RIDDLE

1. Definition: The r. is one of the primary and most important genres within the whole system of folklore. In essence, the central part of a r. is always, irrespective of its concrete surface form, a question which is either explicitly expressed or contained only implicitly. As a minimal condition, the r. question contains the verbal description of at least one more or less characteristical feature of an object or a notion to be guessed which, on a different level, may be a sign itself (a letter, a word, etc.). At least two persons take part in the usual r. process: the r. giver (*riddler*) and the r. solver (*riddlee*). As opposed to ordinary questions, the riddler always knows the answer to his question in advance; he attempts to challenge the riddlee's wits, and in order to complicate the answer, he obscures his question by the use of particular obscuring elements, such as metaphors, grammatical or formal ambiguity, etc. As a rule, the r. question is either solved by the riddlee, or the answer is revealed by the riddler; consequently, in addition to the r. question, the solution is a mandatory part of the r.

2. Analysis: Example (1) is a typical metaphorical r. in which the question is not explicitly asked, and which is expressed in rhymed form:

(1)   *[...] In spring I am gay,*
        In handsome array;
        In summer more clothing I wear;
        When colder it grows,
        I fling off my clothes,
        And in winter I quite naked appear. - A tree.
                (Taylor 1951: No. 587b).

According to Taylor (1951: 1), examples like (1) would be called 'true riddles', i.e., "descriptions of objects in terms intended to suggest something entirely different". Thus, the 'true riddle', or the 'riddle in strict sense', "consists of two descriptions of an object, one figurative and one literal, and confuses the hearer who endeavours to identify an object in conflicting ways" (Taylor 1943: 129f.). Ex. (1) corresponds to this definition: The figurative description of the object to be guessed models the unusual and illogical situation of somebody wearing more clothes when it is hot, and who throws them off when it gets colder. The vagueness of metaphor serves as a diversionary strategy, i.e., the description provides an inadequate basis for solution because some quality of an object is

compared to a similar quality of a different object: the seasonal processes of a tree's growth and its loss of foliage are described in terms of human actions of dressing and disrobing. Ex. (2), which is well-documented in many different cultures (cf. Aarne 1918-20), is very similar in structure; in it, snow is metaphorically compared to various objects and qualities:

(2)   *White bird featherless*
        Flew down from Paradise
        Perched upon the castle wall;
        Up came Lord John landless,
        Took it up handless,
        And rode away horseless
        To the King's white hall. - Snow.
                (Taylor 1951: 368)

Consequently, the r. as a genre has always been discussed in context of metaphor. Based on Aristotle's ideas on the relationship between r. and metaphor, expressed in his *The Rhetoric (III,3)* and in *Poetics (XXI)*, scholars such as or Potter (1950) have repeatedly claimed the essential metaphorical character of the r. Yet, quite a number of examples from Taylor's (1950) famous *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* prove this assumption to be incorrect; in fact, examples such as (3) or (4) show that metaphoricalness is only an optional, but no mandatory feature of the r. (cf. Todorov 1973: 145):

(3)   *Wha' live in de river? - Fish.* (Taylor 1951, No. 98)
(4)   *Red outside, white inside. - Apple.* (Taylor 1951, No. 1512)

Formally speaking, these r.s cannot be distinguished from ordinary questions (if one is willing to add the explicit question, "what is it?", in ex. (4); still, they differ in a pragmatic perspective. As Leech (1974) has shown, the speech act of asking a question is characterized by the following "felicity conditions":

(1)   There is a piece of information (X) of which the questioner is ignorant.
(2)   The questioner wants to know (X).
(3)   The questioner believes that the addressee knows (X).
(4)   The questioner is in a position to elicit (X) from the questionee.

These interactional conditions are mostly reversed in the r. process (cf.

McDowell 1979: 27ff.; Grzybek 1987a: 32f.): The r. giver is by no means the person who is ignorant of the solution (X); instead, he is usually the one who knows the answer. And, in fact, it is the questionee, who wants to get an answer to a question which he has never asked. Furthermore, as an answer to a question which he has never asked. Furthermore, as opposed to an ordinary question, riddling usually implies that the r. solver does not know the answer (and that this is part of the r. giver's assumption). In this sense, these ruminations coincide with Green and Pepicello's (1979: 13) assumption, that "one goal of riddling is for the riddler to finally supply the answer to the riddlee who has given up".

