



Peirce's semiotic approach to irony

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1. Introduction

As someone famously said, irony is usually regarded as “saying what you mean without meaning what you say.” But how exactly this can be achieved is not easy to answer. More precisely, this characterization applies to verbal irony. Verbal irony has classically been conceived of as the act of saying something and meaning the opposite.

But some forms of irony usually recognized are not verbal; they include situational irony and dramatic irony; *situational irony* is not intentional, in the sense that something happens that is the opposite of what might be expected and the result has a negative character (irony of fate). *Dramatic irony*, according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, is “[a] literary technique, originally used in Greek tragedy, by which the full significance of a character’s words or actions is clear to the audience or reader although unknown to the character.” Well-known examples include Shakespeare’s tragedies and Oedipus’ story (the audience knows, while Oedipus does not, that he himself is the murderer he is seeking). Other forms of irony that are often mentioned are *Socratic irony* and *Romantic irony*.

Traditional analysis of irony has focused on verbal irony. Ancient rhetoricians classified irony among the tropes, one consisting in expressing something by its opposite or *contrarium*.¹ Its main character is that of an *improprietas* since the contrast between what the speaker says and what he wants to make understood becomes manifest in a particular context. The ironic understanding between the speaker and the hearer takes place within the framework of rhetorical persuasion; as such, it supposes two parties: the position of the speaker and that of the adversary. Irony involves an implicit evaluation

¹ Irony involving a figure does not differ from the irony which is a trope, as far as its genus is concerned, since in both cases we understand something which is the opposite of what is actually said. [Igitur, quae est schema, ab illa, quae est tropus, genere ipso nihil admodum distat; (in utroque enim contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est) species vero prudentius inveniuntur diversas esse facile est deprehendere] Quintilian() Book IX, II, 40

of the position of the adversary party, and the speaker seeks to persuade the hearer to take his side. But in order to be able to recognize the contrast between the utterance and the topic under discussion it is necessary that the hearer know the speaker's scale of values, and the speaker assumes that the hearer shares it. The speaker's goal is to establish a shared understanding between himself and the hearer, whose intellectual capacities he assumes, and against the adversary. By isolating the adversary's position, it can be undermined and eventually defeated.

Because of the derisive attitude toward the opponent, it was regarded in the Middle Ages as a sin that put at risk the salvation of the soul; and it was considered a form of pretence or simulation in the early modern era. More recently, verbal irony has been analyzed in different fields, resulting in different conceptions of it: as a persuasive device, a rhetorical figure or a pattern of communication. The latter is the object of pragmatics. From a pragmatic point of view, verbal irony is the intentional act of communicating something, using language (or highly conventionalized acts such as clapping, giving the thumbs-up or shaking one's head) to do so. Despite this common point of departure, different theories disagree as to what constitutes ironic communication.

One thing can be said: what the speaker intends to communicate and what she seems to be putting forward are discordant. However, when successful, the hearer clearly understands that she is communicating the opposite meaning, usually in an evaluative (negative) tone. In order to achieve this the speaker uses some clues such as a certain tone of voice, gestures and expressions that can be recognized as pertaining to a more or less identifiable source. Common knowledge and context also contribute to elicit the ironic interpretation on behalf of the hearer. My purpose in this talk is to present Peirce's semiotic approach to irony and analyze whether his view can offer a unifying account that could be applied to all forms of irony and provide a better understanding of its evaluative dimension.

2. Peirce's approach

2.1. Irony as acritical inference

Peirce's view of irony is presented in the context of his analysis of inference. For Peirce, then, irony is a form of inference. Inference, he wrote, is the process that determines belief. Some forms of belief determination, however, are not voluntary. For example, in a conversation you can learn what a man is thinking:

You hear a new slang word: you never ask for a definition of it; and you never get one. You do not get even any simple example of its use; you only hear it in *ironical, twisted, humorous sentences whose meaning is turned inside out and tied in a hard knot*; yet you know what that word means much better than any abstract definition could have informed you. In riding a horse; rider and ridden understand one another in [a] way of which the former can no more give an

account than the latter. (Peirce 1957: 7.447) [emphasis mine]

The passage cited above is from his logic book *How to Reason*, later also referred to as the *Grand Logic*. Some of the material for *How to Reason* was based on manuscripts of earlier projects that had failed. The paragraphs from which the quoted passage is taken were written in 1886. (The text cited is based on an earlier version now published in Peirce 1993: 327-8). Since ironic utterance is used to exemplify acritical inference, the concept of acritical inference must be able to account for the two features of ironic meaning he describes as “its being turned inside out” and “tied in a hard knot.” Firstly, acritical inference is compared with reasoning proper:

Reasoning proper begins when I am conscious that the judgment I reach is the effect in my mind of a certain judgment which I had formed before. The judgment which is the cause is called the premise, that which is the effect is called the conclusion. (Peirce 1993: 328)

The conclusion is the effect of previous judgments -the premises- in the mind of the reasoner who is aware of this relation between these judgments. What makes an inference acritical is the fact that the subject is unable to explain how she came to have the belief. When someone reasons, she is aware of the process by which a belief is determined by the premises in terms of three features that the reasoner is able to provide:

When I am aware that a certain conclusion which I draw is determined by a certain premise, there are three things which I have more or less clearly in my mind. First, I have a peculiar sense of constraint to believe the conclusion, connected with a sense that that constraint comes from the premise; second, I have a conception that there is a whole class of possible analogous inferences (though I may not be able to define the class) in which a similar constraint would be felt by me; and third I have a present belief that all of these inferences, or at least the great body of them would be true. (Peirce 1993: 328)

For our present purposes it suffices to say that the reasoner is aware that the inference follows a rule.² He writes:

Some beliefs are the result of other knowledge without the believer suspecting it. [...] Though inferential in their nature, they are not exactly inferences. Again, a given belief may be regarded as the effect of another given belief, without our seeming to see clearly why or how. Such a process is usually called an inference; but it ought not to be called a rational inference, or reasoning. A blind force constrains us. (Peirce 1998: 11-12)

²Hence, the mind is not only led from believing the premises to judge the conclusion true, but it further attaches to this judgment another that every proposition *like* the premise, that is having an icon like it, *would* involve, and compel acceptance, of a proposition related to it as the conclusion then drawn is related to that premise. (Peirce 1998: 24)

So acritical inference is defined as inference that is not reasoning proper:

If you attend to the phenomena of reasoning, (...), you will nevertheless remark, without difficulty, that a person who draws a rational conclusion not only thinks it to be true, but thinks that similar reasoning would be just in every analogous case. If he fails to think this, the inference is not to be called reasoning. (Peirce 1998: 249)

Although this account is important to understand the nature of reasoning, it does not illuminate the nature of irony as acritical inference. In ironic inference a hearer understands the utterer's intended meaning despite of the fact that she does not present it in a straightforward way. Now, in interpreting someone's thought, we appeal to our imagination:

I converse with a man and learn how he is thinking: I fancy he has told me, that is, has "stated" the fact in accurate forms of speech. But he has not, and how I have found out his thought is too subtle a process for this psychologist writing to find out. (Peirce 1957: 7. 447)

We imagine that he made his thought explicit in an accurate form of speech. But the process itself cannot be accounted for from a psychological point of view. However, what the psychologist cannot offer is the philosopher's task to explain.

2.2. Inference as semiosis

Peirce introduces irony as a means of understanding an utterer's purport in a conversational situation. The hearer forms a belief as to what the ironist's utterance means despite of the fact that the meaning of the sentence is "turned inside out." This belief in the mind of the hearer is the *interpretant* of the utterance.

Sign relation is triadic, involving a sign, an object and an interpretant. In his later view Peirce introduces some qualifications to the original trichotomy; he distinguishes between the immediate and the dynamical object, on the one hand, and between the immediate, the dynamical, and the final interpretant. So every sign has three interpretants, which he named "immediate," "dynamical," and "final" (this classification appears at least from 1906 to 1909). He describes the dynamic interpretant as an actual effect on the interpreter. The immediate interpretant is a possibility, that is, the sign's peculiar interpretability. The dynamic interpretant then makes that possibility actual.

Since his conception of sign "... is perhaps not easy to grasp," as he wrote to William James, Peirce illustrates the distinctions by means of an example. The

sign triadic relation does not apply only to sentences expressing propositions. A question such as ‘what is the weather like this morning?’ is a sign with its two objects and three interpretants. The answer to the question is the sign’s dynamical interpretant. But the reply itself is another sign that in turn can be analyzed in its objects and interpretants:

I reply, let us suppose: “It is a stormy day.” Here is another sign. Its Immediate Object is the notion of the present weather so far as this is common to her mind and mine -- not the character of it, but the identity of it. The Dynamical Object is the identity of the actual or Real meteorological conditions at the moment. The Immediate Interpretant is the schema in her imagination, i.e. the vague Image or what there is in common to the different Images of a stormy day. The Dynamical Interpretant is the disappointment or whatever actual effect it at once has upon her. The Final Interpretant is the sum of the Lessons of the reply, Moral, Scientific, etc. (Peirce 1998: 498)

The object as the sign represents it constitutes the sign’s immediate object, that is, the notion of stormy weather, and the real meteorological conditions at the moment is its dynamical object. The interpreter’s images of stormy weather constitute its immediate interpretant, but the effect actually produced in her mind is the dynamical interpretant of the sign, for instance, a certain behavior, such as staying indoors.

