

Study of Irony on Speech Act Theory

Ronggen Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Publishing and Printing College, Shanghai, China

^azrgen@163.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to study irony from the perspective of speech act theory. By applying two traditional irony standards and combining the classification of speech acts, this approach can establish a typology to distinguish between assertive, impositive, commissive, and expressive irony. This approach shows that the speaker may produce ironic illocutionary effects with the help of illocutionary, predicate and referential sub acts of speech acts. Finally, the paper points out some deficiency of this approach that the incorporation of the cooperative principle and the politeness principle into the speech acts theory still couldn't adequately explain how ironic utterances are understood and why they are made.*

Keywords: *Irony; Speech act theory; Illocutionary act*

1. Introduction

The cooperative principle alone cannot fully explain the way people talk. The politeness principle is complementary to the cooperative principle. Generally speaking, the politeness principle can be formulated as maximizing (other things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs and minimizing (other things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs (Dai, Weidong, et al, 1995) [1].

Here, it can be observed that politeness is usually a function of "politeness belief" and "impoliteness belief". Politeness beliefs are good for the listener (sometimes good for a third party), while impoliteness beliefs are bad for the listener. There is a basic "asymmetry principle" in polite behaviour, that is, the speaker's polite belief is often the listener's impolite belief, and vice versa (Leech, 1981) [2]. Within the politeness principle, six maxims are constructed by Leech [2] as follows:

- 1) Tact maxim (in impositives and commissives): to minimize the hearer's cost; to maximize the hearer's benefit.
- 2) Generosity maxim (in impositives and assertives): to minimize your own benefit; to maximize your own cost.
- 3) Approbation maxim (in expressives and assertives): to minimize the hearer's dispraise; to maximize hearer's praise.
- 4) Modesty maxim (in expressives and assertives.): to minimize self-praise; to maximize self-dispraise.
- 5) Agreement maxim (in assertives): to minimize disagreement between yourself and others; to maximize agreement between yourself and others .
- 6) Sympathy maxim (in assertives): to minimize antipathy between yourself and others; to maximize sympathy between yourself and others.

Those words in brackets such as impositives, assertives, expressives and commissives are different categories of speech acts.

As mentioned above, the politeness principle complementary to the cooperative principle, can be applied to analyzing irony when incorporated into various speech acts. This point will be supported in this paper by the fact that the speaker utilizes irony in order to produce some perlocutionary effect on the listeners, mainly to break their expectation pattern.

2. Conceptual analysis of verbal irony

As is known, one sees that irony has been traditionally defined in two different ways: one is "to say the opposite of what one means"; and the other is "to say other than what one means." These two criteria can be integrated into the speech acts theory in a coherent way (Haverkate, 1990) [3].

2.1. "To say the opposite of what one means."

There are two types of semantic opposites: the negation of a proposition and the opposite meaning of a predicate or its components.

Example (1). I see that you are living together and that you don't speak to each other. Well, a charming couple you are!

Here, the obvious contradiction is related to the semantic content of objective assertion "I see that you are living together and that you don't speak to each other" and that of the evaluative assertion "Well, a charming couple you are!" The semantic oppositions of the evaluative part are:

Example (1a) ... Well, you are not a charming couple!

Example (1b) ... Well, you are a boring couple!

Example (1a) is the negation of the affirmative proposition of (1); (1b) is lexically opposite to the corresponding predicate of (1). (1a) is a figure of speech called litotes or meiosis which helps to mitigate the assessment through non-positive statements, while irony is often used to strengthen the intensity of the assessment. So (1a) cannot be thought of as a non-ironic paraphrase of example (1). Example (1b) on the contrary, it is fully consistent with this purpose, because the predicate "boring couple" clearly indicates the speaker's criticism.

Therefore, to correctly analyse the irony of assertions such as example (1), the opposite literal meaning should not be explained by propositions, but by the opposite lexical meaning of predicate.

However, in the case of idiomatic expressions, ironic interpretation should be based on propositional negation, since they do not enter into lexical oppositions.

Example (2). A: Going to the concert will cheer you up.

