Pitch Differences in Performed versus Extemporaneous Spoken Sarcasm and Verbal Irony

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Statement of topic and specific question. The study of the intonation of sarcasm and verbal irony has suffered from inconsistent conclusions and disagreement among researchers, some claiming the phenomenon of a unique set of vocal cues can be demonstrated (Rockwell, 2000; Cheang and Pell, 2008) and others insisting the evidence is insufficient to make any concrete claims (Bryant and Fox Tree, 2005). One possible explanation for these varying results may be that speakers use different intonational cues when performing versus when speaking extemporaneously.

Example of phenomenon. Ironic and sarcastic statements are characterized by an incongruity between the literal meaning of an utterance and the speaker’s intended meaning. Though usually used by expressing a negative thought with positive language, e.g. a speaker who, upon discovering that her car has been towed, intones “Oh, that’s just wonderful,” positive propositions are also occasionally articulated with a negative literal meaning, as when an audience member comments that a virtuosic pianist “may have potential.”

Methodology. To look into this possibility further, I have gathered examples of both performed and extemporaneous spoken language from several speakers. Focusing on average pitch and pitch variation as the primary vocal markers of sarcasm and verbal irony, I pulled out such utterances from the transcripts of these sources and did acoustic analyses to detect whether there were any significant differences between a speaker’s pitch when speaking sarcastically versus “straightforwardly” in a commencement address (performed) and an NPR interview (extemporaneous).

Significance of findings. If my findings show that performed speech does indeed show a marked difference between pitch patterns of ironic versus unironic statements, but that such differences are not present in everyday conversational speech, the question then becomes: Where do our intuitions about such vocal cues come from? If these speech patterns are not to be found in natural, spontaneous spoken language, then why do we employ them when performing rehearsed text?

Bibliography:


