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Critical Pragmatics: errors, lies and ironies

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Pragmatic theories usually start from explaining "paradigmatic" cases, that is, non-erroneous, sincere and literal utterances of declarative sentences. The idea would be to first establish the basis of a general pragmatic account, and then accommodate "other cases" to it.

The aim of this paper is to argue that Critical Pragmatics (Korta & Perry 2006, 2007) can adequately make this step: I will show how we can explain erroneous, insincere and non-literal cases of speech starting from critical pragmatic grounds. I will do so under the pretext of explaining ironic utterances.

4.1 Critical Pragmatics

While we are browsing Mr. Fog's art collection, he claims:

(1) I really like this painting.

Mr. Fog is not intending to deceive us –he actually likes the painting. Neither he is speaking figuratively –he is not looking through the window and talking about the superb colors of the hills in San Francisco during sunset. And he has not made a mistake when uttering (1) –he did not want to say that he likes fainting. Mr. Fog has

been sincere, literal and has not made any error. There we have an example of a paradigmatic case of speech.

Critical Pragmatics states that every utterance has a variety of contents, even the most paradigmatic, simple ones. Different contexts would permit different hearers to grasp a different content. Among these contents, there is one that we call the "locutionary content" (**P_R**) of the utterance, which is overall comparable to what has typically been called "THE content of an utterance;"[*] that is, Perry's (2001) "referential content," "content$_C$" or "official content;" basically, the content obtained after disambiguations, precisifications of vague terms, and the fixing of the references of context-sensitive expressions.

So Mr. Fog uttered (1) "I really like this painting," whose locutionary content is:

(P_R1) THAT **MR. FOG** LIKES **MUNCH'S "THE SCREAM."**[†]

But it is not just that: Mr. Fog actually believes that he really likes that painting. Well, in fact, he also believes that San Francisco is a beautiful city, that 3 plus 5 is 8, that his mother's name is Loli, and what not. So that one is just one of his many beliefs. However, this belief stands out in Mr. Fog's uttering (1), for it has a special role: it is the belief that he intended to communicate when he uttered "I really like this painting" – it is the belief that motivated his uttering (1).

We call this belief the speaker's motivating belief (MB), and it is the one whose content matches the locutionary content of the utterance in paradigmatic cases, as it happens in this case:

(P_R1) THAT **MR. FOG** REALLY LIKES **MUNCH'S "THE SCREAM."**

[*] Following the traditional monopropositionalist dogma –which claims that there is one and only one proposition linked to every utterance (Korta, 2007).

[†] Following Perry's (2001) notation, boldface stands for the propositional constituent: italic when the constituent is an "identifying condition" or "mode of presentation" and not the object that meets the condition; roman when it is the object and not any condition or mode of presentation.

(MB$_1$) THAT **MR. FOG** REALLY LIKES **MUNCH'S "THE SCREAM."**

Let's consider now an ironic example:

X, with whom A has been on close terms until now, has betrayed a secret of A's to a business rival. A and his audience both know this. A says:

[(2)] X is a fine friend. (Grice, 1967/1989: 34)

Whoever knows the context of the utterance, will easily guess that A is talking about his coworker X, and so they will grasp the locutionary content of A's utterance without much trouble:

(P$_R$2) THAT **X** IS A FINE FRIEND.

Now, whoever knows that A is talking about X –just the X who has certainly betrayed A— will also know that A does not actually believe that X is a fine friend. And, if THAT **X** IS A FINE FRIEND is not the content of one of A's beliefs, that can in no way be the content of A's motivating belief.

In irony, to begin with, we will always have a mismatching between the content of the speaker's motivating belief and the locutionary content of the utterance. Irony is not a paradigmatic case.

4.2 Mistakes

My aunt Maribel has four daughters, and she often gets their names mixed. Today she wanted to say that Maialen had come, but she uttered:

(3) Begoña has come.

