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I say what I mean, I mean what I say
A curiouser and curiouser condition of language

Abstract

This thesis investigates how the relationship between the said and the meant in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* exposes the paradoxical condition of language. First, the theoretical framework accounts for the theory of language put forth by Jacques Derrida. Here it is concluded that discrepancies between the said and the meant are properties of language. This is due to the paradoxical necessary impossibility of assuming a language structure, context and meaning, and the *dissemination* of meaning that accompanies every word. Second, in a close-reading of the *Alice* books, Derrida's theory of language is set in relation to the texts. This is done by examining how Alice and the inhabitants of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World treat the relationship between what they say and what they mean. The analysis has thus consisted of three aspects: the use of puns, established expressions, and the notion of mastery of language. Based on the presented material, this study concludes that the paradoxical condition of language is exposed through Alice's need to assume meaning and context of the words uttered in Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World, however she finds that this can never be ensured. Further, the characters refusal to assume a meaning exposes the necessary impossibility of assumptions. Literal meaning, or *one* meaning bound to the intention and presence of the speaker is in their view what governs understanding. No assumptions are necessary, as everyone should say what they mean and mean what they say. Still, this unwillingness does not make their intentions the master of meaning, which is exposed by Alice's simultaneously naïve, questioning and displeased attitude towards the confusions she experiences.

Key words: *Alice in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking-Glass*, Jacques Derrida, language, meaning

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1 Introduction

Lewis Carroll and the *Alice* books hold a unique place in the history of literature. Being a mathematical logician, his texts written for children have since their publication had a large number, if not a majority, of adult readers. In a context of nonsense, the texts play with and expose discrepancies in a multitude of philosophical and scientific discursive categories, logic and understandings. The condition of language can be seen as one of the targets. The relationship between what the characters of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World say and what they mean creates confusion for Alice. Arguably, all the madness and contradictions of meaning that Alice experiences, illustrate properties of the language system and are made possible by the paradox language must work within.

1.1 Purpose of study

The intent of this thesis is to study the exposing effects of *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). I argue that through the characters of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World's understanding of the relationship between what they say and what they mean, this relationship can be questioned. I argue that the most generative exposing force of these texts is the play with language and meaning, where shortcomings, discrepancies and downright absurdities are in the spot light.

This thesis uses the theory of language put forth by Jacques Derrida as its framework, where the condition of language can be viewed as paradoxical. The intent of this thesis is thus to investigate how this condition of language is exposed in the *Alice* books, and thereby establish a connection between Derrida's understanding of language and the texts in question. By examining how the characters in the texts regard their own utterances, I argue that a necessary impossibility of a language structure, meaning and context is exposed.

In clear text, this thesis addresses the following question:

How does the relationship between the said and the meant in Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World expose the paradoxical condition of language?

1.2 Material

The primary material in this thesis is Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books. However, in order to answer the thesis question, an extensive investigation of texts regarding Derrida's complex understanding of meaning is needed. Derrida's own texts concerning language, along with thorough reviews of these texts will constitute the key material of the theoretical framework.

The aspects of the *Alice* books that are of relevance to this thesis are the passages that concern language and meaning, and expose the condition of language. Thus, the relevant literary material is narrowed down to puns, expressions, and the notion of mastery of language.

1.3 Previous research

It is safe to say that the *Alice* books have been a frequent object of research. Within the field of children's literature, many researchers have argued that the evolvment of children's status, situation and cultural options during the nineteenth century can be illustrated with Carroll's texts.¹ Sarah Gilead points out that Alice's dream can be understood as "[...] a child's uncomprehending but lucid view of mad adult reality."² The phenomenological difficulties, the harshness of adults, and the moralization children face is taken to the extreme, but also the idealization of childhood as a purely joyous and carefree time in a person's life is questioned.³

The *Alice* books have been used to illustrate aspects within a wide range of disciplines, for example neurology, psychology and law.⁴ Furthermore, Derrida has used the texts as a point of entry into a discussion concerning the interaction and hierarchy between humans and animals.⁵ The *Alice* books have also been used in order to illustrate problems and arguments in language philosophical inquiries. With his *The Logic of Sense* (1969) and the essay *Lewis Carroll* (1993), Gilles Deleuze discusses the *Alice* books in relation to language, identity, becoming, the surface of things, sense and nonsense. As Claire Colebrook states, Deleuze uses the *Alice* books in order to illustrate his view of language as an active creation and transformation of sense, rather than a reactive representation.⁶ Sense can, in Deleuze's use of the term, not be reduced to meaning in

¹ cf. Karen L. McGavock, "Agents of reform?: Children's literature and philosophy", *Philosophia*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2007

² Sarah Gilead, "Magic Abjured: Closure in Children's Fantasy Fiction", *PMLA*, vol. 106, no. 2, March 1991, p. 282

³ Ibid.

⁴ cf. Randolph W. Evans & Loren A. Rolak, "The Alice in Wonderland Syndrome", *Headache*, vol. 44 no. 6, 2004; Richard A. Epstein jr.'s "Alice's Loss of Wonderland", *Residential Treatment for Children and Youth*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2003; Parker B. Potter, "Punishment in Wonderland", *International Journal of Punishment and Sentencing*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2008

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2008, pp. 7-9

⁶ Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, Routledge, London, 2002, pp. 111-112

language, as sense is what allows language to be meaningful.⁷ Lewis Carroll combines language in new ways, for example with his ‘portmanteau’ words, in order to produce a new sense.⁸

This thesis aims to fill what I argue is a gap in the literature regarding the *Alice* books, and generate a new approach to the treatment of language in the texts in order to add to the established readings. Even though the angle may not have been grossly overlooked in previous research, no connection has been made *explicitly* between Derrida’s understanding of the relationship between the said and the meant, and the *Alice* books. Thus, this study aims to create a comprehensive connection between Derrida’s theory of language and meaning, and the texts in question.

1.4 Delimitations

In addition to play with the relationship between the said and meant, the *Alice* texts also uses allegories that can be interpreted as references to the condition of language. For example, games with indistinguishable rules, or rules which no one seems to follow, can be seen as directed at language. However, as this study focuses on passage that concern meaning and language directly, and the understandings of meaning that are conveyed, this aspect must be subsequently ruled out.

This study does not make use of Deleuze’s discussion concerning the *Alice* books. I have no doubt that his extensive reading of the texts could have a valuable impact on the analysis. However, this thesis focuses on the language theory put forth by Derrida. Professor of philosophy Gordon Bearn has argued that the difference between Deleuze and Derrida is the difference between Yes and No; the difference between the Deleuzian game you can never lose and the Derridean game you can never win.⁹ If Deleuze’s understanding of paradoxes and language were to be incorporated in this study, a thorough comparative analysis regarding Derrida’s and Deleuze’s theory would be integral. Unfortunately, the scope of this study prohibits such a comparison.

