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**Taylor Swift's use of irony in "Blank Space" as a rhetorical device to
respond to linguistic injury**

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Taylor Swift's use of irony in “Blank Space” as a rhetorical device to respond to linguistic injury

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ABSTRACT

This article aimed to analyze how Taylor Swift uses irony in her song "Blank Space" (2014) as a rhetorical device to respond to linguistic injury. The research incorporated insights from Butler (2021) on injurious language, Hutcheon's (1992) sociocultural perspective on irony, and other relevant works that discuss the uses of irony and the representation of female artists in the media. Using a qualitative interpretative approach, the analysis delved into the song's lyrics to identify instances where Swift strategically employs irony. As a result, it was possible to find many instances where Swift uses irony as a rhetorical tool to challenge the associated 'serial dater' stereotype. This deliberate use of irony emerges as a sophisticated rhetorical strategy, which allows Swift to reshape the narrative surrounding her romantic life creatively.

Keywords: Taylor Swift; irony; rhetorical device; linguistic injury.

RESUMO

Este artigo objetivou analisar como Taylor Swift usa a ironia em sua canção “Blank Space” (2014) como um recurso retórico para responder a uma injúria linguística. A pesquisa incorporou ideias de Butler (2021) no que diz respeito à linguagem injuriosa, a perspectiva sociocultural acerca da ironia de Hutcheon (1992), e demais trabalhos relevantes que discutem os usos da ironia e a representação de artistas femininas na mídia. Através de uma abordagem qualitativa interpretativa, a análise se aprofundou na letra da canção a fim de identificar instâncias em que Swift usa a ironia como uma ferramenta retórica para desafiar o estereótipo associado à imagem de ‘namorada em série’. Esse uso deliberado da ironia surge como uma estratégia retórica sofisticada, que permite a Swift remodelar criativamente a narrativa criada em torno de sua vida amorosa.

Palavras-chave: Taylor Swift; ironia; recurso retórico; injúria linguística.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of contemporary pop music, female artists often have to face the dual-edged sword of fame: being successful and having to deal with constant scrutiny from the media and the public. Taylor Swift, one of the most acclaimed singer-songwriters of this last decade, has explored this unstable terrain through her lyrics, using her songwriting skills to address and subvert the narratives constructed about her personal life.

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As a prime example of a response to the media's portrayal of her romantic life through the years, Swift wrote "Blank Space", a song that was released in 2014 and that explores the themes of love and heartbreak through the eyes of a woman who seems to be emotionally unstable and constantly moves from one romantic relationship to another. The choice of such a theme for the song was influenced by the perception that the media created about Swift herself throughout her career. It is common to find on the internet headlines such as "Dating drama: Taylor Swift's many boyfriends"², or "15 Reasons Why It's Dangerous To Date Taylor Swift"³. Headlines of this type have been produced and reproduced for years and serve as examples of how the media stimulated and reinforced Swift's so-called serial dater stereotype.

During her performance of "Blank Space" (2014) at the Grammy Museum in 2016, the singer-songwriter shared insights about the inspiration behind the song. In her explanation, she revealed that her first reaction to what was being said about her in the media was to think that the whole situation was a bummer and not fun for her. However, she had a second reaction later on, which was to think that the persona the media created was, in fact, a very interesting and complex character, and she could use this narrative for a song. (Swift, 2016). Hence, "Blank Space" (2014) came to life as a way to ironize the harmful stereotype associated with her and transform it into a creative source of inspiration.

As Worcester (p. 142 *apud* Hutcheon p. 224) states, "[i]rony offers an escape from mental pain as morphine offers an escape from physical pain". Therefore, I understand that the song "Blank Space" (2014) can be seen as a musical embodiment of this escape and a way that the singer-songwriter found to respond to the linguistic injury (Butler, 2021) caused by the media's portrayal of her romantic life.

