IN THIS CHAPTER WE shall explore the exploitation of morphology and syntax in producing wit in riddles. We shall also consider the interaction of phonological, morphological, and syntactic strategies in creating the block elements of riddles. In dealing with morphological ambiguity, we find two types of grammatical manipulation. The first is similar to the morphological ambiguity described in chapter 2; i.e., it is a play on the homophony of two morphologically different constructions. So, for instance, we find riddles like those in sentences 1 and 2.

1. What's black and white and red all over? Newspaper.
2. Why is coffee like the soil? It is ground.

In sentence 1 we find homophony of a simple lexical item /red/ and a verb plus its past participle morpheme, /red/. This latter form must be interpreted morphologically as /riyd/ + /-d/, where /-d/ is the regular past participle morpheme in English. However, /riyd/ falls into the category of verbs known as irregular, which means that its past tense and past participle markers do not conform to the normal rules for forming these inflectional forms. Thus, /riyd/ may be classed with such verbs as /bliyd/ (past participle /bled/) and /liyv/ (past participle /left/), where the past participle forms, as well as the past tense forms, must be learned by rote, rather than by rule.

In sentence 2 we find a similar instance of morphological
ambiguity. Here, the lexical item /grawnd/, a noun, is homopho
 nous with the past participle of the verb /graynd/. We should not
e here that in cases like 1 and 2, the syntax of the ambiguous ut
ances differs on the various readings. Thus, the answer to 2, It is ground, has two possible underly
structures, depending upon whether /grawnd/ is a noun or a verb form as in figure 9 and figure 10. So in figure 9 we
have a simple predicate noun, where the form of the verb to be is a copula. In figure 10, however, the situation is quite
different. For in order for the surface structure of figure 10 to mirror that of figure 9, several things must happen. First, the sentence must be passivized. This entails moving the indefinite subject NP someone to the end of the sentence into a by-phrase (i.e., making it by someone) and moving the object NP it into subject position. At the same time, the verb /graynd/ must be made passive by inserting the verb to be with the past participle of /graynd/. These processes yield an intermediate stage of derivation roughly like sentence 3.

3. It is ground by someone.

This structure is homophonous with that of figure 9 except for the phrase by someone. In English, as noted above, we may delete unspecified, i.e., indefinite NPs, if this deletion does not destroy the sense of the sentence. In 3, then, we

Figure 9

```
S
  /\    /
 NP  VP
 /\   /\ 
 N  V  NP
|  |  |  |
it  is ground
```
may delete by someone, thus yielding the so-called “agentless passive,” or “impersonal passive” of English, in this case It is ground.

It could be argued, then, that the difference between 1 and 2 is syntactic, rather than morphological. But such an argument misses an important point. Let us assume for a moment that /graynd/ is a regular verb in English. As such, its past participle would be /grayndəd/ (cf. /maynd/~/mayndəd/, /sawnd/~/sawndəd/). In this case if we applied all the same processes outlined for the derivation of figure 10, we would end up with sentence 4.

4. It is grinded.

Obviously, this sentence is not homophonous with the sentence represented by figure 9. Thus, even though the syntax of figures 9 and 10 is different, it is the morphology involved that causes the ambiguity. For though we also depend upon syntactic processes to produce similar sentence patterns from figures 9 and 10, it is the irregular morphology of the verb /graynd/ that is the key to producing the ambiguous element upon which the riddle depends.

The point here is that riddles like 1 and 2 clearly involve more than one grammatical level in their composition.
However, in such cases, it is the morphological manipulation that is primary in the creation of ambiguity. It is for this reason that we classify such riddles as morphologically ambiguous, as opposed to syntactically ambiguous. A similar cross-classification was seen in chapter 2 in dealing with stress- and juncture-related riddles. In these cases the various readings of the ambiguous elements of the riddles frequently differed at the morphological level or the syntactic level. However, the overriding factor in each case was the placement of stress or juncture, so that we classified these riddles by the primary source of grammatical ambiguity.

