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Source: *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (September 1997), pp. 251-258

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814892>

Accessed: 30/07/2009 17:53

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Theory and Practice of Compiling a Motif Index, with the Child Corpus as Example

By the beginning of the twentieth century, collections of folkloristic material were already arousing interest in the cataloguing of text corpora, and suitable principles of classification were being discussed. Antti Aarne's various folktale indexes formed the basis for Stith Thompson's index of folktale types (Aarne and Thompson 1961). Similarities and correspondence between versions of a narrative type drew attention to the spread and stereotypification of individual narrative elements in folktales and ballads. It was from the study of a large number of narrative types that Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (1989) emerged. In its revised and expanded editions this has had a formative influence on folkloristic research.

At around ten percent of the total, the number of motif indexes published up to now is far below that of type indexes, and they usually deal with relatively small corpora.¹ This is probably due to problems with terminology and systematization. Motif indexes are also frequently published in conjunction with an index of types in which they are found.² In this way the dual character of the motif—as both moveable semantic unit and integral component of a text—can be taken into account. A motif index has the difficult task of doing justice to both of these aspects. A type index on the other hand takes whole texts as a starting point, classifying their versions into types and these in turn into thematically related groups.

If a motif index is to be useful, it needs to be comprehensive. More importantly, however, it must have adequate classification. The classificatory principles of indexes have a theoretical basis and are determined by the respective methodology (Voigt 1977; Uther 1984) and by the underlying motif concepts (Würzbach 1993). Thompson's *Motif-Index* (1989) owes much to the genealogical and geographical ideas of the "Finnish School." Later, in the wake of Propp's morphological approach, it was suggested that motif concepts might be both determined and catalogued according to criteria of deep-structure and narrative grammar. With this approach, however, research was limited to the analysis of individual texts. Thompson's system is now held up to criticism, in some respects not without justification. It remained the definitive model for most motif indexes even though this

did not always guarantee a comprehensive correlation with Thompson's material. With the motif index to the Child ballad corpus in mind (Würzbach and Salz 1995), I should like to show to what extent theoretical considerations and preliminary decisions played a role in its compilation. At the same time I would like to present for discussion some modifications to the cataloguing of motifs as hitherto practiced.

In defining the concept *motif*, various aspects of function and content need to be considered which are all relevant to the cataloguing of motifs. First, we must determine the meaning of motifs. This comprises characters, actions, objects, localities, and dispositions.³ These aspects of content are functionally related and can be given differing emphases in a particular motif. Thus in the motifs of "beggar," "giant," or "dwarf," the character aspect predominates, while in "devil" or "bride," action components are also implied. In motifs such as "marriage," "brothers' quarrel," or "bewitchment," character and action contribute equally to the meaning. Motifs of place, such as "hell" or "fairylane," indicate the kind of characters involved, just as "grave" or "greenwood," as potential settings, imply certain actions. Dispositions such as "jealousy" or "pregnancy" for their part imply characterization and motivation for actions. Classifying motifs according to whether character, action, object, locality, or disposition predominate does indeed help us to recognize the nature of a motif and also to interpret an individual text. It has little significance however for the cataloguing of motif material in a corpus, as the user is primarily interested in place and frequency of occurrence.

On the other hand, such a classification of motif content brings into focus the inherent categorization of the motif according to person, space, and time (in the course of events). These criteria serve to distinguish the motif from a general theme, which owing to its highly abstract nature has no deictic structure. This distinction between *Motiv* and *Thema*, used especially by German scholars (Frenzel 1974; 1980a; 1980b), is of particular relevance in deciding whether an item should be included in a motif index. The *Thema* of "love" can appear in various motifs such as "love against family's wishes," "marriage," "death from love," and many others, and should only be included in a motif index in such a form. Similarly, the *Thema* of "marriage" contains motifs such as "adultery," "misalliance," "parting," and many others. Making a distinction between *Motiv* and *Thema* also helps to determine the sequence of motifs in a text. The central motif of a text is often termed inadequately its *Thema*, as for example "adultery" in "Old Robin of Portingale" (Child 80), whereby the position of this motif within a sequence of several motifs such as "marriage," "betrayal," "combat," "punishment," and "penance" is left unclear. In "Queen Eleanor's Confession" (Child 156), the same central motif appears in quite another motif combination ("confession," "disguise," "murder," "revenge [threatened]"), which would not be clearly

expressed if "adultery" was termed a "theme." The great advantage of a motif index is that it does not delineate general themes but the far more concrete motifs, which are more meaningful for the individual text. It is however necessary to distinguish between motifs and plot kernels. These are more comprehensive than motifs, and at the same time deictically far more precisely determined (Frenzel 1974). They usually also contain several motifs, as for example "bluebeard" ("abduction," "murder").

