

The problems of Interpretation of Ironic Speech Acts

Manana Rusieshvili, Tbilisi State University, Georgia
Ilona Kenkadze, Tbilisi National University, Georgia

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Abstract

This article is dedicated to the problems of interpretation of irony in the light of speech acts theory and provides a general idea of recent developments in the research of irony as a combined category of form, meaning and context. The utterance becomes ironic only in the context which helps the hearer to determine the discrepancy between the speaker's intention and the literal meaning of the words he actually uses. In the article which discusses the issues regarding decoding irony in the light of speech acts, the semantic model of irony is considered to be a hierarchical structure of three interdependent layers: explicit, implicit and background cultural levels. On the surface level the proposition is actualised whereas the deep level is tied in with the contextual parameters on the one hand and with the background cultural knowledge level on the other.

Key Words: irony, speech acts, negative and positive intention, implicit, shared knowledge

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Introduction and theorising irony

Irony, which is a complex, interdisciplinary category comprising the form, meaning and context of an utterance, remains one of the central problems for pragmatics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, theory of communication and philosophy of language.

Irony is frequently actualised in everyday life and reveals specific emotional relationships between the participants of the communicative act, their individual psychological values and experience. As well as this, it is gradually becoming a significant part of the world perception. Being a changeable concept, irony tends to modify together with the time and development of the society. This somewhat instable nature of irony makes it interesting for scholars who aim to understand its functions and mechanisms in specific speech situations as well as in the language system. Our particular interest in irony is determined by the multifaceted nature of irony and its complex actualisation in the context.

It should be mentioned that in modern linguistics there is still no agreement reached regarding universally accepted formal definition of irony that would be acceptable for at least the majority of interested scholars. The reason for this is that, in order to come up with the definition which would include all important traits of irony, it must be borne in mind that different methodologies rely on various criteria and suggest different mechanisms of the exploration of irony. Gibs and Colston argue that the word “irony” can mean different things to the speaker, the hearer and the researcher that adds complexity to this issue. (Gibs and Colston, 2001). Fernandez claims that “one person’s irony is always possibly another person’s sincerity”. (Fernandez, 2001:13)

Scholars hold different views regarding the decoding conditions of irony as well. To name a few, Attardo believes there are three main conditions for this: ambiguity that helps to recognise utterance as ironical; inappropriateness of the utterance explicit meaning to the context it is used in; the speaker’s real intention. (Attardo 2000). Giora claims that irony is an indirect negation ‘forcing’ the hearer, in the first place, to activate the salient meaning of the utterance in the process of its decoding. (Giora, 1999). Sperber and Wilson consider that in certain circumstances any object can cite any other object and this citation should always be relevant to the hearer so that he could adequately interpret the ironic utterance. They see irony as ‘use and mention’, i.e. using an utterance and echoing it. (Sperber and Wilson, 1981). Scholars also contemplate on irony in the context of politeness theory with the ability of the speaker to be critical and not aggressive at the same time when activating irony. Clearly, face threatening situations (disapproval, accusation, or complaint) are very common in everyday life and play an important role in interpersonal communication. (Brown, 1987:61) Thus, being polite to the interlocutor and prevent their face loss becomes the issue and challenge of the speaker’s communicative competence. A good example of this is below where Oscar Wilde indirectly criticises youngsters for their universal claim to possess an overwhelming knowledge of the world implicitly addressing young generation although on the explicit plane speaking only about himself preserving politeness:

1. "I am not young enough to know everything." Oscar Wilde

Having familiarised ourselves with the main theories of irony (32 types of irony have been identified, according to our study) it can be claimed that scholars base the traditional definition of irony on the idea that irony, looked at as the interaction of the proposition's explicit, implicit and contextual meanings with a usual 'clash' of positive and negative connotations, expresses something other than or opposite to the literal meaning of the utterance. During its actualization the speaker deliberately attaches the opposite meaning to his utterance tying it in with a specific ironic context which contains emotional and evaluative components of condemnation, irritation, protest or criticism. It becomes obvious that the interpretation of irony especially in its complicated cases of realisation should be based on the whole complex of meanings of the words that create irony in correlation to the specific context. (Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995; Utsumi, 2000)

2. You got the worst mark in your yesterday's test, you genius!

The speaker in this example reveals his irritation and anger by addressing irony and criticising the hearer for bad test results, by intentionally assigning the opposite meaning to the word "genius".

