Chapter Six

WE HAVE NOW EXAMINED in some depth the formal linguistic properties that are exploited in the riddle genre and thereby become part of the definition of wit. We have shown that the exploitation of formal properties of language represents a continuum of strategies from those that depend upon oral transmission to those that must be written to achieve their effect. This continuum thus takes into account the major manifestations of language and points out the nature of the relationship between these manifestations. The delineation of this continuum has emphasized our preoccupation with the relationship of form to content in the various exploitations of flexible areas within the formal code to produce licensed confusion in the message.

We turn now to the characterization of another continuum. In this case, we are concerned with the differing natures of riddles like 1–3 and those in 4 and 5.

2. What's black and white and red (read) all over? *A newspaper.*
3. How is a duck like an icicle? *Both grow down.*
4. In spring I am gay
   In handsome array;
   In summer more clothing I wear;
   When colder it grows
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I fling off my clothes;
And in winter I quite naked appear. A tree.

5. I have a cock on yonder hill
I keep him for a wonder.
And every time the cock do crow,
It lightens, hails and thunders. A gun.

We shall define the difference in strategies used to create a block element in these riddles as one of formal grammatical ambiguity of the type already discussed (and exampled here in 1-3) versus literary or metaphorical ambiguity, i.e., ambiguity resulting from cultural tropes that produce, in the riddling context, surprising additional semantic structures for existing words or phrases.

Further, we shall claim that the two types of ambiguity that we distinguish represent endpoints on a continuum of the conscious, artful manipulation of ambiguous language in verbal play, and we shall examine various points along this continuum that fit neither extreme exactly, but that exhibit elements of both. We shall see, then, how the relationship between grammatical and metaphorical ambiguity defines a continuum of ambiguity, and we shall suggest how it is that we can categorize various types of ambiguity in the riddle genre.

Having already paid close attention to the nature of grammatical ambiguity, let us turn to an examination of metaphor and metaphorical ambiguity as language and as a strategy in riddling. The study of metaphor has a long literary tradition. Folklore, though a relatively new discipline, has also demonstrated a concern with figurative language in oral tradition (Taylor 1943 and 1951 being the best examples). Until fairly recently, however, metaphor has not been the subject of extensive treatment by linguists. Because our arguments are based on the assertion that the code is the central issue in ridding, and linguistics is the discipline most directly concerned with the code, this recent scholarship, though lacking in some regards, is central to our understanding of those riddles that employ metaphor as a block element.

A review of linguistic literature on metaphor (e.g., Bick-
erton 1969, Mooij 1976) shows that metaphors have been categorized largely on the basis of grammatical and semantic deviance, from the linguistic point of view. Let us consider a linguistic analysis of the following examples.

6. Women and men went their came.
7. Hate blows a bubble of despair.

In the first example, we find syntactic deviance in two respects. First, the verb *went* is intransitive and therefore should not take a direct object. Second, even if *went* were transitive and so could take a direct object, direct objects must be noun phrases, and *came*, which is in direct object position in this sentence, is clearly not a noun phrase, but a verb. A componential analysis of this utterance yields the following scheme for the crucial terms *went* and *came*:

\[
\text{went} = [+ \text{verb}, - \text{transitive}, + \text{past} \ldots ] \\
\text{came} = [+ \text{verb}, - \text{transitive}, + \text{past} \ldots ]
\]

This analysis shows in terms of a binary feature system the specific features of these terms that conflict to produce syntactic anomaly.

In the second example, the syntax of the construction is grammatical, but the semantics of the sentence is anomalous. *Hate*, which is an abstract, inanimate noun, cannot serve as the subject of *blow*, which requires an animate, concrete, living subject. Moreover, *bubble*, which is a concrete noun, cannot be described as being composed of *despair*, since *despair* is not concrete. Again, we can display the conflicting features of the relevant elements in the diagrammatic fashion:

\[
\text{hate} = [+ \text{noun}, - \text{animate}, - \text{concrete} \ldots ] \\
\text{blow} = [+ \text{verb}, + \text{transitive}, + \text{animate subject} \ldots ] \\
\text{bubble} = [+ \text{noun}, + \text{concrete}, - \text{animate} \ldots ] \\
\text{despair} = [+ \text{noun}, - \text{concrete}, - \text{animate} \ldots ]
\]

Obviously, the type of analysis just mentioned is concerned with figurative usage of language vis-à-vis literal usage, and the interplay of literal and figurative usage is basic to this analysis. Such analyses, however, focus on contrastive aspects of the two usages, rather than on the nature
of the relationship between the two. The understanding and
description by formalized procedures of this relationship is
crucial to understanding riddle construction and the means
by which this genre exploits linguistic malleability in both
grammatically ambiguous and metaphorical riddles.

In a recent work dealing with children's riddling,
McDowell 1979 addresses the roles of metaphor and ambi-
guity in the strategy of riddling in general. Through a dis-
cussion of the notions of homophony and polysemy, he
attempts to construct a theoretical base for explaining how
riddles may be used to reify what he terms “dead words” or
“dead metaphors,” through the resurrection of literal mean-
ing. Although his effort to present a unified approach to
both metaphorical and formally ambiguous riddles is com-
 mendable, when McDowell's notions are examined from a
linguistic point of view we discover that his basic assump-
tions concerning the relationship of linguistic ambiguity and
imagery in riddles are questionable, and the resulting
framework he constructs is neither linguistically nor psycho-
logically valid. Before suggesting a more appropriate means
of characterizing the relationship between linguistic ambi-
guity and metaphorical language, these assertions concern-
ing the flaws in McDowell's scheme require clarification.

McDowell bases his arguments on that segment of verbal
art he has labeled the interrogative ludic routine, which he
defines as “an extrasentential verbal sequence founded on
the interrogative system of the language, but adapting that
system to purposes of play” (1979:ix). Though not inconsis-
tent with the concept of the riddle we have advanced in this
work, McDowell intends by this notion to encompass a
wider range of materials than the riddle genre proper. We
shall concern ourselves only with the relevance of his com-
ments to traditional riddling.

McDowell sets forth in chapter five of his book a typology
of “ludic transformations” or devices for deceiving a riddlee,
using either a linguistic code or a cognitive code. Concen-
trating on those devices that exploit the linguistic code, we
find two basic types of ludic transformation employed in the
interrogative ludic routine that includes riddles. The first
type operates through the juxtaposition of contradictory elements in such a way as to facilitate the perception of an anomaly. This strategy, McDowell claims, is realized in riddles by use of homophony, the exploitation of a single phonetic string that may represent two or more semantic interpretations. His examples of this type of riddle include:

8. What’s black and white and red/read all over? A newspaper.

9. What has four wheels and flies? A garbage truck.

The second type of ludic transformation depends on a comparison, a transitory association of two similar elements in such a way as to highlight the perception of congruence. This strategy is realized through what McDowell terms “conventional polysemy,” the historically or psychologically motivated occurrence of two or more semantic interpretations in a single phonetic string. Thus polysemy differs from homophony by a factor of motivation. An example of a polysemous riddle is:

10. Something has an ear and cannot hear. Corn.

Another sort of comparison, radical polysemy, is seen in riddles such as:


McDowell (1979:101) contends, “In taking up radical polysemy we depart from those comparisons enfranchised in ordinary usage.” The strategy requires the linking of two relata “without the prior sanction of conventional usage,” and “involves the transitory association of two objects on the basis of some common feature.” Although McDowell suggests various syntagmatic relations between signifier and signified, it is sufficient to note that figurative usage is the common base of such riddles.

Let us examine the typology in some detail. In the case of homophony, McDowell suggests that the cause of homophony is the conflict between restrictions on the phonemic inventories of languages (i.e., possible sounds in natural languages) and the “fundamental logic of natural languages,” which “includes a one-to-one correspondence between phonetic representation and semantic representation” (1979:90). In the same discussion he considers this
conflict (which he calls “wrinkles in the code”) to “constitute a threat to the very possibility of language,” which necessitates disambiguation of homophonous elements, usually through context. It is the manipulation of these “wrinkles in the code” that are the focus of riddles like 1 and 2.

McDowell is correct in assessing the role of homophony in riddling, but we must take issue with his statement concerning the place of homophony in language and thus with his treatment of homophony in general. First, and most important, homophony is not a “threat” to language, but rather a manifestation of one very important aspect of natural languages, namely redundancy.

By redundancy we do not mean “needlessly repetitive” in the nontechnical sense, but rather we mark the usage as it applies to language as a system of communication. Let us examine this notion briefly and see how homophony can be treated as a form of redundancy.

Natural languages (i.e., those spoken by humans) constitute a subset of communications systems in general, e.g., systems like Morse code, signal flags, or computer languages. If we view such systems as consisting of a source, a signal, and a receiver, we can see language as a system that can be schematized as in figure 24. Thus, a message (information) is encoded according to some set of signals and is transmitted over a channel to a receiver where the signals are decoded to reveal the message. In spoken language the information source is the human brain, the transmitter is

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Figure 24
the vocal tract, the signals are phonemes, the channel is vibrating air, and the receiver is another human being.

Ideal communication in all communications systems is achieved when the minimum number of signals possible to send any given message is used. For example, if one were using a transmitter code in which the signals were the presence or absence of a flow of electric current, one could encode the message “yes” by allowing the current to flow, and “no” by stopping the flow. Thus the two positions of a simple relay, open or closed, could correspond to the two messages. Such a system, however, is subject to outside interference with the channel. That is, although the intended message may be properly encoded, the channel may be disturbed, in the case at hand, for example, by static in the system or by a temporary interruption in the flow of the current. Such unintended outside interference is termed noise in communication theory. Noise may cause the signal, and hence the message, to become garbled or even changed completely. Thus, any communication system that is subject to noise must make provision to ensure effective transmission of messages.

Redundancy is such a provision. We may define redundancy with Rosie 1973 as “the presence of any detail in a . . . system, other than the minimum necessary for the representation or transmission of the required information” (1973:60). The simplest example of redundancy in any system is the repetition of a signal. This method is, of course, used in natural languages. However, the amount of information transmitted by natural languages is in general far too great for the systems of signals used to transmit this information. English, for example, has approximately thirty-six phonemes with which to encode an infinite number of messages. Clearly the burden on the phonemic system is enormous. Thus, many messages that are encoded are very similar to one another, often varying by only one signal (i.e., phoneme). If we consider the word level, for instance, we find many words that differ by only one phoneme (called minimal pairs):
Such distinctions make effective use of the phoneme inventory of English. However, human communication is subject to noise from many sources, for example, other people talking, coughing, traffic, howling wind, which makes the perception of such distinctions in the system difficult. Thus, English, as all natural languages, has redundancy factors built into the system.

One such factor is the set of restrictions on initial consonant clusters in English. Thus, no word in English may begin with a cluster of more than three consonants, and then only if the first one is /s/. Further, if the first consonant in a triconsonantal initial cluster is /s/, the second consonant can only be /t/, /p/, or /k/, and the third only /r/, or /l/. Obviously, these combinations represent only a minute subset of the logically possible initial consonant clusters in English, given the entire phonemic inventory. These limitations, however, enable the receiver of a message encoded in English phonemes to decode the message even if his reception of the message is partially obscured. Since the number of possible combinations of phonemes is restricted, the receiver, who is aware of these restrictions, is able to guess fairly accurately what a given phoneme in a given sequence of phonemes might reasonably be. Another clue to the decoding of such a message is the context, to which we shall return momentarily.

Another manifestation of redundancy is homophony. In this instance different messages have identical phonemic representation. McDowell, as we saw, sees this situation as antithetical to the one-to-one correspondence of phonetic representation to semantic representation that he assumes. However, his assumption does not in fact hold for natural languages; although an ideal communication system, one that is not subject to noise, could have a one-to-one correspondence of signal to message, such a situation is obviously
impossible in natural languages. The basic reason is one of limitation of the human brain. Simply, it would be impossible for humans to store in memory or to discriminate the number of messages required for such a system without overlap of signals. Further, a one-to-one correspondence of the type McDowell sees as basic to language would be impractical, since any interference (noise) within the transmission of reception of a message would render the message unintelligible; without built-in restrictions on the system there would be no way for a receiver of a message to guess what the garbled part of a message might be.

