

Unresolved contradictions specifying attitudes – in metaphor, irony, understatement and tautology¹

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Abstract

Tropes using unresolved contradiction to specify attitudes can be found in several kinds of figurative language. Examples of metaphor, irony, understatement and tautology are presented. In metaphor, the discrepancy between the ordinary reference of a term and its metaphoric use can be an instrument of specifying an attitude for the receiver. Unresolved contradiction can be useful in comprehending metaphors in which (1) there is a paradox, (2) the subject is implicit, and (3) the subject is ill-defined. In irony and understatement, the gap between what is literally said and the sender's belief can communicate the sender's attitude towards the subject matter. By being literally repetitious and non-informative, tautology can express attitudes of self-justification, conservatism and the like. We conclude that contradictions implied at the surface level of a trope need not always be resolved for the trope to be properly understood.

1. Introduction

In the traditional view, all figures of speech involve some form of contradiction – understood as a violation of standards (Gibbs, 1994). Yet, at the same time, they are appreciated as meaningful statements. This raises the question: How can a statement be meaningful and contradictory at the same time? A common solution is to suggest that the contradiction implied at the surface level of the trope is removed in the receiver's interpretation of the trope (e.g., Searle, 1993). Here, we wish to draw attention to a possibility which we believe has been largely overlooked in the literature, namely, that a

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contradiction implied by a trope may be left unresolved in the reception of the trope and appreciated in terms of an attitude.

Removal of contradiction is traditionally regarded as the overarching principle of communication and meaning, and cooperation in a conversation implies not contradicting oneself, and certainly not simply leaving any contradiction that happens to arise unresolved, without even the expectation of an eventual resolution. To use contradictions can be regarded as a violation of the Gricean quality maxim: "Speak the truth, be sincere!" (Grice, 1989; Brown and Levinson, 1987). At the same time, however, it is clear that a speaker could give a listener an example of a contradiction, saying that the example is just that – a contradiction. In such an exchange, the speaker would expect that the contradiction would remain unresolved. For example, consider the case of a mathematical proof that the square root of two is irrational. One can base the proof on contradiction, as follows. Let root two be rational, meaning it can be expressed as a ratio of two integers, a/b , where it is not the case that both a and b can be divided by two. If root 2 is a/b then 2 is a^2/b^2 . Therefore, a^2 is $2b^2$. Since $2b^2$ is even, a^2 is even, which means a is even. Therefore, a can be written as $2c$. Therefore, 2 is $4c^2/b^2$. Therefore, b^2 is $4c^2/2$. Therefore, b^2 is $2c^2$. Therefore, b is even. But our initial assumption was it is not the case that both a and b can be divided by two. Therefore, our initial assumption has led to a contradiction. Hence it cannot be that root 2 can be expressed as a ratio of two integers. Notice that the contradiction, following one assumption (that root 2 is rational), specifies the truth of the other (that root 2 is irrational) and remains unresolved in the specification.

The relevance of unresolved contradiction in communication has also been pointed out in philosophy. For Søren Kierkegaard, the founder of the existentialist movement, attitudes and beliefs in relation to life should not be conveyed in a straightforward way. On the contrary, Kierkegaard contended, they should be conveyed in such a way that the receiver of the message would be able to experience matters personally, rather than simply grasping ideas in an abstract and emotionally-distant way. Among other things, Kierkegaard (1963 [1846]) advocated the use of paradoxes to achieve this aim. The paradox should be "understood as a paradox" (p. 190, our translation, italics added). That is, it should not be resolved in order to become meaningful. On the contrary, to resolve the paradox was to take away its vital meaning, according to Kierkegaard. As an illustration of Kierkegaard's point, consider how the Canadian author, Joy Kogawa (1992) uses literal contradiction: "It's right, it's wrong to be humble. It's wrong, it's right to speak up" (p. 202). The quotation stems from a novel about the internment of the Japanese Canadians in The Second World War. This internment created a profound schism between love of the adopted country and a feeling of worthlessness caused by rejection. That which was loved despised us. How could it then deserve love and obedience? The result was frustration, schisms within the Japanese Canadian community, mistrust, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness. Kogawa aims to express these attitudes by speaking in contradictions, we suggest. A similar strategy of communication characterized the expressionist school of painting and literature. Among other things, this school advocated that the artist should deliberately contradict and violate the way in which the outer world appeared in order to draw attention to something other than the outer world (Stangerup and Jansen, 1977). From our point of view, the important aspect

of this attempt lies in the idea that the contradiction is not dispelled once its function is understood. It is appreciated, not resolved, and it specifies some matter beyond itself.

