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Decoding the Mind: *A Relevance-Theoretic Approach to selected English Riddles*

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Abstract

Riddles, as universal form of wordplay, challenge solvers via metaphor, polysemy, and wordplay, requiring inferential reasoning. This paper explores English oppositional riddles from the framework of Relevance Theory distinguished by paradox, contrast, or contradiction. The paper explores antithetical, privational, and causal contradictory riddles, investigating how solvers interpret them by making balance between minimal cognitive effort and maximal contextual effects, as proposed by Relevance Theory. A qualitative method employs close textual analysis to examine how solvers resolve vagueness by recognizing explicit meanings and concluding additional ones. The paper highlights the interaction of linguistic hints, cognitive processes, and cultural context, underlining cultural knowledge's role in recognizing metaphorical language and historical practices. Findings show that oppositional riddles exploit linguistic vagueness and cultural relations, encouraging solvers to change conceptual frames, representing cognitive flexibility. Riddles works as cognitive and linguistic logical challenges and cultural relics, preserving social values and showing how thought is shaped by language. This paper underlines riddles' value as tools for intelligent and cultural engagement, illuminating the complicated relationship between language, cognition, and culture.



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1. Introduction

Riddles, among most universal and oldest forms of wordplay, have charmed human imagination across cultures and periods, serving as intellectual puzzles that challenge and amuse (Saad and Obied, 2022). Recognized as far back as the Sumerians in the fourth millennium BC and appearing in holy texts like the Old Testament the Rig Veda, riddles are an evidence to continuing of humanity captivation with linguistic vagueness and imaginative problem-solving (Bregenhøj, 2018). Riddles are known as questions or statements intentionally crafted to be puzzling. They involve solvers through contradiction, metaphor, and wordplay, needing inferential reasoning to decipher layered meanings (Saad and Obied, 2022). They are regarded as both “dead and alive”, symbolizing an intellectual voyage that swipes between the fulfilment of resolution, and the frustration of deception. This study explores a classification of English oppositional riddles entrenched in contrast, contradiction, or paradox through the lens of Relevance Theory which is a cognitive-pragmatic framework that enhances how solvers decode these linguistic enigmas by making a balance between cognitive effort and the contextual effects (Bregenhøj, 2018).

English riddles, deeply rooted in the linguistic and language’s literary traditions, affect the richness of polysemy and metaphor to produce cognitive challenges. The word “riddle” itself, is resulted from the Germanic verb *redana* that means “guess” or “to interpret”, reflects its explanatory core, a quality shared with its Old English predecessor *rædels* and the German *Rätsel* (Saad and Obied, 2022). Riddles function as expressive models of inquiry, reflecting formal examinations in cultural contexts, like a judge probing a defendant, or a teacher questioning a student (Forman, 1971). They serve multi-layered roles such as educating, amusing, and socializing while developing creativity, critical thinking, and cultural identity (Bregenhøj, 2018). Basically, riddles include elements like the riddle itself, the challenge and the guesses of the solver, often categorized into enigmas; which are metaphorical and lyrical, and conundrums; which rely on verbal tricks and puns (Taylor, 1951). This paper gives emphasize to oppositional riddles, classified as antithetical contradictive, privational contradictive, and causal contradictive, each requiring different cognitive strategies to resolve their innate contrasts and contradictions.

Relevance Theory, as established by Sperber and Wilson (1986), suggests a strong procedure for analyzing how riddles are processed and solved. This theory of cognitive-pragmatic proposes that human mind is geared toward maximizing relevance, by making a balance between the cognitive effort needed in processing information and the contextual effects it produces (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). In the context of riddles, solvers primarily understand the given hints by recognizing explicatures; the explicit meanings deduced from linguistic expressions and implicatures; the implied meanings that bridge the gap to the resolution (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). This process is led by the core principles of the theory, the Cognitive Principle of Relevance and the Communicative Principle of Relevance. The former suggests that human cognition highlights inputs with the highest cognitive reward for the minimum effort, while the latter states that every communicative act, such as posing a riddle, conveys a presumption of optimal relevance, confirming the solver’s effort is justified by the resolution’s reward (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). By using Relevance Theory, this study reveals how solvers uncover the riddles’ vagueness, by activating background information and cultural context in choosing the most relevant interpretation. The significance of this paper lies under its interdisciplinary approach, mixing pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, and cultural analysis to discover the instruments of riddle-solving. Riddles are not only linguistic interests, but also cognitive and cultural relics that show how thought is shaped by language and how cultural information informs understanding (Kasango, 2019). For example, a riddle like “What has a nose and can’t smell? (teapot)” relies on solver’s ability to grasp “nose” as a teapot’s spout, a metaphorical leap grounded in cultural knowledge (George and Dundes, 1963). This study aims to: (i) clarify the roles of both Explicature and Implicature in the selected riddles decoding process, (ii) show the application of Relevance Theory’s core principles to the selected English riddles (iii) reveal contextual and cultural factors that influence these riddle interpretations. The study targets to answer the following questions: (i) how do both implicature and explicature influence the interpretation of these riddles to achieve relevance? (ii) how Relevance Theory is

applied to interpret and convey meaning in selected English riddles? (iii) and what contextual and cultural factors affect the decoding and interpreting of these riddles?

