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Research in Brief: Slaying the Jabberwock

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WPEL Research in Brief

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Slaying the Jabberwock

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

David Howland studies foreign and native speakers' strategies for interpreting the poem "Jabberwocky" by Lewis Carroll. Howland explains that Carroll originally presented the poem under the title "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry" in a private family journal called Mischmasch (published posthumously in 1932); in this journal Carroll annotated his manuscript with glosses of the "quasi-Old English" words, many of which he had fabricated himself, and a complete "translation" of the text.

Howland continues that the poem known to modern readers was first published, though without glosses, in Through the Looking Glass. The

cryptic lexical items interspersed among the recognizable English words seem to be of foreign origin, yet contain English-like morphemes and word roots. Many of these words are amalgamations of two or more English words ("slithy" was derived from "slimy" and "lithe"--Carroll 1932: 140); other words are actual English words which are now obsolete ("mome" once meant "mother", "a blockhead", "a carping critic" or "a buffoon"--Gardner 1960: 195); others appear to be arbitrary creations; while still others are onomatopoeic ("Callooh! Callay!" refers to the call of a species of duck found in Scotland--Gardner 1960: 197).

Howland criticizes a purely structural approach to decoding the poem in which inflectional morphemes, word order and word class provide clues to the meanings of the unfamiliar lexical items; he compares the poem to an abstract painting or a sculpture of words which is meant to evoke different images in each reader while giving all readers the idea that the "Jabberwock" has been slain.

In a preliminary study, Howland elicited interpretations of this poem from four respondents: two non-native speakers, one with a background in literature; and two native speakers, one also with a background in literature. He first asked respondents to pronounce the unfamiliar forms and to explain how they arrived at that pronunciation. Respondents used semantic clues as well as pronunciation rules as the basis for their explanations; for example, in discussing the word "slithy", two respondents related "slithy", and all words beginning with "sli-" in English with "slippery", and one respondent related it to "little", since the poem sounded like a fairy

tale. These three respondents pronounced the word as /sliθi/. The fourth respondent, a native speaker of English with little background in literature, pronounced it as /slaiʒi/ because it sounded like "slimy". The "slimy" interpretation by the last informant colored his later "translations" in the first stanza: "'Twas (brilliant) and the (slimy toads) did (mire) and (muck) in the (mud);..."

The last line of the first stanza produced uncertainties as to structure as well as meaning: two interpreted "mome raths outgrabe" as: N + V + PP, while the other two chose an ADJ + N + two-part V or NP + two-part V structure. Howland concludes that structural cues are secondary to an overall impressionistic interpretation by line or stanza.

Howland contends that the poem's unusual lexical items and ambiguous meaning as a whole can be related to the Prague School's concept of "foregrounding": bringing the unexpected to the attention of the reader. He describes the interpretation of Carroll's "multiple foregrounding" as necessitating a cyclical approach. The first cycle seemed to be for these four respondents the perception of lexical meaning, upon which the decoding of structure seemed to depend; the semantic and structural perceptions formed the in toto perception; and, in turn, readers built upon their total impression to aid in decoding later structures and lexical items.

Carroll, L. (1932). The ractory umbrella and Mischaesch.
London: Cassell and Company, Ltd.

Gardner, M., (ed.). (1960). The annotated Alice.
New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc.