

On Traditional Classifications of Irony

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Keywords: Irony; Verbal irony; Dramatic irony; Extant irony; Artifacts irony

Abstract: Irony is a figure of speech, where the word irony is derived from Greek. Since irony is so pervasive in our daily communication and has a profound effect upon human thinking, it is worth studying carefully. Based on the two traditional criteria for defining irony, i.e. "to say the opposite of what one means" and "to say other than what one means", the paper analyses four categories of irony such as verbal irony, dramatic irony, extant irony, and artifacted irony. And the author finds that there are some problems in traditional view of irony. Then he suggests in the further study of irony he will incorporate some pragmatic principles to the two traditional criteria.

1. Introduction

Irony is a figure of speech. The word irony is derived from the Greek word *eironeia*, which was first recorded in Plato's *Republic*. It roughly means a glib and despicable way of deceiving people. From generation to generation, irony has been used as a powerful weapon in debates. Now it is also at the tips of people's tongue in everyday life. Since irony is so pervasive in our daily communication and has a profound effect upon human thinking, it is worth studying carefully.

Irony and interest seem to be everywhere. It is not only a literary means, but also a rhetorical means. As Chen Shouzhong pointed out, comic irony or tragic irony often appears in drama (Chen Shouzhong, 1985) ^[1]. Irony is also a favorite skill of poets, essayists and novelists. It is appreciated by people at all levels. People use it from family kitchens to political forums. In short, irony often appears in daily conversation and writing. Since irony is so common in our life, we should learn and use it skillfully. A witty irony can be used as a powerful weapon to expose the stupidity or evil of things and people, and criticize them; A wise politician can use it to defeat his opponent in a wise way; A playwright can use it to make his plays more vivid and humorous. On the one hand, irony can bring joy and laughter to our life; on the other hand, it leads us to meditate. Of course, the impact of irony is far more than that. It has attracted many people and prompted them to study it. In fact, in modern discussions, irony is studied and understood in various ways. However, the description of irony is mostly summarized from a large number of examples, and linguists have also studied irony from many aspects.

In traditional rhetoric, scholars often define irony by the two criteria, i.e. irony expresses the difference between what a person says and what he intends to express, or irony expresses the difference between what actually happens and what he expects to happen. Also, this traditional definition of irony is formulated as "to say the opposite of what one means" or "to say other than

what one means.” But these traditional formulations are insufficient to describe it. Later, analysts and theorists have made more classifications of irony. From the perspective of pragmatics, scholars have produced four types of irony, each of which is not mutually exclusive. These four categories are verbal irony, dramatic irony, extant irony, and artifactual irony (Asher, 1994) [2].

2. Verbal irony

2.1. Typical verbal irony

Verbal irony is primarily called rhetorical irony (Dane, 1991) [3]. Johnson defined it as a way of speech with the opposite meaning of words (Chen Shuhua, 1990) [4]. It is a rhetorical device used to make one's speech persuasive and challenging. In order to achieve the desired effect, the ironist usually takes a detached and distance attitude. He seems disengaged and objective, and seems only concerned with giving straightforward statements. He often asserts a lie because he knows he can always rely on the audience to contradict it with an interesting and humorous retort and find out the real meaning of the ironist. Apparently, verbal irony is established from definition 1 of the OED on the criterion "to say the opposite of what one means". To understand it, the audience must be able to go beyond the literal meaning of a word or phrase and see its intended meaning. Of course, this requires the audience's ability and wisdom to read, but it also provides him with fun and enjoyment. Look at the opening sentence in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* [5]:

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.

Example 2: They were all young men and they were saving their country. The second army was being reformed beyond the Tagliamento. They were executing officers of the rank of major and above who were separated from their troops. They were also dealing summarily with German agitators in Italian uniform. They wore steel helmets. Only two of us had steel helmets. Some of the carabinieri had them. The other carabinieri wore the wide hat. Airplanes we called them. We stood in the rain and were taken out one at a time to be questioned and shot. So far they had shot everyone they had questioned. The questioners had that beautiful detachment and devotion to stern justice of men dealing in death without being in any danger of it. (Ernest Hemingway: *A Farewell to Arms.*) [6].

