

THE SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC FEATURES OF STYLISTIC OXYMORONS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract: *This article aims to identify the syntactic and semantic features of stylistic oxymorons in the English language. Some previous researchers and linguists have studied oxymorons from different aspects- with a comparison and contrast in native and non-native languages about the functions, concepts, categorizations, semantic logical foundations, and expressive values. The article uses qualitative and quantitative research methods with techniques like description, linguistic and contextual analysis, induction, deduction, comparison, etc. Semantic fields and oxymoron types were grouped as part of the data statistics from a collection of 570 oxymorons, based on the sources of numerous articles, websites, plays, poems, textbooks, novels, short stories, colloquialisms, everyday conversations, sayings and quotes for one year. The data was then combined and analyzed to determine the semantic aspects of literal and figurative meanings for the stylistic variation of literary, artistic, philosophical, media, and everyday expressions. This article will contribute to a vast understanding of the oxymorons of the English language from the linguistic and social-cultural dimensions for both lecturers and students at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University.*

Keywords: *syntactic feature, semantic features, stylistic, oxymoron, figure of speech.*

I. Introduction

A comprehensive understanding of English word usage and linguistic devices is essential for effective communication. Oxymorons play a vital role in meaning formation as both figurative speech techniques and reasoning tools. By juxtaposing opposing ideas paradoxically yet logically, oxymorons enhance literary expression and everyday communication, encouraging deeper reflection and interpretation. Their ability to create multi-layered semantic meanings adds richness

to discourse. This study investigates the syntactic and semantic features of stylistic oxymorons. Previous research has examined oxymorons from various perspectives, including their conceptual, categorical, and expressive values, though some have focused solely on their functions. This study aims to clarify oxymorons' syntactic and semantic properties through data collection and analysis. Specifically, it seeks to answer: (1) What are oxymorons' syntactic and semantic features? (2) What are the common stylistic types of oxymorons? A dataset

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of 570 oxymorons was systematically collected, categorized, and analyzed based on their stylistic properties. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of oxymorons from both linguistic and socio-cultural perspectives.

II. Literature review

2.1. Definitions on oxymoron

An oxymoron appears when words, especially two words, are combined, conveying contradictory meanings. In essence, the two words are usually antonyms, but they are not against each other negatively. It is often realized that the combination doesn't make sense externally. Internally, the two words generate a figure of speech, bringing a whole new connotation. It is explained in Greek that "oxys" denotes "keen" or "sharp," and "moros" indicates "dull" or "foolish." The whole word "oxymoros" implies "pointedly foolish". The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines an "oxymoron is a phrase that combines two words that seem to be the opposite of each other." According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the definition is "an oxymoron is a combination of contradictory or incongruous words." The Collins Dictionary gives a little different definition "An oxymoron is a figure of speech in which opposite or contradictory ideas or terms are combined."

2.2. Oxymoron as a stylistic communicative tool

In a similar study, Oxymoron is a valid subset of the phrases known as "contradiction in terms" (Fletcher & Olwyler, 1997). The purposeful usage of oxymora for rhetorical impact sets them apart from other paradoxes and contradictions. The contradiction is only visible because the combination of phrases offers a new way to communicate a notion.

2.3. The syntactic features of English stylistic oxymorons

Grothe (2009) asserts that oxymorons can occur at the phrase level and that words used together in a phrase may belong to the same syntactic class or a different one. In particular, an oxymoron's syntactic framing may be at sentence level. The range of the oxymoron in the study does not cover the stylistic aspects. According to Lederer (2008), oxymoron comes in various frames and can occur at the word level. Two forms can be achieved in this situation: a. A single-word oxymoron made up of dependent morphemes, such as superette (big-small), ludicrous (before-after), and pianoforte (soft-loud). b. A single-word oxymoron is made up of separate morphemes. Spendthrift, bittersweet, speechwriting, and wholesome are two meaning-bearing components that might be combined to form a single term. He does not put them at sentence level.

2.4. The semantic features of English stylistic oxymorons

For the role of oxymorons, Pavlovich (1979) believes that an oxymoron is a figure of speech made up of two elements that stand in opposition to one another. He only studies the use of oxymorons in the cognitive aspects of a certain kind of frames. Shestakova (1994) reveals that the logical-semantic law of disjunction governs the understanding of attributive oxymoron combinations, where one of the contradictory features is subject to the combined semantics of the combinations, restoring its logical balance. A semantic relationship that produces an emphatic or epigrammatic impact between the meanings of two lexical units is called opposition.