Other riddles that function like 1 and 2 include:

5. When is a rope like a child at school? *When taut (taught).*
7. When is a doctor most annoyed? *When he is out of patients (patience).*
8. What musical instrument should one not believe? *A lyre (liar).*

In 5 we find that the situation is parallel to that in 1 and 2, where the past participle of /tiyč/ is homophonous with the adjective /tat/. In 6 the ambiguity lies in the word /bətər/, which is either a simple lexical item or a complex form composed of /bət/ plus the agentive suffix /-ər/. In 7 the plural of the noun /peyşənt/ is homophonous with the simple lexical item /peyşənts/. And in 8 we find another situation like 6, in which the simple lexical item /layər/ is homophonous with the complex word /layər/ plus the agentive suffix /-ər/.

We note here that such riddles depend upon oral transmission for their effectiveness. For when they are written, one must frequently explain the relationship of the spelling to the morphology and phonology involved, e.g., that the word *taught* is homophonous with in 5 is *taut*. This may be done in writing by listing both answers, as we have done in several instances.

Another set of strategies for creating morphological ambiguity in riddles involves the arbitrary division of words into their morphemes, and then the use of these morphemes as if
they were independent lexical items. So, for instance, consider riddles like those in sentences 9, 10, and 11.

10. What kind of ears does a train have? Engineers.
11. What room can no one enter? A mushroom.

In fact, these examples represent not a single class of morphological strategy for riddling, but three separate classes. The first, exemplified by 9, simply takes the component morphemes of a word and treats them as free lexical items. Thus the -bow of rainbow is a morpheme that constitutes a part of the larger word. The same strategy is exemplified in riddles like:

12. What driver is never arrested? A screwdriver.
13. On what side of a country church is the graveyard? The outside.

In these cases again, the morphemes, -driver and -side, are treated as if they were isolated words, rather than meaningful constituents of larger words.

Examples 10 and 11 may at first appear to use the same type of morphological strategy, but closer examination reveals that they are indeed of different types. In 10 the phonological sequence /iyrz/ (spelled either ears or -eers) is the block element. Unlike 9, however, the morpheme that is used as if it were an isolated word is not the same morpheme that appears in the resolution, but is merely another, homophonous morpheme. Thus in 9 the morpheme -bow is part of the word rainbow. In 10 the morpheme ear is not the same as the suffix -eer that appears in the word engineer. Such riddles as 10, then, employ not only the morphological strategy described for 9, but also employ the homophony of different morphemes to confuse the riddlee, i.e., a type of lexical ambiguity.

Other riddles that operate like 10 are:

14. Which miss is most unpopular? Misfortune.
15. What ship has two mates but no captain? Courtship.

In 14 the independent morpheme meaning a woman is played against the negative prefix, both pronounced /mIs/. In 15 the independent morpheme meaning a sailing vessel is
played against a nominalizing suffix, both pronounced /sip/. In both instances, as in 10, the apparently independ­ent morpheme is homophonous with a morpheme con­tained in the answer to the riddle, but is not in fact an occurrence of this morpheme.

Although morphological manipulation is the central fac­tor here, the syntax of such riddles also helps to confound the riddlee. For in each case, the riddle question is one that treats the morpheme being used ambiguously as if it were a noun. That is, in each case the riddle question contains an interrogative pronoun what, that indicates (misleadingly) to the riddlee that a question is being asked regarding the specification of a particular noun. The riddlee's error is that he assumes that the noun being questioned is the one that appears in the riddle question, when this is not the case.

It should again be noted that these riddles depend upon oral transmission. Thus, for instance, in 10 or 12, where the ambiguous morpheme is spelled differently in its use in the riddle question from the way it appears in the larger mor­phemic construction of which it is a part in the resolution (-eer vs. ear and mis- vs. miss), a written explanation becomes cumbersome and detracts from the riddle.

