

## Paradoxes of 'orality': a comparison between Homeric oral poetry and the heroic and courtly epics in Middle High German

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# Paradoxes of ‘Orality’: A Comparison between Homeric Oral Poetry and the Heroic and Courtly Epics in Middle High German

The processes of composition, memorization and performance in oral poetry turn out to be more complex than was once supposed.  
Finnegan 1977, 86

**Abstract:** On the premise that cross-linguistic comparisons are a suitable tool for investigating the mechanisms of the ‘oral’ communicative system within the linguistic structure of historical texts, the paper undertakes a comparison between the Homeric tradition and Middle High German (MHG) heroic and courtly epics. Based on a revision of traditional accounts of ‘orality’ in older stages of language and an analysis of different grammatical features which are commonly seen as ‘oral’, this paper shows that the main difference between the investigated texts is not primarily shaped by medial aspects of ‘orality’, but rather by the pragmatic presupposition of the poet with respect to narrative truth. This will allow for a more fine-grained view of both the communicative triangle SPEAKER – ADDRESSEE – WORLD as a historically variable constellation as well as of the relationship between the different dimensions of orality and their diachronic mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Oral poetry; Middle High German; Homer; deixis; narrativity.

## 1 The “Vortex” of Orality

The ‘oral’ communicative systems of older stages of language have retained their fascination until today. Decades after the seminal work by Parry and Lord, we have gained a more detailed view of the Homeric epics and their ‘formulaic poetry’ (e.g. Bakker 1997b, Bozzone 2010, Bozzone 2021). In addition, many other characteristics of the Homeric epics have been investigated within the realm of orality. Although this has led to valuable insights, it has also been criticized that orality had to serve as an explanation for too many features that are not directly linked to the written vs. spoken distinction:

Despite a significant amount of revisionist work, the concept of orality remains something of a vortex into which a range of only partly related issues have been sucked: authorial originality/communal property; impromptu composition/meditated composition; authorial and audience alienation/immediacy. The relevance of orality to these issues is not in dispute; the problem is that they do not vary along specifically oral/literate axes.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, it has been shown that a dichotomous difference between written and spoken language is not adequate to capture the various aspects of oral composition, performance, and transmission within older stages of language, and that the concept of orality rather comprises several different aspects.<sup>2</sup> However, which of these different aspects of orality have which effects on the linguistic structure has remained an open question. In order to win a more fine-grained view of the interplay between the different aspects of orality in historical stages of language, and, as such, of the general ‘mechanisms’ of the oral communicative system, I will zoom out of the archaic epics by investigating orality in Middle High German (MHG). Based on a revision of previous accounts of orality and a distinction between different aspects of orality, I will compare the Homeric epics with two different types of MHG epics and show that such a comparison allows for investigating the ‘vortex’ in a more systematic way.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 starts from the observation that many ‘oral’ linguistic features have been evaluated inconsistently – or in some cases even in contradictory fashion – in the literature. This calls for a distinction between different dimensions of orality which is based on a revision of approaches on historical orality in the Classical, Romance and German scholarly tradition. The benefit of this distinction is illustrated in Section 3, which offers a comparison between several ‘oral’ features in the MHG courtly and heroic epics. Since the two epics are situated in the same period of time and the same cultural context but reflect different medial constellations, their analysis allows for insights with respect to the effects of the different dimensions of orality on the linguistic structure. In this respect, my analysis shows that the main difference between the two poems lies within the attitude of the narrator towards the told story. In Section 4, this result is discussed in comparison with the Homeric epics, which leads to hypotheses with respect to the relationship between the different dimensions of orality and the oral predisposition within a specific cultural context. In sum, it is argued in Section 5 that the distinction between different dimensions of orality allows for dissolving the paradoxical descriptions of oral features, and, as such, a clearer view of the ‘vortex’.

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<sup>1</sup> Hall 2008, 279.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Koch/Oesterreicher 1985; Bakker 1998, Bakker 2005; Zeman 2016a, Zeman 2016b.

So although ‘oral’ features of Homeric epics will be the starting point, the paper does not claim to say anything new about the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* but is concerned with the concept of orality in its historical dimension per se, the general mechanisms of oral communicative systems.

## 2 Paradoxes of ‘Orality’

If we have a look into Hall’s ‘vortex’ of orality, we find many different linguistic features of epic poems that have been classified as ‘oral’ such as formula, metrical patterns, repetitions, orthographic alternation, anacolutha, paratactic structure, ‘illogical’ narrative chronology, tense alternations, interjections, modal particles, deictics referring to the ‘here and now’, epithets, a general ‘fluidity’ of the text, etc. However, almost every feature of this (not comprehensive) list has been controversially discussed with respect to how oral it actually is. One famous example in this respect is ring composition, i.e. the representation of thematic elements in a pattern like A-B-C-B-A, which has commonly been seen as a “fundamental structural device of Homeric narrative”.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, ring composition has been described as a pattern that reflects “the activity of performance and composition itself”<sup>4</sup> and “could well have been evolved by oral poets”.<sup>5</sup> As linked to the medial conditions within oral performance, ring composition would thus be an oral feature par excellence. This assumption has also been supported by Person, who argues that ring composition can be understood as an expansion of common practices found in everyday oral conversation.<sup>6</sup> Minchin, on the other hand, has argued that the A-B-C-B-A pattern refers “primarily to the pragmatics of storytelling”,<sup>7</sup> and is a feature which is only indirectly linked to the oral predisposition of Homer. In a similar way, Douglas has argued that ring composition is a cognitive pattern “hardwired in the brain”<sup>8</sup> and, as such, found in many narratives all over the world, but that it is not specifically characteristic for oral composition. In addition, ring composition has also been characterized as a literate principle of elaboration that cannot be deduced from the principles of oral composition.<sup>9</sup> According to Whitmann, for example, ring

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<sup>3</sup> Nimis 1998, 65.

<sup>4</sup> Nimis 1998, 66.

<sup>5</sup> Sale 1996, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Person 2016, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Minchin 2001, 198.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas 2007, 40.

<sup>9</sup> See Stanley 1993.

composition might have been a mnemonic device in its original function, but constitutes an artistic architectonic principle in the *Iliad*.<sup>10</sup> As this short overview shows, one single feature can thus be evaluated as an oral compositional device and as a pattern of artistic elaboration at the same time.

The main problem of such inconsistent evaluations leads back to the fact that the investigation of orality in older stages of language is based on a paradox itself: we are looking for oral residues of language in written texts. So what does 'oral' mean? In order to cope with this methodological problem, it is common to distinguish between 'medial' vs. 'conceptual'<sup>11</sup> or 'cognitive'<sup>12</sup> orality. Medial orality refers to the technical dimension, i.e. the fact that words are spoken, and is dichotomously opposed to written language. 'Cognitive' or 'conceptual' orality, on the other hand, is a gradual concept that refers to the fact that a (written or spoken) utterance can more or less reflect an 'oral style', regardless of its actual medial realization. Historical orality, i.e. orality that is only preserved in written texts of historical stages of language, can therefore not be anything else than conceptual/cognitive orality by definition. Which properties are characteristic of such an 'oral style', however, has remained an open question.<sup>13</sup> Koch and Oesterreicher themselves have defined conceptual orality as a mixed bag ("bunte Mischung"),<sup>14</sup> i.e. as a space in which components of language of proximity and language of distance combine and constitute particular linguistic constellations.<sup>15</sup> In order to gain a more nuanced view of conceptual orality, it is thus necessary to have a closer look at these different constellations. In other words: we first have to examine what is inside the bag and disentangle the different aspects of orality and, second, specify their relationship to each other.

