

**TILTM 2022****Topical Issues of Linguistics and Teaching Methods in Business and Professional Communication****LINGUACULTURAL ANALYSIS OF FLORA REPRESENTATION  
IN SPANISH, MEXICAN, AND COLOMBIAN RIDDLES**

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**Abstract**

This paper is dedicated to the linguacultural, lexical and semantic analysis of Spanish, Mexican, and Colombian riddles about plants. The study of the linguistic worldview perception and its verbalization associated with flora representation in folklore texts is of particular interest. Phytonyms in riddles carry a great semantic load, help to better understand ethnic priorities. Of particular interest are riddles in which ethno-specific features of the Spanish, Mexican, and Colombian linguistic pictures of the world are manifested. Units of culture are revealed in the texts of riddles, firstly, because they contain linguistic elements that are peculiar only to a certain culture, and due to unique ethno-specific elements directly reflect the features of the corresponding linguistic culture. Secondly, in addition to such a direct reflection, cultural units can be transmitted indirectly in texts, through specific structures, which find their expression in the way of describing hidden phytonyms. The lexical and semantic analysis of riddles about the plant world makes it possible to reconstruct the folklore features of phytonyms and, based on the typology of these features, describe plants that are prototypical for linguistic personalities of different Spanish-speaking countries. The analysis of non-standard language explicants of plants allows not only to determine their most relevant features, but also to generalize the metaphorical or metonymic aspect of transfers.

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## 1. Introduction

Multidirectional trends of modern Spanish studies are combined with the status of Spanish language national variants as not only linguistic, but also cultural and ideological entities (Chesnokova, 2020, p. 9; Malyuga et al., 2019). Cultural and linguistic aspects of territories development are topical problems of modern interdisciplinary research in Romance Philology (Zagryazkina, 2019, p. 10).

The folklore identity of Spanish-speaking peoples is an interesting and in-demand topic in modern interdisciplinary humanitarian knowledge, as respect for traditional regional diversity is relevant along with the desire to form a single Pan-Spanish identity (Raevskaya, 2019, p. 109-110).

The riddle occupies a special place in the ethnic community folklore identity and in the system of folklore genres. The riddle reflects ideological, religious, mythological and other ideas of people that form part of the folklore picture of the world, which is an important part of the conceptual picture of the ethnos (Chesnokova & Talavera, 2018; Chesnokova & Usmanov, 2022; Chesnokova et al., 2020; Emer, 2011; Khrolenko, 2010; Martynenko & Chesnokova, 2022; Selivanova, 2010). At the same time, due to semantic depth of poetic word and compactness of the verse, the riddle actively influences the reader, generates a special type of poetic dialogue and discourse, and creates the folklore identity of an ethnic community, which is very significant for the pluricentric Spanish language.

## 2. Problem Statement

This article discusses peculiarities of flora representation in Spanish, Mexican, and Colombian riddles, analyses their cognitive parameters and linguosemiotics. The objects of research are Spanish, Mexican, and Colombian riddles about plants, and the subjects of analysis are their lexical and semantic features. The materials of the article were riddles, extracted by continuous sampling from specialized collections, periodicals, websites, as well as samples of riddles given by 30 native speakers of the Spanish language (Castilian, Mexican, and Colombian national variants).

The study is meant to

- analyse the folklore worldview as a specific phenomenon resulting to be the most striking manifestation of ethnic specificity in language and culture;
- carry out a comprehensive linguistic and cultural analysis of riddles about plants in Castilian, Mexican, and Colombian national variants of the Spanish language.

## 3. Research Questions

Thematic of traditional and modern riddles reflects the folklore picture of the world relevant for an ethnic community. One of the riddles characteristic features is the ability to capture the content topical for the modern folklore consciousness in a traditional form. Spanish, Mexican, and Colombian riddles about plants reflect the folklore pictures of the world of the Spaniards, Mexicans, and Colombians respectively.

Despite the mutual influence of Spanish-speaking cultures, nationally marked and culturally bound vocabulary is found in Spanish, Mexican, and Colombian riddles. It demonstrates national differences in

linguistic pictures of the world of the inhabitants of these cultures (Malyuga & Tomalin, 2017; Malyuga & Yermishina, 2021).

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the study is to identify linguocultural, structural and semantic features of Spanish, Mexican, and Colombian riddles about plants and to compare them.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The study used a comprehensive methodological approach. The description of the content features of the texts is carried out using the interpretive method.