Thus, homophony (and hence ambiguity) is a result of the limits on the possible number of combinations of signals used to encode messages. It is not a “threat” to language, but rather is basic to the function of language as a communication system. The “threat” posed by riddles is to the usual interaction of speakers in normal discourse; it is caused by the exploitation of ambiguity or tropes inherent in linguistic structures or in the comparisons of cultural categories. The linguistic or broader cultural elements found in riddles are not themselves in danger of being “turned on their head” (McDowell, 1979:208); rather, the threat of disorder is at the level of interaction. That is, riddles take the question-and-answer format of normal interaction and play on this conventional mode of exchanging information. In this way riddles are a threat to the communicative frame, since, among other considerations, the riddlee must determine whether the interaction mode is serious or playful (see Bateson 1972:177ff).

McDowell’s discussion does, nonetheless, raise the interesting question of how we deal with the potential problems inherent in homophony, the foremost among these being the perception of which semantic representation a source intends when sending a message that contains homophonous, and therefore ambiguous, elements. The answer is that the receiver appeals to the broader level of discourse and the clues provided therein to ascertain the context of the ambiguous element in a given utterance, thereby eliminating certain semantic interpretations as possible intended
messages. Recourse to context in discourse is often sufficient to resolve such ambiguity. If not, then elaboration, i.e., messages that serve to define and clarify other messages, is required.

Let us turn now to the cases of homophonic riddles cited by McDowell, both of which he claims turn on the juxtaposition of two possible interpretations of a single word. Thus in riddle 8 we have the simple adjective *red* juxtaposed with the past participle *read*, and in riddle 9, the word *flies* is either a plural noun or a third person singular present tense verb. However, although McDowell's analysis may be adequate at a surface taxonomic level, it will not suffice if he is to fulfill his goals of relating surface patterns to underlying deep linguistic structures (1979:59). For indeed, these two riddles are examples of only two of many "wrinkles" in the linguistic code that are exploited in riddling, and most important, their sources are entirely different.

Riddle 8 falls into the category of morphological riddles defined in chapter 3, whereby the homophony involved depends crucially on a peculiarity of English morphology, namely that the verb *read* /rɪyd/ plus its past participle morpheme, are pronounced /red/. Riddle 9, as McDowell sees, depends on syntax, but he misses the point that the ambiguity in 9 arises from the nature of the deletion transformations involved in producing homophonous surface pronunciations from two different underlying structures, rather than from a case where a "kernel element, consisting of a linguistic unit with homophonic properties, is embedded within a syntactic structure and semantic argument in such a manner as to enhance the perception of ambiguity" (1979:93).

This latter view confuses underlying structure, surface structure, and the syntactic transformations that link the two. From a linguistic point of view, we are clearly dealing with two kernel elements, i.e., the underlying structures of the two semantic readings employed in the riddle, not one, as McDowell claims. Further, it is not the kernels themselves but their eventual surface structures that have homophonous properties. Homophony results from the
grammatical rule that allows deletion of repeated elements, so that the following schema applies, where brackets indicate material that has been deleted.

12. What has four wheels and what flies?
   What has four wheels and [ ] flies?
13. What has four wheels and what has flies?
   What has four wheels and [ ] flies?

Nor can we say that any linguistic unit is embedded in a syntactic structure or a semantic argument. Rather, two semantic arguments (more properly, semantic propositions) are made to coincide in syntactic form by exploiting formal grammatical processes. McDowell's observations do not draw this important line of development. They confuse the properties of the message (semantics) with manipulations of the signal (grammar). It is the identification and classification of the syntactic transformations like those involved in riddle 9 that is vital to an understanding of the linguistic strategy involved in such riddles.

McDowell's second type of ludic transformation, which depends upon comparison, draws force from what he calls "conventional polysemy." As stated, this involves an historical or psychological motivation for establishing a relationship between two otherwise homophonous items. In homophony proper for McDowell, the two or more semantic interpretations which may derive from a given phonetic string do so fortuitously. He raises two main points in this connection. The first deals with the problems of distinguishing homophony from polysemy. The second deals with polysemy as it occurs in everyday language and as it occurs in the riddle genre.

In regard to the first point, McDowell allows that homophony and polysemy seem to blend in some cases. For instance, he considers the homophonous pair ear (organ of hearing) and ear (head of corn), which have different etymologies and so are not historically related. He claims that in riddles like 10, which also turns on the word ear, we have polysemy, in that there is an "intuitive perception of a semantic relationship between the two lexemes coincident on the phonetic base ear" (1979:96). He continues, "Even
awareness of the actual historical picture cannot shake our
determination to hear a polysemic relationship in our
duplicitous phonetic sequence. The intuitions of native
speakers will then serve as the technique for sorting out
homophony from polysemy... Admittedly, marginal cases
are difficult to classify but the majority of the corpus falls
easily into one category or the other" (1979:96).

There are two major problems with this distinction
between homophony and polysemy. The first is that
McDowell assumes that the native speaker's intuition is suf­
ficient in deciding whether a given instance is a case of
homophony or polysemy. This problem of whether given
homophones are somehow related is one that has not eluded
semanticists from the time of the ancient Greeks. In the
modern linguistic era, this problem has been treated by
among other schools, structuralist morphology, and general
semantics. Simply, it is the case that native intuitions in
instances like ear vary drastically.

McDowell himself proves this by insisting that ear is (for
him) polysemous, but admitting that in fact the two words
pronounced /iyr/ are not historically related. By his own
definitions, the two words should be homophonous, not
polysemous. Another parallel case is seen in the instance of
the word(s) board (plank), board (council), and board (meals).
Historically, we see a development from board designating a
plank of wood to the specialization of the plank in its use as a
table for meetings of councils and for eating meals. These
specializations develop in turn to designate the people at the
table in the former instance and the activity at the table in
the latter instance.

There is no way to predict whether native speakers of
English will, when asked, perceive any semantic (or histori­
cal) relationship between these uses of the word board. By
McDowell's definitions, board must be polysemous. What,
then, are we to say about the native speakers who see no
apparent relationship between the uses, and who thus see
the uses as instances of what McDowell terms homophony?
Clearly, as native speakers, their intuitions cannot be
"wrong." They simply have a different lexical entry in their
mental lexicon for *board* than do native speakers who perceive a relationship in the uses. Thus one cannot, as McDowell does, gloss over such problems for his theory by appeal to intuition. On the one hand, he admits that intuition is sometimes at variance with etymology; on the other hand, psychological aspects of intuition may vary drastically from person to person. As stated by Lyons 1969, "The distinction between homonymy [homophony] and multiple meaning [polysemy] is, in the last resort, indeterminant and arbitrary" (1969:406). Lyons further states that evidence of this arbitrariness can be found reflected in discrepancies of classifications in dictionaries, where lexicographers must decide whether two homophonus words are separate but homophonous or merely polysemous.

