Making Sound Sense :Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky

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Abstract: In *The Annotated Alice*, Martin Gardner writes: "Few would dispute the fact that Jabberwocky is the greatest of all nonsense poems in English. It was so well known to English schoolboys in the late nineteenth century that five of its nonsense words appear casually in the conversation of students in Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky & Co*." (Gardner, 234). This short poem has been translated into as many as fifty languages and has even inspired a movie based upon it. Although this much feted poem is written in apparent gibberish, it nevertheless seems to make some kind of sense. This poses certain interpretive challenges for the reader, as words that are clearly nonsense seem to somehow gesture at a semblance of meaning. This paper attempts to decode the strategies employed by Carroll in order to achieve this effect.

IndexTerms – **Meaning, Nonsense, Content words, Function words, Structuralism**

I. INTRODUCTION

We encounter the poem through the seven-year old Alice, who is the protagonist and focaliser for Carroll in this novel. It puzzles her. As a child, it is not strange for Alice to not be able to distinguish between 'real' and 'unreal' words, as children do go through a struggle to comprehend language. But the poem poses the same challenge to adult readers alike, as it both seems to make sense and also not to do so. This paper thus attempts to unravel the meaning, if any, of the poem *Jabberwocky*. Does it make sense? If it does, what does it mean? If it doesn't, how does Carroll create the illusory effect of meaning without actually using "meaningful" language? What linguistic devices does he use, if any, in order to do so? This paper will attempt to address some of these questions and will also attempt to understand the significance and the reasons for its lasting influence on generations of readers, critics, scholars and linguists.

II. DECODING THE TEXT

In the book *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice comes across this poem in a diary but is initially unable to read it as there seems to be something wrong with the alphabets. She then remembers that she is in the Looking Glass world and realizes that it is written in a mirror- reverse form. Thus she is able to read it only when she holds it up in front of a mirror. Very early in the novel, this serves to suggest that the world Alice has entered is based upon a tension between the binaries of order and disorder, between reality and illusion, that she has entered a realm which will confound her expectations and also lead her to question her previous sense of reality. Thus Carroll is also holding up a looking glass to the real world and inviting the reader to take a look at it and draw their own conclusions.

Having read the poem, Alice is just about able to make out that "*somebody* killed *something",* but nothing more than that. The reason behind this lies in Carroll's linguistic sleight of hand, by which he is able to create a nonsense poem that makes sense. In 1952, the linguist Charles Carpenter Fries proposed the distinction between content and function words. Function words are those words that are lexically of minor importance but serve the crucial function of establishing grammatical relationships with other words in a sentence and also signal the mood or attitude of the speaker. Thus function words act as the foundation of a sentence and holds the structure of a sentence together. In the poem, Carroll only paradigmatically changes the content words, but retains all the function words, thus leaving the syntactic structure of the sentence intact. As a result, it is easy to understand the actions being represented through the lines. If we read the first stanza,

'Twas brillig, **and the** slithy toves
Did gyre **and** gimble **in the** wabe:
All mimsy **were the** borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

We see that the function words make it very clear that it was a certain time of day or a certain occasion (brillig) and the slithy (adjective) toves (countable noun) were doing the gyre amd gimble (verbs) in the wabe (noun-object), and so on. It is also clear that the lines describe a set of events that happened in the past, communicated by the use of the past tense in such words as "twas",

"did" and "were". Conversely, if Carroll had inserted nonsensical function words and kept the content words real, his lines would have made no sense. In his book *It's All in a Word: History, Meaning and the Sheer Joy of Words*, Vivian Cook quotes from a Theodore Sturgeon story using made-up content words but real function words:

"So on **Lirht**, while the decisions on the fate of the miserable **Hvov** were being formulated, **gwik** still **fardled**, **funted** and **fupped**. Just as in *Jabberwocky*, here too, the lines are intelligible because the syntagmatic order has not been changed. He goes on to demonstrate that if the same sentence were rearticulated with fake function words and real content words, it could be indecipherable, as follows:

"So kel **Mars**, dom trelk **decisions** kel trelk **fate** mert trelk **miserable slaves** hiv polst **formulated**, **deer still grazed, jumped** kosp **survived**."

