LITOTES IN EVERYDAY LANGUAGE

Djabbarova Z.R
ASIFL, researcher

Annotation: *The article is devoted to the investigation and comparison of different definitions of the stylistic device of litotes aiming at outlining the interrelation between the two main explanations, not always exactly fitting each other. The litotes is compared to the stylistic device of meiosis, having little difference in definition and functions. The task settled in the article is the usage of litotes in every day speech and possible meanings in social context.*

Keywords: *litotes; meiosis; definition; difference; stylistic devices.*

Аннотация: *Статья посвящена исследованию и сравнению различных определений стилистического значение литоты с целью очертить взаимосвязь двух основных объяснений, не всегда точно соответствующих друг другу. Литоту сравнивают со стилистическим приемом мейоза, имеющим небольшую разницу в определении и функциях. Задача, поставленная в статье, — употребление литоты в повседневной речи и возможные значения в социальном контексте.*

Ключевые слова: *литота; мейозис; определение; отличие; стилистические средства*

Litotes is more common in everyday speech than it is in literature, where examples of litotes are oftentimes so subtle that they go unnoticed. As with many types of figures of speech, litotes can be heard regularly in everyday speech. It is something which is often used during an informal conversation. We are now going to take a look at some examples of litotes being used in general conversation. Rarely heard, but extensively used - that is litotes among the regular speakers of English language.

Popularly a figure of speech, the word 'litotes' originated from the Greek word 'litos' which means simple. Litotes is defined as 'an ironical understatement in which affirmative is expressed by the negation of the opposite'. In this figure of speech, the usages are intentional, ironical and provide emphasis to the words. This is mainly done through double negatives. To put it in simple terms, in litotes, instead of saying that something is attractive, you say that it is not unattractive. In literary circles, plenty of poets as well as writers have used this concept to convey strange and vivid images. It changes the thought process and thereby beautifies and adorns the literary works.

Most of the literary works describe litotes in such a way that the words described are not false, but do not come near a complete description of the action in question. Rather, they are presented in a passive tone and demand more careful attention from the reader. Even figurative language use litotes to convey messages in a clear and impressive manner . Following are some of the commonly used litotes.

She's not the brightest girl in the class.
The food is not bad.
It is no ordinary city.
That sword was not useless to the warrior now.
He was not unfamiliar with the works of Dickens.
She is not as young as she was.
You are not wrong.
Einstein is not a bad mathematician.

The first known mention of litotes is in a letter from Cicero in 56 B.C. Cicero uses the word to mean simplicity (or frugality) of life. Over time, however, the meaning and the function of the word changed from 'simple' to the idea of understatement that involves double negatives, a way to state things simply. Litotes is also found in the New Testament to assert an affirmative by negating the opposite. In Acts 12:18, for instance, Luke says there was "no small commotion" among the soldiers over Peter's absence from prison. Old Norse had several types of litotes. These points are denied negatives -"She's not a terrible wife" meaning "she's a good wife" , denied positives - "He's not a great learner" meaning "he has difficulty learning" , creating litotes without negating anything, and creating litotes using a negative adjective - "Days spent in his home left him unenthused" meaning "he preferred to be out and about . [1]

Litotes can be used to establish ethos, or credibility, by expressing modesty or downplaying one's accomplishments to gain the audience's favor. In the book "Rhetorica ad Herennium" litotes is addressed as a member of The Figures of Thought known as deminutio, or understatement. It is listed in conjunction with meiosis, two other forms of rhetorical device . For example, a very accomplished artist might say "I'm not a bad painter," and by refraining from bragging but still acknowledging his skill, the artist is seen as talented, modest, and credible.

In looking closely at the use of litotes, we have learnt that it is used to convey an understated irony by using a double negative. By negating a word, we can add the required understatement. Litotes is used frequently in every day spoken language and we can see plenty of examples of its use in a literary context. Sometimes an unfamiliar ancient Greek word can mask a rhetorical device that's as commonplace as salt. One such device goes by the name of litotes – and you've been using it all your life, probably without even knowing it. If you've ever been asked if you like something and replied "it's not bad", you were using litotes. If you've ever found yourself encouraging someone to do something by telling them "it's not hard", you were using litotes. And if you've ever questioned someone's intelligence by describing them as being "not the sharpest tool in the box", you were using litotes then, too.[2]

When I first came across definitions of litotes, they made my head spin. For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "an ironical understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of its contrary". As you might have already gathered, litotes takes the form of a double negative. A positive statement like "it's good" is

transformed into its opposite, "it's bad", and then negated. So we end up with the litotes, "it's not bad". But what's the difference between something that's good and something that's not bad? Well, the first obvious difference is that litotes is a form of understatement. The speaker is implying that the thing is less than good; not quite up to the mark, in fact. So, "not bad" can be a euphemistic alternative to describing something more bluntly as "awful" or "rubbish". We often use litotes as a way to express criticism while, at the same time, trying to avoid hurting someone else's feelings.

