ARTICLE

Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky': non-sense not nonsense[1]

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Abstract

Although Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky' is traditionally considered to be 'nonsense', such a characterisation ultimately rests on a Western folk notion of language as fundamentally semantico-referential. A more semiotically, and pragmatically, informed view of language and language-use, however, is capable of describing in considerable detail both the means by which a text such as 'Jabberwocky' 'makes sense' and the ends to which such a text can be put. Indeed, such a view shows that some discursive ends are particularly suited to attainment by means of so-called 'nonsense' texts such as 'Jabberwocky'. This article outlines such a view and applies it to 'Jabberwocky', which is thus seen to make both denotational and interactional 'sense'.

Keywords: *Carroll, Lewis; 'Jabberwocky'; literary pragmatics; poetics; pragmatics; semiotics*

The analysis of the two closely interconnected synthetic powers of poetry – that of similarity and contiguity and that of selection and combination – is a burning task faced by our science. Any fear of or reluctance about the analysis of poetic transformation of language impairs the scientific program of those linguists who pull back from the pivotal problem of this vital transformation; and likewise it curtails the research of those literary scholars who, in treating poetry, pull back from the innermost problems of language.

(Jakobson and Waugh (1979) *The Sound Shape of Language*, p. 236)

1 Introduction

Since its publication in 1871 as part of *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky' (see Appendix) has traditionally been considered to be a masterful piece of 'nonsense'. Such a classification reflects the poem's apparent non-referentiality when set against traditional folk views of language that see unambiguous reference as the sole (or at least, unmarked) goal of language-use. Since Carroll used a number of made-up words that had 'no sense', and hence could not refer, 'Jabberwocky' as a whole has appeared to be not fully meaningful – that is, the poem has appeared to be 'nonsense'.

Such an assessment was encouraged by Carroll himself by his portrayal of

Alice's reaction to the poem. After first holding the poem to a mirror read the reversed writing, she says:

> It seems very pretty . . . but it's rather hard to understand! . . . Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don't know exactly what they are! However, *somebody* killed *something*: that's clear at any rate.
>
> (Carroll 1960b: 197)

Moreover, when Alice later turns to Humpty-Dumpty for assistance in understanding the poem, he supplies her with definitions that, in the 'Looking Glass' spirit where things are reversed, make the poem less meaningful rather than more so (Carroll 1960b: 270–3).

As an entertainer of children, Carroll had been using the theme of 'nonsense words' for some time, for children are continually operating in a world in which many words make no 'sense' to them. After all, they are still learning the language. Thus, for instance, at the very outset of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when Alice falls down the rabbit hole, she speculates about her 'Latitude' and 'Longitude', although she 'had not the slightest idea what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but . . . thought they were nice grand words to say' (Carroll 1960a: 27).

Perhaps even more striking is a parody of Prince Henry's soliloquy in Act IV, Scene IV of Shakespeare's *King Henry IV, Part II* which Carroll wrote for a 'family magazine' when he was 13 years old (Carroll 1954: 25). In this 'quotation from Shakespeare with slight improvements', Carroll highlighted every student's frustration with the host of 'meaningless' words found in the works of the Bard. Indeed, Carroll's 'improvements' to Prince Henry's soliloquy have the sleeping father awaken in order to ask the son the meaning of two such words!

So successful was Carroll in developing the theme of 'nonsense' words in 'Jabberwocky' that he fostered an analytic tradition in which many commentators, including modern ones, have adopted 'nonsense' as the theoretical backdrop for their comments about the poem. Typical, for instance, is Martin Gardner's commentary in *The Annotated Alice* in which 'Jabberwocky' is compared to an abstract painting and Carroll to an abstract artist 'free to romp' in his medium. In particular, Gardner writes that:

> . . . the nonsense poet does not have to search for ingenious ways of combining patterns and sense. . . . The words he uses may suggest vague meanings, like an eye here and a foot there in a Picasso abstraction, or they may have no meaning at all – just a play of pleasant sounds like the play of non-objective colors on a canvas.
>
> (Carroll 1960b: 192, n. 11)

