# The Linguistic Construction of Power along the Concepts of Race, Class and Speciesism in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

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*H*arry Potter (*HP*) is arguably the favourite children's book series of a whole generation of now young adults. But it is not only a children's story about a magical world – it contains highly political themes like power, race, class and fascism. As it can be fruitful to take a look at how certain topics are presented to readers at a young age, I will try to open up a new, linguistic perspective on the construction of power in *HP* by employing methods of a literary linguistic analysis. A close look at how power relations are constructed linguistically is necessary since language is an important means to reproduce, enforce and create power. Or as Dumbledore says: "Words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic. Capable of both inflicting injury, and remedying it" (Harry Potter, 01:34:57-01:35:08).

In order to answer the question of how power is constructed along the concepts of race, class and speciesism in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets,* the analysis will be structured as follows: First, the literary linguistic analysis of the construction of power will be presented, touching briefly upon the theoretical background of the methods used for analysis along the way. Then, the findings will be discussed from an intersectional perspective. In the end, I will provide a summary of the linguistic features primarily contributing to the construction of power hierarchies in the novel. The analysis mainly focuses on the second novel of the series because issues of racial or class differences begin to play a central role there. When the Chamber of Secrets has been opened, racially motivated attacks on students begin, and the topic of power structures moves to the centre of the story.

## RACE

One axis along which a power hierarchy can be observed in the novel is race[1]. It contrasts pure-blood wizards or witches and so-called mudbloods. On the level of spatio-temporal perceptual perspective, power is constructed with the help of spatial and temporal deixis which "may be loosely characterized as those 'orientational' features of language which function to locate utterances in relation to speakers' viewpoints" (Simpson 1993, 12). It includes proximal and distal spatial features suggesting proximity to or distance from the speaker. Thus, it can reveal a speaker's attitude towards another person, an object or idea. For instance, when Ron Weasley explains the insult "mudblood" to Harry, he distances himself from this racist idea by referring to the persons who proudly call themselves pure-bloods as "they" and only "some" (Rowling 2014, 121). In contrast to that, Ron refers to the part of the wizard community that "know[s] it doesn't make a difference at all" (121) whether someone is pure-blood or not as "us" and "everyone else" (121), thus further distancing himself from the idea of pure-blood superiority. After the Chamber of Secrets has been opened, the concept becomes far more urgent for the Hogwarts students as attacks on Muggle-born students begin. The danger and immediacy this ideology embodies are underlined by proximal temporal deictic expressions uttered by Draco Malfoy: "it's only a matter of time before one of them's killed" (237[2]) and "I'm quite surprised the Mudbloods haven't all packed

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1 The concept of race is not so much about skin colour or place of origin here, but rather the idea that with a certain race come certain inherited abilities or essential traits (Walters 4): the ability to perform magic or not (Wallace and Pugh 99).
2  All emphasis within quotations is mine.

their bags by now […] the next one dies" (282).

From an ideological perspective, lexical choice and lexical fields make up one aspect that can say a lot about the attitudes of Hogwarts' students towards the concept of racial hierarchy. This aspect contains lexical fields which introduce overarching themes and also the deliberate choosing of one word over another in order to convey a certain impression or atmosphere. One lexical field that is frequently employed to talk about Muggle-borns is dirt. As the name mudblood already shows, Muggle-borns are associated with being dirty, impure persons by families like the Malfoys. For instance, Hermione is called a "'filthy little Mudblood'" (177) by Draco and is said to have "'Dirty […] Common blood'" (122). Draco also calls all Muggle-borns "slime" (235), and "scum" (167), thus frequently drawing on this lexical field to insult Muggle-borns and lift his own status as a pure-blood above them. Additionally, the idea of dirt is extended to the concept of contamination in contrast to purity. The supposedly dirty Muggle-borns are thought to contaminate pure-bloods as shown, for example, through Professor Binn's remark that Salazar Slytherin wanted to "'purge the school of all who were unworthy to study magic'" (159). Muggle-borns contaminate others, so that Dumbledore is, in Draco's eyes, "'the worst that's ever happened to [Hogwarts]'" (235) because he welcomes Muggle-born students to the school. This image is also employed in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* when the picture of Mrs. Black screams at Harry, Hermione and the Weasleys for coming into her house, because, in her opinion, they are unworthy people contaminating her pure-blood home: "'Filth! Scum! […] How dare you befoul the house of my fathers'" (Rowling 2003, 74).

Moreover, the idea of disgrace adds to the one of contamination and makes up another connected lexical field. Arthur Weasley is one example

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of a wizard who is fascinated with and supportive of Muggles and is therefore seen as a disgrace by conservative pure-blood wizards/witches. At one encounter with Lucius Malfoy, Arthur is called a "'disgrace to the name of wizard'" (2014, 65). This idea is shared by Draco who claims: "'he should snap his wand in half […] You'd never know the Weasleys were pure-bloods'" (235). Harry, too, is criticised for being friends with Muggle-born Hermione as Draco says: "'He's another one with no proper wizard feeling'" (236). Again, this constructs the image of being a disgrace to the magical community and not behaving appropriately for a wizard because he has relationships to 'unworthy' Muggle-born witches/wizards. By having these relationships, he endangers his and his community's purity and exclusiveness as pure-bloods and allows or risks contamination.

