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## **Humour and Irony as research objects and as parts of everyday discourse in Russia [Юмор и ирония: объект изучения и часть повседневного общения в России]**

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### **Аннотация**

В статье представлены исследования юмора и иронии как дискурсивных феноменов. Кроме того, анализируются особенности использования юмора и иронии в повседневном русскоязычном общении. Цель статьи двоякая: во-первых, в ней дается обзор исследований юмора и иронии в рамках различных наук: лингвистики, философии, этнографии, этики и литературоведения. Во-вторых, в статье описывается функционирование юмора и иронии в русскоязычной устной, письменной и электронно-опосредованной повседневной коммуникации. Показано разнообразие форм существования «несерьезной» коммуникации и их влияние на социальные отношения между коммуникантами.

В советский период «несерьезные» формы коммуникации, как и способы их изучения контролировались государством, при этом явный уклон делался на «правильный» юмор: характерными иллюстрациями комического были примеры из классической литературы. Исследователи практически не обращались к проблеме разграничения различных форм смешного: термины «юмор», «комическое», «смех», «ирония», «сатира» могли использоваться как синонимы. В последние десятилетия вспыхнул исследовательский интерес к различным жанрам non-bons fide дискурса, в частности, к анекдотам и к их функционированию в повседневной речи. Однако юмористический и иронический дискурсы не ограничиваются рассказыванием анекдотов: примеры смеховой коммуникации можно обнаружить не только в устной, но и в письменной и компьютерно-опосредованной коммуникации. Независимо от используемого канала, non-bona

*fide* дискурс всегда является способом выражения социальных отношений или оспаривания существующих социальных норм.

**Ключевые слова:** «несерьезный! (*non bona fide*) дискурс, юмор, ирония, анекдот, критическое отношение

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## 1. Introduction

2 Humour and irony are indispensable elements of modern Russian culture: one can encounter instances of the *non-bona fide* discourse in everyday spoken and written communication as well as in computer-mediated interaction. It is no coincidence that the past decades have faced a growing number of publications by Russian scholars devoted to various *non-bona fide* forms of discourse.

3 Discussing the nature of humour, Henry Bergson states: “The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every little effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation” [Bergson, 1911]. Despite having been written more than a century ago, these words still reflect the state of research in the field of humour studies, and Bergson’s statement can be successfully applied to humour research in Russia. Attempts to define humour and irony and describe their functions have been made by the researchers from various fields: philosophers, anthropologists, linguists, etc. However, the discussions are going on, and this is a sign that *non-bona fide* forms of discourse still merit scholarly attention and are important for the modern society.

4 In this paper, I will present an overview of research on humour and irony published by Russian scholars. I will also attempt at demonstrating how jokes and ironic utterances function in oral, written and computer-mediated modes of discourse and what social implications they convey.

5

## 2. Humour research in Russia

6 Research of humour and irony in Russia has a long-standing tradition which, on the one hand, is based on the ideas expressed by European scholars, and, on the other hand, offers its own theories and approaches to humour.

7 In the Soviet Union, humour was a rather serious matter: the communist state treated humour as a tool for ideological influence, and only what can be termed as “good examples of humour” were subject of scholarly analysis. In the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century humour research was restricted to its literary forms, and detailed, but ideologically laden definitions of the basic concepts, e.g., *humour*, *satire* or *irony* can be found in sources like Literary Encyclopaedia [Literaturnaya Entsiklopedia, 1929-1939]. Anatoly Lunacharsky’s article “What is Humour?” is a good example of purely ideological treatment of humour. Lunacharski, who, apart from being a writer, a translator and an art expert, was also a revolutionary and the first People’s Commissar of Education in the Soviet Government, began the text with the statement that the works of two Russian writers – Gogol and Chekhov – are good examples of humour. Lunacharsky likens humour to laughter and claims that laughter emerges when people find something that contradicts the norms. Following this line of reasoning, Lunacharsky gives examples of classical Russian literary works in which the writers criticized the injustice of pre-revolutionary “tsarist” social order [Lunacharsky, 1967].

