

ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКАЯ, ПРИКЛАДНАЯ И СРАВНИТЕЛЬНО-СОПОСТАВИТЕЛЬНАЯ ЛИНГВИСТИКА

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IRONY IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: DISCURSIVE PRACTICE, STRATEGY AND TACTICS

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Abstract

Aim. The study lays the basics of a new theory according to which political irony is regarded as the inherent characteristics and integral part of communication in the modern world of politics. The objective of the current study is to establish link between ethnic style and pragmatic side, i.e. cultural/communicative values and irony functions, mechanisms and language means.

Methodology. The paper focuses on political irony as a discursive practice and regards it as a characteristic feature of English political discourse. The fragments of modern English political speeches (2014–2024) of D. Cameron, B. Johnson, R. Sunak, D. Trump, J. Biden and others (from YouTube resource) make the base for the detailed analysis. The research is conducted via the following methods: the method of intent analysis; the method of content analysis; the method of discourse analysis (mainly CDA – critical discourse analysis), social role analysis, genre analysis and analysis of communication strategies.

Results. The findings prove the initial hypothesis about the interrelation of national and cultural peculiarities, individual characteristics of the politician and situational context. These aspects influence the nature of English discursive irony, the frequency of ironic statements and their functions, as well as an extensive set of linguistic means. Irony is regarded as a strategy of political discourse, which follows and operates within the mainstream strategy of theatricality. Political irony is implemented through a considerable number of discursive tactics that create variable ironic images. The results of the politicians' speeches analysis show that different tactics can be used to fulfill a single strategy. The choice of the tactics is based on the "friend–foe" (aka "us–them") opposition, the specific features of the ethnic style and the individual style of the politician's speech portrait.

Research implications. The paper opens new perspectives in political linguistics for developing the classification of ironic images as situational or emotional. The scheme for the analysis can be applied in further studies in the field of political linguistics and ethnostylistics.

Keywords: ethnic style, irony, ironic image, ironicality, political communication, political discourse, strategy, speech portrait, tactics

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Научная статья

ИРОНИЯ В ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ КОММУНИКАЦИИ: ДИСКУРСИВНАЯ ПРАКТИКА, СТРАТЕГИЯ И ТАКТИКА

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Аннотация

Цель. В статье излагаются основы теории, согласно которой ирония рассматривается как характерная черта политической коммуникации в современном мире. Исследование направлено на установление взаимосвязи между этностилем и функционально-прагматическим аспектом иронии в дискурсе; при этом этностиль рассматривается как отражение культурных и коммуникативных ценностей, в то время как функционально-прагматический аспект представлен функциями, механизмами и лингвистическими средствами репрезентации иронии.

Процедура и методы. В представленной работе ирония рассматривается как дискурсивная практика, а также как характерная и неотъемлемая черта английского политического дискурса, которая проявляется в процессе сотрудничества автора и адресата. Эмпирическая база исследования состоит из фрагментов современного англоязычного политического дискурса (2014–2024 гг.) государственных деятелей: Д. Кэмерона, Б. Джонсона, Р. Сунака, Д. Трампа, Дж. Байдена и др. Для анализа материала был использован ряд методов: метод интен-анализа для реконструкции интенции; метод контент-анализа для оценки частотного распределения слов и словосочетаний; метод дискурс-анализа (в том числе, критического дискурс-анализа) для выявления сущностных характеристик социальной коммуникации. Применялись также элементы социально-ролевого анализа, жанрового анализа и анализа коммуникативных стратегий.

Результаты исследования показали, что характер иронии, её функции и частотность употребления напрямую зависят от национальной и культурной специфики, определяются идиостилем (индивидуальными особенностями речевого портрета) иронизирующей личности и конкретным ситуативным контекстом, в рамках которого происходит коммуникация. Результаты анализа фрагментов политических речей показывают, что для реализации определённой стратегии могут быть использованы разнообразные тактики или сочетания тактик. Последние актуализируются в дискурсе государственных деятелей через оппозицию «свой – чужой» в собирательных образах «друзей» и «врагов».

