

## **The Alternation of Past and Present Tenses in Slovenian and Russian Wonder Tales and its Structural Pattern-Forming Role in the Narrative<sup>1</sup>**

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The folktale is an orally transmitted and maintained text/construct dealing with a greatly removed fantastical past that is not connected with any specific historical epoch. One would expect it to be narrated in past tense, because obviously it relates events that are anterior to the time of their telling. And for an English speaker, this assumption is confirmed. Third-person narrative portions of English-language tales, excluding dialogues and editorial comments are, generally speaking, uniformly in past tense.<sup>2</sup> But as I demonstrate in this article, contrary to this common-sense view, in Slovenian and Russian folktales third-person verbs are arranged in complex patterns of alternating past and present forms. In fact, Slovenian tales recorded in the nineteenth century generally have about three-fourths of their predicates in present tense and only one-fourth in past tense. A reverse situation is found in Russian tales collected at the same time. Narrative portions of Russian wonder tales have three-fourths of their predicates in past tense and one-fourth of their predicates in present tense. This article is the first to address tense alternation in Slavic oral narratives. I will describe the distribution of tenses in Slovenian and Russian wonder tales and suggest a narratological, pattern-forming role for the phenomenon of such tense alternation, relating this role to Vladimir Propp's functions of wonder tales.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am very thankful to Dr. Monika Krojež, Dr. Michael Biggins, and Dr. Barbara Henry for generously giving of their time and expertise in commenting on drafts of this article.

<sup>2</sup> A number of collections confirm this statement; for example, by Katharine M. Briggs and Ruth L. Tongue (1986), or by Herbert Halpert and J.D.A. Widdowson, or even English-language Native American versions of English folktales, such as "The Toad-Son," in Richard Dorson's collection (1952).

<sup>3</sup> To prevent possible confusion with the historical present, I point out that there is a distinction between this well-known phenomenon and the tense alternation I describe in this article. Both oral and written English may describe past events using the device of historical present. A joke, for example, is a common oral form narrated fully in present tense, "A panda walks into a bar..." In literature, one of the better known examples is Dickens's *Bleak House*, where the third person narration is in historical present while the heroine tells her story in past tense. Historical present is a pattern of consistent use of present tense relating past events for relatively large units of text. It is very much unlike tense alternation, where every fourth predicate may be in present tense embedded in a matrix of past tense or, as is the case with Slovenian tales, vice versa.

An example of tense alternation is a mid-text excerpt from a Slovenian tale “Olje mladosti” (The oil of youth) below. In it, events are described that take place after two treacherous older brothers have stolen the oil of youth from their little brother and thrown him into a deep hole. The easy mixing of tenses, identified by my superscripts, is clearly evident. Also evident is the predominance of present tense in the narrative (the predicates are indicated with a superscript identification of their tenses). A single tense switch stands out: it consists of just two predicates in past tense (in bold), embedded in the present tense matrix.

Sinova mu z oljem mladosti namažeta<sup>present</sup> oči in starček spregleda<sup>present</sup> ter se pomladi<sup>present</sup>. Ostane<sup>present</sup> pa mož beseda in da<sup>present</sup> polovico premoženja najstarejšemu sinu, drugo polovico pa izroči<sup>present</sup> drugemu sinu.

Najmlajši sin pa **je priletel**<sup>past</sup> nepoškodovan na dno globokega usahlega studenca in milo **jokal**<sup>past</sup>. Kmalu nato pridejo<sup>present</sup> mimo studenca popotni ljudje, zaslišijo<sup>present</sup> njegove klice in ga rešijo<sup>present</sup>. On se pa preobleče<sup>present</sup> v raztrgane beraške cunje ter se napoti<sup>present</sup> peš proti hiši svojega očeta. (Brenkova 1970: 206)

(The two sons spread the oil of youth onto their father's eyes, and the old man could see again and turned young. He kept his word and gave half of his property to the oldest son, and the other half—to the second son.

But the youngest son fell unharmed onto the bottom of the deep dried-up waterhole and was crying pitifully there. Pretty soon after that, there walked by the waterhole some wanderers; they heard his cries and rescued him. He then changed into some torn rags of a beggar and started on foot to his father's house.)<sup>4</sup>

In choosing to translate the Slovenian passage above as past tense and to ignore tense alternations that are unacceptable in written English, I follow most translators. For example, the beginning passage of a Russian folktale “Dvoe iz sumy” (Two out of the sack), below, quickly moves into cycling of tenses as indicated by my superscripts, and, in contrast to the Slovenian passage above, it is present tense (in bold) that is embedded in the matrix of predominant past tense. There is a single tense switch consisting of three predicates in present tense and one instance of present tense of *govorit* 'says', which I consider to be a special case, as I describe later in the article. This pattern of tense alternation is ignored in its classical, if stodgy, translation by Norbert Guterman, which is entirely in past tense:

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<sup>4</sup> All translations, unless stated otherwise, are mine—V.M.

Zhil <sup>past</sup> starik so starukhoi. Vot starukha na starika vsega **branitsia**, <sup>present</sup> chto ni den'—to pomelom, to rogachom **otvalivaet** <sup>present</sup> ego; stariku ot starukhi zhit'ia vovse **net**. <sup>omitted</sup>  
<sup>present of byr'</sup> I poshel <sup>past</sup> on v pole, vzial <sup>past</sup> s soboi tenety i **postanovil** <sup>past</sup> ikh. I poimal <sup>past</sup> on zhuravlia i **govorit** <sup>present</sup> emu: "Bud' mne synom! Ia tebia otnesu svoei starukhe, avos' ona ne budet teper' na menia vorchat'." (Afnas'ev 1957: 32)

(Once there was an old man who lived with his wife. The wife constantly abused her husband; not a day passed on which she did not beat him with a broomstick or oven fork; he had no peace with her at all! He went into the field with some traps and set them. He caught a crane and said to him: "Be like a son to me! I will take you to my home and perhaps she won't scold me so much." [Guterman 1945: 321])

I became aware of the phenomenon of tense alternation through translating passages from Slovenian and Russian folktales for my research. I find that I have to convert tenses of the originals to uniform past tense for the texts to sound natural in English. Curiously, until my translation efforts, I was not at all aware of tense alternation in Slovenian and Russian tales when I listened to them, read them, or even, as a storyteller in my native Russian, narrated them and used this device of narration myself. Listening to other Russian folktale narrators and reading transcripts of oral narratives in Slovenian and Russian, I see that tense alternation is a very stable constitutive part of those tales. I conclude that such a well-preserved and maintained feature must play an important role in the folktale.

To understand how tense alternation functions in the folktale, this article first describes tense alternation in Slovenian and Russian folktales in some detail. To describe the phenomenon, I employ simple descriptive statistics on the frequencies of past and present tense instances in two small systematically selected samples of Slovenian and Russian oral narratives. I focus on the wonder tale subset of folktales. Wonder tales are stories that contain magical objects, magical transformations, travel to the land of the dead to obtain those magical objects, and are classified as Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) Types 300–749 in the International Index of Tale Types (Uther 2004). For this study, I have used fifteen Slovenian tales from a number of collections and editions and ten Russian tales from Afanas'ev's collection. I first describe how I have selected and analyzed the texts and then present and discuss the results. I will then offer my hypothesis of tense alternation as a structural element in orally delivered wonder tales.

To ensure representation over as wide as possible a variety of wonder tales, ten Russian tales have been selected for the statistical sample from the published list of AT types (the version of the system preceding the

current ATU system) in Afanas'ev's collection (vol. 3: 464–80). The Russian tales selected are the first and then every tenth tale on the list. In a similar fashion, ten Slovenian folktales have been systematically selected by picking every seventh tale from the list of tales (*kazalo*) of two collections, *Slovenske ljudske pripovedi* (Slovenian folktales), edited by Kristina Brenkova (1970: 237–39), and *Slovenske narodne pravljice* (Slovenian folktales of magic), edited by Alojzij Bolhar (1974: 205–206). Only wonder tales generated by that list have been retained; animal tales, clever answer tales, legends, etc. have been omitted. In addition, five Slovenian wonder tales have been selected as a random match to Russian tales (by pulling ATU numbers from the Russian set of folktales out of a hat) for comparison with Russian tales of those ATU types specifically.

