

How Embedded Irony affects Truth-conditions

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This essay demonstrates how irony embeds within the scope of logical/sentential operators, and how it can affect the truth-conditions of the utterances in which it embeds. In the process, it examines several challenges that embedded irony raises for dominant semantic and pragmatic theories, casting doubt on the reliability of the embedding criterion of truth-conditionality. A semantic/truth-conditional account and a refined implicature account are outlined as the main contenders for a unified theory of simple and embedded irony. It is argued that the implicature account on which irony embeds *qua* implicature is superior in that it does not weaken the rationale for the semantics-pragmatics distinction, as the truth-conditional account arguably does. In this way, one can eat the cake and have it: irony is an implicature but it's still embeddable.

This essay examines the semantics/pragmatics of embedded irony, as in (1), and also in logical compounds such as conditionals, disjuncts, or quantifiers and belief-reports.

- (1) Because *he's such a fine friend*, I've struck him off my list.

U uses 'he is such a fine friend' ironically about person Y to express that he is anything but a fine friend. The antecedent is ironic; the compound sentence is not. But the ironic content of the antecedent is part of the meaning of the compound sentence. Insofar as it is the ironic antecedent content (B's not being a friend at all) that has any bearing on whether the consequent content (B's being struck off U's list of friends) is accepted or not, it is reasonable to think that the sentential operator 'because' takes as argument the ironic, rather than the literal, content of the antecedent.

I'll argue for two claims. First, that irony *embeds* in the scope of logical/sentential operators in the following sense: At least some key aspect of what U would naturally convey by uttering a simple (unembedded) irony is also used as a contribution by the complex utterance in which it embeds. Second, insofar as the justification for the consequent relies on the ironic content of the antecedent, the irony may be seen as *affecting the truth-conditions* of the complex utterance (i.e. what U *says/asserts* by the complex utterance rather than what she *implicates* by it).

Both claims pose a serious challenge for semantic and pragmatic theories that aim to provide a unified theory of simple and embedded irony. Gricean-implicature theories are directly under attack since it is difficult to explain how the two claims can be held together: (a) simple irony is an implicature (not affecting truth-conditions), but (b) when it embeds the content that is supposedly implicated *can* affect the truth-conditions of complex utterances.

How can we respond to this challenge? One suggestion is to reject (a) and argue instead that irony is truth-conditional in both simple and embedded cases. This provides a way out of (b) since irony embedding *qua* truth-conditional content can affect the truth-conditions of complex utterances in a way that preserves compositionality. Alternatively, one may maintain (a)—that irony is an implicature in both simple and embedded cases, but the challenge is now to explain how ironic implicatures *can* affect the truth-conditions of complex utterances in which they embed, since compositionality is violated.

I'll discuss the pros and cons of the two possible solutions in relation to the more general phenomenon of so-called *embedded implicatures*. The recent literature focuses on embeddings of scalar implicatures, and generalized implicatures, showing that the alleged implicatures affect, thereby intruding into, the truth-conditions of the logical compounds in which they embed. The debate focused essentially on whether embedded/intrusive implicatures are implicatures at all in Grice's sense, or are rather some kind of conventional but defeasible content of particular expressions, which affect straightforwardly the truth-conditions of the utterance. A key argument deciding this matter is a so-called *embedding criterion* which classifies content that embeds as truth-conditional, banning implicatures from embedding. The dominant line is this: insofar as the apparent implicatures embed, they are not really implicatures but are better accounted for as cases of truth-conditional content obtained via pragmatic ('primary') processes that impact on the truth-conditions of the utterances.

The embedding criterion is inferentially connected to two other theses:

TO: logical/sentential operators are truth-functional

TC: compositionality is truth-conditional.

TO assumes that operators take as arguments truth-conditional content and deliver more complex truth-conditional contents. **TC** assumes that the truth-conditions of an utterance are compositionally determined from truth-conditional contents of its parts. It is in virtue of **TO** and **TC**, I take it, that the embedding criterion makes the truth-conditional predictions it makes.

To the extent that the embedding criterion (and its corollaries **TO** and **TC**) is plausible, it follows either (i) that irony cannot embed *qua* implicature, since implicatures are banned from embedding, and therefore needs to transmute into truth-conditional content, or (ii) that irony (simple or embedded) is not an implicature after all.

I'll flesh out two possible explanations that can meet this challenge:

H1: truth-conditional-*in*/truth-conditional-*out*.

H2: implicature-*in*/truth-conditional-*out*

H1 accommodates (i) by providing a truth-conditional alternative to (ii). Irony is cast in terms of modifications of truth-conditions and hence it predicts that it embeds *qua* truth-conditional content. This then explains how embedded irony can affect the truth-conditions of complex utterances in a way that preserves compositionality, and in accordance with the embedding criterion. Two versions are discussed under this truth-conditional account: a hidden-indexical construal and a pragmatic-modulation construal.

I'll argue that once the consequences of embedded irony are fully appreciated, the motivation of the embedding criterion is seriously undermined. For a theorist applying the embedding strategy to embedded irony to argue that irony is *not* an implicature but a contribution to the truth-conditions of the utterance in which it embeds (and similarly for simple irony), is forced to tell a similar story for other (particularized) implicatures that may embed (e.g. Grice's reference letter example) which are uncontroversially non-conventional and non-generalized. This is surely too much to ask. If *all* implicatures become truth-conditional content what is the point of distinguishing said-content from implicated-content? Unless a principled basis is proposed to filter which embedded implicatures are entitled to truth-conditional treatment, and which are not, the rationale for the semantics-pragmatics distinction is seriously weakened.

To guard against such consequences and preserve the semantics-pragmatics distinction, we face the following dilemma. We must either reject the claim that simple irony involves implicature, and hence that it embeds *qua* implicature, or dispense with the embedding criterion.

H2 defends a suitably refined implicature account of simple and embedded irony so to accommodate (i)—ironic implicatures embed *qua* implicatures—at the cost of giving up embedding criterion.

However, compositionality is violated: implicatures of parts (embedded clauses) *can* affect the truth-conditions of complex utterances. I'll argue that once we relax the truth-conditions of an utterance so that they depend not only on whether its truth-conditional content obtains but also on the felicity-conditions associated with implicatures of its parts, we are released from the constraints of truth-conditional compositionality as currently advocated in the semantics-pragmatics debate. A more sophisticated notion of compositionality is urged to explain how truth-conditions of complex utterances may depend on implicatures of their parts.