

Strategies and functions of irony in the Romanian parliamentary discourse. A pragma-rhetoric approach.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the simulation nature of a widely spread pragmatic and rhetoric phenomenon that is the irony. This simulation can be identified by means of some strategies, out of which the focus will be on four of these: the strategy of simulating the illocutionary force, the strategy of impoliteness, the strategy of intertextuality and the strategy of the fallacious argumentation. Verifying these strategies on a corpus made of some Romanian parliamentary discourses will lead to the establishment of some irony functions particular to this special type of speech, such as to attack the opposition, to express affiliation or disaffiliation with MPs, to negotiate the perspectives set in highly institutionalised debates and to maximize the agreement between contrastive opinions. Irony is regarded as a common and 'legitimate' discursive practice in the Romanian parliamentary discourse.

Keywords

'simulation', the strategy of irony, strategy of impoliteness, strategy of intertextuality.

1. Introduction

Irony represents a pragmatic and rhetoric phenomenon of highly interest for linguists, psiholinguists, language philosophers, which consists of a contrast between the propositional content of the enunciation and the meaning intended by the speaker who uses this enunciation.

This way we can discuss about a process of ironical coding and decoding on two distinct levels: the literal level and the implicit level. We shall point out the speaker's strategic ability of creating an ironical enunciation and the interlocutor's interpretative ability of regaining the real communicative intentions of the locutor, directed towards highlighting a disapproving, ridiculous, criticizable state of facts.

Consequently, the reader will face a 'setting' of some enunciations with a 'simulated' illocutionary force, with an 'echoic mention' of the used utterances, with a 'staged intertextuality', with an 'allusion' and a 'pragmatic insincerity' towards some social norms or expectations flouted by the ironist, or which prove a 'strategic maneuvering' of language by appealing to fallacious arguments.

This idea of 'simulation' is not new, but it has been approached by Clark and Gerrig who sustain the fact that the locutor is a naive agent and the interlocutor is an ignorant actor and who pretends to be sincerely communicating the enunciation. The locutor's intention is for the interlocutor not to discover the lack of sincerity in the enunciation, but, as part of this theatre play, the latter will finally remark the locutor's real communicative intentions (Clark&Gerrig 1984 *apud* Gibbs&Colston 2007: 26-27).

The same dramatic perspective can also be found at Grice who speaks about the fact that the ironist pretends uttering a true enunciation, which, at the implicit level, contains the true meaning communicated and recovered by the test of opposition or antiphrasis. Adopting this pretended communication is meant to reveal a negative, hostile evaluation from the ironist's part (Grice 1989: 53-54).

This concept of 'simulation', according to which the ironical assertion lacks the 'force of a serious assertion' (Récanati 2004 *apud* Negrea 2010:114), is still present nowadays in Currie's article. The author notices that the locutor simulates attributing a serious illocutionary force to the enunciation. This way, we witness a counterfactual world where the locutor simulates a particular evaluation of reality, in contrast with the context of the real world (Currie 2006 *apud* Negrea 2010: 87-92).

According to Sperber and Wilson, irony is a type of 'echoic mention' (Sperber&Wilson 1981: 306), namely the ironical enunciation echoically mentions the original utterance by adopting a dissociation mood with the intention to express a critical derogative attitude towards it. This type of irony becomes an example of indirect quotation of someone else's utterance, not for the locutor to describe a state of facts, but to express an opposite attitude towards it which finally he rejects as being false or irrelevant (Sperber &Wilson 1992 *apud* Gibbs&Colston 2007: 41). The relevant communicative intentions which deserve to be retained by the interlocutor will ensure maximal effects for the correct decoding process of the ironical

enunciation (Sperber&Wilson 1992 *apud* Gibbs&Colston 2007: 47).

Regarding Kotthoff's theory of irony as 'staged intertextuality' (Kotthoff 2002: 7), we cannot understand it if we do not connect this to another conceptualization such as 'dissonant poliperspectivity' (Kotthoff 2002: 14). Kotthoff makes a clear distinction between the perspectives staged by the ironical speaker, namely a positive perspective or evaluation at the dictum level and a negative perspective at the implicit level, between these two perspectives being raised an 'evaluation cleft' (Kotthoff 2003: 1389-1390) as marker for the speaker's intention of ironising.

