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Article

The Structural Analysis of Anthroponyms in "Beowulf"

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Abstract: This article examines the structural features of anthroponyms in the Old English epic Beowulf. The study focuses on the morphological and syntactic organization of personal names, identifying dominant structural patterns and their narrative functions. The findings demonstrate that anthroponyms in Beowulf are predominantly compound and patronymic in structure, reflecting Germanic naming traditions and reinforcing heroic ideology.

Keywords: Anthroponyms, Beowulf, Meaning, Structural Analysis, Old English, Compound Names.

1. Introduction

Anthroponyms play a crucial role in epic discourse, serving not only as identifiers but also as carriers of cultural, social, and ideological meaning. In Old English literature, particularly in the epic Beowulf, personal names are structurally rich and semantically motivated. They often encode information about lineage, heroic values, and social hierarchy, which are essential elements of the Germanic worldview.

Previous onomastic studies have emphasized the etymological and cultural aspects of anthroponyms in Beowulf; however, their structural organization as linguistic units requires further systematic analysis. This article aims to analyze the structural types of anthroponyms in Beowulf and to identify the dominant morphological models employed in the poem.

Literature Review. Scholarly interest in anthroponyms within Beowulf has a long and well-established tradition in the fields of historical linguistics, onomastics, and literary studies. Early research primarily focused on the etymological origins of personal names, viewing anthroponyms as keys to understanding Germanic mythology and heroic symbolism. Scholars such as Tolkien emphasized the narrative and symbolic power of names, arguing that they contribute significantly to the epic's mythopoetic structure. Subsequent linguistic studies approached Beowulf anthroponyms from a historical-morphological perspective. Researchers noted that Old English personal names frequently follow dithematic patterns, combining two semantically meaningful elements related to warfare, kinship, and honor. These studies established that anthroponyms function as motivated linguistic signs rather than arbitrary labels, reflecting broader Germanic naming conventions.

More recent onomastic research has expanded the scope of analysis to include functional and discourse-oriented perspectives. From this viewpoint, anthroponyms are examined in relation to narrative structure, formulaic repetition, and oral-traditional composition. Studies in this vein highlight the role of patronymic and appositional name structures in reinforcing genealogical continuity and social legitimacy within heroic

narratives. Despite the richness of existing scholarship, relatively limited attention has been paid to the structural classification of anthroponyms as a coherent system within Beowulf. Most studies address individual names or semantic fields rather than providing a systematic overview of structural types.

2. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative-descriptive methodology based on structural and morphological analysis. The corpus consists of anthroponyms extracted from the standard Old English text of Beowulf. The names were classified according to their internal structure and syntactic form.

The analytical procedure included the following steps:

1. Identification of all personal names occurring in the epic.
2. Classification of anthroponyms into structural types: simple, compound, patronymic, and descriptive (name + epithet).
3. Analysis of morphological components and their distribution patterns.
4. Interpretation of structural features in relation to narrative and cultural context.

3. Result and Discussion

Compound anthroponyms constitute the most dominant structural type in Beowulf. The majority of personal names are dithematic, consisting of two meaningful lexical elements. These elements are commonly derived from nouns denoting weapons, animals, power, or abstract heroic qualities. Structurally, the most frequent models include noun + noun and adjective + noun combinations. Examples such as Beowulf, Hrothgar, and Hygelac illustrate how compound structures encode strength, glory, and leadership. This structural dominance confirms the productivity of compound name formation in Old English.

Beowulf → *bēo* (bee) + *wulf* (wolf)
Hrothgar → *hrōð* (glory) + *gār* (spear)
Hygelac → *hyge* (mind, courage) + *lāc* (gift, play)
Wiglaf → *wīg* (battle) + *lāf* (remnant)

Both components are lexically meaningful. The second element often functions as a name-forming base. Compounds are syntactically inseparable. These names encode heroic ideals such as bravery, warfare, loyalty, and honor.

Patronymic anthroponyms form the second most prominent group. These structures typically consist of a personal name followed by a genealogical identifier, often realized through syntactic constructions equivalent to "son of." Such forms function as extended anthroponymic units rather than independent clauses. Structurally, patronymics reinforce lineage and inheritance, emphasizing the importance of kinship in heroic identity construction within the epic. Simple anthroponyms, composed of a single lexical unit, occur less frequently than compound and patronymic forms. These names often represent abbreviated or conventionalized forms that have undergone lexical simplification.

Structurally, they function as monomorphemic units and are typically used in contexts requiring narrative economy or rapid reference to well-known characters. A further structural category includes descriptive anthroponyms, where a personal name is combined with an epithet, title, or ethnonym. These appositional constructions expand the anthroponymic structure and provide additional semantic information, such as social role or tribal affiliation. Structurally, they enhance textual cohesion and assist in distinguishing characters within complex narrative episodes.

Ecglaf's son (Beowulf)
Healfdene's son (Hrothgar)

Patronymics are expressed **syntactically**, not morphologically.Genitive constructions dominate (*X's son*). They reinforce **genealogical legitimacy** and heroic inheritance.

Many anthroponyms occur with **descriptive epithets**, forming extended naming structures.

Proper name + descriptive noun/adjective

Examples: Beowulf, the Geat, **Hrothgar, ring-giver**, **Unferth, son of Ecglaf**. Epithets are **syntactically separate**, not part of the name itself. Function as **contextual identifiers**. They clarify **social role, tribal affiliation, or moral evaluation**.

Discussion

The results of the present study confirm that anthroponyms in *Beowulf* are not random or purely referential elements, but structurally motivated linguistic units that perform important narrative and cultural functions. The dominance of compound anthroponyms reflects the productivity of the Germanic dithematic naming system, where personal identity is linguistically constructed through the combination of semantically loaded morphemes. This structural feature aligns with earlier onomastic research emphasizing the meaningful nature of Old English personal names.

From a structural perspective, compound anthroponyms function as compressed semantic units. By combining elements associated with strength, warfare, animals, or glory, these names encapsulate heroic ideals central to the epic's value system. Their frequent recurrence across the narrative reinforces thematic cohesion and contributes to the elevated, formulaic style characteristic of oral-derived epic poetry.

Patronymic structures further extend the anthroponymic system beyond individual naming. Structurally, these constructions integrate personal names into genealogical chains, emphasizing kinship as a foundation of social legitimacy. In *Beowulf*, heroic authority is often validated through ancestry, and patronymic anthroponyms linguistically encode this social principle. This finding supports discourse-oriented studies that view naming as a mechanism for maintaining social order within heroic narratives.

Simple anthroponyms, although less frequent, play a distinct structural role. Their reduced morphological complexity allows for rapid reference and narrative efficiency, particularly in action-driven passages. Descriptive and appositional structures, on the other hand, function as hybrid forms that combine identification with characterization. By attaching epithets or ethnonyms to personal names, the epic achieves clarity while simultaneously reinforcing social roles and group identities. Overall, the interaction of compound, patronymic, simple, and descriptive anthroponymic structures demonstrates that naming in *Beowulf* operates as a coherent system. This system balances morphological economy with semantic richness, ensuring that personal names contribute simultaneously to linguistic structure, narrative progression, and cultural representation.

4. Conclusion

The structural analysis of anthroponyms in *Beowulf* shows that personal names are predominantly compound and patronymic in form, reflecting Old English morphological norms and Germanic cultural values. These structures play a significant role in shaping narrative organization and expressing heroic ideology. By embedding culturally salient concepts such as strength, lineage, and honor into personal names, the epic reinforces its heroic worldview through linguistic form.

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