

J.K. ROWLING'S LINGUISTIC INNOVATIONS – TRANSLATION IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

DANIEL LEOTESCU
University of Craiova

Abstract: *Translators faced unusual and surprising linguistic challenges in keeping the original element of the J. K. Rowling's style in the Harry Potter series. Our paper focuses on the impact of the British writer's story by highlighting the subtle puns and hidden clues in her made-up words that have gone "beyond the book" and even leapt into the Oxford English Dictionary.*

Key words: *blend, difficulties, etymology, innovation, translation*

1. Introduction

One of the most common features that has sparked the interest of critics and contributed to the largely positive reviews about the world-famous book series is J. K. Rowling's linguistically complex representations. Although not evident to the untrained eye that either engages in pleasure reading or has not yet acquired the necessary tools to recognize the potential of Rowling's play on words and the beneficial revival of Latin's cultural authority, the innovative use of language represents one of the writer's characteristics. Not only did she manage to include anagrams, compound words, prefixed or suffixed terms, but she also infused her intricate plot with Latin and French etymologies or other foreign words. As far as Rowling's quest to share the pluralism of her ideas is concerned, it is clear that one of the best mechanisms to serve the desired symbolic functions was to hide meaning, history and destiny inside the words of the story. Thus, the whole atmosphere and complexity of the two worlds that coexist is augmented by terms pertaining to various semantic fields, although serving one purpose: to ensure a rich and innovative magical realm with its logical natural laws that have mesmerized children and adults alike.

Our investigation aims not only to analyze the manner in which the British writer has imaginatively incorporated her passion for language(s) in the *Harry Potter* heptalogy, but also to discover the origin of the terms that contribute to this vast magical vocabulary. Thus, we endeavour to track other meanings that her words might have had in the history of the English language. Additionally, we seek to highlight how some of Rowling's words conceived for the magical universe have even transcended the books and entered the real world, an outcome which clearly demonstrates the huge impact of her lexical resourcefulness.

2. J. K. Rowling's Techniques in Innovations

According to Matt Norton's article published on the Cambridge University Press website (Linguistics section, available online) on 15 August 2017, the term *portmanteau* was created by Lewis Carroll in his pursuit to merge words and create more "spliced" patterns of isolated units. In *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) *slithy* (*lithe and slimy*) and *mimsy* (*miserable and flimsy*) appear, thus illustrating the benefits of aggregating two meanings in one word and, consequently, increase efficiency. We can also observe that even the designation is a combination between the

French origin words *porter* (to carry) and *manteau* (cloak). *Portmanteau* has multiple definitions in the *OED* (online edition) and is firstly described as *a case or bag for carrying clothing and other belongings when travelling; (originally) one of a form suitable for carrying on horseback*; nowadays, it refers especially to *one in the form of a stiff leather case hinged at the back to open into two equal parts*. Nevertheless, the second category of compound words that include this term outlines its attributive nature that is employed in extended use, with the sense *that into which things are packed together*. Thus, *portmanteau word* designates *a word formed by blending sounds from two or more others and combining their meanings* and, also *a phrase or expression formed by combining elements from others*. A clear example for this type of word formation is provided here as *motel* combines *motor* and *hotel*, while the *Cambridge English Dictionary* offers the term *jeggings* as a combination of *jeans* and *leggings*. Crystal and Davy (2013) note that the traditional morphology implies root, prefix and suffix in terms of word structure. However, there are further possibilities that can fall into “distinctive categories and types of word formation, such as frequent compounds, complex affixation involving elements from classical Latin or Greek, and also any deviant forms that might occur, including portmanteau words, nonce formations, word-class changes (such as *he pillar-boxed the letter*), puns, and so on” (Crystal and Davy 2013: 55-56).

