

The Pragmatic Functions of *manage to-infinitive*¹

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Abstract

This study investigates which of the Gricean sub-maxims is flouted when *manage to-infinitive* implicates humor or irony. Conventionally, the target *to-infinitive* describes that someone has strived to accomplish something to the benefit or credit of him or herself. However, humor or irony is implied when a conventional interpretation would lead to a contradiction; e.g. “Mike managed to upset his mother yet again today. (humorous)” (*MED* 2002: 855) and “He managed to muddle it (irony)” (*COD* 1976: 739). The implicature of humor or irony is created when the target *to-infinitive* describes a situation where a disadvantage or discredit to the person concerned is implied. Ten native speakers of English (henceforth, NSEs) were surveyed to verify the lexicographic explanations. Although the NSEs’ interpretations of the samples varied, humor or irony was usually found to be invoked when the target structure was used. The conclusions are that flouting the sub-maxims “Do not say what you believe to be false” (Grice 1975: 45) and “Avoid obscurity of expression” (Grice 1975: 45) results in implied humor or irony. This study proposes that the target structure can impose an element of indirectness so that the people who are referred to can save face (Brown and Levinson 1987).

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate which of the Gricean sub-maxims is flouted when *manage to-infinitive* invokes humor or irony. It is generally recognized that using the *manage to-infinitive* usually has the implicit meaning of humor or irony in utterances such as (1) “He always manages to say the wrong thing (humor)” (*OALD* 2010: 934) and (2) “He managed to muddle it (irony)” (*COD* 1976: 739). It seems that *manage to-infinitive* produces two different implications. Birner (2013) and Wilson (2006) note that in general, the sub-maxim “Do not say what you believe to be false,” which comprises the Maxim of Quality, is flouted in the case of irony. In addition, another sub-maxim may also be flouted when the target *to-infinitive* phrase gives the implicit meaning of humor or irony.

Attardo (2014) shows that humor is a linguistic message with out-of-place levity and

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playfulness, which the listener regards as a joke. In other words, humor is a playful joke, leading the listener to see it outside of his or her commonsensical or logical schema (Attardo 2014). By contrast, irony is defined as a “form of non-literal language” (Cook 2005: 35) meaning more than what the speaker says, or creating the opposite meaning of what the speaker says (Terasawa 2002). *COBUILD* (2012: 838) defines irony as “a subtle form of humor which involves saying things that you don’t want to,” so it seems that humor and irony invoke implicit meanings in order to communicate to the listener what lies beyond the actual utterance. In humor and irony, there is a clear distinction between what the speaker is saying and what he or she really means (Davies 2000).

It appears challenging to discriminate humor from irony in an utterance where *manage to-infinitive* invokes a specific implicit meaning, since both are comparable linguistic phenomena with only subtle differences (Wilson 2006). An authentic analysis that aids in distinguishing humor from irony would involve phonetic analyses of rate of speech, intonation, intensity, and other qualities of the utterance. Expressions of humor and irony involve different phonetic tactics (Attardo 2014). The present work does not attempt to distinguish humor from irony in a number of examples where the target infinitive phrase is used. Rather, the work conducts a survey to investigate whether 10 NSEs interpret slight humor or irony in the stimuli in order to verify the lexicographic hypotheses.

In what follows, Section 2 reviews literature on the Cooperative Principle (henceforth, CP) (Grice 1975), Jorgensen’s 1996 study of sarcastic irony, as well as previous research of *manage to-infinitive*. Section 3 discusses the survey, the results, and insights into the target infinitive phrase. Section 4 addresses the issue at hand with comments from the NSEs and gives final conclusions, as well as limitations of the study.

2. Past studies

2.1 The Cooperative Principle

Davies (2000) built on Grice’s work and conducted pragmatic research into mechanisms in which speakers create an implied meaning which is interpreted by the listener, and the clues by which the speaker grasps whether or not the listener understands his or her true intention. The linguistic form of an utterance and the meaning of the utterance do not have a one-on-one formal mapping at the discourse level (Davies 2000). This is largely because several indirect speech acts usually help the true intention of a speaker to be communicated to the listener. An example from Davies (2000) illustrates this:

Dialogue

(3) A: Is there another pint of milk?

