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STUDY PROGRAMME
English Studies (Linguistics)

The Stylistics of Nonsense in Children's Poetry: Two Case Studies
Master Thesis

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Vilnius

2026

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Davide Castiglione, for his constant guidance and feedback throughout this entire process. Thanks to him, I always felt encouraged to stay curious and challenge myself during both my bachelor's and master's studies.

I am grateful to all the professors, lecturers, and staff of Vilnius University from whom I learned so much over the years. Every subject I studied at Vilnius University has taught me something important, whether academic or otherwise.

I also deeply appreciate the support and patience of my family and friends throughout my studies, who experienced the stressful (and joyful!!!) moments of this journey with me – in a way, this milestone is yours as well.

Abstract

Greta Drūkteinytė. *The Stylistics of Nonsense in Children's Poetry: Two Case Studies*. Master's thesis, supervisor Assoc. Prof. Davide Castiglione, Vilnius University, Faculty of Philology, 2026, p. 48

This master's thesis investigates the phenomenon of nonsense in American poetry for children. Its focus is the way nonsense manifests in poems by Calef Brown and Jack Prelutsky, and how their use of nonsense compares to the traditional understanding modelled by Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. The research employs qualitative and comparative methods; the framework draws from E. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska's (2017) list of nonsense triggers.

The results show that both authors' works had a similar number of nonsense triggers, however the specific frequency differed among them. For instance, decontextualisation or logical deviances were widespread, while syntactic ill-formedness was present in only one poem by Prelutsky. The analysis shows that semantic anomalies, paradoxes, hyperboles, and personifications captured the nonsense and helped destabilised the poems' narratives, which then lead to the decontextualisation and logical deviances. Additional engagement features, like informal language, direct address, named characters, or present tense, were most likely used to render the poems more proximal and immersive. These findings suggest that nonsense is both a playful and purposeful element of children's poetry.

This master's thesis contributes to the broader field of stylistics of children's poetry; further contributions could include reader response or multimodal studies of such texts.

Keywords: nonsense, children's poetry, children's literature, stylistics, Jack Prelutsky, Calef Brown

Anotacija

Šis magistro darbas tiria nonsense reiškinį amerikiečių vaikų poezijoje, konkrečiai Calefo Browno ir Jacko Prelutsky'io poemose, bei kaip jų nonsenso vartojimas skiriasi nuo tradicinio nonsenso supratimo, kuris matomas Lewiso Carrollo ir Edwardo Learo darbuose. Tyrime taikomi kokybiniai ir lyginamieji metodai; metodologinis įrankis remiasi E. Chrzanowskos-Kluczewskos (2017) nonsenso dirgiklių sąrašu.

Rezultatai rodo, kad abiejų autorių poemose buvo panašus nonsenso dirgiklių skaičius, tačiau jų konkretus dažnumas skyrėsi. Pavyzdžiui, dekontekstualizacija ar loginiai nukrypimai buvo plačiai paplitę, tačiau sintaksiniai nukrypimai pasitaikė tik vienoje Prelutsky'io poemoje. Analizė parodė, jog semantinės anomalijos, paradoksai, hiperbolės ir personifikacijos perteikė nonsensą ryškiausiai ir padėjo destabilizuoti poemų naratyvus, o tai ir lėmė dekontekstualizaciją ir loginius nukrypimus. Papildomi įtraukiantys teksto bruožai, pavyzdžiui, neformali kalba, tiesioginis kreipimasis į adresatą, esamasis laikas ir konkretūs personažai, turintys vardus, buvo naudojami norint padaryti poemą artimesnėmis ir įdomesnėmis. Tai rodo, kad nonsensas yra žaismingas ir svarbus vaikų poezijos elementas.

Šis magistro darbas prisideda prie platesnės vaikų poezijos stilistikos srities, o tolimesni tyrimai galėtų įtraukti vaikų poezijos skaitytojų patirties ir multimodalines analizes.

Raktiniai žodžiai: nonsensas, vaikų poezija, vaikų literatūra, stilistika, Jack Prelutsky, Calef Brown

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Introduction

The subject of this master's thesis is the phenomenon of nonsense in children's poetry.

The combination of nonsense and children's poetry is a promising area of research. As several publications (Benton, 1978; Maybin & Watson, 2009; Coats, 2013; Alfredsson & Skaret, 2021; Burke & Coats, 2022; Giovanelli, 2018, 2023) have noted, children's literature had been a neglected field of study for a long time, although it has gained more and more traction in recent years. Benton (1978, pp. 121-122) emphasises the need to recognise children's poetry in particular as a valuable, engaging, and rewarding part of both children's curriculum and their everyday lives. This genre plays a huge role in children's introduction to the world of books, as well as in their emotional and cognitive development. Similarly, the phenomenon of nonsense has been of interest for quite some time. As a literary concept, nonsense is often associated with a "partial lack of meaning" or "reduced meaning", and manifests as "broken conventions of language use" (Cheetham, 2019, p. 65). It is often the playful combination of nonsense and humour that renders texts more attractive for children (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2017, p. 26). Poets traditionally epitomizing nonsense such as Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear are well-known, and their whimsical and imaginatively daring works have been analysed at length (Pitcher, 1965; Hark, 1978; Cixous & Maclean, 1982; Colley, 1988; Shires, 1988; Sewell, 1999; Antinucci, 2015; Minslow, 2015; Santa; 2024).

Since Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear both lived in the 19th century, it would be interesting to investigate contemporary nonsense writing to track continuities and recent developments. With that in mind, the research aims at exploring and comparing manifestations of nonsense in 20 poems written by award-winning children's authors Jack Prelutsky and Calef Brown. Both authors are celebrated for their contributions to children's literature, more specifically children's poetry: Brown has won such awards as the Marion Vannett Ridgeway Award for Poetry and the Myra Cohn Livingston Award for Poetry (Poetry Foundation, n.d.-a), while Prelutsky was Poetry Foundation's Children's Poet Laureate from 2006 to 2008 (Poetry Foundation, n.d.-b).

Ten poems per author were chosen to strike a balance between authorial representativity and the need to conduct a nuanced qualitative analysis of nonsense. While the corpus may appear small to linguists dealing with more conventional genres and text types (e.g., news article), it is actually quite large when it comes to the stylistics of poetry. Poems were chosen from Prelutsky's *A Pizza the Size of the Sun* (1996), and from Brown's *Polkabats and Octopus Slacks* (1998) and *Flamingos on the Roof* (2006).

Prelutsky's *A Pizza the Size of the Sun* is a large collection, consisting of 105 poems. While the poet admitted he drew inspiration from Dylan Thomas and Robert Louis Stevenson, his style has been

argued to also reflect the influence of Shel Silverstein or Edward Lear, two similarly eccentric nonsense poets (Glenn, 2006). In reviews of the collection, Kirkus Reviews (2010) highlights Prelutsky's "obvious delight in words", and Harper Collins Children's Books (n.d.) calls the collection "wonderfully rich, varied, funny and clever", encompassing "[h]umour at its best from one of America's funniest poets". Prelutsky's *A Pizza the Size of the Sun* is meant for primary and early middle-school children: Harper Collins (n.d.) and Amazon (n.d.-a) indicate the age range of 6-10, Harper Collins Children's Books (n.d.) states 9-12, and Kirkus Reviews (2010) recommends it for children aged 5+.

Brown's award-winning collections, *Polkabats and Octopus Slacks* and *Flamingos on the Roof*, contain 14 and 29 poems respectively. Publishers Weekly (2006) notes that the latter collection echoes the style of Silverstein or Prelutsky, while the poet himself admitted to draw inspiration from Dr. Seuss, Lewis Carroll, and A. A. Milne (Stohr-Hunt, 2009). Brown's (n.d.) website features selected reviews of the collections, which note *Polkabats and Octopus Slacks*' nonsensical and quirky nature, unconventional wordplay and humorous rhyme schemes. The poems from *Flamingos on the Roof* are similarly described as humorous and nonsensical. Brown's first collection for this study, *Polkabats and Octopus Slacks*, is meant for children between 4 and 8 years of age, according to Publishers Weekly (2001), whereas Amazon (n.d.-b) recommends it for children ranging from preschool through the 3rd grade, i.e., 3-9 years old. The age group for *Flamingos on the Roof*, according to Publishers Weekly (2006), is indicated as children aged 6-12; Similarly, Amazon (n.d.-c) indicates the target audience as ranging from the 2nd through 7th grade, i.e., children aged 7-13.

The indicated age ranges of the three collections differ slightly, although they all cover ages 7-8. All three collections vary greatly in terms of length, although many do revolve around specific characters, both human and non-human. These poems explored two central themes: identity, and imagination and fantasy. Keeping these differences and similarities in mind, it will be interesting to see the extent to which the nonsense within the poems will differ in terms of complexity or distribution.

While children's literature is often multimodal, this study will restrict its attention to its linguistic medium to keep the analysis manageable. This choice is further justified because the chosen poems can be enjoyed on their own, due to their linguistic originality and sound patterning. Images certainly make the poems more engaging and accessible to young readers, but in the end, they are simply supplementary material. For example, Brown's own drawing of the "Allicatter Gatorpillar" in one of his poems simply illustrates what the poem already enacts – an alligator-looking butterfly (or a butterfly-looking alligator). What is more, the multilayered nature of nonsense and the

comparative scope of the dissertation already add extra complexity to the analysis. Hopefully, the narrower linguistic focus adopted here will pave the way for multimodal analyses in the future.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse and compare manifestations of nonsense in two contemporary children's poets, as well as to identify continuities and innovations from canonical figures such as Lear and Carroll. In order to achieve this overall aim, the following objectives have been set:

1. To review previous literature on nonsense, children's literature and poetry, as well as interrelated emerging themes;
2. To choose and, if necessary, adapt and expand a stylistic framework for the study of nonsense in children's poetry;
3. To identify the instances and categorise the types of nonsense in the chosen data based on the aforementioned framework;
4. To examine the similarities and differences in the nonsense strategies used by Prelutsky and Brown, both in terms of stylistic choices and purported effects.

This thesis seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do different contemporary renowned authors approach nonsense in the same subgenre?
2. How does contemporary nonsense compare to the traditional understanding modelled after Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear?
3. Is humour always present along with nonsense in the chosen data, as suggested by several scholars (Benton, 1978; Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2017; Cheetham, 2019)?
4. Is nonsense more likely to occur in poems dealing with certain themes?

To answer the research questions, qualitative and quantitative methods will be used. Qualitative methods will aid in finding and describing the instances and effects of nonsense. Quantitative methods will involve counting such instances and calculating their frequencies, so as to discover recurring patterns across the chosen poems.

I. Theoretical overview

This literature review will cover nonsense, humour, children's literature and poetry, as well as other interrelated topics. Rather than being devoid of meaning, nonsense poetry for children is a multifaceted and entertaining space and its study relevant and potentially fruitful. Understanding how all these topics interact will provide the foundation for the upcoming analytical chapter.

1. Nonsense

Nonsense refers to what we cannot “understand or meaningfully contextualise within a given framework”, and is consequently associated with “the realm of the anomalous, the deviant, and the unreal” (Menninghaus, 1999, p. 4), a “lack of stability” (Shires, 1988, p. 11), or “inconsequence, pointlessness, senselessness, incongruity” (Sewell, 1980, p. 39). In terms of readerly comprehension, nonsense is accompanied by a partial or incomplete access to meaning due to “broken conventions of language use (grammatical, lexical, meaningful, interactional, in terms of truth, possibility, world knowledge)” (Cheetham, 2019, p. 65). Nonsense can indeed manifest on multiple linguistic levels, like sound, structure, or meaning, as Chrzanowska-Kluczevska (2010; 2017) states in her framework of nonsense triggers, i.e., sources of language distortion. While her 2010 paper covered how nonsense arises in natural language, the 2017 paper, with the help of an improved nonsense framework, addresses how this phenomenon, along with humour, manifests in children's poetry in particular. The latter study's framework of nonsense triggers will be expanded on in the Methods section, as it serves as an annotation tool for this current research.

The boundaries between meaningfulness and meaninglessness and between sense and nonsense are typically fuzzy, being heavily context- or theory-dependent. While sense is considered to be the independent, default value of language, nonsense is inherently tied to sense, i.e., we understand nonsense in terms of what it negates or opposes (Menninghaus, 1999, pp. 3-4; Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2017, p. 26). The unconventional and contradictory nature of nonsense is also what allows writers to play with the rules and patterns of linguistic meaning and structure, challenging writing conventions - especially the expectation of meaningfulness - in a puzzling yet inventive manner. For instance, although ‘micycle’ in Jack Prelutsky's “Nine Mice” has no real-life referent, as a neologism formed via blending it is not a completely nonsensical word. The poem represents mice riding tricycles and then freezing into icicles, and so we are able to grasp the meaning of this neologism and imagine its content, even if it refers to an impossible situation in the extra-linguistic world. Since the distortion of linguistic conventions is deliberate, nonsense follows an established formal pattern, order of meaning or intrinsic logic which, according to Flescher (1969, pp. 128-129) is what simultaneously distinguishes nonsense from the absurd and from typical meaning-making strategies. Far from simply being a matter of formal structures with no communicative purpose,

nonsense is a complex and paradoxically meaningful phenomenon (Flescher, 1969, p. 133; 142) based on “sense and logic” (Bellian, 2016, p. 7). This is because nonsensical meanings heavily rely on readers’ wilful engagement and prior expectations. For instance, in Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky”, the dissolution of sense is both disciplined and chaotic: while representationally the poem is full of nonwords, it is highly structured, with its rhymed quatrains, recognizable rhythm and underlying syntax; the form of “Jabberwocky” is then deemed more important than its content (Shires, 1988, pp. 275-276). Similarly, in Edward Lear’s carefully structured limericks, featuring multiple voices and characters, nonsense blurs the linguistic and social boundaries between normality and abnormality to encourage child readers to question both their reality and accepted social norms. For example, in “There was an Old Man with a gong”, the main character is punished for not being entertaining enough, while the character in “There was an Old Man with a nose” refuses to conform to cultural ideals of beauty (Minslow, 2015, p. 50).

At the semantic (referential) level, nonsense is typically conveyed through anomalies, absurdities, exaggerations and puns (Sengupta, 2021, pp. 129-130). Such stylistic features may be challenging to grasp, especially for a young readership, because they violate the norms of conventional language. Cheetham (2016, pp. 93-94) advocates for the use of such elements in works for children: he gives the example of Roald Dahl’s neologisms (e.g., ‘Oompa-Loompas’ or ‘wipple scrumpet’) and argues that deeming them ‘too complicated’ or ‘cognitively demanding’ is an unreasonable assessment, especially considering that Dahl’s stories are widely known and enjoyed by young audiences. In fact, Dahl’s phonologically motivated neologisms are instrumental to convey and enhance the fantastical, whimsical and humorous nature of his stories and characters. What is more, although nonwords do lead to ‘gaps of sense’, children are often confronted with unrecognizable or even nonsensical language on an everyday basis (Rose, 1995, p. 3). Phonological playfulness, moreover, may reflect the childish habit of inventing nonsensical words just for the sake of it (Jeffries, 2009, p. 226). Nonsense language should not necessarily be considered daunting, then, but rather a welcome and entertaining space for children.

