

Irony and politeness

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Abstract

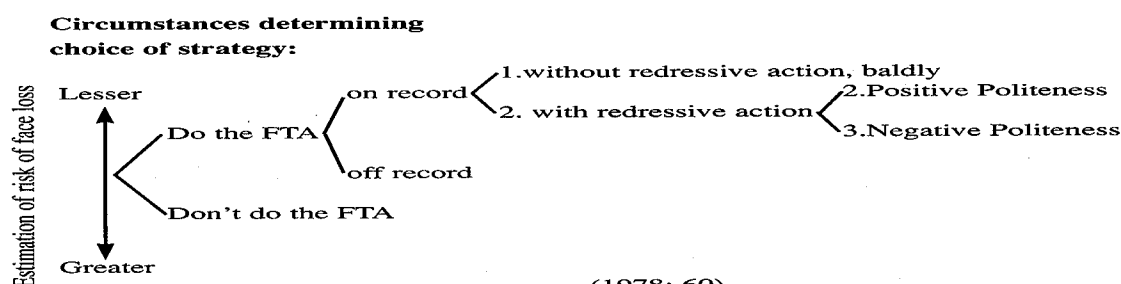
The phenomenon of verbal irony is analysed in the present paper with respect to Brown and Levinson's Theory of Politeness. Within such a theory, irony occupies a very definite position as a particular off record strategy. This point is argued and discussed, since there seems to be evidence that shows that the devices typical of on record strategies (Positive and Negative Politeness) can also be used in ironic discourse.

1- Introduction:

The general aim of this paper is to analyse the phenomenon of verbal irony in the light of the Theory of Politeness, as developed by Brown and Levinson in their book *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (1987). This is part of a major study analysing the phenomenon of verbal irony from a pragmatic point of view, but in this article I shall specifically try to discuss whether irony always fits perfectly within off record strategies (as Brown and Levinson state in the aforementioned book), since it has been observed that there are many ironical utterances in which the use of Positive and/or Negative Politeness is clear, and these strategies are presented by Brown and Levinson as on record, distinct from off record ones.

The reader is expected to be familiar with Politeness Theory, since many concepts are taken for granted and not explained herein.

Brown and Levinson consider that some acts intrinsically threaten the face of the hearer and/or the speaker (Face Threatening Acts (FTAs)) and consequently the speaker will generally want to minimize the face threat of the FTA. In order to do this he will use a set of strategies which are numbered from 1 to 5, which are illustrated by means of the following chart, reproduced here:



IRONY occupies a place as a substrategy of major strategy nº 4. i.e., OFF RECORD. Brown and Levinson explain that an actor goes off record in doing and act A when there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention, so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent. This is opposed to going on record, which shows a clear intention on the part of the actor or speaker. According to these authors, then, linguistic realizations of off record strategies include metaphor and irony, rhetorical questions, understatement, tautologies and all kinds of hints as to what a speaker wants or means to communicate (1987: 69).

Irony is not clearly defined in Politeness Theory, but it is understood -from the authors' explanations- that it consists in "saying the opposite of what the speaker means" (1987:221). But irony seems to be a much more complex phenomenon. A lot of examples of ironical discourse can be found in which it would be very difficult to say that it is merely "saying the opposite of what it means". Even in the cases in which the speaker or writer means the opposite, there are further pragmatic shades of meaning that can be analysed. Many authors (Sperber and Wilson (1981, 1984, 1986), Blakemore (1992), Enright (1988), Williams (1984), Berbe (1995), etc) have discussed this fact and have tried to define irony in a more complete way. The different definitions will not be treated herein, for it would go beyond the scope and aims of this paper. The point here is to show that irony is a multifarious and complex linguistic phenomenon and that it covers more than it was traditionally thought to cover. This will help us to see why and how irony is not restricted to off record strategies in the context of Politeness theory.

