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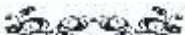
The Impact of Irony Establishing the Dynamics of Conversation: A Case Study

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Abstract

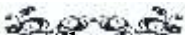
The interactionalist perspective on communication argues that the impact of a speech act is not solely based on the speaker's communicative intentions, as suggested by Gricean theory. Rather, the addressee's acknowledgment also plays a crucial role in determining the illocution. Advocates of this viewpoint assert that illocutionary acts inherently have the power to establish, abolish, or modify deontic states such as commitments, obligations, rights, and entitlements, which define the intersubjective relationships among participants in an interaction. This concept is inherently linked to a normative understanding of communication, viewing conversations as collaborative actions where participants work together to agree that a certain speech act has occurred, thereby triggering its conventional effect through this consensus.

Key words: echoic, pretense, relevance, interactionalist, illocutionary, counterproposal, intersubjective, collaborative, communicative intentions, conversational sequences, normative understanding, verbal, dramatic, situational, parodic irony, irony of fate, and of satire.

1. Introduction

Discourse analysis suggests that the basic structure of a conversation involves a three-part sequence: an initiating action by the speaker, the addressee's response (which may be an acknowledgment, rejection, or counterproposal), and a final validating or corrective action by the initial speaker. This sequence is crucial because it determines that the meaning of words arises from their placement within conversational sequences or series of interactive moves. From my perspective, this triadic sequence not only complements the interactionalist approach but is also essential for adequately explaining numerous communicative interactions where meaning is dynamically co-created by the participants through a process of negotiation and agreement.

This perspective is often depicted through basic scenarios in scholarly works, where the recipient of a message misunderstands the speaker's intent, leading to a dialogue in which both parties work to mend the miscommunication and potentially reach a consensus on the intent and significance of the initial statement. My objective is to examine a real-life instance of redefining the impact of a public declaration from an interactionalist and normative standpoint. In this case, the speaker's original intentions were recognized but not deemed definitive for the statement's illocutionary force. This study aims to challenge the core argument of the interactionalist perspective and may reveal some of its limitations and boundaries. While a single case study cannot support broad conclusions, it can shed light on certain aspects of the phenomenon and highlight important considerations for a comprehensive theoretical framework.



In the ensuing discussion, the current research advocates for the interactionalist approach to communication. However, my analysis will concentrate on the interaction dynamics and how they lead to a mutual establishment of meaning by the participants. To illustrate this, the research employs a three-step sequential analysis to demonstrate how the meaning can be collaboratively determined by the parties involved, with the recipient actively participating in this process, even if the final agreed-upon meaning and impact differ from the initiator's original intent. The first example involves parodic irony in a personal blog, which triggered an extended interactive sequence, resulting in the initiator being held accountable for the literal interpretation of his words. To analyze this, various theoretical perspectives on irony are considered to apply them to the case at hand. Lastly, I will offer some insights on the theoretical conceptualization of communicative interaction.

2. A Case Study

On February 6, 2011, the Spanish newspaper *El País* published an editorial note by its ombudsperson titled "No Jokes with the Holocaust," detailing an incident involving the newspaper. Previously, on January 29, Nacho Vigalondo, a filmmaker employed by the newspaper for a TV ad campaign and who also ran a cinema blog on its digital platform, reached 50,000 followers on his personal Twitter account. Celebrating this milestone, he tweeted, "Now that I have over 50,000 followers and have had four glasses of wine, I can share my message: the Holocaust was a hoax!" He also added, "There's more: the magic bullet that killed Kennedy hasn't landed yet!" (Miguel Sebastian 2020: 24-38). According to the editorial, this tweet prompted immediate responses from his followers, many of whom felt the joke crossed a line of decency. Vigalondo responded with a series of Jewish and Holocaust jokes, sparking further backlash, especially from descendants of Holocaust

victims. Subsequently, the newspaper issued a formal statement terminating its collaboration with Vigalondo, denouncing his comments as "unacceptable and incompatible with its editorial policy," (Miguel Sebastian 2020: 24-38) and apologized for the unfortunate series of events. On the same day, Vigalondo posted a final blog entry and a letter to the newspaper, apologizing for the distress caused by his tweet, clarifying that he is neither anti-Semitic nor a Holocaust denier, and explaining that the controversial tweet was intended as a parody, not a revisionist statement.

