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Alice in Blunderland: (Un)systems of Life and Language Beyond the Looking Glass

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If *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll 1871) is a critique of the regimented structures of everyday life in post-industrial England, it simultaneously undercuts the loose manner in which language is used in that world. Beyond the Looking Glass, when Humpty Dumpty advocates unmitigated subjectivity in communicating through language, he stretches the arbitrariness in the use of the English language to its (il)logical extreme. Many of the *Looking Glass* creatures, extensions of Alice's psyche, similarly communicate in bizarre English that is another version of the language of Alice's world. Language is constantly interrogated in the text for not having been revamped commensurately with the overhauling of rules in other spheres of life, and seems slovenly amidst the progress made in science, technology and industry. Ironically, the discourse that censures the laxity of the English language runs as a counter narrative to the discourse indicting excessive disciplining and standardisation in Victorian England, and has the text reading against itself.

Keywords: communication through language, post-industrial England, discipline, standardisation, freedom from rules

"When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less", says Humpty Dumpty to Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll 1871: 124). The arrogance of the statement provokes a deeper question about the irrationality of the English language. Humpty Dumpty's value-charged, narcissistic rhetoric does not merely legitimise but in fact celebrates the subjectivity of the way the English language is used. The novel is an exposé of the slack syntactical

parameters and semantic discrepancies within which the language functions. Simultaneously, however, it interrogates the incommensurate standards of stringency in the workaday world that surrounds it. Critical consensus has read into the two *Alice* texts a critique of the excessively structured, post-industrial phase of Victorian England. The illogical, arbitrary mode of communication represented by the English language in its ordinary usage, however, does not easily correlate with the severe disciplinary system that underlies revitalisation in this historical period.

Humpty Dumpty's self-aggrandising proclamation, within such a context, could simply be interpreted as his appeal for personalised constructions of words and their meanings. It could also be construed as an ironic reminder to Alice that the language *she* speaks is just as whimsical and devoid of objective meaning as some of the goings-on in the *Looking Glass* world which baffle her perception of what constitutes sense. But it is not as though Alice and Humpty Dumpty are engaged in an antagonistic dialogue about the virtues and failings of the English language. After her initial outrage at how disdainfully some of the *Looking Glass* creatures react to ostensibly perfect grammatical constructions, semantic structures, spellings and meanings of words in English, she is more than willing to see or even be won over to their point of view. The *Looking Glass* creatures, in spite of everything, function not as her opponents but as extensions of her psyche who enable her to shed some of the baggage of stodgy complacency that she carries with her from the real world in which she has grown up. Nina Auerbach avers that Alice, "prim and proper in her pinafore and pumps" (1973: 31), is a Victorian child, anchored in Victorian respectability and order, and yet a combination of "literal-mindedness and dream" (ibid.). Her latent propensity to escape the rigour and tedium surrounding her facilitates her imaginary conversations with the *Looking Glass* creatures. Since the creatures embody conflicts within herself, these chats stimulate her to engage with some of the ways of the world, including its linguistic incoherence. The exchanges, therefore, also open up hitherto unexplored, introspective spaces within her that go against mainstream assumptions in curiously divergent ways. She hardly realises that her views (or the *Looking Glass* creatures' comments) about rules vs. leniency or order vs. chaos vis-à-vis the discipline of life and the discipline of language are greatly contrary. In Alice's interactions with the *Looking Glass* creatures, I therefore decode prime illustrations of the text reading against itself. The discourse that censures the looseness and the senselessness of the English language is not only at odds with, but runs as a counter narrative to, the discourse indicting the disproportionately meticulous observation of rules in every other sphere of life.

It is a critical commonplace to read both *Alice* books as "representative of repressed Victorian childhood […] surrounded by irrational, rule-making and

solipsistic adults" (Hunt 2001: 46). Many critics have expressed in diverse ways that the texts ridicule "smug formalism and copy-book maxims" (Knoepflmacher 1998: 154) or condemn "a world that privileges reason, progress and strict codes of morality and behavior" (Thacker and Webb 2002: 14). The word 'queer' is used in the two books at least twenty times, says Seth Lehrer, to "define experience outside the strictures of Victorian propriety" (2008: 195). In England, the bourgeois ideas of time and discipline which led to a hitherto unprecedented regimentation in homes and schools found one of its severest critics in Carroll's Alice. The homogenisation of the treatment of childhood during the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath had reduced the child almost to an assembly line product (see Thompson 1981). Alice breaks out of this pre-programmed format and is pleasantly surprised to find everything topsy-turvy and not abiding by any rules of society, law or any other institution in Wonderland, or in the land of the *Looking Glass*. Alice's predilection to dream of situations where she can elude the shackles of her workaday life represents the child's resistance to the decorum and regimentation of the adult world.