8 The tradition to refer to various forms of humour, irony or satire in literary texts as “laughter” was taken up by many Soviet scholars. For instance, in their book *Laughter in Ancient Rus’* Likhachev et al. focus on the comic genres that existed in the ancient Russian culture and describe laughter as a social phenomenon which breaks the rules of culture and creates a new environment of “anti-culture” [Likhachev, 1984].

9 Another well-known example of the study of comic forms in fiction is Yury Tynyanov’s analysis of literary parody [Tynyanov, 1977]. The writer and literary scholar, Tynyanov focuses on social functions of parody and gives a range of examples from the classic Russian literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

10 One of the researchers who presented a systemic account of humour in literary texts was Vladimir Propp, whose posthumous book “On the Comic and Laughter” was first published in 1976 [Propp, 1976; Propp, 2009]. Propp focused specifically on the forms and functions of laughter and what he termed as “the comic” in literary texts. He created a theory which allowed for the analysis of empirical data, defined the concept of “the comic”, and classified types of laughter. Again, in Propp’s book *laughter* was used as an umbrella term for what is known as humour, irony and sarcasm. Propp’s classification of laughter was based on the concept of ridicule, which makes the classification more applicable to irony rather than humour. According to Propp’s taxonomy, laughter can be benign, bitter, cynical, joyful, ritual or carnival. Propp’s ideas were further expanded to the treatment of irony and comic discourse as phenomena existing in a particular cultural context.

11 A step towards the study of non-literary forms and genres of humour was made in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Recent years witnessed a range of publications devoted to the nature of humour and laughter [Shmeleva, 2002; Kozintsev, 2007; Logicheskij analiz jazyka, 2007], stylistic and cultural features of specific humorous genres [Shilikhina, 2017; Aleksandrova, 2018], etc. Canned jokes (or “anecdotes”) are, perhaps, the most popular humorous genre among scholars [Khimik, 2002; Shilikhina, 2017]. In their book “Russian canned jokes” E. Shmeleva and A. Shmelev describe a prototypical “anecdote” as a short coherent text recited with the primary intention to

make the audience laugh. Prototypical canned jokes consist of a meta-textual introduction, words that belong to the narrator and utterances of the joke characters [Shmeleva, 2002].

<sup>12</sup> Researchers also pay attention to the origin and various sources of canned jokes. In the Soviet Union many joke cycles were culture-specific since they were based on the plots of well-known books and popular Soviet films and the characters from these books and films became the characters of the jokes [Arkhipova, 2013]. Book- and film-based jokes still play an important role in constructing the national self even in historically changing circumstances, as understanding of such jokes is based on the shared knowledge of culturally significant sources. The roots of many Russian canned jokes also lie in political history of the country [Kozintsev, 2009; Waterlow, 2018] or in current political events [Arkhipova, 2018].

<sup>13</sup> Jokes can be interwoven in practically any kind of speech or text (to see how jokes are used in Russian newspaper texts see, for instance, [Vasilieva, 2017]; the paper [Shilikhina, 2013] describes the use of “anecdotes” in public political discourse). As of today, canned jokes function in all modes of discourse: written, online and spoken. To trace the emergence of new jokes as public reaction to social changes and political events, the researchers analyse Internet sites that specialize in accumulating and disseminating jokes and present both qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data [Arkhipova, 2018]. Online humour has become the source of empirical data illustrating the realm of modern political humour in Russia. Because online mode of joke-telling allows for the anonymous expression of public discontent, one can find jokes that openly criticize authorities and current political regime. The jokes that appear on a daily basis demonstrate public reaction towards certain events and reflect changes in the social and political context. The following jokes illustrate the point:

<sup>14</sup> (1)- *Ну, что там на счет пенсионной реформы? - Есть две новости. Хорошая и плохая. - Начинай с плохой. - Пенсионный возраст поднимут. - А хорошая? - Мы все равно до него не доживем.*

<sup>15</sup> - *Any news about that pension reform? - Well, I've got two pieces of news: the good and the bad one. - What's the bad news? - The retirement age will be increased. - And the good one? - We won't live up to it.*

<sup>16</sup> (2) - *Live fast, die young. - Дмитрий Анатольевич, благодарю Вас за изложение концепции пенсионной реформы.*

<sup>17</sup> - *Live fast, die young. - Dmitry Anatolievich, thank you for your explanation of the concept of the pension reform.*

<sup>18</sup> The target of both jokes is the pension reform which was announced when the football World Cup was held in Russia in the summer of 2018. The reform led to the increase of the retirement age and was not welcomed by the citizens. To tone down criticism the government officials made public comments of the situation and were immediately parodied in the jokes.

