

The Study of Irony in Chinese by Relevance Theory

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Abstract: *This essay is mainly devoted to the relevance theory to explain the phenomenon of irony in Chinese. Firstly, the author introduces the definition of relevance theory and two principles of relevance theory (The cognitive principle of relevance and The communication principle of relevance). Then the focus is given to the application of relevance theory to irony. Next the author studies specific aspects of irony in Chinese by selecting them. It includes ironic expressions in internet phrases, literature works and cartoons. Finally, the authors summarize the use of irony in Chinese with relevance theory.*

Keywords: *Irony, The cognitive principle of relevance, The communication principle of relevance, Internet phrases, literature works, Cartoons*

1. Introduction

The irony is a very powerful speech act and is one of the typical applications of relevance theory. The study of the localisation of discursive irony from a relevant perspective is a question worthy of investigation. And Halliday (1978:253)^[7] held that words and images are used for communication and meaning expression as the meaning potentials. Therefore, this survey explains the specific irony in Chinese Internet terms, literature, and cartoons through relevance theory.

2. Discussion

2.1. Relevance Theory

Wilson and Sperber first introduced relevance theory in a series of dissertations published by each in 1975, which explored contextual factors in pragmatic communication from different perspectives. Their book *Relevance, Communication and Cognition*, published together in 1986, marked the birth of relevance theory. 'Relevance theory is based on a definition of relevance and two principles of relevance: a Cognitive Principle and a Communicative Principle.' (Cummings, 2010: 394)^[6] So, what follows is a definition of relevance theory and two primary principles.

2.1.1. Define of relevance theory

Clark (2013)^[4] elaborated on the definition of relevance in terms of effects and effort. The first factor to consider is what are the attributes of things that are relevant and what are the effects that make them relevant. That is to say 'the result of interaction between a newly impinging stimulus and a subset of the assumptions that established in a cognitive system.' (Huang, 2006:183).^[8] According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), the first thing that needs to be clarified is the difference and relationship between contextual effects and cognitive effects. 'The difference is that contextual effects are defined formally without reference to the kind of system which might give rise to them, while cognitive effects are effects which arise within a cognitive system, i.e. cognitive effects are contextual effects within a cognitive system.' (Clark, 2013: 100) ^[4]The relationship is that 'a cognitive effect is a contextual effect within a cognitive system.' (Clark, 2013: 101)^[4] Whether the conclusions are based on pre-existing or new perceptions. That means 'a new assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that it gives rise to cognitive effects and that the more cognitive effects it gives rise to, the more relevant it is for that individual at that time.' (Clark, 2013:101) Furthermore, Sperber and Wilson(1995) distinguished three main types of cognitive effects that can be induced when processing new information in a context. That is given as follows:

- (a) Strengthening an existing assumption
- (b) Contradicting and cancelling an existing assumption

(c)Generating a conclusion derivable from new and old information together, but from neither new or old information separately, which is called contextual implication. (Huang, 2006: 183)^[8]

Taking example from Blakemore: (2002: 60-1)^[2]

A bus driver is to leave from a bus stop. He sees the reflection of an anxious-looking woman carrying a bus pass from the rear mirror, trying to cross the road behind him.

There will be three reflections according to the three different types of cognitive effects mentioned above. Firstly, based on the bus driver's existing perceptions and assumptions, the woman was trying to catch the bus because of the woman's bus pass in her hand and her anxious expression. Secondly, the bus driver's assumption that the woman intended to ride in his car is removed when he notices that the woman is walking across to the bus card top-up station on the opposite side of the road after crossing the road. Finally, considering that the woman has her bus pass in hand, then the assumption that she intends to take the bus would lead the bus driver to a new hypothesis or contextual implication. Another concept that needs to be mentioned is positive cognitive effects. Other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater the relevance of the input to the individual at that time. (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 126-127)^[14] Another factor used in the definition of relevance: processing effort will be elaborated on in the following sections. Sperber and Wilson (1995: 126-127)^[14] pointed out that 'other things being equal, the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the input to the individual at that time.' Considering another scenario:

Amy, an international student, who has just arrived in Dublin, wants to rent a room from Jame, her potential landlord. She wants to know whether the Jame keeps any single room. She could receive either of the replies as follow:

- (a)The Jame has two single rooms and one double room.
- (b)Either the Jame has three rooms or has three pets.
- (c)The Jame has three rooms.

