Global Understanding: Prototype for Cross-cultural Narrative Patterns

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Fairy tales serve as a field of exchange between different cultures and for learning 'otherness'. The stories of the Brothers Grimm are also one of the most important works for literary socialization in East Asia (Noguchi 1977, Liang 1986). As folk narrative form, fairy tales appear world-wide. The folk narrative derives from archetypes. It moves in a fictional world without definite locality or definite characters and is filled with the magical elements (Lüthi 2004). In this simplified world we find the prototype of daily life through the conceptual structure of narrative patterns in our mind. In reading them we extend the conceptual structure from the experience-based domains to more abstract domains (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999, Gibbs 1994). Starting from the similarity in subjects and episodes among the folklores from different epochs and cultures, I presume that a common anthropological origin indicates the roots of a universal metaphorical mapping based on basic experience of human life. Taking Grimms' and Chinese traditional fairy tales as example, I investigate the interaction of constructed world in tales with embodied cognition of recipients. A previous empirical study on the cross-cultural literary understanding demonstrates that inference-driven-comprehension is closely related with the existing schemata in the mind of recipients (Zhang 2008). Although the inference-driven-thinking works as a dynamic process, the presented analysis shows knowledge acquisition and meaning formation from the tales build on causal categorization which traces back again to prototype. The analysis comes to the conclusion that character, plot and setting in fairy tales apply to the presumably universal prototype. The results expound, furthermore, why figurative thinking raised by fairy tales is appropriate for cross-cultural understanding and the topic of fairy tales plays an essential role in the current best-selling literary works as well as films.

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