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Whence the Unicorn? A Frame-Semantic and Corpus Linguistic Interpretation of the Notion of Unicornhood in the Characterology of Iris Murdoch's Novel: *The Unicorn*

József Andor

Introduction

- 1 In the sources of our Western Culture, written or oral alike, unicorns are considered to be non-existent beings, similar to those like *Pegasus*, the *basilisk*, *chimera*, *troll*, *naiad*, and others, all known from basically ancient Greek, Latin, or Scandinavian mythology. There is general agreement in the sources, though, that such non-existent beings are shaped like unique animals, or a combination of animals and humans, both concerning their appearance and their behavior. In mythology and consequent narrative genres, such as fairy tales and fables, but even in forms of phraseologically based linguistic constructs, expressions such as proverbs and sayings, some of these beings are represented as the embodiment of negative or positive features and values, especially concerning their behavior.
- 2 The philosophical literature on the notion of non-existent objects is extremely rich, from Frege to Wittgenstein, and to the present days, even taking into consideration sources with a cognitive-based bias such as Dummet (1993), Kripke (2011), Sainsbury (2005, 2012), Crane (2015), and Everett (2013). So is the case with sources of cognitive psychology, linguistic – especially cognitive-based – theory, and all in all, cognitive science. Investigating the nature of predication expressed related to or by non-existent objects or the mental vs linguistic representation as well as storage and aspects of access to them are among the hottest debated current fields of research in these disciplines.

- 3 Of the rich choice of such notions believed to refer to the non-existent, only a single item, that of *unicorn*, and *unicornhood* will be discussed in the first part of the present paper. Let me note, right at the start, that *unicorns* are only believed to be non-existent, basically constituting mythological creatures in our culture. Their existence or non-existence has been hotly debated in our cultural history. In an influential book providing complex, many-sided cultural and scientifically based information about unicorns, Gotfredsen (1999) points out with ample evidence cited from travel documents and art history, that unicorns may in fact have existed in the Far East during antiquity but they may have become extinct. According to relevant sources, unicorns of the antiquity were strong, fierce animals. There is no exact knowing about whether, concerning the constitution of their body mass and their appearance, they looked like horses, or stag-like creatures with a single horn, or perhaps they were smaller. Certainly though, according to the ancient sources, they were quadruped animals. We do not know when exactly the character of unicorns started to appear in the mythology of various cultures. They do occur in ancient Chinese texts, as creatures that live in solitude and that are seldom seen. Interestingly, whereas in Chinese textual sources they are positive figures, in another major culture of the Far East, that of Japan, the unicorn, called *Ikakkakky*, has a negative character. In the region of Mesopotamia their figure symbolizes evilness and destruction, however, in Iran, the unicorn, which is a great ass, is virtuous and is white in colour. The unicorn certainly does appear in the biblical texts of our Western religious culture, and its character became particularly significant in the Middle Ages. It is a common feature of unicorns in legends of the Middle Ages that the single horned creature lives alone in nature, it is fierce in its behavior, invincible, and it allows itself to be enticed and tamed by a woman (Gotfredsen 1999: 17) who has to be a virgin. The magic nature of its horn, which occasionally is depicted as being long and plain, or even spiral, also started to gain frequent representation in the legends of the time. Further, commonly cited features include

- that it cannot be captured alive;
- that it is stereotypically white in color, a horse-like animal with rapid movement;
- that it has blue eyes, and;
- that its magic is hidden in its horn (for instance, used for purifying water).

- 4 It started to be a common feature of legends (and also of masterpieces of art, especially painting), that the unicorn can only be captured when tamed by a virgin (usually Virgin Mary), upon running to her and putting his head in the lady's lap. Here a strictly expressed symbolic relation between the horned being (representing Christ) and mother Virgin Mary can be observed. Paintings of the Middle Ages more and more frequently started to depict hunting scenes for the unicorn, for whatever reason (see, for instance, the famous unicorn tapestries of the Metropolitan Museum of New York, or those in the *Musée National du Moyen Âge* in Paris. Idyllic pictures of ladies with the unicorn were also frequently painted, for instance, by artists of the Renaissance. It was specifically this age when unicorns started to gain a great degree of mysticism, a feature radically different from concepts of antique Far Eastern culture. It was especially the Renaissance when the mystic relation between the Lady and the unicorn started to gain more and more ground not only in the fine arts, but also in textual sources, including literature. It was this age, Gothicism, when the image of the unicorn started to be varied in size and color, from the stereotypically white figure of horses to smaller sized, goat like animals, for instance, where their white color, a marked symbol of chastity and purity changed into the less pure, more earthly brown (as can be seen, for instance in Rafaello's painting titled 'Lady