Interestingly enough, children's early r.s display a curious combination of the ordinary question form with these reversed interactional conditions (cf. McDowell 1979; Grzybek 1987c). Only in a diachronical perspective, it seems reasonable to assume that in early rituals, both r. giver and r. solver knew the answer in advance and 'simply' exchanged in a particular way (cf. §5).

From a contemporary point of view, most r.s are characterized by a particular (seemingly) incongruency between r. question and r. solution - the lack of congruency is only retrospectively compensated by a fitting answer. According to Pepicello, Green (1984), various forms of vagueness and ambiguity are traits of all r. types. They assume the existence of a continuum with metaphorical r.s on one of its ends, and r.s in which the 'block element' (i.e. the complicating element) is the result of **lexical or grammatical ambiguity** on the other end; cf. ex. (5):

(5) *What turns but never moves? - Milk.*

Here the word 'turns' is a homophonous word, both readings belonging to the same part of speech and syntactically not distinguishable from each other (cf. Pepicello, Green 1984: 45f.). In ex. (6), the involved **grammatical ambiguity** of the block element depends on oral presentation:

(6)   *Black and white and red all over. - Newspaper.*
                (Taylor 1951: No. 1498a).

Here, the ambiguity of [red] ('red' vs. 'read') is a result of the homophony of two morphologically different constructions, which both fit in the context of the r. question: the adjective 'red' as a color is widely determined by the context, in which 'black' and 'white' suggest the comprehension of [red] as a colour adjective; only in retrospective, i.e., in the answer already given, the solution "newspaper" offers an alternative reading, which makes sense with

the past participle of the verb 'to read'.- Between these extreme points of r.s, either based on metaphors (with metaphorical vagueness or ambiguity functioning in a paradigmatic mode) or on linguistic or grammatical ambiguity (functioning in a syntagmatic mode), there exists a large variety of intermediate and mixed forms. There also is a broad spectrum of r.s covering items which mainly depend on the knowledge of reality within a given culture (cf. ex. 9) as well as texts which require some knowledge of orthography or otherwise conventionalized stimuli. For example, there are many r.s which allegedly focus on the conveyed message, but which in fact are orientated toward the linguistic code itself. Such r.s may exploit letters of the alphabet like e.g. ex. (7) and (8), or the relationship between letters of the alphabet and the speech sounds they represent, or even the shapes of letters and numerals (cf. Pepicello, Green 1984: 62).

(7)   *What makes a road broad? - The letter 'B'.*
(8)   *What part of London is in France? - 'N'.*

The following Kasakhian ex. (9) illustrates cultural specifics inherent to the r. as a genre:

(9)   *Two are watching, four are sleeping, and one is kneading dough. - A camel.*

As empirical studies have shown, a majority of Kasakhian subjects were able to offer the supposed solution, whereas non-members of the given culture had no chance of guessing the demanded answer (cf. Grzybek 1987b).

3. Typology: Although there is no commonly accecpted typology of the r., various subtypes of the r. have always been distinguished, both in scholarly studies and in r. collections. Here, the basic distinction has usually been made between 'true riddles' and several other types of the r. Petsch (1899), for example, separates 'true riddles' ("wirkliche Volksrätsel") from 'wisdom questions' ("Weisheitsproben"), 'neck-riddles' ("Halslösungsrätsel"), and 'joking questions' ("Scherzfragen").

As opposed to the true r., a **'wisdom question'**, according to Petsch (1899: 13), is not directed at the reasoning mind, but at acquired knowledge. 'Wisdom questions', also called 'puzzles', thus presuppose a particular educational knowledge. They may either check the riddlee's mathematical skills in arithmetical calculations (cf. 10), the riddlee's combinational faculties in r.s on family relationships or genealogy (cf. 11),

his or her knowledge of the Bible, for example in the form of so-called catechetical questions (cf. 12), or any other culturally relevant field of knowledge:

(10) *How can you change a dollar into exactly fifty coins? - Forty pennies, eight nickels, two dimes.*

(11) *Brothers and sisters I have none, but the man's father is my father's son. Who is he? - His son.*

(12) *Two brothers dear,*
Two sister's sons are we,
our father's our grandfather,
and whose sons are we? - Lot's grandsons.

