

METAMIND

International Research Arts Project

Daina Teters (Ed.)

Metamorphoses of the Mind

Latvian Academy of Culture

Proceedings of the
International Research Conference
“Metamorphoses of the Mind: Out of One’s Mind,
Losing One’s Mind, Lightmindedness, Mindlessness”

Organized by the Latvian Academy of Culture and Goethe Institut Riga
Riga, 21–23 September 2006

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ISBN: 978-9984-32-183-7

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Printed by: Riga Technical University
Bound by: “Atēna”

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Uncommon Nonsense: The Reflection of the Non-rational in Stylistic Use*

Anita Načisčione

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to have a closer look at the non-rational in the stylistic use of language. These cases are not logical fallacies, which violate the rules of logic and which are merely seen as errors in reasoning to be avoided in argumentation. My aim is to examine cognitive acts, which do not follow the canons of logic, but at the same time are seen as acts of creativity, challenging the neutral standard forms of language expression. The use of the non-rational streak for a stylistic effect has been a long-standing tradition in the English language, which is manifest in many types of British folk wisdom: riddles, shaggy-dog stories, limericks and others. The non-rational lies at the basis of the whole genre of English Children's Nonsense Literature, providing the inimitable flavour of a unique topsy-turvy world and creating uncommon nonsense. The skilful use of the non-rational is one of the subtleties of thinking in English. The tradition of the stylistic use of the non-rational is alive in English today, both in literary and media discourses, including such applied areas as advertising.

*Much madness is divinest Sense
To the discerning Eye...*

Emily Dickinson

1 Introduction

My concern is to give a brief insight into the reflection of the non-rational¹ in the stylistic use of English. These are cases of creative language use, which stretch our imagination beyond the confines of logic and common sense. This is a very broad phenomenon with variegated applications. Just as “satire cannot readily be assigned a single discourse function” (Simpson, 2003: 3), the stylistic use of the non-rational also serves many intents and purposes. The non-rational in thinking has diverse manifestations in stylistic use. Importantly, it is all steeped in creativity: the process of creation and re-creation.²

*I would like to thank Elena Semino and John McRae for useful comments on an earlier version of this article.

¹By the non-rational I understand thought representation that goes against the principles of non-contradiction in classical logic.

²For a thorough study of creativity, see Pope (2005).

When dealing with the non-rational in language in general and stylistic use in particular we need to bear in mind the findings of psycholinguistics and cognitive science: it is not actually a matter of language, it is a matter of human thought and cognitive motivation (Gibbs, 1999a: 103–109). Cognitive science reveals that language is not independent of the mind; it reflects people’s perceptual and conceptual understanding of experience (Gibbs, 1994: 434–447). It is clear that the non-rational in stylistic use is also thought-driven: it reflects the workings of the human mind. These cases of stylistic use may not look rational, but they are cognitively coherent: these changes are produced by a non-rational turn of thought. The use of the non-rational is not a modern or a postmodern phenomenon, it is ingrained in culture and has deep roots in the previous centuries.

2 From the Field of Folk Tradition

Different patterns of thinking, which are used in language, differ from country to country and my aim is to give a brief diachronic insight into the use of the non-rational as a pattern of language and thinking, which has existed in the English language throughout centuries. The use of the non-rational for a stylistic effect has been an age-long tradition: it is part of British cultural heritage. The non-rational is a common strand of popular wisdom; it is also part of the British mindset and their sense of humour.

For instance, shaggy-dog stories present the incredible and the improbable, no reason can believe them. Yet they are part of folk wit, creating a vision and revealing a keen sense of humour. They usually take the form of funny longwinded stories that are characterised by the absence of a rational setting and the presence of the logically impossible, though the dialogue seems perfectly rational. Here is a short one by way of an example:

Two horses are sitting in a tree and knitting. Several dogs come flying by. One horse says to the other,

“Have a look! It’s going to rain!”

“How do you know?” asks the other horse.

