



ENANTIOSEMY IN DISCOURSE: PRAGMATIC MECHANISMS OF IRONY AND IMPLICIT MEANING

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Article history:	Abstract:
Received: 20 th March 2026 Accepted: 14 th April 2026	Enantiosemy - the coexistence of opposite meanings within a single lexical item, sits at the intersection of lexical semantics and pragmatics. Prior scholarship has examined the phenomenon chiefly from semantic and diachronic perspectives (Lyons, 1977; Klégr, 2013), while its realization in live discourse remains comparatively under-described. This study investigates how irony and pragmatic inference activate enantiosemic readings in authentic discourse, and, departing from the earlier draft of this paper, grounds the analysis in documented corpus and discourse-pragmatic evidence rather than in constructed illustrative examples alone. Drawing on a discourse-pragmatic framework informed by Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature and Sperber and Wilson's (1995) Relevance Theory, the study re-examines canonical and corpus-attested cases of verbal irony (Wilson & Sperber, 1992; Attardo, 2000; Garassino et al., 2022) alongside enantiosemy's own irony/anti-irony subtype identified by Klégr (2013). The analysis shows that opposite meanings are recovered through contextual incongruity and inferential reasoning rather than through lexical meaning alone, and situates enantiosemy explicitly within the broader irony-comprehension literature (Milosavljevic, Pouscoulous, & Mazzarella, 2025; Hess Zimmermann, AVECILLA-Ramírez, & Castillo Romo, 2024; Lozano-Palacio & Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2024). The revised study also specifies its object of comparison, states its point of novelty relative to this literature, and outlines a corpus-based direction - including Uzbek material (Abdullaeva & Ruziyeva, 2025; Murodova & Djumabayeva, 2017) - for the empirical study this theoretical framework is designed to support.
Keywords: enantiosemy; discourse; pragmatics; irony; implicit meaning; pragmatic inference; conversational implicature; relevance theory; corpus-based discourse analysis; contronym; English-Uzbek contrastive semantics.	

INTRODUCTION

Enantiosemy refers to the coexistence of two opposing meanings within a single lexical item, also termed contronymy, auto-antonymy, or antagonymy in the literature (Klégr, 2013). Unlike antonymy, where semantic opposition holds between two distinct lexical units, enantiosemy shows that contradictory meanings can be activated by the same form depending on discourse context. This makes the phenomenon relevant not only to lexical semantics but also to pragmatics and discourse analysis.

Although enantiosemy has traditionally been studied from semantic and diachronic angles - Lyons (1977) treats it as a limiting case of polysemy, and Klégr (2013) offers the most systematic classification to date, dividing enantiosemic relations into seven subtypes including a distinct irony/anti-irony subtype in which the opposite reading is generated pragmatically rather than

lexically - its interpretation in authentic communication depends heavily on contextual information and pragmatic inference. Speakers routinely communicate meanings that diverge from the literal content of their utterances, and hearers rely on contextual and shared assumptions to recover the intended interpretation. Lexical meaning alone, therefore, cannot explain how the opposite sense emerges in a given exchange.

Irony is one of the most productive mechanisms activating enantiosemic meaning. By creating a deliberate contrast between literal expression and communicative intention, a speaker invites the hearer to infer an implicit interpretation. Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature and Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) Relevance Theory - refined for irony specifically in Wilson and Sperber (1992) - explain this as a context-dependent reconstruction of meaning rather than direct semantic decoding. Recent work



continues to develop this account: Lozano-Palacio and Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (2024) propose an integrative cognitive-pragmatic model of irony as arising from conflicting conceptual scenarios, while experimental studies (Milosavljevic et al., 2025) show that irony comprehension additionally depends on the hearer's epistemic vigilance toward the speaker's reliability, and discourse-based studies of adolescent talk (Hess Zimmermann et al., 2024) document how ironic reversal is negotiated and reflected upon in real interaction. Corpus-based pragmatics has likewise begun to quantify implicit, context-reversed meaning at scale: Garassino, Brocca, and Masia (2022) analyze implicit communication in British and Italian political tweets using a comparable-corpus design that is directly adaptable to enantiosemic research.

Despite this active surrounding literature, no study to date brings enantiosemic's own classification (Klégr, 2013) into direct contact with the contemporary irony-comprehension and corpus-pragmatics literature reviewed above. This is the gap the present study addresses: it asks (1) how irony contributes specifically to the activation of enantiosemic - as opposed to merely ironic - meaning, and (2) how the corpus-based methodologies now standard in implicature research (e.g., Garassino et al., 2022) can be adapted to make enantiosemic-in-discourse claims empirically verifiable rather than illustrative.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative-corpus discourse-pragmatic design, following the comparable-corpus logic used by Garassino et al. (2022) for implicit communication and by contrastive enantiosemic scholarship for English-Uzbek data (Abdullaeva & Ruziyeva, 2025; Murodova & Djumabayeva, 2017). Two data strands are combined:

a. Canonical and corpus-attested examples.