In my view, commentators such as Gardner are wrong, as is the naive characterisation of 'Jabberwocky' as 'nonsense'. Rather, 'Jabberwocky' is a

veritable showcase of semiotic principles subtly and skilfully structured for unified effect. Indeed, the poem has definite meaning – that is, 'makes sense' – on two levels, one 'denotational' (as relatively decontextualised text), and the other 'interactional' (as relatively contextualised discourse). To demonstrate this, however, requires that we follow Jakobson and Waugh (1979) and analyse the poem in conjunction with some of the 'innermost problems of language'.

2 Nonsense vs. non-sense

The traditional characterisation of 'Jabberwocky' as 'nonsense' depends as much upon a traditional folk theory of language as on the work itself or readers' reactions to it. This theory, which we can call the 'doctrine of sense', claims reference to be the sole (or, at least, unmarked or default) goal of language use and sees the 'meaning' of a text as derived exclusively from the 'senses' of its constituent parts and the rules governing their combination. In other words, the meaning (= sense) of a sentence is thought to be derived from the concatenated meanings (= senses) of its constituent words, the meaning (= sense) of a paragraph from the concatenated meanings (= senses) of its constituent sentences, and so on, to ever-larger units of text. Thus, full understanding of a text is ultimately thought to require a full understanding of *all* constituent words; words unknown to the addressee are thought to inevitably result in 'gaps of meaning', since they result in 'gaps of sense'.

Among the intuitive 'evidence' for this view of language is the everyday encounter with 'unknown' words in which a primary discourse is suspended while 'definitions' are supplied in a secondary discourse by either a dictionary or an interlocutor. Once meaning (=sense) has been given to such words, the primary discourse resumes. A text containing words which neither a dictionary nor an interlocutor is capable of defining is therefore necessarily seen as 'incomplete', incapable of 'fully' referring and thus as a 'failure' of normal language-use (albeit a possibly aesthetically pleasing one). In a word, such a text is seen as 'nonsense'.

As I have already noted, children are particularly familiar with the problem of undefined words since they are forever encountering words beyond their vocabulary. Sometimes the given level of discourse can be suspended while a metalinguistic discourse gives 'meaning' to 'unknown' words and sometimes it cannot. Thus, in a very real sense, children are surrounded by 'nonsense' words and texts all the time (and this *excludes* adult performances of 'goo-goo gah-gah' and the like). 'Nonsense' is therefore perhaps more usefully considered as relative to an addressee's definitional resources rather than an absolute property of a word, and we should more usefully speak of 'easy' and 'hard' words for a class of addressees than of 'real' and 'nonsense' words in the language.

Yet the crux of the matter lies even deeper for, contrary to this folk view of language (sustained in part, perhaps, by a Whorfian 'linguistic analogy' [Whorf

1956b: especially 135–6] between 'non-sense' and 'nonsense'), whether a sign *'bears* sense' (i.e. conveys semantic meaning) is entirely distinct from whether the sigh *'makes* sense' (i.e. conveys meaning in general); the former is a subset of the latter (see 3.2). Indeed, at least one early Carrollian analyst was able to clearly distinguish between sense and meaning and therefore between 'non-sense' and 'nonsense' poetry. Langford Reed, in an introduction to an anthology of Carrollian verse, writes:

> The Nonsense writings of Lewis Carroll are a highly technical form of conscious and responsible humour, which, when analyzed, are found to contain plot (or 'idea'), achievements, climax, and, in the case of his poems, rhyme and rhythm. 'Jabberwocky' offers excellent proof of this. Rhyme and rhythm, indeed, are absolutely essential to good Nonsense Verse, which the further removed it is from rules of sense must conform the more closely to rules of sound. It is these factors and the others mentioned in conjunction with them which render Nonsense Poetry so superior to the nonsense rhymes of the nursery and the folk song, including the sea chanty. One type is Nonsense [i.e. non-sense], the other is D[amned] Nonsense [i.e. nonsensical].
> (Reed 1926: 14–5)