with the Unicorn' or on the back of Piero della Francesca's famous diptych, the 'Triumph of Battista Sforza' and the 'Triumph of Frederico da Montefeltro', where one of the carts is drawn by four white horses (most certainly representing the more positive figures), and the other one by four brown unicorns (perhaps the less positive figures). Let me note here that art criticism has not yet been able to provide a clear explanation to della Francesca's symbolism expressed here. All in all, it can certainly be observed how at the time of the Renaissance, in the age of a high degree of humanism, the fierce wild animal became a tamable, kind, positively depicted and characterized, white colored figure.

1. Native speakers' testing of conceptual representation

- 5 Most of the above pieces of knowledge comprise constituents of the educated European citizen's encyclopedic knowledge about unicorns and unicornhood. With the aim to elicit the nature of the acquisition and the mental representation of the concept and lexical status of unicornhood in the mind of native speakers of English, we performed an experimental survey with 40 university students speaking American English as their native language. They were asked to respond to four tasks :
 - first, they had to give a dictionary-like definition of the word *unicorn*;
 - second, they had to describe the appearance of the creature;
 - third, they were asked to characterize its behavior;
 - finally, they were asked to express whether they considered unicorns to be positive or negative figures.
- 6 The results of testing were the following :
- 7 Task 1 : Facets of the meaning of the lexical item *unicorn* given in dictionary-like definitions¹ :
 - physical creature (36), in ancient times (38), horse-like animal with a single, long horn on its head (40), appears in fairy tales (24), its color is white or like that of the rainbow (34), has (two) wings (21), fictional animal (34), supernatural animal (36), inhabits a world of fantasy (22), beautiful (35), mythical creature (31), has magic, powerful hair (33)
- 8 Task 2 : Appearance of unicorns :
 - white or bright colored (36), horse sized (37), has one, long, sharp horn on its forehead (40), has four legs with hooves (36), has long hair and tail (34), eyes are blue/white/grey (20), has wings so that it can fly (21), very strong (23), beautiful (35)
- 10 Task 3 : Behavioral and other characteristics :
 - protective (38), eliminates enemies (27), flies anywhere it wants (20), runs fast (32), supernatural (40), eager to fight, hard to kill (31), very strong (38), lives long (20), enthusiastically serves owner (22), prances (21), runs in the field (24)
- 12 Task 4 : positive figure (40)
- 13 It is striking that the responses given in the above lists have a high rate of frequency of occurrence. Concerning their content, they match the facets of the creature dominantly depicted in the history of art or the media. Description of content of appearance and behavior is clearly frame based: acquired as a form of stereotypical, global type of information gained indirectly from perceptual types of knowledge or via reading or hearing narratives (Andor 1985). Behavioral characteristics given show marked signs of

script-like information. A significantly high rate of conceptual mistakes can be observed concerning blurring of the conceptual domains of unicorns and those of the mythological flying horse's, Pegasus's figure. The polarity marker mentally coded about the figure is unanimously positive.

2. Representation of the lexical item *unicorn* in standard, corpus-based dictionaries of general English

- 14 With the aim to observe to what extent standard, desk-size dictionaries of British English represent the notion of unicornhood, three sources have been examined, among them two widely used, corpus based dictionaries of general English : (a) the most recent, 9th edition of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 2015) based on the authority of the 100-million word British National Corpus and the Oxford English Corpus of 2 billion words words, (b) the 8th, most recent edition of the Collins COBUILD Advanced Dictionary of English (2014) based on the Collins Corpus of 4.5 billion words, and (c) an encyclopedically based source, Hutchinson's Concise Encyclopedic Dictionary (1989 / 1992), which was not a corpus-based source. Headings for the word *unicorn* were given as follows :

■ **OALD:**

noun (in stories) an animal like a white horse with a long straight horn on its head (p. 1708)

■ **COBUILD:**

N-COUNT In stories and legends a unicorn is an imaginary animal that looks like a white horse and has a horn growing from its forehead. (p. 1711)

