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Pragmatic and semantic potential of antonyms of the German language

Pragmatinis ir semantinis vokiečių kalbos
antonimų potencialas

DIANA MOVCHAN, Sumy State University, Ukraine

SVITLANA ALEKSENKO, Sumy A. S. Makarenko State Pedagogical University, Ukraine

LARYSA SHCHYHLO, Sumy State University, Ukraine

Abstract

The article deals with the study of antonymic nouns in the German language from the viewpoint of structural-semantic and functional-pragmatic approaches. This is conducive to a detailed and comprehensive description of the systemic meaning of antonymic oppositions and an analysis of their pragmatic potential, demonstrating the mechanisms of its realization in speech. The meaning of an utterance that arises during the actualization of the systemic meaning of antonyms in speech is treated as the pragmatic meaning of antonyms. The following types of pragmatic meanings were distinguished: 1) contrastive opposition; 2) the meaning of exhaustive multiplicity; 3) indefiniteness; 4) alternativity; 5) negation of the opposite; 6) contradiction. It has been determined that the formation of the aforementioned types of pragmatic meanings, which can be interpreted through the reference of the actual meaning of antonymic units to a certain type of semantic realization, is a prerequisite for the fulfillment of the pragmatic functions by antonyms. The results of the study demonstrate that antonymy comes across not only as a linguistic reality but also as a tool for self-expression and communication. Antonyms perform the function of operational units that serve the purpose of the realization of the author's pragmatic intent. Due to certain features of their semantic structure and possible ways of combination with other linguistic units in the flow of speech, antonyms help the speaker to influence the addressee in the most effective manner, stimulating a certain reaction in their thoughts or behavior.

KEYWORDS: antonymy, opposition, pragmatic meaning, pragmatic functions, pragmatic potential.

Introduction

Antonymy is one of the linguistic universals and stands out as an essential display of lexical and semantic relations in a language system. It has been in the focus of linguistic scientific pursuit for quite an extended period of time.

Antonymic relations represent associations based on which reveal significant discrepancies between objects, phenomena, actions, qualities and features, homogeneous by nature. In linguistics, antonymy is regarded as a category of opposition between words in terms of their meaning (Agricola & Agricola, 1977; Bierwisch, 1989; Poliuha, 2007; Schippan, 1972) with antonymic relations being characterized by semantic difference, semantic fragmentation and incompatibility (Cruse, 1986; Günthner, 2024; Lutzeier, 1995; Lyons, 2012; Müller, 2000; Proske, 2024; Römer & Matzke, 2005; Schwarz & Chur, 2014; Taranenko, 2017).

An overview of scientific studies of antonymy attests to the fact that the subjects of scholarly inquiries have been the nature of antonymic oppositions, their philosophical and logical basis (Horn, 1989; Lieber, 2004; Movchan, 2022), the criteria of antonymicity (Agricola & Agricola, 1977; Bielova, 1999; Budz, 1978; Greenberg, 2022; Johannessen, 2021; Kotzor, 2021; Knobloch, 2022; Müller, 2000), the classification of antonyms (Lutzeier, 1995; Lyons, 2012; Römer & Matzke, 2005; Schröter, 1980; Yurgens, 2021), textual actualization of antonymic pairs (Jones et al., 2009; Murphy, 2022; Steffens, 2018; Unukovych, 1985), linguocultural specificity of antonymic pairs (Koptjevskaja-Tamm et al., 2024; Nurannisa et al., 2019; Rakhi-mova, 2025; Strati & Bezhani, 2023), the psycholinguistic aspect of antonymy (Jones et al., 2009; Nguyen et al., 2016; Suknaić & Uštulica, 2025; Terekhova, 2000), antonymy through the prism of computational linguistics (Cao et al., 2025; Kühn et al., 2023).

Although the comprehensive investigation of antonymy as a linguistic phenomenon has recently been in the focus of linguists' attention, there is still no sufficiently thorough and systematic description of antonymic relations within literary discourse, particularly with regard to the pragmatic potential of antonyms. The aim of the study is to identify and analyze the semantic and pragmatic characteristics of antonymic oppositions in the German language based on literary texts with particular emphasis on the types of pragmatic meanings and the pragmatic functions they perform in speech, thereby revealing the mechanisms through which antonyms contribute to the realization of the author's intentions and the pragmatic impact on the addressee.

Antonymic nouns were chosen as the object of the present study due to their semantic flexibility and contextual adaptability which enable them to acquire additional pragmatic meanings in communication and thereby determine the wide range of their pragmatic functions.

The presented research has been carried out in the framework of the interaction of lexical semantics and pragmatics resorting to structural-semantic and functional-pragmatic approaches. These are operational because, on the one hand, we view the semantics of words as a potential factor of implementing the speaker's communicative intention, while, on the other hand, we take into account the actualization of the systemic meaning of language units in speech. Thus, the study reveals a shift of emphasis in the examination of antonyms – from the perspective of general functioning in a language to the concrete linguistic realization of antonymy within the utterance.

Theoretical Background

Defining antonyms, the emphasis is admittedly made on the notion of opposition. Some scholars turn the extralinguistic criterion of antonymicity into an absolute, tracing it in reality and interpreting antonymic relationships as an analogy of ontological links of opposition between the objects of the surrounding world (Bally, 1965; Holikova, 2014; Lytvyn, 2017).

Another point of view concerning treatment of antonymy consists in distinguishing it as a purely logical phenomenon (Pavel, 2022). Words are deemed as antonyms if they reveal in their meaning the potential capacity for antagonism which is displayed in the relations of opposition of concepts being correlated with one another.