Methods and techniques of linguistic analysis (structural and philological analysis, semantic, contextual analysis) are used to identify the specifics of the linguistic implementation of the riddle genre. In order to reconstruct the discursive picture of the world of the Spanish, Mexicans, and Colombians a linguo-cognitive method has been used.

#### **6. Findings**

The term of linguistic worldview is of high relevance and importance in modern linguaculturology. According to V. Telia, the linguistic worldview is an inevitable product of consciousness, mental, and linguistic activity, which arises as a result of thinking, reality and language as a means of expression in acts of communication synergy (Telia, 1988, p. 189).

We should keep in mind that riddles represent a relevant part of folklore, and their unique ability is to reflect ludically the culture that has created them. Like any anonymous folk text, they allow more than one option for interpretation. Folk wisdom can be seen through folk riddles: they can be considered a part of the first didactic system that ever existed in the world: the system of questions and answers.

Riddles can show us unique facets of described phenomena, the ones a person could not even think about, and turn everyday life into poetry.

Most riddles describe human body, household items, clothing, musical instruments, plants and animals that surround people, natural phenomena. All of them make up traditional world of any culture.

Riddles about plants constitute one of the most extensive themes in traditional and modern Spanish, Mexican, and Colombian cultures. Images of agriculture have the deepest connection with archaic motifs.

##### **6.1. The concept of a phytonym in paremiology**

This paragraph is aimed at examining scientific studies of phytonyms in linguistics, linguoculturology and linguo-folkloristics. Lexical units nominating plants fix and reflect the process of different flora nomination in cultures.

One of the main problems associated with the history of phytonymic vocabulary study is defining the semantic scope of the concept of phytonym, since there is no generally accepted interpretation of the term in linguistics, despite its active use since 1970s.

The meaning of the term has been studied in detail by U. Dyachenko. The author points out that the first attempts to interpret the term were made in separate articles mostly defining a phytonym as a Proper Noun (Dyachenko, 2010, pp. 11-12), i.e. phytonymy was considered as a special section of onomastics, a linguistic science that deals with a comprehensive study of proper names (Bondaletov, 1983, p. 7).

Bobrova (1974) defines the phytonym as a terminological name of all the plants (p. 73-79).

In 1990s a broad understanding of this lexical unit was fixed by lexicographic practice of etymological dictionaries, where the phytonym is presented as a name of any plant (dandelion, pine tree).

Phytonyms are defined in our article as units of folk botanical nomenclature and are opposed to scientific plants designations.

An attempt to reconstruct the linguistic picture of the world from riddles is based on an extensive textual material, which includes both riddles related to the mytho-epic picture of the world and riddles that reflect modern ideas or correspond to the modern picture of the world. The total corpus of analyzed examples was more than 1003 Spanish, Mexican, and Colombian riddles about plants (454 of them are Spanish riddles, 330 Mexican riddles, and 219 Colombian riddles).

The theme has been selected due to the fact that the nature surrounding people, plants and animals, are among the basic concepts that determine human consciousness and life experience and are the key folklore categories that reinforce the folk life foundations. In addition, phytonyms are included in the so-called main vocabulary, which slightly changes over time and therefore reflects the most ancient vocabulary layer.

The analysed examples show us that the texts of riddles give a fairly full picture of the terrains, floras, ways of life of the cultures under study. Moreover, most Spanish, Mexican, and Colombian riddles demonstrate the rural lifestyle, since riddles, as a folk genre, reflect, in the first term, the historical reality and folk life.

An active functioning of phytonyms in the folklore discourse indicates the need for their internal classification and ordering of lexical units, which are organized into the flora semantic field.

There are various types of biological and linguistic typologies of phytonyms. We suggest to distinguish the following lexico-semantic groups of phytonyms represented in Spanish, Mexican, and Colombian riddles:

1. collective concepts (tree, flower, grass) and names of plant parts (root, stem, branches)
2. trees and shrubs,
3. fruits, berries, and nuts
4. root crops, vegetables
5. cereals, legumes
6. flowers and herbs.

It is also worth mentioning that the boundaries between the identified groups and subgroups are mobile, since there is no consensus on the taxonomy of plants, both in botanical and linguistic studies.

## 6.2. Spanish riddles about plants

Riddles about plants are common for the Castilian national variant of Spanish. We have found 454 Spanish riddles about phytonyms.

The analysis of phytonyms showed that the share of various classes of plants is not equal in riddles.

Most of the riddles (135, or 29.8%) are about fruits, berries, and nuts. The most common of them are riddles about grapes, olives, citrus fruits.

26 riddles are dedicated to grapes, vineyard, and vine, which is not, since vineyards occupy more than a million hectares of Spain.

Most of Spanish riddles about grapes describe the process of wine making

Soy redonda como el mundo,	I'm round like the Earth
al morir me despedazan,	when I die they tear me to pieces,
me reduced a pellejo,	peel my skin off,
y todo el jugo me sacan.	take all the juice out of me.
(la uva)	(grape)

(Fernández & Gárfer, 1989, p. 46)

Riddles about olives are numerous and interesting. Spain is the world leader in olive oil production. It is believed that the first olive was planted by the Phoenicians there in 800 B.C. There are about 260 varieties of olive trees grown in Spain.

De verde me volví negra	I have just become black.
y me molieron con tino,	If you take me in the palm of your hand
hasta que al final del todo,	And squeeze your fingers smoothly,
de mi hicieron oro fino.	You'll find a drop of gold.
(la aceituna)	(olive)

(Fernández & Gárfer, 1989, p. 86)

24% of Spanish floristic riddles are riddles about root crops and vegetables.

The most numerous of them are riddles about an onion (la cebolla). Spain is the birthplace of all salad onions. Onions here are consumed raw, in salads, fried or grilled. It is used as a base for sauces along with garlic and tomatoes. The Spanish riddles emphasize its many layers, as well as its ability to make people cry.

Vive bajo tierra,	He lives underground,
muere en la sartén,	he dies in the frying pan,
sus diez camisas	his ten little shirts
llorando se ven.	make the people cry.
(la cebolla)	(onion)

(Fernández & Gárfer, 1989, p. 53)

98 Spanish riddles from our samples are about herbs and flowers. This group is very diverse in composition: we found riddles about an ivy, a poppy, a chamomile, a rose, a wormwood, a sunflower. The most numerous in this group are riddles about cotton, tea, and tobacco.

Verde fue mi nacimiento	Green was my birth
y amarillo fue mi abril;	and yellow was my April;
tuve que ponerme blanco	I had to turn white
para poderte servir.	to be able to serve you.
(el algodón)	(cotton)

(Fernández & Gárfer, 1989, p. 66)

The least numerous category among the Spanish riddles about plants turned out to be riddles about trees and shrubs. We found a total of 38 riddles belonging to this group, and most of them are riddles about fruit trees: apple, pear, orange tree.

The quantitative statistics of the plants categories in Spanish riddles are presented in the Table 1.

**Table 1.** Quantitative analysis of riddles about plants in the Castilian national variant of the Spanish language

Phytonym category	Number of riddles	%
collective concepts and names of plant parts	38	8.3
trees and shrubs	28	6.1
fruits, berries, and nuts	135	29.8
root crops, vegetables	109	24
cereals, legumes	46	10.2
flowers and herbs	98	21.6

### 6.3. Mexican riddles about plants

Most (31.8%) of Mexican riddles about plants are riddles about fruits, berries, and nuts; they are followed by riddles about root crops and vegetables (26.4%). Riddles about flowers and herbs make up 14.2% of Mexican plant riddles. The least numerous categories among the Mexican riddles about plants are riddles about trees and shrubs (5.1%), collective concepts and names of plant parts (7.9%). It is indicative that riddles about cereals and legumes make up a significant proportion (14.6%) of Mexican riddles. This is explained by the fact that cereals, in particular corn (maíz), has been grown in Mexico for centuries, and form the basis of rural life and of Mesoamerican Culture.

The statistics of the plants categories in Mexican riddles is presented in the Table 2:

**Table 2.** Quantitative analysis of riddles about plants in the Mexican national variant of the Spanish language

Phytonym category	Number of riddles	%
collective concepts and names of plant parts	26	7.9
trees and shrubs	17	5.1
fruits, berries, and nuts	105	31.8
root crops, vegetables	87	26.4
cereals, legumes	48	14.6
flowers and herbs	47	14.2

Mexican riddles about corn are numerous and varied. They describe its value and its characteristic features.

Blanco salí de mi casa	White I left my house
en el campo me enverdecí,	in the field I grew green,
espero ponerme blanco	I hope to turn white
para regresar como salí.	to return as I left.

(el maíz)

(corn)

(Salgado, 1988, p. 48)

Many vegetables and fruits, such as potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, pineapples, come from Latin America.

