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Readers' Comments on Op-Eds – Evaluation and Response to Irony

Equivalent to thesis

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English Abstract

1. Background

The current study examines how readers evaluate the use of political irony in op-eds in the daily press in their online comments, how they respond to it and whether they pursue it. Irony was studied in a natural situation through readers' comments to op-eds, in which irony was previously identified. It leans upon a developed coding scheme designed by Weizman (Weizman, 2012), in which readers' comments were categorized into two types: **meta-comments**, which indicate the identification of irony, and **ironic comments**.

The meta-comments shed light on the readers' judgments of irony. They are highly valuable since they were both utilized as a research tool for the identification of ironic op-eds, and as the subject of the study, providing access to the intuitive and spontaneous judgments of the readers and to their negotiation on ironic meanings.

2. The goals of the study

The study examined tendencies which Weizman had pointed out, by the extension of the sample and an empirical research (Weizman, 2012, 2015; 2016 (in Hebrew)). The objectives of the study were:

- To examine the readers' attitude to the ironic key as it is manifested in meta-pragmatic comments;
- To test the Reciprocity Hypothesis, i.e. the assumption that ironic utterances in the op-eds are responded to by readers in similar patterns and frequencies.

3. Method

The op-eds were collected from the weekend digital edition of Haaretz newspaper in 2011-2012 including all readers' first-order comments, which followed them. They were retrieved a year after publication to confirm that the communicative process had been completed.

77 op-eds that were collected included at least three occurrences of ironic utterances, and 37 op-eds, in which ironic cues were not found. The first op-eds constituted the research group, and the latter – the control group.

Specifically, the op-eds were assigned based both on utterances in quotation marks, (which are a conventional co-textual sign that might trigger the interpretation of the irony or support it) and through the search for literal words and phrases on the ironic keying in the readers'

comments (which were collected in an initial study from 52 op-eds written by Yossi Sarid, who was a highly reputed ironist).

Following Weizman's coding scheme (Weizman, 2012) they were divided into direct meta-comments: *cynical, ironic, sarcastic*, and indirect meta-comments: *poison, malice, sharp, sophisticated, ridicule, belittlement, disparagement, witty, make fun of, poke fun at, wise guy*. They were both identified in the corpus using SketchEngine, a corpus querying tool.

The irony in the op-eds and in the readers' comments was analyzed by a pragmatic discourse analysis, under the assumption that an utterance will be considered ironic, if it has at least one cue for irony (Weizman, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2015, in press; 2016, in Hebrew).

In the current study, utterances were identified as ironic when they included at least one cue or a combination of the following cues: (1) Blatant flouting of the quality Gricean maxim (Grice, 1975, 1978), or the other maxims of his Cooperation Principle (Attardo, 2000; Colston, 2000; Leech, 1983); (2) Echoic mention (Sperber, 1984; Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Wilson, 2006; Wilson & Sperber, 1992); (3) Violation of the sincerity condition (Haverkate, 1990).

It was taken into consideration that for a blatant flouting to be employed as a cue for irony, it should convey criticism addressed at a target. The research was based on mixed methods: a quantitative methodology and a qualitative one.

The quantitative component includes calculations of frequencies and distributions of the different categories and correlations between the types of the readers' comments and the groups of the op-eds (ironic and non-ironic). The qualitative part consists of a set of case studies, in which readers' comments were analyzed according to the pragmatic theories mentioned earlier. The findings from the two methods were crosschecked and compared to answer the research questions and hypotheses.

4. Research questions

In order to account for the evaluation of irony and the responses to it, two major questions were placed in the forefront: the first question focused on the evaluation of irony – i.e. how do readers evaluate irony, does the ironic indirectness reduce the threat of criticism or enhance it?

The second question aimed to test the Reciprocity Hypothesis, in other words, to what extent, if at all, is irony in op-eds responded to by readers' comments, utilizing similar patterns to those used by the writers?

5. Research Hypotheses

It was assumed that (a) the readers will evaluate irony as negative, arrogant, aggressive and offensive (Weizman, 2008, 2012, 2015, in press; 2016 (in Hebrew)); (b) The more the ironic utterances in the op-eds are frequent and sharp, the frequency of the ironic utterances in the readers' comments will be higher, and similar ironic cues to those used in the initiating article will be utilized.

6. Findings

Q1. How do readers evaluate irony, does the ironic indirectness reduce the threat in criticism or enhance it?

In the meta-pragmatic comments, the number of the negative evaluations to irony (F=92) was 1.4 higher than positive ones (F=38).

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses show that irony in the initiating article is valued as improper and inappropriate. The readers explained their revulsion in terms of inter-personal relationships: face damaging acts for readers and others; violation of social conventions: inappropriateness, undermining truth-value and imposition on readability.

These findings support the hypothesis that the readers conceive the ironic key as negative, since it threatens the face of readers, writers and victims.