When we talk about intertextuality we also infer this 'evaluation cleft' between the two voices which come into contrast and inclusively the two perspectives that, faced with the mutual knowledge background, will lead the interlocutor to decipher all the implicatures or the presuppositions encoded in the ironical utterance. The simulated aspect of this theory regards the apparent positive perspective which the interlocutor will find as irrelevant for the comprehension of the real perspective intended by the locutor.

Another theory which stands for this idea of simulation regarding irony operates with two important notions: 'allusion' and 'pragmatic insincerity' (Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg&Brown 1995 *apud* Gibbs & Colston 2007: 60-61). This feature of indirectness about irony is visible in the notion of 'allusion' to some social norms or expectations which have been flouted by the victim of irony and because of which he has to be verbally sanctioned. This intended sanction cannot be made directly, but implicitly, and in this case we shall confront again with a pragmatic insincere or simulated illocutionary force. This 'pragmatic insincerity' means flouting the sincerity condition for a felicitous speech act, but this violation does not threaten the Cooperation Principle of an ironical enunciation. The ironical discussion follows the 'Cooperative Principle' (Grice 1975: 45), in the sense that the ironical speaker does not make the discussion incomprehensible, does not block it, but he only sanctions his victim in such a way not be accused of irrationality as long as he can always evade behind the literal meaning and implicitly behind the positive evaluation which does not disturb anyone.

If we extend the pragmatic view of the Cooperative Principle to an argumentative perspective regarding irony we shall deal with its pragma-dialectical correspondent, namely the 'Principle of

Reasonableness' (van Eemeren& Grootendorst 2013: 149). This way, we shall understand the fact that in a parliamentary discourse, irony, although it works with ambiguities, represents a legitimate procedure of persuading the reader to accept the implying perspective, many times being a negative, critical judgement.

In order to reach this aim, the ironical Member of Parliament (MP) will appeal to a 'strategic maneuvering' (van Eemeren&Frans 2013: 145) in accordance to which he will communicate his standpoints or perspectives in a reasonable, deliberate manner, even if his hidden intention is to attack the opponent's public image, making the latter lose his credibility.

The MP's commitment to reasonableness will be the shield behind which he will withdraw whenever he is going to be declared irrational. For the purpose to make his perspective be accepted by the reader as the only valid argument, but in a way which does not suggest conflict, adversity, the MP will invoke 'some fallacious arguments' (van Eemeren & Frans 2013: 148-149), that is the ad personam arguments. These fallacious arguments will turn into some strategic movements which are aimed at helping the MP to impose his negative evaluation on the victim and this way highlighting himself as an ethical character.

Taking into account these theories of irony, we can observe the fact that this pragma-rhetoric phenomenon operates with a wide range of concepts such as speech acts, quotation, intertextuality, allusion or fallacious arguments from which we can develop some strategies that spin around the idea of simulation or pretending, such as: the strategy of simulating the illocutionary force, the strategy of impoliteness, the strategy of intertextuality and the strategy of fallacious argumentation. We do not dispose of enough space here to discuss in an exhaustive manner about each strategy and for this reason we shall resume ourselves only to some levels of comprehension such as: the speculative-meditative questions, the allusion, the antiphrasis and the ad personam argument.

In what the functions of irony is concerned, we can underline some of the most representative ones: the MP's intention to reach the reader's understanding of his staged perspectives and the affiliation or disaffiliation towards them, or to reveal the victim's incapacity to respect his responsibilities, losing his credibility in front of the reader.

The analysed corpus contains some Romanian parliamentary

discourses taken from the Romanian Parliament's site which have in common this idea of irony as simulation in order to create a sense of cohesion, reasonableness, institutional rules obeying, agreement, the confrontational evaluations between positive self-presentation and the other's negative presentation.

