Irony in Context

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JOHN BENJAMINS PUBLISHING COMPANY
AMSTERDAM/PHILADELPHIA

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barbe, Katharina.
Irony in context / Katharina Barbe.
p. cm. -- (Pragmatics & beyond, ISSN 0922-842X ; new ser. 34)
Includes bibliographical references and indexes.
1. Irony. 2. Irony in literature. I. Title. II. Series.
PN56.I65B37 1995
306.4'4--dc20 95-36113
ISBN 90 272 5046 4 (Eur.) / 1-55619-327-0 (US) (alk. paper) CIP

John Benjamins Publishing Co. • P.O.Box 75577 • 1070 AN Amsterdam • The Netherlands
John Benjamins North America • P.O.Box 27519 • Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 • USA

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Die Erlernung einer fremden Sprache sollte . . . die Gewinnung eines neuen Standpunktes in der bisherigen Weltansicht sein, und ist es in der That bis auf einen gewissen Grad, da jede Sprache das ganze Gewebe der Begriffe und die Vorstellungsweise eines Theils der Menschheit enthält. Nur weil man in eine fremde Sprache immer, mehr oder weniger, seine eigene Sprachansicht hinüberträgt, so wird der Erfolg nicht rein und vollständig empfunden.

Eine Sprache in ihrem ganzen Umfange enthält alles durch sie in Laute Verwandelte.

—Wilhelm von Humboldt—

Language is itself the collective art of expression, a summary of thousands upon thousands of individual intuitions. The individual goes lost in the collective creation, but his personal expression has left some trace in a certain give and flexibility that are inherent in all collective works of the human spirit.

—Edward Sapir—

Ironie ist Pflicht.

—Friedrich Schlegel—

Ironie . . . ist das Körnchen Salz, durch welches das Aufgetischte überhaupt genießbar ist.

—Johann Wolfgang Goethe—

Acknowledgements

This study represents a substantial re-working and enlargement of my 1989 Rice University dissertation, *Irony in conversational German: A linguistic approach*. I want to thank the many people who discussed their ideas with me. In particular, I am grateful to James E. Copeland and Donald Hardy for reading and critiquing the manuscript in its early stages. Neal Norrick offered many helpful and practical suggestions throughout the project. I cannot thank Wolfram Bublitz enough for taking the time to read two versions of the manuscript. His insights regarding the importance of pragmatics and semantics in the use of irony vastly improved the quality of the final version. Karen Blaser at manuscript services at Northern Illinois University assisted with the final formatting. Finally, I want to thank Wendell G. Johnson, my husband, for his unwavering support in terms of reading the manuscript at many different stages as well as for taking such excellent care of our two little girls, Hannah and Aletta. These two, even though too young to understand irony, will certainly provide much data for future studies. It remains to be said that all mistakes and omissions are my sole responsibility.

Chapter 1

An Invitation to Irony

The Beatles are more popular than Jesus.

John Lennon

My intent here is to discuss verbal irony as an interpretive notion from the point of view of the hearer who understands and interprets. Inherently, instances of irony can be either more language-related (verbal irony) or situation-oriented (situational irony). My concern primarily is verbal irony in its various realizations as well as its place within linguistics and pragmatics. Irony in general is, of course, not only a language phenomenon, but also has its role in other media like photography, or in art (perhaps in the works by the late Joseph Beuys). Music also employs irony, as can be seen, for example, in some of the compositions by György Ligeti or John Cage. Elements of irony thus find expression in a variety of modalities. As a broader concept, irony could well be a potential property of semiotic systems in general. I will leave this claim, however, to be investigated at a later time.

Many prejudices exist about irony, particularly from a cross-cultural point of view. The Australian scholar Clyne (1979, 1984), for example, claims that Germans use verbal irony only to a very limited extent. He further maintains that the employment of understatement for ironic purposes is particularly rare. In comparison with English-speaking children, according to Clyne, German-speaking children supposedly do not use word games and rhymes. Thus he concludes that Germans have a more prescriptive attitude towards language and rarely use verbal humor and irony in everyday settings. Verbal

humor and irony are delegated to creative writers, journalists, and cabarettists (Clyne 1984).

