



University of Peshawar

Available on Gale & affiliated international databases



Journal of
**Humanities &
Social Sciences**

JHSS XXI, No. 3, 2013 (December)

Schema Disruption *and* Identity in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland*

Sameera Abbas, Rubina Rahman

Department of English & Applied Linguistics, University of Peshawar, Pakistan

Abstract

This paper focuses on the importance of schema and context in the interpretation of literary texts and its impact on reader and character identity. The understanding of literary texts is aided and enhanced when a reader is able to create a text world in their mind. A reader's comprehension of a text is partly dependent on their background knowledge, which forms their already existing schema. The reader's existing schema may be supported, challenged, or disrupted in a literary text, which may lead to the creation of new schema and a new reader identity. The newly created schema that might be similar to or different from the reader's existing schema makes a text world for them, helping them in textual comprehension and an analysis of their self. This paper examines the first three chapters from *Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll in the light of these notions. Carroll has been able to create a non-sense text world by manipulating the semantic complexity of language, and leads the main character to self-search. The paper draws on Elena Semino's Schema Theory (1995) for the analysis.

Keywords: Schema Theory, Text World, Homonymy, Lewis Carroll, Reader Identity, Deixis, Context

Introduction

Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland by Lewis Carroll is a literary manifestation of linguistic devices in deviant use. Carroll's manipulation of social and linguistic context and schemas in this literary piece has created a non-sense world that disrupts the reader's existing schema and yet they accept and even identify with it

by the end of the narrative. His play with the semanticity of words makes this piece as interesting and rich for a linguist as it is for a literary critic. Carroll has been able to create a non-sense text world through the interplay between semantic deviation and pragmatic interpretation of language.

Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland contains many instances of a play on context exploiting the disruption of schema giving rise to humour as well as creating a text-world that is very different from the ordinary world around us. For a better understanding of how context can be manipulated in a literary piece, it is important to have a clear comprehension of the factors that enable a reader to interpret linguistic devices used in a context. Thornborrow & Wareing (1998: 88-91), have discussed four different factors of context that need to be kept in mind when the context of language is being interpreted. These factors are deixis, homonymy, other similar texts / discourses, and the prior knowledge of the reader/ hearer. Deixis is the information that is given to the text by the context. According to Levinson deixis is the manner in which language encapsulates linguistic and grammatical feature of the context of utterance and by doing so makes the context an important aid to the interpretation of an utterance (1983:54).

Homonymy is related with multiple meaning potential in lexicon. The context of utterance plays a vital role in identifying the intended meaning within the narrative. Alternatively, deliberate choice of unintended meaning can cause schema disruption. The third significant factor in the understanding of context is 'other similar texts and discourses'. This refers to the past experience of similar intertextual interactions of a reader that help them in interpreting the text. The fourth factor 'prior knowledge' refers to the experience of the world on the part of the reader or hearer. These experiences can be common to the cultural group one belongs to or they may be personal experiences that influence the interpretation of a text (Thornborrow & Wareing, 1998:90).

Schema and Context

The concept of schema is not new in cognitive science. Various philosophers, psychologists and linguist have been writing about it (Kant 1929, Bartlett 1932; 1995, Rumelhart 1977, Cook 1989).

Elena Semino (1995:3) has traced her discussion of schema back to its origin by Bartlett. Bartlett (1932) (cited in Semino, 1995:3) found proof that prior knowledge shapes people's perceptions, understanding, and memory. He termed this phenomenon as 'schema' describing it as 'an active organization of past

reactions, or past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operating in any well-adapted organic response' (p.201).

Human memory depends on cumulative schemata in order to operate and make sense of ever changing and varied interaction with the world at large. Cook (1989:72-73) elaborates upon the activation of several schemata for textual interaction and declares that real discourse must make recourse to several schemata at the same time that would connect with each other to make meaningful communication of thoughts and ideas. He concludes that schemata represent stereotypical patterns that form the data for these constructs and are recovered from memory stores as and when the need arises to make sense of the discourse.

Drawing from early researches (Bransford & Johnson,1972, Rumelhart,1980) Semino (1995:4) describes meaning potential within schema theory as not something that is actually 'contained' in the text but meaning is built by an interaction between the interlocutor and the text, where the interlocutor retrieves several schemata from their memory. If they fail in this to create a link between their pre-existing schemata and the text, then the communication between the text and the interlocutor is, at best, an abortive attempt to make sense of the text.

