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## Riddles as Language Experiences

**Abstract:** Riddles are texts with certain features in common, but with an extraordinary diversity regarding linguistic characteristics. The riddles in the article hail from literature, oral tradition and an educational context. They all demonstrate the versatility, flexibility and utility of language. Linguistic phenomena, ranging from phonetics and morphology to speech acts and adjacency pairs, find their counterparts in riddles, showing how language experiences through riddles are ideal for language sensitivity training.

**Keywords:** riddles, language acquisition, linguistic competence, communicative competence.

### 1. Introduction

Riddles appear in unexpected places, and their abundance of shapes and uses demonstrates the versatility, flexibility and utility of language. They depend on linguistic subtleties or on surprising uses of common knowledge. The American folklorist Roger Abrams describes them as one of many “traditional forms of licensed aggression”, since the aim of the riddler is to confuse the listener by giving hints that point to the right answer only in hindsight (Abrams 2005: 30). The riddle often contains hints that only serve to confound the audience and obscure the solution.

This article aims to sum up the plethora of opportunities riddles provide for language experiences and language stimulation, whether in the context of the first language acquisition or the second/foreign language learning. They represent a language play that often flourishes in the absence of adults, and thereby represents an authentic and natural use of language that cannot be replaced by any pedagogical activities initiated by adults (Opie and Opie 1959). Children also get acquainted with riddles through stories like *The Hobbit* and *Harry Potter*. The abundance of online teachers’ manuals about riddles shows that educators

acknowledge the value of these texts and seek to inspire the play, develop material and introduce new traditions and genres.

It is our conviction that riddles offer excellent opportunities for the development of language skills on every level. From the focus on individual speech sounds and letters, through the complexities of syntactic structures to the subtleties of discourse-related strategies, we attempt to demonstrate how riddles can be instrumental in highlighting intricate workings of language at its various sub-systems. Schools that promote a culture for riddles, can build on children's affinity for this type of texts and recognize this type of play for what it is: language sensitivity training on a high level.

## 2. Theory and method

This article represents a new approach in three regards. Firstly, we include all riddle-like texts in our study. Whether a given riddle-like text conforms to a typical riddle format or is a parody or an innovation, it presupposes the existence of traditional riddles, and all of these texts occur in the language environment of children. The text-types that include a question, an answer and some kind of trickery all apply, since language experiences can be made regardless of the origin of the texts. Secondly, we want to demonstrate the versatility of riddles as regards language. We aim to give a bird's view of this world of possibilities. The challenge is to present this totality in a paper of limited extent, so as to give a convincing account of the relevance of riddles to most, if not all, aspects of language. Last, we include pragmatics in our survey. This field is largely ignored in the literature about riddles.

The logic behind this paper follows an inductive pattern. Our a priori suppositions are firstly that children in general engage in riddle activities. The numerous historical accounts support this notion (Opie and Opie 1959). In addition, countless riddle collections are ceaselessly being published, off- and online, often with a pedagogical marketing implying that they will serve both as entertainment and edification. It is more difficult to find recent studies of modern-day children's folklore that document the uses of riddles. Nevertheless, we can safely assume that children encounter riddles in kindergarten and in school, and that teachers find the activities rewarding because they see the enthusiasm children show.

Secondly, we assume that the language specific elements in the texts of riddles are available to children as a material for the development of language skills. Dienhart (1999) shows that conundrum riddles depend on a semantic linking that serves as a trigger without which the riddle game would soon lose its appeal. Children must be able to make this connection if they want to enjoy the riddles, remember them well enough to retell them and to create new riddles using the

same patterns. Riddles that involve rhyming will certainly represent language meta-consciousness, and rhyming is widely used in the efforts in Anglophone education to overcome children's spelling challenges. The link between rhyming and phonemic skills may depend on the teacher's instruction (Macmillan 2002), but there is no discussion that also informal rhyming play offers an opportunity to discover phonetic elements in words.

