

Cinderella: Evolutionary approach to the study of folktales

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Cinderella is arguably the most famous and widespread folktale in the world. However, it is not currently known where the tale originated or how it developed as it spread from society to society. For this reason, my PhD project aims to bring new theoretical and analytical perspectives to shed light on its evolutionary history. However, coding remains an inescapable problem in studying narratives. To date scholars have been identifying the characters to analyse based on their own individual judgement [1] [2]. Consequently, the risk that both dataset and results were affected by biases and idiosyncrasies is very high. For this reason, we combined methods from cultural transmission theories and phylogenetic analysis, to design a novel experiment based on a transmission chain that resembles a branching tree. By comparing different methodologies of coding derived by theories of structural analysis [3] [4], we were able to establish an effective coding system for narratives and validate the use of phylogenetic analysis.

Assessing these two key points was essential to the next steps of my project. In fact, based on the previous results I am now applying the coding methodology on an empirical dataset that includes more than three hundred variants of Cinderella tale from many different traditions, including those of Asia, America, Europe and Africa, widely documented and published by folklorists [5] [6] [7]. The aim is to trace back Cinderella's origin and development as well as reconstructing its first prototype and establish the evolutionary inheritance of the different features of the tale. Lastly, by borrowing methods from population genetics, I will infer possible correlation between human population structure and human cultural evolution described by the distribution of variants of the folktale.

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