Problems of Understanding English Ironic Expressions by M.A Students of Applied Linguistics at Mu'tah University in Jordan

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Abstract
The present study attempts to investigate the problems of understanding English ironic expressions M.A of Applied Linguistics students at Mu'tah University in Jordan. This quantitative and qualitative study includes 15 of M.A students of Applied Linguistics at Mu'tah University. The participants were selected randomly. Two research instruments were used including questionnaires and semi-structured interview. The findings of present study indicate that students' low level of linguistic competence in English language has a negative impact on understanding English ironic expressions. The study recommends further research to be conducted in this field.
Keywords: ESL, Ironic Expressions, Comprehension, Linguistic Competence.

1. Introduction
English is the most widely used language in the world. It is the first language for over 360 million people. Furthermore, it is the language of 500 million people as their second language (SL). It is used by nearly 1 billion people as a foreign language (FL) (Crystal, 2003), therefore a huge body of research has been conducted in the acquisition of English language. Amante (1981) claims that irony is a gap that exists between the literal meaning and the intended one. Also, Verschueren (1999) states that irony means that the intended meaning is completely the opposite of what is literally said. This indicates that "an ironic message is a blatantly false message containing some counter attitudinal information with the intent of being actively detected by the receiver as being false"(Kreuz and Cauccian, 2007:1).

Irony is a universal phenomenon, which is a literary device that merely includes all cultural uses in daily conversations, and yet 80% of the people are unfamiliar of its intended meaning and take it literally (Siger and Taha, 2012). According to Clark and Gerrig (1984) ironic expressions are understood when listeners distinguish the affectation underlying a speaker's statement. In many cases, ironic expressions accomplish their communicative intent by reminding listeners of some antecedent event or statement (Sperber and Wilson, 1986), or by reminding listeners of a belief or social norm collectively held by a speaker and a listener (Kreuz and Glucksberg, 1989).

There are two basic types of irony: verbal and situational. First, verbal irony is being formed when the speaker intentionally highlights the surface meaning of his or her utterance, usually for humorous purposes. Verbal irony succeeds when the listener receives the intended meaning otherwise, it will fail. Second, situational irony is the inconsistency between one's beliefs or actions and how things actually are without his or her knowledge. Dramatic irony is simply defined as a type of situational irony that occurs in drama (Wolfsdorf, 2007).

2. Literature Review
Few studies have been conducted on comprehending irony by second language learners in comparison with the studies that investigated irony as a figure of speech in general (Rachel et al., 2008).

 Sparr (2015) conducted s a study to examine the pragmatic competency of Chinese ESL learners' with genuine compliments, ironic compliments, and ironic insults. The study took place at Iowa State University of Science and Technology in The United States of America. The sample of the study included 22 Chinese ESL learners and 4 American students. The findings indicated that both Chinese students and American student agree that genuine complements are not insulting, cause a positive impact on the relationship, and associate positive emotions. As well as, both Ironic compliments and Ironic insults are both insulting, cause a slightly negative impact on the relationship, and associate negative emotions. In conclusion, the study revealed that American and Chinese students have positive impressions of genuine compliments and they have negative impressions of ironic compliments. Additionally, both Chinese students and American students had difficulty understanding Ironic compliments. Likewise, Rachel et al. (2008) conducted a study to investigate the perception of Irony by L2 Learners of Spanish and examine the interpretation of ironic expressions in Spanish language films by L2 learners of Spanish and the role of audiovisual contexts in the ability of learners to understand irony. The findings of the study indicated that understanding ironic expressions increases as proficiency level of the target language increases. Furthermore, the study showed that the hypothesis that audio and visual contexts enhance the listener's processing ironic expressions (Yus Ramos, 1998; 2000) was weakly supported and applies only for advanced learners in the present study. Similarly, Siger & Taha (2012) conducted a contrastive study of ironic expressions in English and Arabic at the University of Duhok. The study has yielded some significant findings

and conclusions, the most conspicuous are the following: Ironic expressions need more time to be comprehended than direct meanings. In addition, one cannot understand ironic expressions without being aware of the context. Consequently, the current research aims at investigating the problems of understanding ironic expressions by M.A students of applied linguistics at Mu'tah University since this issue has been investigated before. This is seen in the scarcity of research in this concern as discussed in related literature.

3. Statement of the Problem

Much research has been conducted on second language acquisition (SLA) of irony indicate that learners use ironic expressions from the target language, but unfortunately they encounter some difficulties understanding their meaning (Bouton, 1999; Cook, 2000; Davies, 2003). However, few studies have particularly examined the problems that second language learners might find when dealing with ironic expressions. As a result, this study will investigate the problems of understanding ironic expressions by M.A students of applied linguistics at Mu'tah University.

4. Research Objectives

This research aims at achieving the following objectives:
i.   To determine the problems of understanding English ironic expressions used by M.A Applied Linguistics students at Mu'tah University.

5. Research Questions

In order to achieve the objectives of the research, this study addresses the following research questions:

1Q: What are the problems that M.A Applied Linguistics students at Mu'tah University in Jordan find when handling English ironic expressions?

6. Methods and Procedures

The sample of the study composed of 11 common ironic expressions which were selected from the internet. The data were then analyzed according to Wolfsdorf's (2007) classification of irony. This is because it helps achieving the objectives of the study. Questionnaires and semi-structured interview were used to elicit data for this study. A total of 15 M.A Applied Linguistics students, who are enrolled for more than 24 credit hours, participated in this study. The participants were all second language learners of English.

