

This paper sets out to demonstrate how a pragmatic approach can extend and refine the description of litotes. The pragmatic approach offers an interpretation which removes figures of speech from the notion of rhetorical traditions whereby they are ornaments and, at the same time, it keeps the results of their interpretation as operations used for efficient communication. The analysis presents Hungarian examples to illustrate the general properties of litotes.

Pragmatics came to interpret first and foremost a set of figures that are an obvious part of everyday conversations and count as routine operations, such as metaphor, hyperbole, rhetorical question, simile, irony and litotes. In pragmatic terms, these figures are not additional elements, not parts of the ornate superimposed on contents, not ornaments, but special linguistic representations of cognitive operations and processes.

The pragmatic role of litotes is demonstrated by the fact that in a handbook of pragmatics, Horn (2004: 3) explains implicatures by referring back to a classical definition of litotes by Servius and Donatus. Under this old definition, the figure of speech allows one to 'say less and mean more': *minus dicimus et plus significamus*. It comes as no surprise either, in view of its relevance for implicatures and negation, that litotes has received a number of modern semantic and pragmatic interpretations (BERG 1978; HORN 1989, 1991; WOUNDEN 1995). In my own work, I aim at an integrated approach by building on, and striving to reconcile, traditional rhetoric and modern pragmatic interpretations.

Since ancient rhetoric, litotes has been regarded as a formal device, an immutational figure and trope. Cicero and Cornificius discussed and classified it under ideal figures by the name of *diminutio*. New rhetorics sees litotes as a metalogism, i.e. a figure created through a change in the relation between a linguistic sign and its referent (UEDING 2001: 376). Lausberg likens litotes to periphrasis, synecdoche, antonomasia, emphasis and hyperbole in that it is an instance of boundary shift tropes (*Grenzverschiebungstropen*), where substitution occurs directly from the adjacent semantic domain by a shift or removal of individual word meanings (1963/1990: 74).

In the history of rhetoric, the categories underlying the umbrella term *litotes* have included three different interpretations: (1) mitigation or reduction without negation, (2) a statement by double negation, (3) a statement by negation of the opposite to stress or soften a meaning (UEDING: 2001: 378).

Broadly speaking, litotes can refer to the construal of a concept or state of affairs in a mitigating, alleviating manner. In this sense, litotes is the opposite of overstating (*auxesis*), a subtype of hyperbole, and it is also treated as a separate figure of speech under the name of *meiosis*.

All three interpretations correspond to a linguistic technique that is part of everyday conversations, a routine operation. What the three explanations have in common is that the target concepts come to the foreground of the conceptual domain of a contiguous meaning,

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whether scalar or opposing, and are interpreted accordingly. This shared interpretative operation probably played a role in the joint categorisation of these partly different operations. The prototypical realisations of litotes seem to be the expressions in Groups 2 and 3. Their functions and potential roles shall be analysed later on. In actual fact, Group 3 includes Group 2, only that in this case the opposite concept includes by itself some idea of negation, such as a privative prefix (*not unhappy*) or a preposition denoting lack (*not without reason*).

The frequency and common use of litotic expressions in Hungarian, often occurring in clusters, is indicated by the following Internet forum entries:

1. Nem rossz film, nem kis nevekkal, és azért valaki már elég nagy sztár volt közülük. Nem akarok sok mindent felsorolni, csak a legnagyobb addigi alakításokat: Samuel L. Jackson: *Ponyvaregény* (BAFTA-díj, Oscar-jelölés); Kevin Spacey: *Hetedik*; *Közönséges bűnözők* (Oscar-díj). Na és Donald Sutherland, aki az egyik legismertebb és legelismertebb színész a világon, és nem kis filmekben szerepelt, nem is férne ki ide mind. Szóval azért nem kis színészek játszanak benne, Joel Schumacher sem rossz rendező, és a film sem rossz, bár nem is egy utánozhatatlan remekmű. Figyelembe véve a kereskedelmi csatornák műsorait ez kifejezetten jónak számít.

