

Language Features of Kipchak Riddles in the Codex Cumanicus: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: This article examines the phonetic, lexical, and syntactic features of Kipchak riddles preserved in the Codex Cumanicus, one of the earliest written records of Turkic oral traditions. By analyzing the linguistic structure of the riddles and comparing them with modern Turkic languages, the study reveals the continuity and transformation of Turkic linguistic and cultural traditions. The analysis highlights how phonetic devices such as alliteration and assonance, rich metaphorical vocabulary, and simple, rhythmic syntactic patterns contributed to the preservation of cultural knowledge and artistic expression. The findings demonstrate that many linguistic and thematic features of medieval Kipchak riddles remain visible in contemporary Turkic folklore, emphasizing the enduring role of riddles in maintaining cultural identity across centuries.

Keywords: Codex Cumanicus; Kipchak riddles; Turkic linguistics; Phonetic and lexical analysis; comparative study.

Introduction

Riddles have occupied a significant place in the cultural and intellectual heritage of Turkic peoples, serving both as entertainment and as a means of developing quick thinking and creativity. Among the earliest recorded examples of Turkic riddles are those found in the Codex Cumanicus, a 14th-century manuscript that reflects the linguistic, poetic, and cultural richness of the Kipchak tribes. The riddles in this manuscript not only entertain but also offer deep insights into the worldview, values, and linguistic structure of ancient Turkic societies. This article aims to explore the phonetic, lexical, and syntactic features of Cuman riddles preserved in the Codex Cumanicus, comparing them with modern Turkic languages to highlight both continuity and transformation within Turkic linguistic traditions. The Codex Cumanicus holds a special place in Turkic studies due to its role in preserving early examples of Turkic oral literature in written form. The riddles included in the manuscript showcase a rich use of sound patterns, figurative language, and metaphorical thinking and more importantly, it is the first collection of Turkic riddles (18). Through the careful construction of language, these riddles reveal how the Kipchaks viewed the natural world, social life, and cosmic phenomena. Analyzing their phonetic, lexical, and syntactic characteristics not only enriches our understanding of medieval Turkic linguistics but also sheds light on the poetic artistry of an era that valued wit, memory, and symbolic communication. In recent years, comparative studies between ancient Turkic texts and modern Turkic languages have gained renewed attention. This article contributes to that growing body of research by focusing on the specific linguistic features of the Kipchak riddles. Through examples and comparisons, it becomes possible to trace linguistic elements that have either persisted or evolved in the languages of contemporary Turkic nations. Thus, this study not only celebrates the enduring beauty of Turkic riddles but also emphasizes their vital role as a bridge between past and present Turkic cultural identity. In addition, we are naming them Kipchak riddles

now, as the people who created them were Kipchak; however, it has been named Cuman riddles so far. We believe that it is the most suitable name for the riddles.

Historical Background

The Codex Cumanicus is one of the most valuable monuments of medieval Turkic culture, created during the 14th century and preserved today in the Marciana Library of Venice. This manuscript, compiled primarily for practical use by Italian merchants dealing with Kipchak Turks, contains a multilingual dictionary, religious texts, and a fascinating collection of Turkic riddles (8). These riddles are especially significant because they represent one of the earliest written forms of Turkic oral traditions, capturing the linguistic richness and cultural imagination of the Kipchak people. The riddles of the Codex Cumanicus reflect the structure, thought processes, and worldviews of ancient Turkic societies. They were composed using vivid metaphors, clever comparisons, and sound patterns such as alliteration and assonance. The preservation of these riddles in written form demonstrates not only the importance of oral creativity but also the Kipchaks' efforts to maintain their linguistic and cultural identity amid changing historical circumstances (9). Scholars such as G. Kuun (9), W. Bang(1), Y. Nemeth(16), V. Drimba (4), M. Mollova (15), S. Malov (14), A. Garkaves (7), A. Tietze(18), G. Guner(5) and others have contributed to the study of these riddles, offering translations and analyses in German, Russian, English, French, and Turkish. Many scientists also translated the riddles into their own languages and compared to their folklore. (2,6,11,13,18). One of the Kazak linguists broadly discussed the topics of the riddles also (3). However, the linguistic features—especially the phonetic, lexical, and syntactic aspects—still offer rich ground for further comparative study, particularly with modern Turkic languages like Kazak, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Turkman, Azerbaijani, Karakalpak (12). Thus, the riddles of the Codex Cumanicus stand not only as linguistic artifacts but also as poetic testimonies to the enduring cultural and intellectual legacy of the Kipchak people.

