

IRONY IN THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST BY OSCAR WILDE

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Abstract

The aim of this paper was to discuss the role of irony as one of the stylistic means used for expressing either something different or opposite of what the speaker really thinks. Several key theoretical approaches to irony and its features were compared and analysed in the play of Oscar Wilde 'The Importance of Being Earnest'. The contribution contains examples proving that neither implicit nor explicit irony markers play significant role for the author; that most of the irony in this play is based on the situation or the context and that irony was mostly used to achieve humoristic effect.

Key words: irony, comedy of manners, Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

INTRODUCTION

Irony is one of the most frequently used and most important language means serving people to express their personal opinion towards various phenomena in their lives. It is used by variety of users without any limitations, such as age, gender, educational background, either intuitively or on purpose. Irony as a phenomenon has been studied by various linguists, especially pragmatics. Since there are no strict rules for creating ironic statements, its production, understanding and usage have to be treated very carefully.

1. IRONY

There is no ultimate definition of irony. Even the encyclopaedic entry in the *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics* (ed. J. Mey, 2009, p. 406) by S. Attardo admits certain problems with the definition and offers a rich overview of different theories, treating this pragmatic problem from different perspectives. Mentioning all of them falls out of the scope of this contribution, so its aim is to point at those features that are widely accepted by pragmatics.

Irony is first of all seen as a trope, a stylistic means with specific features which are easily confused with other stylistic means, such as sarcasm, understatement, exaggeration or even a metaphor. A closer inspection of these tropes shows that each of them has its own specific features and that is why they should not be confused.

Sarcasm is the closest to the irony, but while irony is used to express either the right opposite or something else than reality, the aim of sarcasm is mostly to hurt the other participant of a given communicative event.

Paul Grice (In: *Encyclopedia of Pragmatics*, 2009, p. 407) takes irony as an implicature, i.e., as “a deliberate flouting of one of the maxims of the principle of cooperation”. Sperber and Wilson (In: *Encyclopedia of Pragmatics*, 2009, p. 407) see irony as some kind of echo referring to some other echo previously mentioned in the text, presupposing the participant's previous knowledge about the discussed topic, having the same context in order to achieve full comprehension of the speech act.

All the theories considered agree that irony expresses certain discrepancy between the actual situation and the speaker's own attitude towards it. This discrepancy can be expressed in various ways, verbally (by means of lexical expressions or suprasegmental means, e. g. melody, rhythm, accent etc.), or nonverbally (mimics, gestures, actions). Irony is highly subjective, but there are some rules, which can be applied on its interpretation.

Mey (1990, p. 3) introduces two basic types of irony: verbal and situational. An ironic statement is “an utterance of a speaker which refers to certain aspects of an ironic situation to make a point, i. e. to

achieve certain communication goals held by the speakers”, such as humour, social hedging or provide instruction. Verbal irony is therefore always intentional and conscious in its character. Irony situation is a situation, which is either the opposite or different to what the agent desires and must be the background for this irony statement. Haverkate (1990) introduces the term irony of fate and verbal irony for these phenomena. An ironic situation must come first, and only then an ironic statement can follow.

For the identification of ironical statements, implicit and explicit lexical markers are known. Explicit markers contain the word “irony” in themselves, such as “it is ironic that...”. For expressing irony implicitly, the speaker has to use intensifiers, such as deeply, particularly, especially, indeed, certainly, genuinely, bitterly, supremely etc. (Haverkate, 1990: 3). At the same time he claims that there are no lexical limitations of expressing irony – every word can have ironic meaning in a certain context.

Utsumi (2000) presents an implicit display theory, which claims that verbal irony is an utterance or a statement and requires three most important conditions for distinguishing irony from non-irony – participants must have the same context, the irony must violate pragmatic rules supported by giving cues, and the speaker has to give chance to the listener to recognize the irony.

Utsumi’s theory (2000) is one of the most recent theories taking into account most of the previous theories of irony, such as the previously mentioned echoing theory by Sperber and Wilson (1992), or set of theories based on the identifying of common features of all ironic utterances which proved that there is no such a common feature that is shared by all ironic utterances or statements.

The essential features of Utsumi’s theory (2000) are:

1. Proper situational setting consisting of speaker’s expectation, clash between his expectations and reality, and his negative attitude to this clash;
2. Verbal utterance or a statement must express an ironical environment which usually violates pragmatic principles and is followed by indirect cues;
3. Ironical utterance must achieve implicit display by assessing the degree of ironicalness defined by three components – quantitative measure of similarity between the irony and utterance; and the content of prototype-based view on the degree of irony (Utsumi, 2000:1803).

