Verbal Irony: Pretense or Echoic Mention?

Dan Sperber
Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
and Université de Paris 10, Paris, France

According to the mention theory of irony put forward by Sperber and Wilson and tested by Jorgensen, Miller, and Sperber, verbal ironies are implicit echoic mentions of meaning conveying a derogatory attitude to the meaning mentioned. In their criticisms, Clark and Gerrig misrepresent mention theory. The pretense theory, which they offer as a superior alternative, might provide a plausible description of *parody*, but it fails to account for many types and many properties of irony proper.

The word *irony* has been given many senses over the past 25 centuries. It has been used to refer to attitudes (Socratic irony, Romantic irony), to a literary device (dramatic irony), to a figure of speech (verbal irony), to situations, and so on. There may exist interesting relations among these referents, but there is no reason to expect all of them to fall under a single unified theory of irony. Rhetoricians for more than 2,000 years and psycholinguists for less than 20 years have tried to account for one kind of irony, verbal irony, the figure of speech involved when one says, for instance, "How clever!" while making it clear that one thinks, "How stupid!"

In a new development, Clark and Gerrig (1984) offer a pretense theory as a superior alternative to the mention theory of verbal irony put forward by Sperber and Wilson (1981) and tested by Jorgensen, Miller, and Sperber (1984). I argue that pretense theory is in fact inferior to mention theory and is deficient in several important respects. First, however, I would like to point out what both theories do have in common and how they both contrast with classical accounts of irony.

Resemblances Between Mention Theory and Pretense Theory

From classical antiquity (e.g. Quintilian, first century A.D./1921) to the present, verbal irony has been characterized as a "a form of speech in which one meaning is stated and a different, usually antithetical, meaning is intended" (Preminger, 1974, p. 407). In a radical departure from classical accounts, both mention theory and pretense theory claim that verbal irony involves only one meaning, the literal one. That meaning, though, is not *stated*. According to mention theory, the speaker expresses a derogatory attitude to a meaning he or she merely mentions; according to pretense theory, the speaker merely pretends to state a meaning and intends his or her pretense to be recognized as such, together with the derogatory attitude that underlies it.

Classical theorists were of course aware of the fact that verbal irony expresses a derogatory attitude. The mechanism of irony, however, was seen as quite independent of that fact; as in the case of other tropes (metaphor, hyperbole, etc.), it was seen as a mechanism of meaning substitution. More specifically, it was seen as a mechanism of meaning inversion. For both mention theory and pretense theory, on the other hand, the mechanism of irony involves the expression of an attitude as a key component.

Mention theory and pretense theory differ on what, in a particular instance of verbal irony, they take the ironic attitude to be an attitude to: According to mention theory, it is primarily an attitude to the idea literally expressed by the ironical utterance; only derivatively is it an attitude to the people who might express or entertain this idea. According to pretense theory, it is directly an attitude to the people (one of whom the ironist pretends to be) who might express or accept such an idea.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Dan Sperber, 33 Rue Croulebarbe, 75013 Paris, France.

Mention Theory

Derogatory attitudes to ideas one echoes and derogatory attitudes to people one imitates both exist—they may even coexist in the same utterance—and they are not always easy to differentiate. In order to contrast mention theory with classical accounts of verbal irony, as Jorgensen et al. (1984) did, a bare outline of the theory is sufficient. Given the similarities between mention theory and pretense theory, some subtler points (developed by Sperber & Wilson, 1981) have to be taken into consideration.

Mention theory is based on an extension of the logical notion of mention. When an expression is *mentioned*—as opposed to being *used*—it refers to itself (or, more accurately, a token of the expression refers to the type to which it belongs). In formal logic, the only mentions considered are mentions of expressions; moreover, formal mentions of expressions are always explicitly set off from the context (by means of quotation marks or other devices). Sperber and Wilson (1981) argued that mention in natural language differs from mention in formal systems in two ways. First, not just expressions but linguistic representations of any level can be mentioned. For instance, the phonetic representation of *cat* is mentioned below in (1); its alphabetic representation is mentioned in (2); its whole lexical representation is mentioned in (3); an utterance of *cat* (pragmatic level of representation) is mentioned in (4); and the meaning, or semantic representation, of *cat* is mentioned in (5):

Cat rhymes with mat.   (1)

Cat has three letters.   (2)

Cat is an English word.   (3)

He answered, "Cat."   (4)

The French word *chat* means cat.   (5)

The first claim of mention theory is that verbal ironies are *mentions of meaning*.

