Beyond the Boundaries of English:

Nonsense Language in Children's Literature

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between nonsense language and children's literature. Nonsense language as a field of study provides linguists with a means of examining language within the bounds of natural languages by drawing attention to linguistic structures and properties and opening them up to examination. Because of its affinity for oral storytelling and linguistic playfulness, children's literature provides an ideal genre for nonsense authors. This thesis will look closely at three nonsense authors within the field of children's literature: Roald Dahl, Dr. Seuss, and Shel Silverstein. By examining the work of these authors, this thesis will demonstrate that there is a strong connection between nonsense language and children's literature, and that by reading children's literature we are able to gain an awareness of our own understanding of how language works.

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Introduction

Defining Nonsense

      Modern society is shaped by its relationship to sense. One factor which allows society to function is the systems in place which we all take for granted, and which we all agree to adhere to. These systems help create order and allow us to interact with one another without total chaos ensuing. According to Susan Stewart, "Sense making may be seen as a primary activity of everyday life, that is, as an activity that is a feature or goal of a wide range of social behaviours. All 'practical action' is organized along principles of sense making, of rationality, and, at the same time, is an accomplishment of those very principles" (Stewart 8). Sense is essential to everyday life because it provides us with unspoken assumptions which facilitate the smooth functioning of society, and these assumptions largely centre around two things: constancy and structure.

      Sociologically speaking, our society is held together by a set of fundamental assumptions which we further assume to be inter-subjective – that is, we all assume that we assume the same things. These common assumptions can broadly be grouped into three main types of assumptions: "that the world is constant, that the validity of our experience with the world is constant, and that our ability to act upon the world and in the world is constant" (Stewart 8). These assumptions of constancy allow us to determine our place in a social system and in relation to the world around us. We generally assume that our interactions will "make sense" because they will follow the same patterns they have always followed, and that these overarching forces will not change when we least expect it.

These assumptions of constancy, then, give us the structures which help modern society to function and which allow us to relate to one another. These structures in turn create meaning by giving actions and interactions a context within society. As Jonathan Culler notes, "The cultural meaning of any particular act or object is determined by a whole system of constitutive rules: rules which do not regulate behaviour so much as create the possibility of particular forms of behaviour" (Culler 5). Without structure, actions have no meaning. The underlying assumptions of sense are the foundation on which these structures are built, thereby enabling our actions and interactions to have purpose.

This function of sense as providing structures of purpose and meaning can also be mapped onto language. Culturally, sense gives objects and actions a context which in turn imbues them with meaning, and the same can be said of the structure of language as it relates to sounds and words. Culler discusses the reverse of this comparison when he argues that:

> The notion that linguistics might be useful in studying other cultural phenomena is based on two fundamental insights: first, that social and cultural phenomena are not simply material objects or events but objects or events with meaning, and hence signs; and second, that they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations, both internal and external. (Culler 4)

It is important to note that although Culler is discussing the nature of sense in a cultural context, nevertheless he draws a parallel between that and sense in a linguistic context. In the same way that sense provides structure, and by extension meaning, to a cultural artifact, so too does sense provide structure and meaning to language. Language is simply a microcosm which imitates the larger structures of culture and modern society.

Of course, common sense can only function so long as it remains an unconscious act. Because sense is assumed to be made up of shared ideas we all hold in common, it does not need to be spoken aloud for it to function. According to Stewart, "That may be why, in thinking about common sense, it is so difficult to think of 'examples,' for an example is brought to the fore

whenever a rule needs to be illustrated, whenever the rule itself is problematic" (Stewart 8). We only discuss common sense when its validity comes into question, thereby defeating its status as common sense. When sense is forced to consider its own functioning, to become self-reflexive, it ceases to function as sense. In the same way a bird knows how to fly because it does not consider *how* it knows how to fly, so too does sense function purely on a subconscious level, allowing us to interact with one another based on shared, unspoken assumptions.

The simplest definition of nonsense, then, is just as the name implies: nonsense is the opposite of sense, and the absence of sense. By this definition, sense and nonsense are binary opposites, a perfect pair which diametrically oppose one another, and which are necessary to define one another. Stewart explains this function of nonsense as allowing common sense to function within reasonable boundaries. Because nonsense is not sense, it provides parameters within which sense can be said to exist. These parameters create a division between sense and nonsense, creating an opposition between the two. According to Stewart, anything which disrupts the functioning of common sense must be labelled nonsense, so as to "limit [its] influence to another domain, a domain that is not any 'real world'" (Stewart 6). By relegating nonsense to its own domain, it is separated from sense and kept at a distance, where it cannot disrupt sense any further. Sense creates order, while nonsense creates disorder. Each is defined by its opposition to the other, and one cannot exist without the other.

To better understand this function of nonsense, I will use as an example the short poem "Eletelephony" by Laura E. Richards:

> Once there was an elephant,
> Who tried to use the telephant –
> No! no! I mean an elephone
> Who tried to use the telephone –
> (Dear me! I am not certain quite
> That even now I've got it right.)

Howe'er it was, he got his trunk
Entangled in the telephunk;
The more he tried to get it free,
The louder buzzed the telephee –
(I fear I'd better drop the song
Of elephop and telephong!) (Richards 52)

By Stewart's definition of common sense, this poem violates the existing system of order in two major ways. The first is thematically. According to the basic rules of order and common sense, and elephant is not capable of answering the telephone. Being the largest land mammal on earth, without the capability for language and lacking opposable thumbs, it is simply not possible for this imagined situation to occur in the "real world". To allow for this possibility is absurd, and it overturns all systems of common sense. In a similar way, this poem also violates common sense linguistically. By all the conventional rules of English, "elephant" and "telephone" do not rhyme, despite the internal rhyme found in the first two syllables of each word. By allowing herself to become tongue-tied in the poem, the poet violates the accepted rules of English and changes the spelling and pronunciation of two fairly common words. If language is understood to be set in a rigid binary of right and wrong, then the wordplay which the poet employs certainly falls into the latter category.

This poem, then, is nonsense. Because it disrupts and violates the accepted order of common sense, this poem must be relegated to Stewart's "[other] domain" where it can do no further harm. As readers, we can feel safe in saying, "Of course an elephant cannot *really* answer the telephone. This is all in the poet's imagination." The same can be said of the linguistic wordplay. Any reader who has encountered the words "elephant" and "telephone" in the past, will recognize that these two words are not meant to rhyme, and that the author is violating the rules of sense by forcing them to rhyme. However, this violation can easily be dismissed by

acknowledging that this is a poem, and not an ordinary act of speech communication. By doing so we relegate words such as "telephant" and "elephone" to a literary domain, where their impact on the "real world" is limited. In this way, a binary is created between sense and nonsense. Sense is the property of the real world where we live and communicate on a daily basis. Nonsense, on the other hand, belongs in the domain of literature and imagination, separated from our daily lives and the systems that support them.

However, this definition of nonsense is far too limiting. Nonsense is more than just the absence of sense. Rather than considering sense and nonsense to be a binary system, it is much more effective to consider the two together as a more fluid and changing system. The rules of language can be considered ". . . not so much injunctions as the delineation of frontiers on a map, a partition between what can and what cannot be said that is arbitrary and ultimately unpredictable" (LeCercle 54). This change in definition requires a major shift in focus. According to this way of thinking, the basic rules of language are not a rigid line which separates right from wrong, sense from nonsense. Rather, by considering these rules to be an arbitrary boundary, the relationship between sense and nonsense becomes more complicated. According to this definition, nonsense does not simply stand in direct contrast to sense. Instead, nonsense becomes an exploratory act, pushing beyond these boundaries to explore what is possible with language.

This shift in focus also changes our understanding of the nature of nonsense, from being a single, formless body which universally opposes sense, to being a continuum that is moving away from sense. This does not mean we must entirely discard the idea that nonsense can be contrasted with sense. However, as Stewart explains, "Like dirt, texts become increasingly 'formless' or anti-formal as they move away from a given system of order, for form is defined only in terms of congruence with the existing system of order" (Stewart 61). In other words, as

texts stray further from the imaginary boundary between sense and nonsense, they become increasingly difficult to understand and make sense of.

Take, for example, Richards' poem cited above. Although this poem undoubtedly violates basic phonetic structure by changing the pronunciation of "elephant" and "telephone", nevertheless it is still possible to understand what the poem is saying. Although it toys with language at the level of the word, this poem leaves basic grammar and syntax structures intact. In doing so, this poem stays close to the boundary between sense and nonsense, and as a result it retains enough sense that the reader is still able to understand the content of the poem. This is in sharp contrast to the famous statement by the Duchess in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: "'I quite agree with you . . . and the moral of that is – 'Be what you would seem to be' – or, if you'd like it put more simply – 'Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise'" (Carroll 89). This sentence may follow the standard rules of spelling and grammar; however, in its quest for nonsense it allows for the dissolution of syntax. By dismantling this important macro-level linguistic structure, Carroll propels this sentence much further away from the boundaries of sense than Richards' "elephone", and effectively minimizes the reader's ability to make sense of what they are reading.

There can be no arguing that sense is defined by its place within the boundaries of linguistic rules. Without these basic rules and structures, we would not be able to understand what is being read or spoken. However, by inhabiting the space outside of these boundaries, nonsense becomes much more linguistically rich than sense. Nonsense has the ability to stretch

infinitely far away from the boundaries of sense, and as such it holds infinite potential to change and disrupt our understanding of sense and meaning.

At this point, then, it becomes important to differentiate between sense and meaning. In a more traditional understanding of sense and nonsense, meaning is intrinsically tied to sense. If sense is considered the domain of the "real world", and if we find meaning through the forms and structures of this "real world", then it follows that to make sense is to make meaning (Stewart 6). By this definition, there is no meaning without sense. However, although they are linked in this system, meaning and sense are not the same thing. Sense is defined as adhering to the forms and structures of the "real world", while meaning refers to the reader's interpretation and understanding of the text. Meaning can be shaped by a multiplicity of factors, including reader experience, authorial voice, speaker intention, and interaction between the text and the outside world. Certainly, sense produces meaning, but the two are not analogous.

I make this important distinction between sense and meaning, because one of the keys to understanding nonsense is the ability to separate sense and meaning. Although they seek to disrupt our understanding of sense, nonsense writers do not aim to do away with meaning. Rather, nonsense texts ". . . make meaning differently than our expectations of sense normally allow. They create their own boundaries, systems of usage, rules, and individualized syntaxes; but these always interact in a dialogic relationship with the rules and conventions they disrupt" (Rieke 4). Nonsense derives its meaning from its interaction with sense, and with the rules of language. Taking a closer look at Richards' poem, we can observe this complicated relationship between meaning and nonsense. Clearly, Richards is willing to play with and change language at the level of the word. Richards flaunts morphemic structure by rearranging the syllables of "elephant/elephone" and "telephant/telephone", placing her poem within the realm of nonsense.

However, it is important to note that each time Richards breaks a linguistic rule, she does so in order to strictly adhere to the form of the poem. This is evidenced by the fact that in lines 5-6 Richards also plays with grammatical structure in order to fit into her strict rhyming scheme. In these lines, Richards exclaims, "Dear me! I am not certain quite / That even now I've got it right" (Richards 52). The key to finding meaning in the poem "Eletelephony" is to recognize the poem's strict adherence to the form of the rhyming couplet. Because the form dictates that each line in the couplet must rhyme, Richards changes "elephant" to "elephone", "telephone" to "telephant", and "quite certain" to "certain quite".

Truly well written nonsense language does not jettison the rules of language entirely, but rather engages in dialogue with them in order to multiply meaning. Often nonsense language will flout one aspect of the rules of language, such as grammar or phonotactics, while strictly adhering to other aspects, such as syntax. In the case of our "elephant, who tried to use the telephant," (Richards 52) the poet adheres strictly to the rules of poetic structure, which say – at risk of being redundant – that both lines of a rhyming couplet must rhyme. The resulting nonsense (elephant/telephant) presents the reader with a tension between rules and creative freedom, a tension which can offer multiple meanings to the reader rather than any one single meaning. The speaker herself acknowledges that she is "not certain quite" of which is the correct version of this poem, leaving the interpretation up to the reader. The reader may choose to accept the "correct" idea of an elephant using the telephone, or the reader can give meaning to the imaginary "elephone" and "telephant" and allow the nonsense to speak for itself.

With nonsense, meaning is never fully discarded. As LeCercle explains, "On the one hand, the centrality of syntax is upheld, and rules are deemed so important that the only possible attitude to language is one of strong prescriptivism. On the other hand, it appears that, in

practice, communications can be established – can always be established – beyond grammar"

(LeCercle 56) In theory, all meaning should be derived from sense, and without sense there is no

meaning. However, nonsense writers have demonstrated time and again that meaning can be

created beyond the boundaries of the rules of sense. By interacting with the rules of sense,

nonsense changes, rather than discards, the meaning(s) of a text, and gives the reader the power

to interpret meaning for themselves.

The binary opposite of sense, then, is not nonsense, but rather anti-sense (Champigny 10).

Anti-sense is that which defies both form and meaning, and which cannot be reconciled with

sense in any way. While nonsense works in dialogue with sense to create new meaning, anti-

sense stands in opposition and fully removes meaning from a text. Anti-sense performs a critical

function in that it helps us to define sense and shape our understanding of meaning.

Nonsense, however, is much more rich and full than either anti-sense or sense. Nonsense

is a paradox, which brings together sense and anti-sense in a single text, and which engages

sense in a dialogue that draws attention to the arbitrariness of the rules, or boundaries, of

language. In this way, nonsense language gives us a way to study and talk about language

outside of the constrains of natural language itself. LeCercle describes the purpose of nonsense

language as being ". . . a process not merely of denial, but also of reflexivity, that non-sense is

also meta-sense" (LeCercle 2). Linguists are often restricted by the fact that the only tool available

with which to examine language is the object of study itself. Nonsense language, however,

provides a means of examining and drawing attention to the rules and forms of language outside

of traditional sense.

Granted, nonsense language is not fully exempt from the structures of language. To

completely do away with these structures would create anti-sense, of which we as humans are

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not cognitively equipped to make meaning (Champigny 54). However, nonsense language does draw attention to the rules of language through its attempts to break these rules while still making meaning. In this way nonsense allows us to comment on language by ". . . [emphasizing] the reversible and flexible nature of communication" as it is defined, but not limited by, linguistic boundaries (Stewart 69). As Rieke explains, "By manipulating language at the boundaries of meaning . . . they [nonsense writers] heighten our awareness of language as a place where new meaning and sense are born" (Rieke 4). Richards creates this awareness both through her deliberate adherence to the rhyming couplet structure, and by drawing attention to her cognizance of her own mistakes. Richard's rhyming scheme is made possible by the assonance shared by the words "elephant" and "telephone." The two words share vowel sounds and a syllabic pattern of emphasis, giving them a flexibility to interchange syllables in creating the nonsense text. In addition, by acknowledging that she is "not certain quite" of the correct way to tell her story, Richards also gives the reader an awareness of the arbitrariness of the structure of language. In reality, the only reason that "elephone" and "telephant" are wrong is because "elephant" and "telephone" are already existing words in the English language. By questioning whether these new words can make meaning, Richards opens up the possibility to the reader that new sense and meaning can be created by playing with these new words outside the boundaries of our existing lexicon.

Although not exclusive, nonsense language provides an avenue for critically studying the boundaries of language, understanding how they allow us to make meaning in the first place, and recognizing how they can be exploited to make new forms of meaning. The simplest way of understanding nonsense language is recognizing that ". . . its main interest is in language . . . it dwells within the paradoxical necessity and impossibility of a metalanguage for natural

languages" (LeCercle 35). In other words, by its very nature, nonsense language gives us a unique way to talk about and understand the system of language and meaning.

