



The Encounter with the Cybersemiotic Real in Alice Books

Sanam Shahedali¹ and Lale Massiha^{2*}

¹*M.A in English Language and Literature, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran
Email: sanam.shahed@hotmail.com*

²*Corresponding author: Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature,
Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature and Foreign
Languages, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran
Email: l.masiha@tabrizu.ac.ir*

Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to incorporate the three Lacanian orders in Søren Brier's cybersemiotic theory in the context Lewis Carroll's *Alice* texts. As an interdisciplinary framework that emphasizes the role of the observer and its symbolically-generated hieroglyph-like universe of "signification sphere" in which any attempt at accessing the objective world of information seems nonsensical, cybersemiotic is an invaluable tool for re-visiting the three orders by which, according to Lacan, we develop our sense of self and the world. Certain elements such as dream-like states, impossible word plays, paradoxes, and nonsense in the *Alice* books, which follow the titular character into the fantastic realms of Wonderland and the Looking Glass World, can allow for registering the Real by disclosing the self-referential nature of language and debunking the seemingly integrated façade of an imaginary and metaphoric reality founded upon the Symbolic and the Imaginary. For an in-depth analysis of how a creatively self-reflexive handling of language can evoke a space where the three Lacanian orders emerge simultaneously as one collapses onto the other, a cybersemiotic formulation of nonsense in the *Alice* books is introduced as the linguistic moment in which signifier-in-isolation (the Real) and signifier-in-relation paradoxically appear on the same cognitive horizon, revealing the underlying dynamics of the signification process which involves an arbitrary development of differentiated signs rendered meaningful due to a tacit consensus agreed upon over the temporal axis.

Keywords: cybersemiotics, nonsense, the Real, Lacan

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Introduction

“There will be nonsense in it,” (p. 3) predicts Secunda in the prefatory poem to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* written by Carroll (1865 & 1871 / 2009). The prediction proves accurate for all of Carroll’s literary works, including *Phantasmagoria and Other Poems*, *The Hunting of the Snark*, and *Sylvie and Bruno*, but most famously for his great fantasy books, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*.

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, published in 1865 and 1871, respectively, follow the uncanny experiences of a little girl called Alice supposedly in her imaginary dream world. The books are rife with incoherent sets of bizarre events such as sudden changes in Alice’s frame of mind and body shape, counter-intuitive use / abuse of logic, creative employment of nonsensical language and gibberish, and freakish encounters with shrewdly insane characters. All these features in the *Alice* books allow for a linguistic coding of the Lacanian Real by accentuating the whimsical and arbitrary nature of the Symbolic.

The main objective of this paper is to emphasize the significance of that which cannot be signified in order to make more sense of the signifying process. A cybersemiotic reformulation of the three Lacanian orders explains that, as autopoietic systems, the biological, communicational, and social systems reflect the inaccessible objective world out there, or the Real, unto their own signification sphere via the Symbolic and Imaginary orders upon which all the participants have developed a tacit agreement over time based on their evolutionary needs. Language, as a component of the Symbolic order, contributes significantly to the dynamic process of forming the signification sphere. Specific linguistic moments such as nonsense, however, act as miniature models of the way the Real can be registered at the threshold of Imaginary and Symbolic in certain literary texts where an exhaustive mastery over the elasticity and limitations of language creates an opportunity for getting a whole picture of how we make sense of the world and ourselves. This miniature model will help us assimilate the Real into the cybersemiotic framework in a limited manner since a complete analysis of the Real in the entirety of the *Alice* books with regard to cybersemiotics would have been beyond the scope of this paper.

Literature Review

As the title of Brier’s book *Cybersemiotics: Why Information Is Not Enough!* suggests, out of context information, detached from the interconnected web of the intricate Symbolic networks, does not signify anything. Brier offers the interdisciplinary framework of cybersemiotics to establish a ground whereby the concept of information is extended beyond mechanistic views that seek the elimination of subjectivity as much as possible. It focuses, instead, on the process of meaning-making across a signification sphere (Brier, 2021, p. 18). Such an approach, however, does not imply that the framework necessarily must ignore the chaotic Real that is consolidated through the signification process into the Symbolically-arranged signification sphere of an organism.

In his essay "Cybersemiotics in the Information Age," Marcel Danesi clarifies the cybersemiotic framework as an agenda that encompasses both the fields of biosemiotics and cybernetics (Brier, 2021, p. 2). He traces the roots of the term cybernetics to Plato in the sense of governing and control, later to André-Marie Ampère, and finally to Norbert Wiener in his book *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and Machine*. Biosemiotics is mainly concerned with various forms of semiosis across species. Cybersemiotics, as an interdisciplinary field dealing with these two fields and more, accentuates the conceptual distinction and the relationship between a theoretically defined form of objective information and the semiotics-oriented sense of meaning or signification across all systems, including the communication system of language (Brier, 2021, p. 2). Central to this discussion is the human-level consciousness and how impossible it is to imagine the concept of information independent from the dynamics of interpretation and meaning-making, concepts that are, in turn, related to embodiment and survival needs of an organism or any other autopoietic systems. Lacan's conception of the idea of the Real finds relevance to the cybersemiotic agenda in this context as evidenced by Danesi's explanation of how cybersemiotics strives for the yet unsignified:

We make veritable discoveries, we explore space, and, in a sense, we go beyond semiosis, reaching for something that no word or sign can ever really capture, just record in part. Cybersemiotic analysis has, ultimately, the aim of showing how humans, in their apparent quest for large-scale meaning, have the capacity to generate their own evolutionary momentum. (Brier, 2021, p. 14)

The ambition to go beyond that which our autopoietic systems allow into our signification sphere, probably because to do so would be unnecessary or even threatening to our blind survival needs, can open up new cognitive horizons such as posthuman consciousness.

It may not be easy to get in touch directly with the unregulated Real world out there, but the nonsense of Alice books allows for rare moments of comprehending the process of solidifying the Real into Symbolic as the unfamiliar signifier-in-isolation and the familiar signifier-in-relation turn into each other on the vibrating edges of language.

Lacan (1966b) acknowledges in his "Hommage rendu à Lewis Carroll," broadcast in 1966 from the French radio France Culture, that "le symbolique, l'imaginaire et le réel" are "at play in the purest form in their simplest relation" (author's translation) in Carroll's texts. This remark is elaborated by Marret-Maleval (2013) in her densely critical essay "'And, as in uffish thought he stood'" where, in addition to providing an enlightening Lacanian criticism of Lewis Carroll's texts by addressing the issues of knowledge and truth, nonsense, the impossible, the unconscious, and subjectivity in their relation to the real and the symbolic, she confirms that "Lacan noted how the text breaks through beyond this dimension [the imaginary level], which it interrogates, making the articulation among the three

registers of the symbolic, imaginary, and real come to light” (p. 104). In other words, the sense of the Alice stories, where the three Lacanian orders are found to be interwoven in the texture of the text, emerges in the nonsensical meltdown of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, allowing for a semiotic study of the Real.

Bloom’s *Modern Critical Interpretations: Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* contains a number of essays about the brilliant but shadowy figure of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. It also provides some basic historical facts, background information, and critical clues – not to mention controversial rumors – revolving around the *Alice* books. Elizabeth Sewell’s foundational essay “The Balance of Brillig”, included in Bloom’s (2006) book, closely examines nonsense and its various types, parts of speech, and definitions in the context of the nonsense poem Jabberwocky and Humpty Dumpty’s commentary on its peculiar vocabulary from *Through the Looking-Glass* in comparison to the gibberish found in Carroll’s other literary productions with the conclusion that “[n]onsense is a game with words. Its own inventions wander safely between the respective pitfalls of 0 and 1, nothingness and everythingness” (Bloom, 2006, p. 79). In Lacanian terms, nonsense can be used as an instrument to inquire into the Lacanian Real and Symbolic as it disrupts the ruling order and webs of network in the latter, allows glimpses of the former, and, being language-bound, doubles back into the realm of the Symbolic, though with startlingly fresh frames of reference.

In *Philosophy of Nonsense*, Lecerle (1994 / 2002) points out that by wresting language away from the myriad of its semantic networks, nonsense turns the text into an interrogation of itself, making it reflexive (p. 2). Since language constructs the subject, it can be inferred that a text rendered “en abyme” (Lecerle, 1994 / 2002, p. 134) by nonsense can also goad the subject to take regressive steps and deconstruct itself.

Results

This paper demonstrates how certain elements such as dream-like states, impossible wordplays, paradoxes, and nonsense in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books can allow for registering the Lacanian Real by disclosing the limited and self-referential nature of language and debunking the seemingly integrated façade of an imaginary and metaphoric reality founded upon the Symbolic and Imaginary orders. For an in-depth analysis of the manner in which a creatively self-reflexive handling of language can evoke a space where the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real simultaneously emerge as one collapses onto the other, a semiotic formulation of nonsense in the Alice books was introduced as a linguistic moment in which signifier-in-isolation and signifier-in-relation paradoxically appear on the same cognitive horizon, revealing the underlying dynamics of the signification process that involves an arbitrary development of differentiated signs rendered meaningful due to a tacit consensus agreed upon over the temporal axis within the closed loop of a specific “signification sphere,” to use the terminology of Brier’s (2008, p. 32) cybersemiotics.

Discussion

To establish that the ingenious and anomalous manner of wielding language in nonsense leads to the recognition and examination of the Real by manipulating the Symbolic into a self-reflexive identification of its limitations and metaphoric nature, a rigorous scheme based on semiotics can help substantiate the rather abstract and elusive relationship between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in the light of scientific and technological findings.

