

Nino Kuratishvili

IRONY AND SARCASM – VERBAL RESISTANCE AGAINST WESTERN STEREOTYPES

Abstract

This research examines the role of sarcasm and irony in transmitting protest in the speeches of Muslim stand-up comedians in America. The study includes jokes from ten performances of four top-rated Muslim stand-up comedians analysed through the exclusively elaborated criteria that include the concept of ‘face’, ‘target’, ‘implicature’. The results of the research show that ironic and sarcastic utterances applied in comedians’ speeches were related to the most painful stereotypes about the Muslim community. Accordingly, irony and sarcasm were the major resources used to confront these stereotypes. The results of the present research revealed that irony and sarcasm can be effective rhetorical and persuasive instruments against well-established beliefs and stereotypes. We propose that they can be used in other situations with similar success.

Keywords: Stand-up, Satire, Stereotypes.

Introduction

Prejudice toward religious and racial minority groups has long represented a challenge to values such as equality and liberty that are central to the American ethos (e.g., Myrdal 1944). Prejudice toward most minority groups has declined in recent decades, but Muslims are an exception: they are viewed much less favourably than most other religious and racial minorities. The topics of discrimination range from cross-border processes to everyday relationships.

Terrorism is supposedly the most dominant reason for American antipathy toward Muslims. 9/11 terrorist attacks which were followed by “war on terror”, directed at Islamic fundamentalist groups and eventually U.S. military action in Afghanistan and Iraq couldn’t

have ended without certain political and social consequences. The distaste for Muslims was eventually encouraged with the most recent reformation concerning the US immigration policy, that banned citizens of Muslim-majority countries Iran, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia, as well as North Korea and Venezuela from entering the United States.

There is no hesitation that the tension and the actuality of the issue find reflection in every possible aspect in the life of American society, particularly in such a socially determined field as Standup comedy. Satirical and insightful Standup performances have always provided some of the most authentic social commentaries and considering the fact that Standup comedy has been an important feature of American popular culture since its earliest days, we can agree that it echoes the social thought and can easily reshape it as well.

In this study, we discuss the language Muslim Standup comedians use to confront Western stereotypes about the Muslim minority. Sarcastic and ironical utterances will be vetted in particular as they function in communicating attitudes/ assessments in parallel with commenting. Our aim is to detect how sarcasm and irony serve comedians in being funny and didactic at the same time and their functioning in preserving the preciseness of the comedians' attitudes while commenting about different social situations.

Theoretical frame of the article

1.1 Verbal irony

According to Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. G. (2009), the verbal irony is a statement in which the meaning that a speaker employs is sharply different from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed. An ironic statement usually involves the explicit expression of one attitude or evaluation, but with indications in the overall speech-situation that the speaker intends a very different, and often opposite, attitude or evaluation.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), ironic simile is a form of verbal irony where a speaker intends to communicate the opposite of what they mean. For instance, the following explicit similes begin with the deceptive formation of a statement that means A, but eventually

conveys the meaning not A: “as soft as steel”, “as simple as building Babylon”, “as pleasant and relaxed as an Intramuscular injection”.

The irony is recognisable in each case only through the knowledge of the source concepts (e.g., that steel is one of the hardest metals on earth; that building Babylon was hard work; that an intramuscular injection is unpleasant) to detect an incongruity. Accordingly, background knowledge is a crucial component participating in the process of decoding an ironical/ sarcastic utterance.

1.2 Verbal irony and sarcasm

A fair amount of confusion emerges when discussing the issue of the relationship between verbal irony and sarcasm.

The psychologist Martin (2007), in “The Psychology of Humour”, claims that in case of irony, the literal meaning is opposite to the intended and sarcasm is aggressive humour that pokes fun. The author provides the following examples: for irony, he uses the statement “What a nice day” when it is raining. For sarcasm, the author cites Winston Churchill’s reply to Bessie Braddock’s comment on his being drunk: “But I shall be sober in the morning, and you will still be ugly”, as being sarcastic, while not stating the opposite of what is intended.

Psychology researchers Lee and Katz (1998) addressed the issue directly. They found that ridicule is an important aspect of sarcasm, but not of verbal irony in general. By this account, sarcasm is a particular kind of personal criticism levelled against a person or a group of persons that incorporates verbal irony.

1.3 Verbal Irony and echoic allusion

An echoic allusion is the main component involved in conveying verbally ironic meaning. It is best described by Wilson, D. (2006) as a speech act by which the speaker simultaneously represents a thought, belief or idea, and implicitly attributes this idea to someone else who is

wrong or deluded. In this way, the speaker intentionally dissociates themselves from the idea and conveys their tacit dissent, thereby providing a different meaning to their utterance. In some cases, the speaker can provide stronger dissociation from the represented thought by also implying derision toward the idea or outwardly making fun of the person or people they attribute it to.

Prieto, P. et al. (2015) suggest that an echoic allusion, like other forms of verbal irony, relies on semantically disambiguating cues to be interpreted correctly. These cues often come in the form of paralinguistic markers such as prosody, tone, or pitch, as well as nonverbal cues like hand gesture, facial expression and eye gaze.

These definitions from well-known scholars and rhetorical and persuasive functions of irony and sarcasm allow us to see the concepts of irony and sarcasm as the main tools Muslim comedians employ in their discourses to "fight" Western stereotypes about the Muslim community.

According to the definitions of sarcastic and ironic utterances it can be concluded that in order "to make sense", they have to be decoded at some level. To identify an utterance as an ironic or sarcastic, we have to confirm the presence of certain linguistic elements. The following linguistic instruments allow sarcastic and ironic utterances.

1.4 Target

Dauphin (2000: 3) defines sarcasm as "a form of ironic speech commonly used to convey implicit criticism with a particular victim as its target". The target appears to be the object to whom the criticism is directed through the ironic/ sarcastic utterance. Most cases of ironic and sarcastic utterances include some target; it can be a person, an idea or an attitude.

1.5 Implicature

An implicature is something the speaker suggests or implies with an utterance, even though it is not literally expressed. This phenomenon is part of pragmatics, a subdiscipline of linguistics. H. P. Grice coined the term in 1975 and distinguished conversational implicatures, which arise because speakers are expected to respect general rules of conversation, and conventional ones, which are tied to certain words such as "but" or "therefore" (Grice, 1975:24–26).

1.6 Punchline

The function of the punchline is to make the audience laugh. A linguistic interpretation of the punchline/response is enlightened by Victor Raskin in his "Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour" (1985). Humour is evoked when a trigger, contained in the punchline, causes the audience to abruptly shift its understanding of the story from the primary (or more obvious) interpretation to the secondary, opposing interpretation. The punchline will serve as another tool in the research to correctly analyse and interpret stand-up jokes.

1.7 The concept of 'Face'

Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest the concepts of "face-saving", and "face-threatening acts" (FTAs). The Face is defined as the public self-image, projected by a person. A Face-threatening act in some way damages the „Face“ of a person, acting in opposition to what the interlocutor thinks, believes or desires. Every time FTA occurs, it is possible to lessen it through what is labelled as a "Face-saving act". These acts spontaneously occur in conversation and other social interactions. Therefore, it is likely to find such instances in the use of ironic or sarcastic utterances. Observing face-threatening acts in stand-up discourse will help us to determine the role of the aggressive language in creating laughter; it is expected that the seriousness of the target's Face damage increases the quality of the joke.

1.8 Humour – standup comedy

Humour is a strong social and psychological phenomenon. Standup comedy has been an important feature of American popular culture since its earliest days. Standup comedians provide us with some of the most valuable social commentaries. Their performances are politically satiric and insightful. such categorization belies the consistent role of standup comedy as social and cultural analysis. Their complaints contain a critique of the gap between what is and what is believed should be. The issues the comedians address sometimes even cause social divisions.

In all cultures, humour discourse appears to reflect all the crucial characteristics of their social life. Accordingly, comedians are social mediators for society to make changes. In this case, Muslim comedians display their own struggles. They naturally are the “deviations” of behavior and expression between the society and its minorities. As well as this, they become the key to understanding the role of standup comedy in the process of cultural affirmation and subversion is a recognition of the comedian's traditional license for deviate behaviour and expression. (Lawrence E. Mintz, 1985).

1.9 Standup comedy – satire

Quintero, R. (2011) states that satire is traditionally thought of as a literary mode with a moral purpose; the satirist writes with a sense of moral vocation and with a concern for the public interest. It is also clear that satires often address the same sorts of particular moral problems that papers in applied ethics do.

As is known, sarcasm and irony are one of the several linguistic instruments used to achieve satirical effect in any type of discourse. Similarly to satirists, Muslim comedians try to influence moral aspects of their society; their ridicule and mockery always intends a demand for a change and almost always is strengthened by morality.

The amount of irony and sarcasm detected in comedians’ utterances allow us to identify their narrative as satiric or non-satiric.

Methodology

This study aims to explore the figurative language Muslim comedians employ in their discourses to "fight" Western stereotypes about the Muslim community.

Exploration of the resources Muslim comedians use for accomplishing their purposes enabled us to verify the validity of the two most discussed aspects of irony and sarcasm – rhetoric and persuasion.

2.1 Data collection procedures

The data analysis carried out in this research involved several procedures. At the initial stage of the research the relevant data were selected and downloaded from Youtube. After the transcription process was completed, the utterances were carefully examined and analysed. All the humorous utterance segments were selected from 10 performances and treated as the specific data for the present research to the extent that they were regarded as the most representative utterances concerning the expression of protest. 50 utterances compatible with the research purposes were chosen from 10 stand-up performances of 4 Muslim comedians: Ramy Youssef, Mo Amer, Ismael Loutfi and Kumail Nanjiani. The videos were found on Youtube platform. The video transcriptions were later broken down into specific utterances and measured by means of the instruments elaborated exclusively for our research purposes.

2.2 The instruments

The selection of instruments has been determined by their importance in decoding sarcastic and ironic utterances. The following instruments are employed in this research: a target, implicature, a punchline and a face-threatening act.

Target is one of the essential parts of the ironical/ sarcastic utterance; it is the object towards which the criticism is directed.

Implicature is the implied, usually opposite meaning of what was actually stated.

Punchline is [usually last] segment of a joke that creates incongruity and pushes the listener to look for an alternative meaning.

Face-threatening act represents another undoubted hint that sarcasm is present in the utterance. The ridicule and mockery conveyed by the utterance creates a threat to a listener's face.

We also divide speech acts into Apparent and Intended ones in order to demonstrate the contradiction between the intended and actually stated meanings. The last instrument will be the source knowledge. As it has been mentioned above, both, irony and sarcasm are recognisable only by using knowledge of source concepts.

2.3 Data analysis

The study has been carried out by qualitative and quantitative analysis of 10 performances of 4 top-rated Muslim comedians.

The utterances were broken down according to abovementioned criteria; the presence of targets, implicature, punchlines and face-threatening acts were detected and stated in each case. The meanings were also divided into Apparent and Intended ones and the Source knowledge was stated if necessary.

The analysis of the utterances allowed us to state the exact quantity of ironic and sarcastic utterances and eventually make conclusions according to their frequency and intensity.

3. Discussion and Results

The results of the research have revealed that ironic and sarcastic utterances were related to the most painful stereotypes about the Muslim community as seen by the comedians'. These were: Islam is a violent religion; all Muslims are terrorists or potential terrorists; all Muslims are Arab or Middle Eastern; they can't be Muslim and at the same time be patriotic to America; Islam oppresses women and forces them into a subservient role.

Accordingly, irony and sarcasm were the major resources used to confront these stereotypes.

The transcribed 50 jokes were reduced to sarcastic (26) and ironical (19) utterances. Selected (20) utterances were later divided into sarcastic (12) and ironic (8) cases.

As for the intentions, there were detected the cases of biting (7), criticising (8), humiliating (2), mocking (3).

‘Apparent’ and ‘Intended speech acts’ were contradictory in all (20) cases.

The ‘face-threatening’ act was activated in 16 cases.

The target was present in 16 cases.

3.1 An example of ironical expression and its analysis:

“OBVIOUSLY, I DON’T AGREE WITH THE BAN. OF COURSE NOT. BUT THE PROBLEM IS I DO AGREE WITH, LIKE, EVERY THIRD THING THAT TRUMP SAYS.

IT’S LIKE A WEIRD MULTIPLE CHOICE TEST.

HE’LL BE LIKE:

_MEXICANS ARE RAPISTS, MUSLIMS HAVE GOT TO GO, THE GOVERNMENT IS BROKEN, IT COULD DO BETTER.

I’LL BE, LIKE:

_ONE OF THOSE IS TRUE. BUT ARE ALL OF THEM TRUE? (LAUGHTER)”

Type of utterance: sarcasm

Implicature: the only truth is that US government is broken

Apparent speech act: commenting

Intended speech act: mocking

Face-threatening act: yes

Target: US government

Punchline: “I’LL BE, LIKE, ONE OF THOSE IS TRUE”

Source knowledge: Trump is very well known for his inadequate statements.

The use of sarcasm and irony in any kind of narrative bears the purpose of informing, impressing, expressing (our attitude) and many other pragmatically charged behaviours. These definitions make the analysis of standup speeches particularly fascinating data, as they represent the largest minority group in the community; their protest and contradiction invite every possible linguistic instrument for making them extremely dramatic.

What makes comedians narrative more linguistically attractive is the unique fashion of saying one thing and implying another –the wordplay technique. Irony works together with the incongruity mechanism, in other words, we encounter two contradictory layers in an ironical utterance, that makes us negate the literal interpretation of the utterance and perceive it alternatively.

Quantitative and qualitative analyses of speeches of 4 standup comedians enabled us to detect the specificity and purpose of sarcastic and ironic utterances in their narrative.

Sarcastic (12) and ironic (8) cases demonstrate the comedians' approval of these concepts in communicating their attitude.

The cases of biting (7), criticising (8), humiliating (2), mocking (3) visualize, once again, the important share of face damage in standup speeches. However, it seems to perfectly suit their satirical pathos. The comedians attack the vicious sides of the society hoping their jokes assist with the transformation of society.

After discussing the results, it can be stated that comedians' speeches are satiric and ironic and sarcastic utterances are the key instruments in achieving this effect. They reveal a very well-recognised purpose - elimination discriminative attitudes towards Muslim society by pointing out to certain moral values. Muslim comedians show the stereotypic and simple-minded nature of Western society through their sophisticated and witty jokes.

It can be concluded that irony and sarcasm can be effective rhetorical and persuasive instruments against well-established beliefs and stereotypes. We propose that they can be used in other situations with similar success.

Conclusions

As a conclusion, it can be stated that standup comedians play a significant role in foregrounding vicious sides of society and raising awareness about its stereotypical nature. The field they work in (humour) turns them into very powerful force against any misconception of societal norms.

The concepts of sarcasm and irony represent crucial linguistic instruments in the realisation of their negative attitude towards unfair society. They produce the meaning harsh enough to touch peoples' feelings but sophisticated enough to not be perceived as impolite.

References:

Abrams, D. and Michael A. Hogg. 1990. *Social Identity Theory: Constructive and Critical Advances*. London: Harvester- Wheatsheaf.

Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. G., *A glossary of literary terms*, 9th Ed., Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009.

Bryant, Gregory A., and Jean E. Fox Tree. "Recognizing Verbal Irony in Spontaneous Speech." *Metaphor and Symbol* 17.2 (2002): 99-119. Web.

Davis, Darren W. 1995. "Exploring Black Political Intolerance." *Political Behavior* 17 (1): 1-22.

Davis, Darren W. 2006. *Negative Liberty: Public Opinion and the Terrorist Attacks on America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

DIEHL, N. (2013). Satire, Analogy, and Moral Philosophy. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 71(4), 311-321. Retrieved June 5, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/42635868

Douglas M. *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology* Paperback – 22 Jul 1999 Routledge; 2 edition (22 July 1999) ISBN-10: 0415205549 ISBN-13: 978-0415205542

González-Fuente, S. Escandell-Vidal, V. and Prieto, P. "Gestural Codas Pave The Way To The Understanding Of Verbal Irony." *Journal of Pragmatics* 90. (2015): 26-47.

Kinsley, William. "'The Malicious World' and the Meaning of Satire." *Genre* 3 (June 1970): 137-155.

Lawrence E. Mintz Source: *American Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: American Humor (Spring, 1985), Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2712763> Accessed: 29-04-2020 09:39 UTC

Lee, C. J., & Katz, A. N. (1998). The differential role of ridicule in sarcasm and irony. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 13, 1-15.

Martin, R. A., *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, Elsevier Academic Press, 2007. p. 13.

Morris G. Caldwell, *Heroes, Villains, and Fools: The Changing American Character*. By Orrin E. Klapp. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. 176 pp. \$3.95, *Social Forces*, Volume 41, Issue 2, December 1962, Pages 215–216, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2573621>

Myrdal, Gunnar. 1944. *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Nacos, Brigitte L., and Oscar Torres-Reyna. 2002. "Muslim Americans in the News before and after 9–11." Presented at the symposium "Restless Searchlight: Terrorism, the Media & Public Life." Harvard University.

Quintero, R. (2011) *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern* 1st Edition. Wiley-Blackwell; ISBN-10: 9780470657959

Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. (1995) *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Second edition. Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell. First published 1986.

Turner, Edith. 1992. *Experiencing Ritual: A New Interpretation of African Healing*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. [ISBN 978-0812213669](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0812213669)

Wilson, D. "The Pragmatics Of Verbal Irony: Echo Or Pretence?" *Lingua* 116.10 (2006): 1722-1743.

Web references:

Ramy Youssef Is Expecting A Hogwarts Letter From ISIS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9R6vtcD09I&t=42s> Published on May 12, 2017. Retrieved on 5 June, 2020.

Author's email: nkuratishvili@gmail.com

Author's biographical data

The author of the article is a PhD student at Javakhishvili State University, currently working on the issue of detecting the role of sarcasm and irony in humorous discourse. She has an extensive experience of teaching English to multi-level and exam-oriented classrooms. The author teaches at a language learning center in Tbilisi.