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A COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF BRITISH AND ARMENIAN FOLKTALE FORMULAS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines folktale formulas in British and Armenian tales, employing comparative-historical, cognitive, contextual, and analytical methods. It focuses on how opening, intermediate, and closing formulas structure the narrative, ensuring coherence and guiding the listener's or reader's emotional engagement. In the study, these formulas are regarded as cognitive patterns that go beyond mere morphological elements of the folktale genre. Opening formulas function as narrative devices that transport the reader to a distant past, presenting a tale authenticity of which is left to the reader's interpretation. Intermediate formulas create a sense of uncertainty and serve as connectors between episodes. Closing formulas, in turn, serve as a transition that guides the reader back to reality from an imaginary time and space zone. Moreover, numerical indicators within formulas highlight the cultural and symbolic significance embedded in the narratives, offering insight into both universal storytelling elements and distinct cultural layers. The recurrence of these formulas across cultures suggests their deep-rooted cognitive and structural significance in oral storytelling traditions. By analyzing how these formulas function and vary between the two traditions, this study demonstrates that folktales across different cultures follow shared cognitive patterns in constructing meaning and engaging listeners and readers.

Keywords: cognitive patterns, folktale formulas, uncertainty, background knowledge, folktale, indefinite time.

Introduction

Folktales, as archetexts, are distinguished by several unique features. Among them are folktale formulas, which are integral to the genre and play an important morphological role. Folktale formulas are classified into three main groups: opening, intermediate, and closing, each distinguished by specific functions. According to S. Swanepoel, opening and closing formulas serve as markers that differentiate the folktale narrative from other genres [1]. Similarly, R. Finnegan argues that formulas act as special connectives in folktale texts, signaling the beginning and the end of a story. He also notes that opening and closing formulas function as boundaries for the narrative [2].

In this study, we focus on formulas as carriers of semantic layers of time and space. Opening formulas, in particular, represent the spatiotemporal aspect of the folktale's possible world. They are even referred to as "symbols of unreal world" [3]. Thus, the formula serves as a special chronotopic concept within the folktale genre, preparing the audience to immerse themselves in stories about the past, the reality of which often remains uncertain. Analyzing formulas in British and Armenian folktales can shed light on the linguistic perspectives and cognitive perceptions of time embedded in these narratives.

This study adopts the approaches of cognitive linguistics as its foundation, wherein the study of language is inseparable from the study of the mind and cognition. Research into the mind contributes to a deeper understanding of language [4]. As L. Janda argues, the explanation of linguistic phenomena should be sought from the perspective of general cognition [5]. Based on these cognitive linguistic approaches, this study considers folktale formulas as cognitive patterns. They are not merely linguistic units expressing dictionary meanings or simple structural elements of tales but are perceived through the interaction of fundamental cognitive knowledge and the meanings conveyed by linguistic expressions.

The folktales analyzed in this study were selected from well-established collections and archives. British tales were primarily drawn from classic compilations such as those by J. Jacobs, J. Campbell, and J. Riordan, chosen for their inclusion of both canonical and regional variants. Armenian folktales were sourced from the academic series “Armenian Folk Tales” published by the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, as well as fieldwork-based collections by G. Srvandztyants, G. Sherents, and others. The selected tales all contain clearly identifiable opening, intermediate, or closing formulas, ensuring comparability across both traditions.

The folktales analyzed in this study were selected from well-established collections and archives to ensure broad representation and comparative validity. British tales were primarily drawn from the classic compilations of J. Jacobs, J. Campbell, and J. Riordan, chosen for their inclusion of both canonical and regional variants. Armenian folktales were sourced from the academic series Armenian Folk Tales published by the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, as well as from fieldwork-based collections by folklorists such as G. Srvandztyants and G. Sherents. All the selected tales contain clearly identifiable opening, intermediate, or closing formulas, allowing for systematic analysis across both traditions.

Opening formulas

The very first emphasis on time in folktales is the opening formula, which, as W. Nicolaisen notes, primarily reflects “the time of the folktale world, but not the place” [6]. However, this perspective presents a slight contradiction in the context of our study, as it does not truly reflect the exact temporal characteristics of the folktale world.

