Fleabag: the use of irony as a face-saving strategy

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Abstract: This article aims to analyze the use of irony as a "Face-threatening Acts (FTA) minimizing strategy" to preserve the face of the main character and narrator of the TV series Fleabag (2016), by Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Two extracts were selected from the first season and they are analyzed in light of the concept of irony by Grice (1991) as the flouting of the maxim of quality and the face-saving model of the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987). The samples observed illustrate the use of the mentioned figured speech as a way of maintaining the face of the protagonist by preventing her from exposing the traumas regarding the death of her mother and best friend. Therefore, while controlling the narrative by directly addressing the audience, the main character attempts to manipulate her discourse through the ironic use of language as a way of preserving herself from publicly revealing the chaos of her real emotional status.

Keywords: Fleabag; Irony; Face; FTA; Preservation.

Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar o uso da ironia como uma "Estratégia de Minimização de Atos de Ameaça à Face (AAF)" a fim de preservar a face da personagem principal e narradora da série de TV Fleabag (2016), de Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Dois trechos da primeira temporada foram selecionados e são analisados à luz do conceito de ironia de Grice (1991) como uma violação à máxima da qualidade, e do modelo de preservação da face da teoria da polidez de Brown e Le Undergraduate student of English at Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE). This article was produced as a final work for the English VI: Semantics and Pragmatics course in October 2022, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Ricardo Rios Barreto Filho.vinson (1987). As amostras observadas ilustram o uso da mencionada figura de linguagem como forma de manter a face da protagonista, impedindo-a de expor os traumas relativos à morte da mãe e da melhor amiga. Assim, ao mesmo tempo em que controla a narrativa dirigindo-se diretamente ao público, a personagem principal tenta manipular seu discurso por meio do uso irônico da linguagem com o intuito de não revelar publicamente o caos de seu real estado emocional.

Palavras-chave: Fleabag; Ironia; Face; AAF; Preservação.

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1. Introduction

The article aims to analyze the use of irony and politeness in the comedy TV series Fleabag. This topic is analyzed through fragments from the British show. Accordingly, the study focuses on the incidence of irony, its motivation, and its purpose for character and narrative development.

With the increasing popularity of TV series, many of them have become the corpus of research in the pragmatic field due to their illustration of realistic dialogues and to the fact that this data is easier to acquire than naturally produced ones (Mcintyre; Bousfield, 2017). The chosen program shows an innovative way of conducting the narrative by directly addressing the audience during the episodes and, as a result, this strategy culminates into a deeper understanding of the main character's most intimate opinions. Additionally, the show has a remarkable plot that deals with life after a traumatic situation and its effects on someone's personal life. Based on that, the main character uses a number of rhetorical devices to create comic situations out of a dramatic background. Under these circumstances, it is relevant to pragmatically analyze the mechanisms that compound this unique narrative.

This TV comedy is based on a play by the same author, and it was originally produced by BBC in 2016 and has been distributed in Brazil on Prime Video, a streaming platform created by Amazon. During its two seasons, the audience follows the life and dilemmas of a woman trying to cope with the issues caused by some traumatic events. Throughout the episodes, Fleabag, the way in which the protagonist is addressed, will reveal her most feared and intimate thoughts while engaging in strange and comical interactions with the people in different scenarios. Through the series' unique narrative method, the public embraces the journey of a rather uncommon character that, despite the odds, attempts to find a way to deal with life and survive.

Certainly, after watching the series Fleabag, it is clear that the protagonist relies on tools, such as irony, in order to produce humor and thus protect herself from exposing a more vulnerable self. She often hides her feelings towards painful events, such as the passing of her mother and her best friend, showing the way she has decided to handle them. By refusing to talk about the problems in her life while constantly making fun of them, the character reveals that she is not ready to face the things she has been through and tries to convey an image that is not affected by those events. Hence, the main character of Fleabag uses irony to preserve her face from the audience.

It is crucial to note, then, the reason why she needs a face-saving strategy and the audience's usual reaction to the use of the said figure of speech. Consequently, there must be a need to analyze both the theory that surrounds the topic as well as excerpts from the TV show where this strategy is highlighted.

