Structuralism

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Like many of the "isms" that scholars so comfortably bounce among themselves, structuralism is closer to being a bundle of vaguely similar approaches than it is a cohesive theory. Folklorists using structuralist approaches tend to believe that there is an underlying logic to the elements and configurations of certain kinds of folklore, that this subsurface structure can be revealed or at least modeled through careful study, and that understanding this logic is an important step in comprehending folklore, language, culture, or the thought processes of humanity as a whole. Beyond these shared notions, however, there has been disagreement and occasional hostility over methodology, choice of material, and the broader implications, if any, of such revealed structures. The following brief survey touches on a variety of structuralist approaches. I begin with several examples from other disciplines that have proved influential among folklorists, then turn to a discussion of the folkloristic work of Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Finally, I consider studies by several folklorists whose careful attention to expressive detail permits an analysis of structure that avoids some of the pitfalls in the approaches of their predecessors.

Most structuralist work has drawn inspiration from the field of linguistics. In the early years of the twentieth century, Ferdinand de Saussure introduced several key ideas that revolutionized the study of language. He distinguished *langage*, the full human potential for speech, from *langue*, a language system used to generate intelligible discourse. While language systems have no tangible existence, they can be described with models that are constructed from the evidence of actual speech. Saussure put forth the idea that a language is a system of signs with a structure of relationships and oppositions that enables people to connect sound-images (the noises heard from speech or imagined while reading) with concepts, to draw meaning from arrangements of signs over time or across a page, and to fluently produce meaningful sounds and writing. He encouraged synchronic studies, which concentrate on systems as they operate at a given point in time, rather than the diachronic (over a period of time) approaches that had dominated nineteenth-century linguistics. Drawing on the tools developed by Saussure,

linguists identified minimal significant units of language, charted the relationships between these units, and achieved an unprecedented richness of description (de Saussure 1986[1915]).[1]

The successes of Saussurean linguistics inspired researchers in many disciplines to adopt similar methods with the aim of bringing a scientific precision to the study of aspects of human culture, artistry, and psychology. Jacques Lacan explored the mechanisms of psychoanalysis by examining the role of language in therapy (1968). Jack Burnham proposed a structuralist approach to the analysis of works of art (1971), and E. H. Gombrich (1961) delved into the systems that have shaped the development of artistic technique. Jean Piaget's studies in the field of cybernetics dealt with structure in terms of the automatic control that the nervous system exercises over human psychological processes (1968, 1975).[2] The literary critic André Jolles's *Einfache Formen (Simple Forms)* is of particular interest to folklorists. Jolles attempted to describe literature as an outgrowth of linguistic organization based around simple forms. He identified nine of these forms, most of which correspond to widely recognized genres of folklore such as legend, saga, and joke. Such forms are ideal possibilities which emerge from particular frames of mind. When they are actualized through the creation of, for example, a folktale, they carry with them certain requirements that result in characteristic narrative constructions (1930). As Robert Scholes notes in his survey of structuralism in literature, Jolles makes a provocative argument for the widespread occurrence of certain kinds of folklore, but he gives no clear reason for limiting himself to nine simple forms (1974:48). Why, for instance, is prayer left off the list? Nevertheless, *Einfache Formen* raises important issues that remain relevant to folklorists' ongoing debates over the validity and nature of genres.

Folklorists, too, were aware of the exciting possibilities offered by structuralism. In the field of folklore studies, some attempts at scientific analysis of structure had been made early in the twentieth century. Axel Olrik formulated his epic laws to call attention to underlying principles of composition. He hoped that his work might contribute to a new line of inquiry into the "biology" of folk narrative (Dundes 1965:129–41). Sir James George Frazer, in his mammoth work *The Golden Bough*, discerned within sympathetic magic two key principles of operation: imitative magic relies upon the ability of one thing to influence another *similar* thing, while contagious magic relies upon *contact* between two otherwise unrelated items to produce a desired influence (1950 [1922]:12–13).[3] Antti Aarne's *Verzeichnis der Märchentypen*, which was later translated and enlarged by Stith Thompson as *The Types of the Folktale*, was intended as a classification

scheme that would enable scholars to systematically analyze variations in traditional tales (Aarne and Thompson 1961). This book was clearly a milestone in folklore research, but it was also hampered by a somewhat uneven system of categorization. Concerned about the impact of such a system on future research, Russian scholar Vladimir Propp responded with what is now widely regarded as a pioneering formalist study.[4]

Propp had been trained in philology, and he was well aware of recent developments in linguistic theory. What frustrated him about Aarne's system of classification was the lack of consistency in categories and the treatment of types as though they were distinct, organically whole entities. Some types were grouped on the basis of important incidents, some by motifs, and some by key characters. For Propp, this was unacceptable as a basis for the study of tale construction. His response was published as *Morphology of the Folktale*, a brief work that remained largely unknown until its translation into English in 1958. In *The Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp avoided the problems of overlapping tale-types and interchangeable characters by focusing on the significant incidents that connect the parts of the tale. Through detailed study of 100 Russian fairy tales from A. N. Afanas'ev's collection, Propp ultimately distilled 31 core actions, which he called *functions*. These include such familiar elements as "Hero leaves home," "Hero is pursued," "Difficult task proposed to hero," and "Villain punished." The remarkable part, according to Propp, is that when these functions appear in a tale, they almost always fall into the same order.[5] In other words, the tales classified under numbers 300 to 749 in the Aarne-Thompson index share a strikingly consistent logic of composition, a structure which could effectively define the genre (Propp 1968[1928]).

