

A Comparative Lexical-Semantic Analysis of Somatic-Component Riddles in English and Uzbek

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a comparative lexical-semantic analysis of riddles built on somatic components, that is, words denoting parts of the human body, in English and Uzbek. Although both riddle scholarship and the semantics of body-part vocabulary are well developed, the two have rarely been examined together, and almost never across genetically unrelated languages. Working from published collections of English and Uzbek folk riddles, the study isolates riddles containing somatisms, classifies the body-part lexemes involved, and describes the semantic mechanisms of metaphor, personification, and allegory by which these lexemes are turned into concealing images. Its central finding is that both traditions build the somatic riddle on negation, and do so through two mirror strategies: a converse type, in which an object has a body part but is denied its function, as in a river that has a mouth but never eats, and a privative type, in which a referent performs an action without the relevant organ, as in an echo that speaks without a mouth. Against this shared structural core the traditions diverge in surface form: Uzbek riddles negate directly and dress the body-image in everyday, household realia, often in elaborate verse, whereas English riddles lean towards metaphoric and symbolic imagery in a prosaic question frame. The results contribute to the comparative study of folklore genres and to the description of how body-part semantics is exploited under the specific communicative constraints of the riddle.

Keywords: Riddle, somatism, lexical semantics, somatic negation, metaphor, comparative-typological analysis, linguoculturology, English and Uzbek folklore

1. INTRODUCTION

Riddles occupy an unusual position among the genres of oral tradition. They are brief and playful, and they survive largely because people enjoy being momentarily misled by them; yet every riddle is also a compact semantic problem, a description constructed so that its referent is at once concealed and, on reflection, recoverable. Taylor's survey of English riddles from oral tradition laid the descriptive foundation [1], and later work moved from collection towards mechanism: Georges and Dundes defined the riddle through its opposing descriptive elements [2], Levin treated it as a semantic structure built around a deliberately misleading image [3], and Pepicello and Green set out the phonological, morphological, and semantic strategies by which riddles deceive [4]. In these accounts the riddle is not a decorative curiosity but a record of how a speech community encodes, disguises, and retrieves meaning.

A recurring feature of the genre, noticed often but seldom analysed on its own terms, is how frequently riddles describe the world through the human body. Eyes, teeth, tongues, hands, and hearts recur as the raw material of riddle images across unrelated traditions, and body-part vocabulary, the somatic lexicon or somatisms, forms one of the oldest and most stable layers of any language. Because the body is the one object every speaker possesses and observes directly, it supplies a ready source domain for describing less familiar things, and riddling exploits this directness, letting a body part stand for an object while withholding its name. The somatic component thus sits at the meeting point of two well-studied phenomena, the productivity of body-part terms in metaphor and phraseology [5] and the semantic architecture of the riddle, yet the two literatures have rarely been read together.

They have been brought together even less across languages. In Uzbek scholarship the riddle has been studied both as a

folklore genre and as a linguistic object: Sarimsoqov examined its generic and verbal nature [6], while later work described the lexical-semantic and syntactic-semantic properties of Uzbek folk riddles [7, 8]. The semantics of somatic units has been treated separately, most notably by Rahmatullayev [9]. English-language folkloristics has an equally developed line of riddle research [1, 4, 10]. What is missing is the point where these strands intersect: a systematic, comparative account of riddles built on somatic components in two genetically unrelated languages. English and Uzbek belong to different families and rest on different cultural and mythological backgrounds, which makes their shared reliance on the body in riddling something to explain rather than assume.

This article addresses that gap. Drawing on published collections of English and Uzbek folk riddles [1, 11], it analyses, comparatively, the lexical-semantic features of somatic-component riddles in the two languages: the somatisms they employ, the mechanisms by which those somatisms generate riddle images, and the paradigmatic relations, above all negation, that organise them. A somatism is understood here as a lexeme denoting a part, region, or organ of the human body; Uzbek examples are given in Latin transliteration with a close English gloss and the answer. The analysis is qualitative and comparative-typological, its aim being to separate what the two traditions share, and can attribute to the common human body, from what is specific to each and reflects its culture.

2. SOMATIC COMPONENTS AND THE MECHANISMS OF THE RIDDLE IMAGE

Across both traditions the somatisms cluster in the head and face, with a secondary group in the limbs. The most frequent are, in Uzbek, head, tongue, tooth, eye, and ear, and in English, head, brain, teeth, legs, and hands; the head-and-face core is shared, while terms for the limbs are more prominent in the English material (Table 1). Three mechanisms turn a somatism into a concealing image, and all three are attested in both languages.

Metaphor is the most productive. A body part is mapped onto an object that shares its shape, position, or function, and the riddle names the part while suppressing the object; the somatism mouth, for instance, is projected onto any opening. The mechanism can be elaborated into multi-part verse, as in an Uzbek riddle whose four lines each pose a separate puzzle:

*U nimadir quv yog'ochdan og'zi bor,
u nimadir o'rtasida mag'zi bor,
u nimadir yelkasida og'zi bor,
u nimadir suv ostida qimirlar?*

The lines ask what has a mouth of dry wood, what has a kernel at its centre, what has a mouth on its shoulder, and what stirs beneath the water; the answers are the clay oven (*tandir*), the grain of wheat, the mill (*tegirmon*), and the fish. Here one somatism, *og'iz* "mouth," is carried across two referents, the oven's opening and the mill's, while *yelka* "shoulder" locates the second, a compact demonstration of how a single body-part term can generate several images at once.

