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Jocularity in irony and humor: A cognitive-to-affective process

Shigehiro Haruki

1. Introduction

This article investigates a common property observed in irony and humor, that is, jocularity, and proposes a cognitive account for how their jocularity comes out. More specific aims are: (i) to show jocularity common to irony and humor, (ii) to demonstrate that the crucial factor for it is the state of cognitive discordance between two (clusters of) inconsistent assumptions, and (iii) to propose that a COGNITIVE-TO-AFFECTIVE process plays a crucial role in the two interesting verbal phenomena.

There is now a vast amount of literatures on irony and humor. Many of them notice that irony and humor have a lot in common though it is uncertain whether they have the same mechanism in producing and processing. The history of irony and humor researches will be deliberately ignored here since there is no room for mentioning it sufficiently. Most attentions will be cast on jocularity which is supposed to be a common feature in both irony and humor.

The structure of this article is as follows. In section 2 and 3 we will investigate irony and humor respectively. These sections will clearly show the characteristics of the two phenomena. Section 4 will overview their common feature and provide a new account for their general interpretation process in which a certain cognitive aspect directly links to an affective aspect.

2. Irony

The main objectives of this section are, first, to examine several examples of interesting ironies, and second, to indicate a fallacy of a traditional view of irony which is generally accepted in most irony studies.

The traditional view of irony is based on a traditional definition of irony: irony is a figure of speech whose intended meaning is the opposite of the literal meaning. Despite that almost all researches have their own different stand points such as semantic, pragmatic, or cognitive perspectives, many of them accept the traditional view unconditionally (Attardo (2000), Giora and Fein (1999), Grice (1975), Searle (1979), Seto (1998) and many others). Such studies presuppose that irony interpretation is perfectly achieved when an opposite meaning of the utterance is comprehended. This view can give a persuasive explanation to an example of typical irony.

- (1) [To avoid hitting a woman and her cow in the middle of the road, Stone's car runs into a fence.]

Stone: Oh, God. All right, I'm okay. All right. Oh, man, my car, oh! The whole front end is shot! Am I glad you're here! (*Doc Hollywood*, Warner bros.)

In the last part of (1) it seems plausible that Stone intends to communicate an ironical meaning, i.e. either *I am not glad you were here*, or *I am sad you were here*. However further investigation on other types of irony will show that the traditional view of irony is untenable. Consider examples (2) to (4) below.

- (2) [After severely questioning a man, a sheriff threatens the man to hang himself. Seeing the man's writhing in being hung, the sheriff speaks following utterances very slowly and dully.]

Help..., Ben... Help... There's a man who is trying to

commit a suicide now in a jail... You've better hurry...
(*American Gothic*, Renaissance Pictures)

(2) is a jocular case of irony. The sheriff's utterance should be more tensed in such urgency, but his manner and the content of the utterance are totally different. This kind of gap gives rise to humorous effect on his behavior. Although (2) is ironical (and ludicrous), it is quite difficult to find out the opposite of its utterance which the sheriff intends to convey. In (2) what he most intends to express is his jocular, ludicrous and even cruel attitude to the state of affairs. This instance clearly shows that the researches based on the traditional view of irony are insufficient since it is impossible to explain example (2) in an appropriate way. Utterances (3) and (4) are also problematic cases for the traditional view.

- (3) [An overdosed patient leans over and vomits on Stone.]
Stone: Thanks. (*Doc Hollywood*).
(4) Stone: Look, the high-profile, high-profit stuff just makes it possible for us to do reconstructive surgery for the needier patients.

Shulman: Needier patients. You're a saint. You got another customer over there. (*Doc Hollywood*.)

In these two examples, the speaker is being ironical by thanking in (3) and by speaking metaphorically in (4). In spite of their ironical effects, it is difficult to specify the opposite meaning of gratitude or metaphor. We can safely conclude from these instances that the studies based on the traditional view of irony can not appropriately explain irony whose opposite meaning can be hardly specified.

Following the traditional view of irony, we will overlook the important fact that the purpose of using ironical expressions is not to convey the opposite of the literal meaning but to show

certain ironical attitudes. In this sense, irony is not a cognitive manner of communication but an affective manner of communication.

