Contribution of Cooperative Principle to the Interpretation of Irony

Qi n Yao
School of Foreign Languages, Jiangsu University, Zhenjiang, Jiangsu, China
Email: yaoqinz@qq.com

Abstract—Through gathering, analyzing and evaluating some cases of irony from Three Kingdoms by Luo Guanzhong and its translator Roberts, this paper aims to bring the issue of the significance of the indispensability of resorting to Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle (CP) for the analysis of irony in the interpretation of utterances.

Index Terms—cooperative principle, utterances from Three Kingdoms, irony

I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Irony, in the restricted sense, a form of linguistic ambiguity, has become a well-established colorful form of writing in the literature. Writers use irony to achieve their rhetorical ends—be they comic, moral, corrective and/or hortatory—through textual, grammatical, lexical manipulation. Booth classifies irony in two forms: stable and unstable; each is divided into local and infinite on two levels: covert and overt (1974:235). Stable irony involves two steps: the authors offer an unequivocal invitation to reconstruct and this reconstruction is not to be later undermined (1974:233). Unstable irony, on the other hand, implies that “no stable reconstruction can be made out of the ruins revealed through the irony.” (1974:240) Muecke (1982) differentiates between two classes of irony: observable irony and instrumental irony. Instrumental irony is used when someone realizes a purpose using language ironically, while observable irony could be unintentional and hence representable in art. Muecke (1969) distinguishes four modes of irony: impersonal, self-disparaging, ingenuous and dramatized, and gives impersonal irony the most prominent place and classification. Impersonal irony includes: praising in order to blame; blaming in order to praise, pretended agreement with the victim of irony; pretended advice or encouragement to the victim; the rhetorical question; pretended doubt; innuendo and insinuation; pretended error or ignorance; ambiguity; pretended attack on the victim’s opponent; and stylistically signaled irony. Attardo (2000:84) argues that a “smallest possible disruption” of Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle (CP) is put to work when irony is employed. Gibbs (1994) considers that the understanding of verbal irony requires the necessity of breaking Grice’s truthfulness maxims and have a context of situation. How can readers infer writers’ intentions when they attempt to produce irony? The solution is with reference to the violation to Grice’s conversational maxims. The cooperative principle which accounts for Grice’s (1975) “conversational implicature” is spelled out by four maxims, namely:

- quantity (a speaker should give the appropriate quantity of information);
- quality (information given should be correct or truthful);
- manner (expressions should be clear, non-ambiguous, brief and orderly); and
- relation (a speaker should maintain relevance to the subject matter and register).

“these maxims do not represent a descriptive statement of how conversational contributions are” (Coulthard 1985:31) and speakers or writers violate them often for a variety of purposes. When that happens, irony is likely to be employed.

II. THE INTERPRETATION OF IRONY

Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle (CP) plays a crucial role in identifying irony encountered in literature. Take the following excerpts from THREE KINGDOMS for examples:

Example 1


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Sun Quan was much disturbed and turned pale. He looked meaningfully at the bold speaker, but Zhuge Liang would not see. Sun Quan went on to ask if his archenemy had a corresponding number of leaders. "Cao Cao has enough administrators and strategists to control such a host, and his capable and veteran leaders are more than a thousand; perhaps more than two thousand." "What will be Cao Cao's next move now that he has overcome Jingzhou?" "He is camped along the river, and he has collected a fleet. If he does not intend to invade the South Land, what can his intentions be?" "Since that is his intention, it is a case of fight or not fight. I wish you would decide that for me." "I have something I could say, but I fear, Sir, you would not care to hear it." "I am desirous of hearing your most valuable opinion." "Strife has prevailed for a long time; and so you have raised your army in the South Land and Liu Bei collected his forces south of the Han River to act in contest for the empire against Cao Cao. Now Cao Cao has overcome most of his difficulties, and his recent conquest of Jingzhou has won him great and wide renown. Though there might be one bold enough to tackle him, yet there is no foothold for such. That is how Liu Bei has been forced to come here. But, General, I wish you to measure your forces and decide whether you can venture to meet Cao Cao and that without loss of time. If you cannot, then follow the advice of your councilors: Cease your military preparations and yield, turn your face to the north and serve." Sun Quan did not reply. But his guest went on, "You have the reputation of being reasonable, but I know also you are inclined to hesitate. Still this matter is most important, and evil will be quickly upon you if you do not decide." Then replied Sun Quan, "If what you say represents the actual conditions, why does not Liu Bei yield?" "Well, you know Tian Heng*, that hero of the state of Qi: His character was too noble for him to submit to any shame. It is necessary to remember that Liu Bei also is an off-shoot from the Dynastic Family, beside being a man of great renown. Everyone looks up to him. His lack of success is simply the will of Heaven, but manifestly he could not bow the knee to anyone." "Well, you know Tian Heng*, that hero of the state of Qi: His character was too noble for him to submit to any shame. It is necessary to remember that Liu Bei also is an off-shoot from the Dynastic Family, beside being a man of great renown. Everyone looks up to him. His lack of success is simply the will of Heaven, but manifestly he could not bow the knee to anyone."

*Tian Heng was a warrior of Qi at the end of the Warring States period and Qin Dynasty. In his bid to regain the lost kingdom of Qi, Tian Heng rebelled against Qin and fought both Liu Bang and Xiang Yu. Read Ti

The underlined utterance 若其不能,何不从众谋士之论,按兵束甲,北面而事之? (If you cannot, then follow the advice of your councilors: Cease your military preparations and yield, turn your face to the north and serve.) is considered ironic. This utterance is considered a violation of the maxim of quality when in correlation with its context of situation, which is substantiated by the utterance below:

孔明曰: "昔田横,齐之壮士耳,犹守义不辱。况刘豫州王室之胄,英才盖世,众士仰慕。事之不济,此乃天也。又安能屈处人下乎!"("Well, you know Tian Heng*, that hero of the state of Qi: His character was too noble for him to submit to any shame. It is necessary to remember that Liu Bei also is an off-shoot from the Dynastic Family, beside being a man of great renown. Everyone looks up to him. His lack of success is simply the will of Heaven, but manifestly he could not bow the knee to anyone."

This clearly shows that maxim flouting strategy can serve as a trigger of irony. The real interpretation involves the truth-value resting in the reverse of what is said. That is to say, Zhuge Liang's ostensive meaning contradicts his intended one. The ironic device used here is to instigate Sun Quan's anti-CaoCao feelings.

Below is another example highlighting the importance of flouting conversational maxims in arriving at an ironic inference.

Example 2

至晚，人报鲁子敬引孔明来拜。瑜出中门迎入。叙礼毕，分宾主而坐。肃先问瑜曰: "今曹操驱众南侵，和与战二策，先生不能决，一听于将军。将军之意若何?"瑜曰: "曹操以天子为名，其师不可拒。且其势大，未可轻敌。战则必败，降则易安。吾意已决。来日见公，便当遣使纳降。"鲁肃愕然曰: "君言差矣!江东基业，已历三世，岂可一旦弃于他人?伯符遗言，外事付托将军。今正欲仗将军保全国家，为泰山之靠，奈何从懦夫轻敌。战则必败，降则易安。吾意已决。来日见主公，便当遣使纳降。"瑜曰: "孔明急起止之曰: "公瑾主意欲降操，甚为合理。先生何故哂笑?"孔明曰: "亮不笑别人，笑子敬不识时务耳。"肃曰: "先生如何反笑我不识时务?"孔明曰: "公瑾主意欲降操，甚为合理。"瑜曰: "孔明乃识时务之士，必与吾有同心。"肃曰: "孔明，你也如何说此?"孔明曰: "操极善用兵，天下莫敢当。向只有吕布、袁绍、袁术、刘表敌于对敌。今数人皆被操灭，天下无人矣。独有刘豫州不识时务，强与争衡;今孤身江夏，存亡未保。将军决计降曹，可以保妻子，可以全富贵。国祚迁移，付之天命，何足惜哉!"鲁肃大怒曰: "汝教吾主屈膝受辱于国贼乎!"瑜曰: "不然。以将军之雄英，东吴之险固，操未必便能得志也。"二人互相争辩，瑜复称子敬于冷笑。瑜曰: "先生何故哂笑?"孔明曰: "亮不笑别人，笑子敬不识时务耳。"肃曰: "先生如何反笑我不识时务?"孔明曰: "公瑾主意欲降操，甚为合理。"瑜曰: "孔明乃识时务之士，必与吾有同心。"肃曰: "孔明，你也如何说此?"孔明曰: "操极善用兵，天下莫敢当。向只有吕布、袁绍、袁术、刘表敌于对敌。今数人皆被操灭，天下无人矣。独有刘豫州不识时务，强与争衡;今孤身江夏，存亡未保。将军决计降曹，可以保妻子，可以全富贵。国祚迁移，付之天命，何足惜哉!"鲁肃大怒曰: "汝教吾主屈膝受辱于国贼乎!"瑜曰: "不然。以将军之雄英，东吴之险固，操未必便能得志也。"
Why, this intention to submit is perfectly reasonable. It is the one I cannot believe you mean it." Replied Zhou Yu, "The six territories opted it, and they have been exterminated. But you do not know, Sir," replied Zhou Yu. "Of those two women of the Qiao family--"

There are five ironic devices in the above example:

1) 瑜曰: “曹操以天子为名，其师不可拒。且其势大，未可轻敌。战则必败，降则易安。吾意已决。来日见主公，便当遣使纳降。” (Zhou Yu replied, "We may not oppose Cao Cao when he acts at the command of the Emperor. Moreover, he is very strong, and to attack him is to take serious risks. In my opinion, opposition would mean defeat and, since submission means peace, I have decided to advise our lord to write and offer surrender.")

2) 瑜曰: “吾承伯符寄托，安有屈身降操之理？适来所言，故相试耳。吾自离鄱阳湖，便有北伐之心，虽刀斧加头，不易其志也！望孔明助一臂之力，同破曹贼。” (Zhou Yu replied, "I hold a sacred trust from my late lord, Sun Ce. I would not bow the knee to any such as Cao Cao. What I said just now was to see how you stood. I left Poyang Lake, with the intention of attacking the north, and nothing can change that intention, not even the sword at my breast or the ax on my neck. But I trust you will lend an arm, and we will smite Cao Cao together.")

3) 舒曰: “曹操以天子为名，其师不可拒。且其势大，未可轻敌。战则必败，降则易安。吾意已决。来日见主公，便议起兵。” (About eventide Lu Su and Zhuge Liang came, and Zhou Yu went out to the main gate to receive them. When they had taken their proper seats, Lu Su spoke first, saying, "Cao Cao has come against the South Land with a huge army. Our master cannot decide whether to submit or give battle and waits for your decision. What is your opinion?" Zhou Yu replied, "We may not oppose Cao Cao when he acts at the command of the Emperor. Moreover, he is very strong, and to attack him is to take serious risks. In my opinion, opposition would mean defeat and, since submission means peace, I have decided to advise our lord to write and offer surrender."

4) 舒曰: “若蒙不弃，愿效犬马之劳，早晚拱听驱策。”瑜曰: “来日入见主公，便议起兵。” (About eventide Lu Su and Zhuge Liang sat smiling with folded arms. Presently Zhou Yu asked, "Why do you smile thus, Master?")

5) 孔明曰: “吾承伯符寄托，安有屈身降操之理？适来所言，故相试耳。吾自离鄱阳湖，便有北伐之心，虽刀斧加头，不易其志也！望孔明助一臂之力，同破曹贼。” (Zhou Yu listened to the end but then suddenly jumped up in a tremendous rage. Turning to the north and pointing with his finger, he cried, "You old rebel, this insult is too deep!")

Zhuge Liang hastily rose too and soothed him, saying, "But remember the Khan of the Xiongnu People. The Han emperor gave him a princess of the family to wife although he had made many incursions into our territory. That was the price of peace. You surely would not grudge two more women from among the common people."

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3) 孔明曰: “公瑾主意欲降操, 甚为合理(“Why, this intention to submit is perfectly reasonable. It is the one proper thing.”) This utterance features a praise in order to praise, realized by the violation of the maxim of quality.

4) 孔明曰: “独有刘豫州不识时务, 强与争衡……”(The only exception is Liu Bei, who did not understand the conditions and vigorously contended against him.) This utterance features a blame in order to praise, realized by the violation of the maxim of quality.

5) 孔明曰: “将军事于曹, 可以保妻子, 可以全富贵。国祚迁移, 付之天命, 何足惜哉!” (To submit is to secure the safety of wives and children, to be rich and honored. But the dignity of the country would be left to chance and fate—- however, that is not worth consideration.) The much information about the benefit of submitting to Cao Cao the underlined utterance is expressing a violation to the maxim of quantity. Moreover, the verbalization of the fate of DONG WU STATE is also a violation to the maxim of manner. Finally, given Zhuge Liang’s real intention which is revealed throughout the whole passage, especially proved by the following:

瑜曰: “望孔明助一臂之力, 何辞破军?” 孔明曰: “若蒙不弃, 孙效犬马之劳, 早晚供听驱策。” (“Should I be happy enough not to be rejected, I would render such humble service as I could. Perhaps presently I might be able to offer a plan to oppose him.”) This underlined utterance is violating the maxim of quality as well.

More examples of irony highlighting the importance of flouting conversational maxim can be identified.