<sup>19</sup> The jokes which emerge as a reaction to the existing social order often contain multiple intertextual references. The following examples of the jokes published on

October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018 online right after President Putin's speech at the annual Valdai forum visited by journalists, politicians and economists from around the world. The Russian President promised that all Russian people would go to Heaven, and the phrase triggered immediate public reaction:

<sup>20</sup> (3) - Мы, как мученики, попадём в рай! - Господин президент, а есть у Вас другие предложения по повышению уровня жизни? (<https://www.anekdot.ru/an/an1810/j181021;100.html>)

<sup>21</sup> - We, as martyrs, will all go to Heaven! - Mr. President, do you have any other suggestions how to raise standards of living?

<sup>22</sup> (4) Путин на Валдае заявляет:

- Россияне в случае ядерной войны попадут в рай!

*Вопрос из зала:*

- А куда попадут те россияне, которые не верят в бога и рай?
- Как куда? В тюрьму за оскорбление чувств верующих!

(<https://www.anekdot.ru/an/an1810/j181021;100.html>)

<sup>23</sup> At the Valdai Forum Putin says:

- In case of a nuclear war all Russians will go to Heaven!

*Question from the audience:*

- And where will go those who do not believe in God or Heaven?
- Well, to prison, of course, for offending of the feelings of believers!

<sup>24</sup> Both jokes contain explicit reference to the statement which was widely cited by mass media. In both jokes the counter-questions implicitly refer to economic problems of ordinary Russian people and criticize existing social order. The joke [4] also mentions the law adopted in 2013 which prescribes criminal action against people who perform actions or say something that insults the religious feelings of believers, thus imposing limitations on the rights of non-believers. As is the case with the jokes about the pension reform, to understand the new jokes one should be familiar with the current political agenda as well as culturally significant events and pre-texts which trigger public reaction and become the source of intertextual reference.

<sup>25</sup> Apart from canned jokes, a lot of other types of humour (e.g., stand-up humour, visual and multimodal humour) and irony emerge in everyday interaction. In the next section I will focus predominantly on irony in spoken, written and computer-mediated modes of discourse to demonstrate how ironic meaning is conveyed and negotiated and how irony challenges social norms and values and reflects social context in which it emerges.

<sup>26</sup>

**3. Research of irony in Russian linguistics and theory and history of literature**

27 In order to present a full picture of irony research in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, we need to go back to the fact that the terms *laughter* and *the comic* were used as umbrella terms to refer to all forms of the non-bona fide discourse, and *humour*, *irony*, *sarcasm* and *satire* were used as near synonyms. As a result, on many occasions what was termed as *the comic* could actually be termed *irony* or *sarcasm*. For many researchers in the field of ethics irony was a subtype of *the comic* aimed at showing the gap between what is asserted and the reality [Borev, 1970; Pivoev, 2000].

28 Russian literary scholars and linguists also follow classic understanding of irony as a language tool or a rhetorical device which conveys a figurative meaning opposite to the literal meaning of the utterance [Ermakova, 2005; Shatunovsky, 2007, Kozintsev, 2007]. In this view, irony is contrasted to humour and is treated as a meta-message which challenges the situation, mocks or negates it. Referring to irony in literary texts, Vladimir Propp rather radically stated that “irony, which is very close to paradox, is not very difficult to define. While in paradox notions that exclude one another are combined despite their incompatibility, in irony what is really meant but only implied is just the opposite of what is explicitly expressed verbally. Words express something positive while the implication is negative. Thus irony indirectly exposes the flaws of the person (or the thing) in question. It is a type of ridicule, and this determines its comicality. When it is represented as a virtue that is contrasted, the flaw is emphasized. Irony is especially expressive in spoken language, where special ridiculing intonation serves as its instrument” [Propp, 2009: 96-97]. However, this is obviously an oversimplification, since a wide range of factors should be taken into consideration when analysing and defining irony.

29 An example of a detailed linguistic analysis of irony is the seminal book “Irony and its role in the life of a language” by Olga Ermakova, who defined irony as a type of linguistic manipulation which the speakers use intentionally with the aim of mocking other people [Ermakova, 2005]. This approach allowed the researcher to divide all instances of irony into *verbalized* (i.e., conveyed by a single word) and *textual* (i.e., irony that is created throughout an utterance or a text).

30 A number of publications analyse irony as a discourse strategy and discuss the issues that concern its production and detection in communication [Borisova, 2013; Borisova, 2017; Kashkin, 2013; Shilikhina 2014]. This kind of research is supported by a strong tradition of logical analysis of utterances and lexical semantic analysis. The issues of irony generation and understanding are discussed along with the linguistic mechanisms of puns and language play and non-trivial language use [e.g.; Arutiunova, 1987; Sannikov, 2002]. Within this approach, linguists describe verbal signals of irony and outline semantic properties of ironic utterances.

31 Other approaches include treatment of irony as a speech act at the level of an utterance [Paducheva, 1996], or as a speech genre at the level of text [Ermakova, 2014]. Despite ongoing discussions, the researchers cannot reach an agreement on the status of irony, which confirms multi-facetedness of ironic discourse.

32 Some researchers of irony expressed interest in cultural implications of ironic discourse, in recognition and appreciation of irony. Interestingly, they prefer to focus on

the English irony as a national feature (see, for instance, [Gornostaeva, 2013a; Gornostaeva, 2013b]).

<sup>33</sup> One more line of research should be mentioned, namely, attempts at computational treatment of irony (see, for example, [Kotov, 2011]). The results of corpus-based studies of irony production and detection are further used for the modelling of ironic computer agents.

<sup>34</sup> In the next section I will focus predominantly on the use of irony by Russian speakers in three modes of discourse to demonstrate how ironic meaning is conveyed and negotiated and how irony reflects norms and values and reflects social context in which it emerges.

<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. Irony in everyday discourse

<sup>36</sup> Irony holds a special place in modern Russian culture: it exists in many forms and guises, it emerges in face-to-face interactions, social media and in written discourse, and today one can find instances of irony in those spheres of discourse where its use was previously impossible. Verbal irony is a good illustration of “elasticity” of linguistic signs: it demonstrates how easily a word or a collocation can acquire double meaning and become a tool for challenging social norms and values.

<sup>37</sup> Before the analysis of samples of ironic discourse, a number of social functions of irony should be mentioned: most frequently ironic utterances express criticism and negative evaluation. Irony can also be useful when a speaker needs to elevate their status, to implicitly express aggression, or to be humorous while maintaining emotional self-control [Dews, 2007]. Examples of speakers’ ironic stance can be found in all modes of discourse, and today irony as a discursive practice extends its influence, appearing in those spheres of discourse where it was not previously used.

<sup>38</sup>

##### *Irony in spoken discourse*

<sup>39</sup> The most common type of irony is one in which the speaker’s positive words imply a negative attitude. This type of irony is based on reversal of meaning and is easy to recognize in spontaneous discourse. Russian National Corpus provides examples of dialogues in which the speaker’s ironic intention is marked with the tag *с иронией* (*with irony*). In the dialogue Speaker B expresses evaluation by reversing the meaning of the word *beautiful*:

<sup>40</sup> (5) *Speaker A: Такое сочетание у него там/ зелёное с синим / пол оранжевый... Speaker B: (с иронией) Дааа/ красота...<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>41</sup> *Speaker A: He's got this combination / green and blue / the floor is orange... Speaker B: (with irony) Yeah, really beautiful... [Spoken subcorpus of the Russian National Corpus].*

<sup>42</sup> In the dialogue, the speaker uses meaning reversal to express negative evaluation of the somewhat strange choice of colours for the design of premises. Though

the change of positive connotation into negative is the most frequent way of creating irony in spontaneous discourse, to show the reversal of meaning, Russian speakers normally mark their ironic intention with a special falling intonation.

