Biogeographical distributions of trickster animals

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Abstract

Human language encompasses almost endless potential for meaning and folklore can theoretically incorporate themes beyond time and space. However, actual distributions of the themes are not always universal and their constraints remain unclear. Here, we specifically focused on zoological folklore and aimed to reveal what restricts the distribution of trickster animals in folklore. We applied the biogeographical methodology to 16 taxonomic categories of trickster (517 data) and real (93'090'848 data) animals obtained from large databases. Our analysis revealed that the distribution of trickster animals was restricted by their presence in the vicinity and, more importantly, the presence of their corresponding real animals. Given that the distributions of real animals are restricted by the annual mean temperature and annual precipitation, these climatic conditions indirectly affected the distribution of trickster animals. Our study, applying biogeographical methods to culture, paves the way to a deeper understanding of the interactions between ecology and culture.

1 Introduction

The hallmark of human language communication is its expressibility. It can enable us to communicate topics remote in time and space (i.e., displacement, Hockett and Hockett (1960)). Folklore is an aspect of human culture that strongly reflects the expressive characteristics of human language. In theory, folklore can refer to animals unseen by storytellers and even describe imaginary animals that do not exist in the real world (Blust, 2000). Such fictional features can stimulate our curiosity and explorative tendencies (Dubourg and Baumard, 2022). However, worlds invented for fiction are not free from cognitive constraints. For example, the cost of a magical spell that violates physical laws is not randomly decided; rather, it is based on actual inferences about the physical world (McCoy et al., 2019). Similarly, ecological factors can restrict the content of folklore. This study focuses on the ecological factors that restrict the theoretically infinite meaning spaces of folklore.

Researchers have discussed the relationship between cultural and ecological factors for decades. Anthropologists, geographers, and other social science and humanities scholars have argued that natural environments are a major source of cultural diversity (Collard and Foley, 2002; Orlove, 1980); for example, material cultural artifacts such as hunting tools vary across environments (Osborn, 1999; Peng and Nobayashi, 2021). In addition, the environments can affect nonmaterial cultures. Recent studies show that climatic and/or ecological factors affect political ideologies (Conway et al., 2020), individualism and collectivism (Talhelm et al., 2014), social trust (Dang and Dang, 2021), belief in moralizing gods (Snarey, 1996; Botero et al., 2014), and faith in giant trees (Nakadai, 2023).

Commonly perceived as a collection of traditional stories that transmit cultural identity among social groups, folklore (detailed definition in Section 2.1) is an example of nonmaterial culture affected by the environment. Folklore is also vital in acquiring ecological knowledge of the local environment (Scalise Sugiyama, 2001; Ceríaco et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2017); for instance, the folk-biological knowledge or locals' understanding of harmful animals (Scalise Sugiyama, 2006), and the pairing of wild and domestic animals in antagonistic interactions (Nakawake and Sato, 2019).

Biogeography has, for decades, delved into the determinants of species distribution in nature (Lomolino et al., 2010). Climate conditions are predominant among the numerous biotic and abiotic factors affecting species distributions. For example, many studies have reported shifts in animal and plant distributions due to climate change (Feehan et al., 2009; Dyderski et al., 2018; Pacifici et al., 2015; Antão et al., 2022). The concept of biomes, or units of plant assemblages and associated animal species, highlights the importance of climate conditions on species distributions (Smith and Smith, 2012; Gramond, 2021; Hunter et al., 2021); thus, biomes worldwide are classified based on climate conditions (Moncrieff et al., 2016; Mucina, 2019).

Do animal distributions in folklore reflect the climatic conditions and distributions of real animals? This non-trivial question remains under-researched. Folklore concerning imaginary animals such as dragons exists worldwide (D'huy, 2013), even though such creatures do not exist in the real world. The distribution of real and trickster animals should be mismatched if motifs of trickster animals are transmitted freely across ecological conditions. However, ecological conditions are likely to restrict the animal distribution in folklore because folklore contains the ecological knowledge of local environments (Scalise Sugiyama, 2001; Ceríaco et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2017).

