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# The Peculiarities of Nonsense at Lexemic Level

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**Abstract**

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the study of nonsensical expressions. Nonsense is universally accepted as spoken or written words that have no meaning. The present paper aims at presenting real data showing that nonsense is not relevant to meaningless. Consequently, nonsensical patterns can be structured according to different linguistic levels. The nonsense mechanisms at lexemic level are the following: blending, macaronics, graphons, archaisms, onomatopoeia, reduplication, occasional abbreviation and a miscellaneous type.

**Keywords:** : nonsense, nonce pattern, nonconventional nomination

## INTRODUCTION

Nonsense is a term that appears in many contexts. Therefore, there is no clear theoretical consensus about its definition. It may be used by logicians, philosophers, mathematicians, physicists, philologists, linguists, etc. Ordinary people use the word 'nonsense' in connection with situations or statements which do not conform to the facts as they are generally held to be, or which, more simply, are taken to be untrue (Sewell 1952:1).

In contemporary explanatory dictionaries (CollinsCobuilt, American Oxford Dictionary, A. Furritiere, O. Piangiani, F. Ushakov) nonsense is defined as spoken or written words that have no meaning or make no sense. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word is first recorded in writing by Ben Johnson in 1614, in the meaning of 'spoken or written words which make no sense or convey absurd ideas'. All the sample quotations given under the lemma show a depreciative attitude. Thus, 'nonsense verses' are glossed as 'verses consisting of words and phrases arranged solely with reference to the metre and without regard to the sense'. This is apparently how Samuel Taylor Coleridge applied that phrase in 1830. This unfavourable attitude is also prominent in the definitions of the great XVIII-century lexicographer and stylist, Dr. Samuel Johnson, whose 1755 Dictionary gives: 'unmeaning or ungrammatical language' and 'trifles; things of no importance' (Tigges 1988:6).

This attitude made a turnabout in the course of the XIX-XX centuries. Elizabeth Sewell stated in 1952 that 'nonsense is not merely the denial of sense, a random reversal of ordinary experience and an escape from the limitation of everyday life into a haphazard infinity, but is on the contrary *a carefully limited world, controlled and directed by reason*, a construction subject to its own laws' (Sewell 1952:5). This idea was later developed by Wim Tigges; he defines nonsense as 'a play with language elements' (Tigges 1988:47). V Karasik, a famous Russian linguist, perceives nonsense as an intellectual challenge that can be overcome (by a reader) or not. In this respect, nonsensical patterns are to be viewed as nonconventional combinations of forms that consist of meaningful linguistic units. Being the results of authors' intention, they cannot be regarded as meaningless.

Thus, the aim of the article is to show that nonsense is not something irrational or conveying absurd ideas. This can be achieved by analyzing the mechanisms of nonsense creation at lexemic level.

The analysis of 2000 nonsensical patterns revealed the following nonsense mechanisms: blending, macaronics, graphons, archaisms, onomatopoeia, reduplication, occasional abbreviation, miscellaneous type.

### 1. Blending

Blending is the word formation process in which parts of two or more words combine to create a new word whose meaning is often a combination of the original words. The most common example in English – smog, that consists of two morphemes or splinters, i.e. smoke + fog.

The difficulty of interpretation of blend words depends on the types of their formation (clipping, superposition, etc.). They can consist of two, three or more morphemes.

The patterns of blend words can be grouped as follows:

*Table 1. Patterns of blend words formation*

| № | Pattern | Example |
|---|---|---|
| | | **Two-morpheme words** |
| 1 | N+N | Snagwap = snag + wap<br>(imaginary bird that always sits on a snag) |
| 2 | N+N+y | Jabberwocky = jabber + wocky<br>(wocky – a corrupted form of wacky, meaning funny or amusing in a slightly odd or peculiar way; an ugly monster coined by L. Carroll; since early XX c. - invented or meaningless language) |
| 3 | N+N+ous | Soboliferous = sobole + life + ous<br>(producing offshoots/ offsprings) |
| 4 | N+N+less | Womoonless = woman + moon + less<br>(nonce word, a jocular combination of womanless and moonless) |
| 5 | N+N+ism | Dongiovannism = Don + Giovanni + ism<br>(men who are proud of their masculinity) |
| 6 | Adj + N | slushypipp = slushy + pip<br>(hidden annoyance) |
| 7 | N+Adj+ious | Meloobious = melody + looby + ous<br>(silly tunes) |
| 8 | N+V | Gibwink = gib + wink<br>(gib – *obsolete* cat;<br>imaginary creature like a cat, it often winks) |
| 9 | N+V+ing | Pangwangling = pang + wangle + ing<br>(manipulation that may cause pain) |
| 10 | Adj + Pl | Thickplotting (head) = thick + plotting<br>(thinking hard) |
| 11 | Adj + P2 | Languideyed = languid + eyed<br>(dull appearance) |
| 12 | Adj + Adj | Pornosophical = pornographic + philosophical<br>(philosophical 'approach' towards pornography) |
| 13 | Adv + Adj | Silkilyseductive (brows) = silky + seductive<br>(charming and attractive) |
| 14 | Pron + N | Shesouls = she + souls<br>(women's souls);<br>Hesouls = he + souls<br>(men's souls) |
| | | **Three-morpheme words** |
| 15 | Adj + Prep + N | Badfornothing = bad + for + nothing<br>(no bad for nothing) |
| 16 | V+N+ed | Retaled = retell + tale +ed<br>(a retold story) |
| 17 | N+Adv+Prep | Ringroundabout = ring + round + about<br>(to announce to everybody) |
| 18 | V +V +V | Smiledyawnednodded = smiled + yawned + nodded<br>(smiling, yawning and nodding simultaneously) |
| 19 | V + Prep + V | Cometobed (hat) = come + to + bed<br>(a nightcap) |
| 20 | V + Prep + Prep | Knockmedown (cigar) = knock + me + down<br>(a very strong cigar) |
| 21 | Adj +prep + N | Longindying (call) = long(ing) + and + dying<br>(a desperate yearn, craving) |
| 22 | Adj + Adj + Adj | Ickylickysticky (kisses) = icky + licky + sticky<br>(long passionate kisses) |
| 23 | Adj + Adj + N | Loudlatinlaughing = loud + Latin + laughing<br>(laughing in a very loud way, like people from Latin countries) |
| 24 | Adj + Adj + P2 | Tallwhitehatted (sandwichmen) = tall +white +hatted<br>(tall grey-haired men wearing hats) |
| 25 | Adj + Ppep + N | Beautifulinsadness = beautiful + in + sadness<br>(a beautiful woman with a very sad face) |
| 26 | Prep+Adj+Prep | Underdarkneath (the night) = under +dark + (be)neath<br>(surrounded by darkness) |

| Four and more morpheme words | | |
|---|---|---|
| **27** | N+N+N+N | Junejulyaugseptember = June + July + August + September (an approximate date interval) |
| **28** | Adv + V + N + Conj + N | Upturnpikepointandplace = up + turnpike + point + and + place (direction to a turnpike point in Dublin) |
| **29** | Prep+Prep+N+Prep+Prep+Pron | Outtohelloutofthat = out + to + hell + out + of + that (in exclamatory way: go out to the world and leave the situation behind) |
| **30** | Pref+Pref+Adj+Conj+N+N+N | Contransmagnificandjewbangtantiality = con(tra)-(tra)ns-magnific-and-jew-ban(g)-tantiality (futility of consubstantiality confrontation) |
| **31** | Adj +N+N+N+N+N+ous | Splendidophoropherostiphongious (evening) = splendid + dope + horror + hero + stipe + hong(i) + ous (sarcastic description of a very unpleasant meeting) |

Blend words that consist of three or more morphemes attract readers' attention as polymorphemic words are not typical in the English language. The authors explain the meaning of their nonce words quite rarely. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish morphemes and define them. Let's consider the following example from 'Ulysses' by James Joyce:

> «Wombed in sin darkness I was too, made not begotten. By them, the man with my voice and my eyes and a ghostwoman with ashes on her breath. They clasped and sundered, did the coupler's will. From before the ages He willed me and now may not will me away or ever. A lex eterna stays about him. Is that then the divine substance wherein Father and Son are consubstantial? Where is poor dear Arius to try conclusions? Warring his life long on the **contransmagnificandjewbangtantiality**. Illstarred heresiarch. In a Greek watercloset he breathed his last: euthanasia. With beaded mitre and with crozier, stalled upon his throne, widower of a widowed see, with upstiffed omophorion, with clotted hinderparts» (Joyce 2008:32).

The word *contransmagnificandjewbangtantiality* consists of several morphemes, thus it is a blend word. It is possible to distinguish the suffix '-*ity*' that shows that the analyzed word is a noun in the singular form. Despite the apparent meaningless of this noun, its notion can be derived by expanding the word into its constituent morphemes.

