

How Is the Ironic Meaning Made?

Ruxandra Buluc

National Defense University 'Carol I'

Abstract

Irony is the most difficult to define of all speech acts. First and foremost it is the matter of stated versus implied meaning (which are different or opposite), secondly, it is always ideologically laden, and, last but not least, not all readers are able to decode the ironic meaning. Some readers can only interpret the surface, obvious meaning and the irony, the underlying meaning, remains unperceived. The present paper explains why there is this gap in interpretation and the theory put forth is based on the concept of discursive communities and on the shared knowledge that the ironist and interpreter must possess in order for the irony to be transmitted and decoded properly.

Keywords

irony, discursive communities, ideal reader, intentio auctoris, intentio operis, intentio lectoris, shared background knowledge

Motto: *'Reading [...is] as creative a process as writing, sometimes more so. When we read of the dying rays of the setting sun or the boom and swish of the incoming tide, we should reserve as much praise for ourselves [the readers] as for the author. After all, the reader is doing all the work – the writer may have died long ago.'* (Jasper Fforde *First among Sequels*)

When discussing irony several aspects must be taken into consideration. Irony is the one speech act whose whole meaning is not readily available in the text. An ironic message consists of two separate meanings: the obvious, textual one that can be perceived by any reader, and the underlying one, the ironic meaning itself that is obtained only by analysing the discourse itself and the ideology, world view, opinions, comments it denotes.

Consequently, I have chosen to refer to ironic meaning as being made, rather than discovered in a narrative since it is at the meeting point between an author's intentions, the text/message as such, a reader's decoding that this meaning arises and the context in which it was uttered/written.

To begin with, Eco [3, 62] states that when a text is produced and intended not for one reader, but for a community of readers, the author knows that he/she will be interpreted not according to his/her intentions, but as a result of a complex

network of interactions which involves both the readers and their competence with respect to language as part of a common social framework. He also refers to language not solely as a linguistic instrument made up of phonology, morphology and syntax, but as a construct created by history and by previous literary knowledge.

When he speaks about the intention of the author (*intentio auctoris*), Eco points out the fact that he is referring mainly to the intentions of the text and to the intentions of the Model Author ‘to the extent that the reader is able to recognize in terms of textual strategy.’ [3, 63] This type of author has also been termed Liminal or Threshold Author, ‘as the threshold existing between the intention of a certain human being and the linguistic intention demonstrated by a textual strategy.’ [3, 64] This tenet means that not only the reader interacts with the text, but also the author expresses his/her intentions and awaits to see how the words transmit them.

Interpretation does not arise in the reader’s mind if not prompted by the text. For this reason, Eco feels safe in arguing that beside the intentions of the author and those of the reader, one can also speak about the intentions of the text, i.e. about *intentio operis*.

A text is a machine able to produce its own Model Reader. This reader is not the one that makes the unique right assumption. A text may require a Model Reader to try infinite assumptions. (...) The intention of the text is mainly to produce a Model Reader able to make assumptions based on it, and this reader’s initiative is to imagine a Model Author who is not the empirical one and who, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text. Consequently, the text is not so much a parameter used to validate an interpretation, but an object built by, interpretation in the circular attempt to validate itself on the basis of what it construes as its own result. [3, 59-60]

The text’s intention must not be neglected in the reading process since it is, on the one hand, the intermediate step between the empirical reader and the text, and on the other hand, the means of extracting from the written words the implied author’s intentions. *Intentio operis* is in fact a ‘semiotic strategy’ [3, 60] that enables the reader to construct meaning and authorial intentions by employing the clues and information in the text. The validity of this concept is attested by the fact that in order to evaluate whether the interpretation of a part of the text is appropriate (I try to avoid the word correct since it implies uniqueness of interpretation), another position of the text must come to confirm it, otherwise it needs to be dismissed. It is in this respect that the internal coherence of the text controls the reader’s impulses, which would otherwise run amok.

In conclusion, one may argue that no text leaves its reader unguided, free to make any presuppositions he feels like, and turn the text into something it is not. Interpretations may vary greatly, according to which paradigm of comprehension each reader chooses when approaching the text, but all these paradigms have been introduced in the text by the author, who thus controls the reader's understanding.