'Neck-riddles' are a group of r.s which are usually incorporated into short narratives concerning a condemned prisoner, or a defendant in court. More often than not, such r.s are merely insoluble, since they depend upon a unique, personal episode in the prisoner's life: by asking this event in form of a r., this person saves his or her life, if none of the executioners arrives at the solution. Many of these r.-narratives have come down to the 19th century collectors in a mutilated form, i.e., without the frame narrative. A well-known example is the so-called "Ilo's riddle":

(13) *On Ilo I am walking, on Ilo I am standing,*
On Ilo I am neat and nice,
Guess, gentlemen, what can that be?

This r. was posed by a woman, who was condemned to death; since the judges did not find out that she spoke about her dog *Ilo* whose coat she had made to shoes she was wearing, she was acquitted. The prototype of this r. form seems to be the well-known r. of the Sphynx:

(14) *In the morning it walks on four legs, at daytime on two, at nighttime on three. - A human being.*

In the related Greek myth, the monster Sphynx threatened the Theben population by posing this riddle to every passer-by. Everyone who could not solve the r., was condemned to death; only Oedipus guessed the correct solution and received bride and kingdom as a reward. Not all examples sub-summarized under the umbrella term 'neck-riddle', however, deal with

such critical life and death situations.

'**Riddle questions**', or 'joking questions', are characterized by their tendency to direct the listener's attention into an unexpected direction and to distract him or her from the promising way, often by means of linguistic ambiguity, cf. (15):

(15) *Where did Adam hit the first nail? - On the head.*

Often, such joking r.s play with sexual or obscene ambiguities suggested by an ambiguous wording of the r. question, cf.:

(16) *A man and a woman can do it,*
Two men can do it,
Two women cannot do it. - To go to confession.

Such r.s display a close relationship to joking in general; with regard to the sacral origin of the r. (see §4), the r. as a genre must have undergone a long process of secularization. The end-product of this process seem to be 'catch riddles' and r. parodies which play with the r. as a genre, i.e., with the conventionality of the r. process and its participants, cf.:

(17) *Why does an elephant paint his toenails red? - This way he can better hide in a cherry tree.*

Many r. subtypes have been distinguished on the basis of particular linguistic forms. These language r.s include **charades** (in which the solution can be decomposed into separate syllables, each of which is enriddled separately), **palindromes** (words which can be read in either direction, either letter by letter or syllable by syllable), **logogryphs** (r.s with more than one solution, each of which differs in only one phoneme and is enriddled separately), and many, many others. *****Anagrams** may be placed here as well; it is reasonable, however, to treat them separately, since they seem to have played a unique role in the genesis and evolution of both the r. as a genre and the poetic code related to it (cf. §4).

A particular subtype of the r. are non-verbal visual r.s. The best known form of which is the so-called **rebus** whose origin has repeatedly been related to pictographic writing systems; *****droodles** can be regarded as a modern form of visual r.s (cf. Hoffmann 1869; Schenk 1973; Preston 1982; Roemer 1982).

4. History: The origin of the r. cannot be ultimately determined, although

much effort has been laid on this question. Scholars such as Jolles (1925, 1929) have attempted to relate the genesis of the r. to the origin and function of *myth, other scholars, such as Hanika-Otto (1930) or Adrianova-Peretc (1935) have interpreted it in light of dream theory. There have also been attempts to connect the r. with taboo language, for example with the forbidden naming of animals during hunting rituals; Anikin (1959) and Mitrofanova (1978) claim that r.s served an initiating function for the young to the secret language of adults.

