

ON THE PRETENSE THEORY OF IRONY IN JONATHAN SWIFT’S “A MODEST PROPOSAL”

The present paper is an attempt to analyze “A Modest Proposal” by J. Swift in the light of the Pretense Theory of Irony suggested by H. P. Grice. In his pamphlet Swift uses irony and satire to raise alarming problems concerning the low class people in Ireland in the 18th century and the indifference of British political system. The paper is aimed at analyzing what kind of means and techniques the author applies in reaching his goal. The Pretense Theory of Irony perfectly describes why Swift turns to the use of irony to raise some neglected problems of the time.

Key words: *irony, satire, the Pretense Theory of Irony, proposal, “modest” approach, British politics*

“A Modest Proposal”, in full “A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to their Parents, or the Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick”, is an ironic essay by Jonathan Swift, published in pamphlet form in 1729 /www.britannica.com/. This essay belongs to the genre of political satire. The works of British authors at the beginning of the 18th century are full of hypocrisy and wrong orientation to deal with real problems, meanwhile Swift speaks about those problems using irony, humour and exaggeration. As Thomas Sheridan describes, Swift has strong hatred towards hypocrisy /Sheridan, 1787/, and this makes him face the harsh reality by making fun of it, or either showing its misery by dealing with it ironically.

“A Modest Proposal” contains strong messages on some political problems between Ireland and Britain in the 18th century submerged with irony. On the one hand, Swift really cares about the solutions of those problems. On the other hand, why does he choose to speak about them ironically, if he can just write about the miserable reality as it is and request the attention of the ones who are concerned? The answer seems reasonable if we consider the *Pretense Theory of Irony* suggested by Grice /1975, 1978/ and later discussed by Sperber and Wilson /1981/. Swift uses irony as a tool to speak about poverty and miserable conditions of the Irish low class. The main idea of the pamphlet is that Swift proposes to serve Irish poor children as food to the rich and enumerates several advantages that it would bring to the nation, and though this cannibalistic approach is too absurd and exaggerated, it is meant to attract people’s attention and break the wall of indifference towards that alarming reality. The current study discusses the ironic

messages in this pamphlet and tries to find how the Pretense Theory of Irony helps us to decode the underlying metessages of the essay. Moreover, similar political problems can also be found nowadays, and it is very important to face them as they are, so that not to speak about them using attention-snaring tools as irony and exaggeration.

“What is the ironist pretending to do?”, ask Clark and Gerrig in their study “On the Pretense Theory of Irony” /Clark, Gerrig, 1984: 121/. Etymologically the word irony comes from Greek *eirōneia* meaning “simulated ignorance,” from *eirōn* “dissembler” (www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com). *Dissembling* is synonym to *pretending* and as Grice states: “To be ironical is, among other things, to pretend (as the etymology suggests), and while one wants the pretense to be recognized as such, to announce it as a pretense would spoil the effect” /Grice, 1978: 124/. In his Dictionary of Modern English Usage Fowler hints that irony is a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsiders’ incomprehension. It may be denned as the use of words intended to convey one meaning to the uninitiated part of the audience and another to the initiated, the delight of it lying in the secret intimacy set up between the latter and the speaker /Fowler, 1965: 305-306/. Fowler’s idea of two audiences matches with Grice’s idea of irony as pretense and shows that the ironist speaks to two different audiences at the same time by pretending to say something meaning the opposite of that.

The Pretense Theory may be expressed as follows. Suppose S is speaking to A, the primary addressee, and to A, who may be present or absent, real or imaginary. In speaking ironically, S is pretending to be S speaking to A. What S is saying is, in one way or another, patently uniformed or injudicious, worthy of a “hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt” /Grice, 1978: 124/. A in ignorance, is intended to miss this pretense, to take S as speaking sincerely. But A, as part of the “inner circle” (to use Fowler’s phrase), is intended to see everything – the pretense, S’s injudiciousness, A’s ignorance, and hence S’s attitude toward S, A, and what S said. S and A may be recognizable individuals (like the TV weather forecaster) or people of recognizable types (like opportunistic politicians) /Clark, Gerrig, 1984: 122/.