To examine the concept of the Lacanian Real with reference to semiotics, while taking human cognition and language into account, we have analyzed Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books to determine the encrypted linguistic codes that signify the possibility of a semiotic formulation of the Lacanian Real. To this purpose, we have adopted the framework of cybersemiotics, defined by Søren Brier, Professor of semiotics for information, cognitive and communication science at Copenhagen Business School and author of the groundbreaking and comprehensive book *Cybersemiotics: Why Information Is Not Enough*, as "a transdisciplinary approach to information, cognition, and communication studies" (Brier, 2008, p. ii). Brier's book has been composed based on a grand "vision" seeking to establish "a transdisciplinary information science that encompasses the technical, natural, and social sciences, as well as the humanities, in its understanding of understanding and communication" (Brier, 2008, pp. 3-4).

Cybersemiotics posits that even the outside world perceived by the organism is nothing but a sign-mediated world that is reflected in the organism's inner world symbolically or metaphorically based on the said organism's biological and survival needs across the temporal axis. As an interdisciplinary framework that seeks to merge cognitive theories with the more objective sciences of information and communication, cybersemiotics cannot help but to reach out for that which refuses to be symbolized in any signification system. In this light, nonsense, as the linguistic moment in which the Real and the Symbolic exist at a rare balance proves a valuable research tool for analyzing how the Real's refusal for signification in everyday modes of communication could get accentuated and even punctured by the encrypted linguistic codes in literary language.

In his book *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze (1990) describes "the esoteric words which are characteristic of Carroll" (p. 44) in the following manner:

[I]n principle, it is the empty square, the empty shelf, the blank word... This word therefore is "called" by names which indicate evanescences and displacements: the Snark is invisible, and the Phlizz is almost an onomatopoeia for something vanishing. Or again, the word is called by names which are quite indeterminate: *aliquid*, it, that, thing, gadget, or "whachamacallit." (See, for example, the *it* in the Mouse's story or the thing in the Sheep's shop.) Finally, the word has no name at all; it is rather named by the entire refrain of a song, which circulates throughout the stanzas and causes them to communicate. (Deleuze, 1990, p. 44)

The detailed specification above corresponds to and reveals Eyers's (2012) formulation of Lacan's "the signifier-in-isolation," which "designates the signifier as Real, isolated in its material element away from the networks of relation that render it conducive to meaning" as opposed to the "signifier-in-relation" which "designates the signifier as it exists negatively, defined purely by relation to other signifiers and producing meaning as the result of its perpetual displacement along the axes of metaphor and metonymy" (p. 38).

Paralleled with Brier's cybersemiotic re-interpretation of Peirce's triadic semiotic paradigm, Wittgenstein's language game theory, von Foerster's second-order cybernetics, and Maturana and Varela's autopoiesis theory, the "signifier-in-relation" (Eyers, 2012, p. 38) can "stand for something else for somebody in a certain way" (Brier, 2008, p. 28) and be meaningful by distinguishing itself as "a difference that makes a difference" (Brier, 2008, p. 24), because the system of language is a closed (though neither fixed nor finite) system (Brier, 2008, p. 25) "of conventional signs" (Brier, 2008, p. 28) functioning through a "sign process" that operates within the "signification sphere" (Brier, 2008, p. 32) of an observing system's (Brier, 2008, p. 24) cognition which is capable of forming a "structural coupling" (Brier, 2008, p. 24) between the observer's "autopoietic system" and "perturbations from the environment" (Brier, 2008, p. 24). In contrast, "signifier-in-isolation" falls short of meaning since the Real is "undifferentiated" (Evans, 1996 / 2006, p. 162) and fails to be part of the "sign process" (Brier, 2008, p. 27) that needs difference and "networks of relation" (Eyers, 2012, p. 38) to function.

To incorporate the Lacanian Real in the cybersemiotic framework, we can reframe it in the following manner:

1. The Undifferentiated;
2. Objective information (a self-negating concept according to Brier);
3. Some difference that does not make a difference to the human observer because our structure in terms of embodiment and survival needs does not allow it;
4. Some difference that does make some difference to the human observer and cause changes in it, but can hardly be assimilated into any of the sign systems adopted by humans for the following reasons:
 - a. It poses a threat to our survival
 - b. It cannot be symbolized in any of the sign systems available to us for communication.

Understandably, the encounter with the Real entails trauma and confusion. The implications of the "discomfort" (p. 45) experienced by Deleuze (1990) in approaching Carroll's idiosyncratic language due to the uncanny presence of the Real "as the 'ex-timate' limit point inherent to, but disruptive of, all Symbolic logics" (Eyers, 2012, p. 36) come to the fore once we contemplate various forms of nonsense, madness, and logical-linguistic confusion in the *Alice* books with more precision.

The Imaginary and the Symbolic at the Threshold

The oscillation between the three Lacanian orders is prevalent throughout *Alice* stories. While some critics such as William Empson and Florence Becker Lennon believe that Alice's fall down the rabbit hole is a symbol of birth (Bloom, 2006, pp. 33-51), others associate it with the fall of / through the Imaginary and Symbolic orders by upturning the rules of nature, language, and social habits (Walker, 2001, p. 7).

