

On verbal irony, meta-linguistic knowledge and echoic interpretation*

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The aim of this paper is to examine some actual examples of written verbal irony that contain apposition. Meta-linguistic knowledge about apposition as a syntactic structure is claimed to be involved in the interpretation process of the utterance and especially in recognizing the victim of the irony. This discussion demonstrates the interdependence between apposition, its echoic quality in particular cases, and the victim of the irony. Since syntactic structure may serve as a cue to indirect meaning, pointing at the specific meta-linguistic knowledge used for interpreting ironic utterances may enrich the discussion and enhance the description of the interpretation process. Different types of echoing are demonstrated and examined. The analysis also suggests that untruthfulness may serve mainly as a cue to the presence of irony, rather than as an essential component of this phenomenon.

1. Introduction

In contrast with traditional accounts of irony in terms of untruthfulness, and particularly with Grice's proposal to view irony as a case of violating the conversational maxims of quality (Grice 1975, 1978), relevance theorists suggested that irony should be viewed as a case of echoic mention, and that recognition of an ironical utterance as a case of mention is crucial to its interpretation. Sperber and Wilson (1981:309–310) argue that “there are echoic mentions of many different degrees and types. Some are immediate echoes, and others delayed; some have their source in actual utterances, others in thoughts or opinions; some have a real source, others an imagined one; some are traceable back to a particular individual, whereas others have a vaguer origin”.

That is, an ironic effect may arise even when the utterance is a delayed echo of a thought or belief of an assumed, imagined or extremely vague originator.¹

A significant aspect of ironic utterances is that they often have some kind of ‘victim’ or ‘target’ at whom the irony is directed. Picking out the victim of the irony plays a major role in interpreting the speaker’s meaning in ironic utterances. Relevance theorists explicitly refer to the victim of the irony: “The analysis of irony as a type of mention makes it possible to predict which ironical utterances will have a particular victim, and who that victim will be” (Sperber and Wilson 1981:314). The echoic-mention approach to irony provides an answer to the question of whom the speaker’s attitude is directed towards: The speaker generally distances herself from the originator of the echoic utterance, whether she is a particular speaker of a given utterance, or the general public, holding the accepted view (Weizman 2000:239). Holdcroft (1983:497) also argues that the precise target may not be known, though it seems that if one can see that there could be one, the irony is graspable. Irony only becomes totally elusive when one cannot identify the target in any terms at all.²

The aim of this paper is to look at some actual examples of verbal irony that share a syntactic property: They all contain an appositional structure, which, I will argue, is involved in the interpretation process of the entire utterance and especially in the recognition of the victim of the irony. The discussion will show the interdependence between apposition as a linguistic structure, its echoic quality in particular cases and the victim of the irony. The interpretation of the speaker’s meaning in these cases will depend on understanding the implicated meaning of both the echoic mention and the identity relations underlying the syntactic structure.

Apposition normally evokes a semantic relation of co-reference, identity, or equivalence between the two appositives. For example, in

- (1) Paul Jones, the distinguished art critic, died in his sleep last night.

the two appositives, *Paul Jones* and *the distinguished art critic*, refer to the same person. Thus, the relationship underlying the appositional structure is:

- (1) a. Paul Jones is the distinguished art critic.

Similarly, the identity relations which are implicit in (2), are explicitly expressed in (2a):

- (2) A neighbor, Fred Brick, is on the telephone.
a. Fred Brick is a neighbor. (Examples from Quirk et al. 1972:620)

