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GENRE STABILITY AND LINGUISTIC VARIATION IN FANTASY FICTION

Rayhona Narzikulova
SamSIFL

Abstract: Fantasy fiction relies on recognizable genre patterns, but their linguistic realization varies across individual authors and fictional worlds. This article examines how conventional fantasy patterns are maintained and transformed in selected works by J. R. R. Tolkien, J. K. Rowling, and Terry Pratchett. Particular attention is given to the representation of heroic characters, magic and the supernatural, and shifts between elevated and everyday registers. The study applies contextual, stylistic, and pragmalinguistic analysis to lexical choices, evaluative meanings, and register variation. The findings show that familiar genre patterns can remain recognizable while their linguistic framing changes. Heroism may be presented through domestic or conversational language, while magic can be incorporated into educational, institutional, or technical discourse. These transformations influence characterization, world-building, and reader interpretation without removing the underlying conventions from the fantasy genre. The analysis therefore suggests that fantasy fiction combines relative stability at the level of genre patterns with considerable variability in their linguistic realization.

Keywords: fantasy fiction, genre conventions, linguistic transformation, fantasy discourse, register shift, pragmalinguistics**.**

Introduction

The presence of magic, imaginary worlds, heroic figures, and supernatural beings does not by itself explain what makes individual fantasy texts distinctive. Similar genre elements appear in works written in different periods and literary traditions, yet they may function differently depending on the language through which they are presented. A wizard can be associated with ancient knowledge and authority or represented as a member of an established professional community. A heroic journey may retain the elevated tone of epic adventure or be brought closer to everyday experience. In such cases, the convention remains recognizable, while its linguistic realization changes.

This flexibility has been important to theoretical discussions of fantasy. Tolkien's concept of the "Secondary World" emphasizes the construction of an imaginary reality with its own internal coherence. His idea of "sub-creation" suggests that fantasy does more than introduce impossible elements into an otherwise familiar environment: it creates a world in which fantastic phenomena become meaningful within their own system (Tolkien, 1964). Language contributes to this process through naming, description, forms of address, narrative choices, and culturally marked vocabulary.

Later approaches have increasingly treated fantasy conventions as flexible rather than fixed. Attebery (1992) considers fantasy both as a genre and as a mode capable of reusing and reshaping established narrative patterns. Familiar figures such as heroes, wizards, and magical objects may preserve their conventional associations while acquiring new meanings in a different narrative environment. Mendlesohn (2008), in turn, approaches fantasy through the relationship between characters and the fantastic, distinguishing portal-quest, immersive, intrusion, and liminal forms. Her classification further draws attention to how the fantastic is presented and experienced by characters and readers.

This variability becomes particularly visible in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, J. K. Rowling, and Terry Pratchett. Tolkien combines the fantastic with historical depth, culturally marked naming, invented languages, and elevated forms of narration. Rowling places magic alongside the vocabulary of school, family life, rules, examinations, and institutions. Pratchett frequently brings fantastic phenomena into contact with colloquial, professional, administrative, and commercial discourse. The function of a fantasy convention therefore depends not only on its narrative role but also on its linguistic framing.

Despite extensive discussion of fantasy conventions, secondary worlds, and narrative structures, the linguistic mechanisms through which recognizable genre patterns are preserved and modified deserve closer attention. The present article examines this process through lexical choice, evaluative meaning, register, narrative presentation, and contextual interpretation. Particular attention is given to heroic characters, magic and the supernatural, and the interaction between elevated and everyday discourse.

The central question is how conventional fantasy patterns remain recognizable when their linguistic realization changes. The article proceeds from the assumption that transformation does not necessarily remove a convention from the genre. Its effect may instead depend on the reader's ability to recognize the familiar pattern behind its altered form. From this perspective, genre conventions can be viewed as shared literary and linguistic resources that individual authors adapt to the communicative and artistic purposes of their fictional worlds.

Materials and Methods

The material for the study was drawn from three works of English-language fantasy fiction: J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, and Terry Pratchett's *The Colour of Magic*. These texts were selected because they contain comparable fantasy conventions while representing them in different linguistic and narrative contexts.

The study is qualitative rather than quantitative. Textual fragments were selected when they contained a recognizable fantasy convention and provided sufficient linguistic evidence for comparison. Three areas were given particular attention: the representation of heroic characters, the presentation of magic and supernatural phenomena, and shifts between elevated and everyday registers.

The analysis combined contextual-interpretative, stylistic, and pragmalinguistic methods. Contextual interpretation was used to determine how particular lexical units, descriptions, and utterances function within their narrative situations. Stylistic analysis focused on register, evaluative vocabulary, semantic contrast, and forms of nomination. Pragmalinguistic analysis was applied to examine how these linguistic choices activate genre expectations and influence the interpretation of familiar fantasy patterns.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, comparable genre patterns were identified in the selected texts. Each example was examined within its immediate narrative context rather than treated as an isolated lexical occurrence. Second, the linguistic realization of these patterns was compared across the three authors, with particular attention to elevated, domestic, institutional, technical, and conversational language. Finally, the identified linguistic features were interpreted in relation to their discourse functions.

