BG Pulse Journal USA
ISSN:1947-2536 http://www.bgpulseusa.com/index.php/bg

LEXICAL MECHANISMS OF HUMOUR IN TERRY PRATCHETT'S THE COLOUR OF MAGIC: A PRAGMALINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF ONOMASTIC AND OCCASIONAL NAMING UNITS

Aliya Shukan, PhD
Associate Professor, Karaganda National Research University named after Academician E.A. Buketov, Kazakhstan
Rayhona Narzikulova
Associate Professor, Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages, Uzbekistan

The article investigates lexical mechanisms responsible for the creation of humorous effects in Terry Pratchett's novel The Colour of Magic (1983), the first novel of the Discworld series. Although humour has frequently been examined as a stylistic and literary phenomenon in Pratchett's works, insufficient attention has been devoted to the linguistic properties of lexical units generating comic effects. The study focuses on anthroponyms, theonyms, toponyms, chrematonyms, glossonyms, and occasional lexical formations functioning within the novel's fantasy discourse. The corpus consists of 71 lexical units selected through continuous sampling. Descriptive, semantic, etymological, contextual, quantitative, and pragmalinguistic methods were employed. The results demonstrate that humour is primarily generated through semantic incongruity, parody, script opposition, desacralization, and the interaction of elevated and everyday registers. Quantitative analysis reveals that anthroponyms and toponyms constitute the most productive categories of humour-producing lexical units. The findings indicate that proper names in The Colour of Magic function not merely as identificational markers but as pragmatic instruments that parody traditional fantasy conventions and facilitate interaction between author and reader.

Keywords: humour, fantasy discourse, pragmalinguistics, lexical creativity, onomastics, anthroponym, toponym, chrematonym, Terry Pratchett, The Colour of Magic.

Introduction

The study of humour has become one of the most productive areas of contemporary linguistics due to its close relationship with cognition, communication, and culture [2; 3; 5].. Within literary discourse, humour frequently serves not only an entertaining function but also acts as a mechanism for social criticism, ideological evaluation, and reader engagement. Fantasy literature provides particularly fertile ground for humour studies because it combines fictional world-building with linguistic creativity and cultural allusion [11; 12; 14; 23].

Among contemporary fantasy writers, Terry Pratchett occupies a distinctive position. Unlike traditional representatives of high fantasy, Pratchett systematically employs parody and satire to challenge established genre conventions [19; 21; 22]. His Discworld series demonstrates how lexical choices can become powerful instruments for constructing comic effects. While previous studies have examined Pratchett's humour from literary and intertextual perspectives, the lexical mechanisms underlying humour creation remain insufficiently investigated.

The object of this study is humorous discourse in The Colour of Magic. The subject of the study is the system of onomastic and occasional lexical units that contribute to the creation of comic effects. The aim of the research is to identify and classify lexical mechanisms of humour realization and determine their pragmatic functions within fantasy discourse.

Methods and Materials

The research material consists of lexical units extracted from Terry Pratchett's novel The Colour of Magic (1983). A total of 71 lexical units were selected through continuous sampling.

The corpus includes:
- Anthroponyms (20 units);
- Toponyms and urbanonyms (22 units);
- Theonyms (5 units);
- Chrematonyms (10 units);
- Glossonyms (6 units);
- Occasional lexical formations (8 units).

The study employs descriptive, etymological, semantic, contextual, quantitative, and pragmalinguistic methods [4; 5; 6]. Quantitative analysis was used to determine the productivity of lexical categories, while qualitative analysis identified the mechanisms responsible for humour generation.

Results and Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that lexical humour in The Colour of Magic is primarily achieved through naming practices. The distribution of lexical categories is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of Humour-Producing Lexical Units in The Colour of Magic

Category	Number	Percentage
Anthroponyms	20	28.2
Toponyms	22	31.0
Theonyms	5	7.0
Chrematonyms	10	14.1
Glossonyms	6	8.5
Occasional formations	8	11.2
Total	71	100

The results indicate that anthroponyms and toponyms constitute 59.2% of the entire corpus, confirming the central role of literary onomastics in Pratchett's humour strategy [7; 8].

Among anthroponyms, Rincewind constitutes one of the most complex examples of lexical humour in the novel. From a linguistic perspective, the name demonstrates characteristics of descriptive naming and semantic motivation. Some scholars associate the first component with the Old English verb rinnan (‘to run’), preserved in Modern English as run, while the second component, wind, evokes notions of speed, movement, and elusiveness. Consequently, the anthroponym activates a conceptual frame related to escape and constant motion. The humour emerges through a collision between two competing scripts. Traditional fantasy discourse presupposes that a wizard occupies a position of wisdom, power, and courage; however, Rincewind systematically avoids confrontation and survives primarily through flight rather than heroism. The anthroponym therefore functions as a linguistic predictor of character behaviour. From a pragmalinguistic perspective, the reader gradually recognizes the discrepancy between the heroic schema associated with fantasy protagonists and the behavioural reality of the character [7; 8]. This incongruity is further reinforced by Rincewind's later philosophical parody “I run; therefore I am,” which transforms Descartes' famous proposition into a comic self-definition [2; 3]. The name thus operates simultaneously at lexical, semantic, and pragmatic levels, becoming a central instrument of characterization and humour generation.