Textual intention is very important not only in the discussion of novels in general, but also in the interpretation of irony. Many critics have argued that the literal meaning of an ironic utterance needs to be discarded completely in order for the ironic meaning to be instantiated. [6, 12] On the other hand, it is widely known and accepted that the ironic meaning as such is not readily available in the text; after all, irony is an indirect figure of speech. Consequently, the reader cannot discard the literal meaning immediately and start looking beyond it for a possible interpretation. As Linda Hutcheon explains:

The ironic meaning is inclusive and relational: the said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has meaning in relation to the other because they 'literally' interact to create the real ironic meaning. The ironic meaning is not then simply the unsaid meaning, and the unsaid is not always a simple inversion or opposite of the said: it is always different – other than and more than the said. [6, 12]

The ironic meaning actually stems from the interaction of what is said and what is implied; it cannot exist outside of what is spoken directly. Irony destroys the dichotomy 'one signifier – one signified' and replaces it with a complex interaction of meaning that, nonetheless, cannot ignore the stated in favour of the implied. In order for the ironic meaning to be different from what is overtly stated, it means that this literal meaning needs to be taken into account and analysed, and, on its basis, the ironic meaning is perceived and understood. Of course, this ironic meaning is not the same as the literal one, but the overtly stated message plays an important part in creating the tension and even frustration of interpretation that is the trademark of irony.

Every text predicates an implied reader. However more needs to be said about this reader in the context of interpreting irony. The implied author is a construct used mainly in narratology and referring to the instance in the text to whom all of the implied author's intentions are addressed. On the other hand, the Ideal/Model Reader that Eco and others propose is more than a mere addressee; it is the one who actively participates in the making of the text, by discovering the principles of the work and arranging them according to the text's intention.

As Eco points out [4, 203], a text which has a clear aesthetic aim constructs, in fact, two Model Readers. The first-level Model Reader is the one interested in how the story presented will end, what outcome the unfolding events will create. This type of reader is called the 'semantic reader.' [4, 203] The second-level reader, also called the 'semiotic or aesthetic reader,' is the one who 'asks himself what kind of reader that particular story was asking him to become, and wants to know how the Model Author who is instructing him step by step will proceed.' [4,203] In other words, the first reader wants to know what will happen, while the second wants to know how what happens is presented in the text, how it is narrated. In order to become a proficient second-level reader one needs first of all to be a good first-level reader. Every reader first re-constructs the narrative events and then looks at the construction of the narrative.

In light of this theory, I would argue that the Ideal Reader, especially in the case of ironic pieces of fiction, is the second-level Model Reader. This reader is neither an abstraction, nor an actual living reader, but a hybrid, a real reader who does everything in his power to be informed.

Yet, when speaking about irony, one cannot limit oneself to a discussion of a hypothetical Model/Ideal Reader. One needs to take into consideration a larger audience, a multitude of receivers of the ironic message. One single reader may not and cannot determine on his/her own if an ironic reading is appropriate or not. As Waugh argues, any type of fiction (experimental and metafiction in particular) requires an audience that is 'self-conscious about its linguistic practices' [7, 64]. But this audience also has some requirements, the most important one being that the text must be familiar or it will be rejected as incomprehensible: '(i)n metafiction it is precisely the fulfilment as well as the *non-fulfilment* of generic expectations that provides both familiarity and the starting point for innovation. [7, 64]

Therefore, some conventions of realistic or popular fiction need to be employed in the text to facilitate the readers' understanding. The decoding of an ironic meaning is more or less a collective decision, one that implies a communion of interests, goals and knowledge and that allows for this meaning to be considered as such. An individual interpretation of a word, phrase, sentence, or discourse as ironic cannot guarantee that the context has an ironic meaning. Irony is a collective endeavour. It can be seen as either creating communities of understanding or as being based on/born in the midst of pre-existing communities.

This brings to the fore another matter. Does irony appear in pre-existing communities based on a shared system of knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions which allow for the ironic meaning to be transmitted and comprehended? Or does

irony facilitate the formation of communities by gathering those who understand irony and excluding those who do not? Both of the two views have been espoused by literary critics, and arguments have been brought in their favour. The present paper analyzes the tenets of these two opinions and synthesises them into a unitary theory meant to better understand how and why irony is decoded/made correctly by some interpreters and missed by others.

In *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Wayne Booth states that irony builds ‘amiable communities’ between an ironist and an interpreter who experience the pleasure of ‘joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits’ [1, 28]. Thus irony becomes a ‘communal achievement.’ [1, 13] However, the question is whether irony indeed builds bridges of comprehension among people, or if it benefits from pre-existing connections among people belonging to the same community.

Fish also claims that communication can only occur within a system of intelligibility, which is hard to define since it cannot be reduced and applied to a limited number of situations.

