

OBSCENE RIDDLES: MECHANISMS OF AMBIGUITY

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The article is devoted to the problem of ambiguous meaning encoded in obscene riddles. The means of ambiguity formation are analyzed on examples of French, Spanish, and Ukrainian obscene riddles. The methods of the research include consecutive selection, semantic and contextual analysis, and contrastive analysis. We single out logical and stylistic means of ambiguity, as well as linguistic means, in particular specific lexis in obscene riddles. Logical means act together with stylistic ones and presuppose substitution of the whole by its part and vast use of personifications. We analyze parts of speech, which facilitate the ambiguity in obscene riddles. Special attention is paid to nouns, which designate people, animals, body parts and bodily liquids as well as elements of clothing. Specific verbs, adjectives, and deictic words are of no less importance. The research of obscene riddles conducted in the three languages shows that despite some slight differences, ambiguous meaning of obscene riddles is formed due to the simultaneous influence of several means: 1) specific lexis, which can be interpreted in different ways, or polysemantic words; 2) national symbols, which add new layers of meaning to the semantics of a word; 3) the coincidence of grammatical gender of objects and people represented by these objects; 4) wide use of personifications; 5) substitution of a wide notion by its part. Obscene riddles are an excellent example of language play on words, in which an answer is not less important than a question. The article also investigates genres similar to obscene riddles, thus outlining a field for further research.

Key words: obscene riddle, ambiguity, lexis, polysemy, language play on words.

ОБСЦЕННІ ЗАГАДКИ: МЕХАНІЗМИ ДВОЗНАЧНОСТІ

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Статтю присвячено проблемі двозначності в обсценних загадках. Засоби формування двозначності аналізуються на прикладах французьких, іспанських і українських обсценних загадок. Методи дослідження включають метод суцільної вибірки на етапі відбору матеріалу, семантичний і контекстуальний аналіз на етапі дослідження загадок, порівняльний аналіз на етапі міжмовного зіставлення. Ми виокремлюємо логічні та стилістичні засоби двозначності, як і власне лінгвістичні, зокрема специфічну лексику обсценних загадок. Логічні засоби поєднуються зі стилістичними і передбачають заміну цілого частиною та широке використання персоніфікацій. Ми аналізуємо частини мови, завдяки яким обсценні загадки стають двозначними. Особливу увагу приділено іменникам, які позначають людей, тварин, частини тіла та тілесні рідини, елементи одягу. Не меншу вагу мають специфічні дієслова, прикметники та дейктичні слова. Дослідження обсценних загадок, здійснене на матеріалі трьох мов, показує, що, попри незначні міжмовні відмінності, двозначність обсценних загадок формується завдяки одночасному впливу кількох засобів. Це: 1) специфічна лексика, що може інтерпретуватися по-різному, або ж багатозначні слова; 2) національні символи, які додають нові шари значення до семантики слова; 3) збіг граматичного роду предметів та статі людей, які репрезентують ці предмети у загадках; 4) використання персоніфікацій; 5) заміна широкого поняття його частиною. Обсценні загадки – яскравий зразок мовної гри, у якому відповідь не менш важлива, ніж запитання. У статті також розглянуто жанри, подібні до обсценних загадок, які у перспективі можуть стати предметом лінгвістичного дослідження.

Ключові слова: обсценна загадка, двозначність, лексика, полісемія, мовна гра.

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Статья посвящена проблеме двузначности в обценных загадках. Средства формирования двузначности анализируются на примерах французских, испанских и украинских обценных загадок. Методы исследования включают метод сплошной выборки на этапе отбора материала, семантический и контекстуальный анализ на этапе исследования загадок, сравнительный анализ на этапе межъязыкового сопоставления. Мы выделяем логические и стилистические средства двузначности, как и собственно лингвистические, в частности специфическую лексику обценных загадок. Логические средства сочетаются со стилистическими и предполагают замену целого частью и широкое использование персонификаций. Мы анализируем части речи, благодаря которым обценные загадки становятся двузначными. Особое внимание уделено именам существительным, которые обозначают людей, животных, части тела и телесные жидкости, элементы одежды. Не менее значимы специфические глаголы, имена прилагательные, дейктические слова. Исследование обценных загадок, осуществленное на материале трех языков, показывает, что, несмотря на несущественные межъязыковые отличия, двузначность обценных загадок формируется благодаря одновременному влиянию нескольких средств. Это: 1) специфическая лексика, которая может интерпретироваться по-разному, либо же многозначные слова; 2) национальные символы, которые добавляют новые слои значения к семантике слова; 3) совпадение грамматического рода предметов и пола людей, представляющих эти предметы в загадках; 4) широкое использование персонификаций; 5) замена широкого понятия его частью. Обценные загадки – яркий пример языковой игры, в котором ответ не менее важен, чем вопрос. В статье также рассмотрены жанры подобные до обценных загадок, которые в перспективе могут стать предметом лингвистического исследования.

