

A Cognitive Semantic Study of Some English Riddles and Their Answers in *Amidst a Tangled Web*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper was to identify meaning construction strategies in selected English riddles and account for the mental processes involved in their production. In pursuance of this aim, 38 riddles, together with their answers, were downloaded from Amidst a Tangled Web, an online source for English riddles. The answers supplied by the riddlers were subjected to cognitive semantic reading. The riddlers' answers were tested against our cognitive perception of the riddles, which served as clues for conducting and categorizing our analysis. Analysis of the data, based on insights from cognitive semantic theory, proclaimed the primacy of cognitive context in the semantics of the discourse of the riddle by revealing that its production and interpretation required more than conventional linguistic knowledge. The paper showed that the meaning of a riddle is an imposed meaning that relates to the logical, experiential, linguistic, literary and intuitive judgments of the riddlers. The paper concluded that a riddle is an exemplar of cognitive dimension of power dominance expressed in discourses.

Keywords: English riddles, Amidst a Tangled web, Cognitive perception

INTRODUCTION

Meaning is crucial to language and linguistics; language is all about meaning and all functional approaches to the study of language focus on or necessarily relate to meaning. Even language activities, such as children's twaddle and tongue twisting language games, many of which do not produce linguistic meanings and therefore are generally regarded as gibberish, produce affective meanings. Paradoxically, however, a very critical problem that has over the years confronted linguists, philosophers and psychologists, and which has served as a dividing factor among them, is the problem of meaning in language.

While linguists, philosophers and psychologists are divided on their approaches to the study of meaning, they are unanimous in submitting that meaning is elusive. This common submission poses challenges as it impresses on them the need to develop theories capable of accounting for the nature of different meanings in language. Attempts at meeting the challenges lead to such rival perspectives of linguistic meaning as formalist, logical positivism, contextualist, mentalist, referential, structuralist, behaviouristic, functional-pragmatic, and neuro-biological. Each of these approaches generates a great number of disputes, which are not our concern in this paper.

To obtain meanings from language requires the knowledge of three types of context: linguistic, social, and cognitive. The linguistic context of an utterance refers to the totality of its phonological, lexical and grammatical resources. The social context consists of the cultural, institutional, group, etc, circumstances surrounding the use of language. The cognitive context comprises the totality of the belief, pattern of reasoning and the knowledge which produce the utterance. The linguistic context may be regarded as the super-ordinate

context as it is the conveyor, or, at least, the prompt of the other two contexts. Obviously, even a strictly functional linguist will rely on the manifest linguistic information to generate social and cognitive meanings from a linguistic expression. Both the social and cognitive meanings can therefore be regarded as linguistic products.

However, in complex language signs like riddles and jokes, the knowledge of the form and substance or phono-grammatical and lexico-semantic system of the language is secondary, if not totally unimportant, to the knowledge of the cognitive realities which generate the language token. The present paper proclaims the primacy of cognitive context in the process of interpreting the discourse of the riddle by demonstrating that its linguistic context is inadequate in arriving at its answer.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Cognitive semantics is a branch of the general theory of Cognitive Linguistics theory that conceives of meaning as a “cognitive phenomenon” and which is concerned with the “relation between language, meaning and cognition” (Allwood and Gärdenfors, 1999: vi). Gärdenfors (1999:30) describes the approach more aptly as that which “identifies meanings of expressions with mental entities” (p.19). In the words of Saeed (2003), Cognitive Linguistics considers linguistic knowledge as part of general cognition which means that linguistic knowledge is just a part of the general experiential knowledge both of which are crucial in meaning production and reception.

Imran and Hashim (2009) describe Cognitive Semantics as a multi-disciplinary theory of language which attempts to describe language phenomena from a cognitive, cultural and physiological point of view taking into account the sociological and anthropological differences as well as the experiential realisms and natural surroundings that are embodied in the *homo lingualis*. Cognitive Linguistics generally (by extension, Cognitive Semantics) differs from the formal approach to the study of language and aligns with the functional approach by stressing that language cannot be properly analysed primarily in formal terms.

Geeraerts (1997:7) avers that in Cognitive Semantics, the formal structures of language are studied not as if they were autonomous, but as a reflection of general conceptual organization, categorization principles, processing mechanisms, and experiential and environmental influences. Newman (1996: ix), cited in Imran and Hashim (2009), summarizes the theoretical assumptions of the cognitive linguistics enterprise as follows:

1. There are important links between linguistic structure and human cognition, making it imperative to acknowledge the role of human cognition and human experience in motivating and explicating linguistic structure;
2. A language community imposes its own categorizations upon the entities which constitute reality and such categorizations may differ considerably from one language community to another;
3. Most of the categories relevant to linguistics are viewed as having central and less central members rather than being criterially defined;
4. Where the meaning of a form needs to be elaborated, then a larger context or ‘frame’ [domain] needs to be invoked in order to properly describe the meaning.