In the following, we will clarify how our thesis relates to other theories of tropes. Afterward, we will demonstrate the usefulness of our hypothesis that unresolved contradictions can specify attitudes by considering examples of metaphor, irony, understatement and tautology.

2. Reactions to contradictions

There are at least three kinds of reactions to contradictions in analyses of tropes. One is to assume any contradiction vanishes once the trope is properly understood (Searle, 1993). A second is to imagine any likely instance of a trope in common parlance is a version of a more general trope or image-schema in which the contradiction remains intact (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The third – to which we wish to draw attention – is to consider some particular tropes and any contradictions in them as a way of specifying an attitude of the speaker. Consider the three analyses.

2.1. *The consistency-view*

Searle (1993: 110) points out that in a simple metaphorical utterance, a speaker says *S is P* but means metaphorically that *S is actually R*. The utterance meaning is reached by going through the literal sentence meaning, Searle writes. Thus, we need two sentences to explicate a metaphor (p. 87). The second sentence expresses literally what the speaker means when he utters the first sentence and means it metaphorically. Searle points out the meaning of the second sentence is the set of truth conditions determined by the meaning of *S is R*. The metaphor “Richard is a gorilla” says that Richard has certain traits, and to figure out what they are the listener has to consider features associated (rightly or wrongly) with gorillas (p. 93). Searle argues the end result of metaphor comprehension is a claim that is *not logically incoherent* (our emphasis). He points out that if the statements which are supposed to explain metaphors are themselves metaphorical or otherwise figurative, the explanations will be circular. Nevertheless, he is convinced that some metaphors stem from perception and sensibility, not just linguistic practices, and work well across several different cultures. For this reason, he avers that some metaphors can stem directly from deeply-rooted experiences: “The notion of being cold just is associated with being emotional” (p. 98). Several major theorists have adopted this kind of analysis to which we will turn now.

2.2. *The image-schema view*

Gibbs (1994) claims much of our ready comprehension of tropes follows from the fact that a lot of our thinking is constrained by deeply-rooted figurative processes, stemming from our human species, our constitution, and our basic perceptual experiences with the world. Stimulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) he accepts there are figurative models – often called image-schemas – in our conceptual system that support

our use of particular non-literal but standard expressions, e.g., the place is used for the event in “Yugoslavia could become our Chechnya”. Lakoff and Johnson claim that, in many instances, figurative thought is often the very basis of thought (much as Searle claimed some metaphors stem from experiences we “just have”). If so, some of the contradictions that may be present in a trope could still be present in the basis of thought. For example, Lakoff (1993) contends that achieving a purpose is often metaphorically understood as reaching a destination, because the correspondences between achieving purposes and reaching destinations (or acquiring objects) are utterly common in our experience. Experience provides the correspondences, and the result is a metaphor that is completely natural. In effect, Searle’s (1993) concerns about circularity are weighed against the lessons of human experience. If experiences provide contradictions (e.g., affinities between distinct conceptual domains), they will be part of the general metaphoric structures. In this analysis, comprehension of a metaphor, and any literal contradiction therein, can be achieved by relating it properly to a general structure, and any contradiction therein (e.g., Lakoff and Turner, 1989). That is, comprehension of a trope would be in the form of a paraphrase that contained the essential parts of the contradictions in the trope.

2.3. *Contradictions specifying attitudes*

A third possible approach to contradiction is the one we will take here. We contend that the aim of contradictions in tropes can be to specify an attitude towards an idea, a theme, an event, etc. (see Berntsen and Kennedy, 1994). A pattern specific to a source, in a particular context, specifies that source. As Gibson and Spelke (1983: 2) put it:

“To perceive any event or thing, the information in stimulation must correspond to it, in the sense of *specifying* it.”

