NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE IN TERRY PRATCHETT'S THE WEE FREE MEN

Dr. Judita Ondrušeková
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia

ABSTRACT

This article will focus on sociolinguistic aspects in Terry Pratchett's The Wee Free Men. In particular we will deal with the interplay of standard and non-standard British English by which the writer highlights cultural stereotypes as well as narrative ones; creating a children's tale with a distinctively adult-like character set. Pratchett uses Tiffany Aching to explore the topics of non-traditional education, family dynamics and social hierarchies in a fantasy setting. By combining the mundane coming-of-age story with a fantastic adventure, he contrasts the escapist nature of a fantasy narrative with the inevitable growth of responsibility. The paper aims to explore the usage of non-standard language and its effects on the narrative and character components; the reader's reception of this usage is an important factor in the communicative channel formed between the reader and the author. From regional varieties, this work uses Scottish dialect, but Pratchett mixes in some of his own creations, such as the Toad dialect. The author also uses grammatically incorrect phrases or sentences. Therefore, this paper will analyze the instances where Pratchett used non-standard British English and determine their narrative function. Furthermore, it will illustrate the importance of dialects which are viewed as separate languages of fantastic races.

Keywords: *Terry Pratchett, non-standard language, dialects, fantasy, narratology*

INTRODUCTION

This research paper will focus on sociolinguistic aspects in fantasy literature, in particular we will deal with the interplay of written and spoken word in Terry Pratchett's *The Wee Free Men*. As a writer, Pratchett plays with cultural stereotypes as well as narrative ones, creating a children's tale with a distinctive character set.

The Wee Free Men experiments with several language variations: the titular Wee Free Men use Scottish dialect, and the heroine's younger brother is still learning to talk and therefore, his language is in places ungrammatical. Another consideration is the social setting of the book. Pratchett is portraying an average village where education is not a universal right. Therefore, this paper will analyze the instances where Pratchett used grammatically incorrect lexeis or sentences.

Our methodology for this topic comprised of a mix of phonetic, lexical and stylistic analysis of Pratchett's text and search for regional dialects. The main focus will be on Scottish dialect, but Pratchett includes erroneous passages in his literary work. Therefore the aim of this research paper is to identify the function of these

passages in Pratchett's text. Further investigation will reveal if Pratchett's Scottish slang is authentic or if the writer introduced his own variation of language.

THE WEE FREE MEN

The novel begins the story of Tiffany Aching, a twelve year old milkmaid living on a farm in The Chalk. The coming-of-age story explores two worlds through the eyes of a young girl who is trying to save her younger brother with the help of the titular Wee Free Men. The book depicts her first meeting with the Wee Free Men and her further encounters that traverse through their culture. The most obvious sign of their cultural difference is their usage of Scottish dialect. Pratchett mixes the Highland dialect (a mix of Scottish English mixed with Gaelic) [1] with standard British English and supports Scottish imagery by playing with Scottish stereotypes. His fantastic race of Scottish pixies wear kilts, use blue body paint/tattoos and are extremely interested in close combat. All mentioned elements create a visual image, but Pratchett did not stop at this step. Instead, he further supported the cultural division of *Discworld*, giving several fantastic races their own distinct voice, e.g. trolls and golems. Some fantastic races produce their own language which does not get its own translation as the meaning can be understood in the recipient's mind, e.g Sneebs.

Pratchett chooses to work with language to add to the power of his narrative voice – his knowledge of Highland English and Scottish stereotypes is then transferred to the reader who can appreciate the race. Author's acknowledgment of the independence led him to create a completely new name for them: "Nac Mac Feegles", "pictsies" or the "Wee Free Men". Pratchett decided to create a parody race of pixies – small, sometimes mischievous fairies – and named them pictsies. They reject the name pixies and refuse their customs – for example accepting offerings of milk. Instead, they enjoy drinking alcohol and smoking. Their culture is based around fighting, as they view themselves as a warrior race. Their narrative purpose is to provide the hook for Tiffany's adventure – they are looking for a witch and she fits their criteria. They also provide physical protection for Tiffany who is a pre-teen and cannot defend herself against dangerous magical creatures without help. Their last function is to provide the reader with much needed lore exposition, as Tiffany needs to be trained and brought deeper into the fantasy world.

They have knowledge of monsters beyond the heroine's knowledge and serve as her protectors during her dangerous quest to save her toddler brother. The author recognizes that the Wee free folk are ridiculous by design and plays into the silliness of this image by making them look harmlessly bloodthirsty – they are fearsome in their minds and create a dissonance between the reader's conflicting images – figures "about six inches tall and mostly colored blue, although it was hard to know if that was the actual color of their skins or just the dye from their tattoos, which covered every inch that wasn't covered with red hair" [2]. This portrayal of tattooed fairies is amusing by itself, but their outfits are also significant. Because *Discworld* takes place during late Medieval period, they were outfitted to resemble William Wallace from Gibbson's 1995 film *Braveheart.* The effect of fairy-folk dressed as medieval Scottish warriors is then comical, as the weapon size signifying their apparent

strength is highlighted: “They wore short kilts, and some wore other bits of clothing too, like skinny vests. A few of them wore rabbit or rat skulls on their heads, as a sort of helmet. And every single one of them carried, slung across his back, a sword nearly as big as he was.” [2]

SCOTTISH DIALECT

Even though Pratchett’s *Discworld* series is a world that shares and interconnects the setting, themes and characters, the author’s charm comes from making these connections seem seamless. The reader can then appreciate Pratchett’s efforts of writing a hybrid fairy-tale/mystery novel or fantasy/adventure novel that is on one hand set in a fantastic world and on the other draws from English and Scottish cultures.

The author introduces the Wee Free Men early in the book, their speech being distinctive in accent and register: *“Crivens! Gang awa’ oot o’ here, ye daft wee hinny! ’Ware the green heid!”* [2]. The exclamatory phrase *crivens* is repeatedly present throughout the book and oftentimes marks the beginning or entrance of the Wee Folk in dialogue. It does not have a direct translation to English, however, according to Dictionary of the Scots Language [3], it most likely comes from the phrase “Christ’s veins!”. Pratchett visibly brings the accent into life as instead of writing “Get away out of here, you daft wee hinny!”, he instead chose to capture the phonetic differences in Scottish dialect. The changes in vowel pronunciation in “get”, “you”, the clipping of words “away”, “out” and lastly, the addition of more Scottish lexemes, in this case the word “hinny”.

It has to be said that the main character does not regard the Scottish dialect as difficult to understand and does not stumble over any of the expressions. She responds as if she was speaking to another person using standard English. This falls under some suspension of disbelief, as a twelve year old girl could have problems with understanding the Highland English dialect, but she was able to understand the Scottish-Irish amalgamation of accents with little comment. After her initial surprise, she never once commented on the differences in accents and replied to questions or statements without repeating or correcting the dialect. This shows that Pratchett wanted to insert an exotic quality to his narrative, but chose one that would not disrupt his storytelling or slow down the flow of his dialogue. His characters show understanding of each other’s culture and the author’s decision to provide this linguistic barrier does not affect his writing beyond one simple comment or a moment of initial hesitation as shown: “‘And I’m not a hag! Are you fairies of some sort? And what about our ship? I mean, sheep?’” [2]. The differences in pronunciation are written as small jokes and the differences in pronunciation are never discussed in any detail, nor do they produce any xenophobia or form any prejudices. Thus, the writer creates a multicultural society which is apparent to the reader and instills a certain need to understand the playful side of language.

We can also observe dialogue usage of this dialect with two Wee folk discussing Tiffany and the possibility of her being a witch:

"'*Crivens! It's a' verra well sayin' 'find the hag,' but what should we be lookin' for, can ye tell me that? All these bigjobs look just the same tae me!'*

'*Not-totally-wee Geordie doon at the fishin' said she was a big, big girl!'*

'*A great help that is, I dinna think! They're all big, big girls!'*

'*Ye paira dafties! Everyone knows a hag wears a pointy bonnet!'*

'*So they canna be a hag if they're sleepin', then?*'" [2]

