

*THE DISPOSSESSED AND HOW THEY GOT TO BE THAT WAY:*  
URSULA K. LE GUIN'S ONOMASTICS

“‘Is it true that you get your names from a computer?’

‘Yes.’

‘How dreary, to be named by a machine!’

‘Why dreary?’

‘It’s so mechanical, so impersonal.’

‘But what is more personal than a name no other living person bears?’

‘No one else? You’re the only Shevek?’

‘While I live. There were others, before me.’

‘Relatives, you mean?’

‘We don’t count relatives much; we are all relatives, you see. I don’t know who they were, except for one, in the early years of the Settlement. She designed a kind of bearing they use in heavy machines, they still call it a “shevek”.’ He smiled again, more broadly. ‘There is a good immortality’.”<sup>1</sup>

In this passage we are introduced to the peculiar habits of naming on the planet Annares, located in the imagination of Ursula K. Le Guin, and extensively discussed in her novel *The Dispossessed*. It is an unusual planet, but then, it appears in an unusual book by an unusual author.

Ursula K. Le Guin may be the most highly respected living science-fiction writer. Certainly her work has received critical acclaim both outside the genre—winning her the National Book Award for children’s literature—and inside it—she has won both the Nebula Award, presented by the Science Fiction Writers Association, and the Hugo Award, determined by popular vote at annual World Science Fiction Conventions.

An interest in linguistics appears to run in the family: the “K” stands for her maiden name—she is the daughter of the eminent anthropologist A. L. Kroeber. And within linguistics, she has frequently delved into onomastics: an early short story of hers was entitled “The Rule of Names,”<sup>2</sup> to which reference will be made later. But her latest novel, *The Dispossessed*, exemplifies an unusual method of naming in such detail that the reader is able to do what John R. Krueger suggested in “Names and Nomenclatures in Science-Fiction”:

Since we wish to study naming practices in a body of written materials labelled s-f, it must be presumed that we will have little interest in stories laid in a modern milieu in which the names differ but little from those found in any current novel. Of greater interest will be tales of the future or alien cultures in which a regularity of naming or some systematical nomenclature is envisaged by the author as a detail in the story to add verisimilitude.<sup>3</sup>

It is just such a study that the novel at hand allows us to make.

1. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (New York: Harper & Row, Science Fiction Book Club edition, 1974), p. 173. All quotations are from this edition, and will be included in the text.

2. “The Rule of Names,” first published in *Fantastic* (1963); reprinted in *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters* (New York: Harper & Row, Science Fiction Book Club edition, 1975); further quotations from this edition will be included in the text.

3. John R. Krueger, “Names and Nomenclatures in Science-Fiction,” *Names*, 14:4 (December, 1966), p. 205.

*The Dispossessed* is rare in other ways than onomastically; it belongs to a once-thriving genre almost extinct in our century, the true utopia. Our time has seen many examples of the anti-utopia, or dystopia, such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Huxley's *Brave New World*; although *The Dispossessed* does not picture a flawless world (its subtitle is "An Ambiguous Utopia"), perhaps not since B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* has there appeared a major novel inviting us to consider the society it depicts as a model far superior to our own.

In brief, the setting of the novel is this: sometime in the future, humans occupy a planet light-years distant from Earth. The planet contains a variety of governmental states and systems, as does our own, but a flourishing world-wide anarchist movement creates unrest for all of them. Eventually, these anarchists enter into an agreement with the governments of the planet: they are given possession of the planet's moon, which is almost the size of its primary and capable of supporting life. For centuries before the opening of *The Dispossessed*, then, an anarchist society has solely occupied the satellite.

The "Settlement," referred to in the opening quotation, means the settlement of the moon, which the anarchists name Annares. To symbolize their separation from the states they have left behind, and to cope with the practical difficulties of assimilating peoples speaking diverse tongues, they adopt a new language, Pravic. In this respect we see a reflection of the adoption of Gaelic by the Republic of Eire, or the adoption of Hebrew by Israel. But unlike Gaelic or Hebrew, Pravic is an artificial language, created by and for the new society. And the language embodies the principles of the new society in ways too extensive to be examined here.

Even the names are so designed that some, at least, contribute to the meaning of the story. For example, the title of Le Guin's early fantasy, "The Rule of Names," refers to the notion found, among other places, in Genesis, that "the name is the thing"; "To speak the name is to control the thing" (p. 67). In *The Dispossessed*, the central character has a name that is also a common noun meaning "bearing," and Shevek does indeed symbolically bear the hopes of both worlds. But what are "the rules of names" on Annares? The "central registry computer" assigns names to the newborn, apparently at random, subject to two rules:

1. Only one living individual can bear a particular name. This point is stressed several times within the novel.
2. Each name consists of a single five- or six-letter word (p. 219), and no name cited in the book violates this restriction.

With these two as guides to the canonical form of names, it is a simple matter to discover the ranges of sounds and letters in Pravic, and not to estimate but to calculate precisely how many potential names are available.

Here are the Pravic names found in the novel:

BEDAP	GIMAR	PEGVUR	SESSUR	TERZOL
BESHUN	GVARAB	PESUS	SHERUT	TINAN
BUNUB	KADAGV	PILUN	SHEVEK	TIRIN
CHEBEN	KOKVAN	PIPAR	SHEVET	TOBER
DESAR	KVETUR	ROVAB	SHIPEG	TOMAR
FARIGV	KVIGOT	RULAG	SIMAS	TREPIL
FERDAZ	LABEKS	SABUL	SKOVAN	TURET
GEZACH	MITIS	SADIK	TAKVER	TURIB
GIBESH	PALAT	SALAS	TERRUS	VOKEP

A fairly large number of generalizations may be made about these names. They show 16 different consonants, represented by the letters B, D, G, P, T, K, M, N, F, S, SH, CH, V, Z, L, and R. An immediate objection that might be made concerns the relation between Pravic letters and the Roman letters of English, since we have no reason to assume a one-for-one correspondence between the letters of the two alphabets. On examination, it seems it does not matter whether there is an exact correspondence or not. It is sufficient to note that Pravic has 16 consonants

each of which is represented at least by a single letter; we need not worry whether Pravic digraphs correspond to English digraphs.

In the list of names we find five vowels, represented by A, E, I, O, and U. Of course, as in English orthography, these five letters may represent more than five sounds, but that seems unlikely. First, if the vowel sounds represented by a letter are conditioned in their distribution, e.g., if a distinction between long and short vowels exists, with long vowels appearing in open syllables, and short vowels appearing in closed ones, then only five possible vowels, not ten, can appear in any given syllable. Second, suppose the vowel difference is not conditioned, and that a sequence of letters like PIPAR represents two different pronunciations, one with a first syllable like that of *piper* and the other with a first syllable like that of *pippin*. This assumption would mean that two people in the society have names that are distinguished in sound but not in writing, a situation that would appear to violate the primary rule of names. I will assume therefore that Pravic either contains only five vowels or some higher number of vowels only five of which may appear in a given syllable.

The possibility exists that the names that happen to occur in the novel do not exemplify all the sounds in Pravic. To explore that possibility, we may look at the other Pravic words, all place-names and common nouns, that do occur:

ABBENAY	KERAN	PEKESH
AMMAR	KLEGGICH	ROLNY
CHAKAR	MAMME	SEDEP
GARA	MENE	TADDE
HOLUM	NUCHNIB	

The list shows two letters, H (HOLUM) and Y (ABBENAY), that do not show up in the list of names. If these two letters represent consonant sounds that can appear in names, the inventory of consonants is increased to 18.

Now to consider the form of names. First, each consists of an open or closed first syllable and a closed second syllable (DE·SAR, FER·DAZ). Second, note that a consonant sequence represented by two letters at most may appear initially, medially, or finally within a name: TREPIL, TERZOL, LABEKS. These three possibilities exist even if we exclude names like CHEBEN and SHEVEK, in which the English digraphs CH and SH represent a single sound which could be represented by a single letter in Pravic. And third, only one consonant combination may occur in a name. If two consonant sequences occurred, the name would violate the second rule by exceeding the limit of six letters. These consonant combinations may consist of any two consonants. True, no words appear with the *same* two consonants initially or finally, like \*RROVAB as opposed to ROVAB, or \*SABULL as opposed to SABUL, but doubled consonants do appear medially in SESSUR, which presumably has its medial combination distinguishable from the single S of DESAR. There is no reason to assume that the distinction could not be perceived at the beginning or the end of a word as well as in the middle.

With these assumptions justified, we can proceed to the calculation of the number of names available in Pravic. To review: Pravic has a maximum of 18 letters that represent consonants and five letters that represent vowels. Only one sequence of two consonants may appear in a name. Therefore, letting C stand for any consonant and V for any vowel, all names will be classifiable into four types:

- A. CVCVC
- B. CCVCVC
- C. CVCCVC
- D. CVCVCC

The number of names in category A equals  $18 \times 5 \times 18 \times 5 \times 18$ , or 145,800. Each of categories B through D will contain 2,624,400 names by similar calculations. The total number of

permissible names in Pravic is the sum of all these categories, or 8,019,000 names.

I have read almost all the stories and novels of Ursula Le Guin, and her works are linguistically sound and inventive to a degree attained by very, very few writers in or out of science fiction. But in the case of *The Dispossessed*, she has erred badly. It is twice mentioned in the novel (for example, p. 39) that Annares contains 20 million people. But by the method she has carefully outlined, almost 12 million people on Annares *do not* have a unique name, or have no name at all. And when you have no name, you are dispossessed indeed.

And there is a second grave difficulty with the system, one that apparently did not occur to the author. Every two-syllable Pravic word which begins and ends with a consonant and has only one consonant combination is also someone's name. If English had the same system, someone somewhere would be named Hatrack, and Goofus, and Stupid, and Lizard, and Fumble, and on and on and on. Any society wherein I run the risk of being known to the world as Toenail is not my idea of a utopia.

But novels depicting a society with its own official system of onomastics are few and far between. *The Dispossessed* is noteworthy that it is one of them, even if its system does not work.

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