TAMIL RIDDLES

G. Santhi

Introduction

Riddle is a branch of Folklore and it has an important place in the discipline 'Folklore' because of it's structural patten, easy understanding etc. On looking into the riddle structure, every riddle consists of a question and (in need of) an answer.

Riddles are questions that are framed with the purpose of confusing or testing the wits of those who do not know the answer[1]. 'Abhrams' in his paper 'Riddles' demonstrates that opposition is only the most salient of four techniques by which the image (or Gestalt) presented in the riddle-question is impaired and therefore is, in most cases, undecipherable. These techniques are,

1. Opposition - Gestalt is impaired because the component parts of the presented image do not harmonize.
2. Incomplete detail-not enough information is given for proper Gestalt to be made (i.e. for the parts to fit together).
3. Too much detail-the important traits are burried in the midst of inconsequential detail, thus 'scrambling' Gestalt.
4. False - Gestalt - details are provided that lead to an ability to discern a referent and thus call for an answer, but the answer is wrong. This answer is often an embarrassing, obscene reference. This technique is most common in catch riddles.

I. Classification of Riddles

Durga Bhagawat in his 'The riddle in Indian life, lore and literature', classified the riddles into seven as,

1.1. The riddle story

1.2. The riddles of death

1.3. The recreative riddle

1.4. Riddle poetry

1.5. Questionless riddles

1.6. The name riddles and

1.7. The marriage riddles.

The above classifications are mainly based on the content, situtation in which the riddles are put. Following five classification can be made according to the structure of riddles (sentence structure).

1.1.1. Descriptive riddles

1.1.2. Question riddles

1.1.3. Rhyming riddles

1.1.4. Fun riddles and

1.1.5. Riddles in which similies, comparisons are used.

1.1.1. Descriptive riddles:

Before analysing these riddles, one has to describe the common elements found in (Tamil) riddles. Mostly spoken forms are found, it is an indoor game (without taking into account of the occasions of marriage, death ceremonies etc.) resembles folksongs in it's form, mostly having maximum four to five lines, and about the common thing used in daily life.

1.1.1.1. "Paṭṭu mēlē paṭṭuṭuttip
paṭika niṟap paṭṭuṭutti
kācikku pōkiṟa peṇṇē
uṉ paṭṭu enna vilai
ceṭṭiyār conna vilai" (Veṅkāyam - Onion)

1.1.1.2. "Paccai paṅkaḷāvilē
veṇpaṭṭu mettaiyilē
karupputurai tūṅkukiṟār" (Koṭukkā puḷi - a kind of vegetable)

1.1.2. Question riddles:

In question riddles, the riddles form the question and mostly this type of riddles are within one or two lines. These riddles consist of the question words like enna? (what), yār (who), etc. For example,

1.1.2.1. "aḷḷa muṭiyum, kiḷḷa muṭiyātu - atu enna?"

(One can gather, but cannot pinch, what is it?)

Answer : taṇṇi - water

Water can be gathered in hand or in vessel, but cannot be pinched.

1.1.2.2. "artta rāttiri nērattilē
yārumillāta vēḷaiyilē
maḻaipeyyāta nērattile
māppiḷḷaik kuṭaipiṭittuk koṇṭirukirār—avar yār?"

Answer : Kāḷāṉ - Mushroom

(In the midnight, when nobody is found and where there is no rain the bridegroom holds the umbrella. Mushroom is in the shape of umbrella and so is described as an umbrella.)

Almost all riddles are in question type but they are not included under question riddles. Only those riddles containing the question word 'which', 'who', 'what', etc., are treated here as question riddles.

1.1.3. Rhyming riddles:

Rhyming riddles consist of rhyming words. In this type of riddles the riddler uses rhyming words automatically without his knowledge. For example,

1.1.3.1. "Karuppu caṭṭaikkāraṉ
Kāvalukkukkeṭṭikkāraṉ"

(Person wearing black shirt, fit for protection)

Answer : pūṭṭu - Lock.

