

## NAMES AND NAMING AND THEIR CULTURAL CONTEXT IN TERRY PRATCHETT'S DISC WORLD

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**Abstract:** The Discworld is a comic fantasy universe created by British author Terry Pratchett, where over 40 of his novels are set. This diverse world is home to a lot of different cultures and (human and non-human) characters, living cheek by jowl, regardless of species, gender or life status. However, with many allusions, the Discworld is in several ways a parody of our own world, culture and society. All of this make it a very fruitful subject of literary onomastics. The paper analyses, using many examples, the complex multicultural and linguistic context and embeddedness of literary names and naming in Pratchett's Discworld.

**Keywords:** literary onomastics, cultural context, fantasy, humor, Terry Pratchett's Discworld.

### The topic of the paper

#### *Pratchett's Discworld*

The wider topic of the paper is the analysis of literary name giving and name use as a special case of planned language use. Its material is the works of phenomenally popular English novelist Sir Terry Pratchett (1948–2015), more specifically the literary names of his imaginary universe called Discworld. The Discworld sits on the back of four gigantic elephants standing on the back of a giant turtle floating through space. It is a richly elaborated, completely fictional world with a large number of characters and settings, functioning on the basis of its own set of rules, including magic.

The Discworld novels belong to the genre of fantasy, therefore they are not bound by the realities and principles of our world (the Roundworld, as Pratchett calls it). However, they are rife with parody in the shape of rich cultural allusions and references, which connect the Discworld to our world in many ways. An important feature of Pratchett's works is their deep, idiosyncratic, often language-based humour.

Fantasy as a genre can be said to be the potentially richest terrain for literary name giving and its analysis (Algeo 2001: 252). Also, proper names carry a huge potential for humour, which parody can make good use of (cf. Farkas 2012, Slíz 2012). Therefore, in the Discworld stories the connotative values and other, non-identificational functions of the characters' names are especially important.

### *The sources of the study*

The Discworld universe is basically constructed in forty-odd loosely connected novels, supplemented by other publications. For the purposes of our analysis, their material can be considered homogenous, with a rich and varied name corpus. Its more complete overview and interpretation is supported by the numerous supplementary publications, many of those created with Pratchett's contribution: a companion (Pratchett and Briggs 2013), maps, books discussing the scientific and cultural background of the Discworld novels (e.g. Pratchett and Simpson 2008) and especially the online resources and websites compiled by Discworld fans (see mainly the *Discworld & Terry Pratchett Wiki* or the *Wikipedia* entries for Pratchett's Discworld and their further references). I have made a good use of them when writing this paper as well.

It's an important feature of the Discworld stories that many of the characters and settings, and therefore their names appear in several novels. Therefore, in the following I will refrain from referring to the sources of each name cited in the paper, but I make exceptions when the context within the given novel is specifically relevant for the discussion. Also, I will not include a complete list of the primary sources in the References section. The bibliography of the Discworld novels and other works connected to it are readily accessible on the websites mentioned above.

## **Literary names and their cultural context**

### *The typical functions of literary names*

Proper names in literary fiction have a wide variety of different name functions (in details and on more references see Dvořáková 2012, Vácziné Takács 2018, Gibka 2019 etc.). Apart from identifying their bearers, these names also describe and characterise them, help the author construct his or her fictitious world, function as a source of humour, etc. The main goal of literary name giving is often precisely one or several of these functions.

Among the literary names of the Discworld it is especially fruitful for us to look at the ones that connect their bearers to our own world or, in other cases, to other fictitious worlds. These allusions help the reader interpret the Discworld and its entities, and also contribute to Pratchett's humour. One example is the name of the inventor and all-round renaissance man *Leonard of Quirm*, with his profound similarities to the existent historic figure of *Leonardo da Vinci*. In the case of the now wizened Discworld cultural hero and warrior, *Cohen the Barbarian*, his figure is that of similarity and contrast at the same time: for the other Discworld characters, he's contrasted with his earlier, feisty and powerful self, while in the Roundworld, he is a parody of the fictitious figure of pop culture hero *Conan the Barbarian*. Their respective names can help direct readers' attention to these correlations (also supported by other instances in the given books), or at least reinforce them. A further example, the name of the famous permanent theatre building of the Discworld is an especially interesting item. It's called *The Dysk* in the novels, which is at once a reference to Shakespeare's *Globe*

and a self-reflective insider joke valid within the coordinates of the author's Discworld. It can be stated well in advance that some names can have a similar role just through their power to invoke certain types of literary naming, such as the parodies of classic fantasy names *K!sdra* or *Lio!rt* (in *The Colour of Magic*).

