THE POLYPHONY OF VERBAL IRONY

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Abstract: *Through time, irony suffered from an alteration process: it rose from the make-believe world up to the nowadays dissonant poliperspectivity. This modern view of verbal irony presupposes the ironical enunciation as underlying the existence of two kinds of voices or evaluations: the source voice, namely the prior perspective the ironical enunciation echoically interprets, and the target voice, that is the perspective the ironical enunciation imposes as being decoded by the addressee.*

Consequently, verbal irony suggests the presence of double perspectivation that is always dissonant because the speaker makes an allusion to a prior utterance, thought, feeling, expectation or norm which has been violated in order to differentiate from it. This inconsistency between the expected and the real state of facts represents the target of the ironical enunciation, namely of communicating a negative judgment.

On the Romanian parliamentary discourse stage, verbal irony turns into a useful instrument of combining contrastive evaluations by means of allusion, intertextuality, quotation or parentheticals. This game of the Romanian MPs with literal and implicit meanings reflects the equivocal nature of verbal irony: the speakers express their commitment to the truth of their utterances, but also the possibility of retracting their responsibility.

Keywords: *poliperspectivity, allusion, commitment.*

1. Irony as a polyphonic phenomenon

In time, irony "gathered" a large range of different theories which strengthened the idea that what we deal with is a complex pragmatic phenomenon that makes it even more difficult for us to choose the one that best fits our Romanian parliamentary discourse analysis.

Despite this difficulty, we stopped at the idea that irony is viewed as a polyphonic phenomenon that can be depicted from the following authors who theorize it differently, but, as we can notice, their common denominator assesses the presence of two "voices" or "double perspectives/evaluations" over the same matter of discussion.

Therefore, we can think of such authors as Sperber and Wilson (1981: 308; 1992: 61-65) [†††††††††††††], with their "echoic mention/interpretation" theory which sustains that the ironical enunciation does not use the utterance, but it only "mentions/interprets" it in order to metarepresent another utterance, thought, norm, expectation that the ironical speaker or someone else had at a different time from the present one. This metarepresentation consists of a tacitly attribution of a negative judgment towards himself/herself or the other person in the past, which is meant to be rejected by the present ironical speaker. This way we can talk about the source voice, that is the present ironical speaker, and the target voice, from whom the former

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[†††††††††††††] ''The speaker mentions a proposition in such a way as to make clear that he rejects it as ludicrously false, inappropriate or irrelevant. For the hearer, understanding such an utterance involves both realizing that it is a case of mention rather than use, and also recognizing the speaker's attitude to the proposition mentioned" (Sperber, Wilson, 1981: 308).

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dissociates in order to indirectly interpret a past enunciation, thought, norm or expectancy.

Another author, Carmen Curcó (2000 *apud* Gibbs, Colston, 2007: 278-281)‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡ points out that we deal with the following cognitive process in the case of irony: on the one hand, we have the literal level which reflects the relationship between the propositional content of an utterance and its mental representation that is the most relevant piece of information for the addressee to interpret. The moment this relationship does not lift up to the addressee's expectancies, this will go on to the next comprehension level, which is the implicit one, where he will attribute the speaker a thought different from the one he had at the moment of speaking and where he will find the real communicative intentions of the ironical speaker. These intentions cannot be found at the informative level of the utterance, but at the interpretative level, a reason for which Curcó names this cognitive capacity a "second order metarepresentation" of the speaker's primary representations. This way we can discuss about allusion as a means to underline this discrepancy between the expected state of facts and the real state of facts which is marked by the ironical enunciation.

The author who affirms her solidarity with the "echoic mention/interpretation" or the "second order metarepresentation" theory is Helga Kotthoff (2000; 2003). She associates the discrepancy we talked above with an "evaluative gap" (2000: 14; 2003: 1390), that is the addressee has the obligation to understand that the ironical speaker only mentions the enunciation and that she/he must re-evaluate the literal level. Therefore, we can notice a game of "double perspectivation" (2000: 5), namely the perspective at the dictum level which in general is a positive judgment and the perspective at the implicatum level, which in general reflects a negative, critical, disapproving judgment. This distinction between positive and negative assessments is called by Kotthoff "dissonant poliperspectivity" and her way of explaining it consists of "staged intertextuality" (2000: 14), that is a "setting" of perspectives in order to make the conversation ambiguous or equivoque, from rational reasons required by the fact that the speakers must express their communicative intentions in ways accepted by society, made legitimate or institutionalized in the community of practice they are included.

This notion of "polyphony" or "dialogic text" is not new, but it comes from Bakhtin (1970 *apud* Felecan, 2010: 15-24) who underlines the presence of multiple voices inside a text, to interweave the interactants' antagonistic points of view.

Bakhtin's vision of "dialogism" has been incorporated to linguistics by Oswald Ducrot (1984 *apud* Felecan, 2010: 64) who rejects the traditional analysis of irony as antiphrasis, that is saying something true to imply something false. Instead, he affirms that the locutor L of an ironical enunciation presents it as expressing the positive evaluation of an enunciator E, towards which the former does not assume the responsibility or he even considers it ridiculous. This way, the addressee has to

‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡ "According to the CPR, the hearer is entitled to assume that the utterance yields enough cognitive effects for no unjustifiable processing cost. Given this principle, the existence of a contradiction between the propositional content of a contextual assumption and the content of some assumption conveyed by the utterance may lead the hearer to attribute an attitude of dissociation to the speaker. In this way, a clash between context and the propositional content of the utterance may act as a cue for the attribution of a dissociative attitude" (Curcó, 2000 *apud* Gibbs, Colston, 2007: 280-281).

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disambiguate this dichotomic game between the L's perspective and the E's perspective and get to the E's point of view as corresponding to the L's real communicative ends.

This interweaving of contrasting perspectives can be depicted on our type of corpus, namely the Romanian parliamentary discourse. In our corpus, we deal with a "rapport-management" (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 12 *apud* Mills, 2003: 78)§§§§§§§§§§§§§§ of the MPs' interventions which focus on the alternation between a cooperative atmosphere at the literal level and an aggressive, competitive, even insulting atmosphere at the implicit level with the purpose to allow the negotiation of their "images/faces" according to Goffman (1955/1967 *apud* Watts, 2003: 104)********** or Brown and Levinson (1987 *apud* Watts, 2003: 105)††††††††††††††, and, in the end, the most relevant presuppositions/implicatures being advanced at the surface level. This oscillation between the cooperative and the adversative character of the parliamentary discourse can be manifested by means of parentheticals or metadiscursive/metalinguistic commentaries which accomplish the role of unifying polemical, contrastive evaluations upon the same reality (Ilie, 2003b: 43-44).

This variety of theories are meant to reflect the existence of double voices (the quoting and the quoted voices) in the case of irony which play the role of enhancing or diluting the possible significances of the texts.

2. The Romanian parliamentary discourse

The Romanian parliamentary discourse can be characterized as a confrontational setting at different levels: the parties, the ideologies, the group interests, the MPs' public or private roles, the linguistic behaviour (van Dijk, 2004: 355-361; Ilie, 2003b: 28-29).

These differences are lodged in the general framework of the Romanian parliamentary discourse and become manifested through the opposite perspectives which mark the dichotomy "us" versus "them" or the dichotomy "our positive self evaluation" and "their negative evaluation" (Bayley, 2004: 13-14; Ilie, 2003c: 80-81; Roventa-Frumușani, 2004: 142). This polarization spins around the strategies of exploiting the others' degree of vulnerability in order to diminish "their" logos, ethos

§§§§§§§§§§§§§§ "the term "face" seems to focus on concerns for self, whereas rapport-management suggests more of a balance between self and other. The concern of rapport-management is also broader; it examines the way that language is used to construct, maintain and/or threaten social relationships and… includes the management of sociality rights as well as of face"(Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 12 *apud* Mills, 2003: 78).

********** 'The Goffmanian "member" makes a claim for a positive social value which is constrained by the "line" others interpret him to be taking during the course of the interaction. That social value is dependent on the other "members", and it can change from one moment to the next. It is an image of self constructed in accordance with social attributes approved by others, and it may be unstable and changeable` (Goffman 1955/1967 *apud* Watts 2003: 104).

†††††††††††††† "The Brown-Levinsonian "member", on the other hand, appears to have already constructed, prior to the interaction, a self-image that s/he wants to be upheld by society. So although a member's self-image might be changeable, it is far less so than Goffman's positive social value. One part of the Brown-Levinsonian member's wants consists in freedom of action and freedom from imposition (negative face) and the other part is to have an already constructed and "consistent" self-image accepted and appreciated by the others" (Brown, Levinson, 1987 *apud* Watts, 2003: 105).

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and pathos and to maximize "our" rationality, credibility and sympathy (Ilie, 2003c: 80-81).

As we were saying before, the MPs have to save their images/faces during the interactions, which are not a priori constructions, but they are submitted to negotiations, updating, changes during the discourse (Goffman, 1955/1967: 6 *apud* Watts, 2003: 124)‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡. What we perceive is not a singular representation of the MPs, but a plurality of representations both from his partisans and from his opponents.

This is the reason why the MPs have to appeal to "facework" (Goffman, 1955/1967 *apud* Watts, 2003: 125) or management of the images to minimize the disagreement and maximize the agreement among them (Ilie, 2010: 202-204) by resorting to indirect formulas, such as irony in our case. This mitigated way of talking in the Romanian parliamentary discourse tries to avoid open confrontation which might endanger the interpersonal relationships among the MPs and promote a state of non-consensus and block the communication. Instead, the MPs use irony to reconcile opposite evaluations or representations of the same social reality, becoming a legitimate, institutionalized pragmatic and rhetoric tool by repeated, ritualized practices.

This set of discourses which are submitted to our analysis regarding irony strategies and functions is taken from the Romanian Parliament site and it is meant to prove that this ambiguous linguistic game, with literal and implicit interpretations, helps the locutor to keep both his image and his target's image in a social balance.

3. The strategies of irony in the Romanian parliamentary discourse

3.1. The strategy of intertextuality

> Mântuitorul Boc şi creştinul Botiş
>
> Aflat probabil în criză de idei în încercarea sa de a convinge populaţia cât de benefică va fi introducerea neoiobăgiei industriale, ministrul Botiş a decis să adopte o argumentaţie mistică, stimulat probabil de încrederea de care se bucură Biserica, spre deosebire de guvernul din care face parte. "Ridicaţi-vă voi, cei care aţi lenevit, şi munciţi, căci răsplata voastră va fi bunăstarea", a rostit profetic domnul Botiş, ca un adevărat apostol al lui Emil Boc, cel care va mântui România de bunăstare. (Ciuhodaru Tudor, 22 martie 2011)

> The Redeemer Boc and the Christian Botiș
>
> Probably being pushed for ideas in his trial to persuade the people about the advantages of introducing the new industrial bondage, the minister Botiș decided to adopt a mystical argumentation, probably stimulated by the confidence the Church enjoys of, unlike the government he is part of. "Raise you who have been idling and work because your reward will consist of welfare", Mr. Botiș fatefully uttered, like a real apostle of Emil Boc, the one who is going to redeem Romania of welfare. (Ciuhodaru Tudor, 22nd March 2011)

The Biblical quotation (*"Raise you who have been idling and work because your reward will consist of welfare")* recontextualized here, throws an apparent positive light upon the minister Botiș who seems to know the meaning of this enunciation that

‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡ "One's own face and the face of others are constructs of the same order; it is the rules of the group and the definition of the situation which determine how much feeling one is to have for face and how this feeling is to be distributed among the faces involved" (Goffman, 1955/1967: 6 *apud* Watts, 2003: 124).

