

Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication

Volume 12 *IRONY* (published in its final version
12.05.2018)

Article 1

2017

Irony as Expression (of a Sense of the Absurd)

Mitchell Green

University of Connecticut, mitchell.green@uconn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/biyclc>



Part of the [Linguistics Commons](#), and the [Philosophy Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Green, Mitchell (2017) "Irony as Expression (of a Sense of the Absurd)," *Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication*: Vol. 12. <https://doi.org/10.4148/1944-3676.1116>

This Target Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

MITCHELL GREEN
University of Connecticut

IRONY AS EXPRESSION *(of a Sense of the Absurd)*

ABSTRACT: Situational irony is, first, explained as a severe violation of one or more established, non-moral norms; such violation constitutes that situation's absurdity. The classical "inversion" theory of communicative irony associated with Cicero and Quintilian, as well as its refinement in terms of the notion of conversational implicature (Grice 1989), are then shown to be inadequate. The echoic (Sperber (1984), Wilson (2006), Wilson & Sperber (2012)) and pretence (Currie 2010) theories are also shown to fail to account for the broad range of communicative irony, although they each contain valuable insights. Further, both theories hold that ironic speakers express attitudes but do not explain how they do so. On the basis of prior work by Green conceptualizing the notion of expression as signaling and showing a psychological state, we defend a view of communicative irony as expressing a sense of a situation's absurdity. The view generalizes beyond absurdity to encompass expression of a sense of situations' silliness, wackiness, or goofiness, and accommodates milder forms of irony such as we find in meiosis.

1. SITUATIONAL, DRAMATIC, AND COMMUNICATIVE IRONY

Although they may not be common to all human cultures, ironic utterances are a familiar fixture of everyday conversation in (at the very

least) modern Western societies. Such utterances partake of humor, indirection, and sometimes criticism either of a person, institution, culture, or even an entire sensibility. Typically-developing children at age 6 can grasp simple forms of irony, the appreciation of which is impaired with certain kinds of right hemisphere damage and autism.¹

Theories of irony commonly distinguish among situational, dramatic, and “verbal” irony.² (My reason for shudder-quotes around the last of these will be apparent presently.) Dramatic irony does not appear to raise difficult analytical questions: it simply occurs whenever an audience of a dramatic work knows something that a character in that work does not. Our focus in what follows will be on the third of these three, but it will be helpful to pause over what makes something a case of situational irony, as well as how it relates to (what we will presently call) communicative irony. As popularly characterized, situational irony consists in the thwarting of an expectation or aim.³ This, however, is too broad as a characterization of irony, since, for instance, one’s failing to make it through an intersection before the traffic signal turns red is not—aside from instances of preciosity described below—a case of situational irony. Nor is it, in general, ironic when a house burns down. Rather, to achieve situational irony, the thwarting of the aim must occur in a way that is absurd, perverse, or a contravention of an agent’s or institution’s ostensible purpose. It is a terrible thing when any house burns down, but when a firehouse burns to the ground, we also have irony. Similarly, it is not ironic when a typical driver gets arrested on a Driving Under the Influence (DUI) violation. However, it is ironic when the President of the local chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) is arrested under such conditions.

Fire houses and the firefighters who work in them are devoted to the prevention of fires. As a result there is something absurd or perverse about a firehouse burning to the ground, whereas when any other kind of house burns down we have tragedy only. Similarly when a mother who is ostensibly devoted to the prevention of drunk driving is pulled over on a DUI, that creates a situation that is absurd. Following the approach of Green (2007), who in turn takes inspiration from Nagel (1971), we may construe absurdity as consisting in a behavior, institution, or artifact that severely violates established, non-moral norms. Uttering gibberish is absurd because it severely violates estab-

lished syntactic, semantic and/or pragmatic norms. Attempting to build a perpetual-motion machine is absurd because it involves an attempt to violate laws of physics, and thus is a severe violation of established norms of practical rationality. Likewise, because plans, intentions, and expectations can create their own norms, a special case of absurdity is the severe violation of such psychological attitudes as intentions or expectations. Someone so devoted to the prevention of drunk driving as the President of MADD ostensibly is, severely violates a norm when she herself drives intoxicated; those professionally devoted to the prevention of fires severely violate a norm when they allow their firehouse to incinerate. (Of course, unlike in the drunk driver case, the firehouse might burn due to reasons entirely outside the control of the firefighters.) What counts as a severe violation is subject to dispute and not always amenable to being settled objectively; this fact might help us predict a correspondingly incorrigible disagreement as to what counts as situationally ironic. Those who exaggerate the importance of their aims might take the thwarting of one of those own aims to be a severe norm-violation; such an attitude might lead them to judge the missing of an appointment, or even a broken shoelace, to be ironic. This is the realm of preciosity adumbrated above.

Situational irony is only possible in a world with norms, and thus, presumably, with agents on whom such norms supervene. By contrast, verbal irony is only possible in a world in which those agents communicate. However, it is more accurate to call the kind of irony that is neither situational nor dramatic nor accismus, *communicative* rather than verbal, for the following reason: a person might be ironic without using language, and so without verbalizing. Instead, she might use non-verbal means to achieve her ironic end: a wry smile in response to news that she needs a root canal; a thumbs-up in response to a plate of moussaka being dropped on her lap by a server in a restaurant. So too, Currie (2010) remarks that many of the artist Cindy Sherman's photos are ironic. All these cases are communicative acts in that they are behaviors designed to convey information, attitudes, or points of view, but they are non-verbal in that they do not use words. For these reasons, it is preferable to see verbal irony as one form of communicative irony, which itself constitutes a larger class.⁴ (In what follows, I use 'irony' to refer to communicative irony unless I indicate otherwise.)

One can report a case of situational irony without being ironic at all. I might say quite un-ironically, “It sure is ironic that the President of MADD got pulled over on a DUI!” One might even express a negative attitude toward an ironic situation without being ironic, as in, “The President of MADD just got pulled over on a DUI. That’s just ridiculous.” Accordingly, communicative irony cannot be understood simply as a case in which situational irony is reported; nor even as one in which it is reported and commented on in an expressive manner.

