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A Linguistic Analysis of Oxymoron in Ahmed Matar's Selected Poems

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Abstract

The study deals with the oxymoron as a rhetorical device where two words or phrases with opposing meanings are deliberately combined to create a specific effect. The effect can be ironic, sarcastic, humorous, paradoxical or merely emphatic. The study addresses the grammatical, semantic and pragmatic perspectives of oxymoron. It investigates the way these opposing terms function with poetic structure in Matar's poetry to find out their role in shaping meaning. The study aims to examine the different types of oxymoron in Matar's poetry, analyze them, and clarify the way Matar employs oxymoron to evoke dramatic and rhetorical effects. The study hypothesizes that the deliberate use of oxymoron creates dramatic atmosphere to enrich the layers of meaning in Matar's poetry. The study applies syntactic, semantic and pragmatic analysis. The study concludes that the strategic use of oxymoron in Matar's poetry enhances the dramatic intensity and creates a unique literary style that combines contradictions with deeper thematic resonance.

Key words: Flouting, Grice maxims, Oxymoron, Sarcastic

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تحليل لغوي للأرداف الخلفي لقصائد مختارة لأحمد مطر

رقية برهان الدين عبدالرحمن

جامعة تكريت

المستخلص

تتناول الدراسة استخدام الاردااف الخلفي (الأوكسيمورون) كأداة بلاغية يتم فيها الجمع بين كلمتين أو عبارتين بمعانٍ متعارضة بشكل متعمد لإحداث تأثير معين قد يكون ساخرًا، فكاهيًا، مفارقًا، تهكميًا، أو يستخدم للتأكيد فقط. تتناول الدراسة الأنواع المختلفة الاردااف الخلفي، وتتطرق إلى جوانبه النحوية والدلالية والتداولية، كما وتقوم بتحليل أمثلة مختلفة في قصائد مختارة لأحمد مطر. بعد استكشاف معاني ودلالات كل مثال، تبحث الدراسة في الطرق التي استخدم بها مطر الاردااف الخلفي لخلق إطار مجازي لقصائده. تُظهر الدراسة أن الاستخدام المتعمد الاردااف الخلفي من قبل احمد مطر يتيح له استدعاء أدوات بلاغية أخرى لتجسيد الأجواء الدرامية في القصيدة.

الكلمات الدالة: الانتهاك، مبادئ غرايس، الاردااف الخلفي، التهكم

1. INTRODUCTION

An oxymoron is a figure of speech in which two opposite contradictory terms appear next to each other. Oxymorons have been used in language and literature for centuries, though the term itself was coined much later. One of the earliest recorded uses of an oxymoron comes from the ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus in the 5th century BCE. In his play "Agamemnon", he uses the oxymoron "bright darkness" to describe the night sky. Other classical Greek writers such as Homer also used oxymorons in their epics. This shows oxymorons have been a literary device dating back to some of the earliest works in Western culture. In the 16th century, the Italian Grammarian Baldesar Castiglione coined the term "oxymoron" in his book *Cortegiano* to describe figures of speech involving contradictory terms. This is considered one of the earliest uses of the word oxymoron "oxymoron" itself (Richards and Schmidt, 1983).

According to Macmillan English Dictionary (2002), English metaphysical poets during the 17th century (like John Donne) popularized the use of oxymorons in their poetry. They used paradoxical statements to emphasize profound ideas or spiritual truths. Examples include Donne's reference to "separated minds" in his poem "A *Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*". Oxymorons have continued to be commonly used in literature, poetry and speech right up through the modern era. Some famous modern oxymorons include "jumbo shrimp", "living dead", and "deafening silence". They remain an effective rhetorical device for highlighting contrasts or adding humour. Overall,

oxymorons have a long history spanning hundreds of years across many cultures and languages.

2. THEORITICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Defining Oxymoron

Oxymoron is a literary figure of speech pairing two words together that are opposing and/or contradictory. The term is derived from the 5th c. Latin oxymorus, which is derived from the ancient Greek oksus, (sharp, keen) and moros (dull, stupid) resulting in the word oxymoron (Hussein 2020). Oxymoron is an appropriate subset of the expressions called “contradictions in terms”. However, the intended use of oxymoron distinguishes it from other paradoxes and contradictions. An oxymoron is a specific type of contradictions. What specifies oxymoron from other paradoxes and contradictions is that they are used intentionally for rhetorical effect and the pairing of words create a new way of expressing certain ideas (Small, 2008).

Leech (1969) states that the two expressions of the oxymoron are semantically incompatible and people in everyday conversation do not use oxymoron to make some deep statement. Instead, they do it to add flavor to their speech. Oxymoron is used in a number of ways in literary texts. It is used to convey powerful messages, as in the Russian Vashensky's play. An Optimistic Tragedy and Tolstoy's play *A Living Corpse*, Richards and Schmidt (1983) emphasized the dual nature of a phenomenon, concept, or object. For example, Robert and Kemper's *Poor Millionaire* illustrates the empty lives of the wealthy. The title is seemingly contradictory, but reading the novel reinforces the idea that despite accumulating the wealth, the rich remain spiritually poor.

2.2 The Grammatical Perspective of Oxymoron

According to Lederer (2008), oxymorons can be grammatically constructed in different ways:

- a. Single-word oxymorons composed of dependent morphemes such as “pianoforte” (piano: soft- forte: loud), “preposterous” (pre: before- posterous: after), and “superette” (super: big- ette: small).
- b. Single-word oxymorons composed of independent morphemes, such as “spendthrift” (spend-thrift), “bittersweet” (bitter-sweet), and “wholesome” (whole-some).

These examples illustrate how oxymorons can be created by combining contradictory elements at the word or morpheme level.

Oxymorons can occur not only within single words but also within phrases. In these cases, the words used together within a phrase can either belong to different or the same syntactic class. Chaunyu (2008) identifies several types of syntactic frames for oxymorons:

- a. Adverb + adjective: for example, “and faith unfaithful kept him falsely true”.
- b. Adverb + verb: for example, “I silently scream for help that never seems to come”.
- c. Verb + adverb: a phrase like “He wished he was ill, then he could stay away from school. “He began groaning loudly” demonstrates this type of oxymoron.
- d. Adjective + noun: an example is “it is an open secret that Mary and John are engaged”.

- e. Adjective + adjective: examples include “The cat lay on the sofa, looking all drowsy and vivacious” and “hateful good”.
- f. Noun + noun: An example is “Filling in a tax return calls for absolute honesty and cunning”.
- g. subject vs. predicate: for example: “Silence sings all round me; my head is bound with a band”.
- h. subject vs. predicative: as in the phrase “A friend to everybody is a friend to nobody”.
- i. subject vs. object: for instance, “The greatest hate springs from the greatest love”.
- j. Predicate vs. object compliment: as in the phrase “And is he gone? And is he gone?” she cried and wept out outright; "then I will to the water go, and see him out of sight".

2.3 Semantic Perspective of Oxymoron

Oxymoron is a figure of speech where two elements are juxtaposed to create contrast. This contrast is based on the semantic relation between the meanings of the two words involved. According to Shen (1987), opposition is the key factor in oxymoron as it represents the strong contrast between the lexical items used. The semantic relation in oxymoron involves the juxtaposition of meanings that can be strongly opposed or loosely contrasted. For example, in the case of “hot coldness” the semantic features of “hot” and “coldness” have opposing qualities. However, in cases like “eloquent silence”, the contrast between meanings is not as strong. Despite this, both types of juxtaposition still adhere to the principle of binary opposition which is fundamental aspect of oxymoron (Chuanyu; 2008).

