

ON SAYING WHAT YOU MEAN  
WITHOUT MEANING WHAT YOU SAY<sup>1</sup>

Anne Cutler  
University of Texas at Austin

"Then you should say what you mean", the March Hare went on "I do", Alice hastily replied; "at least - at least I mean what I say - that's the same thing, you know".

"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter.

- Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

If Harry's boss says of him:

(1) Harry's a real genius

he may mean what he says; in that case he will probably say it in a tone of reverence and admiration. But he may on the other hand mean, and wish to say, quite the opposite, that Harry is anything but a genius; in this case he can still utter the words of (1), but he will express his meaning by superimposing a certain intonation contour which signals to his hearers that the utterance is intended to be ironic. It is with such utterances that this paper deals: utterances produced in such a way that they express a conveyed meaning which is the converse of the literal meaning.

The main concern of the paper is with the characteristics and distribution of ironically uttered sentences. It is not intended, for example, to investigate the details of the rules which apply to produce such cases, or at what point in a derivation they may apply. Nor will we be concerned with the specific suprasegmental correlates of irony. In fact, there are no invariable correlates; if cues from the context are strong enough, no intonational cues are necessary at all. When two people walk into an empty bar, for example, the utterance

(2) Sure is lively here tonight

will be understood as ironic regardless of the intonation used. At other times sentences spoken ironically may be identified as such in one or more of the following ways: (a) the entire sentence or part of it may be nasalised; (b) the rate of speaking may be slowed; (c) exaggerated stress may be applied to one or more words - particularly, stressed syllables may be lengthened in an exaggerated fashion.<sup>2</sup> Yet again, it is possible in certain dialects of English to achieve the same effect by appending the words "I don't think" (with heavy stress on don't) to a sentence uttered with ironic intent. Additional intonational cues are optional. Thus (3) conveys the same meaning as the ironic reading of (1):

(3) Harry's a real genius, I don't think

(A brief digression will be made here to deal with the problem of writing about a phenomenon which has no conventional written representation. In identifying the ironically uttered examples in this paper, no attempt will be made to represent the suprasegmental cues to irony, if any, in each case; instead, a purely arbitrary convention will be adopted. From this point on, an example or part of an example presented in this *typeface*, shall be taken to represent words spoken with ironic intent, and bearing a conveyed meaning at variance with the literal meaning. Thus a starred example identified by typeface as ironic will represent a sentence spoken with appropriate ironic intonation - it is always possible to speak a sentence in any given manner - but without that intonation producing a conveyed meaning at odds with the literal meaning, i.e. with no ironic effect.)

To be uttered ironically, i.e. to accept a conveyed meaning which is the reverse of its literal meaning, a sentence must conform to the following restriction: it must, in the context in which it is produced, express on its literal reading a desirable state of affairs; the literal reading must be approbatory in tone. Thus its ironical reading must, obviously, express the converse - disapprobation.

It is easy to produce seeming exceptions to this generalisation. What are we to make, for example, of (4), with its conveyed meaning that Harry is not a sucker at all?

(4) *Harry's a real sucker*

It seems perfectly acceptable as an ironic utterance, and easily interpretable: the speaker and his audience, intending perhaps to defraud Harry, have discovered to their dismay that Harry is not as gullible as they had hoped. In uttering the sentence ironically, the speaker is taking his audience to task for having previously held Harry to be a real sucker.

The term "sucker" can hardly be said to be approbatory, so this sentence would seem to be an exception to the above restriction. But in fact it is not an exception at all. From the point of view of the hypothesised speaker and his audience, for Harry to be a sucker would be an immensely desirable state of affairs. The literal reading of the sentence can therefore be said to be approbatory with respect to the context given.

Further, (4) is only one of a very large class of such ironic utterances which consist in the speaker's repeating back to his audience something which the audience has previously held, or said:

(5) *Sure, Joe, you locked the door*

(6) *At least it won't rain, he says*

(7) *The cops won't give us any trouble, Harry'll handle them*

As the ironic tone indicates, in each case things have turned out otherwise.

The examples so far given illustrate that there are two clear categories into which ironic utterances fall; or, two distinct types of context in which they can be used. In one category is spontaneous irony, in which the speaker is expressing "what he means" with no reference to previous context or conversation; (1) is a possible member of this category. The other category may be called provoked irony - the speaker repeats back to his audience something which the audience has previously said or held, with the ironic intonation indicating that the previous claim has turned out to be wrong. (5)-(7) can only be examples of provoked irony.

The distinction between spontaneous and provoked irony is important for the following reason: although any ironic utterance can be a member of the category provoked irony given the appropriate preceding context ((1), for example, given an audience that had previously claimed in all seriousness that Harry was a real genius), the category of spontaneous irony is severely limited with respect to the semantic characteristics of utterances belonging to it - namely, they must be approbatory in character on the literal reading.

(Given a sentence with a literal reading which is not approbatory, therefore, a successfully imposed ironic intonation has the effect of carrying a presupposition with respect to prior context - namely, that it has previously been held that this literal reading represented reality.)

The approbation condition, as originally stated above, held that a sentence can be uttered ironically if it expresses on its literal reading a desirable state of affairs in the context in which it is produced. In this form the condition actually holds also for the category of provoked irony. The desirability of the state of affairs expressed in the literal reading of (4), in the context in which it is presumed to have been uttered, has already been discussed. Similarly, inspection of (5)-(7) reveals that they, too, satisfy the condition - the only imaginable contexts in which they could occur are those in which the locking of the door (or: Joe having told the truth about locking the door), fair weather, and the cops not giving any trouble represent in each case a desirable state of affairs from the point of view of the speaker and/or his audience.

In cases of provoked irony where the literal reading of the ironic utterance must be presumed to have been desirable less from the point of view of the speaker than from that of his audience, it is doubtful whether "irony" is any longer an appropriate term; (8), for example, is more of a sarcastic taunt:

(8) *You'd be promoted before me, huh?*

Terminology, however, is not the point at issue here; the effect of the superimposed intonation on the relation of literal to conveyed meaning is the same as in earlier examples. Similarly, it

is more of a taunt to repeat back to a person (using the intonation we call ironic) an utterance of his which you, the speaker, believe to have been insincere or a lie:

(9) A: How do you feel about Harry?

B: Can't stand him.

A: *Oh, sure, you can't stand Harry.*

In this case, and in others of this sort, it is perhaps difficult to see in what sense the state of affairs represented in B's utterance is desirable from the point of view of either A or B. It is of course in B's interest that A believe it to be a true statement. However, it is also in a general sense desirable that it be true from the point of view of both of them, since it is always desirable that the maxims of conversational behavior be adhered to in any conversation; included in these is that each speaker be sincere. Apparently, then, it is possible to satisfy the desirability condition at one remove; if a previous speaker has been insincere, i.e. by definition an undesirable state of affairs has proved to obtain - or even if the current speaker merely believes such to be the case; after all, it is possible that B really can't stand Harry - then the application of ironic intonation to a repetition of the insincere utterance is an acceptable way of remonstrating with the participant who has offended.<sup>3</sup>

The category of provoked irony, then, is very large: anything previously said or implied which has since been demonstrated to be false, or which is believed by the current speaker to have been untrue or insincere, may be echoed back with a successfully applied ironic intonation. It is obvious, though, that there are certain types of statement which cannot turn out to be false, and which cannot be uttered insincerely - truisms, for example, and tautologies. It is not surprising, therefore, that they also cannot accept irony:

(10) \**A bachelor is an unmarried man*

(11) \**Two and two make, four*

Similarly, sentences which do not by themselves lead us to expect that their literal reading is in any way unchangeable cannot accept irony when embedded in a context in which their truth is presupposed, for instance as the complement of a factive verb. Thus while (12) is acceptable, (13) is not, although it might be expected to have the same force as (14):

(12) *Austin is a swinging town*

(13) \**Bill regrets that Austin is a swinging town*

(14) *Bill regrets that Austin is a boring town*

The distinction drawn by Kiparsky and Kiparsky (1970) between

factive and non-factive predicates is supported by the finding that non-factive verbs will accept an ironic reading of their sentential complements<sup>4</sup> (15) and (16) are equivalent to (17) and (18) respectively:

- (15) *Bill found out Austin was a real swingin' town*
- (16) *Bill thinks Lubbock really swings*
- (17) Bill found out Austin was a real boring town
- (18) Bill thinks Lubbock is really boring

Note, however, that it is not the mere presence of a presupposition which precludes an ironic reading of (13). (19) and (20), for example, presuppose (21) and (22) respectively:

- (19) *Harry's acting real bright again*
- (20) Harry's stopped giving those *wild, fun* parties
- (21) *Harry has acted real bright* (i.e. dumb) before
- (22) Harry used to give *wild, fun* (i.e. dull) parties

The ambiguity of (20) - between Harry having stopped giving parties, and Harry having stopped giving the kind of parties he used to, though he still gives parties - while it is independent of the occurrence of irony, may serve here to illustrate the point that a speaker may apply irony to any predicate singly, without necessarily affecting the rest of the sentence. In sentences consisting of a simple subject-predicate relation, such as (1) and (12), the effect of the irony is global; in (20), however, it is clearly a local effect - the ironic conveyed meaning reverses only the literal meaning of the underlying constituent "the parties are wild, fun". In what follows, particularly in the discussion of the scope of the ironic effect in complex sentences, the treatment will be confined for the sake of simplicity (and economy of space) to "global" irony. In some cases in which it will be asserted that global irony is clearly unacceptable, a sentence with irony applied locally to one underlying constituent may be acceptable. This is, for example, true of questions. While it is in general the case that simple questions (as opposed to tag questions such as (8) which do not in fact carry the effect of questions at all) cannot accept an ironic reading:

- (23) *\*Is Harry a real genius?*

it is nonetheless possible to achieve a local ironic effect in a question:

- (24) Has Harry stopped giving those *wild, fun* parties?

The reader is invited to test this generalisation on later cases in which global irony is said to be unacceptable.

Like simple questions, the antecedents of conditionals have in themselves no truth value; it is possibly for this reason that

they, too, cannot be produced with ironic effect:

- (25) *\*If this is a real swinging town, we won't stay here*

The typical ironic utterance would thus far seem to be a simple declarative. Whether it expresses an affirmative or a negative proposition is immaterial:

- (26) *I just love Harry, sure*  
 (27) *I don't dislike Harry, oh no*

as long as the literal reading (given that we are dealing with a member of the category of spontaneous irony) is approbatory.

There is one further restriction, a consequence of the approbation condition. This condition may sometimes be fulfilled by presupposition, as in (28):

- (28) *Your friend is certainly feminine*

where it is presupposed that femininity is a desirable trait in the context. Presumably one pole of the approbation-derogation continuum has in this case been set equal to feminine, the other to masculine, on the masculine-feminine continuum, which like approbation-derogation is a scalable dimension. What if, however, a predicate involves no scalable dimension? Interestingly, an ironic reading is in that case unacceptable; compare (28) with (29)-(31), i.e. the gradable polarity masculine-feminine with its discrete counterpart male-female:

- (29) *That sure is a masculine canary*  
 (30) *\*Your friend is certainly female*  
 (31) *\*That sure is a male canary*

Obviously, an ironic utterance from the class of provoked irony can involve a non-gradable predicate:

- (32) *That sure is a red coat you're wearing*

would be acceptable in a context where the hearer had promised to wear a red coat but had in fact turned up wearing a coat of a different color. More interesting, though, are apparent violations of the gradability restriction which are members of the class of spontaneous irony and which turn out to satisfy the condition by presupposition:

- (33) *That sure is a cat you've got there*  
 (34) *Susie's another Jayne Mansfield*

Such utterances clearly presuppose a gradable dimension. Thus (33)

on its literal reading is a comment about a good (fast, beautiful, or otherwise desirable) car, while (34) surely makes use of an unspoken dimension of bust size. This group of sentences is co-extensive with the class which can be spoken with an appreciative tone giving just such an expanded approbatory meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Although simple declaratives comprise perhaps a majority of ironic expressions, irony can also occur in complex sentences. The question of the scope of its effect - the production of a conveyed meaning which is the reverse of the literal meaning - in complex sentences reveals some interesting findings. (In the following discussion, for purposes of simplification and thus space-saving, irony shall be taken to refer to spontaneous irony. Most of the examples given will be acceptable as provoked irony given an appropriate context.)