Here, we statistically analyzed databases on tricksters, real animals, and climate conditions to find the determinants of animal distribution in folklore (Fig. 1). We used tricksters (detailed definition in Section 2.1) because they appear worldwide as folklore characters (Leeming, 2014, 2022; Pache, 2012). Berezkin's collection has accumulated various types of folkloristic motifs worldwide, including trickster animals (Berezkin, 2014), and provides an ideal opportunity to quantitatively analyze the distribution of trickster animals. We hypothesized that (i) climate conditions regulate animal distribution in folklore as in nature, and (ii) there is an overlap in the distributions of real and trickster animals in folklore. To test these hypotheses, we classified the climate conditions where trickster and/or real animals were sampled into Whittaker's biomes (Whittaker, 1970). We compared the fractions of the biomes in real and trickster animals and found that the distributions of real animals were restricted by climate conditions and that the presence of real animals restricted the distributions of trickster animals. In other words, climate conditions indirectly restrict the distribution of trickster animals in folklore.

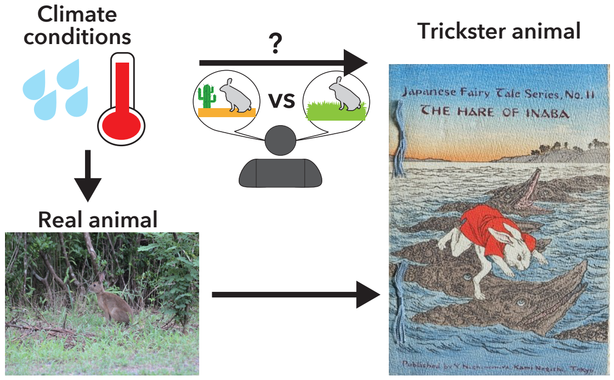

Figure 1: Constraints on the trickster animal distributions

Schematic representations of the manuscript show two environmental conditions: annual mean temperature and annual precipitation. These attributes affect the distribution of real animals that would potentially be represented as tricksters. The distribution of real animals denotes a necessary condition for the presence of corresponding trickster animals. This 1 presents the Japanese hare, *Lepus brachyurus* (Photo by Dr. Abby Darrah `https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/105058298`, CC-BY), and "The Hare of Inaba" (Illustration by Eitaku Kobayashi) as examples of a real and trickster hare, respectively. The image of "The Hare of Inaba" was obtained from the library of the Open University of Japan.

2 Methods

2.1 Definitions of folklore, motif, and trickster

This subsection describes folklore and details the motif of tricksters in folklore. The term "folklore" can include material cultures (Brown, 1998) but commonly refers to oral traditions. (Bascom, 1965) defined folklore as prose narratives including three categories: folktales, legends, and myths. We use an operational definition of folklore in this study as any records incorporated in the lifelong work of Dr. Yuri Berezkin, The Thematic Classification and Areal Distribution of Folklore-Mythological Catalogue (Berezkin, 2015, 2022).

The catalog includes more than 3,000 motif indexes developed by Berezkin, who defined motifs as "any episodes or images retold or described in narratives that are registered in at least in two (although normally in many more) different traditions" (Berezkin, 2015, p. 37). Berezkin classified motifs into 13 major categories, labeling them with letters from A to N; among such motifs, themes incorporating tricksters are classified as "M: ПРИКЛЮЧЕНИЯ III: ПРОДЕЛКИ И ЭПИЗОДЫ (M. Adventures III: Mischief and Episodes; translated by authors; see `https://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/berezkin/`)." Michalopoulos and Xue (2021) can be consulted for further description of this database.

Tricksters are a type of fictional character that performs tricks and deceptions or exhibits mischievous behaviors (e.g., stealing, cheating). The trickster's role is often metaphorically understood: for instance, as "a boundary-crosser" who travels between or connects two different worlds (Hyde, 2008). Berezkin (2010) defined the trickster as "any personage who deceives others, acts in a strange way or gets into comical situations but as one who combines two pairs of opposite characteristics which in the norm are related to different types of actors" (p. 124). Further, Berezkin (2014) suggests that animal or zoomorphic tricksters are found worldwide and have stable characteristics. Therefore, these features were conducive to the study's objectives.

stable characteristics. We thought these features were conducive to the accomplishment of the objectives of our study.

