



## Pragmatic study of Irony in James Thurber's short story "the secret life of Walter mitty"

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### Abstract

*This paper is about the irony in James Thurber's short story (the secret life of Walter Mitty) . It is a textual examination of various forms and purposes of irony in the story. The notion of irony is usually synonymous with a straightforward form like satire with an accompanying contention of narratorial moral presupposition.*

*The goal of this paper is to approach this idea from a pragmatic standpoint and it attempts to answer the following question: What are the pragmatic functions of the types of Irony used in this story? The paper starts with an introduction, a theoretical study and a practical one. The analysis of the Irony presented in the story is straightforward and there are many references about it.*

*The model 'Grice's maxims' is considered suitable for analyzing the story and locating the irony that will be used as data. It was found that there is irony in the story with many utterances because the four types of maxims were violated to show the irony of these utterances. The model then can be applied in the analysis of short stories.*

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## 1. Introduction

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" is the most well-known story by American author James Thurber. To tremendous praise, the tale was initially released in the New Yorker magazine in 1939. It was reprinted in Reader's Digest in 1943 as well as in Thurber's 1942 collection My World—And Welcome To It.

This story revolves around a middle-aged, middle-class man who escapes his ordinary life by daydreaming about heroic victory. Following the story's release, Walter Mitty rose to prominence as the quintessential American. Even in modern times, some still refer to a particular type of daydreaming man as a "Walter Mitty type." Hollywood produced a film with the same name in 1947.

Thurber employs irony as a literary device; in this essay, the pragmatic interpretation of ironic speech will be discussed .

Irony is one of the most prevalent elements of humorous or nonliteral language .

Wilson and Sperber (1993:76) note that because irony is governed by a number of different mental processes, it is regarded as a complex pragmatic phenomena. Usually, an ironic statement creates some kind of conflict between its intended meaning and its actual meaning. This distinction often results from the pragmatic interpretation of a phrase. Thus, it's important to understand that the pragmatic interpretation of an ironic term has its intended meaning, so it's important not to accept it literally.

### 1.1 Research questions

The research attempts to answer the following question: What are the pragmatic functions of the types of Irony used in this story?.

### 1.2 aims of the study

This study aims at investigating the selected short stories from a pragmatic point of view by analyzing Grice's maxims found in the short story.

### 1.3 hypotheses of the study

It is hypothesized that Grice's maxims taxonomy is an appropriate instrument for the analysis of short stories in terms of their types acts recognition, interpretation and understanding procedures of the study.

### 1.4 Procedures of the Study

The procedures of the present study include the following steps:

1. Presenting a theoretical background of short stories.

2. examining the pragmatic aspect of short stories and how to gain a better understanding and convey meaning
3. Collecting data from the selected short story
4. Doing a pragmatic analysis to the selected data

### 1.5 limitation of the study

The study will be limited to the pragmatic analysis of the selected short story.

### 1.6 significance of the study

This study is expected to be significant to students of linguistics and researchers

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Definitions and Theories

'Irony' is derived from the Greek figure Eiron, who surmounted a stronger character by using cunning. This letter is the source of the Greek term "eironeía," which came to signify "dissimulation" or "purposely affected ignorance." The term 'ironia' was then borrowed into Latin, and in the sixteenth century, it was widely used as a figure of speech in English (Wolfsdorf, 2007: 176).

The act of substituting a phrase's figurative meaning with its semantic meaning and taking into account both meanings is necessary to ascertain whether a remark is ironic. Irony, on the other hand, is defined as "saying something but meaning the opposite" and is considered a pragmatic phenomenon in that some action is carried out by the use of an ironic term (Hutcheon 1995: 65).

An ironic utterance is identified when the listener is aware of the violation of pragmatic principles, as maxims of cooperation of some felicity conditions for a speech act, then the opposite of the literal meaning is conveyed, for example:

**-This room is very clean! -**

This utterance is a typical example of irony, and the speaker, a mother, intends to convey something other than what the words explicitly mean (ibid).

Irony, metaphor, and hyperbole are treated by (Grice 1975, Searle 1979) as being in violation of the quality maxim (tell the truth and what you can verify). According to Grice, to flaunt a maxim is to openly break it.

An "obvious lie triggering an implicature contrary in meaning to the literal meaning of the statement" is what Grice defines as irony. (Ziv, 1988: 69).

However, this hypothesis has been criticized by Sperber and Wilson (1981) for failing to explain why speakers would tell blatant lies to make a point that might have been made just as effectively genuinely. Rather than using the term

"echoic allusion" to refer to a thought or speech that can be traced to a specific individual, they provided a definition of irony. As a result, they named their theory "The Echoic Mention Theory." The definitions and theories of irony vary greatly, but the essence of each is always the same; the distinctions come from how the term is understood and how different researchers approach it; for this reason, many theories have been developed by various researchers, such as Sperber and Wilson (1981).

## 2.2 Types of Irony

The three common types of Irony are:

**1. Verbal Irony.** It is "The figure of speech that conveys the opposite meaning of what is literally said" is how it is defined. It is said in daily conversation. Indeed, it is so widely employed that a lot of ironic statements have lost their ironic flavor and become conventional (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 67).

A term or expression that implies the reverse of what is spoken is known as verbal irony (Gibbs, 1994: 362).

It happens when a character says something and then implies or plans to do something else entirely. There is a difference between the speaker's genuine meaning and what he says.

**2. Dramatic Irony.** The distinction between the audience's knowledge and the character's ignorance is known as dramatic irony (Dempster, 1932: 7).