So the word can presumably be expanded into the following morphemes (*con(tra)-(tra)ns-magic-and-jew-ban(g)-tantialit*y):

«contra» - a prefix of Latin origin, meaning 'against, contrary, opposing';

«(tra)ns» – also a prefix of Latin origin (or its abbreviated form '-ns-'), its lexical meaning is – 'across, beyond, crossing'. It can also be an abbreviated morpheme of a theological term 'transubstantiation' (the doctrine that the whole substance of the bread and wine changes into the substance of the body and blood of Christ when consecrated in the Eucharist).

«magnific», i.e. 'magnificent, grandiose, or pompous';

«and» - a conjunction, 'along with; in addition to';

«jew» - 'a person whose religion is Judaism', implicitly St. Mary is implied (as Mary was impregnated by the divine);

«bang» - is a polysemous word, however in this context the following meaning is supposed 'a startling or sudden effect'. It is also possible that the morpheme 'ban' ('prohibition or interdiction') was used, and 'g' is a conjunctive morph.

«-tantiality» - is an abbreviated morpheme of «consubstantiality».

Thus, the blend word is not meaningless. Moreover, it renders the emotive colour. The author ironically speaks about the futility of opposing the leading Christian doctrine of the God and Jesus Christ consubstantiality and his miraculous birth.

However, any nonsense interpretation is based on reader's individual association. Writers can only implicitly give hints through pictures or comments. That is why the interpretation of nonce patterns may vary, depending on the reader's knowledge and preferences. Anyway, blending is the most frequent mechanism of nonsense.

### 2. Macaronics

The term macaronics (first introduced by Teofilo Folengo) denotes words or inflections from one language introduced into the context of another. A lot of macaronic examples can be found in James Joyce's last book 'Finnegans Wake'. The author used morphemes of about 165 languages and dialects. E.g.,

> A bit bite of **keesens**, he sagd, til Dennis, for this **jantar** (and let the dobblins roast **perus**,) or a stinger, he sagd, t. d., on a doroughbread kennedy's for Patriki San Saki on svo fro or my old relogion's out of tiempor and when I'm soured to the tipple you can sink me lead, he sagd, and, if I get can, sagd he, a pusspull of **tomtartarum** (Joyce 1975:317).

The macaronic words '**jantar**' – to have supper/lunch (Portuguese), '**perus**' – a turkey (Portuguese) are introduced into the text with no alternations. However, the words '**keesens**' and '**tomtartarum**' represent a different

type of a linguistic anomaly. The word '**keesens**' is a corrupted Dutch word 'kees' (cheese) and a conjunction 'en', i.e. 'and' and an English formant 's' indicating plurality.

Foreign words can be corrupted in order to look like pure English words. The difficulty of interpretation of the above-cited sentence is the usage of several words belonging to different family of languages.

The use of macaronics may cause nonsensical effect especially if the reader is not familiar or cannot identify the language used by the author. However, this mechanism may be regarded as a source of expressiveness.

### 3. Graphons

Graphon is the intentional violation of the graphical shape of a word (or word combination) used usually to reflect its authentic pronunciation.

As A. Kukharenko (2011) points out, graphons indicating irregularities or carelessness of pronunciation were occasionally introduced into English novels and journalism as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century and since then have acquired an ever growing frequency of usage, popularity among writers, journalists, advertizers, and a continuously widening scope of functions. These irregularities can be permanent or temporary.

Thus, the chapter 'Sirens' ('Ulysses' by J. Joyce) begins with the following sentences: *«Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing. **Imperthnthn thnthnthn.**»* Both sentences seem to be nonsensical. However, from the anaphoric context the reader knows that the actions take place in Ormound Hotel at 15.30. The characters are having alcoholic drinks, listening to music. The cataphoric context makes it possible to guess the meaning of the above-cited sentences:

*A haughty bronze replied:*
   *-- I'll  complain to Mrs de Massey on you  if  I hear any more of  your impertinent insolence.*
   *-- **Imperthnthn thnthnthn**, bootsnout sniffed rudely, as he retreated as she threatened as he had come (Joyce 2008:212).*

Leopold Blum (the main character of the book) was trying to repeat the phrase '*impertinent insolence*', but he pronounced something inarticulate as he was drunk.  Thus, the author used this mechanism to imitate the psychedelic effect of the character.

