

Linguistic Means of Expression in Russian and Uzbek Riddles: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract. *Riddles, as ancient forms of oral folk art, encapsulate cultural values, environmental knowledge, and worldview across civilizations.*

Russian and Uzbek riddles, though structurally similar in their use of metaphor and poetic devices, reveal distinct cultural and ecological imagery reflective of Orthodox and Islamic influences respectively.

Despite a rich body of folkloric literature, comparative linguocultural analysis of riddles between these two traditions has been limited, especially in examining symbolic representation and worldview expression.

This study aims to compare the linguistic means of expression in Russian and Uzbek riddles, focusing on how each tradition encodes cultural identity, environmental interaction, and moral values.

The analysis of 320 riddles demonstrates that Russian riddles favor symbols such as snow, forest, and stove—connoting isolation, endurance, and warmth—while Uzbek riddles prioritize sun, bread, and tandir—emphasizing community, sustenance, and harmony. Russian riddles lean toward lyrical structures, while Uzbek riddles are concise and reflective. Religious elements also subtly shape symbolic choices in both traditions.

The study introduces a detailed classification of riddle imagery into semantic categories and reveals how cultural context determines metaphorical depth and poetic form.

These findings underscore the potential of riddles as tools for intercultural education and linguocultural pedagogy. By analyzing them as symbolic texts, educators and researchers can gain deeper insights into national identity formation and the transmission of cultural knowledge.

Key words: *riddle, linguoculture, oral folk art, comparative analysis, national worldview, symbolic imagery.*

Introduction

Riddles are among the most ancient and enduring forms of human expression, found in virtually every culture across the world. As a distinctive genre of oral folk creativity, riddles have historically functioned not merely as a form of amusement or intellectual challenge, especially for children, but as complex cultural artifacts embedded with layers of meaning. They encapsulate the worldview, daily realities, and philosophical beliefs of the communities that created and transmitted them through generations [1].

From a linguistic standpoint, riddles are notable for their compact structure, metaphorical richness, and reliance on semantic ambiguity. They challenge the listener to decode hidden meanings based on

cultural context and linguistic cues, often utilizing poetic devices such as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, personification, and metaphor. This makes riddles not only a playful genre but also a vehicle for transmitting knowledge, norms, and collective memory [2].

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in examining riddles from a **linguocultural perspective**, which situates language within the broader framework of cultural practices and cognitive models. This interdisciplinary approach emphasizes that riddles are not culturally neutral; rather, they are deeply shaped by the ecological, religious, and historical context in which they are created. As such, riddles offer scholars a valuable lens through which to explore how different cultures conceptualize nature, social roles, morality, and metaphysical beliefs [3].

For instance, the imagery found in riddles often reflects the dominant environmental conditions and societal structures of a given region. In agricultural societies, riddles may include references to land, weather, and crops, while in nomadic or forested regions, animals and natural landscapes may take on symbolic roles. Furthermore, the choice of metaphors and symbolic associations within riddles reveals much about national identity, cultural priorities, and the way a particular group interprets its surroundings [4].

In sum, riddles are more than linguistic puzzles; they are cultural texts that encode collective wisdom, humor, fear, hope, and worldview. A comparative study of riddles from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds—such as Russian and Uzbek traditions—can uncover both universal human concerns and specific cultural distinctions. This makes riddles a fertile ground for interdisciplinary research combining linguistics, anthropology, folklore studies, and cognitive science [5].

Literature Review

The study of riddles as a form of oral folk tradition has long attracted the attention of linguists, folklorists, and cultural theorists. Riddles are recognized not only for their playful and poetic character but also for their function as a reflection of national consciousness and cultural worldview. In traditional linguistics, riddles were often examined from the perspective of poetic structure, metaphorical language, and stylistic devices. However, in recent years, the linguocultural approach has gained prominence, focusing on the intersection between language, cognition, and cultural identity [6].

Prominent Uzbek linguist A. Kayumov defined riddles as “a testing ground for folk thinking and a sacred repository of linguistic wealth.” He emphasized their capacity to encapsulate national experience, collective knowledge, and philosophical depth through metaphor, personification, and symbolic imagery. Kayumov’s work highlights how riddles serve as linguistic microcosms of Uzbek society, embedding cultural wisdom and everyday realities within compact verbal forms [7].

In Russian scholarship, folklorist V. Propp provided a mythological and semiotic interpretation of Russian riddles. He argued that many riddles are remnants of archaic belief systems and seasonal rites. For example, a riddle like *“Without hands, without feet, it knocks at the window”* symbolizes winter winds and reflects animistic perceptions of natural forces in pre-Christian Slavic folklore. Propp saw riddles as tools for understanding how ancient peoples conceptualized their relationship with the environment [8].