This step is crucial since the heterogeneous 'oral' features, such as formula, metrical patterns, repetitions etc. are obviously not oral in the same way. Whereas features like syntactic breaks and metrical patterns are supposed to reflect the fact that the poems have been composed 'on line' simultaneously to their reception, and thus are conditioned by cognitive parsing restrictions in spoken language, deictics and interjections are not directly linked to orality in a technical sense; rather they are linguistic devices that create an impression of

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<sup>10</sup> Whitmann 1958, 98.

<sup>11</sup> Koch/Oesterreicher 1985.

<sup>12</sup> Fleischman 1990a, Fleischman 1990b.

<sup>13</sup> See Hennig 2009 and Zeman 2016a, Zeman 2016b for discussion.

<sup>14</sup> Koch/Oesterreicher 2007, 351.

<sup>15</sup> "Nun können wir das konzeptionelle Kontinuum definieren als den Raum, in dem nahe- und distanzsprachliche Komponenten im Rahmen der einzelnen Parameter sich mischen und damit bestimmte Äußerungsformen konstituieren." (Koch/Oesterreicher 1985, 21).

proximity between the poet, his audience, and the story world. Such features are commonly referred to in terms of ‘vividness’, ‘immediacy’, and ‘enargeia’ and, as such, linked to concepts like ‘language of proximity’ (“Nähesprache”)<sup>16</sup> and ‘involvement’.<sup>17</sup> Conceptual orality thus combines primary aspects of orality in the medial sense of the term, and secondary phenomena like stylistic markers of deictic immediacy, i.e. in Lord’s words, aspects *in* and aspects *for* performance.<sup>18</sup>

The difference between the medial production of the poem and the conceptualization of proximity is crucial for every act of linguistic communication, whether it takes place today or has taken place 2800 years ago. What complicates the matter of historical orality is the common assumption that older stages of language are ‘more oral’ in general, since “[t]he oral mental habits of all languages that have not grammaticalized writing necessarily leave their mark on linguistic structure”.<sup>19</sup> The language of Classical and Medieval documents has therefore been claimed to be “essentially a spoken language”.<sup>20</sup> It has, however, remained an open question to what an extent the style of texts of ‘oral’ cultures is ‘more oral’, and how cultural predispositions relating to the variable relationship between literacy and orality shape the ‘oral style’ of the poems, see Fig. 1.

It is thus the oral predisposition that is a variable of unknown type. Yet, this variable is crucial since investigations of ‘orality’ usually go beyond mere linguistic features and textual style. In the tradition of Ong’s 1982 conception of ‘primary orality’, studies often do not speak of orality in order to describe “what happens when someone talks, but to label a period or a culture as different with respect to our own, literate culture”.<sup>21</sup> In investigations of the Homeric epics, for example, ‘oral’ often not only refers to the fact that oral poetry is composed during oral performance,<sup>22</sup> but also that oral poetry is composed “in a manner evolved over many generations by singers of tales who did not know how to write”.<sup>23</sup> Whereas oral transmission has been a crucial aspect for Homeric oral poetry, it is, however, certainly not a feature of every epic poem that has been evaluated as ‘oral’. In this respect, Finnegan 1977 has objected that the characteristics of oral poetry identified by Parry and Lord cannot adequately describe the variety of oral story telling. In order to take into account cross-linguis-

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<sup>16</sup> Koch/Oesterreicher 1985; Ägel/Hennig 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Chafe 1982.

<sup>18</sup> Lord 1960, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Fleischman 1990b, 22; see also Fitzmaurice/Taavitsainen 2007, 19, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Fleischman 1990b, 24; similarly also Slings 1992, 100.

<sup>21</sup> Bakker 1998, 33; see also Hall 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Lord 1960, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Lord 1960, 4.

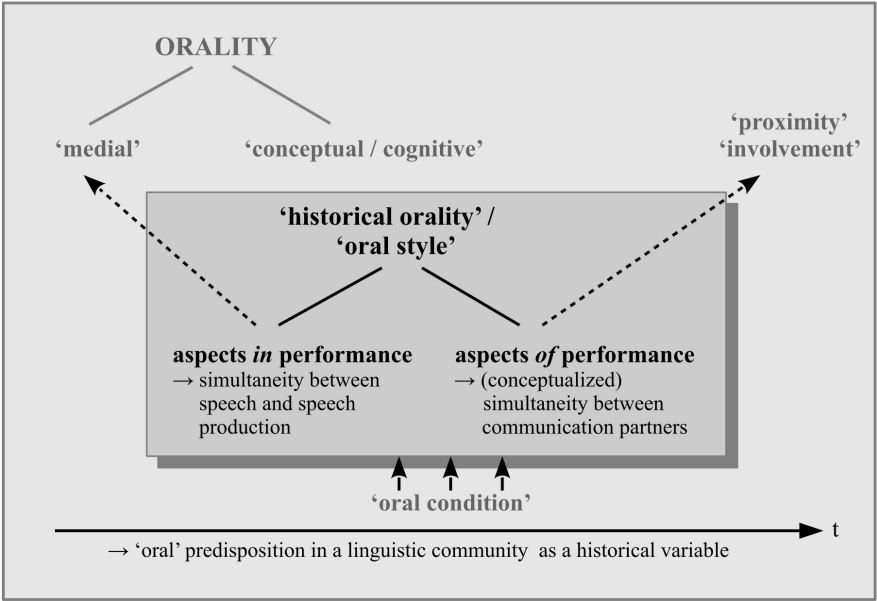


Fig. 1: Dimensions of ‘orality’ (adapted from Zeman 2016a, 183).

tic diversity, Foley 2002 has proposed to differentiate between composition, performance and transmission of the poem. The evaluation of these three individual parameters allows for a more fine-grained classification of an instance of oral poetry, which can be described according to the ‘oral’ constellation of the parameters (see Tab. 1).

Tab. 1: Foley’s 2002 differentiation of ‘oral’ constellations.<sup>24</sup>

	Composition	Performance	Reception	Example
“Oral performance”	Oral	Oral	Aural	Tibetan paper-singer
“Voiced texts”	Written	Oral	Aural	Slam poetry
“Voices from the past”	O/W	O/W	A/W	Homer’s <i>Odyssey</i>
“Written oral poems”	Written	Written	Written	Bishop Njegoš

<sup>24</sup> Foley 2002, 39.

