published in Russia². It is necessary to digress for a moment in order to consider the fundamental definitions used in that book.
6. According to Mel'čuk, a language sign is a triad [I.1, v.1, 119]³ – the first two items are classic Saussurean 'signifié' and 'signifiant', while the third is

² It was originally written in French and published in 1993-2000 by Presses Universitaires de Montréal and CNRS; the Russian translation was much reworked by the author and is now declared by him to be preferred to the French version.

³ Hereafter I omit reference to the author, and include only the reference to the definition (the Roman numeral refers to the Part of the work, the Arabic to the number of the definition in the part), and the volume and page number.

different and bears the name of 'syntactic' (this item holds various information on what contexts the particular sign is encountered in, especially restrictions on compatibility). This latest item has, in addition, a special property – it is never empty, because a syntactic is a feature that, according to Mel'čuk, is unique to language signs and thus distinguishes them from others. The first two sign items, however, may be empty. When the 'signifiant' is empty we get our usual *zero sign*, and the zero marker of the Accusative Singular for Old Norse *a*-declension nouns will suffice as the example (cf. Nom. Sg. *hest* versus Acc. Sg. *hest* – and the reference to the *a*-declension, by the way, is exactly the syntactic mentioned above). But, because the Mel'čukian sign has a syntactic, the normally never-empty 'signifié' is given the possibility to be empty too, and thus we get the *empty sign* [V.3, v. 4, 18], which we are less accustomed to.

7. Empty signs have their 'signifiants', that is, they are materially present (represented by a sequence of phonemes), and have their own syntactic in the sense that their presence is sometimes made obligatory by rules of morphology or syntax. A very common example can be seen in formal subjects – e.g. *it* in English *it rains*, *ça* in French *ça pue* (v.4, 19), and *hann* or *það* in modern Icelandic *hann snjóar* or *það dagar*. But our subject is another type of empty sign, namely the *interfix*, which is an affix that follows a root and obligatorily precedes another root [V.19, v.4, 170]. We see that it is a morph that we encounter exclusively in compounds. According to Mel'čuk, there is not a single language on Earth which possesses non-empty interfixes [v.4, 170]; one has simply have to take his word for that. But why are interfixes empty in the first place?
8. They are empty because there is no possibility of assigning any meaning to them. They are present in compounds and may even look like normal meaningful affixes (as they frequently do, and as they will do in our case), yet they bear no meaning and are bereft of the function that the elements they resemble normally have. Look at the German compounds: *-s-* in *Lebensart* and the same *-s-* that comes last in the phrase *Art des Lebens* have different functions. What proof is there for that? Well, in the case of compounds like *Konstruktion-s-muster* [v.5, 106] one argues that German words ending in *-tion* never accept *-s-* as a case marker (the Gen. Sg. will be *Konstruktion*, and the Gen. Pl. *Konstruktion-en*), so this *-s-* simply cannot be one, but this situation is a little too good (though the most clear, which is why it figures first in Mel'čuk's treatment). The real proof that this *-s-* is empty in *both* cases (*Lebens-art* versus *Konstruktion-s-muster*) is that we cannot attach *an agreed adjective* to either *Leben* or *Konstruktion* when they appear as they do in these compounds (see [v.1, 229]),⁴ while we can do so in expressions like *Art des Lebens*. This criterion is of the foremost importance in exactly the case we are discussing, because it does nothing less than put up the frontier between compounds and word combinations [v.4, 119]. And the adjectives that appear to

⁴ However, Mel'čuk mentions only the syntactic of stems as the part of the sign that is affected when they become parts of compounds. I would like to add that in my opinion this inability to be modified by adjectives is more than a syntactic feature and that it alters the 'signifié' of the stem too.

be attached to the root of the compound are, in fact, modifiers for the whole compound, as their semantics readily testify.

9. Thus what appears to be a case marker is, in fact, an empty sign, a sort of glue between the roots of compounds. It is *emptied* of its meaning when its host, the word-form, enters the compound [v.4, 55-56]. But there is more to it than that; while in a marked word-form an affix is an inalienable part of it (in fact, its presence is necessary for a word-form to be a word-form, otherwise it will remain a bare unmarked stem), when it empties and becomes an interfix in a compound it *loses* its ties with the original stem and is, thenceforth, *an element of the whole compound*, put as a connector *between* two adjacent stems, but not attached to either of them. Its origin is thus morphologically irrelevant, and the proof of that is that, in fact, interfixes are *not obligatory* for compound formation. We can even find compounds with three or more roots where there is an interfix between one couple of stems and no interfix between another – thus in *lögsögumaðr* the first two roots are joined without an interfix, while the second and third have one; or cf. *bókasafn* versus *bókmenntir*, or the full and unquestionable synonyms *læg-eiðr* [Cleasby, 1962, 404] and *laga-eiðr* [Cleasby, 1962, 370].
10. By the way, does not the fate of these former case markers resemble that of skaldic *heiti*? The meaning of the former is gone when their hosts join the overall compound; and when independent *heiti* become parts of a kenning, what happens to them is best described as follows: 'Nouns with concrete, identifying meaning are transformed, or, rather *deteriorate* into *heitis*' [Smirnitckaya, 1992, 222] losing their denotative semantics altogether. There are clear parallels between the fate of meanings of both – both 'signifieds' are affected in a way that diminishes their richness (up to the point of its total emptying). But this is an aside.
11. So we understand that in order to make up a compound of marked word-forms, one has necessarily to empty the case marker and make an interfix out of it. Thus the key moment when a word combination becomes a compound is this moment of *interfixivization* of the case marker and *disjunction* of the former stem + ending unity. This disjunction is fundamental for the creation of a compound, but the interesting thing is that it happens before our very eyes, live, so to speak. And this brings us back to the kennings and their CHs; but first I will mention one last property of the compounds.
12. Normally the elements of a compound follow each other without any breaks; they form an uninterrupted unit in the course of speech. And yet there are contexts where this unity breaks down. This is what Mel'čuk calls 'coordinating tmesis' (accompanied by ellipsis), and examples of it are numerous and perfectly grammatical, e.g. German *Mund- und Lebensarten*, or *Wörterbücherstellungs- und -herstellungsverfahren* [v.1, 210]. We should notice a number of things. First, that the elements of compounds are truly and unequivocally detached – there is even a conjunction between them! Second, that we may thus easily encounter a *bare stem* among other quite normal word-forms (*Mund-* in the first example). Third, that if a stem is detached along with the interfix (as it is in the second example above), the latter *does not turn back*