Among the meta-pragmatic comments, a substantial number of positive comments was found. They pointed out wit, humor and sophistication in the ironic utterances. These findings do not support the assumption that irony is necessarily conceived as negative, arrogant and offensive. As we have seen before, their rate was lower than the rate of the negative comments. (Out of 130 meta-comments in the sample, 92 (70%) valued irony as negative, and 38 (30%) as positive).

In meta-pragmatic comments we found a significant correlation (Positive and mild) ($\rho = .48, p \leq .000$) between negative evaluations to irony and frequency of comments directed at the writer (**ad hominem**).

These findings point out that the irony in the op-eds was perceived as negative, aggressive and offensive, and was therefore responded to by directing the irony at the writers offensively.

This category was added to Weizman's coding scheme. It consists of ironic comments, which are addressed to the writer. The comments in this section were sorted to sub-categories inspired by van Emmeren et al., 2000. (This sub-category does not include ad hominem comments which were addressed to the affiliation of the writer: (leftists, Haaretz journalists, Tel Aviv inhabitants, Arab lovers etc.).

Q 2. (Reciprocity Hypothesis: to what extent, if at all, is irony in op-eds responded for by readers' comments, utilizing similar patterns to those used by the writers?)

Ironic op-eds in the research group were responded to by more ironic comments (generally by more comments) ($p < .000$). Influence of irony in op-eds on frequency of ironic comments.

The categories in which many ironic comments were found, addressing the irony to the writer (**ad hominem**) or to the content of the op-ed (**ad rem**), differentiate between non-ironic articles (control group) and ironic articles (research group) significantly: **ad hominem** ($Md=4.5$); **ad rem** ($Md=4$).

However, ironic comments followed non-ironic op-eds (control group), but in a much lower rate. These findings support part of the Reciprocity Hypothesis, according to which irony in op-eds is responded to in similar frequencies in readers' comments.

Readers' comments to ironic op-eds (research group) both **challenged** or **supported** the stance put forward in the op-ed on which they comment. In both of them comments were directed at the content of the article (**ad rem**), in which similar cues for irony were utilized.

In instances of **support**, affiliative irony was particularly dominant. Readers reciprocate the irony in the op-ed, aligning with the columnist and jointly addressing a third party who becomes a common target. However, in some cases, for example, focusing on a controversial public figure (Ehud Barak) or an excluded public sect (Haredi Jews, Ultra-Orthodox) it was impossible to determine whether ironic comments confirmed the Reciprocity Hypothesis, since different articles focusing on these themes, were followed by similar ironic comments.

7. Summary

As expected, irony in op-eds was mostly evaluated by online readers' as negative, arrogant and offensive. The findings indicated a significant correlation between the negative evaluations of irony and the tendency to address it to the writer and not to his arguments – **ad hominem**. In a large number of comments, readers directed the ironic criticism at the writer pointing out unacceptable features of his/her personality with no justification or relation to the content of the article. Moreover, the ironic comment enhanced the offence.

These findings support Weizman's view (2015, 2016 (in Hebrew); Weizman & Dori-Hacohen, in press) that these comments threaten the positive face of the writer, especially due to the criticism rooted in irony. In addition, addressing irony to the journalist is more challenging on his/her positive

face, since it damages the will to construct a professional ethos of reliability, the source of his/her power as a journalist. Weizman (2016 (in Hebrew)) maintains that the negative face in these circumstances is threatened, because irony prevents response (Weizman & Dori-Hacohen, in press).

This study identified a substantial number of instances in which the ironic response supported the writer's stance. It could be characterized as affiliative irony, where readers support the writer's stance, and respond to it ironically utilizing similar cues for the detection of irony to those of the writers, addressing irony to a third party, who becomes a joint target. The analysis of affiliative ironic comments confirms Weizman's (2015) view, that these comments serve the positive face wants of the affiliating side, the reader in this case, and at the same time threatens the positive and negative face of the target of the irony, the absent third party, who cannot respond.

The findings indicate that the reciprocity was manifested in the use of similar cues. However, some of the affiliative ironic comments did not necessarily stem from reciprocity, but rather expressed rejection towards a person or an excluded social sect. In these cases, readers used mainly echoic mention.

From a wider perspective, one can notice the convergence of the two research questions to a combined process. The readers identify the ironic key and evaluate it usually negatively despite their enthusiasm from its wit, humor and sophistication. They respond ironically utilizing similar challenge strategies (cues) to those of columnists, and address the ironic criticism to the writers (**ad hominem**), regardless of their arguments, or to a third party. These two tendencies were prominent in the study. In both the offence is directed at the writers or a third party, and the quality of the confrontational nature of the discourse is enhanced

Moreover, the interaction between journalists and commenters is hierarchical, and hence asymmetrical. In this discourse, the writers have a high social status in the political-media arena, and consequently they are regarded accountable (Cohen & Neiger, 2007). As opposed to them, the commenters are anonymous, and therefore their accountability is restricted.

The pragmatic discourse analysis views **op-ed-comment** sequence as a conversation, where every move requires a possible response, shows that ironic comments create a confrontational environment, which is offensive and does not lead to resolution or common understanding (Weizman, 2016 (in Hebrew)).