Verbal humour and Lewis Carroll: a linguistic analysis of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass

Summary: Alice's adventures are not simply tales about a girl who discovers different worlds. Throughout her stories the reader becomes more and more conscious of how language works. Instead of listing explicit statements on linguistic matters, the Alice books elicit ideas with the help of verbal humour. It is like a test: the writer is testing language by deforming it. He draws it apart, plays with the components and then shakes them up. All levels of linguistics are involved in this game which is played between the writer, the characters and the reader. In this presentation my aim is to show how wonderfully Lewis Carroll exploited the possibilities offered by different linguistic levels (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics) in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass.

The analysis of these levels aims at arguing the case for the linguistic logic of Carroll's verbal humour. Lewis Carroll was not a linguist and the Alice books are not scholarly works; nevertheless, the living and changing nature of the English language lies hidden in the background of the nonsense worlds.

Introduction

The Alice-stories did not belong to my collection of children's books when I was an enthusiastic reader of tales. It was during my university studies that I first had the chance to read Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (AAW) and Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There (TLG) from Lewis Carroll. What impressed me in addition to the plot-line was the way language appeared on the pages of these works. The discovery of ingenious puns aroused my curiosity about the author whom I had thought to be a linguist.

To my surprise, Lewis Carroll was not a linguist: he approached linguistic phenomena primarily as a humorist (Sutherland, 1970: 26). According to David Crystal (Crystal, 1998: 7) this writer was a master of language play because he illustrated better than anyone else the numerous playful opportunities hidden in the English language. Robert Polhemus describes him as a “Homo ludens”, i.e. someone who deliberately seeks pleasure for its own sake through play, nonsense and games (Polhemus, 1992: 368).
The Alice books have nevertheless aroused the interest of a number of linguists. *The Annotated Alice* was edited by Martin Gardner in 1967, in which the two stories appear accompanied with the comments of the editor. Robert Sutherland's *Language and Lewis Carroll* (1970) is a detailed linguistic analysis of Carroll's works, focusing on the role of signs, names, ambiguity and classification. The more recent work *Semiotics and Linguistics in Alice's Worlds* (1994) is a collection of studies containing mainly semiotic approaches. These analyses usually address only one or two linguistic levels (mainly semantics and morphology), but do not describe the presence of language play at all linguistic levels in AAW and TLG.

My aim is to show how Lewis Carroll was playing with the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects of language in the Alice books. Accordingly, the paper is divided into five sections: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Each of these sections aims at demonstrating the linguistic logic of Carroll's verbal humour. Although Lewis Carroll was not a linguist and the Alice books are not scholarly works, verbal humour can be interpreted as a reflection of the inner mechanisms of language in these books.

**Phonology**

The phonological level of linguistics is presumed to be the hardest to represent in a written literary work. Lewis Carroll was not striving for the illustration of these phenomena consciously; phonological mechanisms can be detected through his constant playing with sounds. The way he handled minimal pairs and homophones shows his obsession with pronunciation.

Minimal pairs occur when two words differ only in one sound segment that appears in the same phonological environment in both words. The great number of minimal pairs attracted my attention already at the first reading of AAW and TLG (see Fig. 1.). These pairs serve as elements of puns that Carroll weaves into the flow of conversations in AAW and TLG. When Alice is falling down through the rabbit-hole, the words "bats" and "cats" get mixed up in her mind; she uses the two terms interchangeably: “Do cats eat bats?” and "Do bats eat cats?” (AAW, I. 28)¹ The Cheshire Cat associates "pig" and "fig" on the basis of their sound sequences:

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¹All the quotations from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* are taken from *The Annotated Alice* (1967) edited by Martin Gardner.
"Did you say 'pig,' or 'fig?'" said the Cat.
"I said 'pig,'" replied Alice; "and I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and
vanishing so suddenly: you make me giddy!" (AAW, VI. 90)

Associations based on phonological resemblance often help the reader understand the
puns involving minimal pairs. In the discussion on school-subjects between Alice and the
Mock Turtle (AAW, IX. 129-130) only one of the word-pairs is mentioned; the other one
has to be guessed from the context: Reeling (Reading), Writhing (Writing), Derision
(Division), Mystery (History), Painting (Painting), Grief (Greek).

