IRONIC RHETORIC IN BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSES FROM FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The present paper is devoted to irony as a rhetoric and stylistic device from the angle of teaching Business English. The authors focus on two main aspects of the topic, i.e. which linguistic means are typical and acceptable in ironic business communication, and what didactic methods Business English teachers should resort to for teaching entrepreneurs and other representatives of business to make the best use of irony in their professional activity. The problem is considered in terms of functional linguistics which is quite efficient to that end.

Keywords: Business English, linguistic education, ironic rhetoric, functional linguistics, pragmatics of business communication, functional approach to teaching English.

1 INTRODUCTION

The objective of the present work is to analyze one of the vivid trends in language of business, namely a more active use of ironic utterances in any communication formats, including formal ones, and how it has to be reflected in Business English courses. The reasons for special attention to ironic rhetoric in business circles are quite substantial.

Irony has always contributed to English native speakers' mentality (see, for instance, works by Peter Mandler, George Mikes, Frank Stringfellow Jr., Robin Shoaps, Ernie Lepore and Matthew Stone, etc.). But as for institutional discourses, they have traditionally restricted the free use of figurative language devices, irony included. And this has been well-grounded, as the necessity to interact on a mutually beneficial and stimulating basis usually drives business partners to being cautious in order to avoid any possible misunderstanding, psychological discomfort or offence, while irony may be perceived by the recipient as a dubious, unpleasant or even unacceptable mode of verbal behaviour.

Still today more and more experts in business communication admit that, following the general process of social and professional interaction democratization, ironic utterances are growing in number in Business English of different discourse registers.

The authors of the current presentation focus on two main aspects of the topic:

1) which linguistic means are typical, acceptable and/or advisable for ironic business communication;

2) how can Business English teachers implement elements of the functional analysis in order to help (future) entrepreneurs and other representatives of business elaborate the ability to make the best use of irony in their professional activity.

2 THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Nowadays, being successful in business implies being efficient in business communication in the first place. In his famous book How to Win Friends and Influence People Dale Carnegie referred to J.D. Rockefeller who considered the ability to deal with people “as purchasable a commodity as sugar or coffee” and expressed his readiness to “pay more for that ability than for any other under the sun” [1]. Specialists in Business English determine the primary characteristics of business discourse as being ‘social action in business contexts’ [2], thus stressing the necessity for communicants to view their interaction with partners from the position of socially acceptable verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

But ‘socially acceptable’ does not necessarily mean pleasant. What should you do in case you need to avoid rudeness but drive a hard bargain, or show firmness instead of flexibility, or put somebody in the right place, or break an unwanted bit of information, or criticize someone you’d rather preserve as a
partner (colleague, employee, etc.)? Using devices like irony seems one of the answers to this question. It is always about how you do it and which reaction on the part of your interlocutor or correspondent your words may give rise to.

In this respect Business English teachers should spare no effort in developing communicative skills of their students in harmony with their analytical competence. By this we mean that an indispensable feature of an effective communicative style makes the ability to build up discourse in such a way that all its elements form a unified system of semantic and pragmatic components, which synergetically produce a certain rhetoric impact on the other part. And in order to make out the potential emotional and sense effects arising out of this or that discourse structure communicants need to be analytically thinking in terms of language units functional loading. Therefore, we find it quite useful to implement some elements of functional analysis in practical teaching, with special emphasis on the use of figurative linguistic means.

As is known, functional linguistics is aimed at disclosing the communicative functions of language units, the purposes of their use and their pragmatic meanings which affect people’s mindsets, opinions, feelings, intentions [3], [4], [5]. Applying some adapted forms of linguistic functional analysis so as to reveal these aspects of ironic rhetoric in Business English courses enhances students’ awareness of language, being an efficient tool of handling various professional matters.

For example, viewed from the angle of, say, structural analysis the following well-known aphorism presents a chain of complex sentences, each containing a subject, a predicate and a subordinate clause with a syntactic function of an attribute:


When looked upon from the angle of functional linguistics, the utterance may be briefly characterised as a piece of ironic discourse built within a framework of semantic relations (contradiction, succession, inference), supported by the enhancing effect of syntactic parallelism and aimed at forming demonstrative pragmatic meanings, like causing confusion by the combination of ill-compatible semantic units and incongruent conclusions. Taken together, these linguistic means result in a compact but rhetorically effective functional system of discourse.

Thus, functionalism reveals semantic and pragmatic loading of speech as a complex system of interacting elements and their interrelations.

The forefathers of functionalism were Ferdinand de Saussure, Otto Jespersen, Jan Baudouin de Courtenay and others who put forward the question of interconnection between the semantic potential of language units within the language system and the actual meaning they acquire in speech under the influence of linguistic and non-linguistic factors of communication.

Later the famous Prague Linguistic Circle (the Prague School) elaborated the so-called the ‘teleological’ principle of language analysis. It claimed that language functions as a teleological – purposeful – system of means of expression specially designed for communication. The founding members of the Prague School (Vilém Mathesius, Roman Jakobson, Nikolay Trubetzkoy, Sergei Karcevsky, Jan Mukarovský and others) presented joint theses at the First International Congress of Slavists held in Prague in 1929 and published in the first volume of *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague*. The *Thèses* outlined the direction of the work of the Circle’s members. Such important concepts as the approach to the study of language as a synchronic system which is, however, dynamic, functionality of elements of language, and the importance of the social function of language were explicitly laid down as the basis for further research [7].

