IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES, we hope to offer new perspectives on the riddle in its enactment both as a conventional use of ordinary language and as an art form. Such an approach involves paying constant attention to the utilitarian, objective aspects of conventional speech on the one hand, and the more emotive, subjective aspects inherent in the artful performance of a folk genre on the other hand (see Guiraud 1971: 10-11). Although the separation of art and language may seem somewhat artificial, the riddle foregrounds linguistic code as well as aesthetic convention in its performance. Lucid 1977 in a critique of Lotman 1970 neatly characterizes this interplay of language and art: “The model of external communication consists of a code and a message that is encoded, transmitted and decoded. In contrast, the scheme of internal communication posits an initial code and the transformation of the message. . . . Art arises within internal speech as an antithesis to the practical speech of external messages but oscillates . . . between these two modes of communication” (Lucid 1977:11). Thus, the realization of an art form requires a subjective, internal perception to be transformed into a code from which receivers (an audience) can derive a meaning. Art is not free to innovate, but is subjected to semiotic constraints, those of some primary code (graphic, aural).

Though still semiotic, aesthetic constraints (artistic con-
ventions) are of a different order, a secondary system imposed on the primary code. This set of constraints proves to be crucial to the realization of artful constructs, also. It is the case, as asserted in Uspensky 1977, that “Every work of art is conventional, for it always presupposes some norm as the background against which it is perceived” (1977:172). Art, then, can hardly be conceived of as novel in any genuine sense of that word. It simply provides a mode for the reexamination of phenomena in terms of a finite set of conventions. This set of conventions may be expanded by a variety of means (some of which are described in this study), but at any given time the artistic expression is compelled to operate within a preestablished cultural framework. The boundaries within which art can operate are suggested by the following remarks found in Edie 1976: “Once men have culturally organized their experience in a distinctive manner, and chosen their metaphors, they tend to think within the cultural-linguistic bounds that they have unwittingly set for themselves. They no longer think as they will but as they can” (1976:170). Such conventional constraints on art in general are especially intense in traditional expressive culture.

We find then that our form-breaking techniques are limited aesthetically by cultural convention; similarly, they are limited linguistically by grammatical convention, and it is here that the focus of our study is to be found. For despite the constraints, within the limits just discussed we may explore linguistic and aesthetic structures, highlighting our knowledge of and facility with these structures. Thus, such notions as reclassification or inversion in riddling should not be taken to mean that riddles contain original metaphors or establish new linguistic epistemologies; rather, riddles play upon a common cultural repertoire of traditional categories, both linguistic and aesthetic, which are subjected to playful manipulation, but never demolished, on riddling occasions. Thus we see the riddle genre as employing organizing principles within a conventional framework.

Yet clearly riddles obscure a message, as well as the code, i.e., the limits on the forms that a message may take. In the
artful manipulation of linguistic and aesthetic codes, we may find an affirmation of the cultural convention, the message, which is hidden in the riddle form. But if riddles are indeed conventional, we might well ask how they achieve their artful end. We shall contend that the essential element in this regard is context, both linguistic and cultural. That is, the contextual frame for riddling is one of performance, as opposed to the normal communicative frame in utilitarian speech. The latter is highly contextualized, and its goal is to facilitate the flow of information; the former suspends normal context, and its goal is to impede the flow of information for the purpose of outwitting the riddlee.

Thus the interplay of code, message, and context is central to our discussion of the riddle, and we shall consider each element in turn. First, however, we need to address the framework within which this interplay occurs, namely that of performance. For if riddling employs organizing principles, as we have claimed, those principles come from the licensed performance of riddles. It is the performance of riddles that enables us to discuss more fully the personal, social, and aesthetic patterns they reveal. The license to exploit such patterns is basic to our analysis; therefore, let us treat this matter more fully.

Performance in contemporary folklore studies, as suggested by Bauman 1975, conveys "a dual sense of artistic action—the doing of folklore—and artistic event—the performance situation, involving performer, art form, audience, and setting" (1975:290). Although the bulk of the work on performance has been done only recently, folklore's concern with performance predates the recent flurry of activity.

