

## **HUMOUR AND IRONY IN MODERN POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

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### **Abstract**

Political discourse has recently been the center of attention of many academics as well as laymen, which is explained by the strenuous international situation in the world. According to Critical Discourse Analysis, politicians use political language as a means of gaining power (Van Dijk, 2009) through different strategies, the main of which are persuasion and manipulation. To achieve this aim different expressive means are used. This article examines humour and irony as a way to influence the audience and contribute to the effect of the politician's speech. The topic of irony and humour in politics has attracted the attention of scholars and rhetors for a long time. Yet, it still remains a debatable question whether it is appropriate for a speaker to use humour and irony in political speech and what effect it has on the audience. Modern authors characterize humour and irony as "interpersonal weapons" (Arroyo, 2010) and as devices which help to cope with different difficult scenarios, like pre-election campaign or interviews (O'Connell, Kowal, 2005). In this study the notions of humour and irony are explored; the authentic material based on the speeches of British and American politicians is analyzed to draw the conclusion that humour and irony are important and powerful tools in the speeches of skillful politicians. The paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of irony and humour in modern political discourse. The results of the study can be used in educating public speakers and pose a challenge for the further development of the theory of political discourse.

**Keywords:** humour, irony, political discourse, strategy, persuasion, manipulation.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Political discourse in the modern world is undergoing a number of changes. It is losing its official tone and acquires certain features of a talk-show with a great degree of entertainment. The audience is no longer willing to accept bare information, but is content with "infotainment" (Fialkova, Yelenevskaya, 2013). At the same time political discourse pursues its main aim – gaining and withholding power (Van Dijk, 2009). To win over proponents, modern politicians rely on different strategies, the main of which are persuasion and manipulation. Humour and irony are becoming useful means of creating a greater effect. They help to convey an additional meaning, ambiguity, contribute to the image of the speaker.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

The study relies on the works of scholars who analyze humour as an effective rhetorical device (Bilgic, 2005) which can bring about different effect and evoke various feelings (Lewis, 2006). Irony is a part of humour to

some extent, but it has its own sphere and functions (Gornostaeva, 2013), being more critical and less positive than humour. Scholars of irony refer to it as inferred contradiction (Alba-Huez, 2014), point that it can be intentional or unintentional (Giora, 2001). Irony can be interpreted and realized only as a product of collaboration between the speaker and the recipient and exists in the frame of context (Fialkova, Yelenevskaya, 2013). The attention of numerous authors is concentrated on the new roles humour and irony acquire in modern political language (Gornostaeva, 2016; Morreal, 2005; Mussolf, 2017; O'Connell, Kowal, 2005. Tsakona & Popa, 2011).

### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 The Notion of Humour

There are different approaches to the study of humour (as well as irony).

The word "humour" can be used in different ways: objectively when things, causing laughter are described; and subjectively when the notion of "being funny" is involved. Though humour has been widely explored in academic literature, this sphere is still not clear enough and poses challenge for research, first and foremost in interpersonal pragmatics: "While a lot has been written about humour, it is still an under-researched area of investigation. Humour is one of the most interesting subjects to study, and more empirical studies in natural contexts are needed in order to further explore the various functions of this strategy." (Schnurr, 2010, p. 319).

Humour is difficult to define, especially as a scientific phenomenon: "...very difficult subject to talk about, and it is an even more difficult subject to be scientific about" (Miller, 1988: p. 60), it is closely connected with the situation: "Humour is glued into social, cultural and even national contexts" (Simpson, 2003, p. 9), "based on the analyst's assessment of paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues" (Schnurr, 2010, p.318).

Dictionaries give the following definition of humour:

*Humour* – "the quality of something that makes it funny; the way that a particular person or group find certain things amusing; the ability to understand and enjoy amusing situations or laugh at things" (LDCE 2001).

Though humour is associated with positive feelings – amusement and enjoyment, some scholars point out its "dark" side: "...the "dark" side of humour, that is, those instances of humour which are designed to put down or personally attack the addressee, and which may thus not result in the amusement of *both* interlocutors" (Schnurr, 2010, p. 308). There exist speech stereotypes which presuppose mutual attacks in a humorous way "This rather challenging way of using humour by jocularly abusing each other is characteristic in particular group of speakers in this particular context and may not be appropriate in other contexts or among members of other groups (Schnurr, 2010, p. 319).

The functions of humour are variable. Researchers point out that it can perform a number of social functions, such as: denoting ethnic identity and cultural values, reinforcing social norms and reflecting people's beliefs (O'Quin and Aronoff, 1981; Duncan, 1985; Holmes, Stubbe, and Marra 2003; Habib, 2008; Chiaro, 1992). In discourse humour is a way to demonstrate solidarity and create a friendly atmosphere, particularly among interlocutors who do not know each other very well (Zajdman, 1995). Humour can either minimize the distance between communicators or enlarge it: "Humour may make others feel as part of the group, but it may also function as a boundary marker – explicitly excluding outsiders" (Schnurr, 2010, p. 319).

It is also a good way to put interlocutors at their ease and optimize communication: "Humour accomplishes many things: it relieves embarrassment; it signals aggression; it displays courage in adversity; it serves as a coping mechanism; it functions as an instrument of social influence" (Simpson, 2003, p.17). Humour is a safe way to solve difficult situations as it allows to discharge tension and turn the situation into a joke.

There are several theories, which consider humour from different points of view: humour, based on the mismatch of meanings; humour as consolation; humour as superiority. The latter has deep routes and dates back to ancient times, when rhetors used humour as a weapon directed to submitting others. Researchers of humour (Chiaro, 1992; Crystal, 1995; Ross, 1998) point out that humour can be intentional as well as unintentional (like irony). There exist a number of scenarios, in the frames of which humorous communication can take place: the speaker strives to a comic effect and succeeds or not; the speaker does not intend to make a comic effect but it happens or does not happen (Simpson, 2003). A vivid example of unintended humour are spoonerisms (a wordplay which happens by chance and produces a humorous effect without the author's desire): *You have hissed all my mystery lectures. You have deliberately tasted two worms and you can leave Oxford by the town drain.*

Summary: according to researchers of humour, it is a complex phenomenon, regarded from different angles and difficult to define; it is normally connected with positive feelings and laughter; it has national peculiarities and can perform different functions – from showing superiority to promoting understanding and cooperation.

### 3.2 The Notion of Irony

Irony is a multifaceted phenomenon. It can be regarded as an utterance, as a speech act (when viewed together with an answer) and a speech genre (viewed as a text). As a category of discourse irony is produced by collaboration between the author and the addressee, it exists only in context and is based on language manipulation which involves the use of a word, collocation or phrase in a sense different from literal (Gornostaeva, 2013). Irony performs a function which corresponds to the communicative intention of the speaker. Frequency of the use of irony is presupposed by the situation and speech genre.

Irony is a part of humour although it has its own sphere of application. Like humour, it is culturally specified and relies on the context.

Irony as a discursive category can imply inferred contradiction (Alba-Juez, 2014), but that does not always mean negative modality. Irony may convey criticism disguised as a praise; or praise disguised as criticism; it can be based on hyperbole or understatement. Irony can be intentional or unintentional (Giora, 2001), which proves the fact that the interpretation of it is as important as its production. Irony can be created and realized only as a product of collaboration between the speaker and the recipient and exists in the frame of context (Fialkova, Yelenevskaya, 2013).

Summary: irony and humour are an integral part of communication. To achieve effective cooperation in the dialogue it is necessary to know their functions and mechanisms. Ironic and humorous communication require efforts on behalf of both sides – the author and the addressee.

### 3.3 Politics and Humour/Irony

The question of the role of irony and humour in political language has not been considered seriously until recently, although these phenomena have always played a great role in it. One of the main social functions of humour is human desire to distract from an unpleasant reality, get rid from censorship, from fear of authority and prohibitions. British scholars wrote about enhancing role of humour in the modern world: “humour... plays such a key role in the maintenance of social life, which is much more important than social theorists have often assumed” (Bilig, 2005, p. 236). Indeed, the interest to humour and irony as linguistic phenomena is rising. Recently there have appeared quite a number of academic works dedicated to their analysis, which marked the beginning of methodology to teach humour and irony.

American scholars point to different attitude to political humour in society. On the one hand, humour is an antidote to stress and a source of pleasure. On the other hand, it can have a negative effect: give false information, cause misunderstanding, disguise problems (Lewis, 2006). This brought about a conflict of interests on American political arena – deliberate introducing humour in political discourse vs rejecting it.

Apart from discharging tension, political humour ensures comfortable atmosphere for the interlocutors, minimizes vertical distance and helps the author to deliver his/her message to the audience. Irony performs similar functions, however it is more critical and aimed at a particular object. Both irony and humour serve to create a better effect on the audience, make a politician's speech bright, attractive and capturing. They represent powerful tools for persuading people during pre-election campaigns, create bonds and defuse aggression: “When people need to relieve tension and pain, give vent to anger and reinforce the boundaries between in- and out-group members, they often resort to humour and ridicule” (Fialkova, Yelenevskaya, 2013, p. 215-216).

### 3.4 Examples and Analysis

Irony in speeches of certain political figures may sound quite bitter, especially if it refers to the opponents. In (1) Donald Trump speaks about Hillary Clinton using ambiguous irony.

(1) *I am sure Hillary is going to laugh quite a bit tonight, sometimes even at appropriate moments* [Al Smith Dinner 20.10/2016]. (This remark conveys an implicit meaning, referring to a popular opinion that Hillary is devoid of sense of humour, and all her emotions, including smile and laughter, are planned before by her image makers) .

In (2) showman and commentator Jay Leno makes a premature conclusion about Mrs. Clinton's presidency:

(2) *Yesterday all five living presidents gathered for the opening of the George W. Bush presidential library in*

*Dallas. Well, six living presidents if you count Hillary in 2016.* [<http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/2016-Election/fl/2016-Election-Jokes.htm>]. (It is done on purpose to cause a humorous effect. The speaker hints at the fact that the result of the elections is already known, in spite of the continuing president race. Ironically enough, what was obvious for many, did not come true).

The following example (3) is a disguised scorn meant to mock at one of the candidates in pre-election campaign:

- (3) *Jeb Bush's brother Neil said that their mother has 'come around' to the idea of Jeb running for president in 2016. Because if there's anything that says you're qualified to be president, it's your own mom saying, 'I guess you could do it'* [<http://politicalhumor.about.com/>]. (Here irony is built around a childish belief that mother is always right and the seriousness of the event, which is not meant for children. Bringing these notions together is a kind of ironic paradox based on an absurd conclusion, which is clear for the audience).

Irony is not always easily discerned, in most cases one needs to know the background of the situation:

- (4) *Insert joke here, as Jeremy Corbyn would say* [YouTube. Boris Johnson's rugby scrum joke – BBC News, 6.10.2015]. (Boris Johnson, speaking about the leader of the Labour party, in fact points to the inability of the latter to joke. Jeremy Corbyn's speeches are very serious, totally devoid of humour and irony. So it is not usual to expect jokes from him (unlike Boris Johnson himself, who is an eccentric, ironic speaker). Those listeners who don't know the context will find it difficult to interpret the irony.

Humour and irony often play a positive role and contribute to a person's image. In (5) Ivanka Trump, daughter of Donald Trump (a candidate for presidency then) characterizes her father, using wordplay:

- (5) *When it comes to building bridges he can do so figuratively but also has the rare ability to do so literally on time and under budget* [YouTube. Donald Trump Presidential Announcement Full Speech, 16.06.15]. (The speaker uses the collocation "to build bridges" in a literal meaning and in a figurative meaning in one sentence. This contrast produces a humorous effect, relaxes the audience and withholds its interest).

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Humour and irony are more than just linguistic notions – they represent the view on life and a way to perceive reality. The ability to be humorous or ironic are individual characteristics of a person, but they have national and cultural peculiarities. The functions of these devices in discourse are variable – from distancing and building boundaries to optimizing communication and creating bonds.

Modern politicians use irony and humour quite a lot for different purposes: to attack opponents, to win support, to draw the attention of the audience, to strengthen their own image, to amuse public. The examples, analyzed in the article, are based on wordplay, ambiguity, absurdity etc. The use of irony and humour makes a speech brighter, more impressive and persuasive. Skillful speakers take advantage of these devices to produce a greater effect on the audience and reach their aims.

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