Children's Literature

Unlike most other literary genres, children's literature is unique because it is defined by the intended audience rather than the content of the text. The first texts published exclusively for children were produced by the Puritan establishment in the eighteenth century. The origins of the genre seem to come from the fundamental idea that, "in the process of their education, children needed books, and that those books must differ from adult books principally through their fundamental attachment to the educational system itself" (Shavit 134). Given that children were already learning to read by consuming the popular literature of the day, mainly in the form of chapbooks, the church decided to provide an alternative literature tailored specifically to the child reader. Texts such as John Newbery's *The Tale of Little Goody Two-Shoes* attempted to instruct children in religion and morality at the same time as teaching them the skill of reading.

Of course, the church quickly found that in order to compete with the adventures and romances printed in chapbooks, then their children's literature needed to offer more than just religious and moral instruction. According to Zohar Shavit, "the Puritan establishment was eventually forced to accept 'amusement' as one of the book's components" in order to appeal to a child audience (Shavit 138). By the middle of the nineteenth century, an imaginative model emerged which introduced features such as animal protagonists to children's texts. From there it was not a far step to introduce nonsense language to children's literature in texts such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Edward Lear's *Nonsense Botany*.

This fundamental shift in the nature of children's literature can be attributed to the fact that children have a very different worldview from adults, and consequently, a vastly different

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approach to language. As children are learning new language skills, the sound shape of language is equally as important as the content and meaning of a text. As Roderick McGillis explains, "The very young child needs to like language before he or she needs to understand it" (McGillis 9). When children are very young, they learn to appreciate the musicality of language, and to appreciate its sound, long before they learn the meaning of new vocabulary words. This means that these young children appreciate stories and poetry differently than the adult reader. A parent reading a picture book to their small child will be thinking about the meaning of the text, but first and foremost the small child will be enjoying the sound of the words being spoken.

This appreciation of the sound of language is not just limited to early childhood, however. Even when children learn to read, they still tend to associate stories with spoken language. This is because, "Children in some sense belong to an 'oral' culture, which means . . . that they will have different modes of thinking, different story shapes" (Hunt 58). Children love to tell stories and to listen to stories as much as they love to read stories. This is why so many successful children's stories use devices such as alliteration, rhyming, and repetition to create a more musical sound shape. Being able to share a story through telling is equally as important, if not more so, than reading it, because it provides the child with the one critical element that matters to the child reader: fun. Above all else, language needs to be fun.

This, then, sets us up for a conflict when studying children's literature. As scholars and authors, the way we understand children's literature is fundamentally different from the way children understand these texts. In writing children's literature, authors must consider "not children, but their conception of what children ought to be and ought to learn" (McGillis 17). As adults we cannot fully recreate the experience of childhood, but we can emulate it to a certain degree in the literature we create. Of course, this brings up the question of whether or not an

analysis is valid if it does not take into consideration the intended audience, given the fact that

the genre is defined by its audience. While there is no easy answer to this question, I believe that

there is much to be learned about our own understanding of language by looking at the way

children understand and learn language through literature. By taking into account adult authors,

child readers, and even those adults who read these children's books, we can gain a richer

understanding of language and how we use it to define the world around us.

Bringing Nonsense and Children's Literature Together

The following thesis will focus on the intersection of these two fields of study. Beginning

in the Victorian era, children's literature became a playground for nonsense writers who wished

to exploit the imagination of the child reader in their creation of whimsy and their desire to play

with language. I will be focussing primarily on twentieth-century authors, as this marked the

period when nonsense language in children's literature seemed to flourish, both in America and

in Britain. I wish to make clear that the authors I have chosen to study are not the only nonsense

writers or authors of children's literature at this time. Nor is this the only time period in which

nonsense language and children's literature co-existed. Rather, I have chosen these authors for

their particular relationship with nonsense, and the unique commentary each one provides on

nonsense and children's literature.

My analysis will follow along similar lines to LeCercle and Stewart in their examination

of nonsense as a meta-language used to examine our own understanding of language. I will be

drawing my analysis from a number of twentieth-century linguists, including Jonathan Culler

(*Strucuralist Poetics*) and Walter Hirtle (*Language in the Mind*), as well as linguists such as

Roman Jakobson and David Crystal, whose work on the sound shape of language informs my

analysis of coinages and other forms of invented language. Finally, I will be situating this

analysis within the larger discourse of children's literature studies, and examining the relationship between the linguistic analysis and the impact on both the child and the adult reader.

My first chapter will focus on Roald Dahl's *The BFG*, and on Dahl's relationship with the "proper" rules of English. I put the word "proper" in quotations, because as I will show, Dahl questions the authority and rigidity of these rules through the speech patterns and character of the BFG. In his work, Dahl presents the reader with a dual layer of meaning which speaks to both child and adult readers. The first, superficial layer I will discuss involves the BFG's struggle to assimilate the language structure of "proper" English. One of the most endearing features of the BFG in this text is the fact that he simply does not have the ability to express himself through "proper" grammar and speech patterns, as his grammatical skills are on par with a very young child. Examining the relationship between "proper" grammar and communication, then, we can see in *The BFG* the way in which use of "proper" grammar can aid in ease of communication, which is why the BFG seeks to assimilate the system in order to communicate with Sophie and the other human beings.

However, Dahl also creates a second, more subtle layer of meaning in his text which pushes back against the rigidity and prescriptive nature of these "proper" grammar structures. By studying other characters' interactions with the BFG, both in terms of language and in terms of the BFG's general character, we see that Dahl is making the argument that traditional language structures do not encompass everything that language has to offer. Instead Dahl invites the adult reader to adopt some of the child-like whimsy and imagination of the BFG, pushing past the restrictive nature of "proper" grammar to explore beyond the limits of what we already know. In this way, Dahl's novel highlights the complex nature of "proper" English as both a positive

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means of communicating with one another, and as a restrictive force which limits our knowledge and imaginations.

My second chapter will explore the relationship between sound and meaning in Dr. Seuss' *On Beyond Zebra*. In this book, Dr. Seuss explores and celebrates the sounds of English, and the potential they hold outside of traditional sense. The premise of the book presents the child reader with a series of additions to the English alphabet, thereby opening the child reader's imagination up to both the phonetic possibilities of English and the restrictive nature of traditional structures of sense. The first part of the chapter will focus on Dr. Seuss' use of coinages to explore beyond the boundaries of traditional English. Following Stewart's argument that one of the purposes of nonsense is to overturn the hierarchy of sound and meaning in literature, which places meaning at a higher priority than sound,(Stewart) I will examine the way in which Seuss uses his coinages to place emphasis on the sounds of English rather than the meaning of the words being used. In doing so, Seuss subverts traditional notions of language and highlights the ambiguity of any sense structure which dictates which words and sounds are "proper" as opposed to those that are simply possible.

Following a close reading of Seuss' coinages, I will then focus on Seuss' relationship with the child reader, and the direct appeal Seuss makes to the reader to subvert expectations and join him in an exploration of language. Drawing a parallel between the child reader and the protagonist of Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell, I will highlight the ways in which Dr. Seuss invites the child reader to explore and experiment with language, investigating the possibilities offered by language when we refuse to "stop at the Z" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*). Throughout the text Seuss' child protagonist is encouraged to explore the possibilities offered by venturing beyond traditional language structures. In doing so, Seuss pushes back against the rigidity of a

"proper" language, and allows the child reader to learn through exploration rather than instruction.

My final chapter will focus on a series of short poems by Shel Silverstein, taken from two of his collections of poetry: *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and *A Light in the Attic*. These poems explore the flexible nature of language, and its potential to allow for multiple interpretations depending on how the reader chooses to make meaning of sense. Looking at Silverstein's poems "The Bagpipe Who Didn't Say No", "The Farmer and the Queen", and "The Meehoo With an Exactlywatt", I will examine the way in which Silverstein deliberately sets up structures of ambivalence to multiply meaning and generate multiple layers of interpretation for the child reader to discover. Silverstein's use of homophones and linguistic conversion, along with his exploitation of binary oppositions, set the reader up to question any meaning initially apparent in the poem, and to seek out and discover a multiplicity of meanings in the text.

In the second part of the chapter then, I will study Silverstein's work through the lens of picture books, examining the way in which Silverstein uses illustrations to further complicate meaning in his poetry. Because of his history as a cartoonist, Silverstein makes use of images and illustrations to multiply and even contradict layers of meaning in such poems as "Wild Strawberries" and "The Loser". In these poems, Silverstein uses imagery to dismantle figurative language in metaphor, thereby creating multiple layers of meaning between text and image, between figurative and literal language. In addition, in "The Loser" Silverstein uses illustration to contradict the text, thereby stratifying and complicating meaning further for the child reader. Through his use of ambivalence, illustration, and multiplied meaning, Silverstein invites the child reader to explore the possibilities of meaning, even within the accepted boundaries of linguistic rules.

Each of these three authors has a unique approach to language and the child reader. Whether each author advocates for or pushes back against traditional language structures, it is impossible to deny that nonsense language and children's literature share a unique bond through the child reader, and that by reading children's literature we are able to catch a glimpse of our own understanding of language.

Chapter 1

Speaking the Most Terrible Wigglish

Language, Grammar, and Communication in Roald Dahl

> 'Words,' he said, 'is oh such a twitch-tickling problem to me all my life. So you must simply try to be patient and stop squibbling. As I am telling you before, I know exactly what words I am wanting to say, but somehow or other they is always getting squiff-squiddled around.'
> - Roald Dahl, *The BFG*

Despite the ever-evolving nature of language, individuals have often made efforts to standardize English and define a 'proper' register of grammar. These efforts have had two primary objectives. The first is to standardize English, and in doing so create a standard of social morality. Myhill et al remark on this tendency when they observe that, "It seems there is only a short step from viewing grammar as guardian against error in speech and writing to associating grammar with moral or social standards" (Myhill et al. 47). Historically, many movements attempting to control social and moral behaviour have been linked to efforts to improve grammar and language skills. In 1775, Samuel Johnson published his *Dictionary of the English Language*, following calls for a language academy by authors such as Defoe and Swift (Lynch 71). Moving forward into the eighteenth century, a movement was started to seek out a universal grammar which would standardize language across the English-speaking world. However, as Shipley notes, ". . . the quest for an ideal, universal grammar, announced by Roger Bacon, in the thirteenth century . . . and zealously pursued by eighteenth-century linguists, goes unsuccessfully on" (Shipley 81). Efforts to standardize English have been unsuccessful, largely because those efforts are impossible to realize.

The second objective of grammar is far more utilitarian, and seeks to establish clarity of communication amongst English speakers. Linguists seek to define structures and patterns which shape our understanding of English, and many of these patterns and structures are enforced as rules of 'proper' language. One of the benefits to assimilating and adhering to these rules of grammar is ease of communication. According to Lynch, the rules of grammar help to establish clarity in speech, and any text or speech act which foregoes grammatical rules, thereby obscuring clarity, is "a genuine obstacle to communication" (Lynch 274). If clarity is defined as the most critical element of communication, and if grammar aids in establishing clarity, then it makes sense to attempt to adhere to the rules of 'proper' English. This second function of grammar will be the primary focus of this analysis. This chapter will aim to discuss the way in which Roald Dahl examines the relationship between grammar and communication in his novel *The BFG*. Specifically, this analysis will study the way in which Roald Dahl both advocates for grammar as a means of establishing clear communication, and simultaneously pushes back against grammar as being restrictive to the child-like imagination.

For all its benefits, 'proper' English is not the only valid form of English. Because language is an ever-evolving force, to define any single form of English as being the 'correct' English is to limit the potential of that language to grow and change. Nonsense authors such as Roald Dahl push back against this notion of 'proper' English through their creative exploitation of the rules of grammar, twisting and perverting 'proper' English to make a statement about the way language evolves. By mocking the capacity that grammar has to impart meaning in a word and clarify communication, Dahl's nonsense language "does not just show us how language restrains thought, it also demonstrates the power that grammatical rules derive from their very regularity" (LeCercle 43). Grammar derives its power from the ability to restrict and regulate

language, effectually preventing the language from evolving over time. Certainly, grammar aids in establishing clarity of communication, but it also restricts the linguistic imagination and denies the possibility of new linguistic forms.

Roald Dahl, then, explores both sides of this argument in his novel *The BFG*. The story of *The BFG* follows a young orphan girl named Sophie, who is kidnapped from her bed one night by a frightening giant and carried off to Giant Country. Once in Giant Country, Sophie discovers that her kidnapper is actually the BFG (Big Friendly Giant), the only giant in the world who does not eat human beings (referred to as "human beans"). Instead, the BFG spends his time blowing dreams into the heads of young children, giving them pleasant dreams at night. Together, Sophie and the BFG invent a plot to capture the other giants living in Giant Country, locking them away so they cannot eat "human beans" anymore. With the help of the Queen of England and all the resources at her disposal, they succeed in their capture of the giants and save the people of the world from the horrible fate of being eaten.

In this novel, Dahl's tendency for subversion and a brazen flouting of the rules comes to the forefront. Originally a writer of Gothic horror for adults, Dahl's work often appealed to children's baser instincts by fighting back against rules and structures which, to him, did not make sense. In an interview with *The Times*, Dahl explains why his novels appeal so strongly to a child audience:

> When you are born you are a savage, an uncivilized little grub, and if you are going to go into our society by the age of ten, then you have to have good manners and know all the do's and don'ts – don't eat with your fingers and don't piss on the floor. All that stuff has to be hammered into the savage, who resents it deeply. So subconsciously in the child's mind these giants become the enemy. That goes particularly for parents and teachers.(Sykes 18)

Dahl deliberately structures his characters and their fates to appeal to the baser instincts of the reader, both for children and adults, albeit in different ways. This is particularly true of the BFG,

with whom the child reader can identify because of his struggles with learning proper grammar. The BFG relates to the child reader, because he too shares the same struggles in learning language. On the other hand, however, the BFG also appeals to adult readers, who are able to pick up on Dahl's subversive approach to grammar and language that rejects the structures of grammar in favour of a more imaginative approach to the world around us.

On one level, then, the BFG struggles with the rules of English, particularly with grammar, and requires help from Sophie in order to communicate with other characters in the novel. The BFG's underdeveloped grammatical skills would seem to be an impediment to communication, and by acquiring 'proper' grammar by the end of the novel, the BFG achieves his ultimate goal of successful communication. However, at the same time as the BFG is attempting to learn 'proper' language and fit in, his unique character opens Sophie's eyes to the fact that she does not know everything there is to know about the world around her, and that there is so much more potential for imagination and wonder. In creating this aspect of the BFG, Dahl opens up the possibility of linguistic exploration beyond the restrictions of 'proper' English. *The BFG* is subtly subversive in its critique of language, grammar, and communication. On the surface, the novel seems to be making the argument that the goal of language is communication, and that to master the system of language is to gain access to a system of communication that puts a person in touch with the rest of society. Throughout the novel, however, there is also the undertone that communication should not be the end goal of language, and that by restricting ourselves to conventional systems we are also limiting the potential of our imaginations.

The BFG's **Multiple Audiences**

As has been already established, children's literature is a unique genre because, unlike most literary genres, it is defined by its intended audience rather than its content. Children's literature is a broad genre, covering texts of all forms from poetry to novel to picture book. The one thing that each of these texts holds in common is the fact that they are all written with a child reader in mind. However, this does not imply that the intended audience is *exclusively* a child audience. Many texts straddle the boundary between children's literature and adult literature, offering multiple levels of interpretation depending on the age and experience level of the reader. Roald Dahl is one such author who traverses this boundary, as "the audience implied in [Dahl's] books is as much an adult one as a child one" (Hunt 46). In many of his novels, Dahl creates stories with multiple levels of meaning, which appeal to both child and adult reader. This duality of meaning is most clearly seen in *The BFG*, in which Dahl creates a subtle and sophisticated argument in favour of exploring beyond the boundaries of grammatical structure, packaged in a whimsical and entertaining tale for children.

