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# THE LEXICAL-SEMANTIC SYSTEM OF RIDDLE TEXTS FROM A TRANSLATION PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the lexical-semantic system of riddle texts and the multifaceted challenges encountered during their translation. Riddles are culturally bound micro-texts that heavily rely on semantic ambiguity, polysemy, metaphor, and wordplay. Translating these texts requires more than linguistic decoding; it demands the cross-cultural transfer of cognitive puzzles. This thesis analyzes the semantic mechanisms that construct riddles and evaluates the translation strategies—ranging from literal translation to functional adaptation—necessary to preserve both the semantic core and the pragmatic effect of the original text in the target language.

**Keywords:** Lexical semantics, riddle texts, translation strategies, functional equivalence, metaphor, cultural untranslatability, wordplay.

## 1. Introduction:

Riddles represent one of the most ancient and universal genres of oral folklore. They function as cognitive puzzles, testing human intellect, associative thinking, and mastery of language. From a linguistic standpoint, a riddle is a complex lexical-semantic construct where the actual object (the referent) is intentionally concealed behind a veil of metaphorical, metonymic, or allegorical descriptions (the vehicle).

The translation of riddle texts poses a significant challenge in the field of translation studies. Because riddles exploit the unique lexical and semantic features of a specific language—such as homonymy, polysemy, idioms, and phonetic resonance—a direct word-for-word translation often destroys the cognitive puzzle or renders it incomprehensible. The primary aim of this thesis is to investigate the lexical-semantic architecture of riddles and to determine the most effective strategies for translating these culturally embedded texts without losing their semantic depth and pragmatic function.

## 2.Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This research is grounded in the theories of lexical semantics and communicative translation. According to Eugene Nida's concept of "dynamic equivalence," a successful translation must elicit the same response from the target audience as the original text did from the source audience. In the context of riddles, this means the target text must remain a functional puzzle.

The methodology applied in this research involves:

**Semantic Component Analysis:** Deconstructing the source riddles into their base semantic components (metaphors, puns, cultural symbols).

**Comparative Linguistics:** Contrasting the lexical capabilities of the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) to identify asymmetries.

**Translation Analysis:** Evaluating different translation models (e.g., Mona Baker's equivalence at word and above-word levels) to determine how semantic shifts occur during the translation of folklore.

## 3. The Lexical-Semantic Nature of Riddles

The architecture of a riddle is built upon semantic duality. The text describes one object but implies another. This duality is achieved through several key lexical-semantic devices:

**Metaphor and Metonymy**

Metaphor is the driving engine of most riddles. The semantic system of a riddle typically involves animating the inanimate or substituting objects based on visual, functional, or behavioral similarities. For example, a riddle might describe a "white blanket" covering the earth, where the lexical item "blanket" semantically substitutes "snow."

**Polysemy and Wordplay (Puns)**

Many riddles rely on the multiple meanings of a single word. A classic English example is: "What has a head and a tail but no body? A coin." The puzzle works exclusively because the English lexical items "head" and "tail" exhibit polysemy, referring both to anatomical parts and the two sides of a coin.

**Semantic Ambiguity and Paradox**

Riddles often employ lexical contradictions (oxymorons) to confuse the listener. Phrases like "eyeless but cries" (a cloud) create a semantic paradox. The lexical items are deliberately chosen to clash, forcing the human brain to search for an abstract or metaphorical resolution rather than a literal one.

**4. Challenges in Translating Riddle Texts**

The translation of riddles is hindered by linguistic and cultural boundaries. When the lexical-semantic system of the SL does not align with the TL, the translator faces a set of specific challenges:

**Loss of Semantic Duality in Translation**

When a riddle relies on a pun or polysemy (like the "head and tail" of a coin), translating it directly into a language where coins do not have "heads" and "tails" will immediately break the riddle. The semantic ambiguity is lost, and the translated text becomes a nonsensical statement rather than a puzzle.

**Cultural Asymmetry and Realia**

Riddles frequently contain culture-specific items (realia) such as traditional clothing, local flora and fauna, or historical artifacts. A riddle describing an object entirely unknown to the target culture creates an unsolvable puzzle. The semantic reference point simply does not exist in the cognitive database of the target audience.

**Phonetic and Syntactic Constraints**

Riddles are generally poetic, relying on rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration to aid memorization. Translators often struggle to balance the semantic accuracy of the lexical items with the phonetic requirements of the target language. Prioritizing exact semantic equivalence often destroys the rhyme, while prioritizing rhyme can alter the original meaning.

**5. Strategies for Translating Riddle Texts**

To navigate the lexical-semantic complexities of riddles, translators employ several strategic approaches, moving from formal equivalence to complete cultural adaptation.

**Literal Translation (Formal Equivalence)**

This strategy is effective only when the SL and TL share a high degree of linguistic and cultural proximity. If the metaphor used in the riddle is universal (e.g., comparing the sun to a golden apple), a direct translation of the lexical items preserves both the meaning and the puzzle.

**Functional Substitution**

When literal translation fails due to linguistic asymmetry (such as untranslatable puns), the translator must substitute the lexical vehicle of the SL with a different vehicle in the TL that points to the same referent. The goal is to preserve the function of the riddle rather than its exact wording. If the target language cannot use the exact metaphor, an equivalent native metaphor is employed to describe the same answer.

**Cultural Adaptation and Recreation**

In extreme cases of cultural untranslatability, the translator may need to completely rewrite the riddle. This involves analyzing the core cognitive intent of the original text and creating a entirely new lexical-

semantic structure in the target language. According to Peter Newmark (1988) "communicative translation" where the cultural context of the TL takes precedence over the SL.

**Explicitation (Compensation)**

Sometimes, translators add lexical items to clarify cultural gaps. However, in the context of riddles, this is dangerous. Over-explicitation can inadvertently reveal the answer, destroying the essence of the genre. Therefore, compensation is usually done subtly, replacing an obscure cultural reference with a slightly more universal one within the same semantic field.

**Conclusion**

The lexical-semantic system of riddle texts is intricate, relying on metaphor, polysemy, and cultural symbolism to construct cognitive challenges. From a translation perspective, riddles demonstrate the limits of literal, word-for-word translation methodologies. Because the aesthetic and functional value of a riddle lies in its linguistic ambiguity, translators cannot simply decode the words; they must decode the underlying semantic mechanisms.

Successful translation of riddle texts requires a flexible approach, heavily favoring functional and dynamic equivalence. Translators must act as cross-cultural mediators, often dismantling the original lexical structure and reconstructing a new semantic puzzle using the linguistic tools available in the target language.

Ultimately, translating a riddle is not merely about transferring text, but about recreating an intellectual experience.

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