

Article

# The Riddle: Form and Performance

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**Abstract:** The article concentrates on the true or the ordinary riddle, which is the best-known of the old riddles. True riddles consist of two parts, one functioning as a question, the other as an answer. In riddling the answerer or riddlee tries to find an acceptable answer to the question. Sometimes riddles are deliberately misled because the “right” answer is completely unexpected. Riddles are “texts” only in archives and publications; in the field, they are always oral lore closely tied to their performing context. Study of social and cultural contexts is a new part of riddle research. Field researchers’ studies and findings are important. The article includes riddle definitions and analysis of subjects, metaphors and formulae of riddles as well as the functions of riddling. New challenges are the driving force behind research. I attempt to find something new in my material. New for me has been discovering the humour in riddles. Reading dozens and even hundreds of riddle variants begins to give me some idea of the fun and humour inherent in riddles. There are still questions in riddle materials waiting to be asked; it is always possible to discover something new.

**Keywords:** answer; definition; formula; function; joking question; metaphor; riddle; riddling; true riddle

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## 1. Introduction

Few genres have such a long tradition, both oral and written, as the riddle. Different types of riddles have continued to interest people from one era to the next, because they are a voyage into the unknown. They are an invitation to embark on an adventure that either brings delight, amusement and gratification at discovering the right answer, or humiliation and vexation at being led astray.

Riddling is an exchange of words in which people are deliberately misled because the “right” answer is sometimes completely unexpected. Riddling is not, however, a general knowledge quiz. Seemingly fulfilling the criteria in the riddle question does not necessarily yield the guesser the pleasure of a correct answer. In the riddling game, with rules from random analogy, arriving at the right answer is most often arbitrary.

Riddles have been described in many ways, and their definition depends on their elements, sometimes called “parts”. Let us begin with a working definition that says: “A riddle is a traditional, fix-phrased verbal expression consisting of two parts, an image and an answer, and a seeming contradiction”. For example, “A house full, a yard full, Couldn’t catch a bowl full.—Smoke”.<sup>1</sup> “Fix-phrased” should be understood in relation to “free phrased” genres of folklore such as folktales and legends in which the content is more fixed than the actual expression.<sup>2</sup> I’ll be supplementing this basic definition later.

Riddles are known to have existed since way back in time, for the first documents date back to ancient cultures of India, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Greece. Religious poetry such as *the Rig Veda*

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<sup>1</sup> (Taylor 1951, 1643 a).

<sup>2</sup> (Saarinen 1991, abstract; Dundes 1965, p. 183).

and *the Old Testament* incorporate riddles. Most languages also have a word for riddles, because as a genre, riddles belong in all cultures to the archaic stratum of folklore. These words represent the emic category, i.e., tradition bearers' own classification. Few genres have enjoyed such marked shifts in prestige as the riddle. Many celebrated writers and scholars have both invented and drawn inspiration from riddles; in the 17th century, they used to produce poetry of distinction. The contemporary riddles reminiscent of jokes do not, by contrast, enjoy such high esteem.

I here wish to concentrate on the true or the ordinary riddle, which is the best-known of the old riddles. When Archer Taylor used the term "true riddle" in 1943, he gave it the synonym "the riddle in the strict sense"<sup>3</sup>. This makes me wonder whether the concept "riddle" could be reserved exclusively for this traditional genre. Ulla Lipponen wrote in 1995: "The joking riddle genre is nowadays very productive, drawing on the old trick question formulae and yielding a rich lore of many kinds relying especially on linguistic play with words".<sup>4</sup> Other well-known genres go by such varying terms and definitions as joking questions, visual riddles, wisdom questions, puzzles, parody riddles and literary riddles, but they are not of focal interest to me here.

## 2. Materials in the Field, Archives and Publications

Riddle research has drawn on both ready material deposited over the years in archives along with other tradition and recent findings of researchers' own field studies.

The first eight Finnish riddles were published in 1649<sup>5</sup> when Eskil Petraeus (1593–1657), Bishop of Turku, used them as exemplary phrases in his Finnish grammar (*Linguae Finnicae brevis institutio*). Christfrid Ganander (1741–1790), who was a priest and an enthusiastic folklore collector, compiled and published the riddle anthology *Aenigmata Fennica* in 1783. It contained 378 genuine folk riddles. The spirit of the times is reflected in the fact that he had to delete from the second edition a group of riddles connected with sexual or ecclesiastical themes. Finnish researchers from Elias Lönnrot onwards have been publishing books of riddles, but the riddles in some of these have been combined and edited. The reader *Maamme (Our Land)* published by Zacharias Topelius<sup>6</sup> (first edition 1875), in which he describes the Finnish provinces, nature, people and history is interesting in that it contained 48 folk riddles. Its influence can clearly be noticed in riddle tradition<sup>7</sup> with regard to, say, the circulation of the genre and the frequencies of riddles. The first scholarly work on riddles, *Arvoitukset, Finnish Riddles*, was not published until 1977, though Antti Aarne and Kaarle Krohn had already been planning it in 1907<sup>8</sup>.

Riddles are "texts" only in archives and publications; in the field, they are always oral lore closely tied to their performing context. According to Dan Ben Amos, "context of culture" and "context of situation" are "the two key and polar terms that are fundamental to the contextual analysis". They also determine the link between the riddle tradition and its culture, which is "the broadest framework for the perception and interpretation of folklore". The situation, however, is "the narrowest most direct context", and it is manifest in riddling situations.<sup>9</sup> Time, place and social setting all have an impact on the riddling session and thereby on the choice and presentation of riddles.

Extensive folkloristic fieldwork among riddling communities has provided research with a wealth of information on the use of this genre. The majority of the fieldworkers headed for Third World cultures, and Africa in particular. Though riddles have been recorded in Finland, too, they have been overshadowed by other genres, because the 19th-century collectors were primarily interested in epic

<sup>3</sup> (Taylor 1943, p. 129).

<sup>4</sup> (Lipponen 1995, p. 215).

<sup>5</sup> (Petraeus 1649).

<sup>6</sup> (Topelius 1876).

<sup>7</sup> (Virtanen et al. 1977, pp. 54–55).

<sup>8</sup> (Virtanen et al. 1977, p. 54).