Second, mentions in natural language need not be explicitly set off. Mentions of meanings, and more specifically of propositions, are quite often implicit; they have to be recognized as such on the basis of contextual clues. In the absence of such clues, the italicized sentences

in (6) can be understood either as part of what Mary is stating or as an implicit mention of the propositional content of what Bob has been saying:

Mary: Bob was speaking earnestly. *It was getting late. We had to go.*   (6)

The second claim of mention theory is that verbal ironies are *implicit* mentions of meaning.

When a speaker mentions a meaning, he or she is not using it as a representation of his or her own thoughts. The speaker is, rather, conveying something *about* this meaning. For instance, it is possible to mention a proposition and draw attention to it in order to convey, explicitly or implicitly, a derogatory attitude to it, in order to suggest, say, that the proposition is absurd.

The third claim of mention theory is that verbal ironies are implicit mentions of meaning *conveying a derogatory attitude* to the meaning mentioned.

There is, however, an infinity of absurd propositions (e.g., "There are more yolks in an egg than fish in the oceans," "Ronald Reagan is the niece of Lady Macbeth"). Most of them are not worth drawing attention to, because no one ever has or ever will entertain them. Absurdity of propositions per se is irrelevant. The absurdity, or even the mere inappropriateness, of human thoughts, on the other hand, is often worth remarking on, making fun of, being ironic about. In other words, in order to be successfully ironic, the meaning mentioned must recognizably echo a thought that has been, is being, or might be entertained or expressed by someone. Here *echo* is used in a technical sense that is wider than its ordinary sense (but not really wider than its conventional metaphorical sense).

The fourth claim of mention theory, then, is that verbal ironies are implicit *echoic* mentions of meaning conveying a derogatory attitude to the meaning mentioned.

According to mention theory, an ironic utterance echoes a *thought* by mentioning a meaning that corresponds to that thought. The thought echoed may have been verbally expressed, or it may be a received opinion, but this need not be the case at all. All that is necessary is that the thought be attributable

to specific people, specific types of people, or people in general.

Clark and Gerrig again and again discuss mention theory as if the echo involved were that of a previous *utterance* or that of received opinions. In discussing the case of "The Hotel" (from Jorgensen et al., 1984), they write: "In being ironic, Carol is claimed to be mentioning Sally's *words* or the proposition she *expressed*" (Clark & Gerrig, 1984, p. 123, emphasis added), whereas our claim is that Carol is echoing a thought that Sally must have entertained, given what she said. Discussing Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," Clark and Gerrig (1984) write:

> To explain the irony, the mention theory would have to say that the *entire* essay was an echoic mention. But of what? It is implausible that anyone had ever uttered the entire essay or expressed its entire contents or that dining on Irish children was ever a part of "popular wisdom or received opinions." (p. 123)

This is true enough but irrelevant to mention theory. And once more, in their Conclusion, Clark and Gerrig write: "Mentioning prior utterances, however, is not powerful enough to do the job: It does not do justice to what the ironist is trying to do" (p. 125). According to mention theory, the ironist is not "mentioning prior utterances" but is mentioning meanings in order to echo thoughts.

Only once do Clark and Gerrig discuss echoes of thoughts:

> The mention theory is forced to say that many ironies are merely *implicit* echoes—echoic mentions of popular wisdom or received opinion—but it does not describe any criteria for deciding what is a possible implicit echo and what is not. If Swift's proposal is considered an implicit echo, then surely almost anything goes. (1984, pp. 123–124)

Actually, all echoes involved in irony are implicit: They don't advertise the fact that they are echoes. What Clark and Gerrig mean by "implicit echoes" are echoes of unuttered thoughts. As we saw, mention theory is directly concerned with the echo of thoughts, whether uttered or unuttered; it is not, therefore "forced," as the result of some inherent weakness, to consider unuttered thoughts; it does so as a matter of course. Nor are the unuttered thoughts it considers limited to popular wisdom and received opinions.

