

## ***The Wonder of the Power of Language in Alice in Wonderland***

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### **Abstract**

Power is a game played by everyone. Learning to confront the power game is important if we do not want to fall prey to it. Among all sources of power, language is one uniquely human. According to Wittgenstein (1968), the language people use in communication is just like a game. People not only connect the referents with the words, but also with the implications behind the expressions. Only through continuous interactions and guessing of the meanings, people can understand each other. As Kemp (2009) argues, the power of language lies in its implications. It can be used to force, to mislead, to satirize or to hurt others. The purpose of this study is to analyze how a little girl, Alice, learns to master the language game in order to survive and not be bullied in Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Textual analysis shows that in order for Alice to survive in Wonderland, she gradually masters the language game by observing and participating in debates with Wonderland creatures.

Keywords: power, language game, Alice in Wonderland

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Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (Gray, 1992) is a story about power games. In reading the story, it can be noticed that most of the characters debate a lot in order to force other people to accept their opinions. In other words, they try to be the power-holders in the conversation. Compared to the Wonderland creatures, a seven-year-old child like Alice is not sophisticated and intelligent enough to refute illogical arguments. Carroll, the author of *AW*<sup>1</sup>, deliberately leads Alice to observe and to participate in the debates with Wonderland creatures, and helps the girl learn to apply her power of language to protect herself and protest against those in power. The purpose of this study is to examine how Carroll helps Alice, a seven-year-old girl acquire the power to resist power through the use of language through his ingenious design of Wonderland. Humans must go through a long period of childhood before they can live independently. This long period of childhood is extremely vulnerable to adult's maltreatment or influence. Understanding the nature of power and how it works is therefore a very important task in children's development. In the book, the adult-like creatures attempt to have power on Alice because she is at disadvantage in terms of the ability to do or to say something. Realizing how she is overpowered by those creatures, Alice gradually learns to use power as a means of resistance to power in order to survive in Wonderland.

### **A Review of Theories on Power**

Power is a term that refers to a relationship between two individuals or groups. In a power relationship, there is always a powerful one, who has more influence on the other, such as making orders and demands; while the other, the weaker one, must obey. Most scholars agree that power is a relation. For example, Partridge (1963) describes power as "omnipresent in human relations; not only in the relations between social groups, but also in the simplest interpersonal relations embracing only two persons" (p. 117). A power relation exists even if there are only two persons. Often, a person is more overbearing than the other in a relationship even though they are good friends. For an individual or a group to exert its influence, power relies on the support of other people. According to Arendt (1970), "when we say of somebody that he is 'in power' we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name" (p. 44). A person's power does not come from him but from those who authorize him to have power. Power games thus are the most fundamental phenomenon in human society. As said by Foucault (1990), power "comes from everywhere" because people are living in a world full of power relations (p.93).

Foucault (1983) defines power in a comprehensive way. According to him, power is an action which produces other actions. He argues that ". . . what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon others' actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or those which may arise in the present or the future" (p. 220). A reaction, that is, an action upon another action, expected or unexpected, is also an exercise of power. For example, in *AW*, the Duchess, who is an aristocrat and employer, has power over the Cook. But out of reader's expectation, the Duchess does and says nothing to stop the Cook from throwing plates to her and the baby. The immobility of the Duchess only allows the Cook to be more and more violent. This shows that only action, including the use of language, can create influence on other people.

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<sup>1</sup> *Alice in Wonderland* henceforth abbreviated as *AW*.

Actions produce reactions. When knowledge is used in the service of power, namely, to rationalize the operation of power, the courage to resist becomes a necessity. Therefore Foucault (1983) claims resistance is one of the essential elements in a power relation. He says:

It would not be possible for power relations to exist without points of insubordination which, by definition, are means of escape. Accordingly, every intensification, every extension of power relations to make the insubordinate submit can only result in the limits of power. . . . which is to say that every strategy of confrontation dreams of becoming a relationship of power and every relationship of power leans toward the idea that, if it follows its own line of development and comes up against direct confrontation, it may become the winning strategy” (p. 225-6).

