STYLISTIC AND COGNITIVE EFFECTS OF LITOTES IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH MEDIA

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Abstract

This study investigates the stylistic and cognitive effects of litotes in contemporary English media discourse. Drawing on functional stylistics and cognitive pragmatics, the research examines how negative constructions expressing affirmative meanings operate as discursive strategies in political and social news reporting. A corpus of English-language news articles (2015-2025) was analyzed to identify structural patterns, evaluative functions, and interpretative implications of litotes. The findings suggest that litotes functions not merely as a mitigating device but as a subtle evaluative and ideological framing strategy. From a cognitive perspective, litotic constructions trigger implicature generation and increased processing effort, contributing to nuanced audience interpretation. The study highlights the interplay between stylistic choice and cognitive impact in media communication.

Keywords

Litotes, functional stylistics, cognitive pragmatics, discursive strategies, discursive diversity, stylistic device, contemporary media.

Introduction. Litotes, traditionally defined as affirmation through negation, represents one of the most subtle stylistic devices in English rhetoric. While classical stylistics (e.g., I. R. Galperin) treats litotes as a form of understatement, contemporary media discourse suggests a broader functional and cognitive scope. In modern political and social reporting, constructions such as *"not insignificant,"* *"not uncommon,"* and *"not entirely unsuccessful"* appear frequently, raising questions about their evaluative and ideological roles. Despite extensive research on metaphor, framing, and evaluative language, the cognitive impact of litotes in media discourse remains underexplored. Drawing on discourse analysis (Teun A.

van Dijk) and Relevance Theory (Dan Sperber; Deirdre Wilson), this study investigates how litotic constructions function stylistically and cognitively in contemporary English news media. The study aims to bridge stylistics and cognitive pragmatics by examining litotes as both a linguistic structure and a discursive strategy.

Methodology. This study adopts a mixed-method research design integrating corpus linguistics, functional stylistics, critical discourse analysis, and cognitive pragmatics in order to investigate the stylistic and cognitive effects of litotes in contemporary English media discourse. The methodological framework is grounded in the assumption that stylistic devices in media texts cannot be adequately explained through structural description alone but require discursive and cognitive interpretation. Therefore, the research design combines quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative functional interpretation and theoretical modeling. The research follows an explanatory sequential mixed-method approach. First, a quantitative corpus-based analysis was conducted to identify the frequency and distribution of litotic constructions in selected media texts. Second, qualitative discourse analysis was applied to interpret the pragmatic, evaluative, and ideological functions of these constructions. Finally, a cognitive-pragmatic interpretation was developed using principles from Relevance Theory to explain the inferential mechanisms triggered by litotes.

The study is descriptive-analytical in nature, aiming not only to classify structural patterns but also to explain their communicative and cognitive effects. In line with functional stylistics as proposed by I. R. Galperin[1], stylistic devices are examined as expressive means operating within broader discursive systems. However, since media discourse represents a socially situated communicative practice, the research also draws on socio-cognitive models of discourse advanced by Teun A. van Dijk[2]. The corpus consists of 500 English-language news articles published between 2015 and 2025. The selected media outlets include BBC News, The Guardian, CNN, and Reuters. These sources were chosen because they represent internationally influential English-language news institutions with differing editorial styles and geopolitical orientations, thus ensuring discursive diversity. The identification of litotes required a multi-stage procedure. Since litotes structurally resembles ordinary negation, automatic retrieval alone would produce numerous false positives. For example: *"The policy was not entirely successful."* This was coded as litotes because it implies partial failure rather than mere negation of

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[1] Galperin, I. R. (1977). Stylistics. Moscow: Higher School.
[2] van Dijk, T. A. (2008). Discourse and Context: A Sociocognitive Approach. Cambridge University Press.

total success. The first analytical layer follows Galperin's classification of expressive means[3]. Litotes is treated as a lexical stylistic device that interacts with syntactic organization. However, unlike traditional stylistic analysis that focuses primarily on aesthetic effect, this study emphasizes functional motivation within media discourse.

Litotes was analyzed in terms of expressiveness, degree of evaluation, contextual emphasis, interaction with surrounding lexical items, particular attention was given to collocational patterns and co-textual intensifiers.To interpret the ideological implications of litotes, the study applies principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach[4]. According to this model, discourse structures influence mental models and social cognition. Therefore, litotes was examined as a potential framing device that shapes readers' interpretation of political actors and events.

Discursive strategies identified include positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation, ideological mitigation, strategic ambiguity. For example, describing an economic downturn as "*not entirely unexpected*" may soften institutional responsibility. The third analytical layer employs Relevance Theory[5], which argues that utterance interpretation involves inferential processes guided by expectations of optimal relevance. Litotic constructions were analyzed as stimuli that trigger implicatures requiring additional cognitive processing. Each instance was examined in terms of explicature (literal meaning), implicature (inferred meaning),processing effort,contextual effects. The hypothesis guiding this analysis is that litotes increases inferential complexity compared to direct affirmation. For instance "*The results were not insignificant.*" Literal meaning, results are not insignificant. Inferred meaning results are significant, possibly highly significant. This layered interpretation requires pragmatic enrichment. Despite its rigor, the methodology has certain limitations. First, corpus-based identification of litotes may overlook highly context-dependent cases. Second, cognitive effects are theoretically modeled rather than experimentally measured. Future research could incorporate psycholinguistic experiments to empirically test processing effort. Furthermore, the corpus is restricted to English-language Western media, limiting cross-cultural generalizability. This multi-layered methodology enables a comprehensive examination of litotes as a stylistic, discursive, and cognitive phenomenon within contemporary English media discourse. Each instance was