Only narrative components of the tales have been analyzed. Editorial comments, formulas, and direct speech have been excluded. The number of predicates in past tense and the number of predicates in present tense have been counted for each tale. The total number is calculated as a sum of past and present tense instances in each tale. In addition, only predicates in simple sentences or in independent clauses of compound sentences have been counted, with dependent clauses omitted. Because parataxis, which is a stylistic technique that favors short simple sentences without subordinate clauses, is characteristic of Russian folktales, the latter condition is easily met for Russian tales. Slovenian texts tend to contain more dependent clauses; as a result, slightly more material has been omitted in the counts for Slovenian tales.

Results for Slovenian tales were initially surprising. Out of the ten systematically selected Slovenian tales, seven are based on present-tense narrative, with predicates in present tense ranging from 62% to 95%. The mean total, including the outliers that run counter to the trend, is about 71% (table 1). The entire Russian-matched sample of Slovenian wonder tales has the same trend, with predicates in present tense ranging from 62% to 90%, remarkably for the same mean total about 71% (table 2). With both sets combined, the grand mean in Slovenian tales for present tense is 71.3% (SD=21.3).

Because of these initially unexpected results, I have reexamined my sample to make sure that the present-tense matrix is not an artifact of stylistic editing. Because the fifteen tales in the sample have been collected by twelve different collectors over the span of almost three-quarters of a century, the present-tense matrix is not likely to be an editing artifact. Moreover, one of the collectors in my sample, Matija Valjavec, who recorded “Zlata ptica” (The golden bird), is known to be the founder of a method for phonetically accurate recording of tales, a method he applied in publishing his collected material from 1848 to 1885 and which greatly influenced other collectors of the time (Kropej 1995: 17). While accuracy in

phonetic recording of dialects is not exactly the same as accuracy in recording verb tenses, the tradition of respecting details of a narrative makes it much less likely that subsequent alterations of grammatical forms would take place.

Table 1. Frequency of present tense in the narrative portion of ten systematically selected Slovenian folktales

Tale	Predicates: total number	Past tense	Present tense	Percent present tense
“Sirotici” (The orphans [Brenkova 1970: 43])	128	12	116	91%
“Začarani mladenič” (The enchanted youth [Brenkova 1970: 48])	99	94	5	95%
“Začarani grad in medved” (The enchanted castle and the bear [Brenkova 1970: 74])	92	71	21	(23%)
“S kačo se je oženil” (He married a snake [Brenkova 1970: 127])	50	43	7	86%
“Olje mladosti” (The oil of youth [Brenkova 1970: 202])	137	39	98	72%
“Zlata ptica” (Golden bird [Bolhar 1974: 5])	268	101	167	62%
“Zdravilno jabolko” (The apple of health), [Bolhar 1974: 18]	111	53	58	[52%]
“Železni prstan” (The iron ring [Bolhar 1974: 26])	207	14	193	93%
“O treh bratih in o treh hčerah” (A tale of three brothers and three daughters [Bolhar 1974: 56])	131	76	55	(42%)
“O dvanajstih bratih in sestrah” (A tale of twelve brothers and sisters [Bolhar 1974: 89])	134	7	127	95%
<b>Mean 71.1%(SD=25.5)</b>				
The mean without the three tales countering the trend (indicated by (..) and [..]) is 84.9% (SD=13.0).				

Table 2. Frequency of present tense in the narrative portion of five Slovenian folktales randomly selected to match ATU numbers of Russian folktales

AT type in Afanas'ev edition	Slovenian Tales to Match Russian Tales—Title and Collection ( <b>in bold is an additional tale, ATU number for which was not found as a match in Bolhar and Brenkova</b> )	Predicates: total number	Past tense	Present tense	Percent present tense
300-1	“Stekleni most” (The glass bridge [Bolhar 1974: 67])	67	21	46	69%
307	<b>“Strah v cerkvi” (Haunting in the church [Drekonja, 1932: 49])</b>	92	9	83	90%
400	“Jug in pastorek”(South Wind and a stepson [Bolhar 1974: 190])	105	40	65	62%
480	“Vila prijateljica in meseci prijatelji” (The fairy friend and the twelve months friends [Brenkova 1970: 161])	75	20	55	73%
675	“Zlata ribica” (The little golden fish [Bolhar 1974: 63])	64	23	41	64%
					<b>Mean: 71.6% (SD=11.1)</b>

In contrast to Slovenian tales, which I conclude indeed greatly favor present tense, Russian tales, not surprisingly, have only slightly over 25% of predicates in present tense, with the range of distribution spanning from 14% to 43%. Table 3 presents results of the counts for individual Russian folktales related to overall percentages.

Table 3. Frequency of present and past tense in the narrative component of ten systematically sampled Russian folktales from Afanas'ev's collection<sup>5</sup>

AT type	Text number and title in Afanas'ev	Predicates: total number	Past tense	Present tense	Percent present tense
300-1	#162, "Khrustal'naia gora" (Crystal mountain)	87	64	23	26
307	#364, "Ivan-kupecheskii syn otchityvaet tsarevnu" (Ivan-the merchant's son holds vigil over a dead princess)	139	103	36	26
325	#24, "Khitraia nauka" (Tricky craft)	165	128	37	22
400	#157, "Koshchei Bessmertnyi" (Koschey the Deathless)	407	298	109	27
430	#277, "Soplivyi kozel" (Snotty goat)	77	44	33	43
480	#95, "Morozko" (Morozko)	151	130	21	14
513B	#144, "Letuchii korabl'" (Flying ship)	177	151	26	15
564	#187, "Dvoe iz sumy" (Two out of the sack)	144	87	57	40
675	#167, "Po shchuch'emu velen'iu" (By the pike's will)	165	122	43	26
725	#240, "Veshchii son" (Prophetic dream)	244	209	35	14
					<b>Mean: 25.3% (SD=9.5)</b>

Aside from having a quarter of its predicates in another tense, the pattern of tense distribution is stable in folktales as well. Usually folktales are framed by past tense. Among Slovenian tales, however, out of the fifteen analyzed (perhaps not surprisingly, considering the prevalence of present tense in Slovenian material), five tales end with their narrative in present tense. For example, as the excerpt below shows, the tale "Stekleni most" (The glass bridge) ends with the king's guard discovering the

<sup>5</sup> References are to folktales as numbered in this and other collections.

branded hero; I preserve the present tense in my translation to stress this feature.

“Ko mu pogledajo na čelo, najdejo <sup>present</sup> na njem kraljičin pečat. Ročno mora <sup>present</sup> z njimi v kraljevi grad in čez nekaj dni ga kronajo <sup>present</sup> za kralja.” (Bolhar 1974: 68)

(When they look at his forehead, they find on it the imprint of the princess's seal. They take him by the hand, and he has to go with them to the king's castle, and in a few days, they crown him their king.)

Two Slovenian tales begin with present tense. For example, “Zlata ribica” (The little golden fish) starts with, “Neka mačeha nažene<sup>present</sup> svojega bedastega pastorka z rešetom po vode” (One stepmother sends her stupid stepson to get some water in a sieve [Bolhar 1974: 63]). There are no Slovenian tales, however, that both end and begin with present tense. In contrast, all the Russian tales in the sample are perfectly framed: they start with past tense, even if it is a single predicate as in the case of “Dvoe iz sumy” (Two out of the sack [Afanas'ev, vol. 2: 132]), and end in past tense as well. The data on lack of framing in some Slovenian tales are summarized in table 4.

Tense alternation in folktales is not a uniquely Slovenian or Russian phenomenon. In spite of its apparent absence in English, there is evidence from other languages that folktales generally exhibit that characteristic. For example, my overall mean result for Russian tales is identical to that obtained by Chrystalla Thoma, who has used a similar statistical approach and who has demonstrated, based on her corpus of more than three hundred tales, that in the Greek Cypriot folktale, 25% of the predicates are in present tense (Thoma 2004: 195). There is also evidence for tense alternation from current translations of folktales originally collected in the early 1900s in the country of Georgia. Apparently a decision to preserve tense alternation in their English versions has been made by a pair of translators from the Georgian language into English in a recently published collection. For example, my calculations show that 22% of predicates are in present tense in their translation of the folktale “The Hunter,” which I randomly selected from their volume (Kurtsikidze and Chikovani 2008: 316–21). I suspect that tense alternation in folktales is a universal phenomenon that English lost under the influence of written culture. I have come to this conclusion by considering possible functional aspects of tense alternation.



