

IRONY AS A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Condrat Viorica

Rezumat

Ironia este mai mult decât un simplu procedeu stilistic menit să simuleze un sentiment, o atitudine contrare celor adevărate. Folosită în conversație, ea apare ca o strategie comunicatională bine gândită, cu ajutorul căreia locutorul își atinge finalitățile comunicatională.

Without irony the world would be like a forest without birds.

Anatole France.

Apart from being a rhetorical device, irony stands for a well-thought communication strategy selected by the speaker in order to obtain the intended reaction from the part of the hearer. Its degree of indirectness is not meant to puzzle the listener; on the contrary, its aim is to make him / her recognize the speaker's communicative intention. The disparity between what is said and what is meant to be said may cause problems for communication to occur. Yet, the participants' shared knowledge helps them understand one another. The listener is supposed to identify and appreciate the sharp contrast which irony implies. Therefore, it is interesting to find out why the speaker selects namely irony to converse.

There are three types of irony: verbal irony (i.e. the use of words to convey a meaning that is the opposite of its literal meaning), dramatic irony (i.e. when the audience perceives something that a character in a literary work does not know), and irony of situation (i.e. discrepancy between the expected result and actual results) [11, p.1]. This classification is not strict as linguists also speak about social irony, Socratic irony, etc. As I am interested in how irony works in conversation the subject of my study will deal with verbal irony.

Verbal irony, also referred to as rhetorical irony, can be defined as "speaking in such a way as to imply the contrary of what one says, often for the purpose of derision, mockery, or jest" [11, p.1]. Thus, irony appears as an indirect way of stating something. It simulates rather than proclaims.

Norman D. Knox interprets irony as "the conflict of two meanings which has a dramatic structure peculiar to itself: initially, one meaning, the *appearance*, presents itself as the obvious truth, but when the context of this meaning unfolds, in depth or in time, it surprisingly discloses a conflicting meaning, the *reality*, measured against which the first meaning now seems false or limited and, in its self-assurance, blind to its own situation. Irony "lies", but it does so only as a dramatic means of bringing two meanings into open conflict" [4, p.626]. It is a "subtle lie", the one which is supposed to emphasize the contextual meaning of words and not the dictionary one. Professor Galperin claims that out of all other stylistic devices, irony is the most "dependent on

the environment” [3, p.142]. This context¹ dependence as well as the degree of indirectness makes irony an appealing topic of research.

So far, the definitions mentioned above touch upon the gap between the contextual and literal meanings of words in an utterance. None of them mentions paralanguage² and its role in both encoding and decoding ironic discourse. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* suggests the following definition for “irony”: “the expression of one’s meaning by saying the direct opposite of what one is thinking but **using tone of voice to indicate one’s real meaning**” [underlined CV] [2, p.632]. Thus, irony implies not only the discrepancy of direct and contextual meanings, but also the usage of specific tone, gestures, etc.

To get a better understanding of the usage of irony in communication, let us analyze it within the theory of speech acts proposed by the philosopher of language J.L. Austin. He affirms that there are three acts enacted in a conversation: the locutionary act, i.e. “the literal, basic meaning of the proposition” [5, p.166]; the illocutionary act, i.e. “the speech act or force showing the intention of the speaker” [ibid.]; and the perlocutionary act i.e. “the effect on the addressee, unpredictable, possibly nonlinguistic” [ibid.].

Norman D. Knox states that irony “lies”, however, a clear distinction should be made between irony and lie. The question of lies is very problematic in the study of speech acts theory. Anne Reboul and Jacques Moeschler argue whether the lie is an illocutionary act or not. They claim that it is a locutionary act and prelocutionary act, but it cannot possibly be an illocutionary one as the speaker’s intentions are not conventionally expressed in the utterance [see 8, p.32]. Irony is not a lie in its direct meaning. The speaker does not intend to deceive the hearer, he wants to communicate something indirectly, for this reason it can perform the three acts. When saying “Oh, brilliantly done!” to someone who has done something stupid, we have: a locutionary act, i.e. the lexico-grammatical meaning of the proposition; an illocutionary act, rendering the speaker’s intention, which in this case is to assert what is contrary to what is said; a prelocutionary act, as it will have a certain effect on the listener. Thus, in this case one can speak of an indirect speech act.