Here, Pratchett signalizes the presence of the Wee folk with the use of the expression *crivens* and proceeds to reveal the workings of their minds by vocalizing their aim in the very next sentence. Their goal is to "find the hag", a hag being a witch in standard British English. The Wee folk wonder about their ability to recognize a witch, knowing that they are looking for a "big girl" and the unhelpfulness of this piece of advice. The only other hint they have is the witches wear pointy bonnets. Since Pratchett is a comedy writer, he could not forego the opportunity to lighten the atmosphere with a simple joke. The joke plays on the literal understanding of the hint – a witch wearing a pointy bonnet – therefore, a girl or a woman who is not wearing one when they are asleep must lose their status of a witch. By providing this exchange, the author gives an insight into the characters' motivation, their goals, way of thinking and also creates a mystery, as he makes it clear they are following hints and therefore command of another being or a higher ranking Wee folk.

The Scottish dialect is present in this exchange: clipping of the -ing suffix in words saying, looking, fishing and sleeping and instead the accent clips off the final sound "g" (sayin', lookin', fishin', sleepin'). Pratchett also highlights the Scottish emphasis on "r" (verra), which is more rhotic [1]. Another set of words changed by pronunciation are prepositions "to" and "down", or in the dialogue "tae" and "doon". The Scots change the form of their auxiliary verb "don't" into "dinna". The syntax of that sentence is helpful to the reader, as they would be able to connect the meaning to the context of the exchange. In this brief piece of dialogue, we see that Pratchett crafts his sentences carefully. He used the dialect to mark most auxiliary verbs, but have them be recognizable by syntax and context and he mostly marked the words with exaggerated pronunciation (very, to, down).

In regards to tense distinction, the Wee folk create past continuous tense by using "was" and the verb with -ing suffix, where "was" is accented to create a lexme "wuz" instead: "'We wuz hungerin', mistress,' he muttered. 'But when we kenned it was thine, we did put the beastie back in the fold.'" [2] The expression "we was hungering"* is ungrammatical in standard British English as the verb "to hunger" does not exist, and therefore cannot be constructed into the past continuous tense. The Wee folk also do not recognize the correct grammatical form of "to be", as the correct form would be "we were". The quotation also shows that the Wee folk can create past simple tense, where they use the expression "we kenned" meaning "we knew". This shows that the Wee folk do not recognize the irregular verbs prescribed by standard British English and such a change could be large enough for the reader to

misunderstand or even not understand the text, but their intentions can be understood since Pratchett left enough contextual clues to decipher the meaning.

Another character who uses Scottish dialect is Tiffany's grandmother, know as Granny Aching. She is not consistent in her usage and even though she uses pronouns "ye" in several instances, she can also speak standard British English:

"A man who takes arms against his lord, that man is hanged. A starving man who steals his lord's sheep, that man is hanged. A dog that kills sheep, that dog is put to death. Those laws are on these hills and these hills are in my bones. What is a baron, that the law be brake for him?" [2]

In this case we see that Granny does not use only standard British English, as evidenced by the presence of a non-standard verb phrase "law be brake for him". However, she does not speak the dialect fluently and pronounces "starving" as a Brit, uses "who" instead of "wha", or "to" instead of "tae". The point of contention The standard British version of a passive construction would be "the law will be broken for him". Scottish dialect creates passive mostly by using the verb "get" or "got" and then adds past participle. The word "brake" however, does not correspond to past participle in Standard Scottish English or Highland dialect. Granny therefore did not use passive voice correctly and this structure should only be marked as ungrammatical. In a later exchange, she shows her accent quite clearly:

"*'Bring ye siller? Bring ye gilt?' said Granny Aching.*

'No silver. No gold,' said the Baron." [2]

