

THE USE OF IRONY AS A FACE-SAVING STRATEGY IN THE MEMOIR 'I'M GLAD MY MOM DIED' BY JENNETTE MCCURDY

Deborah de Assis Torres
(UFPE)

INFORMAÇÕES SOBRE OS AUTORES

Deborah de Assis Torres é mestranda do Programa de Pós-graduação em Letras com ênfase em Linguística pela Universidade Federal de Pernambuco. Possui graduação em Letras - Inglês pela mesma universidade. Email: deborah.atorres@ufpe.br

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to examine how irony functions as a politeness strategy to preserve the protagonist's face in the best-seller memoir *I'm Glad My Mom Died* (2022) by Jennette McCurdy. To accomplish this, two excerpts are analyzed in light of the concept of irony stated by Hutcheon (1992, 1994), Spencer-Oatey's (2005) rapport management framework, and the types of faces discussed by Culpeper (2011). The samples illustrate the use of the aforementioned figured speech as a way of maintaining the face of the main character's face by preventing her from creating an inharmonious relationship with her mother. Therefore, irony is used as a tool to enhance the general storytelling experience by enabling the development of more complex characters and relationships between them. Finally, the research also indicates the value of utilizing literature as pragmatic data, as it allows a comprehensive analysis of linguistic concepts found that are seen in real-world situations as well.

RESUMO

Este artigo busca examinar o uso da ironia como estratégia de polidez a fim de preservar a face da personagem principal no best-seller *I'm Glad My Mom Died* (2022), escrito por Jennette McCurdy. Dessa forma, dois trechos são analisados à luz do conceito de ironia de Hutcheon (1992, 1994), do modelo de orientação de rapport de Spencer-Oatey (2005) e das categorias de face discutidas por Culpeper (2011). Os fragmentos observados ilustram a utilização da ironia como uma forma de manter a face da protagonista, evitando que ela crie uma relação desarmônica com a mãe. Portanto, a ironia é utilizada como uma ferramenta para enriquecer a experiência narrativa, permitindo o maior desenvolvimento de personagens e a criação de relações mais complexas entre os mesmos. Por fim, a pesquisa também aponta a importância da utilização da literatura como objeto de estudo pragmático, pois permite uma análise abrangente de conceitos linguísticos que também são encontrados em situações do mundo real.

KEY-WORDS

Politeness; Irony; Face; Rapport; literature.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Polidez; Ironia ; Face ; Rapport; Literatura.

INTRODUCTION

Literary texts can be seen as a corpus for pragmatic linguistics because they can be a useful tool to explore exchanges between characters, allowing the comprehension of how these texts might be understood by the readers (McIntire; Bousfield, 2017). That way, this study deals with irony and politeness in a contemporary memoir, the usage of the said rhetorical trope to the preservation of the author's face, and its effects on the narrative.

The book *I'm Glad My Mom Died* (2022) shows the journey of the actress Jennette McCurdy, from her childhood to her adult days, focusing on her relationship with her mother and the consequences of her mother's abusive behavior. That way, throughout the pages, she explores and copes with sensitive issues such as abuse, eating disorders, cancer, grief, religion, mental health, and the acting industry. The author, then, creates an innovative narrative that stands out in the celebrity memoir genre. As a result, the book sold out on its first day of release and topped the New York Times bestseller list for over 30 consecutive weeks.

As part of the memoir literary genre, the book is widely known for tackling difficult topics and mentioning people who could have felt exposed if done otherwise. However, the author manages to bring humor to balance its depth. The said humor is often located in dramatic situations, and irony is the main tool to cause this comic relief. Thus, it is suitable to pragmatically analyze the elements that take part in this narrative.

