

IRONY AS A WESTERN COMMUNICATION FORM

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Every culture uses language in unique ways, and many of the specialized communication forms used in a culture can pose severe difficulties for those who do not understand them. Often regarded as “black humor” or “American joke,” verbal irony ranks as one of the most difficult communication forms for non-native speakers to understand. As a simple definition, verbal irony is essentially a literary device in which a person says one thing but means something quite the opposite as in calling a blundering idiot a *beacon of brilliance*.

The term *irony* derives from a Greek word *ieron* meaning *dissembler* or *feigned ignorance*. In the Greek tradition, the word applied to people generally who pretended to have a less important status in life than they actually had, a pretense that concealed the incongruity between appearances and reality. *Verbal irony* functions on this distinction between appearance and reality. The *verbal irony* that is notoriously associated with American humor and witticisms is used for a wide scope of purposes, ranging from imparting humor, making criticisms, to attacking opponents, among many others.

Generating Humor

First of all, verbal irony serves as one of the great instruments of humor and tongue-and-cheek buffoonery. Humor is generated when people realize the discrepancy between what is said and what is actually meant. Here's an example taken from an American comedy sketch in which the speaker indirectly attacks a person named Bill Hicks. Speaker: “*Who? Bill Hicks? Oh, yeah, he's a real genius, a genuine intelligentsia, a bona fide Einstein, that guy! His level of brilliance gives a new meaning to the term `brain dead.' Why, he is such a mental giant that they had to make a special IQ test that could accommodate a score of 9. The guy is a veritable brain surgeon, I tell you. If I had a sister, I would want him to marry her so that his incredible intelligence would enter our family's gene pool.*” A comedienne announces with a very serious tone that “*You know, ladies, marriage is such a marvelous, wonderful institution. You can have all the sex you want—and its legal. And sometimes, if you're really lucky, your husband may even join in too.*” *Verbal irony* to joke around usually has a positive purpose and occurs commonly among friends. A friend might teasingly call a pal who is just learning to drive a boat, “Captain.” Americans consider this kind of teasing as good fun. *Verbal irony* is also used to make gentle fun of others who goof up by ironically stating the opposite of their meaning. One friend tells another “*That was very intelligent of you not to bring even a pocket knife when you went camping for two weeks up in the Sierras. I hereby award you the Nobel Prize for intelligence in the field of camping!*” The other might reply ironically “*Thanks a lot, buddy. I really needed someone to point out that I screwed up! Yeah, you're a great friend!*” These kinds of wisecracks can operate on positive or negative reversals of meaning. After eating a

meal in which the food was, say, awful, even burned, a friend comments about the Sara, the cook: “*Oh, hell, Sara is a great cook, a regular French Chef.*” However, some *verbal ironies* can impart a sense of *sarcasm*. After Harrison Ford playing the character Quinn in the film *6 Days, 7 Nights*, crashes his plane on a deserted island, Anne Hecht demands her money back for the fare, but Quinn only gives her half of it arguing that he got her half the way: “*Halfway? You got me half way?! That's fantastic!*” She obviously uses the term *fantastic* with a sarcastic meaning. She really means just the opposite—that Quinn is taking advantage of her.

The negative form of irony conveys the same level of scathing humor. After eating a truly delicious meal, the same friend might comment that “*Oh, Sara? Hell, she can't cook worth a darn! Poor kid!*” Friends usually view this kind of kidding as playful fun. This device is also used to express black humor; here's a parody of tough guy talk found in early Hollywood crime films featuring “Bogie” characters (from the actor Humphrey Bogart): “*The mug we're looking for is a real sweetheart; he killed his own mother with a hatchet. He's the kind of guy you'd want to bring home to meet the folks. In one of his last capers, he even stole the kid's piggy bank and shot the family dog before he burned their house down. The guy's all heart, I tell ya.*”