This introduction sets the stage for a comprehensive analysis of six oppositional English riddles, that are selected from reliable sources like Taylor (1951) and George and Dundes (1963) for their reliance on semantic contrast and contradiction. The study adopts a qualitative approach using close textual analysis to explore how these riddles involve solvers' inferential skills. By investigating both explicatures and implicatures, and Relevance Theory's core principles, the study reveals how riddles deceive and resolve, conveying cognitive satisfaction via less effort. Moreover, it reflects the contextual and cultural factors that shape the decoding of these riddle, such as shared information and native expressions, which are essential for interpreting humor and logic (Bregenhøj, 2018). Eventually, this study is not only a try to expand our understanding of riddles as cognitive and linguistic enigmas, but it also underscores their worth as tools for improving critical thinking, linguistic dexterity, and cultural awareness, with suggestions for education, cognitive science, and cultural studies.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Riddles

Riddles are the earliest and the most common kind of word puzzle, that can be seen in every historical period and in every part of the world (Augarde, 1984, p.1). They are amazing genre: both 'dead and alive' at the same time, they represent intellectual voyage into the mysterious, signifying either satisfaction from answering them or prevention from being deceived (Bregenhøj, 2018, p.9). They are questions or statements intentionally created to be puzzling or ambiguous. They take the form of expressive challenges proposed to inspire people to involve their creative thinking (Magachi,2015, p.13). According to Taylor (1951) a riddle is a contrast between two completely different objects, highlighting ambiguity as their key characteristic. Operationally, a riddle includes two expressive elements: a positive, metaphorical component and a negative, literal component. Maranda (1976, p.127) describes riddles as mathematics in formal learning, riddles in folk traditions train the mind to resolve the mysterious through known clues, promoting critical thinking and creativity.

Riddles origins trace back to the Sumerians, who documented them in cuneiform in the fourth millennium BC, and other early nations of India, Palestine and Greece. riddles hold a long-standing tradition in both oral and written forms. They are found in religious texts like the *Rig Veda* and the *Old Testament*, are a universal feature of folklore across cultures (Bregenhøj, 2018, p. 9).

The new English term "riddle" shares its roots with the verb "read", both resulting from the common Germanic verb *redana*. This is also obvious in the German term *Rätsel* and the Old English word *rædels*, which later advanced into the current term "riddle", meaning "to interpret" or "to guess" (Saad and Obied, 2022, p.6721).

Forman(1971, p.509) states that riddles are expressionistic models represent superiors in many different type of cultural contexts, such as teachers, parents, employees, judges, and soldiers, questioning subordinates in a serious and formal way. It is thought that these models are expressive symbols of these questions.

Riddles serve various functions across cultures, offering entertainment, education, and socialization by improving cognitive skills and teaching social norms. They substitute cultural identity, preserve traditions, and deliver a stage for understated critique or opposition. Additionally, riddles inspire creative thinking, facilitate social communication, and, in some contexts, serve therapeutic or symbolic purposes during crises. Through playful interactions, they encourage both individual and shared learning (Bregenhøj, 2018). A riddle can include five elements: the central of the riddle image, the continuous premises, the unseen variable, the certain variable, the answer (Elnaz, 2021). According to Bukenya et al (1994) cited in (Magachi, 2015, p. 24) riddles are consisted of six sections which are: the challenge, the acceptance, the riddle, guesses, prize, and the solution.

Taylor (1951) agrees with most writers, and states that there are two main types of riddles: Enigmas and Conundrums. The enigma in its finest sense is simply a type of riddle in verse. They developed

into a genre, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where poetry passed the riddle in importance (Augarde, 1984, p.15). The Greek term “enigma” means “to darken or to speak mysteriously”, and it defines riddles that rhyme and offer clues about the correct answer in an indirect manner (Danesi,2002, p.43). For example:

1. Pray ladies, who in seeming with delight,

Say what's invisible, yet never out of sight.

(the answer is letter T) (Augarde, 1984, p.17)

The conundrums are the smartest kind of riddles, typically taking the form of a question and requiring the use of a pun, wordplay, or other verbal ploy in the resolution (Brunvand, 1996:626). For example:

2. What would happen if a girl ate bullets?

(The answer is: she would grow bangs') (Brunvand, 1996, p.626).