43 The next sample of spontaneous irony is the transcript of the radio broadcast of the discussion of political legacy of Boris Yeltsin, the first President of Russia. Since the matter under discussion is a rather serious one, the speakers become emotional and their irony functions as a way to express discontent and aggression:

44 (6) *Speaker A: Ответить-то он в какой-то мере должен за то / что случилось в нашей стране / все ведь плохо. Какую область не взять / ну что не коснись / вот возьмите Север... Speaker B: Ну / понятно / понятно / я конкретно спросил / что с ним делать-то. Speaker C: Ну / дать ему еще денег побольше / у него мало денег (сказано с иронией). Speaker A: Да. Пусть он постоянным будет сенатором. [Беседа с социологом на общественно-политические темы (Самара) // Фонд «Общественное мнение», 2000]*

45 *Speaker A: He should bear responsibility to some extent for / what has happened to our country / everything is so bad. Whichever sphere you take / whatever you look at / take the North, for instance... Speaker B: Well/ that's clear / that's clear / I asked specifically / what should we do to him. Speaker C: Well / he should be given more money / he has very little money (with irony). Speaker A: Right. Let him be a life-long senator [Spoken subcorpus of the Russian National Corpus].*

46 The first ironic utterance of Speaker C is an example of absurd irony: it contradicts common sense and the idea of punishment. The utterance *he has very little money* is the example of canonical ironic meaning reversal. The irony of Speaker C is supported by Speaker A, who also suggests the kind of solution to the problem which can hardly be considered a punishment for Yeltsin's political missteps.

47 The next example is a short dialogue from the film "Election Day" (2007), in which a team of PR managers are discussing their plans for the day on board the cruise ship. The interaction demonstrates competitive irony which helps the ironist elevate his status and mock the interlocutor's desire to demonstrate his authority:

48 (7) *Speaker A: Я готов рассказать о цели нашей поездки. Через 5 минут собираемся на совещание в штабе. Speaker B: Саша, где? Speaker A: Ну у меня в каюте. Speaker C: А, Саша, у тебя там штаб! Мы, дураки, думаем, что там просто каюта, а там же штаб.*

49 *Speaker A: I can now explain to you the purpose of our voyage. In 5 minutes we have a meeting in the headquarters. Speaker B: Sasha, where? Speaker A: Well, in my cabin. Speaker C: Oh, it's the headquarters that you've got there! We, fools, are thinking it's just a cabin, while it's really the headquarters.*

50 Speaker C's self-denigration is an example of prototypical irony which implies critical evaluation of Speaker A's grandiloquent nomination of a modest cabin as headquarters. The ironic interpretation of the utterance is obvious since the construction *мы, дураки, думаем* (*we, fools, are thinking*) is frequently used in colloquial speech as a marker of irony to indicate that either the information provided by the other interlocutor is well-known or self-evident, or that the choice of words is unsuitable for the situation.



51 It should be noted that in spoken discourse irony quite often becomes a subject of negotiation:

52 (8) *Speaker A: Подождите, это что, получается, Кудрин пытается разбудить политическое сознание россиян? Speaker B: Кудрин раскачивает ситуацию, конечно. Вы что, не понимаете, он – тайный агент, свой среди чужих, чужой среди своих. Он раскачивает ситуацию. Он пытается всеми правдами и неправдами по теории малых дел двигать все, что только можно, лишь бы только раскачать, конечно. Speaker A: А вы сейчас иронизируете? Speaker C: Там табличка «сарказм» на заднем плане. Speaker A: Просто я ничего плохого в его словах не вижу. Да, действительно, разбудить политическое сознание, включить вот это чувство налогоплательщика ...*  
(<https://echo.msk.ru/programs/personalnovash/2382251-echo/>)

53 *Speaker A: Wait a second, you mean, Kudrin is trying to wake up political consciousness in Russians? Speaker B: Kudrin is stirring the pot, of course. Don't you understand that he is a secret agent, a sleeper agent. He is stirring the pot. He is trying to get everything move, according to the theory of small actions, by hook or by crook, just to make everything move, of course. Speaker A: Are you being ironic right now? Speaker C: There is a sign "sarcasm" at the background. Speaker A: Well, I do not find anything wrong in his words. I mean, to awaken political consciousness, to turn this tax payer's feeling on...*

54 The dialogue is a part of a radio talk show in which two journalists (speakers A and C) and an economist (Speaker B) discuss the economic policy of the Russian government and the actions undertaken by the then minister of Economy Alexey Kudrin. In his answer to the journalist's question the economist uses a number of idiomatic expressions which imply potential ironic interpretation due to their highly evaluative semantics. To suspect the ironic intention the listener should also be aware of the reference to revolutionary activity of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, since the so-called "theory of small actions" is the name of ideological movement which aimed at increasing political activity of ordinary people, predominantly peasants, by educating them and by sharing their lifestyle. Speaker A explicitly checks if Speaker B is ironic or not, while Speaker C (the second journalist) makes a sarcastic remark confirming Speaker B's ironic intention. As the dialogue demonstrates, ironic meaning can be dynamically constructed and negotiated among interactants with specific discourse markers of mode negotiations [Shilikhina, 2018]. Such negotiations are quite common in spoken discourse since the discourse participants need clear instructions for the interpretation of potentially ironic comments.

55

### ***Irony in written discourse***

56 Written discourse is a notion that overarches a wide range of spheres and genres of communication. In this paper I will limit the focus to just two discourse spheres: mass media and academic writings. The choice can be explained by the fact that mass media discourse, being aimed at the vast audiences, is highly evaluative and subjective by its nature. This is the type of discourse where irony is likely to occur. Contrary to the mass

media discourse, academic communication is the sphere that presupposes the least amount of subjectivity and evaluation, so irony is not something to be expected in scholarly writings. However, in reality one can come across ironic evaluation of alternative theories in academic articles and books. So, by looking at these two spheres the reader can get the idea of how irony functions in written discourse in modern Russia.

<sup>57</sup> Like elsewhere, Russian mass media produce and circulate a wide variety of content – from entertainment to news. The target audiences of mass media sources can differ greatly both in terms of quantity and interests. However, irony is possible to emerge in all kinds of mass media sources, aimed at both information and entertainment, with the intention to entertain as well as make serious social or political points amid the laughter.

<sup>58</sup> The following extract is the introductory part of the article about the official meeting of the Russian president with the Prime Minister of Italy published by the quality newspaper “Kommersant”.

<sup>59</sup> *(9) Накануне встречи с российским президентом премьер Италии Джузеппе Конте посетил выставку в «Экспоцентре». Выставка называлась «Мир кожи», и появление Джузеппе Конте в этом пространстве – а это ведь была к тому же не столько выставка, сколько выставка-продажа – могло показаться вычурным. Ну вот кто угодно, кажется, может оказаться в «Мире кожи», но только не премьер-министр Итальянской Республики Джузеппе Конте.*

<sup>60</sup> *Но, с другой стороны, почему нет, если его там ждут итальянские обувщики, чтобы пожаловаться на санкции, введенные итальянским правительством по отношению к России, и на то, что эти санкции стоили обувщикам, по их словам, уже сотни миллионов долларов. Санкции не самоцель, объяснял им премьер (а то они не знали), а способ решить возникшие проблемы. То есть итальянские парни, простые делатели и продавцы обуви, по идее, должны были приунуть: решить проблемы можно, видимо, лишь вернув Крым Украине, а это значит, что мир кожи в России и дальше будет для итальянцев шагреновым [А. Колесников. Борьба за мир во всем Риме. Коммерсант No. 196, 25 октября 2018].*

<sup>61</sup> *Before the official meeting with the President of Russia, the Prime Minister of Italy Giuseppe Conte visited an exhibition in the “Expocenter”. The exhibition was called “The World of Leather”, and the appearance of Giuseppe Conte in this place – especially given that it was not just an exhibition, rather, a trade fair – could look a bit pretentious. Well, it seems, anyone could be at the “World of Leather” exhibition, but not the Prime Minister of the Republic of Italy Giuseppe Conte.*

<sup>62</sup> *But, on the other hand, why not, if he is awaited there by the Italian shoe manufacturers who want to complain about the sanctions introduced by the Italian government against Russia, and to say that these sanctions have already cost the shoemakers of Italy hundreds of millions of dollars. The sanctions are not an end in itself, the Prime minister kept explaining (**as if they did not know that**), but a means of solving the problems. That is, the Italian folks who make and sell shoes, should, in principle, get gloomy: apparently, the problems can be solved, only if the Crimea is returned to Ukraine, and this means that the world of leather in Russia will remain*