Once one determines to resist power, the action of resistance itself becomes another form of power. For instance, in the garden, Alice argues with the Queen of Hearts that executing people without reason is ridiculous and the Queen becomes speechless because she knows Alice is right (p. 64). In a sense, Alice uses the power of language to resist the power of the Queen successfully. Resistance is important in power relations because the confrontations among people are regarded as struggles for power. In history, one can notice a rule that when the power of a group develops to a degree, it would always encounter oppositional powers. Foucault (1987) argues that a power relation which could not be reversed should be called dominance instead of power (p. 129).

Power leads to corruption easily if it encounters no resistance. No matter how difficult or dangerous the situation is, a person with free will should not underestimate her influence on other people. Express one’s thoughts faithfully in the face of power agents, as Foucault (2001) suggests in the *Fearless Speech*, helps them to improve themselves (p. 20). In this case, language is more powerful than one can imagine. It is not only a tool for communication, but also a means to criticize, protest and overthrow those in power. This is what Wonderland experiences try to reveal to Alice.

### **Power of Language and Language Games**

According to Wittgenstein (1968), the meaning of language lies in its use. People use language to express and organize what they think and feel to others, and most importantly, what they want from others. Language is the most important tool for influencing others. Consequently, humans have developed a much elaborated mannerism in language. Playing these language games is one of the most important tasks one must learn as one grew up.

Before one says anything, one should be aware of the power of the word first. The word can be used to manipulate other people. But it is also an instrument of resisting unjust power. One must know how to express oneself effectively, or one may not only fail to achieve intended effects, but also allowing others to have power on oneself. According to Kemp’s (2009) “Rethinking Philosophy: The Power of the Word,” language can bring benefits if it is used carefully or destructions if used carelessly without realizing its power (p.30). In Wonderland, Alice must learn the language games those creatures play on her in order to manipulate or intimidate her.

In different contexts, the power and the function of language vary. Both the speaker and the listener should be able to understand each other, or the conversation is self-annihilating. The language comprehension is what Wittgenstein (1968) calls language game in *Philosophical Investigations*, which refers to the rules or the common understanding of a language on grammar, meaning and referent that make a statement sensible. Children learn to talk through language game by connecting the word with the referent into something meaningful. Through the interactions with adults, they learn how to express and to react with words gradually. In language game, one has to guess and connect the words and the referents, and finally figures out their usages as well as implied meanings through continuous reexaminations with others. If both speakers play by the same rules, the game may work well. If not, they have to correct their rules again and again until they have reached common understandings. As Wittgenstein (1968) describes, “If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments” (p. 88e).

For example, in Wonderland, the Hatter’s time frizzes at the moment when the Queen accuses him for “murdering the time” at the concert (*AW*, 1992, p. 58). According to the note of Gardener (2000) in *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*, “murdering the time” refers to “mangling the song’s meter” (p. 76). The misunderstanding between the Queen and the Hatter comes from the gap in language comprehension: the Queen is referring the words to the measure of music; while the Hatter is showing his understanding as the personalized Time. This is an unsuccessful language act because the Queen and the Hatter have different understanding of the referent. The Hatter does not know the language game played by the Queen but takes the surface meaning.

The language game is the base of language. All language in the form of speech, written words, or signs must denote meaning that is public to its users. Yet, the expressing of one’s thoughts may not be always straightforward. Even worse, language is often used to deceive one’s intention. That is to say, a player may play with different rules, overtones and knowledge in order to take advantage of the other. In that case, language is a means to hide one’s true meaning and block understanding. It serves a social function to achieve a social goal, such as to please, flatter or threaten the interlockers.

The first and the most obvious language game in Wonderland is violation of the rules of games in order to gain advantages over adversaries. For example, the Dormouse plays *shiritori* that every word begins with the letter M:

“They were learning to draw,” the Dormouse went on . . . “and they drew all manner of things—everything that begins with an M—“

“Why with an M?” said Alice.

“Why not?” said the March Hare.

Alice was silent.

The Dormouse . . . went on: “—that begins with an M, such as mouse-traps, and the moon, and memory, and muchness—you know you say things are ‘much of a muchness’—did you ever see such a thing as a drawing of a muchness?” (p. 60)

The Dormouse clearly violates the rules set by himself because “muchness” is not a concrete term like mouse-traps and moon. Rather, muchness is a noun describing two

things are very similar or almost the same. In a sense, the Dormouse cheats to complete the game.