Bukenya et al (1983) as also cited in the work of (Magachi, 2015, p.15) classified riddles based on their function and syntactic structure. The functional approach arranges riddles by their answers into groups such as animals, objects, nature, and elements, focusing on the literal meanings of the answers (denotational classification). While the syntactic approach categorizes riddles by their structural difficulty. Simple riddles are brief, often in one or two statements or questions, requiring short answers. Complex riddles, in contrast, are longer, consisting of multiple sentences, and their answers require detailed clarifications. Other writers have classified the riddles according to their content, for instance Nakene (1943, pp.128-138), Blacking (1961, pp.11-32) Beuchat (1957, p. 145), Khumalo (1974, pp. 193- 226) and Ishegoma (2005) as cited in the work of Kasango(2019, p.31) have classified riddles based on the content. Their classes fall under the following five categories:

- Riddles related to Natural phenomena
- Riddles related to human body and its attributes
- Riddles related to animals and insects
- Riddles related to plants and foods
- Riddles related to domestic and social life.

2.2 Relevance Theory

Relevance theory is a cognitive-pragmatic method to communication proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in 1986 and republished in 1995 in their book “Relevance: Communication and Cognition. They describe “relevant communication” as “information that adjusts and progresses an overall representation of the world” by linking with background information; that is, information that is worthy of attention. Thus, according to the clarification, it can be said that the relevant communication only occurs when both communicator and listener know well about the topic and the context of their conversation (Sartika and Pranoto,2021, p.2).

Grice’s work served as inspiration for Sperber and Wilson, who developed upon and analyzed his notions to generate Relevance Theory. Though they agreed that understanding communicator’s intentions is an essential part of understanding utterances, they highlighted how relevance guides this process (Clark, 2013, p. 77). According to them, as mentioned by (Clark, 2013, p.67) and (Cruse, 2006, p.152), all Grice’s maxims can be replaced by only one principle that of ‘Relevance’. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986, p.161) the main principle of the theory is that every act of ostensive communication interconnects the presumption of optimal relevance. The fundamental assumption of relevance theory is that in any specified context, the recipient has to adopt that what people say is relevant. When Grice (1975, p.46) produced the cooperative principles of communication he did not elaborate on the maxim of ‘relation’ and never turned to it again, as also mentioned in (Clarck, 2022, p.73). In spite of its simplicity, the relevance maxim covers complex problems that he finds challenging and wants to investigate more, such as the many types of relevance, how they develop over a discussion and subject change (Grice, 1975, p.46).

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson explain relevance as a balance between cognitive effort and processing efforts: the less effort with more effects, the more relevant something is (Clarck, 2022, p.73), in other words, the audience’s interests that the communicator should communicate an utterance whose interpreting needs less effort than any other utterance (s)he could have made to

achieve the same effect, this is the core idea of the relevance theory (Blakemore, 1992, p.35).

Sperber and Wilson (1986) also argued that communication is not only about sending coded messages via language. Instead, it includes using context and background information to deduce the implied meaning. The main purpose of communication, according to the relevance theory, is to enlarge mutual cognitive environment is not to duplicate thoughts (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p.193). This view challenges the traditional code model of communication and supports an inferential model, where meaning is understood through clues and reasoning (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p.2). Like writing, gestures, signals, and symbols, language is the most important system of signs used for conveying idea, as quoted by (Saussure 1959, p.16) and mentioned in (Sperber and Wilson,1986, p.7) "A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable I shall call it semiology". They also changed the idea of "Shared Information" with the concept of "Mutual Manifestation". They claimed that even people in the same place do not have identical knowledge or experiences. Instead, they may share what is visible or understandable to both (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p.42). They introduced two kinds of speaker's intention: Informative intention: to share information and Communicative intention: to show that they want to share this information (Sperber and Wilson,1986, pp.58-61).

Sperber and Wilson faced challenges in defining the term 'relevance', but they intended to invoke intuitions of relevance, they highlighted two main points: first, when associating assumptions, it is expected that the hearers or readers will notice relevance, even if it's not labeled as such, second, these intuitive judgments of relevance are useful but not conclusive, and their worth relies on how they fit into psychological models, especially in verbal comprehension. Presenting an unrelated assumption to a set of assumptions has slight influence or relevance to the context (Sperber and Wilson,1986, p.120), what is optimally relevant on one context, or to one hearer in one context, may not be optimally relevant to a different hearer in different contexts (Chapman,2011, p.106). There are thus three types of contextual or cognitive effects that influence the assumptions:

- strengthening existing assumptions.
- contradicting existing assumptions.
- contextual implication which includes concluding something new from the mixture of contextual assumptions and new information (Clarck,2022, p.75) and (Chapman,2011, p.106). So, one can say that Relevance Theory proposes that people look for information with the greatest impact, and the least amount of work which ensures effective communication. (Crystal,2008, p.412).

2.2.1 The Principles of Relevance Theory

Relevance theory is based on two main principles. Cognitive principle: human cognition naturally tries to optimize cognitive relevance, which means balancing between effort and effects. Communicative principle: understanding an utterance entails understanding what the speaker is trying to convey, guided by the principle of optimal relevance (Allot,2013, p.57). Relevance theorists model communication in terms of the working of this comprehension process

A. The Cognitive Principle

Sperber and Wilson (1986, p.260) believe that Relevance Theory is fundamentally grounded in the principle of cognition which states that: 'human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance' also mentioned in (Clarck,2022, p.76) and (Chapman,2011, p.106).