I will argue that this standard reading of appositional structure is a linguistic convention that can be used in the interpretation process of ironic utterances. This process of text-understanding will be described in terms of the *cues* and *clues* (Dascal and Weizman 1987; Weizman and Dascal 1991) required for the interpretation of a speaker's meaning. According to Weizman and Dascal (1991:20–21), contextual information is required “when the reader detects some reason to believe that the computed utterance meaning is not a plausible candidate for being a speaker's meaning”, and “she constructs an alternative speaker's meaning by confronting the computed utterance meaning with the relevant contextual information”. In their model, a distinction is made between two functions of contextual information: When used for the detection of an ‘interpretation problem’, contextual information is labeled a *cue*; whereas when exploited for the computation of an utterance meaning or speaker's meaning, it is labeled a *clue*. “In the case of a speaker's meaning [...] the cue-question is: Is the computed utterance meaning (or an alternative proposal under consideration) a satisfactory candidate for the speaker's meaning?” A negative answer “triggers the search for an indirect speaker's meaning, entailing the clue-question: What, then, is the best candidate for a speaker's meaning (given the contextual information available under the circumstances)?” (pp.21–22).

Using these ideas, I will show how meta-linguistic knowledge about syntactic structure may serve mainly as a cue for the interpretation of the speaker's meaning. The feeling of echoing also serves as a cue, and the search for the identification of the originator (actual or imaginary) of the echoic utterance will be shown to fulfill the role of a clue, pointing to the victim of the irony.

2. Analyzing written verbal irony

The ironic utterances to be discussed appeared in Hebrew newspaper articles by a well-known columnist, Doron Rosenblum, published in the years 1988–1991 in the weekend supplement of the *Hadashot* daily, and reprinted in a collection of his articles, *Israeli Blues*, published in 1996.³ The first example is taken from a text called *A Short History of the Labor Party*, the party that ruled Israel consecutively from the establishment of the state in 1948 until 1977, and since then intermittently. The text gives an ironical description of the party's history and the crises it underwent.

- (3) In the forties and fifties, there was a proliferation throughout Israel of *titans* — creatures having an average height of 1.60 meters, with a Slavic

accent and open collars, who were sustained by the drinking of tea, and who expressed themselves mainly by means of writing notes. (*Hadashot*, November 23, 1991).⁴

As suggested above, the ironic interpretation of this utterance will be shown to rely on the unexpected relations between the two appositives — *Titans* and *creatures having an average height of 1.60 meters, etc.* — and the echoic quality of some of its components.

The Hebrew *nefilim* (“Titans”) is a biblical word for mythological giants, metaphorically used to indicate “great men”, “spiritual giants”, especially in the phrase *dor hanefilim* (literally “the generation of the titans”). In this context, it is an echoic mention of a soubriquet which was actually used for those 40’s and 50’s leaders that were considered “giants” due to their intellectual abilities, high moral standards, principled adherence to ideology, and eloquence. This opinion or evaluation was shared by many. So, while the source of the original utterance here is not specific, it is not imaginary either.

The description proposed by the author is of course a caricature, but each part of this caricature has some “core of truth”: Most of the members of that generation were immigrants from Eastern Europe, who were quite short, especially in comparison to immigrants from Germany. The “drinking of tea” and “writing of notes” are also two real features that over the years became the butt of numerous jokes. Drinking tea was often presented as the main activity carried out by the bureaucrats in the institutions under the control of the ruling party, becoming a symbol of their laziness and lack of efficiency. The system of communication by means of notes symbolizes in Israel the nepotism of government bureaucracies that favored those close to the government.

Nevertheless, there are a number of places in this example where a certain degree of untruthfulness can be identified. While it may be possible that the average height of these people was indeed diminutive, the preciseness of the description of “an average height of 1.60 meters” cannot be accepted as real. The phrases “sustained by the drinking of tea” and “expressed themselves mainly by means of writing notes” may also be viewed as strictly untruthful. “Sustained by drinking tea” seems to imply that this was their main source of sustenance, and from the phrase “expressed themselves mainly by means of writing notes”, it may be understood that this was their main form of communication.