Thirdly, we base our paper on the assumption that some experiences are transferable, so that text and language patterns that children discover in riddles can be used in new contexts and with new texts. We do not think that a child that shows enjoyment over a riddle always grasps the full linguistic implications of the pun or point, but we believe that the mere engagement in riddle games is still of value. The elements of tradition (pattern, repetition, audience support, local situating, etc.) serve as a scaffolding for the child, making it possible to perform tasks beyond its mental maturity. We will focus on the language specific elements linked to such performances as riddle play truly is.

Our material consists of written texts, with all the limitations that words on paper are encumbered with. Riddles are an activity that requires people and context, body and soul, and should perhaps be observed and documented accordingly, yet we are convinced that the reader will be able to infer the body language involved, by studying the text. Our research question is: To what extent do riddle activities represent language stimulation? We answer by sharing the variety of language elements present in different riddles. Our material is in many ways the result of desultory excavations, but the selection we present is intended to give a hint of the diversity of riddles and a systematic overview of language skills, and to suggest to the reader that the list could go on. It seems that there is no area in language competencies that cannot in some way be stimulated through riddle activities.

## 3. Riddles and phonology

It goes without saying that riddles constitute a perfect medium for raising children's phonological awareness, a prerequisite for literacy acquisition. In a nutshell, phonological awareness refers to capability to notice and manipulate phonological units consciously (e.g. Lieberman *et al.* 1989). Let us consider in more detail what phonological constituents and phenomena are skilfully juggled in riddles, and thus, through children's engagement in riddling activities, can be brought to their attention. Onomatopoeia is a good place to start. What goes cluck-cluck bang? (A chicken in a minefield). Since the focus is specifically on sounds, such riddles prepare the ground for a more sophisticated play with various phonological phenomena.

### 3.1. Rhyme, onset and syllable

Among one of the most obvious examples of phonological concepts that riddles can sensitize children to is that of the rhyme. The use of rhymes in riddles is omnipresent: sometimes rhyming serves the role of an adornment or has a mnemonic function, on other occasions, it may be utilised to trigger the solution to the riddle:

- (1) *I'm smaller than a horse, bigger than a frog.  
I jump and I bark. I'm a \_\_\_\_ (Dog)*

In fact, there is also a category of riddles in which rhyming is a required feature of the solution, as is the case in so-called *hink-pinks*, i.e. riddles to which the answer must always contain a pair of rhyming words:

- (2) *What do you call an obese feline? (A fat cat)*

Though *rhyme* in common parlance may be associated only with a poetic device, the rhyme in its more technical sense refers to one of the two basic constituents of the syllable, and the activities which are supposed to help in singling out the rhyme, automatically bring to focus the existence of the syllable onset. The manipulation of this syllabic unit constitutes the gist of the following simple riddle, specifically designed for the purpose of teaching early literacy skills:

- (3) *What rhymes with man but begins with /pl/? (Plan)*

Moreover, extraction and exchange of syllable onsets are the basis for the humour in riddles concerned with spoonerisms (i.e. long distance inter-word metathesis).

- (4) *Why did a butterfly flutter by? (Because it saw a dragonfly drink a flagon dry)*

An even greater number of riddles merely focus on syllables or parts of words, thus drawing attention to the phonological structure of words in general, like the 'my first'-riddles do:

- (5) *My first syllable is a farm animal, my second is the end of it, and my whole is something girls wear; what am I? (Pigtail)*

### 3.2. Phoneme

Phonemic awareness constitutes a more specific subcomponent of phonological awareness which is particularly crucial for successful literacy acquisition (e.g. Morais 1991). It refers to the ability to segment speech and recognize the discrete sounds that are pertinent to the meaning of a word in a language, i.e. phonemes. Early education teachers are often advised to facilitate children's ability to divide words into phonemes by means of various activities, among which riddles figure

predominantly. Here is a small sample of amusing riddles involving various phoneme manipulations (exchanges, additions, alliterations, etc.):

- (6) *What is the difference between a fisherman and an angry school child?  
(One baits his hooks, the other one hates his books)*
- (7) *What do cows put on their Christmas trees? (Hornaments)*
- (8) *What colour is a burp? (Burple)*

### 3.3. Homophones

Another phenomenon lavishly exploited in riddles is homophony. In fact, it is the crux of the construction of all riddles (and jokes) resting on linguistic ambiguity. The simplest examples of such riddles involve cases of homophony between words of the same grammatical category and the same morphological composition (i.e. the same number and type of morphemes). In the following example, the pun rests on the two meanings of *mouth*, and in each instance the word must be analysed as a mono-morphemic noun.