Ключевые слова: обценная загадка, двузначность, лексика, полисемия, языковая игра.

Introduction

As the title of the article by Annikki Kaviola-Bregenhøy (1997) reveals, sexual riddles serve as a test of a listener: the possibility of simultaneous coexistence of both obscene, or sexual, and innocent meaning encoded in a riddle gives a vast space for imagination. Mechanisms of language play involved in such riddles leading a listener or a reader to obscene and, hence, false meaning mostly follow the same patterns. Thus, the **purpose** of the present research is to investigate logical and linguistic mechanisms of ambiguity formation in obscene riddles in three chosen languages.

The material of this research consists of obscene riddles in French, Spanish, and Ukrainian languages. We chose about 40 riddles of this kind in French using the collection “*Devinettes ou énigmes populaires de la France*” (1877), and about 70 riddles in Spanish (predominantly so called “*acertijos picorescos*”) using “*Acertijos extremeños*” (2003). The latter collection is to some extent more modern in comparison with its French and Ukrainian analogs, although the riddles collected in it belong to different periods. And, finally, the source of Ukrainian riddles, which count about 50, is “*Ukrainian sayings, proverbs, and so on*” first printed in 1864 and reprinted in 1993. The reason for this approximation in defining the number of riddles under analysis is the fact that there exist nu-

merous variants of the same riddle, which exploit the same image and / or use almost the same grammatical structure and lexis. The variants of similar riddles are treated without sticking to strict rules in each of the mentioned sources. Thus the actual number of riddles under analysis may be greater than stated. While citing examples from the mentioned sources we stick to the original orthography.

The methods of this research include *controlled elicitations* on the stage of data collection, *semantic and contextual analysis* on the stage of analysis of riddles themselves, and *contrastive analysis* on the stage of comparison of riddles belonging to different languages.

The problem of obscene riddles has not been studied from all the angles possible. We come across numerous studies on riddles in general and obscenity and / or sexuality in folklore, but, as our experience shows, obscene riddles have not been treated with proper attention so far. Among the scholars, who devoted their research to obscene riddles are Annikki Kaviola-Bregenhøy with the article "Sexual riddles: the test of the listener" (1997), based on the Finnish language; Donald McGrady, who studied erotic riddles in Spanish language, in particular their lexical and stylistic distinctive features (McGrady 1984); Jacky Bolding investigating the sexual riddles of the Exeter book (Bolding 1992). Some points close to our research can be found in works by Bruno Roy (1979). The studies concerning similar genres as well as problems connected with them, which, we believe, might become of interest to us in the future, are analyzed in the pre-final part of this article.

It would seem quite obvious that obscene riddles were examined 30-40 years ago and the interest towards them was lost. We are trying to investigate a new direction in this field of linguistic research, imposing an element of comparison, finding similar and distinct traits between the languages and linguo-cultures. Therefore, this research has an implicit and unmeasurable task of showing an all-human tendency towards thinking by similar patterns.

Another argument, which prompted the emergence of this article, is the fact of language play, game of meanings, present in obscene riddles. Of course, the use of ambiguous meanings in literature and folklore with certain stylistic purposes exists since the ancient times, but it has become more than topical in our postmodern or even post-postmodern age.

Results and Discussions

Kinds of riddles in general. Claire Blanche-Benveniste (1977) suggests opposing two genres of riddle in French (a classification which can be generally applied to other languages): *l'énigme-devinette* and *la devinette frustrante*. The first one presupposes certain cognitive operations, the ability to find a relation of proportionality between two objects, a described one and the one under question. An example of *l'énigme-devinette* is:

Qu'est-ce qui est long, rouge au bout et qui sent le pipi ? (La borne kilométrique) (Blanche-Benveniste 1977: 79). – What is long, red at the end, and smells of piss? (A kilometer marker)

La devinette frustrante, as its name suggests, presupposes a certain frustration of a listener or a reader due to the impossibility of its resolution. These riddles contain extra information, which distracts the attention of a listener, and

in these riddles the whole is often substituted by its part, e.g.:

Pourquoi les Américains se servent-ils de brosses à dents en nylon ? (Pour se laver les dents) (Blanche-Benveniste 1977: 80). – Why do the Americans use nylon toothbrushes? (To brush their teeth),

The riddle cited above contains extra information (*en nylon*) as well as unnecessary restrictions (*les Américains*). It can be compared to the riddles we look at in the next part of the article – those based on the substitution of whole by its part, e.g. *En la mano de las damas // casi siempre estoy metido, // unas veces estirado // y otras veces encogido.* (Abanico).