Although the ability to appreciate verbal irony may not imply an ability to produce it, Germans do indeed know how to use verbal irony. As for understatement: I remember that years ago in Darmstadt, Germany, a cousin of mine, at that time about six years old, fell several meters down a relatively steep path, rolled over, got up, and said, *Beinah hinnefallen!* ('almost fell down')—surely an understatement. Clyne bases his conclusions on a 1979 study of foreign born immigrants to Australia, among them Germans. The study was conducted in English, although the test subjects were not native speakers of English. But as is well known to anybody who teaches foreign languages, foreign language humor, irony, and the like are the final obstacles before achieving near native-speaker fluency.

Similarly, R. Lakoff (1990:173) describes an incidence in 1964 in which John Lennon made the supposedly ironic statement *The Beatles are more popular than Jesus*. Lennon's remark was taken literally by many in the United States and caused a big uproar. She concludes that the 'British are skilled ironists; most Americans have trouble with irony, sometimes failing to see it at all' (ibid.). From this we can gather that, for some reason, irony is often connected with sophistication and wit, and that many people believe that most North-Americans lack these traits. North-Americans themselves often have "regional prejudices." In a private conversation, a New Yorker now living in California stated that people in the Midwest do not understand verbal irony. This statement from someone unfamiliar with the Midwest, of course, also criticizes Midwesterners for not being sophisticated or witty. These "regional prejudices" may then result in geographical jokes, which often assume a sophisticated North and a backwoods South. Another factor is the distribution between rural and urban populations. Only urbanites possess sophistication and irony ability.

Similar perspectives exist in academic writings. This "academic chauvinism" is particularly expressed in W. F. Thrall and A. Hibbard's *A Handbook to Literature*: 'The ability to recognize irony is one of the surest tests of intelligence and sophistication' (Tanaka 1973, op cit., who does not agree with this statement). According to a large segment of the literature, it appears that the most able person to detect an irony is a highly educated white

male. However, production and recognition of irony is not necessarily restricted to persons of higher education. Many cultures have geographical areas whose inhabitants are said to be *nicht auf den Mund gefallen* ("have a ready tongue"). Thus Berliners are renowned for their fast wit and gift of gab, which I witnessed many times. In early 1994, I was on a bus in Berlin. Somebody who apparently tried to exit at a stop, stood in an area in the bus which, by means of some electronic gadget, blocked the bus-driver from closing the door and proceeding. The bus-driver, having patiently waited for a few seconds, finally lost his cool and addressed the passenger: *Na wat'n nun? Rin oder raus? Soll ick Ihnen vielleicht noch'n Kuchen backen?* ("Well, what's matter? In or out? Perhaps you want me to bake you a cake.") Think also of British wit found among the educated upper class as well as among lower class speakers. In *Pygmalion*, Shaw plays with this contrast. Incidentally, the German translation of *Pygmalion* has Eliza speaking in Berlin dialect.[1]

The recognition of irony is culturally dependent and not globally unified. Sweeping statements are out of place. Both Clyne and R. Lakoff fail to take into account the importance of shared experience in the recognition of irony. In addition, public statements like John Lennon's, even though often taken out of context, reach such a varied audience that they can seriously backfire.

From the above short discussion, we can already conclude that one important feature in the description or definition of irony is shared background knowledge or common experience. Before proceeding, however, I want to present my view of language and language rules which reverberates through this work.

Some ideas on language

Even though language is use, it is habitually described without regard for its users. The metaphor for this type of language, it seems to me, is an animated movie. An animated movie consists of a large number of frames (that is, movie frames, not frames in the sense of Goffman 1974). Each frame pictures a state which portrays the smallest unit of the movie/language. Once put in sequence, the frames give the illusion of movement. Linguists attempt to

identify these frames. Many linguists would thus claim that we should not analyze discourse before we have successfully described all of the sentences of a language. Even discourse linguists persist in the belief that structure precedes discourse (Hopper 1987). As Friedrich (1979:449) has noted, the 'cognitive, basic-meaning approach . . . tends to lead research toward the study of *fixed* structures, toward *stasis*, rather than toward realization that language is partly chaotic as well as systematic in its sources and dynamics, that language is ultimately a question of flux and process.' Language change and variation thus must be taken into account, as the linguistic system does not exist apart from the speaker. Language models need not be prescriptive or productive but rather descriptive.