R.s have been documented in many ancient cultures, as in the Old Indian (Vedic), Egyptian, Hebraic, Old Greek and Latin traditions (cf. Friedreich 1860; Taylor 1948; Porzig 1925; Wünsche 1883; Ohlert 1886; Ohl 1928). Very often, names for the r. were derived from their initial function, when they were closely related to rituals focusing on the explanation of cosmogonic processes. In context of the Vedic tradition, for example, one of the most important forms of the r. was the *brahmodya* (ca. 1000 B.C.); it represented the verbal part of a ritual which consisted of the ritual exchange of questions and answers between two priests about the structure of the cosmos and its creation. The compound terms *brahmodya* or *brahmavadya* are composed of the two words *brahman* and **udya, vadya*: whereas **udya, vadya* means 'discussion, talk, conversation', *brahman* is the highest abstract principle, from the embodiment of which the world and everything in it derived; it is also the name of the highest God - cf. Elizarenkova, Toporov (1984).

In the ancient Greek tradition we find the term αἴνιγμα, which relates to αἶνος ('story', 'advice', 'speech', 'saying'), and which is also the name of oracles and mockeries. Another Greek term for the r., γρῖφος ('fishernet'), depicts the net in which the riddlee becomes involved when trying to solve a r. Within the Latin tradition, the Greek term *enigma* was used as well as the term *problema*. *Enigma* or *énigme* were also used in England and France. In England, however, the term 'riddle' has also been documented since the Middle Ages. This word derives from the Old English *rædels* ('counsel', 'opinion', 'conjecture', 'riddle'); it is based on the verb *rædon* and related to the verb 'to read' (cf. German: *Rätsel, Rat, raten*, deriving from Indo-European **redh* (i.e., to fix, to counsel, to discuss). In France, we later find the term *devinette* which is related to the Latin *divinus* ('divine'), *divinare* ('to prophecy', 'to guess'), cf. the Italian term *indovinello*.

Subsequent to their primary ritual function of being sacred questions and answers revealing the deepest sense of the world, r.s became elements of (verbal) contest in various social settings. The variety of contest encompasses so-called neck-riddles (cf. §3), as well as contests putting to test other people's wits (cf. *I. Kings 10*, where the Queen of Saaba tests

Salomon's wisdom), contests involving courting a woman, contests during wedding or funeral ceremonies, or children's play contests. In this sense, riddling in general - initially closely related to the realms of ritual and *myth - and the objects of r.s in particular, underwent a constant process of de-sacralization, i.e., increasingly became part of everyday life, humour and play.

On a thematic level, the process of profanation led to an interrelation of three separate spheres, which, in the later development of the r. genre, were no longer understood as genetically interdependent; instead, comparisons between these three spheres are understood as mere poetic metaphors. These central r. motifs are firstly, the stellar universe (cf. Sadnik 1953), secondly, the house and the human environment (cf. Civjan 1987), and finally, the human body (cf. Grzybek 1991c).

R.s have early been used and newly created by poets: literary r.s have been found in ancient Greek authors; in the 5th c., we find a Latin collection of about 100 hexametric r.s in *Symphosius*, which had great influence on the early European tradition of literary r.s (Taylor 1948: 52ff., 66, 109). From the 8th c., we have a collection of 93 Old English r.s in the *Exeter Book* which was influenced by the former Latin tradition, cf. Tupper (1910); Krapp, Dobbie (eds.) (1936). In the European Middle Ages, many Latin question-and-answer dialogues *[altercationes]* on biblical themes existed (cf. Daly, Suchier 1939). These dialogues served mainly didactical purposes; they included not only r.s on cosmological themes, but also r.s on everyday topics, which were later translated into various languages. During Humanism, many r. collections from ancient authors were in use, starting with the Italian author Girardi's collection of *Aenigmatum ex antiquis scriptoribus collectorum libellus singularis*, which was reprinted in larger collections like Reusner (1599). Beginning with the 16th c., collections of printed r.s were spread all over Europe. In the 17th c., literary r.s became increasingly complex in their poetic structure, focusing on charades, palindromes, *anagrams, logogryphs, and similar forms (see §3).

From the time of Enlightenment up to the 20th c., many poets have composed literary r.s; the only criterion to distinguish literary r.s from folk r.s, however, seems to be their original location in a predominantly literal vs. oral tradition (cf. Schupp (ed.) 1972: 370ff.). Today, the literary use of r.s is increasingly replaced by the use of r.s in journals and newspapers (crossword puzzles, charades, etc.), as well as by quiz programs and similar forms on radio and TV.

