

## SOLUTIONS TO RIDDLES

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Among the many genres of folklore, the riddle is most amenable to semiotic inquiry. In short dialogue sequences, riddling includes verbal metaphors, interpretations, and their rejections or validations. Inherent in the riddle is a deliberate ambiguity which is designed to reveal and conceal its subject at one and the same time. Success in untangling the true meaning of the riddle sentence from the knots of verbal deceit depends upon the confirmation of the solution by the riddle poser. However, his acceptance of the answers is often whimsical and manipulative, tending to maintain his socially advantageous position (Abrahams 1968*a*, 1968*b*; Williams 1963).

Such social manipulations of truth demonstrate the riddle's capacity for multiple solutions (see Barley 1974). There is no single valid answer to the riddle, neither is there a single objective by true solution to its puzzle. Each question has a range of alternate possible solutions, each of which could adequately correspond to a metaphoric description, and all of them combined would be a referents set of the riddle. Thus, from a broad cultural perspective, there are no 'wrong' answers to riddles. Each solution is valid as long as it is offered by a native speaker of the language who shares the cultural experience of the community and has an adequate familiarity with traditional knowledge.

Yet, in actual performance there are linguistic and cultural constraints upon the generation of solutions to riddles. Their capacity for multiple answers is limited. Riddle solvers offer their answers within the confines of distinct logical boundaries and relations between question and answer. The logic of the riddle is rooted in the language, thought, and experience of particular societies.

On the basis of currently available information, which is rather meager, it is possible to regard the nature of the riddle ambiguity as the basic constraint limiting its capacity to generate different solutions. Logically the answer has to resolve the puzzle. In orally uttered riddles there are three kinds of ambiguities: linguistic, empirical, and cultural. The linguistic ambiguity can be either phonetic or semantic. So far, I have not discovered any traditional riddles with syntactic ambiguity.

The following are examples of riddles which contain linguistic ambiguity:

1. *Black and white and red all over* – *Newspaper* (1498a).<sup>1</sup> The color terms “black” and “white” provide the semantic context for the phonetic ambiguity in which the sound [red] can be interpreted as a color term, while at the same time the locution “all over” suggests the possibility of regarding it as a passive form of the verb *read*.

2. *Something has eyes and cannot see* – *Irish potato* (277a). The semantic ambiguity inherent in this sentence results from the possibility of employing the same word in contexts of the description either of humans or of inanimate objects (see Kōngäs and Maranda 1971).

The second type of ambiguity is empirical, of which the following riddle is an example:

3. *As I was going in dockyard gate, / I met my uncle Jack, / He had a stone in his throat, / A stick in his hand. / If you tell me this riddle, / I'll give you a groat* – *Cherry* (639). The metaphorical description of a cherry does not depend on the possibility of using words such as “stone”, “throat”, and “stick” in multiple semantic contexts. Rather, the description of a plant in human terms suggests an empirical difficulty and thus creates an ambiguity.

Third, it is possible to generate a riddle on the basis of social and cultural presuppositions, as in this example:

4. *What belongs to yourself, yet is used by everybody more than yourself* – *Your name* (1582). The puzzle depends upon a set of assumptions relating to the association between possession and use. In hypothetical culture in which there is no private ownership such a description would not constitute a riddle.

Any attempt to ignore or change the nature of the ambiguity would constitute either a violation of the riddling game, or a deliberate reduction of the question to a joke. For example, riddle 1 is by now so well known in American society that riddle solvers find little challenge in offering the conventional solution. Instead, they seek out ways which enable them to claim credit for wit.<sup>2</sup> They do so by transforming the phonetic puzzle into a literal description of an object or a being, replacing the ambiguity of the riddle with an oddity in the solution, as the following answers demonstrate:

(1a) *a chocolate sundae with ketchup on it*

(1b) *a sunburned zebra*

(1c) *a blushing zebra*

(1d) *a skunk with diaper rash* (Schwartz 1973: 47).

