Decoding of Irony in the Process of Intercommunication

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Abstract
This article is dedicated to the problems of irony decoding in the process of intercommunication which is based on the results obtained through our three-year research. The given intercultural study investigates the development of specific features of irony taking into account interpretation of a speaker's mind: communicative intention, meaning, belief, attitude and providing the overview of scientific advancements in the field of irony interpretation. We considered irony as a joint category of form, meaning and context. Various studies of irony propose two main ways of how the hearer processes ironic message: a one-stage and a two-stage accounts. One group of researchers considers that the hearer first understands the literal meaning of an ironic utterance and then moves on to the ironic meaning; while the second group suggests that the hearer processes an expression as ironic the moment he/she hears it. While the final explanation of irony understanding is still incomplete, this study tried to clarify and explain both ways of irony decoding.

Keywords: one-stage/two-stage interpretation, communicative intention, shared knowledge, irony decoding, alternative meaning

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Introduction

Irony as an interdisciplinary category, which is a complex and unique communicative phenomenon covering the form, meaning and context of an utterance, is one of the central problems of psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, neurolinguistics, theory of communication, pragmatics. Therefore, almost all scholars looking into dilemma of irony make their investigations in semantic, grammatical and pragmatic fields of speech acts. Our opinion coincides with the experience that irony is a particular strategy of verbal interaction which is characterised by the speaker's pragmatic intention to implicitly criticise the hearer in order to change his/her opinion.

Coding and decoding of irony has always been and remains one of the main functions of a human's activity with the aim to achieve adequate understanding of the utterance, which in its turn, means a competent perception of a complicated proposition of an utterance and a response to the ironic illocution. Having gained a new form and dimension in modern world, investigation of irony is based on the interlocutors' shared knowledge, their background, general way of thinking and perception and experience. The main difficulty here lies in the hearer's communicative competence.

The below example is a comment that a wife makes when seeing her husband with his sunglasses on in a kind of weather when there is no sun at all and the sky is cloudy:

(1)   "Oh, we have the sun shining today!" (empirical material)
Example (1) if said in a different context when the sun is really shining is not ironic but in the speech situation when wearing sunglasses is not appropriate to the weather it gains ironic connotation, especially when the answer from the hearer, in this case husband, also contains implicated ironic meaning and is the following:

(2)   "Indeed." (empirical material)
Decoding of irony and its complex meanings in a specific context in the process of intercommunication is as complicated as its definition. The reason for this is that irony is not an utterance with a ready-given "frozen" form, in every separately taken context it is created anew. The fact that irony is a speech act phenomenon, which expresses opposite or different meaning of what has been said, is evident, but more important aspect of irony perception is the fact that it should be considered as contextually changing element. Thus, it is hard to define irony. Furthermore, the world has significantly changed since the word "irony" was introduced, as a result the term irony has also changed its semantic meaning. Because of this scholars shifted their focus and expanded the "traditional" definition of irony to express something opposite, which led to the concept of irony becoming indistinguishable.

In addition, researchers interested in irony rely on different criteria in the process of irony comprehension which, in its turn, has led to its many definitions – we have identified 32 types of irony during our research so far. Consequently, there is no universal opinion on the method of irony comprehension that all the researchers of irony would agree on: each scholar offers his own, specific methods, mechanisms or framework for irony investigation in light of linguistic, philosophical or psychological background. Our definition of irony is the following: Irony as a pragmatic phenomenon is a systematic trope which can be characterised

by explicit and implicit levels and the coding and decoding of which can be achieved by contextual analysis and interpretation of these two levels. (Kenkadze, 2012).

In the below example (3), my colleague, Marie, sent an email to all the team members asking if they recognised the name and address of the person mentioned in it. This was an urgent payment request that should have been processed immediately. Nobody replied to Marie's email that day. Next day during the team meeting Marie verbally asked the same question and one of her colleagues, Jennifer, confirmed that she knew the person and recognised the address. Marie replied using the classical ironic utterance of expressives when the speaker demonstrates his/her attitude to the prior action in the form of a complaint – communicating regret:

(3)   "Oh, thank you for sending me the confirmation email yesterday, Jennifer!"

