

Contextual-Semantic and Linguopragmatic Factors in the Typologisation of Symbolic Literary Titles

MAIA GABADADZE

Department of English Philology
Akaki Tsereteli State University

Kutaisi,
GEORGIA

Abstract: - This article investigates the contextual-semantic and linguopragmatic factors underlying the typologisation of symbolic literary titles in British prose of the twentieth century. Three principal types are distinguished and theoretically substantiated: occasional, allusive, and syncretic symbolic titles. The study advances a three-member dynamic model of textual genesis (Word → Detail → Symbol) and demonstrates its validity through close analysis of John Galsworthy's megatext *A Modern Comedy*, comprising *The White Monkey*, *The Silver Spoon*, and *Swan Song*. The findings contribute to title linguistics and literary pragmatics at the anthropocentric-communicative stage of linguistic inquiry.

Key-Words: - symbolic title; occasional title; allusive title; syncretic title; textual genesis; literary pragmatics; Galsworthy; subtextual semantics; British prose; linguopragmatics

Received: June 11, 2025. Revised: October 9, 2025. Accepted: May 11, 2026. Published: June 30, 2026.

1 Introduction

In the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century, authors' attitudes towards literary works underwent a radical transformation: the inner world and spiritual condition of characters, their personalities, dispositions, and fates within the socio-cultural context of society moved to the centre of attention, resulting in the creation of works of a psychological and social character. Concurrently, a decisive shift is observed in the art of titling, both from a structural and a stylistic-semantic perspective. The title became precise and business-like; two or three stimulating words proved sufficient and acceptable, since the reader engaged in the accelerated rhythm of modern life refuses verbose titles and demands their laconic form. For writers, the guiding principle becomes the thesis later so vividly and concisely formulated by Krzhizhanovsky:

"A book is a title fully unfolded; a title is a book compressed into two or three words" (Krzhizhanovsky, 1931).

An analogous idea is developed by Yulia Svatko in her linguophilosophical work *Name as Text and Text as Name*. Consequently, preference was given to the selection of titles capable of conveying the essence of an entire work economically, yet in colours enticing to the reader.

Accordingly, British prose of the twentieth century is characterised by the emergence of titles that offer the reader a transformed idea of the work alongside the author's assessment through the medium of symbols and metaphors [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10].

At the contemporary anthropocentric-communicative stage in the development of linguistic thought, linguistic phenomena are examined against the background of intersubjectivity. In accordance with this, we also associate the emergence of this type of title with the author's communicative-pragmatic and simultaneously aesthetic strategy, the essence of which consists in exerting such an influence upon the reader as to awaken in the latter a desire to participate in the textual world, and to afford the reader—in the process of text reception—the possibility of associative imagination grounded in personal aesthetic cognition and the drawing of corresponding conclusions [11], [12], [13], [14], [15], [16], [17].

As already noted, the present study bases the typologisation of symbolic titles on a number of contextual-semantic and linguopragmatic factors. Accordingly, they are differentiated into occasional, allusive, and syncretic types, which differ from one another both in the linguistic model of textual genesis and in their usage within the text, as well as in their role in the artistic-aesthetic conceptualisation of the work.

(a) Occasional symbolic titles are those titles which acquire symbolic meaning gradually, as a result of multiple repetitions within the text and in parallel with its unfolding, on the basis of interpretations by the characters and/or authorial digressions.

(b) The second type of symbolic title is the allusive title, which functions as a symbol of textual content on the basis of intertextuality, where the creation and reception of one text depends upon knowledge of some other text. Titles of this type include, for example, Kipling's *The Gardener*, Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*, O. Henry's *Mammon and the Archer*, Shaw's *Pygmalion*, and others.

(c) Finally, the third type of symbolic title is constituted by so-called syncretic, two-plane titles, in which both their literal and their figurative, symbolic meanings are simultaneously realised. Such titles include, for example, Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Fowles's *The Ebony Tower*, Waugh's *Decline and Fall*, and others.

Symbolic titles create an extraordinarily interesting subtext, and the correct interpretation of the aesthetic-cognitive information contained within them is possible only after traversing a certain receptive path in prospective and retrospective directions; it is wholly dependent upon the reader's intellectual level and capacity for interpretive-analytical thinking.

2 The Textual Genesis of Occasional Symbolic Titles

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Occasional symbolic titles are defined as those titles which acquire symbolic meaning gradually, as a result of multiple repetitions within the text and in parallel with its unfolding, taking into account the interpretations of the characters and/or authorial digressions. It follows from the foregoing that occasional symbolic titles constitute contextually determined titles.

The generalisation of the textual genesis of occasional symbolic titles is grounded in the theory of artistic detail and verbal symbol. Accordingly, under certain conditions—specifically as a result of multiple repetitions within the text—a word possesses the capacity to undergo, within the bounds of the artistic context, such a semantic transformation that it successively becomes an artistic detail and then a symbol. This means that the artistic detail represents the contextual transformation of a word as a lexical unit, while the symbol is the result of that transformation. The sequence of the aforementioned

transformations is represented in this linguistic conception by a three-member dynamic model:

Word → Detail → Symbol

This signifies that there is an internal content-related heredity of the given complex sign's substantive aspect, on the basis of which a subtextual semantics is created that is anthropocentric in nature at the level of the artistic detail, and becomes existential in its depth upon transformation into a symbol. In other words, a word initially cited in its direct meaning alongside the object it denotes, upon becoming an artistic detail, undergoes such a transformation that it acquires anthropocentric subtextuality, reflecting the character's inner world. At the final stage, when the detail transforms into a symbol and the author brings it forth as a title, the subtextual semantics of that same word deepens internally in such a manner that it passes into existence—that is, into infinity—so that it reflects not only the inner world of one character but the inner world of the entire society of which it represents a symbolic generalisation [18].

The reception of a literary text is spiral in its essence, and always constitutes a synthesis of prospective and retrospective stages of the reader's mental activity (Genette, Barthes, Fisscher, Lotman, Kukharenko, and others), as a result of which it becomes possible adequately to perceive those subtextual semantic transformations upon which the process of textual symbolisation is grounded.

2.2 Analysis of Galsworthy's *A Modern Comedy*

Occasional titles are examined on the basis of the material of the social-psychological megatext *A Modern Comedy* by the English realist writer John Galsworthy, which consists of three thematically interconnected novels. It is our view that the title of each of them—*The White Monkey*, *The Silver Spoon*, and *Swan Song*—constitutes a classic example of an occasional symbolic title, the synthesis of whose subtextual semantics undergoes such a transformation that ultimately a global symbolisation of the entire trilogy's content takes place within the socio-cultural context of England and its society in the 1930s of the twentieth century.

The *A Modern Comedy* trilogy constitutes a continuation of the *Forsyte Saga*, which narrates the life of the Forsyte family against the background of the socio-cultural context of England. Each novel of this megatext criticises the vices of the upper strata of bourgeois society—so-called 'Forsyteism'—the

essence of which consists in the fetishisation of property.

What is that which is specifically 'Forsyte-esque'? The writer identified the essence of bourgeois morality and its product—that is, the personality raised according to its norms—and called it the 'man of property,' which became the title of the first book of his trilogy. Galsworthy regards the family as the basic cell of society, the characteristics of which are conditioned by the socio-cultural specificity of the corresponding epoch. As young Jolyon notes in his conversation with Bosinney:

"We are, of course, all of us the slaves of property, and I admit that it's a question of degree, but what I call a 'Forsyte' is a man who is decidedly more than less a slave of property. He knows a good thing, he knows a safe thing, and his grip on property—it doesn't matter whether it be wives, houses, money, or reputation—is his hallmark." (J. Galsworthy, *The Man of Property*, p. 212)

The Forsytes are neither creators nor makers of anything—no member of their family has ever set their hand to creating anything. Yet they strive to acquire and possess what has been created by others. As the author states, the Forsytes are the pillars of society, the cornerstones of convention. The classic embodiment of Forsyteism is Soames, a successful solicitor for whom the greatest passion in life is property and art—painting, which he appropriates as his possession.

2.3 The White Monkey

What is the textual genesis of this novel's symbolic title—*The White Monkey*—and how does it gradually transform from a substantive phrasal noun into a verbal symbol laden with subtextual semantics? In the 299-page book, the word combination 'the white monkey' is mentioned in 20 episodes. The author first employs this phrase on page 88 in its direct substantive meaning, to denote the painting of a white monkey that Soames had seen in the room of his dying cousin George. The author devotes a long and evocative paragraph to the description of the painting:

"The bedroom he now entered was in curious contrast... Over the fireplace was a single picture... A large whitish sidelong monkey, holding the rind of a squeezed fruit in its outstretched paw. Its whiskered face looked back at him with brown, almost human eyes." (Galsworthy, 1976, p. 88)

After lengthy deliberation, Soames's thoughts return to the painting: "If I can get hold of that white monkey, I will." (Galsworthy 1976: 90). He offers his own interpretation: "The monkey's eyes, the squeezed-out fruit—was life all a bitter jest and George deeper than himself?" (*ibid.*, p. 90).

Soon *Fleur* is visited by the artist Aubrey Greene. His assessment of the painting is existential in its semantics:

"Why, it's a perfect allegory, sir! Eat the fruits of life, scatter the rinds, and get copped doing it. When they're still, monkey's eyes are the human tragedy incarnate... He thinks there's something beyond, and he's sad or angry because he can't get at it. That picture ought to be in the British Museum, sir, with the label: 'Civilization, caught out.'" (p. 141)

Throughout the entire novel one feels that the painting is one of the acting persons. It is not merely an ornamental object in the interior but a companion to the principal characters' lives. *Fleur*, having hung the painting on the wall of the drawing room, recalled her unfulfilled love for Jon and compared herself to the monkey: "Since she couldn't have John, what did it matter—Wilfrid or Michael, or both, or neither? Eat the orange in her hand, and throw away the rind!" (p. 145).

Gradually the painting of the white monkey becomes a kind of symbol for almost every principal character in the novel and their lifestyle. Michael Mont, reflecting upon the fate of England with respect to the Chinese philosophy symbolised by the painting, characterises the young generation as quick, clever, self-assured yet dissatisfied—a generation that has lost interest in religion, traditions, property, and even beauty itself.

Thus it may be concluded that in the novel's symbolic title, the conceptual essence of the work is given subtextually, accruing to the reader in parallel with the unfolding of the text as a result of traversing the path that accompanies the aesthetic reception of the literary text.

2.4 The Silver Spoon

The same model generates the subtextual semantics of the symbolic title of the second novel of the trilogy—*The Silver Spoon*. The author employed the words of the English saying 'born with a silver spoon in one's mouth,' meaning to be born wealthy. This too is Galsworthy's symbolic generalised characterisation of England in the 1920s–30s, its young generation, political circles, and upper strata of society, upon whom a life of ease had been bestowed.

The central figure of the novel is again *Fleur* Forsyte, a typical representative of the young generation of 'proprietors,' spoiled and egotistical. Her father, Soames Forsyte, himself acknowledges that it was he who placed the 'silver spoon' in his newborn daughter's mouth: "He was staring at a silver spoon. He himself had put it in her mouth at birth." (Galsworthy, *The Silver Spoon*, 1976: 53).

Michael Mont, reflecting upon the fate of England, metaphorically imagines the country with a silver spoon in its mouth—a country that no longer has the teeth to hold the spoon, yet has no wish to part with it. His self-criticism extends to the entire English upper society: "Members of Parliament, and ladies of fashion, like himself and Fleur, simpering and sucking silver spoons, and now and then dropping spoons and simper, and going for each other like Kilkenny cats!" (p. 84).

At the end of the novel, the author conveys his appeal to the young generation metaphorically and symbolically in a scene where the nanny encourages the young child of Fleur and Michael to learn to use the silver spoon—a symbolic call for the future generation of high society to make wise use of their wealth and to govern the country well.

2.5 Swan Song

The symbolism of the title of the trilogy's final novel, *Swan Song*, is not as clearly and unambiguously delineated as that of the preceding two. Nevertheless, 'Swan Song'—which denotes the pessimistic and tragic conclusion or termination of something—appears more than once in the pages of the novel.

This culminating novel of the Forsyte cycle depicts the collapse that followed all the attempts of high society—of the 'proprietors'—to establish equilibrium between their own lifestyle and the new reforms. Fleur, strolling in the park, sees swans that remind her of her unfulfilled love. Soames too reflects upon his numerous family and their fate. The swans are mentioned for the last time at the end of the novel, when they fly in an indeterminate direction together with Soames, who stands at the threshold of death.

Swan Song is itself the poetic expression of the author's own thoughts—the symbolic designation of the fact that a centuries-old history and tradition are being surrendered and departing, that the England of the Forsytes will never return. The author achieves a generalisation of all three symbolic titles within a single mega-metaphorical title—*A Modern Comedy*—by means of which he offers a symbolic characterisation of England and its society in the 1920s–30s of the twentieth century. *A Modern Comedy*, with its existential subtextual semantics, underscores three profound moments:

(a) The dissatisfaction of the post-war generation and their attitude toward life, the essence of which is expressed in their striving to receive from life everything they desire, and to discard what they do not want (*The White Monkey*);

(b) The inertia and idleness of this generation, conditioned by their material security from birth (*The Silver Spoon*);

(c) The inevitable end of the epoch and society, which is existential in its scope and depth (*Swan Song*).

3 Conclusion

The present study has demonstrated that symbolic literary titles constitute a richly stratified linguistic and aesthetic phenomenon whose typologisation is most productively grounded in contextual-semantic and linguopragmatic factors. Three principal types of symbolic title have been distinguished and theoretically substantiated: occasional, allusive, and syncretic.