This narration is an episode of World War I. Italian officers shot and killed the Germans they suspected of spying without asking them any details. "They were saving their country" and "devotion to stern justice of man" are both examples of verbal irony. The fact is that these young officers did not go to the front line. On the contrary, they hurt their country. What they do is evil, subjective and unfair.

Those two examples of verbal irony are both given by the criterion "to say the opposite of what one means." However, there are many verbal ironies that are very different from the literal messages rather than opposite to them. Hence here comes the other criterion for defining verbal irony - "to say other than what one means." In this way, verbal irony is connected with a wide variety of classical tropes, such as hyperbole, meiosis or litotes, etc. To differentiate them from the above typical verbal irony, we call them verbal ironies in extended meaning.

2.2. Verbal irony in extended meaning

Extended irony includes such rhetoric figures as antonomasia, apophasis, aporia, epitrope, euphemism, litotes, oxymoron, auxesis, and so forth.

Antonomasia means substituting an epithet, a label, for a person's real name, usually with ironic emphasis.

Example 3: He is a Solom. (Solomon signifies wisdom and authority. The irony of (3) comes when "he" has neither much wisdom nor any authority.)

Apophasis, also called paralipsis or preteritio, means "a passing over". In this case, the speaker pretends not to mention something in the very act of mentioning it, achieving strong ironic effect.

Example 4: I shall not go into all his broken promises, his campaign speeches, or his scandalous treatment of his aged mother. (Here, "I" try to defeat my opponent by actually referring to his notorious acts though "I" pretend not to mention them.)

Aporia means doubting, that is, hesitating ironically between alternatives.

Example 5: Whether he is more stupid than negligent, I hesitate to guess. (The non-ironic interpretation of example 5 is that he is both stupid and negligent.)

Epitrope means granting permission ironically.

Example 6: Let her go, let her go, God bless her! (Example 6 ironically means that she should not go and God damn it!)

Euphemism means substituting less pungent words for harsh ones, to achieve excellent ironic effect.

Example 7: After a gallon of whisky, he was slightly indisposed. (Here slightly actually means a great deal. In normal case, a litre of whisky is too much for a person, not to say, a gallon of whisky.)

Litotes means simplifying. The speaker asserts something by denying its opposite.

Example 8: She was not supremely happy. (Example 8 means she was not happy at all.)

Oxymoron means 'pointed stupidity'. The speaker emphasizes his point by the irony of an apparent contradiction or inconsistency.

Example 9: That was a position he enjoyed and feared.

This sentence may be the best one to describe Wang Yi 's case. In February 1996, Wang Yi, an employee of a bank in Changsha, Hunan Province, embezzled 2 million yuan and fled to Vietnam. After 15 years, he was arrested in October 2011. Though he might have enjoyed himself with the money, yet he was afraid of being arrested. He tried to hide himself from the police, only to be caught and put into prison (<https://news.xtol.cn/2011/1028/191720.shtml>) . .

Auxesis means using ironically an overly weighty or exaggerated term for an accurate one.

Example 10: She is an angel. (Example 10 may mean she is pretty to some extent, but far from being an angel.)

The above listing is not exhaustive, but it seems to suggest that any manipulation of language can be classified as ironic, as long as it is in accordance with the criterion "to say other than what one means."

3. Dramatic irony

Dramatic irony is a plot device, with which the audience knows more than the protagonist (Dane, 1991) ^[3]. In dramatic irony, the speaker puts words that have one meaning to him but another meaning to the audience into the mouth of the character (victim); either the audience already knows more than the character, or other elements in the play indicate the difference in awareness between the character and the audience.

Dramatic irony can be grouped into comic irony and tragic irony. In the former, the speaker said he thought it was true, and the listener believed the speaker, but the audience realized that what the speaker said was the opposite of the truth because they knew more than the characters. In the latter, the speaker says what he wants to say, but both the listener and the audience understand that what he says is different from the facts because they know more than the speaker.

