The point of irony

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Abstract

Grice's theory of implicatures brought to the front the pragmatic study of non-literal uses of language, and, among those, the case of ironical utterances. Grice's approach to irony was sketchy and programmatic, so it was subject to various developments and corrections to overcome its drawbacks and limitations. We think that there is one undesirable consequence that has been insufficiently remarked: Grice's treatment makes ironic utterances uninformative and practically nonsensical, and this is inherited by some other approaches, in particular, the ones based on speech-act theory. We will also outline a solution to that problem, in our view, very Gricean in spirit.

Keywords: irony, non-literalness, to make as if to say, uninformative utterances, critical attitude.

> Irony. X, with whom A has been on close terms until now, has betrayed a secret of A's to a business rival. A and his audience both know this. A says X is a fine friend. (Gloss: It is perfectly obvious to A and his audience that what A has said or has made as if to say is something he does not believe, and the audience knows that A knows that this is obvious to the audience. So, unless A's utterance is entirely pointless, A must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward. This must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward.) (Grice (1967a/1989): p. 34)

In this paragraph included towards the end of his seminal work entitled 'Logic and Conversation' (1967a/1989), Grice was just giving an example of one of the many applications of the revolutionary theory of utterance

meaning and content he was putting forward. It showed forcefully that an important part of what rhetoric and stylistics had considered as tropes or figures of speech was amenable for a treatment in terms of the distinction between what a speaker says (or 'makes as if to say') and what she implicates in so doing. It is difficult to exaggerate the impact that Grice's programmatic work had on every issue on language use and communication, and thus on any pragmatic theory, whatever its orientation –philosophical, psychological or linguistic. This is also true for irony, of course.

Grice presents new prospects for the treatment of irony in pragmatic terms, but his overall conception about irony is wholly in line with the traditional view: the speaker says (or makes as if to say) one thing while she means its contradictory, or something that implies it (logically). He gives a brief gloss of how that can happen according to his theory of implicatures and, more or less, that's it. Of course, this approach faces several difficulties that didn't go unnoticed by post- or neo-Gricean scholars, but, in this paper, we will focus on a particular problem that did go unnoticed to many, and, in consequence, has been inherited by other approaches: Grice's treatment makes ironic utterances pointless, uninformative and without a clear rational purpose in communication. We will explain why this is so, and what adjustments can be made to avoid this fatal consequence. We shall show what the point of ironic utterances is.

We will start reminding Grice's approach and pointing briefly to some of its best-known drawbacks. Then, we will explain the problem with the pointlessness of ironic utterances in his treatment, and show how it is inherited by the accounts based on speech-act theory. Finally, we shall venture that an account, Gricean in spirit, could be given to show that ironic utterances indeed have a point.

1. Grice's approach

Grice's short gloss of the fine friend's example (henceforth, example (1)) is quite simple and elegant: the speaker says, or makes as if to say, something, and implicates its contradictory (or something that implies its contradictory); that is, A says, or makes as if to say, "X is a fine friend" (*p*), and implicates "X is not a fine friend" ($\neg p$) or something that implies $\neg p$.

This is not far from the traditional characterization of irony: on the one hand, we have two meanings –the literal one and the ironic one; and, on the other hand, these two meanings are contradictory.

Grice showed how this traditional view of irony could be accounted for within his general theory of conversation: ironic utterances are a particular

case of utterances with contents that go beyond what is being said. Irony is given as an example in which the first maxim of Quality ("Do not say what you believe to be false" (Grice (1967a/1989): p. 27)) is blatantly flouted or 'exploited'; that is, the speaker is overtly not observing the maxim but yet "we have to assume that at least the CP is being observed" (Grice (1967a/1989): p. 39). The other examples he gives of implicatures generated by exploiting the first maxim of Quality are metaphor, meiosis, and hyperbole. What distinguishes irony from those cases is that the implicature in ironic utterances would be the contradictory (or one implying the contradictory) proposition that has been said, or made as if to say.

A first obvious issue about Grice's approach to irony concerns the repetitive and tiresome phrase 'to make as if to say'. First, why does he use it once and again? The most natural explanation has to do precisely with irony. According to Grice's overall theory of utterance meaning, this comprises two main categories: what the speaker says, on the one hand, and what she implicates in saying what she says. The content of the utterance of a declarative sentence includes both what is said (asserted) and what is implicated. If irony consisted in saying a proposition p and implicating $\neg p$, then any ironic utterance would amount to conveying a plain contradiction, from which anything would follow.

That unwelcome conclusion will be avoided if we consider that in ironic utterances the speaker *does not say that p,* but just *makes as if to say that p.* This is probably the reason why Grice used that bothersome wording. This is in line with his further notes on irony. After all, 'to make as if to say' seems a near synonym for 'to pretend to say', and

> To be ironical is, among other things, to pretend (as the etymology suggests), (…) (Grice (1967b/1989): p. 54)

That would also explain, at least in part, why post-Gricean theories look for alternative concepts such as 'pretense' itself (Clark and Gerrig (1984)), 'echoic mention' (Sperber & Wilson (1981)), or 'locutionary content' (Korta & Perry (2007)). So, Grice should be interpreted as maintaining that, when speaking ironically, the speaker says nothing, makes as if to say that p and implicates that $\neg p$.

But then, we encounter another little problem. Remember that irony is an example of exploiting the first maxim of Quality, which states that you should not *say* what you believe to be false. Hence, exploiting the maxim means that you *say* what you believe to be false. But, if when being ironic you say nothing, you cannot possibly exploit that maxim (or, for that matter,

any other maxim in the categories of Quantity, Quality and Relation, since all concern what is said). So, making as if to say requires some reformulation of Grice's maxims in the following way: "Don't say *or make as if to say* what you believe to be false". Making as if to say what you believe to be false would be the way of exploiting the first maxim of Quality, and thereby generating the required (contradictory) implicature characteristic of irony.

Whether the traditional idea of irony as contrariness is an adequate way of explaining irony or not has been another important point of debate (Sperber & Wilson (1981) and (1998), Attardo (2000), Clark & Gerrig (1984), Kreuz & Glucksberg (1989)), but we will not address it here. Grice's further notes on irony also include an important note on the speaker's 'hostile or derogatory attitude' involved in irony (Grice (1967b/1989): p. 54), and that will arise later. But our main concern here is the eventual pointlessness of Grice's ironic cases.

2. Irrational ironic utterances

Take again Grice's famous example of irony. A utters "X is a fine friend". This is usually a way of saying that X is a fine friend, but since it is common knowledge for A and his audience that he does not believe that, A is *making as if to say* that X is a fine friend. And, according to Grice, if the utterance is not 'entirely pointless' there must be some other proposition that the speaker is trying to convey or implicate. And which proposition is that that makes the point of the utterance? Its contradictory, tells Grice. But that cannot possibly be the right answer. If the only proposition implicated by an ironic utterance were the contradictory of the proposition the speaker made as if to say, the utterance would still be entirely pointless. The hearer's reasoning would be something like that:

- A has uttered "X is a fine friend".
- A has made as if to say that p (THAT X IS A FINE FRIEND), because A does not believe that p, and this is common knowledge.
- Therefore, A has implicated that $\neg p$, that is: THAT X IS NOT A FINE FRIEND.

Notice that for the hearer to draw the conclusion that the speaker has implicated that $\neg p$ by making as if to say that p, the hearer must use as a premise the prior (common) knowledge that the speaker does not believe that p. So the only informative effect of the utterance would be the scope of the negation with respect to that belief; that is, from

A does not believe that *p*
to
A believes that not-*p*

If that doesn't make the utterance entirely pointless, it is very close indeed. To be sure, if the first maxim of Quality is exploited, the speaker should have made as if to say not just a proposition she does not believe to be true, but a proposition she believes is false. So, the implicature would be entirely uninformative, and the ironic utterance entirely pointless.

The same happens with the Gricean analysis of example (2), a traditional example by Sperber & Wilson:

Peter: "It's a lovely day for a picnic". They go for a picnic and it rains.
Mary (sarcastically): [(2)] "It's a lovely day for a picnic, indeed."
(Sperber & Wilson (1986/95): p. 239.)

This is the typical example explained by Sperber & Wilson's theory. Nevertheless, it doesn't seem that the Gricean account would have much trouble explaining it, just as it explained example (1), that is to say: in her utterance the speaker implicates the contradictory of what she has made as if to say: Mary makes as if to say THAT IT'S A LOVELY DAY FOR A PICNIC, but Peter knows that Mary believes that it's not a lovely day for a picnic; furthermore, Peter knows that Mary knows that it is obvious to Peter that Mary believes that it's not a lovely day for a picnic. Nevertheless, that's just the content of the implicature generated by the speaker. So, again Mary's ironic utterance would have no point, since the information it provides has to be previously known.

2.1. Irony as insincerity

The problem of pointlessness seems to be inherited by the speech-act theory view of irony. Searle explains how irony works from the hearer's point of view:

> Stated very crudely, the mechanism by which irony works is that the utterance, if taken literally, is obviously inappropriate to the situation. Since it is grossly inappropriate, the hearer is compelled to reinterpret it in such a way as to render it appropriate, and the most natural way to interpret it is as meaning the *opposite* of its literal form. (Searle (1979-b/1979-a): p. 113)

This, on the whole, is all that Searle stated about irony. According to him, then, a speaker, when being ironic, expresses a meaning different from the literal meaning of the sentence, and these two meanings are opposites. No great difference with Grice's view.

