

Mitigation as face threatening and saving strategy

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Abstract

The strategy of mitigation consists of a deduction of the negative effect which some face threatening acts could have on the positive face of the ironical speaker, on the one hand, and his victim, on the other hand. This deduction requires the ironical speaker's heuristic ability to encode a positive meaning at the literal level to maintain a cooperative discourse atmosphere and the reader's interpretative ability to decode the former's real communicative intentions which lie at the implicit level. The ironical speaker can save his positive face by reducing the degree of commitment towards his enunciation by evading behind the literal meaning and, at the same time, he can save his victim's positive face by staging a double perspectivation. The mitigation strategy is verifiable on our corpus made up of some Romanian parliamentary discourses through three categories of speech acts: the behabitatives/expressive (marked by the verb 'to felicitate'), the declaratives (issued by the verb 'to declare') and the commissives (highlighted by the verb 'to promise'). This way mitigation combines with indirectness and, in our case, with irony too.

Keywords

irony, mitigation, behabitative, declarative SAs, commissive SAs.

1. Introduction

Irony represents a pragmatic and rhetoric phenomenon which alludes to a gap between the propositional content of the enunciation and the meaning intended by the speaker who uses this enunciation.

The authors of the 'Tinge Hypothesis' (Schwoebel, Dews, Winner, & Srinivas 2000 *apud* Gibbs & Colston 2007: 254) start from the idea that an essential function of irony is to criticize a state of facts, a constellation of rules or expectations that have been flouted, the most evident form of criticism being known as blaming by praising. According to this theory the ironical criticism is less negative, confrontational or defying than the direct, literal criticism.

This way, what we get is a literal evaluation meant to tinge or mitigate the interlocutor's perception of the real communicative

message intended by the ironical speaker. This double perspectivation will lead the interlocutor towards a softened critical evaluation which helps the ironical speaker to discursively act as a person who obeys the rules of the institution he is committed to and where he must normally impose a certain credible image or 'face'.

The concept of 'face' has its roots at Goffman (1967), but it has been developed by Brown and Levinson as 'the public self-image that every member (of a society) wants to claim for himself' (1987: 61). This notion embraces two aspects: the 'negative face' which means 'the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction- i.e. the freedom of action and freedom from imposition', 'the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others', and the 'positive face' which refers to 'the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants', 'the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others' (Brown & Levinson 1987: 61-62).

Both the negative and the positive faces focus on the idea that every person has certain interests or needs which have to be discursively achieved through a state of cooperation.

The problem with this idea is that, in the attempt to protect his own interests or needs, a person can see himself obliged to appeal to some face threatening acts, but in a reasonable manner, so that he can be credible, persuasive and not willing to serve direct, offensive attacks towards his opponent.

This kind of verbal behaviour can be considered as derailment especially in the highly formalized institution of Parliament where, in order for a Member of Parliament (MP) to protect his public and private role, he might reveal some less flattering aspects of his opponent's personality (Ilie 2004: 15).

In order for the discussion not to be charged with the sentence of intended aggression, the MP can make use of some mitigation formulas, meant to soften the threatening character of his speech acts. In this sense, various theoreticians defined mitigation as 'the reduction of certain unwelcome effects a speech act has on the hearer' (Fraser 1980: 341) or 'is based on avoidance or minimization of responsibility which can meet either the needs of the hearer or the needs of the speaker' (Caffi 2007: 91f, 159).

This 'weakening' or 'softening' the authors talk about can be demonstrated, from a pragmatic perspective, through a 'modification of the illocutionary force of some speech acts' (Thaler 2012: 907-919) the MPs make use of, with consequences on their negative or positive faces.

The theory of speech acts has been studied especially by J.L. Austin (1962) and John Searle (1979) who define the illocutionary force as a conventional force, namely the locutor's communicative intention which has to be correctly interpreted by the interlocutor so that the act can also achieve a perlocutionary effect.

What we are interested in here is the fact that the performance of any speech act must depend on some felicity conditions. Searle noticed that the locutor can strategically appeal to an indirect performance of the speech acts to mitigate their conventionalized illocutionary force. This modification of the illocutionary force implies breaking at least one of the felicity conditions and, in the case of irony, we speak about flouting the sincerity condition where sincerity does not operate with the true or false values, but it is a pragmatic concept which suggests the existence of two meanings – a literal and an implicit meaning- and one precise purpose that can justify this 'double talk' (Goffman 2003: 218) - the face saving in order to keep a social balance, to facilitate the agreement and the mutual accomplishment of interests or needs 'not through the language of force but through the force of language' (Rovența-Frumușani 2004: 54).

