

# IRONY MARKERS AND FUNCTIONS: TOWARDS A GOAL-ORIENTED THEORY OF IRONY AND ITS PROCESSING

by  
Salvatore Attardo

This article discusses the nature and function of irony markers as well as the motivations that speakers have for using irony, within the context of a theory of irony which claims that an ironical utterance is both inappropriate and relevant to its context. The reasons for using irony are found to lie in its social and rhetorical functions, while the function of the markers of irony is to make its processing simpler.

## *1. Introduction*

This article<sup>1</sup> discusses two aspects of the theory of irony which have received comparatively less attention than others, namely the markers of irony and the reasons why the speakers would choose a marked mode of communication such as irony, as opposed to non-ironical, straightforward communication.

We begin the discussion by reviewing the general theory of irony; then we will move on to the markers of irony and successively to the discursive and social functions of irony, within the broad question of what are the motivations for the speakers to opt for a marked mode of communication.

## *2. The Theory of Irony*

This is not the place of a full discussion of the theory of irony, for which see Attardo (2000), but we will review the theory presented in that context to contextualize these remarks on the markers and the purposes of irony.

The theory can be formulated as follows:

an utterance  $u$  is ironical if

1.  $u$  is contextually inappropriate,

2. *u* is (at the same time) relevant,
3. *u* is construed as having been uttered intentionally and with awareness of the contextual inappropriateness by *S*, and
4. *S* intends that (part of) his/her audience<sup>2</sup> recognize points 1-3.<sup>3</sup>

Appropriateness, an extension of Grice's cooperative principle, is defined as follows:

an utterance *u* is contextually appropriate if all presuppositions of *u* are identical to or compatible with all the presuppositions of the context *C* in which *u* is uttered (cf. the notion of 'common ground'; Clark 1996), except for any feature explicitly thematized and denied in *u*.<sup>4</sup> (Relevance should be construed as the usual Gricean maxim).

I believe that most of the aspects of this proposal are fairly obvious (at least to those with some familiarity with (Neo-)Gricean pragmatics). However, it is perhaps best to consider a concrete example, from a *Dilbert* cartoon:

- (1) Situation: The competitors of Dilbert's company have obtained Dilbert's company's secret business plans. The cartoon shows three persons (the frame is labeled 'The competitors') laughing. One holds a sheet of paper and is saying: 'Ooh! Look! They're planning to "utilize synergy." We're in trouble now!'

The statement of the competitor is clearly inappropriate to a situation of laughter and amusement, since his utterance ('We're in trouble now!') is appropriate only if something bad is about to happen, and hence either the utterance or the laughter would be inappropriate. On the other hand, we can salvage the utterance from ill-formedness by inferencing that the speaker is being ironical. When considered as ironical, the entire turn acquires a specific relevance, i.e., the audience reprocesses<sup>5</sup> the sentence 'We're in trouble now!' as essentially antonymous (i.e., 'We're not in trouble now!'). At this point, the audience is faced with a problem, namely to

determine why the competitors are so happy/amused. The presence of a literal quote (mention) from the secret business plans directs the audience attention to this particular aspect and leads to the inference that the reason for the competitors' belief is that Dilbert's company is as non-cutting edge as its business plan language. But who or what is the butt, the target of the irony? On one level, Dilbert's company, which is using such hackneyed phrases as 'utilize synergy.' On a lower level, anyone in the non-fictional world who utilizes such expressions.<sup>6</sup> Note also that the inappropriate turn is introduced and signalled as such to the audience by what are presumably exaggerated paralinguistic markers ('Ooh! Look!'), although the poverty of the written medium makes it virtually impossible to discuss the intonational characteristics that are probably associated with these markers (see section 3).

The previous example – and the theory behind its analysis – leads to a number of interesting conclusions and considerations. Specifically, for the theory of irony the following facts have emerged (albeit not necessarily merely from the discussion above; see Attardo, 2000, for a broader discussion, including a literature review):

- irony is essentially an inappropriate utterance which is nonetheless relevant to the context;
- irony crucially involves a two-stage processing (the first 'obvious' interpretation and its reprocessing);
- irony may go undetected (failure to grasp co(n)-textual clues and /or indices) and not be understood;
- understanding that a text is ironical does not imply understanding its implied meaning (i.e., the meaning of the irony);
- the recognition of irony is distinct and separate from the interpretation of its value (or intended meaning);
- the reconstruction of the intended meaning (value) of the irony is entirely inferential and abductive: it is totally indirect, no aspect of the meaning is given in the text, except the presumption of relevance (and not of quality, manner, or

quantity); or, in other words, irony is a purely pragmatic phenomenon;

- the 'purpose' of irony lies in its rhetorical and social effects (in our example, the critique of the target of the irony). The fact that irony has a purpose, i.e., that it is a goal-oriented activity, will be considered in section 4.

The detection of irony is necessarily the first step in its processing *as irony*,<sup>7</sup> which leads us to the third part of the present paper, i.e., the discussion of the markers or indices of irony.

### 3. Irony Markers

#### 3.1. Irony markers vs. factors

Simple-minded as it may seem, it is necessary to distinguish between indices of irony and irony itself. There has been some confusion between ironical markers and ironical utterances, if not entirely consciously, at least in the practice of some scholars who have come to identify irony with irony that is explicitly marked as such by some ironical indicator. For example, Muecke (1978) quotes Hirsch as arguing that a text which does not have a marker of irony, is therefore not ironical.<sup>8</sup> However, many authors have reached the opposite conclusion, namely that irony cannot be identified with its markers:

It is possible to be ironic or sarcastic without any overt sign of the speaker's insincerity. The put-on, or deadpan act of sarcasm, still differs from a lie in that the speaker wants his or her actual meaning to be understood at least by some happy few members of the target audience (...) (Haiman 1998:18).

Muecke (1978) argues that 'irony markers cannot be defined as infallible pointers to irony' (365) and that irony needs to be defined in terms of 'intention and communication.' (ibid.) The latter is defined as 'marking' S's utterance 'in such a way as to provide [his/]her addressee with grounds for a correct interpretation.' (ibid.) Gibbs (1994:381) notes that '[r]eaders do not simply establish ironic

intentions by recognizing certain textual features that conventionally mark irony.'

An irony marker/indicator alerts the reader to the fact that a sentence is ironical. The sentence would, however, be ironical even without the marker. For example, a wink, before, during, or after a sentence meant as ironical will alert H to the fact that S does not mean literally what he/she is saying. The sentence would, however, still be ironical even if S had not provided H with the indication of its ironical status. Therefore, we must distinguish between irony *markers* and irony *factors*: a marker may be removed without affecting the presence of the irony (only, perhaps, its ease of recognition), while a factor may not be removed without destroying the irony.

The point of the distinction between constitutive elements of irony and mere signals of the irony is lost in Mizzau's (1984:22) distinction between explicit and implicit indices of irony, which focuses instead on the fact that irony markers are explicit (i.e., phonetically realized), while irony factors are implicit (cf. Mizzau 1984:21-25 for further references and discussion).

It is perhaps possible to speculate that the confusion between marking the irony and being part of it has arisen because those factors which are part of the irony (e.g., exaggeration and/or understatement, or co(n)textual inappropriateness) do also, as a side effect, alert H to the presence of the irony. (For further examples, see section 3.2 below.)

#### 3.2. Review of some indices of irony

Muecke (1978) is largely dedicated to a catalog of markers of irony. A list of some 49 cues to irony can be found in Schaffer (1982:45). Booth (1974:49-86) discusses a number of cues used in literary works. The following is a partial review of some of the most frequent and/or clear markers of irony.

##### 3.2.1. Intonation

The most common index of ironical intent is intonation. The ironical intonation has been described as a flat (neither rising, nor

falling) contour (Milosky and Wroblewski 1994) cf. also Shapely (1987), Fónagy (1976), Myers Roy (1978:58, quoted in Barbe 1995), Haiman (1998:35-36). Schaffer (1982:45) reports question intonation (i.e., rising) as a marker of irony. Haiman (1998:30-41) discusses several other intonational patterns that can be used to indicate sarcasm, including lowering of pitch on the normally stressed syllable, exaggerated intonational patterns (cf. also Muecke 1978:370-371), singsong melody, falsetto, etc. all of which can be accounted for as departures from the normal intonational patterns (this is valid as well for the suprasegmental markers below). Muecke (1978:370) reports the use of 'softened voice.'