Personification, often shading into allegory, projects a whole human frame onto an object. An English riddle asks what "runs but never walks, murmurs but never talks, has a bed but never sleeps, has a mouth but never eats" and answers a river; another gives a chair "legs" it cannot walk on, "a strong back," and "two arms" it cannot move, and answers an armchair. In the second riddle legs is not a literal leg but a functional counterpart: the object is given the parts because it shares their configuration, not their capacity for movement, and the image invites the hearer to reason about objects through the frame of the body.

A third, structurally distinct type describes a living being by enumerating its own parts, and it ranges from a compact couplet, "*To'rt oyoqli, temir tuyoqli*" "four-legged, iron-hoofed" (the answer is *ot* "horse"), to a fuller, rhymed quatrain:

*To'rtdir uning oyog'i,
temir mixli tuyog'i,
manzilga yetishtirar,
toshdan qattiq tuyog'i.*

In gloss: four are its legs, its hooves iron-nailed, it carries one to the journey's end, its hooves harder than stone. Here *oyoq* 'leg' and *tuyoq* 'hoof' name the animal's own parts rather than transferring them elsewhere, and the effort of the riddle lies as much in the poetic elaboration, the rhyme on -og'i, as in the puzzle itself.

3. SOMATIC NEGATION: THE CONVERSIVE AND THE PRIVATIVE

Negation is the organising relation of the somatic riddle, and it appears in two mirror forms. In the conversive type the object is granted a body part and at once denied the function that defines it: a river "has a mouth but never eats," an armchair "has legs but cannot walk." In the privative type the relation is reversed, the referent performing an action while lacking the organ that would normally carry it. An English riddle answers echo with "I speak without a mouth and hear without ears; I have no body, but I come alive with the wind," and an Uzbek riddle answers "wind" (*shamol*) with "*Qo'lsiz, oyoqsiz eshik ochar*" "without hands, without feet, it opens doors." The two are built on one template, an unseen, airborne agent described by the body parts it does not have. Both languages, then, negate the body in order to point at it, through the same two complementary schemas.

Synonymy works alongside negation. A single somatism can serve several referents: as the multi-part riddle above shows, mouth encodes the opening of the oven, the mill, and, in English, the river, so that one body part organises a family of images across both languages.

4. THE UNIVERSAL CORE AND CULTURAL DIVERGENCE

Set side by side, the two traditions converge on the negation of somatic function and on a shared core of high-frequency body parts, and diverge in how the negated image is realised (Table 1). The convergence follows from what the riddle does and from where its material comes. Every riddle sets up an apparent contradiction and resolves it by finding a referent for which the description holds only figuratively [2, 4]; when the description is

somatic, the contradiction takes the particular shape of an organ without its function or a function without its organ. Both schemas are available to any community, because the body that supplies the image is the same everywhere, which is why English and Uzbek, for all their genetic and cultural distance, produce riddles as closely matched as the echo and the wind.

Table 1. *Comparative features of somatic-component riddles in English and Uzbek*

Feature	Uzbek riddles	English riddles
Recurrent somatisms	head, tongue, tooth, eye, ear	head, brain, teeth, legs, hands
Mode of transfer	Negative and direct (literal)	negative and metaphoric
Degree of figurative transfer	moderate, drawn from everyday life	high, figurative and poetic imagery
Choice of referent	everyday, household realia	natural and technical objects
Cultural and cognitive orientation	Close to practical life	Leans towards symbolic images

The differences track culture rather than structure. Uzbek riddles keep the transferred meaning close to lived experience, fastening the body-image to household and working realia, the clay oven, the mill, the horse, and negating directly, often in rhymed, multi-part verse. English riddles travel further from the literal, favouring symbolic and natural referents, the river and the echo, in a mostly prosaic question form. The images each tradition reaches for are, in effect, an inventory of what its speakers handle and value, so that somatic riddles are linguocultural documents as much as semantic ones.

The somatic riddle also has a cognitive dimension. Because it asks the hearer to find a body where there is none, or a function where the organ is absent, it exercises the everyday skills of perception and categorisation and holds two readings of a word in mind at once. The demand is modest for an adult but considerable for a child, which is one reason the somatic riddle is so well represented in children's repertoires and so useful in early

language teaching. For the theory of the genre, the material offers a precise refinement: the opposition that structural accounts describe in general terms is here realised through two complementary and countable schemas, the converse and the privative.

CONCLUSION

This article has compared, at the lexical-semantic level, the riddles that English and Uzbek build on somatic components. The two traditions share a small inventory of high-frequency somatisms, concentrated in the head and face, and a common way of putting the body to work: the somatic riddle is organised by negation, in a converse schema, an organ without its function, and a privative schema, a function without its organ. Against that shared structure they diverge in surface realisation, Uzbek negating directly and dressing the image in everyday realia and verse, English favouring metaphoric and symbolic imagery in a prosaic frame, a divergence captured most sharply by the matched pair of the echo and the wind. The body gives the two traditions their common ground, and their cultures give them their differences. The account is qualitative, and a larger, balanced corpus would allow the tendencies reported here to be tested quantitatively; further work might address children's riddles, translation equivalence, and the cognition that resolving somatic riddles presupposes.

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