The reading of the *Alice* books focuses purely on the text, without taking historical context into consideration. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the fact that Carroll was a logician is kept in mind. The context that is of utmost importance in this thesis is language itself, leaving anything that might go beyond or outside the language of the texts irrelevant. This does not exclude a theoretical approach to language, where other texts have an impact on the reading of the *Alice* books.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gordon C.F. Bearn, “Differentiating Derrida and Deleuze”, *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 33. no. 4, Oct. 2000, p. 441

1.5 Disposition

In chapter 2 the method and interpretational criterion of this thesis is outlined. In chapter 3 the theoretical framework, consisting of Derrida's theory of language and meaning, is discussed. Chapter 4 constitutes the analysis of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, which is based on the outlined method and theoretical framework. Chapter 5 summarizes and concludes the thesis.

2 Method

The following chapter presents the method used in this thesis. This consists of a close-reading of the *Alice* books, where I will investigate how the texts expose the condition of language. In order to guide the process of analysis, I will propose a criterion for interpretation.

2.1 Close-reading

The methodological technique of this thesis is ultimately a close and attentive reading of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. The approach has first consisted of reading the two texts in their entirety, and then a selection of the passages that would have the most fruitful bearing on the thesis question has been made. The analysis will be made up of text passages that reveal the troublesome relationship between the said and the meant, and how this exposes the condition of language.

Close-reading as a technique of study evokes a question: how can the analysis be valid beyond my subjective interpretation and prerequisite knowledge? The answer to this is that a demand of objective epistemological operationalization cannot be firmly met or secured through close-reading. However, an attempt to meet such a demand, without claiming it as absolute, should be made.

Derrida's understanding of language, which is presented in the following chapter, will serve as the philosophical ground and interpretational criterion towards which the analysis will be put into context. The use of this theory does not stem directly from the general strategy of deconstruction, but uses the conclusions of Derrida's works as a criterion for interpretation in the reading of the *Alice* books. Thus, this thesis will use the paradoxical condition of language that can be derived from Derrida's understanding as a point of reference which the conclusions will be tried against.

I am not proposing a complete coherency between theory and texts as a criterion, naming all the implications that do not fit into Derrida's theory of language as marginal and of no importance in the understanding of the texts. Nor am I proposing that this thesis can account for the entirety of the *Alice* books. Derrida's understanding of language can be criticized, however it proves to be valuable as a contextualization of the material in question.

3 Theoretical framework

In the following chapter the theoretical framework relevant for this thesis is presented. First, I will account for the general strategy of deconstruction. Second, the effects deconstruction has had on two models of signification, the writing/speech opposition and Austin's serious/non-serious speech acts, will be discussed. It is important to give an overview of the general strategy and the deconstruction of these models of signification, as they are necessary in order to understand the third point of the theoretical framework: Derrida's theory of language, structure, context, intention and meaning. Finally, the concept of irony will illustrate the understanding Derrida proposes regarding the relationship between the said and the meant and the paradoxical condition of language.

3.1 Deconstruction

Deconstruction is, when understood most fundamentally, a mode of philosophical and literary analysis derived from the interrogations of basic philosophical categories and ideas by Jacques Derrida. In his work, Derrida takes on a number of concepts in order to show how they are undermining their own stability, justification and logic.¹⁰

3.1.1 The general strategy of deconstruction

If deconstruction has a general strategy, it is described by Derrida as addressing the violent hierarchy of facing terms in traditional philosophical oppositions.¹¹ The oppositions that can be found in philosophy do not coexist peacefully: one term dominates the other, axiologically, logically etc, and occupies the commanding position.¹² An essential step when deconstructing a concept produced in texts, is therefore to reverse this hierarchy in order to reveal its instability.¹³ However, it is important to note that this approach is double: rather than claiming a superior authority or appealing to a higher logical principle, the practitioner of deconstruction works within the terms of the system but with the intention to disrupt and destabilize it.¹⁴ In other words, the

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, p. 132

¹¹ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*, 25th anniversary ed., Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2007, p. 85

¹² Ibid,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 86-87

practitioners of deconstruction do not move outside the system, discourse or text they deconstruct, but makes use of the very principle, opposition or concept in order to displace it.¹⁵

Therefore, the deconstruction of an opposition should not demolish and thereby render a monism of the underprivileged term.¹⁶ While showing how an opposition is undone by a text, the opposition is still a part of the argument, putting the practitioner in a position of unwarrantable involvement, rather than skeptical detachment.¹⁷ The intent of deconstruction is not to generate a new kind of theory that will set everything straight.¹⁸ To be clear, the oppositions employed by a text, do not demonstrate and should not be regarded as mistakes or accidents that occasionally occur: it is a structural property *and* a rhetorical strategy of the discourse itself.¹⁹ Therefore, an objective of correcting flaws would ultimately claim a secure point of externality, and would in turn reproduce the very principle that deconstruction sets out to take into critical focus. On the contrary, deconstruction holds up provisional and intractable starting points by appealing to attested meanings and fundamental assumptions of the discourse in order to reveal and deconstruct them.²⁰

3.1.2 The speech/writing opposition

In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida discusses the devaluation of writing in philosophy, and the understanding that writing is an impure, non-transparent and artificial supplement to speech.²¹ Speech has been regarded as a direct mediation of thought where the signifiers do not obtrude as material characters, and any ambiguities can be explained by the speaker. Writing, on the other hand, reveals all the unfortunate aspects of mediation: the materiality of the linguistic sign, the possible artful rhetorical figures of communication, or the absence of a subject who can clarify their intended meaning.²² This notion of *phonocentrism*, where speech has a direct and natural relationship with meaning, and writing is seen as a representation of speech, is inextricably associated with the epistemological faith in logocentrism.²³ Derrida is critical of the logocentric tradition in philosophy, which has left philosophy to define itself against writing, as the goal has been the order of meaning — thought, reason, logic, truth, the Word — that transcends language and exists as a central foundation.²⁴

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 150

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Univ. of Chicago P., Chicago, 1982, p. 41

¹⁷ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, op. cit, pp. 87-88

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 109

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 89

²⁰ Ibid. p. 225

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Corrected ed, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998, p. 7

²² Culler, *On Deconstruction*, op. cit, pp. 90-91

²³ Ibid. p. 92

²⁴ Ibid. pp. 90-91

In his extensive reading of Saussure, Derrida argues that even though Saussure postulates a critique of logocentrism by claiming that signs are arbitrary, and insisting on the purely relational nature of the linguistic system, he cannot escape the logocentric conception in his treatment of writing.²⁵ Here, the logocentric idea of thought, reason and truth versus the way to access the *logos* is evident: writing is divorced from the thought that produced the intelligible meaning.²⁶ From this notion, Saussure argues that the spoken word alone constitutes the object of linguistic inquiry.²⁷ However, whilst claiming that writing exists solely as representational supplementation of speech, Saussure also argues that writing is the best tool for making the differential and relational nature of signs clear and evident, as they are visible marks.²⁸ Here lies the self-deconstructive effect of Saussure's text. If writing is the most adequate way of clarifying the nature of the spoken word, then this destabilizes the hierarchical understanding of writing as a supplement to speech.

