Activity 17.4 - Vulgar Errors - further syntactic analysis

• And therefore need not wonder at the variety of opinions; while some conceived it to be *flos maris, and many, a bituminous substance floating upon the sea.

This is the second sentence of Text 119, but does not correspond to modern punctuation conventions, which would probably prefer it to be part of a longer sentence making up the first paragraph,

• What Sperma-Ceti is, men might justly doubt, since the learned *Hofmannus* in his work of Thirty years, saith plainly, *Nescio quid sit, and therefore need not wonder at the variety of opinions, while some conceived it to be *flos maris, and many, a bituminous substance floating upon the sea.

Students are sometimes discouraged from beginning a sentence with *and* or *but*. This is not a rule of punctuation, however, only a guide to acceptable style. Another reason to prefer the longer sentence is because we would expect the deletion of the subject *men* of the verb *need not*, to occur within a sentence. Browne's punctuation shows that sentences are written constructions, not spoken, because a simple change of full stop to comma leaves the clauses and word order completely unchanged. Browne's sentence consists of a MCl,

• MCl therefore (men) need not wonder at the variety of opinions,

which is linked to the first MCl by the conjunction *And*, and followed by two conjoined correlative clauses beginning with *while*, following the *since* in the first sentence.

• AdvCl while some (men) conceived it to be flos maris, and AdvCl (while) many (men) (conceived it to be) a bituminous substance floating upon the sea

The phrases in *italics* fill out the deleted items and show how the cohesion of a sentence can be achieved by leaving things out. Such deletions are part of everyday speech as well as formal writing, but in this text they contribute to the formal balance of the style of the sentence.

Instead of a lengthy complete analysis of the text, all we need to do is to demonstrate from selected parts of it how its formal style is maintained by features of the grammatical structure as well as of the vocabulary.

1st example

• That it was not the spawn of the Whale, according to vulgar conceit, or nominal appellation Phylosophers have always doubted ...

The construction *That it was not the spawn of the Whale* is a NCl functioning as the object of *doubted*, and because it comes first as theme, followed by the PrepP according to vulgar conceit, or nominal appellation, the clause is front-weighted as well as having the marked OASP order of clause elements:

O-theme

 A

 [That it was not the spawn of the Whale, according to vulgar conceit, or nominal appellation]
 S P
 Phylosophers have always doubted,

It is usually easier to read and understand a clause or a sentence if it is end-weighted, that is, if long phrases and embedded clauses, and the information they contain, come towards the end. We can rewrite this example as follows:

• S P O A
Phylosophers have always doubted that it was not the spawn of the Whale, according to vulgar conceit, or nominal appellation ...

2nd example

• That it proceedeth from a Whale, beside the relation of *Clusius*, and other learned observers, was indubitably determined, not many years since by a Sperma-Ceti Whale, cast upon our coast of *Norfolk*.

That it proceedeth from a Whale is another NCl, but this time the subject of the clause in which it is embedded,

• S-theme
[That it proceedeth from a Whale], beside the relation of Clusius, and other learned observers,

P= (A) = P A A NonfCl was (indubitably) determined, not many years since by a Sperma- Ceti Whale, [cast upon our coast of Norfolk.]

which when re-ordered becomes,

• S= P= A =P =S A A

It was indubitably determined that [it proceedeth from a Whale] not many years since, by a

NonfCl A

Sperma-Ceti Whale, cast upon our coast of Norfolk, beside the relation of Clusius, and other learned observers ...

This construction requires the addition of *it* as a dummy subject, to fill the slot left empty by the NCl which has been moved or extrapolated from the front of the sentence.

3rd example

• Out of the head of this Whale, having been dead divers days, and under putrifaction, flowed streams of oyl and Sperma-Ceti;

This example shows once more how Sir Thomas Browne re-orders the unmarked SPOA elements of a clause in order to focus our attention on a particular phrase as the theme of the clause,

• A-theme

Out of the head of this Whale, [having been dead divers days], and under putrifaction, flowed

S

streams of oyl and Sperma-Ceti

The order is AAAPS rather than SPAAA, as in,

Streams of oyl and Sperma-Ceti flowed out of the head of this Whale, having been dead divers

 \boldsymbol{A}

• days, and under putrifaction ...