

LANGUAGE PLAY: ONE WAY OF READING J.K. ROWLING'S *HARRY POTTER*

Trisnowati Tanto^{1*} & Jeanyfer Tanusy²

^{1, 2}, English Department, Maranatha Christian University

Corresponding Author: Trisnowati Tanto, E-mail: trisnowatitanto@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

J.K. Rowling and her *Harry Potter* series, published from 1997 to 2007, have been globally acclaimed as one of the most popular novels with the most varied target readers. A lot of reviews have been made and by far, they focused more on the literary aspects. This research offers a different way of reading *Harry Potter* novels since it will focus more on language play as Rowling's style of writing, which is believed to contribute to the comprehension of the literary elements. Language play is a means of foregrounding – linguistic forms that stand out in a text. The research is done to find out the language play forms contained in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* and how these forms support the understanding of the literary elements. The research employs the descriptive qualitative method; various linguistic forms of language play are taken as the data, which are then investigated further in terms of the types of linguistic features. Afterward, these are connected with the literal and contextual meanings so as to find out how they support the literary elements. The findings show that besides being entertaining, the language play helps support reader's imagination as well as supporting the characterization and plot. The research also shows that language play deserves considerable appreciation since creating as well as understanding it needs a high language skill from both the author and readers, especially when it is intended not only to be entertaining but to support the literary elements.

1. INTRODUCTION

J.K. Rowling (born in 1965) is undoubtedly acclaimed as one of the most well-known and popular writers in the world. According to surveys, in UK alone, 97% of UK citizens know who J.K. Rowling is. In a more detailed perspective in the global coverage, Rowling is mostly known by the “baby boomer” generations (71%), born between 1946-1964, and then followed by Gen X (1965-1981) with the total percentage of 63% (*J. K. Rowling Popularity & Fame / YouGov*, n.d.). Besides, Rowling has also received the title of “The Most Influential Woman in Britain” in 2010, which is an honor given by magazine editors (*J. K. Rowling / Biography, Books and Facts*, n.d.).

The *Harry Potter* series themselves were published from 1997 to 2007 and some achievements have been reached. It is claimed that the *Harry Potter* series have been made and sold as many as 500 million copies; each of the seven novels has been sold around 65 until 120 million copies (Quinn, 2022) with the seventh novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, being the fastest-selling book as recorded by *The New York Times* in 2007 that more than 11 million copies were sold during the first 24 hours only in three markets (*Harry Potter' tale is fastest-selling*



book in history, 2007). Moreover, the novels have been translated into over 70 languages and they have become the most widely read series (A, 2017). Besides, the popularity of the *Harry Potter* series is more obvious as it is the most-searched movie franchise in 75 countries around the globe, beating Marvel's character, Spiderman (MuggleNet, 2021).

By far, most reviews on *Harry Potter* have revolved around the literary aspects of the novels. One review mentions that the plot is outstanding with lifelike characters that succeed in enchanting readers (Breslin, 2019). Furthermore, concerning the themes, Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels usually provide a clear distinction between good and evil so as to enable readers to vividly compare and contrast them. The theme of love is also a crucial aspect that can be seen in the novels as Harry is told to survive the attack of Voldemort thanks to those who love him, while the idea of death appears mostly because Rowling wants her audience to feel the pain of losing someone (*Harry Potter: The Main Themes, Literary Techniques and Devices. Time, Setting and the Plot*, 2021).

Another perspective of reviewing the *Harry Potter* novels is seen from the angle of language use. One study is done focusing on Rowling's writing style in terms of types of sentence structure using Noam Chomsky's Transformational Grammar Theory. All in all, unaware as she might be, Rowling explicitly uses kernel sentences, connectives, and reductions, which can be considered to be her writing style (Bonifacio, n.d.).

Another study confirms that Rowling has a unique writing style. She not only invents her own words but also inserts humor to make every character more lifelike and attractive. Moreover, she also uses some other distinctive styles, for example register variations which range from the formal to the colloquial styles. What is also noteworthy is Rowling's talent in inventing new words, which are of Latin and French origins as well as of mythology references. All this contributes to Rowling's unique use of language (Alla, 2015).

