

## IRONY IN THE HEADLINES

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Irony as a specific means of communication has been known since ancient times. It has been used throughout the ages and its importance, uniqueness and impact has never lacked the interest of linguists. Since the times of ancient Greeks irony has been a constantly changing, dynamic phenomenon. However, as a linguistic means of expression irony received due attention only in the second half of the twentieth century. Since then, it has been a subject of study because of its intriguing communicative value and its pragmatic challenge. In fact, according to N. Knox, "irony is a paradigmatic instance of figurative language, since in a standard ironic exchange a speaker conveys (and the addressee interprets) a communicative meaning which is in contradiction to what is said" (Knox, 1973, 626-634).<sup>1</sup>

In modern times several theoretical perspectives have attempted to explain this complex communicative phenomenon.

The classic definition of irony, that it is the opposition of the literal and implicated meanings, seems inadequate today. Numerous efforts to define irony anew have resulted in a plentitude of different definitions; however, not a single one has been accepted universally because irony is always in flux.<sup>2</sup>

The definition of irony is heavily dependent on the perspective the linguists take into consideration. N. Knox argues that irony can be defined as the conflict of two meanings which has a dramatic structure peculiar to itself: "initially, one meaning, the appearance, presents itself as the obvious truth, but when the context of this meaning unfolds, in depth or in time, it surprisingly discloses a conflicting meaning, the reality, measured against which the first meaning now seems false or limited and, in its self-assurance, blind to its own situation. Irony 'lies', but it does so only as a dramatic means of bringing two meanings into open conflict. Some theorists assert that by encompassing this conflict in a single structure, irony resolves it into harmony or unity" (ibid).

<sup>1</sup> Here irony should not be understood as a lie, as the intention and objectives of the speakers while performing an ironic act are not the same as while lying. In the former case the ironist aims to reveal the inadequacy between the desired state of affairs and the actual situation, using irony for corrective purposes, while in lying the speaker, on the contrary, aims to mislead the others.

<sup>2</sup> The approach to irony as the opposition between the literal and implicated meaning is supported by W. Booth 1969, D. Willson 1994, J. Kreutel 2003 and given in Random House Webster's Dictionary 2004, Oxford English Dictionary 2002, etc. On the other hand L. Huchon 1996, D. Muecke 1969, R. Giora 2002, H. Kotthoff 2000, S. Stewart 1989 and many other modern linguists emphasize the importance to analyse irony as a communicative act where the two meanings are in conflict but not necessarily in direct opposition to each other.

Even though the definition of irony as a linguistic phenomenon brings many ambiguities and conflicting points of view to the fore, no one would doubt its popularity in the mass media as well as in other spheres of everyday life. Irony can be found everywhere: the mass media simply abounds in irony. Television, newspapers and radio reports are particularly ironic and make wide use of this linguistic technique.

The aim of my research is to analyze headlines of political articles found on such Lithuanian and English Internet websites as: Delfi, Blogas, the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, the Guardian, Pointer, Electronic talking heads etc. and to establish a classification of the ironical usage of proper nouns in headlines.

The headlines will be examined in several aspects, such as the types of the websites they occur in, and the usage of specific linguistic means (in particular - manipulation of proper names).

The Lithuanian mass media are expanding and developing along various western (European and American) traditions. Open irony, having been restricted for so many years in political headlines due to the authoritarian style of government, is nowadays used quite widely. Consequently, it cannot be said that it developed step by step in the mass media, more likely it came as a storm, suddenly and multifariously. Democracy and the freedom of speech enable journalists to employ irony more frequently. However, sometimes it is used carelessly, turning it into open offence.

The questions of ethics (the basic principle of which is respect), the frequency of irony and the type of mass media channel are closely related. Newspapers may be divided into quality newspapers (The New York Times, The Guardian) and tabloids (The Sun, etc.). It can be assumed that internet websites may be similarly divided into quality sites (Delfi, The Los Angeles Times) and tabloids (Blogas, Pointer). Quality newspapers do not violate the basic principles of ethics or, if they do, the violation results in a scandal. On the other hand, popular (tabloid) papers seldom care about sparing someone's feelings – the more shocking the piece of news, the better; the more dramatically it can be presented, the more people it attracts. The hierarchical structure of websites is very similar. There are certain websites that, like quality papers, would never descend into gossip or offences. And there are those that specialize in irony, humor, sarcasm, mockery and even offence.<sup>3</sup>

Irony is easily noticeable in mass media discourse because of the impact it makes on the reader. One might forget the exact words that were uttered or written and yet remember that irony was employed in the discourse. However, irony in quality web sites is rarely overused. The research shows that there are seldom more than two or three ironic headlines a week on the websites included in the sample.

On the other hand, the tabloid websites (e.g. Blogas, Pointer, Electronic Talking Heads, etc.) allow themselves to be ironic without restriction, including even the use of offensive headlines that exceed the limits of irony and turn to open mockery.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The distinction between the notions of irony and sarcasm is one more arbitrary question in linguistics. While some linguists argue that irony should be never mixed with sarcasm or humour (D.Mueche 1969, R.Brody 1999, R.Rorty 1997), others insist that all the mentioned devices belong to the domain of irony, and view sarcasm as one of the forms irony takes (H.Kothoff 2000, A.Utsumi 2002, J.Ward 1999). In the article latter theories are supported and sarcasm is treated as the most acute form of irony.

<sup>4</sup> The distinction between the forms of irony used in the two types of the websites should also be commented on. The quality websites employ the forms of irony that are usually associated with wit, while the tabloid websites are not concerned with the intellectual aspects of ironic usage. Thus, sarcasm is a much more frequent means of linguistic expression in tabloid websites.

Speaking about the frequency of irony usage, one more factor should be taken into consideration: the political-economical situation itself. As Voloshinov points out, “The form of irony in general is conditioned by social conflict; it is the encounter in one voice of two incarnate value judgments and their interference with one another” (1973, 34). During times of great political conflict or scandal even quality newspapers and websites begin to make more frequent usage of irony. With the growth of feelings of dissatisfaction, disapproval, or anger the irony gets more acute.

Similarly, when there are no big conflicts in the political arena, the number of ironic headlines decreases. Thus the mode of irony is close to amiable humour in daily reports, placing ironic charge on such things as minor “sins” of government officials, their unmotivated claims, or unusual behaviour. In the following headlines, irony, though obvious, is hardly sarcastic or offensive:

(1) *There's no-one responsible for a business tax*  
*Atsakingų už verslo mokesčių nėra* ([www.delfi.lt](http://www.delfi.lt))

Here the irony lies in the fact that there surely must be officials responsible for initiating a new tax on business, yet they are reluctant to take responsibility for this unpopular decision. The bureaucratic apparatus enables the officials to pass the responsibility to yet another and another bureaucrat, and this headline pokes fun at this situation. Similarly:

(2) *Let's all hug Bill Frist* ([www.latimes.com](http://www.latimes.com))

Although the article deals with the issue of using embryos in stem cell research and accuses Bill Frist of allowing such research, the headline sounds like a friendly invitation. Though irony is amiable neither in the headline nor in the article itself, the situation still allows the reader to distance himself from what is being ironised as the process does not involve him directly.

The type of irony and the reaction of the reader change dramatically when the situation under review is global. This presumption proves true for both Lithuanian and American websites. After Hurricane Katherine the number of ironic headlines increased greatly in American websites (as a reaction to the claims of the authorities that the situation was under control and that all measures had been taken to avoid human casualties). Similarly, irony was used much more frequently after the insinuation of scandals in Lithuania involving the mayor of Vilnius, A.Zuokas.

In such situations irony makes the news more dramatic and the impact it brings is immense. The news itself is shocking and irony makes it explode. High ranking officials are often referred to at length in such cases to increase the emotional load. Thus after the hurricane in New Orleans, the Los Angeles Times website proclaimed:

(3) *Noblesse oblige? Not our president* ([www.latimes.com](http://www.latimes.com))

Though it looks like the blame is put on the president only, the implication prevails that Americans are to blame as well because he is their president, the one they elected.

This example leads to another point of interest: the usage of proper names (usually those of famous politicians) in ironic headlines. Most political issues deal with one or another political

figure, therefore the mention of their names in headlines is very frequent. Based on the analysis of headlines here described, I propose the following classification of ironical usage of proper names.

**Zero irony.** A name occurs in a headline without contributing to the creation of irony. The headline, even without the name mentioned, would still be ironic:

(4) *Guess who'll take the blame for Bush's war?* ([www.politicalstrategy.org](http://www.politicalstrategy.org))

If the name of the president were left out, the headline "Guess who'll take the blame for the war?" would still have ironic charge, because usually such serious matters as wars are not related to guessing games.

**Juxtaposition.** A name is used in juxtaposition to other words that trigger the ironic meaning:

(5) *George Bush and the axis of evil* ([www.pointer.com](http://www.pointer.com))

The implication is that G. Bush and the axis of evil are closely interconnected, and the negative meaning of the phrase is moved (transferred) to the name of the president.

**Echo.** The sentence structure clearly echoes another well known (politically familiar) phrase:

(6) *Zuokas isn't guilty - the environment is guilty*  
*Zuokas nekaltas – aplinka kalta* ([www.delfi.lt](http://www.delfi.lt))

The phrase clearly includes the echo-mention of another familiar structure (the top-phrase of the year) with the only difference lying in the name of the politician: "Paksas isn't guilty - the environment is guilty" (Paksas nekaltas-aplinka kalta).

**Paraphrase.** Using well known titles or proverbs with the substitution of their agents by well-known names and events:

(7) *How Bush stole the elections* ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com))

The headline at once rings a bell, as one of the most popular American children's books is Dr. Sense's *How the Grinch stole Christmas*.

Here the substitution serves to transfer the characteristic features of the "original" subjects to the person and the event of the real life. Therefore Bush comes to represent a cheating, hideous Grinch, while elections might be understood as a festival, a happy day that was stolen from all the people.

**Metaphor.** Proper names may be inserted into metaphorical sayings:

(8) *Is Uspaskich at the end of his rope?*  
*Ar Uspaskichas priėjo liepto galą?* ([www.delfi.lt](http://www.delfi.lt))

Here the irony lies in the metaphoric saying, whose most salient meaning is not the direct but the implicated one, the figurative meaning which by itself carries an ironical attitude to the referred person.

**Neologism.** New lexical units may be created, such as *Bushism*, *Bushonomics*, *Paksism*, *Londonistan*, where a certain suffix serves to create a new word whose meaning becomes clear because of the political context of the time:

(9) *Farewell, Londonistan?* ([www.latimes.com](http://www.latimes.com))

As the article deals with the issues of Islamic countries, the suffix added to London brings out the irony of the city being overloaded with Islamic culture.

**Analogy.** New lexical units may be created according to the analogy to well-known (fictitious) characters:

(10) *The story of Zuocula the Dragon and the Maiden*  
*Pasaka apie Slibiną Zuokulą ir Mergelę* ([www.delfi.lt](http://www.delfi.lt))

Here the newly formed name Zuocula is a clear allusion to the character of Dracula, and the formation is used deliberately to shift the negative features of the fictitious personage onto a political figure.

**National representation.** Proper names may be used to represent the entire nation:

(11) *Why does the barrel of Ivan and Fritz cause fear?*  
*Kodėl Ivano ir Frico vamzdis kelia baime?* ([www.delfi.lt](http://www.delfi.lt))

Here the names of Ivan and Fritz clearly stand for the nationality of Russians and Germans in general without naming the countries directly.

**Suffixation.** Pseudo-names may be created deliberately for one or another occasion, with the aim to express an ironic attitude towards certain officials or authorities without naming them directly. The identity of the people the irony is aimed at is evident due to the background knowledge the reader has about the political situation in the country:

(12) *Chukchianov and Neftianov come to Lithuania*  
*Lietuvą atvyko Čiukčianovas ir Neftianovas* ([www.delfi.lt](http://www.delfi.lt))

In this case, proper name formation uses the suffix –anov, which is typical of Russian surnames and therefore clearly shows that the names represent people of this nationality. Furthermore, the first part of the fictitious surname is formed using a non-standard Lithuanian word (not included into dictionaries) which represents people of the Chukchia Region and involves a negative attitude towards them; the second surname contains a reference to the oil business as the first constituent of the second personal name.

**Rhyming.** Headlines may include words that rhyme with the proper name and thus ironize it:

(13) *How odd of Rod*

The juxtaposition of two words that rhyme well serves to shift the emotional charge of the adjective to the name of the politician. Rhyming is used in poetry to elevate the style, while in ironic headlines the function it takes is contrary: to downgrade.

The functions such ironic headlines perform are numerous. Sometimes the writer is trying to make a serious political, moral or social point and does not wish to do so openly. According to S. Stewart, "irony is used to 'camouflage' the intention" (1989, 37-39). Therefore open criticism, deflation, or scorn is masked by irony.

According to G. Wolfe (2004), nearly all the researchers agree that irony is a form of intense self-consciousness—a knowing, cynical mistrust of institutions and shared truths. "Out of this jaded sensibility comes the ironist's twisted sense of humor, based on the conviction that everything is derivative. The ironist delights in creating a stream of joking allusions, 'quoting', as it were, from the cultural baggage of history" (G. Wolfe, 2004, 144).

As Muecke puts it, "drilled by the media tuned into the joke, we venture onto the double-bottomed plateau of irony more willingly and self-confidently than into the jungle grown thick with seriousness and sincerity" (1969, 64).

To sum up, it can be concluded that irony as a figure of speech, due to its impact and dual nature, is frequently used in headlines on the Internet, where the ironic manipulations with the proper names alone can fall into a variety of categories performing different functions.

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## IRONIJA ANTRAŠTĖSE

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### Reziumė

Straipsnis skirtas ironijos fenomeno tyrimui internetinių tinklapių antraštėse. Atlikta analizė leidžia daryti prielaidas, kad ironijos kaip kalbinės figūros vartojimas antraštėse tiesiogiai priklauso nuo masinės informacijos perdavimo kanalo bei nuo ekonominės- politinės situacijos šalyje. Nuo to priklauso ne tik ironijos vartojimo dažnumas, bet ir ironijos forma, kuri kinta nuo švelnaus humoro iki kandaus sarkazmo. Atliekant antraščių tyrimą ypatingas dėmesys buvo skiriamas vardažodžių ir vietovardžių vartosenai, sukuriantiai ironišką efektą dešimčia skirtingų būdų.