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Gestural codas pave the way to the understanding of verbal irony

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Abstract

It is well known that speakers rely on prosodic and gestural features at the time of producing and understanding verbal irony. Yet little research has examined (a) how gestures manifest themselves in spontaneous speech, both during and after ironic utterances; and (b) how the presence of the so-called 'gestural codas' (audiovisual cues produced after the ironic utterance) influences irony detection. In Experiment 1, spontaneously produced verbal irony utterances generated between pairs of friends in conversational dyads were analyzed for semantic, prosodic and visual contrasts. Results show that ironic utterances contrast with immediately preceding non-ironic utterances, both in terms of prosody and gesture. Experiment 2 tested the contribution of the presence vs. absence of such 'gestural codas' to the perception of verbal irony. An irony rating task was conducted in which participants were audiovisually presented with a set of ambiguous discourse contexts followed by a set of matching ironic and non-ironic utterances presented in two conditions, namely without coda and with coda. Results show that subjects detected the speaker's ironic intent significantly better when post-utterance codas were present (88%) than when they were not (56%), thus confirming the hypothesis that visual information produced after ironic sentences is a key factor in the identification of the speaker's ironic intent.

Keywords: Audiovisual prosody; Verbal irony perception; Gestures; Intonation; Catalan

1. Introduction

From Classical times to the present, language philosophers, psycholinguists and pragmaticians have investigated verbal irony, a complex but common phenomenon whereby (in its most archetypal case) an individual chooses to say ''Oh, great!'' when he/she actually means ''Oh, damn!'' Classical accounts, as well as more current cognitive-pragmatic approaches, have stressed the fact that one of the key factors in understanding verbal irony consists of the recognition of some kind of contrast or 'incongruence' between two contradictory propositional forms involved in the whole speech act (i.e. between the expected proposition ''Oh, damn!'' and the actual proposition ''Oh, great!'') (Curcó, 1995). This simple but

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critical assumption is contained, in some form or another, in the majority of the accounts of verbal irony proposed so far (e.g. Searle, 1979; Grice, 1975; Clark and Gerrig, 1984; Gibbs, 1994; Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995). In the Classical account of rhetorics,[3] irony is regarded as involving the replacement of a literal meaning with a figurative meaning, where this figurative meaning is in fact the opposite of the literal meaning. Thus, traditional approaches to verbal irony propose that we understand an ironic remark when we detect the contradiction between what has been said and what it is really meant. Similarly, conventional/logical approaches to verbal irony (e.g. Grice, 1975) propose that the key to understanding an ironic remark relies on the detection of the incompatibility between its literal meaning and the pragmatic implicature inferred by the listener. Yet there are some cases that classical and conventional/logical accounts cannot explain, namely those in which speakers may mean what they are saying literally and yet still intend to be ironic. These ironic remarks cannot be evaluated in terms of truth conditions: the contrast that triggers the ironic interpretation is not produced by an incompatibility between the literal and figurative meanings of the ironic remark (i.e. when someone who loves surfing says ''I love surfing'' when confronted with a placid, waveless sea). To explain these cases, current cognitive-pragmatic approaches to irony propose a more complex vision of irony which is based on the human ability to simultaneously process contrasting information belonging to different levels. Thus, Gibbs (1994) claims that irony is a common form of thought through which humans juxtapose their expectations on reality. He adds that one of the internal functioning mechanisms of the phenomenon of irony consists in highlighting a discrepancy between expectations and reality (Gibbs, 2012). One of the current cognitive-pragmatic accounts of irony is formulated within the framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995, among others), which proposes that the cognitive Principle of Relevance assists us during the inferential processes. Within the relevance-theoretic approach, irony is understood as a pragmatic phenomenon that ''consists in echoing a thought attributed to an individual, a group or to people in general, and expressing a mocking, skeptical or critical attitude to this thought'' (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995:125). Thus, what the speaker intends when he/she utters an ironic utterance is not ''to provide information about the content of an attributed thought, but to convey her/his own attitude or reaction to that thought'' (Wilson and Sperber, 2012:128–129). When using verbal irony, speakers are simultaneously communicating propositional information as well as a critical attitude towards that proposition, together with their own disassociation from that attitude (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995).

In natural conversation, speakers use a variety of linguistic strategies to mark their ironic intent, some of them being syntactic and discursive (e.g., Escandell-Vidal and Leonetti, 2014; Ruiz-Gurillo, 2008). Among these strategies, prosody has been analyzed very extensively. It has long been noted that speakers rely on prosodic signals when producing and perceiving verbal irony (see Bryant and Fox Tree, 2002, 2005; Bryant, 2010, 2011). Several studies have analyzed the prosodic properties of ironic utterances by comparing them to non-ironic ones (e.g. Gibbs, 2000; Nakassis and Snedeker, 2002; Anolli et al., 2002; Attardo et al., 2003; Laval and Bert-Erboul, 2005; Cheang and Pell, 2009; Bryant and Fox Tree, 2002, 2005; Bryant, 2010; Scharrer et al., 2011; Padilla, 2012). In general, ironic utterances have been reported to contrast with non-ironic utterances in their use of pitch modulations (e.g. lower or higher F0 mean and higher F0 variability values than their non-ironic counterparts), as well as intensity modulations (e.g. higher intensity values and variability) and duration changes (e.g. slower syllable durations, as well as more pauses). Other non-F0 features like non-modal voice quality have also been claimed to signal irony or sarcasm[4] (e.g. Van Lancker et al., 1981; Cheang and Pell, 2008, 2009). Though some of these studies are based on read data produced with a purposeful stereotypic 'ironic tone', research has also shown that in spontaneous speech, verbal irony is not produced with a set of markers or cues (Attardo et al., 2003, 2013; Bryant and Fox Tree, 2005). In fact, it has been shown that irony does not necessarily have to be cued with overt linguistic marking and can be successfully interpreted by relying only on contextual cues. Despite this lack of systematicity, it is clear that speakers employ prosodic modulations when being ironic and that these modulations help listeners to infer irony by detecting a certain 'incongruence' between the coded meaning and the attitude (i.e. the 'actual intention') of the speaker. The complex nature of the phenomenon seems to indicate that speakers can signal the presence of verbal irony by combining and contrasting a variety of prosodic marks, this is, that ''because of the inextricable relations between intentions and emotional tones of voice'', prosodic signals specifically employed to highlight (i.e. to make 'relevant') an ironic remark overlap with the affective prosody embedded in the ironic utterances (Bryant, 2010:546).

Within Relevance Theory, researchers have proposed that prosodic modulations encode procedural instructions that guide the inferential process by constraining the range of possible interpretations (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995; House, 1990, 2006; Clark and Lyndsey, 1990; Fretheim, 2002; Wilson and Wharton, 2006; Escandell-Vidal, 1998, 2011a, b; Prieto et al., 2013, among others). In the case of irony, prosodic signals have been proposed to serve as guidance to

[3] See e.g. Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*.

[4] While some authors understand sarcasm as a subtype of verbal irony that is characterized by an explicit negative and critical attitude towards an event or person (Kreuz and Glucksberg, 1989; Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995; Cheang and Pell, 2008), other authors use both terms (e.g. sarcasm and irony) interchangeably (Amenta and Balconi, 2008; Attardo et al., 2003). For practical reasons, the literature reviewed in the present article includes studies dealing with the production and perception of both ironic and sarcastic utterances.