The stimulation does not copy what it specifies, and it is not similar to it. For example, the information on an edge of a surface and the step in depth at the edge can be given by optic motions and the appearance and disappearance of texture elements in the optic array reaching the eye from the edge. The optical changes indicate the depths and slants of surfaces without actually containing or resembling depth or slant – i.e., they specify features without being similar to the features. Following Gibson’s notion of specificity without similarity, we suggest that a contradiction in a certain context can correspond to an attitude by the receiver; hence it can specify an attitude for the receiver. We use the term attitude in the same sense as F.C. Bartlett (1932), an important forerunner of modern cognitive psychology. For Bartlett (1932) an attitude was a kind of evaluation, dealing with “feeling and affect” (p. 207) and “interests and ideals” (p. 212). It should not be equated with basic emotions or affect. Rather, it is a preconceptual form of evaluation that shares the positive-negative dimension with emotions while, at the same time, it is more differentiated and more informative than mere affect. An attitude is preconceptual because it is a stance taken toward an idea, rather than an idea *per se*. A modern counterpart of the attitude concept may be found in the concept of

“appraisal” (Lazarus, 1991: 354) described as “an evaluation of the significance of knowledge about what is happening for our personal well-being”.

Contrary to the image-schema view, we are not claiming that contradictions specifying attitudes stem from basic, interpersonally shared structures of knowledge. We are making a more modest claim. Just as an example can be cited – or one can pretend to believe and assert a proposition – a contradiction can be mentioned or implicated. But the speaker’s intentions in (contradictorily) making the statement are, in fact, one step removed. The assertion is enclosed within the cognitive equivalent of a quotation mark, as Derrida (1982) might put it. It lies under the node labelled “container for an example of a contradiction”, as it were. Thus, while the contradiction is to be left unresolved, it is circumscribed as an instance of a certain class of statements, and lies within a hierarchical cognitive structure that can be well-formed and consistent as Searle’s stricture on logical coherence requires.

The meaning of a trope may often depend on its context, and frequently, an analysis of an individual case can lead to no more than one of several plausible readings. With that caution in mind, we will demonstrate the usefulness of our hypothesis that unresolved contradiction can specify attitudes, by considering examples of metaphor, irony, understatement and tautology.

3. Metaphors

Usually, it is argued that comprehension of a metaphor means removing a contradiction in it. We agree that this is a common case, but we will argue that it is not essential in every case.

A typical metaphor (A is B) can be described as a statement about identity which conflicts with standard class boundaries. At times, the metaphor can be treated as a kind of analogy (A is to \times as B is to y). However, as Nelson Goodman (1969) puts it, a crucial difference between analogy and metaphor might be that the latter implies contradiction, or conflict, whereas the former is not intended to be appreciated as a statement incorporating conflict.

“Where there is a metaphor, there is a conflict (...) Application of a term is metaphorical only if [it is] to some extent contra-indicated.” (p. 69)

Like Nelson Goodman, we wish to draw attention to the semantic conflict implied by metaphors. This conflict is the so-called tension of the metaphor. We contend that sometimes the tension is to be retained and appreciated in terms of an attitude. However, we will not argue that this is the only principle governing metaphor. Some metaphors do hint at perceived similarities between conceptual domains – one containing As and Bs and one containing xs and ys – as is often proposed (Searle, 1993; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). In short, we do not wish to reject here what we formerly called the consistency and the image-schema views, but we contend that there are certain kinds of metaphors for which such accounts seem incomplete and for which our approach suggests some possible solutions.

3.1. Metaphors in which there is a paradox

Some metaphors involve paradoxes – such as direct oxymora or indirect oxymora (Gibbs, 1994: 396). When some components of a metaphorical statement seem to exclude other components of the same statement, any attempts to make sense of the metaphor A is not A simply as an analogy between two key components (both of which are A!) seem bound to fail. For the same reason, such metaphors are nice examples of our view. If no ground can be established, it seems evident that the tension per se might help specify the trope's meaning.

Metaphors can be paradoxical in several ways. First, the predicate may cancel some defining properties of the subject so that the metaphor almost takes the form of direct contradiction (A is not A), as here:

The blue night is so silent. I am sleepless.
Silence widens and rings, squeaks, shrills
(Johannes V. Jensen, *Interferens* ([Interference], 1906, our translation)

Some indispensable properties of silence are cancelled by silence being predicated by ringing, squeaking and shrilling. Silence is consequently not silent. We suggest that in this context the contradiction is employed with the aim of specifying an attitude of alarm and uncertainty.

Second, the predicate alone may be paradoxical. If the predicate is composed of several conceptions, the properties of one component may exclude some defining properties of another, as below, where beauty is exemplified by a shattered railway station.

