

## Communication Mechanism of Ironic Discourse

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**Abstract.** Irony is a language communication device in which the speaker shows sharp style and sense through an expression that means the opposite of what he or she intends to express. To achieve the envisaged intent of discourse, the speaker uses pragmatic characteristics and functions of speech in a targeted manner in an antithetical or contradictory structure between expectation and reality, and action and results. This study regards irony as an important communication method and examines how it is understood and communicated between senders and receivers in discourse. This study also aims to investigate the main factors required to interpret and understand information communicated through ironic discourse and the communication processes of the ironic discourse itself. We suggest a study plan procedure on ironic discourse in an education setting between a sender and a receiver through these mechanism studies on the interpretation and understanding of ironic communication.

**Key words:** Ironic Discourse, Mechanism of Irony, Metacognition, Communication Factors and Process, Ironic Marker, Evaluative Valence

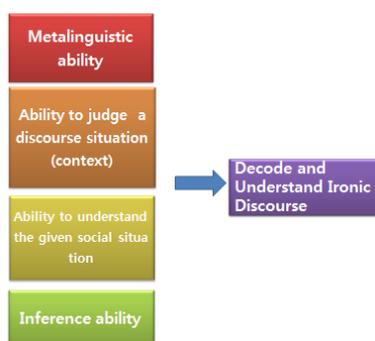
### 1 Introduction

According to dictionary definitions, irony is linguistic irony focused mainly on trope. In other words, it is “the opposite of what the sender signifies.” Mostly, it has characteristics of antiphrasis and the function of depreciation as antonymous relation. This linguistic irony belongs to an exceptional case that violates a discourse rule called the rule of sincerity. Thus, an ironic speaker attempts to show a marker of insincerity. In this sense, he or she constructs a semantic definition by “expressing P while speaking non-P.” A conclusion drawn from the above explanation of the concept and definition of irony is that irony requires a) results of intent, b) concealment technique, c) incongruence, contradiction, and opposition between the spoken and the intended, d) critical evaluation of something in communication, and e) inference skills to read the mind (spirit) of the sender, as there is a possibility of miscommunication.

Therefore, interpreting and understanding ironic discourse inevitably requires interpreting skills in comprehensive contexts, i.e., communicational skills, including sociocultural knowledge shared between the sender and receiver. The success of ironic communication depends on the receiver and is related to pragmatic situations (sender-receiver) such as the level of the receiver’s interpreting skills.

## 2 Necessary factors of ironic communication

Most of the studies on irony are conducted with a conflicting construction between linguistic irony and situational irony.(Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1978; Sperber and Wilson, 1998; Grice, 1975) Linguistic irony involves a rhetorical figure employed under the sole premise that the fact is opposed to the meaning. By contrast, situational irony, mainly used in literature, indicates the possibility of various contrasts or oppositions. In other words, it means various forms, including what is happening in reality, what is expected or hoped to happen, and the object's appearance and its underlying real characteristics and behaviors, results, etc. For this reason, it is necessary to identify the discourse process leading to the recognition of non-literal status, evaluative attitude toward what the sender intends to convey, and the receiver's response expected by the sender to complete proper ironic communication. Necessary factors for the receiver to interpret and understand such ironic communication information include a metalinguistic ability, ability to judge a discourse situation, various markers, and inference ability.



Metalinguistic ability is the ability to consciously reflect on language, including its characteristics and essentials; it is a type of metacognition that regards language as the subject of thought, consideration, and evaluation. (Gomber, 1992) It is difficult to interpret and understand irony without metalinguistic ability. This is because thought about language and its usage should be activated to explore and infer a possibility for a meaning to be changed in a certain discourse situation, without interpreting the gap or difference between what is literally expressed and what is intended by the sender, and between the literal meaning of expressions and the way they are apparently shown. That is, ironic communication presupposes metalinguistic ability.

Also, the ability to grasp the discourse situation is necessary for understanding ironic discourse. Irony is created and communicated in a certain discourse context. It is important to find factors that can confirm irony in this context and infer and interpret them accordingly. Also at stake in understating irony is an inferential ability regarding the sender's information (sender's sex, job, personality, speech, relation with the receiver), given social situation, and intent in the context of the situation of his or her speech. The receiver needs the ability to understand the given social situation and to infer therefrom in order to figure out the sender's intent. He or she

achieves this by considering the relation between the sender and receiver, detailed situational contexts, and various verbal and non-verbal markers based on the sender's specific information.

Factors of the ability to understand a discourse situation require the understanding of the ironist's intent, emotion and attitude of the receiver or observer, topic, and relation between the sender and receiver. It is otherwise impossible to comprehend the various meanings conveyed in irony. In this respect, the premise is that there is an observer who focuses on the contrast or opposition mentioned in situational irony, rather than linguistic irony.

However, perhaps the most important knowledge is the information on the irony sender, including his or her gender and occupation (the ability to understand social situations). This is because people believe irony is used more often by men than women and politicians than educators. (Katz, 2005)

Finally, understanding of the inference ability is essential in understanding irony after the receiver realizes that the sender intends to mean something different from his or her linguistic expression. In other words, ironic communication highly depends on the receiver's understanding of the sender's motive to choose irony, sender's attitude, and intended object and meaning, as well as the receiver's response to the intent, etc.

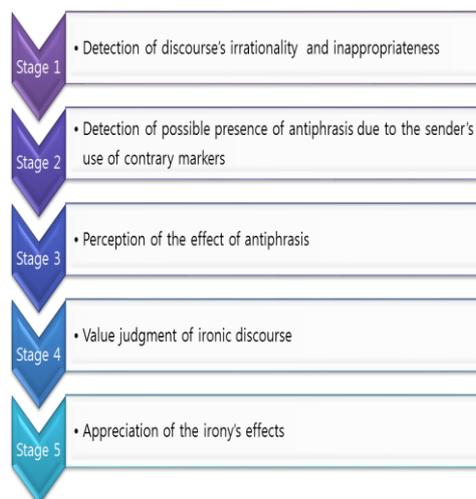
### **3 The process of communication of ironic discourse**

Ironic discourse has drawn attention in that it achieves successful communication without relying on literal meanings. According to Grice (1975) and Haverkate (1990), "irony is an intentional expression to show uncertainty" and the meaning of irony ("telling the opposite of what it was meant to tell") is interpreted and understood as violating the rule of sincerity. When these conditions are not violated, i.e., when the sender and receiver do not know whether it is ironic discourse that violates the maxim of quality ("tell the truth") or the rule of sincerity, the process of ironic communication cannot be explained. However, the receiver comprehends an ironic meaning successfully, regardless of the violation of conditions, because ironic discourse includes prosodic factors (or punctuation marks).

Sperber and Wilson's echoic theory (1998) includes the sender's attitude and meaning of discourse to explain irony. They explain that irony is used when the sender echoes attitudes he or she does not accept or, in other words, another's ideas expressed earlier, while he or she shows an attitude to put some distance between the idea and him/herself. This attitude refers to a psychological attitude of teasing and despising the opponent while regarding the speaker's own ideas as more general thoughts and sociocultural norms. The echoic theory explains the relation between the sender and receiver and interpretation of irony, proceeded when irony is spoken, by using the suitability theory, which regards them as an aspect of communication. Such being the case, irony functions to show the sender's evaluative attitude in communication as well as to criticize indirectly.

For a precise decoding of irony, it is necessary to contrast the conveyed propositional content and communicational situation. Ironic markers are discourse markers intentionally hidden by the sender to communicate with the receiver. The

receiver uses them as clues to interpret the discourse. Thus, in the process of ironic communication, the sender's speech act and the receiver's inference of the sender's intended meaning are the starting points and groundwork for the interpretation of irony. The sender's action and receiver's inference are essentially interlinked. For the discourse that gives rise to irony, the sender's action and receiver's inference create irony. This process of decoding ironic discourse is demonstrated in the following.



The momentum of this process includes the receiver's ability to evaluate and judge ironic discourse, ability to infer, and ability to interpret and reconstruct the situation thereupon. First, there is a stage in which the receiver detects a contradiction of the expected meaning of a discourse or the inappropriateness of the discourse. The following stage is discerning its meaning. In fact, stage 1 and stage 2 are simultaneous and spontaneous processes. At the same time, stage 3 occurs, followed by the evaluation of stage 4 based on the preceding process. Irony's effects, which occur in this process, are regarded as a process that belongs not only to the process of semantic decoding (locutionary act) but also to the illocutionary act that is the comprehensive effect of ironic communication. These stages are identified with the aim of explaining the various steps in the communication process of ironic discourse shown in communication methods, meaning's *op érationnelle* and normative functions, and the existence of axiological metalanguage.

Evaluative valence of ironic discourse consists of implicit evaluation, positive evaluation including inconsistency of situation (incongruence) and praise, or negative evaluation including blame. In other words, it includes two illocutionary qualifications such as depreciation and disqualification.

This depreciatory illocutionary intent is achieved in a dual strategic method that is indirect and concealed. For example, three conditions should be satisfied to fulfill the function of a praising speech act in the situation where a professor (sender) tells students (receivers) who failed an exam, "Wow, you guys are so smart!"

- a) The sender is interested in the performance of the pronounced act. In the context described above, the receivers who failed the exam are gathered in the PC game room.
- b) Although the sender understands that the receivers can perform the act of

studying, the receivers cannot do so at the time of his utterance because they are playing PC games.

c) If the conditions of (a) and (b) are not satisfied and sincere acts [+sincere] are completed, ironic communication cannot be successful.

In this discourse of depreciation, the judgment of the ironic act “states” the object of a standard or the fate of a person, attempts to persuade ironic beneficiaries, or puts them into a situation in which they should adopt a certain attitude. The person and object become an ironic victim.

Meanwhile, irony performs a “disqualification” act by denying or stealing language interaction, or, in other words, the qualification of the receiver as a communication participant. Because of this irony, the receiver is neglected and denied by the violation of cooperative principle. As a result, the receiver denies the sender’s communication intent by rejecting communication cooperation with him or her. When irony deprives the opponent who is allowed to participate in interaction of the right (the act of disqualification) and rejects or destroys the supposed relation, the receiver becomes the target of teasing, as the sender intended, being caught in a psychological situation called inferiority.

#### **4 Conclusion**

In this study, we discovered the main factors that required for the interpretation and understanding of ironic communication include metalinguistic ability, various markers, ability to judge a discourse situation, and inferential ability; and also demonstrated the five-stage process of ironic communication to evaluate ironic discourse. The process of ironic communication involves stages in which the receiver detects the contradiction of expected meanings and inappropriateness of the discourse, discerns its meaning by detecting the presence of antiphrasis as signaled by the sender’s use of contrary markers, perceives the effect of antiphrasis, and evaluates the valence of ironic discourse.

Communicational qualifications of irony through these speech act-related functions of irony linguistic strategies (pragmatic view) are subject to the illocutionary act or, in other words, intent of depreciation related to the contents of the proposition (irony’s subjective characteristic) and value evaluation referred to as the act of disqualification related to the qualification of the communication partner. In depreciatory irony, the communication partner performs a contrary proposition that is explicitly evaluated. In disqualification irony, the communication partner annuls the illocutionary act of irony.

Based on this communicational mechanism of ironic discourse, the study plan procedure on ironic discourse between the sender (professor) and receiver (learner) can be designed as comprising various stages including the a) discovery of the definition and concept of irony, b) distinction of irony types (linguistic irony, situational irony), c) comprehension of the goal and effect of ironic discourse (evaluative valence), d) confirmation of the inconsistency and inappropriateness of irony (formation of evaluation scales), and e) success of ironic communication (existence of intended evaluation).

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