

AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF IRONY AS A RHETORICAL STRATEGY USED BY NOAM CHOMSKY AND JONATHAN SWIFT IN THEIR ESSAYS *A MODEST PROPOSAL*

Viorica CONDRAT, *PhD, university lecturer,
Faculty of Philology,
Alec Russo Balti State University*

Abstract: *The present article aims to compare the way non-native readers react to the use of irony as a rhetorical strategy in the essays written by Noam Chomsky and Jonathan Swift. The paper is based on observation and assessment data collected during the classes in Discourse Analysis held at Alec Russo Balti State University of Moldova. The findings suggest that students found it rather difficult to appropriately decode the authors' intended meanings, as they needed help in the process of discussion. Moreover, it appears that Noam Chomsky's essay did not impact the students at all, even though they are part of the 21st context to which the essay refers. Thus, while decoding Jonathan Swift's essay, irony created a sense of solidarity and inclusion; whereas, irony in Noam Chomsky's essay created a sense of total exclusion in the readers.*

Keywords: *irony, essay, rhetorical appeals, pathos, logos, ethos, indirectness, written discourse, spoken discourse.*

Popularized by Michel de Montaigne in the 16th century, essay writing has become a form of self-expression on various issues, on the one hand, and an art of persuasion, on the other. Essayists artfully encode their perception of a specific problem to develop awareness in the readers. The purpose is not primarily to offer a concrete solution, but rather to make readers reconsider the existing problem from another perspective, to make them think. The essay thus becomes the channel enabling the communication between the author and the readers, it is 'mind speaking to mind' (Hoagland, 1988: 27).

Galperin defines essay as 'rather a series of personal and witty comments than a finished argument or a conclusive examination of any matter' (Galperin, 1981: 293). The author is viewed as a commentator with a definite attitude towards the described issue, yet he/she seems to allow readers to draw their own conclusions. The freedom readers enjoy in the process of reading is what defines the quality of an essay. Moreover, 'essays are directly concerned with the mind and the mind's idiosyncrasy, the very freedom the mind possesses is bestowed on this branch of literature that does honor to it, and the fascination of the mind is the fascination of the essay' (Hoagland, 1988: 27).

Hoagland (1988) argues that essays are targeted at a specific audience who possesses the necessary background that will enable them to appropriately decode the essayist's intended message. The essay, thus, appears to have the role of a means that will generate the reader's thinking process. It may be assumed that reading an essay contributes to the development of the educated reader's critical thinking.

Being a form of communication, the essay tacitly communicates the author's intentions to the readers. Although the discourse itself seems to rather challenge the reader than impose a concrete point of view, a great author will masterfully manipulate his/her readers into arriving at particular conclusions. He/she will use the rhetorical strategies and appeals that will help create a sense of

inclusion in the readers, compelling the latter to adopt the author's perspectives. Such an act of communication can thus be considered successful as the author manages to persuade the readers.

Authors will use the rhetorical persuasive appeals as defined by Aristotle to achieve their communicative intentions. There are three means to persuade the readers. Zachry (2009) defines them as follows: 'the character or credibility of the source of communication (ethos), the stirring of emotions in individual(s) being persuaded (pathos), or proof of truth (or apparent truth) through reasonable argument (logos)' (Zachry, 2009: 71). Consequently, a skilful author will seek to both establish credibility with his/her readers, and appeal to their reasoning, and emotions, in order to persuade them to consider his/her viewpoints as valid and trustworthy.

Connors (1979) argues that writers face a bigger challenge than the public speakers as the latter can have the immediate feedback from their audience, and, thus, understand how persuasive their discourse was. To a certain degree, speakers and their audience co-construct the spoken discourse together in the very moment of speech. Writers, however, interact with their readers via the written text. This is why, they 'must be more on guard intellectually than the speaker and must anticipate the expectations of readers and meet them; otherwise, the discourse will lose all pathetic appeal, and the reader will put it down with disgust or impatience' (Connors, 1979: 287).