The Pretense Theory reflects the reasonable use of irony for several features mentioned by Sperber and Wilson /Sperber, Wilson, 1981/.

1. *Asymmetry of affect*. An ironist is more likely to say “What a clever idea” of a bad idea than “What a stupid idea” of a good one. Why? As Jorgensen et al. /1984/ pointed out, people tend to see the world according to norms of success and excellence, as Pollyannas who view the world through rose-colored glasses /Boucher, Osgood, 1969/. People in ignorance should cling especially tightly to

these norms. In the Pretense Theory, this is just the sort of person ironists pretend to be. If so, they should be more likely to make positive pretenses, “What a clever idea!” than negative ones, “What a stupid idea!”

2. *Victims of irony.* Irony generally has victims. According to the Pretense Theory, they should be of two kinds. The first is S, the unseeing or injudicious person the ironist is pretending to be. The second is A, the uncomprehending audience not in the inner circle. Some ironies seem to make victims of S for their misjudgments, and others, of A for their uncritical acceptance of S. The mention theory cannot distinguish these two types of victims.

3. *Ironic tone of voice.* In pretense or make-believe, people generally leave their own voices behind for new ones. An actor playing Othello assumes a voice appropriate to Othello. An ironist pretending to be S might assume a voice appropriate to S. To convey an attitude about S, however, the ironist will generally exaggerate, or caricature, S’s voice, as when an ironist affects a heavily conspiratorial tone of voice in telling a well-known piece of gossip. Grice puts it as follows:

If speaking ironically has to be, or at least to appear to be, the expression of a certain sort of feeling or attitude, then a tone suitable to such a feeling or attitude seems to be mandatory, at any rate for the least sophisticated examples /Grice, 1978: 125/.

Sperber and Wilson, in arguing against Grice, interpreted him as assuming that the speaker would be using the words see what lovely weather it is in order to implicate its opposite – that the weather was foul. That would give the wrong analysis, as they pointed out, because the speaker doesn’t really mean for the hearer to believe she thinks the weather is lovely. The problem disappears, however, if she is assumed to be mentioning the words instead, as the Mention Theory proposes. But the problem also disappears if the speaker is assumed to be pretending to be a weather forecaster using those words /Clark, Gerrig, 1984: 123/. As Ryle said about pretense: “Actors in speaking their parts before the audience are not, strictly, using their words. They are not being defiant, remorseful, loving, or desperate, but only pretending to be so. Their utterances cannot be classified as either “use” or “mention” /Ryle, 1950: 339/.

With pretense, there is a natural account of the ironic tone of voice /Clark, Gerrig, 1984: 122/. Treated as pretense Swift’s irony in “A Modest Proposal” makes good sense. Swift is pretending to speak as a member of the English ruling class to an English audience. He expects his readers to recognize the pretense and to see how by affecting the pretense he is denouncing English attitudes toward the Irish /Clark, Gerrig, 1984: 123/. Swift mocks the English methods to deal with problems regarding Ireland and offers “solutions” to some really urgent problems

of the period when Ireland was immersed in poverty and the British influence was prevailing in the country. Swift commences the essay saying:

(1) *It is a melancholy object to those, who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads and cabin doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags, and importuning every passenger for an alms* (Swift, 1729, p. 1).

He is ironically concerned about the fact that those who may walk through Dublin cannot enjoy the great city and wants to find solutions continuing:

(2) *Whoever could find out a fair, cheap and easy method of making these children sound and useful members of the commonwealth, would deserve so well of the public, as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation* (Swift, 1729, p. 2).

Swift sarcastically pretends that his intentions are not confined to provide solutions only for the “professed beggars”. He believes that all children at a certain age should be useful to some extent. A child that has just been born is supported by milk, nourished and clothed by their beggar parents, while they simply may stop being “a burthen” to them and, instead, may be devoted to the noble occupation of being useful to the noblemen.