Norton’s article (*Mansplaining, Chillax and Brexit: Blended words in English*) reveals the popularity of portmanteau words in Modern English and offers as evidence the *Spoken British National Corpus 2014* which demonstrates our propensity towards using these blends with a compound-like structure. Besides the words that feature in the title of his article (among which *Brexit* is obviously the most popular one), the vast amount of words collected in this electronic database of spoken British English also includes *Bollywood* (*Bombay and Hollywood*), *botox* (*botulinum and toxin*), *brunch* (*breakfast and lunch*), *email* (*electronic and mail*), *malware* (*malicious and software*), *motorcycle* (*motor and bicycle*), *Oxbridge* (*Oxford and Cambridge*), *pixel* (*picture and cell*), *sitcom* (*situation and comedy*), *smog* (*smoke and fog*), *spork* (*spoon and fork*), etc. As Crystal and Davy (2013) point out, any deviation may occur especially when we take into consideration our tendency in modern English to condense language. Therefore, portmanteaus can also be obtained when some sounds are left out or altered as in *mansplaining* (*man and explaining*) – a man patronizing a woman, when two parts overlap like in *smash* (*smack and mash*), when only the first parts of each word are combined like in *botox* (*botulinum and toxin*) or even when combining more than two words such as *TriBeCa* (*Triangle Below Canal* – a street in Manhattan), *NoLita* (the area *North of Little Italy* – a part of New York City), *LoMEx* (the *Lower Manhattan Expressway*), *MoMA* (the *Museum of Modern Art* in New York), or *turducken* (*turkey, duck and chicken*).

It is notable that Rowling’s love of language is manifested in different semantic fields, as she does not limit herself only to magical creatures, incantations, or potions, but also invests linguistic complexity in proper nouns and even characters’ skills that catch and maintain the reader’s attention. By adding a prefix or suffix to an existing term, by joining two separate words (or parts of them) and creating portmanteaus, by abbreviation or by combining words of different origin, the British writer has managed to create pure innovations, while also highlighting the cultural aspect of her novels. As readers discover the magical world of Hogwarts along with Harry, who embodies the ideal “underdog hero – a very British invention” (Eccleshare, 2002: 22), they are also bewitched and empowered by the boarding school setting (another symbol of the traditional education system during the Victorian age). Not only the mysterious and multidimensional places that they discover, but also the supernatural abilities that characters possess significantly contribute to the readers’ excitement, as they start imagining the thrill of flying on broomsticks, performing different useful spells, navigating through secret corridors, joining in scrumptious feasts, participating at huge celebrations in common rooms, etc.

3. Linguistic Innovations

3.1. Animagus

In our case, *Animagus* falls in the second category, with the same pattern “ma” which occurs in both words that form this blend/portmanteau. Lewis’s type of portmanteaus, however, are quite rarely encountered, as new word combinations either in contemporary English or extracted from literary works that blend the first part of the last word with the beginning of the first word (such as *mimsy*-> *flimsy and miserable*) are more difficult to obtain. In *An Introduction to Modern English: Word-Formation*, Adams (1973) provides many examples of coinages that are based on this compound-like structure provided by several authors such as Dean Colet (*blatterature* -> *bad and blind literature*), Robert Greene (*foolosophyI* -> *foolish and philosophy*), Samuel Purchas (*knavigation* -> *a knavish navigation*), Francis Lodwick (*universalphabeth* -> *universal alphabet*), Samuel Pegge (*clantastical* -> *clandestine and fantastical*), Emma Willard (*Astronography* -> *astronomy and geography*), Charles Dickens (*Wiglomeration* -> *wigs and agglomeration* or *balloonacy* -> *balloon and lunacy*) (Adams, 1973: 148-149). As these writers are significant for the pre-twentieth century period, James Joyce illustrates in a far-reaching (almost excessive) manner the process of coinage based on packing up two meanings in a single word. *Finnegans Wake* (1939) epitomizes the linguistic blends that can be woven not only by relying on existing English words, but also by combining lexical units from different languages and, thus, obtain memorable neologisms.

Characters who are *Animagi* will predominantly appear in the third novel, with Harry discovering that his father was also an *Animagus* or that the process of becoming one is not at all short or effortless. The theme of transformation is further exploited by Rowling both symbolically and linguistically, as she invents another term for wizards and witches who are born with the ability to change his/her appearance at will. As such, she combines yet again the noun *magus* but, this time, with the intransitive verb *to metamorphose* (from something) (into something), resulting in the invention *Metamorphmagus*. The verb entered the English language in the late 16th century from French (*métamorphoser*). The French verb is rooted in Greek (*metamorphosis* from *metamorphoun* meaning to *transform, change shape*) and entered via Latin.