- (9) *What has a mouth but does not eat? (River)*

Moreover, some riddles vividly illustrate the fact that homophony may likewise arise at the phrase level:

- (10) *How can one survive in a desert? (By eating the sand which is /sandwiches there)*

A riddle that aims to confuse on many levels can also stimulate awareness of other supra-segmental phonological phenomena, as in this case:

- (11) *What annoys an oyster? (A noisy noise annoys an oyster)*

The meaning of the answer requires the ability to find the borders between words, whereas the humorous point rests on the ability to spot the repeated homophonous sequence of sounds. Additionally, we have a sequence of trochees in the question that is echoed in the answer, so that the rhythm figure (foot) is also of pertinence.

### 3.4. Cross-accent distinctions

Furthermore, homophone riddles may be employed to highlight cross-accent distinctions between different varieties of the same language (e.g. various English accents). What constitutes perfect homophony in one accent of a language may only be pseudo-homophonous in another. The following riddles illustrate this point:

- (12) *What animal can you never trust? (Cheetah)*
- (13) *What kind of insect does your uncle like best? (Ant)*



In a non-rhotic accent of English (e.g. Received Pronunciation) the pair *cheetah-cheater* is pronounced identically. However, due to r-colouring of the preceding vowel in General American English, for instance, only partial (though still substantial) phonetic similarity will be observed between these two words. Likewise, only in some English accents (e.g. General American) the pair *ant-aunt* is homophonous.

#### 4. Riddles and morphology

Numerous riddles bring into focus the fact that individual words are often composed of smaller meaningful parts (i.e. morphemes) and this aspect of languages may be tampered with to achieve humorous results. The following two examples are what Pepicello and Green (1984: 37) define as morphological riddles, that is these in which homophony is observed between two words of different morphological structure.

(14) *What is black and white and /red/ all over?* (Newspaper)

In the above example, there is a play on the mono-morphemic adjective *red* and the morphemically more complex word form of the verb *read*, which, in fact, consists of two morphemes, namely one carrying the core meaning of the verb and the other one the meaning of 'irregular past participle', though the latter morpheme lacks any overt form.

The wit in morphological riddles may also stem from pseudo-morphological analysis, i.e. situations where a sequence of phonemes is homophonous with a certain real morpheme and thus, for the sake of creating a riddle, can be playfully treated as a (pseudo-)morpheme:

(15) *What kind of ears does a train have?* (Engineers)

Some other riddles may be instrumental in raising children's awareness of a distinction between compounds and parallel syntactic phrases:

(16) *When is a black dog not a black dog?* (When it is a greyhound)

#### 5. Riddles and syntax

The pun of numerous riddles stems from syntactic ambiguity and thus riddles of such a type provide ample opportunity to expose young learners to this interesting facet of language. What is more, research has shown (e.g. Cairns *et al.* 2004; Wankoff and Cairns 2009) that the ability to detect structural (and semantic) ambiguity is correlated with reading comprehension and that the genre of riddles may be an invaluable medium for the development of such skills, which in

turn directly translates into better reading comprehension results (e.g. Yuill 1998; Zipke 2007, 2008).

Obviously, many of the riddles based on structural ambiguity contain homophonous words which may belong to different syntactic categories and as a result a given utterance may be assigned two different syntactic structures. For instance, the pun in the following riddles rests on homophony of *down* (Adv) vs. *down* (Noun) and *hoarse* (Adj) vs. *horse* (Noun), respectively:

(17) *Why is a goose like an icicle?* (Both grow down)

(18) *When is a boy like a pony?* (When he is a little hoarse/horse)

Syntactic riddles can also demand from the riddle detection of syntactic ambiguity that may arise due to ellipsis (a transformation consisting of deletion of a predictable, repeated structure).

