FUNCTIONAL NAMES IN *BEOWULF*: AN ANALYSIS

MIHAELA BUZEC[1]

ABSTRACT. *Functional Names in* **Beowulf***: An Analysis.* Proper names lose their connection with the initial referent of the word, being devoid of their character of semantic predicates. However, when focusing on literature, the names can be analyzed from the perspective of a hidden, conceptual metaphor, either as functional names or as designators of properties. By looking at the names of *Beowulf* as dithematic (part of the Old Germanic name-giving tradition), the analysis becomes one of translation of a new unit of meaning created by the blending of two separate concepts. Juxtaposing this artifice with that of word-play, as well as with aspects of Beowulf's character, a reiteration of the blending occurs, with new levels of meaning. The present paper analyzes the names of the Old English poem *Beowulf* as functional names, used to contrast or highlight themes of the poem, as well as characteristics of Beowulf.

Keywords: functional proper names, Beowulf, conceptual blending.

REZUMAT. *O analiză a numelor proprii utilitare din* **Beowulf.** Numele proprii își pierd legătura cu referentul inițial al cuvântului, fiind lipsite de caracterul lor semantic. Cu toate acestea, numele personajelor literare pot fi analizate ca metafore conceptuale, fie cu rol funcțional, fie ca predicate semantice. Privind numele din poemul *Beowulf* ca nume ditematice (făcând parte din tradiția numelor germanice vechi), analiza devine în sine un exercițiu de traducere a unei noi unități de sens creată prin amestecarea a doua concepte diferite. Juxtapunerea acestui artificiu cu jocurile de cuvinte din poem, dar și cu trăsăturile lui Beowulf, creează un nou nivel de sens. Această lucrare analizează numele proprii din *Beowulf* ca nume funcționale, folosite pentru a contrasta sau evidenția teme ale poemului și trăsăturile personajului *Beowulf*.

Cuvinte cheie: nume proprii utilitare, Beowulf, amestecare conceptuală.

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[1] **Mihaela BUZEC**'s academic interests include generative grammar, child language acquisition, the evolution of language, internet linguistics, and other developments in the field of linguistics. She has written and presented papers on the evolution and use of hashtags, the interpretation of kennings, and the problem of linguistic relativity. Email: mihaelabuzec312@gmail.com.

The analysis of proper names can be a peculiar subject, inasmuch as they lose their connection with the initial referent of the word. Proper names are stripped of their character of semantic predicates, lingering as a reminder of a long-passed link, an empty shell, carrying no meaning. In studying proper names an exercise is required, one that stands—as Clark (1992: 543) puts it— 'at the boundary between "linguistics" and "history"'. However, when focusing on literature, the names can be analyzed from the perspective of a hidden, conceptual metaphor, either as functional names or as designators of properties.

The present study looks at some of the names of *Beowulf* as pertaining to the Old-Germanic name-giving tradition and as having functional roles throughout the poem. The hypothesis is that the names used in *Beowulf*, whether they have historical significance and appear in other sources as well or not, function as catalysts for semantic interpretation throughout the poem. Some names also function as anchors for discourse, especially the names which have historical resonance, helping the audience contour the characters of the poem.

Proper names are mainly used as ways to show kinship, but they also mark the difference between individuals of the same family. In Old Germanic times, names were mostly dithematic, i.e. composed of two elements—or themes—based on the parents' names. One of the themes would stay the same within the family, while the other would vary. For example, someone named Aeðelhere could name his son Aeðelbrand or maybe Ecghere. This is what George Flom (1917) calls the principle of variation, which he distinguishes from repetition and alliteration, two other important principles of name giving in Old Germanic times. The principles work together, but differentiation is needed. Repetition means using the entire name of a relative, i.e. both themes are kept, whereas variation keeps only one thematic element. This practice is thought to have appeared later, and Flom (1917: 7) gives the example of a certain Eurich, who named his son after his great grandfather, Alrich, at around the year 470 AD. This was happening among the Visigoths of Toulouse, and it spread among the Burgundians and then further on. Alliteration, however, functions simultaneously with the other principle, and it is important especially for royal genealogies. Flom (1917: 10) offers numerous examples, and I will reproduce here the Merovingian line, where the alliteration in *ch* is very obvious, and where themes are re-employed: *Ch*ilderich - *Ch*lodovech - *Ch*lodomer - *Ch*ildibert - *Ch*lothachar - *Ch*lodechildis - *Ch*ram - *Ch*aribert. The preference would grow in time towards an alliterative variation, where the prototheme would be kept and suffixes or deuterothemes would be added. By employing this principle, the similarity between the members of the same family grows stronger. Towards the later period, more and more exceptions appear, including cases of end-variation or those in which the prototheme of the first son is used to name the second son,

even if it is not the same prototheme as that of the father. Variations inside the principle of variation become increasingly frequent, and this principle would also grow to be employed in combination with others, rather than on its own.