2. The strategies of irony

2.1. The strategy of simulating the illocutionary force

Oare în acel buget, care are bani de patinoare de lux și numeroase săli comunale de sport sau de târguri săptămânale de turism pentru promovarea unei frunze miraculoase, nu are și ceva mărunțiș pentru despăgubirea supraviețuitorilor opresiunilor comuniste? Sau se așteaptă dispariția totală a acestora pentru a li se face dreptate? (Gerea Andrei Dominic, 23 noiembrie 2010)

Is it possible for that budget, which has money for luxurious skating rinks and for manifold communal gymnasia or weekly tourism exhibitions for promoting some miraculous leaf, not to have some small change too for the compensation of the survivors of the communist oppressions? Or is it that they expect their total disappearance in order for them to be made justice? (Gerea Andrei Dominic, 23rd November 2010)

Gerea asks himself about the possibility for the survivors of the communist oppressions to be financially compensated, but only after their disappearance, and, at the same time, he speculates the idea according to which the reader might agree to one of the two perspectives. This apparent agreement to the expressed possibilities is simulated because he also inserted some linguistic clues antagonistic to the context of the real world. Discovering this simulated agreement, the reader will perceive the ridicule of the dual evaluations. The ironist hints at the gap between these antagonistic situations: the survivors might be financially compensated only after their death, which leads to a distorted, impossible image. The ironist distances himself from this dissonant perspective, placing himself in a counterfactual world in order to express the abnormal state of facts, but also to suggest the way things should look like in reality. One function in this example consists of drawing the reader's affiliation to or disaffiliation from the perspective set by the ironist.

2.2. The strategy of impoliteness

Traian-Gură aurită o să-ți rămână numele, distinse sforar de talie internațională! (Nistor Laurențiu, 10 mai 2011)

Traian-Smooth Tongue shall remain your name, noble worldwide wire puller! (Nistor Laurențiu, 10th May 2011)

The construction ‘distinse sforar de talie internațională (noble worldwide wire puller)’ raises the presupposition that the Romanian president Traian Băsescu is a ‘sforar distins (noble wire puller)’ meaning in fact ‘nobil (noble)’. This praising of the president by the ironist is simulated, in fact revealing an offensive opinion about the president. The real perspective which the reader must achieve is based on the allusion incorporated in the exaggerations ‘distinse (noble)’ and ‘de talie internațională (worldwide)’ and also the allusion to the idiomatic expression ‘a trage pe cineva pe sfoară (to play the fool with)’ which, in the given context, marks a fault of the president and not a quality. The function of this allusion marks the treacherous character of the president, unable to fulfill the assumed responsibility.

2.3. The strategy of intertextuality

Era evident ca în urma acestor ”realizări mărețe” să apară și alți intelectuali care o preamăresc și o apreciază ca fiind: ”Soarele PDL”, ”motorul politicii”, ”femeia care dă ora exactă în politica românească”, ”Kill Bill-ul politicii”, ”inteligentă, frumoasă, tenace, cu duranță la mediul general dezgustător al politicii românești” cu perspectiva de a deveni <un erou al acestei țări/ un erou al muncii> (Chiriță Dumitru, 29 martie 2011)

It was obvious that after these „great achievements” other scholars who praise and appreciate her as being: „the Sun of PDL”, „the engine of the politics”, „the woman who tells the precise hour in the Romanian politics”, „The Kill Bill of the politics”, „smart, beautiful, tenacious, with endurance towards the general disgusting environment of the Romanian politics” with the perspective of becoming <a hero of this country/a hero of labour> should appear (Chiriță Dumitru, 29th March 2011)

When the ironist quotes somebody else in fact he requires from the reader an antifrastique decodification. The fact that the ironist quotes somebody else creates a sense of cohesion towards the set perspective, but in fact he does not feel responsible for the set perspective, but only for his words. He distances himself from the set perspective which he rejects and this way his enunciation becomes

invalid. This way we shall notice a poliperspectivity: on the one hand, there is the set perspective at the literal level, namely the positive, praising evaluation towards Elena Udrea, but, on the other hand, there is the implicit perspective in which the ironist is critical and disapproves this evaluation. This competition between contradictory perspectives upon reality fulfills the function of attack to the opponent's image in order to weaken his credibility and to increase his vulnerability in front of the reader.