From the Nahuatl language, Spanish borrowed the name avocado (aguacate) (Diccionario de americanismos, 2010, p.54): the Aztecs called it ahuacatl ("forest oil"). Mexico, the country that ranks first in the world in collecting avocados, has lots of riddles about it:

Agua pasa por mi casa,	Water runs through my house
cate por mi corazón.	fall for my heart
El que no lo adivinara,	Whoever doesn't guess it
será un burro cabezón.	will be a big-headed donkey.

(el aguacate)

(avocado)

(Salgado, 1988, p. 76)

This riddle uses a wordplay: at the beginning of the first and second paragraphs, the lexemes "agua" and "cate" when put together give the answer "aguacate".

The number of riddles about hot chilli, which is also a Nahuatl borrowing (Diccionario de americanismos, 2010, p. 523) is indicative. It was Mexico that was the birthplace of chili. The lexeme chile has a high phraseological potential in the Mexican national Spanish (Chesnokova, 2020, p. 122-125).

Chili pepper in Mexican riddles is compared to a bird that can peck painfully:

Un pajarito	A little bird
pasó por el mar,	Went through the sea
sin pico y sin nada	And without a beak
me vino a picar.	She pecked me.

(el chile)

(chili pepper)

(Salgado, 1988, p. 32)

A significant layer of Mexican riddles about phytonyms are riddles with an Indian loan component, demonstrating the national and cultural specificity and rich flora of Mexico.

En casa de Chi,	At Chi's house
mataron a Ri,	They killed Ri
vino Mo	came Mo
y dijo Ya.	and said yeah.

(la chirimoya)

(custard apple or 'chirimoya')

(Salgado, 1988, p. 76)

It is important to mention that the lexeme *chirimoya* has a myriad uses in Latin American Spanish on the whole (Diccionario de americanismos, 2010, p. 546).

#### 6.4. Colombian riddles about plants

Colombian riddles were taken from traditional collections such as *Adivinanzas de tradición oral en Nariño* (Colombia) (Beutler, 1961), *Adivinanzas de tradición oral en Antioquia* (Colombia) (Beutler, 1963a), *Adivinanzas de tradición oral en norte de Santander* (Colombia) (Beutler, 1963b), and *Ábrete grano pequeño* (Benavides, 2016).

During the research we have found a total of 219 Colombian riddles about plants. Same as with the Mexican riddles, most of the analyzed Colombian riddles about plants are riddles about fruits, berries, and nuts (42.2%); similarly, they are followed by riddles about root crops and vegetables (31.7%). Riddles about trees and shrubs make up 14.2% of Colombian plant ridd(les. The least numerous category among the Colombian riddles about plants are riddles about flowers and herbs (7.3%), cereal and legumes (3.7%), and collective concepts and names of plant parts (0.9%) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Quantitative analysis of riddles about plants in the Colombian national variant of the Spanish language

Phytonym category	Number of riddles	%
collective concepts and names of plant parts	3	0.9
trees and shrubs	31	14.2
fruits, berries, and nuts	92	42.2
root crops, vegetables	69	31.7
cereals, legumes	8	3.7
flowers and herbs	16	7.3

Among the most frequent Colombian riddles about plants are riddles about avocado (21), banana (16 “plátano” and 6 “banana” riddles), and pineapple (17).

The following riddle uses a wordplay.

Algo por nombre,	The name is Algo,
don por apellido,	The surname is Don
(el algodón)	(cotton).

(Beutler, 1963a, p. 111).

In this riddle about cotton the right answer (“algodón”) can be found in the name and surname of the object in question.

Siempre de mí dicen algo,	Although I’m very humble,
aunque muy humilde soy;	They always tell me something.
no soy señor y me honran	Although I’m not a Sir,
con la nobleza del don	They call me the noble “Don”
(el algodón)	(cotton).



(Beutler, 1963a, p. 111).

The next riddle about cotton is of particular interest given the history of Latin America:

Un caballero	A gentleman from Spain
que viene de España	In a vest and pants.
de chaleco y pantalón;	First, they tell him something,
primero le dicen algo,	Then they call him Don
y después le dicen don	(cotton).
(el algodón)	

(Beutler, 1963b, p. 414).

As in the case with the Mexican riddles about avocado, Colombian riddles about this fruit also have the “agua” and “cate” (or “acate”) parts in the texts which helps us to find the right answer:

En el agua nací yo,	I was born in the water,
del agua me sacaron,	Which they took me out of,
y acate como me llamo	And my name is Cate
(el aguacate)	(avocado).

(Beutler, 1963a, p. 111).