Scholars have attempted to isolate typical nonsense features while also warning these are not necessarily its defining features. After an analysis of a few select nonsense poems, Cheetham (2019, pp. 82-83) sums up the conditions for nonsense to exist as follows: 1) there is a “reduction in expected levels of meaning”; 2) the meaning is not believed to be resolved, or reach conventionally expected levels, in the future, i.e., there is a lack of developed contextual grounding; 3) there is “surface nonsense”, i.e., phonological incongruities (musical playfulness, or rhyme) or lack of cohesion, even if the meaning is resolved; 4) there is a large number of incongruities (e.g., puns), as they will most likely result in nonsensical situations; 5) humour, as a quality or variety of nonsense,

is not resolved and retains its incongruity; 6) it is difficult to pinpoint “specific peaks of unresolved incongruity”, i.e., the nonsense is maintained consistently throughout the text. Overall, a nonsensical work may include reduced or unresolved meanings, abundance of incongruities or lack of cohesion, and may be humorous and harmless. Although, Cheetham (2019, pp. 73-74) emphasizes that a work may not be considered nonsensical if it is simply ‘badly written’, or we can expect some future resolution regarding the impossible situations, events, referents, or neologisms, making them to fit into the general context of the work (e.g., a sci-fi-story). Nonetheless, certain qualities, namely humour or incongruity, can still lead to such texts being interpreted as nonsense; in fact, unresolved humour is considered ‘nonsense humour’ (Cheetham, 2019, p. 76), as the incongruities in the text persist.

Admittedly, nonsense can be resolved to a degree (Cheetham, 2019, pp. 80-81), e.g., we can learn what a ‘micycle’ is and thus resolve the semantic incongruity. It is important to stress that these three conditions do not eliminate nonsense altogether, but might render it less disruptive or chaotic. A neologism which seemingly fits into a given text world can still come across as nonsensical. Brown’s ‘Polkabats’ illustrates this point well: while the word is fictionally meaningful and phonologically well-formed, the entire context is illogical: there is no real-life referent for a Polkabat, and the connection of two unrelated ideas – a bat with human responsibilities – reinforces the nonsense, rather than eliminating it.

2. Humour

Apart from nonsense, incongruity also plays an important role in generating humour. Both phenomena have indeed been important ingredients in children’s literature; for instance, Edward Lear’s and Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poetry collections were cherished in the moralistic era of Victorian poetry, and are still celebrated today for their “gleefully idiotic effects” (Benton, 1978, p. 118), suggesting that humorous works have always been appreciated. Humour is often defined as the result of two simultaneously opposing and overlapping scripts in the text (Corduas et al., 2008, p. 254), and, thus, like nonsense, is dependent on incongruity or conflict, failing to fit into a given conventional framework, and can be further contrasted with congruence, or ‘automatism’ and ‘inelasticity’ (Bergson, 1911, p. 18). Bergson also argues that humour is both caused by – and a ‘corrective’ for – some form of incohesion, namely repetitive, exaggerated, or unnaturally rigid behaviour (pp. 87-88). Humour and nonsense tend to overlap in critical and academic writings, with nonsense often linked to “the comical, the funny, the ludicrous” (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2017, p. 26). This co-occurrence can be explained by the fact that both phenomena can arise from the distortion of established patterns (e.g., extraordinary use of sounds or excessively repeated words), leading to a decrease in linguistic sense or stability. Apart from the linguistic characteristics or

script opposition, Attardo (2020, pp. 139-152) additionally delineates several more parameters of humorous texts, namely: narrative or organisational strategies of the text (e.g., some jokes having a storyline vs. one-liners), the target of the joke (to specify who or what is being ridiculed), the situation or contextual background of the joke (e.g., a world where animals can talk), and logical mechanisms, which account for the resolution of the incongruities within the text.

3. Children's Literature

Since unpredictability and playfulness often draw the child reader in, nonsense and humour are notable features of children's literature. As a genre, children's literature is difficult to define, although any definition arguably depends on three key elements: the texts considered to belong to the genre; their so-called 'for-ness', that is, the rhetorical purpose (e.g., to instruct or amuse children); and the actual child readership (Hunt, 2009a, p. 22). In the most general terms, the scope of children's literature includes texts by children and/or for children, as well as those "of childhood, for childhood, about childhood <...>" (Hunt, 2009a, p. 13).

This definition depends on the genre's audience, however this element is problematic in and of itself: some literary works for older children may deliberately seek to appeal to several audiences, while other texts may do so even without any intent, e.g., *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or *The Hunger Games*. Whether such texts that attract double audiences should be considered children's literature or part of another genre, is still an open question. On the one hand, aiming to engage both children and adult readers is not a rare endeavour, as it is the adults who curate the children's reading routine (Wall, 1991, p. 36; Lambirth, 2004, p. 26). On the other hand, behind the 'children' label there is an elusive audience, varying across periods and cultures. The pre-modern context, of course, was not favourable to the rise of any distinct child-centric entertainment, like children's literature, until a significant ideological shift occurred. In fact, up until the 17th century, children were perceived as 'miniature adults' (Ariès, 1962, Townsend, 1977, as cited in Shavit, 1986, p. 4) rather than delicate beings with a naïve mindset and specific needs for amusement and care, as they are widely regarded nowadays (Shavit, 1986, p. 7; Wilson, 2009, p. 38; Rudd, 2010, p. 3). Nowadays, even without clear boundaries or definitions, children's literature enjoys huge popularity, having entered a new Golden Age in terms of commercial success and creative diversity in the early 2000s (Hunt, 2009b, p. 81).

Even once established, the genre still lacks firm boundaries, instead borrowing from and adapting adult-oriented literary works. Discussing the 'impossibility' of this genre, Reynolds notes the lack of a clear-cut distinction between literature for children and literature for adults (2011, p. 2). He also comments on the loose genre boundaries and broad scope of children's literature, which can

include “everything from folk and fairy tales, myths and legends, ballads and nursery rhymes, <...>, e-books, fan fiction, and computer games <...>” (p. 2). This list may be further extended by including works aimed at juvenile audiences, or deemed ‘juvenile’ by adults, or considered as appealing to children in the past (p. 2). Children’s literature may also be understood in terms of its rhetorical purposes, namely to teach children about the world, to provide joy, inspire creativity, create or strengthen a sense of the self (Benton, 1978; Maybin & Watson, 2009; Coats, 2013; Burke & Coats, 2022; Giovanelli, 2023). More generally, writings aimed at children tend to offer easily digestible storylines, straightforward character arcs, simple and optimistic endings; emotions explored in such stories are noncomplex, familiar to the young (Lambirth, 2004, p. 59). Texts for very early readers, like preschoolers or children in elementary education, tend to consist of basic lexis and simple syntax, parallelisms and anaphoras, direct rather than reported speech, and onomatopoeia, especially in poetry (Giovanelli, 2023, pp. 542-543).

4. Children’s Poetry

One of the key subgenres of children’s literature is children’s poetry. This should not be surprising, as nursery rhymes, jingles, and songs accompany children from a very young age. Just like children’s literature in general, children’s poetry may also cater to both juvenile and adult readerships. In fact, much of early children’s poetry consisted of works originally meant for adults but later deemed suitable for children, or adaptable to them (Styles, 1996, p. 187; Flynn, 2009, p. 76). On this issue, Weil (2020), an award-winning children’s poet, has argued that every person “at every age, respond[s] to the same human impulses”, and that adults should not neglect children’s poetry. Within the already academically marginalised genre of children’s literature, poetry is an even more understudied subgenre, as many scholars have observed (Benton, 1978; Flynn, 1993; Maybin & Watson, 2009; Coats, 2013; Alfredsson & Skaret, 2021; Burke & Coats, 2022; Giovanelli, 2023). As a consequence, children’s poetry suffers from the lack of a unified theoretical framework, with scholars importing theories originally developed for adult poetry (Coats, 2013, p. 129). The approach has two main shortcomings: it reinforces the adult perspective and dismisses the genre’s target audience. Contrary to this view, Hunt (2010, cited in Coats, 2013, pp. 129-130) emphasizes the importance of interacting with children’s poetry in an exploratory manner, in line with the subgenre’s playful and engaging nature.

While children’s poetry is difficult to define based on its readership – just as children’s literature as a whole – there are recurring stylistic characteristics that help us categorise certain poems as typical of this genre. These include simple vocabulary and vivid imagery, as well as rhymes, rhythms, phonetic patterns and repetitions that early readers are particularly responsive to (Green, 1988, p. 8; Lambirth, 2004, p. 42). As Benton (1978, p. 113) elaborates:

“Children have a natural affinity with verse, song, puns, riddles, jokes, word-sounds, rhymes, chants, and so on. Playing with words, inventing rules, enjoying patterns and repetitions; imagining monsters, fairies, witches, talking animals, magical lands: the child’s “inward eye” and the poet’s are more alike than we commonly realise.”

While the genre’s characteristics may differ depending on age groups, some come across as “intuitively child-like”, or linguistically or stylistically distinct (Giovanelli, 2023, p. 542). Neologisms may be used to highlight the fantastical and humorous aspects of the texts (Cheetham, 2016, pp. 93-94). Certain textual cues may be employed to further engage the child reader, e.g., a double deictic ‘you’ could blur the distinction between the extralinguistic and textual worlds, immersing the reader in the story as a result (Giovanelli, 2018, p. 188), although such cues are not exclusive to this genre.

Children’s poetry is notable for its ‘sensual qualities’, as it not only vividly captures sensory experiences but also evokes them in the child reader (Coats, 2013, pp. 132-133). It often relies on active engagement and multimodal, emotive expression in order to connect with the child reader successfully (Giovanelli, 2023, p. 548). Musicality and word-play are two most ‘expected’ features in this subgenre (Jeffries, 2009, pp. 225-226), turning reading into an amusing, playful experience. Since children are naturally curious about the world around them, adult writers may be encouraged to compose poetry full of absurdity and playfulness, so as to help children deal with new, daunting experiences they face. Children’s poetry, then, may spark the imagination, stimulate critical thinking, and familiarise its little readers with uncertainty or unpredictability.

In summary, nonsense, a phenomenon synonymous with playfulness, illogicality, and imagination, often satirises the serious and strict adult-imposed reality by distorting conventional language and prioritising creativity and chaos over order and meaning. Similarly, humour plays a liberating role in children’s works: it subtly encourages the child reader to challenge the rigidity and seriousness of the adult influence. Children’s literature, especially poetry, often demonstrate recognizable characteristics in terms of style and content to engage children; as this readership is drawn to playful language and absurd scenarios, the creativity of nonsense, along with humour found in the subgenre is also attractive. All these topics intersect in the chosen data and hold potential for a compelling analysis.

II. Data and Methods

1. Data

10 poems per author were chosen from Prelutsky's *A Pizza the Size of the Sun* (1996), and from Brown's *Polkabats and Octopus Slacks* (1998) and *Flamingos on the Roof* (2006). The following selection criteria were applied to compile a list of 20 eligible poems out of the total 148 from the three collections. The first criterion was that of omitting multimodal poems. Although typographical and graphological experimentation is present in the chosen collections – especially Prelutsky's – (e.g., Figure 1 below), instances of nonlinear text arrangements, like calligrams, will be excluded on the grounds that these poems' heavy reliance on the visual dimension make them multimodal; as explained in the introduction, multimodality is excluded from the scope of this research to ensure a manageable and detailed analysis of linguistic nonsense. This exclusion does not extend to poems experimenting with varying text fonts, text sizes, or other word-level stylizations, such as reversed words.

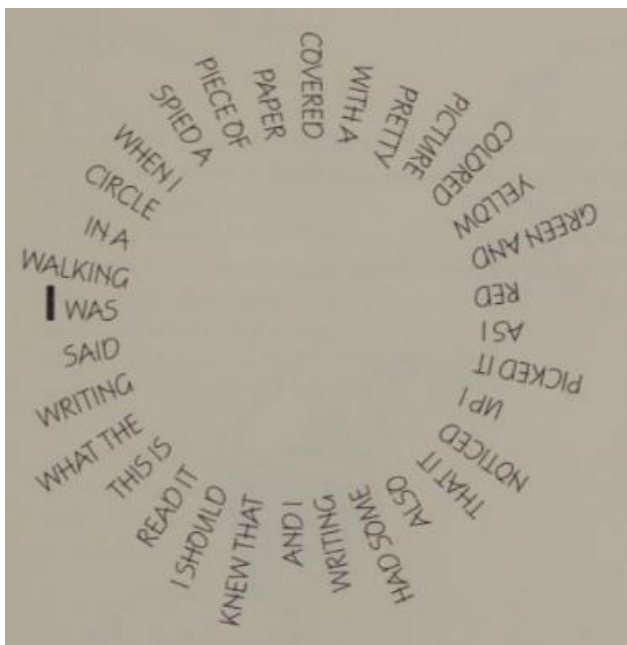


Figure 1. "I Was Walking in a Circle" by Jack Prelutsky

Then, during the preliminary scanning, only a minimum line count was considered: poems over 8 lines. This was done as many poems, at first glance, were of similar length. After a more in-depth review of Prelutsky's collection, the second criterion of a maximum line count was additionally introduced to ensure balance, including poems at no more than 16 lines, since Brown's poems were much shorter on average. The third selection criterion established that the first 10 poems, following their order of appearance in the collections, with at least 3 nonsense triggers (see Framework section below) would be chosen for analysis. Table 1 offers an overview of the data, while Table 2 specifies the title, length and source text of each individual poem:

Table 1. *The poetic corpus analysed*

Author	Collection	No. of poems	Total lines	Total wordcount
Calef Brown	<i>Polkabats and Octopus Slacks</i>	5	62	314
Calef Brown	<i>Flamingos on the Roof</i>	5	63	305
Jack Prelutsky	<i>A Pizza the Size of the Sun</i>	10	156	1053
TOTAL		20	281	1672

Table 2. *Final list of poems*

<i>Polkabats and Octopus Slacks</i> (1998) (poems 1-5) and <i>Flamingos on the Roof</i> (2006) (poems 6-10) by Calef Brown	<i>A Pizza the Size of the Sun</i> (1996) by Jack Prelutsky
1. “Kansas City Octopus” (14 lines) 2. “Funky Snowman” (10 lines) 3. “Snails” (15 lines) 4. “Polkabats” (9 lines) 5. “The Bathtub Driver” (14 lines) 6. “Alphabet Sherbet” (16 lines) 7. “Combo Tango” (16 lines) 8. “Weatherbee’s Diner” (12 lines) 9. “Peas” (9 lines) 10. “Allicatter Gatorpillar” (10 lines)	1. “A Pizza the Size of the Sun” (16 lines) 2. “My Elephant Is Different” (16 lines) 3. “We Are Daddies” (16 lines) 4. “I’m Practically Covered with Needles and Pins” (16 lines) 5. “The Manners of the Moopies” (16 lines) 6. “I Am Riding on a Cloud” (16 lines) 7. “A Teenage Hippopotamus” (16 lines) 8. “Frenetica Fluntz” (16 lines) 9. “I Wear the Most Amazing Shoes” (16 lines) 10. “Reverso Is Name My” (12 lines)

2. Inferred themes

After carefully reading each text, a general interpretation was formulated by addressing questions such as: what is this poem about? What point is it trying to make? Two central inferred themes in the analysed poems are **identity** and **imagination or fantasy**. The theme of identity emerges in 4 of Brown’s (*Kansas City Octopus*, *Funky Snowman*, *Snails*, *Allicatter Gatorpillar*) and in 7 of Prelutsky’s (*My Elephant Is Different*, *We Are Daddies*, *The Manners of the Moopies*, *A Teenage*

Hippopotamus, *Frenetica Fluntz*, *I Wear the Most Amazing Shoes*, *Reverso Is Name My*) poems. These poems appear to encourage children to better understand themselves and the world around them. Identity can be a nuanced and difficult subject, influenced by both external and internal factors; exploring it through nonsense may render it more approachable and engaging for a developing, impressionable audience. Imagination or fantasy is prominent in 5 of Brown's (*Polkabats*, *The Bathtub Driver*, *Alphabet Sherbet*, *Combo Tango*, *Weatherbee's Diner*) and 3 of Prelutsky's (*A Pizza the Size of the Sun*, *I'm Practically Covered in Needles and Pins*, *I Am Riding on a Cloud*) poems. These themes emerge through fantastical, exaggerated, or playful elements, pushing children to participate in creative and absurd storytelling. One poem, *Peas*, could not be fully aligned to the others thematically. The poem describes a fantastical setting (personified, pondering peas), but presents it in a naturalised, quiet, and not overtly humorous manner.

