

Analysis of Experimental Evaluation of Theoretical Results of Irony Perception

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Abstract

This cross-sectional study represents the research of irony decoding in light of interdisciplinary sciences in modern Georgian linguistic space which is a valuable step forwards in our rapidly changing world and echoes the necessity of modern Georgian linguistic paradigm. Irony plays the role of a medium in humans' intercommunication revealing emotional attitude which depends on cultural peculiarities, historical circumstances and individual psychological values and experience that are constantly changing. Having taken into consideration specific features of irony we conducted an experiment and investigated different aspects of interpretation of ironic utterances which the speaker uses to disclose a negative character of his attitude towards the object of irony so that not to damage himself and, at the same time, to save the face of the listener. We came to the conclusion, that one of the reasons of unsuccessful irony is not simply non-sufficient linguistic competence, but also the lack of knowledge of socio-cultural norms accepted in society. It is noteworthy that irony perception is analysed in a new way taking into consideration linguistic and extra-linguistic elements and its decoding results are discussed within interdisciplinary research. The main aim of the study is an experimental evaluation of irony decoding when ironic utterances are given to Georgian students in English. We believe that basic theoretical and practical results of the experiment are significant in modern Georgian linguistics, as any scholar can familiarize him/herself with the difficulties of irony perception.

Keywords: Decoding of irony, linguistic/pragmatic competence, norms of society, comprehension, interlanguage pragmatics, critical attitude, experiment, cross-cultural, intention

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Introduction

Irony is an inseparable part of our constantly changing world, in the world of daily challenges of political, socio-economic and cultural diversities. The form of irony, conditions of its realisation, rules of application and pragmatical intention is a constantly changing concept and its locution and perlocution are being transformed along the historical evolution of the society gradually becoming a significant part of a human world vision. It is noteworthy that irony decoding also has a rather relative than absolute character and is authentic only within given period of time and space.

The first attempts to analyse irony are associated with Plato and Kierkegaard who interpreted irony as a philosophical and esthetical category. In the 12th century Alexander de Villa Dei noted the following: “per voces dictis contraria dant ironiam” that means “Contraries, having been said through words, produce ironia.” (Knox 1989:19-25). Along its path of transformation, functional dimension has been added to irony perception and in 21st century that is reflected by specific socio-cultural conditions, historical circumstances and psychological attitude.

By using irony the speaker takes an opportunity to express his/her opinion which is not allowed to be conveyed directly by the norms and ethics established within a certain society, deliberately attaching opposite/different meaning to his/her utterance in the specific ironic context and as a rule, permanently contains emotional and evaluative components of criticism.

- (1) -You looked perfect at your birthday party!
- Oh, I tried very hard.
- I understand, you have chosen your guests very closely (everyday life).

In example (1) the speaker (who is a friend of the host) deliberately uses irony to express his negative attitude towards his friend's (who is the host of the party) appearance, but at the same time tries not to offend his friend. Such specific ironic speech acts help the speaker to implicitly reveal his attitude of criticism, surprise, scepticism, mockery, belief as well as to ease the psychological tension and influence the listener in the specific speech situation. As Colebrook has it: “Nothing really means what it says.” (Colebrook 2004:1).

Lingvo-pragmatic experiment

This study represents the research of irony decoding in light of inter-disciplinary sciences in present Georgian linguistic space which is a step forward in modern Georgian linguistic paradigm.

We conducted an experiment taking into consideration specific features of irony and investigated different aspects of irony interpretation when the speaker uses irony to disclose his negative attitude towards the object of irony, at the same time saving the face of the listener. “...you can make somebody feel absolutely rotten, but on the surface have maintained the appearance of politeness.” (Myers 1977:180).

- (2) It is certain he will be delighted to see you,” said the officer. (Hemin gway 2010:429).

Said in a neutral, non-ironic context this utterance (2) would be treated as a normal one. But considering the context this sentence has been pronounced in, the hearer will definitely understand it has been said ironically: There is a war zone; two officers came to the Colonel, who was locked in his room with his fiancée, to deliver some important documents to him. The officers were told to wait until the Colonel is free, but they had to return to the front, so insisted on entering the room. Finally the third officer-receptionist who did not allow them to go into the room said the above expression which instantly gained an ironic flavour.

During the experiment we have considered that the process of decoding flows in two dimensions: a) linguistic – when meaning is processed and b) speech – when interpretation of additional data (historical, cultural, psychological, extra-linguistic, social aspects) takes place. It is well-known that linguistic competence is always followed by the speech competence, by the ability to use general humankind and specific national experience during ironic speech acts perception. “On top of what we say, we piggyback attitudes, feelings, moods (Bromberek-Dyzman 2012:98-99).

Therefore, we claimed that to successfully complete irony decoding the speaker and the hearer should have the same background knowledge, beliefs and aspirations and that the reason for unsuccessfully uttered irony can be not only non-sufficient linguistic competence but lack of knowledge of socio-cultural values and norms of the society. This is when we came to a relatively new branch of science - linguistic pragmatics, which studies a language through the interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic factors including the context and taking into consideration human subjective and psychological factors. To prove this we would like to refer to Nerlich and Clarke who claimed that there are “...two general pragmatic principles: 'Make your conversation as interesting/witty/surprising as possible' and 'Make your utterance/text as expressive as possible, but still accessible’”. (Nerlich and Clarke 2001:14).

Every speech act which contains irony has specific intention and emotional expression within a specific context which are reflected in the communicative act of warning, criticising, persuading, shocking, misleading. Thus, in order to better understand the process of irony interpretation, it is necessary to learn its specific contextual parameters which imply official/non-official situation, cultural traditions (that is ability to express his/her negative emotions), gender and profession of the participants of ironic speech act, their psychological state of mood, in addition to their physical characteristics and friendly/hostile relationship. ...any speech-act which has a necessary psychological state may be ironically performed”. (Brown 1980:120).

(3) “Thanks for 12 beautiful years, you have really earned half”. (Online publication)
To correctly understand irony in example (3) we need to be aware of the situation/context this utterance has been said. Imagine a scorned husband who divorced his wife of 12 happy years. He took a court order to give his ex-wife half of what they owned together literally: he used a saw to all of their possessions, then he sent a half share to his wife via post and started selling his own half on auction website eBay. After all this the husband posted a video on YouTube uttering this sentence. So, now a) we know specific context of this irony example, b) we are aware that the state of affairs between a husband and a wife is non-official, c) that the husband expresses negative/critical attitude towards the object of irony – his wife and

a married life with her, d) that the relationship changed from friendly to hostile and therefore husband's psychological state of mood changed to the negative side accordingly and e) that gender is revealed - this is a she and a he involved in this ironic speech act.

We also considered two theories of irony decoding. The first one is a two-step model, based on graded salience hypothesis, which claims that whatever essential, highly supportive or strong an ironic context can be, the process of its interpretation always starts with decoding of its literal meaning first, and then goes to the second stage of generating a suitable ironic meaning after the hearer recognizes inappropriateness of the literal meaning to the context.

The second theory is a direct access model, according to which perception of both: literal and ironic meanings takes place in a parallel way, thus giving the hearer a prospect to understand the ironic utterance from the very beginning ...”understanding irony requires parallel activation of literal and figurative meanings.” (Gibbs 1994: 437).

(4) The most dangerous food is wedding cake. (James Thurber)

Did you catch irony from the beginning or did you start with a literal meaning of the word “dangerous” and then smoothly went into the second stage? We would like to claim that this example (4) can be treated as a classical case of the direct access model, as, even there is no supportive context giving you an idea of inappropriateness of the word to the context, the hearer can easily interpret this utterance as being ironic.

Main objectives of the experiment

During this lingvo-pragmatic study of irony decoding, the research has been actively conducted in the context of semantics and pragmatics, which comprises of intention of the speaker and illocutionary power of the utterance. The main objective of our experiment was to identify which linguistic forms the participants have been applying to decoding of ironic utterances in English, in other words, how they achieved understanding of what has been communicated by the speaker.

The main aim of this study was also an experimental evaluation of irony decoding when ironic utterances are given to Georgian students in English. We tried to define comprehension of irony examples given in a non-native language. To confirm, irony understanding took place in English as a foreign language which implied the participants' relevant knowledge of the English language.

In addition, we investigated which of the two concepts we described above: a direct access theory or a two-step model worked for Georgians participants when comprehending four main types of ironic speech acts: assertives, directives, commissives and expressives (there is no ironic declaratives which form the 5th speech group):

Experiment data: participants and research examples

We have chosen a questionnaire for the experiment, the administration of which was conducted in individual regime. The correct version was the one that denoted negative attitude of the speaker.

We have selected 40 Georgian national students from two leading Georgian Universities whose level of English was from Upper intermediate through to the Advanced, as per their self-assessed evaluation of their knowledge of English. We deliberately have not explained irony concept to the participants, so they could use their own knowledge, experience, competence and intuition during the experiment.

The participants were offered 40 examples. These utterances were not invented or designed specifically for this particular experiment. All of the sentences were examples of “natural situations” written in English representing belles-lettres, illustrations, online publications, newspapers and empirical data including rhetoric questions, sarcastic expressions, examples expressing gratitude or state of being sorry, etc. We have not been restricted by any parameters when choosing irony examples as we tried to achieve a vast diversity of the cases we could offer to the participants.