Another principle that increased in popularity in the later period is repetition, which can be seen as a result of the mixture of front-variation and end-variation within the lines of the same family. However, it is also thought that this principle is to be associated with the belief in the 'transmigration of the soul'. Flom (1917: 16) discusses the idea that 'the belief must have existed early and attached itself to name giving long before repetition set in', and that it was present even in the use of variation or simple alliteration. However, there is no clear religious or spiritual source for any of the principles of name-formation.

The proper names of *Beowulf* seem to fit into this line of tradition, especially the alliterative royal genealogies. Following the line of the Danes, there are Healfdene, his sons Heorogār, Hrōðgār, and Halga, with their respective sons Heoroweard, Hrēðrīc, Hrōðmund, Hrōðulf. The Geatish royal line of ancestry is also faithful to the principles of name-giving, presenting strong alliteration among its members: Hreðel, with his sons Herebald, Hæðcyn and Hygelac, and his son Heardred. In the case of the Swedish royal line of ancestry, we find Ongenþeow with his sons Ōhthere and Onela. Of the royal genealogies, the majority of names are historically motivated, and do not make the object of the present paper. However, most of the names of *Beowulf* are also dithematic (Heremod, Hildeburh, Ecglaf, Freawaru, etc.) which allows the application of the presented context to the personal names of the poem.

In an article entitled "Hands, Helms, and Heroes: The Role of Proper Names in *Beowulf*", Anne Leslie Harris makes the point that we should pay attention to the way in which the poet uses minor characters and their names as a means to emphasize traits of major characters with whom they are connected, or to subtly bring about themes of the poem. The analysis of a name or a character out of context leads to an incomplete interpretation. As such, looking at the instances in which certain names from *Beowulf* appear, one could consider them functional names and look for how language play at a micro level influences the entire poem.

Functional names establish a web of relationships, and they act at a semantic level, for contrasting and highlighting. Some names—especially dithematic ones, or names which double as common words in the lexicon—enter word plays, a very useful aspect for oral poetry, and consequently they are able to covertly suggest interpretations. Among possible explanations for this is the blending theory, which is a cognitive operation also known as conceptual integration (Fauconnier and Turner, 1998). According to the authors,

> [i]n blending, structure from input mental spaces is projected to a separate, "blended" mental space. The projection is selective. Through

> completion and elaboration, the blend develops structure not provided by the inputs. Inferences, arguments, and ideas developed in the blend can have effect in cognition, leading us to modify the initial inputs and to change our view of the corresponding situations.

This can be applied to many areas of cognition, but I see it as an appropriate way of analyzing dithematic names; the prototheme and the deuterotheme come from separate conceptual spaces and they project onto another space where the conceptual images blend into one unit of meaning.

A first example is a name that functions as an ambiguous element, reflecting on the moral ambiguity of the Anglo-Saxons, as well as on the double nature of his role: Unferð. A character about whom scholars debate frequently, he is referred to as Hrōðgār's þyle, a word that is usually kept in the Old English form, with the overall understanding of *spokesman*, or a similar position at court. He is the one who challenges Beowulf and asks him about his past contest with Breca, which presents Beowulf with the opportunity to recall the incident and provide his version of events. As part of his response, Beowulf accuses Unferð of having slain his own kin and says that he belongs in hell. However, Unferð is praised by both Hrōðgār and Beowulf, being regarded as a courageous person, a good warrior, and he has the trust of Hrōðgār and Hrothulf. The nuances and undertones of his character are hidden from the audience. He is an example of a character that is neither good nor bad, but ambivalent, likely being a representative of a warrior culture and of a society that has a different moral code.

