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Interactivity in Readers' Ironic Comments to On-Line Op-Eds. in the Website of "Haaretz" Newspaper: Threads and Ripples

Phd Thesis

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English Abstract

Theoretical background. The current study focuses on ironic readers' comments responding to op-eds in the website of the Israeli *Haaretz* newspaper. Readers' comments are online forums which offer public spheres for the expression of opinions and thoughts by non-expert readers. These spheres of discourse do not necessarily conform to conventional patterns of public institutional communication. Rather, they construct a new type of public discourse in a news-social context, which creates a non-mediated, authentic environment. Readers' comments enable commenters to respond interactively to journalists as well as to other commenters.

Based on a pragmatically-oriented textual analysis of discourse patterns, readers' comments were examined with specific reference to theories of irony, anti-rhetorics, (im)politeness and positioning. Accordingly, the interaction between verbal irony, face-work and self- and reciprocal positioning of the interlocutors was explored, as well as the role played by irony in the construction of anti-rhetoric strategies.

The corpus of the study incorporated three levels of comments: Level 1 – primary comments – written immediately in response to the initiating op-ed. Level 2 – secondary comments – written immediately after a primary comment. These refer to either the primary comment or to the op-ed itself. Levels 3-6 – sub-secondary comments – which respond to another comment at the same level (3-6), to a former comment (primary or secondary), or to the initiating op-ed. Recent studies on ironic readers' comments focused on the relation between irony in the comments and irony in the op-eds. However, the interactive relations between the various levels of comments have not yet been studied in a framework which incorporates the abovementioned theories.

In the current study, the expansion of verbal irony in primary and secondary comments directed at the victims of irony and focused on its loci was investigated for the first time in relation to face, positioning and anti-rhetoric strategies.

The research aims are: (1) to examine the realization of irony in readers' comments, focusing on its expansion in the primary comments as well as in other levels of comments, and how it affects positive and negative face as well as self- and reciprocal positioning of the commenters; (2) to identify the characteristics of the irony's victims and its loci; (3) to define the functions of anti-rhetoric strategies in the realization of irony, and the functions of

politeness and positioning in the construction of anti-rhetoric strategies.

Research questions: (1) How is irony realized and how does it expand in primary and secondary readers' comments, and how does irony influence the construction of the commenters' positive and negative face and their self- and reciprocal positioning? (2) What are the features of the victims and loci of irony in ironic commenting? (3) What are the functions of anti-rhetoric strategies in the realization of irony, and what are the functions of politeness and face in the construction of anti-rhetoric strategies?

Methodology: the study is a mixed-methods research comprised of textual-pragmatic and quantitative approaches: One hundred ironic op-eds were retrieved from the digital weekend edition of *Haaretz* newspaper in 2011-2012, followed by a minimum of 50 comments. Ironic utterances were collected, textually analyzed and categorized into to levels of comments, victims and loci of irony, and according to anti-rhetoric strategies (anti-logos and anti-ethos),. These categorizations were strictly cross checked to confirm the validity and reliability of the classifications of the ironic utterances. Conclusions were drawn and validated based on the triangulation of the textual-pragmatic and statistical analyses.

Findings: The interactive relations between the ironic utterances in the readers' comments discourse (research question 1). The findings indicate that the realization and expansion of irony occur in two patterns of non-dyadic multi-participant interactions: **ripples and threads**, which describe the expansion of the ironic utterances. **Ripples** are vertical expansions of ironic utterances in a circular continuum among primary comments. **Ironic threads** are linear continuums of ironic comments which are written sequentially – mainly horizontally. The category of **ironic ripples** includes two types: (1) **intra-textual ripples** – the ironic utterance responds to the initiating op-ed or to the comment which triggered the motion of ironic ripples; (2) **intertextual ripples** –interact with other op-eds' ironic comments.

Six types of **ironic threads** were identified: (1) An identical repetition of the ironic utterance; (2) A repetition with minor changes; (3) Ironic keying of former comment is pursued, but commenters tend to respond to dictum and not necessarily to implicatum; (4) Ironic utterances respond to former irony successively; (5) Commenters affiliate with each other and direct the ironic criticism at another addressee; (6) Ironic keying is pursued under the influence of the co-textual environment, which lends ironic keying to non-ironic utterances.

Consequently, a new type of **reciprocity** was identified – multi-participant reciprocity,

which describes the way irony evokes irony not only in the dialogue with the journalist, but also in the commenters' discourse. **Ironic reciprocity** was identified both in op-ed–comment and in comment–comment discourse. The quantitative analysis revealed that irony expands through ripples twice as much as compared to threads.

Additionally, the expansion of irony in intra- and intertextual ripples is influenced by the topic of discussion, the identity of the journalist and the accumulated attitude of the commenters towards all the above in addition to the writing style of the initiating ironic utterance.

The features of the victims and loci of irony (research question 2). The victims of irony in the comments were mainly politicians, civil institutions and journalists, and less frequently – groups of civilians and other commenters. The loci of irony were: positioning of the other, challenging the other's self-positioning and challenging a third party's positioning. The ironic criticism and especially the mockery attached to it, positions its victims negatively, and as a result threatens their positive face, and concurrently enhances the positive face of the active participants: journalists and commenters and passive participants who do not comment. They all act as a community of discourse and the use of irony evokes closeness and solidarity among them.

The functions of anti-rhetoric strategies in the realization of irony in readers' comments (research question 3). It was found that in most ironic utterances, commenters used anti-logos strategies. Moreover, a difference was identified between two uses of anti-logos irony: when irony is directed at the op-eds' content or stance – commenters opt for the use of affiliative anti-logos with the journalists, as well as anti-ethos (both ad-hominem and ad-personam) strategies. In contrast, when irony is directed at other commenters, preference is shown for challenging anti-logos strategy, and anti-ethos ad-personam twice as much as compared to the ad-hominem strategy.

Another unique finding showed that a significant rate of ironic ad-personam comments was directed at the political camp or ethnic and religious peer group of the writer, whereas previous studies indicated that ad-personam strategies were directed mainly at single targets.

The use of ironic anti-logos utterances enables commenters to attend to the addressee's (journalist or former commenter) face-wants while creating solidarity with other commenters who share similar stances and opinions. They negatively position the other, and concurrently present themselves and other commenters as a group in a better light. Moreover, the relative multiplicity of ironic anti-ethos comments (ad hominem and even more ad personam)

validates the claim that ironic utterances fail to fulfill the expectation for a deliberative discussion in the public sphere.

The research has theoretical and methodological contributions. From a **theoretical viewpoint,** the currect study contributes to pragmatic theory in several ways: it conceptualizes for the first time the notions of **ironic ripples** and **ironic threads** in readers' comments, and distinguishes between **inter- and intra-textual ripples** of ironic utterances; it provides an elaborated account of reciprocity and introduces a new concept: **multi-participant reciprocity**; and it refines the distinction between the **victims and loci of irony** via the analysis of a large corpus of ironic comments at all levels of commenting. By so doing, the study further contributes to pragmatic research on interactive commenting and irony.

From a **methodological viewpoint, the study** demonstrates the intrinsic value of the triangulation of textual and statistical analyses, and shows how empirical results may contribute to the validation of theoretical conclusions.