

## **Language Games in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* Or:**

*How language operates in Carroll's text to produce nonsensical meanings in common-sense references*

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Uttering a word is like striking a note on the  
keyboard of the imagination.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Though more than one century has elapsed, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) still enchants new generations of young and older readers alike. Among many other reasons, the endurance of Carroll's tale may be explained by its particular work on language and the kaleidoscope of effects, meanings, and games that it produces, thereby creating a remarkable literary work. The same fascination over language was shared by the Modernists of the twentieth century, especially James Joyce to whom we shall return later.

Victorianism was a period of revolution in language. The Education Acts, passed a few years after Carroll's text was published, placed their emphasis on 'correct English' and the three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic), but in London, for example, the working classes became more and more isolated in their own speech which came to be termed Cockney. This peculiar speech began to draw the attention of many Victorian writers who try to render it in their texts.

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll doesn't make any use of Cockney; Alice doesn't come from a working class *milieu*, and the presence of the pack of cards clearly sets the scenery for the role playing of an upper class (cf. Rother 1984: 90). Nevertheless, the language in *Wonderland* bears a close resemblance to the "love of

nuance, rhythm, word-play, and innovation” that defined Cockney and justified its constant rule-breaking (McCrum *et alii* 2002: 300).

As a Victorian writer, Carroll was, together with Edward Lear (1812-1888), responsible for the development of an innovative and intelligent literature for children. Both authors interrogated the potentialities of the English language, and, at the same time, they changed the perception of Victorians by understanding that children were more than just adults to be and by trying to see the world through their young eyes (cf. Sanders 2005 [1994]: 606).

The aim of this essay is to reflect on language, language-games and the shady boundaries between sense and nonsense in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. I will start by defining the concept of “language-game”, as it is presented by Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>1</sup> in his *Philosophical Investigations*, and then proceed by selecting and analysing different sections of Carroll's text.

Wittgenstein argued that language and life are intrinsically intertwined and that, as part of life, language works in a quite unproblematic way. It is only when the philosophers try to detach language from its use, in context, and drive it into a metaphysical environment, from which all contextual signs are excluded, that the problems arise:

When philosophers use a word – “knowledge”, “being”, “object”, “I”, (...) – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?  
What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.  
(Wittgenstein 1963: 48e)

The previous quotation introduces the concept of ‘language-game’. As we shall see, Wittgenstein understands it in a broad sense:

We can (...) think of the whole process of using words as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games ‘language-games’ and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. I shall call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the ‘language-game’. (Wittgenstein 1963: 5e)

Thus, the concept of ‘language-game’ comprises every feature of language in actual use. Several examples of language in context can be found in an extensive list provided by Wittgenstein:

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), Austrian-British philosopher, is also known by his other major work: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

- Giving orders, and obeying them
- Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements
- Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)
- Reporting an event
- Speculating about an event
- Forming and testing a hypothesis
- Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams
- Making up a story; and reading it
- Play-acting
- Singing catches
- Guessing riddles
- Making a joke; telling it
- Solving-problems in practical arithmetic
- Translating from one language into another
- Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying

(Wittgenstein 1963: 11e-12e)

Language-games are not fixed. When they become obsolete, that is when they cease to represent language in use, they disappear and new ones arise.

Wittgenstein's association between language and games should not be surprising. After all, both games and language function according to rules recognised by the players/speakers. Yet, as the author underlines, nothing should stop a restless player or an imaginative speaker or an inventive writer from neglecting, partially altering or completely subverting those rules. It is part of the game! It is what happens, for instance, in the unruly croquet match described in Carroll's text. As Marina Yaguello brilliantly observes:

Everybody has the right to create a world of sense and nonsense. It is precisely the violation of syntactical and semantic rules that gives rise to poetry (...). Linguistic competence includes both the observance of rules and the ability to subvert them. Nothing should keep one from speaking of green ideas full of insomnia sleeping furiously. (Yaguello 1991: 134, my translation)<sup>2</sup>

Equally important is Wittgenstein insight on grammar and its descriptive nature:

Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human beings. It only describes and in no way explains the use of signs.

**When I say that the orders "Bring me sugar" and "Bring me milk" make sense, but not the combination "Milk me sugar", that does not mean that the utterance of this combination of words has no effect. And if its effect is that the other person stares at me and gapes, I don't on that account call it the order to stare and gape, even if that was precisely the effect that I wanted to produce.** (Wittgenstein 1963: 138e, my emphasis)

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<sup>2</sup> "Toda a gente tem o direito de criar um universo de sentido e de sem-sentido. É justamente a violação das regras da sintaxe e da semântica que dá origem à poesia (...). A competência linguística tanto comporta o respeito pelas regras como a aptidão para as violar. Nada nos impede de falar de ideias verdes cheias de insónias que dormem furiosamente."