Unfortunately, Reed had neither the technical apparatus nor (apparently) the motivation to describe the 'rules of sound' and how Carroll used them to create plot, achievements and climax. All he could do was appeal to the intuition that a rule-bound craft must exist because Carroll was a meticulous craftsman. Indeed:

> So responsible and conscious a literary jester was Lewis Carroll that it is doubtful if there has ever been a more meticulous precisian in the use and intentional misuse of words, including those coined by himself. Every word, every comma, had to be printed exactly as he had planned in his development of the spontaneous idea upon which the particular story or poem was based.
> (Reed 1926: 15)

(For an attempt to deduce Carroll's views on language, see Sutherland 1970.)

In the years since Reed made his remarks, scholars have begun to acquire the technical apparatus and motivation adequate to the analysis of poetry such as 'Jabberwocky'. Jakobson, for instance, finds both in the interconnectedness of linguistics and poetics (Jakobson 1960: 350–1; Jakobson and Waugh 1979: 23, 247–8). Indeed, he demonstrates in several analyses that such an approach permits a reconceptualisation of 'nonsense' poetry, since what was once seen as 'incompleteness' of sense can now often be seen as either irrelevant or 'filled in' by non-semantic modes of meaning (Jakobson and Waugh 1979: 217–29).

    On this foundation Silverstein has produced the beginnings of a comprehensive theory adequate to the task of linguistic-poetic analysis, which he defines as the description of 'the total meaning of constituent linguistic signs,

only part of which is semantic' (Silverstein 1976: 19). Central to this work in pragmatics is the recognition, definition and articulation of a full range of uses of language and modes of meaning in place of the single use and mode admitted by the 'doctrine of sense' (Silverstein 1976: 19–20). Furthermore, since all language-use is seen as a form of social action, all analyses of text must ultimately describe the effects of language-use on the situation(s) of use (Silverstein 1976; Silverstein 1985; Silverstein 1987). Analyses of poetry, even 'nonsense' poetry, are not exempt from this requirement (Jakobson 1960).

3 Theory

3.1 Poetic structure

As I have indicated, an adequate account of 'Jabberwocky' depends upon an adequate account of some of the 'innermost problems of language', including a description of a range of semiotic and pragmatic means and ends. For example, the heart of the present analysis is based upon a theory of poetics articulated by Jakobson and later extended by him and others (Jakobson 1960; Jakobson and Waugh 1979; Silverstein 1981; Silverstein 1984). In this view a poetic text is as much governed by abstract, formal rules of structure as a sentence is governed by abstract rules of syntax; both sets of rules are seen to impose partial meanings on the texts they govern. Thus, in contrast to individualistic theories of poetry (such as informed Gardner's 'abstract painting' analogy presented above), under this theory 'the interaction between metre and meaning and the arrangement of tropes cease to be "the free and individual and unpredictable parts of the poetry"' (Jakobson 1960: 368–9).

    In particular, *'the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination'* (Jakobson 1960: 358, original emphasis). Signs comparable along some linguistic dimension establish a 'metre' in a text which can contribute to various effects. The simplest is the comparison of meaning of the signs so aligned in order to establish their 'likeness' or 'unlikeness' (i.e. synonymy or antonymy) (Jakobson 1960: 369). Although rhyme is one of the most common vehicles of metricality, it is 'only a particular, condensed case of a much more general, we may even say fundamental, problem or poetry, namely *parallelism'* (Jakobson 1960: 368) in which 'any sequence of semantic units strives to build an equation' (Jakobson 1960: 370). 'Anything sequent is a simile' (Jakobson 1960: 370). (For an excellent – and brief – example of the application of such principles, although pre-dating Jakobson's paper, see Hill 1958.)