The second flaw in McDowell's distinction between homophony and polysemy is that he considers the etymology of a word, its history, to be relevant to making this distinction in contemporary usage. This approach suffers two drawbacks. First, it lays the burden of the history of a language on every speaker of that language. As Lyons (1969:407) points out in this regard, "Any historical knowledge we might have about the development of the meanings of words is in principle irrelevant to their synchronic use and interpretation." Indeed, as Lyons states, this must be true, unless it were discovered that people who are familiar with the history of the language use it differently from those who are not. Simply put, to claim that words are historical entities is to belabor the obvious. Explanations of synchronic usage in terms of historical usage are irrelevant, since the histories of words are not part of the synchronic grammar of a language and thus do not affect the strictly synchronic usage involved in riddles (see de Saussure 1922).

Further, McDowell himself demonstrates that historical considerations are tenuous grounds upon which to judge homophony from polysemy, since he admits that other considerations, like his own insistence on a psychological link between the two meanings of *ear* discussed above, may do "some violence to etymological reality." Thus the distinction between homophony and polysemy is seen not only to be
unteatable in view of previous work in the field, but in fact in large part irrelevant to the type of ambiguity present in riddles.

Let us turn now to McDowell's treatment of conventional polysemy in everyday life and as it appears in riddling. McDowell defines conventional polysemy as "precisely those instances of polysemy which are codified in daily use of a language. They may at one time have been productive of surprise, but in current usage they have become as regular as any other lexemes encountered in the language" (1979:96). He further claims that the ludic transformation of, for example, riddles juxtaposes current linguistic usage with alternate hearings derived from an historical act of comparison. As examples of this strategy he gives the following routines, which for his purposes are classified as riddles.

14. What did the rug say to the floor? *I've got you covered.*

15. What did the wall say to the other wall? *Meet you at the corner.*

Clearly, to claim that these riddles are polysemous in nature based on historical considerations is subject to the criticism just presented. However, McDowell makes a further claim for such routines, that they take automatized language (i.e., familiar phrases, clichés, idioms) and revitalize them by forcing a reinterpretation of this language. Thus he says that riddles breathe "life into dead words" by allowing for an "unconventional reading" of these words (1979:97-98). In the two examples cited, one is hard put to discern any unconventional reading in either case. In the first, we find homophony of a literal use of the phrase *got you covered* with an idiomatic use of the same phrase. The contrastive use of homophonous phrases, although it constitutes a block element, can hardly be said to "breathe life" into either usage, nor can either be termed "unconventional," since both are in current usage. This is even more true in the second example, since we are merely presented with contrastive readings (both current) of the word *corner.*

In this same vein, McDowell cites Sapir 1977 in claiming that riddles may bring old sayings to life to literalize a dead metaphor. His first examples in this regard are:
16. Why does time fly? *Cause people are always trying to kill it.*

17. Why did the boy throw the clock out of the window? *To see time fly.*

He correctly sees that these riddles play on the literal vs. the figurative meaning of the phrases *time flies* and *to kill time,* but to claim that "in this manner old language is invested with new life" (1979:99) is again to confuse diachrony with synchrony. Regardless of the time depth for the figurative meanings involved, these ludic routines play on two synchronic meanings of the phrase involved, one a literal reading, the other a frozen, idiomatic reading. Historical considerations are irrelevant.

This point is reinforced if we look at further examples that McDowell claims demonstrate the resuscitation of metaphor, and thus a revival of old language:

18. What has an eye but cannot see? *Potato.*

19. What has a tongue and can’t talk? *Shoe.*

20. What has teeth but cannot eat? *Saw.*

Again, although these riddles may be based historically on earlier comparisons, the formal, grammatical ambiguities in the words *eye,* *tongue,* and *teeth* exist synchronically, and must exist synchronically for the riddles to work. Further, it is disputable whether *eye* in riddle 18 is to be considered metaphorical, or merely homophonous on its two readings. That is, it may be argued that the images involved in *tongue* and *teeth* are still synchronically retrievable, but the comparison that renders a human eye and the tuber of a potato similar seems to be weaker, synchronically, and is evident primarily because of the juxtaposition with the verb *see.* This example either has passed, or is in the process of passing, from the realm of metaphor to that of homophony, or formal linguistic ambiguity. The same is true of riddles like:

21. Where is the smallest bridge in the world? *On your nose.*

22. What has a bed but never sleeps? *A river.*

These riddles, although they may be intuited as being at least semimetaphorical, are clearly not so well grounded in imagery as riddles like 19 and 20.
In riddle 21, the use of *bridge* to describe the upper part of the nose, first found in English around 1450, may be claimed to be metaphorical usage, but as such is in need of explanation. For this reason it may be claimed as easily that the two senses of *bridge* are instances of homophonous words, rather than of metaphorical extension of meaning. Indeed, as was the case with *board*, native speaker intuitions vary as to the status of the two meanings of *bridge* being discussed.

In riddle 22 we see a similar case involving the word *bed*. Although the use of *bed* to mean the bottom of a river is clearly metaphorical in origin, it is dubious whether in current usage the relationship between the sleeping place and the river bottom is anything other than simple lexical ambiguity or homophony. Again, though reflection may result in a native speaker's being able to reconstruct the original metaphor (or sometimes to propose an incorrect folk-etymology), the figurative nature of *bed* meaning “river bottom” is clearly not as strong as the metaphors in examples utilizing *tongue* and *teeth* cited above. What we are suggesting, then, is that some figurative language is more figurative than other, and that metaphor may pass gradually from the realm of figurative language to the realm of formal ambiguity, i.e., pure homophony, of the type seen in examples like:

23. What lock can no key open? *A lock of hair.*

24. What vegetable is unpopular on ships? *A leek.*

Here no imagery is involved at all. McDowell has classified this latter type as distinct from those in examples 18–22 and has assumed that 18–22 are of a single type. Let us now examine this assumption, and so the entire scheme of classification of riddles by type of image and/or ambiguity.