B: Oh, I am just in the mood for music!

The non-ironic interpretation of B's ironic statement can only be made by means of the negative proposition, as displayed by example (2a):

(2a). B: Oh, I am not at all in the mood for music!

In utterances like example (1) and (2), the ironic information derives from what is asserted by the subject-predicate relation, such irony is called assertion-oriented irony. But there is another kind of irony, whose ironic information does not come from what is asserted by the subject-predicate relationship, but from what is presupposed by a certain restrictive condition, which has an internal reference field of noun-phrase. This kind of irony is called presupposition-oriented irony, whose noun-ironic variant cannot be generated by means of propositional negation.

Example (3). Jane has stopped organizing her exciting parties.

Here its ironic information derives from what is presupposed by the qualification "exciting".

Presupposition-oriented irony is not influenced by an illocutionary force change (i.e. the speaker's intention to utter that sentence), whereas assertion oriented irony is.

Example (4). You have prepared your lessons very well.

(4a). Prepare your lessons very well.

(3a). Jane, stop organizing your exciting parties!

If we substitute the assertive illocutionary point with an impositive one, (4a) loses the ironic interpretation of example (4) in which the speaker aims to blame the speaker for having got such bad performances at school, while (3a) produces the identical ironic effect as the original (3), in which the speaker implies Jane's parties are the most boring one can imagine. Example 1: It is a truth generally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife.

This is a famous example of verbal irony. The author seems to state a universal and solemn principle or moral truth that everyone can reasonably be expected to agree with. But facts have proved that her pretentious words are just the opposite of the actual situation. As the story unfolds, readers learn that a single woman wants a rich husband. Mrs. Bennet is bent on marrying her five daughters to the rich. This ironic opening indicates the moral conflict of the novel. It brings fun to readers and enhance their participation from the beginning.

2.2. "To say other than what one means."

It has just been shown that irony of assertive speech acts can be interpreted by a paraphrase containing the opposite predicate meaning or the negative propositional content. But what is the case of irony of impositive speech acts?

Example (5). Could you do me the favour of shutting up?

(5a). Could you do me the favour of keeping speaking?

(5b). Couldn't you do me the favour of shutting up?

Example (5a) is not an interpretation of (5), but rather an affirmative request completely opposed to the prohibition implied by (5). (5b) is not a non-ironic interpretation of (5) either, for it stands exactly for the same ironic intention. So we must look for the origin of (5) irony on another level, rather than the origin of proposition, that is, at the level of illocutionary force. Example (5) represents the class of impositive speech acts which express a future act by the hearer. This example is to be further discussed in section III of this paper.

The above analyses demonstrate that verbal irony can be defined and explained in the frame-work of speech acts theory. Therefore, it is necessary to make clear the relation between the manifestation of irony and the types of speech acts.

3. Irony and the types of speech acts

From above, one can see the maxims of politeness principle are incorporated into the speech acts of assertives, impositives, commissives, and expressives. Searle proposed five basic types of speech acts, four of which are: assertives, impositives, commissives, and expressives (Searle, 1979) [4]. Hence the following analysis will focus on assertive, impositive, commissive, and expressive irony.

3.1. Assertives

The illocutionary goal of assertive speech acts can be defined according to the speaker's intention, that is, let the listener accept the propositional content in the utterance as the expression of the real situation. The assertive ironic speaker's intention is to express a limited judgment, whether derogatory or favorable. Derogatory words are used to criticize the behaviour of interlocutors or others, while favorable judgment means that the speaker has a positive attitude towards the situation described by the literally negative meaning.

Example (6). I don't like you at all!

