

# Kenning

Not to be confused with **kerning**.  
For other uses, see **Kenning** (disambiguation).

A **kenning** (Modern Icelandic pronunciation: [c<sup>h</sup>en:ɪŋk]; derived from Old Norse) is a type of circumlocution, in the form of a compound that employs figurative language in place of a more concrete single-word noun. Kennings are strongly associated with Old Norse and later Icelandic and Old English poetry.

They usually consist of two words, and are often hyphenated. For example, Old Norse poets might replace *sverð* "sword" with an abstract compound such as "wound-hoe" (Egill Skallagrímsson: Höfuðlausn 8) or a genitive phrase such as *randa íss* "ice of shields" (Einarr Skúlason: 'Øxarflokkur' 9). Modern scholars have also applied the term kenning to similar figures of speech in other languages, especially Old English.

## 1 Etymology

The word was adopted into English in the nineteenth century<sup>[1]</sup> from medieval Icelandic treatises on poetics, in particular the Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson, and derives ultimately from the Old Norse verb *kenna* "know, recognise; perceive, feel; show; teach; etc.", as used in the expression *kenna við* "to name after; to express [one thing] in terms of [another]",<sup>[2]</sup> "name after; refer to in terms of",<sup>[3]</sup> and *kenna til* "qualify by, make into a kenning by adding".<sup>[3]</sup>

The corresponding modern verb *to ken* survives only in Scots and highly remote English dialects, other than the derivative existing in the standard language in the set expression *beyond one's ken*, "beyond the scope of one's knowledge" and in the phonologically altered forms *uncanny*, "surreal" or "supernatural", and *canny*, "shrewd", "prudent". Modern Scots retains (with slight differences between dialects) *tae ken* "to know", *kent* "knew" or "known", Afrikaans *ken* "be acquainted with" and "to know" and *kennis* "knowledge". Old Norse *kenna* (Modern Icelandic *kenna*, Swedish *känna*, Danish *kende*, Norwegian *kjenne* or *kjenna*) is cognate with Old English *cennan*, Old Frisian *kenna*, *kanna*, Old Saxon (*ant*)*kennian* (Middle Dutch and Dutch *kennen*), Old High German (*ir-*, *in-*, *pi-*) *chennan* (Middle High German and German *kennen*), Gothic *kannjan* < Proto-Germanic *\*kannjanan*, originally causative of *\*kunnanan* "to know (how to)", whence Modern English *can*

'to be able' (from the same Proto-Indo-European root as Modern English *know* and Latin-derived *cognition*).<sup>[2]</sup>

## 2 Structure

Old Norse kennings take the form of a genitive phrase (*báru fákr* "wave's horse" = "ship" (Þorbjörn Hornklofi: Glymdrápa 3)) or a compound word (*gjálfr-marr* "sea-steed" = "ship" (Anon.: *Hervararkviða* 27)). The simplest kennings consist of a base-word (Icelandic *stofnorð*, German *Grundwort*) and a determinant (Icelandic *kenriorð*, German *Bestimmung*) which qualifies, or modifies, the meaning of the base-word. The determinant may be a noun used uninflected as the first element in a compound word, with the base-word constituting the second element of the compound word. Alternatively the determinant may be a noun in the genitive case placed before or after the base-word, either directly or separated from the base-word by intervening words.<sup>[4]</sup>

Thus the base-words in these examples are *fákr* "horse" and *marr* "steed", the determinants *báru* "wave's" and *gjálfr* "sea". The unstated noun which the kenning refers to is called its referent, in this case: *skip* "ship".

In Old Norse poetry, either component of a kenning (base-word, determinant or both) could consist of an ordinary noun or a *heiti* "poetic synonym". In the above examples, *fákr* and *marr* are distinctively poetic lexemes; the normal word for "horse" in Old Norse prose is *hest*.

## 3 Complex kennings

The *skalds* also employed complex kennings in which the determinant, or sometimes the base-word, is itself made up of a further kenning: *grennir gunn-más* "feeder of war-gull" = "feeder of raven" = "warrior" (Þorbjörn Hornklofi: *Glymdrápa* 6); *eyðendr arnar hungurs* "destroyers of eagle's hunger" = "feeders of eagle" = "warrior" (Þorbjörn Þakkaskáld: Erlingsdrápa 1) (referring to carnivorous birds scavenging after a battle). Where one kenning is embedded in another like this, the whole figure is said to be *tvíkent* "doubly determined, twice modified".<sup>[5]</sup>

Frequently, where the determinant is itself a kenning, the base-word of the kenning that makes up the determinant is attached uninflected to the front of the base-word of the whole kenning to form a compound word: *mög-fellandi mellu* "son-slayer of giantess" = "slayer of sons of giant-

ess” = “slayer of giants” = “the god Thor” (Steinunn Refs-dóttir: *Lausavísa* 2).