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indeed it underlines the idea of prosperity or redemption for the people who believe in God. In fact, this intertextuality acts as a means to stage double perspectivation: on the one hand, there is this analogy between a filthy life with the faith in God (in the Biblical interpretation) and with hardwork (in Botiș' vision), but, on the other hand, the locutor has not chosen to quote Botiș' words for free, but with the purpose to criticize him. This text is an example of echoic mention of Botiș' quotation in order to leave the reader to metainterpret the degree of sincerity of the latter's enunciation.

When the locutor included Botiș' words in his own text he did it to suggest a dissociative perspective from the one set by the latter, but with a low degree of commitment not to be accused of an attack towards Botiș' image. Instead, the locutor chose to gratify Botiș' and even Boc's images by naming them prophets or apostles, attributes which are rather lexical items meant to express a sarcastic attitude towards them. The way the locutor achieves his purpose is by offering the reader these evaluations and leave him pick the true communicative intentions.

This way of ironising or even being sarcastic takes the form of blame by praise that is the locutor intentionally and indirectly creates two significances: a positive one at the literal level and a negative one at the implicit level.

3.2. The strategy of quotation

Aderarea la Schengen: o etapă din pleiada de «succesuri» a guvernării Băsescu-Boc

Dacă actuala guvernare are ochelari de cal, este clar că membrii UE şi instituţiile europene nu pot ignora aceste "realizări măreţe ale epocii băsesciene". […] Oricum, Emil Boc şi miniştrii săi pot răsufla uşuraţi, "marele cârmaci" şi-a asumat răspunderea eşecului aderării. Cum "şeful cel mare" a recunoscut că el este vinovat, asta înlătură responsabilitatea membrilor guvernului, ei nefiind, nu-i aşa, decât simpli executanţi. (Chiriță Dumitru, 27 septembrie 2011)

The adherence to the Schengen space: a phase from the constellations of "successes" of the Băsescu-Boc governance

If the present governance possesses goggles, it is clear that the EU members and the European institutions cannot ignore these "great accomplishments of the Băsescu age". [...] Anyway, Emil Boc and his ministers can be relieved because the "great helmsman" took the responsibility for the failure of the Schengen adherence. Because "the big boss" admitted that he bears all the guilt, the members of the Government are not made responsible anylonger, they being only simple executors. (Chiriță Dumitru, 27th September 2011)

These quotations activate a double reading: a literal and a non-literal one because they again echoically mention something else than it is said, reversing the reader's expectancies. The locutor does not make himself responsible for more than the perspective he sets at the dictum level, that is a flattering image of the Romanian president. But this image does not find its equivalent at the implicatum level because there is a discrepancy between Băsescu's eulogistic face and his political decisions which do not strengthen this image.

We cannot say that we deal with an antiphrasis, that is saying something true and implying something non-true, because then we would face a contradiction, an illogical enunciation, but it is rather an evaluative gap, namely an interweaving of perspectives and again a case of blame by praise.

This apparent praise is revealed by the fact that Băsescu's image does not correspond to the reader's horizon of expectancies or, otherwise, the appropriate way the reader wishes for a president to behave.