An initial, informal review of the entire interaction reveals its complexity and the involvement of multiple parties. It begins with a communicative act by the initiator, followed by a series of responses from his audience (the blog readers), prompting a second round of jokes on the same topic from the initiator, who appeared to double down on his original statement. This led to another wave of critical feedback, directed not only at the initiator but also at the newspaper, culminating in the formal severance of ties.

In response to the public's reaction, the newspaper's leadership decided to publicly denounce the statements and take further action regarding their professional relationship with the initial speaker. The speaker then made a final attempt to mend the misunderstanding with his audience by clearly stating his actual beliefs, thereby negating any misattributed stances and clarifying his original intent.

Theoretically, it seems reasonable to concentrate on the key exchanges in the interaction, viewing other contributions as contextually relevant and explanatory. Therefore, the focus will be on a three-part sequence: the speaker's initial statement, the newspaper's response, and the speaker's final attempt at clarification. It is important to note the distinction between the



speaker's description of his initial statement as parody and the editorial's reference to it as a joke. I will argue that the initial statement should be classified as parodic irony.

3. Theoretical Perspectives on Irony

The term 'irony' encompasses a broad spectrum of loosely connected phenomena in everyday language, each distinct in theory. Traditionally, irony is defined as using words to convey a meaning opposite to their literal one. According to Marriam Websters' dictionary "It is the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning". This working definition requires further theoretical refinement. According to Attardo (2006), there are two main theoretical approaches: one views irony as a rhetorical figure, and the other, based on the language/metalinguage distinction, sees it as mention/pretense. These concepts have evolved from Grice's foundational work into two distinct but influential theories.

Before delving into these theories, it is worth noting that the case in question is an example of parodic irony, a specific type of irony considered a rhetorical figure. The theories discussed here address irony as a general concept, which is also applicable to parodic irony. However, this does not include the echoic approach of Relevance Theory, which recognizes parodic irony as involving pretense.

3.1 Grice's Interpretation of Irony

Grice (1975) initially posited that irony is intimately linked to the expression of a negative attitude or judgment. Moreover, Grice (1975) suggested that irony involves pretense, and acknowledging this pretense outright would diminish its effect. Grice's view explains irony as an implicature, particularly as a violation of the cooperative principle's maxim of quality, which states not to assert falsehoods.

3.2 The Echoic Theory in Relevance Theory

Despite its explanatory appeal, Grice's theory has faced criticism, particularly for its inability to account for irony triggered by violating other maxims. This led to alternative theories within the neo-Gricean framework, such as the echoic theory of irony, which posits that irony expresses the speaker's dissociative attitude towards a thought similar to the one expressed, attributed to a source other than the speaker. This theory also allows for irony without an overtly expressed thought, and when the pretended speech act resembles the form of the targeted utterance, it is considered a parody.

Wilson (2013), a proponent of the echoic theory, differentiates between irony and parody, arguing that the target of irony is not necessarily a real-life counterpart but rather a thought or attributed person. In contrast, parody targets a real speech act or observable behavior. Thus, parodic irony is seen as a form of pretense within Relevance Theory.

The echoic theory itself has been critiqued for various reasons, including the argument that mention is neither necessary nor sufficient for irony. Additionally, it has been suggested that literal meanings should remain accessible even after non-literal meanings are activated, and that ironical interpretations, being less salient than literal ones, should require more processing time. According to the echoic perspective, the literal meaning must be decoded and processed to understand the ironic meaning. In the case at hand, the argument is that the recipient needs to recognize the literal meaning as part of the initiation turn to respond appropriately, suggesting that the conveyance of irony involves more than just the subject matter but also the method of delivery.



