Language through the Looking Glass

Language plays a crucial role in our world. Apparently, language plays the same crucial role in the fictional world as well. The poem, “Jabberwocky,” by Lewis Carroll is completely mysterious to the average English speaker, but many can understand and find somewhat of a structure within its jumbled words.

As readers of Lewis Carroll know, after Alice passes through the looking glass, words simply become meaningless. Nothing makes sense, especially when hearing the words of “Jabberwocky.” Though strange and peculiar in and out of context, these words are placed in such a way that readers can almost understand. The zany words of the poem can be categorized into different parts of speech because the poem mimics the sentence structure of English language. “Jabberwocky” is, in fact, grammatically correct. Linguist Charles Yang (2006) writes, “Make no mistake: ‘Jabberwocky’ is really English with nonsense words plugged in, and it is the structure of English that filled Alice’s head with ideas. (The details would have to wait for Humpty Dumpty himself, as Lewis Carroll readers will recall.) We use grammar to translate the combinations of thoughts into the combinations of words, and those who have the same grammar can translate the words back to thoughts” (p. 94).

As Alice proved, grammar is the key element to understanding. Luckily, Alice had already acquired knowledge of a grammar before she journeyed through Wonderland. Young children must start from scratch before embarking on their own adventures. Noam Chomsky
hypothesizes that there is a universal grammar. He believes that everyone is born with an innate sense of grammar. Chomsky (quoted in Yang, 2006) presents two nonsensical sentences:

a) Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

b) Furiously sleep ideas green colorless.

The first sentence, like those is the “Jabberwocky,” is structurally accurate, yet has no meaning. The second sentence, a jumbled version of the first, makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. As speakers of English, we can recognize this because of our knowledge of grammar: “The grammar, therefore, cannot simply be a list of sentences we have previously memorized—not that we could memorize that many sentences in the first place. Rather, the grammar must be a compact device that encodes the regularities of how sentences are formed in our language, one that we can use to create and understand new sentences” (Yang 2006, pp. 95-96).

Sentences can be broken down into groups from biggest to smallest. Sentences can be broken down into phrases, then categories, and finally, words. Every sentence has a noun phrase and a verb phrase. These phrases consist of words that belong to different grammatical categories. Alice used this organization to crack the code of the “Jabberwocky.” Knowing that sentences contain phrases and categories, it is easy to decipher the lines in the poem: “Like Alice, we can make some educated guesses about what’s going on, and we do so purely on the basis of how words (and phrases) are related to one another. ‘Slithy’ is probably an adjective, ‘toves’ must be a noun, ‘gyre’ and ‘gimble’ are verbs, perhaps along the lines of ‘jump’ or ‘roll’, but can’t be ‘push’ or ‘devour’. Of course, massive details are missing, but at least we’ve got a good start” (Yang 2006, p. 106).
In a way, grammar is the reality in an unrealistic circumstance. Alice was fortunate to already understand grammar and its rules, for if she hadn’t, things most definitely would have been even more “curiouser and curiouser.”

References