The speaker could have said: “It was a stupid thing to do”, which would also have shown his dissatisfaction with what was done. However, he opted for an indirect enactment of the message, which the addressee has to work out. Curiously enough, “one fact of human communication is that more often than not interactants do not say directly what they intend to mean” [5, p. 118]. A way to explain this “need” for indirectness can be found in the fun it produces. It can be ingenious and humorous. “It may at the same time allow the speaker to assess how well

¹ The construct of reality as conceived by particular groups of people, representation of what they know of the world and how they think about it [9, p.26].

² Non-linguistic ways of signaling meaning that accompany and act upon the verbal text, e.g. gesture, facial expression, “tone of voice” in speech, the size and placement of print in written language [9, p.131].

the addressee can understand the intended meaning, thus *joining* the speaker as a member of a select group” [5, p.124].

Let us consider the following examples:

1. A: [to a new student] Macroeconomics is an absolutely enthralling subject!
B: Oh, really?
2. A: [to a new student] Macroeconomics is an absolutely enthralling subject!
B: Oh, yes, I agree, I think so too.

It is obvious that A’s intended meaning is to communicate the opposite of what he says:

Underlying meaning	Ironic expression	Apparent meaning
Macroeconomics is a very boring subject.	Macroeconomics is an absolutely enthralling subject.	Opposite, hyperbole (jest)

If B translates the meaning A has intended (Example 1), then A and B share the same opinion concerning macroeconomics, and A believes B to have proper thinking for a student and he can become A’s friend. But if B fails to understand the irony (Example 2), then he is likely to be left out. In such cases, the speaker “is testing out the common ground shared by the speaker and addressee; it can be a **strategy** [underlined CV] to bring the addressee into the same community” [5, p. 124].

Strategy, as a term in linguistics, was taken from the military vocabulary. The New Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language defines strategy as “the science or art of planning and directing large-scale military movements and operations” [10, p. 655]. A communication strategy can be defined as the art of planning and arranging words so that they produce the desired effect on the listener.

Thus, I assume that irony, apart from rendering the disparity between the underlying and apparent meanings, is a communication strategy used in conversation for specific reasons, e.g. to joke, to mock, to express one’s disapproval, etc. and which enables the interactants to understand one another due to both the stylistic devices employed in the utterance (i.e. hyperbole, understatement, rhetorical questions, etc.) and the paralinguistic meaning.

While speaking about the verbal nature of irony, professor Galperin states that “irony is generally used to convey a negative meaning. Therefore only positive concepts may be used in their logical dictionary meanings” [3, p.144]. Indeed, in the examples given above, irony is embodied in the words “an absolutely enthralling”. The context meaning conveys the negation of the positive concepts embodied in the “dictionary” meaning.

Let us consider some other examples of irony taken from literary works.

- (1) “Strike my bob, lad, but you’re a beautiful writer!” [6, p. 104]

(2) “I don’t know what they *do* teach in schools. You’ll have to do better than that. Lads learn nothing nowadays, but how to recite poetry and play the fiddle. Have you seen his writing?” he asked of Mr. Pappleworth.

“Yes; prime, isn’t it?” replied Mr. Pappleworth indifferently. [6, p. 106]

(3) “And how *is* Clara?” asked Miriam.

“Quite all right, I think”

“That’s good!” she said with a tinge of irony. [6, p. 316]

(4) “You told her, then?” came the sarcastic answer.

“Yes; why shouldn’t I?”

“There’s certainly no reason why you shouldn’t,” said Mrs. Morel, and she returned to her book. [6, p. 325]

(5) “He must be an agreeable companion,” thought Kitty ironically. [7, p.59]

(6) “It’s absurd. If you think you ought to go it’s your own lookout. But really you can’t expect me to. I hate illness. A cholera epidemic. I don’t pretend to be very brave and I don’t mind telling you that I haven’t pluck for that. I shall stay here until it’s time for me to go to Japan.”