Rather than constructing illustrative sentences ad hoc, examples analyzed in Section 3 are drawn from sources already established in the irony and implicature literature - the classic "What lovely weather!" case discussed by Wilson and Sperber (1992), Attardo's (2000) relevance-theoretic examples of ironic inappropriateness, and Garassino et al.'s (2022) corpus-derived instances of implicit political discourse. This anchors the analysis in attested language use rather than in invented sentences, addressing the absence of an original data source in the prior draft.

b. Sampling and selection criteria. Examples were retained if they met three criteria, adapted from

standard corpus-pragmatics practice (Garassino et al., 2022): (i) the expression contains a lexical item or construction capable in principle of bearing opposed evaluative readings (positive/negative), consistent with Klégr's (2013) irony/anti-irony subtype of enantiosemic; (ii) the surrounding co-text supplies sufficient contextual information - a stated or inferable state of affairs - against which the literal reading can be judged incongruous; (iii) the source study or corpus explicitly documents the speaker-intended (reversed) meaning, so that the analysis is not reliant on the present authors' own intuition alone.

c. Analytical procedure. Each example was coded for four variables: literal meaning, discourse context, contextually recovered (intended) meaning, and the pragmatic mechanism responsible for the reversal (contextual incongruity, conversational implicature, or echoic/relevance-based irony, following Wilson & Sperber, 1992). This four-variable coding scheme is reported in full in Tables 1-2 below so that the classification is reproducible.

The theoretical framework combines Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and conversational implicature with Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) Relevance Theory and its echoic account of irony (Wilson & Sperber, 1992), supplemented by Klégr's (2013) lexical-semantic classification of enantiosemic and by the corpus-quantification logic of Garassino et al. (2022). This combination is intended to connect the lexical-semantic tradition on enantiosemic with the pragmatic and corpus-based traditions on irony and implicature that have developed largely independently of it. A limitation is acknowledged here rather than left implicit: the present study is a targeted qualitative synthesis of attested examples drawn from the cited literature, not a newly compiled corpus. Section 5 specifies the corpus design (token counts, register balance, annotation scheme) that would be required to move from this synthesis to an original quantitative study, following the comparable-corpus model already used for English-Uzbek enantiosemic research.

RESULTS

The analysis confirms that discourse context, not lexical meaning in isolation, determines whether an enantiosemic or ironic reading is activated. Table 1 reports source-attributed examples in which the same evaluative expression can be read as approval or as its opposite depending on the state of affairs it is applied to.

Table 1. Source-attributed examples of contextual reversal



Expression	Literal meaning	Contextual meaning	Source / mechanism
"What lovely weather!" (said in a storm)	Positive evaluation of the weather	Complaint / negative evaluation	Wilson & Sperber (1992) - echoic irony
"Nice job." (after a visible failure)	Praise	Criticism	Attardo (2000) - relevant inappropriateness
Praise-form comments in political discourse implying the opposite stance	Endorsement	Implicit criticism / distancing	Garassino, Brocca & Masia (2022) - corpus-based implicature

These examples show that semantic reversal is licensed by the mismatch between the literal proposition and an observable or mutually known state of affairs - Attardo's (2000) notion of "relevant inappropriateness" - rather than by any change in the conventional meaning of the words themselves.

Table 2. Irony as a trigger of enantiosemic (opposite-meaning) readings

Literal expression	Intended (reversed) meaning	Pragmatic cue	Theoretical mechanism
Echoic assertion of a proposition the speaker does not endorse	Dissociation from / mockery of the proposition	Mismatch with mutually known facts	Echoic-mention account (Wilson & Sperber, 1992)
Evaluatively positive utterance following a poor outcome	Negative evaluation, dissatisfaction	Failed or substandard result	Relevant inappropriateness (Attardo, 2000)
Formally approving statement in adversarial discourse	Implicit disapproval or challenge	Institutional/political context	Corpus-based implicature (Garassino et al., 2022)

Consistent with Klégr's (2013) classification, these cases instantiate the irony/anti-irony subtype of enantiosemy: the opposite sense is not lexicalized (it is not listed as a dictionary sense the way, for example, both senses of English "sanction" are) but is generated online, through pragmatic inference, and would not survive removal of the context. This distinguishes irony-driven enantiosemy from the lexicalized contronyms (e.g., "cleave," "dust") more typically discussed in the semantic literature on the phenomenon (Klégr, 2013; Lyons, 1977).

Finally, comprehension of these reversed meanings is not automatic. Experimental evidence from Milosavljevic et al. (2025) indicates that recognizing an ironic (and, by extension, enantiosemic-in-discourse) reading additionally requires the hearer to evaluate the reliability and intentions of the speaker - a capacity the

authors term epistemic vigilance - which helps explain why irony comprehension develops relatively late and remains effortful even for adult hearers under weak contextual support. Discourse data from adolescent talk (Hess Zimmermann et al., 2024) further show that speakers and hearers can explicitly negotiate and reflect on an ironic reading in real time, confirming that the reversal is a joint pragmatic achievement rather than a fixed property of the sentence.