Yus (2008, p.131) states that we as developed humans, are biologically geared to paying attention and processing information that is hypothetically relevant to us. At the same time, we are continuously clarifying and ignoring information that is possibly not worth processing, all this is covered by the so-called cognitive principle of relevance, for two reasons:

- First, to do with the general strategy of biological devices.
- Second, with competence in cognitive devices (Sperber and Wilson,1986, p.261).

This indicates that our perceptual systems display the environment for stimuli which is relevant, our memories recover valuable background information, and our inferential systems aim to maximize cognitive benefits (Clarck,2013, p.107). Relevance theory is a cognitive psychological theory and a framework for cognition study. The theory can be verified by checking if cognitive systems focus on relevant information, it is suggested primarily in order to provide a real

psychological account of communication (Ward, 2004,p.626).

According to Sperber and Wilson (1986, p.261), relevance is a property of inputs to cognitive processes, which means that human cognition prioritizes processing the most relevant inputs, whether external such as stimuli or internal such as assumptions. In other words, human cognition is geared to the maximization of the increasing relevance of the inputs it processes. What makes an input relevant to someone is that it cooperates with contextual information he/she has available to produce worthwhile cognitive effects and what makes it maximally relevant is that it produces greater effects, for less effort, than any different input existing to him/her at the time (Huang,2017, p.84).

Sperber & Wilson (2002, p.610) in their article, explain the cognitive principle as: Spontaneously, an input is relevant to someone when it is connected to contextual information he/she has available to produce assumptions that matter to him/her: say, by replying to a question he/she had in mind, improving his/her understanding of a certain topic, settling a doubt, confirming a thought, or correcting untrue impression.

Yus (2008, p.132) states that when a speaker produces an utterance and the hearer interprets it, both interlocutors follow a cognitive principle that leads to select, among the choice of potentials, to design the utterance and the best interpretation of the same utterance in the current context, the one that fulfils these two conditions:

- Condition 1: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large.
- Condition 2: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small (Sperber and Wilson,1986, p.125).

Overall, the cognitive principle of relevance our minds work in such a way as to get as many effects as possible for as little effort as possible (Clarck,2022, p.77), it provides understandings into how humans comprehend and produce language by highlighting the inferential nature of communication, the cognitive effort involved, the significance of context, and the optimization of relevance in both production and conception.

B. The Communicative principle

Relevance Theory relies on the linguistic feature of human cognition, highlighting language as an urbane instrument for sharing opinions. It points out the relevance-seeking inferential procedure, directed by the communicative principle of relevance, that arises during communication (Yus, 2008, p.132).

The central concept of the communicative principle of relevance is that: ‘every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance’ (Sperber and Wilson,1986, p.158), (Wilson and Sperber,2012, p.6),(Birner, 2013, p.92) and (Clarck, 2022, p.78). For the communication to be effective it depends on attracting the hearer’s attention, which normally concentrates on what is the most relevant, and for a successful communication, the speaker has to ensure his/her message is perceived as relevant and is worth for that attention, (s)he signals his/her intent for the hearer to find the utterance expressive (Wilson and Sperber, 2012, p.6).

The Communicative Principle of Relevance and optimal relevance provide a practical method for interpreting the speaker's meaning, listeners interpret messages proficiently, following the easiest route to find a meaning that meets their relevance expectations. The presumption mentioned in the communicative principle is one of optimal, not maximal relevance (Huang,2017, p.85), and that presumption is optimally relevant under two conditions:

- a. The utterance is relevant enough to be worth processing.
- b. It is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator’s abilities and preferences (Wilson and Sperber,2012, p.7) and (Sperber and Wilson,1986, p.158).

For instance, a speaker might specify, (s)he has written a third of the paper, implying no more has been written to guarantee clarity and achieve expectations of optimal relevance (Ward, 2004, p.612). Sperber & Wilson (1995, p.182) highlight the significance explicatures as implicatures, they define them as: “An assumption conveyed by an utterance ‘*U*’ is *explicit* if and only if it is an improvement of a logical form encoded by ‘*U*’, an utterance conveyed by ‘*U*’ which is not explicit is *implicit*.”

“It is an implicature”, they defined explicature as what is conveyed clearly and simply. According to them, an implicature is an ostensibly communicated assumption that is exclusively by the process of pragmatic inference. Implicatures are proposed contextual assumptions which function as properties in the inference procedure and deliver the intended contextual implicatures. The process of deriving explicatures and implicatures is directed by the communicative principle of Relevance. When a speaker produces an utterance, the listener's mind primarily identifies the explicatures, as they are more prominent and pragmatically advanced. Then, the mind changes to infer the implicatures, uncovering the implied premises and deductions. Sperber & Wilson (1986, p.195) suggest two types of implicature, namely, implicated premises and implicated conclusion.