The adult domain that would, one assumes, eventually assimilate Alice within it had lately accomplished fundamental structural changes that revamped but also quite certainly destroyed the presumably laid-back lifestyle of the freer and more spontaneous pre-industrial world. The intimidating railway journey that is imposed on Alice, with its prioritisation of time and money, for instance, provokes her to say that she does not belong to the railway journey at all and evokes her nostalgia about the wood she has just been through. Subsequently, when she is on the boat with the sheep, Alice's lament that the prettiest rushes are always furthest away correspondingly uncovers a kind of romantic longing in her, but is followed soon by her abrupt relocation to the claustrophobic space of the little dark shop, a distasteful reality in the post-industrial world. Brooks and trees alternate with shops and trains as Alice moves along the squares of the imaginary chess board which is an exemplar that reinforces the co-existence of free and disorderly playing within a code of strict rules. Alice's commentary, however, decisively decries the streamlining of life with regulations, technology, inventions and monetary transactions, and seems to suggest that the world was more charming without them.

But paradoxically, as Alice realises through her dialogues with the *Looking Glass* creatures/herself, the extant rules in language have not been questioned and reformulated in keeping with the markers of reason, structure and modernity in real life. Communication through language in Victorian England, the text appears to insinuate, leaves much to be desired. Established modes of Anglophone linguistic

articulation might have intermittently undergone some cosmetic changes of spelling or rejected and replaced words that have become obsolete. Unusually fashioned sentences, awkward and problematic terminology, and eccentric idiomatic expressions that supposedly communicate information, feelings and ideas, however, continue to be mired in a sloppy changelessness. Such a stasis that cannot sustain or augment the faculty of learning which deals with verbal exchanges is virtually retrogressive amidst the no-nonsense and updated co-ordinates of science, technology and industry in the corporeal world. The poem "Jabberwocky", on the other hand, is a fine example of accurate metrical and syntactic rules combined with semantic creativity and freedom – a blend that Alice can hardly boast of in her real life. In her own world, lately accomplished straitjacketed reconfigurations and codes are at odds with an accompanying deficiency in linguistic overhauling. The English language of real life is neither perfectly systematised nor appealingly innovative – it is illogical and arbitrary. Unlike Donald Rackin, I would not say that all this affirms "the sane madness of ordinary existence" (1966: 325) but exposes the contrary pulls of the supposedly sane contemporary co-ordinates of living and the incompatible madness of the English language.

The world of *Through the Looking Glass* deplores the constraints of conveniently standardised, time-based, money-centred, pre-planned arrangements that are accompanied by the loss of freedom and personal choice in our quotidian occupations. According to Patricia Meyer Spacks, "[…] the apparent chaos of the dream-world is less disorderly than the lack of discipline in the real world […]" (2000: 165). Curiously, this dream-world does not simultaneously glorify a loosely designed language that borders on being customised according to convenience. When Alice supports the absurd use of certain words and phrases in English that are challenged by the *Looking Glass* creatures, she blindly follows a rule book that she has internalised. The text does not merely demolish the severe operative structures of industrialisation along with the limp organisational principles of the English language rule book. Instead, unable to work out any equivalence between the two incongruous systems, it appeals for some flexibility within a world governed by mechanised arrangements, while sardonically questioning the laxity and communication gap engendered by the English language that is ingrained within that very rigid scheme of things. While the order of the real world is valued by its adult inhabitants, the English language, in all its disordered unruliness, is equally valorised by them without any reservations. The creatures of Alice's extended consciousness, on the other hand, relentlessly defy both.

To start by exploring the interlocutions within the linguistic matrix of *Through the Looking Glass*, there is the altercation between Alice and her sister about

whether the two of them could pretend to be kings and queens. The sister objects to the proposal since that would involve at least four people. At the end of the transaction, Alice compromises by replying that her sister could be one of them while she could be the rest, keeping open imaginative possibilities within her while letting her sister be confined to a bare fact. The sister, obsessed with nit-picking about "singulars" and "plurals" that can be used in the sentence, cannot let herself go in the make-believe of "Let's pretend" to the extent of inventively fashioning four people out of two. If they could theoretically be metamorphosed into "kings" and "queens", which would likewise pose various hurdles of identity, gender and social status, an ideational reconstitution of the number of people involved in the charade should not seem so shockingly unreasonable to her sister. But the sister is enmeshed in a web that has been fashioned to deal majorly with numbers and quantities and cannot accept anything that does not adhere to its norms. Yet she is not correspondingly scandalised by the empirically unfeasible prospect of their being kings and queens.