Other kinds of *devinettes frustrantes* presuppose the presence of some key words, which condition the answer:

Comment fait-on des enfants bêtes ? (Demande à ta mère) (Blanche-Benveniste 1977: 80). – How do they make stupid children? (Ask your mother).

In this riddle the key word is *bêtes* – *stupid*.

Jeanine Fribourg (1999) in her research devoted to oral literature in Aragon (Spain) pays particular attention to the word play as a means of comicality. In particular, she gives the following example:

¿Porque la Reina quería ir a Andalucía y el Rey a Galicia? (La Reina quería ir a Andalucía para que le toquen el fandango y el Rey quería ir a Galicia para que le toquen la gaita) (Fribourg 1999: 159). – Why did the Queen want to go to Andalucía, and the King – to Galicia? (The Queen wanted to go to Andalucía so that they played fandango for her, and the King wanted to go to Galicia, so that they played the bagpipe for him).

This innocent riddle has also a second meaning, as *tocar* means both ‘to play an instrument’ and ‘to touch’, *fandango* means ‘a folk melody and dance’ and ‘female genitalia’, and *gaita* means ‘a Galician bagpipe’ and ‘male genitalia’.

The cited riddle can hardly be defined as a riddle, as the question part and the answer part make an inseparable unity, and the person who is unaware of the presupposed answer will never respond correctly. We must admit that often an answer to an obscene riddle is not less important than a question itself. This is caused by the fact that obscene riddles despite their ambiguity are in fact **obscene**, and an innocent answer is a factor that ‘legalizes’ their existence (See – *Bonjour, Madame Tarlantantan, // – Bonjour, Monsieur, avec ce qui vous pend. // – Ce qui me pend me défend // Ce qui me porte me comporte...* (Rolland 1877: 17), which has an answer so complicated, that the one unaware of it would never guess).

Logical and stylistic means of ambiguity. One of the most evident means of ambiguity in obscene riddles is **substitution of the whole by its part**. For example, a certain phenomenon could concern the whole population, but a riddle would mention only one sex concerned. E.g.:

Qu'est-ce qui pisse devant Madame, sans avoir honte ? (Une barrique) (Rolland 1877: 94) – What pisses shamelessly in front of a Madam? (A barrel)¹.

En la mano de las damas // casi siempre estoy metido, // unas veces estirado // y otras veces encogido. (Abanico) (Rodríguez Pastor 2003: 329) – In ladies’ hands I can be found almost always: sometimes stretched, sometimes shrunk (A fan).

Понизче пояса, повище колін: як те кличуть, що хлопці руку тичуть? (Кишеня) (Nomys 1993: 710). – It is lower than the waist but higher than the knees: what is it called where guys aim their hands? (A pocket)

Certainly all three objects mentioned in these riddles are not specifically designed for use by one and only one sex, although some preferences of use do exist. The same tendency can be traced in riddles based on **personification** of objects, when a certain sex is assigned to different objects, which (1) often serves to allude to a sexual intercourse; (2) demonstrates a (distant) resemblance of the object to genitals; (3) is stipulated by the same gender of an object and its personification in terms of linguistics.

(1) **Personification** together with **allusions** to a sexual intercourse is realized by means of the whole range of lexemes. These lexemes are analyzed in the section below. At this stage we are just demonstrating the phenomenon using some examples:

Ventre contre ventre, cric crac, et l'affaire est faite. (La porte d'armoire qu'on ouvre) (Rolland 1877: 70). – Belly against belly, bang-bang, and the job is done (A door of a wardrobe being opened).

Con la punta pica, con el culo aprieta, y con lo que le recuelga tapa la grieta. (Aguja, dedal, hilo) (Rodriguez Pastor 2003: 329). – With the tip it prods, with the butt it pushes, and with the hanging thingy it fills the crack (A needle, a thimble, and a thread).

Біжить кіт, задрав хвіст; де дірку бачить, туди й салдачить. (Ключ) (Nomys 1993: 709). – A cat is running, the tail is up; where he sees a hole, he sticks this in (A key).

(2) Objects' resemblance to genitals is realized on the lexical level, by means of adjectives and nouns, although it involves certain cognitive operations:

Il est court et gros, // Et si n'a nulz os, // Et si ne voit goute, // Et quant vient ou trou // Dedens il se boute. (C'est une taulpe) (Rolland 1877: 28). – It is short and thick, and it has no bones, and it does not see anything, and when it comes to a hole it jumps inside (A mole).

Colorado, colorado, // y con los pelos a los lados. (Amapola) (Rodriguez Pastor 2003: 333). – It is red, it is red, and hairy all around. (Poppy).

Панна тоненька, дірка маленька. (Голка) (Nomys 1993: 710). – The lady is thin, the hole is small (A needle).