This is what happens continuously in Carroll's text. Alice is usually the one who stares and gapes while all the other creatures seem perfectly at ease in that linguistic nonsensical wonderland. The dream context creates an alternative reality in which common sense references are constantly challenged and figurative meanings are often taken literally, producing ludicrous situations and funny altercations between Alice and the many creatures she encounters. Indeed, as Jacqueline Flescher points out, in "The Language of Nonsense in *Alice*", "Conversation, or more precisely, argument, is the essential vehicle of nonsense in *Alice*, but it is a conversation of an unusual kind" (Flescher 1969: 137).

An example of quite an unusual conversation is certainly to be found in "The Mad Tea-Party" episode. Four characters intervene: Alice, the Hatter, the March Hare and the Dormouse, who is mostly asleep. The main topic of conversation, and misinterpretation, is 'time':

Alice had been looking over his shoulder with some curiosity, 'What a funny watch!' she remarked. 'It tells the day of the month and doesn't tell what o'clock it is!'

'Why should it?' muttered the Hatter. 'Does *your* watch tell you what year it is?'

'Of course not,' Alice replied very readily: 'but that's because it stays in the same year for such a long time together.'

'Which is just the case with *mine*,' said the Hatter.

Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter's remark seemed to have no meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English. 'I don't quite understand,' she said, as politely as she could.

'The Dormouse is asleep again,' said the Hatter, and he poured a little hot tea upon its nose. (AAW 72)

Alice associates English with "coherence and meaningful language" (Flescher 1969: 135), but the Hatter's reply, though uttered in English, appears to be nonsensical. The truth is that she ignores an important fact: it is always six o'clock at the March Hare house. In consequence, a regular clock is worthless, but, though the information is different, the function of the object remains the same: to indicate time. Despite Alice's bewilderment and the Hatter's attempt to change the subject, misinterpretations over the concept of time proceed:

'Have you guessed the riddle yet?' the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.

'No, I give it up,' Alice replied: 'what's the answer?'

'I haven't the slightest idea,' said the Hatter.

'Nor I,' said the March Hare.

Alice sighed wearily. 'I think you might do something better with the time,' she said, 'than waste it asking riddles with no answers.'

**'If you knew Time as well as I do,' said the Hatter, 'you wouldn't talk about wasting it. It's *him*.'**

'I don't know what you mean,' said Alice.

'Of course you don't! the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. 'I dare say you never even spoke to Time!'

'Perhaps not,' Alice cautiously replied: 'but I know I have to beat time when I learn music.'

'Ah! that accounts for it,' said the Hatter. '**He won't stand beating.** Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he'd do almost anything you like with the clock. (AAW 73, my emphasis)

According to Alice, the language-game of "asking a riddle" is absurd and useless if the person who asks it cannot come up with a suitable answer. Yet, the Hatter feels that the effect intended was, nonetheless, achieved since the riddle intrigued Alice and made her think about it for quite a while. Besides, as far as the Hatter can see, the game rests in the very fact of asking the riddle and not so much in finding the correct response. Questions perpetuate dialogue and argument; answers, on the other hand, usually put them to an end. Alice's annoyed reply launches a new series of misinterpretations for figurative expressions, such as "wasting time" and "beat time", are taken literally by the Hatter, deflecting the conversation to the Queen's concert, his singing performance at the event, and his quarrel with Time:

'We quarrelled last March. [I]t was at the great concert given by the Queen of Hearts, and I had to sing

Twinkle, twinkle, little bat!  
How I wonder what you're at!

You know the song, perhaps?'

'I've heard something like it,' said Alice.

'It goes on, you know,' the Hatter continued, 'in this way –  
Up above the world you fly,  
Like a tea-tray in the sky.

Twinkle, twinkle –' [...]

'Well, I'd hardly finished the first verse,' said the Hatter, 'when the Queen jumped up and bawled out, "**He's murdering the time! Off with his head!**"'

'How dreadfully savage!' exclaimed Alice.

'And ever since that,' the Hatter went on in a mournful tone, 'he won't do a thing I ask! It's always six o'clock now.' (AAW 73-74, my emphasis)

The song bears some resemblance to the original "Twinkle, twinkle, little star", which enables both Alice and the readers to recognize the reference. The rhyme is kept, but the replacement of some words (star/bat; are/at; fly/high; diamond/tea-tray) and the adaptation to the specific context of tea time seems rather odd. Furthermore, the comparison between a bat and a tea-tray is certainly unexpected, but also very imaginative. In fact, if we picture a bat gliding in the sky, it does look like a tray.

