

Irony and echoing: A multidimensional analysis

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Keywords: irony, echoing, implicitness, completeness, conceptual complexity, accuracy

Relevance Theory (RT; Sperber and Wilson, 1995) claims that verbal irony is based on echoic mention (i.e., the interpretive repetition of a previous utterance or thought). For example, the utterance *Melania? Sure she is an angel!*, in a context where Melania is clearly unkind, provides an ironic echo of what the speaker thinks is an erroneous belief (cf. Wilson and Sperber, 2012). However, ironic echoing is more complex than it appears from the standard RT examples. Close examination of a collection of over 200 contextualized examples suggests that echoing is sensitive to at least the following dimensions of analysis, which are not mutually exclusive: (1) implicitness, (2) completeness, (3) conceptual complexity, and (4) accuracy.

Implicitness hinges on the extent to which the echoed material is absent from the ironic utterance thereby shaping its communicative impact. Take the statement: *Yeah, sure. Well, not today; I have a headache*, uttered by a wife in response to her husband's offer to assist her with chores, when she suspected he simply wanted to cajole her into marital intimacy. Her statement echoes the implicature she derives from her husband's move. An explicit echo would have taken this form: *Yeah, sure, you want to help. Well, not today; I have a headache*.

The completeness of an ironic echo (e.g., whether total or partial) depends on focal prominence (Ruiz de Mendoza, 2017). Take a PhD supervisor who tells a doctoral student *I'll be with you to discuss your new thesis chapter at 5 pm tomorrow*. The student, who is aware that her supervisor is invariably late, mutters a wry side remark: *Yeah, right, at 5 pm in your office*. The echo focuses on the part of the supervisor's utterance that bothers the student.

Echoic complexity goes beyond mere repetition. We distinguish between echoic cumulation, echoic compounding, and echoic chains. In cumulation the ironist strengthens the ironic impact of an utterance by listing in succession synonymous expressions that can echo one single target thought (*Yeah, right, an angel, a saint, a treasure!*). Compounding combines different utterances into one single echo: *Yeah, right. You do the heavy tasks, as you say, by dusting the furniture, while I do the light tasks of sweeping, ironing, and washing dishes*. In an echoic chain, the ironist echoes a previous echo: *Yeah, right. Mary IS an angel* (to disprove the previous ironic echo questioning the girl's virtues).

Finally, (in)accuracy is used to control the range of meaning implications arising from the echo in a cognitively economic way (Ruiz de Mendoza & Barreras, 2022). An example of intended inaccuracy is a situation where an indolent employee says: *Let's get started. Hands on deck!* A fellow worker replies: *Yeah, right... Hand on deck*. The inaccurate singular "hand" is used to point to the lesser involvement of the shameless worker.

All in all, the present study provides basic analytical criteria resulting in a higher degree of systematization and a finer degree of analysis than previous studies on ironic echoes.

References

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