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SELF-IRONY AND FEMALE VOICE IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH CHICK LIT

The aim of the paper is to analyse self-irony as a communicative and narrative strategy in French and English chick lit and to determine how the self-ironic female voice participates in constructing contemporary models of femininity. The material of the study includes French novels by Agnès Abécassis [1] (*Chouette, une ride !*), Virginie Grimaldi [3] (*Le parfum du bonheur est plus fort sous la pluie*), Katherine Pancol [8] (*La valse lente des tortues*), Marie Vareille [11] (*La vie rêvée des chaussettes orphelines*), Aurélie Valognes [10] (*Mémé dans les orties*), as well as English novels by Helen Fielding [2] (*Bridget Jones's Diary*), Sophie Kinsella [7] (*Confessions of a Shopaholic*), Marian Keyes [6] (*Watermelon*), Lindsey Kelk [5] (*I Heart New York*), and Jenny Colgan (*Meet Me at the Cupcake Café*). These texts represent stable genre tendencies and provide sufficient material for identifying culturally marked models of humorous female self-presentation.

The emergence of chick lit roughly coincides with a renewed scholarly interest in how gender is performed through language. In this research tradition, gender is treated not as a stable personal quality but as something people do in interaction, responding to the norms and expectations of a particular situation [9, p. 547]. Such an approach draws attention to how narrators arrange their social stance, a process that becomes especially visible in texts built on a first-person voice. Feminist linguists note that any act of self-presentation in narrative inevitably involves a degree of negotiation with the imagined audience: the narrator anticipates possible evaluations of their behavior and adjusts their voice accordingly in order to remain intelligible and acceptable within the cultural framework that surrounds them. Humour becomes one of the key resources used in this negotiation.

Studies on humour and identity show that self-directed irony allows a narrator to acknowledge vulnerability without losing authority. By joking about her own shortcomings, she can pre-empt criticism, create room for emotionally charged topics, and maintain a positive social stance while addressing issues that may invite judgement – appearance, age, parenting,

emotional fluctuations, or romantic disappointments. According to studies on humour and self-representation, self-irony enables the speaker to voice vulnerability, soften possible criticism, and preserve face while discussing socially sensitive topics such as body image, ageing, motherhood, emotional instability, or romantic failure.

In many chick-lit novels, the heroine's self-ironic tone becomes the point of entry for the reader. Instead of smoothing over her doubts or disguising awkward behaviour, she lets these moments stand – sometimes abruptly, sometimes almost unintentionally. A dropped remark about a misjudged decision or an emotional wobble often carries more weight than a carefully crafted confession. Through such irregular disclosures, the narrative acquires the sense of informal closeness that audiences have come to expect from the genre. This practice corresponds to what sociolinguistic research describes as strategic self-depreciation – a communicative choice that strengthens solidarity and mitigates social risks [4]. French and English chick lit demonstrate different stylistic realisations of this phenomenon. In English novels, authors often employ humour through deliberate overstatement and utilize the quick, confessional rhythm typical of diary fragments or personal notes. French writers typically take a different approach: self-irony is integrated into a slower, more contemplative mode of narration, where light comic touches coexist with sentiment and reflection. Despite this divergence in tone, both bodies of texts use self-irony to shape the heroine's sense of self. Through joking reinterpretations of awkward or painful situations, she is able to reframe her experiences and articulate a persona that feels acceptable within her social environment and emotionally convincing to the reader.

The analysis is based on qualitative close reading combined with elements of discourse analysis, aimed at identifying the linguistic markers and narrative structures through which self-irony shapes the female voice in the selected texts.

The comparison of French and English novels shows that self-irony operates through recurrent linguistic and narrative patterns that allow the heroine to regulate her social image. A typical English example appears in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, where the narrator humorously evaluates her weight, romantic failures, or professional mistakes (“the day I heroically destroyed an office file while trying to look confident”). This exaggerated self-criticism is intentionally playful: through humour she neutralises potential external judgment and simultaneously constructs a credible, down-to-earth female persona. A similar device appears in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, where the heroine ironically comments on her inability to control spending.

