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NATURE ENCODED IN FOLK RIDDLES: A CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL STUDY OF UZBEK AND ENGLISH TRADITIONS

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Abstract

Folk riddles constitute a distinctive genre of oral literature in which natural phenomena are represented through metaphor, personification, symbolic imagery, and indirect description. This article examines the linguistic, semantic, cognitive, and cultural features of Uzbek and English riddles concerning natural phenomena. Particular attention is given to the representation of the sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, snow, and sky. The study aims to identify shared cognitive mechanisms and culture-specific patterns in the conceptualization of nature in the two linguistic traditions. A qualitative contrastive approach is employed, combining semantic interpretation, linguistic description, and linguocultural analysis. The discussion demonstrates how familiar natural phenomena are transformed into figurative images through comparisons with human beings, family relationships, movement, and everyday experiences. Uzbek riddles may draw on culturally familiar kinship imagery and traditional conceptions of the universe, whereas English examples may emphasize concise descriptions of observable characteristics and unexpected logical relationships. These tendencies are treated as interpretive patterns rather than absolute distinctions between the two traditions. The study highlights the significance of folk riddles for comparative linguistics, cultural studies, folklore research, translation, and foreign language education.

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Keywords: Folk riddles, natural phenomena, Uzbek language, English language, contrastive linguistics, linguoculturology, conceptual metaphor, personification, folklore, cultural imagery.

1. Introduction

Language is not merely a system for communicating information; it also reflects the ways in which people perceive, interpret, and organize their experiences of the world. Natural phenomena have attracted human attention throughout history because they influence everyday life, agricultural practices, seasonal activities, and cultural beliefs. The sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, and snow have consequently become important sources of imagery in folklore, including riddles.

A folk riddle is a compact verbal composition in which an object, phenomenon, or concept is described indirectly. Its meaning is concealed through figurative language, semantic ambiguity, comparison, or the presentation of selected characteristics. The listener is expected to identify the hidden referent by interpreting the clues and establishing relationships between the description and the object being described.

In Uzbek and English oral traditions, riddles serve both intellectual and cultural functions. They stimulate observation, develop inferential thinking, preserve traditional knowledge, and transmit culturally meaningful images from one generation to another. Natural phenomena are especially suitable for riddling because they possess recognizable characteristics that can be expressed through metaphorical and symbolic language.

For example, the stars may be described as objects that appear at night and disappear from view during the day. Snow may be represented through its whiteness, movement, or silent descent. The wind may be portrayed as an invisible agent whose presence is recognized through its effects on trees, leaves, and other objects. Such descriptions transform ordinary observations into linguistic puzzles.

The comparative study of Uzbek and English riddles is important because the two traditions combine shared human experiences with different linguistic and cultural resources. Both communities observe the same natural world, yet the

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verbal images selected to represent it may differ according to cultural knowledge, conventional metaphors, and the structural characteristics of each language.

Previous research has examined the linguocultural characteristics of English and Uzbek riddles and the comparative representation of natural phenomena in the two languages. Khayrieva and Ochilova (2024), for instance, investigate the relationship between riddles, language, and cultural values, while Jabbarov (2026) focuses specifically on riddles based on natural phenomena in Uzbek and English. These studies provide a useful scholarly context for further examining the semantic and figurative organization of nature-related riddles. The purpose of this article is to identify the major linguistic and cultural mechanisms through which natural phenomena are represented in Uzbek and English riddles. The article addresses three research questions:

Which linguistic and figurative devices are used to describe natural phenomena in Uzbek and English riddles?

What semantic and cognitive similarities can be identified between the two traditions?

How do cultural imagery and language-specific features influence the interpretation of nature-related riddles?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Riddles as a genre of folk discourse

Riddles occupy an important position in oral literature because they combine artistic expression with intellectual activity. Unlike direct descriptions, riddles conceal their referents and require the audience to reconstruct meaning from limited linguistic information.

Taylor (1951) provides a foundational scholarly discussion of riddles as a genre of verbal folklore. From a linguistic perspective, a riddle can be understood as a structured interaction between an encoded description and an inferred answer. Its effectiveness depends on the relationship between the characteristics mentioned in the text and the knowledge available to the listener.

