Rumours and contemporary legends today: "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" in RumorFolk database

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ABSTRACT

Although rumours and contemporary legends are widely present in our daily conversations, they can often be difficult to collect through interviews because informants can find it difficult to understand clearly what it is we want them to tell us.

When collecting such materials, it is therefore important to use strategies that assist us in the task of identifying rumours and legends. Once the materials have been collected, it is likewise important to ensure that they are kept under the best possible conditions so that they can be easily consulted during the subsequent analysis phase.

Given these challenges, the present paper describes strategies that are used to collect rumours and contemporary legends in the research conducted at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona (Catalonia, Spain). It explains how the information obtained during research is organised and introduced into the special "RumorFolk" database that has recently been created at the Folklore Archive of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili, and concludes by demonstrating how the entire process functions through the analysis of the various versions of one of the legends contained in the database: "The Vanishing Hitchhiker".

KEYWORDS

rumour; contemporary legend; database; RumorFolk; The Vanishing Hitchhiker

Resum

Tot i que els rumors i les llegendes contemporànies estan molt presents en les nostres converses del dia a dia, sovint és difícil recollir-les a través de la tècnica de l'entrevista, ja que als informants els pot costar identificar clarament el que volem que ens expliquin.

En la fase de recol·lecció dels materials és important, doncs, utilitzar estratègies que facilitin la tasca d'identificació de rumors i llegendes. Un cop recollits els materials, cal assegurar, així mateix, la seva preservació en les millors condicions possibles, de manera que es puguin consultar amb comoditat per tal d'abordar la fase següent que és la del seu estudi.

Tenint en compte aquests aspectes, el present article explica les estratègies que es fan servir per a la recol·lecció de rumors i llegendes contemporànies en la recerca que es du a terme a la Universitat Rovira i Virgili de Tarragona (Catalunya, Espanya). Així mateix descriu la forma en què s'organitza la informació obtinguda en la recerca i com aquesta informació s'introdueix en la base de dades especialitzada «RumorFolk», recentment creada a l'Arxiu de Folklore de la Universitat Rovira i Virgili. Finalment, tot aquest procés s'exemplifica amb l'estudi d'una de les llegendes que conté la base de dades i de la qual se'n conserven moltes versions: «L'autoestopista del revolt».

Paraules clau
rumor; llegenda contemporània; base de dades; RumorFolk; L'autoestopista del revolt

1. Introduction. The Folklore Archive[1]

The Department of Catalan Studies of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona (Catalonia) has a research unit called Arxiu de Folklore (Folklore Archive). The Archive is the direct result of the academic research carried out at our university in the field of folk literature. Over the years, students who have taken subjects in this discipline as part of the course in Catalan Studies have generated a whole series of materials based on their fieldwork and we have felt the need to preserve these materials. Furthermore, in addition to this strictly academic function, the Archive provides a space for research and helps to disseminate the results generated by this research.

The Archive was created in 1994 by professors Josep M. Pujol and Carme Oriol and has a research support assistant who, since 2005, has been Emili Samper. Moreover, the Archive periodically benefits from interns who provide essential help in cataloguing the inventory of materials that are added to it year on year.

Since 2012, the Archive has had an Internet portal (<http://www.arxiudefolklore.cat>) that is intended to serve two aims: to disseminate the activities carried out by the Archive's staff and to provide a single online point of access to its specialized database. These databases were created to provide support to different research projects and were originally intended for internal use only. However, over time we came to realize the advantages of making them accessible on the Internet so that we could provide permanently up-to-date information that was quick and easy to access (Oriol 2015: 337-338; Oriol-Pujol 2011*a*; 2011*b*). Currently the Archive's Internet portal allows access to three databases: ArxiuFolk, BiblioFolk and RondCat. A new database, Folklorists, is in the process of being built. Below, please find a short description of each of them:

1. The ArxiuFolk database (http://arxiufolk.arxiudefolklore.cat) contains graphic, sound and audiovisual documents resulting from the fieldwork carried out by students of the folk literature. These documents have mostly been obtained through interviews and deal with a number of genres such as folktales, legends, anecdotes, traditions, jokes, customs, phraseology, songs, etc. Most of the Archive consists of oral folklore documents; however, for many years we have also been incorporating samples of non-oral folklore such as graffiti. The Archive also contains other types of document that have arisen as a result of the new forms of communication that are now present in our society, such as messages sent by email or by Facebook. The students use a standardized form to enter the information into the ArxiuFolk database. In doing this, they are helped by certain criteria regarding the transcription and presentation of the documents. Likewise, there is also a list of genres that allows us to ensure that the user always uses the same terminology. Once the student has finished entering the information, the files are checked and incorporated into the public part of the database for consultation on the Internet. However,

access to the database is not open to anyone; instead potential external users must obtain a password by submitting a request outlining the reasons why they want access to the database.