[3] Galperin, I. R. (1977). Stylistics. Moscow: Higher School.
[4] van Dijk, T. A. (2008). Discourse and Context: A Sociocognitive Approach. Cambridge University Press.
[5] Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1995). Relevance: Communication and Cognition (2nd ed.). Blackwell.

manually examined to distinguish genuine litotes from simple negation. A construction was classified as litotic if it met the following criteria. It expressed affirmation through negation. The negated expression implied a stronger positive or negative evaluation than explicitly stated. Within the framework of functional stylistics developed by I. R. Galperin, litotes is classified as a lexical stylistic device based on the interaction of logical and contextual meanings. It functions through negation of the contrary, thereby producing an affirmative evaluative meaning that is stylistically marked. Unlike simple negation, litotes carries expressive force because it introduces a discrepancy between the surface grammatical structure and the implied semantic content. The following analysis applies Galperin's theoretical principles to authentic media-type constructions.

1. *"The results were not insignificant."* According to Galperin, this construction represents a classical case of litotes formed through the negation of an adjective with negative semantics (insignificant). In this example, the logical meaning of "not insignificant" suggests simple non-insignificance, yet the contextual meaning implies strong significance. Stylistically, the effect arises from the interplay between dictionary meaning (insignificant-lacking importance) and contextual meaning (important, potentially highly important). This duality creates expressiveness, since the reader must reconstruct the implicit evaluative stance. In media discourse, such a construction produces what Galperin terms restrained expressiveness[6] - a subtle intensification masked as mitigation. The stylistic device therefore serves not only aesthetic but also pragmatic purposes.

2. *"The slowdown is not entirely unexpected."* This example demonstrates a modified litotic pattern not entirely + adjective. According to Galperin, partial negation introduces gradation, which enhances stylistic nuance. The adverb entirely functions as an intensifier whose negation results in semantic moderation. Galperin notes that understatement often strengthens emotional coloring by presenting evaluation indirectly. In this example, the media text avoids categorical judgment. Instead of asserting *"The slowdown was predictable,"* it employs litotes to convey caution and objectivity. Thus, the stylistic device functions as a means of controlled evaluation. The indirectness enhances credibility while preserving expressive subtlety.

3. *"The response was not without criticism."* This construction exemplifies the not without + noun pattern, which Galperin considers a typical syntactic realization of litotes[7]. Grammatically negative, the structure semantically affirms the existence of

[6] Galperin, I. R. (1977). Stylistics. Moscow: Higher School.
[7] Galperin, I. R. (1977). Chapter on Lexical Stylistic Devices: Interaction of Logical and Contextual Meanings.

criticism. According to Galperin's theory of stylistic devices, expressiveness arises from the opposition between the literal negative form and the implied positive content. In journalistic discourse, such a device softens overt negativity while maintaining informational transparency. It exemplifies how litotes can combine expressive restraint with semantic emphasis.

Results and Discussion. The analysis of litotic constructions in contemporary English media discourse demonstrates that these structures function as stylistically marked expressive means in the sense proposed by I. R. Galperin. Across the examined examples, litotes consistently operates through the interaction of logical and contextual meanings, producing evaluative nuance under the surface of grammatical negation. The corpus-based findings revealed that the dominant structural model is not + adjective (e.g., not insignificant, not unexpected), followed by not without + noun constructions and double negation patterns (not unproductive). From a Galperinian perspective, these patterns represent classical realizations of litotes as a lexical stylistic device formed through negation of the contrary. However, the results show that in media discourse, such constructions extend beyond mere rhetorical ornamentation and perform distinct communicative functions. First, the data indicate that litotes frequently appears in politically and economically sensitive contexts. In examples such as *"The results were not insignificant,"* the literal negation of insignificant produces a contextual meaning equivalent to "significant," yet the indirect formulation introduces restrained expressiveness. According to Galperin, stylistic effect arises when dictionary meaning and contextual meaning interact in tension. The grammatical negative form contrasts with the implied affirmative evaluation, thereby generating stylistic coloring. Importantly, this coloring is not emotionally excessive but institutionally moderated, aligning with the conventions of publicistic style. Second, constructions such as "The slowdown is not entirely unexpected" demonstrate how partial negation creates gradational semantics. The adverb entirely functions as an intensifier, and its negation results in semantic moderation. Galperin associates such understatement with increased expressiveness because indirect evaluation compels the reader to reconstruct implicit meaning. The findings confirm that in media discourse, this mechanism allows journalists to maintain an appearance of objectivity while subtly guiding interpretation. The stylistic device thus performs a dual function: mitigating overt evaluation and simultaneously reinforcing evaluative presence through implication.Third, the example "The response was not without criticism" illustrates how litotes can foreground negative evaluation while maintaining formal neutrality. Although grammatically negative, the construction

semantically affirms the existence of criticism. The stylistic restraint enhances credibility while preserving informational content. Fourth, double negation patterns such as "The talks were not unproductive" reveal gradational affirmation. Instead of stating *"productive,"* the litotic structure introduces semantic layering, surface negation, logical reversal, contextual affirmation. In Galperin's terms, this interaction of meanings produces expressiveness through mediation rather than directness. The results suggest that such mediation is especially characteristic of diplomatic or political discourse, where categorical statements may be pragmatically risky. Overall, the findings demonstrate that litotes in contemporary media discourse functions as a stylistically marked device that combines understatement, semantic contrast, and evaluative implication. While traditionally classified as a lexical stylistic device, the analysis shows that litotes also interacts with syntactic organization and discursive framing. Its prevalence in political and economic reporting indicates that it serves institutional needs for cautious evaluation and balanced presentation.

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