

On Verbal Irony in Arabic: A Relevance Theory Perspective

Mustafa Alhamzi

PhD. Scholar, Department of English & Applied Linguistics, University of Peshawar, Pakistan

Abstract

The present paper dealt with ironic expressions in Arabic. Moreover, the study aimed at investigating the verbal irony in a model of Arabic literature particularly one of the poems written by the well-known poet, Ahmad Mattar, "the story of Abass". The analysis of the data based on a linguistic model, Sperber and Wilson's (1981) model of irony. The application of this model to the selected data has yielded some findings and conclusions. S&W's notion of RT has the ability to provide a firmer theoretical basis for an irony form a language analysis. The study proved that a variety of symbols, connotative names and adjectival words like Abbas, thief, moustache, sineen al-fat-h, naajah(ewe) and awake are used by the Arabic poet, employing his linguistic repertoire to highlight the efficient role of irony in a literary discourse. The irony contributors, which carry with them the presumption of relevance, for example "polishing his sword, the barricades, were used to show the mocked character "Abass", and the intended messages of the poet.

Keywords: Irony, Relevance Theory, Ahmad Matter, Abass

1-Introduction

Irony is a communicative behavior in which the speaker says something and means the opposite. Though irony is a universal phenomenon, people misunderstand it and take it literally. Relevance theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson, shows the nature of communication and interprets irony successfully. The goal of relevance theory is to show how linguistic meaning interacts with contextual assumptions during utterance comprehension. To achieve this goal, we must not only deepen our theoretical understanding, but carry out detailed investigations of utterance interpretation in a wide variety of communication and contexts. Irony is a unique form of communication, and interpretation of irony within the frame of the relevance theory "RT henceforth" is an interesting practice.

2-The purpose of the study

The present paper deals with ironic expressions in Arabic. The data of this study are taken from the internet. Moreover, the study aims at investigating some of the ironic expressions and it tries to explore the verbal irony in a model of Arabic literature particularly one of the poems written by the well-known poet, Ahmad Mattar, "the story of Abass".

2-0 Literature review

From a historical point of view, different scholars and linguists define and view irony differently. Some of them agree with each other's opinion, while others add more to this concept. Fowler (1965), for example, defines irony as:

[a] form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear, and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and the outsider's incomprehension.(p: 306).

On his part, Verschueren (1999) argues that irony means that the implicated meaning is the opposite of what is literally said. In this study the following workable definition is adopted: Irony is a semantic- pragmatic phenomenon which involves a contradiction between what is said and what is intended.

2-1.Types of Irony

Ironic expressions fall into two main types: verbal and situational. With verbal irony there is a speaker and a listener, while in situational irony the audience judge whether the situation is ironic or not.

According to Gibbs (1994),

[b]oth verbal and situational irony involves a confrontation or juxtaposition of incompatibles. Moreover, they also employ incongruity in order to distinguish between facts and expectations (saying one thing and meaning another) while keeping in mind the audience's (reader's) awareness of both (p.363)

2-2 Verbal irony

According to Ajtony (2010), verbal irony is a linguistic phenomenon exploiting the incongruity between reality and expectation and consequently, unveiling an attitude towards such an incongruity.

Verbal irony is the most attainable. It is the most frequent form of irony as sarcasm and humour, simply

because it requires only the two participants speaking to each other. The main concern of verbal irony is the factor of timing. If someone utters the ironic statement very early or late in a conversation, or if someone does not use the required tone or in an incorrect situation, the addressee may take it as an offence and it will cause confusion. That is why, basically, verbal irony needs the correct understanding of the situation, feeling, and the most important thing which is timing.

In verbal irony, an individual presents or evokes a confrontation by his/her utterances. Furthermore, the speaker creates a juxtaposition of incompatible actions or words with a view to convey an attitude (Gibbs, 1994: 363).

In some writings, verbal irony is used because readers get attracted to it. The review of the writer becomes funny because he tries not to exaggerate and to make their statements as soft as possible. It also shows politeness in order to avoid breaking relations (Jonsson, 2010:6).

However, sometimes verbal irony violates the traditional definition of irony (the meaning is opposite to the utterance). In other words, it is not restricted to the idea of saying something while the meaning is opposite. The literal utterance is what the speaker intends to say but at the same time the statement is ironic. This fact is confirmed by Martin (1992 cited in Jeoung, 2006:4) who states that there are cases where the speaker vouches for the truth and the relevance of his utterance: it is ironical despite the fact that it describes an actual state of affairs and it is not itself mentioned.

2-3. The Relevance of Verbal Irony – Echoic Mention Theory

Even if RT is modified to encompass the suggestions of the Graded Salience Hypothesis, it could still be improved via the addition of a specific mechanism to explain how hearers arrive at ironic interpretations. In particular, RT needs to explain what triggers ironic interpretations, and how hearers process a speaker's ironic meaning as relevant.

Sperber and Wilson (1981) argue in favor of viewing irony as an echoic phenomenon, making the argument that ironic interpretations are accessed during the search for relevance because they echo a prior remark or implicit view. Remarks which are referred to multiple times in a discourse are likely to be more relevant than those which have not been referred to often, and thus will be easier to access. They will therefore provide more cognitive information for less cognitive effort and stand a better chance of being viewed as optimally relevant. Echoic Mention Theory treats irony as a type of echoic allusion to an attributed utterance or thought: 'An utterance may be interpretively used to (meta)represent another utterance or thought that it resembles in content' (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 621). In the case of irony the speaker does not use the proposition expressed by her utterance in order to represent a thought of her own, but rather echoes a thought or utterance she tacitly attributes to someone else. Early evidence that irony is processed as echoic was provided by Wilson and Sperber (1992) who argued that irony is a verity of echoic utterance which is used to express the speaker's attitude to the opinion echoed. In order to pass as echoic, an utterance should both repeat another utterance on a meta-level and be relevant by showing the speaker's opinion about this earlier utterance (Sperber and Wilson 2002: 271). Sperber and Wilson clarify this with the following example:

(1.a) Peter: That was a fantastic party.

(2.a) Mary: [happily] fantastic.

b. [puzzled] Fantastic?

c. [scornfully] Fantastic!

Sperber and Wilson argue that 2.a, 2.b and 2.c are all examples of echoic use. In order to understand Mary's utterances, Peter should not only recognize that she paraphrases a part of his earlier utterance (1.a), but also gives her opinion about utterance (2.a). In utterance (2.a), Mary agrees with Peter that the party was fantastic. In utterance (2.b), she is surprised by his judgment and questions the positive judgment about the party. In utterance (2.c), Mary shows Peter that she does not agree with him and that she did not consider the party as fantastic at all. Of all these remarks however, only 2.c is ironic. Sperber and Wilson argue that this is because only 2.c displays a negative attitude towards the utterance about which the speaker gives her meaning.

3-Method

The analysis of the data based on a linguistic model used by Sperber and Wilson's (1981). The data of this study are taken from the internet.

4- Discussion

This poem, though short, is very similar to "mock epic" poems common in the 18th century English poetry like the poem "Mack Flecknowe" by Dryden which exploits verbal and situational ironies.

4-1 The Irony of the Poem

This section will investigate thoroughly the style of Ahmad Mattar irony. Ahmad Mattar, like an ironic poet,

constantly looks at the chaotic situation of the Arabic counties with a critical eye and depicts the realities of them. Then he undertakes to warn the masses and awaken them to their condition. It seems that he considers public ignorance as the main cause of foreign interference in the affairs of his country. Consequently, in many of his poems, he encourages the people to acquire knowledge and awareness and rise against the colonizers. He endeavors to apprise the oppressed people of the sordid condition of their country, hoping that, in this way, he can incite them to stand against colonialism and the colonizers, whose selfish dream is not only to plunder the riches of these subdued countries but to enslave their people. Here, we point out and briefly explain a few excerpts from Matter's poetry in which he has both presented the realities of the society.

عباس وراء المتراس

1-Abbas behind the barricades

يقظ منتبه حساس

2-Alert,awake, attentive

منذ سنين الفتح يلمع سيفه

3-Since the years of the Islamic conquests he has been polishing his sword

ويلمع شاربه أيضا، منتظرا محتضنا دبه

4-And his mustache also, waiting clutching his teddybear

In the poem "the story of Abass," which is laden with his sincere sentiments, Matter depicts the current situation of Abass. This poem is replete with the sighs and lamentations of this sympathetic poet. It begins with describing Abass as warrior who is behind the barricades who is alert, awake and tentative. The poet recalls the glorification of the early Islamic era. He considers the period of the Islamic conquests as the greatest epoch in the history of Islam. The irony in the above lines is that the poet describes Abass as an alert warrior who is polishing his sword since the beginning of the Islamic conquests. Lexically speaking, the poet uses the three adjectival words which have the same meaning "يقظ, منتبه, حساس" alert, awake, and attentive" to depict the vigilant situation of Abass. The use of these adjectival words shows the echoic utterance which gives an ironic description of the watchful situation of Abass. To state it differently, the poet repeated the same adjectival words in order to mock at the character of Abass. Interestingly, the poet lampoons at the character of Abass in the fourth line "And his mustache also, waiting clutching his teddy bear" "ويلمع شاربه ايضا, منتظرا محتضنا دبه". The poet uses the word "mustache" "شارب", which for some people, indicates the strong character of a man. Funnier, the poet entertained himself by watching Abass hugging a teddy bear, which is similar to that of a small child. This comic portrayal of Abass made the poet consider him as a child who sleeps while hugging this doll. Naturally speaking, the word "bear" is a symbol for bravery, however, the collocations "teddy bear-دمية الدب" gives us a sign of verbal irony which indicates that Abass is scared and is being a coward.

The interesting point is that Matter's fascination and enthusiasm for fabulous and national subjects is so immense that he refers to Abass as a heroic character who kept polishing his sword as if he is ready for the battle. The following lines are taken to introduce another verbal irony:

5-Athief swallowed one part of the country

قلب عباس القرطاس

6-Abbas was at a loss

(ضفة بقيت)

7- (The other part of the country remained)

لملم عباس ذخيرته والمتراس

8- Abbas gathered his ammunition and his barricade

ومضى يصفل سيفه

9- And went on polishing his sword

عبر اللص إليه، وحل ببيته

10- The thief crossed over to him and entered his home

(أصبح ضيفه)

11- (Now he was his guest)

قدم عباس له القهوة، ومضى يصفل سيفه

12- Abbas served him coffee, and went on polishing his sword

In order for Mattat to picture Abass's sudden change, he first dramatizes his strong condition with adjectives such as those describing Abass bravery: awake, alert and tentative. Unfortunately, while Abass was polishing his sword, a thief came and took one of the lands of Abass.

Focusing on the lines 8 and 9 of the poem "لملم عباس ذخيرته والمتراس" Abbas gathered his ammunition and his barricade" "ومضى يلمع سيفه" "And went on polishing his sword", the poet scorns at the bravery of Abass. He says mockingly that since Abass was polishing his sword, a thief came and invaded Abass easily without fighting.

Misuse of power is the poem's main theme. Abass being an alert person was attacked easily, that is, only strong man had absolute power to lead the country. Ironically speaking, the poet in line 11 "أصبح ضيفه" "he was his guest" castigates Abass because he whole-heartedly welcomed the thief and had given him a cup of tea to drink. Most

importantly, we can find in line 12 of the poem an echoic utterance “ومضى يلمع سيفه” And went on polishing his sword”. Mattar had a unique style in writing; he implicitly criticized the erroneous practices of thought, emotion, and mood of Abass. Mattar was famous for using symbolism and sarcasm; he wonders and is shocked by the behavior of Abass when allowed the thief to come his house and served him with coffee as if he was a mutual friend for him.

In the next lines of the poem, Matter refers to the ignorance of Abass for his wife and suggests that Abass should take action and save his wife from the thief.

13- Abbas' wife cried: “Your children are dead, Abbas

ضيفك راودني، عباس

14- Your guest is harassing me, Abbas

”قم أنقذني يا عباس

15- Come and save me, Abbas.”

عباس – اليقظ الحساس – منتبه لم يسمع شيئاً ،

16- Abbas – the awake, the attentive – alertly heard nothing

(زوجته تغتاب الناس)

17- (His wife is a gossip).

، ”صرخت زوجته : “عباس، الضيف سيسرق نعتنا

18- His wife cried: “Abbas, the guest is stealing our sheep.”

قلب عباس القرطاس ،

19- Abbas was at a loss,

أرسل برقية تهديد

20-He sent a threatening letter

”فلمن تصقل سيفك يا عباس؟“

“So why polish your sword, Abbas?”

(لوقت الشدة)

21-(For times of need)

إذا ، اصقل سيفك يا عباس

22-Then go on polishing your sword, Abbas.

In the above lines the poet introduces us to another character in the poem which is the wife of Abass. The poet describes the situation in which the wife is living and how the thief ill-treats her. The word “ضيف guest” is used ironically in this poem. It is a cultural norm that the guest has to be polite and behave in a good manner; however, the guest in this poem killed the children and started harassing the wife of Abass. Though the wife was calling Abass to save her and her children, Abass , the awake and the attentive person was hearing nothing.

In many of his poems, Mattar reproves those people who remain silent and persist in their ignorance. For instance, in the poem “the story of Abass”, Mattar puts the definition of freedom, in ironic terms, in the mouth of the colonizers. Thus, alert individuals are those who do not talk; they are in such a deep sleep and refuse to wake up; they are far from progress and lag behind; they are kept in ignorance and do not show any eagerness for fighting. It can be noticed that Abass was naïve to such an extent that when he was told that his children are dead and his wife is being harassed , he simply sent a threatening letter and when he was asked why he kept polishing his sword, he was unworldly saying that “لوقت الشدة” For times of need”. In this poem, the poet tells the utter truth in an ironic manner. He inculcates his audience with the bitter truths and forces them to ponder.

The poet in the above lines ironically mocks at Abass’s ignorance since he does not know that this is the real time for fighting. In such a satirical way, Abass is not suitable and well-qualified to be a brave warrior since he is no longer able to recognize the intuitive facts and phenomena.

In the above lines, Matter rebukes Abass, but this time by the tongue of his wife, saying “إذا ذهب اسقل” then go on polishing your sword, Abbas”. It is again an echoic utterance said by the wife of Abass to indicate that Abass was unable to distinguish between the real time and the kidding time of fighting. Abass was scorned because the poet wanted to give us an image of how scared people act as compared to real men who hold to their swords in action ,who seize their right out of a charging lion’s mouth and hold to the sword by its hilt and persist.

4-2 Relevance theory

At the beginning of the poem, the poet does not point out what will happen for Abass, his children and his wife, but gives a statement “Abass behind the barricades”. Obviously the poet makes use of the typical rule of a brave warrior, which can and must catch the attention of the reader. Great warriors are certainly strong and alert. As RT holds that each utterance starts to call the listener’s attention, and thereafter expects relevance. This poem surely succeeds in this. As mentioned above, a poem is a communication between the poet and the public (as the

readers or audience). To achieve the success of communication, to make the public know Abass is being mocked at, the poet (the communicator) produces utterances in such a way that the audience (or readers) will reach the intended interpretation, that is, what the poet takes into consideration. The poet also needs to guess what information is available to the audience (or readers) when they interpret the poem. The estimation of the audience's processing ability determines to what extent the utterances in the poem are made explicit or implicate. In this poem, the success lies in catching the attention of the audience. That is to say, the poem fulfills the first aim -to attract as large number of readers and potential audience as possible. Some readers really stopping to see it will keep this question in their mind:

- What makes Abass behind the barricades, and keeps polishing his sword?

With their own purposes, the readers will interpret that there will be a serious thing will happen so that Abass is hiding himself and will be attacked any time by his enemy . The poet continues to give the audience the information that a person has to protect himself, yet with "But then again..." the poet offers another stimulus "يقظ، alert, awake, and attentive". It arouses the curiosity of the reader, creates a new context and challenges the reader's processing effort to construct a new assumption:

- Why Abass is alert?

The poet intends to make the reader get to know the state of Abass. The adjectives "يقظ، منتبه، حساس alert, awake, and attentive" describe the state of affairs of Abass.. However, the phrase *teddy bear* has a completely different meaning from those of *teddy* and *bear*. *Teddy bear* is a compound word which refers to a doll used by children for an entertainment. The meaning of the adjectival words "يقظ، منتبه، حساس alert, awake, and attentive", on the other hand, can be deduced from the meanings of their components: to keep someone vigilant and ready for an emergency. This manipulative use of words produces a harmonious sound effect and an entertaining effect that attracts the attention of the hearer/reader.

From the perspective of RT, non-literal utterances like Matter's irony in line (2) cannot be paraphrased with one particular proposition or a set of specific propositions because the utterances are not literal utterances with a fixed meaning. Rather, these are utterances which have a broad range of meanings. In other words, these utterances have an array of weak implicatures. Matter's irony above, for instance, can be "seen" in terms of the following implicatures:

A-Abass is a weak person though he was awake.

B -Abass is a coward person because he could not fight for his country.

C- Abass is scared because he is holding a doll like a small child.

In line 11, the reader might ask why Abass gave the thief a cup of coffee. It can be interpreted that the poet tried to draw the attention of the reader to the hospitality of the Arabs which is one of their common customs.

Adapting RT, we can infer that the great success of the verbal irony in this poem is a result of many factors such as:

- 1- Using symbols and connotative names and words like Abbas, thief, moustache, sineen al-fat-h "the years of the Islamic conquests", naajah "ewe".
- 2- Repeating certain phrases and words many times like "يسقل سيفه" polishing his sword", "المتراس" the barricades".
- 3- Using successive adjectives.
- 4- Using sarcastic contradictory expressions like "alert منتبه", "لم يسمع شيئاً" he did not hear anything" and "ضيفه" his guest".
- 5- Using some expressions in special register (political) like "ارسل برقية تهديد" he sent a threatening letter".
- 6- Using suggestive expressions and vocabulary such as "ومضي" continue", and "لوقت الشده" for times of need". The poet is emphasizing Abbas's obsession with polishing his sword.
- 7- Getting an ironic impact through employing intonation especially in the last mocking sentence.

The skillful use of words by the poet showed the cold reactions of Abbas, which are opposite of what readers expect. They suggested the apparent and foolish behavior and deeds of the mocked character Abbas. The last three lines in the poem represent the highest intensification of irony.

5-Conclusion

The study aimed at irony in Arabic with a special reference to one of the Arabic poems "the story of Abass" by a famous Arabic poet, Ahmad Matter. The study proved that Irony is a communicative message in which there is a gap between what the speaker says and means. Ironic utterances take more time to be comprehended than the literal meanings. The study has illustrated the value of Relevance Theory for literary analysis, especially in relation to the poetic effects of literary texts. As has been discussed, Relevance Theory provides a more adequate theoretical approach to account for the nature of poetic effects. Rather than arguing that poetic effects are the property of literary language, Relevance Theory views poetic effects in terms of the reader's mental process in interpreting the intention of the writer or poet. The study proved that we can add irony exhibits Matter's deep concern or upset feelings about Arabs' attitude and behavior nowadays that are far from Islamic glory and this

concern is depicted in the character of Abass. It has also noticed that we, as readers, can add numerous weak implicatures. However, this does not mean that we can add any implicature that we want. In this paper, what Matter gives us is a greater responsibility to interpret his intention behind the irony, not a freedom to deduce his irony into how we want the irony to be interpreted. When Matter gives a greater duty to the reader to determine his intention, he himself has a responsibility to give the reader a “clue” through which the reader can see his intended meaning as the repetition of words like "يسفل سيفه" polishing his sword", "المتراس" the barricades” and the successful use of the sarcastic contradictory expressions like "منتبه alert”, “لم يسمع شيئاً” he did not hear anything” and “ضيفه” his guest”.

References

- Ajtony, Z. (2010). Humour and Verbal Irony in G.B. Shaw's John Bull's Other Island, *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae Philologica*, vol 2.2, pp: 246- 258
- Fowler, H. (1965). *Modern English Usage Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gibbs, R. (1994). *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language and Understanding*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jeoung, H. (2006). *Irony intended: The Pragmatic Functions of Verbal Irony*. Retrieved on 7 July, 2015 from http://jeas.co.kr/attatchup/3_6JEASJHJ.pdf
- Jonsson, M. (2010). *Irony in Online Reviews: A Linguistic Approach to Identifying*. Retrieved on 7 July, 2015 from http://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/2077/23031/1/gupea_2077_23031_1.pdf.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1981). Pragmatics. *Cognition* 10: 281-286.
- Sperber, D & Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition (2nded)*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Verschueren, J. (1999). *Understanding Pragmatics*. London: Arnold.
- Wilson, D. & D. Sperber. (1992). On verbal irony. *Lingua* 87: 53-76. Retrieved June 30, 2015 from <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lis/studypacks/Wilson-Onverbalirony.pdf>
- Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. (2002). Truthfulness and Relevance. *Mind* 111: 583-632.