McDowell's distinctions between homophony and polysemy have been shown to be untenable both theoretically and practically. Similarly, his claims concerning the resurrection of dead metaphors by the resurrection of their literal meanings ignores a crucial element. Specifically, there is no need to “resurrect” the literal meaning of a metaphor (or idiom, or any figure of speech) in the riddle context since it
is this literal meaning that is the base for the riddle metaphor in the first place. Thus, the literal meaning is a constant. It is the figurative meaning that is subject to changes, e.g., the automatization of meaning, or the freezing of syntactic form. What McDowell sees as a revitalization of an image vis à vis its literal interpretation is often merely a synchronic exploitation of an idiomatic phrase vis à vis a literal meaning of that phrase.

The importance of McDowell's work is that it endeavors to come to terms with the important matter of linguistic vis à vis metaphorical wit in riddles. This is the central issue in riddle construction. His work also presents an array of riddles, some clearly homophonous, some clearly metaphorical, and some that fit neither category exactly. As we have seen, neither McDowell's theory nor native speaker intuitions are sufficient to classify the range of riddles and ludic routines he treats. The problem is attributable, in part, to his tendency to force data into rigid categories. The notions of anomaly vs. congruence exemplify this problem. Rather than existing in polar opposition, it is obvious that the two qualities must coexist within riddles; anomaly characteristically serves as a block element, but congruence must emerge for the answer to be apt. In the riddle, "What's black and white and red/read all over?" for example, the physical anomaly of color forestalls solution, but ultimately gives way to the congruence of the adjective red with the past participle read at the level of utterance. Turning to metaphorical riddles we see the same pattern. Take, for example, our number 4:

In spring I am gay
In handsome array;
In summer more clothing I wear;
When colder it grows,
I fling off my clothes;
And in winter I quite naked appear. A tree.

The anomalous shedding of "garments" with the onset of cold weather becomes congruous with revelation of the figurative qualities of description. Fundamentally, McDowell does not realize, as has been suggested above, that the dis-
Distinction between the type of ambiguity that is purely formal (homophony) and the type that relies on metaphor is not a strict categorical distinction, but rather is a continuum of ambiguity that ranges from the literary to the formal grammatical types that have been discussed.

It is the element of ambiguity that permeates all of the riddle categories we have examined and that serves to relate them. If we begin from the general concept of ambiguity, it becomes apparent how the variety of riddles in current use in our culture fall into a gradient classification. Certainly the relationship between metaphor and ambiguity has not escaped treatment in the relevant literature. Perhaps the first direct treatment of this relationship is to be found in William Empson's work, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Although Empson lacks the linguistic framework necessary to define the formal aspects of metaphorical, or literary ambiguity, he rightly sees metaphor as properly ambiguous; it has both literal and figurative senses. Leech 1966 has discussed metaphor similarly as a type of ambiguity at the "referential semantic level."

In terms of the types of ambiguity relevant for riddle analysis discussed thus far, metaphor represents ambiguity at the lexical, or word/sound level. As we have shown, surface homophony may be the result of processes that occur at the phonological, morphological, or syntactic level of grammar. Thus metaphor is lexical in nature, since it represents a situation whereby an additional semantic underlying structure is created for an existing word or phrase.

However, literary or metaphorical ambiguity goes beyond the simple type of lexical ambiguity we demonstrated in analyzing the sentence *John lives near the bank*. As Leech points out, a figurative or metaphorical item "has been given referential meaning outside of its normal range of meanings... by the standards of the accepted code (i.e., literal meaning) a literary metaphor is a semantic absurdity" (1966:147,149). He offers the example *Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested* (Bacon, "Of Studies"). Such imagery, as noted at the begin-
ning of this chapter, has been treated linguistically primarily in terms of deviance, as a type of language that violates certain grammatical or semantic norms of ordinary speech. If we take another perspective, however, namely that of metaphor as contrived ambiguity, we may partially characterize metaphor in its proper context as a form that is closely related to ambiguous utterances in normal, utilitarian speech, and which thus draws directly on "ordinary" grammar for its creativity, and which, indeed, frequently passes out of literary usage and becomes an element of ordinary speech.

Let us now consider this last point in more depth. It is clear that metaphor is an extension of the phenomenon of ambiguity or homophony in ordinary speech. In ordinary speech grammatical ambiguity is inherently resolvable at the level of contextual discourse. This aspect of normal communication channels may be consciously inverted, and thus intensified, to create ambiguity in a performance context, as discussed above. Metaphor may be considered as taking this type of intensification a step further. Although ambiguity in both normal speech and riddling may derive from formal grammatical ambiguity, metaphorical ambiguity depends upon more general cognitive associations or analogies between the literal and figurative elements concerned. These more general strategies may involve drawing subjective, emotional, and highly personal connections, thus taking metaphor far beyond the boundaries definable by formal grammars. As Leech points out (1966:155), they may also involve reinforcements intended to signal a departure from more strictly referential speech such as alliteration, stress, or rhyme.

Although ambiguity exploits the potential of a given utterance to be derived from more than one semantic base, potential interpretations will always be limited by conventional usage. Returning to John lives near the bank as an illustration, the potential interpretations of the lexical item bank are multiple, but the probable interpretations are limited to three. The same principle of multiple, but limited, interpre-
tation is apparent in all riddles based on formal grammatical patterns or idioms. The scope for interpretation is broadened considerably in riddles such as:

25. White bird featherless
   Flew down from Paradise
   Perched upon the castle wall;
   Up came Lord John landless,
   Took it up handless,
   And rode away horseless
   To the King's white hall. Snow.

In such riddles interpretation is guided neither by conventional grammar nor by conventional fixed usages (i.e., cliché and idiom). Matters are further complicated by the fact that such questions exist outside the realm of the conversational context (as distinct from the performance context of a riddling session). It is true that all riddles are, to a certain degree, non sequiturs. However, riddles based on ambiguity or conventional fixed usage are literal questions and, thus, susceptible to literal grammatical analysis. The present example, though based on general cognitive associations (i.e., it is derived from a relevant cultural trope), is figurative; it expresses something in terms of something else (cf. the definition of the “true riddle” in Taylor 1951). As such, riddles constructed in this manner are truly antiliteral. Perhaps a more useful term would be a-literal, since antiliteral would imply an inversion of fixed usage. If simple inversion were at work here, it should be possible to formulate rules of composition and solution as we have for the previously examined grammatical riddles. Happily for the creative impulse, no rules seem forthcoming. We can do little more than say their “logic” makes sense—after the fact when their answers have been revealed. Metaphorical riddles, then, seem traditional examples of what Austin 1970:24 has called in another context, “prising words off the world” or holding them apart from and against the world, so that we can realize “their inadequacies and arbitrariness,” and can “re-look at the world without blinkers.”