The principles of CL, as reflected in the assumptions above, are significant to the discourse of riddles which we classify in this paper as atypical discourse. By atypical, we mean the discourse is different from the mundane or commonplace use of language in that it is

semantically opaque not in terms of its linguistic component but in terms of its subjective inclination.

RIDDLES: PERSPECTIVES, FUNCTION AND RELATION TO COGNITION

Earlier research on cognition has focused on learning, problem solving and memory. But the more playful side of cognition has been neglected (Shultz 1974). Riddle is an important linguistic genre that elicits humour, fun and entertainment. To Pepicello and Green (1984:i), the riddle is not merely a witty bit of entertainment but “a complex linguistic and aesthetic structure that, when subjected to systematic and scientific study, reveals a great deal about the major human system”. For us in this paper, this system is the cognitive system. Riddles are statements, questions or phrases having ambiguous or obscured meanings, and are put forth as puzzles to be solved.

Based on the general knowledge that the discourse is inherently humorous and entertaining, Shultz (1974: 2) describes the riddle as a question followed by a surprising or incongruous answer. Since the answer is usually too difficult for the listener to obtain on his own, it is provided by the teller after an appropriate length of time. The listener's task is then to figure out how the incongruous answer really does make sense in terms of the original question. If he succeeds, he has resolved or explained the incongruity and should thus experience a certain amount of pleasure.

Sutton-Smith (1973) adds that the riddle is a puzzling question with an arbitrary answer. This is because the subject was expecting meaning A but was given meaning B. It is also systematic because meaning A and B shared another semantic relationship. The import of these definitions is that the elicitation of correct responses to riddles depends on the interplay of code, message and context on the one hand, and, according to Pepicello et al (1984: 4), “on an organizing principle within a conventional framework”, on the other.

In addition to its entertainment function, data from riddle discourses are useful in language learning because it involves playing with words and meanings. Ajayi (1990) opines that it does not only serve as a form of amusement, but also as a means of education and even as a serious test of imaginative powers. Cole-Beucgast (1957) adds that the riddle "combines recreational and educational features to an unusual degree", which suggests that it is cognitively demanding to unravel its meanings. The cognitive task required in uncovering the semantic content of riddles agrees with the Chomskyan view of language learning as a thinking process. In other words, a riddle is a statement with a hidden meaning, which is to be discovered after a sharp mental review of various possibilities.

Earlier studies on riddles have emphasized their metaphorical, oppositional, and classificatory characteristics (George & Dundes 1963; Sutton-Smith 1973; and Ajayi (1990). Robert and Fornan (1972:184) had claimed that riddles are “serious” expressive models or representations, showing that riddles are “formal interrogations of subordinates by superordinates”. This contrasts sharply with Finnegan (1970), who views the riddle as a discourse of childish interest.

Our submission in this paper is that though a riddle is a play on language, it is a product of creative thought; it is a discourse which draws on familiar experiences but renders them in strange ways. Our aim is to identify meaning construction strategies in selected English riddles and account for the mental spaces involved in their production. The specific objectives are to identify and classify the selected riddles on the basis of semantic ‘operation’

carried out on the language token, describe the mental spaces created by the riddler and to connect the discourse of the riddle to the cognitive view of meaning.

METHODOLOGY

In pursuing the aim and objectives as enumerated above, we obtained thirty-eight riddles from *Amidst a Tangled Web*, an online source for English riddles. These riddles, together with their answers, were downloaded from this site and then subjected to cognitive semantic reading. The answers supplied by the riddlers, tested against our cognitive perception of the riddles and linguistic experience, served as clues for conducting and categorizing our analysis.

ANALYSIS

A close reading of the thirty-eight riddles used for this study (see appendix) reveals that the riddle is an amalgam of series of mental spaces because its producer dwells on and connects an array of knowledge sources when generating it. In other words, the riddler appeals to some domains of human cognition, specifically the mythical, philosophical, linguistic, rhetorical, experiential, and metaphorical. The analysis that follows substantiates /explores how riddles appeal to these domains of cognitive context. It will be demonstrated shortly that every riddle is [a phenomenon of ambiguity] an ambiguous expression whose actual meaning lies in the cognitive judgment of the producer. We will also show that the riddle is a serious discourse for illustrating some views of semantics and such modern discourse concepts as power and power domination.

