Semantic Dissonance and the Conceptual Understanding of Nonsense in Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky'

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Introduction

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and *Through the Looking-Glass* by Lewis Carroll are well-known for the unusual features of Wonderland. One of these unusual features is the literature that Alice encounters in Wonderland. 'Jabberwocky' is a nonsense poem that Alice encounters in *Through the Looking-Glass*. The nonsense nature of the poem derives from the fact that most of the open-class words in the poem are replaced with invented words. This means that Alice is unable to fully understand the poem apart from her grasping of the concept that '*somebody* killed *something*' (Carroll 2012: 126). The nonsense in 'Jabberwocky' is an example of literary dissonance. Dissonance is commonly understood as a musical term explaining musical disharmony, but it can also be applied in literature and psychology as a defamiliarizing and uncomfortable effect on a reader. Stockwell (2017: 72) claims that cognitive dissonance is identified as the effect of discomfort when confronted with contradictory or incompatible ideas. Stockwell (2017: 73) also insists that, in literature, dissonance is a feature of semantics in which expected collocations of words and phrases are ignored or subverted. This essay specifically considers how the semantic dissonance in 'Jabberwocky' can begin to be interpreted by a reader, despite the impossibility of accurately translating nonsense.

Theoretical Framework

In Text World Theory, Gavins (2007, 2013: 32) defines a 'text-world' as a mental world or representation created by a text. When considering the creation of text-worlds, Schema Theory is useful in understanding the process of mental concept creation. In this theory, it is proposed that humans possess cognitive knowledge stores that are full of learned and familiar information, and that these familiar knowledge stores are what humans rely on when approaching unfamiliar circumstances (Gavins 2007: 3). Simpson (2004: 89) argues that Schema Theory is 'an umbrella term covering a range of individual cognitive models' in which the key component is 'scripts', which are a human's pre-existing and familiar knowledge stores. Simpson insists that scripts change and expand when experiencing or encountering the new and unfamiliar. To apply this to literary texts, a reader's text-world or conceptual representation of a text is continually modified as new information is encountered. In a similar cognitive process to text-world creation, Simpson (2004: 40) identifies the theory of an 'idealised cognitive model' (ICM), applicable to any imaginative aspects of a text (such as settings, characters, and described objects), which explains the process of conceptual creation taking place in a reader's mind:

> Whatever the precise type of primary input, it is clear that we can form a mental representation which will specify what a certain entity is, what it is for, what it looks like and so on. This image has been rendered down from multiple experiences into a

kind of idealised prototypical image, an image which we might term an *idealised cognitive model*. An idealised cognitive model (ICM) contains information about what is typical (for us) and it is a domain of knowledge that is brought into play for the processing and understanding of textual representations. These domains of knowledge are also accompanied by conceptual slots for the things that routinely accompany the mental representation […] In a dynamic process of conversion, transference between concepts leads us constantly to modify our ICMs as new stimuli are encountered.

An ICM is at first based on a reader's familiar knowledge stores, or scripts, and is a recognition of adaptable familiarity within a text that can be useful in deciphering unfamiliarity through association and conversion.

However, when a reader encounters nonsense, establishing text-worlds and ICMs increases in complexity. When reading 'Jabberwocky', the dissonant nonsense of the poem causes difficulty in forming text-worlds and ICMs due to the constant unfamiliarity and lack of representations to immediately draw associations between. Nonsense means there is little to no familiarity to base mental concepts upon. Despite the complexity, the dissonance and nonsense of the poem does not discourage a reader from attempting to create conceptual representations of the text. Rather, it encourages it. Foregrounding is a technique recognised originally by Mukařovský (1958) and explained by Leech (2013: 61) as an effect of linguistic deviation and subversion that encourages a reader to make interpretations using their imagination, due to the fact that a reader naturally attempts to make sense of anything unfamiliar. Thus, the foregrounding of abnormal language in 'Jabberwocky' encourages a reader's imaginative interpretation. One of the ways that a reader can attempt to make sense of 'Jabberwocky', and thereby form text-worlds and ICMs, is through de Beaugrande and Dressler's (1981) method of 'downgrading'. However, recognising when downgrading is being employed first requires an understanding of de Beaugrande's (1978, 1980: 105-10) original theory of 'textual informativity'.

