

'Him, and ourselves, and it':¹
On the meaning of the 'evidence poem' in
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

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Pronouns have an indexical or deictic function. Their reference is variable, in the case of personal pronouns depending on pragmatic factors such as who is speaking to whom and who is being talked about, and it can be adjusted quite flexibly to textual and contextual, or conversational needs. So, while their anaphoric qualities make them an important instrument for creating textual cohesion, which under normal circumstances (i.e., on unmarked levels of interpretation) is a prerequisite for contextual coherence, their referential variability can result in vagueness and fluctuating uncertainty. What is locally cohesive can thus still be contextually incoherent. Proper names, on the other hand, are normally used as rigid designators. Quoted forms can be viewed as a specific class of (proper) names individualizing particular forms as reifications of their category (I cannot go into more detail here about the different kinds of nominalizations and their effects); quotation can thus be regarded as a means of transforming variable designators into rigid ones. In the enigmatic poem to be discussed, Lewis Carroll makes ample use of this instrument; as the English past tense doesn't have person or number agreement (cf. *I/You/He/She/It went*), he can easily avoid explicitly noting the difference between quoted and unquoted (anaphoric) forms, and can rather draw specifically on the resulting ambiguity. His virtuosity in handling the different levels of designation illustrates how human symbolic abilities allow him (and us) to introduce new levels of meaning and to stimulate our search for possible interpretations by obscuring the seemingly obvious.

Making sense of nonsense can be a hard job — sometimes, it seems, harder than encoding sense as nonsense. Evidence whose message is anything but evident allows of all kinds of interpretations; especially if it appears under the heading of 'Alice's evidence' and is known to have been composed by the notorious 'glutton of words' Lewis Carroll. In fact, if the creator of your witness hides his real name, you shouldn't trust the witness too much; if, as in this particular case, you only have

the ‘evidence’ without the authorizing witness, everything must be fake, fabricated.

Alice’s adventures in Wonderland culminate in one of the best-known trials of (literary) history. After the White Rabbit has stated the case with the well-known four lines

‘The Queen of Hearts, she made some tarts,
all on a summer day:
The Knave of Hearts, he stole the tarts,
and took them quite away!’ (p. 115)

we experience a (not unexpectedly) rather inconclusive and chaotic cross-examination of the Mad Hatter (assisted by his friend, the March Hare) and an even shorter questioning of the Duchess’s cook. Quite to her own surprise, Alice is finally called as a witness. This takes us to the final chapter of the book (‘Alice’s evidence’, pp. 122–132). The title of the chapter is misleading, since Alice tells the King right away that she doesn’t know anything at all about the Hearts’s tarts. So in the end, whether the Knave of Hearts’s head will be chopped off seems to depend on the only evidence left: a piece of paper with a poem on it of which Alice says (p. 127) ‘I don’t believe there’s an atom of meaning in it’, whereas the King (and judge) tries to understand it. After exchanging a few harsh words with the Queen (who wants her head to be chopped off — what else?), Alice (who had already started growing back to normal size before the poem was read to the jury) is suddenly woken up by her sister, and Wonderland dissolves.

Since beheading has always been the special executional treatment for the privileged, namely, kings or queens and their nobility, but has obviously deteriorated, or — even worse — been downgraded by this what’s his name rogue L. C. to knavery, we are not interested in the legal side of the case, nor in its repercussions for the foundations of the Victorian Empire; from a twentieth-century gourmet perspective, the tarts may have been punishment enough. No, our efforts are directed towards an understanding of what the White Rabbit reads before the court, which is a royal court (of cardboard — mind you: L. C. was a visionary) as well as a court of justice (a ‘card board’). The more sophisticated reader may (or may not) wonder if comprehensive schools are open to white rabbits these days, but we prefer not to go into such meticulous details. We would merely like to suggest a reading of the ‘evidence poem’ and speculate, without excursions that venture too far into the unknown, about its ‘sense’ near the end of *Alice in Wonderland*.

As others have rightly observed, pronouns are the main protagonists of the poem; and, frankly, if you were envisaging a death sentence, wouldn't you rather send a pronoun to its execution, however knavish other people would consider that to be? The hang(wo)man (just to balance the obvious sexual bias in the choice of a [fe]male suspect) would certainly do justice to his/her name and hang around waiting for a suitable referent of the pronoun. Doubtless, the suspense in the audience would be enormous, before everything gradually faded away into a joke because the whole execution would have to be suspended. This is precisely the role of the seemingly enigmatic poem: It is the pivot on which the door between reality and fantasy hinges.

Lewis Carroll, the mathematician, is well known and often quoted for his view of language as an arbitrary symbolic system the user of which, especially in the case of a poet, can choose what he wants his words to signify, and he himself makes extensive use of this possibility. His readers, however, must not be humpty-dumptyified and carried away by this sort of extreme option or the expectation of it. We should try to understand the sense before 'sensifying' the nonsense, just as the jocular or the absurd have to be taken seriously to a certain degree before a sensation of funniness can fully unfold.

When Chomsky started formalizing the algebraic properties of syntax, Humpty Dumpty appeared to many to act as a kind of anti-idealist godfather. Identifying human language with the set of acceptable sentences created by a rule system with such profane elements as inputs, outputs, and variables appeared blasphemous in a Humboldtian tradition (forgetting about the positivists) still prevalent in the tower of Babel (although once the linen was stripped off the ghost, the spirit wasn't all that bad). That this equation of language faculty and algebraically enumerated set of sentences was empirically inadequate with regard to textual structure was obvious right from the beginning. The notion of text requires more than any old set of sentences; coherence became one of the magic terms, and pronouns are usually quoted as its most perspicuous illustrations. If you don't know whether the tart thief was male or female, a greedy caterpillar (or maybe several of them), you can't even make the right choice of pronoun in the assertion *he/she/they/it stole the tarts*. And if a knavish male was mentioned as a possible suspect and you pick *she* in the subsequent sentence, your speech is either doomed to incoherence or it implies an anonymous accusation (hinting at a male chauvinist spirit). The latter is the more probable interpretation, since we all start from the friendly cooperative assumption that one doesn't produce incoherent speech. So, pronouns are among the prime indicators of text coherence (cohesion), and ambiguities in pronominal reference can easily disrupt it.

Following the rules of the language game is just one, admittedly the most common, way of exploiting them. But speakers can also deliberately disobey these rules, thereby exploring the communicative services of deviance, the non-regular which presupposes the regularities. This sort of strategy is not uncommon in everyday (mainly jocular) communication, which is quite rich in nonce-words, blends ('portmanteau' creations — to stick to the genre), ad hoc word formation, deliberate over-extensions of rules, unconventional metaphor, etc. The most original applications, however, can best be traced in creative writing, and 'readjusting' the rules is a recurrent theme in *Alice in Wonderland*, too.

In the 'evidence poem' Lewis Carroll makes masterful use of the Janus-like textual properties of pronominal reference. What can be used to unify can also be used to separate, and Carroll exploits both sides of the coin, extracting full value for his reader. My detailed analysis below uncovers a very intricate system of pronominal reference within the poem, while cutting off any identifiable bonds with the outside world: 'It isn't directed at all' ... 'in fact, there's nothing written on the *outside*' ... 'It isn't a letter, after all: it's a set of verses'. The plural pronouns are text-internally tied to singular pronoun denotata by a closely knit web of cataphoric or anaphoric reference. By using the pronoun forms as names (the pronouns in italics in the poem below) Carroll even cancels their most conspicuous property of variablehood, using them as constants, but making simultaneous use of them as quasi-self-referential pronouns designating their person in the paradigm. The enigmatic character of the poem arises because the reader is inclined to search for external referents among the *dramatis personae* or in the 'real' world. The literal meaning of the verses, however, amounts to a repetitive arrangement of the three singular persons of the pronominal paradigm in a much more direct and concrete way than Reichert (1974: 99 ff.) seems to imply. And it makes sense beyond this literal interpretation as a playful return to the 'cruel Three' (p. 10) of the introductory poem, triggered by a psychologically quite convincing association of the three 'persons' in the poem (which are, in fact, variables) and the three 'real' persons of the fictive audience (which may well relate to the three well-known real young ladies of his environment). After all, it is a 'three-legged table, all made of solid glass' (p. 15), and therefore transparent as the pronouns are, which holds the golden 'key reference' to Wonderland. As 'glassy' variables, the pronouns are inherently deictic and could be bound poem-internally as well as poem-externally or in a text-transcending way. With regard to the plot (the second option), they remain absolutely unbound, as becomes particularly clear in the course of the king's vain efforts (p. 128) to tie them to the *dramatis personae*. So the only escape route out of the poem's labyrinth,

which starts with a cataphoric *they* and ends with an equally cataphoric *them*, is via its insistent orbiting around 'the three' persons, not via its connection to the reported wonderland fantasies. The few possibly poem-external references we find are induced by syntactic necessity and are ambiguous, since person deixis depends on the distribution of communicative roles (speaker/hearer etc.), which can shift and to which the reader can adjust his point of view with almost unbounded virtuosity. Generally, the exclusively poem-internal reading, i.e., the reading that is totally disconnected from the plot, is more convincing. The confusion arising from constantly shifting assignments of referents to the pronouns is psychologically also realistic as far as linguistic development is concerned: pronominal reference is not fully acquired until relatively late, precisely because of the complicated shifts of perspective it requires. So combining partial pronominal order with chaos complies very well with the kind of children's dream world narrated here.

The poem

They told me you had been to her,
And mentioned me to him:
She gave me a good character,
But said I could not swim.

He sent them word I had not gone,
(We know it to be true):
If she should push the matter on,
What would become of you?

I gave her one, they gave him two,
You gave us three or more;
They all returned from him to you
Though they were mine before.

If I or she should chance to be
involved in this affair,
He trusts to you to set them free,
Exactly as we were.

My notion was that you had been
(Before she had this fit)
An obstacle that came between
him, and ourselves, and it.

Don't let him know she liked them best,
For this must ever be
A secret, kept from all the rest,
Between yourself and me.³

The interpretation

They told *me you* had been to *her*,

(In the internal reading suggested above: **they** = cataphoric for *you* and *her*, which are used as proper names for the pronouns of the object case; an external reference is not explicitly excluded, the readers and listeners

are even misled by their expectations onto this garden path leading nowhere. Like *you* and *her*, *me* is quoted and treated as an individual.)

And mentioned *me* to *him*:

She gave *me* a good character,

(Note the shift in case, which gives further support and coherence to the internal interpretation: the nominative of *me* is *I* with the unique capital-letter 'character'. Note further the dual function of **she** as anaphoric for *her* [thus creating textual coherence (=cohesion)], but simultaneously establishing a new situation as a proper name.)

But said *I* could not swim.

(*Swim* = stand alone in the pronominal paradigm without the support of a second person pronoun.)

He sent **them** word *I* had not gone,

(**Them** = anaphoric for *you* and *her* [adapting the initial **they** to case requirements], meaning *I* was not the first person of the object case.)

(**We** know *it* to be true):

(**we** = resumptive for *I* and *she* [as *you* has so far only appeared in the object paradigm and is still to complete the subject case], shifting to a first-person point of view, but it could well include the reader/writer and their audiences [the parenthesis even encourages this kind of non-internal reading by suggesting shared knowledge beyond the poem; obviously this move is to lead the reader astray in order to keep the ambiguity of the poem in effect]; so *it* is ambiguous and could refer anaphorically to the preceding statement or the pronoun *it* as part of the paradigm missing so far in any case.)

If *she* should push the matter on,

(The matter of completing the nominative paradigm by 'usurping' *you* [cf. line 4]; *she* is quoted here, so it is a proper name.)

What would become of *you*?

(As all the protagonists of the poem [especially the set of first- and third-person-singular subject- and object-case pronouns] have been introduced, *you* is brought up, which has the specific property of being symmetrical and unspecified with regard to case.)

The third stanza seems to me to be the most ambiguous one. The most probable interpretation appears to be that it relates to the symmetry and case-neutrality of *you* in mutual address.

I gave her one, they gave him two,

(**They** = anaphoric for *I* and *her*; the numbers refer to the numbers of *you*-relations between *I* and *her* [one], **they** and *him* [two]; so *gave* refers to addressing someone.)

You gave us three or more;

(**Us** = first person plurality, but again ambiguous as to inclusion of readers/listeners; depending on what you count you get at least three *you*-addresses.)

They all returned from *him* to *you*

(**They** = anaphoric for all *you*-addresses that were given by *him* [= anaphoric for *you*] are returned to *you* by the addressees.)

Though **they** were **mine** before.

(**Mine** is the syntactically induced equivalent of *me* [note the first two lines, where *me*, *you*, *her*, *him* are grouped together], who started all the *you*-ing. Note further that the poem-internal pseudo-events mix the cases before they are sorted out in the next two stanzas.)

(subject case)

*If I or she should chance to be
involved in this affair,*

(Namely, the affair of building up the paradigm, in this special stanza the subject case paradigm.)

He trusts to you to set them free,

(**Them** = anaphoric for *I* and *she*; setting them free means completing their paradigm.)

Exactly as **we** were.

(**we** = anaphoric for *I* and *she*, this time switching over to a first-person point of view; again the inclusion of readers/listeners is a possibility re-enforced by the literal meaning of being free in contrast to the suspect.)

(object case)

My notion was that *you* had been

(**my** standing for the first person here; note that this stanza is dedicated to the object case)

(Before *she* had this fit)

(The fit of giving *me* the subject character *I* mentioned in line 3 of the poem.)

An obstacle that came between
him, and *ourselves*, and *it*.

(**Ourselves** resumes *me* and *her*; in the paradigm *you* is obviously the 'obstacle' between *me* and *him/her/it*.)

The final stanza is resumptive with regard to the poem and leads the reader back to the external events.

Don't let *him* know *she* liked **them** best,

(**Them** = anaphoric for *I* and *you*, and simultaneously, by a syntactically-conditioned shift in case [canceling the separation of the two cases in the preceding stanzas and unifying the whole pronoun lot again], cataphoric for *you*(rself) and *me*.)

For this must ever be
A secret, kept from all the rest,
Between **yourself** and *me*.

(The 'secret' underlines the enigmatic element, the final first- and second-person pronouns, which are normally interactive, again invoke the impression of a mutual understanding [including the reader] beyond the text, but conveyed by it; once more the 'garden path' is offered. Note also that in the paradigm there is no slot between the first and the second person, so the last line, taken literally could be interpreted as referring to the empty set, a sort of corollary with regard to the contextual relevance of the poem, the 'meaning' of which — quite contrary to Alice's assumption [her grammatical education is still under way] — is 'atomic', i.e., decontextualized.)

This interpretation, which allows of minor changes but seems to be generally straightforward, shows Reichert's claim that the sequence of the six stanzas is totally arbitrary to be only partially true, primarily with

regard to the plot. This relative independence complies with the White Rabbit's announcement of a 'set' of verses; after all, the mathematical concept of a set can refer to a collection of unrelated items, unless some sort of defining property is given. The referential scope of the plural pronouns does not extend beyond the stanza in which they occur, except perhaps, ambiguously, in the last stanza; they are bound up in a mini-world within the mini-world of the poem, thus emphasizing the verses' centripetal function by sheer iconicity: the way out is inside, namely, the three persons. Still, the sequence of the stanzas is not accidental: In the first two (particularly in the first 6 lines), the pronouns of the two verb-related cases are introduced (lines 7 and 8 raising the question about the status of *you*). Stanza 3 summarizes and mixes the whole lot (emphasizing the symmetrical character of *you*), while 4 (subject case) and 5 (object case) assign them to their appropriate cases. The last stanza — somewhat set off from the others — mixes them again, reinforcing the secretive, enigmatic impact. Among the first five stanzas, stanza 3 — essentially concerned with *you* — takes a central, mediating position which mirrors that of *you* in the person and (because of *you's* case neutrality) case paradigms, as well as its symmetrical use in communication.

The general pattern in the use of the pronouns, as explained above, should be obvious. The singular pronouns are applied in dual function: they are quoted, which gives them the quality of proper names, but they also designate abstract positions in the paradigm which are occasionally adjusted according to the needs of the syntax and the sentence semantics, the latter being reduced almost exclusively to relational statements. However, the internal, 'glassy' semantics of the poem, somewhat nonsensical if taken literally, functions as the golden key to the non-literal, sensible outside world. Carroll seems to trust his reader's ability to find their track so much that he even takes some pains to lead them astray; he plays with language very concretely in a typically Anglo-Saxon way, which should rather be shunned by any sort of bombastic interpretation.

This should not preclude us from letting ourselves be carried away to some concluding, admittedly somewhat adventurous associative reasoning. Playing cards have much in common with pronouns. They are two-dimensional (not only with regard to their cardboard existence); they lack a 'real body' and exist only as references to fixed positions in the system of 'constitutive' (in the sense of Searle) rules of a game of cards, their 'paradigm'. In their respective positions, however, they are (individual) constants (at least as members of a specific set of cards) and are reified as individuals according to the physical properties of their representational pictures, their *significant* in Saussurean terms: the cardboard individuals of the story are in fact quotations! The pronouns in the poem

are likewise presented as referring to rule-defined positions in the paradigm, and they are likewise individualized by quoting their names. The mini-world of the poem — and this is just another way of extracting its key role from the literal — thus appears to be a ‘paradi(g)mensional’ way out of the ‘para-dime-novel’ drama in front of the board of cards. Lewis Carroll must have had a very profound understanding of how symbols work as constitutive elements of human cognition, of how much they gear our conceptualizations of the world, imaginary or real — and if you want to tell the difference, you have to be able to transcend the symbolic biosphere.

Notes

1. Carroll (1966: 126). Hereafter, all quotations are from this work unless otherwise cited.
2. I would like to thank Prof. Kuno Schuhmann for drawing my attention to this little poem that I had read more naively (without really making sense of it and therefore without grasping the fascinating use of symbols here) when I was still a student; he also made valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper and made important suggestions about the literature that might be relevant for this sort of investigation. Furthermore, I would like to thank my colleague Ian Trotter for preventing my adventures in English grammar and style from becoming too hazardous. Of course, I take full responsibility for any remaining shortcomings.
3. See Carroll (1966: 126).

References

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