Indexing membership via responses to irony: Communication competence in Israeli radio call-in shows

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to theoretically associate the question of "membering" in call-in radio shows with the diverse responses of callers to these shows to hosts' ironic utterances. Assuming that reactions to irony depend in part on the speaker's communicative competence, we suggest that they might be indicative of the speaker's communicative competence in a specific speech community, such as that of radio call-in program. The indirectness of irony requires that speech be understood and interpreted in a way that is shared by the community. These elements are central to the definition of a speech community: "sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech" (Hymes, 1974:54), and thus require an in-depth familiarity with this community's goals and agreements, modes of participation, and practices of speech.

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1. Using and responding to irony in call-in radio shows

In pragmatic theories (Grice, 1975, 1978; Sperber and Wilson, 1981; Wilson and Sperber, 1992; Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995; Giora, 1995; among others) irony is taken as an indirect, cognitively challenging mode of language, whose use requires a complex interpretation process that could pose considerable cognitive as well as communicative difficulty to the addressee. The wide range of possible responses to ironic utterances stems from a series of complexities on different levels.

First, the addressee of an ironic utterance may or may not recognize the inappropriateness of the utterance in the context. Second, if she does, she may or may not understand what the implied meaning is. Third, even if she does comprehend the speaker's intentions, she may choose to react to what was said or implied, but may also choose not to respond to any of them. Thus, the options to respond to irony, according to Eisterhold et al. (2006), are as follows: (1) React to what was said, (2) React to what was implied, (3) Laugh, smile (4) Not to react (e.g., change the topic, be silent, etc.).

Reactions to what was said, i.e. to the literal meaning of the utterance, are common in spontaneous discourse. Giora and Gur (2003) found in everyday Hebrew conversation among friends that 75% of the ironic utterances were responded to by reference to their literal meaning. Reactions to what was said can be of two kinds. The addressee can take the utterance at face value due to a misunderstanding of the speaker's intentions, but she can also continue the irony inserted by the speaker and thus form a joint ironic sequence. In addition, the addressee can make a meta-discursive comment referring to the very use of irony and whether it is appropriate to the context. We will demonstrate that callers respond to hosts' irony with this variety of responses.

Another complexity in regard to reactions to irony stems from the fact that the addressee's response does not unequivocally reflect her cognitive situation vis-à-vis the ironic utterance. Reaction on the level of what was said does not mean that

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one has not understood the implied level of the ironic utterance. Laughter may be a result of comprehension of the ironic implications, but may also be a reflection of embarrassment due to uncertainty about the speaker's intentions. The fact that the addressee sometimes laughs before processing the speaker's complete verbal utterance (Gibbs et al., 2014) suggests that there is no simple connection between comprehending the speaker's intended ironic meaning and laughter.

Finally, the choice of no response is not necessarily the result of not understanding the irony. The addressee may choose to ignore it for various reasons – a difficulty in finding an appropriate response, a preference for continuing with the topic without interruptions, etc. This choice might be a result of the negative effect of irony, which necessarily conveys criticism, disapproval, a derogatory attitude or at the very least, a certain degree of distance (i.e. Hutcheon, 1994; Colston, 1997).

Another problem in analyzing irony in radio talk-shows is the lack of a visual channel. Thus, unheard responses such as smiles and gestures that are unavailable to the other participant in the interaction or to the audience, including the researchers, might be mistakenly interpreted as cases of no response. Yet, since the other participants have no access to such unseen responses, we assume they should be ignored, as do the other participants.

In publicly mediated contexts, Kotthoff (2003) suggested that victims of ironic utterances have difficulty responding to them. Journalists may exploit this negative potential in their favor and use irony as a way to control institutional communication and win arguments with less experienced speakers (Livnat and Dori-Hacohen, 2013). For that reason, in some institutional circumstances, the powerful actors refrain from addressing ironic remarks at powerless ones. Weizman (2008) found that in Israeli television news interviews, irony seems to be addressed only at experienced interviewees who can be trusted to be able to handle the threat to face despite the pressure of public competition.

On the other hand, research on irony in everyday conversations shows that it may be used as a strategy to build or display group solidarity, in other words to create a community. First, irony is a major means of creating humor, and "explicitly causing pleasure in other people through the use of verbal irony typically makes them feel more positive toward the speaker" (Gibbs et al., 2014: 578). Speakers can use irony to build and re-affirm in-group relations by victimizing out-groups (Hartung, 1998). Myers-Roy (1981) discusses irony as a joint effort among conversationalists, a vehicle to express cohesiveness as well as frustration or subverted aggression against some outside source. Kotthoff (2003) demonstrates how friendly-playful irony can help friends to deal with their differences. Moreover, Clark & Gerrig's Pretense Theory of Irony (1984) suggests that irony distinguishes between two audiences: the ones who grasp the implied meaning and those who don't; while the latter are not only excluded as non-members, they also form a special kind 'victim' of the irony. In addition to the victims that the criticism targets, the former create a stronger bond amongst themselves.

Combining the views that irony is used in everyday interaction for community building when both participants understand it and affiliate around it, and that in mediated environments only more seasoned participants know how to respond to it, we suggest that responding to irony may be used to index membership in the community via the presentation of appropriate communicative competence. Following ethnography of communication tradition, (Hymes, 1974 and below), we show how by responding to irony, a speaker may display a communicative competence that reflects her inclusion in the community of speakers. The conclusions tie the two meta-discursive responses to irony, rejecting its place in the interaction and either explicitly accepting it or continuing it in the interaction, to discuss possible views of irony and its role in the public sphere (Asen, 2004).

2. Between participation and membering

Our setting is Israeli radio call-in programs.[1] In Israel, some people become regular callers to these shows (Dori-Hacohen, 2012a). These callers frequently speak on the show and receive a special status on the program, and are perceived to be pillars of the program's community (Dori-Hacohen, 2012a).

As a result, radio call-in shows in Israel rally a regular community around them, although everyone can participate in them. We can therefore talk about participants and community members as two different categories: the standard, or casual participant, and the regular member. As Philipsen (1989) suggested, talk can be a vehicle to achieving community building and demonstrating membership in a community, which he termed "membering" (1989:82). We argue that regular callers achieve this membering via their talk, while other participants do not achieve such membering, or achieve it to a lesser degree.

The membering of the regular callers is based on interactional practices (Dori-Hacohen, 2012a), and some of these practices reflect the regulars' communicative competence. We take this notion from Hymes, who suggested: "The communicative competence of persons comprises in part of knowledge of determinate ways of speaking." (1974:58) Hymes used this notion in his explanation of a speech community, surrounding speech events. Whereas speech events are events that are structured and governed based on the features of their talk, a speech community is: "Tentatively, [...] defined as a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety. Both conditions are necessary." (1974:54). As Hymes argued, a community member is a member who has the competence to understand the shared rules of conduct and interpretation of speech, and the linguistic varieties of the community.

Hymes's notion of communication competence is part of a long discussion regarding the notion of competence (see Backlund and Morreale, 2015), and we will not repeat this discussion here. As Sanders (2015) argues, this notion has two main understandings, one regarding competence for effective communication, that is, how a speaker achieves her goals (which is not the

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[1] We use the term "call-in" shows to refer to the two genres of these programs: phone-in shows and talk-back shows (for discussion of these genres see Dori-Hacohen (2012b)).