2.2 Data collection

We compiled data on the distributions of trickster animals from Dr. Berenzkin's world myth database (Berezkin, 2015, 2022), real animals from the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) (GBIF.org, 2020), and climate conditions from WorldClim 2.1 (Fick and Hijmans, 2017). We obtained folklore data via personal communication with Dr. Yuri Berezkin, downloading it from his database in July 2022. We used the motifs "Trickster–X" [m29a – m29i] and "Trickster is a(n) X" [m29l –m29y]. The items encased in square brackets show Berezkin's motif index and X represents the following common animals: anteater [m29qq], badger [m29x1], hawk [m29i], mink [m29d], mouse [m29n], opossum [m29l], owl [m29h], porcupine [m29r], rabbit/hare [m29g], raccoon [m29q], rat [m29m], raven/crow [m29a], skunk [m29c], spider [m29p], and wren[m29y]. We removed motifs of (i) monkeys [m29o], (ii) water birds [m29j], (iii) foxes, coyotes, or jackals [m29b], (iv) felines (jaguars, ocelots, or pumas) [m29w], (v) small ungulates [m29v], and (vi) turtles, toads, or frogs [m29k] from our analysis because of difficulties in subsequent analyses. For example, the types of animals to be included in monkeys [m29o], water birds [m29j], or small ungulates [m29v,] were unclear and we could not specify the scientific names of species corresponding to these animals. Diverse species were incorporated into groups comprising motifs of foxes, coyotes, or jackals [m29" " b], felines [m29w], and turtles, toads, or frogs [m29k]. These groups should be subdivided but such an action would require a detailed examination of the folklore for each animal. The amount of data sections remaining for each trickster animal ranged from 6 to 190 (a total of 517 pieces of data).

We used Wikipedia to assign the scientific name of the corresponding real animals for each trickster animal. We confirmed whether these suggested scientific names matched the common names of the animals by accessing the National Center for Biotechnology Information and the Encyclopedia of Life using the sci2comm() function in the taxize library (Chamberlain et al., 2013) version 0.9.98 in R (version 4.2.1). Four scientific names (two ground squirrels: *Geosciurus* and *Euxerus*, and two badgers: *Arctonyx hoevenii* and *Melogale subaurantiaca*) did not appear on either database, and we removed these species from further analysis (see also supplementary data). The distributions of the real animals were collected from GBIF using the occ_download function in the rgbif library version 3.7.3 (Chamberlain et al., 2022) in R. The coordinate data were cleaned using the clean_coordinates function of the CoordinateCleaner library (Zizka et al., 2019) with tests of capitals, centroids, gbif, institutions, and zeros. After data cleaning, the data segments of each animal category varied from 5′400 to 50′000′000 (a total of 93′090′848 pieces of data).

The intensity of data collection relating to tricksters and real animals would probably differ across species and locations. Therefore, we converted the coordinate data into hex grid indices using the geo_to_h3 function in h3 package version 3.7.4 (Uber Technologies Inc., 2018) of Python 3 (version 3.8.13). We set the resolution of the hex grids = 1, generating approximately 840 grids across the world map. In addition, we did not consider the number of reports per grid; we used only the presence data of the tricksters and real animals in each grid. After the data conversion, we obtained 257 data segments on tricksters and 3′413 data sections corresponding to real animals.

The climate data were assigned to each hex grid after the coordinates of tricksters and real animals had been converted. We retrieved the annual mean temperature and annual precipitation of the center point of each grid from WorldClim 2.1 (Fick and Hijmans, 2017) using the latlon-utils package version 0.07 (Sommer, 2022) in Python 3. We selected data on these two climate conditions because they enabled nine environment classifications (and one outlier) of Whittaker's biome (Whittaker, 1970). If the annual mean temperature and/or annual precipitation were unavailable (for example, when a center point of a grid existed on an ocean), we estimated the two groups of environmental data from the means at the coordinates inside the grid at which real animals were reported. We grouped the data into biome classes using the plotbiomes library (Stefan and Levin, 2022) in R.

