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Propp's functions recognized in the children's perceptions of the fairy tales

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Abstract

Vladimir Propp is a Russian structuralist who explored the Russian folk tales in order to determine the characters who undertook the main roles specified in the fables of the tales. He derived 31 functions of the roles in the Russian tales that were later generalized with other folk tales originating from different parts of the world. The aim of this paper is to explore the pupil's perceptions of Propp's functions in tales without their being exposed to any teacher's impact in that field. The main question posed is whether the pupil's perceptions of the Propp's functions depend on pupils' age and which Propp's functions are most frequently recognized by primary school pupils. 957 pupils of different age groups were included in the research sample. The results were drawn and compared among these different age groups on different tales previously read and discussed.

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1. Introduction

The analysis of the tale in the educational process presupposes previous tale reading on behalf of the pupils so that the tale can be fully experienced. Further on, an analysis of the plot of the tale follows by posing simple questions to the pupils in order to enable them to construct the meaning after the reading. The plot analysis continues further on by navigating the pupils to divide the tale into several parts in order to make a more detailed analysis of its structural elements. Propp's search for the smallest elements of which the tale is constructed in order to classify them and find their relation to one another is what the pupils do in class today, but at an elementary level, in a much shorter period, and with a different objective. The parts into which the tale is divided by the pupils are called logical constituents and every pupil determines them according to his/her own perception of the course of the activity. Basically, these logical constituents correspond to the motifs which, if named with a sentence and then listed as such, would eventually give the plot of the tale.

The naming of the motifs and the construction of extended expressions for them in form of oral or written retelling make the objective realizable i.e. enable the pupils to see the structure of the concrete tale which is the subject of the analysis, to understand the plot at a more intimate level, and to become aware of the logical sequence of the events through which the tale is narrated. The division of the tale into parts has many characteristics common with the recognition of the Propp's functions in the concrete tale which can be the subject of an analysis. When dividing and naming those parts (logical constituents), the pupils use verbs and nouns which in many cases can

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present a description of some of Propp's functions. In Native Language classes in the primary schools in Republic of Macedonia, the analysis of the tale is not conducted with Propp's functions. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to show that there is a real possibility for the above said to be performed. This hypothesis is based on the fact that Propp's functions denote concrete categories which are easy to adopt. In case they are transferred as a class game or used to set a problem situation that will motivate the pupils to a creative action, the interest of the pupils for reading and analysis of the literature texts will increase.

2. Structuralist influences on the analysis of the tale: the significance of Vladimir Propp

In the past, many theoreticians tried to define the tale, to determine it closely, to classify it, to analyze its language. Yet, no one before Vladimir Propp had succeeded to determine the tale composition structure as a whole, i.e. to perceive its skeleton. It is with Vladimir Propp's work that the literature theoretical thought begins shifting from formalism toward structuralism. Propp's aim was to grasp the tale as a structure consisting of indivisible narrative units which, depending on the specific combination and context, function as a whole. In order to create an overall image of Propp's work, it should be stated that there were other theoreticians before and after him who attempted to find the fundamental element that cannot be divided further on and from which the body of the text is constructed. Hence, Tomaszewski (Томашевски, 1972) takes the motifs as the units of the text; Joseph Bédier comes to the term invariant in order to stress the universality of the tales; Alexander Veselovsky (Веселовский, 1940) determines the motif and the plot; Claude Lévi-Strauss (1977) takes the mytheme as an indivisible unit which has no meaning by itself. The mytheme in itself comprises characters which are non-temporal and actions which happen at a definite time.

In the book *Morphology of the Folktale*, while studying the Russian tales, Propp (Проп, 2009) isolates 31 functions that he considers as units indivisible any further. He also speaks of the character category as of a variable. When it comes to a folk tales, the things that do not change are the roles, i.e. the functions that a certain character performs. Thus, the names of the holders of those functions can change, but the actions – cannot. Though, Propp considers the functions worth a study, he introduces the term *circle of activity* which encompasses the characters that perform certain functions. So, he distinguishes: 1. circle of activity of the opponent, 2. circle of activity of the donor, 3. circle of activity of the helper, 4. circle of the activity of the king's daughter, 5. circle of activity of the sender, 6. circle of activity of the hero, 7. circle of activity of the false hero. Three cases follow as possible: a) the circle of the activity completely corresponding to the character, b) one character covering more circles of activity and c) one circle of activity encompassing more characters.

