

# A Linguistic Study of Antonymy in English Texts

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**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**—antonymy, 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, oppositeness 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 are gradable 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 antonymy is the commonest type of antonymy. The antonym pairs like *hot/cold*, *big/small* and *tall/short* all belong to the gradable antonyms. 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 *weak* 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*,/ *Misshapen* 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 has *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 *haughtiest 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 a *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.

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