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THE HUMOROUS FUNCTION OF PROPER NAMES IN HARRY POTTER

Answering a question about the idea for *Harry Potter* during one of the numerous interviews she was asked to give, Joanne Kathleen Rowling said: "The characters came first, and then I had to find names to fit them. Gilderoy Lockhart is a good example. I knew his name had to have an impressive ring to it. I was looking through the *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* – a great source for names – and came across Gilderoy, a handsome Scottish highwayman. Exactly what I wanted. And then I found Lockhart on a war memorial to the First World War. The two together said everything I wanted about the character"¹. And fit the names to the characters she did, and as a result, the proper names in the *Harry Potter* series serve not only their primary (identifying-differential) function, but also a wide range of other purposes. One of them is to make the reader laugh.

In this paper I intend to analyse the humorous function of nomina propria in *Harry Potter*. I will demonstrate that the humorous elements of the proper names arise on the basis of the incongruity which occurs in the reader's perception of them. I will start with the presentation of the theoretical background for my research, which will be followed by the analysis of the chosen examples.

The incongruity theory can be said to constitute the basis for the modern research in the field of the linguistic humour². However, this theory which presupposes the existence of some kind of incongruity is too broad to be applied straightforwardly; therefore, I will refer to Thomas Veatch's words who claim that: "Humor occurs when it seems that things are normal while at the same time something seems wrong"³. He adds that "what is necessary and sufficient for the humorous effect to arise is a simultaneous co-occurrence of two visions of the same situation in the mind of the recipient. The first being a basic, normal vision of the development of the situation (N) and the second a vision with a violation of some elements of the situation (V)"⁴.

¹ L. Fraser, *An interview with J.K. Rowling*, London 2002, p. 24.

² M. Rutkowski, *Humor w nazwach własnych*, [in:] *Munuscula Linguistica. In honorem Alexandrae Cieślakowej oblata*, K. Rymut (ed.), Kraków 2006, p. 398.

³ T. Veatch, *A theory of Humor*, „International Journal of Humor Research” 1998, 11.2, p. 163.

⁴ The original quotation: „warunkiem koniecznym i wystarczającym do uzyskania efektu humorystycznego jest współwystępowanie w umyśle odbiorcy tekstu: 1) podstawowej, normalnej wizji rozwoju sytuacji (N), i 2) wizji z naruszeniem (...) pewnych elementów tej sytuacji (V)”, M. Rutkowski, op. cit., p. 399.

Mariusz Rutkowski applies this theory to the field of onomastics. He proves that in *nomina propria* the primary kind of incongruity is the one of the meaningless – meaningful type, because unlike appellatives, proper names do not contain meaning. This allows for the humour to appear when a reader ascribes a semantic value (which is interpreted by them as funny) to an encountered name. As a result the meaningless – meaningful type of incongruity is equivalent to the *nomen proprium – nomen appellativum* one⁵.

Based on these statements, it can be claimed that some proper names present in *Harry Potter* have a humorous element. One of them is the name of a Hogwarts student, Harry's classmate, *Neville Longbottom*. Neville is a shy boy, who is clever and works hard. Nevertheless, he is bullied by a lot of his peers and even some teachers, who by referring to him by his surname insult him and make fun of him. This indicates that Neville's bullies interpret his surname as an appellative (therefore a word based on the entity to which it refers) and as such, being a compound of the words 'long' and 'bottom', it describes Neville's part of the body that he sits on. This is an example of the incongruity of the meaningless – meaningful, or the *nomen proprium – nomen appellativum*, type.

Sometimes more than one type of incongruity can occur simultaneously in one proper name. This can happen for instance when "the name appears in a certain situational or communication context. Then, this context serves as a "catalyst"⁶ releasing the joke"⁷. On the basis of such catalysts a number of incongruity types may arise, one of them is the high – low incongruity, which appears as a result of the fact that the majority of the categories of proper names are 'serious' as they identify the denotations and refer to them in every type of language use (formal as well as informal)⁸.

The names: *Rolanda Hooch*, *Poppy Pomfrey*, *Argus Filch*, *Ludovic Bagman*, *Arsenius Jigger* and *Cornelius Fudge* are examples of such a situation. *Madam Rolanda Hooch* is a teacher at Hogwarts, where she teaches flying on the broomstick. Her surname as a common noun means "strong alcoholic drink, especially something that has been made illegally"⁹. Hence, as her occupation implies respect, the meaningless – meaningful incongruity is accompanied by the incongruity of the high – low type.

The same types of incongruity appear also in the case of the name of the nurse working at Hogwarts – *Madam Poppy Pomfrey*. She is a nurse, but she is definitely not an ordinary one; apart from curing common illnesses, she can grow back bones which have vanished and she can also turn people who accidentally passed from human to animal shape back to their body again. Performing tasks of that kind, she

⁵ Ibidem, p. 400.

