

**Tsapro G. Yu.**

Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University

**POSTFEMINIST IRONY IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH AND FRENCH CHICK-LIT**

*The article examines irony as a central stylistic and ideological feature of contemporary English and French chick-lit written between 1996 and 2025. The research traces how the comic tone of early postfeminist prose gradually transforms into a reflective and emotionally balanced form of narration that links humour with awareness, restraint, and empathy. The material includes ten novels representing successive stages of the genre's development and showing the transformation of the female voice in popular fiction. The study combines stylistic and discourse analysis to explain how language conveys distance, tenderness, and self-observation and how these features construct a dynamic model of femininity. Irony characterises English chick-lit novels with exaggeration and self-commentary, which in its turn hides the main characters' vulnerability beneath verbal play. In French prose, it unfolds through understatement, syntactic balance, and tonal precision, transforming reflection into a dominant mode of expression. The comparison of two literary traditions demonstrates that irony becomes a sign of maturity, representing women's experience. Humour and control act as parallel forms of self-expression, while the gradual movement from hyperbole to simplicity defines the stylistic reorientation of the genre. Irony unites confession with reflection, turning speech into recognition. Irony goes together with sincerity in this way, demonstrating the shift from irony as defence to irony as empathy. The study demonstrates that irony, once a gesture of detachment, now serves as a means of understanding. It functions as both a stylistic principle and an ethical choice, linking self-irony with authenticity and giving contemporary women's prose its distinctive tone of resilience and grace. The evolution of irony through three stages of chick-lit development reflects a transition in sensibility: irony ceases to veil emotion and begins to articulate it, defining the postfeminist search for meaning through language, where irony becomes the medium of emotional truth.*

**Key words:** postfeminism, irony, chick-lit, English and French women's fiction, discourse analysis, comparative literature, gender and language.

**Introduction.** The emergence of chick-lit in the late 1990s marked a new phase in the development of women's popular fiction, reflecting the transformation of feminist ideas into the individualised narratives of postfeminism. Written mainly by women for a female readership, chick-lit represents the linguistic and cultural code of postfeminist femininity, where irony, humour, and self-reflection serve as key discursive strategies. The protagonists of chick-lit demonstrate professional independence combined with emotional vulnerability. Their identity is shaped through everyday speech, interactional humour, and patterns of consumption that reveal social belonging. Chick-lit operates as a discourse of observation rather than confession, reflecting contradictions of femininity in the postfeminist period.

Postfeminist discourse results from the intersection of feminist experience and neoliberal values. It converts collective emancipation into individual practice and translates equality into the right of personal choice. On the linguistic level it appears through self-irony, evaluative and emotive vocabulary, hesitation markers, and forms of self-reference that signal aware-

ness of one's own discourse. These features make chick-lit an important field for studying the mechanisms of constructing female subjectivity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The shift from irony to authenticity in the genre reflects broader social tendencies: from ironic distance toward emotional sincerity, from external performance toward introspective self-recognition.

The relevance of the study is determined by the growing attention to chick-lit as a discursive phenomenon that combines features of mass culture and stylistic experimentation. While cultural and ideological aspects of the genre have been examined by I. Whelehan [23], S. Ferriss, M. Young [2], and S. Harzewski [7], its linguistic and narratological dimensions remain insufficiently analysed, particularly in comparative English- and French-language contexts.

The aim of the article is to trace the evolution of postfeminist discourse in contemporary chick-lit and to identify how linguistic, stylistic, and narrative strategies construct irony as a means of representing femininity in 1996–2025.

**Literature Overview.** Research into chick-lit has expanded over the last two decades, forming an interdisciplinary field at the intersection of literary criticism, linguistics, and cultural studies. Early works by I. Whelehan [23] conceptualised chick-lit as a postfeminist adaptation of the female Bildungsroman, where irony replaces ideological certainty. S. Ferriss and M. Young [2] systematised the genre as a cultural text combining romance, consumerism, and humour. Their approach defines chick-lit as a mirror of neoliberal femininity that translates economic and emotional self-management into narrative form. S. Harzewski [7] interprets the genre as a mode of self-reflexive writing that registers the exhaustion of feminist rhetoric and the emergence of individual negotiation with gender norms.