(19) *Would you rather have an elephant kill you or a gorilla?* (I'd rather the elephant kill the gorilla)

In the above example, the question part of the riddle can be assigned two competing structures, namely *Would you rather have an elephant kill you or a gorilla (kill you)?* and *Would you rather have an elephant kill you or (an elephant kill) a gorilla?* On occasion, a certain linguistic shrewdness can make a big difference!

#### 6. Riddles and semantics

Undoubtedly, riddles are also an effective medium for demonstration of various semantic relations such as polysemy, homonymy, synonymy, etc. In fact, some of the already presented riddles, apart from exploiting other linguistic phenomena simultaneously make use of polysemy, cf. (10), homonymy, cf. (18) and synonymy, cf. (3). Let us then only signal some other aspects of semantics that riddles can employ.

One of such areas is idioms. A frequent strategy utilized in such riddles is the unexpected demetaphorization of an idiom which is then treated as if it were an ordinary syntactic constituent of a phrase rather than an unbreakable unit.

(20) *What weather do mice most dislike?* (When it is raining cats and dogs)

(21) *When is an actor happy to become a thief?* (When he steals the show)

#### 7. Riddles and orthography

This is a category exploiting spelling, homographs and homophony of letter names with certain morphemes or lexemes. Moreover, such riddles make use of the shapes of letters and the visual similarity between Arabic or Roman numerals and

certain letters. Often the reference to orthography is not explicit, constituting the surprise (conundrum) element as is the case in the following instances:

- (22) *What occurs twice in a moment, once in a minute but never in a thousand years?*  
(The letter M)
- (23) *The beginning of every end*  
*The end of every place*  
*The beginning of eternity*  
*The end of time and space*  
*What is it?* (The letter E)

Apart from riddles with the focus on letters appearing in the graphic representation of certain words, there also exist orthographic riddles, solutions to which require some sort of manipulation of letters (e.g. letter addition, subtraction, exchange, reversals and rearrangements).

- (24) *What changes a lad into a lady?* (The addition of letter Y)
- (25) *What did the dyslexic Satanist do on Christmas Eve?* (He sold his soul to Santa)

The reference to the orthographic system may be either implicit, as is the case in (23)-(26), or explicit, when the wordings of riddles already contain such clues as *letter, spell/spelling, written with*, etc:

- (26) *What starts with the letter T, is filled with T and ends in T?* (Teapot)
- (27) *What five-letter word becomes shorter when you add two letters?* (Short)
- (28) *What are the cleverest letters?* (Y's)

Riddles with palindromes and anagrams are particularly interesting:

- (29) *What palindrome expression did Adam use in Paradise to introduce himself to Eve?*  
(Madam in Eden, I'm Adam)

Finally, since the names of consonants include vowel sounds, acronym riddles like the one below may also be included in the repertoire of various orthographic puzzles:

- (30) *Is it possible to spell enemy in 3 letters?* (Yes, N-M-E)

## 8. Riddles and communicative competences

The riddle places us face to face with another human being. Short, poignant and close to life, it gives us something to laugh about or ponder about. The experience of tricking another person by means of language — in the safety of an established text genre — can be enjoyed by anyone anywhere.

As the riddle is based on language and on dialogue, it provides opportunities of fine-tuning of communicative competences. In language studies, *communicative competence* is a term introduced by Dell Hymes in 1966 in reaction to Noam Chomsky's (1965) *linguistic competence*. Communicative competence is the intuitive functional command of the principles of language usage. According to Hymes, a child "acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner" (1972: 277).

Knowledge of the linguistic system is not enough. One needs to know the codes of language conduct and interpretation. These codes (as with linguistic competence) depend on conventions developed in a language community, and they are specific to each language culture. It is common for ESL programmes to emphasize that their goal is communicative competence (Bardovi-Harlig 2013; Savignon 1997; Richards 2006).

