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► **To cite this version:**

Célia Schneebeli. Systematized impoliteness in the nonsense world of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass. Denis Jamet and Manuel Jobert. Aspects of Linguistic Impoliteness, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp.160-172, 2013, 1-4438-4905-7. <halshs-01080551>

**HAL Id: halshs-01080551**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01080551v1>**

Submitted on 17 Jun 2019

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# Systematized impoliteness in the nonsense world of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*

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Theories of conversation very often revolve around the idea of cooperation, an idea dear to their founding father H.P. Grice (see Grice 1975). In a similar fashion, as Jonathan Culpeper points out in the introduction to his article “towards an anatomy of impoliteness”, theories of politeness often define the latter as a set of strategies “employed to promote or maintain social harmony in interaction” (Culpeper 1996:349). For instance, Geoffrey Leech writes that the function of the Politeness Principle is “to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place.” (Leech 1983:82). For Brown and Levinson, politeness presupposes a “potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it, and makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties.” (Brown and Levinson 1987:1), and for Robin Lakoff, “Politeness can be defined as a means of minimizing confrontation in discourse [...]; designed specifically for the facilitation of interaction”, (Lakoff 1989:102) and “is developed by societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction” (Lakoff 1975:64).

All those definitions are strongly reminiscent of the central idea of Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975:45), which is that people taking part to a conversation ideally seek to make it easier by adopting a cooperative behaviour. Besides, the Cooperative Principle is the first component of Geoffrey Leech's Interpersonal rhetoric (dealing with the content of an utterance, as opposed to the textual rhetoric, which deals with its form) in his *Principles of Pragmatics*. And in Leech's system, it naturally goes hand in hand with a Politeness Principle (“Minimize (other things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs”; “Maximize (other things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs”, Leech, 1983:82), which is itself divided into six maxims and completed by an Irony Principle.

For those familiar or accustomed to this vision of conversation, reading Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872) might be quite an interesting (and enjoyable) experience.

## 1. Politeness through the looking-glass

According to those models of conversation, what is at stake in politeness is the establishment of conditions which enable the participants of a conversation to converse successfully. From this point of view, the characters of Lewis Carroll's two Alice books very often prove to be good counter-illustrations of politeness theories. For the heroine, talking with them is often a challenging, unpleasant, laborious, or at best unsettling, experience, to such an extent that she sometimes gives up when their rudeness becomes too much to bear. During her adventures in Wonderland, she does so when trying to talk with the Caterpillar, who makes no effort whatsoever to maintain or feed the conversation and, worse, doesn't refrain from contradicting her, so much so that Alice ends up turning away (“[as] the Caterpillar seemed to be in a very unpleasant state of mind, she turned away.”). A little further on, in the chapter « A mad tea party », it is the Mad Hatter, March Hare and Dormouse's turn to adopt a behaviour that the narrator explicitly calls “rudeness”. They keep contradicting, interrupting, challenging and provoking Alice, to the point that she finally decides to walk off, swearing never to come back : “This piece of rudeness was more than Alice could bear : she got up in great disgust, and walked off [...]. “At any rate I'll never go there again!” said Alice [...]”. On the contrary, all along Carroll's two books, Alice spends her time trying to smooth things over in order to facilitate the conversations she tries to have and displays wealth of discursive strategies (counterfactual forms, self-censorship, multiple polite formulas, self-deprecation, and so on) in order to do so.

However, this polite behaviour is of very little use to her in Carroll's imaginary lands since her interlocutors cultivate an altogether different behavior, which amounts to a sort of systematized impoliteness. This is what Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni remarks in the second volume of *Les Interactions Verbales*, where she suggests reading Lewis Carroll's text as an illustration of the tremendous destructive power of “systematized impoliteness” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1992:306). Carroll's characters indeed relish cutting Alice short, contradicting her, attacking her, interrupting her, ignoring her, criticizing her, in a word making all that is possible to make her uncomfortable in the conversation. It seems that in Carroll's world, confrontation has replaced cooperation as the central principle of verbal exchange. The exchange is a verbal battle, conversation a verbal battlefield to be conquered and systematized impoliteness a set of strategies aimed at doing so. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle writes in *Philosophy of Nonsense*, in Carroll's books, “dialogue is mostly agonistic, [...] it is not a cooperative undertaking for mutually rewarding ends, but a verbal battle, where the speaker's linguistic survival is always at stake” (Lecercle 1994:72).

The goal of Alice's interlocutors is not to converse peacefully and successfully but to defeat their opponent (most of the time Alice) and "drive him or her off the verbal battlefield" (Lecercle 1994:79) by any possible means.

In this respect, impoliteness as practiced by the characters of Carroll's two stories really belongs to what Jonathan Culpeper calls "strategic rudeness" or "instrumental impoliteness" (Culpeper 2011:220), borrowing Leslie Beebe's idea of impoliteness used "to serve some instrumental goal" (1995:154). It is not a mere absence of politeness or a simple deviation from the norm. It can neither be reduced to a hiccup in the conversation nor to a bending of the rules of good conversational behaviour. As we are going to see, it is a perfectly deliberate behaviour, a system in its own right, with its own principle and strategies.

## 2. Impoliteness Principle and selfishness at work in conversation

In order to analyse the systematized impoliteness of the characters of the two Alice books, Jean-Jacques Lecercle proposes a "mirror image" of Leech's Politeness Principle, with six counter-maxims "obtained by substituting 'self' for 'other' and 'other' for 'self' in Leech's maxims" (Lecercle 1994:103). This Impoliteness Principle reads as follows: "Maximize (other things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs" and "Minimize (other things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs". This principle, as Lecercle points out, is also to a certain extent a Selfishness Principle since it basically consists in serving one's own interest. Once turned into a mere confrontation, conversation indeed amounts to a non-zero sum game (that is a game in which one's gain balances exactly the other's loss, and vice versa). Thus there is no possible *status quo* and the essence of politeness, which for Leech is in the balance between the cost and the benefit of a speech act, for both the speaker and the hearer, is untenable. On the contrary, in the Impoliteness Principle at work in Carroll's two books, the benefit of the speech act for the speaker has to be maximized while it has to cost as much as possible to the hearer. In the words of Brown and Levinson (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987), revisiting Erving Goffman's work (Goffman 1967, 1971), there is no room for mutual face protection. It is replaced with a constant attack on the hearer's positive and negative face, which respectively means harming the image he or she holds of himself or herself and wants to portray to others in the interaction, and invade his or her territory, be it cognitive or material, for the sheer benefit of the speaker.

Culpeper (1995) also builds a model of impoliteness around a similar reversal, replacing mutual protection by aggression as a central principle. The goal of the impolite speaker is quite clear: taking or keeping power. Attacking the other indeed reduces him or her to a submissive position while damaging his or her faces and hence enables to assume a high position and having the upper hand in the interaction. Impoliteness, from this point of view, is part and parcel of the mechanisms of conversational hierarchy.

Just as Leech's Politeness Principle, Lecercle's Selfishness or Impoliteness Principle is developed into six maxims which are the exact opposite of Leech's. Of course, they are far from being limitative (there are plenty of other ways to be impolite, see for example Culpeper 2011, Cashman 2006, Bousfield 2008) but they enable to explore conveniently the main strategies at work in Carroll's imaginary land, which all follow the same objective : the conquest of the interaction.

## 3. Tact and Generosity maxims

The first maxim of Geoffrey Leech's Politeness Principle is the tact maxim: « minimize cost to other » and « maximize benefit to other » (Leech 1983, 132). In Lecercle's Impoliteness Principle, the mirror maxim is « minimize cost to self » and « maximize benefit to self ». It goes hand in hand with Leech's second maxim, the Generosity maxim, which reads « minimize benefit to self » and « maximize cost to self », and becomes « minimize benefit to other » and « maximize cost to other » in the Impoliteness Principle. Again in the words of the theory of faces, those two maxims deal with the preservation of faces. True to their selfish logic, the mirror maxims are about preserving oneself as much as possible by protecting one's positive and negative face, and thus doing as little effort as possible for the hearer while expecting as much as possible from him or her. In this respect, all the politeness devices which require the speaker to sacrifice his or her positive face, from humility to self-abasement, are of course forbidden. It is the hearer's task to sacrifice his or her own positive face, as Humpty-Dumpty makes Alice do after blaming her for committing a Face Threatening Act (or FTA, an act which threatens the face wants of an interlocutor), making her try to repair it through self-deprecation:

"It is a—most—provoking—thing," he said at last, "when a person doesn't know a cravat from a belt!"  
"I know it's very ignorant of me," Alice said, in so humble a tone that Humpty Dumpty relented.

Here, Alice is the perfect example of what is to be avoided at all cost in the Impoliteness Principle : harming one's positive face (she calls herself an "ignorant"), like yielding any piece of one's negative face, amounts to assuming a low position in the hierarchy of the interaction. On the contrary, Humpty Dumpty has gained the upper hand through his accusation, which puts him in a position of power over Alice which he will take advantage of afterwards. Indeed, it is even better, when possible, to further use the interlocutor's self-abasement against him or her in the conversational hierarchy, as Humpty Dumpty does a little further and as the Caterpillar does in the chapter "Advice from a Caterpillar" of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The insect takes Alice's self-deprecation at face value and reinforces it in order to make her feel even worse:

"That is not said right," said the Caterpillar.

"Not *quite* right, I'm afraid," said Alice, timidly; "some of the words have got altered."

"It is wrong from beginning to end," said the Caterpillar decidedly, and there was silence for some minutes.

In fact, Alice very often falls into the trap of politeness used against her. She is the regular victim of interlocutors who expect her to respect the rules of politeness without ever returning her kindness. Indeed, she is frequently accused of impoliteness and criticized for her manners. Humpty Dumpty for instance accuses her of eavesdropping ("you've been listening at doors – and behind trees – and down chimneys – or you couldn't have known it!"). As for the Red Queen, she deplores her bad manners in the chapter "Queen Alice" ("you've not had many lessons in manners yet?", "she never was really well brought up", "it isn't etiquette to cut any one you've been introduced to", "it is ridiculous to leave all the conversation to the pudding!") which is all the more ironic since the guests are not necessarily themselves the epitome of good table manners : some of them "scrambled into dish of roast mutton" and "eagerly lap[ped] up the gravy", others "put their glasses upon their heads like extinguishers, and drank all that trickled down their faces" or "upset the decanters and drank the wine as it ran off the edges of the table". Tweedledee et Tweedledum also catch her out on the way she opens the conversation ("You've begun wrong!" cried Tweedledum. "The first thing in a visit is to say 'How d'ye do?' and shake hands!"). Worse, the White King corrects her for a polite expression often used by Alice that he takes at face value:

"I beg your pardon?" said Alice."

"It isn't respectable to beg," said the King."

Thus, the little girl is at the same time accused of impoliteness and a victim of the impoliteness of her interlocutors, and in both cases, criticized or aggressed, condemned to occupy a submissive position in the interaction.

## 4. Approbation and Modesty maxims

In the logic of Lecercle's Impoliteness Principle, Leech's Approbation maxim (Leech 1983:132), "minimize dispraise of other" and "maximize praise of other", becomes "minimize dispraise of self" and "maximize praise of self". As for the Modesty maxim, "minimize praise of self" and "maximize dispraise of self", its mirror image is "minimize praise of other" and "maximize dispraise of other". For the characters of the two Alice books, this means "exalting their own positive face" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1992:188), that is glorifying and praising themselves shamelessly, boasting and bragging openly, while at the same time depreciating and denigrating their interlocutor in a likewise manner. This is precisely the essence of the Lion's classical (but efficient) strategy in *Through the Looking-Glass* when he wants to provoke the Unicorn into fighting and thus boasts and insults his rival at the same time ("I should win easy", "Why, I beat you all round the town, you chicken!"). Denigrating the other is in fact the logical extension of self-glorification, which is in itself already an attack on the interlocutor's positive face. The conversation between Alice and Humpty Dumpty is again a very good illustration of it, straight from its opening, where Alice is already accused of impoliteness and falls into the trap of politeness used against her that we have just seen:

"And how exactly like an egg he is!" she said aloud, standing with her hands ready to catch him, for she was every moment expecting him to fall.

"It's *very* provoking," Humpty Dumpty said after a long silence, looking away from Alice as he spoke, 'to be called an egg—*very!*'"

"I said you *looked* like an egg, Sir," Alice gently explained. "And some eggs are very pretty, you know" she added, hoping to turn her remark into a sort of a compliment.

Humpty Dumpty is openly irritated by Alice's remark (who didn't think she would be heard), which he takes (or pretends to take) as an attack on his positive face. As he very probably expects her to do, Alice immediatly

tries to repair her unintentional FTA and make up for it with “a sort of a compliment” (“some eggs are very pretty”), which he directly, and very strategically, turns into an insult directed at the girl :

“Some people,” said Humpty Dumpty, looking away from her as usual, “have no more sense than a baby!”

His counter-attack on Alice’s positive face turns into a more straightforward attack a few lines later :

“My *name* is Alice, but—t”

“It’s a stupid enough name!” Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently.

Humpty-Dumpty knows it too well: in order to hurt someone’s pride and harm his or her image, there is nothing like a frank and direct *ad hominem*. From this point of view, Humpty Dumpty’s slighting remark reminds Carroll’s reader of the Mad Hatter’s remark in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, who tells Alice that her “hair wants cutting”, which the little girl herself calls “very rude” (all the more so since it is an opening remark). Wonderland and Looking-Glass characters are quite fond of disparaging personal comments and a certain number of other downright insults can be added to the list. Many of them are directed at the intellectual abilities of Alice, like the Griffon and Mock Turtle’s (“You are a simpleton”, “Really, you are very dull”), the Duchess’s (“You don’t know much”) or a Violet’s in the Looking-Glass garden (“I never saw anybody that looked stupider”). Others are even aimed at her face itself, for example when Humpty Dumpty criticizes her face for being too ordinary, or when the Rose in Looking-glass garden says her face is not a clever one.

Contrary to Alice, Humpty Dumpty, who is the embodiment of the Selfishness Principle, always seeks to exalt and glorify his positive face. After having insulted Alice, he opens a new phase of self-glorification, putting the spotlight on himself (« I » is now written in emphatic italics in the text), with all due false modesty (“I’m not proud”, he takes care to add):

“Ah, well! They may write such things in a *book*,” Humpty Dumpty said in a calmer tone. “That’s what you call a History of England, that is. Now, take a good look at me! I’m one that has spoken to a King, *I* am: mayhap you’ll never see such another: and to show you I’m not proud, you may shake hands with me!”

Of course, a book talking about him can only be a history of England!

In short, Humpty Dumpty’s verbal production keeps oscillating between self-praise and attacks on Alice. He takes advantage of any occasion to disparage her and elevate himself in the hierarchy of their conversation, always trying to keep his denigration of Alice at the level of his self-celebration. He even ends up obtaining the ideal interaction in this matter when the little girl addresses him courteously (she now calls him “Sir”) to pay him a compliment, which he can accept and maximize:

“You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir,” said Alice. “Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem called “Jabberwocky”?”

“Let’s hear it,” said Humpty Dumpty. “I can explain all the poems that were ever invented—and a good many that haven’t been invented just yet.”

Whereas the logic of the Politeness Principle would make Humpty Dumpty minimize the complement he receives from Alice (“You seem very clever at explaining words”), the logic of the Selfishness Principle makes it highly recommended for him to accept compliments but also to maximize them, which is exactly what he does here (“I can explain all the poems that were ever invented—and a good many that haven’t been invented just yet.”).

## 5. Agreement maxim

Most of the time, though, the inhabitants of Carroll’s imaginary country largely prefer contradiction to agreement. In their selfish logic, Leech’s fourth maxim, the Agreement maxim (Leech, 1983:132), which reads “minimize disagreement between self and other” and “maximize agreement between self and other” naturally becomes “minimize agreement between self and other” and “maximize disagreement between self and other”. The rules of verbal battle demand to cultivate dissension, to flaunt one’s love of contradiction and automatically take the opposite side on any subject in order better to destabilize the opponent. Tweedledee and Tweedledum are the embodiment of this behaviour with their respective leitmotifs, “contrariwise” and “nohow”, which punctuate their conversation with Alice. Disagreement has to be displayed conspicuously, almost word for word, not beating about the bush, as the Mad Hatter does when he echoes Alice’s “that’s the same thing, you know” with “not the same thing a bit !”, or as the Caterpillar does too, answering Alice’s “I’m not myself, you see” with a terse “I don’t see”. Disagreement is just as head-on and exposed frankly by characters that hold the power such as the royal couples

