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DESCRIPTIVE ELEMENTS AND CONTRADICTIVE RELATIONS IN THE STRUCTURE OF ENGLISH RIDDLES

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This article explores the typological characteristics of the English riddle as a traditional folkloric genre from a linguistic and cultural perspective. Relying on thematic and structural approaches developed in linguistics, folklore studies, and ethnology, the study aims to identify the main principles of riddle classification and to reveal the invariant mechanisms of riddle construction. Particular attention is paid to the riddles of the Exeter Book, whose interpretation is complicated by the absence of explicit answers and by the plurality of scholarly readings. The analysis demonstrates that English riddles encode fragments of the worldview through stable thematic spheres and recurrent descriptive structures, reflecting everyday life, nature, warfare, and the spiritual domain.

Introduction. Riddles constitute one of the most ancient and stable genres of folklore, combining elements of play, cognition, and verbal art. In linguistic research, riddles attract attention not only as entertaining texts but also as culturally significant verbal structures that reflect collective experience, value systems, and modes of conceptualization. The English riddle tradition, particularly as represented in medieval sources such as the Exeter Book, offers rich material for studying the interaction between language, culture, and cognition. Scholarly approaches to riddles vary depending on research objectives. In linguistics, riddles are examined as special types of text with distinctive semantic and pragmatic features; in folklore studies, they are viewed as genre-specific manifestations of traditional knowledge; in

ethnology, they are treated as elements of cultural memory. As a result, different typological principles have been proposed, including thematic classification, structural organization, and methods of metaphorical encoding. Despite the diversity of approaches, two major perspectives remain central: the thematic approach, which focuses on the subject matter of riddles, and the structural approach, which investigates their invariant compositional patterns. The present article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the typological characteristics of the English riddle by combining these two perspectives. The objectives of the study are: (1) to describe the main thematic spheres represented in English riddles; (2) to analyze the structural models underlying riddle construction; and (3) to demonstrate how these models function in the riddles of the Exeter Book. The relevance of the study lies in its contribution to the linguistic description of folklore texts and to the understanding of riddles as a means of worldview representation.

Materials and methods. The research material includes traditional English riddles recorded in folklore collections as well as riddles from the Exeter Book. Due to the absence of explicit answers in the manuscript, their interpretation relies on established scholarly commentaries and translations proposed by B. Thorpe, P. F. Baum, K. Crossley-Holland, C. A. Williamson, T. S. Kuznetsova, and others. The study employs a combination of qualitative linguistic methods. The thematic method is used to classify riddles according to the conceptual fields they represent. Structural analysis is applied to identify invariant descriptive models and to examine the relations between descriptive elements within riddle texts. Interpretative analysis allows for the correlation of linguistic form with cultural content, while elements of comparative analysis are used to contextualize English riddles within broader typological frameworks developed in folklore studies.

Oppositional riddles include antithetical (antithetical–contradictive riddles), deprivative riddles, as well as riddles based on causal and consecutive contradictions (causal contradictive riddles). As an example of antithetical riddles, the authors cite the following: What goes to the branch [stream] and drinks and doesn't drink? (A cow with a bell around its neck). This riddle consists of three descriptive elements: (1) it goes to the branch [stream]; (2) it drinks; (3) it does not drink. The second and third elements contradict one another, since the object of all three descriptions cannot simultaneously perform two mutually exclusive actions. Within the corpus of English riddles, a considerable number of paradox riddles can be identified, whose structure is based on antithetical schemes—juxtapositions of logically opposing actions, situations, or qualities of objects. For example: What can go around the world while remaining in a corner? (Stamp); If you have me, you want to share me. If you share me,

you haven't got me (Secret); What is black when it is clean and white when it is dirty? (Blackboard) [www].

