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Paradox and oxymoron revisited

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Abstract

The study of paradox and oxymoron has been a matter of central concern within traditional rhetoric and literature, where the two phenomena are simply regarded as tropes or figures of speech. In this paper we shall approach paradox and oxymoron from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective in order to analyse how they are produced and understood. In fact, there is a scarcity of serious studies on how these two tropes work from this stance. In order to fill this gap, following Herrero (2009), we shall focus on the cognitive operations that characterise them and on their specific contextual effects.

Moreover, we shall see how paradox and oxymoron can also co-occur with other conceptual analytical phenomena such as metonymy and metaphor (e.g. *He is a stupid brain, to be dead living*).

Keywords: paradox; oxymoron; cognitive-pragmatic; cognitive operations; contextual effects.

1. Introduction

We shall first draw a clear-cut distinction between irony, paradox, and oxymoron since irony is closely related to these tropes. Whereas irony is mainly based on extra-textual reference (e.g. *Nice day today!* in the context of evident foul weather), paradox (except for situational paradox) and oxymoron are purely intra-textual, as we shall show below. So, although the three figures can be explained on the basis of contrast relationships and they follow the same interpretation stages, paradox and oxymoron present a contrast which is found in the linguistic expression itself.

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Furthermore, paradox has a propositional dimension while oxymoron works at predicate level. Thus, we can define these tropes as meaning-derivation processes whereby the hearer reinterprets the incongruity or incompatibility found within the conceptual structure of an utterance so that it fits in the context in which it has been produced. From the point of view of Pragmatics, by means of these tropes the contextual effects generated by the expression with the inner clash are highlighted.

The next sections analyse in detail the cognitive operations (i.e. any interpretive procedure that the speaker/hearer has to use in order to generate/understand a specific utterance –Ruiz de Mendoza & Peña, 2005; Ruiz de Mendoza & Galera-Masegosa, 2012–) and contextual effects (of the kind postulated for other tropes within Relevance Theory – Sperber & Wilson 1995; Vega, 2007–) that underlie both the production and interpretation of paradox and oxymoron. The examples have been extracted from a multi-faced collection of data compiled from *The British National Corpus* (BNC), *The Corpus of American English*, and selected *Google* searches.

2. Paradox

We shall divide paradox into two different types, namely verbal and situational. Verbal paradox presents two or more terms that generate input spaces whose conceptual structures stand in contrast. In order to solve this contrast a projection space is created via integration and accommodation operations in such a way that the structure of the apparently contrasting input spaces is possible in a given context; from this space we can derive the contextual effects produced by the utterance. Consider:

1.	*I must be cruel only to be kind.* (Hamlet)

Sometimes doing harm is a way of setting the stage for something good to happen. The idea is not necessarily that one is cruel and kind at the same time, but rather that being cruel will help you to behave kindly later. We are dealing with two contrasting mental spaces although they are interdependent, also linked by a CAUSE-EFFECT relationship.
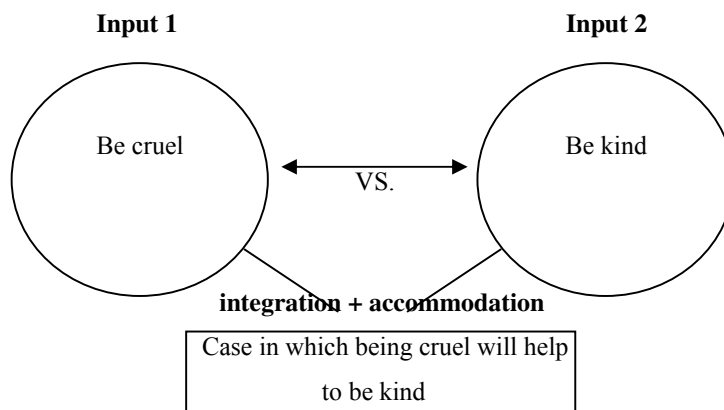

Fig. 1. *I must be cruel only to be kind* (Herrero, 2009, p. 204).

2.	*They have ears but hear not* (the Bible).

Jesus was talking about hypocritical Jews who would not take his message. They were listening to him but they were ignoring his message. The verb 'hear' is being used metaphorically to mean 'understand' (UNDERSTANDING IS HEARING, i.e. PHYSICAL PERCEPTION). The metaphor is cued by the literal incongruity between having ears and not hearing as a way to sort out the semantic clash.