The next question, then, will be what kind of mechanism is concerned with the affective facet of irony. The answer will be posited in section 4. Before that, it is worth considering the nature of irony here again.

Let us take a look at the nature of irony. First, when can an utterance be ironical and in what situation does it lose the status? Some artificial instances will be useful for clarifying the questions. Consider several examples below in all of which we will deliberately ignore those special intonations as irony signal.

- (5) [A and B are scholars who work for the same university. A knows that B thinks that A's laboratory is tidy.]
B: What an organized lab!
- (6) [A and B are scholars who work for the same university. A knows that B thinks that A's laboratory is messy.]
B: What an organized lab!
- (7) [A and B are scholars who work for the same university. A doesn't know that B thinks that A's laboratory is tidy.]
B: What an organized lab!
- (8) [A and B are scholars who work for the same university. A doesn't know that B thinks that A's laboratory is messy.]
B: What an organized lab!

Among these examples, it is only in (6) that the hearer A can clearly interpret the utterance as irony. (5) is understood as a positive evaluation expressed literally; (7) and (8) are subtler

cases since all A can interpret is that B says what he thinks directly even if they happen to sound ironical to A. It seems reasonable from this observation to suppose that irony interpretation is triggered by some kind of inconsistent gap between an assumption derived from the propositional content of the utterance and an assumption entertained in the hearer's mind. Only in (6) the inconsistent gap is recognized. This is the reason why the traditional view of irony, therefore any research which depends on it, fails to capture the nature of irony. The intended opposite meaning should be treated as one part of triggering factor which has already existed in the interpreter's mind but not the result of interpretation process.

The second significant property of irony is related to its function. It might be generally accepted that irony has two main functions: an evaluating function, especially negative evaluation known as sarcasm, and a humorous function. It is worth remarking here that the purpose of irony is to express and communicate these functions (but not to convey the opposite of the literal meaning of the utterance), and that there must be some definite reason why the negative evaluation and jocularity are the main functions of irony. Let us consider these points below.

When we are told ironically or when we speak ironically, what is the first interpretation or our intention of the ironical utterance? Intuitively, we will understand that the speaker intends to blame, ridicule, make fun of or humorously entertain the hearer. Irony does provoke such kinds of feeling as anger, sadness or jocularity. This means that irony is not a rational way of speaking but an emotional one. It is safe to assume from these facts that irony directly influences the affective part of our mind.

To sum up, we will take a brief look at a jocular case of

irony and present two features of irony which have been rather underestimated in the literature.

- (9) [Mrs. Doubtfire walks up to the house and notices that Stuart's Mercedes is parked outside.]

Mrs. Doubtfire: Loverboy is here. What a beautiful little car for Don Juan.

[Mrs. Doubtfire moves to the front of the car and breaks off the hood ornament.]

Mrs. Doubtfire: So sad when that happens.

(*Mrs. Doubtfire*, Twentieth Century Fox film corporation)

In (9) Mrs. Doubtfire's utterance is irony. It is apparent that she doesn't intend to convey the opposite of the utterance since it is meaningless for her to say as a monologue the opposite utterance of what she has in mind. If we presume she intended to convey the opposite of the utterance, it gets obscure why she deliberately speaks in that way despite that she knows what she really wants to express. What she intends to communicate (to herself) is an inconsistent relation between an existing assumption inferred from her behavior and an assumption derived from the utterance. From her behavior to break the ornament, there exist in the speaker's mind inferred assumptions; for example, that she has a distinct intention to do it, that she may dislike the car's owner, and that she may be happy to break it. Into this context is an inconsistent assumption introduced by her utterance, and then an inconsistent relation between the two assumptions emerges into our mind. This kind of gap, as a result, leads to a humorous effect, that is, jocularity or ridiculousness in her behavior.

Let us now summarize the nature of irony.

- (10) a. Irony comes out from the inconsistent gap between two assumptions.

- b. The purpose for using irony is to appeal to such affective facets of communication as negative evaluation, ridicule or jocularity.

3. Humor

In this section we will take a close look at humorous examples and explore the nature of jocularity in humor. Consider two examples below by turns. Let us call an utterance which gives us a cue for humor interpretation a "trigger utterance" for convenience.

(11) First Child?

A man spoke frantically into the phone, "My wife is pregnant and her contractions are only two minutes apart!"

"Is this her first child?" the doctor asked.

"No, you idiot!" the man shouted. "This is her husband!"

(Cited from *Oraclehumor. com*)

In (11), where does its jocularity come from? What makes (11) humorous? Under what condition are we unable to understand its jocosity? Whether (11) is understood to be humorous is completely dependent on whether its trigger utterance *This is her husband!* can be comprehended. From the previous linguistic context, especially the man's reply *No, you idiot!*, his next utterance can be expected to be something like *Her second child* or *Her fifth child*. But his words as a trigger utterance do not meet our expectations. In order to understand the trigger utterance, we have to proceed further inference and find that there are a cluster of assumptions with which the trigger utterance can make sense. In (11), for example, we can recognize two sets of assumption clusters shown below.

(12) Assumptions derived from the previous discourse

- a. The man calls a doctor to know what to do for his wife's labor.
 - b. The doctor asks whether it is her first child in order to find the best way.
 - c. [From the man's reply, following assumptions are predicted.] The man's answer would be: "Her second child," or "Her fifth child."
- (13) Newly inferred assumptions from the trigger utterance
- a. The man's utterance does not make sense as an answer to the doctor's question. (But it is obvious that he does not speak meaninglessly.)
 - b. If he misunderstood the doctor's speech style "Is this her first child?" as such an formulaic utterance as "Is this her first child speaking?", his angry reply completely make sense.
 - c. Therefore he must misunderstand the doctor's utterance.

It is this duality of two assumption clusters which makes utterance (11) humorous. Without recognizing the new assumption cluster (13) and, therefore, without recognizing the duality, we can not understand the jocularity in (11). It should be noted here that those inconsistent assumption clusters are linked together by the trigger utterance. From a cognitive perspective, it can be safely restated that two inconsistent sets of assumptions, which are introduced into our mind, provoke humor since irony is also interpreted from the inconsistent relation between two particular assumptions.

Example (14) can be explained in the same way.

(14) Nobel Prize

A man is driving down a country road, when he spots a farmer standing in the middle of a huge field of grass.

He pulls the car over to the side of the road and notices that the farmer is just standing there, doing nothing, looking at nothing.

The man gets out of the car, walks all the way out to the farmer and asks him, "Ah excuse me mister, but what are you doing?"

The farmer replies, "I'm trying to win a Nobel Prize."

"How?" asks the man, puzzled.

"Well, I heard they give the Nobel Prize ... to people who are out standing in their field."

(Cited from *Oraclehumor. com*)

This sort of humor *pun* is greatly dependent on the polysemous feature of linguistic elements. The same factor seen in (11) works here, although the trigger utterance *Well, I heard they give the Nobel Prize ... to people who are out standing in their field* is different from that in (11), in that its polysemous property is the crucial key for interpretation process.

Several assumptions in (15) are first introduced from a previous linguistic context. Into this state of the interpreter's mind is the newly inferred cluster of assumptions (16) introduced in order to understand the trigger utterance.

- (15) a. A farmer is standing in the middle of a huge field of grass.
- b. The driver asks the farmer what he is doing there.
- c. The farmer replies that he is trying to win a Nobel Prize.
- d. He might observe the meteorological changes by feeling temperature, humidity or wind with his body in order to propose a perfect theory of weather forecast.
- e. By praying devoutly, he might try to realize a perfect

peace on this world.

- f. This might be the best way for him to resolve a mathematical formula which has never been proved.
- (16) a. If the farmer misunderstands the phonological strings and meaning of the word "outstanding" to be those of the words "out standing," and if he also misunderstands the meaning of the word "field", that is, speciality, to be the meaning as agricultural land, then his utterance is consistent with his act.
- b. The farmer is indeed standing in the middle of a huge field of grass.
- c. Therefore he must misunderstand (or, at least, he pretends to misunderstand intentionally).

After achieving this series of further inference, we can make sense of the farmer's seemingly inappropriate utterance. It is worth remarking here that our interpretation of (14) is completely fulfilled not only when his odd utterance is rationally comprehended but also when its jocularity is emotionally emerged. And, in the same way as (11), the jocularity of (14) is derived from the inconsistent relation of two assumption clusters.

