

# Phraseological Riddles as a Linguistic and Cognitive Phenomenon: A Theoretical Perspective

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## Abstract:

Phraseological riddles represent one of the most intricate intersections between language, cognition, and culture. They combine the stability of phraseological units with the metaphorical flexibility of riddles, forming a unique linguistic phenomenon that encodes collective wisdom, cultural identity, and creative thought. As linguistic constructs, phraseological riddles reveal how fixed expressions can extend beyond conventional meanings to generate associative, symbolic, and cognitive interpretations. Their structure embodies the balance between linguistic constraint and imaginative freedom, where metaphor, symbolism, and parallelism operate simultaneously to produce layered meanings. From a theoretical standpoint, phraseological riddles are more than mere folkloric entertainment; they function as cognitive and semiotic systems through which a community expresses its worldview and mental models. Within their compact form, these riddles encapsulate the principles of metaphorical thinking, idiomatic stability, and semantic transformation. They illustrate how phraseological systems serve not only communicative but also epistemological and cultural purposes. In this sense, phraseological riddles exemplify the dynamic nature of language as both a social construct and a cognitive tool. This paper provides a theoretical exploration of phraseological riddles as a linguistic phenomenon, emphasizing their semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic dimensions. It aims to clarify how phraseological units operate within the riddle structure to express hidden meanings and cultural codes. By situating phraseological riddles within the broader framework of linguistic creativity and cognitive linguistics, the study highlights their significance in understanding the interplay between language, thought, and culture. The theoretical insights offered here lay the groundwork for future comparative and translational research in phraseological studies.

**Keywords:** *phraseological riddles, phraseology, cognition, metaphor, semiotics, culture, linguistic creativity*

## 1. Introduction

Language serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a repository of collective thought, culture, and identity. Within this framework, folklore genres such as riddles hold a unique place, as they represent the creative synthesis of linguistic form and cultural cognition. Among these, phraseological riddles occupy a particularly intriguing niche. They merge the metaphorical nature of riddles with the stability of phraseological units, revealing how figurative language can function

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simultaneously as a linguistic construct and a cultural symbol. As a result, phraseological riddles constitute a distinctive linguistic phenomenon that reflects the intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic aspects of a speech community's worldview.

The theoretical exploration of phraseological riddles contributes to understanding how language encapsulates cultural and cognitive models. According to Nida (1964), language is not merely a tool for conveying information but “a vehicle for thought and culture” (p. 3). This statement underscores the necessity of studying phraseological riddles as manifestations of the intricate relationship between linguistic form and cultural cognition. These riddles embody metaphorical compression: they express complex ideas through fixed expressions and symbolic associations, demonstrating the power of phraseology to convey meaning beyond literal interpretation.

From a linguistic standpoint, phraseological riddles operate on multiple levels—lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic. On the lexical level, they rely on idiomatic combinations that maintain semantic stability while allowing contextual creativity. On the syntactic level, rhythmic and parallel structures reinforce coherence and aesthetic unity. Pragmatically, they engage the listener's inferential and interpretive abilities, stimulating a process of decoding metaphoric meaning. As Cowie (1998) suggests, phraseological expressions exist “in a flexible balance between fixedness and creativity” (p. 6), a principle vividly exemplified in phraseological riddles.

Furthermore, phraseological riddles serve a cognitive and semiotic function: they invite individuals to think metaphorically and perceive reality through symbolic reasoning. This aligns with Wierzbicka's (2019) view that linguistic meaning is inseparable from cultural cognition. Through their condensed form, phraseological riddles reveal how communities encode knowledge, emotion, and value systems into stable linguistic forms.

Recent studies (e.g., Charteris-Black, 2017; Schäffner, 2019) also emphasize the role of metaphor and translation in mediating cultural cognition, reinforcing the idea that figurative structures such as riddles provide access to the deep conceptual organization of thought. Therefore, this study approaches phraseological riddles not as isolated folkloric artifacts but as theoretical constructs that bridge language, thought, and culture. It seeks to elucidate their linguistic and cognitive characteristics, emphasizing their significance in understanding the creative and intellectual dimensions of language use.

## **2. Theoretical Foundations**

The study of phraseological riddles rests upon the intersection of several linguistic disciplines—phraseology, cognitive linguistics, and semiotics. Each of these fields contributes to understanding how language encapsulates metaphorical thinking and collective cognition through stable yet creatively functional structures. Phraseological riddles, in this sense, may be defined as compressed linguistic models where idiomatic expressions and metaphorical associations converge to encode thought and cultural experience. Their theoretical basis lies in the way language, as a symbolic system, reflects the worldview of its users.