1.1.3.2. "kāykkāykkum
pūpūkkum
kācukku oru ilaiyillai"

(It will yield, will blossom, but there is no leaf)

Answer : Cappāttikkaḷḷi - Prickly pear

1.1.4. Fun riddles:

In fun riddles, things are described in funny way, for example,

1.1.4.1. "kaiyum illai kālum illai
kaṭṭayaṉ poṇṭāṭṭi
kai koṭuttāl eḻuntiruppāḷ"

(Lady who did not have leg and hands, but gets up if (one) gives a hand)

Answer : kuṭam - waterpot

1.1.4.2. "eṅkaḷappaṉ centalai centalai
eṅkaḷāttāḷ muḻumoṭṭai muḻumoṭṭai
muḻumoṭṭai vayir ṟile koḻukkaṭṭai
koḻukkaṭṭai vayir ṟile kiccu mūccu"

Our father is red headed
our mother has no hair
In her stomach there is 'Kozhukatta'
In it's stomach kiçmuçh (a kind of sound)

Answer: kōḻikkuñcu - Chicken

In this riddle cock is mentioned in the first line (since cock has red crest on the head it is called red-headed); hen is mentioned in the second line (since hen has no crest on the head it is described as having no hair); egg is mentioned in the third line (since it is in the shape of Kozhukkatta (a sweet edible); it is compared with Kozhukkatta, and the last line mentioned the chicken (which produces sound like 'kiçmūç').

1.1.5. Riddles using comparison, similies etc.

In some riddles comparison, similies etc., are used to give a clue to the things described. For example,

1.1.5.1. "cinna viṭu neṟaiya ceṟā"

(The house is small but full of firewood).

Answer : Paṟkaḷ - Teeth

(Here the small house is given as comparison to the mouth and firewood is given as comparison to the teeth in the mouth).

1.1.5.2. "paṭṭuppai niṟaiya pavaṉkācu"

(Gold coins are found fully in the silk bag).

Answer : miḷakāy - Chilly

(Here silk bag is compared to the chilly skin and the coins are compared to its seeds. So the answer is 'Chilly').

"mayil vākaṉaṉ aṇṇaṉām
mutal eḻuttu 'ka'
viṉāyakaṉukku maṟu pēru"

(Brother of he who rides on a peacock, first letter 'Ga', another name of "Lord Vinayaka").

Answer: Ganesan. This type of riddles can be termed as name riddles.

Riddles help to sharpen the thinking power of both the riddler and the solver of the riddle. Like other forms of folklore, riddles also keep oral tradition as the main concept.

Till now the classification is done according to the content of the riddles. The riddling process, the riddling conventions and riddling occasions all contain a rich source of information from which various conceptions of a community and thier cultural experiences can be culled out.

In most of these cases, leaving aside the cross cultural items, a riddle solution can be valid only as it is offered by a native speaker of the language who shares the cultural experience of the community and has an

adequate familiarity with traditional knowledge. In riddles communication is the act of transfering message from one system to another. The message is transferred by means of communication channels. Signals however are what transferred in physical form; the signals therefore are carriers of the message.

A riddle acts as a communication channel, in the sense that the words, items of culture, the signals of various images, act as carriers of message from the central nervous system of the questioner or encoder to the central nervous system of the decoder, where the decoder interprets the chosen items of the code.

According to Aristotle the riddle was an incogrous statement which could only be expressed through the substitution of metaphorical statements or terms, for metaphor and riddle imply one another.

The established and coded inter-relationship between the two parts of the riddle image and answer vary from region to region and help to discover the semantic dominants of different areas to a great extent.

The riddles are ideally suited to be studied by diverse methods and it is considered to be a good concept for inter-disciplinary studies, if one knows how to use them. Because of it's great importance in every primitive cultures, riddling "is as mathematics in the schools of the learned, so is it in the human school of the folk".

Both exercise the mind to understand the unknown, starting from known conditions. Riddles were used not only to test the intelligence and skills of each other, but also as the identity of the members in a culture.

2. Riddle structure

On looking into the riddle structure, every riddle consists of a question and is need of an answer. Elli Kongas Maranda in the paper, "The logic of Riddles", in the book - "Structural Analysis of oral tradition" (edited by Pierre Maranda & Elli Kongas Maranda) discusses the structural analysis of Finnish riddles.

She used three main-central concepts viz., analogy, metaphor and metonymy. According to her, analogy is a technique or reasoning. The

utilization of this technique rests on two kinds of connections between phenomena; similarity and contiguity, in other words metaphor and metonymy. In the analogy formula,

A/B = C/D

two members in the same structural position (A and C) constitute a sign, a metaphor in which one of them (A) is the signans, or the 'signifier', and the other (C) is the signatum or the 'signified'. Finally the members on one side of the equation are in a metonymic relation to each other (A and B). Thus in the analogy we have the inter-relation of metaphor and metonymy in the same picture.