The standard British "your" was replaced by "ye", exactly the same replacement as the Wee folk made. She also mispronounced the words "silver" and "gold", omitting the "v" in silver and replacing two sounds in gold – the "d" with "t" in and completely changing the sound of the word by exchanging the vowel "o" for "i". These changes mark clear usage of Scottish dialect and add to the character. It might seem strange that this human character speaks the dialect which is in this novel used as a language by a completely separate race, but Pratchett connects this usage. Granny Aching was allied with the Wee folk for a long time and had made several business deals with them. She was also considered to be a witch or a "hag" by the Wee folk in addition to being a shepherd and so, her mixing standard British English and Scottish dialect makes sense. This usage of ungrammatical phrases or Scottish dialect do not reflect poorly on her character or her education; she was after all consulting the local baron and made business deals with local picsties. Pratchett's use of ungrammatical expressions, mixing of standard British pronunciation and Scottish one make Granny plot-significant and a role model for Tiffany. The novel's heroine gains a lot of positive attributes and guidance from Granny's off-hand remarks and words of wisdom. Granny Aching's mixing of British and Scottish English speaks more about the location of her farm – as Tiffany speaks only standard British English, it would be possible that the Aching farm is located near Scottish/British border (in the novel's case it would be the border between the Wee folk and villagers).

Pratchett working with sound is apparent when he attempts to introduce the reader to Scottish naming conventions introduces the reader to Tiffany's Gaelic name: "'A good name. In our tongue you'd be Tir-far-thóinn, Land Under Wave,' said the kelda. It sounded like 'Tiffan'" [2]. Here, Pratchett attempts to connect the reader more directly to the alien culture of the Wee folk. No amount of contextual clues would help the casual reader with the pronunciation, so he offers it right after introducing the Scottish name for Tiffany. As with previous cases, the dialect does not contribute to the plot by moving the plot forward, but helps with the descriptive nature of the fantastic world and its different cultures.

UNGRAMMATICAL EXPRESSIONS

We can observe two types of ungrammatical expressions in Pratchett's novel – the first being young speakers whose language suffers because they do not understand how to use language concepts such as grammatical morphemes (grammatical prefixes or suffixes) or prepositions [4]. This comes into effect when Tiffany's younger brother interrupts her with his requests: "'I wanna go-a toy-lut!'" screamed Wentworth" [2]. Pratchett could have used correct grammatical structures and left out the child-like expressions. However, his decision to instead give this character a unique voice makes him immediately recognizable and gives him a distinct feel even in a book that already uses characters who speak in dialects.

Another type of language stylization that falls outside of the standardized scope is the use of incorrectly spelled lexemes:

"*The first tent Tiffany saw had a sign that read:*

JOGRAFFY! JOGRAFFY! JOGRAFFY! FOR TODAY ONLY: ALL MAJOR LAND MASSES AND OCEANS PLUS EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNO ABOUT GLASSIERS! ONE PENNY, OR ALL MAJOR VEJTABLES ACSEPTED!" [2]

The writer uses spelling as medium to convey the irony of a poorly educated person offering earning their livelihood by educating others. Pratchett entertains the reader who understand this concept further by stylizing the advertisement to capitalize on its rhetorical potential. The misspelled word *jograffy** (geography) is repeated three times according the famous rule of three [5] which supports repetition or enumeration of three items to capture the rhythm of comedy and well-written speech in general. Other mistakes in this passage include the misspelled word *kno** (know), *vejetables** (vegetables) and *acsepted** (accepted), where the argument can be made that the writer was trying to reconstruct the words from phonetic into written form unsuccessfully. Again, Pratchett picked only several words where he misconstrued the form in a particular way – it would be much easier to spell *kno** without the silent letter, but his intention was to mark the writer as incompetent, not incomprehensible.

Pratchett adds more ungrammatical expressions in ironic tone which create humorous mood, even though the subject matter itself is serious. Pratchett also

comments on the situation of education in small villages. Tiffany is shown to be a bright child, bright enough to be a witch. Pratchett's witches and wizards do not control magic, they study it in Universities, but cannot explain how or why it actually works. Tiffany's act of witchery was defeating a fast and aggressive monster which grabs unsuspecting people from the river's bank. She was warned about the monster by the Wee folk and could therefore predict where it will appear. Her act of magic was simply good observation skills and her rescuing her toddler brother with a frying pan. Tiffany's supposed intelligence is also shown when she recalled her bargaining for lessons:

"Last year Tiffany had spent three carrots and an apple on half an hour of geology, although she'd been refunded a carrot after explaining to the teacher that 'Geology' shouldn't be spelled on his sign as 'G olly G. "[2]

