

PAPER

ENGLISH RIDDLES: TYPOLOGY, STRUCTURE, AND LINGUISTIC ENCODING

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Abstract

This study explores the typology, structural organization, and linguistic encoding of English riddles, with a focus on zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, phytomorphic, and inanimate object riddles. Emphasis is placed on the descriptive, narrative, and compositional-schematic features of riddles in the Exeter Book and subsequent corpora, illustrating patterns of metaphorical and literal representation. Riddles represent a distinct genre of verbal art, combining cognitive challenge with cultural encoding. In English, they serve as a lens for understanding medieval thought, symbolic representation, and the interplay between literal and figurative language.

Key words: oppositional riddles, antithetical riddles, deprivative riddles, causal contradictive riddles, zoomorphic riddles, anthropomorphic riddles

Introduction

Riddles represent a distinct genre of verbal art, combining cognitive challenge with cultural encoding. In English, they serve as a lens for understanding medieval thought, symbolic representation, and the interplay between literal and figurative language. Previous research (Taylor, 1943; Baum, 1963; Wyatt, 1912) highlights the significance of oppositional, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, phytomorphic, and inanimate-object riddles in medieval English corpora.

Oppositional riddles encompass antithetical, deprivative, and causal-contradictive types.

Materials and methods

The present study investigates the structural and typological features of English riddles, focusing on oppositional, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, phytomorphic, and reimorphic types. The primary materials consist of riddles extracted from historical and contemporary English sources, including the Exeter Book (ASPR collection),

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Taylor's classification of "true riddles," and various modern English riddle corpora available online. A total of 150 riddles were analyzed, selected to represent a broad spectrum of descriptive patterns, linguistic encoding strategies, and semantic oppositions. The methods employed in this study include qualitative and comparative analyses. Each riddle was examined according to its structural components, identifying the relationship between the theme and commentary, the presence of contradictory elements, and the use of metaphorical versus literal description. Typological classification followed the framework proposed by George and Dandes (1990), distinguishing between antithetical, deprivative, and causal contradictory riddles, as well as zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, phytomorphic, and reimorphic riddles. Linguistic encoding was analyzed by identifying metaphorical devices, anthropomorphisms, and other figurative strategies used to disguise the riddle's referent. Comparative analysis allowed for the assessment of variations across historical periods, highlighting the evolution of riddle construction and the persistence of certain cognitive patterns in contemporary riddles.

Data were systematically tabulated, with each riddle coded for type, structural features, key figurative elements, and semantic oppositions. This approach allowed for both quantitative assessment (e.g., frequency of each riddle type) and qualitative interpretation of the strategies employed in riddle construction. Examples were selected to illustrate each typological category, demonstrating the interplay between literal and metaphorical description and the cognitive mechanisms underlying the riddle's solution. For instance, antithetical riddles juxtapose logically incompatible descriptions: "What goes to the branch [stream] and drinks and doesn't drink?" (Cow with a bell). The descriptive elements cannot co-occur, creating a cognitive paradox. Similarly, paradoxical antithetical riddles include:

"What can go around the world while remaining in a corner?" (Stamp)

"If you have me, you want to share me. If you share me, you haven't got me." (Secret)

"What is black when it is clean and white when it is dirty?" (Blackboard)

Deprivative riddles negate expected properties or functions of objects:

"What has legs, but cannot walk?" (Chair)

"What has hands, but no fingers?" (Clock)

"Something has fingers but no toes." (Glove)

Causal-contradictive riddles subvert natural action-result relationships:

"What goes to the mill every morning and makes no tracks?" (Road, Wind, Smoke)

"Something runs but has no legs." (Clock)

"I am weightless, but you can see me. Put me in a bucket, and I'll make it lighter." (Hole)

These patterns illustrate the cognitive play central to oppositional riddles, highlighting the tension between expectation and linguistic representation. Zoomorphic riddles anthropomorphize non-human entities or represent objects as animals or birds. In the Exeter Book, the bagpipes are described with avian features: beak-like elements, birdlike hands and feet, and a capacity for song, yet inability to fly or walk. Later riddles exploit animal traits metaphorically:

"What has teeth but can't bite?" (Comb)

"I'm the part of the bird that's not in the sky. I can swim in the ocean and yet remain dry." (Shadow)

"I fly, yet I have no wings. I cry, yet I have no eyes." (Cloud)

"What is higher without a head than with a head?" (Pillow)

"What always runs but never walks, often murmurs, never talks, has a bed but never sleeps, has a mouth but never eats?" (River)

"Weight in my belly, trees on my back, nails in my ribs, feet do I lack." (Ship).

Phytomorphic riddles encode objects as plants. For example, a battering ram is described metaphorically as a tree. A pen is depicted as a reed, while the palm tree pun enables riddles: "What kind of tree can you carry in your hand?" (Palm). Later riddles in this category are rare, indicating a historical shift in encoding strategy. Inanimate-object riddles, or reified riddles, depict non-living entities as agents or characters.

Examples include:

Sword as treasure, embodying valor and prestige.

River as a dwelling for fish, a necessary habitat.

An object moving universally, providing human benefit without being alive.

In the study of English riddles, several typological categories can be distinguished based on the nature of their descriptive and structural elements. Oppositional riddles are characterized by contradictions between the elements of description, creating a cognitive tension that challenges the solver's expectations. Among them, antithetical riddles juxtapose logically opposite qualities or actions, as exemplified by the riddle "What can go around the world while remaining in a corner?" (Stamp), which contrasts spatial immobility with global movement. Deprivative riddles highlight the absence or denial of a property typically associated with an object, such as "What has legs but cannot walk?" (Chair) or "What has hands but no fingers?" (Clock), thus undermining ordinary associations and prompting lateral thinking. Causal contradictory riddles present paradoxical consequences that defy natural expectations, for instance, "What goes to the mill every morning and makes no tracks?" (Wind) or "I am weightless, yet you can see me. Put me in a bucket, and I'll make it lighter" (Hole), thereby creating a contrast between action and result.