2.3 Statistical analyses

We first investigated the fractions of Whittaker's biome classes. For each animal category, we compared the fractions of the biome classes between the tricksters and corresponding real animals. Furthermore, we compared the fractions of the biome classes with a null model generated by the hex grids and corresponding environmental conditions where at least one of the real animals in our analysis was reported. This null model represents the fractions of the biome classes in terrestrial areas. We used the chi-squared test in R to compare the fractions of the biome classes. We corrected the obtained p-values using the false discovery rate (FDR) method with the p.adjust function.

We then investigated whether the presence of tricksters in each grid was limited by the presence of the corresponding real animals. We calculated the conditional probabilities that the corresponding real animals were reported in a grid within which the focal animals appeared as tricksters in folklore. This conditional probability represents whether the corresponding real animals regulate the presence of trickster animals. A very low conditional probability would imply that trickster folklore could be transmitted to areas in which the locals were unfamiliar with the focal animals. Conversely, a high conditional probability would suggest that the presence of real animals was a necessary condition for the presence of trickster animals in the folklore. Notably, this conditional probability did not intend to show the predictability of the presence of trickster animals, which is beyond the scope of this study.

Next, we performed a permutation test to determine whether the distribution of each trickster animal was clogged. The above analysis indicated that the presence of the corresponding real animals was necessary for the presence of a trickster in the folklore (Fig. 2). Therefore, the null hypothesis was postulated—a focal animal appears as a trickster where the corresponding real animals are observed. We compared the median distance between the hex grids where the focal animals were reported as tricksters and the median of the simulated distances under the null hypothesis. We generated simulated distributions of trickster animals as per the null hypothesis, randomly selecting the hex grids within which the corresponding real animals existed as the number of grids in which the focal trickster animals were reported. We generated $5'000$ such distributions for each animal and obtained the probability distributions of the median distances according to the null hypothesis, which enabled us to calculate p-values. The attained p-values were corrected by the FDR method using the multitest.fdrcorrection function in the statsmodels library (Seabold and Perktold, 2010) in Python 3.

3 Results

3.1 Environmental constraints on animal distributions

We investigated the effects exerted by climate conditions on the distributions of real and trickster animals (bottom panels of Fig. 2). We classified climate conditions into nine groups (and one as an outlier) as per Whittaker's biome classes (Whittaker, 1970) and compared the fractions of the biome classes between each category of animal and terrestrial areas (i.e., the null model). The left column of Table 1 shows that the distributions of 12 of the 16 real animals differ from the null model, suggesting that annual mean temperature and annual precipitation restrict the distribution of many animals. The exceptional animals (i.e., hawk, owl, rabbit or hare, and spider) were found on all continents except Antarctica. In contrast, only four animals (mink, opossum, rave or crow, and skunk) differed in the fractions of biome classes between the tricksters and the null model (the middle column of Table 1). Trickster minks were found in temperate seasonal forests, opossums were noted in tropical seasonal forests/savannas, ravens or crows were observed in the tundra, boreal forests, template seasonal forests, or tropical seasonal forests/savannas, and skunks were seen in boreal forests or temperate seasonal forests. These analyses provide evidence that annual mean temperature and annual precipitation restrict real animal distributions; however, such environmental constraints are less evident on trickster animal distributions. This may, however, be due to differences in the amounts of data (see Section 2.2). The quantity of trickster-related data sections (between 6 and 190) may be too small in comparison to the number of biome classes (totaling 10); thus, the statistical power may not be large enough. The next subsection presents the analysis of the constraints on the distributions of trickster animals.