Table 4. Incidence of present tense narrative as the ending or beginning of a Slovenian tale in the sample

Tale	Present tense ending	Present tense beginning
“Začarani mladenič” (The enchanted youth [Brenkova 1970: 48])	X	
“O treh bratih in o treh hčerah” (A tale of three brothers and three daughters [Bolhar 1974: 56])	X	
“O dvanajstih bratih in sestrah” (A tale of twelve brothers and sisters [Bolhar 1974: 89])	X	
“Stekleni most” (The glass bridge [Bolhar 1974: 67])	X	
“Strah v cerkvi,” (Haunting in the church [Drekonja 1932: 49])	X	
“Vila prijateljica in meseci prijatelji” (The fairy friend and the twelve months friends Brenkova 1970: 161])		X
“Zlata ribica” (The little golden fish [Bolhar 1974: 63])		X

One distinct feature of the folktale is that it always presents its story in a strict chronological order. Viktor Shklovskii defines the *siuzhet* of a story as the plot and the *fabula* as the actual chronological sequence on which the plot is based (1965). Applying his definition, we can say that the *siuzhet* and the *fabula* of the wonder tale are congruent with each other. Once the folktale is identified by its listener during the initial moments of narration as the genre, the competent listener starts expecting this congruence. From that moment on, grammatical tense becomes irrelevant for determining what comes first and what comes next. Grammatical forms of tenses therefore are freed to perform other functions. Considering how stable and how well preserved tense alternation is in folktales, it must have an important function or functions.

As common and well preserved as tense alternation is in the folktale, practically no research on folktales and their third-person narratives has been devoted to this phenomenon. There is a single article by Dick Leith (1995) addressing the question of the role of tense alternation in the English-language folktale. Thoma, who describes the phenomenon in her doctoral dissertation on Greek Cypriot tales, does not address the question of its function, but focuses instead on issues of translating the tales into English (2004: 231–59). There is, however, a body of literature on tense alternation with instances recorded and analyzed by linguists in transcripts of people’s first person oral narratives, for example, a story of a car accident by somebody unfortunate enough to get into one (Wolfson 1979; Shiffrin 1981). Other texts analyzed from the point of view of tense alternation are first-person oral narratives represented in literature as direct

speech (Belyavsky-Frank 1991). And finally, there is Catherine Chvany's (1984) analysis of the function of tense and tense aspect and its patterns in Russian short stories and one literary fairy-tale. Based on these types of texts, two basic hypotheses have been proposed to explain the phenomenon of tense alternation—the dramatic and the structural.

The dramatic explanation is the most intuitive and the most popular. Writing about first-person oral narratives, Nessa Wolfson counts at least twelve authors according to whom the function of present tense in past tense texts is to make the account vivid, immediate, and dramatic—to theatricalize it. According to her, there is a flaw in such an attribution because the feature “is seen as both cause and effect, since narratives are said to contain [present tense] if they are animated and also to derive this quality from its presence” (1979: 169). My objections to the dramatic hypothesis are based on other features of the folktale because, in contrast to Wolfson, I do not necessarily see it as impossible for a narrator warming up to a tale to get more and more animated in the process of storytelling.

This, in fact, is an argument advanced by Leith, the only researcher who has explored present tense in third-person oral narrations in folktales. Writing about a Scottish folktale told in English, he sees present tense frequencies as a function of the narrator's “gradual ‘breakthrough to performance’” (1995: 53). In fact, Leith has published a transcript of a tale with many instances of what could be identified as tense alternation in the narrative (1995: 73–77). Overwhelmingly, however, those instances are of a single verb, “says,” when introducing direct speech—hardly an emotionally charged predicate. (I will return to the special case of “says” later in the article, after the discussion of structural functions of tense alternation in general.)

Another researcher resorting to the “drama and interest” explanation for the present tense instances in narratives is Masha Belyavski-Frank (1991: 117). She appears to be the one and only researcher who addresses the issue of tense alternation in Slavic-language narratives. Her focus is the first-person narrative in literature, such as, for example, in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1991: 118). She deals with directly represented narratives—with direct speech, when a character tells a first-person story, and never with narrative passages in the author's voice. Belyavsky-Frank uses cinematic metaphors to explain the functional significance of tense alternation, which she calls the historical present: “It is as though the narrator is alternately using a close-up and telephoto lens, historical present (or perfective non-past) giving a sudden, finely detailed immediacy to the narrative expressed by the unmarked past” (1991: 117).

Both Leith and Belyavski-Frank assign absolute dramatic qualities to present tense against the background of the “undramatic” past tense. The case of tense alternation in Slovenian folktales, with the predominance of

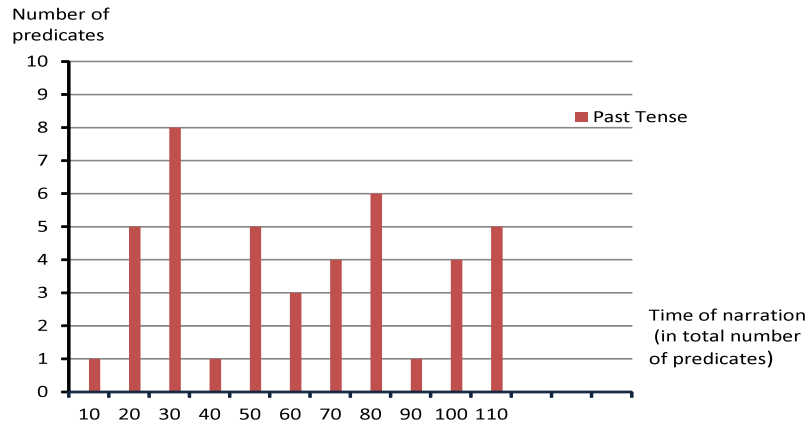
present tense, would seem to undermine this assumption. The predominance of present tense, however, does not necessarily disprove the dramatic explanation, as Catherine Chvany's analysis shows. Even though she herself talks about "the use of 'dramatic *present*' for close-up effect in Slavic literary narrative" (1994: 261) and "the dramatic 'close-up' *presents*," without which "[o]ne gets a non-poetic, less dramatic version" (1994: 262) of a story, she actually argues for the importance of the switch itself, rather than assigning an absolute meaning to a particular verb tense (my italics—V.M.). Chvany approaches texts from the point of view of information theory, whereby "an element unexpected in a particular context is more informative than an expected one" (1994: 262). She also points out that "statistical frequency is crucial to contextual markedness, for it creates the expectations that determine the relative informativeness of a sign in use" (1994: 262).

This "contextual markedness" is what explains the seemingly baffling case of the Slovenian tales narrated predominantly in present tense. In Slovenian, present tense becomes the ground against which the now marked past tense stands out in full relief. This view also explains a certain complementarity of distribution of the frequencies of tenses in Russian versus Slovenian folktales. In other words, if in Russian, present tense is the contextually marked tense, and in Slovenian, past tense is the contextually marked tense, then both languages have similar frequencies of the contextually marked tenses: 28% in Slovenian and 25% in Russian. The slightly higher Slovenian mean is probably explained by two factors: 1) an apparently independent tendency to frame Slovenian tales in the past tense, even though the basic narrative matrix uses present tense as its default value, as well as the 2) the inclusion in the sample of a group of tales, probably of literary origins, that employ a past-tense matrix, such as "Začarani grad in medved" (The enchanted castle and the bear), which is obviously based on the "Beauty and the Beast."

