

A Unified Theory of Irony? As If !

Irony, by Joana Garmendia

Reviewed by Tony Veale

Goethe's observation that "words come in handy when ideas fail us" has rarely found a more apt target than our understanding of irony. Modern discourse is steeped in it, to the extent that we often feel the need to break its cardinal rule when speaking ironically on social media: we actually announce our ironic intent with the hashtag *#irony*, both to make our ironies stand out above others and to avoid the backlash of internet shaming when our intent is misunderstood. When we look at the observations that merit this tag, we find as many views on what it means to be ironic as we find speakers declaring themselves to be ironic. That the tag is equally at home in tweets that exhibit verbal, situational, dramatic and poetic irony at least suggests that there is something shared by these various forms that is deserving of a common label. Yet what seems to unite these uses is the belief that irony can be anything one wants it to be, provided we can discern both humour and aptness in an act, an utterance or a situation. Thus, a guide to Mumbai thinks it ironic that a nightclub that was one frequented by gangsters is now an Italian restaurant named "Corleone", while a famous singer has built her career on a song that sees irony lurking behind life's unwanted coincidences, just as at least one comedian has built his on a witty analysis of what she gets wrong. Our folk notions of irony are so remarkably elastic that they are stretchy enough to accommodate everything from comic coincidence to logical contradiction and self-serving hypocrisy. Our formal accounts may do a better job of identifying the most diagnostic features of irony, but they are no less stretchy for being formal.

This crowded Venn diagram of scholarly perspectives is excellently surveyed in a new book from Joana Garmendia, simply titled *Irony*, as part of the series *Key Topics in Semantics and Pragmatics* from Cambridge University Press. Her book is concise but satisfyingly comprehensive, and shines its spotlight fairly on the many arguments and counter-arguments that compete for our attention in the literature. Having placed irony in its proper rhetorical context, and teased apart the various strands that the word weaves together as one, Garmendia settles on

verbal irony, and considers the relative strengths and weaknesses of the three major families of formal accounts: those grounded in opposition, those grounded in echoes, and those grounded in pretence. Although Garmendia is a neo-Gricean who finds much that is worth preserving in the views of the éminence Grice, she does not shy away from their shortcomings. That the grand old cheese is full of holes and melts easily under the heat of scrutiny will surprise no-one – hence the diversity of contemporary scholarly views on irony – but the holes at least allow his implicature account to be enriched with additional nuances and perspectives. So among the qualities worth salvaging we find: ironic utterances must do more than simply imply the opposite of what they say – there must be communicative value in the opposition too; irony always carries a tinge of criticism, even when it seems to be used for positive ends; irony involves a pretence that asks listeners to collude in the construction of meaning; and though ironic statements are often said in a seemingly arch manner, there is no distinctively ironic tone of voice. In her own revision of, and departure from Grice, Garmendia offers an “as-if” theory of irony that retains its reliance on implicature as well as its critical bent. Since Grice himself noted (but left under-developed) the role of pretence, her view that ironic speakers communicate one stance *as if* communicating another allows her to naturally integrate important elements of the pretence and echoic views too.

These echoic and pretence views are explored with equal depth in chapters of their own, showing where these stances differ and agree, either with themselves or with Grice. Sperber and Wilson’s theory of the ironic echo is perhaps the more formidable and specific of the two, although their notion of what constitutes an echo has necessarily been stretched and reshaped over the years to account for ever more nuanced challenges from rival theories. At its simplest, the ironic echo is a means of mocking an assertion or a prediction by repeating it in a falsifying context, as when we utter “lovely day for a picnic” on a rain-sodden afternoon. But echoes don’t have to literally echo, or even paraphrase, a past utterance; they can capture the naïveté of a prediction that has failed to materialize, such as the act of scheduling a get-together as a picnic in the first place, or merely echo the presumed state of mind or world view of the addressee. We can even stretch the notion of an echo to explain the naming of that Mumbai restaurant as an ironic speech act; by calling the establishment “Corleone,” the new owners seem to be

echoing its former status as a hive of villainy, and winking at those in the know.

The echoic account hinges on the distinction between use and mention, for to ironically echo a proposition is not to use it *as is* but *as if*. To knowingly echo but not actually use another's propositions (real or attributed) requires a suspension of disbelief, perhaps marked by a wink, a nod, an arch tone or a pair of air quotes. Just as a good lie contains more than a grain of truth, an effective pretence will borrow from, or echo, that which it seeks to ridicule. So disentangling the echoic account of Sperber & Wilson from the pretence theories of Clark & Gerrig and of others requires some close reading, but Garmendia is equal to the task. Whether echo is seen as a tool of pretence, or whether pretence is a prerequisite for echo, it is clear that each view has amassed its own stronghold of supporting examples. The discussion leads, inexorably, not to a victory of one account over another but to the realization that irony is a polythetic concept whose many forms are linked by a series of family resemblances rather than by any clearly defined essence. In the context of utterances that wink at an audience, irony looks just like pretence, but in the context of utterances that remind us of failed predictions, it looks just like an echoic allusion. In between these poles we find a world of examples that can be made, with just a little ingenuity, to look like one or the other. Garmendia doesn't pick sides or pick fights, but shows us that – like the users of *#irony* on Twitter – we can treat these alternate views as a buffet rather than a set meal.

Irony's history of scholarly disputes is the stuff of propulsive narrative, and in Garmendia's concise telling this history often feels like a blow-by-blow report of a boxing match on the radio: as each punch from one corner invites a counter-punch from another, the effect is almost just as thrilling. She develops her talking points logically, prompting readers to think loud "buts" at key junctures before then voicing many of the same objections. But a compact volume such as this can only cover so much, and it is worth mentioning some of the topics that get less than a full treatment. For instance, just what is the exact relationship of sarcasm to irony? Despite their evident family resemblance, scholars often feel the need to stipulate a certain relation from the outset. Is sarcasm just a more savage form of irony, one that sacrifices plausible deniability for a biting, unambiguous scorn, or is irony a more subtle and emotionally-muted form of sarcasm? Twitter users

disprove (or at least challenge) Grice's claim that irony is a pretence that cannot be overtly marked as such without ceasing to be irony, but what other, less overt markers of playfulness do speakers use to facilitate ironic communication? Are there linguistic constructions for irony and sarcasm, or are some instances more formulaic than others, or indeed, is sarcasm more formulaic than irony? What is the link between irony and humour? Does irony always strive for humour, or does it simply share the latter's use for incongruities that paint a bigger picture? To her credit, these questions and more *are* addressed in Garmendia's book, if not in the same depth or breadth as more central concerns. For all that, she does not stint on her approach to evergreen questions in the irony literature, such as whether irony always criticizes, even in its positive form when it seems intended to praise, or whether the notion of an ironic tone of voice is at all credible. These are questions to which Garmendia returns throughout her book, and to which she offers credible answers. As a compact guide to a complex and contentious topic, readers will find little to quibble about in Garmendia's engaging treatment. This is a book that will earn its keep on your shelf, to come in handy when words *and* ideas fail you. Perhaps you'll keep it for a rainy day. Picnics are so overrated.