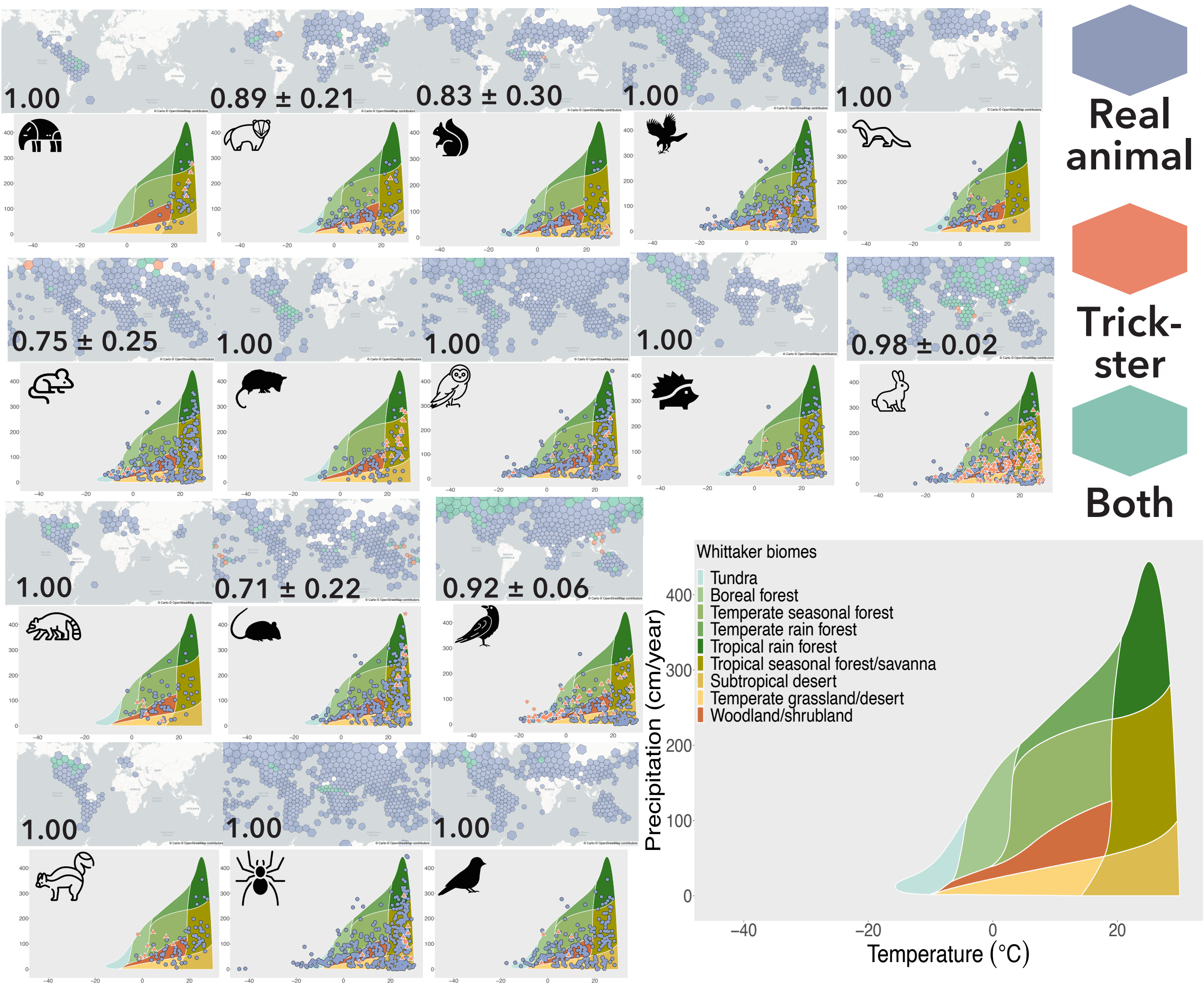

Figure 2: The distribution of trickster animals and their corresponding real animals

The distributions of 16 real and trickster animals (shown by icons) are shown on the world map (top) and Whittaker's biome (bottom), respectively. On the world map, the blue, orange, and green hex grids respectively represent where only the real animals, only the trickster animals, or both versions were reported, respectively. The numbers at the bottom left indicate the conditional probabilities that the corresponding real animals existed in the grid where the trickster animals were reported, and their 95% confidence intervals. The blue circles and the orange triangles in Whittaker's biome depict the climate conditions of the regions where the real animals and tricksters were reported, respectively. The background colors represent the biome classes (see the bottom right panel).

