

## **A Pragmatic Analysis of Selected Riddles in English**

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### **Abstract**

Riddling is an interesting genre which is found in every culture and at all periods. They represent one type of wordplay in which the riddler plays upon the sounds of words in order to produce this literary work. The present study is an attempt to investigate riddles in English. It aims at: revealing the most frequent floated maxims by the riddlers in English; finding out the pragmatic aspects that are found in those texts so that the riddlee will be able to comprehend and understand riddles. It is hypothesized that: the maxim of manner is the most frequent floated maxim by the riddlers in the riddles under study and context with its different types (linguistic, situational, cultural and cognitive) are the pragmatic aspects that are found in riddles, and which enable the hearers to understand and comprehend riddles. The study develops an eclectic model of analysis based on floating Grice's theory of co-operation and context to analyze and comprehend riddles.

**Keywords:** Pragmatics, Grice's Theory of Co-operation, Riddles, context.

### **I. Introduction**

Riddles have attracted the attention of anthropologists and folklorists for a long time. Now, linguists too have tried to study riddles (Dienhart,1998:95). They are seen in every historical era and in all parts of the world (Augarde,1984:1). Pepicello and Green (1984:1), argue that although riddles have been around for a long time, they still hold an attraction for people. Almost necromantic in their ability, they transform riddles into litanies that, when said accurately, reveal the secrets they want to reveal (ibid:1). The riddle, according to Augarde (1984:1), is the oldest and most common sort of word game. It is a question or a statement that takes deductive reasoning to understand and respond, frequently because it is stated in an unclear or deceptive manner (ibid:1).

This study is concerned with studying this interesting genre. It asks the following questions: (a) what is the most frequent floated maxim in the riddles under study? , (b) what are the pragmatic aspects that are found in the texts so that the riddlee will be able to comprehend and understand riddles . It aims at: (a) revealing the most frequent floated maxim by the riddlers in the data under study, and (b) finding out the other pragmatic aspects that are found in the selected riddles so that they will be understood by the hearers or the riddlee. It is hypothesized that: (a) the maxim of manner is the most frequent floated maxim in the analyzed riddles, (b) co-text, situational, cultural and cognitive types of contexts are the other pragmatic aspects that are found in the riddles, and which enable the riddlees to understand the riddle.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Pragmatics: An Overview

The steady increase interest in pragmatics and pragmatic issues grows so quickly and becomes a trend in such a short period of time (Yule,1996:18). According to him, (ibid:7), pragmatics which is concerned with the study of meaning as transmitted by a speaker and (or writer) and understood by a listener (or reader) , is important in providing a richer , deeper and more logical account of human language behavior since it is concerned with determining what individuals mean by their utterances rather than what the words or phrases in those utterances may signify on their own (ibid:3). Birner (2013) believes that pragmatics is the study of how language is used in context. It has to do with a slippery type of meaning that is not found in dictionaries and changes from context to context. Verschueren (1999:1) thinks that pragmatics deals with studying language in use. For Adams (1985:1), pragmatics is the study of the principles of language usage in which the speaker and the hearer are the two most important categories that govern linguistic interpretation. Fasold (1990:19) defines pragmatics as " the study of the use of context to make inferences about meaning", while Gventhe and Schmidt , cited in Verschuren (1999:356) , state that " we cannot achieve an adequate integrated syntax , semantics , and phonology without paying attention to the pragmatic aspects ".

Mey (1993:5) pretty much agrees with Yule's (1996:12-13) description of pragmatics as " the waste-basket of linguistics" ; that is whenever you cannot explain a phenomenon in language using regular, accepted linguistic theories , you must resort to something else , namely pragmatics , which is supposedly undefined and tangible and this gives pragmatics a bright future as (Huang,2007:2) indicates.

#### 2.1.1 Grice's Theory of Co-operation

Grice (1975) develops a theory of relationships in order to know: the expression of the speech, the meaning that the speaker conveys, and the implications of utterances (Grice,1975:45). Anyone who takes part in a conversation, should regard the requirements of other participants (Levinson, 1983:102). That is, he should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly while providing information. Thus, Grice (1975:47) formulates a rough general principle which participants are expected to observe. It is labeled the cooperative principle which states that:

" Make your conversational contribution as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" .This cooperative principle can be implemented through adopting four conversational maxims, each of which covers one aspect of linguistic interaction and describes what is expected of a cooperative speaker with respect to that maxim. Echoing Kant, Grice (1975) calls these categories: Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner (ibid:45). Under the maxim of Quantity falls the following maxims:

**1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).**

**2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.**

-Under the category of Quality, falls a supermaxim:

**"Try to make your contribution one that is true"** and two more specific sub maxims:

**1. Do not say what you believe to be false.**

**2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.**

-Under the category of relation, Grice (1975) places a single maxim, namely

"Be relevant", Finally at the category of Manner, he includes the supermaxim "**Be perspicuous**" and various maxims such as:

1. **Avoid obscurity of expression.**
2. **Avoid ambiguity**
3. **Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)**
4. **Be orderly**

According to Grice (1975:49), there are many ways in which the speaker fails to fulfill a maxim:

1. He may quietly and unostentatiously *Violate* a maxim; if so, in some cases he will be liable to mislead.
2. He may *Opt out* from the operation of both the maxim and the CP; he may say, indicate, or allow it to become plain that he is unwilling to cooperate in the way the maxim requires.
3. He may be faced by a *clash*: He may be unable, for example, to fulfill the first maxim of quantity (Be as informative as is required) without violating the second maxim of quality (Have adequate evidence for what you say).
4. He may *Float* a maxim; that is, he may blatantly fail to fulfill a maxim with no intention to deceive or mislead, but because the speaker wishes to prompt the hearer to look for an extra meaning which is different from the expressed meaning. This additional meaning is called "conversational implicature". Implicatures arise in other speech genres and in writings as they do in conversation. Speakers, writers and addressees assume that everyone engages in communication knows and accepts the communicational norms. This general acceptance is an important starting point for inferences, even if individuals are sometimes unable to meet the standards or occasionally cheat (for instance by telling lies) (Grice, 1975).

### ***Floating the Maxim of Quality***

Floats which exploit the maxim of Quality occur when the speaker says something which is blatantly untrue or for which he or she lacks adequate evidence (Grice, 1975:45-47).

### ***Floating the maxim of Quantity***

According to Cutting (2002:37), the Maxim of Quantity (henceforth: QnM) can be floated when a speaker provides more or less information than is required in a particular context. By increasing or decreasing the quantity of the required information in the mentioned riddles, the riddlee will be led to an interpretation which is different from the intended meaning of the riddler.

### ***Floating the maxim of Relation***

Speakers float the Maxim of Relation (henceforth: RM) when they present irrelevant information to their addressees with the intention to make them "imagine", the implied meaning (Cutting, 2002:39).

### ***Floating the maxim of Manner***

The Maxim of Manner (henceforth: MM) can be floated when a speaker presents an obscure and/or ambiguous conversational contribution(s) (Cutting, 2002:39).

#### ***2.1.2 Context***

Context, whether in spoken or written language, functions as an important notion that sorts out ambiguities. It is regarded as a dynamic not a static concept which can be understood as the surroundings that enable the participants in the communication process to interact and

that makes the linguistic expressions of their interaction intelligible (Fetzer, 2011:2). Leech (1983:13) considers context to be any background knowledge that is assumed to be shared by the S and the H and which contributes to the H's interpretation of what S means by a given utterance.

According to Dijk (2008:5), contextualization is a fundamental part of our understanding of human conduct, in general, and of literature and other texts and talk, in particular. Camp (2000:126), alludes to the role of contexts in analyzing riddles. Riddles, however, with their intention to disrupt, suspend the normal conversational context and thus use their homeless metaphors to confuse rather than to clarify. According to Kaivola-Bregenhøj (2001:92); riddles are a genre of folklore which, by their language alone, seldom merge imperceptibly with the discourse in which they are embedded and almost always require a specific use and performing context. Dijk (2008:6), finally concludes that complex phenomena cannot be understood properly without understanding their contexts.

## **Types of Contexts**

According to Kaivola-Bregenhøj (2001), riddles are classified into five types of contexts:

### ***Linguistic Context (co-text)***

The linguistic context or (the co-text), according to (Huang,2007:13), refers to the surrounding utterances in the same discourse. It could be the sounds, words, or phrases, which surround a particular verbal item (Finch,2005:208).

### ***The Situational Context***

It refers to the environment, time, and place, etc., in which the discourse occurs and also the relationship between the participants (Song, 2010:877).

### ***The Cultural Context***

A riddle is based on a question-and-answer pattern, it can be answered from information included in the question and the solution requires no special knowledge other than that acquired by being a member of a particular folk group (e.g., shared language, customs, worldview). Riddlers must attempt to ask questions that respondents cannot answer, but these questions must contain enough information for any member of the group to solve. Thus, the riddler draws on shared cultural knowledge both for descriptions and for appropriate modes of performance (Bronner,2006 :1047).

