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Verbal Irony from Two Perspectives

Yuki Morita

Introduction

In accordance with classical rhetoric, verbal irony is a figure of speech that communicates the opposite of the literal meaning uttered. However, the classic definition of verbal irony is not comprehensive enough to explain all of the instances, and thus alternative accounts have been proposed to take the place of the traditional definition of verbal irony.

This paper examines two alternative perspectives of verbal irony, and analyzes from a cognitive and relevance-theoretic standpoint. Then, from based on those frameworks and examples, we will see whether the two accounts are applicable enough to explain instances including miscommunication of verbal irony. I also attempt to clarify what is essential for an utterance to be understood as verbal irony.

1. What is communicated through verbal irony?

Before looking closely at what is communicated through verbal irony, we need to be consciously aware that some theorists believe that verbal irony does not communicate in the first place.

First, let us see the accounts by theorists who believe that verbal irony does communicate something. As we have seen in the introduction, from the perspective of classical rhetoric, verbal irony is regarded as intentionally communicating the opposite of literal meaning. Grice (1975) argues that verbal irony communicates figurative meaning which is conversational implicature derived from violating the maxim of Quality.\(^1\)

Sperber and Wilson (1981), however, disagree with Grice stating that what verbal irony communicates is not figurative meaning. The speaker’s intention is not to share the information associated with the content of attributed utterance or thought. Instead,\(^1\)  “Do not say what you believe to be false.” (Grice, 1975:46)
the intention of the speaker is to express his/her reaction or attitude toward the attributed utterances or thoughts.

On the contrary, Kawakami (1984) argues that irony does not communicate, but a speaker projects a structure of contrary relation between re-cognition and prior cognition on the level of speech. For this reason, he emphasizes the point that some people can understand irony, but some cannot. Clark and Gerrig (1984) also do not treat irony as communicating something. According to them, verbal irony is oriented not to perform a speech act. They treat verbal irony as a pretense so that a speaker conveys a contemptuous attitude toward speech act itself, or to anyone who takes it seriously.

In this section, I have referenced some theorists who treat irony as communicating something, and others who believe that it is a kind of pretense or performance done by a speaker. In the following chapter, we will see two alternative accounts, and examine each of them.

2. Kawakami’s Theory of Irony

Kawakami (1984) analyzes irony based on a cognitive standpoint. In his work, he suggests that cognition of irony highly depends on the contrary relation between prior cognition of a certain state of affairs or an expectation, which he symbolizes as ‘p’, and the re-cognition of posterior cognition of it, which he symbolizes as ‘-p’ in the diagram below:

(1)

\[-F (-p,p) \quad Y (\text{re-cognition}) \quad R (p,p)\]

\[-p \quad p \quad p \quad -p\]

\[-R (-p,p) \quad -p \quad X (\text{prior cognition}) \quad F (p, -p)\]

(Kawakami, 1984:219)
In the diagram, the X-axis represents prior cognition and the Y-axis represents re-cognition. In the case of the point R (p, p) or -R (-p, -p), the structure of the diagram is going to be true since there is no discrepancy between prior cognition and re-cognition. On the other hand, if it is point F (p, -p) or -F (-p, p), the structure is going to be false in terms of existing discrepancy between prior cognition and re-cognition. According to Kawakami, discrepancy exists at the points F (p, -p) and -F (-p, p), and discrepancies do not exist on the oblique line from point R (p, p) to -R (-p, -p). He states that this discrepancy is projected to language; therefore the core part of irony is in the speaker’s world of cognition, but not in the form or the function of communication of the speech.

If we take the above into account, we can naturally explain that some people may recognize an utterance as an irony, while others cannot recognize it.

Hamamoto (1998) adopts Kawakami’s Theory of Irony to his analysis. He explains a wide range of instances from non-echoic irony to peripheral cases. Now, let us take Hamamoto’s example to see how Kawakami’s diagram works to explain irony:

(2) (Mr. Kato, a section chief, scolded Taro over a small mistake)

Taro: Our section chief is always considerate to his men.

(3) a. Prior-cognition (that can be interpreted as = expectation, ideal)

Section chiefs are considerate to their staff. That is represented as P.

b. Re-Cognition (= reality)

Mr. Kato is IN-considerate (he is faultfinding). That is represented as -P.

(Hamamoto, 1998:265-266)

In the example, actual situation is the re-cognition or the reality. However, the reality stands contrary to Taro’s prior cognition or the expectation that his chief is considerate to Taro. Taro perceives the discrepancy between re-cognition and prior cognition, and projects it on the level of the speech.

