1 Some basic concepts

Language evolved.

That has consequences.

1.1 Workpoints

The linguist M. A. K. Halliday on why he chose the title *A Short Introduction to Functional Grammar* for one of his books:

> It is an introduction to **functional** grammar because the conceptual framework on which it is based is a functional one rather than a formal one. It is functional in three distinct although closely related senses: in its interpretation (1) of texts, (2) of the system, and (3) of the elements of linguistic structures.

> (1) It is functional in the sense that it is designed to account for how the language is **used**. Every text — that is, everything that is said or written — unfolds in some context of use; furthermore, it is the uses of language that, over tens of thousands of generations, have shaped the system. Language has evolved to satisfy human needs; and the way it is organized is functional with respect to those needs — it is not arbitrary. A functional grammar is essentially a 'natural' grammar, in the sense that everything in it can be explained, ultimately, by reference to how language is used.

> (2) Following from this, the fundamental components of **meaning** in language are functional components. All languages are organized around two main kinds of meaning, the 'ideational' or reflective, and the 'interpersonal' or active. These components, called 'metafunctions' in the terminology of the present theory, are the manifestations in the linguistic system of the two very general purposes which underlie all uses of language: (i) to understand the environment (ideational) and (ii) to act on the others in it (interpersonal). Combined with these is a third metafunctional component, the 'textual', which breathes relevance into the other two.

> (3) Thirdly, each **element** in a language is explained by reference to its function in the total linguistic system. In this third sense, therefore, a functional grammar is one that construes all the units of a language — its clauses, phrases, and so on — as organic configurations of functions. In other words, each part is interpreted as functional with respect to the whole.

> [Halliday 1994²: xiii–xiv]

1.2 Learning goals

In this unit, you will learn:

- to distinguish between **descriptive** and **prescriptive** (and/or **proscriptive**) approaches to grammar

- to distinguish between **formal** and **functional** approaches to grammar

- to distinguish between **structural** and **systemic** approaches to grammar

More specifically, you will become familiar with the following concepts and will learn some of the ways they interact with each other:

- **Stratum** ('a is stood-for by b at a lower level of abstractness')

  [bistratal model:] content ⟷ expression

  [tristratal model:] semantics ⟷ lexicogrammar ⟷ phonology

- **Manifestation** ('b is based on sound, or shape, or body movement')

  phonetics / graphetics / 'signing'

- **Function** ('x meets the basic need y')

  function ⟶ value ⟶ meaning

- **Metafunction** ('y = reflection/action/relevance & explains why language has x')

  ideational ⟷ interpersonal ⟷ textual ('textbildend')

  ↓

  experiential ⟷ logical

- **Rank** ('c is made up of smaller units at the same level of abstractness')

  [grammar:] clause ⟷ group/phrase ⟷ word ⟷ morpheme

  [phonology:] tone group ⟷ foot ⟷ syllable ⟷ phoneme

- **Axis** ('m is related *in absentia* to l and n, and *in praesentia* to p and s')

  paradigmatic (axis of choice; 'l and m and n'; formalized using **systems**)

  syntagmatic (axis of chain; 'p and m and s'; formalized using **structures**)

- **Instantiation** ('k is an instance of i')

  culture ⟷ domain ⟷ situation-type ⟷ situation

  language ⟷ register ⟷ text-type ⟷ text

1.3 Dimensions of the systemic functional model of language

The systemic functional theory of language uses several dimensions. These are briefly described below:

1.3.1 Stratum

'Strata' (the plural of 'stratum') are implicitly defined by the notion of a **sign**: if one thing 'stands for' another thing, then we already need two strata to describe what's going on: some kind of 'content' is being stood-for (or represented) by some kind of 'expression'.
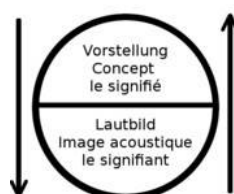

Abbildung 1: The sign function (Saussure) (Source: Wikipedia)

The protolanguage that children invent for themselves from age 7 months to age 18 months, like the language of many other species, has no more than these two strata: sounds stand directly for meanings. There is a fixed number of things that can be meant, and a fixed number of ways in which to mean them. Each utterance thus consists of just one sign: a word.