Deprivative riddles (from Latin *deprivatio* 'loss, deprivation') are constructed through the negation of properties, functions, or parts that are conventionally associated with a given object as inherently characteristic. Thus, the riddle What has legs, but cannot walk? (Chair) consists of two descriptions that present the referent as possessing legs while lacking the ability to walk. The second description negates an obvious function (the ability to walk) typically associated with legs, whose presence is asserted in the first descriptive component. Similarly, the riddle What has hands, but no fingers? (Clock) disrupts the habitual associative link between hands and fingers. Numerous examples of such English riddles can be cited: Something has fingers but no toes (Glove); What has a big mouth, yet never speaks? (Jar); *Ic eom wunderlicu wih* — I am a strange creature; I cannot speak words nor talk with men, although I have a mouth and a wide belly (Jug, Amphora, Cask, or Leather Bottle); Something has an ear and cannot hear (Ear of corn); What has a head, but no hair? (Pin).

Riddles based on causal and consecutive contradictions (causal contradictive riddles) include units built on unnatural or non-normative relations between an action and its result. They deny the expected outcome usually associated with a given action or quality, or they present a result that contradicts conventional expectations. For instance: What goes to the mill every morning and makes no tracks? (Road, Wind, Smoke); There is something that runs day and night and never runs up (River); What goes through the wood and never touches a limb? (Voice); Who works only one day a year but never gets fired? (Santa Claus); I am weightless, but you can see me. Put me in a bucket, and I'll make it lighter. What am I? (Hole); What is full of holes but still holds water? [www]; Something runs but has no legs (Clock). In the last two riddles, unlike deprivative ones, the object—although lacking certain qualities—performs actions that normally presuppose their presence.

Thus, a large number of riddles may be analyzed through a series of typological schemes or model utterance types, whose distinguishing criterion is the nature of the relationships between the structural elements of the riddle (theme and comment), that is, between the constitutive components of a descriptive element, or between two or more descriptive elements. As a structural utterance type expressing English riddles, R. Georges and A. Dundes identify the descriptive type. Alongside the descriptive type, the corpus of English riddles also reveals a narrative type, as well as compositional–plot-based modes of text construction (point-based, multipoint, and linear). It should be noted that, when distinguishing between metaphorical and literal elements of riddles (literal vs. metaphorical), R. Georges and A. Dundes

also employ criteria related to the linguistic encoding of the referent object. Most scholars consider metaphor to be the key device for encoding the concealed object in riddles. Thus, A. Taylor defined the “true riddle” as consisting of two contrasting components—metaphorical and literal—which confuse the solver attempting to identify an object described in seemingly incompatible ways: “A true riddle consists of two descriptions of an object, one figurative and one literal, and confuses the hearer who endeavors to identify an object described in conflicting ways”.

Notably, a number of English riddles represent deviations from this canonical structure proposed by Taylor. These include riddles built on one or more literal descriptions: Something goes through the keyhole where nothing else can go through (Key); Something moving without a leg (Snail). Such texts are nonetheless perceived as riddles when the addressee interprets the literal description as metaphorical, although it is not figurative in fact and merely masquerades as such. Researchers of the genre have also proposed various typologies of encoding strategies for the concealed object, grouping riddles according to shared descriptive principles regardless of thematic diversity. Thus, V.I.Chicherov distinguishes four groups of riddles: metaphorical, onomatopoeic, arithmetical, and jocular. Metaphorical riddles, according to the scholar, represent the most ancient type and typically describe natural phenomena or seasons. They are based on the cognitive exploration of reality and cultivate observation, ingenuity, and comparative reasoning. Onomatopoeic riddles rely not on semantic but on sound imagery, with alliteration and assonance playing a central role. Arithmetical riddles involve numerical relations that must be inferred. Jocular riddles, regarded as a later development, parody the riddle genre itself and are often built on deceptive phonetic or semantic ambiguity.