Regarding his name, most critics agree that it represents a 'fictious name for [...] contextual purposes' (Greenfield 1972: 101), but nevertheless, there is little agreement upon what it might mean. The very debatable nature of the name itself is doubled by the question of its origin. Greenfield makes a compilation of opinions and variations of the name, and reaches his own conclusion about what Unferð's name means for his character. The first part of the name, i. e. *Un-*, although not a fully lexical unit, carries semantic interpretation, even as an operator. Probably having undergone a grammaticalization process in Old English, I will consider it a theme as understood in name-giving conventions. There are two possible interpretations for this theme, one viewing it as a negative prefix and the other as an intensive. Firstly, the negative prefix has been adopted especially in the interpretation of the name as the opposite of peace. In "The semantics of English negative prefixes" Hamawand explains that, prototypically, the prefix denotes 'the antithesis of what is specified by the adjectival base' (2009: 70). Through semantic extension, however, it gains additional negative meanings such as 'not subject to', 'taking away from', or 'bereft of' something or someone. The negative meanings of the prefix are still

seen in Modern English. Following another interpretation, it can be an intensive, as found in some adjectives in Old English[2]. The word *hun* meant giant, but it's possible that through grammaticalization it became an affix which retained part of its initial lexical meaning. This can be supported by the fact that in the manuscript *Hun-* is also present.[3]

The second theme of the name is *-ferð*. With a great amount of certainty, Bloomfield (69) writes about it that '[i]t is obviously a metathesized form of frið', the Old English word for 'peace', and he goes on to interpret the name, as many have done, as "mar-peace", or lack of peace, attributing to the first theme *un-* the sense of negation. However, Greenfield dismisses such a confident claim, adding more nuances to the idea of metathesis. The problem deepens because of the different spellings the two *Beowulf* scribes employ: *-ferð* appears like this (without the middle *h*: *-ferhð*) only in two instances, in the second scribe's part of the text, while the first scribe always spells it with an *h*, no matter the compound in which it appears.

As for *Unferð*, it occurs four times (lines 499, 530, 1165, and 1488), always in the part of the first scribe, but without a middle *h*.[4] Greenfield explains that the very character of a proper name can justify the dropping of the *h*, and by this showing that it cannot be a form of *frið*. Furthermore, he proposes that the metathesized form should be *firð*, and not *ferð*, and that if the scribe had simply changed the form of the name into something more familiar, then the choice would have probably been Hunfrið, as that was a common name.

The problem with this name goes even further, to the semantic level. Here, the two interpretations of the prototheme *Un-* lead to two different readings of the character of Unferð. The deuterotheme—after having established that it is not a metathesized form of *frið*—means "spirit, mind, soul, heart" (Greenfield 1972: 102) rather than "sense" (Klaeber), and when combined with the prefix, it leads to either "no-heart, no-mind", or to "having great spirit or heart" (Greenfield 1972:103). In such cases, one should turn to the textual evidence:

swylce þaēr Hunferþ þyle
æt fōtum sæt frēan Scyldinga   gehwylc hiora his ferhþe trēowde
þæt hē hæfde mōd micel   þēah þe hē his māgum naēre
ārfæst æt ecga gelācum   (*Beowulf* 1165 - 1168) [5]

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[2] The discussion on anhar or unhar in Beowulf, and others. See Jane Roberts, "Old English un- 'very' and Unferth".

[3] Greenfield proposes another line of interpretation, by seeing the prototheme of the name as 'giant'.

[4] In the manuscript the name is Hunferð, but critics agreed upon the dropping of the initial h for alliterative reasons, arguing that the scribe changed the name into something more familiar; for more details on the manuscript see Leonard Neidorf, "Scribal errors of proper names in the Beowulf manuscript", in Anglo-Saxon England, Volume 42, pp 249 – 269.

[5] Quotes and translations of *Beowulf* passages are taken from Benjamin Slade's version (see heorot.dk).

("Unferð the þyle was also there | sitting at the feet of the Scylding lord; each of them trusted his spirit, | and that he had great courage, though he to his kin was not | honourable in clash of blades")

Marijane Osborn presents these lines as a play on *Hunferþ* and *ferhþe*, and Greenfield brings forth more interpretations, two of which relate to the semantic problem itself. Firstly, having these juxtapositions between *mod micel* and the trust in Unferð's *ferhþe* ("mind", "spirit") reflects on the positive qualities of the character, allowing the reading of *Un-* as an intensifier. However, Greenfield argues for a reading that implies a frame of irony, and as a result it would lead to the acceptance of the negative *Un-* and therefore to the understanding of his name as "lacking spirit, lacking mind". However, it might be somewhat courageous to impose irony upon the text.

Looking further into the poem, the following lines support Greenfield's claim that *Un-* is used as an intensifier.