As seen in Tab. 1, the differentiation is in particular useful to describe the possible constellations of the “voices from the past”, which can display different values with respect to composition, performance and reception. According to Foley and Ramey, both the Medieval and the Homeric epics belong to the “voices from the past”, i.e. textual artefacts that “reach us only in writing, but various kinds of internal and external evidence argue that they derive from oral traditions.”<sup>25</sup> In order to compare the different “voices from the past” category, it is thus necessary to determine the specific values with regard to the oral constellation, see also Finnegan:

There turn out to be different combinations of processes of composition, memorization and performance, with differing relationships between them according to cultural traditions, genres and individual poets. There are several ways – and not just *one* determined way suitable for ‘the oral mind’ – in which human beings can engage in the complex processes of poetic composition.<sup>26</sup>

The distinction can furthermore account for the fact that diachronically, there is no abrupt transition from orality to literacy. As “voices from the past”, both Homeric and medieval epic poems are not purely oral as they diverge in many ways and degrees from Ong’s 1982 criteria of primary orality.<sup>27</sup> Both Homeric and Medieval epics have also been described as transitional, semi-oral or postoral texts. These are, however, problematic terms, as they presuppose a straight line of development from orality to literacy, whereas it is nowadays commonly accepted that ‘oral’ is a gradient property, allowing for different constellations with respect to the relationship of spoken and written language within a society. As such, orality is not “incompatible with writing”,<sup>28</sup> and orality and literacy are not contradictory concepts. This holds in particular for the Medieval poems that are rooted both in oral tradition and the written word. As will be seen in the following, even within a rather short period of time, text genres can differ with respect to their oral constellations.

In addition, we have to take into account that oral epic poems are not instances of ordinary everyday storytelling but of ‘special speech’<sup>29</sup> that displays a high degree of elaboration. As such, oral poetry is characterized by the interplay between oral traces within the text and artistic devices like metre and formulae. It

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<sup>25</sup> Foley/Ramey 2012, 85.

<sup>26</sup> Finnegan 1977, 86.

<sup>27</sup> See Stanley 1993, 274 for the *Iliad*, Haferland 2019 for the MHG *Nibelungenlied*.

<sup>28</sup> Bakker 1998, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Bakker 1998, 38.

is thus obvious that there is no straight development from transcription to elaboration, either.

In sum, historical orality cuts across the oral/literal axis by comprising different pragmatic features on different linguistic levels. In the following discussion, ‘orality’ is therefore used as a general term under which heterogeneous phenomena that can be attributed to different dimensions of orality are discussed. What is at stake is the question whether there are systematic dependencies between specific linguistic features and aspects of orality. In order to approach this question, a comparison between MHG heroic and the courtly epic poems seems promising, since both types of poems belong to the same temporal and cultural context but display different oral values with respect to the parameters of composition, performance and transmission.

### 3 ‘Oral’ features in Middle High German and Homeric Epic Poems

For the MHG epic poems, it is commonly accepted that orality played “a crucial role in shaping the grammar (in the linguist’s sense) of medieval vernaculars and, consequently, the linguistic structure of our texts”.<sup>30</sup> It is, however, also evident that the MHG epics are rooted both in the oral tradition and the written word. This can be seen in the fact that many authors of epic poems emphasize their book-based erudition and their knowledge of the written sources of the narrated story. MHG epic poems could be both presented orally and read as texts, but it is assumed that free oral presentation of the poems was rather the rule than the exception.<sup>31</sup> MHG epics are thus not situated in a state of primary orality in the sense of Ong, but in a ‘third kind of medial condition’.<sup>32</sup>

There are, furthermore, crucial differences between two different genres of epic poems, i.e. the heroic and the courtly epics.<sup>33</sup> Heroic epics like the *Ortnit* refer to Germanic epic cycles that were traditionally known. Their authors are not mentioned within the poem and remain anonymous. The story starts immediately or after only a short prologue. The courtly epics, on the other hand, tell stories that originate from French sources and are tied to courtly knighthood. They can frequently be ascribed to a specific author, who often mentions himself

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<sup>30</sup> Fleischman 1990, 22.

<sup>31</sup> Haferland 2004, 463.

<sup>32</sup> Däumer 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Philipowski 2007, Haferland 2019.

in a prologue that precedes the actual story and often asserts its correctness. These genre differences<sup>34</sup> have been seen in connection with different medial conditions. It is assumed that heroic epics have been transmitted without aid of the written word before their transcription as texts. The courtly epics, in contrast, were probably composed and transmitted as written texts. Indications for the latter are frequent assertions by the author that the ‘truth’ of the narrated texts is ensured by written sources. The fundamental difference is thus seen in the fact that MHG heroic epics are the result of oral transmission, whereas courtly epics are composed, performed and transmitted with aid of the written word (see Tab. 2).<sup>35</sup>

**Tab. 2:** The medial constellation of MHG heroic and courtly epics.

	Heroic epics	Courtly epics
Author	unknown	known
Transmission	spoken word	written word
Composition	online processing	text-based
Performance	spoken word	spoken word

In order to investigate whether and how these two different medial constellations leave different traces within the epic poems, I will compare two canonical examples of heroic and courtly epics (both dated around 1200 AD), i.e. *Nibelungenlied B* and *Tristan*.<sup>36</sup> The *Nibelungenlied* is the oldest large-scale epic of MHG. Its status as an oral epos is controversial since it has been seen both as a ‘book *epos*’, i.e. an *epos* that is composed in written form but intended to be read and performed,<sup>37</sup> and as an *epos* based on oral transmission. Arguments for the first view are the fact that it does not display ‘Stabreimdichtung’ which is characteristic for early Germanic heroic epics. Furthermore, it also integrates schemata and topoi from the literary

<sup>34</sup> See Philipowski 2007, 49–57 with further references.

<sup>35</sup> See Philipowski 2007, 44: “Doch der grundlegende Unterschied zwischen höfischer Epik und Heldenepik ist, dass letztere das Resultat eines Tradierungsprozesses ist, der sich unserer Kenntnis nach mündlich vollzogen hat, während die höfische Epik aller Wahrscheinlichkeit nach schriftgestützt entsteht, schriftgestützt vorgetragen und schriftlich überliefert[...] wird.” (emphasis in original).

<sup>36</sup> The following editions have been used: Reichert 2020 and Marold 2016.

<sup>37</sup> See Heusler 1956, Müller 2012, and Heinzle 2015.

tradition of the courtly epos, which is unusual for heroic epics.<sup>38</sup> There are also important differences when compared to the Homeric epics: There is no formula-the-saurus,<sup>39</sup> but there are stereotypical patterns for the representation of thematic scenes like battles, festivals, arrivals and departures.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, it has been questioned whether the large-scale design and the consistency of the text would have presupposed composition by aid of the written word. On the other hand, its metrical-stanzaic form, the emphasis on visual and spatial representations, as well as incongruencies in the text, have been taken as an argument that the production of the text was based on memory<sup>41</sup> and that the text was “without doubt”<sup>42</sup> composed for recitation in an oral performance. In sum, the *Nibelungenlied* is thus based on a mixture of literary principles and codification through memory.<sup>43</sup> *Tristan* is a classic courtly epic. We can assume that it was composed with the aid of writing and that its content was transmitted by written sources, but that it was probably performed orally.

