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Ambiguity and Abstraction in Mongolian Riddles: An Ethnolinguistic Analysis

Dvojznačnost a abstrakce v mongolských hádankách: etnolingvistická analýza

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The Enigma of Everyday Life: Mongolian Riddles in their Linguistic, Phonological, and Semantic Contexts

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0. Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is an examination of Mongolian riddles on the linguistic, semantic, phonological, and syntactic levels. Mongolian riddles are widely known for their extreme succinctness, at times consisting of only three or four words. In fact, it could be argued that part of the art of 'solving' these riddles is not only providing the correct answer (or, in some cases, one of the correct answers), but deciphering the riddle posed at the outset in terms of its deeply embedded qualities of elision and gapping. Why, however, is the phenomenon of elision so widely attested in these verbal forms? What functions does this serve, whether linguistically or metaphorically? Does the extreme brevity, the 'lack' of detail—as might be perceived by a non-native speaker— serve a larger purpose, allowing for a 'slippage of categories' in Lakoff's sense of the term? Finally, the purpose of this dissertation is to examine some of the features of a highly productive genre of adjectives, nouns and verbs, known as iconopoeia—expressions that 'paint a picture' in the mind of the auditor—and which seem to hold a distinctly 'ambiguating' function in these riddles. This phenomenon in turn is closely related to the function of these abstract images: they often lead to a broad cosmological vision embedded in the riddle: a riddle beyond the riddle or within the riddle (sometimes aided or reinforced iconopoeia, but not in all cases). Certain riddles contain explicit mythological references, whereas in others the cosmological references are 'implicit' and must be deduced. Also to be examined are the frequent attestation of distorted loan-words from Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese. These words and expressions have undergone transformation even beyond the regular phonetic changes that occur when words are borrowed into Mongolian (such as abbreviation, loss of syllables, changes in vowel harmony, regressive assimilation, etc.), rendering them unrecognizable, even for a native speaker.

Due to certain health constraints which unfortunately restrict my ability to travel and spend long amounts of time in the field, I am for the time being largely consulting with native speakers in terms of previously collected material.[1] It must, however, be stated that both collections employed are wide-ranging and particularly important in that they were undertaken in the1950s

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[1]Ц. Өлзийхутаг, Түмэн оньсого (*Ten Thousand Riddles*); Printed by Ch. Battulga, Ulaanbaatar, 2013 ; Г. Ловор, Ц. Өлзийхутаг, Монгол ардын оньсого, таавар *(Enigmas and Puzzles of Mongolia),* Shinjleh Uhaanii Akademi, Hel Yohioliin Hüreelen, Ulaanbaatar, 1990.

and 1960s, at a time when a great many older informants would have been able to recollect the pre-Communist era in Mongolia. In particular, Ölziihuyag's two-volume collection *Tümen onisogo* [*Ten Thousand Riddles*] is especially valuable. The author put out a request for schoolchildren all over the country to ask the elders in their family what riddles they knew, to write them down, and send them by post to the author in Ulaanbaatar. Although this collecting effort was met with a certain amount of disapproval from the authorities—and although one must take into consideration the clear ideological biases of the era—the project was allowed to proceed. [2]

The greater dilemma today is that some of the riddles which originate from the intrinsic realities of the nomadic herder's life, riddles which contain deformed loan-words or dialectical variants, or riddles pertaining to certain aspects of Buddhism might be quite opaque to city- or town-dwellers today, or, in some cases, even to individuals hailing from the countryside.[3] Many of the riddles require fairly extensive contextual background in order for a foreign researcher to understand them, and even greater cultural understanding to understand their implicit message. Hence, in addition to an analysis of these riddles, I wish to embed them, hopefully, in a reasonably accurate ethnographic context, a contextualization which could not or did not need to be invoked at the time they were collected.

1. The Linguistic Features of Mongolian Riddles and Ambiguity

It has been said that in literary forms—whether oral or written—condensation can lead to intensification of meaning. Paradoxically, the very succinctness of Mongolian riddles seems to expand their semantic field of possibilities, almost as if 'under-specification' were a deliberate strategy (along with others) to enhance the semantic or referential field.

