Evaluative clash, evaluative cohesion and how we actually read evaluation in texts

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Abstract

Evaluative clashes are, of course, only noticed because of the expectation that speakers will use evaluation consistently and coherently over set stretches of discourse, a process I term evaluative harmony. In this paper I first categorize types of evaluative clash and then investigate, with detailed examples, many derived from large language corpora, of how speakers and writers both construct cohesive evaluative harmony in stretches of text but also how they can sometimes exploit this harmony to surprise and engage their listeners and readers.

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1. Evaluative clash: where and why it occurs

Lullaby

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;
Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral:
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.
        (W. H. Auden, 1907–1973)

Historically, poetry – and literature in general – were places where evaluative 'clash', or 'disjunction', or 'mismatch' as it is variously called (unfortunately English does not seem to have a positively evaluated word for the opposite of *harmony*) were first noticed. The phrase which wraps up the stanza in Auden's poem above, *The entirely beautiful* is certainly a striking example.

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Louw (1993) discusses what he sees as an example of deliberate mismatch for *irony*, definable as reversal of evaluation (Partington, 2007), namely an extract from a Lodge novel in which cultural tourists are described as *bent on self-improvement*. The item *bent on*, notes Louw, is typically followed by negative items and he argues that Lodge, by reversing the evaluative polarity, is making an ironic criticism of such tourists. Partington (2011) also notices a good number of examples used for comic effect:

(1) I concealed my astonishment that anyone could **deliberately love this girl**
(2) If you intend to go through life **deliberately paying back money** then you must be content [to remain poor]
(both PG Wodehouse)

The literature on evaluation contains some, though notably very few, discussions on evaluative mismatches which are not deliberately seeking poetic, ironic or dramatic effect, but may well simply be errors of language performance. Partington (2003: 19) notices the White House press secretary's use of the item *adamant*:

(3) President Milosevic has proved to be quite **adamant** in his campaign of atrocities

whereas the SiBol corpus evidence (see Section 3) suggests that the item *adamant* usually co-occurs with positive ambitions rather than such negative destruction ones. The present author also recently came across the following (my italics):

(4) Wright argues that technology has increased the number of positive-sum games [win-win relationships] that humans tend to **be embroiled in**
(Steven Pinker, The Surprising Decline in Violence, TED Talks 2007)

Pinker is North American and so I looked at how [be] *embroiled in* behaves in the *New York Times* (contained in the SiBol 2013 corpus) to find it co-occurring overwhelmingly with very negative entities, including: *civil war*, *bitter dispute*, *public feud*, *legal battle*, explaining my startled reaction to its appearance with *positive sum games*. Pinker's is probably an example of the real-time performance errors that even the most competent of speakers is capable of committing. A serious issue for translators arises from such instances, namely, do we translate what a speaker actually says or what he meant to say, including in terms of intended evaluation? The answer is probably: it depends on the purpose of the translation.

Louw argues, however, that some performance errors may betray an insincerity on the part of the speaker. He cites a speaker's use of *symptomatic*, an item usually found in negative environments, in a positive one: 'it's symptomatic of the University of Zimbabwe which has such a high reputation . . .' and claims that the mismatch may reveal insincerity on the speaker's part, that he does not in fact think so highly of the University's reputation (1993: 169–171).

Finally, Hunston (2007: 261) muses on the phrase *to the point of*. Her newspaper corpus evidence, including *abundant to the point of extravagance*, *suspicious to the point of paranoia* and *naïve to the point of idiocy* point to the phrase's negative semantic prosody. However, she also finds one concordance line where it is used in a positive environment:

(5) At 23 and with just one exhibition behind her, Brisbane painter Hazel Dooney **is fresh to the point of invigoration**. Her bold and colourful paintings combine elements of youth culture into pop art which is appealing not only for its pure aesthetics but also for its contemporary nature.

Hunston argues that there is no evidence either in the immediate co-text or indeed the whole article that the writer is being ironic or insincere. It seems to be 'simply an atypical use of the phrase' (Hunston, 2007: 262).

There would seem, then, to be a number of potential perlocutionary intents or misfirings behind instances of evaluative clashes.

1. Simple atypical use, with no special intent.
2. Atypical use for dramatic or poetic effect.
3. Atypical use for irony, with critical and often humorous intent.
4. Performance mismatch betraying insincerity.
5. Simple performance error.

2. What is evaluation?

So far we have looked at examples of so-called clashes of evaluation, but what exactly is evaluation? Following Thompson, we can define it in the bi-dimensional sense of 'the indication of whether the speaker thinks that something is