Jansen 1957 argues that there is a "need for notes about the conditions of the actual performance" (1957:10) and indicates that the concern with the performance of folk materials predates his own essay by 25 years, although no specific works are cited in this regard. Jansen suggests that the term performance must be employed in its theatrical sense, for he notes that the presentation of an item of folklore requires the performer to assume "a pose toward his audience . . . that differs from his everyday, every-hour-in-the-
day relationship to that same audience” (1957:112-13). Jansen’s image of folk performer as actor, in a sense, anticipates conclusions drawn by more recent theorists, e.g., Abrahams 1968 and Goffman 1974.

Jansen, however, does not regard performance as a primary object for study, since he explicitly states, “The folklorist is, and must be, primarily concerned with the content, the material of folklore” (1957:111). Moreover, whereas contemporary scholars with an interest in performance tend to regard verbal folklore as, by definition, performance, he views it as a quantifiable element. Thus, he regards performance as something different from Bauman’s “doing.” It is, rather, discussed in terms of the abandonment of mundane social roles and the entry, to a greater or lesser degree, into the alternative role of performer (or “poser” in Jansen’s terminology). Although he does not touch on the important issue of ongoing influences during performance, Jansen does point out the utility of dealing with performance context (the situation surrounding the rendering) as well as texts (the “script” of a particular rendering) when addressing questions of function.

With the call of Hymes 1970 for an ethnography of speaking that would be “concerned with the situation and uses, the patterns and functions, of speaking as an activity in its own right” (1970:101), many of those scholars with an interest in the performance of traditional aesthetic products saw the utility of perceiving folklore as a way of speaking governed by specific rules and subject to all the cross-cultural variations of speech. Two distinguished efforts in this area are the discussion of proverbs as culture-specific communication in Arewa and Dundes 1964 and the analysis of the emergent nature of performance during storytelling events in Georges 1969.

Although there is general agreement among those folklorists who focus on performance as a central concept of the discipline, individual formulations of and approaches to the materials are subject to variation. To illustrate, Lomax 1968 argues that in the social organization of the singing group is to be found “the key to understanding the performance situ-
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ation . . . and its relationship to social structures” (1968:155). Thus, in Lomax' opinion, the analysis of performance events provides the key to unlocking submerged sociocultural patterns. Abrahams 1968, seeking a method that would take into account performance, item, and audience, draws on the insights provided by the contextual interests of the functionalist school of anthropology and the structural concerns of modern literary critics (especially Kenneth Burke) in order to study the “organizational elements of both items and performance” (1968:145). More recently Abrahams (ms.) has characterized performance as the coming together of an occasion, a performer, a performance tradition (i.e., the past experience of the group on similar occasions), and an audience capable of observing and judging effectively. He clearly deals with the constraints in performance events that keep innovation within acceptable frameworks for folk audiences. Ben-Amos 1971, in another reaction against earlier textually-oriented approaches to folklore, argues, “There is no dichotomy between processes and products. The telling is the tale; therefore the narrator, his story, and his audience are all related to each other as components of a single continuum, which is the communicative event” (1971:10).

In spite of minor differences in emphasis, then, the perspectives of performance theorists converge in the assertion that it is crucial to discuss verbal folklore as rule-governed utterance in situ that exploits traditional organizational patterns rather than as text in isolation; however, it remains a unique rendering within certain circumscribed boundaries. Such a convergence of approaches, as argued by Geertz, allows for an interdisciplinary “unpacking of performed meaning” (1980:174). Our aim is to unpack a number of the linguistic layers of riddle performance, thereby delineating another set of boundaries within which the witty devices of riddles are employed.

Goffman 1974 deals not only with the boundaries discussed by Abrahams and Ben-Amos, but adds another dimension in his assertion that “A performance . . . is that arrangement which transforms an individual into a stage
performer, the latter, in turn, being an object that can be looked at in the round and at length without offense, and looked to for engaging behavior, by persons in an 'audience' role" (1974:124). Goffman's notion of transformation emphasizes another element of the performance event in noting that at some point the performer must act, not only in a special role, but to signal his entry into a circumscribed realm or be in danger of social censure because of his manipulation of basic conventions of reference. In order to discuss this realm and the products that arise from it, the idea of a "frame" explicated by Bateson 1972 has been adopted by Goffman, as well as by scholars from a variety of disciplines.

