

**SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF LEXICAL MEANINGS IN MODERN  
ENGLISH SHORT STORIES**

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**Abstract:** This article explores the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of lexical meanings in modern English short stories. Through qualitative linguistic analysis, the study investigates how authors use specific lexical items to convey implicit and explicit meanings, shape character identity, and build narrative subtext. By analyzing a selected corpus of contemporary short stories, the study reveals the dynamic interplay between word choice, context, and reader interpretation. The findings emphasize the importance of contextual meaning and pragmatic inference in literary discourse, particularly in how subtle lexical variations contribute to tone, theme, and narrative cohesion.

**Keywords:** Semantic meaning, Pragmatics, Lexical analysis, Modern short stories, Literary discourse, Contextual interpretation, Implicit meaning

**Annotatsiya:** Ushbu maqola zamonaviy inglizcha qissa hikoyalaridagi leksik ma'nolarning semantik va pragmatik o'lovlarini o'rganadi. Sifatli lingvistik tahlil orqali mualliflarning maxsus leksik birliklardan qanday foydalanib, noaniq va aniq ma'nolarni etkazishi, xarakter identifikatsiyasini shakllantirishi hamda hikoyaning pastki mazmunini yaratishi tahlil qilinadi. Tanlangan zamonaviy qisqa hikoyalar korpusi tahlili asosida so'z tanlovi, kontekst va o'quvchi talqini o'rtasidagi dinamik o'zaro bog'liqlik aniqlanadi. Natijalar kontekstual ma'no va pragmatik xulosalarning badiiy nutqda, ayniqsa nozik leksik o'zgarishlarning ohang, mavzu va matn uyg'unligiga qo'shgan hissasining muhimligini ta'kidlaydi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Semantik ma'no, Pragmatika, Leksik tahlil, Zamonaviy qisqa hikoyalar, Badiiy nutq, Kontekstual talqin, Noaniq ma'no

**Аннотация:** В статье рассматриваются семантические и прагматические аспекты лексических значений в современных английских коротких рассказах. Путём качественного лингвистического анализа исследуется, как авторы используют конкретные лексические единицы для передачи явных и скрытых значений, формирования идентичности персонажей и построения подтекста повествования. Анализ выбранного корпуса современных коротких рассказов выявляет динамическое взаимодействие между выбором слов, контекстом и интерпретацией читателя. Результаты подчёркивают важность контекстуального значения и прагматических выводов в литературном дискурсе, особенно в том, как тонкие лексические вариации влияют на тон, тему и целостность повествования.

**Ключевые слова:** Семантическое значение, Прагматика, Лексический анализ, Современные короткие рассказы, Литературный дискурс, Контекстуальная интерпретация, Неявное значение

**Introduction**

Lexical meaning in literature extends beyond dictionary definitions. In modern English short stories, authors often manipulate semantics and pragmatics to enrich their narratives. Words are chosen not only for their denotative meanings but also for the connotative, emotional, and cultural resonances they evoke. Pragmatics, the study of language in use and context, becomes particularly relevant when interpreting dialogues, narrative irony, or character-driven subtleties.

This study seeks to investigate how semantic and pragmatic elements of lexical meaning function in selected modern English short stories, with the aim of highlighting their role in shaping narrative interpretation and literary effect. Semantics focuses on the meaning of words and expressions as defined by linguistic conventions, including aspects such as denotation, connotation, polysemy, and semantic fields.

However, in literary texts—especially short stories where economy of language is paramount—semantics alone does not capture the full range of meaning. This is where pragmatics becomes essential. Pragmatics examines how meaning is shaped by context, speaker intention, cultural norms, and the interaction between characters and readers. In literature, pragmatic elements such as implicature, presupposition, deixis, and speech acts often add layers of meaning beyond the surface level of the text.

Modern short stories, characterized by brevity, ambiguity, and stylistic minimalism, offer fertile ground for analyzing the interplay between lexical semantics and pragmatics. Unlike longer narratives, short stories must achieve emotional and thematic depth with limited textual space, making every lexical choice critical. Authors like Raymond Carver, Jhumpa Lahiri, and George Saunders are known for their precise, often understated use of language, where much is suggested rather than explicitly stated.

This study aims to investigate how semantic and pragmatic aspects of lexical meaning function in a selection of modern English short stories. It explores how word choice, contextual clues, and reader inferences contribute to meaning-making, character development, and narrative coherence. By combining linguistic theory with literary analysis, the research highlights how short story writers use language to subtly guide readers' understanding, evoke emotion, and shape interpretive possibilities.

Ultimately, this research seeks to bridge the gap between linguistic analysis and literary interpretation, offering insights not only into how language works in literature but also how readers process meaning in richly layered texts.

### Methods

This study adopts a qualitative linguistic approach, combining methods of semantic field analysis and pragmatic inference. The research corpus includes ten modern English short stories written between 2000 and 2020 by authors such as Raymond Carver, Jhumpa Lahiri, George Saunders, and Zadie Smith. Selected excerpts were analyzed for:

- Lexical semantics (literal and figurative meaning, semantic shift, polysemy)
- Pragmatic function (implicature, presupposition, speech acts, deixis)
- Contextual interpretation (reader assumptions, narrative context, cultural nuance)

Each story was coded for patterns of lexical usage and their function in context. Special attention was paid to character dialogue, internal monologue, and descriptive passages where word choice significantly shaped interpretation. Textual analysis was carried out in multiple stages. First, lexical items of interest—such as emotionally charged words, culturally loaded expressions, and contextually ambiguous phrases—were identified within each story. Particular attention was given to dialogue, narrative description, and internal monologue, where language often carries implicit or layered meanings. These lexical items were then examined through the lens of semantic theory, focusing on aspects such as polysemy, synonymy, metaphor, semantic fields, and lexical cohesion.

Following the semantic analysis, each selected item was further analyzed pragmatically. This involved examining how meaning shifted depending on context, speaker intent, and narrative framing. Concepts from pragmatic theory—such as Grice's cooperative principles, implicature, presupposition, deixis, and speech act theory—were applied to determine how meaning is

constructed beyond the literal level. The pragmatic function of lexical choices was evaluated in terms of their contribution to character development, narrative subtext, irony, and emotional tone.

Throughout the analysis, a comparative strategy was used to identify patterns and variations across different authors and texts. Notes and coding were maintained to track recurrent pragmatic strategies and their effects on interpretation. The analysis was interpretive in nature, grounded in both linguistic theory and literary criticism, and aimed to reveal how semantic and pragmatic elements jointly shape the reader’s engagement with modern short fiction.

**Results**

The semantic and pragmatic analysis revealed several key findings:

- ✓ **Polysemy and Ambiguity:** Many short stories intentionally employ lexically ambiguous words, leaving room for reader interpretation. This ambiguity enhances thematic depth and narrative openness.
- ✓ **Context-Dependent Meanings:** Words with neutral dictionary definitions often acquire emotional or evaluative meaning depending on their placement within the narrative. For example, the word *"home"* in several stories shifts between a physical location, a metaphor for belonging, and a symbol of loss.
- ✓ **Pragmatic Inference in Dialogue:** Characters' speech often includes implied meanings or indirect speech acts. Sarcasm, understatement, and irony require the reader to rely on pragmatic knowledge beyond the text.
- ✓ **Lexical Indicators of Character Identity:** Authors use specific lexical fields to construct characters’ psychological profiles. For instance, limited or emotionally neutral vocabulary often reflects emotional suppression or trauma.

<b>Feature Analyzed</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Narrative Function</b>	<b>Example(s)</b>
<b>Polysemy and ambiguity</b>	Words with multiple meanings used deliberately to create interpretive openness	Enhances thematic complexity and reader engagement	“Home” as a place, feeling, or loss
<b>Context-dependent meaning</b>	Lexical items shift in meaning depending on narrative context and character perspective	Builds emotional tone and character psychology	“Light” representing hope or emptiness
<b>Implicature in dialogue</b>	Indirect speech acts implying meanings beyond literal statements	Conveys social dynamics, sarcasm, or hidden emotions	Sarcastic remarks or understatement
<b>Lexical fields reflecting identity</b>	Use of specific semantic fields (e.g., nature, technology, emotions) to construct character traits	Highlights internal states and social roles	Sparse vocabulary indicating emotional suppression
<b>Deictic Expressions</b>	Words referencing time, place, or person depending on narrative viewpoint	Grounds narrative temporally and spatially	Use of “here,” “now,” “you”

## Discussion

The findings suggest that lexical items in modern English short stories function not only as vehicles of meaning but also as tools of reader engagement. Pragmatic competence—on the part of both author and reader—is essential for decoding implied meanings, emotional undertones, and social positioning.

Moreover, the semantic richness of modern short fiction reflects broader linguistic trends such as increased intertextuality, cultural hybridity, and a move toward minimalistic yet loaded language. In stories where brevity is essential, lexical choice carries heightened narrative weight. Pragmatics, therefore, plays a central role in literary interpretation, shaping how readers construct meaning from what is both said and unsaid. The results underscore the intricate relationship between semantics and pragmatics in the construction of meaning within modern English short stories.

The frequent use of polysemous and ambiguous lexical items reflects authors' intentional strategy to engage readers in active interpretation, allowing multiple layers of meaning to coexist within a concise narrative form. This aligns with broader literary trends favoring openness and reader participation over fixed, authorial meaning.

Context-dependent lexical shifts reveal that meaning is never static but dynamically shaped by narrative perspective and cultural context. Words like “home” or “light,” which carry diverse connotations, become symbolic tools that deepen thematic resonance and emotional impact. This confirms the importance of semantic flexibility in literary language and supports the argument that semantic analysis alone cannot fully capture literary meaning without considering pragmatics.

The analysis of pragmatic functions, particularly implicature and indirect speech acts in dialogues, highlights how much of the communicative power in short stories relies on what is implied rather than explicitly stated. This subtlety reflects real-life communication patterns and allows writers to convey complex social relations, irony, or unspoken tensions efficiently. Readers' pragmatic competence thus becomes essential in decoding these nuances, suggesting that literary interpretation is an interactive, context-sensitive process.

Furthermore, the use of specific lexical fields as markers of character identity demonstrates how language functions as a psychological and social indicator. Sparse, emotionally neutral vocabulary can suggest repression or trauma, while richer, more descriptive lexical choices may indicate emotional openness or cultural background. This lexical differentiation aids in character development without extensive exposition, which is particularly valuable in the short story's limited space.

Deictic expressions serve a grounding function by situating the narrative temporally and spatially, facilitating the reader's immersion in the story world. Their pragmatic role underscores the necessity of viewing lexical items within the broader discourse context rather than in isolation.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that semantic and pragmatic analyses complement each other, offering a fuller understanding of how lexical meaning operates in literary texts. For scholars and educators, this suggests the need for integrated analytical frameworks when studying literature, combining linguistic precision with sensitivity to narrative context and reader response.

The study also opens avenues for further research, such as exploring how these semantic-pragmatic patterns vary across different genres or cultural contexts, or how digital reading environments affect the interpretation of lexical meaning in contemporary fiction.

### Conclusion and recommendations

This study concludes that understanding the semantic and pragmatic layers of lexical meaning significantly enhances the interpretation of modern English short stories. It is recommended that future literary and linguistic analyses incorporate pragmatic frameworks alongside traditional semantic approaches to fully appreciate the nuances of modern fiction.

Educators should also integrate semantic-pragmatic analysis into literature curricula to help students develop deeper interpretive skills. Further research could explore comparative cross-cultural pragmatic patterns in English short stories by authors from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This study has demonstrated that the semantic and pragmatic analysis of lexical meanings offers vital insights into the complexity of modern English short stories. The interplay between literal meanings and contextual inferences enriches narrative depth, enhances character portrayal, and invites active reader engagement. By examining polysemy, context-dependent shifts, implicature, and lexical fields, the research highlights how word choice functions as a multifaceted tool shaping literary meaning beyond mere dictionary definitions.

Understanding these linguistic layers not only deepens literary interpretation but also illuminates how authors use language economically and effectively within the condensed form of short stories. The findings emphasize that pragmatic competence is essential for readers to appreciate subtle nuances and implied meanings, which are hallmarks of contemporary literary style.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that literary scholars and educators incorporate semantic-pragmatic frameworks into their analytical and pedagogical practices. Teaching students to recognize both denotative and contextual meanings can enhance critical reading skills and foster greater appreciation for the complexity of modern fiction.

Further research is encouraged to explore cross-cultural variations in pragmatic usage in English short stories, especially considering the growing diversity of English-language authors worldwide. Additionally, integrating corpus-based methods and reader-response studies could complement qualitative analysis, offering a more comprehensive understanding of lexical meaning in literature.

Overall, this study contributes to bridging linguistics and literary studies, underscoring the value of interdisciplinary approaches in uncovering the rich, layered nature of language in modern storytelling.

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