7. Discussion of the Findings

The aim of this study is to investigate the problems of understanding English ironic expressions faced by M.A Applied Linguistics students at Mu'tah University. A questionnaire was distributed to the participants. They were encouraged to participate in the study after having them informed about the objectives of the study.

No.	Statement	Verbal Irony	Dramatic irony	Situational irony	No irony
1	As sunny as winter day in Alaska.	40%	0%	60%	0%
2	A teacher failed a test.	26,6%	13,3%	46.6%	13,3%
3	A fire station burns down.	6,6%	13,3%	53,3%	26,6%
4	In Romeo and Juliet, the former thinks Juliet is dead, but the audience know that she only took a sleeping position.	0%	93,3%	6,6%	0%
5	Exclaiming "oh great" after failing an exam.	46,6%	20%	26,6%	6,6%
6	In scary movie, the character walks into a house and the audience knows the killer is in there.	6,6%	33,3%	33,3%	20%
7	Her hair was silk.	33,3%	20%	13,3%	33,3%
8	The weather is as cool as a summer day in the Midwest.	26,6%	13,3%	60%	0%
9	"Oh great! Now you have broken my camera."	53,3%	13,3%	33,3%	0%
10	The sun is like a yellow ball of fire in the sky.	33,3%	13,3%	0%	53,3%
11	The name of Britain's biggest dog was "Tiny".	53,3%	0%	33,3%	13,3%

Table (1) shows the Participants Responses in Percentage.

As Table (1) shows, statements 1,5,8 and 9 are all classified as verbal irony converted into written form according to Wolfsdorf's (2007) classification of irony. Based on the analysis, six participants out of fifteen

determined the first expression as verbal irony with a 40% percentage. Also, seven participants answered sentence 5 correctly recording 46.6%. However, only four of the participants recording 26.6% have answered 8 sentences correctly. In addition, eight participants out of fifteen have answered 9 sentences correctly. More importantly, only five students could support their answers by giving correct explanations. They identified verbal ironic sentences and gave a valid definition unlike the remaining ten students who showed ignorance about the nature of verbal irony.

Moreover, sentences 2,3 and 11 are situational irony following Wolfsdorf's (2007) classification. Seven students out of fifteen answered sentence 2 correctly recording 46,6%. Also, 53.3% of the students answered sentence 3 correctly. Furthermore, only 33.3% from the overall students could answer 11 sentence correctly. None of the participants could support their answers or give an acceptable meaning for any of the previous sentences.

Two sentences, sentence 4 and sentence 6, are compatible with Wolfsdorf's (2007) classification of irony. As shown in Table (1), fourteen students out fifteen , recording 93.3% , have answered sentence 4 correctly. This high percentage is attained because all of the students, who answered correctly, could recognize the sentence as being dramatic from the word 'audience' and that could be referred to their previous knowledge about drama which they have got from the undergraduate level. Also, eight students out of fifteen answered sentence 6 correctly recording 53.3%.

Sentences 7, 10 are written using simile. They, out of context, don't have an ironic style. However, only five students recording 33.3% could identify sentence 7, and eight students out of fifteen recording 53.3% could identify sentence 10 as not ironic statement.

To sum up, it is obvious from the analysis of table(1) that the students who participated in this study have had difficulties in comprehending ironic statements. Students seem not to have the necessary linguistic and cultural competence in English in order to comprehend irony. In fact, 26.6% of the students reported vocabulary difficulties. Moreover, 40% of the students are not able to differentiate between the literal meaning of an utterance and the intended meaning. In addition, 13.3% wasn't able to understand the syntactic relation between the words in the statements. In conclusion, students must reach a high level of proficiency in English language in order to correctly interpret ironic expressions.

NO	Statement	Percentage	Frequency
1	As sunny as winter day in Alaska.	40%	6
2	A teacher failed a test.	46.6%	7
3	A fire station burns down.	53.3%	8
4	In Romeo and Juliet, the former thinks Juliet is dead, but the audience know that she only took a sleeping position.	93.3%	14
5	Exclaiming " oh great" after failing an exam.	46.6%	7
6	In scary movie, the character walks into a house and the audience knows the killer is in there.	33.3%	5
7	Her hair was silk.	33.3%	5
8	The weather is as cool as a summer day in the Midwest.	26.6%	4
9	" Oh great! Now you have broken my camera."	53.3%	8
10	The sun is like a yellow ball of fire in the sky.	53.3%	8
11	The name of Britain's biggest dog was "Tiny".	33.3%	5

Table (2) Shows Percentages and Frequencies of the Students' Right Responses to the Statements in the Test.

8. Conclusion

The present study investigates the problems of understanding English ironic expressions by M.A Applied Linguistics students at Mu'tah University in Jordan. Qualitative and quantitative analysis were used to classify the problems that the students may find when dealing with ironic expressions. The findings of the study indicate that M.A Applied Linguistics students may find difficulties understanding ironic expressions concerning to their linguistics skills like their ability to understand lexical meanings of words; their ability to comprehend the syntactic relations between words, and their ability to locate the incompatible word within the ironic utterance and the purpose of using it.

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