Table 1: P-values in chi-squared test to compare the frequencies of the biome classes

Category	Real vs Null	Trickster vs Null	Real vs Trickster
Anteater	1.46×10^{-4} ✓	5.00×10^{-1}	8.26×10^{-1}
Badger	2.13×10^{-5} ✓	1.02×10^{-1}	5.47×10^{-1}
Ground squirrel	2.09×10^{-7} ✓	5.00×10^{-1}	2.13×10^{-1}
Hawk	9.96×10^{-1}	6.29×10^{-1}	7.55×10^{-1}
Mink	2.59×10^{-9} ✓	4.08×10^{-2} ✓	5.72×10^{-1}
Mouse	1.77×10^{-2} ✓	7.11×10^{-2}	9.78×10^{-4} ✓
Opossum	1.07×10^{-2} ✓	4.08×10^{-2} ✓	1.80×10^{-1}
Owl	9.96×10^{-1}	8.47×10^{-1}	7.55×10^{-1}
Porcupine	3.38×10^{-2} ✓	2.45×10^{-1}	2.18×10^{-1}
Rabbit/Hare	8.00×10^{-2}	7.99×10^{-2}	2.92×10^{-1}
Raccoon	3.56×10^{-7} ✓	3.45×10^{-1}	7.69×10^{-1}
Rat	2.99×10^{-4} ✓	5.00×10^{-1}	5.47×10^{-1}
Raven/Crow	2.49×10^{-8} ✓	1.55×10^{-7}✓	1.81×10^{-5} ✓
Skunk	6.45×10^{-3} ✓	4.08×10^{-2} ✓	4.51×10^{-4} ✓
Spider	9.96×10^{-1}	6.29×10^{-1}	7.55×10^{-1}
Wren	8.84×10^{-7} ✓	3.40×10^{-1}	5.44×10^{-1}

✓represents p-value after FDR correction < 0.05.

3.2 Ecological constraints on animal tricksters

Next, we determined whether the trickster animals were freely distributed across the world or whether their presence was restricted by the presence of their corresponding real animals. For this purpose, we calculated the conditional probability that a corresponding real animal existed in the region where the trickster animal appeared in local folklore. The values in Fig. 2 show that the conditional probabilities of 14 animals were greater than 80%, suggesting that the presence of real animals is an almost necessary condition for the presence of trickster animals. As the real animal distributions were restricted by the two climate conditions, we concluded that these conditions indirectly restricted the distribution of the trickster animals. Further constraints were unclear because only three trickster animals (i.e., mouse, raven or crow, and skunk) differed in the fractions of the biome classes from their corresponding real animals (the right column of Table 1).

Mice and rats showed exceptionally lower conditional probabilities than the other animals. Although these species appeared in certain regions where only tricksters were observed, such areas were surrounded by the regions in which real mice and rats were seen (i.e., the orange areas surrounded by blue or green areas on the world maps in Fig. 2). These findings indicate that real mice and rats were likely to be present in these areas and suggest the possibility of missing data.

3.3 Constraints by neighbour tricksters

We also investigated whether the presence of trickster animals was affected by other tricksters in the neighborhoods (i.e., surrounding grids). Clusters of trickster animals are displayed on the world map Fig. 2. The permutation test revealed that the distance between the grids where trickster animals existed was shorter for 13 animals than the distance between randomly chosen grids in which the corresponding real animals existed (Fig. 3). These animals and the p-value calculated after FDR correction are noted here:: anteater $p = 9.58 \times 10^{-3}$; badger $p = 7.74 \times 10^{-1}$; ground squirrel 8.20×10^{-3}; hawk $p = 6.12 \times 10^{-1}$; mink $p = 1.45 \times 10^{-2}$; mouse