2- Hypothesis

The research question is then: Can Positive and Negative Politeness strategies (on record) be also off record strategies? Or is it that on record and off record strategies do not exclude each other and can very often co-exist in the same utterance or piece of discourse?. The hypothesis deriving from this problem would then be:

Either a) Positive and Negative Politeness can also be substrategies within the off record superordinate strategy, or:

b) On record and off record strategies can co-occur very often in the same utterance or piece of discourse.

3- Positive and Negative irony

Many authours (Sperber and Wilson (1986) among them) state that irony always conveys a derogatory attitude to the meaning mentioned. It is true that irony is a mode of expression that tends to convey ridicule, and that is principally used as a device for criticism, as when somebody says in an angry mood, "you're a fine friend" (a typical ironic criticism meaning "you're not a good friend"). But there are some cases in which

it can also convey praise. David King and Thomas Crerar include examples of this kind of irony in their book *Choice of Words* (1969). Jerzy Pelc (1971) speaks about this kind of irony and calls it “anti-irony”, describing it as “an approval which has the appearance of a criticism” (1971: 169). The word “heinous”, Pelc says, is an anti-irony when it de facto means “nice”.

Thus, I am here going to speak of two main kinds of irony: a) the one used as a device for criticism, and b) the one used as a device for praise. The former I shall call “Negative irony”, the latter, “Positive irony”¹. These names have been chosen in connection with Politeness Theory, since it is my impression that Positive irony is always a strategy that has to do with Positive Politeness and the positive face of the addressee, and that Negative irony has to do with Negative Politeness and the negative face of the addressee. If someone is praising another person -be it by means of irony or by any other means-, he or she is carrying out redressive action directed to the addressee’s positive face (i.e. his perennial desire that his wants (or actions/aquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable). It has also been noticed in the research previous to and necessary for the writing of this paper that the cases of Negative irony could be connected to Negative Politeness in the sense that the purpose in being ironic has to do with an effort not to surpass the hearer’s territory in an excessive way. Thus, by being ambiguous and indirect, the speaker is trying not to impede the hearer’s wants or actions.

Sometimes Positive and Negative Irony can occur together in the same utterance. Suppose that I have a friend who is not very self-confident and after an examination he says:

“I’m going to fail this exam. I did it all wrong”

After some days I meet him and he tells me that he has passed the exam with a very good mark. Then I could ironically say (and this would also be a clear example of echoic mention):

“Oh yes, you have failed, you did it all wrong, you are a very bad student!”

In this particular context I would be criticising and praising my friend at the same time. I would criticise his previous self-deprecating attitude, but I would be also praising him by implicating that I think he is better and cleverer than he thinks he himself is.

It is important to remark that irony is not always restricted to a couple of lines or a single utterance. In many cases it extends over a whole text or article or dialogue and it even extends over the non-linguistic context and the personal history of or the relationship between the interlocutors, in such a way that it is impossible to identify a single utterance which contains the irony. The context is the necessary and

indispensable condition that will allow us to get to the right implicatures, which in turn will allow us to distinguish between ironic and non-ironic discourse.

4- On record and off record strategies working together?

As has been said, Brown and Levinson do not consider irony to be in connection with on record strategies. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that “many of the classic off record strategies -metaphor, irony, understatement, rhetorical questions, etc.- are very often actually on record when used, because the clues to their interpretation (the mutual knowledge of S and H in the context, the intonational, prosodic and kinesic clues to speaker’s attitude; the clues derived from conversational sequencing) add up to only one really viable interpretation in the context” (1978: 212). These authors do in fact believe that there can exist a kind of “on record-off recordness” only in some special cases such as the one that is shown when using conventionally indirect requests as a negative politeness strategy (e.g. “Could you please pass the salt?”, which shouldn’t be interpreted as a question about the addressee’s potential abilities).

