
LINGUOPRAGMATIC POTENTIAL OF HUMOR IN THE ENGLISH PUBLIC SPEECHES

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INTRODUCTION

In the modern globalized world public speaking, particularly in English, plays a pivotal role in the political, social and cultural communication. Humor serves as a powerful tool of communication in public speaking capable of establishing rapport between the speaker and the audience, reducing emotional tension and making speeches more enjoyable and accessible for comprehension¹. It strengthens the emotional bond between the speaker and the audience by conjuring the ambience of confidence and sympathy². This allows the speaker to appear more affable, which in turn contributes to a more effective reception of their ideas.

A speaker who can make the audience laugh is perceived as more charismatic and communicatively competent, which positively affects their overall effectiveness³. Moreover, humor helps to render information more relatable and people tend to better remember the content that elicits amusement. Humor may thus function as a tool for reinforcing the key ideas and messages of a speech, turning them into more vivid and impactful. Overall, humor in public speaking not only contributes to creating a comfortable atmosphere for the audience but also enhances communicative effectiveness and facilitates a deeper understanding of the staples of the talk⁴.

It is estimated that humor is a complex and varied phenomenon that combines linguistic, cognitive, cultural and pragmatic aspects⁵. This is especially relevant

¹ Miller F. E. No Sweat Public Speaking. London: Fred Co, 2011. 252 p.

² Stieger S., Formann A. K., Burger C. Humor styles and their relationship to explicit and implicit self-esteem. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2011. Vol. 50, No. 5. Pp. 747–750.

³ Stewart P. Laughter on the 2008 campaign trail: How presidential candidates used humor during primary debates. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. 2012. Vol. 25, No. 3. Pp. 233–262.

⁴ Webster L. J. Introduction to Public Speaking: PhD. Louisiana State University, Shreveport, 2012. 111 p.

⁵ Norrick N. The Pragmatics of Humor in Conversational Interaction. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 2003. 284 p.

to public speeches where humorous elements often rely on wordplay, cultural allusions and contextual hints that require a thorough linguo-pragmatic analysis. The study of the linguo-pragmatic specifics of humor in the English-language public speeches is particularly timely, given the current need to understand the nature of the public communicative space.

The aim of the present study is to determine the linguo-pragmatic features of the functioning of humor in the English-language public speeches, as well as to identify the major principles and strategies involved.

Achieving this aim involves addressing the following **objectives**:

- to analyze the main theoretical approaches to defining the concept of humor, as well as its functions and classifications from linguistic and pragmatic perspectives;
- to identify the linguo-pragmatic features of humor as a means of communication in the English-language public speeches;
- to determine the types of stylistic devices employed in the English-language public discourse.

Research Framework

The object of the study is humor as a complex pragmatic and cognitive-discursive phenomenon in the English-language public discourse.

The subject of the study is the linguopragmatic means of realizing humor in the English-language public speeches.

The material for the study comprises texts and video recordings of contemporary English-language public speeches from various genres. The research corpus includes political speeches, such as the addresses and public statements by Barack Obama. A particular section of material comprises performances by comedians and satirists, particularly monologues from Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, which combine analytical journalism with satirical humor on current socio-political issues as well as selected segments from stand-up comedians, where humor is used to illustrate social phenomena and personal experiences. An important part of the corpus includes public lectures (TED Talks), featuring the use of irony, self-irony and visual humor to get the message across. Media interviews and talk shows, particularly interviews with politicians and public figures on TV and radio channels like CNN and NPR were also analysed.

1. Theoretical framework of studying humor as a sociocultural and linguopragmatic phenomenon

The concept of humor has persistently attracted the attention of scholars from various academic disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, sociology,

literary studies, linguistics and communication studies⁶. Such interdisciplinary interest is caused by the complex nature of humor, which integrates cognitive, emotional and linguistic dimensions. Within the linguistic framework humor is regarded as a specific type of speech activity characterized by communicative orientation, pragmatic purpose and realization through particular linguistic means⁷.

Humor is increasingly viewed in contemporary linguistics not merely as a form of entertainment or emotional influence, but as a complex communicative phenomenon that has a range of important social, pragmatic and discursive characteristics⁸. Humor in public speaking, particularly in the English-language contexts, where humorous strategies constitute an established instrument of oratorical art, acquires special significance, as it is employed to perform a certain set of functions.

Linguistically humor emerges as an intricate phenomenon that requires a comprehensive approach to analysis. It is not only a stylistic or rhetorical device but also an important component of interpersonal communication, closely connected to pragmatics, cognition, cultural awareness and social interaction. This approach enables the study of humor as a holistic linguopragmatic phenomenon that plays a key role in the structure of public discourse.

Modern linguistic approaches interpret humor as the result of a violation of the addressee's linguistic and cognitive expectations, arising from wordplay, logical incompatibility, stylistic mismatch or the subversion of cultural conventions. This perspective is grounded in theories of incongruity, which posit that the comic effect is achieved through the collision of two incompatible meanings or logical levels⁹. Such an approach makes it possible to identify the fundamental mechanisms underlying the construction of humor in speech, particularly within the public discourse¹⁰.

Particular attention in linguistic research has been devoted to the cognitive mechanisms underlying the generation of humor. Relevance Theory by D.

⁶ Блинова І. А., Зернецька А. А. Гумор як різновид комічного: критерії виокремлення, теорії реалізації і засоби вираження. *Вчені записки ТНУ імені В. І. Вернадського*. 2021. Т. 32(71). № 1. Ч. 2. С. 35–43.

⁷ Калита О. Типи комічних текстів та особливості їх стилістичного аналізу. *Лінгвостилістичні студії*. 2015. Вип. 2. С. 54–61.

⁸ Yus F. *The Pragmatics of Humor across Discourse Domains*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing. 2016. 311 p.

⁹ Raskin V. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company. 1985. 292 p.

¹⁰ Разумна К. А. Англійськомовний публіцистичний дискурс у дзеркалі сучасних лінгвістичних розвідок. *Науковий вісник Дрогобицького державного педагогічного університету ім. І. Франка. Серія «Філологічні науки (мовознавство)»*. 2018. № 10. С. 121–125.

Sperber & D. Wilson¹¹ treats humor as the result of a disruption of the expected interpretation of a speech message, which requires additional cognitive effort for its decoding¹². This approach enables scholars to analyze humorous utterances as the outcome of multi-level interpretation in which context, encyclopedic knowledge and the communicative competence of participants of a discourse play a significant role¹³.

In the linguocultural aspect, humor is viewed as a culturally determined phenomenon, represented in language through stereotypes, allusions, stylistic devices and forms of verbal (or paraverbal) influence¹⁴. The comic effect is often associated with the peculiarities of national mentality, cultural codes, historical allusions or social contexts, which may only be understood by native speakers of the corresponding culture. Thus, humor serves as an indicator of national characteristics in the communicative behavior. For example, English humor often relies on self-irony and understatement (deliberate downplaying) (ibid.), while Ukrainian humor is more emotionally expressive and tends to lean towards satirical or everyday contexts. Analyzing humor in this regard facilitates a new understanding of the relationship between language, culture and communication, as well as revealing the underlying mechanisms that govern the creation and perception of humorous expressions in the public discourse.

Within the framework of Pragmalinguistics humor is viewed as a pragmatic act that realizes specific communicative intentions, such as reducing social tension, establishing contact with the audience, expressing criticism or irony and engaging in a speaker self-presentation. This interpretation is based on the premise that speech is a goal-oriented process in which humor functions as a tool for achieving pragmatic aims.