2.5. The previous research

Flayih (2009) examines how oppositely meaningful words or phrases are intentionally combined for effect, focusing on their ironic, humorous, paradoxical, or emphatic functions. However, his study is limited to specific contextual uses. Ayupova et al. (2024) compare the structure and semantics of oxymorons in English and Russian, relying on frequency and semantic analysis to explore implicit and explicit oxymorons. Their research highlights stylistic and cultural perspectives but lacks a deep linguistic analysis. Nguyễn Thế Truyền (2005) studies oxymorons in terms of concepts, categorization, semantic logic, and expressive value. He explores contradictions in both semantics and user perspectives through different linguistic theories but does not address their stylistic function. Unlike previous studies, this article systematically analyzes the syntactic and semantic characteristics of stylistic oxymorons in English through data collection, categorization, and analysis. It contributes to a broader understanding of English oxymorons from both linguistic and socio-cultural perspectives.

III. Methodology

3.1. Context of the Study

This study was conducted to address the need for a comprehensive reference on figures of speech among lecturers and students at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University. It serves as a resource for courses in Lexico-semantics, Translation, Speaking, and Writing skills. Additionally, lecturers can use this research to develop exercises that enhance students' vocabulary acquisition.

3.2. Scope of the Study and Data Collection

The study analyzed oxymorons

collected from various sources, including articles, websites, plays, poems, textbooks, novels, short stories, colloquialisms, conversations, sayings, and quotes. The selection process considered stylistic and semantic criteria such as humor, description, sarcasm, paradox, emotion, and child-oriented expressions. Over one year, approximately 570 oxymorons were gathered using computational methods, with exclusions for jargon, slang, and taboo words. The collected oxymorons span multiple discourse types, including literary, artistic, philosophical, media, and everyday communication.

3.3. Research Methods and Data Analysis

A mixed-method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative techniques, was applied. Various linguistic patterns were examined based on settings, genres, and corpora. Analytical methods such as description, contextual and linguistic analysis, induction, deduction, and comparison were employed. Oxymorons were categorized according to semantic fields, allowing for statistical analysis of their frequency, adaptability, and distinctive characteristics. The study also examined syntactic patterns, focusing on subordination and coordination at the phrase and sentence levels, and analyzed the interplay between literal and figurative meanings in different stylistic contexts.

IV. Major findings and discussions

The following results provide insights into the unique linguistic and rhetorical techniques used in oxymoron use, indicating cultural and stylistic preferences. The study clarifies how oxymorons serve as stylistic techniques to express contradiction, contrast, and depth of meaning, demonstrating the adaptability and inventiveness of language usage.

4.1. Syntactic features of stylistic oxymorons

4.1.1. Syntactically, stylistic oxymorons can be classified into phrases.

Based on Grothe (2009) with the structure of oxymoron at the phrase level and sometimes sentence level in the pragmatic aspects, Pavlovich (1979) with the role of oxymorons in a variety of syntactic frames just for the cognitive aspects, and Lederer (2008) with the various syntactic frames occurring at the word level, this study has expanded the pragmatic range of oxymorons with the stylistic usage of oxymorons in the seven popular and adaptable syntactic structures.

Some syntactic structures and examples are mentioned in sentences as follows:

a) Verb + adverb: He could stay away from school. She acts naturally.

b) Adverb + adjective/ adverb; Faith unfaithful kept him falsely true. It is awfully good. She has a painfully beautiful feeling. The dog is pretty fierce. The cake is disgustingly delicious. They are all alone together. His behavior is seriously funny.

c) verb + prepositional phrase; He kills the cat with kindness.

d) Adjective + Adjective; The living dead is said to rise. The cat looks drowsy and vivacious. My least favorite characters are reconsidered. It is the larger half. It is bittersweet.

e) Adjective + Noun: It is an open secret. They need virtual reality to practice. This is the original copy of her handouts. That is an unpopular celebrity. He doesn't need the exact estimate. This is the impossible solution. I know her noticeable absence.

f) Adverb + Verb; I silently scream for help. He definitely may be here. He clearly misunderstood.

g) Noun noun: This calls for absolute honesty and cunning. It is a love-hate relationship. She needs zero tolerance. It is the relationship of the guest host. It is a matter of love-hate.

Via the above classification, it is seen that the syntactic features belong to two structural concepts: subordination and coordination. In most cases, the first component often acts as a modifier and the second component often acts as the head. In some cases, the first and the second components are of equal values. It is called coordination. In fact, there are not many cases of coordination being used.

4.1.2. Syntactically, stylistic oxymorons can be classified into sentences.

a) The predicate is contrasted to the complement: He is found missing. The cake is growing smaller.

b) The subject is versus the predicate: Silence sings all around me. My head is bound with a band. His eyes were wide shut. The less is the more.

c) The predicate is opposed to the object: I will go to the water and see him out of sight). We agreed to disagree on certain things. Press the brake to start.

d) The subject opposes the object: The greatest hate springs from the greatest love.

e) The subject is opposed to the complement: This silence is deafening. A friend to everybody is a friend to nobody.

An oxymoron is a distinctive stylistic device that merges opposing ideas to form a new, complex meaning rather than simply combining antonyms. Unlike antithesis, which highlights contrast, oxymoron preserves a logical connection between its components while creating a novel concept. It also serves as a psychological and cultural phenomenon, momentarily disrupting conventional

thought patterns and evoking a striking cognitive effect. By introducing elements of paradox, irony, and contradiction, oxymorons reshape perception and enhance expressive impact.

4.2. Semantic features of stylistic oxymorons

Each field reflects a nuance of meaning. It can be a stronger or weaker irony. There are different types of oxymorons with different kinds and layers of meanings. The following oxymorons are grouped according to the most popular types with similar semantic characteristic features based on the criteria of frequency, style, adaptability, and semantic fields. Through those groups of oxymorons, their distinctive features of semantic aspects can be revealed.

Table 4.2.1: Different fields of comical oxymorons for semantic use

Types of oxymorons (95)	Literary expressions (27)	Philosophical expressions (9)	Artistic expressions (21)	Media expressions (15)	Everyday expressions (23)
Literal	9	6	5	11	11
Figurative	18	3	16	4	12

It can be seen from Table 4.2.1 that the number of users for both types of meanings is nearly the same, but the adaptability of the figurative meanings is bigger. In different styles, the literary and the artistic expressions account for the highest number of uses. The philosophical expressions witness the lowest number, with only six uses in the literal meaning and three in the figurative meaning. The media and everyday expressions experience the same number of uses in literal and figurative meanings. Notably, the literal meaning in use is the same for the press and everyday expressions with 11 uses.

4.2.2. Descriptive oxymorons

Descriptive oxymorons are mostly used to create new, evocative meanings. Unlike other oxymorons, they provide rich

4.2.1. Comical oxymorons

Most of the following comical oxymorons convey humorous aspects. Sometimes, they are called “opinion oxymoron”. They reflect an assumption of joyfulness, evoking laughter or amusement. The comical oxymorons can be a means of education. They reflect the implicit assumption, providing some moral teachings or values. Among the 95 comical oxymorons, the most noticeable examples are: terribly pleased, literally figurative, peace force, larger half, passive aggression, liquid-solid, quiet scream, harmonic dissonance, seriously casual, incredibly real, uninvited guest, real fantasy, virtual substance, active standstill, true lies, actively lazy, certain possibility, same opposite, purposeful accident, real mirage, openly secretive, etc...

details and specifically vivid images of the matters they are describing. They help add layers of complexity and nuances to the texts. In different semantic fields, the descriptive oxymorons enrich the mind and ear. They help readers get more access to the figurative meanings. Descriptive oxymorons also help create a layer of deep emotional expressions, bringing about a more impactful picture of ideas. Among the 105 descriptive oxymorons, the most noticeable examples are mandatory option, openly hidden, plastic glasses, silent scream, soft rock, constant variable, crash landing, detailed summary, dry ice, exact estimate, deep shallows, dull shine, empty fullness, fast turtle, feeble strength, full void, genuine imitation, hard pillow, heavy feather, high lows, innocent guilt, joyful sorrow, known unknowns, light darkness, minor crisis, etc...

Table 4.2.2: Different fields of descriptive oxymorons for semantic use

Types of oxymorons (105)	Literary expressions (43)	Philosophical expressions (11)	Artistic expressions (17)	Media expressions (15)	Everyday expressions (19)
Literal	14	5	11	11	7
Figurative	29	6	6	4	12

The most noticeable figure in Table 4.2.2 goes to literary expressions, and the outnumbered cases of semantic use are for figurative meanings. The chances for the semantic use of the literal meanings for both artistic and media expressions are the same. In the field of everyday expressions, there is a bigger tendency for the use of figurative meanings. The distribution of both the literal and figurative meanings in different fields is not the same. The least popular semantic use goes to philosophical expressions. In literal usage, the same number (with 11 uses) happens in the styles of artistic and media expressions. Regarding figurative meaning, the same frequency of uses goes to philosophical and artistic expressions (6 uses).

4.2.3. Paradoxical oxymorons

Paradoxical oxymorons tend to lead readers and listeners to the challenge of assumptions and expectations and

compel audiences to see everything from a different angle. They appeal to the sense of absurdity and irony by showing inconsistencies and contradictions in both reality and language. They express the paradoxical contradictions which are inherent in human nature. They express simultaneously both the positive and the negative aspects in equal measure. Among the 86 paradoxical oxymorons, the most noticeable examples are: partial whole, close distance, sad joy, controlled freedom, boring entertainment, tragic optimism, real fantasy, cheap luxury, creative destruction, awfully nice, quiet roar, structured improvisation, dull shine, silent noise, etc, ... A paradox is a claim or circumstance that seems contradictory on the surface but has a deeper meaning. In order to reveal their underlying reality, paradoxes encourage critical thought.

Table 4.2.3: Different fields of paradoxical oxymorons for semantic use

Types of oxymorons (86)	Literary expressions (11)	Philosophical expressions (22)	Artistic expressions (25)	Media expressions (12)	Everyday expressions (16)
Literal	4	8	12	8	7
Figurative	7	14	13	4	9

The main focus of the semantic use of the paradoxical oxymoron is still on the literal and figurative meanings. The semantic use of the paradoxical oxymorons in Table 4.2.3 doesn't show much difference. The gap between the literal and the figurative meanings is not big. However, the users give preferences on the metaphorical meanings. There are more uses of words in philosophical

and artistic expressions. The media and literary expressions show less attention from users in fewer cases. The highest number of all goes to philosophical and artistic expressions, with 14 and 13 subsequent uses.

4.2.4. Emotional oxymorons

An emotional oxymoron is an arrangement of contradictory words to

express complex and various emotions. It helps writers transfer the paradoxes and nuances of human feelings in a very effective way. In emotional oxymorons, contradictory elements often fuse to create an unexpected emotional impact. They also add some layers of complexity to communication and texts. Those emotional oxymorons with evocative potentials are frequently used to strengthen spoken or written communication. Among the 102 emotional oxymorons, the most

noticeable examples are: deafening silence, cruel kindness, loving hate, bittersweet, passive-aggressive, anxious excitement, hopeful pessimism, joyful tears, blissful misery, frightening love, painful beauty, freezing fire, serious joke, defensive attack, regretful satisfaction, alive dead, dark light, heavy feather, quiet roar, witty dullness, careless attention, elegant clumsiness, eager reluctance, patient impatience, formal casualness, comfortable discomfort, etc ...

Table 4.2.4: Fields for the semantic use of emotional oxymorons

Types of oxymorons (102)	Literary expressions (42)	Philosophical expressions (24)	Artistic expressions (13)	Media expressions (14)	Everyday expressions (9)
Literal	18	5	5	3	4
Figurative	24	19	7	11	5

From Table 4.2.4, it is seen that emotional oxymorons are adaptably used in different fields. The figurative meanings account for the more significant part of the meanings. In other words, the figurative meanings outnumber the literal meanings in the case of uses. The trend is that it is easier for the speakers or writers to use emotional oxymorons indirectly. The users can avoid hurting other people, and at the same time, they can make fun of their friends. The literary expressions have the highest number, with 24 uses in figurative meaning. They show emotional depth in various fields. Everyday expressions experience the lowest number with 4 uses in literal meaning and 5 uses in figurative meaning, subsequently. Certainly, those can elevate the emotional ranges and the emotional impact of the message on any form of communication.

4.2.5. Oxymorons for children

Oxymorons for children often provoke curiosity and interest. Most oxymorons for children convey the literal meanings. Those give children a fantastic way to learn how to use contrasting elements in making sentences. Oxymorons for children show vivid aspects of daily life activities and fun. Their semantic features help make words and phrases simpler and easier to understand. Those oxymorons can be a playful way to open young minds, encouraging children to think creatively and critically. Those can leave memorable learning moments with fun. Among the 89 oxymorons for children, the most noticeable examples are: jumbo shrimp, random order, same difference, growing smaller, act naturally, clearly confused, pretty ugly, freezer burn, even odds, liquid gas, honest liar, blind seer, civil disobedience, sad smile, loud whisper, wise fool, oddly normal, tense calm, etc...

Table 4.2.5: Different fields of oxymorons for children for semantic use

Types of oxymorons (89)	Literary expressions (36)	Philosophical expressions (13)	Artistic expressions (11)	Media expressions (12)	Everyday expressions (17)
Literal	23	8	8	9	6
Figurative	13	5	3	3	11

In Table 4.2.5. above, all types of expressions are likely to convey literal meanings, except for everyday expressions. The literary expressions see the highest number, and they dominate the range of semantic fields with 23 uses. The preference goes to the literal meaning. The matter is that children have no habit of identifying figurative meanings, so the use of literal meanings is the most common. However, contextual values are still needed. Thanks to the conceptual-objective nature of the expressions, the evaluative meanings are softened. The lowest number of figurative meanings falls to artistic and media expressions, with three uses.

Compared to Flayih (2009), who examined the emphatic effects of oxymorons, and Nguyễn Thế Truyền (2005), who explored their semantic foundations and expressive values, this study analyzes both literal and figurative meanings across five stylistic aspects and five semantic fields. Stylistically, oxymorons often convey irony and emotional depth, adapting to different communicative contexts and reflecting linguistic and cultural distinctions. Oxymoronic pairings fall into two categories: literal and figurative.

Oxymorons serve five key stylistic functions with various semantic aspects: (a) capturing attention and stimulating curiosity, (b) enhancing expressive depth to clarify viewpoints, (c) engaging the audience's perception, (d) emphasizing meaning by highlighting key aspects, and (e) creating striking stylistic effects. They function as both expressive and descriptive tools, enriching language with depth and complexity.

V. Conclusion

An oxymoron is a rhetorical device that helps language users write their texts creatively and playfully. It is necessary for lecturers, students, and other researchers to know more about it. The results about the syntactic and semantic features of oxymorons will provide non-native language users with a new look at word choice. They can be applied to translation, lexicosemantic study, and writing skills. As a matter of fact, oxymorons will add a new tone of language use to various types of texts. Hopefully, this study will be an open suggestion or a theoretical foundation on stylistics and linguistics for students to look back at their language competence a little bit and to enhance their understanding of linguistic figures.

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CÁC ĐẶC ĐIỂM NGŨ NGHĨA VÀ CÚ PHÁP CỦA CÁC NGHỊCH NGỮ PHONG CÁCH TRONG NGÔN NGỮ ANH

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này nhằm xác định các đặc điểm cú pháp và ngữ nghĩa của phép tu từ nghịch hợp (oxymoron) trong tiếng Anh. Trước đây, một số nhà nghiên cứu và ngôn ngữ học đã tiếp cận phép nghịch hợp từ nhiều góc độ khác nhau, bao gồm so sánh và đối chiếu giữa ngôn ngữ bản địa và phi bản địa về chức năng, khái niệm, phân loại, cơ sở logic ngữ nghĩa và giá trị biểu đạt. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp định tính và định lượng, kết hợp các kỹ thuật như mô tả, phân tích ngôn ngữ và ngữ cảnh, quy nạp, diễn dịch, so sánh, ... Các trường ngữ nghĩa và kiểu nghịch hợp được phân loại dựa trên số liệu thống kê từ 570 phép nghịch hợp, thu thập từ nhiều nguồn khác nhau, bao gồm bài báo, trang web, kịch, thơ, sách giáo khoa, tiểu thuyết, truyện ngắn, ngôn ngữ đời thường, hội thoại hàng ngày, thành ngữ và trích dẫn trong vòng một năm. Dữ liệu sau đó được tổng hợp và phân tích theo các tiêu chí về ngữ nghĩa, bao gồm nghĩa đen và nghĩa bóng, nhằm làm sáng tỏ sự biến đổi phong cách của phép nghịch hợp trong các lĩnh vực văn học, nghệ thuật, triết học, truyền thông và ngôn ngữ đời sống. Bài báo này đóng góp vào việc mở rộng hiểu biết về phép nghịch hợp trong tiếng Anh từ góc độ ngôn ngữ học và văn hóa - xã hội, phục vụ cho giảng viên và sinh viên Khoa Tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Mở Hà Nội.

Từ khóa: đặc điểm cú pháp, đặc điểm ngữ nghĩa, phong cách học, phép nghịch hợp, biện pháp tu từ.

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