Any communication is intended to be mutual and consists of coding and decoding processes, therefore in order to decode an ironical proposition both parties of the communicative act require a certain specific contextual knowledge to select a particular structure relevant to the particular situation. Thus, to communicate irony means to achieve a correct understanding of the utterance by means of intentional mutual exchange of information using verbal and, sometimes, non-verbal cues and elements such as gestures, mimics, intonation. This confirms the necessity of cooperation between linguistic competence and mental structures (psychological condition, belief, intention of the speaker) in the process of irony decoding.

We look at irony as a phenomenon with a dual nature. On the one hand, it is a pragmatic strategy frequent in the process of a verbal interaction characterised by the speaker's contextual pragmatic intention to implicitly communicate a specific (often negative) message. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that irony is a systemic trope which can be characterised by several layers of expression. We consider the semantic model of irony to be a hierarchical structure of three interdependent layers: surface, deep and background cultural level. (Rusieshvili, 2005) The explicit meaning of the utterance is revealed on the surface layer, whereas its implicit layer expresses contextual meaning the speaker intends to convey. A shared cultural knowledge that the speaker and the hearer must possess in order to decode the speech act successfully, can be viewed as a layer which is tied with the contextual parameters of the irony and determines the degree of the hearer's readiness to effectively interpret the utterance. Therefore, irony decoding can be achieved by contextual analyses and interpretation of these three layers. Thus, the reason of unsuccessfully uttered irony can be not only non-sufficient linguistic competence, but also, lack of knowledge of socio-cultural values and norms. (Kenkadze, 2012:267)

Each example of irony shows specific features of the speaker's communicative intention to impress, criticise, protest, forbid, deny, ask, accuse, blame, reprimand, disapprove and the meaning he discloses accompanied by his emotional state, e.g. being annoyed, furious, angry, irritated, insulted or sympathetic; that's why the role of communicative competence should be considered as one of the main significant issues in irony interpretation. (Hymes 1967).

3. There's an acrid smell in the air and suddenly I realize the Bolognese is burning. Wanda is just standing there by the stove..., not even noticing. Gently I take the spoon out of her grasp and start to stir. Thank God you don't need a Nobel Prize to do this. (Kinsela 2012:95).

The utterance (3) conveys a strong ironic meaning which can be decoded on the deep layer of the model of irony suggested by us, tied with the background cultural level which in this particular example (3) is as follows: the speaker, Poppy Wyatt, works in a small office and is going to marry a man, Magnus Tavish, a handsome University lecturer who writes books; his mother, father and a brother also write books representing a top academic family. Poppy is being annoyed when her future mother-in-law, Wanda, who is constantly speaking about her scientific achievements during the reception party forgets about such a "mundane" thing as stirring the food so the former uses irony to express her disapproval of the situation and at the same time to protest against being considered not suitable for her future family as she has no proper education, does not have a Nobel prize but still can cook the Bolognese well enough.

As mentioned above, irony is not an utterance with a ready-given "frozen" form but a changing-in-time unique communicative phenomenon and an important part of a language, a thought and human experience that in each separately taken context, is created anew. As an example we would like to present the following utterance:

4. I have \$20 and I feel like I can compete with Bidzina Ivanishvili.

This utterance is a good illustration of a recently created ironic speech act which clearly reveals additional ironic meaning between \$20 and Bidzina Ivanishvili who is a Georgian multi-millionaire. This ironic proposition cannot be successfully decoded without employing the background cultural level. Specifically, all the citizens in Georgia can easily capture the implicit ironic meaning of this utterance as currently when the inflation rate is too high in the country, having £20 is considered to be equal to being rich. Once again, the adequate decoding of the situation is tied with the relevant background knowledge of the situation.