Litotes, though, is not always as innocent as it looks; it can have a sting in its tail. At the beginning of this general election year, in a speech to the Fabian Society conference, Ed Miliband deployed the following litotes: "The problem is that under David Cameron we have a government who, far from turning things round, is making things far worse. Not by accident. But because they are guided by totally the wrong beliefs about how a country succeeds in the 21st century."[6]

By substituting the antonymous phrase "on purpose" for the word "accident", and turning the negative statement – "not on purpose" – into a positive one, we're left with the phrase "on purpose". Reverse-engineering the Labour leader's litotes in this way reveals that he's saying something altogether more polemical. Imagine the hullabaloo his speech would have caused if he'd accused Cameron's government of make things worse for people "on purpose". In this, instance, far from being an understatement, Miliband's provocative criticism hides itself in plain sight, behind a cloak of irony.

In November 2014, David Cameron made a speech on the potentially incendiary topic of immigration. And, like a man skating on a frozen pond on a sunny day, he proceeded with great caution: "We should be clear. It is not wrong to express concern about the scale of people coming into the country."[1]

He could have been more forthright and simply said: "It is right to express concern about the scale of people coming into the country." But he went for the more understated, euphemistic "it is not wrong". He used litotes to take the sting out of a highly divisive issue for both his party and the country. Litotes made a political hot potato just that bit cooler. And those on both sides of the immigration debate were able to find a crumb of comfort in what he said.

Litotes is best appreciated as a kind of rhetorical magician or illusionist. It can draw our attention to something – its badness, its difficulty, etc – while, simultaneously, emphasising its opposite. The quickness of the rhetorical hand deceives the mind's eye – now you see what's being meant, now you don't. Litotes enabled Ed Miliband to go on the offensive while keeping his powder dry; and it allowed David Cameron to disarm his opponents as he continued to set up camp in the no-man's-land that divides them. [3]

Litotes (e.g. not unhappy), usually described as negating the contrary of what is meant is a rhetorical figure that has been associated with understatement, attenuation, politeness and irony. Within this perspective, the meaning of litotes is analysed as an implicated evaluation that makes use of antonymic scales (happy - unhappy). Not unhappy is analysed as referring to the unexcluded middle: neither happy nor unhappy (attenuation). This again could be used to understate, meaning rather happy. This analysis

explains figurative meanings of litotes but disregards another use of litotic form: The mere negation of expectations. Thus, in the given context, you might think unhappy, but I say not unhappy. This denial of potential expectations could be analysed together with implicated evaluations within a coherent system of litotic meanings. A common grievance about litotes is that, since it avoids directness, precision, and clarity, it can obscure what the writer really means to say. For instance, in the sentence, "Ten thousand dollars is not an inconsiderable sum of money," the writer seems to avoid stating that ten thousand dollars is actually a considerable sum of money. The statement might come across as timid or coy rather than direct, which can be frustrating for readers.[5]

Similarly, negative statements in particular can lack clarity because, instead of affirming a truth, they simply negate a possibility. In other words, to say "She wasn't unhappy with her new car," if used as litotes, implies that the recipient of the car was, to some extent, happy. However it's unclear what her exact reaction was: was she just a bit happy, or ecstatic? Litotes, then, allows the speaker to avoid making statements with the precision of a statement in the affirmative such as, "She was thrilled by the car," or "She was surprised to get a car".

Some people argue that it’s a way of affecting psychological distance from the conversation topic. For example, if I say “Great job!” I’m demonstrating a genuine investment in the situation. I’m showing that I care and therefore making myself vulnerable. If I simply say “Not bad,” however, I maintain a safe distance from the situation and give the impression that I don’t really care that much. In our increasingly ironic society, where genuine commitment and investment are less and less common, litotes may well be on the rise. On the other hand, sometimes litotes can be a way of softening the impact of criticism. If you have to say that someone is doing a poor job at something, it may be less hurtful to say “you don’t excel at math” rather than “you’re terrible at math.” Depending on what’s being said, litotes might express modesty or arrogance, irony or sincerity, compassion or invective. [4]

Litotes’ ability to draw attention to something by appearing to ignore or diminish it is attractive to politicians because it’s the rhetorical equivalent of having your cake and eating it. Like its cousin apophasis, litotes is one of the stealth bombers of the rhetorical world – its anonymous ubiquity defies reason and gives it the power to strike at any time, without warning.

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