

The Fine Difference between Irony and Sarcasm

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Abstract

These are two pragmatic phenomena that can be slightly distinguished. However, our opinion is that there is a fine difference between ironical and sarcastic enunciations which is important for us to depict as to understand the nature of the motives a speaker has the moment he utters them. The both types mentioned above imply a certain degree of criticism which has subjective or objective causes.

The more the causes are subjective, the more the enunciation is susceptible of a higher degree of criticism, and the more the causes are objective, the more the enunciation aims at a lower degree of criticism. Consequently, if the speaker is suspected of subjective reasons, he is more sarcastic than ironic, and in the case his reasons should be objective, he is more ironic than sarcastic.

These presuppositions can be verified on the grounds of the 'echoic mention' theory which will establish the idea that ironical enunciation has more to do with cooperation among speakers and the sarcastic enunciation is more connected to an aggressive impact on the speakers' public image.

Key words

irony, sarcasm, cooperation, conflict, image.

1. Preliminaries

Tracing the numerous articles which have tried to establish a clear distinction between irony and sarcasm we shall notice that their results have remained.

The idea of 'criteria' rather asks to be replaced by some 'perspectives' according to which the reader can recover an ironical or a sarcastic interpretation. What we can observe is that, as long as the both terms, namely irony and sarcasm, coexist in any language, there are points of view which direct the reader towards a fine difference between them, with distinct mechanisms of producing and recovering each type of enunciation, with pragmatic functions and effects.

These perspectives or criteria are 'grounded' in several theoretical aspects such as: the multiple forms irony can depict and the single form sarcasm can take; the dichotomic nature of the target when it comes to irony, on the one hand, and the only nature of the target when we discuss about sarcasm, on the other hand; the involuntary level for irony and the intentionality level for sarcasm; the lower degree of indirect criticism when we talk about irony and the higher degree of criticism when we identify a sarcastic meaning.

This enumeration is not made at random, but it is meant to be understood as a set of arguments in favour of the idea that irony and sarcasm imply not only coexistence but also contrastive frames in which they become present as distinct operational concepts and, consequently, suggestions for further research.

The theoretical background supports the argument that we meet irony with its multiple shapes such as: *self-irony* (a situation that exemplifies the ‘echoic mention’ theory of Sperber & Wilson in 1981: 308, according to which the ironical enunciation echoes, through quotation, the words the ironical speaker uttered in a previous context and to which the reader attributes a dissociative attitude of ridicule, critics, mocking, etc.); *the situational irony* (discussed by Haiman 1998: 20 *apud* Attardo 2001 in Gibbs & Colston 2007: 137); *the positive irony* (also called ‘asteism’ by Fontanier 1968: 150 *apud* Attardo 2006 in Mey 2009: 406) or *the kind irony* (Anolli, Ciceri & Infantino 2002 in Gibbs & Colston 2007: 363; see also *ironic praise/compliment* at Schwoebel, Dews, Winner & Srinivas 2000 in Gibbs & Colston 2007: 254; Dews, Kaplan & Winner 1995 in Gibbs & Colston 2007: 298; Lee & Katz 1998: 2); *the Socratic irony* (which alludes to the Greek philosopher Socrate, in Plato’s ‘Republic’, who dissimulates to empathize with his interlocutors in order to actually reveal the inconsistencies of their arguments, in Nilsen & Nilsen 2000 *apud* Attardo 2006 in Mey 2009: 408), a variety of forms (and our enumeration can continue, but it does not represent the aim of our present paper) that cannot be applied to sarcasm (so, denominations such as **self-sarcasm*, **situational sarcasm*, **kind sarcasm* or **Socratic sarcasm* are incorrect).

As we have already mentioned, another argument supporting the difference between irony and sarcasm consists in associating the latter term with the presence of a victim and a more general target for the former concept. So, the ironical intention might allude to a specific person, to the ironical speaker himself or herself in a previous context, or to a situation or to some general norms that have been disregarded or ‘violated’ (as to use a Gricean notion), in which cases we deal either with a subjective cause or with an objective one. For the sarcasm, things look quite different as it has a specific and not a diffuse target, that is, it goes together with a person who becomes the centre of the ‘bitter’ interpretation, so it mainly has a subjective reason.