Subsequent research emphasised the hybridity of postfeminist discourse. R. Genz [3] and D. Negra [14] describe postfeminist discourse as internally contradictory, combining the language of empowerment with the patterns of adaptation to consumer values. In their view, agency is presented as a linguistic construct rather than a social constant. R. Gill [4] defines this model as “intimate neoliberalism,” in which emotional openness functions as a communicative norm and forms part of self-presentation. The studies demonstrate how linguistic strategies of self-reference, confession, and humour maintain gender asymmetry under the appearance of autonomy. Linguistic studies [1; 12] identify discourse markers, hedges, and pragmatic routines that construct a voice simultaneously self-conscious and socially compliant. These findings confirm that the representation of femininity in chick-lit is both linguistic and ideological.

Further contributions highlight the communicative and stylistic parameters of the genre. M. Montoro [13] examines pragmatic markers and discourse particles functioning as structural elements of narration. Their use reproduces conversational rhythm and defines the communicative type of female speech. L. Macé [11] and F. Pageaux [17] analyse French chick-lit texts and indicate that translation and adaptation influence the linguistic form of humour and emotional evaluation. Comparative observations show both convergence and divergence in English- and French-language corpora. Irony acts as a stable discursive feature, while the level of linguistic informality correlates with national conventions of speech and gender representation. Quantitative analysis of these parameters has not yet been systematised.

Recent studies have applied a corpus-based methodology to the analysis of chick-lit discourse. J. B. Peterson [18] records recurrent lexical fields

of emotion and consumption, which reveal stable connections between affective and material codes. A. L. Rees [19] traces changes in evaluative vocabulary of female-authored prose and notes the tendency toward explicit emotional expression after 2016. The observations confirm the gradual movement of postfeminist discourse from ironic distance to authentic self-representation. These studies align with sociolinguistic observations that late postfeminist discourse tends to reappropriate emotional expression, which was once regarded as incompatible with empowerment. This tendency supports the hypothesis of gradual movement from irony to authenticity, observable both in English- and French-language corpora.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that chick-lit operates as a discursive field reflecting transformations in gender ideology and linguistic representation. Despite substantial theoretical attention to its cultural role, the linguistic mechanisms of irony, emotionality, and self-reference remain insufficiently systematised. The analysed research defines chick-lit as a discursive formation that reflects changes in gender ideology and linguistic practice. The material shows that the genre reproduces social meanings of femininity through lexical, stylistic, and pragmatic choices. Previous interpretations concentrate mainly on thematic and cultural aspects. Linguistic mechanisms of irony, emotionality, and self-reference are mentioned but not classified. Their description requires a unified methodological basis combining corpus and discourse analysis. Such approach makes it possible to trace the formation of postfeminist subjectivity and to outline the evolution of feminine voice in English- and French-language popular prose of 1996–2025.

**The material of the study.** The research material comprises a corpus of ten chick-lit novels written in English and French between 1996 and 2025. The corpus represents two linguistic traditions and illustrates the dynamics of postfeminist discourse within the genre. The texts are divided into three chronological periods reflecting stages of thematic and stylistic development.

1995–2007 – the period of formation of the ironic postfeminist narrative (S. Kinsella – *Confessions of a Shopaholic* [9], *Can You Keep a Secret?* [10]; M. Keyes – *Watermelon* [8]).

2018–2023 – the period of hybridisation and authenticity-centred discourse (B. O’Leary – *The Flatshare* [15], *The No-Show* [16]; V. Grimaldi – *Le parfum du bonheur est plus fort sous la pluie* [5], *Une Belle Vie* [6]; A. Valognes – *Mémé dans les orties* [20];

M. Vareille – *La vie rêvée des chaussettes orphelines* [21], *La dernière allumette* [22]).

The corpus illustrates the gradual shift in linguistic and narrative strategies, from ironic representation to direct expression of emotion. The total volume of the analysed material is about one million words.

