Defense of pretense

An explanation of irony

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Abstract

I argue that irony is best understood as a form of pretense. I compare three competing theories of irony and their various strands: echoic theory, pretense theory, and meaning opposition theories. I point out that pretense theory is best able to capture the data when it comes to indexicals and specifying in what cases irony arises. However, I note that irony as a form of pretending to assert does not properly account for cases of embedded irony. I conclude by claiming that irony ought to be understood as pretense at the belief level, rather than at the speech act level.

Table of contents

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the William James lectures of 1967, Paul Grice develops an enormously influential two-part system of speaker meaning where he spells out the relation between what a speaker says and what they may intend to suggest or imply by what they say. When a speaker violates rules that make rational and cooperative conversation possible, the audience looks for a reason as to why they have said what they did—this reason is what is known as *implicature*. Thus, utterances become imbued with their total signification due to joint work between the speaker and the audience (Grice 1975).

One may go so far as to say it was a two-tiered system of speaker meaning, as what is implicated is calculated based on the content of what is said. In other words, saying is more fundamental to meaning than implicating. This means we run into a problem when we deal with overt violations or floutings of the maxim of quality: "try to make your contribution one that is true" (Grice 1975, 46). If what is said is necessarily part of meaning, then how is it possible that I say something false without meaning something false? Grice's brief comments on this topic state that a speaker who utters a sentence S, flouting the maxim of quality, does not in fact say S but merely makes as if to say, drawing a difference between the physical act of making sounds that resemble words from a language and *saying* as Austin did before him.

It's unfortunately not clear that this terminological change is sufficient to solve the issue, especially when it comes to verbal irony. Many scholars, including Grice himself, are in agreement that irony is inadequately accounted for under the original implicature model. But Grice is not alone. Attempting to explain irony has been a pastime of rhetoricians, philosophers, and linguists throughout history; many have thrown their hat in the ring before "Logic and Conversation," and many are still doing so today. Of these contenders, two major theories developed as part of a larger system responding to Grice's theory of implicature: the post-Gricean echoic view and the neo-Gricean pretense view.

What follows will be an argument in favor of some sort of pretense theory of verbal irony. Chapter 1 is the introduction; Chapter 2 lays the historical groundwork for the debate between echoic theory and pretense theory today; Chapter 3 returns to the Gricean view of meaning inversion and argues against its modern instantiations; Chapter 4 points out the flaws in the echoic view and the pretense view; and Chapter 5 specifies the sort of pretense that is necessary to characterize verbal irony.

Chapter 2

History

The large class of phenomena that are called *ironic* have one thing in common: incongruence. In dramatic irony, there is incongruence between what the reader knows and what the audience knows. In situational irony, there is incongruence between the situation at hand and certain facts or other situations that are relevant. In verbal irony, which I will be focusing on in this paper, there is incongruence between what one says and the context of utterance. Unless otherwise noted, *irony* is to be taken as interchangeable with *verbal irony*.

The most important feature of verbal irony is that the incongruence is intentional on the part of the speaker. Stereotypical cases of verbal irony consist of a speaker asserting p while intending to transparently get across that they believe p–that is, that there is an incongruence between what they say and what they believe. By transparently, I mean to express that it is known by all interlocutors that the speaker believes p. This formulation doesn't capture all cases of verbal irony. For example, assertions of true sentences can be ironic, and so can non-assertoric speech acts.

(1) I love cooking in a clean kitchen. [uttered when you are expected to cook in a very dirty kitchen]

(2) Did you get that skirt from the landfill or the eighteenth century?

(3) Wow, how impressive that you ran a mile in twenty minutes!

(4) Thanks for being so generous with your time—that five minute meeting was really helpful.

Assume that all of the above examples were intended to be understood ironically. Assertions of true facts such as (1), questions such as (2), exclamatives such as (3), and expressions of gratitude such as (4) all can be considered ironic. Despite the diversity of irony in the real world, irony that resembles the assertion of a false fact has received the most attention from linguists, rhetoricians, and philosophers going back thousands of years to Quintilian: "we understand something which is the opposite of what is actually said" (Quintilian 1920/95, 401).

2.1 Gricean view

Correspondingly, when Grice attempted to extend his theory of implicature to include irony, he focused primarily on cases where something flagrantly false is asserted.

> It is perfectly obvious to A and his audience that what A has said or has made as if to say is something he does not believe, and the audience knows that A knows that this is obvious to the audience. So, unless A's utterance is entirely pointless, A must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward. This must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward. (Grice 1975, 83)

Much like other implicatures, an ironic speaker can mean something that is not part of what is said because the audience is under the assumption that the speaker is behaving rationally and cooperatively, and that the speaker would not be behaving rationally and cooperatively if they were simply taken for their word.

Here's an example. Suppose I say (5) about Sachien, who has just kicked a puppy in

front of my audience and myself.

(5) He has an upstanding moral code.

It ought to be clear to everyone that Sachien does not have an upstanding moral code, given his recent action. Because I made a choice to utter the specific sentence (5) rather than any other sentence, my audience will assume that what I mean is related to what I've uttered despite the fact this relation is not characterized by identity as it usually is. With irony, the proposition literally expressed and the proposition I mean are contradictories of each other, which ultimately conveys the contrary proposition. That is, irony turns the meaning of "She has an upstanding moral code" to "It is not the case that she has an upstanding moral code," which is the contradictory proposition, then via some sort of pragmatic processing, becomes "She is a terrible person," the contrary proposition.

