
Agent- and Patient-Centricity in Myth

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Agent- and Patient-Centricity in Myth *

If, in literature, the work of art as such is the form of expression of an idea, it is all the more so in folklore.

—Vladimir Propp¹

MY PURPOSE IN THIS PAPER is threefold: (1) to propose a theoretical parameter for the comparative study of myth—a conceptual continuum whose poles are “agent-centricity” and “patient-centricity”; (2) to show how variation along this parameter can be studied empirically; and (3) to map out some theoretical implications of this variability for the study of mythology generally, and, as well, for the study of the specific “mythological corpus.” I will be drawing my examples primarily from the mythology of the Shokleng Indians of southern Brazil,² and the Bella Coola of the Northwest Coast of North America. My empirical hypothesis may be formulated as follows: specific myths, as well as the entire mythological corpus associated with a culture, may be productively viewed as more or less agent- or patient-centric. That is, in each culture we can expect to find a bias toward agent- or patient-centricity, a bias that is detectable despite variations within the corpus and even within specific myths.

Agent- and Patient-Centricity

In order to characterize the agent-/patient-centric contrast at the level of a

* A portion of my analysis in this paper is based upon materials collected during my own research among the Shokleng Indians of Brazil between 1974 and 1976, which was funded by a grant from the Doherty Foundation Program in Latin American Studies. The present paper is an outgrowth of research that is being assisted by a grant from the Committee on Latin America and the Caribbean of the Social Science Research Council. I wish to thank, for their criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper, Laura R. Graham, Corinne Kratz, Frank Proschan, and Lux Vidal.

¹ Vladimir Propp, “Study of the Folktale: Structure and History,” *Dispositio*, 1 (1976), 289.

² These are Jules Henry’s “Kaingang.”

model, independent of any specific myth, I begin by elaborating a highly abstract conception of myth, related to but distinct from the Proppian formalist conception. While my conception is by no means restricted to what is technically considered “myth”—narrative in which the world is conceived as different from the way it is today, and in which changes occur that make it resemble more closely the contemporary world—the present essay will focus primarily upon “myth” in this technical sense.

A mythic narrative, in this view, may be conceptualized as a sequence of events, having the underlying form of transitive or intransitive sentences in language. That is, we may represent the events, generally, by means of one-place or two-place propositions. I am referring here not to the actual sentences of a given text in a specific language, but to the propositions culled from such a text, which capture the essence of events, and which form a kind of minimal translatable core of a myth. For the present, I propose to ignore the descriptions of situations and states, such as make up the background and contribute to the concrete richness of an actual text. Myth here is thus seen as a sequence of events or “goings on” that unfold over time, and in which states (of persons and things) are affected and typically modified.

An event can be conceptualized as having an internal structure, involving basically three, though often more or fewer, components: (1) the “action” (symbolized below by \rightarrow), or what takes place—“action” thus being a conception somewhat narrower in scope than Propp’s “function,”³ which includes a built-in reference to the actors involved, even if only as variables; (2) the “agent” (Ag), or the doer who brings about the action; and (3) the “patient” (Pa), or person or thing affected by the action.⁴ From this perspective, it is possible to define three basic event “types,” which may be schematized as:

- A. Ag \rightarrow Pa
- B. Ag \rightarrow
- C. \rightarrow Pa

These correspond roughly to what are in language “transitive sentences”

³ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

⁴ For the linguistic concepts of “agent” and “patient,” see Charles Fillmore, “The Case for Case,” in *Universals in Linguistic Theory*, ed. E. Bach and R. T. Harms (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968), pp. 1–88. For an alternative structural account of agency and patiency in narrative, see Claude Bremond, *Logique du Récit* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973).

(type A), “intransitive sentences” wherein subject is agent (type B), and intransitive sentences wherein subject is patient (type C).

Myths have typically what I will be calling a center—a person (main character or protagonist) or thing, functioning as a connecting link that ties together the various narrative events and episodes, and that forms the principal basis of continuity of the narrative text.⁵ The center is thus agent or patient in some portion of the individual events constituting a total sequence. Now it is entirely possible for the center to be distributed randomly as agent and patient in a succession of events, and, indeed, this is in some measure what we find in actual texts. However, my claim in this paper is that there is a tendency or bias, in a given myth and in a given corpus of myths, for the center to be more often agent than patient or vice versa.

Such an empirical claim suggests a parameter for the comparative study of myth, a parameter whose endpoints may be labeled “agent-centered” (center is predominantly an agent) and “patient-centered” (center is predominantly a patient). An ideal, or hypothetically perfect, agent-centered myth would have a structure isomorphic with the following:

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Event 1:} \\ \quad 2: \\ \quad 3: \\ \quad 4: \\ \quad \vdots \end{array} \left. \begin{array}{l} \rightarrow \text{Pa}_1 \\ \rightarrow \text{Pa}_2 \\ \rightarrow \\ \rightarrow \text{Pa}_3 \end{array} \right\} \text{Ag}$$

One and the same Ag appears throughout the sequence, the events differing only in regard to the Pa and to the action. Correspondingly, an ideal or perfect patient-centered myth would have a structure paralleling the following:

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Event 1:} \\ \quad 2: \\ \quad 3: \\ \quad 4: \\ \quad \vdots \end{array} \left. \begin{array}{l} \text{Ag}_1 \rightarrow \\ \text{Ag}_2 \rightarrow \\ \rightarrow \\ \text{Ag}_3 \rightarrow \end{array} \right\} \text{Pa}$$

Of course, it is possible, in either schema, for the action type (\rightarrow) itself to be held, in some measure, constant, action-type distribution giving rise to a “thematic” structure.

⁵ It is possible for a myth to be “dual-centered” or “multi-centered,” that is, to have two or more centers, which consecutively dominate it. When in a given stretch of narrative two or more personages or entities vie for the “center,” I will speak of “competition for the center,” rather than “dual-centricity.”

Undoubtedly, we will never find an actual myth whose structure matches perfectly either of these ideal models. The concept of centrality is rather a statistical one. Models such as these serve instead as a kind of “conceptual lens,” through which the tangled underbrush of detail found in actual texts can be brought, in some measure, into focus. Subsequently, I will be arguing as well that these models help us to understand certain “qualitative” consequences of an agent- or patient-centric bias, which lend a characteristic shape or appearance to a given mythological corpus.

