

Verbal Irony and the Maxims of Grice's Cooperative Principle

Laura Alba Juez
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

ABSTRACT

This paper makes reference to Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, and their treatment of irony as an off record strategy. These authors consider that different off record strategies violate or flout different maxims, and "being ironic" is labelled as a strategy violating the Quality Maxim. The main aim of this paper is to discuss how, by being ironic, a speaker or writer can flout not only the Maxim of Quality but the other three Gricean Maxims as well.

1. Introduction

This work is part of a major study on the phenomenon of verbal irony, which tries to clarify the concept and to look at it from a pragmatic point of view. Many authors have tried to define verbal irony, a task which seems very difficult. Among them, I could mention Sperber and Wilson (*Relevance*), King and Crerar, Cutler, and Clark and Gerrig. But none of them, to my mind, has succeeded to encompass all possible occurrences of this phenomenon within their definitions. Leech includes irony as a second-order principle depending on the Principle of Politeness, and he refers to the possibility of violation of the Quantity Maxim (not the Quality one) by ironic speakers, although he does not go deeper as far as this issue is concerned. In this particular paper I study such verbal irony in the light of Politeness Theory, as presented by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson in their book *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (1978). In this book, the authors place irony as one of the various *off record* strategies that a speaker/writer has at his disposal. According to them "a communicative act is done off record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act" (211). Thus this is an ideal strategy to use when the speaker/writer wants to avoid responsibility for doing a Face Threatening Act (FTA).¹ By going off record, the speaker can leave it up to the addressee to decide how to interpret the FTA.

The clue to the correct interpretation of off record FTAs lies in the making of some inferences which will allow the addressee to understand what was in fact intended by the speaker. The off record speaker or writer, thus, invites conversational implicatures by flouting the Gricean Maxims of communication in some way. Brown and Levinson arrange their list of off record strategies according to the maxim that they believe each strategy violates, as can be seen in their chart (Brown and Levinson 214) in the Appendix.

As the chart shows, “Be ironic” is included within the strategies that violate the Quality Maxim. My intention in this paper is to discuss the possibility of its violating the other three Gricean Maxims as well, as it seems to be the case after some research done in different texts and types of discourse. I shall then present examples which I believe support this argument in the next section. The hypothesis put forward herein is implicit in a paper in which I refer to the co-occurrence of the different off record strategies to convey ironic meanings (Alba Juez, “Irony and Other Off Record Strategies”).

2. Irony and the Cooperative Principle

2.1. Maxim of Quality

As can be observed in the chart mentioned above, its authors consider that, by being ironic, a speaker is violating the Quality Maxim, expressed by Grice in the following terms:

Try to make your contribution one that is true: (1) Do not say what you believe to be false, (2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The fact that Brown and Levinson consider irony to violate only the Maxim of Quality is very consistent with their view of irony as meaning “the opposite” of what is said, since in this way it is clearly seen that one is not “making a true contribution.” Brown and Levinson’s view of irony is proposition-oriented. This would include typical examples of irony such as “John’s a fine friend” or “John’s a genius,” meaning “he’s not a good friend” and “he’s stupid” respectively, where the literal meaning of the proposition is not true. But in most cases irony goes beyond “meaning the opposite” and it covers a wider scope of verbal phenomena.² Thus it seems that it can also go beyond the flouting of the Quality Maxim. Let us analyse the remaining maxims one by one.

2.2. Maxim of Quantity

Grice expressed this maxim as follows:

(1) Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange, (2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Brown and Levinson give an example of “understatement” violating the Quantity Maxim which seems to be also perfect as an example of ironic utterance. This is the case of “a

teenage girl that might say 'He's all right' as an understated criticism implicating 'I think he is awful' or as an understated compliment implicating 'I think he's fabulous'" (218). In this way the Maxim of Quantity is violated by avoiding the lower points in the case of a criticism and by avoiding the upper points in the case of a compliment or admission.

In the following example (taken from the scripts of a famous American TV series called *The Golden Girls*), Dorothy is being ironical about Blanche's "experience" with men, and by not making further comments or not arguing any longer (i.e. saying less than it seems to be required), she implies that Blanche has a reputation for having dated a lot of men:

Blanche: You think Dirk looks at me and sees an old woman? He sees a young, vibrant, passionate contemporary.

Dorothy: Blanche, you haven't even been out with him yet.