Tired of sitting on the grass by the river on a "hot day" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 9) with her older sister, little Alice spots a rabbit hurrying by. She follows the rabbit when it jumps into a hole in the ground, and down she falls into a well. To examine herself about some of the lessons she has learned in her private classes, Alice wonders how many miles she has fallen. She then begins puzzling over her location in terms of "latitude" and "longitude" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 11), words and concepts she has only heard of but does not really understand. The fall takes so long that Alice assumes she will come out eventually through a hole on the opposite side of the planet earth "among people that walk with their heads downward," who would be the "antipathies" (a malapropism of antipodes) (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 11). The absurdity of her reveries during the fall climaxes when, remembering her cat, Alice keeps asking, "Do cats eat bats?" and "Do bats eat cats?" while the narrator comments that "it didn't much matter which way she put it" since "she couldn't answer either question" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 11).

Rules of grammar are defied when Alice, having grown larger by eating a cake, forgets "how to speak good English," exclaiming: "Curiouser and curiouser!" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 16). Examples of the "subversion" (pp. 105-106) recognized by Marret-Maleval (2013) are not scarce. Alice has to admit she is speaking "nonsense" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 17) when she catches herself planning to send Christmas presents to her feet in the process of body expansion. Too large to get through the door, Alice starts wondering whether the changes in her body size mean she is a completely different person now. Her attempts to resolve this identity crisis aggravate the situation when she fails to remember "all the things" she "used to know" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 19).

Although Alice's confusion over her geography, mathematics, history, language, and didactic lessons may be Carroll's way of criticizing the weaknesses and absurdities of the Victorian educational system for children, the general mood of temporal and spatial disorientation, as well as linguistic obfuscation, points towards a collapse of the regulating forces of the world by constant breaks in the Symbolic order. Alice's bewilderment and identity crises indicate to what extent our identity and understanding of the world is predicated upon the Symbolic.

Wonderland strikes us as curious and wonderful because the exaggerated and absurd state of things in it highlights the imaginary and alien state of the world in which we are living. For example, the scene of Alice's encounter with the Caterpillar, preceded and followed by violent - and violating - body expansions and contractions, is significant since it can be considered as a reference to the mirror stage. Alice's identity is audaciously questioned by the caterpillar smoking hookah on a mushroom. It is well known that the caterpillar transforms during a process of

metamorphosis, eventually maturing into a butterfly that would be designated as its imago. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the “imago,” or “the image of the self,” as the editor’s note indicates, is developed in the mirror stage as “the transformation,” leading to “an identification,” which “takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (Lacan, 2007, p. 1124). The “consistency” of this image is “precarious” though (Eyers, 2012, p. 161). Indeed, Alice struggles to properly answer the Caterpillar’s persistent question, ““Who are you?”” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, pp. 40-41) because, in the dismantling of the Imaginary order in Wonderland, her body image, and consequently her image of self, has been impaired by the constant body changes. The main question is not whether “to be, or not to be” (Shakespeare, 1603 / 2003, p. 158), but the more fundamentally significant “who” and “what” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, pp.18-39). The imaginary status of the self is underscored in Wonderland because Alice hardly knows who she is anymore once her exterior point of reference, her body image, that is “constituent” (Lacan, 2007, p. 1124) of her identity, has been confounded by “being so many different sizes in a day” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 41).

Any process that unmask the imaginary and symbolic nature of the regulating orders of the human psyche leads to a deconstructive self-reflexivity. After her fall down the rabbit hole, Alice experiences a deconstruction of her sense of identity: ““Who in the world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle!” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 18). She is confused while trying to decode herself as a sign because all the points of reference that used to anchor her to a unified sense of self were dislocated at the threshold of the Symbolic and the imaginary. Alice’s encounter with her self-as-the-other results from engaging with the Real at the threshold of the Symbolic and the Imaginary where their nonsensical inconsistencies come to the fore.

Word plays can sometimes bring us to the threshold of the Symbolic to expose its limits. For instance, to get “dry” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 25) after getting out of the pool of tears, the Mouse delivers a “dry” history lesson on William the Conqueror. When the Mouse reaches the part in which ““the patriotic archbishop of Canterbury, found it advisable-,”” the Duck is confused about what the word “it” refers to: “I know what ‘it’ means well enough, when I find a thing,” said the Duck: “it’s generally a frog, or a worm. The question is, what did the archbishop find?” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 25). As suggested in the “Introduction to Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” from the book *CliffsComplete™ Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, by turning the rules of nature, language, and social habits on their heads (Walker, 2001, p. 7), Carroll manages to affirm the often-stated argument in semiotics that the signifiers conceived as significant in these systems would prove nonsensical or unrecognizably warped once they are cut off from the chain of signifiers that bring into action the sign play in everyday contexts. With no common ground to communicate, the meaning of the signifier “it” seems so proliferated at this point that the Mouse has no choice but to ignore the Duck’s question and go on with the story, which, dry as it may be, still leaves everyone ““as wet as ever”” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 25). Here, the Dodo proposes the Caucus-race, a race with no rules that cannot be explained but only performed. This is one of the examples in which the metaphoric and metonymic nature of language is

paradoxically underscored through the defamiliarizing force of undermining this inherent quality of language.