The statement in question had to be articulated in a manner that allowed the speaker to express it openly, prompting a response. The echoic perspective is seen as a single-stage process, unlike other theories that require a two-stage process for recognizing irony.

3.3 Two-Stage Processing Theories: Giora and Attardo

The echoic theory serves as an alternative to Grice's traditional view. According to this theory, identifying an ironic statement involves a two-step process where the listener must first detect the non-literal nature of the statement due to its incongruity with the context or the speaker's presumed beliefs. Only after this recognition does the listener seek the intended non-literal meaning, guided by the principles of cooperative communication. Building on Grice's foundational work, some theorists have proposed two-stage models that aim to overcome the limitations of previous theories. Giora's model is based on the concepts of indirect negation and graded salience, suggesting that an affirmative expression can imply a state of affairs that deviates from the expected or desired norm, without negating or directly opposing it. This allows for the coexistence of both the explicit and implied messages, enabling the listener to discern the contrast between them.

Giora's (2003) graded salience hypothesis posits that information becomes prominent in one's mind when it is consolidated in the mental lexicon. Salience varies in degree, influencing the priority of interpretations, especially in figurative language, and depends on factors like conventionality and familiarity. In this framework, the obvious literal meaning of an ironic statement serves as a benchmark against which the actual situation is evaluated, expressing frustration or disassociation.

Attardo defines irony as a statement that maintains relevance while breaching the norms of contextual

appropriateness, either explicitly or implicitly. He provides a criterion for appropriateness, stating that a statement is fitting if its presuppositions align with or are compatible with the context's presuppositions. He argues that deliberate inappropriateness, seen as a breach of cooperative communication, is both necessary and sufficient for irony. This violation encompasses sincerity, cultural norms, and other expectations. Attardo also introduces the principle of least disruption, suggesting that the speaker should minimize their breach of cooperative principles and connect it to the broader interaction.

Both Giora and Attardo's theories are seen as advancements of Grice's original concept, rejecting the primacy of literal meaning and instead emphasizing salient meanings or the search for contextual appropriateness. They view the interpretation of irony as a two-stage process requiring reevaluation and reinterpretation, focusing solely on the speaker's intentions. The listener's role is to accurately infer these intentions. Attardo's perspective also considers the social context, suggesting that cultural norms and the participants' understanding of each other's belief systems play a role in interpreting irony.

3.4 The Pretense Theory

The pretense theory, proposed by Clark and Gerrig (1984), is another significant approach. It suggests that when using irony, the speaker pretends to be someone else, addressing a pretend listener. The speaker's critical attitude towards the pretend speaker's statements is evident, and these statements are deemed uninformed or misguided. The real listener is expected to recognize the pretense and understand the irony. This theory highlights the importance of shared social context, mutual beliefs, and knowledge between the speaker and the listener for the successful interpretation of irony. The pretense theory

underscores the necessity of common ground in ironic communication.

3.5. Balance and Interpretation

Considering shared understanding is essential for making sense of ironic exchanges, such as the one being discussed. It's noteworthy that an audience that reacts differently than expected isn't necessarily misunderstanding the situation. There are instances where an audience may grasp the context fully yet choose to interpret the speaker's words literally. This implies that the audience actively participates in shaping the meaning of an utterance within the dialogue. The following discussion will examine this case to evaluate if the theories mentioned provide a thorough explanation of the interaction, taking into account how irony is received by the audience.

4. Interaction Dynamics in Responding to Irony

For clarity, let's reiterate the interaction sequence being analyzed into three parts:

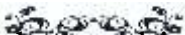
- ⌘ **Initiator's Opening Remark [R1]:** "Having surpassed 50,000 followers and consumed four glasses of wine, I am now prepared to declare: the Holocaust was a fabrication!"
- ⌘ **Interactant's Remark [R2]:** "The journal finds the remarks provided to be objectionable and not aligned with our editorial principles."
- ⌘ **Initiator's Second Remark [R3]:** "I extend my apologies for any distress caused by my tweet. To be clear, I am neither anti-Semitic nor a denier. The controversial tweet was a satirical portrayal."