The Gricean speaker relies on two main conditions to hold in order for an ironic utterance to be properly understood: the assumption that your interlocutor is rational and cooperative, and common knowledge that what is asserted is false. Though the first of these is common to all exchange of information, the latter is unique to flouting of the maxim of quality. I've already touched on the first objection to this position: not all verbal irony can be reduced to the form that Grice delineated, which we see in examples (1), (2), (3), and (4). Indeed, it's unclear exactly what the opposite of asking a question or saying thank you would be.

A second objection is that the two conditions listed above are not necessary nor sufficient, even if we suppose that we can loosen the second condition to include non-assertoric speech acts. To borrow Grice's own example, imagine a car with its windows shattered (Grice 1978, 124). It would not be possible for me to say "That car sure has intact windows" in order to express that the car's windows are shattered, even if it was accompanied with an ironic tone. Both conditions are present; irony is absent.[1]

[1]I won't spend a lot of time discussing the ironic tone. For the purpose of this paper, assume that some speakers and audiences use tone of voice to distinguish between an ironic utterance and a non-ironic utterance—this should be fairly uncontroversial.

To address these discoveries, Grice suggests two amendments in "Further Notes on Logic and Conversation": that irony ought to be understood as a type of pretense, and that it must be linked to a negative attitude toward the content of what is uttered, which is often expressed with a tone of voice conventionally associated with that attitude (1978, 125).

2.2 Post-Gricean view: echoic theory

These expansions are still not sufficient. In "Irony and the Use-Mention Distinction," Sperber and Wilson identify three main features of irony that remain unexplained by the Gricean account (1981, 311–312). First, we employ a tone of voice or register to accompany ironic utterances that depart from how we normally speak. There are a few ways to characterize this tone, but it is generally more exaggerated, more pretentios, and so on. Second, there is a normative bias inherent to the judgments that accompany ironic utterances. We are more likely to say "He is a genius" to express that he is not smart than we are to say "He is an idiot" to express that he is quite smart. This has been empirically verified in various studies (Kreuz and Glucksberg 1989; Beukeboom and Burgers 2020).

Three, irony always has a victim, as seen below.

(6) I would love to go on a date with you.

(7) Anna sure knows a lot.

(8) Noise music is the peak of Western civilization.

Assume that (6), (7), and (8) are uttered ironically. The victim of irony is explicit in the first two cases—the addressee and Anna respectively—and implicit in the last—a hypothetical individual who enjoys noise music in (8)—but what is the same in both cases is that someone or some group of people is negatively singled out by these utterances. Later, this position was refined to something called *the ironical attitude* toward what is expressed, where the target of dissociation is the proposition expressed by the utterance. Those who believe or at

least entertain this proposition can be victimized but only indirectly, as the primary target of irony is, again, the proposition (Wilson and Sperber 2012, 141). Though in many cases the victim is someone other than the speaker, one can make themselves the victim of their own ironic utterance if they believe that their beliefs are worth dissociating from. For example, someone who believes or used to believe noise music is good music, may utter (8) to make fun of themselves.

As stated above, Grice commented on the first and second of these objections, but he never attempted an explanation of why any of these may be the case. Even if Grice's project was never intended to capture every facet of irony, a theory that can account for more facts is intuitively more appealing than competing theories that do not.

Sperber and Wilson account for the three features of irony by appealing to the use-mention distinction. An expression is used if it involves "reference to what the expression refers to," and it is mentioned if it involves "reference to the expression itself" (1981, 303). Suppose I say "You are short" and my interlocutor says "Who are you calling short?" In this case, I have used the word short and my interlocutor has mentioned it, as I employed the word to refer to its semantic meaning, and my interlocutor has repeated the word to object to my use of it.

Verbal irony is a special type of mention known as echoic mention. Unlike the mention of short in the earlier, echoic mention echoes an entire proposition with the intention to indicate that "the preceding utterance has been heard and understood" and to react to what was just uttered (Sperber and Wilson 1981, 306). Consider the following exchanges from Jorgensen et al. (1984, 113):

(9) A: I've lost my job.

B: You've lost your job. I'm sorry to hear that.

(10) A: Should I wear a tie?

B: Should you wear a tie? Who cares?

(11) A: It's not my fault!

B: Then it's my fault! Is that what you're implying?

Verbal irony is a subtype of echoic use, which itself is a subtype of mention rather than use, characterized by "attitudes… from the dissociative range: the speaker rejects a tacitly attributed thought as ludicrously false (or blatantly inadequate in other ways)" (Wilson and Sperber 2012, 130). More specifically, irony expresses an attitude that tends to be on the mild side of the spectrum of dissociative attitudes. We'll return to this point later.

Thus, if the weather is actually terrible today, an utterance such as

(12) The weather is so nice today.

could be uttered ironically in at least two cases: one in which someone had earlier stated that the weather would be nice today, or one in which the speaker believes that someone thought the weather would be nice today. You could also say the sentence without there being a particular person who had this explicit thought, since people generally expect the weather to be nice on any given day.

The purpose of irony for post-Griceans is not to express the opposite of what is said, but to express that you do not approve of a proposition that was expressed earlier or expected of a situation. Someone who is doing such a thing can certainly believe the opposite of what they say, but as we've already discussed, Sperber and Wilson are correct in saying that meaning reversal is not everything there is to irony.

