

Sense and Nonsense: Image Schemas in Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*

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Abstract

Ever since its inception, the Image Schema theory has helped linguists develop an understanding of how our bodily experiences impact our cognition and language. It has contributed to an understanding of the complex cognitive processes including realization of metaphors. Non-sense literature has an appeal to itself since it does not align with the concept of normality. The ensuing issue is how does our brain conceptualize the bizarre events presented therein? The present study is aimed at explaining how Image Schemas help our mental process and make sense out of nonsense, by applying them on a particular event from *Hunting of the Snark* by Lewis Carroll.

Keywords: Cognitive linguistics, image schemas, nonsense literature, Lewis Carroll

1. Introduction

Literary non-sense is a literary genre where the rules of logic and language are not strictly followed. Its origin is unknown; nonetheless it gained popularity in the Victorian age through the works of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. Non-sense literature has been the subject of not only literary analysis but it has also attracted a number of linguists to examine the subject from linguistic perspective. Lewis Carroll wrote a fascinating poem *Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits*, published in 1876, where he describes the adventure of a peculiar team which sets out to hunt an animal called 'Snark'. Each Fit of the poem is like an expletive episode eventually culminating into a tragic climax.

The poem is set in the same background as an earlier poem *Jabberwocky*, from *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll, 1871, p. 7). The plot describes how a team of ten members, a Bellman (the leader), a Boots, a Bonnet-maker, a Barrister, a Broker, a Billiard-marker, a Banker, a Butcher, a Baker, and a Beaver set out to hunt a 'Snark' (Carroll, 1876, pp. 3-12)

Snark within this text is a fictional animal that sprung out of Carroll's fertile imagination. It has various species like the ones with feathers that bite, the ones with whiskers that scratch and an inexplicable variety called 'Boojum' which causes the hunters to vanish. The description of Snark and its habitat has a combination of commonplace and unusual features, and it is this combination which makes it nonsense.

Hunting of the Snark is one of the lesser known works by Carroll since scholars pay more attention to *Alice in the Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. By selecting this particular poem for our study we attempted to contribute towards highlighting the poetic genius of Carroll reflected through a lesser known classical work, and at the same time extended efforts to avoid intellectual redundancy. Moreover, the format and subject matter of the poem offer infinite potential for cognitive linguists and stylisticians. The powerful mental images presented in the poem are indeed a prolific area for scholars and ordinary readers alike.

The present study focuses on the last fit of the poem. We approached the poem from a cognitive linguistics view point, specifically from the perspective of image schemas, which are recurring patterns of understanding imprinted in our brains through our bodily experiences. These embodied experiences impact our cognition and language, building a comprehension from our perceptions (Velasco & Sanchez, 2014, p. 284). The present study determines how the suspension of disbelief is achieved through application of image schema and through 'schema restructuring' (Landriscina, 2013, p. 18), a process which helps our brain to conceptualize unorthodox realities through family resemblance. The study shows that each event in the course of the poem conforms to, or resembles some kind of pre-established image schema, making the verisimilitude very likely and thus, though the poem is categorized as nonsense, our brain can conceptualize these abnormalities.

Nonsense is often confused with *Absurdity*. It is important to distinguish between Nonsense and Absurdity. Absurdity has no concurrence to reasoning or precepts and concepts, whereas non-sense is recognized and conceptualized by our brain. While reading absurdity we keep tallying with logic, but are unable to achieve suspension of disbelief, whereas nonsense is able to achieve this end.

2. Image Schema

Image schema is a recurring pattern of understanding built in the brain through our embodied experiences. Since our childhood, we develop concepts and precepts of reality in our brain. These concepts are initially based on precepts of space and image schemas are built upon these spatial primal. (Mandler & Canovas, 2014, p. 510)

The realities are dependent on bodily experiences and when similar events are repeated, they form a pattern or 'schema' in our cognition. These experiences exist within domains encompassing similar schema (Clausner&Croft,1999, p.2;Evans&Green, 2006, p. 46). Through constant iteration, the image schema is further strengthened in our cognitive domains. However, this pattern is somewhat abstract, implying they are 'pre-conceptual in origin' (Evans & Green, 2006, p. 180) rendering them flexible in application. When we come across

similar situations within a domain where a few elements in the setting are uncommon, we can still conceptualize through recognizing family resemblance using a process called 'schema restructuring' (Landriscina, 2013, p. 18). This is how metaphoric extensions of reality are understood. We chart out patterns "from the 'imagistic' realms of sensorymotor experience [image schema] to non-imagistic ('abstract') ones" (Hampe, 2005, p. 2) and this is how suspension of disbelief is achieved while reading Non-sense literature.

