

On the Pretense Theory of Irony

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We propose a pretense theory of irony based on suggestions by Grice and Fowler. In being ironic, the theory goes, a speaker is pretending to be an injudicious person speaking to an uninitiated audience; the speaker intends the addressees of the irony to discover the pretense and thereby see his or her attitude toward the speaker, the audience, and the utterance. The pretense theory, we argue, is superior to the mention theory of irony proposed by Sperber and Wilson.

What is irony? Traditional theories, according to Jorgensen, Miller, and Sperber (1984), assume "that an ironist uses a figurative meaning opposite to the literal meaning of the utterance" (p. 112). A person saying "What lovely weather" on a rainy day is using the figurative meaning, "What terrible weather." As an alternative, Sperber and Wilson (1981) offered a mention theory of irony in which a speaker is being ironic when he or she is mentioning, or echoing, an earlier utterance, such as a weather forecaster's saying "The weather will be lovely today," in order to express an attitude such as contempt or ridicule toward it. Of the traditional theories, the main one with which Sperber and Wilson contrast their theory is that of Grice (1975, 1978). Sperber and Wilson marshaled a range of arguments, and Jorgensen et al. add experimental evidence, in support of the mention theory and against Grice's and the other traditional theories.

Grice's theory of irony, however, isn't what it is made out to be. It does not assume that the ironist is, technically, "*using one proposition in order to get across its contradictory*" (Jorgensen et al., 1984, p. 114; italics added), which is the main criticism leveled against it. It assumes, rather, that the ironist is *pretending*

to use that proposition. In appealing to pretense, Grice appeared to be reflecting other traditional accounts of irony, the oldest perhaps going back to the Greeks. In this article, we expand Grice's few remarks on irony into a *pretense theory of irony*, argue for its superiority to the mention theory, and describe its advantages for a psychological account of the functions and processes of irony.

A Pretense Theory of Irony

The word *irony* comes from Greek *eironeia*, meaning "dissembling, ignorance purposely affected" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). From the beginning, it appears, irony was thought to have something to do with pretense. Grice (1978) began, like Sperber and Wilson, by assuming that "irony is intimately connected with the expression of a feeling, attitude, or evaluation. I cannot say something ironically unless what I say is intended to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt" (p. 124). But Grice (1978) went on, in a crucial remark, to echo the Hellenic account: "To be ironical is, among other things, to pretend (as the etymology suggests), and while one wants the pretense to be recognized as such, to announce it as a pretense would spoil the effect" (p. 125). For Grice, then, irony is a kind of pretense.

What is the ironist pretending to do? Although Grice was silent about this, Fowler (1965), in his authoritative *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, hinted at an intuitively satisfying answer.

Irony is a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more

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and of the outsiders' incomprehension. [It] may be defined as the use of words intended to convey one meaning to the uninitiated part of the audience and another to the initiated, the delight of it lying in the secret intimacy set up between the latter and the speaker. (pp. 305-306)

Putting Grice's pretense with Fowler's two audiences makes good sense of the irony in this example from Jorgensen et al. (1984):

She: Trust the Weather Bureau! See what lovely weather it is: rain, rain, rain. (p. 114)

With "See what lovely weather it is," the speaker is pretending to be an unseeing person, perhaps a weather forecaster, exclaiming to an unknowing audience how beautiful the weather is. She intends the addressee to see through the pretense—in such rain she obviously could not be making the exclamation on her own behalf—and to see that she is thereby ridiculing the sort of person who would make such an exclamation (e.g., the weather forecaster), the sort of person who would accept it, and the exclamation itself. The addressee can take "delight" in "the secret intimacy" shared with the speaker in recognizing that ignorance.

The pretense theory may be expressed as follows. Suppose S is speaking to A, the primary addressee, and to A', who may be present or absent, real or imaginary. In speaking ironically, S is pretending to be S' speaking to A'. What S' is saying is, in one way or another, patently uniformed or injudicious, worthy of a "hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt" (Grice, 1978, p. 124). A' in ignorance, is intended to miss this pretense, to take S as speaking sincerely. But A, as part of the "inner circle" (to use Fowler's phrase), is intended to see everything—the pretense, S's injudiciousness, A's ignorance, and hence S's attitude toward S', A', and what S' said. S' and A' may be recognizable individuals (like the TV weather forecaster) or people of recognizable types (like opportunistic politicians).

The pretense theory provides transparent explanations for several important features of irony mentioned by Sperber and Wilson (1981).

1. *Asymmetry of affect.* An ironist is more likely to say "What a clever idea" of a bad idea than "What a stupid idea" of a good one. Why? As Jorgensen et al. point out, people

tend to see the world according to norms of success and excellence, as Pollyannas who view the world through rose-colored glasses (Boucher & Osgood, 1969). People in ignorance should cling especially tightly to these norms. In the pretense theory, this is just the sort of person ironists pretend to be. If so, they should be more likely to make positive pretenses, "What a clever idea!" than negative ones, "What a stupid idea!"

2. *Victims of irony.* Irony generally has victims. According to the pretense theory, they should be of two kinds. The first is S', the unseeing or injudicious person the ironist is pretending to be. The second is A', the uncomprehending audience not in the inner circle. Some ironies seem to make victims of S' for their misjudgments, and others, of A' for their uncritical acceptance of S'. The mention theory cannot distinguish these two types of victims.

3. *Ironic tone of voice.* In pretense or make-believe, people generally leave their own voices behind for new ones. An actor playing Othello assumes a voice appropriate to Othello. An ironist pretending to be S' might assume a voice appropriate to S'. To convey an attitude about S', however, the ironist will generally exaggerate, or caricature, S's voice, as when an ironist affects a heavily conspiratorial tone of voice in telling a well-known piece of gossip. As Grice (1978) put it, "If speaking ironically has to be, or at least to appear to be, the expression of a certain sort of feeling or attitude, then a tone suitable to such a feeling or attitude seems to be mandatory, at any rate for the least sophisticated examples" (p. 125). With pretense, there is a natural account of the ironic tone of voice.

The Mention Theory of Irony

The mention theory of irony hinges on a distinction between the *use* and *mention* of an expression, as in the following example from Jorgensen et al. (1984):

There is a cat in this room. (1)

There is a *cat* on this page. (p. 113) (2)

As Jorgensen et al. explain, *cat* in (1) is used to refer to some animal; the word *cat* in (2) is mentioned as a printed object with three letters. The idea behind the mention theory is

that with irony a sentence is not used but mentioned. When the speaker in the previous example utters "See what lovely weather it is" with irony, she is mentioning some weather forecaster's words or sentiments in order to express contempt toward them. Not all ironies echo actual utterances, so the mention theory assumes that what is echoed may also be "popular wisdom or received opinions" (Jorgensen et al., 1984, p. 114). A good many ironies are explained as implicit echoes.

Sperber and Wilson, in arguing against Grice, interpreted him as assuming that the speaker would be *using* the words *see what lovely weather it is* in order to implicate its opposite—that the weather was foul. That would give the wrong analysis, as they pointed out, because the speaker doesn't really mean for the hearer to believe she thinks the weather is lovely. The problem disappears, however, if she is assumed to be mentioning the words instead, as the mention theory proposes. But the problem also disappears if the speaker is assumed to be *pretending* to be a weather forecaster using those words.¹ As Ryle (1950) said about pretense,

Actors in speaking their parts before the audience are not, strictly, using their words. They are not being defiant, remorseful, loving, or desperate, but only pretending to be so. Their utterances cannot be classified as either "use" or "mention." (p. 339)

So Grice did not assume that with irony the speakers are *using* their words. As he said, "To be ironical is, among other things, to pretend" (Grice, 1978, p. 125).

How *should* irony be viewed—as echoic mention or as pretense? Is the speaker mentioning a weather forecaster's words or pretending to be a weather forecaster using those words?

Note first that all cases of ironic mention can be reinterpreted as cases of ironic pretense, often with more plausible results. Consider the echoic version of "The Hotel" by Jorgensen et al. (1984):

"Shall we walk back to the hotel or take a taxi?" Sally asked.

"Let's walk. It's not far. Just follow me," answered Carol.

Sally felt she could have found the way herself. At one point she thought Carol had taken a wrong turn; she muttered, "We are getting lost!" and Carol heard her. But Carol seemed so self-confident that Sally followed her. They quickly reached the Campo San Stefano, and there stood the hotel.