A Sample Patient-Centered Myth

A Shokleng myth, “The Origin of Honey,” furnishes an example of a patient-centric myth. Henry has already published a version of this myth,⁶ and my own collection includes two additional versions, which differ from Henry’s only in details. I provide here Henry’s “free translation,” despite my disagreement with a few points of translation—for example, Henry’s use of a reduplicated quotative device, “that is what he said,” where in the text we find a double subject construction—because I hope to avoid thereby any bias I may myself inject into the translation. However, I have superimposed upon his version a paragraph organization, designed to reflect what I view as the episodic structure of this narrative:

THE ORIGIN OF HONEY

[I.] The bee was gathering flowers. Then the tucan followed him but did not see the hive. Then he came back and said, “I did not see the hive.” That is what he said. Then the baitaka [another bird] did the same as he—when the bee was gathering flowers he followed him but did not see it. Then he came back. Then he arrived. Then he said, “I did not see the hive.” That is what he said. Then when the bee gathered flowers the maracaná [another bird] went after him again. Then he saw the hive. It was the maracaná that saw the hive. Then when he arrived he said, “I saw the hive, but it was inside a rock.” That is what he said.

[II.] Then they all went there. Then they pierced it. But their beaks would always break. So they said to the tucan, “Come here. Take your big beak.” So he came there. Then he pierced but his beak broke. Now, there were a great many of them there trying to pierce the hive. Now, the woodpecker had his mb3 [ceremonial mother’s] pestle under a cloth. Then he pierced the pestle. Then he pierced through. Then he turned it around and pierced again. Then he said, “If I go to the bee-hive I’ll pierce it in just this way.” So saying he went there. Then he said to them, “What’s all this noise about?” That is what he said to them. Then they said to him, “The noise is because I am about to pierce this hive.” That is what they said to him. Then they said to him, “Come here and pierce it for me.” That is what they said to him.

⁶ Jules Henry, “A Kaingang Text,” *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 8 (1935), 172–218.

Then he came there. Then he came there and pierced it. When he pierced it for them he ate honey with them.

[III.] But in the meanwhile they did not give any to læŋ'dzili [hummingbird]. When he saw this he stole the water from them. So when he stole the water he would always go away to drink. Now, when he saw that they did not give him any honey he did that to the water and so they were thirsty. Then they said to him, "Is the water near here?" That is what they said to læŋ'dzili. Then he said, "No. Water is far away. I really have to travel, then I drink water." So, since they were thirsty they licked and sucked damp rocks.

[IV.] In the meanwhile tʃi'klæ [another bird] did the same as they and was walking around licking damp rocks. In the meanwhile læŋ'dzili was coming along. When tʃi'klæ heard this he hid himself. In the meanwhile læŋ'dzili did not see tʃi'klæ. So he tilted back big-turtle [water's lid]. In the meanwhile tʃi'klæ was looking on from his hiding place. In the meanwhile læŋ'dzili tilted back big-turtle and drank water. After drinking he closed it down on top. When he did this he went away. Then tʃi'klæ came over and tilted up big-turtle. Then he went, "Hi hi hi hi hi! I see water! I see water! I see water!" That is what he said. When they heard this they came there. Every single one of them came. In the meanwhile læŋ'dzili came there. Then he took his big-turtle and placed it over the water. But they payed no attention to it. They did the same as he and tilted it up again. When læŋ'dzili saw this he stopped. In the meanwhile there were many of them in the water. Then they were all drinking. They were very thirsty that is why they looked for the water.

What I wish to establish is that "The Origin of Honey" is, in considerable measure, a patient-centric myth. To establish this, I argue that (1) the episodes or paragraphs are about "seeing" (or finding), "piercing," "stealing," and "seeing" again; (2) the myth contains two centers, Honey/Hive and Water; and (3) the centers are primarily patients.

Intuitively, the thematic structure proposed here—seeing/piercing/stealing/seeing again—is an obvious one. Merely through reflection upon what abstract events underlie each episode, one would be led to some such conclusion. However, this structure seems to emerge as well from the text itself. Thus, in paragraph I, the verb "see" dominates the text statistically, appearing fully seven times,⁷ that is, it occurs more frequently than any other verb. In paragraph II, "pierce" easily dominates the text, occurring eleven times, considerably more than any other verb. In paragraph III, the issue is less clear-cut. "Steal" occurs three times—if we include its anaphoric occurrence in "did that"—but so also does "say," in Henry's translation at least, while

⁷ My analysis here is of the English text. However, I have done a comparable analysis of the Shokleng text, with substantially the same results, though text-counts differ somewhat. Still, I am convinced that the translated text provides only a partially adequate basis for analysis. This is illustrated by the fact that here "say" seems to compete with "see," since it occurs six times. This is, however, a product of Henry's translation of double subjects as double quotatives. In fact, in the Shokleng text the verb "say" is not so reduplicated. Under ideal circumstances, I would be working entirely with native texts.

“give,” “see,” and “drink” each occur twice. Nevertheless, the narrator was clearly at pains to reiterate the stealing, as can be seen from the convoluted text, and this suggests its prominence in his own mind. In paragraph IV, “see” once again handily dominates, occurring five times, while the semantically linked verb “look” occurs twice. From the frequency and distribution of linguistic tokens themselves, therefore, emerges a textual structure isomorphic with one that we intuitively apprehend.

Intuitively obvious perhaps as well is the centrality, in paragraphs I and II, of Honey/Hive. Interestingly, Honey/Hive is conceptualized in the myth as a single definite entity, as is Water, a fact of some note in connection with the “animacy hierarchy” I will be discussing subsequently. This issue of definiteness, incidentally, rules out an alternative interpretation of this myth, namely that it is really an agent-centric myth about “birds” and what they did. While certain specific birds are prominent in the text, especially in paragraphs III and IV, the abstract term “birds” cannot, by definition, be considered a “center.”

In any case, Honey/Hive is the one entity that ties together the various events of paragraphs I and II. It thus forms the basis of narrative continuity. Centricity can also be studied by textual means, though here the methods are less simple, and the problems of using a translated text compounded. For a number of reasons, the most suitable measure of centricity seems to me this: the total number of occurrences of a noun or its anaphoric substitute in subject or object position in transitive clauses, whose subjects and objects are themselves nouns or nonclausal noun phrases. By this measure, Honey/Hive is clearly the center in paragraphs I and II, occurring fully fifteen or sixteen times, depending upon whether “honey” is counted (in Shokleng these words are encoded by the same form). The closest rival for center is “woodpecker,” which occurs eight times.⁸ The latter, indeed, seems to be the center of an agent-centric sub-episode in paragraph II, where the agentive power of Woodpecker is demonstrated, presumably as a device for showing why, among the various agents, this specific agent was able to pierce the Hive. In any case, while this textual method is a crude one, in need of considerable refinement, it nevertheless confirms what we intuitively apprehend.

