Writing a Riddle: "Genre Memory" and Modern Information Environment

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Abstract

This paper aims at the study of modern folklore, which in contrast to the traditional one is part of the global information space. We try to examine the functions it performs and define the systems users apply, as well as the consequences leading to the transformation of its genre forms. As the riddle is one of the folklore genres preserved the “genre memory” and adapted to contemporary reality, this study aims at identifying this genre model in the mind of a modern person and the features of its transformation as a result of its adaptation.

Keywords: Modern folklore; genre model; riddle; modern person’s mind; information environment

1. Introduction

The issue of folklore’s modern existence is actively discussed in various fields of modern academia: folklore, cultural studies, psychology, philosophy, and others (Adonieva, 2004; Baiburin, 1993 and 2001, Bogdanov, 2001; Dundes, 2003; Sims and Stephens, 2011; Toelken, 1996). Until recently linguistics showed no interest in this issue, paying little attention to the specifics of the folklore text as a whole.

The possibility of using experimental methods to study folklore is determined by the specifics of one of the aspects of modern folklore problems. It concerns not only folklore text, but also its functioning, and the specific cognitive models of its generation (Nekludov, 2010, 2003; Tsivjan, 2005; Putilov, 1994; Bogdanov, 2001;...

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Adonieva, 2004, et al.). Folklore in this aspect is viewed as a special communicative system that reflects the axiologically oriented gnoseological systems of people.

The modern person lives in a poly-information space, folklore being only one of its components (not the key one at present) and turns to folklore primarily in order to define cultural identity (Bogdanov, Kagan, Kargin, Nekludov, Khrenov, et al.).

The riddle is a genre that actively performs a cultural identity function. The riddle is an aesthetically complete text describing general features and properties of realia for members of a particular culture to recognize these realia. There are many works on various genre features of the riddle that analyze its cognitive nature (Cook 2006; Dorson, 1972; Georges, Dundes, Toward, 1963; Green, Pepicello, 1979; Kaivola-Bregenhoj, 1977; Kongas-Maranda, 1971a; 1971b; Levin 1978; Volotskaya, 1995; Zhurinsky 1989). However, the question of the genre model of the riddle in the mind of the modern person has not been discussed. On the one hand, the specificity of this model is caused by the “genre memory” (Bakhtin, 1963), i.e. members of a particular culture bear a cognitive model of the riddle genre that was formed as a result of its active functioning in the household, educational, pedagogical and other representations of culture.

2. The Experimental Study

This paper presents an analysis of folk genre form representation in the mind of the modern person, based on the results of an experiment.

2.1 General characteristics of the experiment and its theoretical grounds

The aim of the experiment was to determine the changes in the genre model of the riddle in the mind of the modern person. The experiment was conducted in the city of Tomsk in 2013-2014 and involved 250 students of Tomsk universities as respondents. The method of experimental data processing was developed with due consideration of the structural and semantic features of this type of texts.

The riddle as a text has a two-part structure that includes the riddle itself and the answer to it. The answer is the nomination of the subject that is to be guessed; the riddle represents the image of this subject (Volotskaya, 1995). If viewed from the structural and semantic formation principle, the image in the riddle part can be expressed in two ways.

The first way involves a direct citation of features of the subject to be guessed (What is the softest thing in the world? - A hand; I do not buzz when I am sitting, I do not buzz when I am moving, I do not buzz when I am circling, I buzz when I am working. – A bee). The subject is not nominated, but its features implicitly represent it in a generalized form (What is the softest thing in the world? – the guessed subject is particularly soft; I do not buzz when I am sitting, I do not buzz when I am moving, I do not buzz when I am circling, I buzz when I am working – the subject is capable of performing these actions).

The second way involves making a link between the subject to be guessed and its substitute. The latter is expressed explicitly in the text of the riddle (Four brothers under one roof. – A table; A fat lady with a wooden belly and an iron belt. – A barrel). The substitute must have features essential for the subject to be guessed (a table has an essential feature of having “four legs” = “four brothers” and “sitting” = “under one roof”; the essential features of the barrel are its shape = fat lady, material – wooden, and a special detail – an iron “belt” (hoop).