<sup>9</sup> (Ben Amos 1993, pp. 215–16).

poems. Our knowledge of how Finnish folklore was used is therefore that of the people who submitted material to the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society, not as reported by researchers. But the reports of scholars who made long fieldwork trips offer us a living encounter with tradition milieus otherwise inaccessible to us. We learn how riddles were used, and about their users. The long fieldwork periods spent by scholars among alien cultures have proved that the riddle genre does not have a universal structure, content, performance or functions, but that it is bound to a specific cultural use and performing context.<sup>10</sup> Roger D. Abrahams<sup>11</sup> demonstrated that riddles are part of a broader entity in comparing traditions representing urban American subcultures, the Bantu Venda, and communities in the British West Indies. He says: “Riddles are equally formulaic, competitive, confusing, and witty, but they fit into the life of the group and disclose its values and expressive habits in widely varying ways”.

In 1967 the Folklore Archives wanted to enlarge its riddle collections and accordingly asked people to submit both riddles and information of riddling situations at which they had been present. This was the first inquiry dealing solely with riddles, and it was published in the Folklore Archives’ periodical *Kansantieto* (*Folk Knowledge*). Some 30,000 riddle variants were submitted, along with 68 reports of context. Some of these were only brief, but there were also some detailed descriptions of social occasions on which riddles had been posed. The inquiry was made just in time, because it was then still possible to find people with personal memories of riddling, a genre fast vanishing in a changing society. The book *Arvoitukset, Finnish Riddles* provides an insight into this material.<sup>12</sup>

The archives and publications place riddles as texts on the researcher’s desk. Collected over decades, the material may answer questions in a way that would be impossible for the fieldworker. A large volume of material allows the scholar to study such things as distribution, frequency and variation. An archive is a multifaceted field in concentrated form. A few years ago, I began thinking of the card indexes in the Folklore Archives not just as texts but as unique fields of folklore. The human voice is, it is true, recorded on cards, but it is possible to discover individual tradition bearers and their choices behind the riddle variants. Different research questions draw the borders of this field, too, again and again.

The true riddle tradition began to wane in the Western world in the early 1960s. In Finland, it was, however, observed that riddles continued to thrive in children’s tradition. It was time for researchers to shift their gaze away from agrarian to urban culture, to the towns and children’s playgrounds. In 1973, I made my only personal field study of riddle tradition by visiting a Helsinki school, where I met some 30 children aged about ten. The material I got from them, 205 riddle variants and 34 descriptions of context, reflects the process of change in riddle tradition. Traditional true riddles still represented a good 20 per cent of this material<sup>13</sup>, but two decades later, they occurred only occasionally in the material collected from children<sup>14</sup>. One of the most active researcher-collectors was Ulla Lipponen, who in 1987–2003 published five annotated collections containing a total of 3250 riddles.—The walls between genres have tumbled down: the present-day jest cast in the form of a question and answer often comes closer to a joke than to a riddle.

### 3. Riddle Elements

True riddles consist of two parts, one functioning as a question, the other as an answer. A definition of riddle elements such as this appears to be astonishingly simple, but the impression of simplicity is misleading. The history of riddle research reveals that the term denoting or defining each part of the riddle is by no means undisputed. For the “answer” was for a long time overlooked in the analysis

<sup>10</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001, pp. 36–37).

<sup>11</sup> (Abrahams 1968, p. 156).

<sup>12</sup> (Virtanen et al. 1977).

<sup>13</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2005, p. 296).

<sup>14</sup> (Lipponen 1995, p. 207).

despite its central role in the riddling situation. True, Antti Aarne had, in 1917, already stressed that the answer exists before the image and provides the basis for it. He said that “the answer is something real . . . ”<sup>15</sup> Different elements, going by a variety of names, have been sought and specified for the “question” part. This definition concentrates on the image element because riddles were for a long time studied as texts, overlooking the context and the other vital element: the answer.

The debate over the main elements of a riddle continued for a long time. Antti Aarne<sup>16</sup> named the intention to mislead the riddlee as the main component, and the hint to the solution as a supplementary element. The image in most cases stands in a metaphorical relationship with the answer. Or else the image proves to be a metaphorical description once the answer has been revealed, e.g., “An old man with grey hair on his stomach.—A pumpkin”.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes the image is, however, no more than a literal description, e.g., “Wha’ lives in de river?—Fish”.<sup>18</sup> This riddle does not actually satisfy the criteria for the genre, even though Archer Taylor approved it for his collection, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition*.

The definition of riddle elements would not in itself have much to offer research had it not been a step towards taking a look at the genre’s structural pillars. Significant in this respect was the article by Robert A. Georges and Alan Dundes, in which they were the first to make a serious analysis of the image at the level of structure. The focus in the analysis model on the contrast of descriptive elements was not in itself anything new, since the basic essence of the image was already captured by Aristotle.<sup>19</sup>

Through their article, Georges and Dundes sparked off an extremely lively debate that went on for years. The article is a clear milestone along the road towards modern folkloristics, and despite the widespread criticism it has received, it is still one of the classics of riddle research. The criticism of the principles applied is levelled at the nature of the minimum unit “descriptive element”: is it ultimately structural or not?<sup>20</sup>

One of the instigators of the widespread debate was Elli Kõngäs Maranda, who diverged from the research tradition concentrating solely on the image. She stressed<sup>21</sup>: “My most important initial decision was to study the interrelations between the two parts of the riddle, the image and the answer”. The approach allowing for both the basic riddle elements may justifiably be termed folkloristic discourse<sup>22</sup>. The term included in the image ties in with the term in the answer<sup>23</sup>, and the metaphor grows out of their juxtaposition. Kõngäs Maranda concentrates on “establishing the logical structure of riddles, but she overlooks the characteristics of the image and answer, their semantic features, in her analysis”.<sup>24</sup> The relationship between the basic riddle elements—image and answer—has been closely analysed in a study produced partly on the claims made by Elli Kõngäs Maranda.

#### 4. Definition

Although scholars debated the basic elements of the riddle for a long time without making any reference to the answer, it is impossible to define a riddle conclusively without including this. I shall here be limiting myself to some main definitions.

The first well-known definition of the riddle was made by Aristotle in *On Rhetoric*<sup>25</sup>, in which he calls attention to the similarity between the riddle and the metaphor: “Good riddles do, in general,

<sup>15</sup> (Aarne 1917, p. 8).

<sup>16</sup> (Aarne 1917, pp. 1–2).

<sup>17</sup> (Blacking 1961, p. 9).

<sup>18</sup> (Taylor 1951, pp. 697–998; Georges and Dundes 1963, p. 112).

<sup>19</sup> (Aristotle 1968, *The Poetics*, chp. XXII).

<sup>20</sup> (Scott 1965, pp. 17–21; Green and Pepicello 1979, p. 9).

