

THE LOGICAL STRUCTURE OF SOME RUSSIAN RIDDLES

On the basic function of folk riddles and their
scientific classification

Introduction

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For a long time people have recognized and appraised the didactic nature of riddles. It is not by chance that in folklore studies, especially in the studies of peoples having little or no written language, much attention is paid to riddles. Thus, old men of many tribes in Africa from the Ivory Coast (Baulé) to Namibia (Ovambo) would gather young people from time to time for special evenings of contest in riddle-answering. The young participants are then divided into groups. An old man tells a riddle. The group whose member finds the correct answer first is given a point (forfeit). The group that collects the most points is then proclaimed as the winner. If no one can give an answer to the riddle (as is often the case), it is the questioner himself who gives the answer. Such contests in riddle-answering are of much interest even by themselves. But perhaps their most interesting feature is that it is not only the everyday articles of life, natural

phenomena, local events, ideas or views of a tribal group as expressed by pictures or descriptions that serve as an answer to a given riddler (thus resembling traditional Western European or Russian answers to riddles), but also different clichéized sentences: proverbs, tokens, economic, "juridical" and "ethical" sayings (e.g. strictly formulated rules of property inheritance, rules of behavior in different situations etc.). Memorizing the answers to a certain set of riddles, young people gradually learn not only the names of things necessary in their lives, but also a number of sayings that are indispensable for social intercourse and proper behavior. And although in more developed societies with a wide range of schooling, books and mass media information it would appear to be unnecessary for riddles to be used in such a way, as a consequence of which riddles change from "serious", "adult" folklore to "children's" folklore, nevertheless their didactic role does not disappear. Though in the form of a kind of game, they keep on teaching the same things as they used to teach earlier.

The didactic function of riddles has for a long time attracted the attention of ethnographers and specialists in folklore, paremiologists, in particular. It is not without reason that any serious semantic classification of riddles is based on the so-called "thematic" principle, that is it actually reveals (describes) those spheres of people's life and activities, of macrocosm and microcosm, which are taught by way of riddles. As a rule, it includes man and the parts

of his body, his dwelling with all its furniture, livestock, and handicraft, his trade, public relations, beliefs, natural phenomena, the local flora and fauna, the sky and earth, and so on and so forth, in a word, everything that a man encounters in his everyday life and in his thoughts about it.

But riddles teach us not only this. It is striking how heterogenous their inner and outer linguistic structures are. There are riddles in the form of a direct question, but there are also riddles whose first part is expressed by an affirmative or a negative sentence, there are riddle tales, riddle anecdotes, riddle stories, riddle songs, riddle plays, riddle puns, riddle traps, riddle jokes, riddle puzzles, riddle sum-doings and many other riddle types. And all of them exist in several (sometimes in many) syntactic forms that are phenetically and rhythmically built up in a different way. If we add to this that all or almost all of the folk riddles are well-cut and firmly sewn and, consequently, easy to memorize, it becomes evident how important their role is in the acquisition of the riches of a mother-tongue. It is well known, too, that the majority of riddles are built on a metaphor, i.e. their first part describes an object (or a phenomenon) which is contained in the second part (in the answer) in terms of a different sphere of life. This accustoms people to understanding the given trope (and it is extraordinarily important from the point of view of human communication) and at the same time it enhances the development of fantasy and

metaphoric (figurative) thinking.

Even this is still not the end of the list. Our investigations of riddles of eighty peoples in Europe, Asia and Africa show that folk riddles differ from one another not only in their linguistic form and set of realia used in the questions and answers, but also in their logical structure. That is to say, every riddle is built up on a certain logical model and requires for its answer a corresponding logical method.

As an example, let us compare some simple riddles with a direct sense (i.e. not metaphorical).

(1) There is a cat sitting on the window; its whiskers are like those of a cat, its eyes are like those of a cat, its ears are like those of a cat, still it is not a cat.

(Who is it?)

(2) What horse can see equally well from the front and from behind?

(3) When they started to build Moscow, how did they drive the first nail?

(4) You are my son, but I am not your father. (How can it be?)

(5) There are two of it in a woman, and none in a girl. (What is it?)

(6) A magpie flying, a dog on its tail. (How can it be?)

(7) There were two fathers, two sons, one grandfather and one grandson walking. How many people were there walking altogether?

(8) A cock cried and woke up three men. How many cocks are necessary in order to wake up nine men?