In the following section, I will examine whether and how these differences with respect to the medial predisposition are reflected in the linguistic structure of the poems. In order to do so, I will apply a method designed by Ágel and Hennig that is based on Koch and Oesterreicher’s differentiation between ‘language of proximity’ and ‘language of distance’ and has already been successfully applied to Early New High and New High German texts.<sup>44</sup> The benefit of this method is that it breaks down orality in different linguistic parameters, i.e. “time” (i.e. phenomena of serialization such as left-/right dislocation; paratactic structures etc.), “role” (i.e., signs of interaction between the discourse participants like vocatives and imperatives), “situation” (i.e. spatial, temporal and personal deixis), “code” (the interplay between verbal and non-verbal means, emotional evocations and interjections) and “medium” (i.e. traces of spoken language within the texts, such as phonic words which neglect graphical word boundaries, e.g. *shouldya* instead of *should you*). All these parameters are derived from universal-pragmatic conditions of the ‘language of proximity’ and comprise features that are supposed to be oral in general.

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38 Haferland 2019, 39.

39 See in detail Miedema 2011, 38–44 who shows that the epithets in the *Nibelungenlied* are neither fixed patterns nor used very frequently.

40 Haferland 2019, 58.

41 Haferland, 2019, 55.

42 Müller 2012, 315.

43 Haferland 2019, 60.

44 Ágel/Hennig 2006.

The method has been developed to provide a tool that allows for situating a historical text within the continuum between the two poles of Koch and Oesterreicher's 'language of proximity' and 'language of distance' and to compare different texts with respect to their 'value of proximity', but this will not be the aim in the following.<sup>45</sup> Instead, the method is used in order to compare the different parameters of 'orality' and investigate the differences between the heroic and the courtly epics and their relationship with respect to their medial predisposition so as to gain a more fine-grained view of the interplay between the different linguistic features.

The analysis is based on an extract of 4000 words for each text. The text extracts have been randomly selected, but attention has been paid that both text excerpts involve the same amount of 'dialogical' (i.e. direct speech, comments of the narrator) and 'narrative' passages. In compliance with the method of Ágel and Hennig, each occurrence of an oral feature is counted as one point. Next to micro-structural features within the different parameters, also macro-structural characteristics like sentence length and the relationship between main and subordinate clauses have been analyzed. The results are summarized in Tab. 3.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See Zeman 2016b for discussion.

<sup>46</sup> The analysis does not contain all features that are taken into account by Ágel/Hennig 2006. The frequency of 'phonic' words, for example, has not been included in Table 3 since most of the instances are conventionalized word contaminations (e.g. *mirz* ~ *mir ez*, "me it") so that it can be assumed that they are not direct reflections of spoken language. Furthermore, the low frequency of these contaminations does not allow for any conclusions. Also, 'Ausklammerungen', i.e. the positioning of sentential constituents outside the verbal bracket have not been included in Tab. 3. Since MHG does not have the same fixed word order as Present High German and often displays 'partial sentential frames', they would require a more detailed analysis with respect to their status as an oral feature in MHG. For the present analysis, I therefore restrict the analysis for the time parameter to the clearer cases of 'left-dislocation'.

**Tab. 3:** Comparison between *Nibelungenlied B* and *Tristan* with respect to oral features.

Parameter (Ágel/Hennig 2006)	<i>Nibelungenlied B</i>		<i>Tristan</i>	
	narrative	dialogical	narrative	dialogical
MICROSTRUCTURE				
Code (interjections, emotive)	4	4	2	58
Role (imperative, vocative)	0	52	0	55
Situation (personal deixis; temporal & local deixis)	5	268	8	264
	4	24	9	24
Time (left-displacement)	17	4	11	15
MACROSTRUCTURE				
Matrix sentences	180	200	140	163
Subordinate sentences	65	97	117	125
Length on average (in words)	11,1	10	14,3	12,3
(Microstructural) features in total	30	352	30	416
Words in total	2000	2000	2003	2004
	1,5 %	17,6 %	1,5 %	20,8 %

If we look at the sum of microstructural features in total, we see that the frequency of oral features within *Tristan* is higher than within the *Nibelungenlied*. The supposedly more oral character of the *Nibelungenlied* is thus not reflected within the frequency of oral features. But only if we look at the parameters individually, the differences between the two epic genres become more apparent. First, Tab. 3 shows a significant difference between narrated and dialogic passages, which concerns in particular the parameter of Code, Role and Situation. This result is expectable as it can be assumed that the amount of e.g. speaker-oriented deictics is higher in direct speech and comments of the narrator than in narrative passages. It is, however, remarkable that interjections and emotives are in particular characteristic for the dialogic passages within the courtly epics. Without the code parameter, the amount of oral features within the *Nibelungenlied* and *Tristan* are more or less comparable. The time parameter is not sensible to the narrative – dialogic distinction in the same way. With respect to the macro-structure, there is no indication for a difference between narrated and dialogic passages either, but a tendency that the amount of subordinated sentences is lower within the *Nibelungenlied* and that the average length of a sentence is shorter.

In the following, some exemplary features are discussed in detail in order to examine how the statistical data correlates with functional differences between the poems.

### 3.1 Time Parameter

The time parameter comprises phenomena that are dependent on the time during the production of discourse. For oral communication, it is assumed that the simultaneity between composition, production and reception leads to a more ‘aggregative’ and ‘additive’ (in contrast to ‘integrative’ and ‘subordinated’) discourse structure. A striking example is left-dislocation,<sup>47</sup> i.e. the positioning of a sentential constituent outside the sentence like in *My aunt, she used to sing folk songs*, which has been seen as characteristic for oral narratives in general.<sup>48</sup> Dislocation patterns can frequently be found in MHG epic poems. In (1), the subject is referred to by a NP and a subsequent pronoun, so that the subject is presented as a separate intonation unit.

1. *Vier hvndert swertdegene, | di solden tragn chleit | mit samt Sivride.*  
 “400 knight’s attendants | THEY were about to wear knightly clothes | together with Siegfried.”  
 (*Nibelungenlied B* 28, 1–2)

Such patterns have also been described as a common feature of the Homeric epics<sup>49</sup> and as “a clear manifestation of their oral syntax”,<sup>50</sup> see 2., where the “pendant nominative”<sup>51</sup> (*Patroklos dé*) presents the subject as an isolated referent within its own intonation unit.

