

Linguistic Ambiguity and Indigenous Cognition in Iban *Entelah*: A Structural, Cognitive, and Pragmatic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the structure, cognitive processes, and pragmatic strategies that shape ambiguity in entelah, the traditional Iban riddle genre. Although Iban riddles are rich in cultural knowledge and poetic language, previous research has often analysed them through Western frameworks, which do not fully reflect indigenous perspectives. To address this gap, the study investigates the structural terminology unique to entelah and explores how riddle givers use linguistic ambiguity to conceal meaning and guide interpretation. The research draws on mixed methods, combining ethnographic fieldwork in Saratok with a corpus-based linguistic analysis of 338 riddles, consisting entries from Entelah (Tun Jugah Foundation, 2019). The analysis identifies how Iban riddle givers employ devices such as ulu lungga (hint) (phonological clues), menua lama and menua baru (metaphorical imagery), lexical ambiguity, and culturally grounded cognitive categories to construct riddles that challenge solvers and transmit world knowledge. Findings show that ambiguity in entelah arises from both linguistic and cultural processes, including violations of salience, shifts in accessibility hierarchy, parallelism, and the use of deep and shallow Iban registers. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of Iban verbal art by demonstrating that riddling is a sophisticated linguistic act embedded in cultural cognition, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and poetic performance traditions.

Keywords: Entelah; ambiguity; cognition; structure; pragmatic.

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INTRODUCTION

The Iban, historically known as the Sea Dayaks of Borneo and once renowned for their headhunting practices, have in recent generations become more settled in their longhouse communities. Contemporary Iban society is characterised by concerns such as land rights, rice

cultivation, traditional weaving, the preservation of heirloom collections, and the continuation of ritual practices. Their deep engagement with land conservation and environmental stewardship is frequently reflected in *entelah*, which often feature plants, animals, and human actions and inactions as central motifs.

Entelah, the traditional Iban riddle, is a distinctive oral genre that combines poetic language, cultural symbolism, and playful ambiguity. Far more than a simple question-and-answer activity, *entelah* functions as a medium for transmitting environmental knowledge, moral values, and worldviews across generations. Iban riddles draw heavily on *jaku kelaung* (concealed language), where imagery and metaphor are deliberately crafted to obscure meaning and challenge the solver (Sather, 2016). Their structure typically consists of a riddle statement (*saur*), a phonological clue (*ulu lungga*), and an answer (*lalai*), forming a communicative act rooted in both linguistic artistry and social interaction (Osip, 2006). Earlier studies also highlight the importance of indigenous interpretive frameworks, as many Iban riddles rely on cultural categories and cosmological concepts that differ from Western definitions of “true riddles” (Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 2017; Pepicello & Green, 1984). As a result, *entelah* offers valuable insight into Iban cognition, aesthetics, and communal knowledge-making, making it a significant component of their oral heritage.

The analysis of folk riddles is commonly grounded in two key frameworks: a cultural framework and a linguistic framework. The cultural framework provides the context for studying manipulative language, often deemed different from other existing forms of social interaction, whilst the linguistic framework helps govern how information is conveyed. Both processes appear fairly straightforward, but appearances can be deceiving. Riddling is unlike other forms of social interaction where clear expression of ideas is expected; it involves processes whereby the riddle giver purposefully conceals information from the riddle solver, with the aim of outwitting one another (Pepicello & Green, 1984). This concealment is understood differently by cultures worldwide (e.g. as fun, wit, wisdom, or intergenerational knowledge transmission). Moreover, many languages and cultures perceive riddles in ways that diverge significantly from Western conceptualisations (e.g. jest, gag, banter, prank, pun, and wordplay) (Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 2017). Furthermore, the conventional definition of a “true riddle” as comprising a two-part structure—namely a “question/image” and an “answer”—does not always hold across cultures (as will be demonstrated in relation to Iban). Consequently, by framing riddle structures and knowledge using non-emic (e.g. Eurocentric) analytical categories, researchers risk overlooking opportunities to represent indigenous conceptualisations of world knowledge on their own terms. As Goddard (2002) notes in his study of Malay in Southeast Asia, “indigenous terms and their cultures can disclose a world of meaning if they are subjected to soundly based semantic and linguistic scrutiny” (p. 114). This perspective highlights the importance of interpreting indigenous verbal forms through analytical lenses that respect local epistemologies rather than imposing external conceptual categories.