The aim of this article is, therefore, to investigate the use of irony in "Blank Space" (2014) as a rhetorical device to reshape the narrative surrounding Swift's personal life and fight against the serial dater stereotype. For that, it is necessary to explore implications related to the portrait of female artists in the media, as well as the uses of irony as a literary device for critical engagement. I see this article as not only an opportunity to do an analysis of a song's lyrics, but also an opportunity to contribute to academic discourse on gender, media representation, and the transformative potential of irony as a rhetorical device. These factors motivated me into this research.

² ANO. Dating drama: Taylor Swift's many boyfriends. *Fomojo*. 08 Sep. 2016. Available in: <<http://www.folomojo.com/dating-drama-taylor-swifts-many-boyfriends/>>. Accessed on: 31 Dec. 2023.

³ SINGER, Ariane. 15 Reasons Why It's Dangerous To Date Taylor Swift. *The Talko*. 22 Feb. 2017. Available in: <<https://www.thetalko.com/15-reasons-why-its-dangerous-to-date-taylor-swift/>>. Accessed on: 31 Dec. 2023.

Furthermore, the next sections of this article delve into specific topics that contribute to its objective of research. In section 2, I provide a theoretical framework that encompasses studies regarding the use of irony, the reproduction of stereotypes and linguistic injuries, and gender issues related to the representation of female artists in the media. In section 3, there is the methodology section, which explains how the analysis of the lyrics of “Blank Space” (2014) is done, then section 4 is the analysis of the song.

2. FEMALE ARTISTS IN THE MEDIA, IRONY, AND FIGHT AGAINST LINGUISTIC INJURY AND STEREOTYPES

The representation of female artists in the media is a complex phenomenon that comprises issues of gender, power dynamics, and societal expectations. In order to better understand it, it is important to first discuss aspects of the media itself.

Fairclough (1995) examines the media as a powerful institution that plays a significant role in shaping and constructing social reality. According to the author, media texts “are designed to keep people politically and socially informed, are cultural artefacts in their own right, informed by particular aesthetics; and they are at the same time caught up in - reflecting and contributing to - shifting cultural values and identities. (Fairclough, 1995, p. 47). Because of that, the media holds power to shape people’s perspectives regarding many different subjects in society such as politics, health, religion, and other people’s lives in general.

In the case of celebrities, they are constantly present in the news due to fame and wide visibility. This makes them more vulnerable when it comes to having their lives exposed to the general audience, and, according to Projansky (2014, p.6) “media’s fascination with celebrities and girls is intensifying simultaneously”. As women are already a marginalized group under the forces of a patriarchal society, and, because the media is influenced by society itself, it raises the question of how much a female celebrity can be benefited or harmed by the media. As Baglia (2012, p.1) emphasizes, the media can advertise men and women both positively and negatively . Consequently, female celebrities (and other people as well) can be celebrated and/or heavily criticized by the media, and such occurrence “is part of the spectacularization of girlhood in turn-of-the-twentyfirst-century media culture: the discursive production and social regulation of the girl as a fabulous and/or scandalous object on display.” (Projansky, 2014, p.5). In this light, anything related to the life of a female celebrity can become material for the media's spectacularization machinery. Whether it is

celebrating their achievements or criticizing their actions, the media's lens amplifies the dichotomy between portraying these women as fabulous or scandalous.

The portrayal of female celebrities as either fabulous or scandalous objects on display, as highlighted by Projansky (2014), often leads to the reinforcement of gendered expectations and normative roles. Such occurrences can lead to the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes associated with these celebrities.

In a general perspective, stereotypes can be simply understood as ways in which individuals can be sorted and it has a creative social function of making sense of things that exist in the world (Fowler, 1991, p. 17). In this light, they have a powerful influence over how people see themselves, someone, or something else. Even though it is common for people to make stereotypes based on what they observe and predict about others, Hentschel, Heilman, and Peus (2019, p.2) emphasize that “stereotypes also can induce faulty assessments of people – i.e., assessments based on generalization from beliefs about a group that do not correspond to a person’s unique qualities.”. Thus, stereotypes can be harmful to a person or a group of people since they do not represent the entirety of an individual’s identity.

