Study of Irony on Cooperative Principle

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Abstract: This paper first introduces the category of the cooperative principle in conducting a conversation. Then, it illustrates how the principle is manipulated in interpreting irony, and irony is considered by Grice as an example of conversational implicature. Finally, it finds that this pragmatic account of irony as conversational implicature on the cooperative principle also seems to be insufficient.

1. An Introduction of the Cooperative Principle

In conducting a conversation, all participants should abide by a general principle. This guiding principle is called the cooperative principle (CP). CP runs as follows: At the stage of the conversation, make necessary conversation contributions according to the recognized purpose or direction of the conversation you participate in (Dai, Weidong, et al,1995)[1]. CP was put forward by an American philosopher Grice in his Logic and Conversation in 1968 (Grice, 1978) [2].
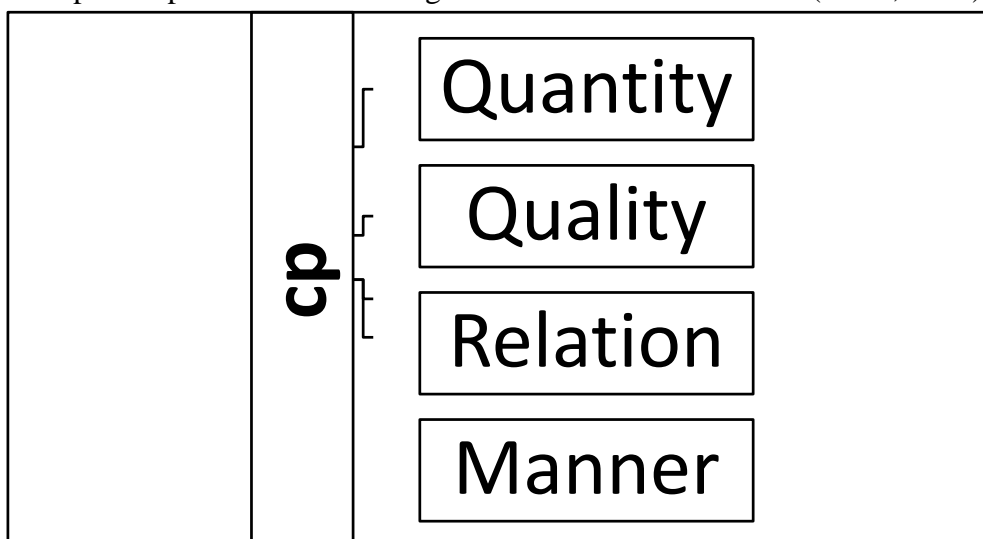

Figure 1: Relation between CP and its four maxims

From CP, four maxims and some more specific sub-maxims are derived. The four maxims are Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, which are concluded so as to speak truly, briefly, relevantly, and clearly (to see figure 1). Here, for the purpose of studying irony, the maxim of

Quality is especially emphasized. It is:" Try to make your contribution true. "And it is supplemented by two more specific sub-maxims (to see figure 2).

i. Do not say what you believe to be false.

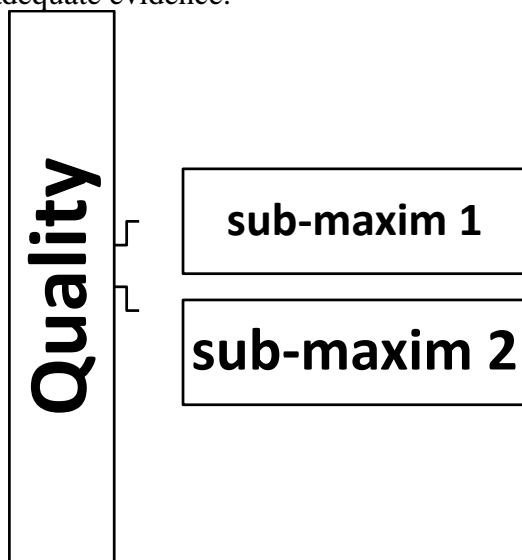ii. Do not say what lacks adequate evidence.

