

Solutions to Riddles

AMONG THE MANY GENRES OF FOLKLORE, the riddle is the most amenable to semiotic inquiry. In short dialogue sequences, riddling includes verbal metaphors, interpretations, and their rejections or validations. The immediate succession of a message, a decoding, and a feedback condenses a process that extends over a longer span of time in the communication process of many other genres. Moreover, 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; he can reject certain solutions on one occasion and acknowledge them the next time, as long as he is able to maintain his socially advantageous position.¹

Such social manipulations of truth demonstrate an important attribute of the riddle, its capacity for multiple solutions.² There is no single valid answer to the riddle; neither is there a single, objective, 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 set of referents. Such a view implies that, from a broad cultural perspective, there are no "wrong" answers to riddles. Each solution can be 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 this broad interpretation of truth in riddles should not ignore the fact that, in actual performance, there are linguistic and cultural

¹Roger D. Abrahams, "A Rhetoric of Everyday Life: Traditional Conversational Genres," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 32 (1968), 44-59; Roger D. Abrahams, "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore*, 81 (1968), 143-158; Thomas Rhys Williams, "The Form and Function of Tambunan Dusun Riddles," *Journal of American Folklore*, 76 (1963), 95-110.

²Nigel F. Barley, "Structural Aspects of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle," *Semiotica*, 9 (in press).

constraints upon the generation of solutions to riddles, whose capacity for multiple answers is, after all, limited. Theoretically, any solution which is conceivable by a native speaker is correct in terms of the cultural perspectives; in actuality, riddle solvers offer their answers within the confines of distinct logical boundaries and understood relations between question and answer. In other words, there is a discoverable order within the perception of riddles and solutions offered, even though some of the solutions are not accepted in particular situations. While it is possible to abstract a formal logic from the riddle itself, the logic of riddles is, rather, rooted in the language, thought, and experience of particular societies.³

There are some methodological and cultural difficulties which often prevent a full accounting of the entire range of conceivable solutions for a riddle. While participants in an occasion for riddling might conceive of a variety of possible answers, they are often reluctant or hesitant to offer them, for fear of rejection. The interrogative power of riddles is intimidating.⁴ Naturally, such an observation is limited to particular cultures. In my attempt, in the summer of 1973, to record as many alternate answers as possible among the Edo people of the Midwestern State of Nigeria, I found that participants preferred to admit their inability to answer a riddle than to venture the wrong solution. Of course, the attitude toward riddles and riddling might differ in other societies. Yet the paucity of adequate ethnographic texts is probably at least partially due to the effects of social pressure on the riddle solvers. Because scholars lack sufficient data, any exploration of the riddle's capacity for multiple solutions, is, of necessity, at least partially speculative. Hopefully, further research will enable us either to confirm or refute the following observations.

On the basis of the currently available information, it is possible to regard the nature of riddle ambiguity as the basic constraint which limits its capacity for the generation of 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 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).⁵ 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

³Elli Köngäs Maranda, “The Logic of Riddles,” in *Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition*, ed. Pierre Maranda and Elli Köngäs Maranda, University of Pennsylvania Publications in Folklore and Folklife, 3 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), pp. 189-232.

⁴John M. Roberts and Michael L. Forman, “Riddles: Expressive Models of Interrogation,” *Ethnology* 10 (1971), 509-533.

⁵Unless otherwise noted the numbers in parentheses refer to the classification system in Archer Taylor, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951).

regarding it as a passive form of the verb “read.” The initial and the terminal elements of the sentence provide conflicting semantic contexts for the interpretation of [red] in at least two possible meanings. While the ambivalence of the semantic contexts is necessary, at the center of the riddle there is a phonetic ambiguity.

(2) Something has eyes and cannot see. – Irish potato (277a). The formation of this riddle is made possible by the metaphoric use of the word “eyes” in the English language. The ambiguity inherent in this sentence results from the possibility of employing the same word in descriptions of human beings and inanimate objects.⁶ It depends upon the multiplicity of meanings for a single word in a given language, and hence it basically involves semantic ambiguity.

The second type of ambiguity is empirical; 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 apparent contradiction is empirical rather than linguistic. The metaphorical description of a cherry does not depend on the possibilities of using words such as “stone,” “throat,” and “stick” in multiple semantic contexts. Rather, the description of a plant in human terms, reversing the relations which are obtained in riddle 2, suggests an empirical difficulty and formulates the ambiguity.

Thirdly, it is possible to generate a riddle on the basis of social and cultural presuppositions, as for example in

- (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 a hypothetical culture where there is no private ownership, such a description would not constitute a riddle.