The initiator's comments are multifaceted, serving as intricate communicative actions. In [T1], the initiator appears to be deliberately impersonating a type of person who would deny or hold anti-Semitic views, with the expectation that this act of pretense is identified, leading the audience to deduce the true

intention behind the statement. The underlying message might be to highlight the internet's capacity to disseminate and legitimize even the most outlandish claims. However, for the audience to understand this intention, they must be able to recognize the speaker's intentional breach of truthfulness. Later, the speaker feels compelled to explicitly state that anyone familiar with their work would know they have never supported such views, which they vehemently reject.

This subsequent clarification seems to support Grice's interpretation of irony as a deliberate violation of the principle of sincerity, encouraging the listener to seek a compatible meaning. It also suggests that both literal and implied meanings should be present during the interaction for reevaluation. Conversely, a single-stage interpretation struggles to account for the preservation of both meanings within the interaction. On the other hand, the one-stage account appears to struggle with providing an explanation that aligns with the entire sequence. This is because the ironic meaning ought to have been immediately understood if the communicative act was effective, which is a reasonable assumption. However, the one-stage account suggests that once a meaning is chosen, alternative interpretations are rejected and not considered further. This leaves the question of how the interaction managed to maintain both meanings unresolved.

Furthermore, the content shared seems somewhat out of place in the given context (considering the blog is personal, why should an increase in followers prompt the author to ponder the internet's ability to propagate false beliefs?) and potentially counterproductive (is the author implying to his audience that he intends to do just that?). Such a stance could only make sense if one assumes the author had an ironic intent to implicitly refute his own statements, essentially denying that he was in a position to spread any kind of false belief. However, the manner in which



he proceeded indicates he was driven by an additional, underlying motive. This hidden motive appears to be a desire to boast, to dazzle and garner admiration for his supposed influence over public opinion. Yet, this kind of motive is not communicative in nature, as “acknowledging this intention could undermine achieving the desired impact and instead foster the opposite result” (Strawson 1964: 452). This ulterior motive, which must remain unexpressed for the speech act to achieve its intended perlocutionary effect, was overlooked in the subsequent exchanges and had no bearing on the interaction. Nonetheless, it does shed light on the author’s demeanor throughout the events.

The fact that this additional intention did not influence the interaction can be explained by the theoretical concepts previously mentioned. The inappropriateness of the utterance and the inferred ironic intent should be evaluated separately from the psychological reasons that led the author to adopt an ironic stance. Furthermore, the prominence of meaning likely directed the interpretation of the implied meaning, despite other non-communicative intentions. Up to this point, a two-stage interpretation consistent with Grice's theory appears to offer a satisfactory framework for explaining the case in question. The challenge arises when considering that the journal's editors, the intended audience in [T2], seem to have understood the speaker's ironic intention but chose not to engage with it, instead interpreting the words literally. This perspective explains the initiator's subsequent apology in [T3], which tacitly acknowledges the interlocutor's interpretation and attempts to rectify the misunderstanding. It is unlikely that the interlocutors failed to perceive the speaker's ironic intent.

To make sense of the apparent mismatch in the second part of the conversation, it’s beneficial to explore an additional theoretical perspective that considers how irony is received. Kotthoff (2003) presents empirical evidence that strongly

supports the notion that irony involves processing both the implied and the explicit meanings, and that “responding to the explicit meaning doesn’t necessarily mean the listener failed to navigate the ironic divide” (Kotthoff 2003). Her research suggests that an individual’s reaction to irony is shaped by its impact on them. This clarifies why recipients often respond to both the stated and the implied meanings—the literal and the ironic. In doing so, they “influence the unfolding meaning within the conversational sequence” (ibid. p. 1387). Importantly, for our analysis, Kotthoff (citing other scholars) argues that the distinct contrast between the said and the implied, the literal and the non-literal, isn’t confined to the proposition level (semantic) or the illocution level (pragmatic speech act), but rather exists “at the evaluative level” (ibid., p. 1389). Evaluation is described as a process where an individual assigns a value (on a continuum) to the subject of evaluation, from a viewpoint that deems certain characteristics important and gives them a normative value. The connections between the subject of evaluation, the aspect of evaluation, and the evaluation standard are traditional and stem from the practical activities that incorporate the subject.