Recurrent (permanent) graphons are usually used to imitate speech defects. E.g.,
*"I **wiss** Sylvie was a little more dreamy," said Bruno.*
*"What do you mean, Bruno?" said Sylvie.*
*Bruno went on addressing his father. "She says she ca'n't, oo know.*
*But **I thinks** it **isn't ca'n't, it's wo'n't**."*
*"Says she **ca'n't** dream!" the puzzled Warden repeated.*
*"**She do** say it," Bruno persisted. "When **I says** to her 'Let's stop lessons!', she says 'Oh, **I ca'n't** dream of letting **oo** stop yet!" (http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/620).*

The author uses deviated forms of well-known words in order to imitate this defect.

Graphon proved to be an extremely concise but effective means of supplying information about the speaker's origin, social and educational background, physical and emotional condition, etc. Graphon, individualizing the character's speech, adds to his plausibility, vividness, memorability. At the same time, graphon is very good in conveying the atmosphere of authentic live communication, of the informality of speech act.

### 4. Archaisms

Archaic words cannot be classified as nonsense. However, changes in spelling can cause a nonsensical
effect. This technique was frequently used by L. Carroll. 'Jabberwocky' is probably his most famous nonce word. The writer gave explanation of this word in his letter addressed to 'the Fourth class of the Girl's Latin School at Boston, U.S.' in 1184. He wrote: 'He finds that the Anglo-Saxon word "*wocer*" or "*wocor*" signifies "offspring" or "fruit". Taking "jabber" in its ordinary acceptation of "excited and voluble discussion," that would give the meaning of "the result of much excited discussion" (Carroll 2009:280). Nowadays this word entered the standard English vocabulary and acquired a new meaning, i.e. invented or meaningless language.

Writers can use both archaic root and affixational morphemes.Thus, the following adjectives follow the same pattern (Anglo-Saxon root + suffix): *vorpal* (to-weorpan, -werpan, -worpan, -wurfen, - wyrpan; p. - wearp, pi. wurpon; pp. - worpen - to destroy, to break in pieces, to demolish» (Bosworth 1972:1010) and suffix '–al' typical for adjectives), *tulgey* (tulge – strongly, firmly» (Bosworth 1972:1018) and suffix '-y'), f*rumious* (frumetlmg,e – a youngling, young cow) and suffix '-ous').

The use of archaic affixes can also cause nonsensical effect to a certain extent. In the adjective 'brillig' (coined by L. Carroll) it is possible to distinguish the root morpheme '*brill*' and an archaic suffix '*ig*'. As Peter J. Lucas marks, it has to be read as [*ij*]. Moreover, it is found at the end of words with more than one syllable (Lucas 1997:510). However, L. Carroll explains in '*Mich-Masch*' that is has to be spelt 'bryllyg'. This technique is famous as linguistic mimicry, i.e. imitation of Old English forms.

### 5. Onomatopoeia

An onomatopoeia is a word that phonetically imitates, resembles or suggests the source of the sound that it describes. Common occurrences of onomatopoeias include animal noises such as 'oink', 'meow', 'roar' or sounds of nature.

The problem arouse with occasional onomatopoeic words. They usually describe some individual and unique associations. J. Joyce invented various onomatopoeic words, like:

• Imitative sound of waterfall: *Poulaphouca    Poulaphouca    Poulaphouca    Poulaphouca; Phillaphulla Poulaphouca Poulaphouca Poulaphouca!*

• Imitative sound of splash of waves: *In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap*

• Imitative sound of grass: *seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss ooos*

• Twittering: *Leo! Icky licky micky sticky for Leo! Leeolee!*

• Imitative cat's sounds: *mkgnao u mrkgnao.*

Writers use this mechanism to enhance the psychoacoustic effect, to express the inner state of a character, etc. These non-standard lexemic patterns show the unusual writer's categorization of reality.

## 6. Reduplication

Reduplication in linguistics is a morphological process in which the root or stem of a word (or part of it) or even the whole word is repeated exactly or with a slight change.

This mechanism is often used in the nonsense genre to indicate imaginary creatures and geographical toponyms. E.g., L. Carroll coined the following imaginary bird and tree:

*Beware the **Jubjub** bird, and shun*
*The frumious Bandersnatch!*
*\*\*\**
*So rested he by the **Tumtum** tree,*
*And stood awhile in thought.*
*Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun*
*The frumious Bandersnatch!* (Carroll 2009:134)

The stems of both words (Jubjub and Tumtum) are repeated with no alternations. The morpheme '*jub*' can be interpreted as: an apocopic morpheme of 'juba' (i.e. mane hair) or an onomatopoeic derivative of 'jug-jug'.

