Chapter 2
Sarcasm and Irony as a Political Weapon:
Social Networking in the Time of Crisis

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ABSTRACT
The chapter investigates the use of sarcasm and irony at the time of on-going political and social crisis in Ukraine. It analyzes examples collected on popular Russian and Ukrainian social networks in 2014 that stood out as especially creative, original, or successful in achieving their communicative goals. Ironic statements are usually characterized by pretence and by echoing (lexical, genre, and conceptual) and display the speaker’s dissociative attitude to the opinions or evaluations expressed in the utterance. Sarcasm and irony present several benefits for those who employ it, such as increased memorability and creation of the self-image as a witty person knowledgeable about the current events. Sarcasm and irony are used both to mock and offend the opponents by exposing their viewpoints unworthy of an earnest response and to strengthen in-group bonding through expressing the shared opinions. Despite the fact that sarcasm and irony are indirect modes of communication, in many cases they appear to be more effective than straightforward messages.

INTRODUCTION
In the winter of 2013/2014, a political and social crisis erupted in the Eastern European country of Ukraine. The revolution that replaced the Ukrainian government in February 2014 split the country into pro- and anti-western factions and produced, among other effects, an explosion of linguistic creativity. Many of the texts and slogans used in the conversations devoted to the conflict and targeted at the opposing side exhibit the characteristics of sarcasm and irony. This paper will analyze the nature of these communicative techniques and their functions in the politicized communication surrounding the current conflict.
This project grew out of a personal quest to find unsolicited, uncensored information about the events. This goal often led to spending a considerable amount of time on social networking websites. Consequently, this study focuses on irony in the medium of online social networks. Unlike the majority of literature devoted to the study of irony, which uses artificial examples and short exchanges that leave context reduced and ambiguous (some exceptions include Bryant & Fox Tree, 2002; Myers Roy, 1981; and Kotthoff, 2003), the work presented here is based on the samples of real online conversations and authentic posts regarding the conflict in Ukraine that were taken from actual social network websites.

The material largely comes from the posts on a popular Russian-speaking site Odnoklassniki.ru (Classmates) with occasional examples found in other locations after following links pasted in the comments on Odnoklassniki. The website is used both by Russian and Ukrainian citizens and speakers. The examples used in this paper are mostly translated from Russian, though occasionally there is a Ukrainian sample or a mixed-code expression where both languages are present.

The posts often originated in such user groups as “AntiMaidan and we are millions, Truth and God are with us!” and “Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the Heroes of Maidan!” The collection started with joining the groups on Odnoklassniki.ru that contained the words “Maidan” (the name of the central square in the capital, Kyiv, which gave its name to the protest movement) or “Anti-Maidan” in the titles of the groups, and then the membership extended to other groups whose posts commented on the current events.

The number of posts grew exponentially between the winter and summer of 2014 but decreased around the time that the conflict escalated to military actions. At this time, verbal fights appeared to lessen while people switched to physical and military fighting. Therefore, the majority of the examples used in this paper were collected between March and August of 2014.

Because of the complicated situation with ethnic and national identification of the discourse participants and the multifaceted nature of the conflict in the south-east of Ukraine, a few issues need to be clarified. The authors of posts and comments included in this paper (according to the information in their profiles) come from both Russia and Ukraine, and their nationality does not predict their viewpoint on the issue: some Russian nationals express pro-Ukrainian, anti-Russian views, and some citizens of Ukraine may express opinions that could be labelled pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian. In reality, these people do not denounce their respective countries, but the division comes down to either supporting or rejecting the current reforms and changes in Ukraine. For example, the residents of the south-east territories of Ukraine who have been called “pro-Russian” in the media do not hate their homeland; they do, however, disagree with the results of the revolution, largely fuelled by the forces from the western part of the country, and refuse to accept their new government as legitimate.

Therefore, this paper will avoid such labels as pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian but will use the identifications most commonly used by the discourse participants themselves – namely the South-East or the Western Ukraine and pro-Kyiv and anti-Kyiv – to denote acceptance or rejection of the reforms. Another common method of identification is by the use of “Maidan,” the name of the central square in Kyiv, where the revolution of 2014 originated: the supporters of the revolution will be identified as pro-Maidan and their opponents as anti-Maidan.

The examples in this paper come from both pro- and anti-Maidan groups indiscriminately, and their choice was dictated by how typical they were rather than by the side they supported. The examples that appear in this paper are not used to make a political statement but to illustrate the linguistic strategies utilized by communicators in the discourse under analysis.

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