

THE SEMIOTICS OF RIDDLES¹

Riddles have been a very ancient semiotic communicative means: the exchange of riddles was characterized as a marked semiotic situation. For example, we can see such an exchange in the Bible where Samson's wedding was described. It was connected with the exchange of gifts and with the exchange of women — that is the kernel of semiosis.

My aim is to point out the semiotic processes inherent in Russian riddles.

There are a lot of Russian riddles — more than 5,000 items are collected now. I'll examine only those riddles where words are used in the literal sense; riddles built on the basis of metaphor will be excluded from my presentation.

A riddle as it is known has a dual structure: a puzzle and a solution. The riddle and its answer is, so to speak, a unit of cultural memory. These units as a whole represent a picture of the world ("Weltbild" by Wittgenstein) reflected by this structure.

Specificity or the uniqueness of such a picture of the world is characterized by the definite correlation of the words in a given field and by the correlation of these fields to themselves. Jost Trier, developing the ideas of Herder and Humboldt, wrote:

1 This article is a continuation of my previous paper published in Russian: Семиотические аспекты «индексальной» загадки // *Лекомцева М. И.* Устроение языка. Сборник трудов. М., 2007. Р. 446-457. I am obliged to express my sincerest thanks to Finn Cohen for assistance and advice when I became lost in my English. The examples of riddles are taken from: *Митрофанова В. В.* Русские народные загадки. Л., 1968.

Every language dissects the reality by its own way, creating thereby its own specific picture of reality and establishing its own concepts².

A collaboration between J. Trier and L. Weisgerber resulted in “the German Picture of the World” (1950), a hypothesis of linguistic relativity along the lines of E. Sapir and B.L. Whorf.

The fact that the meaning of a word is defined by its position in the structure of the semantic paradigmatic field (let us call it “Trier’s field”) is clearly seen in terms of kinship.

There are many riddles where an answer is determined by the structure of this field, i.e.:

- Шуринов племянник
Как зятю родня? — сын.

Who is a brother-in-law’s nephew
from the point of view of a son-in-law? — A son.

- Идут три человека: одного отца —
матери дети, меж собой не
братья? — сестры.

Three people are walking: they are
the children of the same father and
mother. But they are not brothers.
Who are they? — They are sisters.

- Сын моего отца, а мне не брат? — я сам.

My father’s son, but not my brother? — Me.

But kinship terms don’t exhaust all these cases. For example:

- Ни корабль, ни лодка,
Ни весел, ни паруса,

² Trier, Jost. Aufsätze und Vorträge zur Wortfeldtheorie. The Hague — Paris, 1973. S. 145-146.

А ПЛЫВЕТ, НЕ ТОНЕТ
(ПЛОТ — «ПЛАВСРЕДСТВО»)

It is not a ship, not a boat,
Has no oars, no sails,
It sails, but it does not sink.
(raft).

The most numerous class of riddles takes its clue from a semantic field. Really, every dictionary has a class of such words, in which “meaning is defined by context exclusively: we bite — by teeth, of course. One licks — by tongue, clearly. Who is it, who is barking? A dog. <...> What is blonde? A human being’s hair. The fact that was illustrated here by a few examples is so common that we are not disposed towards noticing it and — most important — we don’t incline to value its importance”³.

But the riddles estimate this fact and exploit it very often. The riddle in such a case is a context for the word that has to be guessed.

The place of this word in a context — in a riddle — is specified by several ways. It may be an interrogative pronoun or personal pronoun, a numeral, or a construction with ellipses.

1. Interrogative pronoun.

- Что видно только ночью?
(звезды)

What can be seen only at night?
(stars)

- Кто ткёт без рук,
Без стола,
Без челнока
(паук)

³ *Porzig, Walter.* Das Wunder der Sprache. Probleme, Methoden und Ergebnisse der Sprachwissenschaft. München, 1971. S. 123.

Who spins without hands
 Without loom,
 Without shuttle?
 (A spider)

The word that has to be guessed can also be a verb:

- На печи горячо
 На полатях скрипуче,
 На лавке тесно,
 А под лавкой душно,
 А на столе грешно,
 А под столом смешно,
 А на кровати хорошо
 (спать)

It is hot on a stove,
 It is squeaky on a plank bed,
 It is cramped on a bench,
 It is stuffy under a bench,
 It is a sin on a table,
 It is funny under a table,
 And it is good in a bed.
 (to sleep)

When we see a riddle where the pronoun “it” is implied through repetition, we can suppose that “it” refers to the same word.

