Grammar and Order

JABBERWOCKY

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
  Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
  And the mome raths outgrabe.

`Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
  The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the jubjub bird, and shun
  The frumious Bandersnatch!'

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
  Long time the manxome foe he sought--
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
  And stood awhile in thought.

And as in uffish thought he stood,
  The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
  And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
  The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
  He went galumphing back.

`And has thou slain the Jabberwock?
  Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Calloh! Callay!'
  He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
  Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
  And the mome raths outgrabe.

As we found out in class, although many of the words in Jabberwocky are gibberish and do not have “dictionary meanings” (the are *semantically empty*—you can’t find a definition for them in the dictionary), we are able to determine that, for instance, there are **things** called *borogoves*, and that *borogoves* can be *mimsy*. But there is not a thing called a *mimsy*. The *borogroves* were *mimsy*. Similarly there are *raths* that are *mome raths*, and there are trees of the *jubjub* type; there are *frumious bandershatches* and (my favourite) *toves* that are *slithy*.

After more discussion we began to realize that part of the way that we understand whether a word represents a “thing ” or instead describes a “thing” has to do with word order. We realized for instance, that in English, words that describe “thing” words can be

placed in front of those “thing” words. Similarly there seem to be these little words that tell us whether the thing is a general thing (A slithy tove), or a specific thing (the slithy tove) and these words appear in front of the describing words the thing word.

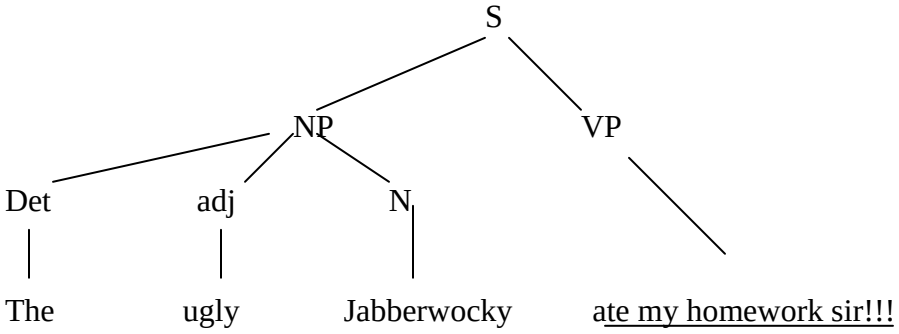
Lets give these types of word some names that we can use to identify this order. “Thing” words, as many of you seem to sense, are formally referred to as “nouns.” The describing words are called “adjectives” and the little pointer words (the words that say “here comes a noun”) are called articles or determiners. If we look at a lot of simple sentences in English we will find that these words appear at the beginning of simple sentences in this order:

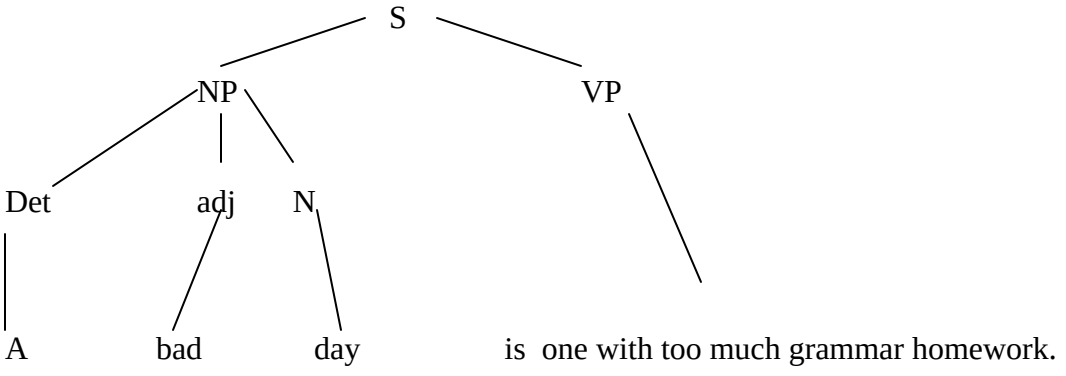
Det) (Adj)* N

where the brackets mean that the item—the determiner and/or adjective—are not necessary: they can be in a sentence but don’t have to be. And the little star (this guy➔*) means that the word—in this case the adjective—can be repeated.

All simple sentences include some form of this collection of elements at the front of the sentence. If the sentence begins with such a collection—called a noun phrase—and then has a simple “predicate” (the back part…we’ll get to it in a bit) the noun phrase at the front is called the “subject.” Generally speaking, the subject is what the sentence is “about.”

Here then are some simple sentences with a couple of simple subjects. In class we will sort out how to diagram these, and then we will try out a few for homework.





Homework:

Create sentence trees for the following:

1. The large box contained some books.
2. Students live in this house.
3. The sturdy solid tree swayed in the wind.
4. Mr. Jones gave the class too much homework.
5. A broken computer is not much use.

For fun if you're a grammar geek: Identify and diagram any other NPs that you can find in these sentences.