Morphology of the Folktale fell by the wayside in the Soviet Union as scholarly trends and political currents shifted away from Formalism. By the time an English translation was published, Claude Lévi-Strauss's unique approach to structural analysis had already generated excitement and controversy among scholars. Alan Dundes, who wrote the introduction to the second English edition of *Morphology*, was one of the few American folklorists to attempt a detailed project inspired by Propp's methodology. In *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* (1964), Dundes intentionally chose source material that was distinct from the European fairy tale tradition. He developed a simplified scheme of *motifemes* (an alternate term for functions reflecting both their association with motifs and their emic character) centered around contrasting pairs such as Lack/Lack Liquidated and Interdiction/Interdiction Violated. Dundes pointed out that

such structural elements persisted over time, even as characters, specific events, and storytelling styles shifted.

    Dundes also drew an influential distinction between the approach of Vladimir Propp and that of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose studies of myth present a radically original vision of anthropological analysis. According to Dundes, Propp focuses on the *syntagmatic* aspects of structure, while Lévi-Strauss is concerned with *paradigmatic* structuralism (Propp 1968:xi–xii). These two terms were proposed by Saussure to highlight important dimensions of language. Words and elements of language gain some of their meaning from their position and relationship to other parts of a linear sequence, such as a sentence or narrative. Saussure called this aspect of language "syntagmatic" (the word is related to the more familiar "syntax"). Another vital source of meaning in language comes from the relationship between sets of interchangeable elements. For example, a particular word in a poem might be replaced by any from a set of words which sound similar and would preserve a rhyme scheme. It also belongs to a set of words which share the same meaning, to a set that share a grammatical function, and to many other potential sets. Paradigmatic analysis is concerned with relationships within categories, and the significance of the choices that are made from such sets in the process of composition (Scholes 1974:18–19). It may be unfair to paint these two scholars' concerns as completely divergent, but it is important to realize that distinctions of this sort have resulted in methods and conclusions that are difficult to reconcile in a single, tidy characterization of structuralism.

    Claude Lévi-Strauss may well be the best known and most influential proponent of structuralist theory. In his 1955 *Journal of American Folklore* article "The Structural Study of Myth," his four-volume *Mythologiques* series (1969, 1971, 1979, 1981), his venture into material culture in *The Way of the Masks* (1988), and many other published works, Lévi-Strauss has developed a fascinating, often puzzling perspective on folklore. At the heart of his work is the idea that human thought, and mythological thought in particular, shares at a deep level a tendency to perceive binary oppositions and to move from these contradictions toward mediation. While individual myths carry messages, an examination of multiple myths reveals broader patterns. Certain combinations of elements recur from one myth to another. Lévi-Strauss refers to such bundles of elements as the *armature*. Drawing from events within myths and from other cultural evidence, he diagrams the "code" of the myth—the relationship between basic units or *mythemes*. When these relationships are transformed within a single narrative, from myth to myth, or in the passage from one culture to another, such transformations are often indications of significant cultural attitudes and

beliefs. While Propp's *Morphology* stresses the progression of functions that governs the narrative unfolding of a fairy tale, Lévi-Strauss's studies typically downplay the chronology of events in myths. In his approach, the properties of items in a myth (raw/cooked, black/white, water/fire) are more important than their sequential order. At times, he is even willing to identify an element in one culture's myth as the solution to a problem expressed in the structure of a myth from a completely different culture (1979:17). This kind of abstract, seemingly free-form analysis makes Lévi-Strauss's work difficult to reproduce, although Edmund Leach (1970), David Pace (1977), Mary Douglas (1972), and others have made admirable attempts.