3.2. Apparating and Disapparating

Experiencing greater freedom than a child would normally enjoy in other types of academic institutions, Harry Potter and, implicitly, we (as readers) learn that wizards can also disappear and then miraculously reappear in a matter of seconds from one place to another. This method of magical movement is known in the wizarding world as *Apparating* and *Disapparating*, another careful control of blend between the verbs *appear* and *evaporate*, respectively, *disappear* and *evaporate*. Thus, the British writer succeeds in investing this magical transportation with multiple meanings (than the mundane verbs *appear* and *disappear* would normally convey). By inventing yet another portmanteau (which receives a prefix to denote the counteraction), Rowling manages to also reflect the purpose of this neologism, as a common lexical unit could not have rendered the “sensation [that] does take some getting used to”: “being pressed from all directions”, hardly being able to breath, “iron bands tightening around [the] chest”, “eyeballs being forced back into [the] head”, “eardrums being pushed deeper into [the] skull” “as though [one] had just been forced through a very tight rubber tube” (Rowling, 2005: 60). The verb *appear* entered from Old French during the Middle English period, when the form *apareir* was commonly known. Its origin, however, lies in the Latin *apparere* – as a compound term based on *ad-* (*towards*) and *parere* (*come into view*).

3.3. The Knight Bus

Another invention which relies on the same technique of using homophones that, nevertheless, lose their impact in other languages, as there is no equivalent to keep Rowling's wordplay is *the Knight Bus*. Described as "emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard" (Rowling, 1999: 30) which drives at night, this compound word reflects once more the logic behind the originality. As a noble warrior whose role is to help the less fortunate in their "darkest" hour, the use of the noun *knight* in the punning title suggests that, at least from a linguistic point of view, nothing is arbitrary or left to chance; rather, everything is carefully planned and, sometimes, becomes an essential part of mastering the English language (and not only) on behalf of the writer. In Old English, the form was *cniht* and it had a completely different meaning: *boy, youth, servant*. The noun is related to Dutch (*knecht*) and also to German (*Knecht*), while its reference in the *OED* (online edition) as *one upon whom a certain rank, regarded as corresponding to that of the medieval knight, is conferred by the sovereign in recognition of personal merit, or as a reward for services rendered to the crown or country* dates from modern times (more specifically, in the 16th century). Moreover, Rowling performs a magical twist to the familiar London bus, as the Knight Bus is described as a triple-decker and the erratic leaping route that Harry Potter experiences all over the United Kingdom also allows the author to promote the British culture.

4. Linguistic Innovations and Difficulties in Translations

The author's development of linguistic complexity in these novels has continuously generated unusual and surprising challenges (for a definite representative of children's literature or so thought of) for translators.

As far as methods of travelling are concerned, Rowling manages to adjust language and create mellifluous or funny-sounding designations that demonstrate not only originality, but also her competence in choosing or combining lexical units to assign a name to a newly established reality in such a manner as to cause difficulties in translating it. Innovations such as *Apparating* and *Disapparating* lost their unicity in the French translation, both being translated with *transplaner*.

The process of struggling to find appropriate equivalents and transfer the meaning of what is said (or implied) in the source language into the target language, while being aware of the cultural phenomena of both languages, has certainly resulted in projects fraught with difficulty for translators worldwide. Not only is the translation of literature more challenging than that of scientific texts because the tone and essence of a story should be captured as closely as possible, but translating fantasy literature becomes even more complicated due to the imaginary places and unique names invented by authors.

4.1. Hogwarts

Analyzed as a compound word, Hogwarts contains the plural form of the English common noun - *wart* - *a small, round, dry, though excrescence on the skin; especially common on the hands of young persons*. This time, the idiom *warts and all* has a negative connotation, as it refers to an appearance *without concealment of blemishes or unattractive parts*. The *OED* (online edition) indicates that people were accustomed to *wearte* in Old English which was the equivalent of *warte* in Old Frisian. It is noteworthy that both English and continental German used the metathetic forms with *wr-*. Additionally, the historical dictionary encourages us to explore *wart-hog*. The last noun refers to *a swine of the African genus Phacochoerus*. Still, it is highly possible to consider Hogwarts a wordplay on this common English noun. But if we replace the vowel "a" with "o", the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (online edition) retrieves a genuine English word, *hogwort*, which represents *an annual silvery green weed (Croton capitatus) of the south eastern U.S. that is also called woolly croton*.