Mongolian itself contains an array of grammatical and syntactical features which could be said to favour ambiguity and terseness in utterances. Some of these include:

>-frequent elision of verbs of existence, (or, on the other hand, elision of the subject of the verb);
>-non-marked gender;
>-non-marked (for person or number) verbal declination;

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[2] Luvsandorj, personal communication, 2013

[3] When I asked one man, Uugan, the father of a family of two living the Khuvsgul region, about riddles generally, he immediately summoned his younger son: "Tögsöö, recite some riddles!" This would tend to suggest, at least for the microenvironment of this settlement, that riddles as such no longer formed a part of the family entertainment, but had become a part of the school curriculum, and were viewed as part of the national store of folklore and oral heritage transmitted through the school system.

-high occurrence of substitution words (including nouns, verbs, and adjectives);

-high occurrence of zero case endings;

-the wide mandate of the dative/locative case in Mongolian (*d/t* in Modern Mongolian for both dative and locative, proximate and distal locations remain unmarked);

-the overlapping of certain word-categories (adjective and noun, verb and noun);

-the unspecificity or 'generalized nature' of the tense system (verbal roots with the converb -*j* represent a generalized 'present-future,' the iterative ending *–dag* can be considered to be a kind of 'tense-less verb,' and so on);

-the presence of so-called 'zero-phoneme words with nearly all-encompassing referential sweep (for example, the word *burqan*, which can indicate a deity, a statue of a deity, or the Buddha [as in the expression бурхан багш]); and so on.

These linguistic features tend to lead to what could appear to a native speaker of an Indo-European as a general and persistent state of 'under-specification,' yet this statement must be bracketed as well within the linguistic and cultural context in which it is being generated; in other words, a universal norm of what should and should not be specified (beyond subject and predicate) in any given language cannot with any degree of objectivity be established, so that it is very reasonable to suppose that on the contrary, many Indo-European languages could appear to a Mongolian speaker to be *over*-specified.[4] Any translator who has translated from a genderless language into a language where gender is marked, whether by pronouns, or by verb and adjective declensions, knows how much paradoxically is lost from the potential referential field when he or she is forced, for example, into choosing a gender by the nature of the language they are translating into.

All of the linguistic features outlined above are obviously widely attested in the two riddles corpuses under examination. (Elision will be discussed specifically in Section 2.) What stands out as highly prominent in the two collections under discussion are:

-high occurrence of zero case endings

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[4] Luvsandorj compared Indo-European languages to classical paintings, where every detail is clearly defined and visible; Mongolian, on the other hand, is like an abstract painting, where the forms are much more ambiguous and suggestive. In a traditionally academic classical painting, every detail must be filled in, or else the painting does not make any 'sense;' in Mongolian, the auditor is compelled to fill in the missing details himself, possibly be able to tolerate a higher level of uncertainty and ambiguity, or intuitively and cognitively grasp the level of detail being expressed as within the desired norm.

-the wide mandate of the dative/locative case in Mongolian;

-the overlapping of certain word-categories;

-the 'inherent vagueness' of the tense system in Mongolian perhaps contributes to a sense of some of these riddles as existing in a world outside of time, contributing to their cosmological implications

-the presence of so-called 'zero-phoneme';

-the high frequency of iconopoeia (see Section 7.)

Unlike, for example, the earliest Anglo-Saxon riddles, Mongolian riddles do not seem to be aimed at a specific 'addressee': the question phrase 'Who am I?' or 'what am I?' is usually not present. (This also brings more than a few riddles in close proximity, both formally and in terms of content, to proverbs: both have a clear instructional function, which Alena Oberfalzerová has termed 'ethno-pedagogy').[5] The question of 'voice,' as well—in contrast to the earliest recorded Anglo-Saxon riddles, which according to one source originated from inscriptions on objects, and thus gave 'voice' to inanimate objects which could be seen as then 'describing' themselves in an enigmatic fashion—is also much more generalized in Mongolian riddles.[6]

1. Elision

As has been noted, elision in and of itself forms a major component of Mongolian speech patterns, and mastery of spoken Mongolian could also be said to demand a mastery of correct comprehension and usage both of elided and substitute speech. Thus far I have been able to observe the following general patterns: When the subject is general (impersonal), it is elided altogether:

лууны нулимсыг	Dragon's tears
Тогтоож болохгүй	Cannot be stopped
Лусын шээсийг	Dragon's pee
Хэмжиж болохгүй	Cannot be measured
– үүл, бороо[7]	– clouds, rain

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[5] reference

[6] See Tiffany, Daniel, 'Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity', in *Critical Inquiry,* Vol. 28, No. 1, Things (Autumn, 2001), p. 73: "In the Anglo-Saxon world prior to the eleventh century, certain artefacts (crosses, weapons, bells, jewellery, sundials, chess pieces) bear inscriptions—in the first person—that refer to the object's maker or owner (or both), to the world at large, and to the object itself. For the most part, the scope of these inscriptions is quite limited, consisting of formulaic phrases such as 'Godric made me,' or 'Elfred ordered me made'… A smaller number of objects, however, bear more complex inscriptions betraying the form of a riddle. One object, for example, declares, 'Cross is my name. Once, trembling and drenched with blood, I bore the mighty king.' " The origin of the riddle, as Tiffany notes, is thus intimately tied to the life of objects in and of themselves (he contrasts this case of the object speaking itself to the 'modern commodity fetish' of today, p. 73.)

[7] Г. Ловор, Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 1990, p. 47.

Although in English translation, the subject clearly appears to be 'dragon's tears' and 'dragon's pee,' the situation in the original version is a little more complicated, as 'dragon's tears' and 'dragon's pee' are both marked with the accusative case, thus seeming to bring up the inherent question: who would try to stop the dragon's tears or the dragon's pee? The unexpressed subject in the English translation becomes 'no one,' 'not anyone;' it is an impersonal statement. The accusative marker in the Mongolian original strongly suggests an elided subject, as if there were in fact someone who was possibly thinking about trying to measure the dragon's pee. Although the riddle is humorous, it also, through this elision, expresses the taboo surrounding the *luus* more strongly and possibly more ominously, than if it had been explicitly stated.

The much higher degree of elision that a language such as Mongolian can employ and tolerate is well evidenced in the following riddle, in which the subject of the riddle ('shadow') is elided, but so as well are all pronouns and verbs—with the exception of the very last line, which provides the auditor with the information that the subject of the riddle is something that 'comes out, emerges' [*gar-*], just never in a southerly direction:

өглөө баруун талд	In the morning to the west
Өдөр хойд талд	In the day to the north
Орой зуун талд	In the evening to the east
Урд талд хэзээ ч гараагүй	In the south [it] never emerges
– суудэр [8]	– Shadow

The location (*tal,* 'steppe, place, side, direction') is marked with the dative case, while the time-indicators are not (typical for the spoken language). This is as well a riddle which like many paradoxically describes movement and action through a series of static images.

In the following riddle, the subject is elided to the point where there is no pronoun, only an indication of where the movement is taking place ('there above') and how ('without a camel,' 'without a cart'). The complete absence of a subject in the original facilitates—more so than the English translation with its required pronoun—the process of substitution which must occur for the riddle to be successfully solved. The elision is a deliberate blank space, a fruitful or productive lacuna within the fragmentary text of the riddle.

тээр дээгуур	Up there above
Тэрэггүй нүүдэл	[They are] nomadizing/moving without a cart
– үүл нүүх	– Clouds moving
тээр дээгуур	Up there above

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[8] Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 2013, p.33.

Тэмээгүй нүүдэл	[They are] nomadizing/moving without a camel
– үүл нүүх [9]	– Clouds moving

In the following riddle, the verb is fully elided:

хөлтэй дайчин хөлөөрөө [зогсон, зогсож байна, etc.]
Хөлгүй зайсан элгээрээ [харуулсан]
– ширээ, авдар [10]

Literally, this could be translated as:

The legged fighter with his legs[11]
The legless *zaisan* with his stomach
– Chair, wooden chest

The elided verb of the riddle was filled in by a native speaker in the following way: хөлтэй дайчин хөлөөрөө [зогсон, зогсож байна, etc.]/ Хөлгүй зайсан элгээрээ [харуулсан]:[12] 'The legged fighter [stood / stands [there] with his legs / The legless *zaisan* with his stomach [shows off].' Of course, the elided verb of the riddle refers to most ironical and humorous part. The verb, which is not expressed, refers to the act of preening and showing off. A more accessible translation would read:

Legged fighter [standing there] with his legs
Legless official [preening] with his stomach

The humour arises from the thought of a table 'showing off' the fact that it has legs, as well as the comparison of the preening wide-girthed petty official to a wooden chest. (In addition, the wooden chests used in yurts are universally beautifully and elaborately decorated in bright colours, just as a Manchurian official of old would be garbed in an appropriately ornamental and colourful *deel*.)[13]

Although I have not yet completed a statistical analysis as of yet, it would appear that many or most of the riddles containing the sacred, the religious, or

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[9] Г. Ловор, Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 1990, p. 48.
[10] Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 2013, p. 48.
[11] Luvsandorj corrected the term 'дайчин' to 'зайсан,' as in the second line. A *zaisan* was a petty official during the Manchurian Dynasty.
[12] Luvsandorj, consultation, 2013. Note the variability of tense in the verb that was filled in.
[13] What is also interesting in terms of this particular riddle is how Luvsandorj automatically began to improvise variations upon it (including the exact same elision), one of which was *чэх эр гэдсээрээ*, ('A Czech man [preening/showing off] with his [beer] belly'), as well as a riddle which alluded to the present author, *Рахел эмгээгээрээ*, 'Rachel [showing off] by means of her earrings.' Consultation, 2013.

the cosmological as a clue or as their answer fully elide the verb, where the verb in most cases would probably be a simple verb of existence.

2. Missing Ethnographic Context

These riddles are characterized by an 'ethno-context' which is not always evident, even to native speakers: they can often refer to an ethnic practice which can no longer be derived from the riddle itself. One example is the following:

Хуурай модоор хуурцаг хийв	A box from dried-out wood was made
Хувхай ясаар хана хийв	A wall from whitened bone was made
– өлгийтэй хүүхэд[14]	– Child in a cradle

It is very difficult to know what exactly the 'wall from whitened bone' is referring to in this riddle. According to one informant, this riddle would seem to indicate that at one time, animal bones might well have been employed in the construction of babies' cradles: perhaps the curving rib cage bone was used as an arch above the cradle, while attached to both sides, so that the cradle could be hung from one of the wooden poles supporting the *toono* (the circular opening at the top of the *ger*).[15] Although in the riddle a 'wall of whitened bones' is referred to, thus presumably this would be something perpendicular to the ground, as opposed to arching above the cradle and the child within. This is a clear example of a riddle which may well have to remain without full explanation.

3. The 'Root' of the Riddle, Etymology of the Word *onisogo* [riddle]

Interestingly, the root of the word *onisogo* [riddle] in Mongolian, *oni*, has the following meanings: *oni(n)*: 'a cut or incision at the edge or tip of something, groove, nick; the saddle of mountain; order in a queue; the beginning, the first part of something,' whereas онсь (*onis(u)* in Classical Mongolian) has the meaning of 'bolt, lock, device, mechanism,' as well as 'the opening part of something, opening of something, unfastening of something; the essential part of something.' Онсь is paradoxically associated with both opening and closing— just like the wooden chest that figures in so many riddles.

S. Dulam, one of the most important theorists of oral and written Mongolian literature working today, writes the following about riddles in Mongolian culture:

> One, concerning the etymology of the word *onisogo* (riddle), on the basis of the explanation given in "Dictionary of Mongolian Lexical Roots," the meaning "to find the essence (of a thing)" is cited; two, the words *üliger* (story, tale) and riddle (*onisogo*) have always been, since ancient times, connected; they share a common origin; three, the

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[14] Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 2013, p. 127.
[15] Consultation, Luvsandorj, Oct. 2013.

term *üliger* in the context of our discussion is not a 'story' or 'tale' in the general sense of the word, but instead concerns origin myths, that is, the events surrounding the existence of the gods (*tenger*) and other deities (*asar*); four, the true task and intention of the riddle, manifest in the thought contained in it deserving of special notice, is to direct the agency of non-human forces, which, while co-existing among man and beast, are not conspicuous: to gladden and appease them, to frighten them, and to render them harmless.[16]