Results and discussion. The thematic approach to riddle classification is based on the distribution of texts according to conceptual fields that form a traditional picture of the world. These fields include nature, animals and plants, human beings and their daily life, labor activities, household objects, warfare, seafaring, and the spiritual sphere. Riddles belonging to each field form a relatively autonomous micro-system united by thematic relevance. C. W. Kennedy’s analysis of English riddles demonstrates that their thematic content closely reflects everyday human experience. Birds such as the cuckoo, hawk, jay, nightingale, owl, swallow, and swan occupy a prominent place, indicating the importance of the natural environment in traditional consciousness. Rural life is represented through domestic animals (dog, hen, bull, ox, pig), while household utensils and tools (pail, churn, flail, loom, plough) reflect agricultural labor and domestic routines. Food and drink (honey, wine, beer, ale) function as markers of basic material culture. Maritime imagery occupies a special position in English riddles, which is

historically обусловлено the seafaring orientation of English society. Objects such as boat, anchor, fish, and oyster, as well as references to storms and shipwrecks, reflect both everyday economic activity and the symbolic perception of the sea as a dangerous and powerful element. The military sphere is also clearly represented through riddles about weapons and armor (sword, shield, spear, helmet, chain mail), emphasizing the social significance of warfare.

A comparable thematic classification is proposed by V. V. Mitrofanova in her study of Russian riddles. Although her classification is more detailed, it confirms the anthropocentric nature of the riddle genre, where the central conceptual focus is the human being, their labor, domestic life, and interaction with the natural and spiritual worlds. The thematic classification of the Exeter Book riddles presents particular difficulties due to interpretative uncertainty. Nevertheless, on the basis of scholarly interpretations, several dominant thematic spheres can be identified: nature, everyday life, warfare, and the spiritual world. Riddles of nature describe natural phenomena (wind, sun, moon, fire, ice, water), animals and birds (swan, nightingale, cuckoo, ox), and plants (reed, oak, beech). Riddles of everyday life focus on humans, clothing, food and drink, household utensils, tools, and seafaring activities. Military riddles depict weapons, armor, and warships, while riddles of the spiritual sphere address religion, reading, and writing. While the thematic approach focuses on the subject matter of riddles, the structural approach is concerned with their formal organization. R. Georges and A. Dundes propose viewing riddles as variants of a limited number of structural invariants. They identify the descriptive element as the minimal unit of riddle structure, consisting of a topic (the referent being described) and a comment (an assertion about that referent). A riddle may contain one or several descriptive elements. In some cases, these elements complement one another, gradually adding details to the description. In other cases, they stand in semantic opposition, creating a paradox that must be resolved by the addressee. On this basis, Georges and Dundes distinguish oppositional and non-oppositional riddles. Non-oppositional riddles may be literal, where the description directly reflects the referent, or metaphorical, where the referent is encoded through figurative language. The riddles of the Exeter Book illustrate the productive use of these structural models. A single lexical answer is unfolded into a complex textual representation through metaphor, accumulation of descriptive features, or semantic contradiction. Such structures not only conceal the referent but also activate the cognitive and interpretative efforts of the recipient. The combined application of thematic and structural approaches allows for a multidimensional analysis of the English riddle. Thematic classification reveals the conceptual organization of the traditional worldview encoded in riddles, while structural analysis uncovers the invariant mechanisms of riddle construction. The material

demonstrates that riddles function as a means of preserving and transmitting culturally significant knowledge, presenting it in an indirect and playful form. From a linguacultural perspective, English riddles reflect an anthropocentric worldview in which human activity, labor, and everyday experience occupy a central position. At the same time, the frequent use of metaphor and opposition indicates a high degree of cognitive complexity, suggesting that riddles served not only as entertainment but also as tools of intellectual training.

Conclusion. The study shows that the English riddle is a typologically stable yet thematically diverse genre that encodes fragments of the worldview through recurring conceptual spheres and invariant structural patterns. Thematic analysis highlights the close connection between riddles and everyday life, nature, warfare, and spirituality, while structural analysis reveals the descriptive mechanisms that enable riddles to conceal and reveal meaning simultaneously. The riddles of the Exeter Book provide particularly valuable material for understanding the interaction between language, culture, and cognition in early English tradition. The results of the study may serve as a basis for further comparative research and for the investigation of riddles in other linguistic and cultural traditions.

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