Hamamoto states that, in some cases, the prior cognition is not easily recognizable since it may be based on one’s ideal, certain social standards, or norms. He summarizes Kawakami’s discussion in the table below:
When there is a discrepancy between prior cognition and re-cognition, the prior cognition will be judged to be false. However, Hamamoto points out that the term 'false' here refers to the contrary relation on the cognitive level, not to the contradictory, true or false relation on the linguistic level (Hamamoto, 1998:265).

From examining Kawakami's Theory of Irony, it seems that his account succeeds in the way of covering the entire mechanism of how we detect irony. Kawakami also proposes the possibility that the diagram could be applied to non-verbal communication as well.

3. Relevance theoretic approach to verbal irony

Sperber and Wilson (1981) and Wilson and Sperber (1992) proposed that verbal irony is essentially an echoic utterance which is attributive. Sperber and Wilson (1981) proposed an alternative account to Grice's which distinguishes the aspects of language into 'use' and 'mention'. Later, Wilson and Sperber (1992) took over the issues proposed in Sperber and Wilson (1981), and developed and added some modifications. One of the problems addressed in Sperber and Wilson (1981) was that the notion of echoic mention was too limited to apply. They generalized the theory so that it could be applied to broader instances. In their research, Wilson and Sperber (1992) explain how verbal irony can be displayed in the form of echoic interpretive use, especially during instances when a speaker's expression of disapproving attitude is uttered as shown in the example below:

(5) Peter: Ah, the old songs are the best.
Mary: (contemptuously): Still the best! (Wilson and Sperber, 1992:59)

See example (9) and (10) for echoic use.
See example (6) through (8) for attributive use.
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In the example, Mary’s utterance is understood as verbal irony since she mockingly quotes what Peter just said, and expresses her contemptuous attitude toward his utterance. We can clearly say that it is echoic and a form of disapproval, therefore it can fit into their alternative explanation of verbal irony they suggest.

Wilson and Sperber's literary explanation succeeds in relation to how they define and treat verbal irony. To them, verbal irony is one kind of echoic mention where they can explain the instances that do not fit into the classic definition. Since their study of echoic mention, further studies on verbal irony have been conducted based on the idea that irony essentially communicates neither literal proposition, the opposite meaning, nor conversational implicature derived from violating maxim of Quality.

Wilson (2009) suggests that irony should be an attributive use which is a sub-type of interpretive use, and include an expression of speaker’s dissociative attitude toward the attributed utterances or thoughts. She also explains that the echoic use is a sub-type of attributive use. To compare two types of uses, let us take Wilson's example and look at the attributive use below:

(6) a. John phoned his wife and told her that the train was about to leave.
   b. He was hoping that they would have a quiet evening alone.

(7) a. An announcement came over the loudspeaker. All the trains were delayed.
   b. The passengers were angry. Would they ever get home?

(8) a. Would the trains ever run on time, the passengers were wondering.
   b. His evening was ruined, John feared.

(Wilson, 2009:201)

Wilson explains that the attributive use is oriented to communicate the attributive thoughts. In (6a), it is an indirect quote of an utterance guided by the word ‘told’, and (6b) is also an indirect quote of an utterance guided by the word ‘hoping’. In (7a), the utterance “All the trains were delayed” can be implicitly attributed to the railway company. Also, in (7b) the utterance “Would they ever get home?” can be implicitly attributed to the passengers who are angry about the delay. Finally in both (8a) and (8b), the utterances are attributed to someone by parenthetical expression.
Hence, we can say (8a) and (8b) are intermediate cases of attribution. Then, let us take some examples of echoic use:

(9) Jack: I’ve finished my paper.

(10) a. Sue (happily): You’ve finished your paper! Let’s celebrate!

b. Sue (cautiously): You’ve finished your paper. Really completely finished?

c. Sue (dismissively): You’ve finished your paper. How often have I heard you say that?

(1b:202)

Wilson defines the echoic use that it is the case of attributive use and expressing speaker’s attitude toward the attributed utterance or thought. In the example above, Sue repeats Jack’s preceding utterance, and each of utterances is communicating the following; a. Sue believes Jack’s utterance as true, b. Sue cannot measure the truthfulness of Jack’s utterance, c. Sue does not believe Jack’s utterance as true. From examining the examples, Wilson explains that it is easier for a hearer to recognize a speaker’s attitude if it is related to preceding utterance, but the speaker is also able to express his/her attitude toward previous utterances or thoughts, which are tacitly attributed and not represented at present.

Finally, Wilson and Sperber (2012) identified an ironical attitude as one of the features to verbal irony. They argue that ironical attitude is not a puzzling feature added to figures of speech but is essential to verbal irony. Wilson and Sperber (2012) also point out that Grice fails to explain that irony includes the expression of attitude, and metaphor does not. Let us look at Grice’s broken window example below:

(11) A and B are walking down the street, and they both see a car with a shattered window. B says, Look, that car has all its window intact. A is baffled. B says, You didn’t catch on; I was in an ironical way drawing your attention to the broken window.

