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CONSTRUCTING THE FANTASTIC: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF MAGIC IN YA FAIRY TALES

This article explores the linguistic construction of magic in two contemporary young adult fairy-tale texts – Naomi Novik's Uprooted and Leigh Bardugo's The Language of Thorns – through the combined lens of semantic field theory, corpus stylistics, and narratological analysis. The study moves beyond thematic interpretation to focus on how magic functions as a semantically unstable element, shaped by recurrent lexical and grammatical patterns. Drawing on a custom-built corpus of both texts (over 255,000 tokens), the authors identify and interpret patterns where magic appears as an animate force, instrumental tool, personal attribute, or source of danger. These roles emerge through verbs like snarl, flow, use, or own, and through noun and adjective collocates such as magic blood, terrible magic, or own magic. The findings highlight how linguistic texture itself becomes a vehicle for sustaining narrative ambiguity and emotional complexity in contemporary YA fantasy.

By combining quantitative linguistic mapping with close textual reading, the article demonstrates that magic plays a key narrative and affective role, particularly in how it encodes ambiguity, instability, and ethical tension. The analysis draws on Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the fantastic, framing magic as a force that sustains hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations. While acknowledging alternative genre frameworks like Farah Mendlesohn's taxonomy of fantasy, the authors argue that the linguistic portrayal of magic in both texts supports a Todorovian reading rooted in semantic and emotional uncertainty. Ultimately, the study shows how language itself, through patterns of collocation and syntactic framing, contributes to the construction of the fantastic and invites further comparative research into how YA fairy-tale fiction represents themes of power, transformation, and resistance.

Key words: *Young adult fairy tales, magic, corpus analysis, semantic field theory, Tzvetan Todorov, Naomi Novik, Leigh Bardugo.*

Галина Цапро, Ксенія Ткаченко. ПОБУДОВА ФАНТАСТИЧНОГО: КОРПУСНЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ МАГІЇ У КАЗКАХ ДЛЯ МОЛОДІ

У статті досліджується мовна репрезентація магії у двох сучасних казках для підлітків – Uprooted Наомі Новік та The Language of Thorns Лі Бардуґо – крізь призму теорії семантичного поля, корпусної сти-лістики та наратологічного аналізу. Дослідження виходить за межі тематичного тлумачення й зосеред-жується на тому, як магія функціонує як семантично нестабільний елемент, сформований повторюваними лексичними та граматичними структурами. На основі спеціально зібраного корпусу обсягом понад 255 000 словоформ авторки виявляють і тлумачать моделі, в яких магія постає як одухотворена сила, інструмент, особистісна риса або джерело небезпеки. Ці ролі реалізуються через дієслова на кшталт snarl, flow, use, own та іменникові й прикметникові сполучення на зразок magic blood, terrible magic, own magic. Результати свідчать, що сама лінгвістична фактура виступає засобом підтримання наративної багатозначності й емоційної напруги в сучасній підлітковій фентезі.

Поєднуючи кількісне мовне картографування з уважним текстуальним аналізом, стаття демонструє, що магія відіграє ключову наративну та афективну роль, зокрема в тому, як вона закодовує неоднознач-ність, нестабільність і моральну напругу. У дослідженні використано теорію фантастичного Tzvetana Тодорова, де магія постає як сила, що утримує напругу між природним і надприродним. Попри визнання альтернативних жанрових моделей, зокрема таксономії Фари Мендлсону, авторки доводять, що мовна репрезентація магії в обох текстах підтримує тодорівське прочитання, ґрунтоване на семантичній та емоційній невизначеності. Зрештою, дослідження показує, що мова – через сполучуваність та синтаксичне оточення – активно сприяє побудові фантастичного й відкриває перспективи для подальших порівняльних досліджень тем влади, трансформації та спротиву в казках для підлітків.

Ключові слова: *казки для підлітків, магія, корпусний аналіз, теорія семантичного поля, Цвєтан Тодоров, Наомі Новік, Лі Бардуґо.*

Introduction. Contemporary young adult (YA) fairy-tale fiction offers a productive space for the reinterpretation of folkloric motifs through the lens of present-day emotional, ethical, and psychological concerns. Rather than positioning magic as a vehicle for enchantment alone, recent narratives depict it as unstable, morally ambiguous, and closely bound to questions of identity and personal agency. This shift is particularly evident in *Uprooted* by Naomi Novik and *The Language of Thorns* by Leigh Bardugo – two texts that recast traditional enchantment through dense imagery, disrupted narrative expectations, and emotionally charged language. In both, magic functions not just as a plot device, but as a semantic force that shapes the atmosphere, informs character development, and sustains a kind of ontological uncertainty.

Rather than isolating magic as a fantastical trope, this study approaches it as a lexically embedded phenomenon, examining how patterns of word choice and grammatical behaviour construct its narrative function. By looking closely at the language of magic – how it acts, is acted upon, or described – the analysis highlights how YA fairy tales use language to create symbolic ambiguity and emotional resonance. This is particularly significant in a genre where protagonists often face moral thresholds and transformations, and where linguistic nuance reinforces the instability of the worlds they inhabit.

Aim of the Article. This article explores the representation of magic in *Uprooted* and *The Language of Thorns* through the lens of semantic field theory and corpus stylistics. It aims to identify recurring lexical and grammatical patterns associated with *magic*, categorising them according to semantic roles such as tool, animate force, danger, or personal attribute. These patterns are then interpreted in light of Tzvetan Todorov's theory [11] of the fantastic, which frames the ambiguity of magic as central to the genre's narrative tension. Rather than offering a purely quantitative account, the study combines computational mapping with close reading to argue that the linguistic texture of magic plays a formative role in shaping meaning, suspense, and affect in YA fairy-tale fiction.

Theoretical Background. Recent YA adaptations of fairy-tale motifs respond to changing cultural contexts, particularly in how they approach narrative form, authority, and emotion. These texts often move away from linear progression, fixed endings, and rigid oppositions that define the classical model. Instead, they favour open-ended narratives, ethically ambivalent characters, and emotionally layered storytelling. As Jack Zipes [13] points out, the modern fairy tale has become a site for cultural reflection and critique, often pushing back against the ideological norms usually found in traditional folklore. In YA fiction, this becomes especially salient as protagonists navigate liminal states – between childhood and adulthood, certainty and doubt, tradition and innovation. This liminality is mirrored not only in plot and theme but also in language, particularly in how magic is articulated and experienced.

In both Uprooted by Naomi Novik [9] and The Language of Thorns by Leigh Bardugo [1], magic is not merely an instrument of plot progression or an ornamental trope. Rather, it becomes a volatile semantic presence – oscillating between embodiment, agency, and danger. These texts engage with what Nikolajeva [8] calls "semantic instability" in fantasy literature, where enchantment is not merely externalized but also internalized, becoming part of the protagonist's psychological and ethical development. In this way, the narrative ambiguity of magic is deeply connected to its linguistic construction. The present study proposes that this ambiguity can be meaningfully traced through a close examination of lexical and grammatical choices, informed by semantic field theory.

Semantic field theory, originating in structural semantics (e.g., Trier [12]; Lehrer [5]) and later refined by cognitive linguists such as Geeraerts [3], provides a model for understanding how groups of related words encode conceptual categories. In literary texts, these fields are not merely reflective but generative: they actively shape how phenomena like magic, power, or danger are imagined and narrated. As Stubbs [10] and Mahlberg [6] have shown in corpus stylistics, semantic fields allow us to connect micro-level language patterns to macro-level thematic structures. In the present article, the field of magic is defined not through authorial intuition alone but through observable lexical clusters: verbs like snarl, unravel, own, try; modifiers like wild, dark, or defensive; and syntactic frames that cast magic as subject, object, or possessor. This distribution reveals the semantic roles magic plays – as tool, force, threat, or inherited trait – and provides a linguistic lens for exploring how narrative uncertainty is maintained.

To interpret these findings, the article turns to Tzvetan Todorov's [11] classic formulation of the fantastic. For Todorov [11], the fantastic arises in the moment of hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations – a state that must be sustained but never resolved. Although his model was developed with 19th-century fiction in mind, it remains useful

for analyzing contemporary narratives that resist clear ontological boundaries. In both Novik's and Bardugo's texts, this hesitation cannot always be seen through plot twists, but through the language of magic itself. Animacy, emotionality, and irregular behaviour picture a persistent uncertainty, creating a suspension between metaphor and materiality. While some critics, such as Farah Mendlesohn [7], argue that YA fantasy tends toward the marvellous – where the supernatural is accepted without question – the linguistic instability observed in these texts suggests that they participate, at least partially, in a Todorovian logic of the fantastic.

In these novels, magic remains ambiguous not just on the thematic level but also through the language used to describe it. By combining corpus analysis with fairy-tale theory, the study shows how meaning takes shape through the interaction of linguistic patterns and genre-specific expectations.

Methodology. This study employs a corpus-based stylistic approach to examine how the concept of magic is constructed at the lexical and grammatical levels in two contemporary young adult fantasy texts: Uprooted by Naomi Novik [9] and The Language of Thorns by Leigh Bardugo [1]. These works were selected due to their densely metaphorical language, intertextual engagement with folkloric traditions, and sustained narrative focus on enchantment, agency, and moral complexity.

A custom-built corpus was compiled from the full texts of the two novels, yielding a total of 255,047 tokens and 216,935 word forms. The corpus was processed using the Sketch Engine platform, which enables advanced analysis of collocational and grammatical behaviour through lemmatized searches, part-of-speech tagging, and syntactic relation extraction. The study examines how the lemma *magic* functions across different grammatical positions – including as subject, object, premodifier, and head noun – to uncover patterns of use that shape its semantic contours within the corpus.

Through this framework, the study isolates high-frequency collocates, verb associations, and possessive constructions that contribute to the construction of magic as an animate force, personal attribute, tool, or threat. These roles are not predefined but emerge inductively from the corpus data and are later interpreted in relation to the narrative and thematic dynamics of the texts. This combination of computational mapping and close reading allows for a stylistically grounded account of how magic operates as a discursive force within the broader affective and narrative architectures of YA fairy-tale fiction.

Lexical Field of *Magic*: A Corpus–Based Interpretation. Although the broader themes in both tales include power, violence, and transformation, this study centres specifically on the lexical and semantic construction of magic, as it provides a dense and variable site for exploring both linguistic patterning and narrative ambiguity. The corpus was interrogated using Sketch Engine's *Word Sketch* and *Concordance* tools to identify:

Verb collocates where *magic* appears as subject or object (e.g., *burn*, *snarl*, *flow*, *use*, *practice*);

Adjective–noun combinations, revealing how *magic* is emotionally and ideologically framed (e.g., *terrible magic*, *own magic*);

Noun–noun phrases where *magic* modifies or is modified by concrete or abstract concepts (e.g., *magic blood*, *magic spell*).

This computational mapping of lexical associations enables a more precise tracing of *discursive roles*: *magic* as an animate force, a tool, a danger, or a personal attribute (see Table 1). As Mahlberg [6] argues, corpus stylistics reveals how repeated patterns contribute to literary meaning beyond thematic labeling, helping us understand how narrative atmosphere and character agency are encoded in language. Corpus-based analysis enables researchers to decode discourse markers, structural coherence, and semantic fields in academic texts – a principle that proves equally valuable in examining narrative style and lexical patterning in young adult fiction [2].

Table 1

Semantic Roles of *Magic* in the Corpus

Semantic Role	Typical Lexical Patterns	Examples from Corpus	Interpretive Implication
Animate Force	Verbs where *magic* is subject	*magic burned, magic snarled, magic flowed*	Magic as an agentive force with will or semi-consciousness
Tool / Object	Verbs where *magic* is object	*use magic, learn magic, practice magic*	Magic as skill, resource, or technique
Danger / Threat	Adjectives modifying *magic*	*terrible magic, defensive magic, strange magic*	Magic as risk, weapon, or destabilizing presence
Personal Attribute	Phrases indicating possession or intimacy	*own magic, magic blood, magic music*	Magic as embodied, inherited, or emotionally tied

This semantic patterning aligns closely with key narrative moments in both texts. In Uprooted, magic as a tool becomes ethically charged when Agnieszka chooses to wield her power not through formal spellcraft but through intuitive, emotionally grounded actions, such as healing corrupted forest victims, even when doing so goes against the Dragon's instructions. This positions her magic as morally subversive and resistant to instrumental logic. As an animate force, magic in Uprooted appears to possess agency, particularly in scenes where it "grabs," "flares," or "snarls," resisting human control and behaving as though alive. In The Language of Thorns, magic as danger is repeatedly emphasized through its cost: in "Ayama and the Thorn Wood," magical transformation functions as both a solution and a form of punishment, revealing the instability and violence beneath its surface. Finally, magic as a personal attribute emerges through expressions such as "her own magic" or references to bloodlines and inheritance, most notably in Uprooted, where Agnieszka's magic is said to be "rooted in the valley" evoking both ancestral connection and a kind of elemental belonging.

The concept of magic in young adult fairytale fiction rarely exists in isolation; rather, it is deeply embedded in networks of lexical associations that shape its meaning in context. Drawing on semantic field theory, particularly the work of Geeraerts (2010), this study considers magic not as a fixed or monolithic signifier but as a node within a broader field of relational meanings. The visualisation of lexical associations drawn from the corpus (Picture 1) illustrates how the word magic interacts with various parts of speech – verbs, nouns, and adjectives – across distinct grammatical roles.

One notable dimension of this field involves verbs where *magic* serves as the grammatical **subject**. These include dynamic and often metaphorical actions such as

1) *burn – He stalked away, leaving me to go hunt out some rags from the kitchens to pick up the glass with, and a bucket: I washed the floor as well, though there wasn't a trace of anything spilled, as though the magic had burned off like the liquor on a pudding. I kept stopping and lifting my hand up from the stone floor to turn it over front and back, making sure the stone wasn't creeping back up my fingertips;*

2) *snarl – I was still bound up with him, our magic snarled up into great messy tangled knots,*

3) *flow – There was only the easy movement of the song, the memory of faces gathered around a table laughing. And then finally the magic flowed, but not the same way as when the Dragon's spell–lessons dragged it in a rush out of me.*
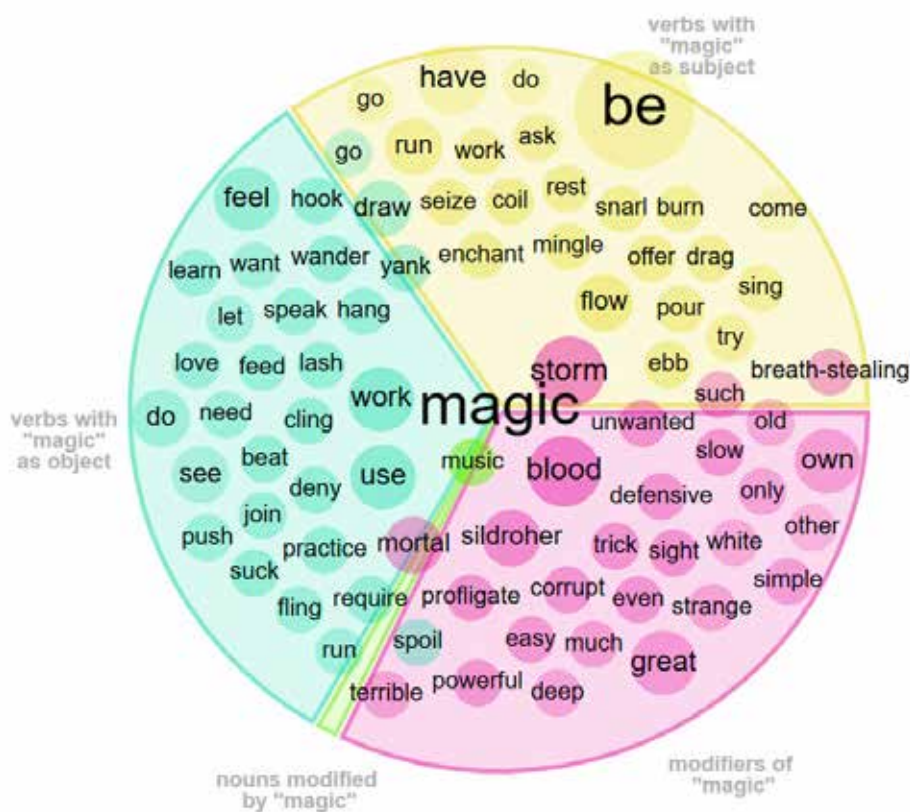

Fig. 1. Collocational network of the lemma *magic* in the YA fantasy corpus

Instead it seemed to me the sound of the chanting became a stream made to carry magic along, and I was standing by the water's edge with a pitcher that never ran dry, pouring a thin silver line into the rushing current;

4) *try – Perhaps the magic was trying to save me and itself, because the dish flattened out and turned into an enormous shield, of heavy steel;*

5) and *offer – He resisted at first, holding for a moment to the clean precision of his own working, but my own magic was offering his an invitation, and little by little he began to read – not any less sharply, but to the beat I gave.*

These collocates suggest an image of magic as animate or agentive, capable of initiating action and change. Magic here is personified, operating as a force with its own will, an idea that aligns with fantasy narratives in which magical forces are often semi–sentient or independent of human control.

In contrast, verbs where *magic* functions as the **object**, such as use, work, learn, deny, and practice, present it as something to be handled, acquired, or resisted. This construction frames magic as a tool or substance that characters interact with, reflecting a different narrative logic: one in which power must be learned, tested, or refused. The tension between these two frames – magic as actor versus magic as object – contributes to the ambivalent positioning of magical power in young adult literature, where characters often confront the burden of choice and consequence.

Equally significant are the **nouns modified by magic**, such as *blood*, *storm*, *music*, and *spell*. These pairings form a semantic field where the magical is fused with the bodily, the elemental, and the aesthetic. The presence of *magic blood* or *magic music* suggests a kind of enchantment that is inseparable from material or emotional experience. These collocational patterns construct a metaphorically rich landscape in which magic permeates the material world, investing objects, environments, and characters with symbolic depth.

The final semantic cluster consists of adjectives that modify *magic, including great, terrible, defensive, strange, and own,* which function as evaluative and affective markers shaping how magic is conceptualized within the narrative world. Magic is not presented as a neutral phenomenon but as a contested and emotionally charged presence. The adjective *own*, for instance, implies a personal or internalised form of magic, while *defensive* and *terrible* point to its protective and destructive capacities.

Taken together, these patterns show that *magic* occupies multiple semantic roles in the corpus: it

acts, it is acted upon, it modifies, and is modified. These roles are not random but patterned, reflecting the genre's tendency to blur boundaries between agency and vulnerability, self and other, risk and wonder. The lexical field of *magic* thus becomes a key mechanism through which narrative tension is produced and meaning is negotiated.

The Function of Magic as a Fantastic Element in YA Fairy Tales. From a Todorovian perspective, the representation of magic in *Uprooted* and *The Language of Thorns* exemplifies the condition of the fantastic, defined by "the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" [11, p. 25]. In both *Uprooted* and *The Language of Thorns*, magic resists systematization and remains unbound by coherent supernatural logic. Rather than adhering to fixed rules or predictable mechanisms, it is situated within a liminal space, at once intuitive, affective, and fundamentally opaque. In *Uprooted*, Agnieszka's magic resists codified instruction and emerges through intuitive and affective engagement. It disrupts the formal system proposed by her mentor, remaining irregular and non-formulary in its realisation. Bardugo likewise avoids explanatory frameworks: in her narratives, magic appears suddenly, often bound to themes of revenge, fate, or sacrifice. In both cases, ambiguity is not incidental but sustained, producing the narrative hesitation central to Todorov's theorization of the fantastic, where natural and supernatural interpretations remain in unresolved tension.

Corpus data reinforce this interpretive lens. As the analysis shows, verbs like *burn*, *snarl*, *flow*, and *offer* depict magic as an autonomous, almost sentient agent, while verbs like *use*, *learn*, and *practice* suggest magic is a learned or willed skill. This duality maps directly onto the structure of the fantastic, in which events remain "in a kind of no-man's-land between the uncanny and the marvelous" [11, p. 33]. The same semantic fluidity appears in noun and adjective collocates: phrases such as *magic blood* or *own magic* blur boundaries between internal and external sources of power. Rosemary Jackson [4, p. 3] notes that in fantasy literature, such ambiguity often reflects a deeper subversion of boundaries: "fantasy characteristically attempts to transform the condition of culture itself by making visible what is repressed or concealed". In this case, magic functions not as stable world-building, but as a narrative tool for sustaining instability and psychological depth.

This ambiguity is especially evident in the affective framing of magic. Descriptors such as

Table 2

Semantic and narrative features of magic in *Uprooted* and *The Language of Thorns*

Aspect	*Uprooted* (Novik)	*The Language of Thorns* (Bardugo)
Source of magic	Intuitive, nature-bound, resistant to formal logic	Mysterious, sudden, tied to sacrifice or fate
Supernatural ambiguity	Magic blurs with emotion and instinct	Magic is embedded in mythic structure but left vague
Narrative resolution	Ambiguous; no full rational or supernatural closure	Often unresolved or ending with ironic/moral twists
Lexical markers	*own magic*, *magic blood*, *burned*, *offered*	*strange magic*, *defensive magic*, *flowed*, *snarled*
Position in Todorov's spectrum	Between uncanny and marvelous	Strongly aligned with the fantastic

terrible, *defensive*, and *strange* encode magic as a force that is never emotionally or ideologically neutral. It is either threatening or protective, inherited or resisted. In Todorov's terms, the fantastic "requires the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons" while resisting any ultimate explanation (1975, p. 41). Magic's function in both texts mirrors this uncertainty. It serves as both narrative motor and ontological destabilizer – never fully externalized, yet never fully metaphorical. In both texts, hesitation between conflicting meanings functions as a structural element rather than a narrative byproduct. It positions the works within a contemporary tradition of fairy-tale revision that foregrounds ambiguity and resists fixed moral or narrative closure.

While Todorov's [11] theory of the fantastic provides a compelling lens through which to interpret the ambiguous representation of magic in *Uprooted* and *The Language of Thorns*, it is important to acknowledge that not all scholars would classify these texts as belonging to the fantastic mode. Farah Mendlesohn [7], for instance, argues for a more precise taxonomy of fantasy literature, distinguishing between the marvellous, the portal-quest, the intrusion, and the liminal. According to her framework, most young adult fantasy–particularly stories with established magical worlds and protagonists who ultimately master or adapt to magic–fits squarely within the marvellous, where the supernatural is accepted as normal and never questioned.

By this account, the ambiguous status of magic in these texts might be interpreted less as a structural hesitation (in Todorov's sense) and more as a stylistic or thematic fluctuation within a marvellous world. However, the semantic instability uncovered through corpus analysis suggests a lingering ambivalence that resists complete assimilation into the marvellous. Magic in these stories remains unruly, emotionally charged, and epistemologically unstable, inviting a reading that preserves the hesitation central to Todorov's conception of the fantastic, even if that hesitation operates more at the level of discourse than plot.

Conclusions. The analysis shows that magic in young adult fairy-tale fiction functions through several recurring semantic roles. It appears as a force, a tool, a trait, and a source of threat. These roles are shaped by lexical patterns that are integral to narrative structure. In both Uprooted and The Language of Thorns, the treatment of magic carries emotional and ideological weight. It reflects tension, ambiguity, and change–motifs central to the genre. The language surrounding magic sustains a mode of hesitation, in line with Todorov's conception of the fantastic. It keeps the boundary between natural and supernatural unresolved. These narrative choices also link magic to themes associated with adolescence, including instability and moral uncertainty. Together, these elements point to a broader conceptual framework within contemporary YA fantasy.

Future research will extend this analysis to larger corpora of young adult fairy tales in order to examine broader lexical and narrative patterns associated with magic.

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