Schema is not fixed once and for all but instead keeps on changing and adapting with new information that is absorbed and retained by the mind. Black (2006: 36-37) discusses the inter-textual context that is created between the reader and the text, which also has a tremendous effect on the way a text is interpreted. Schema is relevant to the understanding of texts because as a reader we bring certain expectations to the text based on our previous experiences. These experiences might be the experience of other texts or it might be the experience one has had in the world. These experiences are usually considered as culture specific but they might at times be general and are equally essential for creating a link between the reader and the text.

Schema theory is relevant to the comprehension of literature because it creates text worlds that can only be comprehended if schemata are activated. Referring to Enkvist (1989:166), Semino elaborates on text worlds as mental constructs that are an outcome of interaction between prior background knowledge and comprehension (1995:6). She further links schemata to comprehension of literature. She argues that literature has a tendency to challenge and modify the readers existing schemata. She elaborates on Cook's (1990: 223) definition of literariness that focuses on 'schema disruption', which implies upset of the reader's pre-existing schema and a 'schema refreshment' which is a resultant new schema that arises out of the synthesis of the old with the new knowledge (p. 6-7).

This change in schema due to schema disruption or schema refreshment leads to the creation of a text world. This text world is either similar to the actual world of the reader, if the text is realistic; or it is deviant and abnormal in comparison with the actual world of the reader. Context plays a crucial role in creating schemata for a reader, which ultimately influences their interpretation of texts.

In the following analysis, the role of linguistic choices and patterns of language would be focused on to figure out their potential role in the creation of new schema or modification of the existing ones that eventually lead to a change in the reader perspective about the world/s and their own identity within these.

Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland

Analysis and Discussion

The first three chapters of *Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland* form one narrative episode within the novel and this paper examines them for the interplay of schemas and text world and their relation with character and reader identity.

Schema theory has definite influence on reading comprehension where the reader has to interact between his real world and the textual world. The characters within the textual world too need to adjust their schemata as the narrative moves and takes them through its world. The interplay between the real and text world schemata result in literary interpretations:

Expectations based on particular prior knowledge may need to be adjusted in order to accommodate new information provided in the text and to achieve a coherent understanding of the outcome of the narrative. (Fakhri, 2011:3)

An expectation through manipulation of context is created right from the beginning of the novel. Alice is seen as bored, having nothing to do, sitting by her sister's side, on the bank of a river. Her sister's book does not seem to attract her interest because 'it had no pictures or conversations in it'. Alice's remark '... and what is the use of a book without pictures or conversation?' creates an expectation in the readers mind about the importance of characters and conversations in the upcoming part of the novel. 'Pictures and conversations' suggest a reference to participants of a discourse and the discourse itself. So an indirect reference to the context is suggested here.

An impossible world is created as she sees a white talking rabbit with a watch and following this rabbit she falls down a long tunnel. From this onwards she finds herself in an impossible text world where the reader continuously experiences a schema disruption. As she is falling down the tunnel, she sees books in bookshelves, maps, pictures, and a jar that she picks from a shelf labelled 'orange marmalade'. The tunnel schema of this text world is an entire deviation from the schema of a real world tunnel. In the real world, tunnel schema would include darkness, insects, dirt and perhaps uncomfortable turns and twists. Alice's fall is also unnatural and deviant as is the fact that she does not get hurt at all when she finally reaches the ground. Her thoughts point out the strangeness of the act by comparing it to real world fall¹:

'Well!' thought Alice to herself, 'after such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down stairs!' (p.3)

This creates an expectation regarding an upcoming impossible world in the proceeding text. However, though she takes a talking rabbit very calmly but does question a rabbit who takes a watch out his waistcoat-pocket. And a little later on the narrator makes a comment:

For, you see, so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that a very few things indeed were really impossible. (p.6)

In this impossible world, she continuously changes in size and there comes a point when she starts speaking to her feet as her size grows beyond the normal range:

Goodbye feet! ... Oh my poor little feet, I wonder who will put on your shoes and stockings for you now, dears? (p.10)

The impossible world turns into a non-sense world because the schema of human limbs in actual world is very different from the schema portrayed in this novel. In the actual world they do not change in size so drastically nor do we engage in conversation with them, neither would such a phenomenon taken so calmly. Once again, though Alice is talking to her feet and even planning to write a letter to them, she realizes the senselessness of her act:

Oh dear, what nonsense I'm talking. (p.11)

¹ The page numbers are according to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a publication of Harper Collins 2010 (See References).

