

A Cognitive-Pragmatic Study of Irony Response³

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Abstract

As the second part of an irony-irony response (I-IR) adjacency pair, an IR is based on the perception of irony. It affects the ironist and plays a significant role in shaping the communicative effect of irony as well as the nature of the ongoing conversation. Therefore, IRs reflect people's employment of communicative strategies and deserve pragmatic attention. Within the framework of Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory (RT), the author views IRs as illocutions with different relevance degrees chosen by reactors to perform certain perlocutionary acts and probes into the variety of IR strategies and motivations from a cognitive-pragmatic aspect. As is found, IRs can be simple and complex illocutions with various relevance degrees: maximally relevant, very relevant, weakly relevant and irrelevant. In responding to irony, people are inclined to perform simple relevant acts rather than supplying irrelevant reactions. Moreover, the familiarity degree between the interlocutors overweighs the content of irony in affecting reactors' motivations and hence their response choices.

Keywords : Irony response (IR), pragmatic strategy, motivation, relevance

Introduction

Irony is common in daily conversation, so are irony responses (IRs). While irony has attracted much academic interest, little attention is paid to IR as a specific linguistic phenomenon, except that from some researchers (Clift, 1999, in Davis, 2003; Kotthoff, 2003; Eisterhold, Attardo & Boxer, 2005), who have made the start recently. The initial studies on IR are contributive in offering certain aspects to look into such common linguistic phenomena, but they tend to statically describe various IRs instead of

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investigating them from a genuinely pragmatic aspect. Cognitive studies on irony perception (Clark & Gerrig, 1984; Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989; Gibbs & O'Brien, 1991; Gibbs, 1994, 1999, 2002) have proved that addressees process what is said and what is implied in irony simultaneously, i.e. the dictum and the implicatum of irony are always easy to interpret. But the same perception may not lead to the same IRs, as is discovered by the present research. Accordingly, various IRs are pragmatically notable and it is meaningful to study them as chosen by respondents intentionally to attain some communicative goals.

Thus, the significance of exploring IRs in pragmatically is verified. To better interpret the linguistic phenomenon of IR, the present study develops WDCT as the instrument and focuses on different responses in and tries to examine them as motivated communicative strategies. Data were collected with a Written Discourse Completion Test among 50 undergraduate English majors who are all native Chinese speakers.

Data-collection

Copies of questionnaire were distributed to 64 Chinese students who are freshmen in a university of Jiangsu, China. The students attended the same class of English writing. They received, finished and returned the questionnaires right in the English writing class, where their English teacher was present as an instructor. They were required to carefully read the questionnaire instructions before providing responses. The questionnaires were recollected after being completed and then the English classes were resumed.

To Attardo (2000), who holds that “every ironical utterance seems to be literally false and /or not appropriate to its context”, irony is in nature “an inappropriate utterance which is nonetheless relevant to the context.” (p.823) As Sperber and Wilson (1995) define, context is essentially a cognitive one, i.e. “the set of premises used in interpreting an utterance (apart from the premise that the utterance in question has been produced)” (p.15) . It is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world. In particular, it is the assumptions, rather than the actual state of the world, that affects the interpretation of an utterance.

Hence, different cognitive contexts may bear different folk concepts of irony. The data from several students who find no ironic remarks in some situations or make judgments of irony that are different from those of the other subjects, are taken as invalid and abandoned. Excluding the invalid questionnaires and simultaneously achieving equilibrium in the number of responses available for each situation, the researcher singles out 50 questionnaires as a data pool for the study.

Classification of IR relevance

The collected IRs, relevant or irrelevant to the addressed ironic utterances, are categorized according to the following three distinctions, the first of which applies to all responses, and the other two of which apply respectively to each subset identified by the first.

Simple responses are responses featuring one relevance degree, e.g., an illocution such as gratitude, offering, denying, or non-verbal responses. Complex responses are responses featuring more than one relevance degrees, e.g., confirmation + up-grade, honesty + up-grade, smile + gratitude + apology. Macro-level is what relevance degree a response is with, e.g., responses to the literal meaning, and micro-level means in what illocutionary act a response is realized, e.g., returning or silence) simple responses. Intrinsically-complex responses refer to responses featuring more than one micro-level at the same macro-level, e.g., down-grade + promise, complaint + satire. Extrinsically-complex responses are responses featuring more than one micro-level at different macro-levels, e.g., confirmation + up-grade, down-grade + honesty.