Example (6) may be an ironic statement made in a dialogue between two lovers. However, the irony described in (6) rarely occurs, for an assertion literally expresses a negative evaluation, but implies a positive evaluation, such as appreciation or approval, which is more likely to lead to misunderstanding, even among friends, than an assertion which conveys a positive evaluation, but implies criticism or blame. The reason for this is that a speaker uttering an assertion of the former type violates two pragmatic conventions at the same time: one corresponding to the maxim of quality of the cooperative principle "Don't say what you believe to be false", the other corresponding to the approbation maxim of the politeness principle "to minimize the hearer's dispraise and to maximize the hearer's praise." But a speaker uttering an assertion of the latter type violates only one pragmatic convention, namely, the one corresponding to the above maxim of quality. The approbation maxim of politeness principle is not only respected but applied deliberately, because the propositional content of the assertion expresses a positive judgement. Both the ironic assertion and its non-ironic interpretation have the same communicative purpose, that is, to let the hearer accept the proposition content with ironic meaning or literally specified as the expression of the real situation. The difference between them lies not in the illocutionary force, but in the perlocutionary effect the speaker wishes to bring about.

Finally, let's come to the analysis of three categories of assertive irony, whose non-ironic interpretation can be made in the light of propositional negation only.

First, irony based upon manipulating existential presupposition

Example (7). A: I love you so much that nothing else in the world is important to me.

B: Of course, with all the money we have to get married.

This is a mini dialogue between lovers. Speaker A is a poor young man who tries to pursue the girl speaker B; ironically, she reacted to his amorous statement for they had no money to get married. By applying the agreement maxim of politeness "to maximize agreement between yourself and others", the irony of example (7) stems from the fact that the specified object does not exist, as "all the money we have".

Second, irony in a generalization statement that assigns attributes to a specific set of objects

Example (8). I love people with good manners.

Suppose that Mary and Jane are in the same class. Jane always giggles in class, which annoys her classmates very much. When Mary talks with her classmates about Jane, Mary says example (8). So the ironic interpretation of (8) concerns a communication situation where the speaker addresses the hearer to express his anger at the impolite behaviour of a third person. Its interpretation is based upon a process called referential defocalization, that is, what the speaker of (8). The intention implies that the person who aroused her anger is not a polite person. Here, what is applied to in the interpretation is the approbation maxim of politeness "to minimize the others' dispraise."

Third, irony manifested in rhetorical questions

Example (9). Who taught you to be so polite?

The combination of irony and rhetorical questions is an appropriate means to strengthen the perlocutionary of the negative evaluation of the listener's behaviour. The ironic rhetoric question of example (9) was raised by a mother who criticized her child for making rude observations while she was showering in the bathroom. The ironic effect here is achieved by the speaker's violating the maxim of quality and applying to the approbation maxim of politeness "to maximize the hearer's praise".

3.2. *Impositives*

Directive speech acts include impositives and non-impositives. Impositive speech acts are those behaviors of the speaker in order to make the hearer implement the proposition directly or indirectly for the benefit of the speaker, so as to affect the hearer's intentional behaviour. Impositive speech acts consists of requests, orders and pleas.

Non-impositive directive acts are performed in order to get the hearer to carry out the action primarily for his own benefit. They consist of advice, warnings and instructions. However, directive irony is expressed in the form of impositive utterances in most cases. Within the framework of these two traditional criteria, directive speech acts, especially the ironic realization of impositive speech acts, can be properly described. The criterion "to say the opposite of what one means." is applicable to the opposition between affirmative and negative impositives, while the criterion "to say other than what one means" is applicable to indirect impositives in the form of rhetorical questions.

Example (10). Very well, keep doing yourself harm!

As for the ironic interpretation of (10), we can imagine a father's impositive words to his son, who had just hurt himself clumsily with a hammer. Since impositive irony is related to what will happen in the future, the opposite meaning involved is related to the behaviour as a description of proposition content of the utterance. In example (10), by applying to the tact maxim of politeness "to minimize the hearer's cost", the speaker implies that the affirmative impositive, expressed literally, must be explained by the corresponding negative impositive. Therefore, the non-ironic interpretation of (10) can be constructed in two equivalent ways, one is propositional negation (10a), and the other is the opposition of lexical meaning (10b). (The interjection "very well" is deleted, for it conveys ironic information in itself.)

(10a). Don't keep doing yourself harm!

(10b). Stop doing yourself harm!