Then, in the case of irony, the only possibility of on recordness would be left for those cases in which it is conventionalized and in which there can be no other interpretation. The argument put forward in this paper is that even in cases of non-conventionalized irony the speaker may be using it in combination with a Positive or a Negative Politeness strategy. Besides, it is very difficult to say when an ironical utterance is conventionalized². Although the intonation used or sometimes the nasalization of an utterance can be clear clues that convey only one interpretation in favour of irony, there is always the possibility of a further interpretation or contradiction which seems to be precisely the essence of all irony.

Let us then present some examples in which on record Positive and Negative Politeness are used strategically together with off record irony. Brown and Levinson give an example to illustrate a strategy other than irony (strategy nº8 within Positive Politeness: “Joke”) which I believe is a clear instance of what in this paper I have called “Positive Irony” (i.e. irony used to convey praise):

“How about lending me this old heap of junk? (H’s new Cadillac)”(1978: 124)

This question could be made by the speaker as a joke to his friend (in fact irony is very often used to joke) in order to praise his car in cases in which it is evident that the car is new and expensive. This is the typical case of irony in which the speaker means the opposite, but at the same time there is the further implicature that tells the hearer that the speaker likes his Cadillac, or in more technical terms, that “he wants his wants”, i.e., he tries to maintain H’s positive face. Therefore it seems to be the case that this ironical (off record) utterance also fulfils the conditions to be “on record with Positive Politeness”. Or perhaps one might say that it is not on record, but that the Positive Politeness strategy can also be an off record strategy. Following this line of

thought, it can be said that all occurrences of Positive Irony are also occurrences of the Positive Politeness strategy.

On the other hand, it appears to be in agreement with the mode of reasoning of Politeness Theory that when using irony to convey criticism the speaker/writer is also making use of his negative politeness strategies in the sense that he/she is being indirect in order not to impose his opinions or not to impede the hearer's actions. So we can say that in these cases irony is also oriented toward partially satisfying (redressing) the hearer's negative face (his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self determination), because it leaves the door open to the hearer to take it as a personal criticism or not (given the ambiguity which is characteristic of off record strategies). Furthermore, the typical devices of Negative Politeness are very often used in ironical remarks, such as hedges or indirect-conventionalized questions. In the following conversation (taken from the scripts of the T.V. series "The Golden Girls"), Rose is talking to the Reverend Avery. In his last remark the Reverend Avery is ironical about Rose's previous comment (implying that it was irrelevant and silly), but at the same time he is trying not to be rude (and therefore thinking of her negative face) by using the hedge "I guess":

Reverend Avery: Well, before we open the doors, I just want to thank you all for taking time away from your own Christmas to provide Christmas for some that are less fortunate. We promise to turn away no one, remembering how Mary and Joseph were turned away at the inn.

Rose: Reverend Avery -it's always puzzled me; why didn't Mary and Joseph call ahead for reservations?. Surely they must have realized how impossible it is to get a hotel room during the Christmas season.

Reverend Avery: I guess that's one for the Theologians, Rose.

(1991: 160)

The following passage, taken from a pamphlet written by Jonathan Swift (published in King and Crerar's aforementioned book) is endowed with all the formality and "conventional indirectness" typical of Negative Politeness strategies, but at the same time is a very good example of the sardonic criticism which is characteristic of ironic discourse:

"Another advantage proposed by the abolishing of Christianity is the clear gain of one day in seven, which is now entirely lost, and consequently the kingdom one seventh less considerable in trade, business, and pleasure; besides the loss to the public of so many stately structures, now in the hands of the clergy, which might be converted into playhouses, market-houses, exchanges, common dormitories, and other public edifices.

