

LEXICAL TRIGGERS OF FANTASY WORLD-BUILDING: A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF PROPER NAMES, TOPONYMS, AND MAGICAL TERMS IN PATRICK ROTHFUSS

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Abstract: This article advances a psycholinguistic and cognitive-poetic account of how invented vocabulary builds fictional worlds, taking Patrick Rothfuss’s *The Kingkiller Chronicle* (*The Name of the Wind*, 2007; *The Wise Man’s Fear*, 2011) as its corpus. It argues that proper names, toponyms, and magical terms function not as inert labels but as *lexical triggers*: surface forms that capture attention, anchor reference in a secondary world, and point to unseen linguistic and cultural depth. Drawing on cognitive poetics (Stockwell), Text World Theory (Gavins), possible-worlds narratology (Ryan), the philosophy of reference (Kripke), and the psycholinguistics of proper-name processing and sound symbolism, the study identifies three triggering mechanisms operating across Rothfuss’s onomasticon: phonological foregrounding, morphological depth-cueing, and semantic re-purposing. It contends that immersion arises from the inferential gap between a trigger’s compact surface form and the elaborate system it implies but does not state. The analysis is qualitative and theory-driven; it concludes by deriving falsifiable hypotheses for eye-tracking, self-paced reading, and rating studies, and by situating the findings within the comparative onomastic and cognitive-linguistic scholarship of the Uzbek and wider Turkic tradition.

Keywords: cognitive poetics; literary onomastics; psycholinguistics; world-building; proper names; toponyms; sound symbolism; Text World Theory; possible worlds; Patrick Rothfuss; fantasy literature

1. Introduction

Few literary genres are as openly dependent on lexis as fantasy. Where realist fiction can lean on a shared referential world—its London, its automobiles, its named months—secondary-world fantasy must conjure its referents into being almost entirely through words, and very often through *single* words: a name, a place, a term of art. A reader who encounters *Kvothe*, *Tinue*, or *sympathy* in the opening pages of *The Name of the Wind* is handed not a description but a token, and is invited—indeed compelled—to construct around that token a person, a place, and a craft that the text has not yet explained. The central claim of this article is that such tokens are best understood as

lexical triggers: compact surface forms whose function is disproportionate to their length, because each one initiates a process of world-construction in the reader's mind.

The phrase "lexical trigger" is borrowed from cognitive poetics, where it names the textual cue that activates a frame, schema, or mental representation (Stockwell, 2020). My contention is that in fantasy the trigger is most concentrated in three onomastic categories-anthroponyms (personal names), toponyms (place names), and what I will call magical terms (the technical vocabulary of a magic system)-and that these categories deserve a unified psycholinguistic treatment. They have rarely received one. Onomastic studies of fantasy tend to catalogue names and discuss their etymologies or translation (Sarmasik, 2022; Motschenbacher, 2020); cognitive-poetic studies tend to address world-building at the level of discourse and deixis (Gavins, 2007); and psycholinguistic studies of proper names rarely venture into invented vocabulary at all. This article brings the three literatures into contact around a single, unusually self-aware corpus.

Rothfuss is an apt test case precisely because his series thematizes its own lexical machinery. *The Name of the Wind* is, at the level of plot, a book about the power of true names; its hero is a man with many names; its magic is divided between *sympathy*, a teachable pseudo-science, and *Naming*, an ineffable command over the deep names of things. A novel so reflexively concerned with naming offers an ideal setting in which to ask what naming *does* to a reader. The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. Section 2 assembles the theoretical framework, integrating cognitive poetics, Text World Theory, possible-worlds narratology, the philosophy of rigid designation, and the psycholinguistics of names and sound symbolism. Section 3 describes the corpus and the qualitative method. Section 4 analyses the three onomastic categories in turn. Section 5 synthesizes the analysis into a three-mechanism model of lexical triggering and locates that model within established cognitive-poetic constructs. Section 6 situates the study in comparative onomastic and Uzbek cognitive-linguistic scholarship. Section 7 concludes by converting the model's claims into testable empirical predictions.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Cognitive poetics and the lexical trigger

Cognitive poetics studies literary reading as an act of cognition: it asks how textual features marshal the ordinary machinery of attention, memory, categorization, and inference to produce literary effects (Stockwell, 2020). Two of its core constructs are central here. The first is *foregrounding*-the idea, inherited from Russian Formalism and the Prague School, that texts achieve salience through deviation and parallelism. A form that departs from the linguistic norm draws attention to itself and resists automatic processing; Shklovsky (1917/1965) named this *ostranenie*, defamiliarization, and treated the slowing of perception as the very purpose of art.