The hearers, as they know Maribel's daughters, will immediately grasp the locutionary content of the utterance:

(P_R3) THAT **BEGOÑA** HAS COME.

That is to say, they will understand that Begoña –Maribel's elder daughter— has come. Nevertheless, Maribel does not believe that Begoña has come; she instead believes that Maialen –her youngest daughter— has come, and that was in fact the belief she intended to communicate –that was her motivating belief.

(MB_3) THAT **MAIALEN** HAS COME.

Just as in the fine friend example, in this case the speaker's motivating belief does not match the locutionary content of the utterance. However, Maribel was not intending to be ironic –she just has too many daughters to remember their names.

There are some differences between this last mismatch and that found in the fine friend example. Maribel's mismatch has not been made intentionally –she has just made a mistake when confusing the names. On the contrary, A was totally aware that he was uttering "X is a fine friend" while not believing that X is a fine friend.

The ironic speaker intentionally mismatches the content of her motivating belief and the locutionary content of the utterance. That intentionality in the mismatching is what distinguishes irony from errors.

4.3 Lies

Irati, 18, is in a San Francisco bar. She knows that the law in California does not allow drinking alcohol unless you are older than 21. When she orders a beer, the barman asks her how old she is. Irati replies:

(4) I'm 21.

The barman can easily grasp the locutionary content of that utterance:

(P_R4) THAT **IRATI** IS 21.

However, Irati does not believe that she is 21. Irati knows very well that she is 18. So the content she has communicated cannot match the contents of her motivating belief. Moreover, Irati has not mixed numbers, has not confused her age, or whatever an error she could have done. Irati has intentionally made an utterance whose contents mismatch the contents of her beliefs –just as our ironic speaker, and unlike our absentminded, mistaken Maribel. But Irati was not being ironic.

In fact, there is a big difference between this last example and irony. When being ironic, the speaker intends the hearer to recognize:

i) that the referential content of her motivating belief and the locutionary content of the utterance are discordant, that is, they mismatch; and

ii) that the speaker intends the hearer to recognize i).

That is to say: the ironic speaker intends the hearer to recognize both the mismatching and her intention to make it recognizable –the ironic speaker's mismatching is *overt*.

And overtness distinguishes irony from lies: when a speaker is lying, as our last speaker, she intends the hearer not to recognize that the contents of her beliefs do not match the contents of her utterance –she does not want the hearer to recognize her lying.

4.4 Ironies

The ironic speaker overtly and intentionally mismatches the contents of her motivating belief and the locutionary content of her utterance. This basic characteristic carries big consequences for ironic utterances.

To start with, due to the overt mismatching of ironic utterances, the speaker does not commit herself to the locutionary content of the utterance when being ironic (i.e., she does not take responsibilities for believing in its truth). This sets irony apart from the other cases we have considered so far: in every other case the speaker was indeed committed to that content.

Consequently, the ironic speaker does not *say* the locutionary content of the utterance. Saying implies committing (Korta and Perry 2007: 171), and there is not commitment in ironic utterances.

A big question arouses here: why, then, utter a sentence ironically, if it is not to say something? Well, the ironic speaker says nothing, but implicates a content. That content is implicated by making as if to say the locutionary content. For example, our speaker, A, may have intended to implicate something along the lines of:

Ironic content$_1$: THAT **X** IS NOT A FINE FRIEND, THAT **A** HAS BEEN A FOOL BELIEVING IN **X**, THAT HE SHOULD NOT HAVE TRUSTED HIM.

We call this content the "ironic content" of the utterance, since it is the speaker's having implicated them that makes the utterance ironic.

4.5 Conclusion

Explaining non-erroneous, sincere and literal utterances of declarative sentences is just a first step of a long trip. Explaining cases beyond paradigmatic ones would be the next challenge for any general pragmatic account. Here I have shown that Critical Pragmatics can accomplish this mission without much trouble: having left apart the

monopropositionalist dogma, errors, lies and ironies can be adequately explained using no more than the basic tools included within our general pragmatic approach.

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