Example 3

up and seized their shining weapons. "Do you not think my soldiers a fine lot of fellows?" said Zhou Yu. "Strong as bears and bold as tigers," replied Jiang Gan. Then Zhou Yu led him to the rear of the tent whence he saw the grain and forage piled up in mountainous heaps. "Do you not think I have a fairly good store of grain and forage?" "Your troops are brave and your supplies ample: The empire's gossip is not baseless, indeed." Zhou Yu pretended to be quite intoxicated and went on, "When you and I were students together, we never looked forward to a day like this, did we?" "For a genius like you, it is nothing extraordinary," said the guest. Zhou Yu again seized his hand, and they sat down. "A man of the time, I have found a proper lord to serve. In his service, we rely upon the right feeling between minister and prince outside, and at home we are firm in the kindly feeling of relatives. He listens to my words and follows my plans. We share the same good or evil fortune. Even when the great old persuaders like Su Qin, Zhang Yi, Lu Jia, and Li Yiji lived again, even when their words poured forth like a rushing river, their tongues were as a sharp sword, it is impossible to move such as I am!" Zhou Yu burst into a loud laugh as he finished, and Jiang Gan's face had become clay-colored. Zhou Yu then led his guest back into the tent, and again they fell to drinking.

The underlined utterance 周瑜告众官曰: "此吾同窗契友也, 旋从江北到此, 却不是曹家说客, 无等勿疑."(Zhou Yu's reserve seemed to thaw and he said, "Jiang Gan is an old fellow student of mine, and we are pledged friends. Though he has arrived here from the north, he is not a clever pleader so you need not be afraid of him." is considered ironic given the context, substantiated by the utterance before this utterance:

"For a genius like you, it is nothing extraordinary," said the guest. Zhou Yu again seized his hand, and they sat down. "A man of the time, I have found a proper lord to serve. In his service, we rely upon the right feeling between minister and prince outside, and at home we are firm in the kindly feeling of relatives. He listens to my words and follows my plans. We share the same good or evil fortune. Even when the great old persuaders like Su Qin, Zhang Yi, Lu Jia, and Li Yiji lived again, even when their words poured forth like a rushing river, their tongues were as a sharp sword, it is impossible to move such as I am!" Zhou Yu burst into a loud laugh as he finished, and Jiang Gan's face had become clay-colored. Zhou Yu then led his guest back into the tent, and again they fell to drinking.)

The underlined utterance 周瑜正在帐中议事, 闻将干至, 笑谓诸将曰: "谈客至矣! "(The commander was in his tent at a council when the message came, and he laughed as he said to those about him, "A persuader is coming." And by the utterances after this utterance:

"For a genius like you, it is nothing extraordinary," said the guest. Zhou Yu again seized his hand, and they sat down. "A man of the time, I have found a proper lord to serve. In his service, we rely upon the right feeling between minister and prince outside, and at home we are firm in the kindly feeling of relatives. He listens to my words and follows my plans. We share the same good or evil fortune. Even when the great old persuaders like Su Qin, Zhang Yi, Lu Jia, and Li Yiji lived again, even when their words poured forth like a rushing river, their tongues were as a sharp sword, it is impossible to move such as I am!"

Hence, this underlined utterance gives rise to the violation of the maxim of quality since the real intention rest in the reverse of what is said. That is to say, Zhou Yu uses the ironic device to instigate implicit doubt and the dismay of Jiang Gan.

III. CONCLUSION

The examples above support the idea of minimal ironic devices to build discourse. As Simpson puts it, irony functions as "the infrastructure and determinant of the discourse" (2004:83) and "text-internal elements as textual evidence for inferencing" (2004:66), the making of meaning of and construction of sense resort to "conflictual textual or contextual evidence or markers socially agreed upon" (Hutcheon, 1995:11), "the relevance of an ironical utterance invariably depends, at least in part, on the information it conveys about the speaker's attitude the opinion echoed." (Sperber & Wilson, 1995:239), hence the understanding of verbal irony requires the necessity of breaking Grice's (1975) cooperative principle (CP).

To sum up, this paper highlights the indispensability of resorting to Grice's (1975) cooperative principle (CP) for the analysis of irony in the interpretation of utterances. The theory of CP take us beyond the words to a philosophical world where certain rules are set to infer the real meaning of what is being said in the analysis of irony. This emphasizes the need to develop a pragmatic competence of reception and interpretation of irony where conversational strategies based on Grice's cooperative principle are applicable.

REFERENCES


Qin Yao was born in Zhenjiang, China in 1974. She is pursuing her Ph.D. degree in translation from Shanghai International Studies University, China. She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Jiangsu University, Jiangsu, China. Her research interests include translation and American literature.