Alice in Ego-Land

Ever noticed how inanimate objects just can't stop talking? **Katie Wales** explores the rhetoric of everyday life.

One day recently I decided to go into my local city centre, Cambridge, to do some shopping. I had Weetabix for breakfast ('Try me hot!'), and cleaned my teeth and mouthwashed ('Try me: or your money back'). Just as I was leaving the house the post came ('Read me and recycle me'). I made a shopping list on some notepaper ('I am already recycled') with my new pencil ('I used to be land-filled now I am recycled') and picked up my hessian shopping bag ('I'm naturally handsome'). I ran for the bus, but one went straight past me ('I'm not in service'). I passed two estate agent signs: on a house ('I'm taken') and a flat ('Rent me!'). In the supermarket I picked up a basket ('I'm a shopping basket', 'please use me') and found some fresh vegetables ('pick me up') and fruit ('weigh me'; 'eat me'). A packet of Findus Lean Cuisine proclaimed 'Try me free!' A fruit drink urged 'Please keep me cold'; whilst other purchases suggested 'Help me to the till' and 'Take me along'. At the check-out I found a magazine ('Pick me up! I'm free and begging to be read'). In a department store I found a rail of jumpers urging 'Buy me now before I disappear'; and a rail of jeans whose heartfelt 'Buy me now before you lose me forever' I could barely resist. Back in the street I threw my receipts in the bin ('Fill me up').
I tried to sit on the grass in a park, but a notice said 'Your feet are killing me'.

What is going on here? It is nearly 150 years since Lewis Carroll wrote Alice in Wonderland, where, in a dream fantasy down a rabbit-hole, Alice was urged to 'Drink me' and 'Eat me'. But in the mundaneness of our everyday life we are all of us being subjected to similar exhortations. Even though the prime medium is written, we are made aware of a 'voice' speaking, however silent, as if the product or object is human, or at least animate. In









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the terms of classical rhetoric we might call this a low-level, or lower order of, prosopopeia: from the Greek for 'person-' or 'face-' making. This is a very common device in literature, and a kind of personification in which the non-human and the human are blended, an inanimate object is given human attributes. So in poetry, particularly for evocations of natural phenomena, we can think of Tennyson's The Brook ('I come from haunts of coot and hern') or Shelley's The Cloud ('I am the daughter of Earth and Water'). Non-human speakers are also a feature of riddles ('My first is in butter but not in bread… What am I?') and fables (animals talking) and children's literature, for toys as well as animals. Since the mid-twentieth century we have also become accustomed to the Disneyfication of objects and animals in animated cartoons.

Poets certainly want us to see nature afresh, to de-familiarize what we so often take for granted. A speaking cloud gives us another perspective and in a very dramatic way, as the effect is to engage the listener or reader in a personal even familiar implied 'dialogue'. In the modern age we have grown accustomed to the idea of the poeticality of advertising discourse as the means to its persuasive and pragmatic ends, so prosopopoeia can be seen to be an extension of that. We have also come to accept the imperative speech act of consumerism, so 'Buy me' seems a logical extension of 'Buy this product', and 'Eat me' a literal act of consumption, even a kind of cannibalism. But what a subtle – and appealing – difference the first person makes: the impersonal replaced by the livelier and more personal I-persona, with a wider range of speech acts hinted at, from the merely informative ('I'm taken') to the suggestive ('Try me hot') and even emotional blackmail ('Buy me now before you lose me forever'). The animation of a televisual culture may also have been an influence here: we are used to the vocal self-promotion of animated household products such as Mister Muscle and Mr Sheen. Increasingly, as many critical discourse analysts have noted, discourses such as marketing and advertising have become more and more familiar and informal, and packaging of products more and more 'chummy': so again, the increasing use of prosopopeia seems a logical next step. It also seems to chime with the current zeitgeist: shopping as a pastime, commodities as objects 'crying out' (sic) to be desired and loved. But even Karl Marx, writing his Kapital around the same time

as Lewis Carroll wrote Alice, decried what he termed the 'fetishizing' of commodities so prevalent in a capitalist culture, the tendency to feel some intimate relation with a product.