The second language game is the knowledge game. In Wonderland, the one with more knowledge and higher social position has more power to speak. For example, the Caterpillar keeps pushing Alice to answer his question about her identity. This Socratic way of asking questions continuously exemplifies knowledge power in language. The Caterpillar might intend to help Alice in searching for her identity and subjectivity. Instead, he makes the poor girl seeking for his advices on being aware of her own ignorance. One is putting himself under the power of the helper when seeking for the help, unless one filters the information carefully, skeptically and logically. This is because the helper can decide whether to give a hand or to kick the person when he provides false information. Skepticism enables people to think deliberately on those seemingly common and right conventions which are created by the power institutions as a method of control. Thus people may gain wisdom from resisting and questioning their superiors. This is the essence of the power of knowledge in language.

A third kind of language game is implied meanings. Language has implied unspoken meaning. For example, as Alice approaches the big table, March Hare and Hatter cries out there is no room for her to sit. To Alice, this statement is not true because there is plenty of room at the table. So she sits down in one of the chairs. To counteract Alice's unwelcome behavior, the March Hare tries to intimidate her by offering some wine that doesn't exist on the table, giving a hint that she is not welcomed. He says to Alice:

“Have some wine,” the March Hare said in an encouraging tone.  
Alice looked all round the table but there was nothing on it but tea. “I don't see any wine,” she remarked.  
“There isn't any,” said the March Hare.  
“Then it wasn't very civil of you to offer it,” said Alice angrily.  
“*It wasn't civil; of you to sit down without being invited,*” said the March Hare.  
(p. 80; emphasis added)

As a game of implication plays on Alice, apparently it is foolish to offer something which does not exist. However, the Much Hare is trying to give Alice a lesson in a humiliating way that she should not appear in the tea party just like the wine. He technologically points out that Alice's behavior is impolite. His expression at the very beginning of the conversation is difficult and obscure for a young child without full understanding of the power of language. When its intended message failed to achieve the effect, the March Hare is forced to reveal the implied meaning in the end: Alice is not welcomed to the party. The girl then learns from the March Hare that a seemingly nonsensical utterance may imply double meanings. Later, she applies this technique on the Duchess, who talks endlessly and dogmatically. Impatient with the Duchess' moral lessons, Alice politely hints: “I think I should understand that better . . . if I had it written down: but I can't quite follow it as you say it” (p. 72). Just like the March Hare who offers some invisible wine as a sign of hostility, Alice also conveys her impatience under the disguise of praising the Duchess as so knowledgeable that she understands not a single word.

In the above example, the Duchess is playing a game of knowledge to show her friendliness to Alice. But the Duchess' authoritative talks only reveal the imbalance of

power between them. On the one hand, the Duchess is smug continuously about her limited knowledge. On the other hand, she is making every endeavor to trap Alice to agree with what she said. So the Duchess' friendly gestures are only a disguise. Her real intention is to have power over Alice, which is symbolized by poking the girl's shoulder with her sharp chin (p. 70). Fortunately, the girl senses the hidden meaning and asks the Duchess to stop bothering her by claiming that she has the right to think independently (p. 72). This is a great improvement to Alice for she has learned to counteract the unwanted power by language.

In conversation, a seemingly nonsense utterance might be quite meaningful. Nonsense sounds meaningless because the message receiver fails to understand its intended meaning because it is beyond the logic he knows. Speaking nonsense suggests one refuses to follow the rules of conversation. In her article "The Language of Nonsense in Alice," Flesher (1969) regards nonsense has structure, and a talking with orders cannot be nonsense entirely. She describes the rules of the nonsense language game as follows:

Nonsense bears the stamp of paradox. The two terms of the paradox are order and disorder. Order is generally created by language, disorder by reference...The backbone of nonsense must be a consciously regulated pattern... It is the existent or implicit order which distinguishes nonsense from the absurd. It is the departure from this order which distinguishes nonsense from sense. (p. 128)

Nonsense is not meaningless anymore if what is communicated in the nonsense has its order of structure.

In *AW*, nonsense is often used as a form of implication. For instance, it is logical if the March Hare asks Alice to have some wine and does offer it. In contrast, it is nonsense if the March Hare offers some wine that does not exist on the table. In the first example, the implication of the language ("having some wine") matches well with the referent (offering some wine) that the March Hare is going to provide to Alice. The second example is in disorder and is nonsensical because the referent and the language do not match. How can one offer something that does not exist? No wonder Alice thinks the statement is ridiculous. On the contrary, it is sensible if the March Hare is suggesting Alice to leave the party. Nonsense is a game of the inconsistency played on spoken words. It is created by imposing an inconsistency between referent and language. These functions of nonsense work as using one's knowledge through words with an intention to achieve certain effects. They are parts of the power of words. According to Flesher (1969), nonsense has three functions in conversation: playing puns, undercutting topics and satire (p. 139-41).