At present, gaining an insider understanding of a language’s pragmatics requires careful attention to cross-linguistic lexical meanings and how semantic priming shapes interpretation (Goddard, 2002). This approach is essential for understanding indigenous riddle cultures and their accompanying knowledge systems. However, this is not a straightforward endeavour given the considerable variation in riddle genres, registers, and functional categories found in Borneo, particularly in Sarawak. As anthropologist Harrisson (1965) noted, “Borneo material, even when

distinctive and locally specialised, cannot be treated in isolation” (p. 3). He explained that understanding cultural patterns requires consideration of local beliefs, the movements and interactions of other ethnic groups, and the surrounding environment. The Iban people of Sarawak possess a rich riddle tradition in which written and oral riddle-poems exist as “texts” in archives, publications, and personal collections. However, in practice, riddles are performed orally and improvised during communal events. The Iban riddling language (*jaku kelaung*) belongs to a specific speech genre used in rituals and is deeply connected to Iban worldviews. One prominent example is the Iban idea of “upside-downness,” which is central to their theology. This idea is not based on written tradition but is closely connected to how the community understands life and the stage that completes, rather than ends, death. Similarly, the visual and verbal mental images of the Iban universe are characterised by profound divisions (Harrisson, 1965; Ganing & Amat, 2017), and this imagery recurs throughout their epic narratives and riddles.

The Iban do not classify riddles as part of their formal rituals, yet they often use symbols and references connected to upper-world spirits in their riddling practices, as these are believed to bring material benefits to listeners (Sather, 2017). In this context, material benefit refers to how a community understands and relates to its environment. Weiner (1997) explains that the world knowledge embedded in folk riddles can shape a culture’s cognitive categories and belief systems, making such knowledge important to the linguistic framework, especially because of its links to the grammar of the language. Riddle givers also create new metaphors to hide meaning, challenge the audience, and make the riddle more engaging by using words and phrases that resemble other existing expressions.

Despite the cultural and linguistic richness of Iban riddles, there remains a significant gap in the literature concerning how *entelah* structures reflect indigenous cognitive and pragmatic strategies. Existing riddle scholarship has predominantly applied Western analytical frameworks, which may inadequately capture the emic perspectives of non-Western riddling traditions. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to how Iban riddlers manipulate linguistic ambiguity and cultural resources to encode world knowledge. To address these gaps, this study aims to: (1) introduce and analyse the structural terminologies specific to Iban *entelah*; and (2) explore the cognitive and pragmatic mechanisms underlying language ambiguity in Iban riddles; The paper will begin by clarifying key terminologies related to *entelah* structure. Among the Iban, riddles known as *entelah* are either “given” to children or presented before mixed audiences by riddle givers in the form of simple riddles and formulaic riddles. Following this, the study will examine various cognitive and pragmatic strategies for interpreting linguistic ambiguity in Iban, thereby contributing to a more culturally grounded understanding of this understudied riddling tradition.

METHOD AND APPROACHES

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining ethnographic fieldwork with corpus-based linguistic analysis to examine the structural, cognitive, and pragmatic features of the *entelah*. The research design was informed by linguistic anthropology and cognitive linguistics, allowing for both qualitative interpretation of cultural practices and systematic analysis of linguistic patterns. This approach enabled the researchers to capture the dynamic nature of *entelah* as a living performance tradition whilst also identifying recurring structural and semantic features within the corpus.

Fieldwork was conducted in Saratok, Sarawak. This location was chosen because it is home to a recognised riddle expert cum informant and a community that actively maintains traditional Iban cultural practices, including riddling traditions. The study also utilised a corpus of 335 Iban riddles compiled in *Entelah* (Tun Jugah Foundation, 2019) a community-authored collection that represents both archival materials and contemporary riddles gathered from various Iban-speaking regions. This corpus provided a complementary dataset for structural and semantic analysis, allowing for comparison between recorded performances and documented textual forms. Each riddle entry in the corpus includes the riddle, its *ulu lunga* (*hint*) (clue), the answer, and contextual annotations where available.

Prior to commencing fieldwork, formal permission was obtained from the riddle expert following Iban protocols for engaging with traditional communities. The research objectives, methods, and expected outcomes were explained in Iban during initial community meetings, and informed consent was secured from the participant. All interviews and performance sessions were conducted in the Iban language by the lead researcher, who is proficient in Iban and familiar with local cultural norms. Audio and video recordings were transcribed and translated into English by the research team, with back-translation checks performed by native Iban speakers to ensure accuracy. Field notes were expanded and organised thematically on a daily basis during fieldwork.

