

JABBERWOCKY 8: THE CHINESE BOX

The “chinese box” that children give at parties consists of a beautifully wrapped package, enclosing another, enclosing a third one, and so forth—a great frustration, no doubt, to the recipient trying to unwrap the package. The Chinese Box of the Jabberwocky addict has the same effect on the reader. This type of Jabberwocky has three main forms: the clause within a clause, the phrase within a phrase, or the stacked-up array of direct modifiers preceding a noun.

Poor: Next, sort out the records which arrived in the mail which was delivered today.

Good: Next, sort out the records which arrived in today’s mail.

Poor: One of the hadiest of the plants of the desert is the creosote bush.

Good: One of the hadiest desert plants is the creosote bush.

Poor: The final table 10 figures corrections have been approved.

Good: The final corrections to the figures in table 10 have been approved.

Why do writers construct Chinese Boxes? For the same reasons, we suppose, that they write any Jabberwocky. They become so immersed in their statistics and words that they lose perspective. They remember a deadline looming in the future, and they panic. They fail to look over what they have written, they miss a redundancy they should have caught, they forget to subordinate, they commit themselves to a bad beginning and refuse to change, they become overexplicit, they let other Jabberwocky types intrude—a thousand wrong impulses (give or take a few) stand ready to nudge them into woe. Naturally, the causes vary with the pattern the Chinese Box may take.

1. **Clausal Stack.** This clause-within-clause form nearly always results from oversight—a simple failure to look back at what is taking shape and to remember that ideas of unequal weight ought not occupy structures of equal form.

Poor: This communications barrier is the kind which is typically found in areas which are culturally remote.

Good: This communications barrier is typical of those found in culturally remote areas.

2. **Phrasal Stack.** This form, which usually exhibits an excessive string of prepositional phrases, is the most likely of the three types to develop through other Jabberwocky faults. In the next example, notice how easily we can avoid unnecessary *of*’s by improving on the Windy Verbal *gave a criticism* and the abstract noun *propagation*.

Poor: He gave a criticism of our method of the propagation of these micro-organisms.

Good: He criticized our method of propagating these micro-organisms.

3. **Modifier Stack.** This form—by far the most irresistible Chinese Box to today’s writer—can come from a variety of sources, the most prominent of which is the writer’s unwavering conviction that any word or group of words can be suitably used to modify a noun.

- Poor:** She mentioned two recently published Sliptread Armored Vehicles Company special reports.
- Good:** She mentioned two special reports published recently by the Sliptread Armored Vehicles Company.

Here are some more examples:

- Poor:** They did not question him further because they knew he was embarrassed because he could not speak the language well.
- Good:** They did not question him further because they knew he was embarrassed by his inability to speak the language well.
- Poor:** The belief of the majority of the members of the committee was that the worst was over.
- Good:** Most of the committee members believed that the worst was over.
- Poor:** The amount of the variation of the temperatures of that area sometimes exceeds 40 degrees in a 24-hour period.
- Good:** The temperatures in that area can vary more than 40 degrees in 24 hours.
- Poor:** In spite of the agreement of the majority of the officials to this proposal, a few continue to resist it.
- Good:** Although most of the officials have accepted this proposal, a few continue to resist it.
- Poor:** This is the apparent Biometrics Research Laboratories current policy.
- Good:** This is apparently current policy at the Biometrics Research Laboratories.
- Poor:** His report describes the June 2 Test Division acoustics and vibration tests.
- Good:** His report describes the acoustics and vibration tests conducted on June 2 by the Test Division.
- Poor:** These are the most commonly occurring simulated lunar conditions induced failures.
- Good:** These are the failures most commonly induced by simulated lunar conditions.

Since the Chinese Box so often involves not only words but structure as well, you may see other possibilities than the revisions labeled *Good*. So much the better; it is a good idea to keep a flexible outlook in matters concerning the language.