Beautiful like a shattered railway station are
our youth, our power, our wild ideas
(From T. Kristensen, *Landet Atlantis* [The land of Atlantis], 1920, our translation)

To exemplify beauty by a shattered railway station seems to exclude some indispensable properties of the standard conception of beauty, such as perfection, completion, harmony and peace. Thus, what is implicitly stated is “beauty is not beautiful”. A destructive and revolutionary attitude is specified by this contradiction, we suggest. Because the application of “beautiful” so strongly opposes our traditional ideas of beauty, one could be inclined to read the metaphor as ironical. However, such a reading would conflict with the rest of the poem and especially with the last stanza, where the intention of metaphorically attacking the conception of beauty is explicit: “In chaos, I raise my gun/and aim at the star of beauty” (our translation).

A third form of paradoxical metaphors is found when the predicates within a corpus or within a pair of metaphors appear mutually exclusive, as here by Kogawa (1992: 193): “We are the fishes in the deep, blue sea and we are the fisherfolks standing on the shore”. It is self-evident that the “we” of the statement cannot be both the fishes in the sea and the fisherfolks on the shore. The contradiction seems employed to specify an attitude of identity-confusion and estrangement.

3.2. Metaphors in which the subject is implicit

Is the subject of the metaphor understood in terms of the predicate? A problem in this elementary account of metaphors is how we make sense of metaphorical statements where the subject is not literally present, as in the following extract:

Across the ice, the snow is sweeping –
lonely the wind, the snow, the heart
are playing together.

(From O. Gelsted, *Afsked med poesien* [The leave of poetry], 1924, our translation)

Any sophisticated account of metaphors can employ ellipsis, and certainly our view does not require a subject to be present explicitly. The extract above has a pointed discrepancy between the ordinary reference of “heart” and its reference in the text, where “heart” is described as a part of an outer, wintry landscape. First let us note the obvious: Some central properties of the normal reference of heart are abolished in the description, namely the fact that the heart is a vital part of the inner life of a person (both as a physical organ and as a cliché for the lovelife of the person). We suggest that this tension between the ordinary reference of “heart” and its novel location in a wintry and lonely landscape specifies an experience of a loss of power and passion – an attitude of resignation, we may say. It might be objected that “heart” simply replaces a concept referring to something in the wintry outer world, e.g. “ice”. If so, the metaphor merely indicates the analogy: *the inner life is as insentient as the wintry landscape*. However, this account may be insufficient for some readers, as it does not explain why “heart” is described as having moved from the inside of the person to the outer world, and not vice versa – the wintry landscape moving into the person. The direction of this movement is not arbitrary; we think it may be especially apt for specifying an experience of a loss of power and affection. An attitude of resignation is further emphasized by the adverb “lonely” qualifying the verb phrase “are playing together” in a quite contradictory fashion. This indicates that the “play” is not the pleasant pastime one could normally seek. Rather it is more likely the best one can do under the circumstances, one might reasonably take it.

3.3. Metaphors in which the subject is scarcely known

In everyday speech, metaphors are often employed to characterize individuals and their behaviour – e.g., “she is an angel”. A key problem in an account that treats metaphors as analogies is to explain how the receiver selects the relevant similarities between the subject and the predicate in cases where the receiver knows little about the specific subject of the metaphor beforehand. For example, “My roommate is an angel” involves a conflict between the normal uses of “roommate” and “angel”. Following Searle’s (1993) discussion of ellipsis, this could be written as “my roommate has some of the properties of an angel”. The properties could be made explicit, as in “my roommate is selfless, understanding and kind”. The term angel could be taken to be hyperbolic. But there may be something in addition to be gained by stressing that there

is a contradiction in the original phrase that should be retained in part. Saying “my roommate is an angel” could be a hyperbolic way of saying there is something inexplicable here – just like the vulgarian “my roommate is an arsehole” would indicate something inexplicable rather than just the proposition “my roommate has some of the properties of an arsehole”. The attitude reflected in the original phrase is one of pleasant surprise at gaining what one cannot ordinarily predict, for reasons one cannot quite fathom, from a person whose motives are slightly beyond one’s ken. It is grace, not one’s own endeavours, that have produced this roommate, and grace is something to be thankful for. Furthermore, if the receiver wants to characterize the roommate as having some properties of an angel, the bemused gratitude signified via the contradiction helps to constrain the relevant commonalities. The roommate is assumed to share only those angel-characteristics which are outstanding from a human perspective of pleasant surprise, such as being especially helpful, forgiving and selfless, whereas angel-properties that are less adorable from a human perspective – such as being especially pious, innocent, clean, radiant and dressed in unusual robes – are likely to be considered irrelevant. Thus, even when the metaphor functions in a way where its discrepancy could be resolved, the attitude specified by the contradiction may guide the receiver to recognize the implicit ideas.