2. The BiblioFolk database (http://bibliofolk.arxiudefolklore.cat) is one of the fruits of the project entitled the Bio-bibliographic Repertory of Catalan Folk Literature dedicated to research into printed publications (books and journals) containing data on Catalan folk literature from the 19th century until now (Oriol-Pujol 2010*a*, 2010*b*, 2011*c*). All the researchers working on the project use this database where they can simultaneously enter their research data using their own password. The database provides the researchers with a set of criteria which they have to follow when creating the files. When the researchers have finished entering the data into the files, their work is reviewed and then incorporated into the public part of the database, which can be consulted for free on the Internet.

3. The RondCat database (http://rondcat.arxiudefolklore.cat) is one of the results of the project Catalan Folktales, which aims to catalogue, study and disseminate Catalan folktales. The project has also led to the publication of the books *Índex tipològic de la rondalla catalana* (Oriol-Pujol 2003) and *Index of Catalan Folktales* (Oriol-Pujol 2008), the latter appearing in the series Folklore Fellows' Communications of the Academia Scientiarum Fennica. RondCat is a multilingual tool (in Catalan, English, Spanish and French) that allows the user to consult information about the Catalan folktales that have been collected throughout the Catalan speaking areas since the publication of the first collection of folktales in 1853 by Manuel Milà i Fontanals up to the present day. Of the 5.975 folktales in the database, forty-seven per cent have been related to the international index (Uther 2004), which leaves fifty-three per cent that have not. We are currently working on cataloguing this second group of folktales with the aim of creating an index of folktales that have no relation to any of the types on the international index.[2]

4. The Folklorists database (http://folkloristes.arxiudefolklore.cat) is intended to act as a dictionary of Catalan folklorists. In the first phase, the content of the database is presented in Catalan, and in a second phase, this same information will be provided in Spanish and English. Each folklorist will have a file with the following content: photograph, biographical data (with particular focus on folkloric activity), folkloric publications, studies on their work in the field, and a brief selection of representative texts. The aim of including these texts is for the database to be useful for cultural outreach and educational purposes.

2. The RumorFolk database

The RumorFolk database (http://rumorfolk.arxiudefolklore.cat) was created at the beginning of 2016 to provide online access to the rumours and contemporary legends that are preserved in the Folklore Archive of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili. The ultimate aim is for users to be able to consult the database in either

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2. See Oriol (2015: 338-344) for details and examples about these three databases: ArxiuFolk, BiblioFolk and RondCat.

Catalan or English, although currently work is only being conducted on the Catalan version.

RumorFolk

Base de dades de rumors i llegendes contemporànies

| Introdueix la cerca... | Cerca |

Inici · Cerca avançada · Què és RumorFolk

RumorFolk

Files in the Folklore Archive database contain the following fields:

1. Details of the informant: name, gender, age, profession, place of birth and place of residence.
2. Details of the document: plot, location (place where the story occurs), comments by the informant, observations (remarks, analysis) by the collector and date of collection.
3. Catalogue information: type number and cataloguing notes.
4. Details of the collector: name and surname, age and e-mail address.

The information in the RumorFolk database can be consulted in two ways:

1. A basic search (with a single search box),
2. Or an advanced search (where the user specifies particular fields in which they want to search for information).

To see what a file looks like, we can search for a specific document in the database. We enter the word "autoestopista" ("hitchhiker" in Catalan) and we get some results. By selecting the first, we can see how the details regarding this version of the legend of the vanishing hitchhiker are presented. By clicking on the type number that we have assigned to it (using our own numbering system) we can see the title and the generic summary of this legend.