But adult human language, in addition to having words, also has grammar — and that changes everything, because now sounds stand for words, and words (in grammatical structures) stand for meanings. So we can define three strata:

There is SEMANTICS (the system of all possible linguistically expressible meanings), there is LEXICO-GRAMMAR (the system of all possible wordings — choosing words (lexis), and arranging them (grammar)), and there is PHONOLOGY (the system of all possible linguistically relevant sounds). Phonology is the least abstract of these three strata, as it is closer to real physical sound.

The development of a three-level semiotic system in our species was one of the most significant events of the last few million years.
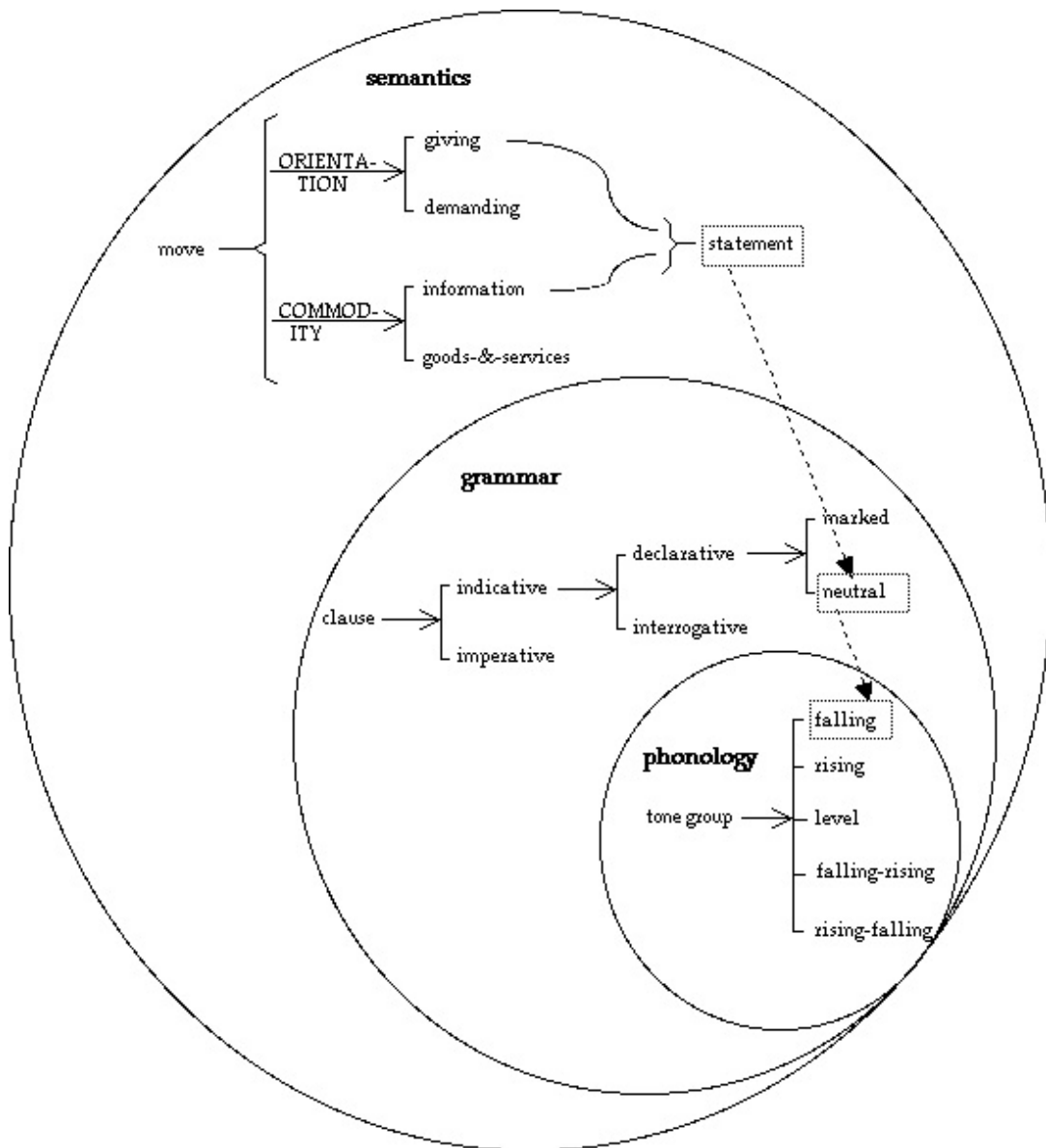
Abbildung 2: Strata (Source: C.M.I.M. Matthiessen)