The Queen's reaction to the song is actually more bizarre than the new version of the lyrics. Lullaby songs usually aim at quite children and lull them to sleep. And sleeping represents a sort of time suspension which can be associated to death. Could this justify the Queen's wild behaviour? It's possible, but "killing time" is also a figurative expression, synonym of "wasting time". The Queen may have thought that the Hatter's

talent as a singer was not much and, that being the case, his performance became, in a metaphorical sense, a murder of time. The problem is that, in Wonderland, Time is actually a character and he shares his fellow characters tendency to take meanings literally. The Queen's accusation makes him resent the Hatter and his revenge assumes the form of a crystallization of the tea time.

Alice tries to control language, but sometimes words deceive her. That's what happens when the March Hare kindly invites her to drink more tea:

'Take some more tea,' the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly.  
'I've had nothing yet,' Alice replied in an offended tone, 'so I can't take more.'  
'You mean you can't take *less*,' said the Hatter: 'it's very easy to take *more* than nothing.' (AAW 76)

Using the word 'more' generally implies that something has already happened. After all, more of nothing is still nothing. There is, however, a great difference between 'more of nothing' and 'more than nothing'. This linguistic nuance is cleverly explored by the Hatter who deconstructs Alice's world of references. As Marina Yaguello shrewdly points out:

The rules of conversation of Alice's world are constantly ridiculed and their stereotyped nature becomes evident. The courtesy formulas and the phrases destined to establishing or keeping contact are voluntarily misinterpreted. The automatisms of language have no place in Wonderland. (Yaguello 1991: 28, my translation)<sup>3</sup>

Being unable to argue with the Hatter, Alice resorts to a rather childish reply: "Nobody asked *your* opinion", she says. At this moment, Alice's honest attempt to be civil and polite is spoilt as a result of her loss of control over language.

From the Tea Party we move on to the "Mock Turtle's Story" chapter. Just before, Alice is introduced to the Queen of Hearts. That's when she utters the famous sentence: "Why, they're only a pack of cards, after all. I needn't be afraid of them!" (AAW 82). She plays croquet and meets the Duchess again. The latter seems very happy to see Alice, who blames her former bad temper on the pepper. In spite of her sympathy, Alice is very annoyed by the Duchess' fondness of morals.

Still, among all her morals, the Duchess makes a rather curious statement: "Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves" (AAW 90). This is, in

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<sup>3</sup> "As regras de conversação correntes do mundo de Alice são constantemente ridicularizadas e o seu aspecto estereotipado é evidente. As fórmulas de cortesia, as frases destinadas a estabelecer ou a manter o contacto são tomadas à letra ou voluntariamente interpretadas de esguelha. Os automatismos da linguagem não têm lugar no país das maravilhas."

fact, a very important advice given that in Carroll's text almost every paragraph contains some sort of play on words, their sounds and their multiple senses. When, following the Queen's orders, the Duchess disappears, Alice is told to go and meet the Mock Turtle to hear his story. Taken by a Gryphon, she ends up landing on a truly pun realm.

To make a pun is to exploit double meanings of a word for humorous purposes or effects. Sometimes the play is on different senses of the same word; sometimes it is on the similar sense or sound of different words. In the "Mock Turtle's Story" episode, the puns are usually of the second type, but not exclusively:

'When we were little,' the Mock Turtle went on at last, more calmly, though still sobbing a little now and then, 'we 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; and then they both sat silent and looked at poor Alice, who felt ready to sink into the earth. (AAW 94-95, my emphasis)

This simple excerpt of conversation reveals effectively the two types of pun previously described. The first one revolves around the exploitation of different meanings of the word 'school'. Alice's world of references immediately leads her to think of 'school' as a place where children go everyday, hopefully to learn lots of interesting subjects guided by their teachers. Still, a turtle's home is the sea and 'school' also stands for a group of fishes or whales swimming together.

The second example explores the sound similarities between the word 'Tortoise' and the phrase 'taught us'. As far as the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon can see, following the implicit rules of sense is quite a tedious practice. They rather follow some sound reasoning of their own. If the Master Turtle taught us, then it becomes a Tortoise even though it does not belong to the terrestrial turtle family at all. The important thing is the sound resemblance between words and not their actual meanings or their accurate application to the context. Other examples of this concurrence of different semantic fields include the pairs 'lessons' / 'lessen', which can be found in this same chapter, and 'purpose' / 'porpoise', introduced in "The Lobster Quadrille" episode:

'And how many hours a day did you do lessons?' said Alice, in a hurry to change the subject.

