

BOOK REVIEWS

Conversational Folklore Genres

The Language of Riddles: New Perspectives. By W. J. Pepicello and Thomas A. Green. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984. Pp. 169, introduction, conclusion, postscript, appendix, bibliography, index, figures. \$17.50)

This compact study makes a genuine contribution to our understanding of one kind of riddle, the riddle founded on manipulation of the verbal code, of either spoken or written language. It is especially useful for its careful handling of the grammatical trickery underlying riddles whose block element derives from purely linguistic machinations. The authors show how a variety of linguistic features operate to bring about the anomalous verbal propositions found in riddles of this sort. They also present a brief, comparative excursion into Spanish-language riddles, which exhibit many of the same elements documented for English-language riddles.

In a more venturesome spirit, Pepicello and Green attempt to locate the discussion of riddles in the framework of artistic and innovative uses of language. They draw on a body of semiotic and sociolinguistic literature that should be of considerable interest to folklorists working with verbal art. The authors formulate the concept of the folk riddle as an agonistic, ludic, context-free exploration of the linguistic code. In so doing, they move some distance toward characterizing the riddle as a particular kind of speech act or speech event, though here, as in the discussion of grammatical trickery, the authors' analysis stops short of any such explicit, formal characterization.

In spite of these and other promising suggestions, there are some serious shortcomings in the Pepicello and Green account of the riddle. I found that their study presents an impoverished vision of the riddle as a social and cultural product, perhaps due to two crucial factors: first, they base their conclusions on a very limited corpus of riddles, a corpus with certain peculiarities that apparently escaped the notice of the authors; and second, they work from a very conservative orientation toward art, holding that art must "operate within a preestablished cultural framework" and therefore cannot be "novel in any genuine sense of that word" (p. 4). These factors result in the articulation of a narrow arena for the riddle: the authors claim that riddles lead to solutions and not to altered states of perception; that riddles do not revitalize conventional modes of expression; that riddles are context-free performances; and that the signified of the riddle is the linguistic code. Each of these assertions is somewhat misleading, and in concert they deprive the riddle of the greater part of its social and cultural significance.

In the interests of furthering a discussion of these matters, I will briefly explore the gap between the Pepicello and Green account and a broader account of the kind I would favor. Let us first note that Pepicello and Green provide a list of some 68 items collected by themselves and that they "feel safe in assuming that they constitute a reasonable sampling of contemporary American riddles in the English language" (p. 155). But one is left wondering: just how representative is this sample, and which component of our diversified society does it represent? On inspection, it will be found that well over 90% of this corpus turns on purely grammatical deceptions, on the

order of: (1) *When is a doctor most annoyed?* (When he is out of patients). The very few riddles on this list deriving from metaphorical processes (some four items) all utilize conventional polysemy of the sort found in idioms and clichés, as in (2) *What has a mouth but cannot eat?* (River). Conspicuous for their absence are riddles based on innovative metaphor, and the kind of riddle based on real-world anomaly is represented by only a couple of items, such as (3) *What do you call a man who marries another man?* (A minister). Each of the riddles cited above achieves its deception through a different route. The fourth possibility, that of innovative comparison, is not to be found at all in the Pepicello and Green riddle corpus. Riddles founded on purely grammatical block elements predominate overwhelmingly.

This finding is of considerable interest in its own right. It suggests a dramatic intensification of a trend away from metaphorical riddles in modern urban society (see my *Children's Riddling*, 240–241). The predominantly upper-middle, professional class producing the Pepicello and Green corpus (the authors state that their samples came mostly from University and professional settings) has apparently all but divested itself of metaphorical riddles in favor of the kinds of riddles founded on purely linguistic operations. But wait: before reaching such a conclusion, let us note that the authors state that many of these riddles “were provided by audience members who approached us after paper presentations at professional meetings” (p. 155). It seems probable that some degree of self-selection (audience members knew that the authors were interested in the linguistic approach) may have entered the system to create an unnaturally high proportion of riddles with linguistic block elements.

Pepicello and Green, it must be noted, do draw on additional sources (including Archer Taylor's classic collection), but they seem to base most of their speculations, as is only natural, on the comparatively larger corpus gathered by themselves. The truth that they capture from their data, and attempt to apply to the folk riddle as a genre, is only a partial one: they correctly view the riddle as a species of folk linguistics, dedicated to the examination of the linguistic code.