We have already seen that the literal meaning of the antecedent of a conditional cannot be reversed ironically. If, then, ironic intonation is applied to a conditional, it may be assumed that only the consequent will be able to bear a conveyed meaning the reverse of the literal meaning. This is in fact so, regardless of the extension of the ironic intonation over the sentence. Thus, (35) and (36) have the same force with the intonation extended over antecedent and consequent as they would have were it applied to the consequent alone; the scope of the ironic effect is confined to the consequent.

- (35) *If Harry did that, he must be a real genius*  
 (36) *If the secretar admits she erased the tape on purpose then her boss will sure be happy*

It will be seen that in any complex sentence of which one part is an acceptable candidate for irony (in the sense that the restrictions described above are met) while the remainder is not, the scope of the alteration of meaning effect will be restricted to the segment which accepts it irrespective of how much of the sentence bears the ironic intonation. Thus in (37):

- (37) *Harry's a real genius to have got into this*

the scope of the irony is restricted to the predication on Harry whether that alone or the entire sentence is spoken ironically.'

Where there is more than one part of a sentence which could accept an ironic reading, it will presumably be impossible to shift or extend the range of application of the ironic intonation without affecting the scope of the ironic effect. (38) and (39) show that this is indeed so:

- (38) *Harry's the Boy Wonder and Bill's a real genius*  
 (39) *Either Harry's been real bright or Susie's had another of her creative brainwaves*

Both sentential segments of each of (38) and (39) bear an ironically reversed meaning.

Further inspection of (38) reveals another interesting effect of irony in complex sentences. If only one conjunct - either one - is uttered in the ironic manner the sentence becomes unacceptable (though acceptable if the and is replaced by but). The relationship of commonality which is required if two sentences are to be conjoined (Lakoff 1971) may be satisfied or destroyed by an ironic effect. When the conjunction involves symmetric and, as in (38), the commonality relationship is merely a fairly loose one involving some common topic. The common topic of (38), that of superior performance on the literal reading and inferior performance where both conjuncts are spoken ironically, is destroyed if only one conjunct bears the irony.

In sentences conjoined with symmetric and there is relative freedom in the application of irony. As in (35)-(37), if one conjunct is unacceptable as an ironic utterance the scope of the irony will be restricted to the other conjunct, regardless of how far the intonation is extended:

(40) *Austin lies on the Colorado River and it's a really swinging town*

If the scope of the irony is restricted to the first conjunct the second conjunct may elaborate upon it:

(41) *Harry's a real genius and so is his brother*

(42) *Austin's a really swinging town and you can say the same for Lubbock*

- it is clear that what is said for (?) Lubbock in (42) is not the literal but the conveyed meaning of the first conjunct.

As Lakoff noted, the common topic can be established in conjoined sentences via presupposition. It is possible for the presupposition to be satisfied in such a case by an ironic - conveyed - meaning rather than the literal meaning of one of the conjuncts:

(43) *Austin's a really swinging town and I wouldn't want to live in Lubbock either*

Similarly, where the common topic of a sentence conjoined with but can be established by presupposition, the presupposition can be satisfied by the ironic reading:

(44) *Austin's a really swinging town, but you might enjoy San Antonio*

Given that irony can only be applied to approbatory comments to yield a derogatory effect, and that the necessary relation between but-conjuncts is one of dissimilarity, it is apparent

that a but-conjoined sentence in which irony was to be applied to one conjunct would require the other conjunct to be approbatory in meaning in order for the relation of dissimilarity to hold once the irony was applied. Thus both the conjuncts would be on their literal reading approbatory in meaning and in the sentence as a whole on its literal reading no relation of dissimilarity would hold, i.e. the sentence would be anomalous. The same is the case with sentences conjoined with asymmetric and, in which the relation between the conjuncts is one of cause and effect; if the cause-effect relation holds between the literal reading of one conjunct and the ironic reading of the other, it cannot hold between the literal readings of both conjuncts, and the sentence as a whole would be on its literal interpretation anomalous.