The corpus of 335 riddles, supplemented by newly collected riddles from the fieldwork (totalling 338 riddles), was subjected to structural analysis to identify recurring patterns in riddle composition. This included categorisation of riddle types, examination of question-answer formats, and identification of formulaic expressions. Structural features such as syntactic parallelism, metaphorical mappings, and phonological play (e.g. homophony, alliteration) were systematically coded. Drawing on Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) principles (Goddard, 2002) and cognitive metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the study analysed how world knowledge is encoded in *entelah*. This involved identifying conceptual domains, metaphorical entailments, and culture-specific semantic primes embedded in riddle language. Particular attention was paid to indigenous concepts such as cosmological divisions that shape Iban cognitive categories. Ethnographic data were analysed to explore the pragmatic functions of *entelah* in social interaction, including strategies for concealment, audience engagement, improvisation, and the negotiation of cultural knowledge. Thematic coding was employed to identify patterns in how riddle givers manipulate linguistic ambiguity and how solvers navigate interpretive challenges.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents an analysis of the structural terminologies specific to Iban *entelah* and the cognitive and pragmatic mechanisms underlying language ambiguity within these riddles. Examples drawn from the corpus and informants are referenced using the notation “R” followed by a number (e.g., R1). Riddles labelled R1, R2, and R12 are from the informants, meanwhile the rest are from *Entelah* (Tun Jugah Foundation, 2019).

The Structural Terminologies

The term *entelah* (riddle) derives from the root word *telah* (to utter) and refers to an utterance or sequence of image representations. This etymological foundation provides a methodological entry point for analysing riddling as a communicative act. According to Ganing and Amat (2017), the

distinctiveness of Iban *entelah* lies in its structure, symbolic repertoire, and disguised meanings that conceal the *lalai* (answer). Sather (2016), on the other hand, sees this uniqueness in the poetic register known as *enteli main* (words of play), the formal structure of riddles, and the interpretative effort required to decode their meanings. Riddle givers generally employ rhythm, compositional patterns, and end rhymes to emulate naturally occurring prose whilst simultaneously departing from ordinary discourse. Central to this distinctive discourse are the concepts of *jaku dalam* (deep speech) and *jaku mabu* (shallow speech). Competent riddle givers often vary the depth of their riddles by shifting fluidly between these levels of language. Poet-bards (*lemambang*), given their extensive knowledge of Iban theology and cosmology, tend to be particularly adept at bridging movements between visible and invisible realms, thereby creating deeper layers of meaning. This ability enhances their reputation and results in poet-bards being sought after for presenting riddles during public performances and ceremonial occasions.

There are at least two principal contexts through which riddle knowledge is transmitted: the personal (familial) sphere and the public (communal) sphere. Within longhouse communities, parents and extended families invest in their children’s future well-being by sharing food, labour, and—crucially—knowledge with family and kin. Given the high value placed on resource accumulation, which encompasses the accumulated knowledge and experience of countless generations and takes considerable time to develop, skills such as environmental literacy and linguistic competence are greatly esteemed. In this context, parents typically allow grandparents or other respected adults to share stories and riddles with the young. The riddles presented to children are known as *entelah anembiak* (children’s riddles or elementary riddles). These riddles are brief and deliberately incorporate ambiguous word meanings, designed to help children notice, recognise, and categorise objects and phenomena in their environment. Importantly, the language and imagery employed in *entelah anembiak* are rarely considered “too deep” (*dalam*) for children; rather, they are calibrated to match children’s developmental and cognitive capacities whilst still encouraging interpretative engagement. The following examples of *entelah anembiak*, shared by the informant during fieldwork, illustrate these characteristics:

No.	Iban	English
R1	Tekura niki dinding Ulu lungga: <u>Ku</u> li Lalai: <u>Ka</u> li	Tortoise climbs the wall Answer: Wok
R2	Apai Jebu, apai Jebai, Nadai jari tau bepegai dikerigai tingkah batu, Apai jebu, apai jebi, Tegar bejalai nadai kaki, Bekerinci atas raung. Ulu lungga: <u>Jag</u> ar Lalai: <u>Ula</u> r	Jebu’s father, Jebai’s father, No hand can hold stone boulders, Jebu’s father, Jebi’s father, Can walk fast without legs, Stands on dried grass. Answer: Snake