5. Related Forms and Transformations: The r. is so central to the system of folklore that relationships can be found with almost any other folklore

genre. The posing and solving of r.s turns out to be an important element in the course of action of fairy-tales (cf. *Märchen) and similar popular narratives; no. 22 of Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, for example, is explicitly entitled "Das Rätsel", but other texts contain r.s, too. There are a number of particular studies on this topic, such as those by Eleonskaja (1907); Kolesnickaja (1941); or DeVries (1928).

Due to the implied humorous aspects of the r., close relationships can also be seen with regard to *jokes (cf. Johnson 1975), *wellerisms, *blasons populaires, and many other forms.

An interesting case is the verbal identity of *proverbs and r.s; that is to say that one and the same verbal form may either be a proverb or a r. Such items cannot be classified on the basis of the verbal surface structure alone, but additional functional and pragmatic factors have to be taken into consideration; according to Permyakov (1973) this phenomenon should be called "paremiological homonymy".

Whereas the genetic interdependence of r. and proverb have not been sufficiently clarified, there are quite a number of studies devoted to the interrelation between r. and *myth. In light of his theory of *Einfache Formen*, Jolles (1925, 1929), for example, related these two forms to one another by reference to the concept of 'knowledge' ("Wissen"): according to him, there is a close relationship between question and answer in both genres. But whereas myth, according to Jolles, is an answer in which a question was contained, the r. is a question which asks for an answer. This generic relation between r. and myth has been shown to originate in the genesis and evolution of the r. Porzig (1925), for example, pointed out the function of the r. in the Vedic tradition, where priests exchanged questions and answers during ritual sacrifices. Porzig also realized that these ritual dialogues, which have been called 'ritual riddles', were linguistically characterized by a 'special language' ("Sondersprache") common only among the priesthood. Only recently, Toporov (1981) has revealed the mythological foundations of this special language: According to him, the dissection of the ritual text corresponds to the dissection of the primary being out of which the cosmos was created (a motif taken from the reconstructed Indo-European 'basic myth'). Therefore, *anagrams have accompanied these rituals from the beginning. Still today we find many riddles which are characterized by the presence of *anagrams; in such anagrammatic r.s, the solution is anagrammatically contained in the question. Ex. (18). is a typical anagrammatic r.; in this particular case, as Evans (1976: 181) reports, the r. giver, a 60-year-old man from Mississippi, rejected alternative answers such as 'wind' or 'smoke' and insisted on 'air':

(18)   *It goes upstAIRs and all downstAIRs and never makes a track.- AIR.*

Thus, we can assume a close interrelation between the form and function of r. and myth on the one hand, and the related emergence of particular poetic devices on the other hand (cf. Grzybek 1993).

6. Geography: R.s can be assumed to exist in every culture all over the world. Regardless of cultural specifics in form and function, the r. tends to be universally represented as part of oral and/or literal tradition. Though only those r.s from archaic cultures are available to us which have been recorded only later in written sources, one can conclude from oral r.s of cultures without a literal tradition that literal r.s very often depend on older earlier oral sources.

The history and distribution of the literary r. in ancient and European cultures until the 17th century have been documented by Taylor (1948). But r.s have well been documented in non-European cultures, too. In Japan, for example, the first literary r.s can be dated in the period Heian (8th to 12th c.); here, the first collection of literary r.s with 173 texts was *The collection of the Ex-emperor Gonara-in*, containing many folk r.s which are in use today. In ancient Japanese tradition, the r. was a sort of language-play in different forms for adults and children; of these r.s, mainly the traditional oral children's r.s survived and developed into various forms similar to r.s in other traditions (Mazurik 1987).

In Africa, according to Harries (1971: 377), "the riddle is one of the most important forms of oral art". In Taylor's (1951) bibliography of r. collections in English, more than sixty publications dealing with African r.s are listed; as Harries (1971: 378) later pointed out, even more collections were available already at that time. Meanwhile, further collections and studies have been published, among them, e.g., Ovambo r.s (Kuusi 1974), Mbeere r.s in Kenya (Glazier, Glazier 1976), Bantu r.s (Gowlett 1975, 1979), and r.s of the Merina in Madagascar (Haring 1985).