Taking into account the fact that children appreciate more the extrinsic experience of reading, enjoying the sounds of language being read aloud much more than any deeper, hidden meaning, (McGillis 4) Dahl creates a character who plays with grammar and speech sounds in a way that appeals to the child reader. In many ways, the BFG as a protagonist is imitative of, and identifiable to, very young children. As we will see later in this chapter, the BFG speaks with a simple grammar that imitates the speech style of very young children. Much like a young child learning the complex, often abstract rules of grammar, the BFG struggles to communicate 'properly' with other English speakers. Even his coinages, unless they describe a completely unheard of concept, are often perversions of words and phrases in the English language. Take, for example, the "hippodumplings and crockadowndillies" which live in the zoo (Dahl 23).

Although they are not fully learned language users themselves, young children can understand this struggle with learning the seemingly abstract rules of English. The young child reader, then, is offered the chance to learn and master English alongside the BFG, whose own language skills improve by the end of the novel. In the meantime, the young child is entertained by the silliness of the mistakes made by the BFG, and the extrinsic, whimsical quality of the novel draws the child reader into the story.

However, this extrinsic appeal is not the only feature which makes Dahl's novel a success. Like many of his other novels, *The BFG* contains a deeper layer of meaning which is not immediately apparent to the child reader. Speaking of Dahl's novels collectively, Seth Lerer makes the argument that Dahl's work is "rife with caricature and sharp parody" (Lerer 302). According to Lerer, Dahl's work offers the reader a parodic look at society and its pitfalls, framed in the innocent context of a children's novel. This assessment certainly can be applied to *The BFG*, which offers the reader multiple parodies on our linguistic understanding of society. Most notably, Dahl offers the adult reader a more subtle pushback against the very grammatical structures which the child reader is attempting to learn. Although the character of the BFG desires to learn 'proper' English so he can communicate effectively with other language users, nevertheless his unspoken character and his influence on the world around him express the idea that grammar is more restrictive than it is necessary to communication. In addition, Dahl questions the relation between language, communication, and sociolinguistic status through the relationship between Sophie and the BFG. Despite the BFG's evident struggle with 'proper' grammar, nevertheless he is able to establish a rapport with Sophie in which the two intimately understand one another. Because of this relationship, Sophie views the BFG as her social and

linguistic equal, resisting the tendency to consider the BFG's idiosyncratic speech as being inferior or underdeveloped.

Lerer's assessment of Dahl's work is not entirely accurate, however. Lerer also makes the argument that in his novels, "Roald Dahl illustrates the dangers of imagination unbridled" (Lerer 302). However, a deeper reading of *The BFG* indicates that the opposite is true. Through his actions and interactions with other characters, the BFG shows Sophie and others that they evidently do not know everything that there is to know about the world around them. In fact, Sophie finds herself drawn into the imaginative world of the giant, as "This extraordinary giant was disturbing her ideas. He seemed to be leading her towards mysteries that were beyond her understanding" (Dahl 94). By showing Sophie a world beyond her own imagination, the BFG inherently highlights the restrictive nature of the knowledge and grammar that structures our lives, and invites Sophie to go beyond these restrictions into unexplored territory to see what is possible.

In this way, Dahl creates a text with two registers of meaning, and two intended audiences. At first glance, this novel would seem to be aimed towards a child audience, with its delightfully naïve protagonist and whimsical wordplay. However, a deeper reading reveals an invitation to question what we know, and to explore the possibilities open to us when we explore beyond our traditional language structures.

Language, Grammar, and Communication

For most of us, language is an intrinsic part of the human experience, as natural as breathing. Children learn language quickly, often before their first birthday, and barring disease or traumatic injury to the brain, they retain this ability throughout their lives. Fowler notes the fact that, even in the most extreme of circumstances, children seem to be able to acquire

language skills in some form. As Fowler explains, "If, then, a second language is hard to induce in an adult, the first language is nevertheless inordinately difficult to suppress in an infant. The rule seems to be: if you are human, you will in the natural course of events become a language-user very rapidly" (Fowler 2-3). Language is one thing we all share; it is something that connects us to one another and allows us to function within human society.

Despite its naturalness, however, "language is a genuinely complicated kind of knowledge and behaviour" (Fowler 1). Language is not a simple skill to acquire. Even if we are not actively thinking about it, it takes years to learn language, and still many more years to master it. Much of the process by which children acquire language skills, particularly before the age of one, is still a mystery. However, we do know that young children learn to understand language long before they are capable of imitating the speech sounds of adults around them. Known as the *fis phenomenon*, studies have shown that "there can be a big difference between what children hear and what they can say" (Crystal 87). This phenomenon is named after a particular study, in which a child referred to his pet fish as his "fis," yet became increasingly frustrated when the adult in the conversation also referred to the animal as a "fis" instead of a fish (Crystal 87). The implication of this knowledge of language acquisition is startling: if children understand more than they are capable of saying, then they must also mean more than they are capable of saying as well. However, without the grammatical and phonological capabilities of adult speech, they cannot effectively communicate their ideas in a clear and complete way.

It is likely, then, that the reason these language skills are so difficult to acquire is because language encompasses such a complicated, and often arbitrary system of rules and norms that govern how words work together with one another to make meaning. Culler makes this point when he writes that "to learn English is not to memorize a set of utterances . . . To know English

is to have assimilated the system of language" (Culler 8). It is not enough to simply learn and memorize the various vocabulary words which make up the entirety of the English language. Besides the fact that there are simply too many words for any one person to memorize, without structure and rules these words have no context, and consequently little to no meaning. Therefore, to understand a language, a person must learn the rules which govern two key functions of communication. The first is how language users interact with one another in a social situation. This is the equivalent of knowing that the correct response to the question "What is your name?" is not "The library is due north."

The second set of rules dictating appropriateness refers to the way in which words interact, and how language users interact, to create meaning. This system of rules and norms is the grammar which structures language. Grammar is the system which allows words to have meaning, and which gives order and structure to language. Of course, when we use the term grammar, there are two distinct ways of understanding the term. The first form of grammar is "a psychological property, 'linguistic knowledge' of a deliberately restricted kind" (Fowler 39). This form of grammar exists in the mind of the speaker, and encompasses the cognitive forms and structures that allow the speaker to make sense of the world around herself. This internal grammar structure assigns meaning and value to speech sounds – both heard and spoken – for the speaker, and is unique to each language user. No two internal grammars are exactly the same, but each is essential to creating meaning in language.

The second form of grammar is a more formal one, and consists of linguists' attempts to define the rules of language. According to Fowler, the purpose of this form of grammar is to generate sentences by assigning structure and value to individual words in a way which makes sense of both the sound and meaning of language (Fowler 40). Although not the only factor in

making meaning, it would be wrong to say that grammar does not contribute to the meaning of a word within the context of a sentence. By assigning a grammatical structure to a word, the speaker is imbuing it with meaning in relation to other words within the sentence being spoken. Hirtle explains it well when he states that, "Thanks to this grammatical meaning, a word can fulfill the particular function foreseen for it in the sentence under construction" (Hirtle 43). Without this secondary form of grammar, words are isolated units and cannot function within a sentence. Although meaning is primarily formed in the mind, a formal grammar structure crystalizes and clarifies meaning within a greater context.

Of course, there are many benefits to assimilating the language system and learning the grammar structure of English. One of the most important aspects of this skill is the access it grants the speaker to a system of communication. In a broad sense, culture is defined by, and can be considered analogous to, language. According to Stewart, culture can be considered as "mutually understood systems of communication" (Stewart 58). Language is one system which allows us to interact with the people around us, and to participate in the culture at hand. Without language in some form, whether it be written or spoken, we have no means of communicating with one another. By extension, then, without language there is no communication, and without communication there is no culture. To learn a language system is to integrate into and participate in a culture.

The rules of grammar, then, allow us to participate in culture through the act of communication. Although we all have our own internal grammars and idiosyncratic ways of using the English language, the rules of grammar in many cases allow for clarity and ease of communication. In speech, grammar allows for a certain register of clarity which allows the listener to understand what is being communicated. Jack Lynch gives the example of using

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'proper' grammar in a job interview, as opposed to colloquialisms such as "dese here" (Lynch 274). By using 'proper' grammar, the person being interviewed speaks with a higher degree of clarity, and can be understood better by the interviewer. The same principle can be applied to literature, where using traditional grammar structures can allow for an easier and clearer reading experience. As Lynch explains:

> A good writer, therefore, won't wantonly split infinitives – not because infinitives can't be split, not because it's some moral outrage, and certainly not because the English language needs to be protected, but simply because split infinitives might distract readers who've been taught that they're wrong. At the same time, a good writer won't let these rules get in the way of real communication. Grace and clarity should always trump pedantry. (Lynch 275)

It is important to note that Lynch's statement here can be considered quite controversial, and contains problematic elements. Not all literature aims to make clarity its goal, valuing proper grammar over style. Certainly Rieke would disagree with Lynch's assertion, as she argues that modern nonsense writers in particular "challenge the notion that coherent, logical meaning must be the object of inquiry and that meaning must be the aim and outcome of language" (Rieke 4). In addition, Lynch's statement about grace and clarity does not necessarily take into account those factors which define what grace is to the author based on contextual influences such as social status, educational background, genre, etc. Nevertheless, the essence of Lynch's statement can be taken as true in the context of communication. By invoking proper grammar structures, an author significantly increases the clarity of his or her writing, and thus increases communication with the reader. There is a significant benefit to assimilating and conforming to the language system, in that a speaker or author may enter into the system of communication and interact with other persons within the culture system.

Looking to Dahl's novel, then, it becomes apparent that the BFG's greatest struggle is one of communication with other language-users. It is evident that the BFG has access to

Fowler's first form of grammar. Through his conversations with Sophie, we can see that the BFG has a certain intrinsic understanding of language which allows him to make sense of the world around him. However, there is a disconnect between the BFG's understanding of the world, and his ability to communicate this understanding to another language user. As the BFG announces to Sophie while attempting to describe a snozzcumber, "'What I mean and what I say is two different things'" (Dahl 41). Although the BFG is able to understand and make sense of the world around him, he struggles to communicate this sense to Sophie through language. The BFG finds himself incapable of constructing a sentence which fully conforms to an external grammar structure which Sophie can understand.

Of course, the reason for this disconnect is the BFG's underdeveloped assimilation of the grammar structure of 'proper' English. Throughout the novel the BFG demonstrates that his understanding of grammar structures is equivalent to that of a small child. In their text *Infants and Children: Prenatal through Middle Childhood*, Laura Berk and Adena Meyers lay out the typical pattern of language development in young children, with specific attention to the assimilation of grammatical structures. According to Berk and Meyers, most children begin piecing together a subject-verb-object sentence structure between the ages of two and three (Berk and Meyers 350). These sentences are usually extremely simple in their structure, and they do not make proper use of complex verbs. On average, English-speaking children do not learn to conjugate more complex verbs such as the verb "to be" until close to age four (Berk and Meyers 351). Once the child attains the ability to conjugate complex verbs, his or her sentence structures become increasingly complex through middle childhood, growing to include more difficult structures such as conditional verbs and passive voice. Typically it is not until the teenage years

that the most complex grammar structures are understood and language structure begins to resemble adult speech (Berk and Meyers 456).

Although the BFG demonstrates a remarkably comprehensive vocabulary, his grammatical skills more closely resemble those of a child of three. He frequently misuses conjugations of the complex verb "to be", as when he tells Sophie, "'We is in Dream Country . . . This is where all dreams is beginning'" (Dahl 72). Because the BFG cannot grasp the concept that the verb "to be" must take irregular forms – I am, you are, etc. – when conjugated, he defaults to using the third person "is" in every context where the verb is required. Although his internal grammar allows him to choose the correct verb to express his meaning, the BFG cannot understand that it would be more correct to say, "'We [are] in Dream Country . . . This is where all dreams [are] beginning'" (Dahl 72). In addition, the BFG struggles with complex grammar structures such as the formation of the superlative. In expressing his disgust at Sophie's living conditions at the orphanage, the BFG exclaims, "'That is the horridest thing I is hearing for years! You is making me sadder than ever'" (Dahl 31). In the same way the BFG defaults to simpler verb conjugations, he tends to default to using the suffixes "-er" and "-est" to construct the superlative. Rather than saying the situation is "the most horrid" he has ever heard, it is "the horridest". By over-extending simple grammatical structures instead of showing an understanding of more complex structures, the BFG finds himself struggling to communicate at the level of a more learned language user.

For his part, the BFG is well aware of these grammatical deficiencies, even if he is not able to correct them himself. The BFG responds to Sophie's criticism of his grammar by saying, "'. . . please understand that I cannot be helping it if sometimes I is saying things a little squiggly. I is trying my very best all the time'" (Dahl 42). For the BFG, communication is a

struggle at this time, because his speech does not employ grammatical structures which Sophie recognizes. Sophie, on the other hand, has fully assimilated the grammatical structures of the language, and so she must pause and give conscious thought to deciphering the BFG's speech occasionally. This barrier in communication is frustrating to the BFG, who wishes to share his thoughts and ideas with Sophie without difficulty.

Of course, the BFG cannot be fully blamed for his underdeveloped grammatical skills. In learning the English language, the BFG did not follow the same learning curve as most English-speaking children. While most children learn language by observing and imitating the adults around them, the BFG is largely self-taught, having acquired his language skills through reading. Children learn both grammar and vocabulary by interacting with adults. For example, a small child may excitedly observe, "Look at the mouses!" only to be corrected by the mother, who replies, "Yes dear, those are very pretty mice." In this case the child learns a new term, "mice", which they come to understand is the plural form of mouse (Berk and Meyers 350). However, the BFG does not have the benefit of a corrective influence to teach him how to use grammatical structures, and so his language skills are acquired through reading. Specifically, the BFG only has the novel *Nicholas Nickleby* at his disposal to read and to use as a teaching tool for language. The result is that, although the BFG has an extremely well-developed vocabulary set, he has not assimilated or understood the more complex and abstract rules of grammar.

By the end of the novel, however, the BFG recognizes that mastering the system of 'proper' grammar will give him access to a system of communication from which he was previously excluded. In the novel's epilogue, Dahl writes that, "The BFG expressed a wish to learn how to speak properly, and Sophie herself, who loved him as she would a father, volunteered to give him lessons every day. She even taught him how to spell and to write

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sentences, and he turned out to be a splendid pupil" (Dahl 198). As an experienced language user, Sophie takes on the role of teacher and provides the language learning tools which the BFG thus far has been lacking. Through interacting with, and learning from, Sophie, the BFG is able to assimilate the language structure in a way which allows him to communicate effectively with others. These communication skills even extend into the literary sphere, and just like Lynch's successful writer who "won't wantonly split infinitives", the BFG transforms his language skills and achieves his goal of communication by writing a novel. The end of Dahl's text claims that the true author of the tale is the BFG, citing his authorship as evidence of his linguistic achievements. In the end, 'proper' English triumphs, and the BFG succeeds in his dream of effective communication.