According to Osup (2006), riddle givers also provide a clue known as the *ulu lungga* (hint) to reveal a phonological match between the riddle image and the answer. The *ulu lungga* can be any word with a similar end sound that matches the final sound of the answer. For instance, in R1, the

sound 'li' matches with *kuali* (wok). R2 bears a superficial resemblance to the Malay *pantun teka-teki* (poetic riddle), but the similarity largely ends there. Unlike the *pantun*, which is a fixed text reproduced from memory, the *entelah* is composed during performance or reassembled using pre-existing phrases and formulae drawn from ritual language (*jaku adat*). Consequently, no two performances of an *entelah* are exactly alike. Whilst the *entelah* can entertain in a manner reminiscent of English nursery rhymes (e.g. Humpty Dumpty), in practice, riddles such as R2 may serve pedagogical functions—for example, warning children about dangerous snakes that rear upright, such as cobras. R2 exemplifies a recurring formula emblematic of oral poets worldwide, wherein vivid imagery is employed to introduce the rich landscape, its abundant resources, and the dangers lurking nearby, utilising literary devices such as personification, hyperbole, and metaphor.

Most riddles are characterised by a two-part structure: the riddle question or image “offered” by the riddle-teller and the response provided by the riddle solver. Conventionally, scholars presuppose that the riddle question and answer jointly form a single cohesive unit (Dienhart, 1998; Pepicello & Green, 1984). Riddling, as a reciprocal communicative act, involves both the riddler (riddle giver) and the riddlee (audience or riddle solver). In Sarawak, *entelah* exists as a hybrid genre—part riddle, part poem—and is often “given” to young children by older relatives as part of personal culture or as a vehicle for intergenerational knowledge transmission. When presented to children, an answer is typically expected, as the purpose is to test wit and foster cognitive development. However, when performed in ceremonial or public contexts, *entelah* is regarded primarily as a means of transmitting intergenerational wisdom, environmental knowledge, and life skills; in such settings, an explicit answer is not mandatory, and interpretative engagement is valued over definitive resolution.

The riddling language, *jaku kelaung* (literally, “masked” or “concealed” language), is particularly significant in this regard. Ritual specialists and poet-bards invest considerable time and effort in crafting poetic riddles that employ *jaku kelaung*, drawing upon both *jaku dalam* (deep speech) and *jaku mabu* (shallow speech). This linguistic dexterity is accorded high prestige, particularly during the *leka main* ritual, where the ability to manipulate different registers of Iban is publicly celebrated (Sather, 2017). Poet-bards, as ritual professionals, characteristically employ allusive or obscure language to confuse, mystify, and impress their audiences—a hallmark of their craft. Consequently, ambiguity exists not only within the “question/image” component but also in the constituent parts that structure the riddle image (e.g. *ulu lungga* and *menua*), as well as in the lexical and phonological choices that render the riddle poetic.

Crucially, the cultural strategy underpinning riddling is to incorporate ambiguity seamlessly into the riddle structure without being excessively explicit about how or where that ambiguity operates. These inherent contradictions are not only expected but are accepted as an essential aspect of communicative competence within Iban culture. By investigating the ambiguity of *entelah* in terms of both cultural and linguistic acts, researchers can better comprehend how traditional communities conceptualise and deploy ambiguity, and how such practices remain culturally relevant in contemporary contexts.

A simple *entelah* typically takes the form of a short declarative statement (as in R3) or an imperative verb paired with an observation (as in R4).

No.	Iban	English
R3	Antu bekedumu dalam tanah Ulu lungga: Pah babi Lalai: Buah Ubi	Spirit waiting in soil Answer: Tapioca
R4	Patahka jari, patahka kaki, lalu simpan dalam sentubung Ulu lungga: Main mana Lalai: Cheremin mata	Break a leg, break a hand, store in coffin Answer: Spectacle

The term “riddle question,” however, can be misleading, as the *entelah* is “given” rather than asked in the form of a syntactic question. Whilst there are instances where the *entelah* takes the form of an interrogative statement—particularly during the initial composition or reassembly of riddle phrases—this is not the dominant structural pattern. This is illustrated in R3: “What is waiting in the soil?” or “What is the spirit waiting in the soil?” To an outsider unfamiliar with Iban cosmology and linguistic conventions, both the language structure and cultural representations embedded in such riddles can appear confusing, particularly when they invoke concepts such as “waiting spirits” or “coffins as storage containers.” However, these analogies are culturally intelligible and widely accepted within Iban society, given that the referents—such as tapioca and spectacles—are commonplace objects in daily life.