The comparison does not seek to establish direct influence among Tolkien, Rowling, and Pratchett or to present their works as successive stages in the development of fantasy. They are treated as contrasting cases in which comparable genre conventions appear in different linguistic environments.

Results

The analysis revealed that conventional fantasy patterns remain identifiable despite considerable variation in their linguistic realization. The main differences concern lexical choice, evaluation, and register rather than the presence or absence of particular fantasy elements. Three

tendencies were especially evident: the transformation of the heroic pattern, the normalization of magic through familiar discourse, and shifts between elevated and everyday registers.

3.1. Linguistic Transformation of the Heroic Pattern

The heroic figure is one of the most recognizable conventions of fantasy, yet the selected texts show that heroism does not depend on a stable set of explicitly heroic lexical markers. It may instead be constructed through a contrast between conventional expectations and the language used to represent a particular character.

In Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins initially responds to the prospect of adventure in domestic rather than heroic terms:

"We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner!"

The evaluative sequence *plain, quiet, nasty, disturbing,* and *uncomfortable* contrasts with the associations conventionally attached to heroic adventure. The final reference to *dinner* moves the evaluation of adventure from danger and achievement to everyday domestic routine. The lexical item *adventures* activates a familiar genre pattern, while the surrounding vocabulary interprets it from the perspective of comfort and ordinary life. The transformation is therefore based on evaluative contrast.

A different mechanism appears in Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Harry's entry into the magical world is marked by Hagrid's statement:

"Harry – yer a wizard."

Grammatically, this is a simple copular construction in which Harry is assigned a new identity through the predicative noun *wizard*. Its pragmatic significance lies in recategorization: a character previously situated within an ordinary social environment is identified as belonging to a supernatural category. At the same time, Hagrid's *yer* places this identity-changing statement within informal spoken discourse. Extraordinary information is therefore communicated through an ordinary conversational register.

Pratchett transforms the heroic convention differently. In *The Colour of Magic*, the narrator observes:

"What heroes like best is themselves."

The generic plural *heroes* activate a culturally recognizable category, while *like best* redirects evaluation from heroic achievement towards self-regard. The positive associations conventionally attached to the hero are therefore challenged by the immediate context. This can be described as semantic reevaluation of the heroic category.

The three examples reveal different linguistic mechanisms – evaluative contrast, recategorization, and semantic reevaluation – while preserving the recognizability of the underlying heroic pattern.

3.2. From the Supernatural to the Familiar: The Linguistic Framing of Magic

The representation of magic demonstrates a related tendency. Its supernatural status may remain unchanged, while the discourse surrounding it moves towards familiar educational, commercial, or technical domains.

In Rowling's novel, this process is visible in the name *Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*. The expression combines two semantic domains: *witchcraft* and *wizardry* explicitly mark the supernatural, whereas *school* introduces a familiar institutional category. This combination is extended throughout the novel through vocabulary connected with teachers, lessons, rules, examinations, and school subjects. Magic is thus incorporated into an educational framework rather than presented exclusively as mysterious or exceptional. This process can be described as institutional normalization.

A similar combination of the familiar and supernatural occurs in Ollivander's statement:

"The wand chooses the wizard, remember."

The active verb *chooses* assigns agency to *wand*, preserving the mysterious character of the magical object. At the same time, the wider scene takes place in a commercial environment where wands are described, compared, and acquired. The object consequently participates in two discourse frames: supernatural agency and ordinary commercial practice.

Pratchett employs a comparable mechanism but moves towards technical rather than educational discourse. In *The Colour of Magic*, Rincewind refers to:

"a zone with a high magical index"

The collocation *magical index* combines an explicitly fantastic adjective with a noun associated with measurement and classification. The modifier *high* reinforces the impression that magic can vary in degree and potentially be measured. The expression therefore creates register hybridization, representing a supernatural phenomenon through a quasi-technical linguistic model.

The comparison shows that magic can be normalized through different discourse environments without losing its fantastic status. Rowling primarily connects it with institutional and educational language, while Pratchett introduces technical and quasi-scientific forms of description.

3.3. Register Shift as a Mechanism of Genre Transformation

Register emerged as a broader mechanism connecting the patterns identified above. Fantastic content can be presented through elevated language, but it can also interact with domestic, institutional**,** commercial, technical, and conversational discourse.

In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo's attachment to food, home, meals, and comfort establishes an everyday lexical field against which extraordinary events are experienced. The secondary world therefore does not depend exclusively on elevated language; domestic vocabulary provides a familiar perspective on the fantastic.

