

A critical pragmatic approach to irony

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When we first approach the traditional pragmatic accounts for irony, they really seem very different amongst themselves, clearly differentiated. But as soon as we analyze them thoroughly, we realize that beyond their differences they have some common features.

One of them is that they all avoid using the term “saying” when explaining irony. Examining this point, we understand that it is not a mere coincidence: behind that avoidance strategy a fundamental characteristic of irony lies hidden. That is how we encounter irony’s “*what is said* issue”.

In this paper, I shall first clarify what the “*what is said* issue” is all about. I shall then mention the main alternatives offered up to now to solve this issue. Finally, I shall propose a critical pragmatic theory to explain irony, following the pathway opened up by Korta & Perry; in addition, I shall maintain that this way of approaching irony allows us to dismantle the “*what is said* issue”.

1. The issue: what is said in irony?

Grice (1967/1989) states that the ironic speaker *makes as if to say*; Sperber & Wilson (1981) claim that she makes *an echoic mention*; and Clark & Gerrig (1984) hold that she *pretends to say*. So, none of these pragmatic theories claims that the ironic speaker *says* something with her utterance.

All these alternatives seem to address a very real problem: what we call the “*what is said* issue” of irony. Let’s illustrate this problem using one of the most thoroughly discussed examples of irony ever given, the one introduced by Grice:

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 [(1)] *X is a fine friend*.
(Grice (1967/1989): p. 34)

And now, let’s suppose that the day after, one of A’s hearers, Gorka, tries to tell Iñaki what A said, since Iñaki was not present when A spoke.

GORKA: Yesterday A spoke to us about X.

IÑAKI: And, what did he say?

There is nothing unusual about Iñaki’s question. It is easily understandable, but rather difficult to answer. How could Gorka answer it? He could reply “A said that X is a fine friend”; but, if Gorka replied in that way, he would have to make it clear that A said it *only* ironically; otherwise, Iñaki wouldn’t understand the utterance.

Gorka has some other alternatives: “A said that X is not a fine friend, and that he has been a fool trusting him until now”. This answer reflects more accurately what A communicated; but if we look at it in greater detail we shall observe that Gorka has stated the following: that A *said* the implicatures of his utterance. In other words, that A *said* something different from (or even contradictory to) That X is a fine friend.

Thus, although Grice’s example is a rather simple one, as soon as we try to rephrase the ironic utterance we realize it’s not an easy task. In fact, an ironic speaker’s utterance is not easily reported with indirect verbs such as “saying”, “asserting” or the like. Here we have irony’s “*what is said* issue”: it’s difficult to state what a speaker says when being ironic.

It seems that in order to report an ironic utterance adequately it is necessary to clarify that the speaker has “ironically said” something. This shall be my task in this paper: I shall clarify what it means to “ironically say” something. But, first, let’s see what alternatives have already been proposed.

2. Traditional solutions

2.A. GRICE: making as if to say

The explanation Grice offers of the fine friend example is quite simple at base: the speaker flouts the first maxim of quality (“Do not say what you believe to be false” (Grice, 1967/1989: p. 27)) on the level of what has been made as if to say, but this flouting is blatant and apparent: the speaker, via the implicatures, has communicated the contradictory of what she has made as if to say.

So, basically, the speaker *makes as if to say* something and implicates its contradictory (or something that implies its contradictory); that is to say, A makes as if to say “X is a fine friend”, and implicates “X is not a fine friend” or something that implies that.

So, Grice’s solution for the “*what is said* issue” is to claim that the ironic speaker does not *say*, but *makes as if to say*.

This approach has some important drawbacks, most of them closely linked to this term Grice introduced for the first time: in fact, Grice didn’t define the term “making as if to say”, although he based his characterization of irony on it.

And so, we consider that Grice left many loose ends when explaining irony: if we look again at his example, we shall see that we know A is making as if to say something, but with this mere information we cannot know exactly what he is doing.

Moreover, Grice has explained to us that A has implicated something; but, since he has not said anything, we don’t know how he is able to implicate anything –since his theory of implicatures takes *what is said* to be the input for implicatures¹.