Language, Diversity, and Imagination

The relationship between language and communication, however, is not the full story. Despite the access to communication that the BFG gains from 'proper' language structure, there is a subtle undertone throughout the novel that pushes back against the restrictive form of traditional grammar structures. Going back to Stewart's definition of culture as "mutually understood systems of communication", it is important to note that Stewart clarifies this definition by explaining that, "The order of communication is a shifting and emergent order; the classification process does not work so much like a clock as like a living thing" (Stewart 58). The reality is that language is constantly changing and evolving as cultures change and evolve, and any attempts made to define a single 'correct' English will naturally be thwarted. Of course, this fact does not stop attempts to define a single, 'proper' English. Lynch notes the fact that educators and linguists have been attempting to correct English grammar in schools for over a

century, with "remarkably little to show for their effort" (Lynch 273). Students continue to make the same mistakes, without hampering their ability to communicate their thoughts to one another.

The truth is, "the version of English that's taught in schools isn't *correct* English, but *appropriate* English – English suited to the occasion" (Lynch 274). This fact does not exclude Lynch's argument that there is a certain register of English grammar which gains the speaker access to different modes of communication. However, on the flip side of that argument is the salient point that so-called 'proper' grammar is not the *only* form of English. Arguably, there are as many different 'englishes' as there are speakers of English. Crystal supports this argument with his breakdown of language structure as it relates to dialect. According to Crystal, "Dialects can thus be seen as an abstraction, deriving from an analysis of a number of idiolects; and languages, in turn, are an abstraction deriving from a number of dialects" (Crystal 290). Based on Crystal's logic, languages are nothing more than a collection of idiolects; that is, they are a structure made up of the unique speech patterns of every individual who claims to speak that language. Following this argument, this means that the English spoken by the BFG is equally as valid as the English which Sophie, or any other character, speaks throughout the novel.

Dahl certainly seems to be supporting this premise throughout his novel, as he uses the speech patterns and the character of the BFG to subvert the power that grammar has to achieve meaning and communication. Dahl demonstrates that although 'proper' grammar aids in communication, it is evidently not as essential as we would like to believe. Throughout the novel the BFG and Sophie are able to communicate with one another on more than just a functional level, despite the difference in their grammatical structures. In fact, the only misunderstandings which occur between the two characters occur over vocabulary, rather than grammar, as when the BFG tells Sophie that the English taste of "crodscollop", to which Sophie replies "'I'm not

sure I quite know what that means'" (Dahl 26). In this case, it is the definition of "crodscollop" which has Sophie confused, rather than the conjugation of the BFG's verbs. This is a pattern repeated throughout the novel, effectively demonstrating that 'proper' grammar is not as formidable a barrier to communication as the BFG would have us believe.

By breaking the tie between grammar and communication, then, Roald Dahl creates a nonsense text which draws attention to the restrictive nature of grammar. Following LeCercle's model of nonsense, we must recognize that "Rules of grammar, in the widest sense, are always stated tongue in cheek in nonsense – but using them paradoxically, or parodically, presupposes that one recognizes them first, in both senses of the term" (LeCercle 36). Dahl achieves this first requirement of nonsense when he gives the BFG a grammar structure which is on par with a very small child. However, it is important to note that in order to allow the BFG to use this simplified grammar structure, Dahl also must recognize and acknowledge grammar structures as they exist in their completeness. The BFG's concern over learning 'proper' grammar recognizes a certain hierarchy of grammar, in which the speech of Sophie is supposedly 'more valid' than that of the BFG. However, these same grammatical structures allow for perversion through simplification, creating a new grammar for the BFG which is entirely his own, yet entirely understandable.

Essentially, the key to this line of argument is understanding that "in practice, communications can be established – can always be established – beyond grammar" (LeCercle 56). This is evident in the relationship between the BFG and Sophie, who find themselves able to communicate with one another despite their differences in grammar. At times in the novel, Sophie even adopts some of the BFG's linguistic idiosyncrasies, if not in grammar, then certainly in vocabulary. At a late point in the novel, Sophie recommends seeking help from the Queen of England, telling the BFG, "'You can't call her a squiffletrotter or a grinksludger'" (Dahl 108).

Sophie also encourages the BFG in his own unique speech patterns, telling him, "'I think you speak beautifully' . . . 'I just love the way you talk'" (Dahl 44). It is clear that Sophie and the BFG have established a rapport, and that they both understand and appreciate each other's unique speech patterns, whether or not they resemble 'proper' English. In establishing communication beyond grammar, Dahl highlights the unnecessary restrictions which we place on ourselves, deeming them necessary for communication rather than simply recognizing that grammar is one useful tool out of many.

These restrictions are not limited to speech alone, either. By complimenting the BFG on his style of speech, Sophie is making a radical statement about grammar, dialect, and social status. For many English speakers reading *The BFG*, sociolinguistic status is just one means of navigating interpersonal relations in a greater societal context. Family lineage, occupation, education, and many other factors contribute to a person's status in society, and according to Crystal, ". . . the way people talk (and, to a lesser extent, write) reflects this background to a considerable extent" (Crystal 309). The BFG's underdeveloped grammar structure is indicative of the fact that he has not received a formal education, a factor which has the potential to lower his social status. However, as Crystal also notes:

> Some people think of dialects as sub-standard varieties of a language, spoken only by low status groups . . . Comments of this kind fail to recognize that standard English is as much a dialect as any other variety – though a dialect of a rather special kind, because it is one to which society has given extra prestige. (Crystal 290)

By acknowledging and valuing the BFG's speech patterns, however, Sophie is overturning this sociolinguistic hierarchy, and accepting the BFG as an equal. In this way, Roald Dahl is presenting the reader with the idea that all dialects and idiolects should be equally valued, and by valuing one over the other we are placing arbitrary restrictions on our sociolinguistic relations that only serve to divide.

It would not be enough, however, for Dahl to make this argument solely on the linguistic level. Rather, Dahl further highlights the need to break free of linguistic restrictions through the overall character of the BFG, and the tendency he has to introduce other characters to an entirely new understanding of the world around them. Throughout the novel, the BFG is consistently reminding Sophie that she actually knows very little of the world around her, and that her knowledge is as limited as her linguistic imagination. In playfully chastising Sophie over her non-belief in the snozzcumber – a repulsive vegetable which tastes of rotten fish and unwashed feet – the BFG remarks, "'Yesterday . . . we was not believing in giants, was we? Today we is not believing in snozzcumbers. Just because we happen not to have actually *seen* something with our own two little winkles, we think it is not existing'" (Dahl 40). Through this encounter, Sophie is forced to admit that there are things in this world which she could not have imagined existed, such as giants and snozzcumbers. In the same way that Sophie's language is restricted by the grammar she has learned, her imagination is restricted to her own life experience in the orphanage in London. However, the BFG invites her to look past her own learning and experience, and to imagine things which she could not have believed possible before.

Sophie is not the only character to experience this pushing of boundaries with the BFG, either. The air force pilots who follow the BFG to Giant Country in order to capture the other, bloodthirsty giants find themselves exploring territory which does not exist on any map. When the discovery is made that they have flown off the map, the crew of the helicopter are understandably astonished:

> 'That's exactly what I *am* telling you!' cried the Air Force man. 'Look for yourself. Here's the very last map in the whole flaming atlas! We went off that over an hour ago!' He turned the page. As in all atlases, there were two completely blank pages at the very end. 'So now we must be somewhere here,' he said, putting a finger on one of the blank pages.

> . . . The young pilot was still grinning broadly. He said to them, 'That's why they always put two blank pages at the back of the atlas. They're for new countries. You're meant to fill them in yourself.' (Dahl 178)

This, then, becomes an intriguing parallel between linguistic restrictions and physical restrictions. In their interaction with the BFG, the air force pilots are forced to go beyond the restrictions of the physical map of the world, and venture into unknown, uncharted territory. The pilot's remark that the blank pages in the atlas are meant to be filled in as new countries are discovered is remarkable, because it gives the blank pages a purpose. This view of the atlas assumes that not everything which could possibly exist has been discovered, and that we cannot simply restrict ourselves to what we already know. In the same way, if we accept LeCercle's argument that the rules of grammar are "not so much injunction as the delineation of frontiers on a map," (LeCercle 54) then the parallel becomes startlingly clear. If we are meant to fill in the blank pages of the atlas with new discoveries, then clearly we are meant to make new discoveries beyond the boundaries of language as well.

As much as the BFG desires to learn 'proper' English so he can assimilate and learn to communicate with humans, the nature of his character is such that he invites those around him to explore beyond the boundaries of what they know. Physical exploration, knowledge-based exploration, and linguistic exploration are all tied together in this single character. The BFG shows Sophie and others that they do not know everything there is to know about the world around them, and that there is always more to explore. His nonsense speech demonstrates that it is not necessary to be restricted by grammar in order to communicate, and that new linguistic discoveries can be made when we are not limited by 'proper' grammatical structures.

Conclusion

The rules of 'proper' English are not a bad thing. As Culler explains, "The rules of English enable sequences of sounds to have meaning; they make it possible to utter grammatical

or ungrammatical sentences" (Culler 5). Without these rules, we lose clarity in our speech, which affects our ability to communicate with one another. As we see in *The BFG*, grammar aids in communication and understanding, allowing a person to share their thoughts and ideas with others. Without learning 'proper' grammar from Sophie, the BFG would have continued to struggle in communicating his ideas to other, adult characters in the story. He certainly would not have been able to write a novel detailing his experiences and life story and have a reader understand what he is writing. In this sense, *The BFG* demonstrates that the rules and structures of 'proper' English have their benefits and their role to play in aiding communication.

However, Dahl also warns the reader not to allow these structures to become restrictive, as they are not the only possible form of English. In opening up Sophie's eyes to the possibilities the world holds beyond her imagination, the BFG also invites her to consider new linguistic possibilities she would not have considered before. English can take on many forms, and it is important to note that:

> It's not a corruption of proper English, but an evolution. It doesn't demand a rearguard action to stave off the attackers; it doesn't call for guardians of the language to rush the barricades. In fact, English doesn't need protection. It's been doing remarkably well over the last fifteen hundred years, and is likely to outlive us all. (Lynch 273-74)

English will continue to change and evolve, despite all efforts to restrict it to a single 'proper' English. Adhering strictly to 'proper' grammatical structures limits our linguistic imagination, and does not allow for the freedom to explore this ever-changing language. Roald Dahl is very cognisant of this tendency of grammar to restrict, and warns his reader against this tendency by encouraging exploration through the BFG.

Chapter 2

Most People Stop With the Z, But Not Me

Exploring Beyond Linguistic Boundaries in Dr. Seuss

> 'In the places I go there are things that I see
> 'That I never could spell if I stopped with the Z.
> 'I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends.
> '*My* alphabet starts where *your* alphabet ends!'
> -   Dr. Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*

According to LeCercle, a nonsense writer is like "a timid poet" in their willingness to push the boundaries of language (LeCercle 34). Nonsense language is defined by its conflicted relationship with the linguistic code. The attitude of the nonsense writer is simultaneously one of strict adherence and of exploitation of the rules of language. By inhabiting this liminal space, nonsense defamiliarizes language and forces the reader to reconsider what he or she understands about language. This is similar to the way in which poets play with language and attempt to create a richness and multiplicity of meanings in their texts. By playing with the rhythmic and musical qualities of language, most poets invite the reader to examine the relationship between sound and meaning in language.

How, then, do we approach poets like Dr. Seuss who incorporate nonsense into a form that already pushes the boundaries of language? In examining the poetry of Dr. Seuss we need to acknowledge that Seuss is complicating the relationship between sound and meaning on multiple levels. On both the level of the word and the level of the poem itself, Seuss inverts the hierarchical relationship between sound and meaning, between form and content, to celebrate language itself and present it in a different light. In creating new coinages, Seuss plays with and explores sound in ways which draw deliberate attention to the phonetic possibilities offered by the English language. Seuss then plays these coinages off one another to place further emphasis

on the sound shape of the poetry over the meaning. In doing so, Dr. Seuss gives the reader a celebration of the sounds of English not bound by rules or norms.

Perhaps the most important element of Dr. Seuss' nonsense poetry, however, is his invitation to the child reader to join in the celebration and exploration of the sounds of language. Although *On Beyond Zebra* is a poem, it is also a story with a child protagonist who is learning and exploring past the boundaries of existing language. Throughout the story, the narrator shows the character of Conrad Cornelius O'Donald O'Dell, "My very young friend who is learning to spell," (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*) all the possibilities offered by language when he does not limit himself to the traditional English alphabet. The child reader is then able to see him or herself in the role of Conrad Cornelius O'Donald O'Dell, exploring language with Dr. Seuss and imagining new linguistic frontiers. By inviting the child reader to join the narrator in imagining new words and sounds, Seuss is giving the child a chance to participate in his celebration of language and its possibilities.

Of course, Dr. Seuss' penchant for linguistic experimentation has long been recognized. Mary Lystad has referred to Seuss' texts as involving a "distaste for the commonplace and preference for a touch of anarchy", and *On Beyond Zebra* is no exception (Lystad 197). *On Beyond Zebra* demonstrates Seuss' seemingly cavalier attitude towards language at its finest. The premise of the book is based on the idea that the standard English alphabet of A through Z does not encompass all the possible letters and words of the English language. As an anonymous writer for *The Chicago Daily Tribune* writes in a 1955 book review, "If you, like Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell, though that the alphabet ends in Z, Dr. Seuss will now set you right . . ." (M.B.K. d12). Instead of limiting himself to the existing alphabet, Seuss invents a series of new letters which he tacks onto the end of the English alphabet, along with the various creature

names which these new letters are required to spell. To create his coinages, Seuss plays with and combines the various phonemes of English in ways that push the boundaries of accepted English phonology, playing words off of one another to question the relationship of sound and meaning in the text.

This tendency to break apart and play with language has made Dr. Seuss a controversial author in the many decades since the publication of *On Beyond Zebra*. Historically, Seuss' books have been loved by children, who enjoy his whimsical wordplay and inventive imagination. However, Seuss' work has come under closer scrutiny by parents and educators, who consider his works to be straying too far at times from 'proper' English. According to Lystad, Seuss' writing style "has brought criticism from teachers and librarians, but children enjoy both his predilections and his sense of humour" (Lystad 197). This assertion by Lystad is supported by the reactions generated by *On Beyond Zebra* when the book was released in 1955. The same anonymous author who noted that Dr. Seuss' nonsense alphabet will "set you right" also describes Seuss' work as "delightfully mad," (M.B.K. d12) while in the same year Jane Cobb of *The New York Times* wrote of *On Beyond Zebra*:

> Like most writers Dr. Seuss probably has his troubles, but there is one worry from which he must be free. When he is putting a book together he need never get into a cold sweat wondering if some other author-illustrator might be working on the same idea. *Nobody* could possibly have ideas in any way resembling those that occur to this talented man. The one complaint to be made is that his themes are so bizarre that it is hard to make them clear to anyone who does not have the book right in his hands. (Cobb BRA45)

One thing is certain: Dr. Seuss has consistently generated mixed reactions to his linguistic experimentations. He is both delightful and mad, talented and inexplicable. As a linguist and experimental author, however, his work is rich and complex. Dr. Seuss plays with language in ways which invite the child reader to explore a natural fascination with the sounds of English, and which push back and resist the notion of a prescribed 'proper' English.

This chapter will look at Dr. Seuss' *On Beyond Zebra* from two angles. The first is through the lens of nonsense language and phonetics. As in many of his texts, Dr. Seuss makes prolific use of coinages in *On Beyond Zebra*, inventing new words and new letters which exploit the possibilities offered by the phonetic structure of English. This analysis will follow the argument made by LeCercle that nonsense "does not invent words at random," (LeCercle 33) as well as Stewart's argument that nonsense poetry seeks to overturn the hierarchy of meaning and sound inherent in language (Stewart 76). According to LeCercle, nonsense authors are careful to make use of the previously established rules of English phonetics in creating coinages, so as to draw attention to the way in which we typically combine these phonemes in the first place. Dr. Seuss exploits this tendency of nonsense language in *On Beyond Zebra* in order to overturn the hierarchy of sound and meaning, and to prioritize sound over meaning in his nonsense poetry. Seuss' use of uncommon phoneme combinations and creation of onomatopoeia put emphasis on the sound of a word as the source of meaning, rather than the other way around. The same can be said of Seuss' poetry at a macro level, as his use of a strict rhyme scheme and inventive tongue twisters complicate the relationship between sound and meaning by suggesting that each is equally as important as one another, albeit in different ways.