The functional approach in linguistics has been substantially developed by S. Dik, T. van Dijk, R.P. Fawsett, M.A.K. Halliday, W.L. Chafe, G. Leech, J. Svartvik, O.V. Aleksandrova, G.A. Zolotova, V.A. Zvegintsev, E.S. Kubryakova, N.A. Slyusareva and many others whose works reveal the multisided functional interaction of various components of the multilayered, dynamic and flexible system of the natural human language.

Theoretical works turned out to be useful for developing quite numerous applied functional concepts, which embrace improving students’ literacy, phonetics, stylistic peculiarities of speech, enhancing eloquence, polishing up various registers of professional communication, and so on [8], [9], [10]. Highly productive is functional investigation of discursive strategies, especially cooperative ones, as successful and coherent collaboration makes the ultimate goal of business communication.

Mastering elements of the functional linguistic analysis helps students form a holistic, systemic and meaningful perception of discourse, make their own speech semantically and pragmatically richer and
more appropriate. Applying these skills in ironic discourse they acquire, figuratively speaking, the ‘intangible assets’ of eloquence, persuasion and communicative attractiveness.

3 IRONY IN BUSINESS ENGLISH: FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

In linguistics irony as a rhetoric and stylistic device is generally defined as can be found, for instance, in the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*: ‘the use of words that say the opposite of what you really mean, often as a joke and with a tone of voice that shows this’ [11]; other sources mostly give analogous definitions. Thus, in the following examples ‘the opposite of what you really mean’ is so evident that we cannot fail to feel the humour of it:

*And we talked to some of the lads from the Post Office last night and they said we could trust Mr Lipwig’s word ‘cos he’s as straight as a corkscrew.* [12]

*Rocky is returning to American cinemas this Christmas. And the financial markets increasingly resemble Sylvester Stallone’s ageing pugilist: they may get knocked about a bit, but they always seem to bounce back.* [13]

On the other hand, sometimes people resort to the so-called ‘bitter irony’ which essentially falls under the above definition but with one exception: it is not funny at all, like, for instance, in the following extract from G. Greene’s *The Quiet American*. The main character, a British journalist, addresses a Mr. Pyle whom he thinks secretly tied to the local dictator Thé and partly responsible for a terrorist attack in a Vietnamese town:

*’Do you expect General Thé to lose his demonstration? This is better than a parade. Women and children are news, and soldiers aren’t, in a war. This will hit the world’s Press. You’ve put General Thé on the map all right, Pyle. You’ve got the Third Force and National Democracy all over your right shoe. Go home to Phuong and tell her about your heroic deed – there are a few dozen less of her country people to worry about’* [14].

Considering this paragraph in functional terms we may start with the assertion that its inferred message (what is sometimes referred to as the functional attractor) is not worded discretely, and is still unequivocally perceived by the addressee of the speech. The text does not contain any claims directly accusing Pyle of the crime, but the communicative purport of the speaker is revealed absolutely undoubtfully if viewed as a functional system which, firstly, actualises the semantic and pragmatic potential of the given combination of language units; and secondly, activates the interaction of the text itself and extralinguistic facets of its realisation. The sane people worldview will surely reject sacrificing peaceful citizens as an acceptable means of achieving political goals. Therefore such derisive ‘praise’ of the terrorist attack and Pyle’s role in it leaves no ambiguity about the sharp indignation of the speaker. The bitter feeling of the person whose heart is tortured by what he witnesses is reflected in the ‘proof from the contrary’, as he understands the futility of direct accusations towards the guy who sincerely believes that political struggle cannot do without innocent victims and whose involvement in the crime cannot be definitely proved. In these conditions mobilizing the functional potential of such interacting units as *better than a parade, women and children are news, hit the world’s Press, put on the map, heroic deed, less people to worry about* the system of discourse brings to life the hidden message of the speaker and produces the combined sense opposite to the direct meaning of the uttered words.

So, as we see irony is an effective trope which transforms the surface structure of the worded text and puts the hidden meanings in the foreground.

Business communication has traditionally been known as a stylistically restricted and conventional kind of verbal interaction. Generally, this premise is still in force. But the tendency to a more informal and sometimes almost loose stylistics of language of business is growing more and more intensive. According to recent investigations [15] for the past 50 years the evolutionary shifts in business stylistics have shown the following tempo of increase in the use of stylistically marked elements: vulgarisms – by 27 %, ironic means – by 35 %, hyperboles - by 16 %, metaphors – by 12 %, etc.

So it becomes more and more evident that the question of whether students of business should be taught irony and other figurative means as a special business rhetoric device should be answered in the affirmative. Suffice it to say that such popular source of learning material as the *Economist* is extremely rich in ironic contexts much enjoyed by students. For example:
For proud Indians, nothing—except perhaps victory for their national cricket team—is as sweet as the sight of Indian companies marauding acquisitively across the globe. And marauding they are. So far this year Indian firms have announced 34 foreign takeovers worth more than $10.7 billion in all. For local industrialists, among the proudest Indians, the buying binge indicates a renaissance, and not only in business. “There’s a new India emerging,” says Kumar Mangalam Birla, chairman of the Aditya Birla group, a big conglomerate” (Marauding maharajahs // The Economist. - vol. 382.- № 8522: March 31st – April 6th 2007. – P. 69)

4  CONCLUSION

Having analysed the use of irony in Business English we come to the conclusion that analyzing ironic rhetoric in business from this perspective and implementing it in the teaching process have proved highly efficient for developing students’ professionally relevant competences, especially those belonging to the analytical, systemic and communicative competence blocks.

REFERENCES [Arial, 12-point, bold, left alignment]