
SIMPLE FORM

Simple forms (SFs) refers to a concept of folk literature as the expression of elementary cognitive attitudes (mental dispositions, modes of thought) and provides a theoretical umbrella term to systematically cover various verbal folklore genres. As a term, SF is the English translation of *Einfache Formen* (EF), a book published in 1930 by art historian and literary scholar André Jolles, which has continued to give theoretical impulses as well as reason for confusion and critique. This book was never translated into English, but it continues to be published in German and remains influential.

Jolles was born in 1874 in the Netherlands. After school, as a poet and promoter of the symbolist movement, he founded and contributed to various literary and cultural journals. Studying in Italy, France, the Netherlands, and Germany, he finished archeology and history at Freiburg University. In 1907, Jolles became a university teacher, moving to Berlin in 1908. After receiving German citizenship (1914), Jolles volunteered in World War I until 1916, then becoming professor of archeology and art history in German-occupied Ghent (Belgium). In 1918, he was appointed professor of Flemish and Dutch at Leipzig University, becoming professor of comparative literature in 1923. From 1933 on, Jolles was a supporter of Nazi ideology and a party member, who after the war admitted only academic consultation with the regime concerning the history

and symbolism of 18th-century Freemasonry. Jolles became an emeritus professor in 1941 but remained at the university until the end of the war, where he taught seminars on the psychology of races and cultures. He was one of the last honorees to receive the renowned Goethe-Medaille für Kunst und Wissenschaft (Goethe Medal for Art and Science) in 1944. Jolles died in 1946, before making a decision about whether to return to the Netherlands.

Based on various prestudies from the 1920s, Jolles attempted to define specifically and systematically what had before been termed *Naturpoesie* (natural poetry) by Jacob Grimm in the early 19th century. Grimm characterized natural poetry as divinely inspired and spontaneous, as opposed to *Kunstpoesie* (artistic poetry), the result of individual acts of creation. In contrast to literary scholarship focusing the individual genius (*Genieästhetik*), Jolles postulated the “determination of form” (*Formbestimmung*) and the “interpretation of pattern” (*Gestaltdeutung*) as central morphological tasks. Referring to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, he defined this task with regard to poetry as a whole, asking if the various patterns form a common, internally coherent and ordered whole, a *system*.

With special focus on folk literature, Jolles anticipated German morphological literary approaches of the 1940s (Emil Staiger, Gunther Mueller, Horst Oppel); he did not, however, concentrate on individual texts: His rather phenomenological approach is far from being structuralist in orientation, and his interests in morphology must by no means be confounded with early structuralist ideas as, for example, Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Russian Folk-Tale* (1928). Jolles’s approach, though similar in inclination, also differs from ideas simultaneously propagated by Roman Jakobson and Pëtr Bogatyrev. In their 1929 seminal essay “Folklore as a Special Form of Artistic Creation,” these authors attempted to determine similarities and differences of folklore and literature, favoring a *functional* view, introducing the notion of “preventive censorship of the community,” and assuming that only the forms operating in a given community will survive in folklore.

Thus, at a time when in Russia formalist approaches to literature were already converting into structuralism, Jolles adhered to a Romantic concept of language as an “anthropomorphic deity” and “Goddess language,” as early reviews phrased it.

In order to identify the patterns of this allegedly closed system of simple forms, Jolles referred to so-called mental occupations (*Geistesbeschäftigungen*)

underlying them. A summary of these simple forms and their corresponding mental occupations follows: legend (*Legende*)—imitation; saga (*Sage*)—family, or tribe; myth (*Mythe*)—knowledge; riddle (*Rätsel*)—knowledge; saying (*Spruch*)—experience; case (*Kasus*)—norm; memorabilia (*Memorable*)—real/actual; folk-tale (*Märchen*)—marvelous; joke (*Witz*)—comic.

Jolles excluded transitions between SFs or derivations from one SF to another. Although, for example, both myth and riddle are related to “knowledge,” emphasizing question and answer, the riddle for him is a question asked in the present to be answered in the future, whereas the myth is a question from the past answered in the present. Jolles refused to identify SFs with concrete genres (and even less with specific texts). Rather, in analogy to the Saussurean opposition of *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech) in linguistics, Jolles saw an SF to exist only potentially (*potentialiter*); only when (re-)produced in oral or written form does it come into being actually (*actualiter*). When Jolles therefore juxtaposed a “pure” SF (*Reine EF*) to an “actual(ized)” SF (*Aktuelle, Vergegenwärtigte EF*), he had in mind some kind of archetypes; referring to the modern genotext–phenotext concept (based on the well-known genotype–phenotype distinction in genetics), one might adequately use the terms *genoggenre* versus *phenoggenre* to refer to Jolles’s idea. Jolles could thus interpret Ancient Greek victory odes (*epinikia*) as well as modern sport reports to be actualizations of the legend. For the joke, Jolles considered relief or discharge as characteristic, when something bound is released or (dis)solved—what allows for a comparison with other concepts of humor. Depending on historical, geographical, and other factors, the pure SF joke may thus be actualized in concrete genres such as the pun; Jolles here even referred to the *schwank*, seeing its essence in the derision of individual characters or typical figures. Pure and actual(ized) SFs must not be confounded with what Jolles called an analogical, related, or derived SF, that is, individually authored texts, literary creations, based on or even pretending to be SFs, as for example, literary tales, riddles, or even novels.

Modern concepts have elaborated the concept of SF and (re-)interpreted it from different theoretical perspectives, including structuralist approaches (e.g., those of Elli Königas-Maranda and Pierre Maranda, and of Grigorij L. Permjakov), concentrating on analogies between SFs and processes of elaboration or condensation, and semiotic attempts

considering SFs as prototypes of more elaborated ("higher") literary genres and cultural prototypes. Historical-diachronical studies have demonstrated interrelations between SFs, for example, myth and riddle, originally being related by specific rituals. Conceptually integrating cultural processes of step-wise profanation (desecularization) and ridiculization, or the process of making something ridiculous, might well help explain the evolution of individual SFs (*sacred riddle* → *everyday riddle* → *joke riddle* → *meta-linguistic riddle*) and evolutionary transitions between SFs (e.g., *myth* → *folktale* → *schwank* → *joke*).

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See also Folklore; Jokes; Puns; Riddle; Schwank; Witz

Further Readings

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