All the misunderstandings over homonyms and homophones with polysemic qualities show how unreliable the Symbolic order, which happens to have a constructive role in forming our understanding of the world and self, can be. Perhaps, if Plato knew how far removed from truth language is, he would have expelled all language users from his Republic.

After coming out of the wood ““where things have no names”” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p.155), Alice is relieved to remember that her name is Alice, though she is vexed by the loss of the Fawn, her “dear little fellow-traveler” that, remembering it is a fawn and Alice is a ““human child”” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 157), flees from her as soon as they emerge out of the wood. The poignant scene is reminiscent of the loss of pure signified as we adopt the Symbolic order. In *Looking Glasses and Neverlands*, Coats (2004) explains “this lack” (p. 79) in the following manner:

In simplest terms, the word is not the thing, so that whenever we use words to talk about objects or experiences, there is always a gap, a mediation of the referent through language that necessarily makes the referent other than what it is. (Coats, 2004, p. 80)

Alice could not feel comfortable about being nameless in an amalgam of nameless things. She needs her masks and needs to know what these masks are. She cannot do without the different and differentiating signifiers that separate her from her environment and help her communicate with her surroundings, and she is willing to pay the price (Lane, 2011, p. 1029) by a perpetual sense of loss and an eternally suspended desire. She cannot taste the pure sweetness of the marmalade but has to be content with the empty jar labelled ““ORANGE MARMALADE”” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 10). The label takes its own virtual course without being equal to the thing it represents. The signifier is separate and independent from the signified. Still, Alice feels lost in terms of identity and her sense of being in the world when she is cut off from the Symbolic.

To remain in the Symbolic, signifiers have to be in relation to the other signifiers in the Symbolic network. Otherwise, we would have what Eyers (2012) calls “the signifier-in-isolation,” which “designates the signifier as Real” (p. 38). The source of confusion over the meaning of words such as “it” in the Mouse’s tale comes to light in this context. Isolated from a Symbolic network over which the sender and receiver of a message agree upon, meaning is rendered moot, and communication does not occur. Cut off from the chain of signifiers that enables communication through sign play in everyday contexts, even signifiers conceived as significant would prove nonsensical or unrecognizably warped as manifest in the *Alice* books. Among the extreme examples of signifiers isolated from the signification chain are the obscure neologisms invented by Carroll, particularly the semantically impossible ones (Marret-Maleval, 2013, p. 110), such as “toves” that, according to Humpty Dumpty, ““are something like badgers—they’re something like lizards—and they’re something like corkscrews”” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009,

p. 192). They are instances of the way language tends to bend upon itself and circle around a gap in human understanding. Borrowing from Deleuze, Marret-Maleval (2013) suggests that Carroll's neologisms disclose the arbitrary and abstract nature of the relationship between the signifier and the signified: "The Carrollian neologism unveils the fact that meaning is founded on "an empty square," on the basis of which signifier and signified articulate on the surface of language and being" (p. 107).

The Real at the Threshold

From unimaginable neologisms, ineffable notions, and insurmountable puzzles of logic, to the gaping gap of nothing, nobody, and the pure self, we are dealing with the impossible, and as Lacan has stated: "the real is always the impossible" (Marret-Maleval, 2013, p. 116).

Based on the myriad forms of impossible, along with the numerous instances in which the Imaginary and the Symbolic have been presented as highly problematic, the *Alice* texts can be counted as the example of a writing capable of supporting the Lacanian Real as elaborated by Thurston: "Access to a real conceived as ex-sistence, irreducible to any image or signifier, can only be afforded for Lacan by a writing which is ultimately incommensurable with the symbolic order, beyond metaphor" (Nobus, 1999, p. 158).

Engaging with Carroll's text can be perceived as an opportunity to consider how Lacan's "Borromean knot" can be "a writing" that "supports a real" (Nobus, 1999, p. 151). In "Ineluctable Nodalities: On the Borromean Knot," Thurston explains that "the symbolic, the imaginary and the real" (Nobus, 1999, p. 66) constitute the three rings of Lacan's Borromean knot. This happens when a writing does not shy away from betraying the contradictions of the Imaginary and the "hole" (Nobus, 1999, p. 151) of the Symbolic. The *Alice* texts in their entirety justify their own logic and significance by showing how illogical and unreliable the process of signification is. This explanation corresponds to the idea of the Lacanian Borromean knot in Thurston's observation that "its representation of the real does not conform to the logic of the signifier. The signification it entails is ultimately identical with the thing signified" (Nobus, 1999, p. 151).

A Lacanian Reformulation of Nonsense

According to *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, nonsense, as distinguished from "gibberish," "has a kind of internal lunatic logic of its own" though it "is never intended to make formal sense" (Cuddon, 2013, p. 475).