Tumtum, an imaginary tree, follows the same pattern. Martin Gardener believes that «Tum-tum was a common colloquialism in Carroll's day, referring to the sound of a stringed instrument, especially when monotonously strummed» (Carroll 2009:165). But it is also possible to assume that 'tum' derives from an English colloquial word 'tum', that meant 'a person's stomach or abdomen, abbreviated form of tummy'. This association implicitly points to the size of the tree, and the morpheme's repetition intensifies it.

The roots can be repeated with slight structural changes. E.g.,

*The seven young Cats set off on their travels with great delight and rapacity. But, on coming to the top of a high hill, they perceived at a long distance off a **Clangle-Wangle** (or, as it is more properly written, Clangel-Wangel); and, in spite of the warning they had had, they ran straight up to it* (Lear 2001:117).

There are consonants alternations (Cl → W) in the word '*Clangle-Wangle*'. The second component of this compound word means 'obtain something by using persuasion or clever manipulation'. But the first component is a nonce word, as it doesn't belong to the English vocabulary. It is possible to assume that it represents an apocopic word 'clanger' meaning 'an absurd or embaarassing blunder' and a suffix '-*le*'. E. Lear describes the beast in details. Clangle-Wangle is mentioned in several Lear's books. In "The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World" the writes does not present any information about it. Thus, the authour expects that the reader is familiar with his previous texts.

This mechanisms is frequently met in books for children. It is usually used to follow the rhyme and prosody.

## 7. Occasional abbreviation

Trying to attract the readers' attention, writers can use abbreviations as visual 'obstacles'. This mechanism can cause nonsensical effect if the reader is not able to restore the abbreviation:

*The work of salvage, removal of debris human remains etc has been entrusted to Messrs Michael Meade and Son, 159, Great Brunswick Street and Messrs T. C. Martin, 77, 78, 79 and 80, North Wall, assisted by the men and officers of the Duke of Cornwall's light infantry under the general supervision of H. R. H., rear admiral the right honourable sir Hercules Hannibal Habeas  Corpus Anderson **K.G., K.P.,  H.T., P.C., K.C.B., M.P., J.P., M.B., D.S.O., S.O.D., M.F.H., M.R.I.A., B.L., Mus. Doc., P.L.G., F.T.C.D., F.R.U.I., F.R.C.P.I. and F.R.C.S.I.** (Joyce 2008:47).*

The excessive use of abbreviations makes this sentence almost incomprehensible. Presumably, these abbreviations may stand for:  Knight of the Order of the Garter, Knight of the Order of St. Patrick, High Templar, Privy Councilor, Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath, Member of Parliament, Justice of the Peace, Bachelor of Medicine, Distinguished Service Order, sod, Master of Foxhounds, Member of the Royal Irish Academy, Bachelor of Law, Doctor of Music, Poor Law Guardian [144, p. 286], Fellow of Trinity College Dublin, Fellow of Royal University of Ireland, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland and Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland.

Except easy recognized abbreviations (M.P., K.P., Mus. Doc., etc) there is a new abbreviation coined by     J. Joyce (P.L.G. – Poor Low Guardian) and a pseudo-abbreviation (S.O.D.). This way he shows his sarcastic attitude to the character responsible for the salvage works.

A distinctive feature of occasional abbreviations is the implicit nature of the rendered information. Occasional abbreviations imply the creative nature and subjectivity. They always depend on the context.

### 8.  Miscellaneous type

This group includes lexical units built with the help of several mechanisms. It is a rather frequent mechanism (14% of analyzed patterns) and it is the most complicated one on regard of its comprehension. The patterns can be grouped as follows:

*Table 2. Miscellaneous type*

| № | Pattern | Example | Comment |
|---|---------|---------|---------|
| 1 | **blending + macaronics** | pftjschute | pfui (an exclamation of contempt or disgust) + chute ((French) – fall); |
| 2 | **blending + archaism** | gibwink | Gib (*arc*. a cat) + wink |
| 3 | **blending + reduplication** | wavyavyeavyheavyeavyevyevy hair | Wavy + hair and repeated forms 'ya', 'vye' |
| 4 | **macaronics + archaism** | Teco | Arch. form of *con te* (Italian, meaning «with you») |
| 5 | **macaronics + abbreviation** | INRI | Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum (Latin). Jesus, King of the Jews |
| 6 | **onomatopoeia + reduplication** | Bulbul! Burblblburblbl! | (imitative) the sound of a hunting horn |
| 7 | **graphon + reduplication** | Curchycurchy | repeatedly performing a curtsy (реверансы) |
| 8 | **graphon + reduplication + onomatopoeia** | Nyumnyum | Nyumnyum – form of yumyum – a word used to children to indicate that a food tastes good, is delicious |
| 9 | **blending + macaronics + onomatopoeia** | bababadalgharaghtakammin-arronnkonnbronntonnerro-nntuonntpunntrovarrhounaw-nskawntoohoohoordenenthur-nuk | (imitative) the sound of thunder |