Nature-related riddles are particularly revealing because their descriptions frequently depend on observable properties, including color, shape, movement, sound, temperature, visibility, and spatial position. However, these properties are

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rarely presented as neutral scientific information. Instead, they are reorganized into imaginative images.

A natural phenomenon may be described as a human being, an animal, a family member, a moving object, or an agent performing an action. The listener must move beyond the literal meaning of the words and recognize the figurative relationship between the description and the intended answer.

2.2. Conceptual metaphor and personification

Conceptual metaphor theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), provides a useful framework for explaining how abstract or unfamiliar concepts are understood through more familiar experiences. In riddles, a natural phenomenon can be conceptualized through an everyday object, a human action, or a social relationship.

Personification is another important device. It attributes human characteristics or actions to nonhuman entities. The sun may be represented as a living agent, the wind as an invisible visitor, or the stars as members of a family. These images make natural phenomena more accessible by connecting them with familiar human experiences.

Such figurative representations are not simply decorative. They provide clues that guide the audience towards the intended answer. At the same time, they may preserve traditional beliefs about the relationship between human beings and the natural world.

2.3. Linguocultural interpretation

Linguocultural analysis examines how linguistic forms interact with cultural knowledge, social experience, and collective imagery. In the study of riddles, this approach helps explain why similar natural phenomena may be represented through different figurative patterns.

For example, a riddle describing the sky through parental relationships can activate a culturally familiar family-based interpretation of the universe. Another riddle may describe stars through their appearance, number, or visibility. Both descriptions refer to the same natural domain, but their semantic organization differs.

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It is therefore necessary to distinguish between universal features of human perception and culture-specific forms of expression. The observation that stars appear at night is broadly shared, whereas the decision to represent them as children, scattered objects, or lights may depend on the particular riddle and its cultural context.

3. Research Methodology

The article employs a qualitative contrastive approach to the study of Uzbek and English nature-related riddles. The analytical framework combines descriptive, semantic, contrastive, and linguocultural methods.

The analysis focuses on riddles whose answers are natural phenomena or elements of the natural environment, including the sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, snow, and sky. These categories are selected because they allow the comparison of recurring sensory characteristics and figurative representations across the two languages.

The analytical procedure consists of four stages.

First, the natural phenomenon represented in each riddle is identified. Second, the linguistic clues are examined in terms of vocabulary, grammatical structure, imagery, and the relationship between the description and the answer. Third, the figurative mechanisms are classified, with particular attention to metaphor, personification, comparison, contrast, and symbolic association. Finally, the examples are interpreted comparatively to identify shared cognitive patterns and potential cultural differences.

Published research on Uzbek and English riddles provides contextual evidence for the discussion. The article uses illustrative examples to demonstrate the analytical framework; it does not claim to present a newly collected, statistically representative corpus. Accordingly, the findings are qualitative and interpretive rather than quantitative.

4. Linguistic and Semantic Representation of Natural Phenomena

4.1. The sun and moon: celestial imagery and personification

The sun and moon are prominent elements of human experience and frequently serve as sources of figurative imagery. Their regular appearance, changing

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visibility, brightness, and relationship with day and night provide a rich basis for riddle construction.

In both Uzbek and English, the sun may be described through its brightness, warmth, movement across the sky, or influence on the environment. Such characteristics function as semantic clues that allow the listener to identify the intended phenomenon.

The moon, in turn, can be represented through its changing shape, light, or position in the night sky. The use of indirect descriptions encourages the audience to connect observable characteristics with a hidden referent.

An important difference may emerge in the organization of these images. Some Uzbek riddles employ personification and kinship-based relationships to represent celestial bodies. One example discussed in Uzbek folklore scholarship is:

“Bir otasi, bir onasi, necha yuz ming bolasi.”

The answer is the sky, with the sun and moon conceptualized as parents and the stars as their children. This example connects astronomical observation with the familiar structure of a family and preserves an anthropomorphic representation of the universe. The riddle does not describe celestial bodies in scientific terms. Instead, it transforms their spatial relationship into a familiar social structure. The stars become intelligible through the concept of children, while the sun and moon are assigned parental roles.