Finally, Grice claims that A has flouted the first maxim of quality, but we don’t know how he is able to flout it, since he hasn’t said anything –and this maxim reads,

¹ Grice sometimes warns that it is also possible to arrive at the implicatures from what is made as if to say: “A man who, by (in, when) saying (or making as if to say) that *p* has implicated that *q* (...)” (Grice, 1967/1989: p. 30). But in the case of irony we arrive at the implicatures via the first maxim of quality, and making as if to say is not mentioned in that maxim, but only *saying* itself. Therefore, even if we admitted that by following Grice we could arrive at some implicatures without what is said, we wouldn’t know how to arrive there in the case of irony, since there’s no flouting of this maxim when nothing has been said.

not to *say* what one believes to be false.

So, as he didn't define the core term of his approach, Grice's explanations for irony turn out to be rather loose. But there are a few other drawbacks in this approach, which I shall merely touch on, since they are not strictly linked to the issue we are dealing with.

On the one hand, according to Grice, the only thing an audience will understand when hearing an ironic utterance is a proposition which they must already know by the time they hear this utterance.

Let's notice that A's hearers have to know that A does not believe That X is a fine friend (otherwise they wouldn't be able to recognize the flouting of the maxim); but all the same, that's the only content that A has communicated by his being ironic. In this way, the Gricean account makes nonsense of ironic examples: at best, ironic cases would be mere remarks on very well-known things (see Garmendia & Korta, 2007).

On the other hand, the Gricean approach has serious problems explaining a certain sort of ironic example. Among these problematic examples, the most evident are those in which there is no contradiction between meanings:

During the precept, Danny was dominating the discussion. He certainly seemed to be familiar with the subject, but he was obnoxious in the way he showed off his knowledge. Jesse, one of Danny's classmates, said:

(2) You sure know a lot. (Kumon-Namakura, Glucksberg & Brown, 1995: p. 7.)

In this example, Danny does believe that Jesse knows a lot. Therefore, he assuredly has not flouted the first maxim of quality, nor has he intended to implicate the contradictory of what he has said/made as if to say. Therefore, Grice's theory cannot explain this example satisfactorily, since it is based on the concept of contradiction and the flouting of the first maxim of quality.

2.B. SPERBER & WILSON: echoically mentioning

Sperber & Wilson's explanation of irony is based on a double concept: the ironic speaker *echoically mentions* a proposition (instead of using it); moreover, she mentions it

in such a way as to make it clear that she rejects it as ludicrously false, inappropriate, or irrelevant (Sperber & Wilson, 1981: 557).

Thus, according to this approach, in the fine friend example, A has echoically mentioned That X is a fine friend. We may guess, for instance, that A has uttered “X is a fine friend” time and again, on the days when he really considered him to be so. This then would be the source of his echo.

At first sight, and bearing in mind the examples with which the concept is introduced, it may be thought that echoing a proposition means rather narrowly repeating an utterance existing in the speaker’s and the hearer’s (close) context. But if the echo were intended to be understood thus, many examples of ironic utterances wouldn’t fit this concept. For instance:

Ainara and Fran don’t know each other. They happen to be at a party tonight. Fran, 20 years old, is playing the fool all the time. Ainara:

(3) How old are you?

No echoic mention, in this first narrow sense of the concept, can be found in this example. Ainara and Fran don’t even know each other, and so they don’t have a shared context where the echo may have had its source. It may be supposed, then, that Sperber and Wilson had in mind a rather wider sense of the term:

Not all ironical echoes are as easily recognisable. The thought being echoed may not have been expressed in an utterance; it may not be attributable to any specific person, but merely to a type of person, or people in general; it may be merely a cultural aspiration or norm. (Wilson & Sperber, 1992: p. 60)

In other words, in order to be successfully ironic, the meaning mentioned must recognizably echo a thought that has been, is being, or might be entertained or expressed by someone. Here *echo* is used in a technical sense that is wider than its ordinary sense (but not really wider than its conventional metaphorical sense). (Sperber, 1984: p. 131)

Here we have a rather wider sense of “echoing”. But, if we can echo “a thought that has been, is being, or might be entertained or expressed by someone” or even “a cultural aspiration or norm”, it’s difficult to see how this concept could distinguish irony from other cases of speech –this sense of the term seems applicable to everything. So the echo, if we make it wide enough to be able to explain some ironic examples, becomes too vague to be the feature that distinguishes ironic utterances from non-ironic ones.