This theory seems to be the most appropriate for the analysis of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, one of the plays by Oscar Wilde.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Oscar Wilde’s plays are interesting for their wit and pure literal language. They are written in a light mood, their style is polished and cultivated, showing the author’s good taste. They can be called society plays, because they depict the fashionable life of aristocracy in London. Dialogues between men and women are the most important component of these plays. The plot is generally less important. Wilde pointed in them at the aspects of the real human nature that is cannot be seen at first sight. In some parts, his plays express admiration of defects and stains of the upper-class society.

In the comedy of manners, plot is less important than ironic and satiric dialogues, and it is based on the depiction of some social scandal (illegitimate child, corruption, lover etc.). The characters are also more or less the same – only people from the British upper class, politicians, their wives, women with the past (e. g. unmarried women with illegitimate children, women who left their children etc.) or dandies (rich, attractive, unmarried and experienced men) .

The plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in particular is slightly different. It does not cover any of these topics, but on the contrary, it shows the reader/audience the life of bored young gentleman and ladies and their struggles in having fun in their lives. But even if the characters have fun, they are just bored.

For this contribution, some of the crucial dialogues and sequences were selected, displaying features of irony and giving the opportunity to explain their context, and their importance for the play. They are presented in chronological order to achieve easy orientation in the plot.

Example 1

Algernon. How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

Jack. Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?[...] I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

Algernon. I thought you had come up for pleasure? . . . I call that business. (Act I)

This sequence provides the example of verbal irony that Wilde used in his play. Wilde used the contrast between the general concept of love, which is taken for something very positive, pleasant, and cannot be governed by reason. Wilde's character Algernon used one of the words that can have the opposite meaning, what is strongly based on reasoning and requires intensive concentration. This statement provided by Algernon was supposed to point at his attitude to love, to entertain Jack and to make contrast between these two notions.

This example shows that verbal irony is always a mental activity and its aim was to achieve a humoristic effect, in this case to mock Jack's belief in love and some kind of naivety. There are no explicit or implicit markers of irony.

Example 2

Algernon. I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. (Act I)

This statement is similar to the Example 1, based on the discrepancy between the action itself and the verbal comment. The speaker claims desire to propose a young lady to marry him, but his expectations are opposite to what he officially declares – acceptance of the proposal. This example of verbal irony has its background consisting of description of a situation. Combination of these two elements, the possible action and its comment, creates together an ironical situation. Acceptance of the proposal by the young lady would give the character an unpleasant result of his action; the success (accepting of the proposal) would be an actual loss. The primary goal is the refusal, contradicting the character's utterance.

Example 3

Algernon. Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [Takes one and eats it.]

Here, again, we can see discrepancy between the action and verbal comment. The sandwiches serve as an instrument demonstrating feelings between characters. They are prepared for the guest who is not invited for a long visit. The character prepares them and then eats all of them to achieve his ultimate goal. It is an intentional activity. There is a discrepancy between the first sentence, where there is a verbal protection of the instrument and then the following action contradicts the utterance. The character wants to be sure that all cucumber sandwiches will be eaten so that there is nothing to offer to the cordially invited guest. The action suggests that the character does not trust anyone to eat all sandwiches; he wants to do that job personally. This is clearly a situational irony.

The situation continues later, after the arrival of Aunt Augusta:

Algernon. [Picking up empty plate in horror.] Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially.

Lane. [Gravely.] There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went down twice.

Algernon. No cucumbers!

Lane. No, sir. Not even for ready money.

Algernon. That will do, Lane, thank you [...] I am greatly distressed, Aunt Augusta, about there being no cucumbers, not even for ready money. (Act I)

In this sequence, the character of Algernon and his servant Lane perform a dialogue in order to persuade Aunt Augusta that she is more than welcomed in Algernon's house, but, unfortunately, he cannot satisfy her requirements and she has to leave early. Algernon even echoes Lane's comment, that cucumbers cannot be bought "even for ready money". The word "even" is one of the intensifying implicit means to achieve ironical effect in the utterance.

Example 4

Algernon. 'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.' There is no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew her uncle, I can't quite make out.

