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Morphology, Semantics, and Style in "Jabberwocky"

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, "Jabberwocky" was introduced to the main character, Alice, in a "looking-glass book," meaning that it was on the page backwards and had to be held up to a mirror to be read (Carroll). "Jabberwocky" began as a one stanza poem that Carroll printed in a periodical he created for his family's amusement. He called it "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry" and it went:

Twas bryllyg and ye slythy toves

Did gyre and gymble in ye wabe:

All mimsy were ye borogoves;

And ye mome raths outgrabe ("Jabberwocky").

Based on the poems beginning, it is clear that it began for pure amusement; however, as most linguists and literary artists know, language and literature were not created in a box—The meaning of each can change over time, depending on who is reading it. "Jabberwocky" has done just that. It began as a one stanza poem for his family's amusement and has since grown to represent the union of language and literature.

"Jabberwocky" is a poem "about a boy's initiation into manhood as he triumphs over the terrible Jabberwock, whose head he brings home as a trophy to his rejoicing father, it is at the same time about an initiation into the frightening thicket of language" (Goldfarb). Though when Alice reads it in the book, all she understands about it is that "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" (Curzan 275).

In an article on "Jabberwocky," the writer analyses the poem by talking about Humpty Dumpty's reference of the poem as a portmanteau. "You see it's like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word." She also defines portmanteau as it applies to words: "A portmanteau is the opposite of a pun. Whereas a pun derives two meanings from a single word, a portmanteau uses two words to arrive at a single meaning" (Goldfarb). According to a textbook for language and linguistics, "meaning isn't confined to lexical meaning: it develops from the relations of words, morphosyntax, and syntax in specific context, dependent also on relationships among speakers" (Curzan 203). Though there are many words in the poem that we do not understand, there are also many words that we do, most from closed morphological classes, meaning "words we use to organize sentences and larger segments of speech" (Curzan 203).

Looking specifically at the second stanza of "Jabberwocky," we do not know what a "Jabberwock" is, but we know it has "jaws that bite" and "claws that catch." And we know that someone is warning him by the recognized word "beware," and we know it is his father speaking to him by the noun phrase "my son." So when we break it down, the first two lines could be saying: "Beware the [thing], my son! The jaws that bite, and claws that catch!" We also do not know what "Jubjub" means, but we can say it is a kind of bird. And we don't know what

"frumious" means or what a "Bandersnatch" is, but we know we are supposed to "shun" it. So the second two lines of this stanza could be saying: "Beware the [kind of] bird, and shun the [kind of] [thing]!" All of the nonsense words are ones that are easily identifiable within a class. "Jabberwock" is obviously a noun because it has a determiner "the" before it. "Jubjub" is an adjective because it comes after determiner "the" and before noun "bird," meaning that it is describing the bird. "Frumious is an adjective because it ends in the morpheme "-ous" and comes before "Bandersnatch," which is a noun because it is capitalized and comes after "the frumious." Though the words make no defined sense to us, we can figure out what it is saying without knowing what exactly it is saying it about (Carroll).

Looking back at Alice's statement "However *somebody* killed *something*; that's clear at any rate," we can look at how she came to this conclusion in the fifth stanza. "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" (Carroll). The first line is a description of the movements during the fight using repetitive phrases as if the boy stabbed the Jabberwock several times. "Vorpal" is an adjective describing the blade and "snicker-snack" is an onomatopoeia, so the second line could be saying "the [some kind of] blade went [some kind of noise]." The third line is where she understood that the Jabberwock was dead because it was a recognizable clause and phrase. "He left it dead, and with its head" tells us that the boy killed the Jabberwock and took its head with him. "He went galumphing back" is a description of his leaving the scene and going home to his father. Though we don't know what "galumphing" means, we know it's a verb and we know it is leading him "back" to where he came so it must be a motion verb (Carroll).

The not-really nonsense language in "Jabberwocky" is a great representation of morphology, semantics, and style. Morphology is "the study of word structure" (Curzan 99) and

can be represented in "Jabberwocky" by the recognition of morphological classes by morphemes on the end of words: "-ous" in "frumious" and "-ing" in "galumphing" are two examples. Semantics has two sides to it: lexical semantics, which is how words mean and compositional semantics, which is "how words and syntax work together to make sentences mean" (Curzan 204). Compositional semantics is represented in "Jabberwocky" by how we know that the Jabberwock is some kind of animal because we know it has "jaws that bite and claws that catch," and we know that the vorpal blade made a noise because it "went snicker-snack." Style is represented in the text by the idea of it being a "portmanteau" made up of smaller "portmanteaus," the smaller ones being the words and the larger the poem itself as Goldfarb said. "Jabberwocky" has many linguistic aspects to it and is a great source for extra understanding of how the parts of language work.

Works Cited

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