A purely linguistic approach to addressing this issue involves identifying criteria of antonymy on the basis of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic properties of words (Greenberg, 2022; Kostić, 2015; Kotzor, 2021; Poliuha, 2007). Thus, among the essential features of antonyms, scholars point to: 1) lexical-semantic criteria, name-

ly: belonging to the same lexico-semantic group; the presence of opposing semantics; the ability to form lexical fields and word-formation nests; 2) grammatical criteria, characterized by identical part-of-speech membership of the antonymic pair and by parallel lexical combinability; 3) functional-stylistic criteria, marked by comparable emotional-stylistic colouring and by the regular paired recurrence of antonyms in context.

At the same time, it should be noted that the insufficient study of some categories, certain instances of antonym usage, the role of pragmatic factors in shaping relations of opposition between lexical units and a range of other issues is not conducive to an overall representation of antonym pairs and their hierarchy as a once and for ever established system. In this work, it seems cogent to adopt such an approach to determining the antonymic status of language units that would allow for the ontological, analogical (i.e. the elucidation of how nominative units reflect the surrounding world), oriented to logic, structural-semantic and functional-pragmatic aspects of antonyms. It is motivated by the communicative functions which antonyms being both nominative and predicative units perform in language and speech. We define antonyms as lexical units that form polar oppositions on the basis of the semantic-structural principle of contrast; that serve as verbal explicators of concepts functioning as the mental analogue of ontological relations of opposition between objects of the external world; that realize opposing meanings in particular communicative situations.

The pragmatic approach to defining antonyms is characterized by the perception of linguistic elements as tools, instruments or means for accomplishing certain goals and intentions in acts of communication via language (Black, 2006). We proceed from the assumption that antonyms, like any other nominative units, have a specific functional purpose: to serve as a means of the successful realization of communicative participants' pragmatic intentions. Antonyms may undergo modification and individual reinterpretation under the influence of pragmatic factors as they adapt to particular communicative situations. The explication of a speaker's communicative intention may acquire alternative forms since variation in the formal and semantic properties of linguistic elements gives rise to new antonymic units and create non-standard communicative meanings. The primary role in this process is played by the addressor's individual communicative competence and by the specific communicative situations involved.

While analyzing the pragmatic aspect of antonymy, we deem it expedient to examine semantics and pragmatics in interaction and interrelation (Susov, 2009, p. 138). Semantics as a discipline studies the nominative meaning of antonyms, whereas pragmatics is concerned with the realization of antonymic meaning in specific communicative situations and the formation of antonymic senses in speech.

The meaning of a word consists of a semantic component proper (the conceptual core) and a pragmatic component aimed at the use of the sign, which functions as a program regulating the rules of the appropriate selection and use of a lexical unit, taking into account the constraints on its application in various communicative situations (Morris, 1938). Such a position is grounded on the understanding of a word's lexical meaning as a complex and multifaceted construct which includes reference to: 1) a specific fragment of the surrounding reality; 2) the manner of its representation in the human consciousness; 3) the characteristics of the interaction of the nominative unit with other linguistic signs; 4) the speaker's attitude toward the referent and the type of communicative situation in which the nominative unit may be used. Accordingly, the semantics of an antonymic word encompasses the following aspects: denotative, significative, relational and pragmatic.

Based on the semantic-pragmatic approach that guides our investigation of the pragmatic aspect of antonyms, it can be asserted that: 1) the systemic characteristics of antonyms acquire pragmatic relevance in the process of their functioning in speech; 2) the result of the speech adaptation of the lexical meaning of antonyms under the influence of internal factors (referential correlation, significative features, implicit pragmatic parameters) and external factors (place, time, and the speaker's communicative intention) is the emergence of the pragmatic meaning of antonyms.

The term "pragmatic meaning" is interpreted in various ways in contemporary linguistics: as illocutionary meaning, in contrast to propositional (denotative) meaning (Cummings, 2005; Kozlovskiy, 2008; Levinson, 2017; Lyons, 2012); as the manifestation of the speaker's subjective-evaluative attitudes toward denotative meanings (Busse, 2015; Carston, 2016; Gao & Zheng, 2014); as speech-act meaning (Deppermann, 2020; Grice, 1993; Müller, 2003); as the speech influence on the addressee (Aznaurova, 1988; Kecskes, 2014).

We uphold the view of scholars who understand pragmatic meaning as a speech-act meaning – the sense of an utterance that arises in the process of actualizing the meanings of linguistic units in speech. Virtual pragmatic meaning is actualized in speech and is correlated with the speaker's real conception, which constitutes its individualization (Bally, 1965). Pragmatic meaning cannot be conveyed literally; rather, it activates the listener's own semantic resources.

If the systemic meaning of an antonym is formed through designation, that is, the relation of the nominative unit to its denotatum, its reference, then pragmatic meaning functions as an intensional component, a structure of features related to the denotatum, which, however, changes repeatedly depending on the syntagmatic context, the speech situation, the personal characteristics of the speaker and other factors. Given the actual functioning of an antonymic unit in speech, it is impossible to grasp its lexical and pragmatic meanings as autonomous entities, separate from one another. The communicative use of antonyms, their inclusion in a communicative act, determines the formation of a particular actualized antonymic sense and presupposes a specific semantic realization of their lexical meaning (Suleimenova, 1989). The formation of the pragmatic meaning of antonyms may occur both on the basis of the semantics of antonymic units established by usage and as a result of secondary nomination of concepts through the variation of form and content. The mechanism of the influence of context on the systemic meaning of an antonymic word can be reduced to two types:

- 1 accentuation, that is the strengthening of individual semes, including peripheral and potential ones:

Ex 1 *Was würde wohl ein Weißer sagen, wenn die Indianer und Neger in sein Land kämen, den Weißen mit der Kamera auflauerten, säugende weiße Mütter fotografieren, in den Kirchen die Altäre und Christusfiguren umschwärmten und dabei laut in ihrer Sprache herumredeten ...* (Konsalik, 1985, p. 295).