Alice's ultimate nightmare of a quantity-crazed world is one in which time is worth a thousand pounds a minute, land is worth a thousand pounds an inch, smoke is worth a thousand pounds a puff and language is worth a thousand pounds a word. On the other hand, when Humpty Dumpty's "nice knock-down argument" related to time and numbers to Alice about how much better it is to get 364 un-birthday presents than only one surprisingly has the potential for a wishful escape from the time-centric rhythms of the world, invented by people who are obsessed with computing everything in terms of numbers. In Humpty Dumpty's utopian scheme of things, the significant celebratory signposts that mark our age as we grow older are of no consequence if we do not assign such import to one specific date in the calendar but consider all other days as equally if not more noteworthy and auspicious. The 364 days of Humpty Dumpty's contention, therefore, is not a quantitative calculation whatsoever but a perspective that oversteps number- and time-related milestones with aplomb, only to enable endless festivities and gifts galore in the bargain. Similarly, although the formidable Red Queen admonishes Alice for not knowing her Arithmetic, Alice, who is too much of a creature/student of the real world she has left behind, is outraged by the Red Queen's preposterous numeral-divested calculations of dividing a loaf by a knife or subtracting a bone from a dog in which what remains is the dog's temper. Like the interaction with Humpty Dumpty, this one, aggravating as it is to Alice, conjures up the possibility of more human and tangible computations than those that merely deploy abstruse numbers.

In the *Looking Glass* world, Alice is repeatedly sensitised to the inconsistencies of the English tongue whose cultural legacy, with all its time-honoured but ridiculous regulations, does the English-speaking world proud. A word should uniformly mean one thing, feels Alice, when she says to Humpty Dumpty: "The question is," […] "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things" (Carroll 1871: 124). As far as Alice is concerned, this is a rhetorical question, for, according to her, words can hardly act as vehicles of communication if they mean different things at different times. Humpty Dumpty perplexes her further by replying that he can "master" and "manage" words because the end of communication is not cogency and lucidity but what he calls "impenetrability". Humpty Dumpty does not really explain what he means by the word except to confuse Alice with a garbled sermon ending with how they should move on to the next topic. But his utterance of the word "impenetrability" is perhaps a summing up of conventionally accepted but opaque and obscure verbalisations. Alice's question about whether one word can be made to mean two different things rebounds on her as the conversations in the novel feature many words in English that change colour, emphasis or even meaning, depending on their context. In a dialogue between her and the Gnat in Chapter IV, she designates as a bad joke his pun on the word "Miss". However, one hardly has to read between the lines to realise the implications of the discrepancy between the two same words with absolutely different meanings. One is a formal way of addressing a girl and the other means something like "fail to notice" or "let something go by", both of which are spelt and pronounced in the same way in English. Equivocations on many other such pairs of words illustrate the lack of inventiveness in the evolution of the English language (or any natural language) that is supposedly so impoverished of words that it has to take recourse, at times, to the same word to denote different things and ideas. It resorts to homonyms and homophones to designate diverse *things*, but sometimes also uses discrete verbs, nouns, and adjectives in an unintelligible, *impenetrable* muddle. The word 'ground' (a noun) that means a specific piece of land, and the same word that signifies the past tense of 'grind' (a verb) are not only pronounced but spelt the same way. The other two pairs of words (flower–flour and bough–bow) are at least *spelt* differently, but the fantasy world of *Looking Glass* is presumably non-literate and does not take into account *written* communication, at least within what we can see in the text itself. Such ambivalence of signification around divergent uses of the same word causes endless bewilderment, which could be resolved simply by different nomenclatures for different things. It is implied that the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet could surely have been combined in virtually innumerable permutations and combinations for the sake of greater clarity of communication.

