

FORMAL DISCOURSE AND TYPES OF IRONIC EXPRESSIONS⁷²

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Abstract

Considering the intricate nature of verbal irony one might assume that ironic expressions have no place in formal speech. However, only a superficial glance at a political speech, reveals that the above-stated assumption is far from the truth. Verbal irony appears to be one the favorite “weapons” in the hands of politicians, particularly, when they are determined to disparage their political opponents’ repute in the eyes of the public. Not all ironic utterances in formal speech are of the same type. Ironic utterances may appear in many different forms (ironic complements, ironic criticism, ironic questions, offers, orders, promises, apologies, etc.).

This particular study focuses on analyzing verbal irony employed in political TV discussions and debates. The aim is to determine which types of ironic utterances are more and which are less frequently employed in formal speech. Moreover, comparisons are drawn between Macedonian and English, and certain similar and dissimilar tendencies in both languages are established.

Key words: irony, formal speech, Macedonian, English

⁷² original scientific paper

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we delve into the use of verbal irony in one special type of formal speech - political discourse. Undoubtedly, politicians are keen on using ironic expressions, especially, when their aim is to undermine their adversaries' positions. Nevertheless, the question remains as to how they go about phrasing their ironic intentions, and what their preferred types of ironic utterances are. This study is targeting verbal irony in two languages – Macedonian and English. The aim is to draw comparisons as to the frequency with which different types of ironic expressions are used in formal political discourse employed during political TV debates and discussions in Macedonian and in English.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A) Political discourse

Political discourse is the text and talk of professional politicians or political institutions, such as presidents and prime ministers and other members of government, parliament or political parties, both at the local, national and international levels (van Dijk, 2002). Political discourse is normally contextualized in such communicative events such as cabinet meetings, parliamentary sessions, election campaigns, rallies, interviews with the media, bureaucratic practices, protest demonstrations, and so on. (van Dijk, 2002). Considering the great significance and responsibility of the politicians' job, it is no wonder their speech during all these above-mentioned communicative events is also marked by a high degree of formality and gravity.

Persuading the electorate is central to politicians and political discourse. To politicians' mind, hearers, viewers and readers must be convinced to accept a specific ideological position. In that respect, verbal irony comes in really handy as it enhances the effect of persuasion political discourse has on the electorate (Neshkovska and Trajkovska, 2017).

B) Types of irony

Verbal irony is not a fixed and narrow pragmatic phenomenon. On the contrary, it is a complex phenomenon which encompasses various different types and sub-types motivated by diverse cognitive, linguistic and social factors (Gibbs, 2000).

Thus, so far distinction has been made between: **explicit** and **implicit** VI (Barbe, 1993); the speech act of the **assertives** (assertions) vs. **the other speech acts used ironically** (commissives, directives, expressives) (Grice, 1975, 1978; Haverkate, 1990); **counterfactual** vs. **truth-telling** VI (Kreuz, 1996, 2000; Martin, 1992); **ironic criticism** vs. **ironic complement** (Anolli et al., 2000, 2001); **jocularity** vs. **sarcasm** (Sechman and Couch, 1989).

Evidently, various researchers have centered their studies of VI around one, two or several different types of irony, and, to the best of our knowledge, none has offered a comprehensive classification encompassing all of these already established types of VI.

In that respect, a recent study proposes that despite the fact that the previous classifications are all based on different criteria, still, a logical connection among all of them can be established on 5 distinct but interrelated levels (Neshkovska, 2014) (Chart 1).

Level 1: All ironic utterances can initially be recognized either as **implicit** or **explicit** VI depending on whether they contain an expression which directly points to the presence of irony (“*it is ironic that ...*”, “*the irony is ...*” etc.).

Level 2: The implicit irony further branches into: a) **assertives** and b) **other speech acts used ironically** (commissives, directives and expressives), depending on which conditions of well-formed speech acts are fulfilled. Namely, the assertives either meet or do not meet the condition of truthfulness; whereas, the other speech acts all have to meet the condition of pragmatic insincerity in order to be considered ironic.