We have also included one example of asteism (positive irony) – it was an ironic compliment which had a positive connotation of irony in the negative context. Such utterances of irony called asteism are very rarely used, as they are vague and ambiguous and can be treated as offence because the speaker expresses positive message in a negative form, that is, the speaker explicitly criticizes something, and implicitly praises the “victim” of irony.

- (5) - Come back then now. Henry asked.
- No, Catherine said. I have to do the chart, darling, and fix you up.
- You don't really love me or you'd come back again.
- You are such a silly boy. She kissed me. (Hemingway 1977:76).

Example (5) from the experimental list was taken from Hemingway's novel “Farewell to arms” where main characters - Kathrine and Henry speak in hospital after Henry had been operated on. Of course, Henry could easily understand that Catherine was not criticising him at all, as she kissed him after the utterance confirming to him her intention to praise him. However we have not come across many asteism examples due to them being elusive and confusing.

Procedures

We asked the participants to attentively read all the examples before answering the questions.

Each and every example was followed by seven (open and multiple-choice) questions arranged in one and the same order. All the questions were divided into three groups. The first group contained the first five questions (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5) examining comprehension, meaning, belief, intention and attitude of the speaker. The second group consisted of one question which was question number Q6 in the experiment and which was evaluating speech act theory confirming participants' understanding of the

speaker's main purpose of the utterance: request, command, advice, congratulation, gratitude, apology, promise or assertion/confirmation of a true idea. The third group included the seventh question Q7 assessing participants' ability to grasp "the ironiness" of the example. In Q (7) - is the content ironic? participants were asked to rate the target utterance and choose one answer from 5 possible options: content is slightly ironic/ironic/very ironic/not ironic/can't say; when 0 was the lowest score and reflected a total lack of perception of irony with the chosen answer "can't say", while score 5 was given to the answer - "very ironic".

To assess the answers to Q7, all 40 examples have been arranged into 5 groups:

	Group 1 - Thanking	Group 2- Excuses	Group 3 - Rhetorical questions	Group 4 - Congratulations	Group 5 - assertives
7a	16.3%	19.2%	20.5%	14.2%	17.8%
7b	37.0%	27.5%	23.0%	30.0%	31.7%
7c	13.5%	14.1%	14.5%	12.5%	11.3%
7d	20.5%	24.3%	26.5%	28.3%	27.2%
7e	12.7%	14.9%	16.5%	15.0%	12.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

This gave us an opportunity to analyse the results of how the participants measured the ironiness of the examples and to claim that the highest percentage of the correct answers were for group 5 – assertives with 31.7 %, where only 11.3% and 12.0% have chosen the answer -"content is not ironic/can't say". The most difficult to comprehend were examples from group 3 with the percentage of 23.0% and (14.5% and 16.5%) respectively.

Findings, observations and results

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

We came to the assumption that the participants were not able to adequately perceive irony if they could not distinguish other person's intended meaning from what was literally said and if they could not comprehend the speaker's intention, attitude and belief, that is, what in reality the speaker thought and meant. We considered ability of participants to detect and understand speaker's intention and attitude towards the utterance to be critical for a complex ironic speech act perception.

The study revealed three groups of participants at which they performed: 1. those participants who completely failed to understand ironic utterance because they could not see irony in it; (7 participants) 2. those participants who partially perceived irony (20 participants); 3. those participants who correctly understood the utterance (13 participants).

Having analysed the results we received a general picture which reflects all components of irony perception - meaning, belief, intention and attitude and which confirms that it was not difficult for Georgian students participating in the experiment to understand ironic examples given in English, especially in cases where the context of the utterance seemed sound, reasonable and clear to the participants, close to their general knowledge. This, in turn, confirmed that overall Georgian participants had sufficient capacity to adequately decode irony examples in English.

78.4% of the students perceived irony correctly, however some cultural aspects, different level of common knowledge, certain socio-historical differences and weakness in pragmatic and linguistic competence hindered 100% perception of irony. It is important to mention here that Kasper in his work "Data collection in pragmatics research" claims that only 96% of the population can perceive irony. (Kasper 2000) This happens when irony is given to the participants in their native language. In our research the percentage was 78.4% for the utterances presented in a foreign language.

	Question				
Example	1 comprehension	2 meaning	3 belief	4 intention	5 attitude
40	78.4%	68.8%	68.9%	59.6%	62.8%

It is interesting to mention that Georgian participants easily recognised asteism – ironic compliment which was number 31 in the experimental list of examples. 80% of participants replied correctly to the question - what was meant by the utterance. However, 55% have chosen the answer “content is not ironic / can’t say”, which means that we received controversial results.