2. Πάτροκλος δ’ | εἶος μὲν Ἀχαιοὶ τε Τρῳεὺς τε τείχεος ἀμφεμάχοντο |  
 “And Patroklos, | as long as the Achaeans and Trojans were fighting around the wall, |”  
 θοάων ἔκτοθι νηῶν, | τόφρ’ ὅ γ’ | ἐνὶ κλισίῃ ἀγαπήνορος Εὐρυπύλοιο |  
 far from the swift ships, | all the while HE, | in the tent of pleasant Eurypylus, |  
 (*Il.* 15, 390–392; example from de Kreij 2016, 151)

Such dislocation patterns have also been seen as an indication that for oral syntax, not the sentence but the intonation unit constitutes the basic element.<sup>52</sup> The

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<sup>47</sup> ‘Left-dislocation’ is, of course, a literal term since it presupposes a typeface from left to right. Since it is a common term, I keep it nevertheless.

<sup>48</sup> Chafe 1994, 67–68.

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. Bakker 1997b, chapter 5; Bonifazi/Elmer 2011; de Kreij 2016; Ready 2019.

<sup>50</sup> De Jong 2012, 122; quoted in de Kreij 2016, 152.

<sup>51</sup> “Pendant nominative” is the term of traditional grammar; see Bakker who argues that the phrase is better described as the theme of the upcoming description (Bakker 1997b, 102).

<sup>52</sup> Chafe 1994; see Bakker 1998, 39 for the Homeric epics.

frequent use of left-dislocation in the Homeric epics has therefore been taken as an argument that the Homeric text is “characterized by a thoroughly oral conception, and so very far removed from our conception of a written text”.<sup>53</sup>

It is interesting to see that within the *Nibelungenlied*, left-dislocation tends to be particularly frequent in narrative passages. This supports the hypothesis that left-dislocation serves the discourse function of “framing” or “priming” the discourse referents, which marks the protagonist as the center of the following lines of discourse.<sup>54</sup> As such, it can be expected that left-dislocations are characteristic for narrative passages. Once conventionalized, the pattern can become a meta-narrative signal for scene shifts.<sup>55</sup> As such, left-dislocation is not just oral, but also part of the narrative syntax. The data suggests that the courtly epics adopt this narrative strategy also for dialogical passages. More empirical analyses would be necessary to examine this in detail. Yet, the data supports the observation made above that it is crucial to take into account the difference between narrative and dialogical passages.

### 3.2 Situation, Code and Role Parameter

As seen in Tab. 2, the parameters of situation and role display comparable values, and, as shown in the following, share a similar function in referring to the communicative frame between the narrator and the audience, i.e. to the ‘here and now’ of discourse (see 3. – 4.).

3. *Hei waz da liehter ringe der chvene Danchwart cebrach!*  
‘alas what there many chain mails the bold Dancwart broke!’  
(*Nibelungenlied* B 212, 4)

4. und als er abr ze Tintajoël/ze dem hovegesinde kam, /  
and when he came again to the court at Tintajol,

*seht, dâ hôte er unde vernam/in gazzen unde in strâzen /*  
look, there he heard and got to know/in alleys and in streets

von klage al solch gelâzen,/daz ez in muote starke,  
due to laments such a behavior that it troubled him very much.’  
(*Tristan* 6022 – 6027)

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<sup>53</sup> Bakker 1998, 41.

<sup>54</sup> Bakker 1997b, 86 – 111.

<sup>55</sup> De Kreij 2016, 164.

In 3. – 4., the narrator addresses the audience directly by an exclamative (*hei waz* “alas what”) and an imperative of a verb of perception (*seht* “look”). Both examples presuppose the ‘here and now’ of the telling moment as a shared communicative situation between poet and audience. In addition, they evoke the impression that the narrating and perceiving act and the narrated events are happening simultaneously before the narrator’s and the audience’s mental eyes. As such, these linguistic features are not oral in the medial sense of the term, but are instances of ‘language of proximity’, ‘immediacy’ and ‘involvement’.

While both the heroic and the courtly epics are characterized by linguistic means that refer to the communicative situation, there are differences with respect to the established relationship between the poet, the audience and the story told. For the *Nibelungenlied*, exclamative utterances like in 3. are quite common and are usually insertions by the narrator (i.e. 35 of 41 instances of the pattern ‘*hey* + exclamative’), whereas in the courtly epic *Tristan*, similar exclamations with *â*, *ach* (“alas”) (e.g. *â welh ein castêl!* (“alas what a castle!”); *Tristan* 3159) and *ôwê* (“woe!”) are rarely used by the narrator but are common for characters’ speech. This suggests that the narrator plays a different role within the two epics. This is supported by the finding that evaluative comments about the events within the story world are more frequent within the courtly epics. In addition, metanarrative comments that reflect the production and representation of the story are characteristic only for the courtly epics:

5. *wie gevâhe ich nû mîn sprechen an,/daz ich den werden houbetman*  
 ‘How do I now begin my speaking/that I prepare the dignified protagonist /

*Tristanden sô bereite ze sîner swertleite,/daz man ez gerne verneme?”*

*Tristan in such a way for his knightly accolade/that one would like to hear it willingly?*  
 [*Tristan* 4589 – 4593]

In 5., the narrator is not narrating the events, but reflecting about the further representation of the story. This serves two different functions. First, 5. evokes the impression that the epic is originating from a dynamic on-line production process, in which the story evolves while speaking. On the other hand, the comment also serves as a retardation of the knightly accolade of the protagonist, which constitutes an important peak in the story. Before this important scene is finally described, an extensive metanarrative excursus about the poetic problems of ekphrasis is inserted (4595 – 5000). Such metatextual reflections are uncommon for the heroic epics.

A linguistic feature which plays an important role in such metatextual comments is the present tense, a feature which has cross-linguistically been seen as one of the most prominent expressions of a ‘vivid style’<sup>56</sup> and ‘oral narration’.<sup>57</sup> Traditionally, the so-called ‘Historical Present’ (HP) has been described as a rhetorical device that dramatizes the story “by making the audience feel as if they were present at the time of the experience, witnessing events as they occurred”.<sup>58</sup> However, the HP in its narrow sense – i.e. a present tense which is used (i) in narrative contexts (ii) in alternation with past tenses and (iii) refers to events ‘on-plot’ – is not documented in every oral tradition and does occur neither in the Homeric epics<sup>59</sup> nor in the older stages of German.<sup>60</sup> In MHG, the present tense does not referentially denote the sequential steps of an action on the plot-line, but is restricted to the level of discourse, as seen in 5.

As the ‘author’s present’,<sup>61</sup> the present tense establishes a shared communicative frame that includes two different relations: the immediacy between the poet and the audience, as well as the immediacy between the communication partners and the representation of the narrated events. With respect to the question of how oral the present tense is, it becomes thus obvious that it is not so much a feature of orality in the technical sense of medial orality, but of performed narrativity. The present tense functions as a meta-linguistic device that “establishes the discourse as something other than narration”.<sup>62</sup>

Similar observations have been made on the “immediate present” in the *Iliad*. According to Bakker, the present tense is one of the most important devices in order to indicate an immediate mode in Chafe’s sense, and, as such, a direct interaction between the poet and the audience.<sup>63</sup> But why then do the Homeric and the MHG narrators not make use of the Historical present? With respect to the Homeric narrator, Bakker 2005 suggests that “the Greek epic tradition aims at something other than mere vividness or pretended immediacy”:

Recreating the past, reviving the crucial events of the epic world as models for the present may be the concern of any tradition of epic poetry, but the Homeric tradition appears to go one step beyond such an unreflective immediacy. [...] as I will argue, the implicit poetics of

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<sup>56</sup> Koch/Oesterreicher 2011, 74–75; similarly also Fleischman 1986, 203; Wolfson 1982; Fludernik 1991, Fludernik 1992.