Invented names are foregrounded almost by definition: they deviate from the reader's lexicon and, frequently, from the phonotactics of the reader's language. The second construct is the trigger itself-the cue that calls up a cognitive structure larger than the cue. A schema, once triggered, supplies default expectations the text need not state. The economy of fantasy world-building rests on this asymmetry: a four-letter name can stand proxy for an unstated history.

2.2 Text World Theory and world-builders

Text World Theory (Werth; developed by Gavins, 2007) models discourse comprehension as the construction of mental "text-worlds." A text-world is built from *world-building elements*-the deictic and referential furniture that establishes where and when the world is, who and what is in it-and *function-advancing propositions* that move events along. Proper names and toponyms are paradigmatic world-builders: they populate the spatial and personal coordinates of the represented world. The theory's value for the present argument is its insistence that comprehension is incremental and cumulative; each world-builder is added to a running representation that the reader maintains and updates. A name is therefore not processed once and discarded. It becomes a node to which subsequent information attaches, which is why first encounters and re-encounters with a name are cognitively distinct events-a distinction Section 5 turns into an empirical prediction.

2.3 Possible worlds and rigid designation

Possible-worlds narratology treats a fiction as a system of worlds projected by the text and accessed by the reader (Ryan, 1991, 2015). Within that frame, the proper name has a special status, illuminated by Kripke's (1980) account of names as *rigid designators*: a name picks out the same individual across all possible worlds in which that individual exists, and it does so not by encoding a description but by being anchored to its bearer through an initial "baptism" and a subsequent chain of use. Fiction exploits this directly. When a narrative introduces *Kvothe*, it performs a baptism; thereafter the name rigidly designates one individual in the secondary world, and the reader's task is to accumulate, under that rigid label, whatever the text discloses. Rothfuss's interest in naming can be read as a sustained meditation on exactly this mechanism-and, as we shall see with the character Denna, on what happens when an author deliberately *destabilizes* rigid designation to render a character unknowable.

2.4 The psycholinguistics of proper names

Psycholinguistic and neuropsychological research has long held that proper names are processed differently from common nouns. Names are harder to retrieve than occupations or other semantic facts; they are disproportionately implicated in tip-of-the-tongue states and in the selective anomias that follow certain brain injuries, where a patient can describe a person in detail yet fail to produce the name. The

standard explanation is that a proper name is a comparatively arbitrary, purely referential label—a phonological form with a thin or absent semantic content—so that retrieval cannot be scaffolded by meaning the way a common noun's can. This is the baseline against which invented fantasy names become interesting. A fantasy name is *not* purely arbitrary: it is engineered to carry phonosemantic and morphological information that a real-world surname does not. It therefore occupies a hybrid position between the contentless proper name and the meaningful common noun, and may recruit processing resources from both. The hybrid status is, I will argue, precisely the source of its world-building power.

2.5 Sound symbolism and embodied semantics

Two further bodies of work supply the mechanism by which a name can mean without a dictionary. The first is sound symbolism: the non-arbitrary association between phonological form and meaning. Sapir (1929) showed that vowel quality maps onto perceived size; Kohler's maluma/takete demonstration, revived as the *bouba/kiki* effect (Ramachandran & Hubbard, 2001), shows that rounded, sonorant-heavy forms are reliably matched to soft, rounded referents and sharp, obstruent-heavy forms to angular ones. Invented names can thus pre-load an evaluative or sensory coloring before any narrative content arrives. The second is embodied semantics: the finding that comprehending action and concrete words recruits the sensorimotor systems that would be used to perform or perceive the referent (Pulvermuller, 2005). If magical terminology denotes manual or bodily operations, it may be grounded in simulation and read as vivid and concrete; where it denotes the ineffable, it resists such grounding and reads as numinous. Rothfuss, as Section 4.3 shows, exploits exactly this contrast.