The most common opening formulas in British folktales include *once upon a time*, *there was once*, and *at some time*. Similarly, in Armenian folktales: *լինում է, չի լինում, կար չկար* (*there is, there isn't*), *կար ժամանակով, մեկ օր* (*once upon a time*), along with numerous dialectal variations.

At first glance, these opening formulas seem to indicate the temporal framework of the folktale world. However, their primary function, in both traditions, is to detach the story from any specific or concrete temporal markers. Instead, they create a timeless and universal framework, inviting the audience into an abstract, mythical realm where the narrative can unfold beyond the constraints of real-world chronology.

From the above-mentioned formulas, we will analyze *once upon a time*, which is the most widespread opening formula in British folktales, and its Armenian counterpart: *լինում է, չի լինում* (*there is, there isn't*).

Once upon a time there was a young lady called Lady Mary, who had two brothers [7].

Ըլնումս չի բլնում մի մարդ, մի կնիկ: Դրանք էլ ունենում են օխոր սղջիկ [8].

There was, there wasn't a man and a woman. They had seven daughters.

The opening formulas in both examples serve as cognitive patterns, which convey the concept of indefinite time and intermediate elements to transfer the readers to an imaginary time and space zone. These formulas are designed to evoke a sense of distant and indeterminate time in the subconscious of the audience.

Despite their shared function, these formulas differ structurally. In Armenian folktales, the formula is expressed in the present simple tense and singular form. In contrast, the English formula *once upon a time* does not explicitly indicate grammatical number or tense. Instead, these aspects are conveyed through fixed word combinations that follow the opening formula, such as *there was/were* or *there lived*. These expressions fulfill the same role as *լինում է* (*there is*) in Armenian folktales [9]. The primary distinction lies in the fact that, in English, these expressions can appear in both singular and plural forms and are presented in the past tense. It should be noted that the Armenian opening formula, *լինում է, չի լինում*, consists of two parts: the first is affirmative (*լինում է*), and the second is negative (*չի լինում*). The affirmative part creates a sense of reality, while the

negative part neutralizes this perception, suggesting from the very beginning that the following story may not correspond to reality. Interestingly, American-Armenian folktale compiler S. Hougasian-Villa preserved a literal translation of this distinctive Armenian opening formula in the Armenian folktale series collected and published in the United States.

*At one time, **there was and there was not, there were** a man, his two sons and his second wife [10].*

Hougasian-Villa not only retained the unique structure of the Armenian formula but also emphasized the spatiotemporal unreality and uncertainty of the fairy tale by using the plural auxiliary verb **were** with the singular noun **a man** (there were a man). Similarly, the use of the singular personal pronoun **I** with the auxiliary verb **were** in English indicates an unreal or hypothetical reality.

The opening formulas of both British and Armenian folktales clearly indicate that the events occurred in a distant past. However, they do not specify an exact time. Their primary function is to consciously and subconsciously create a sense of uncertainty while preparing the listener for a possible journey into an imaginary and magical world [11, 12]. Moreover, the ambiguity of these opening formulas serves as a deliberate narrative device that absolves the storyteller of responsibility for the truthfulness of the events being narrated. There is a group of opening formulas in British folktales where the repeated use of the word *time* creates an atmosphere of uncertainty around the events that follow. This can be illustrated through a passage from the folktale “*The Well at the End of the World*”:

***Once upon a time, and a very good time it was, though it wasn't in my time, nor in your time, nor anyone else's time, there was** a girl whose mother had died, and her father had married again [13].*

The opening formula mentioned consists of several affirmative and negative parts. It begins by stating that the event occurred in a wonderful

time but subsequently denies this, explaining that it did not happen during the time of the storyteller, the listener, or anyone else. The primary emphasis here is on denial, which creates a cognitive image of unreality and improbability. This formula serves as a cognitive pattern designed to immerse the listener in uncertainty, leaving them the choice to believe in the authenticity of the events.

A similar cognitive pattern can be observed in the Armenian folktale “*The Old Woman and the Poor Man*” recorded by G. Sherents.

Կէլնի, չ’էլնէ. կէլնի, չ’էլնէ. կէլնի, չ’էլնէ: Կէլնի, կէլնի մէկ պառաւ [14].