Analogy

Metaphor

Metonymy A/B C/D

In other words, metonymy is the relation of two terms, metaphor, the equation of two terms. Tamil riddles also can be approached structurally. This approach finds out the inter-relations between two parts of the riddle, the image and the answer. A neat relation exists between the images and answers. This approach is based on the idea that a riddle is a structural unit, which necessarily consists of two parts, the riddle image and the riddle answer. In a riddling situation these two parts are uttered by two different parties.

The structural unit of the riddle is, a unit larger than a sentence. So it's constituent elements do not agree with those of a sentence. So following possible syntactic variations are all equivalent in terms of riddle structure.

1. "Aṇṭa pūkkaḷ cinna cinnatāka irukkum pūkkaḷ
anta pūkkaḷ ciṅkāramāka irukkum pūkkaḷ
anta pūkkaḷ citarikkiṭakkum pūkkaḷ
anta pūkkaḷ iravil pūkkum pūkkaḷ
anta pūkkaḷ enna pūkkaḷ"

'irukkum' **deletion transformation**

anta pūkkaḷ cinna cinnatāka pūkkaḷ
anta pūkkaḷ ciṅkāramāka pūkkaḷ
anta pūkkaḷ citarikkaṭakkum pūkkaḷ
anta pūkkaḷ iravil pūkkum pūkkaḷ
anta pūkkaḷ enna pūkkaḷ"

'āka' **deletion transformation**

anta pūkkaḷ cinna cinnap pūkkaḷ
anta pūkkaḷ ciṅkārap pūkkaḷ
anta pūkkaḷ citarikkiṭakkum pūkkaḷ
anta pūkkaḷ iravil pūkkum pūkkaḷ
anta pūkkaḷ enna pūkkaḷ"

'anta' **deletion transformation**

pūkkaḷ cinna cinnap pūkkaḷ
pūkkaḷ ciṅkārap pūkkaḷ
pūkkaḷ citarikkiṭakkum pūkkaḷ
pūkkaḷ iravil pūkkum pūkkaḷ
pūkkaḷ enna pūkkaḷ"

equi NP deletion transformation

ciṇṇa cinnap pūkkaḷ
ciṅkārap pūkkaḷ
citarikkiṭakkum pūkkaḷ
iravil pūkkum pūkkaḷ
enna pūkkaḷ" - naṭcattiram **(Star)**

3. Classification of Riddle according to it's structure

As far as "Tamil Riddles" are concerned, sturcturally three type of riddles can be found. They are;

3.1. Simple riddle structure
3.2. Compound riddle structure
3.3. String riddle structure

3.1. Simple Riddle Structure

Simple riddle structure like

"ūci nuḻaiyāta kiṇattilē orupaṭi taṇṇīr" - tēṅkāy

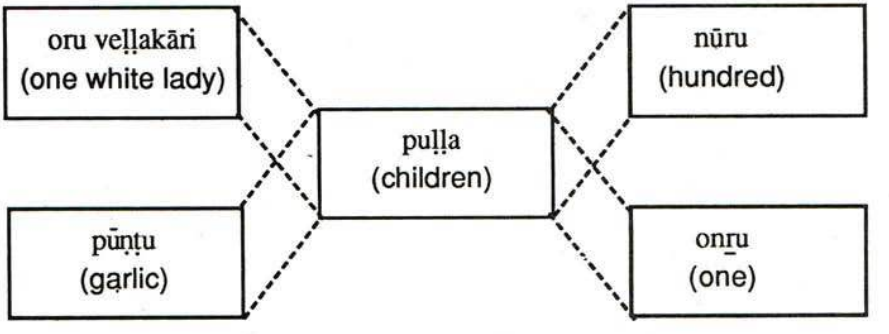
(Needle cannot enter into the well where one litre water is found — coconut).

This riddle structure has only one clue with one answer. In this riddle whole sentence structure is the clue; main clues are (i) kiṇaṟu 'well', (ii) taṇṇīr 'water' and (iii) ūci nuḻaiya muṭiyāta taṉmai' the condition where needle cannot enter; so the answer is coconut.

The simple riddle structure for

"oru veḷḷakkārikku puḷḷa nūṟṟu' - pūṇṭu

(For one White lady hundred children - garlic) can be derived as follows.



The above figure shows the interaction of the intrpretation about a thing and the true thing which form a riddle. The structure also can be shown in the table form.

