

Paper title:

What's in a name? The importance of nomenclature in biotechnology

In June 2006 the World Health Organisation published a review of the issues concerning International Nonproprietary Names (INN) for biotechnological products, reflecting a growing awareness of the challenges posed by novel therapies to the established scientific naming conventions. Like many aspects of the biotechnology industry, the process of naming and branding new drugs is complex and often shrouded in technical vocabulary. Examining fictional representations of biotechnology in parallel with analysis of the 'real-life' processes for product naming reveals some of the implications of nomenclature whilst rendering the scientific discourse more transparent. In doing this, I combined the critical analysis research skills developed during my postgraduate research with my personal experience as Communications Manager for a UK biotech company to create a dialogue between the fictional and the real, suggesting how the two discourses may influence and inform one another.

First published in 2003, Margaret Atwood's novel, *Oryx and Crake*, depicts a world destroyed by a human-made biological virus distributed in vitamin tablets by a biotechnology/pharmaceutical company. Through a series of flashbacks narrated by one of the few survivors, the events leading up to the global disaster are revealed. This novel paints a dystopian picture of the effects of biotechnology when controlled by a powerful few, and incorporates many of the themes of fear and distrust seen in popular press coverage of the biotechnology industry. Throughout the novel Atwood brings language to the fore, emphasising brand names and adapting the creation myth to ironic effect. Atwood's treatment provides a helpful way into thinking about the current, 'real-life' guidelines and processes for naming a new medicine, and, in outlining these I draw attention to the implications of defining a new mechanism of action or a new 'family' of medicines, and the role that naming plays in validating a novel product.

Issues of nomenclature and definition remain an important priority for feminism, replete as they are with questions of what is included or excluded from a category. The existing body of work developed by Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and others on situated knowledges promotes close examination of all aspects of science, including nomenclature. The biotechnology industry is a particularly relevant field to consider in this respect, characterised by highly novel therapies and smaller, dynamic companies, where products are often at early stages of development, and where there may be greater opportunities for involvement or intervention.

BIOGRAPHY

Katherine has a BA in English and French from University of Wales, Swansea, and an MA in English from King's College, University of London. Her MA dissertation was concerned with representations of new technologies in the work of Donna Haraway and Jeanette Winterson. She is currently undertaking PhD research at Birkbeck, University of London, under the supervision of Professor Lynne Segal and Dr Laura Salisbury. Her thesis is provisionally titled 'Intersections of gender, language and new technologies: exploiting mutual dependencies for feminist theory'. She lives and works in London, UK, where she is also Communications Manager for a UK biotechnology company called Antisoma.

Institutional affiliation **Birkbeck, University of London**