1.3.2 Manifestation

Originally all human language was spoken language: it had only one 'manifestation', namely as SOUND. Some time after the neolithic revolution (development of agriculture and livestock-raising in settled communities), a system of written symbols evolved, standing for the elements of language and thus providing a second manifestation for language: WRITING. There is also a third manifestation, in the form of the SIGNS (*Gebärden*) that make up the sign language of the deaf.

1.3.3 Function and metafunction

Human language evolved because it served two very useful extrinsic functions: it provided a way of understanding the world by classifying the phenomena of experience so that one person's experience can be shared with others, and a way of changing the world by interacting with the other people in it. These two functions need to be woven together intrinsically, so that pieces of shared experience and interaction are relevant to the situation and to what has gone before.

The internal arrangement of language is a reflection of the functions it serves in society. Because it has to classify experience and establish the logical relationships between different 'portions' of that experience, it has an **experiential** and a **logical** function (together called the **ideational** function). Because it has to enable social interaction between individuals, it has an **interpersonal** function. And because it has to create relevance, it has a **textual** (or 'text-creating') function. (The notion of 'text' is related to the notion of 'textiles', in the sense of something that is 'woven together'. Text could perhaps be called 'Sinngewebe'.)

	An asteroid	killed	the dinosaurs	
clause as representation:	Actor			(experiential)
clause as interaction:	Subject			(interpersonal)
clause as message:	Theme			(textual)

Abbildung 3: An English clause partially analysed according to three different functional dimensions of meaning ('metafunctions')

If we look inside language, we see that it contains a number of resources for fulfilling these different functions, and that these resources are largely independent of each other. I can tell you that Mozart wrote 41 symphonies or that Beethoven was Viennese or that the moon is made of green cheese; in each case, what I am 'doing' stays the same: 'giving information' (which may or may not be true); but the kind of experience I am representing varies from Mozart's symphony-writing to Beethoven's Vienneseness to the moon's internal composition. Alternatively, I can ask you to close the window, ask you whether you've closed it, or tell you that you already closed it; in each case, I am representing the same process of 'window-closing', but doing different things interpersonally (a command, a question, and a statement). Finally, I can tell you that Beethoven died in the year 1827, that the year Beethoven died in was 1827 or that it was in 1827 that Beethoven died; in each case, I'm representing the same process of dying (rather than symphony-writing), and performing the same act of information-giving (rather than information-demanding), but I'm presenting the information in different ways to make it easier to take in.

These internal reflections of the external functions of language can be called 'metafunctions' ('meta' in the sense of 'more abstract').

1.3.4 Rank

So far, we have three dimensions: stratum, manifestation, and metafunction. Now we add a fourth: rank.

When people use language, they produce it in 'bits'. But the bits are made up of smaller bits, which in turn are made up of even smaller bits, and so on. For most people, this is the most noticeable kind of 'structure' in language; it is similar to the structure of matter, with molecules made up of atoms, atoms made up of subatomic particles, and so on.

At the stratum of lexicogrammar, we can recognize the following four 'ranks' of units: clauses, made up of groups or phrases, made up of words, made up of morphemes (Wortbestandteile). At the stratum of phonology, we can recognize tone groups, made up of feet, made up of syllables, made up of phonemes. If we change the manifestation from sound to writing, and replace phonology with orthography, then we can recognize units such as letters, making up orthographic words, making up subsentences, making up sentences, making up paragraphs, making up sections or chapters, making up written works such as books.