B: I’m going to the supermarket to buy it. (Davies 2000: 1)

A competent speaker of English in Dialogue 1 understands that the listener is aware that all of the milk has been used up, and hence he or she is planning to buy some at the supermarket (Davies 2000). When the speaker says “Is there another pint of milk?,” he or she is of course aware that there is no more milk and it needs to be bought sooner or later, but actually, the speaker is indirectly requesting the listener to go to the store and buy it. This is considered as an indirect speech act. By rule of thumb, we all have what is termed an “accepted way of speaking” (Davies 2000: 2) in everyday life; so, for that reason, there are a number of distinct expected responses to Utterance (3-A). The listener could respond by saying either that some milk is available (if that is the case) or that he or she is going to buy another pint. The listener could even ask the speaker to go and buy another pint of milk. The accepted way of speaking involves the listener taking into consideration what the speaker is intending to say. Grice (1975) proposes the CP as well as the accompanying four maxims (see below) to account for a chain of processes in which the listener manages to grasp the implied meaning of the speaker’s utterance (Davies 2000).

The central tenet of CP rests on the statement “Make your contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice 1975: 45) as well as the four maxims that accompany CP:

The Maxims

Quantity (I) Make your contribution as informative as is required

(II) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

Quality (I) Do not say what you believe to be false

(I) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

Relation (I) Be relevant

Manner (I) Avoid obscurity of expression

(II) Avoid ambiguity

(III) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)

(IV) Be orderly

Davies (2000) shows that the term “cooperation” in CP is not the same as the everyday use of this word, and hence needs to be interpreted with caution. “Cooperation” in these maxims does not refer to mutual help among those concerned. Rather, it means that even if CP is hypothesized to prevail in conversation, the speaker does not necessarily assist the listener in grasping the intended meaning with any accuracy (Davies 2000). There is a relationship between the conventional meaning of an utterance and the implicit meaning. It is up to the listener to figure this out (Davies 2000). The speaker will communicate his or her intention to the listener via any number of utterances. However, the listener may not necessarily figure out the intention of the speaker as expected. In other words, there is always the possibility that a misunderstanding will arise between the speaker and the listener, with the listener failing to interpret the speaker’s

intended meaning. In other words, the burden of grasping the intention of the speaker nearly always rests solely on the listener rather than on a mutual effort between speaker and listener to clarify meaning.

2.2 Flouting the Maxim of Quality

It is generally recognized that various types of figurative speech such as irony, metaphor, hyperbole, and litotes flout the Maxim of Quality, particularly its sub-maxim “Do not say what you believe to be false” (Grice 1967, 1989). The interpretation of figurative speech rests on the listener’s recognition that a sub-maxim is being flouted. Wilson (2006) gives these examples:

- (4) Mary (after a difficult meeting): That went well. (Wilson 2006: 1)
- (5) Tim Henman is not the most charismatic player in the world. (Wilson 2006: 1)

Utterance (4) shows that the listener interprets the utterance as implying that the meeting had not gone well. The speaker implied the opposite of the reality, instead of stating the reality straightforwardly. This flouts the sub-maxim, which is the pragmatic parameter of creating irony (Grice 1967, 1989). But why does the speaker make an indirect remark instead of a straightforward one? “Intuitively, the explanation for indirect speech seems obvious: we use it to escape embarrassment, avoid awkwardness, save face, or reduce social tension” (Pinker 2007: 438). Similarly, the speaker avoids a direct remark in Utterance (5). In this example, the listener interprets the utterance as meaning that Tim Henman is definitely not the most charismatic tennis player (Wilson 2006).

Wilson (2006) argues that Gricean Theory contains a few flaws. Grice (1967, 1989) has yet to account for why a rational speaker would state what is obviously false. The speaker in Utterances (4) and (5) could have instead said literally what he or she believed to be true and speak his or her true intention. For instance, the speaker in Utterance (4) could have said “The meeting did not go as well as I had expected,” expressing his or her disappointment in a straightforward manner. What is important is that producing a positive comment on the surface has the effect of shocking the listener in an indirect way. Pinker (2007: 439) states “In many implicatures involved in off-record indirect speech acts, the intended message is negative but the literal content is positive or neutral.” For Toplack and Katz (2000), an interesting question is how a positive utterance could have the effect of criticizing the listener. For example, saying “You are a fine friend!” could amount to stating “You are not a good friend at all” (Toplack and Katz 2000: 1468), which is called pragmatic insincerity (Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995).

2.3 Face saving act

It is generally accepted that one of the purposes of using irony to criticize something is to allow the speaker or the listener to save face (Brown and Levinson 1987; Jorgensen 1996). An

indirect comment used instead of a direct comment is often treated as a “negative effect” (Roberts and Kruez 1994), “humor” (Dews et al. 1995), “mocking” (Katz and Penman 1997), or “politeness” (Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995). Irony is regarded as a form of indirect speech which is used to save face. Irony is used for disagreement, criticism, complaint, and insult, and is generally used in a way that prevents hurting the face of the listener (Jorgensen 1996).

