

Lexical Contradiction and Idiomatic Tension in The Style of Gustave Flaubert

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Abstract: This article investigates the stylistic and linguistic features of Gustave Flaubert's prose, with a particular focus on lexical contradiction and idiomatic tension. Through a close analysis of key works such as *Madame Bovary*, *L'Éducation sentimentale*, and *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, the study highlights how Flaubert's writing systematically juxtaposes opposing semantic registers—romantic idealism and mundane realism, poetic elevation and trivial detail. These lexical contradictions not only enrich narrative depth but also underscore the disillusionment and irony characteristic of Flaubert's modern vision.

The article further explores how Flaubert manipulates idiomatic expressions, either by subtly distorting them or by integrating them ironically into character discourse. This tension between conventional language and authorial critique reveals Flaubert's ambivalent relationship with linguistic norms and his pursuit of *le mot juste*. Drawing on French and Francophone critical literature, the study situates Flaubert's stylistic innovation within broader debates about the literary function of cliché, the evolution of free indirect discourse, and the modern fragmentation of narrative voice.

By analyzing the paradoxes at the heart of Flaubert's style, the article demonstrates how lexical contradiction and idiomatic tension function not only as aesthetic devices but also as means of epistemological inquiry—interrogating language, meaning, and the act of writing itself.

Keywords: Gustave Flaubert, lexical contradiction, idiomatic tension, stylistic irony, French prose, clichés, free indirect discourse, literary modernity, semantic dissonance, linguistic subversion, *le mot juste*, narrative voice.

Introduction: Gustave Flaubert's literary style is renowned for its meticulous precision and pursuit of "*le mot juste*" - the exact word that captures the intended meaning. This dedication to linguistic exactitude is evident in his works, where he often spent extensive time refining sentences to achieve the desired effect.

In Flaubert's narratives, lexical contradictions—where words or phrases convey opposing meanings—serve to highlight the complexities and dualities of human experience. For instance, in "*Madame Bovary*," the juxtaposition of romantic idealism with the banality of provincial life underscores the protagonist's internal conflicts and disillusionment [35].

Additionally, Flaubert's use of idiomatic tension - manipulating common expressions to convey irony or subvert expectations—adds depth to his characters and themes. By recontextualizing idioms, he challenges readers to reconsider conventional meanings and the societal norms they reflect.

This article explores how Flaubert's strategic use of lexical contradictions and idiomatic tension contributes to his distinctive narrative voice. By examining these stylistic elements, we gain insight into his innovative approach to storytelling and his influence on modern literary techniques.

METHODS

This study centers on Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) as the principal text for the analysis of lexical contradiction and idiomatic tension. *Madame Bovary* is generally considered one of the most influential works to show Flaubert's formal style and experimental narrative methods. The rich language of the novel and its ironic, realistic interplay make it a good object to consider the down-to-earth phenomena in question.

Previous scholarship has extensively explored Flaubert's commitment to stylistic precision and his influence on literary realism. Flaubert's pursuit of "le mot juste" and his meticulous revision process are well-documented, underscoring his dedication to linguistic exactitude.

In examining *Madame Bovary*, critics have noted the novel's intricate use of irony and its subversion of romantic tropes. The interplay between romantic idealism and the banalities of provincial life creates a tension that is often manifested through lexical choices and idiomatic expressions.

Furthermore, studies have highlighted Flaubert's innovative use of free indirect discourse, which allows for a nuanced portrayal of character consciousness and contributes to the novel's layered irony.

The research entails a close-reading of a number of *Madame Bovary* passages including passages representing instances of lexical contradiction and idiomatic tension. These passages are read as a way to explore the language choices Flaubert makes and how they tie into character and theme, to the larger narrative structure.

Drawing on previous literary criticism as well as detailed textual analysis, the study is concerned to explain how Flaubert's unique style comes about.

Since 2000, scholarship on Flaubert's stylistic innovations has expanded to incorporate interdisciplinary methodologies, including cognitive linguistics, digital humanities, and postcolonial theory. Recent studies have deepened our understanding of how Flaubert's lexical contradictions and idiomatic tensions reflect not only aesthetic choices but also broader philosophical, ethical, and socio-political concerns. Below is a synthesis of key trends and contributions in 21st-century Flaubert criticism.

RESULTS

Numerous critics have highlighted the strange duality of Flaubert's style, characterized by striking contrasts. As early as the 19th century, he was criticized for his "mixture of genres": during the trial of "*Madame Bovary*" (1857), the prosecutor Ernest Pinard

denounced the "mix of the sacred and the vulgar" in the novel. Later, essayists such as Charles Du Bos viewed the disproportionate nature of Flaubert's style [21], the constant clash between the sublime and the trivial as the source of its literary power. Indeed, Flaubert frequently practiced stylistic antithesis: his writing juxtaposes romantic idealism with down-to-earth prosaicness. In "*Madame Bovary*", for example, exalted lyrical images are abruptly juxtaposed with mundane or grotesque details, creating an ironic contrast.

Recent analyses have theorized this double-faced style. Palagyi (2024) refers to the "two faces of Flaubertian style": a romantic penchant for the sublime constantly paired with vulgarity [30]. This coexistence of extremes produces a fruitful lexical contradiction, where language seeks both poetic idealism and the most raw realism. Some scholars interpret this as a hallmark of modern aesthetic tension. Jacques Neefs, for instance, has shown how the prose of "*Bouvard et Pécuchet*" is a "book of vengeance against overly invasive conventions," in which Flaubert confronts disparate linguistic elements in the text itself [14]. Similarly, the alternation between "plenitude and emptiness" in Flaubert's style is often noted: the style seems at times richly adorned, then deliberately dry, to emphasize the void of meaning [19, 239–247]. This dialectic of fullness and emptiness, of lyricism and triviality, gives Flaubert's prose its distinctive depth. It also explains the characteristic ironic tone of his novels, born from the continual gap between verbal beauty and the mediocrity of the reality described.

Another crucial aspect of Flaubert's style is his relationship to French clichés and idioms [15]. The author was notoriously obsessed with the "stupidity" of conventional language: he nurtured a true hatred of clichés, which he actively hunted in his writing. In his "*Dictionary of Received Ideas*" (an annex to "*Bouvard et Pécuchet*"), Flaubert compiled a satirical collection of commonplace formulas to expose their intellectual emptiness. Recent linguistic studies have shown that Flaubert transforms these fixed expressions into a paradoxical literary tool. According to Pellegrini, Flaubert's clichés reveal, "dans un double mouvement paradoxal, leur caractère inopérant tout autant qu'incontournable" [4] (in a double paradoxical movement, both their inefficiency and their inevitability). In other words, Flaubert shows that these set phrases are empty and ineffective, yet impossible to avoid - hence a constant idiomatic tension in his writing.

This tension is evident in his ironic subversion of idioms. Flaubert deliberately inserts banal expressions into the speech of his characters or narrator but signals them

ironically. Jean-Paul Sartre aptly described this in his reflection on “stupidity” in Flaubert: the author is “sans cesse en état d’étrangement devant les mots” (constantly in a state of estrangement before words) [34], terrified of the unintentional cliché slipping into his prose. Flaubert inserts parenthetical comments to distance himself from these clichés: “comme dit le concierge” (as the janitor says), “pour parler comme l’épicier” (to speak like the grocer), or “comme dirait M. Prudhomme” (as Mr. Prudhomme would say) [34]. Through these asides, he shows his awareness of the cliché and attributes it to a stereotypically foolish character. This stylistic strategy illustrates the ongoing idiomatic tension: Flaubert oscillates between the unavoidable use of fixed expressions and the denunciation of their banality.

Several French scholars have examined this phenomenon. As early as 1972, Pierre Bergounioux noted that for Flaubert, “le langage est un ensemble rigide, une concrétion d’expressions lexicalisées, de syntagmes figés” (language is a rigid system, a concretion of lexicalized expressions and fixed phrases) [3, 40-50], reflecting bourgeois automatic thought that must be undermined. Similarly, Antoine Compagnon (2018) reevaluated the role of “stupidity” in literary modernity, emphasizing how Flaubert turned it into his intimate enemy by amassing examples of linguistic foolishness. “Bouvard et Pécuchet” becomes a catalog of stereotypical discourses, each chapter parodying the jargon and platitudes of a discipline (science, history, politics, etc.). Contemporary critics view this novel as the culmination of Flaubert’s strategy of saturation through cliché. As Florence Pellegrini puts it, clichéd phrases become the very object of fiction, and their systematic accumulation exposes the mechanisms of fixed language. Flaubert shows that common language, filled with automatisms, produces meaning through repetition while being stripped of originality—a rich observation for linguistic and stylistic analysis.

Flaubert’s unique style has long attracted theoretical analysis in France. The author himself laid out the foundations of his aesthetic in his “Correspondence”. His famous 1852 letter to Louise Colet speaks of “un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style” (a book about nothing, held together by the internal force of its style). For him, “le style [est] une manière absolue de voir les choses” [16, 9–22] (style is an absolute way of seeing things). These principles - primacy of form, authorial impersonality, stylistic self-sufficiency - have shaped subsequent criticism. In the interwar period, stylisticians like Léo Spitzer began detailed stylistic readings of Flaubert (e.g., of “A Simple Heart”). A famous grammatical controversy erupted in

1919–1921 around Flaubert’s so-called “errors.” While purists accused the author of breaking grammatical norms, others defended his creative audacity. Marcel Proust himself intervened to praise Flaubert’s “grammatical genius” [31]. Collected by Gilles Philippe (“Did Flaubert know how to write?”, 2014), these texts reveal how Flaubert’s linguistic innovations (verb tense use, preposition choices, etc.) helped redefine literary norms in the 20th century [20].

Since the 1950s and 60s, stylistic approaches to Flaubert have evolved. Scholars have studied his use of “free indirect discourse” and the “impersonal narrator” — techniques that allow the infiltration of character perspectives into the narrator’s voice, often creating ironic ambiguity. Just a word or phrase can shift the narrative voice subtly into a character’s consciousness, creating internal polyphony where social voices (often clichéd) clash with individual thought. This mechanism directly links to lexical contradiction and idiomatic tension.

Furthermore, “genetic criticism” (Neefs, de Biasi) has revealed Flaubert’s obsessive revisions. His drafts show him eliminating repetitions, adjusting rhythms, and replacing clichés with more vivid images. Comparative studies also connect Flaubert to modern authors: for instance, Palagyi (2024) compares him to Michel Houellebecq, noting in both a stylistic tension between high and low registers, pathos and clinical detachment. Such synchronic readings highlight Flaubert’s lasting stylistic legacy: his exploitation of lexical contrasts and clichés continues to influence literary prose.

Recent directions include digital textual analysis and sociolinguistic approaches. Computational studies have mapped lexical contradictions and idiomatic patterns in Flaubert’s corpus [22]. Other research explores how the discourses of his time (press, science, politics) influenced his language and how he transforms them. Scholars have also examined how the ironic subversion of idioms affects translation [1]. Flaubert is increasingly recognized as a linguistic laboratory of modern fiction. As Philippe and Piat summarize, with Flaubert, “literary language” in France emancipated itself, becoming distinct from the standard language [17]. His stylistic legacy remains a vibrant field of inquiry, where linguistic analysis intersects with reflections on literary creation and common speech. Each reading of “Madame Bovary”, “Sentimental Education”, or “Bouvard et Pécuchet” confirms the richness of this prose built on lexical contradiction and idiomatic tension—a writing where, in Flaubert’s own words, “the words ring true” while subtly exposing the banality of received expressions.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the intricate dynamics of lexical contradiction and idiomatic tension in the literary style of Gustave Flaubert, focusing particularly on works such as *Madame Bovary*, *L'Éducation sentimentale*, and *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Through a detailed examination of his stylistic choices, it becomes evident that Flaubert's prose operates at the intersection of idealism and irony, beauty and banality, precision and parody. His use of lexical contradiction is not merely an aesthetic strategy but a philosophical gesture that reveals the complexity of modern subjectivity and the dissonance between language and reality.

Flaubert's subversion of idiomatic expressions—either by ironizing them or by embedding them in the consciousness of his characters—reflects his acute awareness of the limitations and automatisms of language. The tension he cultivates between the literal and the figurative, the poetic and the prosaic, not only undermines linguistic clichés but also creates a unique mode of literary irony, where the narrator's voice is both present and effaced.

This linguistic craftsmanship contributes to a broader reflection on the role of style in shaping meaning. Flaubert's stylistic innovations, especially his manipulation of free indirect discourse and his meticulous revision process, position him as a pivotal figure in the evolution of literary modernity. His works serve as a linguistic laboratory in which idioms are dissected, recomposed, and resemanticized - not for ornament, but to confront the inertia of expression and to challenge the reader's interpretive habits.

In conclusion, Flaubert's writing reveals that language is never neutral. The stylistic features analyzed in this article—lexical contradiction and idiomatic tension - are not decorative devices but fundamental tools in his artistic and critical vision. They render his prose both structurally rigorous and semantically unstable, making his work a vital reference point for the study of stylistic ambiguity and the rhetorical power of the unsaid in literary discourse.

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