### ***The Cognitive context***

Cognitive context is a structured, multi-layered construct which is indispensable for language processing and differencing. The nature of the connectedness between its constitutive layers and subsystems is meta communicative and meta-systemic (Fetzer,2017:272).

### ***The Generic Context:***

According to (Kaivola-Bregenhøj,2001:93), the generic context which refers to the conformities characteristics of the genre has far received a little attention. It helps both the riddler and the riddlee to make a detailed note of the conformity's characteristic of a genre, such as the formula peculiar to it. In the case of riddles, for example, the generic context determines the extent and the way the images deviate from "normal language" and the type of unrealistic image solutions that may ensue. The differences in the images are likewise clear in the case of riddle subgenres, such as true riddles and trick questions. This context acts as an

aid to the riddle inventor and guesser by providing conventions and modes for analogy.

## **2.2 Riddles: An Overview**

The modern English word "riddle" shares its origin with the word "read", both are stemming from the common Germanic verb "redana", German "Rätsel", and old English "rædels", the latter of which became modern English word "riddle", which means to "interpret" or "guess" <https://www.etymonline.com/word/riddle>.

For Smith (1973:1), a riddle is a difficult question with an enigmatic solution. This is because the subject expects meaning A and instead receives meaning B, which does not match their expectations. It is quite systematic since there is another semantic link between meanings A and B (ibid:1). Abraham (1972:182) considers riddles as methods that are used to display control over words, things and concepts that are important in the lives of the riddling group. He explains his opinion that whenever a riddler challenges the audience, he displays a certain level of control over the vocal points of his surroundings, as well as the critical transmission and exchanges within the community. As a result, the riddler functions as a harmonizer and as an educator (ibid:182). This opinion is shared by Roberts and Forman (1971:509), who attribute the riddler's control to the superior knowledge and authority that give him the right to question others. Roberts and Forman (ibid:509) believe that riddles are expressive models or representations of the serious and even formal questioning of inferiors by superiors that takes place in cultures when a parent questions a child, a teacher questions a student, an employer questions an employee, a judge questions a defendant, a soldier of superior rank questions a soldier of inferior rank, and so on. They are viewed as expressive depictions or models of the serious, formal interrogations of subordinates by superiors that take place in many cultural contexts (ibid:509). For Magachi (2015:13), riddles are written to encourage the reader to utilize his or her own cleverness by purposefully presenting information in a confusing or descriptive manner. Odaga (1984) cited in Magachi (2015:15), thinks that riddling is more than a general knowledge test. They are great brain teasers or discussion openers that compel others to think about the answer. Additionally, it is a social affair that emphasizes quick wit and entertainment.

Riddles are often characterized as being short and to the point. However, this is not a necessary requirement (Dienhart,1998:101). Many of the old English riddles are very long (ibid:101). A riddle is often made up of two parts: a question (or image) and an answer linked by a cognitive connection that is based on a metaphor, lexical ambiguity, grammatical ambiguity, or another "block component" that makes the riddle harder to solve (Attardo,2014 :645). In English speaking countries, riddles take the form of a wh-question and an answer. What do you call a person who puts you in touch with spirit world? A bartender (Dienhart,1998:101). Other openings are formulaic: Why did the .....? Other examples are "How can you tell ? And what's the difference between? (Ibid:101).

## **Types of Riddles**

According to most authors, riddles are of two types: Enigmas and Conundrums (Taylor,1951). In the strictest sense, the Enigma is nothing more than a form of verse-based riddle. It develops into a genre for a while, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where the poetry overtook the riddle in importance (Augarde,1984:15). The word enigma comes from Greek which means "to darken and hide" or "to speak obscurely". They are rhyming riddles that contain one or more veiled references to the answer (Danesi,2002:43).

The other type of riddles is known as the "conundrum". A conundrum is defined as is



described as one of the cleverest types of riddles, typically taking the form of a question and requiring the use of a pun, play on words, or other verbal ploy in the resolution (Brunvand,1996). The origin of the word conundrum is a conundrum in itself (Cresswell,2014:253). The phrase conundrum is first documented in 1596 by the satirist Nashe, who uses it as an insult for a crank or pedant". He says that "So will I drive him to confess himself a conundrum, who now thinks he hath learning enough to prove the salvation of Lucifer ". Somewhat later, a man was warned to be aware of a woman saying that: "she has more conundrums in her head than a fencer" (Shipley,1960:11).

