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INTERPRETATION OF IDIOMS IN A LITERARY TEXT

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Abstract

The article examines the role and interpretation of idioms in literary texts. Idiomatic expressions are an essential component of language and culture, contributing to the aesthetic and expressive value of literary discourse. The study focuses on the semantic, stylistic, and cultural aspects of idioms and discusses the challenges associated with their interpretation. Special attention is paid to the contextual analysis of idiomatic units and their contribution to characterization, imagery, and the author's individual style.

Keywords: idiom, literary text, interpretation, figurative language, phraseology, stylistics, context.

Introduction

Language is not only a means of communication but also a reflection of the cultural and historical experience of a nation. Among the most expressive linguistic units are idioms, which embody collective wisdom, traditions, and cultural values. Idioms frequently occur in literary texts where they perform various stylistic and communicative functions.

The interpretation of idioms is a complex process because the meaning of an idiomatic expression often cannot be derived from the meanings of its individual components. Therefore, readers and researchers must take into account linguistic, contextual, and cultural factors when analyzing idioms in literary works. The purpose of this article is to investigate the peculiarities of idiom interpretation in literary texts and to identify the main factors influencing their understanding.

Idioms are stable combinations of words whose meaning is partially or completely different from the literal meanings of their components. According to Vinogradov, phraseological units are characterized by semantic integrity and structural stability [9, 118].

Methods

The research is based on the methods of contextual, semantic, stylistic, and linguocultural analysis. The descriptive method was used to classify and characterize idiomatic expressions found in the literary text, while the method of continuous sampling was applied to collect the data. Comparative analysis was employed to examine the translation and interpretation of idioms, and interpretative analysis helped reveal their figurative meanings and artistic functions within the literary work. Scholars have proposed different classifications of idioms based on their semantic transparency, grammatical structure, and stylistic functions. Moon defines idioms as “institutionalized expressions whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of their constituent parts.” [6, 4]. Idioms are important because they enrich language, create imagery, and provide emotional coloring. In literary discourse, they often serve as a means of characterization and help reveal cultural and social aspects of the narrative.

In literary works, idioms perform several stylistic functions. Writers use idioms to reveal social background, education, age, and personality traits of characters. The speech of fictional

characters often contains idiomatic expressions typical of a particular social group or region. For example, in Charles Dickens' novels, idiomatic language contributes significantly to the realistic portrayal of characters from different social classes.

Idioms create vivid images that enhance the emotional impact of a literary text. Expressions such as to spill the beans, to break the ice, or to burn bridges evoke visual associations and strengthen the reader's perception of events. Idioms preserve cultural traditions and historical experience. Their use in literature helps authors reflect the national identity of a particular linguistic community [1, 12].

The interpretation of idioms presents several difficulties. Many idioms are semantically opaque, meaning that their figurative meaning differs significantly from their literal meaning. For instance, the expression kick the bucket means "to die" rather than performing a physical action involving a bucket. Idioms are deeply rooted in culture. Readers from different linguistic backgrounds may have difficulty understanding culture-specific idiomatic expressions without additional context.

The meaning of an idiom may vary depending on the context in which it appears. Literary authors frequently manipulate traditional idioms, modify them, or use them ironically. Such transformations require careful contextual analysis. As Fernando notes, idioms often acquire additional connotations in literary discourse that extend beyond their dictionary meanings [4, 35].

Results

Researchers employ several approaches to idiom interpretation. Contextual analysis is considered one of the most effective methods. The surrounding text helps determine the intended meaning of an idiom and reveals its stylistic function. The cognitive approach views idioms as conceptual structures reflecting human experience. Lakoff and Johnson argue that many idioms are based on conceptual metaphors that shape human thinking [5, 52].

Cultural analysis examines the historical and social background of idiomatic expressions. Understanding cultural references often helps readers interpret idioms correctly. Comparing idioms across languages allows researchers to identify universal and culture-specific features. This approach is particularly important in translation studies.

Consider the idiom to wear one's heart on one's sleeve, used by Shakespeare in Othello. The expression refers to openly displaying one's emotions. In the literary context, the idiom contributes to character development and reflects themes of sincerity and vulnerability. Another example is the idiom all that glitters is not gold from The Merchant of Venice. Its figurative meaning emphasizes the contrast between appearance and reality. The expression has become widely recognized and continues to be used in contemporary English. These examples demonstrate that successful interpretation requires attention not only to dictionary definitions but also to literary context, symbolism, and authorial intention.

The interpretation of idioms in literary texts requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural and contextual awareness. Idiomatic expressions often carry meanings that go beyond their literal interpretation and contribute to characterization, thematic development, and artistic imagery.

One of the most famous idioms in English literature appears in William Shakespeare's Othello:

"I will wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at." (Shakespeare, Othello, Act I, Scene 1).

The idiom to wear one's heart on one's sleeve means to openly display one's emotions rather than conceal them. In the context of the play, Iago uses this expression ironically, claiming that he is not the kind of person who reveals his true feelings. The idiom therefore serves a dual purpose: it characterizes Iago as deceitful and introduces one of the central themes of the tragedy—

the discrepancy between appearance and reality. According to Naciscione, phraseological units in literary discourse often acquire additional stylistic meanings that exceed their conventional semantic content [7, 87].

Another well-known example occurs in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice: "All that glisters is not gold." (Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, Act II, Scene 7).

The modern form of the idiom is all that glitters is not gold. Its figurative meaning suggests that outward appearance may be deceptive. Within the literary context, the expression is connected with the casket test and emphasizes the moral lesson that true value cannot always be judged by external attractiveness. Crystal notes that Shakespeare's phraseological innovations have had a lasting influence on the English language and continue to function as idiomatic expressions in contemporary speech [2, 221].

Discussion

Charles Dickens frequently employed idiomatic language to create realistic dialogue. In David Copperfield one finds the expression: "Barkis is willing." (Dickens, David Copperfield).

Although not a traditional idiom before Dickens, the phrase became a fixed expression in English. It implies readiness or willingness to accept a proposal. The repeated use of this phrase contributes to character development and provides comic effect. The expression illustrates how literary texts can generate new idiomatic units that later become part of common usage [3, 356].

An example from modern fiction can be found in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone: "Keep your eyes peeled."

The idiom means "to watch carefully" or "to stay alert." In the narrative, the expression creates an atmosphere of anticipation and danger. The literal interpretation of "peeling one's eyes" is impossible, making contextual understanding essential. As Fernando argues, idioms frequently intensify the expressive power of literary discourse by combining figurative meaning with emotional coloring [4, 45].

Another example appears in George Orwell's Animal Farm: "Napoleon always has his way."

In discussions of Napoleon's leadership, several idiomatic expressions associated with power and manipulation occur throughout the text, including metaphorical and phraseological language that reflects political domination. The interpretation of such expressions requires knowledge of the historical and ideological background of the novel. This confirms that cultural context plays a crucial role in understanding literary idioms [8, 67].

Conclusion

These examples demonstrate that successful interpretation of idioms depends on several factors: linguistic competence, contextual analysis, cultural knowledge, and awareness of authorial intention. Idioms in literary texts are not merely decorative elements; they contribute to thematic development, characterization, symbolism, and the overall artistic impact of a work.

Idioms constitute an important element of literary language and play a significant role in creating artistic meaning. Their interpretation involves linguistic, contextual, cognitive, and cultural dimensions. Because idiomatic meanings are often non-literal and culturally bound, readers must rely on contextual clues and background knowledge to understand them fully. The study of idioms in literary texts contributes to a deeper understanding of language, culture, and literary creativity. Further research may focus on comparative studies of idiom interpretation across different languages and literary traditions.

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