Toward a cognitive linguistics
Understanding of folk narratives

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Introduction:

"Culture is the precipitate of cognition and communication in a human population."(Dan Sperber, 1990, p. 42). The primary and most straightforward relationship between language, culture and folklore can be based on the fact that folklore is expressed by means of language and that both language and folklore are set in the culture of the people who speak the former and produce the latter. In addition, both reflect the culture they are set in. cognitive linguistics believes that there is no objective, disembodied truth, and consequently the world is not objectively reflected in language. Language is much more than just a mirror, it describes our individual and collective experiences of the world and these experiences lead to the embodied meaning in language and discourse; and what better way to understand those deep rooted culture-specific worldview than through folklore, as folklores/folktales reside in the mind of a people not just as stories but almost like a set of norms to follow that sets the boundaries of concepts relevant for a culture? Conceptual and linguistic universals arise from the fact that we have similar bodies and brains, that we inhabit similar environments and that we communicate with each other; but relativity sneaks in through the cultural differences reflected in language and literature that throws a light on the differential aspects of cognizing the world around us.

Language is not, as pointed out by Snell-Hornby (1988:39), ‘an isolated phenomenon suspended in a vacuum but an integral part of culture.’ As such, language is better understood with reference to culture. According to Malinowski (1923/1938: 306), ‘the study of language, spoken by a people … must be carried out in conjunction with their culture and their environment’.
The cognitive approach to the study of culture consists in attempting to explain internal and mental reasons for the links between a particular cause and a particular effect. This approach ‘tends to use the concepts of modeling, and talks of mapping, underlying patterns and the culture-bound categorizing of experience’ (Katan, 1999: 19). In connection with this, Nostrand (in Katan, 1999: 19) ‘talks of a culture’s ‘central code’ which involves the culture’s ‘ground of meaning’; its systems of major values, habitual patterns of thought, and certain prevalent assumptions about human nature’.

**Understanding Folklore/Folktales**

Since its creation in 1846 by William Thom as, the definition of the term “folklore” has, as Dundes (1965: 1) puts it, been subject to a great deal of discussion. According to him, some definitions concern the definition of ‘lore’, that is the material of folklore and others concern the folk, that is the people who produce the lore. folklore has also been defined as the set of customs, beliefs, traditions and all types of folk literature (myths, legends tales, poems, proverbs, sayings, spells, etc) and experiences passed on from one generation of a folk, defined by Dundes (1965: 2) as ‘any group of people whatsoever who share one common factor’, to another either through oral tradition or through imitation. folklore is related to culture in the sense that it is, a mirror of culture. Folklore reflects culture because it relates to the way of life of the people who produce it: their ceremonies, their institutions, their crafts and so on. It also expresses their beliefs, customs, attitudes and their way of thinking. Folklore actually gives a penetrating picture of the way of life of the people who produce it (Dundes, 1965: 284). For that reason, it is, as pointed out by Malinowski (in Dundes 1965: 281), important to understand the setting of folklore in its actual life if one wants to understand it. According to Malinowski (in Dundes, 1965: 282), ‘text … is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless.’ This means that one cannot fully understand folklore without understanding its cultural context.

The relationship between culture and folklore can also be shown in the definition of folktales, as part of folklore, by Lester (1969: vii) who says that folktales are stories that give people a way of communicating with each other about each other- their fears, their hopes, their dreams, their fantasies, giving their explanations of why the world is the way it is. It is in stories like these that a child learns
who his parents are and who he will become. Arbuthnot (1964: 255) corroborates this idea by saying that ‘...folktales have been the cement of society. They not only expressed but codified and reinforced the way people thought, felt, believed and behaved.’

For the current paper the term folklore/folktale is understood in the broad sense where it refers to a body of traditional oral narratives that encode information about the moral, social and psychological norms in a society.

**Functions of Folklore**

Dundes (1965: 279-298) discusses four main functions of folklore. The first function of folklore is that it serves as a form of amusement or entertainment. The second consists in the role it plays in validating culture. The third function of folklore is found in the role that it plays in education and the fourth function consists in maintaining the stability of a culture. As to the second function which consists in validating culture, it is, according to Dundes (1965: 292) fulfilled by ‘justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them;' Malinowski (in Dundes, 1965: 292) illustrates this function by saying that myths, for instance, serve as a ‘warrant, a charter, and often even a practical guide’ to magic, ceremony, ritual and social structure. This is, however, not only applicable to myths. It also applies to many other genres of folklore.