The word seems to have meant an artful dodge. Its modern meaning of a conundrum or a riddle date from the seventeenth century, in a sermon in 1645. The custom then becomes popular, since there are regular conundrum parties in the eighteenth century, with each visitor attempting to outconundrumize the others (Shipley 1960:11 and Cresswell,2014:253). According to (Hovanec 1978) cited in Danes (2002:43), Conundrums are riddles that take use of the similar sounds of word pairs and the diverse meanings of words or phrases. They spark our curiosity and encourage us to consider many choices. Even though a riddle has only one answer, its obscure nature motivates us to look into such a number of possible solutions. (Schiltz,2015: 11).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Data Description and Model of Analysis

Four riddles are chosen randomly to be analyzed. They are taken from some books of riddles and web sources that are mentioned in the references. The model of analysis to be adopted is an eclectic one. It is based on Grice's theory of co-operation 1975 and context as shown in figure (1).

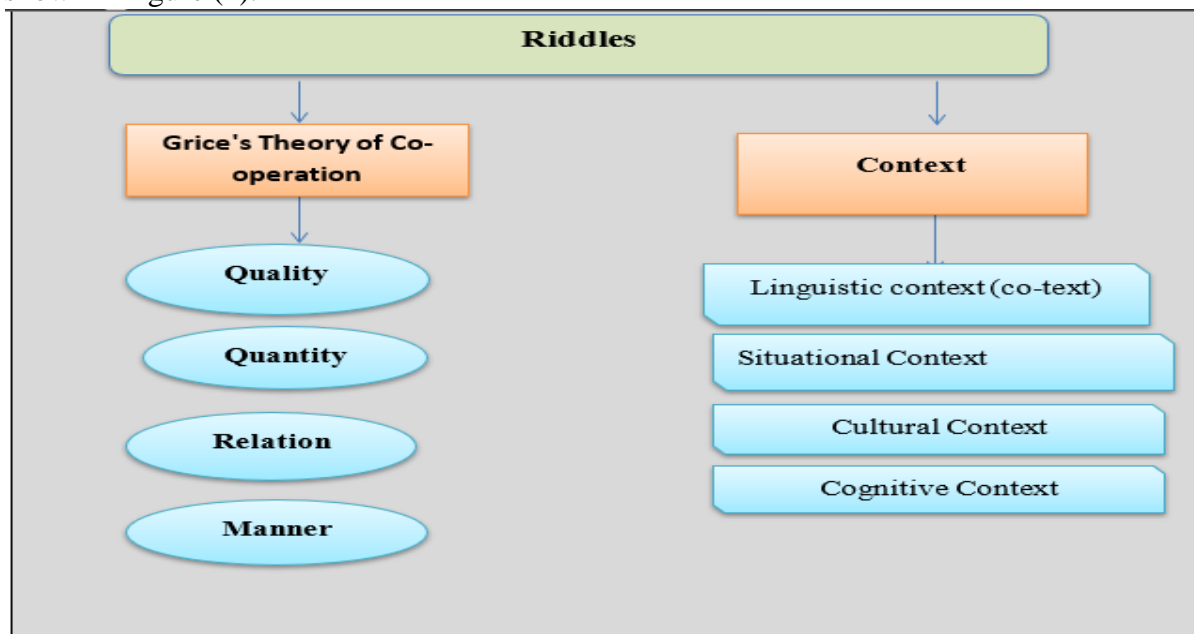


Figure (1): The Eclectic Model of Analysis

#### 3.2 Data Analysis

##### 3.2.1 Riddle 1

**Q/ What flowers grow between your chin and your nose?**

**A/ /tú:lps/**

The riddler is asking a question about the name of the flowers which occur between a person's chin and nose. The answer is provided as /Tú:lps/. The hearer interprets the sequence

with the first script /tulips/. He does so because of the influence of the word "flowers" but do flowers grow between the nose and the chin of human beings? The answer is, of course, no, so why does the speaker say so and break the maxim of quality. The maxim of manner is also broken because the answer of the riddle is ambiguous, and the hearer is uncertain about the intended meaning of the riddle. At this moment, the linguistic context of the interpreter of the body parts of human beings leads the hearer to recognize the intended meaning easily and understands its exact meaning which is /two lips/ not /tulips/.