Irony and the speech acts

In order to discuss the issues of ironic speech acts interpretation we need to say a few words about speech acts in general starting with the traditional school that claims that any language is an inevitable part of action and introduces a speech act as a human interaction of social character acted through words in a form of a request, offer, refusal, compliment, greeting, thanking depending on the situation it is used. (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) A speech act is closely connected to sociocultural factors and is

based on the speaker's intention and psychological state of mind, i.e. relation between the words and the world.

5. It's such a pity that everybody who knows how to rule a government have already been employed as taxi drivers or hairdressers. (François Maurice Adrien Marie Mitterrand (The 21st President of France, 1981-1995))
6. I have 2 Diplomas as I graduated from 2 Universities so I can start working as a taxi driver.

These two examples belong to two different social contexts but share the same meaning. The first describes the situation in France, the other belongs to a Georgian native speaker, but in both countries, we believe, these utterances can be easily decoded as examples of ironic speech acts as the hearer easily identifies the general picture which reflects all three layers of irony perception that are involved in the process of decoding. Based on these examples we can say that interpretation of irony is based on contextual pragmatic grounds on the one hand and on the relations between the speaker and the hearer, on the other. Obviously, these are the cases when the speaker "masks" his utterance which implicitly contains something negative and the hearer, familiar with the situation, decodes the meaning of an utterance as ironic.

As known, there are 5 main speech acts: 1. assertives - the meaning of the utterance is true and the speaker believes in this truth; 2. directives - the speaker tries to make the hearer commit further action in future that can exist in the form of a request, advice, permission or warning, demand, instruction, order, command; 3. expressives - the speaker demonstrates his attitude to the action completed prior to the utterance or his psychological state of mind by expressing negative feelings, complaint, irritation, regret or thanking, gratitude, apology, congratulation, excuses, greetings; 4. commissives - the speaker obligates himself to act in future, that can be an offer, a promise, an oath, a threat, abet, a guarantee and 5. Declarations - in this work we will not look into this group as there is no declarative speech acts being identified as ironic. (Trosborg, 1994)

The table below reflects the percentage of all 4 types of ironic speech acts examples that we came across in our research. It should be emphasised that in our investigation we were not restricted by any parameters that gave us the opportunity to distinguish and illustrate different kinds of utterances conveying the ironic meaning. The data illustrates utterances of "natural situations" representing classical patterns of echoic theory, rhetoric questions, close to sarcasm utterances, ironic compliments from literature, illustrations, online publications, empirical material, TV shows and everyday speech situations in the English language.