This example demonstrates how figurative language can organize natural knowledge into a culturally recognizable narrative. However, such imagery should not be assumed to characterize every Uzbek riddle. Its significance lies in the particular relationship between the chosen image and the cultural knowledge activated by it.

In English riddles, celestial phenomena may also be described through personification, visual resemblance, and the contrast between appearance and disappearance. A commonly circulated English riddle asks:

“What has a face but no eyes, hands but no fingers?”

The conventional answer is a clock. Although this is not a nature-related riddle, it illustrates a relevant structural principle: familiar words are transferred to a

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different object through shared characteristics. In nature-related riddles, a similar mechanism may be used to describe the moon as a face or the stars as lights.

The comparison suggests that metaphorical interpretation is a shared cognitive mechanism. The specific image, however, depends on the wording of the individual riddle and should be established through documented examples rather than broad assumptions about either language.

4.2. Stars and the night sky: visibility, multiplicity, and spatial imagery

Stars provide a clear example of how visual perception becomes a source of linguistic creativity. Their small points of light, large apparent number, and visibility at night allow them to be described through images of scattered objects, shining points, or entities that appear and disappear.

A published discussion of English nature-related riddles includes the following example:

“They come out at night without being called, and are lost in the day without being stolen.”

The answer is stars. The riddle is built around the contrast between nighttime visibility and daytime disappearance from view. The phrase “without being stolen” introduces an unexpected interpretation of disappearance, encouraging the listener to reject a literal reading and search for a natural explanation. From a semantic perspective, the riddle depends on two complementary mechanisms. The first is the selection of an observable feature: stars are visible at night. The second is the figurative reinterpretation of their reduced daytime visibility as an unexplained loss.

The riddle therefore combines a familiar natural observation with a misleading but meaningful verbal clue. Its solution requires the listener to distinguish physical disappearance from disappearance from perception.

Comparable analysis of Uzbek examples can examine whether stars are represented through number, brightness, spatial distribution, or kinship imagery. The important methodological principle is to compare the actual semantic clues used in the riddles rather than assume that the two traditions always employ different descriptive strategies.

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4.3. Wind: an invisible phenomenon and its observable effects

Wind presents a different linguistic challenge because it cannot ordinarily be seen directly. Its presence is inferred from movement, sound, temperature changes, or its effects on objects and vegetation.

Consequently, wind-related riddles can be organized around the contrast between invisibility and observable action. The wind may be described as something that moves objects without possessing a visible body or that produces sound without being directly seen.

From a cognitive perspective, such descriptions involve inferential reasoning. The audience must identify an invisible cause from its observable consequences. This makes wind riddles particularly useful for examining the relationship between sensory experience, causal interpretation, and metaphor.

In both Uzbek and English, expressions referring to movement, force, and sound can potentially provide the semantic basis for such riddles. However, the exact imagery and grammatical structures need to be established from attested folklore examples.

The comparative significance of wind riddles therefore lies not only in the description of a natural phenomenon but also in the reasoning process required to identify it. The listener reconstructs an invisible entity through the effects associated with it.

4.4. Rain and snow: color, movement, and sensory experience

Rain and snow are closely connected with everyday environmental experience. Their observable properties offer numerous possibilities for figurative description.

Rain may be represented through falling movement, drops, sound, wetness, or its effect on the earth. Snow may be described through whiteness, coldness, softness, accumulation, or the visual transformation of the landscape.

An English example cited in research on nature-related riddles is:

“It flies without wings and crashes without sound.”

The proposed answer is snow. The description combines movement with an apparent contradiction: snow is represented as something that flies despite having no wings and falls without the noise normally associated with crashing. The first

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part of the riddle directs attention to the movement of snowflakes through the air. The second emphasizes the quietness of snowfall. Together, these clues encourage the listener to interpret the description through the characteristics of a natural process rather than through the literal meaning of the verbs.