3.2 Icons, indexes, symbols

Besides poetics, the analytic approach initiated by Jakobson and refined by

Silverstein employs three semiotic modes modelled on Peirce's trichotomy of 'the nature of the meaning communicated':

> *Icons* are those signs where the perceivable properties of the sign vehicle itself have isomorphism to (up to identity with) those of the entity signalled. That is, the entitities are 'likenesses' in some sense. *Indexes* are those signs where the occurrence of a sign vehicle token bears a connection of understood spatiotemporal contiguity to the occurrence of the entity signaled. That is, the presence of some entity is perceived to be signaled in the context of communication incorporating the sign vehicle. *Symbols* are the residual class of signs where neither physical similarity nor contextual contiguity hold between sign vehicle and entity signaled. They form the class of 'arbitrary' signs traditionally spoken of as the fundamental kind of linguistic entity.
>
> (Silverstein 1976: 27)

Strictly speaking, therefore, semantics is the realm of symbolic meaning and is thus simply one of the several realms of meaning. Beyond limiting the scope of semantics, however, Silverstein reshapes the understanding of what remains. In place of the 'doctrine of sense', he institutes a theory of semiotic partials in which words are seen as 'abbreviations for *semantic complexes* made up of semantico-referential (i.e. symbolic) primes in grammatical constructions *together with* all of the *indexical modalities* of meaning' (Silverstein 1976: 51, original emphasis). Words are thus seen as combinations of simpler units of meaning, each of which can operate in any of the four modalities (symbolic, indexical, iconic, poetic). Indeed, each unit can potentially operate in several modes at once, as can the synthesised word itself (Silverstein 1985).

From this perspective, the meaningfulness of 'nonsense' words becomes describable. For although a word as a whole may be novel, its constituents, as well as the process of composition, may be familiar. For instance, on the most basic level, Whorf noted that Carroll's monosyllabic 'nonsense' words were correctly cast from the English phonological mould (Whorf 1956a: 224). At a higher level, we can note the presence of a range of standard grammatical devices (Hockett 1958: 262–5); for example, that all the 'hard' verbs have proper tense and aspect markings. Higher still, 'portmanteau' words combine previously uncombined, yet known, lexemes (see Partridge 1950: 187).

4 Denotational meaning of 'Jabberwocky'

4.1 Overview

Considered denotationally, 'Jabberwocky' is a parody of an 'Old English Ballad of Dragon-Slaying', a kind of St George and the Dragon with the names changed to protect the innocent. Carroll enjoyed spoofing the Anglo-Saxon

scholarship fashionable in his day (Carroll 1960b: 279, n. 2), and we find an extended example of this in Chapter 7 of *Through the Looking Glass*. Indeed, already in 1855 at the age of 23 Carroll had written the '"Twas brillig' verse as a stand-alone piece under the title 'Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry' (Carroll 1960b: 191, n. 11). In shaping the final poem Carroll seems to have had in mind a long German ballad, 'The Shepherd of the Giant Mountains', about a young shepherd who slays a monstrous Griffin. Carroll's cousin Menella Bute Smedley had translated and published the ballad in *Sharpe's London Magazine* in 1846 (Carroll 1960b: 197, n. 36).

To achieve this effect of parody of an 'Old English Ballad of Dragon-Slaying', Carroll used a variety of devices to which we now turn.

4.2 Poetic structure

The primary vehicle of denotational meaning in 'Jabberwocky' (see Appendix) is its poetic denotational structure which establishes a variety of 'metres'. For example, the deictically-specified position of denotata creates a symmetry of going and coming about the middle:

> V.1 Nowhere (ambient 'it')
>   V.2 Origin (home; default position)
>   V.3 Distad ('sought')
>   V.4 Maximal distance ('stood')
>   V.5 Proximad ('back')
>   V.6 Origin (home; default position)
> V.7 Nowhere (ambient 'it')

Similarly, the topic of the outside four verses is symmetrical about the middle three verses (which share a single topic):