Yet another morphological strategy is revealed in exam­ples like 11. In this instance a sequence of phonemes that is homophonous with a morpheme, /ruwm/, is treated as if it were an independent morpheme. However, once the answer to the riddle is revealed, it is seen that this sequence of phonemes is not a morpheme of the larger word, i.e., -room is not a meaningful constituent of mushroom. In other words, the riddle may treat a sequence of phonemes as if it were an occurrence of a given morpheme, when in fact it is not an occurrence of that morpheme, or of any morpheme, in order to confuse the riddlee. Other riddles that employ this strat­egy are:

16. What is the key to a good dinner? A turkey.
17. What chins are never shaved? Urchins.
18. What pets make the sweetest music? Trumpets.

In each of these examples, the riddle question asks for spec­ification of an apparently independent lexical item, key, chins,
and *pets*. However, these apparent lexical items are not morphemes extracted from larger words, or ambiguous morphemes, but merely sequences of phonemes that are homophonous with certain morphemes. Thus, the *-key* of *turkey* has nothing to do with an instrument for unlocking a door, nor with any other definition of the word *key*. Similarly, the *-chins* of *urchins* has nothing to do with the human anatomy, nor does the *-pets* of *trumpets* relate to animals. Such sequences of phonemes that are treated as morphemes may be referred to as *pseudomorphemes*.

This same strategy employing pseudomorphemes can be seen in riddles like:

19. What kind of cat do you find in the library? *Catalogue*

20. What toe never gets a corn? *Mistletoe*

21. What is the gentlest kind of spur? *Whisper*

Here again we see the creation of pseudomorphemes—sequences of phonemes that are homophonous with English morphemes but which themselves are devoid of semantic content. Thus, the /kæt/ of /kætalag/, the /tow/ of /mIsalow/ and the /spar/ of /wIspar/ are not semantically related in any way to the actual morphemes they resemble, and so cannot be considered real morphemes. In the riddle act, however, only the riddler knows that the forms in question are pseudomorphemes, and he uses this knowledge to confuse and outwit the riddlee.

As was the case above, such riddles are dependent upon oral transmission, since examples like 21 require an explanation of the interrelationships of spelling, morphology, and phonology.

We turn now to the level of syntax in characterizing the role of ambiguity in riddling. We find that the syntax of English may be manipulated in several ways to create ambiguity in the riddle form. The first way, as outlined in chapter 2, is through phrase structure ambiguity, whereby two different underlying syntactic structures have identical surface structures as a result of the homophony of contrasting parts of speech. The second way is through transformational ambiguity, where two different underlying structures have identical surface structures by virtue of the transformational proc-
esses that apply in the derivations of the surface forms. Two basic types of transformations are used to create ambiguity in riddles: rearrangement and deletion transformations. A rearrangement transformation is simply any transformation that rearranges the order of constituents in a phrase structure. So, for instance, passivization is a rearrangement transformation which, given a structure like that in figure 11, moves the NP Mary into surface subject position and the NP John to the end of the sentence into a by-phrase, yielding Mary was hit by John. Another common rearrangement transformation is Question Formation, which converts a structure like figure 12 into the sentence Who did John hit? by moving the indefinite NP someone (after it has been changed into an interrogative pronoun) to initial position in the sentence. As we shall see, this transformation is frequently employed in the riddle form.

Deletion transformations are simply those that allow some element to be deleted from a phrase structure tree. One such transformation, Unspecified Pronoun Deletion, is discussed in chapter 2. Thus, there are three basic syntactic processes that may be utilized in creating ambiguity in riddles. Let us now examine each in turn.

Figure 11

```
S
  NP
    N
      John
  VP
    V
      hit
  NP
    N
      Mary
```
The exploitation of phrase structure ambiguity is comparatively rare in riddling, but can be seen in riddles like:

22. Why is a goose like an icicle? *Both grow down*

23. When is a boy like a pony? *When he is a little horse*

The ambiguity in this case can be seen by examining the underlying syntactic representations involved in the confusing element of the riddle. Thus, the ambiguity in *Both grow down* is resolved in the possible underlying structures in 13 and 14. We see here that in figure 13 *down* is a direct object, and so an NP, but in figure 14 *down* is an adverb.