"We are definitely lost!" Carol said. (p. 120)

In being ironic, Carol is claimed to be mentioning Sally's words or the proposition she expressed. But is she? Sally talked about how they were *getting* lost, and Carol's words were about being definitely lost—the *result* of getting lost. It seems more perspicuous to say that Carol was entering the make-believe world of Sally's former worries and staging the next step in it by exclaiming they were definitely lost. In making that pretense, she was making light of Sally's earlier worries. All ironic mentions, we suggest, can be translated into ironic pretense along these lines.

Many ironies that are readily interpretable as pretense, however, cannot be viewed as echoic mention, for example, Jonathan Swift's (1729/1971) essay, "A Modest Proposal." The proposal was to serve up children—Irish children—as food to the rich. Methodically, and with perfect seriousness, Swift outlined the benefits of this plan, among them that these children would provide a new source of income for the poor and add a new dish to tavern menus. This essay is often pointed to as a model piece of irony. To explain the irony, the mention theory would have to say that the *entire* essay was an echoic mention. But of what? It is implausible that anyone had ever uttered the entire essay or expressed its entire contents or that dining on Irish children was ever a part of "popular wisdom or received opinions" (Jorgensen et al., 1984, p. 114). Surely Swift's irony works just because the idea is so absurd that no one could ever have entertained it seriously.

Treated as pretense, however, Swift's irony makes good sense. Swift was pretending to speak as a member of the English ruling class to an English audience. He expected his readers to recognize the pretense and to see how by affecting the pretense he was denouncing English attitudes toward the Irish. In Swift's "A Modest Proposal," Grice's pretense and Fowler's double audience are particularly apparent.

The mention theory is forced to say that many ironies are merely *implicit* echoes—echoic mentions of popular wisdom or received

¹ For a characterization of pretense, or of engaging in make-believe, see Walton (1973).

opinion—but it does not describe any criteria for deciding what is a possible implicit echo and what is not. If Swift's proposal is considered an implicit echo, then surely almost anything goes. The predictions of the pretense theory, in contrast, are as precise for nonechoes as for explicit echoes. Ironists can pretend to use the words of any person or type of person they wish, just as long as they can get the intended audience to recognize the pretense and, thereby, their attitude toward the speaker, audience, and sentiment of that pretense.

The rhetorical device of irony, as Fowler pointed out, is just one of several types of irony. There is also dramatic irony. In the Greek drama of Oedipus, for example, an utterance by Oedipus would seem insignificant to one of his companions but of great import to the audience, who realized its meaning for Oedipus's impending doom. And there is irony of fate, as in the statement, "Ironically, George bought a brand new Studebaker the day before the automobile company announced it was going out of business." What ties the three types of irony together, Fowler argued, is the presence of two audiences—one in on the secret and the other not. The mention theory of irony doesn't allow for the resemblance among the three types of irony. The pretense theory does.

On the Psychology of Irony

Psychological models of language use—saying and understanding, broadly conceived—tend to be of two sorts. Some specify the functions an aspect of language plays in saying and understanding, and others specify the mental processes by which those functions are realized. The two models of irony we have been discussing are both functional ones, and so each needs to be rounded out with models for the processes by which irony is designed and recognized. Our interest is in the recognition of irony.

A listener's understanding of an ironic utterance depends crucially on the common ground he or she believes is shared by the ironist and the audience—their mutual beliefs, mutual knowledge, and mutual suppositions (see Clark & Carlson, 1981; Clark & Marshall, 1981). The pretense theory makes clear how

common ground will be needed. The mention theory does not.

Speakers are not just ironic: They are ironic only to certain listeners. Suppose it is common ground to Harry, Tom, and Anne that none of them can abide the poetry of Ezra Pound. Now suppose that Harry and Tom have just been to a lecture on Pound that they agreed was unexpectedly fascinating. As they meet Anne coming out of the lecture, Harry says either of the following:

Harry to Tom: Tedious lecture, wasn't it? (3)

Harry to Anne: Tedious lecture, wasn't it? (4)

With (3), Harry is being ironic to Tom, but not to Anne. Without knowing that they enjoyed the lecture, Anne cannot be a party to Harry's irony, because as far as she can tell, he is completely serious. Uttering (4) can only lead to confusion. Harry recognizes that Anne will take him seriously, based on their common ground, and so to utter (4) would be to deceive her. She has no way of recognizing his pretense.