The dream world, therefore, is a world in which language is taken seriously (see Spacks 2000: 172). But the *Looking Glass* creatures do not read parallels, echoes, connotations and reflections within the use of language, and decontextualise the language to an extent that it seems to be at war with itself – saying something at odds with what it intends to mean. In a larger sense, this kind of reading aims to recognise "a relationship […], between what [the writer] commands and what he does not command" (Derrida 1976: 158). One can read into the text the paradoxes and contradictions of some conventional grammatical constructions that sometimes dismantle equally established linguistic combinations. Being smugly conformist about the use of phrases like "answering the door", for instance, the indignant and judgmental grammarian in Alice is not confronted by the same deadlock as the Frog. Alice does not even pause to think about the odd phrasings and combinations of words that are already in use. The Frog's question about what it is that the door asked that somebody should answer attains validity only when seen in conjunction with other such knotty plays on words by the creatures of the *Looking Glass* world.

The use of negatives, absences, binaries and polarities in Chapter VI makes the reader conscious that one only has available certain *specific* words that are prefixed with an 'un' to create their antonyms. But there are words and words in the dictionary to which one could innovatively add an 'un' for them to become antonyms, providing new and interesting possibilities of engaging with them. Word combinations in English as a natural language are not contained within severe strictures of sense, so Humpty Dumpty merely stretches the gibberish of the lexicon to construct what is Alice-the-grammarian's nightmare. Humpty Dumpty's "un-birthday present", representing one such use of language that could enlarge our vocabulary, goes a little overboard in adding the prefix 'un' to a noun instead of to an adjective, which would have made better sense. However, Humpty's ingenious use of the prefix, as I have already mentioned, also has the creative potential to tempt the child in us with the prospect of receiving gifts on all days except birthdays – all year round, in fact. The invocation of words that can be added to the English language by adding a simple prefix or by distorting them a little opens up frontiers and vistas that would henceforth not abide by any moribund proscriptions on crossing linguistic thresholds. "Meaning is literal", says Jacqueline Flescher, "but language is imaginative. It is language which governs meaning and determines the creative process" (1969: 140). Some preposterous prefixes have already been subsumed into the already prevalent language without much ado, or without being questioned by pedagogues and linguistic experts, despite the bizarrely nonsensical pictures they engender. "Tiger-lily", "turtle-dove", "dragon-fly", "butter-fly" and "horse-fly" are some illustrations that are discussed in Chapter II, but new

dimensions are accreted to them by the use of further prefixes that evoke images of laboratory-produced crossbreeds, like “snap-dragon-fly”, “bread-and-butter-fly” or “rocking-horse-fly” (cf. Carroll 1871). Juxtaposed to these, the indiscriminate use of ‘un’ as a prefix to create the opposite of a word is relatively innocuous and sane, yet it does not seem to have the sanction of linguistic authority.

The conception of names undergoes an analogous trial to that of prefixes. The Gnat disputes that the names of insects are of no use anyway since insects do not answer to names. In Chapter VIII, the Knight who brags about his own inventions calls the song “Haddock’s Eyes” by sundry names, depending on whether the question is about: a) what it *is*, b) what it is *called*, c) what it is *named* or d) what its *name is called*. This is the Knight’s rejoinder to the specious logic of the English language that has so many different ways of saying the same thing. Its flip side would be to philosophically absorb the Shakespearian dictum that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. A sub-text on proper nouns is also woven into the discourse on names. The names of living things, including human beings, hardly mean anything, and are yet so important to us because of the illusory sense of identity and self-worth they confer on us. In the wood “where things have no names” (Carroll 1871: 61), Alice goes through a transitory phase of amnesia where she can neither remember her own name nor that of the fawn. Almost reduced to tears, as they find themselves at the end of the wood, she is enabled with the help of the Fawn to remember at least the taxonomy under which she can place herself – that of a human child. For the Fawn, who similarly recalls that he is a Fawn, it is sufficient to classify the species to which he or Alice belong, for all other living creatures are content with their generic identity. Alice’s preoccupation with recollecting her first name seems superfluous and self-indulgent in such a context.

To mention just a few wordings that are also put to the test, the White Queen bribes Alice with the prospect of having jam *every other day*. The phrase “every other day” can be deconstructed as “the other of every day”, which amounts to mean “never”. The Queen really hopes to cheat Alice by tempting her with a conditionality whose allure will yield no reward for her, and also ensure that the Queen’s material resources are not depleted. This kind of deployment of language is as reasonable or unreasonable as the meaning gleaned by human beings or the frog from the phrase “answering the door”. The asymmetry of the known and accepted English language, giving us the leeway to perpetually innovate with its words, is thus under the relentless scrutiny of the *Looking Glass* creatures.