Rowling develops this interaction more systematically. *Witchcraft, wizardry,* and *spells* coexist with the vocabulary of school, examinations, rules, shops, money, and sport. The interaction between these lexical fields becomes part of the organization of the fictional world, allowing unfamiliar phenomena to be interpreted through recognizable social categories.

In Pratchett, register contrast is especially visible when modern social vocabulary enters a traditional fantasy environment. Twoflower, for example, is identified as a *tourist*, and Rincewind interprets the term as follows:

"Tourist, Rincewind had decided, meant 'idiot'."

The verb *meant* gives the statement the grammatical appearance of a definition, although the relationship between *tourist* and *idiot* represents Rincewind's contextual evaluation rather than lexical equivalence. The construction thus produces pragmatic recategorization. At the same time, *tourist* introduces the discourse of modern travel into a world of wizards, gods, magical objects, and fantastic geography.

Across the three texts, register shift performs more than a stylistic function. Elevated language can emphasize otherness, historical depth, or symbolic significance, whereas domestic, conversational, institutional, commercial, and technical vocabulary brings fantastic phenomena closer to familiar forms of experience.

The findings therefore operate on two related levels. At the genre level, basic patterns such as the hero, wizard, magic, adventure, and the supernatural remain recognizable. At the linguistic level, their realization varies through evaluative contrast, recategorization, semantic reevaluation, institutional normalization, and register hybridization. Fantasy conventions can thus preserve their genre identity while acquiring different meanings and discourse functions through linguistic transformation.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the transformation of fantasy conventions depends on a balance between recognition and variation. A conventional pattern does not need to retain the same lexical

or stylistic form in order to remain recognizable. The hero, magic, and the supernatural preserve their basic genre associations, while their linguistic realization changes according to the discourse environment of a particular fictional world. Language therefore contributes not only to the representation of a convention but also to the meaning it acquires in a particular context.

This observation is consistent with Attebery's (1992) view of fantasy as capable of reworking familiar narrative patterns. The present analysis shows that such flexibility can also be observed at the linguistic level. Evaluative contrast, recategorization, semantic reevaluation, and register shifts allow writers to retain recognizable fantasy patterns while modifying the way they are perceived. Heroic and supernatural elements can therefore function within domestic, educational, technical, or conversational discourse without losing their connection with established genre conventions.

The results can also be related to Mendlesohn's (2008) emphasis on how the fantastic is presented and experienced. Rowling's integration of magic into educational and institutional discourse shows how supernatural phenomena can become socially organized within a fictional world. Pratchett develops a different form of normalization through technical, commercial, and colloquial vocabulary, while Tolkien demonstrates that domestic language can coexist with the construction of a coherent secondary world. In this sense, familiar discourse does not reduce the fantastic to ordinary reality; rather, it provides a linguistic framework through which the fantastic becomes accessible to characters and readers.

Register shift appears particularly important in this process. Elevated language can emphasize distance, antiquity, or symbolic significance, whereas familiar registers bring fantastic phenomena closer to recognizable forms of social experience. The interaction of registers can contribute to characterization, world-building, evaluation, and reader engagement. It may also produce humour or parody, particularly in Pratchett, but the findings indicate that comic effect is only one possible function of linguistic transformation.

The role of the reader is equally important. A transformed convention can be interpreted as such only when its familiar form remains recognizable. Categories such as *hero* and *wizard*, as well as expectations associated with magic and adventure, carry meanings established through literary and cultural experience. When these expectations encounter a different linguistic frame, the reader interprets both the conventional pattern and its contextual modification. Genre knowledge can therefore function as part of the pragmatic background against which linguistic transformation becomes meaningful.

Conclusion

The study has shown that conventional fantasy patterns can remain stable at the genre level while varying considerably in their linguistic realization. The comparison of *The Hobbit*, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, and *The Colour of Magic* identified several mechanisms involved in this process, including evaluative contrast, recategorization, semantic reevaluation, institutional normalization, and register hybridization.

Register proved particularly significant. The interaction of fantastic vocabulary with domestic, conversational, educational, commercial, or technical discourse changes the way familiar genre elements are presented and interpreted. These shifts can contribute to characterization, world-building, evaluation, and reader engagement, while humour represents only one of their possible effects.

From a pragmalinguistic perspective, the interpretation of such transformations also depends on the reader's recognition of established genre expectations. A familiar convention provides the background against which its altered linguistic form becomes meaningful. The relationship between genre stability and linguistic variability can therefore be regarded as an important feature of fantasy discourse: recognizable conventions are preserved while their meanings and functions are adapted to different fictional contexts through language.

Further research may extend this approach to a broader corpus and examine how similar mechanisms operate across different fantasy subgenres, historical periods, and literary traditions.

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