

A Comprehensive Study of Irony in Human Communication

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Abstract: Irony, as a unique and powerful rhetorical device, occupies an important position in language expression and literary creation. It provides people with diverse ways of expression and thinking due to its contrast between literal and extended meanings, humorous or satirical effects, dependence on context, and ambiguity and openness. This paper aims to conduct a comprehensive and in-depth study of the rhetorical device of irony in human communication, including literary works, daily communication, advertising and marketing, political and social commentary, etc. Through a detailed exploration of the definition, classification, characteristics, and applications of irony in different fields, this paper reveals to readers the unique role of irony in language expression and literary creation, helping readers better understand and apply irony, and providing reference for further research on irony.

1. Introduction

Irony is an ancient and widely used rhetorical device that expresses ideas in a unique way, conveying deeper meanings through the contrast between literal and extended meanings. Irony is everywhere, in diverse and expressive forms in human communication, including literary works, daily communication, advertising and marketing, political and social commentary, etc. In-depth study of irony helps readers better understand the richness and complexity of language, as well as the unique ways in which human thinking and expression occur.

Irony originates from the ancient Greek word “εἰρωνεία(eirōneía)”, which originally meant “pretending to be ignorant”. In modern contexts, irony typically refers to a way of expressing words or actions that appear to be contrary to the actual intention or situation. This contrast can be subtle hints or obvious contrasts, requiring the audience to understand its true meaning through context. For example, when a person says “this weather is really nice” on a rainy day, the word “nice” here is obviously not really praising the weather, but expressing dissatisfaction with the bad weather through irony.

The following is research on the definition of irony:

Muecke (1969) explored in detail the definition, types, and applications of irony in literature [1]. It analyses irony from multiple dimensions, interpreting its definition from different perspectives and levels, and examining it in a broad cultural, social, and literary context. This work promotes the study

of irony, provides theoretical foundations and ideas, inspires subsequent research, and opens up new perspectives.

Hutcheon (1994) explored the theory of irony and its expression in cultural and political contexts [2]. This book makes an in-depth exploration of definitions and categories of irony, involving cognitive differences between surface and reality, expectations and outcomes; analyses the expression of different types of irony, such as language, context, and drama, in different contexts. Hutcheon's study has great influence on promoting theoretical innovation and interdisciplinary development in irony research, providing guidance for literary creation, and enhancing social cognitive abilities.

Claire Colebrook (2004) deeply analysed the definition and complexity of irony from multiple dimensions such as philosophy, literature, and politics [3]. This book traces the historical context of irony from Socrates to the postmodern period, and outlines its evolution in different times, segmenting ironic types such as language, context, and drama to showcase their diverse expressions. It also studies irony across philosophy, literature, and political disciplines, revealing its deep connotations and diverse values, and providing important references for later academic research and ideological expansion.

Kierkegaard (1841) explored the definition of irony from a philosophical perspective, especially Socratic irony, which defines irony from multiple dimensions [4]. Its essence is profound thinking and existence, revealing the differences between reality and ideals by saying the opposite of the meaning. At the same time, it is pointed out that Socrates is a model of irony, and his dialogues and philosophical practices demonstrate the profound connotation of irony, inspiring a thirst for truth and self-reflection; It also elaborates on the types of irony such as language, context, and drama, revealing the complexity of reality and the multifaceted nature of human nature from different scenarios.

2. Classification of irony

Traditionally, irony can be classified as verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony.

2.1 Verbal Irony

Verbal irony is one of the most common forms of irony, referring to the situation where the literal meaning of the speaker's words is opposite to their actual intention. For example, a student who received an "F" grade in the final exam may say, "Wow! I did really well in the final exam." This implies dissatisfaction with the exam results and expresses the opposite feelings through exaggerated expressions. Verbal irony can be further divided into the following types.

2.1.1 Sarcasm

This is a more direct and sharp form of verbal irony, in which the speaker maliciously uses satirical language to mock or criticize the other party. For example, "You're such a genius, you can't even solve such a simple problem."

2.1.2 Understatement

It is also known as understated statement, where the speaker intentionally states facts lightly to achieve an emphasis effect. For example, when describing a big fire, someone says 'this fire is a bit big'.

2.1.3 Overstatement

Contrary to understatements, speakers exaggerate their opinions to highlight the degree or

importance of things. For example, “I’m so exhausted that I can hardly move my feet.”

2.1.4 Socratic Irony

This originated from the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, who often posed questions in an ignorant manner, guided others to think through dialogues, and ultimately overturned their views, in order to reveal the truth.

