

Study of Irony on Principle of Relevance

Sun An

Humanities School, Shanghai Open University, Shanghai, 200433, China

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Abstract: This paper shows how irony is explained as echoic mention by following the principle of relevance. According to this analysis, ironic utterances are essentially concerned with the speakers' attitudes. A listener does not finish understanding irony until he is reminded in an echoic way of some familiar proposition, and of the speaker's attitude about it. Empirical research shows that the analysis of irony as echoic mention better captures the psychological process of understanding irony. The paper first introduces the explanation of irony as echoic mention on the principle of relevance; then it tells the reader how to detect irony; finally it points out there are three kinds of ironic utterances: an ironic utterance consisting solely of propositions, one carrying suggestions of attitude, and one carrying suggestions of images. Compared with traditional methods, it is possible for the framework of echoic mention to describe a wider range of examples of irony in more detail.

1. Introduction

According to Sperber, inferential communication is carried by the communicator providing evidence of his intentions, while the audience infers his intentions from the evidence [1]. There is only one attribute - relevance - that makes information worth processing. The goal of a particular communicator is to maximize the relevance of the information processed. A common way to achieve relevance is to provide the addressee with evidence related to some of his assumptions.

Relevance is defined as a relation between an assumption and a context. It is a matter of degree. Relevance has two conditions: one assumption is related to the individual, and when it is optimally processed, the contextual effect is great; an assumption is related to one person because the effort required to optimize it is very small.

Here, "an assumption is optimally processed" means that achieving maximum relevance involves choosing the best possible context to deal with assumptions; In other words, the context can achieve the best balance between effort and effect. "The contextual effects "are contextual implications, contradictions, and strengthenings. Contextual implications come from key interactions between old and new information, that is, they are a synthesis of old and new information. In addition, this information may provide further evidence for the old assumptions and strengthen the old assumptions. Alternatively, it can provide evidence against the old assumptions and lead to the abandonment of the old assumptions.

Here, it can be seen that inferential communication involves the speaker taking an utterance as an open interpretation of his thoughts, while the hearer makes a psychological interpretation of the utterance and the original thought. That is, an utterance is the explanatory expression of the speaker's thought, and the hearer makes explanatory assumptions about the speaker's information

intention. The proximity of interpretation can be determined according to the principle of relevance. Irony involves the explanatory relationship between the speaker's thought and the given thought or utterance. Ironical speakers are considered to aim at optimal relevance. The best interpretative expression of an idea should provide the hearer with information about the idea, which is relevant enough to be processed, and should be processed with effort as little as possible.

How can the interpretation of other people's thoughts achieve relevance? Davis thinks, in the case of "reported speech", its interpretation realizes relevance by telling the hearer what someone said or thought. In other cases, these explanations achieve relevance by telling the hearer that the speaker remembers what someone said and has a certain attitude towards it; the speaker's interpretation of the thought itself is relevant. Those interpretations which achieve relevance in this way are called echoic. Ironical utterances are cases of echoic mention, which shows that the utterance has been heard and understood, and expresses the hearer's response to it [2]. Verbal irony always involves the implicit expression of an attitude. The relevance of ironical utterance always depends, at least in part, on the information it expresses, that is, the speaker's attitude towards the point of view it responds to.

Example 1. Peter: The Joneses aren't coming to the party.

Mary: they aren't coming, hum, if that's true, we might invite the Smiths.

Here, Mary's first sentence echoes what Peter just said. It achieved relevance, of course, not by reporting what he had just said to Peter, but by providing evidence that Mary had noticed his words and was weighing their reliability and implications.

Example 2. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going to heaven, we were all going direct the other way [3].

Dickens informs his readers that he has in mind a number of evaluations that people have had of the late eighteenth century, and that he has a certain attitude to them. Each of them may echo the views of different groups, that is, it may represent the views of different people on that era.

The speaker can use echoic an utterance to express a series of attitudes and emotions, from complete acceptance and approval to complete rejection and opposition. Some people doubt whether there is a well-defined subset of ironical attitudes or a well-defined subset of ironical utterances expressing ironical attitudes. The attitudes may be doubtful, questioning, scornful, contemptuous, approving, and the like.

Example 3. You devils ought to search our heads and not our pocket. ---Gorky

Here, Gorky says "mother" tells the police to "search our heads" which were full of revolutionary ideas. This shows his and also "mother's" attitude of mockery and scornfulness to the police [4].

Example 4. I can picture that old time to myself now, just as it was then: ..., when the boy came home the next week, alive, renowned, and appeared in church all battered up and bandaged, a shining hero, stared at and wondered over by everybody, it seemed to us that the partiality of Providence for an undeserving reptile had reached a point where it was open to criticism. --- Mark Twain.

Here, Mark Twain remembers his naive boyhood when he dreamed of becoming a pilot. He says one of his neighboring boy became a pilot and came back home as "a shining hero", though battered up and bandaged [5]. We can see he admired the boy very much. So Mark Twain's attitude to the boy is certainly an approving one, not mockery at all.

Example 5. (a). He: It's a lovely day for a picnic. (They go for a picnic and it rains)

(b). She (sarcastically): It's a lovely day for a picnic, indeed. [6].

Here, the speaker of example (5b) scornfully rejects an opinion echoed. The speaker of example

(5b) obviously doesn't think it's a good day for a picnic. From this point of view, her companion said that today was a good day for a picnic, that judgment was wrong, that shouldn't have started, that was his fault that their fine day was ruined, and the like.

The above examples show that the attitude expressed by ironic discourse is always refusal or disagreement. The speaker separated himself from the point of view he echoed and said he did not hold this point of view. In fact, it is clear that in this case, he believes that the opposite view has been responded, as in example 5.

2. How to detect irony

From above, one sees that in accordance with the principle of relevance there are three steps to make manifest the speaker's informative intention: first, to recognize the stimulus to be ostensive; second, to identify the informative intention, and third, to interpret the intention. Similarly, there are three common factors to be considered in the interpretation of all ironic utterances: first, recognizing that the utterance is echoic; second, confirming the source of the opinion echoed; third, identifying that the speaker's attitude towards the opinion echoed is refusal, disapproval or approval.

It is said that the speaker of echoic utterance is separating himself from the thought it echoes, when the hearer can clearly see this according to the context. However, in many cases, the speaker will give the hearer some hint, which is the way that the utterance should be understood. In spoken discourse, the irony can use his tone, facial expression or accompanying gestures. However, these resources are clearly not applicable to authors. In some cases, the author may rely on the reader to identify the absurdity of the idea or opinion echoed.

In some cases, a writer may give the reader a clue as to the attitude he is expected to adopt.

Example 6. Being an invalid, Joseph Sedley contented himself with a bottle of claret besides his Madeira before dinner, and he managed a couple of plates full of strawberries and cream, and twenty four little rout cakes that were lying neglected in a plate near him (Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*) [7].

In example 6, Thackeray does not simply rely on our knowledge that invalids often have very poor appetites: he also chooses vocabulary which is apparently inappropriate in the circumstances. Consider his use of the phrase "contented himself with" and the verb "manage". One would normally content oneself with much less than a bottle of claret. And the verb manage suggests that Sedley is having difficulty in eating something that is very hard to reconcile with the amount he actually consumed. All this helps the readers to share Thackeray's idea that Joseph Sedley's claim to be an invalid is ridiculous.

Example 7. "And how does dear, dear Norland like?" cried Marianne.

"Dear, dear Norand "said Elinor," probably looks as it always does at this time of year. The woods and walks thickly covered with dead leaves." "Oh!" cried Marianne, "with what transporting sensations have I formerly seen them fall! How have I delighted, as I walked, to see them driven in showers about me by the wind! What feelings have they, the season, the air altogether inspired. "[6].

Some writers may use the voice of one character in order to separate themselves from the thoughts of another character. As in example 7 in *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen mocks the feelings of sensibility expressed by Marianne through the voice of Elinor. Here Austen has Elinor echo part of Marianne's first utterance in order to ridicule her over-sentimental memories of Norland. Then she combines Elinor's realistic but not romantic description of Noland with Marianne's ecstasy.

In the above examples, the speaker / writer may have expressed his attitude towards the point it echoes, but he did not express his attitude explicitly. On the contrary, he makes it implicit, which depends on the speaker's estimation of the hearer's contextual resources. Only when the speaker

believes that the hearer can be immediately exposed to a context in which the hearer can identify with less effort than it takes to deal with an explicit statement can the speaker make his attitude implicit. This means that if the speaker's attitude is implicit, it shows that the hearer and the speaker have the same assumptions about what is absurd or ridiculous.

In example 6, the idea that Joseph Sedley claims to be an invalid is ridiculous. In each case, the speaker / author implies a series of contextual assumptions that are necessary to determine the absurdity of an idea or proposition. But in each case, he hinted that he was intimate enough to the hearer / reader to understand these assumptions without being explicitly expressed. In other words, the speaker or the author of ironic utterance conveys the hint of conspiracy by hiding his attitude. Obviously, this brings risks. The hearer may not realize that the speech is echoic, and will be misled into the speaker's attitude towards the expressed view and his beliefs. However, if such a listener is indeed aware of the irony, the discourse will have the effect of increasing the degree of intimacy between the speaker and the hearer. It is this increase in intimacy that makes the risk of misunderstanding worth taking.

3. Types of Irony as Echoic Mention

Since ironic utterances are called cases of echoic mention, there are many echoic mentions of varying degrees and types. Some are immediate and some are delayed; some come from actual utterances, others from thoughts or opinions; some have real sources, others have imaginary sources; some can be traced back to a particular individual, while others have vague sources.

In each case of irony, the speaker may echo a remark, suggesting that he thinks it is untrue, inappropriate, or irrelevant. According to what is echoed in a remark, there are three kinds of cases: an ironic utterance consisting solely of propositions, one carrying suggestions of attitude, and one carrying suggestions of images.

First, the ironic utterances consisting solely of propositions:

Example 8. I'm glad we didn't bother to bring an umbrella. (Jane repeated this in the pouring rain.)

Here, the fact is that before Jane and Mary set off, Mary advised Jane not to take an umbrella, and they were soon caught in the rain. Jane's utterance ironically echoes Mary's advice as untrue in the circumstances.

Example 9. "You take an eager interest in that gentleman's concerns", said Darcey in a less tranquil tone, and with a heightened colour. "Who that knows what his misfortunes have been, can help feeling an interest in him? ", "His misfortunes!" repeated Darcey contemptuously, "Yes, his misfortunes have been great indeed." - Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* [8].

In example 9, the speaker echoes a remark, implying that the speaker thinks it is untrue, that is, the way the speaker mentions a proposition shows that it is an absurd mistake for him to reject it. For the hearer to understand such an utterance, it is necessary to realize that this is not only an example of mention, but also the speaker's attitude towards the proposition mentioned. Depending on this double recognition, the interpretation of the last part of the utterance is:

Example 9(a). He has not been the victim of misfortunes.

Example 10. "Now just attend to me for a bit, Mr. pitch, or witch, or stitch, or whatever your name is. "My name is pinch." observed Tom, "Have the goodness to call me by it." "What! You mustn't ever be called out of your name, mustn't you?" cried Jonas, "pauper" prentices are looking up, I think, Ecod, we manage'em a little better in the city!" - Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*. [9].

In example 10, the speaker echoes a remark in such a way as to imply that he finds it inappropriate, that is, when a speaker mentions a proposition, he will make it clear that he rejects

the proposition and thinks it is ridiculously inappropriate. The interpretation of example (10) will be: (10a). You have no right to demand that I call you by your proper name.

Second, the ironic utterance carrying suggestions of attitude:

Example 11. Elinor looked at him with greater astonishment than ever. She began to think he must be in liquor..., and with this impression she immediately rose, saying, "Mr. Willoughby, I advise your business may be with me, It will be better recognized and explained tomorrow." "I understand you," he replied, with an expressive smile, and a voice perfectly calm, "Yes, I am very drunk - A pint of porter with my cold beef at Marlborough was enough to upset me." – (Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*) [10].

Example 11 is a case that what is echoed is not a proposition expressed by an utterance, but a thought imputed by the speaker to the hearer; like example (9) and (10), in example (11) the way the speaker refers to a proposition is to show that he rejects it because it is ridiculously irrelevant to the facts. Its interpretation is:

Example 11(a). I am not drunk.

Third, the ironic utterance carrying suggestions of images:

Example 12. It's a bird - it's a plane - it's Superman.

(When a short boy tripped over his foot while he was arriving last in the school sports competition, one audience turned to another and said so.)

This remark is clearly ironic, because it is an actual quotation. It is taken as a joke. Here, the speakers mention suggestions of images in such a way in order to make clear that they reject them as ridiculously false. That is, the undersized boy cannot run as fast as a bird, nor as a plane, nor as a Superman.

4. Conclusions

This paper shows how irony is explained as echoic mention by following the principle of relevance. According to this analysis, ironic utterances are essentially concerned with the speakers' attitudes. A listener does not finish understanding irony until he is reminded in an echoic way of some familiar proposition, and of the speaker's attitude about it. Empirical research shows that the analysis of irony as echoic mention better captures the psychological process of understanding irony. People judge that ironic utterances with obvious echoic mentions are more ironic than those without echoic mention [11].

The following is evaluations on echoic mention analysis by comparing it with the traditional interpretation of irony and with the implicature analysis of irony: Three main points are to be focused on: First, why ironic utterances are made? Second, how to explain implicature; and third, how to account for the victim of irony.

First, why ironic utterances are made?

Echoic mention analysis explains why ironic utterances occur and why they occasionally (but not always) imply content contrary to the literal meaning. Different from the traditional theory, it does not mention the concept of intended meaning. Also different from the traditional interpretation and the implicature analysis, it does not involve substitution mechanism, whether semantic or pragmatic. And different from the implicature analysis, it assumes that it is necessary (though not sufficient) for an utterance to have ironic semantic conditions, that is, ironic utterance is a case of mention. In addition, it naturally describes a key fact, that is, an ironic utterance not only expresses propositions (which can be explained from the perspective of meaning and implicature), but also vague hints of images and attitudes.