Homophones are two words differing in graphic form but sharing the same
pronunciation. They may deceive the ear of the listener; thus, they often lead to
misunderstandings. Carroll played with the potential ambiguity created by these words (see
Fig. 2.). The role of homophones in the creation of humorous effect will be discussed in the
section on semantics.

Stress operates as a meaning differentiator in the texts of AAW and TLG; it implies
contrast in the meanings of compounds and sentences. Phrase stress usually occurs in
expressions making meaning more precise. In the conversation between Alice and the
White Knight the expressions "next course" and "next day" are in the focus of the author's play:

"In time to have it cooked for the next course?" said Alice. "Well, that was
quick work, certainly!"
"Well, not the next course," the Knight said in a slow thoughtful tone: "no
certainly not the next course."
"Then it would have to be the next day. I suppose you wouldn't have two
pudding-courses in one dinner?"
"Well, not the next day," the Knight repeated as before: "not the next day."
(TLG, VIII. 304-305)

When the primary stress falls on the first word in "next course", the Knight is indicating
that it was not the next but presumably a later course for which he cooked the pudding. The
switch of the stress to the second word implies that it was not a following course for which
the pudding was ready but for a different occasion. That is why Alice wants to clarify what
the Knight wanted to say, presupposing it must have been the next day. However, the same
problem is responsible for the ambiguity again. The disambiguating role of contrastive
stress is turned upside down. Carroll always indicates deviation from the normal stress-pattern of sentences. In the shop of the Sheep in TLG, for instance, Alice would like to look all round first before making up her mind what to buy. The Sheep does not understand her, saying she cannot look all round herself (TLG, V. 252-253). Within the phrase "look all round" the middle component is stressed, which results in the breaking up of the original phrasal verb construction and its transformation into a prepositional verb.

**Morphology**

Playing with words was one of Lewis Carroll's favourite activities. He was the inventor of several word-games, puns, anagrams and riddles in which he exploited and enriched the lexical inventory of the English language. His interest in the formation of new words was that of a logician; Carroll's neologisms are the results of an attempt to create and analyse words from the point of view of pure logic. According to Sutherland (Sutherland, 1970: 52), the linguistic era of the nineteenth century contributed a lot to Carroll's lexical sensitiveness. Lewis Carroll reflected upon the work of etymologists and gave a humorous description of language change. His hidden intention may have been to satirise the self-confidence of historical linguists (Sutherland, 1970: 52). Lewis Carroll’s etymological explanations that appeared in one issue of his self-written periodical *Mischmasch* (1885) can be found in the annotated version of AAW and TLG (Gardner, 1967: 191), together with Martin Gardner's notes with their OED reference (Gardener, 1967: 192-197).

Although there are not too many derived words among Carroll's neologisms in his literary works, examples such as "beamish", “un-birthday”, “brillig” or “uglification” give a sample of his experimentation with the combination of bases and affixes. Carroll also created words by clipping off the first syllable. In a letter to a child-friend he wrote that "uffish", for example, reminds him of "a state of mind when the voice is gruffish, the manner is roughish, and the temper huffish" (Gardner, 1967: 196) All of the three words end alike phonologically, which leads to the association of the three meanings with one form.

In spite of being one of the most productive word-formation processes in English, compounding is used only once in AAW and in TLG. As Sutherland points out (Sutherland 1970: 36), the title of the nonsense poem "Jabberwocky" is actually a compound of two words: "jabber", meaning "excited and voluble discussion" and "wocer" or "wocor" referring to "offspring" or "fruit". Blending fascinated Carroll's mind much more than compounding; most of his invented words have gone through this process. Lewis Carroll
must have been interested in the mental process that is working in the background of blending. He described it in the following way:

For instance, take the two words "fuming" and "furious". Make up your mind that you will say both words, but leave it unsettled which you will say first. Now open your mouth and speak. If your thoughts incline ever so little towards "fuming", you will say "fuming-furious"; if they turn, by even a hair's breadth, towards "furious", you will say "furious-fuming"; but if you have that rarest of gifts, a perfectly balanced mind, you will say "fruminous". (Gardner, 1967: 195)

