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This is a contribution from *Manners, Norms and Transgressions in the History of English. Literary and linguistic approaches.*

Edited by Andreas H. Jucker and Irma Taavitsainen.

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# Impoliteness in Blunderland

## Carroll's Alice books and the manners in which manners fail

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Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), two linguistic treatises in disguise, create ingenious fantasy worlds where the rules of language and the conventions of communication are turned upside down. What is (semantically) illogical or (pragmatically) inappropriate confounds Alice, who struggles to make sense of nonsense and to keep the order of a polite, rational world in place. In her dialogues with anthropomorphic animals and objects, ambiguity and fallacy coexist with interactive manipulation, while her communicative expectations crumble and comic misunderstandings arise.

This article looks into the construction of linguistic and pragmatic transgressions in Carroll's acclaimed books with a view to unveiling their contribution to impoliteness. On the one hand, the paper analyses the structural mechanisms of wordplay vis-à-vis phonetic, morpho-syntactic and lexical ambiguity. On the other, it examines the pragmatic strategies whereby speech-act infelicities, conversational maxim violations, and bald-on-record clashes contribute to reversing the established conventions of (polite) social interaction. The premise guiding the analysis is that the pervasive existence of double meaning and incongruity in the Alice books underlies not only linguistic phenomena such as punning, neologism, and relexicalisation, but also interactive patterns, in which the expected norms of courteous conduct in social exchanges do not obtain. The antithetical and script-oppositional (hence, humorous) nature of this process defrauds outsider Alice – the victim, but at times the happy recipient, of the uncooperative challenges of this inverted, refracted, teasingly nonsensical world.

**Keywords:** impoliteness, face, manners, incongruity, ambiguity, wordplay, infelicity, speech act, nonsense, humour

## 1. Introduction

This article intends to map the ways in which fictional characters transgress manners in a particular case study of modern English literature: Lewis Carroll's Alice books, namely *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). This transgression must be considered against a set of social norms, whose existence and acknowledgement are the condition for any transgression to be possible in the first place. In Carroll's works, norms of proper behaviour are very much present. Characters show to be aware of, and keep an eye on, each other's manners, for instance by spotting and condemning rudeness. They also routinely engage in polite exchanges and use politeness formulae. Alice, for one thing, is the ultimately courteous figure: she excels in thanking, apologising, agreeing, and praising, just as she does in showing interest, approval, and concern, and so on and so forth.

In light of Alice's behavioural carriage, which is rigidly framed by conventional Victorian rules of civil interaction, it remains to be seen the extent to which such norms ever get to be broken, and if so, by whom and to what effect. The answer to these questions will allow us to unveil not only the transgression of manners in Carroll's Alice books, but also, and crucially, the role language plays in such a transgression. It will also allow us to understand whether, and in what way, the resulting impoliteness may be regarded as humorous.

The hypothesis from which this article departs is that transgression occurrences in Carroll's works bear on a dual analytical level. On the one hand, they exploit language structure in what comes to the ambiguity inherent in phonetic, morphological, syntactic and lexico-semantic features of the language system; on the other, they stem from pragmatic interaction, in terms of conversational maxim infringements, speech act infelicities, and explicit enactments of impoliteness. Therefore, the textual analysis section of this article will divide transgressions in the Alice books into two categories – linguistic and pragmatic transgressions – so as to confirm, or refute, the above hypothesis. At the same time, it will ponder the ways in which such forms of transgression, if existent, consubstantiate (humorous) impoliteness strategies.

But a number of theoretical questions need be approached beforehand. For that reason, the following section will address, in a necessarily brief way, some issues regarding the Victorian cultural context, the ever-evolving field of impoliteness research, and the corresponding methodological and conceptual implication for a treatment of literary fiction, particularly that meant for children, where humour plays an important role.

## 2. Victorian manners

Written in the very midst of the Victorian era, it is no wonder that Carroll's Alice books mirror the ways and customs of civilised living in nineteenth-century England. The survival of very detailed reports of how to behave according to strict conduct rules dating from that time (e.g. Hayward 1837; Klein 1899; Mitchell 1844; Sala 1864) leaves little doubt as to how important courtesy was held as being. Besides etiquette books, novels also played a pedagogical role in teaching their (especially female) readership how to behave. As Maunder (2000: 55) points out, novels "encouraged in readers – especially in 'ladies' – the close observation of how people conducted themselves in particular social situations".

As a girl, Alice must be placed in a cultural context where the pressure of Victorian morals and ideals greatly affected the upbringing of women. As Montabrut (1994: 151) remarks, in his discussion of *The Angel in the House*, the ever so famous poem by Patmore, women were raised to exhibit faultless behaviour and to almost emulate saints in their role as wives and mothers. Hence the nearly consecrating connotation that civility held: "Civility in this light (...) connotes the idea of a humanising, civilising, and ultimately *sanctifying* energy at the root of courtly manners" (ibid.). Besides, when it came to girls, who had no educational or professional prerogatives, little more was expected of them than to be good bride material. In privileged classes, like Alice's, this meant mastering the skills of sophisticated living: Jordan (1987: 65) significantly mentions that "a girl was led towards becoming marriageable through her command of the pianoforte and French".

As a Victorian child, Alice is also supposed to keep a respectful distance from her elders and betters. This distance is not only ritual and behavioural, but also physical. Hughes (1993: 66) notes that upper-class children in Victorian times were kept away from adults, even from their parents: "In very large houses where the schoolroom and nursery were housed in a distant wing, parents might encounter their children only by prearranged appointment". The idea that children should be under control in such a way as to be almost invisible is also present in Robinson-Tomsett's (2013: 77) discussion of the "importance of being inconspicuous" for young ladies' ideal conduct in the nineteenth century: "Any desire for self-expression that broke social convention was to be suppressed; any action that drew the attention of others should be avoided."

The way Victorian children were raised actually involved, in middle- to upper-class environments, submissiveness and deference to their superiors. In the family realm, as Frost (2009: 32) puts it, "most middle- and upper-class children remained dutiful to their parents and followed the expected family roles". The sense of hierarchy and the notion of indebtedness to parents made the ordinary parent-child

relationship be one “in which affection is coloured by deference and partial reserve” (Roberts 1978: 69). Indeed, the idea that children and adolescents should be subordinate and subservient to adults seems to underlie Victorian civility.

At the outset of this article it is fitting to briefly outline how noticeably polite Alice is in her use of conventionally courteous forms of address and her mannerly verbal performance. Besides, it is useful to sketch the framework of “good manners” against which Carroll’s characters interact, from the perspective of their own comments, or from the remarks the narrator makes about their opinions and thoughts. Even though Alice, at times, yields to provocation and commits etiquette blunders herself, she stands out from the group as the epitome of good manners.

In the Grinning Cat episode, for example, she addresses the Duchess by using politeness hedges, namely modals and the request marker “please”, which the narrator actually frames as being a result of her concern with manners:

- (1) “*Please would you tell me,*” said Alice a little timidly, for *she was not quite sure whether it was good manners* for her to speak first, “why your cat grins like that?” (Carroll 1865: 82. Italics mine, henceforth.)