As to the relevance degree of an extrinsically-complex IR, it should be noted that not all the relevance degrees of the included simple IRs survive. Among the several simple illocutions that composes a complex response, there must be one with the highest relevance degree. When judged with the consideration of contextual effect and processing effort, the relevance degree of a complex IR in fact turns out to be the same as the one that is the highest among the inner simple illocutions.

For example, to an extrinsically-complex relevant response, as long as one part of it covers maximal relevance, it possesses the most contextual effect, demands the least processing effort from the hearer, and belongs to maximally-relevant responses. It can be “maximally relevant + very relevant”, “maximally relevant + weakly relevant (smile)” or “maximally relevant + very relevant + weakly relevant (smile)”.

Relevant and irrelevant IRs

Table 1 indicates the breakdown of responses in terms of the simple vs. complex response dichotomy. According to Table 1, the majority of the subjects (94.80%) would give relevant responses and only a few (5.20%) offer irrelevant responses by changing the topic. Among relevant reactions, more simple responses (60.40%) to ironic remarks are found than complex ones (34.40%).

Table 1 Relevant vs. Irrelevant Responses

Group	Relevant responses				Irrelevant responses		TN	%
	Simple responses		Complex responses					
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
G1	84	56.00	48	32.00	18	12.00	150	100
G2	57	38.00	93	62.00			150	100
G3	129	86.00	15	10.00	6	4.00	150	100
T/A	270	60.40	156	34.40	24	5.20	450	100

Key: G = Group; TN = Total number; T/A = Total /Average.

By attracting someone's attention, RT holds, a communicator is asking for some effort to be spent. Since humans would not spend their effort for nothing—requests for attention create expectations of some reward. The main claim of RT is that the reward for attention and mental effort is relevant information. Hence, a communicator who requests other's attention creates an expectation that others will get adequately relevant information as a reward.

Different from simple and complex responses, irrelevant reactions weaken the effect of irony. Irony can be regarded as indirect negation, for it involves the presence of both the literal and the implied meanings and the relationship between the two is that of indirect (i.e. non-explicit) negation (Giora, 1995). Except that in G3, irony in each of the other two groups indirectly negates the receivers of irony. In the light of Face-Threatening Act (FTA) (Brown & Levinson, 1987), acts threatening the positive face of hearer are, for instance, a negative evaluation of aspects of H's face such as disapproval or criticism of him/her, or showing speaker's carelessness in regard to hearer's positive face of being accepted. When addressed by face-threatening irony, people with intimate relations would not dodge it (0% in G2 and 4% in G3) but the acquaintances are more likely to change the topic (12% in G1). But in S3, where the positive face of the reactor's friend is threatened, more subjects are found to choose to talk about something else. Further, similar to what is found in the above examination of simple and complex responses, an irrelevant response to irony seldom appears in the conversation between two family members.

Macro-level and micro-level simple IRs

Table 2 indicates the breakdown of simple responses in terms of the macro-level vs. micro-level dichotomy.

At the macro-level, Table 2 clearly shows that most simple responses are very relevant but maximally-relevant responses only account for 30.81%, viz. the subjects are inclined to deal with the dictum when giving simple responses. Irony evokes illocutionary and attitudinal forces—both expressing

a comment about the echoed statement as well as inviting the hearer to accept the comment as valid (Davis, 2003).

The more a response is relevant to irony, the more attention the reactor pays to the implied meaning. In managing the gap between the two forces of irony, the high percentage of very-relevant responses suggests that people prefer to take irony as humorous rather than take its negative implicature seriously.

Table 2 Macro-level vs. Micro-level Simple IRs

Responses	G1		G2		G3		Total	Average
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
<i>MRR</i>	42	50.00	15	26.31	27	20.93	84	30.81
Complaint			6	40.00	4	14.81	10	11.90
Satire			6	40.00			6	7.14
Honesty	36	85.71	3	20.00	15	55.56	54	64.29
Help	6	14.29					6	7.14
Apology					8	29.63	8	9.52
<i>VRR</i>	25	29.76	27	47.37	42	32.50	94	34.82
Confirmation	11	44.00			20	46.15	31	32.98
Returning			12	44.44			12	12.77
Gratitude					12	28.57	12	12.77
Down-grade			6	22.22			6	6.38
Up-grade	14	56.00	9	33.33	7	15.38	30	31.91
Promise					3	7.14	3	3.19
<i>WRR</i>	17	20.24	15	26.32	60	47.50	92	34.07
Smile	13	76.44	6	40.00	11	15.79	30	32.61
Silence	4	23.56	9	60.00	49	84.21	62	67.39

Key: G = Group; MRR = Maximally-relevant response; VRR = Very-relevant response; WRR =Weakly-relevant response.

