



A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE SPECIFIC LEXICON OF CHARACTER SPEECH IN JOHN STEINBECK'S THE GRAPES OF WRATH.

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the pragmatic functions of specific lexical units used in the speech of characters in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The study explores how regional dialectisms, colloquial expressions, sociolects, emotionally marked vocabulary, and culture-specific lexical items contribute to the construction of character identity and the representation of social realities during the Great Depression. Employing pragmatic and stylistic approaches, the research analyzes selected dialogues from the novel to determine how linguistic choices reflect social status, interpersonal relations, and communicative intentions. The findings demonstrate that Steinbeck strategically utilizes non-standard lexical forms to create authenticity, establish solidarity among characters, express resistance to social injustice, and reinforce the novel's socio-cultural context. The study contributes to literary pragmatics by highlighting the relationship between lexical selection and pragmatic meaning in fictional discourse.

Keywords: *pragmatics, lexicon, character speech, literary discourse, Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, dialect, sociolect, pragmastylistics.*

INTRODUCTION

Language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for constructing social identity and expressing pragmatic meanings in discourse. Contemporary linguistic research emphasizes that lexical competence and



contextual language use are essential components of communicative effectiveness in both educational and literary environments (Usmanova, 2025). The development of vocabulary through authentic communicative contexts enables speakers to convey nuanced meanings and pragmatic intentions more effectively. Set during the Great Depression, the novel portrays the migration of Oklahoma farmers to California and depicts the social, economic, and psychological challenges they encounter. One of the distinguishing features of the novel is Steinbeck's extensive use of regional and colloquial language in character speech. Through the specific lexicon of his characters, Steinbeck recreates the linguistic atmosphere of the American Southwest and provides insight into the worldview of displaced rural communities.

The present study investigates the pragmatic significance of specific lexical items employed by Steinbeck's characters. The research focuses on how lexical choices contribute to meaning construction beyond their literal semantic content and how they function as markers of identity, solidarity, power relations, and emotional expression.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent studies have demonstrated that lexical development should be viewed not merely as vocabulary accumulation but as a multidimensional process involving semantic, pragmatic, and communicative adaptation. According to Usmanova (2025), lexical competence develops through contextualized language use, semantic networking, and pragmatic flexibility, all of which are necessary for successful communication in diverse discourse settings. Furthermore, digital and communicative approaches to language learning reveal that vocabulary acquisition is closely connected with authentic language interaction and contextual meaning construction. Such findings support the pragmatic view that lexical items derive meaning from communicative contexts rather than from isolated semantic definitions.



The relationship between language and literature has long attracted scholarly attention. Pragmatics, as a branch of linguistics, examines language use in context and investigates how speakers convey meanings that extend beyond the literal interpretation of words. According to Austin (1962), linguistic expressions perform actions in addition to conveying information. Building on this idea, Searle (1969) developed speech act theory, emphasizing the communicative functions of language in various contexts.

Leech (1983) introduced the concept of literary pragmatics, arguing that literary texts can be analyzed through pragmatic principles because fictional dialogues often mirror real-life communication. Similarly, Mey (2001) emphasized that pragmatic interpretation depends on social and cultural contexts, making pragmatics particularly useful for analyzing literary discourse.

Studies of Steinbeck's language have primarily focused on stylistic and sociolinguistic aspects. French (1961) noted that Steinbeck's use of dialect contributes significantly to the realism of his narratives. Owens (1985) argued that non-standard language in *The Grapes of Wrath* functions as a marker of social class and regional identity. More recent research has explored how linguistic variation in Steinbeck's works reflects broader issues of power, resistance, and social inequality.

Despite extensive scholarship on Steinbeck's style, relatively few studies have examined the pragmatic functions of specific lexical items in character speech. This article seeks to address this gap by providing a pragmatic analysis of selected lexical features in the novel.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs qualitative textual analysis based on pragmatic and stylistic approaches. The corpus consists of dialogues extracted from *The Grapes of Wrath*. Lexical items were selected according to the following criteria:

- Regional dialect words and expressions.
- Colloquial and informal vocabulary.



- Socially marked lexical units.
- Emotionally expressive lexical items.
- Culture-specific vocabulary.

The analysis focuses on the pragmatic functions performed by these lexical elements within communicative situations. Particular attention is paid to speaker intention, contextual meaning, social relations between interlocutors, and the contribution of lexical choice to characterization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the most prominent features of character speech in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the frequent use of regional dialect forms. Characters commonly employ lexical items such as *ain't*, *fella*, *gonna*, and *ya* instead of their standard equivalents.

For example: "Ain't nobody gonna starve."

The use of *ain't* and *gonna* immediately identifies the speaker as belonging to a rural working-class community. Pragmatically, these forms function as markers of group membership and solidarity. Rather than indicating linguistic deficiency, they signal cultural identity and shared experience among members of the migrant community.

Steinbeck's lexical choices enable readers to recognize social distinctions without explicit authorial commentary. The pragmatic meaning of dialect vocabulary extends beyond denotation, serving as an indicator of collective identity.

The novel contains numerous colloquial expressions that reinforce interpersonal relationships. Words such as *buddy*, *fella*, *folks*, and *kids* occur frequently in conversations among family members and fellow migrants.

For instance: "How you doin', buddy?"

The lexical item *buddy* performs an important pragmatic function by reducing social distance and establishing familiarity. Such expressions contribute to the cooperative atmosphere within the migrant community and strengthen emotional bonds among characters. From a pragmatic perspective, colloquial vocabulary



operates as a positive politeness strategy. It reflects speakers' attempts to maintain social harmony and demonstrate solidarity during periods of hardship.

Steinbeck often employs emotionally charged vocabulary to portray psychological states. During moments of suffering, frustration, or hope, characters use highly expressive lexical items that communicate feelings more effectively than neutral language.

For example: "God Almighty, we got nothin' left."

The phrase combines religious vocabulary with emotional emphasis. Pragmatically, such expressions function as indicators of despair and emotional intensity. The lexical choice allows readers to infer the speaker's psychological condition without explicit narrative explanation. Expressive vocabulary also contributes to empathy by enabling readers to experience the emotional reality of the characters more directly. Many lexical items in the novel carry ideological significance. Characters frequently use words associated with oppression, exploitation, and injustice when discussing banks, landowners, and authorities. Examples include:

- bank monster
- owners
- deputies
- hungry people

These lexical choices create a clear distinction between powerful institutions and marginalized communities. Pragmatically, the vocabulary functions as a means of resistance by expressing negative evaluation and challenging dominant social structures. The metaphorical expression bank monster is particularly significant because it transforms an economic institution into an oppressive living entity. This lexical strategy intensifies criticism and evokes emotional responses from readers.

The findings correspond with contemporary research emphasizing the importance of contextual adaptation and pragmatic flexibility in language use.



According to Usmanova (2025), lexical competence involves not only knowledge of word meanings but also the ability to employ lexical resources appropriately across diverse communicative contexts. This observation is particularly relevant to Steinbeck's characters, whose speech reflects a dynamic interaction between language, social identity, and communicative intention. The novel demonstrates that vocabulary functions as a social and cultural resource through which individuals construct meanings, negotiate relationships, and express their understanding of the world around them.

The analysis reveals that specific lexical units in *The Grapes of Wrath* perform several interconnected pragmatic functions:

Pragmatic Function	Lexical Examples	Communicative Purpose
Identity construction	ain't, gonna, ya	Indicate regional and social background
Solidarity building	buddy, folks, fella	Strengthen interpersonal relations
Emotional expression	God Almighty, nothin'	Convey feelings and attitudes
Social criticism	bank monster, owners	Express resistance and evaluation
Cultural representation	sharecropper, tenant	Reflect historical and social realities

The multifunctionality of lexical choices demonstrates Steinbeck's linguistic mastery and his ability to integrate social, cultural, and psychological dimensions into character speech.

Overall, the analysis confirms that the specific lexicon of character speech in *The Grapes of Wrath* performs multiple interconnected pragmatic functions,



including identity construction, solidarity formation, emotional expression, social evaluation, and cultural representation. The multifunctionality of lexical choices highlights Steinbeck's linguistic craftsmanship and demonstrates how literary language can effectively represent complex social realities through carefully selected linguistic forms.

CONCLUSION

The pragmatic analysis of specific lexicon in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* reveals that lexical choice plays a crucial role in character construction and meaning generation. Dialectal and colloquial vocabulary contributes to authenticity and identity formation, while emotionally expressive and ideologically charged lexical items communicate attitudes, emotions, and social criticism.

The study demonstrates that the pragmatic significance of character speech extends beyond literal semantics. Steinbeck employs specific lexical units strategically to portray social realities, establish interpersonal relationships, and convey implicit meanings associated with power, resistance, and cultural identity. Consequently, the novel serves as a valuable source for examining the interaction between language, society, and literature from a pragmatic perspective.

Future research may expand the analysis by comparing the pragmatic functions of character speech in *The Grapes of Wrath* with those in other Steinbeck novels or by conducting corpus-based investigations of lexical variation in American literary discourse.

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