3.3. *Commissives*

The illocutionary goal of the speech act of commissive is that the speaker undertakes the obligation and performs the behaviour described by the content of the utterance proposition. Commissives are completely opposite to impositives, since in commissives it is the speaker who performs an action for the benefit of the hearer. The basic commissive speech acts are promises and offers. Such an ironic interpretation is based on the criterion "to say other than what one means". Their ironic performance is realized through the ability of expression and the premise of acceptance. If the speaker cannot perform an action, but promises to perform it, they will get an ironic explanation. If the speaker cannot perform an action but commits himself to performing it, the commissive utterance can be explained ironically.

Example (11). Shall I help you bring your luggage upstairs?

Example (11) was interpreted as a proposal that the speaker was unable to move due to a broken leg. By applying to the tact maxim of politeness "to maximize the hearer's benefit", the speaker may reproach that the hearer cannot expect the speaker to help him carry his luggage upstairs.

The acceptability precondition is as follows: Speaker A presupposes that hearer B prefers A to do the behaviour rather than A not to do it, that is, speaker A's behaviour is acceptable to hearer B.

Example (12). Do you want me to throw you out of the room?

In example (12), the speaker presupposes an action which will not be accepted by the hearer, because it brings about negative effects on the hearer. By applying to the tact maxim of politeness "to minimize the hearer's cost", one can interpret the speech act concerned as a threat.

3.4. *Expressives*

The illocutionary goal of expressive speech act can be defined as the expression of the speaker's psychological state, which is caused by the state of affairs indicated by the proposition content. Cases of expressives are "thanks", "congratulations" and "condolences". The irony of expressive speech acts is that of speakers who "say other than what they mean". The speaker's main intention is to make derogatory statements about the hearer's behaviour.

Example (13). I congratulate you on this stupid remark.

In example (13), the ironic mechanism operates on the violation of the choice between "congratulation" and "stupid comment". The speaker violates two maxims at the same time: the quality maxim, because his meaning is different from what he said, and the politeness maxim "to maximize the hearer's praise and to minimize the hearer's dispraise", because he used a formula with inherent negative denotation.

There seems to be one general constraint on expressive irony, that is, the irony is completely inappropriate to the act of expressing sympathy. For example, it is pragmatically ill-formed to say "I condole with you on the birth of your son".

4. The reason for the violation of maxims - the sincerity of the ironic speaker

In the previous two sections, one can see that each kind of ironic speech act gets its non-ironic interpretation by violating the quality maxim, and sometimes, the politeness maxim. What motivates speakers to violate these maxims? To answer this question, one should first make clear a concept called "sincerity". Sincerity refers to the psychological or intentional state of the speaker. It is proposed by Searle as an inherent necessary condition of any speech act [4]. For example, assertive sincerity refers to the speaker's belief that the proposition expresses the real situation, while impositive sincerity refers to the speaker's wish that the interlocutor perform the behaviour specified by the proposition. The hearer assumes that the speaker is sincere as long as he does not notice the opposite sign. Therefore, sincerity is the internal expression of any ironic speech act. However, sincerity is not a necessary condition for verbal communication, because the speaker may express a state of intention that he does not actually have. In this case, his contribution to communication is not sincere.

Now, let's come back to the question - What is the reason for the speaker not to express himself sincerely? Or what prompted speakers to violate quality maxim?

First, it should be made clear that there are two forms of violation of the maxim: transparent and non-

transparent. Non-transparent violation of the maxim helps to deceive the hearer. Such violations manifest themselves as lies, insincere requests, invitations, promises, etc. Transparent insincerity is clear and aims to be conveyed; and the speaker's overt expression of their insincerity aims to produce a certain rhetorical effect on the interlocutor. According to whether it affects the propositional content or illocutionary goal of speech act, there are two types of transparency and insincerity. The former type of transparent insincerity is traditionally called "rhetoric figures", mainly including metaphor, hyperbole and litotes, while the latter type covers rhetorical question and irony.

Second, it should be emphasized that irony is a complex strategic means: it is manifested not only on the propositional level, but also on the illocutionary level of speech acts. Irony is an insincere intentional expression - a starting point for explaining violations of quality maxim.