⁸ Important problems occur in trying to decide about transitivity cross-linguistically, and even within English translations. This textual method is therefore used here only in conjunction with the intuitive argument.

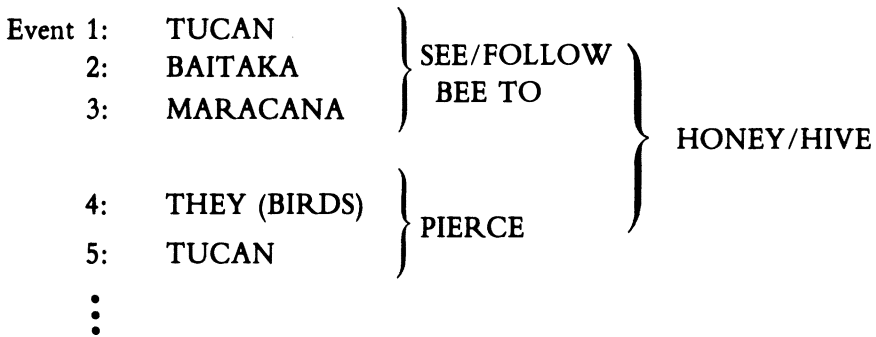
Less obvious, perhaps, is the centrality of Water⁹ in paragraphs III and IV. In my interpretation, these episodes are about, respectively, how Water was stolen (by Hummingbird), and how it was found once again (by Čikre—tʃi'klæ in Henry's orthography). Viewed from this perspective, Water is clearly the basis of narrative continuity, tying together the various events. However, there is in some measure a "competition for the center," with Hummingbird and Čikre being especially prominent. This competition is reflected in a textual analysis, wherein Hummingbird scores 10, Water 9, and Čikre 6 (or 7), by my count. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that someone might construe these paragraphs as being about what Hummingbird and Čikre did. However, Hummingbird, Čikre, and all of the other birds as well, orient their action in these paragraphs entirely toward a single object—Water. This leads me to conclude that Water is more important to the narrative than either of these birds, and that, consequently, it should be construed as the center.

While establishing centrality for paragraphs III and IV presents certain difficulties, the assignment of agency and patiency values to the centers is absolutely clear-cut. Intuitively, Honey/Hive and Water are patients, or recipients, of action originating elsewhere. Thus, it is Honey/Hive that is "seen" and "pierced," Water that is "stolen" and "seen" again. Similarly, Hummingbird and Čikre are primarily agents, stealing and finding, respectively. Although it is not necessary here to confirm this agency measure textually, I will want a textual measure later. As a calculation of the "agency index" of a center, I will take the following ratio or its associated percentage: number of occurrences of center-encoding noun (or anaphoric substitute) in transitive subject position to total number of occurrences as subject or object in transitive clauses, where we use only transitive clauses having nouns and nonclausal noun phrases in subject and object position. For passive sentences, which I use only where the agent noun phrase is overtly expressed, I count subject position occurrence as an object position occurrence. Thus, Honey/Hive and Water each have 0% agency index, Hummingbird has a 100% index, and Čikre an 83% (5:6) index.

If Honey/Hive and Water are construed as centers, "The Origin of Honey" is evidently a highly patient-centric myth. Indeed, paragraph I has a structure approximating probably as closely as is possible the ideal-typical

⁹ The connection between honey and water, portrayed in this myth, has, as many ethnographers of Central Brazil know, a basis in reality. Consuming large quantities of honey produces thirst, and, indeed, the Indians very often dilute honey with water before consuming it. On this point, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1973), p. 52.

patient-centric structure discussed earlier. Here a succession of agents are seen doing (or attempting to do) something to a patient, the Honey/Hive, and this strongly patient-centric structure carries over into paragraph II. Analyzing paragraph I into highly abstract "events," the structure can be diagramed as follows:



A Sample Agent-Centered Myth

A Bella Coola myth, "Tradition of SE/LIA," recorded by Boas,¹⁰ provides an example of what I call agent-centricity. Like "The Origin of Honey," this myth is dual-centered, the second center being a person related to the first as son to father. Owing to the length of this narrative, I provide here only the first half:

TRADITION OF SE/LIA

In the beginning our world was dark. At that time Tōtosō'nx descended from heaven, and reached our world on a mountain near the river Wa'k'itšmai (Fraser River). Here he built a house, in which he lived in the company of the Raven. The latter had a black canoe which was called "Raven." The two resolved to travel in order to find people. They descended the river until they came to the sea. After some time they reached a house which was covered inside and outside with shells. The totem-post of the house was also covered with shells. It shone like the sun. They saw a canoe on the beach, and this too was completely covered with abalone [sic] shells. A chief, whose name was Pēlxanē'mx ("abalone man"), invited them to enter his house. As soon as Tōtosō'nx reached this place, the sun rose. If he had not found the place of the abalone chief, there would be no sun. Tōtosō'nx did not wish to stay. He looked at the house, and saw something turning about on top of it. When they came nearer, he saw that it was a Mink, which was running about on the roof. Many people were inside the house. When Tōtosō'nx approached and saw the beautiful canoe, he wished to have it. He offered the chief

¹⁰ Franz Boas, "The Mythology of the Bella Coola Indians," *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, II (New York, 1898), 50-53.

their canoe in exchange. This offer was accepted, and Tōtosō'nx travelled on with the abalone canoe. The Raven staid with the abalone chief. Tōtosō'nx continued his travels, following the course of the sun. First he travelled southward, and came to the post which stands in the west of our world. From here he travelled on, and reached the copper country, which is situated a little farther to the north. When he saw the country from a distance, it looked like fire. When he came near, he saw a house which was built of copper. On the beach there was a canoe, which was also made of copper. The chief was sitting in front of the house, and invited him to come in. A carved post in the shape of a man was standing in front of the chief's house. It also was made of copper. Then Tōtosō'nx offered to exchange canoes with the chief. The chief took the abalone canoe, while Tōtosō'nx took the copper canoe. The chief also gave him a large box made of copper, and he gave him his daughter La'liayōts in marriage. Besides this, he gave him olachen [a type of fish], which was to serve as food for his daughter. In the copper box were all the whistles and other paraphernalia of the sisau'k' ceremonial. He travelled on, and reached our country in the north. When he arrived, the sun began to shine for the first time. He met a chief, to whom he gave the sisau'k' whistles. Wherever he met people, he presented to them the whistles of this ceremonial. Thus he met the Haida, the Tsimshian, the Git'amā't, the Gitlōp, the Xa'exags, the Hē'iltuq.

He travelled on, and reached Wa'nuk (Rivers Inlet). There he threw the olachen into the water. They multiplied, and since that time there have been many olachen in that river. He travelled on, and came to Nux'its, to Sō'mxōL, and to Ts'i'o, on the lake above Rivers Inlet. He gave the chiefs of these places the sisau'k' whistles. He arrived at Ase'ix, in Talio'mx'. Here he left whistles and olachen. He did the same at Q'oa'px and Nū'ik^U in South Bentinck Arm. Then he travelled down the fiord to the little island Qē'nk'ilst, at the mouth of South Bentinck Arm. Here he left the sisau'k' whistles. Finally he came to Sē'lia, near the entrance to South Bentinck Arm. He liked this place very much, and was surprised not to see any people. He travelled on, and reached the mouth of Bella Coola River. Here he staid four winters. He used his whistles, and performed the sisau'k' ceremonial. At the end of this time a quarrel arose between him and the chief at Bella Coola, therefore he turned back. When he came to Sē'lia, he stopped and built a house. The house resembled in shape that of the chief La'lia. He called the house "La'lia." His wife, the daughter of the chief of the copper country, had many children. They increased rapidly, and became the tribe Sē'liamx'. He invited the neighboring tribes to a feast. He performed the sisau'k' ceremonial. He never gave feasts in honor of his youngest son, Sēnxag'ila.

Thematically, this myth presents a striking parallel to "The Origin of Honey." Both are narratives concerned with discovery, or "seeing" the world, and this myth especially involves little action or jostling about. Rather, we are here situated in a serene world, whose wonders—an abalone-shell canoe, a mink atop a house, a country that from a distance looks "like fire," a large copper box, and so forth—are apprehended for the first time. Intuitively, the myth is one of apprehension and making contact with a new and uncharted world. Similarly, paragraph I, at least, of "The Origin of Honey" is concerned with probing and apprehending the world, but in this case, specifically, the previously unknown Honey/Hive. The myth narrates a first encounter with this mysterious entity.

This thematic parallel is confirmed by textual analyses. As already demonstrated, “The Origin of Honey,” especially paragraph I, is dominated by the verb “see,” which occurs twelve times, seven of these occurrences being in paragraph I. Similarly, “see” is a dominant verb in the SE’Lia tradition, especially the first paragraph. I should note that while “see” is a common verb, it is by no means dominant in all myths. I will be considering subsequently myths in which the dominant verb is “kill,” a verb that occurs nowhere in either of the myths under present consideration. In the SE’Lia tradition, “see” occurs seven times in all, six of these in the first paragraph, where it is followed in frequency by “reach” and “travel,” each occurring there five times. Overall, “see,” “reach,” and “travel” overshadow all other verbs in this text, occurring respectively seven, seven, and eight times. These textual facts, therefore, confirm an intuitive impression.

Despite this thematic parallelism, these myths are wholly distinct in another regard. Whereas “The Origin of Honey” is essentially patient-centric, the various events being woven together by the continuous presence of Honey/Hive and Water, “Tradition of SE’Lia” is essentially agent-centric. The single entity that ties together the narrative is the ancestor *Tōtosō’nx*, who appears in some 38 transitive clauses. Moreover, *Tōtosō’nx* is decidedly an agent, with an agency index of 36:38 or about 95%. There is no patient that comes close to competing with this agent for the center, nor even another agent, although Raven makes an appearance initially. This myth is thus decidedly agent-centric, and even, at points, approximates the ideal-typical agent-centric structure discussed earlier.

While no single prominent patient emerges from this narrative, an intriguing similarity can be found among some of the patients. They are containers (houses, canoes, and boxes) of a peculiar perceptual saliency, shining “like the sun,” or looking “like fire,” because they are covered with abalone shells or fashioned from copper. In semiotic terms, these patients are “icons” of one another, forming a class defined by similarity, much as the agents in “The Origin of Honey” form a class—they are all birds. It may indeed be a universal tendency that in such strongly agent- or patient-centric myths the corresponding patients or agents, while multiple and thus not qualifying as a center, nevertheless tend to be elaborated according to a principle of iconicity.

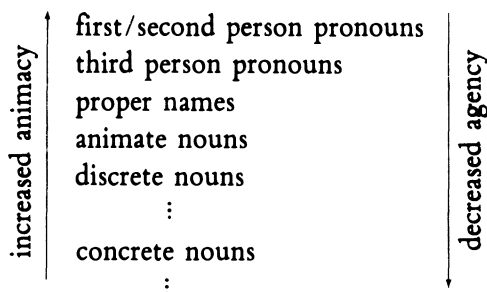
Intuitively, the contrast between the myths discussed above is parallel to the metaphysical “subject”/“object” contrast. In the Shokleng myth, our attention is concentrated on the object (Honey/Hive and Water), and we are interested in the subjects (the various birds) only insofar as they bring us into contact with the object. The myth illuminates the object by probing it through various subjective experiences, for example, the various birds

endeavoring to “see” the Honey/Hive. In contrast, in the Bella Coola myth we are located, so to speak, inside the subject. We peer out at the world through his eyes, seeing what he sees: abalone-shell canoes, copper boxes, and so forth. The myth illuminates the “subject” by following him and bringing us into contact with his manifold perceptions of the world outside. There is really nothing fully comparable to this myth in the Shokleng corpus. It is very much an agent-centered myth.

Animacy Hierarchy and Centricity

Agent-/patient-centric variation, we may conclude from the above comparison, represents one type of variation between myths, the parameter forming one axis for comparative study. However, it interlocks with another parameter of variability—concerned with “animacy level” of the center—which, we might conclude initially, represents the controlling variable for agent-/patient-centricity. Intuitively, it is apparent that entities differ in their capacity for agentive control over situations. Thus, a human being is a “naturally good” agent, whereas a stone is inherently less capable of agentive control.

