THE HORNS AND THE SPIRAL

Distribution, structure, functions and origin of a Eurasian children's rhyme about snails
by Giovanni Grosskopf www.GKweb.it

3.1 – THE STRUCTURAL MODEL: GENERAL FRAME

It's now time to present the model which, in our opinion, represents the structure implied by all the versions of the snail rhyme so far collected in our database (visible here).

Our model is made of eight sequences. These are the different structural moments that form a rhyme. The order of the sequences is free. Each sequence can be repeated or not. A rhyme is not necessarily formed by all the possible sequences together; on the contrary, it seems that such a situation does never occur and there are some versions made by two sequences only.

NON-MOTIVATIONAL SEQUENCES The non-motivational sequences are the simplest part of the rhyme: they are used to make a request to the animal and to say what will be done with the good things that will be obtained if the animal obeys the request.
A) CALLING THE SNAIL. The snail is called, often repeatedly.
B) THE SNAIL IS REQUESTED TO DO SOMETHING. The snail is asked to extract its horns, or to come out, or to go in a given place; more rarely, it is asked to perform a different action.
DIST = DISTRIBUTION FORMULA. The severed horns of the snail, or the snails themselves, or some positive and useful things, perceived as produced from the fact that the snail has obeyed the request, are distributed among different subjects, or are counted to check their quantity.
XTR = EXTRANEOUS TEXT. Added text of different nature, that probably does not have the same origin as the snail rhyme and does not belong to the usual structure of this kind of rhyme.

MOTIVATIONAL SEQUENCES The motivational sequences are used to try to persuade the snail, by giving it at least a good reason to obey the request made to it.
C) SITUATION OF NEED FOR THE HUMANS. A situation of need is described, a negative context in which somebody needs help, or the need is implied by the fact that it is said that somebody is invoking the animal, or that somebody is dying, or by expressing a deep concern with the weather conditions (which can have an influence on the agriculture). It is supposed that the negative situations will go on, if the snail will not listen to the request made to it. What is mentioned in this sequence is especially negative for the human beings.
D) CONTINUING A TRADITION. The request made to the snail is motivated by stating that "we have always done so", "this is the tradition", "the snail's ancestors have always obeyed such a request in the past", or by similar statements.
E) PROMISE OF POSITIVE THINGS FOR THE HUMANS. If the snail obeys the request, then beautiful and positive things will come (a description of them follows here); what is mentioned in this sequence is especially positive for the human beings.
F) PROMISE OF A REWARD FOR THE SNAIL. If the snail obeys the request, then it will receive itself a reward or an offer; what is mentioned in this sequence is especially positive for the snail; the offer could in some cases consist only in an expression of praise or admiration.
G) RIGHT CONDITIONS OCCURRING. The request made to the snail can also bemotivated by stating that "this is the right moment", "it is the right hour of the day or the right day of the year", "the right and most proper condition are occurring now", "the right and most proper actions are being performed precisely now" or in another specified moment.
H) THREATENING THE SNAIL WITH A POSSIBLE PUNISHMENT. If the snail does not obey the request, it will be punished (it is often eaten, killed, or it has its horns or its head severed). What is mentioned in this sequence is especially negative for the snail.

At present, this seems the most correct structural model to us.
Each variant will be classified also according to it.