The category of theonyms demonstrates Pratchett's systematic strategy of desacralization [10; 19; 21]. One of the most illustrative examples is Blind Io, the supreme deity of the Discworld pantheon. The lexical contradiction encoded in the name immediately attracts attention. The

adjective blind conventionally denotes the absence of sight, whereas the character is described as possessing numerous eyes distributed across his body. The humorous effect arises through semantic reversal: the lexical meaning of the name directly contradicts the physical attributes of its referent. At the same time, the name alludes to Io, the volcanic moon of Jupiter, thereby introducing an additional layer of astronomical intertextuality. The result is a parody of traditional omniscient deities whose divine knowledge is represented through exaggerated visual perception [10; 19]. By transforming omniscience into a grotesque accumulation of eyes, Pratchett replaces reverence with absurdity. The theonym therefore functions as an instrument of comic demythologization, reducing metaphysical authority to a physically exaggerated and inherently ridiculous image.

Toponyms represent the most productive category within the corpus and perform important world-building and humorous functions. The most significant example is Ankh-Morpork, the principal city of the novel. Linguistically, the toponym is characterized by semantic duality. The first component, Ankh, evokes associations with the Egyptian symbol of life and therefore activates a script related to antiquity, spirituality, and cultural prestige. The second component, Morpork, has often been interpreted as phonetically reminiscent of the English phrase more pork, which introduces associations with materiality, consumption, and urban vulgarity. The combination of these incompatible semantic domains produces a strong incongruity effect. The city simultaneously embodies grandeur and decay, civilization and chaos, mythology and everyday life. From the perspective of Raskin's Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humour, the toponym functions through the collision of two mutually incompatible scripts [1; 2]. This semantic opposition contributes significantly to the satirical representation of Discworld society and demonstrates how proper names participate actively in humour construction.

Another important toponym is Unseen University. At the lexical level, the noun university conventionally denotes an institution dedicated to knowledge dissemination, rational inquiry, and intellectual development. The modifier unseen, however, introduces notions of invisibility, secrecy, and inaccessibility. The resulting semantic tension creates humour because the institution fails to fulfil the expectations associated with its name. Rather than serving as an efficient centre of learning, the university is portrayed as a bureaucratic and often dysfunctional organization whose members devote considerable attention to meals, ceremonial status, and internal rivalries. Consequently, the toponym operates through semantic contradiction between denotational meaning and narrative reality. The humour emerges from the reader's recognition that the lexical form promises one reality while the narrative consistently delivers another [4; 5; 6].

The category of chrematonyms reveals Pratchett's tendency to generate humour through register collision. The most prominent example is The Octavo, the sacred book containing the fundamental spells responsible for the creation and maintenance of the Discworld universe. The lexical basis of the name originates from printing terminology, where octavo designates a specific book format. The application of a technical publishing term to a cosmologically significant magical artefact creates a striking contrast between the ordinary and the sublime. The humorous effect is produced because readers expect a sacred object to possess an elevated and mysterious name. Instead, they encounter terminology associated with printing houses and book production. This collision between high fantasy discourse and everyday professional vocabulary exemplifies Pratchett's broader strategy of demystification [11; 19; 21]. Through lexical choice, the author transforms an object of immense cosmic importance into a source of understated humour.

A particularly productive group consists of occasional lexical formations. The term iconograph provides an example of pseudo-technological nomenclature. Morphologically, the word resembles scientific compounds such as photograph and lithograph. The lexical structure therefore activates a

technological script. However, within the narrative, the device operates through magical rather than scientific principles. The resulting incongruity arises from the coexistence of scientific terminology and supernatural functionality. Similar mechanisms are observed in curiobiological museum, where the scientific register associated with biological classification is combined with absurd fantasy phenomena. Such formations imitate the language of academic discourse while simultaneously parodying its claims to objectivity and rationality [2; 3; 6].

The monetary units Zchloty and quarter-iotum constitute particularly sophisticated examples of lexical humour. Zchloty is a phonological deformation of the Polish currency name zloty. The introduction of the unusual consonant cluster zch- increases the impression of foreignness and exoticism while simultaneously creating a mildly absurd phonetic form. Quarter-iotum operates through a different mechanism. The lexical element iota traditionally denotes an extremely small quantity, and Pratchett transforms this abstract concept into a fictional unit of currency. The further subdivision of an already negligible amount into a quarter produces mathematical absurdity and economic satire. Together, these lexical innovations parody monetary systems while simultaneously enriching the linguistic landscape of Discworld. Their humour arises from the interaction of morphological creativity, semantic incongruity, and pragmatic exaggeration [1; 2; 5]. The distribution of humour mechanisms identified in the corpus is illustrated in Figure 1.

