Abstract
Teaching English as a foreign language of business and professional communication is often a challenge as future economists, politicians and diplomats must not only be able to verbalize their ideas in a clear and efficient way, but also understand their British and American counterparts, whose speech is abundant in various rhetorical devices. Irony is a very specific rhetorical figure and a typical feature of British national mentality. It infiltrates various types of English discourse, including different genres of Business English. When students don't know about this famous culturally specific British tradition to combine outer politeness and ironic attitude veiled with the help of numerous linguistic means, it can lead to serious business problems and possibly even the collapse of partnership relations. The paper proves that it is necessary to research into effective ways of making a pragmatic impact on recipients and forming the required functional field with the help of irony. The author analyzes his teaching practice at Moscow State Institute of International Affairs and draws empirical material from his classroom observations as well as extensive linguistic research into Business English discourse. This paper aims at revealing useful functional properties of irony in business communication through the methodology of functional-linguistic analysis and finding ways of integrating the results into the educational process.

Keywords: discourse studies, functional linguistics, irony, Business English, teaching methodology, rhetoric.

1 INTRODUCTION
Teaching Business English in modern extralinguistic environment is one of the most important aspects of professional higher education in Russia. Future specialists in different spheres must know how to use foreign languages to organize and optimize their own job-related activities, be it commercial, industrial, scientific, managerial or any other professional area which requires a certain amount of cross-cultural interpersonal communication. Competences, fostered at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University), require from students to be able to set definitive goals of verbal interaction, then combine various linguistic means and rhetorical devices, arrange them in a carefully thought-out sequence to make a necessary pragmatic impact on English-speaking interlocutors. By pragmatic impact here we mean

- changing the recipient’s attitude to a certain phenomenon or a fact,
- modification of his / her emotional state and intentions,
- transforming categorical structure of people’s individual consciousness and introducing new categories,
- activation of particular cognitive frames and scenarios that are useful for the speaker.

Today Business English is one of the most popular communication systems, its goal being to establish partnership among the participants of discourse. Trust and mutual respect are the cornerstones of any business relationships, which are based on the ability

- to properly implement the speech strategy,
- efficiently model utterances,
- use different rhetorical devices to influence interlocutors’ intentions and decision-making,
- change other people’s viewpoints on the problem under discussion,
- modify the communicative situation to the speaker’s advantage.
It isn’t always easy to do all the things mentioned above, because such functional peculiarities of English business discourse as conventional communicative norms, strict regulation of verbal interaction, obligatory adherence to rules and roles impose considerable limitations on the range of linguistic means available to the participants of discourse. Thus, it is necessary to research into effective ways of making a pragmatic impact on recipients and forming the required functional field, especially with the help of irony – a very specific rhetorical figure. This paper aims at revealing useful functional properties of irony in business communication through the methodology of functional-linguistic analysis and finding ways of integrating the results into the educational process.

2 THEORETICAL GROUNDING. WHY DO WE NEED TO STUDY IRONY IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION?

The most serious difficulties experienced by many Russian businessmen and diplomats in the process of cross-cultural communication with partners from Great Britain and the USA are such properties of the English language as ambiguity and polysemy, doubtful expressions, multidimensional nature of verbalization generated by the synergy of the outer formal structure of an utterance and deeply hidden subtext and hints. Many researchers have noticed that speech behaviour of the British can be characterized with the mindset to vague semantics, some sort of evasiveness and understatement, meanwhile irony and humour in general form a very specific trait of British national mentality, reflected in the language system, thus the traditional play with homophones, polysemantic lexemes, paradoxicality and witticisms, innuendo in numerous genres of English discourse.

For ages Englishmen have been fostering sense of humour as to have it means to be almost well-mannered. However, Englishmen’s passion for self-directed irony and ability to laugh heartily at themselves frequently causes bewilderment, confusion and misunderstanding by non-native speaking foreigners who miss the whole pragma-semantic spectrum of the utterance and are therefore “trapped” in a sophisticated joke or pun.

Being a typical feature of British national mentality and an attribute of postmodernism, irony infiltrates various types of English discourse, including business and professional communication. If you don’t know about this famous culturally specific British tradition to combine outer politeness and ironic attitude veiled with the help of numerous linguistic means, it can lead to serious business problems and possibly even the collapse of partnership relations. That is why studying irony as a rhetorical figure of English business interaction plays an important role in boosting efficiency of discourse.

Briefly speaking, irony is a mere combination of functionally incompatible discursive elements. It has been studied in many branches of science: philosophy, ethics, rhetoric, the theory of literature, stylistics, cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, linguo synergetics and of course functional linguistics. In terms of the latter, irony can be described as a discrepancy between how something is said and what is actually meant. Ironic effect of an utterance may be obvious to some recipients and absolutely missed by the others. There are certain conditions which predetermine whether the use of irony helps finally achieve its communicative goal, e.g. equal background knowledge shared by both the speaker and the listeners, proficient command of the English language, ability to sense linguocultural components of the pragma-semantic field of discourse, etc.

Irony in the speech of businessmen and professional specialists can become a real “weapon” capable of destruction. It has to be used very carefully due to moral and ethical aspects of interpersonal relations. In rhetoric there are a lot limitations imposed on irony to make verbal interaction more humane and ethically correct. Traditional communicative norms of “classical” business discourse prescribe to avoid ironic utterances when

- interlocutors don’t have a sense of humour;
- other participants of business discourse are in low spirits, anxious or stressed;
- the speaker isn’t well-known to the recipients;
- the current communicative situation isn’t suitable for ironic expressions and humour doesn’t seem appropriate;
- the situation is highly emotional, especially in ritualized communication (e.g. weddings, funerals, etc);
- it is strictly forbidden to direct irony towards someone in front of those people that the “victim” depends on in a social, psychological or emotional way;
it's not recommended to ironically mock at people's flaws and weaknesses or something they value or believe in.

So it's hardly efficient to speak ironically about a person in the presence of his / her boss as it definitely won't harmonize or optimize business cooperation. Nevertheless, irony is actively used in different genres of both oral and written English business discourse, which means it has a high positive functional potential. The value of understanding how irony works in Business English as applied to EFL teaching practice is self-evident.

The theoretical basis for this paper includes works on functional linguistics [1, 2, 3, 4], irony [5], the theory of discourse and its semantic field [6, 7, 8], linguodidactics and teaching methodology [9, 10, 11].

3 LINGUOPRAGMATIC PROPERTIES OF IRONY IN ENGLISH BUSINESS DISCOURSE: ADVANTAGES FOR THE FUNCTIONAL FIELD

Statistical analysis of different fragments of English business discourse from the 1970s to the 2010s demonstrates a tendency to considerably more frequent use of irony in business communication. Irony is often exploited as a polemic device, discrediting interlocutors in the eyes of other people. Evidently, it can be explained with the fact that in a recent decade classical communicative norms tend to be deviated from. Rules of business speech etiquette are sometimes completely ignored under the influence of democratization in the life of modern society.

As it was said before, irony is actively used in multiple genres of English business discourse due to postmodern cognitive patterns in the minds of native speakers, peculiarities of British national mentality, specifics of the language system and individual characteristics of the communicative style of those who produce ironic utterances. Depending on the extralinguistic situation and the particular genre of verbal business interaction, irony can have quite a versatile functional loading.

At Moscow State Institute of International Relations English is studied in the lessons of ESP, economic translation, home reading and British culture studies. To attract students’ attention to the phenomenon of irony in business communication it is easier to invoke texts of different genres, i.e. transcripts of dialogues from textbooks, articles on economy and problems of international business community in mass media, popular books on professional interaction and fiction which describes life and work of businessmen and politicians (e.g. by Jeffrey Archer, Sydney Sheldon, Arthur Hailey, etc). Analyzing fragments of texts containing ironic business discourse allows students to have a deeper insight into the functional aspects of irony.

1. One of the main functions of irony in business communication is to establish and maintain professional contacts, making speech less formal. In some cases it helps optimize business interaction as deviations from formal style of communication make speech more convincing and produce a substantial pragmatic impact on recipients, e.g.:

When Charles Seymour returned to the Commons on the Tuesday there was a note from the Whips’ office waiting for him on the Members’ Letter-board. One of the Housing and Local Government team had lost his seat in the general election and Charles had been promoted to number two on the Opposition bench. “No more preservation of trees. You’ll be on to higher things now,” chuckled the Chief Whip. “Pollution, water shortage and exhaust fumes…” [12]

2. The second most frequent function of irony is easing the tension in conflictual situations, during difficult negotiations or any other situations when the speaker is opposed to interlocutors, e.g.:

“Most of you gentlemen are aware of procedures which have been agreed on… As to the order of speaking, we’ll employ that ancient chance which all of us were born under – alphabetical precedence.” Jerome Patterson’s eyes twinkled toward Alex. “I’ve paid a penalty sometimes for being a ‘P’. I hope that ‘V’ of yours hasn’t been too burdensome”

“Not often, Mr. Chairman,” Alex said. “On some occasions it gives me the last word.”
A ripple of laughter, the first today, ran around the table [13].

3. Irony is a good method of self-defense. It might be used to protect oneself from criticism and verbal attacks or discredit opponents, reducing their credibility in the eyes of other recipients, e.g.:
“I genuinely regret,” Alex Vandervoort was saying now, “to find myself before the board in conflict with my fellow officers, Jerome and Roscoe. But I cannot, as a matter of duty and conscience, conceal my anxiety about this loan and my opposition to it.”

“What’s the trouble? Doesn’t your girl friend like Supranational?” The barbed question came from Forrest Richardson, a long time FMA director; he was brusque-mannered, had a reputation as a martinet, and was a crown prince of meat-packing.

Alex flushed with anger…[13]

4. Irony is a good way to express your personal negative attitude to something you are talking about in an implicit veiled manner. Thus you can stay within the norms of business speech etiquette and general decency which is crucial in this type of discourse. E.g.:


Elements of functional-linguistic analysis can be introduced to classroom activities to give students proper methodology of discerning ironic utterances and understanding the discursive mechanism behind them. For example, at Moscow State Institute of International Relations future economists and business administrators read Iain Banks’s novel “The Business” as part of their home reading classes. To highlight the functional significance of irony it is possible to draw students’ attention to the following extract:

“I think you’d be mad to go ahead with this, Dwight,” I told him.

Dwight stared at me, aghast. Then he leant towards me, eyes narrowed. “But you do think it’s a great idea?”

“Brilliant. It’s a breathtakingly good idea. But if you really want to put it to good use, find somebody in the movie industry you hate and would like to see ruined or dead and suggest the idea to them in a way that would let them claim it as their own.”

“And watch them pick up the Academy Award?” Dwight laughed at my naiveté. “I think not”[15].

Kathryn Telman, the main character, tries to persuade young and ambitious Dwight to reject his idea of making a blockbuster movie based on his own script. When Kate states her opinion directly, it doesn’t produce the desired effect on the interlocutor. He keeps on insisting on his point of view. So Kate resorts to the rhetorical figure of irony to generate a pragmatic effect, dispelling the opponent’s misconception. The first two utterances (*Brilliant. It’s a breathtakingly good idea*) encourage Dwight to perceive positive information (from his viewpoint) and a long awaited approval. But in the next sentences there emerge such discursive elements as *hate, ruined or dead*. Their functional fields within this context dissonate with the current semantics of the discourse. The recipient’s mind is supposed to process this discrepancy and come to the conclusion, that Kathryn hints at the danger and possible failure of the planned cinematographic masterpiece. The only rational use for Dwight’s script could be to frame up his personal enemy by making him / her a dubious business proposition to invest in making this film leading to unavoidable bankruptcy. Unfortunately, Telman’s communicative goal isn’t fully achieved as Dwight is so absorbed in his own idea, that Kathryn’s ironic rhetoric doesn’t affect him. The attempt to make a pragmatic impact on him fails. Functional-linguistic analysis usually makes it easier for students to see the mechanism of irony in business communication and identify its functional loading by thinking over different elements of the discourse and their cooperation in pursuing common synergetic pragmatic goal.

4  CONCLUSION

At Moscow State Institute of International Relations EFL learners work with a lot of specific didactic materials comprising business texts of different genres, formats and styles, naturally coming across such a typically British rhetorical figure as irony. Having analyzed teaching practice, we come to the conclusion that elements of functional-linguistic analysis during reading and listening activities in the classroom help students perceive the whole pragma-semantic range of ironic English business discourse, discern communicative goals and identify contextually predetermined functional loading of ironic rhetoric. Thus, this makes them better prepared to successful participation in cross-cultural professional discourse.

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REFERENCES