When reading the book, it is clear to the reader that the author leans on tools, such as humor and irony in order to lighten the weight of all she is going through, and, consequently, not expose herself as much. Hence, her true emotions are often hidden in jokes and sarcastic comments so that she does not need to admit the way she feels about distressing circumstances such as her mother dealing with cancer and later passing away, her struggle with eating disorders, and her finding out who her real father is. While using the mentioned mechanisms not to be vulnerable, she shows that she is still not ready to face these problems, and further on in the book, with the help of therapy and self-reflection, she allows herself to confront and come to terms with them. Hence, the narrator of *I'm Glad My Mom Died* uses Irony strategically to preserve her face while retelling her coping journey.

Consequently, the article employs qualitative documentary methods to examine excerpts from the book, with the aim of exploring the occurrence of irony, its underlying reasons, and how it contributes to character and plot development. In this sense, the research focuses on the protagonist's use of irony while answering the following question: why does she need to use irony as a tool to preserve her face?

Therefore, the main objective of this research is to investigate the reason for the usage of irony by the author to preserve face. To achieve this, two excerpts of the memoir are selected to analyze the usage of irony as a face-saving strategy. Besides, the kinds of irony used are also discussed along with how they operate to enhance the overall narrative.

Furthermore, this study provides a theoretical framework for contextualizing (1) the utilization of literary works as practical data; (2) theories of politeness (Spencer-Oatey, 2010; Culpeper, 2011); and (3) concepts of irony (Hutcheon, 1992, 1994). After that, the samples are then examined in accordance with the presented theory. In the final section, the conclusions reached through the analysis are explored and how further investigations can contribute to the matter.

1 LITERARY TEXTS AS PRAGMATIC DATA

In Linguistics, the use of data that was not produced naturally used to be the target of criticism by intellectuals. However, nowadays, it has become a common source of pragmatic analysis for providing practical and new insights into the field. Therefore, using literary texts as a subject for linguistic research provides many advantages such as having a limited data set and the presence of more complex discursive structures (McIntire; Bousfield, 2017).

Thus, pragmatic concepts can be applied to these often complex structures so it is possible to comprehend, then, how the narratives were built and how the readers might perceive them. Accordingly, Locher et al. (2023) state:

The fictional artefacts themselves should also be seen as dynamically created in the sense that their meaning, like utterances in a casual conversation, is essentially made up of the communicative efforts of the sender and the processing effort of the recipient. Recipients interpret utterances, and by extension entire fictional artefacts, against the context of their own cognitive backgrounds, their worldviews and their previous interactions in everyday exchanges, as well as in interactions with other fictional artefacts. (Locher *et al.*, 2023, p. 8)

In other words, the communicative acts must be interpreted by the reader as being part of an interaction as the ones that are naturally produced. Once again, it reveals that these kinds of texts are of great relevance to pragmatic analyses.

For that reason, literary texts are valid extracts of language worth being studied. Jucker and Locher (2017, p. 5) thus state that “fictional language is not seen as representative of language in general but as a variety of language that is sufficiently interesting in itself to deserve closer scrutiny.” In this sense, these texts not only are legitimate but also part of human interaction and that is why they are analyzed.

In consonance, the interaction between the narrator and reader should also be taken

into account in the same manner as the speaker and the hearer in other contexts. This happens because the “communication between the narrator and the reader in fiction can be compared to human communication, insofar as both are based on politeness, or, (...) on the mutual cooperation of its participants.” (Kizelbach, 2017, p. 426). So, the reader takes part in interaction, making their perception of the utterances a key point to conveying meaning.

2 POLITENESS

This study deals with the face-threatening acts theory that was first proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). According to the authors, the concept of face can be defined by the “public-self-image” that everyone in society has and tries to maintain. Consequently, it is an emotionally invested notion that is related to the idea of feeling ashamed or humiliated. Because of that, in an interaction, all participants' concern is to sustain each other's faces. Finally, the authors elaborate that “certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face” (Brown; Levinson, 1987, p. 65), the so-called Face Threatening Act (FTA).

However, Spencer-Oatey (2005) proposes a different framework for politeness studies, the concept of rapport management. She defines rapport as the “relative harmony and smoothness of relations between people, and rapport management refers to the management (or mismanagement) of relations between people.” (Spencer-Oatey, 2005). That way, rapport can be divided into several types according to the intention of the interaction: rapport-enhancement orientation, rapport-maintenance orientation, rapport-neglect orientation, or rapport-challenge orientation (Spencer-Oatey, 2005).

Furthermore, along with Spencer-Oatey's rapport framework, Culpeper (2011) elaborates on three kinds of faces: quality face, social identity face, and relational face. The first one encompasses a desire for evaluation regarding one's self-esteem. While the second one is the wish to be acknowledged and validated in a specific social role or group. Finally, the relational face covers the values that are effectively claimed for one's relationships with others.

In this regard, the study focuses on the concepts of rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2005) and face (Culpeper, 2011) to understand the ironic statements selected in *I'm Glad My Mom Died* (2022).

3 CONCEPTS OF IRONY

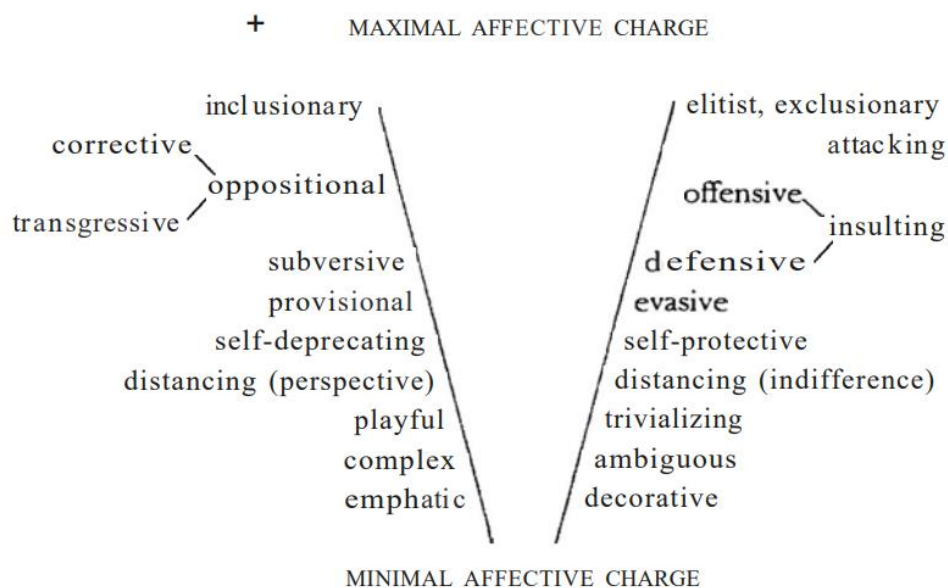
Brown and Levinson (1987) define irony as a violation of the Gricean maxim of quality (Grice, 1991) by expressing the opposite of what is meant. However, this idea is later considered limited by scholars who consider it to be a more complex interactional phenomenon:

It is more often a semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings - and doing so with some evaluative edge. It is also, however, a culturally shaped process. No theorist of irony would dispute the existence of a special relationship in ironic discourse between the ironist and the interpreter; but for most, it is irony itself that is said to create that relationship. I want to turn that around here, and argue instead that it is the community that comes first and that, in fact, enables the irony to happen. (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 85)

Hence, ironies are socially situated and consider more than just the opposite meaning of the speaker. According to Hutcheon (1994), its performative aspect is also considered, encompassing all the interactions between the parties, the ironist, and the process of text-making.

Moreover, ironies may carry out different functions according to the context, ironist intentions, and interactions. As specified by Hutcheon (1992), they can be classified in order of affective charge (i.e., critical edge) and in a positive and negative connotation, varying from empathic to inclusionary and decorative and exclusionary, respectively. In this regard, this research focuses on the self-protective function of irony which has a medium critical edge and is negatively coded.

Figure 1 - The functions of irony



Source: Hutcheon, 1992, p. 221

This function is intrinsically related to face theory since when leaving the responsibility for the listener to interpret, the speaker is less vulnerable. Self-protective ironies work by reducing the effect of what was said, as mentioned by Hutcheon (1992, p. 225): “You can protect yourself because you can always say: I was only being ironic. You can even make an error into a joke with that same line; you can certainly use it to get out of embarrassing situations.” Consequently, when using this kind of irony, the ironist's face will be preserved.

Based on this, the analysis is developed according to the theories shown above. This way, it is possible to illustrate how these concepts occur in the book *I'm Glad My Mom Died* and construct a narrative that deals with several sensitive topics.

4 ANALYSIS

In this section, two extracts from the book are analyzed in light of the theory indicated previously. To achieve this, the context of the book and each excerpt are presented, followed by the interpretation of the ironic utterance and, finally, its implications for the character's face and rapport.

The book chronicles the life of Jennette, the narrator, main character, as well as

author of the memoir. It is divided into two parts entitled “Before” and “After”, referring to the death of Jennette’s mother. The first part includes scenes from Jennette’s childhood and adulthood, focusing on her relationship with her mother, the development of her eating disorders, and her experiences as a child actor. While the latter deals with grief and her understanding of the abusive behavior her mother had toward her. Thus, the first sample to be analyzed was retrieved from the first section, and the second one from the last part.

Extract 1

I used to think going inactive was a terrible thing, a sin to be ashamed of. But maybe it’s not.

Maybe it’s a sign that things are going right. Maybe people go to church because they want things from God. And they keep going while they’re wishing and yearning and longing for those things. But then maybe once they get those things, they realize they don’t need church anymore. *Who needs God when you’ve got clear mammograms and a series regular role on Nickelodeon?*

I let her sleep and start memorizing my lines for Monday. (McCurdy, 2022, p. 149)

In the first excerpt, the reader sees Jennette doubting her mother’s decisions for the first time. She starts questioning the reason why people go to church and comes to the conclusion that it is because they are longing for a specific thing. Accordingly, she assumes it is what happens to her mother. Since she is not dealing with cancer and Jennette has a regular job that pays her bills, she does not need to go to church because she does not have anything else to ask for.

However, being an active member of the church is an important part of Jennette’s life, as can be seen in the following segment:

“We’re not gonna go inactive.”

“We’ll see.” Makaylah shrugs.

Even though I hate Makaylah and I desperately want her to be wrong, I fear that she might be right. If I really think about it, there are already a few signs. (McCurdy, 2022, p. 117)

Thus, in the excerpt, she tries to convince herself that it is not as important as she thought it was so that she does not go against her mother's judgment. That way, she assures herself that her mother knows what is best for her: booking a regular show, even though she never wanted to act and it was always her mother's wish.

In this manner, the irony of the utterance highlighted lies in her being disinterested in an act that is very important to her. Hence, it falls into the "distancing (indifference)" function of irony stated by Hutcheon (1992). As mentioned by the author, it implies "a refusal of engagement and involvement or can act as a means of control (...) a refusal of the tyranny of explicit judgments at a time when such judgments might not be appropriate or desirable" (Hutcheon, 1992, p. 223). Therefore, it confirms that she did not want to appear affected by her mother's decisions, so she shows indifference as a way of not engaging in an action she disapproves of.

In this context, there can be seen a rapport-maintenance orientation. As stated by Spencer-Oatey (2000), this kind of orientation concerns an effort to preserve harmonious relations and minimize rapport-threatening behavior. The mother threatens their rapport by not respecting the things that are important to Jennette, such as going to church. Thus, in order not to go against her mother's will, she gives up said action so that their relationship continues to be harmonious.

At the same time, the mother also threatens the protagonist's relational face. Throughout the book, Jennette mentions how important her relationship with her mother is, and she always tries to make her happy, even if it means doing what she hates and giving up the things she loves. Besides that, they often refer to each other as best friends, upholding their closeness beyond a mother-daughter relationship.