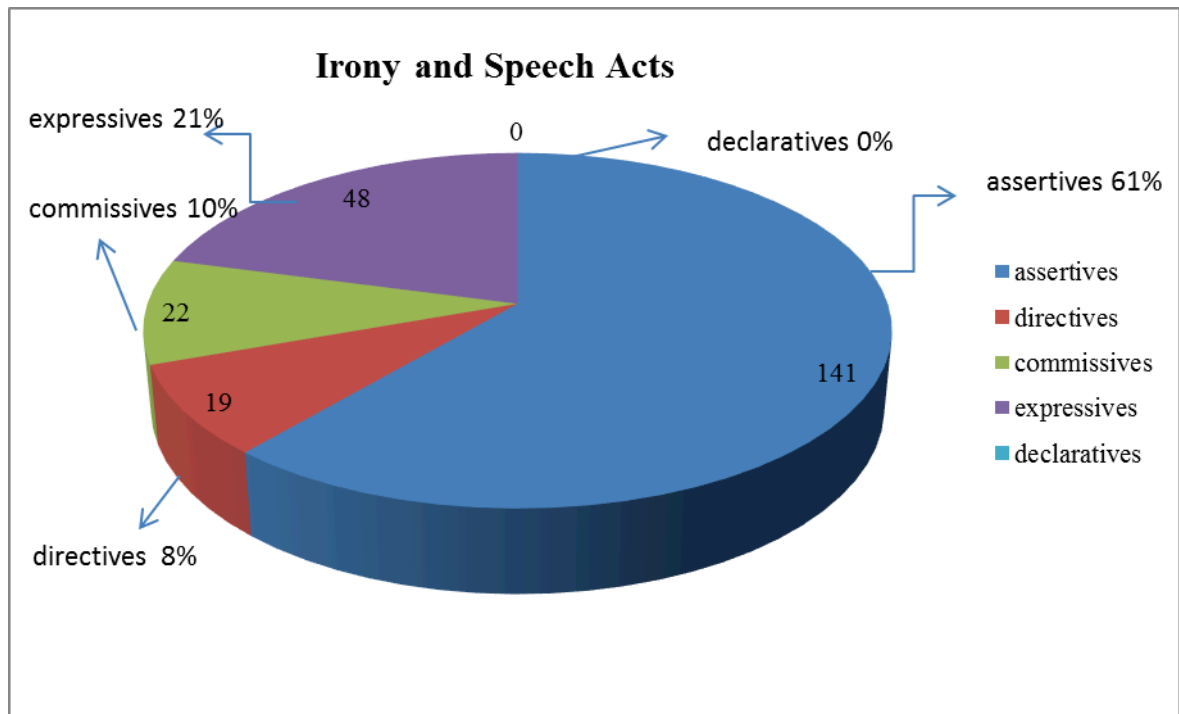


Table 1

The main objective of any ironic speech act is its successful performance when the interlocutors participate in a complex process of semantic, stylistic and pragmatic characteristics in specific contextual situations achieving the hearer's understanding and adequate reaction to the utterance, i.e. a competent decoding of a complicated ironic illocution. Therefore, the best way to interpret ironic utterance is to go further than what was meant in the utterance, to what remains beyond it. The difficulty in this process lies in the speaker's and the hearer's communicative competence. Thus, to decode irony and to understand what the utterance really means in the given context is to adequately "read between the lines". (Colebrook, 2004).

One question that arises here is why the speaker makes a choice in the favour of irony? The answer to this rhetoric question, from our point of view, lies in the following:

1. Every society has its norms and traditions that regulate a communicative behaviour of its citizens banning some kind of verbal actions being offensive.
2. The speaker has an inner intention to create a specific ironic effect which can help him to influence the hearer making him to change his view on a certain situation. Each example of irony shows specific communicative intention to affect, condemn, object to, accuse, blame, reprimand or disapprove.
 7. The nice thing about egotists is that they don't talk about other people. (Lucille S. Harper, public figure)
 8. To those who are interested in my private life I can say that I am still young and happy and even am not dieting.

By using irony in the above two utterances (7) and (8) the speaker takes an opportunity to express his/her opinion which is not allowed to be delivered directly by the norms of ethic and simultaneously creates a specific ironic effect, which helps him/her to ease the psychological tension and persuade the listener in this specific speech situation not to intrude in other's private life. However, if the hearer lacks the relevant knowledge of socio-cultural values and norms of the society in question, this speech act can fail to achieve its real aim.

According to our research, the speaker uses irony with a certain intention that is reflected in perlocutionary acts, such as alarming, persuading, convincing, misleading to effect the hearer and to make the hearer recognize his opinion and emotion to correctly interpret the utterance containing a wish, an idea or a feeling. (Kenkadze, 2012) "People adjust their language to their addressees and the situation in order to achieve interpersonal effects". (Locher, 2010:2)

Another example (9) has been taken from London weekday newspaper that had an article describing Ed Miliband's tour in London in 2013. He was promoting his cost-of-living campaign when he was greeted by the opposite party fans with eggs thrown at him in protest. In his utterance Ed Miliband makes everybody understand his emotional and psychological state implicitly criticising the situation while explicitly thanking for warm welcome using irony as because of ethical norms he could not have achieved his goal and disapprove the violent action towards him directly.