From the two instances of humor, the nature of humor can be concluded as follows.

- (17) a. Humor is comprehended when two clusters of assumptions are recognized simultaneously.
- b. The inconsistent relation between two assumption clusters provokes a certain kind of affective process, i.e., jocularity.

Humor can be called an affective manner of communication through a characteristic cognitive process.

4. The state of cognitive discordance: A common feature of irony and humor

The previous two sections showed that irony and humor have two common properties. Let us restate here their common properties as a beginning of this section. It can be summarized that their common features are the following two respects; (i) the first step of the comprehension is to perceive an inconsistent relation between two (clusters of) assumptions, and (ii) the inconsistent relation provokes affective facets of interpretation. In this section, I will present a new analysis based on Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995)) in order to capture the two properties described above.

4. 1. Communication and cognitive effects

Before discussing a new analysis, it is useful to examine from a Relevance-theoretic perspective how our verbal communication is performed. In the framework of Relevance Theory, our communication is treated as an ostensive-inferential communication. In other words, a speaker intends to convey a certain information which is presumably worth paying attention for a hearer, and the hearer expects the presumption that the information is worth interpreting and begins to understand the speaker's utterance. To put it cognitively, the speaker communicates and the hearer interprets, on the presumption that the speaker's utterance is profitable for constructing the hearer's cognitive environment, so called, the system of belief. What is important here is whether the speaker's utterance gives a profitable modification to the hearer's cognitive environment. How is, then, the cognitive environment modified profitably?

Relevance Theory gives a clear explanation to this question in terms of three cognitive effects (which are also called 'contextual effects'). In the present study, however, one of the

effects *contextual implication* will be deliberately ignored since it is not important for the discussion here. Let us take a brief look at the other two cognitive effects which are related to the confirmation value assigned to each and every assumption in the cognitive environment.¹

(18) Contextual effects

- a. Contradiction leading to abandonment of existing assumptions : $\{C:n\} + \{P:m\}, (P \leftrightarrow C, n < m) \rightarrow \{P:m\}$
 $\{C1:n\}$: [Mary said to me that] John did not believe in UFO's.
 $\{P1:m\}$: [I saw John deliver a speech in a UFO club meeting.] John must believe in UFO's.

- b. Strengthening : $\{C:n\} + \{P:m\} \rightarrow \{C:n+m\}$
 $\{C2:n\}$: Extraterrestrials exist.
 $\{P2:10\}$: A UFO landed just in front of me yesterday.
 $\{C2:n+10\}$: Extraterrestrials exist.

Contradiction leading to abandonment of existing assumptions is as follows when there are two contradicting assumptions, which have different confirmation values, in a cognitive environment, the one which is weakly confirmed is abandoned. In (18a), for example, $\{C1:n\}$ contradicts $\{P1:m\}$, and the weakly confirmed $\{C1:n\}$ is abandoned since $\{P1:m\}$ obtained through a direct experience is much stronger than $\{C1:n\}$ gained from other's story.

Strengthening is as follows when there are two complementing assumptions in a cognitive environment, the confirmation value of the existing assumption is strengthened by the other newly introduced one. In (18b) the existing assumption $\{C2:n\}$ and the new assumption $\{P2:10\}$ complement each other and then the confirmation value of $\{C2:n\}$ is strengthened to be

{C2 : n + 10}.

4. 2. Cognitive discordance

Based upon the cognitive effects which are ordinary cognitive processes in constructing the cognitive environment, there can be found a different facet of the cognitive effects, which should be called "(the state of) cognitive discordance." As is shown in Haruki (2000), two types of cognitive discordance can be posited as bellow.

- (19) Cognitive discordance means two extraordinary states of cognitive environment;
- a. Discordance by contradiction: Two contradicting assumptions, {C} and {P}, exist in a cognitive environment at the same time, and
 - b. Discordance by strengthening: Two complementing assumptions, {C} and {P}, exist in a cognitive environment without being strengthened,

From the cognitive discordance perspective, it follows that: (i) the state of cognitive discordance means some sort of unstableness of the cognitive environment, and (ii) the unstableness can lead us directly to certain affective responses such as rather negative emotion, on one hand, and jocularity, on the other. We can now easily expect that the cognitive discordance can give a persuasive explanation for two properties which reside in irony and humor.² We will concentrate on the first cognitive discordance, discordance by contradiction (19a), here since it is associated with irony and humor.³

In the case of irony like (1), a certain assumption inferred from the previous car accident context is entertained in the cognitive environment, into which an assumption derived from Stone's utterance is introduced. The state of discordance by

contradiction like (20) is now brought about in the cognitive environment, and this unstableness of mind provokes rather negative emotion.