It is in large part through cultural references and proper names and networks of names that Pratchett builds up his world and its characters. For instance the greatest strategist and military theorist ever to have lived on the Discworld, whose name is said to have yielded the modern word *tactics*, is named *General Tacticus*. He wrote the book *Veni, Vidi, Vici: A Soldier's Life*, his horse's name was *Thalacephalus*, and some of his imparted wisdom puts you in mind Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. All these details can at once associate Tacticus' character with the (Greco-Roman) antiquity in general and conjure up the images of existent historic figures like Julius Caesar (cf. his phrase: *Veni, vidi, vici*), Alexander the Great (cf. his horse's name: *Bucephalus*), some ancient military theorists, and also the name of the great historiographer Tacitus. This is how one fictional character can become a condensed version of an entire type in Pratchett's Discworld.

#### *The linguistic and cultural context*

It is to be emphasised that the Discworld and its system of names, like also in the cases other works of fiction, can be interpreted in the linguistic and cultural context of the author, the text and the recipient respectively. More specifically:

1. The author's context: Pratchett's background is predominantly in the Anglo-Saxon and wider European culture, but thanks to his vast expanse of erudition, he incorporates instances of the universal cultural history of the Roundworld in its spatial and temporal entirety. All this massive erudition inevitably serves as background to his Discworld. The majority of his stories, though, are set on the fairly multicultural Main (Unnamed) Continent of the Discworld, which is mainly modelled after Europe and is described in the greatest detail among the Discworld continents. Pratchett wrote in English, but in his name giving practices we can spot the influences and patterns of other Roundworld languages as well.

2. The context of the novels themselves: As it was already pointed out before, Discworld is a fully fictional universe, created with plenty of conscious references and allusions to the Roundworld in mind. Thus it is particularly important to interpret these novels not just along the lines of its internal coherence but also from the vantage point of the author's real world. As for the question of linguistic diversity, Pratchett didn't create fully fledged fictitious languages like J. R. R. Tolkien, and while we are informed that on the Discworld several languages are spoken, we only catch some words and phrases of them. The name system of this fictitious world itself becomes varied and diverse in parallel with the ethnocultural diversity of its inhabitants, also mirroring some of the linguistic and cultural patterns of our Roundworld.

3. The context of the cultural background of the reader: Apart from the fact that

this background is, of course, different for each individual reader, this is very much a question concerning the translations of the novels. Translation is a special form of interlingual and intercultural communication, mediating utterances, works of fiction and their worlds for recipients with a different linguistic and cultural background. It is to be taken into account that the translator will, to some extent, reinvent the name set of a work of fiction, with regard to these considerations.

It's worth noting that Pratchett's universe is a multicultural world in several respects. The Discworld is inhabited by a wide variety of peoples, sentient species and cultures (not only humans), living in geographically distinct though communicating areas, but also living side by side or, as the author likes to put it, cheek-by-jowl, especially on the Main Continent and in its most populous city and the most frequent setting of the Discworld stories, Ankh-Morpork (cf. Gibson 2018). The diversity of this world is, however, modelled after that of our real world and its culture (history, literature, etc.). The translations of the Discworld novels make this rich and varied, culturally colourful universe accessible for the representatives of so many nations and cultures in their own language (in the broad sense of the word) as well.

## **The onomastics of the Discworld and what's behind it**

### *Onomastic phenomena in the Discworld*

In Pratchett's universe not only the names themselves, but also the name systems, and the basic patterns of name giving and name use follow the patterns we see in the Roundworld. Pratchett uses these, more precisely his own selection of these patterns with a smaller or larger degree of intentionality, rather than constructing a set of different rules and practices. He often uses these in a natural, unreflected way, while at other times they also become a source of humour in their own right.

The onomastic phenomena known in the Roundworld can be observed also in the case of Discworld toponymy. For example, a city or town (or region) might well be named after a river that crosses it, as in the case of *Lancre* and *Ankh*; or there might be name clusters of related names, as in the case of the city states of the Sto Plains: *Sto Helit*, *Sto Kerring* and *Sto Lat*.

As for anthroponymy, due to its much stronger cultural embeddedness, these phenomena are a lot more prominent. Some examples: There are parallel but demarcated sets of male and female names, with even pairs differing in their typical endings, e.g. *Igor* and *Igorina*, *Maladict* and *Maladicta* (see especially in *Monstrous Regiment*). The characters who become performing artists often choose stage names for themselves, as in the cases of *Theda Withel* > *Ginger* > *Delores De Syn* film star or *Imp Y Celyn* > *Buddy* rock musician (in *Moving Pictures* and in *Soul Music*); while the ragged membership of a secret society also have cryptonyms: *Brother Fingers*, *Brother Dunnikin*, *Brother Plasterer* (in *Guards! Guards!*). There are examples of the exotic name giving practices of faraway peoples (in *Reaper Man*), too: in Howondaland newborns are named after the first thing their mother sees after giving birth, hence a character's name is *One-Man-Bucket*, more precisely *One-Man-Pouring-a-Bucket-of-Water-over-Two-Dogs*

(whose but a few minutes junior but less lucky brother is not called *Two-Dogs-Fighting*, but something much less honorable).

