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# Making sense of N/nonsense in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*, a Wittgensteinian perspective

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## Introduction

- 1 The issue of mapping parameters of meaning can be broached from two different angles and at different levels. In texts and discourse, parameters of meaning can be described as microlinguistic structures or as larger discursive units. My analysis focuses on textual meaning, which implies broadening parameters to encompass pragmatic criteria such as illocutionary intention, text-cohesion, situational context and inter-subjective relations.
- 2 They can also be tackled negatively, i.e. by examining parameters of the elaboration of nonsense. Understanding what opposes meaning to its opposite would then enable us to circumscribe it. The notion of limit is essential here, all the more so as it is often blurred and elusive: as we will see, it is often hard to establish a clear-cut distinction between sense and nonsense.
- 3 The theoretical framework for my analyses of meaning elaboration will be pragmatics, taking into account the notions of speech acts and Gricean cooperation. My starting point will be the so-called "early Wittgenstein" and his claim in the *Tractatus* that meaning can only be defined from the inside as 'what can be said'. It is impossible, for Wittgenstein, to try and define meaning from a meta-physical point of view, since we would then be outside of it, and we would not make sense. This leads him to his famous claim that 'what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' (§ 7). What strikes me in this logic is that it necessarily excludes nonsense precisely as what cannot be circumscribed and cannot be talked about. How then can we attempt a linguistic reflection and positive

configuration of the phenomenon itself, other than by dismissing nonsense as mere nonsense (whatever lies outside of the realm of sense)?

- 4 My aim here is to map out instances of what we usually call nonsensical discourse, by focusing on examples considered as both purposeful and positively creative, rather than mere failures of sense. Such instances show that nonsense can only be comprehended through its realization within a context of meaningful discourse. It thus reveals the elasticity of meaning as much as it exposes itself as one of its extreme variations. My corpus is therefore based on two novels by the Irish satirist Flann O'Brien (1906-1966): *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*. Making sense of nonsense is at the heart of both works, through a playful game of subversion of what we generally call "meaningful" and "nonsensical" discourses. O'Brien offers a philosophical reflection on language by depicting his characters' complex relationships to their specific languages, English and Gaelic Irish. His novels and chronicles describe diglossic angst and the constant hesitations of speakers who are never quite sure when they are making sense or talking nonsense. At the same time, O'Brien's comic writing makes use of language games and displays the exhilaration and poetic pleasure nonsense can create. Such games can be traced back to different literary traditions, including, but by no means limited to, Victorian Nonsense literature.
- 5 I will examine four examples in order to establish a gradation in nonsensical discourse; this gradation brings to light the limited pragmatic parameters at work in the process of elaborating and understanding meaning. It also reveals their essential deformability. Thus I wish to avoid reducing nonsense in literature to either a *cadavre-exquis* type of discourse, or to Jabberwocky Nonsense (where I believe the official, capitalized name has already led to limiting a very wide linguistic and literary phenomenon to a historically narrow genre).
- 6 Flann O'Brien often quoted and inserted dictionary definitions in his stories, the more to point out their faults and satirize what he regarded as their undeserved and tyrannical authority. It is only fitting, then, that we should start our inquiry in a typical Flann O'Brien fashion, with a dictionary.
- 7 The OED only defines "nonsense", simply and frustratingly, as "That which is not sense; absurd or meaningless words or ideas". We must therefore go back to the definition of "sense". According to the OED, sense consists of "meaningful symbols combined in a legitimate manner". Therefore, if we take it the other way round, nonsense must correspond to either symbols with no meaning content, or to symbols with legitimate meaningful content but arranged in a non-legitimate way. The following examples illustrate this definition:
  - (1) snarks are dangerous
  - (2) lion tiger stag
- 8 These are textbook-classic examples but do not satisfy me as typical cases of nonsense. The first one features a word (borrowed from Lewis Carroll's poem "The Hunting of the Snark") whose reference is unknown but still highly evocative of meaning because it belongs to a known grammatical category (discrete noun). Also, because of its close resemblance to other meaningful words such as 'shark' 'lark' and 'snake', the overall effect of the sentence does not strike us as nonsensical, but rather, as fictional. The second example (originally coined by Chomsky; quoted in Carruthers 1992) is clearly non-grammatical, but how is the listener to know, without any context, whether this is a case of infelicitous meaningful intention on the part of the speaker, or the result of a genuine

endeavour to “talk nonsense”? This in turn raises the question: can we relevantly talk of strict parameters of meaning? If there is such a thing as utter nonsense then we cannot possibly conceptualize it. My premise is that pure nonsense lies outside the realm of analysis – simply because the very fact of analysis requires minimal sense in the object of study. Or to put it in terms of possible worlds, pure nonsense would not fit in any possible world and therefore cannot be grasped by our understanding.