Mention theory does describe a criterion for deciding what is a possible echo of a thought, namely, that it be recognizable as such. Again, there is an infinity of meanings that cannot be used in this way, that is, recognized as echoes of thoughts attributable to specific human beings, types of human beings, or people in general. This is particularly obvious if we keep in mind that the recognition of the echo is not a task to be performed at leisure, like, say, solving a riddle. It has to be achieved, on the contrary, within the time and attention constraints characteristic of real-time verbal comprehension. It is subject to whatever rules comprehension is subject to (Gricean maxims, or as we proposed, a single "principle of relevance"; see Sperber & Wilson, 1982, Wilson & Sperber, 1981). Like all communicative intentions, ironic intentions have to be relevant to the hearer (or at least manifestly seem so to the speaker) in order to be recognized. Therefore, in a verbal exchange, only potentially relevant echoes are recognizable. We are very far indeed from the idea of "almost anything goes" suggested by Clark and Gerrig.

Conditions for Pretense and Conditions for Mention

According to pretense theory, "Ironists can pretend to use the words of any person or type of person they wish, just as long as they can get the intended audience to recognize the pretense" (Clark & Gerrig, 1984, p. 124). The characterization of a pretense, however, imposes stricter conditions on a recognizable pretense than there are on a recognizable echo. The true addressee of the irony has to be able to recognize who (or what kind of person) the ironist is pretending to be and whom he or she is pretending to address. In other words, there has to be a plausible speaker–audience pair for whom the utterance would *not* be pretense. This implies that whenever the conditions are met for pretense, they are met for echo: If you can identify the (type of) person who the ironist pretends to be when he or she utters a certain proposition, a fortiori you can identify that proposition as one that could be entertained by some (type of) person.

Clark and Gerrig's argument to show that "many ironies that are readily interpretable as pretense . . . cannot be viewed as echoic mention" (1984, p. 123) is based on the therefore mistaken notion that the conditions for

pretense are more easily met than the conditions for echoic mention.[1] Yet, I argue, Clark and Gerrig are correct (though their reasons are not) in suggesting that there are cases of pretense that cannot be viewed as echoic mention of meanings. However, these cannot be viewed either as cases of the figure of speech irony. In fact, pretense theory fails to distinguish verbal ironies proper from other verbal manifestations of a derogatory attitude, parody, for instance, even though the distinction is conspicuous.

Actually, the reverse of what Clark and Gerrig claim is true: The conditions can be met for echoic mention without being met for pretense, and this in two ways. First, it is possible to echo a thought that the person who entertains it would never express or assent to. Suppose Bill, who wants everybody to think of him as a totally sincere person, tells a transparent lie and believes he is believed. Judy says ironically:

What a clever lie! (7)

Now, Bill is clearly the victim of the irony. According to Clark and Gerrig, there are two ways in which the ironist can aim his or her speech at a particular victim: by pretending to speak as the victim or by pretending to speak to the victim and to obtain his or her "uncritical acceptance." In this case, though, neither way is available. Judy could not be pretending to speak as Bill, because even though Bill might well entertain the idea expressed by Judy, he would never express it to anyone. Nor could Judy pretend to be obtaining Bill's uncritical acceptance, because the one thing that would shatter Bill's belief that his lie was a clever one would be to have somebody tell him that he had been lying. So Judy's irony does not meet the minimal condition that there be a plausible speaker–audience pair for whom the utterance would not be pretense. It is easy, on the other hand, to analyze it as an echoic mention of Bill's unuttered thoughts.

Second, an ironic utterance may be blatantly self-contradictory. For instance:

Jones, this murderer, this thief, this crook, is indeed an honorable fellow! (8)

Outside temperature is again below freezing point: a true heat wave! (9)

Here again, there is no speaker–audience pair who could express and assent to (8) and (9) understood unironically, and therefore pretense in the matter is infeasible. An echoic interpretation, on the other hand, is quite straightforward. The meaning of "honorable fellow" in (8) is mentioned in order to echo the idea that someone, Jones himself for instance, has or would like others to have of him. "A true heat wave!" in (9) may be taken to echo an idea that the speaker and his or her audience entertain with nostalgia in their current conditions and the inappropriateness of which is worth being ironic about.