The following specifies for each kind of speech act, the corresponding violation of the condition of sincerity caused by the ironic realization of the speech act.

4.1. Assertives

An assertion is sincere if the speaker intentionally believes that the situation described is true. In most cases, the insincere irony of assertive speakers mainly focuses on the choice of predicates. Like

Example (1) "I see that you are living together and that you don't speak to each other. Well, a charming couple you are!"

Here, the internal structure of the proposition enables the hearer to infer that the speaker cannot be attributed to believing the intention state he literally asserts, but to believing the opposite intention state he literally asserts. In addition, there is an ironic insincerity that will affect the content of the whole proposition. Like

Example (2). "A: Going to the concert will cheer you up. B: Oh, I am just in the mood for music!".

Here, the non-ironic paraphrase of B's reaction is based on negative proposition: "I am not in the mood for music."

Finally, insincerity can be reflected by the referential elements of a proposition. Like

Example (7). "A: I love you so much that nothing else in the world is important to me. B: Of course, with all the money we have to get married".

Here, the ironic insincerity stems from the speaker's reference to a non-existent object, "all the money we have to get married"; and this noun phrase is specified by the definite article, which means that the money actually exists. Therefore, the hearer must rely on his understanding of the context and utterance to infer that the speaker does not deliberately believe that money exists in the reality.

4.2. Impositives

The performance of an impositive is sincere if the speaker is in the intentional state of wishing that the hearer carry out the action he asks him to carry out. For example:

Example (5). "Could you do me the favor of shutting up?"

In fact, here, the speaker feels troubled by the undesired behaviour of the interlocutor, which leads him to try to impose his will on the latter. Therefore, literally, the speaker sincerely hopes that the hearer will perform the specified action. However, as far as the illocutionary point of the question is concerned, he is insincere because he is assumed to know the answer. In other words, the speaker takes it for granted that the interlocutor can shut up. Here, the speaker avails himself of the traditional criterion "to say other than what one means" to bring about the illocutionary transformation of the polite request (5) into an authoritarian order (5c) as his ironic interpretation.

(5c). Shut up!

From example (5), we see the ironic effect is produced by the rhetorical characteristics of the question formulated literally. In uttering example (5) the speaker violates the inherent sincerity condition of interrogative speech act. Its propositional content clearly refers to the hearer's ability to perform the required action.

Besides, impositive irony can also be expressed by quoting two other preconditions that constitute impositive speech acts, namely reasonableness and obviousness. Reasonableness involves the speaker's

ability to prove that he has committed a impositive act. Obviousness means that the speaker should not issue a command or request, intending to make the hearer create a state that already exists at the time of speaking.

Example (14). Do you have to make that noise when you're eating?

In example (14), through rhetorical questions, the speaker covered up his ignorance of the etiquette rules that he should not make noise when eating. This produces an ironic effect. By asking questions, the speaker conceals the possibility that the hearer has reason to act in a way unaccepted by society, but, in fact, the hearer cannot have such reason. Therefore, rhetorical questions mean both an order and a reproach.

In saying so the speaker applies to the tact maxim of politeness "to minimize the hearer's cost " in order to reproach the hearer for doing so.

Example (15). Ah, are you already preparing a cup of coffee for me?

In example (15), when both the speaker and the hearer clearly know that the other party is not involved in the activity at all, this question will be interpreted as a request or order to prepare coffee for the speaker. The irony originates from the rhetorical characteristics of the question. The speaker makes clear the obvious prerequisite, violates the sincerity condition of interrogative speech act, and puts forward an informative question, and he already knows the answer to this question when he speaks.

In saying example (15), like in (14), the speaker also applies to the tact maxim of politeness in order to blame the hearer's not preparing coffee for him.