“I should have thought that you would want to accompany me when I am about to set out on a dangerous expedition.” [7, p. 64]

All these examples are indirect speech acts, even Example (5) where the speaker and the addressee is one and the same person. The illocutionary act is realized by means of irony. It is a strategic communication plan used by the speakers to achieve their communicative goals.

In the first two examples the speaker uses irony in jest. His intention is to make the listener change his handwriting. The word combination “a beautiful writer” and the word “prime” convey the negation of their literal meanings. Example (2) is interesting for presenting two different speech acts. The first speaker expresses directly his communicative intention, i.e. his employee should write more accurately (You’ll have to do better than that.); while Mr. Pappleworth asserts indirectly the idea that the boy’s handwriting is awful.

The third example enacts the conversation between two ex-lovers. Miriam’s “concern” for the present girlfriend is meant to render her annoyance for having been left out. Her irony is supposed to hurt her ex-lover. The illocutionary force is again revealed indirectly. Being acquainted with her listener very well, the speaker knew which communication strategy to choose so that he saw her irritation without stating it directly. Such formulas (e.g. How are you?/ How is your mother? etc.) are the opening utterances of a conversation. Their primary goal is to express politeness, not necessary concern. Thus, the speech act under analysis is an expression of a negative aspect of politeness.

Irony can be selected as a communication strategy to show the speaker's disapproval of something. Thus, in Example (4), the displeased speaker chooses to state it indirectly. The speech force is rendered by the negation "there's certainly no reason". The speaker emphasizes her discontent with the help of the adverbial modifier "certainly". This example is interesting because it has already a negation, which, in its turn, conveys another negation, this time of what has already been negated.

Example (5) is what the speaker thinks; she does not state the utterance aloud to an audience. However, all three speech acts are enacted here as well: the locutionary act (the sentence itself), the illocutionary act (the speaker's intention is to amuse herself by formulating an ironic observation) and the perlocutionary act (it produces the desired effect of amusement on the listener who, in this case, is the speaker herself). It should be pointed out the importance of the modal verb "must" which adds shades of sarcasm to the ironic meaning of the utterance. It is used in such a context when "we realize that something is certainly true" [1. p.112]. Thus, the speaker achieves the desired effect.

The irony expressed in the last example has the strategic intention of openly mocking at the listener. It is a sarcastic utterance meant to express the speaker's disdain. However, there is a tinge of self-irony in this utterance as well. It sounds like a bitter remark the speaker states in order to assert his previous observation regarding the listener's dishonest behaviour.

The analyzed examples illustrate the discrepancy between apparent and underlying meanings that irony implies. They can be rendered in the following table:

Underlying Meaning	Ironic Expression	Apparent Meaning
Your handwriting is bad.	...you're a beautiful writer! ... prime, isn't it?	Opposite, exclamation (joke). Opposite, disjunctive question (joke).
I don't really care.	And how <i>is</i> Clara? That's good.	Opposite (unsympathetic).
You shouldn't have called her.	There's certainly no reason why you shouldn't.	Opposite, negation (dissatisfaction)
He is a disagreeable companion.	He must be an agreeable companion	Opposite, modality (mockery)
I know you don't want to go with me.	I should have thought that you would want to accompany me when I am about to set out on a dangerous expedition	Opposite, modality (sarcasm).

To sum up, irony is a strategic enactment of the speaker's communicative intentions. It is used for specific reasons, such as to joke, to express one's disapproval, to mock, etc. The means by which irony is achieved are various (e.g. disjunctive question, overstatement, negation, modal verb usage, etc.). Yet, each ironic utterance is meant to state the opposite of what it is said. The context has the leading part in the recognition of irony. Ironic utterances, taken out of context, lose all their illocutionary force, producing no effect on the listener who will not identify the intended meaning.

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