The "contextual markedness," however, does not prove that tense alternation is exclusively dramatic by its nature, as Chvany's conclusions would lead one to believe. Undoubtedly, depending on the narrator's style of performance, there can be a dramatic element to tense alternation. I argue, however, against the *primarily* dramatic explanation for the phenomenon in oral artistic narratives. If tense alternation were an exclusively dramatic device in folktales, as offered by Leith's "breakthrough to performance" explanation, we would consistently see long passages in the unmarked tense in the beginning of a tale with increasing frequency of marked tense instances followed by a stable dwelling in the marked tense in the climatic portion of the story. Instead, both Slovenian and Russian tales have a comparable occurrence of predicates in the marked tense in short segments of typically two verbs, as I observe. The distribution

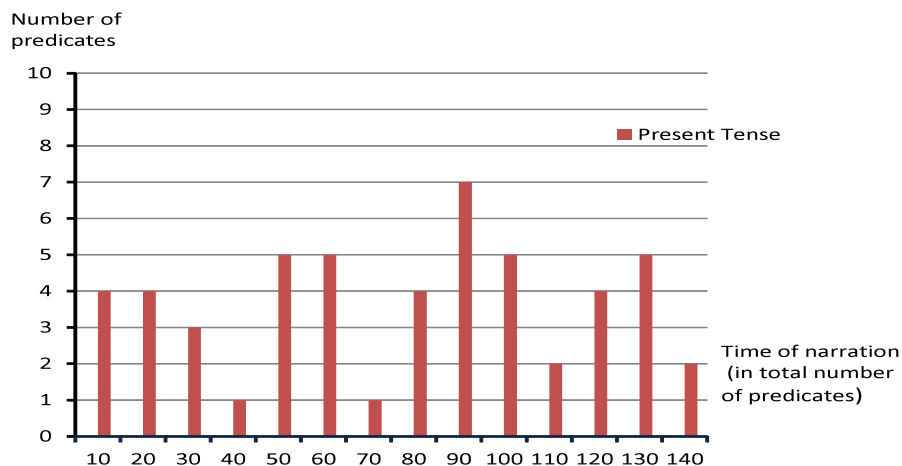
can be graphically represented as the number of marked-tense predicates over the total number of predicates laid out on a time scale measured in ten-predicate increments (figures 1 and 2), representing two randomly chosen tales, a Slovenian and a Russian one.

Fig. 1. Past tense distribution in the Slovenian tale “Jug in pastorek” (South Wind and a stepson [Bolhar 1974: 190])



From the patterns of marked tense distribution in the third-person narratives of Slovenian and Russian folktales, it is clear that the dramatic explanation does not fully account for the formal qualities of tense alternation. To explain this phenomenon in folktales, I will advance an argument similar to Wolfson and Shiffrin’s argument concerning oral first-person narratives. Writing about the function of present tense in English speakers’ oral personal narratives, such as descriptions of car accidents, and following a line of reasoning similar to Chvany’s line of reasoning concerning literary narratives, Wolfson takes a position that it is not the present tense per se, but the *switch* from past tense that is significant (1979: 172). Importantly, however, according to Wolfson, the contrast afforded by tense alternation has the function of narrative organization, separating events from one another rather than dramatizing the narrative (1979: 172). Shiffrin agrees with Wolfson but also adds an evaluative function in addition to the separating one—only the critical parts of the narrative, those particularly relevant to the plot rather than those expressing the emotional state of the narrator, are introduced with a tense switch (1981: 45).

Fig. 2. Present tense distribution in the Russian tale “Dvoe iz sumy” (Two out of the sack [Afanas’ev, #187])



In the rest of this article, I will establish a connection between tense alternation and the structure of the folktale by demonstrating a close narratological relationship between them in my sample of Slovenian and Russian tales. For that, I employ the well-tested tool developed by Vladimir Propp; his thirty-one functions of the magical folktale describe the underlying structure of any piece belonging to the genre (1998: 25–51). My hypothesis is as follows: If Wolfson and Shiffrin’s conclusions concerning the structural significance of the switch in conversational narratives are applicable to the oral artistic form of the folktale, a correlation would occur between changes of tense and the sequential introduction of Propp new functions in a story.

Examining my sample of folktales from that point of view, I see a considerable trend that confirms the hypothesis. Most tense switches “co-localize” with a new function in the tale. A tense switch does not often occur independently of a function, with the notable exception of verbs introducing direct speech, such as “says,” “asks,” and “tells.” But even when those verbs of speech are included in the counts, my general observation for both Slovenian and Russian tales is that usually the number of tense switches is equal or smaller than the number of Propp functions in each tale. That means that not all functions are marked by a tense switch, which would accord with Shiffrin’s observation about the selective nature of tense alternation.

Among the Slovenian tales, my observations are based on the following data: The initial switch from the framing past tense takes place at

the moment of the introduction of a new function in ten out of thirteen Slovenian tales that start with past tense. For example, in “Siroťici” (The orphans), the switch (preserved here in the translation below) occurs after a relatively long exposition describing a widower who has remarried a mean woman who mistreats and schemes against her stepchildren.

Črnila je<sup>past</sup> pastorka in pastorko pri možu in mu naposled zapovedala, <sup>past</sup> naj ju spravi od hiše, ako ne, da pojde ona od doma. Mož **posluša**<sup>present</sup> bolj ženo ko lastno očetovsko srce in nekega dne **vzame**<sup>present</sup> sirotici ter ju **pelje**<sup>present</sup> v gozd. (Brenkova 1970: 43–44)

(She slandered her stepson and stepdaughter to her husband and finally told him that he should turn them out of the house, otherwise, she herself would leave home. The husband listens to his wife more than to his own heart of the father, and one day takes the two little orphans and drives them to a forest.)

The passage continues in present tense to establish the present tense matrix characteristic of Slovenian tales. Each subsequent tense switch, however, is a full switch: to past tense and then back to present tense. In the entire sample, it is the initial function that is introduced by the initial tense switch in eight out of the thirteen tales, with the mode of position #5 for the predicate switching from past tense to present tense. Only one tale, “Zlata ptica” (Golden bird), does not have a perfect correspondence between a function and the initial switch, with the switch occurring late, when the inconsequential middle son goes to perform a task (Bolhar 1974: 5). These data are presented in greater detail in table 5.

Table 5. Initial switch to present tense and its correspondence to a Propp function in Slovenian wonder tales

Text	First switch to present tense predicate position	Function	Correlation
“Sirotici” (The orphans [Brenkova 1970: 43])	#10 <i>posluša</i> 'hears'	IX-B <sup>5</sup> (Banishment from home)	Initial function
“Začarani mladenič” (The enchanted youth [Brenkova 1970: 48])	#5 <i>opravlja (delo)</i> 'does'	<i>i</i>	No (still in exposition)
“Začarani grad in medved” (The enchanted castle and the bear [Brenkova 1970: 74])	#5 <i>de</i> 'says'	VIII-a <sup>3</sup> (Lack of magical object)	Already not initial function
“S kako se je oženil” (He married a snake [Brenkova 1970: 127])	#3 <i>se dogovorita</i> 'the two of them agree'	IX-B <sup>3</sup> (Leaving home)	Already not initial function
“Olje mladosti” (The oil of youth [Brenkova 1970: 202])	#5 <i>pokliče</i> 'calls'	VIII-a <sup>2</sup> (Lack of remedy)	Initial function
“Zlata ptica” (Golden bird [Bolhar 1974: 5])	#20 <i>gre</i> 'goes'		No (the switch occurs after the initial function and before the next one)
“Zdravilno jabolko” (The apple of health [Bolhar 1974: 18])	#3 <i>zboli</i> 'falls ill'	<i>i</i>	No (still in exposition)
“Železni prstan” (The iron ring [Bolhar 1974: 26])	#5 <i>stopi</i> 'enters'	IX-B <sup>3</sup> (Leaving home)	Initial function
“O treh bratih in o treh hčerah” (A tale of three brothers and three daughters [Bolhar 1974: 56])	#5 <i>umrje</i> 'dies'	I-e <sup>2</sup> (Absentation)	Initial function
“O dvanajstih bratih in sestrah” (A tale of twelve brothers and sisters [Bolhar 1974: 89])	#3 <i>reče</i> 'says'	VIII-a <sup>1</sup> (Lack of bride)	Initial function
“Stekleni most” (The glass bridge [Bolhar 1974: 67])	#6 <i>zboli</i> 'falls ill'	XII-Д <sup>3</sup> (Testing by Donor)	Initial function
“Strah v cerkvi” (Haunting in the church [Drekona 1932: 49])	#6 <i>pride (vrsta)</i> 'his turn comes'	IX-B <sup>1</sup> (Dispatching of hero)	Initial function
“Jug in pastorek” (South Wind and a stepson [Bolhar 1974: 190])	#2 <i>reče</i> 'says'	IX-B <sup>5</sup> (Banishment from home)	Initial function
“Vila prijateljica in meseci prijatelji” (The fairy friend and the twelve months friends [Brenkova 1970: 161])	N/A-starts with present tense	N/A	N/A
“Zlata ribica” (The little golden fish [Bolhar 1974: 63])	N/A-starts with present tense	N/A	N/A

An analysis of the full text of a short tale “Stekleni most” (The glass bridge) in the Slovenian sample illustrates the point about selective marking of certain of Propp functions by a tense switch. As is evident from table 6, there are eleven Propp functions in it (including a triplicated *Hero Enters a Competition* function) and five instances of tense alternation. The pattern of tense alternation distribution creates a certain rhythm and almost symmetry of marked and unmarked introductions of Propp’s new functions. The sequence of functions is “MuuMMMuuMuu,” where “M” stands for the marked tense and “u” stands for the unmarked tense, past and present, correspondingly.

