

Stylistic Signals of Verbal Irony

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Abstract

The subtle nature of ironic expressions, which very frequently serve to elegantly but covertly ‘sting’ the interlocutor, inevitably entails using cues or signals which point to the ironic intent of the ironist. Research has shown that there is a wide variety of linguistic items which undertake the role of signals in adequate ironic contexts. In this paper we focus on the stylistic signals of verbal irony as a separate category. In fact, the purpose of this study is to look deeper into their usage in Macedonian and English formal and informal speech. The accent is put, primarily, on ascertaining the frequency with which they occur in oral expressions; and, secondly, on determining the different types of stylistic signals. The results obtained indicate that metaphor, hyperboly, personification, understatement, synecdochy as well as proverbs are the most commonly used stylistic signals of verbal irony in both formal and informal Macedonian and English discourse.

Keywords: verbal irony, stylistic signals, Macedonian, English, formal/informal speech

1. Introduction

Taking into consideration the subtlety of verbal irony (VI), i.e. the fact that its interpretation is a very specific process of inference, it is very frequently claimed that the recognition of verbal irony in both oral and written speech is mainly assisted by the so-called signals or markers of ironicalness (Löffler, 1975; Barbe, 1995; Mucke, 1978; Hutcheon, 1995).

The very first serious scientific attempts directed at defining VI also outline the existence of signals as an indispensable part of this intrinsic linguistic phenomenon. Thus, for instance, Löffler (1975: 125) purports that each ironic expression consists of the expression itself and the signal of irony (linguistic or non-linguistic) which changes the meaning of the expression (in Stanel, 2006: 33). According to Clyne (1974: 343), one could not interpret irony if he/she is not familiar with the context and if the ironic expression does not contain certain linguistic means which serve as indicators for irony. Additionally, he states that each linguistic aspect (lexical, syntactic and phonetic) could become a signal of ironicalness in an adequate context.

Many researchers have attempted to compile a comprehensive classification of the signals of VI (Muecke, 1978; Kreuz, 1996; Utsumi, 2000; Attardo, 2001; Burgers et al., 2013), whereas some have merely focused on a doing a thorough analysis of a single signal such as, for instance, the ironic tone of voice (Bryant & Fox, 2002, Cutler, 1974 etc.).

This particular research tackles one category of signals of VI – *stylistic signals of VI*. This, in fact, is a cover term for various figures of speech (metaphors, hyperboly, understatement, synecdochy etc.) which in given contexts simply remind the interlocutor that he/she is not expected to interpret the utterance literally.

The stylistic signals present in the ironic expressions have been discussed by many researchers so far. Kreuz (1996), for instance, in his elaborate classification of the markers, sets litote and hyperboly as a separate group of signals of VI. Utsumi (2000), also, distinguishes between verbal and nonverbal¹ signals of VI and within the category of verbal signals he clearly highlights the usage of metaphors and hyperbolies as signals of VI.

¹ The nonverbal signals of VI encompass different body posture, gestures, facial expressions and eye movements.

One of the most recent efforts to classify the stylistic signals of VI as a separate category, however, could be attributed to Burgers et al. (2013: 46). They refer to them as *tropes and stylistic figures* used to signal ironicalness and place hyperboles, metaphors, understatements and rethorical questions within this category.²

The primary aim of this study is to look deeper into the usage of the stylistic signals of VI in both formal and informal oral discourse within two completely unrelated languages – Macedonian and English. More to the point, primary, we set out to ascertain the frequency with which they are used in the ironic expressions uttered in formal as opposed to informal contexts; and, secondly, we focus on detecting similarities and differences with respect to the different types of stylistic signals of VI used in these two languages.

2. Research Methodology

The analysis of the stylistic markers initially necessitated compiling a linguistic corpus of authentic conversations in both Macedonian and English.

Bearing in mind the relatively easy accessibility of the television as a medium, the corpus was built of excerpts of recorded television programs which include authentic conversations of two, or sometimes more than two interlocutors.

