IRONIC CONTEXT-FREE IRONIES IN THAI AS CONVENTIONALIZED IMPLICATURES

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Introduction

It is claimed that there are no lexical items in English which are carriers of ironic meanings (Myers 1978). That is, to determine whether an expression is ironic or not depends on context.

Similar to English, most cases of verbal irony in Thai are context-dependent (Panpothong 1996). Yet Thai has expressions which always convey the opposite of literal meaning. In this paper, I refer to them as context-free ironies. Like dead metaphors, these expressions start life as conversational implicature before by-passing their literal meaning. Thus, they are appropriately viewed as conventionalized ironic implicatures.

The paper consists of three sections. In the first section, the definition of verbal irony adopted in this paper shall be provided. In the second section, examples of context-free irony in Thai shall be presented. And in the last section, the context-free ironies shall be viewed on the basis of Grice's theory.

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The Definition

Irony is basically classified into two types; verbal irony, and plot irony (Amante 1975:17). While plot irony involves an unexpected or ill-timed situation or event, verbal irony is related to the use of language. To some pragmaticists (Myers 1978, Wilson and Sperber 1991), a litotes such as *He was not unmindful* which means 'He gave careful attention' (Harmsworth 1968:66) should be included as an example of verbal irony. Nonetheless, others consider it to be another type of rhetorical device outside the domain of irony. And while the terms *irony* and *sarcasm* are used interchangeably in some studies, there are scholars who argue that the two terms are different concepts. There seems to be no established definition of verbal irony among pragmaticists and literary theorists. For this reason, I find it essential to provide the definition of verbal irony adopted in this paper at the outset.

Chen (1990:2) and Martin (1992:8) note that verbal irony might be the most complicated among all figures of speech and too varied to be given a simple definition. To include different types of irony, Haverkate (1990) suggests a broad definition—irony as a device of saying one thing and meaning the other. This

definition is obviously too loose since it includes cases of implicature or other rhetorical devices such as metaphor, understatement, etc.

According to the most widely adopted definition, irony is a rhetorical device of saying one thing and meaning the opposite (Knox 1961:30). Wilson and Sperper (1992:54-55) argue that the definition is not only too restricted but is also inappropriate. Nevertheless, their argument is not so solid because the supportive examples they use are questionable. According to them, the following examples are intuitively ironic but will be excluded if we follow the well-known definition.

(1) We come upon a customer complaining in a shop, blind with rage and making a public exhibition of himself, I turn to you and say: *You can tell he's upset*.

(2) *When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life*, said in a rainy rush-hour traffic jam in London.

It is obvious that examples (1) and (2) do not convey the opposite of the literal meaning. However, the claim that examples (1) and (2) are intuitively ironic is disputable. (1) is an example of understatement which some scholars consider to be another type of rhetorical device, while (2), to some speakers of English, is intuitively non-ironic (Dr. Patricia A. Lee, personal communication).

In this paper, I take the well-known definition. Verbal irony refers to expressions which convey the opposite of the literal meaning. It might be worth noting that the term *opposite* here is used in a broad sense. The oppositeness may be binary antonymy such as the relationship between *true* and *false*, gradable antonymy such as the relationship between the words *clever* and *stupid*, or converse such as the case of *father-child*.

Context-free ironies in Thai

It is found that most cases of verbal irony in Thai depend on context (Panpothong 1996). However, Thai has expressions which always convey the opposite of the literal meaning. The context-free ironies in Thai are as follow:

ngaam naa

> ngaam[2] naa
> gracefulface
> 'disgraceful'

According to the *Royal Institute Dictionary*, the word *ngaam* which means 'graceful' and the word *naa* which means 'face' form a compound which is always used as a sarcastic expression meaning 'disgraceful'. Consider the following examples taken from conversations in contemporary novels.

(3)
ngaam	naa
gracefulface	
la	si
fin.	fin.
mEE[3]	man liang
mother	res. raise
luuk	prasaa aray
child	way what

'Shame! How did her mother raise her?'