Hūru ne gemunde	mago Ecglāfes
eafoþes cræftig	þæt hē aēr gespræc
wīne druncen	þā hē þæs waēpnes onlāh
sēlran sweordfrecan	selfa ne dorste
under ȳða gewin	aldre genēþan,
drihtscype drēogan	þaēr hē dōme forlēas
Ellenmaērðum	(*Beowulf* 1465- 1471)

("Indeed he could not have recalled, the kin of Ecgelaf, | mighty in strength, that which he had said before, | drunk on wine, when he lent that the weapon | to a better swordsman, he himself did not dare | under the waves' turmoil to risk his life, | to carry out bravery; there he forfeited glory, | fame from valour")

Here, Greenfield (1972: 105) reads into the lines as such:

his lending of his sword to a "better sword-fighter" implies that he was no slouch himself; and he could not "lose" his "glory, fame for courage" if he did not possess some of it.

All of these interpretations urge the reader to reconsider the role of Unferð. So far, his name has been looked at as a possible way of describing his own character, and the duality of interpretation beautifully reflects the ambiguity of his person. However, I believe that his entire character might be meant as a foil for Beowulf.

Unferð is a precious advisor and a good fighter, otherwise he would not have been in the position to challenge Beowulf. His role is to represent a mindful

character, placed in a morally grey area; nevertheless, when he faces Beowulf, his qualities seem unimportant, even forgotten. The juxtaposition of the characters in such a light emphasizes the heroic qualities of Beowulf and his importance as the saviour, by contrast. Since it is an oral poem, bringing such characters together under the same looking glass can be difficult; by making the names carry meaning, it is easier for the audience to pinpoint the characters, contrast between them, and reach a conclusion based on inference from a common conceptual ground.

Another dithematic name which is highly functional is that of Wiglāf. He is one of Beowulf's thanes, the only one who faced his fear of the dragon and decided to help Beowulf in battle. With his help, the hero manages to kill the dragon, even if he is mortally wounded. Wiglāf receives the appreciation of Beowulf, and remains 'the last of their kind, the Waegmundingas'.

Dyde him of healse	hring gyldenne
þīoden þrīsthȳdig	þegne gesealde
geongum gārwigan	goldfāhne helm
bēah ond byrnan	hēt hyne brūcan well:
'Þū eart endelāf	ūsses cynnes
Waēgmundinga	(*Beowulf* 2809 - 2814)

("Took him from his neck the golden ring, | the valiant chief, to the thane gave, | to the young spear-warrior, gold-adorned helm, | ring and byrnie, told him to use them well: | 'You are the last remainder of our race, | of the Waegmundings;")

This passage already reflects on his name. The dithematic name is composed of the prototheme *Wig-*, meaning "war", and the deuterotheme *-laf*, meaning "remnant, the one who lives". The word play the poet makes on his name here is enough to consider *Wiglāf* a semantically-charged name. The poet calls him *endelāf*, the last one, the survivor, so as from the very beginning the audience is aware of the fate of this character. Shortly after he is introduced in the poem, the *Beowulf*-poet uses both these words in the line: 'nē his mægenes lāf | gewāc æt wīge' (*Beowulf* 2628 - 2629), which roughly translates as "nor the heir/remainder of strength/might will fail in battle" (referring to his father's sword). From these lines attributed to Wiglāf, the audience learns that he is a survivor, he is the heir, and he will not fall in battle.

However, the darker implication of his name is that he will be the last one of their tribe. The name *Wiglāf* brings to mind a previous moment in the poem: the episode with the lay of the last survivor (a character that remains unnamed). This fragment appears earlier in the poem and sends to an episode that is only implied in *Beowulf*. Foreshadowing makes use of certain linguistic triggers for the blending of different conceptual fields together. The last survivor

of a great civilization is brought back to the mind of the listener/reader by the messenger and reflects on both Beowulf and Wiglāf. Throughout the poem, there are hints to the idea that after Beowulf's death, the Geats will be attacked and eventually destroyed, as only the fame of the powerful hero was able to keep their enemies at a distance. Wiglāf is the one that stands by Beowulf as he dies, the last one with whom the hero speaks, and also the one with whom the poem ends. He is a metaphor for the idea that along with Beowulf, the Geats all bury themselves. The warrior-like mentality of the Germanic society dictates that death is better than the shameful life of a deserter, the life that Beowulf's companions would have after the death of their leader. Wiglāf, the new leader, will be the last one to remain after the upcoming war, as is encoded in his name.