> V.1 Episode interface (ambient 'it')
>   V.2 Direct quotation (father to son)
>   V.3 ⎫
>   V.4 ⎬ Son's Jabberwock mission
>   V.5 ⎭
>   V.6 Direct quotation (father to son)
> V.7 Episode interface (ambient 'it')

Additionally, the speaker of the verses alternates between omniscient narrator and father while the addressee alternates between reader and son:

V.1 Omniscient narrator → reader
  V.2 Father → son
V.3 ⎫
V.4 ⎬ Omniscient narrator → reader
V.5 ⎭
  V.6 Father → son
V.7 Omnicient narrator → reader

The net effect of these and other metres is to create a verse structure perfectly symmetrical around the middle in which verse 1 is paired with verse 7, verse 2 with verse 6, verse 3 with verse 5, while verse 4 stands alone (Alkalay- Gut 1987: 27–8):

V.1 'Twas brillig . . .
  V.2 Father: 'Beware of Jabberwock'
    V.3 Son outward
      V.4 Son and Jabberwock confront
    V.5 Son homeward
  V.6 Father: 'Joy, no Jabberwock'
V.7 'Twas brillig . . .

Since the temporal unfolding of the poem is isomorphic to the temporal unfolding of the event described, we find that in each pair of verses the initial verse is transformed into the final verse by the events of the intervening verses. Thus, verse 3 is transformed into verse 5 by the virtue of verse 4, verse 2 is transformed into verse 6 by the virtue of verses 3–5 and verse 1 is transformed into verse 7 by virtue of verses 2–6.

This last case conveys a critical component of the poem's overall meaning. Verses 1 and 7 are identical; thus, in what sense can a transformation be said to have occurred? Exactly in the sense that *no* (or better: a '*null*') transformation has occurred. In other words, no matter where we 'have gone' in verses 2–6, we ultimately end where we began; no matter what has taken place, the world order *after* is the same as the world order *before* in mathematical terms, the verse-structure is isomorphic to the group of integers modulo 6). In the grand scheme of things, therefore, the events of verses 2–6 either are ultimately insignificant or they represent the rectification of a disturbance (see the analysis of the Rotinese poem 'Oe No Dain Biin' in Silverstein 1981).

Verses 2 and 6 are the beginning and ending of the Jabberwock episode proper. Both are direct quotations of the father (as we deduce from the 'he' in verse 6) to the son; the first is a warning filled with foreboding while the second is a joyful congratulation. Thus, whatever occurs in verses 3–5 reverses the father's bearing to the world and his son. Verses 3–5, of course, are the son's adventure. In verse 3 the son picks up the gauntlet (or disobeys the father, depending on how you interpret it) and sets off in search of his 'manxome foe',

and in verse 5 the son kills the Jabberwock and returns home. In verse 4 the son and the Jabberwock come together for combat.

Thus, it is the son's encounter with the Jabberwock (verse 4) that ultimately accounts for the son's going and coming (verse 3 and verse 5), the father's shift in bearing (verse 2 and verse 6) and the restoration of the natural order of the universe (verse 1 and verse 7). Indeed, the poem's very title reflects and heightens the primacy of verse 4, and it is this verse which is depicted in John Tenniel's authorised illustration (Carroll 1960b: 198). Furthermore, we see that verses 1 and 7 and verse 4 are maximally opposed, that the outer and inner layers of structure are mutually antithetical. And since the meaning of verse 4 is clear while the meaning of verses 1 and 7 is not, we can deduce the latter by negating the former. Verse 4 is about 'out there'; verses 1 and 7 are therefore about 'here' (i.e. 'home'). Verse 4 is about imminent mortal combat; verses 1 and 7 are therefore about carefree repose. Verse 4 is 'instantaneous'; verses 1 and 7 are therefore 'eternal'.

Taking these facts together, we find in the poetic structure of 'Jabberwocky' the story of a happily resolved 'alien' aberration of an otherwise unchanging domestic idyll. Or, in deictic terms, we can say that 'Jabberwocky' depicts a narrowly bounded bad-there-then within an unbounded good-here-now (an observation critical for the analysis of the poem's interactional meaning; see 5).