Such an understanding implies that writing is an inessential extra, but supplementation is only necessary if speech itself is inadequate in conveying meaning.²⁹ Through his reading of Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782-1789), where Rousseau discusses writing as a supplement to speech, education as a supplement to nature, masturbation as a supplement to "normal" sexual activity, Derrida argues that the logic of the supplement would entail the supplement to resemble the supplemented in some essential way.³⁰ This would mean that the qualities generally attributed to writing, the possibility of misunderstanding, the absence of a clarifying subject, are also qualities that mark speech. This leads Derrida to propose an emerging necessity: the infinite chain of supplements produce the sense of the very thing they supplement.³¹ Thus, the opposition which assumes writing to be marked as insufficient, and threatening to the purity of speech, is destabilized.

3.1.3 Austin's problem with non-serious utterances

Through his theory of speech acts, J.L. Austin puts forth the study of the use of language [*parole*], contrary to Saussure's objective of studying the linguistic system in its own right [*langue*]. Meaning is determined by many factors other than word's lexical or grammatical definition, and Austin argues that language should be seen as performative, not merely descriptive or constative.³²

²⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, op. cit, pp. 30ff

²⁶ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, op. cit, pp. 99-100

²⁷ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, Owen, London, 1960, pp. 23-24

²⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, op. cit, pp. 52-57

²⁹ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, op. cit, pp. 102-103

³⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, op. cit, pp. 144-152

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 157

³² Georg Henrik von Wright, *Logik, filosofi och språk: strömningar och gestalter i modern filosofi*, [Ny utg.], Nya Doxa, Nora, 1993, pp. 218-219

For Austin, this does not lead the foundation of meaning back to the speaker's performative intention, but the conventional rules involving features of the context the utterance occurs in.³³ For example, the utterance "I promise X" is not descriptive, but an action done with words. Whether or not the speaker keeps their promise, or ever intended to keep it, is irrelevant: Austin does not treat failure as some external accident that threatens the nature of the performative, but sees the possibility of failure as essential to it.³⁴

Austin attempts a critique of logocentric premisses by refusing to explain meaning as the intention of the speaker, and by attacking philosophers who have regarded utterances that cannot be named true or false as marginal.³⁵ Nevertheless, Derrida argues that Austin reintroduces this premiss when he urges a distinction between serious and non-serious utterances.³⁶ "Surely the words must be spoken 'seriously' and so as to be taken 'seriously'? This is, though vague, true enough in general—it is an important commonplace in discussing the purport of any utterance whatsoever. I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem."³⁷ Austin sees the non-serious use of language as "parasitic upon its normal use", and thereby excludes this from consideration: "[o]ur performative utterances [...] are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances."³⁸ Thus, as Saussure excludes writing as a distortion, Austin names non-serious utterances as marginal, impure and of no consequence for his theory. Austin's text deconstructs itself by reintroducing the notion of intention and *logos*.³⁹

3.2 Language without security

I have now outlined two language theories which have proved to undermine their own justification. From this I will move on to Derrida's own understanding of language.

3.2.1 The non-center in language

Derrida's theory destabilizes the traditional understanding which he identified as reliant on a center in language.⁴⁰ The center functions as a balancer and an organizer of the structure, and as a limiter

³³ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, op. cit, p. 111

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Struktur händelse kontext", Marc-Wogau, K. Carlshamre, S. & Bergström, L. (red.) *Filosofin genom tiderna. 1900-talet. Efter 1950, 2.*, [rev. och utök.] uppl., Thales, Stockholm, 2008, pp. 128-131

³⁵ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, op. cit, p. 115

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 115-116

³⁷ John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: the William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, 2. ed., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1975, p. 9

³⁸ Ibid. pp. 21-22

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Struktur, tecken och spel i humanvetenskapernas diskurs", Entzenberg, C. & Hansson, C. (red.), *Modern litteraturteori: från rysk formalism till dekonstruktion*, 2. uppl., Studentlitteratur, Lund, 1993', pp. 389-390

and an enabler of the structure's play.⁴¹ However, the center is contradictory coherent: the center controls, and thereby eludes the structure — the center is simultaneously *outside* and *inside* the structure it controls.⁴² Within this thought, by the power of being a center, it should be defined only by itself. The breaking point, Derrida suggests, was perhaps initiated when the necessary attempt to articulate and repeat the center by supplementing it began.⁴³ As mentioned in regards to the speech/writing opposition, this would imply that the supplement in some essential way resembles and can correct an original lack in the supplemented. The supplement can never be a substitute for something that has in some way existed before the supplementation, thus the supplement must produce the center.⁴⁴ Derrida sees a need to imagine a non-center: in the absence of a center everything becomes discourse, and we can no longer think in terms of a system where the center, the original transcendental signified, is absolutely present outside a system of differences.⁴⁵

Derrida argues that the notion and authority of presence in the history of western philosophy has benefited the logocentric epistemology and has structured all our thinking: the presence of an essence; the presence of meaning; temporal presence of the now or the moment; self-presence, subjectivity; intersubjectivity, etc.⁴⁶ This is profound in trivial understandings of language. For example, in considering the meaning of an utterance as the idea or intention of the speaker at the moment of speaking, evokes the reliance on presence: temporal, subjective and intersubjective presence.⁴⁷ Derrida argues that the authority of presence is a complex construction, and claims that language is never marked simply by presence or absence.⁴⁸

3.2.2 Structure, event and *différance*

In language, there is a paradox of structure and event: the structure of a language is a product of previous speech acts (events), but when investigating the events that presumably determine the structure, one finds that every event is determined and made possible by prior structures.⁴⁹ The structure of language and the particular language events cannot be separated, and becomes almost like the discussion of which came first: the chicken or the egg. An attempt to determine a first structure or event of language might be impossible, since we must always assume some prior

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 391

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, op. cit, p. 12

⁴⁷ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, op. cit, p. 94

⁴⁸ Derrida, *Positions*, op. cit, p. 26

⁴⁹ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, op.cit, p. 95

structures of signification, which then again were made up of previous events. Language must have a pre-existing order, as it is not something we make up as we go along, but each conversation also alters and defers that order: “[e]ach inscription of a lawful language is particular, and each instance of a concept fails to fulfill the concept in general.”⁵⁰ Thus, language events are structured by a system, but the system is never fully capable of determining the meaning of the events.

In this paradox of structure and event, how can the meaning of words be determined? The meaning of a word is marked by the presence of previous meanings given to this word in speech act, but is simultaneously marked by the traces and difference from other words.⁵¹ Derrida introduces the term *différance*, from the French word *differer* meaning both differ and defer. Also, it is a conscious misspelling of the word *différence*.⁵² This seems to be a taunting remark directed at the inadequacy of Saussure’s notion of there in language being only difference without positive terms.⁵³ Furthermore, it may be seen as directed at the speech/writing opposition: the difference between the two words are not apparent in speech, only in writing.⁵⁴ *Différance* refers to the (1) passive difference of words, which already exists as a condition of signification, (2) the active deferring of a sign’s meaning, and (3) the active differing from other signs that must be appealed to in order for it to signify.⁵⁵ *Différance* “[...] is a structure and a movement that cannot be conceived on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. *Différance* is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing by which elements relate to one another.”⁵⁶ This should be exemplified: if I say ‘box’, it is passively separated from ‘ox’, ‘pox’, ‘fox’. But the meaning of the word is deferred as it stands on its own. By adding “cardboard box”, “Xbox” or “box of chocolates”, the meaning of the word becomes more focused. ‘Box’ differs from ‘canister’, ‘carton’ and ‘trunk’, which even though they in some way are all boxes, signify something different.

