

## RESEARCH TITLE

# ANOMALY IN LEWIS CARROLL POEM "JABBERWOCKY" A SEMANTIC PERSPECTIVE

Asst. Prof. Dr .Hussain Hameed Mayuuf<sup>1</sup>

Asst. lect. Hasan Imad Kadhim<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Babylon

Email: husm56@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Department of English, Al-Mustaqbal University College, Hilla, Babil, Iraq

Email: hasan.imad@mustaqbal-college.edu.iq

HNSJ, 2022, 3(2); <https://doi.org/10.53796/hnsj3244>

Published at 01/02/2022

Accepted at 14/12/2021

## Abstract

Anomaly can be defined as a violation of semantic rules resulting in expressions that seem nonsense. The semantic properties of words determine what other words they can be combined with. A sentence widely used by linguists illustrates this fact: Colorless green ideas sleep furiously. The sentence obeys all the syntactic rules of English. The subject is colorless green ideas and the predicate is sleep furiously. It has the same syntactic structure as the sentence "Dark green leaves rustle furiously".

The present study tries to answer the following questions: What is Semantic anomaly? How is it applied in poetry?

The aims of the study are: first, is to find out the anomalous expressions in Lewis Carroll poem **Jabberwocky**. And to find out the difference between semantic anomaly and syntactic anomaly.

## Theoretical Account

### 2.1 General Survey of Anomaly<sup>3</sup>

Cruse (2006:13) says that speaking about semantic anomaly is when having interacting meanings in a grammatically well-formed expression intuitively do not 'go together' normally, as in *plastic anxiety* or *feeble hypotenuses*. Expression like these are not necessarily uninterpretable; indeed anomaly in a literal interpretation of an expression is often a sign that it is intended to be taken non-literally.

There are many ways in which an expression may be semantically odd (including *pleonasm* and *zeugma*), but the term *anomaly* usually refers to cases where there is a conflict in fields of applicability. For example, it is difficult to see how the notion of feebleness can be associated in any meaningful way with hypotenuses. Some anomalous expressions are more anomalous than others.

The previous anomalous are those by which the anomaly can be cured by replacing one of the elements with a synonym: *?My favorite cactus passed away while I was on holiday; My favorite cactus died while I was on holiday.*

Somewhat odder are cases in which the anomaly can only be cured by replacing an element with a superordinate or a co-hyponym from the same perspective: *I heard a mouse barking; I heard a dog/animal barking.*

Oddest of all are cases in which none of these strategies effects an improvement: *feeble hypotenuses*. These three degrees of anomaly are sometimes called 'inappropriateness', 'paradox', and 'incongruity'.

Dascal (2003: 582) stated that the difficulty in establishing what the sentence technically means, which is an essential prerequisite for measuring its truth-value, is suggested as the cause. A lack of match between the predicate and the sentence's subject, which isn't far from a semantic 'anomaly,' could be the cause of such a problem. Imagining that, despite being directed to pay attention just to the literal meaning, the subjects naturally construct or infer a metaphorical interpretation, exactly because generating a literal reading in the first place is difficult.

A spatial anomaly is something that does not fit into the normal order. It is a rip in the space-time continuum. Tendahl (2009: 72) claims in his sentence *Tom is a pig*. Saying

that Tom is a human being, the hearer of such sentence would have to detect a semantic anomaly. Then, having decided that he should better look for a meaning other than the literal one, he must use a strategy to find the intended meaning.

Shier (2002: 31) denotes in his sentence "you are not going to die". Clearly, the mother is not guaranteeing the kid of his ultimate immortality, but the operative pragmatic anomaly here is not obvious falsity but lack of relevant specificity. This is clear if we consider a positive version of the same utterance.

A doctor could say to a cancer patient, who wants a frank prognosis,

"I'm sorry to tell you, but there is nothing I can do. You're going to die."

Seemingly, the patient will not take the doctor to mean that he, like anyone else, is mortal. But it's not the obvious truth of what is said that enables him to understand the doctor; it's the presumption that the doctor is telling him something relevant to his medical condition. Similarly, utterances of the negations of the previous examples would typically have the same implicit qualifications as utterances of those sentences themselves. Obvious truth, like obvious falsity, has no bearing on the hearer's inference in these cases.

## 2.2 Semantic Anomaly versus Grammatical Anomaly

Cruse (2000: 44) states that for it's crucial to distinguish semantic oddity from grammatical anomaly when describing meaning. This is another point of contention.

The most widely used criterion for distinguishing between the two sorts of anomalies is corrigibility: it is said that grammatical anomalies are typically corrigible in the sense that the 'right' form is clear, whereas semantic anomalies are typically not. Thus, \*Me planted two mice may simply be changed to / saw two mice, whereas \*The noiseless typewriter-blasts squirmed faithfully has no clear method of being changed. While this is true in general, it is not difficult to uncover easily correctable faults that are immediately obvious semantic:\* This hole is too large for John to crawl through.