Note that so far the analysis has not had to make use of any of the 'hard' words; all it has used are the ordinary meanings of the 'easy' words and the unambiguous poetic structure. Indeed, it was able to bypass the semantics of the first and last verses entirely once the verses were noted as identical, and it is precisely these verses that account for the preponderance of 'hard' words in the poem. Thus, we come to appreciate the genius of Carroll's ability to deploy the minimum semiotic material necessary for his purpose: just where poetic structure made semantically-driven meaning least necessary he used minimally-semantic signs.

4.3 Semantic, indexical and iconic contributions

Although the outlines of the denotational meaning of 'Jabberwocky' are established by the poetic infrastructure, many of the individual words ('easy' *and* 'hard') convey symbolic and indexical meanings which further particularise the poem as a mock-Old English ballad. The denotata of the poem are archaic and chivalrous and many of the words themselves are archaic and/or incorporate Celtic lexemes and/or follow Germanic morphology. (Throughout the Alice stories – and his other writings too, apparently – Carroll does not discriminate between Celtic and Anglo-Saxon as 'Old English'. He uses Celtic words and Germanic morphologies to index 'olden days' but refers to them directly as 'Anglo-Saxon'.) 'Jabberwocky' takes place in either the indeterminately remote past or the mythic/nomic realm (Silverstein 1993), as indicated by the opening and closing 'twas' which functions much like 'once upon a time'. The natural,

woody setting of the action, the use of swords and the formal speeches of the father all recall medieval chivalry. The predominantly idyllic conditions point to Camelot. In addition to 'twas' (which appears twice), we find 'hast', 'raths' and 'manxome' all of which index ancient usage, reinforced by the iambic tetrameter, significantly used in song and in archaic poems.

Many of the 'hard' words make definite semantic contributions to the denotational text. Contrary to popular belief, some of these are not 'made up' at all, but rather archaic or obscure; for instance, *gyre*, *whiffling* and *beamish* (Carroll 1960b: 194–7). Of the true neologisms, most are composed of existing lexical and/or morphological units. In particular, Carroll's famous 'portmanteau' words – which, as Humpty- Dumpty puts it, pack two meanings into one word (Carroll 1960b: 271) – combine several known lexemes, each appropriate to the context of use. For instance, *chortled* incorporates '*chuckled*' and '*snorted*' (Carroll 1960b: 271, n. 7; Carroll 1960b: 197 n. 35) and even the word *Jabberwocky* itself combines the known lexeme 'jabber' (Carroll 1960b: 195, n. 21) with a variation of 'wacky'.

Other neologisms signify through their iconic similarity to known/'easy' words and idioms. For instance, *wabe* is phonologically similar to 'wave', but appears in a position idiomatically parallel to 'wind'. Both takes, however, contribute to a reading of 'did gyre and gimble in the wabe' as roughly 'did toss and turn in the wind/wave', suggesting gentle undulation consistent with the poetic requirements of the verse.

Perhaps most interesting, though, is the case of 'borogoves' which, 'is commonly mispronounced as "borog*ro*ves" by Carrollian novitiates' – an error so common that this 'mis-spelling even appears in some American editions of the book' (Carroll 1960b: 195, n. 17, emphasis added). Note that the word as consistently mis-read suggests some sort of tree grove, a reading compatible with possible readings of the other 'hard' words in the verse and with the woody setting of the entire poem. In other words, the very fact of consistent mis-reading itself suggests that the meaning of this 'word slot' is only partially determined by the word which actually occurs there. A word entirely incompatible with this contextually-determined meaning would jar, disrupting the unity of the work. A semantically-vague word, on the other hand, is manhandled by readers into maximum conformity – even at the price of changing the word itself.