According to Bateson, the frame is a set of implicit or explicit messages providing clues for the interpretation of coexistent messages; the former in Bateson's terminology are "metamessages" (i.e., messages about messages). The importance of this principle in the present discussion is that the use of these metamessages is to transform organizational patterns appropriate to serious behavior into ludic actions. Our sporting contests provide a number of illustrations of these principles in operation. For example, the metamessages of a boxing match (a restricted playing area, a referee, judges, and special protective equipment) that coexist with very real blows, cause us to interpret this activity as a game rather than as an actual fight. In the case of verbal interaction, there are also elements that serve as framing devices that are culturally recognized transformers of speech from talk into performance. Bauman 1975:295 cites several examples:

1. special codes, e.g., archaic or esoteric language, reserved for and diagnostic of performance (e.g., Toelken 1969, Sherzer 1974);

2. special formulae that signal performance, such as conventional openings and closings, or explicit statements announcing or asserting performance (e.g., Crowley 1966, Reaver 1972, Uspensky 1972, Babcock-Abrahams 1974);
3. figurative language, such as metaphor, metonymy, etc. (e.g., Keenan 1973, 1974, Fox 1974, Rosaldo 1973, Sherzer 1974);

4. formal stylistic devices, such as rhyme, vowel harmony, other forms of parallelism (Jakobson 1966, 1968, Stankiewicz 1960, Austerlitz 1960, Gossen 1972, 1974, Fox 1974, Sherzer and Sherzer 1972);

5. special prosodic patterns of tempo, stress, pitch (e.g., Lord 1960, Tedlock 1972);

6. special paralinguistic patterns of voice quality and vocalization (e.g., Tedlock 1972, McDowell 1974);

7. appeal of tradition (e.g., Innes 1974);

8. disclaimer of performance (e.g., Darnell 1974, Keenan 1974).

By means of such conventional devices, the aesthetic tradition of each group provides its performers with the means for framing verbal art, for signaling the audience to a performance event that what co-occurs with such devices is somehow different from what has come before and what will be presented in the stream of utterance to follow. What emerges from this reorientation is a move from the traditional text into the heart of such structures, the group expectations surrounding their forms and performances—aesthetic conventions, and the ways in which these play upon nonludic formulae.

It is with these conventions, specifically the conventions of description, that this study intends to deal. For our material, we rely in large measure on English-speaking traditions and remain within Western culture. Our data are drawn from published collections, our own field work, and those field notes colleagues have generously provided. Despite the limitations of this corpus, the arguments based upon it appear generally applicable to the riddle genre in a variety of cultural contexts. Moreover, as is suggested in the final pages of this study, our arguments concerning riddles apply to other traditional art forms as well.

In our examination of the structure of riddles, we must remember that they, like all art, provide conventional yet
creative means by which principles of order are rehearsed and revealed (cf. Abrahams, 1972:177). Applying our original paradox to our current problem, it is clear that for the riddle to work it must encompass both innovation (creativity) and convention as they emerge in performance. This difficult task is accomplished by manipulating the code(s) involved to create striking images without departing from the parameters provided by these accepted frameworks. Our arguments are based on the realization that riddles may bring perceptions into “saying” but not into “being.” They simply exploit preexisting patterns of various sorts. The conventional patterns exploited in riddles are drawn from at least two interrelated systems: the linguistic and the aesthetic.

The linguistic system of any group imposes the most formal set of constraints on its verbal art forms. Despite flexible areas, the grammar of any natural language limits the range of deviation within which communication can be accomplished. In its most general terms, a language, or any communicative system for that matter, must provide a code by which, as Lotman 1970 observed, messages can be encoded, transmitted, and decoded by those with whom we wish to communicate. Such systems require a high degree of predictability attainable only through relative rigidity.

