

The Effect of Sound on Children's Imagination in *The Nursery "Alice"*

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Introduction

The Nursery "Alice" (1890) is a retold book based on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll (1832-98), and it was adapted for children aged "from nought to five" by the author himself (Preface). Whereas *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has novel style texts and twelve chapters, *The Nursery "Alice"* has fourteen chapters of unique texts in which Carroll narrates as if he talks to infant readers. The twenty illustrations of *The Nursery "Alice"* coloured by John Tenniel (1820-1914), who made forty-two original white and black illustrations of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.¹

One of the characteristics of *The Nursery "Alice"* is that it has only one song. The original book has eleven poems, and many of these poems were created and parodied by Carroll. Representative of his poems are "All in the golden afternoon" (6) at the opening of the book, and "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Bat" (92) which is a parody of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." We can see his talent as a poet through these. In *The Nursery "Alice,"* on the other hand, there is no parodied poem like these, and we can see that only one poem, "The Queen of Hearts," was taken from nursery rhymes known as Mother Goose.

Why is there no poem by Carroll in *The Nursery "Alice"*?

Yasunari Takahashi says that Carroll omitted difficult words, nonsensical wordplay, and parody poems in *The Nursery "Alice"* for children (104). As He explains, he made this book very easy for children to read, and these are different points from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Izumi Yasui asserts that children aged from nought to five cannot understand the story of Alice (112). On the other hand, he also says that coloured illustrations and Carroll's narrative style are entertaining (119). Hiroko Sasada states that Carroll's narrative please children, but in fact many riddles remain unexplained, and this is a very important factor for making a fantasy book (26). Like Yasui, Sasada interprets that Carroll simplified the story of Alice as much as possible in *The Nursery "Alice,"* and made the text easy to read for children, even if they cannot understand the story. It is not clear how Carroll tried to attract children and make them imagine the scene. Martin Gardner says that verses are hidden in the prose in Carroll's letter to children (171). The sound which Carroll used to speak to the children is one

¹ The front and back covers were painted by not Tenniel but Emily Gertrude Thomson (1850-1929), a woman illustrator.

of his techniques to entertain them. However, since no songs are found except for “The Queen of Hearts,” nobody would think that there is anything interesting about the sounds in this book. In this essay, I will analyse sounds, rhymes, and rhythms in the text of *The Nursery “Alice,”* because these poetic elements have not been studied, though his poems in the original book have been examined many times. Moreover, I will also examine how these elements attract children and stimulate their imagination.

1. The Use of [p]

In Chapter I, Carroll describes in detail the physical characteristics and clothing of the white rabbit:

Hasn't it [the White Rabbit] got **pretty pink** eyes (I think all White Rabbits have **pink** eyes); and **pink** ears; and a nice **brown** coat; and you can just see its red **pocket-handkerchief peeping** out of its coat-**pocket**: and, what with its **blue** neck-tie and its yellow waistcoat, it really is *very* nicely dressed. (*The Nursery “Alice”* 2)

Another feature here is the voiceless bilabial plosive [p]. Words containing [p] are “pretty,” “pink,” “pocket,” and “peeping.” The sound of [p] is repeated eight times, and the sound of [b] is repeated three times. Therefore, a total of eleven plosives are used.

In Chapter 1 of the original book, the appearance of the White Rabbit is explained as below:

[. . .] when suddenly a White Rabbit with **pink** eyes ran close by her. (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* 9)

[. . .] **but** when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket*, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never **before** seen a **rabbit** with either a waistcoat-**pocket**, or a watch to take out of it, and **burning** with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it **pop down** a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

(*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* 10)

We can see that there are 12 bilabial plosives in total. If we look only at the total number, plosives in this book are fewer than in the original. However, since Carroll shortened the sentences to explain the appearance of the White Rabbit to children, percentage of plosives in this book is higher than in the original, as shown in the figure below (Figure).

Figure: The number of plosives, words in sentences and percentages of plosives

	The number of [p]	The number of [b]	The total number of plosives	The number of words in sentences	Percentages of plosives
<i>The Nursery "Alice"</i>	8 times	3 times	11 times	51 words	21.5%
<i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i>	5 times	7 times	12 times	81 words	15%

In *The Nursery "Alice,"* the word of "pretty" can be rephrased "cute" and "lovely." Also, "peep out" can be replaced "through out" and "from." We can guess that Carroll uses [p] a lot, intentionally choosing "pretty" and "peep," in addition to the use of "pink" three times. These words represent the characteristics and behaviours of the White Rabbit. Why are plosives repeated, especially [p]? Onso System Institute illustrates that [p] gives a masculine, dynamic or active image. Furthermore, Sanae Terashima explains that the White Rabbit's attire is a nineteenth century dandy fashion (66). Thus, [p] in *The Nursery "Alice,"* gives the reader the impression that the rabbit is a middle-class man.

