

# Grammatical Strategies in the Formation of English Riddles

Surama Fernandes da Silva  
Wagner Rodrigues Silva\*

---

## Resumo:

Adivinhas são textos verbais breves formados pelo par pergunta/resposta. Na pergunta, encontraremos um enigma resultante de relações fonológicas, morfológicas, sintáticas, semânticas ou pragmáticas (cf. Dionisio, 1999). Baseando-nos em Pepicello and Green (1984), iremos nos deter nas relações fonológicas, morfológicas e sintáticas responsáveis pelo estabelecimento do enigma proposto. Ressaltamos que aspectos sócio-culturais estarão sempre presentes na construção enigmática deste gênero textual.

---

*"The riddles genre  
permits us to demonstrate our  
lack of command of language,  
as our command of language"*  
Pepicello and Green (1984:60)

With the teaching of English as a foreign language in mind we present riddles as a type of text to be used in the English class. In fact, as a number of students seem to have a total aversion to English, we propose the solving of riddles as a kind of activity that can attract their attention. Moreover, the text of riddles explores many grammatical aspects and its use could be the first step to a reflection about working with the English language. For all these reasons we have decided to present this paper specially to English teachers and students who are preparing to become teachers. Our research is based on Dionisio (1999) and Pepicello and Green (1984). This paper is a kind of summary of chapters two and three of these latter scholars. Obviously, our primary intention is to open the eyes of professionals to possibilities that exist in their field of work

We consider riddles to be a descriptive text composed of a question and an answer. The answer is encoded in the question by a witty strategy, the block element. To solve the block element of riddles the riddlee has to use cultural and linguistic knowledge (cf. Pepicello and Green, 1984 and Dionisio, 1999).

According to Pepicello and Green (1984) there are three grammatical strategies that result in a block element: (i) phonological strategy of wit, (ii) morphological strategies of wit and (iii) syntactic strategies of wit. In spite of the division above, it is important to note that riddles have more than one level of grammatical strategies of wit but there is usually one that is more expressive than the others, in any given riddle.

---

\* This paper is part of the research "A organização textual-interativa das adivinhações" (PIBIC/CNPq – UFPE) coordinated by Prof.<sup>a</sup> Angela Dionisio, it was also presented in English 7, administered, by Marli Hazin.

### *1-Phonological strategy of wit*

According to Pepicello & Green (1984), phonological ambiguity refers to lexical ambiguity of phonemic form, stress, and juncture. Thus in this level there is ambiguity caused by Homophony, Word stress and Juncture.

#### *·Homophony*

Homophony is when “the pronunciation of various underlying concepts (i. e, words) is identical” (Pepicello & Green, 1984:30). It is an identical phonological form of two or more lexical item which, in riddles, are manipulated in such a way as to cause ambiguity. So, it reflects a lexical ambiguity that we can see in the riddle below.

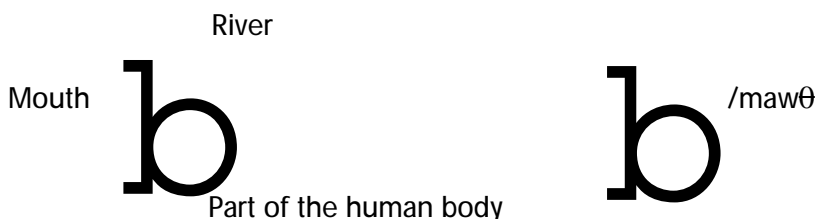
1- What has a *mouth* but does not eat?

- River.

2 - What has an *eye* but cannot see?

- Needle.

In the riddles above, we find homophony of a simple lexical item, that is the identical pronunciation of various underlying concepts. This ambiguity lies in the words *mouth* and *eye*. The riddlee can choose one of them by inference considering his knowledge, but the last word belongs to the riddler because he is the only one to know which semantic interpretation is involved in the riddle.



#### *·Word stress*

According to English Language Services (1968:5). stress is “the degree of loudness or force with which syllables are spoken in English.” The loudest or strongest stress in the word is called *primary stress* while the softest or weakest one is called *weak stress*. Although each word has one primary stress, when two words come together in a sentence only one word retains its primary stress.

