

TOWARDS A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF  
THE MALTESE RIDDLE ON  
MARANDA'S METAPHORIC STRUCTURES<sup>1</sup>

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UNTIL a few years ago, the mid-sixties roughly, structural analysis had never been heard of in Maltese linguistics. The pioneering developments by the Moscow school, de Saussure, Vladimir Ja. Propp and Lévi-Strauss were still unknown among scholarly circles. Moreover, Maltese oral tradition had not as yet been put to a structural test. The present introductory essay is intended as a modest rudimentary attempt in a detailed investigation of the logical structures of Maltese riddles and, may be, of the process of generating such structures applying throughout Elli Köngäs Maranda's general principles on metaphoric structures.

Malta still lacks the establishment of national folklore archival collections and the dedication of experienced full-time field collectors. In this critical situation the materials are from *Haġa Moħġaġa u Taħbil il-Moħħ leħor* (Riddles and Other Conundrums)<sup>2</sup> by Gużè Cassar-Pullicino – the only appreciable corpus of printed riddles (with important comparative data) so far. It includes 187 riddles, with 137 variants, taken down mostly from oral tradition. These 324 items are not a good proportion of the 'n' number of unrecorded texts, yet their form is highly representative of Maltese riddle structures.<sup>3</sup>

In analysing each riddle (and variants) one should not isolate the riddle image ('signans') from the answer, ('signatum'),<sup>4</sup> for two

<sup>1</sup>This essay is modelled to a large degree on Elli Köngäs Maranda's studies 'The Logic of Riddles', *Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition* (1971), 188-232 and 'A Tree Grows', *Structural Models in Folklore and Transformational Essays* (1971), 116-145.

<sup>2</sup>Malta: Department of Information, 1957-1959. Later Cassar-Pullicino analysed and classified his collection according to Archer Taylor's classification of English riddles, in turn adapted from Lehmann-Nitsche's Argentinian collection, in 'Towards an Analysis of Maltese Riddles', *Scientia* XXXV (1972), 41-42, 85-91, 139-144, 181-189; XXXVI (1973), 37-39.

<sup>3</sup>Cassar-Pullicino adopts Pitrè's criteria in selecting these 'true' riddles: *Haġa Moħġaġa...*, 15-16; see also page 20.

<sup>4</sup>In the aforementioned riddle analysis Cassar-Pullicino follows in the steps of Taylor and other scholars in studying the riddle image independent of its answer.

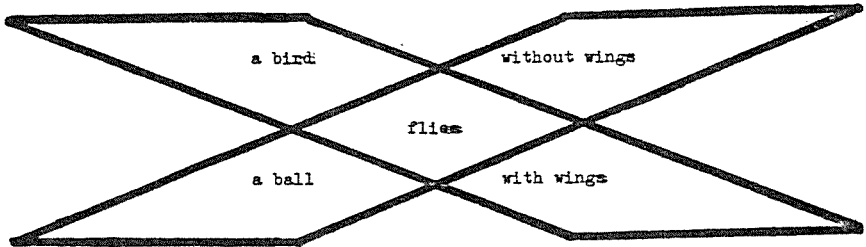
important reasons. Firstly, the riddle is one stylistic and structural entity made up of two organic components of question and answer. Secondly, the relationship between question and answer goes far beyond the meaning of the unit: 'the answer can be shown to participate even in the features of style which govern the riddle image'.<sup>5</sup>

The simplest Maltese riddle structure consists of five elements:

- I. the riddle image or signans,
- II. the constant premiss for both the signans and the signatum,
- III. the hidden variable or the surprise aspect of riddles often based on a pun and/or a paradox showing that the signans is not to be accepted,
- IV. the given variable pointing at the direction of the answer,
- V. the hidden term, signatum.

The following component parts serve as an example of a single structure:

- (1) *Bla ġwienaq u jtir – Ballun.* 166<sup>6</sup>  
 'Flies without wings – Ball.'



Assigning labels to the different parts of the structure we arrive at the following:

TERMS		PREMISSES		
		CONSTANT	VARIABLE	
GIVEN	A bird (I)	flies (II)	without wings (IV)	IMAGE
HIDDEN	A ball (V)		with wings (III)	ANSWER

<sup>5</sup> 'The Logic of Riddles', 192.

<sup>6</sup> The number after each riddle refers to Cassar-Pullicino's classification. The opening formulas 'Haġa moħġaġa .../Hawn haġa .../Haġa haġa ...' have been omitted. For an etymological annotation on the word 'moħġaġa' see Aquilina, J. and Cassar-Pullicino, J., 'Lexical Material in Maltese Folklore', *Journal of the Faculty of Arts* I i (1957), 15.

