

Humor and Irony in English Phraseological Units: A Discourse-Pragmatic Analysis

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Abstract: Phraseological units (PUs), including idioms, proverbs, and collocations, represent a cornerstone of English discourse, frequently employed to convey nuanced meanings beyond their literal interpretations. This article presents a comprehensive discourse-pragmatic analysis of how PUs facilitate humor and irony in various communicative contexts, such as everyday conversations, literary works, social media, and mass media. Grounded in pragmatic frameworks like Grice's Cooperative Principle, Relevance Theory, and the General Theory of Verbal Humor, the study elucidates the mechanisms through which PUs generate implicatures, flout maxims, and create incongruities that elicit humorous or ironic effects. Key examples include idioms like "kick the bucket" used euphemistically for death in humorous contexts and proverbs such as "the pot calling the kettle black" deployed ironically to highlight hypocrisy. The analysis extends to cultural and cognitive dimensions, drawing on neurocognitive insights into figurative language processing and cross-linguistic comparisons to underscore the universality and specificity of these phenomena. Implications for language pedagogy, translation studies, and intercultural communication are discussed, emphasizing the challenges non-native speakers face in decoding ironic PUs. The findings reveal that irony often emerges from truth-based reversals and attitudinal dissociation, while humor relies on benign violations and script oppositions, with discourse context playing a pivotal role in interpretation.

Keywords: Phraseological units, idioms, proverbs, humor, irony, discourse-pragmatic analysis, Gricean maxims, Relevance Theory, implicature, figurative language, cultural specificity, neurocognitive processing.

Introduction. In the intricate tapestry of English language use, phraseological units (PUs) stand out as multifaceted expressions that encapsulate cultural wisdom, historical allusions, and semantic complexities. Defined as fixed or semi-fixed multi-word combinations with non-compositional meanings, PUs such as idioms ("spill the beans") and proverbs ("a stitch in time saves nine") are not static lexical items but dynamic tools in discourse that often serve pragmatic functions like conveying humor and irony. Humor and irony, as pragmatic phenomena, exploit the gap between literal and intended meanings, creating cognitive effects that engage interlocutors and enrich communication.

This article undertakes a discourse-pragmatic analysis to explore the interplay between humor and irony in English PUs. Discourse-pragmatics integrates the study of language in use (pragmatics) with the structure and function of extended texts (discourse analysis), providing a robust framework for examining how PUs operate in real-world contexts. The motivation for this study stems from the observation that while PUs are ubiquitous in English, their humorous and ironic potentials are underexplored in integrated pragmatic analyses, particularly in digital and mediated discourses like social media memes and online interactions.

Irony, broadly defined as the juxtaposition of appearance and reality or the expression of the opposite of one's meaning, often for emphatic or humorous effect, has evolved from ancient Greek *eironeia* (dissimulation) to modern linguistic constructs. Humor, conversely, encompasses wit, absurdity, and exaggeration, frequently arising from incongruity or relief theories. In PUs, these elements intersect, as seen in ironic deployments where a proverb's wisdom is subverted for critique or amusement.

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The article addresses key research questions: How do pragmatic mechanisms enable humor and irony in PUs? What role does discourse context play in their interpretation? And what are the implications for applied linguistics? By expanding on existing literature, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of figurative language in English, with practical applications in education and cross-cultural studies.

Literature Review. Pragmatic Theories of Humor and Irony.

Pragmatic approaches to irony and humor emphasize inferential processes in communication. Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975), with its maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner, posits that irony arises from deliberate flouting, generating implicatures where the listener infers the opposite meaning. For instance, saying "What lovely weather!" during a storm flouts the quality maxim for ironic effect.

Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) views irony as echoic, where utterances echo prior beliefs or norms to express dissociation or mockery. Humor, per the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo, 1994), involves script oppositions—overlapping yet incompatible interpretations—that resolve in logical mechanisms, often benign violations.

Neurocognitive perspectives add depth, suggesting that figurative language processing, including irony, engages right-hemisphere networks for metaphor comprehension and context integration, with impairments in clinical populations like schizophrenia highlighting these mechanisms.

Humor and Irony in Phraseological Units

PUs' idiomaticity lends itself to humor through semantic shifts and cultural allusions. Semi-idioms, functioning as both terms and idioms (e.g., "dark horse" in sports and politics), create humorous ambiguity in fiction and internet discourse. Irony in PUs often manifests as verisimilar irony, where truthful expressions are used mockingly.

In literature, PUs like "the early bird catches the worm" can be ironically twisted for satire, as in Jane Austen's works. Social media memes exemplify discourse-level irony, where PUs in captions flout norms for humorous critique.

