

Irony and Implied Negation

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Abstract: Irony, as a universal language phenomenon, draws great attention from various fields of philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, achieving fruitful results in both theoretical and empirical studies. However, an agreement hasn't reached yet on the issue of the production, interpretation and even definition of irony. Hence, based on previous studies, the paper proposes a new idea, claiming that irony is in essence implied negation, expressing the meaning of $\sim P$ by P without negation markers. With this definition, conceptions with similar usage can be distinguished, like understatements, litotes, metaphors and sarcasms. Irony can be classified into propositional negation irony and ideational reversal irony and its pragmatic functions can be divided into positive kinds, including humour, compliment and intimacy, and negative kinds, including criticism and sarcasm. Irony plays an important role in our daily communication, reflecting the vividness and interesting side of language. The study of irony facilitates further investigation of language and meaning and interpersonal communication.

Keywords: Implied negation; Definition of irony; Classification of irony; Pragmatic function

1. Introduction

As a universal language phenomenon, irony attracts the attention from rhetoricians since ancient Greek and Roman, and in recent years, it has triggered heated discussion among philosophers, linguists, psychologists and cognitive scientists, etc. In the aspects of its definition, production and interpretation mechanism, rich achievements have been gained in both theoretical and empirical researches. However, unified viewpoints on these issues haven't yet been reached. Hence, the paper, dividing previous studies into the perspectives of pragmatics, cognitive science and other aspects, analyzes the defect of previous theories in the understanding of the essence of irony, puts forward new ideas, and deals with the definition, classification and pragmatic functions of irony from its essence of implied negation, hopefully bettering the understanding of irony and the issue of language and meaning.

2. A Literature Review of Irony Studies

Irony draws keen attention from various fields. In this section, previous studies are divided into three groups: pragmatics, cognition science and other aspects, reviewing significant achievements in irony studies, absorbing productive results as well as finding limitations, and finally exploring new ideas of understanding irony.

2.1. The Perspective of Pragmatics

The irony studies from the perspective of pragmatics will be discussed in this section, including relevance theory, speech act theory and the theory of conversational implicature. Sperber and Wilson proposes the Mention Theory of irony, stating that irony is echoic utterances, expressing speaker's attitude or reaction to what was said or thought.^[1] The theory explains the production motivation and interpretation methods of irony. After proposing the theory, Sperber makes relevant experiments to verify the theory.^[2] Cao and Lu discuss the Mention Theory put forward by Sperber and Wilson, arguing that this theory can better reveal the essence of irony and is more convincing and scientific than traditional irony theories.^[3] Haveskate claims that irony is a can be described within the framework of the theory of speech acts. Speakers make use of irony in order to produce certain perlocutionary effects on their hearers, the principal ones being to break their patterns of expectation and involve them in a type of verbal interaction that is characterized by interpersonal distance.^[4] Huang starts from the

Gricean Philosophy to set up a new approach to irony by modifying and extending Grice's original theory.^[5] He argues that irony intrinsically expresses the speaker's attitude and carries a reversed evaluation and generates conversational implicature invariably carrying negative evaluation. Sullivan states that verbal irony is best viewed as one among many species of particularized conversational implicature, illustrating a taxonomy of the varieties of verbal irony based on Grice's theory of conversational implicature: quality-irony, quantity-irony and relation-irony. His theory originates from conversational implicature while makes some improvement and amendment.^[6] Combining the theory of conversational implicature and the theory of relevance, Attardo presents a theory of relevant inappropriateness of irony, which claims that an ironical utterance is both inappropriate and relevant to its context.^[7] The above classical theories of pragmatics play a significant role to the study of meaning. However, irony, when be put into the framework of these theories, cannot be distinguished from other linguistic phenomena producing pragmatic meaning and from other rhetorical languages and its essence cannot be reflected. Besides, counterexamples which cannot be explained by the above theories are found in some studies, for example, some irony cases are not echoic.