It is important to note that reading *entelah* from a written text, as in the present analytical context, necessarily limits the full riddling experience. This is because the written form denies access to the accompanying sound, rhythm, intonation, and performative effects of the riddling context, all of which are integral to the meaning-making process. In practice, *entelah* are “given” orally before a group of listeners, and the interplay between verbal artistry and audience engagement is central to the genre’s communicative force. In terms of indigenous terminology, the Iban refer to the riddle image, question, or statement as *saur*. The *saur* encompasses all means of articulating the riddle text, replete with its word knowledge (linguistic form) and world knowledge (cultural content). Importantly, the community tolerates a degree of flexibility when it comes to interpreting the language within the riddle, reflecting the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of oral performance.

When it comes to public performance, the oral presentation of *entelah* involves at least three parties: the riddle giver, the listener (or riddle solver), and the broader audience. The terms “audience,” “riddle giver,” and “riddle solver” are employed here to denote the respective groups that contribute to the riddling event, following the terminological frameworks established by Burns (1976). The audience typically comprises family members, kin, and guests of the riddle giver, creating a communal setting in which knowledge transmission and entertainment converge. Public performances may begin with a brief explanation or framing statement by the riddle giver, setting the tone and context for the riddling session that follows.

- Riddle giver** : 1. Thank you for coming.
2. Now I will give you five *entelah*.
3. **(Start)** *Berayang tunsang ruit* (inverted harpoon alerts village pre-dawn)
4. *Kampong tesau tumpau tumu* (turns village into turmoil)
5. *Simpau selang selit giga temu bunsu* (with twisted knots and invisible sources)
6. *Ulu lungga: batang lungkak*
- Riddle solver** : 7. The language is difficult. Is that a snake?
- Audience** : 8. Listen to *ulu lungga* (hint)“ak”
- Riddle solver** : 9. Sorry, I do not know
- Riddle giver** : 10. *Pemulak* (Liar)
- Audience** : 11. Ah... (smiles)
- Riddle giver** : 12. This *entelah* is deep. Talking about fake news.
13. We do not say what we want directly. This is part of the culture. Using different level. We must bring language to the higher level. (audience remain silent)
14. Let me explain. If I want tell a lie? You cannot find out what is true or a lie. If I tell you this, it sounds very nice but if you want to know you cannot. So I become a liar (*pemulak*).

The riddling process concludes at line 11. It remains unclear whether the meta-analytic statement in line 14 serves to explicate the answer provided in line 10 or functions as a form of philosophical rhetoric. What is evident, however, is that ambiguity is a richly layered concept in this context. Different approaches to interpreting public riddle performances may arise depending on the linguistic and cultural competencies of the audience. For instance, ambiguity on the part of the riddle solver may stem from limitations in understanding the language, particularly unfamiliarity with certain registers of Iban such as *jaku lama* (old or archaic Iban). One such example is the word *tunsang*, which refers to the Iban concept of “upside-downness”—a cosmological principle central to Iban theology and worldview. An audience member less familiar with this specialised vocabulary might interpret the answer in multiple ways. It could refer to: (a) an inverted spearhead, traditionally associated with deceit or a liar; or (b) a metaphorical representation of unverified news circulating on social media—a contemporary adaptation of the riddle’s referential scope. The fact that the answer is an abstraction reveals a deliberate strategy on the part of the riddle giver to

confuse, challenge, or even deceive the audience. However, given the community's belief in the interplay between visible and invisible forces, the interpretative possibilities are intentionally multidimensional. Often, it is precisely the depth of meaning and the cognitive challenges involved in matching sounds and semantic associations that motivate riddle givers to craft increasingly intricate and demanding riddles.

Overall, it is evident that riddling constitutes a popular form of social interaction, functioning simultaneously as poetry in motion and as playful verbal banter. The basic structure of an *entelah* requires at least three components: (A) the image or riddle statement (*saur*), (B) the hint with phonological clue (*ulu lungga*), and (C) the answer (*lalai*). A supplementary clue known as the *menua* (location or setting) is occasionally employed to provide additional context or to buy time during performance. The *menua* may itself contain witty or allusive language, though it will not be addressed in detail in the present study. The riddling session must be formally initiated, and the verb “give” (as seen in line 2 of the transcript) signals that the performance has commenced. Whilst there is no formal penalty for failing to provide the correct answer, an inability to solve a riddle can result in social embarrassment or light-hearted ridicule. Ultimately, an *entelah* is not composed overnight but is carefully assembled through the integration of multiple cognitive, pragmatic, and linguistic processes. This iterative and collaborative nature of riddle composition reflects the dynamic interplay between individual agency and collective cultural knowledge, ensuring that the tradition remains both rooted in ancestral wisdom and responsive to contemporary linguistic and social contexts.