### 3.2.2 Riddle 2

**Q/ What soup is the hardest?**

**A/ /kæsti:l/.**

Pragmatically, the riddler asks a question about the hardest type of soup. The answer is provided as /kæsti:l/. The hearer first interprets the answer as /cast steel/ because of the effect of the word 'hard' which is usually associated with 'steel'. He thinks that the speaker is breaking the maxim of quality because it is impossible for a soup to be casted or made from steel. The maxim of manner is also broken because the answer of the riddle is ambiguous and confuses the riddlee. Finally, the cultural context of the riddle itself as well as the shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer enables him to get the intended meaning of the riddle /castile/ which is a familiar name for a kind of soup that is hard.

### 3.2.3 Riddle 3

**Q/ What is the coldest place in a theatre?**

**A/ /ziərou/**

On the pragmatic level, when the hearer first hears the sound sequence /ziərou/, she interprets it as /zero/ because of the normal quick pronunciation of the sequence. The Maxim of Manner is exploited here by the riddler throughout floating the principle "avoid ambiguity". The riddler intentionally creates an ambiguous answer /ziərou/ which is intended to mean one thing by the riddler /z+row/ and taken to mean another thing by the riddlee. The sequence /ziərou/ is intentionally intended to sound ambiguous in order to lead the riddlee to guess the real answer of the riddle. In this riddle, the situational context and knowledge which is existed in the hearer's mind about the environment around enables him to infer the intended meaning of the riddler who intends to say /z+row/ to refer to a line of seats in the theater which is labeled "Z" row. Finally, she gets the implicature of the riddle.

### 3.2.4 Riddle 4

**Q/ Why does a coat get bigger when you take it out of a suitcase?**

**A/ Because you will find it /mkri:sɪz/**

This riddle is asking about the reason which makes a coat in a suitcase to be bigger in size when it is taken out. The answer is provided as because it is found /mkri:sɪz/. When hearing the answer, the interpreter gets the meanings of enlargement or expanding. He becomes perplexed and feels that it is not the right answer of the riddle because as far as he knows, a coat will not be bigger in size when it is put in a suitcase. The speaker breaks the maxim of quality. It is not true that a coat will be bigger if it is put in a suitcase. The maxim of quantity is also broken. The speaker is less informative than is required. The maxim of manner is obviously broken because the sequence /mkri:sɪz/ has two different meanings at the same time. It is intentionally made in an ambiguous manner in order to confuse the riddlee and leads him to infer the implicature of the speaker. This interpretation will be quickly cancelled because the cognitive context of the hearer and the words surrounding the riddle help the hearer to discover the new meaning. He starts asking himself about the reason that leads the speaker to respond incorrectly, less informatively and ambiguously. This process of thinking leads him to discover the implicature of speech which is due to being folded, the coat seems as if it is bigger

than it is .

### 3.3 Discussion of Analysis

The present study has two objectives. The first one is to specify the types of Grice's maxims that have been most frequently floated in the chosen riddles. The following table is presented:

**Table (1)** Floating the Maxims of Grice

Grice's Maxims	The Chosen Riddles	
	Freq.	%
Quality	3	37.5 %
Quantity	1	12.5 %
Relation	0	0 %
Manner	4	50 %
Total	8	100 %

The quantitative analysis shows that the most frequent floated maxim is the maxim of manner which constitutes 50% percentage while the maxim of quality constitutes 37.5%. It is the second floated maxim by the riddlers. The maxim of quantity is the least floated maxim which is about 12.5% while the maxim of relation has not been floated in the chosen riddles. It constitutes 0% percentage.

The second objective of this study is to find out the other pragmatic aspects that are found in those texts so that the riddlers will be able to comprehend and understand them. The qualitative analysis reveals that (Linguistic context, situational context, cultural context and cognitive context) are the remaining pragmatic aspects that help the hearers to recognize and arrive at the intended meaning of the riddler.

## 4. Conclusion

After analyzing the chosen data in accordance with Grice's theory of co-operation, it is concluded that the cooperative principle with its four maxims which each person is expected to follow throughout communication, are intentionally floated in this work for the sake of producing a riddle.

It is also concluded that Context is a determinant factor in the study of riddles. It is the remaining mechanism that helps the listeners to interpret the intended meaning of the riddle produced. Different types of contexts are distinguished in this study which are advantageous in interpreting different riddles. One type of context is the co-text which refers to the set of words that surround the riddles and helps to interpret its intended meaning. Other types of contexts are situational context, cultural context and cognitive context which have a main role to help the hearers to arrive at the intended answer. If the riddler is a member of the same society of the riddler and sharing the same culture, background knowledge, and if he is aware of all these types of contexts, he will be able to comprehend riddles even if they are difficult or complicated.

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