

CONCEPTUAL ANTITHESIS IN MODERN LINGUISTIC THEORY

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Abstract

This thesis examines conceptual antithesis as a fundamental cognitive and discursive mechanism that structures human understanding of oppositional relations. While traditional rhetoric views antithesis primarily as a stylistic device based on syntactic parallelism, contemporary cognitive and linguistic research demonstrates that antithesis operates at a deeper conceptual level, reflecting binary structures that shape categorization, evaluation, and interpretation. Drawing on materials from Russian and international studies, the work analyzes how conceptual antithesis functions within literary, ideological, and scientific discourse, revealing its role in constructing evaluative meaning, enhancing rhetorical expressiveness, and modeling abstract processes. Special attention is given to the interaction between antithesis and conceptual metaphor, particularly in dichotomous metaphors such as knowledge as light and ignorance as darkness, which rely on embodied image schemas. The thesis emphasizes that conceptual antithesis is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a cognitive pattern deeply embedded in cultural worldviews and discursive practices. Its interdisciplinary relevance highlights its significance for understanding meaning construction in contemporary linguistics.

Keywords: conceptual antithesis, binary structures, cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis, oppositional meaning, ideological contrast, stylistic device, conceptual metaphor, dichotomous models, evaluative semantics, rhetorical strategies.

Conceptual antithesis constitutes one of the fundamental mechanisms through which human cognition organizes, structures, and interprets oppositional meaning. Whereas classical rhetoric defines antithesis primarily as a stylistic device based on syntactic parallelism, contemporary research in cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis demonstrates that antithesis functions at a deeper conceptual level, shaping the formation of binary categories and evaluative judgments. Antithesis is not merely an expressive ornament but a cognitive model through which human beings perceive and categorize the world. As shown in the study of the conceptual nature of antithesis (Radzhabova 2023), oppositional structures emerge within a unified conceptual sphere where contrast becomes meaningful, and interpretation is grounded in systematic relations between opposing concepts.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, antithesis is understood as a manifestation of binary conceptual structures that guide human perception and

categorization. Many linguistic, philosophical, and cultural systems are built upon oppositions: GOOD vs EVIL, LIGHT vs DARKNESS, ORDER vs CHAOS, FRIEND vs ENEMY. These pairs are not limited to lexical antonymy; they represent culturally encoded conceptual frameworks that structure emotional, moral, and ideological experience (Radzhabova 2023; Kiklewicz 2004). Because cognition relies heavily on contrastive differentiation, conceptual antithesis becomes an essential cognitive mechanism that allows speakers to construct meaning through opposition. The structure of contrast thus forms not only linguistic expression but also cultural worldview, evaluative systems, and interpretative models.

Stylistically, antithesis possesses significant expressive potential because it integrates multiple rhetorical devices within parallel syntactic structures. As demonstrated in Razinkina's analysis of antithesis as a stylistic phenomenon (Razinkina 2013), antithesis often incorporates metaphor, comparison, epithet, oxymoron, and repetition. The combination of semantic divergence and syntactic symmetry creates cognitive tension, intensifies emotional resonance, and enhances the interpretative depth of discourse. Parallelism ensures that each element of the contrast receives equal structural emphasis, producing a sense of balance even when the semantic content reflects conflict. This interaction between structural harmony and semantic opposition yields a complex rhetorical effect that enriches textual meaning.

From a discursive perspective, antithesis serves as a mechanism of coherence, persuasion, and ideological framing. Monakhova emphasizes that stylistic devices cannot be viewed in isolation from cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural contexts (Monakhova 2020). Antithesis plays a crucial role in constructing evaluative meaning, guiding interpretation, and framing arguments. In many discursive settings—political, journalistic, pedagogical—antithesis functions as a tool that directs attention, emphasizes contrastive relations, and shapes attitudes toward the presented information. The construction of opposition, rather than mere juxtaposition, indicates intentional communicative design, revealing the author's attempt to manipulate interpretative outcomes and influence the recipient's perception.

An especially revealing domain in which conceptual antithesis emerges as a cognitive and ideological mechanism is political and propaganda discourse. As shown in Shurma's study of Soviet propaganda in 1960s Ukrainian newspapers (Shurma 2023), antithesis structures ideological narratives through sharply polarized categories: PEACE :: WAR, SOCIALISM :: CAPITALISM, PEOPLE :: ENEMIES. These oppositions do not simply describe ideological conflict; they construct a conceptual framework in which the political "Us" is portrayed as

morally superior, harmonious, and just, while the ideological “Them” is depicted as hostile, immoral, or dangerous. Through such conceptual binaries, propaganda shapes collective consciousness, reinforces ideological loyalty, and legitimizes political actions. Antithesis, therefore, becomes an instrument of ideological cognition, binding linguistic form with sociopolitical function.

In scientific and educational discourse, antithesis also proves to be an important cognitive tool. Fredriksson’s analysis of Nobel Prize lectures demonstrates that antithesis enhances comprehension of complex scientific material by creating spatial, embodied contrasts such as UP vs DOWN, ORDER vs DISORDER, and INSIDE vs OUTSIDE (Fredriksson 2015). These oppositions help audiences conceptualize abstract phenomena by grounding them in familiar image schemas derived from bodily experience. Such contrasts facilitate cognitive processing and enable more accessible explanation of phenomena that cannot be directly observed. This supports Bain’s classical assertion that contrast is one of the fundamental operations of human understanding and a building block of cognitive organization. Conceptual antithesis also interacts with conceptual metaphor, forming a combined system through which human cognition interprets dichotomous relations. As demonstrated by Papiřta (2023), metaphors such as KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT and IGNORANCE IS DARKNESS rely on embodied image schemas of LIGHT vs DARK, VISIBLE vs INVISIBLE, which simultaneously express evaluative meaning and encode conceptual opposition. These metaphors reveal how metaphorical and antithetical structures mutually reinforce one another: metaphor provides the experiential grounding, while antithesis supplies the evaluative and categorical differentiation. This interaction illustrates that human reasoning often relies on dualistic patterns that are both metaphorical and contrastive, forming a multidimensional cognitive model of meaning.

In conclusion, conceptual antithesis must be regarded as an essential mechanism of language, cognition, and discourse. It structures oppositional meaning, reveals cultural models, amplifies rhetorical expressiveness, and serves as a powerful ideological tool. Whether functioning in literary analysis, propaganda, scientific discourse, or everyday communication, antithesis demonstrates how human beings interpret the world through systematic contrast. It unites cognitive processes with linguistic expression and cultural worldview, making it a key analytical construct in modern linguistic research. The interdisciplinary nature of conceptual antithesis underscores its importance as a mechanism of meaning-making and highlights its potential for further study across cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis, and cultural studies.

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