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File name:	6176_Simon_Arsa_Manggala_The_Roles_of_Humans_and_Ani…
File size:	291.57K
Page count:	9
Word count:	4,150
Character count:	22,326
Submission date:	17-Oct-2023 03:09PM (UTC+0700)
Submission ID:	2198447879

The Roles of Humans and Animals in Selected Southeast Asian Folktales

Simon Arsa Manggala,
English Letters Department, Universitas Sanata Dharma
Yogyakarta
simonarsa@usd.ac.id

ABSTRACT

In folktales, the main characters are often animals. Choosing animals as the characters could attract children as the tales' target readers. They are strategically selected as the plots' point of departure. The depiction of animals should be chosen carefully. Children would find the stories easy to follow if they could find the characters in their surroundings. This paper aims to rigorously examine the linguistic choices employed in some folktales from Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Timor Leste, and Vietnam in portraying animals. The folktales are titled *The Mighty Babau, The Clever Mousedeer, The Dog and The Hunter,* and *Heaven's Uncle Toad*. The stories are chosen as the object since animals are prominently mentioned in the stories. Even they appeared in the titles. This paper intends to answer how humans and animals are linguistically depicted. The folktales are analyzed by the thematic structure of the clauses. The analysis centers the discussion on the selection of the verbs, their arguments, and the thematic roles assigned to the arguments. Hypothetically, thematically, the animals in the folktales are assigned significant roles as the Agents. They are the ones doing actions and performing the verbs. On the other hand, human characters are not always depicted as Agents. This paper argues that the thematic structure and roles assigned to animals and humans in the folktales imply their close relationship.

Keywords : Animals, Folktales, Thematic Structure, Thematic Roles

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to reveal how humans and animals in selected folktales are depicted linguistically. The aim is motivated by the close distance between tales and humans, the common appearance of animals in the tales, and the feasibility of linguistically examining humans and animals in stories. Previous studies and evidence from texts will support the elaboration in this section. The purpose is to show that human and animal characters in the selected folktales are assigned specific roles and related.

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INTRODUCTION

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The discussion also intends to show that the topic relates to everyday life and discussion.

Stories are inseparable from humans' life. Humans even create stories when thinking (Gottschall, 2012). The stories help humans construct their ideas, eventually contributing to human civilization. They can capture life's good and bad aspects (Anderson, 1999). Another research can show that stories can affect humans and society. It mentions that people in Southern Madagascar believe a story noting that a species of tortoise, the radiated tortoise is dirty and sacred (Lingard, Raharison, Rabakonandrianina, Rakotoarisoa, & Elmqvist, 2003). It proves that tales, stories, and narratives are so close to people, and people can hand down teachings and stories by telling stories. The feasibility of preserving the culture by telling stories results in the utilization of stories, tales, and narratives in pedagogical settings like what has been conducted by Small (2019) in employing folktales as a tool to teach theater. Those studies prove that stories can affect humans' life and lives. However, the relationship between human and stories is not one-directional, rather, it is mutual.

Nature and society can affect stories and tales as well. The relationship between humans' culture and stories is mutual. Research by Preston & Harcourt (2009) argues that the extinction of animals can affect traditions and people's attitudes towards animals. The research was conducted in Native American tribes. They also believe that preserving the customs or culture demands the conservation of the animals. Therefore, studying folktales is important. The animals' appearance in folktales also indicates humans' observation of their surroundings. "Animals of all kinds feature in rituals, legends, and folktales throughout world culture reflecting the curiosity humans have always had about other species with which they share the earth" (Pickering, 1999, p. 10). By studying folktales, we can get some picture of the society, conserve the nature, and preserve the culture at the same time.

Animals in folktales are very common, and they have special roles in folktales. Specifically, a research by Kane (2015) successfully makes a systematic list of bird names that appear in folklores from native speakers of Emberá in Darién, Panamá. In delivering moral messages, the famous Aesop's fables and many other folktales from many cultures employ animals, as the characters of the fables are commonly animals. Many species appear in the fables, and they are assigned important roles. Mousedeer appears prominently in Indonesian folktales like in *The Mousedeer Becomes a Judge* (Conger, Romulo, Suyenaga, & Toth, 2019). In the tale, the mousedeer serves as the judge solving the problems. Birds also appear in stories. In a Sarawak folktale (Munan, 2017), a bird character, *Pong* Kapong, had an important role in setting the blooming of trees in the jungle. The other animals were in trouble when they Pong Kapongs were missing since no trees bloomed and produced fruits. A bird character also appears in many Japanese folktales. One is in *The Tongue-cut Sparrow* (Sato

