

## *Linguistically Encoded Contradictions in Understanding Verbal Irony*

### **1. Introduction**

Linguistic discussions on verbal irony have focused mostly on ironic utterances, such as (1) or (2), which can be described as pragmatically-determined since they can be interpreted as ironic only in a specific context of use. Examples of such utterances presented in literature are typically supplemented with additional information which provides the necessary contextual cueing.

- (1) Johnny always comes on time.  
(said of someone who notoriously comes late)
- (2) Well done, Jenny!  
(said to someone who has just committed a blunder)

Traditionally, such ironies have been understood as conveying the meaning which contradicts the literal meaning of the utterance. Present day pragmatics offers a number of different accounts. For Grice (1975, 1978) irony involves a breach of a communicative maxim, which generates an implicature: the hearer is supposed to suppress the literal meaning and replace it with its reverse. Martin (1992) and Giora (1995) view irony as a form of indirect negation while for Sperber and Wilson (1990: 152) it “rests on the perception of a discrepancy between a representation and the state of affairs that it purports to represent.”

Relatively little attention has so far been given to another type of ironic utterance, presented in examples (3) and (4), which can be described as linguistically-determined since their irony seems to stem from what is linguistically encoded in the utterances and remains unaffected by the context in which they are used.

- (3) Ed knows how to handle children even though he’s a child psychologist.

- (4) After his recent flutter on the Stock Exchange, Harry's immense fortune amounted to £5.

Here, too, we find a discrepancy but, unlike in the previous examples, it is clearly part of what is explicitly stated in the utterance. Thus the most striking feature of (3) is what seems to be a misused connective *even though*, while in (4) the ironic effect is triggered by the incompatible meanings of the constituent parts of the utterance, namely a paltry sum of £5 described as an immense fortune.

Contradictions or at least discrepancies seem to be an important aspect of irony understanding, a fact noted by Curc6 (2000:279), who observed that "very often during the process of interpreting ironic utterances contradictions are encountered," adding that "what is characteristic of the comprehension of verbal irony is [...] the way in which the contradiction encountered is manipulated." In the present paper I shall use the relevance-based framework to compare and contrast the way contradictions are handled in the two types of ironic utterances and to offer some thoughts on the degrees of the cognitive complexity involved in interpreting both kinds of irony.

## 2. The relevance-theoretic position on verbal irony

### 2.1. Defining features of irony

The account of irony, first developed by Sperber and Wilson (1981) and (1986), and then refined by them (1992), breaks with the tradition of treating irony as conveying the opposite of the literal meaning of the utterance. No reversal of meaning is postulated and no breach of communicative rules is posited. Instead, ironic utterances are seen as achieving relevance by informing the hearer that the speaker is entertaining a certain attributable thought and that he holds a disparaging attitude to that thought (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 239).

The propositional content of ironic utterances is not to be negated or contradicted because it does not reflect a state of affairs but represents another propositional form which it resembles in some aspect. Thus in (1) the speaker is ridiculing an opinion that someone may have voiced about Johnny or which Johnny himself may have expressed, namely that Johnny always comes on time. When uttering the exclamation in (2) the speaker echoes a set expression used to praise someone's performance of a task and distances himself from the idea that the addressee deserves to be praised.

As can be seen, resorting to irony allows the speaker not to endorse the thought his utterance is echoing. This is achieved thanks to the contradiction we find

between the content of an assumption conveyed by the utterance, i.e. that Johnny always comes on time or that Jenny deserves to be praised, and the propositional content of a contextual assumption, which is that Johnny notoriously comes late or that Jenny has done nothing worthy of praise.