Speaking is not the only thing that goes into dramatic irony. Dramatic irony arises when a character's actions or words have the opposite connotation from the actual circumstances. The difference is between the actual circumstances and what the character says, believes, or acts out. Furthermore, although the reader or audience can perceive the contrast, the character is unable to do so.

**3. Situational Irony:** Situational irony contradicts reasonable expectations and logical cause-and-effect linkages. The irony would be situational, for instance, if a rapacious millionaire bought a lottery ticket and won further millions. This kind of situation is impossible to rationalize. A situation like this appears "unfair." Situational irony is characterized by this feeling of being "unfair" or "unfortunate." People start to wonder if the universe makes sense because they are unable to explain the unfairness. Incongruity between what actually occurs and what is rationally expected to occur is another definition of situational irony (Lagerwelf, 2007: 1705).

## 3. Data Analysis

### 3.1 The Pragmatics of Irony

Expressions that are ironic and those that are not share the same semantics. This could be because on the surface, each of them seems to be syntactically and linguistically equivalent. Distinction appears at the pragmatic level. Compared to irony, which relies almost entirely on the inferential activation of scripts,

jokes typically have a deeper semantics. The main contrast in irony is between the "literal" and the "figurative," or, to put it another way, between what is asserted and what is actually true. (O'Brien and Colston, 2000: 122)

### 3.2 The Pragmatic Functions of the Story

According to the pretense approach, the speaker of an ironical utterance is pretending to perform a speech act while simultaneously expressing a mocking, skeptical or contemptuous attitude to an attributed utterance or thought, Thurber tells the story of Walter Mitty, a man who lives in a dream world to escape from the routines and he suffers every day. In the story there are many ironic phrases that can be understood pragmatically.

According to Grice's maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner are important elements in any communication speech, there are many examples in this story about the violation of these maxims, this means that, the speaker intends to deceive the listener without allowing any implicature of the speech, such as when the speaker is lying. People in real life tend to tell lies for different reasons. For instance:

#### a- "Not so fast! "

During which Walter Mitty and his wife go on their weekly shopping trip. Walter slips into his daydreams, only to be awakened when he has made an error in judgment, such as speeding or driving on the wrong side of the road. This phrase is said by the wife when Walter Mitty was pretended as if he drive a plane in astorm, According to Grice maxims there is a violation of quantity in which a speaker has to make his contribution as informative as required or do not make his contribution more informative than is required. The violation of this maxim produces an utterance that is noticeably odd. So, the irony in this utterance can be interpreted either as a criticize Mitty's driving which it is slowly or can be interpreted as an order or request to not drive so fast.

#### b- You were up to fifty-five

'By this utterance Mrs. Witty makes a violation relation and manner maxims, in that the maxim of relation, where one tries to be relevant, and says things that are pertinent to the discussion, whereas the maxim of manner, when one tries to be as clear, as brief, and as orderly as one can in what one says, and where one avoids obscurity and ambiguity

Allusional pretense' account of irony which involves elements of both attribution and pretense. The pretense element is introduced to deal with a variety of ironical utterances which Kumon-Nakamura et al. see as allusive but not properly echoic. These include ironical assertions such as offers to someone acting inappropriately for their age.

#### c- Quiet!, man.

These words are said by Mitty in a low voice when he trying to pretend as if he can fix the machine easily, but in reality he has no idea about that , so this reflect the fact that there is a violation of quantity maxim in that Grice's maxims of quantity (make your contribution as informative as required)

The function served by this speech is the evaluative function. It evaluates both the mitty's imagination and what other's think about him.

**d- "Give me a fountain pen!"**

The utterance expresses the ironic use of words which serves persuasiveness. The speaker tries to persuade others about his existence and that he can manage the situation . By this utterance, Walter makes a violation in the relation maxim: this maxim means speakers have to avoid obscurity of expressions, avoid ambiguity. But Walter's request for a fountain pen in order to fix the machine during the operation is un clear and strange for others.

**e- That will hold for ten minutes:**

These words are said by the main character Walter Mitty in one of his daydream ,when he imagines himself as a famous surgeon who assists in saving the life of a wealthy patient, a banker named Wellington MacMillan, according to Grice's maxims in conversation ,Violation relation and quantity maxim are raised. It does violate the quality maxim as well since dreams are not real ,hence they are not true and the main idea of this maxim is to be true .

**f- We've been all through!"**

this utterance is said by Walter's wife , he stopped the car in front of the building where his wife went to have her hair done. "Remember to get those overshoes while I'm having my hair done," she said. "I don't need overshoes," said Mitty. She put her mirror back into her bag. "We've been all through that," she said.

Violates quantity and manner appear here since she doesn't give more information about this situation ,also she doesn't be clear whether she truly has a previous experience with this or she only want to criticize him .

**4. Conclusions**

Irony is considered a complicated pragmatic phenomenon because it is ruled by a variety of mental processes traditional approaches to irony group it together with other tropes, such as metaphor, hyperbole and understatement. On this type of approach, all these tropes share the property of involving some discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. In the case of the Gricean approach, irony is accounted for as a violation of the maxims.

A typical ironic statement produces some sort of contradiction between what it truly means and the message it's trying to get through. This difference is frequently the outcome of an utterance's pragmatic interpretation. So, it's crucial

not to take an ironic expression literally for the intended meaning of it is embedded in the pragmatic interpretation.

Irony is represented throughout the short story through variety of ways in that , in ironical utterances, two mechanisms would combine, allowing the speaker to attribute to some actual person or type of person (or people in general) a thought is similar in content to the imaginary speech act.

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