2.C. CLARK & GERRIG: pretending to say

According to this third approach, A, when uttering “X is a fine friend”, is *pretending* that he is speaking to an unknown hearer. It is absurd that A should *say* that (since he himself and the hearers know that he doesn’t believe That X is a fine friend); and what has been pretended to be said deserves a hostile opinion. A’s hearers will realize this absurdity, and the attitude which A has towards what he has pretended to say (Clark & Gerrig, 1984).

So, when a speaker makes an ironic utterance, she pretends. But, what exactly is pretending? We shall not find any direct and immediate answers in Clark & Gerrig’s approach². What we do know about their concept of pretense, is that it isn’t using words: it’s similar to what actors do on stage; it’s dissembling, making believe, playing the fool.

But, characterized in this general way, pretense is too broad a concept to explain irony while distinguishing it from all other cases: it encompasses everything from the making believe that occurs in children’s plays, to what actors do on stage. And neither children when playing nor actors when acting are (necessarily) being ironic. So, pretending, unless it is defined more closely, cannot distinguish irony from non-ironic cases of speech.

2.D. A shared strategy

We have seen, then, that three main solutions have been offered for the “*what is said* issue” of irony. If considered separately, each theory has some major limitation, which makes us reject it as a valid option for explaining irony. But, if we look at them all together, we shall realize that they take a very similar approach to tackling the issue we are now concerned with, in that they offer a substitute for the problematic concept: *making as if to say*, *echoically mentioning* and *pretending* are substitutes for “*ironically saying*”.

In what follows, we shall question this strategy itself. We agree that nothing

²In Clark (1996), the author gives some explanations about the Pretense Theory. But these explanations don’t add much new material to the claims of Clark & Gerrig (1984), at least not on the level of the analysis we are now doing.

seems to be *said* in irony; but instead of getting rid of this concept and adopting a new one, we shall first analyze where the problem lies when applying the concept of saying to irony. And only then shall we decide whether we really need a substitute for “ironically saying”.

So we aim to clarify what it means to “ironically say” something. But our first step should be to direct our attention to the notion of *saying* in itself, since this term is not problematic just when applied to ironic utterances. Indeed, the problem goes far beyond the analysis of irony: it affects the bases of pragmatics.

“What is said” is in truth a very tricky concept, full of everyday intuitions and theoretical additions. That’s why some authors recently have left it out of their explanations, and thus chosen a point of departure that offers them further levels for analyzing utterances.

So I consider that this sort of attempt could offer us a better framework for tackling the concept of saying, and hence also the issue of clarifying what is said in irony –or whether something is actually said in irony. And so, I shall adopt John Perry’s (2002) reflexive-referential theory, developed in Korta & Perry’s (2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c) “Critical Pragmatics”, and I shall see whether irony can be more adequately explained by starting off from these new bases: whether the critical pragmatic pathway toward irony also suffers from the “*what is said* issue”.

3. The Critical Pragmatic Approach

Here there is a drawback which Korta & Perry find in the traditional pragmatic view: it is necessary to distinguish between acts of saying and locutionary acts; and this the traditional approach doesn’t do (Korta & Perry, 2007b). This distinction is necessary because the common concept of saying has acquired a lot of additional extras through daily use; hence its obscurity, and the difficulty of using it on a theoretical level.

According to the Critical Pragmatic approach, when a speaker utters an utterance, this utterance has some contents. Within these contents we distinguish between the minimal semantic content –the product of the fact that an utterance has

been made plus the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered—; a variety of reflexive contents –contents that are about the utterance itself, with truth-conditions that are relative to the utterance itself—; and the locutionary content –what has typically been called “THE content of an utterance”: that is, Perry’s “referential content”, “content_c” or “official content” (Perry, 2001) —basically, the content obtained after disambiguations and fixing the references.

When understanding an utterance, all these contents are available to the hearer. So, contrary to what is usually accepted among linguists and philosophers, we cannot speak about THE content of an utterance, or about THE truth-conditions of an utterance. Based on this claim, Korta & Perry show how their approach can handle the difficulties that traditionally arise from the theoretical use of *what is said*.