Figure 2: Relation between Quality and its sub-maxims

Based on the cooperative principle above, in the following account, one will see how the principle is manipulated in interpreting irony.

2. CP, Irony and Conversational Implicature

Irony is considered by Grice as an example of conversational implicature, in which some maxims are violated at the level of what is said, but the listener has the right to assume that the maxim, or in the least the principle of overall cooperation, is abided by on the level of what is implicated.

2.1 John is a Fine Friend

John has a close relationship with Tom. He leaked Tom's secret to a business rival. Tom and his audience know this. Tom said John was a good friend. To Tom and his audience, it was obvious that what Tom said was something he did not believe, and the audience knew that Tom knew it was obvious to the audience. So, unless Tom's words are meaningless, Tom must be trying to understand what he claims to be making. This must be an obviously relevant proposition; The most obviously relevant proposition contradicts the proposition he claims to put forward. Thus, example (1), by flouting the first maxim of Quality "do not say what you believe to be false." means the opposite of the literal interpretation (to see figure 3). That is "John is not a fine friend or John is a bad friend."

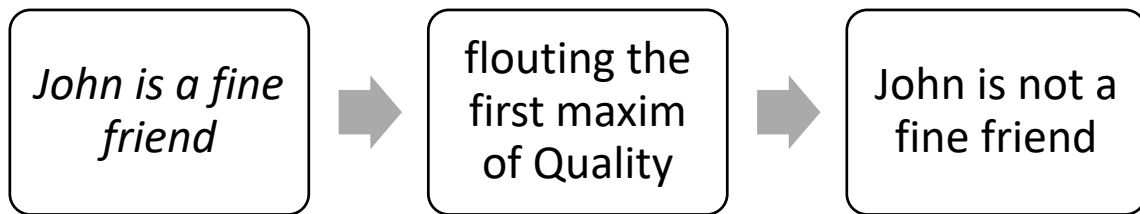| John is a fine friend | → | flouting the first maxim of Quality | → | John is not a fine friend |

Figure 3: Irony as a form of implicature

From the above, one can see that to see irony as a form of implicature requires an underlying assumption of basic understanding. Only when participants are convinced that they have a common basic belief can irony be considered an interesting game rather than a lie or bizarre statement.

2.2 John's a Real Genius. (Lakoff, 1990)[3]

John's stupid.
If I want you to understand (2), as (2a), I must have reason to believe that you have the same contempt for John's IQ as I do. So, understanding irony means "you and I are the same". If there is no such tacit understanding, understanding irony may bring disastrous consequences.

3. Further Notes on this Account

One may find the following merits and demerits in seeing irony as conversational implicature on the cooperative principle.

At first sight, this approach to irony looks more promising than the semantic approach discussed in the previous chapters. It tries to reexplain the category of intended meaning of an utterance in terms of the category of conversational implicature. Therefore, with this approach, ironic utterances would conversationally implicate, rather than figuratively mean the opposite of what they literally say.

At first glance, this ironic approach is more promising than the semantic approach discussed in previous chapters. It attempts to re-analyze the intended meaning of discourse from the perspective of conversational implicature. Therefore, with this method, ironic discourse will imply conversationally, rather than figuratively express the meaning opposite to the literal meaning.

3.1 What Lovely Weather.

The weather was awful. would have no intended meaning, but would conversationally imply (3a) the weather was awful. This pragmatic approach will alleviate the concerns of traditional semantic theory about such problems as : What is the intended meaning of an utterance? How can we derive such a meaning? These problems cannot be solved simply by transferring from semantic field to pragmatic field. It still has to be shown how the interpretation of ironic utterances can be successfully integrated into a more promising pragmatic framework.

