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COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF TIME IN ARMENIAN
AND BRITISH FOLKTALES

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Abstract

Introduction: Time is an abstract and intangible phenomenon that human beings primarily comprehend through metaphor and experience. Folktales, as carriers of collective cognitive and cultural knowledge, offer valuable material for exploring the conceptualization of time. The ATU 470 folktale cycle is particularly significant in this respect, as it depicts two contrasting temporal realms: time in the folktale real world and in the otherworld of immortals. *Methods and Materials:* This study applies a cognitive-linguistic, comparative methodology and textual analysis to study time in Armenian and British folktales of the ATU 470 type. *Analysis:* The analysis reveals that time in ATU 470 folktales is rarely expressed through precise chronological markers. Instead, temporal duration is inferred from spatial movement, repeated actions, and environmental change. Journeys to the otherworld are described in spatial terms, allowing listeners to conceptualize time indirectly. Time spent in the otherworld is typically vague, approximate, or illusory, whereas time in the real world is often revealed through striking contrasts after the hero's return. *Results:* The findings demonstrate that temporal vagueness and spatial encoding are narrative devices. Both Armenian and British folktales employ similar cognitive mechanisms to represent time, highlighting shared patterns of human temporal imagination across cultures.

Key words: *ATU 470, other world, folktale real world, conceptualize, uncertainty, time, space.*

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Հուսինե Գ. Մադաթյան

ՀՀ ԳԱԱ հնագիտության և ազգագրության ինստիտուտ

Ռուս-հայկական համալսարան, Երևան, ՀՀ

Ամփոփում

Ներածություն. Ժամանակը վերացական և անշոշափելի երևույթ է, որը մարդը հիմնականում ընկալում է փոխաբերության ու հենքային գիտելիքների միջոցով: Ժողովրդական հեքիաթները՝ որպես հավաքական մտածողության և մշակութային գիտելիքների կրողներ, արժեքավոր նյութ են ժամանակի հայեցակարգավորման ուսումնասիրության համար: ATU 470 թվահամարի ժողովրդական հեքիաթները ուշադրության են արժանի դրանցում պատկերվող երկու հակադիր ժամանակային ոլորտներով՝ ժամանակը հեքիաթի իրական աշխարհում և անմահների այլաշխարհում: Մեթոդներ և նյութեր. Այս ուսումնասիրության մեջ կիրառվում են ճանաչողական-լեզվաբանական, համեմատական մեթոդաբանությունը և տեքստաբանական վերլուծությունը ATU 470 թվահամարի հայկական և բրիտանական ժողովրդական հեքիաթների տարբերակներում պատկերվող ժամանակը ուսումնասիրելու համար: Վերլուծություն. Ուսումնասիրությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ ATU 470 ժողովրդական հեքիաթներում ժամանակը հազվադեպ է արտահայտվում ճշգրիտ ժամանակային ցուցիչներով թե՛ մարդկային աշխարհում, թե՛ այլ աշխարհում: Փոխարենը, ժամանակային տևողության ընկալումը ձևավորում է տարածական տեղափոխությունների, կրկնվող գործողությունների և շրջակա միջավայրի փոփոխությունի հիման վրա: Այլաշխարհի ճանապարհորդությունները նկարագրվում են տարածական տեղափոխություններով, ինչը թույլ է տալիս ունկնդիրներին անուղղակիորեն ընկալել կամ ենթադրել ժամանակը: Այլ աշխարհում անցկացրած ժամանակը սովորաբար անորոշ, մոտավոր կամ պատրանքային է, մինչդեռ իրական աշխարհում ժամանակը հաճախ բացահայտվում է հերոսի վերադարձից հետո ակնհայտ հակադրությունների միջոցով: Արդյունքներ. Արդյունքները ցույց են տալիս, որ ժամանակային անորոշությունը և տարածական եզրույթներով ժամանակի արտահայտումը պատումային հնարներ են: Հայկական և բրիտանական ժողովրդական հեքիաթներում ժամանակը ներկայացնելու նմանատիպ ճանաչողական միջոցները ընդգծում են տարբեր մշակույթներում ժամանակի հետ կապված մտածողություններն ու դատողությունները:

Բանալի բառեր՝ ATU 470, այլ աշխարհ, հեքիաթի իրական աշխարհ, հայեցակարգավորել, անորոշություն, ժամանակ, տարածություն:

Ինչպես հղել՝ Մադաթյան Լ. *Ժամանակի ճանաչողական վերլուծությունը հայկական և բրիտանական ժողովրդական հեքիաթներում*: // ՀՀ ԳԱԱ ՇՀՀ կենտրոնի «Գիտական աշխատություններ»: Գյումրի: 2026: Հ. 1 (29): 180-187 էջեր: DOI:10.52971/18294316-2026.29.1-181

INTRODUCTION: Time awareness is one of humanity's most significant distinguishing traits and, at the same time, one of nature's most enigmatic phenomena. People perceive the presence of time, yet they cannot touch, see, or hear it. Consequently, it is

unsurprising that time has been studied across philosophy, natural sciences, linguistics, and other disciplines. Over the years, scholars have proposed diverse theories, interpretations, and approaches to explain the nature of time.