Korta & Perry classify these difficulties into three groups. On the one hand, saying, in itself, is usually considered an illocutionary act, as is asserting (although saying would have weaker connotations). In relation to this point, the speaker is usually seen as being committed to the truth of what she says:

But propositions are expressed in the antecedents and consequents of conditionals, as disjuncts, and in many other cases without being asserted. (Ibid.: p. 3)

Therefore, it is necessary to arrive at an approach that allows one to distinguish between saying and the illocutionary act.

On the other hand, saying is a *forensic* concept, so to speak: the speaker has responsibility for the competent hearers’ approach to what she has said. Korta & Perry propose the locutionary content as a concept that is not linked to the hearers’ understanding:

But locutionary content is not sensitive to actual and hypothetical mental states of the audience. (Ibid.)

They explain the third difficulty using the following example:

- I am Joana
- Joana is Joana
- I am I (Ibid.)

According to these authors, we won’t intuitively accept that Joana has said the

same thing with these three utterances. In fact, Korta & Perry claim that what is said should be sensitive to the information the speaker is intending to convey. Again the locutionary content is distinguished from what is said:

Locutionary content does not have this sensitivity to the information the speaker is trying to convey to sort this out. Our theory is quite sensitive to such matters, but we do not handle this by stretching the concept of what is said to cover all needs, but replace it, for theoretical purposes, with a number of other concepts. (Ibid.)

Korta & Perry's solution to these problems is to distinguish between the locutionary content and what is said. In this way, when determining the locutionary content of an utterance, some of the speaker's intentions are determinant (first, the speaker has to do grammatical phrases of a language, and, second, she has to have appropriate intentions that clarify certain aspects of language; for instance, the speaker has to resolve: the words, meanings, syntax, ambiguity, demonstratives, anaphoric relations,...); but others are not: the appropriate intention to resolve the mess caused by indexicals, for example.

So, "what is said" is a concept that should be used with care. This applies in all cases, but especially so in irony, since we've seen that grasping what is said is even more difficult when working on ironic examples.

We've rejected the alternatives offered up to now to eliminate "what is said" from irony: Grice's "making as if to say", Sperber & Wilson's "echoic mention" and Clark & Gerrig's "pretense" have not been considered adequate solutions. Instead, in our search for an appropriate solution, we've decided to go the way of the locutionary content approach: when faced with the problems caused by what is said, the locutionary content will be easier to use to analyze irony, since it is a sharper concept.

4. The *asif*-theory for explaining irony

We have seen that the Critical Pragmatic approach distinguishes between the locutionary content of an utterance, and what is said by that utterance. Let's see how this distinction affects the analysis of ironic utterances in general, and the *what is said* issue of irony in particular.

An ironic utterance has a variety of contents –just as any other utterance does: from the most basic minimal semantic content, through some reflexive contents, to the locutionary content. One of the contents of the utterance, the locutionary content, is usually identified with “what is said”. But not always, since what is said has some further connotations.

We have seen that one of these extra connotations is linked to the speaker’s commitment. Let’s see how the speaker’s commitment differentiates what has been said by an utterance from its locutionary content:

- I shall consider that a speaker has said the locutionary content of her utterance if, by uttering it, she has committed herself to that very content: that is to say, if the speaker takes responsibility for the truth of that content by making the utterance³.

We can support this claim by approaching the point along Searle’s path:

An assertion is a type of illocutionary act that conforms to certain quite specific semantic and pragmatic rules. These are: (...) 4. The sincerity rule: the speaker commits himself to a belief in the truth of the expressed proposition. (Searle, 1974-5/1979: p. 62)

So we have the locutionary content plus the speaker’s commitment within what is said. Therefore, only if a speaker commits herself to the locutionary content of her utterance shall we maintain that she has *said* that content. Thus, as we are wondering whether the ironic speaker actually says the locutionary content of her utterance, we now know that what we have to discover is whether the speaker commits herself to that very content.

Let’s take the fine friend example again. The locutionary content of utterance (1) is as follows:

(P_{R1}) THAT X IS A FINE FRIEND.

But A did not commit himself to that content when uttering (1), since he didn’t take responsibility for the truth of That X is a fine friend. And that’s why his hearer, Gorka, couldn’t report A’s utterance as A having said **(P_{R1})** THAT X IS A FINE FRIEND.

