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Abstract: From the study of language creation, it is gathered that in most cases the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, except in the case of those words which have a very clear echoic origin (e.g. bubble). Nevertheless, after a close reading of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There,* the reader is encouraged to reflect upon this matter and to wonder who has the ability to establish this relationship and why; being this one of the main topics that this article covers. Additionally, some comments will be made on the procedure through which nonsense texts should be approached and the study will include some discussion on how the meaning of certain words may sometimes be intrinsic to the things themselves. Such would be the case of the nonsense poem, "Jabberwocky" and the names of the insects mentioned in Chapter III (e.g. Bread-and-butterfly). For all these reasons, throughout this work it will be studied up to what point is the name of things related to their nature; including cases in which the connection is lost, if ever (e.g. if a nonsense poem is analyzed and some sense is made out of it, is it still a nonsense poem?), as much as who is in charge of establishing those power relationships and what are the consequences of it in terms of power.

Keywords: Carroll, language, sign/signifier, power, nonsense poetry, aestheticism.

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Language in Wonderland: Referentiality and Power in Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*[1]

0. Introduction: Signifier and Signified

Throughout the years, many philosophers have faced the problem of language development and the origin of language, that is, how humans started developing a system formed by apparently arbitrary symbols that could be used as a means to communicate with one another. Theories go, as we can see in Deutscher's *The Unfolding of Language* from the most extraordinary, like Brisset's theory on the origin of French in the croaking of frogs, to the most advanced theories drawn from computer simulations which are supported by a greater range of scientifically supported data. The origin of language is meaningful to this study because it is important to start at the beginning, hence, we have to discuss whether it is the very language itself, us, the speakers, or our social conventions that have the power to establish the relationship between signified and signifier.

1. Games and language

For the sake of the argument that the use of games in the Alice books is strictly related to the use of language, we will begin by quoting Oxford's Online Dictionary's entry for language: "The method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of *the use of words in a structured and conventional way*" (italics mine) ("Language") and Merrian-Webster's online entry for game: "a physical or mental competition conducted according to rules with the participants in direct opposition to each other" ("Game"). As it can be easily seen, these two definitions share certain characteristics: the need for more than one participant and the existence of a set of rules shared and agreed by the participants. This is the same as to say that both participants ought to renounce to part of their individual freedom for the sake of convention. Chronologically, namely, beginning with *Wonderland*, it is worth noticing how Alice is very much perturbed by the way in which crocket is played in Wonderland: " […] and they don't seem to have any rules in particular; at least, if there are, nobody attends to them—and you've no idea how confusing it is." (Carroll "Alice" 124)

In this extract, Alice is judging a game (which is likely to have its own rules), based on the rules of croquet that *she* knows. [2] This is just as absurd as if she, as an English speaker, were judging the speakers of a completely different language, e.g. Chinese, by the rules of English. In other words, she is trying to impose her own personal meaning onto something else which may have that meaning, a different one or none at all. The quick-witted will not fail to establish a relationship between Alice's understanding –or, more likely, her not-understanding– and the feeling produced in the reader by certain passages in the Alice

[1] For convenience's sake, throughout the article, these books by Lewis Carroll will be alluded as *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*.

[2] This relation will be studied in depth later on when attending to the relationship between shape and meaning.

books, in which language often seem to raise more questions than the answers it provides. In the case of the famous chess game drawn in the first pages of *Through the Looking-Glass,* it cannot be helped noticing that this time it comes with a set of instructions:

> As the chess-problem, […] it is correctly worked out, so far as the *moves* are concerned. The *alternation* of Red and White is perhaps not so strictly observed as it might be, […] ([but if you] set the pieces and play the moves as directed, to be strictly in accordance with the laws of the game.) (Carrol "Preface" 133)

This can actually be extrapolated to being an explanation of how the whole book works in terms of language. The "*moves*" (the words themselves, the succession of events) are correctly worked out, but it is the "*alternation*" (what gives true meaning to the intercourse: semantics and pragmatics) that "is perhaps not so strictly observed as it might be". It is therefore, the player (or the reader) who sets the rules of the game (or selects the meanings of the words).