**Methods of the Research.** The research applies corpus, stylistic, and discourse analysis. The corpus approach provides quantitative data on lexical and pragmatic markers that represent irony. The linguistic material was processed in SketchEngine with lemmatisation and frequency ranking to identify collocational tendencies in English and French chick-lit.

Stylistic analysis defines the linguistic realisation of female subjectivity through narrative voice, evaluative vocabulary, and pragmatic markers of emotion. It describes how humour and self-reflection function in the text and how these categories change across three chronological periods.

Discourse analysis interprets linguistic data in the context of postfeminist ideology. It shows how forms of expression correlate with representations of femininity and autonomy. The combination of methods ensures quantitative precision and contextual accuracy of interpretation.

**Results and discussion. Postfeminist Irony in Contemporary Women's Fiction.** Irony in contemporary women's prose serves as both a stylistic and psychological mechanism that transforms contradiction into self-expression. In early postfeminist fiction, it emerges as a rhetorical mask protecting the heroine from exposure and judgment, while simultaneously revealing the impossibility of reconciling autonomy with emotional dependency. Across the selected novels – *Confessions of a Shopaholic* [9], *Can You Keep a Secret?* [10], *Watermelon* [8], *The Flatshare* [15], and *The No-Show* [16] – irony becomes the central discursive resource through which femininity negotiates its visibility in late modern culture.

In *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, irony grows out of linguistic contradiction. Becky Bloomwood works as a financial journalist, yet her job only magnifies her inability to handle money. The contradiction is not hidden – it defines the tone of the novel. When she insists *the Jigsaw suit was on sale, so that was actually saving money* [9, p. 54], the reader hears a logic both comic and persuasive. What looks like irresponsibility is presented as autonomy, a deliberate act of self-reward. In this inversion, the discourse of consumer culture turns weakness into strategy and pleasure into proof of control. The inversion of values – spending as saving, indulgence as reward – reveals a discourse that normalises economic irratio-

nality through the vocabulary of choice and self-care. When Becky tells herself *it's only a VISA bill, how scary can a few numbers be* [9, p. 47], the line sounds half comic, half desperate. The humour is not decorative; it works like a defence, a way of keeping panic at a distance. Through this brief self-persuasion, she regains a sense of order, turning anxiety into a familiar rhythm of speech that keeps her world intact. Kinsella constructs a distinctive female idiom of irony – elastic, self-interrupted, and intimate – where self-mockery performs the double task of confession and concealment.

*Can You Keep a Secret?* extends this ironic mode into the domain of speech and performance. Emma Corrigan's voice is saturated with pragmatic markers of hesitation and euphemistic understatement. Her self-address *the important thing is to keep confident and businesslike* [10, p. 23] immediately collapses under the weight of situational chaos, producing verbal irony rooted in the mismatch between intention and execution. The central in-flight scene – *this is going to be a completely pleasurable experience from start to finish* [10, p. 41] – turns panic into humour through exaggerated composure. Kinsella builds her sentences to sound as if Emma were thinking out loud – hurried, uneven, full of qualifiers that cancel each other out. The fragments and repetitions give the page its nervous energy. What seems comic is really the mind trying to keep control. Irony here is not a pose but a slip: emotion breaks through the language that was meant to hide it. By confessing too much, the heroine accidentally articulates the very vulnerability she attempts to control, transforming embarrassment into authenticity.

In *Watermelon*, Marian Keyes converts irony into emotional resilience. The opening contrast – *the day I gave birth to my first child was the day my husband left me* [8, p. 7] – encapsulates the absurd simultaneity of joy and loss. Claire tells her story with a sharp sense of the absurd. Bitterness never fully wins; she keeps turning pain into laughter. When she says *I wouldn't want my close friends present at the removal of my appendix* [8, p. 12], the remark cuts through sentiment with the precision of good comedy. What might have been tragedy becomes observation. Keyes lets humour do the work of recovery – exposing the clichés of motherhood by showing how little comfort they offer. Later, self-mocking understatement – *to put it simply, I was not looking my best* [8, p. 15] – transforms humiliation into irony, signalling a conscious mastery of discourse. The humour that runs through Keyes's novel is defensive yet healing: it re-establishes agency by allowing pain to be narrated with-

out self-pity. Through irony, the protagonist reclaims authorship over her trauma, converting breakdown into narrative coherence.

