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# VERBAL IRONY IN ARABIC AND ENGLISH: A DISCOURSE APPROACH

## A THESIS

*Submitted as a partial fulfilment of the requirement  
of the degree of M.A. in Linguistics*

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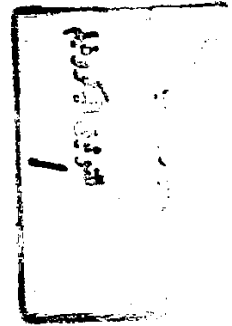
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# CHAPTER ONE

## ***CHAPTER ONE*** ***INTRODUCTION***

### **1.1. Section One : Theoretical Preliminaries**

#### **1.1.1. Aim of Study**

This study aims at examining the form and the function of verbal irony predominantly as it appears in English and Arabic spontaneous discourse. The aim of this study is two fold: First, it aims at describing the linguistic and contextual cues of verbal irony as manifested in Everyday Conversational English (ECE) and Colloquial Cairene Arabic (CCA). Second, this study is most concerned with the role and function of irony in spontaneous discourse in both languages. In this respect, the study attempts to explore the similarities and differences between them as far as the linguistic forms and the functions are concerned.

In doing this, this study attempts to identify the various syntactic as well as lexical forms that verbal irony exploits. Furthermore, the study also attempts to examine how the various contextual features both situational and linguistic are crucial to the production and recognition of irony in spontaneous discourse. Closely related to this is the fact that this study tries to assign the different discourse functions relevant to verbal irony to their typical situations prone to irony.

#### **1.1.2. Preliminaries**

##### **1.1.2.1. Irony, its subtypes and related concepts:**

Irony is perhaps the most complicated among all figures of speech. Booth (1974) states, for example, that "irony has come to stand for so many

things that we are in danger of losing it as a useful term altogether" (p.2). It encompasses several subtypes, relates to a number of other figures of speech, and has different nodes of expression. This section discusses what aspects of irony I will deal with and what aspects I will not.

On the dimension of the mode of expression, irony can be divided into two groups: verbal and nonverbal. The latter type includes not only technical terms (in literary criticism) such as "dramatic ironies" and "tragic ironies", but also loosely defined labels like "situational ironies", "cosmic ironies", "irony of fate," "ironies of events" and so on. Since this type of irony does not involve utterance, it belongs to the realm of literary critics, an area into which I will not trespass. My concentration is on verbal irony, as indicated in the title, i.e. ironies which are expressed in and related to language. A detailed description of the distinction between verbal irony and other types of irony will be provided in section three (p.27). However, in the rest of the study I will use the label irony, to refer to verbal irony for sake of brevity.

Even after nonverbal ironies have been ruled out, verbal irony is still a "messy subject" (Booth, 1974, p. 241). For instance there are various types of verbal ironies such as sarcasm and innuendo. While the relationship between irony and innuendo is apparent (the latter being a subtype of the former), the relationship between sarcasm and irony is more blurred. On the one hand, we can say that sarcasm is a subtype of irony, in which case it can be asserted that not every irony is sarcastic. On the other, sarcasm can be seen as a device of being ironic (Holman, 1975). I will ignore these distinctions among subtypes of irony, treating all utterances seen as ironic, which include innuendo and sarcasm. In other words, I will be focusing only

on the general nature of irony and leaving its subdivision into more particular types for latter study.

The complication of irony also involves related figures of speech. For example, one can utter an "ironic metaphor", like "she is a doll" after hearing that Jane has always caused troubles for her mother at home. Furthermore, irony is related to hyperbole and understatement in that the latter two can be devices of the former. Other figures of speech such as pun, satire, metaphor and lies may overlap with verbal irony. The distinction between verbal irony and other figures of speech will be subject to some detailed investigation later in this chapter.

#### **1.1.2.2. Facts about Irony:**

The linguistic pragmatist who attempts to account for verbal irony has to take into consideration the following facts. These are meant to identify the general linguistic and non-linguistic features of the phenomenon under investigation, namely Verbal Irony.

#### **Fact 1 : There is no accepted definition of irony among linguists:**

Almost all leading dictionaries and reference books define irony as a figure of speech where one says the opposite of what one means (Holman, 1975, p. 279; Grove, 1961, p.1195) which I will refer to as the standard definition. This definition, however, has been shown to be grossly inadequate by almost all recent linguistic studies of irony (Kaufer, 1977, 1981; Cutler, 1974; Myers, 1976, 1977, 1978; Clark and Gerrig, 1984; Williams, 1984). For example irony includes cases not only like:

-what lovely weather!

(Sperber and Wilson, 1981, p.300)

when said during a downpour, but also like :

A: How is your husband?

He's Ok. He has been sober several times during the past few months

(Chen Rong, 1984, p. 66)

which differs from the above example in that the ironist "B" is heard to speak the truth. The standard definition obviously fails to account for this type of irony since we can not say that "B" means the opposite of what she says, which would be something like "He's Ok. He hasn't been sober several times during the past few months". But this is what the standard definition forces us to do.

The above mentioned writers disagree not only with the standard definition but also amongst themselves as how to define irony. A detailed critique of their works will be provided in the following chapter. It suffices for the present purpose to remember that the definition of irony is a thorny problem for linguistic pragmatics.

### **Fact 2: Ironies are emotional and attitudinal:**

An ironist not only wants to convey his/her real thought expressed as the propositional content, but also his/her attitudes, evaluation, and emotion, which sometimes "reflect a hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt " (Grice, 1978; Sperber, 1984, pp. 130-131). When I say "Henry is a real genius" (Lakoff, 1977, p. 123) on hearing that Henry had got three F's in four of his classes, I want to get across not only

the meaning that Henry is not a genius, but also my feeling of contempt about what Henry had achieved.

**Fact 3 : The ironist seems emotionally detached :**

Despite the real emotional attachment of the ironist to whatever target he aims at, the ironist tries to seem aloof and detached from the emotional involvement. When the ironist says "Henry is a real genius" on the occasion described above (Fact 2), he tries to stay away from the contempt he actually has and hopes to get across. For example, if the audience accuse him, saying: "You should not look down upon people like that", he can defend himself saying "I do not have any contempt towards Henry. I only said that Henry was real genius, didn't I?" In fact, his utterance makes it impossible for the hearer to accuse the ironist at the literal level. Here we see the double character of the ironist: on the one hand, he wants to express his often derogatory attitudes, on the other, he wishes to remain detached from such feelings.

**Fact 4 : The ironic meaning is indirect :**

The ironist does not state his real intention directly. The ironic utterance has two levels of meaning: the literal meaning and the non-literal one. The ironist intends to make his meaning ambiguous but still allows the hearer to realize his ironic intent through contextual clues. The hearer has to make use of these markers to interpret the ironist's meaning.

The ironist chooses to communicate his meaning by means of irony for politeness principles. He wants to keep his face as well as the face of the

hearer saved. Being indirect enables the ironist to escape the responsibility of his ironic criticism.

### **1.1.3. Scope of Study**

This study confines itself to answering the following questions:

- (1) What are the linguistic forms (syntactic and lexical) employed by verbal irony?
- (2) How far is context important in recognizing verbal irony?
- (3) What are the language functions characteristic of verbal irony?
- (4) How does an ironic utterance work (the mechanism of irony)?
- (5) What are the different linguistic and paralinguistic cues necessary for the recognition of irony?

This study will attempt to provide answers to these questions through a detailed analysis of spoken data both in ECE and CCA. In this analysis we will try to see why the ironist say what he/she does not mean, requiring more effort from the hearer to interpret, how the ironist can be assured that the hearer has the ability to arrive at the ironist's ironic message, how the hearer can realize that the ironist is being ironic and reject the literal meaning of the ironist.

### **1.1.4. Sources of Data :**

When analyzing irony in actual spontaneous conversation we immediately encounter several problems. As most discourse is not inherently ironic, it is necessary to search through large amounts of language data in order to find instances of irony. The vastness of these data follows