If the figure comprises more than three elements, it is said to be *rekit* “extended”.<sup>[5]</sup> Kennings of up to seven elements are recorded in skaldic verse.<sup>[6]</sup> Snorri himself characterises five-element kennings as an acceptable license but cautions against more extreme constructions: *Núnda er þat at reka til hinnar fimtu kenningar, er ór ættum er ef lengra er rekit; en þótt þat finnisk í forn-skálda verka, þá látum vér þat nú ónýtt.* “The ninth [license] is extending a kenning to the fifth determinant, but it is out of proportion if it is extended further. Even if it can be found in the works of ancient poets, we no longer tolerate it.”<sup>[7]</sup> The longest kenning found in skaldic poetry occurs in *Hafgerðingadrápa* by Þórðr Sjáreksson and reads *nausta blakks hlé-mána gífrs drífu gim-slöngvir* “fire-brandisher of blizzard of ogress of protection-moon of steed of boat-shed”, which simply means “warrior”.

## 4 Word order and comprehension

Word order in Old Norse was generally much freer than in Modern English because Old Norse and Old English are synthetic languages, where added prefixes and suffixes to the root word (the core noun, verb, adjective or adverb) carry grammatical meanings, whereas Middle English and Modern English use word order to carry grammatical information, so-called analytic languages. This freedom is exploited to the full in skaldic verse and taken to extremes far beyond what would be natural in prose. Other words can intervene between a base-word and its genitive determinant, and occasionally between the elements of a compound word (tmesis). Kennings, and even whole clauses, can be interwoven. Ambiguity is usually less than it would be if an English text were subjected to the same contortions, thanks to the more elaborate morphology of Old Norse.

Another factor aiding comprehension is that Old Norse kennings tend to be highly conventional. Most refer to the same small set of topics, and do so using a relatively small set of traditional metaphors. Thus a leader or important man will be characterised as generous, according to one common convention, and called an “enemy of gold”, “attacker of treasure”, “destroyer of arm-rings”, etc. and a friend of his people. Nevertheless, there are many instances of ambiguity in the corpus, some of which may be intentional,<sup>[8]</sup> and some evidence that, rather than merely accepting it from expediency, skalds favoured contorted word order for its own sake.<sup>[9]</sup>

## 5 Definitions

Some scholars take the term kenning broadly to include any noun-substitute consisting of two or more elements,

including merely descriptive epithets (such as Old Norse *grand viðar* “bane of wood” = “fire” (Snorri Sturluson: *Skáldskaparmál* 36)),<sup>[10]</sup> while others would restrict it to metaphorical instances (such as Old Norse *sól húsanna* “sun of the houses” = “fire” (Snorri Sturluson: *Skáldskaparmál* 36)),<sup>[11]</sup> specifically those where “[t]he base-word identifies the referent with something which it is not, except in a specially conceived relation which the poet imagines between it and the sense of the limiting element” (Brodeur (1959) pp. 248–253). Some even exclude naturalistic metaphors such as Old English *forstes bend* “bond of frost” = “ice” or *winter-gewæde* “winter-vestment” = “snow”: “A metaphor is a kenning only if it contains an incongruity between the referent and the meaning of the base-word; in the kenning the limiting word is essential to the figure because without it the incongruity would make any identification impossible” (Brodeur (1959) pp. 248–253). Descriptive epithets are a common literary device in many parts of the world, whereas kennings in this restricted sense are a distinctive feature of Old Norse and, to a lesser extent, Old English poetry.<sup>[12]</sup>

Snorri’s own usage, however, seems to fit the looser sense: “Snorri uses the term “kenning” to refer to a structural device, whereby a person or object is indicated by a periphrastic description containing two or more terms (which can be a noun with one or more dependent genitives or a compound noun or a combination of these two structures)” (Faulkes (1998 a), p. xxxiv). The term is certainly applied to non-metaphorical phrases in *Skáldskaparmál*: *En sú kenning er áðr var ritat, at kalla Krist konung manna, þá kenning má eiga hverr konungr.* “And that kenning which was written before, calling Christ the king of men, any king can have that kenning.”<sup>[13]</sup> Likewise in *Háttatal*: *Þat er kenning at kalla fleinbrak orrostu [...]* “It is a kenning to call battle ‘spear-crash’ [...]”.<sup>[14]</sup>