Jorgensen (1996: 196) argues that ironic sarcasm is usually directed to “victims,” i.e., those whom the speaker wishes to criticize or complain about. The speaker does not usually make an ironic comment to the listener about a third party who is not present. Instead, Jorgensen’s 1996 experiment shows that ironic comments are more likely to be made to those with whom the speaker has a high degree of personal intimacy. In Jorgensen’s 1996 experiment, 30 undergraduate students (6 male and 24 female) at California State University, Hayward were asked to define the meaning of “sarcasm,” and to describe the most memorable sarcasm that they could recall, what the sarcasm was concerned about, in what kind of setting as well as context it was used, and to whom the sarcasm was directed. Each participant ranked their sarcasm on a Likert scale. Results of the experiment show that the more ironic tinges the comment had, the more intimate the relationship was between the speaker and the listener. For example, the participants were more likely to make ironic sarcasm to their brothers, sisters, and close friends rather than doctors, dentists, and professors. This shows that ironic sarcasm is not generally directed towards people to whom the speaker is not intimate (Jorgensen 1996).

2.4 Manage *to-infinitive*

The conventional meaning of *to manage* is to “succeed in doing something difficult” (COUBUILD 2012: 950), or “to succeed in accomplishing” (Merriam-Webster 2015). So, when a person has managed to do something, it is an accomplishment which was made with difficulty. Each of the examples below implies that the action was or will be done with difficulty or despite difficulty:

- (6) In spite of his disappointment, he managed a weak smile. (OALD 2010: 934)
- (7) Can you manage another piece of cake? (OALD 2010: 934)
- (8) We managed to get to the airport in time. (OALD 2010: 934)
- (9) (He)²managed to escape from prison. (Merriam-Webster 2015)
- (10) He managed to muddle it. (irony) (COD 1976: 662)
- (11) She managed to fail the exam. (irony) (Super Anchor 1996: 940)
- (12) He managed to lose a lot of money on the stock market. (irony) (New Century 1996: 865)
- (13) Mike managed to upset his mother yet again today. (humorous) (MED 2002: 855)
- (14) A commentator might observe both candidates had managed to debase themselves by the

² The present author inserted the subject ‘He’ for the sake of clarity since it is omitted in Merriam-Webster (2015).

end of a political campaign. (Cornog 2010: 601)

(15) How do you manage it? You've only been home five minutes and already the place is a mess! (humorous) (*MED* 2002: 855)

Examples (6) to (9) show various kinds of benefits, such as a weak smile (Example 6), a piece of cake (Example 7), a timely arrival at the airport (Example 8), and a prisoner's escape from prison (Example 9). On the other hand, in examples (10) to (15) the speaker would seem to describe that the third person did not do things well, such as messing up (Example 10), failing an exam (Example 11), mismanaging money (Example 12), infuriating someone's mother (Example 13), and debasing oneself and his or her political opponent (Example 14). In example (15) the speaker is scolding the listener for messing up the place.

According to *MED* (2002: 855), *manage to-infinitive* has the implicit meaning of humor. *MED* (2002: 855) defines the meaning of this verb as "to succeed in doing something annoying or wrong (*often humorous*).” When an implicit meaning of irony or humor is implied as in Examples (10) to (15), verbs such as *muddle*, *fail*, *lose*, *upset*, and *debase*, imply unpleasant consequences to the person concerned. For example, the speaker in Example (15) seems to be annoyed to find the place in disorder or is annoyed with the person who messed up the room.

An in-depth comparison of Examples (6) to (9) with Examples (10) to (15) shows that broadly speaking, *manage to-infinitive* polarizes the consequences that the person concerned faces as a result of the action that the verb refers to; i.e., POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES in Examples (6) to (9) versus NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES in Examples (10) to (15). The tentative hypothesis this section puts forward is that NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES may serve as a necessary condition for the target phrase to be interpreted as irony or humor by the listener. However, further study needs to be conducted to find out what kind of *to-infinitive* is used when NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES are involved.

3. Survey

3.1 Questionnaire

This section involves the questionnaire survey which was conducted with 10 NSEs to check the validity of *COD* (1976: 739) and *OALD* (2010: 934) in five examples with *manage to-infinitive*. The purpose of the survey was to verify whether the lexicographic explanations of the target phrase correlated with the intuitive understanding of the phrase by the 10 NSEs. The first question of the survey was "Do you interpret each utterance to be humorous or ironic in view of the meaning that the verb *manage* creates in this utterance?" The second question of the survey was "In what kind of situation would you use the utterances from (i) to (v)? State the specific context for each."