If drawing an addressee’s attention to an ironic situation, and even expressing an attitude toward the situation thus pointed out, is not enough to be ironic, what would be? As we will see below, the two leading contemporary contenders for an account of irony, the echoic and the pretense theories, require that the ironist in some way exemplify the ironic situation that she wishes to point out: the first appeals to the idea of echoing an attitude whose expression would make for an ironic situation, the second invokes pretending to adopt a point of view the having of which would make for an ironic state of affairs. However, as I will argue, neither theory adequately captures how the ironist exemplifies the absurdity of the situation on which she wishes to comment or otherwise express an attitude. In the final section I will attempt to do that.

Until then it will be instructive to see whether we can explain communicative irony in terms of or at least with reference to situational irony. Perhaps the ironist does something (other than explicitly commenting on it) that in some modest respect exemplifies the absurdity of a situation in the service of expressing an attitude toward it. In so exemplifying the absurdity of a situation the ironist expresses a negative attitude toward it—contempt, disdain, disgust, etc. However, in cases of irony known as *asteism*, the ironist might also express an attitude that is positive (Gaunt 1989). Suppose Morgan has a history of self-deprecatingly referring to herself as selfish. We now encounter her making a large, anonymous donation to a charity, and one of us remarks:

- (1) Always looking out for Number One, I see.

Here the speaker is offering mild criticism of the clash between Morgan’s professed selfishness and her current behavior, but also expressing

admiration or something of the kind toward Morgan. Still, as Wilson and Sperber (2012) point out, irony, unlike metaphor, tends in general to involve the expression of negative rather than positive attitudes.⁵

Another feature of communicative irony to bear in mind is that although the ironist normally intends her audience to recognize that she is being ironic, her attempt at irony will lose much of its humorous or other entertainment value if she announces that she is being ironic (Grice 1989, p. 54). The metaphorist, might, albeit pedantically, preface her remark with, ‘To speak metaphorically. . .’ An analogous prefatory comment made by the ironist will, if not defeat her enterprise, at least throw a wet towel on it.⁶ A more common but by no means universal device to indicate ironic intent is a distinctive prosody, which tends to be slightly slower than the non-ironic speech surrounding it (Bryant 2010).

While it does not seem possible to be inadvertently ironic, it does appear that one can be ironic without intending that one’s ironic intent be apparent to one’s ostensible addressee. My friends and I might be passing a street performer of dubious talents. I offer him a faux-compliment such as,

(2) That’s some great fiddling you’re doing there!

intending my friends to catch my irony but, not wanting to hurt anyone’s feelings, intending that the performer not do so. In this respect, insofar as irony is a case of speaker meaning, it would seem to involve a distortion of the usual means by which this phenomenon occurs: some irony appears to involve a divergence between the ostensible addressee of an utterance, and the intended appreciators of the utterance so carried out.⁷

2. IRONY AS MEANING-INVERSION

The best-known accounts of communicative irony describe it as an instance in which a speaker says one thing but means the opposite. Meaning the opposite here presumably is a matter of meaning the negation of what one says, assuming that the ironist says something with a semantic content. A diner who utters, “Nice job,” in response to a plate of moussaka being dropped on her lap by a server in a restaurant says that

the server's performance was a nice job, but means that it was a bad job—or at least something other than nice. Likewise, in (2) above, the utterer of the left-handed compliment means that the fiddler is doing some fiddling that is other than great.

This meaning-inversion approach has an ancient pedigree: Cicero remarks in *Institutio Oratorica* that in irony, 'what you say is quite other than what you understand.'⁸ So too, Quintilian holds in *De Oratore* that in irony, 'something contrary to what is said is understood.' Observe that as it stands, this view offers no account of how a speaker manages to convey something that is contrary to what she says. Generally and on the whole, speakers mean what they say. So by what mechanism do they manage to mean the opposite in cases of irony? Further, the meaning-inversion theory fails to accommodate many cases of irony. We sometimes ask questions ironically, but it is not clear what the opposite or contrary of a question would be. A is having difficulty getting his car started, and after watching him struggle for some time, B asks him whether he is having trouble with his car. A replies,

(3) How could you tell?

This is an ironic question, but it is hard to know what its opposite or contrary might be. Likewise, a person very knowledgeable about baseball might drone on about baseball trivia in an attempt to be impressive, and I reply,

(4) You sure know a lot about baseball!⁹

I might say this in such a way as to denigrate rather than express admiration for the speaker, but I may nevertheless think, and mean, that the speaker knows a lot about baseball. Accordingly, what I say is at least part of what I mean. The meaning-inversion theory would seem unable to accommodate such a case.

It is tempting to suppose that the problem with the meaning-inversion theory is simply that it is too crude, and that if it were updated with some recent analytical tools it could be made defensible. With the objective of determining whether this is so, we turn to the approach to communicative irony in terms of conversational implicature.¹⁰

3. IRONY AS CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE

An appealing strategy for explaining irony is from within a framework widely used to account for other ways in which we mean more than, or other than, what we say. This is the theory of irony as a species of conversational implicature. Grice's theory of conversational implicature ((1989); 'CI' for short) naturally suggests an extension to the case of irony and other figures of speech like metaphor. Grice offers just this while also invoking the idea of making as if to perform a speech act. His theory of CI starts with the observation that conversations and related "talk-exchanges" are governed by norms, among which are the requirement that interlocutors make their contributions relevant, truthful, and reasonably efficient. Interlocutors sometimes violate such norms, and in certain of these cases they do so as a result of a cognitive or moral failing. However, in other cases their norm-violation can justify an addressee or eavesdropper in hypothesizing that the speaker may be trying to convey a message that goes beyond her words. Further, "going beyond" one's words may take one of two forms: it may take the form of meaning what one says but meaning something in addition to that; alternatively, it may take the form of not meaning what one says but meaning something different instead. Either type of case can be the vehicle of irony.¹¹

