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# A Relevance-Theoretic Approach to the Ironies in *The Book of Tea*

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## Abstract

Traditional pragmatic approach regards irony as a figure of speech which communicates the opposite meaning of what was literally said, while Wilson & Sperber (1992) insists that verbal irony is an example of echoic interpretive use and that the author or speaker dissociates himself/herself from the thought which the irony communicates. According to Wilson & Sperber's Relevance-Theoretic approach, irony echoes the cultural standards or the denial attitude of the author, and produces its implicature, so that it can obtain optimal relevance. Adopting the theory of echoic interpretive use, we will investigate the process in which the ironies in *The Book of Tea*, satisfying the First (or Cognitive) Principle and the Second (or Communicative) Principle, can gain optimal relevance, and will make it clear that the ironies in *The Book of Tea* echo the negative thoughts of the author OKAKURA Kakuzo or the cultural standards in the Meiji Era.

Keywords: *Relevance Theory, ostensive communication, irony, echoic interpretive use, optimal relevance, The Book of Tea*

## 1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse the ironies in *The Book of Tea* in the framework of Relevance Theory. By examining each example of the ironies, we will show that ironies are explained as an echoic interpretive use and that they echo the negative thoughts of the author OKAKURA Kakuzo or the cultural standards in *The Book of Tea*. In chapter 2, we will outline Relevance Theory, which is a revised version of inference model proposed by Sperber & Wilson (1986, 1995<sup>2</sup>). In particular, we will discuss the First (or Cognitive) Principle and the Second (or Communicative) Principle. Chapter 3 will deal with previous accounts of irony: Grice (1975) and Wilson & Sperber (1992). According to echoic interpretive use proposed by Wilson & Sperber (1992), we will indicate that the weaker its implicature is, the more relevant it is. In chapter 4, we will ana-

lyse the ironies in *The Book of Tea*. What we wish to show is that we can describe the process in which ironies in *The Book of Tea* can gain optimal relevant, based on echoic interpretive use. Chapter 5 is a concluding comment.

## 2 Relevance Theory

In this chapter we will outline Relevance Theory, a theory of pragmatics proposed by Sperber & Wilson (1986, 1995). It is regarded as a developed version of inference model by Grice's theory<sup>1</sup>.

A communicator generally has the two intentions in communicating with others: *informative intention* and *communicative intention*. *Informative intention* is to inform the audience of something that a communicator has in his/her mind, while *communicative intention* is to inform the audience of one's informative intention. A communicator expresses clearly what he/she intends to communicate to others with *informative intention* and *communicative intention*.

Now let us discuss the main concept of Relevance Theory: *relevance*. *Relevance* depends on the two factors: *cognitive effect* and *processing effort*. A person has a set of assumption in his/her mind, which is called *cognitive environment*. Following Relevance Theory, a communicator's intention in communication is to modify the cognitive environment of the addressee. To modify the cognitive environment by deleting or adding the logical form and so forth is *cognitive effect*. On the other hand, *processing effort* is that which is required on the part of an addressee in processing utterances. The aim in information processing is to recover as many *contextual effects* as possible for the least cost in processing (Blakemore 1992). Processing utterances requires time and mental effort, so our mind will process utterances in the way which are less costly to process and represent them. Other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effect of the utterance is and the less processing effort is required, the more relevant it is. However, the smaller the cognitive effect is and the more processing effort is required, the less relevant it is.

A stimulus which explicitly shows the intention to communicate something, in other words, which has both informative intention and communicative intention is called *ostensive stimulus*, which is defined in *Presumption of Optimal Relevance* as follows:

(1) Presumption of Optimal Relevance (revised)

- a. The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it.
- b. The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences.

(Sperber & Wilson 1986, 1995<sup>2</sup>: 270)

Such communication as takes place on the basis of *the ostensive stimulus*<sup>2</sup> is called *ostensive communication*. According to *Presumption of Optimal Relevance*, the addressee is entitled to expect a level of relevance high enough to warrant his attending to the stimulus, and which is, moreover, the highest level of relevance that the communicator was capable of achieving given his/her means and goals. (Sperber & Wilson 1986, 1995<sup>2</sup>) Therefore, ostensive communications which addressees can obtain the maximum cognitive effect with minimum processing effort are the ones which can get an optimal relevance.

From the above discussion, Sperber & Wilson come up with the two Principles of Relevance, the First (or Cognitive) Principle of Relevance and the Second (or Communicative) Principle of Relevance, as is shown in (2) and (3), respectively.

(2) the First (or Cognitive) Principle of Relevance

Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance.