It is in aesthetic systems that the group’s unique organizational formats are expressed through symbolic means. As Burke 1968 notes, “The forms of art . . . are not exclusively ‘aesthetic.’ They can be said to have a prior existence in the experiences of the person hearing or reading the work of art. They parallel processes which characterize his experiences outside of art” (1968:143). Thus our traditional verbal art should be seen in relation to other patterns of experience established in the performing group.

As regards riddling the influences of shared aesthetic-cultural patterns have been recognized for some time (e.g., Hamnett 1967 and Abrahams 1972). Verbal art emerges, then, in the interaction of the linguistically permissible with the aesthetically desirable. Moreover, both sets of
constraints are closely related to other sociocultural organizational patterns of the group. Within such restrictions, how can novel perception be created?

Emotive ends (i.e., deviation from a narrowly referential transfer of information) may be achieved because our communicative systems are not constructed of impermeable categories. Our systems invariably "leak." These "leaks," more properly areas of flexibility in the code, are what lead to occasional misunderstandings concerning the nature and interpretation of a message. More importantly, however, these resilient areas are often consciously exploited. Such exploitation occurs even outside the circumscribed realm of art. Linguistic change, for example, could not occur in the absence of such a system. "Human languages," Thomas 1969 writes, "are noticeably redundant . . . we use more elements than are needed to convey our meaning. This fact contributes to linguistic flexibility. The flexibility, in turn, facilitates linguistic change" (1969:34-35). Our concern, however, is with the exploitation of these flexible areas in performance contexts.

As we have previously noted, with the appearance of signals that ongoing activity constitutes performance as opposed to mere behavior, a special interpretative frame that contrasts with the literal is called into being. Behavior that ordinarily would be labeled inept or even overtly antisocial is frequently permitted and, in fact, encouraged in performance situations. The influential arguments found in Bateson 1972 demonstrate that the signals that "this is play" allow for the manipulation of the orders and disorders of nonludic experience without censure. Under such circumstances those patterns that are ordinarily interpreted as violations or incompetence may become virtuosity if they demonstrate intentionality. Even clumsiness may become art if it is manifestly intentional; if, in Kenneth Burke's terms, it is an act: "As for 'act,' any verb no matter how specific or how general, that has connotations of consciousness of purpose falls under this category. If one happened to stumble over an obstruction, that would not be an act, but mere motion.
However, one could convert even this sheer accident into something if, in the course of falling, one suddenly willed his fall" (Burke 1969:14).

It would be unwise in delineating the qualities of verbal art (though perhaps not impossible) to regard as artful an in medias res conversion from action to act, but Burke is correct in calling our attention to the principle of intentionality as the central criterion for separating art from simple behavior. The following comment on metaphor by Gardner and colleagues 1978 reinforces Burke’s argument: “To qualify as metaphor . . . the link formed must be intentional and conscious, rather than accidental or inadvertent” (1978:6). The “link” we attend to in metaphor is the coupling of a term’s “original” sense with a novel usage in performance (in the previously discussed folkloristic rather than the Chomskyian linguistic sense of this term). As commentators from Aristotle (The Poetics) to the present (cf. Gardner and colleagues 1978:15) have argued, in metaphor a renaming occurs. However, there is not mere substitution, but an overlapping of frames of reference for lexical items and phrases. As Edie 1976 characterizes the situation, “A word can become a metaphor, take on a new sense, only because, and precisely because it can enable us to take it as something else without ceasing thereby to signify its own original meaning” (1976:187).

Thus, tensions of various sorts (Gardner and colleagues 1978:6 notes the tensions between original and changed metaphorical meanings) are purposely generated in performance: literal meaning vs. metaphorical meaning, accident vs. intention, utilitarian vs. ludic, to name but a few. In verbal art this is possible only because language is systematic; it constitutes a pattern that although followed in utilitarian communications, may be subverted in play. As Thomas 1969 states concerning metaphor, although the same could be said of all verbal art, “If there were no system . . . then there could be no novelty” (1969:35).

In riddles the system of language employed by the folk group may be subverted in various ways through the intentional overlapping of frames of reference for purposes of
temporarily blocking communication. These means will be given detailed treatment in subsequent chapters. Let us begin to indicate the two major devices at this juncture, however.