into a case marker as it is still impossible to attach an agreed adjective to its ex-host. Moreover, in that case the interfix serves as the detachment marker (the hyphen is, of course, nothing more than spelling convention), as does the bareness of stem in cases where a bare stem is detached.

13. And finally now we may conclude by simply stating that the skaldic kenning possesses all the above-described properties of compounds; their behaviours are completely identical. Morphologically, there is nothing in the kenning which would distinguish it from compounds thus described. Thus we may, I think, safely call the kenning a compound, and a very typical Germanic compound at that; we see in the kenning exactly the two things that are necessary for a word combination to turn into a compound:

- a) the turning of case markers into empty interfixes, and
- b) *disjunction* of formerly united CH word-forms into two independent morphs – a stem and an interfix.

The well-known distancing of the elements of kennings should not surprise us either, because we now agree that even when we encounter an element which seems to have a case marker attached to it, it is not actually a case marker but simply an interfix, as distancing of elements does not turn the compound back into a word combination. Moreover, if we adopt such an approach, we can predict that:

- a) we may be finding *detached bare stems*, and
- b) in cases where the CH was itself a compound, we may find distancing of elements of this particular compound and not simply of the overall kenning compound (cf. the hypothetical but perfectly grammatical modern Icelandic *há- og menntaskólabókasöfn*, where an original compound (*háskóli*) that was used to form a larger compound, *háskólabókasöfn*, is itself split).

And both predictions turn out to be true – examples of such cases are discussed in my 2004 article in *Skandinavistik* [Sverdlov, 2003].

14. And thus we may now safely call CHs morphs in a very unambiguous and non-metaphorical way: they appear to possess all the necessary properties of proper morphs, namely, they are *elementary* language signs [V.6, T.4, c. 38]. The whole interfix discussion was aimed exactly at bringing to our attention the fact of the *disjunction* between the stem and its former affix, so that they both enter the overall compound *independently*, as independent morphs in their own right (otherwise a ‘marked’ CH would forever remain a nominal word-form, which in Old Norse is always a non-elementary sign, i.e., one made up of other signs). And of course we agree that distancing of CHs in a kenning, or, in other words, the property of kenning to appear split, is no hindrance to considering kennings as compounds in an *ontological, formal sense*, not merely in a metaphorical one.
15. But there is still an important condition to be considered before we can do so. If we could find examples of an *agreed adjective* attached to a non-root base-

word,⁵ or worse, to the determinant of a kenning, we would be obliged to modify our proposition; but so far, there seem not to be any. There are, of course, bare-stem epithets attached to base-words, but because these epithets are bare stems, they change nothing in the overall compound nature of the kenning (formally, *hlémáni*⁶ is as good as *háskóli* – or *fleinþing*, for that matter); that is my main point in this paper. And importantly, the semantics of such epithets clearly mark them as placed not upon the actual CH they form compounds with, but upon *the embedded kenning* of which this CH is the base-word (as is normal with compounds), and this feature will make it possible to hold to the compound theory advocated here even if we do encounter agreed adjectives.

16. In any case, the treatment proposed here may at least serve as a distinguishing tool, so that kenning-like structures that conform to the conditions listed above are assumed to be surely and truly kennings, while those that are not are left for further discussion or assumed not to be kennings. This is quite logical, as we understand that the proposed treatment explains well the known peculiarities of kenning behaviour, especially the inversion of order of kenning CHs. It goes practically without saying that the unity of a compound is not based solely on the order of its components⁷ but rather on the fact that compound elements are morphs and not marked word-forms, so that the discovery of such a 'bare' morph in the text (as in oral speech) is enough to indicate that we have stumbled upon a compound and that we now have to assemble it. The possibility of a successful assembly, in the case of skaldic kenning, rests, of course, upon the rules of extension and rules of CH lists.

⁵ The root base-word, of course, has the case marker of the whole kenning compound attached to itself, and thus may have a fully fledged agreed adjective attached to it without the compound ceasing to be a compound.

⁶ This CH, with a bare-stem epithet attached to it, is part of the longest known kenning, *nausta blakks hlémána gifrs drifu gim-slöngvir*, appearing in the st. 1 of *Pórolf's drápa Skoimssonar*, by the eleventh-century skald Þórör Særeksson. *Nausta blakks máni* ('moon of the horse of the dock' [i.e. 'of the ship']) means 'shield', and the epithet *hlé-* is quite fitting, denoting 'shelter'.

⁷ Discovery of usual-language examples of compound splitting of the hypothetical type *beide Mundarten und Lebens-* would have strengthened my argument considerably, but so far I am not aware whether these exist or not.

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