



PEJORATIVE EVALUATION IN POLITICAL LEADERS' SPEECH: IRONY AND SARCASM AS SEMANTIC STRATEGIES

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Abstract. *Pejorative evaluation is a hallmark of modern political rhetoric, functioning to delegitimize opponents, consolidate in-group identity, and draw ideological boundaries. Framed within hybrid semantics and pragmatics, this article foregrounds irony and sarcasm as central strategies that convert descriptive content into negative evaluative force. We outline the semantic mechanism of pragmaticalization, emphasize the contextual plasticity of pejoratives, and discuss the rhetorical utility of humorous derision in political communication. The analysis highlights the regulative, image-shaping, and audience-alignment functions of irony and sarcasm and argues for an integrated semantic-pragmatic approach to evaluative language in political discourse.*

Keywords: *pejoration; irony; sarcasm; hybrid semantics; pragmatics; political discourse; evaluative language*

Pejorative evaluation constitutes one of the most salient features of modern political discourse. It serves as a means of delegitimizing opponents, consolidating political identity, and establishing ideological boundaries. From a semantic perspective, pejoratives are not simply emotional reactions but structured linguistic signs whose meanings evolve through pragmatic usage. Recent approaches in hybrid semantics demonstrate that pejoratives undergo pragmaticalization, transforming descriptive meanings into evaluative, often negative, connotations.

Within this paradigm, irony and sarcasm emerge as central strategies of pejorative evaluation. Both function as stylistic and semantic devices that reinforce negative assessment while simultaneously shaping the audience's perception of political reality. Irony, grounded in incongruity between literal and implied meaning, and sarcasm, distinguished by its overtly mocking tone, allow speakers to intensify criticism, ridicule adversaries, and align with their audience through humor or disdain. These strategies, therefore, should be examined not only as stylistic ornaments but as semantic mechanisms with profound pragmatic consequences in political communication.

From a semantic point of view, the issue of pejoratives lies not in the "reality" of the emotional experience, but in the meaning of the words by which people describe these emotions [10, p.88]. Pragmatic theories of "meaning as use" are often regarded as fundamentally opposed to traditional semantics. However, the studies of D. Kaplan, M. Schroeder and other scholars show that the methods of hybrid semantics complement traditional approaches to semantic analysis. Their research is



based on the observation that for certain lexical units, semantic theory defines the rules of use rather than the expression of these units. This is confirmed by the philosophical investigations of L. Wittgenstein, who argued that the notion of “meaning” is, for the most part, determined as “the meaning of a speech expression and its use” [13].

A common phenomenon is the pragmaticalization of pejoratives, which has already been described in hybrid semantics and is regarded as the acquisition by a word of emotive content on the basis of its descriptive meaning.

On the basis of the analysis of pejoratives, we argue that the observed changes reveal a natural formalization from the point of view of the diachronic semantic type of change, i.e., the original expression, which was classified as conditionally-true, through the process of pragmaticalization becomes conditionally-applicable. This not only records semantic changes during pragmaticalization but also presupposes many specific properties of the resulting pragmaticalized elements, such as their frequent peripheral position, their scope, etc., in which the given linguistic unit functions as a mixed linguistic unit (hybrid), simultaneously contributing to the realization of conditionally-true and conditionally-applicable meaning. This intermediate stage on the path of pragmaticalization, on the one hand, relies on mixed functioning, and on the other hand, ensures the maintenance of the conditions of hybrid usage [8].

In view of the high frequency of such usage, a word may become conventionalized and form part of the semantic structure of the word. At the final stage, the initial meaning may disappear, so that only the negative conditional component remains from the original descriptive statement, which as a result may be called an abusive conditionally applicable element [7].

In the interpretation of pejorative units, context plays an important role. It makes it possible to analyze the relationship between different lexical units in the text. According to J.R. Firth, “the semantics of words in context can differ significantly from the semantics of isolated units, since only in extended expression does the word acquire its real meaning” [6, p.29]. Let us note that context, depending on the communicative situation, may modify a pejorative lexeme into a neutral or meliorative one, and vice versa, a neutral or meliorative lexeme into a pejorative one.

Stylistic and graphic means of intensifying the meaning of pejoratives in context, i.e., all the elements belonging to peripheral zones, play a secondary role and have a subordinate function in relation to lexical, word-formation, and grammatical means. Such a position proves the heterogeneity of the pejorative field, and also makes it possible to distinguish several areas of the field, defined zones possessing internal semantic unity and uniting features similar in content [12].



Pejorative evaluation is realized through various semantic devices such as irony, sarcasm, agonality, aggression, disapproval, disdain, contempt, swearing, etc., and is used to express a negative and unfavorable attitude toward the interlocutor.

Most often, irony is used as a device of verbal aggression, in the realization of which neutral linguistic means in the stylistic aspect acquire expressive meaning. The processes of globalization in the modern political world and the growing need for political debates, constant tense communication, and the necessity for negotiations between political figures have led to the transformation of irony and sarcasm into a means of communication among participants of political discourse, a means of criticizing the political views and program of an opponent, and a means of consolidating one's position on the political stage. Speech acts of participants in political discourse with ironic or sarcastic coloring have certain functions. The main goal of using irony in political discourse is to deliberately diminish in the eyes of the addressee a particular political figure and his activities, by using colloquial and pejorative vocabulary, or to criticize them covertly, using tropes and stylistic devices. According to the precise statement of E. Orujeva, "irony creates a humorous effect, and humor is one of the necessary conditions for the creation and interpretation of irony. Irony is a critical and negative form of argumentation, consisting of special rhetorical figures and partly funny scenes. In the ironic argument, these elements create a peculiar persuasive effect" [9, p.35].

Creative forms of ironic devices most often used by politicians include comparison, metaphor, metonymy, personification, hyperbole, litotes, occasionalism, transformed phraseological expressions, enumeration of consecutive arguments, irony, sarcasm, ridicule, etc.

It should be noted that in most cases politicians resort to the use of humor, i.e., irony, in political debates, interviews, television shows, since ridicule is one of the ways of suppressing one's opponent. By using laughter and humor, a politician is called upon to humiliate his opponent and thereby correct his behavior in the desired direction. Such an orientation has been deliberately exploited in political debates since the times of the Roman Empire. Let us note that offensive humor is perceived by society as appropriate only in the most critical period, since ridicule is on the verge of moral permissibility [3, p.42]. The speaker "enters into a conspiracy" with the listener, trying to remove from the game his political opponent as one not deserving of positive attention [2, p.4].

A.V. Alieva notes that "by using political texts, every skillful politician exerts a certain influence on the addressee, introducing into his perception certain



conceptual values and information. The main instrument in this process is the text, conceptually consisting of a set of ideas and loaded with specific information, which is created in the course of speech communication” [1, p.18]. To depict a negative speech portrait of an opponent and for criticism, reproach, mockery, politicians use ironic or even sarcastic addresses, greetings, compliments, words of gratitude, condolences, offers of help. We distinguish between the concepts of irony and sarcasm. By irony we understand an utterance with a hidden content opposite to the content that is directly expressed. Therefore, the peculiarity of ironic meaning is the presence of two semantic planes – the expressed and the latent. Irony is most often constructed on the use in the external plane of a positive evaluation, and in the internal – of a negative one. This is due to the fact that a positive judgment is considered normative, while a critical one is regarded as an exception, a deviation from the norm [5, p.89].

Sarcasm can be defined as ironic offensive mockery or a mocking, sneering, harsh utterance. Sarcasm is the highest degree of irony, and its essence is not exhausted only by a high degree of derision and exposure, but lies primarily in the correlation of two informational planes – the implicit and the explicit. Sarcasm is distinguished by a tone of indignation [11, p.163]. Consequently, it can be argued that sarcasm correlates with aggression, whereas irony does not. Obviously, ironic and sarcastic utterances are characterized by the speaker’s unfriendly attitude toward the addressee, tension in communication, veiled negative attitude, a sense of disdain and indignation. Analyzing irony, sarcasm, and their place in the space of political communication, we can identify several important functions. The most important function characteristic of any contextual fragment of political discourse containing irony or sarcasm is the regulative function, consisting in the fact that the speaker, consciously or unconsciously, tries to influence the addressee in order to achieve the intended goals.

The presence of negative connotation is characterized primarily by the nominative nature of the expression. However, it does not necessarily imply the object of influence. Sometimes pejoration presupposes an influence on the addressee with the aim of making him aware of his mistakes. Such an influence is possible with the participation of direct verbal explanation, i.e., through the use of phraseological units with pejorative connotation, in which not only a negative emotional reaction is embedded, but also censure, criticism or even insult of the opponent.

Pejorative phraseology is a living layer of speech, whose expressiveness determines its influence on the consciousness of the addressee of communication. That is why it is necessary to take into account not only the nominative,



communicative and pragmatic functions of phraseological units, but also their occasional functions, i.e., those arising on the basis of a specific context. Pejorative phraseologisms are designed to discredit the behavior and actions of the addressee, to express disapproval, censure, irony and other negative emotional states in order to achieve the communicative goal of the speaker.

