

A Comprehensive Study of English Phraseological Units and Their Role in Literary Discourse

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Abstract: This article investigates the semantic and functional complexity of English phraseological units, with particular emphasis on phraseological homonyms and synonyms and their realization in literary discourse. The study examines the principal characteristics of these linguistic phenomena and considers the ways in which they contribute to the semantic, stylistic, and expressive organization of literary texts. Particular attention is given to the role of context in determining the intended interpretation of phraseological expressions whose meanings may vary according to their linguistic and situational environment. Examples drawn from English literary works demonstrate that phraseological homonyms and synonyms may serve as effective instruments for creating ambiguity, double meanings, stylistic variation, irony, and additional semantic associations. The analysis confirms that the appropriate use of phraseological units considerably enhances the expressive potential of literary language and encourages readers to engage more deeply with the semantic and aesthetic dimensions of literary texts.

Key words: phraseological units, phraseological homonyms, phraseological synonyms, literary discourse, semantic ambiguity, context, stylistic function..



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INTRODUCTION

Phraseological units constitute one of the most significant components of the lexical and semantic structure of a language. Idioms, proverbs, fixed expressions, and other established combinations enable speakers and writers to express complex ideas in concise, conventionalized, and often culturally meaningful forms. Unlike freely constructed word combinations, phraseological expressions frequently possess a degree of structural stability and semantic integrity that prevents their meanings from being interpreted solely on the basis of their individual components.

The significance of phraseological units becomes particularly evident in literary discourse, where language is employed not only for the transmission of information but also for the creation of imagery, characterization, emotional effects, stylistic contrasts, and multiple layers of meaning. Within this broad category, phraseological homonyms and synonyms deserve particular consideration because their formal and semantic relationships provide authors with additional opportunities for linguistic creativity.

Phraseological homonymy is associated with the coexistence of formally identical expressions that differ in meaning, whereas phraseological synonymy concerns different expressions that convey identical or closely related semantic content. Both phenomena may considerably expand the interpretative potential of a literary text. Depending on the surrounding linguistic and situational context, the same form may evoke different meanings, while semantically related expressions may be selected to produce stylistic variation or to emphasize particular aspects of a character, event, or situation.

Language should consequently be regarded as a dynamic and multifaceted system in which phraseological phenomena interact with semantic, contextual, and stylistic factors. The study of phraseological homonyms and synonyms is therefore relevant not only to phraseology itself but also to the analysis of literary language.

The present study aims to examine the characteristic features and literary functions of English phraseological homonyms and synonyms. Particular emphasis is placed on their contextual interpretation and their contribution to the semantic richness and stylistic organization of literary works. The analysis of examples from English literature makes it possible to demonstrate how these phraseological phenomena contribute to ambiguity, semantic nuance, linguistic variation, and reader engagement.

Methods

The study employs descriptive, quantitative, qualitative, classification, and literature-review methods. The descriptive method is used to characterize the principal linguistic properties of phraseological units, while qualitative analysis focuses on their meanings and contextual functions in literary discourse. Quantitative analysis is employed where necessary to identify the distribution of relevant linguistic phenomena. The classification method facilitates the differentiation of phraseological homonyms and synonyms according to their formal and semantic characteristics.

The research examines phraseological units occurring in original English literary texts and considers their semantic and contextual realization.

The object of the research: English phraseological units used in original literary texts.

The subject of the research: phraseological synonyms and homonyms, as well as their contextual peculiarities and functional characteristics.

Theoretical Characteristics of Phraseological Units

Phraseological units are fixed or relatively stable combinations of words that function as integral semantic units. They encompass idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and various established word combinations. Examples include the idiom “kick the bucket” and the proverb “a stitch in time saves nine” [1]. In such expressions, the meaning of the whole unit may differ substantially from the literal meanings of its individual components.