The research on the classification of irony includes the following:

Fu (2012) used the American sitcom “The Big Bang Theory” as the research object to explore the cognitive patterns of linguistic irony generation and recognition understanding from the perspective of cognitive pragmatics. Through the analysis of ironic dialogues in the drama, it is found that ironic communication is governed by the principle of relevance, and ironic users have psychological motivations such as expressing opposition and criticism. The generation of irony is a response and interpretation of discourse, and its recognition and understanding are the process in which the listener obtains contextual effects under the guidance of the principle of relevance and infers the speaker’s purpose [5]. Jiang (2010) analysed irony from a pragmatic perspective, using Grice’s Cooperative Principle and Leech’s Politeness Principle to explain irony, and combined examples to analyse the ironic, polite, effective, and humorous functions of irony [6].

Chopin (2001) uses techniques such as verbal irony to help readers better understand the plot, characters’ emotions, and story themes, fully demonstrating the importance of irony in novels [7]. In short stories, the author employs many literary elements to depict characters, especially irony and imagery. These rhetorical devices vividly describe characters and criticize the inequality between men and women in the late 19th century.

2.2 Situational Irony

Situational irony refers to the ironic effect that occurs when the actual situation of an event is completely opposite to people’s expectations. It presents a dramatic contrast that goes against expectations and goes in the opposite direction, causing readers or viewers to feel a strong sense of surprise and impact, by contrast. For example, a fire-fighter’s home caught fire while carrying out a firefighting mission; or someone who is always worried about a plane crash, but ultimately encounters a car accident while taking a ride in a car.

The research related to situational irony is as follows:

Jiang analysed irony from a pragmatic perspective, and combined examples to analyse the ironic, polite, effective, and humorous functions of irony. The analysis of the manifestation and function of situational irony in practical language use is helpful for a deeper understanding of the characteristics and functions of situational irony [6].

Ni (2015) conducted an in-depth exploration of the types and functions of Chinese irony, analysing the expression and role of irony in literature and art, including different types of irony such as situational irony. By using specific literary works as examples, readers can see more clearly the presentation and unique charm of situational irony in the Chinese language context [8].

Zhao (2011) conducted an in-depth analysis of the culture of irony in his book, starting from the formal characteristics of irony and exploring its significance and value in contemporary culture. The book also analyses the cultural influence of situational irony as an important form of irony, which helps readers understand situational irony from a cultural perspective [9].

Richard Rorty explored irony from a philosophical perspective in this book, which involves some ideas of situational irony. He believed that irony is a way of cognition and expression, which reveals the absurdity of reality through self-reflection and criticism. The philosophical reflection on situational irony in the book can provide readers with a deeper understanding and inspiration [10].

Situational irony can be divided into the following categories:

2.2.1 Cosmic Irony

Cosmic irony involves the intervention of supernatural forces or fate, causing things to develop beyond people's expectations. For example, Gatsby deeply loved Daisy, and in order to relive his old dreams with her, he held a luxurious party in an attempt to attract Daisy's attention. He believed that with wealth and status, he could win Daisy's heart back. However, Daisy ultimately did not choose him, but kept a distance from him. Gatsby's efforts and sacrifices were shattered, his American Dream shattered in the face of cruel reality, and fate seemed to be deliberately playing a trick on him, making his dream impossible to achieve [11].

2.2.2 Poetic Irony

Poetic irony is commonly seen in literary works, where crimes, evil and other behaviours are not presented in a bloody and violent manner, but are treated in a gentle way to meet the aesthetic expectations of readers. For example, the Book of Genesis in the Bible provides a detailed account of the events that took place in the Garden of Eden. "In the garden of Eden, man was given dominion, yet he fell from grace through his own whimsical choice." In the Garden of Eden, humans are endowed with sovereignty, but they became vicious due to their own arbitrary choices. Here, the beautiful gifts bestowed by God are compared with the corrupt behaviour of humanity, ironically revealing the weaknesses and tragedies of human nature, with a poetic irony [11].

2.2.3 Structural Irony

In structural irony, the entire plot is based on a cognitive foundation that contradicts the truth, often occurring with unreliable narrators or naive characters. For example, Hamlet pretended to be crazy and foolish to deceive others in order to avenge his father, but his heart suffered greatly. His actions did not achieve the expected results, but instead sparked a series of doubts and confusion, including his own death. He intended to change the status quo, but was ultimately influenced by fate [12]. Structural irony, as an important literary technique, enhances the artistic and intellectual depth of works by revealing the differences between plot and character expectations.

2.2.4 Historical Irony

In historical irony, at the time of the incident, it seemed ordinary, but looking back afterwards, it was discovered that there were early signs, giving it a sense of "being wise after the event". For example, the Titanic was hailed as "unsinkable" during its construction, and its designers, manufacturers, and related personnel all firmly believed in this statement. Even the captain declared to the public before setting sail that "God personally leads us on our journey, and even the harsh weather at sea will become calm and peaceful. However, in reality, the Titanic quickly sank after colliding with an iceberg on its maiden voyage, causing a large number of casualties [13].