One of the fundamental categories of pragmatics is the speech act, which in humorous utterances is realized as a special type of illocutionary act. For example, in the statement *'I'd agree with you, but then we'd both be wrong'* the speaker not just expresses disagreement but does so with humor, simultaneously performing an illocutionary act of denial, irony and self-irony. The perlocutionary effect in this case lies in provoking laughter or a smile as well as establishing a close rapport with the addressee (cited in ¹⁵). Moreover,

¹¹ Sperber D., Wilson D. Relevance Theory. In L.R. Horn & G. Ward (Eds.) *The Handbook of Pragmatics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. Pp. 607-632.

¹² Veale T., Hao, Y. *Computational Approaches to Humor and Irony*. Heidelberg: Springer. 2010. 250 p.

¹³ Attardo S., Raskin V. Script Theory revis(it)ed: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. 1991. No. 4(3). Pp. 293-347.

¹⁴ Jie Z. James Thurber's Humor Represents Typical American Humor. *Sino-US English Teaching*. 2016. Vol. 13, No. 5. Pp. 395-400.

¹⁵ Meyer J. C. Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication. *Communication Theory*. 2000. № 10. Pp. 310-331.

Speech Act Theory facilitates the interpretation of a humorous utterance as an illocutionary act with a distinctive perlocutionary force, namely, the creation of a comic effect and the elicitation of laughter or other audience responses¹⁶.

Considering humor as a linguopragmatic phenomenon also involves studying it not only as a purely linguistic phenomenon but also as a result of purposeful communicative action, occurring in a specific sociocultural context, with the intentions of the interlocutors being taken into account. This approach requires a comprehensive analysis of the linguistic means of creating humor, the mechanisms behind generating the comic effect as well as the interpretive strategies that allow the recipient to recognize humorous intention¹⁷.

Given this, it is important to integrate theoretical developments from related fields, such as pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, communication theory and discourse theory into the proposed analysis. This study examines key approaches to humor classification, the typology of the comic, theories of incongruity and relevance as well as models of implicit meaning, all of which help to explain how the comic effect is achieved within a specific linguistic environment¹⁸.

Humor as a communicative phenomenon has attracted the attention of researchers since ancient times. In the works of Plato and Aristotle, humor was viewed as a manifestation of superiority over others or as a way to demonstrate intellectual superiority. During the Middle Ages, attitudes towards humor changed – it began to be interpreted as something sinful or inappropriate. However, with the development of humanistic ideas and the rationalist philosophy of the Enlightenment era (particularly in the works of T. Hobbes, I. Kant and A. Schopenhauer), humor started to be understood as a complex cognitive and psychological process. In the 20th century, humor became the subject of interdisciplinary analysis, with significant attention given to its linguistic dimension.

Humorous expressions are formed due to specific linguistic means, among them are irony, sarcasm, pun, paradox, hyperbole, litotes, wordplay, allusion, ambiguity, contrast and others. For example, a typical case of wordplay is the well-known English joke: «I used to play the piano by ear, but now I use my hands», in which the phrase «by ear» is employed based on its homonymous meanings: the literal meaning of «by ear», that is «using ear as a tool / device / instrument» and the figurative one – «using one's capacity to remember components of music while performing musical

¹⁶ Barker L., Gaut D. Communication. Boston : Allyn and Bacon. 1996. 433 p.

¹⁷ Mulkay M. On Humor: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society. Cambridge : Polity Press. 1988. 193 p.

¹⁸ Зайцева В. В. Про жанрову своєрідність газетної мови. *Український смисл*. 2015. № 1. С. 39–48.

pieces». Thus, there occurs a simultaneous play on both the figurative and literal meanings of the expression. Classical theories of humor in linguistics elaborate the concept of incongruity (incompatibility), according to which the comic effect arises from the collision of two expectations or semantic planes. In the given example, the typical logical structure of the phrase is disrupted, activating the element of surprise – one of the fundamental aspects of humorous communication.

Puns are considered to be one of the most common types of verbal humor, particularly characteristic of the English-language public speeches, where they are often used to create a cheerful and relaxed atmosphere¹⁹. For example, in Stephen Colbert's public talk one encounters the following: «*After the surgery, I'm feeling dis-jointed*» (The Story of Stephen Colbert's Ruptured). The wordplay exploits the dual meaning of the term «disjointed» (literally «disconnected», but its secondary meaning is «illogical, perplexed»).

Irony and sarcasm possess significant pragmatic potential, as they imply a hidden meaning that contradicts the literal one. The classic example might be «Oh great, another meeting» which actually conveys dissatisfaction, despite being grammatically in a positive form. Such constructions require particular interpretation, as the comic effect depends not only on the vocabulary but also on intonation, situational context and cultural expectations²⁰.

Humor serves a variety of communicative functions: it can alleviate tension, build a certain bond between the speaker and the audience, act as a means of social criticism or serve self-presentation purposes²¹. In this context humor becomes a part of the speech act, in which not only the utterances but also the speaker's intentions and the listener's reactions play a crucial role. For instance, in a stand-up comedy or political speeches, speakers often employ hyperbole to exaggerate a particular situation for comic effect: «I'm so hungry I could eat a horse» (cited in ²²).

A particular point of interest is the paradox – a device based on the combination of incompatible statements, such as: «*The more you try to impress people, the less impressed they are*» (cited in ²³). In this case, the comic effect is achieved through an unexpected shift in the logical direction of the utterance, which compels the listener to reconsider the situation.

¹⁹ Stewart P. Laughter on the 2008 campaign trail: How presidential candidates used humor during primary debates. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. 2012. Vol. 25, No. 3. Pp. 233–262.

²⁰ Attardo S., Wagner M. M., Urios-Aparisi E. Prosody and Humor. Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing, 2013. 192 p.

²¹ Morreale S. P., Pearson J. C. Why Communication Education is Important: The Centrality of the Discipline in the 21st Century. *Communication Education*. 2008. Vol. 57, No. 2. Pp. 224–240.

²² Chiaro D. The Language of Jokes: Analyzing Verbal Play. London : Routledge, 1996. 261 p.

²³ Veatch T. A theory of humor. *Humor*. 1998. Vol. 11, No. 2. Pp. 161–216.

Humor often violates Grice's maxims, particularly the maxim of quality («Do not say what you believe to be false») or the maxim of relevance. This violation is intentionally employed as a means of creating a comic effect. For example, a character says «The weather is lovely today», standing under a downpour. In this case, the maxim of quality is violated, as the statement contradicts the obvious reality. At the same time, such a remark is perceived as ironic meaning that the recipient interprets it with consideration of its indirect meaning, which requires cognitive processing.

Another aspect of the pragmatic analysis of humor is its functional role within a specific type of discourse. In political or journalistic discourse, humor can serve as a tool for criticism or resistance²⁴, ²⁵. For example, in the statement by the British politician Boris Johnson: «*My friends, as I have discovered myself, there are no disasters, only opportunities. And, indeed, opportunities for fresh disasters*» (cited in ²⁶) we observe an example of a paradoxical and simultaneously ironic utterance. This statement both conceals criticism and functions as a rhetorical device to soften the judgement.

To sum up, humor functions as a multidimensional tool of communicative influence, which requires consideration of situational, cultural, cognitive and interpersonal factors. Its effectiveness depends on the speaker's ability to adapt linguistic means to the situation contexts and predict the recipient's response, making humor an exceptionally flexible and complex element of speech.

It is worthwhile noting that humor in both linguistic and pragmatic dimensions emerges as a complex, multi-layered phenomenon that combines formal linguistic means with the speaker's intentionality and the contextual conditions of communication. In the linguistic aspect, humor is realized through a certain range of specific linguostylistic tools which will be dealt with later in this study. In the pragmatic context, humor serves communicative functions, aiding in the establishment of contact, the mitigation of conflicts, social criticism or self-irony. Its effective use requires a high level of linguistic competence, contextual and cultural awareness, which is particularly significant in the public discourse.

²⁴ Belle V. H., Rutten K., Gillaerts P., Mierop V. D. D., Gorp V. B. Let's talk politics: New essays on deliberative rhetoric. Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing, 2014. 216 p.

²⁵ Kiouis S., Kim Ji Y., Ragas M., Wheat G., Kochhar S., Svensson E., Miles M. Exploring New Frontiers of Agenda Building During the 2012 US Presidential Election Pre-Convention Period. *Journalism Studies*. Florida, 2015. Vol. 16. No. 3. Pp. 363–382.

²⁶ Alexiyevets O. Prosody of the viewpoint in political discourse. *Lege artis. Language yesterday, today, tomorrow. The Journal of University of SS Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. Warsaw : De Gruyter Open*. 2017. Vol. 2. No. 1. Pp. 4–41.

1.1. Basic theories of humor: cognitive, social, pragmatic

A number of theoretical approaches have developed over the centuries aiming to classify and explain humor as a phenomenon of human communication, thinking and culture. These theories reflect efforts to comprehend why we laugh, what specifically triggers the comic, how humor functions in speech and what role it plays in society.

The study of humor within the framework of the humanities traditionally encompasses three main conceptual directions: the superiority theory, the incongruity theory and the relief theory. Each of these focuses on different aspects of the comic effect: social, cognitive or psychological and offers its own interpretation of what makes a particular statement or situation humorous. Contemporary linguists actively develop cognitive, social (or discursive) and pragmatic theories of humor, a terse account of which follows below.

The cognitive theory of humor is based on the idea of humor being the result of mental processing of information, particularly the disruption of expectations, changes in cognitive schemas and the activation of several incompatible interpretations²⁷. In this approach, the comic effect is understood as a consequence of incongruity – the clash of two different mental models or frames that cannot be simultaneously reconciled in the mind but transition into one another, creating an unexpected effect.

One of the key models within the cognitive approach is the Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH) proposed by Viktor Raskin²⁸ and its further development into the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) by Salvatore Attardo^{29, 30, 31}. According to these models, a humorous statement contains two scripts – scenarios activated in the mind of both the speaker and the listener that partially overlap but also contradict each other. For example: «I asked my dog what's two minus two. He said nothing». In this short joke, two scripts are activated: a logical-mathematical script (the expectation of a real answer to a mathematical question) and a zoological / animalistic script (the realization that a dog cannot talk). The listener initially follows the first script (expecting an answer to the question), but the final line («he said nothing») unexpectedly activates the second script: «nothing» is both the answer to 2-2 and the real

²⁷ Veale T., Hao, Y. Computational Approaches to Humor and Irony. Heidelberg : Springer, 2010. 250 p.

²⁸ Raskin V. Semantic Mechanisms of Humor. Dordrecht : D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985. 292 p.

²⁹ Attardo S. Linguistic Theories of Humor. Berlin : Mouton de Gruyter, 1994. 426 p.

³⁰ Attardo S., Raskin V. Script Theory revis(it)ed: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. 1991. No. 4(3). Pp. 293–347.

³¹ Attardo S., Wagner M. M., Urios-Aparisi E. Prosody and Humor. Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing, 2013. 192 p.

state of things (a dog cannot speak). The comic effect arises precisely from the shift between these two scripts (cited in ³²).

Cognitive humor also actively employs the effect of conceptual shift – switching between different mental scenarios, which often occurs in wordplay or irony. As an example of this type of humor let us draw in an excerpt from David Letterman's performance: «USA Today has come out with a new survey: Apparently, three out of four people make up 75 percent of the population»³³. The obvious tautology of the statement is initially perceived as a statistical fact, but it is cognitive awareness of its absurdity that is activated in the second part of the phrase. Here, the mechanism of logical inference is disrupted, prompting the listener to change their mental strategy for understanding.

The cognitive theory is also closely linked to the idea of blurred boundaries between denotation and connotation. It is the case of a shift in the perspective which forces a reinterpretation of prior knowledge. For example: «I'm on a seafood diet. I see food and I eat it» (cited in ³⁴). Initially, the script of a «diet» is activated, typically associated with some restriction. However, this script is later «broken» by the wordplay between «seafood» and «see food», which activates an alternative scenario – the deliberate «rejection» of a diet. The dwelt upon theory helps to account for the cultural variability of humor: scripts that are accessible or typical for one culture may be absent in another, meaning that the same joke can be funny to some while incomprehensible to others. The cognitive theory of humor offers a deep understanding of the mental processes underlying the comic effect. It enables the analysis of humor both as a linguistic phenomenon and an expression of the flexibility and unpredictability of human thinking, where key roles are played by scripts, conceptual frameworks and inter-scenario links.

The social theory focuses on the study of humor as a social phenomenon that arises within the context of interaction between individuals. According to this theory, humor serves as a means of communication through which individuals define, uphold or challenge social norms, constraints and hierarchies; establish their status; lower or elevate the status of their conversational partner; facilitate interactions between interlocutors; maintain social bonds or, conversely, disrupt them³⁵. Its ability to strengthen social bonds or set off social inequalities makes it a powerful means of communication in a whole gamut of social contexts.

³² Attardo S., Raskin V. Script Theory revis(it)ed: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. 1991. No. 4(3). Pp. 293–347.

³³ David Letterman's Quotes. URL: https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/196550.David_Letterman

³⁴ Chiaro D. The Language of Jokes: Analyzing Verbal Play. London : Routledge, 1996. 261 p.

³⁵ Stieger S., Formann A. K., Burger C. Humor styles and their relationship to explicit and implicit self-esteem. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2011. Vol. 50, No. 5. Pp. 747–750.

Thus, humor actively functions as a mechanism of socialization, promoting cohesion of social connections. It contributes to creating an atmosphere of cooperation and partnership, especially in situations where both communicators seek to come to terms with one another.

One of the major models of social humor is the superiority theory, which dates back to antiquity, particularly, the works of Aristotle. According to this theory, humor arises when one person feels a sense of superiority or dominance over another, which is often manifested in laughter at someone or something. Social humor can serve as a way to affirm one's social position, diminish the status of another person or group and also function as a mechanism for establishing and maintaining social norms³⁶. The following excerpt can serve an example of humor as a form of disparagement: «*I told my wife she was drawing her eyebrows too high. She looked surprised*» (cited in ³⁷). Here humor is grounded in a social context where the status of «correctness» in terms of appearance is an important aspect of interaction. By joking about his wife, the husband points out her mistake, thereby lowering her status and making the listeners feel superior to her. In this case, humor acts as a tool to emphasize the superiority of one of the participants in the social interaction.

Social humor is often closely tied to cultural norms and political realities, and its perception can vary depending on social conditions and context³⁸. It may be used to express criticism or protest which is an important component of public discourse³⁹. Certain social or political phenomena can be questioned through humor without resorting to open aggression, thus avoiding direct conflict while still drawing attention to significant issues. For instance, the joke «*The only reason I'm running for office is because I'm already out of work*» (cited in ⁴⁰) aims to criticize political processes by highlighting the futility of political candidates who occupy positions merely as a means to secure employment. In this case, humor serves as a tool for social criticism, enabling direct tackling vital social concerns.

³⁶ Mulkay M. On Humor: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society. Cambridge : Polity Press, 1988. 193 p.

³⁷ Stieger S., Formann A. K., Burger C. Humor styles and their relationship to explicit and implicit self-esteem. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2011. Vol. 50, No. 5. Pp. 747–750.

³⁸ Diningsih S.W. Andayani, Rohmadi M. Literature learning: Pragmatic study of humor discourse in Indonesian political humor book. *International Journal of Educational Research Review*. 2019. Vol. 4. Pp. 680–690.

³⁹ Третяк Н. В. Тенденції розвитку публіцистичного стилю на сучасному етапі. *Наукові праці Кам'янець-Подільського національного університету імені Івана Огієнка. Серія «Філологічні науки»*. 2015. № 38. С. 328–331.

⁴⁰ Belle V. H., Rutten K., Gillaerts P., Mierop V. D. D., Gorp V. B. Let's talk politics: New essays on deliberative rhetoric. Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing, 2014. 216 p.

Humor aimed at political leaders may also aim to lower their status or serve as a criticism of power. The well-known British humor, exemplified by comedian John Oliver, frequently uses social humor to criticise political and social phenomena. In his show «Last Week Tonight with John Oliver» humorous remarks about politicians are commonly used as a means of diminishing their authority in the public's eyes, highlighting their mistakes or shortcomings, for instance: «If Donald Trump's presidency were a TV show, it would be a reality show called «The Worst Decision You Could Possibly Make»⁴¹. This joke is an example of social humor that plays with the idea of critical and somewhat superior attitude in regard to a highly controversial reputation and expertise of the politician in question, doubting his moral and professional qualities.

According to the social theory, humor can serve as a tool for creating social bonds and cementing group identity. In groups of people who share common values, humor can be a way of strengthening their connections. For example, jokes based on shared experiences, cultural references or common beliefs can foster a sense of unity: «We all know that one person who is always late, and you know they're gonna show up just when you're about to leave». Such type of joke is based on a shared experience, allowing individuals to feel a stronger sense of belonging to and engagement in a particular social group (cited in ⁴²).

The pragmatic theory is grounded in treating humor as a communicative phenomenon that functions within the context of interaction between participants in the speech process. According to this theory, humor is not only a linguistic act that activates cognitive structures or emotional responses but also a strategy that helps achieve specific pragmatic goals in communication, such as manipulation, the assertion of social relationships, conflict mitigation or the creation of cooperation⁴³. Additionally, the pragmatic theory of humor emphasizes the speaker's intentionality – his or her goal of eliciting specific reactions from the listener (such as laughter, relaxation, agreement, empathy etc.) and the contextual aspects such as social roles, norms and cultural differences.

Pragmatic humor is often used as a means to ease situations where social tensions may arise⁴⁴. This is particularly important in official or formal settings,

⁴¹ Last Week Tonight. *Breaking news on a weekly basis. Sundays at 11PM*. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/user/LastWeekTonight>

⁴² Norrick N. *The Pragmatics of Humor in Conversational Interaction*. Berlin : Mouton de Gruyter, 2003. 284 p.

⁴³ Barker L., Gaut D. *Communication*. Boston : Allyn and Bacon, 1996. 433 p.

⁴⁴ Morreale S. P., Pearson J. C. Why Communication Education is Important: The Centrality of the Discipline in the 21st Century. *Communication Education*. 2008. Vol. 57, No. 2. Pp. 224–240.

where there is a need to reduce the intensity of a conflict or create a lighter mood in communication. The phrase «*I'm not arguing, I'm just explaining why I'm right*» exemplifies this type of humor (cited in ⁴⁵). In this joke, humor functions as a pragmatic act. Apart from expressing the speaker's point of view it is also conducive to easing the relationship between the interlocutors. It represents a communicative strategy that allows the speaker to express confidence in their opinion having not worsened relations with the other person. The use of humor in this case reduces potential conflict, turning it into light irony.

Humor in public speeches, particularly in political or media contexts, is often used to achieve strategic communicative goals⁴⁶. In such contexts humor can serve several functions, ranging from establishing trust with the audience to increasing popularity or manipulating the perception of certain ideas or individuals. For example, in political speeches humor may be used to create a veneer of closeness with the audience or, conversely, to emphasize differences with opponents without resorting to direct confrontation. For instance, in the joke «*You know you're a politician when you can stand in front of a crowd, say nothing and still get applause*» (cited in ⁴⁷) humor is used as a tool for self-criticism in order to demonstrate an increased awareness of the flaws in a political activity. On the one hand, it helps to create a positive image of the politician capable of self-reflection while on the other, it criticizes the meaninglessness of a majority of political speeches.

Thus, the pragmatic theory of humor emphasizes the importance of context and communicative goals in the use of humor. Humor is not merely a linguistic device but a part of a communicative strategy that contributes to achieving pragmatic objectives in the human interaction. From soothing social tensions to manipulating audiences' perception, humor serves as an effective medium in public and political encounters.

1.2. Humor as a means of communication in public speeches: functions and types

Humor in public speaking performs several important functions, contributing to effective communication between the speaker and the audience. First, humor provides the opportunity to capture the listeners'

⁴⁵ Norrick N. The Pragmatics of Humor in Conversational Interaction. Berlin : Mouton de Gruyter, 2003. 284 p.

⁴⁶ Webster L. J. Introduction to Public Speaking. Louisiana State University, Shreveport Edition, 2013. 115 p.

⁴⁷ Stewart P. Laughter on the 2008 campaign trail: How presidential candidates used humor during primary debates. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. 2012. Vol. 25. No. 3. Pp. 233–262.

attention, which is especially important at the beginning of a speech when it is crucial to establish rapport with the public. When a speaker uses a joke or a light amusing story, it not only creates a favorable atmosphere but also immediately engages the audience, thereby making the listeners more perceptive of new information and facilitating better comprehension of the main message. This enables the speaker to maintain the audience's interest throughout the entire presentation.

Allowing the speaker to immediately engage the audience in the talk, humor reduces psychological barriers between them. For example, during one of his speeches, the British comedian Stephen Fry remarked: «*I always say, if you want to hear something important, listen to me, and if you want to laugh – look at my pants*» (cited in ⁴⁸). Such a jest warms up the audience and allows the speaker to begin the speech with a light humorous tone, thereby setting a positive mood.

Humor also serves as a means of relieving tension, particularly when the speech addresses serious or complex topics. In moments when the audience may feel tension due to the importance or complexity of the issue, humor facilitates creation of a more congenial atmosphere, promoting the reception of the message. For example, Winston Churchill used humor to lighten the gravity of the moment, often combining pungent sarcasm with profound political messages. The statesman frequently employed humor in his speeches during the Second World War to ease the oppressive atmosphere. His well-known remark «*I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat, but I'll still try to look decent while doing it*»⁴⁹ underscored the urgency of the situation while simultaneously assisting the audience in coping more easily with harsh realities, what with the best intentions and a strong moral compass of the renowned statesman. This joke not only diverted attention from the plight of World War II but also demonstrated Churchill's commitment to the cause.

The 44th president of the USA Barack Obama frequently employed humor to make his speeches less tense and more accessible. His jokes elicited laughter while highlighting important political ideas, making them easier to perceive. For instance, during one of his campaigns he joked: «*The only thing we have to fear is a lack of hope. And maybe some Republicans, but mostly hope*»⁵⁰. This joke proved expedient to break the ice and enabled the politician to convey an important political idea by way of suggesting questionable credibility of his Republican opponents.

⁴⁸ Miller F. E. No Sweat Public Speaking. London : Fred Co, 2011. 252 p.

⁴⁹ Winston Churchill Quotes. Brainy Quote.

⁵⁰ Obama: «It's Still Hope Vs. Fear». Full Speech in Ohio.

In an attempt to create an air of credibility a speaker may be led to appear straightforward and sincere what, in turn, furthers the delivery of crucial ideas and messages. Well-crafted jokes, such as the use of sarcasm, can make a speech more dynamic and agreeable for the audience. For example, Jon Stewart, a renowned American comedian, political commentator and the host of *The Daily Show*, in a recent installment to this show dwelt on the policy of DEI («diversity, equity and inclusion») being blamed by D. Trump's administration. In order to come up with more profound and impactful political commentary as well as bitter ridicule, Stewart at first featured a snippet of the speech by RNC Chairwoman Lara Trump (being Donald Trump's daughter-in-law at that) where she was saying: «*In the United States of America we get ahead and succeed by merit and merit alone*»⁵¹. Retorting, the host concludes: «*Yes, merit and merit alone – says RNC Chairwoman Lara – hold on, let me get my glasses* [LAUGHTER] – *Trump*». To refine his mockery to perfection, Stewart finishes off with a precise impersonation of Donald Trump saying: «*It was a blind submission. Never saw her name on the application*» while steadily arriving at the cathartic denunciation: «*That's the irony of this whole thing ... People standing next to Trump, blaming DEI and trying to reinstall white guys as the only non-suspect pool of hires are themselves DEI hires. For one particular identity that they possess – the ass-kisser*» (ibid).

Acting as a kind of «cue» humor encourages better retention of the main ideas presented during a speech. When speakers use amusing examples or anecdotes, listeners are better able to retain the key points of a speech. People generally remember things that make them laugh far better, so a joke can serve to reinforce the major messages. The aforementioned Jon Stewart resorted to humor in his presentations to foreground important social or political issues. In one speech, he remarked: «*If you want to get a politician's attention, give them a microphone. If you want to make them listen, give them a joke*» (cited in ⁵²). This witticism boosted his central message about the need to remain critical of those in power, making it more pronounced to the audience through humor.

Another example of using humor so as to facilitate the audience's smoother processing of the key messages and more tenacious remembering of them is TED Talk given by Sir Ken Robinson, a British education expert, on the relation of creativity and public education nowadays. The speaker uses humor quite amply to explain serious issues within the education system saying: «*If you were to visit education as an alien and say «What's it for, public education?»*

⁵¹ Jon Stewart's Best Trump Takedowns of 2025 | The Daily Show.

⁵² Stewart P. Laughter on the 2008 campaign trail: How presidential candidates used humor during primary debates. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. 2012. Vol. 25. No. 3. Pp. 233–262.

*I think you'd have to conclude – the whole purpose of public education throughout the world is to produce university professors. Not all of them – but typically they live in their heads. They are disembodied in a kind of literal way. They look upon their body as a form of transport for their heads»⁵³. This gag made a serious issue (skewed academic training) easier to grasp and urged the audience to gain a more vivid understanding of the problem of inadequate education system in the 21st century which is focused on «*children's heads and slightly to one side*» (ibid).*

Thus, humor in public speaking not only helps create a comfortable air but also serves as an effective tool for achieving various goals, from capturing attention to enhancing information retention. It turns out (while entertaining) a powerful tool for establishing an accord with the audience, furthering understanding of complex topics and adding to the memorability of core messages.

Humor can take various linguistic forms in public speaking, each serving a specific role in communication with the audience. One of the most common types of humor is irony⁵⁴. Irony allows the speaker to emphasize a particular idea or situation through the opposite meaning of what is said. In the abovementioned talk Sir Ken Robinson resorts to irony while commenting on what he labels as 'academic inflation' when degrees are suddenly not worth anything: «*When I was a student, if you had a degree you had a job. If you didn't have a job, it's because you didn't want one. And I – didn't want one, frankly*». To comprehend the embedded irony here, one has to be familiar with the context of the speaker's career: his not having a «proper» job on graduation wasn't caused by unwillingness to have one but rather by Robinson's prolonged academic studies which rendered full occupation impossible. Hence, the irony «...and I – didn't want one».

Another type of humor is self-deprecation (or self-irony), in which the speaker ridicules themselves. Self-deprecation portrays the speaker as someone capable of laughing at their own shortcomings alongside ironizing. For instance, a well-known television host of «The Tonight Show» Jimmy Fallon frequently uses self-deprecating humor in his performances. For example, during one of his appearances, he said: «*I know I'm not perfect, but I'm better than most of the other people who are not perfect, so that's something*»⁵⁵. Such a joke allows him to appear affable and witty while creating a playful, relaxed mood.

⁵³ Sir Ken Robinson's TED Talk «Do schools kill creativity?»

⁵⁴ Norrick N. The pragmatics of humor in conversational interaction. Berlin : Mouton de Gruyter, 2003. 284 p.

⁵⁵ Jimmy Fallon: i didn't expect it to be this brutal! The hate was something i wasn't prepared for!

Absurdism as one more type of humor consists in referring to illogical and highly unusual situations / objects / points of view etc. By using absurdism, a speaker can draw attention to a particular issue while simultaneously eliciting laughter from the audience. One example can be seen in the comedic performances of John Oliver, the host of Last Week Tonight. For instance, he joked: «*We have a lot of serious problems in the world, like the fact that there are still no flying cars. But I'm not here to solve that problem, I'm here to make fun of it*»⁵⁶. This joke not only makes the audience laugh but also mocks all the contemporary skewed patterns of human priorities and values through an absurd comparison.

Sarcasm is yet another type of humor that can be highly effective in public speaking. It allows the speaker to underscore the discrepancy between what is said and reality through bitter and often scathing ironic remarks. For example, during a performance at Comic Relief, British comedian Ricky Gervais remarked: «*I don't care about the poor. If they wanted a better life, they should have made more money, or not been born poor*»⁵⁷. This sarcastic comment, though provocative, prompts the audience to reflect on the origins of poverty as a social stigma while simultaneously eliciting laughter through the uttering incongruent and somewhat childish-like reasoning.

Another type of humor is the use of wordplay (or puns), which exploits the multiple meanings of words or their different interpretations. An American comedian George Carlin was a master of such jokes. During one of his performances, he noted: «*Why is it that when you're driving and you see a sign that says 'Slow. Children' you just want to speed up?*»⁵⁸. This pun provokes laughter in the audience who is faced with an interplay of possible interpretive meanings of the phrase 'Slow. Children'. The latter yields at least two possible semantic and pragmatic treatments: the first – as a directive to drive at a slower speed due to being in the vicinity of some juvenile establishment and the second – as an assertive (when ignoring a punctuation mark) that there are slow children around what in itself sounds weird and thus provokes a menacing effect on the recipients of this information resulting in the desire to hit the throttle.

Thus, humor in public speaking is manifested through its various types (irony, self-deprecation, absurdism, sarcasm and puns) while easing the creation of a proper emotional stance with the audience and leading to the increase of the overall effectiveness of a talk, speech or performance.

⁵⁶ last week tonight. *Breaking news on a weekly basis. Sundays at 11PM.*

⁵⁷ Ricky Gervais: i'm not proud of being rich.

⁵⁸ George Carlin. On campus 1984. Cars and driving.

2. Linguistic means of creating comic effect

Humor in public speaking occupies a special place as it combines elements of intellectual play, emotional influence and interpersonal interaction between the speaker and the audience. Its effectiveness is largely determined by the selection and combination of stylistic and linguistic means that create the comic effect. In the English-language public discourse humor is realized through various linguistic devices, among which the most notable are wordplay, irony, allusion, hyperbole, paradox, paralinguistic (prosodic) means.

One of the most widespread means of creating a comic effect is **the wordplay (or pun)**, which is based on polysemy or phonetic similarity of words. This phenomenon enables the speaker to simultaneously activate multiple meanings, thereby generating an effect of surprise. According to S. Attardo's semantic script theory, a pun arises as a result of the overlap of two semantic scripts that are only partially compatible, which leads to a comic effect through the sudden reinterpretation of the situation⁵⁹. The cognitive mechanism underlying this phenomenon consists in a violation of D. Sperber and D. Wilson's principle of relevance⁶⁰, whereby the addressee is compelled to expend additional cognitive effort to decode an alternative interpretation of the utterance, an effort that is ultimately rewarded with positive emotional responses.

For instance, during one of his presentations Steve Jobs while introducing a new iPod model joked: «*It's the best thing since sliced bread – and it fits in your pocket*» (cited in ⁶¹). The comic effect of this utterance lies in the combination of a stereotypical English idiom (the best thing since sliced bread), employed to denote a major technological breakthrough, with a mundane deliberately understated image (*it fits in your pocket*). This stylistic incongruity creates an effect of surprise and highlights the product's innovativeness through a witty metaphor, thereby realizing the pragmatic function of exerting a positive influence on the consumer.

A similar mechanism, albeit with a socio-political subtext, can be observed in politicians' utterances. For example, Barack Obama, commenting on the complexity of international relations, once remarked: «*Some folks think I'm too cool. Well, it's not easy keeping your cool when dealing with Congress*»⁶². A classic pun is used here based on the polysemy of the adjective cool. Two meanings are activated simultaneously: (1) *cool* as «calm, self-controlled» (to

⁵⁹ Attardo S. *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Berlin : Mouton de Gruyter, 1994. 426 p.

⁶⁰ Sperber D., Wilson D. *Relevance Theory*. In L.R. Horn & G. Ward (Eds.) *The Handbook of Pragmatics*. Oxford : Blackwell, 2004. Pp. 607–632.

⁶¹ Morreale S. P., Pearson J. C. Why Communication Education is Important: The Centrality of the Discipline in the 21st Century. *Communication Education*. 2008. Vol. 57. No. 2. Pp. 224–240.

⁶² Obama: «It's Still Hope Vs. Fear». Full Speech in Ohio.

keep one's cool) and (2) *cool* as «fashionable, popular» (a slang meaning). This wordplay pursues a strategy of self-irony, allowing the speaker to simultaneously acknowledge his popularity and point to the difficulties of working with Congress, thereby reducing social distance from the audience and demonstrating a critical attitude toward political institutions.

Wordplay functions not only as a stylistic device but also as a complex linguopragmatic tool that makes it possible to achieve a range of communicative goals, from constructing a positive image and reducing tension to engaging in social criticism and self-presentation. Its effectiveness, however, largely depends on the audience's background knowledge and cultural competence, which constitutes the main challenge for its adequate decoding and comprehension.

Irony and sarcasm are no less significant components of comic impact as they are grounded in complex pragmalinguistic mechanisms. According to the speech act theory, irony is realized as an indirect illocutionary act in which the literal meaning of an utterance diverges substantially from its communicative intention, creating a semantic dissonance that must be resolved by the addressee⁶³. Irony constitutes a mode of language use in which the speaker signals their critical stance toward a particular thought or situation. Sarcasm, by contrast, is viewed as a socially oriented, intensified form of irony that conveys sharp criticism and often employs specific prosodic means to heighten the perlocutionary effect. Sarcasm invariably contains a clear evaluative component and is aimed at lowering the status of the addressee or the object of criticism through a mechanism of verbal aggression mitigated by a comic form.

A vivid example of political sarcasm can be found in John Oliver's remark: «*It's reassuring to know that our leaders are as confused as we are – only much better paid*»⁶⁴. In this utterance there is a verbal sarcastic construction, in which a formally positive evaluation (reassuring) is employed to mask trenchant criticism. It creates an effect of violated expectations: the listener initially perceives the first part of the statement as a practical and helpful comment, but the second part (only much better paid) radically shifts the interpretation, pointing to social injustice and the lack of professionalism among politicians. Such a device constitutes an effective rhetorical strategy, as it allows biting criticism to be expressed under the guise of a light-hearted remark, making it more acceptable to the audience and enhancing its persuasive force.

Another telling example of political sarcasm is Winston Churchill's remark: «*I am ready to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the great*

⁶³ Yus F. The Pragmatics of Humor across Discourse Domains. Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing, 2016. 311 p.

⁶⁴ Last Week Tonight. *Breaking news on a weekly basis. Sundays at 11PM.*

ordeal of meeting me is another matter»⁶⁵. The humor here is realized through the enhanced irony, thereby Churchill subjects his own personality to the harsh criticism with the implication that facing him could be too hard a task even for the Almighty.

Hyperbole plays a substantial role in the forging of humor as it is a stylistic device consisting in a deliberate exaggeration that emphasizes affectionate nature or absurdity of a situation through the violation of Grice's maxim of quality. Hyperbolization enables the speaker not only to produce a comic effect but also to spotlight the key aspects of the message, making it more impressive. The cognitive mechanism of hyperbolic humor lies in the construction of an intentionally distorted mental model, which is subsequently recognized by the audience as a comic exaggeration.

An illustration of a masterful use of hyperbole is contained in Barack Obama's commentary on the mushrooming «birther» conspiracy theories about his birthplace, made at the 2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner: *«I want to make it absolutely clear to you all that I was born in the United States. Period. I was not born in a manger. I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii»*⁶⁶. An image of being born in a manger is an exaggerated escalation of such theories since no one had ever claimed that. A manger evokes the biblical birth of Jesus, so the line hyperbolically elevates the accusation to a ridiculous, almost mythic level. This exaggeration is ironic because it contrasts sharply with the mundane, factual follow-up: «I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii». The anticlimax underscores the irony – after the grand symbolic setup the truth is ordinary and verifiable. This contrast mocks the controversy by implying it belongs in the realm of legend rather than reality. Obama uses wit to reframe the claim as laughable reinforcing his credibility while subtly criticizing the persistence of misinformation.

Thus, irony, sarcasm and hyperbole as means of comic influence are characterized by a complex structure that integrates linguistic, pragmatic and cognitive planes. Their effectiveness in public speaking directly depends on the speaker's ability to create and resolve semantic dissonances, as well as on the communicative competence of the audience, which enables it to recognize indirect implicit communicative intentions.

Allusion is employed equally frequently in public speaking, being a form of intertextual reference to well-known events, figures or cultural phenomena, what creates an additional layer of meaning by activating the audience's background knowledge. According to D. Sperber and D. Wilson's relevance theory,

⁶⁵ Winston Churchill Quotes. Brainy Quote.

⁶⁶ C-SPAN: President Obama at the 2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner.

allusion is an effective means of minimizing communicative effort: the speaker merely hints at a particular cultural code, while the addressee activates the corresponding cognitive context on their own, resulting in the emergence of “intellectual empathy” and an enhanced comic effect. The success of allusive humor directly depends on the degree of overlap in the cultural competences of the speaker and the audience.

An example of political allusion is Barack Obama’s joke during the annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner: «*Even Hillary sends me friend requests on LinkedIn*» (ibid). A simultaneous use of several pragmatic strategies can be traced here: firstly, the mention of Hillary Clinton (former Secretary of State and Obama’s political rival) creates an intertextual link to the 2008 presidential campaign; secondly, the allusion to the social network LinkedIn as a platform associated with professional contacts rather than personal relationships coupled with the intensifier «even» before the name of the opponent wittily comments on the decorous formality of political interactions. This allusion allows Obama to demonstrate his humor and self-confidence while avoiding direct opposing his political rival and emphasizing his communicative skill. It is noteworthy that this type of humor is culturally specific and requires the audience to be conversant with both the American political context and the functioning of social networks.

