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REINHARD KAHLE
Universidade Nova de Lisboa

A LOGICIAN'S SIDELONG GLANCE AT IRONY

1.

In *Irony as Expression (of a Sense of the Absurd)*, Mitchell Green is presenting an interesting account of *communicative irony* where "we express a sense of a situation's absurdity (wackiness, goofiness, etc.)" (Green 2017, p. 18). In this line of argument, he is questioning the adequateness of *irony as meaning-inversion* and *irony as conversational implicature*.

In this note, we would like to take the idea of *absurdity* a little bit further, considering it in its logical sense. As a consequence we can offer a possibility to defend, at least partially, irony as meaning-inversion and conversational implicature.

Absurdity is used in logic as a propositional constant representing the unconditionally false sentence, usually denoted by the symbol $\bot$. In some logics, this constant is taken as primitive and the negation of a sentence ϕ, for instance, can be defined in terms of absurdity by $\neg\phi :\Leftrightarrow \phi \to \bot$.[1]

Our working hypothesis for a logical analysis of irony is the following:

($\star$) An ironic statement ϕ, placed in the proper formal representation of the given situation, will lead to the derivability of a contradiction, i.e., absurdity.

This is a working hypothesis only, as it is not yet properly worked out. A fully-fledged theory for it would require some specifications about formal representations of a situation and derivability which are far from being straightforward. In particular, we will need to refine the notion of "situation", to make the hypothesis work in more interesting examples.

We believe, however, that our hypothesis has some inherent plausibility which comes from the supposed reaction of a listener: listing to an ironic statement, the listener should usually react by thinking something like: "this is absurd." Presupposing that the speaker has consistent convictions, one continues to conclude: "(s)he cannot mean this seriously; thus, (s)he must mean this ironically." This line of argument may apply to all examples where the listener is able to "derive" a contradiction from the assumed "knowledge base" of the utterer and the ironic statement.[2]

In this perspective, *irony as meaning-inversion* comes nearly by definition: to logically cause absurdity, the ironic statement has to contradict the speaker's "knowledge base" or, equivalently, the speaker has to believe the negation of the ironic statement.[3] In some sense, we have inverted here Green's perspective, putting absurdity at the beginning of the analysis of irony, and not at the end.

But Green correctly points to examples where the speaker clearly does not believe in the negation of the ironic statement, like in example (4), "You sure know a lot about baseball!" (Green 2017, p. 6). *Irony as meaning-negation* fails here, if absurdity would have to be obtained by assuming that the other person would not be knowledgeable about baseball. We can, however, obtain absurdity by another—somehow "second-order"—argument. Assuming Grice's Maxim of Quantity, statement (4) gives—in the situation described by Green—somehow more information than needed: to know *a lot* about baseball is not to be derived from baseball trivia. Thus, we obtain a contradiction, not with any fact about a person's knowledge about baseball, but with a generally assumed maxim in a conversational discourse. In this form of "higher-type irony" the listener would have to reason as follows: "this statement contradicts the Maxim of Quantity; thus, it has to be meant ironically." In fact, one could also argue that (4) violates the Maxim of Relevance, because it appears to be neither relevant nor pertinent.

While this reasoning is quite different from the case of *irony as meaning-negation*, it still involves the derivability of a contradiction. As this contradiction involves a conversational maxim, we see this as a possible instance of *irony as conversational implicature*. But we should add that here *irony as conversational implicature* works differently than for Grice. His example, concerning "*X* is a fine friend" ((Grice 1989, p. 34) and (Green 2017, p. 8)) would still be subsumed under *irony as meaning-negation*, as it is "derivable" in the given situation that *X* is not (any longer) a fine friend of *A*. In contrast, *irony as conversational implicature* serves in our account to derive a contradiction with the conversational maxims rather than with the factual situation.[4]

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Notes

[1] See, for instance, (Troelstra & Schwichtenberg 2000, p. 3).

[2] Consider, for example, the "great fiddling" example (2) (Green 2017, p. 5). In this particular case, the performer might not be able to derive the contradiction as he doesn't know the standards of musicality of the utterer.

[3] Formally, this would follow only if one assumes beliefs to be deductively closed, which seems to be a too strong assumption (Kahle (2002)). However, in case the speaker *intentionally* makes an ironic statement (s)he clearly will count on the negation to make absurdity derivable.

[4] One may, however, subsume *irony as meaning-negation* under a special case of our understanding of *irony as conversational implicature*: the utterance of a statement, contradicting an underlying knowledge base, can well be considered as a violation of the Maxim of Quality.

References

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