There is, there isn’t. there is, there isn’t. there is, there isn’t. There is, there is an elderly woman.

In the opening formula, the repetitive use of the affirmative and negative forms of the verb *to be* is an intentional narrative device. This repetition distracts the listener from any concrete belief about the time and place of the story events, likely reflecting the storyteller’s own uncertainty about the authenticity of the narrative. Moreover, the phrase *there is, there isn’t* repeated three times, creates a rhythmic pattern that builds anticipation.

In contrast, in the folktales recorded by G. Srvandztiants, an opening formula without a negative component is also common. Here is an example:

Կէր ու կէր, կէր ու կէր, մէկ խէր ու մէր, մէկ լաւ [15].

There was and there was, there was and there was, there was a father, a mother and a son.

The repetition of the formula constructed with the verb *to be* in the past tense and connected by the conjunction *ու* (and) pushes the narrative as far away as possible from the present. This prepares the listener to mentally transport themselves to distant and unfamiliar times. G. Sherents notes that folktales often begin with such repetitive opening formulas, and this repetition could continue until the storytellers are out of their breath [16]. However, such traditional openings are not characteristic of British folktales we have studied.

Another group of opening formulas, present in both British and Armenian folktales, involves the enumeration of absurd or nonsensical realities. In these formulas, the negative element is entirely absent. For instance, in the British folktale “Midland”:

Once upon a time- and a very good time it was when pigs were swine and dogs ate lime, and monkeys chewed tobacco, when houses were thatched with pancakes, streets paved with plum puddings, and roasted pigs ran up and down the streets with knives and forks on their backs crying, “Come and eat me!” [17].

The narrator uses figurative language to emphasize the unreal nature of the tale: *dogs ate lime, monkeys chewed tobacco, houses were thatched with pancakes, and streets were paved with plum puddings*. This formula, viewed as cognitive pattern and interpreted through our background knowledge, clearly describe impossible actions. The pattern conveys a sense of unreal time, framing the events that follow within an explicitly imaginary context. Thus, opening formulas of this type set a unique tone for the story and make it clear that such events have never happened.

Similar absurd beginnings, which we refer as *nonsense* formulas, also serve the function of attracting the listener’s attention. Notably, we also encounter a similar formula in Armenian folktales:

<i>Ժամանակն էն ժամանակն էր,</i>	<i>The time was that time,</i>
<i>Իսար (խարար) ժամանակն էր,</i>	<i>It was ruined time,</i>
<i>Փիսիկը փայլեան էր,</i>	<i>The cat was tightrope walker,</i>
<i>Ուղտը թալանչի էր,</i>	<i>The camel was a robber,</i>
<i>Աքրոր բաղաչի էր,</i>	<i>The rooster was a clown,</i>
<i>Մուկը ճանապարհ կտրող էր...</i>	<i>The mouse was a road-blocker...</i>
<i>Կար, չկար... [18]</i>	<i>There was, there wasn't...</i>

Generally, these formulas in English and Armenian are largely similar, with one key difference being the placement of the primary opening formula. In the British folktales, the unreal time is emphasized at the very

beginning, whereas in Armenian folktales, the unreality of the events is underscored at the end with the formula *lyur, zlyur* (*there was, there wasn't*).

Thus, despite the linguistic and cultural differences in the opening formulas of British and Armenian folktales, these formulas metaphorically emphasize the unreal and indefinite time of the narrative. They can therefore be regarded as cognitive patterns of uncertainty that enhance the listener's experience of the imaginary and magical world of the folktale.

Intermediate Formulas

It is a well-known fact that folk tale texts are characterized by the use of special formulas, not only at the beginning and the end of the tale but also throughout. These are known as intermediate formulas and serve the specific function of connecting episodes, events, and introducing new environments. The intermediate formulas in both British and Armenian folktales are not clear indicators of time. Similar to opening formulas, they serve as cognitive patterns for depicting the indefinite time of the story. Furthermore, they are devices characteristic of the folktale genre that avoid presenting factual information. Let us consider the following examples:

He took himself off on a day of days, and he reached the hill above the town from which he went away; but who should come to him but the Mischief [19].