Example 23 manifests the same type of syntactic strategy. In this case the crucial element is the phrase /Ital howrs/, which is either an adjective-noun combination or an adverb-adjective combination. This is shown by contrasting the two underlying structures as in figures 15 and 16. At this point we should note the difference between riddles like those under discussion and those we have called lexically ambiguous in preceding chapters. Simply, in lexically ambiguous riddles we find two homophonous words that are the same parts of speech and that are not distinguishable syntactically in the riddle in which they are employed, for example, the word *turns* in "What turns but never moves?"
Figure 13

```
S
  NP
    N
      both
  VP
    V
      grow
  NP
    N
      down
```

Figure 14

```
S
  NP
    N
      both
  VP
    V
      grow
    ADV
      down
```
Figure 15

```
S
  | NP
  | VP
  |   | V
  |   | N
  |   | he
  |   | is
  |   | ADV
  |   | ADJ
  |   | little
  | ADJ Phr.
  | ADJ
  | hoarse
```

Figure 16

```
S
  | NP
  | VP
  |   | V
  |   | N
  |   | he
  |   | is
  |   | ADJ
  |   | little
  | ADJ
  | NP
  |   | N
  |   | horse
```
Milk." In the case of phrase structure ambiguity, we have homophony that results when two syntactically different constituents, for example, a noun and an adjective as in example 23, may occur within a string of words in such a way that the syntactic parsing of the sentence is unclear. Thus, in these latter cases, it is the grammar, and not merely the lexicon, that is central to the creation of ambiguity. The fact that the word order does not distinguish the two syntactic structures enables the riddler to use the homophonous constructions as the core of his riddle. The reason for the rarity of this particular type of ambiguity is, we believe, fairly clear. It is simply the case that the number of instances in which different underlying syntactic structures contain homophonous lexical items and have identical word orders are few in English.

Another type of syntactic ambiguity, transformational ambiguity, is frequently employed in the riddle genre. Taking first examples of deletion transformations, consider riddles like:

24. What do you call a man who marries another man? Minister.

25. Would you rather have an elephant kill you or a gorilla? I'd rather the elephant kill the gorilla.

26. When is a man like a snake? When he is rattled.

In each of these cases, ambiguity is created when the deletion of some element from an underlying structure makes this structure homophonous with another, different structure. So, for instance, in 24, we find that the phonological form /mæriə/ may have two semantic representations, which in turn have different syntactic reflexes. One representation designates a formal commitment made between two people and can be represented by the tree in figure 17. The other representation designates a state in which one person performs a ceremony that involves two other people and can be expressed in figure 18. It can be seen from these structures that the configuration of figure 18 is syntactically like that of figure 17, except that figure 18 has an additional prepositional phrase (PP). However, if the NP of the PP in figure 18 is unspecified, it can, as we have seen, be deleted.
Figure 17

```
S
  NP  VP
    N    NP
     V  N
      marry X  Y
```

Figure 18

```
S
  NP  VP
    N    PP
     V  NP
      marry N  X
      to Y
```

This deletion then leaves the structure in figure 18 syntactically identical to that in figure 17. This being the case, only a larger conversational context can distinguish which semantic representation is intended, since the syntax can no longer serve this function. Naturally, in riddling, there is no larger conversational context upon which to draw. Therefore, only the riddler knows in asking the riddle in 24 that he is employing the semantics represented by the construction in figure 18, and not figure 17. This fact is revealed to the riddlee in the answer, since the NP minister represents the third party in the second representation of /mæriːv/ described above. The riddlee then realizes that the underlying structure of the question in 20 is really something like “What do you call a man who marries another man to someone?” He understands then that to someone has been deleted, as discussed previously.

In 25 we find another case of ambiguity caused by deletion. In this case the two underlying syntactic structures involved are illustrated in figures 19 and 20. In this case we are dealing with the deletion of identical repeated elements in underlying structure. So, in figure 19 we may delete the VP of S₄, since it is identical to that in S₃. We might point out here that this deletion rule is the same one that yields sentences like John and Mary went to the store from John went to the store and Mary went to the store, where the second went to the store (i.e., the VP) is deleted under identity with the first, and the subject NPs are then conjoined.