Alice also apologises profusely throughout the chapters, as happens when she addresses the Mouse and the Pigeon:

- (2) “You are not attending!” said the Mouse to Alice severely. “What are you thinking of?”  
 “*I beg your pardon,*” said Alice very humbly: “you had got to the fifth bend, I think?” (1865: 38)
- (3) “Why, I haven’t had a wink of sleep these three weeks!” said the Pigeon.  
 “*I’m very sorry* you’ve been annoyed,” said Alice, who was beginning to see its meaning. (1865: 72)

Likewise, Alice rather often employs polite address forms, like “Sir” and “your Majesty”, as is the case in the following situations:

- (4) “Well, I should like to be a little larger, *sir*, if you wouldn’t mind,” said Alice: “three inches is such a wretched height to be.” (1865: 67)
- (5) “My name is Alice, so please *your Majesty*,” said Alice *very politely*; but she added, to herself, “Why, they’re only a pack of cards, after all. I needn’t be afraid of them!” (1865: 116)

Significantly, in the above example, the narrator’s use of the adverbial phrase “very politely” further emphasises Alice’s overall stance. The same phrase occurs at other moments in the books:

- (6) “I’m afraid I can’t put it more clearly,” Alice replied *very politely*, “for I can’t understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.” (1865: 60)
- (7) “All cats can,” said the Duchess; “and most of ’em do.”  
“I don’t know of any that do,” Alice said *very politely*, feeling quite pleased to have got into a conversation. (1865: 83)

The affirmation of Alice’s engagement with politeness is directly proportional to her dislike for rudeness, which the narrator also acknowledges, in a rather literal way, next:

- (8) Alice did not much like keeping so close to her [the Duchess]. However, *she did not like to be rude*, so she bore it as well as she could. (1865: 132)

Even if sometimes Alice is so baffled and taken aback that she lets some affronts go unnoticed, she is very much able to assess other people’s rudeness, and she actually complains about it several times in the stories. A paradigmatic example takes place in her difficult conversation with the Hatter:

- (9) “You should learn not to make personal remarks,” Alice said with some severity: “*it’s very rude*.” (1865: 96)

The other characters also reprimand Alice for her alleged lack of proper manners, as is the case in the Mad Tea-Party, in which she jumps to her own defence:

- (10) “*It wasn’t very civil of you* to sit down without being invited,” said the March Hare.  
“I didn’t know it was your table,” said Alice; “it’s laid for a great many more than three.” (1865: 96)

Sometimes, in her rush to set things straight, and to restore truth and common sense, Alice makes other courtesy blunders, such as contradicting the other characters – and she thus fails to keep her politeness unblemished. In the following passage, for instance, Alice contradicts the Dormouse, getting duly scolded:

- (11) “It was a treacle-well”, the Dormouse said.  
“*There’s no such thing!*” Alice was beginning very angrily, but the Hatter and the March Hare went “Sh! sh!” and the Dormouse sulkily remarked:  
“*If you can’t be civil*, you’d better finish the story for yourself.” (1865: 107)

As can be seen from these examples, Carroll’s characters interact in a clearly established politeness framework, apparently knowing what is conventionally expected from their behaviour. When there are infringements and transgressions of such conventions – as we shall see in greater depth in the next sections – the animals and

Alice sometimes (though by no means always) acknowledge the inappropriateness of such a behaviour and produce reprimands that function as repair utterances.

In politeness research, these corrective utterances are instances of what is called First-Order (Im)politeness. Watts et al. (1992: 3–4) proposed the distinction between “politeness1” and “politeness2” at the beginning of the 1990s, and a decade later Eelen (2001) followed in their footsteps. The former term designates a layperson’s understanding of the concept, which is usually limited to showing good manners, using formal language, and abstaining from cursing. Second-Order (Im)politeness, on the other hand, amounts to technical, theoretical approaches to the phenomenon, which tend to be more comprehensive, covering communicative strategies that are not usually deemed (im)polite, but which are, from the analyst’s perspective, “perceived to be salient and marked behaviour” (Haugh 2013: 305), such as insider joking, in-group nicknaming, and aggression.

Approaching Carroll’s patently impolite Alice books from a Politeness Theory perspective necessarily implies, as the previous paragraph shows, going beyond not only the forerunning treatise in the field, namely Brown and Levinson’s (1978/1987), but also Lakoff’s (1973) and Leech’s (1983) seminal contributions, in search of later research into the reverse phenomenon, that of impoliteness. A brief outline of the evolution of this extremely rich area of enquiry (see e.g. Ermida 2006, Locher 2015) will help us lay out a few essential tools to tackle Carroll’s works.

### 3. From politeness to impoliteness

When Lakoff, in 1973, puts forth her Rules of Pragmatic Competence – Be Clear vs. Be Polite – she shows an early understanding of politeness as the avoidance of offense. This, she holds, is more important in a conversation than to achieve clarity, “since in most informal conversations, actual communication of important ideas is secondary to merely reaffirming and strengthening relationships” (Lakoff 1973: 298 – this phatic function of language is clearly present in our Examples 7 and 37, where Alice is happy enough to keep a conversation going). Two years later, Grice’s (1975) cooperative model makes room for politeness, albeit as a rather secondary concern: “be polite” is just one among “all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social, or moral in character)” (Grice 1975: 47). In 1983, Leech follows up on the “conversational-maxim view” (Fraser 1990: 222) in his approach to politeness. Hence the three principles that substantiate his Interpersonal Rhetoric: Cooperation, Irony and Politeness. The latter includes six politeness maxims, namely Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy – to which, in a recent book-length approach, *The Pragmatics of Politeness* (2014), were added three others: Obligation, Opinion Reticence, and Feeling Reticence. With

Brown and Levinson (hereafter B&L 1978/1987), the speaker's "apparent irrationality or inefficiency" (B&L 1987: 4) in not talking strictly according to Grice's maxims are due to valid and legitimate politeness concerns. B&L's Theory of Politeness lies at the core of the critical hub that has kept growing to this day.

Later researchers, however, came to concentrate on the reverse phenomenon, which I propose to call "communicative egotism", a type of linguistic behaviour that takes the interests of the speaker as more important than the hearer's and the latter's needs as negligible. This is in contrast to Leech's (2014: 4) notion of "communicative altruism", a view of politeness as the promotion of the image and ego (i.e. face) of others. Increasingly, impoliteness and its correlates (aggression, disrespect and offense) came to the fore. The scope of analysis broadened from face-saving behaviour to concerns about face-aggravating communication. One important precursor of this tendency dates back to 1980: Lachenicht was the first to apply B&L's early version of politeness theory (1978) to what he calls "aggravating language" and defines as "a rational attempt to hurt or damage the addressee" (1980: 607). What Lachenicht does in his analysis is invert B&L's framework and propound two essential types: (a) *positive* aggravation is "conveying that the addressee is not liked and does not belong"; and (b) *negative* aggravation is "interfering with the addressee's freedom of action" (1980: 608).

It was roughly from the 1990s onwards that impoliteness received proper attention in its own right. With Culpeper (1996), a reversal of B&L's politeness taxonomy produced a model of impoliteness with five impoliteness superstrategies: "bald on record", "positive impoliteness", "negative impoliteness", "sarcasm" or "mock politeness", and "withhold politeness". Soon afterwards, Kienpointner (1997) also analysed impolite utterances, proposing two types of rudeness: cooperative and non-cooperative rudeness. In the former category are included e.g. ritual insults, reactive rudeness, and sociable rudeness, whereas the latter comprises e.g. strategic rudeness in public institutions. Later on, Culpeper applied his five superstrategies to TV corpora (Culpeper et al. 2003; Culpeper 2005).

A number of researchers, such as Cashman (2006) and Kienpointner (2008), adopted Culpeper's 2005 model. Bousfield (2008), in particular, did so but he dropped the positive/negative impoliteness distinction, on the grounds that positive/negative face strategies had by then been found to associate systematically in interaction, which renders Brown and Levinson's classic distinction superfluous. Yet, several other scholars preserved similar distinctions. This is the case of Scollon and Scollon's (2001) "involvement" vs. "independence" face, House's (2005: 17–18) "societal" vs. "individual" tensions (animal urges of "coming together" versus not being disturbed), Terkourafi's (2008) attempt to establish a universal notion of face2 based on the emotions of "approach" vs. "withdrawal", and Arundale's (2010) dichotomy between relational "connectedness" and "separateness", among many others.