2.3 Dramatic Irony

In dramatic irony, the audience or readers know the truth about the danger or impending events they are in earlier than the characters in the play. This form of irony is particularly common in literary works and dramas, as it increases the suspense and tension of the story, allowing the audience to view the development of the plot from an omniscient perspective. For example, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience knows that the love between Romeo and Juliet will face a tragic ending, but the characters in the play are immersed in the longing for love, which enhances the infectiousness

and tragic colour of the work.

The research on Dramatic Irony is as follows:

Tan (2013) explores drama in depth, including the use of dramatic irony as an important means of enhancing dramatic feature. The book elaborates in detail on the role and forms of dramatic irony in plot, character development, and thematic expression. Through specific analysis of works, it helps readers understand how dramatic irony makes drama more engaging [14].

Martin Esslin (1981) provides a comprehensive analysis of drama, and in the process of exploring the essence, constituent elements, and developmental laws of drama, and it also mentions dramatic irony. Through the analysis of different types of theatrical works, the book demonstrates the application of dramatic irony in different styles and themes of drama, as well as how it affects the audience's understanding and perception of drama [15].

Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Barrels of Amantia" is a classic example of dramatic irony [16]. In the story, Montessori pretends to warmly invite Fortunado to his own cellar to identify a precious barrel of amantia wine, but in reality, he lures it deep into the cellar for revenge. Fortunado remained unaware of his fate from beginning to end, until he was buried in a cellar, and this stark contrast formed a typical dramatic irony. By reading this work, one can gain a deeper understanding of the shock and contemplation brought about by dramatic irony.

Dong and Ma (2006) makes a systematic introduction to drama art. When explaining the basic concepts, development process, and genre styles of drama in the book, the important technique of dramatic irony is also involved. It can help readers understand the role of dramatic irony in the entire theatrical art system from a macro perspective, as well as its interrelationships with other dramatic elements [17].

3. Characteristics of irony

3.1 The contrast between literal and intended meaning

This is the most prominent characteristic of irony, where the literal meaning expressed by the speaker or author is completely opposite to the true intention, requiring the audience to understand the intended meaning through literal words. This contrast can be a literal reversal at the level of words, or a deviation from expectations and reality at the level of context.

3.2 Dependence on context

The understanding of irony cannot be separated from specific contexts. Whether it is verbal irony, situational irony, or dramatic irony, their true meaning needs to be judged based on contextual information. The same words or sentences may produce different ironic effects in different contexts, so accurately grasping the context is the key to understanding irony.

3.3 Humorous or satirical effect

Irony can often trigger readers or listeners' sense of humour or critical thinking about a certain phenomenon through subtle expressions and unexpected plot twists. It can be a light-hearted and humorous joke, or a sharp and profound satire that makes people feel the charm and power of language in laughter or reflection.

3.4 Ambiguity and openness

Due to the difference between the literal and extended meanings of irony, its interpretation often

has a certain degree of ambiguity and openness. Different audiences may have different interpretations of the same irony based on their own understanding, experience, and values, which also makes irony have richer connotations.

Here are some studies on the characteristics of irony:

Zhao (2011) deeply analysed ironic culture from the perspective of formalism, emphasizing that understanding ironic culture requires starting from its formal characteristics. The book points out that irony has the characteristic of acknowledging each other's right and wrong but not escaping through relativism. In contemporary culture, irony has become a unique cultural phenomenon and expression, presenting complex connotations through specific forms [18].

In addition, Zhao (2016) explored linguistic irony and symbolic irony, analysing the characteristics and forms of irony at the semiotic level. It provides a new perspective for understanding irony from the perspective of semiotics, helping readers realize that irony is not only a rhetorical device in language, but also involves the transmission and interpretation of symbolic meanings [19].

Wang (2017) focuses on the stylistic irony of Lu Xun's novels, and elaborates on the unique expression and role of irony in Lu Xun's works. The book may involve the sharp and profound characteristics of irony in Lu Xun's novels, as well as how irony is combined with Lu Xun's ideological expression and literary creation [20]. Shen (2022) conducts in-depth research on the presentation of irony in narrative and its relationship with other narrative elements, which helps readers to have a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics and functions of irony [21].

In short, these researches have elaborated on the characteristics of irony from different perspectives, whether it is formal theory, semiotics, literary analysis of specific writers' works, or narrative perspective. They provide diverse thinking paths for a deeper understanding of the connotation, expression forms, and role of irony in culture and literature, helping readers to more comprehensively grasp this unique language and cultural phenomenon.

