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On the Irony-Affect Interface in Political Discourse

Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to identify patterns in the communication of irony in political discourse, and to determine the role of negative emotions in conveying ironic meaning. The first point to be considered is how politicians use irony, which communicates a contextually incongruent meaning. To be specific, the author's aim is to investigate what mechanisms of negative politeness are communicated by irony. The second issue to be analysed is the role of negative affect and irony in political discourse. Consequently, the author's aim is to investigate whether such an interface is socially acceptable and justified in parliamentary discourse. The empirical part of the research seeks to probe the language-affect interface in human interaction. The qualitative and quantitative elements of the analysis lead to results that corroborate the findings relating to the *Tinge Hypothesis* of Shelley Dews and Ellen Winner (1995: 3), which underscore that irony mutes negative emotions. The paper also takes the perspective of linguistic pragmatics and sociology to highlight the individual factors which play a crucial role in communicating irony. These include face-threatening acts (henceforth: FTAs), role-taking, and negative emotions (evaluations). Another aspect to be considered is the role of the speaker in producing ironic meaning. The author expounds upon the patterns of communication among politicians who share affect-imbued ironic meanings.

Keywords: irony, face, impoliteness, affect, political discourse

1. Introduction

Verbal irony is thoroughly studied not only by contemporary linguists considering spontaneous discourse, but also by diligent students of humour. Some patterns and functions of the communication of irony are common to all kinds of people; however, the speech communities to which they belong are inherently heterogeneous. Considering the specific speech community of politicians, what need to be described are *natural units of speaking* such as situations, events, roles, etc. The dynamic interrelationships of politicians construct a salient cultural system in which performances are (1) emergent (often driven by emotions) (see Bauman 1975: 290, Barrett 2013: 385, 2017: 37), (2) contextual (Chilton and Schaffner 2002: 15, Dijk 2009: 14), (3) idiosyncratic (Andeweg *et al.* 2020: 495), and (4) momentary (Palonen 2014: 282, Gorham 2000: 17). Furthermore, irony is realized within certain norms, presuppositions and social

expectations. The nexus of all these factors causes interplay between them and eventually dictates our understanding of ironic meaning as a face threat or as friendly teasing (Drew 1987: 219).

The traditional view of irony as contradictory meanings that are in a bipolar position with respect to each other (Barbe 1995: 17) is just the tip of the iceberg. It is not enough to explicate irony as a linguistic form of expression that hinges on the speaker's intention and communicates something opposite to what he means. The dichotomous nature of irony expounded by various scholars (Barbe 1995, Grice 1989: 54, Sperber and Wilson 1981: 298) only signals an affective exponent in creating ironic meaning. Building on the view that irony is contextually embedded, it is necessary to situate the ironic speaker in the here and now. Thus, irony ought to be considered as built out of emotions which are momentary, spontaneous, and dictated by contextual features. According to Sperber and Wilson (1981: 298), irony is an abstract concept, embedded within psychological mechanisms which all taken together create an ironic effect. Of situations which can be characterized as ironic, no two are alike, although some elements typical of ironic situations may coexist and create the ironic effect. What is more, there are no irony-specific signals which can be classified as its markers (Bryant and Fox Tree 2005: 273, Attardo *et al.* 2003: 243).

Undoubtedly, irony would be non-existent without the ability to recognize congruent meanings; however, research also shows that another communicative effect that irony serves is that of conveying negative emotions in the form of evaluations and judgements such as criticism, ridicule, or complimenting (Bromberek-Dyzman 2011: 9, Dews and Winner 1995: 3). It is of primary importance to investigate the influence of affect in communicating irony, as empirical researchers have tended to neglect the affect-irony interface (Leggitt and Gibbs 2000). It seems especially useful to undertake such research in view of the interactive character of irony, which inherently communicates a change of style or register (Sperber and Wilson 1981: 311).

1.1. Irony and meaning-making

To get a grasp of verbal irony, one needs to interpret what is being said. However, this is often difficult and misunderstandings can occur, especially when a hearer does not interpret irony in the way the speaker intended. Due to the fact that irony is not stated explicitly in the text but rather remains *in the eye of the beholder*, it is a prerequisite to determine what factors (verbal or textual) play a crucial role in the recognition of irony. A point of reference for this discussion may be the differentiation between sentence meaning and speaker meaning. Sentence meaning opens the floodgates to different meanings which, if cohesive, make a given text a communicative occurrence (De Beaugrande and Dressler [1972] 1981: 6). The other way of dealing with irony is to dig down to the intentional base of ironic meaning, which is inherently rooted in the context, this being the setting of the occurrence of irony and subject to the speaker's subjective interpretation (hearer meaning).