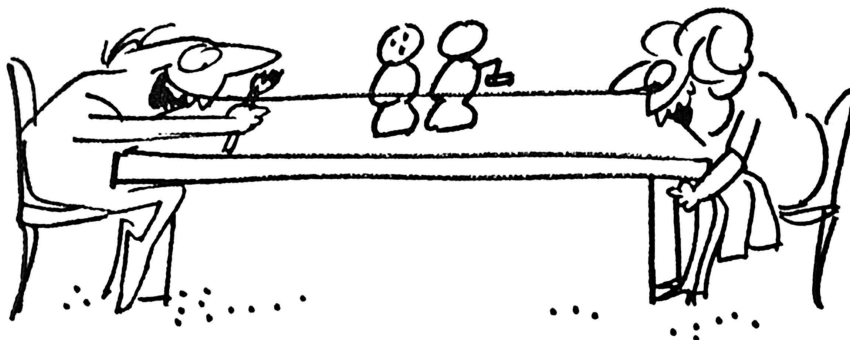
“The dogs are flying very low today!”

This is an improbable story, but at the same time it reflects a piece of common folk judgement: birds fly low when rain or a storm is approaching, which is in keeping with the old adage, *Swallows fly low before a rain*.

Another distinctive part of British folk heritage is riddles as a manifestation of folk wisdom. They display a great variety, ingenuity, and wittiness. They can also boast an original stylistic application of language, especially lexical and phraseological puns, and a wealth of phonetic stylistic means, testifying to folk creativity. In teaching,

riddles turn out to be a useful tool for raising the stylistic awareness of language and appreciating language change. The non-rational streak is manifest in some types of the traditional English riddles³, which seem absurd:

- A. What kind of tables do people eat?
- B. Vegetables.



This riddle is based on English spelling, playing on the intricate relationship between spelling and pronunciation. Spelling is an important part of the English language instruction and acquisition from early stages on; spelling competitions, called spelling bees, are organised for all ages starting with junior forms.

Some of these riddles have a sinister tinge. You may feel a bit uncomfortable with the solution, e.g.:

- A. What does every drowning person say no matter what language he speaks?
- B. "Glub, glub!"
- A. How do you make a Venetian blind?
- B. Stick a finger in his eye.

Many modern jokes and riddles⁴ also display a kind of absurd humour, which is perceived as morbid by many people, showing a strong interest in such subjects as death. These jokes are often referred to as black humour⁵. Some of the modern riddles are obscene or macabre, often called mad or sick riddles⁶, as they may be cruel or so unpleasant that they may upset people, and indeed many people find them disturbing. The common expectations are defeated by an irrational turn, which produces a shocking effect. People notice logical deviations and anomalies because they attract and hold their attention (see Arutyunova, 1988: 298–314), e.g.:

³ Rosenbloom (1976a;b), for instance, offer examples of the most common types of English traditional riddles.

⁴See Chiaro (1996: 105–113) for more on the contents of modern jokes and riddles.

⁵For more on black humour see Alexander (1997: 126).

⁶One of the meanings of *sick* is morbid, unhealthy, unnaturally cruel in likings and humour, e.g. *a sick joke/mind*, see Rundell and Fox (2002: 1323).

- A. How do you make a dog go Miaow'?
- B. Dunno. How do you make a dog go Miaow'?
- A. Tie its tail to the back of Concorde and it goes Miaaaaow'.

This can certainly be classified as violence, especially in the framework of the modern ideas of animal welfare and animal rights. There are also some modern riddles, which sound perfectly criminal and one feels like putting the question, "How far is black humour allowed to go?" For instance:

- A. What's red and sticky and lies in a pram?
- B. That's horrible!
- A. A baby with a razor blade.

Many modern jokes present an absurd vision, revealing an unhealthy impossibility and necrophilic or cannibalistic desires, e.g.:

- A. Mummy, Mummy, can I play with Granddad?
- B. No, you've dug him up three times already this week.
- A. Mummy, Mummy, I don't like Daddy!
- B. Leave him on the side of your plate and eat vegetables.

The non-rational is widely represented in the famous limericks, which are another form of folk creativity in English. Limericks are part of English culture, they are jokes in the style of stories in verse form⁷. As a form of poetry, they go back to nursery rhymes, recorded in the fourteenth century and have been popular ever since. In limericks, it is not only rhyme and rhythm that are exploited for humorous ends. It is the contents, which are humorous, nutty, often bawdy, absurd, or even macabre, creating a sense of jocular irrationality:

There was a young lady of Riga,
Who smiled as she rode on a tiger;
They returned from a ride
With the lady inside
And the smile on the face of the tiger.

There was a young lady of Ryde,
Who ate some green apples and died;
The apples fermented
Inside the lamented,
And made cider inside her inside.

⁷See Chiaro (1996: 49–61) for more on the joke as a narrative form.