Riddles, in Dulam's formulation, are directly connected to the mythical task of man, in that they automatically lead to the origin myths which are in and of themselves offerings to the deities, the manifestations or mechanisms of which may be opaque to us. They therefore perform a clear cosmological function (See Conclusion for further considerations on this topic). Riddles, in this analysis, form part of the nomadic praxis of keeping the balance of forces between man, the heavens (*tenger*), and the earth (*gazar*) in alignment.[17]

4. Ambiguity in East and West; Ambiguity in Mongolian Riddles

As mentioned in Section 1, the perception among native speakers of a given language of what is deemed an 'acceptable' level of ambiguity differs greatly between differing languages and cultures. Perhaps even what may be perceived as ambiguous would not be perceived as being so in a different linguistic and cultural context.

In looking over the history of the term 'ambiguity' in the Western world, one is struck by the fact that largely, it is perceived as a negative trait or something to be removed from language. [18] From its Latinate beginnings onward, ambiguity was associated with the dark and the enigmatic (*in aenigmate*, 'darkly'). [19] Greek theoreticians saw it as a property to be *removed from* language.[20] Of course, what strikes us in a survey of Mongolian riddles, is just how semantically and referentially *productive* ambiguity is, and that without this productive ambiguity, the cosmological function that seems to embrace many of these riddles would not operate in quite the same way, and would render 'necessary semantic expansionism' (see Section 7) difficult, if not

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[16] Dulam, S. and Nandanbilig, 2007, pp. 154-155.

[17] See Oberfalzerová, 2006.

[18] This is perhaps more true than ever with the increasing use of computerized translation, where establishing programming features of *disambiguation* is crucial. (The opposite term, *ambiguation* —creating more ambiguity, creating opacity in language—does not seem to exist, which is a statement in and of itself.)

[19] See Tiffany, 2001, p. 81.

[20] See Cerquiglini, 1988. See also Peppicello, W.J., and Green, Thomas A.,1984, p. 22 : 'In ordinary speech, ambiguity is considered to be a linguistic accident.'

impossible. The role that ambiguity plays in these riddles compels one to confront the notion of lexical slippage as inherently desirable.

5. Unrecognizable Loan Words

Widely attested in the two collections of riddles is the presence of words that are not in any dictionary, and are often opaque even to a native speaker. These are, in effect, words that have undergone 'too much' distortion, or whose paths of distortion can no longer be identified or traced. For example:

Сээргүй ягнаа	*Yagnaa* without a spine
Сэмжгүй ягнаа	*Yagnaa* without intestinal fat
– загас, туулай [21]	– Fish, rabbit

The word *yagnaa* is not, to my knowledge, attested in any dictionary. Here it is clearly functions as an adjectival noun: it 'names' the subject of the riddle—fish and rabbit—and it is possible that the long 'a' vowel at the end carries a kind of vocative function (as if this subject were being addressed. On the other hand, '*naa—*' also seems to mimic the *—na⁴* verbal ending with the final vowel lengthened for emphasis, as one hears frequently in the spoken language.) One native speaker associated the word *yagnaa* with the Tibetan loan-word *yang* ('chanting [of religious texts],'[22] but also in more modern usage, 'melody').[23] (As to possibly why there would be an association of a fish or a rabbit with the word *yang*, see Section 9.)

In addition, there are riddles with proper names that cannot be specifically identified, such as:

Га, ха, на усэгтэй	With the letters ga, ha, na
Гарди шубуун хүзүүтэй	With the neck of a garuda
Бэри дана биэтэй	With the body of **Beri dana**
Биндэрьяа дуутай	With the sound of beryl
– хонх [24]	– Bell

Beri dana clearly refers to a deity of some sort, but it is very uncertain as to which one, or even if 'Beridana' refers to a specific deity at all. The name conjured up for one native speaker as it were an abstract phonemic image of the potential or possible name of a bodhisattva or even of the Buddha in Sanskrit. To a Mongolian speaker, it 'sounds like' the name of a deity in Sanskrit, creating a kind of abstract phonetic image, and this is potentially more significant than if it were to refer to one specific deity.