Table 6. Identification of Propp functions and their correlation with tense alternation in the Slovenian tale “Stekleni most” (The glass bridge [Bolhar 1974: 67–68])

Excerpts from the Slovenian original with tense alternation	Translation of the excerpts	Propp functions for the entire tale (those associated with a tense switch are in bold)
<p>Živel<sup>past</sup> je nekdanj oče, ki je imel tri sinove, dva sta bila<sup>past</sup> pametna, tretji pa je bil<sup>past</sup> podpečnik. Ta je namreč vedno sedel<sup>past</sup> v podpečku, zato so ga sploh tako imenovali. Oče zbolil<sup>present</sup> na smrt. Pokličel<sup>present</sup> svoje tri sinove ter jim reče<sup>present</sup>:</p> <p>»Po dediščino si pa morate priti tretji večer na moj grob. Prvi večer naj pride starejši, drugi večer stednji, tretji večer pa najmlajši!«</p> <p>...</p> <p>Pred mostom je bilo<sup>past</sup> zbrano že veliko imenitne gospode in veliko hrabrih junakov je že poizkusilo<sup>past</sup> svojo srečo, a nobeden ni zmagal<sup>past</sup>, vsak se je s konjem povaljal<sup>past</sup> po mostu. Konj našega vojaka pa je skočil<sup>past</sup> kvišku in kakor bi trenil, je bil<sup>past</sup> na drugi</p>	<p>Once upon a time there lived a father and his three sons. Two were smart, but the third one was a stove boy. That is to say, he always sat under the stove, and that is why they called him that. The father took deathly ill. He called his three sons and said to them, “For your inheritance you have to come on the third night (sic!) to my grave. The oldest son on the first night, the middle son on the second night, and the youngest son on the third night.”</p> <p>...</p> <p>In front of the bridge, there had already gathered a lot of noblemen, and a lot of brave youths had already tried their luck, but none could win; each fell with his horse off the bridge. But the horse of our soldier jumped up and in the blink of an eye was on the other side; and swift as lightning, he disappeared again, and</p>	<p>Exposition—<i>i</i> (all in past tense)</p> <p><b>XII-Д<sup>3</sup>-Testing by a dying donor</b></p> <p>XIII-Γ<sup>3</sup>-Hero serves the dead one XIV-Z<sup>2</sup>-Hero receives magical objects</p> <p><b>1. XVI-Б<sup>2</sup>-Hero enters a competition</b></p>



<p>strani, in kakor blisk je spet izginil<sup>past</sup>, da nihče ni vedel, kam.</p> <p>Zdaj kralj ni vedel<sup>past</sup>, kdo je dobil stavo. Zato dá<sup>present</sup> spet razglasiti, da kdor preskoči most, dobi, kar je že obljubil.</p> <p>...</p> <p>Hitro odjezdi<sup>present</sup> k mostu. Tudi zdaj je dobil<sup>past</sup> stavo on, medtem ko nihče drug ni mogel čez. Spet je izginil<sup>past</sup>, da kralj ni vedel, kdo je dobil stavo. Zato dá<sup>present</sup> še enkrat razglasiti, kdo more preskočiti most.</p> <p>...</p> <p>Vsi so poizkusili<sup>past</sup>, a nihče ni mogel<sup>past</sup> čez. Ko pa je poizkusil Podpečnik, je bil<sup>past</sup> kakor blisk na drugi strani mosta. Nato je hotel<sup>past</sup> brž pobegniti, pa pristopi<sup>present</sup> kraljična in mu pritisne<sup>present</sup> na čelo svoj kraljevski pečat...</p> <p>...</p> <p>Ti res pogledajo<sup>present</sup> vsakega mladeniča na čelo, a noben ni imel<sup>past</sup> pečata.</p> <p>...</p>	<p>nobody knew where to.</p> <p>Then the king did not know who won the bet. So he had it announced again that the one who jumps over the bridge will get what he had already promised.</p> <p>...</p> <p>Quickly he rode off to the bridge. That time too he won the prize when nobody else could. And again he disappeared, so that the king did not know who had won the bet. So once again he had it announced to whoever could jump over the bridge.</p> <p>...</p> <p>Everyone tried, but nobody could do it. But when Stoveboy tried, he was on the other side of the bridge like a flash of lightning. At that point he was about to run away, but the princess came up to him and pressed her royal seal onto his forehead...</p> <p>...</p> <p>They actually looked at every young man's forehead, but none carried the seal.</p> <p>...</p>	<p><b>2. XVI-B<sup>2</sup>-Hero enters a competition</b></p> <p><b>3. XVI-B<sup>2</sup>-Hero enters a competition</b></p> <p>XVII-K<sup>1</sup>—Hero is branded XX-↓—Hero returns home unrecognized</p> <p><b>XXIV—False heroes come forth</b></p> <p>XXVII—Hero is recognized XXXI—Hero marries and becomes the ruler</p>
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Before I proceed to discussion of the reasons for such patterns, I will demonstrate more evidence for correspondence between tense alternation and Propp functions coming from the sample of Russian tales. As mentioned above, all the Russian tales open with an introductory passage in past tense. Each such passage sets the scene that corresponds well to the exposition, *i* phase, of Propp's morphological scheme (1998: 23). Sometimes the past tense introductory passage is extremely short; for example, Afanas'ev's "Dvoe iz sumy" (Two out of the sack), quoted at the

beginning of this paper, starts with a very laconic, one-predicate-long statement that once upon a time there lived an old man and an old woman, “Zhil starik so starukhoi” (Afanas’ev, vol. 2: 132). I identify the second predicate in the present tense in the phrase about the man being constantly scolded by his wife, “Vot starukha na starika vseгда branitsia,” as the introducer of the Propp function VIII-*a*., “Odnomu iz chlenov sem’i chego-libo ne khvataet, emu khochetsia imet’ chto-libo” (One member of the family feels a lack of something, he/she wants something [1998: 30]).” The unhappy man obviously lacks his wife’s love and responds to this situation by setting a trap for a crane.

In this fashion and as with the Slovenian sample, every initial tense switch to present tense in the sample of Russian folktales has been analyzed in its relation to Propp functions. In seven out of ten tales, the initial tense switch corresponds to the initial Propp function of the tale (table 7). Moreover, with a single exception, even if the initial tense switch does not correlate to an *initial* Propp function of the tale, it corresponds to one of the *subsequent* Propp functions.

In terms of relative proportions of the number of Propp functions to the number of intervening marked tense passages in a tale, Russian tales have a pattern similar to Slovenian tales—usually the number of functions is equal to or greater than the number of tense switches. For example, “Khrustal’naia gora” (Crystal mountain), which is very similar to the Slovenian “Stekleni most” (The glass bridge) and which has the following structure, according to Propp’s own analysis and designation of functions:

↑   Д<sup>6</sup>   Γ<sup>6</sup>   Z   R<sup>5</sup>   A<sup>1</sup>   C   ↑   Л<sup>1</sup>   ↓   C\*

(Propp 1998: front cover table insert)

shows that eleven intervening present tense segments correspond to the eleven Propp functions in it. Similar to Slovenian tales, however, in most Russian tales the number of functions is greater than the number of intervening marked tense instances, for example, fourteen functions and ten present tense switches are found in the tale “Morozko” (Father Frost [Afanas’ev, vol. 1: 140–43]).

