

Hirsch, Galia (2008)

Between Irony and Humor: a Pragmatic Model Based on Textual Analysis of Literary Works and their Translations

PhD dissertation

The Department of Translation and Interpreting Studies, Bar-Ilan University

This work was carried out under the supervision of Prof. Elda Weizman

English Abstract

Research topic and purposes

This research proposes a model for distinguishing between cues for irony and humor in the context of literary texts. It purports to construct a comparative model based on existing models and elaborating on them, to substantiate the model through textual analysis focusing on cues for irony and humor in the source texts and their translations, and to further expand the initial model, based on concepts drawn from translation theory, primarily relating to differences in the use of explicitation strategies while translating irony and humor. The research is based on four conceptual paradigms: pragmatic studies of irony, pragmatic studies of humor, a pragmatic approach to the study of literary texts, and theories of text interpretation. Both the analysis of irony and humor as well as the comparison between source text and its translation are pragmatically oriented.

Methodology

Unlike a large part of pragmatic research on irony and humor, which draws on isolated and invented examples, the model proposed here is based on the analysis of occurrences in context. For this purpose, we selected nine literary works, translated from Spanish and English into Hebrew, and for each of them source and translation were analyzed separately. The literary texts, all of them with irony and humor, include: *Catch 22* (Joseph Heller), *David Meyer is a Mother* (Gail Parent), *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas* (Lucía Etxebarria), *Lazarillo de Tormes* (Anónimo), *El misterio de la cripta embrujada* (Eduardo Mendoza), *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (Mario Vargas Llosa), *Pantaléon y las visitadoras* (Mario Vargas Llosa), *Don Quijote de la Mancha* (Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra) and *The House of God* (Samuel Shem). This particular selection allows for a comparative study of irony and humor in their natural contexts, and makes it possible to delineate their contribution to the general meaning of the text.

The analysis comprised three stages: (1) cues for irony and humor were identified in the source texts (Spanish and English), their functions in context were delineated, and a distinction was made between them; (2) the translations underwent the same procedure; (3) the source texts and their translations were compared in terms of discourse patterns and their functions.

The conceptual framework

The textual analysis is based on a model for the interpretation of indirect speaker's meanings (Dascal & Weizman 1987; Weizman & Dascal 1991), and on the notions of "cues" and "clues" as they are perceived in this model. In this view, irony and humor are viewed cases of indirect speaker's meaning. Their interpretation presupposes the search for cues indicating that utterance meaning differs from speaker's meaning, as well as for clues which contribute to the reconstruction of an alternative speaker's meaning. This process is based on the interrelations between textual patterns and contextual knowledge.

In its first stage, the model distinguishes between irony and humor based on central theories in pragmatics, which shed light on cues for the detection of ironic or humoristic meanings. In the approach proposed here, the combination of a number of cues defines a given utterance as either ironic or humoristic. The cues for irony include the flouting of Gricean maxims (Grice 1975, 1978) or of the sincerity condition (Haverkate, 1990), and the detection of echoic mention (Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Wilson & Sperber, 1992) or of pretense (Clark & Gerrig, 1984). The cues for humor

include script opposition and the violation of expectations (Raskin & Attardo, 1994), punch line (Oring, 1989) and word play (Alexander, 1997) or non-sense (Jeffers, 1995). In its second stage, the model draws on the theory of translation, mostly on the notions of “explicitation” (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958; Dimitrova, 2005) and of “obligatory-” and “non-obligatory shifts” (Toury, 1977), partly adapted to the purpose of the present research.

Results

The research proposes a theoretical model for the distinction between cues for irony and humor in literary texts. It further provides us with tools to distinguish between typical cases and occurrences which may be located on a continuum between the two extremes, since they include cues for both interpretations. The comparison between source and translation makes it possible to add another criterion for the distinction: translations of irony manifest more explicitations, whereas translations of humor yield more non-explicating shifts. This finding should be further substantiated in future research. At this stage it may be interpreted as indicating that while the explicitation of humor cancels its function altogether, the explicitation of irony does not, since the implied criticism is not cancelled. This finding further strengthens the claim that irony is inherently critical, whereas humor is not.