

Phraseological Units in Theodore Dreiser's Novels: Semantic, Stylistic, And Functional Analysis

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Abstract: This article investigates the use of phraseological units in Theodore Dreiser's novels, primarily *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*. Phraseological units are examined as fixed or semi-fixed expressions that carry semantic, stylistic, and pragmatic value beyond literal meaning. The study aims to identify the main types of phraseological units in Dreiser's prose and to determine their role in characterization, emotional description, and representation of social reality. The research is based on a qualitative textual analysis of selected passages from reliable editions of Dreiser's novels available through Project Gutenberg and interpreted through established scholarship on idioms and phraseology. The results show that phraseological units in Dreiser's fiction perform several key functions: they intensify emotional expression, compress social meaning, reinforce realism, and reveal relations of power, insecurity, and class aspiration. The study concludes that phraseological units are an essential component of Dreiser's narrative technique and contribute significantly to the naturalistic force of his prose.

Keywords: Phraseological units, Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, idioms, stylistics, semantic analysis, literary language, naturalism.

Introduction: Phraseological units occupy a central place in modern linguistic analysis because they represent conventionalized expressions whose meanings are not always predictable from their individual components. Research in phraseology and idiom studies has shown that such expressions are deeply connected with discourse, evaluation, and cultural perception. In literary texts, phraseological units often function as compressed vehicles of social meaning and emotional nuance.

The fiction of Theodore Dreiser offers particularly rich material for such an investigation. Dreiser is widely recognized as a major American naturalist whose novels portray the pressures of social mobility, poverty, desire, and urban modernity. Because his narratives are grounded in everyday life and social conflict, their language frequently incorporates familiar phraseological patterns that help communicate lived experience in a concise and vivid form.

Although Dreiser has been studied primarily from literary, philosophical, and sociological perspectives, the phraseological dimension of his prose deserves

closer attention. This article therefore examines phraseological units in two of his novels, *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, in order to determine how they function semantically and stylistically.

The objectives of the article are:

1. to identify phraseological units used in Dreiser's novels;
2. to classify their major semantic and stylistic functions; and
3. to explain their contribution to characterization and social representation.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method based on textual and stylistic analysis. The research corpus includes selected passages from Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*. These novels were selected because both focus on social aspiration, economic vulnerability, and interpersonal struggle, which are especially fertile contexts for idiomatic and phraseological language. The textual evidence was drawn from reliable digital editions provided by Project

Gutenberg.

The theoretical framework combines insights from phraseology, stylistics, and literary semantics. Phraseological units in this study are understood as fixed or semi-fixed word combinations that function in discourse as recognized units of meaning. The analytical procedure involved:

1. identifying recurrent idiomatic and phraseological expressions in the selected texts;
2. grouping them according to semantic and stylistic function; and
3. interpreting them in relation to context, characterization, and naturalistic narrative technique.

The analysis focused on four main categories:

- ✓ phraseological units expressing socioeconomic condition,
- ✓ units characterizing psychological and emotional states,
- ✓ units expressing interpersonal dominance or dependence, and
- ✓ units serving as evaluative narrative shorthand.

RESULTS

The analysis shows that phraseological units in Dreiser's novels perform several interconnected functions.

Phraseological units and socioeconomic reality

One of the most prominent functions of phraseological units in Dreiser's prose is the representation of material insecurity. In *Sister Carrie*, the expression from hand to mouth is used to describe a family living in a precarious economic condition. This phraseological unit condenses the social reality of financial instability into a compact expression that readers immediately recognize. Rather than offering an extended description of poverty, the author relies on phraseology to create a quick and powerful social image.

A similar pattern appears in *Jennie Gerhardt*, where related expressions refer to unstable livelihood and practical survival. These examples show that phraseological units help Dreiser represent economic struggle as part of ordinary speech and ordinary life.

Phraseological units and characterization

The study also found that phraseological units serve as tools of characterization. In *Jennie Gerhardt*, expressions such as have the upper hand communicate a character's sense of control or superiority. Such units do not merely report action; they reveal self-perception, psychological attitude, and social posture.

Likewise, visual and evaluative phraseological expressions such as written all over him work as narrative shortcuts. Through them, Dreiser makes personal qualities appear externally visible, suggesting that confidence, prosperity, or anxiety can be read directly from appearance. This strengthens the naturalistic tendency to connect character with social surface.

Phraseological units and emotional states

Another important result concerns the role of phraseological units in emotional and perceptual description. Dreiser often uses expressions such as in a new light to mark psychological change. These units help translate internal shifts into concrete figurative language.

In scenes of attraction, hesitation, or disappointment, phraseological expressions intensify emotional immediacy. They allow abstract feelings to be represented through conventional linguistic imagery, making the psychological condition of characters more accessible and vivid.

Phraseological units as narrative compression

The analysis further demonstrates that phraseological units function as instruments of narrative compression. Expressions such as carry through or by the throat encapsulate prolonged practical struggle or pressure in a highly economical form. Instead of lengthy explanation, Dreiser uses phraseological language to condense conflict into memorable verbal patterns.

This technique contributes to the fluency of the narrative and enhances the readability of socially dense scenes. Phraseological units therefore operate not only as stylistic ornaments but as efficient carriers of action and evaluation.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that phraseological units are integral to Dreiser's narrative technique. Their importance lies in their ability to merge realism with expressiveness. Since Dreiser's novels are deeply concerned with class mobility, insecurity, desire, and social competition, phraseological language becomes a natural medium for representing these themes.

The presence of phraseological units in contexts of poverty and aspiration confirms their social function. They transform structural realities into familiar forms of speech, thereby narrowing the distance between literary narrative and everyday linguistic experience. In this respect, Dreiser's phraseology supports the broader aims of literary naturalism: to depict human beings as shaped by material and social forces.

The analysis also suggests that phraseological units in Dreiser's novels are multifunctional. A single expression can simultaneously describe emotion, reveal character, and imply social evaluation. This multifunctionality gives Dreiser's prose density and economy. Even brief idiomatic expressions can carry considerable semantic and stylistic weight.

Another important point is that phraseological units help create interpretive immediacy. Readers do not need long analytical commentary to understand states such as insecurity, dominance, exhaustion, or desire; the phraseological expression itself often communicates them at once. That is efficient writing, and slightly unfair to longer sentences trying to earn the same salary.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that phraseological units in Theodore Dreiser's novels play a major role in the construction of social meaning, emotional expression, and characterization. In *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, such units are especially frequent in passages dealing with poverty, ambition, attraction, insecurity, and interpersonal struggle.

The results demonstrate that phraseological units in Dreiser's prose perform four principal functions: they represent socioeconomic conditions, shape characterization, intensify psychological description, and compress narrative action. Their presence is therefore not peripheral but central to the stylistic and semantic texture of the novels.

Future studies may extend this analysis to other works by Dreiser, such as *An American Tragedy* and *The Financier*, or may examine the translation of his phraseological units into Uzbek and other languages. Such research would deepen understanding of both Dreiser's style and the broader relationship between phraseology and literary discourse.

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