Interestingly, tombstones and headstones offer a vast field of research for the stylistician. Normally the text teems with euphemisms, including euphemistic metaphors, which are so commonplace that we fail to notice them, because it is the ordinary way to talk about death. Most of them lie within the framework of the basic conceptual metaphor DEATH IS DEPARTURE (see Lakoff and Turner, 1989: 1–11). Many of the older English tombstones⁸, however, beat the expectation of a soulful message; they demonstrate glorious incongruity between the seriousness of the situation and the absurd, nonsensical, or jocular text of the inscription, landing in the realm of the non-rational. The common euphemistically metaphorical way of conceiving death is broken; instead, we are facing the harsh reality, presented through the prism of black humour. How to explain the sadly unexpected, unreasonable wordings, which display chilling messages from the graveside? For instance, you see that the whole life of a man is put just in two words: THORPE'S CORPSE, or there is a family tombstone that gives no names of the deceased or the years of their demise, but invites you to wait till Doomsday: PARTICULARS THE LAST DAY WILL DISCLOSE, or the real surname of the man is changed on the headstone only because it would not rhyme with the rest of the inscription:

Here lie the remains of
 Thomas WOODH^{EN}
 The most aimiable of
 Husbands
 And excellent of men
His real name was Woodcock
*But it wouldn't come in Rhyme*⁹

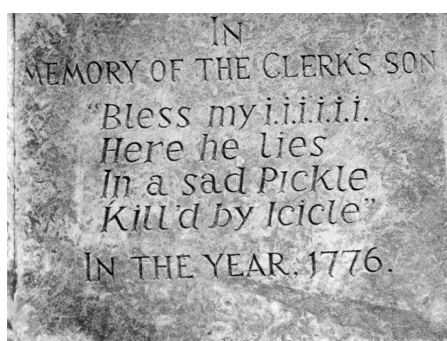
Some more examples of unexpected and bizarre tombstone inscriptions that are inexplicable if guided by logic or common sense: *Do not disturb! I'm Dead You're Not! I was somebody. Who, is no business of yours.* Or another one, which displays non-rational fascination with the morbid: *Mrs Derns, now being ate by worms*¹⁰. And all that instead of “Rest in Peace!” and the customary way of expressing pain and grief at the loss of someone who has been dear and near to you. Even the practical considerations are puzzling: why pay for the stone and the memorial mason's work? The irrationality of these haunting epitaphs is brought out by utter inappropriateness of the text, which fails to meet the expected standards of the sad occasion. Is the non-rational an antidote to grief and a way of fighting fear? Or is it seen as emotional rescue or an escape?

⁸Many English parish churches and churchyards are centuries old and they display headstones with inscriptions, which present various items of stylistic interest, see Bland (1979: 88–97).

⁹See a collection of English headstone inscriptions in Ross (2006: 130–146).

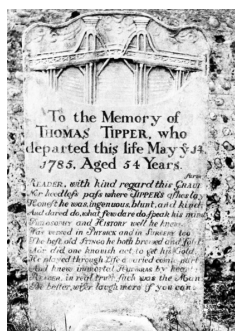
¹⁰For more unforgettable epitaphs in English churchyards, see The Wolfstone Group (2006).

The following is a memorial to a clerk's son who was killed by an icicle. It may be amusing only if you can ignore the demise of a young boy. If not, it is a poignant reminder of the fatal accident. On the other hand, it gives a revealing picture of how our ancestors lived, felt, and thought.



In
Memory of the Clerk's Son
"Bless my i.i.i.i.i.i.
Here he lies
In a sad Pickle¹¹
Kill'd by Icicle"
IN THE YEAR. 1776.
Memorial stone at Bampton, Devon

Is it the famous stiff upper lip that would go against open display of grief? Or is it a peculiar English understatement of restrained grief? The ability to laugh at oneself or look at things with detached amusement is a basic ability of the British, even in a grave situation. By nature they are a reserved people, and humour is their way of survival. They tend to make light of serious matters. As Jarski writes, "Our determination to treat serious matters trivially and trivial matters seriously is one tradition it would be tragic to lose" Jarski (2005: xvi).