A very short explanation of Propp's functions (Проп, 2009) follows. I. *Absence* – a member of the family goes away from home. It may be some of the elder members of the family going to the forest, or to work, or to war, or even dying. Absence of the younger members can also occur as well such as paying a visit to someone, or going to fish ... (p.51). II. *Interdiction* – the hero is prohibited an activity. For example: *Do not look in that chamber (159), (p.51),...* Opposite form of the interdiction is the order to do something: *to carry the breakfast to the field (133), to take the brother with oneself to the woods (244),...*(52). III. *Violation of interdiction* – the interdiction is violated. This function can stand independently, but it also complements the previous one and together they make a pair. IV. *Reconnaissance* – the antagonist is trying to examine. But, there is an opposite form of the quest in which the antagonist is examined by his/her victim. V. *Delivery* – The antagonist gets information about his/her victim. Or the victim gets the information if she/he is the one who examines. VI. *Trickery* – the antagonist is trying to deceive the victim in order to get something from the victim. VII. *Complicity* – the victim allows the deception and thus becomes *accomplice* of the antagonist. VIII. *Villainy or Lack* – the antagonist does harm to one of the hero's family members (villain abducts a person, the villain seizes or takes away the magic agent, the villain seizes the daylight, the villain causes body injury...). IX. *Mediation* – the harm or the missing of somebody or something is announced, the hero is begged or ordered to depart, i.e. sent somewhere. X. *Beginning counter-action*. XI. *Departure* – the hero leaves his/her home. XII. *Testing - the hero is challenged to prove heroic qualities, The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., This prepares the way for his receiving either a magic agent or helper* i.e. the magic power donor tests the hero. XIII. *Reaction, Hero responds to test*, i.e. the hero reacts to the actions of the future donor... XIV. *Receipt of the magic agent* – the hero acquires or gains magic power or means such as magic animals, objects,

power... The magic means can be made, sold and purchased, gained by chance, earned, consumed, stolen... XV. *The hero is transferred or delivered* – the hero is transferred from one place to another by flying, sailing, horse riding or walking on land, stairs, across a magic pass, etc. XVI. *Struggle* - the hero and the villain face each other in order to fight, to play cards, to compete. In certain cases the struggle can be symbolic. XVII. *Branding, marking* - the hero is branded or marked by the princess in many cases, i.e. gets injured, the wound is dressed, after the struggle he gets a kiss and on that place a mark appears, etc. XVIII. *Victory - The villain is defeated*. XIX. *Initial misfortune or lack is resolved or liquidated* – the hero or the victim gets released from the original misfortunes. XX. *Return* – the hero returns home. Sometimes the returning has characteristics of an escape. XXI. *Pursuit* - the hero is pursued or chased. XXII. *Rescue* – the hero is rescued from pursuit. XXIII. *Unrecognized arrival* - The hero returns home unrecognized, but the returning can be simple, without disguise. XXIV. *Unfounded claims* - A false hero presents unfounded claims. XXV. *Difficult task* - the hero is given a difficult task. XXVI. *Solution* - the task is resolved. XXVII. *Recognition* – the hero is recognized. XXVIII. *Exposure* - The false hero or villain is exposed. XXIX. *Transfiguration* - the hero is given a new appearance. XXX. *Punishment* - the villain is punished. XXXI. *Wedding* - the hero gets married and ascends the throne. In some cases the prize is not a wedding, but some kind of compensation.

3. Methodology of research

A more concrete objective of this research is to answer the following research questions: Can the pupils of primary school recognize Propp's functions in a given tale without previous methodological influence by the teacher? Which Propp's functions can the pupils recognize in this way? What is the influence of the age over the ability to recognize Propp's functions in a given tale? This is the point upon which the hypothetical frame of this paper is set: Main hypothesis: X = The pupils' perception of Propp's functions is possible without prior methodological influence by the teacher; Auxiliary hypotheses: X_{A1} = The type of Propp's functions perceived by the pupils depends on their age; X_{A2} = The number of Propp's functions perceived by the pupils depends on their age. This research is descriptive because it describes the outcome of teaching classes designed for a tale to be analyzed without allowing certain intervention regarding the methodological approach used by the teachers in Republic of Macedonia.