In Jabberwocky the word "slithy" is a blended form of "slimy" and "lithe", meaning 'smooth and active' (Gardner, 1967: 195). This interpretation agrees with that of Humpty Dumpty in TLG but does not have any relation to the historical explanation of its origin in the OED (Gardner, 1967: 195): the word is a variant of "sleathy", an obsolete word with the meaning 'slovenly'. Further examples that can be mentioned here are “burble”, “gallumphing”, “shortled” and “vorpal”. There are blends where the rules for blending are more obvious; the roots are easy to recognise: e.g. glasphalt, slanguage, balloonatic (Bauer, 1983:236). I interpret these words as borderline cases between blending and compounding. We can find examples in TLG: "Bread-and-butter-fly", "Snap-dragon-fly" and "Rocking-horse-fly". These names represent insects; in chapter three the Gnat introduces them to Alice. Concerning their structure they are alike: all of them are compounded of two expressions in such a way that the last component of the first word and the first component of the second word is the shared element in the construction: bread-and-butter+butter-fly; snap-dragon+dragon-fly; rocking-horse+horse-fly.

**Syntax**

Structure refers to order, arrangement and organisation; thus, it always implies some kind of logic. In AAW and in TLG the logician Lewis Carroll intuitively displays the structural characteristics of the English language in different ways. He makes Alice and the reader rely on their syntactic knowledge for the interpretation of incomplete, nonsense and ambiguous utterances. Structure can be helpful in the understanding of sentences containing new words. English belongs to those languages characterised by a relatively fixed word-order; there are certain grammatical patterns that determine the creation of utterances. Carroll's poem, the
"Jabberwocky" would be meaningless and hardly decodable in the absence of such a syntactic framework.

Charles C. Fries and Sutherland have pointed out the relevance of structural signals in the first verse of Jabberwocky and have found that these are word order, function words, inflectional markers, indications of verb tense/number and co-occurrence phenomena (Sutherland, 1970: 208-209).

1st verse: Twas ---------, and the --------y ------s
             Did ----- and ------- in the -------;
             All -----------y were the -------------s,
             And the -------- -------s --------.

The first clause of the first verse starts with an "it was" construction. It is incomplete in this form; the predicate needs to be completed, i.e. the verb phrase (VP) requires an additional element, which can only be one word in this case. As this English structure is typically used with climatic predications, it is presumable that a noun with a similar sense finished the VP and thus the clause. The next clause follows the word-order of English sentences. The article "the" triggers a noun phrase (NP) functioning as the subject in the sentence. As the endings suggest, it consists of a modifier and a noun. The auxiliary indicates the coming VP, which is divided into two verbs and a prepositional phrase (PP). As the PP can be rewritten as P+NP and the preposition is already there, it is without doubt what has to stand at the end of the clause. The phrase structure rules make Alice able to have at least a vague idea of the meaning of the poem. She makes use of the syntactic patterns in her mind and draws the conclusion: "It seems very pretty," she said when she had finished it, "but it's rather hard to understand!" ... "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 — " (TLG, I. 197).

However reliable it seems, structure can easily be misleading, especially if only the surface structure of a sentence is taken into account. It seems very likely that Carroll liked to play with word-order to make use of the humour originating from syntactic ambiguity. At the mad tea-party this phenomenon becomes a matter of debate:

"Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on.

"I do," Alice hastily replied; "at least — at least I mean what I say — that's the same thing, you know."
"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "Why, you might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as "I eat what I see'!"

"You might just as well say," added the March Hare, "that 'I like what I get' is the same thing as 'I get what I like'!" (AAW, VII. 95)

Structure can be responsible for ambiguity: the linear order of words can imply different interpretations depending on the presumed function of the words in the sentence. One further example of this: "But you'll stay and see me off first?" (TLG, VIII. 314).

"To see somebody off" means to take leave of someone setting out on a journey; accompany to the place of departure. The Knight asks Alice to see him off in this sense. The same phrase gets a different interpretation if "off" is a preposition: to see somebody falling off from somewhere — as Alice sees the Knight falling off from the horse when he is leaving.

Semantics

Being a logician, Lewis Carroll must have been an enthusiastic researcher of the semantic phenomena in language. His works provide an insight into the problems of meaning, the operation of naming and the consequences of ambiguity. As Sutherland (Sutherland, 1970) points out, he was familiar with John Stuart Mill's *Symbolic Logic* (1843), a book that formed the basis of further doubts and inferences for him. All the same, I would not call Carroll a semiotician; his "semantic theory" is by no means consistent, complete or deliberate.