Clark and Gerrig's claim that "all cases of ironic 'mention' can be reinterpeted as cases of ironic pretense" (1984, p. 123) is mistaken. On the contrary, typical examples of verbal irony such as examples (7) through (9) provide strong evidence against pretense theory while falling unproblematically within the scope of mention theory.

Pretenses

Clark and Gerrig claim that "the pretense theory provides transparent explanations for several important features of irony mentioned by Sperber and Wilson (1981)" (p. 122). Actually, we didn't just mention, we tried to explain, five aspects of irony, three of which Clark and Gerrig discuss in their turn:

1. *Asymmetry of affect.* Here I find their

---

[1] Clark and Gerrig try to illustrate their point with Jonathan Swift's (1729/1971, cited in Clark & Gerrig, 1984) "A Modest Proposal," a questionable choice. Text-length irony stands to phrase- or sentence-length irony the way allegory stands to metaphor, and it is an old debate whether they come under the same description: Is "A Modest Proposal" a good example of the figure of speech irony? More important, do we want to emulate literary scholars and base psycholinguistic discussions of figures of speech on these complex literary examples? Even supposing we did, there would be no greater difficulty in describing "A Modest Proposal" in terms of mention theory than in terms of pretense theory. If, as Clark and Gerrig suggest, "Swift was pretending to speak as a member of the English ruling class to an English audience" (p. 123), then he was caricaturing that speaker and that audience, because, in reality, no member of the English ruling class would ever have made or accepted his proposal. Now, if one can caricature while pretending, surely one can do so while echoing: It is not any harder to think of Swift's essay as a caricatural echo of what a member of the English ruling class might have proposed than as a caricatural pretense.

argument baffling: The ironist, they claim, pretends to be an injudicious, ignorant person; such persons view the world through rose-colored glasses, and that is why an ironist is more likely to say, "What a clever idea" of a bad idea than, "What a stupid idea" of a good one. Is this a question of cultural difference? Are all ignorant *Americans* happy optimists? Ignorant French people are notorious complainers; they see failure and deception everywhere, yet French ironists display the same asymmetry of affect as American ones.

Compare this "explanation" with the one derived from mention theory:

Standards or rules of behavior are culturally defined, commonly known, and frequently invoked; they are thus always available for echoic mention. On the other hand, critical judgments are particular to a given individual or occasion, and are thus only occasionally available for echoic mention. Hence, it is always possible to say ironically of a failure *That was a great success,* since it is normal to hope for the success of a given course of action. However, to say of a success *That was a failure* without the irony falling flat, the speaker must be able to refer back to prior doubts or fears, which he can then echo ironically. (Sperber & Wilson, 1981, p. 312)

2. *Victims of irony.* Irony often has victims. The classical theory fails to identify these victims. Pretense theory identifies too many and not always the right ones. For pretense theory, the ironist is each and every time pretending to be a certain (type of) person addressing a certain (type of) audience, and these evoked characters are the victims of the irony. But what about ironies that do not have victims? If one says "What lovely weather!" when the weather is miserable, is it usually the case that the speaker is making fun of some "injudicious person" and of some "uncomprehending audience"? According to mention theory, there are no particular victims when the thoughts echoed are universally shared ideas, norms, hopes, or expectations, such as, for instance, the hope for good weather. For the ironic "What lovely weather!" to have a victim (as it sometimes may), it has to echo, say, a too optimistic weather forecast; the victim is then the forecaster.

According to pretense theory, there are two kinds of victims: the person the ironist is pretending to be and the audience he or she is pretending to address. Clark and Gerrig claim moreover that "the mention theory cannot distinguish these two types of victims" (1984,

p. 122). Do we want, though, in a proper theory of irony, to be stuck forever with two types of victims, and just *these* two? Irony may have no victim, or it may have one victim, or it may have several victims of different types.