2.6 Sub-creation, immersion, and theory of mind

Tolkien's (1947) essay on fairy-stories supplies the genre's own theory of the matter: the maker of a secondary world practices *sub-creation*, and the world's persuasiveness depends on an "inner consistency of reality" in which invented languages and names are not ornament but foundation. Mendlesohn's (2008) typology of immersive fantasy formalizes the effect Tolkien describes: the immersive text withholds explanation, treating its world as already known, so that the reader infers a totality from fragments. The reader's inferential labour is, in turn, the subject of two cognitive accounts of fiction: Zunshine's (2006) application of Theory of Mind to the tracking of fictional persons—names being the handles by which minds are tracked—and Oatley's (2011) account of fiction as a simulation run on the mind's own social and perceptual hardware. The lexical trigger, in this synthesis, is the smallest unit at which sub-creation operates: the point where a single word asks the reader to run a world.

3. Corpus and Method

The corpus comprises the two published volumes of *The Kingkiller Chronicle*: *The Name of the Wind* (2007) and *The Wise Man's Fear* (2011). The unit of analysis

is the lexical item belonging to one of three onomastic categories: anthroponyms, toponyms, and magical terms. From these volumes I assembled an inventory of focal items selected for analytic salience rather than frequency-items whose phonological, morphological, or semantic structure most clearly illustrates a triggering mechanism, together with their narrative and discourse contexts of first appearance and recurrence.

The method is qualitative, theory-driven close analysis in the cognitive-poetic tradition, supplemented by descriptive phonological and morphological observation. For each focal item I describe (a) its surface form-its conformity to or deviation from English phonotactics, its sound-symbolic profile, and its morphological transparency; (b) its referential behaviour in the text-world-how it is baptized, anchored, and re-encountered; and (c) the schema or frame it imports. No experimental data are collected here; the article's empirical contribution is the derivation, in Section 7, of falsifiable predictions that follow from the model. This is a deliberate division of labour: cognitive poetics generates the hypotheses that psycholinguistics can then test, and conflating the two stages-claiming experimental support that has not been gathered-would be a methodological error. The analytic claims below should accordingly be read as motivated interpretations and testable conjectures, not as demonstrated processing facts.

4. Analysis

4.1 Anthroponyms: names as hybrid designators

The series' onomastic centre of gravity is its protagonist, and his name is a deliberate problem. *Kvothe* opens with the cluster /kv/, which English phonotactics does not license in word-initial position; the form is therefore foregrounded at the level of articulation before it carries any meaning. Yet the deviation is not random. The /kv/ onset evokes Germanic and Slavic phonologies, lending an exotic, old-world resonance, while the orthographic shape and the author's stated pronunciation align the name with the archaic *quoth/quothe*-the verb of old storytelling. A name that sounds like "quoth" primes a narrative register at the very threshold of a novel that is, formally, one long act of telling. The name thus does triple duty: it is foregrounded (deviation), evaluatively coloured (exotic), and semantically suggestive (the storyteller's verb)-a clear case of the hybrid designator described in 2.4, a proper name engineered to carry the kind of content a real surname lacks.

Around this centre Rothfuss builds an unusually dense system of *aliases*. The same individual is, across the two volumes, Kvothe, Kote (his innkeeper's name in the frame narrative), Reshi (his apprentice's honorific for him), Maedre, and a string of epithets-the Bloodless, the Arcane, Kingkiller, among others. Each alias is a separate baptism that nonetheless rigidly designates the same person, and the proliferation enacts a theme: identity as the sum of names accrued. The frame name *Kote* is especially economical. It is a near-anagram and phonological diminution of *Kvothe*-

the great name worn down to a small, quiet syllable-so that the reduction of the man to a broken innkeeper is encoded in the very phonology of his assumed name. The reader who later learns the relation between the two forms experiences a retrospective foregrounding: the name was a clue.