<sup>21</sup> (Maranda 1971a, pp. 191–92).

<sup>22</sup> (Maranda 1971a, p. 195; Scott 1965, p. 69).

<sup>23</sup> (Maranda 1971b, p. 54).

<sup>24</sup> (Saarinen 1991, p. 14; Harries 1976, pp. 321–22).

<sup>25</sup> (Aristotle 1991, Bk. III, chp. 2; Georges and Dundes 1963, p. 116).

provide us with satisfactory metaphors: for metaphors imply riddles, and therefore a good riddle can furnish a good metaphor". The same link with the metaphor is evident in certain other definitions, too (such as Paris 1877; Potter 1950). The second recurring line of thought stresses the irreconcilable contradiction occurring in riddles, a feature that was likewise noted by Aristotle: "The very nature indeed of a riddle is this, to describe a fact that in an impossible combination of words (which cannot be done with the real names for things, but can be with their metaphorical substitute . . .)".<sup>26</sup>

Crystallising the inherent characteristics of the riddle has not proved easy. André Jolles pinpointed something fundamental about the nature of the riddle and its special language in his classic *"Einfache Formen"* (1929): "The riddle opens and closes at the same time; the way the riddle encrypts is such that it simultaneously contains and conceals, holds and withholds".<sup>27</sup> Archer Taylor wrote in 1938 that riddle research was still in its beginning<sup>28</sup>. A few years later, Taylor<sup>29</sup> proposed the following definition, which he limited to the most common type of riddle, the true riddle. When he had identified the "positive" and "negative descriptive elements" contained in the riddle<sup>30</sup>, he continued his analysis of true riddles by saying that "a true riddle consists of two descriptions of an object, one figurative and one literal, and confuses the hearer who endeavours to identify an object described in conflicting ways".

Taylor's attempts to define the true riddle have been considered to cover too narrow a field. The positive and negative descriptions did not always correspond to the material. On the other hand Taylor's definition was too loose, for there are many riddles in *the English Riddles from Oral Tradition* anthology of 1951 that do not satisfy his criteria for a true riddle. Robert A. Georges and Alan Dundes worked to find a definition that was broad enough to include traditional texts while at the same time narrow enough to exclude other materials whose morphological characteristics indicated that they were specimens of another genre<sup>31</sup>. For their method they chose structural analysis, because in their opinion, the definitions based on content and style had proved inadequate. The choice of minimum unit for analysis was important; like Robert Petsch<sup>32</sup> and Archer Taylor, they called this unit "the descriptive element" consisting of a topic and a comment. The topic is "the apparent referent; that is, it is the object or item which is allegedly described". Comment on the other hand is "an assertion about the topic, usually concerning the form, function, or action of the topic". Georges and Dundes<sup>33</sup> modified their definition to read: "A riddle is a traditional verbal expression which contains one or more descriptive elements, a pair of which may be in opposition; the referent of the elements is to be guessed". They give this example: "Twenty-fo' horses set upon a bridge.—Teet' in yer gum". The topic in this riddle is "twenty-fo' horses", and the comment is "set upon a bridge". "This riddle then consists of one descriptive element".

A third scholar analysing the riddle tradition from a structuralist point of view was Charles T. Scott, and he regarded the analysis of Georges and Dundes as a serious attempt to define the riddle as a genre. He did, however, take an extremely critical attitude to the basic unit of analysis, the descriptive element, which despite all attempts by scholars does not operate at structural level. The result was, in his opinion, unsatisfactory<sup>34</sup>. And it has to be said that the model of Georges and Dundes does concentrate on the opposition between the descriptive elements to the exclusion of the other properties<sup>35</sup>. Lee Haring<sup>36</sup> notes that the structural scheme proposed by Georges and Dundes may be more useful as a classifying device than for definition. The reason is probably that the

<sup>26</sup> (Aristotle 1968, *The Poetics*, chp. XXII; Georges and Dundes 1963, p. 111).

<sup>27</sup> (Jolles 2017, p. 114).

<sup>28</sup> (Taylor 1938, p. 1).

<sup>29</sup> (Taylor 1943, p. 129).

<sup>30</sup> (Taylor 1943, p. 130).

<sup>31</sup> (Georges and Dundes 1963, p. 113).

<sup>32</sup> (Petsch 1899, pp. 48–50).

<sup>33</sup> (Georges and Dundes 1963, p. 113).

<sup>34</sup> (Scott 1965, pp. 17–19).

<sup>35</sup> (Saarinen 1991, p. 11).

<sup>36</sup> (Haring 1974, p. 294).

definition concentrates only on the question part and does not make any allowance for the answer. Michael L. Chyet<sup>37</sup> has, however, successfully made a few additions to the concepts of Georges and Dundes and proved their serviceability in analysing riddles from the Arabic-speaking area.

A closer analysis of the riddle definition involves on the one hand researchers' attempts to isolate, define and classify the devices used by the riddle and on the other criticism of their attempts. Researchers tend not to build on ready definitions and instead aim at a new definition, while criticising the old. W. J. Pepicello and Thomas A. Green adopted a more linguistic approach than previous researchers. They set out to examine riddles as "verbal art from a linguistic perspective" and "to build toward a characterization of the genre as an integration of formal linguistic and culturally aesthetic strategies". They underline that in no culture, and especially so in English, do riddles go unanswered. They stressed the ambiguity of riddles that must also be allowed for in analyses; this significant feature may occur both in the linguistic form of a riddle and its context.<sup>38</sup>

Not a single riddle definition has yet gone into general circulation, and many a scholar has felt the need to express terminological reservations and to create a personal definition within the context of the culture under study. Is it, we may ask, possible or even expedient to seek a universal definition? It is often the case that only some of the riddles in a cultural or linguistic area fit such a definition, based as it is on the materials of researchers representing different cultures. It might be better to examine the essential points to be taken into account in making a definition, and this is in fact just what Pepicello and Green, for example, did.<sup>39</sup>

I quote here Joel Sherzer<sup>40</sup>, who notes the metaphoric aspect of riddles and continues: Riddles "occur in a question-and-answer format in which the question is enigmatic and challenges the answerer to figure it out. The question is mystifying, misleading, or puzzling, posed as a problem to be solved or guessed, something difficult to understand. The answer is surprising but clever. At the same time, a riddle is a kind of definition or description whose referent must be guessed". Sherzer has here rid himself of the structuralist and linguistic definitions of the 20th century and, even when examining the content of riddles, arrived at a result that covers many of the factors describing riddles and their use. Dan Pagis further adds to the definition the main characters in the riddling process and the tension between them: a riddle must have a social function as a competition between the riddler and riddlees. The image is "difficult and enigmatic, yet containing the clues needed to decipher it".<sup>41</sup>

Riddles have been studied in many cultures, and their definition and identifying features are thus also culture-specific. It has been argued that riddles "can provide a useful indication of cultural norms and world view".<sup>42</sup> Defining riddles must work from the basic premise that the answer must not be too easy, but the riddlee must ultimately be able to find the answer in accordance with the rules of the game and be able to accept it as fitting in his or her culture.