- 9 My aim is to examine nonsense as a specific category of language use just as Victorian Nonsense is a literary genre, bearing in mind that although they share common features, nonsensical discourse cannot be reduced to a set of literary conventions. The examples I have chosen are particularly representative of Flann O'Brien's writing, and will enable us to examine four essential features of nonsensical discourse through a gradual typology: starting with nonsense as a subversion of conventional rules of communication, I will then concentrate on the distortion of traditional logic, and finally examine extreme cases of nonsensical gibberish.

## 1. Nonsense as non-cooperative discourse: pragmatic parameters

(3) [the birth of Furriskey being the subject of the examination referred to:]

In what manner was he born?

He awoke as if from sleep.

His sensations?

Bewilderment, perplexity.

Are not these terms synonymous and one as a consequence redundant?

Yes: but the terms of the inquiry postulated unsingular information.

(...)

Describe this man's conduct after he had examined his face.

He arose from his bed and examined his stomach, lower chest and legs.

What parts did he not examine?

His back, neck and head.

Can you suggest a reason for so imperfect a survey?

Yes. His vision was necessarily limited by the movements of his neck.

(Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* [1939], 1967, London, Penguin, p. 42)

- 10 The nonsensical dimension in this comic scene is the absurd succession of irrelevant questions and answers within the same text unit. However, the textual context of this excerpt enables us to outline a number of criteria highlighting how sense and nonsense interact here.
- 11 *At Swim-Two-Birds* is O'Brien's first novel, and was hailed as a comic masterpiece by Joyce himself (Cronin 1998). The comedy mostly relies on puns, nonsensical jokes and absurd situations, as well as a series of embedded narratives, which have earned the book its epithet of post-modern from many critics (Hopper 1995). The novel features an unnamed first-person narrator who lives with his uncle and studies at University College Dublin but spends most of his time in bed, writing a novel about Trellis, a tyrannical author who writes stories and so on and so forth. Passages from the main storyline alternate with so-called excerpts from the narrator's novel, as is the case in the example above.
- 12 Our first example is a nonsensical trial; it takes place in a dream. Trellis, the fictional author, is tried by his own characters, then found guilty (of exploitation and cruelty) and

sentenced to a horrible death. Furriskey is Trellis' fictional son, a character Trellis gave birth to through 'aesthogamy'.

- 13 Here the very setting calls to mind the tradition of Victorian Nonsense – nonsensical trial being a trope of the genre. Jean-Jacques Lecercle has analysed nonsensical trials in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. He defines nonsensical discourse based on four main criteria (Lecercle 1995):
- the dialectical opposition between excess of structure and lack of logic,
  - the metalinguistic dimension of discourse
  - nonsense reveals the literary text as fiction
  - the ambiguous relationship between dream and reality.
- 14 In our excerpt, Trellis (the respondent) betrays a form of excess in his use of synonyms to answer a simple question. As his judge remarks, synonyms saturate the paradigmatic axis of the utterance and thus paradoxically, deplete its meaning. The repetition itself is nonsensical because it effectively voids the utterance of its strength. Nonsensical repetition is also to be found in the list of body parts at the end of the scene. For Lecercle, nonsense relies on the exhaustion of lists and series. Similarly, the nonsensical logic of series means that speakers exhaust the list of possible questions, regardless of any form of pragmatic relevance; in this case, the last two questions are obviously unnecessary since the non-examined parts of the body are clearly those left out of the previous list of examined parts. Trellis answers consistently with this nonsensical logic of series, since he responds literally to all the questions, thus flouting the Gricean rules of clarity, and quantity, and overall relevance (Grice 1975).
- 15 The first consequence of the nonsensical list is that it reveals its own commentary on language itself. Here the trial is at the same time a trial of language; language is at fault when Trellis is made to give a redundant answer because the "terms of the inquiry postulated unsingular information". The metalinguistic comment on language is therefore necessarily embedded in the nonsensical trial dialogue.
- 16 A second consequence directly derived from this is the meta-fictive dimension of the text, which is made explicit by the underlying narrative irony throughout the text.
- 17 Finally, the confusion between dream and reality is the very backdrop to the scene: the rebellious characters have drugged their master and take advantage of the fact that he is asleep to carry out their coup. Trellis becomes his characters' hostage in his own dream. Trellis' description of Furriskey's birth as 'waking as if from sleep' further echoes the confusion between reality and dream throughout the book.
- 18 We can now draw a first set of conclusions. First, as we have seen, this dialogue fits the definition of Victorian Nonsense as laid out by Jean-Jacques Lecercle, both structurally and in its goal: it is first and foremost a kind of metalinguistic discourse. Bearing this in mind, we can now go back to Wittgenstein who states in his early philosophy that any 'meta-' or reflexive discourse is necessarily nonsensical, because to be able to speak about the meaning of language (as the object of our discourse), we would have to locate ourselves outside meaning, in a realm of non-sense. However, I believe that much more than being nonsensical, meta-discourse in fact accurately reveals the inner opacity of language itself. It suggests that nonsense is a constitutive part of language and that it needs to be construed as another variable inherent to the process of meaningful utterances, making us realise that there is no clear-cut distinction between sense and nonsense.