Roundworld patterns are seen at work in the case of other name types, e.g. the naming of pure-bred pedigree beasts, here swamp dragons, *Lord Mountjoy Gayscale Talonthrust III of Ankh*, *Talonthrust Vincent Wonderkind of Quirm*, although the specimen in question, doesn't even belong to a particularly noble breed (see especially in *Guards! Guards!*).

Pratchett also makes use of the phenomenon of appellativisation, based on universal as well as characteristically English examples, as in the following cases. The members of the Ankh-Morpork City Watch are known as *Sammies*, based on the name of their commander, Samuel Vimes (cf. *Bobbies* 'London policemen', from the name of Sir Robert Peel, the founder of the London Metropolitan Police). Or, the greatest ambition of *Lieutenant Blouse* (in *Monstrous Regiment*) is to have an item of clothing or a dish named after him, as exemplified by numerous other high-ranking officers of his army, e.g. *General Anorac*, *General Froc*, *General Puhloaver* etc. (cf. *Lord Cardigan* > *cardigan*, *Lord Raglan* > *raglan sleeve*, *Lord Wellington* > *beef Wellington* etc.).

In the following, I shall direct my attention to the composition of the name stock of the Discworld, its Roundworld sources and patterns. First in terms of the diversity of name bearers, seen through the examples of personal names in the novels; then in terms of the names themselves, complementing the earlier approach with the examples of place names of the Discworld.

### *Species-based, ethnic and sociocultural differences*

The wide variety of names, name giving and name use is an integral part of the multicultural diversity of Pratchett's universe, which is mainly down to the species-based, ethnic and sociocultural diversity of the characters. (For the folkloric and mythological background of these see the relevant chapters of Pratchett and Simpson 2008.) The multiculturalism of the Discworld is also obvious in the case of the deities, who represent several cultures' pantheons in line with the fact that both the Roundworld and the Discworld are characterised by significant cultural diversity. Their names also may reflect to this diversity (see some examples below).

The names of the human characters are inspired by the Roundworld correspondents of their background in the Discworld, involving not only current, contemporary patterns of anthroponymy, but also those of the cultures of antiquity and faraway peoples. However, demonstrating these interrelations would require a more detailed introduction to the Discworld as a whole, which, however, is outside the scope of this paper. Thus I will restrict myself to illustrating my point through types and examples from non-human characteronymy.

The names of the dwarf characters hark back to numerous sources. They use the translations of their original names (like *Sh'rt'azs*) when they live as a minority among a human majority population. Their patronyms, nicknames and surnames might reflect their Roundworld and Discworld characteristics, such as *Ironfoundersson*,

*Stronginthearm*, *Thighbiter*; while their given names may reflect the majority society surrounding them: *Albrecht*, *Rhys*, *Thomas*. However, their names may have been influenced especially by the name stock of the Nordic cultures of the Roundworld: *Albrecht Albrechtsson*, *Glod Glodsson* (cf. Nordic patronymics), *B'hrian Bloodaxe* (the first Low King of the Dwarfs; probably the name of an early computer game, but also a reference to the name of *Eric Bloodaxe* Norwegian ruler, and *Brian Boru*, the High King [!] of Ireland, both from the 10th century). Also, there are intertextual references to other fictitious dwarf characters: *Gimlet* (cf. Tolkien's *Gimli*, while also the name of a small hand tool), or *Morose Stronginthearm* and *Bashful Bashfullson* (cf. Walt Disney's *Grumpy*, *Bashful*). The names referring to the traditional mythology of the Discworld dwarfs incorporate insights into their traditional mining-metalworking culture: *Ironhammer*, *Agi Hammerthief*.

The society of trolls, which is described as much less complex than that of the dwarfs, has a simpler and more homogenous name giving convention. Trolls, being silicone-based beings, have minerological names; the males those of more or less known rocks and minerals: *Detritus*, *Flint*, *Morraine*, *Bluejohn*, while the females especially those of (semi-)precious stones: *Beryl*, *Jade*, *Ruby*. An urban-born youth is called *Brick*. When trolls adopt stage names, they choose them from the same set of concepts: *Cliff*, *Rock Cliffe* (in *Moving Pictures* and in *Soul Music*). Troll deities have awe-inspiring names of a similar character: *Chondrite* (a type of meteorite), *Monolith*, *Gigalith*.