In this sense, the article is divided in four sections. The following topic, which is the theoretical framework, establishes the concepts that are used throughout the paper, such as irony, face-saving strategies, and humor. Then, the methodology section explains how the research was done. After that, the analysis shows the correlation between the theory

and the samples chosen to exemplify our thesis. Finally, in the conclusion, we discuss the thoughts that were drawn from the analysis and how further researchers can contribute to this field of knowledge.

2. Theoretical framework

The analyses will focus on the concept of irony presented by Grice (1991) regarding the violation of the maxims:

> [...] it is perfectly obvious to A and his audience that what A has said or has made as if to say is something he does not believe, and the audience knows that A knows that this is obvious to the audience. So, unless A's utterance is entirely pointless, A must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward. This must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he [the speaker] purports to be putting forward (Grice, 1991, p. 34).

Thus, according to the author, irony exemplifies a flout of the maxim of quality. Which means it disregards the truthiness of the information being shared during the interaction. Consequently, irony is a way of sharing a view of the world that does not match with the reality as it presents itself and, therefore, it allows the individual to enrich their ways of conveying the same message.

In addition, the receiver must rely on related propositions to successfully interpret the meaning. So, if the inferences produced are the result of an analysis that also relies on contextual information, then the receiver has to recognize the contrast between what is intended by the sender, the literal meaning, and the context. As a result, this complex movement might provoke a powerful and useful outcome: self-preservation.

According to the face-saving model of the Politeness Theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), every individual seeks to hold a "public-self-image" that is called "face". According to them, this concept is related to "notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, or 'losing face'. Thus, "face" is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to interaction." (Brown; Levinson, 1987, p. 61). Consequently, it is of interest to all parties in interaction to cooperate to maintain each other's "face".

Furthermore, that notion can be divided into two categories: "negative face: the want of every 'competent adult member' that his/her actions be unimpeded by others. positive face: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (Brown; Levinson, 1987, p. 62). That way, it can be understood that the first is concerned with one's wants to be free to do their actions, while the second deals with one's wanting to be accepted by other members of society. Hence, they express opposite ideas, but they do not carry a good or bad connotation, they simply imply a desire to break free and belong.

In this sense, still regarding the mentioned theory, some acts (intention when doing or uttering something) inherently threaten one's positive or negative face, the so-called Face-threatening Acts (FTA). So, an agent might use "FTA-minimizing strategies" in order to preserve their face. However, some FTAs are performed "off the record", when

> It is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act. In other words, the actor leaves himself an 'out' by providing himself with a number of defensible interpretations; he cannot be held to have committed himself to just one particular interpretation of his act. Thus if a speaker wants to do a FTA, but wants to avoid the responsibility for doing it, he can do it off the record and leave it up to the addressee to decide how to interpret it (Brown; Levinson, 1987, p. 211).

Therefore, when choosing to make a contribution that is open to several different interpretations and, thus, not effective, the speaker might violate Grice's maxims and may lead the hearer to an interpretation of the utterance that is not true.

An off-the-record strategy to promote face-saving behavior is the use of irony. As previously mentioned, by using this figure of speech, speakers can convey their intentions indirectly by uttering the opposite of what they mean and by using prosodic, kinesic, or contextual clues. Then, the spectator will be responsible for the interpretation (or misinterpretation) of the irony. In this manner, one of the functions of the use of irony is to self-protect the speaker, by attenuating the meaning of what is said or to self-depreciate them, to show oneself as less than they are, which will prevent the speaker from being vulnerable (Hutcheon, 1992, p. 225), and will consequently preserve their face.

Considering the premises explored in the previous paragraphs, the interpretation of irony may also reflect on the creation of humor due to the explicit incongruity acknowledged by the addressee of what was said by the sender and its context of use. So, "the relationship between humor and politeness is also an interesting issue. Early approaches [...] saw humor as a face-saving strategy" (Attardo, 2017, p. 9), the two elements - humor and irony - also relate in the sense of protecting one's more vulnerable side and, thus, preventing the individual from losing their socially built identities.

Within this framework, the concepts of irony and face-saving strategies are going to be used as a foundation to analyze the utterances chosen from the TV series Fleabag. In the following sections, we will focus on the reason for using this strategy, what can be implied from this act, and the effect it has on the audience.

3. Methodology

The study that will be presented is based on descriptive qualitative research. It has as its main focus the observation and analysis of the presence of irony and the effects of its use on the preservation of the main character's face in the TV series Fleabag, by Phoebe Waller-Bridge.

Firstly, the selection of this specific show derives from how the narrative is conducted and how the main character dialogues directly with the public and uses her discourse to shape the interactions while attempting to manipulate the happenings of the story. Therefore, we aimed at analyzing both language use and social behavior and the way in which these contribute to one another.

Secondly, for the study, we use data retrieved from the script of the first season, episodes 1 and 3. The mentioned segments were chosen based on (I) the mentioning of at least one of the most traumatic events in the life of the protagonist - the deaths of her mother and best friend, (II) the occurrence of irony according to the concept of Grice (1991) as the violation of the maxim of quality, and (III) its use as a face-saving strategy in light of the ideas regarding the face-saving model of politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987). Equally, the bibliography selected took into consideration the materials that dealt with the definitions and functions of irony, the concept of faces, and how they relate to one another in the sense of self-preservation. To conduct the analysis, we used both the script available in the book *Fleabag: the scriptures* (2019) by Phoebe Waller-Bridge and also the episodes from the first season available on Amazon Prime Video. Then, we chose the two examples that better illustrate our objectives.

Lastly, the methodological choices were made considering that the data analyzed would provide a deeper understanding of how irony was used as a face-saving strategy and how the excerpts observed would provide a microcosm of the whole production.

4. Analysis

In this section, we deal with the analysis of the samples selected. The first one was retrieved from the first episode (season one), in which, after a chaotic day that started with an awkward meeting between Fleabag and her sister, followed by a disastrous date and the recurrent memory of the main character's dead best friend, the protagonist decides to go to her father's house, as a momentary impulse, to find any kind of consolation in the middle of this emotional conflict. However, such as what had previously happened in her day, this encounter is also frustrating, and while coming back home, Fleabag starts sharing with the taxi driver the reasons why she currently runs a café on her own. The following excerpt shows the dialogue between the main character (Fleabag) and the taxi driver:

> DRIVER: A café eh?
> FLEABAG: Yeah.
> DRIVER: On your own?
> FLEABAG: Kind of.
> DRIVER: Kind of? Go on!
> FLEABAG: It's a funny story actually. (1)
> DRIVER: Oh that's good! It'll keep me going! Shoot. (2)
> FLEABAG: I opened the café with my friend Boo.
> DRIVER: Cute name.
> FLEABAG: Yeah. She's dead now. She accidentally killed herself. It wasn't her intention, but it wasn't a total accident. She didn't actually think she'd die, she just found out that her boyfriend fucked someone else and wanted to punish him by ending up in hospital and not letting him visit her for a bit. She

decided to walk into a busy cycle lane, wanting to get tangled in a bike, break a finger maybe. But as it turns out bikes go fast and flip you into the road. Three people died. (3) (Waller-Bridge 2019, p. 45).

The utterance in line (1) is used as an introductory strategy to categorize the type of information Fleabag is about to provide. However, the proposition encoded by her is incompatible with the situation of use, once the terrible story behind the suicide of one's best friend cannot be defined as "funny". Therefore, the contribution presented in (2) illustrates how the receiver wrongly guessed the sender's meaning because of the false information provided by the sender. Consequently, the driver even encouraged her to share the story since it was 'funny' and it would make them have a nice time. That leads to Grice (1991): while providing untruthful information, the main character violates the maxim of quality and, in this case, creates irony.

Equally, that violation is proved by excerpt (3) in which Fleabag finally tells her story, and the public is presented with a chaotic number of happenings that led to the death of not only her best friend but three other innocent people. The incidents described show how sad the story actually was and how traumatic it must have been for Fleabag since, as we get to know at the end of the first season, she was the one that 'caused' this fatal accident. Evidently, she attempts to preserve herself from exposing the pain caused by the trauma through the use of the self-protective mechanism of irony (Hutcheon, 1992).

In the first sample analyzed, the main character creates irony as an "FTA-minimizing strategy" to maintain her "public-self-image". Likewise, she explores the incongruity acknowledged by the interpretation of the utterance in relation to the context, having in mind the violation of the maxim of quality, to create humor that can also "be seen as a face-saving strategy" (Attardo, 2017, p. 9). Therefore, she builds an even more complex process of camouflage that prevents her from losing her face and finally admitting to the public, and even to herself, the sadness behind the events in her life.

The second segment was taken from the third episode (season one). The succeeding situation happens at the beginning of the chapter when the protagonist is jogging in the cemetery in which her mother was buried. After that, she meets her sister, Claire, and they start talking about things that remind them of their mother. Then, Claire's phone rings, and while she is answering, Fleabag, directly addressing the camera, 'xplains what happened to their mother. She has the following interaction with the audience:

> *Claire's phone rings.*
> CLAIRE: (to the grave) Sorry.
> (to Fleabag) Sorry.
> *She picks it up and walks away out of shot.*
> CLAIRE (on phone): Hello, Claire speaking…
> FLEABAG (to the camera): Mum died three years ago. She had a double mastectomy but never really recovered. It was particularly hard because she had amazing boobs. (1) She used to tell me I was lucky cos mine would never get in the way. (2)
> *Claire sits back down, her call over.*
> FLEABAG (to camera): My sister's got whoppers.

She looks at her sister's breasts.
FLEABAG (to camera): But she got all of Mum's good bits. (3) (Waller-Bridge, 2019, p. 101).

In this excerpt, she tells the audience directly what happened to their mother: she died of breast cancer three years earlier. Irony is used as a rhetorical device when delivering this tragic information about the characters. The utterance (1) says that the bad part of the whole traumatic event is the fact that "she had amazing boobs" and had to remove them. However, the audience as the hearer can imply that this information is untrue for it not being a usual response when commenting about one's death from breast cancer. Once again, she violates the Gricean maxim of quality when uttering it. Additionally, utterances (2) and reinforces (3) her initial narrative of presenting the double mastectomy as the worst part of the events she went through in the past, instead of what someone would expect of her mother battling the disease and dying of it.

That way, also in the third (3) part of the utterance, she belittles herself by saying that her sister got the best part and not her. Hence, it goes along with Hutcheon's (1992, p. 9) self-deprecating function of irony that is used to make one appear less vulnerable. Then, we can say that the idea of irony's self-deprecation and self-protection functions being "two sides of the same coin" (Hutcheon, 1992, p.9) also applies to the TV series, since the protagonist uses both simultaneously as a face-saving strategy.

All in all, the humor she tries to create through the said figure of speech is an attempt to hide her true feelings regarding the situation, once again, proving the concept of "humor as a face-saving strategy" (Attardo, 2017, p. 9). In that sense, as defined by Brown and Levinson (1987), during the analyzed interaction she attempts to preserve her face by using irony and thus not getting vulnerable by what she was previously saying, she brings the audience's attention to her comic trial in an unexpected context.

6. Conclusion

This article aimed to show how irony can be used as an FTA-minimizing strategy in the TV series Fleabag and the intention behind its usage. For that purpose, it was necessary to select and analyze extracts from the show where irony was used as a self-protection mechanism that allowed the protagonist to hide her true feelings from the audience and even herself.

As Woods (2019, p. 9) mentions, Fleabag is struggling to "make emotional connections necessary for an embrace of adulthood". This is shown in her face-saving acts through the use of irony to create humor and estrangement, be it to a client or the audience. The protagonist is, then, in a "constant ironic remove from her life" (Woods, 2019, p. 9), she is put in this estate when dodging her feelings instead of facing them. Consequently, she enables "emotional control and manipulation" (Woods, 2019, p. 9) of the narrative and only loses it at the end of the season, when she finally comes to terms with her traumas and unveils them to the viewers.

This analysis served to demonstrate how irony can be present and used in cinematographic narratives to create an elaborate character that deals with complex

emotional dilemmas that usually mirror people's real-life struggles. Furthermore, it shows how valuable TV series content is to academic discussions because they allow an in-depth study of linguistic concepts that are present in everyday situations. Finally, it would be interesting to investigate the incidence of irony as well as other figures of speech in this show and many others, along with their pragmatic reasoning as a way of analyzing their linguistic, social, and psychological motifs. That way, it is possible to understand how face-saving strategies not only are ubiquitous in everyone's lives but also are key points in the construction of characters in fictional narratives.

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