The editorial comment that serves as the basis for the analyzed case indicates that the trigger for the journal’s official declaration was not solely the initial ironic remark, but also the originator’s reaction to the critique through a sequence of Holocaust-related jokes. However, it is important to recognize that for certain readers, particularly those who are descendants of the victims, the use of denialist and anti-Semitic rhetoric, along with its overt repetition, was strongly condemnable. It appears justifiable to assert that this aspect was a significant factor in the journal’s decision to respond. This is further underscored by the editorial note’s title itself, “No jokes with the Holocaust.”

5. Joint meaning and accountability



If the interpretation is accurate, it would appear that the journal's response was addressing both the explicit and the implied meanings. The critical judgment was clearly about the manipulation of the topic, which assumes a metapragmatic stance from the evaluator. Concurrently, this critique also seems to pertain to the actual spoken words, taking their literal meaning at face value (as previously discussed, this view is corroborated by the initiator's final reply). Theoretically, the response from the second party appears to present two distinct understandings and assigns two separate speech acts to the initiator. It raises the question of whether such a dual interpretation is feasible and, if so, what enables it.

The recognition that a single statement can embody multiple illocutions is a recognized concept, first noted by Austin in 1962 and widely acknowledged by academics since. It's important to realize that by classifying irony as an (indirect) illocution, we diverge from Austin's original dismissal of language used "not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use" (Austin, 1962, p. 22). Searle later identified irony as "an indirect speech act where the literal meaning of a sentence diverges from the speaker's intended meaning, suggesting that the unsuitability of the statement necessitates reinterpretation" (Searle, 1975, pp. 112-113). Subsequent efforts have been made to interpret irony as an indirect speech act, often viewed as insincere and requiring reinterpretation. In this light, Attardo's view that "such theories could also be seen as Gricean" (Attardo, 2000, p. 801) appears justified. We have proceeded with the assumption that irony constitutes an (indirect) illocutionary act, which can be analyzed on its own terms, considering various pertinent approaches that shed light on the subject.

Determining the illocutionary force in context is not as clear-cut as it may seem. Theories based on Grice's principles and the common understanding of irony as an indirect speech act

place the speaker's intent as the key to the illocutionary meaning of a statement. The debate has centered on the conditions, such as prominence or unsuitability, that limit and enable the listener to deduce and accurately identify those intentions. Yet, Kotthoff's perspective on interpreting irony has brought to light a previously overlooked element: the chance that the listener might interpret a statement in a way the speaker did not intend, even though the listener has correctly understood the speaker's intentions. This suggests that the listener plays a proactive role in shaping the illocutionary impact of a statement, leading to a more intricate and dynamic interaction throughout the communication sequence. Bearing this in mind, we can revisit our case study.

As previously mentioned, in one interpretation, the speaker's utterance acquired an illocutionary force during the interaction that differed from his original intention. It was the utterance's literal meaning, rather than its figurative sense, that became the shared understanding. Ironically, the initiator's final remark, which outright denied ownership of those views, inadvertently validated the second participant's interpretation as a viable one within the exchange. The concept of joint meaning, originating from Clark (1996), is described as such: "Joint meaning is established whenever a speaker and listener mutually agree that a particular communicative action has taken place" (Carassa and Colombetti 2009: 1849). This meaning entails a mutual agreement by the participants that a certain speech act has occurred. Thus, joint meaning extends beyond a mere shared belief about the spoken content and includes deontic consequences regarding the commitments and the corresponding legitimate expectations that the participants acknowledge and attribute to one another.

