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A SEMANTIC-PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE PHENOMENON OF IRONY AND SARCASM

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Abstract

This academic research article provides an in-depth study of the laws governing the formation of sarcasm, irony, and satire in Arabic linguistics, their role in communicative discourse, their lexical-semantic characteristics related to figurative content, and their socio-cultural foundations. The layers of hidden meaning that emerge through indirect expression (ta'rid and kinaya) in the Arabic language, as well as through morphological (sarf) and syntactic (nahv) constructions, are analyzed using examples from classical works and modern discourse. Additionally, the methodological aspects of forms of satire in various Arabic dialects (particularly the Egyptian and Gulf dialects) and the ironic techniques found in classical literature (Al-Jahiz, Al-Mutanabbi) are also covered. The semantic nature of picking, its double-layered meaning, and its pragmatic impact are scientifically substantiated through a comparative analysis with similar speech phenomena in the Uzbek language.

Keywords: Irony, sarcasm, discourse on the Arabic language, metaphor, pragmatics, dialectology, speech culture, morphology and syntax, indirect communication, semantic layer.

Introduction

The internal structure and lexical system of every language consist of a uniquely complex world of meanings. In interpersonal communication, information is not always expressed openly and directly; some meanings are conveyed to the recipient (the listener) indirectly, through hidden intonations, various pragmatic signals, and figurative means. In Arabic linguistics and speech culture, sarcasm,

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irony, and mockery are linguistic phenomena belonging to such a highly subtle layer of hidden meaning, and they are manifested through the language's incomparably rich forms and grammatical possibilities.

In the historically formed Arab social society, expressing one's opinion or criticism directly (openly) was often considered less acceptable from the perspective of the etiquette of communication (adab al-muloqot) , For this reason, people preferred to convey the original meaning in a softer, more figurative, or ironic way, thereby "saving face" for their interlocutor. This need, in turn, paved the way for the extensive development of a number of stylistic devices such as irony, ta'rid (oblique expression), and majaz (metaphor) within the Arabic science of Balagha (Ilm al-Balagha)¹ .

In the fields of speech act theory and pragmatics, devices such as irony and sarcasm are explained as the formation of thought on a dual semantic layer basis: where the speech's surface (uttered lexical) meaning and its deep (intended by the speaker) content are fundamentally different from each other. In Arabic, this duality is deeply intertwined with subtle semantic nuances, word formation, intonation features, as well as the pragmatic context and social situation in which the speech is uttered.

The cultural-historical and social roots of irony

The forms of irony and indirect expression in the Arabic language have a deep historical, cultural, and sociological basis. In the early Arab tribal society (starting from the Jahiliyyah period), they served to soften interpersonal relationships, to avoid directly reprimanding someone, There was a strong social need to express disagreement with an elder, a person of authority, or someone socially respected in a polite and diplomatic manner. It was this very cultural need that led to the unprecedented development in the language of indirect forms of expression—phenomena such as *kināyah* (الكنية), *sarkasm* (السخرية), and *majāz* (المجاز).

The Arabic language, from ancient classical literature to modern communication, is a language rich with sarcasm, subtle humor, and irony. Even

¹ Yasinov, R. Stylistics of the Arabic Language and Speech Culture. Tashkent: Fan, 2016.

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many phrases and stories in the verses of the Quran, the holy source of Islam, also contain reality, There are numerous examples that suggest a deep tradition of indirectly expressing meaning (the methods of allusion and description), rather than openly stating the flaws in human nature. Such styles in the Qur'an increase the speech's impact and invite the reader to deep reflection. Even today, Arabs make effective use of irony in their daily lives and political discourse to evaluate, criticize, or humorously comment on an event.

One of the most prominent forms of sarcasm and irony in everyday conversation is the use of a positive-sounding (affirmative) statement to convey a purely negative (denial or criticism) meaning. For example, in reference to a person who is doing something very slowly and lazily: " Ma shā'a Allāh, you're really fast today!" (Ma shā'a Allāh, you're so fast today!) While this phrase has a purely complimentary lexical appearance, it is, in fact, a sharp criticism. This type of usage is considered a very common phenomenon in the Arabic language. For example, to a merchant overcharging for a product at a market one might say , "رخيص جداً, Ma shā'a Allāh" (May God keep it, you've made it too cheap), the buyer intends to sarcastically point out the price's unreasonable highness without stating it directly. Intonation and paralinguistic cues (facial expressions, gestures) here drastically reverse the pure meaning of the words by 180 degrees. This situation is structurally and semantically equivalent to Uzbek expressions like "You really did great!" and "Well done, you did it very well!" or "Nice work, you really nailed it" are structurally and semantically fully equivalent, indicating the proximity of the psychological and social foundations of politeness in both languages² .

The Expression of Pitching Based on the Laws of Morphology and Syntax

As a flexional language with strict morphological patterns (weights) and a complex syntactic structure, It is possible to impart a different meaning (including irony) not by changing the word itself, but by altering the syntactic construction. The rules of Nahw (syntax) and Sarf (morphology), pillars of Arabic grammar, play a crucial role in shaping the external form of pitch.

² Al-Jahiz. Kitab al-Bayan wa-t-Tabyin. Cairo: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 2018.

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Typically, in Arabic, sarcasm is created by a deviation from the normal word order in a sentence (the phenomenon of **taqdim** and **ta'khir**), or by using certain verb forms (for example, the forms for exaggeration and astonishment) in a way that is contrary to their original purpose. For example, strong is created by applying words of superlative or hyperbolic meaning to the most incompetent person: Calling an incompetent person 'allāmah' (a term for a highly learned scholar) is morphologically a compliment, but pragmatically it sharply exposes their illiteracy. Conveying a powerful comic effect in a short phrase is a key feature of piching. "Mumtāz jiddan!" (Mumtāz jiddan! - "Excellent!") is often sarcastically used in reference to mistaken negative situations, and this radical shift in meaning is conveyed through direct emphasis and intonation.

Irony in Classical Arabic Literature and the Works of Thinkers

In the history of Arabic literature, irony has been valued not merely as a play on words, but as a complex literary art form serving profound socio-political functions. In many of the qasidas and verses of the famous poet al-Mutanabbi, the rulers, commanders, rival poets, and various political figures of his time are subtly and indirectly criticized. In particular, in his poems dedicated to Qawur Ikshidiy, although Mutannabi outwardly appears to be praising him, he satirizes him in the most scathing terms in the subtext (using irony). Mutannabi and other writers were forced to hide their true meaning through layers of irony, especially during difficult times of censorship when open criticism was dangerous and could sometimes be punished by death³.

Similarly, the great master of prose and philosopher Al-Jahiz (Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr ibn Baḥr al-Kīnānī al-Jāḥiẓ) in his masterpieces, harmonized descriptive expression, metaphor, and satire to such a high degree that the result was multiple complex layers of meaning in the text. Al-Jāḥiẓ satirized the vices of society, When satirizing societal ills such as stinginess, ignorance, and hypocrisy, he does not pass direct judgment on them but rather uses ironic dialogues and satirical depictions to encourage the reader to draw their own conclusions.

³ Al-Khatib, Muhammad. *Pragmatics in Arabic Discourse*. London: Routledge, 2020.

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In Arabic, irony forms an inseparable unity with the art of مجاز (metaphor). For example:

You are a specialist... in impossible challenges. It's clear that you are
(Clearly, you're an expert... in impossible tasks.)

Such sentences are considered ironic praise, and behind them lies a bitter criticism. This is not simply overt irony, but an artistic device that indirectly influences human psychology, which in turn has further expanded the semantic richness and aesthetic dimension of the Arabic language. Later, such profound expressions detached from classical literature and became part of the everyday lexicon of the general populace.

Dialectological Features and Modern Transformation

In addition to Classical Fusha (Fushā - literary Arabic), the semantic application and intonation of irony also manifest differently among the various regional dialects (Amiyya) of the Arab world. Studies show that the cultural character of each region is also reflected in its irony.

Egyptian dialect (Lahja Masriyya): The social character of Egyptians is distinguished by their openness and inclination toward satire, so their sarcasm tends to be more humorous and lighthearted. For example, in Egypt, to a person who is boasting excessively and without justification during a conversation, one might say "Inti muhimm awi!" (which means "You're such an important person!") — "Wow, you're such an important person!") is perceived less as a sharply hostile criticism and more as a lighthearted joke to defuse the situation. In the speech of the inhabitants of the Persian Gulf (Khaleej) states (such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar), irony is used more in a calm tone, within the framework of customs and restraint, and in a more serious manner. For example, "أنت عالم ما شاء الله" ("Inta 'ālim, mā shā'a Allāh" — You are a scholar, God forbid they envy you) is used in the region with heavy sarcasm and irony toward someone who tries to appear unduly wise and knowledgeable. This clearly demonstrates the power of contextual pragmatics⁴.

⁴ Hassan, Sami. Arabic Rhetoric and Figurative Speech. Doha: Qatar University Press, 2019.

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Pragmatics of Communication: Social Distance and Psychological Protection

In linguistics, the pragmatic functions of pitch are extremely diverse. Among these are important psychosocial factors such as maintaining social distance, softening potentially contentious objections, moderating interpersonal relations and controlling emotions, , as well as conveying a sharp idea to the addressee indirectly. In the Arab social environment, as noted above, it is considered culturally impolite to express a direct, open objection to elders, teachers, or high-ranking leaders. For this reason, irony in communication serves this function of overcoming this obstacle very effectively. For example, to let someone know at work that they are being overly serious, nervous, or distracted: Saying, "You look so light today, like a young boy," is actually a tactful and gentle way to remind them that they are extremely tired and unable to concentrate.