Pun is a play of homonym or similar sounds on words that have more than one meaning to satirize or being humorous. For example, "Shakespeare *shakes beer*," is a joke about the name of a great writer. In *AW*, the Gryphon calls the Old Turtle in the sea school as "Tortoise," which is a kind a turtle lives on land rather than in the sea. As the Gryphon explains, the nickname is a play of words for it sounds like "taught us" (p. 75). Bu it also implies that the old torte is not a right teacher for the sea turtles.

To avoid answering something offending or awkward, people would shift the focus of the conversation by changing the topic. When Alice asks those creatures something difficult to answer, they either cut the topic by saying something unrelated or blaming

the girl as rude or ignorant. For example, the March Hare offers tea and the Hatter asks for changing seats with Alice in order to stop Alice from questioning the Dormouse's story of three little sisters drawing treacle in a wall (p. 59). To them, Alice's challenge of their knowledge and authority is unwelcome.

When nonsense is used to satirize, it is a different language game with different rules and objectives. It attacks or criticizes a subject by derogation and ridicule. In the case of satire, the author warns Alice the danger of false education through playing the puns of the school subjects in a humorous way. He expects the girl to figure out the ways to play the word games in order to protect herself from being fooled or bullied by other people. For instance, the Mock Turtle said in the sea school, he has learned *the three Rs*, which refer to Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. Yet, the *three Rs* here refer to Reeling (a pun of Reading), Writhe (Writing) and branches of Arithmetic, including Distraction (Subtraction) and Derision (Division) (p. 76). These puns are not only funny but quite meaningful because these *three Rs* are impossible for turtles to learn. It is ridiculous for turtles to learn Reeling for they have hard shells and cannot wind in a circle like eels. Even worse, in the sea school, they teach Distraction, not listening carefully; and Derision, scorning someone as stupid and useless. Here, some of the reasons for children to hate school are implied: the subjects are not interesting and the stress of school bullying. The false education and unfriendly environment make a real turtle becomes a mock turtle. This dialogue is a satire to the education in the real world that students are not taught in accordance with their aptitudes.

### **Alice's Learning to Use Language to Resist Power**

Language has power. It is human's most important means to influence others. The powers that come from physicality, gender and so on are difficult to revolt. The power of language, instead, is penetrating and does not discriminate against different people. Yet, a seven-year-old girl does not fully appreciate the power of language. Thus, it is necessary for her to learn to appreciate and apply the power of language. The Mouse is the first Wonderland creature who talks to Alice. He is frightened constantly by Alice because she always leads the conversation to how her pet cat, Dinah, and a neighbor's dog are good at hunting mice (p. 18-9). By simply mentioning the name of a mouse's natural enemy, the girl has coercive power over the Mouse and some of the other creatures for these names threaten them effectively. This is because the words of cat and dog are symbols of dangerous animals which may hunt the Wonderland creatures as preys because they are mostly mice and birds.

Alice sadly notices all of the creatures run away out of fear whenever cats and dogs are mentioned. Though this is the first time she has triumphed over those creatures. Alice feels sorry for scaring them again and again. In fact, she does not fully sense the power of words through the whole journey. The closest moment for her to be aware of the power of words happens when she is arguing with the King and Queen on the court. Out of the spirit of just, Alice demands the royal couple to provide logical statements, concrete evidences and following the judicial procedures before making sentences. These behaviors show she has finally grasped some of the rules of language games demonstrated by Wonderland creatures. Alice's leaning of playing the games of language are described as follows:

First, to express oneself is one thing, but to speak clearly and logically is another. A person will not be regarded as knowledgeable if he or she cannot express thoughts

properly. The Cheshire-Cat is one of the friendliest Wonderland creatures who plays the question game with Alice and teaches her the way to ask right questions in order to get the information she wants:

“Come, it’s pleased so far,” thought Alice, and she went on. “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get *somewhere*,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

Alice felt that this could not be denied, so she tried another question. “What sort of people live about here?” (p. 51; emphasized in origin).