For this study, one event has been selected from the *Hunting of the Snark*. The selected event has been analyzed using image schemas of various natures, and their contribution in achieving verisimilitude. The event under discussion is from Fit the VIII. It is the final Fit where the team of hunters finds itself in proximity of a Snark. The Baker finds the Snark and everyone cheers in joy and gets excited. However, it turns out to be a tragedy when the Baker announces it is a Boojum but vanishes before even his utterance has ended.

3. Analysis

While we read through the text of any length, our brain engages itself in rationalizing the text. This involves invoking all knowledge related to previous experiences and memory and developing concurrence with the text. Here is where image schema helps us visualize; as Kimmel (2009, p.172) proposed they formulate 'meso- and macrostructure' of realities and abstracts. And since the categorization in our cognition is fuzzy, this slipperiness of concepts help readers build mental images of the nonsensical events as acceptable reality.

Image schemas, being the mental-maps are abstract and flexible by their very nature. They help us construe meaning out of metaphor through family resemblance while reading, rendering true unlikely events such as the ones depicted in nonsense literature. Let us consider the lines from Fit the VIII in 'Hunting of the Snark'

Fit the VIII opens with the following lines:

THEY sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
They pursued it with forks and hope;
They threatened its life with a railway-share;
They charmed it with smiles and soap. (Carroll, 1876, p.79)

Here we observe that far-fetched images are used, such that are not in line with reasoning. How can railway-shares be used for threatening? Nonetheless, while reading these lines our mind builds connections. The action of seeking is apparent from the first two lines. Seeking conforms to our schema of 'Identifying' (Clausner & Croft, 1999, p. 15) where we look for something that we already recognize. The next two lines show a force behind them. When the poet says

'they threatened its life' we know that an element of force is registered here hence the mind either ignores the object used for 'compulsion' or finds humor in it.

They shuddered to think that the chase might fail,

And the Beaver, excited at last, went bounding along on the tip of its tail, for the daylight was nearly past. (p.79) from the lines above it can be construed that an element of fear is involved. Fear, as Kimmel (2005, p.451) pointed out, relates itself to the image schema of 'force-dynamic patterns'. It is interesting to note that the next three lines give a sense of anticipation and excitement, which also conform to force-dynamic patterns. Yet, the connotation or feeling attached to it is somewhat positive. However, in the element of fear, we feel the force of 'restraint'(Clausner & Croft,1999, p.15) whereas in excitement and anticipation an opposite force of enablement is prevalent.

The story progresses in the following lines:

"There is Thingumbobshouting!" the Bellman said.

He is shouting like mad, only hark !

He is waving his hands, he is wagging his head,

He has certainly found a Snark !" (p. 80)

There is a pattern conformation to the schema of 'Identification' (Clausner & Croft,1999, p. 15), where the Bellman recognized or 'matched' the previous known knowledge of the persona of Baker with the now shouting and waving figure. Also to be noted that waving of hands, wagging of head, shouting to beckon, they all show forcedynamics. Some actions show movement through space. Our brain recognizes the movement-through-space schema, hence we can almost visualize Baker moving and waving his hands above his head. The various domains involved in the construct of this image include 'up and down' schema where we conceptualize the Baker having his hands in the air slightly 'above' his head; and force-dynamic schema through which we conceptualize the waving motion depicting excitement. This sense of excitement and his active motion has a consequent affect on the Bellman. The element of recognition through inference is generated. The Bellman infers through his actions that he has probably found a Snark.

The team on the whole has found a new sense of respect for the Baker. The following lines are written from a certain point of reference, that being the point where the whole team of hunters is standing.

They gazed in delight, while the Butcher exclaimed

"He was always a desperate wag!"

They beheld him their Baker their hero unnamed
On the top of a neighbouring crag, (p. 80)

From here we can find two schemas in operation. The dimension schema i.e.: far-straight (towards Baker) and the up and down schema, both of which are space bound. From each of their reference point, all the hunters are looking straight in the direction of the Baker, who is on top of a crag, which is above their reference point. Traditionally everything that is 'up' is taken into positive/progressive account. The Baker is on 'top' of the crag, we know he is held in certain kinds of reverence by his fellows. The image is further strengthened by words like 'delight': a positive energy, thus a positive force schema and 'their hero': a person held in 'high' account that is metaphorically 'upward' and taking the Butcher's compliments into account. 'He was always 'a desperate wag'. Generally, being desperate is not taken into good accounts, nonetheless, here the word 'wag' shows it is linked to constant movement. From a referential point, if a body is in constant movement, it submits the amount of energy that goes into the process, which is operative in force domain. Here the force used is positive; making the Baker a very active hunter, commended by his team members. The 'up' schema is further emphasized in the line to follow:

Erect and sublime, for one moment of time. (p. 80)

'Erect and sublime' both reinforce the schema of 'up'. Being the hero, he now stands 'up' above everyone else and claims their respect. Nonetheless, it quickly changes with: In the next, that wild figure they saw

