EXPLORING SYNONYMY AND ANTONYMY IN LITERARY DISCOURSE: A SEMANTIC STUDY OF THE LAST LEAF

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Abstract: *Semantics is the study of meaning in language, one branch of which is the study of lexical relations—how words relate to one another in meaning. This article focuses on two types of lexical relations: synonymy and antonymy, as applied to O. Henry's short story The Last Leaf, using Murphy's (2010) semantic framework. The aim is to show how these relations function not only at the lexical level but also contribute to narrative meaning, emotional development, and character psychology. Using a descriptive qualitative method, ten data points were analyzed in relation to their semantic roles within the context of the story. The findings indicate that the author intentionally uses lexical contrasts such as hope vs despair and life vs death to build emotional depth and strengthen the story's thematic structure. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that synonymy and antonymy are not only stylistic elements but also serve symbolic and expressive functions in literary texts. It further shows how semantic theory can be effectively applied in literary analysis.This research also encourages future semantic-based investigations of literary texts to explore how meaning operates beyond the sentence level.*
Keywords: *Lexical Relation, Sinonim, Antonim, Short Story, Semantic.*

INTRODUCTION

Semantics is a fundamental branch of linguistics that concerns itself with meaning in language. One important area of semantics is lexical relations, which examine how words relate to one another in terms of meaning. These relationships play a central role in how we understand and interpret language in both everyday and literary contexts. Lexical relations include several categories, such as synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, meronymy, and others. In literature, authors make strategic lexical choices not only to convey meaning but also to express emotion, mood, tone, and theme. Among the most prominent types of lexical relations are synonymy and antonymy. According to Murphy (2010), synonymy refers to pairs of words that share similar meanings and are often substitutable within a given context. Antonymy, on the other hand, refers to oppositional relationships between words, including binary pairs (e.g., alive–dead), gradable pairs (e.g., hot–cold), and reversive pairs (e.g., enter–exit). Understanding how these lexical relations function within a literary text can offer deeper insights into the emotional and symbolic dimensions of the narrative.

This study focuses on the application of synonymy and antonymy in the short story The Last Leaf by O. Henry. The story's exploration of hope, despair, illness, and sacrifice provides a compelling space for analyzing how lexical relations are used to build emotional impact and thematic resonance. Through selected examples from the text, this research seeks to analyze how O. Henry's lexical choices contribute to the narrative's psychological depth and artistic expression.

By applying Murphy's (2010) semantic framework, this study aims to show that synonymy and antonymy in literary texts are not merely linguistic features but are essential tools that shape storytelling. The purpose of this research is to identify and interpret ten instances of synonymy and antonymy in The Last Leaf, demonstrating how these elements enrich the reader's understanding of character, emotion, and theme.

METHOD

This research was conducted using a descriptive qualitative approach to explore and explain the use of synonymy and antonymy in literary discourse, especially in the short story The Last Leaf by O. Henry. This research is non-experimental because it does not involve participants directly.

The data source for this study is the original text of O. Henry's The Last Leaf, which contains various expressions and vocabulary that illustrate lexical relationships, especially synonymy and antonymy. Data were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on sentences or phrases containing significant adjectives, verbs, or nouns with potential synonymy and antonymy relationships.

Data collection was done through textual analysis by carefully reading the literary work and identifying words that have synonymous or antonymous equivalents. Each selected lexical item was analyzed based on its context in the story, and the semantic relationships formed (either as synonyms or antonyms) were documented.

The collected data were then analyzed using a semantic approach, drawing on Lynne Murphy's (2010) theory of lexical meaning, specifically the categorization of synonymy and antonymy. This analysis involved classifying the data into two groups-synonyms and antonyms-and then interpreting how these lexical relationships contribute to the thematic development, characterization, and emotional tone of the story.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the selected utterances in the novel "The Last Leaf by O. Henry", some of the utterances that have lexical relationships, especially synonyms and antonyms, are identified and analyzed semantically. The analysis focuses on the types of lexical relations, the contextual meaning of each expression and their implications for literary discourse. Murphy's (2010) theory of lexical meaning, particularly the framework of context-dependent synonyms and contextual antonyms, was used to interpret the findings.

1. "The doctors said she had only one chance in ten."

In this sentence, the word "chance" is used to express the low probability of a patient surviving. Synonymously, chance can be associated with words such as possibility, hope, or probability. However, according to Murphy's (2010) theory in his book Lexical Meaning: Meaning in the Empirical Study of Language, synonymy is not an absolute or fully interchangeable meaning relationship, but is often relational and contextual. In this context, although coincidence and possibility have similarities, coincidence has a more personal and emotional feel, especially since it is used in life and death situations.

Meanwhile, the antonym of chance in this context is certainty, especially certainty of death. Murphy emphasizes that antonymy in real language use is often implicit and determined by context, not just by lexically opposite word pairs. In other words, readers understand this opposition of meaning through the narrative situation presented, not because the antonyms explicitly appear in the text. The contrast between chance and certainty creates emotional tension and serves as a means of portraying the tenuous hope in the story.

2. "She has made up her mind that she is not going to get well."

In this sentences, "made up her mind" functions as a contextual synonym for decided or resolved. Following Murphy (2010), this kind of idiom exhibits imperfect synonymy which means that it is conceptually the same as (declare a decision), but

carries the psychological nuances of firmness and finality that decide does not fully exude.

Meanwhile, the phrase "get well" has the pragmatic antonym remain "ill" or deteriorate. The contradiction reinforces the theme of the character's capacities. Murphy emphasizes that antonyms are often activated implicitly by context. here, the denial of recovery contrasts the hope of life with the certainty of prolonged illness.

3. "You may bring me a little broth now..."

The word "broth" draws its meaning close to soup or stock, but, as Murphy found, near-synonyms are mediated by register and pragmatic function. The patient refuses to eat in the previous scene; the request for broth marks the attitude change from desperate to accepting care.

The pragmatic antonym is not another "broth", but rather the absence of food-silence, refusal, or take it away. In this way, the meaning of broth transcends its lexical definition to become a symbol of recovery, explaining ostensibly how the synonymy-antonomy relationship contributes to the development of the plot.

4. "The leaf is still there."

The existing phrase "still" is synonymous with endure or remain. However, emotional intelligence-which is grounded in everyday life-proves what Murphy calls contextual synonymity with evaluative content. The implied meaning is "lost" or 'fallen', which in the storyline indicates 'death' or "loss of hope". This type of anthonomy does not come from a dictionary passage, but rather from narrative contrasts that support inferential reasoning and highlight lexical oppositions as symbols in literature.

5. "She wanted to paint the Bay of Naples someday."

The verb "want" comes from the words "wish", 'hope', or "desire". Murphy lists these categories as cognitive synonyms: semantic, differing in intensity, and effective. A metaphor for life ambition is the desire to paint.

Pragmatically, the antonym means to give up or abandon, which indicates artistic hope. According to Murphy, synonymy and antonymy combine to provide emotional support, linking future dreams with potential failure. They also state that communication goals can arise from non-lexical structures.

6. "looking through the small Dutch window-panes."

The participle "looking" has close synonyms, such as peering, observing, gazing and watching. Murphy explains that visual perception differs in terms of intentionality and focus; gazing indicates a close relationship with the outside world. Its contextual meanings include ignoring, looking away, or closing the eyes, which contributes to emotional self-doubt.

Therefore, the opposition does not come from the use of the word "still", but rather from the character's attitude illustrated through verbalization. The use of the typical Dutch small window glass modifier also highlights how lexical details (small vs. large) can create an effect on imagery without necessarily being a complex statement, confirming Murphy's assertion that meaning is multidimensional and determined by the interaction of discourse elements.

7. "Oh, I never heard of such nonsense"

The word "nonsense" is made in the morphological form of sense, a complementary antonym: i.e. something is categorized as either sense or nonsense, not both, According to the principle of minimal diffrence, this opposition is canonical because of the various domains of meaning 'rationality' with the single difference being the negative prefix "non-".

Viewed synonymously, nonsense is a cluster of near-synonyms that overlap in negative evalutive meaning but differ in speech style. The choice of nonsense (instead of, for example, folly) maintains Sue's spontaneous, light-hearted but very assertive conversational tone that shows her instant rejection of Johnsy's idea without being overly harsh.

8. "Sue stopped whistling,"

The word "stop" in this sentence belongs to verbs and synonyms close to "cease and halt", all three sharing the basic meaning of "ending an activity", but also the most neutral and colloquial stop. Murphy asserts that near-synonyms are distinguished by their collocational distribution and degree of formality.

A semantic opposition emerges through the anonymous "continue/resume" which forms a gradable pair: the activity can continue partially or fully. The choice of the word "stop" can also index a change in the focus of the scene when tension increases, the casual activity (whistling) is stopped in favor of empathy for Jonhsy, supporting the narrative function of the scene.

9. "So she can sell the editor man with it."

The lexical word "sell" has close synonyms with the words "vend, market, peddle" which all express the transfer of goods for a fee, but their casual business connotations are different. Following Murphy, this subtle difference shows that the author chose the most common word for dialogue, maintaining the naturalness of the poor artist character's conversation with Sue.

This antonym contrast arises because it is implicit with the verb "buy/purchase" this relationship is relational (conversational antonym). The word "sell" marks the perspective of the seller, while the word "buy" has the perspective of the buyer, an example of opposition that, according to Murphy, is not based on scale but on the perspective of the participants. This contrast highlights the economic dynamics of the artwork in the story.

10. "keeping her eyes fixed out the window"

The word "fixed" is a disynonymous adjective close to the words "riveted, focussed, dlued" All three describe intensity of attention but have different metaphors (mechanical vs. visual). The choice of fixed adds a static and tense feel.

The contextual antonyms are averted or wandering, a pair that meets the criteria of pragmatic antonyms (context-dependent, not lexically standardized) as outlined by Murphy in the concept of contextual opposites. This contrast clarifies Johnsy's decision to fixate on the last leaf.

11. "Sarah cried over her paper menu"

The word "cry" has emotional verbs that are close to the words "weep, sob" according to the theory of clustred near-synonyms, each choice carries gradations of intensity and register, "cry" is more common, sob is more intense and weep is more poetic.

The antonyms of cry (laugh, rejoice) form a gradable pair (negative-positive spectrum of affection). In a narrative sense, this opposition emphasizes the dystopic emotional shifts experienced by the characters when facing the decision, while confirming the "sadness - hope" pattern that is the central theme of the short story.

12. "The world is an oyster about to be opened with a sword"

This metaphor highlights the verb open, a close synonym of unlock, unseal. The choice of open maintains symbolic simplicity - the world as a shell ready to open. Its lexical antonym close/shut, a complementary pair in the domain of accessibility. Given

the principle of minimal difference, open-close is considered canonical antonymy due to high substitution distribution and basic semantic equivalence

In context, the open-close opposition reinforces the character's optimism (world → opportunity) and offsets the morose tone of the previous paragraph, confirming the rhetorical function of antonymy for thematic contrast.

13. **"Typewriter"**

In the context of The Last Leaf, the word typewriter refers to a writing machine or an artifact of the modern office world in New York in the early 20th century.

According to Murphy, these synonyms are gradient-the "same meaning" relationship is always negotiated by the pragmatic context in this sentence, typewriter can be replaced by the near-synonym typing machine or in the contemporary register, keyboard. However, full substitution is only possible if the physical context of "machine" is retained, typewriter cannot be exchanged for typist without destroying the referent. This difference confirms Murphy's claim that synonyms are synonymous, as each member of the set carries different nuances of register, word age, and cultural associations.

14. **"The world of office work"**

Phrased, this sentence constructs the semantic domain of clerical life where O. Henry's characters earn a living. However, pragmatically speaking, world has synonyms realm, sphere and domain.

Murphy emphasizes the concept of Relation-by-contrast principle, where the selection of a particular synonym is evaluated based on the extent to which it contrasts with other alternatives available in the text. For example, realm of office work would sound more formal and poetic while sphere emphasizes the professional aspect. In terms of antonyms, this domain can be seen as contrasting because it is implicit with manual labor or field work i.e. it represents an "office vs outdoor" dichotomy that is activated by the reader due to cultural experience rather than the existence of fixed lexical antonym pairs.

15. **"Typist"**

The word "typist" is positioned as an administrative worker with typing skills. Murphy (2010) emphasizes that not all words have canonical antonym pairs. typist shows this, it has near-synonyms (stenographer, secretary) but no systematic bipolar opposite (non-typist is just a private compositional form, not a member of the lexicon). Therefore, the relevant semantic relation is synonym cluster.

16. **"Hetty Pepper went back to her room … with a sharper chin and nose than usual"**

The verb "went" is used as the past tense of the word "go", which shows physical movement to a known place, namely her room.

According to Murphy's theory, the word "went" belongs to a group of basic verbs that show movement, like the words "go, walk, run or travel" these words have many close synonyms whose meanings can differ depending on the context, such as the gait, distance or emotion involved. For example, words like returned, walked, heade back, or marched can be used as substitutes, but each carries a different nuance. Since the word "went" sounds neutral and doesn't show direct emotion, its selection in this sentence helps to create a calm and distant narrative atmosphere.

If this word were replaced with "stormed back" or "dragged herself back" the sentence would give the impression of being angry or tired. This shows that synonyms are not always interchangeable, as each word carries additional meaning depending on the situation. As Murphy explains, the meaning in context and the power of pragmatics

can greatly influence whether the words are truly equivalent or not. In this case, "went" helps to show that Hetty's character is keeping an emotional distance, although the reader can still pick up on her feelings through other clues around the narrative.

17. "She walked into the Biggest Store..."

In this sentence, the verb "walked" shows a common way of moving with the feet at a normal pace. In this context, the word "walked" describes how the character entered the biggest store without any haste or pressure. According to Murphy's theory, walked belongs to a group of movement verbs that have many synonyms with meanings that can change depending on the situation. For example, words like "strode, marched, ambled, tiptoed, or strolled can be used, but each of them gives a different nuance of being confident, stiff, relaxed, cautious or even cheerful.

O. Henry's choice of the word "walked" shows a neutral choice, not imposing a certain emotion. This leaves room for the reader to interpret for themselves how the character is feeling at that moment. For example, if the author had used the word "marched" (which makes the impression of being assertive and aggressive) or the word "tiptoed" (which sounds hesitant or silent), then the impression captured by the reader would be very different.

This strongly supports Murphy's theory that near-synonyms always rely on pragmatic appropriateness or lexical equivalence not only as a matter of denotative meaning, but also as a narrative effect and tone carried by the word. In this sentence, the word "walked" reinforces the sense of realism and the undramatized flow of the narrative, which suits O.Henry's subtle but sharp style of storytelling.

18. "Too much candy makes you nauseated."

In this sentence, the word nauseated expresses the physical and emotional condition of feeling nauseated due to consuming too much candy

In Murphy's theory, the word "nauseated" is an example of an adjective that has several near-synonyms such as the words "queasy, sick, ill or disgusted, depending on the nuance and context of use. For example, queasy focuses on the mild sensation of nausea, while the word disgusted refers more to a disgusting emotional reaction.

In terms of antonyms, nuaseated is on the gradable scale of antonyms that are opposite to healthy or comfortable conditions, such as the words "comfortable, fine or well". This means that nauseated does not have one fixed antonym pair, but falls into the gradable and context-dependent scale of human physical experience.

Thus, the choice of the word nauseated shows lexical precision that maintains the physiological focus of the sentence, which reinforces the causal relationship between consumption (too much candy) and bodily effect. This is in line with Murphy's principle that the choice of synonyms or antonyms cannot be separated from the semantic nuances or antonyms cannot be separated from the semantic nuances and pragmatic goals in discourse.

19. "In a quiet corner of the counter..."

In this sentence, the word "quite" is used as an adjective that describes the atmosphere in the corner of the table that is calm, quiet, and undisturbed by surrounding sounds or activities. According to Murphy, the word "quiet" is a gradable antonym which means that the level of quietness can vary, such as very quiet, a bit quiet or not so quiet. The opposite word is also not always one, it can be noisy, loud or bustling depending on the context.

This can show that antonyms don't always have a fixed pair. On the other hand, the choice of antonym can change according to the meaning and atmosphere needed to be built in this sentence. In this case, the word "quiet" gives the impression of a

peaceful place and supports a more intimate or reflective atmosphere in the narrative.

20. "He saw her friendly face..."

From this sentence, the word "friendly" is included as an adjective that describes facial expressions that show friendliness, warmth and openness. In this context, 'Friendly' can give the impression that the woman's face looks visually friendly or expressive.

So in terms of antonyms, the word 'friendly' belongs to the category of gradable antonyms which means that the meaning can be increased or decreased for example, very friendly, less friendly). Its opposite can be 'hostile, cold, unfriendly, or aloof, depending on the context. Murphy explains that such antonyms are not just direct opposites (good vs. bad), but also form evaluative contrasts, for example, a friendly face will automatically look different than another character who looks cold or unfriendly.

So, the author's choice of the word 'friendly' not only describes the facial appearance, but also helps to form a picture of the character's personality. In accordance with Murphy's theory, this shows that one word can carry a deeper meaning and narrative effect than just the dictionary meaning.

21. "He felt imprisoned, captured, attacked, raided, dismissed, judged, threatened, bullied, without knowing why."

The word imprisoned in this sentence is used metaphorically, which is to describe the feeling of being trapped or confined emotionally or psychologically, not of actually being in prison. According to Murphy, imprisoned is a passive verb that carries a strong and emotional meaning. The word is often used in literature to indirectly describe an inner situation or oppressive condition. Its metaphorical use helps describe the character's feelings of being unfree, even though he is not physically locked up.

In terms of antonymy, imprisoned has an opposite in the form of words such as free, liberated, or released, which is included in gradable antonymy because it shows a spectrum of attachment to freedom. Murphy explains that in literary texts, antonymy often does not appear explicitly, but is presented implicitly through the contrast of meaning constructed by the reader. In this case, the feeling of being imprisoned gives rise to an automatic opposition to lost freedom.

The word imprisoned in this sentence not only plays a semantic role, but also a pragmatic and symbolic one, marking the intensity of the character's emotional experience. This is in line with Murphy's view that synonymy and antonymy in literary discourse are not mere exchanges of words, but complex instruments of expression that activate the reader's interpretation emotionally and cognitively.

22. "His clothes were neat, but his face was weary and pale."

In this sentence the word "weary" is used as an adjective to be able to describe deep fatigue that can be physical, emotional or both that can be seen from the character's facial expressions. According to Murphy, the word "weary" belongs to the group of near-synonyms of the words tired, exhausted, fatigued or worn out. However, the word "weary" has a more subtle nuance and usually denotes long-lasting or deeper fatigue, which can even imply mental or mental exhaustion.

Here, the use of the word "weary" can give a softer and more poetic impression. This word not only describes physical exhaustion, but it can also suggest that the character is emotionally or mentally exhausted. This is in keeping with the literary style of writing that often uses words with double meanings and subtle emotional effects.

Murphy emphasizes that synonyms are not always interchangeable. Each word has an additional meaning and functions stylistically differently, so if it is replaced with

another word like exhausted, the mood of the sentence can change. In this case, the word "weary" was chosen because it is able to convey a deep and reflective feel of exhaustion without being overwhelming.

23. **"His eyes were dull from the weight of physical and mental suffering."**

The word "suffering" in this sentence refers to a state of intense suffering experienced physically or mentally. In the context of the narrative, the word "suffering" is an emotional center of meaning that describes the expression of eyes that are dull. According to Murphy, 'suffering' is an abstract noun that has several near-synonyms, such as pain, anguish, torment, distress and agony. However, each of these synonyms has a different level of intensity, range of emotions and contextual associations.

The choice of the word 'suffering' in this sentence shows a broad and comprehensive word choice, as it can refer to both physical and mental suffering, without sounding excessive or dramatic. This may indicate that these words have synonym-like meanings that are not always used interchangeably, as Murphy explains one word can have a broader or narrower meaning than its synonym depending on the purpose and context of the writer.

In terms of antonyms, the word 'suffering' does not have a directly opposite pair as in "black vs. white". But we can understand it through gradable antonyms with words like relief, comfort, ease or well-being. Murphy explains that in cases like this, antpnim is more pragmatic and conceptual which means that the meaning lawana is imagined by the reader and not one that must be written down directly. In this sentence, the reader can feel the contrast between suffering and the opposite condition, which is a state of no pain or burden even though the opposite word is not mentioned. This shows that the choice of the word 'suffering' not only conveys meaning, but also creates an emotional interpretation of the narrative.

24. **"Hetty stopped. So did the young man."**

The word 'young' here is used as an adjective indicating the relative youth of the male character, which provides basic descriptive information about the character. Based on Murphy's theory, the word 'young' is a classic example of a gradable antonym, with its direct antonym pair being 'old'. However, this relation cannot be absolute, but rather scaled as whether someone is young, middle-aged or old depends on their social context and cultural perceptions.

From the point of view of antonyms, young and old as a gradable pair not only indicate age, but also often carry symbolic weight in literary texts for example, the word 'young' as a symbol of hope, beginning, or innocence. the word 'old' as a symbol of experience, fatigue or decline. In this sentence, you also helps to shape the image of the male character as someone who is comparable in age or setting to Hetty, providing a basis for subsequent interactions.

25. **"The young man stopped at the bottom of the stairs and felt confused."**

The word 'confused' in this sentence describes the mental state of a character who is confused, unsure, or does not fully understand the situation. This word can refer to cognitive or emotional confusion in the character after stopping at the stairs. According to Murphy, 'confused' is an adjective that has many near-synonyms.

In terms of antonyms, the word 'confused' is part of a gradable antonym whose opposite is clear headed, certain, or focused. In Murphy's theoretical framework, confused and its antonyms work within the mental scale of clarity, not as absolute oppositions. In literary texts, confusion is often presented not only to express a character's weakness, but to illustrate inner conflict, the process of melting and change.The choice of the word 'confused' in this sentence also supports a narrative

tone that is empathic and humane, not hyperbolic like bewildered and not too technical like oriented. This can show that the choice of synonyms in literary discourse should consider the emotional effect, tone and interpretation of the reader, in accordance with the principle of contextual appropriateness outlined by Murphy.

CONCLUSION

This journal aims to analyze lexical relationships in the form of synonyms and antonyms in the short story 'The Last Leaf' by O. Henry using Muprhy's semantic theoretical framework. Based on the analysis of all purposively selected data, it is found that the author's choice of words not only functions as a means of linguistic communication, but also as a profound expressive tool to convey emotions, build character and strengthen the theme of the story.

The method used is a qualitative descriptive approach, with contextual analysis of words that have synonymous or antonymic relations. The results of this study show that synonyms in literary texts are often contextual, not fully interchangeable, and carry different shades of meaning depending on the emotional context, style of speech and level of formality. Meanwhile, antonyms in these texts often appear implicitly and pragmatically, i.e. they are understood through the narrative situation and the reader's experience, and not just from pairs of words that are explicitly opposite in meaning.

Words such as 'hope, suffering, weary, confused and imprisoned can show that lexical relations in literary texts are not static, but also dynamic and interpretive. Synonyms and antonyms play an important role in creating emotional tension, conveying symbolism and shaping narrative structure. In addition, this study can also show how lexical relations can enrich the meaning of the story and build aesthetic experiences for readers.

Therefore, this study confirms that semantic theory can be effectively applied in literary analysis to understand the deeper meaning of the word choice and language structure used by the author of the story. Furthermore, the research can encourage further semantic studies on other literary works so that the hidden meanings in the text can be revealed more comprehensively through appropriate linguistic approaches.

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