At the literal level, the speech acts directed at the opponent's face preserve their conventionalized sincere illocutionary force which makes them keep a cooperative discursive atmosphere, but, at the implicit level, the same speech acts prove to be personal or public attacks and this way they become the bearers of an additional mitigated illocutionary force, synonymous to the speaker's real communicative intentions.

From the known typology of the speech acts theory, we shall resume ourselves only to three categories: the behabitatives/expressives (marked by the verb 'to felicitate'), the declaratives (issued by the verb 'to declare') and the commissives (highlighted by the verb 'to promise').

This process of face saving through the appeal to ironical utterances, namely to indirect strategies, requires a diminishing of the

speaker's responsibility to have offended somebody by evading behind the literal meaning and it is checkable on the analysed corpus that contains some Romanian parliamentary discourses taken from the Romanian Parliament's site.

2. The classification of speech acts

2.1. The behabitative/ expressive speech acts

De pildă, cercetătorii au constatat că bacteria E.Coli, rezistentă la antibiotice, era mult mai răspândită în localitățile traversate de drumuri asfaltate decât în cele mai greu accesibile din punct de vedere rutier. Iată de ce consider că, din această perspectivă, Guvernul României ar trebui felicitat!

Vă dați seama ce nenorociri s-ar fi întâmplat dacă pe criza asta din sistemul sanitar Guvernul ar fi făcut și prostia de a construi autostrăzi și de a asfalta drumurile?

De unde spitale? De unde medici? De unde medicamente să ne luptăm cu epidemiile?_(Grațela Leocadia Gavrilescu, 4 octombrie 2011)

For example, the scientists noticed that the EColi bacteria, resistant to antibiotics, was much more diffused into the villages crossed by asphalted roads than into the villages which are less accessible from this point of view. That's why I consider that, from this perspective, the Romanian Government should be felicitated!

Do you realize what disasters would have happened if, on this crisis in the medical system, the Government would have also made the inanity of building highways and asphaltting the roads?

Where from hospitals? Where from doctors? Where from medicines to fight against epidemics? (Grațela Leocadia Gavrilescu, 4th October 2011)

These behabitives/ expressive speech acts refer to the speaker's attitude of praising of the Romanian Government responsible for people's life saving through the lack of asphalted streets which could have led to an epidemic with the EColi bacteria. This way we can observe that this speech act has an innate or conventionalized illocutionary force, namely the intention of praising, which seems sincere because there is also some evidence in favour of this decision of the Romanian Government, being invoked an 'argument ad verecundiam' (Lo Cascio 2002: 273), that is the trustworthy authority (the scientists) who cannot be contradicted.

The clues that contradict this illocutionary force as being the intended one are the rhetorical questions: 'Vă dați seama ce nenorociri

s-ar fi întâmplat dacă pe criza asta din sistemul sanitar Guvernul ar fi făcut și prostia de a construi autostrăzi și de a asfalta drumurile? De unde spitale? De unde medici? De unde medicamente să ne luptăm cu epidemiile? (Do you realize what disasters would have happened if, on this crisis in the medical system, the Government would have also made the inanity of building highways and asphaltting the roads? Where from hospitals? Where from doctors? Where from medicines to fight against epidemics?)' which bear an additional illocutionary force that is to blame the Romanian Government's inefficiency regarding the medical system and the asphaltation of the streets. These rhetorical questions act as ironical markers through which the speaker issues an attack aimed at the Romanian Government's positive face whose public image and responsibilities are contradicted by reality. This way, what the ironical speaker follows is to criticize the lack of a modern medical system and functional streets. A reason such as a possible epidemic in a modern country in all regards is not a sufficient argument to hide the Romanian Government's irresponsibility towards the country it governs. Consequently, we witness an apparent negotiation or cooperation between the ironical speaker's interests and his victim's interests, namely the former wishes to protect his negative and positive face but also the Romanian Government's positive face. The ironical speaker is displeased with the fact that he must commit himself towards the propositional content of his utterance, in order for him not to be accused of irrationality and illogical coherence about the conventionalized intention with which the opponent is going to decode his performed speech act, but, on the other hand, he has the duty to attach a secondary illocutionary force to his speech act which betrays the ironical meaning. For this reason, he tries to reduce some of the strength of his commitment through mitigated means in order to make the reader regain the real communicative intentions. At this point, his positive face is put in danger because he cannot be credible, persuasive, appreciated as sincere any longer.

This double perspectivation requires for the ironical speaker to reduce some of the strength of his commitment through mitigated means in order to save both his negative face (i.e. in case he is accused of having offended somebody he can evade behind the literal meaning) and his positive face (i.e. despite the above accusation he can still be satisfied with his sincere, convincing character).

We can discuss about the same softening of the negative effect on the victim's positive face this time because its perception by the reader can be an alternative one: the latter can choose to believe the conventionalized illocutionary force of the ironical speaker's speech acts and that is a praising of the victim or the mitigated illocutionary force which is a blaming one.