Table 7. Initial switch to the present tense and its correspondence to the initial Propp function in Russian wonder tales

Text number and title in Afanas'ev	First switch to present tense verb	Function	Correlation
#162 "Khrustal'naia gora" (Crystal mountain)	#3 <i>govoriat</i> 'speak'	XI-↑ (Departure)	Yes
#364 "Ivan-kupecheskii syn otchityvaet tsarevnu" (Ivan- the merchant's son holds vigil over a dead princess)	#8 <i>idet</i> 'goes'	XIII-Γ <sup>5</sup> (Hero's reaction to a future donor)	Yes
#249 "Khitraia nauka" (Tricky craft)	#13 <i>popodaetsia (na vstrechu)</i> 'meets'	VI-r <sup>1</sup> (Trickery)	Already not initial function
#157 "Koshchei bessmertnyi" (Koschey the Deathless)	#4 <i>kachaiut</i> 'rock'	i	No (still in exposition)
#277 "Soplivyi kozel" (Snotty goat)	#4 <i>posylaet</i> 'sends'	II-6 <sup>2</sup> (Reverse prohibition)	Yes
#95 "Morozko" (Morozko)	#34 <i>govorit</i> 'says'	VIII-A <sup>9</sup> (Villany)	Yes
#144 "Letuchii korabl'" (Flying ship)	#16 <i>uvidit</i> 'sees'	XI-↑ (Departure)	Already not initial function
#187 "Dvoe iz sumy" (Two out of the sack)	#2 <i>branitsia</i> 'scolds'	VIII-a <sup>3</sup> (Lack)	Yes
#167 "Po shchuch'evu velen'iu" (By the pike's will)	#4 <i>dumaet</i> 'thinks'	VIII-a <sup>3</sup> (Lack)	Yes
#240 "Veshchii son" (Prophetic dream)	#4 <i>prikhodit</i> 'comes'	II-6 <sup>2</sup> (Reverse prohibition)	Yes

In terms of understanding which functions are marked by a change of tense, and why—i.e., what kinds of patterns are created by tense alternation—it is instructive to look at the Russian tale "Гуси-лебеди (Swan-Geese)," which was not included into my original statistical sample. The story is short and elegant: A young girl is charged with babysitting her baby brother while the parents are away. Instead of watching him, she runs out to play in the streets. He is abducted by the agents of the Russian witch Baba-Yaga—the swan-geese. When she realizes that her baby brother is kidnapped, the girl initiates a search, during which she is offered help by

various magical characters—the donors, as Propp refers to them—but only on the condition of passing tests of eating simple peasant foods. In spite of three unsuccessful initial encounters with the donors, when the girl insolently refuses to eat the simple foods, she is helped eventually by a hedgehog and reaches the house of Baba-Yaga. There she finds her baby brother. She manages to sneak him away and runs back home. But the swan-geese chase after her. The original donors provide help along the way as she then successfully passes their tests of eating the simple foods, and she makes it back home safely with the swan-geese giving up their chase (Afanas'ev, vol. 1: 185–86).

I focus on “Gusi-lebedi” (Swan-Geese) because Propp himself used it extensively to illustrate his ideas on the morphology of the wonder tale. Subsequently Tsvetan Todorov used it to illustrate his ideas on the nature of narrative. By adding my observations to such authoritative discussions of the story, I arrive at some compelling conclusions concerning the meaning of the connection between tense alternation and Propp's functions.

First of all, in terms of its tense-alternation statistics, “Gusi-lebedi” (Swan-Geese) is a typical Russian wonder tale. It has seventeen present-tense predicates and fifty-six past-tense predicates. That means that 23.3% of its predicates are in the present tense, which is very close to the mean of my statistical sample. Propp identifies nineteen functions or, if triplication is counted independently, twenty-three functions in the tale (Propp 1998: 73–75). I identify eleven instances of tense alternation in it, with six of them as two cases of triplication of Propp functions—all associated with the girl's encounters with the donors in the tale. I also identify one instance as not related to a Propp function but associated with a description of Baba-Yaga and her house. Again, as in the case of the Slovenian tale “Stekleni most” (The glass bridge), there is a certain rhythm and symmetry of the arrangement of the marked functions in the Russian tale. Listing the functions marked by present tense and using Propp's designations for the functions results in the following sequence:

$$\mathcal{D}^1 \quad \mathcal{D}^1 \quad \mathcal{D}^1 \quad \Gamma 7 (***) \quad \Pi p^1 \quad \mathcal{D}^1 \quad \Pi p^1 \quad \mathcal{D}^1 \quad \Pi p^1 \quad \mathcal{D}^1,$$

where (\*\*\*) stands for one instance of tense alternation that does not correspond to a function recognized by Propp. Table 8 presents more details on the correspondences of the tense alternation in “Gusi-lebedi” (Swan-Geese) to its Propp functions.

Table 8. Identification of Propp functions and their correlation with tense alternation in the Russian tale “Gusi-lebedi” (Swan-Geese [Afanas’ev, #113])

Episode containing tense alternation	Every actual predicate in each tense alternation instance	Propp function
Meeting a stove	<i>stoi</i> 'stands'	Testing of the heroine by a donor $\Pi^1$
Meeting an apple-tree	<i>stoi</i> 'stands'	Testing of the heroine by a donor $\Pi^1$
Meeting a river	<i>stoi</i> 'stands'	Testing of the heroine by a donor $\Pi^1$
Meeting a hedgehog	<i>sprashivaet</i> 'asks'	The heroine does a favor to a donor $\Gamma^7$
Description of the situation at Baba-Yaga's house	<i>stoi</i> 'stands', <i>stoi-povarachivaet</i> 'stands-rotates', <i>sidi</i> 'sits', <i>sidi</i> 'sits', <i>igraet</i> 'plays'	NOT a Propp's function ***
Swan-geese chase after the heroine and her brother	<i>letiat</i> 'fly'	Chase in the form of flight $\Pi p^1$
Meeting the river again	<i>bezhit</i> 'runs'	Testing of the heroine by a donor $\Pi^1$
Swan-geese chase after the heroine and her brother	<i>letiat</i> 'fly'	Chase in the form of flight $\Pi p^1$
Meeting the apple-tree again	<i>stoi</i> 'stands'	Testing of the heroine by a donor $\Pi^1$
Swan-geese chase after the heroine and her brother	<i>naletaiut</i> 'fly on', <i>b'iut</i> 'beat'	Chase in the form of flight $\Pi p^1$
Meeting the stove again	omitted present tense of <i>byt</i> 'to be'	Testing of the heroine by a donor $\Pi^1$

From the fact that there are twenty-three Propp functions in the tale, only ten of which are marked by tense alternation, it follows that a selective process is at play. The triplicate nature of marked functions confirms that the tense alternation is not random, that it is reserved in this version of the tale specifically for those functions. I suggest that tense alternation, at least in this tale, very subtly draws its listeners' attention to what that particular version of the tale is really about—the transformation of the main character.

Before further developing the idea of transformation in the tale as associated with tense alternation, I refer to Todorov's observations on the

role of transformation in narrative. In writing about “Gusi-lebedi,” Todorov asserts that “all of the [Propp] functions are not necessary to the narrative in the same way.” Based on that assertion, he identifies five indispensable elements, none of which could have been omitted “without causing the tale to lose its identity.” They are

- 1) the situation of equilibrium at the beginning, 2) the breakdown of the situation by the kidnapping of the boy, 3) the girl’s recognition of the loss of equilibrium, 4) the successful search for the boy, 5) the re-establishment of the initial equilibrium, the return to the father’s house. (Todorov 1971: 39)

It is in those elements that the principle of succession dwells, and according to Todorov, other actions recognized by Propp are optional and are simply added to the fundamental scheme. He uses an example of the girl relocating her brother thanks to the intervention of a donor and points out that she “could have found him thanks to her ability to run fast, or her powers of divination, etc.” (Todorov 1971: 39).

Significantly, in identifying these “optional” elements, such as the girl’s interactions with the donors, Todorov excludes from his list of “indispensable elements” exactly the functions highlighted by tense alternation—that is, those functions that make the basic plot into this specific tale, and, in my interpretation of the tale, those functions that actually give meaning to the plot, making it a tale of the heroine’s transformation. Actually, in initially calling them “optional,” Todorov employs a rhetorical device by demonstrating that their “optional” nature is only apparent. He then reverses himself by saying that “the principle of succession and the principle of transformation are equally necessary to narrative” (Todorov 1971: 41).

Indeed, in “Gusi-lebedi,” the initial condition of the heroine is that of an insolent child, unduly proud of her family’s fine living and incapable of functioning in society even in a time of crisis. The notion is reinforced by the triplicated unsuccessful encounters with donors representing various aspects of society and its values—the importance of those encounters is marked by the contrasting present tense. Likewise, her pivotal encounter with the hedgehog is marked by present tense, when finally the girl begins to act wisely, instead of just giving in to her *id* urge to kick the little creature. (Freud’s tripartite scheme of *id*, *ego*, and *superego* seems to fit particularly well in the case of this character.) With the hedgehog, she is stopped from kicking it by her rational *ego*, fearful of being pricked by the animal. The complete transformation that is achieved is presented in the tale by the girl’s subsequent encounters with the original three donors in reverse order, each encounter again marked by present tense. She is not only polite now but she acts as a socialized member of her group behaving in a manner

dictated by her *superego*, consuming the plain foods of her group, whether she wants to or not. The triplicated series with intervening episodes of the swan-geese chasing after the girl, with each such episode marked by present tense, underscores the completeness of her transformation—she now knows how to behave in a crisis. In this particular narrative, the principle of transformation is subtly differentiated from the sequential principle by marking elements critical to the transformation aspect of the story as a separate group with tense alternation.