Does the echoic theory address the three objections to the Gricean picture of irony raised by the post-Griceans: tone of voice, normative bias, and victim of irony? The answer is unsurpisingly yes. First, Wilson and Sperber explain the tone of voice as "a natural cue to the particular type of mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude that the speaker intends to convey to the thought being echoed." Second, the normative bias of irony is explained by the fact norms are always available to be echoed from, and norms themselves have a positive bias—kitchens should be clean, skirts should be stylish, the weather should be nice, and so

on. Finally, the the ironical attitude is not explained but adopted as one of the constitutive features of irony (Wilson and Sperber 2012, 141–143).

2.3 Neo-Gricean view: pretense theory

Though the echoic view is associated with the post-Griceans and relevance theory, nothing in it is theoretically inconsistent with a neo-Gricean framework—echoes could be understood as a violation of the maxim of relation. Nonetheless, the neo-Griceans developed a position of their own, expanding on Grice's note that speaking ironically is to engage in a pretense. Clark and Gerrig, following traditional approaches from literary theory, argue that speakers who are being ironic pretend as though they are someone who holds the views expressed by the utterance. As this person who they pretend to be, who they call S', the speaker S, expresses what they believe to be transparently "uninformed or injudicious" positions to A', who are members of the audience that accept these positions uncritically (Clark and Gerrig 1984, 122). A' stands in contrast to A, the members of the audience that see through the pretense. That is, at least some members of the audience are meant to see that S is only pretending to be S', the attitude that S holds against S', and thus, the attitude that S holds against the specific belief held by S'.

Note that I say "at least some members of the audience" rather than simply "the audience." To explain why we speak ironically at all, Clark and Gerrig also appeal to something known as the double audience, described by Fowler. Not everyone understands that S is merely pretending to be S'. The audience is, at least hypothetically, divided into two groups: one group that understands that pretense is present, and another group that is ignorant of the pretense. Those in the former group have a sort of camaraderie with S because they share secret knowledge in common, unlike those in the latter group. Irony, then, has a uniting effect between people who are 'in' on the bit, as well as a distancing effect between S and people who hold beliefs that resemble those of S'.

How are the three features of irony originally identified by Sperber and Wilson explained? First, the tone of voice that accompanies irony is explained by the fact actors put on a voice when they are portraying a character. Second, the normative bias of irony is explained by the fact ignorant people tend to hold positive-leaning beliefs. Third, the ironical attitude is built into the fabric of the theory, as both S' and A' are victimized by an ironic utterance.

Pretense theory and echoic theory have something in common: both theories are expressivist in nature. Expressivism differs from the implicature view because the ironic speaker does not mean a particular proposition at all, but instead "draw[s] attention to a disparity between how things are and how they should be, and thereby express[es] a "dissociative attitude" about some aspect of this disparity" (Camp 2012, 588).

As such, it should not come as a surprise that some theories have attempted to blend pretense theory and echoic theory together. For example, Kumon-Nakamura et al argue that the purpose of irony is to allude to a failed expectation. Allusion is similar to the concept of echo in that they both involve reference and resemblance to an earlier source–in fact, Kumon-Nakamura et al claim that echoes are a type of allusion (2007/1995, 88).

The failed expectation is alluded to by way of pragmatic insincerity, which is defined in terms of Austin and others' felicity conditions for a given speech act. For example, if I say something like (6), I assert that I would love to go on a date with you while failing to abide by the felicity condition that I ought to believe the content of what I said. An advantage of this view is that non-assertoric ironic utterances are easily accomodated: "declarative assertions should be true, compliments should be true and taken as compliments rather than rebukes, questions should be asked only when an answer is desired, offers should be made only when acceptance is desirable, and politeness levels should be appropriate to the situation" (Kumon-Nakamura et al. 2007/1995, 61). To put it in terms of pretense, the speaker pretends to be sincerely making a speech act without abiding by the felicity conditions that make the utterance sincere in the first place.

One problem with this view is that it is not certain that allusion really is necessary for

irony to succeed. Consider the following example:

(13) A: I think Cole is a bad speller.

B: Yeah, and I think Michael Phelps is a bad swimmer.

B certainly says something ironic in 13; however, it's unclear exactly what B is trying to allude to, since the expectation that Michael Phelps is a good swimmer is not violated by A's saying that Cole is a bad speller. This form of irony is known as surrealistic irony, where the intended meaning of the ironic statement is a "negative evaluation of the previous utterance" (Kapogianni 2011, 60).

The same problem is not faced by the echoic view, since what can be ironically echoed is not limited to expectations but can include implications of previous utterances or existing expectations. Thus, Sperber and Wilson and other relevance theorists may argue that by saying something obviously false in 13, A also simultaneously implied other obviously false things via the principle of explosion from classical logic, where one contradiction opens the doors for all other contradictions to enter. In contrast, what can be ironically alluded to for Kumon-Nakamura et al is limited to expectations. The predictions made under this account say that B is not making an ironic statement because B is not calling attention to the fact that the expectation *everyone believes Michael Phelps is a good swimmer* was broken by A. Even if the expectation that B is trying to call attention to is some sort of expectation for truth, A does not allude to this expectation so much as break the expectation in a more conspicuous way. After all, it would not be an instance of allusion if someone was unkind to me and, in trying to bring attention to the fact they broke an expectation of politeness, I was unkind to them in return.

Chapter 3

Grice strikes back

Some developments to existing theories on irony were basically terminological. For example, post-Griceans re-label the implicit or explicit victims of irony as "ironic attitude" to what is expressed in 1984 (Jorgensen et al., 114) and they also replace the notion of mention with interpretive resemblance and attributive use in 1986 (Sperber and Wilson). These changes do not pose major challenges to their general framework developed in 1981 outside of what I've already discussed.