(3) *I propose to provide for them in such a manner, as, instead of being a charge upon their parents, or the parish, or wanting food and raiment for the rest of their lives, they shall, on the contrary, contribute to the feeding, and partly to the clothing of many thousands* (Swift, 1729, p. 2).

Another “advantage” proposed by Swift concerns the horrible experience of voluntary abortions. This is a vivid expression of pretense to be really concerned about that alarming problem, but in this case I am personally intended to think that Swift tries to mention about that issue as well, and here we deal with the *mention-use theory* of sarcasm. Both *Pretense* and *Mention* theories can be supported in this passage:

(4) *it will prevent those voluntary abortions, and that horrid practice of women murdering their³⁰ bastard children, alas! too frequent among us, sacrificing the poor innocent babes, Idoubt, more to avoid the expense than the shame, which would move tears and pity in the most savage and inhuman breast* (Swift, 1729, p. 3).

Swift’s “modest” approach is extreme and exaggerated. It follows the purpose to draw attention and exclaim about evident problems. The irony of pretending to be concerned about the feeding of the English landlords, meanwhile getting rid of beggars, is a way to shout out the urgency of finding solutions for the desperate situation. Swift “humbly” proposes his thoughts and offers them to public consideration.

(5) *I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasie , or a ragoust* (Swift, 1729, p. 4).

Nevertheless, a part of those children should be kept for breeding. According to Swift’s calculations “one male is sufficient to serve four females (Swift, 1729, p. 5). The rest can be offered in sale to the noblemen. Besides, he is “reasoning” that these children are seldom fruits of marriage.

The Pretense Theory of Irony is also reflected in a number of infamous calculations. Swift provides logical numbers that make a real sense from the point of view of mere numbers, but are horrible to think about. He computes that there are “an hundred and twenty thousand children of poor parents annually born” (Swift, 1729: 3) and ironically questions how these children are going to be suited and useful citizens in their country? He even goes further calculating how much they will weigh in a year so that they can make a “reasonable dish”.

(6) *I have reckoned upon a medium, that a child just born will weigh 12 pounds, and in a solar year, if tolerably nursed, increases to 28 pounds* (Swift, 1729, p. 5).

There are several “beneficiaries” of the proposal. On one hand there are the beggar parents, who will not have to bear the responsibility to take care of their mostly unwanted children, on the other hand there are those English noblemen who will have been given the “sheer” chance to have the diversity of dishes and will not have to be concerned to solve so many civil problems. There is also the third party, the great city Dublin itself. Swift ironically mentions the necessity of workplaces in the city, dragging another major issue into consideration.

(7) *As to our City of Dublin, shambles may be appointed for this purpose, in the most convenient parts of it, and butchers we may be assured will not be wanting; although I rather recommend buying the children alive, and dressing them hot from the knife, as we do roasting pigs* (Swift, 1729, p. 6).

To have a complete pretense of proposing his “ingenious” ideas Swift speaks about the advantages of his proposal point by point. He separates six major advantages classifying them of highest importance. For first:

(8) *As I have already observed, it would greatly lessen the number of Papists, with whom we are yearly over-run, being the principal breeders of the nation, as well as our most dangerous enemies, and who stay at home on purpose with a design to deliver the kingdom to the Pretender* (Swift, 1729, p. 8).

Swift touches upon the topic of Papists, which is an offensive term for Roman Catholics (www.vocabulary.com), and ironically pretends that they are the enemies of the nation and their only function is to deliver the kingdom to the Pretender,

Swift is even concerned by the inducement of marriages and “proposes” his strategy of achieving it, as many other countries do with refinements of laws and making severe penalties.

These are the major advantages, but Swift pretends to have many more extra ones that are of no less importance. For instance:

(14) *The addition of some thousand carcasses in our exportation of barreled beef: the propagation of swine's flesh, and improvement in the art of making good bacon, so much wanted among us by the great destruction of pigs, too frequent at our tables; which are no way comparable in taste or magnificence to a well grown, fat yearly child* (Swift, 1729, p. 10).

Swift “believes” that no one should object to his proposal as it provides so many solutions and advantages. He wishes the readers to understand that his “modest proposal” is not only for the commonwealth of the Kingdom of Ireland, but even of the Earth. Considering “the proposal” no one can talk of other expedients like:

(15) *Of taxing our absentees at five shillings a pound;*

(16) *Of using neither clothes, nor household furniture, except what is of our own growth and manufacture;*

(17) *Of utterly rejecting the materials and instruments to promote foreign luxury;*

(18) *Of curing the expensiveness of pride, vanity, idleness, and gaming in our women;*

(19) *Of introducing a vein of parsimony, prudence and temperance;*

(20) *Of learning to love our country, wherein we differ even from Laplanders;*

(21) *Of quitting our animosities and factions, nor acting any longer like the Jews, who were murdering one another at the very moment their city was taken;*

(22) *Of being a little cautious not to sell our country and consciences for nothing;*

(23) *Of teaching landlords to have at least one degree of mercy towards their tenants;*

(24) *Of putting a spirit of honesty, industry, and skill into our shopkeepers, who, if a resolution could now be taken to buy only our native goods, would immediately unite to cheat and exact upon us in the price, the measure, and the goodness, nor could ever yet be brought to make one fair proposal of just dealing, though often and earnestly invited to it* (Swift, 1729, p. 11).

Swift can think of no one objection, that will possibly be raised against this proposal, unless it should be urged, that the number of people will be thereby much lessened in the kingdom.

(25) *This I freely own, and 'twas indeed one principal design in offering it to the world. I desire the reader will observe, that I calculate my remedy for this one*

individual Kingdom of Ireland, and for no other that ever was, is, or, I think, ever can be upon Earth (Swift, 1729, p. 12).

This enumeration of expedients is the ultimate irony of pretense. Swift ironically counts the things that should not be executed by politicians and the noblemen in charge of the country, while in reality these are the very solutions he proposes. This is the real proposal that should be taken into account seriously. Here, *the Pretense Theory of Irony* works perfectly. It delivers messages to whom they may be concerned and offers real solutions to work out the problems of the poor citizens of “the great town” Dublin.

After all, Swift is not so violently bent upon his own opinion, as to reject any offer, proposed by wise men, which shall be found equally innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual. But before something of that kind shall be advanced in contradiction to his scheme, and offering a better one, he desires the author or authors will be pleased maturely to consider two points:

(26) *First, as things now stand, how they will be able to find food and raiment for a hundred thousand useless mouths and backs* (Swift, 1729, p. 12).

(27) *And secondly, There being a round million of creatures in humane figure throughout this kingdom, whose whole subsistence put into a common stock, would leave them in debt two million of pounds sterling, adding those who are beggars by profession, to the bulk of farmers, cottagers and laborers, with their wives and children, who are beggars in effect; I desire those politicians who dislike my overture, and may perhaps be so bold to attempt an answer, that they will first ask the parents of these mortals, whether they would not at this day think it a great happiness to have been sold for food at a year old, in the manner I prescribe, and thereby have avoided such a perpetual scene of misfortunes, as they have since gone through, by the oppression of landlords, the impossibility of paying rent without money or trade, the want of common sustenance, with neither house nor clothes to cover them from the inclemencies of the weather, and the most inevitable prospect of entailing the like, or greater miseries, upon their breed for ever* (Swift, 1729, p. 12).

Swift concludes his satire by appealing to the politicians and readers. He wants them to believe in the “sincerity” of his intentions and ideas.

(28) *I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in endeavoring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the public good of my country, by advancing our trade, providing for infants, relieving the poor, and giving some pleasure to the rich* (Swift, 1729, p. 13).