The population examined encompassed pupils of all grades in primary schools in Republic of Macedonia. The sample was decided upon by random choice - 957 pupils from grade III to grade VIII of the eight-year-primary schools and from grade III of the reformed nine-year-primary-schools in Republic of Macedonia out of which 720 from urban environment and 237 from rural environment.[†] The data were collected in the second half of the school year 2008/2009. The pupils were tested twice with the use of two tales. In the first case the tale *The Wolf and the Seven Kids* (Tatar, 2002) was used, and a few months later - the tale *Little Red Riding Hood* (ibid). These tales were selected on purpose as they have similar structure from the aspect of Propp's functions, which makes the results of the two tales comparable. In order to enable a comparison between Propp's functions recognized by the pupils and those recognized by the theoreticians, analysis of the two stories is conducted and given below. The testing was implemented in class in the following way: motivation for reading the tale; tale reading; the teacher asks short questions in order to verify that the pupils have understood the plot; a few pupils retell the tale; individual pupil's work: each pupil divides the tale into logical constituents and names each of them with a title or a narrative sentence; sharing with the other pupils in the class. While being tested the pupils were suggested to divide the tale into as many logical constituents as possible. They were also advised to mark the most significant events that they recognized in the tale and to give them names.

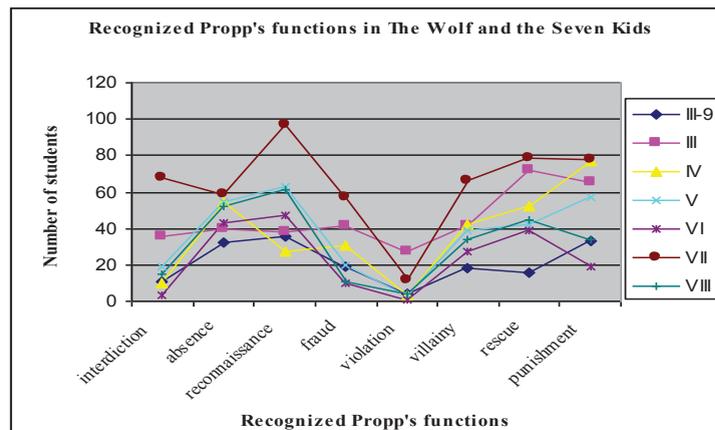
4. Analysis and results

After the collection of the data, an analysis was made of the pupils' test papers. In order to identify and name Propp's functions, the titles given by the pupils to the logical constituents that they had detected were analyzed.

[†] In Republic of Macedonia until 2007 the primary education was eight-years and the pupils were matriculated in 1 grade with fully 6 years. From, 2007, with the reformed primary education which became nine-years, the pupils are matriculating in 1 grade with fully 5 years.

In order to verify the main hypothesis, the two auxiliary hypotheses were examined. For verification of the first auxiliary hypothesis X_{A1} the null hypothesis $X_0 = \text{There is no statistically significant difference between the types of Propp's functions which have been recognized by the pupils in different grades}$ was set. Then we applied the ANOVA test for single factor using the Excel Data Analysis tools on the data obtained with the analysis of the tale *The Wolf and the Seven Kids* and *Little Red Riding Hood*. Because $F(6,49) = 4,27442$, $p = 0,001537$ and $p\text{-value} < 0,05$ the difference is statistically significant for the first tale and $F(6, 49) = 3,596375$, $p = 0,004938$ and $p < 0,05$ which means the difference between the variances of the data categorized in different classes is statistically significant. for the second tale. Hence, we reject the null hypothesis. We hereby turn to accept the auxiliary hypothesis $X_{A1} = \text{The type of Propp's functions perceived by the pupils depends on their age}$.

In the previous analysis of the tale *The Wolf and the Seven Kids*, we selected 14 Propp's functions[‡]: absence, interdiction, violation of interdiction, reconnaissance, delivery, trickery, complicity, villainy or lack, mediation, beginning counter-action, departure, rescue, punishment and wedding (festivity). Out of them only 8 were recognized by the pupils. The conducted descriptive analysis of the collected data has shown the following order of the most frequently recognized Propp's functions: reconnaissance, punishment, rescue, absence, villainy or lack, trickery, interdiction and the violation of interdiction. It is interesting to point out that the least noticed of all functions were interdiction and its pair - violation of interdiction.