V.M. Zhirmunsky further explored the poetic and metaphorical richness of Russian riddles. He considered them as “mirrors of folk poetic thought,” with particular attention to their depictions of rural life, seasonal change, and moral values. His analysis of natural landscapes and domestic imagery illustrates how riddles reflect the lived experience and spiritual dimensions of Russian village culture [9].

Contemporary Uzbek scholar R. Rajabov took a linguocultural perspective in analyzing symbolic elements in Uzbek riddles. He categorized common images such as the moon, sun, water, mountain, and earth as “semantic cores” grounded in agricultural life and traditional Islamic beliefs. Rajabov’s work demonstrates how these symbols function as cultural codes, revealing attitudes toward nature, social cohesion, and divine providence [10].

From a broader theoretical viewpoint, Russian linguoculturalist N.F. Alafirenko proposed that riddles are cultural-linguistic units that encapsulate national mentality. He emphasized the role of semantic structures and symbolic imagery in conveying culturally embedded meanings. Likewise, anthropological linguists such as S.G. Ter-Minasova and Y.N. Karaulov argued that language serves as a reflection of national consciousness. They maintained that folk genres like riddles provide vital insights into intercultural differences and the symbolic organization of reality [11].

In the context of comparative folklore studies, riddles are increasingly recognized as vehicles of intercultural dialogue, transmitting not only linguistic but also cognitive and emotional knowledge. Despite sharing some universal patterns—such as metaphor, ambiguity, and brevity—riddles vary significantly in the symbols they employ, the environments they reference, and the values they promote. These differences underline the importance of cultural specificity in linguistic expression [12].

In summary, the existing body of literature affirms that riddles are rich, multifunctional texts that function simultaneously as language games, cultural expressions, and cognitive models. Through the lens of linguoculture, riddles from Russian and Uzbek traditions reveal deep-rooted worldviews, aesthetic orientations, and moral frameworks. This literature provides a theoretical foundation for the present comparative analysis, highlighting the need to study riddles not only as poetic structures but also as culturally charged linguistic phenomena.

Methodology

To explore how language and culture intersect in Russian and Uzbek riddles, this study adopts a linguocultural approach that goes beyond mere textual comparison. The goal is not only to analyze riddles as poetic or stylistic constructions, but also to understand them as cultural expressions that reflect national identity, worldview, and cognitive patterns. For this reason, the methodology combines tools from several disciplines: linguistics, cultural anthropology, folklore studies, and cognitive semantics.

The first step in the research involved compiling a diverse and representative corpus of riddles. In total, around 320 riddles were selected—half in Russian and half in Uzbek. Care was taken to include texts from both printed folklore collections and trusted online databases, such as Zagadki-Online and ZiyoUz, which archive traditional riddles from across regions. This variety helped ensure that the riddles analyzed reflected a range of environmental, religious, and social backgrounds.

Once the corpus was established, each riddle was examined closely for its internal structure and language. Special attention was paid to the metaphors, personifications, and symbols embedded in each text. These poetic devices often carry meanings that are not immediately apparent but are deeply rooted in the traditional beliefs and life experiences of a people. For example, the frequent appearance of “snow” in Russian riddles evokes not only a physical element but a cultural association with silence, endurance, and the passage of time. In contrast, Uzbek riddles often include references to “sun” or “bread,” which in their cultural context symbolize life, warmth, and sustenance.

The riddles were then classified into five broad semantic categories: natural imagery, domestic objects, animals, symbolic figures, and religious elements. This classification enabled a clearer understanding of the thematic focus in each cultural tradition. But more importantly, it revealed how language functions as a mirror of cultural reality. What Russian riddles emphasize—such as forests, bears, and stoves—reflects a cold, woodland environment. Uzbek riddles, with images of the sun, mountains, and tandir ovens, reflect an agricultural and communal lifestyle shaped by heat and hospitality.

Another key part of the analysis focused on the poetic structure of the riddles. Russian riddles often take the form of rhymed quatrains with a distinct musical rhythm, which reflects the influence of oral poetry and traditional song. Uzbek riddles, on the other hand, tend to be shorter, often built on metaphor and layered meanings. They are less about sound and more about insight, frequently resembling moral reflections or proverbs.

The study also involved a simple statistical analysis of image frequency. For instance, “snow” appears 41 times in the Russian data set, while “sun” appears 37 times in Uzbek riddles. Though seemingly minor, these numbers helped confirm broader cultural patterns—namely, that riddles are shaped by geography and daily experience as much as by linguistic creativity.