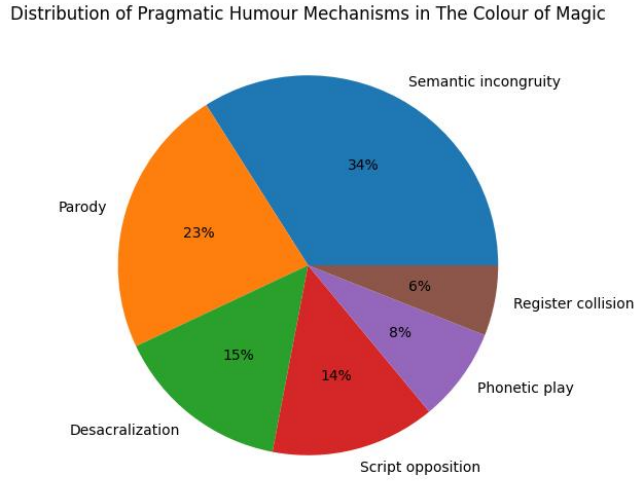


Figure 1. The distribution of humour mechanisms identified in the corpus

The results demonstrate that semantic incongruity functions as the dominant mechanism responsible for humour generation throughout the novel [1; 2; 3].

Conclusions

The study demonstrates that lexical humour in The Colour of Magic is primarily realized through onomastic creativity and occasional lexical formation. Anthroponyms and toponyms represent the most productive categories of humour-producing units, accounting for more than half of the research corpus.

The findings indicate that Pratchett systematically employs semantic incongruity, parody, script opposition, desacralization, and register collision to generate comic effects [1; 2; 3; 19; 21]. Proper names perform not only identificational functions but also act as pragmatic instruments for parodying fantasy conventions and establishing interaction with readers [4; 5; 7].

The scientific novelty of the research lies in the systematic classification of humour-producing lexical units within The Colour of Magic and the identification of their dominant pragmatic

mechanisms. The practical significance of the study consists in its applicability to literary linguistics, humour studies, fantasy discourse analysis, and translation practice.

References

1. Raskin, V. (1985). Semantic mechanisms of humor. D. Reidel Publishing Company.
2. Attardo, S. (1994). Linguistic theories of humor. Mouton de Gruyter.
3. Attardo, S. (2001). Humorous texts: A semantic and pragmatic analysis. Mouton de Gruyter.
4. Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1995). Relevance: Communication and cognition (2nd ed.). Blackwell Publishers.
5. Yule, G. (1996). Pragmatics. Oxford University Press.
6. van Dijk, T. A. (2008). Discourse and context: A sociocognitive approach. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511481499
7. Nicolaisen, W. F. H. (1979). Onomastics and literature. Journal of Literary Onomastics, 1, 1–12.
8. Begmatov, E. A. (2013). O‘zbek ismlari ma’nosi. O‘zbekiston milliy ensiklopediyasi.
9. Kristeva, J. (1986). Word, dialogue and novel. In T. Moi (Ed.), The Kristeva reader (pp. 34–61). Columbia University Press.
10. Genette, G. (1997). Palimpsests: Literature in the second degree. University of Nebraska Press.
11. Jackson, R. (1981). Fantasy: The literature of subversion. Methuen.
12. Todorov, T. (1975). The fantastic: A structural approach to a literary genre. Cornell University Press.
13. Shippey, T. (2000). J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the century. HarperCollins.
14. Clute, J., & Grant, J. (Eds.). (1999). The encyclopedia of fantasy. Orbit.
15. Pratchett, T. (1983). The colour of magic. Colin Smythe.
16. Pratchett, T. (1988). The light fantastic. Victor Gollancz.
17. Pratchett, T. (1992). Soul music. Victor Gollancz.
18. Pratchett, T. (1994). Interesting times. Victor Gollancz.
19. Özbay, A. (2020). Fantasy literature as a postmodern parody: Terry Pratchett’s Discworld novels. Journal of Language and Literature Studies, 16(2), 55–68.
20. Safarov, Sh. S. (2023). Tilshunoslik terminlarining izohli lug‘ati. Lesson Press.
21. Вержинская, Н. В. (2010). Дискурсивные особенности юмора в произведениях Терри Пратчетта. Вестник Волгоградского государственного университета, 9(2), 112–118.
22. Bakiyev, R. R. (2015). Lingvostilisticheskie osobennosti proizvedeniy Terry Pratchetta. Filologicheskie Nauki. Voprosy Teorii i Praktiki, 8(50), 27–31.
23. Fredericks, S. C. (1978). Problems of fantasy. Science Fiction Studies, 5(1), 33–47. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239144
24. Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. G. (2015). A glossary of literary terms (11th ed.). Cengage Learning.