Not a bad film, the names aren't small, and some of them have been quite big stars before. I'm not gonna list everything, only the greatest performances: Samuel L. Jackson played in *Pulp Fiction* (BAFTA Award, Oscar nomination), and Kevin Spacey in *Se7en* and *The Usual Suspects* (Oscar Award). Not to mention Donald Sutherland, who is one of the best-known and most recognized actors in the world, and played **in no small movies**, I couldn't even list them all here for lack of space. So **the actors in it aren't small, Joel Schumacher isn't a bad director, and the film isn't bad either**, although obviously not a masterpiece beyond comparison. Considering the offer of commercial TV channels, this definitely counts as a good one.

2. Feltételezésre alapozva (és hivatkozva) vevőt elküldeni a fészkes fenébe nem éppen elegáns megoldás, nem szép dolog a potenciális vásárlót megsérteni. Ugyanígy nem tesz jót az sem, ha mégis megkapja az autót a vásárló, amit nem tud engedélyeztetni, vagy ne adj isten, ha sikerül neki, egy olyan autóval kerül az utakra, amit nem tud megbízhatóan vezetni, ami nem igazán alkalmas közúti forgalomra (saját igényei alapján) pályán versenyzésre, szigorú előírások betartása mellett, megfelelő tudású versenyzővel a volánnál igen.

To tell a customer to get the hell out of here, based purely on speculation, **is hardly an elegant move, it's not a nice thing** to offend a potential customer. In the same way **it can do no good either** if the customer does get the car, which he can't get registered however, or God forbid, if he gets on the road with a car he can't drive properly, which is not really meant for city traffic at all but rather for the race track, where strict rules apply, with a professional driver at the wheel.

The analysis of the roles played by litotes in various contexts reveals the following typical examples:

Nem kis 'not small', *nem kevés* 'not a little', *nem lehetetlen* 'not impossible', *nem elképzelhetetlen* 'not inconceivable', *nem megoldhatatlan* 'not unsolvable', *nem buta* 'not stupid', *nem csúnya* 'not ugly', *nem felesleges* 'not superfluous', *nem ok nélkül való* 'not without reason', *nem semmi* 'no nothing', *nem akármilyen* 'not anything' (to mean: 'quite a thing'), *nem a legjobb* 'not

the best', *nem éppen elegáns* 'not particularly elegant', *nem mindennapi* 'not usual', *nem zökkenőmentes* 'not without minor problems', *nem problémamentes* 'not without problems', *nem lenne ellenére* 'would not be opposed to', *nem veti meg* 'does not despise', *nem lenne meglepve* 'would not be surprised'

The functions of litotes have gained controversial interpretations in rhetoric and linguistics. According to several rhetorical analyses, litotes is used to emphasise or stress the opposite of the negated concept, while certain linguistic studies claim that it may have a role in making the unambiguous nature of the opposite concept vague or softer. A semantic-pragmatic analysis may account for this duality and may shed some light on the relations between the two apparently contradictory functions.

As a first approximation, we said that litotes states something through negation. However, a semantic analysis reveals a more specific operation. According to Horn's semantic analysis (1989, 1991), litotes may only be generated by pairs of concepts that are not in contradictory, but rather in contrary opposition. Contradictory antonyms, such as *man-woman*, *single-married*, *black-non-black*, cover an entire conceptual domain, whereby the negation of one concept is clearly equivalent to the statement of the other. By contrast, the negation of a concept in contrary opposition is not tantamount to the clear statement of its antonym, since the two opposites may be regarded as gradable. For instance, the expression *not unhappy* as part of the antonymous pair *happy-unhappy* may, if placed along a scale of happiness, mean 'feel in-differently or neutrally' or 'be happy to some extent', or 'be expressly and excessively happy'.



Because a contrary antonym makes the expression of such gradable nature impossible, Horn does not regard such negation as litotes.

In terms of a pragmatic approach based on the preceding semantic analysis, litotes may serve the functions of both weakening and emphasis. Indeed, the figure is effective and its implicature is powerful precisely because it leaves construal open along the individual grades. For example, Wouden proposes that a key characteristic of litotes is exactly openness and uncertainty (1996: 146).

In Grice's Cooperation Model, litotes flouts the maxims of quantity and manner because the quantity of information is, precisely due to vagueness and ambiguity, insufficient and hence it creates an implicature (1975: 41–58).

In pragmatic terms, negation of the opposite may not be equivalent to an emphatic statement because, according to Levinson's M-heuristics, "what is said in an abnormal way isn't normal" (2000: 38). In other words, by selecting a marked or less simple expression, the speaker signals that the application of the simpler form would be inadequate.

In their research conducted with American university students, Roberts and Kreuz (1994) found that the most typical conversational goals attributed to litotes were deemphasizing, i.e. the euphemistic, mitigating function already mentioned above, and the expression of negative emotions, in which irony (as well as euphemism) might play a role.

The uncertainty of the expression may become clear through intonation and context. For example, the expression *not ugly* used to describe a woman means 'definitely beautiful' in example 4, so that it assumes an emphatic function. In example 5, the meaning is 'not very beautiful', and its function is mitigation:

3. *Micsoda hatalmas tükör a falon, nagyobb a tükör, mint ő. Milyen jól meglátja magát benne. Otthon csak egy kis mézeskalácsos tükör volt. A Becsénél valamivel nagyobb, már fémfoglatba épített tükör volt, de ilyen nagy tükröt, ami az egész alakját mutatja még nem látott. Meg is nézegette magát benne. Meg is fordult, előre, hátra lépegetett. Bizony nem csúnya nő, állapította meg megelégedéssel.* (Bánfalvi János: Féltestvérek)

What a huge mirror on the wall, even bigger than herself. Just ideal for taking a look. At home, she only had a mirror the size of a gingerbread. At the Becs family, the mirror was slightly bigger, with a metal frame, but she had never seen a mirror so big that it would show her whole body. So she took her time to size herself up. She turned and stepped back and forth. **This is indeed not an ugly woman**, she concluded, content with herself.

(*Half Brothers* by János Bánfalvi)

4. Nem volt éppen csúnya asszony. Sátoros ünnepen, ha jól kimosakodott, menyecskekre kötötte a fejét, még talán szépnek is lehetett mondani.

(Sásdi Sándor: Tél hozta, tavasz vitte)

She was not a particularly ugly woman. On special days, when she washed herself carefully, and tied her hair as young ladies would, maybe you could even call her a fair dame.

(*Brought by winter, gone with spring* by Sándor Sásdi)

Alleviating litotes is very often motivated by negative politeness, as termed by Leech (1983: 81–146), i.e. an intention to minimise impolite ideas:

5. *A szomszédék építkezése nem volt éppen sikeres vállalkozás...*
The building work of our neighbours **wasn't a particularly successful project**.
6. Nem állítanám, hogy a legjobb megoldást választottad.
I wouldn't claim that you chose **the best solution**.
7. *A b5 által nem éppen maximális jóindulattal felvetett lehetőségek mellé még megemlítenék egy párat...*
To the options mentioned by b5, with hardly an excess of goodwill, I'd like to add a couple more.

Such solutions contain an implicature and can hence soften the criticism. By lack of the verbalisation of a negative quality, such formulation leaves room for construing negation along a cline from neutral to negative.

