Irony as Cognitive Deviation

Masashi Okamoto
Language and Knowledge Engineering Lab,
Graduate School of Information Science and Technology,
The University of Tokyo
Abstract

This presentation aims...

- to consistently grasp a variety of ironic utterances in view of ‘cognitive deviation’
- to present the classification of ironic utterances based on the types of the deviation.
(Referring to a friend X who betrayed the speaker)

X is a fine friend. [spontaneous irony]

[In traditional rhetoric studies] a rhetorical expression which directly conveys the opposite meaning of its literal one.

⇒ a semantic issue

[For Grice (1989)] one of the conversational implicatures, which flouts the Maxim of Quality (‘Do not say what you believe to be false’) and then let its hearer recognize some implicit meaning intended by the speaker.

⇒ a pragmatic issue
[In Relevance Theory]: Sperber & Wilson (1981) claimed that there exists another type of verbal irony which cannot be adequately accounted in previous framework:

A: I may not look it, but I was the top model.
B: (Contemptuously) The top model!  [echoic irony]

What does B imply?

Not the opposite meaning or the negation as accounted in traditional/pragmatic approach.

B implies that he has some negative attitude toward A’s opinion by echoing the expressed proposition or its part.
Cognitive Deviation

How can we recognize irony?

To find some discrepancy between the utterance and the fact, the proposition expressed and the actual event, or the speaker’s attitude and the desirable one.

Not just discrepancy but deviation from the norm is important!

We thus formulate the cognitive processes of the deviations that have been so far mentioned in previous studies, and try to analyze the pattern of those cognitive deviations in the actual data of ironic utterances.
Stanford University law professor Lawrence Lessig said:

"You can make a gun that kills people, and you aren't liable, but you can innovate on security technology and you can be sent to jail for 25 years."
Stanford University law professor Lawrence Lessig said:

"You can make a gun that kills people, and you aren't liable, but you can innovate on security technology and you can be sent to jail for 25 years."
Stanford University law professor Lawrence Lessig said:
"You can make a gun that kills people, and you aren't liable, but you can innovate on security technology and you can be sent to jail for 25 years."
Deviation-referring Irony

That teacher teaches his students only to make them fools!

[canonical act] : to make students wise
[deviated act] : to make students fools
[the cause] : that teacher

<canonical event>

<deviation of act>
That teacher teaches his students only to make them fools!

[canonical act]: to make students wise
[deviated act]: to make students fools
[the cause]: that teacher
Deviation-referring irony is understood as follows:

1. The speaker perceives some deviation in an actual event.

2. He attributes the cause of the deviation to someone.

3. The hearer recognizes the deviation and its cause in the actual event referred to by the speaker.
(Referring to a friend X who betrayed the speaker) X is a fine friend.
Deviation-creating Irony

✿ (Referring to a friend X who betrayed the speaker) X is a fine friend.
Deviation-creating Ironic is understood as follows:

1. The speaker intentionally creates some deviation in his speech event.

2. The hearer recognizes the deviation and the speaker's intent.
A: I may not look it, but I was the top model.

B: *(Contemptuously)* The top model!
**Deviation-implying Irony**

*A:* I may not look it, but I was the top model.

*B:* *(Contemptuously)* The top model!
A: I may not look it, but I was the top model.

B: (Contemptuously) The top model!
Deviation-implying irony is understood as follows:

1. The speaker intentionally deviates from a canonical speech event by imitating the target’s utterance or speech act like a mirror image.

2. The hearer recognizes an implication that the target owes the cause of the deviation.

Therefore, mimicry and other imitating acts of others’ behaviors often get ironical.
Conclusion

Irony is a coherent cognitive category which consists of three types according to its deviation type:

- Deviation-referring irony
- Deviation-creating irony
- Deviation-implying irony

Irony comprehension is an interaction between a speaker’s cognition and a hearer’s cognition.
Thank you for your attention.