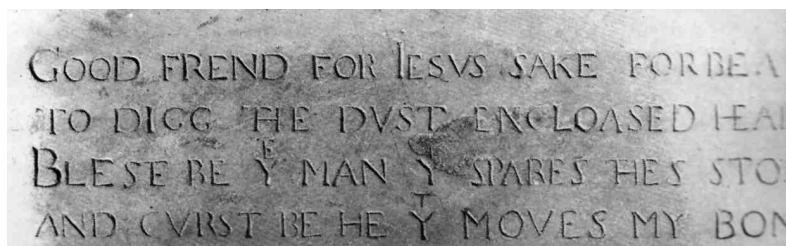
Another interesting headstone is dedicated to a remarkable man, Thomas Tipper, who was a brewer and at the same time was well "versed in Physick and Surgery", as well as Philosophy and History¹². His epitaph ends with the words, "Be better, wiser, laugh more if you can." Indeed, it is a very good piece of advice, which is obviously given to those who would read the inscription. It reveals the British propensity to make everything a subject of humour¹³.

Even Shakespeare's gravestone bears a doggerel verse, which is intended to be funny rather than serious. This epitaph is supposed to have been written by Shakespeare himself for his own gravestone, which you can find in the Holy Trinity Church at Stratford-on-Avon, where he lies buried in front of the altar:

¹¹In a pickle—(*informal, old-fashioned*) in a difficult situation, variants: in a pretty/full/sad pickle (Rundell and Fox, 2002: 1064).

¹²The pictures of these tombstones have been taken from Bland (1979).

¹³Haunting or non-rational epitaphs are not only a feature of some old tombstones. For instance, Bernard Manning, the Manchester City-supporting comedian had wished that the inscription on his tombstone should read: "I'd rather be here than Old Trafford" (*The Daily Telegraph*, June 25, 2007, p. 35). Old Trafford is a suburb of Manchester and the name of the football ground, which is the home of the football team, "Manchester United".



GOOD FREND, FOR JESUS SAKE FORBEARE
 TO DIGG THE DUST ENCLOSED HEARE
 BLESE BE THAT MAN THAT SPARES THES STONES
 AND CURST BE HE THAT MOVES MY BONES

3 Stylistic Patterns

The very system of stylistic patterns includes devices, which do not respect the logical principles of non-contradiction, and are intrinsically based on the absurdity of seemingly irreconcilable constituent elements, thus displaying logical incompatibilities, e.g., oxymora and paradoxes, which are widely used in English.

An oxymoron is a figure of speech that combines two seemingly contradictory elements (Gibbs, 1994: 394–397), e.g., *a wise fool*, *deafening silence*, *unfaithful faith*, *falsely true*, *cruel to be kind*, *orderly disorder*. In the system of language, an oxymoron may also appear in the base form of phraseological units¹⁴, e.g., *cold comfort*, *(as) clear as mud*, *friendly fire*. Contradiction is inherently part of oxymora as they infringe upon the law of non-contradiction, which is one of the basic principles of logic. However, in discourse, oxymora may be intentionally used for a fresh rhetorical effect. The contradiction is apparent, and the combination of words creates a novel expression of some concept. A classical example of the stylistic use of oxymora is Romeo's monologue about the gentleness and tyranny of love:

Why, then, O brawling love! O loving hate!
 O any thing, of nothing first create!
 O heavy lightness! serious vanity!
 Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeming forms!
Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health!

W. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1

Oxymora are used by the media to attract attention to some piece of news, e.g., the headline *Nostalgia nudges designers back to the future* (*Financial Times*, February 19,

¹⁴The phraseological unit is a stable, cohesive combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning. For my understanding of the basic terms in phraseology, see Naciscione (2001).

2007, p. 8) sums up fashion nostalgia for the old magic of the twenties, the seventies, or the eighties, plucking at the emotional fashion heartstrings of both the fashion designers and the viewers. Nostalgia plays an increasingly important part in the creative fashion process today. The use of an oxymoron in the headline embodies a stylistic irrationality: it provides a flashback and a flash-forward at the same time.

A paradox is a seemingly true statement that leads to a contradiction. Paradoxes seek to revise what we hold as our common sense by saying the opposite of what we really mean. They frequently follow the piece of advice given by Arden, “Whatever you think, think the opposite” (2006). As an apparently self-contradictory pattern it is sometimes called a kind of expanded oxymoron, in which antithesis is brought to the fore in an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, e.g., Orwell’s three slogans of the Party: *War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Truth* (G. Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four). The reader must probe beyond the literal meaning to find a deeper, usually more philosophical meaning, which will reconcile the apparent absurdity. Paradox is a trope that can be effectively exploited because of the initial puzzlement. It may also appear in riddles, e.g., *I devour words, yet I am not any wiser* (a bookworm) (see Wales, 2001: 282).