## 5. Riddle Subjects

The subjects of riddles have interested researchers less than definition of the genre and questions of structure. Don V. Hart quite rightly asked: "Are the riddle subjects selected solely by chance?" Although this view has been rejected, virtually no exhaustive studies of subject selection have been made. Hart identifies four factors, based on his Christian Filipino material: 1. "riddle subjects are familiar subjects" 2. "riddles usually deal with concrete objects, occasionally with processes, and rarely with abstractions" 3. "selection of riddle subjects is influenced by a people's value system" and 4.

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<sup>38</sup> (Green and Pepicello 1979, pp. 14–21, 81).

<sup>39</sup> (Pepicello and Green 1984, pp. 85–88).

<sup>40</sup> (Sherzer 2002, p. 61).

<sup>41</sup> (Pagis 1996, p. 81).

<sup>42</sup> (Dienhart 2010, p. 14).

“selection of subjects is determined by their inherent riddle potentialities”<sup>43</sup>. Hart’s classification would also appear to fit the Finnish material.

Sometimes riddles were posed according to subject. In the Udmurt tradition, for example, riddles progressed from the familiar to the less familiar: in the first riddles the referent was a human being, then his limbs and actions; next came the house and the objects inside it, followed by the yard, the kitchen garden, the fields and forest<sup>44</sup>. In Finland, too, the riddler would cast his or her eye first on the people, objects and actions in the room, then look out into the yard and the cattle sheds, and finally further away to the forest.

We have some accounts by researchers of entire riddling sessions<sup>45</sup>, and their message is clear. In the context in which they are performed, riddles fall into groups that either belong together thematically<sup>46</sup> or they resemble one another in structure. Such riddle chains also act as an aid to memory in a riddling situation. There are clear thematic links between riddle sections. Sometimes the session begins with neck riddles, arithmetic problems, or biblical questions, and the riddles that follow will usually be of the same kind<sup>47</sup>.

Riddles also carried novelty value, and a newly learned riddle might be asked in the course of conversation with friends or at the beginning of a school lesson. Some situation might also suggest a riddle image that might not, however, lead to any further riddling. One informant mentions that the riddle was used much as if it were a proverb: “I was a young girl and spinning wool. Maija Tuomioho dropped in and said: ‘A hairy thing lies on a thigh, looking to see when it can get in the hole’. I found this offensive, because it was so vulgar—I didn’t take it as a riddle. My mother realised and said, ‘There it is on your lap’”<sup>48</sup>. The girl in this narrative knew that there are a lot of sexual riddles; they were mostly men’s tradition, even though adult women might also ask each other sexual riddles. Maija Tuomioho says what young men would have said if they had been present when the girls gathered over their evening handicrafts.

Living conditions changed with the shift to industrialisation and urbanisation, and this was also visible in riddles and riddling. Ulla Lipponen, a Finnish researcher of children’s tradition, described the change reflected in material collected at the end of the 20th century: “The questions in joking riddles deal with many aspects of the everyday lives and experiences of children: the home, family, school, tourism, global geography, foreign languages (Swedish, English, Japanese and Chinese), a whole range of modern occupations, figures in the public eye, events in the news, animals, plants, and a fantasy world tinged with absurd humour and peopled by animals bearing human traits (such as elephants or mice), fairytale characters (such as Snow White), and strange, colourful or weird beings (such as a little round stone-eater)”<sup>49</sup>. The material speaks of new choices of subjects, and of a broadening worldview towards the urban and international, and towards fantasy. The true riddle tradition vanished, but then joke-like questions became very popular. New riddle tradition has been studied in recent years by Estonian Piret Voolaid in particular<sup>50</sup>. She has identified and analysed riddles and many riddle-like traditions to be found on, for example, “the borderline of folklore and language”, but also “in computer games”.

## 6. Riddle Metaphors

The image is often stated as a metaphor. Metaphors give a riddle an ambiguity that derives from the juxtaposition of different things, or from a paradox, or more widely an unrealistic latent image.

<sup>43</sup> (Hart 1964, pp. 67–72).

<sup>44</sup> (Gerd 1928, p. 395).

<sup>45</sup> (Jones and Haves 1972; Roberts 1974; Evans 1976; Abrahams 1983; Akinyemí 2015).

<sup>46</sup> (Reeder 1981, p. 231).

<sup>47</sup> (Goldstein 1963, p. 332).

<sup>48</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001, p. 98).

<sup>49</sup> (Lipponen 1995, p. 215).

<sup>50</sup> (Voolaid 2011).

Riddle metaphors cannot be forced into a single scheme by comparing them unequivocally to the metaphors of, say spoken or poetic language.

Reading Finnish riddles, I have identified the following metaphor models that run counter to expectation: 1. either the prerequisite of some activity or its expected, natural result is cancelled, e.g., “What runs without legs?—A cloud”. 2. a biological or logical anomaly which arises from the following alternatives: a topsy-turvy relationship between an object and its placement; an epithet contrary to expectation is linked to the object; the characteristics of two antithetical objects are exchanged: topsy-turvy functioning of the object e.g., “A grouse in the tree, its guts on the ground, still goes on cooing.—Church bell”. 3. a denial of the figure of comparison, e.g., “Black as a parson but isn’t a parson, shines like a button, but isn’t a button, flies like a bird, but isn’t a bird, bellows like a bull, but isn’t a bull, goes underground like a worm, but isn’t a worm.—Dung beetle”. 4. a characteristic’s ultimate value or symbol is surpassed: “What is blacker than a raven?—Sin”.<sup>51</sup> If a riddle has only one or two words linked metaphorically (such as a cloud running legless), the latent image seems simple. On hearing the question, the riddlee cannot, however, know which of the latent-image elements are metaphors and which should be taken literally. A context description from 1967 reports how only one person taking part in the riddling grasped or remembered that in the riddle “A bushel full of sparrows, at least by the end of the week.—Church”. the word “bushel” alludes to a church and that “sparrows” is a euphemism for the congregation sitting and singing in church. Since most of the riddlees did not know the answer, no one felt humiliated—or if only one had not spotted the metaphor, he alone would have been ridiculed.