This table contains five elements in the simple riddle structure. They are,

I. Comparable given terms i.e., veḷḷakkāri - white lady, here.

II. Constant i.e. puḷḷa irukkiratu 'has children' for both the given and hidden term.

III. The hidden variable which has always zero value in the explicit structure of the riddle i.e. onru 'one', here.

IV. The given variable which serves as the clue to get the answer i.e. nūru 'hundred', here.

V. The hidden term i.e. the answer i.e. pūṇṭu 'garlic', here.

Terms	Premises			
	Constant	Variable		
Given	oru veḷḷakkāri (one white lady) I	puḷḷa irukkiṟatu (has children) II	nūṟu (hundred) IV	Image
Hidden	pūṇṭu (garlic) V		onṟu (one) III	Answer

Though this type of derivation is possible for simple riddle structure, in Tamil all simple riddles cannot be taken into account under this derivation, but most of them can be treated as above.

3.2 Compound Riddle Structure

In Compound riddle structure we can have more than one clue i.e. the elements (clue: answer) are in the ratio

N:1 where 'N' is greater than 1. i.e. N>1, 'N' may be 2,3,4,.....

In this collection of riddle, it is found that maximum number of clue is '3'. There can be more clues for one answer.

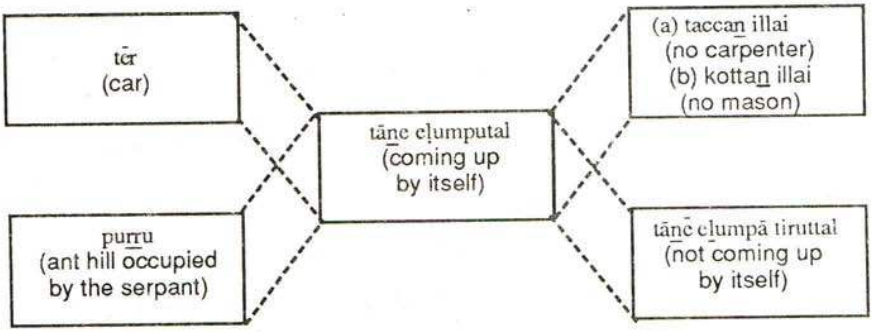
Following riddle consists of the clue and the answer in the ragio N:1 i.e. the number of clues is two for one answer.

"taccaṉum illāmal kottaṉumillāmal tāṉē
eḻumbum cittirait tēr" - (Puṟṟu)

('cittirai car' built up by itself without the carpenter and the mason).

(Ant hill occupied by the serpents)

In this riddle (I) the comparable given term is tēr 'car'. (II) the constant for both given and hidden term is tāṉē eḻumputal 'come up by itself'. (III) hidden variable which has zero value in the explicit structure of the riddle is tāṉē eḻumpātiruttal 'not coming up by by itself'. (IV) Given variables which 'serve as the clue to get the answer are (a) taccaṉillai 'no carpenter' and the hidden term i.e. the answer 'puṟṟu' 'ant hill' occupied by the serpents. This structure can be shown in the picturesque form as follows:



This figure shows the intersection of the interpretation about a thing and the true thing. In this riddle two clues viz. taccaṉ illai and kottaṉ illai give the idea to the answerer i.e. to get the answer. This structure can be arranged in the table form. I, II, IV in the table are described by the riddler and III is remembered by the answerer to get the answer V.

Terms		Premises		
		Constant	Variable	
Given	tēr (car) I	tāṉē eḻumputal (the act of coming up by itself) II	(a) taccaṉ illai (no carpenter) (b) kottaṉ illai (no mason) IV	Image
Hidden	puṟṟu (ant hill) V		tāṉē eḻumpāt-iruttal (the act of not coming up by itself) III	Answer

Thus compound riddles consist of more than one clue for one answer.

3.3. String riddle

String riddle consists of the elements (clue: answer) in the ratio N:N where 'N' is any number. In string riddles each line consists of a clue and an answer. With these, (clue and answer), the actual answer for the riddle is pointed out for which also there is a clue. For example,

"āṉai acaintu vara
arumiḷaku cinti vara
kottaḷattu peṇkaḷ ellām kūṭi kulaviyiṭa - avai enna"

(mēkam, maḻaittuḷi, tavaḷai).

