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Paradox and oxymoron revisited

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Abstract

The study of paradox and oxymoron has been a matter of central concern within traditional rhetoric and literature, where the two phenomena are simply regarded as tropes or figures of speech. In this paper we shall approach paradox and oxymoron from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective in order to analyse how they are produced and understood. In fact, there is a scarcity of serious studies on how these two tropes work from this stance. In order to fill this gap, following Herrero (2009), we shall focus on the cognitive operations that characterise them and on their specific contextual effects. Moreover, we shall see how paradox and oxymoron can also co-occur with other conceptual analytical phenomena such as metonymy and metaphor (e.g., He is a stupid brain, to be dead living).

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1. Introduction

We shall first draw a clear-cut distinction between irony, paradox, and oxymoron since irony is closely related to these tropes. Whereas irony is mainly based on extra-textual reference (e.g., Nice day today! in the context of evident foul weather), paradox (except for situational paradox) and oxymoron are purely intra-textual, as we shall show below. So, although the three figures can be explained on the basis of contrast relationships and they follow the same interpretation stages, paradox and oxymoron present a contrast which is found in the linguistic expression itself.

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Furthermore, paradox has a propositional dimension while oxymoron works at predicate level. Thus, we can define these tropes as meaning-derivation processes whereby the hearer reinterprets the incongruity or incompatibility found within the conceptual structure of an utterance so that it fits in the context in which it has been produced. From the point of view of Pragmatics, by means of these tropes the contextual effects generated by the expression with the inner clash are highlighted.

The next sections analyse in detail the cognitive operations (i.e. any interpretive procedure that the speaker/hearer has to use in order to generate/understand a specific utterance –Ruiz de Mendoza & Peña, 2005; Ruiz de Mendoza & Galera-Masegosa, 2012--) and contextual effects (of the kind postulated for other tropes within Relevance Theory – Sperber & Wilson 1995; Vega, 2007--) that underlie both the production and interpretation of paradox and oxymoron. The examples have been extracted from a multi-faced collection of data compiled from The British National Corpus (BNC), The Corpus of American English, and selected Google searches.

2. Paradox

We shall divide paradox into two different types, namely verbal and situational. Verbal paradox presents two or more terms that generate input spaces whose conceptual structures stand in contrast. In order to solve this contrast a projection space is created via integration and accommodation operations in such a way that the structure of the apparently contrasting input spaces is possible in a given context; from this space we can derive the contextual effects produced by the utterance. Consider:

1. *I must be cruel only to be kind.* (Hamlet)

Sometimes doing harm is a way of setting the stage for something good to happen. The idea is not necessarily that one is cruel and kind at the same time, but rather that being cruel will help you to behave kindly later. We are dealing with two contrasting mental spaces although they are interdependent, also linked by a CAUSE-EFFECT relationship.

![Fig. 1. I must be cruel only to be kind (Herrero, 2009, p. 204).](image-url)

2. *They have ears but hear not* (the Bible).

Jesus was talking about hypocritical Jews who would not take his message. They were listening to him but they were ignoring his message. The verb ‘hear’ is being used metaphorically to mean ‘understand’ (UNDERSTANDING IS HEARING, i.e. PHYSICAL PERCEPTION). The metaphor is cued by the literal incongruity between having ears and not hearing as a way to sort out the semantic clash.
3. *Hear the sound of silence.*

The sound of silence is the false perceptual impression that there is sound in a context in which it is impossible to hear anything because there is no actual sound. Or it may refer to the almost imperceptible noise produced by natural elements in a context which is extremely soundless (e.g. in the desert). We solve the incongruity by calling upon a weaker version of the category ‘silence’, whereby ‘silence’ is not ‘absolute silence’ but simply ‘prevailing silence’.

As for situational paradox (or situational irony), it is a type of paradox based on an exophoric reference that emerges from the contrast arising between the context of situation and our cognitive environment (to give an example, imagine that we are in summer and it is freezing and snowing).

In this kind of paradox, there is a mental space which is generated by the context (i.e. it is very cold) and another one abstracted away from someone’s expectations or world knowledge (i.e. if it is summer, it should be hot). The resolution of situational paradox is based upon the incorporation of one of the input spaces into the other via the creation of a figurative space or *projection space* in terms of Ruiz de Mendoza & Peña (2005). Ultimately, the hearer should find out an appropriate context of situation for the accommodation of the resulting integrated cognitive structure to take place.

We have further identified cases of overstated and understated paradox. As regards overstated paradox, we shall go back to example (3) above, which may be either reinforced, as in *Hear the loud sound of silence*, or mitigated as in *the whisper of silence*. In both examples, we can further distinguish between the speaker or the hearer’s point of view.
3. Oxymoron

Oxymora are characterised by the fact that one or more of the features in the matrix of features of one of the concepts used is either negated or contradicted by the other one. For instance, in the oxymoron *Sweet sorrow*, ‘sorrow’ could include the following set of features: sadness, bitterness, grief, unhappiness, regret, etc. Hence, ‘sweet’ (which leads to happiness, pleasure, joy...) obviously antagonises ‘bitterness’ and the other features in such a way that opposition emerges.

4. *Parting is such sweet sorrow!*
The example of *Sweet sorrow* could be included in the following situation: imagine that you are in a party and you hook up with a pretty girl, when it comes the farewell until seeing her the next day, that very moment could be considered to be full of ‘sweet sorrow.’ Contrary to the belief that the meaning of ‘sweet’ is the pervading one in the expression rather than the innuendoes expressed by ‘sorrow’, the two feelings are in opposition and balanced at the same time.

In terms of Cognitive Linguistics, a mental space which is generated by the term ‘sweet’ and another one corresponding to ‘sorrow’ stand in opposition. The resolution of this figure is also based upon the incorporation of the structure of both input spaces and their accommodation in a specific context of situation.

![Figure 5](Herrero, 2009, p. 208)

More examples of similar oxymora can be found in:

5. Sad joy.
6. Wise fool.

In (5) the expression *Sad joy* can be paraphrased as ‘sadness caused by some event that also produced joy,’ as in *Her eyes shone with relief and sad joy.* As for (6), we can find this collocation in language instances like *Be not a fool, even worse, be not a wise fool* for a wise fool thinks himself wise when he is indeed a fool.

More instances of oxymoron can be found in:

7. Clamorous silence.
8. Original copy.
10. Calm disturbance.
12. Loving hate.

(7) can be expressed on occasions such as being in a religious procession in Seville, Spain, when there is total silence because of respect, but popular clamour is felt; (8) can be an expression uttered to refer to an unusual version that a musical group has made out of another group’s song; (9) appeared on a bank advertising leaflet in which the entity offered a mortgage and a credit at the same time so that the mortgage could be paid; (10) may be uttered by a father who is looking at his children noisily playing at their safe home; (11) can refer to the lover’s pinches, which hurt but are desired; finally, (12) can be used for instances in which a sweetheart makes a joke to their lover.
We have also identified cases of overstated and understated oxymoron. As for overstated oxymoron, consider *This is terribly good*, which contains an oxymoron based on the antagonism between ‘terrible’ and ‘good.’ Similar cases are: *awfully/damned/wicked good*. Now consider *This is terribly excellent*, instance in which there is a reinforcement operation (‘good’ > ‘excellent’) on the part of the speaker.

An instance of understated oxymoron can be built upon the expression ‘stupid genius’ if we elaborate it into *He’s a bit of a stupid genius*. This example is characterised by a mitigation operation on the part of the speaker.
Lastly, the fact that there exist other antagonic combinations that do not qualify as cases of oxymoron can be explained as cases in which the opposing components of the expressions do not have a specific situation in which they can be interpreted. Also, there exist combinations which have already been crystallized and have a meaning on their own, which is not the sum of its parts (e.g. bittersweet, an Eastern flavour and sauce in origin).

4. Complex tropes

Interestingly enough, paradox and oxymoron can also co-occur with other conceptual analytical phenomena such as metonymy and metaphor.

Let us consider the expression He is a stupid brain uttered to refer to someone who has acted in a stupid or foolish way. This sentence could be roughly paraphrased as ‘he has a stupid intelligence’ and is based on a target-in-source metonymy developed within the domain that corresponds to the term ‘brain.’

\[\text{He is a stupid brain} \]

Fig. 8. He is a stupid brain (Herrero, 2009, p. 212).

Please note how the meaning changes completely in the expression He’s a stupid big brain, in which there is an overstated oxymoron based on the previous example and which means ‘he is very intelligent but has acted stupidly.’ Similarly, we may also have cases of understated oxymoron based on representational models, as in He’s a bit of a stupid brain.

As far as metaphor is concerned, let us have a look at the following extract from Google:

\[(...) \text{into the car with a pistol... pointing at me...honey I was dead living, I thought he would kill me... but he collected my bag which has the whole money.}\]

If we focus on the expression ‘dead living,’ we can interpret it as an oxymoron in which the term ‘dead’ is based on the metaphor DEATH IS INACTIVITY. In this connection, from the perspective of Cognitive Linguistics, the experiential basis for this metaphor comes from the fact that when we are very frightened, we clearly resemble a dead person, since we make no movements and we are unable to react. The features which are characteristic of a dead person are mapped onto the image of a very scared person.
5. Paradox, oxymoron, and contextual effects

Finally, as regards paradox and oxymoron, as models that focus on literal contextual effects, the usual effect is to catch the receiver’s attention and cause them to reflect upon something. This is so because to solve either the paradox or the oxymoron, it is essential to discover the meaning implications that underlie the statement.

13. False truth.  
15. Wise fool.  
16. The sound of silence.  
17. They have ears but hear not.  
18. I must be cruel only to be kind. (Hamlet).  
19. Do not read this sentence.  
21. Hell’s Angels.  
22. Deafening silence.

As we can observe, (13)-(16) are cases of oxymoron in which the main purpose is to make the addressee deeply think about what they mean (obviously in their respective contexts). (17) and (18) are instances of paradox also to make the reader reflect upon something. (19) and (20) are rather humorous cases of paradox. Finally, (21) and (22) create a dramatic effect.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have distinguished between paradox and oxymoron: the former has a propositional dimension, while the latter is restricted to just two or three predicates.

We have not only identified two different types of paradox (verbal and situational) but we have also studied their underlying operations: to solve the contrast produced by two or more terms, a projection space is created via integration and accommodation operations in such a way that the conceptual structure of the apparently contrasting terms is possible in a given context. We have further identified cases of overstated and understated paradox (e.g. Hear the loud sound of silence or the whisper of silence respectively).

With regard to oxymoron, it is accomplished via the same operations as paradox and it may also appear in combination with overstatement (e.g. This is terribly excellent) and understatement (e.g. He’s a bit of a stupid genius).

Moreover, we have shown that the tropes under scrutiny can also co-occur with other conceptual analytical phenomena such as metonymy and metaphor, as attested by He is a stupid brain and the expression to be dead living. To end with, we have described the most prototypical contextual effects that are brought about by both paradox and oxymoron.

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