Now consider a different response: A thunderclap is heard and Charles responds, “Oh, it’s a beautiful day.” While the dynamical object remains the same, that is, the actual stormy weather, the weather as represented by the sign, is the notion of a beautiful day. The immediate interpretant, the images of beautiful days, is in conflict with the object. Now it is in respect to something that exists that the discrepancy can be discerned. For this collateral observation is required; the previous acquaintance with what the sign denotes is thrown into question since observations disagree. The hearer then imagine that the speaker expressed his thought accurately.

2.3. Acritical inference and imagination

Peirce says that the meaning of an ironic utterance is “turned inside out” but also “tied in a hard knot,” since the utterer intends to make its meaning determined. And when ironic understanding is successful, the interpreter acquires a belief that is the dynamical interpretant of the utterance. The interpreter’s previous knowledge (her notion of good weather, Charles’s dislikes, etc.) are put into play in order to determine her belief.

As I mentioned earlier, inference determines belief; irony is inferential since it determines a belief in the mind of the interpreter concerning the ironist’s

purport. But ironic inference is an instance of acritical inference, according to which the interpreter is not aware how the previous knowledge determines the resulting belief, that is, that the process is guided by a rule of inference. Peirce writes:

There are, however, cases in which we are conscious that a belief has been determined by another given belief, but are not conscious that it proceeds on any general principle. [...] Such a process should be called, not a reasoning but an *acriticalinference*. (Peirce 1998: 348)

But this more precise account of inference focuses on a feature that characterized acritical inference in the sense that Peirce had previously explained in *How to Reason*, namely, that acritical inference is indubitable:

It will be found to follow that there are, besides perceptual judgments, original (i.e., indubitable because uncriticized) beliefs of a general and a recurrent kind, as well as indubitable acritical inferences. (Peirce 1998: 348)

The acceptance that we have acritical indubitable beliefs and inferences characterizes Peirce's doctrine of common sensism.³ While reasoning refers to fixation of belief by another belief that is deliberate, and self-controlled, in the case of acritical inferences and propositions, "you cannot go behind them" (Peirce 1998: 347). The inference "I think, then I am" is offered as an example of this type of inference (Peirce 1998: 348). Descartes could conclude that he is although he was not certain that everything that thinks, exists.

In ironic understanding, the belief that the interpreter forms as a result of the speaker's utterance may be regarded as a hypothesis that attempts to explain the speaker's surprising remark. In this sense, the acritical inference is akin to abductive reasoning. In effect, abductive reasoning "... is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis." (Peirce 1998: 216). An abductive conjecture to explain a surprising fact C involves the premiss "If A were true, C would be a matter of course," and its conclusion is not shown to be true, in the sense that it only says that it is reasonable to believe that A is true (Peirce 1998: 231; 287). Moreover, it introduces a new idea (see for example, Peirce 1998: 216; 287). Now when the conclusion, i.e., the explanatory hypothesis, is drawn deliberately, a reasoning is performed. But ironical inference is acritical and, consequently, based on common sense, that is, on previous beliefs that are not put into question since the utterer assumes that the hearer accepts them. If that is the case, the hearer understands the ironist's purport.

³ "... I laid down, in the very first place, the doctrine of Common Sense; namely, that there are some propositions that a man, as a fact, does not doubt. (Peirce 1998: 432).

3. Conclusions

In sum, Peirce regarded ironic interpretation as a kind of acritical inference. In acritical inference a belief is determined by previous cognition. This belief that is caused in the interpreter by the ironic sign is the interpretant of the ironic utterance whose meaning was “turned outside out,” and therefore explains how the utterer’s purport is “tied in a hard knot,” since the inferential process results in an indubitable belief in the sense required by Peirce’s critical commonsensism. Naturally, signs, and ironic interpretation, are not limited to linguistic signs. Peirce’s late theory of the interpretant can account for a multi-dimensional model that opens the way to the interpreter to share the ironist’s perspective.

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