"The elephant is moving
The small pepper is sprinkling down
The ladies in the village are making sound - What are those"

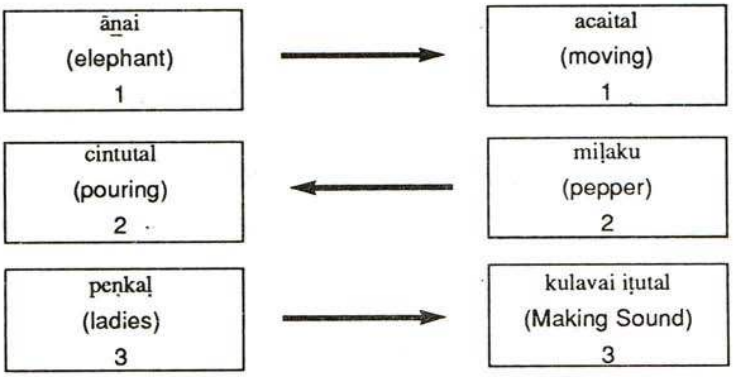
(Cloud, rain drops and frog)

has three answers for three clues, cloud moves like an elephant, the rain drops come down like small pepper , all the frogs make sound in a happy mood like the ladies in the villages. In this riddle the actual answer viz. frog can be identified by means of the given clue and the proceeding answers. Also in this riddle each clue and the answer are stringed with one another. So this type of riddles are treated as string riddles.

In this type of riddle the constant is only one, though the clue, variables, answer etc., are more than one. This riddle consists of a constant viz., oru ceyal 'an action' (in every step we have an action). Given variables are 1) acaital 'the act of moving' 2) cintutal) 'the act of pouring', 3) kulavai itutal 'the act of making sound' (in a jolly mood). Like in other type of riddles, in string riddle also there is a hidden variable viz. kulavai iṭātiruttal 'the act of not making sound'. As every one knows, only when there is rain the frogs make sound in a jolly mood. So if there is no rain

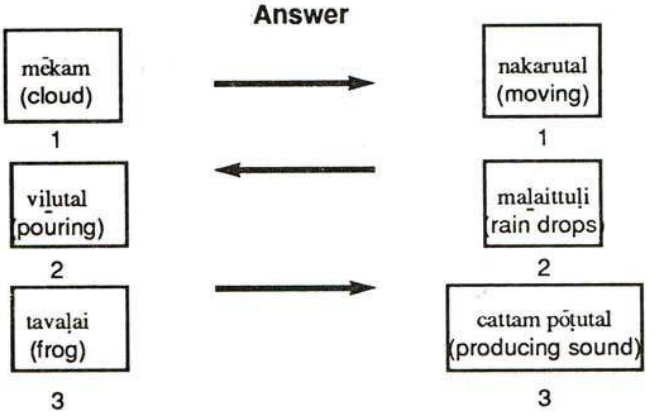
there will be no action of this kind. But the first two lines refer the cloud and the rain, and so automatically one can find our that 'peṇkal' refers to 'tavaḷai'. This structure can be shown in the following figure.