Another important mechanism of the comic creation is the deliberate violation of expected linguistic norms or logical sequences, which is grounded in incongruity theory. It is the sudden mismatch between two interpretive frameworks (scripts) that generates a comic effect, as the audience experiences positive emotions while resolving the cognitive dissonance. This mechanism is often realized through **paradox** – a stylistic figure that combines formally incompatible concepts, compelling the listener to seek a deeper meaning beyond the literal interpretation of the words.

A masterful use of paradox is demonstrated by Trevor Noah, a famous South African comedian. For instances, in his remark: «*The British don’t say what they mean, and they don’t mean what they say – but somehow, everyone understands them*»⁶⁷ the comic effect arises from the sequential violation of several of P. Grice’s conversational maxims: the maxim of quality (truthfulness), the maxim of manner (clarity) and the maxim of relation (relevance). The antinomic structure of the utterance (don’t say what they mean / don’t mean what they say) creates a logical impasse, which is resolved at the end of the sentence by the unexpected claim of mutual understanding. This construction brilliantly reflects the peculiarities of the British communicative style, where

⁶⁷ Trevor Noah. 15 minutes of Trevor Noah: Man of All Nations.

irony is considered the norm rather than a deviation. The pragmatic function of this humor rests not only in entertaining the audience but also in fostering sociocultural reflection – critiquing national communicative patterns through the mechanism of hyperbolizing their characteristic features. Another cogent example of Noah’s paradoxical stance of humour can be found in the passage: «*For me Donald Trump is an emotional paradox. Logically I can process him. Emotionally, I struggle. On the one hand, I will admit, I wake up many days terrified at the notion that he is President of the most powerful nation in the world. But also, I must admit, I wake up many days knowing he’s gonna make me laugh*» (ibid) which masterfully captures the essence of the astonishing chasm between the conventionally accepted image of a typical American president and the way the image of this institutional role is currently being shattered in a most unpredictable and often ludicrous manner.

Allusion and paradox are means of comic impact which are highly effective in public speaking due to their ability to simultaneously activate the audience’s intellectual resources, create a sense of shared access to a cultural code and convey complex ideas in a digestible form. However, their successful use is contingent upon the speaker’s profound understanding of the audience’s cultural background and his / her high degree of communicative sensitivity, as the boundary between sophisticated humor and misunderstanding is often determined by the stability of the sociocultural context.

A significant component of humorous mastery, often overlooked in textual analyses, is **prosodic features**: intonation, tempo, pauses and stress. Wit is not always contained in the words themselves; it is frequently determined by the manner of delivery, which underscores the need for an integrated approach to the study of humor as a performative phenomenon.

According to the research by S. Attardo and M. Wagner, prosodic elements are not merely accompaniments to verbal humor but function as independent markers of comic intent, capable of both strengthening and attenuating the effect of wordplay⁶⁸. The cognitive mechanism of their influence is found in the creation of a specific rhythmic pattern, which primes the audience’s neural structures for the perception of an unexpected resolution, thereby activating pleasure centers.

A distinct example of masterful use of prosody can be found in Robin Williams’ performances, where the comic effect was achieved through a complex combination of paralinguistic means. His rapid speech rate (up to 250 words per minute versus the normative 150–180) created an effect of

⁶⁸ Attardo S., Wagner M. M., Urios-Aparisi E. Prosody and Humor. Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing, 2013. 192 p.

“information explosion,” sudden changes in pitch (from falsetto to baritone) realistically portrayed different characters and strategically placed pauses before key punchlines served as a powerful tool for building up emotional tension. This prosodic technique, referred to as a «comic storm», allowed not only the transmission of content but also the creation of a holistic performative act, in which form was inseparable from meaning. It is remarkable that this type of humor is virtually untranslatable in written form, as its effectiveness is determined approximately 70% by paralinguistic factors (ibid). Intonational emphasis of key words within the structure of a pun (for example, contrasting pitch elevation on homonyms) facilitates faster identification of the point of incongruity, easing the audience’s process of decoding the humor. Such prosodic control allows speakers both to manage audience reactions effectively and create the illusion of spontaneity in carefully rehearsed gags.

To sum up, the linguistic and stylistic means of creating comic effect in the English-language public speaking form a complex, multi-layered system in which semantic play, intonational expressiveness, sociocultural allusions and rhetorical text design are organically integrated. The synergy of verbal and non-verbal components generates a powerful psychological effect, whereby laughter acts as a catalyst for trust and receptivity, transforming a public address from a mere informational message into a performative act with a clearly measurable pragmatic outcome.

3. Pragmatic strategies of humor realization in public speeches

Pragmatic strategies for the use of humor in the English-language public speeches constitute an important means of communicative influence, aimed at facilitating effective interaction between the speaker and the audience. Humor in this respect becomes a tool for persuasion while at the same time shaping a positive image of the speaker and conveying paramount ideas indirectly. Public speaking, particularly in political or social domains, often requires the speaker to manage the audience’s emotional disposition and general frame of mind and humor becomes one of the most instrumental mechanisms of achieving this.

One of the most common and effective strategies in public speaking is **audience engagement through humor**. According to social-psychological research by S. Stieger, the use of jokes, self-irony and witty affiliating humour activates processes of identification with the speaker in the audience, creating a sense of ease and psychological affinity⁶⁹. Neurobiological studies’ results

⁶⁹ Stieger S., Formann A. K., Burger C. Humor styles and their relationship to explicit and implicit self-esteem. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2011. Vol. 50. No. 5. Pp. 747–750.

confirm that shared laughter stimulates the release of endorphins, reducing defensive barriers and increasing receptivity to argumentation. An audience that laughs is significantly more receptive to subsequent serious arguments, since humor acts as a sort of «social glue» that bridges the psychological distance between the speaker and the audience.

A classic example of masterful use of this strategy can be seen in Barack Obama's speeches, in which he regularly started off with jokes, demonstrating his ability to laugh at himself. At the White House Correspondents' Dinner, he remarked: «*These days, I look in the mirror and I have to admit, I'm not the strapping young Muslim socialist that I used to be*»⁷⁰. From a pragmatic point of view this utterance is constructed to pursue a carefully calculated strategy: the self-irony targets simultaneously his appearance (strapping young), political biography and conspiracy theories regarding his religious affiliation. This multifarious humor functions as «preventive disarmament» that is the speaker draws attention to his own vulnerabilities, depriving opponents of the opportunity to exploit them. The strategy immediately elicited laughter in the room and predisposed the audience to a favorable reception of the speech.

The effectiveness of the strategy of audience engagement through humor is substantiated by experimental data: studies show that listeners retain 25–30% more information from speeches that begin with relevant humor compared to formal openings⁷¹. Politicians who regularly employ self-irony are perceived by audiences as more «approachable» and «trustworthy», directly reshaping their public image and the level of credibility. The strategy of engaging the audience through humor is a complex, multi-component phenomenon that combines psychological, linguistic and social mechanisms of influence. The precondition of its successful implementation constitutes not only the speaker's excellent command of language but also a brilliant insight of the social context, the capacity for critical self-reflection and the ability to precisely gauge the possible psychological impact of each humorous element.