As far as the third function is concerned, it is also important in the sense that most folklore is intended for younger generations in order to teach those manners, customs, beliefs, practices, and so forth. As an example, Dundes (1965: 293) says that ogre tales serve the purpose of disciplining young children, and lullabies are sung in order to put them in good humour. Fables and folktales are used to teach general attitudes and principles and to ridicule vices and misbehaviour; proverbs are used as a means to warn them against what is bad and, as Dundes (1965:296) puts it, ‘to warn the dissatisfied or over-ambitious individual to be content with his lot, to accept the world as it is and thus to conform to the accepted patterns.’

Finally, folklore fulfils the function of maintaining the stability of culture in the sense that it operates within a given society to ensure conformity to the accepted cultural norms and continuity from older generations to younger ones through the role it plays in education. the genres of folklore that fulfill this function do so by applying pressure and exercising control over the members of a society with a view to maintaining its culture and disapproving of individuals who attempt to deviate from social conventions. Folklore also fulfils this function by expressing social approval of individuals who conform to social conventions.
Along with these functions that are typically intra-community factors, in today’s multicultural and multilingual world, the folk narratives serve another crucial function, namely that of the inter-community understanding. They are sometimes used as a slice of the culture being studied.

Among the above mentioned functions of folklore, the use of folktales as a mode of ‘reflecting, validating, and maintaining stability in a culture’ is of special interest to cognitive sciences in general and to cognitive linguistics in particular; Cognitive linguistics investigates the internal mechanisms that achieve these goals.

**Social Cognition and Cultural Artifacts**

Cultural groups are held together by a “constant flow of information, most of which is about local transient circumstances and not transmitted much beyond them.” (Sperber and Hirchfeld 2004) Some part of this information, which is more general in nature, is repeatedly transmitted in an explicit or implicit manner and can end up being shared by many or even most members of the group. ‘Culture’ refers to this widely distributed information, its representation in people's minds, and its expressions in their behaviors and interactions. As Watts mentioned (Richard J Watts 1981 )“the principal goal of social sciences is to describe and explain the social use of material objects ….the total network of descriptive systems or codes will constitute the society’s culture and within that culture the material objects can be considered cultural artifacts.”

Noted folklorist Alan Dundes (1971) points out that folklores deal with “traditional notions that a group of people have about the nature of man, of the world, and of man's life in the world….. various underlying assumptions held by members of a given culture. All cultures have underlying assumptions and it is these assumptions or folk ideas which are the building blocks of worldview.” Folklore/folktales constitute an integral part of the flow of information that eventually constitutes the shared cultural knowledge of a people, usually passed on from one generation to another orally. Whether it is entirely oral narrative or, at a later stage, exist in the form of texts, folk narratives render an experience of impersonality on the readers/listeners. It is impersonal in the sense that the stories become an object in themselves, independent of the story-teller; an aspect of communication transform into a thing in itself, a tangible, analyzable and quotable object. From this standpoint, it becomes a cultural artifact, like other cultural symbols. These stories celebrate a tradition and through these live on the cultural symbolism, values and conceptualizations of a community. This cultural symbolism can
be arrived at by delving into the conceptualization pattern at work in the creation of these folktales. There are various processes that create our image of the universe, most salient of them being the processes of categorization, conceptual metaphor and use of schemata. Therefore, an analysis of folktales on these grounds leads us to the worldview of the community in question.

Conceptualization and folktales

Cognitive Linguistics understands meaning as conceptualization, understood broadly as the stuff that mental processing is made of (Langacker 1987: 5); it involves the basic relation between mental content and the experience of the world. The world is not presented to us in a structured way, the organization and structure is imposed upon the myriad inputs by way of various mental functions of categorization, schematization etc. Culture-specific ways of understanding the world refer to the differences in these construal operations. The word cognition and cognitive derive from the Latin ‘cognoscere’, meaning “to know or have knowledge of”. Thus cognition refers to knowing or the knowledge processes. Some of the key cognitive processes are attention, perception, memory, knowledge representation in terms of concepts and categories and schematization, also called cultural conceptualization. Concepts are the ideas we think with, they are the internal, mental representations of the properties of objects and events. The objects and events that embody a concept are called a category. Similarly, schemas are the mental representations of events and objects that the mind stores, derived from our own embodied experience related to people, events and roles etc. different languages of the world reflect different patterns of creating of these schemas. Role schemas have been defined as “knowledge structures that’s people have of specific role positions in cultural group”. This includes knowledge about social roles that denotes sets of behavior that are expected of people in particular social situations. The role schema of a ‘wife’ might differ significantly from one culture to another. The exact nature of these various schema as used by different cultures can be understood by a close analysis of folktale.