Blanche: My instincts are infallible about this. Believe me. I *know* men.

Dorothy: No arguments here. (71-72)

2.3. Maxim of Relevance

Grice stated that the way of carrying out this maxim was by "making your contribution relevant." This has been interpreted differently by different authors. Brown and Levinson consider that there are some off record strategies in which the Maxim of Relevance is violated, such as (a) "give hints," (b) "give association clues" and (c) "presuppose." The interpretation given is the following: "If the speaker says something that is not explicitly relevant, he invites the hearer to search for an interpretation of possible relevance" (213), and this, I believe, is something that can also happen when someone is being ironical.

Brown and Levinson show that one way of violating the Maxim of Relevance is by using euphemisms. In the following dialogue, Dorothy uses a euphemism ("pillow talk") to be ironical towards Blanche, and Sophia goes even further with this irony:

Rose: Your date is over?

Blanche: You sound surprised.

Dorothy: Well, it's just that your dates usually end with a little—pillow talk.

Sophia: Yeah, like, "What did you say your name was again?" (186)

There are, however, authors such as Sperber and Wilson (*Relevance*) who believe that the Relevance maxim is never violated since they support the idea that "[r]elevance may be achieved by expressing irrelevant assumptions, as long as this expressive behaviour is in itself relevant" (121). Then the relevance of the ironic utterance lies in the information it gives about the speaker's attitude towards the "attributed thought" (for in their opinion ironic utterances are always cases of echoic use of attributed thoughts). This interpretation of the Maxim of Relevance is wider than the one given by Brown and Levinson. From the standpoint of Relevance Theory, communicators could not violate the principle of relevance even if they wanted to (162). There are, according to Sperber and Wilson, many situations where the speaker aiming at optional relevance should not give a literal

interpretation of his thought, and where the hearer should not treat her utterance as literal (233).

To refer to Relevance Theory has been considered necessary for I am now referring to the Maxim of Relevance, but the main concern of this paper is Politeness Theory with respect to verbal irony. Then the argument put forward has to do with the way in which the violation of the Maxim of Relevance is presented in Brown and Levinson's Theory of Politeness. Following their reasoning (as well as Grice's), the Maxim of Relevance can be flouted sometimes, and this, I believe, can be also the case for ironic utterances.

2.4. Maxim of Manner

This maxim states that in order to achieve efficient communication we should be "perspicuous" and specifically:

- (1) Avoid obscurity
- (2) Avoid ambiguity
- (3) Be brief
- (4) Be orderly

It is obvious that when going off record and in a great number of instances in which the speaker chooses verbal irony as a strategy he does not avoid obscurity and ambiguity. Especially if he is using irony with the intention of criticising,³ he may tend to be ambiguous and obscure in order to minimize the FTA or to avoid responsibility.

In the example to be found in the final Appendix, taken from the London Lund Corpus of English Conversation, two female secretaries are talking about another woman. By saying that "she's not of the most helpful variety" they are being ambiguous (because they do not say that she is unhelpful) and at the same time they are ironically criticising her (the intonation with a falling tone on "helpful" and a rising one on "variety" as well as the laughing also help decipher the ironic interpretation). If we consider the majority of the cases of verbal irony, which, according to the major study named in the introduction, seem to have an off record nature,⁴ it could be said that all these cases are ambiguous in some way or another, and that they consequently violate the Maxim of Manner.

3. Conclusion

The analysis and examples presented seem to give evidence showing that ironical utterances can not only flout the Quality Maxim but also the other three Gricean maxims. In most of the cases, ironical remarks appear to be violating two, three or even all the maxims at the same time, which seems nevertheless to be coherent with the off record status of the majority of cases analysed (see note 4). Therefore, it does not seem to be the case that ironic speakers violate the Quality Maxim in particular, but that they can flout other maxims—in co-occurrence *or not* with the flouting of the Quality Maxim—without diminishing the ironic effect in the least. This gives proof of the fact that verbal irony is

a more complex phenomenon than thought by Brown and Levinson and that it has very rich possibilities of realisation within spoken and written discourse.

Notes

1. The reader is expected to be familiar with Politeness Theory and for that reason many concepts are not explained in this paper.

2. The fact that irony is a wider and multifarious phenomenon used to express much more than just "the opposite of the literal proposition" has been discussed by many authors (Sperber and Wilson, Williams, Jorgensen, Clark and Gerrig, etc.) and by myself in "Irony and Politeness."