The Cognitive and Pragmatic Mechanisms Underlying Language Ambiguity Within the Entelah

According to Weiner (1997), folk riddles derive their characteristic ambiguity through deliberate violations of pragmatic rules that govern ordinary discourse. This form of ambiguity can be productively explored through three key concepts from pragmatics: salience, accessibility hierarchy, and parallelism. All three aspects are relevant to the analysis of *entelah*, as they can be linked to cognitive categories and features associated with specific domains of cultural knowledge acquisition. Given that culture fundamentally shapes and influences cognitive strategies, violations of the rules governing cognitive categories can be interpreted as another form of linguistic manipulation. Pragmatics therefore offers a valuable analytical lens for studying riddling language as both a cultural and linguistic phenomenon.

Salience refers to the prominence or psychological centrality of a particular feature with respect to a concept to which it does or could apply. An illustrative example is R5. When considering a common tropical seaside fruit such as the coconut, an individual is likely to foreground salient attributes such as its hard outer shell, fibrous husk, and association with coastal palm trees. R5, however, deliberately disregards these conventionally salient features in its construction of the riddle image, as shown below.

No.	Iban	English
R5	Bisi langit nadai bulan, bisi ai nadai ikan Ulu lungga: Bah bubur Lalai: Buah nyiur	There's water without fish, sky without moon Answer: Coconut

To solve the above riddle, it is necessary to exclude the most salient feature of the coconut (i.e. its hard shell) in order to arrive at the answer. This riddle functions effectively because the top of the fruit is typically sliced off to reveal a pool of clear water suitable for drinking, and the fruit is subsequently split open to expose the white flesh—described metaphorically in the riddle as “the open white sky.” Since neither the moon nor fish fit within the conceptual framework of a coconut, they automatically function as distractors, leading the solver away from the intended answer.

No.	Iban	English
R6	Lebuh mit mesai sumpit, Lebuh besai mesai terabai. Ulu lungga: Manuk ibun mansang Lalai: Sumbuk daun pisang	When small like a blowpipe, When big like a shield. Answer: Banana shoot
R7	Agi mit bekain udah besai telanjai Ulu lungga: Kayu Lalai: Tubu	When I was an infant I was wrapped, when I grew up I was naked Answer: Bamboo shoot

Another pragmatic process involving ad hoc categorisation and accessibility hierarchy can be observed in R6 (shared by an informant) and R7 (Tun Jugah Foundation, 2019). In these riddles, when one hears “big” and “small,” these terms are initially processed in relation to adjectival size distinctions. However, beyond this surface interpretation lies the phonetic correspondence between the end sound of the *ulu lungga* and the answer. Adjectives such as “small blowpipes” and “wrapped infants” can be assigned to ad hoc categories such as “ways of describing weakness, helplessness, or protection” and “youth as vulnerability versus toughness through exposure.” These categories can be understood as representing membership in Iban society for R6, and the transition from childhood to manhood for R7. The riddles are therefore not primarily concerned with graded taxonomic categories but rather with cultural values and foundational concepts embedded in Iban world knowledge.

No.	Iban	English
R8	Batang iya jabang, dan iya rungan Ulu lungga: Manang Lalai: Senapang	The stem is cassava, the branch is papaya Answer: Rifle
R9	Ada siku, digitang indunya, ada siku, digitang indunya Ulu lungga: Alah baya Lalai: Buah nangka	Comes a baby, the mother hangs it, comes a baby, the mother hangs it Answer: Jackfruit

Parallelism refers to a cognitive and linguistic tendency to anticipate parallel structures when presented with a list of two or more attributes. In R8, both “stem” and “branch” are attributes of a tree or plant, whilst “trunk” and “papaya” are food or plant resources. There is conceptual harmony

in the pairing of “trunk” and “stem,” but discord arises when “branch” is linked to “papaya,” thereby complicating interpretation. When the solver hears the end sound of the *ulu lungga* as *-ang*, a phonological realisation of the end rhyme */sina:pa:ng/* is anticipated. In R9, both mother and infant are positioned in a relationship of care—one who “gives” care and one who “needs” it. However, associating the mother with infanticide creates conceptual friction with reality, as this is not a common cultural category and requires specific environmental and contextual awareness. Pragmatically, these features help explain how *entelah* derives its characteristic ambiguity. A third dimension of parallelism can be observed in the rules of poetic structure. The Iban view riddling language as poetic prose (Sather, 2017), and the Saribas Iban recognise several varieties of end rhymes (e.g. *enteli main*), which they employ freely in their *leka main* performances.

