Lewis Carroll's Wordplay

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*

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Introduction

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
    Did gyre and gimble in the wabe ;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
    And the mome raths outgrabe.
                  (from the first stanza)

The above extract comes from 'Jabberwocky' by Lewis Carroll who is famous for the nonsense song. In this stanza, we come across a number of unfamiliar words like 'slithy' (slimy + lithe), 'mimsy' (flimsy + miserable), and the like. These words were coined by an author who was very adept at playing with words and numbers in his stories.

Lewis Carroll (1832–1898), the pseudonym of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, was a lecturer in mathematics at Oxford University. His literary writings abound in a variety of wordplay based on his elaborate calculation. The skillfully computed handling of words appeals to the imagination of all his readers young and old. His junior readers immediately become fascinated by his playful nonsense, while his senior readers are delighted by his sense of language. In short, playing on words is the pith of Carroll's linguistic art.

The present thesis aims to look into the form and function of wordplay *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which established the author's status as a man of letters, and its sequel *Through the Looking Glass*, for the purpose of throwing some light upon his verbal artifice. The first chapter deals with the phonological aspect, the second the semantic, the third the syntactic, and the fourth and last the aspect of expression. It might be said that it is more difficult to find common sense than nonsense in his use of words, and his logic often takes us far beyond the world of common.

Chapter 1 Phonology

We will start with examining a few phonological features such as homophony, homonymy and other types of sound similarity, giving illustrative examples chosen from his writings.

I. i Homophony

OED (2nd edition) defines 'homophony' as follows.

> Applied to words having the same sound, but differing in meaning or derivation ; also to different symbols denoting the same sound or group of sounds.

Two or more different written forms are described as homophones when they have the same pronunciation. For example, there are 'not — knot' [nɔt], 'flour — flower' [fláuə], 'hoarse — horse' [hɔːs], and so on.

> "And how many hours a day did you do *lessons*?" said Alice, in a hurry to change the 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."
> This was quite a new idea to Alice, and she thought it over a little before she made her next remark.
> "Then the eleventh day must have been holiday?"
> "Of course it was," said the Mock Turtle.

(*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* IX : italics mine)

Here, Mock Turtle is giving Alice a facetious explanation of the school lessons in the sea by taking advantage of the homophones 'lesson' and 'lessen' [lesn]. School hours lessen day by day in the case of submarine school, for 'lesson' can imply 'lessen' because of lessening day after day. Clearly, this is wordplay depending on the same pronunciation of 'lesson' and 'lessen'.

I. ii Homonymy

OED defines 'homonymy' as follows :

Applied to words having the same sound, but differing in meaning.

When two words are homonyms, which have quite different meanings, they are labeled as separated entries in most dictionaries.

"Once upon a time there were three little sisters," the Dormouse began in a great hurry ; "and their names were Elsie, Lacie, and Tillie ; and they lived at the bottom of a *well* —" . . .

Alice did not wish to offend the Dormouse again, so she began very cautiously : "But I don't understand. Where did they draw the treacle from?"

"You can draw water out of a water—*well,*" said the Hatter ; "so I should think you could draw treacle out of a treacle—*well* —eh, stupid?"

"But they are in the *well,*" Alice said to the Dormouse, not choosing to notice this last remark.

"Of course they were,"said the Dormouse ; " —*well* in."

(*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* VII)

The first four 'well' are used as a noun. It is apparent from their syntactic structure of a determiner plus the headword 'well'. On the other hand, the fifth 'well' have no determiner, so it is natural to assume that the full sentence is 'they (=three little sisters) were well in (the well).' That is to say, 'well' in this context is an adjective functioning as a subject complement.

I. iii Sound Similarities

Playing with similar sounds is called punning. Children find puns funny, but many contemporary authorities on what children are supposed to like believe that puns rather lower the literary quality of children's books. On the contrary, Carroll makes the most of wordplay of similar sounds very well.

"*Reeling* and *Writhing,* of course, to begin with," the Mock Turtle replied ; "and then the different branches of Arithmetic—*Ambition, Distraction, Uglification,* and *Derision.*"

(*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* VII)

The Italic words above, malapropisms of a sort, seem to stand for some popular subjects in the sea school. The following table shows 'original words' in the left column and the corresponding words of similar sound in the right.

(sea)　　　　　　 (land)
Reeling——————— Reading
Writhing——————— Writing
Ambition——————— Addition
Distraction—————— Subtraction
Uglification————— Multiplication
Derision———————Division

Chapter 2　Semantics

In this chapter, we will consider Carroll's wordplay from the semantic viewpoint and analyze it under the headings of polysemy, literalism, and metalanguage.

II. i Polysemy

Yule (1985) explains this term as follows.

Relatedness of meaning accompanying identical form is technically known as polysemy, which can be defined as one form (written of spoken) having multiple meanings which are all related by extension. Examples are the word 'head', used to refer to the object on top of your body, on top of a glass of beer, on top of a company or department ; or 'foot' (of person, of bed, of mountain), or 'run' (person does, water does, colors do).