Additionally, the intentional function of irony can be a point of reference for a discussion about how negative affect contributes to the comprehension of ironic meaning. According to Kotthoff (2003: 1388), it is the ability to grasp the evaluative content between what is said (*dictum*) and what is intended (*implicatum*) that is the key to understanding irony. Building on Kotthoff's findings, it is found that people choose to respond either to the meant or to the produced meaning. In formal parliamentary debates, which are publicly displayed and obey certain institutional norms, the *implicatum* is followed. The *dictum* level is an intimate zone reserved for friends, who can ironically joke and tease to maintain bonds and solidarity.

The grounds for recognizing irony are largely based on linguistic cues, as well as situational, social, and cultural knowledge (Barbe 1995: 5), which all taken together construct the context of the situation. Due to the complexity, non–discreteness and unpredictability of the factors that occupy context, the comprehension of irony is an intrinsically intangible but discernible notion that poses many challenges for meaning analysis.

1.2. The features and functions of irony

One of the obvious features of irony is its dichotomous nature. Barbe (1995: 17) emphasizes that contradictory meanings that are in a bipolar position with respect to each other are the most common patterns in literal/nonliteral surface meanings. Thus, a person in a restaurant sounds ironic when he says *wow, perfect timing!* to his friend who is late for dinner. However, this may not always be the case. Another way of expressing ironic meaning is through formulations that are compatible with the speaker meaning of the utterance. As an example, one person arguing with another suddenly says *you're giving me a headache*. Both the sentence meaning and the speaker meaning are on the same page; they conflate in the instance of irony. The chameleon–like nature of irony creates paradoxical meanings that cause ambiguity and contextual incongruity (at least on the sentence level), but without such a pattern, irony would be non–existent.

The mechanisms of irony comprehension build a clear picture of how contextually incongruent meanings operate in synergy to create a perceptual ironic environment. The feature of irony that plays a crucial role in ironic meaning–making is the ironic environment. Utsumi (2000) argues that an ironic utterance entirely hinges on implicit context–content incompatibility. This means that the more dispersed the linguistic or contextual cues, the more prominent the verbal irony becomes. According to Colston (2002: 111), much of the hearer's interpretation of the ironic context is based on the perceptual contrast effects and the pragmatic functions of irony. Figurative language comprehension is believed to hinge on the contrast between the semantic meaning of the utterance and its actual reference context. The figurative meaning of irony can be expressed through jocularly, sarcasm, hyperbole, understatement, and rhetorical questions (Gibbs and Colston 2012: 52). Previous studies (Colston and O'Brien 2000: 1557, Camp 2012: 622) have revealed that irony comprehension requires the noticing of such incongruity in the contrast of meaning. This mechanism presents an ironic comment that is attached to a *positive semantic* meaning. However, it refers to a *negative situation* which requires unfavourable evaluation. Such a discrepancy of two contrasting effects results in the contextual comprehension of an utterance as ironic. According to Christian Burgers and Gerard Steen (2017: 88), irony is a dimensional concept that cannot be reduced to a unified structure with unambiguous components.

Another similar mechanism of situational irony comprehension highlights the role of incoherence (Shelley 2001: 778). What characterizes an ironic situation is its bi–coherent conceptual structure, consisting of concepts. Bicoherence is understood as the opposition of coherence in which a particular configuration of emotions is a central part of situational irony, next to adequate cognitive salience. Shelley's view presents the contributions of emotions in this conceptual structure as integral elements interacting in an ironic framework. She mentions two ways in which emotions relate to situational irony. These are emotion specificity (particular emotions that are typical of situational irony) and emotions as indicators of a situation's salience (heightened emotional response signalling the occurrence of irony).

Bicoherence acts as a signpost for dealing with situations that are sensed as ironic. Emotions set the scene for a response to the problem of incoherence between concepts.

The complexity of irony, exhibited in its dichotomous nature and mechanisms, is not the only aspectual challenge. Having classified ironic utterances as intended meanings (what is implied) with the opposite stated meaning (what is said), there is still ample space left for interpretation and subjective experience (Barbe 1995: 11).

1.3. Politeness and irony

In the face of the complex nature of irony, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory presents its communicative functions in a dual manner. On the one hand, irony can be viewed as an expression of opaque criticism. Consequently, facework mechanisms come into play. On the level of language, irony can be viewed in terms of face-threatening acts to positive face (Brown and Levinson [1978] 1987: 95) which undermine or attack a person's public self-image. On the other hand, the authors' account (Brown and Levinson [1978] 1987: 95) does not seem to be fully consistent with their previous assumption of irony as a form of criticism. What these authors emphasize is the importance of irony as a being part of "[l]inguistic realizations of off-record strategies next to metaphor, rhetorical questions, understatements, tautologies, and all kinds of hints as to what a speaker wants to communicate, without doing so directly, so that the meaning is to some degree negotiable" (Brown and Levinson [1978] 1987: 69). However, is irony truly an off-record strategy? In terms of meaning manipulation, it does aim to conceal the true message (by being ambiguous), but on the part of the hearer, irony is an on-record strategy that throws accusations and criticism at the recipient of the message. The intention of being off-record can be equated with an indirectness that always distances the speaker from the potential H's retaliatory remarks. The speaker's use of irony is a strategy for being offensive in a seemingly unaggressive way.