## 2.2. Interpreting irony

One of the claims made by the relevance theory is that understanding irony does not require any special principles of interpretation. Understanding any utterance, whether ironic or not, involves decoding and inferring, i.e. to understand an utterance the hearer combines the information encoded linguistically with some contextual assumptions and forms a hypothesis about the speaker's communicative intention. In doing so the hearer is guided by the search for optimal relevance, i.e. tries to derive sufficient cognitive effects at the lowest processing cost. However, in the case of irony a successful recovery of the intended interpretation requires the hearer to recognise that there is an extra layer or layers of metarepresentation added to the communicated content because in addition to decoding what is communicated explicitly, the hearer has to attribute to the speaker "a thought about an attributed thought, as well as an attitude of dissociation from it" (Curcó 2000:268). The difference between the representational levels required to interpret a literally and an ironically intended utterance (1) is shown in diagrams I and II, respectively, adapted after Curcó (2000:269); "someone" is to be understood as someone different from the speaker at the time of the utterance:

### *Diagram I:*

#### **Literally intended utterance**

The speaker intends  
 the hearer to know that  
 the speaker thinks that  
*Johnny always comes on time*

### *Diagram II:*

#### **Ironically intended utterance**

The speaker intends  
 the hearer to know that  
 the speaker thinks that  
 someone thinks that  
*Johnny always comes on time*

Curcó's model of the inferential process involved in the recovery of the dissociative attitude is presented in diagram III, where premise 1 "allows the hearer to recognize the speaker's communicative intention" and premise 2 "is a metarepresentation containing the contextual assumption that clashes with the propositional content of the utterance" (Curcó 2000: 272).

**Diagram III:**

(Curcó 2000: 273)

*Premises*

- (1) The speaker intends  
       the hearer to know that  
           the speaker intends  
               the hearer to believe  
                   that  $p$
- (2) The hearer believes that  
       the speaker believes that  
           the hearer believes that  
               the speaker believes that  
                    $\sim p$

*Conclusion:* The hearer believes that the speaker is ironic

I would like to argue, however, that the process possibly takes a different form, presented in diagram IV, which indicates that in order to successfully recover the attitude of dissociation from the attributed thought the hearer first has to recognise attribution, i.e. construct a multi-layered representation of the kind shown in diagram II (and possibly even more complex), which he may then use as a premise in the inferential process and combine it with another premise, thus embedding the clashing propositions in two different metarepresentations and arriving at conclusion 1. He then continues the inferential process using conclusion 1 as a premise to be combined with yet another premise, which allows him to draw the implicated conclusion that the speaker is ironic. What signals the attitude of dissociation is the clash between a contextual assumption (premise 2) supplied by the hearer and the propositional content of the utterance  $p$ .

**Diagram IV:***Premises*

- (1) The speaker intends  
the hearer to know  
that the speaker thinks that  
someone thinks that  
 $p$  (e.g. *Johnny always comes on time*)
- (2) The hearer believes that  
the speaker believes that  
the hearer believes that  
the speaker believes that  
 $\neg p$  (It is not the case that *Johnny always comes on time*)

*Conclusion 1:* The hearer believes that  
the speaker believes that  
to think that  $p$  (e.g. *Johnny always comes on time*)  
is absurd

*Implicated premise:* The hearer believes that  
speakers deliberately express absurd opinions to show  
that they do not endorse them

*Conclusion 2:* The hearer believes  
that the speaker is ironic

The complex meta-representational reasoning required to recover ironic interpretation makes ironic utterances more difficult to process in comparison with non-ironic discourse, a hypothesis which is borne out by various empirical studies conducted in recent years (Happé 1993; Curcó 1995; Smith and Tsimpli 1995).

### 3. Questions about linguistically determined ironies

Now, to what extent does this characterisation of irony production and interpretation apply to linguistically-determined ironies? Are they essentially different from the pragmatically-determined ones? Are they also echoic in character? Do they not require sophisticated metarepresentational reasoning to be interpreted as ironic?

To address these questions let us try to establish what is encoded in linguistically-determined ironies.

## 4. What do linguistically determined ironies encode?

### 4.1. “Oxymoronic” ironies

Characteristically, none of the linguistically-determined ironies contain explicit logical oppositions. Utterance (5), which asserts a contradiction, would not be considered ironic.

(5) John is a real genius and he is not a real genius.