Generally, most dictionaries treat these multiple meanings

within a single lexical item : 'sour' (=having a sharp or acid taste/ of a person or temper harsh), 'sweet' (=having the taste of sugar/ pleasing to the senses, mind, or feelings) and 'bite' (=cut into or nip with the teeth/ a skin wound or puncture produced by biting).

> Alice didn't like being criticised, so she began asking questions. "Aren't you sometimes frightened at being planted out here, with nobody to take care of you?"
> "There's the tree in the middle," said the Rose : "what else is it good for?"
> "But what could it do, if any danger came?" Alice asked.
> "It could bark," said the Rose.
> "It says '*Bough*—*wough*!' cried a Daisy : "that's why its branches are called boughs!"
>
> (*Through the Looking Glass,* II)

The flowers say that the tree in the middle takes care of them. But Alice asks them what the tree could do face to face with dangers. The answer is "It could bark". 'Bough —wough' [báuwáu] are rhyme words like a dog's cry 'bowwow' [báuwáu]. As a result, the flowers don't get frightened because it works as a watch dog. In addition, the wordplay is derived from the double functions of the word 'bark' both as a verb (=utter a bark) and a noun (=the tough outer covering of the stems and roots of a tree).

II. ii Literalism

As is well known, a lot of common words have developed more or less metaphorical meanings, in addition to their literal and original meanings. To the resulting multiplicity of meanings has wordplay resourse not infrequently.

> "Did you happen to meet any soldiers, my dear, as you came through the wood?"
> "Yes, I did," said Alice : "several thousand, I should think."
> "Four thousand two hundred and seven, that's the exact number," the king said, referring to his book. "I couldn't send all the horses, you know, because two of them are wanted in the game. And I haven't senyt the two Messengers, either. They're both gone

to the town. Just look along th Road, and tell me if you can see either of them."
> "I see nobody on the road," said Alice.
> "I only wish I had such eyes," the King remarked in a fretful tone.
> "To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it's as much as I can do to see real people, by this light."
>
> (*Through the Looking Glass,* VII)

The White King asks Alice if she can see either of two Messengers who have gone to the town. She answers "I see nobody on the road." The word 'nobody' can be expressed as "I don't see anybody on the road". But he employs "nobody" in the sense of a proper name. Then he ironically observes, "I only wish I had such eyes. To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance! Why, it's as much as I can do to see real people, by this light!"

II. iii Metalanguage

Our daily speech seems to consist of two distinct types, i.e. what is called 'Object Language' and 'Metalanguage'.

> (a) There is a *moon* tonight.
> (b) We have a full *moon* tonight.
> (c) '*Moon*' is an English word.
> (d) '*Moon*' is a word of four letters.

(a) and (b) above refer to indicate the object of a heavenly body, while (c) and (d) stand for the word 'moon' itself. They are termed pure (or syntactical) metalanguage because they relate not to their content, but the words themselves.

> Next camean angry voice—the Rabbit's—"Pat! Pat! Where are you?"
> And then a voice she had never heard before, "Sure then I'm here! *Digging for apples,* yer honour!"
> "*Digging for apples, indeed*!" said the Rabbit angrily.
>
> (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* IV)

A speaker says something, and another speaker repeats all or part of the first speaker's words, adding his own feeling. Then the second speaker's words are repeated in as

an immediate response.

In the last sentence above, the emotive word 'indeed' is added, and the emotion is specified in the reporting clause. This may schematically be shown as follows.

> PAT :   'Digging for apples' [object language]
> RABBIT :   'Digging for apples' [metalanguage] ＋
>   'indeed' [emotive word] (implying 'dig-
>   ging for apples? Impossible!')

Chapter 3 Syntax

In the third chapter, particular attention is given to the syntactic aspects, which are classified into the following three heads ; i.e. transposition, possessive case and neologism.

III. i Transposition
Needless to say, word order does a most important function in English, which is also true of wordplay.

> "All right," said the Cat ; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the rail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.
> "Well! I've often seen *a cat without a grin*," thought Alice ; "but *a grin without a cat*! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!"
>
> (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* VI)

The simile 'grin like a Cheshire cat', though of an obscure origin, was popularized by Carroll. Here is the problem about a cat and a grin in a grin without substance. Like a cat without a grin, we can say a grin only after an attribute. It makes no sense to transpose the substance with the attribute. This is almost a question of ontology and Martin Gardner explains in his annotation as follows.

The phrase 'grin without a cat' is not a bad description of pure mathematics. Although mathematical theorems often can be usefully applied to the structure of the external world, the theorems themselves are abstractions that belong in another realm 'remote even from the pitiful facts of Nature . . . and ordered cosmos, where pure thought can dwell in its natural home, and where one, at

least, of our nobler impulses can escape from the dreary exile of the actual world.'