- (20) a. [An assumption inferred from the previous car accident context]

STONE IS IN AN UNPLEASANT MOOD (SINCE HE THINKS THE ACCIDENT TOOK PLACE BECAUSE THE WOMAN AND HER COW STOOD IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD)

- b. [An assumption derived from stone's utterance]

STONE IS VERY GLAD THAT SHE AND HER COW WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD

The case of humor can be explained in the same way. In example (11), from the previous linguistic context, a certain assumption cluster exists in the cognitive environment. When the trigger utterance of the young man is comprehended in a different way, a newly derived assumption cluster is entertained in the cognitive environment. The two assumption clusters introduce the state of cognitive discordance, and then provokes an affective state of mind; jocularity. In (14) the two assumption clusters, repeated here as (21) and (22), cause the state of cognitive discordance, which provokes jocosity.

- (21) An assumption cluster derived from the previous discourse: (a) A FARMER IS STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF A HUGE FIELD OF GRASS / (b) THE DRIVER ASKS THE FARMER WHAT HE IS DOING THERE / (c) THE FARMER REPLIES THAT HE IS TRYING TO WIN A NOBEL PRIZE / (d) HE MIGHT OBSERVE THE METEOROLOGICAL CHANGES BY FEELING TEMPERATURE, HUMIDITY OR WIND WITH HIS BODY IN ORDER TO PROPOSE A PERFECT THEORY

OF WEATHER FORECAST / (e) BY PRAYING DEVOUTLY, HE MIGHT TRY TO REALIZE A PERFECT PEACE ON THIS WORLD / (f) THIS MIGHT BE THE BEST WAY FOR HIM TO RESOLVE A MATHEMATICAL FORMULA WHICH HAS NEVER BEEN PROVED

- (22) An assumption cluster inferred from the trigger utterance: (a) IF THE FARMER MISUNDERSTANDS THE MEANING (AND PHONOLOGICAL STRINGS) OF THE WORD "OUTSTANDING" TO BE THOSE OF THE WORDS "OUT / STANDING", AND IF HE ALSO MISUNDERSTANDS THE MEANING OF THE WORD "FIELD", THAT IS, SPECIALITY, TO BE THE MEANING "AGRICULTURAL LAND", THEN HIS UTTERANCE IS CONSISTENT WITH HIS ACT / (b) THE FARMER IS INDEED STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF A HUGE FIELD OF GRASS / (c) THEREFORE HE MUST MISUNDERSTAND (OR, AT LEAST, HE PRETENDS TO MISUNDERSTAND INTENTIONALLY)

The analysis presented here can explain the nature of irony and humor more effectively in the following two respects.

- (I) It can capture the true nature of irony and humor. It can treat the inconsistent gap seen in both of them as the state of cognitive discordance.
- (II) It can give a clear answer to the question why such types of affection as negative evaluation and jocularity are prominent in irony and humor. The unstableness shown in the state of cognitive discordance links up directly with rather a negative affection or jocularity.

5. Concluding remarks

In this article, it has been demonstrated that the cognitive discordance plays a central role in capturing the nature of irony and humor. Both of them are not a cognitive manner of communication but an affective manner of communication. The present analysis is preferable for understanding the characteristics since it can treat their affective facet in a direct way. I must admit, however, that this study is still at a preliminary stage, and that, for lack of space, I ignored the detailed argument about other researches on irony and humor. Full exploration of this issue would require further accumulation of studies. I will leave it to future research.

NOTES

- 1 For detailed discussion of cognitive effects, see Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995: chapter 2).
- 2 It is worth remarking that the term "contradiction" is used loosely here to refer to every kind of opposition.
- 3 It should be noted that the second discordance by strengthening is also useful, especially when we examine such rhetorical expressions as parody and pure echoic irony.

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