The counter-case is Denna, and it is instructive because it works by violating the principle that governs Kvothe. Denna appears under a shifting series of names-Denna, Dianne, and others-never settling into a single stable form. Where Kvothe's many names accrete to one rigid designator the reader can track, Denna's many names actively *resist* rigid designation: the reader cannot fix the referent under a stable label, and the resulting referential instability is the textual correlate of her unknowability, both to Kvothe and to us. Here onomastic technique is characterization: by withholding the baptismal anchor that 2.3 identifies as the basis of fictional reference, Rothfuss makes a person into a moving target. The contrast between Kvothe and Denna is, in effect, a controlled demonstration that rigid designation is doing cognitive work-its presence yields a trackable self, its sabotage yields an enigma.

Antagonist names exploit sound symbolism toward the sinister. The collective *Chandrian*-three syllables, a medial /dr/ cluster, a faintly Sanskritic resonance (cf. *chandra*, "moon") closed by a collective suffix-reads as exotic and ominous before the narrative confirms it. Their leader *Haliar* ends on a hard /ks/ that lends the name a doom-laden, regal finality. Most extreme is the *Cthaeh*, the malevolent oracle whose name approaches unpronounceability; its onset cluster recalls the Lovecraftian *Cthulhu*, and the articulatory difficulty is iconic-the mouth's struggle to produce the form mirrors the moral danger of the thing it names. At the opposite pole, *Felurian*, the faerie seductress, is built from fricatives and liquids and open vowels across four melodious syllables: a maximally sonorant form whose *bouba*-like softness pre-loads beauty and allure, exactly as the sound-symbolism literature predicts. Across the cast, then, phonology is consistently recruited as a first, pre-semantic channel of characterization.

4.2 Toponyms: the economy of implied geography

Rothfuss's place names range from the maximally plain to the maximally foreign, and the range is itself meaningful. At one extreme stands *the University*-an ordinary English common noun elevated by capitalization and definite reference into a unique designator. It is barely foregrounded at the phonological level, yet it is among the most powerful world-builders in the text precisely because the definite article asserts uniqueness: not *a* university but *the* University, the singular institution of its world, whose name presupposes a world organized around it. Minimal surface deviation, maximal referential anchoring.

At the other extreme stands *Tinue*, whose diaeresis signals a foreign disyllabic value and whose chief appearance is in the idiomatic greeting "How's the road to

Tinue?"-a phrase the characters use to mean, roughly, "how are things?" This single toponym is a masterclass in economy. The idiom implies (a) that Tinue is a destination of note, (b) that roads connect it to elsewhere, (c) that travel to it is common enough to lexicalize into a folk greeting, and therefore (d) an entire geography and a shared culture of travelers-none of which the text ever describes. The name is a synecdoche: a fragment that licenses inference of a whole. This is the immersive technique Mendlesohn (2008) describes, realized at the smallest possible scale.

Between these poles, the toponymic field is sorted by invented language, and the sorting produces the depth illusion that Tolkien (1947) identified as the heart of sub-creation. Place names cluster phonologically by culture: the Aturan and Commonwealth names (Tarbean, Imre, Trebon, Newarre) pattern differently from the Adem names of *Ademre* and its holdings, which pattern differently again from Yllish and Siaru forms. A reader need not be told that Temerant-the world-contains multiple language families; the statistical texture of the toponyms implies it. Each place name therefore functions twice: once as a coordinate in the text-world's space (a world-builder in Gavins's sense) and once as a sample from an unseen language, so that the toponymic inventory as a whole projects a linguistic deep structure it never spells out. The persuasiveness of the world is, in large part, this projected depth-the reader's sense that behind every name lies a grammar that could, in principle, be reconstructed.

4.3 Magical terms: re-purposing, coinage, and the ineffable

The magic terminology divides along a line that maps neatly onto the embodied-semantics contrast of 2.5. On one side is *sympathy*, the series' teachable, quasi-scientific magic. The term is a re-purposed English word: the everyday *sympathy* (fellow-feeling) is estranged and re-fitted with a rigorous pseudo-physical sense (the transfer of energy between objects linked by a "sympathetic" bond). This is defamiliarization in Shklovsky's sense applied to the lexicon itself: a familiar word is made strange, and the reader must rebuild its meaning from technical context rather than from the dictionary. The cognitive cost of that rebuilding is, paradoxically, an immersive asset-the effort of re-learning a known word is part of the felt experience of entering an expert subculture. The same logic governs satellite terms such as *alar* (the trained, belief-bearing will) and *binding* (the established sympathetic link): *binding* in particular denotes a manual, almost tactile operation and is apt to recruit sensorimotor simulation, rendering the magic concrete and learnable rather than mystical.