### 8.1. Turn-taking

Taking turns in communication is what children learn from the moment they are born, when they engage in proto-dialogue with adults. Riddles are based on dialogue, and to have a dialogue, one needs two persons. Riddles highlight the presence of the participants in several ways, for example by using the word *you*:

- (31) *The more you take, the more you leave behind.* (Footsteps)

This *you* is quite literal, so that the riddle is in fact a text about the listener, here and now. When riddles use the daily life or general knowledge as their motive, they represent an easy access type of literature. Still, the *you* here is also a general *you*, as in the poetry of proverbs. Thus, riddles can be a first step towards language that is not here and now. Sometimes the play between the literal and the textual is a point:

- (32) *-What is the difference between a mailbox and a crow's nest?*  
*-I don't know.*  
*-How unfortunate, I was about to ask you to post a letter for me!*

This is a joke in the shape of a riddle, and here the *you* is not the general one of oral culture, but the particular dialogue partner. He is caught in the rhythm of the genre, loyally contributing with the mandatory *I don't know*, only to be ambushed by a change of context.

For small children, turn-taking can be challenging: "Taking turns is one of the hardest lessons for children under five years to learn (...) the young child cannot without much experience believe that 'his turn' really will come in due time. All

that he knows is that the others 'have got it' and he hasn't" (Isaacs 1933: 222). Riddles is one way of practising this. Instead of the child competing with others for the adult's attention, riddles ensure that the turn-taking goes swiftly and merrily. Sacks *et al.* (1974) describe so-called turn-constructural components and turn-allocating components. They follow quite complex rules in natural communication, involving the status of the participants, the conventions the group follows, the crucial points in the conversation (transition relevance place) and so on. The riddle provides a pattern where the turns distribute themselves, and where it becomes clear what behaviour benefits the good conversation.

## 8.2. Adjacency pairs

Some acts of language have only one or a few possible responses. When one utterance is determined by the former in a dialogue, the two are called an adjacency pair (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). When a person says *Congratulations!*, the correct answer is *Thank you*.

A riddle is an adjacency pair. The first part of the pair needs to contain a hint that it is a riddle. The second needs to acknowledge that fact. There are several ways to determine whether it is a riddle or not. *Would you like to hear a riddle? – Yes* is one prelude to riddles that also is an adjacency pair. But it is possible to skip the prelude. If there is a reason to assume that the audience will know it is a riddle, one may pose the riddle without further ado. The audience have some clues to help them:

The context may be of help. Let us imagine the evening fire of a scout camp. Someone addresses the crowd, saying:

(33) *A room full of wool, but you cannot grab a fistful!* (Smoke)

And maybe someone will add this one:

(34) *If I drink, I die. If I eat, I grow.* (Fire)

Now a game is on, and anyone may participate. Sometimes we know more texts than we realize, and what is actually happening, is an extensive display of adjacency pairs.

The structure of the riddle is also a hint. A short query with a triumphant air is a fair warning. The *I am* structure or the *my first* structure is also readily recognizable. Often the riddle will have a nominal as the answer, so that the question starts with *what is* or *who is*.

(35) *What is harder to catch, the faster you run?* (Breath)

The content of the riddle is also a giveaway. If someone asks a question of no relevance, or a question that seems to have no meaningful answer, or utters a sentence in the form of a paradox, a riddle is afoot:

(36) *What is black when it is clean and white when it is dirty?* (A blackboard)

Some riddlers like to make sudden attacks. In the middle of the workday, to friends and family at the party, even to the stranger in the shop he may lean over and smile and ask:

(37) *What is long, brown and sticky?* (A long, brown stick)

More often than not, people do expect an adjacency pair, and are able to laugh when the answer comes. The following joke in the shape of a riddle is the start of a simple adjacency pair:

(38) *Why did the duck cross the road?* (To prove he wasn't a chicken)

The appropriate answer to the question is *I don't know*, there is no actual call for a guess. Instead, the audience enter a game where they willingly accept the fools' part. The point is not the answer of the riddle, but the multitude of ways the riddler can vary the structure of a joke. In riddle jokes like these, adjacency pairs of many forms and contexts become the focus of attention.