Tipus: 2A
L'autoestopista del revolt
Elisenda
27-12-2009

Dades de l'informant		Lloc de residència		Lloc de naixement	
Nom	Elisenda	País	Països Catalans	País	Països Catalans
Sexe	Dona	Regió	Catalunya	Regió	Catalunya
Edat	29	Comarca	Tarragonès	Comarca	Tarragonès
Ocupació	Administrativa	Municipi	Pobla de Mafumet, la	Municipi	Tarragona

Dades del registre	
Tipus	2A
Localització	El Coll de l'illa, Montblanc
Data de recollida	27-12-2009
Argument	Una vegada un home circulava de nit per una carretera de corbes. De sobte va veure una noia que feia autoestop i va aturar el vehicle per recollir-la. Ell li donava conversa però ella no parlava gens. Tot d'una, la noia li va dir: compte amb la corba. Al cap d'un minut va tornar a dir: compte amb la corba. El conductor, que no entenia res, va continuar conduint amb molta precaució. En el moment de traçar una corba molt tancada la noia va fer un crit fortíssim i, quan el conductor va mirar al costat per veure el que passava, va adonar-se que ja no hi era, havia desaparegut. L'home va voler investigar què havia passat. Finalment va trobar un retall de diari antic on explicava que una noia jove feia uns cinc anys havia tingut un accident i havia mort en aquell tram de carretera.
Comentaris de l'informant	La informant diu que la primera vegada que va sentir aquest relat va ser durant una excursió de cap de setmana a Miramar, un petit poble molt a prop de Montblanc. Per aquest motiu sempre que ha explicat aquest relat l'ha situat al Coll de L'illa.
Observacions del col·lector	Aquest relat possiblement sigui un dels més coneguts entre les llegendes urbanes. Jo personalment sempre l'he situat a les corbes del Garraf. La primera vegada que me'l van explicar de petita, em van dir que aquests fets havien passat a les corbes del Garraf. És un dels relats que recordo haver explicat més vegades, sobretot a les nits vora el foc, en llocs ben tranquils quan explicàvem "històries de por" amb els amics. En el llibre *Benvingut/da al club de la SIDA* aquesta llegenda urbana rep el nom: 16 "L'apareguda del revolt". Aquest recull de llegendes diu que aquesta és una de les més versionades i conegudes fins al dia d'avui. També parla de la importància i l'interès que desperten les històries de persones desaparegudes. Aquesta llegenda urbana, a part de ser molt coneguda des del punt de vista de la narrativa oral, també l'hem pogut veure reflectida en produccions cinematogràfiques i en articles de premsa. En el llibre podem veure la còpia d'un d'aquests articles de premsa que parlen del tema.
Notes	Mot. E332.3.3.1 The Vanishing Hitchhiker (Thompson); Mot. E332.3.3.1 The Vanishing Hitchhiker (Baughman); 01000 The Vanishing Hitchhiker (Brunvand); 16 L'apareguda del revolt (Pujol/GRFO).
Col·lector	Emma Salvat Virgili, 31 anys

Example

3. Collecting rumours and legends

Although rumours and contemporary legends are widely present in our daily conversations, they can often be difficult to collect through interviews because informants can find it difficult to understand clearly what it is we want them to tell us. When collecting such materials, it is therefore important to use strategies that assist us in the task of identifying rumours and legends. We will now describe how we tell our students to go about collecting rumours and legends.

The students use the interview technique to compile their own collections of rumours and legends. Right at the start they are given the following documents: a set of instructions on how to conduct the interview, and two lists of rumours and legends, one of which contains a set of complete summaries so that the collector is familiar with the stories, and another list of rumour and legend themes that is to be used in the interview with the informant.

The list of rumour and legend themes has been created using the "incipit" technique, which is used, for example, to collect ballads. This technique consists of using the first words or phrases in a text in order to get the informant to identify the story without being influenced by any particular version. The list groups similar rumour and legend themes together. This encourages the informant to recall stories that they know or to tell new ones related to the particular theme.

For example, in the section on "Apparitions and prodigies" we find various summaries. The first is as follows:

> 2A. L'AUTOESTOPISTA DEL REVOLT. Un automobilista que circula de nit per una carretera que té molts revolts recull una noia tota vestida de blanc que fa autoestop. Just abans d'un revolt molt tancat, la noia fa un crit. El conductor es gira i veu que la noia ha desaparegut. Quan arriba al primer poble i intenta aclarir què ha passat, la policia li ensenya una foto de la desconeguda: és una noia que anys enrere havia mort d'accident en aquell mateix indret.

> [2A. THE VANISHING HITCHHIKER. A motorist is driving at night along a winding road and picks up a hitchhiking girl who is dressed all in white. Just before a very sharp bend, the girl shouts out. The motorist turns to find that the girl has disappeared. When he reaches the next village and tries to find out what has happened, the police show him a photo of the mystery girl, who turns out to have died in an accident at the same spot several years before.]

This complete summary is modified for the informants in the following way: "2A. Un automobilista que circula per una carretera amb molts revolts veu en un costat de la carretera una noia aturada" [A motorist who is driving along a very windy road sees a girl waiting at the side of the road].

