NARRATIVE STRUCTURES ACROSS LANGUAGES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FOLKTALE MOTIFS IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH TRADITIONS

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Abstract: This comparative study investigates the structural, thematic, and linguistic organization of narrative motifs within Uzbek and English folktale traditions. Utilizing Vladimir Propp's structural methodology outlined in Morphology of the Folktale, this research analyzes fifty traditional tales (twenty-five Uzbek pari/pahlavon narratives and twenty-five English fairy tales) to identify common plot archetypes, functional sequences, and language-specific mechanisms of expression. The findings demonstrate that while both traditions exhibit strong alignment with Propp's thirty-one narrative functions—particularly initial lack, interdiction, departure, donor testing, and resolution—their linguistic realization reflects fundamental cultural and grammatical differences. Uzbek folktales rely heavily on agglutinative morphology, evidential verbs (-gan ekan), fixed formulaic opening/closing couplets, and Turkic epic motifs. Conversely, English folktales favor hypotactic sentence structures, temporal adverbial framing, and localized moralizing motifs. The study provides quantitative and qualitative evidence that narrative functions transcend linguistic boundaries, while morphosyntactic structures dictate the cognitive pace and stylistic delivery of folktale motifs.
Keywords: Narrative structures, Comparative folklore, Proppian analysis, Uzbek folktales, English fairy tales, Archetypal motifs, Morphology of the folktale, Evidentiality

Introduction

Folktales represent foundational artifacts of oral tradition, encoding social values, historical experiences, and cognitive paradigms across human societies. The systematic study of narrative patterns gained rigorous scientific grounding through structural linguistics and formalist folklore research in the twentieth century. Vladimir Propp's landmark work on Russian magic tales established that narrative units—termed "functions"—act as constant, stable elements in a story regardless of how or by whom they are fulfilled [1]. Subsequent comparative scholarship extended Propp's framework to non-Slavic traditions, confirming the cross-cultural universality of basic narrative functions while highlighting localized stylistic variations [2].

Comparative research between Turkic and Germanic oral traditions reveals significant parallels in plot construction, hero archetypes, and magical auxiliaries. However, the linguistic vehicles used to convey these structural motifs differ sharply. Uzbek folktales (o'zbek xalq ertaklari) belong to the rich oral tradition of Central Asia, deeply influenced by nomadic epic poetry (doston), Persian literary contact, and Islamic moral philosophy [3]. English folktales, recorded by collectors such as Joseph Jacobs and the Brothers Grimm (via English translations), reflect Western European agrarian, medieval, and maritime socio-cultural contexts [4].

Despite extensive individual documentation of both traditions, systematic comparative analysis combining Proppian structuralism with linguistic discourse analysis remains underrepresented in Central Asian philological studies. This article addresses that gap by analyzing plot archetypes and linguistic expression mechanisms across Uzbek and English folktale corpora.

Methodology

This study adopts a formalist-comparative methodological framework based on Propp's thirty-one narrative functions and seven roles (the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess/father, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero) [1].

The primary corpus consists of fifty representative folktales divided equally between two traditions:

- **Uzbek Corpus:** 25 tales selected from multi-volume academic compilations edited by Afzalov, Rasulov, and Khudoyboronov, focusing on wonder tales (sehrli ertaklar) such as Zumrad va Qimmat, Kenja batir, and Oltin tarvuz [5].
- **English Corpus:** 25 tales selected from Joseph Jacobs' English Fairy Tales and More English Fairy Tales, including Jack and the Beanstalk, Childe Rowland, and The Red Ettin [6].

Analytical Procedure

1. **Structural Segmentation:** Each tale was segmented into constituent narrative functions following Propp's functional typology.
2. **Quantitative Mapping:** The occurrence frequency of core Proppian functions (e.g., Absentation, Interdiction, Violation, Donor Testing, Victory, Return) was tabulated and expressed as percentages.
3. **Linguistic Framing Analysis:** Formulaic expressions, verb morphology, evidential markers, and syntactic complexity were systematically extracted and categorized to evaluate how narrative transitions are linguistically encoded in Uzbek and English.

Results

Quantitative analysis reveals a high degree of structural symmetry between Uzbek and English folktales in terms of macro-level narrative functions, alongside distinct variations in micro-level linguistic realization.

Frequency of Key Proppian Functions

Proppian Function	Uzbek Folktales (n=25)	English Folktales (n=25)	Statistical Correlation
I. Absentation (α)	88% (22 tales)	92% (23 tales)	High ($p<0.05$)
II. Interdiction (γ)	76% (19 tales)	80% (20 tales)	High ($p<0.05$)
III. Violation (δ)	76% (19 tales)	76% (19 tales)	Identical
VIII. Lack / Villainy (a/A)	100% (25 tales)	100% (25 tales)	Universal
XII. First Function of Donor (D)	84% (21 tales)	72% (18 tales)	Moderate-High
XIV. Receipt of Magical Agent (F)	84% (21 tales)	68% (17 tales)	Moderate-High
XVIII. Victory over Villain (I)	92% (23 tales)	88% (22 tales)	High ($p<0.05$)
XXXI. Wedding / Coronation (W)	80% (20 tales)	64% (16 tales)	Moderate

The structural comparison demonstrates that functions related to the initial disruption (Lack/Villainy), the hero's testing (Donor Testing), and the ultimate resolution (Victory, Wedding/Coronation) constitute the indispensable core of wonder tales in both cultures.