Imagine for instance that against Judy's advice, Bill bought what a crooked art dealer told him was a true Picasso. Roger, claiming to be competent, vouched for the painting's authenticity. Other friends of Bill's were much impressed by the painting until a genuine expert at last showed it to be a fake. When Judy then says:

That was a truly beautiful Picasso!   (10)

Bill, Roger, and Bill's friends are, in different capacities, the victims of her irony. Mention theory easily allows for any number of victims differentiated in any kind of way (including, of course, a speaker–audience differentiation). The thought echoed may have been recognizably entertained or expressed by different people in different ways. The identification and differentiation of victims is merely made possible by the mechanism of irony. Whether that possibility is exploited at all, and to what degree, depends on the context and on the general mechanism of comprehension that, we claimed, is governed by the search for relevance. In a nutshell, *relevant* identifications of victims will be made, and others will not.

There exists a whole range of standard cases of verbal irony with an obvious victim that do not fit with pretense theory. Imagine that Bill often says sincerely of himself:

I am a very patient person.   (11)

However, nobody else would ever say that of him, because he is anything but patient. Now, on a day when Bill has been particularly quick-tempered, Judy says:

Bill is such a patient person!   (12)

Clearly, Bill is the victim of her irony. Yet, she could not have been pretending to be he: Bill does not speak of himself in the third person! Nor could she have been pretending to be someone else addressing Bill, because nobody else but Bill believes (12). There is no difficulty, on the other hand, to see an echo of Bill's opinion of himself in Judy's remark. It is because of such obvious cases that we were led

to distinguish between mention of an expression and mention of a meaning and to link verbal irony to the latter.

3. *Ironic tone of voice.* Here, Clark and Gerrig confuse the change of voice involved in imitation and the true ironic tone of voice, even though the two are not only different but often even antithetical. Imagine that Bill keeps saying,

Sally is such a nice person!   (13)

and that Judy totally disagrees. Judy might express a derogatory attitude to Bill's judgment on Sally in two superficially similar, but quite perceptibly different, ways. She might imitate Bill and say herself, "Sally is such a nice person!" with an exaggerated tone of enthusiasm or even worship. Or she might utter the same sentence but with a tone of contempt, so that there will be a contradiction between the literal content of what she says and the tone in which she says it. The first tone of voice is indeed one of pretence and mockery. The second tone of voice is the ironic tone, the nuances of which have been described by rhetoricians since classical antiquity.

Clark and Gerrig write that "with pretense, there is a natural account of the ironic tone of voice" (1984, p. 122). In fact, however, there is a natural account of the *parodic* tone of voice. Not only is there no natural account of the true ironic tone of voice, but the very existence of that tone constitutes strong evidence against pretense theory. Indeed, this tone, when it is used, makes any pretense impossible. There is no audience, real or imaginary, that would fail to perceive the derogatory attitude and hence the ironic intent it conveys. Therefore, ironies spoken in an ironic tone of voice fall outside the scope of pretense theory!

Final Remarks

One of the merits Sperber and Wilson (1981) claimed for mention theory is that it allows at one and the same time to distinguish irony from parody and to account for the fact that they are closely related. The parodist is reproducing (usually with dramatic exaggeration) the very words, tone of voice, facial expressions, and so on, that he or she is attributing to his or her victim. The ironist is reproducing in his or her own words and tone of voice (by means of which he or she can express directly a derogatory attitude) the content of the words or thoughts that he or she is attributing to the victim. The ironist (if forsaking the use of the ironic tone of voice) may pretend to part of the audience to be speaking in earnest but cannot pretend to be someone else. The parodist, of course, does pretend to be someone else.

Parody, then, stands to irony as mentions of words and utterances stand to mentions of meanings and propositions, or, as direct quotations stand to indirect ones. The distinction is clear, yet the relation is a close one. Both verbal irony and parody can serve to express the same attitude, though they do so by different means. Irony and parody can combine in the same text or even in the same sentence, just as, in indirect quotation, some phrases may be directly quoted. It is precisely because of their closeness that parody and irony are important to distinguish. This, Clark and Gerrig have failed to do. What they offer as a theory of irony is a straightforward theory of parody.