Textual informativity is a three-level scale of how far a text matches a reader's understanding of their own world, and the three levels are first-order informativity, second-order informativity and third-order informativity. First-order informativity means that a text completely matches a reader's expectations and does not include any deviance or dissonance. Therefore, a reader can grasp the text without difficulty. Second-order informativity means a text is somewhat strange, with some but not many unusual features. Third-order informativity means a text is so deviant and unusual that a reader finds it challenging to understand or follow. The nonsense in 'Jabberwocky' makes it an example of third-order informativity. However, for a reader to try and make some sense of 'Jabberwocky', the method of downgrading can be applied. Downgrading is defined by de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 143-4) as an attempt to rationalise deviant or dissonant features into an understandable concept. For downgrading, a reader relies on their scripts, or familiar knowledge stores, to make connections with the unfamiliar. These connections allow ICMs and text-worlds to begin to be formed through rationalisation and conversion. In 'Jabberwocky', a reader can downgrade by finding links or patterns between the nonsense words and information already stored in scripts.

Analysis

Alice claims that 'Jabberwocky' fills her head with ideas, but that she cannot explicitly identify the events of the poem besides '*somebody* killed *something*' (Carroll 2012: 126). 'Jabberwocky' inspires the same confusion in a reader. A reader's cognitive processing of the text is challenged by the text's persistent dissonance, as the nonsense words are not located in familiar realms of knowledge. The foregrounding of the nonsense words means that dissonance mainly features on the poem's semantic levels. In contrast, the syntax and poetic form are regular. It is the regularity of these features that allows a reader to begin extracting understanding from the poem, as the recognisable grammatical patterns prompt the identification of word classes of most of the nonsense words.

The first stanza of 'Jabberwocky' (Carroll 2012: 125) immediately alerts a reader to the dissonant nature of the poem:

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

A reader must rely on their cognitive scripts to attempt to make sense of the nonsense. This process begins at a syntactic level where the grammatical patterns are familiar and word classes decipherable. ''Twas', a contraction of the phrase 'it was', is a recognisable start to the poem, introducing a subject and verb, though it is not yet clear what the subject is. This familiarity is contrasted by the unrecognisable word 'brillig'. However, the whole phrase, ''Twas brillig', can be syntactically recognised as an independent clause. Because it begins with a subject noun (the contracted 'it') and a verb ('was'), 'brillig', because it is in the grammatical position to modify the noun, must be an adjective. This is furthered by the fact that there are no determiners or articles before 'brillig' to identify it as a noun.

Successful deciphering of the poem's syntax then prompts a reader to try and extract meaning on a semantic level, and this can be done through phonetic association, which is an instance of a reader employing downgrading to find understanding in the unfamiliar. By downgrading the dissonance of the poem through phonetic association, a reader can begin to build clearer mental images of what is being presented in 'Jabberwocky', relying on making connections between familiar knowledge and simultaneously employing the imagination. The nonsense adjective 'brillig' shares phonetic association with the first two syllables of the adjective 'brilliant'. A reader can apply the familiar semantic domain of 'brilliant' to 'brillig' by association, familiarising and creating meaning out of an unfamiliar word. Then, because a semantic domain has been established, synonyms can be applied to further the understanding of the phrase. Connecting to the synonyms 'bright' or 'light' from 'brilliant', the opening phrase of 'Jabberwocky' can be identified by a reader to be the representation of a sunny day. This establishes a setting at the beginning of the poem. A reader continues to rely on familiar knowledge to continue building a conceptual image of 'Jabberwocky'. Having deciphered the poem's initial phrase to possibly indicate a sunny day and setting, this concept can extend its semantic reach across the rest of the stanza, an example of transference of concepts. By transference, the other nonsense words begin to occupy the 'conceptual slots for the things that routinely accompany the mental representation' (Simpson 2004: 40). In this case, the mental representation is the sunny setting.

The 'slithy toves' are the subject of the following phrase, identifiable as a noun phrase due to the preceding definite article 'the'. In this noun phrase, the component 'slithy' is recognisable as an adjective because of its position preceding the plural noun 'toves', as well as because the '-y' suffix (also seen in 'mimsy', which similarly modifies the plural noun 'borogroves') is a common morphological indication of an adjective. Applying phonetic association to uncover possible meanings for 'slithy', it can be found to be similar to the familiar adjective 'slimy', which includes the same '-y' suffix, and in which the only deviation is in the middle consonants 'm' and 'th'. This association can also extend to the rest of the noun phrase, applying conceptual transference, and, through semantic connections, suggest that the noun 'toves' is something with slimy qualities. The 'toves' may be identified more specifically as animals, not only through semantic connection to familiar slimy animals such as toads, but also through the dynamic nature of the verbs expressed in the following line.