Communication occurs only within such a system (or context, or situation, or interpretive community) and the understanding achieved by two or more persons is specific to that system and determinate only within its confines. [5, 304]

The public and the norms (of language and understanding) are not embedded or inherent in language. Their origin lies in an institutional structure. He considers the structure to be the meeting point of context and interpretive communities.

According to Hutcheon [6], irony has a transideological nature as well as many complex functions and effects. It could be assumed that it does more than create amiable communities. As Hutcheon suggests, and her idea bears resemblance to Fish’s:

irony does not so much create “amiable communities” as itself comes into being in “contact zones” as the “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.” [Pratt qtd in 6, 93]

These ‘contact zones’ facilitate communication, be it ironic in nature or not. If overlapping between different communicative communities did not exist, meaning could not be transmitted, and we would all live in a world of monologues.

Even within each community, there is a great diversity of speech, and different people live in different worlds of discourse. The whole communication process depends on these worlds. The communication process is also enabled by

these different worlds. They help readers develop expectations, make assumptions, and process that very complex discourse they are confronted with every day, and which is commonly referred to as language in use.

Within this world of everyday speech, irony distinguishes itself quite clearly, since interpreters are more likely to fail when attempting to comprehend it. Irony is not simple communication. It entails semantic reinterpretations, emotions and evaluations, it has a cutting edge that may hurt some, annoy others, entertain some more or exclude the rest. Nobody likes to feel left out of a communicative situation. As Hutcheon claims:

Irony is more often a semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings and doing so with some evaluative edge. It is also, however, a culturally shaped process. No theorist of irony could dispute the existence of a special relationship in ironic discourse between the ironist and the interpreter; but for most it is irony itself that is said to *create* that relationship. (...) It is community that comes first and in fact enables irony to happen. [6, 89]

Hutcheon points out that irony does not form communities, but appears as a result of the ironist and interpreter sharing the ideological beliefs of one pre-existing community. She goes on to combine the idea of community with the fact that irony appears in the context of one particular discourse which, by definition, is ideologically laden and requires an evaluative interpretation. In other words, irony is bound by and in a discourse, and the discourse exhibits the ideological features of one particular community. Therefore, in interpreting irony one may speak about discursive communities, since the focus is no longer on who uses irony, but on what discursive community is able to understand it.

Hutcheon defines *discursive communities* in general by the ‘complex configuration of shared knowledge, beliefs, values and communicative strategies.’ (6, 91) Discursive communities are dynamic, subtly differentiated. The constraints that govern them may not be overt or readily apparent to the members of that particular community. They become manifest when discursive communities are faced with one another in communication. Then the constraints become obvious. These constraints of discursive contexts refer to and foreground

the particularities not only of space and time, but of class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual choice – not to mention nationality, religion, age, profession, and all the other micropolitical groupings in which we place ourselves or are placed by our society. [6, 92]

This enumeration of possible traits, defining discursive communities, helps to further clear up what exactly determines our belonging to a certain community.

At the same time, as Hutcheon stresses, ‘we belong to many overlapping (and sometimes even conflicting) communities or collectives’ [6, 92]. This overlapping enables the transmission and interpretation of irony, no matter how dented, partial or incomplete it may be as a consequence of the differences among the characteristics of various communities.

This theory has another advantage: it demolishes the elitist views of irony that were put forth by the German theorists. They proclaimed the superiority of the ironist as he was the producer of irony, and the submission of the audience, whether or not they understood irony. Irony was seen not as a shared experience, but as a hierarchy of understanding and of intellectual powers. One could even speak of a hierarchy of participants, with the ironist on the top position, seconded by those members of the audience who understood irony, followed by those who did not. It promoted a feeling of exclusive elitism that influenced views of irony until contemporary times. Even Wayne Booth, when discussing the interpretation of irony, uses the metaphor of building a higher platform of meaning, and, from this platform, the interpreter who comprehends irony can look down on those who ‘dwell in error’ [6, 35-37].

If we are to follow Hutcheon’s idea that discursive communities precede irony and make possible its comprehension, the separation between the knowing few and the ignorant many would no longer hold. Consequently, one might still talk of two audiences, but instead of the initiated and uninitiated, one might refer to the addressees and the hearers. Both of them are part of the comprehension framework of irony, each with a different role and different degrees of participation.

