Case studies in English

1.7. From Classical Rhetoric to Textual Linguistics

Case study Nº 1.7
Lewis Carroll, *Alice in wonderland*, 1865,
chapitre XII (excerpt).

The King and Queen of Hearts have organized a trial to determine who is guilty of stealing the tarts made by the Queen one summer's day. The King accuses the Knave of Hearts and summons as witnesses those who, according to him, might provide information about the case. The White Rabbit acts as the court clerk. The jury is made up of twelve animals who take notes on the witnesses' statements. Alice attends the trial and finds the King's questions and reasoning unconvincing. Just as it seems that all the necessary information to solve the mystery has been gathered, the White Rabbit announces that a new piece of evidence has just appeared. It is a text that the Rabbit has just picked up from the ground. Although it refers to a "letter" (the King assumes it was written by the Knave of Hearts), it is difficult to identify the speaker and the addressee of the text. Moreover, the handwriting does not match that of the Knave of Hearts, and the format of the text is not that of a letter but of a poem.

"There's more evidence to come yet, please your majesty," said the White Rabbit, jumping up in a great hurry: "this paper has just been picked up."

"What's in it?" said the Queen.

"I haven't opened it yet," said the White Rabbit: "but it seems to be a letter, written by the prisoner to—to somebody."

"It must have been that," said the King, "unless it was written to nobody, which isn't usual, you know."

"Who is it directed to?" said one of the jurymen.

"It isn't directed at all," said the White Rabbit: "in fact, there's nothing written on the *outside."* He unfolded the paper as he spoke, and added "It isn't a letter after all: it's a set of verses."

"Are they in the prisoner's handwriting?" asked another of the jurymen.

"No, they're not," said the White Rabbit, "and that's the queerest thing about it." (The jury all looked puzzled.)

"He must have imitated somebody else's hand," said the King, (The jury all brightened up again.)

"Please your majesty," said the Knave, "I didn't write it, and they can't prove I did: there's no name signed at the end."

"If you didn't sign it," said the King, "that only makes the matter worse. You *must* have meant some mischief, or else you'd have signed your name like an honest man."

There was a general clapping of hands at this: it was the first really clever thing the King had said that day.

"That *proves* his guilt," said the Queen: "So, off with—."

"It proves nothing of the sort," said Alice. "Why you don't even know what they're about!"

"Read them," said the King.

The White Rabbit put on his spectacles. "Where shall I begin, please your majesty?" he asked.

"Begin at the beginning," the King said, gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

There was dead silence in the court whilst the White Rabbit read out these verses:

"They told me that 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. "

"That's the most important piece of evidence we've heard yet," said the King, rubbing his hands; "so now let the jury—"

"If any one of them can explain it," said Alice, (she had grown so large in the last few minutes that she wasn't a bit afraid of interrupting him), "I'll give him sixpence. *I* don't believe there's an atom of meaning in it."

The jury all wrote down on their slates, "*She* doesn't believe there's an atom of meaning in it," but none of them attempted to explain the paper.

"If there's no meaning in it," said the King, "that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any. And yet I don't know," he went on, spreading out the verses on his knee, and looking at them with one eye; "I seem to see some meaning in them, after all. '— *said I could not swim*—' you can't swim, can you?" he added, turning to the Knave.

The Knave shook his head sadly. "Do I look like it?" he said. (Which he certainly did *not*, being made entirely of cardboard.)

"All right, so far," said the King, and he went on muttering over the verses to himself: "'*We know it to he true* —' that's the jury, of course— '*If she should push the matter on*' — that must be the Queen— '*What would become of you?* '— What, indeed!— '*I gave her one, they gave him two* —' why, that must be what he did with the tarts, you know—"

"But it goes on '*they all returned from him to you,*'" said Alice.

"Why, there they are!" said the King triumphantly, pointing to the tarts on the table. "Nothing can be clearer than that. Then again— '*before she had this fit*—' you never had fits, my dear, I think?" he said to the Queen.

"Never!" said the Queen furiously, throwing an inkstand at the Lizard as she spoke. (The unfortunate little Bill had left off writing on his slate with one finger, as he found it made no mark; but he now hastily began again, using the ink, that was trickling down his face, as long as it lasted.)

"Then the words don't fit you," said the King, looking round the court with a smile. There was a dead silence.

"It's a pun," the King added in an angry tone, and everybody laughed. "Let the jury consider their verdict," the King said, for about the twentieth time that day.

"No, no!" said the Queen. "Sentence first—verdict afterwards."

Analysis

The first part of the excerpt shows that the King is convinced the Knave of Hearts is guilty of stealing the tarts. No one knows what the text the Rabbit has just found actually says, but the King assumes it must necessarily be related to the ongoing case. In making this assumption, the King is acting according to the principle of coherence that usually governs discursive exchanges, which holds that a text should correspond to the communicative situation in which it circulates, as well as to the shared knowledge and experience of the people involved in the communication process. In the real world, a text may or may not be coherent with a given situation, but in Wonderland, the King decrees coherence before even knowing the content of the text the Rabbit is about to read. The King assumes—and imposes—coherence on a text whose only connection to the subject of the trial is that it was written on a piece of paper found on the floor of the courtroom.

The King concludes that it is a letter written by the Knave of Hearts and that its subject is the theft of the tarts. When the Rabbit points out that there is nothing written on the envelope in which the text was found, the King replies that it is not normal for a letter to be addressed to no one. When the Rabbit informs him that it is not a letter but "a set of verses" (line 12), the King ignores this detail. When the Rabbit adds that the handwriting is not the Knave of Hearts', the King argues that altering one's handwriting is a common tactic used to cover up guilt. And when the Rabbit notes that the mysterious text is unsigned, the King sees it as further proof of the Knave's dishonesty—because all honest people sign what they write.

Alice, who has grown considerably and is no longer afraid of the King and Queen (now much smaller than she is), protests against this series of absurd arguments and points out that the King is drawing conclusions without even having read the text. The King then orders the White Rabbit to read the text and tells him to start at the beginning, continue to the end, and then stop—as if this basic method could somehow guarantee order and rationality in what is to follow.

If the desire to find coherence (or, as Michel Charolles puts it, *relevance*) is what prevails before the mysterious poem is read by the White Rabbit, it is the question of cohesion that arises during its reading. Let us recall that cohesion depends on how a text is organized to present itself as a unified whole. The devices that ensure cohesion can be syntactic, grammatical, lexical, phonetic, or graphic. Thanks to these, reference, thematic progression, and referential continuity within a spatial, temporal, or discursive framework remain clear. The different forms of agreement, pronominal

substitution, and especially repetition are the fundamental mechanisms of cohesion. However, to avoid repetition without reducing clarity, the speaker can also use synonyms, hypernyms, or resort to ellipsis.

Although the work on sound, meter, and rhythm gives a certain cohesion to the poem, it is difficult to understand what it means. From the very first stanza (“They told me you had been to her, / And mentioned me to him”), the identity of the first person (“me”) is unknown, as is the identity of the second person (“you”) and the reference to the third persons designated by the pronouns “they,” “her,” and “him.”

In the second stanza, it is unclear whether the person referred to by the pronoun “he” is the same person as the one referred to by “him” in the first stanza. The reader is also unsure who is included in the “we” of “We know it to be true,” and whether “it” refers to what was just said at the beginning of the stanza, or to something else entirely.

In the third stanza, it is possible to imagine a referential continuity between the pronoun “they” in “they gave him two” and the third-person plural at the beginning of the poem. Yet it is difficult to know who or what the speaker is talking about when saying “one”, "two", “three” and “they all returned to him”. Just as puzzling is the meaning of "this" in the final stanza “For this must ever be”. It is also impossible to know for certain what “them” refers to in “she liked them best,” and what secret must be “kept from all the rest”, “Between yourself and me”.

The poem nevertheless displays a certain cohesion, because although the first link in each referential chain is missing, one can initially assume that there is continuity from beginning to end for each of the enigmatic entities designated by personal pronouns, indefinites, and possessives.

Identifying the first and second persons would not pose any problem if the context of enunciation were known. However, in the poem read by the White Rabbit, there is no element that allows this context to be defined: what the Rabbit reads is written on a piece of paper found inside a blank envelope. Normally, the use of third-person personal pronouns or possessive, demonstrative, or indefinite pronouns instead of clearly identifiable references in the context or cotext ensures referential continuity within a spatial, temporal, or discursive framework. But textual or situational references are absent at the beginning and are not provided later in the poem either. This does not pose an obstacle for the King, who is accustomed to assuming and imposing his own version of words and things. The King thus begins to reconstruct a large part of the missing information, so that the poem ultimately aligns, in broad terms, with the usual workings of language and the demonstrative logic expected in a courtroom. The King supplies the cohesion and coherence that are lacking and, in doing so, parodies the normal functioning of both mechanisms.

As the King believes from the start that the Knave of hearts is the author of the letter/poem, to determine the identity of the “I” who speaks in the text, it is enough for him to quote the line “But said I could not swim.” Indeed, as a cardboard playing card, it is obvious that the Knave of Hearts cannot swim. The King also arbitrarily decides that the first-person plural in the second stanza refers to the members of the court (the idea that court members are the ones who know the truth seems self-evident to him). He also decides that the pronoun “she” in the same stanza refers to the Queen of Hearts. He then concludes his argument by explaining that in the third stanza, all the enigmatic references (“one,” “two,” “three,” “all”) refer to the stolen tarts, which suddenly appear there on the table, in plain sight of everyone attending the trial.

There are substitutions the reader can infer from context: for example, one might understand that “this” at the end of the poem refers to what was just said at the beginning of the final stanza about what *she* likes best. However, it is more difficult to explain the referential continuity that should normally exist between the pronoun “she” in the second stanza (which, according to the King, refers to the Queen of Hearts) and

the other occurrences of “she” in the first, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth stanzas — but the King does not address this. Nor does he identify the reference of the third person singular in the second stanza (“He sent them word”) and in the third stanza (“they gave him two”).

The King restores a certain cohesion and coherence to the enigmatic poem read by the White Rabbit during the trial over the stolen tarts. His interpretations are, in any case, sufficient for the text to acquire an acceptable level of readability and for the reader to appreciate the parody of the usual mechanisms of discourse.

The explanation for the Queen of Hearts' contradiction (she claims she "never had fits", line 91, yet she says this "furiously, throwing an inkstand at the Lizard" named Bill, who is part of the court, lines 93-94) is given when the King says, “Then the words don’t fit you” (line 98). The King insists that, in this case, the poem’s words prove nothing and serve only as wordplay. It is amusing to note that the only words in the poem the King considers irrelevant are precisely those describing the Queen’s tantrums (playing on the double meaning of the word “fit” – to be suitable and to lose one’s temper). This is amusing because it is the only reference immediately understood by people both inside and outside Wonderland: everyone knows that the Queen of Hearts is always angry.

One might even think that the claim about "words that don't fit" (line 98) and that only serve as puns (line 100) applies not just to the Queen’s temper tantrum reference, but to the entire poem read by the White Rabbit during the trial over the stolen tarts — and even to a large part of Lewis Carroll’s work as a whole. The King engages in a series of puns and in absurd reasonings to mock the workings of language and, at the same time, to question the operation of the 19th-century English justice system — a system in which, as shown at the end of the excerpt, the sentence comes before the verdict (line 103).