Graph 1. Recognized Propp's functions in *The Wolf and the Seven Kids* by the pupils

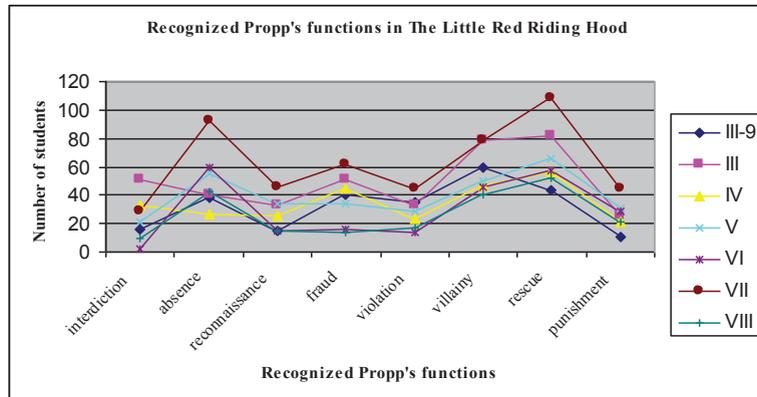
Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the perceived Propp's functions by the pupils in the tale *The Wolf and the Seven Kids*

	Mean	Min.	Max.	Std. Dev.
Interdiction	23,14286	3	68	22,31165
Absence	48	32	59	9,83192
Reconnaissance	52,71429	27	97	23,54226
Fraud	27	10	57	17,17556

[‡] In the tale *The Wolf and the Seven Kids* the following Propp's functions are recognized: 1. *Absence* (the mother goat goes in the forest, which means she digresses from her house.); 2. *Interdiction* (the mother goat warns her kids - not to open the door to strangers, especially not to open it to the wolf and not to talk to him); 3. *Violation of interdiction*; 4. *Reconnaissance* (the wolf tries to get information from the kids), 5. *Delivery* (the kids talk to the wolf), 6. *Trickery* (the wolf sets them a trap.); 7. *Complicity* (the kids are deceived and they open the door); 8. *Villainy or Lack* (because they have opened the door, punishment reaches them: the wolf eats all of them except the youngest one which has hidden in the clock); 9. *Mediation* (the mother goat arrives. The youngest kid tells her what has happened.); 10. *Beginning counter-action* (the mother decides to save her children); 11. *Departure* (the mother goat leaves her house and she finds the wolf in the yard); 12. *Rescue* (the goat rips the wolf's stomach and saves the kids); 13. *Punishment* (the goat fills the wolf's stomach with stones and sews him up. He leans over the well and because of the stone's weight he falls down into the well); 14. *Wedding* (there is no wedding, but a compensation in the form of happiness. The mother once again gets her family gathered together).

Violation	7,71429	1	27	9,19627
Villainy	38,14286	18	66	14,98253
Rescue	49,28571	16	79	21,17950
Punishment	51,85714	19	78	23,34116

We also present the data collected regarding primary school pupils' perception of the types of Propp's functions in the tale *Little Red Riding Hood*.[§] Table 2 with Propp's functions perceived by pupils in the tale *Little Red Riding Hood* lists them from the most frequently perceived to the ones perceived most rarely: rescue, villainy or lack, absence, trickery, reconnaissance and punishment, violation of interdiction and interdiction. In this case, the most rarely noticed functions were *interdiction* and its pair – violation of interdiction.



Graph 2. Recognized Propp's functions in *The Little Red Riding Hood* by the students

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the perceived Propp's functions by the pupils in the tale *Little red Riding Hood*

	Mean	Min.	Max.	Std. Dev.
Interdiction	23,14286	2	51	16,24221
Absence	50,57143	27	92	21,17276
Reconnaissance	26,28571	15	46	12,0791
Fraud	37,42857	14	62	17,66217
Violation	28	14	45	10,84743
Villainy	57,14286	40	79	15,97319
Rescue	66,42857	44	108	21,90782
Punishment	26,28571	11	45	10,56274

In order to verify the second auxiliary hypotheses X_{A2} = The number of Propp's functions perceived by the pupils depends on their age, ANOVA test was applied and the second null hypothesis set – X_0 = There is no statistically