<sup>57</sup> Koch/Oesterreicher 2011, 170.

<sup>58</sup> Fleischman 1990a, 376 n. 22.

<sup>59</sup> Bakker 2005, 96.

<sup>60</sup> Herchenbach 1911; Boezinger 1912; see for an overview Zeman 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Hempel 1966.

<sup>62</sup> Fleischman 1990, 306.

<sup>63</sup> Bakker 2005, 94.

the Homeric tradition reveal that the “true” poetic version of the epic events is better than the real thing: besides the urge to create the presence and nearness of the epic events, Homeric epic, I will suggest, is also concerned with distance [...].<sup>64</sup>

Bakker argues that the oral characteristics of the Homeric epics are not only features of immediacy between the communication partners but concern the whole communicative situation, including the relationship between the poet and the audience as well as their relationship towards the ‘narrative truth’, i.e. the “acknowledged correspondence between a statement and a state of affairs referred to”.<sup>65</sup> One of his arguments is the use of a construction that Bakker discusses as symptomatic for Homeric discourse: μέλλω + inf. μέλλω has been classified as a (semi-)auxiliary that denotes a present intention or arrangement for the realization of a future state of affairs.<sup>66</sup> In its literal meaning, μέλλειν denotes the subject’s mental state of thinking about doing something while it is not determined whether the intended action actually will take place in the course of the story or not. There is, however, another use where the realization of the event in the future is indicated as certain, while the intention of the subject is not at issue or even contradicted as in 6.:

6. οὐδ’ ἄρ’ ἔμελλεν  
 oud’ ár’ émellen  
 but not PTCL intend-3SG.IMPF.ACT
- |                     |                |        |                       |
|---------------------|----------------|--------|-----------------------|
| ἐλθὼν ἐκ νηῶν       | ἄψ Ἑκτορι      | μῦθον  | ἀποῖσιν.              |
| elthō:n ek ne:ō:n   | áps Héktori    | mûthon | apoísein              |
| come from the ships | back to.Hector | report | to.bring.back-INF.FUT |

“but in fact *he was never to return* from the ships and to bring his report back to Hector”<sup>67</sup>  
 (Il. 10, 336)

In 6., μέλλω + inf. indicates what will happen in the future course of events against the will of the protagonist, since it is known from context (and the common knowledge of the audience) that it is not Dolon’s intention not to return. Uses like 6. have been termed as ‘destiny in the past’ or ‘future of fate’. According to Bakker, the central feature of this construction is not its temporal meaning, but the divergence between two different states of consciousness:<sup>68</sup> the nar-

<sup>64</sup> Bakker 2005, 96.

<sup>65</sup> Bakker 2005, 92.

<sup>66</sup> Wakker 2007, 169. See on the semantics of μέλλω also Markopoulos 2008.

<sup>67</sup> Translation by de Jong 2007, 25.

<sup>68</sup> Bakker 2005, 100.

rator knows what is going to happen, while the protagonist is unaware. A very similar effect is also induced in MHG by the past form of the modal verb *suln* (“shall”) + inf. (see 7.).

7. [‘they (i.e. Tristan and Isolde) were afraid of what happened later, namely that which later on deprived them of joy and brought them into distress]:  
daz was daz, daz diu schoene Îsôt/dem manne *werden solte*,/

That was that that the beautiful Isolde *was to become* the lover of the man  
dem sî niht werden wolte.  
of whom she did not want to become [a lover].  
[Tristan 12401–12406]

*sollte* + inf. and ἔμελλεν + inf. display a similar semantic pattern. Both *suln* (“shall, be obliged to”) and μέλλειν (“intend to”) + inf. are constructions that involve a projective meaning, a past marker and presuppose an external modal force.<sup>69</sup> As such, they inherently unite present plan, future realization and retrospection. The projectivity of the denoted event refers to a time interval that is posterior to a reference point that is already past as seen from the perspective of the narrator. Linked with that, the narrator is talking about the events to come, i.e. the construction does not refer to the representational, but to the presentational level of discourse in the sense of Kroon.<sup>70</sup> This perspective ‘from outside’ is reinforced by the fact that the future realization of the event lies outside the control of the focalized character.<sup>71</sup> In both 6. and 7., the events will happen against the will of the protagonists: Dolon intends to come back to the Trojans, and Isolde does not want to commit adultery, but neither of them can change their destiny.

What can these observations tell us with respect to the oral character of the epic poems? Bakker is certainly right to state that the construction is more than “immediacy” in terms of *enargeia*. What is at issue is not so much the visual reviving of the past in the narrative present but the simultaneous activation of two different reference frames at the same time, i.e. the discourse world of the speaker and the story world as well as the correspondence between the denoted event and the fact of its future realization which can only be foreseen by the narrator. As such, the ‘future of fate’ is restricted to narrative passages. Interestingly,

<sup>69</sup> See in detail Zeman 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Kroon 1998, 207.

<sup>71</sup> The focalized character is the protagonist on the story level who constitutes the reference point for narrative perspectivization. It could be defined as the most salient mental subject in the story. As such, it does not necessarily coincide with the syntactic subject.

the ‘future of fate’ reading of MHG *sollte* + inf. is used in courtly epics, but not in the *Nibelungenlied*. In the heroic epos, prolepses are prototypically indicated by the past tense and the adverbial *sît/sint/sider* (“later on”), a pattern which is documented 100 times in 9504 verses (see 8. – 9.).

8. si frvmten starkiv wunder *sît* in Etzelen lant.  
‘they achieved great deeds later on in Etzel’s land’  
(*Nibelungenlied* B 3,4)
9. si erstvrben *sît* jæmerlîche von zweier edelen frowen nit.  
‘they died later on miserably due to two women’s envy.’  
(*Nibelungenlied* B 4,4)

*sît/sint/sider* (“later on”) are not explicit markers of the future, but can also be used to indicate the next step in the successive progression of events. The preference for this pattern is in line with the assumption that the heroic epics are primarily focused on the sequence of events within the story world, whereas the courtly epics are characterized by a strong tendency to evaluate and comment on the narrated events, metanarrative reflection on the representation of the story and the narrator’s dialogues, and dialogues with allegoric instances (“oh, it is you, Lady Aventiure, how is the dear hero doing?”; Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, IX,7). This might suggest that the MHG epic poems – more similar to the prose narrator in Ancient Greek than to Homer – rather fictionalize an oral performance situation than directly reflect it.