Wilde is seen as a master of paradox, which is part and parcel of his style. For instance:

I couldn’t help it. I can resist everything except temptation.

O. Wilde, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Act 1

A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies.

O. Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*

Paradox is one of the stylistic techniques to create a non-rational form of expression. The stylistic effect stems from a breach of traditional logical reasoning. The following is a case of re-creation: by way of the instantial stylistic use of the proverb, *Two is company, but three is none*, which is the result of the replacement of two base constituents:

In married life thre e **is company** and **two none**.¹⁵

O. Wilde, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Act 1

Apart from oxymora and paradoxes, malapropisms stand out as a special English stylistic technique, based on a logical blunder. Malapropisms also belong to the category of stylistic patterns, which are based on logical incongruities. A malapropism is a logical mistake in the choice of the right word or the term, usually due to a fallacy in thinking, exploited for a comic effect; thus, it is not a slip of the tongue, it is a slip of the mind, as language reflects thought, e.g., a *nice derangement of epitaphs* (i.e.,

¹⁵The PU is underlined, the elements of the base form are marked bold; the replaced elements are spaced.

arrangement); *I saw allegories on the bank of the Nile* (i.e., alligators); *What are you incinerating?* (i.e., insinuating); *people are cremated equal* (i.e., created); *this food contains conservatives* (i.e., preservatives). Such examples raise the same question that has been put by many authors in similar cases, “Does the unconscious work this way?”. The term ‘malapropism’ was coined in the early 19th century after a character of Sheridan’s play, *The Rivals* (1775), called Mrs Malaprop (Fr.: *mal à propos* ‘not to a purpose’), who comically used to mix up polysyllabic or Latinate words (Wales, 2001: 242–243). Actually the stylistic technique was already used before Sheridan, for instance, by Shakespeare.

4 English Children’s Nonsense Literature

The tradition of nonsense literature by no means starts with Lewis Carroll, it has deep roots in the English language tradition and writing (Benayoun, 1959). Many researchers have sought to discover the sense of nonsense, actually they have not really advanced much beyond the famous line pronounced by Polonius in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.

W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act II

English Children’s Nonsense Literature is a special type of fictional world, which features an actual world with both possible and impossible events. Logical impossibility is a conceivable form of an impossible world according to Ryan¹⁶. Thus, the creative



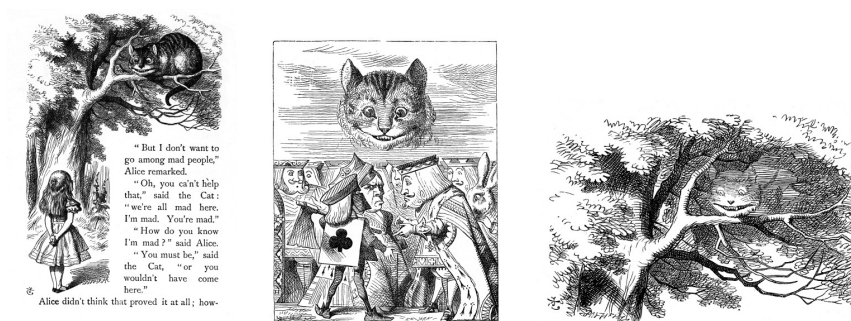
use of the non-rational plays an important part: it conjures up a fantasy world of logical impossibility, which is so appealing to both young readers and adults. This genre creates the inimitable flavour of a unique topsy-turvy world. For instance, in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* the Hatter and the March Hare¹⁷ are raving mad. Alice joins them at the Mad Tea Party with a sleepy Dormouse in-between them. The whole never-ending tea party is a stretch

¹⁶For possible worlds theory in literary studies and narrative theory, see Ryan (2006: 31–47); Ryan (1992: 536–538).

¹⁷Their names originate from the comparative phraseological units (*as*) *mad as a hatter* and (*as*) *mad as a March hare*, which are firmly established in the language tradition.

of irrationality. The March Hare offers Alice some wine, which is not there. The Hatter tells her that it is always six o'clock now and that's why it is always teatime and that's why there is no time to wash tea things up, and they usually move one seat up at the table if he wants a clean cup. The Dormouse tells them a story about a treacle well where three little sisters draw things, beginning with an M, including much of a muchness, which is a grammatical irrationality in itself.

