

THE HORNS AND THE SPIRAL

Distribution, structure, functions and origin of a Eurasian children's rhyme about snails
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3.2 – THE STRUCTURAL MODEL: INSIGHTS AND METHODOLOGIES I

A phase dealing with the data analysis starts here and it will lead us to the core of this research. We have so far collected, translated, listed, mapped and commented some hundreds versions of the “snail rhyme” and we would now summarize shortly how our work will go on.

The purpose of our research is to understand as much as possible about the origin of our rhyme, when it was originated, where it was originated, what was its purpose and which were its functions before it became a children's rhyme, and how it was widely spread throughout the world, differentiating and generating so many variants.

We want now to illustrate shortly how we will proceed. As a first step, and in combination to what we have already explained in the former paragraph, we have decided to use a classification model based on sequences, subjects, functions (or actions), attributes. Our model will therefore be “motivic” and “structural”. “Motivic” because, in this kind of studies, the subjects or the common actions present in the various structural variants are often called “motifs” (for instance: in this kind of researches we can call “motifs” the action of drinking, the water, a field, eating, and so on...); “structural” because our model, following the tradition of many other similar studies, will try to individuate some fixed structures, present in the same way in many different variants.

In other words, a reference model has been built, which is valid for any variant of our rhyme. It has these features:

- As we have already explained in the former paragraph, the rhyme is divided into sequences (they are nine). Each sequence is a phase of the basic structure which has been detected in all the variants (for example: the first sequence is the invocation of the name of the snail; the second is the request to put its horns out or to come out, etc...).
- The subjects are individuated within the sequences. The subjects are characters, human beings, animals or things that may appear during the rhyme (for instance: the narrator, the snail, a house, an old woman, the brother, the mother, the sister, a door, water, fire, a saint, the rake, a bucket, some candies, a dress, etc...). The classification shall of course specify in which sequences the different subjects appear.
- The subjects may have a function (for instance: the punisher of the snail, the bringer of wealth and health, the donator of a reward given to the snail, etc...), or may perform actions (for instance: to kill, to eat, to hit, to steal, to sew, to arrest, to sleep, to drink, to forecast weather, to grow crops, etc...): functions and actions shall therefore be classified, too. The classification shall also specify which subject is performing a given action or is associated to a given function and in which sequence of the rhyme this is happening.
- The subjects may also have attributes, which will also appear in our classification method (for example: the house is destroyed, the field is burnt, the water is muddy or clear, the dress is beautiful, etc...).

Then, all the variants will be classified according to that model; the classification will specify:

- which sequences are present in that particular variant of our rhyme
- which subjects are present
- in which sequence they are present
- which functions are present
- which subjects are associated to those functions
- which actions are present
- which subjects are performing those actions
- which attributes are present
- which subjects have those attributes

This will imply that we shall make the complete lists of all the subjects, of all the functions and actions and of all the attributes, giving an identification number (or an abbreviation) to each subject, function, action or attribute (for the sake of convenience and brevity).

The next steps shall include:

- A study of the geographical distribution of the most important motifs (subjects, functions, actions, attributes), mapping also their geographical distribution, and a study of their relationship with the language families or other problems connected with this research. The motifs may be grouped by affinity (the groups of motifs will be called “themes”).
- A comment on the most interesting or the most widespread motifs and themes and on their possible meaning, especially when it is not obvious.
- A study about how frequent the motifs or the themes are (regarding subjects, functions, actions, attributes).
- A study about the variety of versions within a given area, or about the number of different motifs that are present in that area and on the number of structural schemes present in that area.
- A study concerning the ratio between the number of versions collected in a given area (especially in the areas where our rhyme is very much present) and the variety of the motifs collected in that area. In other words, it will also be important to check the degree of homogeneity of the versions collected within a given area, especially in the areas where a great number of variants has been found.
- A classification of the motifs (subjects, functions, actions, attributes) conceived in such a way that it will be possible to set apart “local” motifs (present only in a limited geographical area, but not elsewhere) and “disseminated” motifs (which are found in many geographical areas, sometimes even distant from each other).
- A study about the presence of “local” and “disseminated” motifs in given areas, especially in the areas where our rhyme is most present.

We will also check whether some motifs or themes are always associated with each other, or others are never associated with each other, by studying the associations between motifs or themes, rather than the motifs or the themes themselves.

We will also try to find out a strict definition of “complex of variants”, that is a group of variants with similar features, in order to study, at different hierarchical levels, how these complex behave and interact, where a complex ends and another one starts, and whether “complexes of complexes” exist, and also whether complexes that are similar to each other exist in different places or not.

We will also try to understand where the (seemingly) most “corrupted” versions are found and where those that are structurally less “corrupted” are; which motifs have undergone transformations, changing their meaning; where are the versions containing the most transformed motifs; where are the versions containing the same motifs in a hypothetical original non-transformed condition; which motifs show a lesser tendency to change; where are the versions containing these “stable” motifs; which motifs are the most “disseminated” and which are the most “local”; where are the versions containing the greatest possible number of the “disseminated” motifs together; whether unusual pairs of versions exist that are virtually identical versions collected in places very distant from each other.

Through all these remarks, and by combining all the data, we will make a first etiological hypothesis, that is a hypothesis on the origin of this rhyme (when, where and why it was originated, and how it spread about and was transformed).

Another further analysis phase will follow, in which we will explore the relationships with other connected traditions, also documented by historical or archaeological sources, and we will check, by the way, also which motifs can be found in the “children’s rhymes” about other small animals (we have collected for this purpose many rhymes on the ladybugs – the most widespread ones together with those on the snail – and on glowworms, crickets, ants, moles, longhorn beetles [Cerambycidae], scarabs, hedgehogs, cats and other animals) or anyway in rhymes that are in some way similar to ours, and we will try to understand if there is anything that is typical only of the rhymes on the snail.

Then, once we have analyzed the texts, we will try to analyze the music and the melodies of the versions collected during this research and to understand their role.

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