- 19 Nevertheless, we cannot be content with this example as a typical instance of nonsense: we (the reader, the narrator and the characters taking part in the dialogue) understand what happens in this scene very clearly, and this is what makes O'Brien's comic writing successful here. From a pragmatics point of view, what we have analysed is a set of rules for a type of discourse. Considering the pragmatic interaction between speakers in dialogue (1), and bearing in mind Grice's maxims of cooperative communication (Grice 1975), we can now say that the rules of nonsensical discourse roughly overlap with those of non-cooperation (refusal to be informative, clear, relevant, and truthful). This is where the problem eludes us: the principles of non-cooperation are in fact equally essentialist as those of cooperative, meaningful communication. Hence Nonsense as a literary genre, though based on transgression of meaning and cooperation, posits the very same principles as those which it seeks to subvert. Example one thus shows that nonsense can be traced within sense itself, as an extreme variable in the pragmatic parameters of cooperative conversation, and as a dynamic force which playfully distorts and unsettles our received conception of meaning.

## 2. Nonsense and truth-value: parameters of logic

(4) If a man stands before a mirror and sees in it his reflection, what he sees is not a true reproduction of himself but a picture of himself when he was a younger man. De Selby's explanation of this phenomenon is quite simple. Light, as he points out truly enough, has an ascertained and finite rate of travel. Hence before the reflection of any object in a mirror can be said to be accomplished, it is necessary that rays of light should first strike the object and subsequently impinge on the glass, to be thrown back again to the object – to the eyes of a man, for instance. There is therefore an appreciable and calculable interval of time between the throwing by a man of a glance at his own face in a mirror and the registration of the reflected image in his eye.

(*The Third Policeman* [1940&1967] 2001, London, Flamingo, pp. 68-69).

- 20 *The Third Policeman*, O'Brien's second novel, is for the most part a satire of philosophers and scientists. It targets both the logic and authority of scientific discourse, and the 'new physics' of his time – quantum physics and the law of relativity. True to the genre of Nonsense, this passage depicts the same dialectic of excess and loss, contrasting the lengthy and exhaustive reasoning of De Selby with his complete disconnection from reality. More specifically, this example presents us with a piece of nonsensical scientific reasoning.
- 21 I previously mentioned the OED definition of a nonsensical utterance as one which either lacks meaning or does not present a legitimate grammatical structure. In De Selby's discourse, premise and logical reasoning function as meaning and grammar. Everything is fine until De Selby brings in the concept of logical necessity: "it is necessary that rays of light should first strike (...)". This sentence presents a double modality, with the extraposed clausal subject emphasizing the modality of logical necessity, and with the further insistence of the modal *should*. It seems as if De Selby protests too much here: why not simply use *must* to express logical necessity? His insistence on necessity comically betrays the fact that De Selby is not only mistaken, but also that he has no idea what he is talking about.
- 22 Besides the polyphonic dimension of the text (the whole explanation is presented with ironic distance by the first person narrator), De Selby's logic is defective on two accounts:

first, his reasoning is entirely made up from the conclusion; in the text, De Selby's conclusion is at the beginning and serves as his premise. Secondly, De Selby mistakes *quantifiable* for *visible*, thus blowing up the infinitely small into humongous proportions. De Selby follows through with his logic further on in the scene, declaring that with a very big glass and a system of embedded mirrors, he can see himself at birth.