The elusive character of time largely stems from its apparent detachment from the physical world. It is intangible, yet undeniably present. Although humans have no specific organ for sensing time, they possess a deep, intuitive awareness of its flow, often compared to an internal natural clock [5, p. 51]. Early human conceptions of time were closely linked to observable natural cycles, such as the alternation of day and night or the phases of the Moon, which anchored abstract temporal experiences to concrete spatial and physical phenomena [10, pp. 256-257].

Cognitive linguistics continues this tradition by emphasizing how time is metaphorically structured through spatial concepts. Scholars such as G. Lakoff and M. Johnson argue that people understand time using metaphors of motion and direction, framing it as something that flows or moves through space [11, pp. 127-130]. This close relationship between time and space influences not only individual perception but also cultural representations of time, including those found in myths, rituals, and folktales. In discussing time, people primarily rely on basic cognitive knowledge. Drawing on the experience stored in the cognitive system, humans attribute spatial, object-like, or event-like characteristics to time. Such metaphorical linguistic expressions of time are particularly evident in folktales, which, as orally transmitted narratives, preserve the cognitive and linguistic patterns of entire communities rather than of individual authors.

This study examines the cognitive representation of time in Armenian and British folktales of the ATU 470 type [14, p. 275], focusing on how temporal experience is constructed through narrative structure and linguistic means in the world of immortals and in the real world of folktale. Rather than being measured or chronologically fixed, time in these tales is often perceived indirectly, emerging through movement, spatial relations, repetition, and the reader's or listener's background knowledge. From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, folktales provide a valuable framework for studying how abstract concepts such as time are metaphorically conceptualized, reflecting collective cognitive patterns rather than individual perception.

Moreover, folktales are playful manifestations of ancient, intuitive understandings of life and the world [12, p. 23], making them especially valuable for exploring the interplay between human imagination of time, especially in the two worlds: the otherworld and the real world of the folktale. As a genre, they also serve as cultural mirrors [7, p. 53], revealing both differences and similarities in patterns of thought. The language of folktales, as M. Lüthi notes, presents "a particular image of man and his world" [13, ix]. For these reasons, folktales offer a uniquely advantageous lens for analyzing cognition, and cultural understandings of time.

By analyzing selected Armenian and British variants, this research demonstrates that temporal vagueness and spatial encoding are not narrative deficiencies but essential features of the folktale worldview, particularly in depictions of journeys to the otherworld.

Cognitive Models of Time Perception in Folk Narratives

Folktales of the ATU 470 cycle constitute a particularly fruitful object of cognitive analysis of time, as they depict the coexistence of two distinct realms: the real world of the folktale and the otherworld inhabited by immortals. The study of temporal representation in these narratives is of special interest, since it reveals not only culturally grounded conceptions of time in the human world, but also imaginative reconceptualizations of time as it operates beyond ordinary reality. Through contrasts between mortal and immortal temporalities, these tales offer valuable insight into how time is cognitively structured, experienced, and linguistically encoded within and across worlds.

A notable tale within this cycle is “*The Story of King Eskandar*”. In this tale, the king’s son, unwilling to accept death, sets out on a quest for immortality. The narrative does not specify numerically how long the journey lasts before the protagonist reaches the world of immortals. Instead, the duration of the journey is inferred through spatial expressions. From a cognitive perspective, although temporal length remains imprecise, it is conceptualized through movement in space, since time and space are inherently interconnected and human understanding of time is largely metaphorical, grounded in spatial motion [11, p. 129].

The following passage illustrates how spatial movement functions as a means of conceptualizing time:

Քյնրւ ա քյնրւ ա օվկյանսին դեւ ամնրւ, օվկյանսի վրա ոչ մի պան չկա, ինքը կարաւ չի քյնւ, մնրւ ա դրադիւ նստած մտածիլիս... (He goes and goes until he reaches the ocean. There is nothing over the ocean, and he cannot cross it. So, he sits by the shore, lost in thought...) [3, p. 209]

Although the text does not explicitly indicate how much time has passed, the repetition of the verb *գնալ* (to go) implicitly suggests the passage of a considerable period. Moreover, considering present-day geographical knowledge, namely, that Armenia is a landlocked country, the listener or reader may infer that the protagonist must have traveled a long distance to reach the sea. This spatial distance is cognitively interpreted as an extended duration of time. At the same time, such an interpretation remains debatable, as Armenia’s borders have changed throughout history. As architefts, folktales often allow for multiple layers of interpretation, and depending on the audience’s background knowledge, both temporal vagueness and the implication of a long journey remain equally plausible.

A comparable mode of time depiction is found in British folktales. In “*Oisín in Tír na n-Óg*”, as in Armenian tales, the duration of the journey to the otherworld is not specified numerically. Instead, time is represented indirectly through space. The following passage demonstrates how spatial imagery is employed to conceptualize temporal passage:

Oisín and Niamh held on as the horse guided them back to Tír na n-Óg. He galloped across the waves of the ocean, hardly touching the water at all. Soon the deep green valleys and mountains of Ireland disappeared behind them, and they were surrounded by a thick ocean mist” Irish Fairy Tales, Folk Tales and Fables [9].

Here, the horse carries the heroes across the ocean. Based on general background knowledge, the reader can infer that such a journey would require a significant amount of time, since oceans represent vast spatial expanses. Thus, once again, temporal duration is cognitively derived from spatial movement.

Time depiction in the world of immortals in ATU 470 tales presents another layer of complexity. In “*The Story of King Eskandar*”, the protagonist marries a young woman, and his stay in the otherworld is described as follows:

Կենրւ ա, ապրրւ ա, կյնլիս ա մի չորս-հինգ տարի անց կենրւ, մեռնրւ չի, ջահել էլ կենրւ ա: (He goes and lives, and in that world, he spends about four or five years. He does not die, nor does he age.) [4, p. 210].

The phrase *մի չորս-հինգ տարի* (about four or five years) expresses temporal approximation rather than precision. The indefinite pronoun *մի* combined with the numerals *չորս-հինգ* (four or five) creates a vague and indistinct temporal span, reinforcing the otherworld’s deviation from ordinary temporal norms.

Notably, other Armenian variants of ATU 470 depict the duration spent in the otherworld differently. In “*The Son of the King Does Not Want to Die*” [1, pp. 395–397], the protagonist remains there for only three days, while in other variants the time span is either unspecified or

expressed with uncertainty. In the folktale “Dlo”, for example, the passage of time is conveyed indirectly through expressions such as *թը քրնի տարի գրնցնու* (how many years passed) or through opposing adverbs like *շատ* (much) and *քիչ* (little), often connected by the conjunction *թե* (or). These linguistic choices generate both approximation and vagueness:

...թը քրնի տարի գրնցնու, կուղէ-գիւնէ, քրնի կէրթա գծեկնու, քրնի կէրթա՝ կայեղնու, շատ կմնու թը քիչ... (...how many years has passed, he eats and drinks; with every passing moment he grows younger; more renewed he becomes; much or little passes) [3, p. 52]

A similar strategy of temporal indeterminacy appears in “Lo Tlo’s Tale”, where the time spent in the otherworld is not specified at all. The narrative describes the protagonist bathing in a spring, becoming young again, and then going hunting every day. Only later, during one of these hunting episodes, does he remember his father’s land and decide to return. Here, time is conveyed solely through repeated actions, which do not provide a concrete sense of duration. As a result, the temporal dimension remains diffuse, reinforcing the timeless and fluid nature of the otherworld typical of ATU 470 narratives.

Similarly, in British tales, the time spent in the otherworld is not always specified, and when it is mentioned, it can vary. For instance, in the tale “Oisín in Tír na n-Óg”, the amount of time spent in the otherworld is not explicitly stated:

Oisín settled well in Tír na n-Óg. The people were always happy and friendly towards him. Niamh was very kind to him as well, but as time went by, he began to miss Ireland [9].

Here, *time went by* conveys the passage of time without giving an exact duration. In some British folktales, especially those involving fairies, the time spent in the fairy world is often illusory. This illusion of time is a storytelling device that creates vagueness, leaving the reader or listener uncertain about the true duration. A similar example is the tale “A Visit to Fairyland”, where the protagonist spends seven years with the fairies, yet it seems *a dream of the night*:

When he thought he had been a twelvemonth there, he began to wish to see the strong men again, his brothers... [6]

Interestingly, while the period of time in the otherworld is often unspecified in ATU 470 tales, the time elapsed in the real world is sometimes indicated, either before or after the protagonist’s return. In “The Story of King Eskandar”, the protagonist learns that 500 years have passed before he returns home:

Միտքը թերվրս ա էտ տղեն՝ էտ Ըսկանդար թաքալորը, որ քննն իրան հոր երգիրը, հաւա հինգհարիւր տարի անց ա կըցել, հոր երգիրը որդի՞ ա (Then, King Eskandar decides to visit his father’s land, where five hundred years have passed, where is his father’s country) [4, p. 210].