Lewis Carroll's interpretation of meaning must have been a provoking approach in his time; he questioned the relevance of the definite relationship between the signifier and the signified and provided an interesting definition of meaning. In AAW and in TLG the theory of meaning is the following: the meaning of an expression is determined by the intention that the speaker wishes to express with it. The representative of this theory is Humpty Dumpty who claims to have absolute power over words:

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all." (TLG, VI. 269)
There is, however, one respect in which the Humpty-Dumpty-theory cannot be accepted and that is understanding. Successful communication ought to be based on the mutual understanding of the participants, which can only be achieved by sharing the knowledge necessary for the interpretation of their utterances. If one of them decides to attach "private meaning" to a word without any explanation, communication can break down.

In the *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (1985) Victor Raskin proposed a semantic theory of humour to explain what semantic properties of the text make it funny. He interprets the meaning of a word as follows: "In fact, there is no contradiction between meaning as an inherent property of the word and meaning in use. The meaning of every word can be successfully and non-circularly defined as a set of units of meaning each of which is the ability of the word to be used in a different phrase of the language" (Raskin, 1985: 79). Meaning is always meaning in use — as Wittgenstein and Carroll stated. Raskin describes the mental lexicon with the concept of the "script". The script is an internalised cognitive structure constituting a part of the native speaker's lexical knowledge. It is represented in the form of a graph which consists of nodes connecting the different semantic domain corresponding to a word. Every word evokes a script or more scripts with which it is associated. An ambiguous word will evoke more domains and more scripts. It is the role of the combinatorial rules to find the compatible scripts of the words in a sentence and combine them to produce semantic interpretations. According to Victor Raskin's Main Hypothesis, a text is humorous if it is compatible with two scripts which are opposite. The switch from one script to the other is signalled with a trigger that can either be based on ambiguity or contradiction. The role of the trigger is to introduce the second script and suggest a second interpretation of the text. Most lexical triggers are ambiguous words and phrases. Raskin analysed English jokes from the point of view of this theory and I would consider it equally applicable to the analysis of some instances of verbal humour in AAW and in TLG.

"And how many hours a day did you do lessons?" said Alice, in a hurry to change subject.

"Ten hours the first day," said the Mock Turtle: "nine the next, and so on."

"What a curious plan!" exclaimed Alice.

"That's the reason they're called lessons," the Gryphon remarked: "because they lessen from day to day." (AAW, IX. 130)
The trigger is a phonological string of sounds ['lesn] which can refer to two lexical items and several meanings:

I. v 1. to make less
2. to become less

II. n 1. sth to be learnt or to be taught; the period of time given to learning or teaching
2. sth serving as an example or warning
3. a passage from the Bible read aloud during a church service

Script A is the script of learning supported by the previous passage of the conversation (what the Mock Turtle learnt at school) and by the expression "hours a day". The switch to script B is prepared with the gradual lessening of the hours from day to day and is finally accomplished in the explanation of the Gryphon, which puts meaning I/2 in the foreground. The appearance of script B is unexpected and quite late; script A is the dominant one until the last remark.

"Where is the servant whose business it is to answer the door?" she [Alice] began angrily. ...

"To answer the door?" he [the Frog] said. "What's it been asking of?" (TLG, IX. 328)

An idiom can also function as a trigger in verbal jokes. In this case the idiomatic meaning evokes the first script which is strengthened with the words "servant" and "business". It is usually the servant’s task (business) to open doors: the first script is clearly described. The second script is introduced with the repetition of the trigger and the supplement of a question referring to the literal meaning: ask-answer.

**Pragmatics**

Conversations constitute the basis of AAW and TLG. As Patrice Salsa points out in her conversational analysis on Alice (Salsa, 1994: 159), dialogues have a determining role in Carroll's texts, as the focus is not on the actions but on the speech. According to her, Alice's adventures are actually getting into discourses with the characters. This section offers a pragmatic interpretation of these dialogues applying the general discourse analyses of Akmajian et al. (1984), Coulthard (1985), and the Alice-focused conversational analysis of Salsa (1994).