Parallel to these lexical fields, the use of modality underlines both the high level of dislike towards wizards siding with Muggles(/-borns) as well as the serious danger all Muggle-born students face at Hogwarts after the Chamber of Secrets opens. According to Simpson, "modality refers broadly to a speaker's attitude towards, or opinion about, the truth of a proposition" (43). It signals "a speaker's attitude to the degree of obligation" (deontic modality), expresses desire (boulomaic) or the "confidence in the truth of a proposition" (43) (epistemic). Therefore, analysing modality can show to what extent the racist attitudes of characters are serious and genuine thoughts. For instance, the strong disapproval of people like Arthur Weasley or Dumbledore by the Malfoys is shown by the use of high epistemic modality in statements such as: "'Father's always said Dumbledore's the worst thing that's ever happened to this place. He loves Muggle-borns. A decent Headmaster would never've let slime like that Creevey in'" (Rowling 2014, 235) Additionally, the high epistemic modality in Draco's statements about the attacks on Muggle-borns marks his confidence in

the certain danger all non-pure-blood students face as he claims at several occasions "'You'll be next, Mudbloods!'" (147), or "'I know […] a Mudblood died. So I bet it's only a matter of time'" (237).

All of this ties into the construction of Muggle-borns as passive potential victims through transitivity. The system of transitivity "shows how speakers encode in language their mental picture of reality" (Simpson, 82). It describes processes like "actions, speech, states of mind or simply states of being" (82), and assigns participant roles (who is doing what to whom). Material processes of doing, on which this analysis will focus, contain an actor or doer (e.g. "Jane"), the process (e.g. "ate") and a potential goal, the done-to-role (e.g. "the cake").

> Transitivity, one of the most important markers of how power is constructed in the novel, shows who is given agency

Applying this to the analysis of the novel shows that witches/wizards of non-magical parents are frequently pushed into the done-to-role so that they are portrayed as endangered as well as inferior to pure-bloods. For example, Draco says: "No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood" (117) to Hermione, punishing her for speaking on her own and having an opinion. By portraying Hermione in the done-to-role Draco imposes his authority based on his pure-blood status on her. Then, when characters talk about the attacks on Muggle-borns, they are again presented in the passive role, showing that they are victims at the mercy of Slytherin's heir. This can be seen when Draco says: "'I bet it's only a matter of time before one of them's killed'" (237) or when Riddle talks about Ginny who "'set the serpent of Slytherin on four Mudbloods'" (327). All this time the Muggle-borns as the goal or done-to-role are threatened, paralyzed and killed by the heir in the actor or doer-role due to a racist ideology of pure-blood supremacy.

Another case of not mistrusted but often racially discriminated persons in the magical world are Squibs like the caretaker Argus Filch: people with magical parents who are not or hardly able to perform magic. Lexical choice and transitivity are two prominent aspects that show how they are viewed by other magical persons. Firstly, the lexical field of the joke is employed in a letter advertising a Kwikspell course to learn magic. Two Squibs write that their potions and charms were "'a family joke'" and "'sneer[ed] at'" (134) and later Ron explains that "'it's not funny really'" (154) being a Squib. Secondly, shame is another recurring lexical field in connection to Squibs. It becomes clear that Squibs seem to regard themselves as shameful: Filch blushes, "snatche[s] up the envelope" (135), twists his hands together and begins to stutter when he notices that Harry must have read his Kwikspell letter. All these bodily reactions portray nervousness and being ashamed. This image that Squibs have of themselves and that many others seem to share is also mirrored through the use of transitivity, because they, like Muggle-borns, are portrayed in the done-to-role. Since they are "sneer[ed] at" (134), "taunted" (133), considered a shame or pitied by others, Squibs, too, become passive victims of the construct of pure-blood superiority.

CLASS

Another dimension in which a hierarchy is established between magical people is class, the difference between rich and poor (wizard) families[3]. In the Harry Potter series, the Malfoys and the Weasleys portray this conflict. Lucius and Draco frequently mock the Weasleys for being poor, drawing on the lexical field hunger connected to spending money. For example, Draco tells Ron he is "'surprised […] to see [him] in a shop'" and: "'I suppose your parents will go hungry for a month to pay for that lot'" (65). Lucius adds, speaking to Arthur: "'what's the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don't even pay you well for it?'" (65). Another time at Hogwarts,

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3 Whilst class is originally based on a person's position in the production process, the distinction used for analysis will focus on socio-economic status in general, i.e., rich vs. poor characters.

Draco again uses the fact that Ron's family is not wealthy to construct a hierarchy: "'Weasley would like a signed photo, Potter […] It'd be worth more than his family's whole house'" (102). So by mocking the Weasleys for their lack of money the Malfoys establish a class hierarchy in which they stand at the top.

