

Understanding of the Mechanism of Irony within Internet Communication by Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This paper is aimed to find out effective exercises for acquisition irony by adult learners of English as foreign language with the level of comprehension B1 and reveal possible relations between features of ironical mechanisms and easiness/difficulty of comprehension. Being complicated pragmatic phenomenon stored in the level of so-called social cognition and produced accordingly to personal characteristics, irony partly depends on cultural peculiarities and puts significant difficulty for acquisition even for native speakers not to mention learners of foreign language. To achieve research goal, we used multi-staged methodology, including data collection, implicature analysis and conceptual mapping of collected data, creation retentive and productive exercises and their evaluation, conduction of final test and its evaluation, and analysis of relations between features of irony mechanism and its comprehension by students. Analysis of results of created exercises and final test showed that while some exercises were noticeable easy (multiple choice and matching pairs) or hard (filling gaps without words and phrases in boxes) for students, they were not efficient enough for irony comprehension, while exercises with middle level of difficulty, such as matching parts of sentence and filling gaps by words and phrases in boxes, provided high efficiency. Also, mocking irony was more frequent and better comprehended by students than expressing dissatisfaction ones. Finally, ironical expressions with conceptual contradiction between said and expected were comprehended better than these with implicature based contradictions. Hence, acquisition of such difficult phenomena as irony can be achieved efficiently by usage of exercises with suitable level of difficulty.

Keywords: *irony, cultural features, implicit contradiction, conceptual contradiction, humor, mocking*

1. Introduction

Functioning both on “pragmatic” and “constitutive” levels of human interaction, communication is a symbolic process of reproduction messages within space and time based to culturally accepted rituals (Cox and Pezullo, 2016; Rickard, 2021; Thompson, 2009; Webler, 2014).

People interact with each other every day in various situations by different verbal and non-verbal tools, while mediators for this interaction became much more diverse in past 20 years. Comparing to the times before popularization of Internet, interpersonal non-public communication was possible only through face-to-face communication, letters, and phone calls.

Development of Internet technologies, along with innovations and incarnations of communicative tools, gave us various mediators for transmission of information and our emotions and optimize possibilities of strengthening various relationships (Candrasari, 2020; Walther and Whitty 2021). Nowadays, instead of writing paper letters or long e-mails for interpersonal communication, people use messengers and various social platforms, which added special features to pragmatic side of language usage, such as mix of spoken and written styles of language units in written form of short messages, posts, visualisation of emoticons and so on (Androutsopoulos and Busch, 2021, Masciandaro et al., 2024, Shagieyeva 2020).

People use various language tools to achieve diversity of communicative goals, such as transmission of information, expressing needs and emotions, and fulfil the intentions, and one of them is irony.

Irony is a type of figurative language, used to build humoristic communicative act, strengthen an opinion, and transfer some important message (Isakova, 2023; Rorty, 2020). Irony is constructed by expressing contradiction between expected and said, while this contradiction may vary from difference between said and meant to the difference between an expected result and said result (Antoniou and Milaki, 2021; Ronderos et al., 2024).

Producing irony, addresser may have different intentions to communicate, such as presenting emotions, criticising, or laughing and teasing (Fabry, 2021). These communicative intentions can be achieved by such types of ironical expressions as as mocking, expressing satisfaction or

dissatisfaction, praise, and so on (Colston and Gibbs, 2007; Littman and Mey, 1991; Wilson and Sperber, 2012).

The processes of comprehension produced irony and acquisition of irony production are deeply related to each other in the identification of what is ironical and what is not, and if it is ironical, then what is its implied meaning (Antoniou and Milaki, 2021; Cordonier et al., 2020; Fabry, 2021).

The form of implication in contradiction and concepts used to create it is stored in so-called social cognition and emotional processed of one or another culture (Athanasiadou, 2017; Fabry, 2021; Filik et al., 2014; Regel et al., 2010, 2011, Winner, 1997). That is why acquisition of production and comprehension of irony in foreign languages can be difficult task for learners.

Thus, motivation of present paper is a necessity to find way of to make the process of acquisition of production and comprehension irony easier for English as Foreign Language Learners (EFL). In this research we make an attempt to provide more effective methods for acquisition of production and comprehension irony.

We collected ironical materials written in English from the within online communication in the form of posts in Twitter and produced exercises on understanding and creation irony in English for adult EFLs. We set up following research questions:

RQ1: What features has mechanism of irony in English within online communication in popular social platform X (previously Twitter)?

RQ2: What exercises are more effective for acquisition of irony comprehension?

RQ3: Is there any relations between features of irony mechanism and comprehension of irony?

Present paper consists six main chapter: Introduction, Materials and Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion. Materials and Methods reflects detailed information on the process of research data collection, type of materials, and methodology. Results summarize achieved progress of analysis and show answers on set research questions, while detailed explanation and description is in chapter of discussion. Conclusion consists of summary for all research process, achieved results, limitations and future directions.

2. Materials and Methods

Modern society spends significant part of their communicative activity within online space (Gómez-Moreno, 2024; Gryzunova and Shipi, 2021, Haque and Abulaish, 2023; Pantilimon and Tasente, 2022). This is the reason for selection online discourse as a sphere for present research.

The data of present research is short ironical posts from online media platform X (former Twitter), which is used approximately by 611 million users from all over the world every month in 2024, while about six part of posts and comments is written in English. We collected 100 posts by searching with keyword “irony” within the period November, 18th — 30th.

Following step was analysing collected data. As it was mentioned above, irony is figurative language used for construct humorous effect with the various communicative goals, like transmission of emotions, strengthening information, and so on (Kadirova, 2021; Muecke, 2021; Olkonemi and Kaakinen, 2021; Popa, 2010). Irony is created on the basis of contradiction of two main types: implicit contradiction between “what is said” and “what is meant”, contradiction between the concepts, either expected and said or comparing ones (Colebrook, 2000; Musiichuk and Musiichuk, 2021; Shilikhina, 2009; Vlasova, 2019).

Thus, the analysis of ironical expressions is held in two directions: (1) implicature analysis with the support of descriptive methodology to reveal contradiction between “what is said” and “what is meant” (Grice, 1975; Latić, 2020; Wilson and Sperber 2022); (2) mapping of concepts to reveal relations between “what is said or meant” and “what was expected to be said” (Davides, 2011; Lakoff, 2023). Let us have a detailed look on following instance:

— *“Everything is not black and white sometime shit be hispanic”.*

This ironical utterance has complicated contradiction structure. Metaphorical expression of black and white that refers to positive and negative events during life flow is widely known. However, this utterance implicitly refers to races and skin color, black and white, equaling Hispanic with some negative characteristics too.

Meanwhile, the process of production and comprehension requires, on the one hand, to differentiate what irony is and what is not, and, on the other hand, to understand what ironical is in this or that utterance (Antoniou and Milaki, 2021; Fabry, 2021). Thus, analysed dataset was

used to construct a range of educational exercises.

We created six types from easy to difficult of exercises on the basis of retention and production according to the communicative theory of language teaching, including reading, bilingual matching, multiple-choice, matching pairs, and filling gaps with or without words in box (Folse, 2006; Hashemzadeh, 2012; Paribakht & Wesche 1996). All exercises were aimed for adult EFLs (Russian native speakers), who is studying in level B1, 22 students in each group.

The distribution of exercises was following. We divided collected utterances into 5 groups, which is equal to the number of students' groups, with 20 pieces for every group. Then we divided each group into subgroup of 4 pieces and created couple of exercises for every subgroup with the combination of reading and one of the five types left. Like that, students had to read for utterances and discuss them with teacher. Then each of them has to complete retention based exercise with the same irony expressions.

The process was repeated five times until each of five group do not complete exercises for given them 20 utterances and with five types of exercises along with reading. The exercises on reading and answering to related task were given in one day with the time difference of 5 hours to avoid possibility for storage in short memory. Reading and discussion part was necessary due to possibility of incomplete understanding of the utterance. Examples of exercises are following:

a) Read and discuss in class four following utterances:

- I. You are old, but you are 20.
- II. I'm making healthy eating choices in 2025. Goodbye 10 pc wings and hello 5 pc wings.
- III. Art school was the best thing never happened to me.
- IV. I don't have rizz, I have seductive eyes and a fear of abandonment.

b) Match pairs of English original text with its Russian translation (all numbers are written by words in translation not to give additional cues):

- I. I don't have rizz, I have seductive eyes and a fear of abandonment.
- II. Art school was the best thing never happened to me.

III. You are old, but you are 20.

IV. I'm making healthy eating choices in 2025. Goodbye 10 pc wings and hello 5 pc wings.

A. Ты стар, но тебе двадцать.

B. У меня нет харизмы, у меня есть соблазнительные глаза и страх покинутости

C. В две тысячи двадцать пятом я выбираю здоровое питание. Пока, десять крылышек, и привет, пять крылышек.

D. Художественная школа — это лучшее, что никогда не случилось со мной.

c) Select the correct variation of original text for the translated utterance “Прогресс — это то, как человечество загоняет себя на дно”:

I. Progress is climbing a mountain only to realize it's the wrong one.

II. Progress is immortality while fearing of aging apps.

III. Progress is like freedom until you read the terms of service.

IV. Progress is humanity racing itself to the bottom.

d) Match the pairs of two parts of an utterance:

I. Not posting out emotions is

II. I exclusively use twitter to read

III. Twitter is like group therapy, but

IV. Progress is

A. sliding down from the hill, while your sleigh in fire

B. a different type of self-control.

C. no one heals

D. things that make me feel bad

e) Fill the gaps using words and phrases in the box below:

I. Even _____ in Belgaruru is healthier than doing yoga in Delhi

II. Did you check British Museum? Mostly _____ are found there.

III. _____ won't replace us; it'll just manage our mess better.

IV. Half princes, half _____.

A. progress

B. brave prince

C. stolen things

D. menace

E. AI

F. smoking

G. running

f) Fill the gaps by related words and phrases according to your memory:

I. How to fight with gravitation, if we _____?

II. You're still in your twenties... you have whole of Dostoevsky to get through yet. Then Tolstoy, _____.

III. "Ain't that haram?" — me, a _____.

IV. Let's hope that never _____ is the next pandemic.

After that we evaluated results of every type of exercises according to the amount of solved tasks, except reading. Lastly, after 4 days, we asked students to pass final test with the task to translate all 20 utterances they have studied given in translation to Russian back to English and analysed efficiency of every exercise according to the results of final test. In this process, we also considered mechanisms of irony revealed on the step of analysing utterances, to see if there any correlations

3. Results

Conducted analysis provided us with several results regarding irony comprehension and effectivity of various retention and production based exercises.

First of all, there is following consequence of the tasks according to amount of correct answers within per type of task: matching translation and original (97%), multiple choice (94%), filling gaps by words and phrases in box (87%), matching part of sentence (86%), and filling gaps without words and phrases in box (66%).

Final test, which was held in 5 days after reading and completing tasks, showed that the most effective for comprehension irony was matching parts of sentence (94%) and filling gaps by words and phrases in box (92%). Then matching translation and original (81%) follow. Then is multiple choice task (56%) and the last one was filling gaps without words and phrases in box (34%) with significantly low level of efficiency.

There are also following results regarding to features of irony mechanism of English produced within online discourse. Key feature of extracted ironical utterances is related with their communicative goals. Most of utterances was aimed to produce self-mock (69%). Utterances to express dissatisfaction with some phenomenon (24%) got second place, while mocking on some phenomena (15%) was in the third position. Last 2% contains various or unclear communicative goals. Also, self-mocking and mocking on some phenomena were comprehend better (78% in average) than expression of dissatisfaction (56% in average).

Lastly, we found out that there were three main types of irony in regard to the type of contradiction. Ironical utterances, which were created by contradiction between said and expected concepts (63%) were significantly more often than irony with implicature based contradiction (25%) and utterances with complicated contradiction of implicature and used concepts (12%).

Students better showed better acquisition for irony with contradiction in the frameworks for “what is said or meant” and “what was expected to be said” (82%) than for irony with contradiction in implicit level, constructed on opposition of “what is said” and “what is meant” (46%).

Summarizing our achievements, let us give answers to the research questions, which we set up in the introductory chapter.

RQ1: What features has mechanism of irony in English within online communication in popular social platform X (previously Twitter)?

Collected and analysed data allows us to tell that most of irony was based on mocking self and others, while dissatisfaction and other smaller types was in minority. Also, ironical utterances were based on both types of contradiction: between said form and implicature and between expected and said concepts.

RQ2: What exercises are more effective and the less effective for acquisition of irony comprehension?

Analysis of students' tests showed that the most effective from all provided types of exercises were matching parts of sentence and filling gaps by words and phrases in box, while more difficult and less difficult tasks, such as multiple choice or filling gaps without words and phrases in box were significantly less effective.

RQ3: Is there any relations between features of irony mechanism and comprehension of irony?

It was revealed, that ironical expressions with contradiction between said and expected concepts were comprehended by students easier than ironical texts with complicated implicit contradictions.

Like this, achieved results can be explained within features of cognition in acquisition foreign languages and, thus, needs detailed discussion, which would be provided in the next chapter.

4. Discussion

Discussing achieved results, firstly, we need to pay our attention on relations between the type of exercises, its level of difficulty, and efficiency of acquisition of irony comprehension and production.

Considering level of difficulty for created task, it is important to notice about correlation between difficulty and efficiency of exercise (Artigue et al., 2021; Gleitman and Landau, 1994; Laufer, 2019). Like this, it was easier for students to complete such tasks like matching translated texts

and source texts and select correct answer in multiple choice than all other tasks as they require less cognitive efforts for solving, as these exercises are retentive based tasks with significantly low level of difficulty. Although, as we can see in regard with results of the final test, this low level difficulty in completion leads to low efficiency of comprehension and production of such pragmatically complicated phenomenon as irony. However, they still can be used for interim steps of exercises.

However, it is also noticeable that high level of task's difficulty does not provide high efficiency in acquisition of comprehension and production semantically and pragmatically language tools. Like this, the most difficult task, filling gaps without words and phrases in box, showed low results in both completion and efficiency in the final test. Despite of preparation stage of reading ironical utterances and discussion it in class, students showed significantly low level of completion and even lower level of acquisition. The reason of this can be explained by insufficient level of preparation before completion of this type of task. There is high probability that these exercises would be better completed and showed higher efficiency in the final test in case of longer preparation stage including not only reading and discussion, but also preliminary exercises, as this type of task requires high cognitive efforts.

The most effective exercises for acquisition comprehension and production irony in English for adult learners of English as Foreign Language appeared to be matching parts of sentence and filling gaps by words in phrases in box. These types of tasks have middle level of difficulty to completion, however, their efficiency was the highest. This is related with sufficient level of cognitive involvement and effort of task completion, which allows deeper acquisition of irony nature, provided foreign language, helping to store obtained information and knowledge into long-term memory.

Let us shift our attention from efficiency of tasks to comprehensiveness in relation to features of mechanism of irony. As it was mentioned in previous chapters, irony is complex pragmatic phenomenon that is based on contradiction of two types (implicit and conceptual) with various communicative intentions, such as construction of humorous situation, strengthen opinion, transfer emotions, and so on (Antoniou and Milaki, 2021; Fabry, 2021; Isakova, 2023; Ronderos et al., 2024; Rorty, 2020). Like that, these communicative intentions can be achieved by various ironical types, such as mocking, expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction, praise, and so on

(Colston and Gibbs, 2007; Littman and Mey, 1991; Wilson and Sperber, 2012).

Comprehension of ironical utterances even in mother tongue requires high efforts as differentiation of irony from non-ironical utterances requires from communicant presence of humor sense and mastering in extraction implicature (Cordonier et al., 2020; Gibbs and Colston, 2007; Fabry, 2021; Milanowicz 2013). It is even more difficult task for foreign language learners, as it is constructed within social cognition with emotional involvement typical for one or another culture (Antoniou and Milaki, 2021; Cordonier et al., 2020; Fabry, 2021, Pálinkás, 2014; Winner, 1997).

In previous chapter we can see that collected utterances were mostly mocking, and only part of them were expression of dissatisfaction, while significantly small amount contained other types of ironical messages. Meanwhile, analysis of final test's result showed that it was easier for students to comprehend mocking type of irony than dissatisfaction. This may be related with type of contradiction, which was used to create ironical effect. According to the results of efficiency, achieved by final test, students easier comprehended contradictions within framework of "said or implied" and "expected".

Irony with mocking, especially with self-mocking, did not contain that complicated implicature as for expressing dissatisfaction, and was created by opposition of said or meant and expected concepts. Thus, this type of contradiction is easily detected and reconstructed comparing to complicated implicature (de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2020; Pexman 2008, 2021; Richter and Leuthold, 2022). Let us consider some following examples.

— *"Please hesitate to contact me"*.

In ordinary way, people are used to say cliché *"Please, do not hesitate to contact me"* when they want their interlocutor feels comfortable in following communication. Thus, contradiction to negation *"please, hesitate"* is not expected and detected without much cognitive effort, as here is not any hidden implicature, and addresser is just mocking others.

Another example contains both implicature and contradiction between said and expected concepts:

— *"May he accidentally say my name when he's talking to another girl"*.

Implicature here is related widely known case when men sometimes being in secret affairs call their partners by names of other women. In this ironical utterance, addresser implies that her partner is unfair in relationships and supposes that probably he tells her name talking to other woman, that is going against the expected by addressee situation, making this utterance ironical.

Opposite, hidden implicature may require efforts even from native speaker, not to mention foreign language learners:

— *“Every pump feels like destiny until the dump proves otherwise”.*

Here addresser creates complicated implicit meaning. First of all, *“pump”* is metaphorically referring to ordinary people, while *“dump”* is conceptually mapped with graveyard. Addresser mocks others, implying that every ordinary person feels immortal and like doing some important activities, while graveyard decides. This type of difficult conceptual metaphors adds difficulty to comprehend this others-mocking irony (Colston and Athanasiadou, 2017; Kövecses 2007; Lakoff, 2006; Pálincás, 2014, 2018; Winner, 1997), while adding conceptual metaphors to requires additional cognitive efforts (Gibbs and Colston, 2007; Hamamoto, 1998)

Like this, acquisition of production and comprehension of irony depends of various factors, which not limits only by type of exercises provided to train irony skills. It also depends on personal characteristics of language learners and features of irony mechanism itself.

This paper is limited by relatively small amount of testing ironical samples, as data collection process was restricted by nature of discourse, mediator of communication, type of message and language. Results of present paper can be used for more wide researches, including studying irony within various types of interpersonal and public discourses and / or provided by various mediators of communication. There is possibility that irony itself and features acquisition of irony within other types of discourse or other mediators of communication would be slightly different.

Also, there is necessity to provide also speaking and audio exercises to understand difference of acquisition comprehension and production irony within speaking abilities and perception of audio.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we analysed acquisition irony in English by adult learners of English as foreign language. We selected recent ironical posts written in English popular social network X (previously Twitter) within the period November, 18th — 30th, analysed collected data and found out that, most of collected ironical utterances included mocking on self and other, while expression of dissatisfaction and other minor types were not that often to meet.

Then we created exercises on retentive and productive basis, including reading and discussion, and five other types with the aim to find effective ways for irony acquisition. In 5 days after conducting exercises with 5 groups of students with level in English B-1 with 22 students in each, we hold final test, which became the basis for evaluation efficiency of tasks and comprehension of irony regarding to its type.

We found out that exercises with low (multiple choice) and high level (filling gaps without words and phrases in box) of difficulty were not effective for irony acquisition, while the highest efficiency were achieved by such tasks as matching parts of sentences into pairs and filling gaps by words and phrases in box. Also, analysis revealed that students easier comprehended irony with contradiction between said and expected concepts than implicature based ones, which is related with higher requirements of cognitive efforts.

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