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[2] *ng* represents the velar nasal.
[3] **E** represents the low front vowel.

(4)   The following expression is said by a woman to her sister. The woman has just been insulted by a man who came to see the sister.

ngaam	naa
gracefulface	
llak@@n[4]	
exceedingly	
yuu	diidii	kEE
stay	good	you
pay	kiaw	kray	maa
go	court	who	come
daa	chan	
insult	I	

'Shame on you! You invited someone to insult me.'

phOOtuadii, mEEtuadii

phOOtuadii[5] , mEEtuadii
good one
'one who causes trouble'

Bundhumedha (1977:148) points out that terms of address with pleasant meanings such as phOOcaawprakhun 'a benefactor', phOOmahacamr@@n 'a prosperous person' can be used as sarcastic remarks depending on intonation and/or context.

But the term of phOOtuadii is now used only as a sarcastic expression meaning 'one who causes trouble'.

(5)   phOOtuadii   paynaymaa
       good one   where have
                      you been
       'Double trouble, where have you been?'

paakdii

The expression paakdii, which literally means 'good mouth', is another expression which is rarely used literally now. In the following example taken from a novel, paakdii is used with an ironic intent.
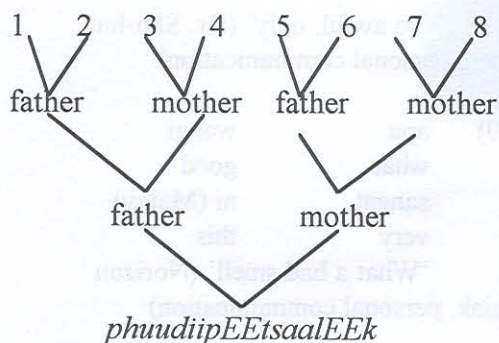
(6)   M:caamOOn   yuu   nay
       Chamorn   stay   where
       'Where is Chamorn?'

       F:yuu   nay   kOO
       stay   where
       chang   th@
       no matter   final particle
       rlang   aray
       story   what
       khOOng   khun
       of   you
       'It's none of your business.'

       M:paakdii   cing
       good mouth   really
       'Sharp tongue.'

phuudiipEEtsaalEEk

phuudii pEEt
aristocrat   eight
salEEk
lineage
'spurious aristocrat'

According to Pramoj Na Ayudhaya (1986:110), the expression phuudii pEEt saalEEk originally meant 'an aristocrat of the bluest blood--a person whose great-grandparents are from aristocratic families.

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[4] @ represents the mid central vowel.
[5] O represents the low back vowel.

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1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8
 \ /     \ /     \ /     \ /
father  mother  father  mother
    \     /         \     /
    father          mother
        \             /
         \           /
      phuudiipEEtsaalEEk
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In previous times, the Thais were either *phuudii* 'aristocrat' or *pray* 'peasant' (Rojanaphruk 1994:13). Due to the change from absolute monarchy to democracy and the educational reform which resulted in an increase in educational opportunities, the clear-cut sectorization between *phuudii* and *pray* does not exist any longer. The expression *phuudiipEEtsaalEEk* is now seldom used literally. It is used only as an ironic expression with the intended meaning 'spurious aristocrat' to convey a sarcastic attitude towards those who assume the behavior and values of aristocrats in the past.

The expression *kaaw maykhaan* 'nine pole' is sometimes added to the popular idiom to make it a more sarcastic remark. The word *salEEk* also means 'a carrying frame made of rattan'. It is used with *maykhaan* 'a pole for carrying *salEEk* across the shoulder' by street vendors. The expressions *phuudiiphEEtsaalEEk kaawmaykhaan* 'an aristocrat with eight carrying frames and nine poles' is always used ironically meaning 'affected aristocrat'.

pras@@t

The word *pras@@t* which originally meant 'excellent' is now used as a sarcastic expression meaning 'terrible' or 'extremely bad' in colloquial Thai. Nonetheless, it should be noted that in formal or literary Thai, it still has the meaning 'excellent'.

suaytempradaa, suaytaay, suaytaayhaa

suay (or any adjectives with pleasant meaning) + *tempradaa/taay/taayhaa* beautiful + intolerably, destructively 'awful'

According to the *Royal Institute Dictionary*, *tempradaa* and *taay* are modifiers meaning 'temthii' or 'intolerably, whereas *taayhaa* which was originally used as a verb meaning 'to die of cholera or bubonic plague' is now used as a modifier meaning 'destructively'.

Bundhumedha (1977:146) points out that some speakers like to use a word that has negative meaning such as *pilIk* 'oddly', *banlay* 'destructively', or *raaykaat* 'evilly' with an adjective that has pleasant meaning to indicate an intensification of meaning. For example, *suaybanlay* means 'extremely beautiful'.

In contrast with *suay banlay* or *suay raaykaat* which can be ironic or non-ironic depending on context, *suay tempradaa/taay/taayhaa* are always used ironically with the intended meaning 'awful'.

suaysamaymii

The expression *samaymii* 'has never had' is a slang which has been widely used recently. The popular expression might come from:

samaymii   kray   priap
has never had anyone   compare
'nobody can compare'

For example, *ngoo samaymii* means 'incomparably stupid'. The expression *suay samaymii* which originally meant 'incomparably beautiful' is now used as an ironic remark with the intended meaning 'awful'

wiseet

According to the *Royal Institute Dictionary*, *wiseet* is a Sanskrit loanword meaning 'terrific' or 'superb'. However, in daily conversation, the word is now used as an ironic remark meaning 'terrible'. Several examples of *wiseet* used ironically are found in contemporary novels.

(7)   mEEkhunmEEthuunhua
        dear girl, good girl
        wiseet   lIak@@n
        terrific   exceedingly
        na   mEE
        final particle
        'My dear girl, you're so terrible.'

(8)   khun   kOO   mIankan
        you   same
        wiseet   nak
        terrific   so
        'You too are so terrible.'

Like *pras@@t, wiseet* still has its literal meaning 'superb' in formal or literary language.

Thai is not the only language which seems to have context-free ironies. The following examples are from Mandarin Chinese and Malay.

(9)   mei   de
        beauty   marker
        mao   pao (Mandarin Chinese)
        emit   bubble

'so awful, ugly' (Dr. Shu-hui Chen, personal communication)

(10)   apa   wangi
         what   good
         sangat   ni (Malay)
         very   this
         'What a bad smell' (Norizan Rajak, personal communication)

According to my consultants, the ironist does not need to impose any special intonation to signal irony in the above examples because the expressions always convey the opposite of the literal meaning.

Context-free ironies in Thai as conventionalized ironic implicatures

Grice (1975) points out that there are implications, expressed in natural language, which are not deduced from any rules of inference in logic. The term **conversational implicature** is introduced to refer to these implications. According to Grice, we calculate conversational implicature on the basis of the **cooperative principle** by using contextual information and/or background knowledge. The cooperative principle consists of four maxims.

1. The maxim of Quality: (i) Do not say what you believe to be false. (ii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
2. The maxim of Quantity: (i) Make your contribution as informative as is required. (ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
3. The maxim of Relation: Be relevant.
4. The maxim of Manner: (i) Avoid obscurity of expression. (ii) Avoid

ambiguity. (iii) Be brief. (vi) Be orderly (Grice 1975:46).

It is the maxim of quality which is directly related to verbal irony. According to Grice (1975), verbal irony is an instance of conversational implicature arising from the flouting of the first maxim of Quality. The following example illlustrates his idea.

