IN SEARCH
OF \textsc{(Non)Sense}
IN SEARCH OF (NON)SENSE

Edited by

ELŻBIETA CHRZANOWSKA-KLUCZEWSKA
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PREFACE

MICHAEL TOOLAN

I am honoured to have been invited to write a brief Preface to this collection. In her Editor’s introduction to this volume, Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczewska provides a systematic and scholarly overview of the polysemous interpretations of sense, nonsense, and the search for sense that drives many a literary semantic analysis of text. She reports the various struggles of Frege and Wittgenstein, Saussure and Trier, to hold down the greased pig of sense. One favourite strategy is to call in the extra help known as Context, or the Discourse World, as the background against which, for sure, a particular determinate meaning can be reliably established. Once you have the text penned inside its context, it can’t get away. The trouble is, as most acknowledge upon reflection, context itself is boundless.

There are other questions broached by the editor and taken up by contributors which are, to my mind, central to a literary semantic reflection on (literary) sense and nonsense: why do we go to the trouble of producing nonsense with concomitant burdens on our addressees, when sense seems usually so much the easier option? Perhaps it is, as Professor Chrzanowska-Kluczewska suggests, because we love experimentation, invention, and the straining of our interpretative faculties. Venturing beyond sense into the dark forest, barren desert, or endless seas of nonsense is perhaps necessary (although not sufficient) for creativity.

This volume of papers valuably returns us to some of the things that literary semanticists, cognitive poeticians, and text analysts will and must tirelessly confront: the why and the how of the kinds of sense different literary texts project, in the particular worlds they construct. In the pursuit of new sense, fresh sense, revived sense—anything but the utterly automated received or common sense—literature habitually visits or colonizes or flirts with nonsense, absurdity, fantasy, the impossible, and transcendence, whether that takes the local form of an outrageous pun or the general postulation of an entire alternatively-organised world.
I can do no better than let the Dominican writer Junot Diaz (author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 2007) do my sermonizing for me. In a recent interview he decries those narratives which are “too coherent” and make too much comforting sense—that is writing as pure fiction indeed:

“People are committed to their narratives of consolation,” he told me, “so the coherent person, the coherent character, graspable, is something people are very committed to, that’s what they want. They’re, like, ‘please, sir, narrator or dictator, give me a coherent story that makes sense and I can encapsulate it, not too many silences and not too many lacunae, not too much aporia, please hook it up that way so I can be consoled’” (Ch’ien 2008, 2).

At the same time, Diaz freely admits to his interviewer, he himself cannot resist the impulse to (try to) create “full characters,” characters who ironically then fail to show how fragmentary our sense of the world is in actuality: “The world tends to give us pieces, and then in our imagination, because of our desire and because of our need, we make them whole” (Ch’ien 2008, 2).

The articles that follow are a fascinating and enjoyable exploration of the workings out of these human tendencies and desires, as readers and as scholars.

**Works cited**

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS (NON)SENSE?

ELŻBIETA CHRZANOWSKA-KLUCZEWSKA

One of the remarkable qualities of human beings is that they always assume that texts they hear or see should make sense.
—Enkvist 1989, 181

Everybody seems to know what sense is; nonsense, on the other hand, has been given various names but no good definition that would capture its intricate and mysterious nature. Both sense and nonsense are two inextricably bound properties of utterances generated by this amazingly powerful and partly unpredictable system called natural language.

Yet the word sense, commonly taken as synonymous with meaning, is an ambiguous and theory-dependent notion. Philosophers, logicians and semanticists have approached it in strikingly different terms. Let me mention only the best known proposals associated with the term sense, wishing to remind the Readers that its understanding is by no means trivial and obvious. Not without reason did J. Culler (1962, 24) call the word meaning obscure and its synonyms sense and significance slippery.

G. Frege saw in sense a way of representing a referent, a supra-individual and objective meaning, not hidden within one particular mind but shared as an abstraction by a community of speakers. In this capacity, senses dwell in what L. Wittgenstein called later logischer Raum, that is logical space (dubbed also semantic space). Frege allowed for the dissociation of sense from the relation holding between language and the world called reference. This is demonstrated by such expressions as ‘Unicorn,’ which possess sense (mean something to us) despite the fact that they do not denote anything in the real world. In other words, their extension (the class of entities they describe and refer to) is empty. Thus modern logical and semantic theories apply the terms extension and
intension as closely related to reference and sense, respectively. Intension is a condition to be met by an object about which something is being predicated, that is sense seen as an ascription of certain properties to individuals and things (cf. Carnap 1947).

In turn, J. Trier (1934, discussed in Lyons [1977] 1981, Vol. 1) defined sense as a conceptual area covered by a given expression, without really making it clear whether his sense was a concept understood as a mental entity, individualized and residing “in one particular head,” or as present “in many heads,” like in Frege’s extra-linguistic and public conception of sense. I am referring here to the memorable statement by H. Putnam (1975, 144), “[…] meanings just ain’t in the head,” which goes against Trier’s and Frege’s senses alike.

Another, quite widespread understanding of the term sense perceives in it some central, stylistically neutral meaning of a linguistic expression, sometimes called misleadingly cognitive meaning or, better, descriptive meaning (cf. Lyons [1977] 1981, 175), and often equalled with intension. Approached from this perspective, sense stands in opposition to connotation, namely a subjective, emotive or stylistically marked shade of meaning, secondary in relation to the ‘core’ sense.

Still another, structural approach to sense takes it to be a specific place occupied by a given linguistic unit in a system of semantic relationships contracted with other expressions in the language (Lyons [1977] 1981, Ch. 9). The obvious Saussurean flavour discernible in such claims presents sense as a purely intra-linguistic phenomenon, detached from reference and also very different from the Fregean extra-linguistic abstraction. On this theory, sense is best realized through such staple semantic “-nymy” relationships as synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, homonymy, polysemy, meronymy, etc. In this framework, meaning is understood as a complete set of sense-relations in which a given expression is involved, thus predominantly as word-meaning and, compositionally, sentence-meaning. As such, it contrasts with the pragmatically understood speaker-meaning that reflects the communicative intention of its producer.

The search for sense and/or meaning has been the ultimate goal of all hermeneutic endeavours that underlie a successful interpretation of texts, where text should be understood broadly, allowing for inter-semiotic connections and translations. And, since long, it has been realized that in order to “make sense” out of linguistic expressions it is not enough to pay attention to sense only, especially in the narrow formalized versions listed above. Meanings in language exist only in relation to the world to which it refers (be it the real/actual or possible world, like in daydreaming,
hypothesizing or fiction). It follows, then, that all interpretation has to take into account not only what is often called a text world or scenario but also the surrounding universe of discourse (Enkvist 1989) or discourse world (Stockwell 2002). The pragmatic considerations make us conceive of context as containing not only some sort of index covering the producer, receiver, third party, immediate situation, and co-text, but also social and cultural aspects of human communication, that is “the world in all its aspects” (cf. M. H. Freeman below).

In spite of the fact that sense is the “default value” and the ultimate goal of our interpretative efforts, the user of human language is capable of generating not only well-formed and meaningful structures but also all kinds of constructions that demonstrate aberration from norms. Nonsense has functioned in philosophical, logical and linguistic literature under many names: anomaly, deviance, meaninglessness, absurdity, non-significance. Other, more colloquial expressions to name this phenomenon appear in M. H. Freeman’s article that opens this volume. And again, like with the word sense, the above-mentioned terms only superficially look like synonyms. In fact, their meaning differs and is heavily theory-oriented.

Let us mention, then, some formal sources of nonsense-creation in language. Reference-failure, the use of non-denoting terms, although an outstanding feature of fictional discourse, is not absent from ordinary language. The sentences in which what should be denoting expressions fail to refer (like “The present King of France is bald”) according to Frege are not meaningless but devoid of truth-value. The issue of whether we encounter here falsehoods (B. Russell) or a truth-value gap (Frege, P. Strawson, B. C. van Frassen, among others) has been a philosophical dispute more than a linguistic problem. Lack of reference and the ensuing or accompanying lack of truth-value (T – true, F – false) are the most conspicuous instances of logical deviance. It is interesting to note that a truth-value gap, or else some mediating value I (intermediate, indeterminate) between truth and falsehood in some logical systems has been called meaninglessness (cf. D. A. Bochvar 1939 quoted in Haack 1996, 170), non-significance, or straightforwardly nonsense (Routley 1969). This can be too severe an assessment, for certain sentences (future contingents, most conspicuously) may be only temporarily indeterminable (cf. S. C. Kleene 1952 quoted in Haack 1996, 171). It appears too severe as well to refer to all fictional creations as sheer nonsense, for they do make sense to us, under special conditions. If they did not, we would never read fairy tales, fantasy or science fiction. These “special conditions” are created, among others, with the help of useful constructs
called possible worlds (or text worlds for those who, on ontological and logical grounds, dislike possible worlds as too formal and underdetermined). The internal inconsistency of such non-normal worlds, their non-standardness in the choice of inhabitants that people them often violates the laws of classical logic (for instance LEM, the law of excluded middle (p V ~p)) and is also a source of nonsense.

Yet another cause of nonsense can be semantic anomaly (the effect of the violation of selectional restrictions holding between collocating parts of speech) like in the clichéd Chomskyan “colorless green ideas” that for no apparent reason “sleep furiously.” This sentence, albeit semantically odd, is not completely uninterpretable and could safely function as a poetry line.

Nonsense can also spring from syntactic ill-formedness/structural ambiguity, visible in e. e. cummings’ “He danced his deed,” D. Thomas’s “And the mussel pooled and the heron/Priested shore/The morning beckon [...]” or several of G. M. Hopkins’s instances of “telescoped syntax.”

In turn, imprecise predicates, like ‘bald,’ ‘oldish,’ or even ‘red,’ and indeterminacy of subjects (e.g. ‘the students’ taken either collectively or distributively) create vague utterances. Both phenomena, pointed out by Ch. S. Peirce (quoted in Haack 1996, x), lead to a lesser degree of deviance than the afore-mentioned instances of nonsense but may confuse the recipient of the message.

Certain stylistic devices can also be adduced as nonsense-generating mechanisms, to mention only the metafigure of catachresis (discussed in Chrzanowska-Kluczezewska in this volume and forth.), a broadly conceived figure of strangeness difficult to interpret or uninterpretable at all. A far-fetched metaphor verging on absurdity is its prototypical realization.

Further, the lack of cohesion and coherence can undermine the interpretability of texts, on the linguistic and conceptual plane, respectively.

Certain texts, especially modern and post-modern experiments with narration or poetry, display an excess of meaning, overcoding, an unnecessary play of signs often leading to infinite semiosis (one of favourite subjects of deconstructionists). Overcoding, which violates the economy of language as a system and can be seen as an unhealthy manifestation of redundancy, may easily end in unintelligibility.

Finally, the lack of proper pragmatic anchoring, of adequate contextual grounding, of an appropriate discourse world, etc., in brief the failure of contextualization, can render any text or discourse uninterpretable, for the simple reason that language never functions in the void.
The phenomena briefly enumerated above are major but not the only linguistic sources of nonsense. M. H. Freeman’s article below adds to the list other nonsense-inducing properties of natural language and its use.

The outcome of the mechanisms discussed here is nonsense in its different aspects, which points to the fact that both sense and nonsense are scalar phenomena, the properties of linguistic expressions that come in degrees. It would be difficult to pinpoint on this cline the exact moment when sense merges into non-sense. Perhaps vagueness, then equivocation and ambiguity, then multivalence and so on mark a gradual transformation of meaning into meaninglessness. Humour, as well as such genres as parody, satire and grotesque all play on different degrees of strangeness. The uncanny, the non-standard, the non-natural heads towards absurdity and sheer nonsense at one end of the scale.

Yet, against all the nonsense-creating linguistic mechanisms at our disposal, “[i]n our normal, relentless quest for meanings and references […], we clutch at every straw” (Enkvist 1989, 181). In this respect, some help has come from the side of philosophy, logic and linguistics itself. And so we can look for some formal ways of coping with nonsense in various non-standard logical systems. To modal logicians we owe an extension of their system that includes possible worlds semantics. Possible worlds have proved extremely interesting conceptual constructs that enable us to accommodate non-denoting entities and help in overcoming the trouble with logical deviance based on reference-failure and truth-valuelessness, visible especially in modally marked and fictional discourse.

Those unhappy about stringent logical requirements imposed upon the construal of possible worlds can always turn to more literature-oriented theories of text and discourse worlds, the latter cognitively enriched and furnished with semantic and pragmatic details. The cognitive linguistic orientation offers us the tool of mental spaces and the related mechanism of blending that can also solve certain problems connected with the accommodation of unusual entities and imagined or hypothetical situations within the theoretical framework.

Non-classical logical systems such as free logics (to which the Polish school of philosophical and mathematical logic in the persons of S. Leśniewski, Cz. Lejewski, S. Jaśkowski and A. Mostowski has made a significant contribution), can also prove helpful in analysing fictional discourse. Since they admit of denoting and non-denoting terms within one set (universe of discourse), they can come in useful any time we would like to bring together entia imaginationis and actual individuals within one discourse. Meinongian semantics with its claim that we can
refer to whatever can be thought of (any intentional object), although criticized on various grounds (cf. Haack 1996, 133-135), is not to be too lightly dismissed by scholars concerned with imaginary worlds peopled with possible and impossible individuals.

Deviant logics include also some many-valued systems (J. Łukasiewicz 1930, 1957, E. Post 1921, D. A. Bochvar 1939, S. C. Kleene 1952, all discussed in extenso in Haack 1996) that postulate from three to an infinite number of values running between truth and falsehood. L. A. Zadeh’s fuzzy logic (1975), the most radical and the most controversial departure from the classical bivalence, can still be of interest for those schools of thought that believe in the categorical fuzziness of natural language.

In the face of the ongoing discussion on the unsolved issue of “truth in fiction” some of the proposals coming from non-standard logical systems are an important voice in this argument, despite a strong opposition to accept such non-classical non-bivalent systems of truth/falsehood assignment on the grounds of their complexity and partial semantic uninterpretability (for what does it mean, for instance, that a sentence/utterance is 0.6 true and 0.4 false?).

Deviance resulting from the breach of syntactic rules can also be subject to recategorization (sometimes called also reconstruction; Enkvist 1989, 182 quotes I. Fairley and her reconstruction of e. e. cummings’ “ungrammar”). A similar strategy called semantic evaluator and feature-grammar was postulated by, respectively, U. Weinreich and Generative Semantics many years ago to cope with semantic anomaly of the sort we encounter in such metaphorical and poetical pronouncements as: “They crucify the mystery.” Both strategies aim at restoring structural well-formedness and making semantic interpretation possible.

In turn, pragmatic considerations have offered us the tool of (re)contextualization, close to the creation of new universes of discourse, and showing some kinship with the theories that advocate a constant search for new points of view and openness to new perspectives. I. Calvino called once this flexible attitude of human mind “lightness” and cognitive scholars have paid due attention to the value of perspectivization.

Each of the theories just invoked may be either accepted or rejected and, actually, each has met with an equal amount of praise and chastisement. My aim has been to show that our “relentless quest for meaning” can be conducted in many theoretical ways and that as researchers in the field of literary and linguistic theories we should eschew turning a deaf ear to methodologies different from our favourite frame of mind. We ought also to show generosity towards several proposals...
coming from the related fields and disciplines, with philosophy, logic and cognitive sciences being a sine qua non support in contemporary considerations on the nature of natural language.

It looks like the idea of holism, once preached by W. V. O. Quine and D. Davidson, deserves some attention, although it was criticized by M. Dummett (1994) and Haack (1996) as untenable in its radical claim that a sentence makes sense only in the context of the entire system (all sentences of a given language). Undeniably, if we want to “make sense” out of sense and out of several degrees and stages of nonsense, we have to fiddle with the lexical, phraseological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic layers of language and to ply and put to test our entire cognitive apparatus. So we have to be “ holistic” and “integrational,” but not in the narrow sense given to holism by philosophers and formal semanticists.

We have also to admit that sense, meaning and significance are not only “in the head” and “in the text,” but also “in the world,” against those who forget that a language without reference to a reality is not a natural language any more. Sense, meaning and significance repose also, at least partly, “in the heart” and M. H. Freeman makes an important point, urging us not to overlook the emotive and the subjective motivation behind linguistic behaviour within the framework of the “third generation cognitive science.” It is worth recalling that E. Benveniste noticed some decades ago that: “Language is marked so deeply by the expression of subjectivity that one might ask if it could still function and be called language if it were constructed otherwise” (Benveniste [1966] 1971, 225).

Why do we then produce linguistic nonsense and put ourselves and others at pain to interpret it later on? This question can only open a long discussion, which is one of the purposes that lie behind the collection of articles in this volume.

I personally believe that several users of language (very decidedly writers and poets, but also children in the process of language acquisition) like to experiment with its structure and texture, probing the limits of their creativity and making us, as readers and recipients, strain our interpretative faculty.

A related reason was diagnosed by M. Bakhtin, who highlighted the carnivalesque attitude of human mind, reflected in various playful genres, literary and non-literary alike. This means that behind the creation of nonsense there lie ludic reasons par excellence (cf. Enkvist 1989, 182 on nonsense as “intellectual game”). Apparently, human beings indulge in approaching the borderline between sense and nonsense if only to gain what J. Piaget called aptly “ludistic satisfaction,” and because as players they can for a moment escape from the boring realm of everyday
commonsensical, non-poetic and unimaginative discourses and occupations. We ought to remember, however, that whereas some people are excellent players, *hominis ludens*, others are poor players or no players at all, *hominis non-ludens* (more on this subject in Chrzanowska-Kluczewska 2004). This is the problem of “cognitive styles” brought to our attention by M. H. Freeman below. Thus nonsense may be delightful to some yet unpalatable to others.

M. H. Freeman addresses also the issue of the exploratory (epistemic) and purely artistic value of (non)sense and other Authors give their own explanations. The Readers are heartily invited to provide their own response to the question about a rationale behind nonsense in human language (and behaviour).

The origins of this volume go back to the 4th IALS Conference organized at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków in October 2006. For this reason the title of the book repeats the main theme of our Cracovian debates. However, the discussion on the subject of (non)sense has extended far beyond the conference circle, involving several scholars, both IALSians and sympathisers across the world, in the personal and “virtual” exchange of opinions. The book has gathered the analyses and opinions of literary scholars and linguists, often working within different theoretical confines. It ends with the voice of an artist, one of creators of *liberature* (the term coined by Polish writer Z. Fajfer), a new genre of artistic book, where sense and meaning step out of the text proper and reside, additionally, in the physical, often unconventional shape of the book, in its colour, material, size and touch. This is also a holism of sorts, cognitive and phenomenal, with the book talking to us through sensual perception in addition to mental effort and emotional reaction.

Kraków, December 2008

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Introduction: In search of nonsense

To prepare for my talk on the leading theme, I went in search of nonsense. I was surprised at what I found. Are we perhaps not just fascinated by but obsessed with nonsense? It seemed that everywhere I turned, I found references to nonsense or things that don’t make sense, and caught myself using similar expressions. Even a recent Dilbert cartoon thread picked up on the fad, with a new hire talking in nonsensical language like “When the snake falls in love with the spaghetti, it’s time to buy a new hat” (Adams 2006). Each day it seems I come up with another word that we use to represent things that don’t make sense: fiddlesticks, for example, or baloney, or drivel. When I googled sense (http://www.google.com/), I got about 900 million hits. But when I googled nonsense and related phrases (“doesn’t make any sense,” “a load of rubbish”), the combined total of hits comes to over 1,200 million (and that’s not counting terms like gibberish or absurd or lunacy). Considering these hits include many of the entries for sense, that indicates a greater concern for what doesn’t make sense than for what does. That’s of course in English only; I don’t know what you’d come up with if you googled French (or Polish). All this is nonsense, of course, because googling isn’t the same as consulting a reputable database like the British Word Corpus.¹ Nevertheless it gives us an idea of what people are thinking about.

It seems that our human brains are constructed in such a way that we inevitably search for meaning whenever we come across something that we cannot rationally account for. This need is expressed most succinctly in the development of mathematics and science. But it also occurs in the creation of the arts. One of the problems the 2006 IALS conference in Kraków asked us to address is the relative interpretability of literary texts

¹ Many of the hits on search engines like Google are repetitive, so that the total number of usages recorded is actually lower than indicated.
that are—or seem to be—anomalous, deviant, absurd. We were asked to consider the costs involved in striving after interpretation of such texts. I ask why do we strive after interpretation in the first place, and what are the consequences of doing so? In this paper, I argue that our apparent fascination with nonsense arises from the challenge it presents us in making sense of ourselves and the world around us. That challenge, I argue, presents itself in the need to discover the forms and structures of our thoughts and experiences. By “need” I mean the necessity of discovering the forms that create meanings and the emotions that motivate them. Since the complexities of literature arise from the intricate relation of form and feeling, literary texts are particularly germane to understanding and explaining their relation to meaning. First, then, I look briefly at some of the categories of nonsense I discovered in my internet search. I then explore in more depth two examples of nonsense creation that reflect the extremes of disinterestedness in scientific exploration and of attachment in drug-induced fantasy to prepare for my argument that both science and the arts rely upon the same cognitive processes of meaning creation, processes that include both form and feeling. I conclude by looking at how these cognitive processes enable us to “make sense” of a Dickinson poem.

Categories of nonsense

The semantic network for the word nonsense turns out to be large. It includes phrases that negate the word sense, such as “it doesn’t make any sense” and “it makes no sense,” among others, and words that more subjectively reveal the speaker’s attitude, like drivel, gibberish, and even more forthright expressions like hogwash or bullshit. It includes the category of humor (itself enormous), anomalies that are incoherent, inconsistent, or counterintuitive, logical fallacies that are irrelevant or absurd, and drug-induced fantasies and dreams. On top of all these is the philosophical notion of abstraction: ideas and concepts divorced from the concrete impressions of our five senses. Following are brief examples of the kinds of things that people think don’t make sense.

Humor. Itself divisible into many different categories, humor-generating nonsense occurs, for example, in the Canadian humorist, Stephen Leacock’s sentence: “He got on his horse and rode off in all directions.” You might call that defying-laws-of-physics nonsense.

Anomaly. Salman Rushdie (1992, 55) notes an incoherent anomaly in the film Wizard of Oz when the Witch says:
I’ve sent a little insect on ahead to take the fight out of them. But, as we cut down to the forest, we learn nothing at all about such an insect. There is simply no such insect in the film. There was, though; this line of dialogue is a hangover from an earlier version of the film, and it refers to the ghost of [an] excised musical sequence. […] The ‘little insect’ was once a fully fledged song, that took over a month to film. He is the Jitter Bug.

Inconsistency of style can also be anomalous. Joan Anderman (2006) reviewed a music CD by the Dutchess of York as follows: “There isn’t a rotten track in the bunch, and Fergie gets credit for somewhat fearlessly indulging in such a counterintuitive range of musical styles. It doesn’t make much sense, and it won’t matter a year from now.”

Absurdity. Counterintuitive anomalies are different from what people consider trivial or simply trash. In a comment on the recent trash movie, Snakes on a Plane, one reviewer noted: “Since the story doesn’t make the slightest sense, a moviegoer is reduced to the sordid task of admiring how smoothly a digital snake crawls out of someone’s mouth” (Denby 2006, 141).

Disagreement. In a thread entitled “It doesn’t make any sense at all” on the allhiphop community website, the first writer objected to the seatbelt law (http://community.allhiphop.com/showthread.php?p=7230569): “This whole thing is so stupid. […] it makes no kind of sense to me.” The more colorful expressions for not making sense—a load of rubbish, hogwash, bullshit—usually indicate the speaker’s disagreement with someone else’s observation.

Logical fallacies and non sequiturs. A made-for television spoof introduces the term “Chewbacca Defense,” based on Johnnie Cochran’s defense in the murder trial of O. J. Simpson and referring to arguments that “do not make sense” and have nothing to do with the case (http://images.southparkstudios.com/media/sounds/214/214_chewbacca.wav). As the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chewbacca_Defense), notes:

The term Chewbacca Defense is used […] to refer to any legal strategy or propaganda strategy that seeks to overwhelm its audience with nonsensical arguments, as a way of confusing the audience and drowning out legitimate opposing arguments. It is thus a kind of logical fallacy: specifically, a red herring fallacy and non sequitur similar to argumentum ad nauseam.

But why, we may ask, don’t people follow logical reasoning or even plain common sense? Why do Americans vote for a president whose tax
credits enrich the already wealthy to their own detriment? Or support a president who sends their sons to unjustified and illegal wars? Or recognize that failure to abide by the Kyoto Agreement or to accept the International World Court undermines the United States’ professed adherence to pollution reduction or international law? Or fail to see that descriptions of terrorism and torture that are applied to others’ actions also apply to one’s own (killing innocent citizens, Abu Gharaib, Guantanamo)? Why can’t people see sense?

Nonsense as a category is not equivalent to meaninglessness. Even the use of phrases like “it makes no sense” or “it doesn’t make any sense” often as not indicate not so much lack of understanding as (not always polite) disagreement. What seems to be common to all the categories of nonsense I’ve looked at is the stance we take to our experience of the phenomenal world (by that, I mean the world as we experience it). That is, to use cognitive terminology, people are grounded in their own phenomenally real environments, and their perspectives or points of view are constrained by that position. Thus, we find funny or absurd the ideas of a horse moving in more than one direction at once or snakes oozing out of someone’s mouth. Fergie’s range of musical styles and the inexplicable nonappearance of the Jitter Bug in the *Wizard of Oz* film are both counterintuitive because they offend our need for coherence and consistency. Logical fallacies, like the Chewbacca Defense, can be employed from either side of opposing points of view. Drivers who don’t wear seatbelts, or anyone who disagrees with someone else’s position, are standing squarely on their own turf, refusing to accept an alternative way of seeing. We tend to hold to our beliefs, regardless of their apparent absurdity in the light of cool reason. This very human tendency of ours is what science attempts to counteract in being “disinterested” or “objective” in its search for truth, and what the arts in their own search for truth attempt to capture in being “interested” and “subjective.”

**Nonsense creation**

There is some evidence that creating nonsense involves rules, just as grammars or other human inventions do. Even words like *bullshit* and *gibberish* can refer to rule-governed expressions. A *bullshit* generator on the web (http://dack.com/web/bullshit.html) is compiled of three columns: verbs, adjectives and nouns, in that order. So the generator will create nonsense phrases, even though its syntax is regular and conforms to grammatical English. That is, instead of getting something like “make delicious meatpies,” you get “empower frictionless mindshare” or
“disintermediate visionary deliverables.” This is of course along the lines of Chomsky’s famous “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously,” syntactically well-formed, but semantically crazy (though there are those who claim to “make sense” of Chomsky’s phrase, and even the phrases above seem to “almost make sense”)
2 Like bullshit, gibberish also has a web generator (http://thinkzone.wlonk.com/Gibber/GibGen.htm) that works by rule, in this case scrambling an otherwise coherent text through a statistical distribution of characters (or letters). The sample on the site is from Hamlet’s quietus speech. When Alan Sokal published his version of gibberish in his famous (or infamous, depending on your perspective) hoax in Social Text, he did not simply write down random bits of nonsense, but, as the Lingua Franca editors (2000, 2) note, he

spent hours researching his topic, performing electronic searches for certain combination of terms. […] Unlike most scholars, however, Sokal was searching for references that struck him as nonsensical. He gathered a collection of the best (or worst) he could find and built an impenetrable essay around them. The result: a mix of plausible claims that go too far, implausible claims that go nowhere at all (concealed in syntax so dense as to be almost unreadable), and fringe philosophical theories set forth as widely accepted scientific advantages. He topped these off with a vast number of endnotes and the occasional truth, and christened the piece “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity.”

It seems that even when we generate nonsense, we are locked into the way our brains function, following pattern and rule. Thus, in creating his nonsense, Sokal nevertheless followed scholarly rules of procedure. In his subsequent revelation of the hoax that Lingua Franca published, Sokal (2000, 51-52) explains why he did it:

While my method was satirical, my motivation is utterly serious. What concerns me is the proliferation, not just of nonsense and sloppy thinking per se, but of a particular kind of nonsense and sloppy thinking: one that denies the existence of objective realities, or (when challenged) admits their existence but downplays their practical relevance. […]

In short, my concern about the spread of subjectivist thinking is both intellectual and political. Intellectually, the problem with such doctrines is that they are false (when not simply meaningless). There is a real world;

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2 The phrase “almost makes sense” comes from the co-worker’s response to the nonsensical language of the new hire in the Dilbert cartoon mentioned above. These responses to the cartoon and Chomsky’s phrase arise, I would claim, from the very fact that the form of the utterances is rule-governed.
its properties are not merely social constructions; facts and evidence do matter. What sane person would contend otherwise? And yet, much contemporary academic theorizing consists precisely of attempts to blur these obvious truths. […]

If all is discourse and “text,” then knowledge of the real world is superfluous; even physics becomes just another branch of cultural studies. If, moreover, all is rhetoric and language games, then internal logical consistency is superfluous too: a patina of theoretical sophistication serves equally well. Incomprehensibility becomes a virtue; allusions, metaphors, and puns substitute for evidence and logic.

Sokal here of course is speaking as a scientist, a physicist, and also as a Socrates against a Gorgias. I think we, as “sane person[s],” would not disagree. As literary scholars, don’t we also deplore “nonsense and sloppy thinking”? (I am not here referring to the nonsense that the organizers of the conference suggested we are fascinated by.) Where we differ from Sokal, if we do, is in our understanding of “allusions, metaphors and puns”—not as substitutes for “evidence and logic,” but as part of the very fabric of our conceptualizing minds as expressed through language. To fully understand our world, I would argue, evidence and logic are necessary but not sufficient; allusions and metaphors, and even puns are necessary, too. And that’s where the arts—and especially for our purposes, the literary arts—come in.

In a lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (September 21, 2006), Salman Rushdie noted that writers need the notion of anomaly, of chance, of randomness, the idea that characters may change, the idea that not all attitudes and behaviors make sense. They need to capture enigma, mystery at the heart of the “Other.” Why, Rushdie asked, does Shakespeare’s King Lear not immediately see through the hypocrisy of his daughters Regan and Goneril (though he does eventually)? Why, given his devoted love for his favorite daughter, Cordelia, can he not see that she is expressing honest and true love for him, even as he accepts the honest truth of his fool? Actors’ characterizations of Lear (for example, vulnerable to flattery, obsessed with power, or cunning strategist) depend on how they answer these questions. If Lear’s actions had made obvious sense, we wouldn’t have a play. We are emotionally drawn into the play because of the anomaly in Lear’s behavior.

Even the illusions produced by trances and dreams can be seen as the temporary adoption of a particular perspective on the part of the experiencer. Walter Benjamin, the philosopher and literary critic, under the influence of hashish, is reported by his doctor to have raised his “arm and index finger […] high in the air, without support. The raising of the arm is ‘the birth of the kingdom of Armenia.’” In another session, he is
reported “to have come up with the phrase ‘Wellen schwappen—Wappen schwellen’ (‘Waves splash—armorial bearings swell’), claiming that the rhyming words held the clue to a deep structural connection between waves and the designs used in heraldry” (reported by his doctor Fritz Fränkel; quoted in Kirsch 2006, 84). As Benjamin noted in the cold light of morning: “What we are on the verge of talking about seems infinitely alluring. We stretch out our arms full of love, eager to embrace what we have in mind. Scarcely have we touched it, however, than it disillusioned us completely. The object of our attention suddenly fades at the touch of language” (quoted in Kirsch 2006, 84).

**Meaning creation**

Benjamin’s comment raises a complex issue that underlies my whole discussion of nonsense, what it might mean, and what role it plays in people’s lives. That issue is the role of language in our attempts to make sense of our world and our experience of it. Whereas the natural sciences attempt to explain the physical world through formulae that avoid human language, the literary arts attempt to capture the essence of our phenomenological world through natural language itself. As literary semanticists, we are all aware of the limits of language, of the debates over the extent to which it guides and governs our ways of perceiving and thinking. I won’t rehearse them here. What I want to focus on are two aspects in the creation of nonsense that Benjamin’s experiences reveal: aspects that may be summed up in the words **lunacy** and **gibberish**. The difference between the two terms is that gibberish is meaningless whereas lunacy or madness occurs when facts are inverted or turned loose from their moorings in actuality. Sokal called his article in *Social Text* gibberish because its use of terminology and descriptions was completely meaningless. In a recent book called *Heat*, the writer and journalist George Monbiot (2006) traces the roles that the tobacco company Philip Morris and the oil company ExxonMobile have played in bankrolling various seemingly independent scientific thinktanks that reject peer-reviewed scientific reports. These thinktanks have inverted the truth arrived at by the disinterested methods of science by calling their own pseudo-research “sound science” and true research “junk science.” That’s lunacy.

In his most recent book on Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*, Reuven Tsur suggests that we are governed by one of two cognitive styles: either we tolerate ambiguity and are comfortable in a state of uncertainty, or we are not. These styles are governed not by reason but by mood or emotion. Psychologists like Forgas, Frijda, and Oatley (Frijda, Manstead and Bem
2000) have provided evidence that moods and emotions affect our cognitive thinking and our behavioral responses to events and situations. 

Cool reason alone cannot explain our phenomenal world; hot imagination is needed, too. Otherwise, how can we even begin to understand Lear’s behavior or why it might make sense to wear seatbelts? Much of my googling of nonsense and related terms turned up an interesting discovery: when people dismiss something as nonsense because they think it meaningless or mad, they are in effect closing their minds, rejecting the possibility of alternative ways of seeing. One doesn’t have to reject the reality of the world to recognize we cannot be objective observers of it. Objectivism or subjectivism are no longer the only games in town. What Lakoff and Johnson (1998) call “embodied realism” supersedes both. For example, in an early response to Sokal’s exposure of his paper as a complete hoax (Lingua Franca 2000, 245-248), Andrew Ross, one of the editors of Social Text, tried to defend his publication of the article by distinguishing between gibberish and obscurity. By calling Sokal’s piece “obscure,” Ross was presenting himself as the type of person who has an open mind, one that can tolerate uncertainties. Unfortunately for Ross, the consequences of his open mind resulted in closing it to Sokal’s proof that his piece was indeed gibberish, that no interpretation of it could make any sense at all.

However, there is another way of looking at the question—by distinguishing the difference between meaning and significance. That is, something meaningless or mad can still hold significance in the way we interpret our world and our own and others’ behaviors in it. Our apparent need to interpret at all costs, or what Meir Sternberg (2003, 377) has called our “rage for meaning,” leads us to consider the reason why something appears as anomalous, deviant or obscure. The opening lines of Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure is a case in point. The question is whether the Duke’s opening speech is in effect gibberish or simply obscure. One student in a recent graduate seminar reacted quite violently to my observation that the syntax of the Duke’s speech was characteristic of Emily Dickinson’s syntactic style. He felt that the two were quite different, that the Duke’s speech was incoherent (therefore closer to gibberish). What was interesting about his analysis was that he then interpreted it as a sign of the Duke’s incapacity to govern well. In other words, what we perceive as nonsense or as not making sense is no less significant than that which does make sense. In exploring the possible reasons for the Duke’s apparent incoherence at the beginning of Measure for Measure, we are not only accepting the fact that there are things that don’t seem to make sense in our phenomenological world, but we are open
to understanding the reasons why that may be so. Our attempts to find coherence and meaning in the Duke’s behavior and actions in the play mean that we as readers are not content to dismiss our non-understanding of the “Other” by labeling it as nonsense, but instead we make an effort to understand why we might think it so. Reuven Tsur’s two cognitive styles describe extreme positions: one that seeks objective certainty and one that prefers subjective mystery. As Robert Musil has noted in *The Man Without Qualities*, “A man who wants the truth becomes a scientist; a man who wants to give free play to his subjectivity may become a writer; but what should a man do who wants something in between?” Although psychologically as individuals we may tend toward one or the other, as literary critics I think we recognize the roles both play in our experience of the phenomenal world.

Another category of *non-sense*, implied by the parentheses in the conference title, is the existence of abstractions, those ideas and concepts that seem divorced from the concrete experiences of our five senses. As we learn more about the workings of the human brain, we come to understand that sense impressions do not enter as one unitary stream to one particular location. The brain is always actively working to “translate” those fragmentary impressions into a unified conceptualization. But the translation is not always perfect. Language fails to capture fully what Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1962) has called our primordial or precategorial experience. Ellen Spolsky (1993) has argued that the relative intractability of the mental gaps caused by the mind’s modularity is what leads to creativity; without those mental gaps, we would not have the evolutionary ability to change our understanding or to create new knowledge.

Walter Benjamin’s drug-induced fantasies may be seen as an example of the brain’s attempt to synthesize across these mental gaps. Like all dreams, they can be understood as the brain making unconventional connections between memories of fragmented impressions. The uplifted, unsupported arm with up-stretched index finger, we are told, “is the birth of the kingdom of Armenia.” Lunacy perhaps; but consider the circumstances of this lunatic moment. It occurred on April 18, 1931, just five days before April 24, commemorated by Armenians throughout the world as the day on which, in 1915, the Genocide began with the murder of the Armenian intelligentsia in Constantinople (today’s Istanbul). The state of Armenia was much in the news in 1931, having certain of its territories “adjusted” into new boundaries. Was Benjamin perhaps thinking of these historic events? His expression connects a gesture, the upraised arm and up-stretched index finger, with a concept, emergence into being, and a memory, historical knowledge of the Kingdom of
Armenia. Whatever might have been the source for Benjamin’s fantasy, it shows connections across different brain modalities.

Even more intriguing is Benjamin’s fantasy of having discovered the clue to a deep structural connection between waves and the designs used in heraldry in the rhyming words “Wellen schwappen—Wappen schwellen.” Only the sound [sh] distinguishes them. That is, you have *wellen-schwellen* and *wappen-schwappen*. The connections are not as far fetched as they might appear. All three words—*wellen*, *schwellen*, *schwappen*—are associated with undulated movement, often connected with water. *Wappen* seems the exception in its association with heraldic crests, but note that the German translation for the English word *crest* (*Federbusch, Haube, Kamm*) in its verbal form is “mit einem Wappen versehen.” Idioms exist in many languages for “on the crest of a wave” (http://www.answers.com/topic/crest).

We cannot know, of course, any more than Benjamin himself did, what triggered his brain to make such connections at this particular time and place, but we can speculate on what might have motivated them. As he expressed the experience afterwards, “What we are on the verge of talking about seems infinitely alluring. We stretch out our arms full of love, eager to embrace what we have in mind.” Allure. Love. Eagerness to embrace. What I’d like to suggest is that it is our feelings, our reactions to sensations and emotions, that motivate conceptualization and reasoning in bridging mental gaps in order to understand our phenomenological world (these can, of course, also reflect our hates and fears). The arts—especially literature, with language as its means of expression—are the forms which best convey these relationships and connections. Although historically linguistics has not considered the relevance of emotion to language (and that might be one explanation for its apparent indifference to literature3), the situation may be changing.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1998) have called the early days of cognitive science “first generation cognitive science,” when researchers, influenced by analytic philosophy, were exploring cognitive functions in terms of formal symbolic units independent of the body. It is now sometimes referred to as cognitivism, to distinguish it from second generation cognitive science, which recognizes the mind as embodied. Second generation cognitive science has been influenced primarily by the emergence of cognitive linguistics. Lakoff and Johnson (1998, 3) identify

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3 Although cognitive linguists have shown themselves open to considering literature worthy of study, the journal *Cognitive Linguistics* has yet to publish an article devoted to literary text. Classical linguistics in the Chomskian tradition ignores literature altogether.