Snorri’s expression *kend heiti* “qualified terms” appears to be synonymous with *kenningar*,<sup>[14][15]</sup> although Brodeur applies this more specifically to those periphrastic epithets which don’t come under his strict definition of kenning.<sup>[16]</sup>

Sverdlov approaches the question from a morphological standpoint. Noting that the modifying component in Germanic compound words can take the form of a genitive or a bare root, he points to behavioural similarities between genitive determinants and the modifying element in regular Old Norse compound words, such as the fact that neither can be modified by a free-standing (declined) adjective.<sup>[17]</sup> According to this view, all kennings are formally compounds, notwithstanding widespread tmesis.

## 6 Semantics

Kennings could be developed into extended, and sometimes vivid, metaphors: *tröddusk törgur fyr [...]* *hjalta*

*harðfótum* “shields were trodden under the hard feet of the hilt (sword blades)” (Eyvindr Skáldaspillir: Hákonarmál 6); *svarraði sárgymir á sverða nesi* “wound-sea (=blood) sprayed on headland of swords (=shield)” (Eyvindr Skáldaspillir: Hákonarmál 7).<sup>[18]</sup> Snorri calls such examples *nýgervingar* and exemplifies them in verse 6 of his Háttatal. The effect here seems to depend on an interplay of more or less naturalistic imagery and jarring artifice. But the skalds weren’t averse either to arbitrary, purely decorative, use of kennings: “That is, a ruler will be a distributor of gold even when he is fighting a battle and gold will be called the fire of the sea even when it is in the form of a man’s arm-ring on his arm. If the man wearing a gold ring is fighting a battle on land the mention of the sea will have no relevance to his situation at all and does not contribute to the picture of the battle being described” (Faulkes (1997), pp. 8–9).

Snorri draws the line at mixed metaphor, which he terms *nykrat* “made monstrous” (Snorri Sturluson: Háttatal 6), and his nephew called the practice *löstr* “a fault” (Óláfr hvítaskáld: Third Grammatical Treatise 80).<sup>[19]</sup> In spite of this, it seems that “many poets did not object to and some must have preferred baroque juxtapositions of unlike kennings and neutral or incongruous verbs in their verses” (Foote & Wilson (1970), p. 332). E.g. *heyr jarl Kvasis dreyra* “listen, earl, to Kvasir’s blood (=poetry)” (Einar skálaglamm: Vellekla 1).

Sometimes there is a kind of redundancy whereby the referent of the whole kenning, or a kenning for it, is embedded: *barmi dól-g-svölu* “brother of hostility-swallow” = “brother of raven” = “raven” (Oddr breiðfirðingr: Illugadrápa 1); *blik-meidendr bauga láðs* “gleam-harmers of the land of rings” = “harmers of gleam of arm” = “harmers of ring” = “leaders, nobles, men of social standing (conceived of as generously destroying gold, i.e. giving it away freely)” (Anon.: Líknarbraut 42).

While some Old Norse kennings are relatively transparent, many depend on a knowledge of specific myths or legends. Thus the sky might be called naturalistically *élker* “squall-vat” (Markús Skeggjason: Eiríksdrápa 3) or described in mythical terms as *Ymis haus* “Ymir’s skull” (Arnórr jarlaskáld: Magnúsdrápa 19), referring to the idea that the sky was made out of the skull of the primeval giant Ymir. Still others name mythical entities according to certain conventions without reference to a specific story: *rimmu Yggr* “Odin of battle” = “warrior” (Arnórr jarlaskáld: Magnúsdrápa 5).

Poets in medieval Iceland even treated Christian themes using the traditional repertoire of kennings complete with allusions to heathen myths and aristocratic epithets for saints: *Prúðr falda* “goddess of headdresses” = “Saint Catherine” (Kálfr Hallsson: Kátrínardrápa 4).<sup>[14]</sup>

Kennings of the type AB, where B routinely has the characteristic A and thus this AB is tautological, tend to mean “like B in that it has the characteristic A”, e.g. “shield-Njörðr”, tautological because the god Njörðr by nature

has his own shield, means “like Njörðr in that he has a shield”, i.e. “warrior”. A modern English example is “painted Jezebel” as a disapproving expression for a woman too fond of using cosmetics.

