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A Study on the Interaction between Irony Rhetoric and Pragmatic Strategies in Social Media——Based on the Ciron Chinese Weibo Irony Dataset

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Abstract

In the digital era, social media has become one of the most important channels for public expression and interpersonal interaction. Weibo, as a representative social platform in China, carries a huge number of short-text comments, hot topic discussions, and daily emotional expressions every day. The language used in such online environments is often implicit, context-dependent, and rhetorically rich. Among various linguistic devices, irony stands out as a typical phenomenon that combines both rhetorical charm and pragmatic functions. Irony usually conveys implied attitudes through inconsistency between literal meaning and real intention, helping speakers express criticism, humor, or satire in a mild and indirect way. This study is based on the Ciron dataset, a publicly available and authoritative Chinese Weibo irony corpus, to explore the distribution of ironic expressions, the pragmatic strategies frequently used with irony, and the relationship between topic types and irony use. Through descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis, this study examines how irony operates as both a rhetorical form and a pragmatic tool. The results show that irony is more frequently distributed in hot social topics than in entertainment and daily topics, and irony is often combined with pragmatic strategies such as rhetorical questions, negation, exaggeration, and implicit evaluation. In addition, the use of irony follows basic pragmatic principles including politeness and relevance. This study enriches empirical research on Chinese irony, provides reliable data support for the integration of pragmatics and rhetoric, and offers a clear and practical framework for similar studies. The findings also help readers better understand implicit online expression, improve media literacy, and provide references for platform content governance and language teaching.

Keywords

Irony; Pragmatics; Rhetoric; Social Media; Weibo; Ciron Dataset

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of mobile internet and digital technology, social media has profoundly changed the way people communicate, express opinions, and participate in social discussions. Weibo has become one of the most influential online platforms in China, allowing users to comment on social events, share daily life, express emotions, and interact with others in a highly efficient and convenient way. The language used on Weibo is characterized by short length, strong context dependence, rich emotional expression, and frequent use of implicit rhetorical devices. Such linguistic features provide abundant and authentic materials for pragmatic and rhetorical research.

Among various linguistic phenomena in online communication, irony is widely used and highly representative. Irony is not only a rhetorical device that enhances expressiveness but also a pragmatic strategy that helps speakers achieve communicative goals safely and appropriately. Different from direct statements, irony transmits implied meanings through contrast between literal content and actual attitude. In many cases, irony is used to express mild criticism, gentle satire, which reduces the possibility of direct conflict and makes the expression more acceptable in public contexts. Therefore, the study of irony can reveal not only the rules of language use but also the psychological needs and communicative habits of online users.

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to irony in Chinese social media. However, early studies often relied on small-scale self-built datasets or individual examples, lacking unified, standardized, and publicly available corpus support. Many conclusions were based on subjective interpretation rather than systematic empirical analysis. The release of the Ciron dataset provides a high-quality, manually annotated, and publicly shared benchmark for Chinese irony research. Based on this authoritative dataset, this study conducts a comprehensive and reliable analysis of irony in real Weibo texts.

This study aims to answer three core research questions:

1. What pragmatic strategies are frequently combined with ironic expressions in Chinese Weibo ?

2. How do different topic types affect the distribution and frequency of irony ?

3. How does irony reflect the integration of rhetorical functions and pragmatic principles in online communication ?

Through systematic data analysis, this study attempts to clarify the pragmatic and rhetorical characteristics of irony, supplement empirical evidence for relevant theories, and provide practical implications for online communication understanding and training.

With the continuous expansion of online communication scenarios, the forms and functions of language use are constantly updated. Implicit expressions such as irony are becoming increasingly important in maintaining harmonious communication and expressing personal attitudes. Therefore, a systematic and data-based study on

irony is not only theoretically necessary but also practically valuable for both individual users and platform managers. This research takes the Ciron dataset as a solid foundation to ensure that all conclusions are based on real and credible language materials, avoiding the unreliability caused by artificial examples or small-scale data.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Pragmatics and Online Communication

Pragmatics is the study of meaning in context. It focuses on how speakers convey implied meanings and how hearers infer real intentions based on situational background, shared knowledge, and logical reasoning. Different from semantics, which focuses on literal meaning, pragmatics emphasizes the relationship between language and its users, as well as the appropriateness of language use in specific contexts. With the rise of online communication, pragmatics has been widely applied to the analysis of digital discourse, including short comments, chats, and public opinions on social media.

Online communication has obvious characteristics that differ from face-to-face interaction. It lacks facial expressions, intonation, and immediate feedback, so users tend to rely more on context and conventional pragmatic strategies to ensure accurate understanding. Politeness, implicitness, and context adaptation become particularly important in online environments. Users often choose indirect expressions to avoid unnecessary conflicts, especially when discussing sensitive or controversial topics. As a typical indirect pragmatic strategy, irony has thus received extensive research attention.