Speaking about genitals in riddles in particular and in folklore in general, we must admit that lexemes like *a hole*, *a tail*, etc. alluding to female and male genitals had and have a lot of synonyms and symbolic representations, which vary depending on the stylistic level of a language.

And, finally, (3) **grammatical gender of personified objects generally coincides with sex and grammatical gender of their personifications**. It can be easily demonstrated as the category of gender is present in all the three languages under analysis: French and Spanish have masculine and feminine genders, and Ukrainian has masculine, feminine, and neuter genders:

La demoiselle est sur le feu, Monsieur la fouille dessous, La demoiselle lui pisse dessus ? (La marmite) (Rolland 1877: 77) – The lady is on the fire, The gentleman is touching her from below, The lady is pissing on him (A pot).

La demoiselle (f) → la marmite (f)

Monsieur (m) → le feu (m)

Estando mi abuela regando vino mi abuelo y le metió el tango. (Alberca, cuando le ponen el tapón para que no salga el agua) (Rodriguez Pastor, 2003: 331). – When my grandmother was dripping, my grandfather came and put a stick inside of her (A reservoir, when it is being plugged in order to avoid dripping).

La abuela (f) → la alberca (f)

El abuelo (m) → el tapón (m)

Стоїть пані Петрова, у її все готово! прийшов пан Петро, удів свій днот та ї пішов. (Коморя і ключ) (Nomys 1993: 709). – Petro's pani (Mrs.) is standing, she has everything ready! Pan (Mr.) Petro came, stuck his instrument and off he went (A pantry and a key).

Пані (f) → комора (f)

Пан (m) → ключ (m)

This coincidence may be partial as far as answers to the riddles are concerned, although the riddle itself preserves the idea of penetration of an object of masculine gender into an object of feminine gender.

Lexical composition of obscene riddles does not prove to be homogeneous within all of the three languages under analysis. We single out several groups of words, which, in our opinion, serve to create ambiguity in obscene riddles.

1. Nouns, designating people, which serve as personifications of objects of everyday life. We paid attention to the nomination of humans acting in obscene riddles: manner of naming (onyms or appellatives, use of courtesy titles), supposed age, etc. We singled out 16 nominations of people in French riddles, 48 – in Spanish ones, and 39 – in Ukrainian ones. First of all, nomination permits to infer certain tendencies concerning the age of personifications. Table 1 deals with the age aspect in the riddles.

Table 1

Age distribution

	French riddles	Spanish riddles	Ukrainian riddles
Old	6% (1)	16.7% (8)	48.7% (19)
Young	6% (1)	29.2% (14)	23% (9)
? or neutral	88% (14)	54.1% (26)	28.3% (11)

As we see from the table, French riddles show a high level of neutrality as far as age is concerned. The only mentions, which more or less explicitly demonstrate the age of the characters, are those of *demoiselle* and *grand-mère*. Spanish riddles are dominated by neutral nominations, although the part of nominations alluding to a certain, old or young, age is substantial. And, finally, characters' age distribution in Ukrainian riddles seems to be quite unexpected. First of all, taking into account the period, in which riddles were collected, we must admit that women and men were considered old as soon as they became grandparents, i.e. at the age of about 40. Grandparents giving birth were seen as abnormal,

and, consequently, from that time on, sexual relations of the 'old' couples were considered unnecessary and even socially unacceptable, although the reality sometimes was different from the norms imposed by society (Ihnatenko 2018). The substantial percentage of nouns designating elderly people may be due to the fact that even the riddles were used to ridicule the fact that aging couples were still active sexually.

As far as the manner of nomination is concerned, we distinguish two groups: those of appellatives and those of onyms, as demonstrated in table 2.

Table 2

Use of proper and common names

	French riddles	Spanish riddles	Ukrainian riddles
Onyms	37.5% (6)	8.3% (4)	7.7% (3)
Appellatives	62.5% (10)	91.7% (44)	92.3% (36)

All of the proper names of the selected French riddles are purely invented. Some of them serve the purpose of rhyming (*Bonjour, Madame Tarlantantan, // – Bonjour, Monsieur, avec ce qui vous pend...*), others suggest a hint (*De qu'es acò? de qu'es acò? // Madamo la Negreto // Pourtado sus tres cambetos // E Moussu lou Rouget // Que li bufo al quieulet* (Rolland, 1877: 78). – *Madam Blackish* together with *Mister Reddish* allude to a pot and a fire). Proper names in Ukrainian riddles are only popular names of women and men, which do not allude to anything. As far as Spanish riddles are concerned, they combine both kinds of names: real popular names (*don Juan, doña Juana*) as well as invented names (*tía Rabicueca* alludes to a lady with a big booty and *tío Labiergatiesa* – to an erection).

