

MOTIF INDEX

Motif indexing is the process of breaking down a story into its smallest individual components (motifs) and arranging these pieces into an organized structure. The resulting index enables scholars to compare folktales across cultures by similar motifs, and serves as a story-finding aid and selective bibliography of folktales in single editions and collections. The motif index proper is often accompanied by several other indices that facilitate access to it, such as a subject index or a tale title index. While the entire reference work may be called a “motif index,” the book is actually a collection of indices that provide access to the primary component: the motif index proper.

Organization

There are several organizational schemes for the motif index proper, but the most common English language one is the alpha-numeric system devised in 1932 by Stith Thompson and published in his seminal work, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1955-58). The index is organized by broad categories that are assigned alphabetic letters (A=Mythological motifs, B=Animals, etc.). These categories are further divided into subcategories that are assigned a numeric range (B0-B99=Mythical animals, B100-B199=Magic animals, etc.). Within these subcategories, individual motifs are assigned specific numbers, and derivative or related motifs are then given decimals within that whole number classification (B81=Mermaid, B81.2=Mermaid marries man; B81.2.1=Mermaid has son by human father). This leads to a multi-layered system of classification, much like the Library of Congress system of cataloging books, which is flexible and immensely expandable for adding future motifs.

Access

The most common approach to finding stories in a motif index is from the specific to the general. The subject index, a vital complement to the motif index proper, is organized by major keyword, followed by a descriptive phrase and a pertinent motif number. A scholar who needs folktales involving mermaids, for example, would look up the keyword “Mermaid,” choose from among the short descriptive phrases the one for further study (“weds fisherman”), find the accompanying motif number (B81.2.5), and then locate the number in the motif index. The entry in the motif index will often include: the motif number, a description of the motif, a geographic or ethnic indicator, the last name of the author or editor of the collection of folktales, the title of the collection – or keywords from that title – and inclusive page numbers of the text in which the folktale can be found (**B81.2.5 Fisherman catches mermaid. SCOTLAND: East *The Singing Sack* 16-17**). In Thompson’s *Motif-Index*, many of these references are to other motif indices, so there may be several extra search steps before finding the original story text. All the tales that contain the sought motif would be listed, similar motifs would be nearby, and related motifs in other areas of the index would be cross-referenced. The final steps in finding the actual story text are: look up the author in the bibliography in order to find the complete publishing information about the collection, get the book from the library or bookstore, turn to the referenced pages, and read the tale. This process is particularly useful for finding all stories that include particular elements, such as a slipper or a dragon, but its primary function is to lead scholars into the motif index proper so that they can compare the occurrence of motifs across stories.

A general-to-specific approach is to use a synopsis of the index that functions much like a table of contents for the motif index proper, as it shows the structure of the motif index in its most general terms (A = Mythological Motifs, B = Animals, C=Tabu, D=Magic, etc.). Scholars interested in folktales about mermaids, for example, could begin with the letter “B” (representing Animals) and then proceed to the B0-B99 numbers that are devoted to Mythical animals; they could then

browse that section for mermaids (B81) and then explore the particular motifs of interest. While the first strategy is a specific search for a known topic, the second is more akin to browsing.

While most motif index reference works will contain both the motif index proper and a subject index, some books have added further finding aids to facilitate the discovery of precise tales or groups of tales. For example, the *Storyteller's Sourcebook* (1982) and its 1983-1999 supplement contain an alphabetic tale title index that points the user from a specific story title (i.e., *Cinderella*, *Maui and the Sun*, etc.) to the primary motif under which that story appears. To increase its utility to storytellers, librarians, and other story scholars, this source has also added brief story synopses, more complete references to text sources within the motif index proper, and an index arranging stories by geographic location and then by ethnicity, such as stories from Africa, and more specifically, stories from the Asante or Yoruba peoples.

Further Reading

- Baughman, Ernest W. *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America*. Indiana University Folklore Series, no. 20. The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966.
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- Ikeda, Hiroko. *A Type and Motif Index of Japanese Folk-Literature*. Folklore Fellows Communications, no. 209. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1971.
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- Neugaard, Edward J. *A Motif-Index of Medieval Catalan Folktales*. Binghamton, New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1993.
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