The analysis is as follows. All the three replies are relevant to the question of Amy whether the Jame keep any single room. The first assumption is more relevant than the second one. Since the second hypothesis requires more processing effort than the first. The first hypothesis is more relevant than the third hypothesis because the first one can lead to more positive effects than others. So defined relevance is a matter of degree. It is a trade-off between effects and efforts. Sperber and Wilson (1995)^[14] realized that it provides clear comparisons in some cases. This has led to criticism about measuring effectiveness and effort objectively or why there is a special way to meet the cognitive principle of relevance.

2.1.2. Two principles

This relevance is embodied in the two principles of relevance: the cognitive principle of relevance and the communicative principle of relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1995).^[14]

The cognitive principle of relevance means that 'human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance.' (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 260)^[14] According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), this does not mean that both the speaker and the listener expect maximum relevance. 'In the context of utterances, in particular, the mental effort of finding the most relevant interpretation of a stimulus can prevent listeners from expecting maximum relevance.' (Tendahl, 2008: 42)^[16] Optimal relevance elaborated on what the audience expects.

Optimal relevance

An utterance, on a given interpretation, will be optimally relevant.

- (a)It is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it;
- (b)It is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences.

(Wilson and Sperber 1998: 9)^[17]

This means that the most relevant words may require no effort on the addressee or that communicator may not be able to produce the most relevant discourse. So listeners should be known that the most relevant information may not come from the speaker. But the concept of optimal relevance is a central part of the communicative principle of relevance.

Communicative principle of relevance

Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 260)^[14]

So this principle cannot be consciously pursued as a goal by communicators and discourse may not be optimally relevant. There are several other key points to present regarding communicative principle of relevance. Ostensive-inferential communication will be the first to be introduced.

Ostensive-inferential communication

(a) The informative information

An intention to inform an audience of something.

(b) The communicative information

An intention to inform the audience of one's informative intention

(Sperber and Wilson 1995: 262)^[14]

Sperber and Wilson (1995)^[14] suggested that encoding and decoding processes and ostension and inference processes are two processes of communication. The former process is code model and the latter is inferential model. Huang (2006:187)^[8] stated that ostension and inference are two sides of the same communication coin. Further, The former is from the communicator and the latter is from the audience.

2.2. Explaining Irony

2.2.1. The irony of the rhetorical phenomenon

Relevance theory is used in various fields, such as the study of various rhetorical phenomena, the interpretation of discourse analysis, the explanation of various pragmatic phenomena, etc. The following section, however, focuses exclusively on the study of the irony of the rhetorical phenomenon. Irony refers to the fact that a claim that the speaker is supposed to agree with is actually ludicrous and contrary. (Wilson and Sperber, 2012)^[18] Here are some classic examples related to irony:

(a) (After boring party): that was funny

(b) I left my bag in the restaurant, and someone kindly walked off with it.

(c) (to someone who has done her a disservice): I can't thank you enough.

(Wilson and Sperber, 2012:123)^[18]

These are examples of interpretations that have the opposite of the literal meaning. There are two important stages of development to mention regarding the development of irony. One is 'the classical rhetoric, and the verbal irony is analysed as a trope.' (Wilson and Sperber, 2012:123)^[18] The other is Grice's account of irony. But they are the same pattern. The drawbacks of this model are exposed at both the theoretical and descriptive levels. For example, 'it is impossible to discover why metaphor and irony exist from the traditional model.' (Wilson and Sperber, 2012:125)^[18] In addition, It is true that the ironic interpretation makes more effort than its literal counterpart but yields no additional benefit.

Next turning attention to the three puzzling characteristics of irony. The first thing worth noting is that irony can express a characteristic attitude. Secondly, what needs attention is the normative bias. The irony is often used to point out that a situation, event or performance does not meet certain norm-based expectations. Its main use is to criticise or complain, except in exceptional circumstances, is used to praise. (Wilson and Sperber, 2012:127)^[18] The last point is the ironic tone of voice. This tone is used in those ironic utterances to help the audience recognise the ironical intent of the speaker. (Bryant and Fox-Tree, 2005)^[3] A flat or deadpan tone, slower tempo, lower pitch level and greater intensity are features of the ironical tone of voice, and greater intensity than in the corresponding literal discourse. (Ackerman 1983; Rockwell 2000; Bryant and Fox-Tree 2005)^{[1][12][3]} Also, the tone of irony is negative both in criticism and praise.

2.2.2. Moving on to the application of irony

Regarding applications, two aspects need to be mentioned: the echoic account of irony and pretence accounts of irony. Firstly, 'echoic use is a subtype of attributive use, in which the speaker's primary intention is to express her own attitude or reaction to the idea.' (Wilson and Sperber, 2012: 128-129)^[18]

Echoic utterances convey the speaker's attitude to more distant utterances, or to tacitly attributed but unexpressed thoughts. There are two features of echoic utterances: 'Informing the hearer about the content and an indirect report can inform the hearer about relevant aspects of its content.' (Wilson and Sperber, 2012:131)^[18] Another one is pretence accounts of irony. The pretence accounts of irony is that 'the speaker of an ironical utterance is pretending to perform a speech act, in order to convey a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude to the speech act itself, or to anyone who would perform it or take it seriously.' (Wilson and Sperber, 2012:131)^[18] Two separate mechanisms attributed to the adequate attributive-pretence account of irony. 'A pretence mechanism which enables the speaker to perform an imaginary speech act without being committed to its illocutionary force and an attributive mechanism of the type proposed in the echoic account, based on resemblances in conceptual content.' (Wilson and Sperber, 2012:140)^[18]

2.3. Examples of Irony in Chinese

The focus of this section shifts to explaining the use of irony in Chinese through association theory. This section will explore irony in online language and self-published media, literature, and cartoons.

2.3.1. Irony in terms of online language and self-published media

Internet buzzwords are terms that are widely used, circulated and known by people within a certain period of time, a certain region and a certain social group.' (Jin, 2019: 19)^[9] In the Internet era, people are exposed to many new things and therefore need to constantly seek new ways of expressing themselves, and at the same time, people are eager to break the traditional rules of language and create their own personalised language, which can be spread rapidly through the internet. The following examples of expressions used on the internet are taken from internet talk shows. Internet talk shows often contain popular and hot internet phrases of current years.

Example 1:

Ning Jin (name): Our host today, Mr. Zhang, also appeared in a film called "Qi Gong". Mr. Zhang worked very hard for his film and spent \$300,000 to invite his friends to see the film. In the end, thanks to his efforts, the film grossed 400,000. Of course, this is not a good way to put it, because the box office is always in the tens of millions, so the box office for Mr Zhang's film was 0.04 million to be exact. (Tu Cao Meeting--one of the Chinese internet talk show, 2017, Issue 1)

Analysis:

Ning Jin did not comment directly on the film, but chose to use figures to say that Zhang Shaogang's film had grossed \$400 million, or \$0.04 million to be exact. The figure of 0.04 million is really embarrassing, as the box office is always measured in millions, or even hundreds of millions of dollars. The use of 0.04 million is a good irony of the film's effect. Also, the third characteristic of irony, the ironic tone of voice, is vividly demonstrated as Nan Jin delivers her speech. The audience is quick to pick up on her intent of this irony.

Example 2:

Chi: Huang is very serious, he records his mistakes each time he hosts, and as you know , not everyone is like him. There are mistakes every time. (Tu Cao Meeting, 2017, Issue 1)

Analysis:

Chi first praised Huang for being a serious host, taking note of his mistakes after each session so that he wouldn't make them again. While this should have been a good habit, Chi has taken a different tack and come to the conclusion that not everyone makes mistakes every time like Huang. Irony has a heartbreaking affect. This example is similar to the pretence account of irony. In order to convey a sceptical attitude to Huang, Chi is present to perform a praise act. The recipients of ironic banter in self-published media are often not just one or a few people, but all Internet users. In the case of Weibo, for example, each tweet has a wide audience, and the number of recipients is high enough to become a "hot topic". (Lei, 2018)^[10] For ironic banter to be valid, both parties need to have a common intellectual background or consensus. Therefore, in self-media, the speaker often chooses anomalous natural phenomena or some widely circulated hot topics as the target of the ironic banter. Most of these social phenomena reflect the negative or dark side of social reality.

Example 3:

The price of fuel has risen and traffic is down. However, pedestrian traffic has increased and traffic

pressure is high. For this reason from next year, road user restrictions will be introduced. Single-eye single-day travel, double-eye double-day travel, one single and one double person travelling at night, and those with double-eye cut travel will be treated as a set of license plates, please inform each other.