From example (5), (14) and (15), one can see that the speaker makes clear one of the prerequisites (such as ability, reasonableness and obviousness) inherent in the performance of indirect impositive speech acts. By applying to the criterion of "to say other than what one means", the speaker formally realizes one speech act (a) and connects it with another speech act (b) by implication. Therefore, the insincerity of the indirect impositive speaker affects the behaviour of asking for information, that is, the speaker does not want the hearer to truthfully convey the information he needs to him, because he already knows the information. This kind of insincerity should be described by means of the criterion that the speaker means something different from what he says.

4.3. Commissives

If the speaker intends to perform the act specified in the proposition, the implementation of the commissive speech act is sincere. In two cases, the commissive speaker will express himself in an ironic way. They either promise to do what they can't do, or promise to do what they presuppose the hearer can't accept.

In example (11) "Shall I help you bring your luggage upstairs?" the speaker is not in the intentional state of performing the indicated action because he is physically unable to perform the action. In example (12) "Do you want me to throw you out of the room?", the ironic explanation stems from the speaker's manipulation of the premise of acceptability, that is, the speaker obviously mistakenly believes that the behaviour involved is acceptable to the listener, resulting in insincerity.

4.4. Expressives

Due to the different illocutionary goal of expressive speech acts, the sincerity conditions must be defined for each situation in a specific way, that is, we cannot formulate general sincerity conditions. As for the expressive speech act of congratulation, the sincerity condition may be defined as follows: The speaker who sincerely congratulates the hearer is in a state of intention and is positive about the fact that the listener benefits. Therefore, the ironic expression of this speech act means that the speaker feels negative about the situation involved, like example (13) "I congratulate you on this stupid remark". In example (13), the lexical incompatibility between "congratulations" and "stupid" enables the hearer to correctly explain the expressive without relying on specific background information.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to study irony from the perspective of speech act theory. By applying two traditional irony standards and combining the classification of speech acts, this approach can

establish a typology to distinguish between assertive, impositive, commissive, and expressive irony. This approach shows that the speaker may produce ironic illocutionary effects with the help of illocutionary, predicate and referential sub acts of speech acts.

The study shows that Ironic speakers always try to express their negative judgment or evaluation to the hearer, but occasionally show a positive attitude of the speaker to the hearer. The reason is that in the former case only one maxim is violated, but in the latter case, two maxims are being violated, that is, the maxim of quality and some maxims of the politeness principle, like in example (6) "I don't like you at all!" This shows the relation between the cooperative principle and the politeness principle in performing the ironic speech act:

The politeness principle is always to be respected even if the quality maxim of the cooperative principle is being violated; while in rare cases where misunderstandings are not easily aroused, even some maxim of the politeness principle is being violated deliberately to create some intimate atmosphere.

Next, let's come to the argument of the study, that is, recognizing a discourse as irony is a necessary prerequisite for understanding the meaning of the speaker's discourse, that is, irony is an intentional expression of insincerity. But empirical studies in psychology have found that people seem to understand the intention of ironic statements, although they are not always consciously aware of the existence of irony (Gibbs & O'Brien, 1991) [5]. In addition, people usually do not analyze irony until they realize that its literal meaning violates the norms of communication. Here are two places where the speech act analysis of irony seems to be wrong.

Therefore, the incorporation of the cooperative principle and the politeness principle into the speech acts theory still couldn't adequately explain how ironic utterances are understood and why they are made. Those problems remain to be solved in some other ways. In the coming paper, echoic mention theory governed by the principle of relevance may be able to solve them more effectively.

References

- [1] Dai Weidong, *He Zhaoxion. (1995) edited by Hua Jun, Concise English Linguistics, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. (In Chinese).*
- [2] Leech, G. (1981) *Pragmatics and Conversational Rhetoric, in Parret, Herman (ed.) Possibilities and Limitations of Pragmatics, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, B.V.*
- [3] Haverkate, H. (1990). *A speech act analysis of irony. Journal of Pragmatics, 14(1), 77–109.*
- [4] Searle, John R. (1979) *Expression and Meaning, Cambridge University Press.*
- [5] Gibbs, Jr, Raymond W & O'Brien, Jennifer. (1991) *Psychological aspects of irony understanding, Journal of Pragmatics 16:523-530.*