The second angle of analysis is that of oral storytelling in children's literature. This section of the chapter will follow Hunt and McGillis' work on the orality of children's literature, and the way in which children understand literature differently than adults. Children learn language primarily through speech, assimilating the language by listening and interacting with other language users. As such, children value the sound shape of language far more than its written form. Dr. Seuss capitalizes on this tendency of children to prefer oral stories through his experimentation with phonetic structures. Seuss' coinages in *On Beyond Zebra* present the child

reader with new sound shapes which experiment with the possibilities of English. In doing so, Seuss appeals to the child reader's innate need to experiment with the sounds of language. In addition, if the appeal to the child reader through playful language is too subtle, Dr. Seuss uses a direct address to the reader, inviting the child to participate in the linguistic experimentation.

Bringing these two perspectives together, we see that in *On Beyond Zebra* Dr. Seuss exploits the tendency of nonsense poetry to invert the hierarchy between sound and language in order to create a text that better appeals to the child reader. In this text, Seuss accomplishes three things. The first is to complicate the relationship between sound and meaning in poetry, the second is to celebrate the possibilities of language when not restricted by convention, and the third is to invite the child reader to participate in linguistic exploration. In this way, Dr. Seuss invites the child reader on a journey beyond the boundaries of conventional English, and inspires a love of language in the child reader.

Coinages in Dr. Seuss

One of the most distinctive and recognizable features of Dr. Seuss' nonsense writing is his prolific use of coinages. Dr. Seuss is well known for inventing fantastic and whimsical new names for his creatures and places. Millions of children have grown up reading about the "Noothgrush" who lives on your toothbrush, (Seuss, *There's a Wocket in My Pocket*) or marvelling at the group of "Bippo-no-Bungus" housed at McGrew's Zoo (Seuss, *If I Ran the Zoo*). The wonderful world of Dr. Seuss is a magical place filled with wondrous new words never before imagined. Of course, Seuss' creations are aided by the fact that it is notoriously difficult to create a word that noticeably stands out from the English language. As LeCercle explains, "the frontier between coinages and normal words in English is uncertain," and as long as an author sticks to

the phonetic range of English, then coinages are likely to fit into the existing language structure (LeCercle 29).

In general, coinages can be fit into three categories: baragouin, charabia, and lanternois (LeCercle 21). The first two categories in this list are closely related to one another. Baragouin refers to coinages which imitate the sounds of a foreign language, while charabia refers to those coinages which imitate the writer or speaker's own native tongue. These two forms of coinage are the most commonly created, in nonsense language or otherwise, because they lend themselves well to meaning making. The third category of coinage, lanternois, is by far the least common of the three categories. This group of coinages refers to the compulsive repetition of sounds which have nothing to do with meaningful language, for example, mama or dada. Although these coinages are common in the first speech of infants and young children, when used excessively they detract from meaning making in a text. This difference in the level of meaning making is tied directly to the difference between the fields of phonetics and of phonology. Culler defines phonetics as being the field of speech sounds which are possible to create within a language structure, while phonology studies those phonetic combinations which actually hold meaning (Culler 6). A discerning nonsense author like Dr. Seuss understands this fundamental difference, and exploits it in the exploration of new language.

Pushing Boundaries and Celebrating Language

One of the realities of any language is that the possible morphemes which can be spoken vastly outnumber those select morphemes which are spoken and which convey meaning. Even within the limits of already meaningful vocabulary, "we have just a few dozen sounds to learn, a few hundred sound combinations in syllables . . . but there are hundreds of thousands of units of vocabulary" (Crystal 190). Realistically speaking, it is impossible for any one person to learn and

master the entirety of the meaningful vocabulary that makes up the English language. There are simply too many morphemes to learn. Keeping this in mind, Culler makes the point that once a person masters the rules of language, they are capable of understanding an infinite number of sentences which they will never hear in their life (Culler 9). By extension, once a person learns the basic phonetics of the English language, they are capable of understanding an almost unlimited number of words which they will never hear. Dr. Seuss then exploits this potential in creating his coinages. Although whimsical and unique, his coinages all fall under the category of charabia, meaning they imitate the phonetic structure of previously existing English words. This means that readers encountering his coinages for the first time are able to recognize how to read and pronounce these coinages, despite never having heard these words before.

The beauty of well-written nonsense is that it ". . . does not invent words at random. It exploits the possibilities offered by the phonotactics of English" in creating new vocabulary (LeCercle 33). At its core, phonotactics refers to the allowances given by the rules of English with regards to syllable structure. In other words, effective nonsense coinages use the existing phonetic structures of English in order to generate new vocabulary. In creating charabia that imitates English, Dr. Seuss pushes back against the notion that everything that can be said or imagined will fit within our already defined limits of language. He argues that there is limitless possibility in language as long as we are willing to explore beyond what we think we know. Seuss' narrator tells us, "When you go beyond Zebra, / *Who knows . . . ?* / There's no telling / What wonderful things / You might find yourself spelling!" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*). The emphasis here on the phrase "*Who knows . . . ?*", combined with the description of the new alphabet as "wonderful" gives the reader a sense of the narrator's – and by extension Seuss' – excitement in the exploration of language "beyond Zebra." The narrator is intrigued and awed by

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the possibilities offered by unrestricted language. The narrator in this story fully embraces the world of nonsense language because "Nonsense seeks to find out exactly what can be said, given that not everything is actually said" (LeCercle 38). *On Beyond Zebra* is an exploration of sound beyond the boundaries of meaning, an invitation to "[seek] to find out exactly what can be said" and discover the new possibilities offered by English.

This exploration of sound, then, inherently subverts the hierarchy of meaning over sound, because to prioritise meaning limits the poet to the already accepted set of English vocabulary. In typical speech, although sound and meaning are bound together in the word, it is not necessarily a balanced relationship. Walter Hirtle explores this relationship when he explains that when we speak, we typically use a word for its meaning and not for its sound. According to Hirtle, "Meaning is primordial in the word because the notion or idea a word expresses is linked to the message, to what the speaker intends to communicate" (Hirtle 36). There are many functions of speech which determine the vocabulary chosen by the speaker. Speech is used to navigate social groups, convey concepts and ideas, and create verbal art. However, acknowledging that one of the primary purposes of speech is communication, then it makes sense that we typically favour meaning over sound when choosing or crafting a word. Looking at the text, though, we see that Seuss pushes back against this idea in *On Beyond Zebra* in the choices he makes in creating his coinages. In his text, Seuss plays with and explores sound in creating his coinages in ways that draw deliberate attention to the phonetic possibilities offered by the English language. By combining phonetics in fresh and unexpected ways, and by playing with the sound shape of English in new words, Seuss exploits language in a celebration of the sounds of English.

Linguists such as David Crystal have noted that there are certain unspoken norms that dictate which phonemes can and cannot be combined to create new words in the English

language (Crystal 71). In his book *How Language Works*, Crystal cites an example by contrasting the phonemes /s/ and /ʃ/. According to Crystal, the morpheme /s-t-r/ is commonly used in the English language to begin vocabulary words, such as the words 'string' and 'straight'. However, nowhere in the English language do we see a vocabulary unit beginning with the morpheme /ʃ-t-r/. Crystal does not offer an explanation as to why certain morphemes such as /s-t-r/ are more accepted in English other than to say that the less common morphemes such as /ʃ-t-r/ serve as "an important abstract unit" which highlight and demonstrate the proper and improper ways for phonemes to behave within the sound system of English (Crystal 71). Crystal does note, however, that /ʃ-t-r/ is a fairly common morpheme in the German language, a fact which further highlights the abstract nature of sound as it relates to meaning.

Dr. Seuss, however, pushes back against these abstract norms by including unusual morphemes in his coinages which may not strictly adhere to the standards of English. Two shining examples of this pushback are Seuss' use of the morphemes /m-p-f/ in "Humpf-Humpf-a-Dumpfer" and /ɵ-n/ in "Thnadner" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*). The morpheme /m-p-f/ is extremely uncommon within the English language, used almost exclusively in colloquial speech rather than formal vocabulary. Even the encyclopedia *Who's Who and What's What in Dr. Seuss* twice describes the shortened "humpf" as being a "Seussian rendering of the interjection 'humph'" (Lathem 65). Certainly /m-p-f/ can be found in other languages such as German, but it is quite uncommon in English outside of colloquialism. The "Humpf-Humpf-a-Dumpfer" thus resides liminally on the fringes of charabia, not quite venturing into the territory of baragouin, but still pushing at the boundaries of what morphemes are acceptable within the English language.

A similar effect is achieved with the morpheme /ɵ-n/ in "Thnadner". This morpheme is even less common than /m-p-f/ to the English language, not even making an appearance in colloquial speech. It appears to be one of Crystal's "abstract [units]" which demonstrates its own incorrectness through its very existence. Nevertheless, Seuss calls this notion of abstract language units with a self-defeating purpose into question in his creation of the "Thadner". If Crystal is correct, then there should be no use for the morpheme /ɵ-n/ in the English language. Yet, Seuss vindicates LeCercle's assertion about nonsense seeking out the possible rather than the already existing when he gives a purpose and a place in the English language to /ɵ-n/. By exploring the possible rather than the accepted, Seuss gives meaning to a previously abstract unit of sound. Of course, like the "Humpf-Humpf-a-Dumpfer", the "Thnadner" sits on the fringes of charabia. This time, Seuss pushes the boundaries towards lanternois through his use of what is understood to be a meaningless unit of sound. However, by combining this morpheme with other more accepted morphemes, Seuss brings /ɵ-n/ into the realm of charabia and gives it a standard of meaning equal to the already accepted morphemes in the English language. Thus, by combining uncommon morphemes with more accepted English morphemes to create his coinages, Dr. Seuss highlights the fact that our accepted use of morphemes are norms, and not rules. Coinages such as "Humpf-Humpf-a-Dumpfer" and "Thnadner" show the reader that exciting new creations can be brought to life if we are willing to explore beyond the boundaries of accepted sound.

Working within the realm of accepted English morphemes, however, Dr. Seuss also finds creative ways to invert the relationship between sound and meaning. On their own, phonemes and morphemes do not inherently have any meaning. It is only when they are assigned to a word that meaning is assigned and the hierarchy of meaning over sound is established. However, as

Jakobson points out, the human mind abhors a vacuum, and so it tries to fill this void by assigning a simple meaning to different phonemes (Jakobson, *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning* 113). This meaning is not any concrete idea which can be articulated, but rather manifests itself in feelings or attitudes towards certain sounds. This theory of Jakobson's was confirmed in 2007 by a research team in Canada and Germany who studied the psychological reaction we have to certain phonemes. The research team found that while phonemes such as /aɪ/ (as in 'high') and /ʧ/ (as in 'cheerful') were associated with pleasantness or cheeriness, other phonemes such as /oʊ/ (as in 'low') and /ŋ/ (as in 'angry') were associated with unpleasantness or nastiness (Nastase et al. 5). Although not fully conclusive, this study helps to explain the nature of onomatopoeia. In attempting to imitate the meaning of the text through the sounds being produced, onomatopoeia effectively demonstrates the way in which the relationship between sound and meaning can be more complicated than we typically allow for.

Dr. Seuss certainly uses this complication to his advantage in *On Beyond Zebra* with his creation of creatures known as "Floob-Boober-Bab-Boober-Bubs / Who bounce in the water like blubbery tubs" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*). In creating this coinage, Seuss takes advantage of the way in which certain sounds imitate and call to mind the meaning they are trying to express. His use of long, rounded vowels, separated by the repetition of the /b/ phoneme imitate the motion of the "Floob-Boober-Bab-Boober-Bubs" as they float in the water, bobbing up and down like corks. This name evokes the image of these creatures, and to give them a different name such as "Glikker" – an insect-like creature also mentioned in the text – would not hold the same meaning for the reader. By invoking onomatopoeia in his coinage, Dr. Seuss highlights the idea that any exploration into the unknowns of language must rely on sound in order to help create meaning.

In this way, Seuss is celebrating the power of sound to create meaning, and stressing the importance of sound over meaning in the inverted hierarchy of nonsense.

At a more macro level, then, Seuss also inverts this hierarchy of sound and meaning at the level of the poetry itself. By playing words off one another in his poetry, Seuss' text embodies Stewart's nonsense poetry, which "takes the traditional division between content and form (technique), with its hierarchical weighing of content over form, and inverts statuses to present form over content" (Stewart 76). If we draw a parallel between form/content and sound/meaning, we can see how Seuss cleverly uses his coinages to invert our expectations of what is most important to a poem. When taken as a whole, Seuss' poetry places more emphasis on the sounds of English than it does the meaning of the coinages. While traditional poetry uses sound to multiply meaning within the poem, Seuss' nonsense celebrates sound for its own sake. That is not to say that Seuss' text is meaningless. Dr. Seuss has a long history as a radically subversive author, disguising such politically charged topics as despotism and U.S. race relations in whimsically colourful creatures and playful coinages (Brennan 106). However, in *On Beyond Zebra* the deeper meaning Seuss is examining is language itself, and how we understand the way in which we make meaning through sound. Because of this, Seuss uses his nonsense poetry to complicate and invert the relationship between form and content in poetry, forcing the reader to examine more closely the relationship between sound and meaning in the text.

One way in which Dr. Seuss plays with sound and meaning at more macro level is in the creation of tongue twisters. According to Marilyn Jorgensen, a tongue twister can be defined as "a kind of speech play which has as its goal the pronunciation of combinations of words that are difficult to articulate rapidly and repeatedly" (Jorgensen 67). Jorgensen goes on to add to this definition by noting that a well-made tongue twister "almost inevitably results in a

malfunctioning or complete breakdown of the ability to continue speaking" (Jorgensen 67). This breakdown then creates a comic effect, as the speaker finds him or herself unable to repeat the tongue twister correctly, or even to speak properly at all. Of course, the question then arises as to whether or not a tongue twister can be created using coinages, or whether the comic effect comes from the relationship between the sound and the meaning of the text.

Seuss addresses this question in *On Beyond Zebra* with the following tongue twister:

And NUH is the letter I use to spell Nutches
Who live in small caves, known as Nitches, for hutches.
These Nutches have trouble, the biggest of which is
The fact there are many more Nutches than Nitches.
Each Nutch in a Nitch knows that some other Nutch
Would like to move into his Nitch very much.
So each Nutch in a Nitch has to watch that small Nitch
Or Nutches who haven't got Nitches will snitch. (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*)

This tongue twister makes use of minimal pairs of vowels to create speech difficulty – in this case the /ʌ/ in "Nutches" versus the /I/ in "Nitches". By placing these two vowels in rapid succession, interspersed with other similar words such as "much", "each", "watch", and "snitch", ensures that inevitably reading this passage aloud will cause the reader to stumble and mix up the words of the poem. As a result of dissimilation, the muscles of the tongue quickly become tired attempting to switch between these minimal pairs, and the words of the tongue twister can become inverted as a result. Given that "Nutches" and "Nitches" are coinages and not part of the English language, it would be easy to dismiss this mistake as being meaningless on a grander scale. However, because Seuss gives these coinages meaning by defining "Nutches" as small, cave-dwelling creatures and "Nitches" as the dwelling-place of Nutches, then it becomes absurd to say that "each [Nitch] in a [Nutch] has to watch that small [Nutch] / Or [Nitches] who haven't got [Nutches] will snitch."