Example 11: "I hope Tom's better off where he is", said Sid, "but if he'd been better in some ways--""Sid! "Tom felt the glare of the old lady's eye, though he could not see it." Not a word against my Tom, now that he's gone! " (Mark Twain: *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer*) ^[7]. (Example 11 is a dialogue between Sid and Aunt Polly. Both of them think Tom to be dead, but the audience know this not to be true, since at the very time Tom is hidden under the bed overhearing the dialogue.)

Example 12: The boys did as they had often done before -- went to the cell grating and gave Potter some tobacco and matches. He was on the first floor, and there were no guards.

His gratitude for their gifts had always smote their consciences before --it acted deeper than ever this time. They felt cowardly and treacherous to the last degree when Potter said:

"You've been mighty good to me, boys...well, boys, I done an awful thing-- drunk and crazy at the time, that's the only way I count for it, and now I got to swing for it, and it's right...,it's a prime comfort to see faces that's friendly when a body's in such a muck of trouble, and there don't none come but yourn. Good friendly faces -- good friendly faces. Get up on one another's backs, and let me touch'em. That's it. Shake hands-- Yourn'll come through the bars, but mine's too big. Little hands, and weak--but they've helped Muff Potter a power, and they'd help him more if they could." (Mark Twain: *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer*) ^[7].

Example 12 is an instance of tragic irony. Speaker Potter admitted that he had killed someone and thanked the boys for coming to see him and doing good for him. But the boys felt sorry and embarrassed because they knew it wasn't true. The truth is that Potter is the victim. He was trapped by a real killer. He stole Potter's dagger when he was drunk and crazy. The boys happened to see this, but they didn't dare to tell the truth and were afraid of revenge.

One might see the difference between example 11 and example 12. Example 11 is an example of comic irony, in which the dramatist expresses satire in the ignorance of the victim speaker Sid and the hearer Aunt Polly. But in example 12 the audience could not find any satire in the ignorance of the speaker Potter, instead, it might arouse the audience's deep sympathy for the innocence of Potter. Thus, one may conclude that the difference between the two types of dramatic irony is as follows: comic irony is a combination of irony and satire, while tragic irony is one of irony and seriousness. Despite the differences, the two kinds of dramatic irony are based on the contrast between the audience's understanding of the character and that of the character, or the contrast between the character's limited knowledge and the audience's more comprehensive knowledge. As mentioned earlier, in verbal irony, what the speaker says is contrary to his meaning. Therefore, the difference between dramatic irony and verbal irony can be expressed as follows: verbal irony means the conflict between language and thought, while dramatic irony means the contrast between events and their interpretation. In order to express more accurately, verbal irony enables the speaker to express his meaning by comparing the thought he obviously wants to express with the thought properly expressed in words. The dramatic irony is that the audience knows more about the event than the speaker, which leads to the contrast between their explanations. In dramatic irony, although what the speaker understands is opposite to what exists in the novel or the world, he does say what he wants to express, while in verbal irony, what the speaker says is opposite to what he wants to express.

4. Extant irony

Extant irony suggests the existential condition. Extant irony can be divided into the situational and the cosmic. Situational irony is also called structural irony or irony of circumstance. It refers to the difference between expectation and its realization, and the difference between general expectation and actual occurrence. This is a irony of affairs or events. This shows that people have a modest view of a person's lack of control over his situations. In situational irony, a person may laugh at another person's misfortune, even if the same misfortune happens to himself and he doesn't know it. However, cosmic irony refers to a contrast between a character's aspiration and the treatment he or she receives at the hands of Fate. It suggests that the universe is indifferent to human efforts, which can be expressed in a view that God, a god or the universe manipulate the outcomes in a way that human beings do not know. Cosmic irony is also called the irony of fate which reviews events controlled by undisguised personality, society and even God.

Example 13: It rains on the day of the Weather Bureau's picnic.

Example 14: Several vacationers at the Luxurious Richelieu Apartments there held a hurricane party to watch the storm from their spectacular vantage point. Richelieu Apartments were smashed apart as if by a gigantic fist, and 26 people perished. (Joseph P. Blank, 1970) ^[8].