In sum, the gap between the ordinary reference of a term and its metaphorical use can be left unresolved to specify an attitude for the receiver. This enables the receiver to make sense of paradoxical metaphors, and it may guide the understanding of cases in which the subject of the metaphor is implicit, or scarcely known to the receiver.

4. Irony and understatement

In the traditional view, irony contains a contradiction since the ironist believes the opposite of what he or she says. Here, we will argue that this contrast is often intended as a way of specifying an attitude for the receiver – such as reservation, superiority and the like. In a similar manner, understatement contradictorily diminishes the importance or magnitude of the subject matter. We argue that this contradictory reduction can serve to specify attitudes – e.g., indignation and sympathy.

A related view of the two tropes is advocated by the so-called pretense theory (Clark and Gerrig, 1984; see discussions by Gibbs, 1993, 1994) according to which a speaker using irony or understatement is pretending to be somebody else (an imagined person) who is addressing somebody other than the actual listener. By this pretense, the actual speaker is able to convey a “derogatory attitude” towards the idea that is literally expressed.

4.1. Irony

The traditional account of irony takes the meaning of an ironical statement to be the opposite of what is literally said e.g., “a real winner” means a loser. As pointed out by Sperber and Wilson (1986) and Gibbs (1994) there are several problems in this view. Among other things it fails to explain why the sender does not simply present the

intended message directly nor does it explain what distinguishes irony from mere irrational statements such as “Something is coming” said at a crossroads when the road is clear (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 240).

For an ironical statement to be successful, it is crucial that the receiver is aware of the fact that the sender does not mean what he or she explicitly states. Otherwise, the receiver will take the statement literally, and it will consequently fail as irony. Therefore, successful irony involves an opposition between a literal statement and what the receiver takes to be the sender’s belief.

We suggest that the meaning of irony often lies in the effect of the employed contrast. To produce a statement about a subject matter which opposes apparently indisputable knowledge or beliefs can be a way of displaying the subject matter is taken by the speaker to be amusing or ridiculous or absurd or beneath contempt, depending on the context. That is, the contrast between the literal statement and the shared background knowledge can be a way of specifying an attitude of, for example, good-humoured superiority towards the subject matter, as here, from Eco (1993):

“In the following, and though in a quite compressed way, I will try to explain why one should write a preface, what it should contain and how the acknowledgements should be disposed. That skill with which the acknowledgements are disposed is the standard for the true worth of the scientist.” (Eco, 1993: 88; our translation)

The irony lies in the last statement’s conflict with what virtually everybody would believe – namely, that the skill with which the acknowledgements are disposed is far from the standard for the true worth of the scientist. Here, Eco has constructed a statement in which the act of writing acknowledgements appears absurd against shared background knowledge. By that opposition, Eco specifies a wry attitude not only toward heavy-handed acknowledgements, but (presumably) also towards scientists more interested in their career than in their discipline. Eco hints that there is an unresolvable tension between truth and the business of science.

Another way of overcoming the risk of the irony being taken literally is to enlist hyperbole or parody, so that the receiver more readily recognizes the contrast between the belief presented and the belief actually held. When parody and hyperbole serve irony there is a case of *metalepsis*: a trope based on a trope –as in the following example:

We till and sell and pile our money
and the hedge is ten feet high
we dread the future, what it will bring
vexation, bad luck and troubles.
I trudge my round with the dog and the gun
and if anyone enters, they’ll get shot
for oh-so-envious people are
just because we are doing so well.

(From N. Hausgaard, *Havesyge* [covetousness], 1991, our translation)

Gibbs’s (1994) situational irony is evident in the last statement, “we are doing so well”. Taken to mean having material possessions there is not much contradiction here.

But if it is taken to mean “we are in a general state of well-being” there is a distinct anomaly – a case of irony. In the latter sense, “we are doing so well” conflicts with what we are told, namely, that the “we” are worried, annoyed, always on guard, etc. In order to highlight this tension, hyperbole and parody are employed: The hedge is “ten feet high”, the people are “piling” their money, and the narrating I is on guard with his gun and his dog, ready to shoot anybody who enters. The contrast between the negative content of this description and the statement “we are doing so well” specifies an attitude of detachment in relation to the “we” of the text.