The identity-themed poems by both Brown and Prelutsky feature a variety of self-assured human, anthropomorphic, or animal characters showcasing quirky or counterintuitive behaviour. Some of these characters are bluntly unapologetic about their identity or self-expression: for instance, both the speakers in *Kansas City Octopus* and *I Wear the Most Amazing Shoes* feel confident and proud in their new attire; the speakers in *Funky Snowman* or *Reverso* express themselves with freedom, *We Are Doddies* showing self-assurance despite their physical or behavioural oddities, or *Frenetica Fluntz* admiring her own eccentric abilities. Non-conformism is thus portrayed as a source of joy rather than discomfort or alienation. The characters in *Snails*, *My Elephant Is Different*, *The Manners of the Moopies*, or *A Teenage Hippopotamus* are portrayed as unconventional by an external narrator who still is very positive or at least accepting towards their diversity. Both speakers/characters of both *My Elephant Is Different* and *Allicatter Gatorpillar* are physically unusual: the former depicts an elephant that does not resemble one at all, while the latter portrays a hybrid animal going through a transformation. Such characterisation, once more, emphasizes identity as fluid.

Imaginative or fantastical topics are also prominent. Such unreal narratives may help readers find meaning or humour in simple situations, as in *I'm Practically Covered in Needles and Pins*, which describes a character adorned by decontextualised everyday objects, like a teakettle, bolts, or hinges; or enable readers to familiarise themselves with uncomfortable situations through the safe distance created by the humorous setting, as in *Polkabats*, which describes the bats acting in disruptive and spiteful ways. These poems also portray hyperbolic and positive emotions, like the professional excitement in *A Pizza the Size of the Sun* or the dreamy elation in *I Am Riding on a Cloud*. In the former poem, the narrator outlines a plan to make a pizza of astronomical size; in the latter poem, the narrator describes a dreamy, soothing scene as they float through the sky. In *the*

Bathtub Driver, *Alphabet Sherbet*, or *Weatherbee's Diner*, the fantastical elements elevate the mundane act of selling something into a magical, surreal experience. In *Combo Tango*, the reader is invited to co-create meaning by playfully performing odd dance instructions communicated via imperatives. Overall, the themes of the poems portray nonsense as a successful tool to explore topics that are both contemplative or amusing; nonsense, especially in the case of children's poetry, can simply be a fun narrative device, or may prove itself useful when discussing more reflective themes of identity and the struggles associated with it, rendering them more accessible or diverting for a younger audience.

3. Framework

In order to locate the nonsense in the chosen data, this study draws on Chrzanowska-Kluczevska's list of potential nonsense triggers (2010; 2017, pp. 27-29), which will serve as a qualitative annotation tool for this study. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska (2010; 2017), notes that nonsense may take place on all levels of language and often arises through syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, phonological, or discourse-level deviations. The original list of triggers can be found in Appendix 3, while the modified framework of the triggers is presented below in Table 3:

Table 3. *Nonsense triggers used for coding the data*

Nonsense trigger	Description	Example from analysis
Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF)	Violated conventional word order, word-level rearrangement; this covers smaller units of text (words, phrases, clauses).	Clear rather it's me to, learn to wish not do you, you for feel I sad how– away go will I now. (Prelutsky)
Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I)	The lack of specificity, explanation or rationality, e.g., references to ambiguous characters or their features or behaviour, temporal or spatial settings, ideas, which then may lead to unsuccessful complete interpretation or enhance confusion.	<...> when you're in the groove, you don't need feet. <...> Kick it, Funky Snowman!! (Brown)
Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC)	Disjointed, contradictory, or juxtaposed ideas, descriptions, or events, especially if they are concurrent and lead to a sense of randomness; topic shifts, and the reduction of cohesive	I sleep as I eat and I eat as I drink and I drink as I shout and I shout as I think and I think as I draw and I

	devices; this covers larger chunks of text.	draw as I walk <...> (Prelutsky)
Lack of contextual grounding (LCG)	Decontextualised objects or characters, i.e., those which do not fit the conventional use or standards, e.g., objects used for unrelated purposes; imaginary characters which cannot be verified empirically; the lack of (unified) developed contextual background/world-building, or any insufficient explanation regarding the time, place, logic, or means of doing something; logical deviances, e.g., illogical or impossible situations (paradoxes or personifications) or characters, i.e., disruptions of real-life logic or conventions.	A teenage hippopotamus is living overhead. (Prelutsky)
Phonological experimentation (PE)	Rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, repetition, puns, speech sounds and their patterns. <i>Phonological experimentation is named 'phonetic experimentation' in the original paper. However, since the analysis covers sound patterning rather than the actual speech sounds, this trigger was renamed accordingly.</i>	<...> The thunder is wonderful, order it loud, with sun-dried tornado on top of a cloud (Brown)
Incongruities (INC)	Semantic anomaly, i.e., the violation of selectional restriction/unconventional, neologisms, odd collocations; figurative devices, like personification (instances of human attributes or actions being assigned to animals or inanimate objects), metaphor, simile, hyperbole, or oxymoron, that are hard-to-interpret or otherwise lead to confusion, absurd humour or distortion/reduction of sense, rather than presenting an entity better (with more clarity or easier comprehension).	<...> They have multicolored laces, flashing blinkers on the heels. They have beepers, bells, and buzzers, and a strange device that squeals. (Prelutsky)

It is important to note that not all emerging triggers could be marked individually or ascribed to a specific section in the text, as some either covered the entirety of a poem (e.g., syntactic ill-formedness, or humour), or were the result of a cluster (e.g., a ‘Polkabat’ indicating logical deviance, graphological experimentation, and semantic disconnect at once).

In addition, additional prominent features emerged in the poems during the nonsense coding: named characters (NC), direct address (DA), informal language (IL), and present tense (PT: present simple, progressive aspect, i.e., present continuous). These features appeared typical of children's poetry, but their presence was not emphasized enough in previous research, to the best of my knowledge. As a consequence, a decision was made to incorporate them in the analysis. Thus, the data was coded for the following features: nonsense triggers, which included syntactic ill-formedness (SIF), vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I), lack of contextual grounding (LCG), lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC), phonological experimentation (PE), incongruities (i.e., semantic anomalies, logical deviances, and figurative devices) (INC), and additional proximal or engaging features, namely PT, NC, DA, and IL.

4. Procedure

After choosing the framework of nonsense triggers, the collected data was coded and analysed employing qualitative and comparative methods. The qualitative method, accompanied by the descriptive approach, was implemented in order to find and interpret the nonsense and its effects in children's poems according to the framework of the study, which relies on Chrzanowska-Kluczevska's (2017) list of nonsense. The comparative method helped to ascertain the recurring patterns of nonsense instances in the analysed poems: their frequencies and distribution were calculated based on the number of lines containing nonsense. The combination of these methods was instrumental in answering the research questions raised in the introduction.

III. Results and Analysis

This section presents the findings: the classification, distribution and analysis of nonsense in Brown's and Prelutsky's poems. The aforementioned modified nonsense framework based on Chrzanowska-Kluczevska (2017) was used to mark the nonsense conditions and resulting triggers observed in the poems. The first section reports the classification and distribution of nonsense across the poems, along with the poems' central themes. The second analytical section qualitatively examines the stylistic choices and purported effects of nonsense.

The Appendices provide the coded data, with the poems' nonsense-generating conditions and their respective nonsense triggers: Appendix 1 covers Brown's poems and Appendix 2 Prelutsky's poems.

1. Results

While the mere presence of nonsense was a criterion to select the poems to further analyse, the specific nonsense triggers and their distribution will be examined here. 79 instances of nonsense triggers were collected across all poems. Their types and distribution are overviewed in Figure 1 below.

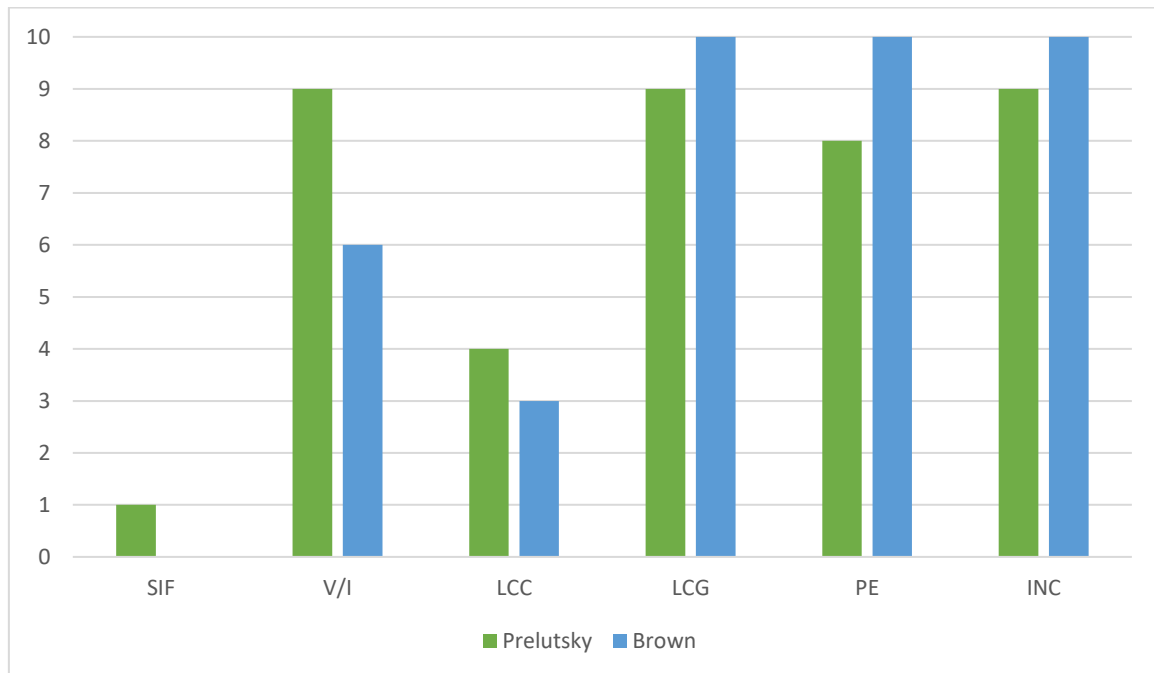


Figure 1. Comparison of frequency of nonsense and additional triggers between the authors.

A more in-depth look at the poem-by-poem distribution of nonsense triggers and the engagement features (the last four columns) across the poems is presented in Tables 4 and 5 below. The green colour indicates the presence of the feature in any given poem, the red its absence.

Table 4. Distribution of nonsense in Brown's poems

Trigger/ feature	Nonsense						Engagement			
	SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	PT	IL	NC	DA
Brown's poems										
Kansas City Octopus										
Funky Snowman										
Snails										
Polkabats										
The Bathtub Driver										
Alphabet Sherbet										
Combo Tango										
Weatherbee's Diner										
Peas										
Allicatter Gatorpillar										

Table 5. *Distribution of nonsense in Prelutsky's poems*

Trigger/ feature	Nonsense						Engagement			
	SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	P E	INC	PT	IL	NC	DA
Prelutsky's poems										
A Pizza the Size of the Sun										
My Elephant Is Different										
We Are Daddies										
I'm Practically Covered in Needles and Pins										
The Manners of										

the Moopies										
I Am Riding on a Cloud										
A Teenage Hippopotamus										
Frenetica Fluntz										
I Wear the Most Amazing Shoes										
Reverso Is Name My										

39 instances of nonsense were found in Brown’s dataset and 40 in Prelutsky’s (see Fig. 1). While raw frequencies are comparable across the two poets, normalised frequencies indicate a notably higher density in Brown’s poetry, where nonsense was detected once every 16 words (619 w./39 nonsense triggers) against a frequency of once every 26 words (1053 w./40 nonsense triggers) in Prelutsky’s poems. Interestingly, while the analysed poems show a variety of nonsense triggers, no poem has all of them. Of course, nonsense is a graded phenomenon and so it does not require the co-presence of all the triggers to be activated.

All of Brown’s poems showed LCG, PE, and INC; similarly, Prelutsky’s poems displayed LCG and INC as the most frequent nonsense manifestations, as well as V/I, each appearing in 9 out of 10 poems. Nonsense triggers are distributed almost equally across Brown’s two collections hosting the poems analysed, *Flamingos on the Roof* and *Polkabats and Octopus Slacks*. The former collection had slightly more instances of V/I (4) compared to the latter (2). SIF was completely missing from Brown’s poems. In comparison, the vast majority of Prelutsky’s poems (9) is marked by V/I and one poem had an extensive case of SIF.

The poems with the most nonsense – 5 different triggers per work – are Brown’s *Allicatter Gatorpillar*, *The Bathtub Driver* and *Polkabats* and Prelutsky’s *My Elephant Is Different* and *Frenetica Fluntz*. Poems with the lowest number are Brown’s *Kansas City Octopus*, *Funky Snowman*, *Snails*, and *Peas*, and Prelutsky’s *A Pizza the Size of the Sun* and *I Am Riding on a Cloud*, with 3 instances of different nonsense triggers each, as stipulated by the initial selection criteria. Interestingly, the length of the poems did not appear to have any significant influence on the frequency or diversity of the nonsense triggers; for instance, Brown’s *Polkabats* and *Allicatter Gatorpillar* – 9 and 10 lines respectively – were among the shortest poems in the dataset, and yet

they turned out to have the most diverse variety of nonsense triggers; by contrast, Prelutsky's *A Pizza the Size of the Sun* and Brown's *Snails* show a lower number of nonsense triggers despite being significantly longer at 16 and 15 lines respectively. This counterintuitive finding can be explained by reference to the more narrative-driven nature of Prelutsky's poems: it may well be that narrative flow cannot sustain too many nonsense triggers, otherwise reading pleasure would give way to cognitive effort and a sense of overwhelm. Additional engagement features (columns 8-11) are also widespread. Present tense (PT) is used in all of the poems by both Brown and Prelutsky, as well as informal language (IF), which has been found in 9 poems each. Direct addresses (DA) and named characters (NC) are more frequent in Brown's poems, each appearing in 5 poems. In comparison, Prelutsky had DA in 3 and NC in 4 poems. The way nonsense triggers and engagement features dynamically interact with each other will be discussed in depth in the Analysis and Discussion section.

2. Analysis and Discussion

Nonsense triggers (listed by Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2017) and engagement triggers (determined during the coding) will be analysed separately. Nonsense triggers that will be discussed include syntactic ill-formedness (SIF), vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I), lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC), lack of contextual grounding (LCG), phonetic experimentation (PE), and incongruities (INC), while the list of engagement triggers includes named characters (NC), direct address (DA), informal language (IL), and present tense (PT).

During the analysis, it became clear that certain triggers are global and therefore hard to pin down, due to their pragmatic and partly overlapping nature: these include the lack of contextual grounding, logical deviances, vagueness or indeterminacy, and lack of cohesion or coherence. They often depend on or emerge as effects of other nonsense triggers, and cover extensive portions of the text. In addition, all these triggers behave similarly: they affect meaning-making by omitting key contextual information and/or by presenting an incomplete or fragmented worldview; this worldview is usually incompatible with norms of realism or plausibility effects, thus making the narrative more ambiguous, absurd, or surreal. Other nonsense triggers, namely the incongruities (INC; semantic anomalies, personification, hyperboles, and neologisms), were instantiated more locally and easier to identify. For this reason, the section of nonsense triggers will extensively focus on incongruities, while the remaining ones will be commented on where appropriate. The section on engagement triggers will include present tense, named characters, direct address, informal language, and phonetic experimentation. Phonological experimentation (PE), although initially coded as a nonsense trigger, proved its main effect or purpose to be creating musicality and drawing attention to aspects of the text; thus, it will be included in the engagement triggers.

1. Nonsense triggers

The section covers semantic anomalies, nonsensical or absurd figurative language (e.g., hyperboles, paradoxes, metaphors, personification), and morphological neologisms. All poems, except Prelutsky's *Reverso* showed at least one of these incongruities; *Reverso* is an exception since it had no propositional structure due to the all-encompassing syntactic ill-formedness.

Personification (INC) regularly occurs in Brown's poems (*Kansas City Octopus*, *Funky Snowman*, *Snails*, *Polkabats*, *The Bathtub Driver*, *Peas*, *Allicatter Gatorpillar*), with the personified characters being at the centre of attention, for instance:

- 1) Peas peek out of the pod.

They ponder.

They whisper.

They nod. (*Peas*, ll. 1-4)

- 2) His one-legged duck

rides along for good luck

yelling "Three for a buck!" (*The Bathtub Driver*, ll. 4-6)

Prelutsky, on the other hand, had only two definite instances of personification (INC): the birds in *I Am Riding on a Cloud* speaks to (ll. 3-4), and the neighbour in *A Teenage Hippopotamus* (ll. 1-2):

- 3) making idle conversation

with the birds who happen by.

- 4) A teenage hippopotamus

is living overhead.

With Prelutsky, there were some ambiguous cases (V/I): it is unclear whether *Reverso*, the Doddies or the Moopies are human, or if the speaker in *Teenage Hippopotamus* is also an animal (they do, interestingly, live in an apartment complex with animals as their neighbours), which could lead to a more open-ended interpretation, as well as blur the boundaries between human and non-human characterisation. Given the fact that the narratives are often illogical and lacking in pragmatic grounding (LCG), personified, or specified characters (NC) help to provide some stability or form to the storyworld. In some cases, they may also make it easier to relate to or get emotionally engaged with a narrative, help interpretation, as well make a familiar situation absurd or disorienting, like in *A Teenage Hippopotamus*, which describes a conflict between two neighbours.

In other cases, like with *Allicatter Gatorpillar*, it may make the atmosphere more surreal or dreamlike:

- 5) Allicatter Gatorpillar
sings a song,
then he's gone. (ll. 4-6)

In *Allicatter Gatorpillar*, apart from the personification (INC), the character is further removed from reality as it is a logically impossible hybrid of two extremely different animals (LCG), an alligator and a caterpillar, later morphing into an Allibutter Gatorfly. Morphologically, both Allicatter Gatorpillar and Allibutter Gatorfly are creative blends (INC) denoting an animal whose physical appearance is intrinsically fluid and metamorphic. The use of blends may also reinforce the hybrids as personified symbols or representations of a changing identity, rather than literal entities, as the poem describes a life cycle of a butterfly.

Interestingly, in *Snails*, the personification is evoked via its negation (INC), as the narrator mostly emphasizes the human activities that these snails do not, in fact, perform:

- 6) Oh well, at least they don't make threats,
they don't eat meat,
they don't place bets,
they almost always pay their debts (ll. 9-12)

Some of the characters are named via neologisms which, along with the personification (INC), distances them from the real-word context further (LCG). In *Polkabats*, the compounds 'polkabat' and 'polka-turds' respectively stand for a particular (imagined) species of bats and for excrements; interestingly, only the latter is hyphenated, although both presumably suggest a spotted appearance. However, in the following lines it also gives rise to a pun:

- 7) The Polkabats are on the loose,
<...>
All the spotted bats are out
(except the ones on jury duty) (ll. 1, 3-4)

While 'spotted' can simply refer to the polka-dotted look of the bats, it can also be interpreted as 'seen' or 'perceived'. The neologism of Moopie is of unclear origin (V/I). The closest word in terms of similarity is 'mopey', which describes someone unhappy, or 'moppy', which describes unkempt hair; neither word seems particularly connected to the Moopies. The word 'Doddies', on the other hand, may have derived from a nickname denoting something "lumpish", "foolish", or "hairless"

(Hanks, 2006), which is consistent with their descriptions in the poem, e.g., “smooth as eggs” (l. 1), or “small and round” (l. 9). All of these neologisms carry a strong sense of playfulness, and often humour, as it reinforces the surreal nature of the characters.

Semantic anomalies (INC) were often conveyed as collocational dissonance, strengthening the lack of contextual grounding (LCG). In some poems, semantic anomalies appear in clusters (*Weatherbee’s Diner*, *Alphabet Sherbet*), while in others occurrences are scarcer, like the phrase “tub-dwelling” in *The Bathtub Driver*. In *Kansas City Octopus*, the verb phrase ‘wear slacks’ collocates with the octopus, which is semantically anomalous in and of itself; “they fit like apple pie” (l. 8) is a manipulated version of the idiom “as easy as pie”. Apart from the personified one-legged duck, which is already anomalous, the main character of *The Bathtub Driver* is also described as “tub-dwelling”, contradicting the first interpretation of the tub being a means of transport, and reinforcing the idea of it being a home as well. The previously discussed *The Manners of the Moopies* features collocational dissonance in the manners, e.g., when the characters “recline on mashed potatoes” (l. 5); their social code overall shows a contrast between propriety and filth, as their understanding of politeness and socially acceptable behaviour includes getting dirty or rowdy (e.g., “they tie wieners to their ears,/they smear jelly on their noses“, ll. 6-7). These manners are undeniably unconventional, but the speaker recognizes their strangeness when he claims that “The manners of the Moopies/tend to be unorthodox...” (ll. 1-2). This evaluation aligns with the reader’s commonsense perspective, and therefore lessens their possible feelings of disorientation. Several unusual lexical combinations can also be found in *I Am Riding on a Cloud*, in which the speaker lists activities where the verbs are accompanied by unlikely collocates: ‘riding on a cloud’ (l. 1), ‘try to catch a rainbow’ (l. 9), ‘rainbow-catching mitt’ (l. 10), ‘build imaginary castles’ (l. 11). All verb phrases denote playful, childish activities; although the semantic connection is abnormal, the reader should be able to easily interpret the poem as a fantastical and lively narrative.

In some cases, semantic anomalies intensify the chaos of the world within the poem. *Weatherbee’s Diner* presents a diner that offers decontextualised weather phenomena (LCG) as nourishment; additionally, it features unconventionally collocated phrases, often presented as phonological puns, like “sun-dried tornado” (l. 6), which phonetically plays on ‘sun-dried tomato’, or hyperboles (e.g., “ordering thunder”, l. 5) presenting a humorous and surprising twist on the diner’s menu:

- 8) Start off your meal with a bottle of rain.
Fog on the glass is imported from Maine.
The thunder is wonderful, order it loud,
with sun-dried tornado on top of a cloud. (ll. 3-6)

The poem invites the reader to a surreal restaurant for no other purpose but to explore and enjoy its whimsical food and beverages. An interesting parallel can be drawn here to Arthur Rimbaud's *Feasts of Hunger*, which similarly portrays decontextualised items, like boulders or coal, as ways to satisfy hunger:

- 9) If I have any taste, it's for hardly anything
but earth and stones.
<...>
Let us eat air, rock, coal, iron.
<...>
Eat, the stones a poor man breaks,
the old masonry of churches, boulders,
children of floods, loaves lying in the grey valleys! (ll. 2-3, 5, 9-11)

Rimbaud's poem is more complex in its imagery, contrasting natural and man-made objects (e.g., earth vs. churches), to convey dissatisfaction or disconnect with the body, nature, and society. While both poems can be regarded as extended metaphors with surreal narratives, their goals feel different: while *Weatherbee's Diner* conveys delight and humour, *Feasts of Hunger* explores physical hunger.

Dramatized behaviour can be seen in *A Pizza the Size of the Sun* or *Frenetica Fluntz*, although with different effects. In *A Pizza the Size of the Sun*, the amounts of ingredients the enormous pizza requires are reconceptualised as landscapes or environments, which is both semantically anomalous and hyperbolic (INC):

- 10) a pizza resplendent with oceans of sauce.
I'm topping my pizza with mountains of cheese,
with acres of peppers, pimentos, and peas,
with mushrooms, tomatoes, and sausage galore (ll. 4-7)

Despite the outrageous descriptions, the poem does not feel completely arbitrary, as people often describe food or hunger hyperbolically (e.g., 'I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse!'). Instead, it offers striking imagery, presenting the narrative as a dream-like scenario. Making a dish is presented as a grand and significant endeavour, worth the narrator's pride and enthusiasm.

Frenetica Fluntz describes someone who performs incompatible actions simultaneously, which also comes across as hyperbolised, as well as unexpected and unexplainable (LCG):

11) I sleep as I eat and I eat as I drink
and I drink as I shout and I shout as I think
and I think as I draw and I draw as I walk
<...>
and I mop as I skate and I skate as I sweep
and I sweep as I write and I write as I sleep. (ll. 5-7, 13-14)

Since her actions are intransitive, they also retain indeterminacy (V/I), as it is up to the reader to assume what she drinks, or thinks, or sings. Insisting that “there’s nobody else who can manage such stunts” (l. 15), Frenetica Fluntz simultaneously praises herself and makes sure her eccentricity is confined to herself, i.e. not contagious. The narrative is illogical and chaotic, destabilising a meaningful interpretation (LCG, LCC).

In *I’m Practically Covered in Needles and Pins*, the narrator gets covered in metal objects because of a swallowed magnet, itself a very unlikely and imaginative situation. Several semantic anomalies (INC) arise as these objects are tied to various body parts with the help of unlikely verbs which depict specific material processes (like ‘adhering’, ‘embellished’). The objects come across as a kind of jewellery, resulting in a hilarious and nonsensical portrait of the narrator:

12) A hook is adhering to each of my ears,
my head is topped off by a mountain of gears,
<...>
My back is embellished with ladles and chain,
<...>
my neck is adorned with a stainless-steel pen– (ll. 9-10, 13, 15)

By amplifying the features of a character through hyperboles, the authors achieve nonsensical, humorous, and memorable portraits. For instance, in *A Teenage Hippopotamus*, the ordinariness of the situation – a conflict with a neighbour – is undercut by the unlikely identity of the neighbour. Similarly, *Polkabats* are described as “Loudly screeching nasty words/like “Stroganoff”” (ll. 5-6); the dramatized use of a regular, inoffensive word presented as an expletive comes across as unexpected and incongruous, leading to humour and absurdity. In *I Wear the Most Amazing Shoes*, the exaggerations escalate, as the speaker lists more and more features of their shoes, which result in a dense, ridiculous portrait:

13) They have ribbons, beads, and spangles,
buckles, bangles, belts, and bows,
and assorted silver sequins

<...>

flashing blinkers on the heels.

They have beepers, bells, and buzzers,

and a strange device that squeals. (ll. 5-7, 10-12)

The accessories get progressively more bizarre and excessive, including objects that are not typically associated with shoes, like beepers or bells, and culminating in an ambiguous and personified “strange device” (INC); while the beginning of the poem does not suggest complete illogicality, and the description of the shoes could be literal, as the narrative progresses, it gets more absurd, chaotic and unreal, somewhat blurring the lines between real and dreamy scenes (LCG).

Paradoxes helped to strengthen the ambiguous and unsettling logic or conflicting events of the narratives in the poems, often leading to humour. For instance, *Funky Snowman* is an enthusiastic dancer, despite the faced challenges:

14) You’d think he wouldn’t have much chance

without two legs

or even pants.

Does that stop Funky Snowman?

No!!

<...>

when you’re in the groove, you don’t need feet.

<...>

Kick it, Funky Snowman!! (ll. 2-6, 8, 10)

Interestingly, the narrator’s invitation to “Kick it, Funky Snowman!” (l. 10) sounds humorous because the idiom ‘kick it’ means ‘to relax’, but in the context of the poem it can be interpreted literally, resulting in a paradox: how can Funky Snowman really ‘kick it’, if he has no legs? In *My Elephant Is Different*, the narrator presents a pet elephant whose appearance revolves around contradictory features that defy our prototypical knowledge not only of elephants, but of animals in general: this elephant is simultaneously scaly and furry, and has feathered feet:

15) its ears are short and fuzzy,

it has feathers on its feet.

It’s scaly like a lizard,

and it’s furry like a skunk,

<...>

at times I think my elephant's
no elephant at all. (ll. 3-6, 15-16)

The elephant's impossible appearance and the narrator's mild perplexity towards the incongruities reinforce the suspense and absurdity of the situation.

The Moopies and Doddies portray a broader scope of vagueness via imprecise settings (V/I, LCG): they are insufficiently described and occupy an unclear, unconventional social context. *We Are Doddies* showcase characters performing actions that are paradoxical as they are often built around antonyms that are not, however, logically contrasted but temporally, cohesively linked:

16) We are warmest when it's hot,
we are coldest when it's not.
<...>
we're not missing when we're found.
We are closest when we're near,
we're not there when we are here. (ll. 7-8, 10-12)

The Doddies describe themselves as "smooth as eggs" (l. 1), with "bodies on [their] legs" (l. 2), "heads with tiny brains" (l. 3), "small and round" (l. 9), which fragments or impedes any possible coherent mental representation.

2. Engagement triggers

Apart from the nonsense-triggering features discussed in the previous sections, the poems show additional techniques that foster a sense of proximity and familiarity, balancing out the oddity and surprise caused by nonsense triggers. These features include: informal language, the present tense, direct address, named characters, and phonetic experimentation.

All of the poems extensively feature the present simple tense, with the use of past or future tenses being very minimal; 3 of Brown's and 5 of Prelutsky's also use the present continuous tense. For instance, Prelutsky's *A Pizza the Size of the Sun* and Brown's *Kansas City Octopus* both begin with the present continuous tense, immediately signalling an intention (ex. 17) or an ongoing action (ex. 18, 19):

17) I'm **making** a pizza the size of the sun,
<...>
I'm **topping** my pizza with mountains of cheese (ll. 1, 5)

18) Kansas City Octopus

is **wearing** fancy slacks.

<...>

Kansas City Octopus

is **looking** good tonight! (ll. 1-2, 13-14)

19) The fork on my forehead is **making** me frown,

the bolts of my shoulders are **weighing** me down (ll. 5-6)

The choice of the progressive aspect may help the reader to perceive the events as unfolding in real time and fostering vividness and viewpoint alignment. The actions in (17), (18) and (19) feel dynamic and immediate, making the reading experience more evocative and immersive, as if the narrator is recounting a story right at this moment. For instance, the ridiculous self-portrait in *I'm Practically Covered in Needles and Pins* builds as the “accessories” are layered on top of each other and recounted in present simple or present continuous; this makes the poem feel like a continuous shot or visual, expanding the scene into a very detailed narrative in progress.

The use of present simple tense, on the other hand, conveys more stable or fixed temporal information which could feel more distancing to the reader. This tense was used to describe a static scene (*Peas*, ex. 20), habits or conventions (*Snails*, ex. 6, or *The Manners of the Moopies*, ex. 21), or states (*Polkabats*, ex. 7):

20) The wind is in the willow trees.

The sun is on the sod.

Peas peek out of the pod. (ll. 7-9)

21) when they roll in squashed bananas,

when they wash with lentil soup. (ll. 11-12)

The narratives written in present habitual tense tend to feel more universal, as if they are not anchored in a specific moment in time. Instead of the “continuous shots”, like in *I'm Practically Covered in Needles and Pins*, poems like *Polkabats* present a static, finalised picture.

Informal language

The poems were also informal, often including colloquialisms, contractions, interjections, rhetorical questions, vocatives, or parentheses. According to Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), informal language

is associated with communication in more casual and familiar settings, often featuring contractions or ellipses. Relying on this definition, we can say that all poems showed some degree of informality except two: *Peas* and *The Manners of the Moopies*. *Peas* is a more lyrical poem with little to no humour, while *The Manners of the Moopies* touched upon social (although nonsensical) conventions, so the subdued conversational tone could have been a particular choice to keep the sense of formality. Contractions, or specific vocabulary choices, helped to portray the narrators or characters in a friendly, approachable way rather than formal or authoritative figures; this can be seen in *Kansas City Octopus* ('em', 'bucks', ll. 4-5), *Combo Tango* ('lingo', 'yo-yo', 'pro', ll. 3, 9-10), *A Teenage Hippopotamus* ('bumbles out', 'louder than a train', 'blast', 'driving me insane', ll. 4, 10-12), and *I Wear The Most Amazing Shoes* ('amazing', 'blinkers', 'beepers', ll. 1, 10-11). Poems with informal speech markers tended to feel more conversational and genuine, as the specific vocabulary hints at the social setting (e.g., intimate, welcoming) and character personality (e.g., charming, easy-going), fostering reader alignment while preserving the humour.

Named characters

Several poems also featured specifically named characters, i. e., they either had a full name or other identifying information. Since the poems often lack sufficient or rational world-building, characters with names or recognizable features help to provide some anchoring. For instance, although *Frenetica Fluntz*'s or *Reverso*'s worlds are illogical and their behaviours abnormal, their names reflect their identities, helping the reader predict what they should expect: *Reverso* speaks in reverse, while *Frenetica* seemingly works herself into a frenzy performing several unrelated actions at once. Similarly, *Funky Snowman* hints at the musical theme of the poem, while *Allicatter Gatorpillar* (and *Allibutter Gatorfly*) foreshadows the transformation of the character via morphological blending. Character names reduce the initial ambiguity, providing an identity or presence the reader can align (or misalign) with. In some cases, the specificity of character names, like with *Kansas City Octopus*, *The Bathtub Driver* (and his duck Alphonso), the *Doddies* or the *Moopies*, reinforce the lack of contextual grounding. Although distinctive, these names feel out of place and lacking in explanation, e.g., it is unclear why the octopus is in or from Kansas City, or how this piece of information should be relevant to the plot of the poem; nor is there any reason why a personified duck has a human name but the driver, counterintuitively, has not; and whether the *Doddies* or the *Moopies* are human or not, their name fits their personality. Several poems feature an addressee, which, it is safe to assume, is the child readership; Brown is more inclined to engage the reader (*Funky Snowman*, *The Bathtub Driver*, *Alphabet Sherbet*, *Combo Tango*, *Weatherbee's Diner*) than Prelutsky (*We Are Doddies*, *Frenetica Fluntz*, *Reverso Is Name My*). Especially for children, direct address signals trust and familiarity, and so it gives rise to a sense of

emotional connection; in some poems, the child reader is positioned as or invited to be a co-creator or an active participant, like in *Combo Tango* (ll. 13-16):

22) Swivel on your kneecap.
Wobble like a mud flap.
Take a little catnap.
Do it all again!

This poem mostly consists of imperatives, as the narrator invites the reader to follow the dance instructions, making this a shared experience that could potentially be acted out. Similarly, *Funky Snowman* (“Turn up the music with the disco beat”, l. 7), *The Bathtub Driver* (“So get up and sing out a fabulous song”, l. 10), *Weatherbee’s Diner* (“Start off your meal with a bottle of rain.”, l. 3), and *We Are Daddies* (“we are Daddies, look for us”, l. 16) include instructions. Despite the use of commands, the narrators in these poems do not appear like adult, authoritative figures; instead, the playfulness and absurdity in the poems suggest the role of a guide or even a fellow child. The use of ‘you’ contributes to a familiar, warm tone, while also making the poem feel more grounded despite the imaginative absurdity of the narrative: Direct address makes the child reader feel included and understood, creating a playful and engaging atmosphere.

Phonological experimentation

Like with other engaging triggers, both authors often use phonetic devices, like alliteration, assonance and consonance to engage, ground or disorient the reader. This can be seen in the examples from *Reverso Is Name My* (ex. 23) and *I Wear the Most Amazing Shoes* (ex. 13):

23) Clear rather it’s me to,
learn to wish not do you,
you for feel I sad how—
away go will I now. (ll. 9-12)

In *Reverso Is Name My*, form is prioritised over meaning: the consistency of the AABB rhyme scheme adds a sense of order but also unnatural constraint to an otherwise nonsensical, disorienting text: it grounds it by evoking a clear poem or nursery song schema. The feeling of uneasiness and disorder regarding the semantics or syntactic relations is then subdued by this stable phonetic and rhythmical frame. Similarly, in *I Wear the Most Amazing Shoes*, the chaotic atmosphere could be said to be upheld by the alternation between short (e.g., in ‘pink’, ‘ribbons’, ‘spangles’, ‘buckles’, or ‘belts’) and long vowels or diphthongs (e.g., ‘gold’, ‘green’, ‘beads’, ‘sequins’, ‘beepers’, ‘squeals’ or ‘bows’); in addition, the rhyme scheme is not consistent. In a way, the variation of the vowels could reflect the unpredictability or incongruity of all the different accessories the narrator puts on

their shoes. Similarly, in *Polkabats*, phonetic choices mirror the chaos of the narrative: “a flapping flock of flying fury.” (l. 2), for instance, features strong alliteration on the fricative voiceless labiodental consonant /f/ or /fl/, which conveys the fast and light movement of the Polkabats; in the second stanza, the lines “Loudly screeching nasty words / like “Stroganoff” / to scare the birds” (ll. 5-7) have a sense of tension and force because of the sibilants, approximants, and plosives in the consonant clusters /scr/ and /str/, with “Stroganoff”, as an expletive, sounding harsh and punchy; the instances of /k/ and /g/, including the ‘expletive’, come across as harsh and dissonant (Hiraga, 2005, p. 132), further amplifying the chaos and frenzy of the narrative.

Combo Tango, a poem about a dance, frequently features plosives like /d/, /k/, /b/, /t/, /p/, which add rhythm and punchiness (e.g., ‘dance’, ‘combination’, ‘tango’, ‘boogie’, ‘bop’, ‘drop’, ‘banjo’, ‘bango’, and others), and lines that start on heavy stress because of the frequent monosyllabic imperatives; the blend of short and long vowels (‘freeze’, ‘boogie’ vs. ‘stomp’, ‘flip’, ‘tumble’) correspond to the chaotic and dynamic nature of the tango, as shorter vowels show a faster pace with higher energy, and longer vowels feel slower and more drawn out. Assonance in ll. 5-6 (“**B**oogie to the **ban**jo./**B**op to the **bon**go”) keep the poem musical and rhythmic, possibly leading to easier engagement of the reader. *We Are Doddies* also features gliding sounds (e.g., diphthongs like /ɪə/, /aʊ/, /aɪ/), and /v/ throughout the poem, often in end rhymes (ll. 3-4, 7-8, 9-10, 13-14), tying into the smoothness and roundness of the Doddies themselves as characters, as they describe themselves as being “smooth as eggs” (l. 1), and “small and round” (l. 9). *Frenetica Fluntz*’s name similarly evokes resemblance to the word ‘frenzy’, which can be linked to the character’s erratic behaviour throughout the poem. Similarly, in *My Elephant Is Different*, the detailed features of the animal extensively feature alliteration and assonance (“feathers on its fet”, (l. 4), “scaly like a lizard,/and it’s furry like a skunk” (ll. 5-6), “sports a sort of auger/where there ought to be a trunk” (ll. 7-8), “blue behind” (l. 12)), as well as consonance (“cackles like a chicken”, l. 13); the rhymes throughout the poem are conventional and structural, giving this fragmented portrait some stability.

Three poems, namely *The Bathtub Driver*, *Alphabet Sherbet*, and *Weatherbee’s Diner*, had rhythmical, playful and memorable sound patterning, which at times made them sound like jingles. For instance, *Alphabet Sherbet* has instances of rhymes (/u:/ in ‘beautiful’, ‘blue’, ‘cool’, more scarcely /e/ in ‘alphabet’, ‘fret’, ‘get’, ‘sherbet’, and /oʊ/ in ‘so’, ‘go’, ‘bowl’) scattered throughout the poem, including multi-word rhymes (“Alphabet Sherbet,/Have you heard of it?/I bought myself a gallon,/and ate about a third of it.” ll. 1-4). In addition, the poem’s referential strangeness is compensated by its formal cohesion (“The A’s are all amazing./The B’s are a beautiful blue./The C’s and D’s/are cool and delicious.” (ll.5-8)), as the letters correspond to their flavours in a sort of alliteration game, with possibly also a reference to alphabet pasta, i.e., pasta, that comes in shapes

of letters or numbers. *The Bathtub Driver* has strong end rhymes, e.g., ‘town/pound’ (ll. 1, 3), ‘duck/luck/buck’ (ll. 4-6), ‘long/gone/song’ (ll. 8-10), and a repeated /eɪŋ/ rhyme in the end. In addition, frequent plosives, like /t/, /p/, /d/, /b/ add punchiness, while the repeated /s/ could hint at the slipperiness of the soap, (or even wonder, as pointed out by Hiraga (2005, p. 132) holding the reader’s interest and engagement:

24) So get up and sing out a fabulous song
for a sweet-smelling,
Soap-selling,
tub dwelling guy
and his one-legged duck named Alphonso. (ll. 10-14)

Finally, *Weatherbee’s Diner* has regular, perfect rhymes, making it sound musical and easy to remember:

25) Snow Flurry Curry is also a treat.
It’s loaded with lightning and slathered in sleet.
Cyclones with hailstones are great for dessert,
but have only one or your belly will hurt. (ll. 7-10)

There is a lot of phonetic foregrounding: consonance in ‘Flurry Curry’, and alliteration in ‘loaded with lightning’ and ‘slathered in sleet’. Then, there are puns in lines 11-12 with ‘chilly’, evocative of ‘chili’, and ‘cook up’, meaning both ‘to create, devise’ or ‘prepare (food)’. This poem, like the two previous ones, has plosives /k/, /b/, /d/, /t/ to add punchiness and rhythm. There is a variation of long and short vowels, mirroring the chaotic nature of the narrative, i.e., the weather phenomena, like cyclones or tornadoes, as menu items. All three poems were ‘promotional’, and the abundance of sound patterning in all three poems is engaging and exciting to the reader. Repeated sounds help to increase memorability and keep the reader’s attention, helping the poem to sound more distinct, with some lines sounding almost like slogans (“Regardless of whether it’s chilly or warm,/at Weatherbee’s Diner they cook up a storm!” (ll. 11-12).

3. Comparison with Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll

Despite their individual approaches and specific preferences, the way Prelutsky and Brown employ nonsense strategies largely overlaps. Firstly, both poets often explore themes of individuality, self-acceptance, or fantasy. The characters in the poems are often unconventional, usually in their appearance or behaviour. Personified animal characters are prominent in Brown’s *Kansas City Octopus*, *Funky Snowman*, *Snails*, the duck in *The Bathtub Driver*, *Allicatter Gatorpillar*, and Prelutsky’s *A Teenage Hippopotamus*. The characters’ playful and fluid identities challenge

established dichotomies (e.g., human vs. non-human): readers are thus invited to celebrate eccentric and metamorphic characters and behaviours rather than the social conformism exemplified by fixed or standard identities. Engaging with such characters may indeed help children embrace differences while exploring their own developing sense of identity. In Prelutsky's poems, characters similarly find joy in being different. Both *The Manners of the Moopies* and *We Are Doddies* feature characters that defy conventional social norms. Despite this, the Moopies are eventually accepted and even welcomed by the speaker ("But I believe the Moopies/are a fascinating bunch", ll. 13-14), while the Doddies unapologetically embrace who they are ("we don't mind/if we leave ourselves behind./So we never make a fuss", ll. 13-15).

The social commentary and its implications observed in Brown and Prelutsky can be traced back to the work of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. According to Antinucci, in Learean limericks "Both human and animal characters tend to be uneasy about their physical appearance, and are often confined into abnormal bodies" (2015, p. 302). Lear often reflects on what it means to be an individual eccentricity, an Other, in a society, i.e., look or behave differently (Hark, 1978; Antinucci 2015; Minslow, 2015). Some characters in the limericks are nonconformist who get punished for their differences (e.g., in *There Was an Old Man with a Gong*, the man gets smashed after being declared a 'bore' by others), or opt to accept themselves, like in the following limerick (Minslow, 2015, p. 49):

26) There was an Old Man with a nose,
Who said, "If you choose to suppose
That my nose is too long,
You are certainly wrong!"
That remarkable man with a nose.

This limerick shows a character who rejects the judgement of others and instead shows self-assurance; this idea that Otherness should not be met with rejection but rather acceptance has been shown to repeatedly occur in Prelutsky's and Brown's poems for children. The darker elements of the classical nonsense works are missing in Brown's and Prelutsky's poems: the characters there do not get punished for being eccentric, and the Other does not hold so much power.

Carroll's explorations of identity, on the other hand, are more inward-oriented: rather than questioning how identity is influenced by other people, he is more focused on its stability or logic (Shires, 1988; Pitcher, 1965). In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll questions sense-making in its entirety; from her first moments in Wonderland, Alice's sense of time and place is warped; she grows and shrinks, and these repeated physical changes affect her sense of identity and

interaction with others. For instance, when the Caterpillar asks Alice to introduce herself, she is unable to do so (“I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, <...> because I'm not myself, you see”, p. 60). This (in)stability of identity is central to Brown's *Allicatter Gatorpillar*, which similarly embodies the nature of personal growth through a metamorphosis of a hybrid animal, and may encourage children to reflect on people who are different or undergo profound transformations. Importantly, nonsense allows authors to approach sensitive topics such as diversity and self-acceptance indirectly, avoiding confrontation through humour and playfulness.

Prelutsky's and Brown's poems are often playful and interactive. For instance, the speaker of Brown's *Combo Tango* uses direct addresses and imperatives (“Boogie to the banjo./Bop to the bongo“, ll. 5-6) to invite the reader to imagine the dance or even physically partake in it. Similarly, the earlier nonsense in works by Carroll and Lear has been described as game-like (Shires, 1988; Antinucci, 2015; Santa, 2024). Much of the playfulness or game-like quality can be attributed to the tight sound patterning in the works. Both Prelutsky and Brown use phonological foregrounding to enhance the absurdity, playfulness or humour in their poems, as my analysis has demonstrated. Lear's limericks often employ similar strategies to be more enjoyable and playful (Antinucci, 2015); Carroll's most famous nonsense poem, *Jabberwocky*, similarly, prioritises form over content (Shires, 1988) by using non-existent words, yet still manages to evoke a semblance of meaning. As Shires further explains, “[w]e may try to make the content mean something, but Carroll is simply playing games with us and showing us how the metonymic chain can structure any meaning” (p. 276). While not as extreme, this idea is also reflected in Prelutsky's and Brown's works – in their poems, meaning-making is a sort of game; although the reader may not initially know what a Polkabat or Allicatter Gatorpillar is, they are still able to construct an interpretation based on what the poem's storyworld (however sketchy or absurd) has to offer.

Another shared element lies in the vague storyworld evoked by Prelutsky's and Brown's poems: not only are the characters unconventional, but they also perform impossible actions: In most cases, the poems showcase little to no contextual grounding, i.e., concrete spatial (or temporal) information; the only character with a specific place name is the octopus from Kansas City, although the city provides no relevant information on the character or the scenario, despite anchoring it in a real toponym. Prelutsky's *I Am Riding on a Cloud* explicitly addresses this sense of spatial vagueness with “I am riding on a cloud/in the middle of the sky <...>./I'm uncertain how I got here” (ll. 1-2, 5); this underspecificity and the negative epistemic marker (“uncertain”) strengthen the poem's dreamlike atmosphere. In contrast, in *Alice* books, Carroll constructs nonsense through verbal play, confusing or invalid semantics and syntax, puns, riddles, nonwords, and fantastical beings (Pitcher, 1965; Shires, 1988), Learean nonsense is noted in informal lexis and syntax, loanwords and

coinages, as well as reversals of register (Antinucci, 2015). Lear features quirky characters often performing impossible actions in his limericks; interestingly enough, while some limericks feature real places (e.g., *There Was an Old Lady of Chertsey*, or *There Was a Young Person of Smyrna*), the specificity of the place names provide no real contextual grounding for the events (Hark, 1978; Colley, 1988; Antinucci, 2015; Santa, 2024). While the limericks follow the same highly predictable form (i.e., *There Was a [Character] of [Place Name]*), there is a conceptual disconnect between the characters, places, and plot points (Hark, 1978; Colley, 1988; Minslow, 2015; Santa, 2024). Lastly, both Prelutsky and Brown used a variety of techniques to convey nonsense at all levels of language, including phonological (e.g., the excessive alliteration and assonance in Prelutsky's *I'm Practically Covered with Needles and Pins*), morphological (the neologisms of Allicatter Gatorpillar, Polkabat, Moopies, Doddies), and semantic ("recline on mashed potatoes" in l. 5 of *The Manners of the Moopies*). The phonological features are the most pervasive, as there are instances of alliteration, assonance, consonance, or onomatopoeias in all the analysed poems. Rather than causing disruptions in sense-making, phonological foregrounding enhances musicality and the playfulness in the poems. Carroll's nonsense works likewise resist stable narrative or meaning on all levels, as argued by Cixous & Maclean (1982).

In conclusion, nonsense in Prelutsky's and Brown's poems appeared on multiple levels of language. Despite being meant for younger audiences, the nonsense poems showed a variety of both complex and simple linguistic deviations. Incongruities, which included semantic anomalies, paradoxes, hyperboles, and personifications, were widespread, often strengthening or leading to the decontextualisation, logical deviances, and vagueness or indeterminacy. Phonological experimentation appeared more fit as an engagement feature, rather than a nonsense trigger after all, since it often drew attention to specific lines or images, rather than disrupting the poem's structure. Other engagement features were meant to help the reader interact or align with the poems more easily, by creating a connection through direct addresses, named characters, or present tense. Surprisingly, there were several similarities between the contemporary and traditional nonsense models, ranging from the techniques, to themes, to their interactive nature. Overall, all of the triggers and features portray nonsense poems for children as more complex than it may initially appear.

Conclusions

This thesis aimed to analyse the nonsense within Calef Brown's and Jack Prelutsky's poems for children, alongside comparing it to the nonsensical works from Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. After completing a review on previous literature and the analysis relying on a modified stylistic framework based on Chrzanowska-Kluczevska's (2017) list of nonsense sources, several conclusions can be drawn.

A similar number of nonsense triggers were found in Prelutsky's and Brown's poems: 40 and 39 triggers respectively. The length of the poems did not affect the nonsense within them, as some of Prelutsky's poems, although longer and more verbose, showed a lower number of nonsense triggers than some of the shorter poems by Brown. This could be due to the fact that Prelutsky's poems were more narrative-driven, while Brown's often prioritised imagery and sound. One nonsense trigger, syntactic ill-formedness, was found only once in *Reverso* by Prelutsky. This could be due to the fact that syntax is more unyielding to structural changes, as a violation in word order leads to grammar and meaning collapsing by default. Pragmatic or semantic deviations, in contrast, are more flexible, as meaning can change due to context. The nonsense often manifested as semantic anomalies, hyperboles, paradoxes, or personifications; decontextualisation, vagueness/indeterminacy, lack of cohesion and coherence, or logical deviances were more often effects of these deviations, rather than part of the triggers themselves. Similarly, phonological experimentation proved to be a strong accompanying engagement trigger, along with informal language, direct address, named characters, and present tense, helping the reader to align themselves with the narratives or characters of the poems, as well as strengthening the nonsense and playfulness within them.

There are more similarities than differences between the four nonsense poets, e.g., they explored similar themes and used similar nonsense techniques. All four poets employ nonsense on several levels of language, like syntax, semantics, with phonology often helping to make their texts more engaging or playful. In addition, the reader often encounters odd, eccentric characters in vague, absurd storyworlds. One notable difference is the lack of censure in Brown's or Prelutsky's poems, since it was present in Carroll's and Lear's works. This shows that nonsense presumably has a different purpose in more modern children's poetry, since it often is more overtly humorous or light-hearted.

Humour was difficult to pinpoint in specific lines of the poems, but I think it is safe to say that most of them had elements of amusement and fun. The wordplay, exaggerated descriptions, catchy rhythms, and light-hearted tone of the works definitely contribute to the overall comical tone. Some poems came across as more traditionally lyrical and serious, rather than directly absurd or humorous, with *Peas* being one such outlier. Although, given the overall context *Peas* is in, one

could say the difference in the perspective still comes across as humorous. Similarly, this poem was an outlier in regards to the inferred themes. While most poems explored one of two central themes – identity and imagination or fantasy – *Peas* once again was an exception, instead focusing on nature. Through nonsense, the poets analysed and presented a simple and more reflective themes.

This particular study strived to not only analyse two contemporary poets and compare their uses of linguistic nonsense, but also draw parallels to the traditional nonsense works by Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. Thus, this research demonstrates how nonsense, although often viewed as a complex phenomenon, can also be successfully used to communicate with younger audiences. Further analyses on nonsense could take into account its multimodal elements, and include reader-response studies, to fully grasp the effects and functions of this phenomenon.

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Summary

Both children's literature and literary/linguistic nonsense are valued fields in their own rights: the former has much significance on the child's development and well-being, while the latter encourages to defy conventional language use and fosters creativity in its readers. This MA thesis seeks to contribute to the growing area of study of nonsense literature, namely poetry, for children. The research aims at exploring the nonsense found in 20 poems for children written by two contemporary award-winning children's authors, Jack Prelutsky and Calef Brown, and comparing their understanding of nonsense to that of the traditional nonsense poets, namely Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. The research questions this thesis seeks to answer are as follows:

1. How do different contemporary renowned authors approach nonsense in the same subgenre?
2. How does contemporary nonsense compare to the traditional understanding modelled after Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear?
3. Is humour always present along with nonsense in the chosen data, as suggested by several scholars (Benton, 1978; Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2017; Cheetham, 2019)?
4. Is nonsense more likely to occur in poems dealing with certain themes?

In order to locate the nonsense present in the chosen poems, the stylistic framework draws from E. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska's (2017) list of nonsense. All of the data was compiled and coded manually, and analysed employing qualitative and comparative methods.

The quantitative results show that both poets used a similar number of nonsense triggers, regardless of the poems' length, with syntactic ill-formedness being the least, and lack of contextual grounding and incongruities being the most popular nonsense triggers. The qualitative analysis demonstrates that nonsense was the most striking in semantic anomalies, personifications, hyperboles, and paradoxes, which lead to decontextualisation and logical deviances. Additionally, informal language, direct addresses, present tense, and named characters often appeared in these poems, helping the reader feel more connected to the given narratives.

This study suggests that nonsense can be a paradoxically meaningful and attractive phenomenon in poetry for children, making the act of reading come across as a playful and engaging experience. In addition, any additional multimodal analyses or reader experience studies could be an additional benefit for this field in the future.

Santrauka

Tiek vaikų literatūra, tiek literatūrinis/lingvistinis nonsensas yra vertingos tyrimų sritys: vaikų literatūros žanras turi didelę reikšmę vaiko vystymuisi ir gerovei, o nonsensas skatina nepaisyti įprasto kalbos vartojimo ir ugdo skaitytojų kūrybiškumą. Šis magistro darbas siekia prisidėti prie augančios nonsenso literatūros, ypač poezijos vaikams, studijų srities. Tyrimo tikslas – ištirti nonsensą iš 20 eilėraščių vaikams, parašytų Jacko Prelutsky'io ir Calefo Browno, dviejų šiuolaikinių vaikų literatūros autorių, ir palyginti jų nonsenso supratimą su tradicinių nonsenso poetų – Lewiso Carrollo ir Edwardo Learo – supratimu. Tyrimas siekia atsakyti į šiuos klausimus:

1. Kaip skirtingi šiuolaikiniai autoriai vartoja nonsensą tame pačiame subžanre?
2. Kaip šiuolaikinis nonsensas skiriasi nuo tradicinio jo supratimo, grindžiamo Lewiso Carrollo ir Edwardo Learo pavyzdžiais?
3. Ar pasirinktose poemose humoras visada lydi nonsensą, kaip teigiama kitų lingvistų (Benton, 1978; Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2017; Cheetham, 2019)?
4. Ar nonsensas dažniau pasitaiko poemose su tam tikromis temomis?

Siekiant nustatyti pasirinktuose eilėraščiuose esantį nonsensą, šio tyrimo metodologinis įrankis yra paremtas E. Chrzanowskos-Kluczewskos (2017) nonsenso dirgiklių sąrašu. Duomenys tyrimui buvo surinkti ir susisteminti rankiniu būdu bei išanalizuoti pritaikant kokybinius ir lyginamuosius metodus.

Kiekybiniai rezultatai rodo, kad abiejų poetų eilėraščiai, nepriklausomai nuo jų ilgio, rodė panašų nonsenso dirgiklių skaičių, iš kurių rečiausiai pasitaikė sintaksinės struktūros nuokrypiai, o dažniausiai – dekontekstualizacija ir semantinės anomalijos, personifikacijos, hiperbolės bei paradoksai. Kokybinė analizė rodo, kad nonsensas buvo labiausiai pastebimas semantinėse anomalijose, personifikacijose, hiperbolėse ir paradoksuose, kurie ir vedė prie dekontekstualizacijos ir loginių nukrypimų. Be to, šiuose eilėraščiuose dažnai pasitaikė neformali kalba, tiesioginis kreipimasis į adresatą, esamasis laikas ir konkretūs personažai, turintys vardus; jie padėjo skaitytojui labiau įsijausti į pateiktus pasakojimus.

Tai leidžia daryti išvadą, kad nonsensas vaikų poezijoje gali būti paradoksaliai prasmingas ir pritraukiantis fenomenas, dėl kurio skaitymas tampa žaisminga ir įtraukiančia patirtimi. Ateityje šioje srityje būtų naudinga atlikti papildomas multimodalines analizes ir skaitytojų patirties tyrimų.

Appendix 1

This appendix includes the analysed poems from Calef Brown's collections. Each poem is followed by the list of nonsense triggers and a table which indicate and elaborate on the appearing nonsense triggers.

POLKABATS AND OCTOPUS SLACKS

Kansas City Octopus

Kansas City Octopus

is wearing fancy slacks.