In passing, I will record one disagreement with the Pepicello and Green treatment of these language-based riddles. They find it implausible that riddles pointing to the linguistic quirks of clichés and idioms might be capable of investing ordinary language with new life and vitality. Their synchronicity is impeccable: “historical considerations are irrelevant” (p. 105). But to some users of the language at least, a riddle like: (4) *What has an eye but cannot see?* (A potato) does open up a vista on the history of the English language. Moreover, by juxtaposing the conventional and metaphorical hearings, it forces a re-experiencing of that historical moment when speaking of the “eye” of a potato amounted to a striking expansion of conventional usage. Riddles of this kind endow language with multiple frames and surfaces, enriching our perceptions of the linguistic resources at our disposal. In denying this function to the riddle, Pepicello and Green strip the genre of one of its essential missions, that of enhancing the ordinary user's appreciation of his own language.

But let us return to the peculiar status of the Pepicello and Green riddle corpus. What happens to their account of the folk riddle when riddles founded on innovative comparison and real-world anomaly are thrown into the pot? I refer to riddles like these (taken from my field collection among children): (5) *What's blue and white and has two cherries on top?* (A police car); (6) *A thousand lights in a dish. What is it?* (The stars in the night sky); (7) *What's taller sitting than standing?* (A dog); and (8) *How many balls of string would it take to reach the moon?* (One big one). The first two are riddles based on innovative comparison, while the latter two are citations of real-world anomaly. They are vital to any account of the genre, even if certain social environments might work toward diminishing their presence.

The first revelation occasioned by our attending to riddles of these kinds is that linguistic play is only one of the mechanisms for constructing block elements. Riddles are not limited to the inspection of linguistic codes; they are equally instruments for exploring extra-linguistic concep-

tual codes, the codes we use to classify and interpret experience. Next, an imaging function comes into play and takes on an importance equal to that of linguistic trifling. We perceive that one class of riddles calls upon us to visualize objects in the world and to inspect them for formal similarities, while another class of riddles directs our attention exclusively to their linguistic substance. A sliding scale between the linguistic and the metaphorical, as proposed by the authors, appears to undermine this vital distinction.

Third, we can now see that riddles can indeed produce altered states of perception. Contrary to Pepicello and Green, riddles apparently can transcend cultural systems, by pointing to alternative means of organizing experience and thereby pointing out the inherent weaknesses of conceptual systems. Pepicello and Green have discovered only one dimension of the meta-cultural dispensation of the riddle. They have not dealt with the role played by metaphorical riddles in organizing different realms of experience into a superordinary world view (a prominent theme in the work of Elli Kōngäs Maranda), nor have they noted the role played by riddles that cite real-world anomaly in challenging complacent assumptions regarding the nature of reality. When these functions of riddles are taken into consideration, the genre acquires a transcendental cultural mission far surpassing the limited scope allotted to it in the study under review.

Finally, I should mention one other area in which I would maintain that the Pepicello and Green account occasions a loss of vital substance. The authors' proposition that the folk riddle is a context-free performance genre whose signified is the linguistic code, closes off access to a number of important dimensions of riddling. The social context of riddling can exert a tremendous influence over the kinds of riddles produced; the riddling session as a social process remains a basic component of any adequate account of the genre. Lastly, the Pepicello and Green assertion that "the signified of riddles is not an object or a situation, but rather the code itself" (p. 128) disregards the explicit content of riddle propositions and solutions. Two major insights are at stake: one, the characteristic maneuver of the riddle to seize on the familiar realms of experience and render them strange, investing them with a new vitality (just as we have seen in relation to ordinary language); and two, the manner in which inventories of objects mentioned in riddle texts reflect the life-ways, concerns, and general outlook of the host community. Indeed, the authors' own riddle corpus nicely illustrates each of these propositions.

Pepicello and Green have produced a welcome addition to the literature on riddles, in the form of a thought-provoking commentary on one kind of riddle. If, as I have suggested, their attempts to formulate a general account of the genre have unfortunately weeded out basic social, cultural, and cognitive dimensions of riddling, they are nonetheless to be commended for moving the discussion of the riddle onto fresh and promising intellectual ground.

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Naming Systems. Symposium organized by Harold C. Conklin; proceedings edited by Elisabeth Tooker. (Washington, D.C.: American Ethnological Society, 1984. 1980 Proceedings of The American Ethnological Society, Pp. vii + 107, foreword. \$12.00)

This collection of papers presented at the Spring 1980 meeting of the American Ethnological Society shows that the lack of interest in personal and place names, as reflected in the inadequate attention heretofore paid to names in the ethnographic literature, is unwarranted and that a systematic treatment of names and naming behavior can be very helpful to us in understanding and interpreting a great many social and cultural phenomena. If we but carefully examine a society's naming practices—how names originate and are used—we can learn how its individual members