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Notes on a Guessing Game

Riddles can be considered a language game both in the sense of "amusement, passtime", and "physical or mental competition conducted according to rules" (Webster's, 1966), and in the sense of Wittgenstein's meaningful speech uses (High, 1967) or *speech acts* in Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) terminology. In the first sense riddles are akin to other games, such as charades, rebuses, conundrums etc; and in the second, they constitute a particular type of discourse, governed by a set of rules, which, however, need not always be strictly observed (High, 1967, 82—86). These rules dissolve and mingle with other sets of rules such as the rules for narrative discourse, questioning, and commanding.

Riddling has been widely studied by ethnologists and anthropologists, and found to be a phenomenon common in most societies, particularly associated with child training in responsibility (Roberts and Forman, 1972, 206). Riddles formerly played an important role in initiation rites and similar rituals meant to introduce the young to the adult way of life (Čubelić, 1975; Roberts and Forman, 1972); some of these functions were taken over by other types of discourse, notably a system of examinations in the educational processes of modern societies. Riddles, on the other hand, have been mostly reduced to games where the wit and intelligence of the players are tested.

Both riddling and examinations are question and answer "games" where the interrogator knows the answers (in contrast to questions whereby the interrogator seeks information from the interrogated), and tests or challenges the interrogated about a particular topic.

The interrogated, on the other hand, is expected to answer or solve the riddle by guessing, i.e. to find "an answer by

forming a judgement or opinion from insufficient, uncertain or ambiguous evidence or on ground of probability alone" (Webster's, 1966). Such a situation may occur in other types of interrogation, not as a prerequisite, but rather as a possible alternative to normal, informative answers, such as are expected, for instance, in examinations.

Riddling is a popular language activity among children whose favourite way of reporting is by saying "Guess who . . .", "Guess what . . ." and the like, the correct answer, more often than not, being supplied by the interrogator himself. The real function of the riddle however, would seem to be expressive interrogation rather than expressive reporting.

The expressive traits of the language (Sapir, 1933) used in riddling, made riddles an apt literary form, frequently incorporated in folk tales, but also found as an independent genre of popular literature. Such are the Old English (OE) riddles from the Exeter Book (Sweet, 1959), and traditional Yugoslav riddles (Čubelić, 1975), which will serve as data for an examination of the linguistic form and content of this type of discourse.

These two types of riddles, though differing in language and structure, can nevertheless be regarded as typical representatives of the genre, and therefore satisfactory material for a rough model of riddling.

The OE riddles belong to a written literary tradition; their authors meant them to be written down, and even composed some of them in imitation of an older literary model.¹

The Serbo-Croatian (SC) riddles belong to an oral literary tradition, and have been collected from rural informants during a period covering roughly one century (mid 19th to mid 20th).

Both types of riddles perform the main social function of any discourse, which is a give and take between participants of the communication.² There are some further points that can support the claim that the OE written riddles are very similar in function to oral riddles:

a) medieval literature was habitually read aloud to an audience; hence it automatically involved a speaker — hearer context, like any oral communication;

¹ Sweet (1959) in his notes to the OE riddles mentions that some of them are based on the riddles of Aldhelm, others on the Latin riddles of Symphosius.

² Teun A. van Dijk (1976) argues that in "literary communication" a similar influencing "via" the internal states of the reader is intended, and achieved.

b) all medieval literature was primarily meant to have a practical function as means of education, moral guidance etc.; thus presupposing the existence of a hearer-reader.

c) riddles are "mistifying, misleading or puzzling questions" (Webster's, 1966), or in Searle's (1976) terms, illocutionary acts classified as *directives* influence the hearer (or reader) to act, i.e. answer or solve the riddle;

d) no answers are given to the riddles in the original OE text, which may be understood as an assumption of the author that a hearer-reader will supply (or attempt to supply) them.

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The basic rules for the riddling game require the following conditions:

1. There should be at least two participants in the discourse, a speaker/writer (SW) and a hearer/reader (HR). In an oral game, hearers may take turns as speakers, and each speaker can conversely become hearer.