## 8.3. Speech acts and context

Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) provide descriptions of what they call *speech acts*. We do things in the act of saying things, *in* saying things and *by* saying things. These are the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. If someone says *I am cold*, he, or perhaps she, performs three things: Saying that it is cold is the first (a locutionary act). The second is referring to the actual situation, where it may be chilly (an illocutionary act). The third is guiding someone's attention to the door, that may need to be shut (perlocutionary). The context helps us determine which one is the intended speech act.

The *textual context* refers to the preceding and succeeding utterances. One may regard a conversation as a text that we initiate, expand and terminate together. If closing doors has been an issue in previous parts of the conversation, it may be easier to determine the speech act intended in the utterance *I am cold*. The situation (the *context of utterance*) may also help, if the cold from the door is tangible. The *cultural context* may play a part in decoding the speech act: Can one expect someone to take a hint from a freezing lady in this culture?

Riddles focus on such matters in several ways. The obvious speech act is that of tricking, fooling, impressing, intimidating and bewildering — the riddling.



*Would you like to hear a riddle?* is a direct speech act — what you do is what you intend. But you may pose a riddle in order to impress or to intimidate. This may be the indirect speech act. Direct/indirect is one way to complicate the relations between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary properties of a speech act (40). A riddle may also contain elements meant to be taken literally or non-literally (41). And sometimes it is explicit, sometimes implicit as in (42).

(39) *Four hanging, four walking, two pointing up to the sky, two showing the way to town, and one following after.* (Cow)

(40) *What is found over your head, but under your hat?* (Hair)

(41) *Chink, chink in the grass, bald head, no ass.* (Snake)

Austin (1962) lists a number of speech acts:

- (42) Constatives: affirming, alleging, announcing, answering, alleging, denying, disclosing  
 Directives: advising, asking, dismissing, instructing, requesting, suggesting, warning  
 Commissive: agreeing, guaranteeing, inviting, offering, promising, swearing, volunteering  
 Acknowledgments: apologizing, congratulating, greeting, thanking, accepting

All riddles, of course, both announce, allege and disclose, but it is possible to identify speech acts locally in each text:

- (43) a. Constative (predicting): *A tree that grows in Winter and dies in Summer, top down and roots up.* (Icicle)  
 b. Directive (instructing): *Do what he says and you'll be fine, don't and you lose the game.* (Simon)  
 c. Commissive (promise): *A box without hinges, lock or key, yet golden treasure lies within.* (Egg)  
 d. Acknowledgment (thanking): *A man runs into a bar and asks for a glass of water. The bartender pulls out a shotgun and yells at him. The man thanks the bartender, then walks out of the bar happily. Why? (He had the hiccups!)*

#### 8.4. Principles of cooperation

H. Paul Grice (1975) set out to determine what logical mechanism makes an utterance in a conversation seem meaningful. He postulated that conversation is based on a principle of cooperation. We all follow the same maxims when we talk to people:

- (44) Maxims of quantity: 1. Make your contribution as informative as required. 2. Don't make your contribution more informative than is required.  
 Maxims of quality: 1. Don't say what you believe to be false 2. Don't say what you lack adequate evidence for.

Maxim of relation: Be relevant.

Maxims of manner: 1. Avoid obscurity of expression. 2. Avoid ambiguity. 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). 4. Be orderly.

Riddles challenge all of these. The misleading information in the riddle may be brief, ambiguous, obscure, irrelevant and untruthful:

(45) *What begins with T, ends with T and has T in it?* (Tea)

T is ambiguous here, and the information is too brief. The orderly structure is chaos in disguise. When riddling, we say things that we know to be not true. But this is part of the convention of the text type. The entertainment value of the riddle is often to lie to someone and still keep some apparent logic in our sentences:

(46) *How many of each species did Moses take on the ark with him?* (None, it was Noah)

This is deliberate lying. In fact, we could infer riddle maxims, that would be the opposite of Grice's maxims. Otherwise, we would be left only with riddles like these:

(47) *What is yellow like a lemon, big as a lemon and smells like a lemon?* (Lemon)

(48) *What do you call the hairs on the tip of a cat's tail?* (Cat hairs)

Instead, riddles invite us to break conventions, sometimes making the world a little absurd:

(49) *What is the difference between a fish?* (It can neither ride a bike)

Inadequate as this question is, it still highlights parts of the grammar, without spelling them out. If one wants to learn the words *neither* and *nor* in English, this little text may help one focus and remember. The next riddle goes like this:

(50) *What is the difference between two fish?* (They can neither ride a tandem bike)

The element of metalanguage is evident. If one can learn about the rules of language by breaking them with a smile, one has struck gold.