(Grice, 1967/1989:53)

In this example, speaker B says the opposite of what he actually intends. However, B’s utterance is not understood as verbal irony. It is assumed from this example that
even if a speaker say the opposite of what he/she intends, the utterance will not always be a verbal irony. Wilson and Sperber point out that even Grice realized the involvement of the speaker’s expression of attitude to verbal irony, he did not include the idea into his discussion. As for Gricean account, Wilson and Sperber add, ‘Neither the role of attitude in irony nor the fact that irony and metaphor differ in this respect has a straightforward explanation in the Classical or Gricean accounts, which treat both metaphor and irony as departures from a convention, norm or maxim of literal truthfulness’ (Wilson and Sperber, 2012:127) in respect to the treatment of ironical attitude in the Gricean account.

4. Puzzling phenomena of verbal irony

So far, we have introduced examples of utterances that a speaker originally intends as verbal irony and a hearer understands it as verbal irony also. However, we can imagine the following instances as well:

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<th>Speaker’s intention</th>
<th>Hearer’s interpretation</th>
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<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>Verbal irony</td>
<td>Verbal irony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>Verbal irony</td>
<td>Literal meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>Literal meaning</td>
<td>Verbal irony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>Literal meaning</td>
<td>Literal meaning</td>
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As the chart shows, there can be some cases where a speaker’s intention and a hearer’s interpretation end up being different than the speaker intended, such as (12b) and (12c). In this chapter, we will assess whether both Kawakami’s and relevance-theoretic accounts can be applicable not only in instances where a speaker’s intention and a hearer’s interpretation correspond but also in cases of miscommunication.

4.1 Verbal irony understood as literal meaning

First, we focus on the case where a speaker intends for verbal irony to be understood but instead that intention ends up being understood through the literal meaning of the utterance. From Kawakami’s account, we can assume that only the speaker has the
point of $F (p, -p)$ or $-F (-p, p)$ on the diagram he suggested. Let us examine an instance of this occurrence from the movie *Mean Girls* below:

(13) (Regina and Cady are talking at a high school hallway, and Lea is walking by)

Regina: (elaborately) *Oh my God, I love your skirt! Where did you get it?*
Lea: Uh, it was my Mom’s in the ‘80s.
Regina: (wryly) *Vintage. So adorable.*
Lea: Thanks!

(after Lea walks away, Regina turns to Cady)
Regina: That is the ugliest skirt I’ve ever seen.

(*Mean Girls, 2004*)

In this example, it is obvious that Regina intends for her utterance to be interpreted as verbal irony since there is a discrepancy between prior cognition, or appearance, which is the adorable skirt that Lea is wearing, and re-cognition or reality, which is the old-fashioned skirt from Lea’s mother. From this example, we can easily imagine that there is the point $F (p, -p)$ in Regina’s cognition. On the other hand, since there is not a gap between Lea’s prior cognition and re-cognition, and no point $F (p, -p)$, Lea did not interpret Regina’s utterance as verbal irony as a result.

Whereas Kawakami would treat this phenomenon as a matter of participants’ way of recognition, relevance theorists would treat this as a matter of interpretation of a speaker’s attitude. From relevance-theoretic point of view, Regina’s utterance is regarded as ostensive communication which has both informative intention and communicative intention. Regardless of whether an utterance is intended as verbal irony or not, the interpretation of the utterance depends on hearer’s inference. When the utterance is intended as verbal irony, a speaker expresses his/her dissociative attitude that the opinion being made through the attributed utterance or thought does not belong to him/her.

With the example above, from Regina’s utterance “I love your skirt,” we can
recognize that Regina clearly dissociates herself from the thought that Lea’s skirt is adorable or fashionable enough to wear at a high school circa 2004. At this moment in the conversation, Regina still does not know whether Lea took Regina’s utterance as verbal irony or its literal meaning since Regina asks the question where Lea got her skirt immediately after her ironical utterance, and Lea answers Regina’s question as her reply. Then, Regina utters another verbal irony “So adorable.” Even though Regina’s utterance is easily understandable as verbal irony to the audience of the movie, Lea fails to interpret Regina’s dissociative attitude, and as we can see from her response “thanks,” takes it as a literal meaning of praise. Thus, the case in which verbal irony ends up with literal meaning results in misleading utterance, triggered by the hearer failing to interpret the speaker’s dissociative attitude.