In the summer of 2015, each participant was provided with a questionnaire containing

five examples with the two questions for each example. The participants were all native speakers of English. They were five males and five females who were living in Kyoto, Hiroshima, Himeji, and Osaka at that time. Table 1 shows the nationality and gender of the participants in the leftmost column and the number of the examples in the top row. The participants were told that the survey was being conducted in order to study the pragmatic functions of the English phrase *manage to-infinitive*. The following five examples were shown to the participants.

- (i) He always manages to say the wrong thing. (*OALD* 2010)
- (ii) Andrew has managed to get himself sacked. (*LEDO* 2015)
- (iii) I don't know how I managed to arrive so late. (*LEDO* 2015)
- (iv) During a strike, for example, representatives of labor and management become antagonists; they often manage to antagonize each other. (Cornog 2010: 469)
- (v) When confronted with a matter that no one really wants to face, a chief executive may relegate it to a committee "for further study," which may manage to ignore it for years. (Cornog 2010: 437)

3.2 Results

The first question, "Do you interpret each utterance to be humorous or ironic in view of the meaning that the verb *manage* creates in this utterance?" As shown in Table 1, the answer to this question varied from participant to participant. However, the target *to-infinitive* in all of these examples was interpreted as implying humor or irony. This may have been a reflection of the participant's ability to interpret the implied meaning from the example, as well as the participant's views of humor and irony (Wilson 2006). It is the listener, not the speaker, who interprets implied humor or irony (Davies 2000).

Table 1: The Interpretation of Implied Humor or Irony

Nationality/Gender	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(v)
Canadian/ Male	Yes	No	No	No	No
American/ Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
British/ Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
American/ Female	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
American/ Female	No	No	Yes	No	No
American/ Female	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
American/ Female	No	No	Yes	No	No
American/ Female	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
American/ Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
American/ Male	No	Yes	No	No	No

The second question, “In what kind of situation would you use the utterances from (i) to (v)? State the specific context for each?” This question delves into the specific context where the target example could be used. As predicted, the answer varied from participant to participant, and the lists below show possible situations suggested by the NSE participants.

List 1: Possible contexts where example (i) is used

- Someone in higher status might be insulting the other in lower status.
- The group would be well disposed towards the unsuccessful member regarding him as an amicable buffoon who habitually commits faux pas.
- When you make up a cover story.
- This might be used with unkind irony after someone says something inappropriate or incorrect.
- In awkward situations.

List 2: Possible contexts where example (ii) is used

- A friend has done something foolish resulting in his being sacked.
- If you do not like that person
- This might be said when someone is not surprised that Andrew lost his job; it is unfortunate but not expected.

List 3: Possible contexts where example (iii) is used

- Excuse for lateness, but I’m not really to blame.
- Someone is joking when they are constantly late.
- This might be used either bewildered (Wow! I don’t understand how it got so late.) or humorously (laughing at oneself for being late.).

List 4: Possible contexts where example (iv) is used

- Simply be being an opposite side of an issue where people antagonize each other.
- This might be said dryly by someone on the sidelines – neither on the side of labor nor management. They are amused that they cannot cooperate.
- This is used when people push blame on each other for the situation going on; they began to fight with each other.

List 5: Possible contexts where example (v) is used

- Humorous report of an issue
- Deferment of an issue
- The target section is humorous because it contradicts the quoted section; one might say this to describe a specific difficult problem.

4. Discussion

4.1 Analyses

As shown in the preceding section, most of the examples in the questionnaire were interpreted as being humorous or ironic, except Example (iv). Based on the findings of the questionnaire and the results of past studies, this section investigates the research questions.

In Example (i), a contradiction arises with the fact that the person concerned always says the wrong thing and the understanding of the listener that the wrong things should not be said, which could imply humor or irony. This contradiction results in implied humor or irony. Since *manage to-infinitive* refers to contriving something or working to accomplish something, with the accomplishment to the benefit or credit to the person concerned, the listener realizes that the speaker states something that is false, which flouts the sub-maxim “Do not say what you believe to be false.”

As shown in List 1, Example (i) is an exchange that might take place between interlocutors who are relatively close, such as two friends or family members, or the statement might be spoken in an insulting manner by a boss about his or her subordinate who constantly says inappropriate things. This is in accord with the results of Jorgensen’s 1996 work on sarcastic irony. The present work, however, does not address typical cases of irony following Jorgensen (1996) who asserts that speakers rarely use irony about a third party.