Two ways of Irony decoding

The present paper reports the experiment which addresses the question of whether irony comprehension is a two stage process or a direct access vision. In particular, our interest was to assess whether there is a literal meaning of the ironic utterance that emerges first and needs to be processed before the ironic meaning can be retrieved. This question appears to be an important cue in ironic decoding.

Recently various theories have been proposed focusing on different aspects of explaining how people use and understand irony. We can identify two main approaches of irony decoding where "both sides present a large body of psycholinguistic laboratory-based research to support their respective cases." (Partington, 2007). These are a one-stage and a two-stage accounts. But despite a large amount of experiments with their convincing results, there are still a lot of questions on these two accounts of irony decoding. As Fernandez says: "Any scholar who deals with irony "cannot help but dance on irony's sharp edge". (Fernandez, 2001:19). These two major ways of irony processing differ significantly and this is how they assess the role of the salient/literal meaning of irony in a given context.

The theory of Grice, which represents a classic pragmatic theory of a two-stage account of irony understanding, explains that irony decoding consists of two phases: the first - when the hearer makes analysis of the literal meanings of the ironic utterance, understands that this meaning is inappropriate to the context the word is used in, and the second - when the hearer develops the correct nonliteral interpretation of the utterance which corresponds to the adequate decoding of irony. (Grice, 1989).

(4)   "Oh, I am sweating all over", said Marie. (empirical material)
In example (4) Marie used irony in her reply to the manager to reveal her emotion and attitude to the climate condition in the office with really low temperature, when she has been constantly feeling cold, as there was a problem with ventilation system. Management team finally arranged for the office desks to be slightly moved away from the ventilation points. As moving desks did not resolve the problem, the room temperature remained the same low. When next week the manager asked Marie: "How do you feel today?" Marie applied to irony as the best way to express her mind and to spice up the utterance. According to Grice, the

first meaning of the word "sweating" is processed by the hearer using the literal meaning of "being hot" and therefore sweating. Then, on the second stage the hearer rejects the meaning of "being hot" and comes to the ironic meaning of "being cold" as the most appropriate one to the context/speech situation: Marie still feels cold.

Standard Pragmatic Model by Grice (Grice, H.1989), and Graded Salience Hypothesis by Giora (Giora, R. 1998, a; b) are two main variants advocating the two-stage irony interpretation when irony processing proves to take longer than non-irony examples. The main element of this theory is the view that whatever important, supportive, predictive or strong an ironic context can be, the process of its interpretation always starts with decoding of literal/salient meaning, recognizing its inappropriateness to the context, and later, at the second stage, processing of implicit meaning finally generating a suitable ironic interpretation.

Dews and Winner (Dews and Winner, 1999) in their studies describe that it took participants longer reaction times to decode ironic utterances compared to non-ironic, literal utterances. Contextual and pragmatic information becomes fundamental to understand the implied ironic meaning revealing the speaker's belief, attitude or intention. These results proved the standard pragmatic model of Grice according to which, the hearer is required to recognise an extra layer of the meaning of the words used in the utterance which should be added to the communicated content. In addition to understanding of what is being said explicitly, the hearer has to perceive implicit meaning, "a thought about an attributed thought, as well as an attitude of dissociation from it" (Curcó 2000:268).

We would like to mention that Booth (Booth, 1974) goes even further and introduces a four-stage way of irony decoding adding two more stages to already existing ones. In scholar's view irony decoding consists of: 1. negation of literal meaning; 2. search for the alternative interpretation; 3. understanding of the speaker's intention; 4. accessing the adequate ironic meaning. Attardo (Attardo, 2002) agrees with Booth and implies this four stage account to humour comprehension:

recognition→understanding→appreciation→agreement (Attardo 2002:166).