Amante (1981) and Haverkate (1990) provided a more detailed account from the speech-act perspective:

> A father to his son, who has just hurt himself by clumsily handling a hammer: [(3)] "Very well, keep doing yourself harm!"
> (Haverkate (1990): p. 94)

Haverkate's assessment is roughly the following one: if a speaker ironically orders the hearer: "do (p)", the latter is supposed to infer from the context or situation of utterance that the speaker intends to order him: "do ~ (p)", and vice versa (Haverkate (1990): p. 95). So, in example (3), in understanding that his father is speaking ironically, the son will understand that his father intends to communicate to him the following:

> (3b) Stop doing yourself harm! (Haverkate (1990): p. 95.)

So, in this example, if the kid is going to understand the utterance properly, he must understand that his father doesn't want him to harm himself. Talking in speech-act theoretic terms, this means that his father breaks the sincerity condition of his (directive) speech act. The kid knows that, had he been doing harm to himself, his father would like to stop it. And that's precisely what, according to Haverkate, would be the content of the ironic utterance.

The speech-act theory treatment of irony seems to be a generalization from Grice's treatment of assertives to utterances with other illocutionary points. And, so, it inherits Grice's problems of pointlessness.

Being aware of the problem, we could bite the bullet and take ironic utterances as mere reminders of prior knowledge. But, we don't think that's the only option.

2.2. A matter of opinion

Sperber & Wilson were aware of the problem of the lack of a point of ironic utterances in Grice's account:

> (…) knowing the speaker's beliefs about the weather is a precondition for, rather than a consequence of, recognizing that his utterance was ironical. The standard approach to irony, which claims that the main point of an ironical utterance is to convey the opposite of what is said, would thus make every ironical utterance uninformative, both on the level of what is said and on the level of what is implicated. (Sperber & Wilson (1981): p. 553)

What would be, then, the point of ironic utterances? According to Sperber & Wilson, by her utterance (2), Mary is echoing Peter's previous words, and thus indicating that she doesn't hold the opinion echoed. In so doing, Mary implicates that

> It was wrong of her companion to say that it was a lovely day for a picnic, that his judgment has been unsound, that they should never have set out, that it was his fault that their day has been ruined, and so on. (Sperber & Wilson (1986/95): pp. 239-240).

In our view, Sperber and Wilson's concept of 'echoic mention' is not an adequate alternative for Grice's 'to make as if to say', but we won't pursue that line of discussion here.[1] They agree with Grice that the proposition made as if to say ('echoically mentioned' in their terms) is not believed by the speaker, but they point to further implicatures involving a criticism by the speaker. In fact, Grice himself had caught sight of the importance of the speaker's attitude in ironic utterances:

> I cannot say something ironically[2] unless what I say is intended to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt. (Grice (1967b/1989): p. 54).

That is to say, when being ironic, the speaker always expresses a negative attitude. And that's really something. Grice seems to have had noticed that, without adding a critical attitude expressed, at least some examples risk absurdity. Ironic utterances could not consist merely in making as if to say a proposition that the speaker does not obviously believe. He considers the following example:

> A and B are walking down the street, and they both see a car with a shattered window. B says [(4)] "Look, that car has all its windows intact". (Grice (1967b/1989): p. 53.)

[1] For a discussion of the notion of 'echo', and a detailed account of 'making as if to say', see Garmendia (2007b).

[2] It seems that in this quote Grice uses "to say ironically" where he usually says "to make as if to say".

As Grice points out, it would be absurd for B to intend to utter (4) and, thereby, just to communicate the opposite. There must be something else if, being ironic, the utterance is to make any sense: the most obvious candidate is the critical attitude that the speaker is trying to convey. That's also Wilson and Sperber's contention:

> As we set off for a stroll, I complain to you that my street is being used as a dumping ground for broken-down cars. You tell me I'm imagining things: the cars all look in perfect condition to you. Just then, we pass a car with a broken window, and I turn to you and say [(4b)] "Look, that car has all its windows intact".
> (Wilson & Sperber (1992): p. 61)

It's clear that adding the expression of the speaker's negative attitude, the utterance has a point as a case of irony. As Wilson and Sperber explain, "all that is needed to make (7) [(4b)] ironical is an echoic element and an associated attitude of mockery or disapproval" (Wilson & Sperber (1992): p. 61). In our terms, all that's needed is that the speaker makes as if to say a proposition, a bridge content, and implicatures involving the speaker's critical attitude.