On the other side stands *Naming*, the deep magic of commanding a thing by knowing its true name. Here Rothfuss literalizes a schema of great cultural depth-the Adamic naming of Genesis, the *logos*, the true-name magic that Le Guin (1968) made canonical for modern fantasy in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. The single term *Naming* triggers and imports this entire mythic frame; it is a lexical trigger in the strongest sense, a word that calls up a tradition. Crucially, *Naming* resists embodiment. Unlike *binding*, it

denotes no manual operation; it is presented as intuitive, half-conscious, ineffable-the apprentice cannot be taught it directly, only induced to it. The term's resistance to sensorimotor grounding is the source of its numinous register, and the contrast with the embodied, teachable *sympathy* is, I suggest, deliberate and structural: the two magics differ not only in the plot but in the cognitive profile of the words that name them.

Between these lies coinage proper, exemplified by *sygaldry*, the runic artificing of the world. The coinage is morphologically poised: transparent enough to be parsed (it evokes *sigil* and the craft suffix of *heraldry/-ry*) and opaque enough to feel arcane. This is morphological depth-cueing in miniature-a word built to *look* like the product of a derivational system, so that it reads as a real term of art drawn from a real craft-language. The reflexive crown of the whole apparatus is the title phrase, *the name of the wind*: the highest feat of Naming is to speak the wind's true name, an act in which the novel's title, its magic, and its theme collapse into a single lexical event. A book about the power of names is itself named for the supreme name, and the term that denotes the magic is also the term that denotes the book-a reflexivity that makes the entire series an extended demonstration of the thesis advanced here.

5. Discussion: A Three-Mechanism Model of Lexical Triggering

The analysis supports a model in which fantasy lexical triggers operate through three mechanisms, frequently in combination. The first is *phonological foregrounding*. By deviating from the reader's phonotactics (Kvothe's /kv/, the Cthaeh's near-unpronounceable onset) and by exploiting sound symbolism (Felurian's sonorant softness, Haliar's hard close), a name captures attention and pre-loads an evaluative or sensory coloring before any narrative content arrives. The trigger works here at the level of form, recruiting the attentional consequences of deviation that cognitive poetics attributes to foregrounding and the affective mappings that the sound-symbolism literature documents.

The second mechanism is *morphological and distributional depth-cueing*. Coinages built to look derivationally regular (*sygaldry*), and name-fields sorted into phonological clusters by invented language (Aturan versus Adem versus Yllish toponyms), together generate the statistical impression of underlying languages and cultures. No grammar is supplied, yet the texture of the inventory implies one. This is the cognitive substance of Tolkien's sub-creation: each name becomes a *sample* that licenses inference to an unseen population, so that the name is a synecdoche for a system.

The third mechanism is *semantic re-purposing and schema-import*. Repurposed common words (*sympathy*) defamiliarize a known meaning and force its reconstruction; culturally resonant coinages and terms (Naming, the name of the wind) trigger and then modify deep pre-existing schemas (true-name magic, the Adamic

word). Here the trigger works at the level of meaning, using the reader's existing conceptual structures as raw material and estranging them into something new.

These three mechanisms map cleanly onto the framework of Section 2. Phonological foregrounding realizes the attentional capture that cognitive poetics assigns to deviation (Stockwell, 2020). The world-building function of names and toponyms is exactly the text-world construction of Gavins (2007). Referential anchoring across re-encounters is the rigid designation of Kripke (1980) operating inside Ryan's (1991, 2015) projected worlds. The embodied/ineffable split between *binding* and *Naming* instantiates the predictions of embodied semantics (Pulvermuller, 2005). And the tracking of persons under their names is the Theory-of-Mind labour that Zunshine (2006) places at the centre of fictional engagement.