3.2.3 Context, intention and dissemination

Derrida argues that for language to function, we must accept that meaning cannot merely rely on the context, but assume some proper meaning that exceeds a context.⁵⁷ The possibility of being repeated and altered outside a single context is a condition for a sign to have meaning: “[a] mark

⁵⁰ Colebrook, *Irony*, Routledge, New York, 2004, pp. 97-98

⁵¹ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, op. cit, pp. 95-96

⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Univ. of Chicago P., Chicago, 1982, pp. 2-4

⁵³ Saussure, op.cit, p. 120

⁵⁴ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, Augmented ed., Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 2002, p. 41

⁵⁵ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, op. cit, p. 97

⁵⁶ Derrida, *Positions*, op. cit, p. 27

⁵⁷ Colebrook, *Irony*, op.cit, p. 97

that could not in any way detach itself from its singular context – however slightly and, if only through repetition, reducing, dividing and multiplying it by identifying it – would no longer be a mark.”⁵⁸ In order for something to be a sign, it must have the ability to be repeated, cited and altered in all sorts of circumstances, thus including the non-serious circumstances that Austin eliminates.⁵⁹ This does not imply that context should be eliminated: meaning is bound to context, but the context is boundless and can neither be entirely determined nor can it totally govern and ensure meaning.⁶⁰

Meaning must also necessarily exceed the private intent of the speaker. If language is to be used successfully, by being meaningful and understood by others, it must have a force beyond private intent.⁶¹ Before meaning, intent or speech acts, there must lie a system of sounds and marks that make meaning, intent and uttering possible.⁶² Any use of language is necessarily bound to the structure it inhabits, not only to the meanings produced by the structure, but also to the unintended and ‘accidental’ effects.⁶³

With the term *dissemination* the problem of naming intention as a foundation of meaning becomes clearer. According to Gordon Bearn, Derrida suggests that the semantic power of words lie in them not being reducible to neither a ridged meaning nor regulated polysemic meanings.⁶⁴ Many of Derrida’s own terms play with this impossibility of reduction, and the example *différance* has already been discussed. *Dissemination* is also filled with several meanings, as ‘sem’ plays on *semen*, referring to sperm, and *sèmes* which refers to the basic semantic feature, the sign.⁶⁵ The term would thus call attention to the fertile dispersal of infinite possibilities of meaning that accompany every sign, and thus goes beyond the control of a stable interpretation.⁶⁶ Stability in meaning is impossible, as words are constantly filled with endless, always increasing possibilities of meaning.⁶⁷ The term *dissemination* should not be confused or be seen as equal to ‘ambiguity’, as ambiguity implies a limited number of possible meanings.⁶⁸ What Derrida is insisting on with this term, is the impossibility of totalization, which ranges from the basic unit of language to context and to the entire system of language. Within the structure, language consists of play and *différance*, and can

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, Verso, London, 2005, p. 216

⁵⁹ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, p. 99

⁶⁰ Jae Emerling, “Jacques Derrida”, *Theory for Art History*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 138

⁶¹ Colebrook, *Irony*, op. cit, p. 105

⁶² Claire Colebrook, *Irony in the Work of Philosophy*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Neb., 2002, pp. 32-33

⁶³ Colebrook, *Irony*, op. cit, p. 105

⁶⁴ Gordon C.F. Bearn, “The Possibility of Puns: A Defense of Derrida”, *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 19, no. 2, Oct. 1995, p. 333

⁶⁵ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, op.cit, p. 144

⁶⁶ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 3. ed., Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2008, p. 93

⁶⁷ Bearn, “The Possibility of Puns”, op.cit, pp. 333-334

⁶⁸ Baldick, p. 93

never be totalized or fully present.⁶⁹ The lack of totalization does, however, not imply that one can speak or write from a position of pure play: language must be structured by some sort of system.⁷⁰ Rather, this should be understood as the possibility of any utterance having the potential of meaning something other than what is thought of as a stable and established meaning.⁷¹ This leaves the notion of linguistic mastery, of the structure and of one's own utterances, as a mere product of wishful thinking.⁷²

3.3 Destabilizing the said and the meant

I have now accounted for the main aspects of Derrida's understanding of language. In order to make the theoretical approach to the relationship between the said and the meant as effective as possible, I will now illustrate Derrida's understanding by exemplifying with a classical concept that plays precisely on this relationship, namely *irony*. However, this does not imply a focus on the verbal irony of the *Alice* texts: what I am investigating is how the texts expose a discrepancy in language, and how the relationship between the said and the meant in general is destabilized. Still, I argue that the way irony can be viewed in light of Derrida's theory may be one of the most fruitful manners of accounting for this relationship. Following this exemplification, I will summarize what can be understood as the paradoxical condition of language.

The language figure of irony initiates a problem with regards to meaning as it can, in logical terms and in its most simple use, be reduced to $A = \text{not } A$: what is being said is not what is meant. The intention of the sender would therefore seem an appropriate origin of the meaning of such an utterance. Furthermore, Douglas Muecke and Wayne Booth have argued that irony relies on a shared context and views.⁷³ If irony is a figure of language that *necessarily* leads meaning back to intention and a stable context, irony would seemingly pose a problem for Derrida's understanding of language.

3.3.1 Irony as a property of language

Derrida never explicitly dealt with the concept of irony in his works.⁷⁴ However, his understanding of language can be successfully applied to irony, and *visa versa*: irony can effectively illustrate Derrida's theory.

⁶⁹ Derrida, "Struktur, tecken och spel i humanvetenskapernas diskurs", op. cit, pp. 402-407

⁷⁰ Colebrook, *Irony*, op. cit, p. 107

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Bearn, "The Possibility of Puns", op.cit, p. 334

⁷³ Colebrook, *Irony*, op. cit, pp. 42-44

⁷⁴ Colebrook, *Irony in the Work of Philosophy*, op. cit. p. 32

In the context of this theory, it is important not to think of irony as some unexplainable or marginal feature of language. Naming irony as something that stands outside the theory of language outlined above, or as a parasitic destabilizer of ‘ordinary language’, would reproduce the arguments Derrida opposes in his deconstruction of Austin’s non-serious utterances. If irony, or non-serious utterances, are possible, it is because they are a property of language. Such utterances are in no way a special distortion, an impure or an exceptional form of non-transparent language, but stem from the potential of all utterances meaning something other than what may be regarded as the stable meaning.⁷⁵ Nothing outside language can *secure* that meaning is successfully conveyed, and there is always the possibility of a different meaning than what might have been intended.

The speech/writing opposition named speech as a direct conveyer of meaning, where nuances of meaning or misunderstandings could be clarified by the present speaker, for example by the tone of voice. Irony might be thought of as easier to grasp if the sender of the ironic message is present. However, as previously mentioned, the insufficient qualities historically given to writing are just as prominent in speech. Irony does not have a more secure foundation in speech than in writing, as the possibility of misinterpretation is a property of the language system.

