Research Status

In general, this work presents a digital advancement of the method of comparative fairy tale research. The achievements of the historical-geographical method of the Finnish school as well as the structuralist method developed by V. J. Propp are in focus.

In the historical-geographical method, the structure of the fairy tale is considered a hierarchical order consisting of the following elements: motif, episode, and type.

The terminology used to describe the structural elements of fairy tales among the proponents of the historical-geographical method is often inconsistent unless a unified classification method is applied. The structure presented above is based on Aarne's attempt at systematization. According to his model, the fairy tale is composed of the following elements (Aarne 1913: 65):

1. Tale = element of the highest category
2. Main part = middle element
3. Main feature = smallest element

This structure is even more apparent in its practical implementation. In the analysis of the fairy tale ATU 670 – The Man Who Understands Animal Language, Aarne segments the content as follows:

"The content of the fairy tale can be divided into three main parts: the first deals with learning the animal language, the second with the conflict caused by this knowledge between the man and the woman that leads the man to prepare for death, and the third with the resolution of the conflict. The main features of the first part of the fairy tale are the man who understands animal speech or the main character of the fairy tale and the opportunity to learn the language along with its teacher" (Aarne 1914: 24).

The main parts correspond here to the narrative sequences and thus represent the elements of the middle category. The main features of the parts, in turn, correspond to the components of the middle elements and thus represent the elements of the lowest hierarchical level.

A significant refinement of this classification in the corresponding terminology goes back to Kaarle Krohn. According to his recommendation, the parts of the narrative are called "episodes" and the parts of the episodes are called "moments" (Krohn 1926: 29). Despite his argument to use the term "moment" instead of "motif," the latter was later preferred. Eventually, the terms "type," "episode," and "motif" became established to differentiate the hierarchically segmented narrative parts in comparative fairy tale research (cf. Anderson 1934/40: 515).

An empirically observable characteristic to support the definition of these elements is missing in the description of the structure. An exception is the entire narrative, which serves as the basis for the definition of the fairy tale type. When a story is told, at least one type can be referred to.

The formalist approach in fairy tale research emphasizes the possibility of generalizing individual similar actions in the tale and discusses a certain number of so-called functions that form the entire composition of the tale. According to this theory, the specific content of the tale is a special realization of the function, which in turn must be considered a constant element. Furthermore, no physical characteristic is assigned to the function in the text of the tale by which the presence of these elements can be recognized. Indications that these functions correspond to predicates or are associated with specific protagonists cannot refer to any objective sign. The generalization of the actions performed by a character can, in turn, depend on which part or facet of the action is prioritized by the researcher.

Thanks to the confirmation of the border crossing between the supposed structural elements in the text by an objective sign that regularly appears in each individual text, this approach differs from all previous teachings on the structure of the fairy tale and thus sets further fundamental premises for the discussion of the same problem.