The rumour and legend themes help to guide the conversation. The informant may be asked the following questions:

Do you know the story? If the informant answers yes and shows that they know the story well, they will then be asked:

Does it occur in a specific place? The information given by the informant is entered into the "location" box.

Have you ever told this story? The informant's answer shows whether they have ever told the story or merely heard it.

Can you remember any details regarding the times that you have been told the story or have told it yourself? This information is entered in the "informant's comments" box.

The strategy described up to now has been found to be very productive for obtaining rumours and legends. At this point it is worth stating that some stories that were frequently recorded years ago are no longer well known, and that other stories have emerged in their place. We have also observed that some very well-known legends have evolved over time and now have different endings from those they had years ago, as is the case with "The Vanishing Hitchhiker", as we will now see.

4. Example: The Vanishing Hitchhiker

The legend has been well studied since Richard K. Beardsley and Rosalie Hankey recorded it in 1942. We can find it in Thompson's Motif Index (1955-58)[3] and in Baughman's catalogue of English and North American folktales (1966: 148). It also appears in the latest encyclopaedia of urban legends by Brunvand (2012).[4] Brunvand (1981, 2001) and Gillian Bennett (1998, 2011, 2013, Bennett-Smith 2007) have studied the legend on several occasions. In the Catalan ambit, Josep M. Pujol (with the Osona Folklore Research Group) catalogues it under the number 16 (2002: 118). In the RumorFolk database, the legend is listed as type 2A "L'autoestopista del revolt" / "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" and information on the alternative cataloguings of the legend can be found in the "Notes" field.

In the Folklore Archive we can find 40 versions of the legend collected between 2009 and 2016, although these are still being introduced to the RumorFolk database.

In most of these versions, the story takes place at various locations in the province of Tarragona, often on roads that are difficult to access or that have restricted visibility (from Vilaplana to la Mussara, from els Reguers to Alfara de Carles, from l'Ampolla to el Perelló, from Deltebre to l'Ampolla or from Alcanar to Ulldecona, for example). The most frequently cited location, with eight versions, is Coll de Lilla, a natural pass over the Miramar massif that connects the Alt Camp and Conca de Barberà districts.

The field observations by the collector provide interesting information about the origin of the legend and its relation with films or the press. As Emma Salvat explained in 2009:

> Aquesta llegenda urbana, a part de ser molt coneguda des del punt de vista de la narrativa oral, també l'hem pogut veure reflectida en produccions cinematogràfiques i en articles de premsa.

> [This urban legend, in addition to being very well known in oral literature, can also be found in film and newspaper articles.]

Marta Arnau stated in 2011 that:

> De fet, ara mateix recordo que en moltes pel·lícules apareix aquesta escena, sense gaires variants. Sol ser de nit, el conductor un home i el fantasma una noia.

> [In fact I can remember this scene appearing in many films with very little variation. It usually happens at night, the driver is a man and the ghost is a girl.]

Bennet & Smith (2007: 288) explained that:

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3. Mot. E332.3.3.1 "Ghost of young woman asks for ride in automobile, disappears from closed car without the driver's knowledge, after giving him address to which she wishes to be taken. Driver asks person at address about the rider, finds she has been dead for some time. (Often driver finds that ghost has made similar attempts to return, usually on anniversary of death in automobile accident. Often ghost leaves some item such as a scarf or a traveling bag in car)".

4. Type 1000. "Ghostly or heavenly hitchhiker vanishes from moving car, sometimes after giving warning or prophecy. Portrait identification and sweater-on-grave motifs may occur".

Vanishing Hitchhiker stories turn up in a variety of media as well as in a variety of places. They may be found in literary works, magazines, folklore journals, and popular story compilations. They also circulate as topical rumours reported by newspaper.

The use of the legend in audiovisual media leads to a two-way relationship, as Koven (2008: 69) points out:

> Popular culture has been one of the chief disseminators of contemporary legends in our society, through not just film but television programming as well. Both types of cinematic presentation draw on contemporary legend materials for their story lines but also, by retelling and reshaping the legends, redistribute them to a new generation.

Returning to the versions in the Folklore Archive, in 2013 Sarai Pastó offered a possible reason for the spread of this legend via cinema:

> En [sentir] explicar aquesta llegenda em va venir a la memòria que a mi també em sonava. Tot i així, jo la coneixia a través d'una pel·lícula. A vegades agafem els arguments d'una pel·lícula de terror i l'acabem transformant en un fet real que sabem o assegurem que li ha passat a algú.

