

Language and tone in swift's work a modest proposal



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Language and tone in Swift's work A Modest Proposal In Ireland in the eighteenth century many people wrote pamphlets in which they suggested solutions to the contemporary situation in their country. Among them was also Jonathan Swift, whose pamphlet A Modest Proposal differs from the others in its satirical tone. At that time Swift was a member of a literary club called the Scriblerians, who were against modern ideas in science and philosophy. Swift himself was inspired by this, which can be seen in his A Modest Proposal. The work I am writing about is a pamphlet written in a form of an essay. Swift alludes to the contemporary political philosophy in Ireland which was based on ideas of buying and selling. " People were beginning to look at the society in terms of money, economics and politics rather than in human terms" (Forsyth). To express his ideas Swift chose to write the pamphlet in a form of a satire to put emphasis on the problems. He is blind to the horrible moral implications of his proposal and favours the economic progress only. The dominant figure of speech in the work is verbal irony whose purpose is to say the opposite of what the author means. The irony is also in the content of the proposal in which Swift on one side wants to protect babies by saying: " There is likewise another great advantage in my scheme, that it will prevent those voluntary abortions, and that horrid practice of women murdering their bastard children, alas, too frequent among us, sacrificing the poor innocent babies, I doubt, more to avoid the expense than the shame, which would move tears and pity in the most savage and inhuman breast" (Swift), and, on the other side, he compares them to goods and wants to kill them for food. The expressions Swift uses are extraordinary, as demonstrated in the following quotation, in which he compares children to cattle, using words that denote its meat: " I have been

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assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasee or a ragout" (Swift). The aim of A Modest Proposal is to draw people's attention to the social development which went in a wrong way. The author proposes his ideas as they could be realised without problems and he suggests serious, rational and elaborate arguments using real numbers and facts. He expresses his solution as it was the best and the only possible way to solve the situation in Ireland. To characterize the tone of the work I have been inspired by Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature in which the tone is said to be deadpan that appears to be the exact expression. This is the way which in my opinion enforces the satirical message of Swift's work. Another figure of speech the writer uses is the metaphor. By that means he presents children as domestic animals that should be bred and fed up like cattle in order to be more tasteful. This can be seen in the following part: " I also humbly offer it to public consideration that of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males, which is more than we allow to sheep, black cattle, or swine..... always advising the mother to let them suck plentifully in the last month, so as to render them plump and fat for a good table. (Swift). We should not overlook the words ' breed' and ' plump' which are normally used to refer to animals. He uses these words to make the satire more powerful and to draw people's attention to the message of the work. However, the words he chooses are not always literary and worth a public speech, the language in general is formal and rather high. The combination of a serious tone of the

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work and using of pejorative words makes a contrast, which plays an important role in the satirical message of the work. A Modest Proposal offers arguments in favour of eating babies in order to shock people. This effect has retained until today, although the problems are no longer topical. Swift compares poor Irish people to animals because they are born to be eaten by the rich. They are never thought of as human beings. " From that reason these poor people would rather have been sold as food when they were a year old than have to cope with the misfortunes they were suffering" (Forsyth). Another means of expressing the attitude of the rich towards the poor is the use of pejorative expressions when Swift calls children ' bastards'. In my opinion the irony of the work also consists in the way the author presents his proposal. Swift as a proposer conventionalizes himself to the role of some Irish rich person by writing this pamphlet. He puts his inhuman ideas across in a cold, ignorant and oppressive way. He does not care about emotions, he is lethargic to others and puts the inhabitants of Ireland on the same level as the cattle. This can serve as a metaphor for the contemporary attitude of England towards Ireland. A Modest Proposal has become very famous not only for the message that this pamphlet sends the inhabitants of Ireland, but also for the way Swift elaborated it. He uses an original approach to the topic, works with unusual words and metaphors. That is the reason why satire is so strong in A Modest Proposal and why it has engraved into the memory of many people and was inserted to works we should know about. Forsyth, V. L. 2008. Lectures in English Literature to 1750. Praha: Univerzita Karlova v Praze, Pedagogickã fakulta. Gillie, Christopher. 1992. Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd.
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