However, discrimination is often intersectional and the Weasleys are no exception. They experience not only discrimination based on their class status but in combination with being treated as a disgrace because of their fascination with and support of Muggles/Muggle-borns. This can be shown by Lucius' statement: "'The company you keep, Weasley … and I thought your family could sink no lower'" (66). The implication that the Weasley's social status is even lower because of their interest in Muggles adds to their low economic status and leads to an intersectional perspective on discrimination. As will be shown in the following paragraphs, this perspective does not only apply to the Weasley family.

INTERSECTIONAL POWER RELATIONS

The intersectional nature of discrimination can be observed by looking at the depiction of house-elves. They experience a combination of discrimination on the levels of class and race. In this case the racial discrimination can even be specified as *speciesism*[4] since they are not human beings. This double oppression leads to and legitimises their enslavement to wealthy families. It is, for example, shown by the particular use of deictic perspective.

Firstly, Dobby, the Malfoys' house-elf, speaks of himself in the third person singular (14), indicating that he even overlooks himself as a person and does not see himself as a subject. This emphasises the idea of house-elves being passive, obedient servants to wizards'/witches' orders and not being treated equally. In addition, he does not seem to see a way out of his enslavement, because he describes

his servitude as lasting "'for ever'" (14), that he "'will serve the family until he dies'" (15). Thereby he establishes a temporal deictic perspective reaching far into the future. And thirdly, Dobby's slave habitus[5] and incorporation of his inferiority leading to self-punishment are described in specific deictic expressions and mirror his slave status. For instance, Dobby "scurr[ies] in after [Lucius], crouching at the hem of his cloak" (353) which locates him spatially and metaphorically under the wizard.

Dobby's construction as inferior is also established through elements of ideological perspective such as lexical choice. One lexical field that stands out is authority, since Dobby always addresses Harry with "sir" (15) and/or his full name. This way, the house-elf reproduces the hierarchy and shows how much he is used to treating wizards/witches as authorities. Additionally, he makes use of expressions indicating his low social status when he talks of house-elves as: "'treated like vermin,'" and "'the lowly, the enslaved, us dregs of the magical world!'" (188). Also, Dobby talks about future punishment or actually does punish himself. In the second novel, this happens thirteen times in the three scenes in which he appears. These actions further underline the power the Malfoy family has over him and the great extent to which Dobby has internalised the hierarchy and the unquestionable need for punishment.

The perception of Dobby by others, too, is marked by negative lexical fields. One of them is fear and includes lexical items describing him as "anxiou[s]" (19), "miserable" (186) or with "a look of abject terror on his face" (353). Enslavement and again dirt make up another two lexical fields, because Dobby wears a "ragged," "filthy pillowcase" as "mark of […] enslavement" (187), and calls himself "'enslaved'" (188). In the end, Dobby reacts with "wonderment" and "disbelief" (356f.) when he is handed the sock

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4 Speciesism is "a prejudice or bias in favour of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species" (*The Ethics*).

5 Based on a person's socio-economic status and socialisation they develop certain tendencies of tastes, perspectives on the world and behaviours – a habitus – that can be observed in all people occupying a similar socio-economic position in society; they internalise their social position. (Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* French: La Distinction, 1979).

and thus freed from the Malfoys. This description again points to the internalisation of his slave status, making it at first hard for him to believe that he is now free.

Then, the use of transitivity and modality, as marker of power structures, adds especially to the construction of Dobby's obedience and slave status. This is achieved by underlining the seemingly natural character of house-elf enslavement. Firstly, through the passive constructions in which Dobby often talks of himself, his existence as an objectified, obedient slave is constructed. He says: "'the family will never set Dobby free'" and "'Harry Potter asks if he can help Dobby'" (15), thus presenting wizards as the actors and himself as the goal and reproducing the contrasting roles of wizards/witches and house-elves. The motif of self-punishment is introduced by high deontic modality as in: "'Dobby will have to punish himself'" (14). This portrays him as confident that he must be punished and deserves it. Using high epistemic modality therefore shows that for Dobby his punishments are an unquestioned obligation as a result of the deeply internalised power structures in the magical society.

The construction of power in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* is supported by various linguistic features emphasising the character's ideologies concerning race, class and speciesism. One of these features is the use of lexical fields which make up a salient tool to signal attitudes towards the existing power structures. Above all, negative fields like shame, dirt, contamination, or obedience are employed to describe Muggle-borns, witches/wizards who are in contact with Muggles or who have a low class status, as well as house-elves as inferior. They also serve to position wealthy pure-bloods and humans above them in the hierarchy. Concerning deixis, spatial deictic elements like we and they are used to create in- and out-groups of, for example, pure-bloods vs. Muggle-borns or magical vs. non-magical people. Modality then underscores both the Malfoys' belief that they are superior to non-pure-bloods, Muggles or non-human creatures, as well as Dobby's conviction that wizards/witches are authorities. Lastly, transitivity, one of the most important markers of how power is constructed in the novel, shows who is given agency. For instance, Slytherin's heir and pure-bloods possess agency, whilst Hermione and Dobby remain in the done-to-role and thus in a lower, powerless position. In the end, all the different linguistic features interplay and reinforce each other to construct and reproduce the hierarchical structure along the concepts of race, class and speciesism.

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