But in the nature of a caricature, the reader can see through the exaggerated description and identify its “core of truth” (otherwise it would not be funny). The result, I believe, is an utterance that is at the same time both true and

untrue. Thus, an analysis of this ironic utterance in terms of untruthfulness is not straightforward: There is indeed a sense of untruthfulness, but it serves only as a cue for an indirect meaning, rather than as a key through which the full speaker's meaning can be grasped. This later task can only be completed by means of additional cues, such as the recognition of the echoic quality of some components of the utterance, and clues such as the identification of a source or an originator to whom those echoed utterances or beliefs can be assigned. According to Weizman (2000: 242), the echoic mention serves both as a cue and a clue: "The sense of echoing serves as a cue for the identification of the incongruity between the meaning of the utterance and the circumstances of its use, while the identification of the originator of the statement serves as a clue for the recognition of an alternate speaker's meaning".

Although the original use of the word "titans" in the political context is interpreted metaphorically and has an echoic quality on this level, the author does everything he can to preclude a metaphorical reading: Words such as "proliferated", "creatures" and "sustained" are generally used to describe animals or other nonhuman creatures in order to mark the physical elements of the description. The effect is that of a physical description, which enhances a non-metaphorical interpretation. Now, in which way does this affect the interpretation of this whole utterance?

As we assumed, appositional structure normally conceals a semantic relation of equivalence or identity. Thus, the apposition in example (3) can be read as follows:

- (3) a. Titans are creatures having an average height of 1.60 meters.

The untruthfulness of this statement is clear for every reader who knows the meaning of "titans". A metaphorical reading is a reasonable and accessible possibility, but, as I said, it is implicitly ruled out by the author.

But the appositional structure in this case enables another reading, which takes the equivalence relations backwards:⁵

- (3) b. Those creatures having an average height of 1.60 meters were titans.

And this reading may be interpreted as:

- (3) c. Those creatures having an average height of 1.60 meters were *called* "titans".

This kind of interpretation focuses specifically on the word "titans" as an echoic mention. According to this, the irony in this utterance can be understood as

directed primarily at the source of the original echoed utterance: Anyone who used this soubriquet, including the “titans” themselves, who didn’t reject it. The caricature is designed to imply that the kind of belief that underlies it is ridiculous.

But why is it ridiculous? The author indirectly proposes two reasons. The first is related to their height, which leads the reader to a physical level interpretation. Another reason is provided by referring to the “drinking of tea” and “communicating by notes”. This description implies that these people do not deserve this soubriquet because of their behavior, leading the reader to the metaphorical level. Thus, the interpretation of “titans” remains somehow undetermined; as a metaphorical reading it is obvious and highly accessible, due to background knowledge, while at the same time, a literal reading is explicitly suggested by the style or the co-text.

Here is another example, from the same text as (3):

- (4) It came then as no surprise that the third congress convened in an atmosphere of crisis, threats of resignation and an appeal for *a complete overhaul of the party* (in other words, changing the type of letter designating the name of the party) (*Hadashot*, November 23, 1991).

This example contains the explicit indicator of apposition *in other words* (Hebrew *klomar*), which emphasizes the appositional structure and evokes expectations for conventional relations in it. The appositional structure may be read as:

- (4) a. A complete overhaul of the party means changing the type of letter designating the name of the party.

However, from the reader’s knowledge of political script conventions, she knows that changing the type of letter designating the name of the party is not something that can be considered “a complete overhaul”. On the contrary, changing the type of letter designating the name of the party is a trivial act lacking any significance, and does not reflect any real change. This incongruity or mismatch between contextual knowledge and meta-linguistic expectations for equality serves here as a cue directing the addressee to seek an indirect meaning. It also contains the beginning of a clue as to where that meaning should be sought. It directs the addressee to the specific place in the text where it is advisable to look for clues that will lead to the full interpretation of the utterance, namely within the appositional structure itself.

Again, another reading of the appositional structure is possible:

- (4) b. Changing the type of letter designating the name of the party is a complete overhaul of the party.

Since one cannot seriously believe that there is someone who really thinks that changing the type of letter will effect a real change, this claim can alternatively be interpreted as follows:

- (4) c. Changing the type of letter designating the name of the party was *called* (by someone) “a complete overhaul”.