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3.3. The strategy of metadiscursive commentaries

Adevărata faţă a Iui Băsescu

A-l bănui pe Boc de idei macroeconomice - sau, în general, de vreo idee, fie ea şi mai rea - e ca şi cum ai cere lână de la broască şi micşunele de la răchită! Iar până acum nimeni, în afara lui Băsescu, nu şi-a revendicat paternitatea ideilor de retezare a salariilor, pensiilor, alocaţiilor, indemnizaţiilor, sporurilor şi a altor venituri, de frică să nu-l ia lumea la spart ouă cu capul pe stradă... (Răţoi Neculai, 31 mai 2011)

The real face of Băsescu

To suspect Boc of macroeconomical ideas- or, in general, of any idea, even worse- is like asking for the moon or, otherwise, when pigs fly, when two Sundays come together! And until now nobody, except Băsescu, claimed the parenthood of those ideas of cutting salaries, pensions, allowances, indemnities, gains and other financial sources, for fear of not being hit against with eggs in the middle of the street…(Răţoi Neculai, 31st May 2011)

Another example of ad hominem argumentum or indirect attack at a Romanian MP's image (in our case, it is about Emil Boc) consists of the presence of parentheticals which enhance or dilute the plurality of interpretations. These metadiscursive commentaries turn upside down the previous positive evaluation of Boc (he might possess macroeconomical ideas or visions) by attacking his rationality (generally, he cannot be suspected of any kind of ideas; in other words, he is unable to rule a minister because he does not have the cognitive resources to do it). This insertion fortifies the polyphonic nature of irony because again we have an echo to a system of norms or expectancies to which the reader relates when he thinks of the ideal of a leader.

4. The functions of irony in the Romanian parliamentary discourse

In this type of Romanian corpus, we can depict irony as a linguistic and pragmatic tool for creating ambiguous significances. Taking the form of blame by praise, irony turns into a means of suggesting the reader that he should "cross over" the literal level and "reach" the non-literal level. At this second degree of cognitive representation, the reader is going to grasp some functions of irony which are different in our corpus from the ones the same pragmatic tool has known in other kinds of corpus.

Therefore, we can identify the following functions of irony in the Romanian parliamentary discourse:

a. the function of attacking and, at the same time, saving, the locutor's and his target's images by oscillating between the direct and indirect levels of communication;
b. the function of reducing or diluting the degree of commitment from the part of the locutor because his victim's image is not explicit, but implicit, and the latter can make use of this second level of interpretation to "hide" his intention of criticism;
c. the function of proving a great sense of managing the social relationships between the locutor and his target in a normative institution in which the discourses are delivered;
d. the function of joining different or contrastive perspectives on the same state of facts as a way of assuring the minimization of disagreement, aggression, competition, conflict, and the maximization of agreement, non-aggression, cooperation.

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These main functions of irony in the Romanian parliamentary discourse accomplish the role of joining together various evaluations upon the same state of facts in ways accepted by society which do not jeopardize the MPs' public and private institutional roles.

Conclusions

In the Romanian parliamentary discourse a legitimate means of attacking the leaders' image is irony with its most known form, namely blame by praise. This attack is constructed in an indirect, mitigated way, in order to only suggest possible interpretations and not try to impose definite ones.

The reader will get to the right interpretation, corresponding to the locutors' real communicative intentions by making inferences from the literal level towards the implicit one and finding contrastive evaluations that hint at a discrepancy between the desired state of facts and the real one.

This inferential process depends on the allusive character of the texts, in order to perceive, beyond any apparent sense of praise, a sense of criticism.

From or analysis, we can notice that the reader metarepresents the literal significances by reporting himself to an horizon of expectancies which is "flouted" the moment he depicts a gap between the way things should look like and the way they are in reality.

This gap helps the reader to become aware of the fact that he deals with discourses which make use of fallacious argumentation with a lower degree of sincerity and responsibility from the part of the locutor. These fallacies "withdraw" the locutor's commitment for his implicit perspective and "charge" him with the responsibility for the perspective he "sets" at the literal level only.

This way, the reader can observe a sense of detachment from the locutor's side towards his victim that allows the latter to "release" the ad hominem attack towards the former.

Therefore, we can affirm that irony is not only a way of encouraging a "competition between contrastive perspectives", but also a way of reconciling them because of its different strategies which permit for the dichotomic phenomenon to happen in the Romanian parliamentary discourse.

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