■ **Hutchinson's:**

n. a mythical animal usually regarded as having the body of a horse with a single straight horn projecting from its forehead. [from Old French from Latin, translation of Greek *monokerōs*= single horn] (p. 856)

- 15 It can be seen that definitions given in all the three sources provide, in some respects differently, detailed information primarily about the appearance of the animal-like being. The encyclopedic type of dictionary gives further details about the origin of the word itself, rather than providing information about behavior-related factors of the creature considered to be imaginary and mythologically-based. Behavior related factors and those pertaining to a hypothetically identified habitat, which could provide further, encyclopedically based information or idea about the frame and / or conceptual script relatedness of the being have been neglected by all of the sources. However, the imaginary status of the concept is adumbrated via reference to narrative types of sources in definitions given in the corpus-based dictionaries.

3. Corpus-based investigation

- 16 In the 100-million word British National Corpus the frequency of occurrence of the item *unicorn* is 94, and that of its plural, *unicorns* only amounts to 26. Such a low number of occurrences cannot really reveal markedly representative features of the appearance or behavior of unicorns. The results of my search were the following² :

Table 1. Facets of corpus representation of *unicorn* in BNC

appearance	behavioral or other type of facet	no specificity given	Patient role (O of V)	specific habitat	occurrence as a name
golden (2)	cross pass (1)	---	beat (1)	in forest (1)	computer (1)
white (2)	happy (1)		hunt (4)		computer company (2)
	magical (2)		look for (1)		frigate (1)
	mysterious (1)				horn (1)
	mythical (2)				house (1)
	rare (1)				hotel (2)
	spoke (1)				inn (3)
	standing (1)				ship (1)
	symbolized (3)				software (4)
					submarine (4)
					theatre (2)
					unspecified (8)
Total : 4	13	40	6	1	30

Table 2. Facets of corpus representation of *unicorns* in BNC

appearance	behavioral or other type of facet	no specificity given	Patient role (O of V)	specific habitat	occurrence as a name
minute (1)	butt (1)	-	hunt (1)	-	-
	elusive (1)		shoot (1)		
	mythical beast (1)				
	perch in trees and outsized flowers (1)				
	prancing (1)				
	walk (1)				

Total : 1	6	17	2	0	0
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- 17 All in all, out of the data gained from three sources : native speaker testing, corpus representation, and the definitions given in dictionaries, it is the data provided by the 40 native speakers that were the most suggestive and usable, admittedly though also the most subjective source in its nature. Only part of the corpus data of behavior-related stereotypes and the ones of the V- O construction show partial matching with those given by the native speaking informants. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly (due to the low number of occurrence of the lexical item in BNC), hardly any items have been found concerning appearance related information about the being in the corpus.

4. Interpreting the representation of unicornhood in Iris Murdoch's novel

- 18 After this culturally and linguistically based introduction, let me now turn to discussing the novel. The notion of unicornhood in the characterology of Iris Murdoch's novel titled *The Unicorn* has been interpreted variously by literary critics and scholars since the publication of the book in 1963. According to legends taking shape in biographies about Iris Murdoch, she made up her mind to write this novel influenced psychologically (and I believe, by her philosopher's mind as well) by her experience of visiting France and seeing the five pieces of the Red Series of unicorn tapestries (c. 1480) in the *Musée National du Moyen Âge*, in Cluny, Paris (called the Paris tapestries). (In an interview given to John Hoffenden in 1983 in Dooley 2003 : 120-129), she stated that after her years at Oxford she wished to become a Renaissance art historian.) She was not the only literary figure influenced : George Sand saw the tapestries in 1844 and wrote about them in her novel *Jeanne* and in articles (Gotfredsen 1999 : 90). The five pictures depict the Five Senses. As described by Gotfredsen, "Sight" is a young woman with a mirror, *Hearing* shows her [that is, the same woman] occupied with a musical instrument, in *Taste* she is feeding a parrot, her sense of *Smell* is aroused by flowers, and finally *Touch* is demonstrated by the lady holding the flagstaff with one hand and with the other lightly touching the Unicorn's vertical horn (Gotfredsen 1999 : 90). Some of these allegoric symbols also gain representation in Iris Murdoch character of Hannah in *The Unicorn*.
- 19 According to mainstream interpretations of the novel and its characters, Hannah Crean-Smith (identified by many as the main character) in her indeterminately circumscribed situation, symbolic as well as physical, highly ambiguously interpretable atonement in Gaze Castle (the name of which in itself symbolically reflects, represents uninvolved watching (Wolfe 1966 : 186), the atmosphere of seclusion, the inner and outer isolation and submissive suffering of its dwellers, with their life highly distant and restricted from that in the outer, real or realistic world, both physically and psychologically) is understood as the primary representation of the mythological force of the medieval (primarily Christian-based) image of the unicorn, that is, unicornhood. However, as expressed by Horner (2012 : 168), Hannah is not Christ (which the unicorn traditionally symbolizes in Christian mythology), despite her suffering. She is depicted prism-like, a character presented through many conflicting perspectives, being attached to, evoking various, a multiplicity of conceptual frames, such as demonicity, feyness, as an enchantress, a sleeping beauty, an abused woman, a princess, a Pre-Raphaelite figure, an

