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THE DISTINCTIVE NATURE OF RIDDLES AND THEIR CLASSIFICATION: A COGNITIVE AND STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study differentiates riddles from other folk genres, such as proverbs and folktales, by analyzing their unique cognitive and structural characteristics. Through an examination of key theoretical frameworks, the paper identifies the riddle's reliance on semantic ambiguity, inferential reasoning, and the subversion of cognitive scripts as its defining features. The paper further presents a classification system for riddles based on their linguistic mechanisms, thematic content, and the cognitive challenges they present, attributing the theoretical underpinnings to various established scholars. It concludes that the riddle's distinctiveness lies in its compact, paradoxical formulation designed to activate associative thinking and intellectual surprise, serving as a vital genre for understanding human cognition and cultural transmission.

Keywords: Riddles, Folk Genres, Classification, Cognitive Linguistics, Semantic Ambiguity, Inference, Personification, Cultural Schemata.

Annotatsiya

Ushbu tadqiqot topishmoqlarni maqollar va ertaklar kabi boshqa xalq janrlaridan ularning o'ziga xos kognitiv va struktural xususiyatlari orqali ajratib ko'rsatadi. Asosiy nazariy tadqiqotlarni ko'rib chiqish orqali maqola topishmoqning

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semantik noaniqlikka, inferensiyaga (xulosa chiqarishga) va kognitiv skriptlarni buzishga tayanuvchi o‘ziga xos xususiyatlarini aniqlaydi. Maqola topishmoqlarni lingvistik mexanizmlar, mavzuviy mazmun va ularni yechishdagi kognitiv qiyinchiliklar asosida tasniflash tizimini taqdim etadi va uning nazariy asoslarini turli nufuzli olimlarga bog‘laydi. Xulosa shuni ko‘rsatadiki, topishmoqning o‘ziga xosligi uning ixcham, paradoksal tuzilishida bo‘lib, u assotsiativ fikrlashni va intellektual hayratni faollashtirishga mo‘ljallangan, shu bilan inson kognitsiyasi va madaniy uzatishni tushunish uchun muhim janr bo‘lib xizmat qiladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: topishmoqlar, xalq janrlari, tasnif, kognitiv tilshunoslik, semantik noaniqlik, inferensiya, personifikatsiya, madaniy sxemalar

Аннотация

Настоящее исследование отличает загадки от других фольклорных жанров, таких как пословицы и сказки, путём анализа их уникальных когнитивных и структурных характеристик. Через рассмотрение ключевых теоретических основ, статья определяет зависимость загадки от семантической неоднозначности, инференционного рассуждения и нарушения когнитивных скриптов как её отличительные черты. Далее в статье представлена система классификации загадок, основанная на их лингвистических механизмах, тематическом содержании и когнитивных задачах, приписывая теоретические обоснования различным признанным учёным. Делается вывод, что своеобразие загадки заключается в её компактной, парадоксальной формулировке, призванной активизировать ассоциативное мышление и интеллектуальное удивление, что делает её жизненно важным жанром для понимания человеческого познания и культурной передачи.

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Ключевые слова: загадки, фольклорные жанры, классификация, когнитивная лингвистика, семантическая неоднозначность, инференция, олицетворение, культурные схемы

Introduction

Riddles, a pervasive and ancient form of human expression, occupy a unique niche within the vast landscape of folk literature. While sharing commonalities with genres such as proverbs, folktales, and epigrams, riddles possess a distinctive cognitive and structural architecture that sets them apart. Their primary function is not merely to convey wisdom, entertain, or narrate, but to actively challenge the solver's cognitive faculties, stimulating curiosity and promoting intellectual engagement. As I.R. Galperin [4; 202] notes regarding the structure of poetic texts, the intended arrangement of elements is to "fix the reader's attention and produce a specific emotional and intellectual impact." This impact, in the case of riddles, is often rooted in surprise, deduction, and the satisfying resolution of a carefully constructed enigma. The riddle's fundamental operation lies in its deliberate opacity. It presents information in a manner that is both suggestive and misleading, relying on metaphorical language, paradox, and ellipsis to obscure its subject. This challenges the solver to bridge the gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the stated and the implied. Understanding the riddle's distinctiveness requires an exploration of its unique structure, the cognitive mechanisms it invokes, and a clear classification system that reflects its multifaceted nature. This paper aims to delineate the defining characteristics of riddles, differentiate them from other folk genres, analyze the cognitive mechanisms integral to their solution, and present a framework for their systematic classification, supported by examples from diverse linguistic and cultural traditions.