*shagreen*. [A. Kolesnikov. *The fight for peace in the whole Rome*. *Kommersant*, No. 196, October 25th, 2018]

<sup>63</sup> The account of Putin's official meeting with Conte is written in a playful style with a range of intertextual references. The headline of the article simultaneously refers the readers to a popular slogan of the Soviet political discourse and to the theme of Russian-Italian contacts: the letters in the Russian word *мур* are swapped around and the name of the Italian capital (*Рум*) appears. At the beginning of the text the journalist expresses his ironic stance at least twice: firstly, he makes an ironic comment (*as if they did not know that*). The target of irony is the manipulative character of the official political discourse.

<sup>64</sup> The journalist uses yet another ironic intertextual reference to Balzac's novel *The magic skin* (*La peau de chagrin*). The irony emerges along with the implication that in reality sanctions greatly limit economic opportunities for both countries.

<sup>65</sup> Written *academic discourse* is the sphere of interaction in which irony did not use to be possible due to the requirements of impersonality and objectivity. However, in the past decades Russian scholarly writings have witnessed the emergence of irony despite existing stereotypes of academic communication being purely objective and emotionless expression of research findings. As the following examples demonstrate, irony comes handy when researchers need to convey their ideas and at the same time to criticize opponents' points of view.

<sup>66</sup> In the first example the author uses irony to downgrade the ideas expressed by her opponent:

<sup>67</sup> (10) *Вообще говоря, узнав, что А. Шмелев и не слыхивал о лингвокультурологии ..., мы преисполнились к нему чувства тоскливой зависти – совсем как столичный экзаменатор к урюпинскому студенту.*

<sup>68</sup> *Generally speaking, having learned that A. Shmelev has never heard about linguistic culture studies, we were filled with wistful envy – just like a metropolitan professor can envy a student from Uriupinsk [Pavlova, Bezrodny 2010].*

<sup>69</sup> The author clearly breaks with the requirements of academic style: her choice of words and comparison of her feelings to those of a metropolitan professor to the uninitiated provincial student are both subjective and emotional (to fully understand irony of the comparison one needs to know that Uriupinsk is a small Russian provincial town the name of which has become the symbol of hopeless provincial life). The writer criticizes her opponent by denigrating his status presenting him as a provincial student instead of treating him as an experienced researcher. The writer uses a variety of triggers to create irony in the passage: firstly, it's the choice of words which do not belong to the academic style. Secondly, it's the comparison itself, and, lastly, it's the reference to Uriupinsk that adds to the ironic tone of the text. Irony also marks the ongoing rivalry between the approaches pursued by the two scholars.

<sup>70</sup> It should be noted that until recently irony was not characteristic of Russian written academic discourse. Criticism was expressed explicitly (if at all). The emergence of irony in scholarly writings is a sign of changes in the scientific prose style – now it

allows for expression of personal stance and evaluation of alternative theories and approaches.

71

### *Irony in computer-mediated discourse*

72 Computer-mediated discourse is the mode of communication where irony functions as a verbal signal of competition and an implicit form of aggression. It emerges in both texts and dialogues as a reaction to important social issues. The following comment was posted in one of the social networks in a discussion of a paid parking in the centre of one of the big Russian cities:

73 *(11) Говорят, в городе пробок больше нет. То есть вообще. И улицы, бают в народе, широкія аки М4, и деревья выше и зеленее, и небо синее, и воздух - чистый кислород, слегка разбуроренный азотом. И люди такие все ходят за ручки, улыбаются и славят громогласно власть-матушку/батюшку, кормилицу и защитницу народную. Рассосались пробки лютые аки после сеанса Кашипировского. И за все спасибо платным парковкам и волевому решению чиновников, да.*

74 *They say, there are no more traffic jams in the city. That is, no more traffic jams at all. And the streets, the folks say, are wide like highways, and the trees are taller and greener, and the sky is blue, and the air is just pure oxygen diluted and muddled by nitrogen if only just a little. And all people are just, like, walking around by the hand, smiling and praising the motherly/fatherly city authorities, our fosters and people's defenders. And gone are the fierce traffic jams as if after the magician's performance. And thank you for everything, paid parking and the arbitrary decision of the officials, yeah.*

75 In a mock-folktale style the writer comments on the changes after the introduction of the new system of parking. The word order in the Russian text imitates the rhythm and syntax of the folktale, it includes collocations and hyperboles typical of the genre. The target of mocking are the official reports on the advantages of the newly introduced system of paid parking.