Creating Poetic Effect: Hyperbole and Litotes

Much of the humor generated by *irony* derives from the two forms of poetic exaggeration called *hyperbole* and *litotes*. Hyperbole means to exaggerate a claim through words and phrases that suggest excess. After eating a very hot pepper sauce, a person comments that “*that hot sauce is so hot that it took the top of my head clean off!*” Irony based on *hyperbole* overstates the condition of something or someone for comic effect. Someone asks how Russell, who is 100 pounds overweight, looks now that he has been lifting weights for a couple of weeks, and another replies that “*You mean Russell, the big, butterball turkey who eats five double cheeseburgers, six hot dogs, and three milkshakes for lunch and has not so much as walked as far as his own front door in ten years? Oh, yeah, he has turned into a real he-man, an Adonis, an undeniable bruiser, total hunk, a real powerhouse. He should be able to try out for a Tarzan movie by next week right after he kicks Arnold Schwarzenegger's butt. But right now he is busy being mobbed by the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders who can't keep their hands off his bulging muscles.*” The example blends *irony* with contempt or *ridicule*.

As just the opposite of *hyperbole*, *litotes* conveys poetic understatement and is also used to poke fun or make comic statements, or even mock philosophical ones: “*love affairs happen in the best of marriages.*” Ironic statements using *litotes* can also be used to deny the obvious. After eating a fiery, explosive taco sauce laced with handfuls of *jalapena* and *habanero* peppers, a person, eyes watering, lips burning, and hair sticking straight up, responds to a question about the fiery level of the sauce by wryly commenting that “*it does impart a slight sting,*” as the perspiration drips down his face and soaks his clothes. This kind of understatement serves as the basis for jokes that reduce gigantic effects to a miniscule significance, as in the case when a huge explosion completely demolishes a chemical warehouse and other buildings ten blocks around it and an eye witness remarks that “*Yeah, there was a little bang.*” This kind of humor makes a big hit in movie

dialogues. In the film *Hammett*, for example, the coroner tells the hero that *"the victim struck himself in the head with a blunt instrument and then pumped a 38 slug into his heart, or vice versa. Ha, ha, ha. Suicide is often fascinating."*

Making Complaints and Criticisms

However, not all ironic comments are so humorous. *Stinging irony* is often used as a vehicle to express a complaint about something that, for some reason or other, people do not want to or cannot state directly. This brand of *irony* is often used to express dissatisfaction. Take for example an instance in which someone has received very poor service at a store or other because the clerk made no attempt to serve the customer at all and responded to all inquiries with a *"Uhhh, I don't know."* Afterwards, the customer might comment something like *"Well, he certainly is Mr. Imagination! I don't know when I have had such great service by such an accommodating and charming sales person. That guy is really on the ball! What a great place to shop!"* Of course, the disgruntled customer means just the opposite, namely that the clerk is intolerably bad. This form of *irony* can also serve as a means of letting off steam or expressing anger. Workers at a computer company, let's say, greet the announcement that they have to work over the weekend on inventory with great disappointment, leading one of them to announce *"Oh, aren't we the chosen ones! How lucky we are to work for such a wonderful company in which upper management has so much compassion for us. Praise be to the company Ayatolla! They never cease to amaze us with the great things that they do to help us spend time with our families and enjoy our lives! Thank you upper management! We didn't want to watch the World Cup. Oh, hell no. We just live to do inventory on Friday and Saturday nights. We're so grateful for your sensitivity!"*

Sometimes ironic complaints impart a fed up or disgusted attitude and may be used to criticize others for some wrong-doing, blunder, or other. Consider the example in which an employee inadvertently erases the entire text of a business brochure that another worker has spent hours preparing. Upon discovering the deleted text, the worker uses biting *irony* to express a state of unhappiness or even anger. *"Oh, just wonderful! I don't mind doing it all over. Hell, it only took me five hours to type it out. So I don't mind staying another ten hours to type it again! It'll be fun not going home to feed my children. Yeah, it'll only take until four o'clock in the morning! Hell, I hate going home and being with my family in the evening. Staying here all night will build character! So I am eternally grateful!"* In another similar example, after discovering that her friend betrayed her, a woman remarks to a mutual friend: *"Isn't it just wonderful how Cathy backs up her friends and keeps her mouth shut! Well, just yesterday she did me the great favor of blabbing to people where she works, knowing full well that Dan's best friend works in the same office. She told them that I really did not go on that library trip with her—that we went drinking that weekend and wound up staying in a truck stop motel. And now Dan got word of it! Oh, she's a great friend, a trustworthy pal to the end, I'll tell you."*

Americans also use *verbal irony* to attack or criticize. The tone used may signify the level of the criticism, ranging, perhaps, from an unpleasant one to a vicious one. Consider how the various levels of tone might affect the seriousness of the following scolding. After an employee uses a

screwdriver to jiggle some wires in the back of the company's main computer system, the boss looks over at the blunderer and says directly *“that was the most brilliant maneuver that I have ever seen! I hope that you will do that again so that we can spend another \$10,000 repairing the machine that you just repaired by jamming a screwdriver into the hard drive, you idiot! It takes a real genius to screw things up in such a brilliant fashion. I am sure that the division chief will jump with joy when I tell her that you “repaired” the system, and that's why we won't be able to finish this job for another week! She will no doubt give you a raise and beg you to accept my job as a reward for your outstanding service to the company!”*

Irony of this sort mixed with malicious *mockery* ranks as one of the most powerful weapons to humiliate and viciously assault others. The American film *Good Fellas* gets high dramatic mileage out of the effects of this level of *verbal irony* chocked full of hostile *sarcasm*. In the famous bar scene in which Billy pretends to be praising Tommy, the sadistic murderer played by Joe Pesci, Billy tells some fellow gangsters all about Tommy's childhood under the guise of complimenting him. But the tone of his words reveals clearly that he actually means just the opposite. He tells them *“This kid was great! They used to call him spit-shine Tommy. He was terrific! He was the best! Salute! Tommy!* But everyone else, including Tommy, of course, knows that Billy is really trying to provoke him. As Tommy starts to become furious, Billy tells him *“I am only kidding with you. I am sorry I don't mean to offend you.”* He later breaks out laughing, and the crowd has to hold Tommy back. But later, Tommy returns and goes at him from behind while some others join in; they end up beating him to death. This episode illustrates the power of *irony* mixed with *sarcasm*—and some of the deadly consequences.

As we just saw in the example above, people sometimes attempt to qualify their *verbal ironies* with disclaimers like *“I'm just kidding”* or some other such statement that might further highlight the discrepancy between what is said and what is actually intended—especially when it is very clear that the comment is intended as vicious irony. Here's another example: *“Oh, Lance's sister is a real nice girl. I mean very nice. In fact, she's real classy, that one! You won't catch her kissing on the first date. Ha-Ha. Oh, no! She's as pure and innocent as a girl scout. She only hangs around sleazy bars and back alleys to sell scout cookies! That's why every guy in the city knows her name and telephone number. Ha! Hey, Lance, I'm just kidding. Actually, your sister is quite nice. She is REALLY ok, right fellas? Hey, take it easy, Lance. I'm just teasing around. You know that I didn't mean any disrespect to your sister. Right fellas?”*

As we have seen, *verbal irony* serves as a means of conveying certain points of view or of revealing how a person really feels about an issue. The message and the tone are sometimes humorous and sometimes serious or even vicious. The success of *ironic* statements depends on the contrast between the words and their intended meanings. Between friends, *ironic jabs* at one another's characters can be considered just playful fun, and, in some cases, people have to read between the lines to fully understand the full *ironic* intent. But in other cases, no such search for meaning is necessary—it may even wound them deeply as in the case of *ironic sarcasm*. Finally, with people we do not know, verbal irony can be deadly for all parties involved.