### 3.2.2. Nasalization

Several authors report that nasalization is a marker of ironical intent, e.g., Cutler (1974:117), Muecke (1978:370; 'mycterism'), Myers Roy (1977 quoted in Barbe 1995), Schaffer (1982:45), Chen (1990:28) and Haiman (1998:30-31).

### 3.2.3. Exaggerated stress

Stress patterns broader than usual are also reported by several authors: Cutler (1974:117); Myers Roy (1977:58, quoted in Barbe 1995); Schaffer (1982:45); Barbe (1995:76).

### 3.2.4. Other phonological means

Among other phonological markers of irony, the following have been reported: slowed rate of speaking (Cutler 1974:117); syllable lengthening (Myers Roy 1977:58, quoted in Barbe 1995; Schaffer 1982:45; Haiman 1998:34 in Chinese and several other languages); pauses (Schaffer 1982:45; Haiman 1998:39, for Japanese and German); laughter (Schaffer 1982:45; Haiman 1998:31). Milosky and Wroblewski (1994) reported a flat intonation pattern as being recognized by hearers as ironical.

### 3.2.5. Morphological means

Muecke (1978:371-372) lists expressions such as 'so to speak' and 'one might say' as well as 'as everybody knows.' Haiman (1998:47-48) reports on the usage of various quotative and evidential moods in Turkish and Albanian, and of lexicalized quotative particles (e.g., in Romanian and Japanese).

### 3.2.6. Typographical means

The written transcription of spoken language being the rough approximation that it is, typographical conventions are a poor substitute for the ironical intonation. 'Scare quotes' are used to convey a certain detachment from a written utterance and hence irony.<sup>9</sup> Myers (1990) examines ironical uses of quotation from a broad rhetorical approach. Other markers are [sic] or [!] and [?], and combinations thereof ([sic!], [!?!], [?!], etc.).

The exclamation mark is used to express emphasis. In the right context, it can underscore other means to highlight irony (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1976:26). Dots ('...') mark a suspended utterance, thus alerting the reader to potential other meanings left unsaid.

### 3.2.7. Kinesic markers

Muecke (1978:368-369) lists a number of markers such as winks, nudges, etc. We may add the tongue-in-cheek gesture (Almansi 1984:14-15 and *passim*).

### 3.2.8. Cotext

Irony can be signalled by its cooccurrence with incompatible elements in the same sentence, paragraph, or larger textual unit. For example, if a writer were to write about Richard Nixon as a great diplomat and a few lines below describe him as a 'man who could not lie,' the reader would be led to reevaluate the first description as ironical (a naturally occurring example in French can be found in Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1976:28). Cf. also Muecke (1978:368).

## 3.2.9. Context

Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1976) distinguishes between

1. irony marked by the contrast between what is said and what is known about or perceived of the referent (cf. Muecke 1978:366-367);
2. irony marked by contradiction between what is said and what is known about the speaker and his/her value systems;
3. hyperbole (and we can add: understatement). On hyperbole, see also Berrendonner (1981:187), Braester (1992) and Kreuz and Roberts (1995), who see hyperbole as a 'marker' of irony, which may render intonational markers unnecessary.

Let us note, however, that it is perhaps misleading to classify contextual markers and cotextual markers (including intonation) under the same rubric. In fact, contextual markers are not just markers, but rather factors (cf. section 3 above). Consider the following example. Suppose I utter:

- (2) We should throw all these immigrants, legal or illegal, out of the US.

Given knowledge of my background (namely that I am a legal alien residing in the US), and the logical assumption that I would not want to advocate something that would be damaging to myself, it would be somewhat perverse to claim that the knowledge that I cannot possibly mean literally what I am saying (merely) marks the ironical status of the utterance. By the time one has processed the utterance to the point that he/she can detect the incompatibility (hence, inappropriateness) between what I have said and what he/she knows about me, there is little left to decode: he/she labels this as irony and moves on. In other words, the fact that one understands something as ironical does not signal that that something *is* ironical: you cannot warn someone of something that has already happened.