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Materials and Methods

This qualitative study employs a corpus-based approach, utilizing a selection of riddles from various linguistic and cultural traditions. The primary materials include Anglo-Saxon riddles (such as those found in the Exeter Book and compiled by Tupper [10]), Uzbek folk riddles [5], and widely recognized general English folklore riddles ([8] and [3]). This diverse corpus allows for a broad exploration of riddle structures and their cross-cultural manifestations.

The methodological approach combines linguistic, cognitive, and comparative analyses. A descriptive analysis of riddle structures and their inherent linguistic features, such as metaphor, personification, paradox, and ellipsis, is conducted to identify recurring patterns. This is complemented by a comparative analysis, systematically contrasting riddles with other folk genres like proverbs, folktales, and myths to highlight their unique functional and structural attributes. Furthermore, a cognitive-linguistic approach is applied to explore the mental processes involved in riddle comprehension and solution. This involves drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as Galperin's stylistics for understanding deliberate linguistic arrangement, Brown and Yule's discourse analysis for inferential reasoning in "gapped" texts, Schank and Abelson's theory of cognitive scripts to explain misdirection, Bartlett's concept of schemata in memory reconstruction, Mednick's theory of associative thinking for problem-solving, and Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) work on conceptual metaphor for interpreting non-literal language. These theories collectively inform the understanding of how riddles function as sophisticated cognitive puzzles. The analysis culminates in the development of a classification system for riddles, built upon these theoretical insights into their linguistic mechanisms, thematic content, and cognitive challenges.

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Results

The analysis reveals that riddles possess several distinctive features that differentiate them from other folk genres, operate through specific cognitive mechanisms, and lend themselves to a multi-dimensional classification.

Firstly, the distinction between riddles and other folk genres is evident in their primary function and structure. Proverbs, such as the English saying "A stitch in time saves nine," convey direct wisdom or practical advice, as highlighted by Christie [3; 3]. Their meaning is transparent, relying on straightforward analogy. In contrast, riddles deliberately obscure their meaning. They present information paradoxically, forcing the solver to infer the subject rather than directly understand a statement. For instance, a riddle might ask, "I am always hungry and will die if not fed, but whatever I touch will soon turn red" (referring to fire). The solver must infer that "hunger" relates to fuel and "turning red" to burning, going beyond literal interpretation and demanding deduction rather than direct comprehension. Similarly, Uzbek proverbs like "Ona yerning bag‘ri keng" directly state a truth about nature's bounty [4; 12]. Folktales, on the other hand, are narrative forms that typically feature characters, plot development, settings, and a resolution, aiming to entertain, educate, or transmit cultural values through storytelling, such as the extended narrative of "Alpomish" with its journeys and challenges. Riddles, in contrast, are static enigmas, presenting a set of clues simultaneously for a single conceptual answer, without narrative progression. Their essence is in their compressed paradoxical structure. Unlike myths and legends, which provide foundational explanations or recount heroic deeds, riddles focus on identifying a specific, often mundane, object or concept through clever linguistic obfuscation. The cognitive task in understanding a myth involves interpretation of symbolic meaning and cultural significance, whereas solving a riddle primarily involves logical deduction and associative recall.