Another such deviation from real world schema occurs when she meets a talking mouse in Chapter III: *A Caucus race and a long tale*. As she is swimming in a pool of her own tears she wonders how to save herself. Her thoughts clearly indicate a real world schema that she has formed of sea and its surroundings. It is encapsulated in brackets to show its lack of alignment with the existing text world where she is located now:

(Alice had been to the seaside once in her life, and had come to the conclusion, that wherever you go to on the English coast you find a number of bathing machines in the sea, some children digging in the sand with wooden spades, then a row of lodging houses, and behind them a railway station) (p.15)

However, this real world schema does not interfere with the text world in which she is at the moment swimming.

In this Chapter Carroll plays on homonymy when the animals come out of the pool of tears along with Alice, all drenched, the mouse calls out: 'Sit down all of you and listen to me! I will soon make you dry enough.' The word 'dry' can be used literally as well as metaphorically. It can be used as an antonym of wet and it can metaphorically mean tedious or boring as in such expressions as 'a dry subject'. The reader or the listener interprets the meaning according to the context. In this instance, the word 'dry' should have been taken literally but instead, the mouse uses it metaphorically and starts telling 'dry' accounts of history. The play upon the word 'dry' in this context creates humour through its contextual misinterpretation.

The same manipulation on homophony is observed when the mouse responds to one of Alice's queries: 'mine is a long and sad tale'. Alice looks at the mouse's 'tail' and says; 'it is a long tail certainly.... But why do you call it sad?' Here Carroll plays on two homophones i.e. 'tale' and 'tail' which sound the same but spell and mean differently. In usual discourse the context determines it for the listener or the reader to make the correct interpretation of such words. Alice's misunderstanding of the context leads to the misunderstanding of the language used by the mouse in this instance. Another similar illustration is that of the use of the two homophone "knot" and "not". When the mouse says, 'I had not!' Alice misinterprets it by ignoring the context when she replies 'a knot! ... Oh do let me help you to undo it!'

The Caucus race' is a perfect deviation from the normal schema of our real world. The schema of a race in actual world includes a starting point and a finishing point; both temporal and spatial. It also includes a kind of a competition among the

participants who are supposed to start the race at the same time from the same point. The winner is usually one person who is given a certain prize for which all the participants competed. An impartial party that does not have a direct role in the competition gives the prize.

‘The Caucus race’ in this text is altogether deviant and abnormal when compared with the real world race- schema. The animals are all scattered in different parts of the race course when the race starts. The race starts without a particular announcement and the participants run without a particular point in mind as a point of destination because the racecourse is circular which is a deviation from real world race course that are linear. The Dodo makes an announcement of the end of the race when it sees that almost everyone is dry. When asked about a winner he announces that everyone has won. The prize is to be given by Alice who herself was a participant in the race. Alice herself is given a thimble that was earlier received from her. Although we are told that

Alice thought the whole thing very absurd... (p.23)

Yet this deviant and atypical schema is taken up by Alice. A reason can be seen in the words of the narrator:

... for this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people (p.8)

A little later she is actually puzzling her mind over her identity issue. In a childlike manner she tries to imagine and compares herself to other children but realizes that she is none of them.

I am sure I am not Ada,...and I’m sure I can’t be Mabel...Besides, she is she, and I’m I— (p13)

She does not realize that she is actually Alice who is shuttling between two world, her physical world that we term as real world and the world of the textual narrative into which she has landed.

At the same time, a text world is created in the mind of a reader. This text world is not only an impossible world but also a non-sense world. The reader accepts this text world on the basis of the challenge it poses to their actual world. They can only understand it in a contrast to their own world. Their background knowledge, although not reinforced in this text-world, does help them in their understanding of new schema by being challenged or disrupted. This additional schema might add to their already existing schema or it might altogether modify it and change their

perception of the actual world around them. There are instances in the selected text where schema disruption of characters takes place during discourse. Such disruption leads to a humorous situation. The Mouse's attempt to dry up the gathering with his dry accounts of history proves the point:

“...‘and even Stigand the patriotic archbishop of Canterbury, found it advisable’-“

“Found what”, said the Duck.

