Identification and Analysis of Visual Irony in Political Cartoons of the Algerian Civil War (1992-2002)

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Background

The poster is about the analysis of visual irony in political cartoons published in three Algerian newspapers during an armed socio-political conflict known as the Algerian civil war (1992-2002).
It reports on the results and the challenges encountered during my pilot analysis of a hundred cartoons which I selected randomly from the larger data set.

Approach to Irony

IRONY ALERT!

Sperber and Wilson's (1981) approach to irony as an echo-mention.
According to this theory, an ironic speaker quotes an earlier utterance or implicit popular wisdom, while simultaneously dissociating themselves from the echoed utterance (Jorgensen et al., 1984). The echo serves to convey an attitude of disapproval, contempt or ridicule.

Methods of Analysis

-Clift's (1999) notion of irony as 'framed evaluation' which serves as a vehicle of criticism towards the object/victim of irony.
It captures the important characteristics of irony across its verbal and visual forms and avoids the problem of finding a specific origin for every echoic irony.

DATA

-Scott's (2004) distinction between word-based and wordless types of visual irony. While the former involves a visual image and 'some form of text', ironic content in the latter is realized purely visually(p. 32).
The recognition of visual irony is made salient by an incongruous juxtaposition of between the reality and the pretended ironic world(p. 34).

Preliminary findings

The data analysis has revealed some original and important findings, namely:
1- Political cartoons have their distinctive formal properties for the realization of ironic intent. Ironic meaning in this genre is often constructed through a combination of visual depictions and verbal language in the form of a caption, human/non-human character's speech, or any other verbal element (see Figure 1).
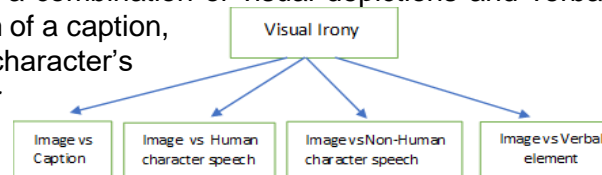

Figure 1: Structure of visual irony in political cartoons

2- My original contribution is that the application of Clift's concept of frame has resulted in two original patterns which I call 'whole-frame' irony where the whole scene of the cartoon is ironic. Alternatively, the cartoonist draws an ironical frame around a part of meaning only, which I call 'partial-frame irony' (see Figure 2)
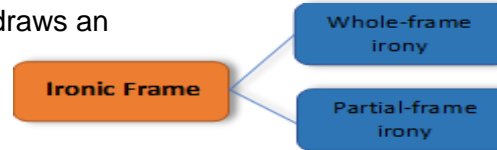

Figure 2: Types of ironic frame in political cartoons

3- While many studies established criticism and denunciation as the main functions of irony in cartoons (Monje, 2011), my findings suggest that ironic cartoons can also express other attitudes such as disillusionment.
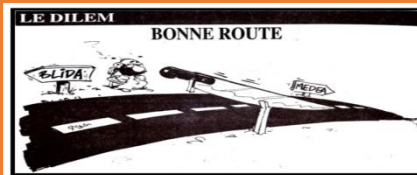

Figure 3: *Liberté,* April 15th 1997

Figure 3 shows a clear and straightforward example of visual irony. Dilem depicts a bearded Islamist sitting by a road linking the cities of Blida and Medea.

- The caption,"Bonne Route" 'Have a safe trip!', is entirely inconsistent with the visual image, which displays a turnpike in the form of an oversized knife dividing the road into two halves. The cartoon points to the unsafety of the road and the perils that travellers face.
- It is the incongruity between the visual depiction and the echoed caption which signals the ironic intent. The ironic interpretation frames the whole cartoon.
- Dilem condemns the series of fake checkpoints along the roads linking the two cities which Islamist groups were notorious for setting up to kill passengers and/or to steal their valuables.
- The use of irony instead of just directly criticising the checkpoints suggests that irony often adds a critical edge to the cartoon and highlights the severity of the situation.

Challenges in the analysis of visual irony in political cartoons

However, some cartoons are very complex. I often find a difficulty to decide whether:

1- the cartoon is ironic or not.
2- the attitude expressed in ironic cartoon is always criticism.
3- the visual irony frames the entire cartoon panel or just a part of it.

-The cartoon depicts the former President Mohamed Boudiaf making his way through a hazardous swamp filled with snakes and crocodiles.
-Nevertheless, Boudiaf's facial expression and body language, and the elegant nature of his attire – including the carefully rolled-up trouser legs – suggest a state confidence and unawareness of the perils he is facing.
-The swamp is a metaphorical representation of the field of politics in Algeria at the time.
-The irony is constructed visually. It entails a clear incongruity between the depiction of the dangerous reptiles, and the character's actions and emotional state, that of confidence.
-However, the victim of the irony and the (critical) attitude being expressed are unclear. It is also hard to identify what is being echoed.

Figure 4:*ElKhabar,* 23/01/1992

Questions for Feedback

Q1-Can any other attitudes, apart from criticism, be expressed by irony in the cartoon genre?
Q2- Is it useful to distinguish between whole-frame and partial-frame ironies?

References

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