Situational and Verbal Irony, and Paradox Revisited

YoungEun Yoon*
Ewha Womans University

YoungEun Yoon. 2006. Situational and Verbal Irony, and Paradox Revisited. Language and Information 10.2, 67–94. This paper revisits some old issues of irony, i.e., situational vs. verbal irony, and irony vs. paradox, in order to further clarify the issues. Although these issues seem to have been fully discussed, there are still unresolved and/or vague aspects that need to be accounted for. This paper also revisits the issue of theorizing the phenomenon of verbal irony, which has long been scrutinized by many philosophers and linguists including Aristotle, Grice, Sperber and Wilson, and recently, Utsumi and Attardo. (Ewha Womans University)

Key words: irony, situational irony, verbal irony, paradox, echoic theory, implicit display theory, relevant inappropriateness theory, expectation, contradiction, experiential contradiction, logical contradiction

1. Introduction

Irony is a well-established concept in contemporary culture. People often use such expressions as It’s an irony and That’s ironic. These expressions are used to describe certain situations or states of affairs. The following example describes the given situation as being ironic:

(1) The irony is that many officials in Washington agree in private that their policy is inconsistent.

On the other hand, in the following example, recited from Martin (1992), the speaker is being ironic:

(2) (The speaker has just sprained her ankle.)
Oh great. That’s nice.

The speaker has just run into an unfortunate event, but she is describing it as being great and nice instead of terrible or horrible.

* Department of English Language and Literature, Ewha Womans University, 11-1 Daehyundong, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul 120-75, Korea. E-mail: yeyoon@ewha.ac.kr

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As is well known, irony could be divided into two categories, namely, situational and verbal irony. (1) is an example of situational irony while (2) is of verbal irony. According to numerous definitions of irony available from a variety of sources such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, and textbooks, the two ironies are being separately treated. In general, a situational irony is defined as “an odd or amusing situation that involves a contrast,” whereas a verbal irony is “an utterance that means the opposite of or something different from what the speaker says.”

And yet, the traditional definitions of verbal irony like the above one have been especially criticized by numerous linguists as accounting for only a limited portion of verbal irony data. Also, it seems that the basic definitions of situational irony need to be elaborated to be able to account for both the general and merely situational irony examples.

Another interesting related issue is the comparison between irony and paradox. The following is a well-known example of paradox.

(3) More haste, less speed.

That the more you make haste, you will be more late on something seems contradictory in view of our normal reasoning. One definition of paradox is as in the following:

(4) A person, thing or situation that has two opposite features and therefore seems strange. (Oxford English Dictionary)

(4) seems to be a bit loose definition in the sense that it does not separate irony from paradox well. Furthermore, the following example of paradox also cited in the Oxford English Dictionary could be regarded as an example of situational irony if its first part is deleted.

(5) It is a curious paradox that professional comedians often have unhappy personal lives.

In this context, the issue of comparison between (situational) irony and paradox also needs to be further delved into.

Given this, the first purpose of this paper is to revisit some familiar issues of irony, i.e., situational vs. verbal irony, and irony vs. paradox. Another purpose of this paper is to revisit the issue of theorizing verbal irony, which has long been scrutinized by many philosophers and linguists including Aristotle, Grice, Sperber and Wilson, and recently, Utsumi and Attardo. In the process of discussing various issues of irony and paradox, we will be able to come up with a better account of paradox and both situational and verbal irony.

This paper is organized as follows: In section 2 various issues of irony will be discussed. First, we will discuss the two kinds of irony, situational and verbal irony. Second, situational irony and paradox will be compared. In section 3 some representative theories of verbal irony will be discussed, including a couple of recent theories by Utsumi (2000) and Attardo (2000). In section 4 we will try to present a comprehensive analysis of situational and verbal irony, together with paradox, based on the discussions of the previous sections.