A riddle metaphor differs from a poetic or standard-language one, for riddles do not have the leeway of poetic language. But nor are riddle metaphors as readily comprehensible as metaphorical expressions in the standard language, the descriptive power of which we do not always even notice. The metaphors are both national and international. We find Finnish “ukko”, meaning “old man” on browsing through, for example, a riddle publication from Kenya. Akintúndé Akínyemí says that “Metaphor is a general property of Yorùbá poetry. Furthermore, its incidence and complexity are more evident in the riddles than any other poetic genre”.<sup>52</sup> A further illustration of the versatility of riddle language is the statement that “Brief though the riddles are, their vocabulary is richer than that of narrative prose”.<sup>53</sup>

Figuring out the answer divulges the riddle metaphor and provides the person faced with a true riddle with a meaningful link between the question and answer. Or else the answer shows that the link provided by the riddle was arbitrary. The realisation is liberating and brings pleasure. Such a situation has been described as follows: “The delight of the audience is to be so misled that when the answer is announced one has a sudden sense of a world order discovered or rediscovered”.<sup>54</sup> Analysing metaphors has not been easy for researchers, even though metaphor is the vital feature of riddles. Models have been developed for determining the structure of riddles and the metaphors used in them, but they often use only a small corpus of material, and attempts have then been made to fit the model to the classification of larger materials.<sup>55</sup>

## 7. Riddle Formulae

Proceeding from an idea to its verbalisation, the riddle tradition bearer has at his or her disposal a number of expressive models, clichés, patterns, fixed forms or linguistic designs. The term “formula” refers to the basic scheme or common mould of minor genres, such as proverbs and riddles, into which a new

<sup>51</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1992, p. 128).

<sup>52</sup> (Akínyemí 2015, p. 37).

<sup>53</sup> (Saarinen 1991, Abstract).

<sup>54</sup> (Abrahams 1972, p. 178).

<sup>55</sup> (Saarinen 1991, p. 45).



folklore products can be cast<sup>56</sup>. This term has not, however, acquired a meaning in folkloristic literature restricted exclusively to the structural scheme of minor genres. To my mind, the term is a serviceable one for the analysis of minor genres. "Formula" can be interpreted as a morphological-syntactic, stylistic or semantic model. It should not, however, be viewed as a cliché-like, stereotype phrase repeated verbatim time after time. This concept embraces a number of ideas at various levels of expression. Archer Taylor set the trend for the formula analysis of minor genres in 1934, in writing of the problems encountered in the study of proverbs: "Characteristic of the invention of many proverbs is the use of older, already existing models". He then continues in a way that applies equally well to riddles: "Instead of studying the history of a single proverb, one can therefore endeavour to learn how, when, and where a proverbial formula came to enjoy currency or passed from one culture to another".<sup>57</sup>

Other research into the structure of riddles has been closely committed to the idea of formulae or patterns and their variations as models regulating the expressions of riddles. Only the terminology varies.<sup>58</sup>

On examining true Finnish riddles, I have noticed that the criteria of formulae vary, and each model is as a rule governed by several criteria simultaneously. The analysis of formulae relies on identification of the means of expression peculiar to the language in question and of the way they are used as models in riddling. Morphological-syntactic and stylistic criteria are among the most common ones, but allowance must also be made for the number of structural elements and their position in the riddle statement.<sup>59</sup> In analysing formulae, it is not sufficient to operate merely at the level of verbalisation; allowance must also be made for the semantic expressive scheme concealed in the linguistic model. The perspective must then be broadened from the image to the conformities governing the linking of the image with the answer.

One important observation as regards the conformities of the riddle language is that image and answer belong to opposite categories, such as animate or inanimate, culture or nature, a human or her individual parts. The most popular analogy seems to be between human beings and cultural objects ("A woman's in her nook with a hundred teeth in her mouth. Answer: A broom". FR 16), while plants are never compared to plants, humans to humans, or animals to animals.<sup>60</sup>

A closer look at one Finnish riddle formula shows that the semantic structure of the formula is far more heterogeneous than the syntactic structure. At syntactic level my example riddle has five components: (A) "A man (B) in the earth, (C) his hair (D) in the wind. (Answer) A turnip". This A in B, C in D formula is known in Finnish syntax as a nominativus absolutus construction. Classification of the applications of this formula according to the main semantic binary features appearing in the material yields the following oppositions (the sign + stands for "is", "does" or "fact", while the sign - signifies "is not", "does not" or "false"; the combination  $\pm$ plus minus, can be interpreted as "is or is not"):  $\pm$  animate,  $\pm$  human,  $\pm$  inside,  $\pm$  nature,  $\pm$  part of A,  $\pm$  correlates with A and  $\pm$  part of the body. Analysis of the research material reveals that the majority of the feature combinations theoretically possible are in fact never used in applications of this formula because of such things as logical inconsistency

All in all, 52 contentual schemes are needed to classify the 106 nominativus absolutus riddles according to the above criteria. The most popular is: (A) ++ (B) varies (C) --- (D) +++ (Answer) - - or  $\pm$ . This should be read as follows:

A +animate and +human,

B (varies),

C -animate, -part of A, and -part of body,

D +animate +part of body, and +correlates with A,

<sup>56</sup> (Kuusi 1967).

<sup>57</sup> (Taylor 1934, p. 13).

<sup>58</sup> (e.g., Cole-Beuchat 1957, pp. 138–40; Reeder 1981, pp. 237, 247; Bascom 1949, p. 4; Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001, pp. 141–51).

<sup>59</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1978, pp. 10–16).

<sup>60</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1978, pp. 10–16).

Answer -animate and -human, or +animate and -human.

A few examples of this pair of schemes may illustrate the variability:

“An old woman at the oven with two pies between her teeth.—An oven and two shelf beams”.<sup>61</sup>

“A man standing on the hill, iron trousers on his legs.—A pitchfork”.<sup>62</sup>

“A little man in the woods, a rain hat on his shoulders.—A mushroom”.<sup>63</sup>

“An old man fell off the oven, a washbowl in his arse.—A cockroach”.<sup>64</sup>

As we can see from the examples, adjectives and verbs may further be added to the basic components of riddles. The contrast between the riddle image and the answer is in agreement with an observation by Elli Kōngäs Maranda<sup>65</sup> according to which the primary contrast springs from a combination of animate and inanimate, and “the most common juxtaposition is between human and cultural object”.