Գնա՛ց, գնա՛ց, օրվա մեկը գնաց մե շենքի դեմ առաւ, մտաւ ներս, տեսաւ էրկու հստ ջահել, սիրուն ախշիկ, նստել իրանց համար քարզահ կէներն [20].

He went and went and one day he came up to a building, entered and saw two young, beautiful girls, sitting and embroidering.

The intermediate formulas in the above passages are quite common in both British and Armenian folktales. In English, temporal uncertainty is indicated by the indefinite article *a* (*a day of days*), while in Armenian, the numeral *մեկ* (*one*) has the same function as the indefinite article. These

patterns create a sense of events taking place at indefinite time. The temporal intermediate formulas in the tales of both cultures are nearly identical structurally and semantically. They typically refer to some vague point in the past. This sense of the past is reinforced by the verb tenses used: the past indefinite (*reached, went*) in English, and the past perfect (*ղիւլ առաւ, մտաւ լեռն*) in Armenian.

Another intermediate formula commonly found in British folktales is *twenty nights and twenty days*. The following example illustrates this formula from Campbell's collection of folktales:

*Conal Croy was caught and bound with three slender ends, and tossed into the peat corner; and a wedding of **twenty nights and twenty days** was made for the young couple, there and then [21].*

In this episode, the wedding, which lasts *twenty nights and twenty days*, seems like an incredibly long event. This is an exaggerated representation of time, used to convey the protagonists' boundless happiness.

The following group of intermediate formulas clearly emphasizes the relationship between time and space. Let us consider this in the temporal intermediate formulas examples taken from British and Armenian folktales, which are conceptualized in spatial terms:

*They went on for **miles and miles**, all the time going **uphill**, through **lanes and narrow passages** [23].*

*Սարէ սար, ձորէ ձոր, չղէ չղ **անցաւ**, տեղ չմնաց օր նոքի տակ չմնար [23]:*

Over mountains, through valleys, across deserts, he traveled, leaving no place untouched.

These examples illustrate how spatial terms function as metaphorical expressions of time. Based on cognitive linguistics, the repetition of *miles* in the English tale conveys the sense of a long passage of time. Similarly, in Armenian tale, repetition of place names and their enumeration indicate an extended passage of time.

We have also identified a group of temporal intermediate formulas that we encountered especially in Armenian folktales:

*Գեղնա գրնկնա ճամպա. շատ կերթա, քիչ կերթա, կը հասնի
էրգիր մէ [24]:*

He went far, he went near he found a city.

Here, the close interplay between time and space creates a magical atmosphere. The protagonist's journey is described with little attention to its duration, emphasizing the outcome rather than the process. The use of antonymous adverbs (*շատ*, *քիչ*) and repeated verbs creates a sense of uncertainty and unreality.

The next example is one of the most common structures in Armenian folktales. It seems to specify a clear time period, but upon closer analysis, it reveals an illusion of precision:

*Անց ա կենում մի օր, էրկու օր, իրեք օր, մալիսաւի `մի շաբաթ,
դրուստ որ էր տղի սասած օրը ընենց մի բութ բորան ա սնում...
[25]*

*A day passes, two days, three days, a week, and indeed, on the very
day pointed by the boy a severe snow storm began.*

Similarly, temporal uncertainty is expressed using the indefinite pronoun *մի քանի* (several), followed by the noun *վախտ* (time) and then a verb:

Մի քանի վախտից հետո մարդ ու կնիկ էկան տուն [26]:

After a while the husband and the wife came home.

A particularly noteworthy formula in Armenian folktales is *մէ ժուկ ու ժամանակ*. For instance:

*Մէ ժուկ ու ժամանակ էր թաքավորի ախշիկ մնաց էր թաքավորի
կուշտ [27]:*

For a while the king's daughter stayed with that king.

In this formula, *ժուկ* refers to a short time period, and when combined with *մէ* (one), it expresses approximate, indefinite time. While this formula may seem like an ordinary one, it holds deeper cultural and mythological significance. In Armenian mythology, *ժուկ ու ժամանակ* is personified as an old man who controls night and day using black and white skeins, symbolizing time's cyclical and dualistic nature [28, 29]. This layered meaning enriches the folkloric context in which the formula appears, marking time not just as narrative progression, but as a reflection of cultural cosmology.