This present research focuses more on the new-invented words or language play found in the first novel of the *Harry Potter* series, namely *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. There are two research objectives that will be pursued in the analysis. First, this research aims to examine in more details Rowling's use of language play, in the hope of offering a different way of reading *Harry Potter* novels. Second, the research also aims to find out how the language play supports the literary elements, such as the plot of the novel and characterization of the characters and how the language play can help build the readers' imagination, especially because the story revolves around magical things in a magical world.

The first linguist using the term "language play" is David Crystal, who says that the ultimate purpose of playing with language is enjoyment, which is related to what he explains further that language play serves the ludic function of language. Basically, playing with language is done by manipulating the language, meaning that the rules of language are bent and broken (Crystal, 1998). This definitely needs high creativity in using language so that what is resulted from the rule bending and breaking is extraordinary language that will be outstanding enough for readers to detect and be amused. This is in fact connected with the concept of foregrounding (Verdonk, 2002) or what is called "de-automatization of the linguistic code." (Leech & Short, 2007). This kind of creativity requires an author to be able to exploit the language in an attractive way or "escape from banality" (Leech, 1991).



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on language style, more specifically on linguistics deviation as a foregrounding element, has been done by several researchers. Hameed and Al-Sadoon (2015) investigated the stylistic deviation found in Maya Angelou's *Still I Arise*. They found out that Angelou employed quite a wide range of linguistic features, such as clear in the use of lexicon and grammar as well as phonological, graphological, morphological, and semantic features. They claimed that these deviations unveil the poet's excellence of language use.

Another research on linguistic deviations was conducted by Hussain et al. (2020) in Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. They examined the deviations in various levels of linguistic analysis, covering the phonological, syntactic, morphological, lexical, and semantic levels. The researchers concluded that all these linguistic deviations add to the literary aesthetic purposes.

Furthermore, in a more specific scope, studies on language play as a form of linguistic deviation have also been done quite extensively; the first one discusses how language play is applied in language learning. The findings suggest that language play is potentially useful as an on-task behavior of a language learner rather than a diversion. This is in support of the idea that learning a language does not mean giving up joy and enjoyment; on the contrary, the research findings suggest otherwise (Kasperek, 2016). Similar research was conducted in Iran, concluding that language play is indeed useful, effective, and engaging to be used as a tool of learning, especially for children aged 9 to 11 (Gheitasi, 2022).

Another study done by Warner (2004) shows how language play is used in another context, which is computer-mediated communication (CMC). The findings show that in online conversations the language play often used covers a form play, semantic play, and pragmatic play (Warner, 2004). Another research examines students' chat on Twitter, resulting in the fact that language play makes them enjoy the process of communication more. The forms of language play found in the chat vary from repetition, joking, insulting, word games, foreign words and references, etc. (Hattem, 2014).

This present research is trying to fill in the gap in the studies of Stylistics and in particular, language play. To be specific, in this research, these language play forms will be examined in terms of how they are formed linguistically. Afterward, since the language play in these novels are believed to contribute to the comprehension of the literary elements, the research is also conducted to describe how the language play forms contained in the novel support the understanding of the literary elements.

Through this research, it is expected that the interrelation between literature and linguistics, which is in fact the basic understanding of Stylistics can be illustrated in a clearer way. Moreover, this research would also give a clear picture how an author and readers should cooperate in order to gain the fullest comprehension of the work; in this case, both sides need high language skills as well as creativity in creating language play and understanding it.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative method, which is a type of research that collects and analyses non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences (Bhandari, 2020). Besides, it



is also a descriptive research method, which is defined as a method that describes and interprets phenomena including their characteristics by the identification of “recurring themes, patterns, or concepts” (Nassaji, 2017, p. 130). Based on the technique of collecting the data, the research belongs to library research. The primary and secondary data are all taken from references, both printed and online ones. According to Meldy et al. (2020), this type of research is “a series of activities related to the method of collecting library data, reading, recording, and processing research materials,” among which are “scientific journal, reference book, and literature” (p. 95). In doing the research, first, various linguistic forms of language play contained in the novels are taken as the data, which are then investigated further in terms of the types of linguistic features. Afterward, with the assistance of dictionaries and other references, these data are connected with the literal and contextual meanings so as to find out how they support the literary elements.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, tells about the early life of Harry Potter. He has unfortunately lived unhappily with his uncle's family since his parents passed away. Then a wizard called Hagrid takes him to Hogwarts, a school of witchcraft and wizardry, and Harry studies here. In this school, he and his best friends, Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger, encounter a lot of adventures, mostly in protecting themselves from the main enemy, Voldemort, who is trying to get the philosopher's stone, which is believed to be able to give him immortality.