The landscape of the debate between these two views has remained basically consistent. However, the echoic view and the pretense view are not the only available ways to approach irony. Some have returned to Grice's idea of meaning reversal, claiming that we we are better off filling holes in his theory than conjuring up an entirely new system.

3.1 Camp

One such person is Elisabeth Camp, who holds a unique view that is half-pretense and half-reversal of meaning:

> On my view, sarcasm always evokes a normative scale, always pretends to undertake one commitment or express one attitude with respect to this scale... and

> always thereby communicates a commitment or attitude which counts as the inverse of this pretended commitment or attitude relative to that scale. (Camp 2012, 620)

A normative scale is a ranked ordering of "some quality, person, fact, or situation [where] X is valorized, and others comparatively disvalued" (2012, 606). If Y is comparatively disvalued to X's valorization, a sarcastic speaker pretends to take Y as the valorized element, and thus communicates that Y is actually disvalued.

Note that she uses the term *sarcasm* rather than *verbal irony* as I have been using in this paper; however, her analysis of sarcasm is intended to "accommodate most if not all of the cases described as verbal irony" (Camp 2012, 625). An advantage of her position is that it purports to explain classic cases of verbal irony as well as like-prefixed sarcasm, such as the following:

(14) Like the next David Lewis would ever want to be my friend.

Contrary to Camp's name for the phenomenon, like-prefixed sarcasm is not restricted to cases of sarcasm where like is prefixed at the beginning of the utterance—a similar effect is reached by replacing like with *as if* and other constructions. This phenomenon is attested in non-English languages, and is different from other instances of irony in that it only applies to declarative sentences and licenses NPIs (Camp and Hawthorne 2008; Bender and Kathol 2001).

(15) The next David Lewis wants to be my friend.

(16) Like, would the next David Lewis ever want to be my friend?

(17) #The next David Lewis would ever want to be my friend.

Though (16) is a possible construction, it is not equivalent to like-prefixed sarcasm because (*like*) is being used not to deny the proposition contained in (16) but to express doubt about it. It is probably better understood as a sort of interjection along the lines of "um" or

"so" (Camp and Hawthorne 2008, 3). Evidence for this comes from the fact the removal of "like" in (16) does not change the meaning of (16) nearly as much as the removal of "like" in (14), even if the NPI were not present in the latter.

Another way in which like-prefixed sarcasm differs from verbal irony is in its pattern of meaning reversal. In (14) the presupposition expressed by *the next David Lewis* is generally not the target of meaning reversal; what is reversed instead is whether this person would want to be my friend or not. In contrast, bare irony easily targets presuppositional material, as (15) could be a way to make fun of someone who believes their philosophical abilities to be on par with that of David Lewis, while sincerely asserting that they believe this person wants to be their friend (Camp and Hawthorne 2008, 5).

Camp suggests that like-prefixed sarcasm is actually the speech act of denying that a proposition is true, as essentially the opposite of the illocutionary act of assertion (Camp and Hawthorne 2008, 12). If like-prefixed sarcasm is a form of verbal irony, then expressivist theories of irony are in trouble. Someone who asserts (14) seems to genuinely commit themselves to the proposition that the referent of the next David Lewis does not want to be their friend, rather than expressing a vague negative attitude toward the belief that the next David Lewis would want to be their friend.

However, there is reason to exclude like-prefixed sarcasm from the category of verbal irony: you can stack, so to speak, verbal irony on top of like-prefixed sarcasm. Compare the following examples:

(18) As if Liam were as good at linguistics as you!

(19) As if Chomsky were as good at linguistics as you!

The structure of (18) and (19) are the same, and so both are conventionally used to mean that the person named is not as good at linguistics as you—that is, they contain the illocutionary force of denying the proposition expressed. However, it is quite easy to imagine the latter being uttered ironically to make fun of someone who overestimates their

linguistic ability. In such a context, the speaker ironically conveys that Chomsky *is* as good at linguistics as you, that Chomsky is in fact *better* at linguistics as you, that you are arrogant to compare yourself to Chomsky in linguistic capacity, and so on.

Under the assumption that like-prefixed sarcasm is indeed a form of sarcasm, we can now know that the relation between irony and sarcasm cannot be characterized as that between a set and a subset. Like-prefixed sarcasm, then, is an instance of what Kapogianni aptly calls *non-ironic sarcasm*, "a bitter comment that does not contain any conflict with reality" (Kapogianni 2011, 55). Though the boundaries between sarcasm and irony have become foggier over the years, the concepts that these terms refer to (or at least, used to refer to) share overlap without any entailment relationship. That is, some sarcastic utterances are ironic and some are not, as irony are sarcasm are related but distinct concepts.

I am assuming that you cannot add double-dip, so to speak, when it comes to irony, that you cannot make an utterance ironic twice over. This is a reasonable assumption. Let's return to (5) and suppose it is revealed to everyone that Sachien spends much of his time volunteering, donates a lot of money to charities, and kicked the puppy to save a child who was in danger of being seriously injured by the puppy. If I utter (5) to the same audience, I may do so with the intention of revealing to everyone that I was wrong to assume that Sachien was a bad person. However, it doesn't make a lot of sense to say that uttering (5) in this context is ironic, despite the fact it would clearly be an echo for the echoic view that distances itself from the original utterance in context. That is, the irony cancels itself out, and the utterance is no longer ironic. This does not seem to be the case with an ironic utterance of (19), which seems typically ironic.