Instead, many linguistically-determined ironies encode lexical oppositions. Haverkate (1990), one of the few linguists who discussed this type of irony, considers the example presented here as (6), observing that “an overt ‘*contradictio in terminis*’ is created between \$100,000, on the one hand, and its qualification ‘a nice little sum,’ on the other” (Haverkate, 1990:82).

(6) Your friend asked me to lend him *a nice little sum of \$100,000*.

More examples of utterances which owe their ironic effect to contradictions of this sort are presented in (7), where the phrase “the whole gamut of emotions” is followed by a clearly incomplete specification “from A to B,” and in the last line of (8), where the phrase “the intellectual calibre,” typically indicating outstanding intelligence, is combined with the incongruous mention of the famed bear of a little brain.

(7) She ran *the whole gamut of emotions from A to B*.

(a remark Dorothy Parker supposedly made about Katherine Hepburn)

(8) Master of Bailey College:

Is he of the intellectual calibre to understand our case?

Sir Humphrey (*hesitation*):

Oh yes... Surely our case is intelligible to anyone with the intellectual calibre of Winnie-the-Pooh.

Master of Bailey College:

Quite! And Hacker is of *the intellectual calibre of Winnie-the-Pooh?*

[from *Yes Minister*. “Doing the honours,” a comedy programme by Pete Atkin]

Similar oxymoronic examples, i.e. (9) and (10), can be found in Seto (1998), who uses them as evidence that some ironies are in fact non-echoic:

- (9) Here is *a nice mess*. (Seto 1998: 249)
- (10) You're as *eloquent as an oyster*. (Seto 1998: 249)

#### 4.2. Assumptions conveyed by “oxymoronic” ironies

Now this brings us to one of our questions. Are linguistically-determined ironies echoic? The answer can be found in Sperber and Wilson (1998:284), where we are reminded that the notion of echo “covers not only cases of direct and immediate echoes ... but also echoes of (real and imaginary) attributed thoughts ... and echoes of norms and standard expectations.” It would seem that the echoes identifiable in linguistically-determined ironies always have a vaguer origin in such general ‘norms and standard expectations.’ Thus, of the two examples presented at the beginning, (3) echoes an expectation that people make investments on the Stock Exchange in order to make immense fortunes, and (4) – a belief that child psychologists know how to handle children. In the similar vein, (8) seems to reflect the expectation that actresses are able to express the entire range of emotions, i.e. “from A to Z,” and (9) – the expectation or at least an illusion that politicians are people of high intellectual calibre. Utterance (10) may echo the general preference for situations not to be a mess, and (11) – a preference for people to be eloquent and articulate. However, linguistically-determined ironies do not encode only the echoed content, as is the case with pragmatically-determined ones. Rather, by attributing two incompatible descriptions to the same object such ironies in fact convey two contradictory assumptions at once:

- (a) contextual information about the perceived state of affairs in the form of a representation used descriptively,
- (b) the echoed expectation or norm in the form of a proposition used interpretively, which the speaker dissociates himself from in the light of the contextual assumption (a).

It is in this way that oxymoronic ironies, such as the ones presented in examples (8) – (9), explicitly bring out contrast between the actual state of affairs, indicated by assumptions (a), and the expected or generally desirable state of affairs, indicated by assumptions (b):

- (8) She ran *the whole gamut of emotions from A to B*.
- (a) She showed a limited range of emotions.
  - (b) She ran the full gamut of emotions from A to Z.

- (9) Hacker is of *the intellectual calibre of Winnie-the-Pooh*.  
 (a) Hacker's intellectual capacity is like that of Winny-the-Pooh.  
 (b) Hacker is a person of a high intellectual calibre.
- (10) Here is *a nice mess*  
 (a) Here is a mess.  
 (b) Here is a nice situation.
- (11) You're as *eloquent as an oyster*.  
 (a) You're as inarticulate as an oyster.  
 (b) You're very eloquent.

How are these assumptions manipulated in the process of interpreting? As shown in Diagram V, the inferential process is almost identical with the one required for the successful interpretation of pragmatically-determined ironies, except that this time the contextual assumption in premise 2 is already encoded in the utterance thus making the processing task easier for the hearer.