The concept of corrigibility has a fundamental flaw in that it assumes that one knows what was initially intended. A better technique is to ask about the smallest alteration that can be made to the text or whatever else is needed to eliminate the oddity. There are three options (if the anomaly is caused by a single source): First the anomaly can only be cured by replacing one or more of the full lexical elements (i.e. a noun, verb,

adjective, or adverb). In this case we can be reasonably certain that we are dealing with a semantic anomaly:

1 - John is too \*small to get through this hole. V big

Second the anomaly can only be cured by changing one or more grammatical elements (affixes, particles, determiners, etc.), but not by changing a full lexical item. In this case we can be sure that the anomaly is grammatical:

2 – Tom \*be going home.

Third the anomaly can be cured either by grammatical or by lexical adjustment.

In this case the need to know whether the lexical possibilities form a natural semantic class or not: if they do, the anomaly can be taken as semantic.

3 - \*Suzan went home tomorrow./Suzan will go home tomorrow. (grammatical adjustment)

Suzan went home \*tomorrow. yesterday. last week.

The items which remove the anomaly share a component of meaning, namely, an indication of past time.

There is one more possible diagnostic criterion: a semantic anomaly can often be improved by manipulating the context, whereas this is usually not possible with pure syntactic anomalies.

5 - The chair saw Kate.

(Kate has a persecution mania. She believes all her accidents are due to harmful forces. No doubt the chair saw her, computed her path across the room, and placed itself just where she would trip over it.)

No amount of contextual elaboration can reduce the anomaly of The mans possess three car.

### 2.3 Types of Anomaly

Cruse (2000:45) states that oddity has been handled as a single phenomenon, with no attempt to differentiate between different types. Even without further improvement, it is a helpful analytical tool because most speakers have keen intuitions about the normality or oddness of a language. It is, nevertheless, occasionally useful to distinguish between different sorts of anomalies. The most common types are shown below

### 2.3.1 Pleonasm

Tom chewed it with his teeth.

It was stolen illegally.

Kate intentionally made a speech.

These examples give a feeling of redundancy: how else can you chew something, if not with your teeth? How can anybody make a speech accidentally?

### 2.3.2 Zeugma

Kate picked the roses she had planted the year before.

Tom expired on the same day as his TV license.

A sense of punning is an unmistakable symptom of zeugma. The essence of zeugma is the attempt to make a single expression do two semantic jobs at the same time.

### 2.3.3 Improbability

The puppy finished off a whole bottle of whisky.

The throne was occupied by a gun-toting baboon.

In the last analysis, there is probably a continuum between improbability and dissonance. For present purposes, improbability shall be distinguished by the fact that *I don't believe it!*, *How fantastic!*, and *That's a lie!*, etc. are appropriate responses. (ibid: 46)

Cruse (2006: 128) says that pleonasm is a type of semantic anomaly where some aspect of meaning is felt to be unnecessarily duplicated. For instance, in 'I kicked it with my foot the with my foot is felt to be redundant because it contributes no extra meaning: 'with the foot' is an essential part of the meaning of kick. Furthermore, in 'a female actress, female is redundant because 'female' is adequately signalled by -ess. Likewise a new innovation, an illegal murder, and so on. Notice that *I kicked it with my left foot* is not pleonastic, because although *kicked* incorporates the idea of 'with the foot', the noun *foot* is necessary to allow *left* to be specified. Mere repetition does not necessarily lead to pleonasm. For instance, *That was very, very good* is not pleonastic because the second *very* makes a distinctive contribution to the meaning by heightening the degree of goodness expressed. Similarly, *Pete shrugged his shoulders* is not pleonastic, although there is nothing else one can shrug. The reason appears to be

that there is a subtle difference of meaning between *Tom shrugged* and *Tom shrugged his shoulders*: the former directs attention to the meaning of the gesture, while the latter highlights the action itself.

Zeugma is type of semantic anomaly (it is also sometimes known as sortal crossing or, especially when deliberate, syllepsis). It occurs when a single occurrence of an expression has to be interpreted in two distinct ways simultaneously, as in *She was wearing a charming smile and a pair of slippers, He could well expire before his passport does*. The possibility of zeugma is one of a number of criteria for the diagnosis of the distinctness of lexical senses, and hence of ambiguity. (ibid: 192)

## 2.4 The Principle of Semantic Compositionality

(Sometimes called Frege's Principle) The meaning of a complex word, phrase, or sentence is determined by the meaning of its pieces and how they are integrated structurally, according to this principle. When understanding the meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence by its pieces becomes difficult or impossible, compositionality breaks down. We will not be able to compute a meaning for the full statement if one or more words in the sentence have no meaning. Furthermore, we will not arrive at a meaning if the individual words contain meaning but cannot be concatenated as required by the syntactic structure and corresponding semantic constraints. Semantic anomaly is the term we use to describe these events. In metaphors and idioms, this is what happens..

### 2.4.1 Anomaly

Anomaly is a violation of semantic rules resulting in expressions that seem nonsense. The semantic properties of words determine what other words they can be combined with. A sentence widely used by linguists illustrates this fact: *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*. The sentence obeys all the syntactic rules of English. The subject is *colorless green ideas* and the predicate is *sleep furiously*. It has the same syntactic structure as the sentence

"*Dark green leaves rustle furiously*".