(5)   Some people die at 25 and aren't buried until 75. (Benjamin Franklin)
If we apply theory offered by Booth, the first stage of irony comprehension in example (5) starts when the hearer recognises the literal meaning and rejects it, then searches for alternative interpretation followed by understanding of Benjamin Franklin's intention to criticize some people being dead in their youth and ends up on stage four when the ironic meaning is in agreement with the uttered sentence in ironic speech situation.
In contrast to the two-stage account (Grice, Giora, Schwoebel, Dews and Winner) another camp of scholars (Gibbs, Sperber and Wilson, Colston) claim that there are no differences in comprehending time of ironic and non-ironic utterances such as in the example:

(6)   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)
For advocates of one-stage theory of irony processing the hearer in example (6) can gasp the meaning of the word "pity" being used in its ironic meaning immediately when the words are

uttered, and both meanings of this word (literal and non-literal) are interpreted simultaneously.

This model provides experimental evidence and empirical results for the hypothesis of the direct access view when both literal and non-literal meanings are processed in parallel mode. "...understanding irony requires parallel activation of literal and figurative meanings." (Gibbs, 1994:437). According to this theory, the perception of ironic and non-ironic utterances takes place at one and the same time. The hearer understands the ironic meaning of the utterance from the very beginning as well as he/she could perceive literal meaning in any non-ironical situation. What counts here is the extent of context influence on the comprehension of irony. Gibbs states that if the context the irony is used in is not sufficiently supportive, then the process of irony decoding slows down. But irony understanding takes no longer than the non-ironic utterance if the context is strong enough to assist in the decoding process.

Research material

Numerous experimental efforts have been undertaken to factor different mechanisms involved in irony decoding, (e.g. Shelley 2001; Gibbs and Colston 2007; Shibata et al. 2010), but these attempts were exploring monolingual irony examples. The present study investigates irony processing in a bi-lingual participants group (Georgian (L1)) with the second language being English (L2) to test comprehension of ironic meaning in a foreign language. The analysis of this paper is based on examples of irony from literature, online publications, newspapers and empirical data in the English language. The aim of the experiment was defined as the study of comprehension of irony examples given in non-native language. The participants were offered the material for testing which contained 40 examples of "natural situations" of irony and which have not been restricted by any parameters. This gave us an opportunity to demonstrate and observe understanding of different kinds of ironic utterances: rhetoric questions, ironic utterances that were close to sarcasm, classical examples of echoic theory of irony and one ironic compliment.

Research participants

Forty native Georgian-speaking students from two Georgian Universities whose level of English knowledge was upper-intermediate/advanced participated in the experiment. All were right-handed, had normal vision and hearing. So, in case of our experiment irony perceptions took place in a foreign language that implied good knowledge of English (as a foreign language).

Procedure

Participants were seated in a room and were given a questionnaire. They were asked to read the examples attentively so they could answer the questions as accurately as possible, thereby ensuring the adequate responses are provided. We explained the types of questions (multiple choice, open) to the participants and made a note that all the examples had one and the same number and order of questions.

We aimed at providing an overview of irony perception grounded in the speech act theory since we investigated four types of ironical speech act: assertive, directives, commissives and expressives. As examples for the Georgian national participants were given in English, we assumed that they had to first interpret the literal meaning and then go to the second stage and decode the ironic one. But due to the limited amount of participants and examples used in the experiment and since the research was conducted within only one experimental group, it is clear that the study has partial achievements and ergo we can't claim for sure if irony decoding is a two-stage process. This obviously needs further investigation.

During our experiment we studied different aspects of irony decoding including the influence of a specific context on the conditions of successful interpretation of irony, the role of social competence and numerous mental and linguistic mechanisms which are involved in its understanding, taking into consideration that communicating of irony is not only a simple combination of grammar and vocabulary knowledge but also a mixture of cultural, historical, emotional and social aspects, which irony belongs to.