There are two other names which are used for the indirect characterization of Beowulf, which I have considered useful names in the poem: the two swords, Hrunting and Naegling. A great deal of importance is attributed in Anglo-Saxon times to swords, with the exchange of swords from one hero to another and the offering of a sword from a king to his warriors having an almost ritualistic significance. Instances when a sword appears or reveals itself to a hero reflect on the hero's qualities or their relationship with fate or the divine. Nevertheless, the images of swords are central to the Anglo-Saxon culture, but they are rarely truly regarded as characters. Giving them proper names is both an anchor—explained by the orality of the poem—for the audience to identify and separate them, as well as a means to imbue the items with semantic charge, either for themselves, or as foils for Beowulf.

Hrunting is the name of the sword that Unferð offers Beowulf before his fight with Grendel's mother. The subject of this sword is very much debated amongst scholars. Some consider that Unferð knew that the sword would fail and gave it to the hero on purpose, while others consider it just a sign of Unferð's character, who stepped down and admitted he was not as good a warrior as Beowulf. The sword seems to have an important meaning to the audience. Beowulf accepts the sword and claims that he will gain glory with Hrunting ('ic mē mid Hruntinge | dōm gewyrce oþðe mec dēað nimeð.' *Beowulf* 1490-91: "I for myself with Hrunting | will gain glory, unless death takes me."), but nevertheless the sword fails him.

The problem of this sword was very much related to Unferð and how he is as a character, considering the motives behind his lending the sword to Beowulf. Because of its name, which is cognate with the Old Norse *hrinda(n)*, meaning "thrust", the sword does not seem to be a peace offering as many have interpreted it. Some argue that Unferð was aware of the fact that it was not a strong enough weapon, although throughout the speeches in which it appears, the sword is praised. Most scholars agree that these passages on Hrunting

reflect on the character of Unferð, but they work just as well as a functional unit in the characterization of Beowulf. The failure of the sword might come from the different nature of Beowulf and the other warriors. "Thrusting" implies a sort of fighting style, one very much reliant on the sword, whereas Beowulf relies mostly on his strength and handgrip. The name of the sword is a keyword that projects an entire conceptual realm, one which is contrastive with the character of Beowulf.

The other sword that Beowulf uses is Nægling. The origin of this sword is not as clear, although it seems to also have been given to the hero. In regards to the origin of the name, it may come from *nægl*, meaning "nail", and might be an equivalent from the *Þīdrekssaga*, or Middle High German epics (Klaeber 1922: 408). This sword, just like Hrunting, fails Beowulf in battle.

	Nægling forbærst
geswāc æt sæcce	sweord Bīowulfes
gomol ond graēgmaēl	him þæt gifeðe ne wæs
þæt him īrenna	ecge mihton
helpan æt hilde	(*Beowulf* 2680-84)

("Naegling burst asunder, | failed in the fight Beowulf's sword | ancient and silver-streaked; it was not granted to him, | that for him irons' edges could | help in battle")

At this point one might argue about this sword that it reflects Beowulf in its description, 'ancient and silver-streaked', just like the old hero. However, for the sake of consistency, this seems to go on the line that *Hrunting* opens for interpretation. Both of the swords' names imply man-made tools used aggressively in battles, aspect which fits well into the war-dominated mentality of the Anglo-Saxons.

The mastery of the *Beowulf*-poet should be taken into consideration nevertheless. His giving the swords such names might send the audience towards the interpretation that Beowulf is not meant to use the swords that a normal warrior would use, that Beowulf is not completely human and in his battles against the elements and super/in-human beings he needs more than human help (emphasis on the idea that 'for him iron edges could not help in battle'). This is an example of how two projections of conceptual realms are juxtaposed for contrastive purposes—rather than for emphasis—relying on negative evidence.

Standing between language studies and literature, this analysis employs both linguistic and textual evidence to support the claims of names as functional units. In the end, it seems to be a matter of perception and perspective. Certain names can be seen as semantic units employed on the one hand as functional keys throughout the poem—akin to how markup language functions—and on the other hand as blends or juxtapositions of conceptual spaces for contrastive

and highlighting purposes. Further explorations into how these anchors work for oral poetry (or in general oral discourse) are needed to see whether conceptual blending functions as such. However, the way in which the names of *Beowulf* are brought together under the same spotlight by the poet is surely motivated. When presented with two options side by side, chances are that the cognitive mechanisms will make people look for a relationship of sorts between the entities, be it causality, contrast or similitude.

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