Echo and inadequacy in ironic utterances

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Abstract

A number of experimental studies have established that the conditions for irony comprehension include allusion to another representation, such as an utterance or a thought, and blatant contextual inadequacy, also referred to as flouting of a Gricean maxim. This paper adopts the relevance-theoretic model of inferential comprehension positing the mutual parallel adjustment of explicit content and implicatures to investigate the role of these conditions, and more generally, of the proposition literally expressed by an ironic utterance in guiding the hearer through the interpretation process. It claims that although both the allusive character and inadequacy of an utterance must be identified in the course of processing, one of them can be initially more salient and play a decisive role in triggering an ironic interpretative path, i.e. one in which the main cognitive benefits stem from exploiting resemblance to another representation and identifying the speaker's disapproving attitude. Among cases in which blatant contextual inadequacy is highly prominent, special attention is given to absurd ironies, such as ''I'm the Queen of Sheba'', which have been analysed in Relevance Theory as instances of echoing the absurdity of the preceding speech act. I argue that such ironies are allusive also on the level of content through strong implicatures carrying echo to thoughts attributed to the utterer of the preceding statement or question.
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1. Introduction

According to Relevance Theory (henceforth RT) verbal irony consists in echoing a representation (e.g., a thought or utterance) attributed to an individual or a group of people, and expressing a dissociative attitude to that representation (Sperber and Wilson, 1978/81, 1986/95, 1998a; Wilson, 2006, 2009, 2013; Wilson and Sperber, 1992/2007, 2012; Curcó, 2000; Yus, 1998, 2000, 2016). On this view, an ironic utterance achieves relevance via the hearer recognizing its allusive function, picking out the representation to which it alludes, attributing it to some source and identifying the speaker's dissociative (scornful, derogatory, mocking, or critical) attitude. Processing an utterance as ironic is therefore oriented primarily towards identifying an assumption the speaker intends to ridicule. Among the cues that trigger interpretation along these lines are prosodic and paralinguistic ones, such as the characteristic deadpan tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures, as well as cues residing in the propositional content of an ironic utterance. Of these, the most widely recognized seems to be overt contextual inadequacy, manifested as falsity, understatement, hyperbole, or apparent irrelevance. This feature was captured in traditional definitions of irony as saying one thing and meaning another. As every allusional account of irony would maintain, there is another key feature of ironic utterances: they have to bear some resemblance to a representation they allude to, for without this, the hearer would be unable to identify the assumption being ridiculed.

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Adopting the relevance-theoretic account of irony, this paper focuses on the two features of the content of ironic utterances, i.e. overt inadequacy and resemblance to another representation,[1] showing how they are exploited in communicating the speaker's meaning and how they trigger the speaker-intended interpretation. I claim that all ironic utterances rely on the identification of the two key features in the course of processing, arguing against approaches which postulate different processing mechanisms, such as pretence, for a subset of ironic utterances (e.g. Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995) and against approaches which postulate distinct classes of irony (e.g. Kapogianni, 2011; Dynel, 2013). Acknowledging that the two key features may not be equally salient in the proposition literally expressed (this concerns especially echo, since in some cases it is not immediately apparent what the proposition expressed alludes to), I demonstrate how this feature may emerge during comprehension when implicatures of an utterance are worked out. The explanation offered draws on the relevance-theoretic conception of the comprehension process as ''mutual parallel adjustment'' (Sperber and Wilson, 1998b/2012), which, as I also point out, affords a possibility of reconciling two apparently opposing views on irony processing, namely the direct access view and the graded salience view.

In discussing the role of the overt inadequacy and echo in ironic interpretation, special attention will be given to absurd replies or comments, such as ''And I am the Pope'' uttered in response to a statement of dubious credibility, in which there does not seem to be any obvious resemblance between their content and any other assumption which could be targeted as an object of a dissociative attitude, and which are analyzed as examples of non-echoic irony by Kapogianni (2011). Such utterances have not been extensively dealt with in RT, except a brief account offered by Wilson (2000/2012). I demonstrate how absurd ironies can be accounted for in echoic terms, using only the tools which are independently motivated in RT.

The paper is organised in the following way: the next section discusses two notions pertinent to irony comprehension, namely interpretive resemblance and metarepresentation. Section 3 presents the echoic account of irony and an overview of experimental studies confirming the psychological reality of the two essential properties of ironic utterances, i.e. echo and ludicrous inadequacy. Section 4 describes the process of mutual parallel adjustment and puts forward the claim that this view of comprehension naturally explains how the proposition literally expressed is exploited in comprehension but not communicated. The section further explores the two key properties of irony, showing that they can be present to different degrees and manifest themselves to the hearer in different phases of mutual parallel adjustment. Section 5 presents some examples of absurd ironies, for which an echoic account is proposed. Section 6 briefly discusses effects of using various ironic utterances, and section 7 offers some concluding remarks.

2. Interpretive resemblance and metarepresentation

In this section I would like to characterize two notions which have a bearing on how irony is produced and understood, namely interpretive resemblance and metarepresentation. The former originates from a distinction between two modes of language use: descriptive and interpretive (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95: Ch. 4.7). Descriptive uses are those in which speakers intend to express their own thoughts about states of affairs in a possible or actual world, whereas in interpretive use, an utterance is intended to represent another utterance or thought that it resembles in content.

Resemblance involves sharing of features. Generally, resemblance between two objects is a graded notion and covers a continuum of cases, from identity of all features to sharing merely one feature. In cognitive studies, it is important to understand how resemblance is exploited in actual situations, rather than to lay down conditions on the degree of resemblance involved. A globe may be objectively a more faithful representation of the earth than an apple, but when explaining planet movements to a child, a parent can use an apple to represent the earth and a lamp to represent the sun, simply because they happen to be available in the kitchen, where the discussion is taking place. Also in verbal communication, speakers may produce an utterance intended to resemble another utterance or thought not necessarily because it is maximally similar to that other representation, but because it happens to be easy and natural to formulate. If Eric thinks that using smartphones is detrimental to children, and Kate says (1) intending to report Eric's opinion, she is using the utterance interpretively, to represent a thought she attributes to him:

(1)   Using smartphones is no good for kids.

In spite of the differences between Eric's thought (to which we have no direct access anyway) and Kate's utterance, (1) may be a faithful enough representation of the view that Kate tacitly attributes to Eric. Thoughts and utterances can be overtly attributed, as in

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[1] Resemblance to another representation will be subsequently referred to as ''echo'', in accordance with the RT account of irony presented in detail in section 3.