In contrast, we could hardly encounter similar personifications of time in the British folktales that we have studied.

Thus, intermediate formulas in both British and Armenian folktales serve to create a sense of temporal and spatial uncertainty, reinforcing the magical and timeless nature of these narratives. While both traditions share commonalities, Armenian folktales uniquely incorporate mythological conceptions of time, adding a distinct cultural dimension to the genre.

Closing Formulas

The end of folktales is marked by closing formulas, which K. Estes describes as devices to immediately pull listeners out of the folktale world and bring them back to reality [30]. As we have already mentioned, the function of the opening formula in the narration of a folk tale is to announce the beginning of a transition to another world and another time zone. The closing formula is the announcement of the end of that zone, in other words, they are a means of returning from the unreal world to reality. Below are examples of closing formulas that are frequent in British and Armenian folktales:

*So, the highlander got the money and the three advices also; and with the money he stocked a farm and **lived comfortably till the end of his days** [31].*

*Ընդունց դէնք **ընչաք մեռնիկները** ապրեցին լավ ու բախտունիքը [32]:*

After that, they lived well and happily until the end of their days.

There is no time limit here. These formulas signal that it is time to return to the real time zone. In addition to the function of ending, the closing cognitive formulas create the same temporal uncertainty. How long the hero lived happily is left to the imagination and assumption of the listener. The study allows us to conclude that it is the closing formulas that make the proposition that the folktale is a world created in the imagination, with its own internal temporal flow.

Some closing formulas establish a connection between the timeframe of the tale and the present moment of the listener. Anyhow, an impression of indefinite time is created. This is achieved through cognitive patterns, which depend on the lack of a clear time point in the story.

*...and if they have not died since then, they are alive **to this very day** [33].*

*Նո՛ր թաւադաւն դաւ 'ի, գունճաւ ' , քե 'ֆ, ուրախուդոյն ' լն, որ, **ով գիտաւ, ընչանք հմի էլ չի պրծե** [34]:*

Again, the dap, the zurna, festivity, joy, who knows, maybe it has not finished until now.

Here, the use of demonstrative pronoun *this*, temporal noun *day*, and the adverb *now* creates a bridge between the folktale world and the listener's reality. However, given that folktales are passed down through generations and are consistently narrated using similar formulas, these expressions can also be seen as patterns reinforcing indefinite time.

Folktale formulas as cognitive patterns are considered to be integral structural elements of the genre highlighting the indefinite temporal framework of the narrative. They also underscore the close interrelation between time and space in these tales. A comparative study of British and Armenian folktale formulas, regardless the languages, reveals remarkable similarities, suggesting that both traditions employ analogous cognitive patterns. At their core, these patterns are rooted in the notions of unreal and indefinite time.

Here we consider it necessary to touch upon the semantic features of numerical indicators of formulas as they often appear in formulas associated

with time in folktales. These numbers frequently carry ritual significance or stem from religious concepts, particularly in European and Eurasian traditions. For instance, the numbers three and seven are prominently featured in both British and Armenian fairy tales. S. Buvala notes that the number three is associated with the concept of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But he also gives another explanation, according to which the number three symbolizes the visit of the three wise men on the night of Jesus' birth, as well as the three days he spent in the tomb before his resurrection [35]. Moreover, according to Celtic numerology, three was considered the first magical number and symbolized completeness and unity. Below are examples of the number three from British and Armenian folktales:

*As soon as **three years** have passed, I will come to you that very night and ask you a question [36].*

Այնուհետև սկսեց դասնով պարսպելը, այնքան շանոսանը փոփոխեց մինչև օր երեք սնդուկն էլ լիքը լցվեց: Այդտեղ մնաց երեք ամիս [37]:

Then he began to practice with it, changing candlesticks until all three chests were filled. He stayed there for three months.

The number seven also carries deep symbolic and religious meaning. It represents the seven days of the week and the seven days of creation [38]. In Hebrew tradition, seven is seen as a powerful number, with God resting on the seventh day of creation [39]. In Celtic numerology, the number seven is synonymous with *many* [40]:

*They made a great rich wedding that lasted **seven days and seven years** [41].*

Յոթն օր, յոթը գիշեր հարսնիք արավ, էն հասավ իր մոլորագին, դուք էլ ձեր մոլորագին [42]:

For seven days and seven nights, the wedding celebration lasted, and they satisfied their desire. May you also satisfy your desire.