Example (ii) shows that the person concerned has lost his job due to his own mistake. From the listener’s point of view, there is incongruity between the fact that Andrew’s mistake led to his job loss and the understanding of the listener that a serious mistake should not be committed at work. According to the listener, “managed to get himself sacked” (LEDO 2015) sounds as if the person concerned had been willing to get himself sacked. A person does not usually do something leading to his or her job loss willingly. The flouting of the sub-maxim results in humor or irony.

Example (iii) deals with a case in which the speaker faces unintended consequences because of arriving late. Incongruity arises between what actually happened and the understanding that he or she should be on time. Therefore, stating *manage to arrive so late* in this utterance implicates that the speaker is looking for an excuse for being so late, which flouts the sub-maxim “Do not say what you believe to be false.”

In Example (iv), where labor union and management often disagree, incongruity is created between their disagreement and the understanding that disagreements between labor and management should be resolved. Stating that *they often manage to antagonize each other* is stating what the speaker believes to be false because both sides are not willing to go against each other, and therefore some listeners will understand the statement as an implication of humor or irony.

The reason that some listeners interpret humor or irony from Example (v) comes from incongruity between the possibility that the problem may be shelved for an extended period of

time and the understanding of the speaker that the committee should handle the matter soon. So, stating *a committee 'for further study, 'which may manage to ignore it'* flouts the sub-maxim “Do not say what you believe to be false.” This implies humor or irony to some listeners.

All of these examples also flout the maxim “Avoid obscurity of expression,” which comprises the Maxim of Manner (Grice 1975). Birner (2013) shows the speaker must believe that the utterance is considerably clearer than any other expression whenever the target sub-maxim is respected. However, all the examples from (i) to (v) could have been stated without *manage to-infinitive* in a more straightforward way:

- (i-a) He always fails to say the right thing.
- (ii-a) Andrew failed to get himself employed.
- (iii-a) I don't know how I answer for being late.
- (iv-a) They often fail to come to an agreement.
- (v-a) The committee may not want to consider the matter for years.

The immediate question to consider is whether examples (i-a) to (v-a) imply humor or irony because unlike the original examples, these modified examples now satisfy the sub-maxims “Do not say what you believe to be false” and “Avoid obscurity of expression.”

In addition, it can be posited that *manage to-infinitive* is used as a means of imposing indirectness in speech so that the third party (i.e., the people who in these examples are referred to as *he*, *Andrew*, *they*, and *committee*) can save face (Brown and Levinson 1987). This is true with the exception of Example (iii), where the first singular pronoun is used as the subject. In Example (iii), the speaker seems to be using the target *to-infinitive* in order to save his or her own face.

4.2 Conclusion

This research explored which of the Gricean sub-maxims is flouted when *manage to-infinitive* implies humor or irony. It is found that *manage to-infinitive* in Examples (i) to (v) flouts the sub-maxim “Do not say what you believe to be false,” which comprises the Maxim of Quality (Grice 1967, 1989). I propose that *manage to-infinitive* implies humor or irony when the speaker describes NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES on the part of the subject; for example, failing an exam (Example 11), upsetting someone's mother (Example 13), constant faux pas (Example i), mistakes leading to getting fired (Example ii), and unpunctual arrival (Example iii).

The conventional meaning of *manage to-infinitive* is *to contrive* (OALD 2010; COBUILD 2012; Merriam-Webster 2015). Therefore, the target phrase is most likely to be used when the person concerned strives to achieve through much effort something challenging for the benefit or credit of him or herself, with the expectation that POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES will result. In the examples given, these POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES include a weak smile in spite of someone's disappointment (Example 6), a piece of cake (Example 7), a timely arrival at the airport (Example

8), and a prisoner's escape from prison (Example 9).

The other sub-maxim that is flouted by *manage to-infinitive* in Examples (i) to (v) is "Avoid obscurity of expression," which is the subset of the Maxim of Manner (Grice 1967, 1989). The reasoning behind this is that respecting the sub-maxim requires the speaker ensure not only the clarity of the utterance, but also a clarity that is not exceeded by any other utterance with an identical content (Birner 2013).

The limitations of this study are that it does not go on to distinguish between humor and irony in the target examples. Although some past studies do distinguish between humor and irony, I find it difficult to distinguish between humor and irony. Two different dictionaries which were published by Oxford University Press state that *manage to-infinitive* implies humor in certain cases and irony in other cases (*OALD* 2010: 934; *COD* 1976: 739); however, in written English, it is very difficult to distinguish between humor and irony because the examples have all been taken out of context and placed on the written dictionary page, so it is difficult to discern whether they refer to humor or irony because extralinguistic clues and context clues are unavailable to the reader. These extralinguistic clues include but are not limited to: social distance, connection, power between speaker and addressee, and status of the speaker and addressee (Pinker 2007).

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