What Makes the Spectacled Boy so Special?: Peculiarities of J.K Rowling Writing Style

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Abstract:

   J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series are one of the bestselling books of all time, thus being subject to many ongoing debates as to what made them so popular and what was so special about them that they made millions of readers consider the Harry Potter books unputdownable. Some critics argued that the books' success was attributed to the well-designed marketing campaign rather than their literary values. The article aims to investigate the linguistic features of J.K. Rowling writing style and demonstrate her ability to write in multiple layers as well as to prove that it was the author's merit that made Harry Potter a worldwide phenomenon. The variations in register, different themes, fantasy elements intertwined with reality, linguistic taboos especially expressed in proper nouns of Latin and French origin and other objects of the imaginary world; mythological words combined with the contemporary way of writing, innumerous culture references related to proper nouns, literary devices; sarcasm; humor and dialect are some of the unique linguistic features in Harry Potter and serve as indication of the author's individual style (idiolect). Apart from the linguistic features, it is important to investigate orthographic features as well, considering the fact that the author has created her own conventions of spelling, capitalizations, hyphenation, word breaks, emphasis, and punctuation in order to convey the tone of text. Such features will be demonstrated through examples taken out from Harry Potter books.

Key words: literary style, variety in register, dialect, invented words, orthographic features

I. INTRODUCTION

J. K. Rowling is the author behind the Harry Potter phenomenon, a series of seven fantasy novels which made her one of the most well-known contemporary authors. Rowling created the character of Harry Potter while travelling on a train in 1990 but did not actually complete the first Harry Potter book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (*PS*) until 1995. It was published in 1997 by Bloomsbury Press, London and in 1998, in the United States of America, by Scholastic as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Nel, 2001: 7-22). Since then, the world has seen six other fantasy books just as remarkable as the first one.

Some critics argued that the books' success was due to a well-designed marketing campaign. Even if this was the case, the strategic marketing campaign would have worked only for the first book, not for all of them. Based on this understanding, the article aims to investigate on the linguistic features of J.K. Rowling writing style and demonstrate her ability to write in multiple layers. The variations in register, different themes, fantasy elements intertwined with reality, linguistic taboos especially expressed in proper nouns of Latin and French origin and other objects of the imaginary world; mythological words combined with contemporary way of writing, innumerous culture references related to proper nouns, literary devices; sarcasm; humor and dialect are some of the distinctive linguistic features in Harry Potter and serve as indication of the author's individual style (idiolect).

Apart from the linguistic features, it is important to investigate orthographic features as well, considering the fact that the author has created her own conventions of spelling, capitalizations, hyphenation, word breaks, emphasis, and punctuation. Such features will be demonstrated through examples taken out from the first three Harry Potter books.

II. EXPLANATION OF THE TERM "LITERARY STYLE"

Style derives from the Latin word *stylus* meaning stake or pointed instrument for writing, and modern meanings are an extension of this. The most relevant definition taken out from the Oxford English Dictionary is: "The manner of expression, characteristic of a particular writer (hence of an orator) or of a literary group or period; a writer's mode of expression considered in regard to clearness, effectiveness, beauty, and the like" (quoted in Hawthorn, 2000: 344).

Abrams (1993: 203; emphasis in original) defines style as "the manner of linguistic expression in prose or verse – it is *how* speakers or writers say whatever it is that they say". Here *how,* which is emphasized by Abrams, refers to the technique or craft of writing. Abrams's definition emphasizes the linguistic approach of style. There are a few ways of looking at style and talking about style; the linguistic focus is a main one.

Different scholars provide different definitions of what stylistics refers to. Some definitions proposed by stylisticians are as follows: Stylistics, simply defined as the (linguistic) study of style … literary stylistics has, implicitly or explicitly, the goal of explaining the relation between language and artistic function … The aim of literary stylistics is to relate the critic's concern of aesthetic appreciation with the linguist's concern of linguistic description. (Leech and Short, 1981: 13) Stylistics is a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to *language*. (Simpson, 2006: 2) Stylistics is the discipline which studies linguistic style.