(3) the Second (or Communicative) Principle of Relevance

Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

(Sperber & Wilson 1986, 1995: 260)

In the present chapter, we have discussed the main point of Relevance Theory. The two Principles of Relevance in (2) and (3) are necessary to make the inferential model of communication explanatory. However, it is noticed that Relevance Theory is not the one which a communicator must follow but the one which he/she cannot violate, if he/she is going to do so. In the next chapter, we will argue about the applicability of Grice's inference model and Relevance Theory to irony.

### 3 Previous accounts on ironies

This chapter will mainly deal with the two pragmatic theories of irony; one is Grice's theory (1975) based on inference model, and the other is Wilson & Sperber's theory of *echoic interpretive use*. We will show evidence against Gricean theory from *The Book of Tea*, then supporting Wilson & Sperber's theory of echoic interpretive use.

First, we will illustrate Grice's theory. Grice (1975) insists that irony means the opposite of what is said. His fundamental idea can be expressed as *the co-operative principle* and the nine *maxims* classified into four categories:

(4) *Maxims of quantity*

- 1 Make your contributions as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
- 2 Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

(5) *Maxims of quality*

*Supermaxim*: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

- 1 Do not say what you believe to be false.
- 2 Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

(6) *Maxim of relation*

- 1 Be relevant.

(7) *Maximums of manner*

*Supermaxim*: Be perspicuous.

- 1 Avoid obscurity of expression.
- 2 Avoid ambiguity.
- 3 Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- 4 Be orderly.

*The co-operative principle* suggests that a communicator should make his/her conversational contribution such as is required at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. On the other hand, the four maxims make it possible to explain how an utterance, which is only an incomplete and ambiguous representation of a thought, can nevertheless express a complete and unambiguous thought.

Consider the example of (8), following Gricean theory.

- (8) He has bought the Nikkei.
- (9) He has bought a copy of the Nihon Keizai Shimbun.
- (10) He has bought a copy of the Nikkei Weekly.
- (11) He has bought the newspaper enterprise which publishes the Nihon Keizai Shimbun and the Nikkei Weekly.

There might be some interpretations of the utterance of (8). There might be situations where only interpretation of (9) would be compatible with the assumption that the speaker does not say what he/she believes to be false, which satisfies maxim of quality. Or there might be situations where only interpretation of (10) would be compatible with the assumption that the speaker does not say what he/she believes to be false, which also satisfies maxim of quality. Moreover, there might be situations where the only interpretation of (11) would be compatible with the assumption that the speaker is being relevant, which meets maxim of relevant. In those situations, the intended interpretations of (8) can easily be inferred.

On the basis of the above approach to verbal communication, Grice insists that irony means the opposite of what is said.

- (12) (when it is pouring) It's a lovely weather.<sup>3</sup>

According to Gricean theory, the meaning of this irony is as follows:

- (13) It is not a lovely weather.

It is true that the meaning of the irony "It's a lovely weather." is "It is not a lovely weather." So Gricean theory seems to be applicable to irony, judging from this example. However, there is good evidence to show that Gricean theory that irony means the opposite of what is said is not legitimate.

- (14) *Why not amuse yourselves at our expenses?* Asia returns the compliment. There would be further food for merriment if you were to know all that we have imagined and written about you.

In (14) the italicised sentence<sup>4</sup> functions as an irony. If Gricean theory were legitimate, its implicature should be like (15).

- (15) Please do not amuse yourselves at our expenses.

However, the irony in (14) cannot communicate such an implicature, the opposite of what is said. Moreover, the underlined sentence is also an irony. According to the traditional Gricean theory, its implicature should be as follows:

- (16) Asia does not return the compliment.

In fact, this irony communicates the implicatures in (17a) and (17b) rather than (16).

- (17)a. Asia gets revenge on you.
- b. Asia revenges itself on you.

Therefore, the Gricean theory that irony means the opposite of what is said cannot be supported.

Next, we will explain irony by a Relevance-Theoretic approach<sup>5</sup>. Wilson & Sperber (1992) propose that irony is an example of the echoic interpretive use<sup>6,7</sup>. In this theory the two concepts play a very crucial role: *interpretive resemblance* and *interpretive use*. *Interpretive resemblance* is the case in which each utterance has a common propositional form, and an utterance which is used to communicate another utterance on the basis of *interpretive resemblance* is regarded as an example of *interpretive use*. (18b) is the interpretive use of (18a).

- (18)a. Hideki Matsui is the best hitter for the Yankees.  
 b. “Godzilla” Matsui is a clean-up hitter for the Yankees.