For a descriptive approach the division sentence meaning (underlying, basic) and speaker meaning then has great explanatory power, however, not because speakers first find the underlying meaning and then move to what they intend to mean in the context. The problem with the division into sentence and speaker meaning is that the former is perceived as being static the latter as dynamic. Sentence meaning, independent from the context is always the same. But take the example of *cutting a film*. Producers now *cut videos*, even though there is no actual cutting involved anymore. The editor tells the *cutter* what kind of *cuts* to make. There is *straight cut editing*, where one *cuts from one scene to the other*. Often a computer even does the *cutting and pasting*. In video-production, there may be a trend towards using *edit* instead of *cut*. But motion-pictures are not filmed on video, so the *cutting* terminology will persist. Now does a video-cutter actually think about the act of cutting when he/she cuts or edits a video or does only the analyzing linguist do so? Does not usage influence the perception of video cutting then denoting solely copying and deleting? Thus in many instances, the "original" meaning of a term can only be accessed via a diachronic approach. The term becomes a metaphor. In a semantic analysis we must thus proceed synchronically and diachronically using the division sentence and speaker meaning as a product of methodology not actual use.

Several problems thus appear in the strict application of sentence and speaker meaning. The fact that languages change. Meanings are considered to be basic and stable. Their ability to change is often ignored. Further, this division lays the foundation for consideration of some meaning as being basic

and others as being evolved. This idea then leads to the troubling notion of violation (von Polenz 1985). Concepts like irony are then interpreted as violations of some norm. Nevertheless, I will use the differentiation as a methodological construct. I believe that both sentence and speaker meaning can be investigated separately. Both are interpretations, neither is prior to the other (Fish 1989).

In the same vein, grammar does not exist before discourse, since 'in natural discourse we compose and speak simultaneously . . . [Grammar is not the only, or major] source of regularity, but instead grammar is what *results* when formulas are re-arranged, or dismantled and re-assembled, in different ways' (Hopper 1987:145, emphasis added). Any structure or any apparent pragmatic regularity emerges from the discourse; it is not pressed upon it like a template. Thus pervasive concepts like irony or metaphors cannot be excluded as exceptional, inconvenient, or irregular. Stable features in grammar—and they do exist—do not form the sole basis of a grammar. For example, the study of repetition in discourse, like idioms, proverbs, cliches, and formulas will result in the discovery of regularities (ibid.). There exists no consistent level on which these regularities can be stated; hence, they have to be viewed holistically.

However, we should also not fall into the trap of positing rules for discourse after we have found some regularities. Certainly, rules may serve as a valid means of discussing and analyzing discourse. However, once we posit rules, we have to describe continually the exception, that is, in which ways the rules are broken. Most discourses then become a string of rule-violations. I find the metaphorical implications of "violation" troubling, even though, admittedly, the term "violation" seems difficult to avoid in any description of language. Because of these reservations, I consider my conclusions regularities, tendencies, or strategies in terms of Brown & Levinson (1988), but not as rules.

Language models need to account for language change, for continuous intra-cultural and inter-cultural influences, for aesthetics, for the phenomenon of language play, or even, very basically, for fun within the diversity of languages. It often appears that a linguistic treatment gains acceptance the more it resembles a mathematical approach (which, of course, includes statistical analyses). Generative linguistics has tried in this way to find its

niche among the natural sciences and is thus not set up to deal well with "irregular" language expressions, counting them among exceptions.

Only very few linguistic models have been used to deal with irony. The Speech Act Theory of Austin (1962) and Searle (1976), as well as the Gricean model (1989)[2] form the basis of most recent treatments of irony. I will introduce, criticize, and expand upon their ideas throughout and try to characterize verbal irony in general and instances of verbal irony in particular.

The speaker/hearer dilemma

The use of the term "speaker" varies within a single publication as well as from publication to publication (Goffman 1971). A speaker can be (i) the speaker in a communicative situation who holds the floor (Speaker A), (ii) the hearer in a communicative situation (Speaker B), (iii) the speaker of a particular language (German speakers, English speakers), (iv) the author of a written work, (v) a protagonist speaking in an author's work. The literature, unfortunately, often does not consider these differences. Perhaps the terms "producer" and "recipient" are more descriptive. Nevertheless, we find ourselves in a muddle as conversation is not a one-way street but usually involves two or more speakers who are also hearers. To indicate the precise role of each participant in a conversation (Speaker A or B) seems impossible, as speakers are at times also hearers, and hearers speakers. Somebody who intersperses another person's utterances with an agreeing "hm" from time to time is at that time also a speaker. Following this line of thought, we may want to propose differing degrees of involvement. What about a speaker who speaks to a group of people where hardly anybody listens? What is the audience's involvement? The idea speaker/hearer points to the idealized notion of conversation: two persons are involved, one speaks, the other listens, then the roles reverse seemingly without any overlap, interruption, trailing off, repair, etc. (Goffman 1971).

