The Social Functions of Verbal Irony: The Ironic Tone in Arabic Proverbs

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Abstract

The question of verbal irony is of expanding relevance to a range of fields of cultural information and inquiry. The present study attempts to shed some new light on the issues revolving around the harmonious relationship between resorting to ironic proverbs and avoiding undesirable reaction in a talk exchange. I refer to a set of irony markers proposed by Attardo’s (2000) to find out that Arabic proverbs are impregnated with overt and covert irony markers which depend on their degree of indirectness to interpret the social functions of thirty ironic proverbs in the Tunisian cultural context. My study, further, suggests that ironic proverbs are multifunctional and set into relief the speaker’s intentional attempt to communicate irony while magnetizing the addressee to join in a social game. The first conclusion of my study is that people make recourse to such a circuitous route in social exchange in order to attenuate the harshness of the utterance. The second conclusion is that proverbial utterances are multifunctional. They are socially conventional and may vary from one culture to another. The article concludes with a discussion of suggested avenues for validating the importance of the social effects of irony markers to communicate irony to the addressee and help detect the speaker’s real intention. The article also suggests some directions for future study of the hearer’s possible reactions while detecting the speaker’s ironic suggestion.

Keywords: Verbal Irony, Proverbs, Tricky Hypothesis, social offense, irony markers, social function, Group Affiliation, Politeness, Retractibility, Persuasive Aspect, Evaluation, Sophistication.
• Introduction
• Statement of the Problem
Irony is a matter of negotiation as it may serve the speaker’s goals. It may be part of the speaker’s strategies of dissimulation. According to Leech (2005), irony is a speech act or in Leech’s terms ‘mock politeness’ that ‘maintains courtesy on the surface, but at a deeper level is calculated to offend’. The speaker, being apparently tactful, intends to annoy his/her addressee by means of indirect linguistic cues in his utterance. Hence, the degree of indirectness of the speaker’s ironic utterance is functional since it determines the level of politeness behavior. Leech (1983:82) argues that ‘if you must cause offense, at least do so in a way which does not overtly conflict with the politeness principle, but allows the hearer to arrive at the offensive point in your remark indirectly’.
In this respect, the pragmatic parameter is the headmost factor in processing irony in proverbial utterances to decipher the multifunctional aspect of proverbs to reach different communicative goals.
The central argument of this paper refers to Muecke (1978) who argues that a prior knowledge of the uttered proverbs and the social context in which they are used makes the interpretation of irony possible (1978:364). According to Onyeoziri (2011:89), proverbs can be ironical to ease the speaker’s ironic outlook of other’s behavior in social exchange. There is an attempt to show how the speaker attenuates the harshness of those ironic barbs in social exchange and spotlight on the strategies employed to uncover the ironist strategies in Tunisian proverbs.

• Central Claim
Face to face interaction is attacked with jeopardy that may lead to interpersonal conflict between interlocutors such as in cases of disapproval or criticism. In order to respect the social norms that characterize a particular culture and mitigate social conflict, a witty language-user resorts to a set of strategies to disguise his/her real intentions (Brown & Levinson 1987). In case of irony, the speaker, being apparently tactful, intends to annoy his/her addressee by means of indirect linguistic cues in his utterance. Hence, the degree of indirectness of the speaker’s ironic utterance is functional since it determines the level of politeness behavior.
This paper does not present a broad discussion of the theory of irony; it is just an attempt to review the context of irony markers and their social functions. The present study is devoted to elaborating a workable framework for verbal irony with a major focus on ironic proverbs. By analyzing ironic proverbs in the Tunisian context, this paper seeks to study ironic proverbs on the scale of indirectness to test how strategic is resorting to proverbial utterances in social exchange. Pragmatic evidence for the central claim of this paper comes from research on irony markers and their social effects in Arabic proverbial utterances in the Tunisian social context.

1.2 Objectives
The major motivation behind the present study of using proverbs in social interaction is to cope with a number of objectives. First of all, the study seeks to show what verbal irony attempts to communicate through the use of ironic proverbs. Second, it tests whether people’s use of ironic proverbs in the Tunisian social context meets the social effect of verbal irony in general. The
third objective is to check the ironic meaning of proverbs and how they are socially accepted in the Tunisian cultural context in relation to their degree of indirectness. Finally, the current study shows how the speaker attempts to gloss his implicated meaning [offensive linguistic behavior] while resorting to ironic proverbs. In other words, there is an attempt to show that the ironist seeks to refine his/her brusque linguistic behavior towards the hearer while resorting to proverbial utterances in a talk exchange.

2. Theoretical Background
Irony is vague and difficult with any precision as it means different. There is large literature on this subject. The pretense theory of irony suggested by Clark & Gerrig (1984) [as cited in Gibbs & Colston, 2007] and Irony as echoic mention by Sperber & Wilson (1981) [as cited in Gibbs & Colston, 2007] are intermingled as they agree on the fact that ironical utterances are less critical and less offensive than the literal ones. The echoic mention theory of irony introduced verbal irony as a variety of echoic interpretation within which the speaker endorses himself/herself from the opinion echoed in connection with mockery.
Zhao (2011) studied verbal irony in literary texts. He considered Sperber & Wilson’s echoic interpretation theory of irony to associate the ironic utterance with a variety of attitudes and feelings that goes from mild humor to a bitter sarcasm. Besides considerable works studied the response to irony in interaction and came out with an appropriate processing model of irony to help the irony-prone bridge the ironic gap (Attardo 2001, 2000c; Khottof 2003).

Reviewing about the modes of irony, it is noticeable that irony consists of two facets, one is semantic and the other is pragmatic. While the semantic consideration does not distinguish between an ironical statement and a non-ironical one, pragmatics account for a broad contrast between the literal and figurative meaning of ironical utterances and rate irony a pragmatic phenomenon (Honeck 1997; Attardo 2001; Dobrovolskij 2006). In this respect, Triki (2002: 77) defines irony as ‘a trope on which an expression is used in such a fashion as to convey the different meaning of what is expressed’. Actually, the pragmatic parameters go beyond the study of the structural property of ironic utterances to shed light on its functional aspect and social impact on the relationship between interlocutors.

In this study, we will turn to pragmatics of verbal irony in order to decipher the hidden intention of the language-user in a particular social context. Drawing on Muecke’s (1978) catalog of irony markers, Attardo explores how these cues of irony are important to decode the social functions of verbal irony in Tunisian proverbs.

3. Methodology
3.1 Corpus Description
In this article, the data consisted of thirty proverbs collected from Hedy Belgh’s (1998) ‘Tunisian Proverbs’. Then, they are literally translated into English, though the translation of proverbs from Source Language to Target Language may minimize their poetic flavor (see table 1). It is worth mentioning that the same corpus was analyzed in Noamen (2012) with Leech’s (2007) Grand Strategy of Politeness. The application of this theory has shown that people’s attempt to soften the harshness of the utterance is sensitive to the vertical and the horizontal distance between
interlocutors in social interaction. Besides, people’s use of proverbs is strategic to cope with the social orientation and self-public image of Face in the cultural Tunisian context. Actually, the choice of the same corpus in this paper is not random. The theme of irony in Noamen (2012) was given evidence through interviews with fifty fluent native speakers of the Tunisian dialect. Indeed, the complex aspect of verbal irony triggered my motivation to study the degree of indirectness of proverbial utterances in terms of their overt and covert irony markers and to check their social effects on detecting the speaker’s hidden intention in a talk exchange.

3.2 The Analytic Framework

This section encompasses the two following frameworks to analyse and conclude the social function of Arabic proverbs.

3.2.1 Attardo’s Framework

The model of investigation to be applied in this research is Attardo’s (2000b, 2000c) model of irony functions to analyse the corpus. His model will serve to study of the indices and factors of irony in Arabic proverbs which aim at appeasing the tension the interlocutors are burdened with in face to face interaction. At first, I referred to the huge catalogue of overt irony markers inspired from Muecke’s (1978) and Attardo (2000b) in order to determine the graphic and lexical markers that were used in our sample of thirty proverbs. Indeed, detecting overt irony markers in proverbs is crucial in processing them as ironic. The second part of my analysis provides a check list of indirectness cues which was extracted from my work in Noamen (2012). It seeks to measure the proverbial utterance’s degree of indirectness and what they reveal about the speaker’s implied meaning in the Tunisian Cultural context.

3.2.2 Verbal Irony in Social Acting

Triki (2012:3) defines acting as ‘the art of representing a character on stage’. This notion is conductive to the spirit of irony as suggested by the pretense theory of irony (Sperber & Wilson, as cited in Gibbs & Colston, 2007) through which the ironist’s mission overtakes a simple task of transmitting the speaker’s attitude and feelings to perform a series of social acts. It is important to consider the sophisticated nature of our verbal interchange which has a dramatic impact on our social behaviour and the choice of our linguistic means of communication (Triki 2012:14). Hence, the last part of this research paper suggests a check list for a close reading of resorting to ironic proverbs in terms of the Tricky Hypothesis (see section 4.3).

4. Corpus Analysis

4.1 The Analytic Toolkit

There is an attempt to study the central motivation to use irony with a major focus on the social purposes for resorting to ironical proverbs in social interaction. The following check list provides a set of linguistic cues (Muecke 1978; Attardo 2000b, 2000c). Within the framework of
pragmatics, the above mentioned approach is included to study the pragmatic functions of proverbs and what they reveal about the Tunisian Cultural context. A qualitative analysis is, then, adopted in the methodological part to apply Attardo’s approach to the social function of irony while using proverbs. [Table 1. The Analytic Toolkit]

4. 1.1 Overt Irony Markers

Many researchers treated overt irony markers at different levels such as graphic, lexical, kinesic markers (Muecke 1978; Attardo 2000b, 2000c; Attardo et al. 2003). The focus in the current study is limited to graphic and lexical irony markers.[ Fig.1 Frequency of Overt Irony Markers in Proverbs]

Figure one shows a total dominance of one type of indices that explicitly mark irony. In fact, the thirty proverbs under study heavily encapsulate Lexical markers to signal irony. At one level, irony is explicitly marked by the excessive use of adjectives and adverbs such as ‘dark-colored’ in proverbs 3 and 4, ‘intrusive’ in proverb 24, ‘never’ in proverb 30. Another sign that gives evidence for lexical markers of irony is the stream of lexical items which connote irony like ‘a good for nothing’ in proverb 2, ‘mocking’ in proverbs 4 and 13, ‘old drone’ in proverb 11, and ‘intrusive guest’ in proverb 24.

Overt signs of irony mark the inappropriateness of the proverbial utterance to the context in which it was said. However, they are significant to initiate the recognition of the speaker’s intention.

4. 1.2 Covert Irony Markers

This study is mainly concerned with the proverb-user’s indirect strategies to address others in social interaction by means of indicators of irony to be able to communicate the social factors of his/her ironic intention. While figure two shows the frequency of indirect strategies and their social effects in Tunisian proverbs, figure three indicates the frequency of indirect cues in rhetorical factors of ironic proverbs [Fig. 2 Frequency of Social Factors in Proverbs]

According to figure 2, the majority of proverbs mark the dominance of the group affiliation sub-social factor. This can be illustrated through in-group identity markers such as [شاذة بزبسط / الغولة إلي القياد / الفحة خادبة / الخوات / خالتي / ضناها] which aim at creating a friendly attitude with the addressee. Besides, proverbs heavily encapsulate items related to social affiliation notably kinship terms [النيدة / البنت / الكئية / سبها / شابية / ضناها]

The second social factor in ironic proverbs is rated by politeness with more than 50%. In this case, a series of indirectness cues are calculated; namely ambiguity [من رطابة شوية من الحنة و شوية / يغدا و جمعة صلاة القياد و عبري و أعطاه الباري حصان / بعضه الحناء بالدار], over generalization [الطفلة في الدار / الكئية و أعطاه الباري حصان / نارك وكوشة الطفولة في الدار], and giving sympathy or goods to the hearer [سعادة يا قصيرة ديما صغير / سعادتك يا الطرش / سعادتك يا الشجاعة / جمعة و أعياد / تقضى الطفولة].

The third ratio in social factors is scored by evaluation. More than 40% of proverbs include indirect cues which vary from understatement [سعود ماهياش قدود / سن ثوم ينتن خادبة], to
overstatement. The choice of ironic proverbs which refer to a third person [زبنطوط، سمرا، زينطوط] are more critical because both parties are engaged in mocking/laughing at the third person while granting themselves the alignment against the other who is the only irony-prone.

Sophistication is the last social factor in terms of cues of indirectness which are illustrated through the use of metaphors [الطفلة في الدار كوشة من نار] and ellipsis [سعدك يالطرش].

With reference to figure three, the study of indirect cues has shown retractibility slightly overrides persuasion. Retractibility implicates a stream of lexical items which connote negative meaning like (/زبنطوط يتنن/شارف/يتمسخر/) and a series of signs of lack of commitment of the speaker (/ضيف و كلوقي/ عربي و اعطم الباي حصان/) as opposed to signs of involvement (/حاجتي حتى على خالتي/) and in-group identity markers such as (/الغولة/القياد/زبنطوط/) as opposed to signs of involvement (/حاجتي حتى على خالتي/) and in-group identity markers such as (/الطفلة في الدار كوشة من نار/)

However, persuasion is shown in proverbs which include both participants in the activity (/طعامك/زبنطوط القياد/الغولة/) and in-group identity markers such as (/عماني ماجاني و دخانك/ زبنطوط القياد/الغولة/)

To sum up, irony is a powerful rhetorical tool because it impedes social clash between both participants. Rhetorical factors serve an underlying social dimension by avoiding more serious reaction on the part of the hearer and creating sympathy between both participants. Hence, they are not just informative acts; they also perform social acts.

The coming section illustrates the common pattern in our corpus between overt and covert indicators of irony placed throughout the entire utterance to justify the use of ironic utterances in social exchange (see figure 4).

4.1.3 The Hierarchy of Irony Markers

The two strategies which are embedded in the collection of Arabic proverbs to look out the ironic tone in them notably the overt and covert markers are presented in the bar-chart figure. [Fig. 4 The Hierarchy of Overt and Covert Irony Markers]

Figure four shows how markers of irony operate in multiple modalities, how these factors operate independently of one another.

Covert markers override the overt ones which are just significant to initiate the recognition of the speaker’s intention. This proves that proverbial utterances are socially conventional. The importance of ironical markers, however, lies behind the speaker’s intention to minimize the risk of misunderstanding between both participants. Still, the crucial point in resorting to ironic proverbs stems in their social effects.

The classification of covert irony markers relying on Attardo’s (2000) model shows that no pattern functions as an absolute marker of irony. The purpose of irony use is determined by its social factors which operate together as a system. Irony is, thus, a complex and prized mode of
communication. In order to hedge his/her intentions, the speaker resorts to a set of markers to avoid misunderstanding and social offense.

Obviously, what makes the ironist exaggerate the use of ironical markers, whether overt or, and covert, is his/her intention to get the message across to the audience. The importance of ironical markers lies behind the speaker’s intention to minimize the risk of misunderstanding on the part of the hearer. Still, the crucial point in resorting to ironic proverbs stems in their social effects. The presence of direct cues in proverbs does not mean that the speaker’s ironical intention is doomed to failure. Contrariwise, the high ratio of directness communicates the ironic intention of the proverb-user.

The previous analysis leads to a number of interesting conclusions and considerations which will be detailed in the next section. They synthesize the two axes of verbal irony markers to be a frame of the butt of resorting to proverbial utterances in social exchange.

4.2 Findings
4.2.1 The Functional Aspect of Ironic Proverbs
Verbal irony is multifunctional. Proverbs have a macro act of irony which is to avoid offense. The relevance of this finding is that the politeness function of ironic proverbs is one of degree and not absolute. This view of alternation shows that the use of ironic proverbs in a talk exchange is strategic.

The relevance of these findings is that the proverb user’s attempt to perform an act of politeness is based on the degree of indirectness of the proverbial utterances. However, this measure is not absolute but rather a matter of degree. A number of conclusions can be outlined from the patterns noted above. First, irony markers at the locutionary level and the social effects intended by the speaker (Attardo et al.2003: 257). Resorting to ironic proverbs has a small negative effect on the speaker-addressee relationship especially when they are close to each other. Indeed, the horizontal distance between two participants affects the intentional use of ironic proverbs as well as the hearer’s processing of its ironical input (Noomen, 2012: 59). Ironic proverbs are, then, modes of softened criticism which grant social payoffs for both speaker and addressee regardless to their familiar or, and unfamiliar relationship.

Resorting to ironic proverbs is not an offensive linguistic behaviour because the addressee is less insulted and more amused by the ironic remark more than when addressed by direct criticism.
The proverb user does not rely only on the explicit signs of irony; he also draws the hearer’s attention to focus on particular social factors to reveal his intentions in resorting to ironic utterances. Thanks to the ironist strategies, the addressee is less insulted and more amused when addressed ironically. The ironic tone in Tunisian proverbs veils offense and ensures communication between both participants.

4.2.3 Towards a Synthesis

In conclusion, our analysis of a corpus of ironical proverbs leads us to establish the following points. First, our data show overwhelming support for the pragmatic parameter which play an important role in interpreting the ironical interaction between participants who belong to the same cultural context. However, in order to understand irony, we should not be limited the proverbial utterance as an act of saying, nor should we restrict our focus on the ironist’s hidden intention. In effect, one should spot light on the verbal ironic act as a whole.

The coming section suggests the study of ironic proverbs in terms of the Tricky Hypothesis.

4.3 Discussion:

Triki (2012:12) argues for the theatrical aspect of social interaction during which language users, just like actors on stage, get disguised to impress their audience. In fact, the notion of theatricality is of direct relevance to people’s use of ironical proverbs. Proverbial utterances which are graded on a continuum ranging from very indirect, indirect, direct to very direct and offensive are strategically adopted by the speaker. In an attempt to pursue such a circuitous route, the proverb user seeks to magnetize the addressee to get engaged in a social game which has its strict rules. According to Triki (2010:3) the participants must be properly equipped to be able to join in social game. They resort to proverbial utterances which carry the potential for acting. Proverbial utterances, then, encode the proverb user’s management of hidden intention.

4.3.1 The Illocutionary Force of Ironic Proverbs

The pragmatic concern of language is echoed in the discrepant relationship between the utterance’s literal meaning and the implied one. The bone of contention goes around specifying what language-users do with the linguistic repertoire they own when they are engaged in social interaction. What is of relevance at this level is that there is no sole interpretation of proverb use. At first, the proverb-user expresses his/her intentions by means of verbal cues which make their act of saying an act of doing. Indeed, whether the proverbial utterance is marked with overt or, and covert irony markers, the speaker’s intention is marked in both cases to uphold the tricky strategy of the proverb-user to impress his / her addressee. Actually, the speaker’s use of proverbs is facetious. However, the speaker’s attempt to disguise his offensive proverbial utterance may be facade and his act of politeness will be interpreted as fake.

4.3.2 Ironic Proverbs in terms of the Tricky Hypothesis

Actually, referring to the principle of the Tricky Hypothesis is not a random choice. Both social and rhetorical factors of ironic proverbs could be processed in terms of the three types of acting propounded in the Tricky Hypothesis. First, the lack of appropriateness between the use of proverbial utterances and the meanings they include is due to the first type of act as manipulating impressions. Then, the fact that verbal irony is successfully detected by hearers thanks to a set of
common social rituals and conventions shared by both participants and does not impede communication is due to acting in the second sense of joining in a social game. At last, the third sense of acting is set into relief thanks to the speaker’s hidden intention while addressing his counter parts to impress them in social interaction and make them share irony. The tricky aspect of irony is manifested when the interlocutors get engaged in a social game which ends to deception. The speaker appears polite just giving a sense of humour to his utterance, but, at the deep level his utterance is deceptive. The proverb-user, then, goes with his/her utterance beyond an act of saying to perform an act of politeness. In order to succeed the social effect of his/her ironic utterance, the speaker calls into play the three dimensions of acting identified in the Tricky Hypothesis.

In a nutshell, in the case of ironic proverbs, the illocutionary act of the utterance manifests itself in terms of the Tricky Hypothesis as follows. First, the speaker tends to deceive his/her addressee (the third sense of acting on people) while resorting to a set of indirect strategies (sense one) according to common shared beliefs and conventions about proverbs in the Tunisian context (sense two). This is schematically represented in [ table 2 Ironic Proverbs in terms of the Tricky Hypothesis] which is borrowed from Triki’s (2012:29) schematic representation of the Tricky Hypothesis’s four maxims.

5. Conclusion

The above discussion has attempted to subvert the very assumptions underlying the concept of ironic proverbs as it is spontaneously used in the Tunisian social context. They are accommodated in people’s daily linguistic behaviour since they are anchored in our verbal interactions. Indeed, the bone of contention with these concepts is about the speaker’s hidden intention in uttering ironic proverbs. At this level, proverbs are perceived as social acts aimed at creating certain effects which are context depended. In effect, what this research tends to show is that in verbal irony, the speaker is engaged in a social game through which he puts the positive function of irony at the skate as the hearer risks to process the speaker’s real intention of being offensive due to his disguised brusque ironic utterance. The speaker, then, minimizes the risk while resorting to a gamut of irony markers in his/her proverbial utterance.

So far, this study has made an effort to underscore that ironic proverbs, like other forms of speech, are double-edged figures which include a mismatch between their locutionary force (what is said) and their illocutionary force (what is implied). Proverbs are, then, deceptive and misleading. Further research is required to study the vexing problem of the connections between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary acts performed by ironic proverbs when uttered in ironical context in order to detect the hearer’s reaction. Will the hearer treat the tease playfully? Or will he seriously react to it by rejecting or correcting the speaker’s ironic suggestion.
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### APPENDIX 1

**A translation of the Tunisian Proverbs into English**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Semantic Translation of Proverbs</th>
<th>The Arabic Transliteration of Proverbs</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I gave my daughter to marriage to be located in her home; she came back to me with her four kids.</td>
<td><strong>Zawajet benti tog’d fe darha, jetne warb’aa sgharha</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A good for nothing is wearing no hat and no coat.</td>
<td><strong>Zbantoot la shashea la kaboot</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not only being a dark-colored daughter-in-law, but also nasalizing and with a broken tooth.</td>
<td><strong>Zeed ‘alkenna samra wbelkhana wmak sorat essenna</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark-colored and clad in green, even the chickens in the cage are mocking her.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacken one’s face and say collier.</td>
<td><strong>Sawed wejhek wgool fa’am</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is all about fortune and not beauty.</td>
<td><strong>S’ood mahyech ta’reyet znood</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A drunk is blaming a gambler.</td>
<td><strong>Sokarjee y’adham ‘la 9amarjee</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A double-edged knife.</td>
<td><strong>Sekeena bou wejheen</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How lucky are the deaf!</td>
<td><strong>Sa’dek ya latresh</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A clove of garlic spoils the big jar.</td>
<td><strong>Sen thoom ynaten khabya</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An old drone is useful neither for inoculation nor for honey provision.</td>
<td><strong>Sheref en’hal la yla9ah wla yjeeb ‘ssal</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes, it is due to “Henna”, sometimes due to smooth hands.</td>
<td><strong>Shewaya melhenna wshewaya men rtabet leeden</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The net is mocking the sieve saying: How large is your hole!</td>
<td><strong>Shebka tadh’hak ‘al ghorbel wet9olou mawsa’ ‘ee nek ya harwel</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders’ prayer is just on Fridays and feasts.</td>
<td><strong>Slat el9oyed ejom’a wel a’yed</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When a Bedouin is awarded a horse by “the Bey”.</td>
<td>‘arbee wa’iah elbey hssan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• The groom is a prince for seven days, a minister for seven other days and a prisoner for the rest of his life.

La’roos sab’a eyem ameer, sab’a eyemwzeer web9eyet ‘omro asser

• Barefooted and wearing a ring on his finger.

‘eryen esse9 wfe sob’3o khatam

• He comes back disappointing after a long absence.

Tool elgheeba wjaal belkheba

• Useless height is just like the Christian ladder.

Etool welkhsara ke saloom enssara

• Obedience of women leads to hell.

Taa’at enssa etdakhal lennar

• Though overwhelmed with your smoke, I have not tasted your food.

Ta’aamek majanee wdokhanek ‘manee

• The tall woman manages to cope with her business, whereas the short one asks for her neighbour’s help.

Etweela tagdhee hajet’ha wel9ssera t’ayet ljaret’ha

• She is looking for her baby while he is on her lap.

Dhnaha fe h’jerha wheya tlawej ‘leeh

• Such an intrusive guest!

Dheef wekloofe

• He wasted all night adjusting the tunes of the lute.

Dhaa’ eleel fe ta9’eed el’ood

• A girl at home is like a burning oven (fire).

Etofla fedar kousha mennar

• For the sake of my interest, even the Ogress becomes aunty.

‘la hajtee hatta elghoula twalee khaltee

• Only fools believe in quarrels between sisters.

’ark lekhwet yjed ‘al mahboulet

• Lucky are the short! Always look young!

Sa’dek ya 9syer deema sghayer

• Co-ownership is never fruitful!

Esherka ma feeha barka
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. The Analytic Toolkit

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Linguistic Cues</th>
<th>Relevance to the topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irony Markers: they are helpful devices adopted by the speaker to draw the hearer’s attention to the switch to the ironical mode. They are overt irony markers which mark the locutionary act of the utterance. (Attardo 2000c :5)</td>
<td>• Graphic</td>
<td>• Irony markers are important to sustain the ironic flavor of proverbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Graphic</td>
<td>• Lexical (Muecke 1978; Attardo 2000b, 2000c)</td>
<td>• Through explicit devices of irony, it is possible to salvage proverbs from brusqueness and infer that the speaker is being ironical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irony Factors: the central motivations to use irony: A para-communicative alert of irony is a strategy through which the speaker alerts the hearer to interpret his / her utterance as ironical (Attardo et al. 2003:257)</td>
<td>• Signs of involvement</td>
<td>• Proverb users want to be ironical in order to minimize the risk of being misunderstood (the social function of irony)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irony is a complex and prized mode of communication. Its purposes are determined by its rhetorical and social effects. (Attardo 2000b)</td>
<td>• Signs of detachment.</td>
<td>• Resorting to proverbs, the speaker seeks to veil criticism, saves face and preserves a friendly attitude with the hearer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social Factors: There are four social factors:</td>
<td>• In-group identity markers.</td>
<td>• In ironical context, both participants share knowledge about the cultural conventions of proverbial utterances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Group Affiliation: shared irony serves to create an in-group feeling.</td>
<td>• Using metaphors</td>
<td>• Both participants are victims of irony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ellipsis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Being ambiguous and vague</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Understating</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Overstating</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Sophistication: an ironical utterance is sophisticated since it requires some mental dexterity to process it. (Attardo, 2000b:13)
The speaker uses irony to appear in control of his emotions. (Dews et al. 1995: 347)

1.3 Evaluation refers to the muting function of irony. It includes an expression of attitude which turns down the negative effect of ironical criticism and the positive effect of ironical praise. (Dews et al. 1995) Attardo (2000a, 2000b) argues that the muting function is when the literal meaning of irony mutes its intended meaning.

1.4 Politeness: Irony is a face threatening act. Yet, a set of indirect cues inserted in the ironical utterance irony makes it less offensive (Attardo 2000b: 13, 2000c:4)
Proverbs are treated as ‘veiled face-threatening acts’(Brown & Levinson 1987)

2. Rhetorical Factors include two aspects:
   • Persuasive Aspect: the
   • Impersonalizing the speaker and the hearer
   • Cues of indirectness (giving hints, being ambiguous, over generalization, giving gifts to hearer such as goods and sympathy)
   • Displacing hearer
   • Including both participants in the activity.
   • Using in-group identity markers
   • Signs of lack of commitment of the
   • The signs of indirectness in ironical proverbs show the strategic intention of the speaker.
   • Irony is a goal-oriented act of saying which performs a specific social act as intended in the illocutionary force of the utterance.
   • The proverb-user intentionally mutes his/her real attitude for communicative purposes.
   • The proverb-user mutes aggression to avoid unpleasant reactions of the hearer.
   • Irony is one of face-saving strategies.
   • Resorting to ironic proverbs, the speaker attempts to refine his/her brusque linguistic behaviour.
   • The ironic proverb is
ironical utterance implicates a proposition in the common ground of shared beliefs between the speaker and the hearer in a given context. (Attardo 2000c: 4)

Irony is a powerful rhetorical tool because it presupposes the truth of the uttered proposition to be self-evident. (Attardo 2000b)

2.2 Retractibility: the peculiar aspect of irony lies behind the discrepancy between the said and the intended meanings of the utterance. Irony allows the speaker to take a non-committal attitude towards what he/she says and avoid the hearer’s unpleasant reactions. (Attardo 2000b, 2000c)

Table 2. Ironic Proverbs in terms of Tricky Hypothesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Tricky Hypothesis’s four maxims</th>
<th>Relevance to my Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Verbal Interaction as Game Maxim: Every act of verbal interaction is part and parcel of a calculated game.</td>
<td>The use of proverbial utterances which are loaded with indirect irony markers is intentional by the speaker to start off his/her social game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dissimulation Maxim: The game is realised through the wearing of appropriate/convenient masks.</td>
<td>The speaker disguises his/her offensive intention by means of ironic proverbs which are socially accepted by both participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The relevance Maxim: This play on</td>
<td>The proverb user resorts to ironical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
masks is governed by the principle of relevance.

- The Stakes Maxim: Relevance is relative to the stakes of verbal interaction as perceived by the speaker engaged in a well-defined social context.

proverbs which are relevant to the social context in which they are uttered to cope with the communicative goal of the social interaction.

Verbal interaction may jeopardize the friendly relationship between both participants. A witty ironist attempts to ease the hearer’s task of detecting irony and include him/her in social game.

The global effect: the multifaceted act of proverbial utterance. It is a culture-based strategy that may vary from one culture to another.

### LIST OF FIGURES

- **Figure 1.** Frequency of Overt Irony Markers in Proverbs
- **Figure 2.** Frequency of Social Factors in Proverbs
- **Figure 3.** Frequency of Rhetorical Factors in Proverbs
- **Figure 4.** The Hierarchy of overt and covert Irony Markers

| Covert Markers | Overt Markers |