Therefore, all language and all forms of lingual mediation face the “problem” that irony faces: the boundless context, the non-totalized structure, the dissemination of signs which can disrupt intentions etc. All utterances have the potential of meaning something other than what is said: all language is potentially ironic.⁷⁶ What this illustrates is that discrepancies between the said and the meant cannot be a special case of lingual circumstances. In this theory, irony cannot always have a *metaphysical* feature due to the assumption of intention or a joint context, contrary to Paul Tenngart’s claims.⁷⁷ Such assumptions are always necessary, but they are nevertheless equally impossible.

3.3.2 The paradoxical condition of language

The paradoxical condition of language that has now been discussed can be summarized in Derrida’s idea of necessary impossibility.⁷⁸ This can be schematically outlined as the following:

⁷⁵ Colebrook, *Irony*, op. cit, p. 107

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Paul Tenngart, “Dekonstruktion”, *Litteraturteori*, 1. uppl., Gleerup, Malmö, 2008, p. 90

⁷⁸ Colebrook, *Irony*, op.cit, p. 98. Colebrook names this the ironic implications of Derrida’s work, however to avoid confusion, I will name this the paradoxical condition.

- (1) A lawful, pre-existing structure of language, and a proper meaning of the sign must be assumed in order for an utterance to mean something.⁷⁹
- (2) A lawful, totalized structure of language can never be achieved and is strictly impossible.⁸⁰ Proper meaning is necessarily absent and deferred.⁸¹
- (3) All utterances potentially mean something other than what is said, and meaning cannot be firmly governed.

The paradox lies in the necessary presumption of structure and meaning, while still accepting that a total structure and meaning is impossible. In order for language to function, we must assume a structure, a context and a meaning, but accept that these factors can never be pinned down and firmly ensure meaning. ‘Accidental’ meaning and disruption of the structure is a property of language, and these aspects can never be mastered. The paradoxical condition of language is what makes discrepancies between the said and the meant possible.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 97

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 98

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 97

4 I say what I mean, I mean what I say

I have now argued that discrepancies between the said and the meant are made possible by the paradoxical condition of language. With this claim at hand, the focus can now be turned to how this is exposed in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. The analysis is centered around three aspects of the texts that have impact on language and meaning: puns, established expressions and the notion of mastery of language.

In order to limit the number of footnotes, the first reference made to either *Alice in Wonderland* or *Through the Looking-Glass* is given as usual, while the following references are given with the page number in question in parenthesis. Both texts are found in the Norton Critical Edition of *Alice in Wonderland*.

4.1 “I know they’re talking nonsense”

Alice thought the whole thing very absurd, but they all looked so grave that she did not dare to laugh [...].

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

As mentioned in the introduction, I regard the *Alice* books as texts that continuously play on meaning. The characters of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World claim to mean *exactly* what they say, ““neither more nor less.””⁸² Seemingly, they wish to leave no room for another meaning. Alice, on the other hand, is frequently confused and names the proposed meaning impossible: by her logic and understanding, what they say cannot be what they mean, as this would be nonsense.

The premisses of the books must be taken into account: Alice is transported from the ‘real’ world to Wonderland through a rabbit hole, and to the Looking-Glass World through the mirror in her living room (however, as is revealed in the closing chapters of each book, it might have all been just a dream). The curiouser and curiouser experiences in these places leave her thinking that a very few things are really ever impossible. Thus, the absurdities she encounters are possible, as the contextual conceivabilities of the ‘real’ world do not intervene in Wonderland or the Looking-Glass World.

⁸² Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland: authoritative texts of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; Through the Looking-Glass; The Hunting of the Snark: Backgrounds, Essays in Criticism*, 2. ed., Norton, New York, 1992 p. 163

4.2 “Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves”

In the *Alice* books, puns play an integral role, and pose an interesting problem for the idea of stable meaning. Two kinds of puns are investigated in the following passages: (a) puns that play on the same or similar audial sign, but are visibly different in writing, and (b) puns that have the same audial *and* physical sign.

4.2.1 “I mean what I say”

After their swim in the pool of tears, the Mouse wishes to tell Alice his “[...] long and sad tale” (p. 24) Alice, misinterpreting the use of the audial sign, comments “[i]t *is* a long tail, certainly,” [...] looking down with wonder at the Mouse’s tail; ‘but why do you call it sad?’” (Ibid.) The intertwined play with tale/tail is further underlined when the Mouse’s tale takes its written, physical structure in the shape of a tail. (p. 25) Seemingly, the material form of the tale is evident to Alice, as when there is an interruption in the Mouse’s story Alice remarks “I beg your pardon, [...] you had gotten to the fifth bend, I think?’ ‘I had *not!*’ cried the Mouse, sharply and very angrily. ‘A knot!’ said Alice [...]. ‘Oh, do let me help to undo it!’ ‘I shall do nothing of the sort’, said the Mouse [...]. ‘You insult me by talking such nonsense!’” (Ibid.)

In Alice’s meeting with the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon, the use of puns is intense. The Mock Turtle begins to tell the story of how he once was a real turtle and went to school in the sea:

“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!”
“You ought to be ashamed of yourself for asking such a simple question,” added the Gryphon [...].” (pp. 74-75)

The pun used here is founded on the similar sounding sign ‘Tortoise’ and ‘taught us’ in British English, leading the master to be called ‘Tortoise’, even though he was an old turtle.

In the song that accompanies the Lobster-Quadrille, another pun based on similar sounding words creates confusion.

*“Will you walk a little faster?” said a whiting to a snail,
“There’s a porpoise close behind us, and he’s treading on my tail.”*
[---]

“If I’d been the whiting,” said Alice, [...] “I’d have said to the porpoise ‘Keep back, please! We don’t want *you* with us!’”

“They were obliged to have him with them,” the Mock Turtle said. “No wise fish would go anywhere without a porpoise.”
 “Wouldn’t it really?” said Alice, in a tone of great surprise.
 “Of course not,” said the Mock Turtle. “Why, if a fish came to *me*, and told me he was going a journey, I should say, ‘With what porpoise?’”
 “Don’t you mean ‘purpose’?” said Alice.
 “I mean what I say,” the Mock Turtle replied, in an offended tone. (pp. 79-81)

The misunderstandings and confusions that occur in these passages are all due to the ‘accidental’ identical or similar sounding audial sign some words share: tale—tail; knot—not; Tortoise—taught us; porpoise—purpose. In speech some kind of differentiation of context would be required in order to separate them. However, in Wonderland, Alice finds that such a context cannot be taken for granted. With her understanding of sense and possibilities, Alice has trouble accepting that the characters of Wonderland mean just what they say.

The examples of audial signs referring to several meanings highlight how speech, or rather representation of speech through writing, is placed in the textual foreground of the *Alice* books. The lack of transparency is in these cases products of ‘accidents’ in spoken language. However, in writing the material *différance* between these signs are evident. The reader of the text has no problem separating these words, underlining the condition of spoken language. Still, the texts play to an equal extent on the signs that are both audibly and materially identical, thus complicating the matter.

At the Mad Tea-Party, the Dormouse is telling the story of the three sisters living at the bottom of a treacle-well⁸³, who were learning to draw.

