

PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF METAPHOR AND SATIRICAL HUMOUR IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

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This article examines how metaphor and satirical humour work pragmatically in war journalism, using a focused corpus of *The Economist* texts on the war in Ukraine. The study asks three questions: (1) which metaphorical frames dominate the selected coverage, (2) how satirical humour is integrated into those frames, and (3) what communicative effects these choices generate for the reader. The analysis combines pragmatic-stylistic close reading with discourse-functional categorization. The theoretical framework integrates Gricean implicature, Relevance Theory and Conceptual metaphor analysis. The material includes 27 articles of *The Economist* coverage on the war in Ukraine, from which 15 high-salience cases were selected for detailed interpretation. The findings show that metaphor and satirical humour do not function as decorative language: they structure interpretation and guide stance. Five recurring pragmatic functions are identified: delegitimising hostile actors and sanction-evading practices; compressing complex geopolitical processes into cognitively economical schemas; assigning agency and responsibility in negotiations; mobilising solidarity and resilience under infrastructural stress; and calibrating scepticism toward diplomatic optimism. Particularly frequent are source domains of game, weather, commerce/brand logic, predation/hunting, and mythic personification. Satirical humour tends to appear in strategically brief, high-impact segments manifesting itself through ironic naming, incongruous analogies, and dark humour and thereby increasing cognitive effect while preserving journalistic density. The article argues that in mainstream war reporting, satirical humour is most effective when embedded in metaphorical framing rather than deployed as explicit ridicule. Such hybrid framing both informs and evaluates, shaping how readers infer urgency, credibility, and moral asymmetry.

ПРАГМАТИЧНІ ФУНКЦІЇ МЕТАФОРИ ТА САТИРИЧНОГО ГУМОРУ В МЕДІАДИСКУРСІ

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Ця стаття досліджує, як метафора та сатиричний гумор прагматично функціонують у воєнній журналістиці, спираючись на цільовий корпус текстів The Economist про війну в Україні. Дослідження ставить три запитання: (1) які метафоричні фрейми домінують у відібраному висвітленні, (2) як у ці фрейми інтегрується сатиричний гумор і (3) який комунікативний ефект вони створюють для читача. Для дослідження використовувався метод контент аналізу та метод дискурсивно-функціональної категоризації. Теоретичну базу становить інтеграція Грайсової теорії імплікатур, Теорії релевантності та аналізу концептуальної метафори. Матеріал охоплює 27 статей журналу The Economist про війну в Україні, з яких для детальної інтерпретації відібрано 15 найбільш показових прикладів.

Результати показують, що метафора і сатиричний гумор не є декоративними засобами: вони структурують інтерпретацію та спрямовують оцінну позицію. Виявлено п'ять повторюваних прагматичних функцій: делегітимація ворожих діячів і практик обходу санкцій; компресія складних геополітичних процесів у когнітивно економні схеми; приписування відповідальності в переговорних процесах; мобілізація солідарності й стійкості в умовах інфраструктурного стресу; а також калібрування скепсису щодо дипломатичного оптимізму. Особливо частотними є домени-джерела «гра», «погода», «комерція/логіка бренду», «хижацтво/полювання» та «міфічна персоніфікація».

Сатиричний гумор зазвичай з'являється у стратегічно коротких, високоефектних фрагментах, проявляючись через іронічне найменування, неконгруентні аналогії та «чорний» гумор, що підсилює когнітивний ефект зберігаючи при цьому насиченість журналістського матеріалу. Дослідження стверджує, що у висвітленні війни сатиричний гумор найефективніший тоді, коли він вбудований у метафоричне фреймування, а не подається як відверте висміювання. Таке гібридне фреймування одночасно інформує й оцінює, впливаючи на те, як читачі роблять висновки про нагальність, достовірність і моральну асиметрію.