In addition to the implied deictic structuring of motif content, a further determining criterion is necessary and relevant for inclusion in a motif index, namely, the "exceptional" nature of the motif. This can be understood as either an historically and culturally variable deviation from the norm ("queer and unusual animals, . . . forbidden things, . . . monstrous people, . . . unusual pieces of luck" [Thompson 1955:7ff.]), or as a momentous life-experience (Frenzel 1980a) such as marriage, pregnancy and birth, imprisonment and flight, jealousy, or fear. The significance of a motif content is determined by the line of tradition of the (often anonymous) authors and motif scholars.

Apart from features of content, there are also functional aspects of the motif which must be taken into account when making theoretical decisions prior to compiling an index. The versatility and repeated occurrence of the motif, i.e., its *paradigmatic recurrence* in a sizeable number of texts, and its individual *syntagmatic integration* into a particular context comprise the range of functions of a motif. In indexes and scholarly studies the motif appears as a paradigmatic unit. In a text it is used syntagmatically, taking on narrative (and if necessary lyrical or dramatic)⁴ functions. In making a distinction between *motif* and *motifeme*, Dundes (1962) points at the difference between the paradigmatic and syntagmatic dimensions. *Motifeme* denotes here a syntagmatic unit on a deep-structure level in Propp's sense of *fonction*, and not the concrete realization of a motif within an individual text. Orientated towards semiotics and narrative grammar, the motif analyses which were developed from this, together with proposals for classifying and cataloguing motifs (Doležel 1972; Courtés 1980, 1982; Bremond 1980, 1982), place a one-sided emphasis on the syntagmatic dimension of the motif. They have proved too time-consuming to be of use in dealing with more extensive motif material and have never been put into practice in the setting up of a motif index. By contrast, most motif indexes that follow Thompson's model mainly take account of the paradigmatic dimension of the motif. Its syntagmatic dimension is both implicit in the source reference and left to individual interpretation. Neither the structuralist narrative-grammatical classification of motifs as *motifemes* nor the simple distinction between main, subordinate, and peripheral motifs according to their degree of importance at the level of the concrete individual text can be meaningfully applied in a motif index.

If an index of motifs is to function as a work of reference, the paradigmatic recurrence of these moveable stock literary devices must be given priority. The most consistent way to do this is to present the motif entries in alphabetical order. At the same time the syntagmatic integration of each motif into its plot context can be at least indicated by a *specification* of the motif according to the criteria of Who? Why? How and Where? as and when these are relevant to the respective plot. This was the intention in the *Motif Index of the Child Corpus* (Würzbach and Salz 1995). The choice of specification was dependent each time on the actual occurrence of a motif in its variations in the corpus under investigation. Some of these specifications are, from the paradigmatic point of view, so firmly established that they can be seen as motifs in their own right and must consequently be classified as *submotifs* and listed separately with their references. So, for example, the motif of “murder,” found with great frequency in the traditional ballad, can be subdivided using numerous specifications and submotifs (in italics) with varying distribution:

1. Who are the actively participating characters, and what (if appropriate) is their relation to each other:

murder:

(of brother) > *sibling murder*

(of child) > *infanticide*

(of father) > *patricide*

(of husband): Child 12, 68, 106, 194, 231 E, F, 242, 301.

(of king): Child 89, 166, 169, 174, 180.

(of rival lover): Child 30, 60, 64 F, 67, 81, 82, 89, 90 D.

etc.

2. Why: reasons for and purpose of an action:⁵

murder:

(in order to prevent discovery of incest): Child 52 B

(out of jealousy): > *crime of passion*

(in revenge): numerous entries.

etc.

3. How and Where: how is an action carried out, what are the particular circumstances:

murder:

(by drowning): Child 10, 86, 173, 242, 243 D.

(by poisoning): > *murder by poisoning*

(with weapon): numerous entries.

etc.

The distinction between a *specification* and a *submotif* according to the criterion of stereotypification and distribution is a gradual one and therefore often a matter of subjective judgment. The specifications and submotifs of a motif are connected to each other in a semantically logical relationship.

By contrast, the *allomotif*, as a subcategory of the similarly deep-structure concept *motifeme*, shares with it the narrative-grammatical function in different texts, but the meaning may be totally unrelated. Thus “rabbit” and “whistle” as allomotifs both symbolize male potency (Dundes 1980), although they do not have a meaning in common. As with motifemes, it is hardly feasible to incorporate allomotifs into a motif index which is based on paradigmatic precepts. On the other hand, although specifications and submotifs do signal possible realizations in concrete texts that are given as examples, they are paradigmatically independent and so can be listed alphabetically. At the same time, a systematization of individual motifs (as specifications and submotifs) is possible below the paradigmatic level, which guarantees greater clarity than is offered in Thompson’s *Motif-Index* (1989).