The names of the members of the other species, less prominent in the Discworld novels, also regularly (though not exclusively) rely on their primary, Roundworld cultural background. Some examples: Some of the vampires, whose names reflect their sociocultural background: *Count Vlad de Magpyr* (cf. *Vlad Țepeș*, whose historic figure inspired the Dracula-story), *Count Bela de Magpyr* (cf. *Bela Lugosi*, the Hungarian-born actor who famously played Dracula on screen). As for the golems, some of their names naturally come from Yiddish, possibly referring to their individual characteristics as well: *Meshugah* ('crazy, foolish'), *Schmata* (cf. slang *schmutter* 'clothing'). The names of demons are based on several different mythologies, such as biblical: *Beezlemoth* (cf. *Beelzebub* and *Behemoth*) or Aztec: *Quezovercoatl the Feathered Boa* (cf. *Quetzalcoatl*, theonym), and also the idea shared by several cultures that they have names that can't be pronounced: *Astfgl*, and even *WxrtHltl-jwlpklz*.

### *The patterns and sources of the creation of the names*

The given names found in the Roundworld often come up in the Discworld as well, in the case of the cultures and species where they are applicable (especially the items of the English given name stock, in the case of humans, and on the Main Continent). With other name types this is more the exception than the rule, the more typical being that Pratchett only follows the naming patterns of the Roundworld in his own name creations in different ways.

One of these is modelling his names on specific existent names, whose bearers are more or less identifiable. Examples include: *Oblong Office* (the office of the

ruler of Ankh-Morpork; cf. *Oval Office*), *Pseudopolis Yard* (the headquarters of the Ankh-Morpork City Watch; cf. *Scotland Yard*), *Überwald* (a land of horror tropes, a country ruled by vampires and werewolves; the word by word German translation of *Transylvania*).

Also, Pratchett follows the various patterns of the various name types to be seen in various languages of the Roundworld. Examples include: *Schmaltzberg*, *Klotz*, and *Müning* (German-looking and -sounding settlement names in *Überwald*); *Borogravia*, *Klatchistan* (country names with morphologies typical for different languages); *Bear Mountain*, *Mountains of the Sun*, *Mount Awayawa* (oronyms with typical syntactic and semantic patterns). These names also help the reader construct the cultural and population geography of the Discworld.

Behind one specific name there are often several connotations to be found, and all of them can contribute to it in the text. For example, in the case of *Zlobenia*: cf. *Slovenia* (a country in the Roundworld) and *zlob* ('malice' in Slavic languages); or *Borogravia*: cf. *Borgravia* (a country analogue to Austria in a Norman Spinrad novel, *The Iron Dream*), *Belgrade* (capital of Serbia), *Belgravia* (a district in central London) and *borough ~ boro* ('a kind of town or region'), *borogove* (a kind of bird in Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem *Jabberwocky*). *Zlobenia* and *Borogravia* are described as relatively small countries in the less developed region of the Main Continent constantly at war with each other and the Former Überwald Republic of Mouldavia. Thus their names can even more refer to the states of the former Yugoslavia (see especially in *Monstrous Regiment*).

### Prospects for further research

The names in Terry Pratchett's Discworld are an excellent ground for onomastic research for various reasons. My paper wished to demonstrate and illustrate this point. We must also add that the Discworld novels have been translated into numerous languages, which fact offers further fertile ground for analysis from the standpoint of the target languages and cultures as well.

The translation of proper names is a complex challenge for translators in any work of fiction. This must be even more so in the case of Pratchett's Discworld novels because of the extraordinary cultural and linguistic embeddedness of their names and their rich associative halo. (See Gibka 2017 etc., Boyadzhieva 2017, Farkas 2020.) Pratchett himself also talked about the difficulties of translating his works and especially the names, giving several specific examples (see in Pratchett and Briggs 2013: 436–439). Looking at the problems facing translators can also help us better understand the original names, not to mention other potential lessons it can yield.

Terry Pratchett's name giving practices, the working of the name functions in his Discworld novels, the problems of translation and other similar questions can and should be dealt with in a wider framework, looking at more of the complexities of its correlations, analysing them on the basis of a comprehensive theoretical model, using methodic corpus analysis, and based on a comparative point of view. A research project initiated by Martyna Gibka from Poland (Gibka n. d.) is a good example of

these approaches, which has resulted in several studies (see Gibka 2017, 2018 etc.). Continuing and expanding the research initiated in this topic and from these aspects can yield interesting lessons in the future, not only for literary onomastic studies, but other fields of onomastics as well.

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