The role of discourse context, prosody and gesture in the perception of verbal irony

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INTRODUCTION

DISCOURSE CONTEXT IN VERBAL IRONY

Most accounts of verbal irony agree in considering it a purely pragramatic phenomenon in which the pragmatic characteristics (e.g., specific situation, shared beliefs, and common ground between speaker and listener) are a key factor in its interpretation (Kreuz & Gliksberg, 1989; Gibbs, 1994; Utsumi, 2000; inter alia).

- Ivanko & Pexman (2003) showed experimentally that an ironic utterance will be interpreted differently depending on the degree of incongruity between the discourse context and the statement.
  Ex: Laura says “fantastic” when something disappointing happens.

RELEVANCE THEORY. Listeners need to detect the incongruence between the coded meaning and the actual intention of the speaker (Wilson & Sperber 2012).

PROSODIC AND VISUAL CUES IN THE PERCEPTION OF VERBAL IRONY

Listeners use prosodic information when recognizing verbal irony.

- Bryant et al. (2005) and Capelli et al. (1990)’s studies demonstrate that, in the absence of contextual cues, the combination of multiple acoustic cues can be sufficient for the detection of ironic intent.

- Woodland et al. (2011), examining together contextual and auditory cues to irony perception, found that both cues influence the perception of an ironic utterance.

Few research has been done on visual cues to verbal irony.

QUESTIONS

- What is the relative contribution of discourse context together with prosodic and visual cues to the perception of verbal irony? (Experiment 1)
- How important visual cues are compared to prosodic cues for the perception of verbal irony? (Experiment 2)

HYPOTHESIS

- Listeners attend to prosodic and visual cues. Together with discourse context to achieve the interpretation of an ironic utterance.
- The relative contribution to the perception of verbal irony will be higher for visual cues than prosodic cues in neutral (non-biased) discourse contexts.

AUDIOVISUAL MATERIALS FOR EXPERIMENTS 1 and 2

Production Task. By means of a Discourse Completion Task, eight speakers of Central Catalan were presented each one with 8 discourse contexts (4 ironic and 4 non-ironic) that lead, crucially, to the same target sentence.

Discourse contexts were carefully designed to minimize sociolinguistic variables that could affect the production of the utterance.

EXPERIMENT 1

Methods

A group of 30 Catalan subjects participated in two online questionnaires in which they were presented with a set of 8 ironic and non-ironic discourse contexts combined with a set of ironic vs. non-ironic target sentences.

Target sentences were obtained by means of a previous Production Task, and were presented in Audio Only and AudioVisual conditions.

They had to assess
1. the degree of literalness of the sentence in that context (from 1 ‘Non-Literal’ to 5 ‘Literal’)
2. the degree of adequacy of the pronunciation of the perceived utterance in relation with the discourse context (from 1 ‘Adequate’ to 5 ‘Non-Adequate’)

Results

- The role of discourse context, prosody and gesture in the perception of verbal irony

EXPERIMENT 2

Methods

A group of 45 Catalan subjects participated in 3 online questionnaires (Q1, Q2 and Q3) in which they were presented with a set of neutral discourse contexts combined with...

(i) Ex2A. Ironic vs. Non-ironic audiovisual performances in Audio Only and AudioVisual (Q1 & Q2)
(ii) Ex2B. Incongruent Audiovisual performances (i.e., in which ironic auditory performances were matched with non-ironic visual performances and vice versa) (Q3)

In all questionnaires participants had to assess the degree of literalness of the sentence.

Results

CONCLUSIONS

- Discourse contexts produce expectations and these expectations are also influenced by the prosodic characteristics of the speaker production (Woodland et al. 2009) and, importantly, by visual cues.

- In neutral discourse contexts, prosodic cues together with visual cues crucially contribute to the perception of verbal irony.

- More research has to be done to investigate the role that specific intonation patterns play in the detection of verbal irony.

REFERENCES