That folktales reflect the community's belief and social structure etc is well known. From a cognitive linguistics perspectives, it can be said that the same cognitive mechanisms that are at work for making sense of the world and creating structure on the 'reality' and which are reflected in language structure are also responsible for creating a community specific worldview in folklore. Some of these cognitive mechanisms are the use schema and conceptual metaphors. The main contribution of the
study of the cognitive aspect of discourse to language and culture studies is that discourse does not only proceed at the level of the sentence; there are other structures coming from outside the discourse and supplying global hypotheses about what is going on. Such global knowledge patterns are called "top-down" structures, using a metaphor from computational modeling of language understanding, which is equally true of folktales as discourse. One such structure is the "schemata" and is associated with how socio-culturally shaped knowledge formed by people's personal histories, vicarious experiences, and interests lead them to expect or predict aspects in the interpretation of discourse.

Schemata:

The Zulu tale of ‘Untombi-yaphansi’ narrates the tale of a girl who after having left her home due to unnatural death of her parent(s) goes to a far-off fantasy place where she faces many ordeals. A fantasy creature imbulu takes over her place and she becomes this creature. Her transformation occurs as part of this ordeal and during this time she goes to the river regularly to wash off the outer shell to become her real self momentarily. At one point she is seen by the king and is reincorporated into the society through her marriage to the king and subsequent killing of imbulu. This story tells of the struggle of a girl towards attaining womanhood. What is noticeable in this story is that the role schema of a girl going through the ordeal of leaving behind childhood and becoming a woman of responsibilities lies entirely upon the person involved. The society takes note of her new status, represented here in the episode of the King seeing and marrying her and thus bringing her responsibilities for which she has now proven fit.(Harold Scheub: 2006)

Compare this with a similar tale from Turkey. In the Turkish folktale ‘Sister Sister dear sister’, a young girl and her brother leave home due to the tortures of a wicked stepmother. The journey involves some episodes like the brother becoming a fawn upon drinking water from a spring. But the girl cares for her brother even in that state. Eventually, the king/prince happens to see her and wants to marry her. The description of the girl as humble but rational in her suggestions and caring in her attitude to her brother as a whole is a cue serving to tap a particular schema, namely the knowledge that a female has the role of attending to the needs of a male in the household primarily due to his essential role in procreation. By portraying the girl in this expected role, the narrator assures that listeners identity with her. It activates the knowledge of the authority of the male over the female in matters related to courtship and marriage. Also the importance of a helper figure, typically an old woman, to establish marital relations has been taken care of in the tale. (Deniz Zeyrek:1997).

A notable tale from Guam ‘how the young maidens saved the island of Guam’, relates how Guam came to be narrow in the middle. A giant fish was eating away the land thus narrowing the
island, the young women then wove their hair into a net to catch the creature and keep it from destroying the island. This story underlies the role women play in this society, who not only nurture but also were powerful figures in clan decision making and in community activities. (Monique R. Carriveau Storie and Kenneth L. Carriveau Jr.: 2006)

In the Trobriand Islands, (Campbell, S.F: 2006) people are supremely confident of their own cultural perspectives and they exhibit a talent of weaving western folklore into their own stories, that includes even the story of Jesus. People in this place trace their descent through mother and do not consider the ‘blood’ of the father to contribute to the formation of the child, his role is merely that of a facilitator. The spirit child, who is tired of life underground in the island of Tuma, enters the mother when she bathes in the water off the beach or in tidal creeks. The way Jesus was conceived is not unprecedented in this culture. This is the reason many Troibanders even claim Jesus to a Trobriand Islander. In the Trobriand version of the story, heaven is not in sky but underground, in the island of Tuma.

In each of these cases, the depth of the meaning in the tales will be understood only by situating them in the culture specific ‘Frames’.

**Metaphor:**

The role that narratives play in describing a culture and its worldview can also be fruitfully explored through its use of metaphors. The cognitive approach to metaphor by Lakoff (1987) and Johnson explains how metaphor influences and changes our perception of the world and it can be used to understand the same in a culture and its literature. As Dundes mentioned, folklore is “perhaps the most important source for the articulation and perpetuation of the group’s symbols” and one way to explore the formation of a culture’s reality through language is to look at the role metaphors play in the process.

