

Verbal Irony and Situational Irony: Why do people use verbal irony?

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Jeong, Ja-Yeon. 2004. Verbal irony and situational irony: Why do people use verbal irony? *SNU Working Papers in English Language and Linguistics* 3, #-#. Many studies on verbal irony has mostly concentrated on the definition and nature of irony, i.e., the question of "what is verbal irony?" The motive for the use of verbal irony, on the other hand, has not been the center of the studies of verbal irony as much. To answer the question of motivation, or "Why people use verbal irony", I would like to look at situational irony based on one study on situational irony (Lucariello, 1994). Situational irony is often precluded in the discussions on verbal irony, for the two "ironies" are regarded as belonging to different domains. Situational irony, however, has much to do with verbal irony in many ways. Both kinds of irony entail opposition or juxtaposition of incompatibles and require shared knowledge: the shared concept of irony in situational irony and the evaluation of the circumstances which trigger irony. Regarding processing route, both ironies are explained more plausibly with one-stage process view. These findings further support the claims of mention theory of verbal irony, which emphasizes the role of shared background between speaker and hearer in the communication of verbal irony. I would thus conclude that the verbal irony should be approached communicatively. (Seoul National University)

Keywords: verbal irony, situational irony, motivation of irony, mention theory

1. Introduction

There have been a number of researches and literatures on the nature of verbal irony. Verbal irony refers to utterances like the following, usually delivered with sarcastic intention:

- (1) I really love to spend summer here in Houston. (The speaker is driving a car whose air conditioner is out of order when it is over 110F.)

This special kind of language use has drawn attention of many linguists as well as rhetoricians and literary scholars, for verbal irony is widely

used in everyday experience by common language users. Most of the studies answer to this question: "what is verbal irony?" Studies on verbal irony attempt to explain how irony is distinguished from non-irony, what elements constitute it, and how an ironical utterance is interpreted.

Another question, however, is not answered as much. Why do people use verbal irony? This question is concerned about the motivation for the use of verbal irony. To be specific, by what is the verbal irony initiated in speaker's mind? The nature of verbal irony can be more plausibly explained by exploring what triggers speaker's production of ironical utterance.

In this paper, I would like to answer to the question of "why" by examining the relation between verbal irony and situational irony. Situational irony denotes situations in life which is viewed as ironical, such as a toothless dentist or Oedipus killing his father not knowing who he is. Situational irony is often precluded in the discussions on verbal irony, for verbal irony and situational irony are regarded as belonging to different domains; the former to the domain of language use, or figure of speech and the latter to the domain of human experience in general. Even though the two kinds of irony cannot be treated in a similar way, however, the relation between them is worth considering. Verbal irony is a language-related phenomena, but it cannot be discussed outside of a situation (Utsumi 2000: 1778). A situational setting that motivates irony is a prerequisite for speaker's production of verbal irony. That situation, of course, cannot be identified with what the term "situational irony" denotes, as Utsumi (2000) points out. My hypothesis is that people's concept about situational irony plays a role in recognizing a situation that motivates irony in some ways. Also, I claim that the role of situational irony in understanding verbal irony will be a strong support for the mention theory of irony, which has been claimed by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1998) and Wilson and Sperber (1992) many times.

2. Review of the previous studies

The traditional view of verbal irony defines irony as "saying one thing and meaning, or implicating, the opposite (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 240)" In this view, irony is a trope, or a figure of speech. I would like

to review briefly what the modern theories of irony has been discussed.

