

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. In the conversive type, an object has a body part but is denied its function, as in a river that has a mouth but never eats; in the privative type, 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, Uzbek and English 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. This double character, verbal game and miniature act of reference, is what has drawn linguists to the genre alongside folklorists. Taylor's (1951) survey of English riddles from oral tradition laid the descriptive foundation, and later work moved from collection toward mechanism. Georges and Dundes (1963) defined the riddle through its opposing descriptive elements, Levin (1978) treated it as a semantic structure built around a deliberately misleading image, and Pepicello and Green (1984) set out the phonological, morphological, and semantic strategies by which riddles deceive. In these accounts the riddle is not a decorative curiosity but a record of how a speech community encodes, disguises, and retrieves meaning.

One feature of the genre has been noticed often but seldom analysed on its own terms: 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 somatisms¹, forms one of the oldest and most stable layers of any language. Precisely because they are so basic, body-part terms are recruited early and often when a language extends meaning by analogy, and they surface not only in everyday phraseology but throughout the figurative language of folklore. Because the body is the one object every speaker possesses and observes directly, it supplies a ready source domain for describing less familiar things. The everyday lexicon is full of the results: the eye of a needle, the mouth of a river, the foot of a hill. Riddling pushes the same projection further, letting a body part stand for an object while withholding its name. The somatic component therefore sits at the meeting point of two well-studied phenomena, the productivity of body-part terms in metaphor and phraseology (Garipova & Karimova, 2022) 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 (1986) examined its generic and verbal nature, while Abdullayev (1993) and Saparniyazova (2005) described the lexical-semantic and syntactic-semantic properties of Uzbek folk riddles. The semantics of somatic units has been treated

¹ The term somatism (from Greek soma, 'body') denotes a lexeme naming a part, region, or organ of the body.

separately, most notably by Rahmatullayev (1978). English-language folkloristics has an equally developed line of riddle research (Taylor, 1951; Green & Pepicello, 1979; Pepicello & Green, 1984). 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, rest on different cultural and mythological backgrounds, and organise their lexicons in different ways, which makes their shared reliance on the body in riddling something to explain rather than assume. The metaphoric transfers that turn a body part into a riddle image, and the systems of images those transfers produce, have not been described contrastively for the two traditions.

This article addresses that gap. Its aim is to analyse, comparatively, the lexical-semantic features of somatic-component riddles in English and Uzbek. Four objectives follow from it: to establish the theoretical basis for treating somatic-component riddles as a distinct object of study; to identify and classify the somatisms that occur in the two corpora and describe the mechanisms through which they generate riddle images; to examine the paradigmatic relations, synonymy and negation in particular, that organise these images; and to separate what is common to the two traditions from what is specific to each, relating the culture-specific patterns to the everyday and mythological knowledge encoded in each language.

Two assumptions motivate the study beyond the description itself. The first is that a riddle, by forcing a body part to stand for something else under a constraint of concealment, exposes the semantic potential of somatisms more sharply than ordinary usage does, which makes it a productive site for lexical-semantic analysis. The second is that comparing an Indo-European and a Turkic tradition on the same narrowly defined material allows motivation that follows from the shared human body to be told apart from motivation that follows from a particular culture's way of seeing it. The analysis is organised accordingly: after the corpus and procedure are set out, it presents the inventory of somatisms, their semantic mechanisms, and their paradigmatic organisation, before discussing the universal and differential patterns that emerge.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Corpus and sources

The study rests on two comparable sub-corpora, one English and one Uzbek, assembled from published collections of folk riddles rather than from fresh fieldwork. For English, the core source is Taylor's (1951) English Riddles from Oral Tradition, still the most comprehensive systematic collection of the genre, together with other published collections. For Uzbek, the material is drawn from standard printed anthologies and academic collections (Jo'rayeva, 2011). Because both traditions are primarily oral, the printed record is a selection of what once circulated in speech; the sub-corpora are therefore treated as representative samples of each tradition, not as exhaustive inventories, and the claims are framed in those terms. Every qualifying riddle in the consulted sources was retained, giving two sub-corpora of comparable size. Because the study describes mechanisms rather than models frequencies, its argument does not rest on exact totals.

2.2 Delimiting the somatic component

A somatism is understood here as a lexeme denoting a part, region, or organ of the human body, together with a small set of closely associated items, such as the bodily substances blood, bone, and hair, that the tradition treats on the same footing (Garipova & Karimova, 2022). The admitted field covers the external body (head, face, forehead, hair; eye, ear, nose, mouth, lip, tooth, tongue, cheek, chin; neck, shoulder, back, chest, belly; hand, arm, elbow, palm, finger, nail; leg, foot, knee, heel) and a smaller internal set (heart, liver, bone, blood, vein). Three boundary decisions are made explicit so that the count is replicable. Substances and products of the body are included, since riddles exploit them as freely as they do organs. Animal body parts are recorded separately and admitted to the comparison only where they map onto the human-body field. Abstract or non-material parts of a person, such as soul, spirit, mind, and breath, are excluded, as they fall outside the somatic lexicon as usually defined.