It would also be possible to recognize different ranks of units at the semantic stratum; but just how many, and what kind, would depend on which metafunction was most important to us. In any case, we can identify the central unit at the SEMANTIC STRATUM: it is the *text*.
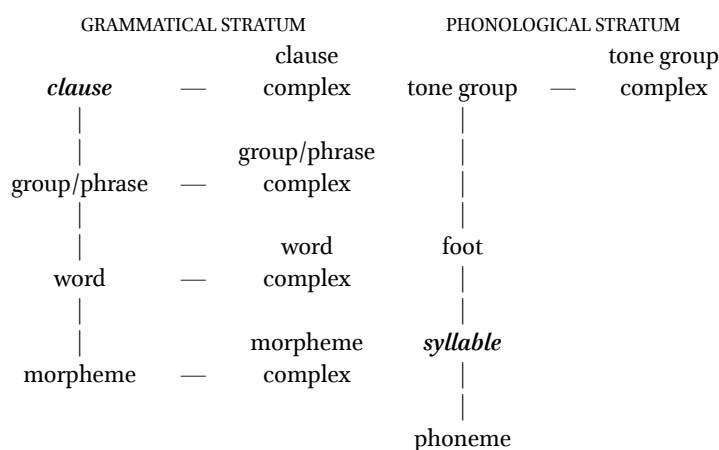


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        GRAMMATICAL STRATUM                    PHONOLOGICAL STRATUM
                        clause                              tone group
   clause       —       complex       tone group    —       complex
     |                     |               |
     |                 group/phrase        |
group/phrase     —      complex            |
     |                     |               |
     |                    word            foot
   word          —       complex           |
     |                     |               |
     |                  morpheme         syllable
  morpheme       —       complex           |
                                           |
                                        phoneme
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Abbildung 4: The concept of 'rank' (units made up of units): examples from different strata

1.3.5 Axis

Language has two axes — the axis of choice and the axis of chain. The first is called the paradigmatic axis, and consists of the relationships among all the items one of which could potentially be chosen at a particular point in a text. The second is called the syntagmatic axis, consisting of the relationships

among all the items that were actually chosen and that therefore occur together in the same portion of text.

Relationships on the syntagmatic axis are represented formally by using the notion of 'structure'; the most easily recognizable kind of structure is constituency structure — the kind already mentioned in the discussion of the term 'rank' above. Constituency structure can be represented by drawing trees with a trunk that splits into branches and sub-branches, or by drawing boxes inside boxes inside boxes.
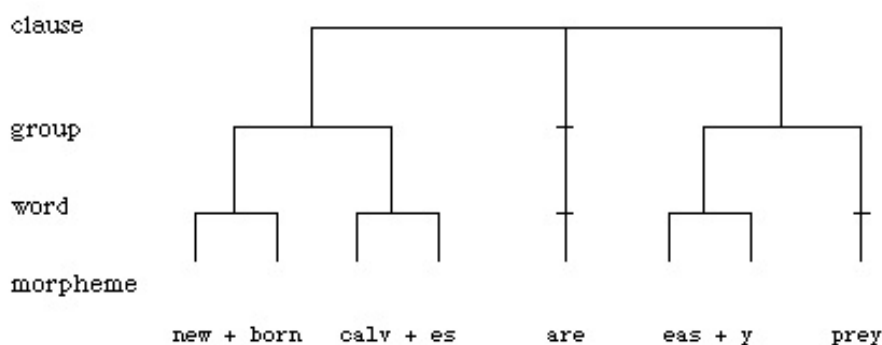

Abbildung 5: STRUCTURE: Constituency structure of an English clause shown as a branching tree (Source: C.M.I.M. Matthiessen)