2.2 The experimental task description

During the experiment, students were asked to make a riddle about Tomsk. The formulation of the task is simple and transparent; it is organic for everyday notions of text generation. Still, it expresses a number of points important for this study that actualize the internal structure of the riddle text.

1. The beginning of the formulation of the experimental task – “to make a riddle” – aims to explicate the model reflected in the first part of the structure of the riddle. It focuses the students' attention on two points: 1) there is no final text (students do not have to extract it from their cognitive memory, they have to produce it); 2) students are able to produce this text as they possess a specific knowledge.
The phrase “about Tomsk” refers to the specific subject to be guessed. The substitutes for this subject are largely limited, which determines its atypicality. The reaction to such a formulation allows the respondents 1) to explicate the essential features of Tomsk as a specific city (the subject to be guessed is indicated by a proper noun); 2) to offer their own subject to be guessed by specifying the formulation (which is also associated with an explication of the essential features of the given concept).

2.3. Results

The experiment showed that none of the respondents refused to make a riddle, which demonstrates that the genre model of the riddle remains relevant for the modern person.

Only 30 % of the respondents chose Tomsk as the subject to be guessed without specifying it (Which Russian city is called the city of students?; Thousands of students live in it, but not everyone knows it). The majority of the respondents (70 %) specified the subject to be guessed interpreting the phrase “about Tomsk” as a thematic field.

As a result of the specification, the following categories became subjects to be guessed: the city's monuments – 25 % (Students rub to tears / the shiny nose of his. – The Monument to A. P. Chekhov), iconic city loci – Lagerny Garden, the Embankment, Yuzhnaya Square and others – 50 % (What place is in the center of the city and in nature at the same time? – Lagerny Garden), selected notable buildings and institutions – the Research Library of Tomsk State University, the “Bukinis” (“Bookseller”) shop, “Kinomax” cinema and others – 25 % (A house there is / where knowledge lives, / with hundreds of old shelves / and lots and lots of stories. – The Research Library of Tomsk State University).

2.4. Results analysis

The following correlation of preservation and specification of the subject to be guessed may be due to the following.

1. One of the essential properties of the classical riddle, according to some researchers (Kongas-Maranda, 1971a; 1971b; Sibirtseva, 2003), is a paradox. In riddles of the paradox is based on the discrepancy of knowledge about the subject indicated in the substitute and its characteristics presented in the text. However, the external non-compliance with conventional views – the lack of meaning and causality – disappears with finding the right answer (Sibirtseva, 2003).

In the classical riddle the subject to be guessed is generally a specific object (artefact, naturfacts, seldom – anthropofacts) associated with human activity and the world around: Antoshka [name of a boy] is standing on one leg. Everyone is looking for him, but he would not make a sound. – A mushroom. Such objects are easily coded for the genre; it is simple to find substitutes for them and form paradoxical links with them. In this sense, this specification can be interpreted as a result of adaptation to the classical genre model of the riddle. The adaptation is external and linear, for the specification of the subject does not generally involve establishment of paradoxical links (85 %) or those links are weakly manifested – they may describe only one aspect of the description of the subject to be guessed. For instance, in the riddle A place which helps us to remember the deeds of our ancestors, and, at the same time, serves as a place of rest and walks. – Lagerny Garden the features of the subject to be guessed are nuclear in relation to it, thus, they do not need a substitute to establish paradoxical links with. Here is an example of a riddle where only one of the elements of the description forms paradoxical links: The place where birds fly to, where the last trolleybus comes to its last stop, where students and convicts live. – Yuzhnaya Square. The author plays with the name of the square and verbalizes the feature of the corresponding part of the world (Yuzhnaya = southern) in the domestic perception rather than that of the subject to be guessed.

