

# ФІЛОЛОГІЧНІ НАУКИ

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## LEXICAL AND SEMANTIC FEATURES OF MEIOSIS AND LITOTES IN JEROME DAVID SALINGER'S «THE CATCHER IN THE RYE»

The article deals with the main lexical and semantic features of meiosis and litotes that were found while analysing Jerome David Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Semantic-stylistic method, comparative method, quantitative analysis, and componential analysis have been used in the process of investigation. Different scholars' opinions have been considered in order to gain general knowledge of the nature of these stylistic devices. The results provide us with the complete picture of the stylistic impact of meiosis and litotes in the novel. Some examples of tropes along with their context have been demonstrated. Accordingly, the paper provides a detailed examination of these examples and the comparison with their Ukrainian correspondences. The distinctions between these two literary devices are also reviewed, as they are both types of the understatement. Furthermore, the problem of terminology in English and Ukrainian languages is outlined.

**Keywords:** meiosis, litotes, understatement, lexical aspect, semantic aspect.

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## ЛЕКСИЧНІ ТА СЕМАНТИЧНІ ОСОБЛИВОСТІ МЕЙОЗИСУ ТА ЛІТОТИ В РОМАНІ «ЛОВЕЦЬ У ЖИТІ» ПИСЬМЕННИКА ДЖЕРОМА СЕЛІНДЖЕРА

**Анотація.** У статті розглянуто основні лексичні та семантичні особливості мейозису та літоти, які були виявлені в ході аналізу роману «Ловець у житті» письменника Джерома Селінджера. Незважаючи на великий обсяг наукових праць, присвячених дослідженню різних аспектів стилістики, проблематика специфіки мейозису та, зокрема, літоти дуже часто оминалася. Тож головною метою статті є чітке окреслення основних лексичних та семантичних особливостей цих тропів. Окрім цього, основними завданнями цієї праці є також порівняння оригінального англійського тексту з українським перекладом та отримання даних стосовно частоти появи випадків застосування мейозису та літоти у тексті роману. Оптимальною методологічною основою для опрацювання цих задач було обрано комплексну модель, що складається з семантико-стилістичного та зіставного методів, кількісного та компонентного аналізів. Основним методом комплексу було обрано семантико-стилістичний, або, як його ще називають, стилістичний аналіз. Для того, щоб скласти загальне судження про природу цих стилістичних засобів, було розглянуто різні погляди науковців. Зокрема, в статті наведено різні визначення мейозису та літоти і проведено їхнє порівняння. Особливу увагу було приділено різниці між термінологією української та зарубіжної лінгвістичних традицій, та надано коментарі щодо цього. Перелічені дані склали теоретичну частину дослідження, яка послугувала основою для отримання повної картини того, яку роль грають мейозис і літота у створенні унікального стилю роману. Було продемонстровано окремі приклади тропів разом з їхнім контекстом. Відповідно, у статті надано аналіз цих прикладів та порівняння з українськими відповідниками. Також було розглянуто різницю між цими двома стилістичними прийомами, беручи до уваги те, що вони є типами применшення. Проведене дослідження може становити цінність для всіх, хто цікавиться не тільки семантикою мейозису та літоти, а й різними стилістичними прийомами, зокрема тими, що належать до лексичних засобів виразності. Окрім цього, дослідження буде цікавим для всіх, хто досліджує творчість Джерома Селінджера.

**Ключові слова:** мейозис, літота, применшення, лексичний аспект, семантичний аспект.

**Problem statement.** Different stylistic devices play a significant role in the creation of the author's individual style. Among all, meiosis and litotes are generating considerable interest as they are not so profoundly examined. More than that, in the Ukrainian linguistic tradition there are divergences with the English one related to the matter of the terminology. So, the main focus of the article is to investigate the nature of meiosis and litotes, completely and thoroughly analyse their lexical and semantic characteristic in the scope of two compared texts of the belles-lettres style in English and Ukrainian languages.

**The latest research and published works analysis.** Meiosis and litotes as the objects of research are mostly highlighted in the semantic

and stylistic fields of literature. The most important for the investigation are the following books: *Negation in English and Other Languages* written by Otto Jespersen, *Negative Contexts* by Ton van der Wouden, *A Natural History of Negation* by Laurence R. Horn. We also gain information from different dictionaries, such as *Dictionary of Literary Devices* by Bernard Marie Dupriez and *Literary Guide Dictionary* by the editorial board consisting of R.T. Hromiak, Yu.I. Kovaliv and others. The works of Ukrainian scholars also take a significant part in our research. Among all, it is worthwhile to note Tkachenko A.O. and his work *The Art of Word, The Introduction to Literature and Practical Stylistics of English* by L.P. Yefimov and E.A. Yasinetskaya.

### Unsolved questions under consideration.

The controversial part of the presented topic is the boundaries of the terms of meiosis and litotes, as well as lexical and semantic distinctions between them. Scholars are still arguing about the accurate definitions of meiosis and, especially, litotes. In English tradition, the term “meiosis” is more or less defined, while the term “litotes” has more variations. In the Ukrainian tradition, the situation is even more complicated, because most commonly the Ukrainian scholars do not use the term “meiosis”, but the term “litotes”, which refer to the same meaning as “meiosis”. Sometimes, litotes is not considered as an independent literary device at all. The other thing which fall under our consideration is the comparison of these linguistic means from the perspective of two languages. The ways of finding the most appropriate correspondences of litotes and meiosis is also an issue, that provokes many questions.

**The aim of the article** can be described as the complex of several constituents. The first one, which can be referred to as theoretical, focuses on how to solve the general problems in the examined field. In this article, the range of scientific views have been investigated. This part provides us with an understanding of the smallest details, and, subsequently, we will gain proper comprehension of our subject. The second part concerns the more practical side of the investigation. It is implied that information received from the previous step should be used in order to examine the specific characteristic of meiosis and litotes within the scope of two compared text (the original English and the translated Ukrainian one). With the help of different linguistic and general academic methods, we have tried to shed new light on the lexical and semantic features of the investigated stylistic devices.

**The main part.** It is important to understand the differences between meiosis and litotes, as they are both types of understatement, but with the significant distinction in the way of expressing it. To bring clarity, it is reasonable to briefly formulate the exhaustive overview of meiosis and litotes. The former stands for the figure of speech which refers to the object in a special way, that deliberately reduce its significance. The latter, in turn, expresses the understatement by denying some qualities in order to claim the opposite.

Our study consists of two parts, which can be referred to as theoretical and practical. Firstly, we will try to get the most consistent and complete definitions, and secondly, we will present the results of the investigation, which was conducted on the materials of the Jerome David Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and its Ukrainian translation.

In most cases meiosis is viewed as a kind of understatement, but there are some peculiarities worth mentioning. James Jasinski in his guidebook concerning different aspects of rhetoric gives the following definition of meiosis: “Meiosis is a statement that depicts something important in terms that lessen or belittle it”. He also writes that “Any verbal effort to make an event, an idea, or a person less significant is a form of meiosis” [12, p. 550]. Contrary to Jasinski, Bernard Marie Dupriez reduces meiosis to only ironic understatement, and provides us with the such description of this stylis-

tic device as “a figure which uses ironic understatement to represent something as in some way less than it is: a form of ironic emphasis” [10, p. 273]. Meiosis is often investigated in a contrast with hyperbole, because comparing these two opposite stylistic devices, we can understand the unique features of each one more accurately. Therefore, Marta Dynel, comparing hyperbole, litotes and meiosis, makes a conclusion that “meiosis is a type of understatement whose aim is to lessen, weaken, or reduce the characteristics of a given entity to show its insignificance” [11, p. 208]. L.P. Yefimov and E.A. Yasinetskaya in their book on the practical stylistic of English use similar approach and state, that meiosis is “the figure of quantity is opposite in meaning to hyperbole. Meiosis is a deliberate diminution of a certain quality of an object or phenomenon” [16, p. 47]. It is important to mention that there are many confusions in the Ukrainian linguistics with the terms “meiosis” and “litotes”. For many years the dominant thought was that litotes is the opposite to the hyperbole. However, it is meiosis that similar to hyperbole in functions and expressions, and it can be described as modifier that reduces the modified word. And as for litotes, “modifier that reduces the modified word” is its only secondary meaning, while the main one stands for “antonym + negation as a way to belittle the statement”.

To gain a better understanding, let us present several examples. It is worth mentioning that the stylistic effect of meiosis depends greatly on context, and cannot be examined separately, but only in the scope of sentence or even paragraph. The most prime example can be provided through the following sentences from the analysing Jerome David Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*:

*“It isn't very serious. I have this tiny little tumor on the brain.”*

*“Oh, no!” She put her hand up to her mouth and all. “Oh, I'll be all right and everything! It's right near the outside. And it's a very tiny one. They can take it out in about two minutes”* [6, p. 68].

– Нічого серйозного. Невеличка пухлина на мозку.

– Який жах! – Місіс Морроу навіть затулила долонею рота.

– Та пусте! Я скоро вичухаюсь. Пухлина не глибоко, майже зверху. І зовсім невеличка. Хвилини дві – і її видалять [5, с. 90].

Words “this tiny little tumor” are exactly case in point. The next sentences enhance the effect of the meiosis. The componential analysis allows us to get detailed and exact meaning of the term “tumor”: Tumor = [illness] [uncontrolled] [abnormal] [growth of cells] [scary] [bad] [suffering] [unpredictable]. Even if we take into consideration that the term is neutral and most frequently is used in the medical field, the connotative meaning of this word is rather negative. Laurie E. Rozakis in her book *Vocabulary for Dummies* highlights that the “tumor” is a scary word and has terrifying connotation [14, p. 215]. Taking into account all information above, the implication of a “tumor” as a something small and insignificant create shocking effect on a reader. The Ukrainian correspondence for the “this tiny little tumor” is “невеличка пухлина”. In this case, the considerable impact is created by the semantical features of the word “невеличка”. From the *Ukrainian Language*

*Dictionary*, we learn that this word is colloquial and a diminutive form of the adjective “невеликий” [7]. The application of the word with such semantic characteristics as an adjective for the medical term which has rather negative connotation creates a good example of the meiosis.

Many scholars point out that meiosis has negative connotation. For example, Brett Zimmerman, who is interested in Edgar Allan Poe’s style, offers the following description of the meiosis: “a lessening, sometimes belittling thing or person, possibly with a degrading epithet, or with the substitution of a word” [17, p. 43]. Apart from creating the negative or ironical stylistic effect, meiosis is also used for the expression of the politeness or modesty. In those cases, the usage of understatement is motivated by specific social norms which are accepted in the society. Such feature of meiosis can be observed in the next excerpt:

*“I thought if you were taking up a collection,” I told her, “I could make a small contribution [6, p. 127].*

*– Бо якщо ви збираєте гроші, – кажу, – то я теж трохи пожертвую [5, с. 167].*

From the context, we know that the sum of the contribution is rather big, because the interlocutors of the protagonist have reacted quite vigorously. However, in our society, it would be considered impolite to say such things directly. Therefore, the deliberate understatement is used. In the Ukrainian translation we can recognize meiosis which is used in the same way.

As it was already mentioned, litotes is also a type of understatement, but with a different structure. In a simplified way, litotes can be referred to as two negative meanings weaken each other. That double negation creates the effect of ambiguity, and the effect of using this device is more pragmatic than semantic, supposing it is important to know the context to understand it [15, p. 94]. A similar idea was expressed by Otto Jespersen, who in his work on negation in English and other languages, highlights that “...it should be noted that the double negative always modifies the idea, for the result of the whole expression is somewhat different from the simple idea expressed positively” [13, p. 63]. It also should be pointed out that some scholars state that litotes is more than just lessening the meaning. For instance, Dwight Bolinger describes litotes as stylistic device that with the help of denying the negative “leaves the entire positive range open to whatever degree is appropriate”. He specifies that this is the reason why litotes is a productive stylistic device. The recipient is provided not with the direct meaning, but with the variety of degrees of opposite meanings, which are able to undergo changes depending on situation [8, p. 115–116]. As it was mentioned above, Ukrainian scholars often consider litotes as an opposite for hyperbole, and, subsequently, as a synonym for meiosis [3, p. 93]. Therefore, we can observe a distinction between Western and Ukrainian stylistic terminology. For instance, the editorial board consisting of R.T. Hromiak, Yu.I. Kovaliv and others, in their literature dictionary presented the definition, which equates the term litotes with meiosis [2, p. 422]. Other Ukrainian scholars, O. Halych, V. Nazarets and Ye. Vasyliiev outline the term litotes as a stylistic device, with the help of which, the

features of the described object are presented with excessive diminution. They state that litotes is the opposite of hyperbole [1, p. 223].

The nature of litotes is more complex and vaguer than the nature of meiosis. To gain a better understanding of this stylistic device, it is reasonable to examine examples from the novel.

*I wasn’t too crazy about him, to tell you the truth [6, p. 24].*

*– Сказати правду, я його недолюблював [5, с. 31].*

In the dictionary we find that idiom “to be crazy about” means the feeling of deep fondness for someone or something [9]. From the context, it is known that the protagonist does not like the described person, as he has given him negative assessments. The negation of the idiom with the highly positive evaluation in order to provide the statement with the negative connotation is a clear example of litotes. However, the Ukrainian correspondent to this sentence does not have any stylistic peculiarities. Another example of litotes, which are highly common, is “not too bad”. We can find it in the following extract:

*“He’s not too bad,” I said. “You don’t know him, that’s the trouble” [6, p. 30].*

*– А Стредлейтер непоганий хлопець. Сволотою його не назвеш, – кажу. Просто ти його не знаєш, ось у чому біда [5, с. 38].*

In this example, we can clearly see the pragmatic feature of litotes. Collocation “not too bad” substitutes the word “good”. And the writer has chosen to make this substitution deliberately. The semantic side is examined in the following analysis: the words “good” and “bad” are contrary antonyms, meaning that they are not strict oppositions, but polar members of a gradual opposition with the possibility of having intermediate elements. So, the short word “good” is intentionally omitted and the opposite “bad” is negated. Therefore, the special interval between two meanings of “good” and “bad” is created, where “not bad” tends to be closer to “good”, but not exactly substitutes it. The meaning of “not bad” is weaker than the meaning of “good”, and it is an accurate example of litotes. The litotes is also often used in order to sound politer. The example of this case can be observed in the next fragment:

*“If I’m not mistaken, I believe you also had some difficulty at the Whooton School and at Elkton Hills” [6, p. 17].*

*– Якщо не помиляюсь, у тебе і в Гутоні та Елктон-хіллі теж не дуже ладилося? [5, с. 22].*

The word collocation “If I’m not mistaken”, which is subtler form, is used in lieu of “I am right”. In this example, the function of litotes is to lessen the harshness of the statement, to make it politer. In the Ukrainian translation we can see litotes with the same functions.

**Conclusions and suggestions for further research.** In the article, we had examined the importance of comprehending the specific lexical and semantical features of meiosis and litotes. Stylistic devices like the ones mentioned above are essential to the literature, especially to the belles-lettres style. So, the profound understanding of their semantics could help in the further realization. Different stylistic devices are an important part of the story. They enrich the language and attach a unique style to the text. Meiosis and litotes are especially

important, as they lessen the significance of the statement, therefore provoke the reader to contemplate the situation. The application of these literary devices allows the author to create the range of variable degrees of undertones within the story. With the help of meiosis and litotes, it is possible to successfully express the implicit meaning. Additionally, litotes creates special interest, as its unusual structure draws the reader's attention. The negation of the opposite, or, even the double negation (as it is in a strict version of the definition of litotes) make an effect of redundancy, and, therefore is quite noticeable. The usage of the meiosis and litotes create the effect of full immersion into the story. The present work could potentially lead to other inves-

tigations in this field. Our work suggests that more full research is ought to be done in order to gain all possible cases of meiosis and litotes in Jerome David Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. The further researches can be made in two directions. The first one implies the deeper investigation of meiosis and litotes within this specific book. For instance, the pragmatic aspect could be included or the comparison with other stylistic devices could be made. The second way suggests a more rigorous examination of meiosis and litotes in the scope of all Jerome David Salinger's works. This would allow us to gain profound knowledge not only about specific features of these forms of understatement, but also about the peculiarities of the author individual style.

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