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[21] Г. Ловор, Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 1990, p. 87.
[22] Lessing, 1960, p. 427.
[23] BAMRS, Vol. 4, p. 1349.
[24] Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 2013, p. 254.

6. Other word distortions and metaplasms

The sheer lexical variability one encounters in Mongolian riddles brings to mind the well-known statement of the linguist Roman Jacobson, according to which 'All poetry is organized violence against language.' While not wishing to present this frequency of phonetic variability as 'violence' against language, one can easily see the inherent poetic function. The 'distortions' often serve to further 'tie' the words and the sounds to each other beyond the habitual use of alliteration. Phonically, this makes each riddle more of a self-contained sonic universe, more of an aural 'container' for the often cosmological message contained within. One such example is the riddle:

хув лам	Amber lama
худаг дотор гүрэмдэм	Prays for healing in a well
– Айраг бүлэх[25]	– churning *airag*

The verb *gürem* (*güremdeh* : 'to perform a *gürem*') is a loan from Tibetan (*sku rim*)[26] with the addition of the verb-formant suffix *'d'* and an 'unknown' verbal ending, *–em*. This could either be an abbreviated form of the Classical Mongolian general present tense ending *–mui*[2] (**güremdemüi > güremdem*), or it could just as well be a phonetic 'slippage' of the general present-future tense ending of *–na*[4] (**güremdene > güremdem*). In any event, it seems fairly clear that the meaning would be evident to a native speaker. The verbal ending could well have undergone phonemic transformation just in the course of the riddle being repeated. What it does though is to 'bind' the word *güremdem* to the word *lam*, creating assonance or what is often termed in English as a 'slant rhyme.' The repeated nasalised consonant at the end of both lines serves to make the riddle a more cohesive phonic unit.

Words are also added for the sake of sound and rhythm:

Дээрээ дэн шарга	Up above [it is] yellow
Дундан дун цагаан	In the middle conch shell white
Доороо азай буурал	Below grey and old [grey-haired]
– Өрөм, сүү, хусам [27]	– Cream, milk, *husam*[28]

The word *den* actually has no meaning and is clearly included for the sake of assonance and rhythm.

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[25] Г. Ловор, Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 1990, p. 166.
[26] Kara, p. 119; Chandra Das: 'reverence, respect, and thence the common word for any set service in a temple and in general for a ceremonial act of worship, and particularly in the special sense of a solemn sacrificial ceremony.' p. 91.
[27] Г. Ловор, Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 1990, p. 164.
[28] *Husam* refers to the sediment on the bottom of the pan after boiling milk. Usually it is scraped off and eaten.

The use of phonetically distorted loan words from Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit (see Section 5) also testify to the practice of word distortion in the service of phonetic beauty, as well as the effect of the mystification of the foreign, displaced phonetic fragment. The phonetically distorted phonemes, like elision, become a field of semantic potentiality, widening the set of potential meanings in the riddle.

7. Iconopoeia and abstraction

To a certain degree, iconopoeia, or 'picture-making words' (*dursleh ug*), can be viewed as motivated signs (as opposed to the now generally accepted postulate of Saussure of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign).[29] The phonemes contained in iconopoeia are perceived by native speakers as not being arbitrary; rather, the vowels across the spectrum of 'male' (front vowel) and 'female' (back vowel) words in Mongolian are felt to be inherently expressive of differing spatial qualities.[30] Iconopoeia are highly represented in both the riddle collections under consideration, and they would seem to place a distinct role in the generation of what could be termed 'cosmological thinking,' or at the very least, in the kind of cosmological images generated by many of these riddles. For example, in the riddle:

хөлтэй дэмбэн	Legged *demben*
Хөлгүй дэмбэн	Legless *demben*
Үстэй дэмбэн	Hairy *demben*
Үсгүй дэмбэн	Hairless *demben*
[үхэг, авдар, газар, тэнгэр][31]	wooden chest (with feet); wooden chest (without feet); earth; sky, heaven

The word *demben* (or *dümben*),[32] which indicates a bulging, unwieldy, large shape,[33] stands in for the universe itself: it represents the earth and the sky, as well as the large wooden chest (*avdar*) present in every yurt, the largest and most important of which is usually placed in the northern section of the yurt (the *hoimor*), and upon which the *jaaz*[34] and the altar objects are placed. The riddle also contains a metaphor or a riddle within the riddle: the wooden chest, or *avdar*, is metaphor for the heavens (as it is as well in numerous other