The auxiliary 'did' identifies 'gyre' and 'gimble' syntactically as verbs, and the prepositional phrase 'in the wabe' provides a spatial or temporal setting for the activity. The grammatical position of 'wabe' in the prepositional phrase, following the combination of a spatial preposition and a definite article in 'in the', identifies it as a noun. This prepositional phrase provides locational orientation and context for the poem's activity. To find further meaning, phonetic association can be used to connect 'wabe' with locational noun 'wave'. This connection would suggest that the opening location of 'Jabberwocky' is a setting by water, such as a beach or by a river. The noun 'wabe', when associated with 'wave', also connects thematically with the previously suggested description of a sunny day. This semantic domain can then also be transferred to the nouns 'gyre' and 'gimble'. Such a semantic reach would suggest that, despite the lack of phonetic association, these two verbs have meanings similar to swimming/diving/floating, verbs that are identified primarily by their relation to water settings.

The second stanza in 'Jabberwocky' (Carroll 2012: 125) features free direct speech:

Beware the Jabberwock, my son!

The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun

The frumious Bandersnatch!

The fact that the stanza features no tags or quotation marks indicates that it is free speech. Moreover, the first line includes an addressee ('my son') and this, along with the repeated exclamations, indicates that this stanza is direct speech. The stanza begins with the imperative phrase 'Beware the Jabberwock'. The imperative verb 'beware' is familiar to a reader, and immediately indicates that the tone of this stanza is one of urgency or fear. Along with this tone, the semantic reach of 'beware' suggests a presence of danger since 'beware' is often used as a warning. This dangerous presence can be assumed to be the 'Jabberwock'. Despite 'Jabberwock' being an unfamiliar noun, a reader is already aware that, whatever it is, it is dangerous, and a reader therefore applies this characteristic to imaginative interpretations of the Jabberwock. This understanding of danger attached to the Jabberwock is emphasised by the description of it having 'jaws that bite' and 'claws that catch'. These descriptive phrases use the violent but familiar verbs 'bite' and 'catch' to exemplify the threatening nature of the Jabberwock, as well as foregrounding the bodily features (claws and jaws) that could most cause harm. In addition to the descriptions of

bodily features, the capitalisation of 'Jabberwock', along with 'Jubjub bird' and 'Bandersnatch', and the recognisable specification of a 'bird', indicates that these names belong to animals. Therefore, a reader can build mental representations of commonly known dangerous animals in association with these nonsense creatures, making sense of the poem's animals through cognitive conversion. A reader continues this process of rationalising the Jabberwock as further information is provided about it by the poem in later stanzas.

The third stanza (Carroll 2012: 125) continues:

He took his vorpal sword in hand:

Long time the manxome foe he sought—

So rested he by the Tumtum tree,

And stood a while in thought.

The word 'vorpal' is the only nonsense word in the first line of this stanza. It can be identified as an adjective due to its position in the noun phrase 'his vorpal sword', in between the possessive determiner 'his' and the noun 'sword'. Adjectives commonly used to describe swords include descriptions such as sharp or heavy, since swords are commonly described by their craftmanship. Therefore, the dominant semantic domain of this phrase (based on weaponry) could suggest, by conceptual transference, that the nonsense adjective 'vorpal' has a similar meaning to something being sharp or deadly. The next two lines are more syntactically complex than the other lines encountered so far in the poem. Almost the whole of the second line is syntactically reversed: the adjunct 'long time' begins the phrase instead of typically ending it, whilst the complement noun phrase 'the manxome foe' appears in the middle of the phrase and the subject verb phrase 'he bought' is used at the end instead of, typically, the beginning. Because of this reversal, the verb 'sought', which would usually appear near the beginning of the phrase, now rhymes with 'thought' at the end of the fourth line. Similarly, the verb phrase 'he rested' is grammatically inverted to become 'rested he' in the third line. Again, this reversal means that a rhyme is achieved, and this time the rhyme is an internal rhyme of 'he' and 'tree' in the third line, foregrounding the rhymes in this stanza and emphasising the playful nature of the poem.

The next stanza (Carroll 2012: 125) focuses on the Jabberwock again:

And, as in uffish thought he stood,

The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,

Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,

And burbled as it came!

Before the Jabberwock arrives, the protagonist stands 'in uffish thought'. Due to its grammatical position before the familiar abstract noun 'thought', 'uffish' can be identified as an adjective. This is furthered by the fact that the suffix '-ish' is commonly applied to turn nouns into adjectives as a modifying suffix that expresses the quality of something. Here, 'uffish' is expressing the quality of the protagonist's thoughts. To attempt to understand the nature of his thoughts, phonetic association can be applied. Words that end in the syllable 'uff' include 'huff' and 'puff', both actions of which are typically done when one feels

frustrated. Therefore, with the stem of the nonsense adjective being 'uff', it can be understood that the protagonist's thoughts are of a frustrated or annoyed quality as he waits for the Jabberwock.