In figure 20 we can delete the subject elephant and verb kill of S₄ under identity with the corresponding elements of S₃. Notice that after the deletions in figures 19 and 20, the only element left in S₄ is gorilla. However, in figure 19 it is left as a subject NP, and in figure 20 it is left as an object NP, even though the word orders in figures 19 and 20 are identical otherwise after the permissible deletions. Thus, 25 asks either which of two animals you would rather have kill you (figure 19), or whether you would prefer to have an elephant kill you or have the elephant kill a gorilla (figure 20).

In riddle 26 we find another case of Unspecified Pronoun Deletion causing ambiguity. Thus, on one reading the
Figure 20

S₁

NP  VP
  NP  NP
    N  V
   you  prefer

S₂

or

S₃

NP  VP
  NP  NP
    N  V
   elephant kill  you
elephant kill

S₄

NP  VP
  NP  NP
    N  V
   gorilla
answer to 26 is merely an adjective rattled, meaning “having a rattle,” and referring to a snake (see figure 21). On the other reading, rattled is part of passive construction that can be roughly rendered as “The man is rattled by something,” coming from an underlying structure like that in figure 22. As was the case above, the unspecified pronoun and its preposition can be deleted from the passive construction, thus rendering the constructions in figures 21 and 22 homophonous.

We turn now to cases in which a movement transformation causes ambiguity. In such cases it is the Question Formation transformation of English that is utilized. The basic strategy employed is to question some constituent of an idiom, thus pretending that the idiom is a normal syntactic construction. To clarify this statement, let us consider the nature of idioms. They are expressions whose meanings cannot be discerned from the constituent words of the expressions, or from the syntax of the expressions. So, for instance, if we take the idiom “kick the bucket” in John kicked the bucket, meaning “John died,” we find that we cannot perform any transformations on the idiom and still retain the idiomatic meaning. Thus, a question-and-answer sequence like:

Q: What did John kick?
A: John kicked the bucket.

Figure 21
cannot refer to John’s death, but only to an event whereby John struck a bucket with his foot.

Similarly, we find that idioms do not undergo various other movement transformations, e.g., passivization. Thus, a sentence like *The bucket was kicked by John* cannot refer to John's death. These examples point to the fact that idioms are frozen syntactic constructions with fixed meanings. That is, since the meaning of an idiom is not derived from its component parts, the only way to recognize an idiom is by its fixed (frozen) syntax. Thus, it is not surprising that idioms do not undergo many transformations, since a change in syntactic pattern renders an idiom indistinguishable from a construction that is composed of the same constituents as the idiom but that does have a meaning derivable from its constituents, i.e., a literal meaning. Therefore, in our example, any syntactic manipulation of the idiom *kick the bucket* meaning “die” makes it indistinguishable from the literal meaning of the ordinary phrase *kick the bucket*.

In riddling, however, we find that the restrictions on transformations of the syntax of idioms may be violated to confuse the riddlee. That is, the riddler is free to question any element of an idiom as if it were not an idiom, but a
literal statement. This immediately creates ambiguity, since the riddler is using both the literal and idiomatic meanings of a given syntactic construction to confound the riddlee. Consider, then, riddles like:

27. What is it you will break if you even name it? *Silence.*
28. When is a lamp in bad humor? *When it is put out.*
29. What does a person grow if he works hard in his garden? *Tired.*
30. What goes most against a farmer's grain? *A reaper.*

In 27 the idiom *to break (the) silence* is violated by questioning the NP *silence.* In so doing the riddler is apparently asking a question about an object that is extremely fragile. It is only in revealing the answer that it becomes clear that we are dealing with an idiom and not a literal statement.

In 28 we find a variation on idiom manipulation. Here the ambiguous syntactic construction *put out* is the answer to the riddle, and the effect of the riddle depends upon the recognition of both the idiomatic and literal senses of the construction. Here, as we discussed above, the riddle hinges not so much on the resolution of ambiguity as on its creation.