The first, linguistic ambiguity, involves single utterances that may yield multiple semantic interpretations. Linguistic ambiguity arises when words are used in their literal senses; there is no recourse to the creative renaming that typifies figurative language. The following example is representative.

John hit the lady with the blue umbrella.

This utterance is subject to two readings: (1) John employed a blue umbrella as an instrument to strike a certain woman, or (2) John struck a woman who is identified by the fact that she carries a blue umbrella. Both interpretations are appropriate and both are literal. Two underlying semantic structures are represented by a single utterance. These structures do not rely on any novel reshaping of preexisting systems.

If we may assume that utilitarian speech strives for clarity (and it must to achieve its referential goals efficiently), we conclude such overlap is assiduously avoided outside playful contexts. There are various means, primarily contextual, by which we attempt to prevent ambiguous utterance. When such slips do occur in utilitarian speech, we regard them as accidents caused by the inherent flexibility of the code. In riddling, however, we exploit these accidents, and if successful, the riddler is credited with wit rather than incompetence.

Similarly, metaphor, though nonliteral, depends on the ability of language to create multiple frames of reference. By the same token, novel metaphor (as opposed to idiom, i.e., "frozen metaphor") may be dangerous in that meaning is not readily apparent. Its dangers in utilitarian speech result in its usefulness to verbal play, especially the riddle genre, in which the blocking of direct transfer of information is the ideal.

We shall begin our examination of riddles as verbal art from a linguistic perspective and build toward a characterization of the genre as an integration of formal linguistic and
culturally aesthetic strategies. For regardless of the device used to create a block in riddles, for example, conventional tropes or syntactic ambiguity, the form is grounded in language. We therefore take the structure of English as our base upon which to construct our comments about the riddle genre. We take the linguistic domain of the riddle to encompass the grammar of a language, in this case English. We shall approach language as a system consisting of basically three levels: (1) a level of sound or utterance, phonology; (2) a level of word-formation, morphology; and (3) a level of sentence formation, syntax. Semantics, the meaning component of language, will be assumed to permeate all levels and will be dealt with in like manner.'

At the level of phonology, we are concerned with the distinctive sounds of English, i.e., those sounds that native speakers perceive as basic units of language for purposes of communication. For instance, if we consider the pronunciation of the pair of words bet and pet, we find that speakers of English uniformly recognize the pair as consisting of two words with different meanings. Since the final sequence of vowel plus consonant is identical in the two words (i.e., they rhyme), the distinguishing factor must be in the initial consonants. On closer examination of the initial consonants, we find that both “p” and “b” are articulated by pursing the lips and then releasing a slight puff of air while unpursing the lips. We call this a bilabial articulation. We notice one difference between the two sounds, however: in the articulation of “b,” we notice that the vocal cords are vibrating; this is not true in the articulation of “p.” Thus, if the distinction between pet and bet rests on the differentiation of “p” and “b,” we find that this differentiation is in the state of the vocal cords during the bilabial articulation. Since this differentiation of “p” and “b” is functional in English in that it serves in determining the identities of different words, it is distinctive and must be taken into account in the description of the English language.

Furthermore, since we shall be concerned in this study primarily with actual speech, in the form of orally transmitted riddles, we must employ a system of notation in which
each distinctive sound of English has one and only one symbol which identifies that sound. In this way we level out spelling problems, such as the “f” sounds of fish, philosophy, and enough, by representing this sound everywhere as /f/. A list of phonemic symbols appears on page 19.

At the level of word formation, we are concerned with the combination of distinctive units of sound (phonemes) into meaningful grammatical units, which we call morphemes. Consider, for example, the English word discontinues, a third-person singular, present-tense verb. This “word” consists of three morphemes: a negative prefix dis-; a basic root continue; and a person-tense marker for verbs, the suffix -s. We can represent this morphological analysis using phonemic notation (always indicated by slashes), as /dIs - kantnyu - z/. Again we see the value in divorcing ourselves from spelling in that the third-person singular, present-tense marker, which is written with a “s,” is in fact pronounced in this case /z/.