Example 13 and example 14 are instances of situational irony. Generally speaking, the Meteorological Bureau should be able to predict the weather the next day. It should not choose a rainy day for a picnic. In example 14, no accident should occur after the hurricane party watches the storm in a luxury apartment. Unexpectedly, the luxury apartment was smashed, which led to the death of 26 people.

As to cosmic irony, a famous example is from O. Henry's short story "The Gift of the Magi", where a young wife sold her beautiful hair and bought a watch chain for her poor young husband as a Christmas gift, but she didn't know that he sold his watch in order to buy a comb for her hair. However, in this story, the twist of fate leads to a happy ending, for the author suggests that, by their futile sacrifices, the lovers are drawn closer together. In another example of cosmic irony, as in Thomas Hardy's poem "the Convergence of the Twain ", the Fates are personified and seen as hostile, for they lead to the death of 1500 people. The poem is about the luxury passenger ship Titanic, which is said to be unsinkable. It sank after hitting an iceberg on its first Atlantic voyage in 1912 (Kennedy, 1983) ^[9]. The four examples above show that both situational irony and cosmic irony share the feature of having an unexpected outcome for a person or a thing. They differ from each other in that the former emphasizes the personal ignorance, while the latter implies the power of the universe.

5. Artifacts irony

Artifacts irony is also called romantic irony. The ironist goes beyond the direct ironic intention and creates a specific illusion in order to destroy it later. The paradox of romance is the reflection of reality. This romantic irony can be found in Don Quixote. In this novel, the writer Cervantes creates a hero who calls himself Don Quixote. Don Quixote's original name was Quixote, which means a thin face. He belongs to the old-fashioned gentry and lives in the small village of Ramcha in ancient Spain. He disguised himself as an unparalleled knight and rode an old thin horse Rozinaute (meaning the former ordinary horse) to help the poor and punish evil all the way. His strange ideas caused many people to laugh at him. However, he didn't realize it until his death.

In Shakespeare's plays, there are also examples of romantic irony, most of them can be understood as the contrast between the appearance of a character and his real existence. Brutus looks noble, but politically blind; Macbeth was strong and noble, but he was driven by the ambition of murder. Let's analyze the character of Macbeth bass in detail. Macbeth was a cousin of a beloved

king and was described as a very brave general. He is proud to suppress the rebellion and repel the invasion of foreign troops. "He was thought honest, or honourable, he was trusted, apparently, by everyone" (Bradley,1985) ^[10]. He has both a sense of humor and fame. He has no lack of humanity and compassion; at the same time, he is ambitious. His ambition is strengthened by his marriage and further stimulated by his extraordinary success. He also has the imagination of a poet to a certain extent. Through this imagination, he keeps in touch with supernatural impressions and is vulnerable to supernatural fear. During his journey home after the war, Macbeth and Banquo (another general) meet three Witches who prophecy that Macbeth is to become Thane of Cawdor and King hereafter, and the kingdom is to be promised to Banquo's children. When he becomes Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth tells his wife, Lady Macbeth about the prophecy and she entices him into murdering King Duncan. After Duncan was killed, Macbeth became king and soon killed Banquo because he had no children and was afraid that Banquo's descendants would succeed him as king. But Macbeth sleepless night, often haunted by the ghost of Banquo. He feels insecure and afraid of revenge. He went to the witches, and they told him that "he will not be hurt by any woman and will never be conquered until Birnam Wood attacks Macbeth and frantically kills those who disobey him. He slaughters Macduff 's wife and children. They refuse to see him and flee to England. Macduff and the king of England help Malcolm (Duncan's son) attack Macbeth's castle. Macbeth saw Malcolm's soldiers holding up branches, mistaking them for Birnam's moving wood, and hurried to fight them. Macbeth realized that Macduff was not born to his mother, but was taken out of his mother's stomach at the right time, so he was completely frustrated and finally killed by the enemy. Therefore, driven by ambition, a powerful hero was destroyed.

The origin of artifactual irony might come back to Socrates' times. Socrates pretended to be naive in order to cause the mistakes of his opponent (victim) to be exposed and his view of truth to be effectively underestimated.