"Not my best friend though," Mom continues. "You're my best friend, Net. You're Mommy's best friend."

I beam. I'm so happy to be her best friend. To be the closest person in the world to her. This is my purpose. I feel whole. (McCurdy, 2022, p. 59)

Hence, in the excerpt, her relational face is threatened as her mother shows that she does not value her needs as much as Jennette does.

Extract 2

I get my phone case and we're out of there in five minutes. We head to a small café on the same level for lunch. I order a salad, dressing on the side to make Mom proud. I don't eat a single bite of it. I feel lucky, grateful

even, that trauma has finally resulted in my lack of hunger. *Sure, Mom died, but at least I'm not eating.* At least I feel thin and valuable and good about my body, my smallness. I look like a kid again. I'm determined to keep this up. I'm honoring Mom. (McCurdy, 2022, p. 220)

In the second sample, Jennette's mother has died, but she feels the need to honor her and not show how vulnerable she is at the moment. This happens because she still does not understand the abuse she went through when her mother was alive. Further in the book she mentions:

I had her up on a pedestal, and I know how detrimental that pedestal was to my well-being and life. That pedestal kept me stuck, emotionally stunted, living in fear, dependent, in a near constant state of emotional pain and without the tools to even identify that pain let alone deal with it. (McCurdy, 2022, p. 350)

Thus, in the extract, she does not want to show weakness after her mother's death and tries to say she is doing well, even though she feels helpless and went back to eating disorders. During her childhood and adolescence, her mother taught her calorie restriction diets that she should follow to become thinner and be accepted for children's television roles. That way, dieting culture and the eating disorder her mother put her through are heavily criticized in her memoir as she tries to heal from this condition, as can be seen in the following passage:

People don't seem to get that unless they have a history with eating disorders. People seem to assign thin with "good," heavy with "bad," and too thin also with "bad." There's such a small window of "good." It's a window that I currently fall into, even though my habits are so far from good. I'm abusing my body every day. I'm miserable. I'm depleted. And yet the compliments keep pouring in. (McCurdy, 2022, p. 236)

In this sense, in the sentence highlighted, she tries to find a positive side to a burdensome situation: her dealing with grief and eating disorders. Therefore, the irony happens because the thing she mentions as positive is a behavior that is criticized throughout the whole book, the eating disorder. Hence, irony has a corrective function in the utterance shown. According to Hutcheon (1992), this kind of irony is part of the oppositional category and is used to ironize something the author disapproves of by giving it a positive connotation. As a consequence, by making a corrective ironic statement, she criticizes her actions, even though at the time she could not let go of that

harmful behavior.

Moreover, there can be seen once again a rapport-maintenance orientation. Despite her mother's death, she still tries to cultivate a harmonious relationship with her. To do so explains that she is honoring her mother by acting in a way she would approve of and going against her values. That way, she still does not see how harmful these actions are as she comes to the realization further in the book:

My mom didn't deserve her pedestal. She was a narcissist. She refused to admit she had any problems, despite how destructive those problems were to our entire family. My mom emotionally, mentally, and physically abused me in ways that will forever impact me. (McCurdy, 2022, p. 350)

While uttering the irony, she maintains her mother's image as someone she always looks up to and continues to validate her opinions and actions. While using the sentence in *italic*, she is trying to preserve her relational face. Even though she knows her mother's actions were not healthy, she tries to maintain her relational face by not showing how affected she is by her mother's past behavior, keeping their relation harmonious. Therefore, she does not let herself see her mother differently and ratifies their peaceful relationship.

All in all, along the excerpts analyzed, the irony can be categorized as not only the ones mentioned above (distancing and corrective) but also as self-protective. This happens because while making the ironic statement, she wants to make herself appear less vulnerable (Hutcheon, 1992) and not affected by her mother's behavior, once again validating their rapport and maintaining her relational face.