Also, in the scene where the white rabbit goes down the rabbit hole, Alice chases after him:

And so, when the White Rabbit ran away, Alice wanted to see what would happen to it: so she ran after it: and she ran, and she ran, till she tumbled right down the rabbit-hole. (*The Nursery "Alice"* 3)

Unlike the original book which contains [p] in "it pop down" this phrase is not used in *The Nursery "Alice,"* so readers can imagine that the White Rabbit is just running. Instead of that, Carroll describes the activity of the White Rabbit by using [p]. As a result, the sentence containing [p] not only gives a strong impression of the White Rabbit, but also makes the reader imagine its activity, from Alice's point of view.

2. Rhymes and Rhythms

In addition to the sounds of consonants, we need to examine some phrases in poems which use not only repeated sounds but also rhythms.

In Chapter VI, Alice's body is growing in the house of the White Rabbit as below:

She [Alice] grew, and she grew, and she grew. And in a very short time the room was full of *Alice*: just in the same way as a jar is full of jam! There was *Alice* all the way

up to the ceiling: and *Alice* in every corner of the room! (*The Nursery "Alice"* 19)

The underline words “just,” “jar,” and “jam” have “j” at the beginning the word, which make up a phrase. The “j” sound is called the voiced post-alveolar affricate and written [d͡ʒ], in International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). There is no result of clear research on the acoustics of [d͡ʒ], so it is difficult to say exactly what [d͡ʒ] is supposed to make the readers imagine. What is unique about this phrase is that the words of “jar” and “jam” are used and that these are routinely placed on the table. It is assumed that Carroll tried to convey Alice’s situation as much as possible, by choosing words which infant readers would know, but “just” is not a necessary word. Therefore, it is natural to assume that Carroll placed “just” as the first word in the phrase in order to lyrically describe “jar” and “jam.”

Also, this phrase is made up of rhythms that all consist of one syllable. The rhythms are created when stressed and non-stressed words are placed alternately:

Júst in the / sáme way as / a **j**ár is fúll of **j**ám

All the words containing [d͡ʒ] are stressed content words. In addition, both “same” and “jam” have consonant [m]. In contrast, “in,” “is” and “as” are unstressed function words. Therefore, this phrase is rhythmic.

In Chapter 4 of the original book, the following description about growing Alice is given in the White Rabbit’s house:

Alas! it was too late to wish that! She [Alice] went on growing, and growing, and very soon had to kneel down on the floor: in another minute there was not even room for this, and she tried the effect of lying down with one elbow against the door, and the other arm curled round her head. Still she went on growing, and, as a last resource, she put one arm out of the window, and one foot up the chimney, and said to herself “Now I can do no more, whatever happens. What *will* become of me?”

(*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* 43)

Also, an illustration of Alice growing bigger is drawn so that readers easily identify her. On the other hand, Chapter VI of *The Nursery "Alice"* has fewer sentences than the original and no illustrations describing Alice’s situation, but it has lyrical phrases containing “jar” and “jam.” These show that Carroll tried to entertain his readers by using the words they know, not only to make them imagine an enlarged Alice, but also to read and hear poetic phrases.

3. Adjective Phrase Containing [s]

Lastly, we will examine a phrase containing the voiceless alveolar fricative [s] to see how it implies silence. We should note that the third person singular present of “she” is

frequently used when Carroll describes Alice, and that the same pronoun tends to be repeated in short sentences. In sentences with many words beginning with [s], therefore, Carroll did not necessarily try to use its sound property. However, there are sentences in which he used it effectively.