Linguists, indeed, have paid careful attention to variations of this sort, which seem to underlie certain grammatical universals, such as “splits” in case-marking systems.¹¹ Indeed, Silverstein furnishes us with a carefully formulated “animacy hierarchy” of noun phrase types, where certain noun phrases are seen as universally good agents, others as progressively less good agents, and therefore better patients.¹² The following is a simplified version of this hierarchy:



¹¹ R. M. W. Dixon, “Ergativity,” *Language*, 55 (1979), 59–138.

¹² See Michael Silverstein, “Hierarchy of Features and Ergativity,” in *Grammatical Categories in Australian Languages*, ed. R. M. W. Dixon (Canberra: Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, 1976), and also, especially, his “Cognitive Implications of a Referential Hierarchy,” unpublished manuscript (1977).

Moving up this hierarchy, animacy increases, and with it the probability that a noun phrase will play the role of “agent,” that is, will occupy transitive subject position in an active construction. Correspondingly, moving downward, animacy decreases, and with it the probability of finding the noun phrase in an agentive role.

Translating these results of linguistic analysis into a framework for mythological study, we see that agent-/patient-centricity variability is, in some measure, correlated with variability in the animacy level of the center. Thus, a beehive is a naturally good patient, and so a myth with Honey/Hive as its center will tend toward patient-centricity. Similarly, a human ancestor is a naturally good agent. So a myth with such an ancestor, for example, *Tōtosō'nx*, as center will tend naturally to be agent-centric.

Mythology is, of course, somewhat special insofar as it represents a type of discourse in which animacy levels are not necessarily determinate of agency. Thus, we find stones and door handles (“inanimate” objects) that talk and give advice, behaving like perfectly good agents. Indeed, I will argue subsequently that some of these modifications of normal agentive capacity of an entity are linked with the agent-/patient-centric bias of a myth corpus. Nevertheless, a general correlation between animacy level and overall agency can be assumed as a working hypothesis.

To separate out the influence of animacy level from agent-/patient-centric variation, we need a controlled comparison in which animacy levels of the centers can be held more or less constant, and in which, simultaneously, the thematic structures are parallel. In searching for materials for comparison, I have struck upon myths about “boys” growing into manhood, which are prominent both on the Northwest Coast and in Central Brazil (though Shokleng, for whatever reasons, lack such a myth). In “boys” we have centers that are potentially ambiguous with respect to agentive capacity, standing in between “children” (good patients) and “men” (good agents), and, indeed, myths about growing into manhood typically show internally some changes in agency through the course of the narrative. My claim, however, is that, by means of a comparison of myths about boys, we should be able to determine whether agent-/patient-centricity is merely a variable determined by animacy level, or is itself a separate parameter in its own right.

The specific myths I submit here are (1) the Eastern Timbira myth of “*Aukē*,”¹³ concerned with a “boy” who became the first whiteman, and (2)

¹³ Curt Nimuendajú, *The Eastern Timbira*, *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 41 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1946), 245–246.

the Bella Coola myth of the "The Salmon,"¹⁴ concerned with the "Salmon-Boy." Owing to the length of the latter, however, I present only one of its episodes, which is thematically parallel to the *Aukē'* myth, but which is especially agent-centric and thus prejudices my comparison. Nevertheless, I have done an analysis of the total myth, and will discuss subsequently the relationship of this myth as a whole to the *Aukē'* myth:

AUKĒ'

A village wanton named *Amčōkwę'i* became pregnant. Once bathing together with many others, she suddenly heard the cry of a wild guinea pig. Amazed, she looked about in all directions, but was unable to discover where the cry came from. Soon after she heard it again. She went home with the rest and lay down on her bedstead. Then the cry resounded a third time, and now she recognized that it came from her own body. Then she heard the child speak, "Mother, are you already tired of carrying me?" "Yes my child," she answered, "do come out!" "Well, on such and such a day I shall come out."

When *Amčōkwę'i* was in labor, she went into the woods alone. She laid paty leaves on the ground and said, "If you are a boy, I shall kill you, but if you are a girl, I'll raise you." Then she gave birth to a boy. She made a hole, buried him, and went home. When her mother saw her coming, she asked about the child and scolded *Amčōkwę'i* when she heard what she had done, saying she should have brought the boy for his grandmother to raise. And when she learnt that he was buried under a *sucupira* tree, she went there, dug up the child, washed it, and brought it home. *Amčōkwę'i* did not want to nurse it, but the old woman did it in her place. Then the little *Aukē'* addressed his mother, "Well, so you do not want to raise me?" She got frightened and answered "Yes, I shall raise you."

Aukē' grew very rapidly. He had the gift of transforming himself into all sorts of animals. When he bathed he turned into a fish; and when he went with others to a farm he turned into a jaguar, thereby terrifying his relatives. Then *Amčōkwę'i*'s brother decided to kill the boy. As he was seated eating a meat pie, the uncle treacherously knocked him down from behind with a club, and buried him behind the hut. But the next morning the boy came back home covered with earth. "Grandmother," said he, "why did you kill me?" "It was your uncle who killed you for frightening the people!" "No," *Aukē'* promised, "I shall hurt no one." But soon after, while playing with other children, he again turned into a jaguar.

Then his uncle resolved to get rid of him in another way. He called him to come along on a honey-gathering trip. The two crossed two ranges of mountains. When they got to the top of a third, the man seized the boy and hurled him into an abyss. But *Aukē'* turned himself into a dry leaf and was slowly wafted to the ground. He expectorated and round about his uncle grew steep cliffs, from which his uncle vainly tried to get out. But *Aukē'* went home and said his uncle would return later. When he had not returned after five days, *Aukē'* magically removed the rocks and then his uncle at last came home, nearly starved.

He planned to kill *Aukē'* in still another way: he put *Aukē'* on a mat and gave him food; but *Aukē'* said he knew perfectly well what he was trying to do. Then he knocked the boy down

¹⁴ Boas, pp. 73-83.

with his club and burnt him up. Then all left the village and moved to a distant spot. Am̄ōkwę'i cried, but her mother said, "Why are you crying now? Did not you yourself want to kill him?"

After a considerable time Am̄ōkwę'i asked the chief and elders to have Aukē's ashes brought. They sent two men to the deserted village to see whether the ashes were still there. When the two arrived, they saw that Aukē' had turned into a white man. He had built a large house and created negroes out of the black heartwood of a tree, horses out of bacury wood, cattle from piquiá. He called the two messengers and showed them his estate. Then he called his mother to live with him. Aukē' is Emperor Dom Pedro II [reigned 1831-1889].