6. Conclusions

The above classification of irony into four kinds is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. There are other ways of classification. For example, Booth divided irony into the stable irony and the unstable irony in a rhetoric way in his book "A Rhetoric of Irony" (Booth, 1974) ^[11].

In spite of the different ways of classification, all categories of irony share the following qualities:

First, in each ironic case, there are three abstract participants, which are easily associated with the grammatical categories of first person, second person and third person. The first-person speaker is an ironist; the second person audience is the perceiver; and the third person is the victim of irony.

In example 1, the ironist is the writer of the novel, Jane Austen; the perceivers are those who read the novel; and the victim of the irony clearly refers to Mrs. Bennet who might represent all those snobbish persons of Jane Austen's days. In example 3, "He is a Solomon", the ironist is the speaker of the sentence; the perceiver is, of course, the hearer; and "he" is the victim of the ironic utterance.

In example 11, an instance of dramatic irony, the writer Mark Twain is the ironist; the audience or readers of the works are the perceivers; the characters Sid and aunt Polly are the victims of the irony.

In example 14, an example of extant irony, the writer Joseph P. Blank is the ironist; the readers of the article are the perceivers; those vacationers mentioned are the victims of the irony.

In the instance of artifactual irony of Don Quixote, the writer Cervantes is the ironist; the readers of the novel are the perceivers; the main character Don Quixote is the victim of the irony.

Second, all the traditional categories of irony conform to the criterion "to say the opposite of what one means" or "to say other than what one means". They are all related to some kind of discrepancy. Verbal irony shows a discrepancy between the literal meaning and the intended meaning of an utterance; dramatic irony expresses a discrepancy between the limited knowledge of a character and the fuller knowledge of the audience; extant irony demonstrates a discrepancy between an expectation and its fulfillment; and artfacted irony is a paradox of reality.

In most cases one says the opposite of what one means, and irony is regarded as a rhetoric device. Analyses of irony based on this criterion are to be incorporated into a semantic theory which has to provide:

First, a definition of the speaker's intended utterance meaning; second, a mechanism for deriving the intended meaning of a sentence; and third, some basis for explaining why such utterances exist: why a speaker should prefer the ironic utterance (15) to its literal counterpart (15a), which on this analysis, means exactly the same thing (Sperber & Wilson, 1986)^[12].

Example 15: What lovely weather! Example 15a: What awful weather!

When no context is provided to these two sentences, it's impossible to tell whether example 15 is irony that says the opposite of what one means.

Another type of irony is that what a person says is not his own meaning, but with a more global feature, because its basis is not the opposite meaning, but a different meaning. The difference between the two types can be expressed by hyponymic opposition: the definition based on opposite meaning standard represents specific members, while the definition based on different meaning standard represents opposite general members. The latter definition seems not so specific, because it is also applicable to the rhetoric devices such as metaphor, metonymy and exaggeration. On the other hand, the former definition seems too narrow because it excludes certain categories of irony, such as rhetorical question: "Could you step on your own feet?"

One problem for traditional view of irony lies in that literal meaning cannot always be regarded as a starting point for deciphering it, because in many cases, given some contextual assumptions, literal meaning itself is an interpretation. In this case, the opposite of the literal meaning of a sentence is not clear, or it is not close to explaining the speaker's real ironic intention. For example, if you do a bad thing to a good friend and he says thank you, the traditional view is that the opposite of your friend's comment might be something like "No thanks" or "It is not the case that I'm thanking you." But these explanations fail to capture the real ironic intention, that is, "you did something I do not appreciate." Sometimes, speakers may also be outspoken, but still want their words to be understood as irony, as when a mother says to her teenage son "I love children who keep their rooms clean." when she has found that her son, once again, failed to clean his room. Although this sentence may be literally correct (i.e. the mother may have a positive impact on children when they keep their room clean), the speaker may use it ironically. Therefore, we can see that it is inadequate to decipher irony based on the two criteria "to say the opposite of what one means" and "to say other than what one means." More criteria are to be sought. The further study of irony will incorporate several pragmatic principles to the two traditional criteria.

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