The unifying proposal is this: every lexical trigger does double duty as an attention-grabbing surface form *and* as a pointer to an unseen depth, and immersion is generated in the inferential gap between the two. The reader is handed a compact token and must supply the unstated system-the history behind Kvothe, the geography behind Tinue, the craft behind sygaldry, the cosmology behind Naming. The felt experience of a "deep" world is the phenomenology of that inference. Fantasy world-building, on this account, is not primarily a matter of how much an author specifies; it is a matter of how efficiently the author's words *trigger the reader to specify*. Rothfuss is an exemplary case not because he explains more than his peers but because, in a series explicitly about names, he explains less and triggers more.

6. Comparative and Local Relevance

The model is framed for an English-language corpus, but its categories are comparative by design, and two extensions are worth marking. The first concerns translation. If a fantasy name carries world-building force through phonological foregrounding and sound symbolism, then translating it confronts a dilemma that ordinary referential translation does not: a translator may preserve the form (retaining the sound-symbolic and foreignizing effect but losing any morphological transparency) or domesticate it (recovering transparency at the cost of the estranging surface). The onomastic-translation literature (Sarmasik, 2022) documents exactly this tension, and the three-mechanism model offers a principled way to predict which names will resist translation most-namely those whose effect depends on phonological form rather than on importable schemas.

The second extension concerns the comparative and cognitive-linguistic study of names in the Uzbek and wider Turkic tradition, where *antroponimlar* (personal names) and *toponimlar* (place names) have long been analysed for their literary-aesthetic function. The cognitive-linguistic frameworks developed in Uzbek scholarship-associated with researchers such as Safarov and Ashurova-share with cognitive poetics a concern for how lexical units encode conceptual and cultural content, and they

provide a natural setting in which to test whether the triggering mechanisms identified here generalize beyond English. The sound-symbolic predictions in particular are language-relative: the phonotactic deviation that foregrounds *Kvothe* for an English reader may be unremarkable for a reader whose native phonology permits initial /kv/, so that the *same* name may foreground differently across reader populations. A comparative onomastics of fantasy-English and Uzbek, original and translation-would be an apt empirical proving ground for the model, and one well suited to a multilingual scholarly environment.

7. Conclusion and Directions for Empirical Research

This article has argued that proper names, toponyms, and magical terms in Patrick Rothfuss's *Kingkiller Chronicle* function as lexical triggers, and that they do so through three mechanisms-phonological foregrounding, morphological depth-cueing, and semantic re-purposing-whose combined effect is to generate immersion in the inferential gap between a compact surface form and the system it implies. The account is qualitative, and its claims about processing are, at this stage, motivated conjectures. Their value lies in being testable, and I close by stating four predictions the model entails.

First, an eye-tracking prediction: phonotactically illegal names (*Kvothe*, *Cthaeh*) should attract longer first-fixation and gaze durations, and more regressions, than matched legal names on first encounter, reflecting the processing cost of foregrounded forms. Second, a self-paced reading prediction: reading times at a novel name's first encounter should be elevated relative to later re-encounters, with the re-encounter facilitation indexing the rigid-designator anchoring that Text World Theory and possible-worlds narratology jointly predict-and the facilitation should be weaker for a referentially destabilized name (the Denna pattern) than for a stable one (the *Kvothe* pattern). Third, a priming/lexical-decision prediction: re-purposed technical terms (*sympathy* in its magical sense) should show measurable interference from their everyday meaning relative to fully novel coinages (*sygaldry*), reflecting the cost of defamiliarization. Fourth, a rating prediction: sonorant-heavy invented names should receive higher pleasantness and "goodness" ratings than obstruent-heavy ones, with the effect modulated by the rater's native phonology-directly testing the sound-symbolic claim and its language-relativity.

Each prediction is straightforwardly operationalizable with established paradigms, and several could be run comparatively across English- and Uzbek-speaking readers. Should they be confirmed, they would convert the cognitive-poetic reading offered here into a psycholinguistic finding; should they fail, they would discipline the model. Either outcome would advance the larger aim: to understand how a genre that must build worlds out of words manages to do so, very often, one word at a time.

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