The variety of early twenty-first-century approaches to (im)politeness also reflects, besides conceptual and methodological debates such as the above, two further issues: one is what some call the “discursive” trend; the other is interdisciplinarity. Indeed, the new century drew attention to the embeddedness of (im)polite social practices within specific societal ideologies, which are locally situated and community-centred. Early universality claims came under attack, whereas the emic comprehension of what it means to be polite or impolite came to be valued. This focus on negotiable assessments of politeness within particular moral orders is of a characteristically postmodern flavour. Eelen (2001: 255) states that politeness requires a “different analytical treatment” as follows: “Instead of cataloguing the behaviours evaluated as (im)polite, the focus would be more on the discursive role and functionality of the evaluations themselves”. Besides, the recipient’s role becomes central: “in everyday practice im/politeness occurs not so much when the speaker produces behaviour but rather when the hearer evaluates that behaviour” (2001: 109). Locher and Watts (2005) reinforce this methodological turn, claiming that “politeness is a discursive concept” and that “what is polite (or impolite) should not be predicted by analysts” or “just equated with FTA-mitigation”: rather, scholars “should focus on the discursive struggle in which interactants engage.”

In recent years, the interdisciplinary bent of politeness research has characterised what is usually regarded as its third wave, one which examines data with an “interpersonal” lens (for an overview, see e.g. Locher 2015; Jucker & Rüegg 2017). Examples of interdisciplinarity are Spencer-Oatey (2007), Locher (2008), and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2013), who borrow the concept of identity from social sciences and introduce it into the discussion of (im)politeness. Locher and Langlotz (2008), Culpeper (2011), and Kádár and Haugh (2013) put forth the key role that emotions play in negotiating (im)polite meaning, drawing on input from cognition and psychology. Kádár and Haugh (2013: 45ff) also point out the need to go beyond two fallacies: the first is the normative and essentialist notion of culture, which is far from homogeneous, and which should be replaced by that of the social group, across which meanings vary; the second is the wrong idea that short units of analysis are inherently (im)polite, instead of focusing on the larger interactional context, where meanings are negotiated.

What remains from this necessarily sketchy overview of the evolution of impoliteness research is the need for this article to be anchored in the specific context of the characters’ interaction. Indeed, to analyse Alice’s experiences in Wonderland and in the Looking-Glass world, one needs to take into account the relational work between her and the characters, instead of focusing on isolated units of meaning. Only by situating the different dialogues, or polylogues, in their larger actional and interactional framework, can their meaning be more safely examined, possibly from the very characters’ assessments ((im)politeness1). This is

in tune with third-wave relational and interactional approaches to (im)politeness. At the same time, the particular community of practice where Carroll's characters dwell – judging from the author's circumstances of writing and the real-life girl Alice is inspired by (i.e. Alice Liddell) – takes us to a specific time, place and social context: in fact, the way to analyse (im)politeness in Carroll's books cannot avoid considering the Victorian era, some Oxfordian location, and children from a privileged, conservative, and traditional upper class. Notwithstanding the fictional combination of these variables in imaginary contexts (on the pragmatics of fiction, see e.g. Jucker & Locher 2017, but also Pratt 1977; Simpson 1989; Sell 1991), one needs to bear in mind the moral order presiding over this social conjuncture, which is in tune with second-wave discursive approaches to (im)politeness as well. Last but not least, this analysis also resorts to first-wave conceptions of face-saving strategies – and crucially of face-aggravating ones – as well as the positive/negative face dichotomy and the on-/off-record distinction “à la B&L”, not to mention the insight from Leech's politeness maxims. It is thus assumed that an eclectic, complementary treatment of different trends and concepts in (im)politeness research serves our analytical purposes more effectively.

#### 4. Transgressions in Carroll's Alice books

The construction of transgression in the Alice books is achieved, I venture, both linguistically and pragmatically. Linguistic transgressions rely on creative usages of language that go against regular practice and usual interpretive expectations. Such usages exploit features of language in ways that are unexpected and surprising, thus requiring extra processing efforts on the recipient's part, and seemingly break the cooperative principle. There seem to be three major types of linguistic transgression in Carroll's works: puns, neologisms and relexicalisations. All three defy the established linguistic norms and conventions by which the characters abide in their use of English. On the other hand, pragmatic transgressions are linked to a non-observance of interactional rules and social guidelines, the disrespect for which is perceived as face-threatening and rude. There seem to be three major types of pragmatic malfunction, as it were: conversational maxim violations, infelicitous speech acts, and bald-on-record impoliteness. The next textual analysis sections will check these linguistic and pragmatic transgressions in Carroll's stories.

##### 4.1 Linguistic transgressions

The occurrences of punning, neologism and relexicalisation in the Alice books all rely on a discrepancy between form and content. Indeed, a pun consists in one

form (a word) with at least two meanings (Redfern 1984; Sherzer 1985; Mulken et al. 2005); a neologism is a new form – or a form that combines existing forms – with new, creative meanings, which have not been recorded in general dictionaries (see e.g. Bauer 1983 and Fischer 1998); and relexicalisation is the process whereby a crystallised form, e.g. a collocate, or an idiom, is taken in a new, different sense (Sinclair 1991; Stubbs 2001; Partington 2006). Ambiguity is, therefore, a key factor in Carroll’s language manipulation and transgression.

In Carroll’s books, such a discrepancy, which is unexpected and sometimes farfetched, makes Alice puzzled and uneasy, in her efforts to understand what her interlocutors tell her. Indeed, her Wonderland companions regularly defy her powers of interpretation, forcing her to find hidden meanings and concealed linguistic connections. At the same time, by demanding extra processing efforts on her part, these linguistic games automatically become a threat to her negative face, insofar as they impinge upon her, invading her space, and force her *to do* something, namely to decode and decipher this “manipulatory play with language”, as Sutherland (1970: 21–26) dubs it. Besides, as her inability to keep up with the other characters’ conversation becomes evident, she also loses her positive face, i.e., she fails to achieve her desire to be liked and admired. In the following sections, a choice of such linguistic transgressions illustrates different structural mechanisms of wordplay, the difficult comprehension of which makes Alice grow more and more baffled.

#### 4.1.1 *Punning*

Carroll’s books are renowned for their richness in wordplay. Phonetic puns, to begin with, abound. They are sometimes based on homophony of independent lexemes and sometimes on juncture. It should be noted that, typically, adult speakers disdain phonetic puns as “the lowest form of humour, in which groans are traditionally expected from the listener” (Beer 2016: 75). However, children tend to relish in their sudden discovery, which explains their abundance in two of the most famous children’s books ever.

Consider the dialogue between the King and the Hatter, which plays on the rather elementary homophony between “tea” and the letter “t”, and which looks like the perfect candidate for a good children’s laugh:

- (12) “The twinkling of the what?” said the King.  
 “It began with the *tea*,” the Hatter replied.  
 “Of course twinkling begins with a *T!*” said the King sharply. “Do you take me for a dunce?” (1865: 170)

Likewise, homophony feeds the pun that occurs in the conversation between Alice, the Mock Turtle, and the Gryphon:

- (13) “And how many hours a day did you do *lessons*?” said Alice (...).  
 “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.” (1865: 145)

This is a play on two homophonous words, namely a noun, “lesson” (a period of learning or teaching), and a verb, “lessen” (to make or become less, diminish), both of which are pronounced as /ˈlesən/.

The same goes for the following phonetic game, which exploits the homophony between two different words with the same pronunciation (/teɪl/):

- (14) “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?” And she kept on puzzling about it while the Mouse was speaking (...) (1865: 36)

Other phonetic puns in the stories derive from a play on the juncture of separate words, instead of words taken as single units. The Mock Turtle episode again provides us with an example:

- (15) “The master was an old Turtle—we used to call him Tortoise—”  
 “Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn’t one?” Alice asked.  
 “We called him *Tortoise* because he *taught us*,” said the Mock Turtle angrily; “really you are very dull!” (1865: 142)

The identical pronunciation of “tortoise” and “taught us” /tɔ:təs/ provides the Turtle with an implausible play on sound that confuses Alice, making her fall prey to his verbal abuse easily.