> [When I heard this legend being told, I realised that I had heard it before. However, this was from a film. Sometimes we take events from a horror film and end up turning them into a real event that we know or are convinced has really happened to someone else.]

These film versions can therefore end up influencing and altering the story. For example, in another version collected in 2014, the 15 year-old informant stated that she knew the legend, but with an important difference: "La diferència era que quan l'home es gira a veure la noia, deixa de mirar la carretera, es desvia i xoca" [The difference is that when the man turns to look at the girl, he takes his eyes off the road, swerves and crashes].

When she was asked where she had encountered this version, the informant said she had seen it in a film, probably *Urban Legend*.

(Fig. 3): *Urban Legend* (1998)

In fact, the film *Urban Legend*, directed by Jamie Banks in 1998, is a very good example of the reciprocal influence between contemporary legends and cinema because the film's "killer bases the methodology of killing the victims on certain contemporary legends" (De Vos 2012: 22). As Koven (2008: 105-106) explains:

> *Urban Legend* is the most obvious example of *multiple fusion narratives* –films that fuse together a number of legend texts (through either ostension or dialogue). [..] The film uses *ostensive embedded narratives* as murder device in a horror film.

> Urban legends are also presented in the movie as more serious ostensive embedded narratives: the whole premise of the film is that a killer is enacting these legends "for real".

The versions presented in this film are portrayed as "real events" and have directly influenced subsequent transmitters of the story. The changes to this legend, therefore, are similar to what De Vos (2012: 22) refers to as the "Disneyfication of folklore", whereby informants are familiar with the versions portrayed in film and "often do not realize that there are other versions". In this regard McKechnie (2010: 51) asserts that:

> *Urban Legend* has had a notable effect on the transmission of contemporary legends [...]. While this film could not exist without the contemporary legends themselves, its depiction of them has served as the variants transmitted by people who have viewed it, including several of my informants. While researching in MUNFLA, I found several interviews with informants whose familiarity with contemporary legends [...] came from having viewed them in *Urban Legend* [...]. Thus one film has managed to influence which variants of several contemporary legends are transmitted.

In fact, regarding this particular legend, the influence on the informant can be so strong that it can led to two different plots being mixed up. Strictly speaking, the film does not actually depict the legend of the vanishing hitchhiker, but rather type 1866 in Brunvand's catalogue which also features a car. And, on this occasion, the legend really does have a tragic ending in which "gangs pursue and kill motorists who flash lights".

Consequently, the trend we observe is for the latest versions collected in the Folklore Archive to adopt this tragic turn of events at the end of the tale and to turn it into a horror story. Whereas in the best known versions of type 2A the hitchhiker's role is to warn the driver and save him from having an accident, in the later versions, the girl takes on a negative role and brings the story to a bad ending. In this regard, it had already been noted both by Bennet and by Campion-Vincent and Renard (2002: 63) that in a small number of older versions of this legend the ghostly hitchhiker was a bad omen for the driver and that the shout that she gives out was not intended to warn him of a dangerous bend in the road but rather to cause an accident in the same place where she herself had been killed:

Rarement –mais cela mérite d'être noté–, l'autostoppeur fantôme est un signe de malheur pour l'automobiliste. Gillian Bennett (1984) signale ce sous-motif de l'auto-stoppeur qui provoque un accident. Une de mes étudiantes, qui s'attache à la légende de la « Dame blanche de Montagnac » (Hérault), a recueilli quelques récits où l'autostoppeuse pousse un hurlement, non pas pour prévenir le conducteur de la présence d'un virage dangereux, mais bien pour provoquer un accident, à l'endroit même où elle avait trouvé la mort.

5. Conclusions

With the creation and dissemination over the Internet of the specialized databases ArxiuFolk, BiblioFolk and RondCat, and the work under way on the Folklorists database and RumorFolk database, the Folklore Archive is continuing in its aim of becoming a virtual space specialized in folk literature that strengthens research in the discipline and transfers knowledge to society. Based on our experience, we are convinced that the Internet offers many new possibilities for carrying out research into folk literature and we fully intend to maintain our efforts in this area.

As far as the legend "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" is concerned, it seems that the versions in which the legend has a tragic ending are probably influenced by the film *Urban Legend* (or other films made in a similar vein) and may cease to be exceptions and instead become more stable variants of this plot. The analysis and study of any newer versions that are added to the RumorFolk database will allow us to confirm whether this has actually become the case.

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