For the experiment we have chosen a questionnaire through which we examined socio-pragmatic and psycho-linguistic characteristics of the process of irony decoding. Questionnaire administering was conducted on an individual analysis basis. The correct version was the one that denoted negative attitude and belief of the speaker. Every example was followed by seven questions arranged in one and the same order that has shown us how competent the participant was in understanding the disagreement between the context of uttered sentence and its ironic implication. All the questions were divided into three groups. The first one consisted of five questions;

1.   Comprehension: What did the speaker say?
2.   Meaning: What did the speaker mean?
3.   Belief: What did the speaker think?
4.   Intention: What did the speaker want to say?
5.   Attitude: Why did the speaker say that? (explain your answer)

The second group consisted of the sixth question of the questionnaire which examined speech act theory;

6.   The speaker's main purpose is to express a:

a)   request   h)   thank
b)   command   i)   apology
c)   advice   j)   welcome
d)   question   k)   promises
e)   invitation   l)   oaths
f)   congratulation   m)   threats
g)   excuse   n)   confirmation of a true idea

And the third group contained the seventh question of the questionnaire which assessed the participant's ability to see "the ironiness" of the utterance. For the final question about the content of the utterance being ironic or not, participants responses were coded using Likert

scale. Participants were asked to rate the target utterance and choose one answer from 5 possible options with 0 (being the lowest score) reflecting a total lack of understanding.

7.   Your verdict:

1)   Content is very ironic
2)   Content is ironic
3)   Content is slightly ironic
4)   Content is not ironic
5)   Can't say

While planning the experiment we formulated 4 hypothetical levels of irony decoding at which the participants could perform:
a) participants completely failed to understand ironic utterance either because they did not see irony in it, or they answered the questions at random;
b) participants partially perceived ironic utterance;
c) participants understood only literal meaning of the ironic utterance, that is, gave the wrong answer to the question: "What did the speaker mean?";
d) participants correctly understood and interpreted the ironic utterance.

Results

According to the results of the experiment we can claim that for Georgian participants to correctly interpret ironical speech act it was required to understand its both direct and ironical meaning, to take into consideration the context irony is used in and to reflect shared knowledge of the world. Analysis of the participants' replies revealed a general picture of irony perception which disclosed performance on the four components of irony decoding: Meaning, Belief, Intention, and Motivation/ Attitude. The results of the experiment have shown that our hypothesis on irony decoding is viable (instrumental) and is directly linked to the ability of the hearer to guess and perceive the speaker's mind.
The participants identified the discrepancy between what is said and what is meant after they acknowledged the speaker's communicative intention, belief and attitude. Our experiment proved the idea shared by Tager-Flusberg that it is not until comprehending of these aspects of other people's mental states is finished that most of the participants could recognise the speaker's irony. (Tager-Flusberg, 2000). "Recent accumulative research shows that… irony communicates non-propositional, implicit, attitude contents… On top of what we say, we piggyback attitudes, feelings, moods." (Bromberek-Dyzman 2012:99) Having mentioned this, we would like to indicate that the hearer cannot adequately perceive irony if he/she cannot distinguish the speaker's (other person's) intended meaning from what they literally said. Therefore, we tried to figure out how adequately Georgian speaking participants could comprehend what in reality the speaker thought and meant. Example (7) in the present paper was given to the participants under number 11 in the questionnaire:

(7)   A Greek girl Pelagia liked a young handsome captain who served in the occupant Italian army. Once, when the captain was entering the house, she deliberately kissed him but in the following second she felt embarrassed and explained: "Don't laugh at me. I thought you were my father (the doctor). I always kiss him like that when he comes in."

The captain answered: "Very understandable. We are both old and small."
The results of irony comprehension are shown in the table below reflecting the percentage of the correct answers to all three groups of questions:

Example 11	Question number										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	**7a**	**7b**	**7c**	**7d**	**7e**
	95.0 %	77.5 %	95.0 %	57.5 %	75.0 %	60.0 %	22.5 %	57.5 %	5.0 %	5.0 %	10.0 %

We need to mention one more implication of our findings: there were ironic utterances that have been interpreted very quickly, suggesting that the one-stage theory proposed by Gibbs (Gibbs 1994) has the right to exist. This happened in cases of "simple" irony examples, when ironic utterance corresponded to generally accepted ethical or socio-cultural norms, when irony gave rise to the hearer's positive emotions or sympathy towards the speaker with no strong negative or critical attitude and when the utterance did not serve to provoke the hearer which, therefore resulted in the process of interpretation going more smoothly. Our understanding is that such utterances of irony have involved universal standards in a specific speech situations.