This perspective on communicative interaction, advanced by various scholars (Clark 1996, 2006; Carassa and Colombetti

2009; Sbisà 2006, 2009; Haugh 2013), posits that such interaction is inherently normative. It establishes deontic ties among the participants, which can be explained through the specific duties, obligations, rights, and privileges that arise during the interaction. Moreover, these ties are formed through the (often implicit) consent of those involved. In this context, Austin's (1962) concept of 'uptake' is reconceptualized regarding the assignment of illocutionary force to a statement: "the illocution is defined by its impact on the interpersonal dynamics of the participants, and its standard effects on their relationship are realized through mutual agreement by the concerned parties" (Sbisà 2009: 49).

Revisiting the case in question, it becomes apparent that the initial meaning intended by the first participant was not embraced by the second. Consequently, the utterance's proposed ironic intent did not shape the collective understanding as a mutually acknowledged truth. Rather, it was the interpretation of the second participant that the first concurred with. The first participant subtly acknowledged the literal interpretation of his words while attempting to distance his personal belief system from that interpretation.

In considering the alternative interpretation, it is clear that the recipient, or second participant, accurately perceived the speaker's ironic intent. However, instead of engaging with the irony in a collaborative manner (refer to Clark 1996: 369-374 for the concept of irony as a collective pretense), the recipient adopted a meta-pragmatic and critical viewpoint to evaluate the speaker's remarks as an inappropriate handling of the topic. In this analysis, the point of evaluation was not what the speaker had intended, but rather a different aspect. Furthermore, the second participant held the speaker responsible for his approach, considering the tangible implications of his words in the real world.

Haugh's (2013) research revisits the concept of speaker meaning, suggesting that a speaker's accountability for their linguistic actions determines if those actions represent speaker meaning. Being accountable means that others view the speaker as socially obligated or answerable for the conveyed meanings. This responsibility encompasses not just the accuracy or genuineness of the spoken content, but also its social or interpersonal effects. Haugh points out that disputes over speaker meanings can arise from their real-world implications. Such disputes are evident in the case study where, despite understanding the ironic intent, participants do not engage in it as a playful exchange.

6. Conclusion

The case study highlighted in section 2 demonstrates the collaborative nature of meaning creation during an interaction, where the recipient actively influences the illocutionary force of what is said. The initial speaker's purpose is met with an opposing viewpoint from the second participant, who critically assesses the speaker's responsibility from two angles. First, the utterance's explicit statement ("...the Holocaust was a hoax!") is accepted as is and judged based on the tangible repercussions of voicing such a belief. Second, while the addressee recognizes the speaker's ironic intent, they choose not to participate in it, instead critically evaluating the use of the Holocaust as a topic for humor.

In both scenarios, the initiator's final remark demonstrates his effort to reconcile the strained relationship (through an apology), which is consistent with the second interpretation (meta-pragmatic layer). Simultaneously, he strives to rectify the miscommunication at the illocutionary level by clearly conveying a message ("I am neither anti-Semitic nor a denier") that was vital to the underlying context required to understand the indirect,



non-literal intent of his statement. It remains logical to ponder if it is reasonable for the recipient to attribute two distinct interpretations to the same initial action. It's important to recognize that each interpretation aligns with separate evaluative dimensions, thus providing two separate standards by which to judge the speaker's responsibility for the impact of his statements.

In my perspective, the interactionist perspective on irony addresses elements that other explanations may miss. Specifically, it considers the active role of the recipient in interpreting and assessing the speaker's statement, thereby attributing to it a significance and impact that surpasses the speaker's original intent. This acknowledgment and evaluative position by the recipient is only finalized when the speaker takes a third turn, acknowledging the interpretation and concurring with the assessment. The interactionist approach suggests that this dialogue of meaning and eventual consensus on the utterance's significance and impact is what establishes the illocutionary effect. However, it's crucial to recognize the necessity of considering a tripartite sequence in our analysis. I argue that the interactionist framework should be augmented with a description of the initiation-response-[evaluation] pattern that collectively determines the meaning and impact in communicative exchanges.

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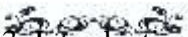
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