#### 8.5. IR analysis

One way of organising a dialogue is by sorting it by its distribution of initiatives and responses (Linell *et al.* 1988). Turns with strong initiatives require responses, like questions or commands. Weak initiatives can be statements, and they do not require a response. Instead, they may invite to a new initiative. Responses may be adequate, minimal or inadequate. Asymmetry in the distribution of initiatives and responses may occur in certain types of dialogue, and riddles is one example of these.



The riddler is per definition the sender of a strong initiative, a question. But this is a sort of initiative that invites to a new initiative, as the other person tells a new riddle. Also the riddle with the structure of a statement requires an answer. Thus, riddles have the following three properties. First, they highlight the initiative-response dyad, for example by focusing on persons:

(51) *Who is born with a beard?* (Kitten)

Second, they motivate for this kind of language behaviour, for example by obscuring this dyad and merely implicate the IR pattern:

(52) *Not below the Earth, not on the Earth, not in Heaven and not in Hell.* (Jonah in the whale)

Third, they demonstrate different kinds of structures that initiatives may have, i.e. questions, statements or commands:

(53) *Say my name, and I am gone.* (Silence)

Some riddles demonstrate the importance of mastering this pattern, like the so-called neck riddles. Here the hero poses an unsolvable riddle to his opponents, as Samson did to the Philistines, after he had seen a dead lion with a bee-hive inside it:

(54) *Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet.* (Judges 14: 14)

In the neck-riddle, this game is a matter of life and death, in conversation, merely of social survival.

## 8.6. Functions of language

Roman Jakobson's (1960) idea of six basic functions of language belongs in the frame of communication competence. We may use language for focusing on the context (referential function), initiating/maintaining/terminating contact (phatic function), focusing on language itself (meta-function), playing with language (poetic function), focusing on the sender of the message (emotive function) or focusing on the receiver of the message (conative function). Riddles, with their dialogic structure, often highlight all functions of language at the same time, making it crucial for the audience to sort out which ones contain the clue to the solution this time:

(55) *Say my name, and I am gone.* (Silence)

True, silence is the topic, but the riddler has also made contact, he has implored someone to answer, he has mentioned language, and he has played with words.

The last of Jakobson's functions is the emotive one, and in this riddle one may safely assume that sharing a riddle is part of an emotional state or a particular mindset.

## 9. Conclusions

Children who engage in riddle activities encounter all the intricacies of language. It is a language learning laboratory; the humour of riddles is largely based on language and play with language. The learning happens by means of experiment, gradual understanding and, in time, mastering of specific language challenges.

Riddle play is motivating, but explanation, accommodation and adaptation has little room here. Some riddles may be of the sort that everyone can understand, but there will always be challenges. The nature of riddles, after all, is to be somewhat insolvable. It is possible to enjoy and to tell a riddle without a full understanding of the semantics involved. Assuming an active role as a listener or a provider of texts is an important language experience in itself. Thus, riddles provide an interesting extension of the zone of proximal development.

For educators there are three points to be noted. First, one should avoid interfering with an activity that is already in good progress. Second, the adult who becomes aware of riddle games at large should make it a goal to map the language experiences involved, informing his classroom practices with observations of schoolyard practices. Third, the educator who wants to introduce his pupils to riddle play should explore different entries, for riddles are everywhere: in movies, computer games, fairy tales, myths, history, mathematics and more. One could start with the story of the Sphinx and the ancient oracles — or simply tell a riddle and see what happens.

Any interest in riddles that a language learner shows represents an interest in language experiences. Riddles are language, and there does not seem to be an area of language that is not in some way demonstrated in a riddle.

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