



THE ROLE MONOSEMY AND POLYSEMY IN RIDDLE FORMATION

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The human fascination with riddles is as ancient as language itself, spanning cultures and epochs. Riddles, at their core, are exercises in linguistic artifice, designed to conceal and reveal simultaneously. This delicate balance hinges on the manipulation of meaning; a process deeply intertwined with the concepts of monosemy and polysemy. While monosemy refers to a word having a single, distinct meaning, polysemy denotes a word or phrase possessing multiple, often related, meanings. In the realm of riddles, polysemy is the master craft, yet it is the subtle interplay with monosemy that imbues riddles with their enigmatic power. This article will explore how riddles strategically employ both monosemic and polysemic linguistic elements to construct their unique challenges, drawing upon insights from both English and Uzbek linguistic traditions. We will examine how these semantic phenomena are not merely incidental features but are fundamental to the cognitive engagement and intellectual satisfaction derived from solving a riddle.

Riddles masterfully create this interaction by presenting a vehicle that simultaneously evokes a specific, monosemic interpretation and a broader, polysemic one. The solver is compelled to navigate these multiple semantic pathways, discarding the literal or obvious meanings in favor of a more nuanced, abstract, or unexpected one. This process is not arbitrary; it is carefully orchestrated through word choice and contextual framing. For instance, a riddle might describe an object using terms that, in isolation, have a clear, monosemic meaning (e.g., "has a tongue"), but when combined with other clues, begin to suggest a polysemic range of possibilities (e.g., "has a tongue but cannot speak"). The solver must then identify the specific sense of "tongue" that fits the riddle's overall context – perhaps referring to the tongue of a shoe or a bell, rather than a human tongue. This deliberate ambiguity, rooted in polysemy, is what makes riddles intellectually stimulating.

Uzbek linguistic scholarship also sheds light on the art of figurative language. Researchers like A. Gulomov, a key figure in Uzbek linguistics, in his works on sentence structure and stylistics, implicitly or explicitly touch upon how words acquire multiple layers of meaning in folk art. While not always directly focused on riddles, Gulomov's emphasis on the richness and flexibility of Uzbek vocabulary and grammatical structures underscores the fertile ground for polysemy. Folk riddles, often relying on metaphorical and metonymic associations, are prime examples where a single word or phrase can carry several connotations simultaneously. For example, a riddle might use a word that monosemically refers to a common object but polysemically alludes to an abstract concept or a different, less obvious object. This requires the solver to decipher the intended semantic field.

Consider the riddle: "What has an eye, but cannot see?" The word "eye" is polysemic. Monosemically, it refers to the organ of sight in living beings. However, in this riddle, the polysemic sense of "eye" as the opening in a needle, a bud of a plant, or the center of a storm is



invoked. The solver must recognize this semantic range to arrive at the answer, such as a needle or a potato. The riddle strategically uses the monosemic understanding of "seeing" to create a paradox with the polysemic understanding of "eye". This highlights how riddles often play on the listener's initial, common interpretation (monosemy) to lead them towards a more nuanced, polysemic interpretation.

The interplay between monosemy and polysemy in riddles is not merely about wordplay; it is about cognitive mapping and associative thinking. Linguists like Roman Jakobson, in his influential essays on language and literature, discussed the "poetic function of language", where the choice and combination of words are as important as their inherent meanings [3]. In riddles, this function is paramount. The selection of words with a rich semantic field (polysemy) allows for multiple potential interpretations, while the specific context provided by the riddle guides the solver towards the correct one, often by eliminating other semantic possibilities through monosemic clues. Jakobson's notion of "selection" (choosing words with certain semantic features) and "combination" (arranging them in a specific order) perfectly encapsulates the riddle-maker's strategy.

Uzbek folk riddles, rich in cultural context and wordplay, often demonstrate this principle. For instance, a riddle might describe a candle using terms that simultaneously evoke its form, its function, and its ephemeral nature. A phrase like "gulxanim" (a type of flower) might be used, which monosemically refers to a flower but polysemically evokes something beautiful, delicate, and perhaps short-lived. The solver must consider these layers of meaning to understand the riddle's true subject. This echoes the broader Uzbek tradition of using metaphors and similes that are deeply rooted in everyday life and cultural understanding, where single words or phrases can carry multiple layers of symbolic meaning.

Let's delve into more examples to illustrate these concepts:

Example 1: The Polysemy of "Head"

- Riddle: *What has a head and a tail, but no body?*
- Answer: A coin.
- Analysis: This riddle masterfully exploits the polysemy of the words "head" and "tail".

Monosemically, "head" and "tail" refer to parts of living beings. However, in the context of a coin, they take on new, specialized meanings: "heads" refers to one side of the coin, and "tails" to the other. The absence of "body" reinforces the non-living nature of the object, pushing the solver away from biological interpretations towards inanimate objects. The riddle relies on the solver recognizing these polysemic uses of common words to misdirect them from a simple, everyday object.

Example 2: Monosemy Creating a Paradox

- Riddle: *What is always invisible, yet never out of sight?*
- Answer: Breath.

• Analysis: This riddle plays on the seemingly contradictory nature of "invisible" and "out of sight". Monosemically, "invisible" means cannot be seen, and "out of sight" means not within the range of vision. The riddle's cleverness lies in the fact that breath is indeed invisible in its gaseous form, yet its presence is constantly perceived through its effects (e.g., fogging a mirror, enabling speech, feeling it in one's chest). The solver must resolve this paradox by finding an entity that fits both descriptions, where the monosemic meanings create a logical puzzle.

Example 3: Og'zi bor, so'zlay olmaydi,



Ko'zi bor, ko'rmaydi.

(It has a mouth but cannot speak; it has eyes but cannot see.)

Answer: Igna (a needle).

Analysis: this riddle exploits the polysemic extension of anthropomorphic vocabulary in Uzbek. The words og'iz (mouth) and ko'z (eye) are monosemically understood as parts of the human body. However, in this riddle they function polysemically, referring metaphorically to structural elements of a needle. The "eye" of the needle denotes the small hole through which thread passes, while the "mouth" metaphorically suggests its opening or sharp working end.

The clauses "cannot speak" and "cannot see" eliminate the literal human interpretation and guide the solver toward an inanimate object. Thus, the riddle creates semantic ambiguity by activating the primary (monosemic) bodily meaning first, then redirecting interpretation toward its figurative (polysemic) application. This demonstrates how Uzbek folk riddles rely on anthropomorphic metaphor as a mechanism of semantic shift.

Example 4: The Ambiguity of "Legs"

- Riddle: "What has legs, but cannot walk?"
- Answer: A table, a chair.
- Analysis: Here, the word "legs" is polysemic. Monosemically, it refers to the limbs of a living creature used for locomotion. However, the riddle employs its polysemic meaning referring to the supports of furniture. The solver must discard the biological connotation of "legs" and consider its broader application to inanimate objects. The phrase "cannot walk" reinforces the inanimate nature, pushing the solver to consider non-living entities with "legs".

The strategic deployment of these minor sentence structures in riddles allows for a condensed yet powerful presentation of clues, forcing the solver to actively reconstruct the implied full sentence and deduce the answer. Whether appearing as verbless clauses describing attributes, nominal sentences defining characteristics, or ellipted forms of common clauses, minor sentences play an indispensable role in the construction and comprehension of riddles. Further research could explore the cross-cultural prevalence and specific typological variations of semantic manipulation in riddle traditions worldwide, building upon the foundational work of scholars like Jakobson and Richards, as well as regional experts like G'ulomov.

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