III. ii Possessive Case
Cursory mention may be made of a wordplay on the meaning of a possessive pronoun.

> "Where do you come from?" said the Red Queen. "And where are you going? Look up, speak nicely, and don't twiddle your fingers all the time." Alice attended to all these directions, and explained, as well as she could, that she had *lost her way.*
> "I don't know what you mean by *your way,*" said the Queen : "all the ways about here belong to me — but why did you come out here at all? . . .
>
> (*Through the Looking Glass,* II)

Alice tries to excuse the Red Queen that she lost her way, using an idiomatic phrase 'lose one's way.' The Red Queen willfully catches Alice in her use of 'my' in the idiom, abstracted in an idiomatic phrase. The Queen pretends that she has the royal ownership of every way, telling Alice : "I don't know what you mean by your way, all the ways about here belong to me." That is to say, the Red Queen interprets 'the way that I should go' as 'the way that I possess.'

III. iii Neologism
Among a number of ways of word−formation is neologism, which means a newly invented word. As is well known, Carroll was equally interested and talented in this respect.

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

When Alice came into the place of glass through the glass, she finds a book on the table. It is only written in words she doesn't know, she reflects it in the mirror, and she understands these words. The title is 'Jabberwocky'. She can spell the words, but she cannot understand their meanings. Later, Humpty Dumpty says that when using a

word, he means just what he chooses it to mean −neither more nor less, which is his unique use of words. The fact is that Humpty Dumpty is really Carroll himself.

What follows is a list of convinced commentaries to these coinages separately made by Carroll himself and Humpty Dumpty.

brillig : derived from the verb to *bryl or broil.* 'the time of broilingdinner.'

slithy : compounded of *slimy and lithe.* 'Smooth and active.'

tove : a kind of badger. It has smooth white hair, long hind legs, and short horns like a stag.

gyre : a verb derived from *gyaour* or *giaour,* 'a dog'.

gimble : whence *gimblet.* 'To screw out holes in anything.'

wabe : derived from the verb to *swab* or *soak.* 'The side of a hill'.

mimsy : whence *mimserable* and *miserable.* 'Unhappy'.

borogove : an extinct kind of parrot. It had no wings, beaks turned up, and made its nests under sundials.

mome : hence *solemome, solemone,* and *solemn.* 'Grave, Serious'.

rath : a species of land turtle. Head erect : mouth like a shark : forelegs curved out so that the animal walked on its knees : smooth green body.

outgrabe : past tense of the verb *to outgribe* and connected with obsolete verbs *to grike,* or *shrike,* from which are derived '*shriek*' and '*creak*'. 'Squeaked'.

Chapter 4 Expression

In the fourth and last chapter, we pay attention to a few traits relating to expression in general.

IV. i Capricious Usage

Humpty Dumpty (= probably Carroll himself) comments on how to use a word as follows.

"When I use a word, it means just what I choose it

to mean −neither more nor less."

"The question is, which is to be master−that's all."

Various characters here and there in the two works we have discussed realize these two views above.

Alice didn't dare to argue the point, but went on :
"−and I thought I'd try
And find my way to the top of that *hill* −"
"When you say 'hill'," the Queen interrupted, "I could show you *hill*s, in comparison with which you'd call that a valley."

(*Through the Looking Glass,* II)

Through a hill and a valley have the difference between an elevation and a hollow of the ground. The Red Queen relates it as the relative difference. About the hill that both Queen and Alice refer to, we compare the height of two hills, and we can answer. But we cannot refer to a low hill as a valley. As a matter of course, we cannot compare 'hill' with 'valley'.

The Red Queen has the privileged authority peculiar to Queen, and she absolutely claims a valley to be 'low', so that she capriciously uses a word. Besides, the Red Queen also remarks. "I've heard nonsense, compared with which that could be as sensible as a dictionary."

Final Remarks

We have looked into Lewis Carroll's play on word in *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass.* We have described his wordplay in four chapters . . . the phonological, semantic, and syntactic aspects and the aspect of expression, respectively. No wordplay proves effective unless you grasp the author's intention, and at times some wordplays seem to require more or less explanation on the part of the author. In the case of the two works treated here, we have dealt with a very curious, complicated kind of nonsense, written for the British readers of the Victorian age (1873−1901), and we need to know a great many things underlying his expressions if we want to appreciate their full wit and flavor.

Carroll's contemporaries lived under the constraint of various rules and morals. Of course, we need some rules to make the world go round smoothly. But Carroll re-

garded them as too heavy a load, so that he intended to set his readers free from these restrictions through his characters, which seems to reveal cynical outlook of the age. This irony is expressed in the following observation of Humpty Dumpty in Though the Looking Glass, 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean −neither or less . . . The question is which is to be master− that's all.' That is to say, the question is whether we use a word or we are used by a word. The former way of thinking ignores the fact that a speaker and a listener cooperate with each other, resulting in a break down of communication. Smooth communication is not necessarily same as conventional language. We must remember also that many characters and episodes in these two works are the products of puns and other linguistic jokes.

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