A Linguistic Study of Antonymy in English Texts

Chunming Gao
School of Foreign Languages, Changchun University of Science and Technology, China

Qianzhen Zheng
School of Foreign Languages, Jilin University, Changchun, China

Abstract—This paper aims to study antonymy in English texts. The significance of the study is presented first, then the definition of antonymy and its classification are elaborated with examples. The focus of the paper is the use of antonymy in specific English texts from linguistic perspective, in which abundant examples of antonyms are quoted to help the illustration and prove that comprehending and investigating into antonymy can help the understanding of different texts and the rising of literature flavor.

Index Terms—antonym, antonyms, English text, linguistic study

I. INTRODUCTION

In linguistics, one of the most important fields is semantic relations, in particular, lexical relation, which includes synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, etc. Antonymy, opposition of meaning, has long been regarded as one of the most important semantic relations. Human thinking and language are closely related, and the significance of antonymy in human thinking is inevitably reflected in human language. Lyons (1968) says that human beings have a general tendency to polarize experience and judgment—to think in opposites. And this would explain the existence of a large quantity of antonyms in the vocabulary of human languages.

Antonymy is one of the semantic relations that are very useful. Antonym pairs are often used in texts and in a large number of proverbs and idioms to achieve rhetorical effects, for example, “a friend to everybody is a friend to nobody”, no matter it is in common speech or in the literary writing. As a matter of fact, it is even one of the indispensable factors in those figures of speech such as oxymoron, paradox, and irony. In addition, antonymy plays a remarkably significant role in language teaching and learning, which can be shown in many definitions, for example, “tall” is defined as “not short”, “trivial” is said to be “not important”. It is often the same case when lexicographers define a word. Just as Jackson (1988) notes that, antonymy ranks the second (only next to synonymy), in terms of frequency, among the various semantic relations used in dictionary definitions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Definition of Antonymy

The word “antonymy” was coined by C. J. Smith as an opposite of “synonymy”. Since 1867, lots of efforts have been taken to define “antonymy”, but the problem is that the definition of antonymy tends to illustration rather than description. For example, if we would like to tell others what antonymy is, to give some examples like old/young, tall/short, open/close, bad/good, etc. will be more effective than to give a definition. However, finding a definition which could account for every example of antonymy is difficult, even problematic.

Lyons (1977) defines “antonym” as the words which are opposite in meaning and “antonymy” as the oppositeness between words. For example, “buy” and “sell” is a pair of antonyms and the relation between these two words is termed as antonymy. Leech (1981) puts forward the definition of antonym and antonymy in Semantics that the opposite meaning relation between the words is antonymy and word of opposite meaning is antonym. And a famous Chinese linguist Hu Zhuanglin (2001, p.164) simply says “antonymy is the name for oppositeness relation”.

Traditional definitions of antonymy only concentrate on the oppositeness of meaning. Some traditional definitions are as follows:

- word of opposite meaning; (Leech, 1981)
- word of opposite sense; (Pyles & Algeo, 1970)
- words that are opposite. (Watson, 1976)

These definitions are only rough ideas and over ambiguous. First, they don’t explain the ways of oppositeness very concretely. The antonym pairs like hot/cold, dead/alive and lend/borrow differ from each other in the way of oppositeness. The pair hot/cold belongs to the gradable antonyms; the pair dead/alive belongs to the complementary antonyms; and the pair lend/borrow belongs to the relational antonyms. Second, these definitions focus more on the discrepancy of the antonyms but they ignore the similarity of the grammar and usage of each of the antonym pairs. Just look at another three pairs, heat/cold, single/married, and beauty/ugly. Although either of them is opposite in meaning, they could not be regarded as antonyms in that they are not the same in grammatical units. Furthermore, people use the antonyms most of
the time just for the effect of contrast. For instance, the juxtaposition of spring and winter can constantly be found in the English literature, as is presented in Ode to the West Wind, "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?"

Taking the above factors into consideration, Lyons classifies opposition into three categories: antonymy, complementarity and converseness in Semantics (1977) and Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics (1968). Lyons only regards words that aregradable and opposite in meaning as antonyms. Cruse (1986) thinks the same way in his Lexical Semantics. So the term “antonym” only refers to the set of gradable opposites, which are mostly adjectives, for gradable antonyms reflect one distinguishing semantic feature: polar oppositeness. However, in our daily life, words like male/female, dead/alive, husband/wife are also considered as antonym pairs, for these words are also opposite in meaning. Therefore, the other two categories, complementarity and converseness, are included in the field of antonymy only in a very broad sense.

In general, there are two criteria in defining antonymy: semantic and lexical. We explain elaborately the antonymy being semantic above, and yet not all semantically opposed words are antonyms. Cruse (1986) exemplifies this with the words tubby and emaciated. Almost all established antonyms have synonyms which could not constitute the antonym pairs, for example, the antonym pair of heavy and light is better than weighty and insubstantial; antonym pair of fast and slow is better opposites rather than speedy and sluggish; antonym pair of happy and sad is more reasonable than ecstatic and miserable.

Although both of the antonymy and synonymy link words together in the lexicon, Gross et al. (1988) argue that antonymy and synonymy are different. They say while synonymy is “a relation between lexical concepts”, antonymy is “a relation between words, not concepts”. Justeson and Katz (1991) also refer to antonymy as a lexical relation, “specific to words rather than concepts”. As a matter of fact, the definition of antonymy must be lexical as well as semantic. Antonyms need to have “oppositeness of meaning”, but they also need to have a strong, well-established lexical relationship with one another. (Jackson, 1988)

Lexicographer Egan (1968) makes a rather satisfying definition of “antonymy” based on her understanding of the nature of the antonymy: “An antonym is a word so opposed in meaning to another word; it’s equal in breadth or range of application, that is, negates or nullifies every single one of its implications”. This definition shows clearly what makes two words be antonyms. The antonym pairs are equal in breadth or range of application but opposed in meaning. And the words which contrast in meaning may not be antonyms because they may be different in their breadth or range of application. Therefore, we can draw a conclusion that Egan’s definition of antonymy may be fitter or easier to be employed into the actual cases than the theories and definitions of antonymy that have been referred to above.

B. The Classification of Antonymy

There are generally three kinds of sense relations, that is, sameness relation, oppositeness relation and inclusiveness relation. Antonymy is the name for oppositeness relation. And there are three main types of antonymy, that is, gradable antonymy, complementary antonymy, and converse antonymy. (Hu, 2001, p.164-168)

1) Gradable Antonymy

Gradable antonym is the commonest type of antonymy. The antonym pairs like hot/cold, big/small and tall/short all belong to the gradable antonymy. We can find that they are mainly adjectives. The gradable antonymy has three characteristics: first, as the name suggests, they are gradable, that is, the members of a pair differ in terms of degree; second, antonyms of this kind are graded against different norms; third, one member of a pair, usually the term for the higher degree, serves as the cover term. (Hu, 2001, p.164)

As for the first characteristic, it also means that if you deny one thing, you do not necessarily assert the other. And the antonym pairs may have the comparative and superlative degrees. For example, “good” and “bad”, both of these two words have the comparative and superlative degrees: “better”/“best” and “worse”/“worst”. Therefore, being not good is not necessarily bad; and being not bad is not necessarily good. Between “good” and “bad”, we can find a degree that is “so-so”. Look at other examples, between the two extremes of the size “big” and “small”, there is a degree that is “medium”; between the two extremes of the temperature “hot” and “cold”, there are degrees that are “warm” and “cool”. From the information referred to above, we can see that the gradable antonyms differ in terms of degree.

Look at the second characteristic, it means that there is no absolute criterion by which we tell an object is “big” and another is “small”. The criterion is relative but not absolute. As we all know, a small car is always bigger than a big apple. This is why the antonyms of this kind are graded based on different norms.

As for the third characteristic, one of the antonym pairs is the cover term, which is known as “unmarked”. “Unmarked” is used more widely than “marked”. We may ask “how old are you” or “how tall is she” instead of “how young are you” or “how short is she”. In that, “old” and “tall” are cover terms, “unmarked”; and “young” and “short” are marked. The distinction between “unmarked” and “marked” reflect the potential value system that the speech community holds. People want to be tall rather than short.

2) Complementary Antonymy

Antonyms like awake/asleep, married/single, pass/fail, alive/dead and male/female are of this type. Complementary antonyms also have three characteristics: first, they divide up the whole of a semantic field completely; second, the norm in this type is absolute; third, there is no cover term for the two members of a pair. (Hu, 2001)

As for the first characteristic, unlike the gradable antonyms, the complementary antonyms share a semantic field. But between the two complementary antonyms, there is no intermediate ground. As Cruse (1986) describes it, the essence of a
pair of complementary antonym is that between them they exhaustively divide some conceptual domain into two mutually exclusive compartments, so that what does not fall into one of the compartments must necessarily fall into the other. The members of the antonym pairs of this kind is complementary to each other. For instance, "He is more female than male". Actually, he is a male but not female. He is a male but he is closer to the state of being female. The denial of male is the assertion of female and the assertion of female is the denial of male. They don’t have the comparative and superlative degrees. And they don’t have the intermediate degree between these two words of an antonym pair.

The second characteristic is that the norm in this type of antonymy is absolute, that is, the norm is the same when it is used for all the things it is applicable to. The criteria to tell male from female is the same when we refer to the human beings and the animals. And the death of human beings is the same as that of any animal.

As for the third characteristic, in the complementary antonymy, there is no cover term or covered term. We can not ask somebody’s sex like age. It means we cannot say “how boy/male is it” like “how old are you”. We should ask “Is it a boy or a girl”. That’s a normal question.

(3) Converse Antonymy

The antonym pairs like husband/wife, doctor/patient, teacher/student, buy/sell, above/below and employer/employee are all converse antonymy. They show a reversal relationship. A is B’s husband means B is A’s wife. A is B’s doctor means B is A’s patient. A is B’s teacher means B is A’s student. It is also known as relational opposites.

Egan (1968) describe these antonym pairs as pairs of words which include such a relationship that one of them cannot be used without suggesting the other. Therefore we can see that there is a huge difference between converse antonymy and the other two subtypes of antonymy, that is, one should presupposes the other as for the two members that involved in an antonym pair. If there is a buyer, then there must be a seller. We cannot say he is a husband, we must say he is whose husband, because one can not be a husband if he has no wife. Just like the parent who can not be a parent if he has no child. In this relationship, one can not talk about A without B.

However, there is something special to the “child”. Child and parent is an antonym pair if the child means the parent’s son or daughter. But when it refers to somebody under the age of eighteen, child is the antonym of adult. It is the same as the word “teacher”. Teacher is a single word when it refers to an occupation. Only when it means one is a teacher only to his student, can this word constitute an antonym pair with “student”.

III. ANTONYMY IN SPECIFIC ENGLISH TEXTS

Antonymy helps achieve textual cohesion. It reveals the opposition and the unity of objects in languages. Employing antonyms in English texts correctly reveals the oppositeness of objects and produces a strong sense of comparison. Therefore, writers are fond of and good at employing antonyms in their literature works, because it makes the works artistically charming and powerfully convincing.

A. Antonymy Used in Poetry

Antonyms are widely used in poetry. English poet Alfred Tennyson had the famous lines in his Ulysses “Though much is taken, much abides; and though/ We are not now that strength which in the old days/ Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are:/ One equal-temper of heroic hearts,/ Made strong by time and fate, but strong in will/ To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” How encouraging it is! Even a man in despair can get the power from the lines. And what makes the lines memorable and powerful is the use of antonyms.

In Romeo and Juliet, Romeo has the poem, “O loving hate!/ O anything, or nothing first created!/ O heavy lightness, serious vanity,/ Misspent chaos of well-seeming forms,/ Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,/ Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!”

B. Antonymy Used in Dramas

Antonymy is also widely used in dramas. It can be seen obviously from the works of William Shakespeare. In Romeo and Juliet “My only love sprung from my only hate. Too early seen unknown, and known too late. Prodigious birth of love it is to me, that I must love a loathed” In the quotation, four antonym pairs are there and they constitute the well known figures of speech in English, oxymoron and paradox. When we read the words at first, we may think them very ridiculous, illogical and raving. However, when we explore the plot of the dramas, we can find that the drama uses these antonym pairs and corresponding figures of speech to depict the contradictory mind of Juliet on the occasion. Juliet says this in Act 1 Scene 5 when she finds out who Romeo is. She’s expressing a bunch of information and emotion all at once here—she’s fallen in love with Romeo, but she’s upset that he is a member of the rival family. She saw him first (too early) and fell for him before she found out who he was (too late). Love now seems very strange to her, that she can love someone she’s supposed to hate.

Antonyms for the most of time are used to make irony and oxymoron. In The Tragedy of Julius Caesar, Caesar states, “I thank you for your pains and courtesy.” Different listeners interpret it differently. Caesar meant one thing; to the audience, who knows that Caesar will soon be killed, the statement means something entirely different. Oxymoron is formed whenever two words that are contrary in normal usage are combined together. (Watson, 2006, p.29)The master of the oxymoron was William Shakespeare. In the Act 5 Scene 1 of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Theseus remarks about the choices for the entertainment in the evening: “A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus/ And
his love Thisby; very tragical mirth./ Merry and tragical? tedious and brief? ! That is hot ice and wondrous strange snow. How shall we find the concord of this discord? ”

C. Antonymy Used in Novels

In the process of writing novels, numerous novelists are very good at employing antonyms. The following is excerpted from A Tale of Two Cities written by Charles Dickens. “It was the best times, it was the worst times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of the foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.” It uses six pairs of antonyms to depict the complicate and dangerous atmosphere before the French revolution. These six antonym pairs are parallel and overwhelming.

In Maxwell Anderson’s Lost in the Stars, you will read “That you are all lost here, black and white, rich and poor, the fools and the wise!” In O. Henry’s The Duel, you will read “I despise its very vastness and power. It has the poorest millionaires, the littlest great men, the naughtiest beggars, the plainest beauties, the lowest skyscrapers, the dolefullest pleasures of any town I ever saw.” In T. Dreiser’s Sister Carrie you will read “there was an audible stillness, in which the common voice sounded strange.” Every famous novelist without exception has a good master of antonyms.

D. Antonymy Used in Speeches

When antonymy is used in a speech, a clear-cut stand and a clear point of view are easily made. The language has stronger rhythm and helps being persuasive. As a result, many people employ antonymy in their speeches to state their opinions, justify their positions and influence the public opinion. This can be best seen from the speeches of American presidents.

Observing Barack Obama’s first victory speech in 2008, we are easy to read following lines: “It’s the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled — Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been a collection of red states and blue states; we are, and always will be, the United States of America.”... “In this country, we rise or fall as one nation — as one people.”... “Our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared, and a new dawn of American leadership is at hand. To those who would tear this world down: We will defeat you. To those who seek peace and security: We support you.”... “And tonight, I think about all that she’s seen throughout her century in America — the heartache and the hope; the struggle and the progress”... “because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change. Yes, we can.”

Abraham Lincoln once in his Address at Gettysburg had “The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, for above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.”. The effect achieved by the use of these antonyms is rather striking. With the beautiful language forms with the use of antonymy the persuasive power of the speakers are strengthened greatly and the audience are more likely to be convinced to a greater extent. Examples are many, not only in presidential speeches, like Barack Obama, Abraham Lincoln. Martin Luther King had “one hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of vast ocean of material prosperity.”

E. Antonymy Used in Proverbs

Proverb is a form of language with the presentation of each figure of speech, which is a fixed short verse naturally coming from the usual use of some composition of the language. (Xu, 2009) Proverb is simple; meanwhile, it entertains a thought deeply. When antonyms are used in proverbs, the rhetorical effect of phonological harmony, formal beauty and conciseness are achieved.

Several examples are given as follows. “More haste, less speed.” “Easy come, easy go.” “Art is long, life is short.” “An idle youth, a needy age.” “Small sorrows speak; great sorrows are silent.” Very famous people are more skilful of using antonymy in proverbs. George Herbert has “Love makes all hard hearts gentle”. And George Eliot has “It is surely better to pardon too much than to condemn too much”. All these examples listed above are neat in the construction of the sentences. No matter visually or phonologically, a kind of beauty of harmony can be sensed, which helps convey profound messages.

IV. CONCLUSION

Antonyms are words with opposite meaning. And antonymy refers to the relationship of oppositeness. Antonyms are exceedingly valuable in defining the exact meaning of a given word and its synonyms. Antonyms enable us to express briefly the opposite of a particular thought, often for the sake of contrast.

From the linguistic point of view, one of the main concerns of studying antonymy is to determine the boundaries of antonymy. Antonymy has been divided into three different types by the linguists, that is, gradable antonymy, complementary antonymy and converse antonymy. Gradable antonymy is described as a relation, that is, “not A” doesn’t equal B. There is an intermediate form between A and B. Complementary antonymy is a relation that “not A” equals B. There is no intermediate ground between them. Converse antonymy refers to a kind of reversal relationship. Antonymy plays rather important roles in specific English texts, especially in poetry, novels, dramas, speeches and
proverbs. Antonymy helps the English textual cohesion. Employing antonyms in texts correctly reveals the oppositeness of the things and produces the strong sense of comparison. Therefore, writers are fond of and are good at employing the antonyms in their literature works, and it contributes to achieve characterization, scene description, statement of opinions, discussion and refutation. 

The linguistic study of antonymy in English texts helps readers understand and appreciate authors’ intention much more easily. Teachers who emphasize the study of antonymy in class will find their students have a higher reading ability. However, the study of antonymy should not stop at linguistic level. Probing into the rhetorical function of antonymy may help us improve the ability of using language and heighten the effect of language output.

REFERENCES


Chunming Gao was born in 1979 in Jilin Province, China. She received her M.A degree in linguistics and applied linguistics in foreign languages from Changchun University of Science and Technology in 2006 and then worked there as a lecturer ever since. Her major research interests include applied linguistics and cross-cultural communication.

Qianzhen Zheng was born in 1992 in Zhejiang Province, China. She received her B. A. degree from Changchun University of Science and Technology in 2013. She is currently a graduate student in the School of Foreign Languages, Jilin University, China. Her major research interest is linguistics and applied linguistics in English.