As a general rule, such sentences are also unacceptable with the ironic intonation imposed; if the literal reading is impermissible, it cannot be manipulated to yield a permissible interpretation involving irony. Thus (45), (47), (49) and (51) are unacceptable, although it might have been expected that the message they would convey would have been that of (46), (48), (50) and (52) respectively:

- (45) \**George is a genius* and he'll never pass the exam
- (46) George is a blockhead and he'll never pass the exam
- (47) \*Everyone left Austin *and it turned into a really swinging town*
- (48) Everyone left Austin and it turned into a really boring town
- (49) San Antonio is a swinging town but *Austin is very lively*
- (50) San Antonio is a swinging town but Austin is dull
- (51) \*George is rich but *he's a real genius*
- (52) George is rich but he's a blockhead

While this generalisation holds for asymmetric-and sentences whether the irony is applied to the first or second conjunct, in the one case where it is applied to the first conjunct of a but-conjoined sentence the irony works despite the anomaly of the sentence's literal reading:

- (53) *Austin is a swinging town* but San Antonio is lively
- (54) *George is a real genius* but he's rich

It is not immediately apparent why this case should be an exception to the rule.

Obviously, this brief discussion of the characteristics of ironic utterances has left many questions unanswered; a large number of interesting phenomena no doubt remain to be discovered. One of the obvious questions must be: is irony a unique phenomenon, or

are there other international manipulations possible which will produce a conveyed meaning the reverse of or otherwise at variance with the literal meaning of a sentence? The "doubting" intonation springs to mind, by which such an utterance as (55):

(55) It's not bad

- uttered with a falling-rising pitch on the final word - can be made to convey the meaning that "it" is in the opinion of the speaker not at all good. Are there more?

#### FOOTNOTES

1. I am deeply indebted to Lauri Karttunen for continued encouragement and critical appreciation of this paper.
2. In addition, the speaker will probably adopt a facial expression which may take various forms, from quizzical to sneering. The fact that this is an almost invariable correlate does not, however, interfere with utterances spoken with the intonation described being understood as ironic on the telephone.
3. Grice (1968) has used irony as an example of a conversational implicature being achieved by the deliberate flouting of the conversational maxim "Do not say what you believe to be false". On his account it is required that both speaker and audience know that the speaker believes what he says to be false, and Grice assumes that the context makes this clear. As we have seen, however, it is also possible to signal by means of intonational cues that one is saying something one believes to be false. In the particular instance of the exchange in (9), this device is taken even further - speaker A uses the irony signal in repeating back B's words, thus indicating that he believes that B has uttered a falsehood.
4. Questions of the scope of irony and the extension of ironic intonation in complex sentences will be dealt with below.
5. An effort has been made here to avoid examples which might compromise the purity of the gradability restriction - for instance, those incorporating proper names ("John sure is male" is a tautology, because "John" is a name usually given only to male persons; thus it is hardly fair to compare it with "John sure is masculine"), or those in which the non-gradable version is unacceptable on grammatical grounds even on its literal reading ("X sure acts feminine" versus "\*X sure acts female"; "Y is just so-o-o feminine" etc.). I am grateful to Don Foss for the canary.
6. In dialects which accept it, "I don't think" has an effect identical with that of ironic tone; "That's a car you've got there, I don't think", and "Susie's another Jayne Mansfield, I don't think" are equivalent to (33) and (34) respectively.

In all cases so far discussed the behavior of "I don't think" is identical to that of ironic intonation.

7. The limitations of the scope become even clearer when the corresponding sentences with "I don't think" are considered.

(37a) Harry's a real genius, I don't think, to have got us into this

(37b) Harry's a real genius to have got us into this, I don't think

The extraposition of "I don't think" in (37b), analogous to extending ironic intonation over the whole sentence in (37), does not alter the scope of the ironic effect.

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