4.2. Understatement

It is often assumed that the meaning of understatement is simply “more” than what is literally stated. The speaker says P but means more than P. “A superb performance becomes pretty fair and a good one passable”, as Nelson Goodman (1969: 83) puts it. As pointed out by Brown and Levinson (1987), understatement can serve conventions of politeness – e.g., it is more polite to indicate a failure than to speak its name straightforwardly. When understatement serves to camouflage an unpleasant fact, for example, we may say that its meaning is simply “more” (i.e., worse) than what is literally expressed. However, understatement often signifies an attitude rather than merely hinting at a camouflaged idea. As in the case of irony, the function of understatement often lies in the tension between the viewpoint literally expressed and what the receiver takes to be the sender’s view.

The key difference between understatement and irony is the form of the conflict. Irony uses contrast or opposition. Understatement uses reduction. Because the literal statement diminishes the importance or the magnitude of the subject matter, it can, at times, be taken as an example of an unjust judgment and call for sympathy and compassion as in the following example (a piece of Danish folk-style music).

Look, there are flags southward, there are flags to the north
Only Pipe-Jens’s flagstaff is withered and dry.
It is pointing to the sky in sharp protest.
And this is the day for the silver wedding party at the agent’s.

In Pipe-Jens’s kitchen, his eggs are boiling.
It smells a little musty and close in his room.
Jens is sitting at the table in his stocking feet and vest.
And this is the day for the silver wedding party at the agent’s.

Though his window is closed as tight as can be,
he can hear when they toast and cheer.
A bit of the egg runs from his chin to his vest.
And this is the day for the silver wedding party at the agent’s.

There were invitations to the party on forms so fine.
 There are doctors and parsons and lots of teachers.
 And the neighbours are going, at least most of them.
 For this is the day for the silver wedding party at the agent's.
 (N. Hausgaard, *Pibe-Jens* [Pipe-Jens], 1988, our translation)

The first three stanzas describe the main character Pipe-Jens sitting alone at home while his neighbours ("the agents") are celebrating their silver wedding. We are told that he has closed his windows as tight as possible, apparently to avoid hearing any sound from the party, but still he can hear them toast and cheer, while he is sitting alone eating an egg clumsily. Understatement is found in the last stanza in the wording: "And the neighbours are going, *at least most of them*". In that cultural context, from which this song stems, "the neighbours" is a conventional way of referring to a certain group of guests to a silver wedding party or a similar celebration. Often the guests are classified in three groups: The family, the colleagues and the neighbours. Thus, "the neighbours are going" is here taken to mean that the agent's neighbours are going. "At least most of them" is a reservation in relation to the general statement "the neighbours are going" – a reservation, which the receiver knows specifically concerns the case of Jens (as he is one of the neighbours). To present the significant fact that he has not been invited as a reservation in relation to another statement, is to subordinate its importance. At the same time, Pipe-Jens's isolation, his experience of loneliness and of being let down is strongly indicated by the context. This conflict specifies an attitude of compassion and indignation. The receiver is invited to side with Pipe-Jens against his thoughtless surroundings and also against the apparent ignorance of the narrator. The intention of the author to moralize is presented – without understatement – in brackets in the headings: "(The story of a dirty trick against a good neighbour)".

It seems awkward to instruct somebody straightforwardly to take joy and pleasure in something. For joy and pleasure to be genuine, it has to arise spontaneously. To avoid the lack of spontaneity implied by straightforward instructions, understatement can be used. The following example is an extract from a poem by William Carlos Williams, which is used by Lakoff and Turner (1989: 140–141) to discuss the creation of poetic metaphors. Here, however, we will emphasize understatement in this poem as a means of specifying an attitude of immediate delight and susceptibility to sensuous aspects of a scene.

To a Solitary Disciple

Rather notice, mon cher
 that the moon is
 tilted above
 the point of the steeple
 than that its color is shell-pink

Rather observe
that it is early morning
than that the sky
is smooth
as a turquoise

(...)

It is true
in the light colors
of morning

brown-stone and slate
shine orange and dark blue.

But observe
the oppressive weight
of the squat edifice!
Observe the jasmine lightness
of the moon.