Unlike homophones, homonyms are words which also share their spelling, besides their pronunciation. They provide semantic, also called lexical, punning. In the following passage, the Dormouse plays on the homonymy between the noun “well” (a deep hole in the ground from which you can get water, oil, or gas) and the adverb “well” (in a thorough manner, completely, effectively):

- (16) “But they were *in the well*,” Alice said to the Dormouse (...)  
 “Of course they were,” said the Dormouse; “—*well in*.” (1865: 108)

Likewise, the two senses of the verb “to beat” – “to mark a rhythmic unit or main accent in music” and “to strike (a person or an animal) repeatedly and violently” – provide material for the Hatter to confuse Alice further:

- (17) “I dare say you never even spoke to Time!”, the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously.  
 “Perhaps not,” Alice cautiously replied: “but I know I have to *beat* time when I learn music.”  
 “Ah! That accounts for it,” said the Hatter. “He won’t stand *beating*. Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he’d do almost anything you liked with the clock.” (1865: 101)

Interestingly, the following passage illustrates a homonymic pun, of whose humorous existence the Gnat shows to be aware. Indeed, he quite pointedly notices the playful effects of switching the noun “Miss” (a title for a single woman with no other title) for the verb “miss” (not to attend):

- (18) “(...) The governess would never think of excusing me lessons for that. If she couldn’t remember my name, she’d call me ‘Miss!’ as the servants do,” said Alice.  
 “Well, if she said ‘Miss,’ and didn’t say anything more,” the Gnat remarked, “of course you’d *miss your lessons*. That’s a joke. I wish you had made it.” (1871: 28)

One final example of lexical punning in Carroll’s books bears on antithesis. It is a complex play on the colours black and white, before which Alice becomes utterly mystified:

- (19) “Do you know why it’s called a *whiting*?”  
 “I never thought about it,” said Alice. “Why?”  
 “It does the boots and shoes,” the Gryphon replied very solemnly.  
 Alice was thoroughly puzzled. “Does the boots and shoes!” she repeated in a wondering tone.  
 “Why, what are your shoes done with?” said the Gryphon. “I mean, what makes them so shiny?”  
 Alice looked down at them, and considered a little before she gave her answer. “They’re done with *blackening*, I believe.”  
 “Boots and shoes under the sea,” the Gryphon went on in a deep voice, “are done with a *whiting*. Now you know.” (1865: 154)

Once again, the Gryphon elaborates on the under-sea shoe issue by means of a comparison with a particular type of fish – this time, a whiting (a slender-bodied marine fish of the cod family). He exploits the morphological similarity of the word with the adjective “white” to evoke a pun with the adjective “black” as regards the noun “blackening” (black paste or polish, especially that used on shoes).

From a Gricean perspective, all these puns can be read as uncooperative violations of the Maxim of Manner (or Clarity), before which Alice is rendered unable to understand, hence becoming an incompetent recipient who loses face.

#### 4.1.2 *Neologism*

A second way in which Alice is confronted with linguistic transgression occurs when she passes through the looking-glass, in the eponymous sequel (1871) to the first Alice book. There, she finds a poem, entitled “Jabberwocky”, written back to front, which is one of the most well-known passages of Carroll’s works. The nonsense set of stanzas is laden with coinages which cause Alice to hesitate and wonder in bewilderment, as they present a world she has no knowledge of and no meaning for, or at least one that she can relate to (on Carroll’s nonsense see e.g. Dolitsky 1984 and Lucas 1997). Indeed, the numerous neologisms in the verses offer her a fake version of reality, one in which the non-existent words, in their ontological capacity, point to the existence of things and beings that *are not*:

- (20) ’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
 Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
 All mimsy were the borogoves,  
 And the mome raths outgrabe. (1871: 10)

Neologisms (from Gr. *νέο-* *néo-*, “new” and *λόγος* *lógos*, “speech, utterance”) in Carroll can be, as Sutherland (1970: 24) points out, “pure gibberish”, though those in Jabberwocky “have a strangely evocative quality, suggesting meanings where none are actually present”. Worth noting is the fact that Carroll originally published the first stanza in 1855, as a fragment of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with spoof scholarly footnotes, in his *Mischmasch* home-made periodical. A glimpse into some of these will help us understand the nature of the nonce words on which the poem is based:

- (21) *Toves*: “badgers with horns that fed on cheese”. (...) *Borogoves*: “an extinct kind of parrot with no wings that nested under sundials”. (...) *Raths*: “a species of land turtle with a mouth like a shark that walked on its knees”. (1855: 141–142)

Complete fantasy disguised as scientific data is what these fake academic annotations boil down to. Humpty Dumpty also supplies Alice with meanings for the coined words: though they sometimes differ from those Carroll provided earlier, they coincide in their utterly whimsical and made-up character. Some of the absurd words he defines also derive from blends of existing, separate words:

- (22) “That’s enough to begin with”, Humpty Dumpty interrupted: “there are plenty of hard words there. ‘*Brillig*’ means four o’clock in the afternoon – the time when you begin *broiling* things for dinner.”  
 “That’ll do very well”, said Alice: “and ‘*slithy*?’”  
 “Well, ‘*slithy*’ means ‘lithe and slimy’. ‘Lithe’ is the same as ‘active’. You see it’s like a portmanteau – there are two meanings packed up into one word. (...) Well then, ‘*mimsy*’ is ‘flimsy and miserable’ (there’s another portmanteau for you). (...)”  
 “And then ‘*mome raths*?’” said Alice. “If I’m not giving you too much trouble.”  
 “Well a ‘*rath*’ is a sort of green pig, but ‘*mome*’ I’m not certain about. I think it’s sort for ‘from home’ – meaning that they’d lost their way, you know.”  
 (1871: 58)

No wonder poor Alice is at pains to situate herself in such a nonsensical, fanciful universe – typical, after all, of children’s literature at the Victorian time and earlier (Lucas 1997; Reichertz 2000). What makes the recurrent situation humorous is that she ends up being held accountable for her ignorance, despite the fact that she is the one who knows better. Interestingly enough, some of Carroll’s coined blends made it to the English lexicon, so popular did his Alice works become. This is the case of “chortled” (a blend of *chuckle* and *snort*) and “frabjous” (perhaps a combination of *fair* and *joyous*), according to the definitions given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives, crediting Lewis Carroll. So too is the case of “galumphing” (possibly, galloping in a triumphant way), which the *Merriam-Webster New Book of Word Histories* (1991) defines as “to move with a clumsy and heavy tread”.

A key passage in the Jabberwocky episode lies in Dumpty’s following pronouncement:

- (23) “When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a 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.”  
 (1871: 57)

Dumpty’s arrogant take on language – his “myopic”, “radically non-social conception of utterances” (Dickerson 1997: 528) – shows he does not attribute stable meanings to words. From his perspective, language means just what he wishes it to mean. This, of course, is a philosophical fallacy, just like trying to make neologisms pass for established words and expect other characters to understand them. Even though Saussure (1916) correctly, and groundbreakingly, ascertained the arbitrary nature of the relationship between signifiers (sounds) and signifieds (meanings),

this arbitrariness cannot be re-enacted by speakers every time they use a word. For instance, there is nothing in the sound /tri:/ that connects it to the meaning of a “tree”; yet, speakers cannot refer to a “tree” by using any new, or existing, cluster of sounds they feel like, lest communication should collapse. As Wittgenstein (1953) remarked, language is a social construct, earning its legitimacy – and operability – by communities of language users: only in the extended group do words acquire their meanings (see also Westacott 2018; on the complexities of the so-called “private language argument”, see Nielsen 2008). Alice is well aware of the stability of common names and the impossibility of switching their lexical tag arbitrarily. Hence her objections to Dumpty’s misapplication of the word “glory”:

- (24) “I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.  
 Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t – till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you’.”  
 “But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.  
 (1871: 57)

Conversely, Dumpty defies Alice’s linguistic common sense when he declares proper names to require meanings:

- (25) “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 short laugh: “*my name* means the shape I am – and a *good handsome shape it is* too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.”  
 (1871: 54)

Not only does Dumpty insult Alice’s name (again, a violation of Leech’s Approbation Maxim), and praise himself (thus disrespecting the Modesty Maxim), but he also imposes new rules for language. In Humpty Dumpty’s inverted world, although common nouns can freely be given to objects at random, proper names must have definite meanings that automatically “describe” their bearers (on Carroll and names, see Sutherland 1970: 113–142). The upside-down nature of this theory of meaning makes Alice, once again, at a loss for words. But why should she use them – the words – if they are said to have no meaning whatsoever?