According to Abrams, stylistics, more strictly known as literary stylistics or linguistic stylistics, is a *linguistic* approach to style or an approach that focuses on the linguistic properties of a writer's style of a literary text. Stylistics, simply defined as the (linguistic) study of style … literary stylistics has, implicitly or explicitly, the goal of explaining the relation between language and artistic function … The aim of literary stylistics is

to relate the critic's concern of aesthetic appreciation with the linguist's concern of linguistic description. (Leech and Short, 1981: 13). Stylistics is a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language. (Simpson, 2006: 2)

Toolan indirectly refers to stylistics by posing the question while referring to Hemingway's works: Why these word-choices, clause-patterns, rhythms and intonations, contextual implications, cohesive links, choices of voice and perspective and transitivity, etc. etc., and not any of the others imaginable? Conversely, can we locate the linguistic bases of some aspects of weak writing, bad poetry, the confusing and the banal? Stylistics asserts we should be able to, particularly by bringing to the close examination of the linguistic particularities of a text an understanding of the anatomy and functions of the language. (Toolan, 1998: viii-ix)

III. STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF J.K ROWLING WRITING STYLE

Invented words

Sometimes, when no other pre-existing name will do, Rowling invents her own. In a 1999 radio interview, Rowling said, "I'm big on names. I like names, generally…some of them are invented…but I also collect them from all kinds of places, maps, street names, names of people I meet, books on saints." (http://www.quick-quote-quill.org/articles/1999/1099-connectiontransc.html) Following is a list of the most frequently used invented words. It is important to stress that the list is much longer that that but considering the space constrains of this paper, only a few of them are listed:

> A Squib, also known as a wizard-born, is a non-magical person who is born to at least one magical parent. Squibs are, in essence, 'wizard-born Muggles.' They are rare and are looked upon with a degree of disdain by some witches and wizards, particularly pure-bloods. Muggle-born witches and wizards

are descended from Squibs who married Muggles: the magical ability unexpectedly resurfaces after many generations. (http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/muggles)

Mudblood is a highly derogatory term for a Muggle-born wizard or witch; that is, individuals with no wizarding parents or grandparents. There does not appear to be any difference in the magical power of Muggle-borns compared to those who are pure-blood or half-blood, but those prejudiced against Muggle-borns consider them to be of "lower breeding" or worth, and undeserving of magic. (http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Mudblood)

A Muggle is a person who is born into a non-magical family and is incapable of performing magic. Most Muggles are not aware that magic exists at all and that those with it have organised their own society largely separate from the Muggle world. (http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Muggle)

Quidditch is a wizarding sport played on broomsticks. It is the most popular game among wizards and witches, and, according to Rubeus Hagrid, the equivalent to Muggle's passion for football. (http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Quidditch)

A Horcrux is a powerful object in which a Dark wizard or witch has hidden a fragment of his or her soul for the purpose of attaining immortality. (http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Horcrux)

Humour is a third key linguistic tool Rowling uses to embed the magical culture. Humour helps build culture because it "characterize[s] the group to its members and can … be used to identify the group" (Fine and de Soucey 2). *Harry Potter* contains a great deal of wizard-specific humour, often through Ron's dialogue. One feature in a joking culture is "set[ting] boundaries in contrast to those who are defined as external to the group" (6). Ron does just this when he teases Hermione

about her family ski trip (a hobby unknown to wizards) and describes it as "Muggles strapping narrow strips of wood on to their feet to slide down mountains" (*Order of the Phoenix* 399). This joke emphasizes Ron's inexperience with this 'external' group's hobby, thus reinforcing his membership in the wizard culture.

Variations in register

A register is a set of connected linguistic practices that are associated with a group of speech situations in a speech community, or with an institution in a speech community. We might speak of a more formal style of English, where we use grammar that is more complex (i.e., more embedded clauses), words that are more Latinate, and pronunciation that is more fully articulated. (Kiesling, 2011: 97) Readers can notice lots of examples of register variation throughout Harry Potter books, ranging from the most formal style; to substandard English. Following are some examples of such variations.