A number of studies that has been made about verbal irony can be divided into two big streams. One is linguistic approach, which focuses on the logical structure of ironic language and explain it in the frame of the Gricean notion of conversational maxim and the violation of the maxim. This approach is "essentially a rewording in linguistic terms of the traditional theory of irony as a trope" (Attardo 2000: 794); that is, the ironical meaning is processed through some special device like implicature after the literal interpretation of the utterance is rejected as inappropriate. Grice defines irony as a case where "the speaker flouts the maxim of quality". (Barbe 1995: 38) Another recent research that represents this approach is Giora (1995). She views verbal irony as a mode of indirect negation. She makes a point that irony understanding involves both the processing of the negated message (what is said) and the processing of the implicated message, so that the difference between them may be computed (Giora 1995: 239). By communicating negation indirectly, she argues, irony achieves what direct negation can't; it communicates absolute degree of negation by avoiding the graded interpretation that direct negation usually imply. The indirect negation view is partly compatible with the theories of Grice. Both assume a two-stage processing that involves literal interpretation first and ironic, non-literal interpretation secondly. The linguistic approach presupposes the dichotomy of literal and non-literal languages. In both theories, verbal irony requires a two-stage deciphering procedure whereby both the literal and the ironic meanings are computed (Giora 1995). Literal meaning of an ironic utterance is thus preserved.

The second approach to verbal irony is called psychological or cognitive approach. The mention theory of irony has been one of the most influential studies with this approach. It challenges the meaning substitution view asserted by the traditional and Gricean theories of irony. Mention theory defines verbal irony as echoic utterance from which speaker dissociates herself. Ironic utterance is echoic because it does not represent what the speaker really thinks but "indirectly quotes" the thoughts or utterances which someone else has. The following is a good example:

- (2) *He*: It's a lovely day for a picnic.
[They go for a picnic and it rains]

She (sarcastically): It's a lovely day for a picnic, indeed.
(from Sperber and Wilson, 1986)

What is echoed is, however, not only someone else's utterance or thought presented immediately before in the discourse context. "General norms or universal desires and their particular instantiations in individual cases (Sperber and Wilson, 1998: 284)" can also be the sources of echo. The notion of echo is "deliberately broad (Sperber and Wilson, 1998: 284)". Hence it is possible for ironic utterances to echo some previously shared event or knowledge. Another property of irony is that it involves attitude, especially that of blame or criticism. The recognition of these attitudes and emotions may be crucial to the interpretation process (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). Mention theory stresses the role of shared background knowledge in producing and interpreting irony. That shared knowledge often means the preceeding context. As mention theory is within a relevance theory of communication, verbal irony also has to achieve contextual effect. The relevance theory of verbal communication thus seems to capture and explain one important nature of verbal irony. Irony is interpreted as ironic because of the circumstances of the ironic utterance (it is not a sufficient condition but a necessary one for success of verbal irony). Contrary to the linguistic view of irony, mention theory argues one can simultaneously access to the ironical meaning of an utterance by inference from the given circumstances and thus has no need to process its literal meaning.

Regarding its claims unfolded above, mention theory seems to give more explanation for the motivation for verbal irony between the two approaches. The motivation is related to the circumstances of an (ironic) utterance as I discussed and supported with Utsumi (2000) in the introduction; that is, the circumstance (or situation) intrigues the speaker's using irony. Mention theory pays attention to the circumstances in which verbal irony is produced and understood, and how it affects the achievement of irony.¹

¹ Studies with linguistic approach also attempt to provide an explanation on what motivates irony. Giora (1995) notes that irony has a communicative function regarding its indirectness; namely, politeness strategy (Giora 1995: 259). This can be, however, understood as the effect of verbal irony rather than the motivation, because it is unlikely to think that the main purpose of using irony instead of direct expression is to save faces. Using irony sometimes threatens

So far, I reviewed some theories of verbal irony and discussed their different standpoints. Lastly, I introduce a study on different subject: situational irony. Lucariello (1994)'s psychological study of situational irony examines whether "situational irony is a commonly shared concept that exhibits typifying features and internal structure" (Lucariello 1994:130). Ironic events have some key features such as unexpectedness, human fragility, outcome (e.g., loss and win) and opposition. Lucariello claims that ironic events can be classified into some categories with these features and that people share a concept about event which is regarded as ironic. In cognition, ironic events thus belong to a different kind of event domain from which non-ironic events belong to. Her study leads us to the way to understand verbal irony. Lucariello notes that verbal irony shares some features of situational irony, such as unexpectedness and juxtaposition of incompatibles (Lucariello 1994: 129). Though not explicitly discussed, the notion of ironic event domain has a potential to evidence the claim made by mention theorists that interpretation of verbal irony does not require the dichotomy of literal and non-literal language and a two-stage interpretation.