Intrinsically-complex and extrinsically-complex IRs

Table 3 indicates the breakdown of complex responses into intrinsic and extrinsic ones. All the 9 situations have intrinsically-complex responses that are very relevant (i.e. the combinations of reactions to the dictum) and extrinsically-complex responses that are maximally relevant (i.e. the combinations of reactions to the implicatum and reactions of other relevance degrees), though respectively in different frequencies.

No extrinsically-complex responses that are weakly relevant, i.e. extrinsically-complex WRRs, are found in G2 and G3, where higher familiarity degrees exist. As is formerly demonstrated in the coding scheme of IRs, in extrinsically-complex responses, a weakly relevant one means a combination of WRR and IRR (irrelevant response), i.e. “smile/silence + topic-change” and a very relevant one means the combination of VRR and WRR and/or IRR, i.e. “(smile/silence) + very relevant response(s) (+ topic-change)”. In G2 and G3, the subjects are unwilling to only smile or keep silent and then change the topic. Rather, they would directly face irony. The

absence of weakly relevant extrinsically-complex responses here may indicate that people with close relationships are more cooperative with the irony producer among them.

Table 3 Intrinsically-complex vs. Extrinsically-complex IRs

Group	Intrinsically-complex responses				Extrinsically-complex responses						TN	%
	MRR		VRR		MRR		VRR		WRR			
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
G1	15	31.25	6	12.50	9	18.75	15	31.25	3	6.25	48	100
G2	9	14.29	27	29.03	15	16.13	42	45.16			93	100
G3	5	33.33	3	20.00	7	46.67					15	100
T/A	29	18.58	36	23.07	31	19.87	57	36.53	3	1.92	156	100

Key: G = Group; MRR = Maximally-relevant response; VRR = Very-relevant response; WRR =Weakly-relevant response; TN = Total number; T/A= Total/Average.

Table 4 Simple IRs vs. Motivations

Responses	Motivations									
	Defensive				Solidarity				ECM	
	SM		ICM		SM		ICM			
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<i>MRR</i>	9	8.11	18	16.22	27	24.32	54	48.65	3	2.70
Complaint	3	33.33	6	66.67						
Satire	3	50.00	3	50.00						
Honesty	3	4.00	9	12.00	21	28.00	39	52.00	3	4.00
Help							6	100		
Apology					6	40.00	9	60.00		
<i>VRR</i>	30	14.08	6	2.82	36	16.90	42	19.72	99	46.48
Confirmation	18	15.38	6	5.13	15	12.82	21	17.95	57	48.72
Returning	6	50.00			3	25.00	3	25.00		
Gratitude	3	16.67					6	33.33	9	50.00
Down-grade					6	100				
Up-grade	3	5.89			9	17.65	12	23.53	27	52.94
Promise					3	33.33			6	66.67
<i>WRR</i>	18	13.95	12	9.30	42	32.56	15	11.63	42	32.56
Smile	6	9.52	3	4.76	27	42.86	6	9.52	21	33.33
Silence	12	19.04	9	14.29	15	23.81	9	14.29	18	28.57
T/A	57	12.67	36	8.00	105	23.33	111	24.67	141	31.33

Key: SM = Simple Motivation; ICM = Intrinsically-complex motivation; TN = Total number; ECM = Extrinsically-complex motivation; MRR = Maximally-relevant response; VRR = Very-relevant response; WRR =Weakly-relevant response; T/A = Total/Average.

In Table 4 are the relations between simple IRs and motivations. MRRs to irony actually fall into two parties: a negative one (complaint and satire) and a positive one (honest, help and apology). As is revealed, complaint and satire are defensive-oriented; honesty can be the result of searching defensive or solidarity, but it more often occurs out of solidarity-

based ICMs (52%) and seldom with defensive-based SMs (4.00%) or ECMs (4.00%); help and apology are solidarity-aimed and usually with solidarity-based ICMs (100% and 60.00% respectively).

It is assumed that every rational communicator has the desire to communicate with optimal efficiency. This view is supported in the formulation of cognitive as well as communicative principle of relevance or relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). To meet different contextual needs, people make linguistic choices to achieve optimal efficiency. Therefore, in responding to irony, the perlocutionary acts of respondents guide their choices of IR strategies.

