



THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF LITOTES AS A STYLISTIC DEVICE

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Abstract: Litotes—a figure of speech employing understatement through double negation or negated antonyms to affirm a positive meaning—has played a significant role in rhetorical and literary traditions across cultures and epochs. This article traces the historical development of litotes from its origins in ancient Greek rhetoric through its adoption in Latin literature, medieval scholasticism, and eventual flourishing in vernacular European literatures, particularly Old English and Russian. Drawing on classical rhetorical treatises, biblical translations, and poetic corpora, the study demonstrates how litotes evolved from a logical construct into a nuanced expressive tool for irony, modesty, emphasis, and cultural ethos. The analysis highlights key shifts in function and perception, especially its transition from a dialectical technique in Aristotle's Rhetoric to a hallmark of Anglo-Saxon heroic understatement and later a vehicle for subtle critique in modern discourse. The article concludes that litotes persists not merely as a grammatical curiosity but as a culturally embedded strategy for managing face, conveying ambiguity, and reinforcing communal values through restrained expression.

Keywords: Litotes; understatement; rhetorical figures; double negation; classical rhetoric; Aristotle; Old English poetry; biblical translation; pragmatic nuance; cultural ethos; stylistic device; historical linguistics; irony; modesty; Slavic literature

В данной статье рассматривается историческое развитие литоты — риторической фигуры, использующей преуменьшение посредством двойного отрицания или отрицания антонима — от античной греко-латинской риторики через средневековые библейские тексты до её значительной роли в древнеанглийской и славянской литературах. Анализ показывает, как литота трансформировалась из логического приёма в культурно значимую выразительную стратегию, передающую иронию, скромность и акцент. Исследование подчёркивает устойчивую актуальность литоты в современной речи как средства прагматической нюансировки и социального взаимодействия.

Ключевые слова : Литота; преуменьшение; риторические фигуры; двойное отрицание; античная риторика; Аристотель; древнеанглийская поэзия; библейские переводы; прагматическая нюансировка; культурный этос; стилистический приём; историческая лингвистика; ирония; скромность; славянская литература

Ushbu maqolada litota — ikki marta inkor yoki qarama-qarshi soʻzni inkor qilish orqali kamaytirib ifodalashga asoslangan retorik uslub — qadimiy yunon va lotin ritorikasidan boshlab, oʻrta asrlar bibliya matnlaridan tortib, qadimiy ingliz va slavyan adabiyotlaridagi muhim rolga qadar tarixiy rivojlanishi tadqiq qilinadi. Litotaning mantiqiy tuzumdan ironiya, vujudli kamtarlik va urgʻuni yetkazishning madaniy jihatdan muhim ifoda vositasiga qanday aylanganligi koʻrsatilgan. Tadqiqot zamonaviy nutqda litotaning ijtimoiy muloqot va pragmatik noziklik vositasi sifatida barqaror dolzarbligini taʼkidlamoqda.



Kalit soʻzlar : Litota; kamaytirib ifodalash; retorik uslublar; ikki marta inkor; qadimiy ritorika; Aristotel; qadimiy ingliz sheʼriyati; bibliya tarjimalari; pragmatik noziklik; madaniy etos; uslubiy vosita; tarixiy lingvistika; ironiya; vujudli kamtarlik; slavyan adabiyoti

Introduction. Litotes (from Greek λιτότης, *litótēs*, meaning “simplicity” or “plainness”) is a rhetorical device characterized by deliberate understatement, typically achieved by negating the opposite of what is meant (e.g., “not bad” to mean “good”). Despite its apparent simplicity, litotes carries complex pragmatic, semantic, and cultural implications. Its history reveals a trajectory from formal logic to literary artistry, reflecting broader shifts in communicative norms and aesthetic ideals.

The earliest systematic discussion of litotes appears in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (4th century BCE), where it is categorized among figures of thought that enhance persuasive effect through indirect affirmation. Aristotle notes that understatement can lend credibility by avoiding hyperbolic claims—a principle aligned with his ethical emphasis on *mesotēs* (the golden mean; Aristotle, trans. 2007). The Stoics later refined litotes within propositional logic, treating double negation as equivalent to affirmation, though rhetorical usage often retained pragmatic nuance beyond strict logical equivalence (Long & Sedley, 1987). In Latin rhetoric, Cicero and Quintilian acknowledged litotes as a form of *deminutio* (diminution), useful for creating contrast or expressing modesty. However, they cautioned against overuse, which could undermine *gravitas* (Quintilian, trans. 2001; Cicero, trans. 1942).