(William Carlos Williams, 1966: 167–168)

The disciple (i.e., the reader) is instructed to focus less on pleasant sensuous aspects, like attractive colours, than on those aspects of the scene which require more reflection to become visible – like the precise position of the moon. The reader is instructed to “rather observe” the position of the moon, than its colour. He or she is instructed to “rather observe” the fact that it is early morning than the appearance of the sky. Similarly, the narrator indicates that it is less important to notice the colours of the brown-stone and slate than to observe the weight of the edifice as he uses the wording: “It is true (...) But observe ...”. However, at the same time the narrator vividly describes the sensuous aspects – the unique colours of the moon (“shell-pink”) and the sky (“smooth as a turquoise”) and the colours of brown-stone and slate which “*shine orange and dark blue*” (italics added). These vivid and detailed descriptions of the sensuous parts in contrast to the literal statements of their minor importance, form the tension of the understatements. The tension aims to specify, we suggest, yielding, almost sinfully, to one’s natural delight in and susceptibility to the sensuous in the scene, for which straightforward and authoritative clear description would be less effective. A rewriting of the first two stanzas should illustrate that the description of the sensuous parts would lose vividness if the reader was instructed in a direct way to focus just as much on them as on the other aspects of the scene:

Notice, mon cher,
that the moon is
tilted above

the point of the steeple
and also that its color
is shell-pink

Observe
that it is early morning
and also that the sky
is smooth
as a turquoise

Further, the last two sentences of the original text instruct the reader, forcibly, with buts and exclamation marks to attend to what is not so pleasant, and then, finally, to yield to the pleasant aspects of the scene, to notice what is delightful, and to do so without any need for exhortation or emphasis in the end.

In sum, irony and understatement imply a gap between what is literally said and what the receiver takes to be the sender's belief. In both cases, this inconsistency can be used to specify an attitude. Here, we have presented examples of irony specifying attitudes of detachment and superiority, and examples of understatement which communicated attitudes of compassion and of delight in sensuous aspects of a scene.

5. Tautology

Tautology all too obviously asserts the truth, e.g., "war is war". As such, tautology violates the metalinguistic rule that the meaning of a statement should develop from subject to predicate. Here, we argue that this violation often is intended as a way of specifying an attitude.

To speak tautologically is often considered to be an error as the predicate of the tautological statement does not give any new information about the subject. By definition, a tautological statement does not tell us anything. However, tautology can serve as an apt trope, as in the "war is war". A straightforward explanation suggests that tautology becomes useful as a trope due to polysemy, that is, "war" as a predicate of the statement refers to something else than "war" as the subject. Consequently, the sentence is informative (Glucksberg and Keysar, 1993). Yet, in addition, we suggest that sometimes what makes tautology meaningful as a trope is its non-informative form. To violate the metalinguistic convention that the content of a message should develop from the subject to the predicate can be a way of signifying an attitude, for example an attitude of resistance towards change and development – as in the following extract, in which tautology takes part in parodying a narrow-minded, highly-conservative attitude:

Us from this part of the country, we are as we are.
That's what we tell one another so often, we are as we are.
That's also the way we would like to continue to be.
We don't think there is anything unnatural about that.
Our sky is so deep and blue.

and the air is so clean.
 We speak the most correct language of the world.
 Our children are nice
 and our women are pretty.
 And then we are so extremely intelligent.
 (From N. Hausgaard, *Velbegavet* [intelligent], 1991, our translation)

“We are as we are” is a tautological statement as the predicate does not add any new information to the subject. By violating the rule that the meaning of a sentence should develop from subject to predicate, it indicates that the way “we are” cannot be changed. It is also the way the speakers are going to be in the future. Here, the (parodied) impassive attitude is a self-righteous one; in another context, “we are as we are” might specify being fixed in the sense of a regret or an apology.

The following example appears to be a string of arguments. However, the predicate of each sentence only repeats what is already implicated by the subject. Consequently, the statements are tautological.