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[29] See de Saussure, 2013.
[30] See Oberzerfalová, 2009,
[31] Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 2013, p. 189.
[32] Luvsandorj perceived the correct word as '*dümben*,' (as did one woman in the Khuvsgul region), who, when I mentioned the riddle, also automatically substituted *dümben* for *demben*. (July 2014). It is hard to know if *demben* is a dialectical variation, or in fact a spontaneously created phonetic parallelism, which would in fact mirror the parallelism inherent in the riddle.
[33] Luvsandorj, consultation, 2013; interview with Uugan, Khuvsgul, July 2014.
[34] The *jaaz* is a wooden, decorated vitrine which is placed on the hoimor and contains photographs of deities, relatives, victorious horses, and movie stars.

riddles). Simon Wickham-Smith, who has translated many works from Mongolian into English, mentions the notion of 'containedness' as being crucial to the Mongolian psyche.[35] The notion of the 'container of the universe, the contained universe' (*yertöncii sav*) holds within it the notion of one's one own birthplace, the region from which one hails (*nutag.*)[36] The iconopoeia, in this riddle as in many others, serves an important polyreferential function: it denotes one big bulky, immovable, yet finite object which can stand for at least four different things which have two crucial elements in common: the quality of being enclosed, of containing other things, and of bearing a similar spatial template. The degree of cognitive abstraction a riddle like this entails is considerable and will be an object of further investigation. We can note as well that in the case of iconopoeia, one single signifier can denote many signifieds or referents, which is interesting, given its potential status as a motivated sign. There is a certain effect of a nearly 'infinite polysemy' contained within this riddle-prototype, a sort of 'semantic expansionism,' which certainly could be said to contrast greatly to the vast corpus of riddles in European Indo-European tongues, in which the basic aim is to narrow a potentially wider subset down to a narrower subset, or to a subset of one object.

8. Polyreferentiality and Substitution

Closely related to the presence of 'nearly infinite polysemy' is the principle of substitution that seems inherent to all of these riddles. When discussing them with Luvsandorj, nearly on every occasion he offered substitutions for certain elements in the riddle, effectively creating a new one or a variant (see, for example, the footnote on p. 12). It seemed to create the impression that these riddles were comprised in a nearly 'modular' fashion, with certain elements that could be added or removed in an improvisational manner.[37] Given the predominantly oral character of Mongolian literary expression for literally millennia, this assertion makes perfect sense, but the trope of polyreferentiality also manifests itself in other ways. For example, in the riddle:

хаирт ээжийн минь	[the] black [*sūtra*] cover
Хийж өгсөн	my beloved mother
Хар баринтаг	made [for me]
Хаана ч явсан хамт	went everywhere [with me]
– суудэр[38]	– shadow

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[35] See Wickham-Smith, Simon, *The World in Miniature: The Interrelationship of Humans and Landscape in G. Mend-Ooyo's* Altan Ovoo, PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2012, p. 4.
[36] Ibid.
[37] I owe this term to Robert Mayer and his research into the modular compositional modes of both Talmudic and early Tibetan *Nying ma* texts. Conference, IATS (International Association for Tibetan Studies), Ulaanbaatar, 2013.
[38] Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 2013, p. 33.

the phrase хаирт ээжийн минь, 'my beloved mother,' is an expression which could be substituted with the phrases *burqan* [god, deity], or *baigal* [nature].[39] Possibly the phrase 'my beloved mother' could be seen as a metaphor for 'deity' or 'nature,' but at least according to the formulation of Luvsandorj, these other phrases form equally valid answers to the riddle, or possibly the basis for another riddle. Another important metaphor as well is contained in the riddle: the speaker and his shadow are compared to a *sūtra* and its (black) cover.[40]

9. Synesthetic Perception and Overlapping Categories in Mongolian Riddles

Certain riddles seem to lend themselves to a kind of synesthetic perception: for example, the word ягнаа (see riddle on page 9) led a native speaker to a synesthetic interpretation of the idea of the association of the unrecognizable word in the riddle (*yagnaa*) with the Tibetan loan word *dbyangs*, pronounced 'yang' ('melody, ritual songs and music, incantation'). This then led to an association of the kinds of music and chanting generated during a typical Buddhist ceremony with the quicksilver, hard-to-grasp movements of fish and rabbits, as if these would be a kind of visual embodiment of these sounds (in other words, quick, decentralized movements of sound as embodying the kinds of movements of, for example, a school of fish.)