Thus, even if Camp is correct in her characterization of sarcasm, it cannot be the characterization of verbal irony that will accomplish the goals of this paper. Unfortunately, Camp is also incorrect in her characterization of sarcasm. An uncontroversial example of non-ironic sarcasm is mimicry. If someone says "I hate linguistics" and I repeat back to them "I hate linguistics" in a mocking way, I could be described as being sarcastic without being ironic.

It is unclear how this count be seen as undertaking a commitment to one side of a normative scale, unless we really stretch the concept of a normative scale.

3.2 Garmendia and Korta

One observation made by Garmendia and Korta is that irony seems to irrevocably violate Grice's purpose of conversation. If what is uttered is transparently false, then what is expressed under the Gricean view must be transparently true, assuming the law of excluded middle. But if the purpose of Gricean rational conversation is efficient exchange of information, then why would we bother to express a sentence that is already known to all interlocutors? To quote from the article: "for the hearer to draw the conclusion that the speaker has implicated that p by making as if to say that p, the hearer must use as a premise the prior (common) knowledge that the speaker does not believe that p" (Garmendia and Korta 2007, 192).

Garmendia and Korta address this issue by saying that the negation of p is merely "bridge content" rather than the point of the utterance. That is, given an ironic utterance such as

(20) Mark is a fine friend.

the speaker makes as if to say the proposition *Mark is a fine friend*, expresses the contrary proposition *Mark is a terrible friend*, which then implicates the propositions *I have been a fool to believe Mark*, *I should not have trusted Mark*, and so on (Garmendia and Korta 2007, 196-197). For the asif account, what is important is not whether what you make as if to say is congruent with what you believe to be true but whether what you present yourself as believing is congruent with what you actually believe.

This view has the advantage of explaining why some obviously false statements cannot be ironically stated. Let's return to the car with broken windows from Grice's "Further Notes." For Garmendia and Korta, the reason I cannot say "That car sure has its windows

intact" is because the contrary proposition *that car has broken windows* does not generate any further implicatures that constitute the point of the utterance. However, if I had been talking with someone who had told me that the neighborhood we were in was completely safe and orderly, I *would* generate further implicatures with the utterance of "That car sure has its windows intact," along the lines of *you were wrong to believe that this neighborhood is safe and orderly*, *I know more about this neighborhood than you do*, and so on (Garmendia and Korta 2007, 198).

So what is the difference between saying (20) and "Mark is a terrible friend"? It is the expression of a negative attitude against the proposition literally expressed. In keeping with the Gricean revisions in "Further notes," the point of irony under the asif account is negativity. From here, "[f]urther implicatures that paradigmatically involve the speaker's negative attitude are inferred" (Garmendia and Korta 2007, 196).

The issue with the asif account is whether it is meaningfully different from the expressivist theories. Implicatures generated by the contrary content seem to capture inferences that can be drawn from a general dissociation from the proposition expressed rather than specific propositions that the speaker intends to convey, and the negative attitude being analytic to the concept of irony is a key feature of the two expressivist views we established above. In trying to be consistent with Grice's program, Garmendia and Korta have in fact reinvented the expressivist wheel.

Notice that neither Camp nor Garmendia and Korta were interested in answering the question of why the ironic tone exists, unlike Sperber and Wilson and Clark and Gerrig. The ironic tone is a tricky concept because there are multiple ways of indicating via tone that an utterance is ironic, and there is evidence to suggest that they are merely tones that express a generally dissociative attitude rather than tones specific to irony (Bryant and Fox Tree 2005). Moreover, since verbal irony is possible through written communication, the tone of

irony itself is perhaps not as essential to a theory of irony as previously thought.[1]

[1]Thanks to Professor Veneeta Dayal for making this point.

Chapter 4

Echo or pretense?

We are once again left with echoic theory and pretense theory. This is not to say that there are no reasons to prefer one theory over the other. The pretense view seems to be superior to the echoic view, though there are objections against the pretense view that I will address as well.

4.1 Issues with echo

First, the echoic view fails to have the correct predictions when indexicals are involved. Linguistic echoes behave the way that physical echoes do in terms of content preservation. I say "Hello" into a canyon and hear the sound "Hello" repeated a few moments later, the echo will have the same aural content as what I have originally uttered. In a similar way, if I utter something like (21) to my friend, I can expect to hear an echo with the same semantic content as what I have originally uttered, such as (22).

(21) I love swimming.

(22) She loves swimming.

This is precisely in line with how Wilson and Sperber describe their own understanding of an echo, insofar as it is a form of attributive use of language: "In attributive uses, [the

thought of the speaker's utterance] is not directly about a state of affairs, but about another thought that it resembles in content, which the speaker attributes to some source other than herself at the current time. (Wilson and Sperber 2012, 128. Italics mine).

The exact wording of the object being echoed, whether it be a private thought or an utterance or anything else, is secondary to preserving the content of the object. We see this in examples of echoes given by relevance theorists themselves, especially those that contain indexicals. As with (21) and (22) given here, the indexical is not preserved in its original form; rather, the indexical changes to preserve the content of the utterance.

This means that (23) could not be an echo because my enjoyment of swimming is not part of what is expressed by (21) in any respect. (23), however, could easily be an instance of verbal irony, especially if followed up by something like "There's nothing more enjoyable than making myself uncomfortably close to drowning for a few hours."

(23) I love swimming, too.