Secondly, the cognitive mechanisms involved in riddle-solving are complex and systematic. The initial step involves selective attention and information filtering,

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where the solver distinguishes critical clues from misleading elements. Riddles are masters of misdirection, as seen in the classical English riddle, "I have cities, but no houses, forests, but no trees, and water, but no fish. What am I?" (A Map). The initial terms evoke literal geographical features, but the qualifiers "no houses," "no trees," etc., force the solver to shift to an abstract representation. Galperin [4; 202] notes how this structured ambiguity "fixes the reader's attention," guiding it through a carefully orchestrated process. Following this, memory retrieval and schemata activation occur, where the mind accesses semantic memory, activating relevant "schemata" or organized knowledge structures (Bartlett, 1932, p. 213). For example, to solve "What has an eye, but cannot see?", the solver retrieves schemata for objects associated with "eye" that are not related to biological vision, such as the eye of a needle or the eye of a storm. Inference is the critical leap, where solvers go "beyond the literal data" [2; 256] to bridge conceptual gaps. The Uzbek riddle "Tili bor, so‘z aytmas, bel bog‘lagan, to‘xtamas" (It has a tongue but doesn't speak, it is belted but doesn't stop) requires inferring "tongue" as a needle's eye and "belted" as its thread, leading to the answer "needle." This goes beyond the literal meaning of speaking or stopping. The solver infers the underlying process being described, as highlighted by Husainova [5; 58]. At the heart of riddle-solving lies associative thinking, crucial for creativity as defined by Mednick [7; 220], which involves "forming of associative elements into yang combinations." Riddles often force the formation of remote associations. For instance, connecting the "eye" of a needle to biological vision is a false path, requiring the solver to re-associate "eye" with its functional meaning in tools. This often involves a form of conceptual blending, where elements from different conceptual domains are merged to create a novel understanding, aligning with Lakoff and Johnson's theories on metaphor, wherein abstract concepts are understood through concrete mappings.

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Thirdly, a systematic classification of riddles can be established along three primary axes, integrating insights from various scholars. This classification, which builds upon the work of researchers like Christie, Husainova, Galperin, Brown & Yule, Bartlett, Mednick, and Lakoff & Johnson, offers a comprehensive way to categorize these puzzles. Classification by Linguistic Structure draws on Galperin's understanding of how language is deliberately arranged for effect and Brown and Yule's discourse analysis regarding information gaps and inference. This category includes: Descriptive Riddles, which present a series of attributes. An Uzbek example is "Tili bor, so‘z aytmas, bel bog‘lagan, to‘xtamas" (It has a tongue but doesn't speak, it is belted but doesn't stop), describing a needle. Here, personification assigns human-like features ("tongue," "belted") to an inanimate object, requiring the solver to infer the literal object based on its form and function [5; 58]. Paradoxical Riddles employ contradictory statements to mislead, such as the English riddle "What gets wetter as it dries?" (a towel). The paradox hinges on the dual meaning of "dries"—drying an object versus the towel itself becoming wet through absorption [8; 40]. Elliptical Riddles omit key information, demanding significant inferential leaps. The Uzbek riddle "O‘zi bitta, ko‘zi bitta" (Itself one, its eye one) utilizes extreme brevity, requiring the solver to deduce the subject (a needle) from its most defining, yet minimalist, features [5; 48]. Classification by Thematic Content, as explored by traditional folklorists like Husainova and Christie, categorizes riddles by their subject matter: Nature Riddles (e.g., "I have cities, but no houses, forests, but no trees, and water, but no fish. What am I?" - A Map, describing abstract representations of geography) [3; 15]; Household Objects Riddles (e.g., the Uzbek riddle "Och qolganimda yeydilar, to‘yganimda esa uloqtiradilar" - When I am hungry they eat me, when I am full they throw me away, referring to a candle, which uses personification of "hunger" related to its consumption) [5;18]; and Abstract Concepts Riddles (e.g., the English riddle "What is always in front of you but can’t be seen?" - The Future, identifying a temporal and conceptual entity) [8;

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55]. Finally, Classification by Cognitive Challenge, informed by Mednick's work on associative thinking, Lakoff and Johnson's theories on metaphor, Schank and Abelson's concept of cognitive scripts, and Bartlett's ideas on schemata, categorizes riddles by the primary mental processes they engage: Associative Riddles (requiring remote connections), Inferential Riddles (demanding logical deduction), and Metaphorical/Personification Riddles (necessitating understanding of figurative language).