Example4:

When you are stuck in traffic, you can call your family, your friends or even your clients. The longer the traffic jam, the deeper the emotional exchange. Some people reap the benefits of long-lost family ties, others negotiate big business as a result Traffic jams really do foster relationships between people

Analysis:

Example (3) is aimed at the traffic system of single and double number restrictions. The system itself is designed to alleviate traffic pressure in the city, and its intention is good. However, it is undeniable that it has caused some motor vehicle owners to suffer from inconvenience and discontent. This is why they have made use of the eyelid genre to express their negative attitude towards the system, as well as their frustration at the increase in fuel prices and traffic flow. Example (4) is a complaint about traffic jams. The speaker reflects on the length of the traffic jam by describing the possible beneficial effects of talking on the phone during the traffic jam. This is a ironic comment on the socially undesirable phenomenon of traffic jams. It is worth noting that this type of ironic banter focuses on the expression of opinions. It is often expressed as a euphemism for, or criticism or ridicule of, a particular person or thought-provoking social phenomenon. As a rule, this type of discourse has a strong sense of irony and a sharper style of discourse. The speaker aims to express his or her attitude or opinion about a social phenomenon or a topical issue in a humorous way and to point out the irrationality of these social phenomena. They may also criticise the irrationalities and express their complaints and grievances. This demonstrates the second characteristic of ironic the normative bias extremely well.

2.3.2. Irony in literature

This section describes the use of irony in some typical Chinese literary works. The main examples are the novel *The Divergent Lamp* and the novel *The Philosophy of Zhang*.

The *Divergent Lamp* is a novel of world affairs with a focus on educational fiction (Jin, 2013).¹⁹¹ This novel contains a large number of ironic descriptions. Its ironic portrayals are aimed at almost all strata of society, and are rich in ideological meaning and satirical techniques. Satire is a novel in which the writer uses artistic techniques, either directly or euphemistically, to expose evil and stupidity and to criticise people's unbecoming or immoral behaviour or human weaknesses, with the aim of persuading them to do good. It is a literary phenomenon whose aim is to induce people to change their evil ways.

Example 5:

It is the one who is willing to talk about science. But when he is a poor scholar, he cannot rule his family only in the same way. Even if they were lucky enough to pass the examination, they only talk about promotion and wealth instead of working for the welfare of the people. And they changed the social culture of studying only to become an official for enjoyment.

(Note: In ancient Chinese times, examinations were an important way of selecting talents for the state. By passing the examination one could become an official to serve the people. Accordingly there were many people who kept taking exams in order to become government officials. The bad effect was that these officials would be corrupt and only thought of themselves for money)

Analysis:

In terms of content, the author points out that the essence of pseudo-doctrines is to do things that have nothing to do with or even run counter to doctrine, under the banner of learning. The irony of the description is that it points out the contradiction between "knowledge" and "action". Specifically, it is a criticism of the lack of synchronization between the moral knowledge and the moral practice of those who are officials. It is also a commentary on the shortcomings of the imperial examination system. In terms of writing technique, the combination of direct contradictory irony and self-revealing irony is used. The example puts two incongruous or contradictory things side by side and exposes the flaws in a self-deprecating manner. The implied irony has to be appreciated by the reader, which makes it somewhat more interesting to read. This example is like the echoic account of irony. And the author's primary intention is to express dissatisfaction with the evils of society.

The novel *The Philosophy of Zhang* is based on the various evil deeds of Zhang, who is the main target of the book's satire (Rongsheng, 2014). ^[13]He is not only ugly on the outside, but even uglier on the inside. The numerous details of his appearance and actions and words portray him as a rogue and villain, and the absurd and comical scenes are so funny that people can't help but laugh.

Example 6:

Zhang is appropriately built for the requirements of being a soldier. Not only was he of such an appropriate height, but his back was straight. When he was examined by the instructor, he was certified by the examiner as a "spine". The "Spine". When criticising the beauty of a person, one should not look at one part and ignore the whole. Although I said that Zhang's nose was like a cicada and his mouth was like a crow. However, I would never dare to say that he is unattractive. The more you look at him, the more you think that he must have a nose like a cicada's to match.

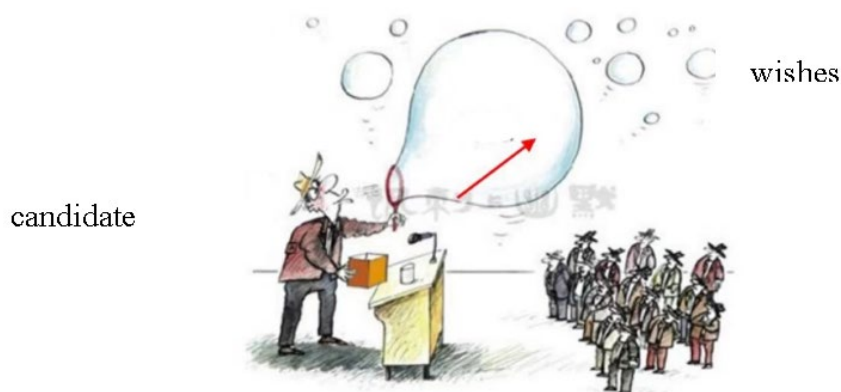
Analysis:

This kind of exaggerated and playful depiction of appearance is the author's specialty in this case. A large number of unconventional and rather exaggerated looks are used to depict the character he is trying to criticise or praise, and different labels are applied to the character depending on his personality. We can determine the author's attitude towards the character from the description of his appearance, such as the 'cicada nose', which is slightly exaggerated but vivid for satirical purposes. The reader is amused by these characteristic descriptions of the character's appearance, which on the one hand make the jokes funny, but on the other hand dilute the satirical essence under the surface of laughter.

2.3.3. Irony in cartoons

The word cartoon is first officially used in Japan to integrate humor with satire. Constable (1954, p. 115)^[5] holds that 'cartoon (from Italian cartone and Dutch karton, meaning strong, heavy paper or pasteboard) is a full-sized drawing made on the sturdy paper as a modello for a painting, glass or tapestry.' According to Li Lin (1997, p. 8),^[11] 'ironical cartoon refers to 'the painting that is mainly used to reveal the social evils or criticize and mock those incorrect or stupid behaviors through exaggeration, metaphorization and so on'. As for the ironical cartoons used for analysis, next examples are just selected from <http://humor.huanqiu.com/>, namely, the official website of the newspaper irony sponsored by People's Daily since the year of 1979, and widely recognized as one of the most popular and influential sources in Chinese press circles, whose works are mainly concerned with the international politics and social life.

Example 7:



Pavi Constantin (Romania)

Figure 1: Ironical Cartoon with Action Process

For the interpretation of Figure 1

(a) This is a funny bubble game called 'making wishes', in which the person on the left is one of the

participants, and people on the right are audience.

(b) This is a film shooting scene, in which the person on the left is, the main actor and those off stage are amateurs or supporting actors.

(c) This is an ordinary election, in which the person on the left, as one of the candidates running for a higher position, is doing something special by blowing bubbles as big as he can so as to attract the audience's attention.

(d) This is a political election, in which the person on the left, as one of the candidates, is making some political wishes or promises which, however, seem unpractical or too ambitious to realize, just like bubble exploding and disappearing in a few seconds.

This cartoon is created in the middle of 2012, a year during which the American presidential election is probably the hottest event receiving the world's attention. Candidates Obama vs. Romney are traveling to many states busy lobbying voters for supports. And it is obviously true that the employment rate has dropped to the lowest level since Obama took office in 2008, which apparently goes against Obama's ambition in his first election, resulting in a decreasing supporting rate among the elder people. Thirdly, from the dressing of the represented characters in this cartoon, it is the typical western style. Fourthly, based on the analysis of image in previous paragraphs, it shows the cartoonist wants to be detached from and strongly disagrees with what the cartoon shows to readers. And the cartoon character on the left is trying to stimulate the same feelings from the people on the right. And the cartoonist attempts to gain readers' support or make them hold similar attitudes towards to the depicted event.

Analysis:

Figure 1 attempts to convey the following to the reader. Firstly, the maker of this cartoon tries to distance himself from the events depicted and strongly opposes what the participants represented are doing, which shows a negative attitude. Secondly there is a different relationship between the depicted participants, with the person on the left having more power over the person on the right. At the same time, the character of the 'candidate' does not seem to expect sympathy from us, the audience, to support his actions. Finally, the producer intends to share his or her feelings with our audience, or for the reader to have a similar attitude towards the events depicted in Figure 1. It is an implied irony that needs to be understood in the context of the cartoon but also in the context of the current political situation. The cartoon is used to convey to the reader the attitude of the artist at the time. It is also an indirect way of conveying information about the content. Therefore the cartoon form is more similar to the echoic account of irony.

3. Conclusion

The essay begins with an introduction to the core concepts of relevance theory. It includes a definition of relevance theory and its two fundamental principles. The two key principles include the cognitive principle of relevance and the communicative principle of relevance. The focus is then shifted to the application of relevance theory. One of the most typical applications is the use of relevance theory to explain the phenomenon of irony. Specific aspects of irony in Chinese are then selected for study, including, among others, the more popular Internet phrases, classic works of literature and ironic expressions in cartoons. Through specific descriptions of these aspects, the concept of irony is better understood in a more concrete way.

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