In other words, pretense is personal; echoes are not. The speaker must claim to hold the belief they utter themselves, rather than call attention to the fact someone has held this belief before. The echoic theorists of course don't believe that content must be perfectly preserved (Wilson and Sperber 2012, 131), but this brings us to my second issue with echoic theory. It seems the echoic view is just too weak to be of explanatory value, since just about anything can be echoed. According to Sperber and Wilson, you can echo general expectations about the weather, thoughts you believe another person hold, implications of a previous utterance, and so on. If we try to restrict what is available to be echoed, we run into the same issue as Kumon-Nakamura et al. (2007) in Chapter 2.3, where surrealistic irony becomes unaccounted for. Exacerbating the problem is the fact "the ironical utterance need not preserve the illocutionary force of the original" (Wilson and Sperber 2012, 139); in other words, the echoic theory permits very weak and tenuous connections between the original utterance and the echo.

Third and finally, the echoic view claims irony can be characterized as a mild dissociative echo, but this underspecifies verbal irony, as not all such utterances are ironic. Consider (10), which expresses disapproval at what the original utterance expressed and yet is not a case of verbal irony. Or better yet, consider the following:

(24) A: Sachien is a good person.

B: Sachien is a good person? I wouldn't say so.

C: Yeah, Sachien is a good person for sure. Kicking puppies is definitely what good people do.

In (24), both B and C express that what A has said is ridiculous; they would both be described as dissociative echoes. However, I would only describe C as being ironic.

If, following the echoic theory, B and C are both uttering dissociative echoes but only C is an ironic utterance, then the only reason given by Wilson and Sperber to explain why C is ironic but B is not is the intensity of the dissociation; that is, C should be dissocating more mildly than B. However, my intuition is that B and C are not distinguished by intensity of dissociation. If anything, C is a stronger dissociation than B. This cannot be explained by the fact B is a question and C is an assertion for two reasons—questions can be ironic as we noted with 2, and we could come up with an echo like D:

D: Sachien is a good person. You must have gone mad to believe something like that.

As B, D utters a milder dissociative attitude toward the proposition asserted by A than C does, but still cannot be described as ironic.

4.2 Issues with pretense

This is not to say that the pretense view is perfect. A common objection against the pretense view is that it isn't clear what is being pretended. To quote Wilson and Sperber, "While it makes sense to talk of mimicking, imitating or pretending to perform a public speech

act, it makes no clear sense to talk of mimicking, imitating or pretending to perform a private thought" (Wilson and Sperber 2012, 139). Even when we *are* mimicking, imitating, or pretending to perform a public speech act, it is possible that the illocutionary act of the public speech act does not match the illocutionary act of the ironic utterance.

(25) A: Josephine is so nice.

B: Isn't Josephine so nice?

Suppose B utters (25) ironically after Josephine has done something that is not very nice at all. Despite the fact that the proposition literally expressed by A and B are identical, it's hard to see how B could be seen as imitating A, since the original speech act was an assertion and the latter was a question.

Another objection against the pretense view is that Clark and Gerrig's mechanism for pretense is rather involved and not accurate to many cases of irony. Irony seems appropriate even when it is clear that nobody will understand me as actually believing the proposition I literally express—that is, when I go out of my way to ensure that A', the set of audience members who believe or believe that I believe what I literally express, does not exist. This is especially clear in cases of sarcastic irony where the interlocutors are antagonistic toward each other. Suppose I say "Wow, you did such a great job at your concert" while I blatantly rolled my eyes, and you know from rumours that I have been telling people that I think you did a terrible job at your concert. Despite the fact that you and I should be subject to the uniting effect between S, the speaker, and A, the audience who sees through the pretense according to Clark and Gerrig, it seems your seeing through my pretense actually causes the antagonism to be as strong as it is.

Finally, pretense seems inefficient. If I can simply say the thing I want to express, why am I doing so in a roundabout way rather than just asserting it outright?

However, the objections raised against the pretense view seem surmountable in a way that the objections raised against the echoic view are not. As such, the final full chapter of

this paper will be dedicated to defending a version of the pretense view that is immune to its major objections.

Chapter 5

Pretense and belief

Let's narrow our focus to ironic false assertions for a second. There is near unanimous agreement on all sides of the irony debate that an ironic assertion is not actually an assertion—— that is, when I ironically assert something, I haven't actually asserted anything (see Sperber and Wilson 1981; Clark and Gerrig 1984; Camp 2012; Garmendia and Korta 2007; and others). With less unanimity, assertions with embedded irony are accepted as legitimate assertions, at least in part (Camp 2012). Ironic utterances such as (1) where something true is asserted are accepted as legitimate assertions (Dynel 2013, 418).

(26) Priscilla really appreciated everything I had to say. You could tell by the way she glared at me.

(27) Priscilla ever-so-politely told me to shut up.

My ironic utterance of 26 will not commit me to the proposition that Priscilla appreciated everything I had to say, but my ironic utterance of 27 *would* commit me to the proposition that Priscilla told me to shut up. According to Camp, the difference between the two is that in the former, the speaker is in 'pretense mode' for the entire utterance, whereas in the latter the speaker is only pretending for the word 'politely.' That is, speakers can move in and out of ironic communication at will.

Why is it that (26) is not a legitimate assertion? The reason that is usually given is that the speaker transparently does not believe the literally expressed proposition, which disqualifies it from being an assertion. This transparency can come about for a number of reasons——it may be the ironic tone, the fact the audience has preexisting knowledge about the speaker's beliefs, or the fact the proposition asserted is just too ridiculous to believe—— but philosophers and linguists tend to believe that this transparency is what precludes fully ironic utterances such as (26) from being a lie, or the assertion of a false proposition.