Here, the expression is used to show that Tiffany has the education to recognize phrases with improper spelling, is not afraid to challenge the authority figure and regain some of her payment right back. It also offers comedy relief and shows the reader the differences between reading and writing in proper English. Unlike the dialect which offers no proper correction, Pratchett makes sure that the correctly spelled version of the word was included in the same sentence as the playful deformation "G olly G". Socilinguistic factor of education factors into Tiffany's personality. She realizes the worth of education and despite growing in environment where formal education does not exist [6], she thrives thanks to her natural talent, willingness to learn and hunger for knowledge. The listed attributed are seldom understood as negative, but Pratchett used them to highlight possible problems, such as growing resentment towards her younger brother, who demand much of her attention.

Pratchett's imagination went into different directions as he invented dialects such as *Toad* for a character that was cursed to take the form of this creature. The only reason to do so was to use it in a singular instance where the cursed character spoke it for a singular lexeme:

"'Oh, croap,' said the toad.

'Pardon?' said Tiffany.

'Er, that was, er, swearing in Toad,' said the toad."[2]

Pratchett's use of an imaginary dialect had two functions in this case – first was to make a joke, a pun. The word "croak", which describes the sound that toads make was combined with a vulgar slang word "crap". This in turn formed the portmanteau expression "croap", and so the Toad slang was created. Another function of this imaginary slang is to create a filter for the vulgar expression. Because this book series is marketed towards a young audience, the author was careful to use Toad language as a disguise for the otherwise offensive expression, and therefore it passed the standard language filter.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Terry Pratchett's *The Wee free Folk* introduces a fantastic race of characters who speak in a Highland English dialect. They are therefore immediately distinct and the author makes no move to translate their speech patterns into standard British English. Their language is marked by their use of Scottish lexemes, their accent which is depicted by clipping of the "g" sound in the grammatical suffix -ing, deletion of "o" in words such as "do", the exaggeration of the "r" consonant and the mispronunciation of pronouns "you" or "your". The changes are not only phonetic, as Pratchett shows that his Wee folk substitute some auxiliary verbs or entire verb phrases for their Scottish equivalents. This depiction is further helped by the in-book description of the Wee folk, where the author liberally borrowed from the Scottish stereotypes as depicted in other media. Their narrative role is then expanded and their culture is incorporated into author's wordbuilding. Even though it does not move the plot along the time/space line, but adds to the descriptive part of storytelling. They have knowledge of monsters beyond the heroine's knowledge and serve as her protectors during her dangerous quest to save her toddler brother. The element of dialect use adds an air of exotic adventure while exploring the Scottish dialect. The writer does not only use dialects, but also brings attention to ungrammatical expressions. Characters who are too young to understand grammatical rules and pronounce words properly break them and mispronounce words. There is also a character who is older and does not use proper, prescribed grammatical structures, but rather uses ungrammatical structures and even mixes standard British English with Scottish dialect. Pratchett also takes education into consideration when creating his world. As a farming village, his setting lacks proper system of formal education, and so the heroine is relying on various travelling teachers whose grasp on language is dubious. Through her, Pratchett shows imperfections even in native speakers where he playfully creates visual and auditive jokes. Therefore, his use of ungrammatical expressions has several functions – to highlight differences in levels of education not only between characters, but also between the reader and his creations. The other function is to provide comic relief as his series is meant to provide entertainment to his readers who can appreciate the creative use of spelling errors in the novel.

REFERENCES

[1] Macafee, C. Scots and Scottish English, In Legacies of Colonial English. Cambridge and New York: CUP, pp. 59-81, 2004.

[2] Pratchett, T. The Wee Free Men. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

[3] "crivens." dsl.ac.uk. Dictionary of the Scots Language, 2019. Web. 7 May 2019.

[4] Lightbown, P. M. and Spada, N. How Languages are Learned. Oxford and New York: OUP, 2006.

[5] Beard, A. The Language of Politics. London: Routledge, 2000.

[6] Steinbrück, M. (Non-)Formal Education in Terry Pratchett's Discworld Novels, In Terry Pratchett's Narrative Worlds. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 93-114, 2018.