2.3 Data selection and coding

Each riddle was entered as a single record and, for Uzbek, given in a consistent Latin transliteration² with a close English gloss and its answer, so that the analysis can be

² Uzbek examples are given in the modern Latin-based orthography, followed by a close English gloss in single quotation marks and the answer; spelling is kept uniform across the sources consulted.

followed without knowledge of Uzbek. Every record was then coded on six variables: the somatism or somatisms present; their position (image or answer); the type of semantic transfer involved (metaphor, personification, allegory, or none); the concealed target referent; the type of negation, if any (conversive or privative); and any specific cultural association carried by the body part. The material was coded twice, with disagreements resolved by re-examination, to keep the categories stable across the two languages.

2.4 Analytical framework and methods

The analysis proceeds in four steps, each supported by an established method. First, the meaning of each somatism as it functions in the riddle is broken down by componential (lexical-semantic) analysis, so that the particular feature the riddle seizes on, whether shape, position, number, movement, or function, can be named rather than assumed. Second, the way that feature is projected onto the hidden referent is classified by semantic-transfer type; here the study uses cognitive-conceptual analysis, treating metaphor as a conceptual mapping and personification as the projection of a whole human frame onto a non-human object. Third, the riddles are examined paradigmatically, for the synonymy that lets one somatism serve several referents and for the negation, conversive and privative, that structures the somatic image. Fourth, the two datasets are set side by side by the comparative-typological method to separate shared patterns from language-specific ones, with historical-cultural analysis used to account for the culture-specific cases and communicative-pragmatic analysis used to keep the riddle's question-and-answer function in view. The descriptive method underlies the presentation throughout; the study is primarily qualitative, its aim being to explain how somatisms are made to mean what they do in the two traditions.

3. Results

3.1 Inventory of somatisms

In both sub-corpora the somatisms concentrate in the head and face, with a secondary group in the limbs. The recurrent items, listed in Table 1 in approximate order of frequency, are, in Uzbek, head, tongue, tooth, eye, and ear, and in English, head, brain, teeth, legs, and hands. The head-and-face core is thus shared, while terms for the limbs, legs and hands, are more prominent in the English material.

3.2 Semantic mechanisms

Metaphor is the most productive mechanism. 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. Metaphoric riddles also appear in elaborate, multi-part question-and-answer forms, in which each verse line poses a separate puzzle and the reply answers in the same metre:

*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 four lines ask, in gloss, 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 reply names four referents in turn: the clay oven (tandir)³, fed through its fire-mouth; the grain of wheat, with its kernel; the mill (tegirmon), whose hopper-mouth sits on its shoulder; and the fish, which stirs underwater. Here one somatism, *og'iz* 'mouth', is carried across two referents, and *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, which then acquires several body parts together:

*What always runs but never walks, often murmurs, never talks, has a bed but never sleeps, has a mouth but never eats?*⁴ Answer: a river. (English; personification; somatisms: mouth, bed)

I have legs, but I cannot walk; a strong back, but I do not work; two arms, but I cannot move them. Answer: an armchair. (English; allegory; somatisms: legs, back, arms)

In the armchair riddle the somatism legs is not a literal leg but a functional counterpart: the object is given legs, a back, and arms because it shares their configuration, not their capacity for movement. The image invites the hearer to reason

³ The Uzbek riddles cited in this article are drawn from published folk-riddle collections; see Jo'rayeva (2011). A tandir is a traditional clay oven, and a tegirmon a mill.

⁴ The English riddles cited here belong to the traditional oral and popular repertoire; for the systematic English corpus see Taylor (1951).

about objects through the frame of the body, which is exactly the inference the genre is built to provoke.

A third, structurally distinct type describes a living being by enumerating its own parts, and it ranges from a compact two-line form to a fuller, rhymed one:

To'rt oyoqli, temir tuyoqli. 'Four-legged, iron-hoofed.' Answer: ot 'horse'.

(Uzbek; enumerative)

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 (ot 'horse'). The somatisms *oyoq* 'leg' and *tuyoq* 'hoof' name the animal's own parts rather than transferring them elsewhere; here the work of the riddle lies as much in the poetic elaboration, the rhyme on -og'i and the metrical parallelism, as in the puzzle itself. This is the type of riddle that shades from concealment towards praise-description.

3.3 Paradigmatic relations and somatic negation

Synonymy is visible in the way one somatism serves 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 a single body part organises a family of images across both languages.