In online public opinion scenarios, language use is not only a tool for information transmission but also a means of emotional expression and attitude presentation. Users often adjust their discourse styles according to the topic sensitivity, audience composition, and communication atmosphere. Such adjustment reflects the application of pragmatic principles in real-time interaction. The widespread use of irony in social media provides a typical perspective for observing how people balance expressive demands and relational maintenance in limited textual contexts.

2.2. Irony as a Pragmatic and Rhetorical Phenomenon

Irony has long been a key topic in the fields of rhetoric and pragmatics. Traditional rhetorical studies regard irony as a figure of speech that expresses the opposite of the literal meaning. However, modern cognitive-pragmatic theories provide a deeper explanation. Sperber and Wilson propose that irony is an echoic mention of expectations, norms, or previous opinions, through which speakers convey implicit attitudes such as approval, criticism, or ridicule . This theory emphasizes the role of context and attitude expression, which has become one of the most influential frameworks in irony research.

Kreuz and Roberts point out that irony is closely related to negation and expectation violation. When reality is inconsistent with people's expectations, they tend to use irony to express dissatisfaction, disappointment, or ridicule. This perspective well explains why irony frequently appears in comments on social events. From a psycholinguistic perspective, Gibbs demonstrates that irony is more memorable and emotionally attractive than direct expression, which helps speakers convey attitudes efficiently. These theories together lay a solid foundation for understanding the nature of irony.

In the development of irony research, scholars have gradually shifted from pure rhetorical description to cognitive and pragmatic interpretation. Modern research no longer regards irony as a simple opposite-meaning device, but as a complex communicative activity involving context, inference, and attitude expression. This shift provides a more comprehensive perspective for understanding irony in social media, where information is fragmented and context is highly variable.

2.3. Pragmatic Functions of Irony in Social Media

With the popularity of social media, irony has gradually become an important linguistic phenomenon in online discourse. Wallace finds that irony is widely used in online comments because it reduces direct confrontation and improves interaction effects. Users are more willing to read, like, and reply to ironic comments because they are mild, implicit, and interesting. In online public opinion environments, irony helps users express positions safely without causing intense conflicts.

However, the understanding of irony depends heavily on context. Without sufficient background information, irony may be misunderstood. Therefore, skilled online users often combine irony with other pragmatic devices to enhance interpretability. Although existing studies have discussed the functions of irony, few have systematically explored the combination of irony and pragmatic strategies based on large-scale authentic Chinese datasets.

In cross-cultural comparison, irony shows different usage patterns in different languages and cultural backgrounds. In Chinese communication contexts, implicitness and euphemism are deeply rooted in cultural traditions, making irony more widely used in situations involving negative evaluations. However, relevant empirical research based on real Chinese corpus is still insufficient, which further highlights the necessity of this study.

2.4. Integration of Rhetoric and Pragmatics

Rhetoric focuses on the artistic effect and expressive forms of language, while pragmatics emphasizes the appropriateness and purpose of language use. In actual communication, the two are closely integrated. Oswald points out that rhetorical devices and pragmatic reasoning interact with each other to help speakers achieve ideal communicative effects. Irony is a typical example of such integration. As a

rhetorical device, irony enhances expressiveness; as a pragmatic strategy, it ensures appropriateness and politeness.

Despite the theoretical foundation, empirical evidence from real Chinese social media data is still insufficient. Most studies remain at the theoretical level, lacking data support from standardized annotated corpora. This study uses the Ciron dataset to fill this gap and provide empirical evidence for the integration of rhetoric and pragmatics in online communication.

The integration of rhetoric and pragmatics determines the effectiveness of language use in online communication. A good expression not only has rhetorical attractiveness but also meets pragmatic appropriateness. Irony, as a combination of the two, provides an excellent entry point for exploring the relationship between rhetorical forms and pragmatic functions. This study helps clarify the internal mechanism of such integration and provides a theoretical reference for related research.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1. Dataset: Ciron Corpus

This study uses the Ciron dataset, the first authoritative and publicly available benchmark corpus for Chinese irony detection. It was officially released at the 12th Language Resources and Evaluation Conference (LREC 2020) and has been widely recognized by international academic circles. The dataset is constructed by professional linguists and native speakers, with strict manual annotation ensuring high quality and consistency.

The Ciron dataset collects real Weibo posts covering multiple topics including hot social issues, entertainment news, daily life sharing, and emotional expressions. All data are desensitized to protect user privacy and comply with academic ethics. The dataset includes both ironic and non-ironic texts, providing a reliable basis for comparative analysis. By using this dataset, this study ensures the authenticity, objectivity, and credibility of the research.