(8)   …Good fences make good neighbours… (Rahman 2015:299)
Decoding of such kind of examples was processed immediately when the contrast between their implicit and explicit meanings initially reveals that the speaker means something opposite or different to what is said.

What is more important, these specific speech situations or context implied communicative purpose, situation, (official, neutral), cultural traditions (expressing 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.

To prove this we would like to present example (9). The main hero - Jonathan Dymond – has been constantly told since his childhood that his uncle's wife Harriet was "not like anybody in the family", that she was of a noble blood and "of a different breed". In the utterance Jonathan criticises his aunt after staying in her house for some time helping her out with making cider. He got acquainted with Harriet better during this time; now he was beyond doubt that she was cruel, fierce, sharp, spiky, difficult to deal with and disagreeable with spiteful pride. As Jonathan was the person who helped all the villagers with making cider, he obviously knew what he was talking about when assessing his aunt's "breed".

(9)   I said: "I think noble blood must be half vinegar." (McCann, 2010:85)
So in example (9) the situation is neutral; social characteristics - Jonathan being a cider maker by profession; psychological aspects show subjective perception and negative emotion revealing socio-psychological relationships between the speaker and the hearer as close family members.

According to our research, the speaker uses irony with a certain intention/purpose which is reflected in perlocutionary acts, such as alarming, persuading, convincing, misleading, surprising, shock. So the speaker makes the hearer recognize his thought using a certain speech act to achieve a certain ironic meaning in a certain context and correctly interpret the utterance containing a wish, an idea or a feeling. "People adjust their language to their addressees and the situation in order to achieve interpersonal effects". (Locher and Graham 2010:2)

Analysis

Analysing the results of our experiment we came to the conclusion that irony cannot be processed without the context and it is the context that helps the hearer to comprehend the utterance having detected speaker's specific intention, his communicative goal, emotional expressiveness and attitude.

The Georgian participants did not find it difficult to decode ironic examples given in the English language. Most of the participants (78.4%) perceived irony correctly. This suggests that, for Georgian users of English as a foreign language at a proficient level of its knowledge, irony decoding poses no bigger challenge in L2 than in L1. However, it is well-known that psycholinguistics studies perception of the text which depends not only on its lexical meaning, but also on cultural aspects, therefore certain socio-cultural differences and weakness in pragmatic and linguistic competences hampered 100% perception of irony.

Question				
1 Comprehension	2 Meaning	3 Belief	4 Intention	5 Attitude
78.4%	68.8%	68.9%	59.6%	62.8%

Conclusion

The present work is the first attempt to explore irony decoding in light of inter-language pragmatics (ILP) in Georgia. To our knowledge, this is the first investigation of perception of ironic utterances in English by Georgian speaking participants. As such, it represents a new test on how pragmatic competence gained in native (L1-Georgian) language works in the process of irony decoding when the target utterance is delivered in foreign (L2-English) language.

In conclusion, the questions that arose during our investigations deal mainly with different aspects of irony decoding, such as relevance theory of irony, use and mention theory, theory of inappropriateness, speech acts theory, one-stage and two-stage comprehension of irony. We can claim that no single theory of irony interpretation, being it a one- or two-stage decoding is capable to describe or prove the diversity of ways in which ironic utterance is understood which should not be surprising given the linguistic, pragmatic and psychological complexity of irony.

Adequate decoding of irony is based on text amount, extralinghistic factors (historical, cultural, life experience), background knowledge, presupposition and emotional application of linguistic material. It is noteworthy that more or less every scientist agrees that the complexity of social, emotional and cognitive aspects and their rapid coordination must be considered as a necessary precondition of irony decoding. Therefore, irony interpretation is one of the most acute and smart and at the same time, complex mechanism of the process called psychological adaptation of the human being.

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