THE SALMON

Then he [the Sun] devised another way of killing his visitor [Salmon-Boy]. He told his daughters to call him into his house. They went, and the young man re-entered the House of Myths. In the evening he lay down to sleep. Then the Sun said to his daughters, "Early tomorrow morning climb the mountain behind our house. I shall tell the boy to follow you." The girls started while the visitor was still asleep. The girls climbed up to a small meadow which was near a precipice. They had taken the form of mountain-goats. When the Sun saw his daughters on the meadow, he called to his visitor, saying, "See those mountain-goats!" The young man arose when he saw the mountain-goats. He wished to kill them. The Sun advised him to walk up the right hand side of the mountain, saying that the left-hand side was dangerous. The young man carried his bow and arrow. The Sun said, "Do not use your own arrows! Mine are much better." Then they exchanged arrows, the Sun giving him four arrows of his own. The points of these arrows were made of coal. Now the young man began to climb the mountain. When he came up to the goats, he took one of the arrows, aimed it, and shot. It struck the animal, but fell down without killing it. The same happened with the other arrows. When he had spent all his arrows, they rushed up to him from the four sides, intending to kill him. His only way of escape was in the direction of the precipice. They rushed up to him, and pushed him down the steep mountain. He fell headlong, but when he was halfway down he transformed himself into a ball of bird's down. He alighted gently on a place covered with many stones. There he resumed the shape of man, arose, and ran into the house of the Sun to get his own arrows. He took them, climbed the mountain again, and found the mountain-goats on the same meadow. He shot them and killed them, and threw them down the precipice; then he returned. He found the goats at the foot of the precipice, and cut off their feet. He took them home. He found the Sun sitting in front of the house. He offered him the feet, saying, "Count them, and see how many I have killed." The Sun counted them, and now he knew that all his children were dead. Then he cried, "You killed my children!" Then the youth took the bodies of the goats, fitted the feet on, and threw the bodies into a little river that was running past the place where they had fallen down. Thus they were restored to life. He had learned this art in the country of the Salmon. Then he said to the girls, "Now run to see your father! He is wailing for you." They gave him a new name, saying "S̄l'ē'mstalalōst'aix' has restored us to life." The boy followed them. Then the Sun said, when he entered, "You shall marry my two eldest daughters."

Establishment of comparable animacy levels for Salmon-Boy and Aukē' is a

far from straightforward task; it requires a careful reading of the entire Salmon-Boy myth, of which I have presented here only a fraction. Such a comparison in fact reveals that we are dealing with figures categorizable as "adolescents." The protagonists of each myth are, initially, infants, Salmon-Boy having been found inside a salmon by a woman; at that time, he was "half as long as her forearm." Just as Aukē "grew very rapidly," so had Salmon-Boy, in a few days, grown "as tall as an ordinary child." Moreover, each character, while unmarried during the main episodes, matures through the course of the narrative, making his transition, finally in the last scene, to adulthood. I thus feel confident in considering the animacy levels of these characters to be comparable.

Thematically, these myths parallel one another as well, since they are, intuitively, about "killing." The main character is in each case the object of a plotted murder. Indeed, this parallelism is confirmed and strengthened by a consideration of the broader Salmon-Boy myth, of which this episode is one fragment. Here we find the Sun repeatedly "testing" Salmon-Boy by trying to kill him, just as repeated attempts are made to kill and dispose of Aukē. There is even an explicitly parallel motif, namely, transformation into a dry leaf/ball of bird's down while falling.

Moreover, both myths stand in opposition to the pair considered earlier, that is, "The Origin of Honey" and "Tradition of SE'Lia," both of these latter being concerned, thematically, with discovery of the world. In these killing plays no part. This can, indeed, be demonstrated by textual analysis, although it is perhaps intuitively obvious. Whereas the verb "see" dominates in the myths of discovery, occurring, respectively, twelve and seven times, "see" plays only an insignificant role in "The Salmon" and "Aukē," where it occurs four and three times respectively. Correspondingly, while "kill" is absent altogether from the discovery myths, it dominates textually in "The Salmon" and "Aukē," occurring, respectively, seven and six times. We are thus here in the presence of two myths that are very similar thematically, standing in contrast to other myths, and that have centers of a comparable level of animacy.

My argument, however, is that, in spite of the numerous similarities between these two myths, they are, from the point of view of agent-/patient-centricity, remarkably distinct. Salmon-Boy is in essence a little agent. The attempted murder merely furnishes him with an opportunity to show off his prowess, which he does in a dazzling sequence of agentive deeds, from killing the mountain-goats to bringing them back to life. While he is often a patient, his agency definitely predominates. Aukē, in contrast, is not so much a doer as

an undergoer of actions initiated by others. Thus, he is buried, dug up, "treacherously knocked down from behind with a club," seized, hurled into an abyss, and so forth. While he is in a number of instances the initiator of actions, as when he causes the cliffs to rise up about his uncle,¹⁵ he seems on balance to be much more of a patient. For the most part, he is a recipient of action, and in this he stands in contrast to Salmon-Boy, who is a doer par excellence.

Textually, this contrast emerges with equal clarity. Whereas Salmon-Boy has an agency index of about 80% in this episode, and a 60-65% index for the myth as a whole, the agency index for Aukē' is closer to 32%. Even if we omit the first two paragraphs, where Aukē' has not yet matured, the index still fails to exceed 40-45% for Aukē'. Despite the similarity in animacy level of the centers, we seem indeed to have here a sharp agent-/patient-centric contrast. We must thus conclude that, while agency is linked to animacy, the two parameters must nevertheless, for purposes of mythological analysis, be kept distinct.

Nor does this contrast appear to be random relative to the Northwest Coast and Central Brazilian mythologies. Central Brazil has a set of myths dealing with "The Origin of Cooking Fire,"¹⁶ the principal episode of which has as its center a "boy" growing into manhood. The episode is once again primarily patient-centric, focusing on how the boy was stranded in a nest, found by a jaguar, taken to the jaguar's camp, and so forth. I have calculated the agency index for a number of variants, and these range between 30-45%. Similarly, the Bella Coola have other myths about boys, and these typically turn out agent-centric. This suggests, without fully demonstrating, that we are not dealing with chance variations between texts, but with a systematic bias built into a mythology, and perhaps into an encompassing cultural matrix.

