‘Cloning Words’: Euphemism, Neologism and Dysphemism as Literary Devices in Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go

Anjali Pandey

Department of English, Salisbury University, Salisbury, Maryland, USA

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‘Cloning Words’: Euphemism, Neologism and Dysphemism as Literary Devices in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*

Anjali Pandey*

*Department of English, Salisbury University, Salisbury, Maryland, USA*

This essay examines the theme and trope of ‘copies’ in Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go*. Whatever one’s final reading of the novel, the theme and thread of copy, copies, copying and copied is never far off. In a semantic sense then, the act of ‘copying’, both as a verb and the indexing of ‘copies’ as a noun, pervades every element of the literary landscape of *Never Let Me Go* and demands closer linguistic rather than mere literary inspection. Kazuo Ishiguro innovatively replicates this dual strategy of thematic and lexical inscription of the trope of ‘copying’ via a creative use of lexical semantics. Like Ishiguro’s clones whose organ parts have to be viewed as wholes, the lexical parts of *Never Let Me Go* make sense only as a whole.

**Keywords:** Kazuo Ishiguro; *Never Let Me Go*; lexical semantics; linguistics; euphemism; neologism; dysphemism; transnational literature

The linguistics of cloned words

The trope of ‘copies’ pervades the entire literary landscape of Kazuo Ishiguro’s powerful proleptic novel, *Never Let Me Go* (2005). As ‘a work of art with multiple iterations’ (Walkowitz 2007, 222) – both a novel, and more recently, a critically acclaimed film – this literary text demands a detailed linguistic analysis. None would dispute that on an obvious level *Never Let Me Go* is a novel about cloning. The three protagonists in the novel, Kathy, Ruth and Tommy, cloned copies in and of themselves, are either in search of copies of people (what readers are euphemistically told to be Ruth’s ‘possible’ in one instance), copies of things lost (a stolen tape in the case of Kathy), or replications of aesthetic creation (copies of animal drawings painstakingly duplicated by Tommy in a bid to get a ‘deferral’ from death). But it is not just the trope of ‘copying’, as an action, or of ‘copies’ as products, which forms a recurring and interruptive literary promontory in the landscape of the novel that confounds readers.

This Booker Prize shortlisted novel could indeed be read on another level as a novel about the tripartite stages of human life – what Britzman (2006) describes as ‘an allegory of psychic development’ (307), including innocence (childhood), experimentation (youth) and knowledge (adulthood) – in essence the ephemeral, and ‘over-copied’ and over-replicated nature of human life. *Never Let Me Go* could also be read as a novel about replicated and persistent problems the world over – which Roos tersely (2008) summarises as ‘the stark division between “them” and “us”’

*Email: AXPANDEY@salisbury.edu*
which are currently common experiences all over the world’ (47). The novel can be seen as a treatment of biopower’s binary divisions of ‘persons on the one hand and mere bodies on the other’ (Jennings 2010, 18), of ‘the relative status’ (Griffin 2009, 653) of clones on the one hand and humans on the other, or as ‘a replicate being, whose fate as a copy is to copy and replace a human part’ (Britzman 2006, 308). The motif of personal and spatial binaries (Roos 2008) copies and inserts itself at several points in the novel. For other literary critics, the story is yet another token, another copy, of an ancient human problem: a love triangle, or what some have described as ‘a rivalrous triangle’ (Robbins 2007, 296).

The notion of ‘tokens’ and ‘types’ seen as ‘useful’ in a literary sense (Walkowitz 2007, 222) prompts critics like Fluet (2007) to view Never Let Me Go as a modern saga about replicating and replicated ‘interiority’ (280). Walkowitz (2007) astutely notes the novel’s dual fascination with and a disdain ‘for “copied” things’ (225) – a word she argues ‘is studded’ and ‘ubiquitous’ throughout the novel (225). Whatever the final reading of the novel, the theme and thread of copy, copies, copying and copied is never far off. In a semantic sense then, the act of ‘copying’ – both as a verb and the indexing of ‘copies’ as a noun – pervades every element of Never Let Me Go and demands closer linguistic rather than mere literary inspection.

The theme of ‘copying’ as an act, as a metonym or synecdoche and ‘copies’ as a product, is not inserted by Kazuo Ishiguro into the text of Never Let Me Go merely as a thematic trope, but rather, is simultaneously inscribed into the novel’s textuality via an innovative process of lexical ‘copying’ – a morpho-semantic process whose workings are the subject of scrutiny of this essay both for what they tell us about the novel and for what they offer in terms of an interdisciplinary application of linguistics in the study and understanding of transnational literature. Ishiguro astutely uses both a top-down rendering of the theme of copying at the very same time as he uses a bottom-up lexical indexing to reiterate his trope of ‘copying’ in the novel. This literary and linguistic marriage is on par with the human genome itself which, as explained by Anft (2010), works simultaneously both as an act and product of ‘copying’ and ‘copies’ respectively – a ‘copying’ of parts to create the whole: ‘Our research confirms that repetitive DNA sequences don’t stay in the same place – they move around in the human genome and insert copies of themselves here and there. They can also mobilize – ‘copy and paste’ – other sequences’ (5).

Kazuo Ishiguro innovatively replicates this dual strategy of thematic and lexical inscription of the trope of ‘copying’ through a creative use of lexical semantics – in particular, by an adept exploitation of the tripartite strategies of lexical meaning: polysemy, neologism and euphemism. These three lexical strategies have an intended semantic output of creating oppositional meaning, namely, antonymy, irony and dysphemism. With a systematic use of these three morpho-semantic strategies, Ishiguro creates cloned copies of words from originals and cleverly manages to provoke ‘an alienation effect’ through ‘an uncommon use of common words’ (Griffin 2009, 651). Like the infertile clones in his novel who bear a superficial resemblance to the ‘models’ from which they have been created, the synthetic synonyms ‘copied’ in Ishiguro’s text, while bearing etymological affinity to the semantic roots from which they have been derived, function as cloned lexical copies – polysemes in the strictest of semiotic senses – and like all polysemes encode a duality of literary and contextual signification. Eventually, these linguistic DNA sequences which Ishiguro creates in Never Let Me Go offer a semantic signification wholly diaphoric in meaning from the original semantic sense from which these multifarious clone words are ‘copied’. Like the
clones in the novel, these neologisms exist for a purpose—a ‘donation’ of new Ishiguro meaning—one which prods consuming readers to cross the realm from euphemism to dysphemism in the examination of an important, globally-relevant issue of legalised bio-engineering. We now turn to that analysis.

**Unpacking Ishiguro’s neologisms: nominal copying**

One of the most powerful ways of getting at Ishiguro’s strategies of meaning is through a lexical analysis. Critics have argued that Ishiguro’s novel is different from other science fiction novels in its absence of overt neologism. Griffin (2009) even goes so far as to argue:

*Finally, Never Let Me Go does not, as is common in science fiction, make use of an invented, specialist vocabulary that references its own scienticity through words that connote expert knowledge and technicality, that establish significant changes in environment, scientific and or technological practice through neologisms designed to signify these changes. Ishiguro does not take that particular verbal path.* (649–50, emphasis added)

This essay contends that contrary to Griffin’s claim, Ishiguro does indeed take the path of linguistic neologism in arriving at his intended meaning. Rather than invent new words, however, Ishiguro uses known words neologistically so that rather than bear their traditional denotative signification, his ‘known’ lexemes function as linguistic chameleons—signifying a multiplicity of ‘oppositional’ semantic hues in the contexts in which they are sighted by readers. By carefully juxtaposing the denotive intent of words in carefully constructed linguistic contexts, Ishiguro successfully manages to create powerful contextual connotations which provide readers with ample evidence of a new polysemic intent related to, but very different from, the word from which the polyseme is ‘copied’.

No word in the novel evokes this semantic intent more powerfully than the lexeme ‘guardian’. In her analysis of the novel, Roos (2008) notes that most of the lives of the two protagonists, Kathy and Tommy, revolves around interrogating and discovering truths from their ‘mysterious guardians’ (45). How does Ishiguro manage to create such a sinister semantic sense in readers from a word as seemingly innocuous as ‘guardian’? Let us unpack the cline of polysemous clone-words that Ishiguro creates in the text to understand how his tokens of the word ‘guardian’ function as literary devices both to inscribe and to index his overarching trope of ‘copies’ and of the ‘copying’ of ‘parts’ in the service of ‘wholes’. While this lexical item does share an affiliation with the dictionary denotation of the word, its use in the novel soon acquires antonymic overtones.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* (2004) defines ‘guardian’ as ‘One who guards, protects or preserves; a keeper, a defender’, with the specialised legal definition being ‘one who has or is by law entitled to the custody of the person or property (or both) of an infant or other person legally incapable of managing his own affairs’. In Ishiguro’s polysemous reiterations of the word ‘guardian’, two related semantic processes seem to be at work. First, we see a narrowing of the meaning of the word to result in a lexical meaning whereby ‘a more general sense of the word has been taken over by a particular one’ (Hebron 2004, 138). Each successive encounter with the word ‘guardian’ in the novel moves the lexeme from its usual denotative meaning, to a narrower, sentry or sentinel semantic sense, related to the notion of a ‘guard’. 
After all, there is ample lexical proof provided in the text of the ostracised and fortified grounds in which the ‘students’ are ‘safe-guarded’. There is ‘a wire mesh boundary with the garden’ (47), and a ‘gate itself which was a fair distance off...’ (34). We are told of the students’ restricted rules of movement, access and their carefully monitored mobility, and Kathy tells readers of a path she likes but where, she confesses, ‘I was never sure if it was out of bounds’ (44). We are further apprised of the students’ awareness of permissible and impermissible boundaries when Kathy says, ‘If, say you were somewhere you shouldn’t be in the main house or the grounds, and you heard a guardian coming, you could often hide somewhere’ (43). It is through such linguistic manipulations of morpho-semantic meaning that Ishiguro generates the prescient sense of irony pervading his entire novel.

An examination of some of the numerous lexical instantiations of this word shows ‘guardian’ being used with a number of polysemous attachments ranging from ‘comforter’, ‘caregiver’ and ‘teacher’ – what The Oxford English Dictionary defines as ‘protecting tutelary – conceived as watching over or protecting a particular person or place’ – to a staff-hierarchy reminiscent of a state-penitentiary, with its own rigid protocol of ‘unnerving’ surveillance. This latter meaning bears an unsettling resemblance to an institutionalised system of guarding – an uncanny affinity to internment – in short, a segregated, hierarchical, formalised system of incarceration. What is particularly salient about Ishiguro’s cloned words is his use of ‘complex instances of polysemy’ whereby ‘two main meanings seem equally valid’ (Hebron 2004, 145). In the case of ‘guardian’, there is both a positive sense of the word, as well as a negative sense of the word, examples of which are provided in Figure 1 in the form of a semantic branching diagram to indicate ‘shifted denotative senses’ (Hebron 2004, 135).

Figure 1 demonstrates pictorially the gradations of meaning encoded in the word as used in the novel which provides semantic evidence for why readers soon begin to view the ‘guardians’ with scepticism. In the first third of the novel, readers pick up on the duality of meanings encoded in this linguistic chameleon of a word. This duality of connotational complexity prompts readers to engage in a ‘slow reading’ (Britzman 2006, 310), which in classic Saussurian terms is ‘the consequence of the signifier’ taking on the meaning of its contextual signification (Britzman 2006, 310).

Figure 1. Complex synonymy.
The eventual effect of these ‘chameleon-like words’ is perplexing. Britzman records the psychodynamics of these words on readers by saying, ‘Then, the dilemma of slow readers is that they never let the word go because they will garble it, mistake it for something else, or worry about the direction the next word may take them’ (310), evidence enough that in this novel, it is diction that bears the dictum.

Such examples confirm indeed that ‘texts come to us mediated by existing frameworks of reception and interpretation’ (Damrosch 2003, 295). In what must be a deliberate and innovative literary move, Ishiguro successfully manages to inscribe the notion of clones at both a deductive as well as an inductive level – thematically as well as lexically – as synonymy, and eventually antonymy – as examined below.

**Constructing semantic pejoration through lexical tokens**

Eventually, the word ‘guardian’ in its multiple iterations in the text acquires a sense of pejoration – a semantic process whereby words ‘take on negative associations, which become so strong that they drag the denotation down with them’ (Hebron 2004, 140). The readers are given ample evidence of the consequences awaiting those ‘students’ who seek freedom from the captivity and internment of Hailsham’s ‘guardians’ and cross its forbidden borders. Young Kathy parenthetically recounts the consequences in the form of a widely-circulating school ‘myth’:

> She’d been a Hailsham student until one day she’d climbed over a fence just to see what it was like outside. This was a long time before us, when the guardians were much stricter, cruel even, and when she tried to get back in, she wasn’t allowed. She kept hanging around outside the fences, pleading to be let back in, but no one let her. Eventually, she’d gone off somewhere out there, something had happened and she’d died. (50)

The eventual effect of such polysemes of imprisonment occurs when readers are proffered even more gruesome details regarding what happens to those ‘students’ who attempt escape from the bounded grounds of Hailsham. Again, Kathy recounts the details:

> There were all kinds of horrible stories about the woods. Once, not so long before we all got to Hailsham, a boy had had a big row with his friends and run off beyond the Hailsham boundaries. His body had been found two days later, up in those woods, tied to a tree with the hands and feet chopped off. (50)

Other hints of the macabre surface at various points in the novel. One guardian, while telling the students that ‘It’s just as well that the fences at Hailsham aren’t electrified’ (78), is also quick to acknowledge death euphemistically: ‘You get terrible accidents sometimes’ (78). This confession leaves the young Kathy too terrified to ask any further questions, a fear she passes on to her readers.

It is no wonder, then, that eventually, the various tokens – the countless copies – of the word ‘guardian’ take on an ironic, even antonym-like twist. For instance, Kathy confesses, ‘Miss Emily, our head guardian, was older than the others. […] We were all pretty scared of her and didn’t think of her the way we did the other guardians’ (39). Perhaps this is what Jennings (2010) means when he refers to the guardian-guarded, ‘closed and narrowly bounded space of Hailsham’ (18) to be ‘ubiquitously entrapping’ (16). The ‘unnerving’ sense of trust that the ‘students’ of
Hailsham have for their captor-guardians is soon apparent to readers – a world in which surveillance continues beyond the confines of the bound and guarded school, requiring signing-in after outings, prohibitions against visiting ‘carers’ who are not supposed to have flats of their own and ‘wire-mesh fences’ barricading care-centres (280).

In the final pages of the novel, Ruth confesses to both Kathy and Tommy that getting the address of Madame ‘wasn’t easy’ (233), and adds ‘It took me a long time, and I ran a few risks’ (233). One wonders what the consequences of being found out are. Soon, the word ‘guardian’ and the world inhabited by the protagonists acquire a sense of something ‘dangerous, secretive, paranoid and persecutory’ (Britzman 2006, 309).

In the interests of space, we are unable to analyse the following neologistic use of words whose polysemous tokens acquire similar antonymic iterations in the text, such as ‘carers’, ‘students’, ‘collections’, ‘Exchanges’, ‘madame’, ‘veterans’, ‘courses’, ‘trainings’, ‘possibles’, ‘deferrals’ and ‘completing’, to name a few of Ishiguro’s extensive neologisms, or what Kemp (2005) has called ‘innocuous words which take on sinister overtones’ (1). Ishiguro’s meticulous use of lexical semantics has its intended potent literary effect. Griffin (2009) eloquently describes in powerful terms this linguistically induced literary effect: ‘And just as the clones keep “an eye out for ‘possibles’” […] so the reader, stung into the alienation effect provoked by the uncommon use of common words, keeps an eye out for the differences and sameness that are at the heart of this novel’ (652).

It is encounters such as this with the words ‘carer’ which like the word ‘guardian’ move Ishiguro’s synthetically derived polysemes from the semantic realm of synonymy to antonymy. They thus resemble what Justice (2004) calls ‘scalar or gradable antonyms’, that is words representing the opposite ends of a scale with the existence of many possibilities in between’ (279). The eventual output of such an astute use of lexemes is an intended irony as readers ‘interpret a word as meaning the opposite of its usual meaning’ (Hebron 2004, 151). Eventually, for readers, the lexical phrasing of the stative use of the term ‘donation’ – a semantic trick conjuring up the monetary sense of the word, of volitionally giving up something desirable – takes on an opposite, even poisonous semantic hue. It becomes antonymic. Ishiguro prods readers to ‘see’ the ‘organic’ sense in which the word is really being used – a meaning in which created beings are coerced through state-mandated ‘notices’ to give up organ after organ until they can give no more. The intended ironic and antonymic meaning of the word in the novel is soon made apparent. Eventually, the ‘volitional’ altruistic act of ‘donating’ organs is seen for the act that it really is – not a donation, not a gift, but rather, as an obscene theft. Ultimately, in Never Let Me Go, guardians are no longer safe-keepers, but guards, carers are no longer tender, but accomplices in murder, and donations are no longer voluntary, but coerced. This is how Ishiguro exploits lexical parts in the service of syntactic wholes and how he uses linguistic potency to achieve literary effect.

Euphemism as lexical and literary device: constructing the tokens of lies

The novel is replete with lexical and thematic euphemism. Tommy is quick to postpone talk of donations saying, ‘So it occurs to me she’s talking about later, you know about after we leave here’ (108). Kathy describes a donor on his deathbed in
the following euphemistic terms – ‘He must have known he wasn’t going to make it . . . He knew he was close to completing . . . ’ (5) – while Kathy describes Ruth’s pain after her first organ donation in vague pronominal terms: ‘and now she was over the worst of it’ (17). In their extensive discussion of the difference between orthophemism (straight talking), euphemism (censored talk) and dysphemism (derogatory talk), authors Allan and Burridge (2004) point out that euphemisms are ‘typically more colloquial and figurative or indirect’ and as speech acts ‘arise from conscious or unconscious self-censoring’ in a bid to ‘avoid the speaker being embarrassed and or offending the hearer or some third party’ (33).

Euphemisms abound in Never Let Me Go. Our introduction to the aftermath of organ donating is verbalised in elusive terms as ‘What’s going to happen to us one day. Donations and all that’ (29). This is seen again in ‘About how we weren’t taught enough about donations and the rest of it’ (30) or ‘We still didn’t discuss the donations and all that went with them’ (84). We soon find the clones using invented euphemisms as when they resort to the ‘closeted’, with the hidden metaphor of umbrellas – a neologistic euphemism – for homosexuality, and a classic instantiation of invented ‘euphemistic dysphemism’ (Allan and Burridge 2004, 39). Kathy uses both the term and a euphemism in her descriptions, while also ‘meta-referencing’ (McDonald 2007, 79) to speak directly to the reader:

Gay sex, incidentally, was something we were even more confused about. For some reason, we called it ‘umbrella sex’; if you fancied someone your own sex, you were ‘an umbrella.’ I don’t know how it was where you were . . . (96)

Euphemisms serve as alternatives to a ‘dispreferred expression’ (Allan and Burridge 2004, 32). Kathy’s pain of loss, and her refusal to acknowledge the truth prompts her to use euphemisms as her speech-act of choice. Despite all the death in the novel, not once is the word used. Kathy describes Ruth’s death euphemistically: ‘. . . and especially now Ruth has gone’ (76); ‘I feel sad she’s gone’ (235); ‘The very last time I saw her’ (235); ‘. . . she wasn’t going to make it’ (235); ‘Tommy aren’t you glad Ruth completed before finding out everything we did in the end?’ (284); ‘I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy . . .’ (286); and finally, ‘a couple of weeks after I heard Tommy had completed . . .’ (287).

Our introduction of Kathy begins with euphemisms. She describes her role as ‘carer’ of clone donors. The preparation for organ harvests from donors on their fourth and final organ donations is narrated entirely in euphemistic terms that are spatially distant from the body (O’Grady et al. 2010, 233):

My donors have always tended to do much better than expected. Their recovery times have been impressive, and hardly any of them have been classified as ‘agitated,’ even before fourth donation. Okay, may be I am boasting now. But it means a lot to me, being able to do my work well, especially that bit about my donors staying ‘calm’. (3)

Kemp (2005) alludes to this potent use of euphemism on the part of Ishiguro’s protagonist, Kathy, saying: ‘terminology such as “baffling”, “wasn’t clear” and “couldn’t fathom” cast a haze over events. Uncertainty signifiers – “maybe”, “somehow”, “perhaps” – work overtime’ (1). In linguistic terms, this would be classified as a careful use of ‘spatial deixtics’ (O’Grady et al. 2010, 233) which Kathy uses to distance herself from the truth of cloning.
Dictating the truth through diction

Few critics have noted the intentional manner in which Ishiguro seems to use the ‘lies’ of euphemism to hint at the ‘truth’ of dysphemism regarding cloning. Walkowitz (2007) proffers a more thematic reading claiming that Kathy is an ‘unwitting accomplice to the organ donation system [which] is obscured by the aleatory style and vague diction of her narration’ (224). I argue that Ishiguro’s juxtaposition of actual euphemism, far from being an accidental stylistic augmentation, is an intentional linguistic and lexical act that induces necessary dysphemism against such an industry.

Consequently, while Kathy consistently uses euphemisms, adamantly visualising her world through ambiguity, Ruth’s linguistic choices prompt in readers an opposite effect – a move from the realm of vague euphemia to dysphemia. We see a foreshadowing of such lexical use in Ruth’s outburst at not finding her ‘possible’ – a tirade which lexically (for the first time in the novel) includes the truth – the orthophemism – of ‘cloning’. An actual token of the word, ‘clone model’ (166) occurs in her outburst. This lexical use carefully juxtaposes the euphemism of replication, against Ruth’s own dysphemic diatribe of truth-discovery – a climactic scene whose veracity leaves both reader and the protagonist Kathy shocked:

But she just carried on ‘we all know it. We’re modeled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren’t psychos. That’s where we come from? Come on. […] Do you think she’d have talked to us like that if she’d have known what we really were? What do you think she’d have said if we’d asked her? “Excuse me, but do you think your friend was ever a clone model?” […] if you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that’s where you’ll find where we all came from.’ (166)

Ruth’s use of dysphemism – ‘derogatory comments directed towards others in order to insult or wound them’ (Allan and Burridge 2004, 31) – is significant on both a linguistic and literary level. The phrasal shift in this diatribe takes the lexicalisation of ‘clone models’ from its euphemistic label of ‘possibles’ to the dysphemism of ‘clones’. In one fell semantic swoop, Ishiguro augments the diametric opposition between the two protagonists, Kathy and Ruth, in and through lexical contrasts, euphemism for the former and dysphemism for the latter. Is it any wonder then that when Ruth prefers the truth of orthophemism – when she chides Kathy for not knowing what it feels like to ‘cling onto life’ (226) – Kathy’s response is euphemistic: ‘They come to terms with it’ (226). After all, ‘Like euphemisms, dysphemisms interact with style and therefore have the potential to produce stylistic discord’ (Allan and Burridge 2004, 51). Jennings (2010), like other literary critics, alludes to Ishiguro’s use of diction by saying, ‘Concepts like student, guardian, giving, caring, service, possibility, completion, holding on and letting go are all turned inside out, rendered corrupt by euphemism and double entendre’ (19).

Dysphemism: copied words in copied lives, or the truth about second, third and fourth donations

The sum total of the lexical and thematic bombardment of euphemism in Never Let Me Go is dysphemism, the net effect on readers who have been ‘been told and not told’ (81). Nunokawa (2007) reports that eventually, this story about ‘a race of
clones cared for, fed and cultivated to be organ donors’ leaves readers ‘speechlessly sad’ (303), or ‘recoiling in horror’ (Robbins 2007, 293). For a novel about clones and cloning (there are only two lexical tokens of this word in the novel), and a story about murdering, killing and dying (words suspiciously absent from the text), the cumulative effect of the euphemisms surrounding this efficient industry called the donation programme’ (264) built on productive, efficient, ‘government homes’ (265), a legally-sanctioned system of ‘forms’ (202), applications for ‘deferrals’ (238), ‘signing-ins’ (275), systematic ‘tests’, physical ‘checks’ (215), ‘notices’ (242), ‘catching up on reports’ and externally imposed ‘regulations’ (259) soon reveals itself.

As readers, we begin to see through this carefully contrived ‘disequilibrium of language’ (Britzman 2006, 309) into the actual nature of the bloated bureaucracy accompanying this morbid, state-sanctioned industry with its own army of ‘carers’, ‘donors’, ‘co-coordinators’ (235), ‘orderlies’, ‘doctors’ and nurses. As the truth emerges, we see the enterprise for what it is: ‘an organ donation gulag tucked away from public view and yet not kept secret’ (Robbins 2007, 292), an institutionalised state-run machinery in which ‘cruelty is indistinguishable from caring’ (Robbins 2007, 300). We begin to see through the ‘fog of language’ (Britzman 2006, 309) and feel a ‘literal creepiness’ when we realise how ‘organ by organ their vital body parts will be surgically removed then transplanted into a human whose own body is threatened by its wear’ (Britzman 2006, 308).

In the words of McDonald (2007), ‘this horrifying practice is revealed as the narrative progresses’ (76), and we soon become cognizant of a legalised cloning industry ‘in which people are exploited and killed by a state seeking the wider benefits of organ farming’ (76), a system in which clone murders ‘are described as completions’ (78), and ‘the competent have been told to stop and die’ (Robbins 2007, 294). Readers soon become aware of the macabre industry at work in ‘England, late 1990s’ (1), the setting of the novel. Prochronism gives way to realism. By the end of the novel, the euphemism of lies obscuring the dysphemia of truth clears.

Ishiguro has readers squirm in visceral disgust when the concrete details of final donations are made morbidly apparent, particularly as they pertain to the killing of one of the most beguilingly innocent of protagonists in the novel, Tommy, who in readers’ eyes is no longer a mere clone or a part, but rather a human, a whole. We begin to understand the depth of uncaring carers as donors are ‘gradually killed (“completed”) by repeated organ retrievals’ (Jennings 2010, 18). Readers soon see through Kathy’s euphemisms as she recounts what happens after the dreaded ‘fourth’ and final donation:

You’ll have heard the same talk. How maybe after the fourth donation, even if you’ve technically completed, you’re still conscious in some sort of way; how then you find there are more donations, plenty of them, on the other side of the line; how there are no more recovery centers, no carers, no friends; how there is nothing to do except watch your remaining donations until they switch you off. It’s horror movie stuff, and most of the time people don’t want to think about it. (279)

Here, the sanitisation of euphemism takes on the contamination of dysphemism. We begin to see ‘the regime of extensive organ procurement and transplantation’ (Jennings 2010, 18) for what it really is.
Readers are hit with the question of how civilised people can possibly harvest the organs of others and think nothing of it. How can humans be so casual in their obsession with anatomical perfection, we ask? How can they have no regard for where these ‘parts’ for their ‘wholes’ come from? In the words of Walkowitz (2007), ‘The novel is disturbing because of its premise, and all the more so because our knowledge of Kathy’s role, [and] her existence as a future organ donor and an unwitting accomplice to the organ donation system’ (224). The chilling, horrific specificities of organ farming and harvesting – persons hooked onto electrical life support for the sole purpose of human harvest, or as Ruth correctly vocalises – being on ‘that table trying to cling onto life’ (226) – is hard to fathom. Indeed, that their heart, lungs, intestines, stomachs – all their usable, ‘excisable’ ‘donatable’ organ ‘parts’ will eventually be extracted – cut out for others – has an intended perlocutionary effect of inducing dysphemistic disgust in the reader. We soon see the ‘ethical deficiency’ (Robbins 2007, 294) of ‘individuated subjects becoming fungible parts’ (Jennings 2010, 16) – a literal message Ishiguro construes from lexical parts.

Eventually, in the words of Roos (2008), the novel exposes ‘human hypocrisy and selfishness’ (52), at the very same time as it proffers its own literary truth namely, ‘A critical deconstruction of . . . “biopolitics” and “biopower” . . . [and] an overtly political and systematic narrative of ethics in the face of power’ (Jennings 2010, 16). We see exposure of one of Ishiguro’s multiple theses, that ‘biotechnology’s objectifying and reductionist form of power that erodes the self’ (the “I”) as a unique subject’ (Jennings 2010, 16). We learn of the number of increasing deaths from second organ harvests which Ruth tells readers ‘happens more than they ever tell us’, a confession that is unsettlingly clear despite Kathy’s vehement euphemistic denial that ‘that’s not common’ since according to Kathy, as a carer, ‘they’re really careful these days’ (225). The ghastly details of Ruth’s grisly death after her second organ harvest leave repugnance in the reader unwillingly and unwittingly forced to witness the horrific details of her pain. Ishiguro writes, ‘It was like she was willing her eyes to see right inside herself, so she could patrol and marshal all the better the separate areas of pain in her body’ (236). Then, in and through the eyes of Kathy we watch as Ruth slowly dies in front of our eyes:

She was strictly speaking, still conscious, but she wasn’t accessible to me as I stood there beside her metal bed [...] and sat with her hand in mine, squeezing whenever another flood of pain made her twist away from me. [...] But just once, as she was twisting herself in a way that seemed scarcely unnatural, and I was on the verge of calling the nurses for more painkillers, just for a few seconds, no more, she looked straight at me and she knew exactly who I was. It was one of those little islands of lucidity donors sometimes get to in the midst of their ghastly battles, and she looked at me just for that moment, and although she didn’t speak, I knew what her look meant. (236)

At this point, the novel takes on the overtones of a ‘pathography, where the illness of those cared for is given testimony, with the reader acting as witness to trauma and loss’ (McDonald 2007, 76). Perhaps this is one of the most potent strategies Ishiguro uses to induce the dysphemia of ‘disgust’ (Fluet 2007, 280) in ‘bystander’ readers who squirm in revulsion at ‘the nightmarish terminus’ (Robbins 2007, 291) which awaits all three protagonists in the novel.
Soon, we begin to remember the details about the messiness, the bloodiness, of the ‘surgical procedures of transplantation’ (Britzman 2006, 312) involved in organ harvesting which are carefully ‘covered’ in the novel. Perhaps the most repugnant descriptions of donations come when the young children broach the subject of their ‘interiority’ (Fluet 2007, 263) which Ishiguro presents using the metaphor of ‘things unzipping’ (87), another foreshadowing. The trope of the whole body as but a metonymic container of spare parts is described in horrific lexical detail in the following terms:

...the ideas of things ‘unzipping’ carried over from Tommy’s elbow to become a running joke among us about the donations. The idea was that when the time came, you’d be able to just unzip a bit of yourself, a kidney or something would slide out, and you’d hand it over. It wasn’t something we found so funny in itself; it was more a way of putting each other off our food. You unzipped your liver, say, and dumped it on someone’s plate, that sort of thing. I remember once Gary B., who had this unbelievable appetite, coming back with a third helping of pudding, and virtually the whole table ‘unzipping’ bits of themselves and piling it all over Gary’s bowl, while he went on determinedly stuffing himself. (87–8)

Pretty soon, we learn the subject of donations for the children ‘wasn’t awkward or embarrassing any more; just somber and serious’ (88), an attitude that as readers we also begin to internalise. We witness the effective use of what McDonald (2007) has called a ‘pathographic trope: the writing of corporeal decline’ (80). We soon begin to dread encountering the pathographic decline of the main protagonists, first Ruth, then Tommy, and eventually Kathy, who we all now know are doomed to the same fate. The denotation of pain, though lexicalised in abstract, euphemistic terms, soon becomes apparent even as Kathy matter-of-factly recounts details in the unfolding narrative.

Readers soon surmise the effects of triple organ harvests on Tommy who walks around with the smell of a ‘faint odour of something medical on him’ – who is unable to go on a planned outing because he’s ‘got a bit of bleeding and couldn’t go anymore’ (220, 221). Other awkward details are revealed: that he has to settle for stimulated rather than real, passionate sexual encounters because he ‘has stitches to worry about’ (238). The third donation procedure has left him with ‘various aches and pains’ (239) – perhaps even, an embarrassing case of incontinence, which he shyly confides to Kathy in the following terms: ‘It’s because of stuff like that coming’ (280). Finally, he pleads, ‘Kath, I don’t want to be that way in front of you’ (281). Soon, the murkiness of the ‘moral obscenity’ (Robbins 2007, 291) regarding organ harvests is crystal clear to participants in this ‘reading trauma’ (Britzman 2006, 312).

Kathy hints at the effect that ‘time spent so close to the pain and worry’ has on her as a carer (207). A friend casually tells her that ‘Ruth had a really bad first donation [...] a bad time’ (210). She later learns that her only friend has gone through an equally traumatic second donation, an organ harvest which ‘hadn’t gone at all well’ (210). Details emerge about the effects on Ruth’s body of the second organ removal. She is in such excruciating pain that Kathy tells us when Ruth ‘got up to give me a hug, she almost immediately sat down again’ (214). Ruth confides in fellow-donor Tommy when they are out on a walk, ‘It’s only bending down like that. I’m sometimes not so clever at it’ (223), and she has to be carried over a fence
because she is so weak. Even the euphemistically driven Kathy begins to record the effects of the organ harvesting on Ruth’s breathing and mobility. She tells readers, ‘By now there was something uncertain about her walk, and I wondered if I’d badly underestimated how weak she still was. Her breathing was getting quite labored, and as we walked together, she’d now and then lurch into me’ (223).

Soon, readers begin to see the macabre effects of ‘a new normalcy in which the price is loss of body, one organ at a time’ (Jennings 2010, 18). Such realisations have prompted critics to wonder aloud about the specifics of the sequence of organ harvesting in this horrifying industry which even Ishiguro prefers to describe in muted terms. ‘Which four organs, you may wonder? A liver, two kidneys, then the heart…’ asks Atwood (2005) while scientists like Harrison (2005) seem keen on asking the squeamishly ‘unaskable’: ‘How are the clones kept alive once they’ve begun “donating”?’ (1). The eventual output of these lexically hinted elements of ‘inexplicable cruelty’ (Robbins 2007, 299) in the text create in readers the realisation of a macabre truth, one whose imaginative force is so powerful, equivalent only perhaps to other terrors such as, ‘The horror of the body buried alive, the paralyzed but not fully anesthetized patient on the operating table, the soma mistaken for the coma’ (Griffin 2009, 656). Soon, all these ‘scenes of cruelty’ add up (Robbins 2007, 290).

**Conclusion: the role of lexical semantics in literary analysis**

The stylistic discord between euphemism and dysphemism, like Ishiguro’s other lexical strategy of cloned polysemy (a measured use of synthetic synonymy in the service of contextual antonymy), functions for a larger semiotic purpose: both to buttress and cantilever his final indictment regarding the state and bio-power’s potency for ‘human’ destruction. The novel’s careful pastiche of lexical cloning to render the gestalt of ‘wholeness’ re-affirms Ishiguro’s dialectic – his transparently opaque thesis – regarding the inseparability of parts from the whole. Like the clones whose organ parts have to be viewed as wholes, the lexical parts of *Never Let Me Go* make sense only as a whole. Ishiguro’s meticulous use of lexical dissonance renders syntactic anomaly; indeed, his use of linguistic discord creates literary cacophony. The novel ingeniously exploits euphemism in the service of dysphemism, synthetic synonymy in the service of antonymy, metonymy in the service of synecdoche, sincerity in the service of irony – in short, lexemes in the service of literature.

In an interview with the British Council, Ishiguro provides evidence for the deliberate use of diction as the primary semiotic bearer of meaning in *Never Let Me Go*: ‘Thinking about how and where his books will be read, Ishiguro claims, has led him to focus on “shape, structure and vision,” or what he calls “architecture,” rather than on “sentences” and “phrases”’ (quoted in Walkowitz 2007, 219). One respected literary critic is said to have faulted Ishiguro’s discourse in *Never Let Me Go* for its ‘familiar, chatty style’ (Kermode 2005, 21), which suggests an inability to recognise other linguistic spaces in which modern authors innovate. While critics like Walkowitz (2007) seem to argue that ‘Kathy H.’s unoriginality seems to be Ishiguro’s too’ (224), the current analysis posits an opposite reading of the novel. Far from reading this text as unoriginal in stylistic rendition, the analysis offered here points to Ishiguro’s use of lexical banality in the service of literary originality, an astute use of the parts of diction to create the whole of literary intent.
both bear the weight of semiotic depth at the very same time as they create meaning in this potent twenty-first century text.

To appreciate the true depth or ‘dearth’ of stylistic and literary complexity embedded in the seemingly simple and ‘superficial’ discourse of *Never Let Me Go*, one has to engage in a systematic, sequenced linguistic, rather than literary ‘harvesting’ of his cloned words, which like the vital organs ensconced in his protagonists’ bodies need a careful, methodical excision if one is truly to appreciate their value, their mysterious wonder, and indeed their exquisitely crafted aesthetic uniqueness.

In the words of critic Robbins (2007), the author’s literary intent is clear: ‘If Ishiguro is urging us to perceive the horror that floats beyond the horizon of our daily routine, it would seem to follow that he must also be urging us, if only obliquely and subliminally, to take some sort of action against this horror’ (294). For globally-expansive, twenty-first century transnational authors like Kazuo Ishiguro, existing lexemes – words – can and should indeed be semantically stretched to bear the burden of new meaning if they are to induce us to think of the manner in which ‘language can normalize atrocities’ (McDonald 2007, 78). Ishiguro prods us to examine more specifically how existing euphemisms of reproductive and genetic engineering such as ‘designer babies’, ‘saviour siblings’ (Griffin 2009, 646), ‘in-vitro’ and ‘surrogate mothers’ have already created a dissonance from the dysphemia of ‘fertility tourism’ and ‘transplant tourism’ (Walsh 2005; Revill 2005) fast emerging, dubiously ethical, yet lucrative bio-industries in an economically asymmetrical, but globally connected world.

Notes on contributor

Anjali Pandey is currently a Professor of Applied Linguistics in the Department of English at Salisbury University in Maryland, USA. Her research and publications encompass issues of linguistic disempowerment in film and language, the impact of globalisation on linguistic choices in film and literary media, TESOL methodology, linguistics and composition, and the role of linguistics in literary analysis. She is a recipient of the Vogel Award of teaching excellence in North Dakota, the 2001 Recipient of the Henry C. Welcome Fellowship out of the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC), the creator of the graduate ACE-TESOL programme at Salisbury University, and author and director of the recently-funded professional development initiative entitled TARGET, sponsored by the United States Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA). Her background straddles three continents: Africa, Asia and North America.

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