There occurs in other riddles unusual overlappings of categories that perhaps go beyond the usual 'category confusion' one comes to expect in riddling in any language. For example, in the following riddle:

Дэрэн дээр	On the pillow
Дэншиг	A *denshig* [41]
– сарны тусгал [42]	– Ray of moonlight

something which is eminently silent – a ray of moonlight on a pillow—is associated with a musical instrument, something that makes a sound. the overlapping category here is the shape: a *denshig* is a little circular form (although they can also be larger in size) and it has the colour and reflective qualities of the moon.

10. Riddles with 'Overt' Mythological Reference

Of course many riddles have not experienced so much phonetic alteration and/or distortion that their meaning is now difficult to reconstruct, or have

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[39] Consultation, Luvsandorj, 2013.
[40] Traditionally, *sūtras* are wrapped in sewn fabric square covers, usually made of brightly hued silks.
[41] A *denshig* is a ritual musical instrument used in Buddhist ceremonies. From Tibetan *ting shag*—pronounced 'timsha'—they are small cymbals, made of copper, bronze, or mixed metals.
[42] Г. Ловор, Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 1990, p. 35.

suffered the loss of their ethnographic context. Certain riddles make very clear mythological references. To cite just one example:

Газар дээр	On the ground
Базар эрх	Vajra's rosary
– Могой [43]	– Snake

According to Luvsandorj, this riddle may be very old, as it contains the earlier Uighur-loan appellation for *vajra* (not to mention the important association of the rosary with the mythical *nāga*, or *savdag*.)[44] Generally speaking, it would seem that the oldest or most archaic riddles contain the fewest words.

11. Conclusions: Riddle as a Picture of the Cosmos

In terms of preliminary conclusions, it seems clear that many Mongolian riddles seek to serve a fundamentally different purpose than, for example, riddling as one may experience it in European culture, although the goal of 'outwitting one's interlocutor' may well be present. Linguistic, semantic, and even a kind of phonetic abstraction are highly present qualities. This abstraction lends itself to the purpose of creating an overall 'image of the cosmos' which is in harmony with the traditional Mongolian nomadic perception of the universe with which the nomad must live in harmony. The highly attested frequency of iconopoeia in the two riddle corpuses under examination demands and serves to enhance as well the cognitive processes of ambiguity and abstraction, which in turn are essential for the widening of the potential semantic and referential fields, leading to a conceptual embrace of the cosmic image, presumably on the part of both riddle-teller and auditor.[45] It would appear that, in contrast to most European riddles, which aim to create a movement of subtraction by reducing a greater subset to a lesser subset, the aim inherent in Mongolian riddling is to define a wider set of potential referents (when the riddle is first stated), which, however, while seemingly being narrowed down to smaller subset, actually then widen out again to embrace an entire new set of referents, including possibly the entire cosmos itself.

One riddle scholar writes of the inherent disappointment in learning the solution to a riddle: "We might point, for example, to the common feeling of deflation and disappointment that emerges with the solution to a riddle: What has golden hair and stands in the corner?...When we discover, with more or less equal delight and dismay, that our princess is a broom, we may be left to wonder: Is anything left over from the initial movement of enchantment?"[46]

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[43] Г. Ловор, Ц. Өлзийхутаг, 1990, p. 84.
[44] These are deities of the earth and waters.
[45] Although, in one conversation, I received the following surprising response to a riddle that used the word *tenger*: '*Tenger baihgüi.*' ('There is no tenger.') Interview, Uugan, Khuvsgul, July 2014.
[46] See Hasan-Roken and Shulman, 1996, p. 5.

Perhaps a truly unique feature of many Mongolian riddles is that, with their embrace of an ambiguous, abstract, yet ordered cosmos, more than a residue of enchantment—and sheer wonder—certainly remains.

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