In order to cater for the formality aspect of the study, one half of the recorded TV conversations consists of excerpts from political discussions and debates where, normally, formal speech is preferred; whereas, the second half contains excerpts from popular TV talk shows which are characterized by the usage of informal speech. Hence, as shown in Figure 1 (see Appendix), the corpus consists of four parts: a) Macedonian political discussions (MPD); b) Macedonian talk shows (MTS); c) English political discussions (EPD), and d) English talk shows (ETS).

More precisely, the first part of the corpus, the political discussions and debates, consists of 12 Macedonian (24 *Analiza*) 15 English (*Piers Morgan Tonight* and *America Live with Megyn Kelly*) excerpts of political discussions and debates. What is typical of these conversations is the fact that they all tackle various important political, economic and social issues, and, the profile of the participants in these conversations encompasses politicians, journalists and political analysts. The second part of the corpus, the talk shows, includes excerpts from 12 Macedonian (*Eden na Eden* and *PM Magazin*) and 13 English conversations (*The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *The Ellen Show*). The hosts of these talk shows, understandably, converse with famous musicians, actors, sports stars etc., and their topics of discussion normally revolve around their professional achievements as well as their private life.

Approximately 9 hours, i.e. 560 minutes of recorded speech are subjected to analysis (280 minutes in Macedonian, and 280 minutes in English) and 94 people, in total, take part in these conversations (49 Macedonian and 45 English native speakers). The equal duration of the analysed conversations in both languages, and the almost equal number of participants, is to ensure obtaining maximally objective results.

After compiling the corpus, the analysis was initially directed at identifying³ and singling out all of the ironic expressions used in the analysed conversations; and, subsequently, identifying of the different types of stylistic signals used in those ironic expressions.

² There is also another set of researchers, however, who claim that these figures of speech should be treated as separate types of VI (Winner et al., 1987; Gibbs, 2000; Colston & O'Brien, 2000 etc.). Nevertheless, since the ironicalness is not their primary feature, i.e. they are ironic only in certain contexts and under certain conditions (e.g. when the condition for pragmatic insincerity of the expression has been fulfilled), in this research, they are treated simply as signals of irony.

³ The process of identifying the ironic utterances and separating them from the non-ironic ones, was conducted by applying the conditions for ironicalness which are elaborated in great detail in the major theories on VI (Cutler, 1974; Grice, 1975, 1978; Sperber & Wilson, 1981, 1986; Clark & Gerrig, 1984; Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995; Colston, 2000; Anolli et al., 2002; Partington, 2007).

3. The Results of the Analysis

The analysis of the recorded conversations has yielded results which manifestly point to the existence of many similarities in both analyzed languages, Macedonian and English (Table 1 in Appendix):

- the number of the analysed utterances used in the informal speech (i.e. in the talk shows) is greater than in formal speech (i.e. the political discussions and debates);
- the number of ironic utterances is also greater in the informal speech, in comparison to their number in the formal speech;
- the number of verbal signals used within the ironic utterances is also significantly larger in the informal speech;
- the total number of stylistic signals in comparison to the rest of the verbal signals is very low;
- the total number of stylistic signals is almost equal in both languages (93 stylistic signals in Macedonian, vs. 80 stylistic signals in English).

This practically means that when Macedonian and English native speakers engage themselves in informal conversations, they tend to speak more than when they are part of formal conversations. They are also more inclined towards using verbal irony in informal speech, and the results indicate that their ironic utterances in informal speech are more frequently accompanied by verbal signals of VI as opposed to those used in formal speech. In any case, the interpretation of this tendency in the two languages could be that both Macedonian and English native speakers attach greater importance on conveying their ironic message as clearly as possible in informal speech. In formal speech, they seem to allow for a more flexible interpretation of their message, i.e. they always leave 'room' to withdraw, if necessary, the ironic meaning of their utterance and, return to the literal one. Furthermore, both Macedonian and English native speakers seem to prefer using stylistic signals only occasionally.