In the case of celebrities, stereotypes can easily spread and be associated with them through the media. When someone who is very famous gets involved in a scandal, for example, it is common to see many news reports about it in different media vehicles, and this can influence how the public perceives and interprets their actions. Fowler's insight (1991, p.13) underlines the reciprocal relationship between newsworthy events and established stereotypes, indicating that the media functions as a conduit through which stereotypes are disseminated and reinforced.

Moreover, the competitive nature of the media industry, as discussed by Fairclough (1995, p. 47), adds another layer to the dynamic. Media outlets are driven by the need to capture attention and generate headlines, further amplifying the association between celebrities and stereotypes. The result is a cycle where celebrities become entangled in a web of existing stereotypes, perpetuated by the media's relentless focus on sensational stories.

If the perpetuation of stereotypes through mediatic discourse is something that can harm people, it is possible to understand that people can be linguistically injured by stereotypes. According to Butler (2021, p.1), when someone says they have been injured by language, they “ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure.” The term ‘linguistic injury’, therefore, suggests that language has the potent ability to inflict harm. This acknowledgment underscores the idea that the choices people make in communication,

whether deliberate or unintentional, can influence individuals or groups, causing psychological, emotional, or social harm.

One way to linguistically injure someone, according to Butler (2021, p. 2) is through name-calling: “[t]o be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns. But not all name-calling is injurious”. This passage suggests that being called a name is part of the process of subject formation within the realm of language. However, only some specific names have the potential to injure, and this potential depends on the social, cultural, and historical context in which these names are employed. (Butler, 2021, p.2). For example, if we consider the word “slut”, it has a long history of being used as a derogatory term to devalue women. When directed towards a woman, it carries a weight of gendered insult and perpetuates harmful stereotypes. In this way, the use of such a term goes beyond a simple designation and becomes a linguistic act that reinforces power dynamics and social norms. Even though name-calling can be seen as a more direct manifestation of linguistic injury, when some are consistently applied to certain groups, it can lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that stereotypes are not are not fixed or immutable structures, but as “resources which can change fairly rapidly, with certain anachronistic aspects being available to be called upon by certain speakers and writers within particular communities of practice.” (Mills, 2008, p. 132). Therefore, the malleability of stereotypes provides an opportunity for change.

Butler (2021, p.2) also highlights that, at the same time that people are linguistically injured, they also are

given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call. Thus the injurious address may appear to fix or paralyze the one it hails, but it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response. If to be addressed is to be interpellated, then the offensive call runs the risk of inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call.

From this perspective, it is possible to understand that when people are subjected to injurious language they undergo a transformative process in which they use language to counter or resist the offensive call. In doing that, the individual who once was offended becomes a speaking subject who holds the power to turn a potentially harmful situation into an opportunity for self-expression and resistance. Within this process, individuals can employ various strategies and linguistic devices to navigate and respond to injurious language, and one powerful tool at their disposal is irony.

The intricacies of irony have long intrigued social and language theorists around the world who have been trying to define and understand the complexities of this rhetorical

phenomenon. One of the most remarkable definitions comes from Griffiths (2006, p.79), who states that “an ironic utterance is one intended to be taken as conveying the “opposite” of its literal meaning.” In other words, when speakers use irony, they intend to communicate the opposite meaning of the utterance, it is a contrast between what is expected and what actually is said. Griffiths’ definition aligns with other widely accepted ones found in reputable sources, such as the Cambridge online dictionary, which defines irony as “a situation in which something which was intended to have a particular result has the opposite or a very different result.” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).

However, many other authors have argued that irony can serve different purposes and there are various intentions behind its use. Hutcheon (1992, p.220), for example, sees irony as “a mixture of the pragmatic (in semiotic terms) and the semantic, where the semantic space is a space 'in between,' comprising both the spoken and the unspoken.” Irony as a pragmatic tool, is, according to the author, the way it is employed in communication, taking into account factors such as context and the relationship between the speaker and the audience. On the other hand, the semantic dimension is considered a space “in between”, which gives the idea that irony functions in the realm of ambiguity and duality, between what is overtly stated and what is implied. (Hutcheon, 1992).