Bell-bottom,

just got 'em,

fifty bucks including tax.

Red corduroy,

and boy-o-boy,

they fit like apple pie.

Multi-pocket snazzy trousers

Custom made for octopi.

Fantastic plastic stretch elastic

keeps 'em nice and tight.

Kansas City Octopus

is looking good tonight!

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF): NO**

- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** NO
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, an imaginary, empirically unverified (and unverifiable) character, and it is an impossible, imaginary situation overall, as well as a logical deviance
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, a rich (exaggerated) rhyme where /ai/ is repeated, and l. 11 is punchy and playful, with the other rhymes being conventional (many of them internal, e.g., bucks/tax)
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, a violation of selectional restriction (“wear” only collocates with people or pets, not with octopi), a dressed octopus results in a semantic anomaly, a personification; manipulated idiom “fit like apple pie” is semantically dissonant as well (reminiscent of “easy/simple as pie”)
- **Additional prominent feature: IL** (*fancy, ‘em, bucks, boy-o-boy, snazzy, looking good*, contractions), **NC** (Kansas City Octopus), **PT** (present simple, present continuous), proximal deixis (*tonight*) → a sense of proximity
- **Humour (HU):** quirky characterisation of a proud octopus wearing slacks.

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	-	-	+	+	+	-	+	+	+

Funky Snowman

Funky Snowman loves to dance.

You’d think he wouldn’t have much chance

without two legs

or even pants.

Does that stop Funky Snowman?

No!!

Turn up the music with the disco beat,

when you’re in the groove, you don’t need feet.

Crowds come out and fill the street.

Kick it, Funky Snowman!!

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** NO
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, there is no contextual background or rational explanation/anchoring for a dancing snowman; the snowman has the ability to dance without any legs, with no explanation for it; logical deviance as a result of an inanimate entity with human qualities, showing eccentric, dramatised behavior
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, the disrupted musicality with l. 6 comes across as a dramatic pause
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, personification as a result of the snowman acting human; “Kick it” as a metaphorical expression and ironic encouragement to perform (again disregarding the lack of legs); l. 8 as a contextual paradox.
- **Additional prominent feature:** **IL** (contractions, rhetorical questions, vocatives), **DA** (the character/the reader, commands (hortatory rhetoric) using the imperative, e.g., ‘turn up the music’ – narratorial intrusion via direct address (ll. 5-6, l. 10)), **NC** (Funky Snowman), **PT** (present simple, ‘loves’, ‘are in the groove’) → a sense of closeness → deeper engagement and motivational appeal
- **Humour (HU):** a result of harmless incongruity and absurdity of the character

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	-	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

Snails

It never fails, those pesky snails

are always in the pudding.

Lousy guests, those nasty pests,
they're always up to something.

I've tried like mad to find their nest
but snails are smart I must confess.
The trails they leave can fool the best,
and snails are good at hiding.

Oh well, at least they don't make threats,
they don't eat meat,
they don't place bets,
they almost always pay their debts
and never puff on cigarettes.
I think I'll keep those snails as pets
and feed them lots of pudding.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** NO
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO, consequential and cohesive
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, snails with human qualities as empirically unverified referents; they perform human actions, which is logically deviant
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, strong end rhymes and near-rhymes, /s/ imitates the slowness and sliminess of the snails, /t/ delivers the tension/punch of the initial disgust and disapproval
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, the speaker's conflicting attitudes towards the snails is humorous, incongruent, and absurd; the snails themselves are personified, performing

human actions; the negation of what snails do not do (ll. 9-13) is serious yet humorous; their nastiness is mentioned along their nicer traits, although the traits overall are unrelated and seemingly random; the snails are disjointed and contradictory, e.g., their nastiness → their slimy, sneaky nature → their intelligence and positive qualities → snails as good pets

- **Additional prominent feature: IL** (contractions, *those pesky snails, lousy, tried like mad, oh well, up for something*), **PT** (present simple) → conversational, personal tone, fostered proximity
- **Humour (HU):** a result of the characterisation of the snails and their behaviour + ‘almost always pay their debts’ (internal deviation, ‘almost’ is quite unexpected, it also breaks the metrical pattern) + unexpected morale behind the story encouraging to accept differences

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	-	-	+	+	+	-	-	+	+

Polkabats

The Polkabats are on the loose,
a flapping flock of flying fury.

All the spotted bats are out
(except the ones on jury duty).

Loudly screeching nasty words
like “Stroganoff”
to scare the birds
while dropping smelly polka-turds
on people down below.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO

- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, ‘on the loose’ implies the Polkabats being free from one place and occupying another, but there is a lack of precise spatial information, which leads to a vague, partial interpretation
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** YES, there is a lack of connection between the different points of the narrative, e.g., freed Polkabats → Polkabats on jury duty → Polkabats being nasty and mean (were they in jail/on trial for being mean?)
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, there is an imaginary, empirically unverified referent of a Polkabat with human abilities; the bats perform human actions which is an impossible situation (logical deviance)
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, /f/ and /fl/ convey the fast and light movement of the Polkabats, whereas the consonant clusters /scr/ and /str/ in stanza 2 show tension, a sense of stress, force; the “nasty word” Stroganoff sounds harsh and punchy
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, personification as result of unverified species of bats performing human actions; opposition of a scary word vs. “Stroganoff”, jury duty bats vs. wild bats, hyperbole (dramatized, exaggerated behaviour of bats); the compounded neologisms of Polkabat and polka-turds (morphology); ‘spotted bats’ – with polka dots or seen by someone (pun)
- **Additional prominent feature: IL** (parentheses, *smelly*, *nasty*, *polka-turds*, *on the loose*); **NC** (Polkabats), **PT** (present simple) → casual, friendly tone
- **Humour (HU):** a result of playful personified animal referents and taboo/dirty topics (e.g., excrements launched by the birds; shitting on people as criminal activity)

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+

The Bathtub Driver

The Bathtub Driver is coming to town

with imported shampoo

that he sells by the pound.

His one-legged duck

rides along for good luck
yelling “Three for a buck!”
when they’re having a sale.

The Bathtub Driver won’t stay very long,
his supply of shampoo will soon be all gone.
So get up and sing out a fabulous song
for a sweet-smelling,
soap-selling,
tub dwelling guy
and his one-legged duck named Alphonso.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, unclear whether the bathtub is his home or just his means of transport which leads to an ambiguous interpretation; the driver himself being an ambiguous character, with an underdefined role/purpose (along with the duck)
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** YES, the topics are disjointed, e.g., the strange bathtub driver coming to town → good-luck duck being personified → performing for them both
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, the bathtub as a decontextualised item, being used for another purpose; logically irrational situation of a duck with a human name and a nameless person living in/driving a bathtub; no rational explanation for either
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, /s/ and plosives coming across as playful, lots of rhymes with /e/, /ɑ:/, /ʌ/, /aʊ/
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, a personified animal, and the two characters driving/living in a decontextualised bathtub; the phrase “tub dwelling” is semantically anomalous yet comical

- **Additional prominent feature:** **IL** (*a buck*, contractions), **NC** (Alphonso the Duck, The Bathtub Driver), **DA** (*so get up and sing out*; the reader), **PT** (present simple, present continuous) → casual and engaging reading experience, proximity
- **Humour (HU):** a result of an absurd narrative and strange characters

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

FLAMINGOS ON THE ROOF

Alphabet Sherbet

Alphabet Sherbet,

Have you heard of it?

I bought myself a gallon,

and ate about a third of it.

The A's are all amazing.

The B's are a beautiful blue.

The C's and D's

are cool and delicious.

The E's are enjoyable too.

The F's are fair,

but don't you fret –

the G's are great,

so go and get

a bowl of Alphabet Sherbet.

You'll love it,

I'm sure of it.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, the ice cream flavours are unclear
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO, there is formal cohesion between different flavours/characteristics, their first letters correspond to their flavours (e.g., *G's are great*)
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, decontextualised food is presented as letters with underspecified flavours → logically incoherent as well
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, assonance and consonance (including in the title), as some ice cream/letters correspond to their flavours/characteristics first sounds, and also compound (or multisyllabic) rhymes spread across two or more words
- **Graphological experimentation (GE):** NO
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, alphabet letters are presented as ice cream flavours, which is an unexpected and semantically unconventional combination
- **Additional prominent feature:** **IL** (*fair, fret, contractions*), **DA** (*go and get, you'll love it; the reader*), **PT** (present simple) → a sense of familiarity and involvement
- **Humour (HU):** a result of harmless incongruity of the ice cream and its flavours; also, promotional style (ad-style) used in poetry: clash of registers (the poem is selling you something that does not exist, but still tries to persuade you in a marketing-oriented way)

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	+	+

Combo Tango

Dance lesson number one:

The Combination Tango.

Listen to the lingo.

This is how the steps go.

Boogie to the banjo.

Bop to the bongo.

Freeze like an igloo.

Stomp like a buffalo.

Drop like a yo-yo.

Swing like a golf pro.

Flip like a hairdo.

Tumble like a domino.

Swivel on your kneecap.

Wobble like a mud flap.

Take a little catnap.

Do it all again!

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, the instructions are comical, strange, and not helpful for learning a dance, which results in an ambiguous interpretation
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, the ‘tango’ is decontextualised, as the provided dance moves do not correspond to the conventional understanding of a tango → does not correspond to the rational understanding of a tango in the real world; logical deviance as a result of a distorted schema of a tango
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, there is alliteration in ll. 3, 5-6 and assonance throughout the poem, adding musicality and rhythm, alongside a pervasive trochaic rhythm where most lines start on a heavy stress (thanks to the monosyllabic verbs used in the imperative)

- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, juxtaposition as a result of a contradictory combination of dance moves; semantic anomaly as a result of the dance not being an actual tango at all, which leads to a confusing, unclear meaning; strange similes as odd dance move instructions
- **Additional prominent feature: IL** (*lingo, yo-yo, golf pro*), **DA** (*listen, boogie, bop, freeze, stomp*, etc.; the reader), **PT** (present simple) → easier and deeper engagement
- **Humour (HU):** a result of the absurd, uncoordinated dance moves and informal language

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	+	+

Weatherbee's Diner

Whenever you're looking for something to eat,

Weatherbee's Diner is just down the street.

Start off your meal with a bottle of rain.

Fog on the glass is imported from Maine.

The thunder is wonderful, order it loud,

with sun-dried tornado on top of a cloud.

Snow Flurry Curry is also a treat.

It's loaded with lightning and slathered in sleet.

Cyclones with hailstones are great for dessert,

but have only one or your belly will hurt.

Regardless of whether it's chilly or warm,

at Weatherbee's Diner they cook up a storm!

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, it is unclear what food is actually being discussed, which results in an incomplete interpretation

- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, the food and weather terms are decontextualised; logical deviance as a result of a diner with weather events or objects as food items
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, regular perfect rhymes, and puns in ll. 7, 11 (chilly), 12 (cook up); consonance in *Flurry Curry*, alliteration in *loaded with lightning*, *slathered in sleet*
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, semantic anomalies as a result of unconventional collocational phrases/metaphorical expressions (e.g., sun-dried tornado, cyclones with hailstones as dessert); the whole poem as an extended metaphor, where inedible entities are presented as edibles; possibly influenced by *Feasts of Hunger* by Arthur Rimbaud
- **Additional prominent feature:** IL (contractions), DA (*you're looking for something, start off your meal*, etc.; the reader), PT (present simple, present continuous) → familiar tone → easier emotional alignment
- **Humour (HU):** a result of decontextualised, vague food items and puns, as well as pervasive hyperbole (ordering thunder, eating cyclones for dessert, etc.)

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	+	+

Peas

Peas peek out of the pod.

They ponder.

They whisper.

They nod.

Everything is new.

The sky is a dazzling blue.

The wind is in the willow trees.

The sun is on the sod.

Peas peek out of the pod.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** NO
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, minimal explanation for the narrative and personified peas, which is an unexplained situation, as well as a logical deviance
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, alliteration with /p/, /w/, /s/ provide a sense of order and calm, and strengthen the poem's reflective, quiet, and gentle nature
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, personification as a result of peas performing human actions (*peek out, whisper, nod*), and contrast of a natural, static landscape with personified, pondering peas
- **Additional prominent feature:** none, except for **PT** (present simple)
- **Humour (HU):** a result of the odd opposition of something simple (peas) and something profound (reflection), but not overtly humorous

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	-	-	+	+	+	-	-	-	+

Allicatter Gatorpillar

Allicatter Gatorpillar

chews a leaf,

shows his teeth.

Allicatter Gatorpillar

sings a song,

then he's gone.

Allicatter Gatorpillar

by and by,

my oh my!

Allibutter Gatorfly!

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, a strange, vague hybrid animal referent, its appearance is unclear, which leads to an incomplete interpretation
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** YES, the ideas in ll. 2-3 and 5-6 are random/disjointed
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, decontextualisation and logical deviance as results of an imaginary, empirically unverified character
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, it arises with the neologism and /aɪ/ repetition; regular rhymes add musicality
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, personification of a strange, vague hybrid animal; the blended morphological neologisms of Allicatter Gatorpillar and Allibutter Gatorfly
- **Additional prominent feature:** **IL** (contractions, *by and by*, *my oh my*), **NC** (Allicatter Gatorpillar, Allibutter Gatorfly), **PT** (present simple) → conversational tone with a specified, memorable character → deeper engagement
- **Humour (HU):** a result of playful language and strange character; nursery-rhyme-like musicality

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+

Appendix 2

This appendix includes the analysed poems from Jack Prelutsky's collection. Each poem is followed by the list of nonsense triggers and a table which indicate and elaborate on the appearing nonsense triggers.

PIZZA THE SIZE OF THE SUN

A Pizza the Size of the Sun

I'm making a pizza the size of the sun,
a pizza that's sure to weigh more than a ton,
a pizza too massive to pick up and toss,
a pizza resplendent with oceans of sauce.

I'm topping my pizza with mountains of cheese,
with acres of peppers, pimentos, and peas,
with mushrooms, tomatoes, and sausage galore,
with every last olive they had at the store.

My pizza is sure to be one of a kind,
my pizza will leave other pizzas behind,
my pizza will be a delectable treat
that all who love pizza are welcome to eat.

The oven is hot, I believe it will take
a year and a half for my pizza to bake.
I hardly can wait till my pizza is done,
My wonderful pizza the size of the sun.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, l. 10 has a distorted idiom, which leads to a vague interpretation
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, there is no concrete time/place/logic/means of making a pizza that size, and portions of ingredients are described using decontextualised units of measure, or greatly exaggerating idioms, the situation is illogical
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** NO, but the AABB scheme is consistent yet playful (see also use of anaphora, stressing the importance of the pizza, ll. 2-4 and ll. 9-11)
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, hyperbole (e.g., it taking a year and a half for the pizza to bake), the pizza and its toppings are also hyperbolised; semantic anomalies as a result of collocational dissonance in ll. 4, 5-7 (amounts reconceptualised as landscapes or environments – mountains, acres, oceans, deriving from FOOD IS PLANET or PIZZA IS STAR metaphor from the title)
- **Additional prominent feature: IL** (contractions, ‘one of a kind’, ‘massive’, ‘hardly can wait’), **PT** (present simple, present continuous)
- **Humour (HU):** a result of incongruity and exaggeration

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	-	+	-	+	-	-	+	+

My Elephant Is Different

My elephant is different
 than most elephants I meet,
 its ears are short and fuzzy,
 it has feathers on its feet.
 It's scaly like a lizard,

and it's furry like a skunk,
it sports a sort of auger
where there ought to be a trunk.