5.1 Bald-faced lying and irony

But blatant lack of belief in the expressed proposition does not disqualify an utterance from being an assertion. According to Austin, the failure to have the mental state associated with the speech act and the failure to behave as though you are in that mental state does not rule out an utterance as an instance of that speech act (Austin 1962, 15-16). To apply this to assertions, neither the fact I do not believe the proposition I assert nor the fact I don't act like I believe it can disqualify my utterance as an assertion. We abuse the speech act of assertion when we use it in this way, but we haven't failed to assert.

In fact, we are perfectly happy to call utterances where the speaker does not believe the proposition they assert and do not even act like they believe it when it comes to bald-faced lies. Bald-faced lies are lies where it is common knowledge that what the speaker is uttering is false, and in many cases, wants it to be clear that they are lying (Sorensen 2007, 251). Here's an example of a bald-faced lie. Suppose that Alyssa's birthday cake has disappeared just before her birthday party. Her friends follow the crumb trails to my room and find me sitting in front of a box that once contained a birthday cake with frosting on my mouth. They give me their reasons to believe that I ate the cake, and instead of refuting any of it I say the following:

(28) I did not eat the birthday cake.

(28) is a bald-faced lie because everyone knows that I ate the cake——I haven't made any efforts to deny the (strong) reasons to believe that I ate the cake, but I claim that I didn't eat it anyway. In many cases I may even bolster the bald-faced lie with more ridiculous claims, such as

(29) The cake box appeared in my room all of a sudden, and it didn't have any cake in it when I found it. It may be a ghost.

in order to make it clear that I am engaging in a bald-faced lie.

Can a parallel be drawn between bald-faced lying and irony, despite the fact they appear so different from each other? Bald-faced lying is seen to be a morally worse act than uttering an ironic statement——many people find the former worse than ordinary deceptive lying—and the latter is often part of friendly banter. However, bald-faced lying can also find a place in low-stakes conversations. Suppose I fall asleep during class for a few moments and Ben sees me fall asleep. When I realize that he saw me fall asleep, I tell him the following.

(30) I didn't fall asleep just now.

This is not an exaggeration or an understatement of a true proposition, but as false as an ordinary sentence can be——(30) is, quite literally, the opposite of what has just happened. It is also not an ironic statement. In other words, what I've said is a lie, and given that all interlocutors know that what I've asserted is false, it is a bald-faced lie. Since Ben and I are friends, he is likely to understand this bald-faced lie as not a sign of my disrespect against him as bald-faced lies usually are but as some sort of joke that plays on the fact that what I've asserted is obviously false. Moreover, many ironic utterances are rather disrespectful, especially if they are also sarcastic. For example, (6), (7), and (8) are all disrespectful if you actually hold the beliefs that are expressed by the sentences.

Though the biggest difference between bald-faced lying and irony is that a bald-faced liar is speaking on record whereas an ironic speaker is not, we ought to make a distinction between being on record as saying something and common ground. My utterance of (28) does

not contribute its asserted content to the common ground because it is clear to everyone that what I asserted is false, though information along the lines of *the speaker does not respect me as an interlocutor* can be added to the common ground by virtue of the fact what I uttered was a bald-faced lie. In the same way, the ironic speaker does not contribute anything to the common ground via what is asserted (or at least, made as if to assert), though information can be to the common ground by virtue of the fact what I uttered was an ironic statement.

5.2 Pretense

I have drawn a number of parallels between bald-faced lies and irony: both can be used in friendly contexts as well as antagonistic contexts and both manipulate the common ground but not through the content of what is asserted. Another way in which they are similar is in their lack of 'legs.' Lies are often said to lack legs, which means that they need to be supported by secondary lies in order to prevent the pretext from collapsing (Sorensen 2007, 253). We saw this in the context of bald-faced lies with (29). Ironic statements can also support one another, which we saw in the second sentence of (26). Though I could have just uttered the first sentence of (26), my utterance of the second sentence supports the point and the pretense I was making in the original utterance. We will call these secondary lies or secondary ironic utterances that support the point of the original utterance *pretense supports*.

All three of these similarities are explained by the fact both a bald-faced liar and an ironic speaker are both pretending, that is, pretending to believe something that they transparently do not believe. According to this definition, it would trivially qualify as a form of pretense if I was pretending to believe that a circle has four sides while saying "Paris is the capital of France,"; however, a rational person would not pretend to believe a circle has four sides while saying "Paris is the capital of France" unless they had a *reason* for doing so, which rules out nonsensical cases such as this one.

Let me explain my case. First, the disrespect of both bald-faced lying and irony are explainable by virtue of the fact that pretense itself is disrespectful. Of course, one can be ironic in jest as part of relationships where trust is establish, in which case it is more playful than harmful. But we should not fail to conclude that these cases borrow from more paradigmatic cases such as (2), (3), and (4), which are more likely to be uttered in an adversarial relationship than a friendly one. Even an utterance such as (12), which is considerably more polite than the previous examples, is a comment on how inaccurate someone was to believe that the weather was not nice.

