



Comments and Perspectives

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Oppositions in Folktales and Myths: Textometric Approach

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Abstract: This study introduces lexical proximity analysis applied to motif and tale-type summaries in order to identify structural oppositions, assess their relative prominence in a corpus and enable further analysis. Findings are presented and discussed from a pilot study to assess Claude Lévi-Strauss's hypothesis that myths are characterized by 'strong' oppositions while folktales are not. The methodology of lexical analysis can, however, be applied with a variety of aims.

In his study “Transformations of Fairy Tales”, Vladimir Propp noted that sometimes:¹

Нередко основная форма превращается в свою противоположность. Женские образы, например, заменяются мужскими и наоборот. Это явление может коснуться и хатки. Вместо закрытой, недоступной избушки мы иногда имеем избушку с настежь открытой дверью. (Propp 1928: 80.)

the fundamental form [of a tale] is transformed into its opposite. For instance, female images are replaced by male images, and vice versa. This phenomenon can also affect the cottage. Instead of a closed cottage, we sometimes have a cottage with the door wide open.

Claude Lévi-Strauss has taken up this observation, adding that:

les contes sont construits sur des oppositions plus faibles que celles qu'on trouve dans les mythes: non pas cosmologiques, métaphysiques ou naturelles, comme dans ces derniers, mais plus fréquemment locales, sociales ou morales. (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 154.)

tales are built on weaker oppositions than those found in myths: not cosmological, metaphysical or natural, as in the latter, but more frequently local, social or moral.

The oppositions found in folktales would indeed consist of:

homologues (frères / sœurs) ou [en] proches (le pauvre et le riche, tous deux humains, le diable et sa fille, tous deux appartenant au monde merveilleux), tandis que les oppositions dans le mythe sont d'ampleur cosmique et opposent des êtres ou des objets pris dans tous les codes disponibles. (Le Quellec & Sergent 2017: 980.)

counterparts (brothers/sisters) or relatives (the poor and the rich, both human, the devil and his daughter, both belonging to the wonderful world), whereas the oppositions in myth are of cosmic magnitude and oppose beings or objects taken from all available codes.

The hypothesis put forward by Claude Lévi-Strauss seems fruitful, but the question arises of whether it is possible to test. Here, in the form of a short note, I propose a way to do so.

My first analysis is based on Yuri Berezkin's online database (Berezkin & Duvakin, n.d.). In this corpus, according to Berezkin:

Motifs included in the first half of the catalogue and denoted with letters from A to I are mostly related to cosmology and etiology. Motifs in the second half, denoted with letters from J to M, are related to adventures and tricks. (Berezkin 2015: 64).

The website offers 1,153 brief descriptions of motifs in the first half (for 5,293 words) and