Before proceeding it will be useful to distinguish between two notions of saying. One notion consists in the uttering of words and phrases, and corresponds to J.L. Austin's (1962) notion of a locutionary act. In this "thin" notion of saying, one can say, "My pants are on fire," while rehearsing lines for a play, and without being committed to the proposition that an article of one's clothing is incinerating. By contrast, the "thick" notion of saying corresponds to Austin's notion of an illocutionary act, and generally involves an undertaking of commitment. In this thick notion, we would expect one who says, "My pants are on fire," at the very least to be committing herself to the proposition that her clothing is burning. For Grice, 'thick' uses of the notion of saying are also cases of speaker meaning, whereas "thin" uses are not. (Although most naturally associated with indicative sentences, one can say things in either the thin or thick senses with imperative and interrogative sentences.) To forestall confusion, I will below use 'locute' to refer to thin uses of 'say', and use 'illocute' to refer to thick uses.¹²

Grice understands conversational implicature as a species of speaker meaning. As a result, whatever is conversationally implicated must be speaker meant as well. This in turn implies two things. First, the agent who generates the implicatum must harbor a reflexive communicative intention (usually defined an intention to produce a psychological effect on an addressee at least in part a result of their recognition of your intention). Second, the implicatum must be expressible as a semantic content, either as the content of an indicative, an interrogative, or an imperatival sentence. Return to the case in which a server at a restaurant drops a plate of moussaka into my lap and I say, "Nice job." Intuitively, I am speaking ironically, since I do not mean that the server did a nice job in dropping the entrée into my lap. Instead, the Gricean about irony, wishing to refine the meaning-inversion theory, would need to hold that I speaker mean that the server did a poor job in delivering my meal in the way that he did.

Our two main questions are these: How does Grice account for these phenomena, and are these phenomena enough to capture the central features of irony about which we might be concerned? In his first discussion of irony, Grice asks us to imagine that

'X, with whom A has been on close terms until now, has betrayed a secret of A's to a business rival. A and his audience both know this. A says, 'X is a fine friend.' ((1989), p. 34).

Grice expects his readers to agree that X is being ironic here, and further that X is implicating that A is a terrible, or at least very bad rather than a fine friend. Grice offers to explain this effect by holding first of all that in saying what he has, A has violated the Maxim of Quality, which enjoins speakers not to say what they believe false, and not to say that for which they lack adequate evidence. These injunctions are only plausible on the illocutionary construal of saying, since on a merely locutionary construal, we would have to conclude that all actors other than method actors are violating Quality. But on the illocutionary construal, A has not violated Quality either, since of course A neither means nor appears to mean that X is a fine friend.¹³ The most that may be said is that A would have violated Quality had she been illocuting in speaking as she did.

Let us try to patch up Grice's account by suggesting that A's audience might note that A could not plausibly be speaker meaning that X is

a fine friend; further, conversations normally proceed through a series of illocutions as prescribed by the Cooperative Principle, which enjoins speakers to make their conversational contribution appropriate in light of the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which they are engaged. A's interlocutor might accordingly look around for a reason why A might have, or seemed to have, violated the CP in making an utterance that fails to be an illocution. Grice would now suggest that A's interlocutor may hypothesize that A must have speaker-meant the "obviously related proposition" that is the negation of what A locuted: X is not a fine friend.

We may ask several questions of this account. First, is it true that the negation of 'X is a fine friend' is the proposition that is most obviously related to it? After all there are very many propositions related to the one that is expressed by that sentence. What makes its negation the one that is most obviously related to it? Second, a construal of irony in terms of conversational implicature leaves unexplained its role in expressing emotions, or more broadly evaluative psychological states. We have observed that ironic utterances are characteristically used to express such states (primarily but not exclusively negative ones), yet it is at the very least unclear how an account of irony as a form of conversational implicature will account for this. The reason is that that theory at most explains how one utterance might imply a distinct content, be that content propositional (the content of an indicative sentence), imperatival (the content of a sentence in the imperative mood), or interrogative (the content of a sentence in the interrogative mood). Such contents are not inherently evaluative. Third, as we have also seen, not all ironic utterances involve communicating the negation of the proposition expressed by the speaker's locutionary act. We saw this in the ironic question (3) above.

Fourth, the implicature approach would seem to have difficulty with subsentential cases of irony. Supposed I have just been mugged at gunpoint. I might report,

- (5) The assailant took my wallet, but generously allowed me to keep the 11 cents that was left inside after he took the bills.

Here I am reporting (and not pretending to report) that the assailant took my wallet, and that he allowed me to keep the 11 cents that remained after he removed the bills. However, in calling his doing the

latter generous, I am only making as if to complement the assailant's graciousness; I am not in fact claiming that he was generous. It is not clear how a conversational implicature would be generated at this sub-sentential level, since such implicata are normally generated by means of an entire utterance.¹⁴

Fifth, one may reasonably doubt whether the ironist must be speaker-meaning a semantic content in behaving as she does. Even in a simple case like that of the spilled food in the restaurant, one gloss is that the victim who says, "Nice job!" conversationally implies and thus speaker-means that the server did a bad job; however, another, more parsimonious account will be that the speaker has expressed disdain toward the server's performance, without also speaker meaning anything. This approach is more parsimonious because expressing an attitude is generally less cognitively demanding than is speaker-meaning a content. One can express anger by spontaneously scowling, and this does not require an intention to produce a psychological effect on an audience. One might also express anger by scowling intentionally, but even here one does not need to have the reflexive communicative intentions characteristic of speaker meaning.

4. THE ECHOIC THEORY

Some of our utterances involve reproducing aspects of someone else's thought or utterance, or even a thought or utterance of an earlier stage of ourselves. Consider an attitude report made in free indirect style:

(6) (a) He gazed at his desk. (b) What a total mess.