There is a seeming exception to the association between tense alternation and the theme of transformation. As shown in table 8, nearly every tense alternation instance in “Gusi-lebedi” is a single present-tense predicate except the description of Baba-Yaga’s house. There, this notable exception consists of six predicates in present tense, suggesting a particular significance to this three-times-as-long-as-usual tense switch. And yet, not only is the description not recognized as a function by Propp, on the surface, it does not have a connection with the maturation of the girl into a responsible member of her society. On the surface, Baba-Yaga and her retinue are part of the sequential component of the tale, simply a pretext for the girl’s journey. But because I am greatly influenced by Propp’s views expressed in his *Istoricheskie korni volshebnoi skazki* (Historical roots of the wonder tale [1998]), I interpret this episode as a reflection of an initiation rite and as a visit to the land of the dead. After all, it is only after her visiting the house on chicken feet that the girl becomes mature in the tale. The intervening episodes of the chase marked by tense alternation are also focused on Baba-Yaga’s agents, the swan-geese—Baba-Yaga’s associates involved in the initiation rite. I conclude that the description of the situation at Baba-Yaga’s house is directly related to the theme of transformation.

Related Propp functions are also grouped by means of tense alternation in the Slovenian tale “Stekleni most” (The glass bridge [Bolhar 1974: 67–68]). The tale is described above and is extensively quoted in table 6. In it, the marked functions are centered on the theme of recognition of individual transformation, with tense alternation occurring only in conjunction with the introduction of narrative functions. The marked functions are: testing by a dying donor, triplicated competition, and finally, competition against claims of false heroes. In a sense, this is a continuation of “Гуси-лебеди (Swan-Geese).” The Slovenian tale starts with a successful testing by a donor, something that in the Russian story constitutes the second half of the narrative.

The focus of “Stekleni most” (The glass bridge), however, is the social competition of the hero, which is only then followed by his official recognition—in narrative terms still a transformation, but a different type of

transformation from the Russian tale, a different stage in the hero's journey, and perhaps, a particular concern of male-centered tales. Listeners learn soon after the beginning of the tale that the hero is transformed because his trip to the land of the dead, symbolized here by his holding vigils at his father's grave, is successful: The hero is rewarded for each of the three nights of his service to his dead father with gifts of magical objects—copper, silver, and golden walnuts, each containing a miraculous horse. The hero's next task is to demonstrate this accomplishment in a social setting, by being able to ride over a glass bridge to the princess's chamber window without falling off—a feat that he accomplishes with the help of his magical horses. This is a tale of proving to the society at large one's maturity, with Propp functions marked by tense alternation that reinforces that specific focus of the tale.

In some of the other Slovenian tales from my sample, the world of the dead plays as important a role in the narrative as in the Russian "Guslebedi" (Swan-Geese) and is clearly marked by tense alternation. In "Jug in pastorek" (South Wind and the stepson), past tense constitutes almost half of the narrative's predicates—40%. Of those, three-fourths mark predicates that are part of the unusually long and literary description of the *drugi svet* 'other world'. As seen from the quote below, when the narrator describes the hero's actions, the unmarked present tense is used; when the narrator describes the other world and what the hero sees there, the marked past tense is used. This episode starts with the hero pushed by his stepmother into a deep hole and which he falls down into for three days and three nights (past tense is in bold, and tense alternation is preserved in the translation).

Slednjič pade<sup>present</sup> na mehko blazino. Precej dolgo leži<sup>present</sup> kakor mrtev, končno se zave<sup>present</sup> in začuden gleda<sup>present</sup> okoli sebe. **Bil je<sup>past</sup>** na drugem svetu. Blazina, na katero je bil padel, **je ležala<sup>past</sup>** na sredi mesta. Lepe in široke ulice **so se razprostirale<sup>past</sup>** na vse strani. Hiše **ni videl<sup>past</sup>** nobene, samo prekrasne palače **je gledalo<sup>past</sup>** njegovo začudeno oko. Velika črna zastava **je visela<sup>past</sup>** s strehe in noben vetrič **je ni mizil<sup>past</sup>**. Povsod **je kraljevala<sup>past</sup>** mrtvaška tihota: vse ulice **so bile<sup>past</sup>** prazne, nobena ptičica **ni žvrgolela<sup>past</sup>** v zraku. Deček se radovedno približa<sup>present</sup> palači, s katere je visela zastava. (Brenkova 1970: 145)

(Finally, he falls on a soft pillow. He lies there for a long while as if he were dead; at last he comes to and, astonished, looks around himself. He was in the other world. The pillow, on which he had fallen, lay in the middle of a city. Beautiful wide streets ran in all directions. He did not spot a single plain house; only wonderful palaces could be seen by his amazed eye. A great black banner hung from a roof, and not the



slightest breeze stirred it. Dead silence reigned everywhere: all the streets were empty, and not a bird chirped in the air. Curious, the young man approaches the palace, from which hung the banner.)

Undoubtedly the analysis of other tales for tense alternation associated with specific functions and/or themes will result in other patterns as well. Tense alternation is a device of organizing a story according to the import of the story, and the same plot can be developed to reflect different concerns of the storyteller and the audience. The first pass of the selective process occurs when only certain of Propp functions appear in a tale. That process is obligatory in practical terms because stories containing all thirty-one of Propp functions are unknown and unlikely, except as an unwieldy product of a thought experiment by a researcher. As I have demonstrated above, tense alternation reflects further focusing of the tale and further highlighting of certain functions.

In spite of its obviously more optional character, tense alternation is still obligatory in tales collected in the considerably oral cultures of Slovenia and Russia in the nineteenth century. For example, in the passage from the Slovenian wonder tale quoted immediately above, literary influences on the diction of the storyteller are fully evident. "Povsod je kraljevala mrtvaška tihota" (Dead silence reigned everywhere [Brenkova 1970: 145]) is obviously a borrowing from a written source. And yet, the conventions of oral marking of certain functions and certain types of descriptions with tense alternation are preserved.

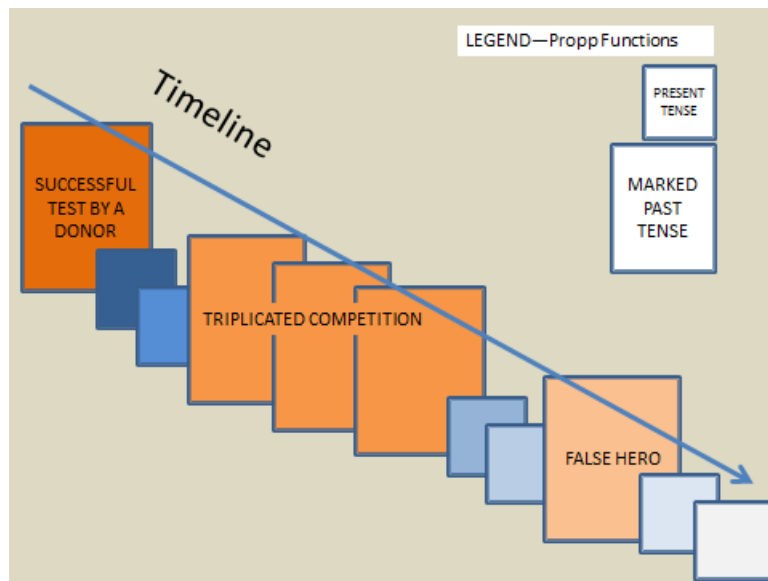
That is because aside from being a subtle focus on certain functions and themes, tense alternation is used as a structuring device in the flow of an oral narrative. The physicality of written text (the fact that such text is literally a picture, considerable chunks of which are available holistically—at a glance) provides guidance to its readers. Words fixed as marks on paper and word, sentence, paragraph, page, and chapter divisions, as well as punctuation marks act as a visual skeleton and give clues to the text's readers of where in the flow of the narrative they are. Their ability to parse text visually is what makes it possible for a novel, for example, to have much more complicated relationships between the *siuzhet* and the *fabula*. It is also essentially what allows a novel to continue for hundreds of pages in the uniform past tense without resorting to tense alternation.

