# REPORTING CHARACTERS' SPEECH IN ENGLISH FAIRY-TALE DISCOURSE (ON THE BASIS OF JOSEPH JACOBS'S "ENGLISH FAIRY TALES")

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***Abstract:*** *The way English fairy tales introduce characters' words has hardly been measured. This article examines direct speech and reporting clauses in all 43 tales of Joseph Jacobs's "English Fairy Tales" using full-text counts. Direct speech fills about a quarter of the corpus; "said" and "says" supply 87.7% of the main speech verbs, and the choice among "said", "says" and "quoth" reveals a tale's oral or printed source.*

***Keywords:*** *fairy-tale discourse, direct speech, reporting clause, speech verb, historical present, inversion, orality.*

## Introduction

A fairy tale is told, and a large part of what is told is talk. Giants threaten, animals bargain, stepmothers give orders, and the listener hears them in their own words. Tannen (2007) calls such speech in storytelling constructed dialogue: the teller does not report what was said but stages it, and this draws the audience into the story. In the stylistics of narrative, Leech and Short (2007) arrange the forms of speech presentation on a scale that runs from the narrator's report of a speech act through indirect and free indirect speech to direct and free direct speech, the narrator's control weakening at every step. Lüthi (1982) observes that folktale characters have no inner life and that feeling is expressed through action and dialogue.

These ideas are well known, but the linguistic means by which the English fairy tale attaches speech to a speaker remain undescribed in figures. How much of

a tale is direct speech? Which verbs introduce it, in what order and in which tense? The aim of this article is to answer these questions and to show what the reporting clause contributes to fairy-tale discourse.

The material is the full set of 43 tales in Joseph Jacobs's *"English Fairy Tales"* (1890), about 51,000 words. Direct speech was identified by quotation marks, and speech verbs and reporting clauses were retrieved from the full text by pattern search and checked against samples; all counts are my own. Because quotation marks are sometimes nested, the share of direct speech is an estimate, while the verb counts are exact. Examples are cited by Jacobs's tale numbers, since pagination differs between editions.

**The share of direct speech**

Direct speech occupies about 24.8% of the running text, roughly one word in four, but the tales differ sharply. At one extreme stand cumulative tales, which consist almost entirely of repeated exchanges: in "The Cat and the Mouse" (No. 34) direct speech makes up 63.0% of the text, in "Master of All Masters" (No. 42) 62.6%, in "The Old Woman and her Pig" (No. 4) 49.9%. At the other extreme stand "The Master and his Pupil" (No. 15) with 5.5% and two tales taken from printed literature: "The Story of the Three Bears" (No. 18), reprinted by Jacobs from Southey, with 5.7%, and "The History of Tom Thumb" (No. 25), taken from a chap-book, with 6.4%. One text, "Mouse and Mouser" (No. 10), is printed as a play, with speakers' names instead of reporting clauses. The proportion of dialogue thus depends on the sub-genre and on the source of the tale: the closer a text is to oral performance, the more of it is spoken by the characters.

Indirect speech also occurs, but mainly as a summary that prepares a scene: "he told her that he had something to teach her" (Jacobs, 1890, No. 42) is followed at once by a dialogue in direct speech. In terms of Leech and Short's (2007) scale, the fairy tale chooses the forms in which the narrator interferes least.

**Speech verbs**

The verbs that introduce speech are few (see Table 1). Among the seven most frequent speech verbs, *"said"* and *"says"* together account for 606 of 691

tokens, or 87.7%. Verbs that describe the manner of speaking are rare: *"cried"* occurs 33 times, *"replied"* 13, *"answered"* 12 and *"exclaimed"* 8 in the whole collection.

Table 1: The most frequent speech verbs in Jacobs's *English Fairy Tales* (tokens in 43 tales)

| Speech verb | Tokens | % |
|---|---|---|
| *said* | 456 | 66.0 |
| *says* | 150 | 21.7 |
| *cried* | 33 | 4.8 |
| *quoth* | 19 | 2.7 |
| *replied* | 13 | 1.9 |
| *answered* | 12 | 1.7 |
| *exclaimed* | 8 | 1.2 |
| Total | 691 | 100 |

This poverty is functional. A neutral verb names the speaker and nothing else; the emotion is carried by the words of the character, often in rhyme or capitals, and by the voice of the person reading aloud. The finding agrees with Lüthi's (1982) view that the folktale does not describe states of mind. It also agrees with Ong's (1982) account of oral style, which prefers the repeated, expected word to the varied one.