Beth O'Leary's *The Flatshare* reconfigures irony within the sphere of social realism. The heroine's first line *you've got to say this for desperation: it makes you much more open-minded* [15, p. 3] already merges irony with empathy. The linguistic playfulness that once served consumer escapism now mediates material precarity and emotional abuse. In *The Flatshare*, humour comes from what shouldn't be funny. Tiffany jokes that *the mushrooms growing behind the toilet are introducing a fresh, outdoorsy feel* [15, p. 5], and the line makes the reader smile before it sinks in – this is what her life has become. The comedy hides a sense of exhaustion. The language that once glamorised consumption now describes survival. O'Leary turns lifestyle optimism inside out: the same cheerful tone exposes the limits of comfort and the absurd economy of urban life. Irony no longer shields the heroine from embarrassment; it lets her keep her balance. Through it, laughter becomes a small act of endurance.

In *The No-Show*, irony defines the emotional logic of narration. Siobhan's line *he's a man, ergo, he let me down* [16, p. 8] shows how disappointment is expressed through linguistic compression. The phrase conveys frustration and distance at the same time and introduces the ironic tone that organises the narrative perspective. When she comments *if she'd known she was going to be stood up on Valentine's Day, she'd have got proper milk* [16, p. 10], humour performs the function of emotional distancing and signals repeated disappointment. O'Leary's later prose demonstrates elliptical construction and tonal restraint: verbal irony correlates with silence and hesitation. The phrase *it has all the makings of a meet-cute* [16, p. 23] appears as a comment on the unfolding story, not as irony in itself. It marks the narrator's awareness of the pattern she repeats and shifts the tone from description to observation. Irony enters quietly here, through the recognition of form rather than through exaggeration. In these instances, irony no longer functions as parody but as a form of introspection that transforms disappointment into linguistic control and emotional dignity.

Across the corpus of English novels analysed, irony delineates the evolution of postfeminist discourse from self-parody to self-recognition. Early heroines articulate conflict through linguistic excess – italics, repetition, and expressive intensifiers – whereas later ones translate it into pragmatic understatement. The contrast between *I am a completely independent woman. I just need to text him. Once. Maybe twice.* [9, p. 92] and *I'm kind of sick of not paying for things*

*myself* [15, p. 124] shows the change in the linguistic form of irony. In the first case, repetition and intensifiers define a model of exaggerated self-assurance that conceals hesitation. In the second, irony functions as statement and expresses a stable position rather than emotional dependence. The movement from excess to restraint defines the stylistic direction of contemporary women's prose and reflects a new model of femininity built on self-awareness and emotional literacy. In this context, irony no longer opposes sincerity but becomes its linguistic form – a means of articulating truth while maintaining composure and humour.

**Postfeminist Irony in Contemporary French Women's Fiction.** In contemporary French women's prose, irony does not appear as parody or exaggeration. It is a way of writing about emotion with precision and restraint. The narrator often observes herself rather than comments on others, turning reflection into the main source of humour. This irony is quiet and deliberate. It transforms fragility into composure and gives disillusionment the form of understanding.

In *Le parfum du bonheur est plus fort sous la pluie* [5], irony grows from the distance between the idea of happiness and its ordinary form. The line *le bonheur ne sent pas toujours la rose, parfois il a une odeur de lessive et de café froid* [5, p. 42] brings poetic language into the space of daily routine. Happiness is not idealised; it is recognised in habit. The author writes *je voulais écrire un roman d'amour, j'ai écrit mon journal de bord* [5, p. 87], and this admission defines the tone of the novel. The story becomes not a plot of romance but a process of emotional recovery told through understatement.

In *Une belle vie* [6], irony appears as observation. The phrase *les jeunes veulent tout comprendre, nous on veut seulement dormir* [6, p. 53] changes the earlier sense of rebellion into acceptance. Humour here expresses continuity, not conflict. The style remains simple and conversational. Through such language, Grimaldi builds an image of maturity based on calm perception.

