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THE AESTHETIC MEANING AND PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN OSCAR WILDE'S NOVEL "THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY"

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the aesthetic meaning and pragmatic functions of phraseological units used in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the text, idioms and fixed expressions play a significant role in shaping characters, depicting the social atmosphere, and intensifying Wilde's ironic and critical narrative style. Phraseological units in Lord Henry's paradoxical speech are especially important, as they influence the reader and act as a persuasive tool that accelerates Dorian's psychological transformation. At the same time, the phraseology found in Basil's and Dorian's speech reflects their inner emotions, moral conflict, and attitudes toward beauty, conscience, and spiritual corruption. The study focuses on how phraseological units acquire aesthetic value through context and how they perform pragmatic tasks such as evaluation, emotional impact, character construction, irony, and manipulation. The research demonstrates that phraseology in the novel is not merely decorative but functions as an expressive device that conveys Wilde's artistic worldview and the moral problems of Victorian society.

Keywords: Phraseology, aesthetic meaning, pragmatics, irony, paradox, evaluation, character, context.

Introduction

Modern linguistics increasingly treats pragmatics as an independent field that investigates how linguistic units are used in real speech: for what purpose, in which communicative situation, and with what persuasive force. Within this



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approach, language is not only a means of expressing meaning, but also a phenomenon inseparably connected with human communicative activity. Therefore, pragmatic analysis places the “human factor” at the center, including the speaker’s identity, intention, the addressee, and the speech situation.

The term pragmatics was introduced into scientific discourse in the 1930s by the American philosopher and semiotician Charles Morris, who defined the study of the relationship between signs and their users as the main object of pragmatics (Morris, 1938). Morris divided semiotics into three major domains: syntax (relations between signs), semantics (relations between signs and the objects they denote), and pragmatics (relations between signs and their users). This approach is particularly relevant for literary text analysis, because in fiction linguistic units are subordinated to the author’s aesthetic and communicative intention.

In contemporary linguistics, pragmatics is commonly interpreted as the study of language use in communication, including the relationship between speaker and hearer, the speech situation, and communicative goals. Later research expanded pragmatics as a linguistic field and enriched it with key notions such as speech acts, implicature, presupposition, and deixis. Levinson defines pragmatics as the study of language “from the perspective of users” (Levinson, 1983). In other words, a linguistic unit is evaluated not only by what it means, but also by what it is intended to achieve and what effect it produces.

According to Yule, pragmatics is aimed at identifying the meaning intended by the speaker; he conceptualizes pragmatics as the study of “speaker meaning” (Yule, 1996). This methodological view is especially important for revealing implicit, indirect, and context-dependent meanings in literary works.

The pragmatic function of a speech unit is determined by the communicative role it performs in a particular situation, with the main focus placed on the intended influence produced through speech. Mey relates pragmatics to the real use of language in human activity and considers the functional aspect of speech units to be the key criterion (Mey, 2001). Leech explains pragmatic functions through the role of speech in regulating social relations; in his view, pragmatics involves not only transmitting information, but also evaluating, influencing, and

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expressing attitudes (Leech, 1983). In literary texts, these functions serve to create characters, express evaluation, evoke emotional impact, and strengthen aesthetic meaning.

Austin’s speech act theory suggests that every utterance embodies three levels: locutionary (what is said), illocutionary (the act performed in saying it), and perlocutionary (the effect on the hearer) (Austin, 1962). In fiction, phraseological units often perform a perlocutionary role by influencing the reader. For example, in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry’s famous statement, “The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it,” appears as a general observation, yet pragmatically it functions as a persuasive device shaping Dorian Gray’s worldview (Wilde, 1890/2003).

Searle classifies speech acts into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives (Searle, 1979). Phraseological units, especially within expressive and assertive acts, intensify pragmatic force and increase the emotional and evaluative impact of discourse.

Grice’s theory of implicature emphasizes that speech contains additional meaning that is not explicitly stated but inferred from context (Grice, 1975). Phraseological units frequently serve as a vehicle for this implicit meaning. Wilde’s novel contains many examples of phraseology conveying hidden evaluation and irony. In expressions such as “I can resist everything except temptation,” logical contradiction generates an ironic implicature and reveals the character’s philosophy (Wilde, 1890/2003).

Presupposition relies on the reader’s background knowledge and forms a deeper semantic layer of the text. Cutting considers presupposition an important pragmatic mechanism that creates implicit meaning in discourse (Cutting, 2002). In literary works, the author often relies on shared knowledge to produce aesthetic and moral meanings through phraseology.

Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is linguistically rich, and phraseological units in the novel function not only as stylistic ornamentation but also as a key pragmatic tool that realizes the author’s ideological and aesthetic intention. The idioms used in the text make characters’ speech emotionally

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expressive, evaluative, and persuasive; they also reveal personality traits and influence the reader by embedding particular ideas.

In the novel, phraseological units perform several major pragmatic functions. The emotional-expressive function strengthens the depiction of inner feelings, psychological tension, and excitement. This is particularly visible in the portrayal of Dorian Gray’s psychological evolution, for example: “It was perfectly true. The portrait had altered” (Wilde, 1890/2003). Pragmatically, such phraseology increases illocutionary force and intensifies emotional impact, prompting the reader to empathize with the character’s state.

The evaluative function is realized when phraseological units express positive or negative attitudes toward people and events. In Dorian’s moral decline, phraseology conveys the author’s implicit judgment and encourages the reader to interpret the character’s actions critically. For instance: “He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul” (Wilde, 1890/2003). Even without direct moralizing, the evaluative meaning emerges through pragmatic implicature.

The character-constructing function individualizes speech and reveals worldview. Phraseology in Lord Henry’s discourse, often ironic and paradoxical, expresses his hedonistic philosophy, while Basil’s morally oriented expressions reflect his idealistic and responsible character. The statement “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it” illustrates this function clearly (Wilde, 1890/2003).

The persuasive (influential) function involves indirect impact and manipulation. This function is especially prominent in Lord Henry’s discourse, where aphoristic phraseology shapes Dorian’s worldview: “Yes, Mr. Gray, the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away. Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!” (Wilde, 1890/2003). Finally, the aesthetic function of phraseological units is related to the imagery, emotional resonance, and coherence of the literary text. Wilde uses phraseology not only for decorative purposes but also as a device that affects the reader’s aesthetic perception. As a result, the language of the novel becomes vivid, memorable, and artistically persuasive.

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Phraseological units thus constitute one of the main pragmatic mechanisms through which Wilde’s artistic-aesthetic concept is realized. They intensify imagery and participate actively in conveying psychological states, moral choices, and worldviews. Pragmatic analysis of phraseology focuses on contextual meaning, implicit implicature, and perlocutionary effect on the reader.



Consider the expression “to be in love with one’s own beauty,” used to describe Dorian Gray. While literally meaning “to be enamoured of one’s own beauty,” in context it becomes a symbol of narcissism and moral carelessness. The phrase gives the description poetic coloring and highlights how external beauty is prioritized over inner values. Pragmatically, it shapes an implicit negative evaluation and produces anxiety and suspicion in the reader.

The phrase “to poison someone’s mind,” used in Lord Henry’s discourse, metaphorically denotes filling a person’s mind with destructive ideas. Aesthetically, it strengthens dramatic imagery and reveals the manipulative nature of Lord Henry’s speech. Pragmatically, it performs both persuasive and implicative functions, suggesting the catastrophic nature of Henry’s influence.

The phraseological unit “to sell one’s soul” represents Dorian’s moral choice and carries religious-philosophical connotations, adding metaphysical depth to the novel’s aesthetic layer. It constructs Dorian as a character who sacrifices inner purity for outward beauty. Pragmatically, it conveys moral evaluation and produces a warning perlocutionary effect, foregrounding the conflict between beauty and morality.

The expression “a mask of innocence” emphasizes the contrast between Dorian’s external appearance and inner essence. In terms of imagery, it is based on contrast and strengthens the opposition between outward purity and inner corruption. Pragmatically, it performs a character-constructing and presuppositional function, enabling the reader to anticipate negative truth about Dorian.

Overall, the analyzed phraseological units demonstrate that Wilde’s phraseology conveys implicit moral evaluation, deepens relationships between characters, evokes aesthetic pleasure and emotional reaction, and transmits the author’s idea

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through implicature. Phraseology is an integral part of the novel’s aesthetic system and functions as an active pragmatic resource.



Speech act theory, developed in the mid-twentieth century by the British philosopher and linguist J. L. Austin, interprets utterances not merely as a means of transmitting information but as actions performed through language (Austin, 1962). According to Austin, a person not only expresses thoughts through speech but also performs certain actions. Austin distinguishes three main levels of the speech act, enabling systematic analysis of meaning, intention, and effect. The locutionary act is the most basic level: producing a grammatically correct utterance with lexical-semantic meaning. Austin describes it as expressing a sequence of sounds in the form of a meaningful sentence. At this level, the utterance conforms to grammatical and lexical norms, and the communicative intention is not yet central. For example, in the sentence “It is cold in here,” the locutionary meaning is simply that the room is cold.

The illocutionary act is the speaker’s intended function—what is achieved by saying the utterance. It answers the question: “For what purpose was it said?” Searle defines the illocutionary act as a socially meaningful action performed through speech (Searle, 1979). Thus, “It is cold in here” may illocutionarily imply a request such as “Close the window” or “Turn on the heater.”

The perlocutionary act refers to the actual effect of the utterance on the hearer, such as an emotional, psychological, or practical response. Austin interprets perlocutionary force as the consequence produced by speech. The perlocutionary effect of “It is cold in here” may be that the hearer closes the window, leaves the room, or expresses dissatisfaction.

These three levels of speech acts are methodologically important in pragmatic and discourse studies of literary texts. Through illocutionary and perlocutionary force, dialogues become multi-layered and pragmatic meaning is intensified.

In conclusion, Austin’s triadic model—locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts—provides a systematic framework for analyzing linguistic units in communicative, social, and aesthetic context. This theory remains one of the central concepts of pragmatics and serves as an effective tool for in-depth analysis of literary texts.

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