In Chapter VIII, the Cheshire Cat in the Duchess' house is described as below:

But I'm nearly sure you've *never* seen a nicer *Cat*! Now *have* you? And *wouldn't* you like to have a Cat of your own, just like that one, with lovely green eyes, and smiling so sweetly? (*The Nursery "Alice"* 30)

Words such as "sure," "seen," "smiling," "so," and "sweetly" have [s] at the beginning each word, and among them, an adjective phrase "smiling so sweetly" fully takes advantage of the effect of the sound. When Alice visits the Duchess who is nursing the Baby, the only animal which was present there is the Cheshire Cat. Then the Baby turns into the Pig in the second half of the Chapter VIII. Carroll describes the crying baby and the pig as "The Baby was howling. [. . .] The Baby kept grunting, and grunting" (*The Nursery "Alice"* 30-1), and "howling" and "grunting" are onomatopoeias. In contrast, the Cat does not utter anything so that any onomatopoeia is not used, and its face is described as "The Cat—it was a Cheshire Cat—was grinning, as Cheshire Cats always do" (*The Nursery "Alice"* 30). "grinning" is a mimetic word. Such mimetic and onomatopoeic words can also be found in the original book. What is interest about this phrase is the use of the word of "smiling," and the alliteration of the words "so" and "sweetly."

Furthermore, the phrase is composed of a rhythm which created by the alternation of stressed and non-stressed words:

and smíling / so swéetly

In Chapter 6 of the original book, the scene where the Cheshire Cat appears at the first time is explained as below:

The only things in the kitchen that did *not* sneeze, were the cook, and a large cat which was sitting on the hearth and grinning from ear to ear.

[. . .] "I [Alice] didn't know that Cheshire cats always grinned; in fact, I didn't know that cats *could grin*."

"They all can," said the Duchess; "and most of 'em do." (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* 75)

Alice is talking with the Duchess about the Cat's grinning, but there is no rhythmical phrase containing alliteration. Also, the word of "smiling" is not found in the original, and it is used only in *The Nursery "Alice."* Therefore, it is clear that Carroll intentionally chose "smiling"

instead of “grinning” in order to take advantage of the phonetic value of [s].

In poetic phrases, the sound of [s] may imply silence. In Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, there is a song in which the alliteration of [s] is used three times in one line:

“Creep in our ears; soft stillness and the night

Become the touches of sweet harmony.” (*The Merchant of Venice* Act 5 Scene 1 185)

These lines mean that how the silence of the night makes the music sound better, and how silence is paired with sound. Also, the word of “sweet” adds “silence” to a favourable impression, and the same association of [s] sound and silence is found “and smiling so sweetly” in *The Nursery “Alice.”* Carroll says, “I’m nearly sure you’ve *never* seen a nicer Cat!” as if the Cheshire Cat is a favourable character. Therefore, at least in Chapter VIII, “smiling” adds the Cat a positive image.

On the other hand, Sonali Khemka states that “the repetition of the ‘s’ sound often suggests a snake-like quality, implying slyness and danger.” In Chapter IX of *The Nursery “Alice,”* the Cheshire Cat repeatedly appears and disappears, and it gets Alice frustrated. In this scene, “smile” is not seen, and “grin” is used three times in order to emphasising its eeriness. In the original book, the Cat tells Alice the way to visit the Mad Hatter and the March Hare, and says, “they’re both mad. [. . .] we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad” (82). Terashima argues that the word “mad” refers to the victims of mental illness and mercury poisoning in the British nineteenth-century society (40). The Cat is the symbol of danger in the original, but “mad” is rarely used in Chapter IX of *The Nursery “Alice”* and described as “they’re both mad!” (35). Carroll does not write that the Cat and Alice are mad, and that danger is the unexplained part in this book, which the reader may sense with [s], in addition to “grin.” As a result, the phrase of “smiling so sweetly” is not only made up of rhythms and gives an impression of the Cat’s silence, but also might make the readers feel its hidden danger.

Conclusion

The Nursery “Alice” has attracted attention only for its colourful illustrations and Carroll’s narrative techniques, but we see that even in a simple text for young children phrases are created by sounds, rhymes, and rhythms. This phonetic aspect which helps young readers to imagine scenes is one of the characteristics of this book and not found in the original. It is often said that Alice’s story is too difficult to understand for children. However, Carroll’s techniques have made this book readable. This book is a delight for children who can imagine the scene with the sound effects, pronouncing and hearing them. These Carroll’s sound techniques of will give children the pleasure of reading and motivate them to read. Children’s

reading experience begins with their mother reading a book to them.² While they listen to their mother repeatedly, they strive to understand the story, develop a sense of poetic sentiment and imagination, and learn to enjoy reading books. Then they start to read poems and novels. It is true that Carroll has no nonsense verse, but we should not assume that this book is simply a simplified version for children. The poetic phrases in this book indicate his talent as a writer of children's literature and the special charm of this book. In conclusion, *The Nursery "Alice"* is no less appealing than *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, whether we analyse it from an educational viewpoint or explore Carroll's techniques.

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² Carroll wrote the preface of this book as an address to mother who reading it to her children.

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