'Ten hours the first day,' said the Mock Turtle; 'nine the next, and so on.'

'What a curious plan!' exclaimed Alice.

'That's the reason they're called **lessons**,' the Gryphon remarked: 'because they **lessen** from day to day.'

This was quite a new idea to Alice, and she thought it over a little before she made her next remark. 'Then the eleventh day must be a holiday?'  
'Of course it was,' said the Mock Turtle.  
'And how did you manage on the twelfth?' Alice went on eagerly.  
'That's enough about lessons,' the Gryphon interrupted in a very decided tone: 'tell her something about the games now.' (AAW 97, my emphasis)

The idea that lessons are named so because they lessen, that is because they become shorter, from day to day, puzzles Alice. Again, the sound resemblance between the words is taken for granted by the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle who keep following an illogical logic. Still, this time Alice is able to interrogate their logic by posing some difficult questions. Indeed, when she seems intrigued about the 12<sup>th</sup> day, they aren't able to come up with a proper explanation and therefore they simply change the subject to games and songs. Besides, talking about school is usually a dull theme for children and this also seems to apply to the creatures of Wonderland.

Changing the subject is, furthermore, a quite recurrent expedient in Carroll's text. Just as much as putting an end to the conversation by throwing in a sulky reply, as Alice had done in "The Mad Tea-Party", and as we shall see in the subsequent quote:

'If I'd been the whiting,' said Alice, whose thoughts were still running on the song, '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 on 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. (AAW 102)

This time, it is the Mock Turtle who ends the discussion, a bit rudely, when Alice's questions threaten to deconstruct his misuse of the word 'porpoise'. The play here lays between the common sense perspective that all journeys should have a purpose, a plan, a goal, and the existence of porpoises, small dolphins which cohabit with turtles and all sorts of fishes in the sea. Thus, though the Mock Turtle uses the word 'porpoise' – belonging to the semantic field of sea –, the implied meaning, highlighted by Alice's comment, does bring to mind the word 'purpose', thereby creating another comic situation.

Carroll's characters are always ready to play on language and they become very annoyed either when they are questioned or ignored. In the trial chapter, for example, the King gets very upset when nobody laughs at his attempt to make a pun on the word 'fit'. "It's a pun!" (AAW 121), he screams in despair.



In addition to puns, the order of words in a sentence and the processes of word formation are also pretexts to play with language in *Wonderland*. A superb example of both these techniques can be found in the Mock Turtle schooling description:

‘We had the best of educations – in fact, we went to school every day –’  
 ‘I’ve been to a day-school, too,’ said Alice; ‘you needn’t be so proud as all that.’  
 (AAW 96)

In the above quoted fragment, it is Alice who misapprehends the Mock Turtle’s comment about going to school everyday, by introducing the concept of day-school, which is not all the same thing. Her rather childish desire to compete with the Mock Turtle leads to a reversal in the words order and, consequently, in the words sense. The subjects taught at school are a subterfuge to further competition:

‘Ah! Then yours wasn’t a really good school,’ said the Mock Turtle in a tone of great relief. ‘Now at *ours* they had at the end of the bill, “French, music, *and washing* – extra”.’  
 ‘You couldn’t have wanted it much,’ said Alice; ‘living at the bottom of the sea.’  
 ‘I couldn’t afford to learn it,’ said the Mock Turtle with a sigh. ‘I only took the regular course.’  
 ‘What was that?’ enquired Alice.  
 ‘Reeling and Writhing, of course, to begin with,’ the Mock Turtle replied; ‘and then the different branches of Arithmetic – Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision.’  
 ‘I never heard of “Uglification”,’ Alice ventured to say. ‘What is it?’  
 The Gryphon lifted up both its paws in surprise. ‘What! Never heard of uglifying!’ it exclaimed. ‘You know what to beautify is, I suppose?’  
 ‘Yes,’ said Alice doubtfully: ‘it means – to – make – anything – prettier.’  
 ‘Well, then,’ the Gryphon went on, ‘if you don’t know what to uglify is, you must be a simpleton.’ (AAW 96)

Amidst the wide range of thematic subjects presented by the Mock Turtle, some are quite conventional – ‘Arithmetic’, ‘Music’, ‘French’ –, but others are rather unexpected – ‘Ambition’, ‘Distraction’, ‘Derision’. The one that puzzles Alice the most is ‘Uglification’. We don’t need a dictionary to understand the meaning of the word. The game-like process is simple. We take a recognisable everyday word, such as ‘ugly’, and, using the rules of word formation, we turn it into a verb, ‘uglify’, or a noun, ‘uglification’. This brings us back to Wittgenstein’s comment on grammar and its descriptive nature. Indeed, grammar rules are at the mercy of creative writers, such as Carroll or Lear, who are able to challenge and subvert them, recreating language one word at the time.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> On grammar and the possibility to produce illogical meanings through logical forms, see also Chomsky 1972:15.