(As if stung by a spasm) plunge into a chasm,
While they waited and listened in awe, (p. 81)

The visualization of plunging action conforms to the 'down' schema. The Baker was standing on 'top' of the crag at one moment and in the very next moment he 'plunges' into a chasm illustrating falling 'down' from a point. Conventionally this implies a negative/regressive thing. This sudden event generates in the rest of the team, elements of fear and inaction, rendering the force-dynamics negative. The following lines clarify the turn of events clearly; notice how space-bound and force-dynamic schemas are used in them:

"It's a Snark !" was the sound that first came to their ears, And seemed almost too good to be true.
Then followed a torrent of laughter and cheers:
Then the ominous words "It's a Boo" (p. 81)

We can see that the poet uses the words 'sound that first came'. The word 'came' metaphorically represents 'sound' as a traveller that *comes* from an observational point that is the Baker towards the referential point which is the other hunters. Therefore, although it went away from Baker, but since we are viewing its activity from the point of reference of the hunters and not Baker; therefore they are the focus of the language, the force-dynamic schema is vector oriented, followed by disbelief; which, ironically, emerges out of all up-schemas. 'Too good to be true' is a phrase which mean almost a lie. How does our mind recognize it? 'Good' is up in schematic structure, so is 'true'. Here we use the adverb 'too' with the adjective 'good' but there is no modifier with the paralleled adjective 'true'. Hence, if good=up and true=up, we know if $a=b$ and $b=c$, then $a=c$; it can be inferred that good=true. But then too good>true is not paralleled anymore, giving way to an element of doubt. Interestinglydoubt is a down in schematic structure.

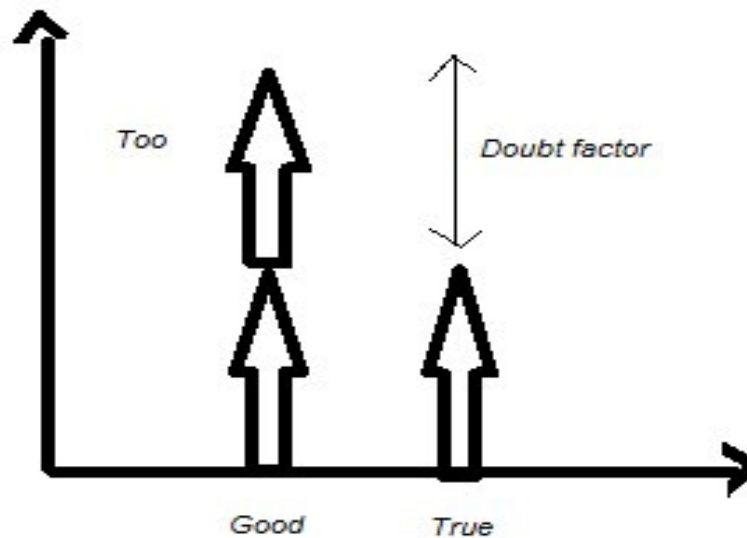


fig: Graphic Representation of schematic structure in the phrase 'too good to be true'

These are metaphoric extensions since neither sound can 'come' to a certain point in a bodily form nor can we assume abstract concepts like 'good' and 'true' show characteristics of tangible entities. However, our mind recognizes these patterns through family resemblance. Another example of the same principle is operational in the next line where the 'laughter and cheers' follow as a 'torrent'. Strong force-dynamic domain is operative in this metaphoric extension. Torrents are strong, forceful, and vector-oriented. This extension is used to highlight the amount of laughter and cheers that all the hunters could hear. They were forceful, strong and were travelling in their direction, reinforced by the word

'followed', which corresponds to the 'came' in previous line. 'Laughter and cheers' are the sign of happiness, thus corresponding to the up schema. But the scenario is altered by down-schematic word 'ominous'. Note that, had the word 'ominous,' which has a negative connotation, not been used, the sentence would not even give our mind a negative stimulus. And we would not be able to conceptualize the 'danger' (fear: forcedynamic schematic) involved. The lines to follow

Then, silence. Some fancied they heard in the air. A weary and wandering sigh
That sounded like "jum!" but the others declare
It was only a breeze that went by. (p. 81)

These lines show a clear loss of force through various schematic structures. First, 'silence' is used to invoke the concept of lost activity. It is in complete contrast with 'torrent of laughter and cheers'. From positive force-dynamic schema the scenario shifts the charge to negative force-dynamic schema. Significantly, the down schema is further strengthened by the 'weary and wandering sigh'. While the vector oriented sound 'came' to them earlier 'followed' by a 'torrent' of cheerful noises; opposed to that the 'sigh' is weary, loss of energy and 'wandering' is directionless. These negative force-dynamic schemas build the context for the identity schema used when they 'fancy' they heard something that sounded like 'jum'. They are trying to match the sigh with a sound. But they are divided on the subject when some of them declare, 'It was only a breeze that went by.' Again, unlike the 'sound' and 'torrent,' this breeze is not directed towards the referential point. It is aimed at some other unknown referential point, and our referential view point, which is the point where the party stands, happens to lie in its way. At this point, the reader's mind can already see a pattern that suggests a down-schematic chain of events in order. We already can conceptualize the tragedy. Although many elements are beyond logic, but since the chain of events is congruent with our image schematic patterns and domains, we not only conceptualize these events, but voluntarily give away reason. The poet then reinstates the identity-schema (Clausner & Croft, 1999, p.15),