The Mythological Corpus

Implications of the Theoretical Model. So far I have concerned myself with manifestations of agent- and patient-centricity in given myths. I wish here to extend these considerations to the "mythological corpus" of a culture taken as a whole, asking what significance, if any, variations in agency may have for a

¹⁵ I do not wish to downplay the significance of Aukē's agency for an internal structural analysis of this myth. However, I am not here concerned with such an analysis. My purpose is rather to map out the overall agent-/patient-centric contrast.

¹⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969).

corpus. I am referring here not to overall statistical tendencies, but rather to what we may think of as “design features” of a mythology, especially the kinds of beings or entities portrayed in myths and their relationship to the mythology as a whole. For myths are surely one area in which the collective imagination, more or less unchecked by empirical-perceptual constraints, is able to manufacture a whole host of extraordinary entities, and to assign to them varying degrees of agentive capability. My question here is accordingly this: in what ways might an agent- or patient-centric bias, characteristic of a given mythological corpus, affect the “collective imagination?”

(1) Super-animacy. There is, of course, a tendency in every mythology for animacy levels to be modified, for animals to speak the way humans speak, for transformations between human and animal to occur, for objects to become agents, and so forth. Similarly, there is a tendency everywhere to modify the traits or characteristics of everyday entities, as in the creation of giant animals or humans, or in the fusion of animal with human traits. We may suspect that these modifications, affecting as they do the animacy level and, therefore, the agentivity of entities, correlate in some way with agent-/patient-centric bias. However, one characteristic of mythologies that bears an obvious correlation with agentive bias is the formation of what I will call “super-animate” entities, of which our Old Testament God is a sterling example.

I mean by “super-animate entity” a being that is endowed with extraordinary powers of control over events and actions. Such a being is a kind of ideal agent, possessing the ability to affect the world, that is, to create, to destroy, to modify, without simultaneously being affected by it. Thus, the super-animate entity is usually an agent in event types, rarely a patient. We may include in this category what are known as “culture heroes,” as well as true “gods,” provided we are sure that the properties of mythological beings so labeled actually match those described. My empirical claim is thus this: in proportion as we find an agent-centric bias in a mythological corpus, in that same proportion should we expect to find super-animate entities. Correspondingly, such entities ought to be less prominent in—or indeed altogether absent from—a corpus governed by a patient-centric bias.

(2) Individuation and Cross-Narrative Continuity. A second effect on the collective imagination stems from the inherent asymmetry in the relationship between agents and patients. Good agents (that is, more animate entities) are on a universal basis more natural centers for narrative than good patients (less animate entities). This is so because, whereas the range of actions of which a powerful agent is capable is virtually without limit, the range of effects that patient can undergo is more circumscribed. Doing something to an entity very often changes the nature of that entity. When an entity is affected in too great

a degree, we no longer recognize it as the same entity. Hence, there is a natural tendency, under a patient-centric bias, for the center of a narrative to fragment. In contrast, a good agent can continue, in theory indefinitely, to perform acts without experiencing any corresponding change in identity. Indeed, an entity becomes typically all the more salient, achieves an even more well-defined identity, the more it acts. We thus, so to speak, know an agent through its acts.

This asymmetry is responsible for a second major effect of agent-/patient-centric variability on the mythology as a whole. In an agent-centric corpus, we tend to find entities or characters who transcend the specific myth (cross-narrative continuity), and whose identities or "personalities" are comparatively sharply defined (individuation). It is as if these mythological characters achieve an independence from the text, a life of their own, apart from the specific narrative. In contrast, in a patient-centric corpus, the tendency is for specifically mythological characters to be "text-bound," that is, to appear only in a specific text, having no independent life, and to be less individuated or unique. We should thus, in some measure, be able to predict from inspection of a corpus in terms of cross-narrative regularity and individuation, the degree of agent- or patient-centric bias governing it, and we should be able to check this prediction against an analysis of agency of centers at certain levels of animacy.

Empirical Evidence. My empirical claim is that Bella Coola mythology, as recorded by Boas, is significantly more agent-centric than Shokleng mythology, or, for that matter, than the mythology of any of the Central Brazilian tribes of the Gê language family, although by no means am I claiming that these represent the extreme types of the agent-/patient-centric continuum. To establish this difference between the Shokleng and Bella Coola mythologies, I examine each corpus with respect to the effects discussed above.

(1) Super-animacy. Bella Coola mythology contains at least one entity that qualifies as "super-animate," though others, including Salmon-Boy, qualify in varying degrees. The most prominent entity, however, is the Sun, who is known as Senx, and also "called Tā'ata ("our father"), or Smai'yakila ("the sacred one"), or Smayalō'Lla."¹⁷ He is for Bella Coola a creator figure, who possesses extraordinary powers of agentive control, as indicated in the following passage:

After the water had subsided, Smai'yakila [the Sun] said, "I shall not make another deluge, and I will make the world beautiful." He told the porcupine that its meat should serve as food for

¹⁷ Boas, p. 29.

man, and that the soup made of its meat should strengthen man, and prevent him from falling sick. And he said, "Your quills will be used for piercing the ears of women when they want to perforate them for the use of ear ornaments." And he gave the marten its beautiful fur, and told the people to use it for blankets; and he taught them to make blankets of lynx and marmot skins; and he told the mountain-goat that man should use its hair for spinning and weaving, and that he should eat its meat; and he told the black bear that people should use its skin, and that man should eat its meat, while he forbade the women to eat bear meat; and he told the grisly bear that its skin should be used for blankets, and that its meat should be eaten by men and women.¹⁸

Sun is thus portrayed here as a controlling entity, "making," "telling," "giving," "teaching," and "forbidding," in short, constituting the world as we presently know it. He is also the agent who, in the village origin traditions, "sends down" to earth the first ancestors.