Oro no es,	It is not gold,
plata no es;	Nor is it silver.
el que no lo adivine	One who doesn't know the answer
muy pendejo es.	Is very stupid.
(el plátano)	(plantain or banana).

(Beutler, 1963b, p. 417).

Es alta,	It is tall,
y no es torre;	But not a tower.
es misa,	It is a mass
y no se oye.	That we can't hear.
(la altamisa)	(altamisa herb).

(Beutler, 1963b, p. 415).

We find interesting the use of death-related metaphors in the riddles about fruits which shows the whole process of fruit development (growth, maturation, senescence, and decay).

Verde fue mi nacimiento;	My birth was green,
colorado, mi vivir;	My life was colourful.
y de luto me vistieron,	I came to die

cuando ya vine a morir.  
(la mora)  
(Beutler, 1963b, p. 416).

Dressed in mourning.  
(blackberry).

Verde fue mi nacimiento;  
amarillo, mi vivir;  
me fui poniendo negrito,  
cuando me quise morir  
(el plátano)  
(Beutler, 1963a, p. 116).

My birth was green,  
My life was yellow.  
I began turning black  
When decided to die  
(plantain or banana).

Vengo de muy lejos,  
preso y atado,  
y me tienen anunciado  
que voy a morir quemado  
(el tabaco)  
(Beutler, 1961, p. 422).

I've come a long way  
As stranded prisoner.  
And they say  
I will die burning  
(tobacco).

The following riddles about a fruit called “guama” (Diccionario de americanismos, 2010, p. 1075) use multiple metaphors related to death and funeral:

Ataúd verde,  
mortaja blanca,  
y el alma negra  
(Beutler, 1963a, p. 114).

The coffin is green,  
The shroud is white,  
And the soul is black.

La caja es verde,  
el muerto es negro,  
la sábana blanca.  
(Beutler, 1963a, p. 114).

The coffin is green,  
The deceased is black,  
And the sheets are white.

Ataúd café,  
mostaza blanca,  
y alma negra.  
(Beutler, 1963a, p. 114).

The coffin is of coffee colour,  
The mustard is white,  
And the soul is black.

The last riddle comes from the Department of Antioquia (one of the main coffee-producing departments) and therefore uses a coffee metaphor.

But not all riddles about plants are this sinister. In Horacio Benavides' riddle book for kids, we have found an entertaining riddle about trees.

El ser por el que indago  
tiene dos copas a la vez  
La una bebe del cielo  
la otra de la tierra dura  
que es un cielo al revés  
(el árbol)  
(Benavides, 2016).

The thing I'm asking about  
Has two cups.  
The first one drinks from the sky,  
And the other one from the ground,  
Which is the opposite of the sky  
(tree).

## 7. Conclusion

The analyzed corpus of examples shows that the texts of riddles give a special ludic picture of the terrain, flora and fauna, way of life.

Notable differences between Castilian, Mexican, and Colombian national variants of the Spanish language are clearly manifested in what is of great importance in each of the cultures.

There are lots of Spanish riddles about olives (la aceituna), grapes (la uva), onions (la cebolla), garlic (el ajo), oranges (la naranja), Mexican riddles are mostly about corn (el maíz), chili peppers (el chile or ají), beans (frijoles), avocados (el aguacate), tomatoes (el jitomate and el tomate), and Colombian riddles are mostly about avocados (el aguacate), banana (el plátano/la banana), pineapple (la piña), blackberry (la mora), orange (la naranja). A significant role in what exactly finds the central (or, conversely, peripheral) reflection in riddles belongs to geographical and climatic features of the ethnic group habitat. Thus, high-frequency use in Mexican riddles of the phytonyms maíz 'corn', chile 'chilli pepper', aguacate 'avocado' is not characteristic for Castilian national variant of Spanish, and vice versa, the use of phytonyms aceituna 'olive', uva 'grape' in Mexican riddles is much less common than in Spanish ones. Mexican riddles are also characterized by the use of Indian loan words, in particular, Nahuatlisms, borrowings from the Nahuatl language, such as the phytonyms jitomate, ají, cacahuate, guayaba. A distinctive feature of some Spanish riddles is also the presence of biblical stories, while Mexican riddles often refer to autochthonous Indian legends, and Colombian ones, mostly to popular folk tradition. Riddles and folkloric commentaries in teaching Spanish enrich the understanding of the humorous discourse, metaphorical and metonymical processes, aesthetics of national worldview, and can become an effective tool contributing to the development of students' intellectual activity and professional skills.

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