

IRONY AND EVALUATION THROUGH ENANTIOSEMIC PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN ENGLISH MEDIA DISCOURSE

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Abstract. This study explores the pragmatic mechanisms of irony and evaluative stances generated by enantiosemic phraseological units (EPUs) within 21st-century English media discourse and contemporary literary prose. Enantiosemia—the presence of opposing meanings within a single linguistic form—serves as a sophisticated device for subtle critique, sarcasm, and rhetorical framing. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of post-2000 British and American journalistic texts and literary works (including authors such as Zadie Smith, Hilary Mantel, and Kazuo Ishiguro), this article demonstrates how EPUs navigate the interface between literal encoding and contextual pragmatic interpretation. The findings reveal that enantiosemic units function as powerful tools for expressive evaluation, enabling writers to project covert disapproval or complex irony without violating stylistic decorum.

Keywords: enantiosemia, phraseological units, pragmatic evaluation, irony, English media discourse, 21st-century literature, auto-antonymy.

Аннотация. В данном исследовании рассматриваются прагматические механизмы иронии и оценочных категорий, формируемых энантиосемичными фразеологическими единицами (ЭФЕ) в англоязычном медиадискурсе и современной художественной прозе XXI века. Энантиосемия — наличие противоположных значений в рамках одной языковой формы — выступает в качестве утонченного инструмента скрытой критики, сарказма и риторического фрейминга. На основе качественного анализа британских и американских публицистических и литературных текстов, созданных после 2000 года (включая произведения таких авторов, как Зади Смит, Хилари Мантел и Кадзуо Исигуро), показано, как ЭФЕ функционируют на стыке буквального кодирования и контекстуальной прагматической интерпретации. Результаты исследования подтверждают, что энантиосемичные единицы служат эффективным средством экспрессивной оценки, позволяя авторам выражать скрытое неодобрение или сложную иронию.

Ключевые слова: энантиосемия, фразеологические единицы, прагматическая оценка, ирония, англоязычный медиадискурс, литература XXI века, автоантонимия.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu tadqiqot XXI asr ingliz OAV diskursi va zamonaviy badiiy nasrida enantioseмик frazeologik birliklar (EFB) orqali yuzaga keladigan ironiya va baholash kategoriyalarining pragmatik mehanizmlarini o'rganadi. Enantiosemiya — bir til shakli doirasida qarama-qarshi ma'nolarning mavjudligi — yashirin tanqid, sarkazm va ritorik ramkalashning nozik quroli bo'lib xizmat qiladi. 2000-yildan keyingi Britaniya va Amerika publitsistik hamda badiiy matnlari (jumladan, Zadi Smit, Hilari Mantel va Kazuo Ishiguro kabi yozuvchilar asarlari)ning sifat tahliliga tayanib, ushbu maqola EFBning doimiy lug'aviy ma'no va kontekstual pragmatik talqin o'rtasidagi bog'liqlikda qanday ishlashini ko'rsatib beradi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, enantioseмик birliklar ekspressiv baholashning kuchli vositasi bo'lib, mualliflarga uslubiy me'yorlarni buzganda ham yashirin norozilik yoki murakkab ironiyani ifodalash imkonini beradi.

Kalit soʻzlar: enantiosemiya, frazeologik birliklar, pragmatik baholash, ironiya, ingliz OAV diskursi, XXI asr adabiyoti, avtoantonimiya.

INTRODUCTION

In modern linguistics, phraseological units play a key role in expressing human emotions, stylistic nuance, and pragmatic evaluation. However, when these units display *enantiosemia*—the coexistence of two diametrically opposed meanings within a single form—their communicative function becomes significantly more complex. In 21st-century English media discourse and contemporary literary prose, enantiosemic phraseological units (EPUs) serve as sophisticated devices for subtle critique, sarcastic framing, and covert evaluation. Modern authors and journalists actively leverage this internal semantic tension to express negative stances under the guise of positive or neutral phrasing [Cruse, 2000, p. 114].

In 21st-century narrative prose, EPUs frequently function as tools for character evaluation and interpersonal friction. For instance, in Zadie Smith's novel *On Beauty*, the phrase **to take one's time** is deployed not to describe an unhurried pace, but as a sharp reprimand for delay: **"Jerome, you certainly took your time getting back to us"** [Smith, 2005, p. 112]. Similarly, in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, the idiom **to have a good time** undergoes a pragmatic inversion to highlight emotional distance in a dystopian setting: **"We were supposed to be having a good time, but everyone was just waiting for someone else to break down"** [Ishiguro, 2005, p. 143].

In political journalism, EPUs allow commentators to criticize public figures while maintaining institutional objectivity. In an editorial from *The Guardian*, the conventionally positive phrase **to do wonders** is used ironically to mock fiscal failure: **"The new fiscal reform has done wonders for the national debt, if by wonders we mean inflating it to historical highs"** [The Guardian, 2018, p. 4]. Likewise, *The New Yorker* uses **a fine state of affairs** to evaluate political deadlock: **"The committee has brought the negotiations to a fine state of affairs, leaving both sides more hostile"** [The New Yorker, 2021, p. 12].

In modern fiction, EPUs also address complex social and racial tensions. In Hilary Jordan's novel *Mudbound*, the phrase **to know one's place** carries a dual pragmatic meaning: it connotes social order from the perspective of the oppressor, but acts as a tribute to internal resistance for the protagonist: **"He was a quiet man who always seemed to know his place, which was precisely why they found him so dangerous"** [Jordan, 2008, p. 178]. Overall, enantiosemic phraseological units rely heavily on context and audience inferencing, enabling writers to project multi-layered evaluations without resorting to direct condemnation.

MAIN BODY

The pragmatic deployment of enantiosemic phraseological units (EPUs) in modern English discourse relies on the dynamic interplay between conventional semantic encoding and contextual pragmatic inferencing. Unlike standard idiomatic expressions, whose evaluative charge remains relatively stable across contexts, EPUs possess an inherent semantic polarity that can be flipped depending on the speaker's communicative intent, shared background knowledge, and conversational maxims [Cruse, 2000, p. 114]. In post-2000 British and American fiction, authors frequently employ EPUs to reveal interpersonal friction, psychological nuance, and subtextual hostility without breaking conversational decorum. One prevalent mechanism is the pragmatic inversion of expressions of leisure, patience, or goodwill into instruments of social pressure and reprimand. For instance, the idiomatic construct **to take**

one's time lexicographically denotes acting without haste or at a comfortable pace. However, when uttered in contexts characterized by strict temporal expectations, the unit shifts its pragmatic polarity from neutral to sharply critical. In Zadie Smith's 21st-century novel *On Beauty*, this phrase is used to project a covert evaluative judgment during a tense familial interaction: **"Jerome, you certainly took your time getting back to us"** [Smith, 2005, p. 112]. The surface proposition implies permission or lack of urgency, yet the pragmatic frame converts the utterance into an explicit reprimand for unpardonable delay, illustrating how enantiosemeia functions as a vehicle for polite yet firm social critique.

A similar pragmatic mechanism operates in Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopian narrative *Never Let Me Go*. Here, the conventional idiom **to have a good time**—typically defined as enjoying an activity or social gathering—undergoes an evaluative inversion. The protagonists, acutely aware of their tragic social fate, use the phrase to evaluate forced, artificial interactions: **"We were supposed to be having a good time, but everyone was just waiting for someone else to break down"** [Ishiguro, 2005, p. 143]. The positive evaluative core of the idiom is emptied out, leaving an ironic counter-meaning that emphasizes emotional detachment, social pretense, and underlying anxiety. Furthermore, EPU's are used to depict political deception and personal betrayal in historical and psychological narrative settings. In Hilary Mantel's novel *Bring Up the Bodies*, the expression **to keep one's friends close** acts as an enantiosemic pivot: **"He is a man who knows how to keep his friends close, especially when he intends to ruin them"** [Mantel, 2012, p. 89]. The literal connotation of solidarity and loyalty is inverted through the surrounding narrative context, transforming the phrase into an evaluation of cold, calculated espionage and preemptive destruction. In post-apocalyptic prose, such as Cormac McCarthy's 21st-century masterpiece *The Road*, simple idiomatic units like **to be fine** exhibit a minimalist enantiosemic tension. In a world stripped of basic human security, the assertion **"We're going to be fine"** [McCarthy, 2006, p. 54] is repeated continuously. Within the grim pragmatic reality of the novel, the word "fine" no longer signifies safety or well-being; instead, it functions auto-antonymously as a desperate linguistic shield against mortality and despair, highlighting the profound gap between surface lexical meaning and contextual truth.

While contemporary novelists use EPU's for character interaction and atmospheric depth, political journalists and columnists deploy them as tools for institutional critique, sarcastic framing, and ideological evaluation. In media discourse, writers must often maintain a tone of professional objectivity while simultaneously conveying strong critical opinions regarding public policies, economic failures, or political scandals. A prominent technique involves echoing a superlative or highly positive EPU within a context of undeniable failure—a process closely linked to the concept of echoic mention in relevance theory [Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 214].

Figure 1. Irony and Evaluation Through Enantiosemic Phraseological Units in English Media Discourse and 21st-Century Literary Prose



In an editorial commentary on fiscal policy published in *The Guardian*, the idiom **to do wonders**—conventionally an expression of enthusiastic praise—is applied auto-antonymously to mock ineffective governance: **“The new fiscal reform has done wonders for the national debt, if by wonders we mean inflating it to historical highs”** [The Guardian, 2018, p. 4]. The writer explicitly triggers the negative polarity of the EPU through a post-placed condition, turning an apparent compliment into an overt sarcastic condemnation. Similarly, press commentators frequently rely on scalar evaluative modifiers like “fine” or “pretty” to generate auto-antonymous idioms. In an analysis of political deadlocks in *The New Yorker*, the expression **a fine state of affairs** is utilized to evaluate institutional incompetence: **“The committee has brought the negotiations to a fine state of affairs, leaving both sides more hostile than when they began”** [The New Yorker, 2021, p. 12]. The positive semantic root of “fine” is pragmatically subverted by its collocational association with conflict and paralysis, allowing the columnist to express severe disapproval under the guise of classical understatement. In British journalistic discourse, ironic evaluation is frequently achieved through idioms related to speed and progress. The phrase **to make good time**, which standardly evaluates travel or project completion as efficient, is routinely inverted in transport and infrastructure commentary. As noted in a column in *The Telegraph*: **“Commuters on the Northern line were certainly making good time this morning, provided they enjoyed standing still for forty minutes”** [The Telegraph, 2019, p. 8]. The contextual contradiction forces the reader to discard

the primary positive meaning and infer the negative, sarcastic assessment of public transit delays.

In addition to interpersonal irony and journalistic sarcasm, enantiosemic phraseological units serve a crucial function in negotiating complex socio-political stances, social hierarchies, and racial tensions in 21st-century literature. In Hilary Jordan's American novel *Mudbound*, the expression **to know one's place** exhibits a dual evaluative function depending on the ideological perspective of the speaker versus the overarching narrative voice: **"He was a quiet man who always seemed to know his place, which was precisely why they found him so dangerous"** [Jordan, 2008, p. 178]. Within the oppressive social hierarchy depicted in the novel, "knowing one's place" is evaluated by the dominant group as a virtue of submission and social order. However, within the broader pragmatic frame of the narrative, the idiom operates auto-antonymously: the character's surface compliance is evaluated as a conscious strategy of internal resistance and silent defiance. This multi-layered evaluative capacity demonstrates that enantiosemia in phraseology is not merely a linguistic curiosity, but an active cognitive and rhetorical mechanism. By exploiting the inherent tension between positive lexical forms and negative contextual realities, contemporary authors and journalists invite audiences to participate in inferential reasoning, thereby creating a shared communicative bond based on implied, unspoken judgment [Gibbs, 1994, p. 275].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, enantiosemic phraseological units in 21st-century English media discourse and literary prose serve as highly sophisticated mechanisms for implicit evaluation, pragmatic irony, and stylistic refinement. The analysis demonstrates that the communicative power of these auto-antonymous structures relies not on static dictionary definitions, but on the dynamic interplay between literal semantics, contextual markers, and pragmatic inferencing. By encoding critical, sarcastic, or subversive judgments beneath superficially positive or neutral phraseological forms, contemporary writers and journalists successfully deliver nuanced commentary while preserving conversational decorum and institutional objectivity. Furthermore, the strategic deployment of such units fosters a heightened level of engagement with the target audience, who must actively decode the underlying evaluative stance through shared background knowledge and context. Ultimately, the systematic investigation of enantiosemia in modern English highlights the evolving nature of phraseology, revealing it to be a flexible, context-dependent asset that enriches both public journalistic discourse and artistic expression.

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