- 23 We call this piece of reasoning *nonsense* because De Selby has inverted the function of language as a tool for describing reality. Instead of using facts of the real world as evidence to keep his imaginative reasoning in check, De Selby makes the world fit his meandering logic. The Searlian “word-to-world fit” metaphor (Searle 1985) brings us back to the problem of referentiality (or lack thereof) as a criterion for meaningful or nonsensical utterance.
- 24 But is this really a case of nonsense? Wittgenstein and analytic philosophers would say, rather, that De Selby's is just a series of false propositions. Again, this is not really nonsense: we understand perfectly what De Selby means: his propositions refer to something but they happen to be false because they do not correspond to facts in the real world. De Selby's theory is not fiction either (although highly imaginative), for lack of a specific intention to that effect. We call his theory nonsense because he is wrong both about the world and about how language refers to the world. I wish to point out here that the notion of truth-value, according to Wittgenstein, does not enter in the determination of nonsense v. sense. As he explains in the *Tractatus*, nonsense is neither true nor false: just like positive and negative numbers, there is a reality that is the case and a reality that is not the case – but it is not relevant to nonsense itself. This means that De Selby's distorted perception of reality still lies within the realm of sense. What we initially recognized as nonsensical elements in De Selby's reasoning is thus in fact an essential part of the fabric of meaning itself.

### 3. Nonsense and glossolalia: unexplainable utterances

(5) The ‘Codex’ (...) is a collection of some two thousand sheets of foolscap closely hand-written on both sides. The signal distinction of the manuscript is that not one word of the writing is legible. Attempts made by different commentators to decipher certain passages which look less formidable than others have been characterized by fantastic divergences, not in the meaning of the passages (of which there is no question) but in the brand of nonsense which is evolved. One passage, described by Bassett as being ‘a penetrating treatise on old age’ is referred to by Henderson (biographer of Basset) as ‘a not unbeautiful description of lambing operations on an unspecified farm’. Such disagreement, it must be confessed, does little to enhance the reputation of either writer.

(*The Third Policeman*, p. 163)

- 25 In this example, De Selby's readers and critics are faced with an illegible manuscript – literally. The impossibility to make sense of the ‘Codex’ leaves us with two hypotheses: either the writing is in fact, legitimate– and nonsense simply reflects an incapacity on the part of the reader, or the manuscript itself is an elaborate joke presenting us with mock writing, something that resembles writing but is not – a written equivalent of the utterance of random sounds to imitate language.
- 26 O'Brien's description of the Codex here is one of the highlights of his comic prose, but it may also be inspired by a real document: the Voynich Code, an entirely undecipherable 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript, which has baffled researchers and code-breakers for decades. The

manuscript, which was first revealed to the public by its owner, antiquarian Wilfrid Voynich, at a 1921 conference in Philadelphia (see Gawsewitch 2005), may well have been known to Flann O'Brien by the time he wrote *The Third Policeman* in 1940. Whether or not this is the case, the range and variety of interpretations that have been suggested for the Voynich Manuscript strikingly resemble O'Brien's comic description here – from a secret cypher by the philosopher Roger Bacon to a liturgical manual of Catharism, to a hoax (Gawsewitch 2005). All attempts have presupposed meaningful intentions on the part of the anonymous writer, just as O'Brien's fictional commentators try to make sense of the Codex. Here, nonsense seems to carry strong pragmatic significance, as it both protects and signals the existence of a secret meaning to be uncovered.