3. Methodology and Data Collection

The current study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytic approach to examine a selection of English riddles, with a specific focus on oppositional kinds those that depend on contradiction, contrast, or paradox for their interpretive effect. The framework for analysis is grounded in Relevance Theory, mainly its core principles of cognitive effort, contextual effects, explicature, and implicature. The goal is to discover how English riddles convey layered meanings and how they involve the solver's inferential abilities, responding key questions related to the cognitive-pragmatic decoding of these texts.

A specific example of six English oppositional riddles will be selected from reliable English riddles books. The riddles chosen are categorized by their use of oppositional logic or semantic contrast, such as ‘What has hands but cannot clap?’ These samples will be exposed to close textual analysis to find how meaning is created and understood.

The analysis will start by recognizing the explicature of each riddle, the explicit propositional gratified deduced from interpreting the linguistic expression and enriched by context. This will be followed by the identification of implicatures, or the additional meanings implied by the solver beyond what is explicitly said. This double-layered analysis will help in clarifying how the solvers bridge the gap between explicit and implicit meaning in the riddle’s interpretation process.

Developing further, the key principles of Relevance Theory, cognitive effort, contextual effects and the presumption of optimal relevance, will be applied to each of the selected riddles. The study will reveal how the riddles require less processing effort while maximizing cognitive reward, leading the solver to an unexpected, yet satisfying interpretation. Each riddle will be observed to adjust how it functions relevance to deceive and then resolve, a specific method of oppositional riddling.

Finally, the study will represent the factors of context and culture that influence the interpretation of these selected English riddles. These may include shared background knowledge, native expressions, and cultural situations that are vital in grasping the logic or the humor of the riddle. By examining how context and cultural assumptions collaborate with cognitive implication, the study will shed light on the pragmatic challenges that are engaged in interpreting riddles across various interpretive communities. This procedure mixes cognitive-pragmatic tools with cultural-contextual awareness to convey a comprehensive analysis of selected English oppositional riddles, concentrating on how they work communicatively through the lens of Relevance Theory.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

Riddles have long charmed minds, requiring the solvers to uncover their cleverly disguised meanings through wit and reasoning. These linguistic enigmas, frequently rooted in contradiction, contrast and wordplay, call us to discover the relationship between language, culture, and cognition. This classification of riddles, categorized as Oppositional Antithetical, Privational, and Causal Contradictive, is analyzed through the lens of Relevance Theory, which discovers how solvers process the given hints, activate background information, and resolve contradictions to deduce the proposed answer.

4.1 Oppositional Antithetical Contradictive: two expressive features oppose each other, with one definitely negating the other

1. **I am rough, I am smooth; I am wet, I am dry; My station is low, my title high; My king my lawful master is I am used by all, though only his? (highway)** (George and Dundes, 1963, p.114).

The riddle enquires the solver to consider the various, contradictory features of the referent described and to deduce what referent fits these descriptions while also satisfying the conceptual hints provided. The solver must first find the hints and activate terminology entries related to them. The given hints are: “Rough, smooth” are contradictory surface qualities, which proposes something that changes in texture depending on its state or situations. “Wet, dry” contradictory conditions relating to the state of the referent, proposing that it can be both wet and dry, depending on the weather or usage. “My station is low, my title high” this indicates that the referent is physically situated in a low position but has a “high” status or importance in society or its purpose. “My king my lawful master is” this proposes that the referent has a leader or ruler, perhaps hinting at the governance or regulation of the space or object. “Used by all, though only his” this infers that while the referent is accessible to everyone, it is still owned or governed by someone likely a king or an authority.

Based on these clues and prior knowledge some assumptions will be derived, and the most relevant one will be chosen. It may be a piece of land or earth while this fits the low station and mutable conditions (wet, dry), it lacks the concept of a “title” and a “king”. “A river” could be both rough and smooth, wet and dry, and have a low station, but it doesn’t fit the idea of a “high title” or a “king” in the same way a road might. A highway is the most relevant answer as it aligns with the riddle perfectly because: it can be rough or smooth, depending on the quality of the surface and weather conditions. It is physically “low” as it runs along the ground, but its “title” is high because it is crucial for transportation and governance. The “king” is the ruler or authority that rules the highway, such as the government or an administrative body. Highways are used by everyone but are controlled by the authorities, making them “used by all, though only his”.

2. **What turns but never moves? Milk** (Pepicello and Green, 1984, P.115).

The riddle presents a deceptive contradiction: it defines something that undergoes a transformation “turns” but does not physically relocate “never moves”. So, to solve it, the solver has to find the key elements and relate terminology entries to them. The word “Turns” proposes change, rotation, or transformation. The solver may first consider objects that physically turn, such as wheels, gears, or spinning objects. The phrase “Never moves” contradicts the previous clue, removing physically rotating elements. Instead, it infers a state of change without movement.

The solver considers different assumption based on the clues and background knowledge: “a clock”, a clock’s hands turn, but the clock itself remains motionless. Though, this interpretation is less optimal because the hands are still physically moving. “A planet or the Earth” while planets rotate, they also move through space, contradicting the “never moves” hint. “Milk” as it sours or curdles is the most relevant interpretation as “Milk” undergoes a chemical transformation (it can be turned into yogurt, cheese or butter) without any physical motion. The word “turns” is commonly used to describe milk spoiling, making the wordplay intuitive. This answer requires minimal cognitive effort compared to other possibilities.