It should be mentioned that unlike the spoken discourse, the written discourse does not have the primary aim of winning an argument. It may seek to convince the readers to take a stance on or react against something, yet, the way in which this is done cannot be as blunt as it may be in oral speeches. The readers seem to enjoy the freedom of arriving at their own conclusions.

While appealing to the readers' logos, writers should be careful not to oversimplify their writing. Similarly, they should pay attention to the theses they decide to repeat as this may result in the readers' rejection of their works. In a way, that may be interpreted by the readers as a type of mistrust in their cognitive abilities in the process of decoding the authors' reasoning.

While appealing to the readers' pathos, writers are expected to convince their readers to continue reading. Hence, they must entertain, outrage, and promise something to the readers. Unlike public speakers, the writers miss 'the sense of a shared rhythm, and empathy that grows up between speaker and audience' (Connors, 1979: 287). Consequently, it becomes even more difficult for the writers to appeal to the readers' emotions, as there is no immediate context where they can build rapport and grow empathy with the audience.

When it comes to the ethical appeal, Connors (1979) believes that it can be found in the writers' style and the argumentation they make. In particular, the scholar states:

Tone, word choice, and sentence construction are important in establishing an implied authorial character, but so are more abstract constructions. A writer's personality can also be established by such factors as fairness and scope of argument, generosity of concessions, evidence of erudition, and apparent soundness of judgement (Connors, 1979: 285).

Indirectness is one of the strategies commonly used by writers. The reason might be found in that "one fact of human communication is that more often than not interactants do not say directly what they intend to mean" (LoCastro, 2006: 118). Thus, the deliberate choice the writers make may be due to the role indirectness plays in everyday conversations. Tannen (1992) argues that:

There are two big payoffs to being understood without saying explicitly what we mean: payoffs in rapport and self-defence. And there's an aesthetic pleasure in communicating cryptically (Tannen, 1992: 56).

It can be assumed that writers might use indirectness as a strategy to build rapport with the readers. It also makes the communication process via the written discourse more aesthetically enjoyable. One way to create an indirect written discourse is to use irony which can be viewed as 'a strategic enactment of the sender's communicative intentions' (Condrat, 2008: 113).

Scholars (Wilson and Sperber, 2012; Black, 2006) believe that irony echoes somebody's thought and expresses a critical, mocking attitude to this thought. In the scholars' opinion the main function of irony is to show that something 'does not live up to some norm-based expectation' (Wilson, Sperber 2012: 8). Thus, irony becomes a strategic enactment of the writers' criticism and objection. It can be viewed as a form of protest in writing.

Writers should be extremely careful while using irony in their essays as it requires an extra-processing effort from the readers to appropriately decode the authors' intended meanings. If it is misinterpreted, it can lead to 'embarrassment and a sense of exclusion' (Black, 2006: 76) in the readers. Thus, irony can result in communication failure if the discrepancy between the literal and implied meanings is missed by the readers.

In order to avoid miscommunication, both writers and readers engage in the process of meaning co-construction. Writers, on the one hand, tend to meet their potential readers' expectations; readers, on the other hand, decode the intentional use of irony in the essays. Here, the context plays a crucial role as it will facilitate this non-face-to-face communication process as it will provide the needed clues for the readers to make the most appropriate inferences; 'it is sensitivity to context which allows us (fallibly) to think that we are dealing with irony' (Black, 2006: 115).

Thus, the use of irony can be very rewarding for all the participants. It can create a sense of inclusion in the reader. It can also have a pleasant aesthetic effect. In addition, it generates extra cognitive efforts, and putting together all the pieces of a puzzle brings satisfaction.

In order to determine to what extent the fourth year students are able to appropriately decode the authors' intentional use of irony in their works, two essays were suggested for in-class discussions. They bear the same title *A Modest Proposal*, yet, they belong to different historical and socio-cultural contexts. One was written by Jonathan Swift in 1792, the other by Noam Chomsky in 2002.

The participants were 12 students in their final year majoring in English. The essays were discussed during the classes in Discourse Analysis in the spring semester of 2017. The data was collected through observation and in the form of the students' written feedback given after having read the essays.

The study sought to determine the difficulties non-native learners might face in the process of decoding irony in two authentic texts. The assumption was that students would be able to more easily decode a more modern essay as they should better understand the context of 2002 than that of 1792. It was also assumed that in both cases students would be able to correctly perceive the writers' intentional use of irony to produce a certain reaction in their readers.

Both essays primarily appeal to the readers' pathos. Both writers seem to produce a dramatic effect on readers by appealing to their emotions but not to logical reasoning. Although both writers seem to provide solid arguments meant to support the validity of their proposals, it is obvious that they masterfully imply the contrary. The discrepancy between the literal and implied meanings is so enormous that it usually has a shocking effect on readers.

Thus, readers are not expected to agree to the proposals, but rather to be appalled and disgusted by them. This is why, these two essays are actual satires reflecting some vicious problems that both authors have no control over. The essays appear to be the perfect means to raise the readers' awareness regarding the severe problems, which might lead to concrete actions in the form of a potential protest.

It is worth noting that the title itself is extremely ironic, as both proposals are far from being 'modest'. The humble tone set from the very beginning is expected to have the opposite effect in readers, in particular, in the context where humility does not help solve a severe problem – in Jonathan Swift's case, the dire conditions of the Irish people under the British rule; in Noam Chomsky's case, the corrupt and false intentions of the American government in starting a war against Iraq.

The students were invited to closely read, first, Jonathan Swift's essay, then, in two weeks, Noam Chomsky's. They read them at home, and the discussion took place in the classroom. Before being assigned to read the first essay, the students were asked to think of a problem Moldova was facing at the time and to write 'a modest proposal' where they would offer a possible solution to the problem. The students started writing after we discussed the possibilities of encoding the meaning in writing directly and indirectly, as well as the importance of anticipating who the potential readers might be, so that the writers can meet their expectations.

The pieces of writing they produced focused upon two main problems Moldova is still facing. The first dealt with the demographic situation, in particular, with the low population growth, on the one hand, and with the high emigration rate of the Moldovan people, on the other. The second focused on poverty.

It is interesting to note that all the students addressed their writings to the political leaders ruling the country at the time. None thought to use their writing as a means to raise awareness

among fellow-citizens. It also should be mentioned that all preferred direct strategies to convey their communicative intentions. When asked, what effect that might have on their readers, they appeared to admit that the impact would be rather insignificant.

At the lesson, I tried to enact the learners' schemata concerning the figure of Jonathan Swift. The author's name was familiar to them. Yet, they could associate his name only with the book *Gulliver's Travels*. They appeared to ignore his origin and his contribution to the fight of the Irish people to enjoy equal rights as the British subjects did. Thus, the learners did not know the context, which might have hampered the decoding process. One learner, though, admitted that she was familiar with the text. Yet, she acknowledged that she did not closely read the essay.

The in-class discussion showed that 10 learners out of 12 failed to appropriately decode the author's communicative intention. They were appalled by the inhumane proposal made by the author, and expressed their strong disapproval. However, they did not manage to grasp the author's irony. The logical reasoning, which had been decoded literally by the students, misled the students into believing that the author would truly suggest such a proposal. Yet, while analysing the essay, the students managed to get a better understanding of the implied meaning and were able to decode the essay from a new perspective.

The students believed that the miscommunication was primarily caused by their lack of knowledge about the context, which resulted in their inability to decode the use of irony in the essay. It also seemed that most students (9 out of 12) did not look for additional information that would have helped them understand the context, which might have facilitated the process of interpreting the essay appropriately. This might imply that the students are not autonomous learners and they are unable to take responsibility for their own learning.

While analysing the feedback they gave after the in-class discussion, the students admitted that, at first, they completely misunderstood Jonathan Swift's intention. They believed that the author wanted to appeal to their logos. While describing their feelings they experienced after having read the essay for the first time, they wrote that they were 'scared', 'shocked', 'confused', 'terrified', and had 'mixed feelings'. The 2 students who managed to decode appropriately the intended meaning said that they liked Jonathan Swift's strategy of using irony as a means to create a certain reaction in the readers. At the end, all the students agreed that such a strategy can be extremely effective.

When it comes to Noam Chomsky's essay, the belief was that the students would find it less difficult to decode the intended meaning. First, they could understand that most probably the author used the same strategy as Jonathan Swift had. Second, they were closer to the context Noam Chomsky referred to in his essay. In order to enact the learner's schemata, I suggested starting the discussion regarding the war in Iraq.

The in-class discussion showed that they had little knowledge about its causes. Moreover, there were students who claimed they did not know anything about it. That is why, they were asked to first research the causes that led to the invasion of Iraq, and then read the essay. They were advised to critically select the information they would come across and avoid jumping to hasty conclusions.

When we tried to analyse the essay in the classroom, it became obvious that only one learner was able to appropriately decode Noam Chomsky's intended meaning. She had the background knowledge enabling her to understand the general implied ideas in the essay. Yet, she kept referring to the USA policies in general, and not to those reflected by the author. Nonetheless, she was successful in understanding the author's irony, but she would extend her interpretation to the context of 2017, and not to that of 2002.

The rest of the class unwillingly took part in the discussion. The essay did not seem to have any impact on them at all. Even while decoding some significant passages together, they did not display much enthusiasm about the problems reflected there; whereas, irony appeared to remain largely misunderstood. This was an example when irony misfires (Black, 2006: 119), the students feeling excluded from the process of communication.

The post-discussion feedback proved that the students found it 'difficult' to understand the author's communicative intentions. Some openly admitted that they were not able to understand the essay. Even the answers which seemed to attest that some of the students had managed to under-

stand it, either reflected the ideas discussed in the classroom or some information they found on the Internet, but not their own perspectives.

Such results were surprising as being closer in time to the specific event reflected in Noam Chomsky's essay did not contribute to the students' appropriate understanding of the author's intentions. Thus, in this case, irony failed to create the desired effect on this particular group of readers. Moreover, the essay seemed to generate a feeling of exclusion in the students, who refused to get a better understanding of the essay. Only one student felt differently, feeling solidarity with the author.

These results appear to indicate that, although knowledge of the context is crucial in the process of decoding the author's implied meaning, it might not always create the intended effect on the readers. Although, at first, the students did not fully decode the intended meaning in Jonathan Swift's essay, at the end, they confessed that they liked his essay and admired his talent and wit in reflecting the problem of poverty namely using irony as a leading communicative strategy. Such a reaction might be caused by the universality of the topic itself. Moreover, the students themselves chose the problem of poverty to be reflected in their own proposals when challenged to write them at the very beginning.

When it comes to the problem of war which is reflected in Noam Chomsky's essay, this topic did not resonate with the readers. Although both essays reflect the injustice a specific ruling body does on other people who are not that powerful, still the topic of war is not perceived as a stringent problem. The students seem to admit that as long as it does not concern them directly they cannot respond to the essay as expected by the author. They were not even curious to research the problem after the discussion, claiming that they do not need it.

Such reactions can be explained by the fact that the students' critical skills are underdeveloped, on the one hand, and that they are not autonomous learners, on the other. Decoding such essays requires more cognitive effort which the students do not want to make on their own. It appears that they are not able to transfer this information to real-world situations. In their opinion, it has no practical value at all. Thus, they seem to believe that remembering and understanding (the basic two levels in Bloom's taxonomy) are sufficient to be able to act in the real world.

This is a rather sad situation, which can be witnessed at different levels in our education system. Hence, the need for language educators to focus more on the development of higher order thinking skills as well as to boost learner autonomy. The 21st century learners need to acquire the skills that will enable them to critically and creatively solve problems. Relying only on remembering and understanding will not contribute to their cognitive development. This is what the students need to be helped to understand.

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