Another function of irony is the emotional-evaluative function, the task of which is the speaker's assessment of the behavior of the addressee to whom the ironic utterance is directed.

As M. Dinel notes, "sarcasm and irony are regarded as means of pejoration"; "Sarcasm and irony do not carry only negative evaluation, but a negative evaluation specially intensified by the use of witty language, often using implicitness for the purpose of humiliating the object of criticism"; "Sarcastic irony and sarcasm are usually contained in complete expressions without reference to individual words of derogatory meaning" [4, p.219].

Irony intertwines with sarcasm, which differs in that a judgment imbued with sarcasm is never funny: it characterizes the object from the standpoint of moral evaluation, reflecting subjective rejection and censure.

Sarcasm and irony perform the regulative function, the function of intensifying criticism, the striving for self-assertion, the masking function, etc. All these functions are conditioned by the communicative needs of the speakers in mutual understanding, in emotional-evaluative influence on the addressee, in expressing the speaker's attitude to the discussed problem with economy of linguistic means. Politicians skillfully use irony mainly for ridicule, mockery and derision, which makes it possible to significantly weaken the authority and image of the opponent in the eyes of the electorate. Irony itself does not contain a discrediting character, however it is a stylistic device characterized by significant pejorative expressiveness.

In political discourse, irony is directed not only at the direct transmission of the utterance to the addressee, its role lies in the indirect influence on the audience. The use of irony makes the speaker's speech brighter, more expressive and figurative, and also further strengthens the impact of words. As E. Orujeva rightly notes, "in political discourse irony creates the opportunity to implicitly express an opinion about existing social values and to demonstrate a negative attitude toward the opponent. Politicians resort to irony more often when speaking about non-trivial political issues. They appear not only as representatives of a social institution but also as personalities possessing linguistic individuality" [9, p.41].

Thus, a speech act of aggression can be identified as a set of linguistic phenomena united by a common pragmatic function of creating a pejorative



expressive effect, delivering a message of negative evaluative connotations, which are made possible through the use of a whole complex of specially chosen linguistic means. In this interpretation, aggression appears also as a specific type of expression with all the characteristics inherent in this phenomenon. Aggression in political discourse can be both “hard,” expressing disrespect for a political opponent, skepticism, irony, and “soft,” that is, a statement of individual facts and their commentary.

Connotative semantics considers pejorative vocabulary in accordance with the classification of emosemes – lexemes with an emotive macrocomponent in the semantics of pejoratives, among which we distinguish: humorous, ironic, disapproving, disdainful, brutal, and abusive. The analysis of pejoratively colored lexemes gives grounds to conclude that one of the important features of pejoratives is the combination in them of both semantic and pragmatic aspects of language. Pejoratives, influencing the semantic structure of an expression or sentence, make it emotionally colored and at the same time carry a pragmatic load.

Bringing the theoretical claims into the arena of political rhetoric, the reproduced section clarifies how pejoratives migrate from descriptive to evaluative meanings via pragmatization and how context governs their polarity (pejorative ↔ meliorative). Within this dynamic, irony and sarcasm are not merely stylistic “extras” but high-impact semantic strategies: they condense criticism, invite audience alignment through humor or indignation, and regulate power relations by undermining an opponent’s ethos. The catalog of devices (comparison, metaphor, metonymy, litotes, etc.) shows the breadth of linguistic resources that can be mobilized to intensify negative evaluation while maintaining plausible deniability through implicature.

These mechanisms help explain why ironic discourse can be socially tolerated in high-stakes moments (cf. the note about “offensive humor” during critical periods) and why sarcastic tone often correlates with perceived aggression. For empirical follow-up, frequency analyses across leaders, genres (debate, interview, social media), and cultures would reveal how tolerance for ridicule and its persuasive payoff vary across audiences.

Pejorative evaluation in political discourse is realized through a spectrum of semantic and stylistic strategies, among which irony and sarcasm play a decisive role. Irony enables the speaker to mask criticism under a veneer of humor, while sarcasm sharpens the evaluative force through explicit ridicule and indignation. Together, they provide an effective mechanism for reinforcing negative connotations, achieving pragmatic goals, and shaping public opinion.



The study confirms that pejorative semantics cannot be examined solely from a lexical perspective; it requires an integrated semantic-pragmatic approach that considers contextual variation, stylistic intensification, and audience reception. Future research should extend this analysis by comparing the frequency and functions of irony and sarcasm in the speeches of different political leaders across cultural contexts, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of evaluative language in public communication.

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