The antonymic meaning emerges as a result of contextual actualization of the semes “skin colour” and “racial affiliation”, which become the basis for semantic opposition between the lexical units. Thus, nouns that are not systemic antonyms acquire antonymic force within the utterance through pragmatic and contextual contrast;

- 2 incorporation into the word's meaning of components not inherent in its meaning but present as actualized elements in the senses of other words:

Ex 2 *Bei Ihnen ist es ein riesengroßer Schwarm, bei ihm ein heißer Flirt, und es passiert genau das, was Barbara so klug sagte: Abschied in Sydney, heilige Versprechen, sich wiederzusehen, Leibesschwüre ... und dann Stille* (Konsalik, 1985, p. 291).

The antonymic relation between ‘*Schwarm*’ and ‘*Flirt*’ arises through the induction of semes that are not constitutive of their core lexical meanings but are actualized through contextual interaction. The introduced semantic components “emotional sincerity” and “romantic superficiality” intensify the contrast between the lexemes and provide the basis for their occasional antonymic opposition.

As we can see, the formation of the actualized sense of a word is a contextually determined sememic variation of its meaning, which involves the activation of the communicatively relevant components of the word's systemic meaning. Thus, meaning manifests itself as a dynamic structure capable of integrating into the situation and acquiring a communicative perspective.

The pragmatic potential encoded in the pragmatic meaning of antonyms facilitates not only the delivery of objective information but also the exchange of value indicators, the interpretation of which requires the ability of creative rethinking. It is realized through three functions inherent in linguistic signs: the representational one, which relates the sign to objects and situations of reality; the expressive function, which represents the sender's will and opinion; and the appealing function, which defines the linguistic phenomenon as an address to the recipient of the information (Selivanova, 2010, p. 16).

The pragmatic functions of language units represent the orientation of their pragmatic meaning towards the realization of the speaker's planned communicative intentions (Grice, 1993; Kecskes, 2014; Levinson, 2017).

Methods and Material

In order to investigate the pragmatic meanings and functions of German noun antonyms in literary discourse we employed structural-semantic, contextual, functional and interpretative methods of linguistic analysis.

The structural-semantic analysis was aimed at investigating the semantic organization of antonymic oppositions, their lexical and grammatical realization within utterances, the various types of oppositional relations between antonyms (such as contrariety, contradiction, conversiveness and reversibility), as well as the interplay between semantic content and syntactic structure in producing pragmatic meanings and communicative effects in literary discourse. The theoretical basis of this approach rests on structuralist linguistics and semantic theory, which conceptualize language as an organized system of interrelated units (Saussure, 1986). It also draws on componential analysis, which enables the decomposition of lexical meaning into minimal semantic components (semes). Furthermore, it relies on oppositional theory in semantics, according to which meaning is frequently established through binary or multidimensional contrastive relations within the lexical system (Riemer, 2015). From this standpoint, antonymy is understood as a structured semantic relation that extends beyond purely lexical opposition and is additionally realized through syntactic organization and contextual actualization. Furthermore, the structural-semantic approach incorporates insights from discourse-oriented linguistics which highlight that oppositional relations can be intensified, weakened or reinterpreted in actual language use. This perspective allows for the analysis of both systemic (lexical) antonymy and contextually generated oppositional meanings, thus uncovering the interaction between linguistic structure and its realization in discourse.

The contextual analysis enables a researcher to determine the meaning of the elements under study and presents them in unity with their environment – the contextual indicator. This procedure for studying antonyms implies understanding context in a broader sense, encompassing not only linguistic but also situational, cultural and psychological aspects. The expansion of the scope of the contextual analysis is justified by the definition of context as a communicative situation that influences the semantics of the units under investigation (Batsevyč, 2004; Strati & Delija, 2014). The contextual method is used by us in identifying and interpreting antonymic phenomena not only of a conventional (usual) nature but also of an individual, occasional character. The analysis of contextual factors facilitates tracing the pragmatic parameters of antonyms, determining the type of their pragmatic meaning, differentiating their pragmatic functions and identifying the causes of variable changes in the formal and semantic aspects of antonymic units.

The functional method, developed within the pragmatic paradigm, presupposes the study of antonyms and antonymy in the process of their functioning with regard to their intended purpose. This approach is based on functional linguistics and pragmatics (Grice, 1993; Searle, 2013; van Dijk, 2008) which highlight the importance of speaker intention in meaning construction and conceptualize linguistic units as context-sensitive elements whose meaning is dynamically shaped by textual and situational conditions. The investigation of the features of conventionally standardized uses of antonymic units, alongside consideration of pragmatic factors in the formation of utterances, allows to substantiate the potential emergence of occasional antonyms which appear as result of contextual reinterpretation, semantic shift or the activation of peripheral or potential semes.

The study relies on *interpretative analysis* aimed at elucidating context-dependent semantic transformations, implicit meanings and pragmatic inferences of antonymic units in literary discourse, arising through the interaction between linguistic form and extralinguistic factors. The method is grounded in hermeneutic theories of interpretation which view meaning as dynamic and co-constructed in the process of textual comprehension (Gadamer, 2004). It also draws on pragmatic approaches to meaning, according to which a significant part of meaning is not explicitly encoded in the structure of antonymic oppositions but is inferred by the reader on the basis of contextual cues, background knowledge and authorial intent. Within this framework, interpretative analysis enables the reconstruction of the intended sense of antonymic constructions in literary texts including their implicitly oppositional meanings as well as their pragmatic effects.