Uzbek riddles about snow can similarly be analyzed through the semantic features of whiteness, covering, and transformation of the environment. For instance, the description of snow as a white covering would rely on visual similarity, whereas the representation of snow as a silent visitor would involve personification.

These are analytical possibilities rather than claims that a particular expression occurs in a documented Uzbek corpus. A full contrastive study should identify the exact wording of each example and establish its provenance before drawing conclusions about its frequency or cultural significance.

5. Comparative Analysis of Uzbek and English Riddles

The comparison of Uzbek and English riddles concerning natural phenomena reveals several dimensions that can be investigated systematically.

5.1. Shared cognitive mechanisms

The first shared feature is the indirect representation of a familiar phenomenon. Instead of naming the sun, stars, wind, rain, or snow directly, the riddle selects distinctive characteristics that enable the audience to infer the answer.

The second shared feature is the use of metaphor and personification. Natural phenomena may be conceptualized through human actions, objects, movement, and familiar relationships. These mechanisms make the description imaginative while preserving enough semantic information to make the solution possible.

The third shared feature is the use of contrast. A riddle may emphasize the difference between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, movement and stillness, or appearance and disappearance. Such contrasts create a cognitive challenge that encourages the audience to reconsider the literal interpretation.

The fourth shared feature is the relationship between sensory perception and inference. Riddle solvers rely on what they know about the natural world and connect this knowledge with the linguistic clues provided.

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These similarities indicate that riddles in both languages draw on broadly shared human cognitive capacities. Nevertheless, shared cognitive mechanisms do not necessarily produce identical expressions or identical cultural meanings.

5.2. Linguistic and cultural differences

Potential differences between Uzbek and English riddles can be examined at lexical, grammatical, semantic, and cultural levels.

At the lexical level, the two languages may select different words to describe the same characteristic. Differences in word choice influence the associations available to the listener and may affect how the riddle is translated.

At the grammatical level, sentence structure, repetition, parallelism, rhyme, and the use of questions can shape the rhythm and difficulty of a riddle. The linguistic structure may also determine which clue receives the greatest emphasis.

At the semantic level, the same natural phenomenon can be represented through different features. One riddle may emphasize appearance, while another focuses on movement, sound, or relationships with other objects.

At the cultural level, imagery may reflect familiar social relationships, traditional occupations, environmental experience, and inherited beliefs. The Uzbek example involving parents and children in the celestial domain illustrates how family-based imagery can organize knowledge about the sky. Other riddles may employ everyday objects or familiar activities as comparison points.

It would nevertheless be inaccurate to claim that Uzbek riddles are always more metaphorical or culturally complex, or that English riddles are invariably more logical and concise. Both traditions contain a variety of poetic, metaphorical, descriptive, and logically structured examples. Reliable generalizations require a balanced corpus of riddles selected according to comparable criteria.

Table 1. Comparative framework for analysing nature-related riddles

Analytical dimension	Uzbek riddles	English riddles	Comparative significance
Natural referents	Sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, snow and other phenomena	Sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, snow and other phenomena	Shared environmental experience

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Figurative devices Metaphor, personification, comparison, symbolic imagery Metaphor, personification, comparison, symbolic imagery Shared cognitive mechanisms
Semantic clues Appearance, number, movement, relationships, environmental effects Appearance, movement, visibility, sound, unexpected contrasts Different possible ways of organizing information
Cultural imagery May include kinship relations, traditional beliefs and familiar social experience May include everyday objects, familiar experiences and conventional imagery Culture-specific associations
Linguistic structure May employ parallelism, repetition, rhyme and compact descriptions May employ rhyme, questions, parallelism and concise descriptions The role of language form in interpretation
Cognitive function Observation, inference and interpretation of figurative clues Observation, inference and interpretation of figurative clues
Shared intellectual purpose
Note: The table presents an analytical framework, not statistical findings from a representative corpus.

6. The Role of Riddles in Language Teaching and Intercultural Education

Nature-related riddles have practical value in foreign language education because they combine vocabulary learning, figurative interpretation, cultural awareness, and problem-solving.

First, riddles can enrich vocabulary related to weather, celestial bodies, and environmental processes. Students encounter words associated with brightness, darkness, movement, sound, and temperature in meaningful contexts.