(particularly the Queens) of both books. For them, it is of course also a strategy aimed at reinforcing their status in front of Alice, who generally takes no offence. Indeed, their status, which is institutionally superior, enables them to enjoy a certain right to impoliteness, which Alice can't afford. However, the little girl sometimes challenges this asymmetrical situation. In fact, she does so more and more often as she explores Wonderland and little by little, learns to leave her good manners aside with the royal couple (often for the sake of her own survival). So much so that her last words are insolent ones: she answers back rudely and refuses to obey the Queen, reducing her and her subjects to "a pack of cards". Interestingly enough, those final words amount to a "coup" : her refusal to respect the hierarchy of Wonderland (*i.e.* obeying and respecting the Queen) brings the whole system to an end and the dissolution of Wonderland as Alice wakes up.

## 6. Sympathy maxim

To finish with, the mirror image of the sympathy maxim (Leech 1983:132), "minimize antipathy between self and other" and "maximize sympathy between self and other", is "maximize antipathy between self and other" and "minimize sympathy between self and other". It really partakes of all the strategies of impoliteness we have already seen before. Generally speaking, most of the characters in Carroll's two Alice books make no effort to be nice with the little girl or to make conversing easier. The Caterpillar, for example, makes no effort whatsoever to fill in the lulls in the conversation or to avoid those awkward silences that leave Alice ill-at-ease. The insect makes no effort either to understand her problem, refusing her the empathy she certainly would have expected from any interlocutor. The two brothers, Tweedledee and Tweedledum do not seek to help her find her way out of the wood, although she asks them as politely as she can (" "I was thinking," Alice said very politely, "which is the best way out of this wood: it's getting so dark. Would you tell me, please?" "). The flowers of the Looking-glass garden take no better care of Alice's positive face (in this precise case her need for contact, be it human or other) since they purely and simply ignore her and exclude her from the conversation, which in fact mainly consists in criticizing her. Same goes for the Lion and the Unicorn, who use the third-person neuter pronoun "it" to refer to her in her presence. The only exception may be the Cheshire Cat, although, as Lecercle points out, "the conversations between Alice and the Cheshire Cat [...] involve an element of fear under their friendly surface" (Lecercle 1994, 81), namely the Cat's "very long claws" and his grin, which shows his "great many teeth", two elements which makes Alice feel "it ought to be treated with respect" (again, this in an interesting way to link relations of power and politeness). In the logic of the Impoliteness Principle, what counts is to keep friendliness at the lowest possible level in order to make the interlocutor feel ill-at-ease. Moreover, being sympathetic would be too much of a risk for our selfish speakers, laying them open to vulnerability. Sympathy is then replaced with constant aggression, and the ideal contribution to a conversation is therefore not a cooperative contribution but a « knock-down argument » as Humpty Dumpty calls it: an argument capable of knocking-down the interlocutor, and thus reducing him to silence, which is a kind of victory. If conversation is about taking and keeping power, the ideal selfish speaker must indeed only care about how efficient his or her contribution is to defeat the opponent.

## Conclusion

The antagonistic vision of conversation developed in Lewis Carroll's two Alice books may be as idealistic as the irenic vision of Grice, Leech and their counterparts, but its great merit is to put into light the relationships of power at work in any verbal exchange. What is at stake in politeness and impoliteness is not only the conditions making the conversation easier (or even possible) but also power relations which are at the same time present in the background of the interaction (what Culpeper calls "power behind discourse" (2011:225), quoting Fairclough (1989:43)), for example in the social status of the participants, and established and negotiated through it ("power in discourse", Culpeper 2011:225), for example confirming or challenging those status. From this point of view, impoliteness (just as politeness) can be perfectly strategic as we've seen with the characters of Carroll's two books. To this extent, far from being only pure fantasy creatures, Carroll's paper creatures are also the spokespersons of an antagonistic and conflictive conception of communication that researchers would be wrong to overlook or underestimate.

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