In 29 Question Formation has been employed to obscure the differences between the literal use of the word *grow* and its figurative sense “become” in the idiom *to grow tired.* Thus, the interrogative pronoun *what* apparently is questioning an NP that would be the direct object of *grow,* thus suggesting a literal interpretation of the verb. When the answer is revealed, however, we see that in fact two syntactic violations have served to confuse the riddlee. First, the interrogative pronoun *what* can be used only to question NPs, and we find that in the idiomatic answer to the riddle, *tired* is in fact an adjective. Second, the idiom *to grow tired* does not allow the application of Question Formation to *tired,* so that no question can be asked of this idiom, the answer to which is *tired.*

In 30 we find a case where the riddle question contains an ambiguity of literal vs. idiomatic interpretation of the expression *go against the grain.* The ambiguous adverb *most* in this instance serves to steer the riddlee toward the idiomatic
interpretation, something like “What most annoys a farmer?” In the answer it is revealed that most means not “to the greatest extent,” but rather “most frequently,” and that the question is to be taken literally.

One last category of syntactic processes involved in riddling is that in which a given syntactic construction is homophonous with a morphological construction. The creation of ambiguity in these cases depends upon both morphological and syntactic processes that result in identical phonological (but not morphological or syntactic) forms. Such instances thus represent the interaction of two grammatical levels. Our decision to include these cases under the study of syntactic ambiguity stems from the fact that it is always the case that a series of transformations causes the surface form of an utterance to coincide with another utterance in which regular morphological processes have occurred. In any case, as we have seen, the relationship between morphology and syntax is complex, and these instances of interaction are merely another indication of the closeness of these levels.

Consider, then, riddles like:

31. What flowers does a person always carry? Tulips (two lips).
32. When is a boat like a heap of snow? When it is adrift.
33. Why is a fish dealer never generous? His business makes him selfish (sell fish).
34. Why is a mouse like grass? The cattle (cat’ll) eat it.
35. Why can’t you starve to death in the desert? Because of the sandwiches (sand which is) there.

In 31 the morphological construction of a noun /tuw̃lip/ plus the plural morpheme /-s/ is homophonous with the adjective-noun construction /tuw/ + /lips/, “two lips.” It should be noted here that the homophony, and the resultant ambiguity, of this construction depend on phonological factors, i.e., stress and juncture, as well as on morphological and syntactic processes. Thus the two constructions above could be represented as /tuw̃l̃ips/ and /tuw + l̃ips/, respectively. However, as discussed above, the use of contrastive stress overrides the normal stress patterns, producing constructions that are completely homophonous.
In 32 we find homophony of an adjective /ədrIft/ and a determiner-noun sequence /ə + drIft/, where in normal conversation no distinction in pronunciation would be made. In fact, in normal conversation the need to distinguish the two would rarely, if ever, arise, since the two constructions are not particularly likely to occur in the same conversational context.

In 33 we contrast an adjective /selfls/ with a verb-direct object construction /sel + fls/, where stress is again a factor as described above. In 34 we find that the syntactic transformation called Contraction changes the form of /kæt + wIl/, cat will, to /kætl/, cat'll, which is homophonous with the noun /kætl/, cattle. And in 35 we find that the head noun of a relative clause, sand, along with the relative clause that follows it, which is there, is homophonous with the plural of the noun sandwich plus the locative there.

In all of the riddles 31-35, although ambiguity plays a major role in the wit of the riddles, we cannot help but note that some element of wit must be involved in creating a question that the desired responses must fit. This element of wit clearly is closely allied with the linguistic manipulation with which we are dealing. This last category of riddles serves to especially emphasize the fact that in all riddles a variety of strategies, linguistic or otherwise, are at work simultaneously. The strictly linguistic aspects of wit in riddling that have been discussed represent only one type of cognitive device employed in riddling. This point is driven home in Ben-Amos 1976, which distinguishes "cultural" and "empirical" ambiguity from linguistic ambiguity. Ben-Amos rightly notes that linguistic and cultural aspects of riddling are complementary, rather than mutually exclusive aspects of riddling.