“What did they draw?” said Alice [...].
 “Treacle,” said the Dormouse [...].
 [---]
 Alice did not wish to offend the Dormouse again, so she began very cautiously:
 “But I don’t understand. Where did they draw the treacle from?”
 “You can draw water out of a water-well,” said the Hatter; “so I should think you could draw treacle out of a treacle-well—eh, stupid?”
 “But they were *in* the well,” Alice said to the Dormouse, not choosing to notice this last remark.
 “Of course they were,” said the Dormouse: “well in.”
 This answer so confused poor Alice, that she let the Dormouse go on for some time without interrupting it.
 “They were learning to draw,” the Dormouse went on [...]; “and they drew all manner of things—everything that begins with an M——” (pp. 59-60)

In this case, ‘draw’ and ‘well’ audibly and materially refer to several different things. ‘Draw’ is alternately used as the verb that could signify sketching a picture, *and* draining or extracting. ‘Well’

⁸³ *Treacle*: a thick, sticky dark sirup, made partly from refined sugar; molasses

is used as a noun, signifying a structure used to extract for example ground water. However, the Dormouse also uses this as an adverb, as the three sisters were *well* (thoroughly) in the well. Alice cannot sort out this confusion, and the Mad Hatter, the Dormouse and the March Hare seem to regard her as stupid: how could she not understand what they mean, when they mean exactly what they say?

The passages discussed above include what can be named involuntary punning, if seen from the characters in Wonderland's point of view. Willful punning is also found in the text, for example in the trial of "Who stole the tarts?". (pp. 86-97) The King attempts to interpret the letter brought into evidence by the White Rabbit. He initially claims it is about the Knave, who is accused of stealing the tarts, and the Queen.

“‘*We know it to be 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! [---]

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. [---]

“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. (pp. 95-96)

Here, pun is intended by the King, who expects his cleverness to be understood by the attendants of the trial. Contrary to involuntary punning, he is offended and angry when no one recognizes this.

4.2.2 “Off with their heads!”

Apparently, the *différance* of sense has not taken care of the *différance* of sounds or signs, as the Duchess implies. (p. 71) The linguist Alan Partington points out, as others have done before him, that “[...] there has never been an entirely satisfactory account of the actual linguistic mechanisms wordplay depends upon.”⁸⁴ Gordon Bearn argues that any attempt to explain the possibilities of puns comes very close to a Derridean understanding, which most philosophers of language would like to avoid.⁸⁵

In “The Possibility Of Puns: A Defense of Derrida” (1995), Bearn writes: “[t]he air of crime clings to puns. In some contexts the use of a pun is enough to convict one of the fallacy of equivocation, and even where [they are] “simply” fun, we refuse to laugh. By groaning, we punish

⁸⁴ Alan Scott Partington, “A linguistic account of Wordplay: The lexical grammar of punning”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 41, no. 9, Sep. 2009, p. 1803

⁸⁵ Bearn, “The Possibility of Puns”, *op.cit.*, p. 330

the punster. Apparently we take puns more seriously than we consistently insist.”⁸⁶ The seriousness of puns, identified by Bearn, is the destabilizing effect they have on the notion that several of the inhabitants of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World hold on to: the conception that when a word is used, it only evokes the intended, particular meaning.⁸⁷ What a pun effectively makes us notice, is the uncontrollable power of words: the speaker can, contrary to intention or context, trigger several other possible meanings of a word. The ringing of Derrida’s notion of dissemination can be heard with every possibility of punning.

The crime of puns begins to take its form. The lack of control is understandably a frightening consequence of dissemination: if there is no one, total meaning in a word, there cannot be one meaning to our own intended meaning, no one meaning in what we meant to say, and thereby no one meaning in what we are understood to say.⁸⁸ Alice’s offense would thus be calling out the impossibility of controlling meaning through intention. Whenever Alice questions the use of a word or suggests the possibility of the sign having another meaning, she is angrily and curtly dismissed. The inhabitants of the world Alice is visiting mean what they say, and nothing else. The insult of this insinuation is severe, as it causes the Mouse to refuse to tell the rest of his tale/tail, and the Mock Turtle to sulk a little before continuing his story. Contrariwise, whenever an intended pun is not recognized, similar reactions are evoked. Seemingly, intention is the key to meaning for the characters, and they refuse to accept any other possibility.

As mentioned, context can never be fully secured in Wonderland or the Looking-Glass World. Due to what Alice identifies as nonsense and absurdities, anything is possible. One could thus argue that the context and premisses presented in the *Alice* texts are an example of non-ordinary circumstances, with non-serious consequences to ordinary language events. However, this can also be understood differently, and as having a greater exposing power. Even though the conceivabilities in the realm do not correlate with the possibilities of the ‘real’ world and makes context a non-stable factor of meaning insurance, this should perhaps not be regarded as something that is specific or special for Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World. Bearn argues that the idea of context being able to overshadow other possible meanings of a word, making dissemination irrelevant to ordinary communication, relies on the notion that context can be “determined independently of the disseminating significances of our words. If they cannot, if what context I am in is determined by what I have said, then the disseminating significances of what I have said, could not [...] be

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid, pp. 330-331

⁸⁸ Ibid, pp. 332-333

constrained by what context I am in.”⁸⁹ Therefore, the context where an utterance is made is determined by what is uttered, and as dissemination follows every utterance, no context can be determined independently from dissemination. The conceivabilities of context are distorted in Wonderland and in the Looking-Glass World, however this is always a possibility through dissemination.

Thus, neither intention nor context can veil dissemination. Intention cannot ensure that the said and the meant are unquestionably identical, and context cannot ensure that the recipient of the utterance understands the intended meaning: dissemination accompanies every word and has the potential of disrupting context.

How does this expose the paradoxical condition of language? Alice works within the necessity of assuming some intention and context in order to attribute meaning to what the inhabitants of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World say, but finds her assumptions to be wrong, leaving the impossibility exposed. Context and intention fail as concealers of other possible meanings. If dissemination is a possibility that accompanies every word, every utterance, every intention, every context, then it is possible that no message has ever been understood completely by anyone.⁹⁰ The punsters crime is thus the exposing of this rather terrifying condition. But paradoxically, every utterance must engage in this possibility. The characters Alice meets refuse to accept this, claiming that they mean *only* what they say. The consequences of the paradoxical condition of language, where the ‘accidental’ effects, the context and even the presence of our own intended meaning of the utterances can never be mastered, are not pleasant to be reminded of. No wonder there are some many capital offenses in Wonderland.

4.3 “I’m sure I didn’t mean——”

Alice’s confusion regarding what the characters in Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World say and mean, can also be reversed: Alice is also misunderstood when she uses figures of speech or established expressions in conversation.

4.3.1 “I only meant that I didn’t understand”

The phrase ‘I beg your pardon’ is used by Alice several times in texts, most interestingly when she wishes the person she is conversing with to clarify what they mean. In *Through the Looking-Glass*,

⁸⁹ Ibid, pp. 333-334

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 334

Humpty Dumpty tells Alice that he was given the cravat⁹¹ he is wearing as an un-birthday present from the White King and Queen. Alice, not knowing what an un-birthday present is, says “I beg your pardon?”, and Humpty Dumpty replies “I’m not offended.” Alice then explains “I mean, what *is* an un-birthday present?” (p. 162) Humpty Dumpty interprets Alice’s words as her wishing to be pardoned of some offense she has made.