⁶ R. Lew, *Dowcip językowy w świetle najnowszych językoznawczych teorii humoru*, [in:] *Świat humoru*, S. Gajda, D. Brzozowska (eds.), Opole 2000, p. 131.

⁷ The original quotation: „Wzmocnienie efektu humorystycznego może nastąpić wówczas, gdy nazwy takie znajdą się w określonym kontekście sytuacyjno-komunikacyjnym. Kontekst ten pełniłby wówczas rolę katalizatora (Lew 2000: 131) „uwalniającego” dowcip; M. Rutkowski, op. cit., p. 402.

⁸ M. Rutkowski, op. cit., p. 404.

⁹ *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, S. Wehmeier (ed.), Oxford 2005, p. 749.

uses a wide range of magical elixirs, which may reinforce connotations evoked by the meaning of her first name as a common noun, i.e.: “a wild or garden plant, with a large delicate flower that is usually red, and small black seeds. Opium is obtained from one type of poppy”¹⁰.

Another Hogwarts’ worker, though not a teacher or a nurse, but a caretaker, is called *Argus Filch*. He is disliked and ridiculed by students. There may be a few reasons for such treatment, two of them being the facts that Argus is a Squib (someone who was born in a wizarding family but does not have magical powers themselves) and that he likes to give detentions to students for even the smallest offenses. However, his surname appears to contribute to the mockery he is subject to, since as an appellative the name means: “to steal something, especially something small or not very valuable”¹¹. Therefore, the two types of incongruity mentioned in the previous paragraphs are also present in the interpretation of the caretaker’s surname.

Professor *Arsenius Jigger* does not teach at Hogwarts but is a wizard who specialises at potions, about which he wrote a book entitled *Magical Drafts and Potions*, used by the first-year students during their potion lessons. On the other hand, the surname of this professor as a common noun means: “a very small glass for measuring alcohol; the amount a jigger can hold, about 1.5 ounces”¹². Moreover, his first name can be said to be derived from the Latin word *arsenicum* which means arsenic¹³. Hence the incongruities of the meaningless – meaningful and high – low types occur again.

The last two human characters the names of whom I would like to discuss in this section are *Ludovic Bagman* and *Cornelius Fudge*. They both are the Ministry of Magic employees and as such they hold posts highly regarded by the wizarding community. *Ludo Bagman* holds the position of the Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports but he is prone to gambling and he tends to cheat while betting. These patterns of behaviour may be considered to coincide with the meanings of both his first name and surname as *nomina propria*, and they mean respectively: “I cheat in gambling”¹⁴ and “a man who gets money in an illegal way”¹⁵. Being the Minister for Magic, *Cornelius Fudge* has total control over “the main governing body of the British wizarding world”¹⁶. However, his surname as an appellative can mean: “a way of dealing with a situation that does not really solve the problems but is intended to appear to do so”¹⁷, or “to avoid giving clear and accurate information, or a clear answer”¹⁸. Therefore, these two ministry employees join the group of characters with names accompanied by the meaningless – meaningful and high – low types of incongruity.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 1170.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 572.

¹² http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/jigger [24.04.2014].

¹³ A. Polkowski, J. Lipińska, *Tezaurus Harry Potter I-VII*, Warszawa 2008, p. 164.

¹⁴ „łac. *ludo* – (...) oszukuję w hazardzie”, A. Polkowski, J. Lipińska, op. cit., p.28.

¹⁵ „ang. *bagman* – (...) człowiek zdobywający pieniądze w nielegalny sposób”, Ibidem.

¹⁶ http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Cornelius_Fudge [20.02.2014].

¹⁷ *Oxford Advanced...*, op. cit., p. 627.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

The last example I would like to discuss in this section is the name *Fluffy*. It is the name of a dog which belongs to Hagrid, another Hogwarts worker, a half-giant who absolutely adores formidable creatures. *Fluffy* has three heads and is gigantic in size, but the fact that the name *Fluffy* is laughed at by other people is something Hagrid cannot comprehend, because the dog is harmless for his owner. In this case the two types of incongruity which arise are the meaningless – meaningful and the harmless – dangerous types.

The situation is different in the case of nicknames. Aleksandra Cieślikowa claims that „creating names which according to their author’s intention are supposed to contain humorous elements (...) causes the emergence of the intentional humour which as soon as the moment of the creation of the names distinguishes them from the proper names in which the semantic humour, which is related only to the perception of the name on the basis of the identically sounding appellative, appears”¹⁹. This applies especially to the non-literary universe, in which nicknames are often intended to be funny but first names are usually given without the intention to ridicule the denotation. On the other hand, in a literary text this may cause the appearance of the degrees of intentionality of humour. As all the proper names present in the text are chosen by the author of the text, none of the humour should be labelled as ‘entirely unintentional’, but, assuming that the above described tendency of naming in the non-literary reality can be transferred to the fictional world, the category of nicknames which are given to characters by the author yet through the mouths of other characters may be claimed to contain the ‘purely intentional’ humour.