To some extent, this pragmatic approach seems to be as flawed as the early traditional approach. Its deviation from the traditional explanation of irony is not too extreme. This is based on the

assumption that the speaker wants to express the exact opposite of what he said. In fact, the only difference between this approach and the more traditional theory is whether the substitution mechanism involved is semantic or pragmatic. As Searle says, the pragmatic mechanism of irony is that if it is understood literally, utterance is obviously not suitable for this situation. Because it is very inappropriate, the listener has to reinterpret it in such a way to make it appropriate, and the most natural way of interpretation is to understand it as the opposite of the literal meaning (Searle,1979) [4].

According to Davies (2007) [5], Grice's cooperative principle is regarded as a basic concept in pragmatics, but its interpretation is often problematic. The use of the word "cooperation" seems to lead to confusion between Grice's technical concept and the general meaning related to lexical cooperation, and these misunderstandings are partly due to the shift of the cooperative principle from philosophy to linguistics. In order to fully understand Grice's views, it is necessary to put the works of cooperative principles and meanings in the overall context of Grice's works.

Chris (2020) thinks that metaphorical utterance refers to the utterance that the speaker does not mainly intend to devote himself to "what is said". On the contrary, metaphorical discourse requires auditors to produce appropriate aspects. That is, the ironic speaker requires the hearer to be committed to making some response to the utterance[6].

Grice himself realized that these maxims could be violated both verbally and non verbally (to see table 1) (Grice, 1989:29) [7], and Greenall (2009) concluded that non-verbally and intentionally violating- flouting- could produce implicature. Furthermore, this is also reasonable to believe that maxims can be non-verbally opted out of, non-verbally flagrantly 'non-observed', and infringed (to see table 2) [8].

Table 1: Violation of maxims for Grice

Violation of maxims	Verbal
	Non-verbal

Table 2: Violation of maxims for Greenall

Verbal or non-verbal Violation of maxims	Flouting
	Opting out Flagrant non-observance
	Infringement

Dynel (2017) thought that there is irony without flouting Quality maxim: it can be said that in some cases of verbal irony, speakers do not "say what they think is false"[9].

A: What's in the airport?

B: Planes.

As Dynel cited, through this answer, the speaker B in example (4) implied that the question was boring. Here the reply ignored the maxim of quantity, that is, not to provide information and not to flout the maxim of quality.

Dinges (2015) said, even if there is no violation of the conversational maxims at the said level, some conversational implicatures will also be generated[10].

3.2 The Student has a Nice Handwriting.

When writing the letter of recommendation for her student, the instructor cannot observe the maxims, especially the quantity maxim, unless she cannot reasonably provide further relevant information, so she may think that she cannot reasonably provide further information. Obviously, the instructor does not believe this (obviously, the student's instructor should be able to provide more relevant information). Therefore, contrary to the original assumption, the writer did not follow the maxim at the level mentioned. Nevertheless, she observed them at the level of communication. Therefore, she must want to convey something other than what she said. Moreover, considering all the factors, the most natural candidate here is that the student's handwriting is very good, and nothing is more deserving praise and approval for the student.

4. Conclusions

The above analyses show that there are some deficiencies in Grice's seeing irony as an example of conversational implicature. First, like the traditional account, Grice's saying cannot explain why ironic words are more inclined than literal ones and why some one should choose to say (3) " What lovely weather." rather than the more transparent (3a) "The weather was awful."

Second, it also does not clearly explain how the transformation from literal meaning to conversational meaning is carried out in the case of irony.

Third, it believes that ironic discourse violates the quality maxim and the assumption of cooperative communication. But psycholinguists' experiments have caused them to doubt whether understanding irony really requires such tacit recognition that ironic statements violate the norms of cooperative communication. For instance, (1) "He's a fine friend," would be quite ironic. This approach assumes that irony violates the norms of communication, which means that the listener should spend more time in understanding ironic discourse than understanding the corresponding literal statement, because he needs additional mental efforts to align the apparent violation with the speaker's actual meaning. But the experimental research indicates that listeners spend no longer time in interpreting ironic remarks such as (1) than they do in comprehending it in the literal context [11].

Therefore, this purely pragmatic account of irony as conversational implicature on the cooperative principle also seems to be insufficient, and more researches are to be done to give a reasonable acount of irony.

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