In her essay "Fantasy, Nonsense, Parody, and the Status of the Real: The Example of Carroll," Shires (1988) reflects on how "Carroll dissolves the realist relationship between signifier and signified" in the nonsensical examples from the *Alice* books (p. 274). In terms of semiotics, nonsense is "not" comprised of a consensual relationship between the signifier and the signified. Rather, it is a "knot" in two different ways: it ties a signifier to a whole new unexpected and unstable signified, while at the same time, it is a blind spot where the signifier and the signified fall flat on each other, leaving no dimension, a complication in which "the

encounter with the impossible” (Gutermann-Jacquet, 2015, p. 48) is revealed as the Symbolic keeps cracking down at its threshold. This example from *Through the Looking-Glass* illustrates the point just argued:

‘That’s right,’ said the Queen, patting her on the head, which Alice didn’t like at all: ‘though, when you say “garden” —I’ve seen gardens, compared with which this would be a wilderness.’

Alice didn’t dare to argue the point, but went on: ‘—and I thought I’d try and find my way to the top of that hill——’

‘When you say “hill,”’ the Queen interrupted, ‘I could show you hills, in comparison with which you’d call that a valley.’

‘No, I shouldn’t,’ said Alice, surprised into contradicting her at last: ‘a hill ca’n’t [sic] be a valley, you know. That would be nonsense——’ (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 143)

Alice declares that the Red Queen’s statement is nonsensical because even the smallest hill cannot be designated with the signifier “valley.” According to the general consensus, a valley is a lowly area compared to the surface of the rest of an area, which is the opposite of the definition of the signifier “hill” as a higher area. No amount of exaggeration on the part of a language user can turn a well-defined signifier into its opposite. Indeed, along the metonymic axis of language, the signifier “hill” means what it does partly because it is not the signifier “valley.” Still, the Red Queen has the audacity to assert she has “heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary!” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 143), and we shall see how she may have a point in saying that below.

In the Introduction to *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Bloom (2006) refuses to recognize Carroll’s work as containing nonsense, insisting that what Carroll produced were “riddles” and “enigmatic allegory” (p. 4). Others, including Elizabeth Sewell, provide evidence to the contrary.

It cannot be denied that even for a nonsense poem like *Jabberwocky*, a level of understanding can and does take place. After reading the *Jabberwocky* poem, Alice believes that it fills her head with ideas, even though she does not know what they are (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, 136), since, as Sewell points out (Bloom, 2006, p. 73), nonsense must sound familiar to us syntactically, morphologically, or phonologically to be distinguishable from pure gibberish. Take the following stanza of *Jabberwocky* for instance:

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, 134)

We may not know what “brillig,” “slithy,” “toves,” and “gyre” mean, but their parts of speech are clear in each single case. “There is,” as Shires (1988) has recognized, “a metonymic sliding of signifiers with no referent” (p. 274). Besides, “slithy” sounds like a familiar word bringing to mind words like “lithe and slimy,” and gyre can easily be a verb associated with the gyroscope. As for the “wabe,” the closest thing we have to a riddle in this context, the lower case b in certain

handwritings can resemble a sundial, and once read as “way *be*,” Alice’s guess that it is “the grass-plot round a sun-dial” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, pp. 191-192) is confirmed because it goes a long way *before*, *behind*, and *beyond* it.

Sewell’s golden statement that “nonsense is maintaining some kind of balance in its language” (Bloom, 2006, p. 73) indicates that, unlike riddles, nonsense is not meant to be solved or resolved in any way. It is “a space of uncertainty” (Shires, 1988, p. 267). There is a constant oscillating movement between recognition and alienation in all the examples of nonsense listed above. It is never brillig in everyday situations in life, and slithy toves that gyre and gimble in the wabe will never mean anything to people who are not familiar with Humpty Dumpty’s interpretation of Jabberwocky. Even to those who have read the *Alice* books, these “esoteric words” (Deleuze, 1990, p. 42) hardly bring a comprehensive image to mind. They can mean nothing, while at the same time, they can mean anything. Shires (1988) declares that the Jabberwocky poem “is both all and nothing, a state of all-being, without meaning” (p. 275), and López-Varela (2014) contends that “[t]he words in the poem are combined in such a way that their meaning is multiplied” (p. 4).

Certain textual moments, such as the following awkward conversation between Alice and the Duchess in Wonderland, can be nonsensical in their entirety due to their special illogicality that occurs because some logic at an irrelevant level is at work.

‘Only mustard isn’t a bird,’ Alice remarked.

‘Right, as usual,’ said the Duchess: ‘what a clear way you have of putting things!’

‘It’s a mineral, I think,’ said Alice.