There are many peculiar characters involved in the story as well as bizarre things and events going on, which makes a lot of sense considering that the story revolves around the world of magic. In this part of the paper, the formation of these proper nouns regarding the names and spells will be analyzed further in terms of the types of language play, whether they play with word formation (morphological play) or word meaning (semantic play). Due to space constraint, the analysis will be limited to those characters, objects, places and spells having prominent roles in the story.

Table 1 below shows the language play process of the proper nouns regarding the characters' names.

Table 1. Language Play Processes in the Characters' Names

No.	Characters' names	Semantic play	Morphological play
1	Albus Dumbledore	-literal meaning -associative meaning	
2	Harry Potter	-literal meaning -synonymy	
3	Hermione Granger	-homophone -literal meaning	
4	Draco Malfoy	-synonymy -literal meaning	-clipping



No.	Characters' names	Semantic play	Morphological play
5	Severus Snape	-literal meaning -synonymy -mime	
6	Rubeus Hagrid	-homophony -literal meaning -associative meaning -synonymy	
7	Sirius Black	-homophony -synonymy -associative meaning	
8	Voldemort	-synonymy -associative meaning -literal meaning	-blending

As can be seen in the table above, in the process of creating the characters' names, there are more than one type of play involved in each name, which indicates that the language play used in this novel is quite complex to detect and understand. Thus, they can be regarded as multi-typed language play, which in this case comprises two kinds of play: semantic play and morphological play.

The first data is Albus Dumbledore, who is the principal of Hogwarts. The first name, Albus, is a Latin word which literally means "white" (Merriam-Webster). White itself is associated with purity or cleanliness (Cherry, 2022). This is in line with the context of the novel, in which Albus Dumbledore is described to have a pure heart so that a lot of people never have any problems in trusting him. Consequently, the name supports the description of the character.

In the dictionary, the first name of the second data, Harry, is a verb meaning "worry" (The Free Dictionary, n.d.), while the last name, Potter, is synonymous with "trifle" or "mess up" (Roget, 1977), which has the literal meaning of "to be the cause of someone's physical, emotional, or mental problems." (Rundell, 2005) When understanding the semantic play contained in the protagonist's name, readers will get some clues that in the story Harry will always face problems that make the people around him worried a lot. Thus, the language play supports the plot elements of foreshadowing as well as suspense.

The last name of Harry Potter's best friend, Granger, is homophonous with the word "grandeur", which literally means "the quality of being great and impressive in appearance." (Oxford Learners' Dictionary, n.d.) In the novel, Hermione Granger is portrayed as an extraordinarily intelligent girl who comes from a non-magic family. Hence, her name does suit her personality.



The next is Draco Malfoy, one of Harry Potter's classmates who is described as an ill-witted boy and tends to treat other people evilly. This description of his personality is line with the language play contained in his name. The first name, Draco, is a clipped form of the word "draconic", which is synonymous with harsh or violent, or vicious" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This is strengthened by the last name, Malfoy, which is similar in form an pronunciation to the word "malevolence" which refers to the condition of "having, showing, or arising from intense often vicious ill will, spite, or hatred" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Professor Severus Snape is a teacher of Potion in Hogwarts. He is unfriendly and easily upset, especially towards students from the House of Griffindor. He is very severe and likes snapping to his students. This portrayal of his character is actually shown from the language play involved in the creation of his name. The first name, Severus, is associated with the word "severe", which is a synonym of the adjective "rigid, strict" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Besides, his last name, Snape, mimes the word "snap", which literally means "become angry or upset" (Macmillan English Dictionary, n.d.).

The next character's name is Rubeus Hagrid, who is a gamekeeper in Hogwarts. Physically, he is wild looking, but he is in fact very kind-hearted. The wild-looking appearance is supported by his last name, Hagrid, which is associated with the word "haggard", meaning "wild-looking, untamed or untrained" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Besides, the kind-hearted personality is related to his first name, Rubeus, which is homophonous with the word "rubious", which is the quality of a ruby. Consequently, this definitely has a positive association.