It doesn't much resemble
other elephants I find,
its tail is like a mushroom
on its tiny blue behind.
it cackles like a chicken,
and it's fourteen inches tall—
at times I think my elephant's
no elephant at all.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, an unclear animal referent that cannot be interpreted successfully
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** YES, the elephant possesses unrelated, contradictory features, which undermine the fact that it is an elephant
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, there is an imaginary, hard-to-define character, that does not fit the description of a conventional elephant, and cannot be verified empirically; logical deviance as a result of ll. 15-16 featuring a contradictory, paradoxical statement, and the character being illogical overall
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, there is alliteration in ll. 4, 5, 7, 12, assonance in ll. 1, 6, 7; conventional rhyming
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, semantic anomalies arising from the fact that the features are conflicting and untypical of an elephant; paradoxical descriptions in ll. 5-6, contradiction of elephants' height (tiny/fourteen inches), absurd simile in l. 11

- **Additional prominent feature: IL** (contractions, conversational tone), **PT** (present simple)
- **Humour (HU):** a result of an ambiguous, absurd portrait of a character

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+

We Are Daddies

We are Daddies, smooth as eggs,

we've got bodies on our legs.

We've got heads with tiny brains,

we play leapfrog when it rains.

We are Daddies, often wet,

we don't know what we forget.

We are warmest when it's hot,

we are coldest when it's not.

We are Daddies, small and round,

we're not missing when we're found.

We are closest when we're near,

we're not there when we are here.

We are Daddies, we don't mind

if we leave ourselves behind.

So we never make a fuss,

we are Daddies, look for us.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, imprecise characterisation of Doddies leading to an incomplete, vague interpretation of them
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, imaginary, empirically unverified characters in paradoxical situations performing actions lacking explanation or rational grounding; logical deviance as a result of contradictory characters and situations, e.g., tautologies in ll. 6-8, 10-12
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, assonance with /ɒ/, /ɪə/, /e/, /aʊ/, /aɪ/, /ʌ/.
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, “smooth as eggs” as an unconventional (but rational/justified) simile; oddities in Doddies’ actions, either showing tautology, paradox or contradiction, e.g., ll. 13-14, the morphological neologism ‘Doddie’
- **Additional prominent feature:** **IL** (contractions, *make a fuss*, *smooth as eggs*), **DA** (l. 16), **NC** (Doddies), **PT** (present simple, present continuous)
- **Humour (HU):** a result of paradoxical language

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

I’m Practically Covered with Needles and Pins

I’m practically covered with needles and pins,
a teakettle’s firmly affixed to my shins,
my ankles are clanking with clippers and keys,
and several spoons are attached to my knees.

The fork on my forehead is making me frown,
the bolts of my shoulders are weighing me down,

a jingle bell's ringing right under my nose,
and tacks add a finishing touch to my toes.

A hook is adhering to each of my ears,
my head is topped off by a mountain of gears,
my waist is encircled by washers and wheels,
and hinges are holding on fast to my heels.

My back is embellished with ladles and chain,
the saw on my stomach's becoming a pain,
my neck is adorned with a stainless-steel pen—
I doubt that I'll swallow a magnet again.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, the circumstances are confusing (unclear whether the 'I' is human or not), but partially, jokingly resolved in l. 16
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, the metal objects are decontextualised and are presented as accessories; severity of the consequences → illogical situation; the reasoning is partially there in l. 16, although the absurd and exaggerated nature of the situation persists
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, each line has instances of consonance and or assonance, the poem has an AABB rhyming scheme
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, decontextualised metal items accompanied by incompatible verbs (embellish, adorn) → collocational dissonance → semantic anomaly; literal description of appearance → absurd and exaggerated → hyperbole
- **Additional prominent feature:** **IL** (contractions, *topped off*, *holding on fast*), **PT** (present simple, present continuous) → a sense of proximity, conversational tone, progressive aspect

- **Humour (HU):** a result of hyperbolic and irrational self-portrait

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	-	+	+	+	-	-	+	+

The Manners of the Moopies

The manners of the Moopies

tend to be unorthodox...

they put pudding in their pockets,

they stuff oatmeal in their socks.

They recline on mashed potatoes,

they tie wieners to their ears,

they smear jelly on their noses

as they swing from chandeliers.

Some people think the Moopies

are a boorish little group

when they roll in squashed bananas,

when they wash with lentil soup.

But *I* believe the Moopies

are a fascinating bunch,

and whenever I am able,

I invite them out to lunch.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO

- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, “some people” and “Moopies” are ambiguous references leading to a vague interpretation
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, imaginary characters and decontextualised food items; the described social norms being abnormal to others → unclear social context (unfamiliarity/foregrounding relating to social norms)
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, consonance (/p/, /r/, /s/ repeated throughout), musicality builds with similar sounds put/stuff, pockets/socks, ears/smear/chandeliers, think/little/in/with, fascinating/I invite
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, food items used for other purposes (e.g., *recline on mashed potatoes*) → collocational dissonance → semantic anomaly; “unorthodox manners”, propriety including filth (rolling around in food, stuffing food in pockets); the morphological neologism ‘Moopie’
- **Additional prominent feature:** NC (Moopies), PT (present simple)
- **Humour (HU):** a result of parodied social norms; decontextualisation of food items and whimsical characters

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	-	+	+	+	-	+	-	+

I Am Riding on a Cloud

I am riding on a cloud
 in the middle of the sky,
 making idle conversation
 with the birds who happen by.
 I’m uncertain how I got here,
 but I surely do not care.
 I’m enchanted to be floating
 unencumbered in the air.

I may try to catch a rainbow
 with my rainbow-catching mitt,
 build imaginary castles,
 or do nothing else but sit.
 What I do is unimportant,
 just as long as I can stay
 in my chariot of billows
 on this dreamy summer day.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** NO
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, a result of personified birds (unverified empirically), undetermined/underdeveloped setting (l. 5 kind of addresses and dismisses it, which is somewhat humorous), the character performing impossible actions with no rationale (*riding on a cloud, catching a rainbow, building imaginary castles*)
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, the repetition of /r/, /m/, /h/ emphasizes the soothing, “airy”, and dynamic nature of the poem/setting; the longer vowels [in colour] strengthen musicality and convey some sort of “laziness” as the character floats through the sky, while the short vowel /i/ comes across as fluttery and light
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, impossible actions (*riding on a cloud, catching a rainbow, building imaginary castles*) with collocational violation (*catch* and *rainbow* or *chariot* and *billows* are unlikely collocates), and result in semantic anomalies; personification (of the birds) and hyperboles (*I’m enchanted to be floating unencumbered in the air, <...> or do nothing else but sit, <...> What I do is unimportant, just as long as I can stay*)
- **Additional prominent feature:** IL (contractions), PT (present simple, present continuous)

- **Humour (HU):** not humorous

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	-	-	+	+	+	-	-	+	+

A Teenage Hippopotamus

A teenage hippopotamus

is living overhead.

I hear him every morning

when he bumbles out of bed.

He crashes through his living room

and makes my ceiling shake.

A teenage hippopotamus

is very hard to take.

That teenage hippopotamus

is louder than a train.

He loves to blast his radio,

it's driving me insane.

He keeps it on around the clock,

it blares and blares and blares—

I'm moving to the place next door,

where lions live upstairs.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO

- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, the expression “hard to take” in l. 8 is distorted (“hard to take *on*”) and somewhat unclear, and could be interpreted figuratively (hard to tolerate) or literally (hard to pick up because of its weight)
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** NO
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, an imaginary (personified) character with no contextual world-building/reasoning – the hippo and the lions living in flats – decontextualisation; there is a lack of context regarding the personified hippo’s and lions’ role/purpose, e.g., why they live in the same apartment complex with human beings; animals living in the same apartment complex with humans (logical deviance)
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, iconicity with “it blares and blares and blares” repetition → quantity, i.e., very long/very loud
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, an animal character with human responsibilities and characteristics (personification); irony and hyperbole as a result of the speaker neighbouring with lions as the better option, and “it blares and blares and blares”
- **Additional prominent feature: IL** (*bumble out, louder than a train, driving me insane, it blares and blares*), **PT** (present simple, present continuous) → enhanced relatability and familiarity
- **Humour (HU):** a result of a familiar yet exaggerated situation: a conflict between two neighbours

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	-	+	+	+	-	-	+	+

Frenetica Fluntz

Hello everyone, I’m Frenetica Fluntz,

I do so many things, and I do them at once.

This makes me extremely amazing to see,

it also saves time, as I’m sure you’ll agree.

I sleep as I eat and I eat as I drink

and I drink as I shout and I shout as I think
 and I think as I draw and I draw as I walk
 and I walk as I read and I read as I talk
 and I talk as I laugh and I laugh as I sing
 and I sing as I slide and I slide as I swing
 and I swing as I run and I run as I hop
 and I hop as I dust and I dust as I mop
 and I mop as I skate and I skate as I sweep
 and I sweep as I write and I write as I sleep.

there's nobody else who can manage such stunts...

I'm one of a kind, I'm Frenetica Fluntz.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO, although the second stanza is a single run-on sentence, which is unnatural; interesting use of repetitions, with systematic anadiplosis
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, actions remain generic because they are all intransitive (What does she dust? What does she sing?)
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** YES, caused by the blending of several contexts, i.e., an impossible series of incompatible simultaneous actions
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, decontextualisation and logical deviance caused by incompatible and unrelated actions happening at once, which is unrealistic and illogical
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, the rhymes are conventional, but the second stanza has musicality because of the abundance of repeated sounds like /i:/, /ɔ/, or /I/ (and is circular!)
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, instances of paradoxes and hyperboles (ll. 2, 15) heighten the absurd contradictory/oxymoronic nature of the poem

- **Additional prominent feature:** **DA** (*you*; the reader), **NC** (Frenetica Fluntz), **IL** (contractions, *stunts*, greeting formulas, *hello everyone*), **PT** (present simple)
- **Humour (HU):** a result of the absurd portrait of multi-taskers or busybodies

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

I Wear the Most Amazing Shoes

I wear the most amazing shoes

the world has ever seen.

The left is pink and purple,

and the right is gold and green.

They have ribbons, beads, and spangles,

buckles, bangles, belts, and bows,

and assorted silver sequins

that illuminate the toes.

They have multicolored laces,

flashing blinkers on the heels.

They have beepers, bells, and buzzers,

and a strange device that squeals.

It only takes an hour a day

to keep them looking clean—

the most amazing pair of shoes

the world has ever seen.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** NO
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, “a strange device that squeals” in l. 12 is an ambiguous, underspecified and personified accessory
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** YES, there is a thematic disconnect between various accessories, they are completely random (although semantically connected) and do not go together/complement each other in a sensible way
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** NO, the context is clear, although a pair of shoes with such accessories is unconventional and exaggerated, and does not fit into a real-world situation
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** YES, alliteration (*beepers, bells, and buzzers*, l. 11; *buckles, bangles, belts, and bows*, l. 6), other sound patterning (/ei/, /i:/) throughout
- **Incongruities (INC):** YES, semantic anomalies caused by exaggerated appearance/nature of the pair of shoes and its accessories, often expressed by hyperbole (figurative language)
- **Additional prominent feature: IL** (*amazing, blinkers, beepers*), **PT** (present simple)
- **Humour (HU):** exaggerated excess of accessories is somewhat comical

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
-	+	+	-	+	+	-	-	+	+

Reverso Is Name My

Reverso is name my,

way this talk often I,

say you of many so,

“you follow don’t we, No!”

Style my by puzzled you’re,

shout you would else why for,

“noise that stop, quiet Be,

much it like not do we!”

Clear rather it’s me to,
learn to wish not do you,
you for feel I sad how—
away go will I now.

- **Syntactic ill-formedness (SIF):** YES, violated conventional word order; each line needs to be read backwards to make syntactic and semantic sense but that would disrupt the rhythm and the rhymes within the poem
- **Vagueness/indeterminacy (V/I):** YES, ambiguous and disorienting meaning-making caused by the disrupted flow of ideas, or SIF, as well as the character of Reverso
- **Lack of cohesion/coherence (LCC):** YES, caused by structural disorder and closely tied to SIF
- **Lack of contextual grounding (LCG):** YES, lack of rationality for the manner of speech, which is unrealistic and illogical
- **Phonological experimentation (PE):** NO, weirdly, the rhymes and metre provide order and structure on the phonological level (AABB)
- **Incongruities (INC):** NO, no propositional structure
- **Additional prominent feature:** **IL** (contractions, *puzzled*), **NC** (Reverso), **DA** (*you*; the reader) → conversational tone, **PT** (present simple)
- **Humour (HU):** a result of language: disorienting semantics and confusing syntax

SIF	V/I	LCC	LCG	PE	INC	DA	NC	IL	PT
+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	+

Appendix 3

This appendix includes the original list of the nonsense triggers, as outlined by Chrzanowska-Kluczewska (2017), which was the base for the modified framework of the analysis in this thesis. The list, as provided in the original paper by Chrzanowska-Kluczewska (2017, pp. 27-29) includes:

1. **Logical deviance**, which covers instances of the lack of reference, or issues with truth-valuations or counterfactual scenarios, e.g. “The Pegasus has just landed near my house” (p. 27);
2. **Semantic anomaly**, i.e., the violation of selectional restrictions, unlikely collocational processes, e.g., “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously” (p. 27);
3. **Vagueness, indeterminacy**, or the ambiguity of meaning and imprecise predicates, e.g., the interpretation of ‘long’ or ‘short’ may be fuzzy without any context (p. 28);
4. **Syntactic ill-formedness**, i.e., ambiguous syntactic structures (p. 28);
5. **Figuration**, or the use of stylistic devices on all levels of linguistic description, which may include instances of oxymorons, paradoxes, and so on (p. 28);
6. **Lack of cohesion and coherence** covers the lack of connectedness and uniformity throughout the text, which could negatively affect interpretation (p. 28);
7. **Decontextualisation** is the lack of pragmatic grounding, which hinders the interpretation or processing of the text (p. 29);
8. **Phonetic experimentation**, or the use of phonetic resources, such as paronomasia, alliteration, and so on (p. 29);
9. **Graphological experimentation** includes the play with verbal and visual dimensions of a text, i.e., instances of multimodality, and how the non-verbal and verbal modalities interact (p. 29).