"They hunted till darkness came on, but- they found
Not a button, or feather, or mark;" (p. 83)

The identification schema is kept enforced until 'darkness came on.' Notice how one little preposition changes the way we associate with darkness. Previously the sound 'came', but here the darkness 'came on.' Here our referential point is under the darkness that came 'on' to them. The space bound schema presents our hunter as 'down' in schematic pattern. Since darkness is absence of light, and things cannot be identified in darkness, where the primary aim of hunters is to identify objects, our mind infers that the darkness is an unwanted turn of events.

It puts 'restrain' upon the hunters which is negative force schema. Furthermore, even before this restrain, the process of imposing identity schema had already failed; they could not find any sign to 'superimpose' (Clausner and Croft, 1999, p.15) the existence of Baker (the absence of button), or the Snark (the absence of feather) or a sign that they existed (no marks). The domain of identification is enforced but it does not bear positive implications, reinforcing the downschemas from the previous lines. The last two lines of the poem invoke the schema pertaining to the domain of *existence*. After explaining how in the middle of laughing and joy Baker:

[...] had softly and suddenly vanished away
For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see. (p. 83)

'Vanishing' is encompassed in the schematic domain of 'existence' (Clausner and Croft, 1999, p. 15), however, in negative perspective. And the last line winds up the tragedy with some attempt to find reason. The snark '*was*' Boojum. Existence schema, with the sub-conscious emphasis laid upon the 'being verb' here helps us achieve the suspension of disbelief for the poem. Our mind is so engrossed in picking up what it knows, i.e. existence schema, that it ignores that facts that a) Snark is imaginary; and b) Boojum is an imaginary species. We readily accept the influx of nonsensical information along with those that our mind is able to reason with and recognize.

4. What Makes 'Hunting of the Snark' Nonsense

Since we have already seen that much of the events do make sense to us, then why is it categorized as nonsense? There is a difference between nonsense and complete absurdity. Farrell (2007, p. 78) suggested that the nonsense literature, particularly the pieces written by Carroll, have underlying structures that are hidden within language. What the language does in turn to create nonsense is, "it alters the meanings of existing words and challenges syntax by creating entirely new words," (Farrell, 2007, p. 78) for instance, 'Snark' and 'Boojum' here, whereas, the rest of the poem is still comprehensible through the rules of grammar and syntax. These words are used to hide away unacceptable elements such as violence. So according to Farrell (1998), interpreting nonsense is more like interpreting dreams.

What happens to our brain when we process nonsense? Samson et al. (2009), discovered that processing nonsense takes multi-sensory information into account and our brain has to struggle to build lucidity. It means that our brain recognizes nonsense as well as sensible data but it has to extend more effort in processing additional information that comes out of linguistic somersaults and language incongruities.

5. Conclusion

The reading process involves continuously invoking our knowledge of reality that we perceive through our precepts and concepts. These precepts and concepts form the cognitive, image schematic plain of our mind, and are relevantly flexible. The flexibility helps us fill extraordinary details in larger image schemas or mental maps and mental templates. Therefore when we read nonsense, we picture events though they are beyond the normal everyday events. Hence, nonsense does make sense, and thus the occasional incongruities like Snark and Boojum, and threatening lives with 'railway-shares' are comprehensible. This does pose some difficulty, but the resultant understanding of such nonsense gives a pleasant sensation, similar to that of interpreting a good joke, a dream or even some complex idea. Therefore, reading nonsense is a fairly pleasant activity not only for the children, who are the intended audience, but also for adults who are the secondary audience. That is the secret of Carroll's everlasting appeal for the both the children and the adults. And this is why *Hunting if the Snark* is a classic.

Notes

- [1] Fit is the poetic division of each episode in the *Hunting of the Snark* (Carroll, 1876, p.7). The word Fit is a clever choice, as the word can either mean *of the right size* or a sudden violent seizure; the second meaning refers to the subtitle *An Agony in Eight Fits*, treats the poem as a tragedy at a sub-conscious level
- [2] Actually Baker: owing to a weak memory, Baker had forgotten his own name. Therefore he told different names to different people. One of them being "Thing-um-a-jig!" (Carroll, 1876, p.7) The Bellman probably mixed up 'jig' and 'bob'.

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