Logical Semantic Space

Under this category, we analyze riddles that result from logical semantic operation. Let us consider the first example:

It is greater than God and more evil than the Devil. The poor have it, the rich need it and, if you eat it, you'll die. What is it?

This riddle appeals to reasoning; the enunciator (the producer of the riddle) draws upon the philosophical domain of cognition because it is a product of deep thought. It is derived from the philosophical reflection on the unparalleled greatness of God and unrivalled devilish quality of the Devil. Through comparative philosophical argument of contradiction, the poor are framed as 'the haves' and the rich as 'the have nots'.

In a similar semantic process of contradiction, the act of eating, which is ordinarily a life-giving act, is re-constructed as a life-terminating act. This riddle illustrates the semantic phenomenon of contradiction, which is resolved in the mental context of the riddler who gives the answer as NOTHING. With this answer, the riddle appeal to the riddlee's reasoning that, nothing is greater than God, nothing is more evil than evil, the rich need nothing and, that if you eat nothing, you will die. Though the part of the riddler's answer that the rich needs nothing is fallacious, the audience is made to accept it. With this imposed meaning, the riddler is exercising some sort of intellectual power of domination on the audience.

The semantic operation in item 1 above also applies to the riddle (to which is given "Tomorrow" or "the future" as answer) below:

I never was, am always to be. No one ever saw me, nor ever will. And yet I am the confidence of all, to live and breathe on this terrestrial ball. What am I? (Appendix 5)

Metaphorical Space

Under this category, riddles that result from the lexico-semantic operation of metaphORIZATION are discussed. In these riddles, some lexical items undergo semantic shift/appropriation, thereby generating hidden meanings. Their meanings do not reside at the surface level of compositionality. Instead, they test the riddlee's ability to establish a relationship between a word and its referent. Riddle 2 reads as follows:

It walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon and three legs in the evening.
What is it? (The answer is given as MAN)

This is an example of a metaphor for "a lifetime". In the metaphor, there is semantic extension to the lexemes "morning", "noon" and "evening" to mean the periods of infancy, adulthood, and old age, respectively. Additionally, "legs" are really not legs, but instead a metaphor for a person's life journey. This riddle elucidates the primacy of ideational meaning over referential in the study of meaning. This is because the physical referents of four legs, two legs and three legs have been extended to relate to the concepts in the mind of the riddler to approximate as the periods of infancy, adulthood and old age. The riddlee can only reveal the answer to the riddler if he/she is operating in the same mental frame as the riddler in seeing the metaphoric relationships between these three ages of a human being.

Also, in item 14, fire is presented as a consuming phenomenon capable of being hungry. This is a semantic extension because fire, an inanimate object, has been animated by being given the quality of a being that can be 'fed'.

Personal Experiential Space

Under this category, riddles that result from factual, cultural and personal experiences are discussed. In generating the meaning of riddles in this category, riddlees do not strictly depend on the linguistic context for cues but draw from their experiences in the domains of agriculture, ecology, geography and customs. The riddlers' knowledge of these experiences places them in a vantage position to exercise intellectual power and domination on the riddles. The riddler engages them in a hide-and-seek game in search of the imposed meanings which only he knows. In this study, the interpretations of items 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20, 23, 25, 31, 34 and 35 are dependent on the experiential knowledge that may be mutually shared by the riddler and the riddlee. For instance, the riddlee would have to resort to their experience in the area of agriculture/food to realize that the answer to riddle 7 below is WATERMELON

There was a green house. Inside the green house there was a white house. Inside the white house there was a red house. Inside the red house there were lots of babies.

It takes a person who has seen a watermelon and its inner components to realize that 'the green house' being referred to in the riddle is not an edifice painted green and that it refers instead to the watermelon whose inner concentric layers are made up of many layers of colour: first white, followed by red, and then seeds, which were referred to as 'a lot of babies' in the riddle. Any person without this shared knowledge would follow a different semantic route in his/her answer to the riddle. A similar riddle is the riddle in appendix 9:

The person, who makes it, sells it. The person who buys it never uses it and the person who uses it doesn't know they are.

The answer to the riddle above, which is given as COFFIN, requires the community knowledge of carpentry and the use of coffins for burials. This experience may not be shared by children in India for example, whose idea of burial relates to cremation. Riddle number 10 is equally dependent on the experiential knowledge of the riddler:

The more you have it the less you see it.

The answer is given as DARKNESS. This meaning making mechanism in riddles exemplifies the mentalist perspective of meaning, which connects the meaning of a linguistic expression with the mental perception of the language user. Furthermore, the cognitive semantic phenomenon is also exemplified in item 13 which has the answer given as PENNY. This answer is somehow fallacious as it is not all pennies that are brown.

The local experience of cooking with charcoal in some underdeveloped worlds is brought into the generation of item 12 to which the answer is given as CHARCOAL:

What is black when you get it, red when you use it, and white when you're all through with it?

In this contemporary world where gas cookers, electric cookers or microwaves are used in cooking, people without such knowledge as instantiated in the answer given to this riddle might not be able to recognize the mental space that generates it and, therefore might not be able to decipher its sense. In getting the answer to riddle 15 below, the riddlee depends on the experience of the processes involved in the mining of iron ore:

Ripped from my mother's womb, beaten and burned, I become a blood thirsty killer.
What am I?

The ecological awareness of the riddler reflects in the semantics of item 17:

I have four legs but no tail. Usually I am heard only at night. What I am?

The answer to this riddle from the riddler's point of view is FROG. The riddler delimitation of the answer as FROG is borne out of the general ecological knowledge that amphibians croaks at night. Given this general knowledge, any other amphibian, like toad could rightly answer the riddle. However, the riddler has exerted some intellectual power domination on the audience by imposing the meaning FROG on the audience. This phenomenon of conceptual imposition is also reflected in the riddle (Appendix 35) below:

Who works only one day in a year but never gets fired?

The answer given, Santa Claus, is derived from the experience of Santa Claus who comes ones in a year during the Christmas to distribute gifts to children. In the Nigerian context, Santa Claus does not work for only one day; sometimes it works for over a month, moving from one location to another. Therefore, considering the Nigerian experience, the answer given to this riddle might amount to cognitive imposition.

Linguistic Space

Under this category, we examine riddles that relate to knowledge of grammatical structure, phoneme-grapheme system and semantic features of language. Item 3 (I am the beginning of the end, and the end of time and space. I am essential to creation, and I surround every place. What am I?), the answer to which is given as letter "E" is an example of riddles in this category. In this item, the riddler is exercising the linguistic knowledge of English graphemic position of letter "e" in the words-'end', 'time', 'space', 'creation' and the group-'every place'. Paying special attention to the positional description of the items being referred to, one would notice that letter 'e' is the beginning of the word 'end', the end of the two words coordinated by and in the phrase 'time and space'. Also, the letter is an inherent component of 'creation' and it circumscribes the phrase 'every place'. Interpreted outside the riddler's cognitive context, one could rightly give the riddle the answer -GOD. Letter E now takes the place of the Alpha and Omega, which is a divine attribute of God. The implication of the answer given by the riddler in contradistinction to the answer that readily comes to mind is

that the riddler, in a bid to achieve cognitive domination, consciously trivializes the commonplace semantics of God as *the beginning of the end and the end of the beginning*, thereby improving on the common knowledge of the audience.

Similarly, item 16 (I know a word of letters three. Add two, and fewer there will be) is given the answer FEW. This riddle results from the riddler's grammatical knowledge of comparative degree of regular adjectives. These adjectives form their comparative with the addition of "er" suffix, which is made up of two letters. Therefore, the addition of these two letters to the root- "few" with the suffix- "er" will form "fewer", which is composed of five letters. In generating this riddle and its answer, the riddler brings to bear the knowledge of numeracy and grammar in order to cause cognitive confusion, thereby achieving obscurity, which puts the audience at his mercy. The riddler's paradoxical conceit is that the meaning of the comparative form of the word "few" grows by diminution.

Additionally, item 24: ('who is closer to you, your mum or your dad?'), with the answer given as MUM, reflects the linguistic knowledge of syntactic proximity in arriving at 'mum' as the answer. In this riddle, the riddler is taking the audience away from a child's relationship with or feeling toward his or her parents, that is the filial attachment of love, care, kindness or emotional connectedness between the child and the parent. The riddler's answer of MUM has no bearing on the aforementioned sense. Rather, the riddler deliberately switches the riddle off its semantic context to syntactic context, playing on the word "closer".

Finally, in item 38 (what is the longest word in the English language?), the answer is given as MILE. In this riddle, the riddler is playing on the knowledge of words used in measuring distance such as centimeters, meters, kilometers and miles, of which "mile" is the longest. All these words belong to the same semantic field of distance and the lexeme-mile is the word measuring the longest distance.