2.2. The Perspective of Cognitive Science

With the popularity of cognitive science, the irony study from the perspective of cognition emerges, which is the focus of this section. Tu argues that the contrast of kind is the inherent property of irony.^[8] The contrast of kind is discussed from aspects of semantics, illocutionary force and evaluation. According to mental space theory, the cognition process of irony is the recognition of contrast, or the interspatial projection and mapping of diverse concepts. Conceptual integration, caused by mapping failure, results in online and dynamic construction of ironic meaning. Cao regards irony as a complex linguistic phenomenon both cognitively and psychologically.^[9] He examines what irony is from an interactive perspective, proposing is as a sort of miscommunication, which is viewed somewhat positively as a chance. He then puts forward four conditions for the production of verbal irony, drawing upon the complementarity of irony theorizing, presents a formal account for the language realization of irony on the basis of its propositional content feature and argues that internal cognitive mechanism for irony perception can be better illustrated via mental space theory. Huang proposes a new approach to the production and interpretation of irony within the framework of mental-models-based pragmatic reasoning.^[10] The use of irony is substantially a cognitive process in which man, constrained by the relational knowledge in his mental models, is innately driven to perceive opposite-directional proximity under a specified context. Irony involves mapping of two sub-domains of the same cognitive domain, which makes irony a special instance of metaphor. Zhang claims that irony derives from the contradiction between what a speaker explicitly says and what he implicitly believes.^[11] The speaker conveys his literal meaning to the hearer while concealing his true beliefs, which produces a cognitive conflict towards the speech act between the speaker and hearer, making an unbalanced communicative unit. The tendency toward balance, however, requires the hearer to make cognitive evaluation at the cost of the hearer's minimum effort. When the cognitive or affected difference is bridged after the hearer reverse his cognition or affect, the balanced unite regained and the speaker's attitude is recognized. Integrating the attitude unit of communication with Conceptual Blending, a Socio-cognitive Balance Model can be set up through which the verbal irony may be interpreted in terms of its meaning and attitude. The above research explain the interpretation and cognition process of irony by Fauconnier's theory of mental space and conceptual blending and Lakoff & Johnson's theory of cognition and metaphor, but neglects the aspect of speaker, the essence of irony and its production motivation.

2.3. Other Perspectives

Despite the perspectives of pragmatics and cognitive science, many researchers discuss irony from other perspectives, which enriches the study of irony. Clark and Gerrig argues that the pretense theory is superior to the mention theory of irony proposed by Sperber and Wilson, since not all irony is echoic.^[12] They propose a pretense theory of irony, claiming that, in being ironic, a speaker is pretending to be an injudicious person speaking to an uninitiated audience and the speaker intends the addressees of the irony to discover the pretense and thereby see his or her attitude toward the speaker, the audience, and the utterance. The theory can make up for the deficiency of mention theory, explaining those ironies which are not echoic, such as the case of Swift's *A Modest Proposal* mentioned in the article, but pretense cannot be the typical features of irony. Giora objects to the viewpoints of Sperber & Wilson and Clark & Gerrig, thinking that irony is viewed as a mode of indirect negation irony understanding involves processing both the negated and implicated messages, and thus takes

longer to process than non-ironic use of the same utterance.^{[13][14]} This paper agrees with the viewpoints of regarding irony as indirect negation, but Giora's study focuses on the processing and interpretation of irony and makes a series of empirical studies to verify graded salience hypothesis. Akira proposes an implicit display theory of verbal irony in order to provide a plausible explanation of how irony is distinguished from nonirony.^[15] Partington states that irony is an implied reversal of the evaluative meaning of the utterance and provides a corpus-assisted investigation into this essence and functions of irony.^[16] Garmendia claims that irony is usually critical, that is, the ironic speaker tends to exhibit an apparent positive attitude in order to communicate a negative valuation, or the ironic speaker can praise by apparent blaming, although it seldom happens, which shows the asymmetry issue of irony.^[17] And he regards criticism as the distinguishing feature of irony from the similar phenomenon of metaphor. All the above viewpoints reveal some features of irony, but not the essence, for example, irony is not necessarily critical.