- Что растет в лесу,
 У коня висит,
 А у девки колыбается?
 (дерево, хвост, коса)

What is it: it grows in a forest,
 (It) hangs from a horse,
 And waves to and fro on a girl?
 (a tree, a tail, a braid)

But here such assumption can be broken: the answer is a tree for the first sentence, a tail for the second part and a braid for the last one.

When we have numerals instead of a word that can be guessed, we are inclined to consider this “counting” as referring to one group of objects. But the next example shows that riddles undermine such supposition.

- Один льет,
Другой пьет,
Третий растет
(дождь льет, земля пьет,
трава растет)

The first pours,
The second drinks,
The third grows.
(rain, earth, grass)

But there can be reference to words connected by some common features:

- Один говорит,
Двое глядят, да
Двое слушают
(Язык, глаза, уши)

One speaks,
Two look, and
Two hear.
(tongue, eyes, ears — those
are organs of sense)

The constructions with ellipses can't be shown in translation into English, but I will try to hint at such possibilities in Russian:

- Днем молчит,
Ночью кричит
(филин)

... is silent by day,
 ... screams at night.
 (eagle-owl)

Or:

- Сидит — зеленеет,
 Летит — пожелтеет,
 Падет — почернеет
 (лист дерева)

... is green when it sits,
 ... is yellow when it flies,
 ... is black when it falls.
 (leaf of a tree)

But the semantic structure of the word in a context can be more complicated: it is evident that it is possible for more than one word to fit the given context. Here the specificity of language interferes dramatically — it is very difficult to demonstrate in English the corresponding Russian riddles.

In Russian, “a sea” and “a cornfield” can be used in the same context — they are both “ruffled” by the wind.

- Не море, а волнуется
 (нива)

It is not a sea, but it has
 waves.
 (a cornfield).

Or:

- Не огонь, а жжется
 (крапива)

It is not a fire, but it burns.

<that is, stings>
(nettle).

“A saw” has prongs — in Russian it is the same word for “teeth”, so:

- Зубы есть, а рта нет
(пила)

There are teeth, but there is no mouth —
(a saw)

So, this kind of riddle shows the typical context for two words and the exclusion of one word from this context by the operation of negation.

2. Now we pass over to the new type of riddles. In these riddles, the context is rather broad, so many words could fit it, but the most interesting feature of this type is how the guessed word is represented here. Let us take some examples of such riddles.

- Что в избе за Филаты?
(полати)

What are Philates in a hut?
(plank bed)

- Что в избе бодро?
(ведра) |v'Odra|

What is |bOdro| (bracing) in a hut?
(buckets)

- Самсонница в избе
(солоница)

The context “what is ... in a hut?” can be fitted by many words. But the key to the guessed word is here the phonological structure of this word.

|filAti| — |palAti, |bOdra| — |v'Odra|, |samsanItsa| — |salanItsa| — we see the phonologically similar representation of the word to be guessed. “Samsonitsa” — nomen proprium (Samson — fem.) — is a phonological “portrait” of “salanitsa” (salt cellar).

Here the representatives of the words that have to be guessed are connected with the answers of riddles as indicators of phonological structures of words. This representative of an answer and the answer itself have no semantic connection to each other. Of course, a context implication is valid here too, but a context alone is not enough. The right guess is determined in such a case by phonological similarity between a word that has to be guessed and its representative in a given context.

But it is not the most complicated connection between them.

3. There is a special class of riddles that plays with the internal structure of words to create a larger context.

Брында! Не лази в пенду,
В пенде канда про Хонду

The answer is:

Кот! Не лезь в печку,
В печке каша для гостя.

Unlike the previous riddles, which create a puzzle out of the meaning of words, these riddles presuppose a syllable structure of words. Not only is there a distinction between phonological and semantic representations of words, but here there are complex syntactical games being played. The puzzles are created by combining the first syllable of a common word with a syllable that has no meaning in Russian, and the vowels at the end of each word indicate its particular purpose in the sentence. For example, in the above riddle, “nd_”, with the “Vowel” being filled by the appropriate vowel for the corresponding case, creates an element of repetition but has no inherent meaning in Russian. So, кА-ша > кА — нда, пЕ-чка > пЕ-

нда, пЕ-чку > пЕ-нду. And “для гостя” — the dialect form of “про хОстю”, which itself is not standard Russian, becomes “про хО-нду”. “Кот” (cat) becomes “Brynda” by combining “bry” — from “Брысь!”, or “shoo!” — with an additive “nda”.