This simple change in the word order of the poem illustrates the innate relationship between sound and meaning, and the power that sound has to create or sustain meaning. Although we tend to prioritize meaning over sound when defining a word, a tongue twister such as Seuss' "Nutches" and "Nitches" has the potential to upset this hierarchy. This tongue twister emphasizes the fact that changing even a single phoneme in a word can change the entire meaning of the word, even the meaning of the phrase as a whole. In this way Seuss gives sound power over meaning, and prioritizes the fun and comical effects that can be obtained through playing with sounds in new ways.

Seuss does not always take such a holistic approach to sound and meaning in his poetry, however. Just a few pages after the reader encounters the "Nutches" in *On Beyond Zebra*, Dr. Seuss introduces a creature called the "Flunnel", who can only be coaxed out of his tunnel home with music. In this particular stanza, Dr. Seuss complicates, and even mocks, the relationship between sound and meaning through his strict adherence to poetic rules. Faced with the challenge of finding a rhyme for the word 'month' – one of the words which has no rhyme in the English language – Dr. Seuss is forced to exercise his creativity and invent a new coinage. Rather than use a slant rhyme, Seuss invents a new musical instrument called the "o'Grunth", which he describes as "a kind of a hunting horn" that plays "the right kind of softish nice music" which will lure out the "Flunnel" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*). This creative rhyming scheme imitates child language somewhat in its consistencies with the rules of poetry. As Jakobson observes, although a child may deviate from standard English in his own language usage, his deviations are always of the same sound and nature (Jakobson, *On Language* 295). This is in line with one of the functions of nonsense language, which mocks the rules of English by strictly adhering to them,

even when an exception is called for. By coining the word "o'Grunth", Dr. Seuss ignores the possibility of a slant rhyme in his quest for a perfect rhyme scheme.

This strict rhyme scheme is then carried forward throughout the rest of the stanza, in which Seuss proceeds to rhyme the word 'month' with "fun-th", "tun-th", and "one-th" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*). By altering existing English words to force a rhyme scheme, Seuss somewhat dissolves the relationship between sound and meaning. At the level of the word, meaning is still given a primordial place, as the word must convey a notion or idea to the reader. However, at the level of the poem itself, sound becomes the more important factor, as phonemes must be rearranged to create the perfect rhyme. In this way Seuss invites the reader to question the relationship between sound and meaning, and how our understanding of language changes when we loosen this relationship and play with new sounds and create our own language.

An Invitation to the Child Reader

As we have already established, children tend to belong to an oral culture rather than a literary culture, meaning they have a different approach to language and literature than adults (Hunt 58). In order to be successful, children's literature must capitalize on the sounds of English rather than any deep or hidden meaning. If children's literature can be considered "the ghost of an oral form," (McGillis 9) then this explains why sound-based literature such as nursery rhymes or poetry appeal so well to children. As LeCercle explains, "We understand why the nonsense of nursery rhymes is so useful to young children: they learn language by learning to manipulate its sounds. Thus, they learn what no rules can teach them – that there is a music specific to the English tongue" (LeCercle 37). The writing style of Dr. Seuss exploits this preference of the young child for an oral form of story by playing with the sound shape of language. By creating new and unexpected phonetic combinations, Dr. Seuss invites the reader to read the text aloud, and to

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attempt to pronounce each of the unique new words created. The child reader will want to explore each coinage and the new creature it represents, trying out new sounds and language as they read.

Dr. Seuss then further encourages the child reader to explore the fresh new language of his text by creating a parallel between the reader and the child protagonist of the story. Seuss sets up this parallel first through the character of the narrator, who acts as a teacher/mentor figure to the protagonist of Conrad Cornelius O'Donald O'Dell. As a mentor, the narrator approaches the teaching moment as if he is letting Conrad Cornelius in on a secret which not every English speaker has access to. The narrator explains to Conrad Cornelius that, "'I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends. / *My* alphabet starts where *your* alphabet ends!" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*). From this starting point, the narrator then takes Conrad Cornelius on a journey through his new alphabet, an alphabet which goes beyond the limits of traditional language. Although the story begins with the narrator explaining his own imagination and creative language, as the linguistic journey continues the narrator begins to encourage Conrad Cornelius to explore his own path beyond the boundaries of language, and to create his own alphabet to fit the fantastic world of his own imagination.

Throughout the journey the narrator tries to inspire in Conrad Cornelius a sense of wonderment and excitement about the possibilities of language. As the narrator takes Conrad Cornelius through his new alphabet, he remarks to the reader, "*The places I took him!* / I tried hard to tell / Young Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell / A few brand-new wonderful words he might spell" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*). The narrator is evidently excited about the possibilities of language, and he is trying to share some of this excitement with his young friend. To the narrator, these linguistic creations are "brand-new" and "wonderful", and he is filled with a

desire to share this unexplored territory with Conrad Cornelius in the hopes that his young friend will come up with wonderful creations of his own.

By the end of the story, it becomes evident that the narrator has succeeded in inspiring a love of language in Conrad Cornelius, who begins to expand his horizons and use his own linguistic imagination. The story closes with Conrad Cornelius O'Donald O'Dell's exclamation, "'This is really great stuff! / And I guess the old alphabet ISN'T enough!'" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*). This exclamation is accompanied by a picture of Conrad Cornelius drawing his own new letter on a blackboard, a letter which is even more complex and whimsical than the letters created by the narrator himself. This transition from the beginning of the story to the end is indicative of the journey Seuss hopes his child reader will take beyond the limits of language and into imagination. Just as Conrad Cornelius transitions from being restricted by the traditional alphabet of A-Z to allowing his imagination to create new and fantastic letters to fit his new and fantastic words, so Seuss encourages the child reader to use his or her own imagination and push the boundaries of language in new and fantastic ways.

If this parallel between the child protagonist and the child reader is not obvious enough, Seuss then highlights this parallel by turning the teacher and student relationship outward with a direct address to the reader. Seuss invites the child reader to follow in the same steps as young Conrad Cornelius by ending *On Beyond Zebra* with the image of Conrad Cornelius' new unnamed letter and the question, ". . . what do YOU think / we should call this one, anyhow?" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*). By inviting the child reader to name the newest – and most fantastic – letter in the book, Dr. Seuss places the power in the hands of the child to use his or her own imagination in pushing the boundaries of language. The child reader is called upon to imagine the possibilities of not only what sound shape the letter might take, but also what "brand-new

wonderful" words this letter might help in spelling. In this way Seuss concludes his story with a celebration of the unlimited potential of language when we allow our imaginations to explore outside the boundaries of traditional English.

Conclusion

Champigny says of poetry, "A wine is to be tasted; and the same might be said about poems, since they are to be recited" (Champigny 63). Champigny's words speak to the charismatic and sound-driven nature of the poetry of Dr. Seuss. Throughout *On Beyond Zebra*, Dr. Seuss plays with sound and language, exploring beyond the bounds of accepted and meaningful vocabulary in the creation of his unique coinages. By experimenting with the phonotactics of English, Seuss inverts the relationship between sound and meaning, and puts the emphasis on sound as being of primary importance to language. In doing so, he creates a text which begs to be read aloud, so the reader can experience the full effect of the playful language and unique words in this wonderful new world. This experiment in sound and meaning is then further highlighted by the intended child audience of the text. Because of the oral nature of children's literature, Seuss' poetry rests on the idea that sound is of primary importance in the creation and shaping of new language. A new coinage must be whimsical to appeal to a child reader, and the meaning is not as important as the sound. In this way, Seuss' poetry becomes a celebration and exploration of the possibilities offered by the sounds of English. Dr. Seuss, then, can be defined as one of Richard Lederer's "Dr. Frankensteins, in the best sense of that label, stitching together meaning-bearing elements called morphemes into something new and alive" (Lederer 88). Seuss' language takes on a life of its own throughout the text as it explores sound and meaning, and it creates the ideal environment to make language exciting for the child reader.

By inviting the child reader to join him, first on the journey through the new alphabet, and then in the creating and naming of even more new letters for the English language, Seuss then further emphasizes the beauty and wonder that can be found in the exploration of language. *On Beyond Zebra* is a celebration of language, and one which is meant to be shared and explored together. According to Seuss, language is a beautiful and creative thing, and a child should be encouraged to use his or her imagination to explore beyond the boundaries of existing language to appreciate its full potential.

Chapter 3

Wild Strawberries and Exactlywatts

Multiplied Meaning in the Poetry of Shel Silverstein

> It was nine o'clock at midnight at a quarter after three
> When a turtle met a bagpipe on the shoreside by the sea,
> And the turtle said, 'My dearie,
> May I sit with you? I'm Weary.'
> And the bagpipe didn't say no.
> - Shel Silverstein, "The Bagpipe Who Didn't Say No"

At its most basic level, the goal of language is communication. As such, meaning is key to understanding language, and specifically ensuring that the 'correct' meaning is being conveyed through the language being used. To have a multiplicity of meanings can defeat the purpose of communication in language. However, this singularity of meaning, although important to clear communication, does not line up with the self-reflexive goals of nonsense language. According to LeCercle, one of the goals of nonsense language is to multiply meanings rather than hone them down into a single meaning for a particular text (LeCercle 20). By multiplying meanings, a text draws attention to the way in which we make meaning of language, and how we make decisions regarding which is the 'correct' meaning of a text. As Stewart explains, the purpose of nonsense language creating multiple meanings is to "emphasize the reversible and flexible nature of communication" (Stewart 69). Language and communication are not as rigid as it would initially seem, as meaning is not as singular and set in stone as we would like to assume. According to Bahktin, meaning in language is a product of all the associations and implications attached to a word, rather than simply from the word itself. Bahktin argues that the various voices (authorial, character, etc) associated with a literary work are all key in making meaning out of a text because, "each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide

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variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized)" (Bahktin 674). The reality is that words and phrases can have multiple meanings depending on how they are interpreted by the listener/reader, a fact which nonsense poets such as Shel Silverstein capitalize on in order to draw attention to and defamiliarize meaning-making in language.

Shel Silverstein began his publishing career, not as an author, but as an illustrator and cartoonist. After receiving Fine Arts training from the University of Illinois and the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, he worked as a correspondent for the American military publication *Stars and Stripes* while on tour in Korea. After returning to civilian life, Silverstein became a regular cartoonist and contributor for *Playboy* magazine beginning in 1956 (Wepman). He did not publish his first children's book until 1963, and his first critical success in the genre came in 1964 with the publication of *The Giving Tree*. The story of a tree which gives everything it has to a boy during the various stages of his life, *The Giving Tree* sold over 1 million copies in the decade following its publication (Wepman). In 1974, Silverstein turned his attention to verse, releasing a collection of poems entitled *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. Silverstein biographer Dennis Wepman has said of this collection of poems, "Blending the madly absurd with the subtly seditious, it was an immediate hit with children . . ." (Wepman). This slightly askew style quickly became Silverstein's signature, manifesting itself in his two subsequent volumes of poetry, *A Light in the Attic* and *Falling Up*.

In general, reception of Silverstein's poetry by parents and teachers was positive, but wary. Reviewers and critics picked up on Silverstein's subtly subversive attitude, commenting that "There's a streak of the weird in Mr. Silverstein's fun . . . In some of his most memorable nonsense, Mr. Silverstein is playfully disruptive of parental authority" (Kennedy BR13). One reviewer for *The New York Times* noted of *A Light in the Attic*, "Mr. Silverstein's very light

verse sometimes borders on the crude, what with burps, behinds, intestines, squashed babies, and brassieres for camels being prominent."(Woods C9) Nevertheless, Silverstein's poetry was not so subversive as to completely alienate his adult audience. As his books sales indicate, Silverstein's poetry found common ground and appealed to both child and adult audiences, as *Where the Sidewalk Ends* sold more than 900, 000 copies in the first seven years after its publication (McDowell BR13). As Wedman explains of Silverstein's poetry, "Its blend of the bizarre, the gross, and the silly had just enough antiestablishment subtext to appeal to children without altogether alienating their elders" (Wepman). Drawing on his success as a playfully subversive cartoonist, Shel Silverstein encouraged child readers to push back against prescribed authority, and to explore the world around them in the silliest, most childish ways they could imagine.

As a poet and an artist, then, Shel Silverstein offers the linguist a subtly subversive perspective on how we understand language. In his poetry, Silverstein experiments with creating multiple meanings through nonsense language, drawing deliberate attention to the flexible nature of meaning. To do so, Silverstein exploits some of the unique features of children's literature which allow for his particular form of nonsense to function. The first feature which Silverstein exploits is the relationship between the oral and the visual elements of a text. Knowing, as we do, that children's literature is simply "the ghost of an oral form", stressing sound over sense, then it becomes important to consider the way in which Silverstein plays with sound to multiply meaning in his poetry (McGillis 9). In his poems, Shel Silverstein plays with homophones and binary oppositions to deliberately mislead the reader and generate multiple levels of meaning.

In addition to his use of the oral nature of children's literature, Silverstein also exploits a little-studied yet popular form of children's literature: picture books. As an artifact, picture books are a uniquely immediate experience, more closely aligned with cinema than with traditional

literature. As Hunt observes, "linearity is a feature of verbal text, but not necessarily of pictures. To force pictures into the same mould as words seems to be potentially unproductive . . ." (Hunt 181). As a rule, picture books force the reader to slow down and halt forward progress through the book, asking the reader to take time looking at and appreciating the details of the picture. This is necessarily held in tension with the text of the book, which pushes for a forward and linear motion. Of course, this tension is a feature of any media which combines textual and visual elements. Take, for example, the graphic novel. According to Smith and Pole, "Graphic novels broaden the notion of print to include multimodal texts. This multimodality increases complexity, which in turn increases demands on readers" (Smith and Pole 170). Both picture books and graphic novels use images and text together to create multiple access points and modes of interpretation for the reader, a feature which Silverstein effectively exploits in his work. By creating detailed images to accompany his poems, Shel Silverstein creates a work which is in dialogue with itself through the tension between image and text. As the reader explores both image and text, a multiplicity of meanings is created in the poem as a whole.

By using these features of children's literature to multiply the layers of meaning in his poetry, then, Silverstein creates what Champigny would consider to be a philosophical text. According to Champigny, "If communicated, a philosophical text is designed to serve as a playful partner and opponent. What is conceptually deep, important, coherent, or self-evident according to one interpreter may be superficial, trivial, incoherent, or bizarre according to others" (Champigny 10). A multiplicity of meanings is essential to a philosophical text, and the same can be said of nonsense texts. Both have the goal of self-reflexivity, questioning how we know what we know. In multiplying meanings in his poetry through his exploitation of oral form

and picture books, Shel Silverstein demonstrates that children's literature is an ideal form for considering our basic understanding of language and meaning.

Nonsense Language and Multiplied Meaning

When it comes to making meaning in a text, it is important to remember that language does not exist in a vacuum. Meaning in language is affected by a multiplicity of factors, including, but not limited to, literary genre, sociopolitical context, historical context, and degree of professionalism. According to Bahktin, "Language – like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives – is never unitary" (Bahktin 674). Rather, as Bahktin asserts, 'Literary language . . . is itself stratified and heteroglot in its aspect as an expressive system, that is, in the forms that carry its meanings" (Bahktin 675). In other words, language, and especially literary language, is fraught with meaning, and cannot be assigned any one, single, all-encompassing meaning. Instead, meaning is nuanced and stratified, offering many different layers for the reader to explore.