The rejection of traditional expectations of sense-making and the desire to experiment with the possibilities of language are also integral to James Joyce's work, particularly *Finnegans Wake*, his last novel. What is more, "Lewd's carol" (FW 501) is a strong presence in the wordplay of the *Wakean* text. Carroll's name and his characters are constantly introduced in the fabric of the text and it is indisputable that he was Joyce's precursor in the use of puns.

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Finnegans Wake* both depict dream worlds or "dreamland[s]" (FW 615). In Joyce's case, the choice of a new language was precisely an attempt to voice the night, which, according to the author, had to be different from the language of daytime:

In writing of the night, I really could not, I felt I could not, use words in their ordinary connections. Used that way they do not express how things are in the night, in the different stages – conscious, semi-conscious, then unconscious. [W]hen morning comes of course everything will be clear again... I'll give them back their English language. (Joyce *apud* Ellmann 1982 [1959]:546)

Joyce's statement reinforces his mastery over the raw material of his work and that includes both the English language and all other languages.<sup>5</sup> When questioned about the allegedly excessive use of puns and wordplays in his text, Joyce answered straightforwardly: "The Holy Apostolic Church was built on a pun. It ought to be good enough for me" (*apud* Ellmann 1982 [1959]: 546). In fact, the allusions and the puns on the bulwarks of Catholicism are common in *Finnegans Wake*: "In the beginning was the Word [...]" (John 1:1), one can read in the *Bible*; "In the beginning was the gest [...]" (FW 468) is one of the *Wakean* versions, but there are others.

The majority of the readers neither understood nor accepted the singularity of the text and their criticism was utterly ruthless. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1927, *The New Statesman* published the following comment:

It [*Finnegans Wake*] should disgust. The taste which inspired it is the taste of cretinism of speech, akin to finding exhilaration in the slobberings and mouthings of an idiot. [H]ow poor, too, the sense of fun, if fun it can be called, which sustains the author through the labour of composing page after page of distorted rubbish? (*apud* Fagnoli 2001: 295-296)

The denseness and opacity of *Finnegans Wake* stems, in part, from the juxtaposition of multiple meanings in a single word, far more than the double meanings identified by Humpty Dumpty in the portmanteau word 'slithy':

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<sup>5</sup> More than fifty languages have been identified in *Finnegans Wake*.

'That's enough to begin with,' Humpty Dumpty interrupted: 'there are plenty of hard words there. "*Brillig*" means four o'clock in the afternoon – the time when you begin *broiling* things for dinner.'

'That'll do very well,' said Alice: 'and "*slithy*"?

'Well, "*slithy*" means "lithe and slimy". "Lithe" is the same as "active". You see it's like a portmanteau – there are two meanings paced up into one word.' (*Through the Looking-Glass* 207)

Joyce's mastery and use of different languages transformed *Finnegans Wake* in a monumental holistic riddle. The following fragment is a paradigmatic example: "**Schoen! Shoan! Shoon the Putz!**" (FW 603, my emphasis). The pronunciation of all these words – 'schoen', 'shoan', 'shoon' – draws the reader's attention to Shaun, brother of Shem, who happens to be a Postman. However, when we investigate the origins and respective meanings of the words, we realise that 'schön' means 'good' or 'pretty' in German; 'schoon' means 'clean' and 'schoen' means 'shoes' in Dutch; 'shoon' is also an English slang word for 'crazy' and, finally (if we are allowed to use this word when it comes to Joyce and *Finnegans Wake*!), among some Gipsy dialects 'shoon' means 'listen'. 'Putzen' is also a German word. It means 'to clean' (cf. McHugh 1991: 603). How can we interpret this linguistic riddle? Is Shaun good, pretty, clean or crazy? Does he need to clean his shoes? He is a Postman; he does walk a lot. Should we listen to him or should he listen to someone else? More important than answering these questions is to appreciate the richness of words and the immense variety of combinations that they produce in a constant recreation of language.

A line in *Finnegans Wake* says that "Though Wonderlawn's lost us for ever. Alis alas, she broke the glass" (FW 270). Indeed, when Alice woke up, Wonderland ceased to exist. Still, a new adventure was to come in *Through the Looking-Glass* and many others after that. Reading is likewise a constant adventure and reading Carroll and Joyce, in particular, means to face countless linguistic challenges. These challenges are what make both authors and both texts truly memorable.

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