

## *Misunderstanding Irony*

"It's hard to keep from writing satire"

(Juvenal, 1963, Satire I, l. 30)

### **Abstract**

Irony, along with other obversive tropes, undermines effective communication. This essay provides numerous fictional, as well as real-life examples in which irony, parody, and satire are misunderstood, thus producing the opposite of the effect their source presumably intended to create.

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**Keywords:** Irony; obversions; communication; misunderstanding.

Imagine a continuum that runs from "FALSE" to "TRUE", and look at it from the point of view of the source of an utterance. Lies would serve as good examples of the "False" end. "True" would be a bit more difficult to illustrate, but confessions and admissions would apply in most cases.<sup>1</sup> All sorts of fiction, including jokes, would occupy a spot just left of center: These are certainly not "true", but neither are they outright lies. Munchhausen-like tall tales would find their place even closer to lies. But where would one put irony, parody, sarcasm, satire, spoof, or burlesque? In each of these tropes and devices there is a "deliberate use of language which states the opposite of the truth, denies the contrary of the truth,<sup>2</sup> or drastically and obviously understates a factual connection", but this is done "for emphasis in the assertion of a truth" (Muecke, 1969, p. 80). So notwithstanding their literal meaning, irony and its companions -- for the lack of a better collective noun I'll call them obversions -- are intended by their source to convey its very opposite.<sup>3</sup> But do they?

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1. But see such denials of the truth of confessions as Kafka (1954, p. 308): "Confession and the lie are one and the same. In order to be able to confess, one tells lies. One cannot express what one is, for that is precisely what one is; one can communicate only what one is not, that is, the lie." It is a curious coincidence that shortly after Kafka wrote the above, another Czech writer commented: "...this systematic lying and pretending that among experts is known as a confession..." (Capek, 1926/1962, p. 30 in the story "Proof positive").
  2. It appears that Muecke erred here by employing a supernumerary negative term. See Moore (1990, 1992)
  3. This essay deals with messages intentionally obverted by their source, and thus excludes the broader issue of

These smartly encoded messages have to be decoded, yet not every receiver is able or willing to do so. Wheelwright (1962) borrowed a term from Milton to distinguish between fit vs. unfit readers: The former see beyond the manifest content, while the latter are trapped by it. (More on this in Kramer-Moore & Moore, 2002, pp. 6-7). Unfit receivers of an obversion are thus receiving the opposite of what the source intended to send. This danger of misunderstanding obversions (that is to say, accepting their surface value) has been observed and commented on by many:

- Thus Richard Whately, a 19<sup>th</sup> c. English rhetorician and Archbishop of Dublin: "For there are some persons so constituted as to be altogether incapable of even comprehending the plainest irony; though they have not in other points any corresponding weakness of intellect. The humorous satirical pamphlet... entitled 'Advice to a Reviewer', I have known persons read without perceiving that it was ironical" (Whately, 1828/1963, p. 155).
- In a letter to the editor of the New York Time's Book Review, Adelman (1989) complained about a review: "This book should be appreciated for what it is, satire, instead of being panned for what it is not, political reporting. Or was The Times being cagey? Was this actually a satire of an inappropriate review?"
- While some have concluded from Keller' article (1985a) that the author had rejected his brainchild, PSI, this was definitely not the case; Keller was being sarcastic. To quote Prof. Keller (1985b): this "confirmed my wife's opinion that not everyone appreciates my 'sense of humor'".
- Kurt Vonnegut (1989) has been quoted as saying that "My natural habit is irony, and there are too many people out there who take you seriously."

But then should not have they known better? By their very nature, obversions achieve their goal by creating ambiguity, by being understood by some while being misunderstood by others, by enabling their source to deny either their straight or their obverted meaning. Obversions undermine communication's purpose: By conveying not just wrong information, but its opposite, obversions create subversion.