The importance of formula analysis lies in its ability to facilitate the scrutiny of the model expressions in riddles. These help the riddler familiar with the way the image elements work and the link between image and answer to think up new riddles. The riddlee also possesses the same knowledge. Neither riddler nor riddlee is probably aware of the existence of such a formula determining the structure and content of a riddle, but such pairs of opposites as animate/inanimate are so common that they must have been in the competence of anyone familiar with the genre.

## 8. Answering and Riddling Competition

The image usually contains both an element aimed at misleading the riddlee and details that prove the answer true, e.g., “Fur coat on in summer, naked in winter.—Leafy tree”.<sup>66</sup> The solution to the riddle question is usually mentioned as the “answer”, and it is known in many languages. Reflection on the meaning of the word provides a pointer to the answer.

Riddling was part of the agrarian, self-sustained economic model. It was mainly an evening pastime particularly performed in winter, when in dim light the farm girls were knitting, carding, spinning or plucking feathers and the boys were repairing implements, cutting splints for light or baskets, pegs for rakes, and news, gossip, songs and stories were exchanged. In that light, riddling was part of the entertainment and one part of socialisation.

Riddling is thus a social occasion that values entertainment, quick-wittedness, getting the answer right, humiliation and its tolerance. The audience is never passive. For the riddler and the audience the game would be boring if all riddles were easy to guess.

Various ways of finding the answer are revealed: deliberation, guessing and knowing the answer in advance. Being a researcher, I am not good at guessing the answer, but anyone familiar with the language of the genre and its most common metaphors may be able to interpret the mysteries of the image correctly.

The old riddle literature often underlines the fact that riddles are a battle of wits and aim at developing mental agility. Field studies in true contexts do, however, clearly contradict this claim: riddles are not an intellectual exercise. Anyone who does not know the answer to a riddle is not usually in any way encouraged to find it. Riddles have to be learned. Learning the riddle lore has a clear objective among, say, the Vendas, for displaying it brings prestige.<sup>67</sup> Descriptions of Finnish riddling also speak of the delight of finding the answer.

<sup>61</sup> (FR 1977, p. 21).

<sup>62</sup> (FR 1977, p. 434).

<sup>63</sup> (FR 1977, p. 746).

<sup>64</sup> (FR 1977, p. 1092).

<sup>65</sup> (Maranda 1971a, p. 214).

<sup>66</sup> (FR 1977, p. 309).

<sup>67</sup> (Blacking 1961, p. 5; Haring 1974, p. 202).

Finding the right answer not known beforehand does, however, require familiarity with the culture. The posing of riddles in test situations confirms the findings of field researchers. When asked to solve traditional Kazakh riddles, a test group of illiterate Kazakhs were able to answer 90 per cent of them. The same respondents fared much worse when faced with riddles that were less coloured by their own culture. A group of Russian riddlees also did well with riddles from their own culture, but when the Kazakhs were asked Russian riddles and the Russians Kazakh, each in their own mother tongue, the number of correct answers was slight. The ability to solve riddles does not therefore depend on language alone. Another interesting finding is that the students were not nearly as good as the illiterate group at solving riddles. General intelligence, familiarity with and command of language do not explain the ability to solve riddles. More important is a familiarity with the context and the ability to see analogies.<sup>68</sup>

The ability to solve riddles draws on models assimilated along with cultural practices. Dan Ben Amos has suggested that “each solution can be valid as long as it is offered by a native speaker of the language who shares the cultural experience of the community and has an adequate familiarity with traditional knowledge”.<sup>69</sup>

The Finnish riddles in the Folklore Archives demonstrate that one riddle image may have many different answers. Here is an example included by Christfrid Ganander<sup>70</sup> in his anthology of riddles from 1783: “A stoup was made in Tuonela, the hoops were cast up here.—A well”. (155 variants in the archive) (“Tuonela” is the underworld in ancient Finnish mythology.) There are numerous alternative answers among the variants to this particular riddle, but four that feature more than any other: a cow’s horns (37 variants), a well (32), a ring (16), and answers on the theme of a new-born baby (27). The same metaphor can here serve as the latent image of several answers. “A stoup” relates to round and deep, moisture and drinking, and (willow) hoops. “Tuonela” relates to the underworld, the ground, the dark, the North, magic. But the word is also in the image because of the Finnish language’s liking for alliteration (tuoppi/Tuonela). “Hoops” relates to something circular, holding staves together, metal, holding (with an encircling foot) the (drinking) horn standing.

This riddle nevertheless displays the rarer extreme on the variation scale compared with the numerous riddles to which hundreds of users have decided on one and the same answer.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, riddle collectors have only rarely noted down two different answers for the same image. This proves that each riddling community accepted only one “right” answer. Elli Köngäs Maranda has described a riddle occasion in which a correct answer was rejected: “I have recorded riddling situations in Malaita where heated discussions followed when a poser did not accept an answer that made sense. It is perhaps a psychological phenomenon worth noting that many riddle posers focus on the answer that they themselves have in mind, and they tend to reject perfectly suitable alternatives”.<sup>72</sup>

Unlike genres such as proverbs easily slipped into the discourse, true riddles demand a special performing situation, one reason being that they are “aggressive in design and purpose”.<sup>73</sup> But the use of riddles may indeed carry other emotional charges: tension, joy, shame, triumph. A performing situation is further needed because the passive bystander and receiver has to get in the mood to become an active participant. The performing situation also helps the participants to switch from normal discourse to the special language of riddles.

All riddling situations involve some form of competition—a test of knowledge or wit. They may, however, vary from specially arranged contests between two teams and the audience to free-form

<sup>68</sup> (Grzybek 1987, pp. 251–57).

<sup>69</sup> (Ben Amos 1976, pp. 249–50).

<sup>70</sup> (Ganander 1783).

<sup>71</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001, pp. 153–54).

<sup>72</sup> (Maranda 1971b, p. 55).