The construction of the Ciron dataset follows strict linguistic standards. Each text is carefully screened and annotated by multiple annotators, and inter-annotator consistency tests are conducted to guarantee reliability. Such a standardized process makes the dataset widely used in Chinese irony detection and related research. Using this dataset, this study avoids the limitations of self-built data and ensures that research results are replicable and comparable.

3.2. Research Methods

This study adopts two simple, clear, and reproducible methods: descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis. Descriptive statistics are used to summarize the distribution of irony in different topic types, showing the relationship between topics and irony frequency. Content analysis is used to extract and classify

pragmatic strategies frequently appearing with irony, such as rhetorical questions, negation, exaggeration, and implicit evaluation.

The analytical process does not involve complex models or calculations, which makes the research transparent and easy to understand. All procedures follow academic norms, and the conclusions are based on real data, ensuring reliability and persuasiveness.

Descriptive statistics provide an intuitive overview of the distribution characteristics of irony, helping readers quickly grasp the overall pattern. Content analysis further reveals the internal structural characteristics of ironic expressions, especially the combination of irony and pragmatic strategies. The combination of the two methods ensures that this study has both macroscopic statistical support and microscopic qualitative interpretation, making the conclusion more comprehensive and convincing.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Distribution of Irony in Different Topic Types

Statistical analysis of the Ciron dataset shows that the distribution of irony varies significantly across different topic types. Ironic expressions are most frequently seen in hot social topics, relatively fewer in entertainment topics, and the least in daily life topics. This distribution reflects users' pragmatic choices in different communicative contexts.

Table 1. Distribution of Irony in Different Topic Types

Topic Type	Ironic Proportion
Hot Social Topics	High
Entertainment Topics	Medium-Low
Daily Life Topics	Low

Hot social topics often involve value differences, interest conflicts, and sensitive attitudes. In such contexts, users tend to avoid direct criticism to prevent confrontation, so irony becomes an ideal implicit tool. In comparison, entertainment and daily life topics are more relaxed and less controversial, so direct expression is more common. This result shows that users' language choices are highly adaptive to context, which is a core manifestation of pragmatic competence.

The high frequency of irony in social topics also reflects the public's attitude towards social events. When facing problems or contradictions, people tend to use mild and implicit ways to express dissatisfaction and criticism. Irony provides a safe channel for such expression, allowing users to voice their opinions without triggering intense conflicts. This function is particularly important in public online environments with complex participants.

4.2. Pragmatic Strategies Combined with Irony

Content analysis reveals that irony is often used together with specific pragmatic strategies to strengthen implicit expression and reduce misunderstanding. These strategies help audiences capture implied attitudes more easily.

Table 2. Common Pragmatic Strategies in Ironic Expressions

Pragmatic Strategy	Frequency Level
Rhetorical questions	High
Negation	High
Exaggeration	Medium
Implicit evaluation	Medium

Rhetorical questions do not aim for answers but guide readers to think and infer implied meanings. Negation enhances the contrast between literal meaning and real intention, making the ironic attitude clearer. Exaggeration amplifies emotional tendencies and strengthens expressive effects. Implicit evaluation avoids direct judgment and maintains a mild tone. These strategies work together with irony to form a complete and effective implicit expression system.

The frequent combination of irony and these pragmatic strategies indicates that ironic expression in Weibo is not random but follows relatively fixed structural patterns. These patterns improve the stability and interpretability of irony in online communication. Users master these implicit expression rules in long-term online interaction, enabling smooth communication even in the absence of face-to-face cues.

4.3. Pragmatic Principles Reflected in Irony Use

The use of irony follows fundamental pragmatic principles. First, irony follows the politeness principle, which reduces face threat and makes negative attitudes more acceptable. Direct criticism is usually regarded as impolite and may cause resistance, while irony softens the tone and avoids direct conflict. Second, irony follows the relevance principle proposed by Sperber and Wilson. The understanding of irony depends on contextual relevance. Hearers infer real intentions by connecting utterances with relevant background information. Without sufficient context, irony may be misinterpreted. Third, irony shows high context adaptability. Users choose whether to use irony according to topic sensitivity, audience characteristics, and communicative purposes. Such adaptability is crucial for successful online communication.

In Weibo's short-text environment, irony helps users transmit rich meanings in limited words. It improves expression efficiency while ensuring appropriateness, which explains why irony is so popular in online communication.

The application of pragmatic principles in irony use fully demonstrates that online communication is not a disorderly linguistic activity, but a rule-governed interactive behavior. Users unconsciously follow pragmatic principles when using irony,

ensuring that their expressions are both effective and appropriate. This discovery helps deepen the understanding of online language use and provides a theoretical basis for improving individual communication skills.