3. Irony can also be used to praise, as shown by King and Crerar and other authors, as well as by myself in the article mentioned in note 2, in which two main kinds of irony are considered and proposed: Positive Irony (intended to praise) and Negative Irony (intended to criticise). I have recently found evidence that shows me that there is a third major category, namely, *neutral* verbal irony, to which I will refer in a future paper.

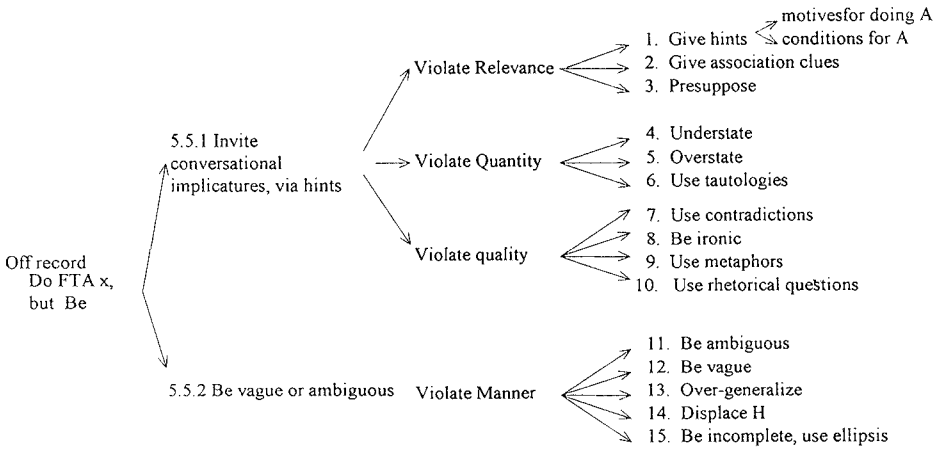
4. The results of my recent research have shed light on a type of verbal irony that cannot be classified as off record. I have found corpus examples of verbal irony where no maxim is flouted by the speaker.

Works Cited

- Alba Juez, L. "Irony and Politeness." *Revista Española de Lingüística* forthcoming.
- _____. "Irony and the Off Record Strategies." *Miscelánea* 16 (1995).
- Brown, P., and S. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978.
- Clark, H., and R. J. Gerrig. "On the Pretense Theory of Irony." *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 113.1 (1984): 121-26.
- Cutler, A. "On Saying What You Mean without Meaning What You Say." *Papers from the Tenth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*. Chicago, 1974. 117-27.
- Enright, D. J. *The Alluring Problem: An Essay on Irony*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988.
- The Golden Girls: Scripts*. London: Boxtree, 1981.
- Grice, H. P. "Logic and Conversation." Cole and Morgan 41-58.
- Jorgensen, J., G. A. Miller, and D. Sperber. "Test of the Mention Theory of Irony." *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 113.1 (1984): 112-20.
- Kasper, G. "Linguistic Politeness: Current Research Issues." *Journal of Pragmatics* 14 (1990): 193-218.
- King, D., and T. Crerar. *A Choice of Words*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969.
- Leech, G. *Principles of Pragmatics*. Singapore: Longman, 1983.
- Sperber, D. "Verbal Irony: Pretense or Echoic Mention?" *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 113.1 (1984): 130-36.
- _____, and D. Wilson. "Irony and the Use-Mention Distinction." *Radical Pragmatics*. Ed. Cole. New York: Academic P, 1981.
- _____, and D. Wilson. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- Svartvik, J., and R. Quirk, eds. *A Corpus of English Conversation*. Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1980.

Williams, J. P. "Does Mention (or Pretense) Exhaust the Concept of Irony?" *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 113.1 (1984): 127-29.

Appendix



C: and uh, they don't seem to bother anybody
 A: 'NO
 C: they seem to know their way around
 A: so it does seem a fairly self-contained unit on its own
 C: it is very self-contained
 A: 'YES
 C: and I think one of the reasons Miss Baker suggested I show you around.
 I don't think you've met Nelly Carwright upstairs
 A: 'NO
 C: I won't pre- uhm, what's the word. pre-persuade you but uh, -she's not of the most helpful variety
 A: (laughs--) Yeah.
 C: erm, I don't know. You may hit it off with her
 A: is she this secretary upstairs...

(Adapted from Svartvick and Quirk, S.1.5.)