Now I would like to make my claims concerning the relation between situational irony and verbal irony through the rest of this paper.

3. Claims

One of the main motives for using verbal irony would be a speaker's intention to make a sarcastic effect by contrasting her utterance with the situation which caused it. Sometimes, the desire for contrasting itself acts as a motivation. It is necessary, then, for the speaker to *recognize* the present situation as the one in which she can use irony. How can the speaker recognize whether it is the situation suitable for an ironic utterance or not and by what "cues" can he know it? I will look for the answer in the mechanisms of understanding situational irony.

Situational irony, such as dramatic irony or irony of fate, should not be confused with the situation of ironic utterance, or the circumstances that trigger verbal irony. It does, however, share a good deal of properties with verbal irony. Both entail a juxtaposition of incompatibles: what is

speaker's and hearer's faces more than a direct reproach does.

said (literal meaning) versus what is intended (non-literal meaning) in the verbal case and what occurred versus what was expected to occur in the situational case (Lucariello 1994: 129). Verbal irony entails unexpectedness as situational irony does. Both are more or less, but necessarily concerned with a deviation from a desirable state, too.

From these, we cannot but acknowledge that the properties of verbal irony that mention theory suggests are very similar or closely related to those of situational irony. Though Sperber and Wilson or other researchers of the mention theory hardly noted or discussed about situational irony, the claims of mention theory of irony accord with the concepts of situational irony. What is echoed in ironic utterance is sometimes social norms or states regarded as desirable. When the situation seems not to conform to the speaker's expectation or to what she thinks as desirable, she can make an ironical utterance by echoing and simultaneously dissociates herself from it. For the relevance theory, which bred the mention theory of irony, views communication as hearer's inference of the most relevant interpretation in the given discourse context, what is important in understanding irony is also the context of the ironic utterance. That's why shared knowledge is stressed on by mention theorists. I will discuss on these points along with Lucariello's findings about situational irony in the next section.

I argue that both speaker and hearer share the concept of situational irony when they use and interpret verbal irony. From this, the claim of mention theory can get another support. Furthermore, I'd like to argue that verbal irony should be understood communicatively, not within the frame of truth-conditional semantics.

4. Situational irony

According to Lucariello (1994), situational irony is a concept, in psychological term, which has an internal structure and external structure. What is the internal structure like? How is knowledge of ironic events related to knowledge of other event types?

4.1. A taxonomy of ironic event type

In Lucariello (1994), the types and characteristic features of situational irony are introduced first to classify ironic events (Study 1). Seven major types (Imbalances, Losses, Wins, Double Outcomes, Dramatic, Catch-22, Coincidence) were identified according to their typifying characters (i.e. the characteristic features). Among four characteristic features, the two main ones Lucariello's study identifies are Unexpectedness, a necessary but not sufficient one, and human fragility, which can be also thought a theory of the world's undependability. There are two other features: outcome and opposition. All of the ironic events classified share a notion of "events gone awry"; that is, an event occurred in a way one never expected it would happen, causing negative effect for the experiencer of the event in most cases (except for the type Wins and some subtype events of Double Outcomes). The examples are such as *The poor banker* or *A kiss that signifies betrayal*. In Imbalances, opposition is a critical feature. She notes that "a sharp *cancelling out* dynamic operates in such ironies, wherein one action or a state negates or opposes another (Lucariello's italic)".