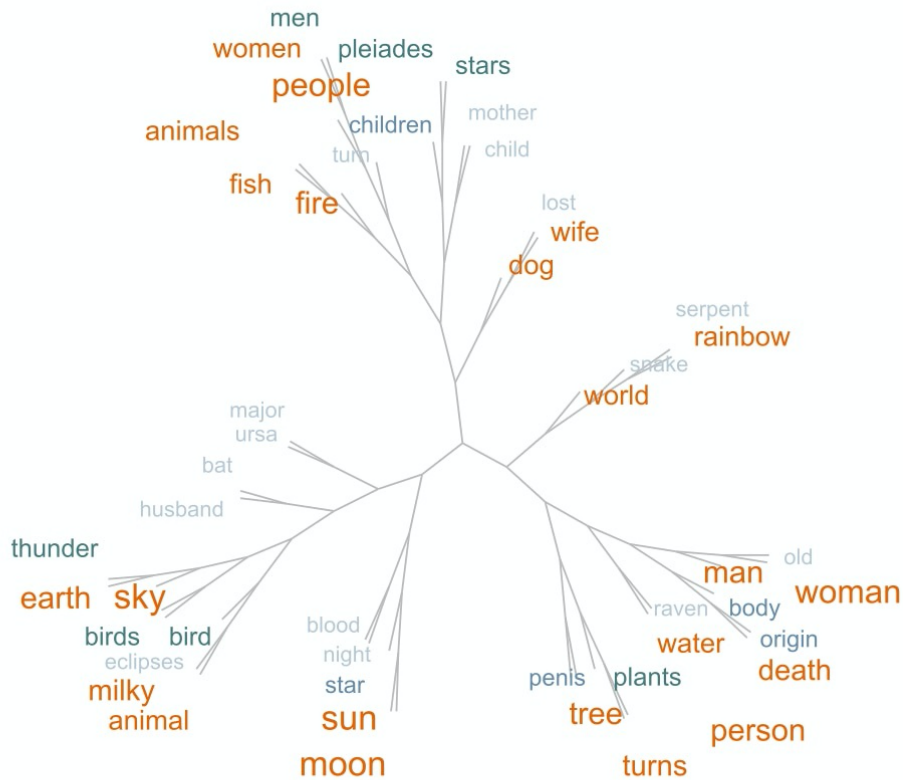


Figure 1. Word tree made from the first part of Yuri Berezkin's corpus (cosmology and etiology).

1,595 descriptions in the second half (for 7,826 words), i.e. an average of five words per motif.

I used the textometric software TreeCloud (Gambette & Véronis 2010), to visualize the frequency at which the most frequent words in the corpus were found to be co-occurring. To

do this, the algorithm 'drags' a 'window' through the text (taking 5 words simultaneously into account in this case) and calculates the number of times a word is close to another within this window (distance formula: jaccard; maximum number of words

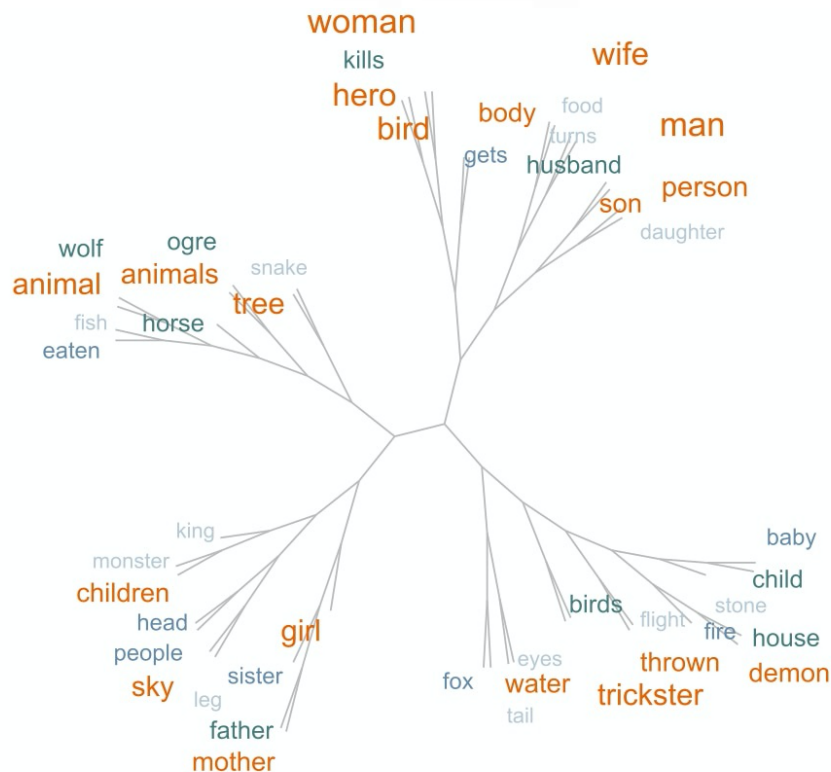


Figure 2. Word tree made from the second part of Yuri Berezkin's corpus (adventures and tricks).