4. The application of irony in different fields

4.1 Literary works

In literary works, irony is an important creative technique. Writers often use irony to shape character images, reveal social issues, create dramatic conflicts, and enhance the artistic appeal of their works. For example, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth's initial misunderstanding and prejudice towards Mr. Darcy, as well as Mr. Darcy's seemingly arrogant behaviour, actually reveal the true emotions and social class differences between the two. This irony makes the characters more vivid and three-dimensional, and also reveals the problems of marriage and class solidification in British society at that time [22]. For example, George Orwell's "*Animal Farm*" uses the seemingly equal but actually unequal "farm" society established by animals to satirize the totalitarian rule and social reality of the Soviet Union during the Stalin era through dramatic plot twists [23].

4.2 Daily communication

In daily communication, irony is also widely used. People sometimes use ironic tone to express emotions such as dissatisfaction, complaints, ridicule, or praise. For example, the phrase "I hope people are okay" originally referred to sincere wishes to others, but now it is often used to ridicule those who like to exaggerate the degree of danger of things [24]. For example, when friends joke with each other and say, "You're so smart, you can't do such a simple thing well; or when facing some unreasonable phenomena, people use ironic language to express satire and criticism, such as "This regulation is really good, it restricts everyone tightly". However, when using irony in daily

communication, attention should be paid to the situation and the target audience to avoid misunderstandings or hurting others' emotions.

4.3 Advertising and Marketing

Advertisers and marketers are also adept at using irony to attract consumers' attention and promote products. Some advertisements use ironic techniques to highlight the characteristics or advantages of products, in order to achieve unexpected promotional effects. For example, an advertisement for a weight loss product may feature an obese character who becomes slim and beautiful after using the product, accompanied by the words "Say goodbye to obesity, and it's so magical" [25]. This exaggerated contrast and irony can leave a deep impression on consumers and stimulate their desire to purchase.

4.4 Political and Social Review

In political and social commentary, irony is a powerful tool of expression. Politicians, writers, and social commentators often use irony to expose social problems, criticize government policies, or satirize certain social phenomena. For example, Mark Twain deeply satirized the hypocrisy and racial discrimination in American society in his works, such sentence as "one is white, one is black; one is a slave, another is the master of the slave; one is a bound person, while the other enjoys freedom." This sentence profoundly reveals the huge differences and inequalities between black and white people under slavery in the southern United States, and provides a powerful critique of racial discrimination [26]. Some contemporary talk show hosts also express their views on social hot issues through humorous and witty irony, which has attracted public attention and reflection.

5. Conclusion

After in-depth exploration of the definition, classification, characteristics, and applications of irony in different fields, we can draw the following conclusions:

As to the definition and essence of irony, irony is an ancient and widely used rhetorical device that expresses deeper meanings through the contrast between literal meaning and actual intention. It not only exists in literature, daily communication, advertising, and marketing, but is also widely used in political and social commentary. This contrast can be subtle hints or obvious contrasts, requiring the audience to understand its true meaning through context.

In light of classification and specific forms of irony: first, verbal irony is the most common form, referring to the speaker's actual intention being completely opposite to the literal meaning. Second, situational irony refers to the situation where the actual situation of an event is completely opposite to people's expectations. Third, in dramatic irony, the audience or readers know the truth of an impending danger or event earlier than the characters in the play.

In terms of the characteristic of irony: first, the comparison between literal and actual meanings is the most prominent feature of irony, which requires the audience to understand the actual intention through literal language. Second, context dependence: understanding irony relies on specific contextual information, and the same sentence may produce different ironical effects in different contexts. Third, humorous or satirical effect: satiricity often triggers readers' or listeners' sense of humour or critical thinking through clever expression and unexpected plot twists. Fourth, ambiguity and openness: due to differences in literal and practical meanings, ironical interpretations often have a certain degree of ambiguity and openness, and different audiences may have different interpretations.

Finally, with regard to the application of irony in different fields: first, in literary works writers

often use irony to shape character images, reveal social issues, create dramatic conflicts, and enhance the artistic appeal of their works. Second, in daily communication, people often use irony to express dissatisfaction, complaints, ridicule, or praise. Third, in advertising and marketing, advertisers and marketers are also adept at using irony to attract consumers' attention and promote products. Fourth, in political and social commentary, politicians, writers, and social commentators often use irony to expose social issues, criticize government policies, or satirize social phenomena.

In summary, irony, as a rich and diverse rhetorical device, not only has unique charm in language expression, but also plays an important role in various fields such as culture, literature, and society. Through a deep understanding and appropriate use of irony, we can better convey ideas, reveal the truth, and enhance the effectiveness of expression in various communication situations. In future research, we may further explore the combination of irony with other rhetorical devices, the forms of expression of irony in different cultural backgrounds, and the development trends of irony in emerging media, in order to continuously expand readers' understanding and comprehension of irony.

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