As indicated in the preceding paragraph, in regard to riddling, the act of “prising words off the world” is true not
only in the larger cognitive sense, but in a more restricted one as well. Metaphorical riddles are unbounded by any conversational context that would facilitate solution. When presented with these questions, we are cut off both from universe of discourse (e.g., Is the subject biological phenomena, meteorological phenomena, behavior, or artifacts?) and mode of discourse (Is the current manner of expression literal or metaphorical?). This dilemma is roughly comparable to the situation that would obtain in nonplayful speech if we were asked, “How tall is it?” in the absence of conversational clues to delimit the referent of the pronoun it.

The term that best characterizes the nature of purely metaphorical riddles is vagueness. Ambiguity refers to the situation that exists when multiple, but limited, interpretations are possible; vagueness refers to situations in which the degree of description provides an inadequate basis for solution (cf. Abrahams 1968 and Abrahams and Dundes 1977, on block elements). In short, riddles utilizing linguistic ambiguity as a block element present literal questions capable of apt solution; riddles utilizing vagueness attempt to block solution by providing an inadequate cognitive basis for solution.

To this point only those vague riddles with a metaphorical base have been examined. The following riddle, although utilizing vagueness as a block, represents a different mode of operation.

26. A house full, a yard full,
    Couldn’t catch a bowl full. Smoke.
In this case we have a question operating in the literal mode that is blocked by insufficient information to limit universe of discourse. The same strategy is manifest in riddles from which the riddlee is required to reconstruct a vignette.

27. Crooked and straight, which way are you going?
    Croptail every year, what makes you care?
    Meadow to a brook and the brook’s reply.
28. Blackey went into blackey, blackey came out of blackey, and blackey left whitey in blackey.
    A black hen went into a black stump and laid a white egg.
These riddles employ metonymy (more precisely, synec-
doche) and in this regard lay some claim to the techniques of figurative language, but they are clearly different in strategy from riddles utilizing intricately developed metaphorical comparisons. Metonymy is in evidence in the first of these riddles because the modifiers crooked, straight, and croptail are used for the referents brook and meadow. By metonymic extension the attributes of the referents are used to stand for the referents themselves. In the second example, we find clues to the answer to this riddle couched in a scheme whereby colors of the referents involved are used to signify each of the central nouns involved in the vignette.

Indeed, if we now consider both types of ambiguity just discussed, formal grammatical ambiguity and metaphorical or literary ambiguity, we discover that there are many riddles that exhibit characteristics of both types, but that fit neither category neatly. Take, for example, riddles like the following:

29. What has teeth but cannot eat? A saw.
30. What has a tongue and can’t talk? A shoe.
31. Many eyes and never a nose, one tongue, and about it goes. A shoe.
32. What’s this that’s got a heart in its head? Lettuce.
33. There is something with a heart in its head. A peach.
34. What has an eye but cannot see? A potato.
35. Where is the smallest bridge in the world? On your nose.

These represent typologically inexact riddles.

In riddles 29 and 30, then, we find the metaphorical extension or comparisons of teeth and tongue are synchronically retrievable by native speakers. That is, some native speakers find the images involved still sufficiently strong to warrant calling the block element in such riddles metaphorical, although certainly not to the same degree as riddles like the elaborately metaphorical ones in 4 and 5. Indeed, the images involved must be synchronically retrievable for such riddles to be considered witty. To make this point clearer, consider for a moment riddle 31, which shares the referent shoe with riddle 30. Although the ambiguity of tongue is a factor, the elaboration of anatomical detail makes it clear
that this riddle is grounded in metaphor. Riddle 30 is neither as elaborately, nor as dependently, based on metaphor as is 31.

In addition we can compare riddles 32 and 33, where the riddle questions are virtually the same, but the answers are substantially different. In 32 we see grammatical ambiguity as the major factor for creating confusion. In 33, however, there is absolutely no grammatical linguistic play, and wit relies on metaphorical language. Thus, the nondiscrete nature of the ambiguity inherent in English riddles is evidenced in these cases in two ways: (1) where the same answer is required by contrastive strategies (30 and 31); and (2) where similar questions require different strategies to discern the appropriate kind of ambiguity necessary to solve the riddle (32 and 33).

In regard to riddles 34 and 35, as we noted in our discussion of McDowell's typology, we find that the block elements have only the barest figurative connections, if any at all. Any figures contained in such riddles have either passed, or are in the process of passing, from the realm of metaphor into that of simple lexical ambiguity. This, as we also have noted, is a common occurrence in language.

At this juncture let us stop to consider what we have suggested so far. We have shown that the figurative use of ordinary language calls forth multiple frames of reference. Thus, it represents a type of ambiguity that is closely related to formal grammatical ambiguity of the type outlined in chapters 2 and 3. Also, we have demonstrated that both strategies are employed as block elements in English riddles. Despite this basic similarity, however, the two strategies differ in crucial ways. These distinct modes of operation should be distinguished, therefore, but in a way that more accurately reflects the fluid nature of language than the rigid typology posited by McDowell. For this purpose we propose a continuum with the two endpoints labeled the grammatical and the metaphorical. With such a scheme we are not bound to a static categorization; a framework of this sort is imperative. As language itself changes in respect to metaphorical usage, so that old metaphors pass into ordinary
idiomatic usage, this change is reflected in the shifting of the strategies involved in riddles based on metaphorical usage along the continuum toward the formal grammatical endpoint.

The following examples and their stations on our continuum illustrate the relationship we suggest in this chapter. For ease of arrangement, let us numerically tag some of the riddles discussed in this chapter.

1. In spring I am gay
   In handsome array;
   In summer more clothing I wear;
   When colder it grows
   I fling off my clothes;
   And in winter I quite naked appear. A tree.

2. I have a cock on yonder hill
   I keep him for a wonder
   And every time the cock do crow,
   It lightens, hails and thunders. A gun.

3. There is something with a heart in its head. A peach.

4. Blackey went into blackey, blackey came out of blackey, and blackey left whitey in blackey. A black hen went into a black stump and laid a white egg.

5. Crooked and straight, which way are you going?
   Croptail every year, what makes you care?
   Meadow to a brook and the brook's reply.