Presence of technical sub-texts:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY UNIFORM

First-year students will require:
1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)
2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear
3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)
4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)
Please note that all pupils' clothes should carry name tags.

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad
PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICKS.

As noticed from the example above, this extract is very distinct from the rest of the text in that it resembles a notice board which informs the students about the school's regulation. As such the style of writing must fit with the purpose of the text. Modal verbs of permission and semi-modal verbs of prohibition are present in this extract. Additionally, it can be noticed that there is a lack of adjectives and emotional words.

Presence of formal style:

When students converse with their professors they are careful with choosing words and being respectful by using titles in front of their names or surnames such as Mr. Sir, Madam, Master, Professor, etc. At the grammatical level, it can be noticed that there are no short forms of negations and the register is very formal as compared to the vernacular style they use when they chat with each other. Following is an example of such style:

> 'Excuse me, Professor Flitwick, could I borrow Wood for a moment?'
> Harry stood up.
> "Sir -- Professor Dumbledore? Can I ask you something?"

As noticed from the sentences above, the requests are expressed in a formal style.

Sub-standard English expressed through Hagrid's dialect speech

According to www.dictionaly.reference.com a dialect is a variety of a language that is distinguished from other varieties of the same language by features of phonology, grammar, and vocabulary, and by its use by a group of speakers who are set off from others geographically or socially. The second meaning from the same soruce is: a provincial, rural, or socially distinct variety of a language that differs from the standard language, especially when considered as substandard. Dialect is present

in the series through Rubeus Hagrid's speech, one of the books' most interesting charecters. Hagrid has a very intersting personality, being a formidable, but kind-hearted person. Rubeus Hagrid's speech can be considered sub-standard English. Some of the most prominent aspects of Rubeus Hagrid's dialect are alternative spellings and apostrophes indicating omitted vowels and consonants.

Examples of Hagrid's dialect:

"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before... probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore.

"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be. An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter."

The presence of this linguistic feature, namely Hagrid's dialectal way is a distinctive feature of his upbringing and lack of education.

Phrases and words common to Hagrid's speech:

Hagrid's expressions	Interpretation
Blimey	mild form of exclamation
bong-sewer	mispronunciation of the French word for hello
budge up	move over
Chappie	chap, person, gentleman
Codswallop	cow manure - mild exclamation

Hagrid uses a contraction of (in') leaving off the (g) in the standard ending (ing):

anything	anythin'
behaving	behavin'
asking	askin'
Biding	bidin'

Other contracted words:

because	'cause
does not	doesn'
because	'cos
different	diff'rent
don't know	Dunno
are not	aren'
apart	apar'

References to Mythology

A myth is a story with traditional roots that uses symbols and imagery to express ideas, mysteries and truth. Although today's western cultures do not interpret myths literally, they are still believed to hold real meaning metaphorically, morally and symbolically. J.K. Rowling draws heavily from mythology, legend and folklore, expressing modern ideas and social morals to the newest generation of readers. She reinvents the old myths through a pattern of surprise twists and a reversal of expectations that reveal the author's own perspective and contemporary ethos. Centaurs, a magical creature whose head, torso and arms appear to be human and are joined to a horse's body, are among the mythological creatures included in Harry Potter. Despite possessing 'human intelligence', centaurs are classified as Beasts by the Ministry of Magic, at their own request, as they were unhappy at having to share being status with hags and vampires.

Another mythological creature in Harry Potter is Fawkes, the phoenix who was owned by Albus Dumbledore. Fawkes lived with Dumbledore at Hogwarts Castle for a large part of his life. He was instrumental in helping Harry Potter defeat the Serpent of Slytherin, bringing the Sword of Gryffindor, blinding the basilisk and saving Harry from the venom. The most startling of the phoenix's abilities is its ability to regenerate itself. It periodically bursts into flames when its body becomes old, and rises from the ashes as a newborn chick. The presence of such a bird in the series is the symbol of persistence and bravery.