Going further into the subject, irony is seen in relation to not being intended by the speaker, but only decoded or ‘read’ in an ‘ironical key’ or from an ‘ironical point of view’ (Muecke 1978: 364 *apud* Attardo 2006 in Mey 2009: 408), the community’s conventions of usage dethroning the individual speaker’s intentions. This theory is also sustained by Haiman (1990: 188 *apud* Attardo 2006 in Mey 2009: 408) who attributes an innocent role to the ironical speaker, the focus being reoriented towards the reader who has the duty to attach an ironical intention to the enunciation. Sarcasm, on the contrary, is a blatant case of intentionality, a type of indirect criticism addressed towards a person, with the clear intention to condemn him or her, similar to insults and with a higher aggressive, face-threatening potential (Brumark 2004 *apud* Sorea 2012: 253). The speaker who uses sarcasm is more susceptible of impoliteness than the one who appeals to irony in order to judge somebody’s actions, to express disparagement or to blame him or her (Gibbs 1994: 398 *apud* Sorea 2012: 353-354).

Barbe (1995: 28 *apud* Attardo 2006 *in* Mey 2009: 409) draws a line between irony and sarcasm in relation to whose face has more to suffer and she concludes that, in the case of a sarcastic speaker, his image is more submitted to compromise because of the incisive, more condemning attitude it attaches to the enunciation and, though it expresses an indirect criticism, it is more powerful than if it were a direct criticism because it communicates not only the real state of affairs, but also the way it should look like to be consonant with the speaker's expectancies. In the case of irony, despite the fact that it communicates a discrepancy between the desired and the actual state of affairs, the latter being criticized and rejected by the speaker as not being in accordance to his wants, the level of criticism is diminished in comparison to a literal criticism, because the responsibility of both the speaker and his victim is lower (Colston 1997 *in* Gibbs & Colston 2007: 321-335).

Next, we shall try to pragmatically analyze some texts belonging to the parliamentary subgenre, dividing them, more or less intuitively, into the irony or the sarcasm categories.

2. An ironical interpretation

(1) S-ar părea că noi nu vrem să construim drumuri durabile: parcă ar fi făcute de barbari pentru barbari. La prețuri cu mult mai mari decât în toată Europa, reușim performanța să avem cele mai proaste drumuri. Nu trece mult timp de la tăierea panglicii inaugurale că apare fisura - debutul gropii și-al craterului de mai târziu în care își rup contribuabilii mașinile. Așa că românii mai scot niște bani din buzunar: pentru repararea mașinilor mutilate de drumurile găurite, ciuruite, bombardate pe care sunt nevoiți să circule. Ce ar trebui făcut pentru ca șoselele noastre să fie ca acelea din Franța, Austria sau Ungaria măcar? Să oprim ploile? Să excomunicăm iarna? Să interzicem circulația autovehiculelor în toată țara? Să umblăm pe jos sau cu bicicletele? Dar poate că drumurile noastre n-ar rezista nici la biciclete. (*Ciocan Gheorghe, 17 martie 2010*)

(1) It looks like we do not want to build lasting roads: they seem built by barbarians for barbarians. With much bigger prices than in all Europe, we succeed the performance of having the worst roads. It won't take long time from cutting the chalk line and the fissure appears- the beginning of the hole, and the later crater in which the tax payers break their cars. So the Romanian people have to take some money out of their pockets for repairing the cars that had been mutilated by the holed, screened, struck roads they need to circulate on. What should be done for our roads to be like the ones in France, Austria or at least Hungary? To stop the rains? To vanish winter? To forbid the national driving? To walk or to ride our bikes? But maybe our roads would not hold either the bikes. (*Ciocan Gheorghe, 17th March 2010*)

In (1), the reader is faced with a chain of speculative-meditative questions which do not have the illocutionary force of a prototypical interrogation and, consequently, they do not expect any answer. Instead, the author asks himself if those situations (to stop the rains, to vanish winter, to forbid the national driving or to replace it by walking or riding bikes) can occur as if people could have the power to make them exist or to make them disappear. The ridicule of taking into consideration these situations as alternatives to make the Romanian streets durable

is doubled by a sense of humour they are responsible for. The reader 'laughs' at the possibility for these situations to become true at the same time revealing a sense of ridicule regarding the author as really believing in these perspectives.

Because the target has a diffuse nature – we do not know whether the author's communicative intentions are directed towards the impossibility for these situations to come to life or towards a person who is in charge with the durability of the Romanian streets and who is verbally sanctioned because he is not able to do his job well and the reality contradicts the way streets should look like to some degree of expectancy-, the reader will rather confront with an ironical understanding that can be associated not necessarily with a 'biting' interpretation, but with a hint of humour, a sense of incompatibility between an expected state of affairs and the contradictory real state of affairs and an intent of 'bonding' (the use of the inclusive pronoun 'we' suggests that not only the author, but also any reader can think of those situations as alternatives that depend on people and that can repair human mistakes although it is only a dissimulated way of seeing things in which neither the author nor the reader really believe).