In the domain of phraseology, fixed expressions are regarded as stable linguistic units that convey meanings beyond the sum of their parts. As Cowie (1998) observes, phraseological units “occupy an intermediate position between freedom and fixity” (p. 6), functioning as a bridge between individual creativity and conventional language. When embedded in riddles, these units acquire additional semiotic depth, as they are not only linguistic elements but also cognitive triggers that activate interpretive reasoning. The riddle, by its nature, invites an intellectual challenge; the phraseological component heightens this challenge by introducing figurative ambiguity and multiple layers of meaning.

From a cognitive perspective, phraseological riddles illustrate how language functions as a tool of conceptualization rather than mere communication. They manifest the principle that linguistic meaning is inseparable from human cognition. As Wierzbicka (2019) notes, every linguistic expression embodies a culture-specific way of interpreting the world, reflecting how speakers categorize experience through shared metaphors and symbolic associations. Phraseological riddles therefore act as cognitive frames that encourage speakers to perceive familiar realities through unfamiliar configurations of thought.

Semiotically, phraseological riddles can be understood as multi-layered sign systems where linguistic, cultural, and cognitive codes interact. Each riddle functions as a miniature semiotic universe: the literal linguistic form (signifier) conceals a metaphorical or symbolic meaning (signified) that the audience must decode. Mounin (1963) emphasizes that “the preservation of stylistic and figurative meaning is essential for the full comprehension of an expression” (p. 112). In phraseological riddles, this principle is fundamental, as the figurative layer is not decorative but constitutive of meaning itself.

This theoretical perspective also aligns with Charteris-Black’s (2017) analysis of metaphor as a persuasive and cognitive force that bridges linguistic form and ideology. Similarly, Fillmore and Kay’s (2013) concept of *frame semantics* explains how meaning arises within culturally shared conceptual structures, a process clearly visible in the cognitive mechanisms of riddles. Phraseological riddles employ such frames to represent everyday experiences metaphorically—thereby transforming ordinary linguistic material into an act of creative cognition.

Recent work in translation and intercultural communication (Göpferich, 2021; Schäffner, 2019) has further shown that metaphorical and phraseological expressions serve as vehicles of cultural cognition. This connection strengthens the argument that phraseological riddles, as condensed cultural units, play a central role in transmitting collective knowledge. Thus, the theoretical study of these riddles reveals the symbiosis between phraseological fixity and metaphorical productivity: stability and creativity emerge as interdependent aspects of linguistic evolution.

In summary, the theoretical foundation of phraseological riddles integrates phraseological theory, cognitive linguistics, and semiotics into a coherent model. Through these lenses, such riddles can be understood as condensed linguistic systems that preserve and reproduce the intellectual and cultural memory of a community.

### 3. Linguistic and Cognitive Features of Phraseological Riddles

Phraseological riddles embody a complex interplay of linguistic stability and cognitive flexibility. Their structure and function illustrate how fixed expressions can generate dynamic meaning through metaphor, inference, and symbolic association. From a linguistic perspective, these riddles operate simultaneously on several levels—lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic—each contributing to the overall depth of interpretation.

At the **lexical level**, phraseological riddles rely on idiomatic expressions that preserve a degree of semantic fixity while allowing contextual reinterpretation. The phraseological unit acts as the core of the riddle's semantic structure, encapsulating shared cultural knowledge and figurative meaning. Because idioms are semantically non-transparent, they invite interpretive engagement from the listener, who must reconstruct the intended meaning through associative reasoning. This process exemplifies *metaphoric inference*, where language bridges literal form and conceptual abstraction.

At the **syntactic level**, phraseological riddles are characterized by rhythmic balance, repetition, and parallelism—features that reinforce their mnemonic and aesthetic quality. The parallel structure often mirrors cognitive symmetry, helping the listener to detect semantic patterns and hidden relations between clauses. These syntactic regularities are not merely stylistic; they fulfill a cognitive function by guiding attention and framing the inferential process that leads to comprehension.

The **semantic dimension** reveals how meaning is constructed through metaphor and polysemy. Figurative language activates multiple semantic layers that coexist within a single expression. The literal and metaphorical meanings interact, producing semantic tension—a feature that makes riddles both intellectually engaging and aesthetically rich. In this sense, the riddle becomes a site of *semantic negotiation*, where meaning is co-created through cultural and cognitive frameworks.