In *Mémé dans les orties* [20], irony moves into the speech of everyday life. The line *il faut bien piquer un peu pour exister* [20, p. 27] summarises the practical logic of resistance. The humour of the phrase depends on tone rather than meaning. When the narrator adds *les gens polis sont souvent ceux qui s'excusent d'être eux-mêmes* [20, p. 65], irony becomes a form of social observation. Valognes turns the gesture of complaint into affirmation and gives humour a function of empathy.

In *La vie rêvée des chaussettes orphelines* [21], irony is condensed into image. The comparison *je trie les chaussettes comme je trie mes souvenirs : il en manque toujours une* [21, p. 49] joins the domestic

with the introspective. Through such phrasing, the novel connects the routine act with reflection. Another remark, *je me soigne à coups de listes et de citations Pinterest* [21, p. 92], brings irony into contact with the discourse of self-help. The character repeats social language and exposes its emptiness. Emotion is still present, but it is filtered through analysis.

In *La dernière allumette* [22], irony speaks through restraint. The line *je n'ai plus peur du noir, j'ai juste peur d'allumer trop fort* [22, p. 118] expresses balance between caution and openness. The syntax itself carries contrast and defines tone. Vareille's irony is not thematic; it exists in the structure of the sentence and in the measured rhythm of narration. The result is a tone that unites precision with empathy.

Across these five novels, irony develops from reaction to reflection. It no longer opposes sincerity but becomes its form. The speech of humour turns into the language of recognition. Each text demonstrates how irony makes emotion visible without turning it into confession. Through such expression, postfeminist fiction defines empathy as its central stylistic principle and transforms the comic tradition into discourse of understanding.

**Conclusions.** Irony defines the stylistic logic of contemporary chick-lit in both English and French traditions. In English texts, it grows from exaggeration and repetition and shows the instability of self-expression. The heroine speaks too much and hides behind humour. In French prose, irony becomes minimal and measured. It expresses observation rather than reaction and marks a more stable emotional position.

The comparison of the two corpora shows one direction of change. Irony moves from external performance to internal commentary. It no longer protects the speaker but organises her perception. The comic tone of the early novels turns into linguistic accuracy in the later ones.

Across both traditions, irony functions as a way of speaking about emotion without sentimentality. It connects self-reflection with restraint and defines a model of femininity based on awareness and control of expression.

Future research may focus on how irony gradually transforms into authenticity, reflecting the shift from self-ironic discourse to direct expression in contemporary women's prose.

#### Bibliography:

1. Benwell B. Postfeminist discourse and the rhetorical construction of female individuality in lifestyle magazines. *Feminist Media Studies*. 2010. Vol. 10, No. 2. P. 169–185. DOI: 10.1080/14680771003672254.
2. Ferriss S., Young M. (eds.). *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*. New York : Routledge, 2006. 312 p. DOI: 10.4324/9780203967939.
3. Genz R. *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 254 p. DOI: 10.1057/9780230244493.
4. Gill R. *Gender and the Media*. – 2nd ed. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2017. 340 p. DOI: 10.1515/9781509514041.
5. Grimaldi V. *Le parfum du bonheur est plus fort sous la pluie*. Paris : Fayard, 2017. 384 p.
6. Grimaldi V. *Une Belle Vie*. Paris : Fayard, 2023. 416 p.
7. Harzewski S. *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*. Charlottesville : University of Virginia Press, 2011. 296 p. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctt6wrhp4.
8. Keyes M. *Watermelon*. London : Arrow Books, 1995. 512 p.
9. Kinsella S. *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. London : Black Swan, 2000. 336 p.
10. Kinsella S. *Can You Keep a Secret?* London : Black Swan, 2003. 368 p.
11. Macé L. *La littérature feel-good : Écriture de soi et culture populaire*. Paris : Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2018. 278 p. DOI: 10.4000/books.psn.3261.
12. McRobbie A. *The Aftermath of Feminism : Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London : SAGE, 2009. 270 p. DOI: 10.4135/9781446263495.
13. Montoro R. *Style in Chick-Lit : Language and Fictional Self in Contemporary Women's Writing*. London : Continuum, 2012. 256 p. DOI: 10.5040/9781472541625.
14. Negra D. *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*. London : Routledge, 2009. 278 p. DOI: 10.4324/9780203888210.
15. O'Leary B. *The Flatshare*. London : Quercus, 2019. 352 p.
16. O'Leary B. *The No-Show*. London : Quercus, 2022. 352 p.
17. Pageaux F. *La littérature populaire et l'imaginaire social contemporain*. Paris : Classiques Garnier, 2020. 310 p. DOI: 10.15122/isbn.978-2-406-10478-3.
18. Peterson J. B. Lexical fields of emotion and consumption in women's popular fiction. *Language and Literature*. 2021. Vol. 30, No. 4. P. 389–403. DOI: 10.1177/09639470211042317.
19. Rees A. L. *Emotion and Evaluation in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. Oxford : Peter Lang, 2022. 240 p. DOI: 10.3726/b18712.