When the Jabberwock arrives, a reader gains more information about the creature to continue modifying understanding of this unfamiliar creature and building conceptual images of it. In this stanza, the Jabberwock is described using the metaphor 'eyes of flame', which encourages a clear semantic domain to be applied to the Jabberwock. The description 'of flame' places the Jabberwock in correlation with animals associated with fire, including mythological animals. As a reader combines the pieces of familiar description given about the Jabberwock (it has dangerous jaws, claws and eyes of flame), a mental image of the Jabberwock can be built using the method of downgrading. The abstract image of the Jabberwock is converted into the image of a more familiar creature of similar description. In particular, the description of the Jabberwock evokes the image of a dragon, a creature which is commonly depicted as possessing sharp teeth and claws and is also most commonly known as fire-breathing. This conversional act of downgrading by a reader builds the conceptual image of the Jabberwock as a dragon. This newfound connection can also transfer its conceptual semantic domain to other features of the stanza, such as 'the tulgey wood'. Since creatures like dragons are commonly depicted as residing in dark and ominous settings, this association can suggest that the adjective 'tulgey' has a similar meaning to darkness or density, further providing settings for the poem.

The next stanza (Carroll 2012: 126) features the killing of the Jabberwock:

One, two! One, two! And through and through

The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!

He left it dead, and with its head

He went galumphing back.

The nonsense words 'snicker-snack' and 'galumphing' can be seen as instances of onomatopoeia since, through form and sound association, they relate to other familiar onomatopoeic words. The compound 'snicker-snack' is almost a perfect example of apophony. Most of the letters stay the same from the first part of the compound to the second, except for the variation in vowels from 'i' to 'a', making 'snicker-snack' apophonic, except for the deviant 'er' in 'snicker'. Wales (2014: 28) claims that 'the alternation of vowel [in apophony] symbolizes alternation of movement or sound'. In this instance, the alternating sound and movement symbolised by the apophony is the back-and-forth swinging of the sword. Therefore, the apophonic nature of the compound also highlights it as an example of onomatopoeia. The verb 'galumphing' can similarly be seen as onomatopoeia. Through phonetic association, the syllable 'umph' (or 'oomph') relates to the same onomatopoeic word that symbolises the noise one makes when bashing into something. Due to this association, a reader can assume that the movement of 'galumphing' is a clumsy act that produces lots of sound. This is further exemplified due to the fact that the protagonist is 'galumphing' as he brings the Jabberwock's head home. The head of the creature can be assumed to be too heavy for him, thereby causing him difficulty in movement and resulting in the clumsy movement and sounds.

The penultimate stanza (Carroll 2012: 126), before the first stanza is repeated as the final one, features direct speech:

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?

Come to my arms, my beamish boy!

O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"

He chortled in his joy.

Similar to the second stanza, this speech features an addressee ('my beamish boy'), the affectionate nature of the address indicating that the speaker is the same as from the second stanza. However, this time, the speech is direct because it uses quotation marks. The difference in indirect speech and direct speech from the second and penultimate stanzas suggests that, in this penultimate stanza, the protagonist is in a spatio-temporal position to actually listen to the speaker. Comparing this to the second stanza, it could suggest that the speech in the second stanza was simply being remembered by the protagonist, rather than truly being heard, as a piece of affectionate advice he had been treasuring during his hunt for the Jabberwock.

Conclusion

Dissonance in 'Jabberwocky' exists at a third-order informativity level and on the semantic level of the poem. Though the extremely dissonant nature of the nonsense means text-worlds formed by 'Jabberwocky' can by no means be objectively correct, the dissonance still inspires imaginative interpretation of the unfamiliar. Ultimately, the method of downgrading is especially useful for a reader in attempting to find meaning in and create mental representations of Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky'. Such downgrading is originally based in a reader's familiar knowledge stores, or 'scripts', as proposed in Schema Theory, that, by association and semantic and conceptual transference, can be used to attach meanings to nonsense. Meaning can be extracted from the nonsense words first through syntactic analysis to find word classes, and then through semantic transference and phonetic association, and finally in cognitive conversion that rationalises the unfamiliar into the realm of the familiar (such as how the Jabberwock, through this process, can be converted into the conceptual image of a dragon).

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