1.4. Irony as an attitude

Crucial to the current analysis of irony is the fact that its comprehension is always dependent on attitude. According to Katarzyna Bromberek-Dyzman (2014), the prime meaning of irony entails an assumption that it "[i]mplicitly communicates an attitude" (Bromberek-Dyzman 2014: 122). An ironic speaker does not want to unveil explicit criticism, but rather tries to be indirect and ambiguous. However, the question is: why does the speaker communicate an attitude weakly and use indirectness if he wants to use irony to achieve his personal goals (usually to threaten or ridicule an opponent)? One of the aims of this article is to answer this question.

Among many researchers who seek to construe and explain the role of attitude in irony communication, two figures in particular have set the stage for a comprehensive account of this issue. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1981: 306) coined their *echoic mention theory* and have rejuvenated the traditional view represented by Grice's substitution of ironic utterance for what was literally said. The point of divergence between what Grice and Sperber & Wilson suggested lies in the speaker's attitude to the uttered proposition. In other words, irony is a property of the speaker, and is not a shift (substitution) from a literal to a figurative meaning of a single utterance. Echoic mentions contain all shapes and sizes of ironic meaning; that is to say, examples of irony are merged into a medley of echoic mentions which may be immediate or delayed (less directly related). Another relevant aspect of Sperber and Wilson's

account of irony is that it does not primarily violate the maxim of truthfulness (as claimed by Grice), but rather communicates the dissociative attitude proposed by a speaker. However, both Grice and Sperber & Wilson find common ground in concluding that “[i]rony is intimately connected with the expression of a feeling, attitude, or evaluation. I cannot say something ironically unless what I say is intended to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgement or a feeling such as indignation or contempt” (Grice 1989: 54). They both agree that the implicit attitude of the speaker is more important than the actual reaction in the form of propositional meaning.

Before the response strategy is triggered, there needs to be a recognition of irony. As presented by Sperber and Wilson (1981: 306) in their proposal of echoic mention, the roles of the speaker and the hearer impart the ironical meaning of an utterance. The speaker presents the propositional content of the message in such a way as to mock or criticize, and thus indicates its irrelevance and inappropriateness. The hearer, on the other hand, recognizes the speaker’s attitude of implicit disapproval and creates further conversational implicatures.

The response strategies to ironic utterances may differ according to the intended effect (to offend directly or tease) and depend on the context (for instance, formal political debates or informal family gatherings). In formal circumstances, the hearer’s response has the aim of redirecting the critical remark and ignoring the effect of a face threat. On the other hand, informal meetings are characterized by unrestrained response to irony, which can entail explicit commentary, reference to what has been implied by the ironic utterance, or staying silent.

Irony processing, reflected in the dichotomous nature of what is said and what is meant, calls for a more elaborate and comprehensive account that encompasses a large spectrum of affect–based cues. However, I would not limit the choice of various forms of communicating irony only to the linguistic structure of propositional meaning. Instead, I would posit that irony processing can be fully recognized in terms of a communicative function (Barbe 1995: 174) that operates within the contextual framework of social, situational, mental, and affective cues. As long as irony expression and comprehension are not homogeneous constructs, the language–affect interface is considered to mark the levels of propositional and non–propositional meanings in which the ironic mode imparts affective meaning.

1.5. Experiment

1.5.1. Participants

A total of 101 (21 male, 85 females; mean age: 21) students of the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, aged between 18 and 25 years, volunteered to participate in the experiment. It was carried out at the Language and Communication Laboratory (LCL) at the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The participants included 94 native speakers of Polish, and 7 students of Czech or Russian descent. Their command of English was highly proficient. All of the students had normal or corrected–to–normal vision.

1.5.2. Materials

A questionnaire and audio–visual stimuli were administered to investigate the emotional content of political debates. The questionnaire was used to validate the stimuli for their valence (degree of

negativity), strength, and the occurrence of various listed sentiments (affect-related concepts). It also contained two factual questions about gender and age. An open-ended question elicited the valence and strength of the perceived emotion. It followed an additional closed-ended question that comprised multiple-choice items as well as an open-ended *Please specify* option. The participants were presented with words describing eight emotional states (I called them *sentiments*) that corresponded only to negative affect. To measure the impact of the experience of the listed emotions, the subjects marked their intensity and strength. The measures were located on a 7-point Likert scale (valence) and on a 9-point Likert scale (strength). The choice of rating scale strategies was dictated by the nature of affect, which is a highly subjective, context-bound, and gradable experience.