Discussion

The results of this analysis underscore the riddle's unique position within the landscape of folk genres, fundamentally distinguishing it from proverbs and folktales by its primary function as an intellectual puzzle rather than a direct statement of wisdom or a narrative exposition. The deliberate semantic ambiguity and paradoxical structures, as identified through the linguistic lens of Galperin, necessitate a sophisticated interplay of cognitive processes. The act of solving a riddle is inherently an act of inference, where solvers actively bridge conceptual gaps by going "beyond the literal data" [2; 256]. This is powerfully illustrated by riddles that subvert common cognitive scripts, as theorized by Schank and Abelson. For instance, a riddle describing something with a "mouth" and "bed" might initially evoke biological schemata, only for the solver to realize it refers to inanimate geographical features or objects, thus demanding a revision of their initial assumption. This process of re-evaluating and adjusting mental frameworks is central to riddle comprehension.

Furthermore, the crucial role of associative thinking, central to Mednick's theories on creativity, is constantly at play. Riddles often require the solver to forge connections between seemingly disparate concepts, pushing the boundaries of semantic retrieval. Consider the riddle "What has an eye, but cannot see?" The solver must move beyond the primary association of 'eye' with sight and access less common associations, such as the eye of a needle or the eye of a storm. This

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process often involves conceptual blending, a mechanism explored by Lakoff and Johnson, where elements from different conceptual domains are mapped onto each other to create a novel understanding. The "eye" of a needle is understood through the metaphorical mapping of a biological feature onto a tool. The effectiveness of these cognitive mechanisms is intrinsically linked to the riddle's linguistic formulation, whether it employs descriptive attributes, paradoxical statements, or elliptical phrasing, as categorized by structural linguistic analysis rooted in scholars like Galperin.

The classification system proposed, which integrates linguistic structure (descriptive, paradoxical, elliptical), thematic content (nature, household, abstract), and cognitive challenge (associative, inferential, metaphorical), provides a framework for understanding the diverse ways riddles function and engage the mind. These categories are not mutually exclusive but often overlap, reflecting the rich interplay of form, content, and cognitive demand. For example, a descriptive riddle about nature may heavily rely on associative thinking to connect its metaphorical attributes to the intended subject. The classification helps to systematize the study of riddles, moving beyond mere collection to deeper analysis of their communicative and cognitive functions. The distinctiveness of riddles from other genres is amplified when considering these classifications. Unlike the direct assertions of proverbs or the linear narratives of folktales, riddles remain inherently indirect, paradoxical, and focused on stimulating an immediate cognitive resolution. They serve as a unique window into how cultures encode knowledge, how language is used to create ambiguity, and how the human mind navigates uncertainty to arrive at meaning. The widespread presence of riddles across diverse cultures, from the Uzbek traditions documented by Husainova to the Anglo-Saxon examples studied by Tupper and Opie & Opie, attests to their fundamental role in human intellectual engagement and cultural transmission.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, riddles distinguish themselves from other folk genres through their inherent structural opacity, paradoxical formulation, and primary function as intellectual puzzles rather than direct statements of wisdom or narrative expositions. The act of solving a riddle is a complex cognitive endeavor, deeply reliant on selective attention, memory retrieval of culturally specific schemata, sophisticated inferential reasoning, and the crucial formation of novel associative links. The deliberate subversion of cognitive scripts and the adept use of metaphor and personification are central to their efficacy. The classification system, integrating linguistic structure, thematic content, and cognitive challenge, provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing the multifaceted nature of riddles, drawing upon the theoretical foundations laid by scholars such as Christie and Husainova. This systematic approach highlights how riddles, through their unique blend of linguistic artistry and cognitive demand, not only entertain but also foster critical thinking, enhance problem-solving skills, and serve as vital repositories of cultural knowledge and worldviews. Their enduring presence across diverse societies underscores their fundamental role in human intellectual development and the transmission of cultural wisdom.

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