Also, in everyday life, sarcasm manifests itself in the guise of friendly banter between people who are socially and psychologically very close (friends, family members). Even if a close person is tired from working tirelessly all day, smiling at them and saying, "Looks like you didn't do anything today either!" is actually a way of acknowledging their hard work and expressing mutual psychological closeness and humor. Thus, these expressions, in addition to the unique grammatical and lexical richness of the Arabic language, also deeply reveal the nature of pan-Arab socio-cultural relationships.

The effectiveness of irony always depends strictly on the context (the situation). The speaker's tone of voice (paralinguistic features), the time and place the sentence is spoken, and the level of formality or informality between the interlocutors are the main indicators that determine the true (internal) meaning of the pitch. Therefore, foreign students, in particular, ...it is considered absolutely necessary for foreign students, particularly those learning Arabic as a second language, to understand irony in a text or speech not only in its lexical (direct semantic) sense, but also within the framework of the speech-contextual environment⁵.

⁵ Al-Mutanabbih. Dewan al-Mutanabbih. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 2015.

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Conclusion:

In conclusion, in Arabic, over the course of centuries, picking, sarcasm, and irony have evolved from a simple lexical device into a profound speech phenomenon with complex layers of meaning, one that is deeply intertwined with the social structure of Arab society, is deeply connected to the Arab society's social structure, and its historical development. Research and in-depth analysis have shown that these discursive techniques serve not only as aesthetic embellishments and artistic devices of the language, but also as a unique psychological defense mechanism in the communication process, and as a powerful linguistic mechanism that acquires its own psychological defense, moral norms, and social charge. The Arabs' vast literary heritage, Islamic religious sources, centuries-old folk oral traditions, and today's globalized modern communication networks all vividly prove how deeply irony and sarcasm are ingrained in the national psyche. In particular, because eloquence (fasah and balaghat) has historically been considered one of the highest values for the Arab people, the masterful use of irony has been recognized as a practical manifestation of logical thinking and high intellect.

A study of ancient and modern sources firmly confirms that irony in Arabic is often expressed openly and directly, softening complex content that would be uncomfortable from the perspective of human dignity and social norms. It is actively used as a strategic tool for strategic purposes, such as conveying complex content that would be uncomfortable from a standpoint of human dignity and social norms if stated openly and directly, and delivering it in a non-confrontational manner without offending the interlocutor's emotional state or maintaining a socio-spiritual distance from them. Notably, a lexical phrase that at first glance seems light and humorous can actually carry a very serious warning or a hidden, expository meaning that immediately prompts the listener to reflect. This process is a testament to the profound depth of the unique speech secrets and layers of syntactic-morphological possibilities in the structure of the Arabic language, which are inherent to the culture of the Arab people. For this very reason, the artistic and linguistic power of pitch in the Arabic language is

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so great that the original meaning of a particular phrase can drastically change to the complete opposite, depending on the pragmatic context, tone, and situation; This miraculous feature infinitely enhances the language's richness, not only stylistically but also practically.

Historical research proves that in the works of Eastern and Arab thinkers, irony is often not a passive linguistic phenomenon, but rather a prominent active weapon for expressing powerful social criticism. In the works of giants of classical literature— —such as Al-Jahiz and Al-Mutanabbi, there are unparalleled, complex prose and poetic forms (constructions) in which biting satire and irony are completely intertwined. These facts confirm that wit in Arabic discourse is not merely simple humor or domestic mockery. For centuries, it has served as a shield to protect free thought, a means of deeply criticizing the policies of despotic rulers without stating them directly, and has served as a means of indirectly conveying to the people sharp social ideas that were forbidden or dangerous to state directly during periods of strict censorship. The logical conclusion is that irony, in the socio-political life of the Arab people, has become not just a literary-artistic style, but an integral and essential component of comprehensive political, cultural, and social discourse.

Even in the modern digital Arab society of our time, irony has not lost its functional importance in the slightest. On the contrary, with globalization and the expansion of virtual space, sarcasm has become an even more powerful and widespread means of expression on social networks, in TV debates, political discussions, traditional media, and in everyday live conversations. Especially in the language of the modern youth, this phenomenon has taken the form of memes, This linguistic and cultural process has transformed picking, taking on a new form in the shape of memes, short visual videos, or sharp wordplay, and has become a tradition of conveying the most complex political or social content in an extremely simple, funny, yet profoundly insightful way. While this linguistic and cultural process demonstrates a transformation in the external form of the punchline, it scientifically confirms that in its internal, semantic, and pragmatic aspects, it has not strayed one iota from its ancient historical roots.

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Simply put, in the Arab and Muslim social sphere, irony continues to thrive not only as a literary art but also as a national cultural code.

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