Aleksandra Cieślikowa claims also that the pragmatic motive for creating nicknames is usually the desire to highlight some particular characteristics of the nicknamed person, and/or to express feelings one has for the person²⁰.

The desire described by Cieślikowa is present in a number of nicknames in the *Harry Potter* series, nicknames such as for example: *Sir Properly Decapitated-Podmore*, *Sniveller Moony*, *Prongs* and *Padfoot*. Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, or as he is more commonly known Nearly Headless Nick, is a Hogwarts ghost. He is called in such a way because he was to be decapitated, yet someone was not very skilful at the job and after Sir Nicholas was “hit forty-five times in the neck with a blunt axe”²¹ his head was still attached to his body with “half an inch of skin and sinew”²². However, Nearly Headless Nick wanted to join the Headless Hunt, but was rejected by the president of the Hunt, another ghost, Sir Patrick Delaney-Podmore, because, unlike in the case of Sir Patrick and his fellow huntsmen, Sir Nicholas’s head did not part company with his body. Fuming at this

¹⁹ The original quotation: „Odmiennym zjawiskiem jest tworzenie takich nazw, które zgodnie z intencją nadawcy (twórcy) mają zawierać elementy humoru. Pojawia się wówczas humor intencjonalny, który już w momencie aktu nazwotwórczego odróżnia te jednostki od nazw, w których przejawia się humor semantyczny, związany jedynie z odbiorem nazw na tle równobrzmiącego apelatywu”, after M. Rutkowski, op. cit., p. 406.

²⁰ A. Cieślikowa, *Rodzaje ekspresji w tworzeniu nazw osobowych*, [in:] *Polonica XV*, 1990, p. 113.

²¹ J. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, London 2002, p. 95.

²² *Ibidem*.

negative reply he got, Nearly Headless Nick christened Sir Patrick Delaney-Podmore *Sir Properly Decapitated-Podmore*. By doing so, Nick highlighted the feature which made him and Sir Patrick different and subsequently made Nick unable to take part in the Hunt.

Severus Snape, another teacher at Hogwarts, some time earlier when he himself studied at Hogwarts, had a ridiculing nickname – *Sniveller*. As an appellation it might be said to be a noun created from the verb *to snivel* which means: “to cry and complain in a way that people think is annoying”²³. This nickname might have suited Severus because of the similarity between the nickname and the first name but not because Severus used to snivel excessively or even at all. However, since his bullies could not find any amusing characteristics of Severus that could be possibly used as a “pragmatic motive for creating a nickname”²⁴, they simply used one that they wanted Snape to have, and in this way they also gave themselves a possibility of convincing people who did not know Severus well that the boy might in fact be a weeper. Therefore, the incongruity of the meaningless – meaningful type arises again.

Another nickname, in which “the desire to highlight some particular characteristics of the nicknamed person”²⁵ may be seen, belongs to a wizard called Remus Lupin. He has a problem; in his childhood he was bitten by a werewolf and consequently became one. This had to remain secret if he was to be able to attend Hogwarts, hence nobody, apart from the Headmaster, the nurse and his three school friends, knew about it. As it may happen with secrets, however, a person who knows it might be tempted to share it with others or to take pleasure from their not grasping overt hints. This is what happened in this case. Lupin’s friends gave him a nickname which not only highlighted one of his characteristics but the one which was indispensable to conceal. Remus changes into a werewolf during the full moon and it is the moon he fears most. And the nickname he got was *Moony*. Hence, apart from the already discussed meaningless – meaningful incongruity another one, the secret – overt, arises too.

A similar situation occurs in the case of two of Lupin’s friends, each of whom was an unregistered animagus. This meant that they could change themselves into animals (and back again, all the time controlling their behaviour), but wizards who mastered this skill had to be registered in the Ministry of Magic, otherwise they committed a criminal offence. If anyone had discovered their secret before they registered themselves they would not only be charged but also expelled from Hogwarts. However, they gave each other nicknames highlighting characteristics of the animals they changed into. And so, James Potter, who could change himself into a stag, was nicknamed *Prongs*, which is supposed to refer to the points of the stag’s antlers²⁶, and Sirius Black, who changed into a dog, got the nickname

²³ *Oxford Advanced...*, op. cit., p. 1448.