#### 4.1.3 *Relexicalisation*

A different type of linguistic transgression has to do with the lexical manipulation of certain common, established expressions, which are deconstructed and imbued with new meanings. Partington (2006: 121) calls this phenomenon “relexicalisation”: the process whereby indivisible preconstructed phrases, whose meaning is



unified, are broken down, taken separately, and given a new, independent meaning (on idioms and fixed expressions, see e.g. Moon 1998).

A very curious example in the Alice books occurs in the dialogue between the Mouse and the Duck, to which our heroine is the baffled bystander:

- (26) “(...) and even Stigand, the patriotic archbishop of Canterbury, *found it advisable—*”  
 “Found what?” said the Duck.  
 “Found *it*,” the Mouse replied rather crossly: “of course *you know what ‘it’ means.*”  
 “*I know what ‘it’ means* well enough, when I find a thing,” said the Duck: “it’s generally a frog or a worm. The question is, what did the archbishop find?”  
 (1865: 31)

Such phrases as “find it advisable”, “find it inconceivable”, and “find it convenient” are indivisible and have a cohesive meaning as they stand. In this case, the Duck attempts to “discover a real-world exophoric referent for the pronoun and isolate some meaning for it” (Partington: *ibid*), which is nonsensical, hence humorous. In other words, the Duck refuses to take the pronoun as a “delexicalised” item in the idiomatic expression, and tries to “relexicalise” it. As Sinclair (1991: 113) remarks, delexicalisation happens when an item reduces its distinctive contribution to the meaning of the sequence where it usually occurs, acquiring “less of a clear and independent meaning”. Stubbs (2001) also speaks of delexicalised words as words that are “semantically depleted”, or “desemanticised”.

A similar example takes place in the Cheshire Cat episode. Alice uses an adverb, “suddenly”, in its delexicalised sense, as a mere emphatic particle, but the Cat takes it otherwise:

- (27) “I wish you wouldn’t keep appearing and vanishing *so suddenly*: you make one quite giddy.”  
 “All right,” said the Cat; and this time it vanished *quite slowly*, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.  
 (1865: 93)

Indeed, the Cat relexicalises the empty intensifier Alice collocates with the verb “vanish” (“vanishing so suddenly”) and treats it as a pure adverb of manner. Yet, what Alice objected to was not the manner in which the Cat vanished, but the very fact that it did.

Similarly, Humpty Dumpty relexicalises Alice’s following question into a different meaning:

- (28) “Why do you sit out here all alone?” said Alice (...).  
 “Why, because there’s nobody with me!” cried Humpty Dumpty. “Did you think I didn’t know the answer to *that*?” (1871: 54)

Dumpty’s reply is surprising to Alice because he does not take her question in its conventional meaning, i.e., as intending to elicit the reasons for someone to do something in this way or another, in this case for him to sit there all alone. The reasons might be that he is anti-social, or his friends are away on holiday. Instead, he takes the question in its metalinguistic dimension, i.e. as intending to elicit the reasons for someone *to be considered* to sit alone.

Likewise, Humpty Dumpty relexicalises a conventional question to ask about a person’s age, making Alice fall into the trap of giving the conventional answer, thus losing her positive face:

- (29) “So here’s a question for you. How old did you say you were?”  
 Alice made a short calculation, and said “Seven years and six months.”  
 “Wrong!” Humpty Dumpty exclaimed triumphantly. “You never said a word like it.”  
 “I thought you meant ‘How old *are* you?’” Alice explained.  
 “If I’d meant that, I’d have said it,” said Humpty Dumpty. (1871: 56)

Another way of breaking preconstructed idioms and relexicalising formulaic expressions is using adverbial phrases that do not usually collocate with verbs. As Norrick (2017: 30) points out, “formulaic language lends itself to play, precisely because of its recognisable, hackneyed character”. In the passage where Alice talks to the White and Red Queens, the following exchange takes place:

- (30) “What do you suppose is the use of a child without any meaning? Even a joke should have some meaning – and a child’s more important than a joke, I hope. You couldn’t *deny* that, even if you tried *with both hands*.  
 “I don’t *deny things with my hands*,” Alice objected.  
 “Nobody said you did,” said the Red Queen. “I said you couldn’t if you tried.” (1871: 87)

“With both hands” is a manner adjunct that cannot collocate with the verb “deny”. One can “grab” something (an opportunity, a chance) “with both hands”. As to “denying”, possible adverbial modifications could be “consistently”, “vehemently”, and “repeatedly”, among others – but one definitely cannot \**deny something with both hands*”.

In the same episode, the Red Queen and Alice engage in yet another lexical game: what would remain if Alice took a bone from a dog? Nothing, perhaps, Alice wonders.

- (31) “Wrong, as usual,” said the Red Queen: “the dog’s temper would remain.”  
 “But I don’t see how—”  
 “Why, look here!” the Red Queen cried. “The dog would *lose its temper*,  
 wouldn’t it?”  
 “Perhaps it would,” Alice replied cautiously.  
 “Then if the dog went away, its temper would remain!” the Queen exclaimed  
 triumphantly.  
 Alice said, as gravely as she could, “They might go different ways.” But she  
 couldn’t help thinking to herself “What dreadful nonsense we are talking!”  
 (1871: 88)

Once again, the verb “lose” in the idiomatic expression “lose one’s temper” is delexicalised insofar as it does not carry its usual sense of “cease to have or retain, be unable to find”. Since “temper” is a person’s state of mind, which cannot be “lost”, “lose one’s temper” cannot be made to mean the same as “lose one’s keys”. But this is exactly what the Red Queen does: she relexicalises the idiom by applying a literal sense to it.

In all these occurrences of linguistic blunders by the other characters, Alice plays the role of (perplexed) recipient. Although she initially tries hard to make sense out of nonsense, she eventually capitulates, unable to process the language transgressions which turn conventional meanings upside down. Her reactions may be to stare in bewilderment, ask for clarification or disambiguation, try to correct her interlocutors, and, more rarely, be amused. Whatever her response, she tends to get rudely reprimanded for not succeeding to understand what is said to her. In short, not only is her negative face unceremoniously destroyed, that is, her right not to be impinged upon, and not to be made to decipher difficult language games, but so is her positive face, insofar as her wish to be liked and admired quite disgracefully falls flat.