Теоретическая и практическая значимость заключается в том, что работа открывает новое направление в политической лингвистике и позволяет классифицировать иронические образы по двум основным группам: ситуативные и эмоциональные. В работе предлагается схема поступенчатого анализа иронического образа политика как дискурсивной категории. Полученные результаты представляют интерес в русле дальнейших исследований в области политической лингвистики и этностилистики.

Ключевые слова: ирония, иронический образ, ироничность, политическая коммуникация, политический дискурс, речевой портрет, стратегия, тактика

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Introduction

A number of modern political discourse studies focus on irony, which becomes an important and even indispensable feature of political communication. The ironic image of a politician, the nature of irony used in discourse, the frequency of ironic statements and their functions – all these aspects are predetermined by certain factors, such as: national and cultural specifics (reflected in communicative values), individual characteristics (speech portrait) of the statesman and a given situation. Different functions of irony are fulfilled through a variety of linguistic means. The current study suggests a view on irony as a discursive practice and as an inherent feature of political discourse, which becomes indispensable in modern conditions. Irony is more than an element of style: it is interaction between the addressor and the addressee, the product of cooperation and active participation of the recipient in the process of embracing and interpreting the interlocutor's words. Among a number of strategies of political discourse highlighted by modern scholars [1–8], the strategy of theatricality pointed out by E. I. Sheigal [9] seems one of the most important ones in the modern political world, where debates are gradually approaching TV talk shows. The ability to use and understand irony at proper time is becoming essential to obtain the desired result. It holds true for political discourse, which is always (or almost always) oriented at the target audience, the electo-

rate. This paper suggests viewing irony as a strategy of political communication. Being at the same time part of the mainstream strategy of theatricality, as noted by a number of scholars [9–11], irony splits into three main sub-strategies: destructiveness, eccentricity, and harmonization of communication. Each of the enumerated sub-strategies functions in compliance with stylistic and ethnic features of irony in political communication. Ironic images of contemporary statesmen are seen as discursive tactics that realize the strategy of political irony. Analyzing these discursive tactics employed in politicians' speeches to create a certain image is the key to accurate irony interpretation.

The topic of irony in political discourse has been the centre of attention of scholars within the last few years [4; 8; 10; 11] and others. Scholars considered political genres and the category of comism [10], irony in political debate [11], functions and mechanisms of irony [8]. This paper focuses on the new aspect of study, the ironic image of a politician, which corresponds to the chosen discursive tactics. The ironic image is marked ethnoculturally and is used by the speaker for self-presentation. This study suggests a new step-by-step analysis which includes the following stages: genre; ethnic discursive features; individual discursive features; strategy of irony; tactics; type of ironic image; pragmatic intention of the speaker. The contribution to the theory of irony in political discourse is the classification of ironic im-

ages into two groups: situational type (part of the speech portrait predetermined by the context); emotional type (reflecting a certain feeling at a given moment).

Purpose of the study

The study is conducted to set the basics for a new ethnodiscursive theory of irony and methodology of irony analysis through ironic images. The developed ideas are based on a set of key concepts: discursive practices, strategies and tactics. The principles of the method of analysis are reflected in the following suggested provisions:

- a. irony can be accurately interpreted through the analysis of ironic images;
- b. irony can be studied through ironic images;
- c. ironic images used by statesmen can relate to both genre (situational images) and style (emotional images);
- d. analysis of ironic images allows to make assumptions about the pragmatic side and the aspirations of the speaker.

Methodology

At the first stage of the analysis the corpus of the UK and US politicians' speeches was created (800 ironic utterances were singled out). It includes institutional and non-institutional political genres (the former are represented by public speeches, debates, inaugural speeches etc., the latter by informal interviews, evaluative comments, fragments of Twitter posts etc.) Stylistically marked contexts, which presumably contain irony, were selected according to the following features:

- hidden sense (since irony, according to its definition, is a phenomenon with hidden meaning, different from a literal one);
- evaluative reaction (modality) based on expressivity of irony and its positive and negative functions, as stated by researchers [3; 4; 8];
- violation of the interlocutor's expectations, as the ironic effect is based on surprise.

Since the empiric material is represented mainly by political speeches, recorded on

video resources, it is possible to take into consideration the mimics and gestures of the speaker, the lengths of pauses, the intonation, thus applying intent-analysis. The results of it make it possible to draw conclusions about politicians' intentions, which correlate with the functions of irony.

After collecting the corpus of ironic utterances, the study proceeds with content analysis, which counts the frequency of irony usage in discourse of a certain politician, determines functions and mechanisms of irony in a given statement. CDA is applied to examine implicit irony, which needs extralinguistic knowledge to be adequately interpreted. Irony of this type contains hints, allusions represented by language means (metaphor, hyperbole, wordplay etc.) and is based on intertextuality.

The proposed scheme for irony analysis is based on the assumptions of political irony as a communicative strategy. Discursive irony produces emotional impact on the addressee / the audience and is formed by the three factors: ethnic identity, individual style and situational context. Irony is realized within the framework of three directions (also called sub-strategies of theatricality), namely: destructiveness, harmonization, eccentricity. These directions are reflected in functions of discursive irony, which, according to researchers of irony [3; 4] can be divided into positive ones (such as optimizing communication, minimizing distance with the audience, discharging tension) and negative ones (aggression, distancing, aggravating conflict). The sub-strategies are realized by speakers through a number of tactics.

The method of analyzing the ironic image involves several interconnected stages: political genre, ethnic peculiarities, communicative values, individual style, strategies and tactics of irony, type of the ironic image. Thus, the following scheme is proposed:

1. Genre (context), institutional/non-institutional, according to the definition of E. Sheigal [9].

2. Ethnic discursive features typical of Anglo-Saxon culture: preservation of pri-

vacy, common sense, pragmatism, competitiveness, reserve etc., as singled out by G. Leech and T. Larina [12].

3. Individual discursive features (speech portrait), based on social role analysis (status, expectations, behaviour).

4. Strategy of irony (destructiveness/harmonization/eccentricity), based on the classification of A. Gornostaeva [4]; A. Bakhnovich [8]; I. Solodilova [11].

5. Tactics (depends on strategy).

6. Type of ironic image (situational/emotional).

7. Pragmatic intention of the speaker.

The analysis of statesmen's ironic images highlights current trends in political discourse. First, it is the role of the "us – them" opposition (i.e., the presence of implicit or explicit conflict), the juxtaposition of an active figure (the leader of "us"), an object of aggression (the enemy, i.e. "them") and a passive figure (the public led by the leader) [3; 13–15]. Second, it is possible to single out the most prominent ironic images used by politicians: the image of a "man of action", the image of an eccentric, the image of a "logical thinker" etc.

Results

The analysis shows that irony in modern political communication is a type of communicative behaviour and is embodied in variable discursive tactics involving statesmen's ironic images. The intention of the speaker, his/her final aim influence the choice of ironic strategies, implemented in speech by different tactics. The tactics are determined by the situation and can be seen in ironic images. The latter are divided into those based on genre (situational) and those based on style (emotional). Situational images are actually part of the speech portrait, while emotional ones reflect the feeling of the moment. The suggested analysis scheme reveals the pragmatic side and real views of a politician disguised by irony.

The results of the analyzed empiric material show the ironic image of a politician can be studied through the following stages:

genre; ethnic discursive features; individual discursive features; strategy of irony; tactics; type of ironic image; pragmatic intention of the speaker. In the process of the analysis the ironic images were divided into two groups according to their type: situational, predetermined by context and genre (e.g. official meeting, public speech) / emotional, showing a moment's reaction (more often used in informal context, e.g. informal interviews, TV programmes). Among the studied material the most popular ironic images chosen by politicians were: "Man of action" (situational), "Logical thinker" (situational), "Eccentric" (emotional), "Delighted" (emotional), "Old and useless" (emotional), "Boasting" (emotional) and some others.

As it will be shown in paragraph "Discussion", the images rely on ethnic communicative values (privacy, pragmatic approach, common sense, competition, assertiveness, positive thinking) and individual features of politicians (reserve, eccentricity, friendliness, determination etc.) The pragmatic intentions, standing behind the ironic images are:

1. Man of action (situational) → to preserve the power, to destroy the opponents.

2. Logical thinker (situational) → to gain superiority over the opponents, to diminish them in the eyes of the audience.

3. Eccentric (emotional) → to appear as "one of us", thus minimizing distance with the electorate.

4. Delighted (emotional) → to protect privacy, to show friendly disposition to the audience.

5. Old and useless (emotional) → to protect privacy, to stop unwelcome questions.

6. Boasting (emotional) → to prevent unwelcome topics.

The results of the ironic utterances analysis is shown in a table with the examples (1-6) from "Discussion".

Discussion

The "us–them" opposition presents the conflict of interests and has an impact on the tactics chosen by the statesman in each specific case to express his/her attitude. Every-

Table 1 / Таблица 1

Political ironic image analysis / Анализ иронического образа политика

Ethnic communi- cative value	Ironic strategies	Tactics	Ironic image	Pragmatic aim
1. Competition Assertiveness	Destructiveness	Showing readiness to act	Man of action	to hold on to power and not give it up, highlight the superi- ority over opponents
2. Assertiveness	Destructiveness Eccentricity	Demonstrating logi- cal thinking	Logical thinker	destroy the op- ponent, show one's own superiority
3. Common sense Pragmatic approach	Eccentricity	Portraying oneself as eccentric	Eccentric	protect privacy, save face
4. Privacy Positive thinking	Harmonization of communication	Portraying oneself as delighted	Delighted	prevent unwelcome topics
5. Privacy Reserve	Eccentricity Harmonization of communication	Portraying oneself as being old and no lon- ger useful in politics	Old and useless	cut unpleasant ques- tions, preserve pri- vacy, save face
6. Privacy Positive thinking	Harmonization of communication	Boasting	Boasting	prevent unwelcome topics

thing that refers to “us” is positive in the eyes of the audience, while “them” are negative and unwelcome. The participants of ironic communication include the author, the addressee, the object of irony (aka: the victim) and the audience whose reaction is most important for the politician). Since irony is never sincere, it can be assessed as a temporary role in accordance with which the public speaker builds his/her discourse. The following examples illustrate British and American politicians’ ironic images (discursive tactics) corresponding to the three sub-strategies of irony: destructiveness, harmonization, eccentricity.

1. “Man of action”

David Cameron, the leader of the Tories, uses irony as a tool of destructive communication, which is directed against the Labour party: *Let’s just take the last week: we both had these leadership elections... we had resignation, nomination, competition and coronation... and they (Labour) haven’t even decided what the rules are yet. If they ever come to power, it would take about a year to work*

*out who would sit where.*¹ The speaker expresses mockery, implemented in the tactic of “comparing and contrasting us and them” (in favor of “us”, the Conservative party). In this case, “them” are represented by the opposition, who are characterized by the Prime Minister (at that time) as indecisive and slow. According to Cameron’s view such qualities are unacceptable for the leaders. The ironic image “man of action” is situational and reflects the inter-party struggle. The pragmatic attention of the politician is to oppose Conservatives to Labour and position the former as determined and responsible people capable of leading the nation, unlike the latter. The strategy of political irony can be defined as destructiveness, the function of irony is attack on the opponents realized by opposing achievements (*resignation, nomination, competition and coronation*) to indecisiveness (*haven’t even decided, it would take about a year*).

¹ David Cameron's final Prime Minister's Questions (highlights). In: *BBC News: YouTube-channel*. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2CeDSR6rz8> (accessed: 08.12.2024).

Following the suggested plan, the analysis shows the following:

1. genre (public speech)
2. ethnic discursive features (pragmatic approach to life and work, competitiveness)
3. individual discursive features (energy, loyalty to his party and country, determination)
4. strategy of irony (destructiveness)
5. tactics (showing readiness to act)
6. type of ironic image (situational, part of the speech portrait)
7. pragmatic intention of the speaker (highlight the superiority over opponents)

2. "Logical thinker"

The following phrase of president J. Biden relies on absurd conclusion: *If you find yourself disoriented or confused, it's either you're drunk or Marjorie Taylor Greene*¹. The interpretation of irony here requires extralinguistic information about Marjorie Taylor Greene, a far-right politician and a conspiracy theorist, a vocal advocate of Donald Trump. In his ironic remark Biden compares Green (her views) and the state of being drunk, thus showing his scorn and disapproval. The ironic image of "logical thinker" corresponds to the strategy of destructiveness, while the aim of irony is to destroy the opponent. The strategy of eccentricity is also found here, since irony is based on absurdity (the condition of being drunk equals being M. Green). According to the scheme of irony analysis, the following results are obtained:

1. genre (informal speech)
2. ethnic discursive features (assertiveness, competitiveness)
3. individual discursive features (eccentricity)
4. strategy of irony (destructiveness)
5. tactics (demonstrating logical thinking)
6. type of ironic image (situational)
7. pragmatic intention of the speaker (to destroy the opponent).

¹ Memoli M. How Marjorie Taylor Greene has become Biden's favorite boogeyman. In: *NBC News*. URL: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/joe-biden/marjorie-taylor-greene-become-joe-bidens-favorite-boogeyman-rcna95123> (accessed: 08.12.2024).

3. "Eccentric"

An example of "eccentric ironic image" use is represented here by the phrase of the US president J. Biden during his public speech at the gathering of women-owned businesses. The country leader ironically introduces himself as "Dr. Jill Biden's husband" and gives a funny reason for coming: *My name is Joe Biden. I'm Dr. Jill Biden's husband. And I eat Jeni's ice cream — chocolate chip. I came down because I heard there was chocolate chip ice cream*². The President's irony follows the strategy of eccentricity, is aimed at ruining barriers between himself and his electorate, becoming closer to the audience. Irony also performs the function of defense and prevents unwelcome questions. Calling himself *Dr. Jill Biden's husband*, who eats *chocolate chip ice cream*, is a way to avoid responsibility as the US President.

The analysis shows:

1. genre (public speech)
2. ethnic discursive features (common sense, pragmatic approach)
3. individual discursive features (eccentricity, unexpected twists)
4. strategy of irony (eccentricity)
5. tactics (portraying oneself as an eccentric)
6. type of ironic image (emotional)
7. pragmatic intention of the speaker (minimizing distance with the audience).

4. "Delighted"

During his campaign trail Rishi Sunak (former UK Prime Minister) jokes about people complimenting his 'tan': *Sombody said to me the other day: Wow! You've got a great tan!*³ Sunak's self-irony is used in preventive function: the politician tries to curb the possible discussions of his ethnic iden-

² Nelson S. Biden makes ice cream joke in first statement since Nashville shooting. In: *New York Post*. URL: <https://nypost.com/2023/03/27/bidens-bizarre-ice-cream-joke-in-nashville-shooting-remarks> (accessed: 08.12.2024).

³ Rishi Sunak jokes about people complimenting his 'tan' while on campaign trail. In: *The Independent: YouTube-channel*. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpEo7SD3JA8> (accessed: 08.12.2024).

tity and colour of skin (which has a natural “tan”) and strives to optimize communication, following the strategy of harmonization. The ironic image of a “delighted with a compliment person” reveals the desire to drop the subject.

The scheme of the analysis shows:

1. genre (informal interview)
2. ethnic discursive features (privacy, positive thinking)
3. individual discursive features (optimism, friendliness, reserve)
4. strategy of irony (harmonization)
5. tactics (portraying oneself as delighted)
6. type of ironic image (emotional)
7. pragmatic intention of the speaker (preventing unwelcome topics).

5. “Old and useless”

Boris Johnson, the former UK Prime Minister after his resignation is faced with many unwelcome and undesirable questions from journalists about his future plans. Such discussions can violate his privacy and pose face-threatening communicative situation. To avoid the topic, he uses self-irony as a means of defense: ... *I am like one of those booster rockets that has fulfilled its function and I will now be gently re-entering the atmosphere and splashing down in some remote and obscure corner of the Pacific*¹. The practical aim of the politician is to drop the sensitive subject and preserve his own privacy in a face-threatening speech act. His self-irony as part of the two strategies (eccentricity and harmonization of communication) performs a preventive (defense) function, and the ironic comparison with *one of these rockets that has fulfilled its function* switches the attention from the retirement to other aspects, thus harmonizing communication. The ironic image of “something / somebody no longer useful” can be classified as emotional, it reveals the speaker’s attitude at a given moment. The analysis highlights:

1. genre (interview)
2. ethnic discursive features (privacy, reserve)
3. individual discursive features (eccentricity, unexpected twists)
4. strategy of irony (harmonization of communication)
5. tactics (portraying oneself as being old and no longer useful in politics)
6. type of ironic image (emotional)
7. pragmatic intention of the statesman (to cut unpleasant questions).

6. “Boasting”

At White House Correspondents’ Dinner, where humour and irony in politicians’ speeches are acceptable and even welcome, J. Biden uses self-irony to speak about his old age and not very good health, stating the opposite: *They say I’m over the hill. Don Lemon would say that’s a man in his prime*². Biden refers to D. Lemon, a TV journalist, a host on CNN from 2014 to 2023, as the one who has experience in interviewing and assessing celebrities. The politician pretends to ironically quote a phrase which might be said thus preventing the unwelcome topic of his age and abilities from arising.

The scheme of the analysis shows:

1. genre (speech in an informal atmosphere)
2. ethnic discursive features (privacy, positive thinking)
3. individual discursive features (eccentricity, unexpected twists)
4. strategy of irony (harmonization)
5. tactics (boasting)
6. type of ironic image (emotional)
7. pragmatic intention of the speaker (preventing unwelcome topics).

Conclusion

Summing up the review of the highlighted features of English political irony of the early XXI century, it can be concluded that

¹ Boris Johnson’s final speech as Prime Minister: 6 September 2022. In: *GOV.UK*. URL: <https://clck.ru/3HTP4a> (accessed: 08.12.2024).

² 2023 White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner. In: *C-SPAN: YouTube-channel*. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfdC5Pn5kCY> (accessed: 08.12.2024).

ironic statements of modern English-speaking leaders are ethnoculturally marked. Irony correlates with national cultural and communicative values and is expressed in statesmen's speeches in the form of ironic images that have their own specifics. During the analysis of the material, it was confirmed that the "friend-foe" / "us-them" opposition is a powerful means of realizing irony in discourse. Since political preferences and the situation in the world in general are in the state of constant flux, the chosen ironic images indicate those who appear in the discourse of a politician as belonging to "us" or "them" at a given time. So, irony as a strategy of political discourse belongs to the major strategy of theatricality and is implemented through a vast variety of discursive tactics that create ironic images. The suggested scheme of analysis of an ironic image, chosen by a politician, classifies the image as situational or emotional. The results of the analysis make it possible to identify the pragmatic intention and political preferences of the speaker. Thus, the image of "man of action", as shown in example (1) reveals the speaker's determination to hold on to power and not give it up; "logical thinker" (2) is aimed at destroying the oppo-

nent showing his own superiority; emotional images "eccentric" (3), "delighted" (4), "old and useless" (5), "boasting" (6) project certain feigned feelings to protect privacy and save face on the one hand and to minimize the distance between themselves and the audience on the other hand. In this way the highlighted strategies of irony in political discourse are observed, sometimes combining within one and the same ironic utterance: destructiveness (1, 2), eccentricity (2, 3, 5), and harmonization of communication (4, 5, 6). These strategies comply with the functions of irony, positive (3, 4, 5, 6) or negative (1, 2).

Theoretical value of the paper is in laying the basics of the new methodology for discursive study of irony as a communicative category in the framework of ethnocultural, functional, stylistic and pragmatic aspects of political communication. The results of the current research pose challenge for new ethnodiscursive direction in the theory of political communication. The schemes for irony analysis can be used in practice in the field of PR and image-making of political figures, may pose interest for speechwriters. The research results can be used in the compilation of dictionaries.

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