CONCLUSION

This paper has confirmed the hypothesis reiterated by Heine, Kuteva and Kaltenböck (2014) that human cognitive behavior in general and linguistic discourse in particular cannot reasonably be reduced to one monolithic system of mental processing. Analyses carried out in the paper have shown that the discourse of riddle illustrates the cognitive linguistic ideas of conceptual blending and conceptual imposition. The paper has shown that the answers to the selected riddles reflect cognitive practice of sense displacement on the part of the actors of the riddles who assume the status of super ordinate language users not in terms of age, position or social status but by virtue of self-acclaimed cognitive power which they wage in cognitively imposing meanings and thereby suppressing the riddlees'/subordinates cognitive interpretive power in language.

This paper has shown further that riddles are products of literary- linguistic creativity with a somewhat mystical semantic core rooted in the 'personal knowledge' or experience of the riddlers. It has also been demonstrated that beyond their humorous content, riddles are products for testing linguistic and experiential domains of knowledge.

The significance of the study lies in its explication of certain views of semantics in general and the theory of Cognitive Semantics in particular, using riddle discourse. The significance also lies in shedding lights on human infinite ability to innovate in language. Riddles, going by our findings in this study, exemplify the view of semantics that meaning lies in the mind of the language user.

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APPENDIX

1. It is greater than god and more evil than the evil. The poor have it, the rich need it and if you eat it, you'll die. What is it? (Nothing)
2. It walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon and three legs in the evening. What is it? (Man)
3. I am the beginning of the end, and the end of time and space. I am essential to creation, and I surround every place. What am i? (the letter E)
4. What always runs but never walks, often murmurs, never talks, has a bed but never sleeps, has a mouth but never eats. (A river)
5. I never was, am always to be. No one ever saw me, nor ever will. And yet I am the confidence of all, to live and breathe on this terrestrial ball. What am I? (Tomorrow or future)
6. At night they come without being fetched. By day, they are lost without being stolen. What are they? (the stars)
7. There was a green house. Inside the green house there was a white house. Inside the white house there was a red house. Inside the red house there were lots of babies. What is it? (Watermelon).
8. What is in seasons, seconds, centuries and minutes but not in decades, years or days? (the letter 'n')
9. The person, who makes it, sells it. The person who buys it never uses it and the person who uses it doesn't know they are. What is it? (coffin)
10. The more you have it the less you see it. What is it? (darkness)
11. What has a head, a tail, is brown, and has no legs? (a penny)
12. What is black when get it, red when you use it, and white when you're all through with it? (Charcoal)
13. You thruway the outside and cook the inside. Then you eat the outside and throw away the inside. What did you eat? (an ear of corn)
14. I am hungry,
I must always be fed,
The finger I touch,
Will soon turn red. (Fire)
15. Ripped from my mother's womb,
Beaten and burned,
I become a blood thirsty killer.
What I am? (Iron ore)
16. I know a word of letters three. Add two, and fewer there will be. (few)
17. I have four legs but no tail. Usually I am heard only at night. What I am?(Frog)
18. All about, but cannot be seen,
Can be captured, cannot be held,

- No throat, but can be heard.
19. Until I am measured
I am not known,
Yet how you miss me
When I have flown (Time)
 20. I drive men mad
For love of me,
Easily beaten,
Never free. (Gold)
 21. Lighter than what
I am made of,
More of me is hidden
Than is seen. (Iceberg)
 22. Each morning I appear
To lie at your feet,
All day I will follow
No matter how fast you run,
Yet I nearly perish
In the midday sun. (shadow)
 23. My life can be measured in hours,
I serve by being devoured.
Thin, I am quick
Fat, I am slow
Wind is my foe. (a candle)
 24. Who is closer to you, your mum or your dad? (Mum)
 25. What is the poorest bank in the world?-(river bank)
 26. What month **does soldiers** hate?- (March)- !!!
 27. Why is empty purse always the same?- (**no change in it**)
 28. Why shouldn't you lose your temper? (No one wants it)
 29. What stays hot even if put in a refrigerator? (Pepper)
 30. What can't be used unless broken? (Egg)
 31. What **two** words contain thousands of letters? (**Post office**)-
 32. What do you get if you cross stereo and fridge? **very cool music**
 33. What is the longest word in the English language? (Mile)
 34. Who works only one day in a year but never gets fired? (Santa Claus)
 35. Who always drives his customers away? (A taxi driver)
 36. Why is $10 \times 10 = 1000$ like your left eye?(it is not right)
 37. How many letters are there in the alphabet? (Eleven!)