9. Thanks to all at East St Market for the warm welcome today. Can recommend it for easy availability of eggs. Ed Miliband. (Metro 2013:7)

Each case of ironic utterances is accompanied by the speaker's varying emotional state. For instance, the speaker may feel upset, frantic, cross, irritated, offended, dissatisfied, but also be somewhat sympathetic to the situation, which may cause another problem in the process of irony interpretation. There are very few examples when irony reveals positive connotation. In such instances the speaker usually expresses a positive meaning through the negative proposition, in other words, the speaker means something positive (on the deep layer) by uttering something negative (on the surface layer). This technique, as is known, is referred to as asteism. It contains a great chance for the speaker to be misunderstood if the hearer is not able to grasp irony in the utterance (due to the lack of the shared cultural knowledge) and, as a result, decodes the utterance as a kind of criticism which, in its turn, leads to negative emotions. Our research follows the opinion that positive irony happens very seldom (Brown, 1980; Attardo, 2000; Booth, 1974) which must be caused by its specific nature and particular difficulty of decoding.

We came across a few examples of "positive" irony which have one thing in common: they can all be adequately decoded only if both participants of the communicative act, the speaker and the hearer, share common cultural knowledge and, in addition, the hearer has an appropriate ability to make out the difference between the speaker's implicit and explicit meanings.

One of the examples is from Sophie Kinsella's "I've got your number". The parents of Magnus and Felix came back home after being away for some time. Their elder son

greet them saying that he missed his Mum and Dad but the younger son sincerely mentions that he did not. Mother intentionally uses irony in a negative form by calling her son a “terrible boy” at the same time expressing positive feeling of love.

10. I'd also like to say a big “welcome back” to Mum and Dad. Magnus raises a glass and they both nod back. We missed you while you were away!
I didn't, chime in Felix, and Wanda gives a bark of laughter.
Of course you didn't, you terrible boy!. (Kinsella, 2012:97)

Another example is taken from Hemingway's novel “A Farewell to Arms”.

11. You are such a silly boy. She kissed me. (Hemingway, 1977:76).

In this sentence Katherine speaks to Henry and kisses him when he, being in hospital after the operation on his leg, asks her if she still loves him. The speaker (Katherine) is successful in using irony as the hearer (Henry) correctly decodes her intention to cuddle him. As we mentioned above, utterances of “positive” irony are always vague and ambiguous and there is always possibility for the hearer to misunderstand the speaker or to interpret the irony in a different way.

12. Do you love me still on these water-worn, cold and old stones?
Yes. I'd like to spread a bed roll here and prove it.
That would be more barbarous than the pigeon shooter.
I'm barbarous, the Colonel said.
Not always.
Thank you for the not always. (Hemingway, 1977:119)

This situation (12) contains two ironic utterances one of which illustrates asteism. Renata and Colonel are in love with each other. They are having a walk in the city centre when Colonel ironically refers to himself as barbarous in order to invite praise words from Renata. She correctly understands his words but replies “not always” that provokes the second ironic utterance from the Colonel, in the form of explicit thank you act, for not admiring him enough.

In the following example (13) we can see that, according to the *mention theory of irony* interpretation, (Sperber and Wilson, 1981) Andrew echoes Christine words in the ironic utterance revealing its propositional negation and his intention to imply the opposite meaning to the words “nice time”. This utterance represents an assertive speech act.

13. Christine remarked happily: “We did have a nice time, didn't we, love?”
“Oh, a very nice time!” Andrew said bitterly. (Cronin, 1993:41).