2. Another reason that explains specification of the subject to be guessed is determined by the factor external for the genre model of the riddle. Perception of the world through specific symbolic objects is the norm of the "inner" cognition and recognition of reality, especially its elements that can be interpreted spatially. Such elements include the city. Cognition of a particular city is connected with discovering loci that become axiologically significant. In this sense, specification of the subject to be guessed reflects the results of this process. In addition, the aspects of specification show the subcultural conditionality of the process: for example, frequently, riddles were about Yuzhnaya Square, which demonstrates the specific trends of interpretation of the urban space by students.
Indirectly, cognition of the reality described above is related to the didactic function of the riddle, as well as to its function of social identification (including the subcultural one). Thus, the logic of the riddle as the "genre memory" corresponds with the general logic of cognition of reality, which is manifested in the texts the respondents produced.

3. The correlation is also related to the specifics of the external cognition of reality. In the analyzed material its results are expressed in the interpretation of the subject to be guessed that are not connected with its specification. If the city of Tomsk in general becomes the subject to be guessed, it is genre coded through categories actively used in the media space which is external for the person. In the experiment, the following similar categories were observed (high to low frequency, with the account for different categories in the same riddle): (1) Tomsk as a student city – 75% (Thousands of students live in it, but not everyone knows it; This town is swarming with students); (2) Tomsk as a provincial town – 50% (A city with a street of our capital; The most student city in the world, the capital of Western Siberia); (3) Tomsk as a city of science and education – 33% (Two elements harmoniously blended here: youth and tradition, history. It is greatness and simplicity. The Temple of Science; A cozy place on earth; A city filled with knowledge and squirrels), (4) Tomsk as a youth city – 25% (This city is full of hustle and bustle. It has a lot of young people and students, and the city’s football team is named after the river that runs in this city; A city of universities, a young city of students); (5) Tomsk as an old city – 16% (Look out of the window now, / a lot of old streets you will see. / Day and night young crowds / part of the best university in Siberia want to be).

The meanings actualized in the riddles of this type correspond to image structure of Tomsk the mass media broadcast.

The opportunity to use these meanings in the riddle is determined by the position of folklore in general and the riddle in particular in the modern information space that is characterized by a multiplicity of the channels of perception of values in the first place, and the diffusion of the boundaries of information systems – in the second. As a result, the riddle as a genre reflecting the socially relevant picture of the world adopts axiological orientations of different information systems (e.g., media systems). It is possible as the riddle genre has requirements (as a didactic and social identification genre), and modern information systems give an opportunity to implement these requirements in accordance with the indicated features.

The above-described synthesis of various information systems is reflected in the verbal form of the produced texts.

The general text structure of the riddle is preserved, but the content of the relevant features of the subject to be guessed is supported on the verbal level by “mimicking” the verbal form of relevant communication spheres: On the top of it there is a tower, not a simple but a wooden one, and a museum. A path of stone, a ladder leads to it. What is this mountain? – The Resurrection Hill (the relevant feature of the subject to be guessed is the "territorial link with the museum", i.e. with the "old days", which is a stylization of folklore); An original monument is the symbol of hospitality of Tomsk hotels and inns. What is it? – A Monument to Slippers (the relevant feature of the subject to be guessed is the “location of the monument – next to a central hotel in the city of Tomsk", which is a stylization of an advertising text); Which two shopping centers in Tomsk are practically similar in terms of products and companies they offer to the consumer? – Smile City and MiraMix (the relevant feature of the subject to be guessed is the “place of active trade”, i.e. a component of the business sector, which is a stylization of a business text).

4. Conclusion

The modern person generally preserves the genre model of the classical riddle. But being adjusted to the modern information system, this model transforms. The changes occur both in the form (the principles of the semantic content organization of the riddle change, paradoxical structures are destroyed, the speech patterns of the riddle actively use the principles of stylization) and in the content (the content is formed taking into account more spheres of reality the person must cognize, no paradox makes the riddle use direct features of the subject to be guessed).

References