Verbal irony shares two key features with the type Imbalances; unexpectedness and opposition. Unexpectedness is the feeling the ironist has towards the situation and opposition is what the ironist creates by her utterance. The opposition of verbal irony is, however, not created out of nothing by the speaker. Rather, the speaker makes the implicit (intra-personal or psychological) oppositional character of the ironic environment explicit. The speaker contrasts the unexpected situation with what she has expected or what she thinks more desirable.

4.2 Do individuals share a concept of situational irony?

The second experimental study performed in Lucariello (1994) (hereafter, Study 2) used a category production task, which required subjects to list 5 separate situations that they think of as ironic. The naive subjects generated all types and subtypes identified in the taxonomy of Study 1. Those event types that exhibit the important category features of opposition (in the type Imbalances), outcome (type Losses), and opposition in relation to outcome (type Double outcomes) were more frequently produced than the types which lack key category features. The category of situational irony was found to exhibit internal structure. Among Imbalances (the most frequently produced event type), the subtypes that exhibit strong opposition were the most frequent, especially those in which the opposition is intrapersonal (Temporal and Contextual Imbalances, e.g., *The wimp who grows up to be a lion tamer* or *The poor banker*). Among Losses, self-inflicted loss forms were most frequent. These results imply that opposition is the most strong factor of ironicalness, especially when it exists within one agent.

The result of Study 2 shows there is a generally shared concept about "ironicalness" between people. That's why one irony type is judged as more prototypical situational irony than another. The knowledge is manifest when a person thinks a situation as ironic. I argue this kind of shared knowledge is also required in producing and interpreting verbal irony. That knowledge would not be the same one as the shared concepts of situational irony. A speaker and a hearer of ironic utterance, however, must also make a judgement whether the situation can be accepted as an ironic environment and that judgement will be based on the shared knowledge. For both the speaker and the hearer involved in a verbal irony, shared knowledge about ironic environment is necessary. Verbal irony requires common knowledge as other verbal communication does. This common knowledge, however, would differ in some ways from the shared background required for communication in general. In the case of irony, this shared knowledge need to involve value judgement, which has to do with the ironist's intention in the utterance. Let's look at one example:

(3) What a lovely party! (in the middle of a lousy party)

(from Giora, 1995)

In this utterance, the speaker and the hearer share the knowledge that *the party is lousy* in the first place. This knowledge would be enough for success of the normal mode of communication if the speaker said "What a lousy party!" For the successful communication of irony, however, the interlocutors need more. They must agree (implicitly, at least) with the notion that *a party should not be lousy* (or the hearer must know that the speaker wants him to have the same idea, at least). Only after sharing an idea that the situation presented in the discourse context is not desirable or far from the expected, irony can be successfully communicated. What is echoed in that ironical utterance is closely related with the shared knowledge (i.e. the presupposed idea): the notion that a party should not be lousy (i.e., should be lovely).

That verbal irony need more shared knowledge than other kind of verbal communication should not be misunderstood. Verbal irony is not a figure of speech outside ordinary verbal communication but a subtype of verbal communication which require the participants share more. In short, the fact that there is shared knowledge especially required for understanding verbal irony reveals the communicative character of verbal irony, which linguistic analyses fail to explain.

4.3 Different domains of event knowledge and processing of ironic events

Situational irony has external structure as well as internal structure. The external structure means "the place of the concept of situational irony in the complete knowledge base" (Lucariello 1994: 143). A knowledge structure is established for ironic event, along with other event knowledge structure like the script². The third and last experimental study in Lucariello (1994) supports this fact by showing that subjects can reliably differentiate among three event kinds: expected events, unexpected ironic events, and unexpected non-ironic events. The subjects

² "The script is a general knowledge structure or schema for events that realize a high possibility of expectation. Scripts underlie frequently enacted activities, such as going to a restaurant, or more conventional ones, such as getting married." (Lucariello 1994: 130)

especially recognized unexpected ironic events and unexpected non-ironic events as distinguished kinds of events. Distinguished from unexpected non-ironic events, ironic events have internal structure. A general knowledge structure is established for ironic events and a culturally recognized pattern is observed in them, too (Lucariello 1994: 143).