The way human linguistic communication works is usually illustrated by models. I am going to rely mostly on the pragmatics chapter of the book written by Akmajian, Demers
and Harnish (Akmajian et al., 1984: 390-427), in which the general description of talk-exchanges is accomplished by comparing the Message Model and the Inferential Model of linguistic communication. I propose that the discourses in Alice's worlds do not only support the inferential nature of talk-exchanges but humorously show the problems that might come up in its absence. To overcome the defectiveness of the Message Model, the Inferential Model was created to prove the importance of a shared system of presumptions and inferential strategies in human linguistic communication. This applies to AAW and TLG where communication often breaks down because Alice and the creatures not only live in different dimensions but also use language in different ways. In Wonderland and in Looking-Glass-world the characters have a separate system of beliefs and inferences. Misunderstandings seem to occur either because they tend to use language according to the Message Model, that is forgetting about ambiguity, nonliteral and indirect communication, or because Alice does the same when not realising their inferential strategies. In both cases, the humorous effect dissolves the tension.

I am going to illustrate the generally formulated problems listed in *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication* (Akmajian et al., 1984, 395-398) with examples from the Alice books.

In the case of ambiguous expressions it is up to the listener to decide which meaning was intended by the speaker in that particular situation. Such decisions are easier if the context itself suggests which meaning is in question. In AAW, however, it is the context that creates confusion:

"Mine is a long and a sad tale!" said the Mouse, turning to Alice, and sighing.

"It is a long tail certainly," said Alice, looking down with wonder at the Mouse's tail; "but why do you call it sad?" (AAW, III. 50.)

Besides ambiguity, inadequate reference details may cause difficulties in decoding messages. The meaning of the expression rarely covers enough information to refer to particular things. When Alice meets the Caterpillar, she can not make use of its advice without asking for further details:

"One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter."

"One side of what? The other side of what?" thought Alice to herself.

(AAW, V. 73)
Successful communication requires the realisation of the speaker's communicative intention. An utterance may be pronounced with different purposes and it is the hearer's task to find out what the speaker actually intended to say. The expression "I beg your pardon?" for example is generally used either to say sorry for something, or to ask for the repetition or clarification of a previous utterance that was mis- or unheard. Alice uses the phrase with the latter intention when talking to Humpty Dumpty:

"I beg your pardon?" Alice said with a puzzled air.
"I'm not offended," said Humpty Dumpty.
"I mean what is an un-birthday present?" (TLG, VI. 267)

Humpty Dumpty, however, misunderstands her communicative intention, and answers according to the other usually meant intention that goes with the phrase.

Language can have non-communicative functions; institutional acts and perlocutionary acts can be mentioned here as examples. Institutional acts affect institutional states of affairs e.g. firing or baptising someone. Such acts work even if the communicative function is not recognised. There are, however, certain rules that must be followed when carrying out these ritualistic acts. Invitations and introductions are speech acts which also have certain conditions to keep. An invitation should be initiated by the person who is not a guest but a host, and it should be accepted or refused by the potential guest. These roles get mixed up in TLG:

The Red Queen broke the silence by saying, to the White Queen, "I invite you to Alice's dinner-party this afternoon."
The White Queen smiled feebly, and said "And I invite you."
"I didn't know I was to have a party at all," said Alice; "but, if there is to be one, I think I ought to invite guests." (TLG, IX. 319-320)

Introductions usually involve two human beings, which is not the case at Alice's party. She is introduced to the mutton and the pudding following the usual way of introductions. "Alice — Mutton: Mutton — Alice". To increase the weirdness of the situation, she is not allowed to eat the meals she has been introduced to. The examples above serve two purposes. First, they can be applied to show the consequences of the absence of a shared system of presuppositions and inferential strategies in linguistic communication. Alice and
the creatures can rarely accomplish successful talk-exchange, while they think and speak in different dimensions. Second, the examples illuminate the inadequacy of the Message Model in the description of the communication process and strengthen the highly inferential nature of our linguistic communication.

Conclusion
This paper has aimed to demonstrate that Lewis Carroll was a master of language play at all linguistic levels. As Ernst Leisi points out, these stories provide a place where childish nonsense and scientific reason can meet — and where the English like to linger (Leisi, 1965: 110). Carroll was not a linguist; he was just playing with language like a mischievous boy. Nevertheless, I think that it is only through playing that the real nature of language can be understood.

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