3. A (neo-)Gricean theory of irony

In our view, in ironic utterances, the proposition that the speaker makes as if to say and the opposite that is already common knowledge do not exhaust the content of the utterances. Further implicatures that paradigmatically involve the speaker's negative attitude are inferred, and they constitute the point of ironical utterances. Take example (1) again:

The speaker makes as if to say a proposition (call it the "*asif*-content" of the utterance):

>*ASIF*-CONTENT$_1$: THAT **X** IS A FINE FRIEND.

Making as if to say means that the speaker is not holding the commitment to that content, because, as it is obvious, she beliefs another proposition:

>IRONIC CONTENT$_1$: THAT **X** IS NOT A FINE FRIEND.

This is a content that she has expressed with her utterance, but that, if we (and Sperber and Wilson) are right, cannot be the only content

communicated, but just the beginning of the ironic content.[3] Considering the context we have available, there are further implicatures to be inferred: THAT A HAS BEEN A FOOL BELIEVING IN X, and THAT HE SHOULDN'T HAVE TRUSTED HIM, for example. So, the complete ironic content of (1) would be something like the following:

>**IRONIC CONTENT$_1$:** THAT X IS NOT A FINE FRIEND, and THAT A HAS BEEN A FOOL BELIEVING IN HIM, and THAT HE SHOULDN'T HAVE TRUSTED HIM.

The proposition that corresponds to the actual belief of the speaker, and is common knowledge for the audience, is one among the propositions of the ironic content intended to be communicated by the speaker. It's intended to be used in the hearer's inference, to get further implicatures: it is the bridge-content of the utterance.[4]

The same applies to Sperber & Wilson's well-known example (2). The speaker makes as if to say a proposition:

>***ASIF*-CONTENT$_2$**: THAT **TODAY** IS *A LOVELY DAY FOR A PICNIC*.

and thus expresses a proposition which is obvious both for the speaker and the hearer:

>**IRONIC CONTENT$_2$**:

>>*Bridge-content$_2$*: THAT TODAY IS NOT A LOVELY DAY FOR A PICNIC.

But that's only a bridge-proposition for further implicatures:

>>*Further implicatures in the ironic content$_2$*: THAT IT IS PETER'S FAULT THAT WE ARE SOAKED WITH RAIN; THAT IT HAS BEEN SILLY SAYING THAT IT WOULD BE A GOOD DAY TO GO FOR A PICNIC.

And these implicatures constitute the point of irony.

The same kind of account would work for Grice's example (4). The speaker has made as if to say a proposition:

>***ASIF*-CONTENT$_4$**: THAT **THAT CAR** HAS ALL ITS WINDOWS INTACT.

And it's obvious both for the speaker and the hearer that the speaker does not believe that proposition; she believes instead THAT THAT CAR DOES

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[3] That's why Garmendia (2007a and 2007b) calls this the "bridge-content."

[4] Our "bridge-content" would be close to Sperber & Wilson's "implicated premises". See Garmendia (2007b: p. 112), Sperber and Wilson (1986/95: p. 195).

NOT HAVE ALL ITS WINDOWS INTACT. But, if making as if to say that content the speaker has not intended to generate some implicatures, the proposition actually believed by the speaker cannot work as a bridge (since it would be a bridge towards nothing). And, without a bridge, the hearer cannot arrive at the point of the utterance. That's why this example is the example of a pointless utterance.

By contrast, if we take that the speaker is trying to convey something else, as in the version considered by Sperber and Wilson (4b), the hearer can in fact arrive somewhere –at a content where further implicatures are gathered. Crossing the bridge of the believed proposition, the hearer will infer the ironic content of the utterance:

> >>*Further implicatures in the ironic content*$_{4b}$: THAT YOU SHOULD HAVE BELIEVED ME, THAT IT WAS RIDICULOUS TO THINK THAT YOU KNOW BETTER THAN ME MY OWN STREET, THAT YOU ARE ALWAYS RAISING OBJECTIONS AT WHATEVER I SAID.

And there we have the point of the utterance. Ironic utterances always have a destination at the other side of the bridge.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to draw attention to one of the drawbacks of Grice's sketchy notes on irony that has gone pretty unnoticed: that, in his account –as well as in the traditional views on irony, in general, and some of the newer ones— ironic utterances don't make much sense, if any. We tried to outline a solution; a solution that was suggested by Grice himself, and was differently developed by Sperber and Wilson.

Of course, an account of irony needs to go much further and give an answer to a variety of issues. For instance, is it always a negative attitude of criticism involved in irony? Is it necessary the case that the speaker does not hold the proposition she makes as if to say? What's the difference between making as if to say, pretending, and echoically mentioning a proposition? Or, besides, what's the place of 'face-saving' or humor in irony? And, what's the place of irony with respect to other non-literal uses of language such as metaphor, or to 'non-serious' uses, such as acting? Or which are the features of irony as a means for persuasion?

These are, no doubt, interesting issues that will constitute the topics for future work.

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