Negation, however, is the organising relation of the somatic riddle, and it appears in two mirror forms⁵. In the converse type the object is granted a body part and at once denied the function that defines it:

has a mouth but never eats; has legs but cannot walk Answer: a river; an armchair. (English; converse: the organ is present, the function denied)

In the privative type the relation is reversed: the referent performs the action while lacking the organ that would normally carry it:

I speak without a mouth and hear without ears; I have no body, but I come alive with the wind. Answer: an echo. (English; privative: the function without the organ)

⁵ The labels converse and privative are used descriptively: the converse names an organ while denying its characteristic function, whereas the privative names a function while denying the organ that normally performs it.

Qo'lsiz, oyoqsiz eshik ochar. 'Without hands, without feet, it opens doors.'

Answer: shamol 'wind'. (Uzbek; privative: the same structure)

The Uzbek wind riddle and the English echo riddle are built on one template: an unseen, airborne agent described by the body parts it does not have. Both languages, then, negate the body to point at it, and they realise that negation through the same two complementary schemas.

3.4 Comparative patterns

Table 1 summarises the comparison. The two traditions converge on the negation of somatic function and on a shared core of high-frequency body parts; they diverge in how the negated body-image is realised. Uzbek riddles tend to negate directly and to clothe the image in everyday, household realia, such as the oven, the mill, and the working horse, frequently in rhymed, multi-part verse. English riddles lean further into metaphor and symbolic imagery, such as the river and the echo, in a mostly prosaic question form.

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

Table 1. Comparative features of somatic-component riddles in English and Uzbek. The clearest single illustration of the pattern is the pair discussed above: the same cognitive template, an agent that acts without a body, surfaces in English as the metaphoric echo and in Uzbek as the plainer wind that opens doors without hands or feet. The deep structure is shared; the clothing is cultural. This split between a universal core and a culture-specific surface is the study's central comparative result.

4. Discussion

The results bear on three questions: why the two traditions share as much as they do, what their differences track, and what the somatic riddle adds to the general theory of the genre.

The shared core 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 (Georges & Dundes, 1963; Pepicello & Green, 1984). When the description is somatic, that contradiction takes a particular shape: either a thing has an organ yet lacks its function, or it exercises a function yet lacks its organ. Both schemas negate the body in order to point at it, and both are available to any community, because the body that supplies the image is the same everywhere. This is why English and Uzbek, for all their genetic and cultural distance, produce riddles as closely matched as the echo and the wind that open with the very same move.

The differences track culture rather than structure, and they fall out along the axes set out in Table 1. Uzbek riddles keep the transferred meaning close to lived experience: the body-image is fastened to household and working realia, such as the clay oven, the mill, and the horse, and the negation tends to be direct. English riddles travel further from the literal, favouring symbolic and natural referents and a more thoroughly metaphoric description. The images each tradition reaches for are, in effect, an inventory of what its speakers handle and value, which is the sense in which somatic riddles are linguocultural documents as much as semantic ones: the oven and the mill belong to one material world, the personified river to another.

Form follows the same division. The Uzbek material is markedly poetic, being rhymed, metrical, and at times built as a multi-part question-and-answer sequence in which each line hides and then reveals a separate referent, whereas the English riddles more often take the compact prosaic question. The contrast is not that one tradition is figurative and the other literal, but that they distribute figuration differently: Uzbek invests it in poetic form over concrete referents, English in metaphoric imagery within a plainer frame.

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: recognising a familiar shape in an unfamiliar object, and holding two readings of a word in mind at once. Riddles that turn on the eye are telling in this respect, since they often play on the partiality of sight, on the fact that the organ of seeing is itself easily hidden or overlooked. The cognitive 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 somatic material offers a small but precise refinement. Structural accounts have long described the riddle in terms of opposition and blocked reference; the body-part data show that, in this domain, the opposition is realised through two complementary and mutually defining schemas, the converse and the privative, that can be stated exactly and counted. Because the human body is a closed and universal source domain, it also provides unusually clean ground for comparison: differences that remain once the shared anatomy is controlled for can be attributed to culture with more confidence than looser lexical fields allow. The same feature explains the genre's pedagogical value, since riddles that reason about objects through the body train perception and inference, and so pass readily between languages in the classroom.

5. Conclusion

This article has compared, at the lexical-semantic level, the riddles that English and Uzbek build on somatic components. Three results stand out. 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, the traditions 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 summarised in Table 1 and 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 study has limits that also mark the next steps. Its corpus is drawn from published collections and its emphasis is qualitative; a larger, balanced corpus would let the tendencies reported here be tested quantitatively. Three extensions suggest themselves: a dedicated treatment of children's riddles, where the somatic image is especially frequent; an examination of translation equivalence, which would test how far the converse and privative schemas survive between the two languages; and an experimental study of how hearers resolve somatic riddles, which would connect the semantic description offered here to the cognition it presupposes.

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