(2) Doar, dacă urmărim firul banilor cheltuiți cu nemiluita de aceiași guvernanți - deși tot ei susțin că nu au niciun ban de risipit la dispoziție-, putem trage concluzia referitoare la noul hobby descoperit de domnul Boc și practicat cu insistență de toate echipele sale: construirea de stadioane pentru cei ce locuiesc în mediul rural. Și banii direcționați în acest scop nu au fost deloc puțini. Ba chiar sunt distribuiți în continuare, cu obstinație, spre același prioritar obiectiv: sportul. Acesta va fi practicat de mii de echipe comunale viitoare, ce vor fi formate din bătrânii satelor, care ar putea juca, eventual, contra fantomelor câșunarilor. (Atanasiu Teodor, 19 octombrie 2010)

(2) Only if we trace the money that was excessively spent by the same members of the government- although they are the ones who keep saying that they do no longer dispose of any money to spend-, we can draw the conclusion regarding the new hobby discovered by Mr. Boc and insistently practiced by all his teams: building stadiums for those who live in the countryside. And the money directed to this purpose was not little at all. They are still directed, obstinately, to the same main purpose: sport. This is going to be practiced by thousands of future villages teams, which will be made of old people, who might play, in any case, against the ghosts of the strawberries reapers. (Atanasiu Teodor, 19th October 2010)

In (2), the hypothesis that sport can be practiced in a village made of old people who would play against their children that do not longer live here, but they are gone abroad to pick up strawberries, turns into a trigger of an ironical interpretation that goes beyond the literal level. The two attributives contain the presupposition that such a situation can really take place, but once the reader has activated the contextual background (according to which the Romanian villages are populated with old people as a consequence of the youth leaving abroad in search of improved work conditions are a matter of fact and do not represent a wonder anymore), he will become aware of the counter-factuality of such an imagined state of affairs.

Our opinion is that the intended message of the speaker is aimed towards an ironical decoding because it focuses more on a discrepancy between a real state of affairs (presented in a playful way, as if the ironical speaker really believed old people were able to still practise sport against ‘ghosts’ as a metaphor for the youth who did not longer live in their native villages) and a desired one (as implied by the sorrowful atmosphere loaded with memories of situations that once had been true). This echo of a state of facts which the ironical speaker indirectly pines after makes the communicated message to have an ironical hint and not a sarcastic interpretation.

3. A sarcastic interpretation

(3) Victor Ponta a reușit să reînvie în memoria colectivă imaginea conducătorului Ceaușescu sau, mai bine spus, s-a transformat el însuși într-un semi-zeu care aștepta ofrandele și ofrandele aduse de Mazăre și de tovarășii din țară. De această dată, Carn(mazăr)avalul din Mamaia s-a mutat pe stadionul 23, un show care ne arată partea întunecată a comportamentului lui Ponta. Vă spun o curiozitate: mare conducător iubit, Ceaușescu, la vremea lui, aduna mai puțini oameni pe stadionul 23 August, la acea vreme capacitatea arenei sportive fiind de 60.120 de locuri iar, de ziua sa, tovarășul Ponta l-a depășit! Felicitările mele! Micul Pontașescu din PSD, dragul nostru tovarăș, ne arată că acel tricou cu Che Guevara nu este o pură întâmplare, iar prietenia sa strânsă cu șmecherași de talia lui Mazăre readuce România într-un moment critic al democrației. (*Chiru Christian, 23 septembrie 2014*)

(3) Victor Ponta succeeded in bringing back to life Ceaușescu's image in the joint memory or, better said, he himself turned into a semi-god who was waiting for the praises and the presents brought by Mazăre and his national companions. This time, the Carni(mazăr)val from Mamaia moved to the 23rd August stadium, a show which exhibits us the dark side of Ponta's behaviour. Let me tell you something curious: a great beloved leader, Ceaușescu, used to gather less people on the 23rd August stadium, in those times its capacity being of 60.210 seats, and, on his birthday, the comrade Ponta exceeded him! My congratulations! The little Pontașescu from the PSD party, our beloved comrade, shows us that the Che Guevara T-shirt is not a pure coincidence, and his tight friendship with cunning fellows such as Mazăre brings Romania back to a critical moment of democracy. (*Chiru Christian, 23rd September 2014*)

In (3), we can notice the presence of two political characters: Radu Mazăre, the mayor of Constanța, and Victor Ponta, the Romanian Prime-Minister. If their names had not suffered for any modification, the reader would not have been faced with secondary or additional communicative intentions and, then, he would not have recovered any ironical or sarcastic meaning. But the reality of the text requires for a more profound interpretation. The name of the mayor is placed between brackets, without any supplementary intention, but inside the word ‘carnival’, a term which asks for contextual information as to correctly interpret it. In this sense, the reader will have to decode the term ‘carnival’ as an echo to a state of affairs that characterizes the mayor's lifestyle. The attributed perspective (the mayor being a fan of feasts) is not in accordance with the perspective of the reader who tacitly dissociates in order to express a sense of ridicule or criticism towards a

‘lusty’ way of living. The victim of the reader’s sarcastic interpretation is verbally sanctioned for his disproportioned lifestyle.