Linguistically, however, the two traditions diverge sharply in three primary areas:

- **Opening Formulas:** Uzbek tales rely on rhythmic, rhymed introductory couplets (Bor ekan-u, yo'q ekan, och ekan-u, to'q ekan...), whereas English tales utilize temporal, location-neutral past-tense indicators (Once upon a time, in a far-off land...).
- **Evidentiality:** 100% of analyzed Uzbek oral tales employ the indirect past tense marker -gan ekan or -ibdi to signify non-witnessed narrative distance. English tales employ standard simple past indicative verbs (was, went, said).

- **Auxiliary Character Expressions:** Uzbek magical helpers frequently take the form of mythical creatures (Simurg‘, Dev, Xizr) or domesticated animals (Samandar ot), whereas English helpers lean toward magical humans, fairies, or small woodland animals [7].

Analysis and Discussion

Structural Archetypes: The Universal Narrative Arc

The structural alignment observed in the results confirms Propp’s thesis that magic tales operate on a limited set of functional sequences [1]. In both traditions, the primary catalyst for action is an initial deficiency or threat (Lack/Villainy).

In the Uzbek tale Kenja Batir, the initial lack is established when the youngest brother must defend his father's garden against a giant (Dev) that steals golden apples [5]. In the English tale Jack and the Beanstalk, the lack is economic survival, forcing Jack to sell the family cow [6].

The donor sequence—where the protagonist encounters an elder or magical entity who tests their character—serves as the critical pivot in both traditions:

- In Uzbek folklore, the donor is frequently an old man with a white beard (Oqsoqol/Xizr) or a old woman (Kampir) who presents a moral or physical test (e.g., combing hair, showing respect, sharing bread).
- In English folklore, the donor is often an old woman, a fairy, or a beggar who requests food or assistance.

[Initial Lack / Violation] ---> [Donor Test / Quest] ---> [Magical Acquisition] ---> [Resolution / Restoration]

This sequence illustrates that across geographic and linguistic divides, the narrative archetype demands that material or spiritual reward must be preceded by moral worthiness and trial [8].

Morphosyntactic Mechanisms of Narrative Expression

While structural functions are parallel, the linguistic execution reveals profound contrasts grounded in the typological differences between Uzbek (Turkic, agglutinative, SOV) and English (Indo-European, analytic, SVO).

Evidentiality and Epistemic Stance

Uzbek grammar mandates the marking of evidentiality in narrative discourse. The past indirect marker -gan ekan serves as a continuous pragmatic frame:

Qadim zamonda bir podsho bor ekan. Uning uchta o‘g‘li bor ekan.

("In ancient times there was [reportedly] a king. He had [reportedly] three sons.")

This suffix explicitly signals that the narrator did not personally witness the events, establishing distance and placing the tale in a shared mythological past [9].

In English, historical narrative distance is created through lexical framing rather than inflectional morphology:

"Once upon a time, when pigs spoke rhyme and monkeys chewed tobacco..."

Once established, English shifts to standard past tense indicative forms (lived, had, saw), relying on context rather than verb inflections to maintain narrative stance [10].

Formulaic Structures and Syntactic Flow

Uzbek folktales utilize complex non-finite verb forms (converbs like -ib, -gach, -ganda) to chain multiple sub-actions into long, fluid periodic sentences:

Uzoq yo‘l yurib, cho‘llarni oshib, bir qari kampirning uyiga yetib kelibdi.

("Having walked a long road, having crossed deserts, having arrived at an old woman's house, he came.")

This syntax creates an cumulative, rhythmic progression ideal for oral performance [3].

English folktales achieve dynamic movement through independent clauses linked by coordinate conjunctions (and, so, then) or subordinate clauses (when, after):

"So Jack climbed up the beanstalk, and he walked and he walked until he came to a great big house."

English narrative syntax prioritizes linear, clause-by-clause progression, which mirrors the rhythmic demands of Western European oral delivery [11].

Conclusion

This comparative analysis demonstrates that Uzbek and English folktales share an underlying structural architecture governed by universal narrative archetypes. Following Propp's morphological model, both traditions utilize consistent sequences of functions—such as initial lack, donor testing, magical intervention, and victorious resolution—to structure imaginative storytelling.

However, the linguistic vehicles of these functions reflect distinctive cognitive and grammatical features:

1. **Grammatical Framing:** Uzbek tales utilize agglutinative morphology, complex converb chaining, and systematic evidential suffixes (-gan ekan) to maintain oral performance distance.
2. **Syntactic Organization:** English tales rely on analytic syntax, explicit temporal adverbials, and linear clause linkages.
3. **Cultural Encoding:** Mythological auxiliaries and localized formulaic language ground each tradition within its respective socio-cultural and geographic environment.

Ultimately, narrative archetypes operate as a cross-cultural blueprint, while the morphosyntactic structures of individual languages dictate the cadence, perspective, and artistic expression of the folktale.

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