4.2 Oppositional Privational Contradictive: the second component denies a natural characteristic or function of the first.

1. **What has leg but cannot walk? (chair)** (George and Dundes, 1963, p.115).

For decoding this riddle, the solver has to reconcile the seemingly contradictory idea of something possessing a “leg” but enable to walk. The riddle plays on the concept of legs as a vital part of walking but produces a situation where the referent with legs does not walk, leading to the solution. The solver must activate the following conceptual elements: “Leg” usually refers to a part of a living being if human or animal that allows movement. The idea of a leg is closely related to movement and functionality, especially walking. “Cannot walk” this phrase suggests that, despite possessing a “leg”, the referent described does not perform the expected function of walking.

Based on these clues and background information, a set assumption will be derived such as a “living being” with a leg but unable to walk this may describe a person or animal with a leg injury or incapacity, which seems reasonable at first but requires more processing effort. A “chair” the chair is the most contextually relevant answer because: it clearly has “legs” which are part of its structural design. In spite of having legs, it does not walk, which matches the contradiction presented in the riddle.

2. **Something has fingers but has no toes? Glove** (Taylor, 1951, P.16).

The understanding process of this riddle involves clue words and encyclopedic knowledge that guide the solver toward the intended answer. The words “fingers” and “toes” are crucial hints in finding the relevant answer. The word “fingers” activates knowledge about human hands, gloves, and objects shaped like hands, and the phrase “no toes” contradicts the first idea and eliminates human and animal referents, leading to non-living objects.

Based on these clues and background information, some assumptions will be derived such as “A human or an animal”, “a prosthetic hand” or “a glove”.

Depending on these assumptions and contextual knowledge, the solver starts excluding not relevant assumptions and focusing only on the most relevant and suitable one. The first assumption of “human or animal” is deleted since fingers typically accompany toes, the second interpretation of “a prosthetic hand” is also deleted, although it has fingers, but it does not fully fit the structure of an everyday object. The third interpretation of “a glove” is the strongest assumption and the most relevant answer for some reasons: a glove has finger-like extensions but does not have a corresponding structure for toes. It is designed to fit fingers without covering the feet. The contradiction is resolved through comparison, aligning with cognitive expectations in riddle-solving.

4.3 Oppositional Causal Contradictive: an act in the first component is followed by an unpredicted or opposing consequence in the second.

1. **Something flies high, and flies low, chops grass and eats none? (Hoe)**

(Taylor, 1951, p.112).

To decode this riddle, the solver firstly understands the explicit meaning, then (s)he activates some terminology entries related to key words “chops grass,” and “eats none”. Based on background information, (s)he derives some assumptions such as: “Flies high” usually denotes birds or planes, objects that can fly through the air at varying heights, “Flies low” could also label flying creatures or objects, but with a lower height, “Chops grass” proposes an action including cutting vegetation, usually related to tools of farming, and “Eats none” indicates that the entity doing the chopping of grass does not consume it, this leads to exclude animals or creatures that feed on grass.

Going beyond the explicit meaning, the solver realizes that the first two phrases, “flies high” and “flies low” propose flying beings or objects, but both are eliminated for not aligning with the action of “chopping grass” or the concept of “eats none”, leading to removing birds or airplanes as possible answers. The third phrase, “chops grass,” is more relevant as it points to a farming or gardening instrument that is used for cutting grass. The clue of chopping grass without eating it fits well with non-living objects, and the fourth phrase, “eats none”, proposes an object that cuts grass without consuming it, this perfectly fits with a tool used for cutting grass.

To grasp the right answer, the solver starts excluding the assumptions with high processing cognitive effort and focusing on the most relevant with less cognitive effort assumption. This guides him/her to conclude that the riddle denotes a “hoe”, a farming tool that fits the explanation of flying high and low in its motion, chopping grass, and not consuming it.

2. **What eats and eats and never gets full? (a sausage-grinder)** (George and Dundes, p.115).

The riddle is describing a referent using contradiction. For interpreting it, the solver has to find the key elements and activate encyclopedic entries related to them. the given key elements are: “Eats

and eats” which proposes an entity that consumes repeatedly, leading to an initial assumption of a living being, and “Never gets full” phrase contradicts the natural expectation that eating leads to fullness, encouraging the solver to reconsider the referent.

Based on these clues and prior knowledge a set of assumptions will be derived such as: “living organism”, “A black hole”, “A fire” or “A sausage grinder”. The solver starts eliminating irrelevant assumptions by focusing only on the most relevant one. The first assumption is excluded because animals and humans eat but eventually reach fullness, contradicting the riddle's conditions. The second assumption is also excluded because a black hole continuously consumes matter, this is too abstract for everyday reasoning. The third assumption is also excluded as fire eats (consumes fuel) but is not a direct symbol for eating food. The only strong candidate is the last assumption and is chosen as the most relevant one because “a sausage grinder” continuously “eats” meat but does not become full. The contradiction is resolved when “eating” is interpreted mechanically rather than biologically. The symbol aligns with how grinders function, strengthening cognitive efficiency in riddle-solving.