Sirius Black is a wizard that always looks sad and mysterious and this is supported by the associative meaning of his last name, Black, which refers to sadness and mystery. Despite looking mysterious, he is sincere at heart and cares a lot about his friends. These characteristics are in line with the language play process shown by his first name, Sirius, which is homophonous with the word "serious", while the word "serious" is a synonym of the word "earnest, sincere" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

The last character's name is Voldemort, who is the antagonist of the story. He is portrayed as an evil spirit that has no form and is a parasite in one's body. He also causes death so as to keep himself alive, he has to kill any live beings. This description is actually reflected in the process of forming the name. the name Voldemort is the result of a blending process of the words "volee", "de", and "mortal". The word "volee" is a French word meaning "flying" (Webster's International Dictionary, n.d.), which is associated with what a spirit does. The next word "de" also comes from French meaning "of", while the word "mortal" is synonymous with "death". Thus, based on the word formation and meanings, the name "Voldemort" can be interpreted as a spirit of death. Once understanding the meaning of the name, readers may get the clues that this character will cause death to other characters, and therefore, in this case the language play serves as foreshadowing. In addition, the language play contained in the name also supports the element of suspense when the name tells readers how evil Voldemort is. Readers will keep wondering what will happen next in the story, how Voldemort will cause deaths and whether or not Harry Potter will be the one that is dead.

Furthermore, there are six data of proper nouns referring to names of objects and places that contain language play as shown in Table 2 below. These language play forms contribute to the better understanding of the literary element and since the novel is about the magic world, one of the most important literary elements is building readers' imagination.



Table 2. Language Play Processes in the Names of Objects and Places

No.	Names of Objects and Places	Semantic play	Morphological play
1	Hogwarts	-mime -synonymy	
2	Griffindor	-homophony -literal meaning	-blending
3	Slytherin	-mime -literal meaning -associative meaning	-blending
4	Owlery		-generalization -suffixation
5	Herbology	-literal meaning	-generalization -suffixation
6	Diagon Alley	-homophony -literal meaning	

The first data is Hogwarts, which is the name of the school of magic where Harry Potter studies. The name Hogwarts mimes the word “hogwash”, which is synonymous with “nonsense” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). When readers understand the language play process, they will be able to build their imagination about this school of magic, where a lot of nonsense things take place.

Data 2 is Griffindor, which is the name of one of the houses or dormitories in Hogwarts where Harry Potter and his friends stay. The house has a lion as its symbol. The process of forming the name includes playing with language, which helps readers have a clearer imagination. The name Griffindor is the result of a blending process of the words “griffin” and “dormitory”. In Greek mythology, it can be learned that a griffin refers to a creature with physically takes the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. Considering that an eagle is the king of birds, while a lion is the king of beasts, it can be understood that a griffin is regarded as the king of all creatures. As such, a griffin is known to be noble, fearsome, and protective (Geller, 2017). By knowing this, readers can expect what type of students stay in this house.

The next data is Slytherin, which is another house in Hogwarts with a snake as its symbol. This is a house where Draco Malfoy stays. The name undergoes some language play processes. First, the name Slytherin mimes the word “slithering”, which literally means “to move around the ground like a snake” (Macmillan English dictionary, 2001). Moreover, the name Slytherin can also be considered to be the result of a blending process of the words “sly” and “slithering”, which are



both associated with a snake. In this case, readers can also imagine that the students put in Slytherin are cunning students who usually use any means to get what they want.

The next two data, Owlery and Herbology, contain the same morphological processes, namely generalization and suffixation. Generalization is a morphological process of generalizing one concept to be applied in similar cases (Richards, 2010), for example the concept of adding the suffix –s to a plural noun in English is applied to some words. The suffix –ery in the formation of the name Owlery generalizes words having that suffix, such as “bakery” or “winery”, which refers to a place of where bread, cake, wine is made and sold. Thus, what is meant by Owlery in the novel is a place where owls are kept. The same process is applied to the name of a school subject, Herbology. Rowling plays with the morphological process of generalization as it takes the same process of some subjects like Biology or Sociology, in which the suffix –ology refers to a science or subjects. Consequently, Herbology in the novel also refers to a subject taught at Hogwarts which is about herbs or plants.