No.	Iban	English
R10	Bejambul baka China , betisik baka naga Ulu lungga: Alah panas Lalai: Buah nanas	Crested like a Chinese, scaly like a dragon Answer: Pineapple
R11	Bujang kurus bagas majuh. Bujang kerigai bagas makai. Ulu lungga: Manuk Lalai: Siduk	Skinny bachelor eats well. Bony bachelor eats well. Answer: Spoon

R10 employs a dominant *-a* rhyme scheme (*enteli main = lebu bedaja*), indicated in bold. The phrases function as similes containing both nouns and adjectives. Whilst the connection between scales and snakes is complementary and semantically coherent, the pairing of crest and Chinese creates confusion. Similarly, R11’s use of “famished” and “bonny,” alongside “skinny bachelor,” presents observations along a similarity cline that requires deeper cognitive engagement. These examples provide evidence for how folk riddles derive their characteristic ambiguity. However, some folk riddles cannot be explained solely through salient features of an object’s identity or through reliance on formulaic phrases and words; instead, they must be examined in relation to linguistic ambiguity.

As noted by Pepicello and Green (1984), folk riddles can and often do contain evidence of both linguistic and metaphorical ambiguity. This view differs from Dienhart’s (1998) position, which emphasises that ambiguity is primarily related to phonologically similar forms. Whilst we agree with Dienhart that phonology plays a controlling role in riddle ambiguity, we also concur with Pepicello and Green’s broader framework. This section will therefore explore Dienhart’s linguistic analysis alongside Pepicello and Green’s conceptual approach.

No.	Iban	English
R12	Bansa lain ti ngempu, bansa kitai ti makai Ulu lungga: Buah nyala Lalai: Rian belanda	Another race owns it, our race eats it Answer: Sour sop

Dienhart (1998) argues that at the heart of linguistically ambiguous riddles lies a “semantic script-switch trigger,” wherein a portion of the riddle simultaneously refers to two unrelated semantic scripts or cognitive frames. In R12, the riddle image provides no immediate clues, making it particularly challenging for the riddle solver to produce an answer. The *ulu lungga*, however, functions as a trigger that prompts the solver to associate the answer with a possible fruit, ultimately leading to the answer *rian Belanda* (literally “Dutch durian,” referring to soursop). Depending on the performance context, the answer can be substituted with alternative fruits such as *limau Mandarin* (Mandarin orange) or *terung cina* (Chinese eggplant). Polysemy is evident here: the word *buah* represents both a collective noun and the specific term “fruit,” whilst *Belanda* can refer to a nationality (“Dutch”) or function as the verb “to run.” According to Dienhart (1998), the semantic script-switch operates in relation to the phonetic correspondence between the two scripts that the trigger links. This makes it possible for one end of the interpretative cline to contain the true identity of the referent, whilst the other end hosts the polysemous or metaphorical alternative. This principle is again applicable to R10 and R11. A clearer illustration can be found in the use of deep and shallow Iban (*jaku dalam* versus *jaku mabu*), as explained by Sather (2017) in relation to the healer’s seeing stone, which can be called either *batu ilau* or *batu karas* (translucent stone). Riddles R13–R16 provide further examples of polysemy at work.

No.	Iban	English
R13	<p>Riung dua riung Tumbuh di tanah matah langgung Jereki enggau badi andung Pun diibun pasun jelu remaung bekuyu kembang Ngibun ubat manang Churing dua churing Jereki enggau badi bari lembing Asuh diibun pasun jelu tengiling Ngeli juring nancham bekumbang</p> <p>Ulu lungga: Enturun Lalai: Talipaun</p>	<p>Two stalks of riung (riverine flower) growing at the plain, Fortune in big blade dagger protected by snarling tiger, Guarding the healer’s medicine Keeping the shaman’s medicine box One stripe two stripes Fortune and death guarded by sharp-teeth pangolin</p> <p>Answer: Telephone</p>

In R13, the trigger is the reduplicated form *ruing ruing*, which employs onomatopoeia to replicate both the sound of a telephone and the name of a riverine flower. In R12, *durian Belanda* (a Malay loanword) simultaneously represents “soursop” and exhibits homonymy with the verb “to run.” Two scripts are considered homonymous when they share the same phonetic and orthographic realisation but represent distinct lexemes. Pepicello and Green (1984) approach linguistic ambiguity in folk riddles through the lens of both linguistic and metaphorical ambiguity, including an exploration of the different linguistic processes (e.g. phonology, morphology, and syntax) that contribute to phonological similarity.