“Found *it*”, The Mouse replied rather crossly; “Of course you know what ‘it’ means”

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?” (p.20)

The Duck's understanding of the historical account is impaired because the use of reference marker “it” differs in the Duck's own schema from the schema of the Mouse's narrative. The object of the verb “find/found” in the Duck's existing schema is a noun phrase. “A frog or a worm” refers to food items in the Duck's schema and it tries to interpret the text narrated by the mouse according to its own schema. The account narrated by the mouse is a text inside a text. This text inside the main text has its own schema which is apparently not understood by the Duck because its schema is limited and relatively simple. The schema of the narrated ‘account’ is complicated and so the verb “found” takes an infinitive clause as its object, showing a plan of action rather than a concrete object. This change in the syntax of discourse is determined by the schemas of the corresponding speakers. The historical account does not carry any sense for the Duck because its schema is too different from the schema in this particular narrative. By exploiting the notion of schema both in the readers and his characters, Carroll has been able to arouse laughter among his readers.

According to Kant (1929), the schema of a speaker mediates his perception of the world. An illustration of this notion can be seen in the difference of perception when Alice speaks to the Mouse about cats and dogs. In Alice's schema cats and dogs carry pleasant associations in comparison with the associations that these animals carry in the Mouse's schema. Their conversation almost reaches a deadlock when Alice continues to talk about cats and dogs and resumes only after Alice makes a promise that she would no longer refer to such animals. Alice continues to talk of her real world cat to text world Mouse and birds which causes this impasse in their conversation. This manipulation of the two schemas by Carroll has both linguistic and literary implications.

From a literary perspective, the deviant schemata not only create humour but also question the norms and traditions humans have set for themselves. It sensitizes the mind to the bonds and chains in a social setting which are imposed because they have been practiced that way for a long time and anything that goes against them appears nonsense.

Conclusion

Through challenging and disrupting the existing schema of both the reader and Alice, Carroll has been able to portray a non-sense text world. The comprehension of this non-sense text world becomes possible for readers only after they compare and contrast their existing schemas with the schema of the text world. Without the background knowledge of the real world, a reader would not have been able to consider the world of Alice as 'Wonderful'. The creation of this wonderful non-sense world arises from the disruption of the readers existing schemas. Carroll has been able to portray a wonderful world through the usage of certain linguistic and pragmatic notions such as schema, background knowledge and the patterns of language intrinsic to context such as deixis. Without these tools the creation of a non-sense text world would have been difficult. The importance of our existing schema in the understanding and interpretation of literary texts has been verified through the contrast between the two schemas between the actual world schema and the text world schema. However, Carroll never lets us forget that it is an impossible and at times a nonsense world through Alice's very realistic remarks. She keeps on juggling between the two worlds and takes the reader along with her but at times in doing so she loses sight of the real Alice as she ponders:

Who in the world am I? Ah, *that's* the great puzzle!' (p.13)

In the end, the reader is also left wondering and the challenge does not remain so much of the worlds that they are shifting between but becomes an identity issue. This juggling between worlds gives the reader multiple identities along with the lead character so that they can adjust to one and the other schemas as the text becomes more 'Wonderful'.

References

- Black, E. (2006). *Pragmatic Stylistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bartlett, F.C. (1932) *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bransford, J.D. and Johnson, M.K. (1972) Contextual prerequisites for understanding: some investigations of comprehension and recall. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour*, 11. 717-26.
- Carroll, L. (2010). *Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland*. London: HarperCollins (Originally published by MacMillan London 1865)
- Cook, G. (1989) *Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Cook, G. (1990). *Theory of Discourse Deviation: The Application of Schema Theory to the Analysis of Literary Discourse*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Leeds, UK.
- Enkvist, N.E. (1989) Possible worlds in humanities, arts and sciences. Allen (ed.), *Research in Text Theory*. 162-86. New York: De Gruyter,
- Fakhri, A.(2011). Schema theory and the language of fear in Leila Abouzeid's novel, *The Year of the Elephant*. *Journal of Literature, Language, and Linguistics*. 3/1:1-9.
- Kant, I. (1929). *Critique of pure reason* (N. K. Smith, Trans.). New York: St. Martin's Press. (Original work published in 1781).
- Levinson,S.C.(1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rumelhart, D.E. (1980). Schemata: The building blocks of cognition. In Spiro, R., Bruce, B. & Brewer, W. (eds.). *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension: Perspectives from Cognitive Psychology, Linguistics, Artificial Intelligence and Education*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Semino, E. (1995). Schema theory and the analysis of text worlds in poetry. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 4, 79-108.
- Thornborrow, J. & Wareing, S (1998). *Patterns in language: An introduction to language and literary style*. London: Routledge.