Latin and French words

It is no secret that the Harry Potter series is heavily influenced by the classics. JK Rowling studied Latin as a subsidiary subject at the University of Exeter, and often draws upon classical myth, rhetoric, and nomenclature in her writing. J.K. Rowling also infuses Latin and French, the two languages she studied at Exeter, throughout the stories. Proper names and magical spells are often the result of Rowling's playful use of both Latin and French vocabularies. Draco Malfoy, for example, is a good illustration. His first name is Latin for serpent. As a member of Slytherin House, whose emblem is a snake, Draco's name is fitting. It also works to suggest his dark side, as snakes have long been associated with death, danger and evil. Draco's last name is equally appropriate, as *mal foy* means bad faith in French. In particular, Rowling usually draws her magical words from classical Latin. Following is a list of Latin-rooted spells.

> *Accio*: this summoning spell literally means 'I summon' or 'I fetch'
>
> *Confundo*: this spell, used to confuse an opponent, literally means 'I stir up', 'I confuse', or 'I bring an end to by upsetting'. The range of translations reflects the scope of the spell, which can be used either to effect mild or fatal confusion
>
> *Crucio*: this translates as, 'I torture'. This spell is used to cast the Cruciatus curse, a torturing spell that is one of the three unforgivable curses in *Harry Potter*.
>
> *Expelliarmus*: a disarming charm. The word is a combination of the Latin *expellere*, meaning 'to drive or force out', and *arma*, meaning weapon.
>
> *Lumos*: a mock-Greek adaptation of the Latin *lumen*, meaning 'light'. Used as a wand-lighting charm.
>
> *Petrificus Totalus*: a full body-binding curse. This is another of Rowling's blends. Although *petrificus* is not a Latin word, the Greek borrowing *petra* means rock. The suffix *–ficus*, which ascribes a sense of making or becoming to its headword, is very common in Latin. In Modern English, this sense of the affix *–fic* is still present in words like *terrific*,*certificate*,

or *mummification*.   Totalus   is   an   alteration   of
Latin *totalis* 'total'.

Playfulness with words

One significant aspect of language in the Harry Potter books is
J. K. Rowling's sense of playfulness. Who can doubt this
important element, when even in the opening pages of book one
she wrote these words of Professor McGonagall that describe
Harry Potter:

> "He'll be famous—a legend—I wouldn't be surprised if today
> was known as Harry Potter day in the future—there will be
> books written about Harry—every child in our world will
> know his name!" (Sorcerer's Stone, 13).

These words and the subsequent references to Harry's celebrity
stature throughout book two have, of course, become a prophecy
fulfilled, though their original intent was surely a playful one.
(Whited, 2002: 293). In names, in the coining of new words, and
in Rowling's descriptions of the magical place the reader enters
upon opening the covers of her books, she displays a keen sense
of language's ability to amuse. Who can leave the world of
Harry Potter without fond memories of Diagon Alley, or
without a smile for Cornelius Fudge in his pin-striped robes?
The playful titles of magical ministries are found comically
pompous by the readers. Likewise, the pin-striped robes, the
acid green pen, and the tartan dressing gown that make their
appearances in the books show the aothor's fine style to create
humor and entertainment.

Suprasegmental features - Orthographic peculiarities

According to Nord, the suprasegmental features of a text are all
those   features   of   text   organization   which   overlap   the
boundaries of any lexical or syntactical segments, sentences,
and paragraphs, framing the phonological "gestalt" or specific
"tone" of the text. (2005 131) The particular framing of a text
depends, first and foremost, on the medium by which the text is

transmitted. In written texts, the suprasegmental features are signaled by optical means, such as italics, spaced or bold type, quotation marks, dashes and parentheses, etc .In spoken texts, the suprasegmental features are signaled by acoustic means, such as tonicity, modulation, variations in pitch and loudness, etc. (ibid)

The layout of the text (e.g. the combination of text and photos, type area, or the choice of types for titles or paragraph headings), which sometimes has an effect on the suprasegmental features (e.g. representation of long pauses by wider spaces between paragraphs) is assigned to the category of non-verbal elements, since the phonetic realization is only affected indirectly. (Nord, 2006: 132)

Apart from the linguistic novelties that J.K. Rowling presents in her Harry Potter books, what else can be noticed is the orthographic features which are diverse and can be found in all the Harry Potter books. Such features are very helpful when it comes to children's literature. When there is a shift in font or capitalization of all the letters, the readers are informed about a difference in the sentence tone.