More cross-linguistic investigations would be necessary in order to draw such conclusions, but there are several indications that the degree of fictionalization is an important indicator for oral poetry. Foley argued that the inventive and ironic use of traditional language in Homer supports the impression that the Homeric text is located “at some remove from its roots in oral tradition”.<sup>72</sup> The ‘roots’ of oral performance have been characterized by the fact that there is no difference between the author and the teller of the story, since author and narrator are the same person. The invention of a textual, fictional voice as “the substitute of the absent author’s actual voice”<sup>73</sup> could thus be seen as a more general development linked to the fictionalization of the text.

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<sup>72</sup> Foley 1993, 278.

<sup>73</sup> Bakker 1998, 32.

## 4 'Orality' and Narrative Truth

In sum, this analysis has shown that different parameters of orality show different effects on the linguistic structure of heroic and courtly epics. Whereas left-dislocation and length of sentence are subject to variation, the situation parameter is rather stable in comparison between the two epic genres. It differs, however, with respect to narrative vs. dialogic passages. This distribution supports the relevance of the distinction between the medial and deictic dimension of orality since it can be assumed that an increased sentence length of the courtly epics is facilitated by the fact that the courtly epics were composed and performed by use of the written word. In contrast, features of the situation parameter like interjections, personal pronouns and imperatives are not 'oral' in the medial sense of the term, but rather concern the relationship between the communicative partners. As such, speaker- and hearer-oriented deictics in general can be assumed to be universal features within passages of direct speech. The traces of deictic elements within the narrative passages, on the other hand, can be seen as reflections of the particular communicative relationship between the poet and the audience.

Based on the qualitative analysis, this general result can be specified in two respects. First, the increased amount of interjections and emotive expressions in the dialogical passages indicates that direct speeches in the courtly epics are more affective than in the heroic epics, as it has been also suggested in literary studies. In the heroic epics, direct speech is often represented as an action which has consequences in the development of the story, whereas it gives little insight into the inner life of the protagonists.<sup>74</sup> For the courtly epics, in contrast, direct speech is often used to represent thoughts and emotions of the protagonists as a motivation for further actions. This increased focus on the representation of the inner world by focalization techniques has been seen as one of the most important developments in courtly narration.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, both genres of MHG epic poems are characterized by deictic means that invoke the impression of 'immediacy' of the reported events. It is thus not only the proximity between the poet and the audience in a (conceptualized) shared reference frame of discourse which is at stake, but also their relation to the narrative events, i.e. the whole communicative triangle *SPEAKER – ADDRESSEE – WORLD*. This is important to note since the difference between the two epic genres refers particularly to the relationship between the speaker and

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<sup>74</sup> Philipowski 2007, 68.

<sup>75</sup> Hübner 2003, 86.

the represented narrative events, as has been shown within the qualitative analysis of grammatical features like the present tense, *solte* and *ἐμελλεν* + *inf.* Whereas both the heroic and the courtly epics display traces of the communicative process and the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, it is characteristic only for the courtly epics that the narrator comments both on the behaviour of the protagonists, the events within the story world and the representation of the story. Such metatextual evaluations as well as allegories and personifications can be seen as an indication of a distanced, self-reflective relation between the poet and his representation of the story. In literary studies, this increased distance with respect to the content of the story as well as its representation is linked to a stronger focus on the discourse level and the beginning fictionalization of the ‘narrator’: whereas within the heroic epics, author and narrator are indistinguishable of each other, the narrator becomes more and more a fictional voice within the courtly epics. As a result, more than one level of communication has to be distinguished: The ‘real’ situation where the performance of the poem takes place, and the displaced narrative communication between narrator and the (implied) audience within the text.

Metatextuality appears thus to be the most important difference between the two epic poems. This focus on ‘reflective thinking’ has often been interpreted as a consequence of written narrations.<sup>76</sup> At first sight, it seems natural to assume that written narration facilitates elaboration and reflective thinking. But this relationship is not straightforward. As Finnegan has shown, reflective thinking is not uncommon in oral poetry either, as many poems rely on long processes of preparation.<sup>77</sup> The observations thus do not add up to a straight line of development from online to reflective thinking. Rather, it seems to be a gradual scale that does not parallel with the oral – written distinction completely, but is fundamental with respect to the differences within the various genres.<sup>78</sup>

This fact is also important when comparing the MHG epics to the Homeric tradition. As seen above, the *Iliad* and the MHG epics share oral features like the segmentation into intonation units and deictics of proximity that simulate a simultaneity between composition and performance. The conceptualization of the performance situation as a shared communicative space between the poet and the audience is thus basically the same in both Homer and the MHG epics and might constitute a universal feature of oral poetry. There are, however, differences with respect to how the communicative triangle is conceptualized

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<sup>76</sup> Butzer 1995, 161; Philipowski 2007, 52 n. 44; Hall 2008, 285.

<sup>77</sup> Finnegan 1977, 80 – 84.

<sup>78</sup> See also Hall 2008, 285: “the distinction between online and reflective thinking provides a mechanism more fundamental than literacy for explaining differences in human behavior.”

within the poems. These differences refer in particular to the narrative structure (e.g. the emotionalization of the dialogues in the courtly epics) and the metatextual stance of the narrator. In both respects, the Homeric epics are more similar to the MHG heroic epics than the courtly epics. This is in line with how both traditions are characterized within the literature, see Tab. 4.<sup>79</sup>

**Tab. 4:** The medial constellation of Homeric and MHG courtly epics.

	Homeric tradition	MHG courtly epics
Oral predisposition	Oral tradition	“third medial state” (Däumer 2013)
Speaker – hearer  World	Online processing in oral performance → Shared communicative situation → (simulated) simultaneity between production and reception	
Narrator – audience  Story world	Past story world → inflation of distance and proximity → pretended immediacy of the events	
	mediator of tradition perceptual enactment Singer = narrator	re-creator of the story fictionalization Narrator => fictional voice
Narrative truth	Story based on re-creation of common knowledge shared by oral transmission	Story based on the reconstruction of literary sources
Story world – world	Truth = discourse	Truth = reality
Narrative source	Memory as active mental perception (Minchin 2001; Bakker 2005)	Memory as a passive thesaurus (Carruthers 2008, 37)

As Tab. 4 shows, the differences cannot directly be traced back to online processing or the communicative situation between the singer and the audience but refer to the attitude of the narrator to the story world. The link to orality is thus only an indirect one. Rather, the difference concerns the ‘narrative truth’, i.e. the way the interaction of the relationship between communication partners and their relation towards the relationship between the told and its validation as ‘true’ is conceptualized. This has been seen in close connection to the epistemo-

<sup>79</sup> As shown above, the oral constellations are more complex than summarized simplistically in Tab. 2. It can nevertheless serve as an outline of arguments that are commonly discussed with respect to orality in Homeric and MHG oral poetry.