To sum up, Jonathan Swift’s “Modest Proposal” is a perfect example of using political satire to raise some alarming problems ignored by the ones who should be concerned to find real solutions. He achieves the desired effect by ironically pretending to offer solutions that, in fact, are extreme and non-human. Similar

political problems can also be found nowadays and the question is – should we be treating them with irony or talk about them as they are? *The Pretense Theory of Irony* explains how Swift dealt with those problems, but it does not provide the answers on how it helps to fight against the atmosphere of apathy towards them.

REFERENCE

1. Boucher J., Osgood C. E. The Pollyanna Hypothesis // *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, v. 8. Esevier, 1969.
2. Clark H., Gerrig R. On the Pretense Theory of Irony // *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, v. 113, № 1, 1984.
3. Fowler H. W. A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.
4. Grice H. P. Logic and Conversation // *Syntax and Semantics*, v. 3: *Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press, 1975.
5. Grice H. P. Further Notes on Logic and Conversation // *Syntax and Semantics*, v. 9: *Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press, 1978.
6. Jorgensen J., Miller G. A., Sperber D. Test of the Mention Theory of Irony // *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 113(1), 1984.
7. Ryle G. “If,” “So,” and “Because” // M. Black (ed.) *Philosophical analysis: A Collection of Essays*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell State University Press, 1950.
8. Sperber D., Wilson D. Irony and the Use-Mention Distinction // *Radical Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press, 1981.
9. Sheridan T. The Life of the Rev. Dr. Jonathan Swift. London, 1787.
10. Swift J. A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to their Parents, or the Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick, 1729 // URL: http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/30827_modestproposal.pdf.

INTERNET SOURCES

1. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/A-Modest-Proposal>
2. <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/The-Two-Pretenders/>
3. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/irony?q=irony>
4. <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/papist>

Հ. ԴԱՆԻԵԼՅԱՆ – «Հեզնանքի ձևականության տեսությունը» Զոնաթան Սվիֆթի «Համեստ առաջարկում». – Սույն հոդվածը փորձ է վերլուծելու Ջ. Սվիֆթի «Համեստ առաջարկը» Հ. Պ. Գրայսի կողմից առաջարկված հեզնանքի ձևականության տեսության լույսի ներքո: Իր պամֆլետում Սվիֆթը օգտագործում է հեզնանք և սատիրա բարձրաձայնելու ահազնացող խնդիրների մասին, որոնք վերաբերում են 18-րդ դարի Իռլանդիայում ցածր խավի խնդիրներին և բրիտանական քաղաքական համակարգի անտարբերությանը: Հոդվածում փորձ է արվում վերլուծել՝ ինչ միջոցներ է հեղինակը կիրառել իր նպատակը իրագործելու համար: Հեզնանքի ձևականության տեսությունը կատարելապես նկարագրում է, թե ինչու է Սվիֆթը դիմում հեզնանքի կիրառությանը բարձրաձայնելու ժամանակի որոշ անտեսված խնդիրներ:

Բանալի բառեր. հեզնանք, սատիրա, հեզնանքի ձևականության տեսություն, առաջարկ, «համեստ» մոտեցում, բրիտանական քաղաքականություն

А. ДАНИЕЛЯН – «Теория иронии как притворства» в “Скромном предложении” Джонатана Свифта. – Данная статья является попыткой проанализировать «Скромное предложение» Дж. Свифта в контексте предложенной Х. П. Грайсом теории иронии как притворства. В своём памфлете Свифт обращается к помощи иронии и сатиры, чтобы поднять волнующие проблемы, касающиеся малообеспеченных людей в Ирландии в 18-ом веке и безразличия британской политической системы. В настоящей статье рассматриваются средства и методы, применяемые автором для достижения этой цели. Теория иронии как притворства прекрасно иллюстрирует, почему Свифт обращается к использованию иронии для поднятии некоторых часто игнорированных проблем того времени.

Ключевые слова: ирония, сатира, теория иронии как притворства, предложение, «скромный» подход, Британская политика

Ներկայացվել է՝ 15.04.2020
Երաշխավորվել է ԵՊՀ Անգլիական բանասիրության ամբիոնի կողմից
Ընդունվել է տպագրության՝ 19.06.2020