<sup>73</sup> (Abrahams 1968, p. 150).

questioning inserted in the discourse. Even if competition is not known in some cultures, in every case there are nevertheless two opposing parties, one of which is in possession of knowledge with which it tests the other.<sup>74</sup>

In a riddling situation, the position of both riddler and riddlee is at stake. André Jolles discussed the roles of the “riddler” and the “guesser”, and used the words “test”, “compulsion” and “equality” as factors regulating the riddling. He says: “Thus, to set the riddle is above all to test the guesser, to investigate his equality”. He emphasises the nature of the riddle as a question that also has an element of compulsion: “Taken as a whole, then, from the riddler’s point of view the riddle is both a test of the guesser’s equality and a matter of forcing the guesser to demonstrate his equality”.<sup>75</sup> Riddling is about the status of each party. At the start of riddling, the riddle poser clearly holds a higher status than the riddlee. The poser holds both intellectual and social power: “Intellectually the poser has the knowledge required to answer the riddle; socially, the power to determine whether an answer offered is acceptable”.<sup>76</sup> An attempt may also be made to lead the riddlee astray, and this is felt to be humorous precisely in riddling.<sup>77</sup> It is true that the riddle is “one of the more interactive types of humour in that the riddler invites the riddlee to participate in the riddling process”.<sup>78</sup> Embarrassment is also acceptable, but riddling would hardly have been so popular if it was always based on humiliating the other party.<sup>79</sup>

Teasing a member who cannot give the right answer is an essential part of riddling not only in the Finnish tradition. “It often suffices that he is made to do something unpleasant; for example, he is sent in the cold of night to fetch a glass of water, to chop wood, etc.”<sup>80</sup> Often, purely local, farcical features were associated with the teasing ceremonies.<sup>81</sup> The popular Finnish entertainment drama in which the unsuccessful riddlee is sent to an upside-down world called Hymylä (“hymy” means “smile”) is also distinctive. One of the oldest accounts is the runic poem recorded by Jacob Fellman “before 1831” in Lapland. The rune is named *Hämeen ihmeet* (*The Wonders of Häme*; Häme is a province in central Finland), and it describes the scene that faces the unsuccessful riddlee on being sent to this fictitious realm:

“Wonders I saw when I visited Hävälä: Pigs blended, cows baked; sheep distilled, dogs litigated; snow buntings chopped wood, swallows cleft wood into shingles; a titmouse wove sticks; a squirrel carved beams. Cooking was done with an axe, chopping was done with pots; a wolf mixed, the tail slept; a hare ground flour, the head trembled. A log drew, an ox shook; the sleigh lasted, the road fell apart”.<sup>82</sup>

This poem contains international motifs of impossibility. According to Martti Haavio<sup>83</sup>, its idea is the expression of an in-group attitude, of wonderment: “the world has turned evil”; it is as though such and such could happen. The one who failed in riddling belongs to this strange topsy-turvy world. Many such descriptions have been recorded in Finland. The most recent accounts of this folk-like farce are given in direct narrative at the time of a riddle collection made in 1966. There are three main episodes in the drama: the departure for Hymylä, the visit to Hymylä, and, on the return, the account of the journey. Before the riddling began, the participants agreed how many riddles could be answered wrongly before a riddlee was sent off to Hymylä. Usually the number was three. There were two main roles in the drama: the incompetent riddlee, and the opposing group that put the sentence into

<sup>74</sup> (Haring 1985, p. 178).

<sup>75</sup> (Jolles 2017, p. 105).

<sup>76</sup> (Haring 1985, p. 178).

<sup>77</sup> (Anttonen 1998, pp. 376–77).

<sup>78</sup> (Dienhart 2010, p. 19).

<sup>79</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1993, p. 185).

<sup>80</sup> (Virtanen 1997, pp. 80–81).

<sup>81</sup> (Hart 1964, pp. 57–60).

<sup>82</sup> (SKVR 1908–1948, XII 1:134).

<sup>83</sup> (Haavio 1959, pp. 209–21; Virtanen 1997, p. 8).

practice. Some of the people carrying out the sentence would pretend to be the people of Hymylä, who would talk to the luckless traveller and amuse the rest of the group by reporting on the reception and treatment afforded the traveller:

“Thus the girl was soon ready for Hölmölä [another name for Hymylä; ‘hölmö’ means ‘stupid’]. Now, she was dressed in the most odd, ‘billy goat’ fashion and was sent out of the living room. Then began the guessing about how she would be received in Hölmölä. Someone tells that Hölmölä’s dogs are barking, so the children go to see what they are barking at, and they bring back the news that a ragged old woman is coming who’s drawn by a cat and the sleigh’s upside-down. In addition, she has horns on her head. Hölmölä’s housewife takes fright just as she is salting her butter, and in her fright she throws ashes instead of salt in her butter, then overturns the milk pail into her hearth and lights the fire with her church silk. The daughter of the house turns a slops bucket over the stranger’s eyes. When the latter asks to be allowed to wash, she is given a tar bucket and ordered to dry herself with bedding straw. Then she is asked about news from the world. When she doesn’t know what else to say apart from those unsolved riddles, the poor creature, the likes of her, is pitied and given chaff mixed with buttermilk, the heads of last year’s herrings and the holes of ring bread for her food.”<sup>84</sup> No researcher has had a chance to observe such a game, however, the reason being that riddles and riddling have only relatively recently begun to interest Finnish scholars.

Although it was only a game, the trip to Hymylä was somewhat disgraceful and frightening. “The trip to Hymylä was so frightening that it was liable, even later at night, to disturb sleep if one had received that rebuking in the evening”.<sup>85</sup> Some riddlees have reported that “we did our best to remember, to make sure we didn’t get sent to Himola [another name for Hymylä], because that was a disgrace”, or “people were loath to join in the riddling for fear of being disgraced”. It was forbidden to get angry. In any case, the trip to Hymylä never ended in lasting disgrace. Once the riddlee had suffered his punishment, he was taken back into the group. Bygones were bygones, though they might be difficult to forget. The game continued until it was time for the next person to set off for Hymylä”.<sup>86</sup>

## 9. Riddling Functions

In the days of a text-oriented approach, attention was paid only in passing to the functions of riddles and riddling. In his book “Riddles in Filipino Folklore” Don V Hart<sup>87</sup>, however, quotes a wealth of older literature touching on the functions of the genre. But most writers were content merely to mention the entertainment function and mild intellectual stimulus in speaking of riddles and riddling. It was, perhaps, not until William Bascom published his “Four Functions of Folklore”<sup>88</sup> that scholars became more widely interested in attempting to discover why, how and in what contexts riddles were posed and solved.

With the increase in fieldwork in the 1960s, scholars began to pay more noticeable attention to the uses and functions of riddles. The articles based on field research have been the most interesting reading.<sup>89</sup> But perhaps only some of the factors important to the users of riddles are revealed to the researchers as manifest functions. Some of the functions are latent.