76 The next example is a blog post which appeared after yet another unsuccessful attempt of launching an artificial satellite by Roskosmos in 2013. The text is a parody of a traditional piece of news:

77 *(12) **Очередное достижение Роскосмоса** Многочисленная глубоководная группировка искусственных спутников Земли сегодня пополнилась новым аппаратом. 1 февраля в 10.56 по московскому времени ракетой-носителем «Зенит-3SL» в экваториальную зону акватории Тихого океана успешно погружен очередной спутник связи Intelsat-27.*

78 *На плавучей пусковой платформе «Одиссей» в честь данного события состоялся впечатляющий фейерверк, а в Центре управления полетами проведен ставший традиционным в таких случаях банкет комиссии по расследованию катастрофы.*

79 *Another achievement of Roskosmos* Today a multiple deep-water group of artificial terrestrial satellites increased its membership. On February 1<sup>st</sup> at 10.56 Moscow time the carrier rocket “Zenith-3SL” successfully drowned yet another communications satellite Intelsat-27 into the equatorial zone of the Pacific ocean.

80 In honour of this event an impressive firework display was launched from the launch platform “Odyssey” and by now a traditional banquet of the aircraft accident investigation board was held in the Mission Control Centre.

81 The title of the blog entry echoes the style of Soviet newspapers which wrote about positive facts and events. By using word play in the body of the text the author parodies official news style but in an absurd way: the failure is presented as a success. Non-trivial collocations intentionally disrupt coherence of the text and trigger ironic interpretation.

82 To sum up, research of humour and irony in Russia witnesses a wave of interest, since non-bona fide forms of communication play an important role not only in literature, but also in everyday interaction. A number of issues still need to be studied, e.g., the emergence of new genres of humour and the spread of ironic communication in new spheres of discourse, the influence of intertextual references on the ironic interpretation of the text, or the relation between different components in multimodal humour. At present, understanding Russian humour and irony often requires good cultural background and familiarity with ongoing events: as the examples of jokes and ironic dialogues and texts demonstrate, explanation of the non-bona effect requires references to realia, historical facts and cultural norms.

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#### Примечания:

1. In the transcripts below slashes demarcate the borders between intonation units.

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# Humour and Irony as research objects and as parts of everyday discourse in Russia

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## **Abstract**

The paper addresses the issues of humour and irony research by Russian scholars and the functioning of humour and irony in everyday interaction. The aim of the paper is twofold: firstly, it presents an overview of humour and irony research in modern Russian linguistics, anthropology, ethics and literary studies. Secondly, it describes functioning of humour and irony in Russian everyday spoken, written and computer-mediated modes of discourse to demonstrate the variety of their forms and conveyed social implications.

There is no single perspective that underlies existing approaches to non-bona fide forms of communication. In the Soviet Union, the use of humour and irony was largely controlled by the state. Therefore, there was a strong ideological influence on the research of non-bona fide genres and the choice of empirical data: researchers focused only on the “good examples” of humour taken from classic literary works. Also there was a strong tradition to use the terms humour, the comic, laughter, irony and satire as near synonyms, so sometimes it is not easy to draw a borderline between humorous and ironic discourses.

In the past decades spontaneous non-bona fide forms of discourse have attracted researchers’ attention. Among a variety of genres canned jokes (or anecdotes) is the most popular humorous genre. Instances of humour and irony can be found not only in written texts, but also in spoken and computer-mediated modes of discourse, and in all modes humorous and ironic utterances are used to convey social implications or challenge existing social norms.

**Keywords:** non-bona fide discourse, humour, irony, canned joke, criticism

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