Introduction. War reporting in high-prestige media is rarely neutral in a strictly linguistic sense since even highly analytical journalism uses evaluative framing to orient readers in morally and strategically complex situations. In such contexts, metaphor and satirical humour are not peripheral ornaments but pragmatic instruments that shape inferencing, stance attribution, and reader alignment. This is especially visible in coverage where military, diplomatic, infrastructural, and economic dimensions intersect and where audiences must process information uncertainty quickly.

Recent Ukrainian scholarship has significantly advanced the pragmatic and stylistic study of satire in media discourse. Studies have demonstrated satire's dual architecture, where "real" and "mythic/

fictional" dimensions interact through stylistic triggers and contextual inferencing (Юрчишин & Матіяш-Гнедюк, 2024). Another work has defined satire as a tool of mass communication combining linguistic and extralinguistic means (Юрчишин & Щербюк, 2025), and has shown that language play and phraseological creativity intensify both criticism and humour through relevance-driven interpretive effort (Юрчишин & Гарбера, 2025). Earlier analyses identified pragmatically significant satirical methods and textual techniques in British media discourse (Yurchyshyn, 2021; Юрчишин, 2021a; Юрчишин, 2021b). A cognitive account of intertextual satire further clarified the role of conceptual blending and multi-context processing (Doichyk et al., 2024).

However, a narrow gap remains: much research focuses on explicitly satirical outlets such as *Private Eye* magazine, while less attention is given to mainstream analytical outlets where satire is more restrained and integrated into hard-news framing. This study addresses that gap by examining *The Economist's* articles covering the topic of war in Ukraine. The corpus contains maritime sanctions reporting, wartime infrastructure narratives, and ceasefire diplomacy narratives, all of which provide rich material for pragmatic analysis of metaphor-satire interaction.

The study's aim is to identify the pragmatic functions of metaphor and satirical humour in this corpus and to explain how these functions operate in relation to reader interpretation. The objectives are: 1) to classify recurrent metaphorical frames in the selected coverage; 2) to identify where and how satirical humour appears within those frames; 3) to map the pragmatic effects such as implicature, stance alignment, responsibility framing, resilience signalling and scepticism calibration.

Material and Methods. The empirical material includes 27 articles of *The Economist* coverage on the war in Ukraine, from which 15 high-salience cases were selected for detailed interpretation. The material covers three macro-themes: sanctions and “shadow fleet” oil shipping narratives, Russian attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure and urban humanitarian strain and ceasefire/security-guarantee diplomacy narratives. This thematic spread is methodologically useful because it allows comparison of metaphorical and satirical strategies across security, humanitarian, and negotiation contexts.

This study adopts an integrated pragmatic-cognitive-stylistic framework to explain how metaphor and satirical humour construct evaluative meaning in *The Economist's* coverage of the war in Ukraine. First, the analysis uses Gricean pragmatics (Grice, 1975; Grice, 1991) to model implicature, indirectness, and stance construction in satirical statements where literal and intended meanings diverge. Second, Relevance Theory (Wilson Sperber, 1995) is applied to account for how compressed, stylistically marked formulations such as ironic headlines, compact metaphorical cues increase interpretive effort while producing stronger contextual and cognitive effects for the reader. Third, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and political-rhetorical metaphor analysis are used to classify source-target mappings and trace their framing potential in political journalism.

The analytical procedure consisted of four stages: 1) articles were collected through continuous sampling, after which metaphorical and satirical-humorous markers were annotated; 2) each marker

was interpreted in its local co-text and broader narrative environment, with attention to implicature, irony, and evaluative positioning; 3) markers were coded by pragmatic function for example, delegitimation, responsibility attribution, resilience mobilisation, following established qualitative content analysis; 4) coded cases were compared to identify recurrent framing patterns and stable function clusters.

Fifteen high-salience fragments were selected for close analysis as prototypical instances. Selection criteria were recurrence, functional clarity, and representativeness across macro-themes.

