What is it that actually varies in folkloric texts?

Mari Sarv, Risto Järv, Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia

Variation is an essential feature of folkloric communication, or as Michel de Certeau (1984) expresses it in his study of everyday practices, the main attribute of cultural transmission is the changing nature of everything that is being passed on. In order to analyse the essence of variation in folklore, we have to observe several to many instances of a phenomenon. Variation takes place in very different aspects of folklore, and is often induced by the external circumstances like environment or language. The thick enough corpora of recordings of folklore enable us to analyse the essence of this variability with quantitative methods. Previous studies of folksongs have shown that the statistical analysis of poetical features of songs as well as their content allows us to locate their geographical origin (i.e., tracing the belonging of songs to the tradition of a local community) quite precisely. At the same time, there are clear differences in the geographical distribution of linguistic-poetical features, especially as compared to the elements of content. Our paper that uses Estonian runosongs and fairy tales as its source data aims to explore how much the variation of the texts is determined by the variation of language, poetic form, content, and by the personal style of the performer or recorder. The potential of computational methods to tackle the dichotomy of stability and variation in folkloric communication poses a most intriguing challenge.