In R14 below, lexical ambiguity is demonstrated through: (a) the connection between two nouns, “stomach” and “eyes” (as in the switch and bulb of a torch), and (b) the metaphor of a blister that bursts (e.g. *picit ((perut)(mata)) melut*). Lexical ambiguity is, of course, a common feature of riddles worldwide, and given the cultural emphasis on deep and shallow Iban, this is to be expected. The other two forms of ambiguity, however, require more detailed analysis.

No.	Iban	English
R14	<u>Lexical ambiguity</u> Pichit perut, mata melut Ulu lungga: Nemu mit Lalai: Lampu picit	<u>Lexical ambiguity</u> Press the stomach eyes protrude
R15	<u>Word stress ambiguity</u> Raja sengat ngema atap seribu Ulu lungga: Apuk Lalai: Manuk	<u>Word stress ambiguity</u> King of sting carries thousand thatches Answer: Chicken
R16	<u>Word boundary ambiguity</u> Luan ditanya, kemudi nyaut Ulu lungga: Yuk Lalai: Uduk	<u>Word boundary ambiguity</u> Front is asked, back answers Answer: Dog

The *entelah* manipulates word stress ambiguity in R15 by placing emphasis on *raja sengat ngema* and *raja sengat*, where stress on *ngema* can imply either a question (e.g. “The king of Y is able to carry X?”) or a statement. Alternatively, it can also invoke *ngema atap*, which functions as a collective noun meaning “attap roof” or “a roof with a thousand thatches.” As for R16, the noun *luan* (front) can be transformed from a noun to a verb by adding the prefix *nge-* to form *ngeluan*, meaning “to prioritise.” When the riddle referent in R16 is articulated with the prefix spoken rapidly, it becomes easy to understand how ambiguity arises, as the meaning can shift to “prioritise the question, and the answer will emerge.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that folk riddling is both a cultural and linguistic act that operates not only in relation to world knowledge but also through processes of semantic association and semantic priming—dimensions often overlooked by local researchers. Whilst folk riddles possess a discernible linguistic framework, riddle givers purposefully produce semantically and syntactically unclear statements, rendering systematic analysis inherently challenging. Consequently, ambiguity must be understood as taking two forms: linguistic and contextual (metaphorical). Although both forms involve the manipulation of language and meaning, linguistic ambiguity is particularly significant for demonstrating that folk riddling functions primarily as a linguistic act rather than solely as a cultural one. As such, a psycholinguistic study of linguistic ambiguity, such as the one presented here, is valuable for several reasons. The study can be

expanded to deepen our understanding of ambiguity and manipulative language use more broadly. The ability to detect and resolve ambiguity constitutes a crucial component of communicative competence. Research examining ambiguity in riddle knowledge contributes directly to the development of linguistic competence. Adults are known to detect and resolve lexical ambiguities more rapidly than surface-structure ambiguities, which, in turn, are processed more quickly than deep-structure ambiguities (MacKay, 1966; MacKay & Bever, 1967). An adequate understanding of children's developing ability to appreciate jokes and riddles therefore requires deep insights into the various stages through which children acquire the capacity to detect linguistic ambiguity.

The ability to detect linguistic ambiguity develops at different rates across individuals, and the detection of syntactic ambiguity is not readily evident in children's riddles. The relatively late development in the ability to detect syntactic ambiguity observed in the present study suggests that syntactic ambiguity may not be accorded sufficient importance in Iban riddle knowledge. This finding may be related to the fact that the concept of "wit" is a culturally loaded term within a hierarchy-based system and does not necessarily align with the values embedded in Western riddling contexts. In light of earlier assumptions regarding the relationship between developmental rate and ease of interpretative processing, the fact that detection of surface-structure and deep-structure ambiguities appears indistinguishable at every developmental level is inconsistent with previous findings in the psycholinguistic literature. This suggests that surface-structure cues are not readily employed by Iban riddle solvers. Furthermore, the fact that the riddles in this study were recorded in a flat, even intonation pattern may have further limited interpretative possibilities, thereby obscuring the role of prosodic and paralinguistic cues in ambiguity resolution.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ The cultural value of vulnerability and protection is operationalised through riddle imagery that contrasts physical smallness with states of dependence or care. In R6 and R7, descriptors associated with size are interpreted as symbolic representations of social conditions such as youth, exposure, and the need for protection, reflecting culturally embedded understandings within Iban world knowledge.

² The ambiguity characteristic of *entelah* is operationalised as a pragmatic effect arising from tension between culturally familiar schemas. Meaning is not resolved through literal interpretation but through the reconciliation of phonological cues, contextual inference, and culturally embedded world knowledge.

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