In addition to the symbolic and indexical modes, there is an iconic mode in which the sounds of words signify directly. In particular, Carroll employed the /i/ – /u/ contrast both to heighten the poetic opposition between verses I and VII and verse IV and to supplement the semantics of individual words. As Jakobson and others have noted, the contrast between /i/ – /u/ mirrors such contrasts as 'smaller – bigger, quicker – slower, more pretty – less pretty, more friendly – less friendly' (Jakobson and Waugh 1979: 192–3) and is often found in children's language (Jakobson and Waugh 1979: 183 ff. By loading the first and last verse with /i/ sounds ('brillig', 'gimble', 'mimsy'), Carroll accentuated the

pleasant, peaceful feeling poetically established and semantically confirmed. Verses II–IV, on the other hand, are loaded with /u/ sounds ('Jubjub', 'Tumtum', 'uffish', 'tulgey') which deepen the gloom and danger of the son's coming encounter with the Jabberwock. Verses V and VI are not loaded either way, accenting the emotional release following the encounter on the way back to the idyll of verse VIII.

4.4 Striving for coherence

Overall, then, through various semiotic modalities Carroll has provided a variety of partial meanings upon which readers/auditors impose order as they strive for coherence. In the process, readers/auditors draw upon whatever knowledge they possess. It just so happened that Carroll knew, explicitly or implicitly, what resources a well- educated, Victorian child such as Alice would possess, thus enabling her or him to see the text-encounter as a parody of a dragon story.

Yet, this is clearly not the only way the text can be coherently understood. Indeed, today it may not even be the dominant way. For example, in a casual survey of people's understanding of 'Jabberwocky', I have found that many modern Americans do not seem to possess the background cultural knowledge necessary to 'recognise' the dragon motif in the poem (although they all appeared to know about dragons, etc. in general). Rather, these subjects did not identify the Jabberwock more specifically than as a 'beast', 'monster', or 'animal'. (Moreover, the background cultural knowledge that modern Americans do possess leads them to invest the poem with an air of futility: for them the return to the *status quo ante* shows that nothing is fundamentally changed by the defeat of the Jabberwock.) These people, then, do not see an encounter with 'Jabberwocky' as a parody of a dragon-slaying.

Thus, we see that in a variety of ways the 'hard' words in 'Jabberwocky' largely function as place-holders, akin to algebraic variables, that each reader/auditor *must* fill in the process of disambiguating the poem. And thus, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' associations to individual words, any more than there are 'right' or 'wrong' interpretations of the poem as a whole. Rather, there are multiple sets of mutually-consistent interpretations for all the words in the poem, each of which can combine with the other semiotic 'vectors' to support a particular coherent reading.

In short, each act of comprehending 'Jabberwocky' is necessarily an act of personalising it. Carroll has created a kind of 'pragmatic' or '*parole*' poem – what Barthes (1974) would call a 'readerly' text – in which the denotata of speech largely depend upon the act of speaking, a king of poetic Rorschach in which any final interpretation is a co-production between author and reader/auditor. (Indeed, one psychoanalyst has actually used 'Jabberwocky' as a projective test [Pietropinto 1973; Pietropinto 1974; Pietropinto 1975].) So, when Alice says that the meaning of the poem is that '*somebody* killed *something*' (Carroll 1960b: 197), she is precisely right. That *is* the point, for in the case of

'Jabberwocky', it is the ambiguity as much as the specificity that is important (or as computer programmers are wont to say: 'it's not a bug, it's a feature').

5 Interactional meaning of 'Jabberwocky'

An encounter with a text is an inherently social act with meaning for the participants beyond the denotational. In other words, the telling is part of an utterance which is itself meaningful. In the case of narrative, this interactional meaning is often 'metaphorical' because the meaning of the narrat*ing* event is derived from the meaning of the narrat*ed* event. In particular, interactional meaning can be generated by mapping the narrat*ed* event onto the narrat*ing* event, enabling the identities and interests of the former to regiment the identities and interests of the latter. One simple way this can be achieved is by mapping the speakers and addressees *in* the poem onto speakers and addressees (respectively) *of* the poem (Jakobson 1960: 371).