Following this perspective, it is possible to understand irony as a nuanced and dynamic form of expression that can be intentionally used to enrich the communicative process, and, as Machado (2014) states, it can also be used as an argumentative and communicative strategy. In this light, the irony is used to make the communicative act more effective, and “[i]ts use gives more flavor to the communicative method, whatever that method may be—speaking, writing, painting, music, gestures, etc.” (Machado, 2014, p. 127). Machado’s insight highlights the versatility of irony as something that is not merely a linguistic ornament, but also an integral part of the communication process, and, it allows people to use it for different purposes, such as causing humor, conveying social critique, provoking reflection, challenging established norms, and so on. Consequently, the irony offers an array of possibilities for shaping narratives, fostering engagement, and promoting meaningful discourse across diverse contexts, as in music.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research is conducted through a qualitative interpretative analysis of the lyrics of the song “Blank Space” (2014), in order to investigate the use of irony in the song. According

to Putnam and Banghart (2017, p. 2) “an interpretive approach emphasizes how actors transform social phenomena into texts, narratives, and discourses that become central to organizational practices.” Therefore, by using this approach, I believe it is possible to better understand how Taylor Swift shapes and transforms social phenomena — particularly her own experiences — into the narrative within the song "Blank Space" (2014).

While acknowledging the song's overall ironic tone, it is crucial to note that, for the purposes of this research, only the most pertinent verses have been selected to facilitate the exploration of the instances where irony is prominently at play. The analysis is influenced by Hutcheon's (1992) sociocultural perspective on irony, which sees it as a device to respond to and influence societal attitudes and structures. The primary objective is to identify instances of irony embedded within the lyrics. However, the analysis goes beyond that by investigating how these instances correlate with the broader context of the singer's personal life.

By concentrating on these chosen verses, I aim to unravel the layers of meaning encapsulated in Swift's deliberate use of irony. Each verse serves as a microcosm, offering insights into the singer's strategic deployment of irony as a rhetorical device.

4. IRONY AS A RHETORICAL DEVICE TO RESPOND TO LINGUISTIC INJURY

In this analysis of the song “Blank Space” (2014), I intend to identify and dissect instances of irony to unveil Swift's intentional deployment of it and its significance in reshaping the narrative surrounding her personal life. For that, I take into account studies previously discussed as well as perspectives about the song shared by Swift herself. It is important to highlight that, throughout the analysis, the narrator in the song is referred to as ‘she’ once I consider the singer as the narrator.

(1) Nice to meet you, where you been?
I could show you incredible things
Magic, madness, heaven, sin
Saw you there and I thought
“Oh, my God, look at that face!”
You look like my next mistake
Love's a game, wanna play? (Swift, 2014)

In (1), it is possible to identify the use of irony in the association of “incredible things” with the elements “madness” and “sin”. The two elements generally correspond to things that people tend not to perceive as good. The pairs “magic” / “madness” and “heaven” / “sin”

demonstrate the use of an antithesis, and it indicates that the narrator is employing irony by presenting a juxtaposition of seemingly positive and negative elements. The use of the phrase "incredible things" suggests a sense of wonder and amazement, typically associated with positive experiences. However, the subsequent inclusion of "madness" and "sin" introduces an ironic twist. Both "madness" and "sin" traditionally carry negative connotations, contrasting with the initial positive expectation set by the phrase "incredible things."

This irony serves to subvert the listener's expectations. By associating elements with contrasting tones, the narrator hints at the unpredictable and potentially tumultuous nature of the relationship that they are offering. This relationship can be something so exciting that feels like magic, but, at the same time, it can be something so unstable that feels like madness.