The last pattern (9) adheres close attention. The word consists of 100 letters:
*The          fall          (**bababadalgharaghtakamminarronnkonnbronntonnerronntuonntpunntrovarrhouna-wnskawntoohoohoordenenthurnuk!)** of a once wallstraitoldparr is retaled early in bed and later on life down through all christia minstrelsy* (Joyce 1975:3).

The following morphemes were used in the nonce word: Kaminari – Japanese Goddess of Thunder; ukkonen - thunder (Finnish); brontę – thunder (Greek); Donner – thunder (German); tuono – thunder (Italian); trovăo – thunder (Portuguese); Varuna - Hindu creator and storm god; åska – thunder (Swedish); tornach (tornokh) - thunder (Gaelic). All these morphemes are related to thunder. Presumably, the first morpheme  '*bada-*' is a shorten form of English interjection '*bada-bing*'. It  was used as a poetic and expressive word to indicate a strong indignation.

### CONCLUSION

All above-cited examples represent a complicated language game. They are probably not oriented to a wide circle of readers, but a model reader endowed with an infinite encyclopedic competence.

The analyses of various mechanisms of nonce patterns prove that nonsense is not synonymous to meaningless. Nonsense in linguistics represent a phenomenon of non-conventional nomination; the result of creating new forms and unexpected meanings through addresser's non-standard and subjective conceptualization and categorization of objective reality.

The most productive mechanisms of nonsense at lexemic level are blending, macaronics, graphons, archaisms, reduplication, abbreviation and a miscellaneous type. The correlation of these mechanisms are presented in the following diagram:

*Fig. 1. The correlation of nonsense mechanisms at lexemic level*
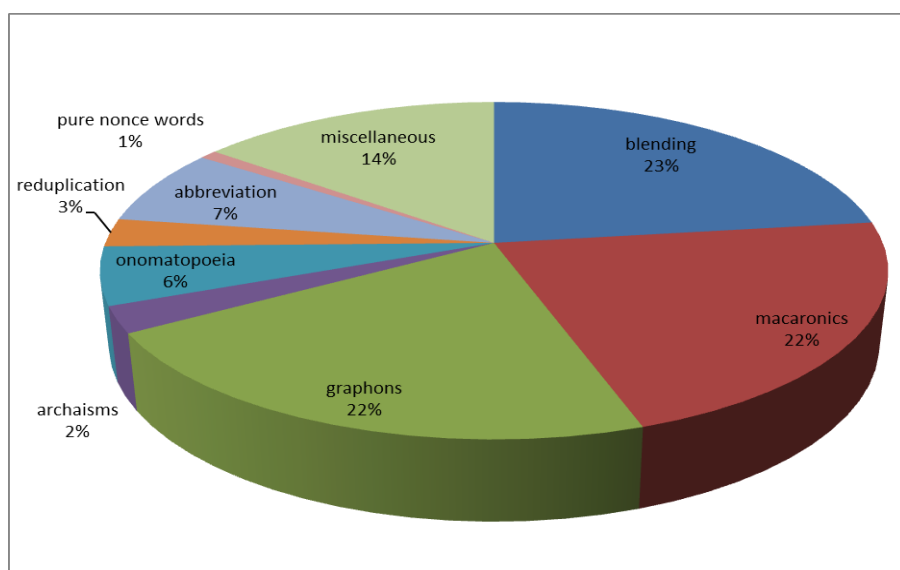


The use archaisms is typical for L. Carroll (75%), however, James Joyce often used macaronics, as the use of foreign words and morphemes is not merely stylistic device for him, but his own philosophy (ideostyle).

The nonce patterns are characterized by freshness, originality, lucidity of their inner form and morphemic structure. The interpretation of all types of these deviated forms is based on associations (if there are no explicit/ implicit prompts), background knowledge and context.

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