This utterance takes place in a situation, when the character of Algernon tells his friend Jack that he found his cigarette case and a suspicious message in it. Algernon is interested not only because Jack is his friend and this situation is confusing for him, but also because Jack is going to be engaged with Algernon's cousin. This purely verbal ironization is based on two meanings of the same word "little", which can either express primarily size, or secondary the age. Algernon intentionally refers to the former, which is the incorrect form of the two options and different to its intended meaning. Algernon recognizes and enjoys Jack's lies, and he verbally makes the trap to achieve his communicative goal – learning the truth.

Example 5

Jack. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.

Algernon. Then your wife will. (Act I)

Algernon uses irony to show Jack that love is not trouble-free, that his optimistic expectations and attitudes towards his future partner do not mean that his love will be equally rewarded which is ironical. He points at the fact that life of married people becomes boring after a while and the only socially acceptable form for having some time for oneself is to make an obviously exaggerated excuse.

Bunbury is an invented friend who serves Algernon as an excuse for skipping boring family meetings. He is of poor health and his condition gets worse every time he is invited to a family dinner. In case something interesting happens, Bunbury's health rapidly improves and Algernon can take part in interesting social gatherings.

Algernon refers to Bunbury again in the conversation with Aunt Augusta:

Algernon. It is a great bore, and, I need hardly say, a terrible disappointment to me, but the fact is I have just had a telegram to say that my poor friend Bunbury is very ill again. [Exchanges glances with Jack.] They seem to think I should be with him.

Lady Bracknell. It is very strange. This Mr. Bunbury seems to suffer from curiously bad health.

Algernon. Yes; poor Bunbury is a dreadful invalid.

Lady Bracknell. Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die... I should be much obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday, for I rely on you to arrange my music for me. (Act I)

According to this dialogue the reader knows that both participants, Algernon and Aunt Augusta too, know that Bunbury is a non-existent character. Aunt Augusta makes ironical comments about Bunbury and his health, because she knows that he does not exist, so he cannot suffer from any serious illness. She even breaks conversational taboo – the death that is rarely discussed in the society, and she mocks it, which would be highly unacceptable in a civilised conversation. Under these circumstances this remark creates a verbally ironical statement.

Example 6

Lady Bracknell. [Pencil and note-book in hand.] I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

Jack. Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

Lady Bracknell. I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. (Act I)

This dialogue refers to the real event, the “Great Smoking Row” at Balmoral. One of the personal servants of Queen Victoria protested against working for too long because he had to wake up early to serve the Queen and going to bed too late because of serving to Queen’s sons-in law that smoked at night. The Queen asked discretely one of the Lords to mention to her sons-in law that the smoking rooms should be closed by 12 o’clock. The Queen was intolerant of smoking and all of her sons-in law were aware of that fact (S. Weintraub, 1987, p. 378).

From the pragmatical point of view, this dialogue is based on ironical situation and irony is displayed here by the author’s description of Lady Bracknell in the brackets. She is examining Jack as an eligible husband for her daughter, which has nothing to do with love, but it resembles a situation on the market – Lady Bracknell is making balance of Jack’s assets and then she calculates his perspectives. This is the opposite arrangement of a marriage proposal – where usually love is involved, here everything is governed by the brain. The ironical situation plays an important role in this verbal exchange.

Example 7

Algernon. You are my little cousin Cecily, I'm sure.

Cecily. You are under some strange mistake. I am not little. In fact, I believe I am more than usually tall for my age. [Algernon is rather taken aback.] But I am your cousin Cecily. You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack's brother, my cousin Ernest, my wicked cousin Ernest.

Algernon. Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily. You mustn't think that I am wicked.

Cecily. If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy. (Act II)

In this dialogue, two verbally ironic situations happen. The first is echoing, referring to the “little Cecily” sequence, when Algernon used word “little” in the meaning of the size and his friend Jack corrected him and pointed at the lexical meaning age. In this sequence, the character of Algernon used the word “little” in the meaning of age, but Cecily corrected him, because she understood his comment as referring to the size, height – the original reference from the Act I (Example 4).

Another verbal irony appears when Cecily says that she hopes that Algernon is good inside, and pretends to be wicked in the normal life – she calls it hypocrisy, but in fact she wants him to be wicked, and that is exactly the opposite of the normal expectations. So, this verbal exchange is based on the opposite meaning of the word “hypocrisy”.

Example 8

Chasuble. Your brother Ernest dead?

Jack. Quite dead.