[§] In the tale *Little Red Riding Hood* the following of Propp's functions are recognized according to the theoreticians: 1. *Interdiction* (The mother sends Little Red Riding Hood to take food to the sick grandmother and at the same time she warns her not to talk with the wolf); 2. *Absence* (Little Red Riding Hood leaves the house and goes to her grandmother's); 3. *Violation of interdiction* (Little Red Riding Hood talks to the Wolf); 4. *Reconnaissance* (the Wolf interrogates Little Red Riding Hood); 5. *Delivery* (Little Red Riding Hood gives the inquired information to the Wolf); 6. *Trickery* (the Wolf deceives Little Red Riding Hood into the forest and manages to elicit the information that he needs to get to her grandmother. He goes to her grandmother's, eats her up and lies in her bed pretending to be her); 7. *Complicity* (Little Red Riding Hood is deceived. She enters Grandmother's house); 8. *Villainy or Lack* (the Wolf eats Little Red Riding Hood up); 9. *Mediation* (the Hunter comes. He notices something weird in Grandmother's house); 10. *Beginning counter-action* (the Hunter perceives the whole situation and tries to save the Grandmother); 11. *Departure* (the Hunter gets into the house); 12. *Rescue* (the Hunter saves Little Red Riding Hood and the Grandmother); 13. *Punishment* (the Hunter kills the Wolf); 14. *Wedding* (In the Russian tales analyzed by Propp, the wedding is the most logical end. In any case, some gain has to be achieved. In this case Little Red Riding Hood is taught a lesson).

significant difference among the variances of the string of data provided on the number of recognized Propp's functions per pupils presenting each of the grades. The results are $F_1(6, 720)=10,56721$, $p = 2,91E-11$, and $F_2(6, 733)=7,266472$, $p=1,49E-07$ and $p<0,05$; $F>F$ crit. As p -value ($2,91E-11$ and $1,49E-07$) $<5\%$ and the $F_{1/2}>F$ critical value, it has been concluded that there is a statistically significant difference among the strings of data on the number of recognized Propp's functions by grades. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis *the number of Propp's functions perceived by the pupils depends on their age* is accepted. As the two auxiliary hypotheses have been accepted, the main hypothesis, i.e. *the pupils' perception of Propp's functions is possible without prior methodological influence by the teacher* is accepted.

5. Conclusion

The research has proven that recognizing Propp's functions on behalf of the pupils occurs even without teacher's methodological approach/strategy/tools (pupils recognized 8 of the total of 14 functions). Moreover, the type of perceived functions depends on the age of the pupils. In all of the grades researched functions that were least noticed by pupils were *interdiction* and *violation of interdiction*. We also conclude that pupils most frequently notice those content elements of the tale which contain dramatics, and the elements that they notice least are those referring the cause of the dramatic situation arisen. And those are *interdiction* (the mother's warning of the possible problems in case the interdiction is not obeyed) and the *violation of interdiction* as well i.e. the moment when the hero makes a mistake and experiences harmful consequences. The pupils did not recognize the functions such as *beginning counter-action*, *mediation*, *departure* and *wedding*, i.e. happiness as compensation. The conclusions stated above can serve as a course for further research.

Furthermore, another conclusion has been reached, i.e. that the number of recognized Propp's functions depends on the age of the pupils. The largest number of pupils of III-9 did not recognize any of Propp's functions in the tale *The Wolf and the Seven Kids*, a situation quite unlike to the one with the analysis of *Little Red Riding Hood*.

On the grounds of the above stated, we recommend further researches upon the presupposition that the type of the recognized Propp's functions depends on the type of the tale. In addition, we also recommend taking into consideration the fact that every literature text i.e. every tale arouses certain reader's emotions with the development of the plot. Pupils' recognize Propp's functions in situations in which the teacher has not invested particular methodological influence to develop perception of Propp's functions and this happens mostly as a result of the interest sparked by a part of the text analyzed. For instance, in the tale *The Wolf and the Seven Kids*, functions that were most recognized were *reconnaissance*, *punishment*, and *absence*, whereas in *Little Red Riding Hood* – *rescue*, *harm* and *absence*.

As pupils recognize Propp's functions spontaneously, teachers may be suggested to organize teaching classes in which explanation of the same will be presented to primary school pupils. This strategy is believed to be developing the analytical and synthetic thinking with pupils, and make them more aware of the compositional structure of the tale as a literature genre.

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