

Academic event report

14th International Cognitive Linguistics Conference (ICLC14), 10-14 July 2017, Tartu, Estonia, Panel “The Diversity of Irony”

The *Diversity of Irony* theme session was organised by Angeliki Athanasiadou and Herbert L. Colston and included a wide range of topics with the purpose of describing irony in its full diversity. The session encouraged different perspectives on irony, which also included analyses and explorations regarding other types of figurative language, which resulted in a deeper and interdisciplinary approach on the subject. This approach searched to answer questions related to modes and representations of irony and its links to thought and communication as well as its cognitive, social, and embodied foundations. In particular, this year’s ICLC provided a more in-depth analysis of irony, showing the intricate ways it is analysed in cognitive linguistics nowadays.

The theme session debuted with Herbert Colston’s talk “On the complexities of embodied irony: Considerations of eye-rolling and other multi-modal evidence”, which discussed irony from a multimodal approach, presenting an analysis on cues that help hearers see a speaker’s ironic intent. Colston discussed this particular cue as an embodied dissociation (in the sense of gaze disruption) in order to mark and make this disruption salient to the hearer(s). Similarly, Sabina Tabacaru’s talk on “Facial expressions in sarcasm: Reasons to raise a few eyebrows” followed the same multimodal approach that describes facial expressions as cues to show the speakers’ sarcastic intent. Based on a corpus of staged interactions from television-series and French presidential debates, the talk offered an empirical basis for raised eyebrows used sarcastically. Hannah Leykum’s “Diversity of irony production (by SAG speakers) and perception (by normal hearing and CI listeners)” investigated the perception of ironic acoustic cues for Standard Austrian German (SAG) speakers. She specifically analysed perception for people having cochlear implants (CIs) and their ability to use visual cues to understand acoustic signals of irony (see also Winn *et al.* 2013).

Vera Tobin’s “Experimental investigations of irony as a viewpoint phenomenon” presented a discussion regarding a unified account of irony as “view of a viewpoint”, following an earlier article (Tobin & Israel 2012) that had presented irony in terms of a characteristic viewpoint configuration. The experiments were based on sentences of “I hate” and “I love” and presented scenes rated by a large number of speakers via Mechanical Turk online. John Barnden’s “Uniting irony, metaphor and hyperbole in a pretence-based framework” explored the link between hyperbole, irony, and metaphor, unifying several accounts by the author and others (Ruiz de Mendoza 2014; Ruiz de Mendoza & Peña 2016), examining the mappings between the imaginary and the real world as highlighted by the pretence-based framework.

Robert Willison talked about “The ethics of irony”, asking if the production and processing of irony are actually ethically questionable practices or if they can be used in a

“healthy” way, given all the blame brought to this notion in the 20th century, and the accusations that it plays a role in modern-day events.

In “Irony in constructions”, Angeliki Athanasiadou explored the forms and functions of irony, centering on its figurative meaning. Based on data drawn from corpora, the author discussed the meaning of irony: rejection of something said previously, acceptance, or both. The difference between these seems to lie in short clauses added to the ironic constructions (such as *if any, if anything, if at all*). Dirk Geeraerts discussed “Second order empathy and irony” centred on the ambiguity in the grounding as used in Cognitive Linguistics. According to Geeraerts, the interlocutor is part of the intersubjective model surrounding the grounding. Second order empathy is thus defined as “the ability of Self to take into account Other’s point of view as including a view of Self”, which will lead to ambiguity in interpretation.

Rachel Giora, Shir Givoni, Israela Becker, Vered Heruti & Ofer Fein reviewed and revisited the Optimal Innovation Hypothesis in “The Optimal Innovation Hypothesis revisited: The case of default and nondefault sarcasm”. The experiments carried out show that default meanings and interpretations can fit the Optimal Innovation if they are deautomised by nondefault counterparts. In this sense, phrases using affirmative sarcasm (i.e., nondefault optimal innovation) will be more pleasant than their negative matches. Wen Xu and Liu Jin presented irony in Chinese in “A cognitive construal to the interpretation of verbal irony in Chinese”, from the perspective of Cognitive Linguistics. The model presented by the authors aims at defining the construal operations used in ironic sentences including also the goal and the cognitive context (such as background knowledge, prosodic features, beliefs, etc.).

The research paths presented clearly outline the state of affairs regarding the research on irony specifically, and humour, in more general terms, using different corpora (BNC, television-series, video recordings, written texts more generally, etc.), software (ELAN, for instance), and experimental analyses.

Both Colston and Tabacaru highlight the embodied nature of irony through the use of facial expressions, frequently used with ironic and sarcastic remarks. Leykum’s research is essential for understanding irony and how much of it is actually linked to prosody in speech. Future research could combine prosodic and visual aspects of irony/sarcasm in order to better understand how the human mind interprets it. The visual and spoken sides of irony are explored by Tobin through experiments that present speakers with different scenes, concluding that scenes that presented two people were the most sarcastic (followed by scenes with three people or one person only). The cognitive side of irony is reinforced by Barnden with a perspective that links irony to metaphor and hyperbole as well as Wen Xu and Liu Jin who highlight the cognitive context of irony in Chinese. This figurative meaning of irony was also highlighted by Athanasiadou in her talk which explored different corpora using given expressions, similar to Tobin’s sentences of “I love” and “I hate”. This is also further explored by Giora et al. who revisit the Optimal Innovation Hypothesis, making a distinction between default and nondefault sarcasm. A new and interesting path is offered by Geeraerts through second order empathy, exploring the phenomenon of grounding and intersubjectivity present in irony.

Finally, Willison makes us think critically of our practices, asking if irony is used for good or bad, exploring different angles from the past up to modern days. And, particularly nowadays, irony seems to play a central role in political life, making us wonder about its ethical implications (taking the rise of Donald Trump as an example of this).

As presented above, the focus of this year’s ICLC conference was clearly multimodal and interdisciplinary, showing how irony is something inherently human, deeply rooted in our mind

and behaviour. The oral, written, and video data presented showed the omnipresence of irony, which makes it worthy of research and discussion. On a more general note, it is refreshing to see that humour has established its role in cognitive linguistics and researchers from different fields gather to shed more light into the phenomenon.

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References

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