I hope I shall be forgiven a hard word, if I call this a perfect cavil. I readily own there has been an old custom, time out of mind, for people to assemble in the churches every Sunday, and that shops are still frequently shut, in order, as it is conceived, to preserve the memory of that ancient practice; but how this can prove a hindrance to business or pleasure, is hard to imagine. What if the men of pleasure are forced, one day in the week, to game at home instead of the chocolate -houses?. Are not the taverns and coffee-houses open? Can there be a more convenient season for taking a dose of physic? Is not that the chief day for traders to sum up the accounts of the week, and for lawyers to prepare their briefs?. But I would fain know how it can be pretended that the churches are mis-applied? Where are more appointments and rendezvouses of gallantry? Where more care to appear in the foremost box, with greater advantage of dress? Where more meetings for business? Where more bargains driven of all sorts? and where so many conveniences or enticements to sleep?“ (1969: 128-9)

Obviously, Swift’s diction suggests a period remote to our own, but in familiar every day present language it seems to be often the case that we use negative politeness together with irony. If, for instance, a woman does not want her husband to be rude to her (e.g. when requesting something) and always tells him that he should be more “polite” (in the common sense of the word) to her, the husband might very well make a future request in either of the following sardonic ironical ways:

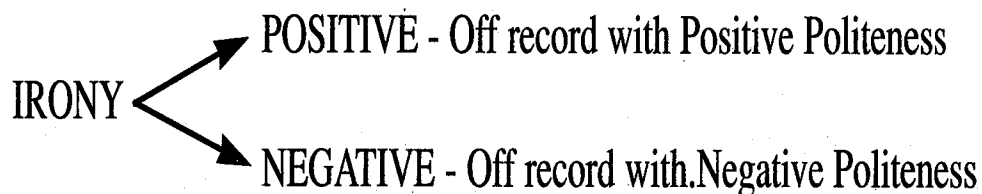
“Excuse me for bothering you, but would you be so kind as to make me a coffee?”

or:

“Will Her Majesty prepare me a coffee?”

which would mean: “It sounds ridiculous to me, but considering you want me to be “polite”, I am mocking you by being polite in an exaggerated way”.

We could then illustrate our argument by means of the following diagram:



which shows the possibility of combination of both on record and off record strategies and therefore would change the position that irony occupies within Brown and Levinson’s conception.

5- *Tentative definition*

To give a good and all-embracing definition of irony is a difficult task, nevertheless, after the previous analysis, I have ventured to work out the following tentative definition (that surely leaves much to be desired) within the framework of Politeness Theory:

“Irony is a strategy used by a speaker or writer, which is intended to criticise or to praise in an indirect, off record way, but which can occur in combination with some typically on record strategies as well. Sometimes, but not always, it is intended to mean the opposite of its literal meaning. In many cases it reveals an echoic mention, but in many others its variety and richness go beyond all this. It generally shows or expresses some kind of contradiction (which can be realised at different levels)”.

6- *Conclusions*

The analysis of irony in relation to the Theory of Politeness has apparently thrown some light on the main issue guiding the development of this work. All the above considerations appear to confirm the hypothesis presented in the introduction, i.e. either Positive and Negative Politeness can also be substrategies within the off record super strategy, or on record and off record strategies are mixed in far more cases than the ones considered by Brown and Levinson. I do not feel inclined towards any of the options in particular, but both show that irony is more than a simple off record strategy, and more than a device used just to mean “the opposite”. I hope this study can contribute to the awareness of the rich variety of options that the ironic speaker /writer has at his disposal in order to make his point. Verbal irony is a versatile strategy indeed.

Notes

1. I have also found evidence of the existence of a NEUTRAL kind of verbal irony, in which there is not any intention neither to criticize nor to praise on the part of the speaker, and in which there seems to be no apparent face threatening. I will not refer to this kind of irony in this article.
2. However, in English there are some expressions such as “A likely story”, which are always used ironically and therefore it can be said that the implicatures leading to the ironic interpretation have been “short-circuited”. Thus they constitute clear examples of conventionalized verbal irony. In the case of “A likely story” it can be said that the adjective likely is the one that is used ironically, and if the speaker used the adjective “probable” in the same phrase, it would most probably lose its ironical effect.

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