In English it would be as follows:

Shoo-nda! Don't get into a sto-nda (stove),
There is a gru-nda (gruel) for gue-nda (guest).

We have another way to code the guessed words:

Рында роет,
Скинда скачет

The context of “роет” — “nuzzles” — implies “a pig” (свинья), and it is an answer to this part of the riddle. But it is interesting how this pig is represented, because context plays a much larger role in the wordplay. “Rynda” can be dissected by taking the “p” from “роет” and combining it with the “nda” — another nonsensical syllabic construction — to indicate the pig. Here we find a marriage of phonological and semantic representations that are completely reliant upon context.

The context “скачет” — “lopes” — implies “a hare”, and it is an answer to this part of the riddle too. The “hare” is coded in the same way: the first consonant “с” is an echo of the verb “скачет” and is combined again with the consonant cluster “nda” to create a word that exists only in this context. In English, it can be hinted as

N-inda nuzzles,
l-inda lopes
(pig, hare)

This repetition of the initial consonant can be seen as the sign of a contextual agreement and the repetition of any abstract syllable — here the “nda” — can be seen as the preliminary form of a quantifier.

In the last group of riddles, there is no single answer, but several answers — and all of them fit the given context. This is a special

pragmatic category of riddles — there are several groups of people who can answer these riddles differently. Based on their answers, we can infer a person's place in the social structure. Though most of such riddles are metaphors or other ways of renaming things, there are some examples when the riddle in its literal meaning has several answers.

- В воде не тонет
(тень; отражение в воде)

It doesn't sink in water
(a shadow; a reflection on water)

Or:

- В стену не вобьешь
(тень; яйцо)

It can't be hammered into a wall
(a shadow; a egg).

The most famous riddle of this group is:

- Перед нами — вверх ногами,
Перед тобой — вверх головой.
(отражение в воде)

Before us it is head over heels,
Before you it is head first.
(a reflection on water).

But the answers to this riddle can be: a fly (on a ceiling); a shadow; an embryo. "A fly" is a mocking answer, a kind of childish parody, but the other answers are not equivalent to each other. A shadow or a reflection on water are more cultured answers while an embryo is a highly sacred thing that normally is a taboo for certain communities.

What can we infer from these observations in regards to semiotics?

We see that in that prehistoric culture, a hierarchy of words was established based on their respective importance to society. These words can be analyzed from a paradigmatic point of view — as a semantic field structure — and from a contextual point of view as elements of Porzig's and Trier's field structures.

Such words that can be defined exclusively by their context have been chosen as a special group. Such pairs of words that can be fitted to the same context have been picked out, and a procedure has been developed that eliminates the second word through negation (“It burns, but it is not a fire.” “A nettle”).

Riddles exploit the idea of syllables and phonemes. They make a distinction between the semantic structure and the phonological structure of a word (a plane of content and a plane of expression).

Riddles also introduce a new type of symbols: those that represent “any syllable” (for example, “nda”) as an example of “any item”. This is the basis for the development of quantification.

We can also see refined semiotic transformations such as the use of proper names to indicate a word's phonological “portrait” (“Samsonitsa/ solonitsa). This transformation implies the arbitrary change of a word's meaning, in particular stripping words of sense — a powerful semiotic device in pragmatic aspects.

It is no surprise that communities of oral tradition have used taboo as a special activity. And riddles display a societal hierarchy based on a person's ability — or lack thereof — to understand and create them. This type of intellectual hierarchy is the dawn of history.

My concern here was a semantic aspect of the semiotic system of Russian riddles. Pragmatic aspect has remained beyond the scope of my paper. Nevertheless, it can be recollected that we see here a formation of a special referential space: the situation of guessing riddles has been marked semiotically, it has been different from the asking (maybe the same question) in common communication.

We know from other sources that riddle guessing was characterized as a semiotically charged situation. Answering or not answering a riddle could change the status of a communicant, as the example of Oedipus has proved, when failure to solve a riddle meant death and solving a riddle meant becoming a king.