In the following lines, the narrator's observation of the person's face and the exclamation "Oh, my God, look at that face!" further deepens the irony. While the initial reaction seems to express admiration or attraction, the subsequent assertion that the person "looks like my next mistake" introduces a play on the conventional understanding of romantic interest: people do not usually get into a relationship looking for a "next mistake", but, in this case, this is the narrator's expectation. Consequently, it is possible to assume that the narrator is someone who is constantly getting into trouble and making mistakes in her relationships, and, because of that, she always anticipates the possibility of a "next mistake".

Lastly, the declaration that "Love's a game, wanna play?" also reinforces the ironic tone by framing the pursuit of love as a playful or risky endeavor. It can also indicate that the narrator sees such a complex emotion like love as something frivolous such as a game. The irony lies in the juxtaposition of the profound and often challenging nature of love with the more carefree and recreational connotations of a game, which suggests a certain detachment or playfulness in the narrator's approach to romantic relationships.

(2) New money, suit and tie
 I can read you like a magazine
 Ain't it funny? Rumors fly
 And I know you heard about me
 So hey, let's be friends
 I'm dying to see how this one ends
 Grab your passport and my hand
 I can make the bad guys good for a weekend (Swift, 2014)

In (2), "new money, suit and tie" indicate the elements that catch the narrator's attention when it comes to her romantic interest. All these elements refer to materialistic things, which hints at the superficial nature of the relationship. This idea is further intensified by the sentence "I can read you like a magazine". It suggests that, instead of noticing the more

intricate and complex details about the person she wants to get into a relationship with, the narrator focuses on superficial aspects, akin to how one might skim through a magazine for quick and shallow information.

The irony lies in the way Swift makes fun of the characteristics that the media attributed to her as the serial dater girl. As the singer-songwriter explains, the media tends to describe this character as a woman who “jet sets around the world, collecting men (...) and then she’s crying in her marble bathtub surrounded by pearls.” (Swift, 2016). This hints at the idea of this sophisticated-dramatic-superficial woman who engages in extravagant and melodramatic behavior. In lines like “Grab your passport and my hand / I can make the bad guys good for a weekend”, Swift takes this exaggerated persona that the media created around her and uses irony to playfully embrace and exaggerate it even further. She employs irony not only to poke fun at the ridiculousness of the media's characterization but also to show that she is aware of and in control of the perception surrounding her, as it is possible to see in “Ain’t it funny? Rumors fly / And I know you heard about me.” In this light, the narrator uses irony also as a way to self-deprecate. As Hutcheon (1995, p. 48) discusses, self-deprecation can be used as a way to protect oneself by replacing something aggressive for something ingratiating. Therefore, Swift employs self-deprecation as a strategic move within the ironic framework of the song. By adopting and exaggerating the media's portrayal of her, she transforms it into a form of self-mockery, creating a shield against potential criticism while simultaneously reclaiming control over her life's narrative.

In the lines “So hey, let’s be friends / I’m dying to see how this one ends” irony appears as a way to subvert and play with the “normal” perspective that people get into relationships hoping that they will last. As discussed before, the narrator is a woman who is constantly going from one relationship to another, so she expects relationships to end shortly.

As Machado (2014, p.120) highlights “[n]arrators use irony to render past events more acceptable, “pretending” that they were not hurt so much but that they still managed to build a life despite all obstacles”. In the context of the song, the narrator is still compromising herself into a new relationship, which can indicate that Swift takes a playful approach, using irony to suggest that she is willing to engage in new relationships and move on with her life, despite the media's portrayal of her personality. So, instead of feeling retracted or sad in this situation, she takes it as an opportunity to empower herself.

- (3) Cherry lips, crystal skies
I could show you incredible things
Stolen kisses, pretty lies

You're the King, baby, I'm your Queen
 Find out what you want
 Be that girl for a month
 Wait, the worst is yet to come, oh no" (Swift, 2014)

In (3), the narrator depicts a romance that is almost like a fairy-tale. "Cherry lips, crystal skies" and "You're the king, baby, I'm your Queen" set vivid and positive imagery associated with romantic allure and beauty. The irony lies in the fact that this imagery is juxtaposed with the cautionary tone hinted at in the later lines. In "I could show you incredible things" the narrator boasts about being able to show the other person a life of excitement, however, there is once again a contrast between this and "pretty lies", which indicates that not all things the narrator can bring into the relationship are, in fact, incredibly positive.