Sometimes a name given to one well-known member of a species, is used to mean any member of that species. For example, Old Norse *valr* means “falcon”, but Old Norse mythology mentions a horse named Valr, and thus in Old Norse poetry *valr* is sometimes used to mean “horse”. A modern example of this is an *ad hoc* usage by a helicopter ambulance pilot: “the Heathrow of hang gliders” for the hills behind Hawes in Yorkshire in England, when he found the air over the emergency site crowded with hang-gliders.<sup>[20]</sup>

## 7 Ellipsis

A term may be omitted from a well-known kenning: *val-teigs Hildir* “hawk-ground’s valkyrie/goddess” (Haraldr Harðráði: Lausavísa 19). The full expression implied here is “goddess of gleam/fire/adornment of ground/land/seat/perch of hawk” = “goddess of gleam of arm” = “goddess of gold” = “lady” (characterised according to convention as wearing golden jewellery, the arm-kenning being a reference to falconry). The poet relies on listeners’ familiarity with such conventions to carry the meaning.<sup>[21]</sup>

## 8 Old Norse kennings in context

In the following dróttkvætt stanza, the Norwegian skald Eyvindr skáldaspillir (d. ca 990) compares the greed of King Harald Greycloak (Old Norse: *Haraldr*) to the generosity of his predecessor, Haakon the Good (*Hákon*):

Bárum, Ullr, of alla,  
ímunlauks, á hauka  
fjöllum Fýrisvalla  
fræ Hákonar ævi;  
  
nú hefr fólkstríðir Fróða  
fáglýjaðra þýja  
meldr í móður holdi  
mellu dolgs of folginn  
— Eyvindr skáldaspillir,  
*Lausavísa*, 8

A literal translation reveals several kennings: “**Ullr of the war-leek!** We carried the **seed of Fýrisvellir** on our **hawk-mountains** during all of Haakon’s life; now the enemy of the people has hidden the **flour of Fróði’s hapless slaves** in the **flesh of the mother of the enemy of the giantess.**”

This could be paraphrased as “O warrior, we carried gold on our arms during all of King Haakon’s life; now the enemy of the people has hidden gold in the earth.” The kennings are:

*Ullr ... ímunlauks*, “warrior”, from *Ullr*, the name of a god, and *ímun-laukr*, “sword” (literally “war-leek”). By convention, the name of any god can be associated with another word to produce a kenning for a certain type of man; here “Ullr of the sword” means “warrior.” “War-leek” is a kenning for “sword” that likens the shape of the sword to that of a leek. The warrior referred to may be King Harald.

*Hauka fjöllum*, “arms”, from *hauka* “hawk” and *fjöll* mountain. This is a reference to the sport of falconry, where a bird of prey is perched on the arm of the falconer. By convention, “hawk” combined with a term for a geographic feature forms a kenning for “arm.”

*Fýrisvalla fræ*, “gold”, from “Fýrisvellir”, the plains of the river Fýri, and *fræ*, “seed.” This is an allusion to a legend retold in *Skáldskaparmál* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* in which King Hrolf and his men scattered gold on the plains (*vellir*) of the river Fýri south of Gamla Uppsala to delay their pursuers.

*Fróða fáglyjaðra þýja melder*, “flour of Fróði’s hapless slaves”, is another kenning for “gold.” It alludes to the *Grottasöngur* legend.

*Móður hold mellu dolgs*, “flesh of the mother of the enemy of the giantess.” “earth.” Here the earth is personified as the goddess *Jörð*, mother of *Thor*, enemy of the *Jotnar* or “giants”.

## 9 Old English and other kennings

The practice of forming kennings has traditionally been seen as a common Germanic inheritance, but this has been disputed since, among the early Germanic languages, their use is largely restricted to Old Norse and Old English poetry.<sup>[11][22]</sup> A possible early kenning for “gold” (*walha-kurna* “Roman/Gallic grain”) is attested in the Proto-Norse runic inscription on the Tjurkö (I)-C bracteate.<sup>[23][24]</sup> Kennings are virtually absent from the surviving corpus of continental West Germanic verse; the Old Saxon *Heliand* contains only one example: *líkhamo* “body-vestment” = “body” (*Heliand* 3453 b),<sup>[25]</sup> a compound which, in any case, is normal in West Germanic and North Germanic prose (Old English *líchama*, Old High German *líchamo*, *líchinamo*, Dutch *lichaam*, Old Icelandic *líkamr*, *líkami*, Old Swedish *líkhamber*, Swedish *lekamen*, Danish and Norwegian Bokmål *legeme*, Norwegian Nynorsk *lekam*).