Writers of fiction often use this propensity to create a humorous effect:

- Heller's (1979, p. 155) hero Gold seems unable to communicate: "That was meant to be ironic, Ralph." "I'm afraid we all missed that, Bruce." "Lately," Gold exclaimed, "all my

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the status of symbols. Burke (1966, p. 469), along with Korzybski, Magritte, and others, in emphasizing that "symbol-using demands a feeling for the negative," reiterates the famous dictum: The word for the thing is not that thing (see Moore, 1993-1994). Obversion has a larger scope: It may also be identified in sardonicism, cynicism, oxymorons, addad-like two-valuedness, and more.

sarcasms are being received as truths." And again, on p. 377: "'Ralph,' Gold cried, 'that was a joke, a sarcasm, a piece of satirical whimsy.' 'We see it,' said Ralph with a look of grave reproof, 'as the absolute truth and are already taking it into our calculations for the future.'"

- In the movie *Small time crooks* (2000) by Woody Allen, the hero organizes a band of crooks, reminding his friends that in jail he was called "the brain". "But that was sarcastic", says one of them. "No, it wasn't", says the extremely inept crook...
- The same happens in the TV series *Monk*: The pathologically shy hero fails to realize that he got his nickname in college, "Mr. Cool", from constantly defrosting the refrigerator and freezer (Breckman, 2006).

Apart from these apparently obvious cases, we can also find others, where the verdict is still out:

- Plato's *Menexenus*, devoted mostly to Socrates' recitation of a funeral oration, has puzzled scholars: Is it parodic or serious? (See Trivigno, 2009).
- No less an authority than Spinoza regarded Machiavelli's *Prince* as a satire: "Machiavelli was a passionate patriot, a democrat, a believer in liberty, and *The Prince* must have been intended (Spinoza is particularly clear on this) to warn men of what tyrants could be and do, the better to resist them" (Berlin, 1971).
- According to Kierkegaard Hegel did not see irony in Socrates' saying in *The Apology* that he was wisest because he was aware of his ignorance (Storm, 2011).
- And Kierkegaard himself, when writing his "Concept of Irony", may have been ironic (Dru, 1951, p. 8)!

Aware of the danger (or perhaps of the opportunity) of misunderstanding, some authors mockingly refer to the need to warn one's audience of irony. This technique may also be regarded as ironic, because it defeats its purported aim:

- Dickens (1837, p. 497): "Mr. Jackson's fingers wandered playfully round his nose, at this portion of the discourse, to warn his hearers that he was speaking ironically."
- Bateson (1972, p. 52): "And when people are being ironic... they often don't tell you they are being ironic."
- Eco (1986, p. 165): "...that insidious figure of speech that rhetors call irony, which must always be prefaced by the *pronunciatio*, representing its signal and its justification..."

Actual misunderstandings of obverted statements in real life occur frequently:

- A group of Native American actors have walked off the set of an Adam Sandler comedy, claiming the film is "totally disrespectful" of Apache culture. According to Netflix, the

company which had commissioned the movie, "It is a broad satire of Western movies and the stereotypes they popularised, featuring a diverse cast that is not only part of - but in on - the joke." The Ridiculous Six is reportedly a satire of The Magnificent Seven. (Entertainment & Arts, 2015a).<sup>4</sup>

- On a British TV show Jeremy Clarkson was heard to suggest that striking public sector workers should be shot in front of their families. By saying this "he was mocking the BBC's stance on politics. ... Listening to the whole segment in context ... you'd really have to be a moron not to see this. But morons there were, in abundance..." (Pullum, 2011).
- Six prominent writers came out "against PEN handing the Freedom of Expression Courage Award to Charlie Hebdo, as they are uncomfortable with the magazine's 'cultural intolerance'... PEN said it did not believe Charlie Hebdo's intent was to 'ostracise or insult Muslims, but rather to reject forcefully the efforts of a small minority of radical extremists to place broad categories of speech off limits'" (Entertainment & Arts, 2015b).

As shown by the above examples, obversive tropes in general, and irony, in particular, are outstanding illustrations of the frailty of communication. As Bacon (1902, # 43) observed: "Words still manifestly force the understanding, throw everything into confusion, and lead mankind into vain and innumerable controversies and fallacies."

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4. There is a long-standing tradition of movies parodying movies: Thus *Blazing Saddles* parodied Hollywood Westerns; *Spaceballs* did the same for *Star Wars*; *Top Secret* satirized *Top Gun*; *Johnny English* spoofed spy movies. Audiences unaware of the parodied item(s) lose the effect created by this obversion.

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