However, without violating the rules of riddling or transforming them into jokes, riddles can become paradigms for solutions. A sequence of answers is a speculative attempt to examine all the possibilities conceivable by native speakers of correlating referents to metaphors or puzzles. The generation of such paradigms of solutions depends upon either the language of the speakers or their perception of empirical reality and their conception of their social and cultural experience. Both language and reality serve as a pool of terms,

objects, actions, ideas, animals, and personalities upon which the riddle solver draws, and which are regrouped in new orders based on the taxonomic principles the riddle offers, in accordance with the constraints upon its capacity for multiple solutions.

A riddle that depends upon semantic ambiguity, for example, could serve as a paradigm for all the possibilities that exist in a given language in which this particular ambiguity obtains. For example, in the English language the term 'eyes' is applied metaphorically to plants and objects (riddle 2). According to Taylor (1951: 94-95) the following answers have been regarded as conceivable by English speakers as solutions to riddle 2 "*Something has eyes and cannot see*" or its variations:

(2a) *Potato*

(2b) *Irish potato*

(2c) *a bough*

(2d) *a needle*

(2e) *a button.*

These solutions are language dependent. In other languages besides English in which the metaphoric application of 'eyes' to objects and plants has different referents, other ranges of solutions would be considered adequate. In languages which such use of 'eyes' does not appear, the riddle would be meaningless and no solutions would be conceivable.

In addition there are also language-free riddles, which have only empirical constraint limiting their capacity for multiple solutions. They reflect the perception a community of speakers have of their environment and their conception of that environment. In these cases the cultural view of reality has not been codified into one language, but nevertheless, as the riddles indicate, it is an integral part of the perception of environment. The perception of reality constitutes a constraint upon the capacity of these riddles for multiple answers. Hence they could serve as an analytical diagnostic tool in the attempt to reconstruct the cultural symbolic view of environment which prevails in a particular society, but which does not manifest itself in language. Different solutions to the same riddle are indicative of what shapes, forms and actions appear similar to the people who share the same culture.

The following transcript and translation of a riddling sequence, recorded in Benin City, Midwestern State of Nigeria, during the summer of 1973, could partially illustrate solutions to language-free, empirical ambiguity.

*Ghìrò*

*Àlòó*

*Úvbí òkpà nè sìònsìònsìòn nè ò mú*

*ùhé dà úgbò èrhà.*

*Úvbí, úvbí, è-è-è-è.*

Riddle, riddle

Go ahead

A very beautiful girl displays her  
buttocks in her father's farm.

Girl, girl, e-e-e-e

*Vbè úwẹ ànà vbé hòn nà?*  
*Èrhà mwẹn ọ mà mwẹn rẹ.*  
*Ẹàen*  
*Àí gbè mwẹn í mà rẹnrẹn ọ.*  
*Èdiébò*  
*Ẹí rẹ òè.*  
*Giè ímà sàen niàn.*  
*Ẹàen*  
*Ẹgìlè*

Where did you hear that one?  
 My father taught it to me.  
 Answer it.  
 You cannot beat me, I don't know it.  
 Pineapple  
 It is not that.  
 Let me answer it, I know it.  
 Answer  
 Snail

The metaphor and the two solutions constitute a set of forms which the Bini people perceive as a paradigm.

Hamnett (1967), Köngäs and Maranda (1969, 1971), and Barley (1974) have suggested and demonstrated the function of riddles in the delineation of cultural cognitive categories of a particular society. The formation of riddles depends upon the underlining conceptual system. The present examination of riddles' capacity for multiple solutions is a proposal to regard the riddle itself as a taxonomic principle which enables members of a language community to cut across boundaries of cultural categories, to perceive similarities between members of different classes of things, beings and concept, not just between two such categories (Köngäs and Maranda 1971), but throughout the entire range of native taxonomy. The diverse answers to a riddle, unrelated as they might appear, constitute the semantic set of a riddle. Each solution becomes a component of the meaning speakers can conceive of or attribute to a single metaphor. An answer to a riddle, even if accepted by the poser, does not express its only solution. Rather, the riddle meaning is an abstract concept of all the possible solutions within a particular culture which a single metaphor has the capacity to symbolize.

#### NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted the numbers in parentheses refer to the classification of Taylor (1951).
2. For a discussion of a cultural situation in which solutions to riddles are well known in the society, see Goldstein (1963).

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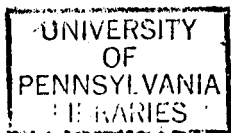
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