The brilliance of *Jabberwocky* also derives from Carroll's use of portmanteau words. In Chapter Six of the novel, the egg shaped, nursery-rhyme creature Humpty Dumpty, who has also been called "that early master of higher criticism" (Imholtz) imperiously announces to Alice that he can explain the meaning of "all the poems that ever were invented – and a good many that haven't been invented just yet." When the hopeful Alice asks Humpty to explain Jabberwocky to her, he regales her with explanations of each of the neologisms used in the poem. Each of these new words combines both the sound and meaning of two words and fuses them together to form a new word. Humpty says, "You see it's like a portmanteau – there are two meanings packed up in one word." Carroll himself endorses Humpty's description thus: "Humpty Dumpty's theory, of two meanings packed into one word like a portmanteau, seems to me the right explanation for all. For instance, take the two words "fuming" and "furious." Make up your mind that you will say both words, but leave it unsettled which you will say first ... if you have the rarest of gifts, a perfectly balanced mind, you will say 'frumious'." Portmanteau words are thus another of Carroll's astounding contributions to the English language – not only do they add punch and force to the poem in question, most of the portmanteau words used here have become a part of the English language. Thus while Carroll may have tried to escape the constraints of the English language through his use of nonsense verse, the English language itself borrowed his creations and made them its own.

Phonologically, Carroll took care to ensure that all the nonsense words used in this poem are pronounceable in English, with a certain onomatopoeic resonance to them as well. In a meticulously researched essay, author and linguist Jodi Lamm points out that, "the entire collection of neologisms from "The Jabberwocky" stays within the confines dictated by the Sonority Principle and the Obligatory Contour Principle as manifested in English. Lamm also alludes to M. Holquist who claimed about nonsense poetry the neologisms in nonsense poetry are almost always contained within the pre-ordered system of a language. Any meaning the nonsense might have is dependent upon the meaning of the natural language it is surrounded by. This tension between the sound and form of natural language and the creativity of neologisms is a part of the poetic effect of the poems in question. None of the nonsense goes so far outside the constraints of English, or even human language, that it is rendered meaningless within the poetry. Thus it was only natural for Alice to think that the words she encountered in Jabberwocky actually existed and it was she who did not know what they meant.

Undoubtedly one of the high points of a linguistic analysis of *Jabberwocky* is the discovery of Humpty Dumpty as an early pioneer of structuralism. In an uncanny echo of structuralist ideas that were not to be pronounced at least for the next forty five years, Humpty has the following conversation with Alice:

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,' " Alice objected.
"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean-neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master-that's all."

If Structuralism studies language as a system of signs (consisting of a signifier and a signified) that are essentially arbitrary in nature, then the portmanteau signifiers coined in this poem can only be complete once their corresponding signifieds are associated with them. Thus in this poem, Carroll deliberately exploits the arbitrariness of the sign by using nonsense verse.

To sum up, then, Jabberwocky is in a sense a representational dance of alternating phonemes and morphemes, which creates a sense of meaningfulness despite consisting of many words that had no existence in the English lexicon. Ferdinand de Saussure's four pronged study of signs, in terms of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics can be seamlessly tested on this poem. At a phonetic level, the poem is an easy match with conventional English pronunciation. Morphologically, the text can be analysed as per conventional grammatical rules. For instance, "slith-y" (adjective with a –y ending) and "tove-s" (plural with s ending) follow normal English grammar. Syntactically, the lines are perfectly coherent and may be classified in terms of noun phrases and verb phrases. Having thus established a perfect adherence to linguistic structure, Carroll undercuts it all at the semantic level. The meaning is there, yet not there. He masterfully deploys nonsense to hold the mirror up to the good sense that is not normally questioned, and exposes its limitations. The most that the reader can do is mimic Alice's reading of the poem:

"'It seems very pretty,' she said when she had finished it, 'but it's *rather* hard to understand!' (You see she didn't like to confess, ever to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas — only I don't exactly know what they are!" However, somebody killed something: that's clear at any rate –"

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