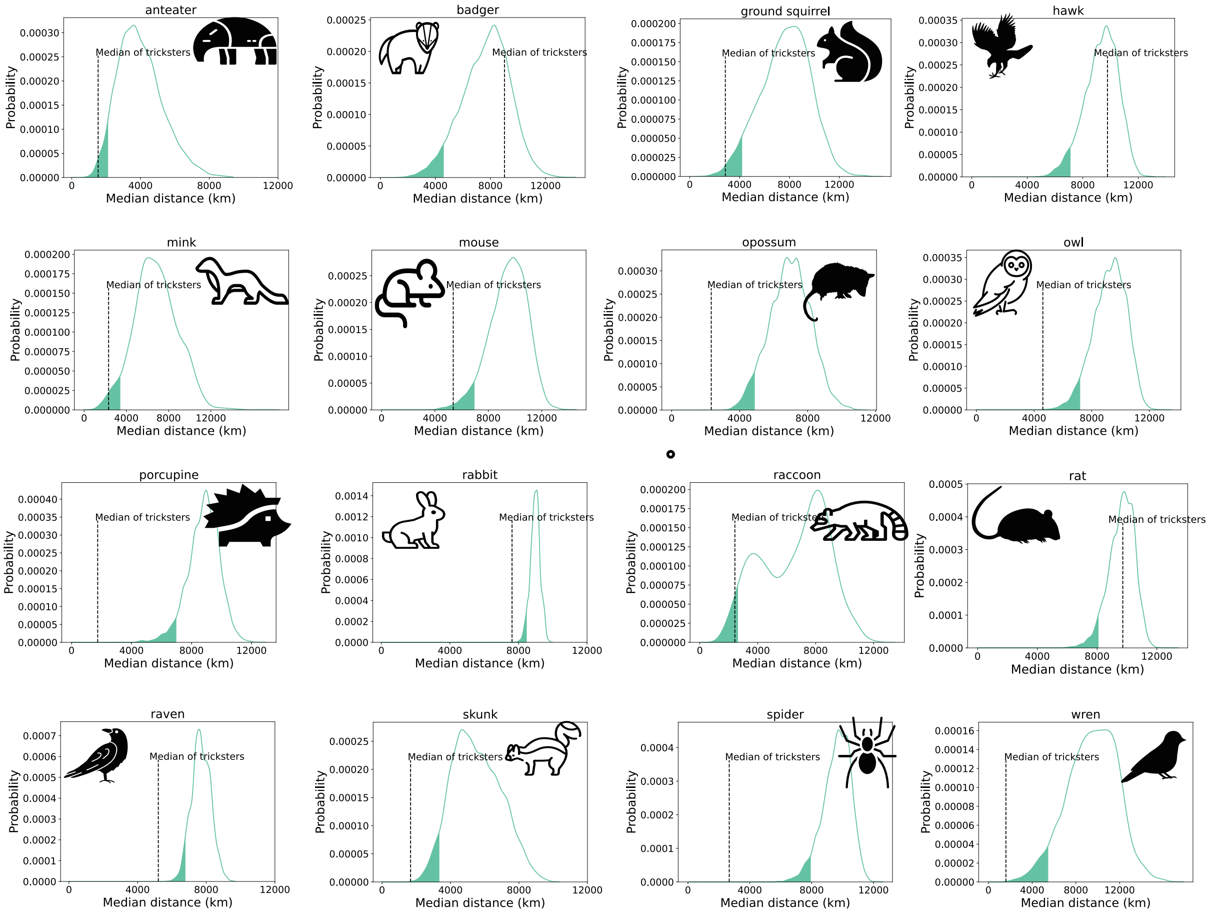

Figure 3: Permutation test of the distances on the world map

In the null model, the trickster animals were positioned randomly on the grid in places where the corresponding real animals were reported. For each animal, we determined the locations in which the corresponding tricksters were more densely distributed. The dashed line in every panel represents the median distance between the tricksters in the data; the curve represents the probability distribution of the median distance per the null model; and the shaded areas indicate the lowest five percent values of the distribution. The p-values after FDR correction have been noted in the main text.