All these detected similarities clearly point to the lack of any real difference in the perception and treatment of verbal irony on the part of both Macedonian and English native speakers.

The subsequent step in the analysis was to ascertain the different types of stylistic signals present in the analysed ironic utterances as well as the incidence with which they are used in both languages. In that respect, the results obtained from the analysis confirm that the role of the stylistic signals of VI is typically allocated to *metaphors*, *simili*, *hyperboly*, *understatement*, *synecdoche* and *personification* (Table 2 see Appendix). Moreover, *proverbs* can also be included in this category of signals, and this is especially relevant for formal speech, insomuch as proverbs or old sayings which are typical for everyday speech, in formal contexts seem to breach the established norms of formal speaking and, thus, add informal overtone to formal expressions and intensify the ironic intention of the ironist, eventually.

The distribution of the different types of stylistic signals of VI in formal and informal speech in both languages, again, is marked by more similarities than differences. Namely, metaphor, hyperbole and simili are all present in both formal and informal speech in both languages; understatement and synecdoche were spotted only in informal speech, whereas the presence of personification was noted only in formal speech. The only obvious incongruity was the lack of proverbs in English formal and informal speech, as opposed to their presence in Macedonian formal speech.

Comparing the results in terms of the incidence with which the stylistic signals of VI are used, several similar tendencies in both analysed languages appear to be noteworthy:

- a) metaphor is the most frequently used stylistic signal of VI;
- b) hyperbole as a stylistic signal of VI is used with a moderate frequency;
- c) understatement, simili, personification, synecdoche and proverbs are the least frequently used stylistic signals.

A) *Metaphors as stylistic markers of VI*

Metaphor is normally defined as a figure of speech used to compare one concept with another unrelated concept due to some similarity which exists between them. This analysis shows that the metaphor is the most frequent stylistic signal of VI in both Macedonian and English, in both types of speech. Namely, 48.57% and 34.52% of all the used stylistic signals used in the analysed Macedonian formal and informal speech, respectively; and 65.38% and 37.5% in English formal and informal speech, respectively, were, in fact, metaphors.

(1)

H: *“You were a big NFL player and then suddenly you go and play at some little league somewhere.”*

G: *“No! Playing... obviously you consider being a university professor being a little league, do you?”*

H: *“Well compared to secretary of state ...”* (from the EPD)

The host of the show with his metaphoric ironic expression *“You were a big NFL player and then suddenly you go and play at some little league somewhere”* expresses his disapproval of the guest’s decision to give up on her extremely successful political career as a state secretary and to proceed with her career as a university professor comparing her with a capable footballer who instead of playing for the national league (*“a big NFL player”*), plays for some insignificant league (*“a little league”*).

(2)

G: *“His weak spot is that he is a little bit nervous. We have a new nickname for him - “220 volts”, as he is always plugged in.”*

(G: *„Лоша страна му е малце е нервозен. И нов надимак му измисливме, “220 волти” оти под напон е стално“*) (from the MTS)

In this excerpt, one of the guests, a very popular handball player, has been asked to describe the personal qualities of his team mate who is also taking part in the conversation. Although he speaks very highly of his colleague, yet, in his last two expressions, he resorts to using irony in order to tease his friend about a bad habit of his – he loses his temper rather quickly and reacts very impatiently during matches. In order to emphasise his ironic intention in his second ironic expression, he uses the metaphor *“he is always plugged in”* – comparing his friend’s temperament with electricity which in some situations could, undoubtedly, be very dangerous.

B) Hyperbole as a stylistic symbol of VI

The hyperbole, i.e. overstatement, is a figure of speech with which the speaker states more than he/she objectively has the right to state. In the analysed corpus, this figure of speech was viewed from the perspective of a stylistic signal and as such it was used with a moderate incidence. In fact, hyperbole accounted for 28.57% and 15.47% of all the stylistic signals used in the analysed Macedonian formal and informal speech, respectively; and for 13.46% and 22.5% of all the stylistic signals in the analysed English formal and informal speech, respectively.

(3)

G: *“No, I won't wait a minute. You want to arm everybody in Milwaukee. You do these racy, Hollywood-style adverts because you want them all out there armed and shooting ... What you're creating is a return to the Wild West in Milwaukee.”* (from the EPD)

In (3) the host overtly criticizes a local sheriff who recorded and promoted an advertisement, encouraging local citizens to provide themselves with weapons and defend their lives and property if attacked by criminals, instead of waiting for the police to help them out. He enhances the ironicalness of his expression by using the overstatement *“you want them all out there armed and shooting”*.

(4)

(G: *“On a 20 hour trip, he sleeps for 21 hours”*)

(G: *„Од дваесет саата нам, дваесет и еден спие.“*) (from the MTS)

In this example, one sportmen, talks about the behavior of his teammates when they are taking long distance trips to play matches abroad. In that context, he describes their captain’s behavior by using the hyperbolic expression *“On a 20 hour trip, he sleeps for 21 hours”*. In other words, he makes fun of his excessive need for sleeping by stating that his sleep lasts longer then the actual duaration of the trip.

c) Understatements as stylistic signals of VI

Among the least frequently used stylistic signals of VI in the analysed corpus there were understatements, which are used when the speaker states that something is less than it actually is. The usage of understatements as stylistic signals was marked only in informal speech, in both English and Macedonian. Merely 6.25% and 5.95% of all the identified stylistic signals in the analysed English and Macedonian corpus, respectively, were understatements.

(5)

G: *“Considering his constitution, he is an excellent shooter. The shooters are normally taller.”*

H: *“You are saying he is tiny, a dwarf.”*

G: *“Not a dwarf, but a little bit shorter.”*

G: „За негови предиспозиции екстра шутер е. Обично се повисоки тие шутерите.“

H: „Сакаш да кажеш дека е тоцкав, џуџе и ради тоа.“

G: „Не џуџе, ама понизок малџе.“ (from the MTS)

The host in his ironic expression in (5), makes use of the understatement (“*he is tiny, a dwarf*”) with reference to one of his guests, who is a very successful handball player, and who in reality is not that short after all. The role of the understatement here definitely is to add a humorous note to the host’s statement who obviously wants to tease his guest a little bit. However, the fact of the matter is that despite being a bit shorter than what is normally expected for a handball player, this sportsman has proven to be an excellent player.

(6)

G: “... *Yea, but I do ...when I need money I call them.*” –

H: “*Right, they do have some. They are lovely, lovely girls.*” (from the ETS)

The same is illustrated in (6) in which the host utters an ironic utterance which contains an understatement “*they do have some (money)*”, when, in fact, the two very successful twin actresses have earned a fortune in a short period of time and are quite well off at the moment.

C) Simili as a stylistic signal of VI

Simili as a figure of speech is normally used for comparing two concepts overtly by means of *as* or *like*. This figure of speech was also among the least frequently used stylistic signals in the analysed corpus. In formal speech, 5.71% of the total number of stylistic signals in Macedonian and 5.76% in English; and, in informal speech, 9.52% of all the stylistic signals of VI in Macedonian and 5% of all the stylistic signals of VI in English were of this type.

(7)

G: “*They will start perceiving us like God.*”

(G: „Они нас со извинение ќе почнат да не гледаат ко да сме Господ.“) (from the MTS)

The guest in (7) expresses her displeasure with ordinary people’s misconception that people from the show business are perfect human beings and have no flaws or issues whatsoever. In order to additionally enhance the ironicalness of her expression, she says that ordinary people would probably soon start to compare them to God.

(8)

H: “*It looks like a toaster with two pieces of bread.*” (from the ETS)

The ironic expression in (8) is used by a host who ridicules his guest’s decision to tattoo his arm with a sign which looks pretty much like a toaster, despite the fact that the guest has previously explained that his tattoo represents the Chinese sign for music.

(9)

G: “*The implementation of the laws in Macedonia happens in an atmosphere of a politicized administration and state, it happens in an atmosphere of politicized judicial system ... If we decide we can act like ostriches and bury our heads in the sand, we can do that, but we cannot escape from these things.*”

(G: „Имплементација на законите во Македонија се случува во амбиент на партизирана администрација и држава, се случува во амбиент на партизирано судство Ако сакаме ние да бидеме како ноеви и да ја забутаме главата во песок, можеме, но од овие работи ние не можеме да избегаме.“) (from the MPD)

The political analyst in (9), directs a very severe criticism to the political figures currently leading the country. However, his criticism turns into bitter irony when he describes the passive and disheartened behavior of the ordinary people who instead of taking measures to change the unfavourable situation their country is in, they choose to pretend that everything is all right. Their behavior reminds him of the rather stupid behavior of a specific type of birds called ostriches which are well known for the fact that whenever they sense danger they bury their heads in the sand, hoping that the danger would simply go away.

E) Personification as a stylistic signal of VI

Personification, i.e. attributing human features to objects, was also very infrequently used in the analysed ironic utterances and accounted for 2.85% and 1.92% of all the stylistic signals in the analysed Macedonian and English formal speech, respectively.

(10)

G: “Well, I think the title itself tells you – Macedonian matters. So, logically, ... and there is a subtitle there too – state, language, nation...”

(G: „Па мислам насловот сам кажува – Македонски работи. Според тоа ... таму има и поднаслов - држава, јазик, нација....“) (from the MPD)

The honorary guest in the TV program in (10), who is an elderly academician, ironically reprimands his host for asking him a very superficial and needless question about the content of his new book. In order to enhance the ironic effect of his reprimand he uses personification attributing a speaking ability to the book itself (“*the title of the book itself tells you*”).

(11)

G: “Well, if they're worse and in more debt than us, I want to see a country that can say they have more debt than we do.“ (from the EPD)

In (11) the guest, who is a well know politician, criticizes his country’s meddling with other countries’ internal affairs and presenting itself as the greatest world power, when, the fact of the matter is that his country is heavily indebted as well. In order to patently signal his ironic intent, he ascribes the attribute of speaking to countries.

F) Synecdoche as a stylistic symbol of VI

The final figure of speech which could also be placed in the category of the least frequently used stylistic markers is synecdoche, i.e. mentioning just one part of something in order to refer to the whole. Only, 1.19% and 5% of all the stylistic signals of VI used in the informal Macedonian and English speech, respectively, were examples of synecdoche.

(12)

H: “Right, so, did you do all those things, the thing with the high-heeled shoe...?”

(H: „Така ги правевте сите тие, нели она со иттиклата, пари во иттикла ...?“) (from the MTS)

(13)

H: “Alright, we are back with the handsome John S. who over the years has kissed a lot of women on screen, off screen. Now we are going to see how well you remember those lips.“ (from the ETS)

In both (12) and (13) the usage of synecdoche can be easily spotted. Thus, for instance, “*the thing with the high-heeled shoe*”, in fact, is only one of the traditional Macedonian customs in the course of a wedding ceremony, when the bride is being presented with her wedding shoes. Thus, in this case, the host who finds it difficult to mentally reconcile the concept of an extra stylish young pop singer, on the one hand, and all those traditional wedding ceremonies which include some quite old-fashioned rituals, on the other hand, sees a wonderful opportunity to tease his guest about her wedding ceremony. In (13), however, “*the lips*” the host is talking about are used, in fact, to refer to his guest’s numerous ex-partners with whom he has been romantically involved in real life and on stage as well.

G) Proverbs as stylistic signals of VI

The usage of proverbs as stylistic signals of VI was also very rare and was observed only in the analysed Macedonian formal speech (1.92%).

(14)

G: “Last year the government of R.M. incurred debts of about 700-800 million euros and this year it would probably do the same or even perhaps a billion euros and will present zero or perhaps one percent rise in the GDP. That is like ... firing a cannon to kill a sparrow, or slaughtering an entire calf in order to get one veal chop.”

(G: „Лани владата на РМ се задолжи некаде околу 700-800 милиони евра и оваа година истото ќе го прави. Ќе ја задолжи Македонија негде 700, 800.. а можеби и една милијарда и ќе покаже нула или можеби еден пораст на GDP. Тоа знаете што... како со топови да тепате врапче, односно или уште попозната изрека за една кременадла да заколете цело теле.“) (MPD)

In (14) the guest who is a politician from the opposition fiercely criticizes the highly unreasonable politics of the current government, which, according to him surely leads the country to bankruptcy. In order to enhance his ironic criticism he uses the two well known proverbs: “firing a cannon to kill a sparrow” and “slaughtering an entire calf in order to get a single veal chop.”

4. Conclusion

The insights of this comparative study which deals with the stylistic signals of VI in two types of speech (formal and informal) within two languages (English and Macedonian), in fact, not only confirm some of the already existing claims regarding stylistic signals of VI in general, but also sheds some new light on this phenomenon as well.

Thus, the thorough observation of the corpus validates the contention that the category of stylistic signals of VI is composed of the following set of figures of speech - metaphor, hyperbole, simile, understatement, personification and synecdoche. However, on the basis of the analysed corpus, we deem it completely justified to suggest that this category should be enriched by another stylistic signal - proverbs. Proverbs as stylistic signals of VI are especially important in formal speech, because by lowering the level of formality they, in fact, greatly assist the ironist in hinting at his ironic intention.

Moreover, on the basis of this study, we could also infer that the stylistic signals of VI are decidedly among the most infrequently used verbal signals of VI in both Macedonian and English formal and informal speech.

Finally, the findings which stem from this study also indicate that verbal irony as a linguistic phenomenon is very similarly treated in Macedonian and English although they are completely dissimilar languages. The same refers to the usage of the stylistic signals of VI, as the number of similarities both in the types of VI and the frequency with which they are used, by far outnumbers the detected differences.

Appendix

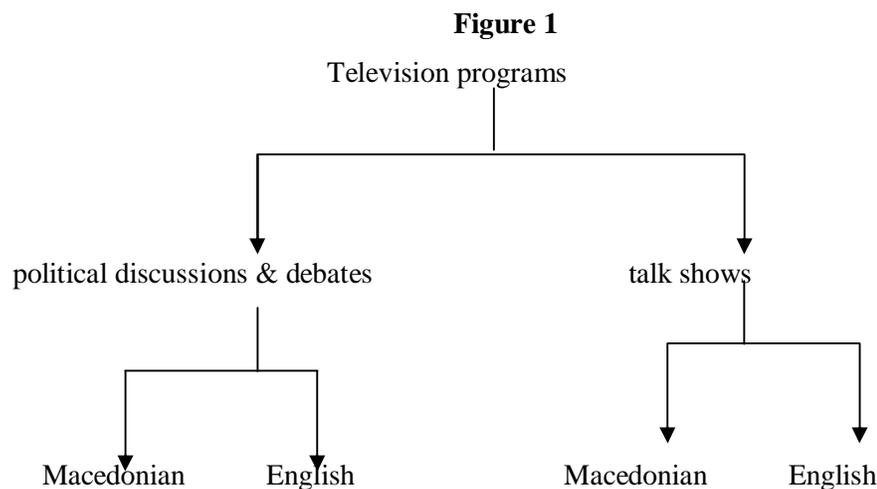


Table 1

	Political discussions and debates		Talk shows	
	Macedonian	English	Macedonian	English
no. of analysed utterances	1017	1420	1391	1602
no. of ironic utterances	117	291	338	322
no. of verbal signals of VI	286	304	630	520
no. of stylistic signals	32	45	60	35

Table 2

Stylistic signals of VI	Political discussions and debates		Talk shows	
	Macedonian	English	Macedonian	English
metaphor	17	34	33	17
hyperboly	10	7	13	9
simili	2	3	8	2
understatement	/	/	5	5
synecdoche	/	/	1	2
personification	1	1	/	/
proverbs	2	/	/	/
total:	32	45	60	35

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