Results and Discussion. Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975; Grice, 1991) explains how evaluative meaning can be communicated indirectly: journalists may keep the literal layer formally neutral while guiding readers toward critical inferences through implicature. His classic formulation “make your conversational contribution such as is required by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange” (Grice, 1991: 45) captures this mechanism: meaning is jointly constructed against shared expectations, not only decoded from explicit wording. In satirical or irony-tinged reporting, this allows stance to be projected through lexical choice, register contrast, and strategic understatement. Relevance Theory (Wilson Sperber, 1995) clarifies why such formulations are efficient under crisis-information pressure: as Sperber and Wilson put it, “human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance.” (Wilson Sperber, 1995: 610). So metaphorical-humorous cues in war coverage can be treated as relevance-optimizing signals as they reduce processing effort while producing strong cognitive and evaluative effects.

Lakoff and Johnson's core proposition “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 5) grounds source-target mapping analysis. Charteris-Black extends this cognitive account into rhetorical framing, showing that metaphor in political discourse also builds persuasive narratives and myths rather than merely decorating language (Charteris-Black, 2011). Simpson's satirical discourse model then specifies how humour becomes pragmatically operative: “the dissonance between the domains of prime and dialectic creates an interpretative pragmatic framework for satire.” (Simpson, 2003). Recent Ukrainian works directly supports this dual dimensional reading, describing satire as characterized by “marked duality” between real and mythic/intertextual spheres (Юрчишин & Маріяш-Гнедюк, 2024) an especially productive lens for analyzing restrained satire in mainstream outlets such as *The Economist*.

The empirical material demonstrates stable and recurrent interactions between *metaphor*, *satirical humour*, and *pragmatic framing* in mainstream war journalism. A key observation is that figurative markers are not decorative: they repeatedly perform *argumentative work* by assigning agency, signalling evaluation, compressing causal complexity, and calibrating reader affect. This supports a discourse-pragmatic view of war reporting where interpretation is guided through strategically optimized cues rather than through explicit meta-commentary alone (Semino, 2008; Simpson, 2003; Yurchyshyn, 2021).

The corpus reveals a stable set of source domains that structure interpretation across different macro-themes (sanctions, diplomacy, infrastructure strikes, military adaptation). 1) **Game/sport** (“*the ball is now back in Russia’s court*”); 2) **Weather/disaster** (“*a perfect storm*”); 3) **Predation/hunting/fishing** (“*slippery vessels... in Western nets*”); 4) **Commerce/brand** (“*platinum-standard*” guarantees; “*equivalent of McDonalds*” for military standardization); 5) **Mythic personification and moralized labeling** (“*the Grinch*”, “*treasure ships of odious regimes*”); 6) **Infrastructure as life-system** (“*Catastrophe comes in stages*”). These frames do three things at once: compress complexity,

cue evaluation, and prepare inferential pathways. In pragmatic terms, they reduce processing costs while preserving strong cognitive effect (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

These patterns align with conceptual metaphor research showing that source domains in political journalism are selected not only for intelligibility, but for normative directionality (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Charteris-Black, 2011). In pragmatic terms, they reduce processing effort while increasing interpretive payoff that is precisely relevance-theoretic balance between effort and cognitive effect (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

We have singled out the following pragmatic functions performed by the metaphors used in these serious analytical articles:

1. Delegitimation and moral asymmetry. A coherent cluster of expressions “*the Grinch*”, “*flags of confidence men*”, “*treasure ships of odious regimes*” constructs an explicit asymmetry between norm-observing and norm-violating actors. This is not merely negative vocabulary: these forms activate culturally loaded scripts (villainy, fraud, predation), which invite the reader to infer not only legal ambiguity but ethical deviance. In Simpson’s terms, this is satirical targeting through a gap between expected norm and represented practice (Simpson,