The analysis of occasional symbolic titles, conducted on the material of Galsworthy's megatext *A Modern Comedy*, has confirmed the validity of the three-member dynamic model of textual genesis (Word → Detail → Symbol). The titles *The White Monkey*, *The Silver Spoon*, and *Swan Song* exemplify with particular clarity how a symbolic title functions not merely as a label but as a concentrated semantic nucleus of the entire work, encoding within itself the author's aesthetic-cognitive and communicative-pragmatic strategy.

The reader's reception of occasional symbolic titles is shown to be spiral in nature, proceeding through prospective and retrospective stages of aesthetic cognition. The symbolic charge of such titles is not immediately accessible but accrues gradually through engagement with the text, rendering the reader an active co-participant in the construction of meaning.

The findings of the present study contribute to the broader field of title linguistics and literary pragmatics, offering a theoretically grounded typology applicable to the analysis of symbolic titles in British and world prose. Further research may productively extend this framework to allusive and syncretic symbolic titles, as well as to comparative cross-cultural and cross-generic investigations of literary titling.

References:

- [1] Fowler, R., and Barker, A. Thematics and the novel. *Style*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1974, pp. 349–367.
- [2] Kozminski, A. K. Titles in literary communication. *Semiotica*, Vol. 20, No. 1–2, 1977, pp. 53–72.
- [3] Hartley, J., and Truman, D. The effects of headings in text. *Applied Ergonomics*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1983, pp. 122–131.

- [4] Brooks, P. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1983.
- [5] Landauer, T. K., Foltz, P. W., and Laham, D. Introduction to latent semantic analysis. *Discourse Processes*, Vol. 25, No. 2–3, 1998, pp. 259–284.
- [6] Kaida, L. G. *Avtorskaya pozitsiya v publitsistike*. Izd-vo MGU, Moscow, 1979.
- [7] Bliskovskiy, Z. D. *Muky slova*. Radianska shkola, Kyiv, 1981.
- [8] Denisova, T. N. *Roman i romanist*. Dnipro, Kyiv, 1982.
- [9] Kozhina, M. N. *Stilistika russkogo yazyka*, 2nd ed. Prosveshchenie, Moscow, 1986.
- [10] Barthes, R. *The Semiotic Challenge*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994.
- [11] Black, E. *Pragmatic Stylistics*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006.
- [12] Aijmer, K., and Stenström, A.-B. (eds.) *Discourse Patterns in Spoken and Written Corpora*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2004.
- [13] Levinson, S. C. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.
- [14] Mardy, C. Titles, texts and interpretation. *Poetics Today*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1980, pp. 35–50.
- [15] Klein, W. The present perfect puzzle. *Language*, Vol. 72, No. 3, 1996, pp. 525–552.
- [16] Makarov, M. L. *Osnovy teorii diskursa*. Gnozis, Moscow, 2003.
- [17] Rudnitskaya, E. L. Zagolovok khudozhestvennogo teksta. *Russkii yazyk za rubezhom*, No. 4, 1981, pp. 74–78.
- [18] Mataradze, M. *Simvoluri dasathaurebis lingvuri modelireba*. Tbilisi State University Press, Tbilisi, 2005.
- [19] Krzhizhanovsky, S. D. *Poetika zaglaviiy*. Nikitinskie subbotniki, Moscow, 1931.
- [20] Korytna, L. M. *Zaholovok v systemi suchasnoho ukrainskoho tekstu*. Osnova, Kharkiv, 1996.
- [21] Veselova, N. A. *Zaglavie literaturnogo-khudozhestvennogo teksta*. Tverskoi gosudarstvennyi universitet, Tver', 1998.
- [22] Lamzina, A. V. Zagolovok. In: *Vvedenie v literaturovedenie*, ed. L. V. Chernets. Vysshaya shkola, Moscow, 1999, pp. 94–107.
- [23] Babicheva, M. E. *Zagolovok kak element teksta*. Nauka, Moscow, 2000.
- [24] Voitkevich, N. N. *Zaglavie khudozhestvennogo proizvedeniya*. Nauka, Moscow, 2007.
- [25] Richie, D., Suster, M., and Allen, J. Symbolic meaning and narrative titles. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2008, pp. 1–20.
- [26] Bock, M. Title comprehension and text processing. *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 2010, pp. 601–615.
- [27] Lorch, R. F., Lemaire, B., and Grant, A. Titles and text comprehension: A review. *Educational Psychology Review*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2011, pp. 97–123.
- [28] Fomenko, I. V. O poetike zaglaviya. In: *Literaturnyi tekst: Problemy i metody issledovaniya*. Tverskoi gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1983, pp. 30–48.
- [29] Novikova, M. A. *Prekrasnozvoriya*. Dnipro, Kyiv, 1986.