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THESIS DEFENCE: PIRET VOOLAID

ESTONIAN RIDDLES AS A FOLKLORE GENRE IN A CHANGING CULTURAL CONTEXT

Piret Voolaid: *Eesti mõistatused kui pärimusliik muutuvas kultuurikontekstis.* **[Estonian Riddles as a Folklore Genre in a Changing Cultural Context.] Dissertationes folkloristicae Universitatis Tartuensis 16. Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, Tartu 2011. 238pp.**

Piret Voolaid's thesis is composed of an introductory chapter and six articles published earlier on different forums.

In the introduction Voolaid looks at riddles and the research on them from many different points of view and presents several theories that can be used in the study of riddles and, particularly, in the study of the special riddle genres, i.e. conundrums, compound puns, acronyms, droodles, that she herself is interested in. As Voolaid states in the introduction, earlier traditional riddles were considered to be in the centre and the above-mentioned subgenres were considered as peripheral. But now

the situation is vice versa: today conundrums and other subgenres seem to form the central genre of riddles, whereas traditional riddles have become nearly extinct, i.e. only those traditional riddles are known that have been printed, for example, in school-books. Perhaps the complete change in the riddling tradition tells us about the loss of the earlier homogeneous culture, and, naturally, about the important role of the mass media in present-day culture.

Voolaid has presented many different folklore theories in the introductory chapter, which is typical of a doctoral thesis. Sometimes it can also be problematic, if these theories are not used in the analysis. In this case several of them – but not all – have been used in the analysis of riddles, however not very explicitly. This is due to the fact that the introduction has been written after the articles.

The references and the bibliography used are thorough and versatile ranging from Anglo-Saxon to Russian ones. As the thesis involves modern subgenres of riddles, the emphasis in the bibliography is on new sources dealing with the relevant phenomena, and the studies on traditional riddles are not quoted extensively.

The thesis is, in a way, the apology for archives. Archives are often conceived of as a mere stock of data, collected in order to preserve ancient knowledge from fading. The author has herself created the databases for Estonian conundrums, compound puns, acronyms, abbreviation formulae, initial letter puzzles, attention tests, calculation trick questions, puzzles of relatives and droodles. The first article, *Mõistatuste perifeeria digitaalsed andmebaasis aastal 2006. Vahefiniš* [Digital Databases of the Periphery of Riddles in 2006. Interim Finish], gives a good review of these genres and their special features and of the additional information that is given about them in the database. At the same time, the article reflects the difficulties in creating a classification, a typological taxonomy of these less studied genres.

In the article *Mõistatusžanri uuemaid arengusuundi 1992. ja 2007. aasta kooli-pärimuse kogumisvõtluse taustal* [Recent Developments of Riddle Genre on the Basis of 1992 and 2007 School Lore Collections in Estonia], Voolaid tells about the data collec-tion among schoolchildren in the years 1992 and 2007 and of the changes that can be seen in the riddle tradition. The material shows the peripheral position of traditional riddles in modern society. In this article Voolaid clearly shows the socio-cultural aspect of her study; very interesting and true is her observation that the traditional riddles did not indicate the attitude, but rather, attitudes were expressed through joking. Nowadays, on the other hand, humour seems to be the key component in new riddle sub-genres.

Interesting is also the remark about the non-oral transmission of new folklore genres, i.e. they are transmitted not only orally but very often literally through the Internet. This is, of course, known to everybody who is familiar with present-day rid-dles, but it is quite contradictory to most of the earlier definitions of folklore.

The article *Zoofolkloorseid aspekte eesti keerdküsimustes, liitsõnamängudes ja pilt-mõistatustes* [Animal Lore in Estonian Conundrums, Compound Word Games, and Droodles] studies the Estonian conundrums, compound word games (compound rid-dles) and droodles containing some animal name. The amount of such riddles is large, according to Voolaid about one fourth of the Estonian conundrums and nearly one third of the droodles contain animal names. Many of these are based on zoological absurdi-ties. Especially in the case of compound word games the absurdity is based on fixed phrase metaphors, dead metaphors.

In the article *Humorous interpretations of abbreviations as a socio-cultural phenomenon*, Voolaid presents the types of abbreviation riddles and their formation formulae. These are based on humour and therefore she uses humour theories to interpret them. Most of the older examples are connected with different phenomena of the Soviet era. Voolaid adopts the idea of code-mixing for acronyms based on Russian but being interpreted with Estonian words. This seems a linguistically plausible solution.

In the article *Narratiivsed piltmõistatused – mitme folkloorižanri piirinähtus* [Narrative Droodles or Droodle Tales – a Border Case of Riddles and Narratives], Voolaid describes narrative droodles as a combination of riddle + tale + drawing + humour + play, which presuppose an interactive act of communication between the one posing the question and the one answering it. They have also been called pseudo-riddles or quasi-riddles by earlier researchers. Voolaid has tried to analyse this odd genre with relatively different methods than in case of other riddles. I do not find the comparison with Vladimir Propp's or Alan Dundes' theories too fruitful, but the author does not seem to be very happy with them, either.

The last article, *Carrying a wolf, a goat, and a cabbage across the stream. Metamorphoses of ATU 1579*, brings us to the second life of folklore postulated by Lauri Honko. It gives a picture of the narrative being formed into a droodle, and the life of the droodle in different Internet games and websites, i.e. the second life of droodles as computer games. Voolaid sees in this the multi-modality or multi-mediality or creolity of folklore.

Piret Voolaid's thesis offers very interesting insights on less studied subgenres of riddles, which have become very popular during the last four decades, she presents a valid analysis and, at the same time, creates a taxonomy of these subgenres.

Sirkka Saarinen

FRAGMENTS FROM THE CONVENTION OF ETHNOGRAPHERS AND FOLKLORISTS

SIEF CONGRESS IN LISBON, APRIL 17–21, 2011

P103. Uneasy places: shifting research boundaries and displacing selves.
P203. Narrative space in a multicultural city.

The panel on *Uneasy places* aimed at interdisciplinary discussion on the connection on how social action and the places shaped by way of this are mutually interrelated, proceeding from a theoretical standpoint that socially framed places are not shaped merely by the free will of people, and more often than not do not speak of neutral feeling of belonging. Rather, the decisions about the associations of belonging are disputable, as this is to do with a constantly changing process due to social interaction, and can be assessed from several viewpoints at a time, and these assessments may refer to the belonging that has not been strived for, and to a wish to belong together, yet this desire has not been achieved. Research on the spaces with concrete boundaries, and the ac-