In a popular legend among the working class segments of Monteros society, a father explains the abstract idea of heaven and hell in terms of concrete realities of daily experience, where the scene of person working in the field with a hoe on his shoulder resembles hell (Brandes, 1980). In the oral tradition of the Beti, Basaa, and Bulu ethnic groups of Cameroon, the orphan is an important stock character and the hero of many tales. The terrible difficulties faced by real-life orphans in Beti, Basaa, and Bulu society are hinted at in the many traditional insults (e.g., "galeux comme un orphelin"), and proverbs (e.g., "si ta mere meurt, puise moins dans le plat") from these groups (Domowitz, 1981). The folktales having the orphan as the protagonist contain elements that are important in helping to explain
certain aspects of the initiation rites typical of these communities. The initiation rites are particularly severe in these societies; and by depicting hardships faced by an orphan in the big bad world, typically after his mother dies, serve as a metaphor for the initiation process at the end of which the triumphant men are welcomed back in the community.

The most notable example of the use of metaphors might be found in the *Panchatantra* which tells its stories through animal protagonists. It is interesting to see that very often in these tales, the traits—bravery, honesty, deceit, and cruelty—are all personified through some or other animal, ostensibly because these factors are actually subject-neutral, as they are present not only in humans. And it is this observation about the nature of particular nature and behavior of these animals in question that help serve as metaphor for the abstract notions, not easy to teach children.

Book 2 of the *Panchatantra* opens with a verse on the *banyan* tree—

*Deer recline in its shade;*  
*birds in multitude gather to roost*  
*darkening its dark-green canopy of leaves*  
*troops of monkeys cling to the trunk;*  
*while hollows hum with insect-throngs,*  
*flowers are boldly kissed by honey-bees;*  
*O! What happiness in every limb showers*  
*on assemblages of various creatures;*  
*Such a tree deserves all praise,*  
*others only burden the earth.* (2: 193)

Needless to say the tree here stands for virtues and values close to the culture in question, the idea clearly rooted in the embodied understanding of the role various flora and fauna play in our lives.

Another such example comes from the ancient tale of “Charyapada”, which perhaps does not strictly fall under the category of folktales, but can still be considered by virtue of being traditional tale created with the aim to disseminate knowledge of the abstract realm with the help of the embodied human experiences. The idea of human life and the sensory inputs we receive through various senses comes alive through the sentence "ka a torubor ponchobi daal...choncholo chie poihe kaal..."(the body is like a tree with five branches…through these time enters the mind).

**Folktales as a resource:**

The folktales of a culture are weaved around the cultural prototypes or schemata. The target audience for these stories, more often than not, being children, these schema are then perpetuated through the stories which are passed on from one generation to another. But the study of folktales need not be restricted to children. In today’s multicultural world, folktales can prove a useful resource in multicultural and integrated approaches to understand a culture and its concepts. They can reflect a
culture as well as offer opportunities for increasing global understanding (Cox and Galda 1990; Hickey 1995; Nelli 1985; Perez-Sable 2005).

However, although a folktale may mirror certain characteristics of the cultural group within which it originated, it must be determined whether those characteristics are specific to a past social context or if they are enduring traits that exist today. Treating a folktale as a cultural resource may unwittingly present unintended or erroneous information mistakenly interpreted as factual information about the present (Kiriazis 1971; Mulroy 1977; Nelli 1985).

Another point to be noted is that as stories that reinforce conformity, folk narratives form a part of the hegemonic social structures that suppress alternative viewpoints, lifestyles and subaltern cultures. Thus the lessons, values and beliefs and behaviors promoted in folktales describe an idealized and stereotypical view of the culture concerned.

To sum up, one can say that the study of folk narratives provide a deep understanding of the human mind and society at work. These narratives, as a genre, have always intrigued the anthropologists, folklorists and social scientists. Today, when interdisciplinary research is the norm and not exception in scientific pursuits, perhaps it is time to have a fresh new look at these timeless narratives from the new perspective of cognitive science. Cognitive science strives to understand the human mind and using the tools and technologies of this field to understand folk narratives would only enrich both the fields of enquiry. This would pave the way for studying folklore from a human cognition perspective (“cognitive folklore”, if one can use to term).

References: