

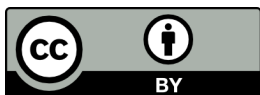
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ANTITHESIS IN MODERN ENGLISH GRAFFITI

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Graffiti is a cross-cultural phenomenon that transcends geographical and chronological boundaries, becoming extremely popular with artists, archaeologists, cultural anthropologists and even linguists due to the variety of forms it takes and limitless freedom of expression it offers. Despite the contradictory nature and mixed views on its value, the anonymous form and wide availability to the public make graffiti an effective communication tool and an exceptionally interesting research object. Artists often employ antithesis (stylistic opposition) that helps them gain a new, broader and at times paradoxical perspective on pressing social, political and environmental issues by finding the points of stark contrast. This study has been carried out to identify the stylistic peculiarities of modern English graffiti, focusing on the analysis of antithesis. The findings indicate that, in order to convey opposing ideas, artists tend to choose contextual antonyms over objectively contrasting pairs of root ones which can be explained by their novelty and extraordinary polarity. The study suggests that all the analysed cases of antithesis can be grouped into explicit (the juxtaposition of the ideas is expressed in the written part while the graphical one heightens the effect) and implicit (the written part opposes the graphical one and a complete understanding of the message encoded in the graffiti is impossible without careful examination of both of them). The research also offers insights into expressive means and stylistic devices that enhance the aesthetic effect of antithesis such as rhyme, alliteration, parallelism and framing.

Key words: art, antithesis, antonyms, contrast, graffiti.

Торговець Ю.І. Антитеза у сучасному англомовному графіті

Графіті — це міжкультурне явище, яке поступово виходить за та подекуди стирає географічні і хронологічні межі, стаючи надзвичайно популярним серед художників, археологів, культурологів і навіть лінгвістів, завдяки різноманіттю своїх форм і безмежній свободі вираження. Незважаючи на суперечливий характер і неоднозначність поглядів на його значимість, анонімність і широка громадська доступність роблять графіті ефективним інструментом комунікації та надзвичайно цікавим об'єктом дослідження. Вуличні художники часто

використовують антитезу для стислого і влучного вираження своїх поглядів на нагальні соціальні, політичні та екологічні проблеми. Стилістичне протиставлення допомагає їм отримати новий, ширший і часом парадоксальний погляд на фундаментальні явища, знаходячи точки різкого контрасту. Виконане дослідження було проведено з метою виявлення стилістичних особливостей сучасних англomовних графіті, а особливу увагу було приділено аналізу антитези. Висновки показують, що в основі проаналізованих прикладів антитези лежать переважно контекстуальні антоніми, що можна пояснити їх новизною, виразністю та надзвичайною полярністю. Проаналізовані приклади антитези можна поділити на експліцитні (протиставлення ідей подається у вербальній частині, у той час як невербальна слугує інструментом посилення ефекту) та імпліцитні (вербальна частина (текст) протиставляється невербальній (малюнку) і повне розуміння послання, закодованого в графіті, неможливо без ретельного вивчення обох частин). Антитеза потужний стилістичний прийом, який, часто задля підсилення естетичного ефекту, використовується у поєднанні з римою, алітерацією, стилістичним паралелізмом та обрамленням.

Ключові слова: антитеза, антоніми, графіті, мистецтво, протиставлення.

Introduction. In the modern ever-globalising world, we are surrounded by a large amount of information, drowning in opinions not always able to understand whether they are trustworthy or not. Notably, in some countries with strict censorship people are forced to refrain from openly criticising or expressing their opinions about the authorities or the generally accepted policy of the country. However, the desire to speak up is inherent in every human being and manifests itself in a number of different ways. To air their views and concerns, people seek powerful tools for self-expression, and graffiti appears to be among the most effective ones of them. Graffiti is not a recent phenomenon, and researchers have studied it in terms of its cultural, artistic and sociological features. Nonetheless, there are very few linguistic studies of graffiti, and they provide insufficient information regarding its stylistic peculiarities. Thus, this research aims to examine cases of antithesis in modern English graffiti and determine their distinguishing features.

Theoretical Background. Several attempts have been made to illuminate the origin of the word *graffiti* and offer its relevant definition. For example, in the Academic Ukrainian dictionary (1980) it is defined as ancient inscriptions and drawings made with sharp objects on vessels or walls of the buildings. Bazhkova, Lurie and Shumov (2005), in their research article on urban graffiti, note that it is derived from the Italian word *grafficaro* to scratch. The researchers claim that at first it was the name of a wall painting technique, but over the course of time, archaeologists began using the word *graffiti* as a general term referring to all occasional drawings and writings on walls. In my humble opinion, not only

inscriptions on street walls, but also texts and drawings that are made inside buildings both on walls and pieces of furniture, moreover, pages of library books may be regarded as a form of graffiti. Thus, the concept has evolved over the centuries and today any sort of unsanctioned application of a substance, whether it is spray paint, pencil markings, or even stickers can be referred to as graffiti (DeNotto, 2014).

Graffiti is a complex phenomenon and views on its nature are rather controversial. Vanderveen and van Eijk (2015, p. 108) emphasise that “authorities, and many criminologists as well, tend to see graffiti as an unambiguous signal of disorder or even crime.” It is common knowledge that the non-authorized offensive markings can disturb the community and damage public and private property. Mac Donald (2014) strongly believes that “Graffiti is always vandalism. By definition it is committed without permission on another person’s property, in an adolescent display of entitlement. <...> . Graffiti’s most salient characteristic is that it is a crime”. As any misconduct or crime, it is defined and described in legal documents. Thus, according to section 44(c) of The Anti-social Behaviour Act graffiti is “an offence under section 1(1) of the Criminal Damage Act 1971 (c. 48) (damaging property etc.) which involves only the painting or writing on, or the soiling, marking or other defacing of, any property by whatever means” (King’s Printer of Acts of Parliament). Consequently, drawing graffiti may result in a penalty and as per section 43 of the Anti-social Behaviour Act, an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom, the sum can vary and depends on a local authority.

Thus, the nature of graffiti is truly controversial. The Culture and Communities Committee in the report maintains that graffiti is “a complex subject, crossing the boundaries between what can be considered vandalism, street art and heritage” (Lawrence, 2020). As a part of our culture, graffiti carries information about people’s beliefs and traditions. It is imbued with the spirit of the epoch and genuinely reflects all the changes in society, minor and major, promoting freedom of speech. Graffitists belong to a proactive part of the population and react to any changes extremely fast. For example, a global pandemic of COVID-19 aroused a lot of public interest and “street artists all over the world have ventured out into quiet streets and left behind vibrant, thought-provoking, amusing commentary on the crisis” (Mitman, 2020). Furthermore, graffiti alters the face of contemporary cities, it improves a dull urban landscape, making it more pleasant and attractive to the eye, it can be seen as “an attempt to make the spaces more aesthetically

appealing” (Haworth et al., 2019). As a result, embracing cultural values of graffiti can do wonders for urban tourism and bring money to the national treasury. For instance, in colourful Buenos Aires a tour of the decorated walls can cost \$25. Therefore, due to its “roots as a means of visual communication for disenfranchised youth to both hide and be seen, graffiti has developed into a bona fide art form, a legitimate force for economic, cultural and social good” (Cathcart-Keays, 2015).

In the current research, graffiti is defined as a form of visual communication, usually illegal, involving the unauthorised marking of public space by an anonymous individual or group (Curry & Decker, 2024).

Researchers (Bazhkova et al., 2005) state that there are two prime functions of graffiti: emotive and communicative. It is obvious that information, decoded in them, aims to evoke recipients’ emotional response and leave deep imprints on their minds. At the same time, graffiti is a kind of informal talk or discussion, a message that has its sender and receiver. Rodrigues, in her article on street art, singles out one more vital function of graffiti – educational. The researcher claims that “street art promotes public dialogue on social justice and can lead to opportunities for learning outside formal schooling”. Graffiti catches our eye as a “pop-up pedagogy”. It makes us think and reconsider our outlook on life and urgent political, social, environmental, health and ethical issues.

We firmly believe that whatever the original purpose or function of graffiti is, one thing is undeniable: though it can be understood as an act of vandalism performed to gain public attention, it is also a unique form of art and an effective visual communication tool.

Data and Methods. The article seeks to analyse functions and semantics of antithesis in modern English graffiti. The research methodology can be described by a three-stage research procedure.

At the first stage of the research process, we chose a sample of 162 English graffiti. The data was collected from different social networking sites, platforms and blogs (Pinterest, Flickr, etc.). The main requirement to the pieces of graffiti at the initial stage of the research was that they had to contain a text. In the course of data gathering and processing, methods of stylistic and contextual analyses along with analysis and comparison of dictionary definitions were used to distinguish, group and interpret the cases of antithesis. Then the collected data was further examined to illuminate the stylistic devices that reinforce the aesthetic effect of antithesis.

Results and Discussion. Taking into consideration extra-linguistic factors of graffiti creation, such as limited public space and time, graffiti artists strive to find the most laconic forms to communicate their ideas. Antithesis or stylistic opposition serves this aim best. Antithesis is a figure of speech in which irreconcilable opposites or strongly contrasting ideas are placed in sharp juxtaposition and sustained tension (“Antithesis”). Antithesis is based on contradiction between various levels of linguistic elements of the text (Hrynya, 2017, 28) and can be effective in emphasising drastic differences between opposing concepts (Malo, 2022).

I dare to assume that cases of antithesis in graffiti under study can be grouped into explicit and implicit. This idea stems from the fact that these pieces of graffiti consist of a picture (graphical constituent) and a text (written constituent). These two components complement each other; their combination promotes a better and sometimes complete understanding of the message encoded in graffiti since more often they function as a single semantic unit. Thus, explicit antithesis can be expressed in a written part of graffiti and enhanced by a graphical one, while to reveal and fully understand implicit antithesis a thorough analysis of both parts is required as, generally, the idea, communicated in the text, stands in stark contrast to that in the picture.

First, we will consider some examples of explicit antithesis.



Figure 1. Police everywhere justice nowhere (Mecha)

As can be seen from the graffiti, the stylistic opposition is carried out by using the contextual opposition of nouns ‘*police*’ and ‘*justice*’, supported by the objectively contrasted pair of root antonyms ‘*everywhere*’ and ‘*nowhere*’. The parallel construction enhances the contrasting effect. A brief explanation might be required here regarding the contextual antonymous pair as the opposition arises out of the context. Generally, ‘*police*’ – the department of government charged with

prevention, detection, and prosecution of public nuisances and crimes (Merriam-Webster) and *'justice'* – the process or result of using laws to fairly judge and punish crimes and criminals (Merriam-Webster) – are semantically close. It is customary for law enforcement officers to spare no effort to bring those who violate the law to justice. Although, after taking a closer look at the graffiti, it becomes clear that these nouns oppose each other in the context. We want to suggest that the graffitist believes that *'police'* do not always bring *'justice'*. The graphical part contributes to this message, fully revealing it. The first thing that catches the eye is a police officer who is on duty: he is fully armed, wearing a bulletproof vest and carrying a gun. A careful examination of the graffiti reveals that instead of a nose, he has a snout. A snout is an attribute of a pig; this detail testifies to the artist's perception of police officers as greedy, unkind and generally unpleasant. It must be noted that *'pig'* is a common slang word for the police. The artist probably supports “the negative stereotype of police officers who are regarded as being incompetent, corrupt, stubborn, ill-tempered and violently aggressive towards other people” (Police pig). Hence, the graffitist raises a deep-seated concern about an important social issue: trust in the police and the judicial system.

This graffiti became widely popular in the streets, and people started vigorously posting it on different social networking sites after a tragic event that shocked the USA and the entire world, when in 2020 a police officer brutally violated the law while arresting Afro-American, George Floyd, and accidentally caused his death.



Figure 2. Close your eyes open your mind (Lisboa{Images}, 2013)

In the graffiti, the objectively contrasted pair of root antonyms *'close'* and *'open'* is supported by the pair of contextual ones – *'eyes'* and *'mind'*. Nouns *'eyes'* and *'mind'* don't have opposite meanings; their antonymous features are

context-driven. The antithesis highlights the inherent dichotomy between mind and body, spiritual and physical, action and inaction. The eye is a complex sensory organ that helps us see and perceive the world around. It is astonishing but the studies show that “our brains acquire about 90% of information from two senses only: sight (about 80%) and hearing (about 10%). The remaining 10% of information is distributed between smell, touch, and taste senses” (Man & Olchawa, 2018, p. 33). However, as a sophisticated instrument of vision, eyes can deter us from doing challenging things since the sight of potential threats fuels the feeling of great fear, which is a primal survival response to dangerous or stressful situations. Sometimes, it is our fear that paves the way for failures and missed opportunities. Consequently, the street artist brings to light the importance of being unbiased and perceptive of new ideas, making them key features of a modern, open-minded person.



Figure 3. You have eyes my dear but you can't see (Lawlor)

The contrasting ideas “*You Have Eyes My Dear / But You Cannot See*” are connected with the help of coordinating conjunction *but*. One does not have to go too far to notice that this antithesis poses a curious paradox. Still, a few observations need to be made here. In terms of biology, a person’s ability to see is directly connected with one of five basic senses, namely, sight. Therefore, if one is not blind, he/she can see. However, the artist employs play on words and intensifies the message using the verb ‘*to see*’ that bears the meaning ‘*to understand*’. Considering the above, the graffitist seems eager to show that people tend to misconstrue things, missing the real point. We can assume that the artist is genuinely concerned about the problem of disinformation and ignorance and has a fervent belief that he/she is a messenger whose sole mission is to shed light on the burning issues of the time and enlighten a potential reader.



Figure 4. Give me hope not candy (Hiboocha)

The contextual antonymous pair ‘*hope*’ and ‘*candy*’ is introduced into the sentence asyndetically (without conjunctions). Significantly, the word ‘*hope*’, desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfilment (Merriam-Webster), and ‘*candy*’, a sweet food made with sugar or chocolate (Merriam-Webster), are not antonyms, but they set against each other in the context, developing certain antonymous features. In my opinion, ‘*hope*’ embodies the power and strength that can help the younger generation survive and thrive, and as such, it contrasts with ‘*candy*’, which is used metaphorically to represent “sweet lies”, something that distracts people from real, urgent day-to-day problems by pulling the wool over their eyes. The graffitist is quite vocal about the role of youngsters in laying the foundations for a new social and political order. Children are endowed with a clear, comprehensive vision of how the world should be and represent a new, conscious generation that needs real actions and is not going to tolerate beautiful lies.



Figure 5. Make music not war (Hynes, 2020)



Figure 6. Help me make art not violence (Belluteau)

In the above pieces of graffiti, ‘*music*’ and ‘*art*’ stand in sharp contrast to ‘*war*’ and ‘*violence*’, becoming contextual antonyms. We may suggest that the street artists are uneasy about the raging wars and the growing rate of violence in the world. They use allusion to make readers interested in the graffiti by transforming a famous anti-war slogan “*Make love, not war*” that was coined by the hippie generation in the 1960s (Deep Blue, 2010). Significantly, the graffitists offer a viable solution to these acute problems that bring about destruction, death and mourning. The way out of a vicious circle of negativity is through peaceful activities such as art and music since they stir up strong, uplifting emotions and make the world a better place to live in. In this view, one Biblical statement comes to mind: “<...> overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). The graphical part of example 6 is immensely significant, as it depicts a beggar (the hat on the ground testifies to this), but instead of money the person asks to assist him in weeding out violence and probably planting the seeds of artistic beauty that later will produce positive results, because as a global community we have to work closely together towards a common goal since our number one priority is a peaceful, abundant life.

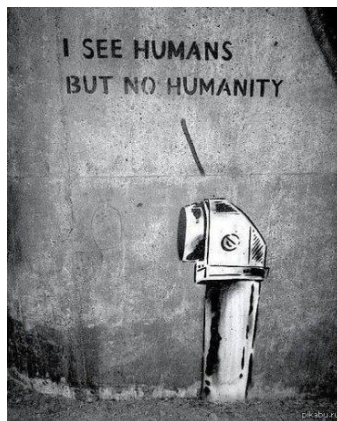


Figure 7. I see humans but no humanity (9gag)

As can be seen from the example, the artist uses two nouns with the same root morpheme: *humans* – a bipedal primate mammal; a person (Merriam-Webster) and *humanity* – people in general; compassionate, sympathetic, or generous behaviour or disposition (Merriam-Webster) and creates a powerful juxtaposition, highlighting the contrast between two seemingly similar concepts. The graffiti discloses the artist's general perspective on humankind, emphasising that we have probably lost our distinguishing feature – the ability to be understanding and kind not only to other living beings' sufferings but also to the sorrows of our own kind. The picture of a periscope reinforces the dramatic effect of the antithesis. It indicates the artist's dissatisfaction with humanity that is, supposedly, moving in the wrong direction and has lost sight of what really matters.

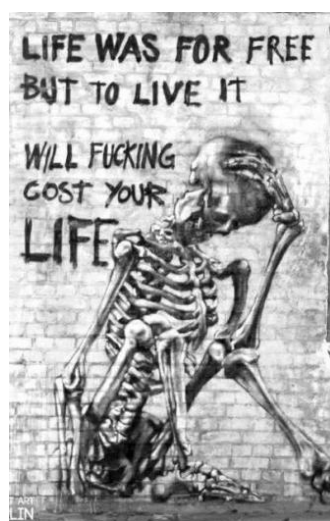


Figure 8. Life was for free but to live it will fucking cost your life (Macrame and skulls)

This antithesis is based on the clash of two ideas – “*Life is free::A normal life costs a lot*”. It should be noted that it is enhanced by framing which is “a type of repetition when <...> the initial parts of a syntactical unit, in most cases of a paragraph, are repeated at the end of it” (Usarov, 2022, p.46). The sharp contrast helps to get a powerful message across to the public: people are born into the world blithe “*tabula rasa*”; life as such is the greatest gift, and it is given for free. However, as time goes by and people grow older, we assimilate into the consumer society and the 24/7 work culture, gradually developing the understanding that everything in this world comes with a price. As tragic as it may seem, satisfaction of our basic needs and innermost desires requires money. As a consequence, in pursuit of money we postpone our life until a later date. Moreover, we get stuck in the rat race and waste precious time, forgetting to live our life to the fullest. The bitterness of the harsh reality is emphasised by the use of the offensive word *fucking* that is illustrative of the overwhelming feeling of anger, frustration and regret that people may have on their deathbed. The graphical part of the graffiti is an intensive symbolic element that greatly contributes to the idea, as the skeleton is depicted in a pose similar to *facepalm*, which is used mainly to express feelings of stupidity and frustration.

Antithesis is generally moulded in parallel construction (parallelism). Parallelism refers to the repetition of sentence structure or word order to achieve a rhythmical effect (Tayeh et al., 2020, p. 367). It is a very powerful foregrounding tool as it highlights crucial points and improves the overall flow of the text, adding to the sense of cohesion and coherence within it, and thus guiding the audience through complex ideas. Parallelism can contribute to the aesthetic appeal of the antithesis, making it more memorable and engaging to a reader.



Figure 9. We can't feed the poor but we can fund a war (Emily, 2019)

Graffiti 9 is illustrative of antithesis that is backed up by parallel construction which generates rhythm and reveals the artist's disapproval of wars and government policy. One more striking thing that catches the eye is alliteration "WE CAN'T **FEED** THE **POOR** BUT WE CAN **FUND** A **WAR**". The similarity of the structure, along with alliteration adds emotional colouring to the words and contributes to the contrast, making it stronger and more vivid. It's worth mentioning that the verbs 'to *feed*' and 'to *fund*' become synonyms in this context, and their choice is not random. The artist employs alliteration to convey the similarity of two processes, as we feed people to keep them alive and the government funds wars to make them last. The cumulative effect brings to the fore pressing social and political problems, producing a strong pragmatic emotional effect. The artist is vocal: the standards of living and quality of life are gradually deteriorating (especially in developing countries) due to a dire economic situation in the world, causing high unemployment rates, inability to meet basic needs such as food, clothes and accommodation, and making millions of people live below the poverty line. Thus, the graffitist expresses his deep concerns about ravaging wars and calls for peace. The analysis of the graphical part of the graffiti, gives me reasons to suggest that it is a clear demonstration of its author's desire to put an end to wars and all the threats they pose, as the boy in the graffiti wears the jacket with the peace symbol ☮ printed on it and the very fact that it is a child not an adult contributes to the significance of the message.

Another means of antithesis enhancement is rhyme. As stated in Encyclopaedia Britannica rhyme is "the correspondence of two or more words with similar-sounding final syllables placed so as to echo one another. Rhyme is used by poets and occasionally by prose writers to produce sounds appealing to the reader's senses and to unify and establish a poem's stanzaic form" ("Rhyme"). Rhyme adds musicality to the prose, making it more pleasant to the ear and memorable.



Figure 10. Respect existence or expect resistance (Twisted Rose)

In the graffiti above, antithesis and full rhyme bring about a far-reaching effect and intensify the idea. Once this phrase was used as a slogan of The Civil Rights Movement that proved to be very catchy and resonated with plenty of people around the world. It is straightforward, thought-provoking and memorable due to its rhyming form and radical juxtaposition of ideas. The graffiti stresses that failure to acknowledge and honour other people's rights and freedoms inevitably leads to resistance because everybody wants equal treatment and recognition of their inherent worth. The message of the graffiti is also reinforced by the graphical part that depicts a part of the face. The angry, disapproving eye expression shows how determined and serious the person is.

The graffiti below illustrates the examples of implicit antithesis.



Figure 11. Born to be Wild by Banksy (ArtStack)

The written part of the graffiti “*Born to be wild*” doesn’t contain any cases of antithesis. Nevertheless, a more cursory glance at it allows us to see the powerful clash between the written constituent and the graphical one. The graffiti depicts a circus bear. A dangerous carnivorous animal, a predator that has not many natural enemies and is born to be wild, is kept as a pet. However, not only the combination of the text and picture but also the colour of the font enhances the antithesis. Red performs few functions in this graffiti. First, as an intense colour it has very high visibility, and thus attracts the recipient’s attention. Second, it is strongly associated with blood, death and The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. A masterly combination of the words and picture creates the antithesis that is brought to the fore by irony. The graffiti provides an insightful instance of the damage done to wildlife and nature and brings up a fundamental question of nature conservation and the way people treat animals.



Figure 12. Go to hell (Benham)

The written part of the graffiti contains an informal phrase that is used to angrily tell someone to go away and leave the person be. The colour of the background is as vocal as the sentence itself since red conjures up a powerful image of blood and splashes around a framed message add vividness to the idea. The graffiti radiates aggression and radicalism. However, the paradoxical thing that boggles the mind is the picture of a little angel. These heavenly creatures from biblical stories are traditionally associated with kindness and righteousness. How can an angel, a God’s servant, the guardian of human beings, send someone to hell? We can only make a wild guess that the artist assumes that he/she is the messenger of free will on earth, similar to angels – messengers of God.

Presumably, the graffiti is the artist's desperate cry from the heart to be left alone because he/she doesn't want to live by the dogmas imposed by modern society.

Conclusions. Taking into consideration the origin of the phenomenon, graffiti can be regarded as one of the oldest forms of art. Although there is a belief that it is just a mere form of vandalism, the findings of the research give us grounds to think otherwise. After a thorough analysis it becomes clear that graffiti, despite the fact that it actually damages public property (walls of residential and public buildings, fences etc.), is placed in the public domain to get through to the vast majority of people and bring up urgent questions concerning political, social and ecological situation in the country/world such as cruelty to animals, public ignorance, indifference and passivity, poverty and growing rate of violence. To achieve this goal street artists often turn to antithesis since the clash of ideas makes graffiti more stunning and expressive. The findings show that antithesis is usually signalled by coordinating conjunctions but / or, with high prevalence of the former, though the cases of asyndetic coordination are also frequent. The study affirms that contextual antonyms dominate over objectively contrasted root ones as they sharply illuminate the difference between opposing phenomena, encouraging to view the problem from a different, unexpected angle. For the artists, who seek to raise public awareness and consciousness about global issues, antithesis becomes a handy means that helps keep the message succinct and to the point as well as eye-catching and memorable. In turn, a comprehensive understanding of the message encoded in graffiti is usually possible after a careful examination of its written and graphical constituents. The research results suggest that rhyme, parallelism, alliteration and framing are used to enhance the overall effect of antithesis.

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