
BOOK REVIEW

BOOK REVIEW of SKALICKY, STEPHEN 2023. *VERBAL IRONY PROCESSING*
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1 Review

A central task of psycholinguistics is to construct and test models of how humans process both the perception and comprehension of language forms. Since none of the processes involved are amenable to direct observation, indirect evidence is sought, usually by way of experiments. Ironical utterances present particularly interesting problems for psycholinguistic theories in that they require an understanding of both the form of an utterance and the interaction of that form with pragmatic contingencies which are at play in their understanding. Central to the latter is the perception of communicative intention when the form of the utterance provides an indirect or contradictory manifestation of that intent. In this volume, Skalicky provides an extended summary of how psycholinguists have investigated the processing and comprehension of ironical utterances, and critically evaluates the various experimental procedures which have been used.

This short, 70-page volume in the Cambridge Elements series is divided into five main sections. The first explores how we identify irony. The second reviews early studies of verbal irony processing. The third looks at later more technologically sophisticated studies. The

fourth addresses additional contextual influences; and the fifth, future directions. A final section revisits the questions of what irony actually is.

Skalicky's survey begins with outlining a standard theory of irony restricted to verbal irony: phenomena such as sarcasm, hyperbole, ironic praise and ironic criticism. As a basic starting point Skalicky notes that,

'(m)any explanations of verbal irony rely upon an oppositional contrast between what is said and what is meant, usually to the extent that a speaker is thought to not agree with what they are stating (e.g., exclaiming what lovely weather during a hailstorm)'. (p.2)

Understanding what is meant requires inference of the speaker/writer's intent based on an appreciation of contextual cues. In the case of irony, the inference classically leads to some kind of disjunction between what is said and what the speaker is inferred to have meant.

The psycholinguistics of the perception of irony and its associated variants can be investigated experimentally in a number of ways. Skalicky begins with experiments which are based on the assumption that the literal meaning of an ironic utterance may be processed before the processing of the ironic intent of the utterance. This is a plausible assumption and has been investigated by using time course experiments since, under this assumption, the time course for processing an ironic utterance should be longer than a non-ironic equivalent. That assumption has also been questioned with the prediction being that ironic utterances should take no longer to process than non-ironic utterances. Skalicky documents how these two basic approaches were supported by different time course experiments carried out by different investigators. This discussion includes the proposal that 'some ironic uses may indeed have a coded figurative or ironic interpretation in the mental lexicon' (p.18), . This leads to a question as to whether 'a meaning is encoded in one's lexicon or not.' (p.22).

I suggest that from a linguistic perspective, utterances cannot be stored in the mental lexicon, or their meaning encoded there, since that would involve storing not only all of what is said but the infinite number of contexts in which each could be said. While there is some debate in current linguistics as to whether the mental lexicon exists at all (Elman, 2011), it has been argued that idioms, formulae and other phrasal lexical items can only be stored with their codified, abstract, conventional contexts, not the infinite set of actual contexts in which they would be uttered (Kuiper, 2009; Sidtis, 2022). Moreover, it is the abstract formulations of use that allow the kind of ironic interpretations that Skalicky is discussing. The ironical interpretation itself cannot be part of the lexical entry of the formula since there are a very

large number of occasions in which a formulae might have been used and might be used in future. Each occurrence has its own context of utterance and hence unique interpretation.

Another, more recent, experimental technique uses eye tracking which records the way in which the eye fixates from saccade to saccade. It was used in early experiments to try to determine what happened when a reader was presented with a syntactic garden path sentence. Results suggested that once a reader has perceived that their initial parse of a sentence is not syntactically coherent, their next fixation is back at the point where the alternative reading was possible. The prediction for processing of ironical utterances is that eye fixation would return for a second look rather like the processing of syntactic ambiguity. Skalicky concludes that eye tracking provides ‘compelling evidence to suggest that verbal irony, in general, requires more effortful processing when compared to literal uses of the same utterances’ (p.33).

The next section deals with individual differences in the perception of irony, including the finding that respondents who are better at processing emotional information are also better at processing sarcasm. In another set of experiments, using event-related potentials, it is concluded that ‘verbal irony processing requires integration of pragmatic and contextual information.’ (p.41), a result which would not surprise anyone working in pragmatics. Skalicky concludes this section with the useful observation that

‘perhaps somewhat frustratingly for researchers attempting to prove one theory over another, the evidence demonstrating that the brain responds differently to verbal irony versus non-ironic equivalents does little to clarify whether qualitatively different processes are in play during verbal irony processing or how the literal versus ironic meanings may be interacting.’ (p.42).

Many of the time course experiments described by Skalicky involve subjects reading written text and a written account of the context of the stimulus. Measuring the time course of reading is easier than measuring the time course of the interpretation of spoken utterances; and it may be that a written stimulus with a written account of a possible context is rather far from what happens in natural speech and written perception. Studies of spoken irony summarised by Skalicky address the issue of whether the production of an ironic utterance with an ‘ironic tone of voice, assists with the interpretation of ironic utterances? ERP studies

suggest that it does. Studies using fMRI scans also support this conclusion. Skalicky concludes that, 'while there is no single unified ironic tone of voice, acoustic properties appear to be one cue hearers across languages attend to when interpreting verbal irony' (p.49).

Skalicky also reviews the interactions between theory of mind (ToM) and irony perception. Since ToM involves the capacity to infer the mental states, including the communicative intent, of others, it can be expected to play a role in the perception of irony. fMRI studies appear to show 'a link between irony and ToM because language processing regions of the brain were coactivated with ToM for verbal irony but not for the nonironic uses.' (p.50). I find this a puzzling result since all utterance interpretation involves inferring the intention of the speaker/writer(s) and so must involve theory of mind. It may be that these regions of the brain are more active during the perception of ironical intent since they require a second guess of that intent, the first guess being the literal interpretation of the utterance.

The final section of the book looks at possible future directions. The literature surveyed in the previous sections concentrated on sarcasm which is one way of being ironical but there are others, particularly hyperbole and understatement. These two involve a second guess of the speaker/writer's intent since comprehension of hyperbole requires using contextual information to infer that something is an overstatement and thus that the speaker/writer does not intend his or her utterance to be taken literally. Likewise with understatement. Further investigations could determine whether the previous findings are restricted to sarcasm or generalize more widely. With the increasing moves in linguistics to approaching phenomena with statistical approaches, it is likely that these, in the form of constraint satisfaction, will play a greater role in the psycholinguistic investigation of the interpretation of ironical utterances.

A further future line of investigation is to explore the universality of verbal irony and whether there is any effect of the particular language involved. The perception of sarcasm in second and third languages is also worth investigating. Skalicky suggests that, since the acquisition of pragmatic uses in non-initial languages is late in the acquisition sequence, the perception of irony is also likely to be late in the acquisition sequence. Furthermore, more work is required to ensure that the psycholinguistic manifestations of the perception of irony are paired with the respondents' actually perceiving a stimulus to be ironical. Skalicky also

suggests that irony production is an area of research ‘largely untapped’ (p. 57), but there are important questions to be answered, for example whether it takes a speaker longer to produce an ironical utterance than a non-ironical one. Satire likewise has received little attention from psycholinguists notwithstanding its close relation to irony. Skalicky suggests that the perception of satire is possibly more complex than the perception of irony calling for additional perceptual effort, and outlines a possible approach to the issue. Skalicky concludes that verbal irony is ‘a means of conveying specific pragmatic information efficiently and directly’ and that ‘unpacking what irony means requires a consideration of [...] pragmatic, attitudinal, and other information’ (p.61).

In sum, this is a carefully argued, concise account of the psycholinguistics of irony with a clear account of the outcomes of many experiments as well as the experimental techniques used in the them. The future work suggested is also provocative since the pragmatics of areas like satire are complex and a detailed analysis of their processing worthwhile.

2 References

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