As this example illustrates, the perception of irony often hangs on subtle judgments of what is common ground to whom (compare Clark & Carlson, 1982), so a listener or reader not supplied with the right information may not make these judgments accurately. Just such a thing may have happened in Jorgensen et al.'s (1984) echoic version of "The Lecture":

The instructor asked the whole class to attend a special evening lecture by a visiting professor:

"How tedious!" Anne complained to Harry and Tom.

Harry and Tom attended together and were both impressed by the high quality of the lecture, which was both educational and amusing. As they were leaving the lecture hall, they bumped into Anne.

"Tedious, wasn't it?" Harry said. (p. 119)

The story fails to give one crucial piece of information: Did all three share knowledge that Anne, too, unexpectedly enjoyed the lecture? If they did, Harry's utterance would have been ironic to Anne; if they didn't, it would not have been, as just illustrated. According to the pretense theory, it should make little difference in this instance whether or not Anne had complained earlier, and it didn't. About half the students in Jorgensen et al.'s study saw irony in Harry's question, and half did not, whether or not Anne's complaint was mentioned earlier. According to the mention

theory, Anne's prior complaint should make an ironic echo especially salient, but, as Jorgensen et al. note, it did not. What appears to be critical is the pattern of shared knowledge and beliefs and not the presence of an utterance to be echoed per se.

In the pretense theory, ironists do not tell their listeners they are making a pretense but let them discover it for themselves. As Grice (1978) put it, "while one wants the pretense to be recognized as such, to announce it was a pretense would spoil the effect" (p. 125). But what do they need to be able to discover it? Again the crucial notion is common ground.

Listeners must see how the speaker's utterance is relevant to the common ground already established between speaker and addressees. If they cannot, they may not be able to discover the pretense. Consider Jorgensen et al.'s (1984) story "The Party" both with their ending and with our alternative ending:

The party was at the Clarks', but Joe didn't know where Mr. Clark lived.

"It's on Lee Street," Irma told him. ("It's the house with the big maple tree on the front lawn.) You can't miss it."

But Joe did miss it. He never would have found it if Ken hadn't seen him wandering down the street and led him to the Clarks' apartment. They lived over a store, and their apartment door was right on the sidewalk.

Irma was already there when they arrived. "You're late," she called to Joe.

"The Clarks have a beautiful lawn," he replied. (p. 117) (5)

Proposed alternative:

"You give wonderful directions," he replied. (6)

When the material in parentheses is absent, Joe and Irma share no knowledge against which they can make sense of (5). But when it is present, they do share the knowledge, and Irma can therefore discover Joe's pretense. That is just what Jorgensen et al. found. For ending (6), however, Joe and Irma's shared knowledge should be sufficient for her to discover the pretense with or without the material in parentheses. Ending (6), we venture, would be judged ironic even without any previous utterance to echo. If so, the reason that (5) isn't ironic without the previous material to echo is not that there is no previous material to echo. It is because (5) cannot be related to anything in Joe and Irma's shared knowledge.

It violates one of Grice's most important maxims to speakers: Be relevant.

Conclusion

The mention theory appears at first to solve the most obvious problem about ironic utterances—that speakers are not really saying what they appear to be saying. What they are doing, the theory asserts, is mentioning, or echoing, prior utterances or sentiments. The solution is to treat irony as echoic mention.

Mentioning prior utterances, however, is not powerful enough to do the job: It does not do justice to what the ironist is trying to do. When Swift begins describing his modest proposal, he wants his readers to think he is serious, and indeed, he is taken seriously—for a few pages. But as readers begin to see the point of his proposal, they realize that he is only pretending to make the proposal and that less astute readers, not privy to their shared understanding, will continue to take it seriously. They can take delight in being in on the pretense, in being a member of the inner circle. It is this way that Swift belittles the speaker, audience, and attitudes of his make-believe world. In some of the most effective examples of irony, the audience is intended to be taken in at first and to catch on only as the pretense is developed. So although irony, as the mention theory assumes, often involves other people's sentiments and a belittling attitude toward them, its spirit really comes from certain added ingredients: the inner and outer circles, the several types of victims, and the game of deception and discovery with the intended audience. All these come only with the more powerful notion of pretense.

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