The next instance of litotes is also powerful because it is euphemistic, on the one hand, and it does not use the simplest expression to refer to obesity, on the other. At the same time, it makes use of the principle of curiosity, i.e. it exhibits the key feature of litotes that it can play a mitigating and an emphatic role. The impoliteness of the utterance is mitigated, while it gains emphasis or importance due to the formulation and the operation of the implicature:

8. *Azonban a tegnapi reggelen én is tanúja lehettem, hogyan változott meg az ellenőrök fellépése: két, nem éppen modellalkatú hölgy üvöltve állta el a jogosulatlanul utazni szándékozó útját, és addig lökdöste a vékonydongájú suhancot a kijárat felé, amíg az szitkozódva megfordult és távozott.*

Yesterday, though, I also had a chance to witness how the attitude of ticket inspectors would change: **two women, hardly with supermodel fig-**

ures, were shouting as they blocked the way of a passenger who wanted to travel without ticket, and kept pushing the slim guy toward the exit until he turned, throwing curses, and left.

Emphasis on the opposite meaning may clearly occur in cases where the speaker/writer and the listener/reader have a shared set of presuppositions. For instance, the expression *not ugly* may mean 'quite beautiful' if the interlocutors have the same presuppositions.

Litotes can function as a highly routinized conversational operation, very often without the speaker's conscious effort or awareness, with e.g. *nem kis* 'not small', *nem kevés* 'not a little' employed for emphasis to mean 'big' or 'a lot'. In these cases, the assumption is confirmed that the role of negation is to emphasize its opposite. The same interpretation is prompted by the commonplace expressions *nem semmi* 'not nothing' and *nem akármi/akárki* 'not anything/anybody'.

In examples (9–11–12) the occurrence of the utterance *not a bad idea* used in various contexts demonstrates the semantic grades implied by litotes (from 'expressly good' to 'not very good').



The frequent expression *not a bad idea* denotes appreciation or emphasis, especially along with the following ending:

9. *Nem rossz gondolat, támogatom!*
Not a bad idea, I support it!

In this situation the speech act coming after the utterance signals that the aim is to strengthen the utterance, i.e. on the arrow showing implied meaning the left side may be assigned to the meaning of 'expressly good'.

In other contexts, however, the contrary meaning may be less clear, oriented towards indifference:

10. *Nem rossz gondolat, de amíg beszerzem a DVD-recordert, addig nincs valami PC-n belüli megoldás?*
Not a bad idea, but until I get hold of a DVD recorder, isn't there a PC-based solution?

As opposed to the expression *not bad*, *better* refers to a mitigating role of litotes, i.e. the meaning of 'not very good':

11. *Hát nem rossz gondolat ez az őrző, de nekem jobbnak tűnnek az eddig elhangzott javaslatok...*
Well, this safe is **not a bad idea**, but I would still prefer the suggestions heard before...

In sum, a semantic-pragmatic analysis of the functions of litotes allows for a refinement of the traditional rhetoric definition. In rhetoric terms, litotes is a figure which expresses a concept or a state of affairs by negating its opposite to emphasise, stress or, conversely, to mitigate or diminish it. The semantic-pragmatic approach reveals that in litotes the negation

of a concept is not the same as the statement of its opposite, but by a conversational implicature it provides an opportunity to express various qualifications: from the emphatic statement of the opposite meaning to the mitigated expression of the negated meaning.

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ABSZTRAKT

A tanulmány célja a litotész működésének szemantikai-pragmatikai elemzése, és ezáltal az alakzat hagyományos, retorikai meghatározásának árnyalása. A retorika értelmezése szerint a litotész olyan alakzat, amely valamely fogalmat vagy tényállást ellentétének tagadása révén fejez ki, annak nyomatékosítása, kiemelése vagy enyhítése, kicsinyítése céljából. A szemantikai-pragmatikai megközelítés pedig rávilágít arra, hogy a litotészben egy fogalom tagadása nem egyenértékű az ellentétének állításával, hanem olyan társágási impikatúrát teremt, amely különböző minőségek kifejezésére alkalmas: az ellentétes jelentés nyomatékos állításától egészen a tagadott jelentés enyhített kifejezéséig.