#### 4.2 Pragmatic transgressions

The second major category of transgression in the Alice books is, according to the hypothesis, pragmatically based, covering three core types of pragmatic interaction: conversational maxim violations; infelicitous speech acts; and bald-on-record impoliteness. All rely on a discrepancy between expectation and realisation, i.e., between what Alice *expects* from her interlocutors and what she realises they actually *say* – and *do*. Indeed, the three main types just mentioned elicit, respectively, the following expectations on Alice’s part: (1) Alice expects her interlocutors to follow the cooperative principle (cf. Grice 1975), but they do not; (2) Alice expects her interlocutors to produce felicitous speech acts (cf. Austin 1962; Searle 1969), but they do not; (3) Alice expects her interlocutors to be polite (cf. B&L 1978/1987; Leech 1983/2014), but they are not. As seen in the previous section, all types of

discrepancies in Carroll's books put a heavy onus on Alice's positive and negative face, since she cannot manage to handle them successfully despite all her efforts. At the same time, the script-oppositional nature of these utterances (cf. Raskin 1985 and Ermida 2008), which are not only incongruous but surprising (just like jokes), make Alice become the humorous butt of most of the stories' sequences. Sutherland (1970: 28) calls this second category of transgression "functional play with language", and defines it as bearing on conventional usages which lend themselves to humour: as he puts it, "[Carroll] realised that humour could be derived from treating these usages in a strictly logical and nonconventional manner".

#### 4.2.1 *Conversational maxim violations*

As a very well-behaved young girl, Alice is also a careful and respectful communicator, always providing her interlocutors with the truth, with the right amount of information they require, with relevant observations, and with clear and unambiguous utterances at all times. In other words, Alice dutifully, if unconsciously, abides by Grice's Principle of Cooperation and its four maxims of conversation. However, that is not the case with the other characters in the stories, whose violations of conversational maxims carry humorous potential (see Attardo's 1993 analysis of such occurrences in jokes). We saw above that the strictly linguistic transgressions Alice is confronted with also rely on violation of conversational maxims, especially that of Manner (or clarity). Yet, the next instances have to do, not with a play on words, but with a play on interactional conventions.

Consider the following dialogue between Alice and the Pigeon, where the latter patently breaks the Maxim of Quality:

(32) "Well! *What* are you?" said the Pigeon. "I can see you're trying to invent something!"

"I—I'm a little girl," said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day.

"A *likely* story indeed!", said the Pigeon *in a tone of the deepest contempt*.

(1865: 72)

By contemptuously saying that Alice's story is "likely", the Pigeon actually means it is *unlikely*, or invented. Irony is one of the typical examples Grice himself gives (1975: 53) of the infringement of the Maxim of Quality, the definition for which goes: "Do not say what you believe to be false [or] that for which you lack adequate evidence" (Grice 1975: 46).

The Maxim of Quantity, meanwhile, stipulates that speakers should give as much information "as is required" (Grice 1975: 45), neither more nor less. In her conversation with the Cheshire Cat, Alice clearly receives less information than she asked for:

- (33) “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”  
 “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.  
 “I don’t much care where –” said Alice.  
 “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat. (1865: 89)

The Cat’s insufficient reply breaks the maxim of informativeness, as it fails to provide Alice with the advice she requested. But if his reply is inadequate in pragmatic terms, that is, in terms of the principle of Cooperation, in logical terms it must be said to be completely faultless. Strictly speaking, Alice does not tell the Cat where she wants to get to (all she knows is that she wants to get out of *there*), which makes him unable to give her directions.

The Cat’s uninformative stance continues in the next lines, where he offers her a pure tautology:

- (34) “—so long as I get *somewhere*,” Alice added as an explanation.  
 “Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”  
 Alice felt that this could not be denied. (1865: 90)

The following dialogue with the Knight is also off-putting to Alice, as she is expecting more information than she is given:

- (35) “It’s long,” said the Knight, “but very, very beautiful. Everybody that hears me sing it — either it brings the tears into their eyes, or else—”  
 “Or else what?” said Alice, for the Knight had made a sudden pause.  
 “Or else it doesn’t, you know.” (1871: 79)

In this case, the Knight introduces a disjunctive construction (either/or) which creates an expectation for the second term of the dichotomy. In failing to provide it, the Knight defrauds such an expectation and violates the Maxim of Quantity at the same time, with obvious humorous effect.

Likewise, the Duchess’s reply to Alice, next, does not respect the Maxim of Quantity, or Informativeness, either:

- (36) “Please would you tell me,” said Alice a little timidly (...), “why your cat grins like that?”  
 “It’s a Cheshire cat,” said the Duchess, “and that’s why.” (1865: 82)

Actually, the conversation with the Duchess is a particularly uncooperative passage, providing examples of infringements of other conversational maxims as well. Her penchant for giving a moral for every story she hears does not coincide with what should be her concern to be relevant:

- (37) “The game’s going on rather better now,” Alice said, by way of keeping up the conversation a little.

“’Tis so,” said the Duchess: “and the moral of that is: ‘Oh, ‘tis love, ‘tis love, that makes the world go round”

“Somebody said,” Alice whispered, “that it’s done by everybody minding their own business!”

“Ah, well! It means much the same thing,” said the Duchess, digging her sharp little chin into Alice’s shoulder as she added, “and the moral of *that* is: ‘Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves.”

(1865: 132)

Obviously enough, the morals the Duchess offers hardly bear any relation at all with what they are applied to. Actually, they are so completely irrelevant as to be absurd. The conversational maxim the Duchess thus breaks is that of Relation, which Grice (1975: 46) succinctly defines as “Be relevant”. Finally, the Duchess does not seem to abide by the fourth of Grice’s maxims either, namely the Maxim of Manner, “Be perspicuous”: be clear, unambiguous, brief, and orderly (1975: 46). Rather, the Duchess seems to delight in confusing Alice, when the latter admits she cannot follow what the former says in her lengthy and convoluted rephrasing:

- (38) “I quite agree with you,” said the Duchess; “and the moral of that is ‘Be what you would seem to be’, or if you’d like it put more simply: ‘*Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.*”

“I think I should understand that better,” Alice said very politely, “if I had it written down: but I can’t quite follow it as you say it.”

“That’s nothing to what I could say if I chose,” the Duchess replied, in a pleased tone.

(1865: 134)

#### 4.2.2 *Infelicitous speech acts*

The idea that there must be conditions for performative utterances to be felicitous goes back to Austin’s original writings (1962). Later, Searle propounded a set of “rules” for illocutionary acts, taking the case of promises as paradigmatic. As he puts it, “speaking a language is performing acts according to rules” (1969: 36; see also 1979: 44ff). Some of these conditions and rules may be material, or “preparatory”. For instance, it makes no sense for me to ask you the time if we are at the beach and I can see you have no watch on. Others bear on thoughts and feelings (“sincerity condition”). If I congratulate you, or apologise to you, I should be happy for your achievement and sorry for what I did, respectively. Others, still, depend on the hierarchy of social structure. Only my superiors can order me felicitously, and so on. In Carroll’s books, the characters often violate such conditions, performing speech acts that are void or faulty – and also, due to the blatant pragmatic

incompetence of which they are symptoms, humorous (on speech act violations in jokes, see e.g. Hancher 1980).

A very obvious illocutionary infelicity, against which Alice protests, takes place during the appropriately called “Mad Tea-Party”:

- (39) “*Have some wine*,” the March Hare said in an encouraging tone. Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea.  
 “I don’t see any wine,” she remarked.  
 “*There isn’t any*,” said the March Hare.  
 “Then it wasn’t very civil of you to offer it,” said Alice angrily. (1865: 96)

A preparatory condition for the commissive illocutionary act of offering (Searle 1979) is to have the thing you offer in your possession. As the March Hare does not have any wine, he cannot – and should not – offer Alice any wine. When he does, he is engaging in a patently faulty, and uncivil, speech act, which Alice actually acknowledges and reprimands him for (thus threatening the March Hare’s positive face).

A different faulty offer occurs in the following passage:

- (40) “But she must have a prize herself, you know,” said the Mouse.  
 “Of course,” the Dodo replied very gravely. “What else have you got in your pocket?” he went on, turning to Alice.  
 “Only a thimble,” said Alice sadly.  
 “Hand it over here,” said the Dodo.  
 Then they all crowded round her once more, while the Dodo solemnly presented the thimble, saying “We beg your acceptance of this elegant thimble”; and, when it had finished this short speech, they all cheered. (1865: 34)

In this case, the performative infelicity lies in offering the hearer something that already belongs to the hearer. The absurd speech act also implies, from an impoliteness perspective, that the Dodo does not show respect for Alice’s possessions, for what she has or who she is.