2. Power, shape and status as tools to impose personal meaning

In the Alice books, it can be observed that there is a direct relationship between those who hold the power and those who establish the meaning of language. The trial of the Knave in Wonderland and the episode of Humpty Dumpty in Through the Looking-Glass are great examples of this relationship. In both passages, the two characters impose their own personal interpretations and Humpty Dumpty even justifies his behaviour: "'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master'" (Carroll "Looking-Glass" 124). But how do these characters end up in this position? In order to clarify this matter, two different aspects will be looked into: shape (as in relation to identity) and status (as something socially accepted).

The relationship established between name, or what, for convenience's sake, may as well be called identity, and shape appears all throughout the two Alice books. In this article, the main focus will be on the characters of the Cheshire Cat and the King of Hearts from *Wonderland* and on the episode of Humpty Dumpty from *Through the Looking-Glass*, with a special focus on the last two, since they both seem to have mastered their will to power, exercised through language. However, some allusions to other episodes like those of the insects or the Fawn in Chapter III may be included for the sake of the argument.

As explained by Valls Oyarzun in his edition to the text ("Introduction" 69-71), in *Wonderland* the Cheshire Cat, who is the only character that accepts his identity, or what is the same, his madness, and the only one that can control the shape he takes, represents the purpose that Alice will struggle towards and finally attains at the final chapter of *Wonderland*. This so-called purpose is

> to reaffirm personal power, […] to construct an identity, to become an autonomous subject, independent and responsible of the idea of the 'self". […] It is only when Alice starts understanding her capacity to influence the world, this is to say, to configure it,

> based on her own will, that she grows up to her full size and is able to cancel the authority of those who have arbitrarily imposed it on her ('Who cares for you?' said Alice, […] 'You're nothing but a pack of cards!') (translation mine) (Valls Oyarzun "Introduction" 69-71)

It is then no wonder that in *Through the Looking-Glass*, when Alice meets Humpty Dumpty, the latter shows such a great interest in knowing what does Alice's name mean, since it is when you adopt your true shape that you are in full control of your identity, or in other words, that you can exercise your power.

This relationship between shape and name has been previously hinted in Chapter III in two occasions: first, the relationship established by the Fawn between shape and identity that compels him to flee from Alice when he remembers that he is a fawn and she a human child and; therefore, even though Alice has not shown any signs of considering him her prey, in his mind he considers this relationship between shape, name and identity undeniable. Second, when Alice and the Gnat discuss the use of having names and some Looking-glass insects are pointed at and their shape, thus, their identity, is explained, as can be observed in the following excerpt: "'You may observe a Bread-and-Butterfly. […]' 'And what does *it* live on?' 'Weak tea with cream in it.' […] 'Supposing it couldn't find any?' she suggested. 'Then it would die, of course.'" (Carroll "Looking-Glass" 68) Eventually, as can be observed above, thanks to Alice's curiosity, the reader learns that if a person fails to fulfill any aspects of his identity, he become nobody; he is nothing and, therefore, he dies together with his persona.

In Chapter VI, Humpty Dumpty confirms that Alice is unaware of the power that can be held through language, as can be clearly seen in the episode cited below:

> "'My *name* is Alice, but—' 'It's a stupid name enough!' Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. 'What does it mean?' '*must* a name mean something?' Alice asked doubtfully. 'Of course, it must,' Humpty Dumpty said with a sort laugh: '*my* name means the shape I am— and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like your, you might be any shape, almost.'" (Carroll "Looking-Glass" 115-116)

Humpty Dumpty uses this information to his own benefit since, from this moment on, he knows that he can exercise his authority over Alice. This is gleaned from the fact that there is a direct relationship between his name (identity) and his being and egg (shape) and apparently, with Alice, it is not so. This relationship, additionally to his being an academic, seems to grant him the power to determine the meaning of words in a similar manner to the case of the King of Hearts in *Wonderland* during the Knave's trial. In other words, both Humpty Dumpty and the King of Hearts use their position, their status (Humpty Dumpty as a philolinguist and the King of Hearts as the king) in order to, as Valls Oyarzun proposes, "establish the concrete meaning of the text […], from what it must be understood that this meaning acts as a law." (translation mine)("Introduction" 67)

The relationship between the signified and the signifier has traditionally been considered as arbitrary, at least since Ferdinand de Saussure presented his theory of the linguistic sign; however, as it has already been covered in this work, certain characters play

by their own rules. Regarding *Wonderland*, Valls Oyarzun may throw some light upon the matter by defending that the character of the King of Hearts does so, throughout his hermeneutical approach to the letter that is being used as evidence when judging the Knave.