Further on, the White King is explaining to Alice why he needs two messengers, “[o]ne to come, and one to go.” (p. 171) Again Alice says “I beg your pardon?”, and the White King answers “[i]t isn’t respectable to beg’ [...]. ‘I only meant that I didn’t understand,’ said Alice. ‘Why one to come and one to go?’” (Ibid.) The begging is thus taken at its word by the White King.

After Alice has been made Queen in the chess game, she finds an arched doorway with the words “QUEEN ALICE” written on it. (p. 198) She tries to knock and ring the bell in order to get in, when an old frog appears:

“What is it, now?” the Frog said in a deep hoarse whisper.
Alice turned round, ready to find fault in anybody. “Where’s the servant whose business it is to answer the door?” she began angrily.
“Which door?” said the Frog.
Alice almost stamped with irritation at the slow drawl in which he spoke. “*This* door, of course!”
[---]
“To answer the door?” he said. “What’s it been asking of?” He was so hoarse that Alice could scarcely hear him.
“I don’t know what you mean,” she said.
“I speaks English, doesn’t I?” the Frog went on. “Or are you deaf? What did it ask you?”
“Nothing!” Alice said impatiently. “I’ve been knocking at it!” (p. 199)

The expression ‘answer the door’ is thus taken literally, and not as a metonymy referring to opening the door for the person who is knocking or ringing the doorbell. The misunderstanding suggests that Alice means that the door has been asking something, which seemingly would be possible in the Looking-Glass World.

4.3.2 “Then you should say what you mean”

At the Mad Tea-Party, phrases that are ingrained in the English language are also taken at their word.

“Why is a raven like a writing-desk?”
“Come, we shall have some fun now!” thought Alice. “I’m glad they’ve begun asking riddles—I believe I can guess that,” she added aloud.

⁹¹ *Cravat*: a short, wide strip of fabric worn by men round the neck and tucked inside an open-necked shirt.

“Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?” said the March Hare.

“Exactly so,” said Alice.

“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. “Why, you might just as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see!’” (p. 55)

Alice’s meaning is questioned, and Alice states that she means exactly what the March Hare proposes. The March Hare then urges Alice to say what she means, implying that “‘I believe I can guess that’” does not mean that she thinks she can find the answer to the riddle. Further on in the tea-party, Alice is so offended by a remark made by the Mad Hatter that she walks off in disgust: “‘Really, now you ask me,’ said Alice, very much confused, ‘I don’t think——’ ‘Then you shouldn’t talk,’ said the Hatter.” (p. 60) The words ‘I don’t think’ are understood literally, as if Alice was lacking cognitive abilities.

The phrases Alice uses are not foreign for any English speaker, and have successfully been given an established meaning through previous speech acts. Thus, these discrepancies between the said and the meant are not usually something that is noticed in conversation. However, for many of the characters in Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World, literal meaning seems to be the governing authority. Alice does not mean *exactly* what she says, as requested by the March Hare.

These passages expose that saying what you mean, and meaning what you say are not the same, contrary to what Alice proposes. The meaning of these expressions and phrases are sufficiently internalized in the English language, and what is literally being said would not be taken as the meaning. Their literal meaning seems to have been forgotten. In the paradoxical condition of language, discrepancies between what is said and what is meant are not products of special circumstances, but are evident in everyday conversational expressions. Alice is clearly irritated when she is questioned whether what she says is *really* what she means, just as the characters of Wonderland were offended when she questioned them. However, Alice’s anger is directed at the unwillingness of the characters to assume an established meaning to these phrases. And why should they assume a more figurative meaning, as they enter into conversation with the principle that everyone should just say what they mean?

Thus, these passages expose the paradox Derrida outlines: the process of understanding is reliant on assumptions of meaning, context and intention, but this does not stand as security for successful exchange. If someone refuses to indulge in this condition of language and understanding, then

vexingly enough every appeal to an established expression can always be questioned: is what you are saying *really* what you are saying? Is what you are saying *really* what you mean?

4.4 ‘When *I* use a word...’

Theories of language have a vital place in the *Alice* books. Through different perspectives, the texts play with the foundation of meaning: what makes a word mean what it does?

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Humpty Dumpty presents his view of the matter. When asking Alice her name and business, he is displeased and asks what her name means. Doubtfully, Alice asks if a name must mean something: “[o]f 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.’” (p. 160) This view of names states that there must be a connection between the name and the object it names, that ‘Humpty Dumpty’ would refer to his egg-round shape. According to Humpty Dumpty, Alice’s name does not signify some property of her exterior or character. The link between name and object could thus be a realistic connection, *or* a demand from Humpty Dumpty that Alice must give a meaning to her name.

Discussing the possibility of getting three hundred and sixty four un-birthday presents, and only *one* birthday present, Humpty Dumpty exclaims: “‘There’s glory for you!’” (p. 163) Alice’s remark that she does not know what he means by glory, brings out a contemptuous smile: “[o]f course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’” (Ibid.) Alice objects that this is not what glory means, and the passage where the arbitrary signification of Humpty Dumpty’s words are revealed should be quoted in its entirety:

“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.” Alice was too much puzzled to say anything; so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. “They’ve a temper, some of them—particularly verbs: they’re the proudest—adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs—however, *I* can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability! That’s what *I* say!”

“Would you tell me, please,” said Alice, “what that means?”

“Now you talk like a reasonable child,” said Humpty Dumpty, looking very pleased. “I meant by ‘impenetrability’ that we’ve had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you’d mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don’t mean to stop here all the rest of your life.”

“That’s a great deal to make one word mean,” Alice said in a thoughtful tone.

“When I make a word do a lot of work like that,” said Humpty Dumpty, “I pay it extra.” (pp. 163-164)

Seemingly, a choice between two possible interpretations must be made from this passage: is Humpty Dumpty the master of all language, making him the transcendental signified that controls the process of all signification, or is he claiming to be the master of what words mean when *he* uses them, naming his intentions as the sole issuer of meaning? As it was necessary for him to ask what ‘Alice’ means, this would imply that he is *only* the master of his own intended meaning: Alice must give meaning to the words she uses, and Humpty Dumpty to the words he uses. This interpretation is strengthened by Humpty Dumpty’s uncertainty with the word ‘mome’ when he explains the poem *Jabberwocky* to Alice: “[...] ‘mome’ I’m not certain about. I think it’s short for ‘from home’—meaning that they’d lost their way, you know.” (p. 166) Thus, it can be argued that Humpty Dumpty claims he is the master of his own words. He manages them, gives them meaning, and pays them extra when he makes them mean a lot.

Nevertheless, it is implied that Humpty Dumpty cannot fully be the master of the words he uses, as he calls *verbs* proud, compared to adjectives. Words apparently also have a say in the process of signification. Some sort of inescapable will seemingly secures that at least verbs do not wish to mean just anything. Simultaneously, Humpty Dumpty outlines a completely arbitrary language only relative to the meaning he wishes to convey, *and* that he to some extent has a difficult time managing words. A pre-existing structure of words seems to be in place, which Humpty Dumpty must take into account when he makes the words mean something.