2.4. The strategy of fallacious argumentation

Inventatorul PDL-ului actual se dezice, mai nou, de propria sa creație- ce pare într-adevăr cam hidoasă, dar, mai ales, periculoasă -, de partidul care a făcut până acum, timp de mai bine de zece ani, tot ceea ce a vrut, dictat sau inițiat de Traian Băsescu, sub imperiul lacrimilor, al furiei sau al comenzii ferme, cu pușca la carâmb, uneori!

Acest mic orfan, născut din marele FSN și apoi desprins și vegheat, pentru puțină vreme, de către părintele său real, a fost răpit brusc, salvătic și transformat continuu, după chipul și asemănarea noului dur tutore!

Astfel, pruncul PDL a fost crescut, hrănit, îmbăiat, înfășat și învățat să meargă, de către actualul președinte, pas cu pas, de la firavul 7% în 2004, până la uriașul 33% , în 2008! (Atanasiu Teodor, 15 februarie 2011)

The inventor of the present PDL recently denies his own creation- which really seems some hideous , but especially dangerous-, the party which has made so far, for more than ten years, everything Traian Băsescu wanted, dictated or initiated, under the falling of tears, anger or steady command, sometimes with the gun at the head!

This little orphan, born from the great FSN and then separated and watched out, for little time, by its real parent, was suddenly kidnapped, it became wild and continuously transformed after its new tutor's likeness!

This way, the PDL baby was bred, washed, swaddled and taught to walk, by the actual president, step by step, from the fragile 7% in 2004, up to the huge % in 2008! (Atanasiu Teodor, 15th February 2011)

The last strategy represents a particular case of attack towards the opponent's image whose logos and ethos are being deconstructed. In order for the ironist not to be accused of irrationality, he appeals to these fallacious arguments to transform the ad personam attacks in acceptable argumentative movements, this way the ironist being held responsible for a strategic manipulation of the language resources.

The ad personam argument hints at throwing discredit on the opponent's image, but in a subversive way for the ironist not to be submitted to the charge of irrational linguistic behaviour, with connotative, ironical, offensive meanings. In this example, the simulation comes from the set perspective at the literal level: the ironist appeals to an allegory between the idea of childhood and parenthood and the development of a political party, both having in common notions like innocence, the lack of evil. But this family perspective stands as an ad personam argument if we understand the negative national impact of this increasing from 7% to 33%, which brings into the reader's mind not the benefic actions of the Romanian president, but associations like poverty, financial difficulties, severe measure.

This attack towards the president's image is not made directly, but implicitly, in order for the ironist not to be accused of defamation and lose his credibility in front of the reader. Instead, he only inserts linguistic clues, which combined with mutual knowledge background about the political ideologies, work as mitigators of the ironist's real communicative intentions.

3. Conclusions

When we talk about irony, we use a wide range of notions like simulation, evaluation, echo, impoliteness, allusion, insincerity, but they can all be resumed to a main idea: irony has to do with two levels- literal and implicit- and this dichotomy creates double perspectivations which come into contradiction.

The illocutionary force of the implicit level betrays the real communicative intentions of the ironist. These intentions, in the Romanian parliamentary discourse, unlike other types of discourses, reflect the ironist's tendency to criticize the real state of facts, to express the ridiculous, treacherous behaviour of some political characters, to hint at an ideal state of facts, expected by the reader, to attack the opponent's public and private image.

These functions can be achieved by appealing to some strategies meant to maximize the agreement and to minimize the disagreement in a highly formalized institution where these differences of opinion or the competition between contradictory perspectives can be solved in an alluding manner, so that they all could be socially accepted. In conclusion, we can approve the idea that

ironical structures represent legitimate pragmatic and rhetoric movements.

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