The paradigm of solutions is constrained by the nature of the ambiguity which has to be resolved. If the puzzle is linguistic—either phonetic or semantic—the successive answers would be similar in kind, attempting to solve the dilemma presented in the riddle. Any attempts 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 into 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, people seek out ways which introduce humor and which would

⁶ Elli Kōngäs Maranda, “The Logic of Riddles.”

enable them to claim credit for wit.⁷ They do so by transforming the phonetic puzzle into a literal description of an object or a being, then 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.⁸

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 by native speakers to examine all the possibilities conceivable of correlating referents to metaphors or puzzles. The generation of such paradigms of solutions depends upon 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, 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 which depends upon semantic ambiguity, for example, could serve as a paradigm for all the possibilities that exist in a given language where the particular ambiguity operates. For example, in the English language the term “eyes” is applied metaphorically to plants and objects (2). According to Archer Taylor, the following answers have been regarded by English speakers as conceivable solutions to riddle 2, “Something has eyes and cannot see,” or its variations:⁹

- (2a) Potato.
- (2b) Irish potato.
- (2c) A bough.
- (2d) A needle.
- (2e) A button.

These solutions are language-dependent. In languages other than English, where the metaphoric application of “eyes” to objects and plants has different referents, other ranges of solutions would be considered adequate. In languages where such use of “eyes” does not appear, the riddle would be meaningless, and no solutions would be conceivable. Among English speakers, it is possible to distinguish two basic applications of the metaphor of “eyes”: the first, in objects, is based on similarity in shape; the second, in plants, connotes the additional resemblance in

⁷For a discussion of a cultural situation in which solutions to riddles are well known in the society see Kenneth S. Goldstein, “Riddling Traditions in Northeastern Scotland,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 76 (1963), 330-336.

⁸Alvin Schwartz, *Tomfoolery: Trickery and Foolery with Words* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1973).

⁹Archer Taylor, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition*, pp. 94-95.

process (as, in this case, the buds of a potato or a bough open up in the spring).

The language-dependent riddles and their solutions reflect a cultural perception of reality. However, even language-free riddles, which have only an empirical constraint limiting their capacity for multiple solutions, reflect the perception that a community of speakers has of their environment. In these cases the cultural view of reality has not been codified into the language; but nevertheless, as the riddles would indicate, that view is an integral part of the perception of environment. Such riddles, which are based on descriptions of empirical reality, enable speakers to group several referents which have at least one apparent common denominator, either in visual, social, or functional terms. 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 the environment which prevails in a particular society but which does not manifest itself overtly in language. The range of solutions to the same riddle is indicative of what shapes, forms, and actions appear similar to the people who share the same culture. Quite likely, those who are outsiders to a particular society and do not partake in the common experiences and do not form symbols from the same substance, would not be able to relate to these riddles in any meaningful way.

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.

<i>Gbírò.</i>	Riddle, riddle.
<i>Àlòó.</i>	Go ahead.
<i>Úvbí òkpà nẹ̀ sìònsìònsìòn.</i>	A very beautiful girl
<i>nẹ̀ ò mú ùhẹ̀ dà ùgbò èrhà.</i>	displays her buttocks in her
	father's farm.
<i>Úvbí, úvbí, è-è-è-è.</i>	Girl, girl, e-e-e-e.
<i>Vbẹ̀ úwẹ̀ ànà vbẹ̀ hoń nà?</i>	Where did you hear that one?
<i>Èrhà mwẹ̀n ò mà mwẹ̀n rẹ̀.</i>	My father taught it to me.
<i>Sàèn.</i>	Answer it.
<i>Áí gbẹ̀ mwẹ̀n í mà tẹ̀n tẹ̀n o.</i>	You cannot beat me, I don't
	know it.
<i>Èdiẹ̀bò.</i>	Pineapple.
<i>Èí rẹ̀ òè.</i>	It is not that.
<i>Giẹ̀ ímà sàẹ̀n, níàń.</i>	Let me answer it, I know it.
<i>Sàèn.</i>	Answer.
<i>Ègílẹ̀.</i>	Snail.

The metaphor and the two solutions constitute a set of forms which the Bin people perceive as a paradigm. Although the riddle is language-free, neither the metaphor nor the solutions would have held any significance to non-Bini. Comparative riddle research, hence, reveals not only

similarities and differences between texts, but uncovers systems of perception and conceptualization of natural, cultural, and social reality.

Ian Hamnett, Elli Kōngās Maranda and Nigel F. Barley have suggested and demonstrated the function of riddles in the delineation of cultural cognitive categories of a particular society.¹⁰ The formation of riddles depends upon the underlying conceptual system. The present examination of the capacity of riddles 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 concepts—not just between two such categories, 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 that speakers can conceive of or can 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 which a single metaphor has the capacity to symbolize in a particular culture.

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¹⁰Ian Hamnett, "Ambiguity, Classification and Change: the Function of Riddles," *Man*, 2 (1967), 379-392; Elli Kōngās Maranda, "Structure des énigmes," *L'Homme*, 9 (1969), 5-48, and "The Logic of Riddles," 189-232; Nigel F. Barley, "Structural Aspects of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle."