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DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2025.49.4.149-159

A Science Term's Metaphorical Journey into the Media and Humanities: A Case Study of *White Noise* and *White Knowledge* (On Don DeLillo and Terry Pratchett)

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the usage of the lexeme *white* to denote a mixture of heterogeneous elements, which originally appeared in optics and acoustics, in particular *white light*, *white noise*. The metaphoric use of natural science terms (notably, the latter originally metaphoric) by DeLillo and Pratchett allowed applying natural science terms to the social phenomena of the informational space, filled with undefined elements forming human consciousness, opinions, and worldviews. The paper studies the origin and functioning of the terms *white noise*, *white knowledge* as an example of usage and meaning shifts and a case of terminology interdisciplinary flow.

KEYWORDS

interdisciplinary functioning of terms; white noise; white knowledge; informational environment; informational pollution

1. Introduction

Interdisciplinary academic communication, along with direct participation of scholars from various fields in the research projects, includes the flow of ideas and terminology toolkit, a particular case of which is the subject of consideration in our paper. We are going to study two terms, introduced in media discourse by postmodern authors Don DeLillo and Terry Pratchett, arisen from the notion of white. Our case study tracks the way how the key elements of the concept move from the field of *natural science* (physics) into Authors' unique style, where they function as *metaphors*, and then gain the features of terms, used by *humanities* (media language studies). An essential component in the semantic structure of

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the lexeme *white* in the terms under consideration is the idea of an *undefined source of information*. The impact of the informational environment in DeLillo's and Pratchett's works was studied by Maltby (1996), Kanchura (2012), Rayment (2014) and other scholars. We are regarding the move of their metaphors into the common media discourse from the late 1990s to the current decade.

The dynamic nature of linguistic thought shapes the development of modern terminology from a cognitive perspective (Cabr  Castellv , 2003; Faber Ben tez, 2009 etc.). As noted by Ivashchenko (2011), cognitive terminology presupposes profiling of the term by different paradigms, which significantly expands the research boundaries, and considers terminology as an open system. Thus, the ways and logic of moving the STEM terms into humanities are to be analysed in the context of terminology toolkit development.

Considering Cherow-O'Leary's (2022) idea of "wide-ranging professional conversations leading to futuristically designed research" (p. 278) we find a number of terms from STEM penetrating into humanities studies. For instance, *entropy*, originated in thermodynamics (Wehrl, 1978), has been extensively adapted in other fields of study, including Shannon's information theory, sociology and literature (Harrington, 1982). A mathematic term *fractal* was successfully introduced in literature studies by Ihor Nabytovych (2011) who incorporated this geometry structure into his research of plot and composition. The list of scientific terms included in literary studies, dictionaries and glossaries is growing: *rhizome*, *texture (euphony)*, *technique*, *evaluation*, *dissemination* etc. (Abrams, 2014; Childs & Fowler, 2006; Cuddon, 2012, etc.). The authors highlight the STEM origin of the terms, introduced into literary theory in the Postmodern period (like *rhizome* or *fractal*), which is the specific to the time, as Hartley (2019) notes while studying the key concepts of communication.

Borrowing the terms of natural sciences to the humanities allows modifying the approach to the object of study. Levine (1987) marks the interaction between science and literature as a subject of growing concern in criticism: the languages of science have increasingly found their way to literature. The first usage of a STEM term in the literature studies is mainly perceived as a metaphor. Compare *rhizome* in biology, which means "a continuously growing horizontal underground stem that puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals" (Britannica, 2023), and in postmodern studies, where it refers to "a non-hierarchical network in which established practices of logic, causation, filiation [...] cannot function" (Childs & Follower, 2006, p. 206). According to this scheme, we are analysing the movement of the terms *white noise* and *white knowledge*, deriving this movement from the elements of meaning of an adjective *white* listed in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2023). After defining the key elements of the concept, we track the terms functioning in academic and in media discourse. We also refer to George Lakoff's cognitive

approach (Lakoff, 1988) in the process of colour conceptualisation, studied by Anna Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka, 1990).

2. The term *white* in physics and its movement towards a metaphor

The term *white light* is an expression, based on the direct literal meaning of the adjective *white*. It describes the colour, which appears when all the colours of the spectrum are combined, a human eye perceives the visible spectrum exactly like this.

The term *white noise* in acoustic physics meaning “noise containing many frequencies with equal intensities” (Britannica, 2023), derives from the *white light* of the spectrum, as connotes with multiplicity of diverse elements. Although *white noise* is a common acoustic term, the *origin* of it is also in some respect metaphorical. Human ears are not supposed to distinguish the colours. They belong to visual perception. Defining the sound with a colouronym reflects the ability of the human mind to make *synesthesia* links. Synesthesia in physiology means “the fact of experiencing some things differently from most other people [...] colours as sounds, [...] shapes as tastes” (OED, 2023) and the origin of the term is metaphoric (Jewanski et al., 2020). This ability was reframed by the writers, who use synesthesia as a literary device to make their language more expressive or pronounced. The term *white noise* was formed due to the synesthetic approach, transmitting the visual characteristic to an acoustic one, according to the key points of the concept: multiplicity and mixture of various elements, which are creating the new wholeness.

The writers’ synesthetic reception of both optical and acoustic terms allows to track the models of understanding these physical phenomena as a metaphor. In Pratchett’s novel *Soul Music* (1994) one of the characters, known for his neglecting of scientific facts and theories, reflects the mixture of multiple sounds at a rock music concert:

It was like that nonsense about *white light* that the young wizards in the High Energy Magic Building went on about. They said that *all the colours together made up white*, which was bloody nonsense as far as Ridcully was concerned, because everyone knew that *if you mixed up all the colours* you could get your hands on, you got a sort of *greeny brown mess* which certainly wasn’t any kind of white. But now he had a vague idea what they meant. All this *noise*, this *mess of music*, suddenly *came together* and there was a *new music inside it* [emphasis added]. (Pratchett, 1994, p. 209).

Ridcully describes the mixture of all the colours as a dirty substance with no distinguished elements, wondering why scientists combine the idea of multiplicity with white, but in a sudden insight he grasps the meaning of the substantial quality shift: the mixture (*a mess*) of the elements becomes something new: “a new music inside it”. This example demonstrates how a physical phenomenon gains a metaphorical meaning. We suppose that Terry Pratchett combines *white light*

and *white noise* in a single reflective passage following the metaphoric usage of *white noise* by Don DeLillo, but also as a reversed echo of the scene from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (the year of first publication: 1954; further references based on the edition of Tolkien, 2001) when Gandalf observes the transformation of Saruman (who had lost his white colour of pure wisdom by choosing the side of totalitarian power). That is how J. R. R. Tolkien plays with the spectrum and refraction phenomena as the source of a metaphor:

“For I am Saruman the Wise, Saruman Ring-maker, Saruman of *Many Colours!*”

I looked then and saw that his robes, which had *seemed white*, were not so, but were woven of *all colours* and if he moved they shimmered and changed hue so that *the eye was bewildered*.

“I liked white better,” I said.

“White!” he sneered. “It serves as a beginning. White cloth may be dyed. The white page can be overwritten; and *the white light can be broken*.”

“*In which case it is no longer white*,” said I. “And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom”[emphasis added]. (Tolkien, 2001, p. 273).

Tolkien (2001) regards an optical phenomenon of light refraction as a metaphor for lost whiteness as a symbol of pure and whole wisdom. “It is no longer white” (p. 273). correlates with broken wholeness and with optical illusion, shimmering, and bewilderment. An optical trick, *illusion*, turns into *delusion*, a conscious evil act. The light refraction in *Soul Music* also includes the logic of “mixture which is dirty” (p. 273) (though is directed backward: from the mixture of colours to white). We cannot positively state the intertextual link between these two excerpts, but the combination of *dirty* and *mixture* prompts the possibility of an allusion in *Soul Music* to the mentioned episode in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

The metaphoric usage of science terms allows the authors to render the ideas of dirtiness/purity, multiplicity/wholeness, and a quality shift, when the whole does not equal the sum of elements.

In terms of semantic development, we can observe the borrowing from the term *white light* the meaning of a multi-element mixture, which becomes something new due to the quality leap, and the additional meaning, appearing in the term *white noise*, – the idea of the human *environment* or atmosphere with the unknown/undefined origin of the elements.

These two additional meanings of the concept got the specific development in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (1985) which, according to Grosvenor (2023) included the physics term into the intertextual space.

3. *White Noise* by Don DeLillo

DeLillo's idea behind the metaphor *white noise* is that of an environment, a background, an undefined source of information coming from the media, in particular from television. In his characters' lives, the role of mass media and

television is immense: “For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is” (DeLillo, 1985, p. 35). The TV in the Gladneys’ house works around the clock, creating a kind of sound background, or “white noise” which Jack’s wife Babette loves so much. The family regularly gather in front of the TV, “it was the custom and the rule”, “every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping” (p. 34). Family did not consider their surroundings to be reality, but rather television programs and news releases. Such kind of background sound can be also referred to as “*white sound*, to be used as a “sleep or relaxation aid” (Grosvenor, 2023). Given the above, it can be inferred that the acoustic physics term *white noise* performs the function of a *metaphor* in the novel, which correlates *stationary noise* characterised by the constancy of *average parameters* with an obsessive phobia that develops into a psychotic fear of death.

The reason for the inability of Jack and his wife to resist mental disturbances and disorders should be sought in the lack of skills for critical perception of advertising and propaganda. As Mark Osteen (1998) notes, in *White Noise* television is a ubiquitous voice droning at the edges of consciousness (p. 165). In Jack Gladney’s life this sound becomes omnipresent: “The precise nature of events. Things in their actual state. [...] White noise everywhere” (DeLillo, 1985, p. 134).

Increasingly, we see that DeLillo emphasises the saturation of TV and consumerism by way of mentioning lists of brand names that punctuate the scenes with disembodied electronic voices. Such insertions may attest to the characters’ fractured consciousness. Maltby (1996) uses the term *visionary moment* to refer to “a flash of insight or sudden revelation which critically raises the level of spiritual or self-awareness of a fictional character” (p. 258); it is a mode of cognition typically represented as bypassing rational thought processes and attaining a higher or redemptive order of knowledge (gnosis). The visionary experience is traced when Jack’s daughter muttered in her sleep the words *Toyota Celica* (DeLillo, 1985, p. 71) as a part of an ecstatic verbal spell imprinted in her mind from TV advertising. Over time, Jack’s thoughts undergo an overwhelming interference that prevents him from obtaining verified information.

As we could trace, the title of Don DeLillo’s novel is symbolic, inviting a multiplicity of interpretations, as the symbolic meaning of the white colour has undergone numerous transformations, a person does not always perceive it as purity, freshness, or beauty. The symbol of colour acts not only as a bearer of a certain emotional charge, but also as a factor in the impact on a person’s mental health and the informational pollution (see the dirty mess from the Tolkien’s and Pratchett’s examples above). Evidently, *white noise* in Don DeLillo’s novel is the flickering of a TV with a monotonous hiss and the ubiquitous electric waves

that penetrate the space of modern life, the waves, without which all the virtual civilisation – radio, television, computers, mobile phones – will disappear. Therefore, the colour and light in the novel are implied in the emotional and artistic background, their symbolic semantics attracted the attention of the writer as an important concept of explaining the psychological state of characters who live an uninteresting, colourless life, exhausting themselves to absurd tasks.

White noise as a term in DeLillo's novel involves the interplay of historical, social, and ideological contexts. Due to the play of codes and self-parody, postmodern art shows the instability of the worldview, mixture of a mainstream literary tradition and a mass culture.

Thus, in DeLillo's novel, the text is constructed as "semantic plurality, complementarity of the symbol – the content plurality of artistic text" (Snikhovska, 2018, p. 15). As Jack Gladney mentions, "remarks exist in a state of permanent flotation. No one thing either more or less plausible than any other thing" (DeLillo, 1985, p. 129). Human communication is perceived by the narrator as a strange, dislocated medium.

4. White Knowledge by Terry Pratchett

4.1 The origin and meaning of a metaphor

Following DeLillo's usage of the term *white noise* as a metaphoric base and main premise of the named novel, Terry Pratchett (1997) suggests the term *white knowledge* which can be compared with DeLillo's usage. Originally, it was introduced by Terry Pratchett in the interview *Words from the Master*, and in the following decade, the phrase spread fast enough. Pratchett (1997) comments:

If I put a reference in a book I try to pick one that a generally well-read (well-viewed, well-listened) person has a sporting chance of picking up; I call this *white knowledge*, the sort of stuff that fills up your brain without you really knowing where it came from.

While in DeLillo's novel, the reader deals with sound, filling the human environment and/or the informational space, for Pratchett, it is the information itself, which fills the human conscious and impacts the responses to the extrinsic triggers. According to Pratchett's description, the elements of an adjective *white* meaning are the following:

- 1) the mixture of the components,
- 2) multiplicity and diversity of the filling substance,
- 3) unknown/indefinite origin of its components,

with elements #1 and #2 coinciding with those of the term *white* in physics and all three – with DeLillo's metaphoric usage.

Considering the combination of the notions *white* and *knowledge*, we can equalise the notions of *information* and *knowledge*, by referring to the commonly

used meanings of the words. Thus, *information* is explained by OED as “Knowledge communicated concerning some particular fact, subject, or event; that of which one is apprised or told; intelligence, news” (OED, 2023). So, the concept of knowledge as a mixture of facts and information accompanied by the word *white* correlates both with the idea of constant environment, providing fertile ground for the mind, and with the term *white* in spectrum analysis. We are suggesting that Pratchett uses the name of a physical phenomenon as a cognitive one, due to an allusion not only to the white noise (audible information) but to the white light (visual information).

4.2 *White knowledge in fiction context: a metaphor reproduced as a term*

The term, introduced by Terry Pratchett, moves on to the neighboring literature space. In a year, in Neil Gaiman’s novel *Neverwhere* (1998) we read: “He continued slowly by a process of *osmosis and white knowledge* (which is like white noise but only more informative) to comprehend the city” (Gaiman, 2000, p. 20).

Supposedly, Gaiman refers both to the interview *Words from the Master* and to personal communication with Terry Pratchett, a friend, and co-author of *Good Omens* (1990). The expression *white knowledge* in the excerpt is mentioned in the *osmotic* context, which correlates with Pratchett’s interview: “Where are all these references to science, physics, in particular, coming from? How much physics do I know? [...] I’m a great believer in *osmotic knowledge*” (Pratchett, 1997).

Thus, *white knowledge* is accompanied by the idea of *osmosis* as “the process of gradual or unconscious assimilation of ideas, knowledge” (Learning by Osmosis, 2013), also a scientific term (originated from chemistry), adopted by humanities (in particular, ontology). This process corresponds to the spreading of knowledge in society and correlates with the multiplicity of *white* and *mixture* as in osmosis the liquid penetrates through numerous tiny holes of a membrane and fills the space like knowledge fills the brain. Moreover, it includes the idea of soft power in spreading and consuming the information (teaching and learning), when the knowledge is being transmitted without pushing efforts of the source and resistance from the receiver.

Neil Gaiman’s (2000) reference to *white knowledge* incorporated the phrase into a broad context of fantasy literature by creating a consistent intertextual fantasy world continuum. The further use of the expression in the fantasy context can be spotted in Robert Jordan’s *The Wheel of Time* series (2021), where the expression refers to the magic that is produced by people who were not being taught (Christensen, 2023).

4.3 *White knowledge in academic context: a term of a specific field*

We assume that the first scholar to introduce *white knowledge* was William Abbott (2002) who compared the notion *white knowledge* with J. R. R. Tolkien’s *cauldron*

of story on the base of multiplicity recreating a brand-new wholeness. White knowledge as a metaphor for intertextual space, introduced in Abbot's Master thesis (sic!) published in *L-Space Web* (the most respectable readers' website on Terry Pratchett) was borrowed by many other scholars and was quoted widely. Studying the use of allusion Abbott refers to both Tolkien's and Pratchett's expressions as *the metaphors of intertextuality* and *the sources of imagination* for the named fantasy writers, the scholar highlights the role of it for modern society and culture and lists the numerous examples of allusions, rooted in the background knowledge, folklore, literature, – all texts, that create the intertextual space of a 21st century person.

In his translation studies monograph, Aleksander Rzyman (2017) refers to white knowledge while analysing Pratchett's way of creating the intertextual fabric of his novels: unmarked "implicit and covert" quotations, demanding the reader's certain degree of erudition (p. 16). According to Rzyman (2017), white knowledge can be regarded as the way the writer challenges the reader: "not a thorough knowledge of literature and other arts in general" (p. 16). Here, the term *white knowledge* is used in specifically literature studies context.

On the other hand, Lucas Boulding uses the term *white knowledge* more likely to compare with a broad background of the contemporary culture with folklore and mythological thinking: the author studies the old beliefs that had inspired the tradition of witchcraft in fantasy novels, referring to such remarks as "everyone knows that". Linking white knowledge with ethical and feminist context, the scholar highlights its connection with public good and argues that the white knowledge is able to *form people's views and declare certain principles* (Boulding, 2015, p. 8). Thus, the scholar notes the *opinion-forming function* of the background knowledge, the function of production of the expectations as well as the potential impact on people's thoughts and, as a result, behaviour. The named feature can be compared with Don DeLillo's white noise impact, as "white knowledge refers to the formation of background assumptions" (Boulding, 2015, p. 16) – the informational massive with an unclear origin, which imperceptibly influences people's subconscious, decisions and actions. The powerful link between fantasy literature and folklore background archetypal beliefs is an intrinsic concept for this kind of literature. The fantasy premise itself is intertextual and can be described as inherent to white knowledge. It avoids plot motivation by coming from some blurred essential worldview, inherited from the pre- and over-science source (Kanchura, 2012, p. 28).

We conclude that since 1998, *white knowledge* has become widely used in postmodern literature studies. Meanwhile, some scholars still present the phrase in italics or with quotation marks or add an explanation of the origin and meaning, according to the initial Pratchett's definition (Boulding, 2015, p. 10; Rzyman, 2017, p. 16). The next step of the expression's functioning is its usage in media language.

4.4 *White knowledge in media language: a commonly used expression*

The move of the concept from the high intellectual spheres of the intertext theory into the mass communication and professional fields widens the usage of the term from fantasy readers to the greater audience. Currently, the leading component of the term's meaning is its *unconscious source*. As the popular American podcast site *WayWordRadio*, focusing on “language examined through culture, history, and family” (WayWordRadio, 2023) states: “white knowledge [is the] information acquired *without conscious effort*”. The *WayWordRadio* podcast authors regularly refer to the term *white knowledge* as one of the teaching/learning field, a way of unconscious education, including it in the osmotic context.

A Q&A site *WiseGeek* includes the term in their dictionary with a specific entry: “information you acquire without effort, or information that you pick up without being able to remember how you know something” (Christensen, 2023). Tricia Christensen highlights the meaning of the informational background, which correlates with “the constant buzz of communication that surrounds them” (Christensen, 2023). The significant focus on communication shifts the attention from a text-centric to a communication-centric world, attuned with Metamodernism theory. So, according to the current usage, the term *white knowledge* is mostly related to the communication background rather than the intertextual space. The sources of it are not only published canonic texts, but oral communication as well, including gossip, slang, and professional spheres.

According to the language-focused public sites, such as *WayWordRadio* or *WiseGeek*, the expression of white knowledge coined by Terry Pratchett is categorised as mass media slang and also has been transforming into a commonly used literature studies term with a clear meaning.

The semantic development, which is appearing in the case of white knowledge, includes the borrowing from the concept *white* (light and noise) the meaning of a multi-element mixture, which becomes something new due to the quality leap, and the additional meaning, emerging in the concept *white* (knowledge), – the idea of the humans' environment with (what is amplified by the usage) the unknown/undefined origin of the elements. According to the meaning of intertextual and extratextual knowledge, originated from nowhere, spread in slang and professional communication, and appropriated as media tropes, the terms of white noise and white knowledge have gained new connotations, being connected with the awareness of informational sources and critical attitude to the statements like “everyone knows”.

5. Conclusion

The case study of the concept *white* usage demonstrated the process of borrowing of terms from STEM into humanities through the stage of the metaphoric meaning. The terms *white noise* (borrowed directly from acoustic physics) and

white knowledge (derived from it) introduced in the field of humanities by DeLillo and Pratchett contain the same elements of the concept *white*:

- a) multiplicity of diverse elements,
- b) emergence of a new wholeness,
- c) an undefined source of the elements.

The terms under consideration correlate with the other STEM terms as follows:

- *white light* (optical physics), as the source term,
- *synesthesia* (psychology and psychophysiology) as the transitional tool from *light* to *noise*,
- *osmotic* (chemistry and cognitive studies) as the way of the background knowledge impact on the human mind.

The usage of terms in the academic and media discourse is a bit different. While the literature scholars prefer to use *white knowledge* describing the intertextual basis of the literary work, the popular media tend to highlight the undefined source of the information, claiming its meaning for communication, critical thinking and media awareness. We suggest the further analyses of the terms *white noise* and *white knowledge*, drawing their meanings and usage to the academic standards, along with the ongoing studies of the interdisciplinary terms transition.

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