Specifications and submotifs represent concretizations as opposed to the motifs, which are more abstract in concept. The former are thereby closer to concrete realizations of a motif in an individual text. The dual character of the motif as both “free-floating” unit in paradigmatic recurrence and concrete component of a text in syntagmatic integration, termed “double-bind” by Ben Amos (1989:27–29), is better understood if we distinguish between the *potentiality* of a motif’s meaning and its concrete and thereby fixed *realization* in an individual text. The identity of the motif as moveable stock literary device derives from its basic abstract meaning which can be realized in a large number of ways, i.e., converted into literary representation (Frenzel 1974:214ff.; Würzbach 1993:79–81). The tension between potentiality and realization is a further constituent feature of the motif in which its creative power and inherent dynamic become clear. This can be investigated by comparing versions within a ballad or story type or types with similar motifs, or motifs occurring in different corpora.

In a motif index, potentiality and realization of the motifs listed can be indicated first of all through subcategorization according to specifications and submotifs. The conversion of motifs, submotifs, and specifications into characters, plot, and setting in a text is made clearer if summaries are given for the individual narrative or ballad types (Würzbach, and Salz 1995). The lists of relevant motifs appended to each summary enable the user of the index to follow the process of determining the motifs as a way of interpreting the tension between potentiality and realization. A combination of motif index and type index is thereby achieved. Furthermore, the theoretical distinction between the potentiality and realization of a motif makes us aware of a practical problem in the compilation of indexes: to what extent the subcategorizations of a motif, of whatever kind, should approach the level of realization without the index becoming unwieldy and confusing through too much detail, as is sometimes the case with Thompson. Care should also be taken to differentiate between a paradigmatically established motif and a detail with no paradigmatic range to speak of.⁶

Within the area of tension between potentiality and realization we encounter a further problem in the compilation of motif indexes. A motif is the abstract representation of an idea whose different realizations in diverse individual texts can in turn be represented by sub-concepts, i.e., by specifications and submotifs. So a motif is identified by means of a formulation, which is always preceded by an interpretation and may vary. Such variation may consist in the choice of the degree of abstraction, for example in deciding the boundary between a motif and a general *Thema*, or in distinguishing between motifs and submotifs. Again, the implicit deictic structure of a motif may be given differing emphasis, as for instance in deciding between *betrayal* and *betrayal*, whereby the latter formulation has a wider meaning as it implies character *and* action (Würzbach and Salz 1995:12ff.). In order to indicate a motif's nucleus of action in the formulation, it sometimes seems appropriate to add an element to an already existing motif formulation: "otherworldly being, encounter with"; "identity, discovery of true" (43ff., 31). Decisions of interpretation also have to be made, for instance whether to differentiate between "pardon" and "reconciliation" through an appropriate formulation (44, 51). Finally, implicit value-judgments and ideologies may creep into motif formulations, as for example moral sentiments in "punishment" and "penance" or sexist prejudice, which are at variance with the realization of the motif in the individual text (Lundell 1986).⁷

The motif is a highly complex chameleon-like construct and as such resists attempts at classification. It is impossible to do equal justice to all its diverse features and functions in a motif index. Subjective decisions have to be taken, compromises made. Despite this, however, indexes are an indispensable aid to our understanding of variants and types, the description of corpora and genres, historical and cultural comparisons, and last but not least our interpretation of texts.

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NOTES

1. Twenty-two of the 186 entries in Azzolina's bibliography (1987) are motif indexes.

2. E.g., Baughman (1966). See also entries 72, 77, 88, 121, 139, 151, and 176 in Azzolina's bibliography (1987).

3. Thompson already uses the terms "actors," "incidents," and "items" in his introductions to the various editions of the *Motif-Index* (1989) and in *The Types of the Folktale* (Aarne and Thompson 1961:414), often referring in his index to such localities as the dwellings of non-human beings and magic worlds. Motifs of disposition (Paul 1989; Würzbach and Salz 1995:2 and *passim*) denote social, mental, and physical conditions such as hunger, poverty, sickness, grief, joy, jealousy, and the

like, which contribute to the characterization of the figures and the motivation for the action.

4. Folkloristic research has been concerned almost exclusively with motifs in narrative texts. In literary scholarship, on the other hand, consideration is also given to motifs in dramatic and lyrical texts. Lyrical motifs usually have little deictic structure and are mainly concerned with objects, localities, and dispositions.

5. In folktales and ballads the reasons for an action, and its aims, can be deduced from its outcome. They are not always easy to determine, since aims are usually not declared, and motives for actions are often implicit and ambiguous.

6. A fair number of entries in Thompson's *Motif-Index* (1989) cite only one or very few sources and are, furthermore, not recognized as moveable stock literary devices.

7. Furthermore, in the formulations the sexual identity of the murderer and victim is disregarded, and characteristics such as courage, activity, or beauty are either sexually stereotyped or ignored.

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