The innovative combination between *hog* and *warts* posed, once more, serious challenges for translators. In the French text, for example, Jean-François Ménard chose to sacrifice Rowling's wordplay and opt for *Poudlard*. Nevertheless, in the same spirit of innovating and avoiding a literal translation that would have lost the funny-sounding characteristics (such as *verruës de porc*), the translator chose to contract *Poux-de-lard* which translates as *bacon lice*. Still, the cultural transfer is not successful and the reminiscence of a medieval setting (when witchcraft was commonplace) is inevitably lost.

4.2. Slytherin

The cunning nature of the Slytherin House is in a clever manner introduced by the author, as it connotes the *behaviour that is secret and dishonest, often intending to trick people* associated with the English noun *slyness*. On a less subtle level, Slytherin represents another wordplay on the English verb *to slither* that receives a third reference in the *OED* (online) connected to reptiles, namely *to creep, crawl, glide*.

Since the house emblem of Slytherins is a snake, Jean-François Ménard (the French translator of the heptalogy) considered it fit to integrate the descriptive aspect of this name and make its underlying meaning more accessible to the target audience. The result was *Serpentard*, since it obviously contains the word *serpent* and also preserves the author's intention to linguistically imbue the name of this house with significance. Although his effort is praiseworthy, one cannot fail to admit that the overt link to snakes of the French translation undermines Rowling's original subtlety and Salazar Slytherin's ability to talk to snakes may seem less surprising given these (linguistic) circumstances. Once more, the memorable Salazar Slytherin loses the original alliteration and becomes *Salazar Luihuinen* (derived from *luihu*) for the Finnish readers to perceive the *guileful, sly* characteristics of students who are part of this house.

5. Magical Vocabulary and the Real Word

Some of Rowling's words conceived for the magical universe have even transcended the books and entered the real world, an outcome which clearly demonstrates the huge impact of her lexical resource. Different publications reported that the specialized vocabulary employed by the British writer has gone beyond the level of distinctive terminology used primarily in the wizarding world.

Rowling has invented a resonant name for one of the foulest creatures in her magical realm, which carries darkness, despair, sterility, coldness and emptiness whether it lingers among prisoners in the wizarding world or accesses the non-magical territory (in the fifth novel). The *Dementor* can not only cause depression, as it drains victims of peace, hope or happy memories until they are left with nothing but their own dark side, but can also take out a person's soul, which explains why it is frequently identified with a "soul-sucking fiend". In the magical realm, they can leave wizards and witches without their powers if they stay around them for too long while, in the parallel world, ordinary people can also sense their presence even if they are invisible. The references contained in the name are anything but obscure, as it appears to be a derivative of the English noun *dementia* that generally refers to *complete loss of judgement; (wild) foolishness resembling insanity; an instance of this* (the *OED*, online edition). The interesting part in our research is that the adjective *demented* is used especially in British English, a fact which reiterates that the overall frame of reference of the story is British. The Latin etymology *dēmentia* (*madness, insanity, craziness, folly*) reinforces Rowling's propensity towards and consistency in infusing her narrative with a classical language that was once the language of the literate.

The author manages to soften the skeletal, sole-less and terrifying Dementors by adding a metaphor which describes the horrifying act of taking humanity out of their victims. Although

readers can surely sense the paralysing terror caused by these creatures with “rooting”, “strong, clammy hands” and “putrid breath” that have “a gaping, shapeless hole, sucking the air with the sound of a death-rattle” (Rowling 1999:281), they learn that it is the “Dementor’s Kiss” which ultimately destroys their targets. Although they may remind us of Tolkien’s Black Riders in terms of appearance and the idea of perceiving the soul as a physical entity, the symbol of depression that Rowling envisages in them is part of her sparkling inventiveness. Their actions may be compared to those of other creatures, namely, insects, that use either fangs or stings with venom to neutralize their victims and, ultimately, kill them. This parallel should not be considered ridiculous because, in 2015, J. K. Rowling’s invention was a source of inspiration for naming a newly discovered wasp species in Thailand’s Mekong region. According to CNN, *The Independent*, *The Observer* and other newspapers, the “*Ampulex dementor*” got more media coverage than the other 139 new species uncovered around that time, as Rowling’s ghostly creatures were famous worldwide and could easily generate all the buzz.