Riddles are interesting interactive patterns insofar as they are characteristically impossible to guess. Asking a riddle is similar to asking an exam question in that the speaker knows the answer beforehand, but it is different from an exam question in that s/he is supposed to inform the hearer about the answer, instead of expecting the hearer to provide it. The Hatter, however, breaks the illocutionary appropriateness of riddles in the next passage:

- (41) “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” (...)  
 “Have you guessed the riddle yet?” the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.  
 “No, I give it up,” Alice replied: “what’s the answer?”  
 “I haven’t the slightest idea,” said the Hatter.

“Nor I,” said the March Hare.

Alice sighed wearily. “I think you might do something better with the time,” she said, “than waste it in asking riddles that have no answers.” (1865: 101)

The Hatter does not fulfil the condition for the illocutionary act of asking a riddle question. In failing to provide the answer, he “wastes” Alice’s time, thus jeopardising her negative face and violating her right not to be intruded upon.

On a different note, promises are commissive illocutionary acts which are only felicitous when the sincerity condition is obeyed, i.e. when the speaker intends to act according to what s/he promises and when s/he actually does so (Searle 1969/1979). This is not the case in the following passage:

(42) “Come back!” the Caterpillar called after her. “*I’ve something important to say.*”

This sounded promising, certainly. Alice turned and came back again.

“Keep your temper,” said the Caterpillar.

“Is that all?” said Alice, swallowing down her anger as well as she could.

(1865: 62)

If the Caterpillar makes a promise to Alice that he will tell her something important, he should keep it. What would qualify as important? Certainly, new information, unbeknownst to Alice. Being advised to keep her temper is hardly what Alice would expect as new information. Also, giving a piece of advice such as this one not only breaks the Caterpillar’s promise, but also impinges upon Alice’s negative face, i.e. her right not to be told about or intruded upon.

Arguing (an expositive) is evidently a different illocutionary act from threatening (a commissive). The following passage, however, takes the latter for the former:

(43) The executioner’s argument was that you couldn’t cut off something’s head unless there was a trunk to sever it from. He’d never done anything like that in his time of life, and wasn’t going to start now.

The King’s argument was that anything that had a head, could be beheaded, and you weren’t to talk nonsense.

The Queen’s argument was that if something wasn’t done about it in less than no time, she’d have everyone beheaded all round.

It was *this last argument* that had everyone looking so nervous and uncomfortable.

(1865: 127)

Obviously, what the Queen does is not to offer an argument, or a piece of reasoning, but to issue a threat. The effect of such a threat on the positive face of anyone present, Alice included, is evident: being told one is going to be beheaded does not qualify as a sign of respect or esteem.



Advising is an exercitive (Austin 1962) / directive (Searle 1969) illocutionary act which threatens the hearer's negative face, insofar as it impinges upon the latter's freedom of deliberation. As such, it requires a recipient, i.e., it targets a hearer to do something which the speaker considers beneficial for the former. The same goes for reprimanding (a behabitive), which cannot exist without a second party: the speaker scolds the hearer for something negative the hearer has done. Yet, this is not the case in the following situation, in which Alice advises and scolds... herself:

- (44) "Come, there's no use in crying like that!" said Alice to herself, rather sharply; "I advise you to leave off this minute!"  
 She generally gave herself very good advice (though she very seldom followed it), and sometimes she scolded herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes; and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself. (1865: 12)

In these cases, Alice is the humorous victim of her own pragmatic blunders.

#### 4.2.3 *Bald-on-record impoliteness*

Besides all the actual threats to face, both positive and negative, that Carroll's characters target at Alice, by making her look like an incompetent speaker and communicator, there are a number of other occasions on which – regardless of what Alice does, or says, or fails to do or say – her interlocutors are openly and explicitly impolite. The first of such occurrences takes place when the Hatter speaks to Alice for the first time. Instead of greeting her (a positive politeness strategy), by saying, for instance, "hello, how do you do" and introducing himself, he goes:

- (45) "Your hair wants cutting," said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech.  
 "You should learn not to make personal remarks," Alice said with some severity; "it's very rude." (1865: 96)

The Hatter's rudeness, which Alice immediately reprimands him for, rests upon two factors: on the one hand, he "withholds politeness" by not greeting her or introducing himself, which is what speakers are supposed to do upon meeting one another; on the other, he violates the principle "don't presume /assume". In other words, he fails to "avoid presumptions about the hearer, his wants, what is relevant, or interesting, or worthy of his attention – that is, keeping ritual distance from the hearer" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 144). In making the suggestion that she should cut her hair, he also "presumes" to know better, "assuming" she needs his guidance, as if she were incapable of self-determination.

In the following passage, Humpty Dumpty commits exactly the same impolite pragmatic blunder:

- (46) “I mean, what is an un-birthday present?” [Alice asked.]  
 “A present given when it isn’t your birthday, of course.”  
 Alice considered a little. “I like birthday presents best,” she said at last.  
 “*You don’t know what you’re talking about!*” cried Humpty Dumpty.  
 (1871: 57)

By presuming to know what she knows, that is, by presuming to be acquainted with what is on her mind, again he intrudes upon her privacy and fails to keep his distance. His remark is also both a way of scolding her and a bald-on-record way of disagreeing (on disagreements and impoliteness, see e.g. Ermida 2018). At the same time, it breaks one of Leech’s politeness maxims, the Approbation Maxim (“Minimise dispraise of other” – Leech 1983: 132).

The Cat also indulges in bossing Alice around, by telling her what she can or cannot do, and what she is or is not – a presumption Alice rightfully challenges:

- (47) “But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.  
 “Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. *You’re mad.*”  
 “*How do you know I’m mad?*” said Alice.  
 “You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.” (1865: 90)

Giving explicit orders is a second major category of bald-on-record impoliteness in Carroll’s books. Being ordered around is actually a very common experience Alice undergoes throughout her adventures, as can be seen in the following examples:

- (48) “Well, *be off*, then!” said the Pigeon in a sulky tone, as it settled down again into its nest. (1865: 63)  
 (49) “Oh, *don’t bother* me,” said the Duchess; “I never could abide figures!” (1865: 84)  
 (50) “*Hold your tongue!*” added the Gryphon, before Alice could speak again. (1865: 142)  
 (51) Very soon the Rabbit noticed Alice, (...) and called out to her in an angry tone, “(...) *Run home this moment, and fetch me a pair of gloves and a fan!* Quick, now!” And Alice was so much frightened that she ran off at once (...). (1865: 42)

In all these cases, the use of straight imperatives (direct directives, in Searle’s 1979 terms) heightens the nature of the FTA insofar as no softening or hedging of the raw illocutionary force of the order is in place. As Brown and Levinson (1987: 108) point out, it is a “power-backed command”, the pragmatic inappropriateness

of which Alice is well aware in the following situation (on the connection between power and impoliteness see e.g. Ermida 2006):

- (52) “Why, she,” said the Gryphon. “It’s all her fancy, that: they never execute anybody, you know. *Come on!*”  
 “Everybody says ‘come on!’ here,” thought Alice, as she went slowly after it:  
 “I never was so ordered about in all my life, never!” (1865: 139)

Interrupting is consensually considered to be against social etiquette: Sacks et al. (1974: 723–4) significantly refer to the “the lore and practices of etiquette concerning ‘interruption’ and complaints about it”. At the same time, interrupting is considered to be a strong marker of power. As Brown and Levinson (1987: 30) remark, “not only do men tend to interrupt women, but high-status men interrupt low-status men, high-status women interrupt low-status women, and adults interrupt children”. Once again, as far as turn-taking goes, Alice is treated as occupying the bottom of the power hierarchy. Indeed, the other characters interrupt her only too often throughout the two books: Humpty Dumpty, for starters, does it all the time (see Examples 22 and 25, above), but many other characters do it as well:

- (53) “But when you come to the beginning again?” Alice ventured to ask.  
 “Suppose we change the subject,” the March Hare *interrupted*, yawning. “I’m getting tired of this. (...)” (1865: 104)
- (54) “And how did you manage on the twelfth?” Alice went on eagerly.  
 “That’s enough about lessons,” the Gryphon *interrupted* in a very decided tone (...) (1865: 146)
- (55) (...) However, there would be no harm, she thought, in asking if the game was over.  
 “Please, would you tell me—” she began, looking timidly at the Red Queen.  
 “Speak when you’re spoken to!” the Queen sharply *interrupted* her. (1871: 87)

One of the most serious face-threatening interruptions Alice suffers takes place when the Hatter, preventing her from finishing her sentence, takes her expression “I don’t think (...something to be the case)” in isolated terms, as an assertion about her *inability* to think:

- (56) “Really, now you ask me,” said Alice, very much confused, “I don’t think—”  
 “Then you shouldn’t talk,” said the Hatter.  
 This piece of rudeness was more than Alice could bear: she got up in great disgust, and walked off. (1865: 110)

Contradicting, another major impoliteness category in Carroll’s stories, implies that the speaker does not agree with whatever the hearer says. In so doing, the

speaker shows lack of respect towards the speaker's opinion and the speaker's positive face. Once again, contradicting is a power-fuelled bald-on-record speech act:

- (57) "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. "You might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see!'" (1865: 97)

In her conversation with the Caterpillar, who also bluntly contradicts her, Alice actually acknowledges the full length of this particular violation of manners which her interlocutors commit against her:

- (58) "Oh, I'm not particular as to size," Alice hastily replied; "only one doesn't like changing so often, you know."  
 "I *don't* know," said the Caterpillar.  
 Alice said nothing: *she had never been so much contradicted in her life before*, and she felt that she was losing her temper. (1865: 67)

Being such a frequent victim of contradiction, Alice ends up doing likewise and being impolite on record. What is more, she even contradicts the Queen – more than once, for that matter – when her patience runs out. The following two passages are examples of this:

- (59) "When you say 'hill,'" the Queen interrupted, "I could show you hills, in comparison with which you'd call that a valley."  
 "No, I *shouldn't*," said Alice, surprised into *contradicting* her at last: "a hill can't be a valley, you know. That would be nonsense—" (1871: 17)
- (60) "That proves his guilt," said the Queen.  
 "It *proves nothing of the sort!*" said Alice. "Why, you don't even know what they're about!" (1865: 182)

Finally, insults are the ultimate expression of impoliteness: they are the most disrespectful and demeaning of all forms of uncivil exchanges, showing utter contempt for the hearer's positive face. Alice is frequently the target of the other characters' insults in the stories. The Hatter, for instance, does not hesitate to slur her, even publicly:

- (61) "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?*" (1865: 108)

Similarly, in her conversation with the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon, discussed above, Alice suffers their verbal abuse, the effects of which the narrator lets us know:

- (62) “Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn’t one?” Alice asked.  
 “We called him Tortoise because he taught us,” said the Mock Turtle angrily:  
*“really you are very dull!”*  
*“You ought to be ashamed of yourself for asking such a simple question,”* added  
 the Gryphon; and then they both sat silent and looked at poor Alice, who felt  
 ready to sink into the earth. (1865: 142)

Even the flowers, which Alice initially takes as passive, harmless things of beauty, affront her openly and gratuitously, going as far as judging her intelligence on the basis of her looks.

- (63) “And can all the flowers talk?,” asked Alice.  
 “As well as you can,” said the Tiger-lily. “And a great deal louder. (...) I really  
 was wondering when you’d speak! Said I to myself, ‘Her face has got some  
 sense in it, though *it’s not a clever one!*” (1871: 14)

What is more, the flowers seem to gather together in a chorus of offence, as if trying to lynch poor Alice through words. Even the most innocent of her remarks, like admitting she was not aware of the pun between “bed of flowers” and “beds to sleep in”, causes her to be their easy prey:

- (64) “In most gardens,” the Tiger-lily said, “they make the beds too soft—so that  
 the flowers are always asleep.” (...)  
 “I never thought of that before!” Alice said.  
 “It’s my opinion that *you never think at all,*” the Rose said in a rather severe  
 tone.  
*“I never saw anybody that looked stupider,”* a Violet said, so suddenly, that  
 Alice quite jumped; for it hadn’t spoken before. (1871: 15)

## 5. Conclusion

The textual analysis above has confirmed my initial hypothesis: that Carroll’s books construct transgression on a twofold level, both linguistically and pragmatically. On both levels, indeed, Alice is confronted with blunders and anomalies which she finds difficult to process. Some of these are incongruities that bear on features of the linguistic system, be they phonetic, syntactic, lexical or semantic; others are glitches that have to do with the pragmatic principles governing communication. In this upside-down world, where language is different from what it should be, and the conversations do not follow usual social conventions, Alice is at a loss for making sense out of what, to her (even though apparently not to everybody else), is sheer nonsense.

Her interpretive difficulties, then, become the trigger for the other characters to bully and abuse her, engaging in different forms of impoliteness. Therefore, the reason why Alice systematically loses her face – both positive and negative, that is, both her wish to be liked and admired and her right to be unimpeded – derives from her patent inability to understand a faulty language on the one hand, and a faulty interactive system on the other.

Yet, her predicaments are not sad or tragic; instead, they are perceived as comical. The humour of the passages in which Alice is the guileless victim of the other characters derives from three main factors. The first, as stated above, is the incongruity between her expectations and her realisations, i.e. between her anticipation and her interpretation (on incongruity and humour, see e.g. Beattie 1764 and Schopenhauer 1818). What she expects to hear and the way she expects to be treated are at odds with what she gets. This clash is semantically organised: every script (or frame of reference) Alice projects and anticipates gets to be overruled by a competing, surprising and farfetched, script (Raskin 1985).

Her bewilderment, and sometimes her anger and revolt, in getting caught between the two pervades through Carroll's books comically. Alice struggles and toils, attempting to understand, trying to make sense, but to no avail. Only with the punch-line – the solution to the pun, the explanation of the new meaning, the discovery of the funny word – does she (and the audience) breathe in relief. Indeed, it is the surprising effect of this constantly re-enacted process that allows the release of interpretive tensions, which is psychologically pleasant (on release in humour, see e.g. Bergson 1900 and Freud 1905).

Finally, there is a third element that contributes to the comicality of Alice's misadventures. It is the fact that it is her, not the reader, that is undergoing such difficulties. The audience relishes in comic enjoyment at her expense. Because of the emotional distance, they establish a sort of *Schadenfreude*, or pleasure, at other people's misfortune (on disparagement and laughter, see e.g. Descartes 1649 and Hobbes 1651). Significantly enough, a passage in the Alice books shows that laughing at other people's adversity is not a prerogative of the audience alone: sometimes, the characters themselves engage in such forms of disparagement, as happens when the Dodo's rhetorical skills become the butt of the other animals' scorn:

- (65) “In that case,” said the Dodo solemnly, rising to its feet, “I move that the meeting adjourn, for the immediate adoption of more energetic remedies—”  
 “Speak English!” said the Eaglet. “I don't know the meaning of half those long words, and, what's more, I don't believe you do either!”  
 And the Eaglet bent down its head *to hide a smile: some of the other birds tittered audibly.* (1865: 32)

All in all, Alice is the rule-abiding character in a rule-transgressive world. Her rationality is as much out of place in nonsensical “Blunderland” as is her care not to hurt or offend her abusers. And if, at times, she does pay them back in their own coin, the reader cannot but sympathise with the exasperated heroine.

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