In contrast to written text, oral text, because of its sequential and ephemeral nature, without its listeners being able to reread the previous parts, has its own devices of organization, has its own signposts for where in the narrative the storyteller and the listeners are. Conventional openings, such as English "Once upon a time...", Slovenian *Bil je nekdej...* (There was once...), and Russian *Zhil-byt* (There lived-there was...) are examples

of such sign-posts. They help to create a mental map of the narrative. Patterns of tense alternation too participate in the creation of a mental map of the oral text, both in the minds of its narrator and the listeners. Figure 3 represents what such a pattern may look like when evaluating all the Propp functions in the Slovenian tale “Stekleni most” (The glass bridge), which is discussed above. In contrast to figure 3, figure 4 represents not all twenty-three Propp functions in the Russian tale “Gusi-lebedi” but all ten instances of tense alternation in the piece, which are extensively described above. Such a model as in figure 4 would overlay the mental model of the entire set of functions in the tale, such as, for example, in figure 3. It is the contrast afforded by an unexpected tense that creates such rhythms (as represented in figures 3 and 4) in the mental models of the stories.

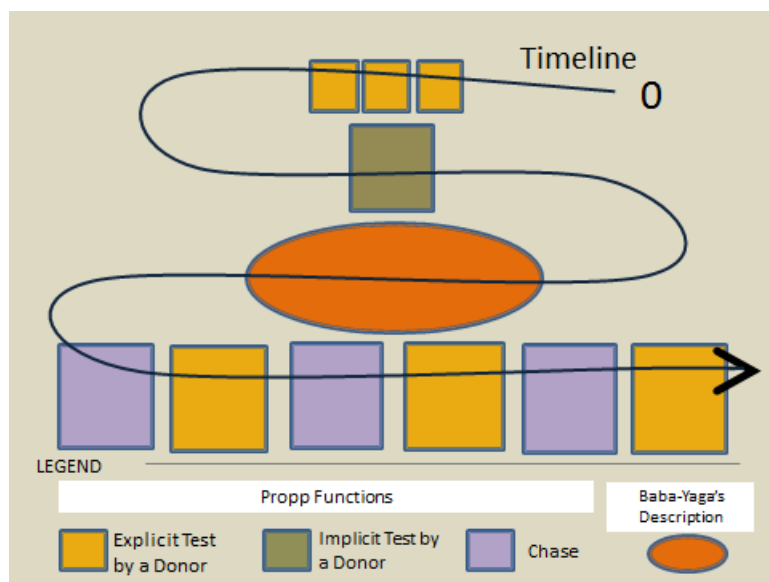
The idea of contrast is also employed in introducing direct speech in Slovenian folktales. There, most speech-introducing words, such as *pravi* 'tells' or *reče* 'says' are more prevalent in their present tense forms, which is the matrix tense, and thus, lacking the contrast. I notice, however, a tendency to apply the marked past tense when introducing direct speech of magical personages and personages in authority, particularly such speech acts as ordering another character to do something.

Fig. 3. Visual representation of the pattern of marked and unmarked by tense alternation Propp functions in “Stekleni most” (The glass bridge [Bolhar 1974: 67–68])



For example, in “Vila prijateljica in meseci prijatelji” (The fairy friend and the twelve months friends), the stepdaughter, who is sent by her wicked stepmother to the forest in the middle of winter to gather strawberries, is addressed by months of the year, personified as young men. Their speech is introduced with past tense that stands out against the present tense matrix of the narrative, “Junaki [...] **so ji rekli**<sup>past</sup>: -Pojdi v le-to prvo dolinico na prisojno stran, tam boš dobila jadgodic, kolikor te bo volja. (The young men [...] told her, “Go to that first little valley on the sunny side; there you will get as many strawberries as you wish” [Brenkova 1970: 163].) Soon after that the direct speech of the step-mother to her own daughter is introduced with past tense as well, “Nekaj dni kasneje, ko je mraz odjenjal, **je rekla**<sup>past</sup> mati svoji hčeri: -Pojdi tudi ti na goro po jagode. (A few days later, when the freezing weather let up, the mother told her daughter, “You too go up the mountain to gather strawberries” [Brenkova 1970: 163].) This tendency of magical characters to have their speech introduced by past tense predicates may be related to the tendency to describe the world of the dead with marked past tense as described above. It appears, however, to be more closely related to their position vis-à-vis Propp functions in Slovenian tales in general.

Fig. 4. Visual representation of the pattern of marked by tense alternation Propp functions and Baba-Yaga’s description in “Gusi-lebedi” (Swan-Geese [Afanas’ev, #113])



The idea of a contrast unrelated to Propp functions is employed in the case of “says” in Russian folktales. Undoubtedly, *govorit* is the most common present tense word in the Russian folktale. Though not always, direct speech is very often introduced with it. For Russian tales, present tense is the marked tense, and, in those tales, I consider “says” to be a performance marker related to orality of the folktale. For a listener, together with the semantics of the predicate “to say,” the switch to present tense from the matrix of past tense signals direct speech. Present tense in those cases has the same role as quotation marks in written texts. For that same reason direct speech is often introduced with “says” even in English folktales, otherwise devoid of tense alternation and narrated entirely in past tense.

The observation above about English folktales is but one example that allows me to suggest that, in general, the principles governing tense alternation and recognized by me as a result of this comparison between Slovenian and Russian tales apply to many oral narratives worldwide. Moreover, they offer valuable insights in the nature of narrative in general. In summary, in this article, I have documented tense alternation in Slovenian and Russian wonder tales collected in the nineteenth century. I have established that in Slovenian stories, the matrix is usually in present tense, while in Russian tales the matrix is in past tense. I have provided evidence in support of the structural, rather than the dramatic, hypothesis to explain the phenomenon of tense alternation by demonstrating that the marked tense performs an organizing and selecting role: It highlights certain of Propp functions in tales in a manner dependent on the import of an individual narrative. Such tense alternation creates a subconscious pattern that reinforces the main idea of an oral, performed tale while participating in structuring the narrative. The pattern acts as a mnemonic device for the storyteller and as signposts in the mental map of the tale in the minds of its listeners.

In addition, the Slovenian texts in this study, with their distinctive matrix of present tense, have afforded a particular insight into the nature of tense alternation. They have prompted me to search for explanations beyond my original limited hypotheses based on perceived unique qualities of present tense per se, and instead to consider effects produced by contrasts in grammatical forms. The value of comparative Slavic folklore studies could not have been confirmed for me in a more compelling way.

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## POVZETEK

GLAGOLSKI ČAS V PRIPOVEDNIH DELIH SLOVENSKIH IN  
RUSKIH LJUDSKIH PRAVLJIC IN NJEGOVA STRUKTURALNA  
VLOGA V PRIPOVEDI

*V pripovednih delih slovenskih in ruskih ljudskih pravljic so oblike glagolov v tretji osebi razporejene v kompleksnih vzorcih izmenično preteklika oz. sedanjika. V slovenskih pravljicah, zbranih v devetnajstem stoletju so približno tri četrtine omenjenih glagolov v sedanjiku, a le četrtina v pretekliku. Pri ruskih pravljicah, zbranih v istem obdobju, velja ravno obratna situacija, in sicer v pripovednih delih ruskih čudežnih pravljic so tri četrtine glagolov v pretekliku, medtem ko je samo ena četrtina glagolov v sedanjiku. V popolni kronologiji čudežnih pravljic kot pripovedne zvrsti, pri kateri dogodki zgodbe vedno sledijo zaporedju časovne premice, glagolski čas ni več potreben za označenje časa. Namesto tega prevladujoči glagolski čas oblikuje ozadje, proti kateremu je drugi, redkejši glagolski čas zaznamovan. . Takšen kontrast v slovenskih in ruskih čudežnih pravljicah igra pripovedno vlogo v zvezi s funkcijami Vladimira Proppa. Kadar spreten pripovedovalec med drugimi pripovednimi pristopi, uporablja zaznamovani glagolski čas za neko funkcijo, daje s tem poseben pomen svoji pravljici s poudarjanjem določene podskupine Proppovih funkcij.*