This sort of reduction in offensiveness finds a parallel in physical actions such as pushing. It is permissible to push a friend lightly after he tells a bad joke despite the fact it is not normally permissible to push people. In fact, the reason I would push him in the first place is precisely because it is not normally permissible to push people. I take something that is socially taboo and apply it to a relationship to check if it would withstand this taboo. Our bond grows stronger because I demonstrate that I trust that he will believe I have good intentions in doing something that would normally be detrimental to a relationship.

To examine this in terms of the literature in linguistics, let's turn to Robin Lakoff's rules of politeness: "Don't impose, give options, and make A [the audience] feel good" (Lakoff 1973, 298). These rules often conflict with each other, since one may have to impose in order to make the audience feel good, which is what we see in the case of irony. In order to express that we are fond of the other person and thereby make them feel good, we speak ironically with them; however, this violates the first rule of politeness to refrain from imposing since you are imposing if you do something rude.

What explains the disrespectful nature of pretense? I can't do this topic justice due to various but I want to draw attention to the fact that pretending to believe or pretending to be something that you are not is disrespectful outside of linguistic cases. Take the case of President Trump pretending to be the disabled reporter in 2016 (Carmon (2016)). This was extremely disrespectful, not because having a disability is bad in and of itself but because

he was pretending as though he were disabled when he was not.

Second, the fact I cannot manipulate the common ground with the content of what I said is easily accounted for under a pretense account. Though another person asserting p is a reason to believe p, it is a reason that can be overriden by the fact the person who asserted p may not believe p. Given that the use of pretense in this paper is meant to be transparent, pretense gives a good reason not to t

Third, the existence of pretense supports are unclear under an account where speech acts are being pretended, since a speech act generally doesn't require another speech act to be considered legitimate. Additional speech acts *can* act to clarify the mental state that a speaker was in when they made the original statement, which supports my argument that belief, rather than the speech act, is the central feature of ironic utterances.

5.3 Pretense and assertion

Previous work on irony places pretense at the level of pretending to assert something one does not believe; however, it is not clear to me what exactly is involved in pretending to assert. As we discussed earlier, if bald-faced lying is an example of assertion, then assertion does not lead to the immediate expansion of the common ground to include what is asserted——rather, the asserted proposition is put forward for inclusion in the common ground, in the words of (Stokke 2018, 64).

Under the Stokkean model, a pretended assertion of an ironic statement is pretending to put forward certain information into the common ground. But it's unclear what this would mean for embedded cases of irony such as (27). Am I putting forward one proposition and pretending to put forward another, one where Priscilla told me to shut up and another where she told me to shut up politely? Am I pretending to put forward that Priscilla told me to shut up politely, from which the audience infers that I really do believe that Priscilla told me to shut up but not the other? A similar problem is faced by cases of true ironic

utterances——what am I pretending to put forward? Since I can't be pretending to assert, where is the pretense located?

It seems ideal to have consistent theory for all cases of verbal irony, so I am inclined to believe that I really am putting forward the entire proposition Priscilla politely told me to shut up, and that the audience picks out from the context that I don't actually believe what she did was polite. Bald-faced lies show that it is possible for content that is put forward for consideration into the common ground can fail to be included in the common ground. That is, I can assert (27), despite the fact I do not intend for it to be accepted as completely true, in the same way I can assert (28) despite the fact I do not intend for it to be accepted as true. However, when I am being ironic, I express a negative attitude toward a belief that I am pretending to hold, the belief that Priscilla could have told me to shut up in a polite way.

As such, (26), (27), and even (1) are not all that different from each other——all three are actually assertions. There is no reason this can't be extended to non-assertoric speech acts. When I ask an ironic question such as (2), I really am asking a question, despite the fact it is not a question that I lack the answer to. Questions are another case where wanting to know the answer to a question is not a prerequisite for the successful completion of the speech act of questioning, since rhetorical questions really are questions.

(31) Who wouldn't want to graduate summa cum laude?

But there must be a difference between (26) and a non-ironic assertion, you may argue, since we interpret them in such different ways. And there is: the utterer of (26) is engaging in pretense at the level of belief. Both the bald-faced liar and the ironic speaker pretend to believe a proposition they transparently do not believe; on top of this, the ironic speaker expresses a negative attitude that is characteristic of irony.

5.4 Conclusion

All that being said, the purpose of irony under my account is to pretend to believe a proposition or a set of propositions with the intention of showing that there are flaws in that particular way of thinking. The pretense must be at the level of belief in order to explain cases of embedded irony in an otherwise intact speech act.

You cannot pretend to believe just anything, of course, to show that there are flaws in that way of thinking for the same reason you cannot just assert true things in the middle of a conversation that does not require them: the maxim of relation, or "be relevant" (Grice 1975, 46). If it is not relevant to the conversation at hand that it would be ridiculout to believe 1+1 is 5, then you ought not pretend to believe it by asserting that 1+1 is 5.

The difference between irony and bald-faced lying is that analytic to the concept of irony is the idea of pretending to believe something with the purpose of pointing out its flaws—this is the ironical attitude discussed by Sperber and Wilson. We would not pretend to believe something that we believed was true, since this would just cause us to come to believe it. A bald-faced liar can assert a false proposition with no intention of pointing out that a particular belief is flawed. Thus, the purpose of speaking ironically is to "talk in such a way that you are noticed" (Keller 1994)—that is, talk in such a way that what you perceive to be flawed beliefs are noticed as flawed beliefs.

Finally, the normative bias of irony is explained by the fact that irony is negative by nature—the ironical attitude and the inherent disrespectfulness of pretense are both negative. It is more efficient and easier to get across negative sentiments through negative medium, which is what we see in irony.

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