Riddle-solving begins with recognizing the given key elements or phrases that serve as hints, typically presenting contrast, contradictory or unexpected labels, such as “has a nose and can't smell” or “rough, smooth”. These given hints challenge the solver's initial assumptions, glowing cognitive engagement. By depending on their background information, the solvers start activating semantic and cultural relations related to the given hints. For instance, in the riddle “What has fingers but no toes? (Glove)”, the term “fingers” mainly infers the image of human body parts, leading the solvers to think of a living creature. However, the concept is later reconsidered as a physical feature of an inanimate object which is “a glove”. This change in meaning creates the need for flexible thinking and reinterpretation, which is crucial in resolving the vagueness that is typically presented by riddles. This reinterpretation process is essential to navigating the vagueness inherent in riddles.

The evaluation of possible solutions includes creating a mental list of referents and thoroughly excluding those that need more cognitive effort, or fail to resolve the contradiction. For example, in the riddle “What turns but never moves? (milk)”, physical items like wheels are quickly excluded, because they comprise movement, leading the solvers toward the non-physical alteration of milk curdling. The last step is selecting the answer that fits seamlessly with all hints, often through wordplay, metaphor, or background information. This study stresses that this collection observes Relevance Theory, as the chosen answer carries the highest cognitive effect resolving the riddle's puzzle with the minimum mental strain. The interaction between linguistic hints and cognitive reasoning is vital, as riddles feat contradiction to generate tension that solvers resolve by shifting conceptual frames.

This research organizes riddles into three groups based on their contradiction type, each requiring different cognitive strategy:

The first type of these riddles describe referents with inherently contradictory qualities, such as “I am rough, I am smooth; I am wet, I am dry; My station is low, my title high; My king my lawful master is I am used by all, though only his? (highway)”. Solvers must recognize a referent exemplifying ‘roughness and smoothness’, ‘wetness and dryness’, and a low physical position with high social position. This study highlights the highway's double nature, its variable surface conditions and governance by authorities as key element to resolving the contradiction.

The second type of these riddles present referents having a feature linked to a function, but missing the expected functionality. For instance, “What has legs but cannot walk? (chair)” undermines the assumption that legs allow walking by referencing a lifeless item with structural “legs”.

And the third type includes contradictions where a predictable cause leads to an unexpected effect. Like in “What eats and eats and never gets full? (sausage-grinder)”, it represents the verb “eating” as a mechanical process, removing biological referents. This study highlights how causal riddles challenge solvers to rethink of causal relationships.

In this study this riddles' classification shows the different cognitive demands they impose, from mixing opposing qualities to reinterpreting causal relations. Each type of these riddles requires

solvers to navigate linguistic vagueness and cultural context, making riddle-solving process a rich exercise in cognitive flexibility.

Relevance Theory is a foundation of this analytical method of the study, offering a framework for interpreting how solvers prioritize explanations. For any communication to be successful, the implied meaning must be inferred with less cognitive effort and high contextual effect. In riddle-solving, solvers exclude interpretations needing high processing effort, such as abstract referents like a black hole for “What eats and eats and never gets full?” Instead, they favor familiar items like ‘a sausage-grinder’, which resolve the contradiction professionally. This study notes that solvers stop searching for more answers once the most relevant one is found, representing the productivity of human cognition.

Riddles are not only cognitive enigmas, but also linguistic and cultural relics. This research highlights their dependence on wordplay and polysemy, with words such as “turns” for “milk curdling” or “fingers” for “gloves” creating contradiction and guiding solvers to the most relevant and correct answer.

The broader implications of this study span linguistic, cognitive, and cultural areas. Riddle-solving demands cognitive flexibility, as solvers shift between literal and metaphorical understandings, a talent relevant to problem-solving in science and imaginative arts. The interaction of wordplay and metaphor shows how thought is shaped by language, with riddles providing frameworks like “legs” for “chairs” that lead interpretation. As cultural relics, riddles preserve information and values, offering understandings into historical practices and social priorities, such as the governance of highways or flax processing.

By classifying riddles into three categories: antithetical, privational, and causal contradictions, the study offers a comprehensive examination of riddles as cognitive and logical challenges. Depending on Relevance Theory, it brightens how solvers navigate vagueness to select the most contextually and suitable answers. Riddles offer a window into language, cognition, and culture, revealing the interaction between thought and expression. Future studies could include different cultural perspectives and experiential data to further improve our understanding of riddles as a universal, yet culturally nuanced phenomenon.