Each participant was presented with audio-visual stimulus materials consisting of a pool of 24 videos and their transcriptions from British parliamentary debates on immigration dated from 2000 to 2015. The flow of migration from other European countries to the UK has been extensively discussed by the British government. Undeniably, such a large-scale phenomenon has not only brought significant economic changes, but has also spurred some ambivalent attitudes among the British themselves. Concerns as to whether Britain will retain its national identity due to the massive flux of other cultures have led to some heated parliamentary discussions on the subject. The stimulus was presented so that each participant was shown a turn-taking frame only once. The content of political debates included proceedings from the House of Commons and the House of Lords which featured context with negative affect. Each political exchange was selected from the Hansard online records and presented as a turn-taking system between speaker A and speaker B, in the form of transcripts. The choice of sessions to be examined was selective and conditioned by the degree of emotional involvement.

1.5.3. Procedure

A single session of stimulus presentation took place in a sound-attenuated room. The audio-visual presentation and data collection lasted approximately 30 minutes. The procedure was facilitated by the use of E-Prime 2.0 software. Stimuli were presented in black, against a white computer screen. Participants were asked to sit at the computers, and short introductory instructions were given. They were told the purpose of the study, which was to explore the role of emotions expressed by speakers in the reception of stimuli. The on-screen questionnaire opened with a short introduction that briefly summarized the type of stimuli (political discourse) and content orientations. Participants were to indicate the degree of negativity (valence) of either speaker A's or speaker B's utterance (specified in the questionnaire). The question was followed by an evaluation of the strength of emotion felt. Last but not least, the participants were instructed to choose from the existing list of eight sentiments the one(s) they felt to be predominant. They were also encouraged to give comments and indicate other sentiments if present. It was also necessary to provide the students with an on-screen transcription of the debate during exposure to the audio-visual stimuli. The main purpose of this was to minimize lexical incongruence and facilitate the evaluative processing task. The rationale behind using the term *sentiment* instead of *emotions* or *feeling* was that it allowed consideration of other linguistic manifestations of affect experience and expressions such as irony or insult, which are scientifically proven to be emotion-related (e.g.: Muecke 1969, Barbe 1995, Sperber and Wilson 1981). Participants were not subject to any time constraint, so they could perform the task at their own pace. When they felt ready to give their evaluations, they pressed the spacebar. Following completion of the questionnaire, a *thank you* sign appeared on the screen to indicate the end of the task.

1.5.4. Data analysis

The questions that inspired the analysis described in this section include the following: (1) What is the role of negative affect in communicating irony? (2) Does negative affect exhibit any recurrent linguistic patterns in the communication of irony? (3) What is the role of context and its constituents in recognizing and dealing with irony? This section focuses on cues, features, and mechanisms of ironic utterances anchored in negative affect (negative evaluations). The findings resulting from the wider scope of the experiment made it possible to identify patterns of behaviour in politicians' communication. Qualitative analysis of the results is presented below in the 'Results' section, along with elements of a quantitative analysis.

The preliminary aim of this experiment was to investigate the emotional load of selected parliamentary debates. Probing how emotions influence irony is just a part of the wider scope of the experiment. With regard to this article's focus on the irony–affect interface, I have selected only the debates with the highest frequency of irony (out of the pool of 24 videos). The elements of descriptive and empirical analysis presented below give ample information about irony–affect political communication. Therefore, I shall begin with a qualitative account of the collected data and describe the predominant patterns found in politicians' behaviour. Next, I will focus on the quantitative data analysis, which shows important tendencies relating to the valence, strength, and types of sentiments found in the debates with the highest frequency of irony. This analysis also demonstrates the correlation of emotions and irony.

1.6. Results: a qualitative account of the collected data

The results of the experiment revealed some predominant patterns of irony processing and comprehension that play a crucial role in determining the scope of understanding of irony and response to ironic utterances. Moreover, valence – considered as a basic property of emotions – is significant in building the evaluative processes that are fundamentally constructed in every speaker's mind. The operations underlying verbal irony encompass physiological/biological (non–propositional) cues, mental dispositions, the contextual domain, as well as the strategic use of language (propositional stratum). There is no uniform definition of irony, because it is a form of linguistic expression that is constantly shaped by environmental (contextual) stimuli. However, there are patterns that systematically emerge out of the analysis of particular parliamentary debates. The observed relationships and mechanisms in the processing of ironic utterances are as follows:

- (1) Irony as a building of image
- (2) Irony as a face–saving mechanism
- (3) Irony as expression of affect

Grice (1975: 26) points out that interlocutors (politicians) ought to seek cooperation and be highly informative. Thus, the Cooperative Principle (CP) implies rigid boundaries of conversational speech that are universally shared irrespective of affective display (anger, love, etc.), power/distance relations, cultural background, and so on. If irony breaches the associated maxims, does that mean that it also terminates successful social communication? Certainly not. I would take as a point of reference not the appropriateness of irony to a maxim–based utterance, but the context of a given situation. It seems that banter or jokes can be regarded as uncooperative among strangers, but fully acceptable in the presence of intimates. The asymmetrical relations of power and social distance are highly influential and informative factors that facilitate the adaptation of irony in a given context. These interpretations and ideas are pieces

of information that dictate interpersonal norms and standards. Irony does not fit the perfect picture of Gricean utterance informativeness, and it undoubtedly is not a violation of a norm. It is true that linguistic norms frame the interpretations and delineate violation boundaries, but they certainly do not correspond to the pragmatic reality of different situation-dependent conversations.

The social aspect of irony as maintaining a bond between interlocutors is visible in the sequence of exchanges. The conversational structure of any dialogue includes topic change (Sacks 1974: 700), which is part of the natural dynamics of every well-progressing conversation. Based on this premise, the speaker wants to attain topical coherence with the hearer and maintain a social bond with him. In other words, the speaker takes the initiative in being interactionally active. Also, he proves himself competent in dictating the rhythm of the conversation dynamics, as he controls the causal sequence of the dialogue.

Another observed pattern that emerges out of the current analysis is irony as a face-saving mechanism. Positive and negative face value are directly linked to impression management or positive public self-image (see Goffman 1961b: 77, Goffman 1961b: 82). Ironic utterances in the analysed debates consistently show that irony is inherently an FTA mechanism that conveys strong criticism. However, if a speaker uses off-record strategies that communicate the content indirectly, he needs to give some hints to the hearer. Thus, irony is a transparent and easily interpreted linguistic realization that may at times directly imply criticism. Based on this knowledge, the hearer's mind rests on conversational implicatures which facilitate meaning interpretation. The strategy of going off-record has several payoffs that contribute to the communicative function of irony as an effective face-saving mechanism. A central tenet of an ironic utterance is that it is indirect. It leaves the hearer autonomous and unimpeded. On top of that, the original speaker gets credit for being loyal, cooperative and tactful. His comments may be explained ambiguously, which curbs the risk of potential face damage to the hearer. Thus, the use of irony promotes the speaker's favourable public image.

Verbal irony is a manifestation of the status of a politician as a trustworthy speaker who performs his role well. As an initiator of his ironic intentions, he needs to specify his goals and reprimand his opponent indirectly so that the negative evaluative meaning of the utterance is communicated. When exploring irony, it is necessary to emphasize the Goffmanian role perspective, in which a performer enacts a wide array of corresponding activities (role-appropriate personal qualities) (Goffman 1961b: 77). They lay the foundations for the constructed self that only needs to be behaviourally approved in a given context. Goffman explains role as "[t]he typical response of individuals in a particular position" (Goffman 1961b: 82). Hence, common character traits of a politician include loyalty, likability, composure, but also charisma, good communicative skills and leadership. Being ironical can be one of the linguistic realizations of such role enactment. The findings show that irony dilutes the negative load carried by words. It can also allow a message to be presented humorously by means of jokes or banter. Ironic comments often break the ice between interlocutors and enhance bond maintenance. This act of communicating politeness helps to mitigate the offensive message and defends the offender's positive image.

Irony is a property of the speaker and does not belong to the content of the utterance. What is clearly visible in the ironic tone of the message is the build-up of emotions. Grice highlights that "[i]rony is intimately connected with the expression of a feeling, attitude, or evaluation. I cannot say something ironically unless what I say is intended to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgement or a feeling such as indignation or contempt" (Grice 1989: 52). The three pillars of irony (feeling, attitude and evaluation) result from one another and allow the speaker to communicate a context-embedded message. The

judgmental tone and negative meaning are inferred through the affective dimension of negative emotions such as anger, contempt, ridicule, disgust, jealousy, etc. These building blocks of the speaker's attitude communicate attitudinal content that is inferred by the hearer. However, it is not only a unilateral relation. The hearer, who is at the same time an interpreter, experiences the ironic environment and becomes emotionally involved. As a result of this, feelings of embarrassment, anger, annoyance, and irritation may occur. Thus, irony causes affect to be expressed by the speaker, but it is also elicited by the hearer.

Although irony may be used strategically and involve an implicit desire to save face, it presents a judgmental evaluation strengthened by affective factors. What comes to the fore when analysing the research data is the way irony regulates strong negative emotions. Whenever explicit verbal attacks occur in the form of negative emotions (FTAs), politicians most often attempt to mute the destructive effect of criticism by using irony.

1.7. Results: a quantitative account of the collected data

The patterns of results obtained in this experiment in relation to the irony–affect interface demonstrate that in some debates the degree of irony was higher than that of other sentiments (*e.g.*: negative emotions) (see Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4 below). Despite the fact that the respondents marked strong negative emotional value (high degrees of valence and strength on the Likert scale), they did not mark negative emotions such as anger or outrage as predominant. Thus, it can be concluded that irony implicitly communicates negative emotions. These findings confirm the *Tinge Hypothesis* of Shelley Dews and Ellen Winner (1995: 3), which underscores that irony carries strong negative emotional evaluation or judgement, but mutes the expression of strong negative emotions. Selected findings (with the highest frequency of irony) are presented below, and demonstrate that irony mutes negative emotions.