In this conversation, Alice is expecting the Cheshire-Cat to provide information about those who live on the forked roads. Yet, the questions come out from her mouth meant totally different. It sounds like she is requesting the Cheshire-Cat to make a decision for her. Sometimes, people talk without much thinking; therefore, the meaning of an utterance becomes obscure. In this case, the message receiver would not understand or may misinterpret what the speaker means. Many arguments and misunderstandings come from carelessness in language expression. With the help of the Cheshire-Cat, Alice figures out the question she really wants to ask and the way to express it properly. The ability to talk clearly is an important developmental task for a human. It becomes an important tool in Alice’s debate with the King and Queen in the later part of her adventure.

The other greatest learning of Alice is logical deduction. The Wonderland creatures make many illogical mistakes in speech though they are fond of flaunting or abusing their knowledge and positional power at the same time. Their illogical arguments give the girl opportunities to retort and question their power and authority by language. Alice has learned a great deal intellectually in the adventure: she becomes skillful and confident in using the power she possesses to influence others. The following passage is the evidence that she not only knows how to exercise power through language but also through logic:

At this moment the King, who had been for some time busily writing in his note-book, cackled out “Silence!” and read out from his book, “Rule Forty-two. *All persons more than a mile high to leave the court*”. . . .

“Well, I shan’t go, at any rate,” said Alice: “besides, that’s not a regular rule: you invented it just now.”

“It’s the oldest rule in the book,” said the King.

“Then it ought to be Number One,” said Alice.

The King turned pale, and shut his note-book hastily. (p. 93-4; emphasized in origin)

Abusing the institutional power, the King attempts to drive Alice away from the court by inventing a limit of height. Of course the smart girl would not be bluffed by it. She immediately points out that the rule is not reasonable and not applicable to her logically. The rule should not be the forty-second one if it is really the oldest rule as the King claims. This argument shocks the King, and he becomes quite nervous since then. This is a great accomplishment of Alice for she has become a person who knows how to use the power of language in protecting herself and to fight for just treatments.

This is probably what the author of *AW* expects young Alice to learn through the adventure. Instead of accepting unjust treatments silently, one should protest by the rules of logic. Communication works only if one's thoughts are expressed clearly and logically. The power-holder has the burden to respond to a logical protest.

Last, through her experience in Wonderland, Alice learns that the resistance of power not only requires courage but also actions. Once a person stands up, his words and actions will arouse a series of chain effects such as mustering more people with the same opinions. The reason of resistance comes from the incongruity between the observed situation and one's reason and subjective feelings. When the doubt of power reaches a point, a feeling of the need to change occurs. Children maybe physically at a disadvantage; however, their knowledge and language are not restricted by it. This idea is clearly exemplified in the following dialogue:

“No, no!” said the Queen. “Sentence first—verdict afterwards.”  
“Stuff and nonsense!” said Alice loudly. “The idea of having the sentence first!”  
“Hold your tongue!” said the Queen, turning purple.  
“I won’t!” said Alice.  
“Off with her head!” the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved. (p. 96-7)

Through the use of truthful language, Alice attempts to stop the Queen from abusing power by clearly pointing out the Queen's words are nonsense. It is illogical to punish a person first and then examine the evidence. From here, one can observe that the experiences of interacting with Wonderland creatures have great influence on Alice. She gradually learns to resist power by using the power of language and knowledge. Perhaps she may not fully understand what she has accomplished in the court in Wonderland, Alice is expected to stand up and speak for herself ever since.

## **Conclusion**

In order to demonstrate to young Alice the ways power works, the author of *AW* guides her to play language games with the Wonderland creatures. Language has power. Every word says or writes by a person denotes meanings such as intentions or implications. Language is a game because the listener and speaker have to figure out the rules of the game by interpreting, connecting meanings and organizing their thoughts in conversations. In Wonderland and in reality, a person cannot express oneself well is relatively powerless to those with better language skills and higher social positions. One's physicality and social position may be in disadvantage to others, yet the mind of the person is free and here language serves as a tool to express it, either in spoken or written forms. Through these games, Alice is expected to realize that language is a kind of action that may change the state of the world and counteract the imbalance of power. Her courage in debating with the King and Queen of Hearts on the issue of juridical justice proves language is a powerful means to stop those power-holders from abusing institutional power.

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