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RIDDLES AND ITS CHALLENGES

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to investigate riddle types and their difficulties to solve. More specifically, this article focused on the appreciation of riddles (reaction), the ability to retell the significant aspect of the riddles (recall).

Key words: riddle, phonological, lexical, surface structure, deep structure, metalinguistic, metaphorical, CNLA (children with normal language abilities), CLD (children with language disabilities)

A riddle is a statement or question or phrase having a double or veiled meaning, put forth as a puzzle to be solved. Defining riddles precisely is hard and has attracted a fair amount of scholarly debate. The first major modern attempt to define the riddle was by Robert Petsch in 1899, with another seminal contribution, inspired by structuralism, by Robert A. Georges and Alan Dundes in 1963. Georges and Dundes suggested that "a riddle is a traditional verbal expression which contains one or more descriptive elements, a pair of which may be in opposition; the referent of the elements is to be guessed". There are many possible sub-sets of the riddle, including charades, droodles, and some jokes.

We can select riddles from 4 linguistic categories (lexical, surface structure, deep structure, and metalinguistic) which are classified as "easy" or "difficult" on
the basis of vocabulary and length. Fowles and Glanz also stated that their selection of riddles was based in part on linguistic criteria modified by Shultz and Horibe (1974). In judging the appropriateness of jokes for Shultz and Horibe's (1974) investigation and for riddles in Shultz' (1974) investigation, over 900 published jokes and 2000 published riddles were analyzed. Both jokes and riddles were eliminated if they were felt to be too difficult with regards to content for the younger children. They were also discarded if there seemed to be no way to create an incongruity-removed or resolution-removed version, which was the primary purpose of both investigations. The six categories of riddles used in this study were selected from those identified by several researchers. The following is a hierarchy for comprehension of riddle types and their definitions identified by Shultz and Horibe (1974), by Fowles and Glanz (1977) and by Lund and Duchan (1988):

1. **Phonological: contains similar sounding words or phrases.**  
   Q: What kind of flower likes to be kissed?  
   A: A tulip  

2. **Lexical: contains multiple meaning words.**  
   Q: What has eighteen legs and catches flies?  
   A: A baseball team.  

3. **Surface structure: contains altered groups of words.**  
   Q: What happened to the man who fell from a ten story building?  
   A: Nothing. He was wearing a light fall suit.  

4. **Deep structure: contains alternate interpretations of the same surface structure.**  
   Q: What animal can jump higher than a house?  
   A: Any animal. Houses can't jump.  

5. **Metalinguistic: focuses on the form of language rather than the meaning.**  
   Q: What is at the end of everything?  
   A: The letter g.
6. Metaphorical: ambiguity is created by the use of idioms or metaphors.

Q: Why did the boy throw the watch out of the window?
A: He wanted to see time fly.

Although these are the major categories of riddle types that have been identified in the literature, only the first five categories have been used in developmental studies (Bernstein, 1986; Fowles & Glanz, 1977; Shultz, 1974; Shultz & Horibe, 1974). The category of Metaphorical riddles or jokes has not been used in any developmental humor studies thus far. It is also not listed in any of the developmental hierarchies of riddle types. Therefore, since metaphorical riddles have been identified as a viable category for jokes and riddles (Lund & Duchan, 1988). A total of 24 riddles spread over the 6 categories were administered to all of the children. Four riddles in each category were administered to every child.

Differences Among the Riddle Types

The six types of riddles: phonological, lexical, surface structure, deep structure, metalinguistic and metaphorical. A developmental hierarchy was found for the riddles in this study and confirms findings by the studies done by Shultz and Pilon (1977), Shultz and Horibe (1974) and Fowles and Glanz (1977).

Shultz and Pilon (1973) who studied the development of children's ability to detect linguistic ambiguity reported differential rates of development for each of four types of ambiguity. They found that the detection of phonological ambiguity appeared between the ages of 6 and 9 years. The detection of lexical ambiguity exhibited a nearly linear increase across the age span of 6 to 15 years.

The detection of surface and deep structure ambiguities did not appear until age 12. Summarizing findings by Fowles and Glanz (1977) and Shultz and Horibe (1974), Bernstein, (1986) suggested that it is not until children with normal language abilities are 12 years old or older that they understand deep and surface structure riddles. However, Bernstein set no criterion in her review for establishing that age as a baseline for understanding those riddles.
The CNLA appeared to comprehend phonological and lexical riddles at approximately 7- and 8-years old. This information corresponded to the classification of riddle and jokes types summarized by Bernstein (1986). In order to understand humor, it is necessary to recognize the difference between literal and figurative meanings in words. Being able to evoke new or different meanings in words and phrases and interpret them literally or figuratively requires the use of an individual's metalinguistic abilities (Kamhi, 1987; Nippold & Fey, 1983; van Kleeck, 1984a). Humor, for example, in the lexical riddle category, is based upon lexical ambiguity. This category proved to be difficult for the CLD. For example, in the lexical riddle,

Q: What has 18 legs and catches flies?

A: A baseball team,

the word flies is the ambiguous word. Spector (1990), who investigated adolescents (grades 9-12) with normal language abilities and adolescents with language impairments, found that the group with language impairments had difficulty comprehending this type of riddles and jokes. Other researchers (Lee & Kamhi, 1985; Nippold & Fey, 1983) noted the difficulty children with language impairments have in grasping the difference between literal and figurative speech. The CLD’s difficulty, in treating language metalinguistically as an object of analysis and observation, was readily apparent in metalinguistic riddles such as "What is at the end of everything?", "The letter 'g'." Or "What two letters of the alphabet contain nothing?", "Em-Tee". Most of the CLD could not offer an explanation or find the source of the humor.

Surface Structure riddles appeared to be the most riddles for the CNLA to recall and explain (see Tables 9 and 10, Figures 1 and 2). Surface Structure riddles were difficult for all children in every age group of this study. The difficulty both groups had with the surface structure riddles may have been due to the ambiguous words such as "sell fish" as opposed to "selfish" or "fall suit" as opposed to "fall-suit". This may have been due to the segmentation of the words and the requirement to resegment them in order to discern the appropriate
interpretation. Spector (1990) also found that the adolescents with language impairments in her study had difficulty with this riddle category, but it did not affect the comprehension of the children with normal language in her study. It should be noted that the children in Spector's study were between the ages of 14 and 19, which is quite a bit older than the children in this study. As stated above even the 11-year-olds in this study had more difficulty with this type of humor. The metaphorical riddles were especially difficult for the CLD to explain since there is figurative language in this type of riddle. Most of the CLD did not attempt to explain this type of riddle. According to researchers (Reynolds & Ortony, 1980; Wiig & Semel, 1984) metaphoric comprehension requires requisite knowledge about different domains and the ability to relate terms from these domains in an appropriate way. The present results would confirm results obtained from figurative language studies (Lee & Kamhi, 1985; Nippold & Fey, 1983) which suggest that children with language impairments experience more difficulty producing and understanding metaphors than children with normal language abilities. The following is an example of how one of the CLD children explained the metaphorical riddle:

Q: What did one birthday candle say to the other birthday candle?
A: This party burns me up.

That child offered an explanation of what was funny as, "because the candle is burning". Difficulty with such expressions as "burns me up", "give a hoot" and "on the house", were similar to findings by other researchers (Blue, 1981; Donahue & Bryan, 1984; Seidenberg & Bernstein, 1986; Wiig & Semel, 1984) who report the difficulty children with language impairments have in comprehending figurative language. The CLD's difficulty in discerning abstract meanings appeared to prevent those children from appreciating many humorous elements.

REFERENCES