As a figure of speech, oxymoron plays on semantic tension to draw attention rather than to resolve contradictions logically. Broadly, oxymorons fall under several categories based on their semantic nature. These types can be summarized as follows:

1. Objective (direct) oxymoron: it refers to those phrases that are contradictory as in sad smile, hardly easy, and cruel kindness. Clearly the opposite words when paired together give a perfect sense (Flayih, 2009).
2. Subjective (indirect) oxymoron: in this type the meaning is not direct since understanding the oxymoron requires more awareness of the context of the term (Ledrer, 2008). For example: cold war.
3. Punning oxymoron: in this type of oxymoron there is a tendency to move from an obvious meaning to a less obvious one (Flayih, 2009). A good example is “painful smile” which carries a dramatic value where smiles are usually associated with happiness. A painful smile leaves some suspense to wonder what feelings or events would result in such response.

2.4 Pragmatic Perspective of Oxymoron

Pragmatics and oxymoron are connected through the way language users interpret meaning of certain contexts. Pragmatics studies how context influences the interpretation of language beyond its direct meaning, it studies how people can infer implied meaning. In the same time, an oxymoron is a rhetorical device that combines contradictory terms (like: deafening silence) to create a unique concept (Rusnak, 2023).

Pragmatically, oxymoron is regarded as a figure of speech that depends on both contextual and cultural cues to convey meaning. In literal sense, phrases such as “original copy” seem to be contradictory, but pragmatically speaking, people can realize it as describing the first reproduction of a document. Pragmatics, as a branch of linguistics studies how contexts can influence the interpretation of language beyond the direct meaning, involving how people infer implied meaning (Shen, 1987).

Furthermore, pragmatics studies how people use oxymoron to certain communicative impact like humor, irony, contrast or sarcastic effect. Thus, while pragmatics doesn't directly create oxymorons, it helps to create a framework to understand how they make sense and what is their function in communication.

Grice (1975) emphasizes the importance of collaboration in conversations and presents four layers of four basic principles called “maxims” that characterize a cooperative conversation which would result in implicature. Grice states that the four maxims determine the quantity, quality, relation and manner of conversation. He explains those four maxims:

- a. Quality: try to be truthful when communicating.
- b. Quantity: give appropriate amounts of information, not too little and not too much.
- c. Manner: utterances should be clear: brief, orderly and not obscure.
- d. Relevance: contributions should be relevant to the assumed current goals of the people involved (Grice, 1975: 22-40).

3. FUNCTIONS OF OXYMORON

Oxymorons imply a number of functions in literature and daily language such as: adding depth, irony, humor, or brevity to expressions by merging contradictory terms. Flayih (2009), Almawla (2021), and Abdul and Qassim (2022) summarize the functions of the oxymoron as follows:

1. **Drawing Attention:** Oxymorons attract the reader's attention, to emphasize an idea by pairing unexpected words. For instance, "I must be cruel only to be kind" highlights the irony of a necessary harshness.
2. **Contrast:** Oxymorons highlight a contrasting idea, helping the reader to see something in a new light, often pointing out misunderstandings as on “flexible schedule”.
3. **Objectification:** By combining opposites, oxymorons can express complex, multi-layered ideas or feelings. For example, "killing with kindness" shows a scenario where excessive kindness might have negative sides.
4. **Sarcastic Effect:** Oxymorons can convey sarcasm, often by exaggerating a situation to reveal a hidden irony. For instance, a speaker without money sarcastically saying “Let me get out my checkbook.”
5. **Humor:** When an oxymoron uses an absurd combination, it can evoke humor by exposing an inherent irony. An example like "honest politician" uses contradiction to poke fun at political stereotypes.
6. **Brevity:** Oxymorons can express complex ideas by fusing opposites, as in "victorious defeat," capturing a mixed outcome in just two words.

Each of these functions enhances language, allowing writers and speakers to convey layered meanings efficiently and memorably.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative research design which paves the way for the reader to comprehend the meaning, experiences, and interpretations conveyed through linguistic features and strategies. This is achieved via providing detailed types of oxymorons to be explored out of which one can capture the complexity of human experiences.

4.2 Data Selection and Description

The present paper analyses three of Matar’s poems "ازهار الخريف" “*Autumn Flowers*”, "ليلة" “*Night*” and "احتياط" “*Precaution*” to examine the pragmatic aspects of oxymoron used. The purpose behind selecting these three poems is that they are relevant to the discussion because of the creative way they employ oxymoron.

4.3 Model Adopted

The following is an eclectic model of a grammatical, semantic and pragmatic analysis where the grammatical perspective focuses on syntactic juxtaposition, the semantic perspective focuses on resolution of lexical paradox, and the pragmatic perspective focuses on context and implicature. The model can be outlined as follows:

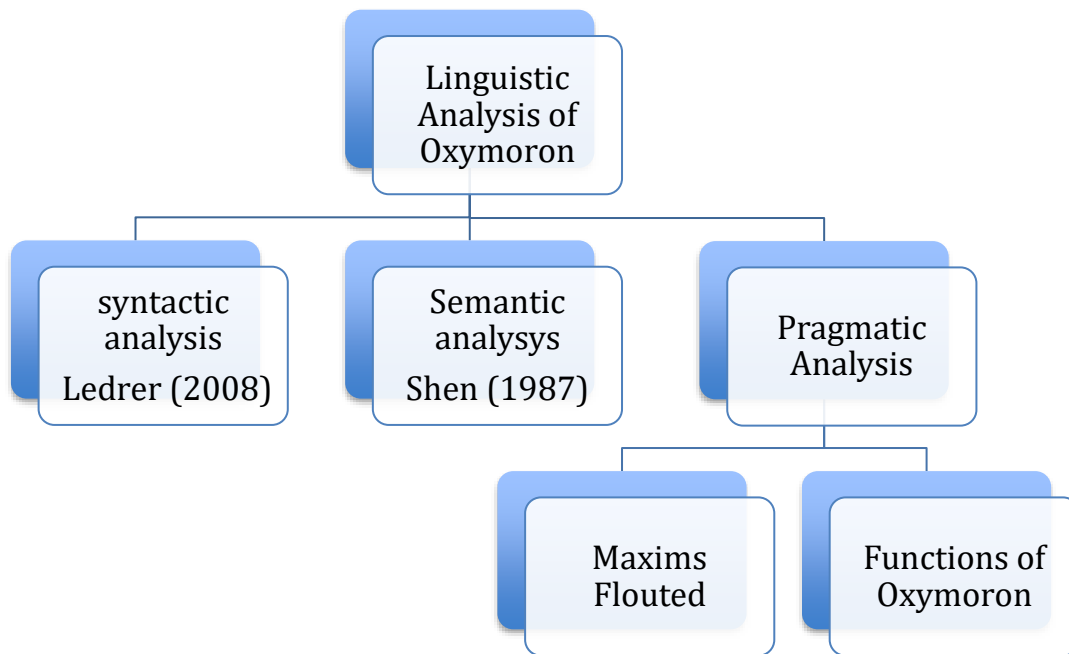


Figure (1)The Mental Representation of the Model of Analysis

4.4 Procedures of Analysis

The researcher identifies oxymoron in three poems in question, highlights the syntactic types and possibilities of meaning intended by the poet, and shows their rhetorical function. In addition, the researcher shows the implicit pragmatic relationship between Grice maxims and the meaning involved in the selected expressions.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

5.1 ازهار الخريف *Autumn Flowers*

Extract (1) ازهار الخريف (*Autumn Flowers*)

The poem vividly captures the poet's feelings of exile and sense of loss through the oxymoronic image he employs. The title itself, ازهار الخريف, *Autumn Flowers*, is an oxymoron, meaning flowers bloom in the season of renewal, while autumn is associated with decay. Matar, by combining those two contrasting ideas, creates an image of hope intertwined with despair. It is an indirect oxymoron whose components are not antonymous. It is in the syntactic form of noun + noun. The oxymoron introduces deliberate ambiguity, potentially violating the maxim of manner. This ambiguity is purposeful, designed to provoke thought rather than to confuse the reader.

Extract (2) ظلي الذي يضيء (*the enlightening shadow*)

The second oxymoron is ظلي الذي يضيء, the enlightening shadow. Syntactically, it is subject + predicate. It is a direct oxymoron. It juxtaposes the contradictory ideas of shadow, which usually brings darkness with lightning. It suggests how the poet's memories (presented by the shadow) provide light and comfort despite his physical and emotional distance from home. This oxymoron serves to highlight the paradoxical nature of exile experience. This tension mirrors the poet's divided state of being physically removed, yet physically close to his homeland.

Extract (3) حاضري ماضيا (*present-past*)

The third oxymoron is حاضري ماضيا (present-past), which is a direct oxymoron where present is the antonym of past. From the syntactic point of view, it is a phrase of noun + noun. حاضري ماضياً (Present-past) combines the ideas of past and present, showing how the past lives in his consciousness. It emphasizes memory's power to exceed temporal barriers and keep the past alive.

The three oxymorons float Grice maxims of quality and manner. Concerning quality, they all suggest a paradoxical image. Autumn, which is associated with decay, is combined with flowers, which represent life. Present and past refer to two contradictory temporal states. And lightning, which is associated with clarity, contradicts with shadow as it is associated with darkness. As for Manner, all oxymorons suggest ambiguity due to the contradictory images of Autumn and Flower, Present and Past, and Enlightening and Shadow. The poet uses those thoughts deliberately for the sake of a poetic purpose, leading the reader to search for a deeper metaphorical meaning.

5.2 احتياط *Precaution*

Extract (1) "دائي معافى" (my ailment is healthy)

The use of sarcasm is clear in the verse of my "wife was shocked when she saw me smiling". Two oxymorons appear. The first one is "دائي معافى" "my ailment is healthy". Syntactically, it consists of combination of noun + adjective. It is a direct oxymoron, where ailment refers to illness, while healthy refers to be cured. Matter combines two contradictory words to express his confusing state of the long-suffering.

Extract (2) انكساري سالما (my brokenness remains intact)

The second oxymoron is "انكساري سالما" "my brokenness remains intact". It is a direct oxymoron, consists of noun plus adjective. Here, brokenness signifies defeat, while intact means being unharmed. The function of the previous oxymoron is to show the absurdity the poet feels, enhancing the reflection of sarcasm and expressing the complex state.

The oxymorons, my ailment healthy and my brokenness remains intact, float the maxims of both quality and manner. Literally, those statements are false as illness cannot be healthy and brokenness cannot be intact. Meanwhile, the two oxymorons are ambiguous because they mix two opposite concepts. The poet deliberately floats the maxims to suggest the internal contradictions.

5.3 ليلة *Night*

Extract (1) تبدأ في الختام (beginning at the end)

In this political poem, Matar adopts the narrative style through which he addresses political issues and criticizes the status quo. In this poem, three oxymorons are used. The first one is "تبدأ في الختام", "beginning at the end". It is a direct oxymoron whose components 'begin' and 'end' are antonyms. From the syntactic viewpoint, it is a phrase consisting of a verb + adverb. Juxtaposing beginning and the end creates a paradox that mirrors Shahrazad's contradictory situation. The ironic oxymoron that shows Shahrazad's challenge to her fate symbolically reflects the fatal ends of the nation.

Extract (2) تكذب بانتظام (lying regularly)

The second oxymoron is "تكذب بانتظام" "lying regularly", which is an indirect oxymoron. The syntactic feature is also verb + adverb, where lying is not likely to be referred to as regular. Rather, lying is a feature which is supposed to be connected with irregularity. This oxymoron shows ironically how people may lie for their survival.

Extract (3) كذبا صادقا (lying truthfully)

The last oxymoron is كذبا صادقا (truthful lying), which is a direct oxymoron composed of two antonyms, truth and lies. Syntactically, it is a noun + adjective

oxymoron. It reflects, ironically, how Shahrazad expresses deeper reality beneath the surface untruths.

The three oxymorons float Grace maxims of quality and manner as well. Since they imply contradictions and ambiguity, these floats are intended, they serve a metaphorical purpose, encouraging the reader to look for deeper meanings inside those contradictions.

The following table highlights the structure, type, meaning, the maxim flouted and the function of the oxymorons in the texts analyzed.

| Oxymoron | Syntactic Structure | Type | Meaning | Maxim flouted | Function |
|----------------|---------------------|----------|---|----------------|-------------------|
| ازهار الخريف | N+N | Indirect | meaning flowers bloom in the season of renewal, while autumn is associated with decay. Matter, by combining those two contrasting ideas, creates an image of hope intertwined with despair. | Quality Manner | Sarcasm |
| ظلي الذي يضيء | S+predicate | Direct | It suggests how the poet's memories (presented by the shadow) provide light and comfort despite his physical and emotional distance from home. This oxymoron serves to highlight the paradoxical nature of exile experience. This tension mirrors the poet's divided state of being physically removed, yet physically close to his homeland. | Quality Manner | Dramatic effect |
| حاضري ماضيا | N+N | Direct | Matar combines the ideas of past and present, showing how the past lives in his consciousness. He emphasizes memory's power to exceed temporal barriers and keep the past alive. | Quality Manner | Dramatic effect |
| دائي معافى | N+Adj. | Direct | Matter combines two contradictory words to express his confusing state of the long-suffering. | Quality Manner | Sarcasm |
| انكساري سالما | N+Adj. | Direct | Here, brokenness signifies defeat, while intact means being unharmed. The function of the previous oxymoron is to show the absurdity of the poet feels, enhancing the reflect of sarcasm and expressing the complex state. | Quality Manner | Sarcasm |
| تبدأ في الختام | V+Adv. | Direct | . Juxtaposing beginning and the end creates a paradox that mirrors Sheherazade's contradictory situation. The ironic oxymoron that shows Sheherazade's challenge to | Quality Manner | Drawing attention |

| | | | | | |
|--------------|--------|----------|---|----------------|---------|
| | | | her fate symbolically reflects the fatal ends of the nation. | | |
| تكذب بانتظام | V+Adv. | Indirect | This oxymoron shows ironically how people may lie for their survival. | Quality Manner | Sarcasm |
| كذبا صادقا | N+Adj. | Direct | It reflects, ironically, how Shahrazad expresses deeper reality beneath the surface untruths. | Quality Manner | Sarcasm |

6. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that oxymoron is a poetic device that can express a range of emotions. In Matar's poetry, oxymorons are not only stylistic flourishes; rather, they are integral to linguistic and thematic architecture of Matar's poetry. The use of oxymoron suggests that something can have two qualities at the same time. Also, the use of oxymoron can draw attention to a particular idea.

Matar employs a wide range of grammatical structures to create oxymoron. The most common one is N+N, the other types used are N+Adj, V+Adv, and S+predicate. As for the semantic types, Matar uses both direct and indirect oxymorons to highlight contradictions. While direct oxymorons provide immediate impact, indirect ones add depth to the poems' themes such as exile, duality and complexity of human life. Pragmatically, the use of oxymoron deliberately flouts the maxims of quality (that requires speakers to avoid saying things they believe to be false). This flouting highlights deeper, emotional truths rather than literal accuracy. For example, phrases like "silent screams" are factually contradictory but effectively convey an emotional reality of suppressed pain or grief. Matar also flouts the maxim of manner (that emphasizes clarity and avoids ambiguity). By introducing contradictory terms, Matar introduces interpretive ambiguity, convincing readers to deal with the layered meanings. On the other hand, oxymorons align with the Maxim of Quantity by being both brief and informative. Oxymorons also adhere to the Maxim of relevance by addressing the central themes of Matar's poetry, such as exile, identity, and loss.

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