Incidentally, this is a different case than those examples of irony which have a postponed marker. An excellent example is provided by the emphatically stressed *not*, placed after a positive statement:

- (3) I love ice-cream. *Not!*

In these cases, the postponed marker does indeed alert H to the presence of irony, which could have been missed (for example if H had not been aware of the counterfactual nature of the claim that S loves ice-cream), but the irony could also have been perceived without the *not* and is in fact independent from its presence. On this 'utterance deflater' see Haiman (1998:53-54).

After considering the markers of irony, we can turn now to the issue of the motivation of the S's choice to use irony.

4. *Reasons for using irony*

A significant problem for the theory of irony is the apparently irrational behavior of the speakers who would prefer an indirect ironical expression to the direct (and less expensive) expression of their thought. Consider, for example, the following passage, from Sperber and Wilson's influential treatment of irony:

The most obvious problem with the classical account [of irony] – and with its modern variant, the Gricean account – is that it does not explain why a speaker who could, by hypothesis, have expressed [his/]her intended message directly should decide instead to say the opposite of what [he/]she meant. (Sperber and Wilson 1986:240; my additions).

While this aspect of irony has not received nearly as much attention as other aspects, nonetheless several interesting suggestions have been put forth. These are reviewed in what follows.

## 4.1. Group affiliation

One of irony's purposes seems to be that of showing off S's detachment and hence superiority (cf. Haiman 1989 on 'alienation') and S's ability to 'play' with language (saying one thing while meaning another). Dews *et al.* (1995:347) show that speakers use irony to 'show themselves to be in control of their emotions.'

Myers-Roy (1977, 1981) finds two opposed purposes: an inclusive and an exclusive one. On the one hand, irony builds in-group solidarity through shared play; on the other hand, it can be used to express a negative judgment about someone (1981:414). Lakoff (1990:173) notes that 'irony makes use of presumptive homogeneity and reinforces it: understanding irony communicates "You and I are the same".' In other words, shared irony serves to create an in-group feeling. Irony can also be used to exclude (Mizzau 1984:95-97). However, to return to the original question, it remains unclear what the speaker would gain by using irony, since he/she could have used a direct way to manifest his/her attitude.

Myers Roy (1981:414) discusses the creation of group solidarity and that of expressing individual control. Dews *et al.* (1995:348) mention the elevation of S's status and the lowering of H's status. Jorgensen (1996) found that criticism was a characteristic use of sarcastic irony, but also that the criticism was of trivial content. Hartung (1996) sees one of irony's purposes as that of establishing 'shared evaluations.'

#### 4.2. Sophistication

As another clue to the reason why speakers should prefer an ironical utterance to a literal one, we can note that an ironical utterance connotes its being ironical (and indirect), and hence its being sophisticated and requiring some mental dexterity to process it.

Being associated with humor adds yet another prized connotation to irony, at least in Western society. The relationship between irony and humor is subtle. Quite clearly, irony and humor intersect, since there are cases of humorous irony. Also quite obviously, there are cases of humor which are not ironical. Less obviously, but again quite clearly, there are cases of irony which are not humorous. In other words, humor and irony overlap significantly, but are distinct. Dews *et al.* (1995:348) speculate that the element of surprise 'yielded by the disparity between what is said and what is meant' may trigger humor. Giora (1995:256-257) argues that humor and irony share some basic mechanisms. Namely, they both violate the 'graded informativeness requirement,' but they do so differently: a joke goes from an unmarked meaning to a marked one, while irony does the opposite (see section 3.1 above). The connection between irony and humor is

borne out by empirical results obtained by Kreuz *et al.* (1991:153-154) who report that, among the goals listed by speakers in ironical utterances, being funny or witty and to play or be silly were listed much more frequently than in the case of non-ironical utterances. Along the same lines, Dews *et al.* (1995:363) show that ironical statements are rated as funnier than literal ones. Therefore, it stands to reason that one of the 'payoffs' of being ironical is that of being perceived as humorous (*ibid.*:365). On the connections between humor and irony, see also Mizzau (1984:40-41), Hartung (1996), and Jorgensen (1996), who sees less of a connection.