This is easiest to see if we imagine a real Victorian father reciting the poem to his real Victorian son. In such an interaction, the text and human psychology conspire to identify the real child and the real father with the poem son and the poem father, respectively. In particular, the direct quotations of the father to the son in verses II and VI map directly onto the speech of the real father to the real son. Indeed, it is easy to imagine the real father 'hamming it up' by exaggerating and 'taking on' the poem father's voice while reading these verses. And it is easy to imagine the real son's willingness to become the hero of an epic ballad and his delight in so doing.

Thus, in this case, 'Jabberwocky' is not only a ballad 'about' a poem son, a poem father and a poem dragon, but it is also 'about' a real son, a real father and other real entities. The 'hard' words whose denotata were partially 'filled in' based on symbolic, indexical and iconic facts of the language take on a parallel set of denotata 'filled in' by facts of the real son's life. In particular, the Jabberwock is no longer identified solely with a dragon, but also with that real son's particular 'monster'. And by analogy with the 'literal', denotational reading, this monster is a minor disturbance in the son's otherwise idyllic life and is dispatched by the child himself to his father's approbation. Thus, a Victorian son would find the telling of 'Jabberwocky' to be ultimately comforting, reassuring and subtly didactic – just right for a child's fairy tale.

Other contexts in which 'Jabberwocky' is encountered will provide other interactional meanings. For instance, a modern American son unfamiliar with the dragon-slaying genre and imbued with the modern existential *zeitgeist* would still generate a parallel ballad about himself. In this case, however, the 'lesson' of 'Jabberwocky' would not be a happy one. Still other contexts, such as mothers reading to daughters, will change the possible regimentations between narrat*ed* and narrat*ing* events, in turn generating different possible interactional meanings. In the case of a solitary individual reading the text, for instance, the

reader inhabits the roles of both speaker and addressee and therefore may find himself aligned with the son, the father or both, each alignment producing a different interactional effect.

Thus, in whatever context with whatever regimentation of narrat*ed* and narrat*ing* events, 'Jabberwocky', in addition to being about some mythical event in which a young boy kills a Jabberwock, comes also to be about us and our relations to family and beasts (hopefully disjoint sets). Such an effect would have been difficult, if not impossible, to achieve without the use of 'nonsense' words.

6 Conclusion

Great works of art not only draw on the language and culture of their past, but also shape the language and culture of their future (Williams 1981), and 'Jabberwocky' is no exception.

Carroll not only drew on English language and culture to compose 'Jabberwocky', he changed both. In the first respect, a number of the 'hard' words in the poem have since entered the English lexicon (Carroll 1960b: 197, n. 35; Partridge 1950). Carroll himself used several of the 'hard' words in other works, including 'The Hunting of the Snark' (Carroll 1960b: 194–6, n. 13, 16, 20, 22–4, 28, 31, 33). In the second, the work as a whole has become a cultural artifact incorporated into a variety of works, including murder mysteries and science fiction. 'Jabberwocky' has even become the subject of parody (Carroll 1960b: 194, n. 11) and a film.

'Jabberwocky' thus demonstrates both sides of Jakobson's argument quoted at the top of this paper: it is poetry which cannot be understood without reference to the 'innermost problems of language' and which will not be *fully* understood without reference to the 'transformation of language' it unleashed. It is yet another example of, 'the ubiquity and mutual implication of Verb and Verbal Art [which] impart a seminal unity to the forthcoming science of the two inseparable universals, *Language* and *Poetry*' (Jakobson and Waugh 1979: 231).

Appendix

Jabberwocky

Verse 1

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

Verse 2

'Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
   The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
   The frumious Bandersnatch!'

Verse 3

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
   Long time the maxome foe he sought –
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
   And stood awhile in thought.

Verse 4

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
   The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
   And burbled as it came!

Verse 5

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.

Verse 6

'And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
   Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!'
   He chortled in his joy.

Verse 7

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

(Carroll 1960b: 191–7)

Note

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