Here the speaker of (6a) reports that the agent in question looked at his desk. In (6b), by contrast, the speaker does not describe the desk as a total mess, but rather roughly paraphrases the thought running through the agent's mind. We do similar things with reports of speech and not just of thoughts, as in

(7) (a) Mona gave a rousing speech. (b) No more dithering: the time to act was now.

The speaker of (7a) asserts that Mona gave a rousing speech. In continuing with (7b), however, she does not assert that the time to act

was (or is) now. Rather, the speaker of (7b) is paraphrasing the gist of Mona's line of discussion.

Wilson (2006), and Wilson and Sperber (2012), call these echoic uses of language. Such uses may, but need not, involve commitment on the part of the speaker. In (6b) and (7b), I commit myself to the claim that the agent in question thought ((6)) or said ((7)) something along the lines I report. Free indirect style of course allows a great deal more leeway than direct discourse, and somewhat more leeway than indirect discourse. However, there is still such a thing as getting it wrong, or right, depending on how we report someone's thoughts or utterances using free indirect discourse. On the other hand, we sometimes echo another's claim in order to draw attention rather than undertaking a commitment to it. Imagine a logic student of limited abilities enters my office and claims that he has just proven an extremely difficult theorem. I might reply,

(8) You proved the theorem, did you? What axioms did you use?

In so speaking, I am not asserting that the student proved the theorem. Instead I am drawing attention to his claim that he did in order to go on to investigate it.

Another notion we need in order to understand the echoic theory is that of a dissociative attitude. Wilson (2006) takes this to be a genus of attitudes of which skepticism, mockery, and rejection are species. The speaker of (1), for instance, expresses mockery of the idea that Morgan is, as she has claimed, always looking out for Number One.

At the core of the echoic theory of irony is the claim that verbal irony involves echoing an utterance or thought and expressing a dissociative attitude toward it. According to the theory's proponents, this is achieved by drawing others' attention to a discrepancy between the echoed attitude and how things are in fact. Wilson writes,

"... the main point in typical cases of verbal irony... is to express the speaker's dissociative attitude to a tacitly attributed utterance or thought (or, more generally, a representation with a conceptual content, for instance a moral or cultural norm), based on some perceived discrepancy between the way it represents the world and the way things actually are." (2006)

On this model, the ironist draws attention to a discrepancy between a tacitly attributed utterance, thought, or moral or cultural norm, and how things in fact are. In so doing, the echoic theory claims, the ironist expresses a dissociative attitude toward that utterance, thought, or moral or cultural norm. When this process occurs, according to the echoic theory, we have irony. Observe that this theory makes appeal to an unexplained notion of expression.¹⁵ Also, it makes no attempt to explain how, by drawing attention to the discrepancy in question, the speaker expresses a dissociative attitude. Also, in restricting itself to dissociative attitudes, this theory leaves no scope for explaining cases of asteism such as (1) above.

Let us also return to the example of the fire house that burns to the ground. Suppose Sydney stands in front of that firehouse as it burns and says, “Oh, that’s just terrible.” She is expressing a dissociative attitude (rejection or disapproval), and that attitude is directed toward the disparity between the cultural norm that firehouses are supposed to prevent fires rather than be destroyed by them, and the fact of this firehouse’s burning down. Evidently also, Sydney’s expression of disapproval is based on a perceived discrepancy between that cultural norm and the way things actually are. We have already seen that one can draw attention to an ironic situation without being ironic oneself. Likewise, we now see that one can draw attention to an ironic situation, and do so disapprovingly or disdainfully, without being ironic. This is precisely what Sydney is doing. As a result, the echoic theory counts as ironic cases that should not so count.

To take another example, consider a photograph discussed in Currie (2011) and taken by Margaret Bourke-White in 1937 after a flood in Louisville, Kentucky. The photo is entitled, ‘Flood victims in front of ‘American Way’ billboard.’ The top of the photo captures a huge billboard depicting a white, middle-American family cruising joyfully in a new car. At the bottom of the billboard are the words, ‘There’s no way like the American way.’ Under the billboard are a line of African Americans who are apparently waiting for a meal or shelter.¹⁶

The Bourke-White photograph depicts an ironic situation: the utter disparity between the attitude expressed by the billboard on the one hand, and the suffering of some Americans who should, but evidently do not share in the high standard of living that the billboard

trumpets. As Currie (2011) observes, however, the photograph is not itself ironic. Imagine now that a pedestrian happens to be there at the very scene captured by Bourke-White's camera, and as she gazes at the billboard and the people standing under it exclaims, "Ridiculous!" Here once again, the pedestrian fulfills Wilson's criteria for irony, but is not being ironic.

The above quotation from Wilson makes clear that she was not trying to give a conceptual analysis of the phenomenon, with necessary and sufficient conditions and other attendant philosophical apparatus. Accordingly, Wilson might reply that the Sydney and the billboard examples are atypical and thus no direct threat to her account which focuses only on paradigmatic cases. However, such a reply leaves open the possibility of finding an alternative theory that would do better by agreeing on the cases that the echoic theory does handle, while also properly describing Morgan's, the billboard, and like cases as well. In the process, we may hope that such a theory will more deeply illuminate the phenomenon of communicative irony. We turn now to an alternative account to see if it improves on the echoic theory in this respect.