Those who do not get the irony are not necessarily what most want to call its victims: they may not care at all; they may simply “misunderstand” (i.e. interpret differently) because they are operating within a different discursive context. The so-called uninitiated are not always the same as the targets either, for many miss (or get) ironies directed at others as well as at themselves. Those who engage the multiple said and unsaid meanings of irony are certainly interpreting differently than those who engage only the said. [6, 95]

The targets of irony are not the ‘hearers’ who do not understand it or who misunderstand it. On the contrary, the targets are those against whom a particular instance of irony is directed, and who may or may not comprehend that they have been ironically attacked. On the other hand, the people who misunderstand irony,

either by misreading its meaning or by ignoring its ironic edge, may not be interested in or affected by the respective ironic instance.

Jonathan Culler has pointed out that the understanding of any utterance (including an ironical one) demands 'an amazing repertoire of conscious and unconscious knowledge' [2, 113]. He has also posited a specifically literary competence: the tacit knowledge of the conventions by which we read literary texts. However, as Hutcheon points out, interpreting irony depends on literary competence, but it also needs to rely on some sort of common assumption between the participants that would signal a possible ironic meaning. As she put it, there must exist 'some sort of culturally agreed upon markers in the utterance and/or in enunciative context to signal both that irony is in play and how it is to be interpreted.' [6, 95-96]. And these markers activate the competences needed to interpret irony within the reader's mind.

Hutcheon's model of interpreting irony is more *interactional* and *relational*. The two participants in the encoding and decoding of irony interact and their cultural backgrounds relate in order to make irony happen.

The success of irony depends upon a lack of disparity or (...) some degree of coincidence between interpreters' and ironists' senses of the rules determining when to speak and when to be silent, and when and where and by what means and in what form, tone, and code who may say what to whom. [6, 99]

And, in the case of indirect speech acts, such as irony, these shared communicative assumptions are the only means available as well as the only possible explanation for how irony occurs.

One might say that it is these 'shared assumptions' rather than competences that determine the transmission of an ironic meaning. This is another argument in favour of the overlapping of discursive communities. Therefore, we can speak less of competence and refer more to the relevance of the context for both participants in irony's meaning making process. If people do not perceive irony in a context, that may happen not because they cannot interpret irony at all, but because of the fact that 'they may lack contextual information to interpret it' [6, 97].

Consequently, the reason why irony is not 'universally accessible' might have less to do with interpreter competence than

with the need for shared discursive context, is to shift the terms of the discussion away from notions of elitism toward an acceptance of the fact that everyone has different knowledge and belongs to (many) different discursive communities. [6, 97]

The more this shared discourse overlaps with the beliefs held by different communities, the easier comprehension is. Therefore, in my opinion, irony is not a matter of elitism, but of difference in knowledge. Considering that we live in an age of abundant information, it is surprising that we manage to communicate at all, not to mention understand irony.

In order to synthesise these views related to communities and the role they play in interpreting irony, I would agree that irony cannot be decoded if the author and the reader do not share the same cultural background. The discursive communities that Hutcheon speaks of should be viewed in a very non-restrictive and fluctuating way. I would not necessarily call them communities as much as *shared cultural backgrounds*. It would be very difficult, I believe, to group people into one community. Even within the same community (of let us say gender) the differences in education, social status, ideology may be so different as to almost completely eradicate any similarities and common ground for irony to form on. Everyone's life experience is different. The idea of overlapping communities is not loose enough to fit all the possible individual variations resulting from the way a person's experience of different cultural discourses may merge into one, unique, but valid nonetheless, view of the world. A shared cultural background is a term that allows for a lot of variation since it does not attempt to group people, only to examine the common points in their knowledge and values systems. The shared cultural background can be viewed as a spider's web, where each knot leads to another which then refers to the next until the message is understood or the network is broken.

However, no matter what we choose to call it, it is obvious that irony needs a broader context and knowledge than that offered by a simple text or utterance in order for the ironic meaning to be made. Irony exists only in relations, in interactions, in the fluidity of human speech or writing. It is the least fixed of all tropes/speech acts. It changes with time - ironic meaning may become obsolete as the context for its appearance becomes more distant in time. It changes with people – as their knowledge of the world progresses, certain views are no longer held. It changes with ideologies – what was once considered ironic may at one point become harmless or offensive, depending on how ideologies progress. Therefore, the study of irony itself evolves in time, and it moulds itself with the way society progresses and interprets/makes irony.

References

1. Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press, 1974.
2. Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics*. London and New York: Routledge, 1975.
3. Eco, Umberto. *Interpretare si suprainterpretare*. Constanța: Editura Pontica, 2004. tr.a.
4. Eco, Umberto. *On Literature*. Harcourt Inc., 2002.
5. Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980.
6. Hutcheon, L. *Irony's Edge*, London: Routledge, 1994.
7. Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1984.