If (18b) is uttered in order to communicate the proposition in (18a) and the addressee has encyclopaedic information on major league, it will be recognised not only that “Godzilla” Matsui in (18b) has the same referent as Hideki Matsui in (18a), but also that a clean-up hitter in (18b) means the best hitter in (18a). Thus, both sentences in (18) have the common propositional form, and they interpretively resemble each other.

Echoing others’ thoughts<sup>8</sup>, cultural norms or general standards, and at the same time ridiculing or despising them by an irony based on echoic interpretive use, a communicator states that he/she does not think that way, Wilson & Sperber suggests. An addressee has to determine what the communicator is saying, what he/she is implicating and what his/her attitude is to what he/she is saying and implicating: implicature. Weak implicatures are the ones which a communicator less certainly intends, and which addressee consequently takes more responsibility for accessing them. The weak implicature which irony communicates must be restored so that irony can play a part which a communicator intends. In order to restore weak implicature, the three conditions should be satisfied; firstly, utterance must be recognised as echoic; secondly, which part of utterance irony echoes must be identified; and thirdly, it must be recognised that the attitude of the communicator is that of denial and rejection (Sperber & Wilson 1986, 1995<sup>2</sup>). If irony satisfies these conditions, its weak implicature will be restored, and as a result, a communicator can obtain optimal relevance.

According to Sperber & Wilson (1986, 1995<sup>2</sup>), the effect of an utterance which achieves most of its relevance thorough a wide array of weak implicature is called a *poetic effect*. The wider array of weak implicatures an utterance has, the more relevant it is and the greater poetic effect<sup>9</sup> it has.

Let us analyse the example cited above on the basis of echoic interpretive use.

- (19) (when it is pouring) It’s a lovely weather. (= (12))

The communicator echoes the general standards in (20) and assumes the attitude of denial to his/her own utterance<sup>10</sup>, as is shown in (21).

- (20) If it is pouring, we cannot say that it is a lovely weather.  
 (21) A communicator dissociates himself/herself from the opinion or thought that it is a lovely weather, feeling ridicule or scorn.

That is, a communicator echoes the general standards that “when it is pouring, it cannot be said that it is a lovely weather,” so that he/she communicates that he/she does not think that it is a lovely weather.

Some linguists criticise that echoic interpretive use can only explain the echoic use of irony, and that it cannot explain conventional ironies of the opposite meaning. However, as has been discussed in this chapter, ironies of the opposite meaning can be really explained as echoic interpretive use, because there are thoughts, cultural norms or general standards which ironies echoes.

#### 4 Analysis of the ironies in *The Book of Tea*

In the previous chapter, we have illustrated that irony is an example of echoic interpretive use, supporting Wilson & Sperber’s theory. This chapter will investigate the process in which irony can get optimal relevance by analysing the ironies in *The Book of Tea*. As Uchida (1994, 1998) suggests, Relevance Theory should be applicable not only to rhetoric, such as metaphor, irony and other figurative expressions but also to literary text, because literary text is not a special field of language but a typical example of linguistics.

tic communication. Thus, we will apply Relevance Theory to the ironies in *The Book of Tea*.

First, consider the example of irony from *The Book of Tea* in (22).

- (22) *Perhaps I betray my own ignorance of the tea cult by being so outspoken.* Its very spirit of politeness exacts that you say what you are expected to say, and no more.

In (22), the italicised part is irony. As the second sentence means, the tea cult's spirit of politeness is not to speak more than is necessary, which serves as the cultural norm. OKAKURA actually feels proud that he himself knows all about *Cha-no-yu*, the tea cult. Thus, the first sentence in (22) echoes the following sentence, the cultural norm, so that he dissociates himself from the thought that he betrays his own ignorance of the tea cult even by being so outspoken, as is shown in (23). In other words, he says that he does not have such a thought.

- (23) OKAKURA dissociates himself from the thought that he betrays his own ignorance of the tea cult by being so outspoken.

If the italicised part in (22) can be recognized as irony, the object which irony echoes can be identified, and the author's attitude of denial and rejection can be recognised by a reader, the implicature of the irony expressed in (24) can be restored.

- (24) Perhaps I do not betray my own ignorance of the tea cult even by being so outspoken, because I know all about *Cha-no-yu*, the tea cult.

As a consequence, irony in (22) can get an optimal relevance.

Let us explain the next example quoted above in (14).

- (25) *Why not amuse yourselves at our expenses? Asia returns the compliment. **There would be further food for merriment if you were to know all that we have imagined and written about you.***

It should be noted that there is a situation in those days where the West amused themselves at the expenses of Japan behind this irony. On the other hand, OKAKURA has the thought that Japan is superior to the West in various respects. Because the irony of the italicised part echoes OKAKURA's thought which denies or rejects the situation in those days and thus its irony says that he does not literally mean "Why not amuse yourselves at our expenses?" it can be explained as echoic interpretive use. This irony can communicate such implicature as follows:

- (26) Even if you amuse yourselves at our expenses, it will be useless, fruitless and meaningless.