Riddle

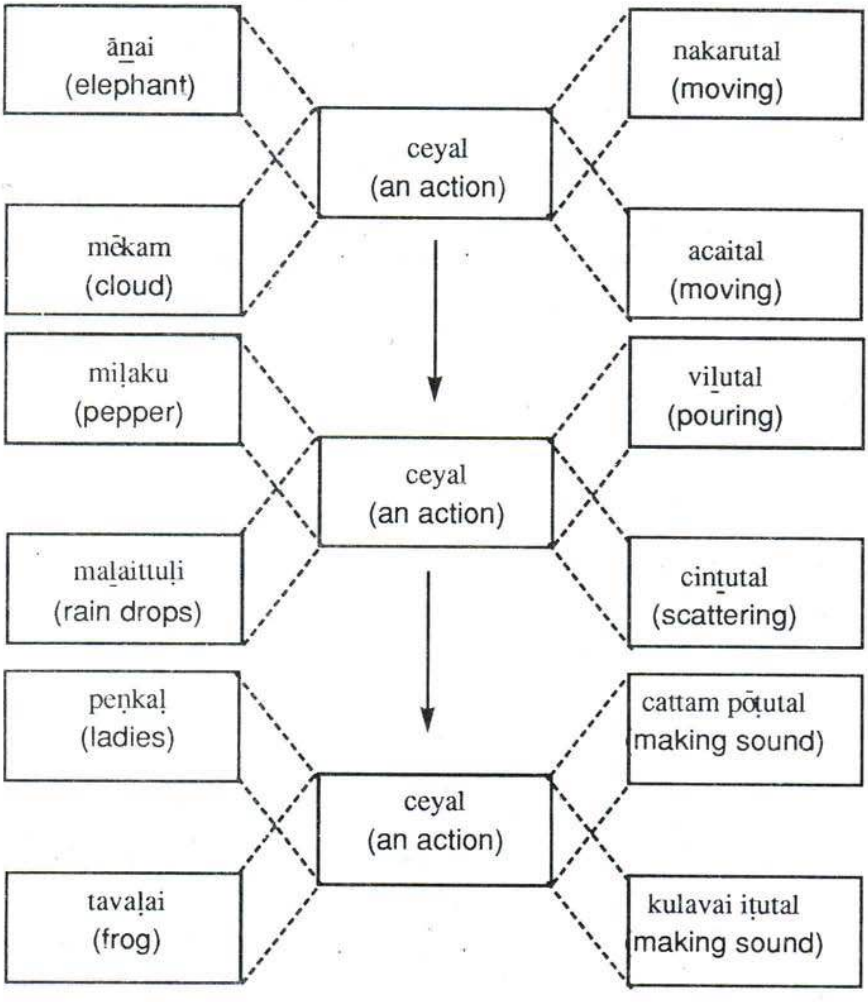


This riddle has the 'Answer' in the diagrammatic form as represented as below:

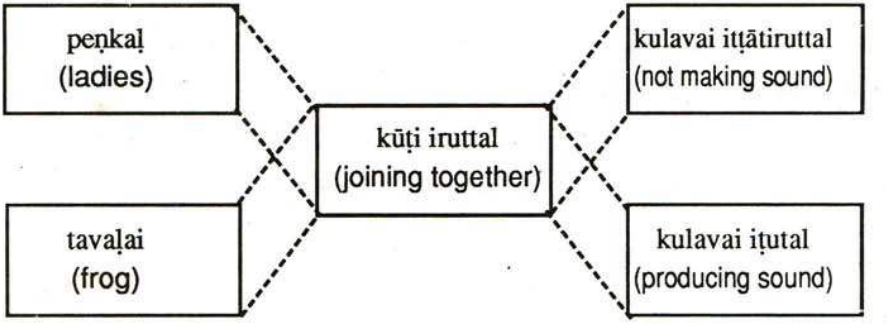
Answer



The riddle and the answer can be connected as follows as shown in the figure.



This figure shows the intersection of the interpretation about a thing and the true thing in each step, which are connected as strings. Only in the last step we can find the hidden variable viz. kulavi iṭātiruttal ' not making sound' which is the main point to the answerer to get the answer. Thus the structure of the last step can be shown in the following figure:



The structure of this riddle can be tabulated. In string riddles, like the constant, the hidden variable is also only one. Thus in string riddle, first a thing is conncted with the next etc., like this the string goes on;

TABLE

Terms		Premises		
		Constant	Variable	
Given	1. āṉai (elephant) 2. miḷaku (pepper) 3. peṇkaḷ (ladies) I	ceyal (an action) II	1. acaital (the act of moving) 2. cintutal (the act of scattering) 3. kulavai iṭutal (producing sound) IV	Image
Hidden	mēkam (cloud) maḻaittuḷi (rain drops) tavaḷai (frog) V		kulavai iṭātiruttal (not producing sound) III	Answer

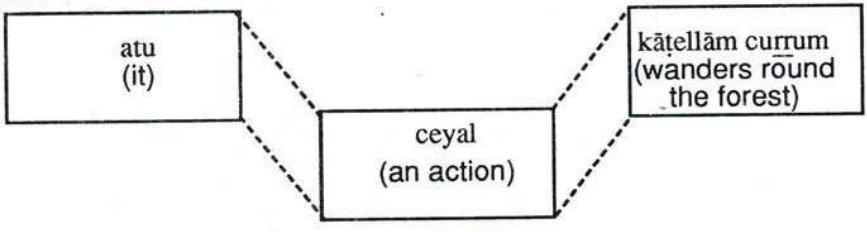
and on the basis of these clue and answer, the answerer points out the correct answer. As in the simple and compound riddle structure, the answerer has to guess the hidden variable which is the most important point to get the answer.