Following along a similar line of argument, then, LeCercle asserts that the nature of a nonsense text is such that it defies any one single meaning. Rather, as LeCercle explains, "its dissolution of sense multiplies meaning" (LeCercle 20). In creating multiple levels of meaning in a single text, nonsense authors draw attention to the way in which we understand the process of making meaning in language. They deliberately defamiliarize language and meaning in order to force the reader to consider how we make meaning in the first place. Shklovsky claims of art that, "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (Shklovsky 16). In the same way, nonsense authors deliberately multiply meaning in their poetry in order to force the reader to consider and appreciate the way

in which we understand meaning, a cognitive and linguistic process not typically considered consciously. As a nonsense poet, Shel Silverstein makes particularly successful use of this feature of nonsense poetry. In his poems, Silverstein uses a variety of different techniques, all to the same end: multiplying layers of meaning in a poem.

One technique which Silverstein uses to multiply meaning in his text is the exploitation and misinterpretation of binary systems. According to Culler, binary systems are the simplest way of classifying language. By neatly defining linguistic terms based on oppositions, binary systems offer a simple way to make sense of the world around us. Because of their simplicity, binary systems are also the first classification systems which children learn when acquiring vocabulary and language skills. As Culler explains, ". . . binary oppositions are inherent in language, both as the first operations that a child learns to perform and as the most 'natural' and economical code" (Culler 15). Binary systems make sense of language, and offer a quick and simple way to classify complex ideas.

We see evidence of the use of binary systems in Silverstein's poem "The Bagpipe Who Didn't Say No." In this poem, Silverstein exploits the binary opposition between 'yes' and 'no' to structure the nonsense of the verse. The basic premise of the poem is one in which a turtle, wandering along a lonely beach, comes across a bagpipe lying in the sand. The turtle immediately falls in love with the bagpipe, repeatedly asking the bagpipe for reassurances of mutual affection. The bagpipe's 'response' to the turtle, repeated throughout the poem, is simply, as the title suggests, "the bagpipe didn't say no" (Silverstein, "The Bagpipe Who Didn't Say No" 132) Setting aside philosophical and ethical concerns, and boiling this down to its simplest binary form, the reader is forced to acknowledge that the opposite of saying 'no' is saying 'yes'. By extension, then, in stating that the bagpipe didn't say no, the speaker of the poem is implying that

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the bagpipe is responding in the affirmative to the turtle's romantic advances. Certainly, this is how the turtle chooses to interpret the bagpipe's response. Following the bagpipe's silence, the turtle is delighted to exclaim, "'Ah, you love me. Then confess! / Let me whisper in your dainty ear and hold you to my chest'" (Silverstein, "The Bagpipe Who Didn't Say No" 132). Because of his limited understanding of language based on binary systems, the turtle is free to interpret the bagpipe's lack of a negative response as being a positive response to his romantic advances.

Unfortunately, the danger of relying on binary systems to classify language is that they lose meaning outside of that quality which defines the difference between A and B. In fact, when taken out of context or placed in relation to other systems, these binary oppositions may even become misleading in their meaning and significance (Culler 16). This is certainly the case in "The Bagpipe Who Didn't Say No." The nonsense in this poem derives from the fact that the bagpipe is an inanimate object, and so cannot declare or deny its love for the turtle. Thanks to his understanding of the binary system of yes and no, the turtle believes that simply not saying 'no' is the equivalent of saying 'yes', since the two are opposites. However, in this assumption the turtle fails to take into account the context of the bagpipe. According to the logic of the poem, although an intelligent animal such as the turtle is capable of accepting or rejecting love, it is absurd to assume that the bagpipe can do the same. Being an inanimate object, the bagpipe cannot think, feel, or speak for itself, meaning that its not saying 'no' is in no way equivalent to admitting love for the turtle. Clearly, in this context, the binary opposition of 'yes' and 'no' is misleading, both for the turtle and for the reader.

Silverstein then turns this misinterpretation around and asks, in a round-about way, that the child reader should not make the same mistake as the turtle. The poem ends with the lines:

> And some night when tide is low there,
> Just walk up and say, 'Hello, there,'

> And politely ask the bagpipe if this story's really so.
>> I assure you, darling children, that the bagpipe won't say 'No.' (Silverstein, "The Bagpipe Who Didn't Say No" 133)

By emphasizing the fact that, if asked, "the bagpipe won't say 'No'", Silverstein appeals to the child's intelligence in perceiving the absurdity of the situation. Despite what the speaker of the poem says, the child reader should not need assurance to know that the bagpipe will not contradict the story told by the poem. In this way, Silverstein draws attention to the fallacy of relying on binary oppositions to define the world around us. Instead, Silverstein indicates that a text has the potential for multiple meanings and interpretations, depending on the context in which the system is situated. This becomes significant to the child reader, who is given a glimpse of the complexity of social relations through the complexity of Silverstein's language. By observing the way in which the meaning of the poem changes depending on the interpretation of "didn't say no," the child reader can begin to understand the multiplicity of meanings inherent in social interactions, as well as in language.

Of course, binary oppositions are not the only system which Silverstein exploits to multiply and confuse meaning in his poems. Silverstein also uses conversion to change the parts of speech assigned to particular words, thus changing the meaning associated with each word. As LeCercle explains, "Nonsense often plays with sounds; but what it really likes to play with is rules," and one of the most fundamental and simple rules to play with is the rule which dictates which parts of speech give a word meaning (LeCercle 40). Grammar, specifically parts of speech, is one of the major contributing factors which gives a word its meaning. Hirtle explains this well when he says, "Thanks to this grammatical meaning, a word can fulfill the particular function foreseen for it in the sentence under construction" (Hirtle 43). Each word has its place in the sentence, and its meaning, as well as the meaning of the sentence as a whole, can be derived

from the particular part of speech assigned to each word. According to linguists like Hirtle and Culler, without this structure most words would be essentially meaningless.

However, many modern writers, have demonstrated that this is simply not the case. Take, for example, Jane Austen's *Emma*. In the novel, when confronted with Mrs. Elton's enthusiasm over Jane Fairfax, Emma thinks to herself, "'Let me not suppose that she dares go about, Emma Woodhouse-ing me!'" (Austen 222). In expressing her fear that Mrs. Elton will be overbearing in her attempts to introduce Jane to the social world, Emma turns her own name into a verb as a nod to her own treatment of Harriet Smith in the novel. Austen's example is just one of many that appear throughout the English literary canon, demonstrating that grammar and parts of speech can be flexible when it suits the author's purpose. Nonsense writers like Silverstein, then, prefer to follow the lead of authors like Lewis Carroll in exploiting this flexibility of language. Carroll is notorious for a sentiment expressed in his textbook *Symbolic Logic*, in which he argues, ". . . I maintain that any writer of a book is fully authorized in attaching any meaning he likes to any word or phrase he intends to use" (quoted in Lerer 193) For Silverstein, this means changing the part of speech assigned to a word in order to alter its meaning in the text. One example of this technique can be found in the poem "The Meehoo with an Exactlywatt". In this poem, Silverstein plays with conversion of parts of speech in his creation of the Meehoo and the Exactlywatt. Although not spelled precisely the same, these creature names are meant to be perversions of the questions "Me who?" and "Exactly what?" By changing the context and parts of speech assigned to these phrases, Silverstein effectively changes their meaning in the text from being a question to being the name of an invented creature.

Silverstein then highlights these multiple meanings by playing the new and old forms of the phrases off one another in a playful manner throughout the poem. In a text which is

whimsically reminiscent of Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First?", the entirety of this poem is

an exercise in confusion as "Me who?" and "Exactly what?" are interchanged with "Mehoo" and

"Exactlywatt" in a quest for clarity. For example:

> Knock knock!
> > Who's there?
> Me!
> > Me who?
> That's right!
> > *What's* right?
> Meehoo!
> > *That's* what I want to know!
> *What's* what you want to know?
> > Me who?
> Yes, exactly!
> > Exactly *what*?
> Yes, I have an Exactlywatt on a chain! (Silverstein, "The Meehoo with an Exactlywatt" 72)

Of course, the full impact of this confusion of meaning cannot be experienced visually.

Because the text alters the spelling of the phrases in question when specifying the creature

names, it becomes relatively simple as a reader to identify the difference between the question

phrases and the creature names. However, if we keep in mind the premise presented earlier that

children's literature is just as much an oral literature as a visual one, then it becomes easier to see

the confusion between "Me who?" and "Meehoo", between "Exactly what?" and "Exactlywatt."

At an audio level, there is no difference in sound between these two homophones, making it

difficult to distinguish at times which meaning is being inferred by the text. In this way, rather

than differentiating between the different parts of speech, Silverstein conflates the interrogations

and proper nouns and multiplies the meanings associated with each particular speech sound. In

this way, not only does Silverstein create comedic nonsense, he also draws attention to the fact

that words, and phrases, can have multiple meanings, and the meaning we ascribe to words may

not be the (only) correct interpretation of the text.

Taking a broader look at the poems of Shel Silverstein, we see that he also uses this strategy of homophones and multiple meanings in some of his other poems. Specifically, the poem "The Farmer and the Queen" makes use of the ambivalence of homophones to create its nonsense text. In discussing strategies for disrupting the classification systems of sense, Stewart defines ambivalence as "that which belongs to more than one domain at a time and will not fix its identity in any one member of this set of domains" (Stewart 61). According to Stewart, ambivalence as a feature of nonsense threatens the existing order of sense because it threatens the autonomy of the different domains in a classification system. As a sound shape, homophones refuse to inhabit any one single meaning, making them a particularly amplified form of ambivalent text with multiple meanings.

Silverstein, then, conflates homophones with onomatopoeia to generate multiple meanings in "The Farmer and the Queen." In this poem, a farmer has a conversation with the various animals on the farm, asking them for advice on what to do when meeting the queen as she passes by. Thanks to the nature of homophones, it appears to the reader as if the farmer is having an intelligent conversation with the animals, as when the farmer asks, "'But should I curtsy or should I cheer? / Oh, here's her carriage now. / What should I do?' he asked the dog. / The dog said, 'Bow'" (Silverstein, "The Farmer and the Queen" 33). On the one hand, it would appear that the single word "Bow" is simply an onomatopoeic representation of the braying of a hound dog. The speech of dogs in English is often represented by the words "Woof" and "Bow Wow". On the other hand, however, in the context of the poem it would seem that the dog is giving the farmer sage advice on how to interact with the approaching queen. Much like the case of the "Meehoo" and the "Exactlywatt", Silverstein's use of homophones in this text plays with the fluid nature of ambivalence to multiply meaning in the text. In both of these poems,

Silverstein calls into question the premise that a word or phrase must have a single, correct meaning based on the text in which it is situated. Rather, Silverstein highlights the slipperiness of language and meaning as he creates multiple layers of meaning and interpretation in his poetry.

Picture Books and Nonsense

One area of children's literature which deserves more scholarship is the visual aspect of the text. Both McGillis and Hunt are in agreement on this point, and each makes the note that the visual impact of a picture book is equally as important as the text itself. Hunt makes the argument that picture books are an important contribution to children's literature because they serve to bridge the gap between the verbal and non-verbal, in that they tell the story through images that direct the eye where to go on the page (Hunt 176). According to Hunt, "Picture books can cross the boundary between the verbal and pre-verbal worlds; they can be allies of the child-reader . . ." (Hunt 176). Particularly for the child reader who has mastered the verbal component of language, but not yet acquired the skill of reading words on a page, the visual component of picture books provides a bridge between written and verbal words. Visual images provide the child with a means of interacting with the text in a more rich and complex way than simply sounding out the words or having the text read aloud.

That is not to say that the only function of picture books is to offer a visual interpretation of the text. The relationship between image and text is much more complex than that. In many ways, visual print media such as picture books and graphic novels are far closer to cinema than they are to traditional novels. Writing about graphic novels, Dallacqua notes of the visual component that, "The reader is able to watch action unfold, see what a character looks like, and experience the setting illustrated in the background while reading a graphic novel. And in a graphic novel, these images are not additions to the story; they are part of the story" (Dallacqua

65). Imagery in both graphic novels and picture books is essential to the story itself. The text cannot stand alone, because the visual component of the book is essential to understanding the meaning behind the text. This meaning becomes more complex, then, when we consider the variety of ways in which the images can interact with the text. As Hunt explains, "Picture books can exploit this complex relationship; words can add to, contradict, expand, echo, or interpret the pictures – and vice versa" (Hunt 176). The relationship between image and word is extremely complex, and the function of this relationship is to enhance each by its interaction with the other. As Letcher asserts, "Graphic novels and comics in general require a different type of literacy from their readers, a literacy that can incorporate not only written words, but also visuals, movement between panels, and different types of transitions" (Letcher 94). The same can be said of picture books, because whether the image depicts a literal interpretation of the text, or whether the text says something completely different from what the image is showing, nevertheless each carries its own significance in interpreting the picture book as a whole.

Of course, it becomes important at this point to note the difference between a picture book and an illustrated book. Although both contain images which interact with the text, the key difference can be found in the frequency of the images. Any book which deliberately employs sparse images to force the child to try and read the text should be considered an illustrated book, rather than a picture book. The key defining feature of a picture book is the fact that the images play an equally important role as the text, and they are pervasive throughout the book (Hunt 177). I mention this key difference, because it could be argued that the works of Shel Silverstein should be considered illustrated books rather than picture books. Because each illustrated poem is a separate unit, and the images together do not create a cohesive story, some might say that they are more illustrations than pictures. However, based on Hunt's definition of the difference

between the two types of books, Silverstein's work must be classified as picture books. The images drawn by Silverstein are pervasive throughout his books, and as we shall see, in many cases the images are critical to understanding and interpreting the text. These images interact with the text in complex ways, and they enrich the text through their additions, interpretations, and contradictions of the words on the page.

One of the key ways in which Silverstein exploits the possibilities of picture books in creating nonsense is in using the images to dismantle metaphor and figurative language. According to LeCercle, nonsense language tends to abhor metaphor. One strategy used by nonsense texts to comment on language is the dismantling of figurative language by taking the text literally, often with comic effects. In fact, nonsense language will often employ complicated strategies, including, but not limited to, literalism, coinages, incongruity, and replacing metaphor with puns in order to avoid using figurative language (LeCercle 63). Silverstein employs these strategies in many of his poems, creating comical nonsense by taking a literal approach to figurative language. However, Silverstein takes this one step further by employing the images in his picture books to enhance and enrich the effect of literalism in his nonsense texts. Silverstein's images depict literal interpretations of typically metaphorical phrases, which then interact with the text in complex ways to enhance the nonsense of the poem.

This use of pictures to enhance the literal reading of the text can be found in Silverstein's short poem "Wild Strawberries." The interpretation of this poem hinges on the reader's understanding of the adjective 'wild.' Typically, when referring to wild strawberries, the image that comes to mind is one of tasty red fruit, grown in areas which are not cultivated or farmed. However, in his poem, Silverstein poses the question, "Are Wild Strawberries really wild? / Will they scratch an adult, will they snap at a child?" (Silverstein, "Wild Strawberries" 66). In this case,

Silverstein is interpreting the word wild to mean savage, rather than uncultivated. In this way, Silverstein is upsetting a more conventional interpretation of the word wild based on context, and personifying the strawberries as creatures incapable of controlling their behaviour around others.