Another aspect of name use concerns mostly language and culture differences, but not the fact of obscenity of the riddles. The use of courtesy titles, for example, is much more typical to French riddles than to riddles belonging to Spanish and Ukrainian linguo-cultures, which is shown in table 3.

Table 3

Use of courtesy titles in obscene riddles

	French riddles	Spanish riddles	Ukrainian riddles
Names with titles (or titles only)	69% (11)	4.2% (2)	12.8% (5)
Names without titles	31% (5)	95.8% (46)	87.2% (34)

Speaking about professions represented in obscene riddles, the only ones we discovered concern occupations connected with religion. In Spanish it is *cura*, which was used to mark the natural needs of catholic priests; in Ukrainian it is *чернець, черниця (monk, nun)* – to underline the human, not-so-acceptable relations in religious circles.

2. Nouns designating different kinds of animals:

Quelle beste a le cul où il devrait avoir la teste ? (Le cheval qui est attaché par la queue au ratelier) (Rolland 1877: 143) – What animal has an ass where it would have to have a head? (A horse tied to a hayrack by its tail).

Лежить баба, иде бик, та бабу – тик! (бочка) (Nomys 1993: 710). – An old woman is laying down, there goes a bull and prods her. (A barrel).

As far as the last riddle is concerned, a bull is considered an embodiment of masculinity, and not only in Ukrainian folklore. It is also mentioned as such in *Rigveda* (Ihnatenko 2016: 34) as well as in other religious and world-view concepts (Cirlot 1992: 242, 445).

Animal images are not common for Romance languages riddles (5% of riddles, which are generally relatively innocent, in French and 0% in Spanish), although they are quite wide-spread in Ukrainian (16%), half of them implying an intercourse between a female human and a male animal.

3. Nouns designating body parts and bodily liquids (blood, milk, sweat). It would be superfluous to mention that body parts that appear in obscene riddles are situated mostly in the lower part of the body.

Branli Branlant² // Entre les jambes de ma grand. (Les clefs et les ciseaux suspendus à la ceinture de ma grand-mère) (Rolland 1877: 155) – Wobble-wobble between the legs of my grandma. (Keys and scissors attached to the belt of my grandmother).

Entre las patas lo hago, // ven acá y lo catarás, // si un caso te gustara // a la noche hacemos más. (Ajo blanco, gazpacho) (Rodriguez Pastor 2003: 330). – I am doing it between the legs, come here and you will taste it, if you like it, we will do some more at night⁴. (White garlic, gazpacho).

Ніжками упрусь, животом притуплюсь, мохнатиця роззявиться, голиши шусть. (Ткань коросна) (Nomys 1993: 709). – I will rest on my legs, I will press with my belly, the furry thing will open up, and the naked things will sneak inside. (The process of weaving is described).

As far as distribution of references to body parts across the languages, we find that 65% of riddles in French mention body parts or bodily liquids, in Spanish this percentage is 53%, and in Ukrainian – only 32%. In calculating the percentage of references to body parts or liquids we also included in the sample riddles mentioning *hair*, as sometimes the latter seems to be crucial in ambiguity formation. An important observation is that the habit of shaving pubic hair (by females) is observed only in riddles belonging to French linguo-culture (at least two references), but not in Spanish and Ukrainian riddles:

Bonjour, Madame Tarlantantan, // – Bonjour, Monsieur, avec ce qui vous pend. // – Ce qui me pend me défend // Ce qui me porte me comporte, // Laissez entrer le mien dans le vôtre. // – Non, Monsieur, car il est rasé de frais. (Un capitaine qui porte l'épée demande à une dame de le laisser entrer dans un pré avec son cheval. La dame refuse, disant que le pré vient d'être coupé). (Rolland 1877: 17) – Good afternoon, Madam Tarlantantan. – Good afternoon, Mister-with-a-hanging-thingy. – A hanging thingy defends me, and what brings me here, behaves properly. Let me enter mine into yours. – No, Mister, it has just been shaved. (A captain carrying a sword asks a lady to let him enter a meadow with his horse. The lady refuses, saying that the meadow has just been mowed).

4. Nouns designating elements of clothing in order to serve the purposes of personification. These nouns are not widespread in obscene riddles (5% in French, 4% in Spanish, and 4% in Ukrainian), and even if they are mentioned, they predominantly designate clothes covering lower body part.

Qui est-ce qui a un manteau, un chapeau, une verge entre les mains et du poil entre les fesses. (Un cavalier) (Rolland 1877: 15) – Who has a coat, a hat, a rod (actually, one of the meanings of ‘verge’ is ‘penis’) in his hands and hair between his buttocks? (A horseman).