Further collections and studies cover cultures all around the world, from the Dusun of North Borneo (Williams 1963) to the Lau on the Solomon Islands in Melanesia (Köngäs Maranda 1971), from Javanese r.s in Indonesia (Ogloblin 1987) to the Kets in Siberia, speaking a paleoasiatic language (Krejnovič 1969) and Quechua speakers in Peru, South America (Isbell, Roncalla Fernandez 1977).

The most important collections of folk r.s which are available to us were compiled in the 19th c., mainly in Europe, in context of overall Romantic and nationality-oriented tendencies. Based on Argentinian folk

material, Lehmann-Nitsche (1911) created a new principle of classifying r.s: the basis was no longer the nature of the r. solution, but the nature of the comparison contained in the r. question. This classification was used by others (e.g. Taylor 1951) and Aarne, who started a large comparative collection of r.s in 1918 (Aarne 1918-1920).

Nowadays, collections from practically all continents and cultures are available; these collections proved earlier assumptions about the lack of r.s in particular cultures to be incorrect. R. collections are well documented in various bibliographies (Taylor 1939; Santi 1952; Peleh 1978), which also contain scholarly works on the r. (cf. §7).

7. History of Interpretation: More than half a century ago, Taylor (1938: 1) stated that the problems in the study of r.s "fall under three heads: the collection [...], the description of the stylistic pecularities [...], and the history of the origins and the use of riddles".

In one way or another, these three topics have remained the main fields of research since the 19th c. Thus, in addition to the first *History of the Riddle* by Friedreich (1860) who concentrated on the literary r. exclusively, we have the comprehensive studies on the history and use of the r. by Bernasconi (1964) and Hain (1966).

Also at the end of the 19th century, Petsch (1899) initiated the stylistic analysis of the 'true riddle'. According to him, a r. ideally consists of five elements, although only few r.s contain all these elements:

1.   the introductory frame element,
2.   the denominative kernel element,
3.   the descriptive kernel element,
4.   the block element,
5. ·   the concluding frame element.

Although Petsch's work understood itself to be stylistically oriented, its re-interpretation in the 1960s led to structural analyses in general. In one of these early structural approaches, Georges and Dundes (1963) assumed that only the descriptive kernel element and the block element in Petsch's definition are structural features; consequently, they classified the remaining elements as stylistic features. As a minimum unit of structural analysis they then proposed a descriptive element consisting of topic and comment (the referent of which is to be guessed).

As was more recently shown, the definition given by Georges and Dundes (characterizing r.s as units containing one or more descriptive elements in which there is a topic and a comment) appears to be identical

with structural definitions of the *proverb (cf. Grzybek 1987a: 7f.); consequently, as opposed to the authors' claim, the only definitional criterion of the r. ("the referent that is to be guessed") turns out to be functional and not structural (Scott 1969).

In many subsequent structural approaches, the analysis of the r. was restricted to the r. question alone. Köngäs Maranda (1969: 192), as opposed to this, emphasized that it is necessary "to study the interrelationship between the two parts of the r., the image (= question) and the answer." In fact, however, many theoretical assumptions of her most influential structural analysis of the r. do not essentially go beyond Petsch's earlier descriptions. She, too, focuses exclusively on 'true riddles', claiming the existence of a 'common function' between r. question and r. answer, which she classifies as the signifier (*signans*) and the signified (*signatum*), respectively. These assumptions have been criticized from both a linguistic and a semiotic point of view (Grambo 1979; Pepicello, Green 1984: 80ff.; Grzybek 1987a: 22ff.); actually, however, r. question and r. solution are nothing but co-referential expressions, one of which (the r. solution) usually is the more conventional form. Recent representative studies on the language and semiotics of the r. can be found in the works of Pepicello, Green (1984), Eismann, Grzybek (eds.) (1987), and Žurinskij (1989). Schittek's (1991) *Die Sprach- und Erkenntnisformen der Rätsel* is another recent monograph on the r.; emphasizing the fact that r.s are "autonomous forms of a way of thinking and speaking in its own right" (ibid., 9), this author, however, denies the fact that the r. as a genre can be adequately described as a rational phenomenon by scholarly categories.

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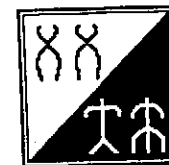
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