2. The next prerequisite of this type of discourse is cooperation between SW and HR.³

3. The sequencing pattern of the discourse should commence with

a) SW presenting the topic T (obligatory);

b) SW asking a question Q about the identification of the presented topic, or demanding an answer/solution (optional). These two speech acts can be sequenced both in the order TQ, which is the case in OE riddles, or QT, which is the more frequent variant in SC riddles. Q is more frequently omitted in the written texts of OE than in oral riddling. It is optional because the assumption of the co-operation principle includes the expectation of a retort/answer A from the HR.

Another type of riddle incorporates T in the question, e.g. *Zašto čovjek hodi?* — Why does man walk?

(Q) T (Q) are followed by:

c) A, which is the answer, or an attempt at a solution, uttered by HR. No response is identical to a negative response in function (i.e. in both cases the interrogated is unable to solve the riddle), and in both cases, in oral communication, the answer may be supplied by the speaker himself.

4. All participants in the discourse are assumed to be familiar with the topic of the riddle; otherwise the co-opera-

³ Van Dijk (1976, p. 40) calls it the "cooperation principle".

tion principle is violated, as no answer can be expected if the participants' experience does not include some knowledge of T.⁴ The presentation of T however, has to be compatible with the evaluation M of the participants, i.e. as being "mystifying, misleading, puzzling" (Webster's, 1966), or "unexpected, surprising, improbable" (Čubelić, 1975, CXXIV). In other words, the presentation is not to satisfy the requirements of straightforward⁵ (withouth the qualifier M) informative descriptive discourse, because if it did, it would be understood as a question, not as a riddle.

The oblique presentation M of the topic T must not violate the truth value of the description, but should deviate from the accepted manner of reporting or describing in the same way that metaphorical expressions do. Metaphors draw on semantic crosscategorical likenesses (e.g. properties of human referents are compared with properties of non-human referents: *to sleep like a log*) or on pragmatically deviant descriptions (*to put the cart before the horse*).⁶ In OE, for instance, the topic is frequently presented using the first person, as if the speaker and topic were identical:

Hrægl min swigað ... (My armour keeps quiet ...)
Ic wæs wæpenwiga ... (I was a warrior ...) etc.

The structures of T, Q, and A can vary, but some basic rules can be observed nevertheless:

5. $T = S_{1,2,3, \dots L}$

In a riddle context the number of sentences is limited, which is marked by the index L, as against an unlimited number (S_n) of sentences in other types of discourse. Without such a limitation co-operation would be blocked, due to the physiological incapability of the human mind to absorb and respond to an excessive amount of information.

6. Q is a *directive* (Searle, 1976) occuring either as a question proper (QQ), which sometimes incorporates the topic (QQT), or as an exhortation or demand (QI) expressed by a

⁴ An example can be found in Grimm's fairy-tale about Rumpelstiltskin, where co-operation is intentionally blocked, since there is no evidence whatever on basis of which the name of the dwarf could be guessed.

⁵ What is considered usual, accepted, or straightforward will depend on the sociological context and norms of language use.

⁶ See D. Maček, to be published.

in English (*I don't know, I can't guess, etc.*) is uttered as a complete sentence. In SC even these are normally elliptical, the subject being suppressed (*Ne znam*, rather than *Ja ne znam*). Formally, the rules for positive and negative answers could be expressed as

$$\begin{array}{l}
 A + = N \\
 \quad N + N \\
 \quad \quad V \\
 \quad \quad \text{Adj} \\
 \quad \quad \text{etc}
 \end{array}
 \qquad
 \begin{array}{l}
 A - = \emptyset \\
 \quad S_{\text{neg}} (V_{\text{know, guess, name, etc.}})
 \end{array}$$

In conclusion riddling could be defined as a composite type of discourse, containing such speech acts as reporting and directing (i.e. descriptions, questions, and commands), its communicational value being one of expressive interrogation.

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