However, there is obviously something semantically wrong with the sentence. The meaning of *colorless* includes the semantic feature "without color," but it is combined with the adjective *green*, which has the feature "green in color." How can something be

both “without color” and “green in color”? Such sentences are semantically **anomalous** (semantically ill-formed).

Semantic violations in poetry may form strange but interesting aesthetic images, as in Dylan Thomas’s phrase a grief ago. Ago is ordinarily used with words specified by some temporal semantic. Feature: a week ago \*a table ago an hour ago but not \*a dream ago month ago \*a mother ago a century ago When Thomas used the word grief with ago, he was adding a durational feature to grief for poetic effect, so while the noun phrase is anomalous, it evokes certain feelings.

The fact that we are able to understand, or at least interpret, anomalous expressions, and at the same time recognize their anomalous nature, demonstrates our knowledge of the semantic system and semantic properties of the language.

### 2.4.2 Metaphors

Metaphor is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between two unlike things. When what appears to be an anomaly is nevertheless understood in terms of a meaningful concept, the expression becomes a metaphor. Technically, metaphors are anomalous, but the nature of the anomaly creates the prominent meanings that metaphors usually have. Metaphors may have a literal meaning as well as their metaphorical meaning. To interpret a metaphor we need to understand the individual words, the literal meaning of the whole expression, and facts about the world. To understand the metaphor Time is Money it is necessary to know that in our society we are often paid according to the number of hours or days worked. Many expressions now taken literally may have originated as metaphors, such as “the fall of the dollar,” meaning its decline in value on the world market. Many people wouldn’t bat an eyelash (another metaphor) at the literal interpretation of saving or wasting time. Metaphor is one of the factors in language change. Metaphorical use of language is language creativity at its highest.

### 2.4.3 Idioms

An idiom is a phrase whose meaning deviates from the compositionality principle, i.e., is unconnected to the meaning of its constituent components. Many idioms exist in languages, and their meanings are not foreseeable based on the meanings of individual

words. Most idioms begin as metaphorical statements that become fixed in their form and meaning once they have been established in the language. Idioms have predetermined meanings that must be understood. They have a structure that is similar to ordinary phrases, with the exception that they tend to be frozen in form and do not readily respond to rules that change word order or components substitution. Her foot was in her mouth. "Her foot was put in her mouth" is an expression we can't change..Idioms, grammatically as well as semantically, have special characteristics. They must be entered into the lexicon or mental dictionary as single items with their meanings specified, and speakers must learn the special restrictions on their use in sentences. (Web source 1)

## Data and Analysis

### 3.1 Nonsense Poetry

The Nonsense verse is a form of nonsense literature that is usually employing strong prosodic elements like rhythm and rhyme. As such, It is whimsical and humorous in tone and employs some of the techniques of nonsense literature. Limericks are the most familiar form of nonsense poetry, despite the fact that, they tend to be used for straightforward humor, rather than having a nonsensical effect.

In certain cases, the humor of nonsense verse is based on the incompatibility of phrases which make grammatical sense but semantic nonsense at least in certain interpretations, as in the traditional:

“I see' said the blind man to his deaf and dumb daughter  
as he picked up his hammer and saw”.

Other nonsense poetry makes use of nonsense words—words without a vivid meaning or any meaning at all. Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear both made good use of this type of nonsense in some of their verse. These poems are considered well formed in terms of grammar and syntax, and each nonsense word is of a clear part of speech. (Web source 2)





sought—

So rested he by the Tumtum tree,

And stood awhile in thought.

And as in uffish thought he stood,

The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,

Came whiffling through the tulgey wood, 15

And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and  
through

The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!

He left it dead, and with its head

He went galumphing back. 20

“And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?

Come to my arms, my beamish boy!

O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!”

He chortled in his joy.

’T was brillig, and the slithy toves 25

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;

All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.”

As was shown above in the poem that the poet Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” is likely the most familiar poem in which most of the content words that have no meaning they do not exist in the lexicon of the grammar. Yet, all the sentences seem as though they should be or could be English sentences. The verses of this poem make no sense at all, since they include “words” that are meaningless; they are not interpretable. They can

be interpreted only if some meaning for each nonsense word can be dreamt up. Nevertheless, all the sentences follow all the syntactic rules of English. The subjects and the predicates have the same syntactic structures.

As far as the grammar and syntax are concerned, the poem is well formed and each nonsense word is of a clear part of speech. The verses of the poet in his poem *Jabberwocky* demonstrates this nonsense technique, despite Humpty Dumpty's later clear explanation of some of the unclear words within it.

## Conclusions

The paper has come with the following conclusions that the entire poem **Jabberwocky by Lewis Carroll** is anomalous and has a lot of anomalous expressions and also called "nonsense". We notice that the entire poem is well-formed from syntax point of view while odd and anomalous from semantic point of view.

In addition, it consists of many metaphoric and idiomatic expressions which enriches or increases the degree of oddness.

Though, the poem can be interpreted in particular ways.

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(Web source 1) on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1:23 P.M.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nonsense Verse> (Web source 2) on 6<sup>th</sup> December 4:57 P.M.