Table 1

Recurrent frames, illustrative markers, and dominant pragmatic effects

Recurrent frame	Typical corpus markers	Dominant pragmatic effect
GAME / SPORT	“ <i>the ball is now back in Russia’s court</i> ”, “ <i>Plan A / Plan B</i> ”, “ <i>pursuing a two-track strategy</i> ”, “ <i>engineers were still racing to avoid disaster</i> ”, “ <i>Russia knocked out its thermal power plant</i> ”	Agency allocation; responsibility sequencing; speed competition against time
WEATHER / DISASTER	“ <i>a perfect storm</i> ”, “ <i>Catastrophe comes in stages</i> ”; “ <i>steal Mr Parmenov’s thunder</i> ”, “ <i>stoking panic</i> ”, “ <i>The capital seems a few steps away from a disaster.</i> ”	Risk intensification through causal compression
PREDATION / HUNTING	“ <i>slippery vessels to land in Western nets</i> ”, “ <i>flags of confidence men</i> ”, “ <i>Bring out the search light</i> ”, “ <i>the treasure ships of odious regimes are being hunted</i> ”, “ <i>Loopholes are closing, which will drag more tankers into the net.</i> ”	Delegitimation of sanctions evasion; framing enforcement as pursuit
COMMERCE / BRAND	“ <i>equivalent of McDonalds</i> ”, “ <i>platinum-standard</i> ” guarantees, “ <i>a second-best assurance</i> ”, “ <i>Mr Trump’s ‘Board of Peace’</i> ”, “ <i>business deals will ensure a future peace holds</i> ”, “ <i>pocket territorial concessions</i> ”.	Institutional scaling logic; prestige signalling with ironic distance
MYTHIC PERSONIFICATION / MORALIZED NAMING	“ <i>the Grinch</i> ”, “ <i>treasure ships of odious regimes</i> ”, “ <i>they are often greeted as gods</i> ”, “ <i>they become lightning-rods for public anger</i> ”, “ <i>fraudsters offering fake flag certificates</i> ”	Moral stigmatization; asymmetry between norm and violator
INFRASTRUCTURE AS LIFE-SYSTEM	“ <i>People hope we will deliver light</i> ”, “ <i>the wiring, strained by surges</i> ”, “ <i>paralysing the system</i> ”, “ <i>patching burnt-out connections</i> ”, “ <i>municipal engineers drained the system</i> ”	Humanization; empathy mobilisation; civic resilience framing

2003). Recent studies on satire similarly demonstrate that evaluative force in media satire is often carried by implicature-rich lexical choices rather than overt moral instruction (Юрчишин, 2021а; Юрчишин & Щербюк, 2025). The pragmatic outcome of such clusters is moral delegitimation with minimal explicit argumentation.

2. Cognitive compression of multidimensional crises. The fragment *“a perfect storm”* condenses multiple factors (sanctions architecture, weather, logistics, insurance, naval risk) into one coherent causal gestalt. Likewise, *“Catastrophe comes in stages”* converts systemic infrastructure degradation into an ordered sequence that readers can track. This operation is pragmatically efficient: instead of fragmented technical detail, the audience receives a high-yield causal model. Such framing is especially important in war journalism, where the informational load is extreme and interpretive speed matters. The finding is consistent with discourse studies showing metaphor as a compression device for complex public narratives (Semino, 2008; Charteris-Black, 2011). Pragmatic outcome here is fast coherence under uncertainty without discursive overload.

3. Responsibility attribution and agency positioning in diplomatic reporting. In negotiation discourse, *“the ball is now back in Russia’s court”* transforms diffuse geopolitical process into intelligible turn-taking logic. Similarly, *“Plan A / Plan B”* reframes strategic uncertainty as structured scenario management rather than chaos.

From a Gricean perspective, these formulations optimize cooperative inference: they make intentions, options, and accountability inferable with low ambiguity (Grice, 1975). The reader is guided toward a stable interpretation of “who must act now,” “what counts as response,” and “what failure would mean.” Pragmatic outcome in this case is accountability clarification and interpretive stabilization.