Thus, the use of apposition has the role of focusing on the phrase ‘a complete overhaul’ as an echoic mention of a genre-specific phrase. The Hebrew *shidud maarachot* (‘a complete overhaul’) is an ancient, uncommon and high-register expression which was used by the first generation of Israeli politicians in their speeches. Here again, the originator is vague but not imaginary. This expression is easily associated with a particular genre used by a particular kind of speakers and speeches. Note that this particular example mentions “*an appeal* for a complete overhaul”, that is, there is an explicit allusion to the vague original utterance that is echoed. According to this, the irony seems to be directed at these leaders whose ability to use flowery language is far more impressive than their ability to bring about a real change when needed.

Given that changing the type of letter representing the name of the movement is not something that can be considered “a complete overhaul”, even a formulation such as “There was a call to undertake a complete overhaul, but they made do with changing the type of letter representing the name of the party” would elicit ridicule and scorn towards cowards who do not dare making real and perhaps painful changes. Criticism or reservation is implied, among other things, by the use of concession expressed by the words “but” and “made do”. However, this wording is quite different from that in example (4). Therefore, the syntactic structure seems to serve as a major clue to the speaker’s meaning as it helps the reader to pick out an originator of the echoing utterance as a possible victim of the irony.

The next example comes from a text that provides an ironical description of television programming on Jewish holidays. The author is describing a festive talk show of the type one might expect to see on the eve of a holiday:

- (5) Also on the program: A veteran educator in a kibbutz *will discuss* the strictness of the members of the First Aliya in matters related to the Passover dietary laws and the scalding of vessels to make them kosher for Passover in the courtyard of Deganya (in other words, the guest will reply in the negative to the host’s question on this subject) (*Hadashot*, April 4, 1991).

“The Passover dietary laws and the scalding of vessels” are Jewish religious customs related to an ancient Jewish holiday. The “members of the First Aliya” were Jews who immigrated to Israel from Eastern Europe in the first decades of the 20th century. These Jews distanced themselves considerably from the Jewish religion and its customs. The kibbutzim during this period did not carry out any traditional religious acts such as the “scalding of vessels”, and there was no strictness whatever concerning the “Passover dietary laws”. Consequently, the untruthfulness of the utterance is apparent primarily from the use of the definite noun “the strictness”, which carries an existential presupposition, namely that this kind of strictness did indeed exist. However, if the guest “replies in the negative to the host’s question on this subject”, it means that there was no such strictness. This is incompatible with the existential presupposition, thus creating a mismatch.

Let me focus on the verb “discuss”, which seems to be of special importance here. The relevant background knowledge required here concerns the type of discussions held on these television programs, the type of interviewees generally invited to appear on them and the various roles filled by the participants in the dialogue. This involves background knowledge about the conventions of television interviews. According to this knowledge, a discussion of the customs on holidays or the days preceding them is legitimate and relevant. It is also possible that an interviewee talk about places or times when the customs were not upheld. Nevertheless, to “reply in the negative” to a question does not amount to engage in “a discussion”, and in a television interview it is not a satisfying response from the point of view of the amount of information an interviewee is expected to provide on a specific subject. The use of the verb “discuss” expresses this clearly: A “discussion” of something usually implies more than simply a “reply in the negative”.

Accordingly, the appositional relationship in this utterance can also be considered untruthful, although even more implicitly so than in examples (3)–(4):

- (5) a. Discussing (a subject) means replying in the negative to the host’s question on this subject.

Again, we may suggest the backwards reading of (5b), which in turn may imply (5c):

- (5) b. Replying in the negative to the host’s question on a particular subject means discussing this subject.
- c. Replying in the negative to the host’s question on a particular subject is *considered* (by someone) to be a discussion of this subject.

In this case, the feeling of echoing is relatively weak: The source is imagined and the origin is vague. There is no way to directly point to a particular utterance echoed here. What is echoed is a belief allegedly held by someone.