Example 31	Questions										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7a	7b	7c	7d	7e
	80.0%	57.5%	60.0%	67.5%	82.5%	42.5%	37.5%	7.5%	35.0%	0.0%	20.0%

Participants assessed as the most ironic - example number 11 with 57.5% of respondents correctly replying to Q (7) and as the most non-ironic - example number 38, with 57.5% of respondents choosing “content is not ironic” or “can’t say”.

Example number (11) from the experimental list:

I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set, I go into the other room and read a book.

Example number (38) from the experimental list:

After finishing school in the asylum Jerusha was sent to college to be educated to become a writer by a person who she had never seen. He paid a large sum of money for her tuition fee, her stay at college, her books, her clothes. During a 4-year course of her studies her only wish was to meet the Man and thank him personally, but she had not seen him even on the photo. So Jerusha wrote the following: “I have it planned exactly what you look like-very satisfactorily-until I reach the top of your head, and then I AM stuck. I can’t decide whether you have white hair or black hair or

sort of sprinkly grey hair or maybe none at all. Here is your portrait: But the problem is, shall I add some hair?”

Examp le	Questions										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7a	7b	7c	7d	7e
11	95.0 %	77.5 %	95.0 %	57.5 %	75.0 %	60.0 %	22.5 %	57.5 %	5.0 %	5.0 %	10. 0%
38	95.0 %	50.0 %	40.0 %	45.0 %	40.0 %	47.5 %	27.5 %	15.0 %	35.0 %	2.5 %	22. 5%

Conclusion

To conclude, the context or speech situation in which the ironic utterance is used is pretty important to adequately decode irony which is based on text amount, extralinguistic factors (historical, cultural, life experience), shared background knowledge, presupposition and emotional application of linguistic material. Therefore, irony interpretation is one of the most acute and smart and at the same time, complex mechanisms of the psychological adaptation of a person.

We believe that basic theoretical and practical results of the experiment are significant for modern Georgian linguistics, as any scholar can familiarize him/herself with the difficulties of irony perception.

Our experimental findings extend previous research on irony interpretation and confirm that irony is a linguistic phenomenon which exists only in a specific context: the more expanded the context is, the easier it was for the participants to interpret irony examples. The results confirmed that to adequately interpret irony Georgian participants were required to have an appropriate level of English knowledge and enough awareness of English socio/cultural/historic specifics along with both - linguistic and communicative competence.

Gibbs R.W. and Colston H.L. mentioned in their work that the word “irony” can mean different things to the speaker, the hearer and the researcher. (Gibbs and Colston 2007). Fernandez J. W. and Huber M. T. claimed that “one person’s irony is always possibly another person’s sincerity” (Fernandez and Huber 2001:13). And Eco added: “[t]here is always someone who takes ironic discourse seriously.” (Eco 1984:68). The results demonstrated the above opinions can be proved, as a certain group of participants answered that given examples were not ironic at all and they were not able to identify irony. In addition, lack of certain knowledge of public norms or psychological state of the speaker led to failure to identify irony.

(6) Thanks Gatwick security! – Thursday, Apr 30, 2015 Metro, 2015:3

Comedy star Chris O’Dowd tweeted the above utterance in example (6) about his frustration following a run-in over baby’s bottle. Chris was passing through security at Gatwick airport and airport security staff “body-searched” his three-month-old baby. Getting frustrated, Chris threw his baby’s toys out of the pram and said the above utterance. In this particular ironic situation there is a chance that the hearer can take this sentence seriously if he does not see any irony taking the thanking literally.

It should be noted that most of the scholars who are interested in irony perception have not come to an agreement on a single formal definition of irony, as well as its functions and therefore there is no common opinion on irony decoding process acceptable for all the researchers. But it is worth mentioning that more or less everybody agrees that the complexity of social, emotional and cognitive aspects and their rapid coordination must be considered as a necessary precondition of irony decoding.

The pilot study presented in this paper investigates irony perception in the light of inter-language pragmatics which proves to be a stepping stone towards a better understanding of the current conditions of decoding of ironic utterances in Georgia in the relatively diverse cultures of England and Georgia. The findings reveal significant cross-cultural differences relating to the perception of ironic utterances.

The results of the experiment are relevant and provide a useful basis in the area of irony exploration within the framework of Georgian linguistics and are a worthwhile reference for further research in wider aspects of investigation. However, these tentative conclusions are based on very limited data since the research was conducted only within one experimental group and both irony examples and number of participants of the experiment were restricted to forty; it is understandable that the study has limited achievements and we cannot claim for sure if irony perception is a one-stage or a two-stage process.

“Everyone has irony in their life. If it’s not physical, it’s mental”. (Freerks 2010:15)

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