The worldwide influence of the universe created by J. K. Rowling is, once more, evident in 2020 when *BBC*, *CNN*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *India Today* and other news providers started reporting that “*Trimeresurus Salazar*” would be the name for a new species of snake discovered in India. Although the bright green viper might not have been aware that the eponym of Slytherin house was the source of inspiration, the case highlights that Rowling’s designations have surpassed the status of fictive referents, entered the English vernacular and, surprisingly, even domains such as scientific research. As such, her inventions have not only served an entertaining function to enliven the reading experience, but have also proven that they are not arbitrary and that a proper and logical correspondence exists between her literary names and the characteristics of referents. The article published by *BBC* also features a retrospective look at some other animals that share either unaltered designations from the Harry Potter universe or slightly modified versions which are, nonetheless, instantly detected by a fan: “*Ampulex dementor*” (already spotted), “*Harryplax Severus*”, “*Eriovixia Gryffindori*” and “*Dracorex Hogwartsia*”.

References to these sinister objects and their initiator, Voldemort, permeated the real world on a diplomatic level, as the *CNN* reports in 2014 about China’s Ambassador to the United Kingdom’s opinion piece. Liu Xiaoming expressed his point of view in Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* regarding the visit made by the Japanese Prime Minister to a symbol of Japan’s imperial past. The event triggered China’s pain and loss from World War II, when Japan’s military aggression was continuously exercised. While Liu began to anchor the fictional objects in this diplomatic feud by stating that “if militarism is like the haunting Voldemort of Japan, the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo is a kind of horcrux, representing the darkest parts of that nation’s soul”, Japan’s Ambassador to the United Kingdom used the same literary reference and compared a possible malevolent reaction of China to Voldemort’s role in the *Harry Potter* narrative. When Steve Bannon was removed from Donald Trump’s administration in 2017 (following other dismissals and resignations of White House advisers), references to J. K. Rowling’s invented term resurfaced, proving that *Horcrux* had become a slang in popular culture for a dark and evil object. People started to compare the former Chief Strategist with a *Horcrux*, among many others, that was finally eliminated from Trump’s inner circle. The association of these advisors with “fallen” *Horcruxes* also hinted at the U.S. president’s loss of valuable people from his administration just like the villain’s complete dependence on these centrepieces that keep him alive. *Elitedaily.com* and *satirev.org* are two websites which recorded people’s reference to *Horcruxes* on Twitter and their rendering of the word with lowercase in comparison with the capital letter stylized by J. K. Rowling in the fictional world. In 2017, the *BBC* mentioned that the Oxford University Press had a watchlist that also included words associated with the *Harry Potter* novels. The news also featured a point of view expressed by an associate editor at Oxford Dictionaries (Charlotte Buxton), who speculated on the possibility of adding *Horcrux* in these unsurpassed guides to the English language.

6. Conclusion

Taking into consideration all these examples, it is clear that J. K. Rowling has paid close attention not only to the physical appearance of the language on the thousands of pages, but also to its materiality (morphology, syntax, sounds, etc.). Repetition, rhyme, alliteration or metrical emphasis are just a few devices that can help a writer achieve the literary critical notion of “foregrounding”.

Moreover, J. K. Rowling’s distinctiveness from a linguistic approach is given by her extraordinary ability to deal with linguistic gimmicks, either by focusing on homonyms to create new words, removing from and adding letters to some words, or switching and rearranging them in a different manner. She uses this technique in order to add some freshness to very familiar words and also to avoid repetition. Therefore, the readers are also involved as they have to undo Rowling’s work, which offers a sense of contentment. Not only do they experience the wonders in the books through Harry Potter’s eyes, but the readers also become involved in the creation process.

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Notes on the author

Daniel LEOTESCU is a doctoral student at the University of Craiova, Faculty of Letters and also teaches English at “Carol I” National College. His main research areas are linguistics, especially historical linguistics and also teaching English as a foreign language. He is the author/co-author of different articles, studies and books. He has a Cambridge certification in CLIL, TKT and TKT Practical.