Word stress is another phonological process that plays a part in riddling. It is related to the difference between a *compound word* and another one formed by a *modifier + noun*. The essential difference between one and the other rests in their phonological representation. In the former, primary stress is placed on the first syllable, whereas in the latter the stress pattern is moved to the second syllable, with the

secondary stress on the first syllable. The phonological representation of a pair such as *hot house* /háthàus/ and *hothouse* /hàtháus/, for instance, shows us how English provides the basis for distinguishing a compound word from a sequence of modifier + nouns, by differing their semantic context. This modifier can be a pronoun, adjective, etc. So, this difference has been exploited in riddles, as we can observe in riddle 3.

- 3 - When did Moses sleep five in a bed?  
 - When he slept with his forefathers.

Forefather / fôwrfâðerz /

Four / fôr /

In the example above, in the word *forefathers* the stress pattern is on the second syllable, but to emphasize the word *four* the riddler shifts the primary stress to the first syllable, because he utters it as /fôwrfâðerz/. Thus, it is the utterance that makes us perceive that when the riddler gives the answer he employs contrastive stress (dislocation of the pattern stress to emphasize another part of the word).

#### · *Juncture*

The juncture is a pause that exists between a sequence of modifier + noun. To understand better the importance of juncture, we need to observe the difference between a compound word and a sequence of *adjective* + *noun*, for instance. This difference lies in the absence of a pause in the pronunciation of the compound word like *bluebird* /blûwbêrd/ and a sequence *blue* + *bird* /blûw+bêrd/ where /+ / represents a pause called juncture (cf. Pepicello and Green, 1984:33). In English, juncture establishes the difference between those phrases. But there are some pairs of the words that in the moment of the utterance, are pronounced without the pause, making them very similar to another pair. Both word stress and juncture are related to utterance, but while the former is related to the dislocation of the primary stress of the word, the latter is related to the absence of the pause that causes ambiguity. As we can observe in the riddle 4.

- 4 - When is a man clearing a hedge in a single bound like a man snoring?  
 - He does it in his sleep (his leap).

The ambiguity results from the pronunciation of the words *his* /hlz/ and *sleep* which despite being two separate lexical items, in the moment of the utterance are pronounced together, so the final z of *his* and the initial s of the *sleep* are mixed and result in a single sound, producing /hlzliyp/ which is homophonous with *his leap*.

#### *II- Morphological strategies of wit*

The first case of morphological manipulation is “a play on the homophony of

two morphologically different constructions", Pepicello and Green (1984:37).

5 - What's black and white and red all over?

- Newspaper.

In the riddle above we find homophony of a simple lexical item [*red*] – color – and a verb plus its past participle [to read read *read (red)*]. This form must be interpreted morphologically as /riyd/ + /-d/ which is the regular past participle morpheme in English. However, /riyd/ falls into the category of verbs known as irregular, which means that its past tense and past participle markers do not conform to the normal rules for forming these inflectional forms (cf. Pepicello and Green, 1984:37). This example involves more than one grammatical level in its composition, but the morphological manipulation is primary in the creation of ambiguity.

Another set of morphological strategies is "the arbitrary division of words into their morphemes, and then the use of these morphemes as if they were independent lexical items" Pepicello and Green (1984:40).

6 - What kind of bow can you never tie?

- A rainbow.

7 - What kind of ears does a train have?

- Engineers.

8 - What room can no one enter?

- A mushroom.

The riddles above represent three classes of the morphological strategy for riddling. The first, exemplified by sentence 6, takes the component morphemes of a word and treats them as free lexical items. Thus the *-bow* of rainbow is a morpheme that constitutes a part of the larger word. In sentence 7 the phonological sequence /iyrz/ (spelled either *ears* or *-eers*) is the block element. The morpheme *ear* is not the same as the suffix *-eer* that appears in the word *engineer*. Such riddles as sentence 7, then, employ not only the morphological strategy as described in 6, but also employ the homophony of different morphemes to confuse the riddlee. In sentence 8, the sequence of phonemes /ruwm/ is treated as if it were an independent morpheme. In other words, *-room* (pseudomorpheme) is not a meaningful constituent of *mushroom* (cf. Pepicello and Green, 1984:42).

### III - Syntactic strategies of wit

According to Pepicello and Green (1984), the syntax of English may be manipulated in several ways to create ambiguity in the riddle form. There are basically two ways that could result in block element (ambiguity) in the riddle form: *phrase structure ambiguity* – two different underlying syntactic structures have identical surface structures as a result of the homophony of contrasting parts of speech – and *transformational ambiguity* – two different underlying structures have identical surface structures by virtue of transformational processes that apply in the derivations of the

surface forms.

9 - When is a boy like a pony?

When he is a little horse.

Figure 1

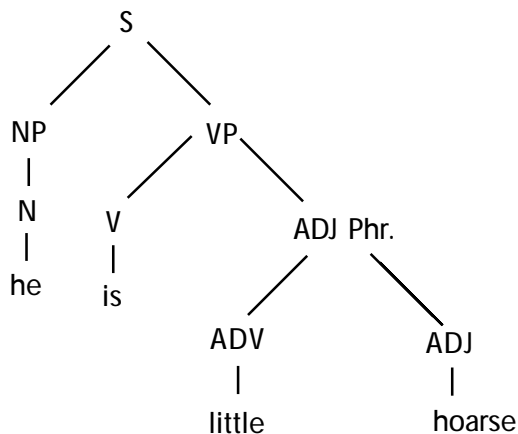
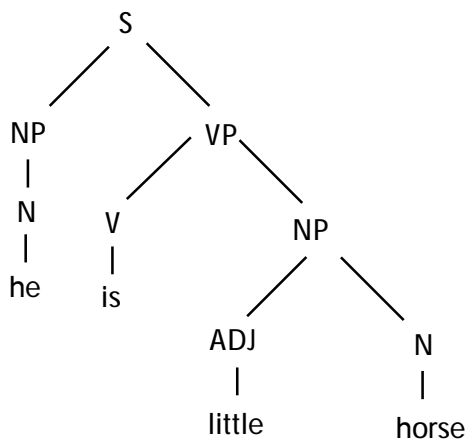


Figure 2



In riddle 9, the crucial element is the phrase *little horse* which is an adjective combination. This is shown by contrasting the two underlying structures as in figure 1 and 2. This is a case of *phrase structure ambiguity*.

10 - What do you call a man who marries another man?

- Minister.

Figure 3s

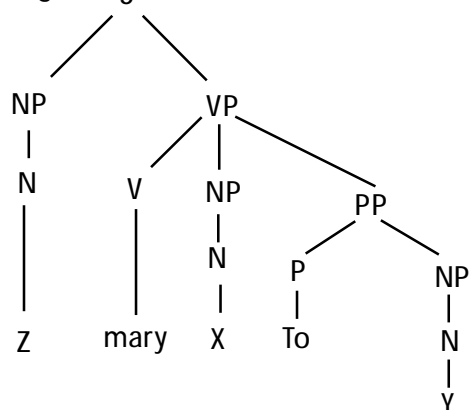
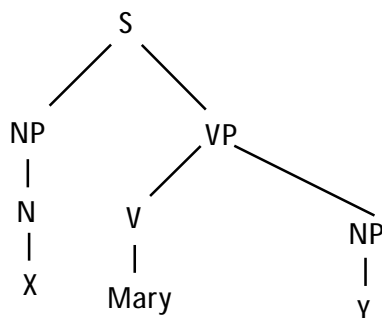


Figure 4



Riddle number 10 is a case of *transformational ambiguity*. This type of ambiguity is created when the deletion of some element from an underlying structure makes this structure homophonous with another, different structure. The phonological form of *marry* may have two semantic representations, which in turn have different syntactic reflexes. One representation designates a formal commitment made between two people and can be represented by the tree in figure 3. The other representation designates a state in which one person performs a ceremony that involves two other people and can be expressed in figure 4. The NP in figure 4 is unspecified, it can be deleted, and the figure 4 become syntactically identical to that in figure 3. Only a larger conversational context can distinguish which semantic representation is intended, but in riddling there is no larger conversational context. The underlying structure of question 10 is really something like "What do you call a man who marries another man to someone?" (cf. Pepicello and Green, 1984:42).

We hope this text can be useful to English teachers and students who are preparing to teach, and stimulate them to use riddles as a kind of text that can attract students' attention and contribute to the development of their knowledge of the English language and culture.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- DIONISIO, A. P. (1999). *A organização textual-interativa das adivinhas - PIBIC-CNPq/UFPE*. Recife (mimeo).
- PEPICELLO, W. J. and GREEN, T. A. (1984). *The language of riddles*. Columbus, Ohio State University Press.
- ENGLISH LANGUAGE SERVICES. (1968). *Stress and intonation: Drills and exercises in English pronunciation*. The Macmillan Company, New York.