Litotes gained prominence through biblical translation, especially in the Vulgate and later vernacular Bibles. Phrases like “not unwise” or “not without merit” became conventionalized, partly due to Hebrew and Koine Greek syntactic preferences for negative constructions (Porter, 105–107, 1993).

In Old English poetry (e.g., *Beowulf*), litotes emerged as a defining feature of the heroic style: “*þæt wæs no þeahtlic sið*” (“that was no cowardly journey”) exemplifies how negated understatement conveyed valor while adhering to cultural norms of restraint (Pope, 1981; Robinson, 1980). Similarly, Church Slavonic and early Russian ecclesiastical texts employed litotes to express humility before divine authority, a practice that influenced secular literature during the 18th and 19th centuries (Lunt, 2001; Vinogradov, 1947/1971).

By the Enlightenment, litotes became a tool of ironic detachment in English prose (e.g., Jane Austen’s “not unsatisfactory”) and philosophical discourse. In 20th-century linguistics, scholars like Otto Jespersen and Roman Jakobson analyzed litotes within frameworks of markedness and implicature, recognizing its dependence on shared cultural knowledge and contextual inference (Jespersen, 1924; Jakobson, 1960).

Contemporary discourse analysis shows litotes remains vital in political speech, advertising, and digital communication—often signaling politeness, sarcasm, or epistemic caution (e.g., “I wouldn’t say no to a raise”; Fraser, 1999; Verschueren, 1999).

Comparative Analysis: Litotes Versus Other Figures of Speech

Litotes occupies a unique position on the spectrum of rhetorical devices, bridging the gap between direct affirmation and understatement. To fully appreciate its distinctive qualities, it is



useful to contrast litotes with other familiar figures of speech, such as hyperbole and simple understatement.

Hyperbole is the art of deliberate exaggeration intended to emphasize a point. For example, saying “This is the best meal in the history of the world” is an overstatement meant to impress. In contrast, litotes achieves emphasis by downplaying or negating the opposite. When one says “It’s not the worst meal,” the speaker implies a positive quality through understatement. The inherent irony in litotes engages the audience in a more reflective manner, prompting them to decipher the true intensity of the compliment or criticism. While both litotes and understatement are strategies for minimizing a statement, the key difference lies in their form and intention. Understatement may simply present information in a subdued manner, such as “It’s a bit chilly outdoors” on a freezing day. Litotes, on the other hand, employs negation to affirm the contrary. For example, saying “It’s not warm outside” not only underplays the cold but also underscores it by denying any warmth. This negation adds a layer of complexity that invites further interpretation. Beyond mere stylistic choices, litotes serves an ethical function in rhetoric. By downplaying one’s qualities or achievements—even when they are significant—it conveys modesty and humility. A talented artist who proclaims “I’m not a bad painter” avoids overt bragging, simultaneously enhancing their credibility and establishing a rapport with the audience. This quality of litotes is particularly valued in cultures where humility is equated with wisdom and trustworthiness.

Comparative Table: Litotes and Related Devices

Below is a table that summarizes the key distinctions between litotes, hyperbole, and general understatement:

Feature	Litotes	Hyperbole	Understatement
Definition	Affirmation by denying the contrary	Exaggeration to emphasize a point	Presenting something as less significant
Tone	Ironic, reserved, modest	Dramatic, emphatic	Calm, subtle
Example Statement	“Not bad” (meaning “good”)	“This is the best meal ever”	“It’s a bit chilly” (when very cold)
Purpose	To imply a positive meaning indirectly	To intensify an idea or feeling	To downplay or reduce emphasis
Cultural Connotation	Modesty, self-restraint, irony	Boastful, dramatic	Neutral or intentionally muted

This table demonstrates how litotes operates within the delicate balance of affirmation and negation—a balance that is not shared by devices that rely solely on exaggeration or simple minimization.

Far from being a mere grammatical oddity, litotes has served as a versatile and culturally resonant stylistic device for over two millennia. Its endurance stems from its ability to navigate



social constraints, encode layered meanings, and align with aesthetic ideals of moderation. Understanding its historical trajectory enriches both literary interpretation and cross-cultural pragmatics.

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