The irony deepens in the last line. After mentioning the amazing aspects that this relationship could have, and even saying that she is willing to fulfill her lover's expectations in "Find out what you want / Be that girl for a month", the narrator reveals that the worst is yet to come, adding an unexpected twist to the seemingly perfect narrative and even conveying an opposite meaning to a commonly used sentence such as "the best is yet to come", which is usually used when people are already talking about positive things or events.

Therefore, it is possible to understand that this strategic use of irony adds depth to the narrative, challenging conventional romantic expectations and engaging the listener in deciphering the complexities of the song's message.

I consider the last chosen excerpt as a culmination of many factors that I have been discussing so far in this analysis. It is a part of the chorus of the song in which the narrator says:

(4) Got a long list of ex-lovers
 They'll tell you I'm insane
 But I've got a blank space, baby
 And I'll write your name (Swift, 2014)

In these lines, the narrator addresses the reputation that precedes her, acknowledging the perception that her previous relationships might have portrayed her as "insane." The ironic twist lies in her response to this reputation: "But I've got a blank space, baby, and I'll write your name." Here, the blank space represents an opportunity for a new beginning, a fresh relationship unmarred by preconceived notions. The irony is in the juxtaposition of the negative perceptions attached to her, countered by the blank space symbolizing a clean slate for a potential lover.

The consequences of this ironic twist in the lyrics are profound in the context of Taylor Swift's public image and the media narrative surrounding her. By openly acknowledging the "insane" label attached to her, she takes control of the narrative, once again, transforming it from a potential liability into a source of empowerment. The act of writing a new name in the blank space can be interpreted as autonomy over her own story and a liberation from the stereotypical perceptions that were previously linked to her.

It is important to keep in mind Mill's insight (2008, p.132) that stereotypes are flexible resources that can evolve quickly. Therefore, through the analysis of this song, I believe that Swift found a creative and effective way to call upon and transform the serial dater stereotype by using irony as a tool for self-reclamation. Instead of succumbing to the negative perceptions perpetuated by the media or ex-partners, she turns it into a playful and defiant assertion of her own identity, proving herself to be a talented storyteller capable of creating and transforming narratives.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has discussed how irony can be employed as a rhetorical device to fight against linguistic injury caused by the perpetration of a stereotype. For this purpose, selected verses from the song "Blank Space" (2014) by Taylor Swift were analyzed to find instances where the singer-songwriter intentionally uses irony, showcasing how this deliberate use serves as a powerful tool to confront and reshape the narrative surrounding her public image.

It was also possible to discuss some issues related to the nuanced relationship between artists and the media in the context of celebrity culture. In this context, the media presents itself as an influential institution that plays a pivotal role in the construction and perpetuation of stereotypes. The creation and perpetuation of stereotypes can reinforce power dynamic and gender norms that already exist, and this can affect female artists profoundly.

Through the analysis of the lyrics, it became clear that Swift uses irony to self-deprecate and make fun of the sensationalist character that the media created. Consequently, this intentional use of irony serves as a form of self-defense and resistance against the media's tendency to sensationalize and caricature her public persona. By employing self-deprecating humor in her lyrics, Swift strategically takes control over her life's narrative.

In this light, "Blank Space" emerged not merely as a response to media scrutiny, but as a deliberate and ingenious endeavor to subvert the narrative. The song became a canvas on

which Swift could playfully and satirically engage with the public's perception of her love life. By adopting an ironic stance, she skillfully crafted a song that transcended personal experience, transforming it into a relatable and universal exploration of the complexities of romance, fame, and societal expectations. In doing so, Swift not only embraced her role as a storyteller but also challenged the conventions of celebrity culture with a narrative of her own creation.

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