Relationships on the paradigmatic axis are represented formally by using the notion of 'system'. A system is defined as a set of mutually exclusive options, together with an entry condition; if the entry condition is fulfilled, one of the options (no more than one, and no less than one) must be chosen.
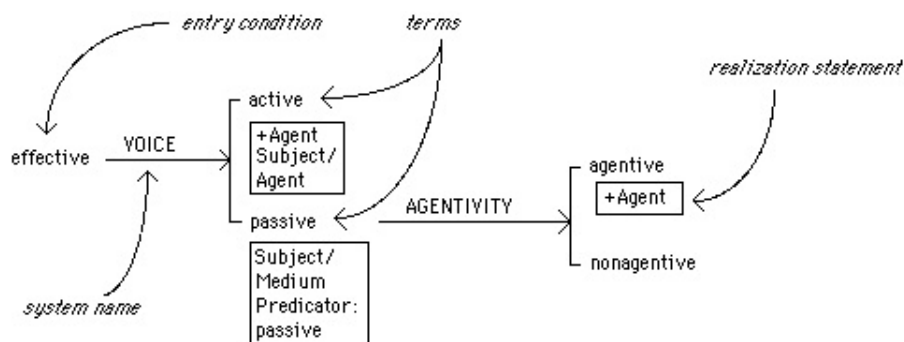

Abbildung 6: SYSTEM: Part of the grammar of English represented as a network of systems (Source: C.M.I.M. Matthiessen)

1.3.6 Instantiation

Climate is the potential for weather; and weather is the actual instance of that potential. In the same way, a language is the potential for creating pieces of (spoken or written, premeditated or spontaneous) text, and any one particular piece of text is an instantiation of that potential.

Instantiation is a 'cline' — a continuous variation space, with the potential situated at one end, the actual at the other, and with various intermediate degrees between the two ends.

Thus, if we plan to use language to say or write something, we are like an organist approaching a pipe organ: we select particular registers of pipes that we want to activate in order to play a particular piece of music. Just like a pipe organ, language can be configured in different ways if the particular text requires it. We call this partly actualized form of a language a register; a register allows us to specify a type of text (German: Textsorte, not Texttyp) to which our actual text belongs.

Whenever text is created, there is a context of situation: a group of people are engaged in a particular kind of social activity, are playing particular social roles, and have particular expectations about what role language can play for them in that situation. The particular configuration of 'social activity', 'social roles', and 'role of language' defines a situation. But each situation is an instance of a situation type; and a situation type is (ultimately) an instance of the situation-generating potential that we call a 'culture'.

Culture is realized by language (and other semiotic systems, like music) in the same way as (within language) meanings are realized by words, and words are realized by sounds.
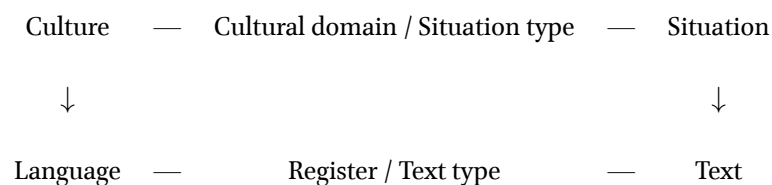
Culture   —   Cultural domain / Situation type   —   Situation

↓   ↓

Language   —   Register / Text type   —   Text

Abbildung 7: Culture, situation, language, text

1.3.7 Some general remarks

Here are two useful mantras:

> A structure is a configuration of functional roles.

> Meaning is function in context.

Their meaning will (I hope) become clear as they are repeated to you at every possible opportunity during this course.

And here are some general principles and some specific technical terms that are worth noting; some of them can cause confusion if it is not recognized that they are being used within a particular theory of language (SFL – systemic functional linguistics) in a particular way:

We shall assume that the best description is not necessarily the simplest; and that different descriptions will be appropriate for different purposes.

We shall deliberately seek mutually contradictory descriptions, and attempt to reconcile the contradictions dialectically.

Applying the above two principles more concretely:

When we analyse clauses (stratum: lexicogrammar; rank: clause; axis: syntagmatic) we shall use both function labels (such as 'Subject') and class labels (such as 'nominal group'), even though minimalists would say this is redundant.