5. THE PRETENSE THEORY

The other best-known theory of (communicative) irony is cast in terms of pretense. The suggestion here is that the ironist pretends to possess an attitude, perspective, or sensibility, and in the course of doing so, she also express an attitude toward the point of view thus feigned. Sperber ((1984), p. 131) objected to earlier versions of the theory that pretending to adopt a point of view, no matter how absurd, is not itself enough for irony. (Just imagine an actor portraying Torquemada at the height of his inquisitorial powers.) A contemporary defender of the pretense theory, G. Currie ((2011), pp. 156-8), responds by suggesting that the pretense must also draw attention to what he calls a target, which need not be identical to the point of view that the ironist pretends to have. An actor playing a U.S. Government official reciting alternative facts would be making as if to possess a perspective, and at the same time to express an attitude toward that perspective, by taking the government official as her target. (She might do so by dressing up as such an official, talking like one notable such figure known for her penchant for

recitations of alternative facts, and so on.)¹⁷

Currie, then, distinguishes between targets and points of view. One might adopt a point of view that is not identical with the target of one's irony. For instance, someone might be moderately unreliable in calculating tips at restaurants, and I might ironize them by pretending to calculate a wildly implausible tip amount compared to the price of our meal. Here the point of view is that of someone incompetent in simple mathematics, while the target is someone with genuine but limited competence. The relation could also be reversed: the target might be outrageously incompetent in some way, and we ironize it by pretending to be mildly incompetent. The closest that Currie comes to a complete formulation of his version of the pretense theory is as follows:

"... what matters is that the ironist's utterance be an indication that he or she is pretending to have a limited or otherwise defective perspective, point of view, or stance F, and in so doing put us in mind of some perspective, point of view, or stance (which may be identical to F or merely resemble it) which is the target of the ironic comment." ((2010), p. 157)

Note first that the phrase 'pretending to have a limited perspective' is ambiguous between two readings. It might refer to cases in which the speaker pretends to have a perspective that is in fact limited, though she does not present this perspective as being limited. Or the phrase might refer to cases in which the speaker pretends to have a certain perspective that she also presents as being limited. The first disambiguation would seem to be too weak for Currie's purposes, since unless the speaker does something to indicate the limitations of the perspective mimicked, no irony will result. Accordingly we will adopt the second construal of Currie's words above.

Like the echoic theory, the pretense theory appeals to the notion of expression (Currie 2010, p. 154): the ironist expresses an attitude toward a person, group, or more general sensibility (their target) by pretending to adopt a point of view. So, too, like the echoic account, the pretense theory takes the notion of expression as an unexplained primitive. This point is not an objection to either theory per se. However, it does raise the question whether, on at least a reasonable conceptualiza-

tion of the notion of expression, we may begin to discern new questions or challenges for either theory.

In some cases, the pretense involved in an ironic utterance comes with a genuine illocution. One may be ironic while making an assertion and not just a faux assertion, for instance. I have a neighbor who is extremely fastidious about his lawn: he is forever raking, mowing, weeding, and fertilizing. Suppose that on walking past it one day I notice that a leaf has fallen onto the lawn from a nearby tree. I immediately call him on the phone and say,

- (9) George, I just saw a leaf on your lawn. I thought you'd want to know.

Here I am asserting, and not pretending to assert, that there is a leaf on George's lawn. I am also being ironic, drawing attention to the absurd lengths to which George goes to care for his lawn. Here I am pretending that George's fastidiousness is so extreme that he would appreciate being told about that leaf.

While pretense is a common feature of ironic utterances, we may doubt that it is necessary for irony. The actor Alec Baldwin might decide that the best way to ironize Donald Trump is to approach his subject as a method-actor. He thus undertakes to adopt Trump's bigotry, sexism, narcissism, and willful ignorance of world politics, perhaps with the aid of hypnotists and brainwashing experts. At the end of the week he appears on Saturday Night Live and gives a brilliant performance. It would seem that Baldwin has been lampooning, and thus ironizing Trump, but has employed no pretense in the process.

Also, consider a case in which an actor plays the character Lenny in a staging of *Of Mice and Men*. Assuming that the actor is not a method actor, he will pretend to have a limited perspective. In so doing he will put us in mind of a point of view, namely Lenny's, that is the target of his performance. But surely the actor need not be ironic in playing Lenny. We might expect him to play the part with compassion or sympathy, but not irony. Curry will presumably reply that a target of a pretense is not just its intentional object. Rather, to target an object, one must also express a critical attitude toward it. Perhaps this is true. If it is, however, then we need to know how the pretender expresses that critical attitude. As the *Of Mice and Men* example shows, it is not

just by pretending to have a limited perspective. Accordingly, even if we do agree that all irony involves pretense, we should still ask how it is that those forms of pretense that are ironic manage to have the expressive powers that they do. In the next section I shall try to explain irony as a form of expression that permits but does not mandate echoic uses of language, and permits but does not mandate pretending to have a limited point of view. It will also help us understand why either of these types of behavior may be used in the service of irony.

6. EXPRESSING A SENSE OF THE ABSURD

According to Green (2016), expressing a state of mind is a matter of showing and signaling that state. Self-expression is a matter of showing and signaling one's own state of mind, whereas expression in general allows one agent to express another's state of mind by proxy.¹⁸ In signaling, we convey information in a way that is designed, where the designer may be a sentient agent or instead a non-sentient process such as natural selection or cultural evolution. Accordingly, signaling a state of mind does not require intentions to produce an effect on an audience; indeed it may be done without any intentions to communicate at all.¹⁹

Showing might occur by means of showing that something is the case (such as occurs in a mathematical proof); or by making something perceptible (such as when I show you the bruise on my arm); or by showing how things seem from my point of view (such as when I use a metaphor that enables you to empathize with my feelings). None of these three ways of showing excludes the other, and all three aspects of showing might occur in a single expressive episode.²⁰ Yet showing how things seem from an agent's point of view is most germane to our purposes here.