At the **pragmatic level**, phraseological riddles perform a dual communicative function: they both conceal and reveal meaning. The concealment provokes curiosity and intellectual challenge, while the revelation produces cognitive satisfaction and aesthetic pleasure. Pragmatically, these riddles foster interpretive cooperation between speaker and listener, activating what Sperber and Wilson (1995) call *inferential communication*.

From a cognitive linguistic viewpoint, phraseological riddles demonstrate how metaphor serves as a fundamental mechanism of thought. They reflect the human tendency to conceptualize abstract ideas through concrete imagery, aligning with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) claim that metaphor is central to human cognition. Thus, phraseological riddles exemplify the cognitive processes through which meaning is constructed, negotiated, and shared.

#### 4. The Role of Phraseological Riddles in Language and Culture

Phraseological riddles represent a vital link between linguistic form and cultural consciousness. As condensed manifestations of a community's creative thought, they preserve collective knowledge, value systems, and worldview through metaphorical and idiomatic language. Their role extends far beyond entertainment: they function as cultural texts that encode social experience and transmit traditional wisdom across generations.

Culturally, phraseological riddles serve as repositories of symbolic meaning. They embody what Wierzbicka (2019) calls *cultural scripts*—linguistic representations of shared beliefs and behaviors. Each riddle reflects a specific way of seeing and interpreting reality, grounded in the community’s ecological, historical, and social context. The phraseological component intensifies this cultural resonance because idioms themselves are products of collective metaphorical thinking. Thus, phraseological riddles are not simply linguistic puzzles; they are cultural models through which societies articulate their understanding of human experience.

From an anthropolinguistic standpoint, the role of phraseological riddles lies in their ability to maintain cultural continuity through language. They exemplify how idiomatic expression can serve as a mnemonic tool for preserving collective memory. As Mounin (1963) observed, linguistic form is a vessel for both aesthetic and cultural meaning, and in riddles this duality becomes particularly visible. Through their compact and rhythmical form, phraseological riddles allow complex cultural concepts—such as morality, wisdom, or social norms—to be transmitted in a memorable and emotionally resonant way.

In linguistic terms, phraseological riddles also highlight the interaction between language stability and cultural dynamism. Although their phraseological units are relatively fixed, their meanings evolve as the cultural context changes. This adaptability ensures that the riddles remain relevant and intelligible to new generations. The process of reinterpretation illustrates how culture continuously reshapes its own linguistic heritage.

Moreover, phraseological riddles perform an important pedagogical and communicative role. They foster linguistic creativity, metaphorical thinking, and cultural literacy, encouraging speakers to explore the expressive potential of their language. In multilingual and multicultural contexts, they can serve as instruments for intercultural understanding, illustrating how metaphor and idiom function as universal cognitive mechanisms across languages (Charteris-Black, 2017; Schäffner, 2019). This perspective aligns with Nida’s (1964) assertion that language is “a bridge between cultures rather than a barrier” (p. 3).

In sum, phraseological riddles function as dynamic cultural and linguistic systems. They embody the shared cognitive heritage of a community while simultaneously adapting to its evolving communicative needs. By integrating idiomatic expression with cultural symbolism, they demonstrate how language not only reflects culture but actively shapes it.

## 5. Conclusion

Phraseological riddles stand at the crossroads of language, cognition, and culture, embodying the intricate relationship between linguistic form and human thought. As this theoretical study has demonstrated, they are not merely products of folk creativity but systematic linguistic phenomena that reveal how meaning is constructed, encoded, and interpreted within a cultural framework. Their phraseological nature combines stability and creativity, allowing language users to communicate complex ideas through metaphor, symbolism, and idiomatic compression.

The analysis has shown that phraseological riddles operate simultaneously on lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels. They utilize fixed expressions to achieve figurative ambiguity and conceptual depth, thereby transforming ordinary language into a tool for cognitive engagement. Their form not only reflects linguistic artistry but also activates interpretive reasoning, encouraging the listener to perceive familiar concepts from novel perspectives.

Culturally, phraseological riddles play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting collective knowledge. They encode the moral, intellectual, and emotional heritage of a community, functioning as symbolic texts that maintain cultural continuity. By integrating idiomatic structures with metaphorical meaning, these riddles reflect the worldview and value systems of the people who create and share them.

In conclusion, phraseological riddles exemplify the unity of linguistic stability, cognitive creativity, and cultural expression. Their theoretical significance lies in their ability to illuminate how language operates as both a system of communication and a medium of cultural cognition. Further research may explore their translational and comparative aspects, extending the understanding of how phraseological meaning traverses linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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