The material for this study comprised antonymic nouns of the German language, identified through continuous sampling from literary works by German authors (Böll, 1971; Böll, 2009; Brecht, 2013; Kehlmann, 2017; Konsalik, 1985; L' Horizon, 2022; Stanišić, 2019; Valmy, 1987; Weber, 2020; Wolf, 1974; Wolf, 1989). The material includes 41 examples in total.

The selection of the literary texts under analysis is conditioned by their stylistic and chronological diversity, which enables a comprehensive examination of the functioning of antonymic nouns in modern German literary discourse. Furthermore, literary discourse constitutes a productive source for investigating the expressive, evaluative, contrastive and cognitively marked realization of antonyms, as fictional texts extensively employ semantic oppositions as a means of conceptualizing reality and exerting pragmatic influence on the reader.

Types of Pragmatic Meanings of Antonyms

Results

The analysis of linguistic material, oriented towards accounting for the interaction of semantic, structural-syntactic and communicative factors as well as the type of opposition expressed by antonyms, enables us to identify a range of pragmatic meanings of German noun antonyms. Let us consider this, using the examples below.

The use of the mentioned below pairs of noun antonyms in utterances imparts to them the meaning of direct opposition. This type of pragmatic meaning is based on the comparative juxtaposition of contrasting aspects of two oppositional objects or phenomena:

Ex 3 *Was in den alten Büchern steht, das genügt (ihr) nicht mehr. Denn wo der Glaube tausend Jahre gegessen hat, eben da sitzt jetzt der Zweifel* (Brecht, 2013, p. 9).

As we can see, 'Glaube – Zweifel' is an example of a contradictory opposition, since the concept of doubt negates the state of faith. In the structure of the utterance, the antithesis is reinforced through syntactic parallelism. The semantic contrast between the abstract concepts reflects a shift in worldview orientations and creates a distinct pragmatic effect of opposing the former and the present spiritual state.

Ex 4 *Ich wollte in der Vergangenheit schreiben, aber die Bruchstücke rutschen mir in die Gegenwart und wieder zurück, verschwimmen* ((L'Horizon, 2022, p. 23).

The antonyms 'Vergangenheit – Gegenwart' function as mutually opposed temporal coordinates. In the sentence structure the antonyms are connected through verbal dynamics (*rutschen mir in die Gegenwart und wieder zurück*) emphasizing the instability of the boundaries between past and present. This creates the effect of inner psychological movement and temporal uncertainty.

Ex 5 *Ich aber bin noch immer nichts Festes. Bin eine Sandbank, tarne mich als Insel. Die Gezeiten tragen mich ab, die Ebbe zieht mich fort, löst mich. Die Flut schwemmt neues an* (L'Horizon, 2022, p. 42).

The antonymic pair 'Ebbe – Flut' denotes cyclical natural phenomena with opposite characteristics. Structurally, both nouns function in parallel predicative constructions (*Die Ebbe zieht mich fort ... Die Flut schwemmt Neues an*), which provides rhythmic symmetry to the text. The semantic opposition between the movements of "moving away" and "approaching" acquires a metaphorical meaning of the variability of the human condition. Despite their opposite nature, antonyms come across as pairs of signs that refer to a single whole, organized according to a dichotomous principle. This characteristic of antonymic units serves as the basis for their use within a semantic-syntactic model with the meaning of exhaustive multiplicity:

Ex 6 *Er hatte Gutes und Böses erlebt wie in jeder Familie, nur mit dem Unterschied, dass das, was in den Straßen um ihn herum geschah, fünfzigmal die Sinne schärfte für die unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten der menschlichen Existenz für Ausland und Gemeinheit* (Valmy, 1987, p. 36).

The antonymic pair ‘*Gutes – Böses*’ represents a contrary opposition within the semantic sphere of moral and evaluative categories. Semantically, the pair does not merely contrast positive and negative experiences but encompasses the full spectrum of human existence. The antonyms therefore function as generalized semantic poles that symbolize the completeness of life experience.

Ex 7 *Ich habe mich gefühlsmäßig in die Lage meiner Gegner versetzt und mich gefragt: „Was würdest du jetzt an ihrer Stelle tun?“ Und siehe da. Sehr oft habe ich ihre Aktionen und Reaktionen vorausgeahnt.* (Konsalik, 1985, p. 226).

The antonymic opposition ‘*Aktionen – Reaktionen*’ realizes a converse opposition, since both nouns denote mutually conditioned aspects of one process. Their derivational and morphological similarity contributes to semantic cohesion and formal balance. Such an opposition conveys the speaker’s ability to foresee all possible developments of interaction, thereby emphasizing psychological insight and strategic thinking.

Nouns that serve to express the generalized meaning of exhaustive multiplicity are in a relationship of mutual complementarity regardless of different types of opposition relations. They can be combined using coordinating conjunctions, as in the examples provided above, or through a non-conjunctive connection, for instance:

Ex 8 *Und überall Krieg. Ich bin nach Norden, nach Westen, nach Süden, nach Osten, überall dieser Krieg stand* (L’Horizon, 2022, p. 239).

The nouns ‘*Norden – Westen – Süden – Osten*’ form a spatial oppositional system based on directional semantics. Structurally, the nouns function as homogeneous sentence elements organized through asyndetic enumeration and syntactic parallelism. Their repetitive prepositional construction creates rhythmic symmetry and reinforces the perception of completeness. The enumeration intensifies the idea of the omnipresence and inevitability of war.

Ex 9 *...Und so erfuhr Daniels und Simones Vater, dass die Durchquerung von Paris geglückt war und es für seine Kinder eine Aussicht gab – worauf? Auf Wind vielleicht und Sonne, Freude, Trauer, Regen, auf alles, dessen er beraubt sein würde, Träume, Taten, Leidenschaften, Spiele – Leben* (Weber, 2020, p. 36).

The antonymic pair ‘*Freude – Trauer*’ represents a contrary emotional opposition. Structurally, the antonyms are incorporated into a broader chain of homogeneous nouns connected through enumeration. Semantically, the pair denotes opposite emotional states that together symbolize the fullness of human existence. The contextual accumulation of lexemes culminates in the final generalized noun *Leben* which semantically integrates all preceding elements into a single conceptual whole.

The meaning of indefiniteness is formed within the framework of a semantic-syntactic model indicating the impossibility of unequivocal perception of an object or phenomenon. The communicative-pragmatic significance of such utterances lies in the ability, through the use of antonyms, to point to the existence of a third, intermediate concept that occupies a middle position on the semantic scale of features:

Ex 10 *Es war eine Augenblickstimmung, in der grauen Stunde zwischen Nacht und Tag, sie waren übermüdet.* (Wolf, 1989, p. 165).

Semantically, the opposition ‘*Nacht – Tag*’ loses its strict polarity because the described moment belongs neither completely to night nor to day. The adjective *grauen* additionally intensifies the semantic vagueness and transitional character of the situation determined by psychological uncertainty and emotional exhaustion.

Ex 11 *Gab es das also doch, wonach wir instinktiv gesucht hatten, als die falschen Wahlmöglichkeiten uns in die Zwickmühle trieben: eine dritte Sache? Zwischen Schwarz und Weiß. Recht und Unrecht. Freund und Feind – einfach leben?* (Wolf, 1989, p. 69).

The antonymic pairs mentioned above are arranged paratactically, forming a chain of symmetrical contrasts. Semantically, these oppositions represent socially and morally fixed categories. However, the rhetorical question „eine dritte Sache?“ challenges the fixed binary opposition and suggests the possibility of an alternative that transcends conventional dichotomous thinking.

Ex 12 *Sie selbst hat für die Wochen ihres Aufenthalts durch ihr Französisch-und Doktorsein und ihren Einsatz für den FLN eine Art Zwitterrolle zwischen Mann und Frau* (Weber, 2020, p. 158-159).

The antonymic pair ‘Mann – Frau’ represents a complementary gender opposition. The noun *Zwitterrolle* functions as a hybrid semantic unit combining features of both poles simultaneously. The syntactic construction *zwischen Mann und Frau* explicitly verbalizes the intermediate position on the semantic scale. The above-mentioned antonyms emphasize ambiguity of social identity and reflect the breaking of traditional gender boundaries.

A clearly expressed structural organization of an utterance involving noun antonyms, connected either explicitly through the disjunctive conjunction *oder* or implicitly through a non-conjunctive connection, characterizes the pragmatic meaning of alternativity:

Ex 13 *Jeder, der außen steht – jeder auf dieser Welt steht außerhalb jedes anderen – empfindet eine Sache immer als schlimmer oder besser als der, der in der Sache drin ist, mag die Sache Glück oder Unglück, Liebeskummer oder „künstlerische Abstieg“ sein* (Böll, 2009, p. 45).

The opposition ‘Glück – Unglück’ represents a complementary antonymic pair based on positive and negative evaluation. The repeated pattern with *oder* creates a rhythm of possible alternatives and broadens the semantic scope of the utterance. The speaker emphasizes that an external observer evaluates any situation differently regardless of whether it is perceived as happiness or misfortune.

Ex 14 *Die Kinder in der Schule machen sich lustig über mich. Manchmal bin ich ein Junge und manchmal ein Mädchen. Aber du kannst nicht beides sein* (L’Horizon, 2022, p. 104).

In the antonymic pair ‘Junge – Mädchen’ the alternativity is expressed through the repetition of the temporal adverb *manchmal*, which presents identity as variable and shifting between two poles. The opposition reflects mutually exclusive gender categories while the context problematizes their rigidity. The utterance conveys inner conflict and social pressure connected with normative identity expectations.

The nomination of a single denotate while simultaneously negating its antithesis characterizes the pragmatic meaning of negating the opposite:

Ex 15 *Das war keine Fähigkeit, sondern ein Unvermögen, das sich als Fähigkeit tarnte* (Wolf, 1989, p. 10).

The antonymic nouns ‘Fähigkeit – Unvermögen’ form a contradictory opposition. Structurally, the negation *keine Fähigkeit* is followed by the adversative conjunction *sondern* which introduces the actual semantic focus of the utterance. The repetition of *Fähigkeit* at the end of the sentence creates a circular structure and reinforces the semantic contrast. The above-mentioned antonyms emphasize the discrepancy between external appearance and inner reality.

Ex 16 *So lebt der Mensch, indem er stirbt. Indem er stirbt für andere? Oder indem er sterben, nichts als sterben will. Das Sterben-Wollen rettet ihn vorm Sterben-Müssen und somit vor der condition humaine* (Weber, 2020, p. 16).

The antonymic opposition ‘Sterben-Wollen – Sterben-Müssen’ is realized through compound nominal formations derived from infinitive verbal constructions. The opposition juxtapose two distinct attitudes toward death: conscious willingness and forced inevitability. This construction gains philosophical and existential

depth, implying that the voluntary acceptance of death enables an individual to overcome the fear associated with unavoidable mortality.

The semantic essence of the pragmatic meaning of contradiction lies in the simultaneous use of two words with opposite meanings, which brings about a distinctive effect of combining the incompatible:

Ex 17 *Es muss ein irrsinniges Schwarzhaar-Blondhaar-Geraune bei den Pfeiffers schon am Frühstückstisch Thema Nr.1 gewesen sein; man war sogar bereit, zu dem ekelhaften Mittel der Ahnenverdächtigung zu greifen, um A.s. Haar zu erklären* (Böll, 1971, p. 103).

The integration of contradictory attributes within one word 'Schwarzhaar-Blondhaar-Geraune' blurs the conventional distinction between opposites and generates semantic inconsistency. Thus, the semantic opposition is not limited to external appearance but symbolically reflects social attitudes and collective speculation concerning origin and identity.

Ex 18 *Sie hatte bei einem Urlaub in Köln einmal in Millowitsch-Theater das Gastspiel einer Berliner Transvestitenbühne gesehen und fast Tränen gelacht über die Männer, die als Frauen auftraten. Die Herren Damen, so nannten sie sich selbst, und es waren „Frauen“ darunter, die jeden Schönheitsbewerb hätten gewinnen können, wenn sie wirkliche Frauen gewesen wären.* (Konsalik, 1985, p. 301-302).

The combination of contrasting lexemes within a single nominal construction 'Herren Damen' generates an oxymoronic effect. Semantically, the expression unites masculine and feminine features within one referential entity, thus questioning conventional binary gender categories. The surrounding context clarifies that the referents are men appearing in female roles, which enables the reader to resolve the seeming semantic contradiction.

The co-occurrence of lexemes such as *Schwarzhaar-Blondhaar-Geraune*, *Herrendamen* may, at first glance, appear illogical and lead to a loss of adequate understanding of the content of the utterance. However, in fact, they are quite meaningful and can be properly interpreted through reference to the textual situation and by drawing on the recipient's personal knowledge of language and the surrounding reality.

Sometimes the components of semantic models with the meaning of contradiction are not formally antonyms:

Ex 19 *Das hat die Welt nicht oft gesehen, Lehrer selbst ans Lernen gehen* (Brecht, 2013, p. 52).

Ex 20 *Ich hatte meistens versucht, Sabine abzulenken, ich führte eine meiner Nummern vor, dann musste sie lachen, lange und herzlich, bis sie anfang, Tränen zu lachen, dann blieb sie meistens in den Tränen hängen, und es war kein Lachen mehr drin...* (Boll, 2013, p. 260).

Ex 21 *Der Tod ist immer neu für uns, und die Dinge der Lebenden sind uns nicht gleichgültig* (Kehlmann, 2017, p.22).

It is common knowledge that the most typical, frequent and widespread means of revealing antonymic relationships in the language system and in speech is the contrast of words with opposite semantics that share the same lexical and grammatical characteristics. Structurally, antonyms are words of the same part of speech. However, certain speech facts indicate that according to the principle of polarity grammatically asymmetrical words with roots of conventional antonyms can also be contrasted.

Such type of variation of opposition in speech can be explained through the explication of the concept of „essence“, which is viewed from a philosophical perspective as the internal content of an object, revealed in the combination of all possible and contradictory forms of its existence (Blikhar et al., 2020, p. 215). From this standpoint, words (or sememes) can express a single essence, even if the forms of the objects and the corresponding forms of such words (lexemes) appear to be different.

Hence it ensues that the noun *Lehrer*, when referring to a person, is semantically connected to the process (*lehren*) and such a specific action as *lachen* is not only categorized under the concept of a process, expressed by the verb, but also under the category of objectivity, expressed by the noun *Lachen*. This may suggest that in terms of approximation, alongside antonymic opposition of nouns like ‘*Lehren – Lernen*’, ‘*Tränen – Lachen*’, ‘*Tod – Leben*’, the opposition of words ‘*Lehrer – Lernen*’, ‘*Tränen – lachen*’, ‘*Tod – Lebende*’, also demonstrates one of the possible examples of oppositional contrasts.

The diversity of means for varying opposition relations in speech is caused by the operation of the law of antonymic attraction (Cong et al., 2023). Attraction can even be applied to words that are semantically distant from their antonyms – those that lie on the periphery of the lexical-semantic fields of their opposites. The antonymization of the meanings of such words occurs due to the influence of semantic factors discussed earlier (modification of the semantic composition or the “induction” of semes):

Ex 22 *Nun, sie war entschlossen, die Schlacht zu gewinnen, und es war für sie die natürlichste Sache von der Welt, dass sie für die Kriegsführung Geld brauchte und Stützpunkte, der einzige Stützpunkt, den sie bei ihrer ersten Truppenbesichtigung und Lagebeurteilung fand, war ich – eine große Ehre und auch eine grosse Last* (Böll, 1971, p. 218-219).

Ex 23 *Und ich muss Ihnen was sagen, das halten Sie bestimmt für komisch: der Boris kam mir rheinischer vor als die anderen, den Pelzer ausgenommen, der hatte genau die Mischung von Kriminalität und Humanität, wie sie nur hier möglich ist* (Böll, 1971, p. 183).

Ex 24 *Jugoslawien. Das aber nicht mehr lang. Der Sozialismus war müde, der Nationalismus wach* (Stanišić, 2019, p. 11).

In the meanings of the nouns ‘*Ehre – Last*’, the oppositional semes “positive – negative aspects” are highlighted and reinforced, while in the meanings of the words ‘*Kriminalität – Humanität*’, the semes “cruelty – humanity”, in the meanings of the nouns ‘*Sozialismus – Nationalismus*’ the semes “equality, community, and social justice – intolerance, extremism, aggression” are emphasized, bringing these lexemes closer together within the framework of semantic opposition with the pragmatic meaning of contradiction.

The Pragmatic Functions of Antonyms

According to the communicative intent of the speaker, the stance towards the perception of the statement, the general context and other pragmatic parameters related to the interlocutors, the following pragmatic functions of antonyms can be distinguished:

- to convey expressiveness and straightforwardness of opinion by presenting information as contrast:

Ex 25 *Wir richteten uns alle drei im anderen Giebelzimmer zum Schlafen ein, auf dem breiten Bett mit der griechischen Felldecke, die im Winter wärmt und im Sommer kühlt* (Wolf, 1989, p. 100).

Ex 26 *Sie hatten immer diesen Körper, und das Monströse an diesem Körper war, dass das nie einfach eine Form war, um in der Welt zu sein, sondern dass es immer ein Geschlecht hatte, nein, ein Geschlecht war – ein Mann ODER eine Frau* (L’Horizon, 2022, p. 60).

Ex 27 *Wie ihre Eltern sind die Kinder in der Schule zweigeteilt: Es gibt die vom Land und die vom Meer, die Bauern und die Seeleute, die, die mit Wörtern gurgeln und neben denen sich die übrigen wie zivilisierte Menschen vorkommen* (Weber, 2020, p. 13).

The information flow takes the form of a dynamic opposition between two logical and semantic planes. Such use of antonyms imparts clarity and credibility to the utterance. In antonymic contexts with a contrastive function, the idea of polarity and strong negation (the fundamental properties of antonyms) manifest themselves most prominently;

- ♦ to intensify the meaning of an utterance by combining opposites expressed by antonyms within a single concept:

Ex 28 *Mein Freund Doktor Rüdiger, den Sie als Wissenschaftler schätzen und noch eine Spur zu lasch finden, hatte den rottenden Einfall, mich, als ich aus Ihrem Zimmer trat, von Kopf bis Fuß mit einem unverschämten Männerblick zu mustern, einen ordinären Pfiff auszustoßen und zu sagen: Schade, Puppe!* (Wolf, 1974, p. 87).

Ex 29 *Der Magie lag ein animistischer Naturbegriff zugrunde, der keine Trennung von Materie und Geist zuließ und den Kosmos somit als lebendigen Organismus imaginierte, bewohnt von okkulten Kräften, in dem jedes Element zu dem anderen in einem Verhältnis der „Sympathie“ stand* (L’Horizon, 2022, p. 186).

Antonyms united within a single semantic entity, such as „von Kopf bis Fuß“ and „Materie und Geist“, neutralize the oppositional meanings expressed by their semantics, thereby creating a new integral sense of “completeness” and “living being.” The above-mentioned antonyms generate tension between opposing poles, establish a contrastive framework of perception and enhance the expressive and persuasive effect of the utterance;

- ♦ to make a new concept explicit through negating both members of the antonymic pair, which leads to the extraction of information about a third, intermediate concept:

Ex 30 *Es gibt eine Kategorie von Frauen, die nicht Huren und nicht Ehefrauen sind, die barmherzigen Frauen, aber sie werden in den Filmen vernachlässigt* (Böll, 2009, p. 119).

Ex 31 *Wir sprachen nie darüber, ob es für andere Familien auch so anstrengend ist, so zu tun, als wären sie wie die anderen Familien, wir sprachen nie über Normalität, nie über Heteronormativität, Queerness, wir sprachen nie über Klasse, die sogenannte „Dritte“ Welt und die geheimen Geflechte der Pilze, die viel grösser und feiner sind als in unserer Vorstellung...* (L’Horizon, 2022, p. 9).

Ex 32 *Wir sind keine Gegenstände, wir sind weder Teufel noch Engel, wir sind stinklangweilige Wesen der Dämmerung wie alle anderen auch* (L’Horizon, 2022, p. 33).

Ex 33 *Die Barbara war nicht die Allerhübscheste, aber auch nicht die Allerhässlichste, und sie hatte allerhand Noblesse* (L’Horizon, 2022, p. 210).

Antonymic pairs, when negated simultaneously, perform a pragmatic function of reduction of categoricalness in the statement, avoiding a simplified dichotomy and conveying the complexity of reality;

- ♦ to express uncertainty or doubt regarding the object of the utterance by means of alternative use of antonymic words. Such a specific use of words with opposite meanings adds additional semantic information to the utterance. Antonyms contribute to a deeper exploration of the topic of reality that the author addresses:

Ex 34 *Nachdem sie den Jungen weggeholt hatten, dachte ich: wohin jetzt, nach Osten, nach Westen oder bleiben?* (Böll, 1971, p. 231).

Ex 35 *Was ich mir auch, allein im dunklen Auto, an Schönem oder Grässlichem vorstellen mochte – mein Gefühl blieb taub* (Wolf, 1974, p. 104).

Antonyms in alternative constructions perform the pragmatic function of conveying the speaker’s inner state of doubt and reflecting mental oscillation, thereby expanding the interpretative potential of the utterance;

- ♦ to clarify and detail the semantic information conveyed by one of the members of the antonymic opposition via the direct negation of its opposite. In such a context, antonyms fulfil the function of correction, interpretation and commentary on the concepts being discussed:

- Ex 36** *Das Ersatzbrot bestand zum größten Teil aus Ersatzmehl und das Ersatzmehl war nichts anderes als ganz grob zerkleinertes Stroh, Häcksel und noch Holzfasern dazwischen - die Spreu, die Spelze, der Häcksel reizte die Därme, und das war keine Ernährung, sondern systematische Unterernährung* (Böll, 1971, p. 267);
- Ex 37** *Das war keine Fähigkeit, sondern ein Unvermögen, das sich als Fähigkeit tarnte* (Wolf, 1989, p. 10).
- Ex 38** *Ich wollte kein Gegenstand sein, ich wollte ein Mensch sein und gross; und gross zu sein, bedeutete, ein Geschlecht zu haben, ein männliches. Als Frau drohte einem, ein Gegenstand zu bleiben oder ein Ozean zu werden* (L'Horizon, 2022, p. 17).

Such utterances not only describe reality but also correct perception while simultaneously performing an intensifying function;

- ♦ to serve as a means of a non-standard verbal interpretation of referential segments of the surrounding reality through the presentation of information as a paradox:

- Ex 39** *Alles, was Sie wünschen, Herr Ambert – nur halten Sie Ihre zarten Riesenbabys ruhig!* (Konsalik, 1985, p. 54);
- Ex 40** *Noch im Glück hatte sie Unglück* (Wolf, 1989, p. 129).
- Ex 41** *Dein unablässiges Reden ist eine Sprachlosigkeit* (L'Horizon, 2022, p. 52).

Antonyms can be used within a single copulative word (*Riesenbabys*) or within semantic and syntactic constructions such as '*Glück im Unglück*', '*Reden ist eine Sprachlosigkeit*'. The ground for the emergence of such linguistic structures represents the deliberate conflict between the core meanings of the combined words. Antonymy as a source of such lexico-semantic innovations is of a paradoxical nature: on the one hand, the meanings of lexical units are grounded in the absolute opposition, while on the other hand, they represent the closest semantic proximity in the lexicon, an essential condition of whose functioning is the relation between the contrasted words. The pragmatic value of such units consists in drawing attention to the object of the utterance, creating a comic effect and irony. They force the re-evaluation of concepts, form new conceptual relations and expand the interpretative potential of the utterance.

The identification of the aforementioned pragmatic functions of antonyms proves that there exists a kind of semantic „tension” between the members of antonymic groupings – an attraction and repulsion of elements – that imparts the character of a system to these groupings. In the antonymic pairs of the nouns we have analyzed, not only the idea of semantic polarity and negation can be manifested, but also their neutralization can occur. In this case, a transition from maximum difference to maximum similarity and identification takes place. This particularity of antonymic words creates the pre-conditions for their specific use.

The specific use of antonyms in semantic and syntactic constructions, where the opposite meanings are neutralized, creates the impression that the lexical units lose their linguistic properties. However, this is not the case. While retaining the distinctiveness of their systemic meanings, antonyms but alter them under the influence of the pragmatic factors.

The possibility of realizing the pragmatic meanings and functions discussed above by antonymic nouns in the German language attests to the fact that antonymy, like any system, is an open phenomenon. Some antonymic units may disappear from the language system, change their meanings, while others may emerge. Linguistic standards of antonymic units form the basis for numerous modifications of opposition relations in speech caused by specific conditions of communication.

Conclusion

The present study has confirmed that antonymic nouns in the German language exhibit substantial semantic variability and pragmatic potential which become particularly evi-

dent in literary discourse. The interaction between semantics and pragmatics proves essential for understanding antonymy not simply as a fixed lexical relation of opposition but as a dynamic communicative phenomenon capable of adapting to contextual and discourse-specific conditions.

The analysis has demonstrated that the pragmatic meaning of antonyms arises through the actualization and transformation of their systemic meanings in speech. This process may involve the intensification of communicatively relevant semes or the incorporation of additional semantic components which may result in the emergence of occasional antonymic oppositions. Such semantic shifts enable antonyms to transcend conventional lexical contrast and actively contribute to the creation of implicit meanings and pragmatic effects.

The study has distinguished six major types of pragmatic meanings realized by German noun antonyms: contrastive opposition, exhaustive multiplicity, indefiniteness, alternativity, negation of the opposite and contradiction. These pragmatic meanings provide the foundation for the principal pragmatic functions of antonyms, including the expression of evaluative emphasis and categoricalness, the intensification of utterance meaning, the construction of new conceptual interpretations, the expression of uncertainty or hesitation, the clarification and specification of semantic content and the generation of unconventional or paradoxical representations of reality.

The findings suggest that antonymy should be viewed not only as a systemic linguistic category but also as an effective communicative instrument through which speakers and authors can shape the recipient's interpretation, emotional perception and cognitive engagement with discourse. Literary texts, in particular, demonstrate the extensive potential of antonyms to convey evaluative, symbolic and contrastive meanings.

Thus, the semantic and pragmatic investigation of antonymic nouns contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying the functioning of lexical oppositions in discourse and opens new avenues for further research into contextual antonymy, occasional antonymic formations and the role of antonymy across different discourse types and communicative contexts.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Declaration on the Use of AI

During the preparation of this paper the authors did not use generative AI tools.

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About the Authors

DIANA MOVCHAN

Associate Professor,
Department of Germanic
Philology, Sumy State
University, Ukraine

Research interests

Functional semantics,
pragmatics, education

Address

116, Kharkivska str.,
Sumy, 40007, Ukraine

E-mail

d.movchan@gf.sumdu.
edu.ua

ORCID iD

0000-0003-3604-7057

SVITLANA ALEKSENKO

Associate Professor,
Department of English
Philology and Linguodi-
dactics, Sumy A.S. Maka-
renko State Pedagogical
University, Ukraine

Research interests

Sociolinguistics, cultural
linguistics, pragmatics and
translation studies

Address

87, Romenska str.,
Sumy, 40002, Ukraine

E-mail

s.aleksenko@sspu.edu.ua

ORCID iD

0000-0001-7187-8791

LARYSA SHCHYHLO

Associate Professor,
Department of Germanic
Philology, Sumy State
University, Ukraine

Research interests

Linguosynergetics,
computer linguistics,
translation and education

Address

116, Kharkivska str.,
Sumy, 40007, Ukraine

E-mail

l.shchyhlo@gf.sumdu.edu.ua

ORCID iD

0000-0002-4505-5094



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