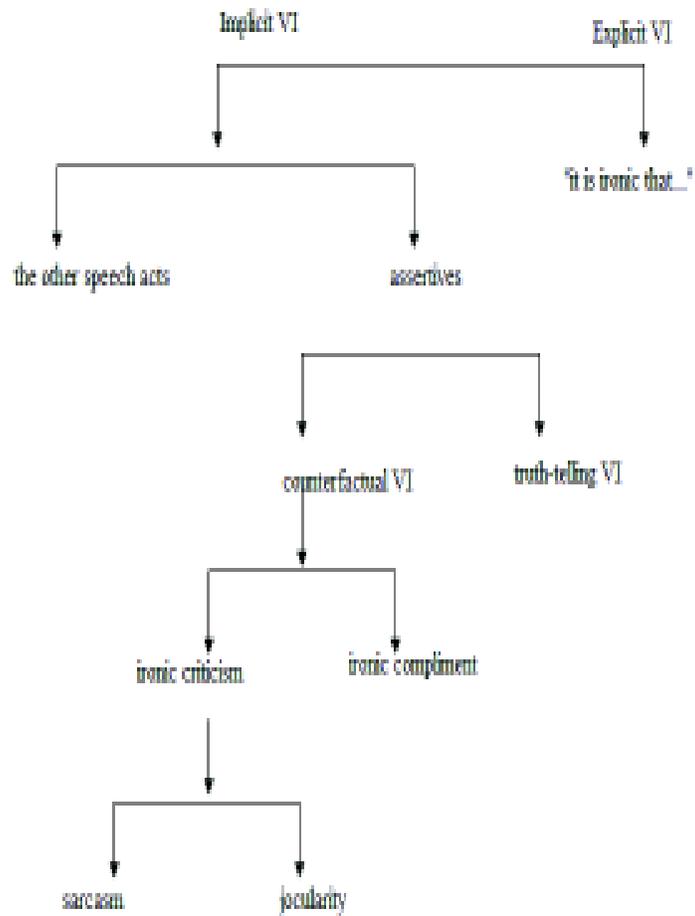


Chart 1 Types of VI

Level 3: The assertives, depending on whether they meet the conditions of truthfulness or not, can either be realized as *truth-telling* (when they meet the condition of truthfulness) or *counterfactual* VI (when the condition of truthfulness has not been met).

Level 4: The counterfactual VI, on the basis of one of the main features of irony, i.e. achieving the opposite effect ('asymmetry of affect'), further branches into *ironic criticism* (a positive expression which conveys a negative message), or *ironic complement* (a negative expression which conveys a positive message).

Level 5: The *ironic criticism*, on the basis of the main pragmatic function of VI - expressing criticism, can either be realized as *sarcastic irony (sarcasm)* with which the ironist conveys a very harsh criticism towards his/her interlocutor, or as *jocularity*, which is a milder form of criticism, usually combined with humor and used for correctional purposes.

This classification of the types of VI serves as the basis for this particular study.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this study two separate linguistic corpora have been compiled – Macedonian corpus (henceforward **MC**) and English Corpus (henceforward **EC**). Both corpora consisted of recorded political TV discussion and debates in which various political figures discuss issues of great social, political and economic relevance for Macedonia and the US, respectively. The political discussions and debates present a special type of formal interaction in which all participants are expected in all seriousness to use formal register, and to present truthful facts and data.

The MC consisted of 12 excerpts from various editions of the political TV show **24 Analysis** aired on the Macedonian TV channel **24 News**. In the EC, 15 excerpts have been included from different editions of **Piers Morgan Tonight** aired on **CNN** and **America Live with Megyn Kelly** aired on **Foxlife**.

The recorded linguistic material in both corpora was of an equal duration – 140 minutes of recorded political discourse in each corpus.

As ironic utterances (IU) do not normally appear in isolation, namely they trigger ironic responses (IR), we initially set out to detect and separate the ironic exchanges (IE) which normally comprise the initial IU and the subsequent IR (if present). Subsequently, all IE were thoroughly analyzed to ascertain the number of IU in each of them individually. Of course, the identification of the ironicalness of the utterances was based on a set conditions of ironicalness proposed by previous researchers (in Neshkovska, 2014) which are impossible to be discussed here, as that would fetch us far beyond the scope of this paper.

The next step of the analysis was directed towards determining the type of verbal irony to which each identified IU belonged.

Finally, comparisons were drawn between the findings in the two languages, and conclusions were reached as to the similarities and differences.

RESULTS

In the MC, 53 IE and 177 IU (17.40%) were found within 1017 utterances in total; whereas in the EC, in all of the recorded conversations, out of 1420 utterances in total, 291 IU (20.49%) within 80 IE were marked (Table 1).

Total	utterances	IE	IU
MC	1017	53	177
EC	1420	80	291

Table 1 Total number of utterances, IE and IU in MC and EC

The number of IE, IU as well as utterances in general, was greater in the EC. The English native speakers on average had 6 or 7 IE in each of the recorded interactions; whereas, the Macedonian ones only 4 to 5 IE per interaction. The results also show that, in each IE separately, there were 3 IU in the MC, and 4 IU in the EC, on average.

As to the types of VI, no instances of explicit VI were found in the two analyzed corpora of formal interactions. This means that all the instances of VI were realized as implicit verbal irony (Table 2).

Types of VI				MC	EC	
Explicit irony				/	/	
Implicit irony	assertives	truth-telling		87	118	
		counterfactual	Ironic criticism	Sarcasm	39	36
				Jocularity	2	16

			Ironic compliment	/	/
other speech acts	questions	Ordinary questions	ironic	14	66
		Rhetoric questions	ironic	39	33
	Offers			4	16
	Thanking			/	2
	Commands			/	2
	Promise			/	1
	Apology			/	1
	Total no. of ironic utterances				185

Table 2 Types of VI in the MC and EC

The implicit irony in both corpora was mostly realized in the form of the speech acts of *assertives*. The usage of the other speech acts was markedly less frequent. More precisely, *the truth-telling irony* was the predominant type of VI as 49.15% of the instances of VI in the MC, and 40.54% of the instances of VI in the EC belonged to this category. In fact the truth-telling irony was the most preferred type of VI not only in comparison to the counterfactual irony, but in general, compared to all possible types of irony (1)⁷³.