#### 4.3. Retractability

Berendonner (1981:238) claims that irony, because it allows one to state something and its opposite at the same time, allows S to avoid any sanctions that may follow from stating directly what he/she thinks. From this perspective, irony allows S to take a non-committal attitude towards what he/she is saying; irony is similar in this lack of commitment to humor (see Attardo 1993, 1994). Chen (1990), Dews *et al.* (1995) and Barbe (1995) emphasize, as seen above, the politeness (face saving) function of irony. Specifically, Dews *et al.* (1995:364) show that ironical criticisms 'serve to mute the level of criticism,' thus allowing the hearer to save face; the speaker saves face as well, being seen as less angry and more in control. Jorgensen (1996) shows that sarcasm makes H less defensive and makes H evaluate S more positively ('friendly feelings').

#### 4.4. Evaluation

Grice (1978:124; 1989:53) notes that irony is 'intimately connected with the expression of a feeling, attitude, or evaluation.' This is a common claim, see e.g., Glucksberg (1995:51). Sperber and Wilson (1986:239), as we have seen, echo this claim (though, strangely, in an attack on Grice's account) and seek to establish the relevance of the ironical utterance on the basis of its expressing a (negative) attitude towards something. The expression of this attitude would then be the point of using irony. Dews *et al.* (1995:349) mention aggression as one of the reasons to use irony. However, they also note that irony

does, in fact, mute both the negative effect of ironical criticism and the positive effect of ironical praise (Dews *et al.* 1995:349; Dews and Winner 1995:15). Thus, Dews and Winner (1995) propose the 'tinge' theory, i.e., that the literal meaning tinges the intended meaning of the irony, by muting both criticism and praises, for example. This muting function would then be the point of using irony.

#### 4.5. Rhetorical

An interesting insight into the rhetorical function of irony comes from Carston (1981:30). She notes that irony is a powerful rhetorical tool because it presupposes the truth of the presupposed proposition to be self-evident. For example, in

- (4) S: 'John is such a good friend.' (When S and H know that John just stole S's car, stereo, collection of rare LPs, etc.),

we see that the set of propositions 'John is a bad friend' and/or 'John is not a friend' must be presupposed by S and H for them to correctly process the irony. Thus, irony can presumably be used to indirectly incorporate a proposition in the common ground of belief that S and H share about a given situation, even if H does not necessarily share the belief that P is true.

Kreuz *et al.* (1991:161) note that irony is memorable and therefore it offers 'highly effective ways for speakers to achieve their communicative ends,' which include 'to mock, to insult and to be funny' (*ibid.*). Giora (1995) sees irony as having two basic functions: a) to provide a highly informative utterance, and b) as a politeness strategy, which takes us to the most significant claim about irony, on which below (section 4.6).

#### 4.6. Politeness strategy

Irony has been seen as a face-saving strategy. Dews and Winner's 'tinge' theory asserts that irony mitigates the face-threatening aspect of direct criticism. Chen (1990) argues that the desire to avoid being impolite to H (on the assumption that this may cause unpleasant reactions by H) and the desire to convey S's intended meaning (with

special reference to S's attitude towards a given situation) motivate the violation of the CP (1990:172-173) and the use of irony.

The idea of irony being motivated by politeness is one of the central tenets of Barbe's work. In fact, she repeatedly (e.g., 1995:73; 79; 94; 107) summarizes her position on irony as a critical purpose on the speaker's part mitigated by politeness. Consider, for example, the following passage:

When employing irony (...) speakers are not as obviously aggressive and can thwart counter-attacks. Irony, therefore, turns conflict aside. A critical statement, once clothed in an inoffensive way, helps speakers and hearers to save face. (1995:90)

As seen above, a critical attitude is not always necessary. As far as the motivation of politeness goes, the use of irony strikes me as a fairly aggressive behavior, especially when coupled with critical intent. While I can imagine S and H looking at the rain outside the window and mellowly contemplating the irony of 'Nice weather, isn't it?', I have a much harder time imagining H assuming that S is being polite, if after H spilled his/her drink on S's carpet, S says 'That was clever of you.' However, as Barbe (personal communication) points out, the ironical remark is more polite than a direct criticism.

