

A Jabberwockian Approach To Discourse Analysis

BY NANCY ARAPOFF

*Tw'as brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble on the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves
And the mame raths outgrave.*

Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky" is very popular in freshman composition texts, partly because of its delightful nonsense words, but mostly because it illustrates so clearly what grammar is. Native speakers often have great difficulty understanding the nature of grammar. Because they don't have to think about grammar in order to formulate sentences in their language, they fail to see that the meaning of the words they utter is determined largely through grammatical context. Words have become real things to them, rather than parts of a symbolizing system.

In "Jabberwocky," though, most of the words have no meaning. The students, however, will insist that they do. When asked whether TOVES refers to a thing or to an action they will inevitably assert that it refers to a thing, or, rather, to two or more things. Then, when asked how they know this, the light dawns. They begin to discover what grammar is: a system which creates meanings.

Since grammar, then, is the conveyor of meaning, it ought certainly to be useful in teaching reading comprehension to foreign students, in teaching students to figure out the meaning of what they read. But the kind of grammar taught in reading comprehension courses must be discourse grammar, not sentence grammar: foreign students taking reading comprehension can already understand sentences, already know the grammar of English sentences fairly well, else they would not be in such a course. Thus, the goal in teaching comprehension must be to teach stu-

dents to understand linguistic units larger than a sentence: discourses. Just as the students should be able to identify the subject of a sentence, so too they should be able to find the assertion in a sentence (the predicate), so too they should be able to identify the assertion in a discourse (the thesis). But all too often they never learn to do this. And the fact is, few teachers can tell them how; few teachers can tell them what discourse grammar is.

Mystique of Language

I think that the minds of all too many of us have been boggled by the many composition and literature courses we took throughout our school years. We tend to think of the written language as a kind of mystique in which THEME and PLOT lurk as mysterious entities. Frankly, as sophisticated as we may be when it comes to sentence-level grammar, we join our unsophisticated students when it comes to discourse-level grammar. If we were asked, for example, why we knew a certain sentence was the thesis of an essay, I'll wager that most of us would answer that it was the main idea of an essay, the one that all of the other sentences discussed, or something like that. We find it very difficult to disassociate ourselves from the meanings of the sentences in a discourse so that we can look at the system which creates those meanings.

I therefore propose that we use a new approach to the grammatical analysis of discourses; an approach in which we can be sure that meaning

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will not interfere with the objectivity of our findings; i.e., a "Jabberwockian" approach.

Space here does not permit thorough exposition of this proposed means of analysis. However, the sample unit below, composed of a model discourse written in "Jabberwockian," and of some questions about it, will give teachers some ideas as to how to use such an approach. Using this approach will help students to understand a "real" written discourse by helping them to understand the grammatical system which creates the meaning of the discourse.

Sample Unit

Although morsle flays have one overtromping ovingle as compared to Maniacan flays, they also have one abstonate disovingle. To illustrate, morsle flays have the ovingle of being a much more smackical bim than Maniacan flays: their ferial cran is less; they cran less to abodate; their tropes are less cranly, and their regray ploy is trumber. On the other hand, morsle flays have the disovingle of being less grumby than Maniacan flays: they haven't as much flout; they have less zam; they don't drom as smithily; and they plack the bondaful maxic trinks that Maniacan flays have. Therefore, those flay-branners twingled in smakomy bim morsle flays while those twingled in grum bim Maniacan flays.

Questions for Students

1. What is the subject of the above paragraph?
2. What is the thesis (the general assertion about the subject)?
3. What two general examples illustrate what the thesis asserts?
4. What relationship do these examples have to one another--i.e., do they have a cause-effect, chronological, enumerative, comparative, or additive relationship?
5. What specific examples illustrate each of the general examples?
6. The questions you have just answered have required that you recognize the meanings of senten-

ces, not in isolation, but in relation to other sentences in the paragraph. These meaning relationships were recognizable only through the presence of various grammatical signals. On a discourse level, the most common grammatical signals are: a) positioning of phrases and sentences within the discourse, b) repetition of key words, synonyms, pronouns, c) parallelism, d) morphemes like -ER, and e) punctuation--especially colons and semicolons. Give specific examples from the paragraph of each of these kinds of grammatical signals, and explain how the presence of these signals makes the meaning relationships among the various sentences of the discourse recognizable to you.



Left to Right: Mrs. King, Sir Arthur King, Dr. Gerald Dykstra (University of Hawaii) and Alice Pack (CCH) with back to camera.

Dr. Arthur King is Comptroller, British Council, in charge of world wide British ESL programs. The Kings had a two day stop in Hawaii during September. They, with their hosts in Hawaii, Dr. and Mrs. Gerald Dykstra, made a brief visit to the Church College campus and were guests of President Owen J. Cook for a tour of the Polynesian Cultural Center. The British educator expressed considerable interest in the BATESL major at the Church College, and felt that such an undergraduate program should be offered at more colleges and universities as the need for trained English teachers on the elementary and secondary level in the English Second Language field is world wide.