Sun is by no means a perfect agent, however. In "The Salmon" myth, discussed above, for instance, he is put in the role of patient by Salmon-Boy, who thereby demonstrates his own agentive powers. Sun is also, in certain traditions, originally "liberated from a box" by Raven. On balance, however, the Bella Coola Sun is seen as an especially powerful agent, capable of exercising control over virtually everything in this world.¹⁹

Shokleng mythology, in contrast, contains no entities of comparable animacy, though we do find analogous creation scenes. In these latter, however, the differences are especially striking. Shokleng mythology includes a lengthy origin account (the *vāñekren*), wherein we hear of how the tapir, jaguar, and snake were created. What is of interest, however, is that the creation in each case is effected not by a single super-animate actor, but always by a succession of actors. Thus, in the jaguar creation episode, one actor fashions an image of the jaguar from a certain type of wood; a second actor arrives and "paints" a portion of the animal; a third actor then arrives, painting an additional portion, and he is followed by a fourth, who completes the painting; finally, the jaguar is instructed as to how he ought to behave, in a passage reminiscent of the Bella Coola episode above, and he proceeds to cry out, imitating a certain bird. From this brief account, it is evident that the center of this protracted "creation" episode is the jaguar itself, the patient. This is thus a patient-centric episode, and, just as in "The Origin of Honey" myth discussed above, wherein a succession of birds searches for the Hive, we have here a succession of agents, each effecting some change upon the jaguar.

¹⁸ Boas, pp. 96-97.

¹⁹ Another powerful agent, for Bella Coola, is *Qama'its* (see Boas, p. 28), who rules the "upper heaven" just as Sun rules the "lower heaven."

The complementarity of these conceptions of “creation” is worth remarking upon. In Bella Coola, creation or transformation seems to occur effortlessly, with the creator-transformer himself performing multiple acts. However, this creation, as in our own Genesis myth, merely appears effortless thanks to the vast agentive power of the creator-transformer. In Shokleng, by contrast, creation appears as an arduous task, being accomplished only with the help of multiple agents. However, this arduousness of creation may be viewed as a product of the lack of agentive power of the creators. Whereas Bella Coola focus upon the agent, and upon his capacity for control, Shokleng focus upon the patient, and upon the multifaceted problem of effecting a transformation of it.

(2) Individuation and Cross-Narrative Continuity. Bella Coola mythology contains various examples of mythological entities whose existence transcends the single narrative. “Sun” has already been mentioned in this regard; he makes appearances not only in village origin traditions, but as well in “The Salmon,” as seen above, and in several other distinct myths, although, curiously, nowhere is he fully the center of a myth.²⁰ Similar to Sun is Raven, who likewise makes appearances in several distinct narratives, though he is not so unequivocally a strong agent. We could also mention the Snēnē’iq, oversized necrophagous humanoid creatures, who appear in several myths. However, in this case we are dealing not with a single individual, but with a species of mythological entities.

Seemingly as a result of cross-narrative continuity, many of these Bella Coola entities take on a life of their own, independent of the specific text. As Boas observed, the Bella Coola have in some measure evolved a “system,” “in which a number of supernatural beings have been coordinated.”²¹ Simultaneously, these beings show signs of individuation, though here the matter is far from clear-cut. Thus, while Sun typically occupies a lofty, fully controlling position, in “The Salmon” myth his schemes are thwarted by Salmon-Boy. Raven, in at least one myth, is a kind of tragicomic trickster figure, but in the village origin traditions he appears as one of those placid purposive ancestors, such as were responsible originally for populating this world. Nevertheless, the degree of individuation, at least of the Sun, is much greater than anything found in the Shokleng corpus.

Insofar as I could determine, Shokleng mythological entities are entirely

²⁰ This may be a typical property of super-animate entities generally; they become, so to speak, too lofty to be of human interest.

²¹ Boas, p. 27.

text-bound. None of them achieves a text-independence comparable to that achieved by the Bella Coola Sun. Thus, jaguar appears in one myth as a humanlike character, but there is no connection between this entity, who, incidentally, appears in no other myth, and the “jaguar” created in the above-mentioned myth. The latter is the actual prowling jaguar we know today. The same text-boundedness is true of every other mythological entity in the Shokleng corpus. In the lengthy origin saga (*vāñēkren*), however, certain individuals carry over from one episode to the next, so that we may detect here some cross-narrative continuity. Still, it is remarkable in just how small a measure we come to know these characters as “individuals,” and, indeed, what a minor role they play in the overall saga.

Conclusion

In moving to questions of super-animacy, cross-narrative continuity, and individuation, we have moved a seemingly long way from the original agent-/patient-centric parameter. We have moved to the heartland of mythology, to its design features. Yet I have argued that variability in these areas is systematically linked to variability along the centricity parameter. Indeed, the latter is a kind of nodal point or master variable, through which can be glimpsed systematic linkages among various otherwise apparently disparate aspects of a mythological corpus.

By no means do I believe that I have exhausted the systematic linkages. So much of mythology is concerned with questions of animacy and its modification; we can readily imagine that there is much more to the systematicity than I have described. Thus, in inspecting the Bella Coola and Shokleng mythologies I was struck by the contrast in animacy transformations used to account for present-day forms. Whereas Shokleng explain animal features by positing a previous humanlike form (the transformation decreases animacy), Bella Coola myths portray the human ancestors as having been once more animallike (the transformation increases animacy). It is possible that this contrast as well is systematically linked.

In any case, should the linkages I have proposed be verified by subsequent research, we will want to consider as a meaningful unit of analysis, alongside such other key analytic units as the motif, function, and myth, the mythological corpus or “mythology” itself. Indeed, it has been a central purpose of this paper to suggest that we can find variations between mythologies that are of the same systematic nature as variations between social organizations, languages, and other cultural systems. This is a variability complementary to, but distinct from, the kind of variability revealed by either (1) diffusionist

studies of motif distributions, or (2) structural studies of the differing realizations of certain universal binary oppositions.

Finally, the methodology employed here in uncovering these systematic linkages is grounded in an assumption about the close relationship between language and myth,²² and, indeed, in the assumption that myth is itself schematized discourse. Thus, I have argued that an agent- or patient-centric bias is not only intuitively felt, it is present actually in the linguistic tokens functioning as sign vehicles, that is, in their frequencies and distributions. Such a close connection between language and myth seems to me a far from improbable one. For mythological discourse, constituting as it does a more or less distilled form of language use, unencumbered by excessive referential and pragmatic constraints, comes perhaps the closest of any discourse mode to allowing for the free play of language-specific semantic structure. Such an assumption, anyway, would seem to me a fruitful one for guiding mythological research of this type.

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²² Indeed, it is possible that variation in agency/patiency may be linked with variations in the structure of language itself, for example, in the case-marking systems and topicalization devices. This is one hypothesis I am presently investigating. However, I am also considering possible correlations with social organization.