4. Satirical humour as calibrated scepticism. The corpus does not show continuous mockery, rather, it exhibits *dosed irony*. Expressions such as *“Board of Peace”* and *“platinum-standard” guarantees* communicate institutional scepticism while preserving journalistic seriousness. The humorous signal is brief but functionally dense: it marks epistemic caution and prevents over-acceptance of diplomatically optimistic narratives. This supports prior findings that modern satirical discourse can operate in low-intensity, high-precision mode, where irony performs vigilance rather than entertainment alone (Юрчишин & Гарбера, 2025; Юрчишин & Матіяш-Гнедюк, 2024). Pragmatic outcome will be here controlled

distancing from official optimism and credibility management.

5. Dark humour as resilience marker. The explicit fragment *“we will crap in ditches...”* is pragmatically coherent in context: humiliation is reframed as collective endurance. The utterance is affectively charged but inferentially economical short, memorable, and identity-binding. In relevance terms, this is a high-effect, low-length signal: strong emotional and group-level implications are generated with minimal textual material (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). From a discourse perspective, dark humour here functions as social glue under conditions of existential pressure. Pragmatic outcome is in-group solidarity, affect regulation, and agency preservation.

6. Institutional legitimisation through incongruous brand analogy. The phrase *“equivalent of McDonalds”* in a military-organisational context relies on incongruity (consumer franchise model vs battlefield command). Yet, its pragmatic direction is constructive: standardisation, replicability, and process control become cognitively accessible through a familiar brand schema. Thus, humour and metaphor converge not for ridicule, but for positive institutional framing under resource pressure. This confirms that satirical-humorous cues in serious journalism can have legitimising as well as delegitimising force, depending on target and context. Pragmatic outcome here is accelerated comprehension of organisational reform and scalability.

The analysis indicates that metaphor and satirical humour jointly perform at least five strategic discourse tasks in mainstream war reporting: 1) *Normative orientation* by signalling who or what deserves condemnation, trust, or caution; 2) *processing efficiency* as they make complex systems cognitively manageable in fast-news environments; 3) *affective calibration* i.e. balancing fear, urgency, scepticism, and agency; 4) *credibility management* as irony prevents naïve uptake of institutional optimism; 5) *Audience alignment*: shared figurative scripts create interpretive synchrony between outlet and readership.

Importantly, these functions are compatible with journalistic seriousness. The corpus suggests that satire and humour in this genre are mostly micro-dosed and goal-directed. They do not replace factual reporting but they frame inferential pathways through which facts become publicly actionable.

Conclusions. The study demonstrates that metaphor and satirical humour in *The Economist’s* Ukraine coverage are pragmatic operators of interpretation, not rhetorical surplus. Metaphorical framing is systematic and function-driven. Dominant domains such as *game, disaster weather, predation,*

commerce/brand, mythic personification recurrently organize agency, causality, and value judgments. Satirical humour is sparse but it has a great impact on readers. In mainstream war journalism, humour appears as targeted irony, concise analogical incongruity, and occasional dark humour which increases cognitive effect without undermining analytical tone. The key pragmatic functions of satirical humour are delegitimation, cognitive compression, responsibility assignment, resilience mobilisation, and scepticism calibration. The most effective passages combine metaphorical mapping with satirical cueing, prompting readers to infer evaluative meaning beyond literal reporting because their interaction is where stance, persuasion, and interpretive guidance are most densely encoded.

Further research can extend this model by comparing mainstream and explicitly satirical outlets, testing reader-response effects experimentally, and integrating multimodal cues such as headline design, visuals, captions etc. Additionally, future research may expand the corpus longitudinally, compare outlets with different ideological profiles and test whether specific metaphor-humour combinations could alter the readers' perceived credibility, urgency, or policy support.

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