logical presupposition of what is conceptualized as ‘reality’ within a speech community and is, as such, linked to the transmission of the content of the stories: whereas the content of the heroic epics is given by tradition and conserved by iterative re-actualization in performance, the reconstruction of the ‘right version’ of the story within the courtly epics by the authors relies on literate erudition. This is obvious in how the narrators emphasize their elaborate literature research in order to present the ‘right’ version: cf. e.g. the narrator’s prologue in *Tristan* (131–162), which ensures that he will tell the story *rehte* (“rightly”, 134) by referring to the ‘right’ literary source, namely the “well read” Thômas von Britanje.<sup>80</sup>

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>10. Ich weiz wol, ir ist vil gewesen,<br/>die von Tristande hânt gelesen;<br/>und ist ir doch nicht vil gewesen,<br/>die von ihm <i>rehte</i> haben gelesen.<br/>[...]<br/>aber als ich gesprochen hân,<br/>daz sî niht <i>rehte</i> haben gelesen,<br/>daz ist, als ich iu sage, gewesen:<br/>sine sprâchen in der <i>rihte</i> niht,<br/>als Thômas von Britanje giht,<br/>der âventiure meister was<br/>und an britûnschen buochen las<br/>[...]<br/>Als der von Tristande seit,<br/><i>die rihte und die wârheit</i><br/>begunde ich sêre suochen<br/>in beider hande buochen<br/>walschen und laînen<br/>und begunde mich des pînen,<br/>daz ich in <i>sîner rihte</i><br/><i>rihte</i> diese tihte.”</p> | <p>“I know well, there are many people<br/>who have read about Tristan;<br/>however, there aren’t many people<br/>who have read about Tristan <i>rightly</i><br/><br/>but as I said,<br/>[the reason] that they haven’t read <i>rightly</i>,<br/>this has been, as I tell you:<br/>they did not tell <i>in the right way</i><br/>as Thomas from Britain does,<br/>who was the master of âventiure<br/>and read in Breton books<br/><br/>The way he tells about Tristan,<br/><i>the right way and the truth</i><br/>I began searching<br/>in books both in<br/>Romance and Latin<br/>and started to take pains<br/>in that I <i>in his correctness</i><br/><i>rectify</i> these epic facts.”</p> |
|---|---|

The truth of the poem is thus guaranteed by the literacy of the poet and the knowledge stored in books. For the MHG poet of the courtly epics, truth lies within the external world which can be rectified by historical studies. This is different in the Homeric tradition where the source of storytelling is seen in the poet’s mental act of the present performance. According to Bakker, truth in Homer is an emergent concept that arises within the production of discourse. Since “the

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<sup>80</sup> Similarly also the prolog of *Der arme Heinrich* by Hartmann von Aue (6–11) and the afterword in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (827).

‘true’ poetic version of the epic events is better than the real thing”,<sup>81</sup> it is the present moment of performance that constitutes the “moment of truth”<sup>82</sup> where the story is ‘re-created’ based on the shared knowledge of tradition. In this sense, the source of narrative truth in Homer has been seen in the “acts of remembering and forgetting”,<sup>83</sup> “judged on the basis of its tradition”<sup>84</sup> and, as such, as an active mental process. Unlike the Homeric epics that do not refer to an “objective reality independent of the narrator (the epic singer), for the epic past exists only as perception, both in the memory of the singer and the imagination of his audience”,<sup>85</sup> the MHG poems conceptualize memory as a passive thesaurus<sup>86</sup> where facts about the external world are ‘stored’. While the reactivation and reassurance of a speech community’s collective memory as shared knowledge can be seen a crucial factor in all oral traditions, the pre-supposition for this oral storage of cultural information can thus be essentially different.

## 5 Conclusion: More Paradoxes

The observations above lead us to the following conclusions. First, this paper has shown that ‘orality’ research combines (at least) three different aspects, i.e. 1. ‘oral’ residues as traces of ‘online composition’, 2. the communicative constellation between the poet, the audience and the story world, and 3. the oral predisposition within a specific cultural context. These different dimensions of orality have to be kept apart in order to gain a more precise view of the relationship between the general structures of oral communication and the cross-linguistic differences in language use since parameters 1. and 2. operate differently in different genres as well as in their diachronic development and seem to be linked differently to the oral predisposition (3.).

### 1. ‘Oral’ residues as traces of ‘online composition’

With respect to the time parameter, we can assume a slow tendency towards increasing word length and decreasing dislocation structures, while the occurrences of deictic means remain relatively constant. This result is consistent with a study on the oral features

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<sup>81</sup> Bakker 1997a, 17; Bakker 2005, 96.

<sup>82</sup> Bakker 2005, 113.

<sup>83</sup> Bäuml 1997, 39.

<sup>84</sup> Bäuml 1997, 42.

<sup>85</sup> Kawashima 2008, 114.

<sup>86</sup> Carruthers 2008, 37.

in Early New High German (1350 – 1650), which shows that the time parameter is more subject to change than the situation parameter.<sup>87</sup>

2. The communicative constellation between the poet, the audience and the story world Whereas the performance situation is basically the same for both the Homeric and the MHG epics, one important difference in the linguistic structure of oral poetry has been seen in the relationship between the narrator and the story world, as shown with respect to the metatextual features and the fictionalization of the narrative voice. In contrast to the Homeric tradition, courtly epics are characterized by a distance from their narrative source. It is not the memory of the poet but the external evidence which is responsible for the reconstruction of the story. As such, this difference is only indirectly linked to orality and rather concerns the validation of ‘narrative truth’.

In sum, the discussion has shown that oral poetry in historical texts is based on more than one paradox:

- P 0 Oral poetry in historical texts is investigated on the basis of *written* sources.
- P 1 Oral poetry is oral story-telling, i.e. a *here-and-now* performance of events within a *distant, epic past*, set apart from ordinary life and language.<sup>88</sup>
- P 2 Oral poetry is *orally performed* but with a language “*removed from that of everyday speech*”.<sup>89</sup>
- P 3 Oral poetry is composed *spontaneously* and based on *preparation* at the same time.

All these paradoxes leave their traces within the linguistic structure, making it hard to evaluate any given linguistic feature along a dichotomous contrast ‘written’ vs. ‘oral’. In this respect, the evaluation of the ring composition (in order to close this ring) seems not contradictory anymore, since elaboration and oral composition are not opposed to each other but instances of different aspects of orality. Differentiating between these aspects of orality can thus lead to a more consistent and maybe more conciliating description of the characteristics of oral poetry.

The comparison between the MHG heroic and courtly epics has thus shown that such analyses are suited in order to investigate the interplay between the different factors of orality and, by doing so, allow for a more fine-grained view of the mechanisms of oral tradition – thus granting us a more systematic view into the vortex.

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<sup>87</sup> See Hennig 2009.

<sup>88</sup> See Mellmann 2014 and Ready 2019, 29 according to whom epics are stories of ‘it is said’ or ‘they say’. As such, they are naturally displaced from their communicative source but re-actualized within the particular performance.

<sup>89</sup> Finnegan 1977, 109; emphasis by S. Z.

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