The interpenetrating narratives – the challenging of the routine and monotony of a world that is governed by a rigorous system predicated on time and money (for instance, Alice’s railway journey in Chapter III), and the undercutting of the same

world that has no schematic blueprint but is casual, in fact lackadaisical, in the way its inmates talk – mirror each other. They are, of course, not exact reflections of each other, just as Tweedledum and Tweedledee's left and right limbs and eyes do not correspond to each other. There is something awry on this side that has a potential for improvement in the *Looking Glass* version. An easygoing, carefree attitude to language co-exists with the harshly streamlined codes that are followed in day-to-day business and pleasure, work and play on this side of the *Looking Glass* world. Beyond the mirror is reflected an ideal world that appeals for its stricter linguistic standards and yet a life freed of irksome standardisation. The irreverence about both the actualities, which intriguingly develop as a kind of thesis and antithesis and are never reconciled, makes a travesty of the critique itself. It blurs the interface between what is real and what is unreal, what is established and what is desirable, what is homogenised and what is particularised, what is restricted and what is free. The text reads against its own current by confounding our perception of the principles and norms that are its objects of derision.

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Alica u Omaškozemskoj: (ne)sustavi života i jezika s onu stranu zrcala

Ako roman *Alica s onu stranu zrcala* (Carroll 1871) predstavlja kritiku krutih struktura svakodnevice u postindustrijskoj Engleskoj, on istovremeno podriva slobodnu uporabu jezika u vlastitu romanesknome svijetu. Kada Dundo Bumbo (*Humpty Dumpty*) onkraj zrcala zagovara sveopću subjektivnost u jezičnoj komunikaciji, on rasteže proizvoljnost uporabe engleskoga jezika do njezinih (ne)logičnih granica. Mnoga zrcalna stvorenja (produžetci Aličine psihe) na sličan se način u komunikaciji služe bizarnim jezikom koji je inačica jezika Aličina svijeta. Budući da izvrtanje pravila u drugim sferama života nije rezultiralo odgovarajućim promjenama na jezičnome planu, u tekstu se neprestano propitkuje i iskušava jezik koji se u usporedbi s napretkom ostvarenim na polju znanosti, tehnologije i industrije doima nehajnim. Ironično je što diskurs koji prigovara učmalosti engleskoga jezika ujedno služi kao protunarativ diskursu koji kritizira pretjerano discipliniranje i standardizaciju u viktorijanskoj Engleskoj, pa se tekst u konačnici čita protiv samoga sebe.

Ključne riječi: jezična komunikacija, postindustrijska Engleska, disciplina, standardizacija, oslobađanje od pravila

Alice in Fehlerland: Lebens- und Sprach-(Un)-Systeme hinter den Spiegeln

Versteht man den Roman *Alice hinter den Spiegeln* (Carroll 1871) als eine Kritik der steifen Alltagsstrukturen im nachindustriellen England, dann ist diesbezüglich festzustellen, dass dort auch der freie Sprachgebrauch innerhalb der eigenen Romanwelt unterwandert wird. Indem Goggelmoggel nämlich hinter den Spiegeln für einen allzersetzenden Einsatz der Subjektivität im Sprachgebrauch plädiert, dehnt dieser die Willkürlichkeit in der Verwendung des Englischen bis zu ihren (un)-logischen Grenzen aus. Ähnlich bizarrer Sprachgebrauch ist auch einigen anderen Spiegelwesen (als Verlängerungen der Psyche von Alice) eigen. Da die Regelverdrehungen in anderen Lebensbereichen zu keinen entsprechenden Veränderungen des Textes auf seiner Sprachebene führten, hat man den Eindruck, als ob man im Text immer wieder die Sprache, deren Fortschritt gegenüber demjenigen im Bereich der Wissenschaften, der Technologie und der Industrie eher gering erscheint, hinterfragt und auf die Probe stellt. Ironisch wirkt dabei, dass man den Diskurs, womit man die Lethargie des Englischen aufs Korn nimmt, zugleich als Gegenmittel zum Diskurs verwendet, worin die übertriebene Disziplinierung und Standardisierung des viktorianischen Englands kritisiert wird, sodass man schließlich den Text als gegen sich selbst gerichtet lesen kann.

Schlüsselwörter: Sprachkommunikation, nachindustrielles England, Disziplin, Standardisierung, Regelbefreiung