> This is a clear example of the arbitrariness of language (since the King is the judge, therefore the arbitrator) and, at the same time, it is greatly illustrative of the ideological nature of 'meaning' as the one given by a supreme magistrate through *his own personal interpretation,* put in another way*,* e*stablishing as an absolute truth a personal, and subjective, even capricious, reading.* ("Alicia" 41)

It would be meaningful to comment that this precise thing that the reader so easily spots, and so decisively condemns, is what many critics and readers have done (and still do) when approaching the nonsense poem "Jabberwocky". This is how we all become Kings of Hearts and Humpty Dumpties by giving our own personal meaning to words, when this meaning may differ from the one they already have, or may be complete inventions if the words did not have a meaning at all.

3. The deceiving apparent senselessness of "Jabberwocky"

"Jabberwocky" cannot truly be considered a pure nonsensical poem since after its analysis in terms of Generative Linguistics it is found that the poem works efficiently in three of its four levels, as explained by Lecercle (20-22): the poem meets the requirements phonetically, syntactically and morphologically. In order to prove this hypothesis, it will be contrasted with the first verses, which are also the most famous ones:

> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
> All mimsy were the borogoves,
> And the mome raths outgrabe.'(Carroll "Looking-Glass" 21)

Phonetically, with the only exception of the Jabberwocky's cry, it can be easily tested that the poem poses no major problems for being read out loud by anyone who is familiar with English pronunciation. Moreover, there are even directions in the prologue so as to properly pronounce some of the words that may lead to reasonable doubt, for instance, "Pronounce 'slithy' as if it were to the words 'sly, the'". Syntactically, all sentences are well constructed; taking as an example the first verse, it can be observed that there is a subject ("the slithy toves"), a verb ("Did gyre") and there is even an adjunct of time ("in the wabe"). Morphologically, it apparently follows the same rules as the English language (e.g. the use of the derivative morpheme -s to indicate the plural, as in *borogove-s*). Nonetheless, when it comes to semantics, as Lecercle (23) explains, it presents certain semantic blanks, specifically where the coined words are inserted. What many researchers have done throughout the years when approaching this poem is plainly the same thing as Humpty Dumpty does in the novel: to attribute meaning to each coined word, to try to draw some

sense out of the nonsense of the poem. This is partially similar to when Alice plays crocket in *Wonderland* or to Chapter VII of *Through the Looking-Glass*, when she is asked to cut the cake:

> 'I've cut several slices already, but they always join on again!' 'You don't know how to manage Looking-glass cakes,' the Unicorn remarked. 'Hand it round first, and cut it afterwards.' 'This sounded nonsense, but Alice […] carried the dish round, and the cake divided itself into three pieces as she did so. (Carroll "Looking-Glass" 154-155)

This episode can be interpreted as a metaphor of how to approach a nonsense text: it is not the meaning of each word that matters (the cutting of each piece), but the individual feeling that is gotten from its reading. In that regard, we can interpret the handing round of the full cake and its division in a different sized piece for each person as the different interpretations of a text by each reader." According to Lecercle (25), nonsense poems are known for being full of invented words which do not necessarily need to have any meaning given to them by the author. This is the main reason why there is no point in trying to figure out what Carroll meant by "brillig" and "gimble" as independent units, since they may not have any meaning at all. For this reason, it is our task as readers, as Alice's is, to experiment, delighting ourselves and playing with the language in the poem. As proposed by Lecercle (24), this would place the language used in the poem in the position of lalanguage, a form of language whose main purpose is delight, instead of meaning (García "Presentación"). In Tom Byers' words ("Lecture"), this way to approach a text is what, years later, readers would do when facing a postmodernist work; a Nietzschean idea that language does not rest in truth but produces more language. Language adopts here a characteristic that is more relatable to art: not needing to mean anything, simply being a figure of admiration. This may be hinted by Humpty Dumpty when admitting that: "When [he] make[s] a word do a lot of work like that, [he] always pay[s] it extra." (Carroll "Looking-Glass" 125) From the extract cited above, it can be gathered how Humpty Dumpty understands that words' only purpose is not to mean something, but rather that meaning is simply something that tends to be imposed upon them. In this way, the reader gets to understand what an important tool for power it is to master language, or words, to be more precise. Therefore, it is not that there are no rules, or that the poem "Jabberwocky" is completely senseless, but that its sense, its meaning, depends on the reader. This open space for speculation causes certain uneasiness, an *Umheimlichkeit* in the reader, which, as defended by Conde Soto, "allows us to understand, not from the world, impersonality or everyday life, but from our very selves." (translation mine) (139)