**Diagram V:**

*Premises*

- (1) The speaker intends  
 the hearer to know  
 that the speaker thinks that  
 someone thinks that  
 $p$  (e.g. *Here is a nice situation*)
- (2) The speaker intends  
 the hearer to know  
 that the speaker thinks that  
 $\neg p$  (e.g. It is not the case that *here is a nice situation*,  
 i.e. *Here is a mess*)

*Conclusion 1:* The hearer believes that  
 the speaker believes that  
 to think that  $p$  (e.g. *Here is a nice situation*) is absurd

*Implicated premise:* The hearer believes that  
 speakers deliberately express absurd opinions to show that they  
 do not endorse them

*Conclusion 2:* The hearer believes  
 that the speaker is ironic



### 4.3. “Procedural” ironies

Finally, let us take a look at example (3), which implies that child psychologists do not know how to handle children, or a similar example, such as (12), which implies that someone who has had progressive education is not expected to be able to read and write.

- (12) Virtually all children (in South Derbyshire) can read and write *even though* they’ve had progressive education.  
[from *Yes Minister*. “The Skeleton in the Cupboard,” a comedy programme by Pete Atkin]

What exactly induces the ironic reading here? A promising way of explaining the source of irony in such examples can be found in the relevance-theoretic distinction between two types of linguistic meaning: conceptual meaning, which provides “information about the representations to be manipulated,” and procedural meaning, which provides “information about how to manipulate them” (Wilson and Sperber 1993:2). The expressions which encode concepts, e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, can become constituents of communicated assumptions, i.e. mental representations which, in the words of Rouchota (1998: 32) “can enter into logical relations such as contradiction and entailment, they can describe or partially characterise a certain state of affairs, they can be true or false, they can act as input to inference rules.’ In the examples discussed so far contradictions clearly resulted from the clash between the conceptual meanings encoded in the words used, i.e. loosely antonymous lexical items encoded concepts which became constituents of two contradictory assumptions. On the other hand, expressions which encode procedural meaning, such as discourse particles (e.g. *so, well*) or connectives (*after all, since, although*) provide an instruction or a constraint on the inferential process in the derivation of implicatures.

At first glance it would seem that *even though* too encodes procedural meaning but it is really so? Let us consider the linguistic status of this connective in the light of the criteria proposed by Rouchota (1998) for distinguishing conceptual expressions from procedural ones, i.e. the criterion of non-compositionality, the criterion of non-truth-evaluability and the cognitive criterion.

There is some evidence that *even though* does indeed have procedural meaning. First, examples such as (13a) and (13b) suggest that it meets the non-compositionality criterion and unlike conceptual connectives, such as *because*, it does not combine with other words to form larger concepts.

- (13a) He can’t read and write mainly because he never went to school.

(13b) \*He can read and write mainly even though he never went to school.

Secondly, conceptual expressions, such as *unfortunately*, are truth-evaluable even when they do not contribute to the truth conditions of a particular utterance, as in (14b), so the oddity of B's reply in (14b) may serve as evidence that *even though* indeed is not conceptual. However, the fact that B's reply in (14c) is acceptable provides some arguments in favour of the conceptual meaning of *even though*.

(14a) A: Unfortunately, he can't read and write.

B: You're mistaken. There is nothing unfortunate about his inability to read and write.

(14b) A: He can read and write even though he never went to school.

B: ?You're mistaken. His ability to read and write has nothing to do with the fact that he never went to school.

(14c) A: He can read and write even though he never went to school.

B: You're mistaken. There is nothing surprising about his ability to read and write despite never having gone to school.