³ For a more detailed characterization of *saying* in terms of commitment, see Garmendia, 2007. There, can also be found a definition of commitment in terms of responsibilities.

We can already understand why it is so difficult to fit “what is said” into an explanation of irony: the ironic speaker does not commit herself to the locutionary content of her utterance; and, as we have just seen, there is no “what is said” without commitment. Therefore, I too have to avoid using this concept when explaining irony. We have just faced the “*what is said* issue” once again: the locutionary content is not said in irony (since there is no commitment either).

But here comes the step which distinguishes us. When other authors were faced with this problem, they tried to solve it by creating a new term, different from saying but, more dangerously, not related to it. We, however, are going to take a different path. Although we don’t have anything said in irony, we do still have something – something that was also present within “what is said”: we have the locutionary content of the utterance.

Moreover, we know that it was the speaker’s commitment that made it impossible to find *what is said* within an ironic utterance: thus the problem lies in the speaker’s commitment. That is, in example (1), A has not committed himself to **(P_R1)** THAT X IS A FINE FRIEND, but this content is indeed available when understanding the utterance. Let’s see what the speaker has done with that content, since he has not said it.

Let’s follow the trail of the locutionary content in example (1), to see where it leads us. A has uttered (1) X is a fine friend, whose locutionary content is **(P_R1)** THAT X IS A FINE FRIEND. Now, Gorka, and any other hearer who sufficiently knows the context of this utterance, positively knows that A does not really believe That X is a fine friend –since A knows that X has recently betrayed him. So what we first discover about **(P_R1)** is that it doesn’t match A’s beliefs.

More specifically, **(P_R1)** does not match A’s motivating belief. In fact, a speaker may have many beliefs when uttering a sentence, but among them there is one that is special:

- There is one belief in the speaker’s communicative plan that is distinguished from all her other beliefs. This belief we call the “motivating belief”, and it is especially important when uttering a sentence: it is the belief that has motivated the utterance. Moreover, in paradigmatic cases⁴, the referential content of the

⁴In short, those cases where the usual assumptions of sincerity and literalness hold, and where there hasn’t been any sort of mistake in the speaker’s communicative plan.

speaker's motivating belief matches the locutionary content of the utterance: that is to say, they can be classified with the same proposition.

For instance, if Mr. Fog enters the room and says

(4) I love orange lollipops.

The locutionary content of the utterance will match the referential content of Mr. Fog's motivating belief:

(P_{R4}) THAT **MR. FOG** LOVES ORANGE LOLLIPOPS.

MB₄: THAT **MR. FOG** LOVES ORANGE LOLLIPOPS.

But this matching does not occur in the fine friend example. A does not believe That X is a fine friend, and so that cannot be the content of his motivating belief. The first thing we have learnt about **(P_{R1})** is, thus, that it mismatches A's motivating belief.

But there is something more to this mismatching: the fact that it has not been an error –it has been intentional on the part of the speaker. That is to say: A knows that the locutionary content of his utterance and the referential content of his motivating belief are not the same (he knows that although he has uttered "X is a fine friend" he does not believe That X is a fine friend).

This distinguishes irony from the cases where an error has occurred: in erroneous cases, the speaker is not aware of the difference between the contents. For instance: Ekain utters

(5) The man in the red sweater is the best Basque writer ever.

since he believes that the man in the red sweater is Bernardo Atxaga; but the person wearing the red sweater is Abraham Olano, a Basque cyclist. So one of the beliefs in Ekain's communicative plan failed. Consequently, the referential content of Ekain's motivating belief and the locutionary content of utterance (5) mismatch:

(P_{R5}) THAT **ABRAHAM OLANO** IS *THE BEST BASQUE WRITER EVER*.

MB₅: THAT **BERNARDO ATXAGA** IS *THE BEST BASQUE WRITER EVER*.

There are some differences between this mismatching and that found in the fine

friend example though: Ekain did not know that the man in the red sweater was not Bernardo Atxaga. That is, in irony the difference between the contents is intentional on the part of the speaker; in the case of the Basque writer (as in every erroneous one) the difference has not been intended by the speaker: it has been an (unintentional) mistake.