The distinction between phraseological units and freely formed combinations is therefore primarily determined by their structural stability and semantic integrity. While the components of a free combination can generally be selected and modified according to the communicative requirements of a particular situation, the constituent elements of a phraseological unit tend to demonstrate a restricted degree of variability. Moreover, the overall meaning of an idiomatic expression frequently cannot be predicted by simply adding together the meanings of its constituent words.

Three major characteristics of phraseological units can be identified [5].

1. Stability.

Phraseological units generally preserve a relatively stable formal structure. Substantial alteration of their constituent elements may affect or even destroy their established semantic identity.

2. Idiomaticity.

The semantic content of a phraseological unit is not necessarily equivalent to the sum of the meanings of its individual components. The expression functions as an integrated semantic whole.

3. Fixedness.

The constituents of a phraseological unit are normally subject to restrictions concerning substitution and structural modification. Consequently, not every formally possible alteration is acceptable within the established expression.

These characteristics distinguish phraseological units from freely generated combinations and explain their importance as conventionalized resources of linguistic expression.

Phraseological Homonyms

Phraseological homonyms represent a particular type of semantic relationship in which expressions share an identical or formally similar linguistic shape while possessing different meanings. Such homonymic relationships may be manifested through identical spelling, identical pronunciation, or both. In literary discourse, the coexistence of different meanings associated with the same form can become an important stylistic resource.

The interpretative potential of phraseological homonyms is especially significant because the ambiguity generated by their formal identity can be deliberately exploited by authors. Depending on the context, a homonymous expression may evoke humor, irony, semantic ambiguity, or a double interpretation. Consequently, homonymy can contribute not only to lexical diversity but also to the construction of deeper literary meanings.

Three types of homonymic relationships are distinguished.

1. Homophones

Homophones are linguistic forms that have the same pronunciation but differ in spelling and meaning. The forms “bare” and “bear” provide a conventional example of this relationship.

2. Homographs

Homographs are forms that share the same spelling but have different meanings. The word “lead,” for example, may refer to the act of guiding or directing, while “lead” may also denote a particular metal.

3. Perfect Homonyms

Perfect homonyms have identical spelling and pronunciation but differ semantically. The word “bat” illustrates this relationship because it may refer either to a flying mammal or to an item of sports equipment.

The literary use of such forms demonstrates how formal identity can coexist with semantic divergence and thereby create additional interpretative possibilities.

Phraseological Homonymy in English Literature

The works of William Shakespeare provide notable examples of deliberate linguistic ambiguity. In *Hamlet*, the expression “grave man” can be interpreted in two ways: it may characterize a serious or solemn person, while simultaneously evoking the idea of a man associated with a grave. The coexistence of these meanings creates a double interpretation and illustrates Shakespeare’s ability to exploit lexical ambiguity as an artistic device [11;178-180].

A comparable example appears in *Romeo and Juliet*. Mercutio’s statement, “Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man,” utilizes the ambiguity of the word “grave.” The expression simultaneously suggests seriousness and death, thus producing a meaningful connection between the literal and figurative dimensions of the utterance [10;101].

Charles Dickens also demonstrates the literary potential of semantic ambiguity in *Great Expectations*. The title expression “great expectations” may be interpreted in more than one way, reflecting both the notion of elevated hopes and the expectations connected with Pip’s personal circumstances [4;133]. Such linguistic choices enable Dickens to establish additional semantic associations and contribute to the development of characters and narrative situations.

These examples indicate that homonymic relationships can function as more than merely lexical coincidences. Within literary discourse, they may become deliberate stylistic instruments through which authors construct ambiguity and invite readers to recognize several possible interpretations simultaneously.

Phraseological Synonyms

Phraseological synonyms comprise formally different expressions that convey identical or closely related meanings. Their presence provides speakers and writers with alternative linguistic means of expressing a particular concept or situation. As a result, synonymous phraseological units contribute to lexical diversity, stylistic flexibility, and semantic precision.

In literary texts, the choice between synonymous expressions may be particularly significant. Even when two expressions convey approximately the same conceptual content, differences in their structure, stylistic coloring, degree of formality, or emotional connotation may influence the overall effect of a passage.

Phraseological synonyms can be broadly divided into two categories: absolute and partial synonyms.

1. Absolute Synonyms

Absolute synonyms are expressions whose meanings are sufficiently close to allow substitution without a substantial change in the general semantic content of an utterance.

For instance:

“Mr. Bingley was good-looking and gentlemanlike.”

“Mr. Bingley was a man of pleasing appearance and polite manners.”

Both expressions present Mr. Bingley in a positive manner, drawing attention to his attractive appearance and socially appropriate behavior. Although their linguistic structures differ, their principal descriptive function remains broadly equivalent.

The selection of one synonymous expression rather than another, however, can still influence the stylistic character of a passage. Jane Austen’s careful use of alternative expressions enables her to introduce subtle distinctions into the representation of characters and their relationships [3;58-60].

2. Partial Synonyms

Partial synonyms share only part of their semantic content and are therefore interchangeable in some contexts but not in others. The relationship between “big” and “large” illustrates this distinction. Although the two words may frequently function as alternatives, their substitution is not universally possible.

For example, “big sister” is a conventional expression, whereas “large sister” does not convey the same meaning.

A literary illustration can be found in Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*. The well-known expressions “it was the best of times” and “it was the worst of times” establish a semantic opposition while simultaneously describing interconnected aspects of the same historical period. The contrast between “best” and “worst” reflects the coexistence of contradictory social and human experiences.

Rather than merely presenting two isolated opposites, the expressions contribute to a broader representation of the complexity and contradictions of the period. Their juxtaposition reinforces the paradoxical character of human experience and demonstrates how semantically contrasting expressions can operate together to produce a more complex literary meaning [4;156].

The Role of Context in the Interpretation of Phraseological Units

Context is one of the most important factors in determining the intended meaning of phraseological homonyms and synonyms. A phraseological expression cannot always be interpreted adequately in isolation because its meaning may depend on the linguistic environment in which it occurs. For this reason, interpretation requires attention to both the immediate context and the broader textual environment.

The **immediate context** consists of the words and sentences surrounding the expression. These elements may provide direct clues concerning the intended meaning. For example, the interpretation of “lead” depends on its linguistic environment. When the word occurs in a discussion of fishing, it may denote the metal, whereas in the context of a team or project it may refer to the act of guiding or directing.

The **broader context**, in contrast, encompasses the wider thematic, cultural, historical, and situational framework of a literary work. The meaning of a phraseological expression may be influenced by the setting, narrative circumstances, characters, and major themes of the text.

Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* provides an illustrative example. The regional dialects and culturally specific linguistic forms employed in the novel require readers to consider the broader social and cultural context when interpreting particular expressions [9;243]. Twain’s use of regional speech contributes to the authenticity of the narrative while simultaneously strengthening the social and cultural characterization of the text.

The significance of context can also be observed in Emily Dickinson’s poetry. Her frequent use of homonymous and synonymous linguistic forms requires readers to interpret individual expressions within the wider semantic and poetic structure of the work. Such linguistic choices contribute to the ambiguity and richness of her poetic expression [6;22-24].

Therefore, contextual analysis is indispensable for understanding phraseological phenomena in literary discourse. The same linguistic form may acquire different interpretations depending on its immediate verbal environment and the broader communicative and literary framework.

The Impact of Phraseological Units on Literary Style

Phraseological units make a substantial contribution to the stylistic and semantic richness of literary language. Phraseological homonyms and synonyms, in particular, enable authors to introduce additional semantic nuances and establish relationships between different levels of interpretation.

Their stylistic significance derives partly from their capacity to move beyond direct and literal communication. Homonymous expressions may encourage readers to consider alternative interpretations, whereas synonymous expressions provide opportunities for variation in lexical form and stylistic presentation.

As a result, phraseological units can strengthen the aesthetic organization of literary texts and increase reader involvement. Their interpretation may require attention not only to individual words but also to the relationships between linguistic forms, context, characters, themes, and the communicative intentions of the author.

The Contribution of Phraseological Units to Literary Techniques

1. Ambiguity and Double Meaning

One of the most significant literary functions of phraseological homonyms is their capacity to generate ambiguity and double meaning. By deliberately employing a form that permits more than one interpretation, an author can create humor, irony, semantic tension, or deeper conceptual associations.

James Joyce’s *Ulysses* illustrates the sophisticated use of homonymic relationships in literary discourse. Joyce’s manipulation of homonyms contributes to the semantic complexity of the novel and increases the interpretative demands placed on the reader [7;345-347].

In *Ulysses*, the interaction between homonymous and synonymous expressions contributes to the multifaceted character of the narrative. Joyce’s playful and complex treatment of language encourages readers to examine the text from multiple semantic perspectives. Consequently, the linguistic structure itself becomes an important source of narrative complexity [7;120-122].

Such examples demonstrate that ambiguity is not necessarily an obstacle to communication in literature. On the contrary, controlled ambiguity can constitute an important artistic technique that encourages active interpretation and allows several meanings to coexist within a single textual environment.

2. Stylistic Variation

Phraseological synonyms contribute to literary style by providing alternative forms of expression and thereby increasing lexical and aesthetic variation. The selection of semantically related expressions may influence rhythm, tone, emphasis, and the overall stylistic character of prose or poetry.

Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique provides an illustrative example of the relationship between synonymous expression and literary style. Her narrative method frequently relies on subtle lexical variation to represent the fluid and continuously developing nature of human thought [12;150-152].

In works such as *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf employs semantically related expressions in ways that contribute to the representation of the complexity of consciousness. Her careful lexical choices allow the narrative to move between different perceptions, emotions, memories, and reflections while maintaining the fluidity characteristic of the stream-of-consciousness technique [12;75-78].

Thus, phraseological synonymy may perform an important stylistic function by allowing authors to avoid unnecessary repetition while simultaneously introducing subtle semantic and emotional distinctions.

Conclusion

Phraseological homonyms and synonyms constitute significant resources of linguistic creativity in literary discourse. Their distinctive semantic and formal properties enable writers to extend the expressive potential of language and to construct meanings that cannot always be conveyed through straightforward lexical choices.

The analysis demonstrates that phraseological homonyms are particularly effective in creating ambiguity, double meanings, humor, and irony. Because identical or similar linguistic forms may activate different semantic interpretations, their use encourages readers to examine the textual context carefully and to participate actively in the construction of meaning.

Phraseological synonyms, in turn, provide authors with alternative ways of expressing related ideas. Their use contributes to stylistic variation, semantic precision, rhythm, and aesthetic diversity. Even when synonymous expressions convey broadly equivalent meanings, their contextual and stylistic differences may influence the reader's perception of a character, situation, or narrative event.

Context plays a fundamental role in the interpretation of both homonymous and synonymous phraseological expressions. Immediate linguistic surroundings as well as the broader thematic, cultural, and situational context of a literary work must be taken into account when determining the intended meaning of a phraseological unit.

The literary examples considered in the study demonstrate that phraseological units are not merely fixed linguistic combinations but also productive resources of literary expression. Their deliberate use enables authors to introduce semantic layers, stylistic contrasts, ambiguity, and emotional nuance into literary texts.

Consequently, the study of phraseological homonyms and synonyms contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between phraseology, semantics, context, and literary style. Their sophisticated use increases the semantic and aesthetic richness of English literary discourse, enhances reader engagement, and demonstrates the capacity of language to communicate complex meanings and emotions through relatively concise linguistic forms.

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