A Semantic and Pragmatic Study of the Oxymoron in Selected Poems

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In the fields of literature and traditional rhetoric, the oxymoron has attracted researchers' attention. The oxymoron is one of the figures of speech that is used in the literary discourse and any other texts for a specific purpose. This linguistic phenomenon refers to a combination of contradictory words intentionally used for creating an ironic or humourous effect. This study aims at exploring such expressions from two perspectives: semantics and pragmatics. It also aims at showing how such rhetorical phrases are depicted in the language of poetry. In addition, it is hypothesised that the poets tend to employ oxymoronic phrases to a wide extent in their own writings. This study is limited to deal with some selected English poems of different poets like Alfred Lord Tennyson and Wilfred Owen. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the procedure followed in this study is as follows: firstly, giving an account about semantics and pragmatics; secondly, defining and explaining the term oxymoron and its types; and finally, identifying the oxymoron structures in some selected English poems.

Key words: *Oxymoron, Pragmatic, Semantic.*

Introduction

Since pragmatics is a relatively new discipline in linguistics, the pragmatic description of literature is only in its first stage, especially when linguists begin to recognise the fact that theory that is prepared only to deal with syntactic or semantic issues, can never cover the richness of a given literary phenomenon, nor to arrive at the writer's intended meaning in a given context of a situation. It is noteworthy that semantics is a main field in contemporary linguistics. It has been first presented by Breal (1883) in his studies on meaning, suggesting that semantics resembles the study of laws, specifying the meaning of specific vocabularies. However, semantics can be defined as a technical term used to denote the study of meaning. The use of the term 'meaning' covers the aspects of the language variety (Palmer, 1976, 1). Bloomfield (1933, 139) states that meaning is the situation where an expression is uttered by a speaker with the purpose of having the hearer's response. The importance of meaning is

affirmed by Firth (1957), the founder of modern linguistics, who claims that an utterance can be imbedded in a social context and generalised across meaning in a specific 'social context'. Likewise, as a functional-systemic linguist, Halliday (1977, 200) focuses not only on the ideational and interpersonal meanings, but also on the textual meaning. The semantic analysis of how a sentence is produced in text is explained by the textual meaning. Brown and Yule (1983, viii-iv) opine that some linguists are interested in studying how the linguistic messages of addresses are constructed by addressers and, in return, how these messages are interpreted by the addressees. So, their interests tend towards studying the semantic relationships between the sentence structures and their syntactic realisations. Furthermore, analysts should bear in mind the importance of context when analysing discourses. According to Saeed (2009, 3), semantics studies meaning that is communicated through the use of language. Linguistic semantics is described by Kreidler (1998, 5) as studying the way whereby the language organises and expresses meanings. Also, semantics refers to studying the meaning in language (Hurford & Brendan, 2007, 1). Meaning in language is either 'the speaker's meaning' or 'sentence meaning'. On the one hand, the speaker's meaning indicates what is intended to be conveyed by the speaker' utterance. On the other hand, sentence meaning (or word meaning) is what a sentence (or word) means, i.e., what is considered to be its equivalent in the language concerned (Yule, 2010, 3).

The meaning that the speaker (or writer) communicates and the listener (or reader) interprets is studied in the field of pragmatics. Pragmatics analyses the speaker's meaning or studies meaning in context. So, it studies the meaning of words within a specific context and how this context would help interpret the utterance. Pragmatics explores how influences are made by listeners to comprehend the intended meaning of the speaker. It also addresses how a great deal of what is unsaid is recognised as a communicated part by the listener (Yule, 1996, 3).

Oxymoron: Basic Definitions and Concepts

The oxymoron is a figure of speech that refers to a combination of contradictory words used for creating a particular and uncommon effect. Poets have employed contradictory expressions as a literary device for a long time to strengthen humour and promote feeling and philosophical thought (Macrson, 2016, 21). Oxymora indicate that one or more features of an expression used are contradicted by those of the other expression. In the expression **'sweet sorrow'**, 'sorrow' includes such features as: sadness, bitterness, grief, unhappiness, regret, etc. On the contrary, 'sweet' could refer to features of happiness, pleasure, joy, etc. which clearly antagonise the features of sorrow in such a way that opposition emerges (Ruiz, 2015, 202). This study intends to draw a distinction between the oxymoron and other figures of speech such as irony and paradox, which are closely related to these tropes. Hence, irony is mostly based on extra-textual reference (e.g., *Nice day today!* in the context of evident foul weather), paradox (except for situational paradox) and oxymorons are purely intra-textual.

Though these terms are explained based on the relationships of dissimilarity following the same stages of explanation, paradox and oxymoron present a contrast in the linguistic expression.

It is worth mentioning that the oxymoron and paradox are not alike. They have been distinguished from each other in such a way that the oxymoron is formed as a phrase; whereas paradox is associated with statements. In fact, the oxymoron is sometimes considered as "condensed paradox" and paradox is considered as "expanded oxymoron". For instance, when used as a linguistic technique, the oxymoron sometimes affects the connection between sentences semantically (Chuanyu, 2008, 7).

Ordinary language and poetic language

The views concerning the distinction between poetic language and ordinary language are too many and highly divergent. Some linguists find it problematic issue to separate these two modes of language, because all features, devices, and functions of ordinary language also exist in the language of literature which is the medium of the writers or the poet's expressions. While other linguists call for the possibility of the deviation of these two forms of language, since poetic language is taken to be a more aesthetically privileged form of writing than ordinary language. Generally, language is a very special tool of communication. Human beings express their feelings by language. Language and literature are related to each other (Leech, 1969, 1). In the same respect, Mukarovsky (1970, 42) believes that there is a close connection between poetic language and the standard one; simply because he sees the latter as "the background against which is reflected the aesthetically intentional distortion of the linguistic components of the work."

Despite this connection, the language of literature differs from the standard one in several aspects. Brooks (1975, 3) says that the language of poetry, which is a form of literature, is the language of paradox; it is not the common language. Dillon (1980, 213) implies that some poets frequently employ inversions and deletion. Writers drive inspiration from, and are heavily influenced by, the world they explore, celebrate, and sometimes criticise. Poets, in particular, use the tools of writing, diction, imagery and other types of figurative language to bring the worlds within their poetry to life. Keller (1980, 342) seems to group himself with those who believe in the existence of deviation between poetic language and ordinary language. He suggests that this deviation stems from the fact that "literary language seems to refer almost entirely to itself, while ordinary language points away from itself toward the thing in the world it is about."

Denotation and Connotation

Meaning is one of the most confusing and controversial terms in language theory. Leech (1974) classified meaning into seven types: denotative meaning (dictionary meaning), connotative meaning (meaning suggested by mind), social meaning, emotive meaning, reflecting meaning, collective meaning, and thematic meaning (multiple conceptual meaning). But denotation and connotation are the two main types of meaning in a language. Denotation refers to the broader meaning of a word than its basic sense. It is often understood through regular relations. For example, the central sense of the word 'rugby' refers to a specific type of football game, based on one's experience of rugby. On the other hand, 'connotation' indicates associations in the listener's or reader's mind. Thus, the word rugby is associated with 'large men', 'manliness', 'boorish and bawdy behaviour', 'public schools', or even may remind you of your pride in your local or national team, or remind you of a present or former boyfriend (Trask, 2007, 51).

Presupposition

As it is one of the pragmatic features, presupposition "is treated as a relationship between two propositions" (Yule, 1996, 26), as in the following utterances:

- *Mary's dog is cute*
- *Mary has a dog*

The relationship between the two utterances is a proposition about Mary who has a dog. However, the first utterance presupposes the second one. A presupposition negates negation. In case of negating the first sentence, as in:

- Mary's dog is not cute

Both sentences, namely, the original and its negation, have the interesting characteristic that they both are still true and the original idea cannot be changed under negation (Trask, 2007, 232). Many critics of literary works found interesting ideas which either contradict or support pragmatics theory. In this respect, Ngara (1990, 14) considers literary works as communicative expressions that are created by authors and addressed to readers. Ngara (1990) believed that a poem differs from daily speech for its great communicative effect on listeners or readers. Moreover, this effect lies in the whole formation of a poem, including the weight of its message along with its emotional, intellectual and imaginative appeal.

The Context

The context refers to specific aspects of a text close to a unit that is under focus. The context partially or entirely determines the emergence of a unit, such as a sound or word. The context is identified in terms of the unit's relations, i.e., the other features with which it combines as a sequence (Crystal, 2008, 108). Obviously, there are various uses of the term context. As a sequence, understanding context is very important to specify variation of meaning and supplies valuable information to understand why and how a particular word varies in meaning when used in a piece of text. In addition, context is of different types. A word meaning varies from one context to another. Thus, explaining context types is very important. Linguistically, context has two types: linguistic and physical. The linguistic context (or the co-text) refers to the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence. The probable meaning of a word is strongly affected by the surrounding co-text. The physical context is demonstrated when a word like 'bank' is used with 'steep' or 'overgrown' in a sentence without a problem to decide the intended type of bank. Or as in this sentence: "he must go to the bank to deposit a sum of money", the intended bank type is known from its linguistic context. In brief, one can realise how to understand words based on their physical context. For example, when a person noticed the word 'BANK' on a building wall in a city, his interpretation will be influenced by the physical location (Yule, 2010, 124-25).

Speech Act Theory

Speech act refers to a theory which analyses the utterance role with regard to the behaviour of the speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication (Crystal, 2003, 427). Austin is the first linguist who recognised this aspect of language. In his influential work 'How to Do Things with Words' (1962), he points out that people use language to accomplish certain acts, known as speech acts. He also claims that there is no clear distinction between physical and speech acts. He says that 'words' are in themselves 'actions' (Austin, 1962, 113). The discourse of speech acts is under focus due to the fact that any linguistic communication involves speech acts. The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has been generally supposed, the symbols, words or sentences, but rather the production of symbols, words, sentences in the speech acts' performance. Therefore, speech acts represent the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication (Searle, 1969, 16). According to Searle (1979, 12-17), and speech acts are categorised into the following:

1- Declarations
They refer to acts where the consistency between reality and the proposition is created by successfully performing one of their parts or changing the world through their utterances. Declarative verbs include: declare, appoint, christen, marry, etc.

2- Expressives

They express the speaker's feelings and attitudes. Expressive verbs include: apologise, welcome, thank, congratulate, etc., e.g.: "I apologise for making this error".

3- Assertives

They denote what is believed to be the case or not by the speaker. Verbs associated with this act include: state, affirm, describe, deduce, etc., e.g.: "I described this design to students".

4- Directives

They refer to the speaker's attempts to make the listener do something, e.g., "I ordered them to clean the class". Directive verbs include: ask, order, request, invite, etc.

5- Commissives

The speaker uses commissive verbs to undertake the performance of an action in future. Verbs associated with this act include: promise, swear, commit, threaten, etc., e.g.: "The president swore allegiance to the republic".

Methodology and Data Collection

A number of literary texts were collected and analysed in terms of semantics and pragmatics. The texts chosen were different poems of different poets including Alfred Lord Tennyson, Wilfred Owen, and William Shakespeare... etc. The model adopted for the analysis was an eclectic model. An eclectic model means that a number of viewpoints were considered from different linguists and references. Therefore, what was discussed in the theoretical section formed the basis of the practical section.

Data Analysis

This section presents the oxymoronic expressions used by the poets in their different poems including different English poets like Shakespeare, Tennyson etc.

Text No.1: Break Break Break: Alfred Lord Tennyson

And the stately ships go on
To their haven under the hill;
But O for the **touch of a vanished hand,**
And the **sound of a voice that is still!**

Analysis

This short poem is characterised by having an emotional impact of the poet after losing his close friend. It has been written in 1834 right after the sudden death of Arthur Henry (Tennyson's friend). Though some authors have considered the speaker's mourning as grief for losing his close friend, this feeling exists in any individual when losing a beloved person in case of death (Shaw, 1976, 260). The speaker in this poem is the poet himself, he is standing in front of the sea addressing all of the things in the sea and even in the sky wishing to get back his friend or at least touching his hand but he will never get that. In terms of semantics, Alfred uses oxymoronic phrases of two contradicted meanings, which are the lexical item 'touch' that contradicts the phrase 'vanished hand'; this refers to the conceptual meaning since the word 'hand' covers the sense of 'touching'. In terms of pragmatics, the oxymoronic phrases also share a property of another intended meaning, which is presupposition as the reader can easily presuppose or suggest by the phrase 'vanished hand' that the speaker has lost someone and he cannot get him back. This interpretation is deduced by the linguistic context rather than the physical one.

Text No.2: The Send-Off: Wilfred Owen

Down the close darkening lanes they sang their way
To the siding-shed,

And lined the train with faces **grimly gay**.

Their breasts were stuck all white with wreath and spray
As men's are, dead.

Analysis

In this verse, soldiers are preparing themselves for war, pretending to be strong as being sent-off by the public; however, they realise that they are heading into uncertainty and horror. In terms of semantics, the poet uses oxymoronic phrases of two contradictory meanings represented by 'grim' and 'gay'. Both of them occur in contradiction to their meaning since the word 'grimly' means someone who is cruel or heartless; whereas 'gay' refers to a person who is totally the opposite of cruel or being heartless. As for pragmatics, the oxymoronic phrase "grimly gay" caries a sort of a background knowledge, which is the presupposition as the reader can easily get the intended meaning or the idea said by the poet relying on his own background knowledge. Hence, this type of intended meaning is deduced by the linguistic context.

Text No.3: Bitter Sweet Boy: Sophia Ratevosian

Being **alone together** with an awfully good looking man
With a cool passion for bitter sweet chocolate

Was sadly crash landing into an awkward defining silence?

Analysis

This poem is an oxymoron; therefore, it includes figurative expressions like "defining silence". The poet uses two oxymoronic phrases; the first phrase is 'alone together' which consists of two contradictory meanings. The second one is the title itself which is 'bitter sweet' which also consists of antonyms. In terms of pragmatics, the oxymoronic phrase 'alone together' gives the reader an implication that the speaker suffers from being lonely and this aspect is done by presupposition as the reader relies on his own background knowledge to understand the poet's intended meaning. This meaning is understood through the linguistic context.

Text No.4: Lancelot and Elaine: Alfred Lord Tennyson

The shackles of love straiten'd him
His honour rooted in dishonoured stood

And **faith unfaithful** kept him **falsely true**

Analysis

This poem is based on the thirteenth-century Italian novella Donna di Scalotta, and thus has little in common with Malory's version. From a semantic perspective, the poet clearly uses two different pairs of oxymoronic expressions: 'faith unfaithful' and "falsely true". Each of these two phrases represents antonyms with a completely opposite meaning. Additionally, the type of the illocutionary force of the oxymoron in the last line of this stanza is an assertive force of speech act because the poet here states or affirms a particular issue about the conception of love.

Text No.5: Sonnet 116: William Shakespeare

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. **Love is not love**
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.

Analysis

This poem is the sonnet 116 written by Shakespeare. In this sonnet, the poet debates the conception of love and marriage. From a semantic point of view, this quatrain includes a sort of oxymoron where Shakespeare uses a phrase that has a contradiction in meaning: 'love is not love'. This represents a contrast since the poet intends to say that if love vanishes by the passage of time, thus it should not be named 'love'. However, the oxymoron example here can belong to the denotative meaning as 'love' might denote other items such as 'feelings', 'relationship' , etc. In addition, the type of the illocutionary force of the oxymoron is an assertive force. The intended meaning of the poet is that if love changes under certain circumstance thus it should not be called love. Finally, like the previous texts the linguistic context plays a significant role in showing this meaning.

Conclusion

The current study concluded that the role of the linguistic context is more crucial than that of the physical context, particularly at identifying how the intended meaning is understood by the reader. As it is a phenomenon of the background knowledge, presupposition is also very important at reaching particular points when reading the text of a poem. This gives the reader the chance to understand certain hidden ideas conveyed by the poet himself. Throughout this paper, poets like Tennyson, Owen and Sophia have tended towards using oxymoron expressions so that they might convey and emphasise certain vivid images. The use of such expressions would enhance the work itself as among the main functions of this linguistic technique is to give the text a sort of rhetorical function.

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