So the victim's positive face is saved and protected by means of modification of the illocutionary force of the ironical speaker's speech acts.

2.2. The declarative speech acts

Anul 2010 a fost un an de "împliniri mărețe", urmare a faptului că regimul Bănescu-Boc "a reușit să ia măsuri în beneficiul poporului, spre binele și fericirea acestuia și pentru propășirea neamului", după cum urmează:

- reducerea salariilor pentru persoanele din sectorul public cu peste 25%;
- reducerea pensiilor militarilor, polițiștilor, în unele cazuri cu 50%;
- scăderea puterii de cumpărare cu peste 30%, comparativ în decembrie 2010, față de decembrie 2009;
- reducerea indemnizațiilor pentru mame, a alocațiilor pentru copii, a indemnizațiilor sociale etc.;
- creșterea evaziunii fiscale la peste 40 miliarde euro etc.

Ca și în anii de tristă amintire, apare "un intelectual de marcă", plătit din bani publici, Sebastian Lăzăroiu, care îi declară "eroi între eroii neamului" pe Traian Bănescu și Emil Boc, pentru că au făcut atât de mult bine țării, chiar dacă "partidul nu a fost solidar cu premierul, dar premierul, împreună cu președintele, au tras tot poporul după ei, cu forța". (Chiriță Dumitru, 29 martie 2011)

The year 2010 was full of 'great accomplishments', as a consequence of the fact that the Bănescu-Boc regime 'succeeded in taking measures to the people's benefit, to its interests and happiness and to its welfare', as follows:

- the deduction with over 25% of the budgetary people's wages;
- the deduction with over 50% in some cases of the militaries and policemen's pensions;
- the reduction with over 30% of the buying capacity, in December 2010, in contrast with December 2009;
- the deduction of mothers and children's allowances, the social allocations etc.;
- the increase of the tax evasion with over 40 milliards of euro etc.

As during the sad memory years, it shows up 'a fine intellectual', paid from the public budget, Sebastian Lăzăroiu, who declared Traian Bănescu and

Emil Boc ‘heroes among the national heroes’, because they had done so much good to this country, even if ‘the party had not been sympathetic to the prime minister, but the prime minister together with the president, had pulled the people with them by force.’ (Chiriță Dumitru, 29th March 2011)

Declarations impose a compulsory relationship between what is said and what is accomplished. The illocutionary force of this declaration imposes a great degree of commitment to the truth of the propositional content from the ironical speaker. This commitment is announced through some hyperboles such as ‘împliniri mărețe (great accomplishments)’, ‘un intelectual de marcă (a fine intellectual)’, ‘eroi între eroii neamului (heroes among the national heroes)’, declarations made by the victim of irony who is Sebastian Lăzăroi. The insertion in the ironical speaker’s own discourse of somebody else’s words suggests an apparent adoption of the perspectives these quotations underlie, that is of praising the measures taken during the Băsescu-Boc regime. These citations increase the ironical speaker’s negative face which employ the idea of sharing the same perspectives his victim sustained.

These hyperboles create positive portraits of some Romanian leaders, but their measures turn the expectations of the reader upside down as long as they are not in the people’s benefit, but towards their disadvantage. This new perspective comes as a consequence of the appearance of a secondary illocutionary force through mitigated linguistic resources. The quotation of somebody else’s words lead to a polyphonic discourse and intrinsically to a competition of perspectives between literal and implicit ones.

The victim’s perspective of praising the Romanian leaders mismatches the ironical speaker’s evaluation of the same theme. The ironical speaker does not agree to this praising as long as the victim’s declaration has no match in reality and the ‘great accomplishments’ are only great words which, instead of fulfilling the people’s expectations, they devoid them of any meaning.

The indirect meaning is created in a mitigated way to save the positive face of the victim, namely his public image as a trustworthy person, but also the ironical speaker’s negative face because he can always withdraw himself in the area of the literal level and not be accused of any implied message. This implied message suggests a blaming of his victim unable to keep a cohesion between the

perspective he stages through his quotations, simple allusions to the communist period where they were used to praise Ceaușescu's personality, and the lack of concreteness in the real world.

In this case, irony reflects the ridicule of his victim's staged perspective but this revealing could not have been made directly as it would have been stigmatized as impoliteness, offence, personal attack.

2.3. The commissive speech acts

Grosimea stratului de zăpadă a fost, de asemenea, egală cu frica de a spune lucrurilor pe nume.

Pot depune mărturie bătrânii care lăncezeau prin funduri de sat și care s-au pus pe băut sărbătorind norocul abundenței de zăpadă și - ce să vezi? - s-au sufocat de-atâta bine acele câteva zeci de năpăstuiți ai sorții.