Lucariello argues that situational irony has a similarity to verbal irony in this respect. As a distinct event-based concept, situational irony may challenge the normative theory of events as verbal irony challenges semantic theories of meaning (Lucariello 1994: 143). The domain of event knowledge is not only established for prescriptive events (i.e., the script) but for a vast array of events. Situational irony is a general knowledge structure for some events that take a striking turn, whereas the script is a representation for events that unfold prescriptively. The issue concerning the processing of ironic event is naturally raised. There are two possible processing routes. The first one is serial processing, where knowledge of what is expected to happen (the script) is activated first. If the expectation is violated, then the knowledge of non-expected event such as situational irony is activated to interpret the event. This two-stage procedure has analogy to the processing of verbal irony suggested by some studies which make a distinction between literal language and figurative language. On the alternative processing route, on the other hand, both script knowledge and ironic event knowledge are accessed when one experiences events. Lucariello (1994) regards this route as the more likely one. One of the reason is that irony comprehension requires the simultaneous juxtaposition of what actually happened and what is expected to happen. This processing route of ironic events reminds us of the processing of verbal irony suggested by the mention theory. What is echoed in the utterance (what is expected) and the ironic environment (what really happened) is simultaneously juxtaposed by ironic utterance. Echo makes that "juxtaposition" possible, for it invites the unrealized "what it must be" into the reality, which has gone awry from the speaker's point of view. The interpreter of verbal irony thus doesn't need to exert effort to process the literal meaning to interpret irony. Hence it is demonstrated that "verbal irony is a case for meaning beyond literal, semantic meaning" (Lucariello 1994: 143). The theory on situational irony thus supports the argument of echo theory of verbal irony.

From the discussions so far, the similar mechanisms of situational irony

and verbal irony are revealed. I made a point that this similarity is not fortuitous but based on the similar mechanism of cognition. Considering that relationship, one may also assume that recognizing the concept of situational irony can possibly act as the grounds for production and comprehension of verbal irony.

5. Conclusion

Situational irony has a lot to do with verbal irony. Both involves the notion of unexpectedness and opposition. Both can be understood only on the basis of some kind of shared knowledge. The processing of verbal irony doesn't require processing of its literal meaning first, just as prescriptive event knowledge need not be activated first for the comprehension of situational irony.

These findings on the relationship between verbal irony and situational irony can be used as a good support for mention theory of verbal irony. Especially, the concept of echo can be more refined in this respect. The term "echo" defined by Sperber and Wilson (1998) which is a technical term and deliberately broad, includes not only the reproduction of what someone else said or thought but also social norms, desirable states and standard expectation. The latter three instantiations of echo can be explained in relation with "prescriptive events" all together. This term used in opposition to ironic events in the study of situational irony seems--ironically, indeed--to give an adequate description to the echoic nature of verbal irony. The notion of "prescriptive events" binds the broad range of sources of echo together under one name. It may be able to work as a good source of counter-argument against any criticism on the loose definition of echo.

Back to the question of "why", I also confirmed that circumstances evoke the use of verbal irony. Although the circumstances where verbal irony is used does not precisely coincide with the situations recognized as ironic, the knowledges on situational irony stored in human mind may trigger a feeling that a contradictory (ironic) utterance would make the present undesirable situation more endurable one: an ironic situation abound in human world. How it is done is explained in relation with the ideas of situational irony and the mention theory. Situational irony support the idea that verbal irony is a mode of verbal communication.

Verbal irony should be approached communicatively rather than purely linguistically, which is how the traditional and (Neo-)Gricean accounts deal with it.

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