Cases of emotional expression that most readily come to mind are scowling, jumping for joy, or screaming in panic, and commonly discussed expressed emotions are anger, joy, terror, disgust, surprise, and sadness. However, we express a wider range of affective and evaluation-laden states than these, and often do so in more subtle ways. For instance, the everyday concept of expression also has scope for the phenomenon of expressing a sense of so-and-so: one might express a sense

of crisis, of longing, of power laid to waste, of futility, or of limitless possibility. When we express a sense of so-and-so, we show and signal our state of mind, but in such a way as to enable others to know how that state feels. As a result, expressing a sense of so-and-so enables others to empathize with us, though it by no means guarantees that they will do so.²¹

As an example of expressing a sense of so-and-so, Liebowitz (1991) offers the final scene in the 1967 film *Bonnie and Clyde* (directed by Robert Penn) in which the notorious couple are ambushed and shot to death by Federal agents. The scene occurs in slow motion, and Liebowitz describes the aesthetic effect as one of expressing a sense of crisis. Because shocking events are often experienced as if they are in slow motion, the implied narrator in the film behaves as if it is in shock as it observes the events unfolding before it. The film thereby shows viewers what that sense of shock or crisis feels like, and because it does so by design, it thereby—according to the above account of expression—expresses that sense. Or I might draw a picture capturing how things look from my depressed point of view: I depict the scene around me as being gloomy, in disarray, even menacing. In so doing I might express my sense of futility or hopelessness. Again I might show you and thereby express my sense of awe by highlighting the grandeur of a situation, such as that of a vast, imposing cliff-face. Ansel Adams' photographs of Yosemite show the viewer what awe feels like by presenting natural phenomena in ways that readily elicit that reaction. Here, too, since one form of expression consists in showing and signaling how an agent's state of mind feels, Adams' photographs express a sense of awe. One of them might do so even when all it depicts is a lifeless hunk of granite.

The foregoing pattern of analysis also helps us to see how I might express a sense of a situation's absurdity. Such an activity has multiple dimensions. First, I might embody, and thereby show, an aspect of a situation in which there is a dramatic violation of an established (non-moral) norm. Staring at A, who has a silly way of walking, might leave it unclear what it is we disdain (his clothes? his gait? his posture?). On the other hand, simply describing the features of A's walk that are silly is expressive of little more than belief. Instead, a different approach is to embody the absurdity of A's walk, by for instance doing an imitation

of that walk in which its sillier aspects are accentuated. If I do this not by accident but with awareness of how silly my way of walking is, I will also be in a position to acquire (if I did not have it already) a sense of this situation's absurdity. Further, in so caricaturing A's behavior I will also normally telegraph to others my aim of drawing attention to its silliness. In so doing I will also express the sense of absurdity recently acquired or experienced, enabling others to know how that sense of the situation's absurdity feels. That is how in caricaturing A's walk, I may also ironize it.

On the approach suggested here, then, communicative irony is constructed in reference to situational irony. Or more accurately, we may suppose that at some stage in culture's practice of ironizing, people did so with reference to the irony, and corresponding absurdity, of various situations. However, there is no reason why, once such a practice has been established, it could not subsequently widen its purview so that it comes to be used not only to express a sense of one situation's absurdity, but also of another situation's wackiness, a third's goofiness, a fourth's bizarreness, a fifth's silliness, and the so on. Wackiness, goofiness, bizarreness, silliness, and the like all involve violations of non-moral norms in ways that are less severe than absurdity proper, but they are still ripe material for irony. Waiting in line at airport security I see another passenger trying to get permission to board with her pet cobra. I remark to another,

(10) He probably has a cute little pet scorpion in his suitcase, too.

In raising the possibility that he is traveling with a dangerous insect, I am expressing a sense of the bizarreness of the situation I am witnessing. Analogous accounts may be offered for wackiness, goofiness and silliness.

In communicative irony, then, we express a sense of a situation's absurdity (wackiness, goofiness, etc.). We do so by embodying that sense of absurdity (wackiness, goofiness, etc.) with the aim of showing what that absurdity, etc., feels like. Furthermore, one cannot express a sense of a situation's absurdity without evaluating it negatively, just as one cannot express a sense of awe without evaluating some situation positively. Of course, as we move from absurdity to wackiness, goofiness, etc., the severity of the negative evaluation may be lessened. However,

irony always involves a dimension of negative evaluation, even if in some cases, such as (1) above, it also carries an unspoken compliment.

Verbal irony retains the embodiment that we find in communicative irony while also refining it. Verbally ironizing might occur in an echoic way, such as when we walk outside into yet another dreary English morning and I remark, “Lovely weather we’re having for this time of year, don’t you think?” Or, “Just look at those proud Americans enjoying the world’s highest standard of living,” said in reference to the African Americans waiting in line for flood relief. The echoic theory captures the importance of embodiment by means of its very notion of echoic use of language, and in this respect it was a breakthrough. However there are other ways to embody a sense of absurdity without echoing. We saw this in case (5) above. So too, when the ironist is employing pretense, we need an explanation of how the target of irony as Currie explains it gets targeted (and not just attended to). But the present approach delivers that, since, as we have seen, to express a sense of a situation’s absurdity just is—at the very least—to express a negative attitude toward it.

Verbally expressing a sense of a situation’s absurdity might involve illocuting (“You sure know a lot about baseball”; “I just saw a leaf on your lawn”), making as if to illocute (“Nice job”), or something in between these two, as in case (5) above. Further, even when an ironic speaker makes as if to illocute, she need not be speaker-meaning that or any other content, be that content indicative, imperatival, or interrogative. Expression of an affective or evaluative state does not require reflexive communicative intentions, which are thus possible but not mandatory for verbal irony.

We have hypothesized that a practice of irony might have begun with a focus on expressing a sense of absurdity and then gradually widened its scope to include expressing senses of bizarreness, wackiness, goofiness, silliness, and the like. We have also suggested that language can come to be used in service of this broader notion. As a fourth stage, we may also imagine that ironists can make their enterprise more amusing, while also signaling their cleverness, by producing ever more subtle forms of irony. Passing by a student dormitory from which is emanating some highly experimental music, we engage in the following dialogue:

(11) (A) Is that music or noise?

(B) I believe it's music.

B, in so responding to A, might be offering a straight answer; on the other hand, in so speaking, B may be highlighting the fact that music is not normally difficult to recognize. Thereby he may be expressing a sense of the absurdity of a situation in which it is difficult to know if what they're hearing is music. A needs to figure out which of these two interpretations is correct, and it may take some discernment to do so. That challenge may in turn have been part of B's plan.