- 27 Finally, De Selby's Codex can also be linked to a written form of what is generally known as *glossolalia*, also known as "speaking in tongues". William John Samarin defines the phenomenon as "a meaningless but phonologically structured human utterance believed by the speaker to be a real language but bearing no systematic resemblance to any natural language, living or dead" (Samarin 1972: 2). Although such phenomenon often occurs as a "kind of automatic behavior or as a feature of an altered state of consciousness" (1972:22), glossolalia is not always dependent on trance. Samarin's conclusion is almost Wittgensteinian in tone, and brings us back to the intrinsic link between sense and nonsense, to our inability to understand one without the other and to the blurred distinction between them: "what I *hear* is nonsense; the sounds make no sense to me. But I know that what lies beyond is what counts, and that is sacred ground" (1972: 236).
- 28 Our example operates at two different narrative levels. At the level of the story itself, the Codex is either a hoax or a piece of mindless scribble; put together with the seriousness of the commentators, it creates ironical contrast and serves O'Brien's comic prose as well as his social satire of philosophers, scientists and academics. O'Brien's criticism meets that of the early Wittgenstein, when he suggests that philosophers delude themselves and others into thinking they are making sense when really, they only create nonsense by talking about "that which cannot be talked about" (*Tractatus*, §7).
- 29 From a more philosophical point of view, the Codex episode offers us a humorous commentary on language as a pragmatic game. There is a shift here: the scene tells us as much about sense and nonsense as it does about social behaviour. What remains meaningful in this nonsensical manuscript is its phatic dimension, as if its sole intention was to establish a contact with the audience (i.e. its readers). It is also a game of make-believe as an imitation of meaningful communicative behaviour. Again, the pragmatic criterion takes pride of place, in the sense that what is left here is an inter-subjective relation between speakers, regardless of the nature of its linguistic content.
- 30 This brings us back to the meta-linguistic dimension of all our examples so far; all such examples can be made sense of, and we are never short of applying meaningful interpretations to what seems at first like nonsense. As the Wittgenstein hypothesis reminds us, we can never completely step outside of meaning. Flann O'Brien's nonsensical games put forward his intuitions on the natural ambiguity and opacity of language, and its essentially social and pragmatic dimension.



## Conclusion

(6) Le Fournier (...) suggests that de Selby, when writing the *Album*, paused to consider some point of difficulty and in the meantime engaged in the absent-minded practice known generally as 'doodling', then putting the manuscript away. The next time he took it up he was confronted with a mass of diagrams and drawings which he took to be the plans of a type of dwelling he always had in mind and immediately wrote many pages explaining the sketches.

(*The Third Policeman*, p. 19)

- 31 This final example shows how elusive nonsense is (is 'doodling' a case of nonsense?), since every effort at analysis and explanation provides meaning even where there was not even a communicative intention in the first place. Thus nonsense is what we cannot talk about, since by giving it meaning, we change it into something else. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein states that all meta-discourse is a form of nonsense. He discards ethics and metaphysics as a waste of time; this implies however, that the *Tractatus* itself, being a philosophical treatise, and thus a piece of meta-discourse, belongs de facto to the same category... which Wittgenstein seems to acknowledge in his conclusion:

§ 6.54. My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

§ 7. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

- 32 While Wittgenstein and the so-called 'linguistic turn' of his time influenced Flann O'Brien's satire and his reflections on sense and nonsense (Coulouma 2007), O'Brien deliberately took the opposite approach to Wittgenstein's injunctions by making reflexive, meta-linguistic speculation his prime method for representing the complexities and ambiguities of sense. Something remains, however, of the Wittgensteinian method in O'Brien's play on sense and nonsense: the opposition between saying and showing, between the realm of sense and that of the inexpressible, where elusive nonsense lies. Bearing that in mind, we can say that nonsense shows itself in our examples, beyond language-mediated explanation and description, as what remains unexplained once we have made sense of everything else.

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## ABSTRACTS

This paper examines the question of nonsense through a series of examples taken from Flann O'Brien's satirical novels. Starting from Wittgenstein's claim in the *Tractatus* that any reflexive discourse on language is itself nonsensical and that nonsense lies outside the realm of what can be talked about, this paper establishes a gradual typology of nonsensical discourse. Its aim is to try and delineate the linguistic and pragmatic parameters separating sense from nonsense in language, and thus propose a redefinition of nonsense.

Cet article propose une analyse du non-sens à travers quatre extraits de deux romans satiriques de Flann O'Brien, et en regard de la théorie Wittgensteinienne du *Tractatus* selon laquelle tout discours réflexif sur le langage (sensé ou non) est lui-même du non-sens. La typologie proposée ici permet d'isoler des paramètres linguistiques et pragmatiques communs à différentes occurrences de discours nonsensique, afin de déterminer la distinction entre sens et non-sens dans le langage, et de parvenir à une redéfinition du non-sens.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** non-sens, jeux de langage, métalangue, Flann O'Brien, Wittgenstein

**Keywords:** nonsense, language games, meta-linguistic discourse, Flann O'Brien, Wittgenstein

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