Propp and Lévi-Strauss are considered important figures in the history of folklore scholarship, but their work has not escaped criticism. Both men have been accused of overlooking the artistry involved in narration. Propp's *Morphology* focuses on constant elements rather than the variable details that characterize the creative input of individual storytellers. Lévi-Strauss downplays plot to the point of eliminating the narrative dimension of myths. Both select significant units and categories in somewhat subjective ways. Perhaps the most frequent criticism, one that can be raised against structuralism in general, is that an emphasis on underlying structure can lead to a devaluation of both the materials that are being studied and the specific people and cultures that create these materials.[6]

More recent folkloristic ventures into structural analysis have attempted to avoid such pitfalls by blending the search for underlying form with detailed considerations of context. Dell Hymes's ingenious efforts to rediscover the poetic dimensions of old, awkwardly transcribed Native American stories have called attention to the importance of form-meaning covariation. Hymes has studied the original languages of the stories and he has a keen ear for the features of performed speech. Using these, he finds in the texts significant points at which parallel variations of linguistic features and content suggest elements in the original performances that were not made apparent when the stories were frozen in print. His methods, while they are often quite complex, ultimately highlight the clarity and artistry of stories that have often been passed over as crude and confusing (Hymes 1981). In a somewhat different vein, but with a similar purpose, Henry Glassie has applied the insights of Lévi-Strauss and the transformational grammar of Noam Chomsky to his own extensive field documentation of vernacular architecture. By considering house design in terms of processes of variation on basic forms, Glassie argues that builders, working within familiar schemes, creatively selected from a wide range of possibilities. The choices that they made resulted in houses that fit their own tastes and responded to community attitudes and social conditions in practical ways. Henry Glassie's work

demonstrates that, when carefully studied in context, such buildings can serve as physical documents of individual artistry, regional cultures, and the history of people who have been left out of written records (Glassie 1975, 1986[1972]).

As decontextualized analysis and the search for universals have fallen out of favor in American folkloristics, scholars have tended to produce studies based in a single community or centered around individual creators. Even in such projects, folklorists often incorporate structural concerns. One recent example is Leslie Prosterman's *Ordinary Life, Festival Days* (1995). In this book, Prosterman considers aesthetics, categorization, and relations of value in the setting of the Midwestern county fair. Such themes often inspire a great deal of extrapolation on the part of scholars, as they are not always clearly articulated. County fairs, however, provide remarkably fertile ground for the study of these topics. The display and competition at the heart of the fair is clearly divided into categories and subcategories that are listed in the program book of the fair. Through the ritual of judging, ideal aesthetic qualities are brought out into the open. Both of these processes are shaped by the active participants in the fair, who decide which categories they wish to enter, present variations which fall by the wayside or inspire new categories, and block the return of judges whose decisions depart from accepted criteria. The fair provides a special setting in which some of the underlying structure of everyday life is made overt, if only in an idealized form.

At present, the discipline of folkloristics emphasizes that humans mindfully and creatively draw on the past in order to give their expressions greater depth and resonance for others in their communities. By searching for structure in folklore, outsiders may be able to articulate patterns of meaning that insiders would normally assimilate over time in a less direct fashion. As can be seen from the excitement that was generated by the linguistic work of Saussure, models of structure derived from real-world expression can be valuable tools for the study of communication. However, such analytical processes carry their own set of hazards. Propp and Lévi-Strauss, whose studies have an almost magical explanatory elegance, have been criticized for treating their models as real-world entities. The beauty of structural models can become central to such studies, overshadowing the importance of the material, its creators, and the historical, cultural, and performative contexts from which folklore emerges. The work of folklorists such as Henry Glassie, Dell Hymes and Leslie Prosterman may point the way to richer forms of structuralist inquiry. If folklorists ground their studies in careful fieldwork and listen to the interpretations offered by the people whose folklore is being studied, they may be able to make fruitful use of structural analysis with less risk of imposing their own imagined order where it does not belong.

Notes

1 See Scholes 1974:13–19 for a good summary of Saussure's contributions to structuralism.

2 Folklorists may be particularly interested in Piaget's studies of the ability of children at different developmental stages to understand game rules (1975).

3 Roman Jakobson noted an interesting parallel between Frazer's two principles and his own explorations of rhetorical metaphor and metonymy (1956:95). Metaphor is based on an analogy between two words, while metonymy is based on an association. Jakobson proposed that a preference for one or the other of these processes might serve as the basis of a distinction between literary styles.

4 Propp's approach is often described as "formalism," to distinguish his syntagmatic emphasis from the paradigmatic structuralism exemplified by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. This distinction became widespread in the wake of Alan Dundes' introduction to the 1968 printing of *Morphology of the Folktale*. While Propp and Lévi-Strauss clearly followed divergent paths, these labels are somewhat misleading. As can be seen by the range of examples discussed in this article, the term "structuralism" has been applied to the search for many different kinds of underlying structure. "Formalism" is closely associated with the early 20th century intellectual movement known as Russian Formalism. In a 1966 essay, Propp himself attacked the vagueness of the term, and expressed strong reservations about being lumped together with the Formalists (1984:67–81).

5 Lord Raglan independently derived a somewhat similar set of recurring elements from traditional heroic life stories. See his essay "The Hero of Tradition" (in Dundes 1965:142–157).

6 See Maranda and Maranda 1971 for a valuable discussion of strategies for solving such problems in structuralist studies, and Propp 1984 and Dundes 1997 for an exploration of a rather tense critical exchange between Propp and Lévi-Strauss.

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