6. A house full, a yard full,
   Couldn't catch a bowl full. Smoke.

7. Many eyes and never a nose, one tongue, and about it goes. Shoe.

8. What has a tongue, and can't talk? Shoe.


10. What's this that's got a heart in its head? Lettuce.

11. Where is the smallest bridge in the world? On your nose.

12. What has an eye but cannot see? A potato.

13. What lock can no key open? Lock of hair.

14. What vegetable is unpopular on ships? Leeks.

15. How is a duck like an icicle? Both grow down.
16. What’s black and white and red (read) all over? *Newspaper.*


The continuum in figure 25 orders these examples according to their reliance on either metaphor or linguistic ambiguity, or some combination of the two, to create the block element(s) of each riddle. Their placements on the continuum have been determined by our analysis and have been further tested against native speaker intuition. Thirty native speakers of English with varying abilities as riddle solvers were queried as to whether each of the above examples was metaphorical or grammatical. The terms used to question informants were comparative, based on metaphor; descriptive; or literal, based on a pun, “trick” questions. Their responses vindicate our analyses. There was no difficulty in assigning the categories reflected on the continuum for riddles 1-3 and 13-17; in fact, informants unanimously agreed with our assignments (although they were not apprised of this). The more difficult riddles 4-6 were termed metaphorical by those who felt capable of labeling them at all. Predictably, our informants found examples 7-12, those at the midpoint of the continuum, more difficult to assign to categories. Our subjects often said they could be either or

![Figure 25](image-url)
that they combined both ambiguity and metaphor. The remainder called them grammatical.

In order to characterize definite points on this continuum, let us examine each set of riddles.

Numbers 1-3 represent indisputably metaphorical riddles. In each, some quality of a specific object is compared to a similar quality of a different object. In 1, the seasonal shedding of a tree's covering is expressed in terms of a human being's disrobing. Riddle 2 compares the firing of a gun to a cock that produces lightning (the flash), hail (bullets), and thunder (the report) when it crows. (The item cock may also be ambiguous, since it may designate either a male fowl or the action of drawing back the hammer of a firearm.) Example 3 is built on the comparison of various physical features of a peach to anatomical structures of an animal. In this riddle, unlike the similar riddle 10, there is no opportunity for a grammatical interpretation.

Numbers 4 and 5 are not as elaborately developed as 1-3, yet, as discussed above, their reliance on metonymy as a descriptive element clearly identifies them as metaphorical.

Example 6 takes analysis into more problematic areas. Our informants frequently were unwilling to assign a label to this riddle. Those who did termed it comparative, but understandably did so intuitively without articulating their reasons for doing so. Close examination of 6 reveals that although it contains no grammatical block, it does operate in the literal mode appropriate to linguistically ambiguous riddles. Its vagueness is apparent, though. On the other hand, the direct use of metaphor that so clearly marks 1-3 as metaphorical does not appear to be in evidence in this example. Note, however, that smoke is placed in a frame of reference (i.e., compared) to substances that can be accumulated in bowls. Beyond vagueness, then, a descriptive device is inherent to the wit of this riddle.

The synchronically retrievable comparison of the tongue and eyes of a shoe to the tongue and eyes of an animal that coexists with the grammatical ambiguity of these lexical items gives riddle 7 qualities from both poles of our continuum. Our informants have identified this riddle either as
capable of being assigned to both categories or, in a few instances, as metaphorical. This last choice, they indicate, is attributable to the elaboration of descriptive detail in this example. Such elaboration dictated our locating 7 slightly closer to the metaphorical pole than the following riddles.

Riddles 8-10 illustrate typologically inexact riddles in that, as previously noted, although the metaphorical extensions of the ambiguous terms *tongue*, *heart*, and *head* are synchronically retrievable, an equally strong case may be made for simple grammatical ambiguity. Informants were divided on the placement of these examples. The majority, though, termed them “puns.”

In riddles 11 and 12, the block elements have only the barest figurative connections, if any at all. In 11, the use of *bridge* to describe the upper bony part of the nose may be claimed to be a metaphorical usage, but as such it is in need of some explanation for many native speakers. For this reason it may be claimed that the relationship between the two senses of *bridge* being employed is simple homophony rather than metaphor. Similarly, the comparison in 12 that may be claimed to render the human eye and the bud of a potato as being similar is weaker than the images in 8-10. That is, historically *eye* meaning *bud* is a metaphorical extension, but synchronically, in the active grammar of a current native speaker who does not have access to the history of the individual words of the language, this figurative connection may be either weak or nonexistent. This figure, then, either has passed, or is in the process of passing from the realm of metaphor to that of simple lexical ambiguity. Informants almost unanimously called these examples puns, although a few did see some underlying metaphorical qualities in the block.

The final segment of the continuum, 13-17, contains those riddles that, according to our analyses and informants’ interpretations, contain strictly grammatical blocks.

By means of this analysis, we discover that ambiguity constitutes a useful means for explicating the block elements in riddles in the English language. Unlike the rigid categories proposed in previous works, however, the use of a con-
tinuum more accurately reflects the relationships between grammatical and metaphorical riddles found in our corpus. We find, also, that the categories are fairly stable in structure only at the extremes of our spectrum. Between these extremes we find examples that fit neither category exactly but that exhibit qualities of both. By identifying various points along this continuum, we hope to have facilitated understanding of the ranges of ambiguous utterance and the ways in which both metaphorical and grammatical ambiguity are manipulated to create wit in riddling and other genres of verbal art.

Let us now consider our continuum of ambiguity and the metaphor paradigm in a more inclusive linguistic context, namely that of semiotics. In this way we can relate the formalizable elements of wit and the conventions dictating its use and interpretation to the overall system of human communication. We have already discussed the nature of linguistic sign in our discussion of metaphor. All language, of course, including metaphor, is representative. That is, it is composed of signs that refer to something else. In metaphor this is perhaps most clear. But the same semiotic analysis holds for the grammatically ambiguous language we have been discussing. For example, in the riddle “What turns but never moves? Milk” turns is a sign that has more than one possible referent. The same is true for the sequence grow down in the riddle “Why is a duck like an icicle? Both grow down.” Thus, from a semiotic viewpoint, the continuum of ambiguity we have outlined can be treated as a whole in that it deals with the relationship of signans to signatum.