When it comes to the cognitive criterion, the situation becomes even less clear. Although it is difficult to identify a mental representation *even though* might encode, and the meaning of this connective is typically described in terms of its function in a complex sentence, some descriptions of its meaning do include references to an element of surprise, which is a conceptual notion. Consider the following sources:

***Even though***: [used] to introduce a clause which appears to partly contradict the main clause in the sentence but does not actually affect the truth of the main clause (*Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*)

***Even if/though***: used to call attention to the extreme nature of what follows (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)

***Even though*** expresses both the contingent dependence of one circumstance upon another and the surprising nature of this dependence (Quirk et al. 1972: 476 (11.29))

While the in-depth analysis of *even though* is beyond the scope of this paper the study of ironicity induced by the connective offers some evidence that it does

represent a borderline case between procedural and conceptual meaning. First, let us examine the procedural meaning it might encode. Arguably, this meaning is similar to or the same as the procedural meaning of *although*, a connective which, according to Iten (1998:100), indicates to the hearer that the subordinate clause it introduces contradicts but does not eliminate some aspect of the interpretation of the main clause. By some aspect she means the proposition expressed by that clause, one of its higher level explicatures, or an implicature of that clause. Thus the procedure encoded by *although* instructs the hearer of sentence (15) to suspend an inference arising from the clause *it was raining*, namely that *Peter didn't go out*, which would directly contradict the proposition encoded in the main clause.

(15) Peter went out *although* it was raining.

If a similar procedure is encoded by *even though*, then in the non-ironic example (16) the implicature arising from *he is a child psychologist* is that Ed knows how to handle children and *even though* instructs the hearer to suspend it because it would be incompatible with the proposition encoded in the main clause, which is that *Ed doesn't know how to handle children*.

(16) Ed doesn't know how to handle children *even though* he's a child psychologist.

In the ironic example (3), the implicature arising from *Ed is a child psychologist* again is that he knows how to handle children and *even though* again instructs the hearer to suspend it, but this time we end up with a contradiction instead of avoiding it. It might be argued that it is this contradiction that serves as the cue of the dissociative attitude of the speaker. A competent hearer will try to resolve it by embedding the two conflicting propositions in metarepresentations in such a way that no contradiction appears. The inferential process involved in the recovery of irony, which is presented in Diagram VI, is in fact identical with the one in Diagram IV.

**Diagram VI:**

- Premise 1*           The speaker intends  
                          the hearer to know that  
                          the speaker thinks that  
                          someone thinks that  
                          *p* (e.g. *Child psychologists know how to handle children*)
- Premise 2*           The hearer believes that  
                          the speaker believes that  
                          the hearer believes that  
                          the speaker believes that  
                           $\neg p$  (*Child psychologists do not know how to handle children*)
- Conclusion 1:*       The hearer believes that  
                          the speaker believes that  
                          to think that *Child psychologists know how to handle children* is absurd
- Implicated premise:* The hearer believes that  
                          speakers deliberately express absurd opinions to show that their  
                          do not endorse them
- Conclusion 2:*       The hearer believes that  
                          the speaker is ironic

However, in example (3) the ironic dissociation does not seem to be the only aspect of communicated meaning. While it is child psychologists that the irony targets here and the utterance implies that the speaker does not think much of their ability to handle children it seems that there in another line of reasoning, triggered by what seems to be the conceptual meaning of *even though* and involving no contradictions and no irony. In this line of reasoning, presented in Diagram VII, premise 2 of Diagram VI is combined with a descriptively used representation, i.e. premise 1 of Diagram VII.

**Diagram VII:**

- Premise 1*           The speaker intends  
                          the hearer to know  
                          that the speaker thinks that  
                          *Ed knows how to handle children*
- Premise 2:*       The hearer believes that  
                          the speaker believes that  
                          the hearer believes that  
                          the speaker believes that  
                           $\neg p$  (*Child psychologists do not know how to handle children*)
- Conclusion:*       The hearer believes  
                          that the speaker is surprised at the fact that Ed knows how to handle children

## 5. Conclusions

I hope to have demonstrated that different types of ironic utterances require similar but not identical ways of resolving contradictions arising during the inferential process. While the contradiction always involves the content of an assumption conveyed by the utterance and the propositional content of a contextual assumption, in pragmatically-determined ironies it falls to the hearer to supply a relevant contextual assumption, in “oxymoronic” ironies it is already encoded in the utterance and in “procedural” ironies it results from the meaning encoded by the connective. In all cases resolving contradiction requires a complex metarepresentational reasoning on the part of the hearer.

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