²⁴ A. Cieřlikowa, op. cit., p. 113.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ The information comes from: http://harrypotter.answers.wikia.com/wiki/Why_is_james_potter_prongs [23.06.2014].

Padfoot, which refers to his dog feet. Moreover, many years later, he got another nickname also suggesting his being an animagus, this time not from James Potter, but from his son Harry Potter, who called him *Snuffles*. Since at the time when Sirius got his second nickname he was a prison escapee looked for by the entire wizarding community, in all three nicknames the meaningless – meaningful and the secret – overt incongruities can be said to arise.

On the other hand, “feelings one has for the nicknamed person”²⁷ are expressed in nicknames such as: *Loony* and *Won-Won*. The first of which belongs to Luna Lovegood, who studies at Hogwarts. She got the nickname from other students, who perceive her exactly like the meaning of the nickname as an appellative suggests (*loony*: “crazy or strange”²⁸). However, their perception is rather unjust since the only difference between them and Luna is her choice of clothing, jewellery and hobbies. They are also bothered by the fact that Luna continues to be herself despite their mockery.

The other nickname belongs to Harry’s best friend, Ronald Weasley. He got it from Lavender Brown – the first girl he dated. Lavender was infatuated with Ronald but the feeling was not reciprocal. After some unsuccessful attempts to make Ron fall in love with her, Lavender decided to take a brave step and kissed him in front of dozens of other students who were celebrating the fact that their team (including Ron) had won a match. After that, they became a couple and she started to call Ron: *Won-Won*. The soubriquet might be said to reflect the manner in which he became her boyfriend and the way Lavender thought about him. Admittedly, it could also be Ron’s name mispronounced, but as Lavender’s pronunciation is faultless this is much less probable. Therefore, this nickname is another example of the meaningless – meaningful type of incongruity.

Both motives specified by Cieślíkowa can be traced in the phrases *ickle Ronnie* and *ickle Ronniekins*. Molly Weasley is the mother of six sons, the youngest of whom is the above-mentioned Ron. Molly treats Ron as her ‘little boy’ and sometimes refers to him as *Ronnie* and *little Ronnie* even when Ronald is a tall young man, which annoys him very much. This induces his brothers (Fred and George) to mock Ron by repeating the (somewhat modified) phrases their mother uses – even after Ron grows taller than them. Therefore, when used by Ron’s brothers the phrases *ickle Ronnie* and *ickle Ronniekins* qualify as nicknames and not diminutives. The mockery might also suggest how Fred and George feel about the way Ron is treated as the youngest son.

A slightly different motive can be seen in the nickname *Voldy*, which was given in order to express a dramatic change in the way one feels about the person. This soubriquet was invented by Peeves, a Hogwarts’ poltergeist, who, due to the nature of his being, could not be harmed by any wizard or witch; therefore, he feared none, not even the most respected teachers. However, it can be said that there was one human being that Peeves dreaded, as he never made jokes or humiliated him (which was the case with all other people he met or heard about). This person was

²⁷ A. Cieślíkowa, op. cit., p. 113.

²⁸ *Oxford Advanced...*, op. cit., p. 909.

Lord Voldemort, an extremely powerful dark wizard who terrorised the wizarding world, and wanted to have an absolute control over it and also over the world of non-magical people. Voldemort was feared by everyone except for Albus Dumbledore, an exceptionally talented wizard and the Hogwarts' Headmaster, who, unfortunately, was a lot older than Voldemort so at one point he could no longer match him. Then Harry Potter became the only hope of those who wanted Voldemort defeated. After a terrifying battle Harry succeeded in achieving his task and Voldemort was finally annihilated. It was then, straight after the battle was finished, not even after the bodies were taken away, that Peeves roamed the castle singing a song of his own composition (as was his wont): "We did it, we bashed them, wee Potter's the One, And Voldy's gone mouldy, so now let's have fun!"²⁹. The nickname *Voldy*, which is also a diminutive of Voldemort, was created with the intention to ridicule the denotation and to make listeners laugh. Lord Voldemort always wanted to be perceived as the greatest wizard ever, so after he was dead (and could do no harm to anyone denying his power) Peeves used this desire to invent a soubriquet highlighting the opposition greatness – littleness. Moreover, the invention of this nickname also marks the moment when Peeves stop dreading the dark wizard.

To conclude, the above-presented examples prove that among the onomastic material of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, there are some first names, surnames and nicknames which serve the humorous function and the humorous elements contained in them appear due to the incongruities present in the reader's interpretation of them. Moreover, apart from the meaningless – meaningful (the primary type of onomastic incongruity) there appear a number of other, non-primary types, i.e. the high – low, the harmless – dangerous and the secret – overt.

²⁹ J. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, London 2007, p. 597.