In order to understand who the victim of the irony is, the reader must reveal who would believe that “to reply in the negative” implies a “discussion” of a subject. Since it is very difficult to point to someone who actually believes this, the victim may be someone whose actions *imply* this kind of a belief: The people who are apparently responsible for this type of program — editors, producers and perhaps also interviewers. The fact that they invite people to the studio who have nothing interesting to say on the relevant subject implies that they have an odd and ridiculous idea of the concept of “discussing”. The victim could also be the viewer of the program who does not sense this incongruity and who is willing to believe that by giving a negative response, the guest has met the expectation that he would “discuss” something.

This example demonstrates the importance of taking a closer look at syntactic structure. As we have seen, a feeling of untruthfulness already arises when interpreting the first part of the sentence, where there is a dissonance between the definite noun “the strictness” and the extra-linguistic knowledge the reader can be assumed to have. But this cue is not enough to tell us who the victim of the irony is. The addition of the apposition not only bolsters the ironic effect, but also, and more importantly, points to the victim and enables the reader to uncover the speaker’s meaning.

Example 6 is taken from a text which is an imaginary monologue coming from a member of the Labor party, an assistant to Shimon Peres. Peres is a senior politician, a former prime minister, a man with numerous achievements, but also failures. His public image in Israel is that of someone who would do anything to become a member of the government and get a senior post. The imaginary speaker is one of his associates ostensibly speaking after the party’s defeat in the elections.

- (6) When that didn’t help, we, Shimon and I, used this *tried and true, cold and calculated political trick* — to fall on our knees at Shamir’s feet, to kiss his boots and cry and beg that Shimon be allowed to enter the government even as the assistant deputy minister for the Diaspora and the Jewish people (*Hadashot*, November 18, 1988).

Because in this case the entire text is presented as a first-person narration, the issue of echoing requires a special explanation. The reader clearly understands that this is an imaginary monologue, invented by the author. Nonetheless, the

feeling of echoing is evoked. Some of the statements sound familiar and similar things have already happened in the history of Israeli politics. Vague past statements from politicians representing behavior involving self-humiliation, as well as foolish and mistaken acts, as if they were calculated political moves, echo in the ears of the reader.

The originator of the statement is also somewhat vague, and consequently, so is the identity of the victim of the irony. According to the analysis suggested here, the victim is the one who believes, or claims, that the identity relationship in the appositional structure is real, that is that to fall on one's knees, etc. is a cold and calculated political trick. This type of interpretation is directed at the politicians who represent their foolish acts and those of their colleagues as calculated political moves.

Since it is highly implausible that someone would believe something like (6a), which is the conventional reading of the appositional structure, the interpretation may be as suggested in (6b):

- (6) a. To fall on one's knees at the prime minister's feet, to kiss his boots and cry and beg is a cold and calculated political trick.
- b. To fall on one's knees at the prime minister's feet, to kiss his boots and cry and beg was *represented* (by someone) as a cold and calculated political trick.

Based on background knowledge about political life, the reader knows that to "fall on our knees" and to "kiss his boots" are not things that can be considered a "cold and calculated political trick". That is, the claimed equivalence relationship is understood as false.

Based on Grice's proposal, this case can be viewed as a violation of the maxims of quality. However, it is also possible to argue that part of the ironic effect is achieved by violation of the maxims of quantity. The list of adjectives "tried and true, cold and calculated", the list of verbs in "to *fall* on our knees at Shamir's feet, to *kiss* his boots and *cry* and *beg*", together with their semantic value which fails to match the political script — are exaggerated formulations hinting that this is not the speaker's real meaning. The following phrase is also noteworthy: "assistant deputy minister for the Diaspora and the Jewish people" is not a real function that in fact exists in the Israeli governmental structure. If such a ministry were to be formed, it would be a marginal one lacking any real influence. The reduction in importance of the job is emphasized if we note that what is involved here is not the job of a minister or even a deputy minister, but only the job of "assistant deputy minister". This excessive use of modifiers actually

diminishes the importance of the position. Or, to put it more generally, exaggerated verbiage and precise formulation diminish the importance of the content.