adulteress and murderess. An enchanter unconspicuously, even in a sense innocently, a figure like those "who attract others because of a kind of discharge or confused spirituality" (IM in an interview given to Louis Chevalier in 1978 in Dooley 2003 : 75). The numerous mirrors in her room reflect her feeble inner character concentrating primarily on her self rather than on influences coming from outer reality. Concerning her appearance, she is a youngish, however not very young woman, freckled, having golden hair and golden-bluish eyes. Her favorite colors are gold and blue. Only a few of her features are directly related to the notion of unicornhood. As Murdoch puts it in an interview given to Jo Brans (Dooley 2003 : 162), "the whole story of *The Unicorn* comprises an allegorical aspect... Hannah is a figure who is either spiritual or demonic". In the novel, maid Marion is depicted as a counterpoint to Hannah (Horner 1012 : 166-167). She comes an outsider, but is gradually captured by Hannah's character spirituality. Her mistress purposefully transforms her to her own character, even by dressing her into symbolically spiritually colored clothes and jewelry (blue and gold, which are symbolic colors of unicornhood). Although an important issue about the characterology of the novel is representation of profoundly polar, pure types of character concerning their frame-based dominance (like the figures of Gerard Scottow, Peter Crean-Smith – Hannah's husband, the scholar of the classics, Max Lejour – for instance, the polarity of the two main characters, Hannah and Marion, is not polarly depicted at all. Being susceptible to submission to suffering, they are still ready to fight (successfully or not successfully) for freedom, both in their behavior and actions, and even in their language (the influence of Wittgenstein and that of the early speech act theorist John Austin can be traced in this latter regard). Unicornhood as a notion in itself is not so much polar : although in Christian mythology, usually considered as a symbol of Christ, it embodies the character in frames of innocence, purity, chastity, submission to suffering, even a certain degree of timidity, as mentioned above in my survey of its history in art and culture, there is a considerable degree (although sometimes left hidden, especially in the Middle Ages), of braveness and even ferocity in its character. Hannah and Marion strictly embody, represent this type of character.

- 20 Another important figure of highly symbolic nature in the character and appearance in frames is Denis Nolan, who represents a strictly polar character in his shy, chaste, modest, and outstandingly honest behavior. He is the one who constantly reveals the secrecies of Gaze's atmosphere to Marion. As interpreted by scholar Bove :

although it initially appears that Hannah is the unicorn of the title, a better reading would show Denis Nolan to be. Denis is a local man believed to possess fairy blood. He is chaste and fey. He is seen as a Christ figure. He willingly accepts the suffering of the Gaze household because he is able to accept suffering without passing it on to others. (Bove 1993: 172-173)

- 21 This is a unique unicornish feature, I believe. Denis's eyes are symbolically (and allegorically) emblematic of knowledge and clear vision (to quote : "very blue, striking, fierce"). Such are the eyes of a unicorn as depicted in art, literarily represented artistically by Iris Murdoch. Denis is enchanted by a multiplicity of uniquely mystic beings representing a multitude of conceptually grounded frames (gold fish, mad hares, half-wild donkeys), creatures of highly symbolic nature, which were characteristic of the Middle Ages (known from bestiaries of the time), primarily of Christ, notes Conradi on p. 155 of *The Saint and the Artist* (1989). Alternatively, Hannah, the other unicorn, also accepts suffering, but "although she seems to be weak, manipulates the other characters through her apparent suffering" (Bove 1993 : 174).

- 22 *Nota bene, expressis verbis*, discussion of the characterology of the unicorn occurs only once in the novel (which manoeuvre is characteristic of Iris Murdoch's prose). It occurs on page 92, when philosopher May Lejour, contemplating about Hannah's character, states that "She is our image of the significance of suffering" and adds that the unicorn is also the image of Christ, expiating crime. Guilt, he says, "keeps people imprisoned in themselves." The idea certainly comes from the moral philosophy of Simone Weil, who was Murdoch's idol at the time. The idea is reiterated twice or three times in later chapters of the book, when unicornish figure Denis says : "Everyone here is involved in guilt", and also on p. 44, when Jamesie Evercreech says "All the people round here are related to the fairies." Further, on p. 92, Hannah says to Marion : "You are my romantic vice", fusing the mystic, unicornish character of herself with her tutor. Iris Murdoch herself considered the unicorn to be an obvious symbol of the figure of Christ, but a highly ambiguous one (interview given to Jean-Louis Chevalier in 1978 in Doorey 2003 : 75).
- 23 Consequently, as pointed out, there is not only a single, but several figures in *The Unicorn* who are more or less representation of the features of unicornhood. The medieval concept of the "beast", as depicted visually and described in words in medieval bestiaries, the features of which are mentally stored in the conceptual frames of users of language, is bestowed in the characterology of Iris Murdoch's novel.

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NOTES

1. Results of testing as given show the occurrence of features listed at a rate of 20 or higher of the potential total of 40.
2. Frequency of occurrence is given in parentheses.

RÉSUMÉS

La notion de licornitude caractérisant le roman gothique d'Iris Murdoch intitulé *Le Château de la licorne* a connu dans la critique littéraire de nombreuses interprétations. Inspirée de la sémantique des cadres, cette contribution propose une analyse linguistiquement et philosophiquement bien fondée dans la mesure où les stéréotypes socio-culturels et comportementaux mentalement stockés dans les structures de connaissances encyclopédiques concernant les êtres non-existants ou imaginaires (mais peut-être existants) seront interrogés pour être identifiés.

Notre analyse tend à révéler certains facteurs d'ordre sémantique et lexico-pragmatique en prenant appui sur une investigation doublement empirique: pour obtenir des données, nous avons recours d'une part à une étude sur corpus et d'autre part, à une étude d'enquête. En examinant les représentations à base de dictionnaire de l'item *licorne* dans le *British National Corpus* de cent millions de mots, et en passant au test les connaissances de l'arrière-plan tacitement représentées chez quarante locuteurs natifs de l'anglais, il sera possible de mettre en évidence que la caractérisation générale proposée par les études littéraires ne permet pas de rendre compte de la charge symbolique multiple de la licornitude représentée dans le roman.

The notion of unicornhood in the characterology of Iris Murdoch's Gothic fiction titled *The Unicorn* has been interpreted variously by literary critics since the publication of the novel.

The present paper provides a linguistically and cultural philosophically grounded, frame-semantic analysis, interpretation as well as evidence of the concept of unicornhood, wherein behavioral and appearance-related socio-cultural stereotypes mentally stored in encyclopedically-based knowledge structures about the factually non-existent, imaginary (or,

perhaps, existent) being are identified and discussed. The semantically and lexical-pragmatically based factors revealed in the analysis are supported by an empirical investigation of corpus-based evidence gained from the *British National Corpus* of 100 million words, by studying the dictionary-based representation of the lexical item *unicorn*, and also by testing the tacitly represented background knowledge of 40 native speakers of English, with the aim to provide a joint control over the corpus-based data. As a result, it is pointed out that the standard characterology offered by literary scholars requires further re-evaluation and reinterpretation, expectably revealing the multiple realization of unicornhood symbolism represented in the novel.

INDEX

Mots-clés : connaissance de l'arrière-plan, représentation conceptuelle, évidence sur corpus, Iris Murdoch : Le Château de la licorne, objet non-existant, stéréotypes

Keywords : background knowledge, conceptual representation, corpus-based evidence, Iris Murdoch: The Unicorn, nonexistent object, stereotypes

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