‘Of course it is,’ said the Duchess, who seemed ready to agree to everything that Alice said: ‘there’s a large mustard mine near here. And the moral of that is—“The more there is of mine, the less there is of yours.”’ (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, pp. 80-81)

As demonstrated in the example above, the significant play on the words “more”, “moral”, “mine”, and “mineral” does not necessarily entail that, on the whole, the conversation makes any sense. There is always an oscillation between the meaninglessness of the entire conversation with the deviant juxtaposition of statements and the meaningful play on the elements that make up this conversation. Here, as in the other instances of nonsense, we are witness to the mental extrapolation Sewell recognizes “between the respective pitfalls of 0 and 1” (Bloom, 2006, p. 79).

Interestingly, sometimes, when Alice feels threatened by death and annihilation, she invokes the word “nonsense” as her shield to ameliorate her distressed state of mind and drift towards life. For instance, when the Queen of Hearts in Wonderland orders her head to be cut off, Alice silences her by crying: “Nonsense!” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 72). When Tweedledee and Tweedledum in the Looking-Glass world tell her she is not real but “only a sort of thing” in the Red King’s dream who will “go out – bang! – just like a candle” once the King wakes up, Alice consoles herself by thinking “they’re talking nonsense!” (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 168).

Even though nonsense is ineffable as a signifier-in-isolation, or signifier as the Real in Eyers' formulation, at first, it can still turn into a signifier-in-relation, only some aspects of the relation in question are not supposed to be the ones established conventionally in the Symbolic network, so the esoteric quality still holds in this perspective. Alice's conversation with Humpty Dumpty about the nonsense poem Jabberwocky makes this point quite clear.

After the hallucinatory episode of the boat trip with the Sheep concludes, Alice finds herself in the Sheep shop again, where she feels obliged to buy an egg. As the egg receded farther away from Alice, the Sheep shop scene gives way to another one with the egg having gradually grown larger and sitting precariously on a narrow wall. Alice immediately identifies the egg as the nursery rhyme character Humpty Dumpty. Absurdly, it is "as if his name were written all over his face!" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 185). After contradicting Alice on various points, Humpty Dumpty boasts of his ability to make words mean whatever he wants them to mean. When Alice expresses her doubts about "whether you can make words mean so many different things," Humpty Dumpty says that it is a matter of "which is to be master" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 190).

As Fink explains in his essay "The Master Signifier and the Four Discourses," the master's discourse in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory espouses "the master signifier," which is also "the nonsensical signifier" (Nobus, 1999, p. 31) since it is supposed to impose it upon things to be what it wants them to be. Humpty Dumpty seems to be the master signifier in himself because he assumes there is an inherent relationship between the form that constitutes his being and his name. He assumes that the signifier "Humpty Dumpty" falls flat on its signified, which is the creature itself, leaving no dimensions on any axis to allow it to be symbolic at any level. Meanwhile, he dismisses the name "Alice" as just a designation that can refer to "any shape, almost" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 186).

Not only does Humpty Dumpty make already meaningful words such as "glory" mean entirely different from what they conventionally mean - "a nice knock-down argument" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 190) in this case - but also he "can explain all the poems that ever were invented" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 191), including the Jabberwocky, a nonsensical poem Alice has read in the looking-glass house. He decodes neologisms such as "Brillig" and "toves" and employs the metaphor "portmanteau" to define "slithy" as "lithe and slimy" and "mimsy" as "flimsy and miserable" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, pp. 191-193). It does not take Alice long to follow suit and make a guess at the meaning of the word "wabe." But even Humpty Dumpty knows that he has to "pay" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 191) something for being the master signifier, the price being that he is dependent on the other (of the Symbolic in this case) for its existence (Nobus, 1999, p. 32). Humpty Dumpty is balancing himself precariously on a narrow wall (Bloom, 2006, p. 73) because he is a product of language, and the whole course of his life and death, from sitting on a wall to his great fall and annihilation, has been chronicled in a nursery rhyme. The circle is complete now. With a "belt" / "cravat" around his "waist" / "neck" (Carroll, 1865 & 1871 / 2009, p. 189), the egg that purports to be the master signifier becomes the split

subject, represented by Lacan with the *matheme* \$ or the barred subject, who is castrated by the Symbolic. To avoid the annihilating force of the Real, the master signifier hides its precarious ontological and epistemological subjection to the Symbolic by remembering to forget that the Symbolic is sustained through the general consensus in a community to make a thing stand for something else. The uncanny resemblance between the nonsensical signifier and the human subject is at full force here. The precarious and arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified in meaningful human communication is only different from the relationship between the signifier and the signified in nonsense in that the former has been solidified into an established consensual association while the latter brazenly exposes the precariousness and arbitrariness of such a relationship on purpose.

Unlike Humpty Dumpty, however, the human subject does not necessarily have to fall to pieces even if it suspects the imaginary and symbolic nature of its grasp on reality. From the world outside Plato's cave, to Kant's *Ding an sich*, Schopenhauer's *wille*, Nietzsche's *das rätselhafte X*, and Lacan's *le réel*, it is evident that we can recognize and play with the Real outside the Imaginary and Symbolic constitution of our reality in a controlled manner. As has been demonstrated in this paper, certain literary texts like Carroll's Alice books, which are endowed with the element of nonsense, can interrogate the Real and unhinge our supposedly certain grasp of reality.