Examples of suprasegmental features in Harry Potter:

The change of the font:
Intrigued, Harry flicked the envelope open and pulled out the sheaf of parchment inside. More curly silver writing on the front page said:

Feel out of step in the world of modern magic? Find yourself making excuses not to perform simple spells? Ever been taunted for your woeful wandwork?

There is an answer!

As seen from the example, the letter has been written in Edwardian Script ITC style, resembling the hand-writing and looking like a real letter.

Capitalization

"I just wondered if I could have my book back."
"GET OUT! OUT!"

There are so many cases of capitalization in Harry Potter books. Any time the tone of the conversation changes, the author resorts to capitalization to visually aid the reader of such a change.

Double dashes (--) and ellipses (...)

Yeh've been singled out, an' that's always hard. But yeh'll have a great time at Hogwarts -- I did -- still do, 'smatter of fact."
Hagrid helped Harry on to the train that would take him back to the Dursleys, then handed him an envelope.
"Yer ticket fer Hogwarts, " he said. "First o' September -- King's Cross -- it's all on yer ticket. Any problems with the Dursleys, send me a letter with yer owl, she'll know where to find me.... See yeh soon,
Harry."

According to (http://www.grammarbook.com) dashes, like commas, semicolons, colons, ellipses, and parentheses, indicate added emphasis, an interruption, or an abrupt change of thought. As seen from the example above, there are two successive dashes instead of one. This is a novelty introduced by the author to me make the text more interesting for the child reader. Additionally, three successive dots indicate hesitation on the part of the speaker. Such features are very frequent in Harry Potter books. According to the same source, ellipses can express hesitation, changes of mood, suspense, or thoughts trailing off. Writers also use ellipses to indicate a pause or wavering in an otherwise straightforward sentence. Ellipses are very frequent in Harry Potter books to show hesitation and pauses.

CONCLUSIONS

Many literary critics, religious leaders and educational authorities in the United States have criticized Ms. Rowling's work as being unliterary, unchristian and unworthy of use in schools. And the world media projects these declarations as if all Western and Eastern countries should follow suit. According to Lia Wyler[1], a work should be called "unliterary" when his/her author/ess aims to write a masterpiece and ends up publishing trash. Ms. Rowling apparently set out to write a thrilling, spell-binding adventure for children and has achieved her goal. (2003: 14)

From the results of this modest study, it can be concluded that J.K Rowling utilizes a variety of styles and registers ranging from the most formal and official style to technical, colloquialisms, substandard English and socio-dialects. Such variations not only served aesthetic purposes but they are indicative to the tone of the text and visually help the child readers to better understand such differences in the tone. Additionally, such styles a play pedagogical and informative role because, while reading Harry Potter, readers notice that each writing style has a functional purpose in a contextual situation.

In addition, J.K Rowling has a talent in inventing new words, especially proper nouns of magical creatures and magical objects which sometimes create a comic or sarcastic effect. Most of the proper nouns are of Latin and French origin, thus adding to the wealth of linguistic properties she offers in the books. The presence of Latin and French words make the child reader more willing to learn a foreign language since the spells are very appealing to them. Reference to mythology is another very interesting feature which adds to J.K. Rowling's encyclopedic knowledge.

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[1] Lia Wyler is the translator of Harry Potter into Portuguese.

Apart from the linguistic novelties that J.K. Rowling presents in her Harry Potter books, what else can be noticed is the orthographic features which are diverse and can be found in all the Harry Potter books. Such features are very helpful when it comes to children's literature. When there is a shift in font or capitalization of all the letters, or changes in punctuation system the readers are informed about a difference in the sentence tone.

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