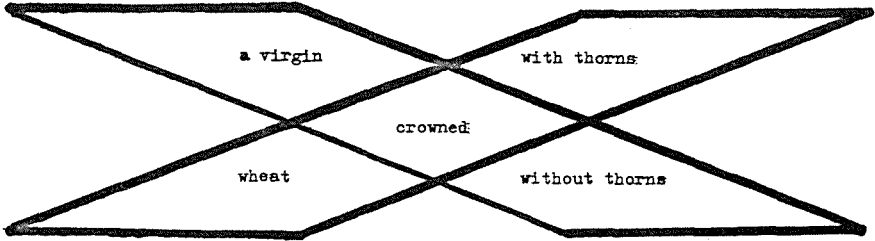
The structure of the riddle would then be:

What [bird] (I) flies (II) without wings (IV)? – Ball (V).

I will take three additional examples:

(2) *Vergni nkurunata – Qamha*. 121

'Virgin crowned with thorns – Wheat.'

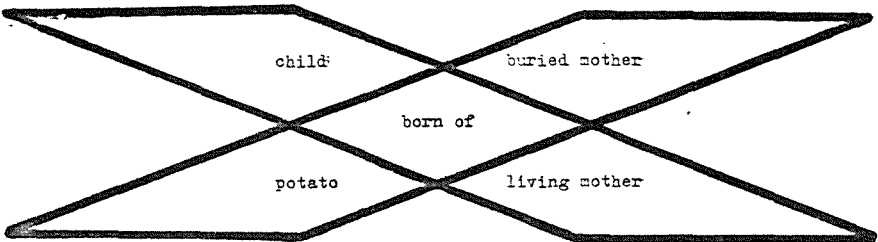


TERMS		PREMISSES		
		CONSTANT	VARIABLE	
GIVEN	a virgin (I)	crowned (II)	with thorns (IV)	IMAGE
HIDDEN	wheat (V)		without thorns (III)	ANSWER

Structure: What virgin (I) is crowned (II) with thoms (IV)? – Wheat (V).

(3) *Twelidt minn omm midfuna – Patata*. 120

'Born of buried mother – Potato.'

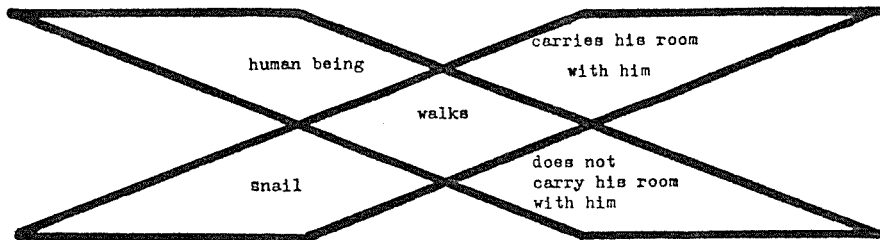


TERMS		PREMISSES		
		CONSTANT	VARIABLE	
GIVEN	child (I)	born of (II)	buried mother (IV)	IMAGE
HIDDEN	potato (V)		living mother (III)	ANSWER

Structure: Which [child] (I) is born of (II) a buried mother (IV)? – Potato (V).

(4) *Meta jimxi jiehu l-kamra mieghu – Bebbuxu. 136<sup>7</sup>*

'When he walks he carries his room with him – A snail.'



TERMS		PREMISES		
		CONSTANT	VARIABLE	
GIVEN	human being (I)	walks (II)	carries his room with him (IV)	IMAGE
HIDDEN	snail (V)		does not carry his room with him (III)	ANSWER

Structure: What [human being] (I) walks (II) and carries his room with him (IV)? – snail (V).

Thus, establishing symbols A, a, B, b, and  $f_x$  as the values for signatum, one of the elements of signatum, signans, one of the elements of signans, and constant premiss respectively, the metaphors in these four riddles are:

$$A = B \Rightarrow f_x A = f_x B$$

1. ball = bird  $\Rightarrow$  a flying ball = a flying bird;
2. wheat = virgin  $\Rightarrow$  crowned wheat = a crowned virgin;
3. potato = child  $\Rightarrow$  born potato = born child;
4. snail = human being  $\Rightarrow$  a walking snail = a walking human being.

The relations  $a/A = b/B$  are metonymic. This finding a common function establishes a point of contact, so that the sets become tangential to each other:

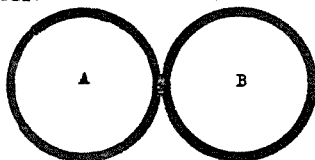


Figure 1.

<sup>7</sup> A riddle in complete form.

Reversibility of metaphors is one important feature of Maltese riddles. As Köngäs Maranda explains, 'If the original metaphor says "A = B", the new metaphor states "B = A"'<sup>8</sup> and metonymically  $b/B = a/A$ . Here are some examples of this mechanism:

- (5) *Is-sinjur jiġborha, il-fqir jarmiha* – *Maħta*. 17  
 'The rich [man] picks it up, the poor [man] throws it away – Snot.'
- (6) *Bi nhar tistrieħ, u bil-lejl taħdem* – *Sodda*. 85  
 'Rests by day; works by night – Bed.'
- (7) *Fis-sajf tilbes, fix-xitwa tinža'* – *Dielja*. 110  
 'She puts on clothes in Summer; casts them off in Winter – Vine-tree.'
- (8) *Twieled l-ewwel fil-familja, iżda hu l-iċċen wieħed* – *In-numru wieħed*. 168  
 'First born; yet he is the youngest – Number one.'
- (9) *Bil-wieqfa fuq rasu* – *Taċċ taż-żarbun*. 178  
 'Walks on his head – Nail in a shoe.'