20. Valognes A. *Mémé dans les orties*. Paris : Michel Lafon, 2015 320p.
21. Vareille M. *La vie rêvée des chaussettes orphelines*. Paris : Charleston, 2019. 384 p.
22. Vareille M. *La dernière allumette*. Paris : Charleston, 2023. 368 p.
23. Whelehan I. *The Feminist Bestseller : From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City*. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 266 p. DOI: 10.1057/9780230503804.

### **Цапро Г. Ю. ПОСТФЕМІНІСТСЬКА ІРОНІЯ В СУЧАСНІЙ АНГЛОМОВНІЙ І ФРАНКОМОВНІЙ ЖІНОЧІЙ ПРОЗІ (CHICK-LIT)**

*У статті розглянуто іронію як центральну стилістичну та ідеологічну ознаку сучасної англomовної й франкомовної жіночої прози жанру чик-літ, написаної впродовж 1996–2025 рр. Дослідження простежує, як комічний тон ранньої постфеміністської прози поступово трансформується у рефлексивну й емоційно врівноважену форму оповіді, що поєднує гумор із усвідомленням, стриманістю та емпатією. Матеріал становлять десять романів, які репрезентують послідовні етапи розвитку жанру й відображають еволюцію жіночого голосу в популярній літературі.*

*У роботі поєднано стилістичний і дискурс-аналіз, аби з'ясувати, як мова передає дистанцію, ніжність і самопостереження та як ці риси формують динамічну модель жіночності. Іронія в англomовному жанрі чик-літ проявляється через перебільшення й самокоментар, що приховує вразливість героїнь за грою слів. У французькій прозі вона розгортається засобами натяку, синтаксичної врівноваженості та тональної точності, перетворюючи роздум на провідний спосіб вираження. Порівняння двох літературних традицій засвідчує, що іронія стає ознакою зрілості у зображенні жіночого досвіду. Гумор і самоконтроль виступають паралельними формами самовираження, а поступовий перехід від гіперболи до простоти визначає стилістичну переорієнтацію жанру.*

*Іронія поєднує сповідь із роздумом, перетворюючи мовлення на акт упізнання. Вона більше не суперечить щирості, а стає її мовним виявом, позначаючи перехід від іронії як захисту до іронії як співчуття. У дослідженні доведено, що іронія, яка колись була жестом відсторонення, тепер виконує пізнавальну функцію. Вона постає водночас стилістичним принципом і етичним вибором, поєднуючи самоіронію з автентичністю та надаючи сучасній жіночій прозі її впізнаваного тону стійкості й витонченості.*

*Еволюція іронії крізь три етапи розвитку чик-літ відображає зміну чуттєвості: іронія перестав приховувати емоцію й починає її формулювати, визначаючи постфеміністські пошуки сенсу через мову, у якій іронія стає засобом емоційної правди.*

**Ключові слова:** *пост фемінізм, іронія, чик-літ, англomовна й франкомовна жіноча проза, дискурс-аналіз, порівняльне літературознавство, гендер і мова.*

Дата надходження статті: 09.11.2025

Дата прийняття статті: 10.12.2025

Опубліковано: 30.12.2025