We have seen that in irony the speaker's motivating belief and the locutionary content of the utterance mismatch, and that this mismatching is intentional on the part of the speaker. But we can go further in our claims about the mismatching found in our ironic example: A has actually intended his audience to recognize the mismatching between his beliefs and **(P_R1)**. Or, stated more clearly: A intended the hearers to recognize

- i) that the referential content of his motivating belief and the locutionary content of the utterance are discordant, that is, they mismatch; and
- ii) that he intends the hearers to recognize i).

That is to say: A's mismatching was overt. And we consider that when a speaker makes overt her intentional mismatching between the locutionary content of her utterance and her motivating belief, she cannot be held responsible for the truth of that content –she has not committed herself to that content.

The ironic speaker's mismatching, apart from being intentional, is always overt then –it has to be recognizable for the hearer. And this overtness is what differentiates irony from lies: when a speaker is lying, the locutionary content of her utterance does not match the speaker's motivating belief, and this mismatching is also intentional. But the liar does not intend this mismatching to be recognizable –she doesn't make the mismatching overt. And so, the liar takes responsibility for the locutionary content of the utterance –she commits herself to this content.

That is, if a speaker is lying, she cannot claim that she is not responsible for the truth of the locutionary content of her utterance, for the sole reason that she was lying: if Maitane, when asked about her age, replies "I'm 18", when her hearer discovers that she is actually 31, Maitane cannot get rid of her responsibilities about the truth of that utterance by explaining "Oh, no, I was just lying when I said I was 18". A liar is committed to the truth of her utterances and so she can be held responsible for it.

To sum up, that's what we have discovered about the path of the locutionary content in an ironic utterance: when a speaker makes an utterance ironically, the locutionary content⁵ of this utterance mismatches the speaker's motivating belief. This mismatching is intentional, since the speaker is aware of it, and is also overt, since she intends the hearers to recognize both the mismatching and the intention to make it recognizable. That being so, the speaker cannot be held responsible for the truth of that content: she has not committed herself to it.

So, the ironic speaker does not commit herself to the locutionary content of her utterance. When we don't commit to a content, we are not *saying* it, but we are indeed doing something: I call this act "making as if to say" a content, following Grice's phrase. A, when uttering "X is a fine friend", has made as if to say That X is a fine friend –that is, he has overtly shown the intentional mismatching between his motivating belief and this content.

And why should someone make as if to say a content? Because by doing so she can implicate a different content –an ironic one, for example. But that's another story (developed in Garmendia, 2007).

5. Conclusions

So, our point of departure has been the knowledge that the problem of *what is said* does not belong exclusively to ironic utterances, but comes from the existing confusion within general pragmatics. We have seen that the critical pragmatic approach clears up this general mess, and so can help us solve irony's specific problem. The locutionary content of the utterance is not *said* in irony, instead it's *made as if to say*.

In fact, within this approach, we had the concept of saying clearly spelt out; and so, once it started to fail, we were able to try to fix it, by detecting exactly which part of the concept had failed, and so repairing it. Roughly speaking, we didn't have to get rid of our favorite toy just because it had started to fail.

⁵ Actually, the locutionary content is not always the source of the mismatching. But we have ignored this point throughout the present paper, for the sake of the general argument. To see how the mismatching can also occur between the speaker's motivating belief and any content of the utterance, see Garmendia (2007): section 2.4.3.

And so, we claim that our approach can satisfactorily deal with the *what is said* issue we were concerned with: we are able to hold that nothing is actually said in irony; but we can also explain what the speaker thus does with the content that is not said.

Our concept of making as if to say is not a mere substitute for “ironically saying”: it’s a concept where the “hows” and “abouts” of the speaker’s beliefs and intentions toward the contents of her utterance are well specified.

This strategy has some advantages: firstly, it’s easier to fit our specific approach to irony into more general pragmatic theories, since we have not included new and separate concepts when explaining irony. Secondly, a whole theory of irony can be built up on the foundation of the “making as if to say” concept (see Garmendia, 2007). Since we have cleaned up our theory’s point of departure, it works smoothly when developed. Thus our general and basic change of approach helps us solve many of irony’s historically problematical aspects.

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