Finally, the narrative is enriched by the use of the said rhetorical trope since it allows to create a complex relationship between the protagonist and the mother and gives the main character control over the narrative. When she decides to maintain their rapport, the narrator shows their bond's constant need for maintenance and distances herself from the problematic situations. In this manner, she asserts that she has the power of choice in that circumstance and does not show her weaknesses.

5 CONCLUSION

The primary goal of this research was to analyze the usage of irony as a politeness

strategy in the book *I'm Glad My Mom Died*. To achieve this, two extracts were examined in order to comprehend the types of irony, rapport management, and face that appear in the text. That way, the analysis demonstrates how these different elements work together to enhance the overall narrative by adding depth to the characters.

Additionally, it illustrates how irony can be found in literature and used to develop intricate character interactions. It happens because, whenever an ironic statement is uttered, it has the aim of preserving the main character's connection with her mother. By doing so, the writer conveys the complexity of their relationship, highlighting the need for constant one-sided effort to sustain a harmonious bond.

Finally, the study also reveals the importance of using literary texts as pragmatic data since it enables a thorough examination of linguistic ideas that are present in real-world contexts. Moreover, it would be worth looking into how other politeness strategies are presented in the memoir and in other books of the same genre. Besides that, future research would benefit from exploring symbolisms, metaphors and their interaction with irony and (im)politeness, expanding the present study. As a result, it would be possible to comprehend how politeness strategies take part in the creation of characters and their relationships, enhancing their narratives.

REFERENCES

BROWN, P.; LEVINSON, S. C. **Politeness**: some universals in language usage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

CULPEPER, J.; TERKOURAFI, M. Pragmatic Approaches (Im)politeness. In: CULPEPER, J.; HAUGH, M.; KÁDÁR, D. Z. (ed.). **The Palgrave Handbook of Linguistic (Im)politeness**. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. p. 11-39.

CULPEPER, J. **Impoliteness**: Using Language to Cause Offence. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

GRICE, P. **Studies in the way of words**. London: Harvard University Press, 1991.

HUTCHEON, L. The Complex Functions of Irony. **Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos**, Edmonton, v. 16, n. 2, 1992, p. 219-234.

HUTCHEON, L. **Irony's Edge**: the theory and politics of irony. New York: Taylor and Francis, 1994.

JUCKER, A. H.; LOCHER, M. A. 1. Introducing Pragmatics of Fiction: approaches, trends and

developments. **Pragmatics Of Fiction**, [S.L.], p. 1-22, 10 abr. 2017. De Gruyter.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783110431094-001>.

KIZELBACH, U. 14. (Im)politeness in fiction. **Pragmatics Of Fiction**, [S.L.], p. 425-454, 10 abr. 2017. De Gruyter. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783110431094-014>. Disponível em:

<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110431094-014/html>. Acesso em: 4 jul. 2023.

LOCHER, M. A. et al. **Fiction and Pragmatics**. [s.l.] Cambridge University Press, 2023.

MCINTYRE, D.; BOUSFIELD, D. (Im)politeness in Fictional Texts. In: CULPEPER, J.; HAUGH, M.; KÁDÁR, D. Z. (ed.). **The Palgrave Handbook of Linguistic (Im)politeness**. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. p. 759-783.

MCCURDY, J. **I'm Glad My Mom Died**. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022.

SPENCER-OATEY, H. Face, (Im)Politeness and Rapport. In: SPENCER-OATEY, H. **Culturally Speaking: culture, communication and politeness theory**. 2. ed. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000. p. 11-46.

SPENCER-OATEY, H. (Im)Politeness, Face and Perceptions of Rapport: unpackaging their bases and interrelationships. **Journal Of Politeness Research. Language, Behaviour, Culture**, [S.L.], v. 1, n. 1, p. 95-119, 1 jan. 2005. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/jplr.2005.1.1.95>.

Título em português:

O USO DA IRONIA COMO PROTEÇÃO DE FACE NO MEMOIR
'ESTOU FELIZ QUE MINHA MÃE MORREU' DE JENNETTE
MCCURDY