We shall not confine ourselves to function labels such as 'Subject' (metafunction: interpersonal), but will simultaneously use other function labels such as 'Theme' (metafunction: textual) and 'Actor' (metafunction: experiential). This will mean analysing clauses three times over, instead of just once. We shall try to keep the 'Theme', 'Subject' and 'Actor' kinds of analyses as separate as possible, so as to increase the tension between them and the benefits of allowing them to interact; keeping them separate will mean abandoning the term 'Object' — a term which mixes two meanings: 'not responsible for the success of the exchange' (interpersonal) and 'the sufferer of the action represented by the verb' (experiential).

1.4 Possible sources of difficulty

As 'object languages' (languages we are investigating), German and English are reasonably similar to each other. But as 'metalanguages' (languages [whose cultures are] providing technical terms to help us investigate languages with), English and German often diverge. The most significant example is the use of the term 'Ebene' in German linguistics; from a systemic functional point of view, this term blurs the distinction between 'stratum' and 'rank'. Textebene (stratum: semantics; rank: text) — Satzebene (stratum: lexicogrammar; rank: clause) — Satzgliedebene (stratum: lexicogrammar; rank: group/phrase) — Wortebene (stratum: lexicogrammar; rank: word). In systemic functional linguistics, a text 'is realized by' a sequence of clauses or clause complexes; a clause 'is composed of' a sequence

of groups or phrases, which in turn 'are composed of' sequences of words; finally, these words 'are realized by' sequences of phonemes (manifestation: sound; stratum: phonology; rank: phoneme) or graphemes (manifestation: writing; stratum: orthography; rank: grapheme).

One specific but difficult point:

When talking informally about grammar, German-speakers often use terms like *Fragesatz*. Does this refer to the form (stratum: lexicogrammar) or to the function (stratum: semantics) of the sentence concerned? While it would be perfectly possible to construct a scientific terminology in which there was a strict distinction between 'Frage' (semantics) and 'Fragesatz' (grammar), modern grammarians of German have a preference for Latin-sounding terms — possibly in order to distance themselves from the 'volksnahe' grammar of the Third Reich.

In English, this fear of the vernacular is not present, so we will be able to wildly mix Anglo-Saxon, French, Latin, and Greek designations whenever and wherever we need to.

One general and difficult point:

The systemic functional approach to language is 'culturally foreign' from a central European point of view.

One desperate, probably hopeless point:

I shall try to use the term 'sentence' to refer solely to the orthographic unit whose boundaries are signalled by an initial capital letter and a final full stop (manifestation: writing; stratum: orthography; rank: sentence). The corresponding lexicogrammatical unit will be referred to as either a 'clause' or a 'clause complex', depending on whether it is simple or complex. The problem with this use of 'clause' will be that there is no good German equivalent for it: if a clause is a 'Teilsatz', then a clause complex would be a 'Teilsatzkomplex', which sounds unnecessarily complicated.

1.5 Further reading

The central reference work is M. A. K. Halliday, **An Introduction to Functional Grammar**, London: Arnold. The editions I use are the second (1994), the third (2004; revised by Christian M. I. M. Matthiessen), and the fourth (**Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar;** Routledge, 2014).

If you are interested in German approaches to grammar, I would recommend anything by Hans Glinz (because I agree with him) and anything by Ulrich Engel (because I don't). There is an excellent German grammar for foreign learners by Helbig und Buscha (Deutsche Grammatik – Ein Handbuch für den Ausländerunterricht. Langenscheidt: 2008).

1.6 Worksheet

Read the following text several times and make sure you understand the meaning of all the words and grammatical structures it contains. We will be using this text for a number of exercises later on in the course:

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, "and what is the use of a book," thought Alice "without pictures or conversations?"

So she was considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a white rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so *very* remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so *very* much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket,* and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and, burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.

The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down a very deep well.

Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her, and to wonder what was going to happen next.

— extract taken from: Alice in Wonderland, by Lewis Carroll