5. Conclusion

It is concluded that:

- the interaction between explicature and implicature in the interpretation of these selected riddles, where the former offers the literal groundwork, and the later allows for richer interpretations required to resolve the underlying contradictions.
- By applying the key concepts from Relevance Theory especially the notion of optimal relevance and the balancing between cognitive effort and contextual effects, the analysis outlined the subtle inferential work needed for grasping meaning in such riddles.
- Significantly, the role of both cultural and situational contexts appeared as central: these selected riddles do not only depend on language, but also on shared background information, norms, and unspoken cultural cues.
- Finally, the study demonstrates that riddle interpretation process is far from a purely linguistic task. It requires a dynamic negotiation between language, context, and thought, making riddles as appreciated lens through which to discover how meaning is built and conveyed in discourse.

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کردنه وهی کۆدی ئەقل: ریبازی تیۆری په یوه ندى بۆ مه ته له ئینگلیزیی هه لېژێردراوه کان

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پوخته

مه ته له فۆرمیكى جیهانى یاریکردن به وشه یه، كه له ریگه ی میتافۆر، فره واتا یان یاریکردن به وشه ئالنگاری بۆ وه لامده رى مه ته له كه دروست دهكات. ئەم توێژینه وه یه لیکۆلینه وه له مه ته له دژیه كه كانى زمانى ئینگلیزى دهكات كه به پارادۆكس یان دژیه ك ناسراون به بهكارهینانى (تیۆری په یوه ندى)، وه شیکاری بۆ مه ته له دژیه كه كانى (دژیه تی و بیبه شکردن) دهكات به وه ی كه چۆن وه لامده ران هاوسهنگی رادهگرن له نیوان كه مترین هه ولئى معریفی و زۆرتین کاریگه رى چوارچێوه ی مه ته له كه. توێژینه وه كه هه روه ها تیشك دهخاته سه ر په یوه ندى نیوان ئاماژه زمانه وانیه كان، پروسه ی معریفی و کلتووری له لیکدانه وه ی زمانى میتافۆر و پراکتیزه میژوو ییه كان. ریبازی وه سفی شیکاری به کارهاتوو ه بۆ لیکۆلینه وه له وه ی كه چۆن وه لامده ران ناروونیه كان دیاریده كه ن، مه به ستی مه ته له كه هه لدیتن و مانای تری پیده به خشن. ئەنجامه كان ده ریده خه ن كه ئەم جۆره مه ته لانه، ناروونى زمانه وانى و په یوه ندى کلتوورییه كان ده قۆزنه وه، وا له وه لامده ران ده كه ن چوارچێوه ی هزرى خۆیان بگۆرن، ئەمه ش واتا رازیبوون به وه معریفه یه. کاریگه رى مه ته له كان درێژده بیته وه بۆناو زمان، زانستی معریفی و په روه رده، به مه ش ده توانن بپه رکردنه وه ی ره خه نی و هۆشیاری کلتووری بنیات بنین له ریگه ی به ره وپیشبردنى کارامه ییه كان و په نگدانه وه یان له زماندا.

وشه سه ره کیه كان: مه ته له، تیۆری په یوه ندى، پروسه ی معریفی، چوارچێوه ی کلتووری.

فك شفرة العقل: نهج نظري للصلة الترابطية لبعض الالغاز الانكليزية المختارة

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الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الالغاز المتعارضة في اللغة الانجليزية، بأستخدام لنظرية الترابطية. وتعرف هذه الالغاز بالتناقض أو التضاد أو المفارقة. ان هذه الالغاز تتحدى المحللين من خلال الاستعارة وتعدد المعاني والتلاعب بالالفاظ، مما يتطلب التفكير الاستنتاجي. تقوم الدراسة بتحليل ثلاثة أنواع من الالغاز المتعارضة والتي هي: المتناقضة، الحرمانية و السببية، وتكشف كيفية فك المحللين لشفرتها عبر تحقيق التوازن بين الحد الأدنى للجهد الإدراكي مع أقصى التأثيرات السياقية، كما تفترض النظرية الترابطية. يتم تطبيق النهج الوصفي لتحليل النص بشكل دقيق لغرض الكشف عن كيفية حل المحللين للغموض من خلال تحديد المعاني الصريحة و استنتاج معاني اضافية. تسلط الدراسة الضوء على التفاعل بين الاشارات اللغوية والعمليات الإدراكية والسياق الثقافي، مع التركيز على دور المعرفة الثقافية في التعرف على اللغة المجازية والممارسات التاريخية. برهنت النتائج أن الالغاز المتعارضة تستغل الغموض اللغوي والارتباطات الثقافية، مما يدفع المحللين الى تغيير الاطارات المفاهيمية، مبرزا المرونة الإدراكية. تعمل الغاز كتحديات استنتاجية ولغوية وتحف ثقافية، حيث تحافظ على القيم الاجتماعية وتكشف كيف تشكل اللغة الفكر. تؤكد الدراسة على قيمة الالغاز كأدوات للمشاركة الفكرية والثقافية، مما يلقي الضوء على العلاقة المعقدة بين الإدراك واللغة والثقافة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الالغاز، نظرية الترابطية، العملية المعرفية، السياق الثقافي.