For the same type of riddle structure following formula can also be applied. The formula accompanying the analysis is A = B; F x A = F x B, 'A' relation of equivalence is establishd between two terms; A and B through a common function given in the riddle. For example,

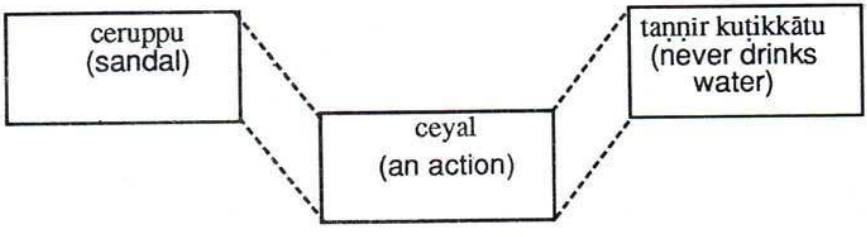
kāṭellām currivarum
kaṇṭa taṇṇīr kuṭikkātu (Ceruppu)

(It wanders around the forest, but never drinks the available water - Sandal)

Signan



Signatum



Applying the formula F x A = F x B, where the function is not fearing for one thing but fearing for the other thing is similar to the function of fearing for one thing and not fearing for other thing B.

$$F \times A = F \times B$$

$$\text{atu x kāṭellām currivarum} = \text{atu x taṇṇir kuṭikkātu}$$

giving rise to a result (or) answer = sandal.

The application of structuralistic models in riddles can improve our understanding of the riddles to see their deeper levels of significance in the different cultures.

Though this type of structures are not applicable to all riddles, most of the riddles can be treated under these three types. This type of structure is not universal because some riddle structures are very complicated and one cannot easily find out the elements of the riddle like constant, hidden variable etc.

4. Proverbs and riddles

Proverbs and riddls have the following distinctions.

Proverbs	Riddles
1. Statement type	Eventhough it is statement type, mostly questions are found.
2. Consists of minimum one line to a maximum of four lines.	Consists of minimum one line to a maximum of four lines and also more than four lines.
3. Four types of structures are found	Structure is entirely different from proverbs.
4. Reason behind it	No reason behind it.
5. Uttered casually in the talk	Not casual
6. Always it is used.	Only at the time of play, to pass the time it is used.
7. Eventhough question type is found, it does not need an answer.	Question is found and it needs the answer.
8. Apart from the structure, various types of information, advices, etc., are found in the proverbs.	For one answer different statements (or) different structured riddles are found.

5. Riddles and other major aspects of Folklore

Riddles are found mostly in folksongs, particularly in love songs and play songs. Riddle can be considered as an indoor game. So riddle can be connected with folk-game. Some customs, habits (like one should not utter their husband's names) and beliefs have close connection with riddle. In almost all the major folklore aspects riddles have their own share.

Conclusion

Riddle is an aspect of folklore like the other major aspects of folklore. It is considered to be an indoor game. It developes mental growth, thinking power of the riddler as well as the answerer. Also it acts as a cross-cultural concept among different community people. Riddle is found among folk people in abundance. This concept is not only the creation of village folk, but is the creation of all folk, in the country, who are interested in this. Eventhough it is found among village-folk in abundance it is a common concept among almost all the people of each and every society.

Notes

1. *Riddles' - Folklore and Folklife - An Introduction, edited by Richard M. Dorson, p.p. 130-131.*

Bibliography

1. Arya,S.P., - 'A Socialogical study of Folklore', Indian Publications, Calcutta.

2. Coffine, P. Tristram- 'American Folklore', (Ed.) III, Voice of American Forum Lectures, 1968.

3. Don Yoder (Ed.) - American Folklife, University of Texas Press, Austin and London, 1976.

4. Dorson Richard, M. - Folklore and Folklife, An introduction, The Univeristy of Chicago press, 1972.

5. Dundes Alan - Analytical Essays in Folklore, 1976.

6. Durga Bhagwat - The riddle in Indian Life, Lore and literature, Popular Prakasham, Bombay, 1965.

7. Leach Maria (Ed.) - Standard Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend, London, 1972.

8. Maranda, P., - Soviet Structural Folkloristics, New York, 1964.

9. Maranda, E.P., - Structural Models in Folklore and Transformational esays, The Hague, Mouton, 1971.

10. ———— - Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition, The Hague, Mouton, 1982.

11. Russel Reaver, J & Boswell, W. George - Fundamentals of Folk literature (N.D.)