In the last part of their article, Clark and Gerrig offer interesting remarks on one of the stories used in the Jorgensen et al. (1984) experiments. They argue that the failure of the subjects to perceive irony as expected was due to insufficiently explicit common ground. This might well be so. How should that be relevant to a comparison between pretense theory and mention theory? Their answer is that "the pretense theory makes clear how common ground will be needed. The mention theory does not" (Clark & Gerrig, 1984, p. 124). This is gratuitous. Both pretense theory and mention theory are offered as a piece of the pragmatic puzzle. They operate within the constraints of more general pragmatic theory. Both turn as a matter of course to common ground and pragmatic rules to explain the recognition of a pretense in one case, of an echoic mention in the other.

I have left the pedantic discussion for the end. Clark and Gerrig claim that we (Sperber & Wilson, 1981) have misrepresented Grice's view of irony. In "Logic and Conversation" Grice (1975) proposed an account of irony according to which an implicature of opposite content had to be substituted by inference for the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered. So, as in classical accounts, this was a

substitution-of-meaning theory of irony, a very different theory, therefore, from both pretense and mention theory. We were not particularly original in understanding Grice this way. So did, for instance, Clark and Clark (1977). Explaining Grice's ideas, they wrote:

Take sarcasm, as when Barbara tells Peter *That was certainly a terrific play we saw tonight* while knowing that he knows she thinks it was a terrible play. In saying this, Barbara is flouting the maxim of quality—she is obviously not being truthful. But she expects Peter to see that, and that she is still adhering to the cooperative principle, so by implication she means her comment to be taken as sarcasm, as meaning the opposite of what she said. (Clark & Clark, 1977, p. 124)

In "Further Notes on Logic and Conversation" Grice (1978) made a few additional and perspicuous remarks on irony, and it is exclusively from there that Clark and Gerrig take their quotes. These remarks, however, are not offered as a replacement for the former theory (actually, both articles belong to the same series of lectures), nor do they integrate with it in any clear way. This, then, is the typical mixture found in all classical works on irony from Quintilian (first century A.D./1921), to Booth (1974) or Morier (1975): a summary characterization of irony in terms of meaning substitution, together with a wealth of perceptive but unconnected additional remarks.

Grice appealed to pretense and in so doing, as Clark and Gerrig (1984) rightly point out, he "appeared to be reflecting other traditional accounts of irony, the oldest perhaps going back to the Greeks" (p. 121). Grice, however, does not attempt to develop a pretense theory of irony, and this might also be in deference to ancient wisdom. Indeed, Quintilian had already considered and rejected pretense theories of irony: "I have found some who speak of *irony* as *dissimulation,* but . . . this latter

name does not cover the whole range of this figure." He discussed word- or phrase-length irony and pointed out that "despite the fact that it implies something other than it says, it makes no pretence about it" (Quintilian, first century A.D./1921, p. 400–401).

References

Booth, W. C. (1974). *A rhetoric of irony.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Clark, H. H., & Clark, E. V. (1977). *Psychology of language: An introduction to psycholinguistics.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Clark, H. H., & Gerrig, R. J. (1984). On the pretense theory of irony. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 113,* 121–126.

Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol 3. Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). New York: Academic Press.

Grice, H. P. (1978). Further notes on logic and conversation. In P. Cole (Ed.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol. 9. Pragmatics* (pp. 113–128). New York: Academic Press.

Jorgensen, J., Miller, G. A., & Sperber D. (1984). Test of the mention theory of irony. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 113,* 112–120.

Morier, H. (1975). *Dictionnaire de poétique et de rhétorique* (Enlarged ed.). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Preminger, A. (Ed.). (1974). *Princeton encyclopedia of poetry and poetics* (Enlarged ed.). London: Macmillan.

Quintilian, M. F. (1921). *The institutio oratoria of Quintilian,* with an English translation by H. E. Butler (Vol 3). London: Heinemann. (Original work written first century A.D.)

Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1981). Irony and the use-mention distinction. In P. Cole (Ed.), *Radical pragmatics* (pp. 295–318). New York: Academic Press.

Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1982). Mutual knowledge and relevance in theories of comprehension. In N. Smith (Ed.), *Mutual knowledge* (pp. 61–85). London: Academic Press.

Wilson, D., & Sperber, D. (1981). On Grice's theory of conversation. In P. Werth (Ed.), *Conversation and discourse* (pp. 155–178). London: Croom Helm.