

Descriptive Language and Idiomatic Phrases in P.G. Wodehouse's Novels

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the study of descriptive language and idiomatic phrases used in P.G. Wodehouse's novels. Here we try to show what really attracts the reader: the plot or the style? Wodehouse skilfully juxtaposes high and low styles. Through different styles, stylistic devices, idiomatic phrases, deformation of idioms Wodehouse creates a completely new specific style which really singles him out among other humorists.

Key words: descriptive language, idiomatic phrases, stylistic devices, deformation of idioms.

Introduction

P.G. Wodehouse is a famous English-American comic writer with a powerfully creative language ability. He makes his reader laugh by the means of funny interaction of stylistically opposite units, abundance of bright, emotionally coloured expressions: deformation of idioms, similes, hilarious dialogue as well as word games. He created a world without real problems and without human depths, and he did this extremely well. His books are those that defy age, they are immortal literary pieces that do not depict the reality but plunge the reader into a sort of musical comedy which leaves the individual rolling down the aisle with unbearable genuine laughter. Wodehouse wrote hundreds of short stories, some eighteen plays, the lyrics for thirty-three theatrical musicals, and a vast, uncollected body of essays, reviews, poems, sketches. Wodehouse was a detached spectator who preferred to observe and write about the life around him than to participate in it. He was a great evader of life's problems shoving all unpleasantness aside and refusing to dwell on it.

Wodehouse once said about his own work: "I believe there are two ways of writing novels. One is mine, making a sort of musical comedy without music, and ignoring life altogether." "The Blandings" – a series of novels – is perhaps the best example of the author's determined resistance to "real life".

Appearing in more than a dozen novels, Bertie Wooster and his manservant Jeeves are the most famous characters in Wodehouse's creations. As he wrote all the Jeeves and Wooster stories in America, there are traces of American slang in Bertie's dialect. These novels have commonly been regarded as Wodehouse's "crowning achievement", but the author once noted that the idea of the latent greatness of Jeeves came to him very slowly.

The Peculiarities of P.G. Wodehouse's Writing Style

The main character and the narrator of many stories is Bertie Wooster who is a wealthy bachelor, aged about twenty-five, but whose mental age is closer to fifteen. The only purpose of his life seems to be "to exist beautifully", or, in other words, to avoid matrimony and work. It is obvious that Wodehouse wrote about Bertie Wooster more than any other of his characters. In many respects Bertie is Wodehouse's alter ego. Bertie Wooster's man servant Jeeves is a butler whose mental capacities seem to have no limits. Richard Osborne writes about Jeeves that "Jeeves in most stories is the rim of the wheel and the hub, the plotter and the plot. Bertie sometimes insists on handling problems his own way. Jeeves, in his background planning, can not only allow for Bertie's mistakes; he can estimate their extent in advance and make them a positive part of the great web he is himself planning" (Osborne 1961:206). The plots in Jeeves and Wooster novels are typically very complicated and involve many characters, the minor characters' function is usually to complicate the action.

Wodehouse's appeal does not lie in his subject matter: it is his style which keeps his readers coming back for more, as it is known that the very simple situation, conversation can be described differently by different authors.

In order to understand the humour in Wodehouse's novels, it is important to understand his writing style. Richard S. Carlson wrote: "The reader who decides to analyze the language and literature of Wodehouse, for example, should expect to get caught up the silly and primrose path of Bertie Wooster's tongue, as the misspent knut speaks like a butterfly caught up in the brandy" (Carlson 1975:83).

The most characteristic feature of Wodehouse's novels is the abundance of dialogues. If we study Wodehouse's dialogues in the Jeeves and Wooster novels, we will see the incompatibility between the languages of the two main characters. By stressing the differences between speech styles of the heroes, Wodehouse managed to create a wonderful verbal comedy. The following extract comes to prove the above mentioned idea.

Well, if that was the attitude he was proposing to adopt, well, I mean to say. My geniality waned. I drew myself up coldly, at the same time raising a stiff eyebrow. And I was just about to work off the old To-what-am-I-indebted-fo-this-visit gag, when he chipped in ahead of me.

"You ought to be certified!"

'I beg your pardon?'

"You are a public menace. For weeks, it appears, you have been making life a hell for all your neighbours with some hideous musical instrument. I see you have it with you now. How dare you play that thing in a respectable block of flats? Infernal din!"

I remained cool and dignified.

"Did you say 'infernal din'?"

"I did."

"Oh? Well, let me tell you that the man who has not music in his soul..."

I stepped to the door. "Jeeves," I called down the passage, "what was it Shakespeare said the man who hadn't music in his soul was fit for it?"

(P. Wodehouse "Thank you Jeeves" p.10)

The differences in the speech styles of the two characters are obvious. Berie Wooster's speech is a mixture of upper-class speech and slang with descriptive expressions. Bertie loves to quote famous poets and novelists, but usually gets them all wrong. Wodehouse's language, and Bertie's peculiar slang, neatly reinforce the hero's charm. Wodehouse's writing could be described as "poetic" in the positive sense: not because it is flowery and affected, but because it throws out attention back from the object being described to the glorious texture of the description.

Sharwood notes that Wodehouse juxtaposes high and low style; he uses low language in high situations, but he also uses low language together with high language, which causes unexpected combinations (Sharwood 1978:211-214).

Another characteristic feature of Wodehouse's novels is the use of idiomatic phrases which gives a fresh impetus to the novels. The interesting thing about the novels is the fact that Wodehouse uses the same idioms in many of his novels, for instance:

in the soup – *in trouble,*
in a nutshell – *in the fewest possible words,*
to be in the red – *in debt, overdrawn, or losing money*
to fly off the handle – *to lose the temper suddenly and unexpectedly,*
informal
to kick the bucket – *to die; etc.*

Wodehouse is also fond of using the device of deformation of idioms, and the following extracts taken from different novels illustrate this.

Unquestionably an eyeful, Pauline Stoker had the grave defect of being one of those girls who want you to come and swim a mile before breakfast and rout you out when you are trying to snatch a wink of sleep after lunch for merry five sets of tennis. (P. Wodehouse "Thank you Jeeves" p.42)

To snatch a wink of sleep is a deformation of idiom *to have a wink of sleep* which is used to express the idea more vividly.

But at this moment Mr. Stoker threw oil upon the troubled waters by announcing his intention of hiring the troupe of negro minstrels to perform at the party. (P. Wodehouse "Thank you Jeeves" p.62)

The idiomatic phrase *to pour oil on the troubled water*, which means to settle a disagreement or dispute with words intended to placate or pacify those involved, has been deformed by the author. Why has the author used *to throw* instead of *to pour*?

The dictionary definition of the word *to throw* is *to push or force (someone or some-*

thing) violently and suddenly into a particular physical position or state, and the definition of the word *to pour* is to cause (a liquid) to flow from a container in a steady stream. As can be seen from these definitions, the word *to throw* gives more expressiveness and vividness to the idiomatic phrase than the word *to pour*.

In his novels Wodehouse likes to quote not only from Shakespeare but also from the Bible.

But when, not a week later, word was brought to Lord Emsworth that, so far from having migrated to Sussex or Norfolk or Kent or somewhere, the fellow was actually just round the corner in the neighbouring village of Much Matchingham, serving under the banner of Sir Gregory Parsloe-Parsloe of Matchingham Hall, the scales fell from his eyes.

(P. Wodehouse "Blandings Castle" p.88-89)

In the Bible this expression described how St Paul, blinded by his vision on the road to Damascus, received his sight back at the hand of God (Acts 9:18).

"I wish I had a brain like yours," said Lord Ickenham. "What an amazing thing, I suppose you could walk down a line of people, giving each of them a quick glance, and separate the sheep from the goats like shelling peas."

(P. Wodehouse "Uncle Fred in The Springtime" p.107) (Matthew 25:32-33)

In "Oxford Dictionary of Idioms" the phrase *separate the sheep from the goats* is explained as *to divide people or things into superior and inferior groups*. (Oxford Dictionary of Idioms, 2004:258). This quotation from the Bible really gives a special charm to Lord Ickenham's utterance.

Conclusion

What makes Wodehouse wonderful, though, is not the preposterous lunacy of the plots, or even the easy nostalgia of the setting; it is his prose. At the core of all of his stories is the surprise of language at its most flexible, fresh and fun. The anarchic combination of high diction, erudite allusion, upper-class slang and informal abbreviations should be incongruous, but instead is enchanting.

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Փ.Գ. Վուդհաուզի ստեղծագործությունների նկարագրական լեզուն և հատկաբանական դարձվածքները

Հոդվածը նվիրված է Փ.Գ. Վուդհաուզի ստեղծագործությունների նկարագրական լեզվի և հատկաբանական դարձվածքների ուսումնասիրությանը: Հեղինակը փորձում է պարզել, թե հատկապես ինչն է այդքան գրավում Վուդհաուզի ընթերցողներին. այսօժնն, թե՛ նրա ոճը: Վարպետորեն համադրելով տարբեր ոճեր և ոճական հնարներ՝ Վուդհաուզը կարողանում է ստեղծել մի յուրօրինակ ոճ, որն էլ առանձնացնում է նրան մյուս երգիծաբաններից:

Описательный язык и идиоматическая фразеология в новеллах П.Г. Вудхауза

Статья посвящена изучению языка и описанию идиоматических фраз в новеллах П.Г. Вудхауза. В данной статье сделана попытка выяснить то, что больше всего привлекает читателей Вудхауза: сюжет или стиль? Умело сочетая разные стили и стилистические приемы, Вудхауз создает уникальный стиль, который отличает его от других юмористов.