In addition to oppositional forms, riddles often employ figurative encoding, whereby the object is masked through metaphor or anthropomorphic representation. Zoomorphic riddles depict objects as animals or birds, such as the bagpipes represented with a beak, birdlike feet, and wings in the Exeter Book, combining literal and figurative descriptions to create an enigmatic image. Anthropomorphic riddles attribute human qualities or behaviors to objects, as in the shield described as a wounded warrior experiencing battle and awaiting healing. Similarly, phytomorphic riddles disguise objects as plants, for example, a pen encoded as a reed or a battering-ram represented as a tree, linking natural growth with human utility. Reimorphic riddles personify inanimate objects, imbuing them with lifelike qualities, such as swords depicted as treasured possessions capable of slaying and carrying wealth, or rivers described as homes for fish. Across these categories, linguistic encoding plays a crucial role, balancing literal and metaphorical descriptions to engage the solver's

interpretive skills, exemplifying the interplay between figurative and literal representation in English riddle tradition.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the collected riddles revealed distinct structural, semantic, and typological patterns, confirming the utility of oppositional frameworks and figurative encoding in English riddles. The results are presented according to the major riddle types identified in the study: oppositional (antithetical, deprivative, and causal contradictory), zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, phytomorphic, and reimorphic riddles. Among the corpus, oppositional riddles were highly prevalent, accounting for approximately 40% of the sample. Within this category, antithetical riddles utilized direct contradictions between descriptive elements, creating semantic tension that challenges the solver's expectations. For example, "What goes to the branch [stream] and drinks and don't drink?" (Cow with a bell) demonstrates three descriptive components, of which the second and third are mutually exclusive. Similarly, paradoxical constructions like "If you have me, you want to share me. If you share me, you haven't got me" (Secret) rely on cognitive dissonance to obscure the referent. Deprivative riddles negate expected properties, such as "What has legs but cannot walk?" (Chair) and "What has hands but no fingers?" (Clock), highlighting the incongruity between conventional assumptions and the object's actual attributes. Causal contradictory riddles disrupt expected cause-effect relationships, e.g., "There is something that runs day and night and never runs up" (River), creating an unusual semantic mapping between action and consequence. These oppositional structures demonstrate the linguistic and cognitive sophistication inherent in riddle construction.

Zoomorphic riddles, in which objects are encoded as animals or birds, represent approximately 15% of the corpus. The Exeter Book Riddle 44 (ASPR 31) exemplifies this type, depicting the bagpipes as a fantastical creature with bird-like appendages, a beak, and human-like movement, yet incapable of walking or flying. Later riddles expand this category to incorporate animal traits metaphorically

associated with the object's function, as in "What has teeth but can't bite?" (Comb) and "I fly, yet I have no wings. I cry, yet I have no eyes" (Cloud). These riddles reveal the creative personification of inanimate objects and the cognitive engagement required to resolve semantic incongruities.

Anthropomorphic riddles were the most frequent, constituting nearly 30% of the corpus. Objects are given human characteristics, emotions, or actions to encode the referent in a metaphorical framework. For instance, the shield in Riddle 49 (ASPR 5) is described as a sentient warrior, experiencing injury, foreseeing battle, and anticipating healing. Similarly, riddles such as "What always runs but never walks, often murmurs, never talks, has a bed but never sleeps?" (River) rely on human-like attributes to structure the solver's reasoning process. Anthropomorphisms facilitate cognitive engagement by mapping familiar human experiences onto abstract or inanimate referents.

Phytomorphic riddles, encoding objects as plants, were comparatively rare (approximately 8% of the corpus) and were more characteristic of early medieval riddles. Examples include the battering ram represented as a tree (Riddle 47, ASPR 53) and the spear disguised as a tree (Riddle 48, ASPR 73). Such riddles employ metaphorical transfer from natural growth and vitality to functional or symbolic characteristics of objects. Later riddles, such as "What kind of tree can you carry in your hand?" (Palm), illustrate a shift toward playful word-based encoding rather than strict morphological metaphor. Reimorphic riddles, representing objects as inanimate or non-living entities, were observed in 12% of the corpus. The sword in Riddle 51 (ASPR 20) is valorized as a treasure, while the river in Riddle 62 (ASPR 85) functions as a dwelling for fish. Reimorphic encoding emphasizes the interaction between physical characteristics and functional significance, reinforcing the solver's reliance on both literal and metaphorical reasoning. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that certain structural strategies, such as metaphorical encoding and oppositional contrast, persist across historical periods, suggesting a stable cognitive framework guiding riddle composition. Comparative evaluation of early medieval and contemporary riddles reveals

both continuity in oppositional mechanisms and innovation in figurative representation, reflecting the adaptability of riddles to shifting linguistic, cultural, and didactic contexts.

Conclusion

The typology of English riddles demonstrates diverse linguistic and cognitive strategies: oppositional paradoxes, anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, phytomorphism, and reification. These mechanisms enable engagement with metaphorical and literal meanings, revealing the sophistication of medieval English literary culture. Analysis of Exeter Book riddles and subsequent examples shows how linguistic encoding and cognitive play intersect to construct riddles as enduring cultural artifacts.

Foydalanilgan adabiyotlar

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