In addition, as stated by Lecercle, this speculative openness is "a kind of textual double-bind or paradox [since] it is both free and constraint. […] I speak language, in other words, I am a master of the instrument which allows me to communicate with others, and yet it is language that speaks: I am constrained by the language I inhabit to such an extent that I am inhabited or possessed by it" (25). Consequently, the reader has to work out the meaning of the coined words in the poem by using his language and mental representations, that is, he will not be able to make up anything that he does not know beforehand. This is

what is drawn from Alice's reaction: she does not know what the referents for the coined words are, therefore, she is unable to feel fully satisfied by the action of reading the poem, although she can pronounce all the worlds and understands what the chain of events is. Nevertheless, this "filling [her] my head with ideas" that Alice acknowledges (Carroll "Looking-Glass" 24), gives the impression to the reader that some images are forming in her head after reading "Jabberwocky", just as they do form in the reader's. This may mean that the words themselves have some meaning which is intrinsic to them, which our brain is playfully able to draw when contrasting them with some other words whose meaning we know already (just as intertextuality in *Through the Looking-Glass* allows the reader to recognize the different characters in the text because they have encountered them before in other texts). This hint to how previous knowledge is needed in order to learn and understand new knowledge keeps us wondering about the origin of language, and who is in charge of establishing the relationships between significant and signifier.

Valls Oyarzun mentions in his quotation of Auerbach, that "Alice and Wonderland are both one and the same thing" (Valls Oyarzun "Introduction" 49) and it is this uneasiness that Alice presents in Wonderland, this feeling of discomfort due to the multiple changes in size, which allows her to go on discovering her own identity. Consequently, it is only when she manages to understand how the power of language works –"You're nothing but a pack of cards" (Carroll "Wonderland" 187)– that it all falls into place, just as it is only when the reader learns the proper way to approach the poem *Jabberwocky*, or, in fairness, the complete works of Carroll, that he is finally satisfied.

As it has been previously mentioned, the mind of the reader of "Jabberwocky" is able to create a mental succession of events; this is a result of his linguistic imagination, not so much of his visual imagination, which is the one we are more often accustomed to, as Lecercle defends:

> They try to make us visualize those *toves*, a thing which is either impossible (if, as is the case with the *Snark*, the creatures 'unmistakable marks' are paradoxical or contradictory) or trivial (Tenniel does represent a *tove*, a chimera-like combination of badger, lizard and corkscrew). But the semantic blanks are not meant to be visualized. They are meant to be playfully explored, or exploited, by our linguistic imagination, which is boundless. (24)

This is exactly the reaction to the poem that Alice has at the beginning of the book. In this way, Carroll is letting us know how the whole book must be approached: it is a book that should be enjoyed. It is, as would be later described by Oscar Wilde; an example of art for art's sake:

> 'It seems very pretty,' she said when she had finished it, 'but it's rather hard to understand!' (You see she didn't like to confess, ever to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) 'Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas— only I don't exactly know what they are! However, somebody killed something: that's clear, at any rate—' (Carroll "Looking-Glass" 24).

4. Conclusion

Several passages in the Alice books in which the study of language as both theme and playfield is developed have been studied and analyzed. This has provided us with the tools to assert that these two books by Lewis Carrol are a piece of art whose main aim is to be an example of the motto "art for art's sake"; the wonder that characterizes them resides in the wondering itself in which the reader finds himself submerged. It is not surprising then that every reader gets a different interpretation from each episode in the book or each linguistic game. Actually, that is the whole point, signifier and signified are not an inseparable unit but a flexible one instead; and the closer we seem to be to the definite answer, the further we actually are from the new possibilities that arise: we are all Alices at the Sheep's shop, trying to grab hold of an egg in a shelf that keeps moving out of our reach.

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