There is also another cultural tendency, however, which at the same time speaks to the universal; what Freud would call 'projection' and anthropologists the 'participation mystique'. It seems to be our nature to be anthropocentric: viewing and judging or empathising with the world in human terms and values, anthropomorphizing it. Animistic religions see spirits in mountains, trees and rivers. We certainly take for granted that plants have life, as well as animals, to the extent that we will talk to them (even plants) and give them names. In turn plants are known to 'respond' to human encouragement. In classical rhetoric apostrophe is the term used to describe an address to the non-human, the reverse of prosopopoeia; and again, poets have much exploited this device, especially in odes. Think of Keats addressing the nightingale, autumn and a Grecian urn. John Ruskin in the nineteenth century coined the term 'pathetic fallacy' for a device whereby human emotions are attributed to nature, in sympathy with the emotions of the speaker: so rain matches weeping. With such notices as 'I'm taken' even estate agents these days seem to be exploiting this idea of 'projection', recognising a widespread belief that houses (and their contents of objects) have their own personalities, or are an 'extension' of the human.

At the present time also, a strong ecological awareness is making us realise the literal impact of human beings on the environment. It is interesting that many of the prosopopoeic 'utterances' I cited at the beginning of this article are really part of this eco-speak, since they are found on rubbish and recycling bins ('What goes in me?'); non-plastic bags ('I'm naturally handsome; I'm already recycled'); used envelopes; public notices about discarded bicycles ('Take me home') and keeping off the grass ('Your feet are killing me'). Succinctness of message is not necessarily the prime issue. 'I used to be landfilled; now I am three recycled pencils' is earnestly informative; at the same time, it startlingly evokes the autobiographical 'transformation' life-story of many Anglo-Saxon riddles, where the manuscript tells us it was once a cow-hide; or the drinking-vessel once the horn of a bull.

I referred at the beginning to a 'lower order' of prosopopeia, precisely indicated by such silent packaging. Is there a 'higher order' in everyday life? This is surely the vocal speaking machine, made possible by modern advances in technology. Robots are obviously the most humanoid, but we are much used these days, for example, to talking lifts ('footbridge level'); automated public address systems ('No smoking on this station'); car warnings ('please fasten your seat-belt'); and non-human shop check-outs ('Thank you for using the fast lane'). Not so long ago The Times described a new laptop program that would scream to strangers 'Get your hands off me, I have been stolen!' Most recently Google revealed its concept for the 'talking shoe' to help runners increase their activity. Interestingly, nagging imperatives appear to be lacking; instead the shoe's 'voice' is totally ego-centric, even emotive: 'I love the feeling of wind in my laces.' Wonderfully, the 'tongue' of the shoe is the speaker! (The Times, 14 March 2013). Technologically sophisticated as these and other automata are, there is the tendency to assume the cognitive gift of intelligence and there is the possibility also that we will address them ourselves, apostrophise; and also give them names (e.g. computers). I am not therefore surprised to read that half the people who draw money from cash-point machines will speak to them. I suspect this is in anger: when the machine 'swallows' (sic) their debit cards.

This is no Wonderland. As Martin Gardner, the editor of The Annotated Alice (1974:15), puts it "life, viewed rationally and without illusion, appears to be a nonsense tale". It was the Russian linguist-philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (d. 1975) who glorified in the 'multi-voicedness' (heteroglossia) of language. He would have loved all these contemporary silent and mechanistic voices; appropriate too as a subject for a magazine called Babel. ¶

Find out more

Books

Paraphernalia: The Curious Life of Magic Things by Steven Connor (Profile, 2011)

Persons and Things by Barbara Johnson (Harvard University Press, 2008)

The Literary Mind by Mark Turner (Oxford University Press, 1996).

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