Each of these riddles can be answered in a different way. In order to answer the first riddle, it is not at all necessary to call to mind all types of cat-like animals, as is usually done by the uninitiated; it is enough to remember that the word "*koshka*" in Russian may refer not only to the animal in general, but it may stand for a "female cat" as well, in this case being opposed to the word "male cat". The correct answer to the riddle will be the word "*kot*", i.e. a he-cat. When answering the second riddle, it is important to notice that the expression "equally well" (*odinakovo khorosho*) in Russian means not "well", but "equally", "in the same way". And then it becomes clear at once that the question is about a *blind* horse, and it sees nothing from the front, the same as from behind. The answer to the third riddle requires finding out about the ambiguity of the interrogative "*vo chto*", for it can have the meaning "in what object", as well as "in what part of an object". And since we know of only one thing from the text of the riddle that could be hit on (i.e. the nail), it is now easy to give the answer: "Hitting it on the head." In order to find the answer to the fourth riddle it is sufficient to realize that it is not only a father who can have a son, but a mother too, (or the other way round: a son can have a father as well as a mother); and if someone calls a boy "son" and it is not his father, then it means it must be his mother. If we

wish to answer the fifth riddle, it is necessary to remember that a given object (denotatum) has a name (significatum) and that this name can be expressed by letters: in the word "woman" ("baba") there are two letters "b", whereas the word "girl" ("devka") has none. One can give the proper answer to the sixth riddle only if he sees that not one object is referred to, but two, and they are independent of each other, with the riddle itself containing no metaphor: "the magpie flies (in the sky), but the dog sits on its (own) tail". (This riddle is especially difficult to answer when it is asked in a row with metaphorical ones.) The answer to the seventh riddle requires that we take into consideration that the words "father", "son", "grandfather" and "grandson" do not only designate certain people but at the same time they refer to relations between them: a man's son may be the father of another, etc. Having considered the ambiguous content of these words it is easy to see that the riddle talks about three men only (a man with his father and his son). The eighth riddle makes it necessary to give up the routine approach ("9:3 = 3") and to understand the specificity of the given situation: the cry of a cock is heard equally by everyone sleeping and it has nothing to do with the number of cocks.

As can be seen from this short list (which could be significantly extended), each riddle requires a specific logical method in its solution. It is very interesting to note, that if someone comes across a riddle of a new logico-structural type for the first time, he has to face certain difficulties, indeed perhaps he cannot even answer the riddle

at all (this, by the way, is of no importance, since the questioner is only too glad to give the answer), but when someone is asked a riddle of this kind for the second time, he usually answers it in an easy and simple way. Thus, if one knows the answer to the first riddle (the one about the cat referring also to a she-cat), then it is easy for him to answer an analogous riddle about the dog. Or if we know the answer to the fourth riddle (the son and his relation to his "not-father"), it presents no problem to answer a similar riddle about a daughter and a "not-mother". If we know the way the fifth riddle is to be answered, then it is not difficult to give the answer to the following riddle: "What is in the middle of the earth (*zemlja*) and at the end of thunder (*grom*)?" The matter is that we already know the *method* with the help of which it is possible to answer a riddle of the given logico-structural type.

Thus, riddles *teach people to think* by way of providing them with the knowledge of different logical methods. And this seems to be the most important feature of the didactic function of riddles.

It is worth noticing that although folk riddles represent an infinite variety, there are comparatively few logical models on which riddles are built: according to our preliminary estimation there are not more than 40 models. But all of them appear to be universal. Riddles of very different peoples are constructed in the same way, regardless of the differences in language and culture. This suggests that the logical models of

riddles and the corresponding logical methods of answering them could serve as a base for an international classification of paremias of this type. All the rest of the features traditionally used for the classification of riddles - such as theme, linguistic and compositional structure, type and nature of riddle, motivation of overall meaning, etc. - can be included as means of dividing riddles into subtypes and categories within the basic logico-structural types.

Unfortunately neither the logical structure of riddles (except for two or three types investigated by E. Königs-Maranda), nor the set of logical methods suitable for answering riddles have been studied so far. Logics and psychology do not only lack any classification of logical methods, they do not even dispose of a full list of these methods.

Consequently, N.V. Barabanova's article below is of great interest as it deals with some logico-structural types of riddles from D.N. Sadovnikov's famous collection "Russian Riddles". As can be seen from N.V. Barabanova's study, riddles from different sections and parts of the collection may have the same invariant model. True, Barabanova has described not all the logico-structural types that appear in Sadovnikov's book. But those described are sufficient to confirm the above idea about riddles helping people to master different logical methods of thinking. It is also important that N.V. Barabanova's logical structures concern not only Russian riddles, but are relevant to riddles of other peoples in the world, too.