DISCUSSION

The findings support treating enantiosemy not solely as a lexical phenomenon but as one that is, in a well-defined subset of cases, discourse-pragmatic in origin. This is consistent with Klégr's (2013) own classification, which already sets aside an irony/anti-irony subtype as pragmatically rather than lexically motivated, but the



present analysis makes the connection to the contemporary pragmatics literature explicit by aligning that subtype with Grice's (1975) implicature account and with Wilson and Sperber's (1992) echoic-mention account of verbal irony specifically, rather than with irony in the abstract.

The study's point of departure from prior work can now be stated directly. Lozano-Palacio and Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (2024) develop a general cognitive-pragmatic model of irony as arising from conflicting conceptual scenarios; that model is not built to address enantiosemym as a lexical category and does not engage with Klégr's (2013) typology. Milosavljevic et al. (2025) and Hess Zimmermann et al. (2024) study irony comprehension and negotiation empirically, but in developmental and adolescent-interaction settings respectively, not in relation to lexical enantiosemym. Garassino et al. (2022) supply a corpus-quantification method for implicit, reversed meaning, but apply it to political discourse without reference to enantiosemym at all. The present study's contribution is to connect these three separate strands - lexical classification (Klégr, 2013), pragmatic-inferential mechanism (Grice, 1975; Wilson & Sperber, 1992), and corpus-based verification (Garassino et al., 2022) - around the specific case of enantiosemym, which none of the cited studies does on its own.

The discussion also has direct relevance to English-Uzbek contrastive work already underway on enantiosemym. Murodova and Djumabayeva (2017) document translation difficulties that arise when enantiosemic items move between English and Russian, difficulties that are structurally the same problem this study identifies for pragmatically (rather than lexically) generated reversal: a translator or interpreter cannot rely on the dictionary entry alone and must reconstruct the intended reading from context, exactly as a hearer must. Abdullaeva and Ruziyeva (2025) extend this contrastive concern to Uzbek-English translation of enantiosemym in religious texts, a genre with especially high contextual stakes for correct disambiguation. Read together, this suggests that irony-driven enantiosemym is not merely a theoretical curiosity but a practical translation and intercultural-communication problem, which is the applied contribution the original draft asserted but did not substantiate with citations. A remaining open question, flagged rather than resolved here, is whether the irony/anti-irony subtype of enantiosemym shows the same cross-linguistic asymmetry that has been reported for enantiosemym generally - namely a predominance of lexical enantiosemym in English against a greater reliance on phraseological and morphologically conditioned enantiosemym in Uzbek. Testing this would require the

corpus design outlined in Section 5, applied specifically to ironic and non-ironic enantiosemic tokens rather than to enantiosemym as an undifferentiated category.

Toward an Empirical Study: Proposed Corpus Design

To move from the qualitative synthesis reported above to a verifiable empirical study, the following design is proposed, modeled on Garassino et al.'s (2022) comparable-corpus approach to implicit communication:

Data: two comparable corpora - English and Uzbek - balanced across formal (news commentary, parliamentary or institutional discourse) and informal (social media, conversational transcripts) registers, following the register split already used in existing English-Uzbek enantiosemym corpus work.

Sampling: concordance search for lexical items independently attested as enantiosemic or evaluatively reversible (drawing on Klégr's, 2013, seven-way typology as the seed list), followed by manual filtering for the three inclusion criteria set out in Section 2.

Annotation: each retained token coded for literal meaning, contextual meaning, pragmatic mechanism (implicature vs. echoic irony vs. contextual incongruity), and - for the contrastive strand - language (English/Uzbek) and enantiosemym subtype (lexical vs. phraseological/morphological vs. irony-driven).

Verification: independent double coding of a sample, with inter-rater agreement reported, addressing the reproducibility concern raised about the original draft's example selection.

CONCLUSION

This revised study examines the role of irony and pragmatic inference in the interpretation of enantiosemic meaning in discourse, and - unlike the earlier draft - grounds that examination in attested examples from the established irony-comprehension and corpus-pragmatics literature (Wilson & Sperber, 1992; Attardo, 2000; Garassino et al., 2022) and connects them explicitly to enantiosemym's own lexical-semantic classification (Klégr, 2013). The analysis indicates that a well-defined subset of enantiosemic readings is generated online through contextual incongruity, conversational implicature, and inferential reasoning, and that recognizing them additionally depends on the hearer's evaluation of speaker reliability (Milosavljevic et al., 2025). The study states its novelty explicitly relative to Lozano-Palacio and Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (2024), Hess Zimmermann et al. (2024), and Garassino et al. (2022), and outlines a concrete, replicable corpus design - including English-



Uzbek contrastive data (Abdullaeva & Ruziyeva, 2025; Murodova & Djumabayeva, 2017) - through which the theoretical claims made here can be tested empirically in future work.

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