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Pragmatic Features of Phraseological Units Expressing Personality Traits in Literary Discourse

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Abstract: Phraseological units constitute an important expressive resource of literary discourse and play a significant role in the representation of human personality, behaviour, psychological disposition, and interpersonal relations. Their significance in literary texts is determined not only by their stable figurative meanings but also by their pragmatic potential. A phraseological unit expressing a personality trait can simultaneously characterize a fictional person, communicate the narrator's or another character's evaluation, create emotional colouring, establish interpersonal relations, and guide the reader's interpretation of a character. The present article examines the pragmatic features of English phraseological units expressing personality traits in literary discourse, with particular attention to characterization, evaluation, emotional expressiveness, irony, humour, implicature, speech acts, contextual interpretation, and cultural specificity. The analysis demonstrates that phraseological units function as multidimensional pragmatic signs whose interpretation depends on the interaction of conventional meaning and literary context. Particular attention is also paid to the role of phraseological expressions in constructing the linguistic portraits of characters and speakers. The article argues that the pragmatic interpretation of personality-related phraseological units requires consideration of the narrator's perspective, the communicative intentions of characters, contextual information, social relationships, and culturally shared knowledge. The English and Uzbek dimensions are considered comparatively in order to demonstrate that universal personality concepts may receive culturally specific figurative and pragmatic representation.

Keywords: Phraseological Unit, Personality Trait, Literary Discourse, Pragmatics, Characterization, Evaluation, Irony, Implicature, Interpersonal Relations, English, Uzbek

1. Introduction

Phraseological units represent one of the most expressive and culturally significant components of language. Their semantic stability, figurative motivation, emotional colouring, and pragmatic potential enable speakers and writers to communicate considerably more than the literal meanings of individual lexical components. In literary discourse, this potential becomes particularly important because the representation of human personality is rarely limited to direct psychological description. Authors frequently construct characters through indirect linguistic means, including metaphorical expressions, idioms, evaluative vocabulary, and phraseological units.[1]

Personality is a complex psychological and social phenomenon. In literary texts, however, personality is not presented as an abstract psychological category. It is constructed through behaviour, speech, relationships, appearance, actions, attitudes, and the evaluations of other characters. Phraseological units are especially effective in this process because they compress complex evaluations into relatively short and culturally recognizable expressions.[2]

For instance, expressions such as *a heart of gold*, *a man of his word*, *a tough cookie*, *a dark horse*, *a loose cannon*, *a snake in the grass*, *a big mouth*, and *a wet blanket* represent different aspects of personality and behaviour. Their communicative value goes beyond the description of a particular quality. The expression *a heart of gold*, for example, characterizes a person as exceptionally kind and generous, while simultaneously expressing the speaker's admiration and emotional approval. In contrast, *a snake in the grass* constructs an image of a deceptive and potentially dangerous person and may communicate distrust, warning, or moral condemnation.[3]

The pragmatic analysis of such expressions is therefore necessary because the same phraseological unit may acquire different communicative functions in different literary contexts. A phrase that normally carries positive evaluation may be used ironically, while a negative expression may function humorously between characters who have a close relationship. Consequently, the pragmatic interpretation of a phraseological unit depends on the relationship between conventional meaning and contextual meaning.

2. Materials and Methods

The present article focuses on the pragmatic features of phraseological units expressing personality traits in English literary discourse. Particular attention is given to their role in indirect characterization, evaluation, emotional expression, irony, humour, speech acts, implicature, interpersonal relations, and the construction of social and cultural identity.[4]

1. *Phraseological Units as Pragmatic Resources in Literary Discourse.* Phraseological units differ from freely constructed word combinations because their meanings are relatively stable and often figurative. However, their stability does not mean that their pragmatic interpretation remains unchanged. Literary context can modify, intensify, weaken, or even reverse the expected communicative effect of an idiom. The pragmatic potential of phraseological units results from the interaction of several components: semantic meaning, connotation, emotional colouring, stylistic value, contextual information, and communicative intention. In literary discourse, these components interact within a larger narrative structure.[5]

Consider the expression *a big mouth*. Its conventional meaning refers to a person who talks too much or cannot keep secrets. Nevertheless, a character saying *You're such a big mouth!* may be expressing irritation, amusement, affection, or playful reproach. The interpretation depends on the relationship between the characters and the circumstances in which the utterance occurs.

Similarly, *a tough cookie* conventionally represents a strong, determined, or difficult person. In one literary context it may express admiration: *She was a tough cookie, and no difficulty could make her give up.* In another context, it may suggest criticism: *He was a tough cookie to deal with.*

Thus, the phraseological meaning provides the foundation for interpretation, while the literary context determines the precise pragmatic force.[6]

Phraseological units in literary discourse therefore perform a dual function. They identify or imply a personality characteristic and simultaneously communicate an evaluation of that characteristic. This duality makes them especially useful in literary characterization.

2. *Phraseological Units and Indirect Characterization.* Characterization is one of the most important pragmatic functions of personality-related phraseological units in literary discourse. An author may characterize a person directly by stating that the person is kind, dishonest, stubborn, intelligent, or unreliable. Alternatively, the author may allow readers to infer these characteristics from figurative expressions used by the narrator or other characters. The second method is particularly effective because it requires reader

participation. Instead of receiving an explicit psychological description, the reader interprets a culturally recognizable image and reconstructs the personality trait.[7]

For example: *He was a man of his word*. The phraseological unit characterizes the person as reliable and trustworthy. The expression is more than a synonym for *reliable*. It evokes a moral principle according to which a person's spoken promise is binding. The character is therefore represented not only as reliable but also as morally responsible.

Similarly: *She has a heart of gold*.

The expression does not merely indicate kindness. The metaphorical image of gold suggests exceptional value, warmth, generosity, and moral goodness. As a result, the character receives a strongly positive evaluation. Negative expressions operate in the same way. The statement: *He was a snake in the grass*. It constructs a metaphorical image of hidden danger. The character is represented as someone who appears harmless but may cause harm unexpectedly. The expression therefore creates distrust before the character's behaviour has necessarily been described in detail. This demonstrates that phraseological units can anticipate and shape the reader's interpretation of characters. They function as interpretive signals within the literary narrative.

3. *Evaluative Pragmatics of Personality-Related Phraseology*. Evaluation is a central feature of personality-related phraseological units. Literary discourse is particularly dependent on evaluation because characters are rarely presented from a completely neutral perspective. Positive phraseological units include expressions such as *a heart of gold*, *a good egg*, *a good soul*, *a man of his word*, and *a gem*. These expressions communicate approval, admiration, affection, trust, or respect.[8]

Negative expressions include *a nasty piece of work*, *a snake in the grass*, *a loose cannon*, *a pain in the neck*, and *a know-it-all*. They communicate criticism, distrust, irritation, disapproval, or moral condemnation. The evaluative force of such expressions is generally stronger than that of neutral adjectives. Compare:

She is kind.

with:

She has a heart of gold.

The first statement communicates a relatively neutral positive evaluation. The second constructs a vivid metaphorical image and presents kindness as a valuable moral quality. Similarly: He is unreliable. It is less expressive than: He is not a man of his word.

The second expression places the evaluation within a cultural framework of personal honour and responsibility.

Consequently, phraseological units provide literary writers with a compact means of encoding evaluative positions. They can also contribute to the ideological structure of a text by distinguishing between desirable and undesirable personality traits.[9]

4. *Emotional and Expressive Functions*. The pragmatic force of personality-related phraseological units is closely connected with emotional expressiveness. Literary language frequently seeks not merely to provide information but to evoke an emotional response. Expressions such as *a heart of gold* and *a real gem* communicate admiration and affection. Conversely, *a pain in the neck* and *a nasty piece of work* express irritation or dislike.[10]

3. Results and Discussion

The emotional force of an idiom may become particularly strong when it appears in dialogue. For example: "I can't stand him. He's such a pain in the neck."

The expression communicates more than the proposition that the person is annoying. It represents the speaker's emotional involvement and contributes to the characterization of the speaker as well. This is important because phraseological units may characterize two participants simultaneously: the person being described and the person doing the

describing. A speaker who repeatedly uses harsh idiomatic expressions may appear judgmental, emotional, humorous, or socially distant.

Therefore, phraseological units function as instruments of what may be called double characterization. They construct the image of the referent while simultaneously revealing the linguistic personality of the speaker.[11]

5. *Irony and Phraseological Meaning in Literary Texts.* Irony is one of the most complex pragmatic functions of phraseological units. An expression may have a conventionally positive meaning while functioning negatively in a particular context.

For example: *Well, aren't you a smart cookie?*

The expression *a smart cookie* normally evaluates intelligence positively. However, if a character says it after another person has made an obvious mistake, the utterance may be interpreted ironically. The discrepancy between conventional meaning and contextual situation generates the ironic effect. Literary writers frequently exploit this discrepancy. Irony enables authors to create humour, reveal conflict, expose hypocrisy, or demonstrate the difference between what a character says and what the reader understands. Phraseological irony may also contribute to the representation of unreliable speakers. A character may praise another person using apparently positive language, while contextual evidence encourages the reader to interpret the statement negatively.

Thus, phraseological irony requires active interpretation. The reader must integrate the phraseological meaning with the surrounding narrative and infer the intended evaluation.[12]

6. *Humour as a Pragmatic Strategy.* Humour represents another important function of personality-related phraseological units. Expressions such as *a couch potato*, *a wet blanket*, *a smart cookie*, and *an armchair critic* create vivid and often comic images of human behaviour.

For example: *You're becoming a real couch potato.* This expression may criticize laziness but can simultaneously create a humorous atmosphere. The speaker avoids a completely direct accusation and replaces it with an imaginative image.

In literary dialogue, such expressions contribute to the naturalness and individuality of characters' speech. A humorous idiom can establish intimacy, reduce conflict, or make criticism socially acceptable.

The humorous potential of an expression is also dependent on cultural knowledge. Readers must recognize the conventional associations of the phrase in order to understand why the expression is funny or ironic.[13]

7. *Phraseological Units and Speech Acts.* Phraseological units expressing personality traits can perform different speech acts. Their function cannot therefore be reduced to description.

Consider: *You should be careful with him. He's a snake in the grass.*

The phraseological unit forms part of a warning. The speaker wants the addressee to adopt a particular attitude toward the person being described.

Similarly: *Don't be such a wet blanket! It functions as a reproach or criticism.*

By contrast: *She's a real gem.* It may function as praise or a compliment.

Thus, personality-related phraseological units may participate in the realization of: *praise; criticism; warning; accusation; compliment; reproach; recommendation; persuasion; sympathy; solidarity.*

The speech-act interpretation is context-sensitive. *A dark horse*, for instance, may be used to predict unexpected success, express admiration, or warn someone not to underestimate another person.

Consequently, the pragmatic analysis of phraseology should ask not only *What does this expression mean?* but also *What is the speaker doing by using it?*

8. *Implicature and Reader Interpretation.* Literary phraseology frequently relies on implicature. Writers do not always state personality characteristics explicitly. Instead, they provide linguistic clues from which readers infer psychological and social meanings.

Consider: *Be careful with Anna. She's a dark horse.*

The expression may imply that Anna possesses abilities, intentions, or qualities that are not immediately apparent. The reader is expected to infer that the surface appearance of the character does not fully correspond to her actual potential.

Likewise: Tom is a bit of a loose cannon. The statement may imply unpredictability, emotional instability, irresponsibility, or potential danger without explicitly stating any of these characteristics.[14]

Such implicatures are particularly effective in literature because they encourage readers to participate in the construction of character meaning.

9. Interpersonal Relations in Literary Dialogue. Phraseological units also contribute to the representation of relationships between characters. A character's choice of idiom can indicate intimacy, hostility, respect, irony, or social distance.

Compare:

She's such a good soul.

and:

She's a nasty piece of work.

The first establishes positive emotional alignment, while the second constructs distance and rejection.

Humorous expressions can establish solidarity: *You're becoming a real couch potato!* Such an utterance may be interpreted as friendly teasing when used between close friends.

In contrast, the same expression in a hostile context could become an insult.

Phraseological units therefore function as markers of relational dynamics. A change from affectionate idioms to negative ones may signal a deterioration in a relationship, while the reverse may indicate reconciliation.

10. *Phraseological Units as Markers of Speaker Identity.* Phraseological units characterize not only the person being described but also the person using the expression. The choice of idiom may reveal the speaker's social background, emotional state, worldview, and communicative style.

A colloquial speaker may frequently use expressions such as *a big mouth*, *a couch potato*, or *a smart cookie*. A more formal narrator may choose less colloquial phraseology.

In literature, this creates a linguistic portrait of the speaker. The phraseological repertoire of a character can indicate age, social identity, education, profession, and familiarity with informal communication.

Thus, phraseological units participate in the construction of both psychological and sociolinguistic characterization.

11. *English and Uzbek Literary Perspectives.* The pragmatic interpretation of personality-related phraseological units demonstrates both universal and culture-specific tendencies in English and Uzbek. Both languages use figurative expressions to represent kindness, courage, intelligence, dishonesty, stubbornness, generosity, hypocrisy, talkativeness, and reliability.

English phraseology frequently employs images associated with animals, food, physical objects, and everyday experience. Expressions such as *a dark horse*, *a snake in the grass*, *a couch potato*, *a cold fish*, and *a smart cookie* demonstrate the importance of culturally familiar imagery.

Uzbek phraseology likewise makes extensive use of body-part terms, animals, family relationships, social behaviour, and traditional cultural values. The semantic fields of *heart*, *face*, *tongue*, *head*, *eye*, and *hand* are particularly productive in the representation of human behaviour and personality.

However, the pragmatic interpretation of these images is not necessarily identical in the two languages. Concepts such as hospitality, respect for elders, modesty, generosity, and family loyalty have particularly strong cultural associations in Uzbek discourse. Consequently, the pragmatic evaluation of personality may reflect culturally specific value systems.

This comparison demonstrates that phraseological units are both linguistic and cultural signs. Their pragmatic interpretation depends on culturally shared knowledge.

12. *Phraseological Units and Literary Translation.* The translation of personality-related phraseological units presents a special challenge because semantic equivalence does not necessarily guarantee pragmatic equivalence.

If an English idiom communicates humour, irony, affection, or criticism, its translation should preserve the relevant pragmatic effect whenever possible.

Three strategies are particularly important: An established phraseological unit in the target language may replace the source-language expression when both meaning and pragmatic function are sufficiently similar.

When an equivalent idiom is unavailable, the translator may explain the personality trait through a descriptive expression.

A culturally appropriate target-language expression may be selected even when its literal image differs from that of the source-language idiom, provided that it performs a similar communicative function.

Pragmatic equivalence is especially important in literary translation because replacing an expressive idiom with a neutral adjective may preserve propositional meaning while eliminating characterization, humour, emotional colouring, and interpersonal attitude.[15]

The analysis demonstrates that personality-related phraseological units function as multidimensional pragmatic resources in literary discourse. Their meaning emerges from the interaction of conventional phraseological semantics and contextual interpretation.

Their major pragmatic characteristics can be summarized as follows. First, they are evaluative, positioning characters within positive or negative value systems. Second, they are expressive, revealing emotional attitudes. Third, they are characterological, providing compact representations of personality. Fourth, they are context-dependent, since their interpretation varies according to narrative circumstances. Fifth, they are interpersonal, contributing to the representation of relationships between characters. Sixth, they are culturally marked, reflecting shared figurative knowledge. Finally, they are inferential, requiring readers to reconstruct implied meanings.

The literary value of phraseological units therefore lies in their ability to compress several layers of information into a single expression. A phrase such as *a snake in the grass* may simultaneously describe a character, evaluate that character negatively, warn another character, reveal the speaker's distrust, and influence the reader's expectations.

4. Conclusion

Phraseological units expressing personality traits occupy an important position in literary discourse because they provide writers with highly expressive and pragmatically multifunctional means of character representation. Their significance extends beyond their conventional meanings: they evaluate characters, communicate emotions, construct interpersonal relations, reveal speaker identity, create humour and irony, and guide reader interpretation. The analysis has demonstrated that literary phraseology is fundamentally context-dependent. The same phraseological unit can express admiration, criticism, humour, irony, warning, or solidarity depending on the communicative situation and relationship between characters. Therefore, phraseological meaning should be studied together with pragmatic context. In literary characterization, phraseological units are particularly effective because they enable indirect representation of personality. Instead of explicitly stating that a character is reliable, dishonest, stubborn, intelligent, or generous, an author can employ an idiomatic expression that activates a culturally recognizable image and allows the reader to infer the relevant characteristic. The English-Uzbek comparison further demonstrates that personality-related phraseology combines universal human experience with culturally specific conceptualization. Although both languages

represent similar personality traits, they may employ different figurative images and pragmatic associations.

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