To conclude, previous study achieves fruitful results, providing explanation for the essence, production motivation, interpretation mechanism and pragmatic effects of irony from diverse perspectives of semantics, pragmatics, cognitive science and psychology, etc., but they are not overall. Hence, this paper makes use of Giora's point of indirect negation and then, on the basis of it, proposes a semantic and pragmatic understanding of irony in order to better reveal the essence of irony.

3. New Idea of Irony Theory: Implied Negation

This section, based on the new idea of regarding irony as implied negation, presents the essence, classification and pragmatic functions of irony by case analysis.

3.1. The Essence and Definition of Irony

Previous section introduces a variety of discussions on the essence of irony, including speech act, particularized conversational implicature, mention theory, contrast, pretense theory, implicit display, criticism. However, this paper argues that the essence of irony is implied negation, and based on this point, provides the definition of irony, the distinction among irony, understatement and litotes and the distinction among irony, metaphor and sarcasm.

The definition of irony in Oxford English Dictionary is "the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect; esp. (in earlier use) the use of approbatory language to imply condemnation or contempt. In later use also more generally: a manner, style, or attitude suggestive of the use of this kind of expression", that is, irony is expressing the opposite meaning with the original form. Nearly all irony studies agree with this feature. For example, Tu sees contrast as the essence of irony.^[8] This paper claims that the contrast proposed by Tu can be stated in a clearer way by negation. Giora points out that irony is a form of negation without explicit negation markers.^[13] The paper endorses this viewpoint that the essence of irony is implied negation, expressing the meaning of $\sim P$ with the form of P , that is, without negation markers. For example, when one is about to go out, but unfortunately the plan has to be canceled because the weather suddenly changed, he can say "what a lovely day" to actually express the meaning "what a bad day". In this way, irony is used for certain pragmatic purpose with implied and indirect negation rather than direct negation with which the expression will be turned into a statement of fact.

3.1.1. Irony, Understatement and Litotes

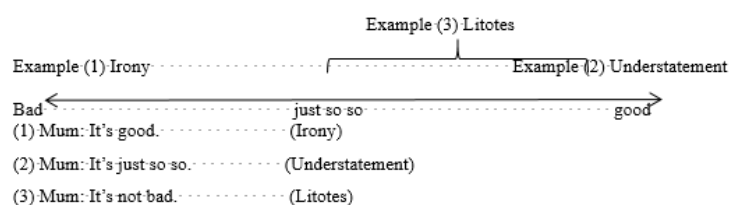


Figure 1: Examples of irony, understatement and litotes

Irony, understatement and litotes are all the kind of linguistic phenomena that the original meaning and the actual meaning are contrastive to some degree. Thus, in order to better define irony and understand its essence, the distinction among three of them is necessary. The theory of Horn-scale can

be exploited here to explain the differences and relation among them. In discussing scalar implicature, Horn uses the concept of scale, such as (excellent, good, OK, mediocre, bad, terrible/awful). Following Horn-scale, we can get (good, just so so, bad), and apply them into three cases respectively to explain the distinction of irony, understatement and litotes, as shown in Figure 1:

Suppose these three examples are in a situation when a mum is asked how her child's test is going. Then in example (1), the child did bad and the mum actually wants to say that it's bad by using an irony here. In example (2), suppose that the neighbor is asking the question and actually the child did well in the exam, while the mum uses "just so so" because of modesty. Then it is understatement in this case. In example (3), according to Neuhaus, there are two explanations, one meaning "just so so" for softening the tone when the child is really not bad, but the result is not as expected and another meaning "good" while using "not bad" for the purpose of understatement and euphemism.^[18] Then it is litotes in this case. In conclusion, in an irony, the original meaning and actual meaning is in two polar ends in Horn-scale in which they are implied negation without linguistic form or negation markers. Whereas, in understatement and litotes, the semantic contrast between original meaning and actual meaning is not so strong to be negation. But one thing to be noted is that, in logic, "bad" is not the negation of "good", while "not good" is the negation of "good", that is, the former pairs are contrariety, while the latter pairs are contradiction. However, Horn indicates that from the perspective of pragmatics, there is a tendency that the contrariety in two polar ends in Horn-scale is becoming the relation of contradiction. Hence, in example (1) of irony, the ironic meaning is regarded as the negation of literal meaning.

3.1.2. Irony, Metaphor and Sarcasm

Irony, metaphor and sarcasm are three kinds of figure of speeches frequently used to compare with each other. Grice takes irony and metaphor as examples of conversational implicature produced by flouting the maxim of quality.^[19] Huang regards irony as mapping between two sub-domains in one domain from the perspective of cognitive linguistics and sees irony as a special case of metaphor. Irony and sarcasm are also in an inseparable relation.^[10] Neuhaus argues that both of them have implied critical attitude and the difference is that the critical attitude in sarcasm is stronger and can even be a kind of verbal attack.^[18] However, this paper claims that implied negation is the essence of irony, which can distinguish irony from metaphor and sarcasm. On the one hand, metaphor does not contain implied negation, as shown in the following two examples:

- (4) X is a fine friend. (irony)
 (5) You are the cream in my coffee.^[19] (metaphor)

Irony example (4) actually expresses the negative meaning that X is not a fine friend, while metaphor example (5) does not have similar negative meaning. On the other hand, implied negation is the necessary condition for an irony, but not for a sarcasm, as shown in the following example:

- (6) Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of "Home sweet home."^[19] (sarcasm)

Example (6) satirizes that Miss X's singing is awful, while this actual meaning is not the negation of literal meaning. It is certain that irony and sarcasm can be in an utterance at the same time, like example (4), but not all ironies are sarcastic or have an implied critical attitude, and this will be discussed in following section with other pragmatic functions of irony.

3.2. A classification of irony

In previous studies, there are different ways of classification according to different criteria. Liu indicates that there are two kinds of ironies according to their meanings: one expressing the positive by the negative and the other expressing the negative by the positive.^[20] And according to pragmatic functions, there are five types of ironies: appraise, satire, joke, intimacy and emphasis. This paper believes that the classification of irony and the pragmatic functions of irony should be discussed separately and thus the latter cannot be the criterion for classification. Dynel divides irony into four types from the perspective of neo-Grice: propositional negation irony, ideational reversal irony, verisimilar irony and surrealistic irony, indicating that the former three types flout the maxim of quality and the last one flout the maxim of manner.^[21] Sullivan classifies irony based on Grice's theory of conversational implicature: quality-irony, which violates the maxim of quality, quantity-irony, which violates the maxim of quantity and relation-irony, which violates the maxim of relation.^[10] This paper argues that the essence of irony is implied negation, rather than conversational implicature, hence the classification should not be discussed in the framework of the theory of conversational implicature. But the paper agrees partly with Dynel's classification. In his classification, four types of ironies correspond

to the following four examples respectively:

(7) You are a fine friend. (when the addressee has done the speaker wrong)

(8) As I reached the bank at closing time, the bank clerk helpfully shut the door in my face.