This precision about the time in real-world is likely a deliberate storytelling device meant to surprise listeners and maintain engagement. The expression *hor yergiry vordi a* (where is his father’s country) can also be read as a spatial conceptualization of time, emphasizing the long passage rather than the location itself. Similarly, in “Lo Tlo’s Tale”, the protagonist is warned that a thousand years have passed in his homeland while he was away:

Տըրն՝ ս՛էհա, նեա խազար պարին կա, տու իկիր էս, քը խոր քաղաք ավեր, ս՛էհա: (Tlo, it is already thousand years that you have come, your father’s town has been destroyed, stay) [2, 235]

In other tales, heroes learn about the passage of time only after returning. In “The Son of the King Does Not Want to Die”, the protagonist discovers that three thousand years have passed:

Տըեղ կընիս ըն ինգուս, վըեր էտ տղան անմահներեն երգիրունն ա իլալ, իրեք հազար տարեն իրեք օրու տեղ ա անց կացել: (Then they guess that the boy has been in the world of immortals) [1, p. 397]

Before the exact time is revealed, readers can infer a long passage from changes of the surrounding world. For example, the transformation of tangible objects in the homeland serves as a narrative device to indicate the passage of time:

Քյիտում ա տրեւնում կրտսը ցրսարած, տրեղը մենակ քարերը մնացած: Ետնան էլ էշում ա, տրեւնում էն պեցիւր ծառը կա վրէջ, հղէ յա ինում, քյիտում հսնում իրան երգյիրը, տրսնում հորը պալատեն տրեղը կյութանը քցած, վար ըն անում: (He goes and sees that the river has dried up, leaving only the stones behind. Then he looks ahead and sees that the tall tree is no longer there. He continues on and eventually reaches his homeland, where he sees that in the place of his father's palace people are ploughing) [1, p. 396]

These changes, the dried-up river, the missing tree, and the vanished palace, emphasize the significant duration that has passed, reflecting a cyclical perception of time.

Similarly, when Oisín returns in “*Oisín in Tír na n-Óg*”, he finds everything changed, including his parents’ house. Only afterward, the passage of 300 years is explicitly stated:

The saddle on the horse broke and Oisín fell to the ground. Suddenly, all the weight of the 300 years fell on his shoulders. In an instant, Oisín was transformed from a great warrior into a feeble old man [9].

On the contrary, in “*A Visit to Fairyland*”, the protagonist’s time in the fairy world is specified to be seven years, but the descriptions suggest the passage of more than seven. This reinforces the illusionary nature of time in the otherworld:

He then turned his face homeward, but when he reached there all was changed: his parents were dead, his brothers and sisters could not recognize him, and his sweetheart was married to another. At the thought of such changes he broke his heart, and died in less than a week after his return [6].

Likewise, in “*Usheen’s Return to Ireland*”, the protagonist believes he spent twelve months in the otherworld, but upon returning, it is clear that more than twelve months have elapsed:

And when he went back to his old place, there was nothing left of the house but broken walls, and they were covered with moss; and all his friends and brothers were dead, with the length of time that had passed [8, p. 257].

In these examples, the passage of time is often presented without exact markers, using the changes like *the broken walls covered with moss* and character loss as narrative devices. The illusory time of the otherworld, combined with tangible changes in the real world, allows storytellers to highlight both the fantastical experience and the profound passage of time, reflecting a cyclical perception of time in folktales of these two nations.

C O N C L U S I O N: The analysis of Armenian and British folktales of the ATU 470 cycle shows that these narratives offer a particularly revealing space for observing how time is conceptualized within human imagination. In these tales, temporal experience is not presented as a fixed or measurable entity but emerges through spatial movement, repeated actions, and changes in the surrounding world. This narrative strategy allows listeners and readers to infer the passage of time by relying on background knowledge and cognitive expectations rather than explicit temporal markers.

The coexistence of the real world and the otherworld plays a crucial role in shaping this imaginative understanding of time. While time in the otherworld is often vague, approximate, or even illusory, the return to the folktale real world is marked by striking contrasts, such as decay, absence, and irreversible change. These contrasts encourage reflection on mortality, continuity, and loss, highlighting how differently time may be perceived across imagined realms.

The comparison of Armenian and British material demonstrates that, despite cultural differences, similar narrative techniques are used to convey temporal experience. This suggests that the ATU 470 cycle provides a shared imaginative framework in which time is reinterpreted,

stretched, or suspended, offering insight into how human cultures explore the concept of time through storytelling and mythic imagination.

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