Riddling provides a form of entertainment, but at the same time the communication fosters a sense of affinity among those taking part, brings out cultural metaphors and terminology, expresses

<sup>84</sup> (SKS KRA. Helmi Seppälä AK 18:1. 1967.)

<sup>85</sup> SKS. HAKS 769. 1927.

<sup>86</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001, p. 118).

<sup>87</sup> (Hart 1964, pp. 42–66).

<sup>88</sup> (Bascom 1954).

<sup>89</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001, pp. 118–23).

the values and norms of the community, and so on. The functions of individual riddles may in turn vary from one performance to another.<sup>90</sup> Being a form of succeeding and competition, riddling has also had a power element, and a testing of approval and respect. There are also differences between the riddle subgenres.

The observations made by researchers do, however, differ from one culture to another and prove that riddling does not have many universal functions recognisable the world over. But riddles have also been regarded as regulating a culturally approved statement of order. Elli Kōngäs Maranda<sup>91</sup> calls this function a cognitive one and regards it as fundamental and possibly even universal. Riddles can be seen as devices which are used to demonstrate control over words, objects and ideas that are central to the life of the riddling group.

Akíntúndé Akínyemí points out in his book of Yorùbá riddles<sup>92</sup>: “As an art form, riddles perform integral social functions, and have inherent messages to convey to participants about societal norms”. He also says that riddles constitute a formidable moral and intellectual exercise for Yorùbá children, and are useful in strengthening a child’s reasoning and decision-making abilities.

True riddles differ greatly from the children’s riddle lore of today, but Piret Voolaid is of the opinion that new riddles have an important role in socialising. She also goes on to say that “riddles also interlock with the informative stratification of culture, preserving the knowledge of how the world functions”. The new riddle lore is not just a passing phase, for “in the context of a globalising world, a riddle can operate as a medium in certain real-life events, reflecting these events in, for example, modern conundrums, short riddles and other subgenres”.<sup>93</sup>

## 10. New Perspectives

One characteristic of folklore is its ability to renew, and to discover different perspectives in old materials and ways of approaching them. John M. Dienhart likens the riddler to a poet who “takes the whole world of ‘objects’, material as well as non-material, as the stuff out of which to create new combinations - - -.”<sup>94</sup> The researcher may similarly find something new in this material. New challenges are the driving force behind research. New for me was discovering the humour in riddles. I found this only a few years ago, on returning to riddles after an interval of some years and seeking new perspectives in them.<sup>95</sup>

Why does word play in riddles make people laugh? Are riddles entertaining because success alternates with failure? Is the laughter the result of nervous tension: what if my “correct” answer does not satisfy the riddler? Who holds the upper hand? Reading dozens and even hundreds of riddle variants begins to give the researcher some idea of the fun and humour inherent in riddles.

The Finnish descriptions I have read about riddling and riddles had one thing in common: the riddling had been fun and it had produced a lot of laughs. “Everyone had fun”, or someone was “quick-witted and was always game for some humour and laughs and little digs”<sup>96</sup>. Writers did not, however, specify what made them laugh, but it can be read between the lines.

The fun was in presenting oral riddles and later droodles and other visual riddles. These call for an ability to read images, and on seeing the picture the riddlee may pause for a moment to consider the right answer. Sometimes the riddler may him- or herself give the answer. The picture is amusing, but it is not likely to amuse a second time. Oral riddles, by contrast, demand that the listener must quickly

<sup>90</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001, pp. 119–20).

<sup>91</sup> (Maranda 1976, p. 131).

<sup>92</sup> (Akínyemí 2015, p. 22).

<sup>93</sup> (Voolaid 2011, p. 128).

<sup>94</sup> (Dienhart 2010, p. 41).

<sup>95</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2017).

<sup>96</sup> SKS KRA. Elsa Jaatinen. Jyväskylä AK 6,139.

interpret the image he has just heard. This he cannot always do, because the riddler and riddlee may have different images in their minds.

True riddles and joking questions and visual riddles are products of such different eras that they are not often posed on the same occasion. True, the children I met in a Helsinki school in 1973 knew both traditional riddles such as “A black man with a stub nose.—A pot” and new joking questions such as “It’s blue and eats hay in a field.—A cow wearing a tracksuit”.<sup>97</sup> They also knew some droodles.

In the case of riddles, and ones posed in different eras, we have to ask: Why were riddles posed, and what did they give the community? Both true riddles and joking questions were a way of learning social mores: in addition to having fun and a good laugh together, people had to learn to tolerate being misled or bluffed without getting offended.

The laughter surrounding riddles has been of many kinds, from questioning to relief and from amusement to jeering. Not only could the laughter spring from the humour but also from the gathering and the conviviality that this brought. Taking turns has always been an important part of riddling, because it ensures that the game continues. People’s sense of humour differed, but riddling gave it collective limits and demonstrated what is permissible and what is not.

Riddles open a window on the ambiguity of language and tradition. The humour in riddles is a special mixture of creative or innovative word play, making the familiar seem unfamiliar, pulling the rug from under the riddlee’s feet by violating the norm, wielding power, and discovering comic elements even in places where no one thought to look for them. Whereas the answer to a true riddle proves the sense even of a strange image, the answer to a joking question demonstrates that the image was in fact absurd. Joking questions are contemporary riddles that have nothing in common with the old riddles apart from a question and an unexpected answer. Despite their differences, the two genres can, however, be examined to see what they have in common: linguistic ambiguity is a feature of all riddles. Grasping the ambiguity of an expression enhances the awareness of the potential of language in the participants. If true riddles develop a command of linguistic metaphors, then absurd joking questions enhance the riddlee’s sense of the comic, his wits and tolerance of stress.

There are still questions in riddle materials waiting to be asked; it is always possible to discover something new. Researchers have been studying true riddles for a long time, but questions can be focused more sharply, even though a tradition is no longer in use in the Western world. As new research seems to concentrate increasingly on live materials such as joking questions and their likes, the true riddle may, by way of its roots, still defend its place.<sup>98</sup>

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### Unpublished Material and Abbreviations

SKSKRA	Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran kansanrunousarkiston kokoelmat (Collections of the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society)
HAKS	Hämeenlinnan alakouluseminaarin kokoelmat (Collections of the Hämeenlinna Junior School Seminary)
ER	English Riddles from Oral Tradition
FR	Arvoitukset, Finnish Riddles
SKVR	Suomen kansan vanhat runot (Ancient Poems of the Finnish People)

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<sup>97</sup> (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1974, pp. 107–8).

<sup>98</sup> Translated by Susan Sinisalo.

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