**Order and position of the reporting clause**

When the reporting clause follows the quotation, the verb normally precedes its subject. With noun subjects this is the rule: about 235 clauses have the form of "said the Middle Bear" (Jacobs, 1890, No. 18). More remarkably, the same order prevails with pronouns. After a quotation, a speech verb is followed by a personal pronoun 106 times and preceded by one only 31 times, that is, inversion occurs in 77.4% of such clauses: "'Darter,' says she, 'put you them there pies on the shelf'" (Jacobs, 1890, No. 1). Biber et al. (1999) note that in present-day English inversion in reporting clauses is usual with noun subjects but unusual with pronoun subjects. The order *"says she"*, *"said he"* is therefore a stylistic signal: it marks the discourse

as traditional narration.

A second feature is the absence of any reporting clause. In about 240 places one quotation follows another directly, and the listener identifies the speaker from the pattern of the dialogue. Once the wolf and the pig have been introduced, their exchange is repeated bare: “Little pig, little pig, let me come in.” – “No, no, by the hair of my chiny chin chin” (Jacobs, 1890, No. 14). This is the free direct speech of Leech and Short (2007), and in the fairy tale it is made possible by formulaic repetition.

**Tense of the speech verb and the voice of the teller**

The most informative choice is that of tense and lexeme. *“Says”*, the historical present, occurs 150 times against 456 for *“said”*, but it is not spread evenly: 90 of the 150 tokens (60.0%) belong to two tales, “Tom Tit Tot” (No. 1, 50 tokens) and “Cap o’ Rushes” (No. 11, 40 tokens). In each of them *“said”* occurs only 11 times. Both tales came to Jacobs from the “Suffolk Notes and Queries” of the *Ipswich Journal*, and of the first he writes: “I have reduced the Suffolk dialect” (Jacobs, 1890, Notes, No. 1). The dialect was reduced, but the present tense of the teller remained: “‘Why, I love you as fresh meat loves salt,’ says she” (Jacobs, 1890, No. 11). Schiffrin (1981) showed that the historical present is a device of spoken narrative, used in the clauses that carry the events of a story. In Jacobs’s texts it is concentrated in the speech verb and thus preserves the voice of an oral narrator inside a printed book.

The opposite pole is *“quoth”*. Of its 19 tokens, 15 stand in “Jack the Giant-Killer” (No. 19), which Jacobs compiled from two chap-books: “‘Oh, Giant,’ quoth Jack, ‘where are you now?’” (Jacobs, 1890, No. 19). The archaic verb belongs to the printed, bookish tradition. Between the two poles lies neutral *“said”*, the form of the editor himself, who declared that he wished “to write as a good old nurse will speak when she tells Fairy Tales” (Jacobs, 1890, Preface). The speech verb is thus an index of provenance: *“says”* points to a dialect teller, *“quoth”* to the chap-book, *“said”* to the literary retelling.

**Conclusion**

Characters' speech in English fairy-tale discourse is reported by a small and stable set of means. Direct speech fills about a quarter of the text and rises to nearly two thirds in cumulative tales. It is introduced almost exclusively by *"said"* and *"says"*, so that the reporting clause identifies the speaker and leaves expression to the quoted words. The clause is regularly inverted, even with pronoun subjects, and is often omitted where repetition makes the speaker predictable. Finally, the alternation of *"says"*, *"said"* and *"quoth"* is not free variation: it reflects the oral, edited or printed origin of a tale and allows several narrative voices to be heard in one collection. The reporting clause, usually regarded as a technical element, proves to be a marker of the genre and of the teller. These observations may be used in teaching the stylistics of English narrative and in translating fairy tales, where the neutrality of the speech verb should be preserved.

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