The Cheshire Cat is a perfect picture of unexpected irrationality: it growls when it is pleased and wags its tail when it is angry. Its very grin is unfeline as is the habit of growling. It says, "You see a dog growls when it's angry, and wags its tail when it's pleased. Now *I* growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad." (Carroll, 1928a: 83). When the Cat vanishes, the grin lingers after it is gone.



Then there are the jurors who pass the sentence first and the verdict afterwards, let alone the Mock Turtle who suffers from deep sorrow that is all in his own fancy, which is all beyond reason and credibility, sounding like "uncommon nonsense" (Carroll, 1928a: 142), as Alice puts it.



Importantly, the non-rational drive creates new concepts and new words. Another striking example is Humpty Dumpty's idea of an un-birthday present. Irrationality goes together with non-conventional, creative use of words and attitude to language. Humpty Dumpty says, "When *I* use a word (...), it means just what I choose it to mean" (Carroll, 1928b: 114). Though this statement runs counter to the established way of linguistic thinking about words and their meaning, it serves the stylistic intention¹⁸ very well. It is purposeful as an act of creation (see Pope (2005)).

¹⁸For intentions see Gibbs (1999b), where he examines authorial intentions, their expressions and functions, and our interpretations of language.

5 Irrationality in Modern Literary and Media Discourses

The use of the non-rational for stylistic purposes is a tradition that is continued in Modern English today, reflecting a non-rational perception that is not commensurable with logic. It features both in literary and media discourses, including such areas of applied linguistics as teaching and advertising.

“The logically impossible is a salient feature in the fictional universe of many works in recent literature”, including postmodernist fiction (Ashline, 1995: 215). The literature of the absurd brings it to a head, liberating its world from the principle of non-contradiction (see Ryan (2006: 32)) and developing a trend away from the logical and towards the transgression of norms: norms of logic, norms of reason, norms of conventional language use at all levels, thus challenging the conventional way of writing.

Absurd writings reveal a conflict between the actual world and the private world of the character, which lies at the heart of the whole drama of the absurd. Broadly speaking, they deal with the subject of despair and the will to survive in spite of despair, in the face of an uncomprehending and, indeed, incomprehensible world, for instance, see *Waiting for Godot* by S. Beckett. His works, starting with his first novel and including his drama, display striking impossibilities not only in the flow of thoughts and emotions, but also in thought representation: the outcry of the soul is reflected in the outcry against the conventional use of language means (lexical, grammatical, graphical) resulting in a new type of stylistic use, which contributes to the stylistic features of the non-rational: an instinctive, subconscious flow of a disturbed and troubled consciousness, presented in superpessimistic tones and undertones, creating a perception of an unintelligible existence. These are the troubled waters of psyche where the rational just does not work, e.g.:

*so things may change no answer end no answer I may choke no answer
sink no answer sully the mud no more no answer the dark no answer trouble
the peace no more no answer the silence no answer die no answer DIE
screams I MAY DIE screams I SHALL DIE screams good*

*good good end at last of part three and last that's how it was end of quotation
after Pim how it is*

S. Beckett, *How It Is*

Beckett's instructions for his own gravestone in Paris are a perfect example of absurd logic: “Any colour, so long as it is grey!”

The theme of insanity is another manifestation of a disturbed and shattered mind, and non-rational thinking. It is a recurrent feature in many literary discourses of the 20th and 21st centuries, see, for instance, the portrayal of the characters' idiosyncratic mind styles in Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (see Semino and Swindlehurst (1996: 143–166)), or the disturbing account of Frederick Clegg's mental illness

in John Fowles's *The Collector*, which is an "implausible story of an insane lepidopterist who collects women without even wishing to touch them" (Semino, 2002: 112).

The tradition of the stylistic use of the non-rational is perfectly alive in the modern media discourses, cultivating inane practical jokes, best seen in English TV comedies and soap operas, for instance, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *Fawlty Towers*, *Only Fools and Horses*, *The Catherine Tate Show*: comedy sketches and many others, thriving on the belief that the best comedy is based on pain and cranky nonsensical jokes. The extensive use of black humour is fully accepted by both the audience and the authors. Hyperbolisation is carried to impossible and absurd lengths, up to a point where it makes no sense any more, e.g. the morbid idea of joking on themes of cancer.