There’s nothing you can do that can’t be done.
 Nothing you can sing, that can’t be sung.
 (...)
 Nothing you can make that can’t be made.
 No one you can save that can’t be saved.
 All you need is love.
 (From J. Lennon and P. McCartney, *All you need is love*, 1967)

“There is nothing you can do” taken literally means “there is no possibility of action”. Therefore, the predicates of the first four sentences include phrases denying the possibility of certain activities. Each sentence consequently redoubles a negative definition of a certain activity, without adding any new information. For that reason, the redundancy in the statements can come to signify a *laissez-faire* attitude – an attitude of optimism and acceptance together with an indifference to needless demands and orders. If we take away the negations (as in “what you can do can be done/what you can make can be made” and so on), an opposite kind of unchanging fortitude would be specified – one of denial of failure and a welcoming attitude to indisputable energy and heroism.

As tautology creates a “non-story” (to borrow a term from Eco, 1979: 119), it can serve to support the belief in an everlasting basis of values which is uninfluenced by changes at the surface. In the example below, tautology expresses a romantic attitude, derogating, or even resisting, power-politics, fascism and the like, and thus it offers something to rely on – as time goes by.

You must remember this
 A kiss is still a kiss
 A sigh is just a sigh
 The fundamental things apply
 as time goes by
 (From H. Hupfeld, *As time goes by*, 1931)

But for the particles “still” and “just”, the central phrases are pure tautology. “Still” adds a temporal dimension taken literally, but is an understated claim for permanence and importance. Likewise, “just” is a way of saying “nothing more than”. Consequently, the particles “still” and “just” emphasize the modest or conservative attitude which is specified by the tautology. The term “must” asserts this attitude is deeply valuable.

In sum, the lack of information in a tautological statement need not be corrected in the receiver’s understanding. The fact that a tautological statement does not add new information to a subject can be used as a way of specifying an attitude for the receiver. Here, we have presented examples of self-justification, laissez-faire and conservatism communicated by tautology.

6. Discussion and summary

We have argued that contradictions implied by the literal meaning of a trope can be considered within at least three different theoretical frameworks: (1) a consistency view in which the contradiction is to be paraphrased to reveal an underlying idea, (2) an image-schema view in which stored perceptual experiences and deep conceptual metaphors form the basis of the comprehension and (3) the present view, in which contradictions at the surface level can specify attitudes with no removal of the contradictions. None of these views, taken in isolation, is likely to offer a sufficient account of all kinds of tropes.

In general what makes a contradiction able to remain unresolved and at the same time to be appreciated as meaningful is two things. One is that it is embedded within a hierarchical cognitive structure that provides a higher-order node or label for it: “There is a contradiction here”, in effect. The contradiction’s presence satisfies the labelling procedure, and the higher-order structure is the one that satisfies Searle’s (1993) call for internal consistency. The second is that the contradiction has an additional teleological function – in a word, its purpose is evident. Our simplest case is a speaker aiming to give an example of a contradiction to the receiver. A more interesting case is the one we have examined here. The contradiction may play a role in specifying not just a situation – being in a dilemma for instance – but one’s attitude to the situation. Not knowing whether to take the left or right fork is to be in indecision, but to be in a panic to avoid the wrong choice is to have an attitude.

Tropes using unresolved contradictions to specify attitudes can be found in various kinds of figurative language. First, in some metaphors, the discrepancy between the ordinary reference of a term and the one it takes in the metaphor may specify an attitude, rather than hinting at certain kinds of similarity. Second, in irony and understatement, there is a gap between what is literally said and what the receiver takes to be the sender’s belief. In irony (and sarcasm) the literal statement is opposed to what the receiver assumes is the belief of the sender, whereas understatement uses reduction. In both cases, the perceived inconsistency can be appreciated in terms of an attitude – such as superiority or detachment in irony, and compassion or indignation in understatement. Understatement can also specify attitudes of spontaneous joy and delight for which

straightforward instructions would be inept. Third, tautology, too, can be used to specify an attitude. To violate the metalinguistic convention that the meaning of a statement should develop from subject to predicate can communicate a conservative attitude, for example. “I am what I am!” indicates that this is also the way I will be in the future, stubbornly, come what may, though “what will be, will be” indicates fate will have its way and we have to accept it. Contradiction specifying attitudes can be found in other kinds of tropes than the ones considered here (e.g., see Shen, 1987, and Gibbs, 1994, on oxymoron).

In sum, removal of contradiction is not the all-powerful and all-pervasive principle of communication or of figurative language. It is just one among many maxims, and while it may be the over-arching one for communication in general, it can allow a subordinate goal of providing an instance of a contradiction. This subordinate goal can indeed be a chief intention of figurative language, at times, under the main goal of successfully participating in a conversation or exchange.

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