¿Qué te parece, veleta // del capucho³ de padre? // Tres cuartas le mete a madre // y tres le queda en la bragüeta. // ¿Qué es? (Cerrojo) (Rodríguez Pastor 2003: 340) – What is a cock that comes out of the father’s hood? Three inches enter the mother, and three stay in his fly. What is it? (A bolt locking a door)

Солений макляк у штанях заляк. (Солоний вгірок) (Nomys 1993: 647). – Salty and wet, got stiff in the trousers (A salted cucumber).

5. Deictic words and other substitutes. This group unites words belonging to different parts of speech, and its existence is conditioned by two facts: (1) a need to name the object that a listener is supposed to guess; (2) need to avoid naming genitals.

Thus, in French this group of words includes personal pronouns (*il* – he, *celui* – he, *le* – him, it), possessive pronouns (*le mien, le tien, le sien* – mine, yours, his / hers), nouns (*une chose* – a thing), subordinate clauses (*ce qui vous pend* – what hangs from you), and substantivized adjectives (*poilu* – hairy, *tondu* – shaved, *bourru* – gruff, *le rond* – the round, etc.), e.g.:

Me permets-tu de mettre mon poilu dans ton tendu? (Mon âne dans ton pré) (Rolland 1877: 17). – Will you let me get my hairy one into your shaved one? (My donkey in your meadow).

The same observation is in order with regard to Spanish riddles. Nouns (*una cosa* – a thing), personal pronouns as direct objects (*lo, la*), subordinate clauses (*lo que recuelga* – what hangs), and substantivized adjectives (*colorado* – red, *redondín, redondete* – round, etc.) also serve the purpose of substitution.

Gorda y tiesa la traía // y en una boca sin dientes // se la metía, // y la leche que rebosaba // con la camisa se la limpiaba. (Teta) (Rodríguez Pastor 2003: 357). – One carried it thick and erect, and entered it into a mouth without teeth, and wiped with a shirt the milk that burst out (Boob).

Ukrainian riddles, besides pronouns (*me* – that) and substantivized adjectives (*голе* – the naked, *мохнате* – the hairy, etc.), have at their disposal a whole range of **nonce words**, which serve to designate objects under question and genitalia: *чучела* (f), *куконочка* (f), *танана* (f), *мохнатиця* (f), *кукунець* (m), *тпру-тпру-тинь* (m). Such words have different degree of motivation. For example, *танана* (f) is not motivated, except for final -a indicating feminine gender. *Куконочка* (f) and *кукунець* (m) similarly indicate gender by means of inflexion. We suppose that *куконочка* (f) might have common etymology with *кукона* (used ironically to designate a lady, a married woman), which was borrowed from Moldavian or Romanian with presumed origin in Italian (*coccone* – *cocoon*) (Melnychuk 1989: 129). We must underscore very close phonological form of Ukrainian words *куконочка* and *чучела* and Spanish words *cuca* and *chocha*

respectively. Both pairs are used to designate female genitalia: Ukrainian words are used as occasionalisms in ambiguous riddles, whereas Spanish ones are used on a regular basis. *Тпру-тпру-тинь* (*m*), used to designate a male sexual organ, is an example of a language play, as it is formed by means of telescoping between an interjection *тпру-тпру* (used to encourage horses) and a noun *прутень* – a male sexual organ.

One more phrase used to substitute genitalia has a form of an adverbial modifier of place. It has the same lexical and grammatical form across the languages: *entre les jambes* – *entre las patas* – *між ногами* – between the legs.

6. Swear words. In our opinion, the presence of swear words spoils to some extent the ambiguity of certain riddles, rudely pushing a listener or a reader to an obscene answer. Nevertheless, swear words, or obscenities, are present in: 30% of riddles in French with the domination of *cul* (10 mentions), *chier*, *merde* (ass, to shit, shit correspondingly); 12% of riddles in Spanish with the domination of *culo* (ass), *cuca*, *chocho*, *chochino* (all of the three words designate female genitalia); 2% of riddles in Ukrainian represented by only one word *сучка* (bitch). This underrepresentation of swear words in Ukrainian riddles compared to its Romance analogs may be explained by a fact of censorship. We suspect the hidden presence of a swear word in at least one more Ukrainian riddle. Moreover, other folklore sources (Sulyma, 2001) suggest that Ukrainian folklore used to employ quite obscene lexis. On the other hand, the definition of *obscene words* varies depending on the culture, which impedes drawing any precise statistical conclusions.

7. Adjectives in obscene riddles can be generally divided into two groups: (1) adjectives giving a general characteristic of an object, (2) adjectives and comparisons expressing the oppositional states of an object 'before and after', i.e. of a male organ before and after an intercourse in certain riddles, and (3) adjectives expressing the oppositional qualities of two objects: one being penetrated and another one performing penetration.