Another interesting area is the remarkable use of the usual irrationalities in English etiquette, which may be bewildering or even provide insurmountable challenges for the uninitiated. However, it is not a major concern of this article. See Fox, who gives striking examples of "the irrational excesses of English politeness" (2005: 60) through the eyes of a social anthropologist.

As to the applied aspects of language use, it is interesting to note that the non-rational streak is also used in teaching materials and CDs. For instance, *The English Teaching Forum* has published recordings for English learners using shaggy dog stories (see Szynalski and Wojcik, 2006). One of these is an improbable story about an intelligent dog, which is endowed with impossible features and made almost human: he has watched a film, yet he likes the book much better. Some essential properties of the person have been carried over to the animal.

When exploring the stylistic effect of an advertisement, most studies focus on the interrelationship and interdependence of the visual and the verbal, on the use of specific stylistic patterns, for instance, visual puns, which play on the figurative and the literal meanings of words, or various unexpected ways of eye-catching graphic design. However, there are other types of creativity that may feature in the discourse of advertising. One of the means is the use of the non-rational to attract the attention of would-be clients and make the advertisement work to effect a sale.



In the following advertisement¹⁹ the picture displays the excellence of accommodation which has combined the features of a gorgeous villa and a five-star hotel while the text puts the question "IS IT A VILLA OR A HOTEL?" which complies with the form and contents of a traditional alternative question as seen by grammar.

¹⁹This advertisement is taken from *The Hilton's Executive World*, June 2006, p. 30.

However, the answer “Yes” is abrupt and unexpected, it is also written in block letters and it has been moved centre stage. Thus it is not only eye-catching, it is also mind-catching, as it contradicts the logical link, so firmly established in grammar: you choose one of the alternatives. Though it goes against the logic of grammar, the answer is philosophically possible as it incorporates both the alternatives. The seeming impossibility is solved; the client does not have to choose as this accommodation offers both. What is conceived as logically inconceivable becomes possible in stylistic use.

6 Conclusion

The expression of the non-rational in language is part of human cognitive processes: it is a mode of thought that serves as cognitive motivation for language change. The non-rational is one of the tools for projecting possible and impossible worlds. The creation of a non-rational instantiation is a mental representation in language. Though it is non-rational, there is always a cognitive explanation for it. It is clear that more cognitive research is needed to explore the role of cognitive motivation for the diversity of meaning expression, including the non-rational schemes of thought and the irrationality-driven language use, which in its turn calls for more extensive empirical research into various types of language material, including cross-cultural investigations. As cognitive processes link thinking and language, more insight is also welcome into the cognitive underpinnings of the stylistic use of the non-rational in the great variety of its specific applications in the process of creation and re-creation.

The stylistic use of the non-rational may differ greatly across languages²⁰. In each culture there is a different way of perception of the world and reasoning about personal experiences. When dealing with different types of English language material over centuries, it is easy to discern continuity in the stylistic use of the non-rational as a language and cultural phenomenon. It is deeply ingrained in British culture. Hence, the stylistic use of the non-rational may be viewed not only as a feature of style, but also as a tradition of the English language. These cases of use may not be unique to the English language, but the extent and the way of their use are distinctly English. “As a race, the British have one peculiarity that sets them apart from the rest of mankind: their extraordinary sense of humour; their ability to laugh at others, to laugh at the sublime and the ridiculous, to laugh at disaster and at triumph, to be indifferent to the subject of the joke but to seek and find humour in everything” (Took, 1976: 1). At the same time it is doubtless that more study is necessary to better understand a humorous conceptualisation of reality²¹, the link between humour and the cognitive aspects of

²⁰The stylistic use of the non-rational is a general linguistic phenomenon, which does not exclude cultural diversity and variations, e.g., most of the types of non-rational stylistic use described in this article are perfectly atypical of the Latvian language and the Latvian mindset. We need more insights into this phenomenon across languages.

²¹See (Gibbs, 1994: 359–397) on irony as a mode of the conceptualisation of reality.

language use, and the use of the non-rational for the purposes of humour.

I may draw a tentative conclusion that the non-rational in the stylistic use of English is part of the English language and way of thinking, and hence part of the people's heritage and a streak of their identity, it is characteristic of the mindset of Britishness. The acquisition of the cultural features and values conveyed by language also promotes awareness and appreciation of the non-rational as part of a language tradition, which is invaluable in both teaching and learning to enhance stylistic awareness and train the discerning eye.

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