In the following, nonetheless, I use the terms speaker and hearer. A speaker is the addresser, the participant holding the floor. A hearer is the addressee. An addressee/hearer is present in the communicative situation but not necessarily involved in it (Bublitz 1988).

A preliminary characterization of irony

With care, I try to avoid the term *definition*. Partly perhaps because of Muecke's (1969:14) wonderful statement: 'Since . . . Erich Heller, in his *Ironic German*, has already quite adequately not defined irony, there would be little point in not defining it all over again.' Of course, Muecke continues to attempt a definition, as is very tempting to do. For the time being, let me call it a characterization or description. Ideally, I would like to have a definition that fits all instances and is always applicable without amendments, without having to call new and perhaps non-conforming instances a violation. Language change, however, entails a change in the understanding of linguistic concepts, including the concept of irony, and thus renders many definitions dated. Let us look at a representative example in order to picture verbal irony.

In reaction to another person's action, *Thank you!* takes on diverse interpretations. Let us assume a friend broke one of my vases. Let us assume further that I never liked this vase and that, just recently, I have tried to find a way to get rid of it. Since the vase was a wedding-present from a beloved cousin, I could not bring myself to give the vase away or break it. In this case *Thank you!* can be understood as communicating relief that the vase is finally gone. Unless my friend knows about my feelings, she may suspect ironic intentions, and I may have to explain. Generally, the definition of irony is cast in terms of opposition of a surface (friendly) to an underlying (disagreeable) reading of a statement. We will see that opposition is not a factor in all instances of irony, and that it is often hard to find what the opposition of a statement may be, as is the case with the opposition of *Thank you!* (Gibbs 1986).

If, on the other hand, I have always cherished the vase, my utterance *somehow* indicates disapproval. The addressee and other participants who know about my feelings will *somehow* recognize my intentions and interpret my utterance as ironic. There are then two different *somehows*, the speaker's and the hearers.' The production and reception of irony represented by these *somehows* is of interest.

A possible audience needs to know my feelings about the vase in order to interpret my reaction. In the first case (i), those audience members who do not know that I hate the vase, may assume that I am ironic. Those who know my feelings may understand my relief. In the second case (ii), those audience members who know my feelings will perceive the irony, those who do not may either suspect ironic intentions or not. Given the right circumstances, speakers want other participants to "read between the lines" in order to recognize that their utterance was to function as a criticism. But these intentions will not always be recognized by all participants.

In saying *Thank you!*, I did not attack the addressee directly, thereby providing the addressee with the opportunity to ignore my remark. It would have been very different had I said *You bloody fool! I love this vase*. The criticism could then not be ignored. Thus saying *Thank you!* provides a means to save face for both speaker and addressee, neither of whom has to acknowledge the possible criticism when challenged. The expression *Thank you!* appears to be an example of an ironic utterance, which corresponds both to (1) the Platonic idea of pretense, and (2) the Aristotelean blame-by-praise figure. Here *Thank you!* constitutes this praise, though in conflict with my feelings about the addressee's action and, therefore, not intended as a praise. In this case, the speaker only feigns praise.

While I believe that blame-by-praise and pretense are factors in most ironic instances, I want to add further elements. I describe verbal irony as a face-saving off record utterance in the sense of Brown & Levinson (1988), which indicates criticism (of an action or utterance or general stance of another participant or participants, who are either present or absent, or of circumstances beyond control). Those persons implicitly criticized are the victims. Speakers typically have an audience that evaluates their attempt to be ironic. We usually describe speakers as the initiators of the irony and supply them with all kinds of intentions. However, the sole evaluator of ironic intentions has to be the recipient. I, then, as a person researching irony, can make valid contributions from the hearer's point of view, because what am I if not one of a number of hearers, perhaps an analyzing observer? Taking the speaker's point of view, I would be limited to my own attempts at being ironic because only I know my intentions. This may be interesting for close friends, but would not be very enlightening for a larger audience.