& Sato, 2022). In the tale, the sparrow is depicted to be supernatural. It helped the human characters even though humans treated the bird badly. At the end of the story, the human character got punished for the cruel deeds. In another folktale titled *Ampak and the Cunning Civet Cat* (Bunanta, 2011), a civet cat appeared as a smart and tricky character. The civet cat is similar to the cat character in *Puss in Boots.* The cat helped the human characters to get a wife. As mentioned earlier, those stories are just examples to show animals' appearances in folktales, and they serve various roles in relation to the human characters. There are abundant stories mentioning animals. Their appearance indicates that humans and animals are connected to one another in many cultures.

Studies on similar topics have highlighted animals and humans in folktales. Linog (2022) explores the roles of animal characters in Maranao folktales. The animals are told to be cooperative and supportive to human characters. They appear when they are needed. They also possess supernatural power and use the power to help humans. The research employed new criticism and textual analysis of the folktales. Zubieta (2016) conducted research in south-central Africa to examine the symbolic meanings of specific animals in rock paintings and a ceremony. The researcher gets involved in the ceremony and combines the experience and the ethnographical data to draw a conclusion. The human-animal relationship is seen in a phase during the ceremony in which the initiate symbolically transforms into an animal. Another research conducted by Pierotti (2016) also indicates the human-animal relationship. He observes the roles of wolves and other animals in Numic peoples. They consider the wolf as the creator figure. The Numic people relate their communal living model to the wolves'. Sault (2020) examines stories from Mexico, Costa Rica, and Peru to observe the appearance of birds in the stories. In the stories, birds may give humans instruction, advice, warning, and guidance. The stories containing the roles of the birds are told from generation to generation. Those previous research share similar interests in inspecting animals and humans in particular cultures.

This present research share similarity dan differences with the previously mentioned studies. It is also interested in seeking the roles of humans and animals in stories. By researching folktales from Southeast Asia, the present research may enrich the discussion of folktale studies from the region. It takes folktales from Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Timor Leste, and Vietnam. Those countries are located in the Southeast Asian area, near the Philippines, where the Maranao people and culture are studied by Linog (2022). Other previously mentioned research has covered stories and cultures from different parts of the globe, namely South-central Africa (Zubieta, 2016), North America (Pierotti, 2016), Latin America (Sault, 2020), Central America (Kane, 2015), and South Madagascar (Lingard, Raharison, Rabakonandrianina, Rakotoarisoa, & Elmqvist, 2003). This present research is also different in terms of the approach. It employs

linguistic analysis to describe and analyze the data. None of the previous research scrutinized the data by using linguistic analysis. Most of them took the ethnographic perspective.

This present research shares a similar methodology with some other linguistic research. This current research shares a similar linguistic analysis in examining the thematic structure of texts with Isti'anah (2019). She analyzes the thematic structure of newspaper headlines to find the representation of the Rohingya issue. The thematic structure follows the notions from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Alvin (2015) also applies SFL's thematic structure analysis to examine research articles. He argues that research articles share a similar thematic structure. This present research does not employ the thematic analysis proposed by Systemic Functional Linguistics. Still, it analyzes the argument structure and thematic roles assignment like what has been conducted by Kang & Morita (2014) and Pradianti & Nur (2017). They explore the arguments of the verbs in the objects based on their thematic roles. Kang & Morita (2014) conducted the research in a classroom setting, taking the texts produced by college students. Pradianti & Nur (2017) also took translated texts as the objects. This present research takes folktales in a non-classroom setting. It considers the object as a product of social discourse. This current research also does not stop at describing the thematic role assignment. It intends to reveal the relationship between humans and animals as represented by the thematic role assignment. In other words, this present research tries to describe the style of the text and the effects evoked by the use of the style.

Since this present research describes the linguistic styles of the objects and figures out the effects, it belongs to the scope of stylistics analysis. This aligns with the key concept of stylistics that analyzes the language forms, the purpose, and the effects (Verdonk, 2002). The objects of this present research are also suitable for stylistic analysis. Stylistics can cover the study of literary works (Toolan, 2013; Simpson, 1993).