The most obvious problem with traditional ironic explanations is that they cannot explain why a speaker, who could have directly expressed the information he wants to express, should decide to

say the opposite of his meaning. For example, suppose we go out for a ride, you stop and look on both sides, and then enter the main road. The road is clear, but when you are ready to continue driving, I whisper:

Example 13. There's something coming.

My utterance in example 13 conforms to the classical definition of irony. "I" have made some obvious mistakes, and "I" could have truthfully expressed a logically relevant assumption:

Example 13 (a). There's nothing coming.

Why don't you come to a conclusion right away that this is what "I" was intending to express? The traditional accounts notably fail to explain the difference between real irony and pure irrationality displayed in example 13 (a). Echoic mention analysis says real irony echoes each other, mainly to ridicule the echoed views. In example 13, you are an overly cautious driver, always alert to danger, and never drive into the main road in front of oncoming vehicles, no matter how far away. When "we" stopped at the intersection, the road was straight and completely unblocked in both directions, except for a cyclist just visible on the horizon. When you drive your car onto the road, "I" blamed you for it, as in example 13. In this case, this remark is likely to be ironic. "I" am responding to the viewpoint you keep expressing, but in this situation your opinion is obviously absurd. Therefore, to make it ironic, all you need is an echoic element and a related attitude of mockery or opposition. It's not enough to say "I" was just trying to imply the opposite of what "I" had said. In example 13 (a), at most, it is only an implicit premise of my utterance, and of course it does not constitute its main point. And the main point of this utterance is to express "my" attitude towards your constantly expressed views, and doing so implies that you are too cautious, that you are fooling yourself by worrying, and so on [1].

In fact, many examples of irony do not belong to the category of classical interpretation, like:

Example 14. When all was over and the rival kings were celebrating their victory with Te Deums in the respective camps. (Voltaire, *Candide*)[12].

This is a genuine case of irony and it does not implicate (14a) or (14b)

Example 14(a). When all was over the rival kings were not celebrating their victory with Te Deums in their respective camps. .

Example 14(b). When all was over and the rival kings were bewailing their defeat with Misereres in their respective camps...

Voltaire is not hinting that neither side won the battle and celebrated on it, nor that either side lost and lamented their defeat. He is echoing the views of his opponent king. Since these statements contradict each other, it is obvious that he cannot support both statements at the same time: he really must believe and expect his audience to believe that at least one of them is false. Example (14) is likely to cause temporary difficulties for readers, which will be offset by appropriate rewards. At first, people interpreted it as an ordinary assertion, reached the absurd conclusion that both sides won, and then reinterpreted the statements again. When adding some explicit materials will immediately put the reader on the right track, the author leaves an implicit echo, thus opening up a new interpretation line. People naturally think that after a battle, both sides will claim victory, and that this behavior is always absurd. Neither the author nor the reader is fooled, and so forth. Therefore, by making the echo implicit, the author tries to suggest that he shares a complete cynical vision with the reader, which does not exist in the version of explicit echo in example 14 (c):

Example 14(c). When the battle was over and the rival kings were doing what they described as celebrating their victory with Te Deums in their respective camps... Their behaviour was ridiculous since no victory could be claimed on both sides at the same time.

Example 15. What lovely weather.

Example 15 (a). What awful weather.

What difference is there between saying example 15 ironically, and example 15(a) literally? On

both traditional and implicature analysis, there is nothing to choose between these two remarks, and therefore no particular reason for ever being ironic. According to echoic mention analysis, what example 15 expresses the speaker's attitude towards his utterance, while example 15(a) expresses the speaker's attitude towards what his utterance refers to: the weather. This distinction between two basic types of utterance is entirely missed by both the traditional account and the implicature analyses, which argue that the ironic utterance example 15 is about the weather, and is thus indistinguishable from the literal utterance example 15(a). Let's explain example 15 in detail in the echoic mention theory. Suppose that, as we were deciding to set off on our walk, someone told us that the weather was going to be lovely. It is obvious that example 15 is an ironic example of this remark. Or suppose we had a rainy winter and talked about walking in the summer sun. Although the echo source of example 15 is far away, its echoic quality is still clearly visible. Even without any utterance in advance, there will still be some vague echoes. That is, people usually set out for a walk with hope or expectation of good weather: example 15 may just echo these prior high expectations. In all these cases the remark in example 15 is interpreted along exactly the same lines. There is no question of a move from one figure of speech to another, with quite different interpretation processes being involved ; the only move is from obvious cases of echoic mention to much vaguer (and duller) varieties of the same thing.

In a word, compared with traditional methods, it is possible for the framework of echoic mention to describe a wider range of examples of irony in more detail.

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