Neither does the Prime-Minister escape a sarcastic decoding because the way his name appears is a proof in favour of an intended modification: his family name ‘Ponta’ has been derived with a suffix ‘-șescu’, which has turned into ‘Pontașescu’. Again, the reader will have to activate shared background information as to correctly grasp this derivation which alludes at or echoically reminds him of a Romanian famous totalitarian leader, Ceaușescu, whose exaggerated way of spending his life in general, and his birthday in particular, is now associated to the Prime-Minister or to the mayor of Constanța. This indirect comparison draws a sarcastic intention which communicates critics, disapproval, and threat to the victims’ public image. These attacks do not regard an ironical interpretation (it should have been a kinder indirect criticism, closer to humour, less face-threatening), but, instead, they presuppose a sarcastic comprehension, more ‘biting’ and with a higher degree of impoliteness.

(4) Televiziunile și-au amintit cât timp a petrecut la guvernare PDL-ul. Programul tv a punctat la țanc - "Boc 1000 de zile!" Număr rotund, merita blagoslovit, tămâiat, comemorat... Numai că atmosfera este pesimistă, mai potrivit ar fi să se vorbească despre "1001 de nopți" cu Boc pe post de Șeherezada și cu Băsescu în rolul califului. E cineva care spune povești ca să supraviețuiască. Uite așa, încet-încet, nici nu am băgat de seamă că fostul primar al Clujului, căruia nimeni nu îi dădea șanse să reziste, s-a încotoșenit la Palatul Victoria. Pare un pensionar al stabilimentului, un veteran, un pensionar pe viață. (Nistor Laurențiu, 27 septembrie 2011)

(4) The televisions remembered how much time had passed since the PDL governing. The TV programme pointed exactly- ‘Boc 1000 days!’ A precise number, which deserved to be blessed, incensed, celebrated... Only that the atmosphere is pessimistic, it would be more appropriate to speak about the ‘1001 nights’ with Boc as Scheherazade and Băsescu as the caliph. There is somebody who keeps telling stories to survive. And this way, hardly did we notice when the ex mayor of the Cluj county, whom nobody gave the least chance to hold on, had got stuck to the Victoria Palace. He seems a veteran, a lifelong retired man of the establishment. (Nistor Laurențiu, 27th September 2011)

In (4), an implicit comparison between Boc and Scheherazade, on the one hand, and between Băsescu and the caliph, on the other hand, does not remain without a sarcastic echo in the reader’s mind. In this sense, the reader has to surpass the dictum level and ‘catch’ the intertextual relationship between the two political figures and the two literary characters (Scheherazade and the caliph).

Beyond any apparent praise of the political figures (by means of putting them in analogy to some literary characters), the reader will recover a sarcastic, critical interpretation coming from the speaker. The latter indirectly endangers or threatens the ethos dimension of his victims (they both make promises they do not keep, but need them in order to ‘survive’, that is, to maintain their political positions and an image of credibility and authority). The reader dissociates from the dictum perspective for which the speaker assumes the responsibility so as to

‘grasp’ an intention of criticism, with face-threatening potential, and a trial to ridicule the victims, making them lose face.

4. Conclusions

There are two pragmatic devices, irony and sarcasm, under which any reader can label the kind of attitude or communicative intention an enunciation wraps out. The both devices have their theoretical arguments as if they were separate tools to express a sense of ridicule, criticism, insult, humour, aggressiveness, biting or bonding relations.

But we can notice a slight, sometimes invisible gap, between irony and sarcasm that must not be omitted as we would lose a difference in the degree of both criticism and indirectness. On the one hand, irony remarks itself as a meaning endowed with less maliciousness than sarcasm and with a more powerful degree of politeness than its literal counterpart. On the other hand, a sarcastic meaning highlights a sneering attitude, with a hint of insult and a stronger degree of impoliteness than if it were a direct form of critics.

As we noticed in the examples, irony is more connected to an objective target (for example, a situation or a norm which becomes dissonant in comparison to the reader’s expectancies), and sarcasm which is bound to a subjective aim (namely a person who becomes the centre of the speaker’s rudeness).

From these theoretical and analytical dates, we can draw the conclusion that it would be incorrect not to make a distinction between irony and sarcasm or, ultimately, to consider sarcasm as subordinate to irony and to use, if not only sarcasm, at least an etiquette known as ‘sarcastic irony’.

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