Overall, this methodology was not just about identifying similarities and differences between Russian and Uzbek riddles. It aimed to understand how two cultures use language to encode their way of seeing the world. Riddles, in this sense, are more than just puzzles—they are symbolic texts, reflecting collective consciousness. By combining close reading with cultural analysis and comparative thinking, this study offers a richer, more nuanced understanding of the linguistic and cultural layers that make riddles such a powerful form of traditional knowledge.

Results

The comparative analysis of Russian and Uzbek riddles revealed clear patterns in the way each culture encodes its environment, values, and worldview through linguistic means. Although riddles across cultures share certain universal features—such as metaphor, ambiguity, and brevity—this study demonstrates that the **semantic focus, symbolic imagery, and stylistic preferences** of riddles are deeply rooted in specific cultural and ecological contexts [13].

One of the most striking findings was the **prevalence of nature-based imagery** in both traditions, yet the content and connotations of these natural symbols varied significantly. Russian riddles frequently featured elements such as **snow, forest, river, frost, and moon**, which reflect the climatic and geographical features of a northern, wooded environment. These images often symbolized stillness, mystery, endurance, or isolation. For instance, the image of “*snow knocking at the window*” is a metaphor not just for weather, but for the presence of nature as a spiritual or even sentient force.

In contrast, Uzbek riddles often highlighted **sun, earth, wind, mountain, and water**—symbols tied to agriculture, warmth, and fertility. These natural elements were depicted as life-giving, communal, and sacred. The recurrence of “sun” and “bread” in Uzbek riddles symbolized both physical nourishment and moral values such as generosity, patience, and faith. These associations support the idea that **linguistic imagery is not arbitrary**, but shaped by the **material and spiritual conditions** in which people live.

In addition to natural elements, **household and domestic objects** served as important metaphoric tools in both cultures. Russian riddles included terms like *stove, window, coat, and broom*, often symbolizing safety, comfort, or domestic labor. Uzbek riddles used images such as *tandir (clay oven), topchan (outdoor platform), tea kettle, and rope*, which reflect open-air communal living and traditional hospitality. These items were not merely functional but carried **emotional and cultural weight** in their metaphorical use.

Animal imagery also played a prominent role in the riddles of both traditions. Russian riddles commonly featured **bear, fox, hare, and wolf**, reflecting the forest environment and the symbolic meanings these animals hold in Slavic mythology—strength, cunning, and endurance. Uzbek riddles, by contrast, referred to **donkey, camel, sheep, and birds**, all of which are tied to agrarian and pastoral life. These animals symbolized labor, patience, and resilience, and sometimes even social roles within the community.

An important finding was the presence of **religious and mythological elements** that distinguished the two traditions. Russian riddles occasionally referenced **church bells, saints, or holy places**, reflecting Orthodox Christian influence. Uzbek riddles referred to **Allah, Ramadan, and prayer**, embedding Islamic values into symbolic language. These spiritual references were subtle yet significant, highlighting how **riddles function as vehicles of moral education and religious reflection**.

Statistical analysis also supported the qualitative findings. The most frequently used images in Uzbek riddles included “*sun*” (37 times), “*bread*” (29 times), “*earth*” (21 times). In Russian riddles, “*snow*” appeared 41 times, “*stove*” 33 times, and “*forest*” 28 times. These numbers confirm that the

lexical core of riddles is shaped by culturally salient experiences, reinforcing the idea that riddles are both a reflection and reproduction of national identity [14].

Finally, the poetic structure of riddles also varied by culture. Russian riddles typically used quatrains with rhythmic balance and rhyme, emphasizing musicality and narrative suspense. Uzbek riddles leaned toward **concise two-line constructions**, rich in metaphor and philosophical implication, often resembling proverbs. This difference reflects contrasting aesthetic traditions: Russian riddles as lyrical and oral-narrative; Uzbek riddles as aphoristic and contemplative.

Overall, the results show that while riddles serve as a universal genre of expression, their **linguistic and cultural realizations are unique**. Each tradition encodes its values, environment, and beliefs in specific ways, making riddles powerful tools for both linguistic analysis and cultural interpretation.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that riddles are far more than playful linguistic puzzles; they are deeply embedded cultural expressions that reveal how different societies conceptualize the world. Through metaphor, symbolism, and poetic structure, riddles act as repositories of traditional knowledge, environmental awareness, and ethical values. A comparison of Russian and Uzbek riddles not only highlights linguistic differences but also uncovers divergent worldviews shaped by geography, religion, and communal life.