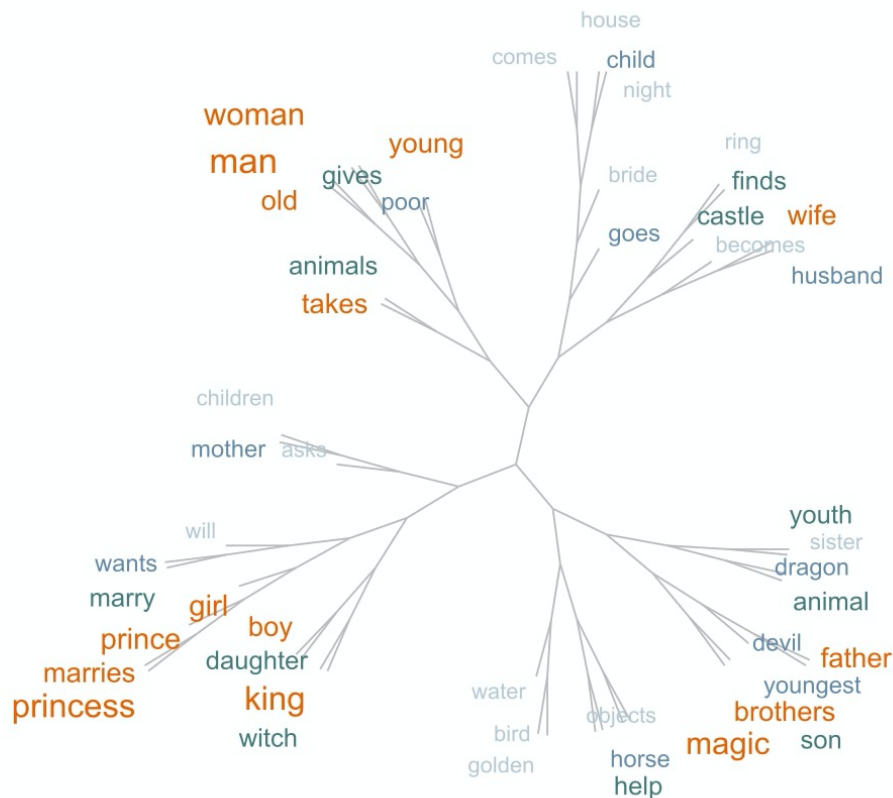


Figure 3. Word tree made from the summaries of ATU (fairy tales).

selected: 50). My hypothesis was the following: if, as Lévi-Strauss proposes, folktales are based on weak oppositions, and myths on strong oppositions, then these should appear in the summaries of the texts, and thus in the final word tree. Strong oppositions concern oppositions related to cosmology or the natural world, while weak oppositions concern human social world.

Figures 1 and 2 give a good idea of how the studied corpora are structured. The more two words tend to appear in the same ‘window’ as it scrolls through the text, the closer the two branches at the end of which they appear will be. Here, however, antinomic terms are often co-current. In the first part of the text, for example, the pairs women/men, people/children, mother/child, earth/sky, sun/moon, star/night, man/woman etc. are often used together (Figure 1). The second part also presents couples in opposition: wife/husband, son/daughter, king/people, girl/sister, father/mother, head/leg, baby/child, fire/stone etc. (Figure 2). The results therefore seem to be in line with Lévi-Strauss’s conclusions.

Checking these results for folktales involves analysing a different corpus. I chose the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) index for folktales, taking into consideration all the fairy

tales (Uther 2011: types 300–745A) and keeping sections where each type was summarised succinctly for the analysis. The resulting corpus consists of 43,600 words, to which I applied the TreeCloud software (this time keeping the automatically proposed 20-word window) (Figure 3). The antinomic terms co-occurrent here are: husband/wife, young/old, woman/man, children/mother, girl/boy, prince/princess, boy/daughter, prince/king, father/brothers, father/son etc. As in the second part of Berezkin’s corpus, the oppositions are essentially ‘local’ – political or family terms – and seem to confirm the existence of mostly weak oppositions.

The use of textometric tools to study oral narratives is not new (see e.g. Colby et al. 1963; Kalin et al. 1966; Colby 1966; Maranda 1967; d’Huy 2014a–b; Thuillard et al. 2018), but it is a pity that this route has been so little used. Indeed, the approach seems well suited to answering some of the questions raised by the study of tales and myths. Applied to three different corpora, it confirms here Lévi-Strauss’ hypothesis and establishes it on a more solid foundation. It should be noted in passing that the weakened oppositions are also found in the textometric analysis of corpora of

tales told in their entirety (d'Huy 2014a), which reinforces these conclusions.

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Notes

1. All translations are by the present author unless otherwise noted.

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