Old English kennings are all of the simple type, possessing just two elements, e.g. for “sea”: *segl-rād* “sail-road” (*Beowulf* 1429 b), *swan-rād* “swan-road” (*Beowulf* 200 a), *bæð-weg* “bath-way” (*Andreas* 513 a), *hron-rād*

“whale-road” (*Beowulf* 10), *hwæl-weg* “whale-way” (*The Seafarer* 63 a). Most Old English examples take the form of compound words in which the first element is uninflected: “heofon-candel” “sky-candle” = “the sun” (*Exodus* 115 b). Kennings consisting of a genitive phrase occur too, but rarely: *heofones gim* “sky’s jewel” = “the sun” (*The Phoenix* 183).

Old English poets often place a series of synonyms in apposition, and these may include kennings (loosely or strictly defined) as well as the literal referent: *Hrōðgar mapelode, helm Scyldinga* [...] “Hrothgar, helm (=protector, lord) of the Scyldings, said [...]” (*Beowulf* 456).

Although the word “kenning” isn’t often used for non-Germanic languages, a similar form can be found in Biblical poetry in its use of parallelism. Some examples include *Genesis* 49:11, in which “blood of grapes” is used as a kenning for “wine,” and *Job* 15:14 where “born of woman” is a parallel for “man.”<sup>[26]</sup>

## 10 Modern usage

Figures of speech similar to kennings occur in Modern English (both in literature and in regular speech), and are often found in combination with other poetic devices. For example, the *Madness* song “The Sun and the Rain” contains the line “standing up in the falling-down”, where “the falling-down” refers to rain and is used in juxtaposition to “standing up”. Some recent English writers have attempted to use approximations of kennings in their work. John Steinbeck used kenning-like figures of speech in his 1950 novella *Burning Bright*, which was adapted into a Broadway play that same year.<sup>[27]</sup> According to Steinbeck biographer Jay Parini, “The experiment is well-intentioned, but it remains idiosyncratic to the point of absurdity. Steinbeck invented compound phrases (similar to the Old English use of kennings), such as ‘wife-loss’ and ‘friend-right’ and ‘laughter-starving,’ that simply seem eccentric.”<sup>[28]</sup>

Kennings remain somewhat common in German (*Drahtesel* “wire-donkey” for bike, *Feuerstuhl* “fire-chair” for motorcycle, and so on).

The poet Seamus Heaney regularly employed kennings in his work; for example, ‘bone-house’ for “skeleton”.

## 11 See also

- Elegant variation
- Heiti
- List of kennings
- Metalepsis
- Metonymy

- Synecdoche
- Bahuvrihi

## 12 Notes

- [1] The *Oxford English Dictionary* says “late 19th century”.
- [2] OED Online
- [3] Faulkes, Anthony (1998 b).
- [4] Verse-forms and Diction of Christian Skaldic Verse.
- [5] Faulkes (1999), p. 5/12.
- [6] Fjórkennt
- [7] Faulkes 1991, 8:29–31; Faulkes 1987, 172.
- [8] Faulkes (1997), pp. 11–17,
- [9] Faulkes (1997), p. 15.
- [10] Meissner (1921), p. 2.
- [11] Heusler (1941), p. 137.
- [12] Gardner (1969), pp. 109–110.
- [13] Faulkes (1998 a), p. 78/17, 22.
- [14] Faulkes (1998 a), p. xxxiv.
- [15] Faulkes (1999), p. 5/9.
- [16] Brodeur (1959) pp. 248–253.
- [17] Sverdlov (2006).
- [18] Faulkes (1997), p. 24.
- [19] Faulkes (1997), pp. 24–25.
- [20] the Really (TV channel) television program *Helicopter Heroes*
- [21] Gordon (1956), p. 250.
- [22] Gardner (1969), pp. 109–117.
- [23] Krause (1971), p. 63. Cited by Hultin (1974), p. 864.
- [24] Looijenga (1997), pp. 24, 60, 205; Looijenga (2003), p. 42, 109, 218.
- [25] Gardner (1969), pp. 110–111.
- [26] Alter, Robert (2011). *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New and revised ed.). New York: Basic Books. p. 16. ISBN 978-0-465-02256-4. Retrieved 12 October 2016.
- [27] “Internet Broadway Database, “Burning Bright””.
- [28] Parini, Jay (1995). *John Steinbeck: A Biography*. New York: Henry Holt & Co. p. 343. ISBN 0805016732.

## 13 References

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## **14 External links**

- Skaldic Project – Index of Kennings
- Jörmungrund: Lexicon of Kennings – The Domain of Battle
- Septentrionalia: The Medieval North (Lexica poetica)

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### 15.1 Text

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