Humpty Dumpty’s use of the word ‘glory’ is what evokes his claim of words meaning what he chooses. Alice already has some idea of what the word means, as she opposes the definition Humpty Dumpty gives to ‘glory’, exposing a discrepancy between the said and the meant. However, here one must consider the possibility of signs being repeated and altered in language, and having the ability to signify beyond their literal meaning. Humpty Dumpty and Alice are discussing un-birthday presents, and Alice states that she likes birthday presents the best. Humpty Dumpty implicitly argues that by sheer mathematics he can prove that un-birthday presents are better, as there are more of them. (pp. 162-163) By his understanding, the difference in quantity makes it incomprehensible to state that *one* birthday present is better than three hundred and sixty four un-birthday presents. His exclamation “‘There’s glory for you!’” could thus refer to the glory and superiority of his argument, or be an ironic statement that discards Alice’s preference as lowly and absurd. When Alice objects to Humpty Dumpty’s definition of ‘glory’ as a ‘nice knock-down argument’, the problem of established and literal meaning, a fixed context and understanding comes into focus. Humpty Dumpty takes use of the paradoxical condition of language, where the established meaning of a word can be altered and exceed its ‘proper’ context. The same goes for the

possibility of ‘impenetrability’ meaning “[...] we’ve had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you’d mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don’t mean to stop here all the rest of your life.” (p. 164) The management of language is perhaps impenetrable, and Humpty Dumpty is warning Alice that he sees no use in a prolonged discussion of the subject. Thus, this understanding of words and meaning somewhat exceeds the governing authority of literal meaning previously discussed, as Humpty Dumpty claims that the meaning of his words relies *purely* on his intentions.

This passage exposes that a word can be distorted from its dictionary definition and be repeated and altered in a context that gives it a different meaning. For Derrida, this is a demand that the sign must fulfill in order to be a sign.⁹² Further, this exposes that discrepancies between the said and the meant do not necessarily leave what is said meaningless or nonsensical. Humpty Dumpty thus proposes that meaning is not stable, still *he* is always sure of what his words mean: his intentions are the stable factor in the equation. However, Humpty Dumpty’s confidence in himself as the master of the words he uses and his idea of a totalized arbitrary system made up of pure play, where meaning is only relative to his intentions, poses a problem.

The understanding of intention as the authority insist on presence as necessary for an utterance to have meaning. When claiming that Alice cannot know what he means by ‘glory’ before he tells her, Humpty Dumpty evokes the notion that nothing can ever be understood if the speaker is not present to explain themselves. Also, this evokes the idea that an utterance must always be supplemented in order for the receiver of the message to know what is meant, as meaning lies purely in the speaker’s intention. This implies that nothing could ever have meaning outside the context of a spoken conversation. Would the meaning of ‘glory’ that Humpty Dumpty proposes be lost if he was absent? Taking Derrida’s understanding of language into account, the answer to this would be no: despite intentions, ‘glory’ must have the potential of exceeding its established meaning, and its ‘proper’ context. Thus, the words Humpty Dumpty uses can mean many different things, but this possibility cannot be a product of his mastery: it is a product and property of the condition of language.

Further, Humpty Dumpty implies that his mastery makes words mean neither more nor less than what he intends, staying true to the mantra of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World. He scornfully discards Alice’s objection that ‘glory’ has another meaning. Regardless of whether Alice’s definition of ‘glory’ correlates with the meaning he wishes to convey, Humpty Dumpty does not have the power to exclude all other possible meanings. Even Humpty Dumpty’s own definition

⁹² Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, op.cit, p. 216

of '[t]here's glory for you' has more than one possible meaning: is he referring to his argument? Is he being ironic?

This passage works within and exposes a complex paradox without outlining a clear and reliable pathway towards a stable foundation. Humpty Dumpty proposes several factors that play a part in the process of signification: a realistic connection, an arbitrary connection, the intention and presence of the speaker, and the will of verbs. He dismisses all meanings that may accompany his words as meaning, if they are not a part of his intentions. The relationship between the said and the meant is simultaneously destabilized in terms of established meaning, while the presence and intentions of the speaker is named the central, stabilizing factor. However, he cannot be the master of the words he uses, as Alice suggests that they have other meanings. His intentions may correlate to some extent with a possible meaning of 'glory', but this cannot solely be due to his mastery. An utterance has always the possibility of meaning something more, even if Humpty Dumpty fell down from the narrow wall he is sitting on, and "[a]ll the Kings horses and all the King's men / Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty in his place again". (p. 159)

5 Conclusion

This thesis has studied how the relationship between the said and the meant in Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World exposes the paradoxical condition of language. In the theoretical framework it was concluded that it is the condition of language that makes discrepancies between the said and meant possible. The paradox language must work within was outlined in three points:

- (1) A lawful, pre-existing structure of language, and a proper meaning of the sign must be assumed in order for an utterance to mean something.⁹³
- (2) A lawful, totalized structure of language can never be achieved and is strictly impossible.⁹⁴ Proper meaning is necessarily absent and deferred.⁹⁵
- (3) All utterances potentially mean something other than what is said, and meaning cannot be firmly governed.

I have argued that puns destabilize the notion between the said and the meant, as puns fiercely demonstrate how dissemination accompanies every sign. Meaning is fertile dispersed by every word, and with the ‘accidental’ identical or similar audible or written sign, puns reveal the unpleasantness of this notion. Alice’s questioning and suggestions concerning a possible other meaning, angers and offends the inhabitants of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World, as this exposes that they cannot control the meaning of their words through intention or context. I thus conclude that the wish to maintain *one* intentional meaning to what is said as the authority, is destabilized. I have further argued that the established expressions Alice’s uses turn the focus towards literal meaning. The characters Alice meets refuse to assume a more figurative meaning to phrases, and I thereby conclude that this exposes how vital assumptions of meaning and context are in conversation. Finally, I have argued that Humpty Dumpty’s understanding of his mastery evokes the paradox of language. Naming himself the master of language, he has the power to make words mean whatever he wishes. He claims that his intention, presence and supplementary explanation is necessary for Alice to know what his words mean. However, Humpty Dumpty’s mastery cannot exclude other possible meanings, as Alice implicitly reminds him.

Based on the presented material, this study concludes that the paradoxical condition of language is exposed through Alice’s need to assume meaning and context of the words and utterances of the

⁹³ Colebrook, *Irony*, op.cit, p. 97

⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 98

⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 97

characters she meets. This evokes point (1) in the paradoxical condition of language. However, she finds that this can never be stable and ensured. All the confusions that occur are not merely the product of the inconceivable context of the texts, but are made possible by the impossibility of a totalization of meaning, structure and context in all lingual circumstances, thus illustrating point (2). Further, the characters refuse to accept this condition. Continuously stating that they mean exactly what they say, they subsequently exclude the possibility of their words having other meanings. Literal meaning, or *one* meaning bound to the intention and presences of the speaker is in their view what governs understanding. No assumptions are necessary, as everyone should say what they mean, and mean what they say. With this idea of meaning, the characters of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World refuse point (2) and (3). Still, their unwillingness does not make their intentions the master, which is exposed by Alice's simultaneously naïve, questioning and displeased attitude towards all the confusions of meaning she experiences.

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