In the same way, the underlined part in (25) is an irony. The general meaning of "to return the compliment" functions as the general norm. Because the irony echoes this general norm, OKAKURA dissociates himself from the literal meaning of "Asia returns the compliment" and communicates the thought that the thing which Asia returns to the West is not literally a compliment. As a result, the implicatures in (27a, b) can be restored and optimal relevance can be obtained.

- (27)a. Asia gets revenge on you.  
b. Asia revenges itself on you.

Moreover, the bold part in (25) is also an irony. How can this irony obtain an optimal relevance? The sentences in (28) and (29) which appear in the following parts of *The Book of Tea* serve as historical backgrounds<sup>11</sup>. This irony echoes the historical backgrounds and thus produces the implicature in (30).

- (28) Your information is based on the meager translation of our immense literature, if not on the unreliable anecdotes of passing travelers.  
(29) Translation is always a treason, and as a Ming author observes, can at its best be only the reverse side of a brocade—all the threads are there, but not the subtlety of color or design.  
(30) You will never know all that we have imagined and written about you.

Thus the bold part of the irony in (25) interpretively resembles the implicature in (30), as well as it echoes “Your information is based on meager translations of our immense literature” in (28) and “Translation is always a treason” in (29), and as a consequence it can get optimal relevance.

In this chapter we have examined some examples of the ironies in *The Book of Tea* following echoic interpretive use, and we have shown the process in which ironies can obtain optimal relevance. In order to restore the implicatures of the ironies properly, OKAKURA’s thought should be recognized. The current of the Meiji Era, in which *The Book of Tea* was written, indicates that the West is regarded as superior to Japan. OKAKURA, however, denies and rejects such a current in those days. So the ironies echo such a thought of OKAKURA, produce implicatures and as a result can gain optimal relevance. Though Wilson & Sperber (1992) states that the object of echoing is the thought of others, but it can be speculated from the above examination that the ironies in *The Book of Tea* echo OKAKURA’s thought.

## 5 Concluding Comment

In the present paper, we have analysed the ironies in *The Book of Tea* on the basis of Wilson & Sperber’s echoic interpretive use. The characteristic of the ironies in *The Book of Tea* is that they echo the cultural norm or OKAKURA’s thought which rejects and denies the current of the Meiji Era. That is, he has the thought that the West is inferior to Japan concerning both thoughts and cultures, in opposition to the current in those days. Echoing OKAKURA’s thought or the cultural norm, the ironies can restore their implicatures, and in consequence they can successfully obtain optimal relevance. Through the above discussion and the investigation of the ironies in *The Book of Tea*, it seems reasonable to conclude that the slight difference between Wilson & Sperber’s theory and ours lies in the object of echoing; in other words, Wilson & Sperber regards the object of echoing as the thought of others, while we see the object of echoing of the ironies in *The Book of Tea* as the thought of the author, OKAKURA Kakuzo himself.

## NOTES

- 1 We will discuss Grice’s *co-operative principle* and *nine maxims* in Chapter 3.
- 2 *Ostensive communication* is the object of study of Relevance Theory.
- 3 We will demonstrate that this example of irony can be explained as echoic interpretive use in the latter part of this chapter.
- 4 Italics, bolds, and underlines in all the examples quoted from *The Book of Tea* are by the author of this paper.
- 5 For further discussion, see Sperber & Wilson (1998) and Wilson & Sperber (2004).
- 6 For ‘echoic mention theory,’ see Sperber & Wilson (1981) and Sperber (1984).
- 7 Sperber & Wilson proposes that echoic utterances and irony should be analysed not as literal interpretations (i.e. mentions) of an attributed thought or utterance, but simply as interpretations, literal or non-literal, of an attributed thought or utterance.
- 8 *Echoing* means indirect quotations which may be used for two rather different purposes. So an echoic utterance not only gives information about the content of the speech or thought but also expresses the speaker’s attitude or reaction to what was said or thought. (Wilson & Sperber 1992)
- 9 Concerning *poetic effect*, see Pilkington (2000).
- 10 Carston (2002) defines ‘irony’ as ‘a use of language by which a speaker tacitly communicates a mocking or, at least, dissociative attitude to a thought or view which she tacitly attributes to someone other than herself at the time of utterance.’
- 11 Encyclopaedic information as assumption plays a very important role in restoring the proper implicature.

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