This misinterpretation of the phrase 'wild strawberries' is further emphasized through the accompanying image presented with the poem. As seen in Figure 1, this image depicts Silverstein's wild strawberry as a creature with eyes, legs, and pointed teeth, marching across the page as if on the prowl. This depiction of the wild strawberry emphasizes its savageness and personification over the more traditional idea of an uncultivated strawberry. Studying this poem, and the accompanying image, we can see the way in which Silverstein uses nonsense language to multiply meaning in the text. Because the word wild can be defined as either uncultivated or savage, we rely on contextual clues to decipher which definition is the correct one. However, through the phraseology of 'wild strawberries' and the image of a strawberry with pointed teeth, Shel Silverstein offers two conflicting meanings of the word wild. According to Silverstein's poem, rather than being either uncultivated or savage, this strawberry is both. By multiplying the meaning of the text in this way, Silverstein upsets notions of how we make meaning in language and invites the child reader to explore alternative meanings outside of the obvious.

Figure 1: "Wild Strawberries" by Shel Silverstein (HarperCollins, 1974)

"Wild Strawberries" is not the only poem where Silverstein employs this strategy, either. Reading through Silverstein's poem "The Loser", we see a similar relationship at play between text and image. This poem opens with the lines:

> Mama said I'd lose my head
> If it wasn't fastened on.
> Today I guess it wasn't
> 'Cause while playing with my cousin
> It fell off and rolled away
> And now it's gone. (Silverstein, "The Loser" 25)

In English, the idiomatic expression "to lose one's head" already presents the reader with a multiplicity of meanings. The most obvious meaning of the phrase in this poem is used to refer to a person's forgetfulness or absentmindedness. Typically the idea is that a forgetful person would "lose their head" if it was not fastened to the rest of their body. However, "to lose one's head" can also refer to a state of confusion or inability to act rationally in a difficult situation. In addition, the titular "Loser" of the poem could refer to one who commonly misplaces things, a person who cannot win in competition, or one who is not socially accepted by his or her peers. The entire premise of the poem revolves around a single expression which already multiplies meaning for the reader depending on his or her own understanding of the phrase.

Of course, because this expression is an idiom, it is generally understood to be figurative language. The idea of a person literally losing their head simply because they are being absentminded is absurd. However, this is exactly the premise that Silverstein presents to the reader in "The Loser". The speaker of the poem does not figuratively lose his head. Rather, in this poem the speaker's head literally falls off of his shoulders and rolls away, leaving the speaker with the predicament of finding his missing head. In creating this literal image, Silverstein follows LeCercle's model of using literalism to dismantle metaphor in his nonsense poetry.

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The accompanying image with this poem, however, has a slightly more complex relationship with the text than that of the wild strawberry. Shown in Figure 2, the image with this poem is one of a headless body sitting on top of a disembodied head, a head which does not look pleased to be used as a seat. On the one hand this image interprets the text and gives the reader a clearer image of the concept behind the poem. In this way the image emphasizes the literalism being employed in the text and adds to the comedic effect of the nonsense.

> So I guess I'll sit down
> On this rock
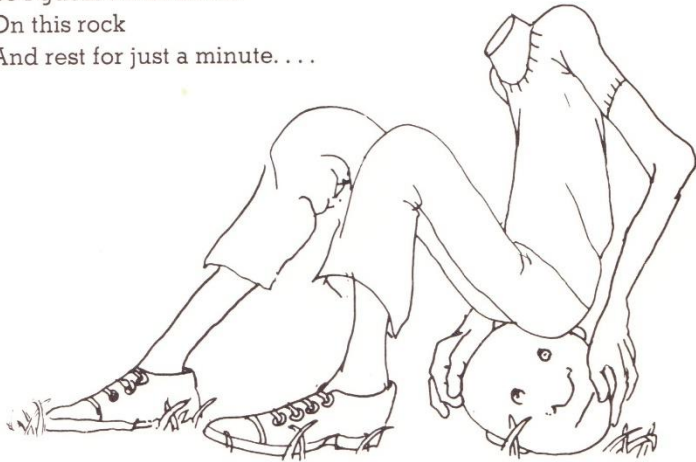> And rest for just a minute. . . .

Figure 2: "The Loser" by Shel Silverstein (HarperCollins, 1981)

However, on the other hand, the image also contradicts the text of the poem. After lamenting his inability to find the missing head – "And I can't look for it / 'Cause my eyes are in it" – the speaker finishes the poem by saying, "So I guess I'll sit down / On this rock / And rest for just a minute . . ." (Silverstein, "The Loser" 25). This, of course, is not the situation, as the reader well knows. By showing a body sitting on top of its head, the image contradicts the words of the speaker in saying that he is sitting on a rock for the moment. Instead, dramatic irony is created between the text and the image, and the child reader is indirectly invited to question the meaning of the text in relation to the image. By creating a contradiction between text and image, Silverstein creates multiple levels of meaning and interpretation in his poem, and asks the reader to examine the process which determines which is the correct interpretation of a text.

Conclusion

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According to Culler, "The rules of English enable sequences of sounds to have meaning; they make it possible to utter grammatical or ungrammatical sentences" (Culler 5). The same can be said of culture, where an action is given meaning by its context within the system. This place within the system has the potential to give a text a multiplicity of meanings at any given point in time. Nonsense language such as that of Shel Silverstein deliberately exploits this feature of language by multiplying meaning and creating deliberate confusion through nonsense poetry. In his poems "The Bagpipe Who Didn't Say No", "The Meehoo with an Exactlywatt", and "The Farmer and the Queen", Silverstein plays with the oral nature of children's literature to obscure clarity and generate multiple meanings in the text. He plays words off of one another in ways that read one way on the page and another way when spoken aloud, thus drawing deliberate attention to the way in which language makes meaning differently depending on the context of the text.

In addition, Silverstein makes unique use of the picture books form to further complicate meaning in his poems "Wild Strawberries" and "The Loser". In these poems, Silverstein uses images to enhance the literalism being used to subvert metaphor, thus creating tension between what the reader understands to be normally figurative and the literal image printed on the page. In addition, Silverstein creates a tension through dramatic irony in "The Loser" in which the image and the text contradict one another, thus creating further layers of meaning to complicate the interpretation of the poem.

Looking at Stewart, we see that ". . . nonsense language must of necessity be a kind of taboo behaviour" (Stewart 88). This is because nonsense language works to make the unconscious conscious and aware of its own functioning. By creating a multiplicity of meanings through text and pictures, Shel Silverstein does exactly this. Silverstein's poetry makes us aware of our own

language processing and the structures we use to make meaning. In doing so, Silverstein disrupts

our preconceived expectations of both the nature of language, and of children's literature.

Conclusion

Children's literature and nonsense language have long experienced a close and complex relationship. As a meta-language, nonsense language seeks to create a means of discussing language and sense within the confines of natural languages. Children's literature, on the other hand, is written and published for a young audience whose linguistic development is far behind the complexities espoused by nonsense language. Nevertheless, for over a century children's literature has proved an ideal form for nonsense language, with authors such as Roald Dahl, Dr. Seuss, and Shel Silverstein capitalizing on traditional features of children's literature in order to create complex and beautiful nonsense.

Reading closely into Roald Dahl's novel *The BFG*, we see that there is a complex relationship between language, communication, and "proper" grammar. On the one hand, proper grammar allows for clarity and ease of communication when conversing with others. However, as Dahl demonstrates, "proper" grammar is also a construct, and one which can be rigid and restricting to the linguistic imagination. Dahl explores both sides of grammar in *The BFG*, tailoring his work to both a child and an adult audience. For the child audience, he demonstrates that grammar is essential to communication, and that to assimilate the system of grammar is to gain access to a network of communication previously denied to the child. However, for the adult reader Dahl also offers a subtly subversive subtext which pushes back against the rigidity of "proper" grammar, acknowledging that the existing structures of grammar do not encompass all possible knowledge.

Both the text and the subtext can be seen in the character of the BFG and his interactions with the world around him. In his quest to establish effective communication with Sophie, the BFG struggles with Fowler's two forms of grammar. Although the BFG has assimilated that

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grammar which Fowler considers "a psychological property" that allows him to make sense of the world around him, he has not fully grasped the formal system of grammar which is an external structure created to define the rules of language (Fowler 39). The BFG's grammar skills are roughly equivalent to those of a young child, with the unfortunate result that "'What I mean and what I say is two different things'" (Dahl 41). Because of this the child reader is able to identify with the BFG and his struggle to assimilate the formal structure of "proper" grammar; the experience of the child reader mirrors that of the BFG in his quest for communication. The young child is then shown the benefits of assimilating the language system by the end of the novel when the BFG succeeds in learning proper grammar, to the point at which he is able to author a novel of his own. In this way grammar is demonstrated to grant access to previously denied systems of communication.

However, to other characters in the book, and to the adult reader, the BFG demonstrates the possibilities available when we break free of the restrictions of "proper" grammar. Working with the notion that "the version of English that's taught in schools isn't *correct* English, but *appropriate* English," (Lynch 274). Roald Dahl dismantles the idea that any one form of English can be the "correct" English which makes up the sum total of our linguistic knowledge. Throughout the novel, Sophie and the BFG are able to understand one another and establish a rapport, despite the differences in the grammatical structures they employ. This gives the BFG's version of English validity, with the implication that although grammar aids in communication, it is evidently not essential. With this understanding, Dahl then shows the reader through the BFG's interactions with other characters that there is always more to learn and understand about the world when we are not restricted by the structures of "proper" grammar. The BFG is the only character (other than the other giants) who cannot speak "proper" English, and yet he has a far

greater understanding of the mysteries of the world than Sophie. In this way Dahl gestures to the idea that although grammar can be useful in certain contexts, if we are not careful then it can become restrictive to our knowledge and imaginations.

Examining next the poetry of Dr. Seuss, we see that in *On Beyond Zebra* Dr. Seuss makes use of nonsense language and coinages to invert the traditional hierarchy of meaning over sound in language. In his poetry, Dr. Seuss exploits the possibilities offered by the phonetic structures of English, creating new words which explore the possibilities of language rather than residing within the bounds of already existing English. As LeCercle says, nonsense such as that penned by Dr. Seuss, "seeks to find out what can be said, given that not everything is actually said" (LeCercle 38). In doing so, Seuss simultaneously celebrates the sounds of English while inviting the child reader to accompany him on a journey beyond the linguistic limits of standard English.

Through the use of his coinages, Dr. Seuss upsets the hierarchy of sound and meaning in poetry, both at the level of the word and at the level of the poem itself. By creating charabia that borders on baragouin and lanternois, Seuss draws attention to the arbitrary nature of English phonetics and calls into question the rules which govern which morphemes fit into English and which do not. Words such as "Thnadner" and "Humpf-Humpf-A-Dumpfer" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*) ascribe meaning to uncommon morphemes, giving them legitimacy as possibilities in English, rather than as non-standard morphemes. In addition, onomatopoeia such as "Floob-Boober-Bab-Boober-Bubs" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*) demonstrate that there are cases where we must rely on sound in order to make meaning in a word, thereby prioritizing sound over meaning. At the level of the poem Seuss further complicates this relationship with the creation of his "Nutches" and of the instrument called the "o'Grunth" (Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*). While the

tongue twister about "each Nutch in a Nitch" demonstrates the power sound has over meaning, the creation of the "o'Grunth" illustrates that the two can be separated and neither is essential to creating the other. In this way Seuss inverts and complicates the relationship between sound and meaning, drawing attention to the unlimited possibilities offered by the sounds of English.

Turning the text outward, then, Seuss devises an invitation which calls the child reader to join him in a journey of linguistic exploration. The protagonist of Seuss' tale, Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell, is set up to mirror the child reader in his journey of discovery beyond the end of the alphabet. The narrator of the tale is repeatedly urging Conrad Cornelius to open his mind to new possibilities, and to not restrict himself to the previously existing English alphabet. By the end of the tale Conrad Cornelius has taken this message to heart, using his imagination to create even more wonderful and complicated new letters. Seuss then brings the child reader into the picture by inviting him or her to name Conrad Cornelius' new letter, thereby bringing the child reader directly into the process of exploring language. In this way Seuss accomplishes the task of showing the child reader "what no rules can teach them – that there is a music specific to the English tongue" (LeCercle 37). In *On Beyond Zebra*, Dr. Seuss creates a poem which celebrates the possibilities of English and invites the child reader to use his or her imagination in exploring the beauty of this language.

Finally, in closely examining the poetry of Shel Silverstein, we can see that Silverstein seeks out deliberate ways of multiplying meaning in his text, inviting the reader to examine the way in which we understand meaning-making structures in the English language. To do this Silverstein exploits both the already existing multiplicity of meanings in language, as well as the complexity of meaning offered by the children's literature form of the picture book. In this way Silverstein engages with nonsense language's tendency to "emphasize the reversible and flexible

nature of communication" (Stewart 69) by making the reader conscious of meaning-making

structures and their inherent flexibility.

In creating his nonsense, Silverstein very rarely dismantles or discards existing language

structures. Instead, Silverstein capitalizes on language's previous potential to have a multiplicity

of meanings in order to create nonsense in his text. In the poem "The Bagpipe Who Didn't Say

No," Silverstein toys with the ambivalent nature of binary oppositions, which lose their meaning

when they are removed from their original context. Silverstein uses the example of a bagpipe

being incapable of saying no to highlight the way not saying no can be interpreted as saying yes,

even when this possibility should not exist. Silverstein also uses a similar tactic in "The Farmer

and the Queen" and "The Meehoo With an Exactlywatt." In both these poems, Silverstein

exploits the function of homophones to create a duplicity of meaning, as the dog's "Bow" can be

taken as either a command or an animal sound, and the "Meehoo" can either be a fantastical

creature or a simple inquiry. In all three of these instances, Silverstein draws attention to the

structures which allow the reader to decipher the meaning of the text, and mocks their capacity to

clarify meaning.

Similarly, Silverstein also capitalizes on the complex nature of picture books to further

complicate the issue of meaning in a text in his poems "Wild Strawberries" and "The Loser". As

Hunt explains, "Picture books can exploit this complex relationship [between text and image];

words can add to, contradict, expand, echo, or interpret the pictures – and vice versa" (Hunt 176).

Silverstein makes clever use of this relationship between image and text by using illustrations to

dispel figurative language in the text. Although both the phrases "wild strawberries" and "to lose

one's head" have metaphorical or figurative connotations in the English language, Silverstein

uses his images to depict literal representations of these concepts, creating a new layer of

meaning in the poem. In addition, in "The Loser" Silverstein also uses the image to contradict the text, creating a dialogue between image and text which further multiplies meaning in complex ways. Both through language and through illustrations, Silverstein exploits the natural tendency of language towards multiple meanings in order to make that very same language self-reflexive. Silverstein forces the reader to examine meaning-making structures, calling attention to the ways in which we understand meaning and language.

Where, then, does this leave us in our understanding of nonsense language and children's literature? According to Stewart, the beginning of nonsense is "language lifted out of context, language turned on itself as infinite regression, language made hermetic, opaque in an envelope of language" (Stewart 3). Stewart goes on to say that:

> Nonsense becomes that which is irrelevant to context, that to which context is irrelevant. Nonsense becomes appropriate only to the everyday discourse of the socially purposeless, to those on the peripheries of everyday life: the infant, the child, the mad and the senile, the chronically foolish and playful. (Stewart 5)

While I disagree with Stewart's labelling of children and their literature as "purposeless," nevertheless there is something to be said for the way in which nonsense fits into the genre of children's literature. The oral culture of children's literature, its tendency towards rhythm and rhyme, and its playful relationship with the phonetic and linguistic structures of English all appeal to the nonsense writer who seeks to call out our basic understanding of the functioning of language. If we can agree that "The very young child needs to like language before he or she needs to understand it," (McGillis 9) then nonsense language provides the opportunity for the young child to do just that. Nonsense language in children's literature gives the young child the tools and opportunity to explore language, to examine and question its rules, and to seek out the possibilities offered by the linguistic imagination.

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