A Cybersemiotic Formulation of Nonsense

According to Brier (2008), "potential information" (p. 87), transmitted from a sender to a receiver, becomes meaningful information only when there is a consensus between the sender and the receiver as to what that which now has turned into a signifier refers to metaphorically. Language, therefore, functions as a network in which signifiers mean what they mean because there exists an agreement as to their meaning. Taken out of the "context" in which a "system" lives and organizes itself, we would merely have what Evers (2012) calls "signifier-in-isolation" (p. 38), which is no signifier at all but the Real.

But how does such a consensual context emerge among the members of a particular living system? Brier (2008) answers this question by invoking Maturana and Verela's autopoiesis theory and von Foerster's second-order cybernetics. In response to the "perturbations" received by "the sensory surface" of a living system, some "changes" (p. 88) have to emerge in the system because, as an "autopoietic system," i.e. "a closed organization, the main concern of which is to stay organized" (Brier, 2008, p. 180), it needs to maintain the balance within itself that has been disturbed by perturbation from the environment. A "repetition" (Brier, 2008, p. 88) of the same perturbations and the same changes in the living system establishes certain habits in the system, leading to a "structural coupling" (Brier, 2008, p. 89) with the environment that enables the system to communicate with its surroundings within the "signification spheres" (Brier, 2008, p. 100).

According to Maturana and Varela, these changes and habits in living systems depend on their structure, which means that the perturbation received by the sensory surface cannot be merely the objective information of Wiener's objective first-order cybernetic. In the cybersemiotic framework, information is considered to be what Bateson refers to as "difference that makes a difference" (Brier, 2008, p. 26) and, more precisely, a difference that makes a difference to an observer (in the form of a living system) in von Foerster's second-order cybernetics. Since the members of a particular living system, humans for example, share the same structure, embodiment, and survival needs, a structural coupling in the form of "signs and meanings they have attained through habits of the mind and body" can be established among them over time. "In humans," explains Brier (2008), "these signs are organized into language through social self-conscious communication" (p. 100).

The shared context of the human language system operates as a medium of communicating meaningful information. Still, as Brier (2008) explains in discussing Luhmann's system's theory, language is closed, not only to other organisms with different signification spheres, but to the other "independent systems" (p. 25) within the human organism, the three closed systems of Luhmann's system's theory being the biological, the psychological, and the socio-communicational.

It is important to note here, however, that unlike other living systems known to us, humans constantly make new codes (Brier, 2008, p. 236). Lacan (1966a / 2007) also accentuates the self-reflexive, constructive, and creative nature of language in the following noteworthy quote from *Écrits*:

it was certainly the Word that was [était] in the beginning, and we live in its creation, but it is our mental [esprit] action that continues this creation by constantly renewing it. And we can only think back to this action by allowing ourselves to be driven ever further ahead by it. (Lacan, 1966a / 2007, p. 225)

Language, even if considered as a closed system, is so productive and creative that sometimes it can reflect its own irregularities, absurdities, and limitations, as evidenced in literary texts exemplifying Lacan's Borromean knot.

Because in nonsense, "language foregrounds itself as nothing but language" (Shires, 1988, p. 275) minus the metaphorical and metonymic aspects, it turns into a "metalanguage" (López-Varela, 2014, p. 4) that can be regarded as a model to reveal the tacit conventionality of meaning that emerges in language based on the shared signification sphere of human beings which is constructed in their own particular "biological and social contexts" (Brier, 2008, p. 87).

Conclusion

Instead of having a regulating effect, as the Symbolic and the Imaginary do, nonsense confounds communication, resulting in more complexity and chaos in the process. It neither perfectly follows nor totally defies the rules of the language games, but takes advantage of their rules to play its own game. Nonsense starts

making some sense in an esoteric manner only when a shared context is created at special textual moments such as the above mentioned examples of nonsense in *Alice* texts. Cybersemiotically explained, nonsense operates in a particular context by referring to itself and creating its own value, a process that brings to mind the self-referential way in which language has been organized self-referentially in a closed loop.

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Author's Biography



Lale Massiha received her B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees in English Language and Literature from University of Tabriz, Azad University Tehran, and University Putra Malaysia, respectively. In 2013, Massiha joined the Department of English Language and Literature, University of Tabriz, as a Lecturer on Modern Fiction, American Literature, Literature of Renaissance and Literary Criticism. Since then, she has had various publications on Fiction, Comparative Literature, and English literature in domestic and international journals. She has supervised some twenty M.A. students.



Sanam Shahedali received her B.A. and M.A. degrees in English Language and Literature from Tabriz University. She defended her M.A. Thesis titled "Decoding the Unencodable 'Real' Human Unknown Encrypted in a Selection of Works from the Genres of Science Fiction and Fantasy" in 2022.