Phonetic, Lexical, Semantic Features

The Kipchak riddles recorded in the Codex Cumanicus demonstrate a rich use of phonetic devices that enhance their memorability and poetic beauty. Phonetic features such as alliteration and assonance play a central role in creating rhythm, musicality, and a sense of unity within each riddle. These techniques not only served aesthetic purposes but also helped oral performers to memorize and transmit the riddles across generations. Alliteration—the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words—is frequently observed. For example: "Alang bulan buv turur, ayrı ağactan yav tamar."(8) (Translation: "A molted deer stands, and oil drops from a separate tree.") The repetition of the 'a' and 'b' sounds creates a rhythmic and musical effect (Kulieva). Similarly, assonance—the repetition of vowel sounds—enhances fluidity: "Koçkar muzi kojurmak, kojurmakdan kojurir." (8) (Translation: "The ram's ice melts, it melts from melting.") Here, the repeated 'o' and 'u' sounds create melodious harmony. Thus, the phonetic richness of the Codex Cumanicus riddles illustrates both the artistic creativity and the linguistic sophistication of early Kipchak society. In addition, it made those riddles easy to remember, recite which gave them life in modern Turkic nations folklore.

The lexical richness of the riddles reflects a deep connection to nature, daily life, and cosmic phenomena. Words from natural settings (henna, stars), domestic life (tools, clothing), and animal life (butterfly, ram, fox) dominate the vocabulary. Ancient words like 'tuv' (mist) or 'koçkar' (ram) have either evolved or survived with slight phonetic changes in modern Turkic languages such as Azerbaijani ('qoç'), Uzbek (qo‘chqor), Kazak and Karakalpak are very similar to the Uzbek example. The riddles often use metaphoric compression, where everyday objects are described poetically—such as the comparison between a felt carpet and the night sky full of stars. This shows the Kipchaks' mastery in using language creatively to convey layered meanings. Thus, the lexical features of Kipchak riddles offer not only linguistic insights but also cultural glimpses into their world-life.

Syntactically, the riddles tend to favor short, rhythmic structures composed of simple sentences or parallel clauses. Example:"Uzun ağaç başında, ulu bitiş bitidim."(8) (Translation: "At the top of a tall tree, I wrote a long writing.") Parallelism, repetition, and sometimes elliptical constructions (where parts of a sentence are omitted but understood) create a poetic and suspenseful tone. Such syntactic

patterns survive in modern Azerbaijani, Uzbek riddles and other Turkic nations as well, showing a deep-rooted stylistic tradition across Turkic cultures.

The semantic analysis of the riddles reveals profound ties to nature, cosmic elements, and daily life. Natural phenomena like stars and plants are key themes, often symbolically representing broader concepts such as wisdom, endurance, or transformation. Everyday objects are metaphorically reimagined, emphasizing the Kipchak people's close observation of their environment and rich symbolic imagination. Riddle-solving itself was viewed as a social activity that celebrated intelligence, quick thinking, and community spirit—cultural values that continue to shape Turkic societies today.

Conclusion

The riddles of the Codex Cumanicus represent a precious linguistic and cultural heritage of the medieval Kipchak world. Through the analysis of their phonetic, lexical, and syntactic features, it becomes evident that these riddles were carefully crafted not only for entertainment but also for the preservation and transmission of collective knowledge. The lexical and syntactic continuities observed between the Kipchak riddles and modern Turkic languages, particularly Azerbaijani, highlight the enduring strength of Turkic cultural identity. Although certain words and expressions have evolved, the core symbolic structures have remained strikingly resilient. Further comparative research could deepen our understanding of Turkic linguistic evolution. The Codex Cumanicus riddles, therefore, are not merely historical texts; they are living testaments to the vitality and creativity of the Turkic oral tradition.

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