Riddles containing adjectives of the first group reveal to be more numerous in each of the languages under analysis:

Rond, long, blanc // *Bourre dedans* (*La chandelle*) (Rolland, 1877: 78) – Round, long, white gets inside (A candle).

Largo y grande // *lo quieren las mozas // que las tape el bujero // y les cuelgue las bolsas*. (*Pendientes*) (Rodriguez Pastor 2003: 349) – Long and large, girls want it to cover the hole and to hang them the bags. (Earrings).

Що то за загадка, що під яйцями гладка? (*Сковорода*) (Nomys 1993: 658). – What is it, that is smooth under the eggs? (A frying pan)⁵.

The presence of two oppositional adjectives, as in groups (2) and (3) makes the obscenity even more explicit:

(2) *Je l'ai vu mou, // Je le vois dur; // Je l'ai vu tendre, // Je l'ai vu mettre dans un ventre*. (*Pâte pour faire le pain*) (Rolland 1877: 100). – I've seen it soft, I see it hard; I've seen it extended, I've seen it enter a belly (Dough to make bread).

Lo metí duro, // lo saqué blando // y goteando. (*Hierro en la fragua*) (Rodriguez Pastor 2003: 345) – I put it hard, I took it out soft and drippy (Iron in the forge).

Покладу **тверде**, вийму **м'яке**, из кінця – кап, кап. (Солоний огірок) (Nomys 1993: 647). – I'll put it hard, I'll take it out soft and dripping from the end. (A salted cucumber).

(3) Lo **duro** entra en lo **blando** // y quedan las bolas colgando. (Pendientes) (Rodriguez Pastor, 2003: 350). – The **hard** enters the **soft** and the balls remain hanging (Earrings).

У тебе **чорне**, як жук, у мене **товсте**, як друк. (Сковорода і чаплія) (Nomys 1993: 658). – You have it **black** like a beetle; I have it **thick** like a stick (A frying pan and its handle).

In certain cases the opposition is expressed non-verbally:

Отака кукуночка (показує долоню), отакий кукунець (показує руку по лікоть). (Сковорода і чаплія) (Nomys 1993: 658). – The cucunochka is this big (shows the palm), the cucunets is that big (shows the arm from the tips of fingers to the elbow) (A frying pan and its handle).

Speaking about oppositional relations, we discovered one more case in Ukrainian language, concerning age differences:

Молодий кричить, що не стирчить, а **старий** стогне, що не зогне. (Солоний огірок) (Nomys 1993: 648). – The young clamors it is too soft, the old moans it is too rigid. (A salted cucumber).

8. Verbs. Sexual intercourse does not have a vocabulary of its own as far as the verbs are concerned. Therefore, verbs common to every domain of human activity are used to designate certain actions during an intercourse. Combined with the nouns mentioned above, they serve to create ambiguity: on the one hand, the action is quite innocent, as no genitalia are mentioned; on the other hand, people tend to use evasive formulae speaking about sex. Perhaps, the most general verb to denote an intercourse is the verb 'to do' (*faire, hacer*). Verbs of obscene riddles include also those denoting back-and-forth motion, the process of taking someone, entering and / or destroying something, as well as certain oral actions (licking, sucking, etc.).

Te la **entré**, // te la **saqué**, // te hice sangre // y te la limpié. // ¿Qué es? (*Inyección, jeringuilla*) (Rodriguez Pastor, 2003: 346) – I entered it inside you, I got it out, I made you bleeding, and I wiped you. What is it? (An injection, a syringe).

Загадаю тобі загадку: вийми в пані старої ягодку, **оближи** – **оближи**, та й знову положи. (Куля в москаля або ложка) (Nomys 1993: 710). – I'll give you a riddle: take the old lady's berry, lick it well and put it back (A bullet of a weapon or a spoon).

Verbs also denote static actions like hanging, implying the usual state of a male organ (*monsieur, avec ce qui vous pend*, etc.).

In Ukrainian riddles verbs are largely substituted by interjections denoting fast actions in some direction:

Нагнав ведмідь дівку та й **штурх** у дірку (Ключ і замок) (Nomys 1993: 709). – A bear caught a girl and – jerk! – into a hole (A key and a lock).

To draw a conclusion, we state that the ambiguity of obscene riddles is based on similarities of the image created in the riddle to the image of a sexual act, genitalia, etc. This similarity is enhanced by specific lexis serving the purposes

of personification and substitution of the whole by its part. At the same time, the image created in a riddle may correspond to a quite innocent image, which is situated in the background. The connection between the image expressed by means of a riddle and a 'true', non-obscene image may be relatively weak, the latter one justifying or 'legalizing' the obscene riddle.

Similar genres. In this part of our research we are going to give an overview of genres similar to obscene riddles, which did not become an essential part of our research, but are still worth attention and, perhaps, will become an object of our research in the near future.