Another way of broadening the remit of irony is via meiosis, construed here as euphemistic understatement. Grice ((1989), p. 34) noted the phenomenon in discussing the utterance of

(12) He was a little intoxicated,

said of someone whom both the speaker and addressee know has gone on a drunken rampage. Given this common ground, the speaker of (12) can use it to highlight the contrast between her description and the actual state of affairs. So too one might under-describe a life-threatening camping trip from which one has just (barely) returned with the words, 'It was a bit challenging,' or describe an outbreak of war between two countries as a 'slight disagreement'. In these cases the speaker expresses a sense not of a situation's absurdity, but rather of its extremity. She does this by purposely highlighting the way in which that situation diverges from how she has described it.

Conceiving of communicative irony as a matter of expressing one's sense of a situation's absurdity (wackiness, goofiness, extremity, etc.) allows us to place this activity firmly in the sphere of expressive behavior. This in turn enables us to see irony as inviting an empathetic response from others: the audience of an ironic remark is invited to imagine their way into the speaker's point of view, and thereby align themselves with her sense of an apt response to a situation. Given irony's characteristically critical role, we may also see it as allowing us to align our attitudes in the service of resistance or even rebellion against the ironist's target. Tyrants and demagogues will seek to hunt out and destroy irony, which may go underground, and become more subtle, but not disappear.²²

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to two anonymous referees for this journal, as well as to Heather Battaly, Dorit Bar-On, and William Lycan, for their instructive comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

Notes

¹ Capelli and Nakagawa (1990), Creusere (1999; 2000), Keenan and Quigley (1999), Nakassis and Snedeker (2002), and Winner (1997) address developmental issues in comprehension of irony. Giora et al. (2000), Happé (1993), Langdon, Davies and Coltheart (2002), McDonald and Pearce (1996), and Smith and Tsimpli (1995) discuss its impairment.

² A fourth species of irony is *accismus*, in which a person feigns indifference toward something she fervently desires.

³ For instance, on the website entitled *Literary Devices* (<https://literarydevices.net/situational-irony/>), we are told that situational irony occurs when there is an incongruity between an expectation of something to happen, and what actually happens.

⁴ Currie (2011) takes a similar approach, although he uses the notion of representational, rather than communicative irony.

⁵ Garmendia (2010) argues that communicative irony always contains an element of criticism.

⁶ Compare ‘lol’ as used on social media: users of this expression seem to want to make clear that they are not to be taken seriously, but announcing it so overtly tends to be ham-handed. Likewise, perhaps we are fortunate that the percontation mark (written with a ‘?’), as proposed by the printer Henry Denham in the 1580’s as an indicator of irony in writing, did not catch on. (See Brewerton (2004).

⁷ Irony would also seem to have a proleptic role. An influential person might ironically express disdain toward a certain clothing style. This may lead others to find that clothing style worthy of disdain as well. By expressing an attitude, we may also bring others in line with the sensibility from which it flows. I return to this point in section VI.

⁸ See Vlastos (1991) for full references to these sources.

⁹ My thanks to David Baldwin for this example.

¹⁰ Camp (2012) offers an account of sarcasm as a form of meaning inversion; however, in defense of this position she invokes a more expansive notion of meaning than is common.

¹¹ Can there be words or expressions that are used conventionally to signal irony? Nothing in principle would seem to prevent this, and as Wilson (2006) points out, perhaps ‘fat chance’ is a phrase that conventionally implicates an ironic attitude. Camp and Hawthorne (2008) discuss what they call ‘sarcastic “like”’, as in, “Like that’s gonna happen,” said by a speaker doubtful that a certain event is probable. Camp and Hawthorne plausibly conceptualize sarcastic ‘like’ as a species of weak illocutionary force indicating device in the sense of Green (2000).

¹² As argued in Green (2018), illocutionary force is an aspect of speaker meaning in that although force is not a feature of the content is meant, it is a feature of how that

content is meant.

¹³Wilson (2006) makes a similar point.

¹⁴Green (2017a), however, considers the possibility of an implicature-like process generating content at the sub-sentential level.

¹⁵On one elucidation (Green 2016) of the notion of expression, saying that the ironist expresses her dissociative attitude amounts to the claim that she signals and shows that attitude, where a signal is a behavior or artifact designed to convey information. I return to this point in section VI.

¹⁶The photo may be accessed through this link: <http://time.com/3879426/the-american-way-photos-from-the-great-ohio-river-flood-of-1937/>

¹⁷Clark and Gerrig (1984) and Clark (1996) also defend a pretense theory of irony, as does Recanati (2004), who writes, “one must discern two ‘layers’ within the primary meaning of the utterance: the surface speech act which the speaker pretends to perform, and the ironical act of staging the performance of that speech act.” (2004, p. 77.)

¹⁸Proxy expression occurs when an actor plays a character who is expressing her emotions, or when someone with medical power of attorney expresses the wishes of an ill patient.

¹⁹Green (2017d) further elucidates the notion of signaling and its relation to intentionally driven communication.

²⁰Imagine a mother on a playground who has just realized that her child is nowhere to be seen. She screams the child’s name. One may readily imagine that her scream shows that she is terrified; we can hear her terror in it; and it enables us to grasp what her terror feels like. (Green (2010) argues that we may literally perceive emotions in certain circumstances.)

²¹Green (2017b) offers an account of empathy in terms of imagining oneself into the affective, cognitive, or experiential situation of another.

²²While this paper is from the December 2017 issue, it was published in 2018.