#### 5. Conclusions

The discussion above has established that irony, far from being a wasteful mode of communications, is a sophisticated, complex and prized mode of communication.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the 'purpose' of irony lies in its rhetorical and social effects. When Ss engage in irony, their extra expense in encoding an ironical message is easily offset by the rhetorical advantages of irony. Therefore, what seemed a puzzling question (cf. section 4), is in fact a predictable consequence of the social and rhetorical values of Ss, as well as of the pragmatics of the communications systems they use.

Furthermore, it has been shown that markers and factors of irony should not be confused. Irony markers are optional, but when they are present, their purpose is to facilitate the Hs' recognition of the irony (although the understanding of the import of the irony is a distinct process).

We can now attempt to see the theory of irony sketched above (in section 2) in the context of these conclusions. The first point that presents itself quite evidently is the observation that the purpose of irony is not a secondary trait of the phenomenon, but rather grounds its interpretation, since it determines the relevance of the ironical sense, after the ironical intention has been determined. In this respect, the present theory sees the rhetorics of irony as foundational to its semantics, and not vice-versa.

Secondly, it becomes clear that irony is essentially a gamble that S takes, in which he/she stakes the possibility of taking advantage of the positive<sup>11</sup> functions of irony, on the risky bet that H will understand S's play. In order to improve his/her chances of success, S will therefore resort to the markers of his/her ironical intent. These are optional, as we saw; however, their frequency and the gamut of their forms tells us that S's strategy involves a great deal of risk minimization. In this respect, it would be interesting to conduct quantitative analyses to determine the ratio of marked/unmarked ironies.

While this is obviously far from being the last word on this subject, I believe that some interesting results have come from this discussion. Further research is necessary in many areas touching on these issues, some of which, such as the vexing problem of the connections between humor and irony, we hope to address in the future.

*English Department  
Youngstown State University  
Youngstown, OH 44555  
USA*

#### Notes

1. I am grateful to Jacob Mey, Rachel Giora, Christian Hempelmann and Katarina Barbe for their help in writing this paper. Needless to say, all errors and omissions are entirely my responsibility
2. The proviso on point (4) that at least part of the audience recognize the ironical intent of S, is meant to account for a situation in which, as Clark and Carlson (1982) point out, S addresses two different audiences at the same time, one who is essentially the 'butt' of the irony and another audience who

is 'in' to the ironical intent and appreciates the irony. Consider for example, the situation in which a child is pestering his/her parents for ice cream and S, one of the parents, says to him/her

- (5) Are you sure you want ice cream?

intending the other parent to understand the ironical intent, but clearly aware that this will be lost on the child.

3. Unless H construes *u* as being unintentional irony, in which case 3-4 do not apply.
4. The last clause is necessary to handle certain more or less metalinguistic utterances of the type 'This table is not a Duncan Phyfe' which presupposes (roughly) that H has the belief that the table is a Duncan Phyfe.
5. We are not claiming that the actual order of the processing of the text is as presented in the text. The reader should take the presentation as a possible inferential path (and a sketchy one, at that). Considerations of size prevent us from providing a complete discussion of the inferential processing of the text. McDonough (1997) has shown that a joke of a size close to the example involves about 60-70 inferences and/or presuppositions. On the issue of the order of processing of the elements of the text, see Attardo (2000) and references therein.
6. There are probably more perspicuous characterizations of the kind of people who are likely to use such phrases, but these issues are irrelevant in this context.
7. Obviously, the text may be processed as non-ironical, straightforward text first, before the recognition of the irony.
8. An interpolation by Muecke (1978) notes that the 'evidence' of irony may be in the text or the context; this does in fact correspond to the claim made in the text.
9. From a grammar handbook: 'Writers sometimes enclose in quotation marks words or phrases meant ironically or in some other non-literal way.' (Troyka 1993:515)
10. In fact, it is tempting to see irony as a 'conspicuous consumption' activity, in the wake of Veblen's (1953) theory. By engaging in irony, S 'shows off' his/her linguistic, rhetorical, and emotional mastery of the situation.
11. Only for S, and in his/her view, needless to say.



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