Mexican oral tradition has an analogue of obscene riddles, which is called *albur*. *Albures* stem from the prehispanic mischievous songs of sexual character – *cuecuchcuicatl* (Johansson 2002). *Albur* in itself is a kind of expression with a double meaning. The degree of implicitness of the sexual subtext can vary, but usually it is not typical for *albures* to use explicitly either swear words or terms of obscenity. Helena Beristáin (2000: 401) defines certain lexemes typical to *albures*, which generally correlate with the ones we singled out while investigating obscene riddles.

The verb *alburear* means to talk in an ambiguous manner, which implies the presence of a sexual subtext. But still, *albur* is not a riddle, as a riddle usually is formed by a question and an answer, and an *albur* combines them in one phrase:

No es la menstruación, lo que pasa es que traigo descongelado el bistec (Hernández 2006: 135). – It is not menstruation, what happened was that the steak got unfrozen.

In this case we are dealing with a euphemism, as code names for menstruation exist in every of the analyzed languages (Ukrainian: *гости з Краснодар / Червонограда* (guests from Krasnodar / Chervonohrad – both city names allude to red color), *гости на червоних «Жигулях» / красному «Мерседесі»* (guests on a red Zhiguli (car brand) / Mercedes), *тета з Америки* (aunt from America); French: *tante Rose* (aunt Rose), *les Anglais ont débarqué* (the English have disembarked), *la visite de la tante Irma* (the visit of aunt Irma), *j'ai mes coquelicots* (I am having my poppies), etc.).

Si la vida es larga y dura, ve y agárrame la vida (Hernández 2006: 134). – If life is long and hard, come and grab my life. → Allusion to a male organ.

The obscene meaning is often hidden by graphic means, i.e. by means of words division. Proper names often are used for this purpose:

Alberto Caraz Vergara (Hernández 2006: 56) → *al ver tocarás Vergara* – When you see it, you will touch Cocker (*Vergara* is a family name which has *verga* – 'penis' as its part, so the suggested *albur* is quite untranslatable).

Albures can have various forms, using all the means of language play possible. A collection of *albures* edited by Victor Hernández includes various forms: poetry, recipes, proper names, short stories, micro-dialogues, commercials, etc., all of them implying obscene meanings.

Ukrainian obscene folk songs are quite similar to *albures*. Whereas a lot of them contain swear words and direct references to sex and genitalia, we still find those alluding to sex indirectly, in the manner that only deep understanding of

folk symbols can help decode the meaning behind them:

Прокрутив павук стелю // Да й впає на постелю; // Де Марися спала, // Там калинонька стала (Sulyma 2001: 78). – A spider destroyed the ceiling and fell down on the bed; where Marysia slept, the berries of guilder rose appeared.

A spider (or a cat) destroying a ceiling symbolizes the loss of virginity (Kotsur 2015: 538). The same can be said about the berries of guilder rose, which have a bright red color (Stavytska 2008: 205).

Ой чи чула, чи не чула, // Як я тебе кликав, // Як я тобі кукурудзу // Попід ніс тикав (Sulyma 2001: 102). – (To a woman): Did you hear or not, as I was calling you, as I was sticking a corn cob to your nose.

Corn cob, due to its form, is associated with male genitals (Stavytska 2008: 219).

Thus, only overview of genres similar to obscene riddles shows a wide spectrum of linguo-cultural problems, which need to be resolved on the level of each and every language, as well as in the linguo-comparative field.

Conclusions

The research of obscene riddles conducted in the three languages – French, Spanish, and Ukrainian – shows that despite some slight differences, ambiguous meaning of obscene riddles is formed due to the simultaneous influence of several means: 1) specific lexis, which can be interpreted in different ways, or polysemantic words; 2) national symbols, which add new layers of meaning to the semantics of a word; 3) the coincidence of grammatical gender of objects and people represented by these objects; 4) wide use of personifications; 5) substitution of a wide notion by its part. Obscene riddles are an excellent example of language play, in which an answer is not less important than a question.

The prospects of further research in this direction may involve the study of obscene riddles on a larger scale and applying the results of investigation to other languages as well as to modern riddles and folklore forms of ambiguous meaning.

NOTES

1. All of the English translations are ours – I.H.
2. Verb *branler* has also a meaning 'to masturbate'.
3. *Capucho* means 'a hood' as well as 'a foreskin'.
4. The use of *noche* (night) adds up to the ambiguity, although the fact of making and eating *gazpacho* at night is quite justified by Spanish eating habits.
5. In Ukrainian 'eggs' and 'testicles' are designated by the same noun. Moreover, a frying pan in Ukrainian folklore symbolizes female genitalia (Stavytska 2008:338).

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