We find, however, that there is a basic difference in the nature of this relationship in metaphorical ambiguity as opposed to grammatical ambiguity. Specifically, metaphor functions in a paradigmatic mode, grammatical ambiguity functions in a syntagmatic mode. That is, metaphor functions according to systematized similarity that is focused upon by means of comparison, but grammatical ambiguity functions by contiguity, i.e., by its context. Thus, metaphorical riddles are solvable by resource to the appropriate
paradigm, although riddles based on grammatical ambiguity must be linguistically contextualized (i.e., placed into a discourse) to be solvable. This is not to say that context plays no part in metaphorical riddles, but rather to point out that metaphorical paradigms are the basic strategy in such riddles.

Between these two extremes we have riddles that function by a combination of paradigmatic and syntagmatic strategies, for example, our riddles 26–28:

26. A house full, a yard full,
   Couldn’t catch a bowl full. *Smoke.*

27. Crooked and straight, where are you going?
   Croptail every year, what makes you care?
   *Meadow to a brook and the brook’s reply.*

28. Blackey went into blackey, blackey came out of
   blackey, and blackey left whitey in blackey. *A black
   hen went into a black stump and laid a white egg.*

In these riddles we find that imagery is a basic strategy, but that the image itself acts by contiguity. That is, since the image is not direct (metonymy, rather than metaphor proper, is employed), it is dependent upon its context for clarity. In riddling, of course, context is suspended, and so the overt comparisons of such riddles are submerged. The riddlee resorts to shared cultural knowledge and/or immediate linguistic context (the riddle unit) in his attempt to solve the riddles.

Such a strategy for solution is complicated by the nature of linguistic sign. For, as pointed out by the Prague School linguists, the sign and its meaning do not cover, in all their points, the same field (see Vachek 1970:31). Specifically, one sign may have several functions. This is the case with the verb *turn* discussed above, and is a basic ploy of riddles that use grammatical ambiguity, or homophony. On the other hand, one and the same meaning can be expressed by several signs, i.e., signs may be synonymous. As pointed out by Karchevsky 1929, each linguistic sign is homonymous and synonymous at the same time and is constituted by the mutual crossing of those two series of considered facts. He represents this relationship as in figure 26. The
relationship of signans to signatum, then, is a sliding one. A sign has functions other than the one found in a particular context; content can be expressed by other than a primary sign in any context. We thus have an asymmetrical relationship that shifts according to context. Riddles, then, manipulate the pivotal semiotic element, context, in creating confusion.

Jakobson 1971 deals with the notions of similarity versus contiguity in his treatment of the differences between metaphor and metonymy. He sees metaphor and metonymy as polar types of figures in that one topic leads to another through similarity in the case of metaphor, and through contiguity in the case of metonymy. We have suggested that grammatical ambiguity depends even more on contiguity than metonymy does, since no "topic" or image is involved, so that grammatical ambiguity is solvable only by recourse to connected discourse. In any event, the point here is that the signans-signatum relationship depends on context, and riddles suspend all normal context. Thus the linguistic sign is not interpretable within a definable locus. One task of the riddlee is to try to place the sign, whatever its nature, in a locus that permits a definition of the signans-signatum relationship, and that permits a definition of the signans-signatum relationship, and thus a solution to the riddle. This task is complicated further in that riddles may employ both metaphor and metonymy, i.e., the strategies of
similarity and contiguity in combination, to confuse the riddlee.

Let us consider two examples in more detail:

36. White comes out of white, and run white out of white. *A white dog runs out of a white house and chases a white cow out of a cotton patch.*

37. Two legs sat on three legs. 
   Up jumped four legs
   And grabs one leg.
   *Man sitting on a three-legged stool; up jump a dog and grabs ham on the table.*

As in cases of metonymy, such as “five sails” signifying “five ships” or the reference to the range of physical sustenance as “daily bread,” riddles 36 and 37 employ one element of an entity to refer to the whole. Though both 36 and 37 utilize the artistic device of metonymy, 37 adds an additional twist. In 36 we have a literal, though vague in the sense of the term we have introduced, riddle utilizing only metonymy as a block element. The single element “whiteness” is used to refer to a variety of phenomena that share this attribute of color despite the drastic differences among these phenomena when perceived in their entirety. In 37, however, we note that the riddle employs not only metonymy—the parts “legs” (specifically the respective number of legs) as signifiers of the things to which these limbs are attached—but a certain degree of linguistic ambiguity is also apparent. That is, on the lexical level, *legs* may designate both the appendages used to support living creatures and the structural supports of furniture. As a result the solution of the riddle requires one to perceive both metonymy and the ambiguity of the signans.

It is thus observed that metonymy in riddles is of a different order than other manifestations of the trope. The differences noted result from the fact that in other usages the referent of the metonym is rendered immediately and manifestly clear by contextual markers, so that context reveals the paradigmatic aspects of the figure. In the case of riddles, even the most literal, the image is denied a disambiguating
context. Moreover, many of the riddles we have designated as formally ambiguous (because that is the primary device for generating the block element) also owe some of their force to metonymy, since one attribute is selected from the bundle of attributes comprising the particular entity signified. Such selection is based on the fact that the name of the characteristic chosen lends itself to the creation of linguistic ambiguity. The following riddles illustrate this argument.

38. What has an eye but cannot see? Needle.
39. What has a mouth but does not eat? River.
40. What has teeth but does not eat? Comb.

Although riddles 38–40 are best classified as examples of linguistic ambiguity at the lexical level, at some intermediate stage between the perception of the referent and its description in the riddling context, selection of a representative attribute—metonymy—has taken place.

These last riddles are to be distinguished from riddles like “What turns but never moves? Milk” where the strategy is purely grammatical. In examples 26–28 and 36–37, the riddlee is presented only partial descriptions; often these descriptions select only a single aspect of the referent and modify this aspect in some fashion. Clearly, then, the principle of metonymy is integral to the process of riddling.

It should be noted here that the signans-signatum relationships we have outlined follow our continuum of ambiguity from the literary to the grammatical, with transitional types between the two extremes. That is, we find strict paradigmatic relationships between signans and signatum in riddles like 4 and 5 earlier in the chapter. We find strict syntagmatic relationships in riddles like 1–3. Finally, in riddles like those just discussed, we find both relationships employed in the creation of block elements.

1 See Lyons 1969, Nida 1948, and Plato, Kratylos.