This relationship of language and culture in riddling may be elaborated upon when we consider riddling in comparison to ordinary speech and to cultural performances that are not language-bound. In the first instance, language is a reflection of culture. Since riddling represents a type of artful manipulation, or play, within a culture, we may regard riddling as a type of metacultural play, in that it is an artful
manipulation of a basic means of dealing with culture, viz., language. As to the relation of riddling to other types of play in culture, the obvious comparison is with slapstick, physical comedy (see, e.g., Hockett 1977). Slapstick, as riddling, takes events that are considered clumsy or embarrassing in ordinary interactions (e.g., slipping on a banana peel or accidently uttering an ambiguous utterance that hinders communication) and makes them artful in a performance context. This is especially true for the morphological riddles examined, for they involve incomplete or incorrect analyses of word structure in English, i.e., grammatical clumsiness.

This exploitation of maladroitness as an art form is apparent in a type of riddle that plays upon some of the most common types of "slips of the tongue" that plague us all. Specifically, the wit in this type of riddle derives from the reversal of sounds (called metathesis) and the reversal of words in a sentence. Such metathesis/reversal phenomena occur in everyday speech, for example, when one says "irrevelant" for "irrelevant," which involves simple metathesis within a word, or when one says "Let me sew you to your sheet" for "Let me show you to your seat," which involves a long-distance metathesis commonly known as a spoonerism. In other cases whole words may be reversed within a sentence, as when one says "I'll mark the hit" for "I'll hit the mark." Let us see, then, how this linguistic clumsiness is utilized in riddling.

A number of riddles employ metathesis, as:

36. What is the difference between a deer fleeing from hunters and a midget witch? One is a hunted stag, the other a stunted hag.

37. What is the difference between a fisherman and a dunce? One baits hooks, the other hates books.

38. What is the difference between a mouse and young lady? One harms cheese, the other charms he's.

In each case the wit of the riddle depends crucially on reversal of initial sounds of words. In other instances it is the reversal of words that makes riddles witty, as in:

39. What is the difference between a jeweler and a jailer? One sells watches, the other watches cells.
40. What is the difference between a professional musician and one who hears him? *One plays for his pay, the other pays for his play.*

41. What is the difference between a donkey and a postage stamp? *One you lick with a stick, the other you stick with a lick.*

In such cases we find reversals involving primarily verbs and direct objects or objects of prepositions (i.e., nouns). In each of these examples, we find a verb (*sell, play, lick*) that becomes an object, whereas an object (*watches, pay, stick*) becomes a verb in the reversed construction. This reversal depends upon certain verbs and nouns being homophones, but not necessarily semantically related. This is most apparent in 39, with the homophones *sell* and *cell.*

A related strategy is one whereby the reversal, which involves verbs and objects, exhibits no particular patterning of grammatical elements in the reversal, as in 39-41. Thus we find riddles like:

42. What is the difference between a sewing machine and a kiss? *One sews seams nice, the other seems so nice.*

43. What is the difference between a hungry man and a glutton? *One longs to eat, the other eats too long.*

In 42 the verb-plus-adverb construction *seems so* is contrasted with the verb-plus-direct object *sews seams,* whereas in 43 the infinitive *to eat* is contrasted with the verb-plus-adverb combination *eats too.* Although the neat patterning of verbs and objects seen in 39-41 is not present in these riddles, we do find again that the reversal depends upon homophony between words that are different parts of speech. It is the fact that the homophony is between different grammatical categories that differentiates the strategy of 39-43 from the strategy of simple lexical ambiguity.

The strategies that have been outlined in this chapter, as well as those discussed in chapter 2, permit a rehearsal and reinforcement of grammatical norms through inversion and intensification (see in this regard Abrahams 1973). As has been demonstrated, the riddles treated in this work are drawn from a wide range of linguistic phenomena that are considered accidents in ordinary speech. In riddling we clas-
sify our linguistic clumsiness and present it in a way that permits us to control it in a performance context. Thus the riddle genre permits us to demonstrate our lack of command of language, as well our command of language.

1. This notion is more fully treated in many places: Ben-Amos 1971, Abrahams (ms.), Bauman 1975, Hymes 1970, and Burke 1968.