Miss Prism. What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it. (Act II)

This verbal irony is based on the verbal murder of his fictional brother Ernest that was executed in this verbal exchange without any emotions. This murder was supposed to make the life of the character of Jack simpler. The character of Ernest was described as a wicked creature that brings only shame to the family, causes endless problems and needs constant assistance. All characters in the play are very sorry for both of them – they are sorry for Ernest’s behaviour and Jack’s problems with him. Miss Prism, Cecily’s governess in this verbal exchange cannot help herself and she expresses a kind of relief that Ernest learned his lesson and this experience will be useful for him in the future. Ironical in this situation is that dead people need no education and moral upbringing anymore. Here is the clash between the situation that is supposed to happen (the death) and something that could not happen (Ernest’s benefit from death as the ultimate punishment for his misdemeanours).

Example 9

Algernon. Did I give you this? It's very pretty, isn't it?

This sequence of questions is ironical in itself, and again, it is said in an ironical situation. The character of Algernon decides to pretend to be the invented brother Ernest and meets Cecily, instantly falls in love with her and proposes her for marriage. He is highly surprised, when she tells him, that they are engaged already and that he gave her a bangle already. Actually, this happened only in her imagination. She made a detailed story of their relationship including engagement, love letters, gifts, break up etc. This single sequence of two questions shows Algernon’s shift from surprise in the first question, to self-confidence in the second question. This is, again, an ironical statement based on the ironical situation.

Example 10

Cecily. May I offer you some tea, Miss Fairfax?

Gwendolen. [With elaborate politeness.] Thank you...

Cecily. [Sweetly.] Sugar?

Gwendolen. [Superciliously.] No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more. [Cecily looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.]

Cecily. [Severely.] Cake or bread and butter?

Gwendolen. [In a bored manner.] Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.

Cecily. [Cuts a very large slice of cake, and puts it on the tray.] Hand that to Miss Fairfax. (Act II)

This sequence and especially the description of the physical actions of these characters provide a strong background for the ironical situation. This sequence is interesting for the pragmatics, because on the verbal level, all utterances are perfectly polite and nothing suggests any discrepancy between

the intention of the characters and the result of the action. Gwendolen requests bread and butter and gets a cake, tea with no sugar and gets four cubes. All irony is provided by means of physical gestures and suggested use of intonation. In exchange, what the character of Gwendolen says is suggesting that she is superior to Cecily, since she is from the town, so she provides Cecily a lesson of the latest trends in the social life of the London upper class.

Example 11

The most ironical situation of the play is the resolution of the play, when Jack learns that his real name really is Ernest, so all the time he had full right to call himself like this. Jack during his whole life thought that he had been Jack, an anonymous foundling from the train station adopted by a wealthy man, who gave him his name and protection. Therefore he invented his second name Ernest, which he used in the city. The end of the play reveals that the Jack is not an anonymous foundling, but a child of Algernon's mother, who was lost in an ironical way – his absent-minded governess coincidentally changed him for a suitcase full of books. So, irony of fate come into the play – the thing that he only imagined in his wildest dreams became true. The moral lesson coming from this play is – choose carefully your dreams, because they may become true, what really happened in this play, and what must be called only “the irony of fate”.

These examples provide a brief insight into the play, represent some of the most typical qualities of Oscar Wilde's wit, and give some data to analyse irony in the play.

3. CONCLUSION

On the basis of aforementioned examples, several conclusions can be made. These eleven examples were chosen in order to prove the presence of irony in Wilde's play.

One of the conclusions can be that irony is dominantly indicated neither explicitly, nor implicitly. Only one of the examples was supported with the intensifier, “even” (Example 3). All the other ironical statements were offered to the reader without any verbal markers.

The conclusion is that verbal irony plays a significant role; situational irony is equally prominent. Out of eleven presented examples, only four of the examples conveying irony appeared to be verbal, remaining seven examples were either a combination of ironic situation and ironic statement, or described purely ironic situation.

Without the doubt it can be also concluded, that selected ironical statements and situations were used purely to achieve humoristic effect.

The selected examples demonstrate that irony is one of the most frequently used implicit verbal expressions. In this particular play the irony was used by variety of characters regardless of their sex, age or social ranking to achieve their particular goal. This shows us that many literary texts or other types of linguistic material can be used for pragmatic analysis and should be treated uniquely and carefully in order to find implicit meanings in the words and actions of the characters.

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