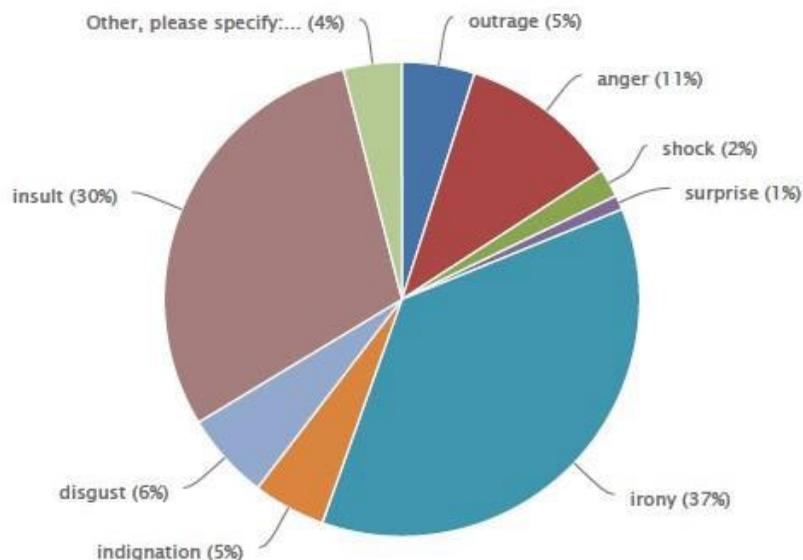


Fig. 1.

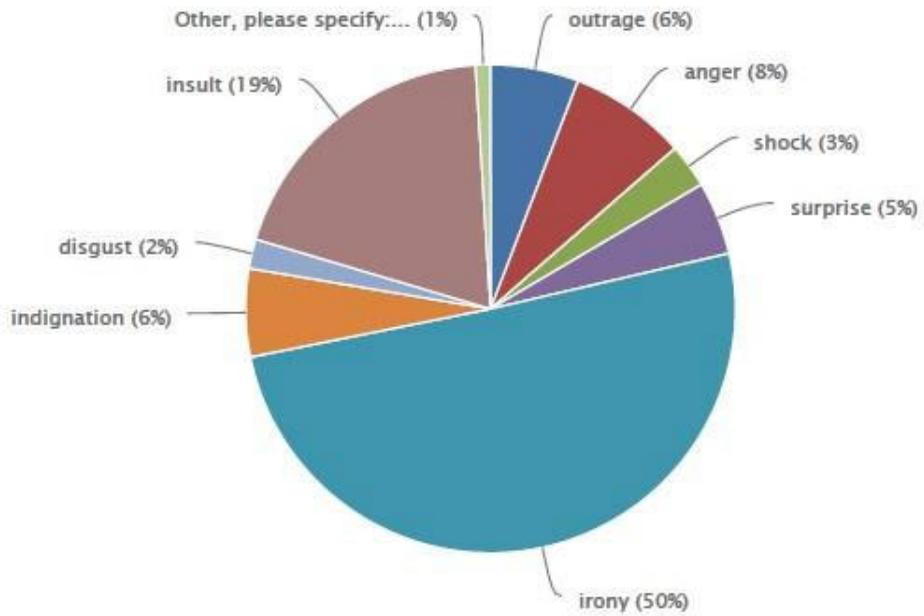


Fig. 2.

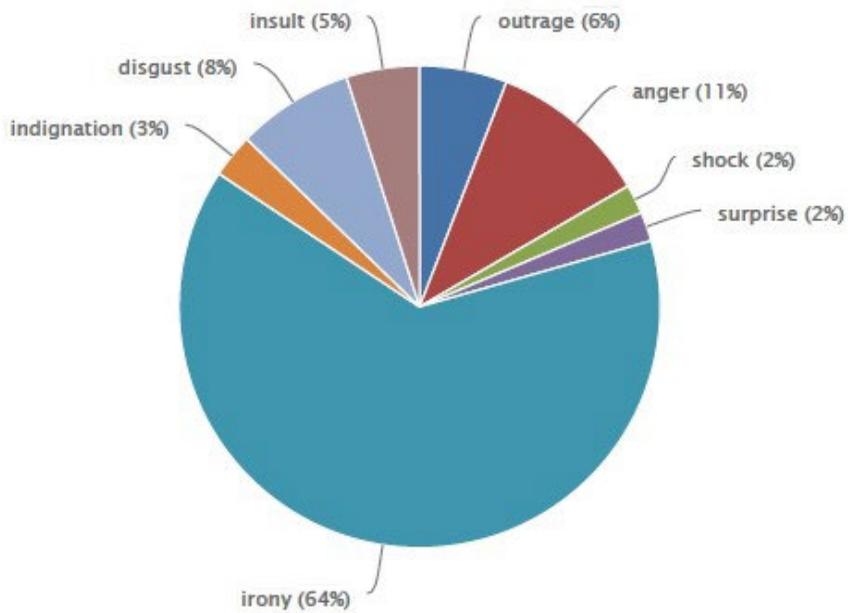


Fig. 3.

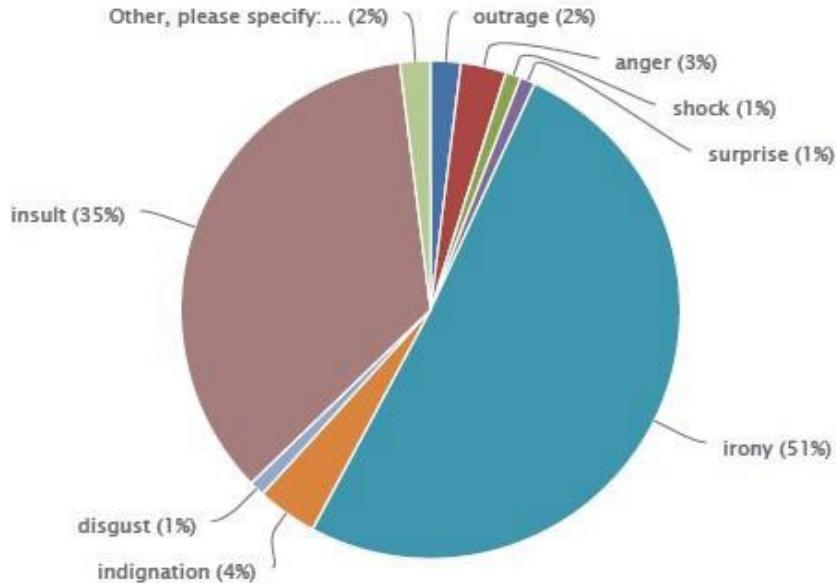


Fig. 4.

Table 1. Correlations between emotions and irony

	outrage	anger	shock	surprise	irony	indignation	disgust	insult
outrage		0,34	0,36	-0,34	-0,53	-0,22	0,10	-0,49
anger			-0,37	-0,24	-0,55	0,10	-0,08	-0,21
shock				0,50	-0,20	0,18	0,02	-0,38
surprise					-0,03	0,58	0,02	-0,28
irony						-0,38	-0,45	0,14
indignation							0,04	-0,14
disgust								-0,19
insult								

The results regarding the data presented in the table of correlations between emotions and irony demonstrate clearly some tendencies that have also been recognized in the qualitative part of my analysis. The negativity of emotions (valence) and their strength were scored high on the Likert scale, and the occurrence of irony is juxtaposed with the occurrence of negative emotions such as anger or outrage. It can be observed that irony flattens the expression of negative emotions. Interestingly, once irony appears in context, the frequency of negative emotions is diminished. Another fundamental observation is that

the use of irony implicitly carries affective meaning. The respondents marked a high degree of emotional expression (based on the degree of valence and strength) in conjunction with the occurrence of irony.

According to the results regarding the correlation of emotions and irony, the less ironical are the statements, the stronger is the expression of anger and outrage. Politicians defending their own faces may exhibit two opposite modes of behaviour. They either explicitly attack and insult their opponent or try to deactivate the conflict. Political discourse assumes the avoidance of social breakdown and focuses on the final consensus. Thus, the use of irony helps to avoid conflict escalation and maintains mutual relations. The use of irony can therefore be understood as a mitigating strategy, ensuring politeness. Emotions are strategically distributed tools to threaten the adversary, but at the same time they communicate verbally, with the use of irony, that common ground is possible. This safe technique of communicative negatively valenced emotions has been predominant in political debates. Anger has also been seen as an emotion which propels action and helps to move forward. This is especially significant in the deliberative process of parliamentary proceedings. In order to introduce important changes, politicians need strong stimulus (anger) to advance their claims. According to my study, the negative correlation of anger and outrage with irony shows that ironical comments serve a communicative function of being aggressive in a seemingly unaggressive way. The impact of negative emotions is 'diluted' by means of irony. The results of my experiment are significant, as they corroborate the findings related to the *Tinge Hypothesis* of Shelley Dews and Ellen Winner (1995: 3), which highlight that irony mutes negative emotions.

1.8. Conclusions

Pragmatic analysis of the data has shown that irony, being an implicit linguistic realization which conveys negative evaluative meaning, has a strong affective influence at the message level. The mechanisms that drive the production and comprehension of ironic utterances cover a wide array of functions. They facilitate bond maintenance, respect the public face of both the speaker and the hearer, and level up emotional discord.

In this study, verbal irony has been shown to play a significant role in a situational and social context. Ironic meaning is manifested in ironic context, of which the boundaries can be delineated by recognition of means and purposes as well as patterns that operate within a group of politicians (Hymes 1964: 3). The existent patterns which have been identified present irony as (1) a means of building image, (2) a face-saving mechanism, and (3) an expression of affect. They make it possible to demarcate some boundaries or areas of activity of the particular spoken discourse within the analysed speech community.

The findings show that being ironical gives a new *status* to the ironic speaker. First and foremost, it is role enactment, performed as "[t]he typical response of individuals in a particular position" (Goffman 1961b: 82). The communicative purpose, the goals and outcome seem to be strategically distributed to account for an indirect negative evaluative meaning of the communicated act. Apart from skilful role-taking, he also needs to be a *competent* ironic speaker. It is not only due to his oratory skills and personal predisposition that he can attain the intended communicative effect. His knowledge needs to be broad enough to get a grasp of the situation, to be able to produce the contextually incongruent meaning, and to use it appropriately at the right time, under the right circumstances (Chruszczewski 2011: 157).

The building of the self-image of a competent ironic speaker is not only concentrated on the communicative purpose centred on his personal attributes. What also needs to be considered is another purpose of interaction, which is not so much to control the impression he makes on the audience, or

to make a self–presentation to achieve the desired effect, but to establish “[a] favourable definition of the service or product” (Goffman 1956: 47). Another side of the coin is the shift of focus from the characteristics of the performer in the act of self–presentation to characteristics of the task. The affective/ expressive or informative ‘content’ of an encounter is measured not according to the personal front of an actor but according to his contribution to the interaction through his appearance and manner. However, although irony is embedded in the language of the speaker/hearer, the decoding process of the participants is not uniform, but rather abstract and arbitrary (Sperber and Wilson 1981: 298) and is speaker–specific due to the “[s]peaker’s affective bias” that produces irony (Bromberek–Dyzman 2014: 122). Irony ought rather to be regarded as a communicative function, “[a] pervasive feature of context” (Barbe 1995: 174) rather than a linguistic structure that can be characterized and measured.

The study’s findings have shown that Politeness Theory, according to which irony functions as a face–saving mechanism, has an important role to play. The main communicative purpose of irony in this respect is to communicate polite criticism. Clearly, apart from tacit criticism, the use of irony is also a manifestation of power and social distance. An indirect and opaque form of criticism provides a way of attaining social order, keeping conflict at bay, and achieving the goal of being aggressive but in a seemingly unaggressive way. The Politeness Principle (PP) stands in opposition to the rules of CP; a violation of the Maxim of Quantity or Quality and PP exclude each other. The Irony Principle, proposed by Leech (1983: 83), may be the golden mean, as it refers to being impolite in a polite way. The social order achieved by PP is superior to the postulates of CP. The ironic speaker upholds PP while breaking some maxims of CP (for instance, the Maxim of Quality and Quantity). All in all, (1) verbal irony is an implicit critical attack (in the form of an off–record face–threatening act), (2) a face threat under a mask of politeness (being ambiguous, indirect) becomes a part of a face–saving mechanism, and (3) irony is instantaneous/ momentary and quickly evaporates; it appears on the spur of the moment. The results of my quantitative analysis also corroborate the crucial role of affect in communicating verbal irony. My findings align with the *Tinge Hypothesis* of Shelley Dews and Ellen Winner (1995: 3) in the view that irony mutes negative emotions.

Useful as the affective approach to ironic meaning might be, it is subject to some limitations in explaining the mechanisms of irony in relation to emotions. Due to the emergent and idiosyncratic nature of affect in participants, it is difficult to come up with uniform ways of communicating and understanding irony. Again, it is a futile effort to build a taxonomy of emotions that are characteristic of irony. Both affect and irony are highly context–dependent, emergent and spontaneous phenomena built on the psychological mechanisms of its users (Sperber and Wilson 1981: 298). For this reason, it is impossible to make a list of salient emotions which always accompany irony. Yet an underlying feature of irony is attitude. This is a standby mode of every speaker before any “[c]ognitive (linguistic) import of a message” (Bromberek–Dyzman 2014: 324) begins.

My significant contribution to knowledge in this area has been the presentation of the irony–affect interface in the discourse of political deliberations. Research on irony in relation to attitude is a neglected area in applied linguistics. I would go as far as to say that affect is the building block of ironic meaning that is contextually embedded. Verbal irony abounds in affective expressions which are part and parcel of social norms of politeness, that is, cultural communication. In order for irony to appear, there needs to be an emergent negative evaluation or judgement (attitude) followed by a specific emotion(s). This momentary state is signalled in a context–embedded message. This context in turn is the building of

norms and rules (politeness) that operate within a speech community. The present results go to show that irony is an inherently attitudinal concept built within the social and situational context, which is a result of the culturally based norms of the analysed speech community.

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