Unit no. 6 may be represented thus:

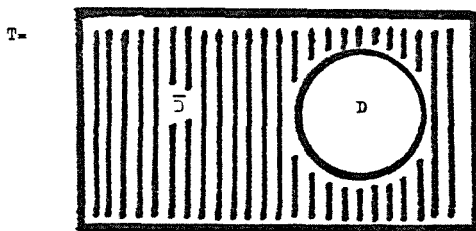


Figure 2. Riddle (6)

in which T (time) = D (day) +  $\bar{D}$  (night). The actions 'tistrieħ' (rests) and 'taħdem' (works) are opposites in that one excludes the other. The figure for riddle 7 is thus:

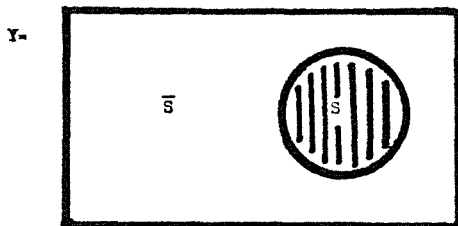


Figure 3. Riddle (7)

in which Y (year) = S (Summer) +  $\bar{S}$  (Winter). The actions 'tilbes' (puts on clothes) and 'tinža'' (casts them off) are opposites in

<sup>8</sup> 'The Logic of Riddles', 205.

that one excludes the other.

Reversibility occurs also in gender: masculine to feminine and/or vice-versa. In examples 11, 11a and 11b the process is clearly feminine to masculine throughout.

(10) *Platt twil,*

*Biċċa laħam fin-nofs,*

*Furketta 'l hawn*

*U furketta 'l hemm – Dgħajsa bl-imqadef.*<sup>36</sup>

'Longish dish,

A piece of meat in the centre,

A fork on each side – Pair-oars.'

Sequence of reversed gender in metaphors:

longish dish (m) = boat (f) + piece of meat (f) = oarsman (m) + fork (f) + oar (m).

(11) *Paljett fuq paljett*

*U paljett mbix – Kaboċċa.* 116<sup>9</sup>

'Mat upon mat

And 'tis no mat at all – Cabbage.'

(11a) *Iktar ma tneħħi tapiti*

*Iktar issibbom sbieħ – Kaboċċa.* 116(i)<sup>9</sup>

'The more carpets you take away

The more beautiful they will be – Cabbage.'

(11b) *Liżar fuq liżar,*

*Liżar fuq liżar – Kaboċċa.* 116(ii)<sup>9</sup>

'Sheet upon sheet,

Sheet upon sheet – Cabbage.'

Thus the sequence of reversed gender in these metaphors:

mat (m), carpet (m), sheet (m) = cabbage (f).

As a result of this reversibility the formula  $b/B = a/A$  has to be turned:

$$\bar{b}/\bar{B} = \bar{a}/\bar{A}.$$

Paradox should deserve mention in the study of Maltese riddles. According to Maranda, 'a paradox [is] ... the *intersection of two sets*. In other words, if a metaphor riddle is a cross between two truisms, a paradox riddle is an objection to a truism'.<sup>10</sup>

Here are some examples:

(12) *Jara bla għajnejn – Imqass.* 77 (ii)

'No eyes, sees – Scissors.'

(13) *Bin-nies madwarha w ma tarax – Tawolina.* 82

'Surrounded by people, cannot see them – Small table.'

<sup>9</sup> A riddle in complete form.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Logic of Riddles', 216.

(14) *Ma titkellimx u tiftiehem – Itra.* 159

'Cannot talk; makes herself understood – Letter.'

(15) *Bla lsien, imma twassal ir-risposti – Bolla.* 160

'No tongue, carries messages – Postage stamp.'

The truism would say: he who knows (A) functions as  $A(f_a)$ .  
The riddle says: he who does not know (A) functions as  $(\bar{f}_a)$ .  
Thus, formulating these paradoxical riddles:

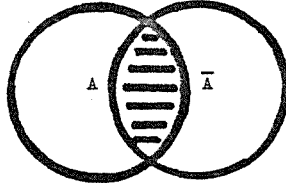


Figure 4. The structure of paradox riddles

This essay is expected to be highly revealing to Maltese folklorists. On the one hand it brings Maltese studies in line with the latest theories, and on the other, and more important still, it will unearth in the near future the oikotypical<sup>11</sup> and stylistic elements of the Maltese riddle – an invaluable aspect indeed which could not be developed in the limited space of this essay.

<sup>11</sup>The following units are some of the best examples for the oikotypical study of Maltese riddles: nos. 24 (i), 25, 27, 32, 37, 54, 60, 70, 133, 187.