4.2 Literal meaning understood as verbal irony

Another puzzling feature of verbal irony is when the utterance which is not intended as verbal irony is understood as verbal irony by a hearer, which is (12c). Let us look at another simple example below:

(14) (Students are chatting with each other as a teacher comes into the classroom)

   Teacher: Seems like you guys are ready to work.
   Students: (stop chatting)

From Kawakami’s perspective, we can assume that only a hearer has the point F (p, -p) on his diagram, but the speaker’s cognition is not the point F(p, -p) since the utterance is intended to communicate literal meaning of the utterance. It is clear from the example above that the speaker does not have the point F (p, -p) in his/her cognition. On the other hand, the hearer or the students may have the point F (p, -p), which has a discrepancy between prior cognition. The appearance would be that the students are ready to study and discuss about the topic in the class, conversely recognition would be the reality that the students are too noisy to start working.

Here, we notice that in addition to the fact that only the hearer has the point F (p, -p) in his/her cognition, the hearer also thinks that the speaker has the point F (p, -p)
despite the fact that s/he actually does not.

Relevance theorists seldom discuss the cases where communication fails or how it fails because the theory is intended to show how communication works and how we derive what another person wants to communicate through the utterance.

Let us examine (14) from relevance-theoretic standpoint. When a speaker intends the utterance as conveying literal meaning and ends up with being interpreted as verbal irony by a hearer, it means that the hearer automatically interprets the speaker's dissociative attitude from the utterance through his/her judgment. When the speaker realizes that the utterance is misinterpreted as verbal irony, s/he would immediately clarify and tell the hearer of what s/he originally intended to communicate through the utterance.

There is another possibility to think about in terms of miscommunication. If a speaker always intends verbal irony in his/her communication, another person that the speaker regularly talks with would be accustomed to this particular form of the speech. When that speaker decides to communicate literal meaning, the hearer will initially think that it is verbal irony because that is the default form when talking to him/her. If we assume that it is not manifest to both a speaker and a hearer, and assume that only the hearer believes that the speaker always intends his/her utterances as verbal irony, then it is possible that such miscommunication happens.

We saw in the previous chapter that Wilson (2009) placed importance on a speaker's expression of dissociative attitude as one of the features of verbal irony. Now, considering example (14), we can assume that the students believed that their teacher was expressing his/her dissociative attitude through his/her utterance. Since no preceding context was provided for this example, it is possible to think that the speaker is implicitly dissociating him/herself from the situation where students are noisy and not ready for class at all. We could also assume that the speaker is dissociating him/herself from a general expectation that students who are about to take a class should remain seated and be quiet.

We have highlighted some puzzling phenomena about verbal irony, and have shed some light on the instances where a speaker's intention and a hearer's interpretation
end up being different, and how we can explain them from two perspectives of Kawakami’s Theory of Irony and relevance-theoretic standpoint. From the observation, it is obvious that Kawakami’s account is simple and reasonable to explain the instances. As for relevance-theoretic approach, some additional discussion will be needed for the examples that we have discussed in this chapter concerning how a hearer interprets an accompanying attitude.

5. What is essential to be understood as verbal irony?

So far, we have examined two different accounts using examples. Upon examination, we conclude that the two accounts differ in how they focus their analysis.

As for Kawakami’s theory of Irony, Kawakami tries to explain irony on the cognitive level of how we detect irony, and what is happening when we detect irony with using a diagram. His explanation could be applicable not only for verbal irony but also non-verbal irony that is situational or dramatic.

On the other hand, the relevance-theoretic approach focuses on a more specific communicative level, and suggests that verbal irony should be attributive and include the speaker’s expression of dissociative attitude.

We also examined whether the two accounts can be applicable to the cases where verbal irony is miscommunicated. It was clear that Kawakami’s accounts were simpler in the way of depending on gap between prior cognition and re-cognition. We saw that a hearer essentially has a point F (p, -p) wherein the verbal irony is detected.

While Kawakami’s account excludes the elements of the speaker’s attitude, relevance-theoretic account takes the speaker’s attitude into consideration. We saw that understanding verbal irony highly depends on a hearer’s interpretation of a speaker’s dissociative attitude. It seems reasonable however, as we have seen in the previous chapter, that dissociative attitude should be defined more specifically from both the speaker and the hearer’s perspective, and explication / implicature distinction to retain the discussion. To summarize the discussion, a hearer should be able to detect some form of a gap between the utterance made by a speaker, and the hearer’s recognition at the moment of the utterance.
Conclusion

In this study, we saw two different accounts to verbal irony, and examined each of the accounts with detailed examples. Upon examination, we saw that the two accounts differ on which aspects of irony each of the accounts focuses. Also, their treating of attitude is distinguishable.

From what has been observed, I conclude that these two accounts are partly compatible in that the understanding of verbal irony depends on a hearer while the discussion between a speaker and a hearer is carried out on the different dimension of cognition and communication.

Further consideration will be needed on the possibility of application of Kawakami’s diagram to non-verbal irony such as situational and dramatic irony.

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Yuki Morita


**Source of example**