

THE LEXICAL-SEMANTIC STUDY OF ANTONOMASIA IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract: Antonomasia is a significant rhetorical and lexical-semantic device in the English language, involving the substitution of a proper name for a common noun or vice versa. This paper investigates the lexical-semantic characteristics of antonomasia in English, examining its structural patterns, semantic mechanisms, and functional roles in literary, journalistic, and everyday discourse. The study employs a descriptive-analytical approach combined with contextual and semantic analysis of selected examples drawn from literary texts and contemporary media. The findings reveal that antonomasia operates through metonymic and metaphoric processes, contributing to semantic enrichment, stylistic expressiveness, and cultural coding in English. The study underscores the importance of antonomasia as a productive word-formation and meaning-transfer mechanism in the English lexical system.

Key words: antonomasia, lexical semantics, rhetorical device, proper nouns, semantic transfer, English stylistics, figurative language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a system of signs but a dynamic mechanism through which speakers encode social, cultural, and cognitive realities. Among the many lexical and rhetorical phenomena that characterize the richness of the English language, antonomasia holds a particularly prominent place. Defined broadly as the substitution of a proper name for a common noun or, conversely, the use of a common noun as a proper name, antonomasia serves as both a linguistic and cultural instrument that reflects how communities conceptualize individuals, roles, and archetypes [1].

The study of antonomasia occupies an intersection between lexicology, semantics, and stylistics. As a figure of speech, it has been recognized since classical rhetoric; however, its systematic linguistic analysis, particularly within the lexical-semantic framework of the English language, remains an area requiring deeper scholarly attention. In English, antonomasia manifests in diverse forms: historical or mythological figures used to denote types (e.g., a Judas for a traitor), brand names replacing generic concepts (e.g., Hoover for vacuum cleaner), and literary characters becoming common descriptors (e.g., a Shylock for a miser) [2].

This paper aims to analyze the lexical-semantic properties of antonomasia in the English language by identifying its types, examining the semantic processes underlying its formation, and evaluating its stylistic and communicative functions. The research draws on examples from literary works, journalistic texts, and everyday speech to provide a comprehensive picture of how antonomasia operates within the English lexical system.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employs a descriptive-analytical methodology combined with contextual and semantic analysis. The corpus of examples was selected purposively from three primary

domains: (1) classical and contemporary English literary texts, including works by Shakespeare, Dickens, and modern fiction authors; (2) British and American journalistic texts sourced from reputable publications; and (3) everyday spoken and written English, including social media discourse and idiomatic expressions [3].

The analytical framework integrates principles from lexical semantics, including semantic change theory, prototype theory, and the theory of cognitive metaphor and metonymy as elaborated by Lakoff and Johnson [4]. Each identified instance of antonomasia was categorized by type, analyzed for its semantic mechanism (metaphoric or metonymic transfer), and evaluated for its pragmatic function in context. A qualitative approach was adopted to enable nuanced interpretation of semantic and stylistic features rather than purely quantitative measurement.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Types of Antonomasia in English

The analysis identified three primary types of antonomasia operating in the English language:

(a) Proper-to-common antonomasia: This is the most prevalent type, wherein a proper name — typically that of a historical, mythological, biblical, or literary figure — is generalized to denote a class of persons or a universal human trait. Examples include Hercules (a person of extraordinary strength), Solomon (a wise man), Don Juan (a seducer), and Einstein (a genius). The mechanism here is primarily metaphoric, involving the projection of attributes associated with the referent onto a new target [1].

(b) Common-to-proper antonomasia: In this subtype, a common noun or epithet is used as a proper name, often ironically or with characterizing intent. This device is especially common in literary texts, where authors assign meaningful names to characters (e.g., Mr. Gradgrind in Dickens's *Hard Times*, Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's *The Rivals*). Such names function as semantic thumbnails, encoding the character's essential qualities within the name itself [5].

(c) Brand/trade name antonomasia: In contemporary English, certain brand names have undergone lexicalization through antonomasia, becoming generic terms for entire product categories. Examples include Hoover (vacuum cleaner), Jacuzzi (whirlpool bath), Photoshop (digital image editing), and Google (internet search). This process reflects the cultural and commercial dominance of certain brands but also illustrates how the lexical system adapts to incorporate new referents [2].

3.2. Semantic Mechanisms Underlying Antonomasia

At the semantic level, antonomasia operates primarily through two cognitive-linguistic processes: metaphor and metonymy. In proper-to-common antonomasia, the semantic transfer is largely metaphoric: the name of an individual is mapped onto a target entity based on perceived similarity in attributes. For instance, calling a person a Napoleon relies on a metaphorical association with qualities of ambition, military genius, and authoritarian leadership [4].

Metonymy, by contrast, underpins many cases of brand name antonomasia, where the part (a specific brand) stands for the whole (an entire product category). The cognitive accessibility of the brand name — due to cultural prominence or frequency of use — motivates its metonymic extension. This process is consistent with the principle of salience in cognitive

semantics: the most cognitively accessible member of a category becomes its representative label [4].

A further semantic dimension of antonomasia is its capacity for semantic bleaching or strengthening. In some cases, repeated use of an antonomastic term leads to the gradual weakening of the original proper name's specific cultural associations, producing a new common noun with broader application. Conversely, in literary contexts, antonomasia often reinforces semantic intensity by evoking the full cultural weight of the original name [3].

3.3. Stylistic and Communicative Functions

In literary and journalistic discourse, antonomasia fulfills several important stylistic functions. First, it serves as an economical means of characterization, conveying complex personality traits through a single evocative name. Second, it functions as a form of cultural allusion, presupposing shared cultural knowledge and thereby strengthening in-group identity among readers. Third, antonomasia can operate as a form of irony or satire: calling a corrupt official a Brutus or a modern politician a Caesar carries implicit critical commentary [5].

In everyday discourse, antonomasia contributes to semantic efficiency. Phrases such as "he is a real Romeo" or "don't be such a Scrooge" pack extensive semantic content into brief expressions. This compression is communicatively advantageous, enabling speakers to draw on shared cultural frameworks to convey nuanced meaning rapidly and effectively [1].

4. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that antonomasia is a multi-dimensional lexical-semantic phenomenon in the English language that operates through metaphoric and metonymic processes of semantic transfer. Its three main types — proper-to-common, common-to-proper, and brand name antonomasia — each reflect distinct cognitive and cultural mechanisms, and all contribute significantly to the expressive and semantic richness of English.

The findings confirm that antonomasia is not merely a rhetorical ornament but a productive element of the English lexical system, actively participating in processes of meaning-making, cultural transmission, and lexical innovation. For language educators and researchers in applied linguistics and lexicology, antonomasia represents a valuable case study in how cultural knowledge, cognitive mechanisms, and linguistic creativity interact within the lexicon.

Further research could profitably extend this analysis to diachronic perspectives, examining how antonomastic formations evolve over time, as well as cross-linguistic comparative studies that contrast the antonomastic systems of English with those of Uzbek, Russian, or other languages in the national educational context.

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