METHODS

In this part, the objects of the research and the procedures will be introduced and elaborated. As the objects of the research, the folktales' synopses are presented, and the working theoretical framework is explained along with the procedure and steps. This present research's stories are taken from a book titled *Telling Tales from Southeast Asia and Korea: Teacher's Guide* (Asia Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, 2010). Many folktales are contained in the collection, but this paper took four of them. The stories chosen as the objects of this research are classified under the subtitle *Folktales about animals.* Thus, animal characters are expected to appear in the stories.

The first story is *The Mighty Babau* (TMB) from Brunei Darussalam. The story has three characters: the villagers, the tiger, and a buffalo named

Babau. It is about the struggle of villagers to catch the tiger. What the villagers did was set a trap and use Babau as bait. Babau was used as the bait since it is a big animal and may look appetizing to the tiger. In addition, the villagers thought Babau had low intelligence and would not attack the tiger. Knowing being used as bait, Babau played dead and attacked the tiger. The villagers then changed their evaluation of Babau.

The second story is titled *The Clever Mouse Deer* (TCMD). This folktale is from Malay. There are three animal characters: the buffalo, crocodile, and mouse deer. There is no human character in the story. It is about the mouse deer who helped the buffalo set free from the crocodile. The crocodile was once trapped. A big log was on its back. The buffalo help the crocodile move the log, but the crocodile bites one of the buffalo's legs. The mouse deer passed by and saw the scene. The buffalo told what had happened to the mousedeer. The mouse deer understood but pretended not to believe the story. It asked the buffalo and the crocodile to repeat the scenes. The crocodile released the bite, and the buffalo put the log back on the crocodile's back. Then, the crocodile realized it was not grateful for what the buffalo had done to it. Later, the mouse deer asked the buffalo to help the crocodile again.

The third story is from Timor Leste. It is titled *The Dog and The Hunter* (TDTH). The characters are one deer, one dog, and a hunter. One day, the hunter and the dog hunt in the woods. The dog chased a deer into the woods, and the hunter followed the dog's track. The dog struggled to get the deer down. Once, the deer asked for help from the hunter, but the hunter ignored it. Finally, the dog succeeded in getting the deer. The hunter and the dog eat the meat, and the dog asks the hunter why the hunter did not help catch the deer. The dog protested, but the hunter remained silent and ignored the dog. He just gave the dog the deer's bone and hid. The dog protested again. This time, the hunter realized that what he did was not appropriate. Since then, dogs have never protested again but have kept loyal to humans.

The fourth story is a legend about why toads croaked. The title of the story is *Heaven's Uncle Toad* (HUT) from Vietnam. The characters are manly animals. They are the toad, bear, bees, crab, tiger, and fox. The non-animal character is only the King of Heaven. The story begins with the drought on earth. The group of animals initiated to go to heaven, asking for rain. The King of Heaven once sent many obstacles to the group of animals to prevent them from entering heaven. However, the animals could overcome the obstacle. They could defeat the animals, and the god Thunder sent them to fight them. Eventually, the animals met the king of heaven. The toad expressed the problems to the king and asked for rain for the earth. The king granted the toad's wish and told the toad that it did not have to go to heaven when asking for rain. The toad just needed to croak.

This present research was conducted in four steps. The first step is the data gathering process. The data for this research is the clauses containing