The last data in Table 2 is Diagon Alley, the name of a market for wizards. This market is unique as its entrance is at the backyard of a pub called Leaky Cauldron. The name itself is homophonous with the word “diagonally,” which has to do with how to enter the market. People will have to tap the right bricks diagonally. Through the language play form, readers’ imagination concerning this place will be built.

The world of magic in the *Harry Potter* novels will definitely be inseparable from spells. Linguistically speaking, the spells are special as they also contain language play, which will help readers to understand the functions of the spells. Table 3 below shows the data of language play in the form of spells.

Table 3. Language Play Processes in the Spells

No.	Spells	Semantic play	Morphological play
1	Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi		-anagram
2	Petrificus totalus	-associative meaning	
3	Wingardium leviosa	-associative meaning	

The first spell is quite long and it is written on a magic mirror frame, saying “erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi”, which on first reading makes no sense. However, when readers can figure out that this is actually a language play form, namely an anagram, they will be able to read it from back to front and it says “I show not your face but your hearts’ desire.” This explains the function of the spell on the mirror, that what is reflected there is not the person’s face but what becomes the person’s deepest desire.

The second spell, “petrificus totalus” is a spell that can make a person totally petrified, a condition when one is unable to move because of being frightened. When connected with the



formation of this spells, the word “petrificus” is associated with the word “petrified”, while the word “totalus” is associated with the word “total”. Therefore, readers will be able to imagine the function of the spell when they understand the language play process.

The third spell, “wingardium leviosa”, is a spell to levitate things. The students at Hogwarts usually practice this spell by levitating feather. This is in line with the language play process contained in the spell. The word “wingardium” is associated with wings, which is further associated with feather as well as the action of flying. In addition, “leviosa” is associated with the word “levitation”. Thus, it is clear that the language play supports readers’ imagination of how the spell works.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, the first concluding point concerns the types of language play used by Rowling in her novel. Most the language play forms (88%) found in the research show that in each data Rowling uses more than one type of language play form, which clearly reflects the complexity of the language play. Besides, in some language forms Rowling not only uses foreign language words, in this case French words, but also some mythology references. All these explain why Rowling’s language play is interesting to know and understand. In addition, these facts also disclose the high creativity of the author in creating the characters’, objects’ and places’ names as well as spells.

In response to the high creativity of the author, readers are required to have a high language skill as well so that there is a good balance. The author’s high creativity will not speak much when readers cannot detect, let alone understand the language play. This further implies the need of mastering the English language and investigating the new-created words in more details in order to be able to enjoy reading the novel in a deeper level.

Another concluding point deals with the fact that based on the linguistic areas, there are two types of language play, namely semantic play (59%), morphological play (12%), or the combination of semantic and morphological play (29%). Since semantic play plays a prominent role, it is understandable that in investigating the language play forms in the research, maximum use of dictionaries is very essential.

In addition, regarding the second objective, which is about how the language play supports the literary elements, it can be concluded that the language play forms contained in the names of the characters, names of places, and the spells do contribute to the understanding of the literary elements of the novel. The data of language play analyzed confirm the contribution of linguistics in the interpretation of such literary aspects as the suspense and foreshadowing, the characterization of the characters, as well as the readers’ imagination. This leads to the fact that Rowling’s coined words are not invented randomly; on the contrary, they are believed to be the result of deep thinking and research.

The research has some limitations due to time and space constraints. Among the seven novels in the *Harry Potter* series, this research only investigates the first novel. This might affect the



dominant types of language play found although this will not affect the fact about Rowling's creative use of language. In further research it is suggested to examine the language play used in the other *Harry Potter* novels so as to be confirmed that language play is indeed Rowling's writing style.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Trisnowati Tanto is a lecturer in the English Department, Faculty of Languages and Cultures, Maranatha Christian University. She got her doctoral degree in Linguistics from Padjadjaran University. Her research interests include Pragmatics, Critical Discourse Analysis, Stylistics, Multimodality, and Semiotics.

Jeanyfer Tanusy is a lecturer in the English Department, Faculty of Languages and Cultures, Universitas Kristen Maranatha. She is at the moment pursuing her doctoral degree in the Linguistics Department, Padjadjaran University, Bandung. Her research interests are in the linguistics areas of Semiotics, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Sociolinguistics and Narratology.

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