The self-mockery (“my debit card seems to have independent emotional needs”) shifts the focus from moral evaluation to shared amusement, thus maintaining the reader’s sympathy.

French chick lit demonstrates a more introspective and emotionally framed type of self-irony. In *Le parfum du bonheur est plus fort sous la pluie*, the narrator reflects on her own exaggerated emotional reactions, ironically noting how she interprets every gesture of others as a sign of disaster. The humour here is softer and closely connected with the heroine’s inner emotional landscape. In *La vie rêvée des chaussettes orphelines*, the diaristic fragments include self-ironic remarks about burnout, perfectionism, and unrealistic expectations: the heroine mocks her attempts to “be productive and luminous at 7 a.m.” while barely functioning. Similarly, in *Mémé dans les orties*, Valognes [10] uses gentle irony when her protagonist misjudges everyday situations, revealing character traits indirectly. This form of self-irony emphasises sensitivity, emotional nuance, and relational depth.

Despite these stylistic differences, both traditions employ self-irony to navigate culturally charged themes. Body image is one of the most prominent domains. English heroines exaggerate their imperfections, while French heroines often reflect on their emotional responses to societal expectations (“I know I should be gracious and elegant, but instead I panic over everything”). Ageing also appears as a topic of gentle mockery in French texts, particularly in Abécassis’ *Chouette, une ride !* [1], where the heroine humorously negotiates her fears about wrinkles, presenting them as evidence of life experience rather than deterioration.

A further sphere in which the self-ironic voice becomes visible is the portrayal of work and intimate relationships. English protagonists frequently respond to professional mishaps or romantic disappointments with a quick, joking aside, using humour to defuse the awkwardness of the episode. French heroines, by contrast, tend to approach comparable situations through a more interior lens: the self-ironic remark is placed within a moment of emotional stock-taking rather than rapid comic commentary.

In *Watermelon*, for instance, Keyes’s narrator [6] revisits the collapse of her marriage with a mixture of agitation and wry humour, exposing the excesses of her own reactions as she tells the story. Pancol’s *La valse lente des tortues* [8] contains similar gestures, although they often surface as brief acknowledgements of misread motives or misplaced trust; the irony directs attention to the heroine’s self-knowledge rather than to the comic potential of the situation.

Read together, these novels show that the self-ironic voice helps the heroine navigate several competing pressures: the cultural script of “proper” femininity, the unruly texture of her own emotions, and the expectation that she speak openly to the reader. Self-irony gives her room to acknowledge frailty without surrendering control over how that frailty is read. In this way, the narrator exercises a form of discursive choice: she decides which aspects of her experience to disclose, the tone in which she discloses them, and the degree of closeness she intends to create with her audience. When the narrator admits her own fragility yet guides the reader’s understanding of it, humour becomes the device through which she assembles a stable sense of self in the story—one that feels sincere but still responsive to social expectations. Seen this way, self-irony reflects an active stance in discourse: the storyteller determines which experiences to disclose, the manner in which they are framed, and the degree of proximity she wishes to establish with her audience.

The study shows that self-irony is a stable and culturally meaningful strategy in both French and English chick lit. Although English and French novels approach humour through different stylistic habits – English writers often favour bold comic overstatement, whereas French authors lean towards more contemplative, emotionally inflected irony – the function of self-irony across both groups remains comparable. What stands out is the way these heroines use ironic self-commentary to manage how they are perceived, to lessen the risks that accompany frank self-disclosure, and to retain the trust of the reader when touching upon sensitive themes. In this sense, self-irony operates as a distinctly gendered resource: it gives female characters the means to recast moments of emotional strain and to turn experiences that might otherwise appear diminishing into occasions for connection and quiet resilience. A broader comparative study, particularly one supported by corpus-analytic tools, could help trace the distribution and frequency of such ironic gestures more systematically.

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