Another example of assertive ironic utterance we would like to present is taken from Mark Twain's “The Prince and the Pauper”: “The Master of Ceremonies was not present; there was no one who felt safe to venture upon this uncharted sea, or risk the attempt to solve this solemn problem.”

14. Alas! There was no Hereditary Scratcher. (Twain, 2011: 36).

In this utterance the situational irony that bears not the opposite, as in 'usual' cases, but different interpretation to the meaning delivered by words when the intention being explicit shows that in those times the King had Masters of Ceremonies, in other words, Masters of Everything, who could assist him in any situation. However, when Tom (disguised as Prince Edward) wanted to scratch his nose and he did not know what to do, there was no Hereditary Scratcher who could help the king by advising how to behave in such a situation without violating an ancient tradition or a custom. Tom's expectations are violated, he criticises the system of "Masters-Helpers" and this is a necessary condition for irony to exist and for the hearer to comprehend it. Overall, this act can only be decoded successfully only if the listener/reader has adequate background cultural knowledge of the Court of that period.

In the below example (15) we deal with indirect speech act of commissives which contains information in the form of a question as the explicit act and a promise and threat "to be nasty" as the implicit one.

15. "He can't go. How am I supposed to be nasty to him if he isn't here?" (De Bernieres, 2001:28)

For this ironic utterance to be successfully decoded, the speaker (the Doctor) sincerely reveals his psychological state and shows that he utterly dislikes the person who, having invaded his country, was going to stay at his place. The doctor honestly desires to encourage the captain stay at his house although his question (15) is insincere as posing it, he already knows the answer. Thus, in this context, the question becomes a rhetoric question, which represents an interrogative syntactic structure but doesn't ask for any information and contains a discrepancy between the form and the function. Being the most favourite rhetoric tool of expression, irony gives the hearer in this example a deeper level of meaning and spices up the utterance.

One more example of commissives is the following.

16. "When I was a boy I was told that anybody could become President; I'm beginning to believe it." (Clarence Darrow, an American lawyer (1857 – 1938).

Irony here (16) works out very well with different layers of meanings hidden in it particularly when the speaker, Clarence Darrow, talks about becoming a President enriching the utterance with an obviously negative connotation.

Our research convinced us that speech acts become ironic only in the context and in order to better understand the process of irony interpretation, it is necessary to learn more about its specific contextual parameters. Specific context of irony implies its communicative purpose, situation, (official, neutral), cultural traditions (that is ability to express his/her negative emotions and opinions), social characteristics (gender, profession), psychological aspects (mood, emotion), physical characteristics, socio-psychological relationships between the speaker and the hearer, their belief (friendly, relative, strange, cold, hostile) and their subjective perception and finally assists the hearer to determine the discrepancy between the speaker's intention to say something

and literal meaning of the words he uses. Austin makes it clear that “words need to be “explained” by the context in which they are used.” (Austin, 1962: 100)

To illustrate this, we would like to give a good example of expressives:

17. I love Germany so. (LaFeber, 1994: 491)

Taken separately, without the context, this sentence can't be analysed from the point of view of speech acts theory, as we don't know whether it is an oath, a promise, a remark, a suggestion or a thanking until we know the context it is used in. What the speech acts have in common is their propositional content, what they differ in is their illocutionary force. [Bierwisch, 1980]. Only after the context (decoded with the help of the deep and background cultural knowledge layers of the model suggested by us) is added to the proposition, the hearer interprets the utterance as ironic:

18. “I love Germany so”, a Frenchman wrote sarcastically. “Every day I thank God that there are two of them”. (LaFeber, 1994: 491)

The Frenchman speaks about Germany as an occupant country during World War II and shows his dislike to the existence of two parts of Germany. The hearer who does not have a specific knowledge on historical context, will not be able to interpret irony in this utterance adequately.