Another function of humor is **the reduction of tension in conflictual or emotionally charged situations**. Humor acts as a communicative «shock absorber», allowing potentially contentious interactions to be redirected into a more constructive channel. In stressful situations humor activates the parasympathetic nervous system, lowering cortisol levels and facilitating psycho-emotional relief. This mechanism is particularly vital in public speaking, fulfilled by politicians, business leaders and leaders of opinion, where tense

⁷⁰ C-SPAN: President Obama at the 2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner.

⁷¹ Morreale S. P., Pearson J. C. Why Communication Education is Important: The Centrality of the Discipline in the 21st Century. *Communication Education*. 2008. Vol. 57. No. 2. Pp. 224–240.

moments frequently arise and the speaker may find themselves in a potentially awkward position.

A valid example of the strategic use of this function is Ronald Reagan's response to questions about his advanced age during the 1984 presidential debates. He remarked: *«I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience»*⁷². Pragmalinguistic layout of the passage proves to be complex: at first, the speaker appears to accept the rules of the game (refusing to discuss age), but subsequently he reverses the situation, turning his own supposed weakness (age) into an advantage (experience) and his opponent's alleged strength (youth) into a handicap (inexperience). This rhetorical maneuver, combining ironic inversion with elements of wordplay, led to listeners shedding their reserve eliciting laughter even from Obama's opponent and effectively transforming a potentially losing topic into a rhetorical asset. This remark became a prototype for the successful use of humor as a weapon in a political combat.

The use of humor as **a form of social and political criticism** appears as a widespread strategy as well. According to the theory of dissonant communication, ironic or sarcastic remarks allow the speaker to highlight societal problems and contradictions while minimizing the risk of open confrontation through a mechanism of «cognitive unloading». As F. Yus notes, «critical humor enables the audience to perceive uncomfortable truths through the lens of laughter, substantially reducing psychological resistance». Consequently, humor becomes a powerful agent of public evaluation, maintaining a formally amicable tone while simultaneously performing mordant social diagnostics.

The statements of Winston Churchill, distinguished for his wit and precision of expression, are particularly indicative in this regard. His aphorisms like *«A fanatic is one who can't change his mind and won't change the subject»*; *«He has all the virtues I dislike and none of the vices I admire»*⁷³ exemplify the effective use of rhetorical devices to criticize or express political intolerance. Linguistic analysis of the former aphorism testifies to the following structure: syntactical parallelism (can't change / won't change) conveys a semantic paradox, presenting fanaticism not as ideological conviction but as communicative inadequacy. This construction delivers incisive ironic criticism of political bigotry, yet, through its comic form and aphoristic brevity it becomes quite lucid and devoid of overt aggression,

⁷² The Ronald Reagan Mic Drop Moment at the 1984 Debate | NBC News.

⁷³ Winston Churchill Quotes. Brainy Quote.

thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the criticism. The latter aphorism, said about Labour politician Stafford Cripps, perfectly encapsulates disdain for someone's perceived moral failings by flipping conventional praise into criticism. It implies the person is irritatingly «good» in a way the speaker finds unbearable, lacking in the flaws that make someone relatable or interesting. The judgement of the traits of character is realized in this utterance due to opposing and gauging the two permanent extremes – «virtues» and «vices» – being collocated with unconventional for them verbs («to dislike» and «to admire» respectively), what makes the whole estimate more stylistically prominent and impactful.

Critical humor has reached a high level of sophistication on the contemporary media scene. For instance, a television host Trevor Noah skillfully combines wit with social reflection, as exemplified in the remark: «*The weirdest thing about politics is that lying is the only job where it's not a deal breaker*»⁷⁴. The use of a «normalization of the absurd» strategy is apparent here: the speaker presents political lying as a routine phenomenon, allowing him to bring to the fore systemic problems without resorting to overt moralizing. This approach exposes the hypocrisy of the political system through a mechanism of «reverse hyperbolization» – portraying a shocking reality as ordinary, thereby prompting the audience to critically reconsider familiar occurrences without their psychological resistance being triggered.

In summary, the pragmatic use of humor in public speaking is a multifunctional phenomenon that organically combines elements of social psychology, rhetoric and linguopragmatics. Humor facilitates effective information delivery, mitigates conflict situations and at the same time can serve as a form of intellectual critique. A well-placed joke, an ironic comparison or self-irony transforms a speech into a lively, dynamic form of communication in which laughter functions both as psychological relief and a powerful means of raising keen awareness of social phenomena and stimulating the audience's critical thinking.

CONCLUSIONS

Delving into the linguo-pragmatic particularities of the functioning of humor in the English-language public speeches and identifying the major principles and strategies involved have resulted in the following conclusions on the matter.

Humor is a complex multifaceted phenomenon that operates at the intersection of linguistics, pragmatics, cognitive science and sociolinguistics. The study of the main theories of humor has demonstrated the effectiveness

⁷⁴ Last Week Tonight. *Breaking news on a weekly basis. Sundays at 11PM.*

of a comprehensive approach integrating cognitive, social and pragmatic dimensions. Cognitive theories of incongruity and script-based analysis explain the mechanisms underlying the emergence of the comic effect through the collision of incompatible conceptual structures. Social theories of superiority reveal the role of humor in the formation of social bonds and group dynamics. The pragmatic approach demonstrates that humor comes across as an effective agent of communicative influence aimed at achieving specific goals in verbal interaction.

The analysis of the functions of humor in public speaking has led to the conclusion that it serves as a powerful rhetorical tool. Humor facilitates effective communication by capturing audience attention, reducing psychological tension, establishing trust and enhancing information retention. Moreover, it has been established that the successful use of humor in the public discourse requires good command of cultural characteristics and the appropriate social context.

The research of stylistic and linguistic means of creating a comic effect has demonstrated that humor in public speaking is shaped through a system of linguistic devices. Semantic means have proven to be the most productive, among them wordplay based on polysemy and phonetic similarity, as well as irony and sarcasm, which generate an effect of surprise through the contrast between literal and implicit meanings. Stylistic figures also play a significant role, including hyperbole, allusion and paradox, which enhance the emotional impact on the audience. Of particular importance are prosodic means, specifically intonation, pauses and speech tempo which often determine the perception of a humorous utterance.

The analysis of pragmatic strategies in the use of humor has identified three main functional directions. The first is aimed at engaging the audience and establishing emotional amity, achieved through self-irony, mild humor and the creation of an aura of ease. The second is associated with the reduction of tension in conflict situations, where humor is leveraged as a tool for initiating dialogue and transforming potentially negative situations into advantages for the speaker. The third one fulfills the function of criticism enabling to put forward social and political evaluation through ironic and sarcastic statements that avoid direct confrontation.

SUMMARY

The present paper dwells on humor as a complex phenomenon functioning at the intersection of linguistics, pragmatics, cognitive science and sociolinguistics, arguing for an integrative analytical framework. Drawing on major humor theories, it synthesizes cognitive incongruity

and script-based models with social and pragmatic perspectives to explain how comic effects emerge and function in the English-language public discourse. Cognitive mechanisms account for meaning clashes, social theories highlight bonding and group dynamics while pragmatic analysis frames humor as strategic communicative vector in interaction. Focusing on numerous excerpts from the English-language public speaking, the study shows that humor operates as a rhetorical resource that attracts attention, reduces tension, builds trust and improves audience retention. It has been proven that effective humorous performance depends on the addressees' sensitivity to cultural norms and situational context, which conditions interpretation and speaker credibility across diverse audiences. Linguistic analysis identifies stylistic devices such as wordplay, irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, allusion and paradox that prove crucial in shaping the necessary comic effect. Finally, three pragmatic strategies in the use of humor have been distinguished: engagement and rapport-building; tension management in conflict situations; indirect criticism enabling social or political evaluation devoid of any confrontational hues in the discourse.

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