Interestingly, the number seven in both British and Armenian folktales is often associated with wedding celebrations. This indicates that some layers of culture, of course, have a universal nature. However, in British folktales, it is also possible to encounter the number twenty, which, according to some numerological interpretations, symbolizes the beginning of something new.

*And a wedding of **twenty days and twenty nights** was made for the young couple [43].*

The number forty frequently appears in Armenian folktales and is deeply tied to ritual significance:

***Քառասուն օր** թըմնալ, թագավոր հրաման էրալ օր. — Ես կէրթամ հարսնիք, ով օր գուզէ թող ինձի հետ զաւորախումբիսն էն [44]:*

Forty days passed, the king ordered- I am going to the wedding. Whoever wishes, let them come with me to join that joy.

Not all numerical expressions of time in folktales can be considered reliable sources for historical or factual arguments. Rather, their usage reflects ancient beliefs and traditions. The study of numerical indicators highlights the cultural and symbolic significance embedded within these narratives, offering insight into shared universal elements and distinct cultural layers.

Conclusion

Folktale formulas, as integral components of the genre, encapsulate the abstract and mythical concept of time within narrative structure. Opening formulas invite the audience into an undefined, magical past; intermediate formulas maintain the timeless and episodic nature of the story; and closing formulas gently guide the listener back to the present, often with a resolution that transcends temporal boundaries.

When analyzed through the lens of cognitive linguistics, these formulas reveal themselves as more than stylistic features. They are cognitive patterns that reflect deeply rooted cultural and psychological conceptions of time. British and Armenian folktales, though culturally distinct, exhibit striking similarities in their use of formulas, affirming their universal narrative function. At the same time, subtle variations in imagery and structure illustrate the specific cultural and linguistic environments from which these tales emerge. In this way, folktale formulas serve as a bridge between linguistic expression and cognitive perception, offering insight into how the human mind constructs and navigates abstract temporal realities through storytelling.

This research contributes to folklore studies by identifying both structural and semantic parallels between British and Armenian folktale traditions, thereby revealing a shared cognitive foundation underlying narrative forms. Simultaneously, it advances the field of cognitive linguistics by illustrating how folktale formulas function as conceptual frameworks-tools through which language gives form to culturally shaped understandings of time, space, and reality. Ultimately, the study affirms that folktale formulas are not only narrative devices but deeply embedded cognitive structures that link language, thought, and collective imagination.

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КОГНИТИВНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ БРИТАНСКИХ И АРМЯНСКИХ НАРОДНЫХ СКАЗОК

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АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье изучаются формулы в британских и армянских народных сказках с использованием сравнительно-исторических, когнитивных, контекстуальных и аналитических методов. Анализ фокусируется на функции начальных, промежуточных и заключительных формул, а также на их роли в формировании повествовательной логики и эмоционального резонанса. В исследовании эти формулы рассматриваются как когнитивные модели, которые выходят за рамки простых морфологических элементов жанра народной сказки. Начальные формулы функционируют как повествовательные устройства, которые переносят читателя в далекое прошлое, представляя историю, подлинность которой остается на усмотрение читателя. Промежуточные формулы создают чувство неопределенности и служат связующим звеном между эпизодами. Заключительные формулы, в свою очередь, служат переходом, который возвращает читателя к реальности из воображаемой временной и пространственной зоны. Более того, числовые показатели внутри формул подчеркивают культурное и символическое значение. Оно заложено в повествовании и предлагает понимание как универсальных элементов повествования, так и отдельных культурных слоев. Повторяемость этих формул в разных культурах предполагает их глубоко укоренившуюся когнитивную и структурную значимость в традициях устного повествования. Рассматривая их вариации и сходства, это исследование подчеркивает, как народные сказки создают общую структуру когнитивного восприятия в различных культурных контекстах.

Ключевые слова: когнитивные закономерности, сказочные формулы, неопределенность, фоновые знания, сказка, неопределенное время.