Oameni buni, din motive pe care o să le analizăm și sancționăm ulterior, nu putem face față astăzi tuturor cerințelor imediate de a deszăpezi satele și orașele, drumurile și șoselele patriei. Prin urmare, vă rugăm să ne scuzați, să ne înțelegeți, să ne ajutați ajutându-vă și să ieșiți - care poate - cu lopata la nămeți! Noi promitem să sancționăm drastic pe cei care ne-au adus în această situație. (Gheorghe Antochi, 21 februarie 2012)

The thickness of the snowpack was also equal to the fear of not calling things by their names.

The old men who were languishing through far away villages and who started drinking to celebrate the luck of the snow abundance can witness- and behold- the numerous people oppressed by fate suffocated of so much good those days.

Folks, from reasons which we shall analyze and sanction afterward, today we cannot face all the immediate requirements of getting the snow out of the way in the villages and towns, on the roads and the highways of the country. Consequently, we ask for your apologies, understanding and help by helping yourselves and come out -who can- with the oar in the snow! We promise to drastically sanction those who have brought us into this situation. (Gheorghe Antochi, 21st February 2012)

Promising represents a psychological state which expresses the want to accomplish a well-established purpose. The fulfillment of this promising is synonymous to a high degree of commitment from the speaker and implicitly the imposing of the sincerity condition. The illocutionary force of this promising seems very sincere at the literal level because it is based on the necessity to sanction the persons who are responsible for the dramatic situation the old men got involved into. This perspective is even more convincing as long as the ironical

speaker creates the illusion of a sincere assessment: 'Noi promitem să sancționăm drastic pe cei care ne-au adus în această situație. (We promise to drastically sanction those who have brought us into this situation) through this plural personal pronoun 'we' which implies the speaker's mutual sharing of his victim's perspective. This strategy is intentionally approached by the ironical speaker in order to protect his negative face (i.e. he accepts to be held responsible for the truth of the propositional content of his speech act) and his positive face because his words can be taken-for-granted.

This sharing of perspective between the ironical speaker and his victim becomes advantageous for the former because he has created a perfect, honest image behind which he can withdraw as long as he wants to damask a secondary communicative intention which might be seen as an attack towards his victim's moral profile and which might bring him moral prejudices and this way be considered irrational.

For this accusation not to happen, the ironical speaker only suggests a blaming attitude towards his victim in charge with the situation the old men have been trapped into. This new illocutionary force which makes the literal perspective become invalid is staged in a mitigated, implying manner through the hyperbole 'sărbătorind norocul abundenței de zăpadă (to celebrate the luck of the snow abundance)', the antithesis 's-au sufocat de-atâta bine acele câteva zeci de năpăstuiți ai sorții (the numerous people oppressed by fate suffocated of so much good those days), or the rhetorical question 'ce să vezi? (and behold)' (which acts as a parenthetical formula). The hyperbole and the antithesis plead for the ridicule of the presented situation, in which the attitude could not be a celebration one, but a deploying one. The effect of surprise announced by the parenthetical is also a staged one, which implies an unpleased continuity, full of contempt towards the authorities' indifference at the old men's tragedy.

This communicative intention from the part of the ironical speaker is created in a mitigated manner in order to save his negative and positive face, as we have already mentioned above, but also to reduce from the negative effect which a direct accusation or attack towards his victim would have had on the latter's positive face (his public image would have suffered from a direct attack).

3. Conclusions

Our research followed some directions towards which the notion of mitigation guided our steps.

From our examples, we can affirm that mitigation of the conventional illocutionary force of some speech acts and the addition of a secondary illocutionary force are directed at revealing some negative, less flattering aspects of the ironical victim's moral profile, but also at softening the manner these aspects come to light in order to save the negative and the positive faces of both the ironical speaker and his victim.

The ironical speaker stages a certain mutual sharing with his victim regarding some positive evaluations about Romanian political actors. He does so to allude towards a cooperative discursive atmosphere, but also to impose a credible, persuasive image in front of the reader, on the one hand, and to be able to withdraw his commitment about a possible negative evaluation of his victim, evading behind the positive, literal level.

This alternation between threatening and saving the victim's positive face especially suggests a precise purpose: the ironical speaker intends to manipulate, or, put it otherwise, to orient the reader's true decoding of his real communicative intentions which can never be found at the surface level, but at the underlying level of the discourse.

For this purpose to find its concretization, the ironical speaker must prove heuristic abilities to encode his subversive communicative intentions under the cooperative appearance of the discourse in order to diminish the possible negative effect on both himself and his victim.

Consequently, we can assess that mitigation works as face saving strategy by appealing to irony as a pragmatic and rhetoric phenomenon meant to suppress indirect significances.

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