References

- Attardo, Salvatore. 2000. ‘Irony as relevant inappropriateness’. *Journal of pragmatics* 32, no. 6: 793–826.
- Austin, John L. 1962. ‘How to Do Things with Words (Cambridge’. *Mass: Harvard* 13.
- Brewerton, Patricia. 2004. ‘Denham, Henry (fl. 1556–1590)’.
- Bryant, Gregory A. 2010. ‘Prosodic contrasts in ironic speech’. *Discourse Processes* 47, no. 7: 545–566.
- Camp, Elisabeth. 2012. ‘Sarcasm, pretense, and the semantics/pragmatics distinction’. *Noûs* 46, no. 4: 587–634.
- Camp, Elisabeth & Hawthorne, John. 2008. ‘Sarcastic ‘like’: A case study in the interface of syntax and semantics’. *Philosophical Perspectives* 22, no. 1: 1–21.
- Capelli, Carol A, Nakagawa, Noreen & Madden, Cary M. 1990. ‘How children understand sarcasm: The role of context and intonation’. *Child Development* 61, no. 6: 1824–1841.
- Clark, Herbert H. 1996. *Using language*. Cambridge university press.
- Clark, Herbert H & Gerrig, Richard J. 1984. ‘On the pretense theory of irony.’
- Creusere, Marlena A. 1999. ‘Theories of adults’ understanding and use of irony and sarcasm: Applications to and evidence from research with children’. *Developmental*

- Review 19, no. 2: 213–262.
- . 2000. 'A developmental test of theoretical perspectives on the understanding of verbal irony: Children's recognition of allusion and pragmatic insincerity'. *Metaphor and Symbol* 15, no. 1-2: 29–45.
- Currie, Gregory. 2010. *Narratives and narrators: A philosophy of stories*. Oxford University Press.
- . 2011. 'The irony in pictures'. *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 51, no. 2: 149–167.
- Ferrari, GRF. 2008. 'Socratic irony as pretence'. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 34: 1–33.
- Garmendia, Joana. 2010. 'Irony is critical'. *Pragmatics & Cognition* 18, no. 2: 397–421.
- Gaunt, Simon. 1989. *Troubadours and irony*, vol. 3. Cambridge University Press.
- Giora, Rachel, Zaidel, Eran, Soroker, Nachum, Batori, Gila & Kasher, Asa. 2000. 'Differential effects of right-and left-hemisphere damage on understanding sarcasm and metaphor'. *Metaphor and Symbol* 15, no. 1-2: 63–83.
- Glucksberg, Sam. 1995. 'Commentary on nonliteral language: Processing and use'. *Metaphor and Symbol* 10, no. 1: 47–57.
- Green, Mitchell. 2000. 'Illocutionary force and semantic content'. *Linguistics and philosophy* 23, no. 5: 435–473.
- . 2007. 'Moorean absurdity and showing what's within'. *Moore's Paradox: New essays on belief, rationality and the first person* 189–214.
- . 2010. 'II—Perceiving emotions'. In 'Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume', vol. 84, 45–61. Wiley Online Library.
- . 2016. 'Expressing, showing, and representing'. *The expression of emotion: Philosophical, psychological, and legal perspectives*.
- . 2017a. 'Conversation and common ground'. *Philosophical Studies* 174, no. 6: 1587–1604.
- . 2017b. 'Illocution and empathy'. *Philosophia* 45, no. 3: 881–893.
- . 2017c. 'Imagery, expression, and metaphor'. *Philosophical Studies* 174, no. 1: 33–46.
- . 2017d. 'How much mentality is needed for meaning?' *Andrews and Beck (eds.) Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Animal Minds (Routledge)* 313–23.
- . 2018. 'A refinement and defense of the force/content distinction'. in *D. Harris, D. Fogal, and M. Moss (eds.) New Work on Speech Acts (Oxford)*.
- Grice, Herbert P. 1989. 'Logic and Conversation. *ibid.* Reprinted in *Studies in the Way of Words*, ed'.
- Happé, Francesca GE. 1993. 'Communicative competence and theory of mind in autism: A test of relevance theory'. *Cognition* 48, no. 2: 101–119.
- Haverkate, Henk. 1990. 'A speech act analysis of irony'. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14, no. 1: 77–109.
- Keenan, Thomas R & Quigley, Kathleen. 1999. 'Do young children use echoic information in their comprehension of sarcastic speech? A test of echoic mention theory'. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 17, no. 1: 83–96.
- Kumon-Nakamura, Sachi, Glucksberg, Sam & Brown, Mary. 1995. 'How about another piece of pie: The allusional pretense theory of discourse irony.' *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 124, no. 1: 3.
- Langdon, Robyn, Davies, Martin & Coltheart, Max. 2002. 'Understanding minds and understanding communicated meanings in schizophrenia'. *Mind & Language* 17, no.

- 1-2: 68–104.
- Leibowitz, Flo. 1991. 'Movie colorization and the expression of mood'. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, no. 4: 363–365.
- Lucariello, Joan. 1994. 'Situational irony: A concept of events gone awry'. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 123, no. 2: 129.
- McDonald, Skye & Pearce, Samantha. 1996. 'Clinical insights into pragmatic theory: Frontal lobe deficits and sarcasm'. *Brain and language* 53, no. 1: 81–104.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1971. 'The absurd'. *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20: 716–727.
- Nakassis, Constantine & Snedeker, Jesse. 2002. 'Beyond sarcasm: Intonation and context as relational cues in children's recognition of irony'. In 'Proceedings of the twenty-sixth Boston University conference on language development. Cascadilla Press, Somerville, MA', 429–440. Citeseer.
- Recanati, François. 2004. *Literal meaning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sainsbury, Mark. 1984. 'Saying and conveying'. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 7, no. 4: 415–432.
- Shelley, Cameron. 2001. 'The bicoherence theory of situational irony'. *Cognitive Science* 25, no. 5: 775–818.
- Smith, Neilson Voyne & Tsimpli, Ianthi-Maria. 1995. *The mind of a savant: Language learning and modularity*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Sperber, Dan. 1984. 'Verbal irony: Pretense or echoic mention?' .
- Vlastos, Gregory. 1991. *Socrates, ironist and moral philosopher*, vol. 50. Cornell University Press.
- Wilson, Deirdre. 2006. 'The pragmatics of verbal irony: Echo or pretence?' *Lingua* 116, no. 10: 1722–1743.
- Wilson, Deirdre & Sperber, Dan. 2012. 'Explaining irony'. *Meaning and relevance* 123–145.
- Winner, Ellen. 1997. *The point of words: Children's understanding of metaphor and irony*. Harvard University Press.