At the level of sentence formation, or syntax, we are concerned primarily with defining the underlying, or conceptual, structure of an utterance and relating this conceptual structure to the actual utterance itself, which we call the surface structure. That is, given an utterance like:

1. Alex wants to go.

we are concerned first with what the underlying propositions of this utterance are. In this case, there are two:

2. Alex wants something.
3. Alex goes.

Once we have determined the underlying propositions, we need to determine the syntactic relationship between them. That is, we need to be able to formally represent the fact that proposition 3 is the object of proposition 2. We do this in generative-transformational theory by means of a “tree notation” known as phrase structure, which is simply a system for representing the underlying syntactic relationships of utterances like 1. A tree for sentence 1 would look roughly like figure 1. We see here that S1 (where S means “clause”) contains a subject noun phrase (NP) and a verb phrase (VP). The subject NP consists of a noun (N), Alex. The VP
consists of a verb (V) and an object NP, which in this case is another S. Thus, we have formalized our intuitions about the underlying propositions of 1 and their syntactic relationship.

We need next to concern ourselves with how the surface structure seen in 1 is derived from the underlying structure in figure 1. To accomplish this, it is necessary that certain processes be applied to the underlying structure. The cumulative effect of these processes is to yield the surface structure. These processes we call transformations. In the case of the underlying structure in figure 1, the most obvious difference between it and its corresponding surface structure is that the N Alex appears twice in the underlying structure but only once in the surface structure. Therefore, one of the occurrences of Alex, the one in S₂, must be deleted. This is done by a transformation called Equivalent NP Deletion, which states that with certain verbs (like want, beg, refuse), if
the subject of the object clause is the same as the subject of the main clause, then the subject of the object clause may be deleted. Thus, after the application of Equivalent NP Deletion, figure 1 would look like figure 2. Now, since the verb in S₂, *goes*, has no subject with which to agree, it becomes a nonfinite verb form, i.e., an infinitive, *to go*. Application of a subject-verb agreement rule in S₁ then yields the desired utterance *Alex wants to go*.

This example is intended only as an introduction to the type of syntactic analysis we shall develop throughout this work. Although descriptions of underlying structures and transformations will be treated and explained individually, it is important here to characterize the relationship of underlying to surface structure. Underlying structure is designed to formally represent a level of grammar that native speakers recognize intuitively. In this way it formalizes relationships that may not always be obvious in surface structure.

**Figure 2**

```
S₁
  NP      VP
  |        |
  N       V
  Alex    wants

S₂
  VP
  | V
  goes
```
(i.e., the actual utterance), but that the native speaker knows exist, nevertheless. This native speaker intuition we call competence. Surface structure, on the other hand, is a representation of an utterance as it is actually produced in speech. It includes all of the imperfections (e.g., slips of the tongue, false starts, unintentional ambiguity) associated with normal speech. This actualization of underlying structure we call performance. Generative-transformational grammar, then, seeks to relate competence to performance through the formal devices of underlying structures, transformations, and surface structures.

It is the concern of linguistics to characterize utterances from their inception in thought (semantics) to their realizations in sound. With the formalisms of phonology, morphology, and syntax, we can do this in an ordered manner. For in order to communicate any idea, we must be able to put the idea into a form that is recognizable to those with whom we wish to communicate. This formal, conventional form we call the grammar of language. It entails the use of various combinations of morphemes to represent concepts and the use of syntax to express the relationships between these concepts. Once we have encoded our idea, we then need to transmit it. The medium of speech is sound, and the actualization of the encoded message is in units of distinctive sound, phonemes. It is this system, then, that we will explore insofar as it may be exploited in the riddle genre.

1. Much of the analysis to be proposed is tied to linguistic theory. For purposes of clarity and simplicity, we employ a basically structural approach to phonology and morphology similar to that found in Francis 1958. Our treatment of syntactic phenomena is based on the generative-transformational model initiated in Chomsky 1957 and 1965. The aspects of these works that we employ in our analysis are those we find most useful in bringing new light to bear on the riddle genre. Our analysis is not tied exclusively to these theories, however, and could be formulated within the framework of other current theories of language. Such alternative analyses, and the theoretical issues they involve, are beyond the scope of this work.
## Phonemic Symbols

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