(1) G: "**I mean, sheriff, listening to the way that you praised yourself in that ad, the kind of Hollywood voice you put on, the deep tones, making it all sound terribly exciting and dramatic, it sounded like some kind of John Wayne movie.** How on earth does that kind of rhetoric to the American people serve any kind of sensible, rational purpose? - from the EC

⁷³ In presenting a particular type of VI within a given IE, only the IU which belongs to that type will be underlined and in bold letters, so that it can be distinguished from the rest of the ironic as well as non-ironic utterances in that same IE.

In (1) the hosts, who assume the role of an ironist, say exactly what he means, but at the same time he disassociates himself from what he says. Namely, he ironically comments on the advertisement shot upon the request of his guest who happens to be a local sheriff. The sheriff, in the ad, calls on citizens to buy guns and to protect themselves in case of attack instead of calling the police and asking the police to help them.

The counterfactual VI, which was much less frequent than the truth-telling VI, was realized solely as *ironic criticism*. No instances of ironic complements were detected in both corpora. More specifically, the ironic criticism in most of the cases was formulated as *sarcasm*, and much less frequently as jocularly. In our study, on the whole, 22.03% of the IU in the MC (2), and 12.37% of the IU in the EC were classified as sarcasm.

(2) Г: „... Тоа е јасно, ние живееме во најубавиот од сите светови. Кога ќе ни нотираат дека тоа не е така, ние се буниме што нè вознемируваат. Значи, јас се сложувам со Тони дека МК е прекрасна.“ - from the MC

(G: “...*It is clear, we live in the most beautiful world of all the worlds.* When someone notes that that is not the case, we rebel because they upset us. *So, I agree with Toni that Macedonia is wonderful.*”)

In (2), the ironist is a political analyst. He criticizes his colleague, who is also a political analyst, because of his attempt to discredit immediately the unfavorable foreign report regarding the progress of Macedonia. In order for him to make the criticism towards his colleague sound harsher, he employs sarcasm describing Macedonia as a “the most beautiful world” and “a wonderful” place, when, in fact, he only wishes to state the opposite – the living conditions in Macedonia are far from ideal and that the international community is right in criticizing us for not progressing fast enough.

As to the rest of the speech acts used ironically, in both corpora, the ironic questions prevailed. But in the MC they were realized as *rhetorical questions* (23.03%) (3); whereas in the EC the usage of ordinary rhetorical questions was more frequent (22.68%) (4).

(3) Г: „Свесни сте за последиците? Сите ли ги знаат последиците? Не абортираат само добро едуцирани жени ...“ – from the MC

(G: “*Are you all conscious of the consequences?*” *All of you know the consequences?* Well-educated women are not the only women who have abortions...”)

(4) H: “Without any embassies in any country?“ – from the EC

In (3) the Minister of health defends the newly introduced changes to the Law on abortion, and tries to convince his interlocutors to accept his position by asking them ironic rhetorical questions. In (4) the host reacts with an ordinary ironic question to his guest's claim that America should stop its excessive meddling in other countries' interior affairs.

The least frequently used types of irony in both corpora were the other speech acts used ironically (ironic offers, thanks, promises and commands). In the MC only few ironic offers were noted; whereas in the EC, besides the offers (5), there were some rare instances of ironic thanking, apologies, promises and commands.

(5) G: "And they said it's science, it's a fact that if you were a child of a black father and a white mother and vice versa you would be inferior, you are not gonna set up for success. **Tell that to Barack Obama!**" – from the EC

In (5) the guest issues a pragmatically insincere offer which has ironic undertone, as he actually wishes to prove to the host, and everybody else for that matter, that a human being's intelligence and success in life is not predetermined by race.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above-stated results with regard to the usage of VI and the types of VI in formal speech, it is notable that both similarities and differences pop up to the surface in both analyzed languages – Macedonian and English.

The results primarily indicate that VI is more frequently used in formal speech among English native speakers since the IU of the native English speakers more frequently lead to instigating new instances of VI.

Regarding the similarities in the types of VI, in both Macedonian and English, it can be noted that: a) the truth-telling irony is the most preferred type of VI, b) the presence of sarcasm in formal political speech is quite frequently present, c) from the other speech acts, the ironic questions are the most preferred type of VI; d) the rest of the speech acts, alongside with jocularity are, in fact, the least frequently employed types of VI.

As to the differences, the most obvious one was due to the fact that in English the range of the other speech acts used ironically was markedly wider than in Macedonian where only several instances of ironic offers were detected. Also, regarding the ironic questions, the Macedonian speakers used more

rhetorical questions; whereas, their English counterparts were more inclined towards employing ordinary ironic questions.

Evidently, more similarities than differences were detected in Macedonian and English as to the types of VI used in formal discourse. This indicates that, in both languages, there are certain types of VI such as truth-telling VI and sarcasm which are overall much more congruent with the formal discourse employed by politicians than the other types of VI.

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