(11)   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 *X is a fine friend*. (Gloss: It is perfectly obvious to A and his audience that what A has said or has made as if to say is something he does not believe, the audience knows that A knows that this is obvious to the audience. So, unless A's utterance is entirely pointless, A must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward. This must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward.)(Grice 1975:53)

Like ordinary conversational implicature, verbal irony is context-dependent. The expression *X is a fine friend* can be used without any ironic intent in the context where X has just been a great help to the speaker. But based on the context described in (11), the expression is undoubtedly ironic. The hearer, by assuming that the speaker is observing the maxim of quality, realizes the speaker intends the opposite of the literal meaning. Grice's position is taken by pragmaticists such as Carter (1981), Leech (1983), and Chen (1990). Chen (1990) claims that verbal irony is best described as conversational implicature because it is

context-dependent, defeasible, and calculable on the basis of the cooperative principle. However, the ironic expressions presented in the previous section appear to be counter-examples to the claim because they are context-free and noncancelable. The following example said by a teacher to her student who has just won a scholarship would be considered to be very odd by Thai speakers.

(12)   *ngaam naa   cing
        beautiful face   really
        luuksit   khruu
        student   teacher
        sOOpchingthun   daay
        win a scholarship   can
        khruu   diicayduay
        teacher   happy for you
'Shame! You've won a scholarship. I'm happy for you.'

The unacceptability of the above example is due to the fact that the expression *ngaamnaa* has already lost the meaning 'graceful'. Thus, when the context is conflicting with the ironic meaning, the expression is considered to be very unusual.

It seems that the idea of conversational implicature cannot account for the context-free ironies in Thai. Nevertheless, the theory provides some explanation. Grice (1975) notes that what starts life as conversational implicature can become conventionalized. A good example of conventionalized implicature is the case of dead metaphors--the metaphors that bypass their original meaning and adopt a new meaning identical with the earlier metaphorical meaning. The difference between context-dependent metaphors and
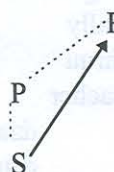
dead metaphors is illustrated by the following figure.

Metaphorical Utterance
(simple)

R

P

S

Dead Metaphor

R

P

S
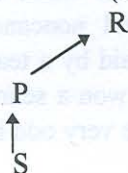
Metaphorical Utterance (simple): A speaker says S is P but means metaphorically that S is R. Utterance meaning is arrived at by going through literal sentence meaning.
Dead Metaphor: The original sentence meaning is bypassed and the sentence acquires a new literal meaning identical with the former metaphorical utterance meaning (Searle 1982:537).

It is hypothesized that context-free ironies in Thai, like dead metaphors, start life as conversational implicature. They, later, bypass their earlier literal meaning and adopt a new meaning identical with the former ironic meaning. As mentioned above, *pres@@t* and *wiseet*[6] are still used literally in formal and literary language.

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[6] It was pointed out to me by a reader that *pras@@t* and *wiseet* are context-dependent ironies. That is, they can still be used literally in some contexts. However, it was confirmed by six informants and two of my colleagues at the department of Thai that the two

As for *ngaamnaa*, even though the meaning given in the *Royal Institute Dictionary* (1982) is the ironic one, we have a piece of evidence to prove that it was once used literally. According to the *Dictionary of the Siamese Language* (1873:131), *ngaamnaa* means 'being graced by having a good wife or property'.

There seems to be a significant difference between the context-free ironies in Thai and dead metaphors that should be pointed out. As mentioned, the context-free ironies have entirely lost their former literal meaning. But as for the dead metaphors, they can still be used literally. The expression *kick the bucket* in English is considered to be a dead metaphor because the speaker can recognize the intended meaning immediately when used metaphorically. Yet the expression is taken literally in certain contexts.

To summarize, it is found that Thai has expressions which are always used ironically. These expressions can properly be viewed as conventionalized ironic implicature.[7]

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expressions are always uased ironically in daily conversation. An informant notes also that *pras@@t* amd *wiseet* used literally in conversation can be found in translated works but not in Thai novels.

[7] It is worth pointing out that Grice uses the term *conventional implicature* to refer to the implicatures which are non-cancelable and given by convention. Yet the term is not adopted in this paper. As Sadock (1978) points out, the notion is vague and questionable because Grice's discussion on this idea is fairly brief and the only examples provided are cases of connectors such as *however*.

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