One of the most important insights emerging from this study is the way in which **environmental factors influence symbolic expression**. Russian riddles frequently evoke images of snow, forest, and darkness—natural elements that dominate the Russian climate and landscape. These elements are often personified or mystified, reflecting a cultural inclination toward introspection, endurance, and spiritual contemplation. In contrast, Uzbek riddles are filled with warmth and light: images of the sun, the earth, bread, and community life dominate the Uzbek cultural space. These symbols indicate a more collectivist and agrarian worldview where the relationship between humans and nature is framed in terms of harmony and productivity.

Another significant observation is the difference in **poetic and rhetorical styles**. Russian riddles often exhibit lyrical qualities: rhyme, rhythm, and balanced stanzas that resemble the structure of folk songs. This musicality reflects oral storytelling traditions where riddles were performed as part of communal gatherings. Uzbek riddles, on the other hand, tend to be more concise and philosophically loaded. Their brevity and metaphorical depth align them more closely with proverbs or maxims, offering not just entertainment but moral instruction and reflection.

The **symbolic choices** in each language also speak volumes about cultural priorities. For example, the Russian concept of “печь” (stove) is not just a household object—it symbolizes warmth, safety, and the heart of the home, especially during long winters. Meanwhile, the Uzbek “тандыр” (tandir oven) serves a similar symbolic function but also carries connotations of hospitality, abundance, and communal care. Such comparisons show that even common everyday objects, when filtered through cultural lenses, take on unique meanings.

Moreover, the role of **religion and spirituality** in shaping linguistic imagery is clearly visible in both traditions. Russian riddles contain subtle references to Christian elements—bells, saints, churches—used to evoke reverence or mystery. Uzbek riddles reflect Islamic beliefs through mentions of Allah, Ramadan, and religious rituals, grounding their symbolism in spiritual devotion and moral responsibility. These references are often understated but function as **moral anchors** in the riddle’s message [15].

Finally, this study confirms the idea that riddles are **didactic in nature**. They are not only used to entertain but also to teach—about nature, community values, religious norms, and social behavior. They serve as cultural mirrors, preserving the worldview of a people and passing it to future generations in accessible, memorable, and often poetic forms.

In sum, riddles provide a rich domain for exploring the intersection of language and culture. While their surface structure may seem simple, their underlying meanings are profound. A cross-cultural

analysis such as this one highlights both the **universal human desire to play with language** and the **deeply specific ways in which cultures shape that play into meaningful expressions** of their identity and worldview.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that riddles are far more than linguistic curiosities; they are profound cultural artifacts that encode the worldview, ethical values, and environmental consciousness of a people. By comparing the linguistic means of expression in Russian and Uzbek riddles, it becomes clear that these short poetic texts reflect deeply ingrained social, spiritual, and cognitive patterns unique to each culture.

Russian riddles, rich in references to cold climates, forested landscapes, and Orthodox imagery, portray a worldview shaped by endurance, mystery, and the human relationship with nature's vastness and unpredictability. Their poetic rhythm and symbolic depth serve not only to entertain but also to teach lessons about survival, patience, and introspection. Through metaphors like "snow knocking at the window" or "a stove without fire," Russian riddles animate the inanimate and offer a glimpse into a national psyche molded by history and climate.

Uzbek riddles, in contrast, present a vibrant landscape filled with light, warmth, and community. The frequent appearance of "sun," "bread," and "earth" reflects an agricultural, Islamic, and family-centered worldview. These riddles emphasize harmony, productivity, and social cohesion. Their structure, often concise and metaphorically dense, mirrors the Uzbek tradition of philosophical wisdom and communal storytelling. Riddles in this context function not only as verbal puzzles but as vessels of cultural memory and moral instruction.

The comparative perspective taken in this study also underscores the **universality of symbolic expression** alongside the **specificity of cultural meaning**. While both Russian and Uzbek riddles share structural features such as metaphor, personification, and ambiguity, the content and values they project differ significantly. This reinforces the idea that language is not simply a tool for communication but a mirror of identity and a repository of historical experience.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that riddles can serve as effective tools in **intercultural education and linguistic pedagogy**. Because they are short, engaging, and rich in meaning, riddles can be used to introduce learners to the cultural logic and symbolic systems of different languages. They also provide fertile ground for interdisciplinary study, bridging linguistics, folklore, anthropology, and even psychology.

In conclusion, Russian and Uzbek riddles, though separated by language, geography, and tradition, share a common function: to encode and transmit cultural knowledge through poetic form. Their continued relevance today speaks to the enduring power of metaphor and oral tradition in shaping how societies see themselves and their world. Future research may further explore riddles as dynamic cultural texts that adapt over time while preserving the core values of the communities that create them.

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