The author uses a similar strategy in example (4) in the phrase “changing the type of letter representing the name of the movement”. The irony in the utterance would have been created even if changing the *name* of the movement had been involved, since this is not a genuine change either. However, by focusing on the graphic representation of the name through a long phrase, the author adds verbiage that further diminishes the importance of the change, thus enhancing the irony and aiding in revealing it. Thus, the violation of the maxim of quantity can also create an ironic interpretation. In relevance theory, this effect may be seen as a result of the increased processing effort added by the verbiage, together with the lack of contribution to cognitive effects.⁶

3. Conclusions

A number of possible conclusions can be drawn from our discussion. First, the analysis suggests that there is a link between irony and the syntactical structure of the ironic utterance. The syntactic structure may serve as a cue to indirect meaning, pointing at the specific meta-linguistic knowledge used for interpreting ironic utterances, thus contributing to their interpretation process. In this paper, only one syntactic structure has been discussed, that of apposition, but it may serve as a point of departure for further investigation of other linguistic structures.

The analysis also suggests some insights related to well-known approaches to irony. There seems to be a close connection between irony and untruthfulness, but this connection should be described in a different way than that suggested by Grice (1975). Untruthfulness may serve mainly as one of the cues to the presence of irony, rather than an essential ingredient in all its occurrences. In this respect, two of the rival approaches to irony — Grice’s suggestion of violation of conversational maxims and the echoic mention theory — can be seen as complementary rather than contradictory. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the analysis of the metaphor in example (3) and of the exaggerated formulation in examples (4) and (6), the role untruthfulness plays in ironic utterances may be much more complex. The use of tropes like metaphor or hyperbole creates an utterance that can be judged as “true” on one level and at the same time “untrue” on another, and this double-reading may also serve as a cue to ironic interpretation. The analysis of these utterances also shows that the maxims of quality are not the only Gricean conversational implicatures

involved in creating and understanding ironic utterances. An ironic effect can also be achieved by flouting the maxims of quantity. It is also possible to consider the violation of expectations underlying the use of apposition as a flouting of the maxim of manner. This conclusion is compatible with that of Colston (2000) that a flouting of (at least one of) Grice's conversational maxims is a necessary condition for verbal irony comprehension, although it is not a sufficient one.

Notes

* I wish to thank Elda Weizman and Deirdre Wilson for insightful comments on early versions of this paper, and for many fruitful suggestions.

1. Colston (2000) considers echoic mention one type of "allusion to violated expectations", which is a broader term referring to a characteristic that is claimed to be necessary for verbal irony comprehension (see also Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, and Brown 1995). Since this paper does not intend to provide generalizations about irony but rather to examine cases of irony in written texts where interpersonal situation plays a very minor role, I find the notion of echoic mention broad enough for this purpose.

2. For further discussions of the notions of target and victim see, for example, Barbe (1995); Dews et al. (1995); Jorgensen (1996); Weizman (2001).

3. Examples of this kind may be easily found in the writings of other Hebrew authors, although it is of course a matter of personal preference of the author. The use of apposition to create an ironic utterance appears in other languages as well.

4. The translation of examples of this type into English may evoke a feeling of excess from the point of view of the linguistic means creating the irony. This type of excess has been described as characteristic of op-ed articles in the daily Hebrew press, and as culture specific, at least in comparison to French (Weizman 1984a, 1984b, 1986).

5. The possibility for a reverse reading of the underlying equivalence relations is implicitly suggested by Quirk et al. (1972); see examples 2–2a above.

6. This type of clue appears in other places in Rosenblum's writing too. For example, in the context of the peace process with Egypt, there ultimately remained a small tract of land whose fate was determined only at a relatively late stage. On this tract of land stood a hotel, the ownership of which was discussed in the context of the peace agreement. Rosenblum describes the problem in this way: "And then too, the small but fateful issue will remain unchanged concerning the ownership of **the second armchair from the left in the lobby of the Sonesta hotel [...]**" (*Koteret Rashit*, January 22, 1986). The description of the issue of ownership of the land as if it were merely a matter of the ownership of a particular armchair is an ironic description that uses excessive verbiage to reduce the importance of the issue and to express criticism.

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