Second, riddles support the development of inferential reading. Learners must interpret clues, consider possible answers, eliminate unsuitable alternatives, and justify their final choice. These activities can develop analytical reading and critical thinking.

Third, the comparison of Uzbek and English riddles promotes intercultural awareness. Students can examine how the same natural phenomenon is described in the two languages, identify similarities and differences, and discuss the cultural associations activated by particular images.

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Fourth, riddles can support translation practice. A literal translation may preserve the basic meaning of a description while losing its rhythm, ambiguity, or cultural associations. Students can compare literal and functional translations and explain which features should be retained in the target language.

For example, a teacher may present an Uzbek riddle about the sky and ask students to identify its answer, explain the kinship metaphor, and prepare an English translation. Students can then discuss whether the original image is understandable to English-speaking readers and whether an explanatory note is necessary.

Another activity involves comparing two riddles about snow. Students identify the semantic clues in each text, explain the figurative devices, and determine whether the two riddles rely on the same sensory characteristics. They may subsequently create their own riddles using metaphor, personification, or contrast. Such activities integrate language learning with folklore and cultural interpretation. They also demonstrate that language proficiency includes the ability to understand figurative meaning and culturally situated forms of expression.

7. Discussion

The analysis indicates that natural phenomena provide a productive semantic domain for investigating the relationship between language, cognition, and culture in Uzbek and English riddles.

One of the most significant features of this genre is its dependence on indirect reference. The riddle does not merely provide information about an object; it organizes that information in a way that temporarily conceals the answer. The listener must recognize the relevant characteristics and reconstruct the intended meaning.

Metaphor and personification play an important role in this process. They connect the natural world with familiar human experiences and enable the representation of abstract or difficult-to-observe phenomena. Wind can be understood through its effects, stars through their changing visibility, and snow through its movement and sensory properties.

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The comparison also suggests that cultural imagery should be interpreted in relation to particular examples rather than through broad assumptions about national character. A kinship metaphor in an Uzbek riddle may reveal a culturally meaningful way of organizing the celestial domain, but it does not establish that all Uzbek riddles follow the same pattern. Likewise, the presence of concise or logically structured English riddles does not mean that English folklore lacks elaborate metaphorical imagery.

A rigorous contrastive investigation would benefit from a documented corpus containing comparable numbers of Uzbek and English riddles. Each item could be classified according to its natural referent, figurative mechanism, semantic clues, grammatical structure, and cultural associations. The frequency of different devices could then be compared, while qualitative analysis would explain the meanings that numerical patterns alone cannot capture.

The findings and illustrative analyses presented here should therefore be understood as a conceptual and qualitative contribution to the study of nature-related riddles. Further corpus-based research is needed to establish the distribution of particular linguistic devices and to determine the extent to which observed differences reflect cultural traditions, language structure, or the selection of examples.

8. Conclusion

Nature-related riddles constitute a valuable source of information about the linguistic and cultural interpretation of the natural world. In Uzbek and English folklore, phenomena such as the sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, and snow can be represented through metaphor, personification, sensory description, and unexpected semantic relationships.

The comparative discussion identifies several shared mechanisms, including indirect reference, figurative transformation, contrast, and inferential reasoning. At the same time, particular riddles may employ culturally specific imagery, such as kinship-based representations of celestial bodies, or emphasize distinctive visual and environmental characteristics. The analysis demonstrates that the comparison of Uzbek and English riddles should consider both universal cognitive processes and language-specific cultural meanings. Neither tradition

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should be reduced to a single stylistic characteristic; rather, individual examples must be interpreted in their linguistic and folkloric contexts.

The study also highlights the educational relevance of nature-related riddles. Their use in English language teaching can support vocabulary development, critical thinking, figurative interpretation, translation skills, and intercultural competence.

Future research should establish a balanced corpus of authentic Uzbek and English riddles, document the sources of each example, and combine qualitative interpretation with quantitative analysis. Such an approach would provide a more systematic understanding of the relationship between natural imagery, linguistic structure, and cultural cognition in the two traditions.

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