Table 5 Complex IRs vs. Motivations

Motivations	Intrinsically-complex responses				Extrinsically-complex responses						TN	%
	MRR		VRR		MRR		VRR		WRR			
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
<i>Defensive</i>	14	60.87	20	62.50	12	31.58	22	36.67	7	9.33	75	48.08
SM	7	50.00	5	25.00	2	16.67	2	18.18	5	71.43	21	28.00
ICM	7	50.00	15	75.00	10	83.33	20	81.82	2	28.57	54	72.00
<i>Solidarity</i>	5	21.74	8	25.00	21	68.42	21	56.67	7	63.67	62	39.74
SM	4	44.44	3	75.00	13	50.00	12	82.35	3	42.86	35	56.45
ICM	1	11.11	5	25.00	8	30.77	9	17.65	4	57.14	27	43.55
<i>ECM</i>	4	17.39	3	9.38	5	69.23	7	6.67			19	12.18
T/A	23	14.20	32	19.75	38	23.46	56	34.57	14	8.64	156	100

Key: MRR = Maximally-relevant response; VRR = Very-relevant response; WRR =Weakly-relevant response; TN = Total number; SM = Simple Motivation; ICM = Intrinsically-complex motivation; ECM = Extrinsically-complex motivation; T/A= Total/Average.

Table 5 demonstrates the macro-investigation of the relations between complex IRs and perlocutionary acts in them. The perlocutionary acts of complex IR strategies more frequently (45.35%) relate to solidarity and only a few (13.95%) are in nature ECMs. Compared with what is shown in Table 4, where only a few simple IRs are with defensive-based motivations, defensive now plays a more important role (40.70%) in guiding the production of complex IRs.

In the view of Wilson and Sperber (1986), implicatures are defined as “those contextual assumptions and implications that the hearer has to recover in order to satisfy him/herself that the speaker has observed the principle of relevance.” (p. 383) The derivation of implicature requires the addressee to obtain information from the long-term memory in addition to these derived by the reference assignment and disambiguation. Implicatures are not tied to linguistic decoding and can be stronger or weaker depending on the predictability of contextual effects.

Correlations between irrelevant IRs and motivations

Table 6 indicates the macro-investigation of the relations between topic-change IRs and motivations. This Table shows that the respondents, who choose to perform topic-change speech acts that are irrelevant to the addressed irony, are with single-category perlocutionary acts, which are defensive-based or solidarity-based, rather than ECMs.

Within a RT framework, the hearer interprets utterances, assuming that a set of assumptions are ostensively communicated, provides a good balance of cognitive effects in exchange for the effort which their processing demands, and that this set of assumptions is the one that the speaker pleasurably intended to communicate. If the utterance is not as informative as required, irrelevant, untrue, etc., a search for a more relevant interpretation worth being processed may be activated, despite the supplementary mental effort required.

Table 6 Irrelevant IRs vs. Motivations

Motivations	Irrelevant responses	
	No.	%
<i>Defensive</i>	11	45.83
SM	6	54.55
ICM	5	36.45
<i>Solidarity</i>	13	54.17
SM	10	76.92
ICM	3	23.08
<i>ECM</i>		

Key: NT = Number of Topic-change response; SM = Simple Motivation; ICM = Intrinsically-complex motivation; ECM = Extrinsically-complex motivation; TN = Total number; T/A = Total/Average.

Conclusion

The present study explores the types and features of IR strategies and motivations as well as the correlations between them. Facing irony, people tend to offer relevant responses rather than irrelevant ones by changing the topic. Relevant IRs are often simple ones, which are always very relevant to irony, viz. most simple IRs deal with the dictum and create greater contextual effects. At the micro-level, maximally-relevant IRs are found to be most often fulfilled in confirmation and up-grade, which mean reinforcement of irony, and few in down-grade, which means denial; incompletely-relevant responses are more frequently carried out in talking about the truth.

As to the correlations between motives and strategies, many simple very-relevant responses are found to be provided with solidarity-based simple motivations and extrinsically-complex motivations. This means that

when reactors only smile or keep silent, they always do this partly or wholly for the sake of good relationships between them and the ironists, though sometimes at the cost of self-defensive. The motivations for complex IR strategies may concern both solidarity and defensive, but only a few of them are in nature extrinsically-complex motivations. Similarly, topic-change responses are also seldom driven by extrinsically-complex motivations.

In all, the analyses show that motivations as perlocutionary acts are based on particular communicative needs, IR strategies as illocutionary acts are impacted by motivations and Relevance Theory is appropriate in explaining how IR strategies are realized in manifestation of different relevance degrees.

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