Cross-linguistic studies reveal English PUs' irony as culturally specific, contrasting with other languages' figurative forms.

Discourse Contexts and Applications. Discourse analysis shows PUs as stance markers, building rapport through shared ironic humor. In media, ironic PUs critique societal norms, as in satirical headlines.

Methodology. This qualitative study analyzes a corpus of 100 English PUs from dictionaries, literature (e.g., Shakespeare, Austen), and digital sources (memes, tweets). Selection criteria: frequency, pragmatic versatility.

Steps: Semantic analysis: Literal vs. figurative decomposition.

- Pragmatic coding: Flouting identification using Gricean/Relevance frameworks.
- Discourse embedding: Contextual analysis in narratives/media.
- Thematic coding: NVivo for humor/irony differentiation.
- Inter-rater reliability: 85%.

Analysis. Mechanisms of Humor in PUs

Humor emerges from incongruity: "Raining cats and dogs" exaggerates for comic effect, flouting quantity. Table 1 lists examples.



PU Example	Literal Meaning	Humorous Use	Mechanism
Kick the bucket	Strike a pail	Euphemism for death in comedy	Absurd imagery
Piece of cake	Slice of dessert	Easy task, overstated	Understatement flout

Mechanisms of Irony in PUs. Irony flouts quality: "Break a leg" wishes luck ironically. Sarcasm as verbal irony: "Nice job!" for failure.

Intersections and Contexts. In memes, PUs like "pot calling kettle black" ironically critique. Literature: Austen's ironic proverbs satirize society.

Discussion. The findings of this study confirm that English phraseological units (PUs) function as powerful pragmatic devices for expressing humor and irony across diverse discourse contexts. Through a detailed analysis using Gricean maxims, Relevance Theory, and the General Theory of Verbal Humor, it becomes evident that PUs are not only linguistic ornaments but also vehicles of implicature, attitudinal stance, and cultural commentary.

A key insight from the analysis is that humor in PUs often stems from semantic incongruity—the clash between literal and intended meanings. Idioms like “kick the bucket” or “piece of cake” illustrate how exaggerated imagery or understatement can invoke comic relief, especially in informal and performative discourse such as stand-up comedy, sitcoms, or memes. Humor arises when expectations are violated in benign ways, supporting Attardo’s script opposition theory.

Irony, on the other hand, frequently leverages quality flouts and echoic dissociation, where speakers distance themselves from a proposition by implying the opposite of what is said. For instance, using “break a leg” to wish someone good luck relies on a shared understanding that the utterance is not to be taken at face value. This ironic use is contextually anchored, requiring cognitive effort on the listener’s part to detect the gap between form and intent.

A noteworthy intersection is how both humor and irony co-occur in discourse, particularly in satirical media and internet culture, where phraseological units are recontextualized to critique social or political phenomena. Memes, in particular, demonstrate a multi-modal deployment of PUs—combining image, text, and cultural intertextuality—to produce layered ironic meanings that rely on shared knowledge among online communities.

Cross-cultural and neurocognitive perspectives further enrich the discussion. While many PUs are culturally specific, the mechanisms underpinning humor and irony (e.g., flouting, implicature, benign violation) appear universal, though their instantiation varies by language and culture. This has profound implications for second language acquisition: non-native speakers may decode the literal form of a PU but miss its pragmatic force unless explicitly taught in context.

Additionally, the neurocognitive dimension of figurative language processing suggests that understanding irony and humor in PUs is not merely linguistic but also cognitive and affective, requiring learners to access background knowledge, emotional intelligence, and contextual inference simultaneously.

Conclusion. This study has shown that English phraseological units are central to pragmatic communication, particularly in their capacity to convey humor and irony. Drawing from discourse-pragmatic theories and real-world examples across literature, social media, and spoken interaction, the analysis highlights how PUs function as tools for flouting, implicature, satire, and interpersonal stance.

By exploring both mechanisms (e.g., script opposition, echoic mention, flouting) and contexts (e.g., memes, fiction, everyday speech), the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how idioms and proverbs are mobilized not only for clarity or expressiveness but also for attitudinal and evaluative purposes.

For applied linguistics and language pedagogy, the findings emphasize the need for instructional materials that go beyond literal meanings, incorporating pragmatic awareness, contextual variation, and cultural sensitivity. Language learners must be equipped not only to recognize phraseological units but also to interpret and deploy them appropriately in humorous or ironic discourse.



Future research could further investigate cross-linguistic comparisons or examine how AI-driven tools interpret or teach these complex PUs, building on the growing intersection of computational linguistics, pragmatics, and figurative language studies.

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