19. I believe there is something out there watching us. Unfortunately, it's the government. (Woody Allen, an American actor, writer, director)

Another example of expressives is the utterance in which Woody Allen expresses his psychological state revealing the feeling of deep regret that he does not believe in existence of extra-terrestrial life but is being controlled by the administration. In this case is not necessary for the hearer it to possess the extra-linguistic knowledge to decode this ironic intention.

In the light of speech act theory the speaker uses directives in the form of a command, request, advice, warning, demand or instruction to force the hearer to perform the action in future which is specified by the intentional state of proposition of the utterance.

20. Please don't kill me, I am innocent. (De Bernieres, 2001:27).

This is a request not to be killed which is pronounced by the Captain of the enemy army, the invader, Captain Corelli, who entered the house he lived in and saw a young woman, a native citizen of the occupied Greek island with a large cooking knife preparing dinner in the kitchen. The way he uttered these words using dramatic pronunciation and intonation is also worth mentioning “The captain fell to his knees before her and exclaimed dramatically” (De Bernieres, 2001:27).

Two other examples of a directive speech act were taken from everyday life. In both cases, in order to adequately interpret the utterance, the hearer needs firstly to assess “the ironiness” of the utterance, then understand the disagreement between the context of the uttered saying and its ironic implication (a hero who rescues wine (21) and a

request to be tortured (22)) and finally has to have enough background knowledge to identify the speaker's belief and communicative intention to advise. In example (21) the words belong to an employee who is looking forward to having a relaxing weekend with his friends enjoying his time and drinking wine. In example (22) the speaker reveals his wish to live or to die a sudden death by saying the opposite.

21. It is Friday time to be a hero and rescue some wine trapped in this bottle.

22. How do you prefer to die: a sudden death or torture?-Torture, please.

Thus, every ironic speech act consists of the members of the communicative act (the speaker and the hearer), the utterance itself which has three planes of expression: explicit, implicit (with the context-bound ironical meaning) and the background cultural knowledge plane. In addition, an ironic speech act possesses its specific communicative goal and emotional expressiveness. Through all these we have outlined a further way of our study of the ironic utterance interpretation in a specific context taking into consideration that a successful pragmatic decoding of the ironic speech act example reflects the main goal of the speaker: to be correctly understood.

Conclusion

In modern linguistics ironic speech acts theory has become crucial and important focusing on speaker's intention, belief and attitude, context, illocutionary force, specific speech situations as the process of defining of ironic connotation is impossible without employing concepts of pragmatics.

To summarize, having taken into consideration that pragmatics deals with speech acts and the context these speech acts are used in, we can assume that the most difficult issue in the interpretation process of ironic speech acts lies, in the first instance, in identifying the logical relation between two meanings of the ironic utterance (expressed and implicated, surface and deep) which emphasises discrepancy between expectations and the actual turn of events. In the second instance, it lies in understanding which one of two levels is true or false following by a competent decoding of the utterance that meant something different/opposite to what was said based on shared cultural background level as cross-cultural research suggests that speakers of any two given communities can understand irony differently. Other problems of adequate irony interpretation that we tackled in this paper and are considered to be critical in the process of a complex ironic speech act perception are caused by mental ability of the hearer to detect, assess and understand complicated aspects of the speaker's beliefs, attitudes towards the utterance and intention to communicate and reveal certain negative (rarely, positive) moods.

Thus, for a full understanding of irony and for its adequate interpretation, on the basis of the model of interpretation of three layers suggested by us. Specifically, on the surface, explicit layer the interlocutor will hear the proposition which opposes general meaning of the situation; on the implicit, deep and background cultural levels he/she will find clues about the real meaning and if the listener is ready enough, he/she will be able to decode the meaning of the utterance successfully.

To sum up, irony interpretation is a complex mechanism of the process called psychological adaptation of the human being. “Irony itself is an occupational hazard of being human, present in every age.” (Fernandez and Huber, 2001).

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