human and animal characters. The clauses are numbered for the ease of indexing and counting. The result of the first step is the list of clauses containing animal and human characters from all the stories. The second step is the syntactic analysis of the clauses. This step was done to determine the arguments of the predicates. The result of this step is the argument structure of the clauses. It is important since not all phrases in the clauses are arguments. "The argument structure of the verb determines which elements of the sentence are obligatory" (Haegeman, 1994, p. 44). In other words, only the elements needed by the predicates to complete the meaning were taken as the arguments. In the third step, the arguments were analyzed semantically in relation to the predicates to find the thematic structures. In this step, the thematic roles are assigned. The thematic structures were limited to what were mentioned by Haegeman (1994), namely: Agent/actor, patient, theme, experiencer, benefactive/beneficiary, goal, source, and location. The result of the third step was the clauses with the assigned thematic roles to the arguments. By the third step, the syntactic and semantic analysis had been done. The last step is the interpretation. The interpretation was done by gathering the animal and human characters and the thematic roles.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the first step, the total clauses from all the folktales are 152 clauses. there are 28 clauses containing human and animals from TMB, 50 clauses from TCMD, 37 clauses from TDTH, and 37 also from HUT. The second story, TCMD does not contain any human character. From the 27 clauses in TMB, 14 have animals as one of the arguments in each clause, 11 have humans as the arguments, and three clauses have both humans and animals as the arguments. All clauses in TCMD have animal arguments. In TDTH, there are 17 clauses having animal arguments, 17 clauses have human arguments, and five clauses have both human and animal arguments. The last story, HUT, 18 clauses mention animals as the one of the arguments in each clause, 8 clauses mention human arguments, and 10 clauses mention both human and animals. The numbers and the comparison of the distribution of the human-animal arguments dan be seen in table 1. From the number of the clauses and the distribution, animal is prominently dominant in the folktales. It supports the classification of the book that they are grouped into folktales about animals. Another interpretation from the distribution is that animals are foregrounded in the folktales. The readers would pay attention to what they act in the narratives. The analysis proceeds with the argument structure of the clauses.

Table 1
The number of human and animal arguments in each folktale

	TMB	TCMD	TDTH	HUT	*Total*
Animal	14	49	17	18	*98*
Human	11	0	17	8	*36*
Human – animal	3	0	5	10	*18*
Total	*28*	*49*	*39*	*36*	*152*

The discussion on the theta assignment of the arguments should start from the clauses containing both the animal and human as the arguments. In those clauses, the relationship between the two characters can be seen clearly. The number of those clauses are also not many. This small occurrence does not indicate the unimportant or irrelevant findings about human-animal relationship. Otherwise, they should mark the connection between human and animals. The interpretation should consider that the folktales are grouped as folktales about animals. The clauses containing human and animal arguments should be treated as special occurrences.

From the analysis, the dominant relationship between human and animals is shown by the clauses containing human and animal arguments. The human arguments are usually assigned as the actors or experiencers while the animals are either the themes or the patients. From excerpt 1, the villagers represent the human argument and Babau is the animal arguments. The villagers experience uncertainty about Babau. While in excerpt 2, the human argument is represented by the pronoun they. It is a special case, in that the pronoun refers to both human and animal. The deer, for sure, represents animal.

Excerpt 1: The next morning the villagers^{EXPERIECER} were not sure how to treat Babau^{PATIENT}

Excerpt 2: When they^{ACTOR} found a deer^{THEME},

The animals are assigned like humas most of the time when they do not appear together with human in a clause. They are assigned as actor and experiencer. The assignments indicate that they can act, behave, and feel as if they are human. This finding is very prominent in TDTH where the dog can act and talk like human. Even, the dog can protest and express what *he* feels toward the human characters. As exemplified in excerpt 3, the dog can speak like human beings. Further in excerpt 4, the dog performs other activities just like human, by the predicate *ate.*

Excerpt 3: In the old days, dogs^{ACTOR} spoke like human beings

Excerpt 4: The dog^{ACT} ate what its master gave it

Human characters are depicted mostly as actor and experiencer. This highlights human physical and cognitive abilities. Being actors indicates human characters' performance in physical abilities, and being experiencer

indicates the emotional and cognitive abilities. However, those abilities and skills become not special to humans in this research since animals are also assigned as actors and experiencer also.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion shows that the folktales foreground animals as the central characters in the folktales. However, humans are still positioned as central arguments whenever they appear together in a clause with animal. Humans are depicted more powerful than animals since they are assigned as the actors or the experiencers, while animals are portrayed as either the theme or patients. The analysis also shows that the methodology needs to be elaborated more with more perspective from various linguistic angles, for examples: the theme-rheme structure, the transitivity analysis, or other syntactic and semantic approaches. Thus, the findings of this research may serve as a preliminary study for future research.

As a final remarks, the analysis on folktales to observe and examine animals is worth-doing to preserve the culture and nature. The cultural preservation is done by bringing the folktales into academic discussion. While doing so, the mentioning of the animals can raise awareness of the importance and the existence of the animals as part of the ecosystem. It can also keep the natural resources accessible for future generations to discuss. Without cultural exposure, future generations might not have the opportunity to imagine their natural surroundings. Therefore, the analysis and the discussion will be prospective to be conducted by taking more perspective and by embracing more fields and academic disciplines.

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