$p = 7.06 \times 10^{-3}$; opossum $p = 9.85 \times 10^{-11}$; owl $p = 1.23 \times 10^{-4}$; porcupine $p = 1.72 \times 10^{-21}$; rabbit/hare $p = 1.03 \times 10^{-6}$; raccoon $p = 3.69 \times 10^{-2}$; rat $p = 4.99 \times 10^{-1}$; raven/crow $p = 4.42 \times 10^{-10}$; skunk $p = 1.28 \times 10^{-4}$; spider $p = 6.50 \times 10^{-59}$; wren $p = 1.23 \times 10^{-4}$). Therefore, the tricksters of a focal animal were positively affected by the presence of other tricksters in the vicinity.

Discussion

Human imagination is boundless and human languages are almost unlimited in terms of expression. Theoretically, stories can contain creatures never witnessed by their tellers. Hence, fictional creatures in folklore could be shared worldwide via cultural transmission. This study, however, demonstrates that the presence of real animals is almost a prerequisite for trickster animals to appear.

This study applied a biogeographical methodology to demonstrate how certain cultural notions are limited by local ecological factors (in this instance, folk motifs). The folklore of societies is unlikely to include focal trickster animals if the corresponding real animals did not exist there. This result was especially remarkable in the distribution of animals that inhabited specific geographic areas, such as anteaters in the Americas (Fig. 2). The annual mean temperature and annual precipitation affect the distribution of many real animals. Hence, these climate conditions indirectly restrict the distributions of trickster animals in folklore (Fig. 1).

More generally, natural environments can restrict the distribution of fictional creatures. For example, dragon-related folklore is described in all continents (D'huy, 2013). Blust (2000) argues that dragons were inspired by the rainbow, a natural phenomenon worldwide. This argument would be supported by investigations of climate conditions to find correlations between dragon-related folklore and the occurrence of rainbows. Such research directions can also apply to other supernatural creatures or totem animals that are connected to our cultural and social identities through means such as magico-religious beliefs.

Although the detailed mechanism to elucidate these findings is beyond the scope of this study, human cognitive biases may be an explanation. Humans tend to focus on familiar informational content and reproduce stories as per content or schematic frameworks (i.e., schema) that they already know (Lyons and Kashima, 2006; Hunzaker, 2016). Previous experiments have shown that cognitive biases shape folklore in certain directions (Lyons and Kashima, 2006; Hunzaker, 2016; Stubbersfield, 2022). Similarly, cognitive or behavioral processes may similarly shape folklore, incorporating trickster animals whose corresponding real animals were familiar to locals. It would be interesting if prospective studies explored such processes.

The recent increase in quantitative analyses of cultural resources has advanced our understanding of human cultures by incorporating theories and methodologies employed in evolutionary biology (e.g., cultural phylogenetics) (Tehrani, 2013; Martini, 2020). Our investigation incorporates biogeographical theories and methods to explore the links between folkloristic traditions and local ecological conditions. We believe that biogeographical concepts, particularly Whittaker's biome scheme, would enrich our understanding of the relationships between human culture and ecology. Ecological and biogeographical approaches consider dimensions that overlap with biological species, such as the distribution of herbivorous butterflies being restricted by the distribution of their host plants. However, this methodology can be utilized for considerations beyond animal species. Ecological and biogeographical methods can be applied to investigate the relationships between certain aspects of culture and animal species or even between cultures such as how the distribution of folkloristic motifs is restricted by social institutions.

Future studies could apply ecological approaches to move from investigating restrictions to predict cultural distribution. Ecologists have developed statistical methods to predict the distribution of species. However, these methodologies can also apply to fictional creatures (Warren et al., 2021) and institutions (Ai et al., 2022). Such analyses employ aspects such as climate conditions, the distribution of other species (potentially including cultures and institutions), and their interactions (Pollock et al., 2014)). Further, ecologists have investigated the determiners of biodiversity and temporal stability of systems (May, 1972; Shmida and Wilson, 1985; Landi et al., 2018).

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Data availability

The original data on folklore is available from Dr. Yuri Berezkin. The codes used in this manuscript are available from `https://github.com/ShotaSHIBASAKI/DistributionTrickSter`.

Author contributions

S.S., R.N., and Y.N. conceived the research, S.S., R.N., and Y.N. compiled data, S.S. performed the statistical analysis, and S.S. wrote the first draft. All authors revised the manuscript and approved the final draft for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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