4.4. Emotional Orientation and Interpretive Characteristics

Most ironic expressions in the Ciron dataset carry negative or critical emotions, while a small proportion express humor or gentle ridicule. Very few ironic texts are used to convey positive praise. This shows that the core pragmatic function of irony in Chinese Weibo is to express implicit negative evaluations. Compared with direct complaints or accusations, irony is more moderate and euphemistic, making it more suitable for public expression.

The interpretation of irony requires readers to have certain contextual knowledge and pragmatic competence. Many ironic statements cannot be correctly understood only through literal meaning. Readers must combine event background, social norms, and common sense to infer the real attitude of the speaker. This interpretive feature makes irony an important indicator of online media literacy.

5. Discussion

5.1. Context Adaptability of Irony

The results confirm that irony has strong context adaptability in social media communication. Users consciously choose irony in sensitive and controversial topics to ensure safety and politeness, while using direct expressions in relaxed scenarios. This phenomenon reflects that online users have high pragmatic competence: they can flexibly adjust language forms according to contextual constraints and communicative goals.

Context adaptability is the key reason why irony is widely used in online communication. It balances expressive needs and relational maintenance, allowing users to convey attitudes clearly while avoiding conflicts. This characteristic makes irony an important strategy in public opinion expression.

In different cultural contexts, the context adaptability of irony shows different characteristics. In Chinese online environments, the emphasis on harmony and implicitness further strengthens the application of irony in sensitive topics. This study provides empirical evidence for context-based language choice and enriches the understanding of cultural influences on online communication.

5.2. Integration of Rhetoric and Pragmatics

Irony is not only a rhetorical device but also a pragmatic behavior. Rhetoric provides the structural form of irony, while pragmatics determines its appropriate use. The two dimensions are integrated and inseparable in real communication. This study provides empirical evidence for the integration of rhetoric and pragmatics, showing that rhetorical forms serve pragmatic functions and pragmatic principles

constrain rhetorical choices.

The findings support the view proposed by Oswald that rhetoric and pragmatics are mutually reinforcing in actual language use. Irony achieves both artistic expressiveness and practical communicative effects, which is a typical example of the integration of the two fields.

The integration of rhetoric and pragmatics reflected in irony provides a new perspective for discourse analysis. In future research, more linguistic phenomena can be analyzed from the dual perspective of rhetoric and pragmatics to reveal the internal laws of language use. This study establishes a replicable analytical framework based on real corpus, which can be extended to other rhetorical and pragmatic phenomena.

5.3. Cultural and Social Factors

Chinese cultural traditions value politeness, implicitness, and moderation, which further promotes the widespread use of irony. Chinese users prefer indirect expression to maintain interpersonal harmony, especially in public online environments. Such cultural characteristics make irony particularly suitable for Chinese Weibo communication.

Compared with Western platforms, Chinese social media relies more on implicit strategies to express negative attitudes. This study reflects the influence of cultural factors on language use and provides a basis for cross-cultural pragmatic research in the future.

Cultural factors not only affect the frequency of irony use but also shape its forms and functions. The combination of irony and pragmatic strategies observed in this study is deeply embedded in Chinese cultural and communicative habits. Understanding these cultural-linguistic characteristics is helpful for cross-cultural communication and online content management.

5.4. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study enriches empirical research on Chinese irony and provides data support for classic pragmatic theories including politeness and relevance. It verifies the applicability of these theories in real online contexts and promotes the development of pragmatic and rhetorical research.

Practically, the findings help platform managers better understand user expression habits and optimize content review mechanisms. For ordinary users, understanding irony can improve media literacy and reduce misunderstanding. For language teaching, this study provides real cases and practical rules to improve learners' pragmatic competence in online communication.

In addition, the findings of this study can be applied to public opinion guidance and emotional analysis. Recognizing ironic expressions helps accurately grasp public sentiment and attitude orientation, which is valuable for social governance and

platform management. The application of the Ciron dataset also provides a standardized data foundation for related applied research.

6. Conclusion

Based on the Ciron dataset, this study systematically analyzes irony in Chinese Weibo communication, including its distribution in different topics, its combination with pragmatic strategies, and its reflection of pragmatic principles. The results show that irony is most frequently used in hot social topics and is often combined with rhetorical questions, negation, exaggeration, and implicit evaluation. The use of irony follows the principles of politeness, relevance, and context adaptability, reflecting the integration of rhetorical functions and pragmatic needs.

The findings of this study also remind users that mastering implicit expressions such as irony is an important part of media literacy. In the era of information fragmentation, correctly interpreting and appropriately using irony can improve communication effectiveness, reduce misunderstandings, and promote more harmonious online interaction. As a typical linguistic phenomenon integrating rhetoric and pragmatics, irony will continue to be an important topic in online discourse research.

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