(9) I love children who keep their rooms clean. (upon entering one's child's messy room)

(10) Perhaps Superman will arrive to solve your problems.^[21] (in response to a statement that a problem will solve itself)

Example (7) is propositional negation irony, whose negation is in sentence level. Example (8) is ideational reversal irony, whose negation is in vocabulary level and example (9) and (10) are verisimilar irony and surrealistic irony respectively. The paper claims that example (9) and (10) does not belong to irony since there is no implied negation between actual meaning and literal meaning. Example (9) is a hinting, where the mum hints that the child's room is untidy and want him to clean the room up. And example (10) is a sarcasm using a situation which apparently violates common sense or common knowledge and is impossible in real life to satirize the absurdity of the hearer. Hence, according to the essence of irony, implied negation, irony can be divided into two types, propositional negation irony, whose implied meaning is in the sentence level and ideational reversal irony, whose implied meaning is in the vocabulary level. For instance, example (7) actually means "you are not a fine friend", and in example (8), "helpfully" actually means "unhelpfully", in which both ironic effects are realized by implied negation.

3.3. The pragmatic functions of irony

The production motivation and interpretation mechanism are closely related with context. Therefore understanding irony from its form and semantic meaning is not enough. This section thus concludes the pragmatic functions of irony to make a further analysis. The pragmatic functions are divided into positive types and negative types in this section.

3.3.1. Positive functions

Positive pragmatic functions of ironies include humor, praise and intimacy, which are as follows:

(11) Xiexie, diyi ci lian, chadian likai zhege meili de shijie.

Thank you. first time practice, almost leaving this beautiful MM world

Thank you, it's my first time doing this exercise and I almost die from it. (from the comment of an exercise video with high intensity)

(12) You did really bad in this exam! (it is said to someone in a situation when he is worried about the result of an exam, but it turn out good after the announcement of results)

(13) ni zhege moren de xiao yaojing!

2SG this torturous MM little evil

You naughty girl!

In example (11), "thank you" is an ironic use, which does not mean gratitude, but rather a way of humor or self-mockery to show that following this exercise video is a difficult thing. Example (12) is expressing the positive by the negative and actually means "you did good in this exam". Example (13) is a recently popular buzzword on the internet to show intimacy among friends or couples.

3.3.2. Negative functions

Negative pragmatic functions include criticism and satire. Examples are as follows:

(14) Mom said to her child angrily: "You've really grown up, for you can come back home in 12 o'clock."

(15) ruyasuihe/ koutufenfang

Being polite and easygoing/ being gentle

In example (14), "grown up" is actually a criticism to child for his late backing home. Example (15) is an internet buzzword to satirize the rudeness of the hearer with vulgar language and bad temper, which is often used in Weibo comments or video bullet screen. The above examples show that irony is closely related with the context, without which the hearer may get the opposite meaning of what the speaker actually wants to convey. Therefore, in order to avoid hearer's misunderstanding, the speaker should fully consider the context of the sentence. In oral language, on the one hand, the speaker can use

certain intonation to express irony and on the other hand, some other factors play an important role in the conversation, such as time, place, relationship between interlocutors, common ground, etc. In written language, there will be some other ways to make sure the ironic meaning be conveyed to the readers. For example, additional information or quotation marks will be added in the sentences. In example (11), “thank you” is an ironic use and the latter half sentence provide necessary context for the readers. There is a popular way to show irony in the comment of Weibo or other internet social media, that is, adding an emoji of dog head. And thus a sentence is becoming popular: adding dog head to save one’s life. It is because that irony is misunderstood very often on the internet language and in order to avoid others’ verbal attack, there is a tendency that one will use the emoji of dog head to make clear his ironic use of the sentence so that some trouble can be avoid, or he can “save life”.

4. Conclusion

Irony plays a significant role in daily communication, showing the vividness and interest of language. The language attraction of irony prompts us to think further about the question of language and meaning, and interpersonal communication. This paper focuses on implied meaning, which is the essence of irony, exploring the definition, classification and pragmatic functions of irony. The study mainly focuses on the speaker and refers to hearer’s interpretation with superficial discussion, but not a detailed investigation, and the data collection is not enough in the study. These issues are expected to be solved in future study. Besides, there are already neurolinguistic studies of irony in recent years and therefore despite theoretical exploration, empirical study is also expected for further development.

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