THE RHETORICAL DEVICE OF IRONY WITHIN JOURNALISTIC TEXTS

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This paper will begin in a traditional way by analysing a couple of dictionary definitions of irony. The latest user-friendly dictionaries, ironically adopting almost Johnsonian-type definitions at times, are less than thorough. Longmans informs us:

the use of words which are clearly opposite to one's meaning usually either in order to be amusing or to show annoyance. (AA.VV., 1987)

Oxford's entry is similar

the expression of one's meaning by saying the direct opposite of one's thoughts in order to be emphatic, amusing, sarcastic, etc. (AA.VV., 1989)

but makes two significant additions. Firstly, by mentioning 'sarcasm' it draws no distinction between the two concepts, and this will be helpful in dealing with certain newspaper contributors. Secondly, the 'etc.' leaves scope for the formation of an even more extended typology of irony.

Before leaving dictionaries, a distinction must be made between the definitions discussed above of instrumental irony, where language is the instrument, and the complementary definitions of observable irony as (to quote Longmans):

a course of events or a condition which has the opposite result from what is expected. (AA.VV., 1989)

For example, "we went on holiday to Greece and it rained every day, while our native Scotland was undergoing a heat wave. The irony of it!" At times the distinction can be blurred. For instance, when a dubious politician says "I am in politics because I want to serve the people", is he being ironic dynamically, in that what he really means is that he wants to serve himself, or is what he says ironic in a static way? Similarly the ironic intention of the speaker is not always clear. The hero of Italo Svevo's Confessions of Zeno says

Accountants are by nature a race of animals much inclined to irony. (Muecke, 1970:1)
This statement itself strikes one initially as ironic, but as Svevo (and his hero) were in commerce, they may have been being deliberately ironic or may have been telling what to them was a truth.

Even apart from these areas of grey, the dictionary definitions quoted above seem woefully reductive in terms of what one intuitively feels to be ironic, in the modern sense of the term. D.C. Muecke points out that the meaning of irony has changed over the years, since Plato say, to arrive at its being, in the twentieth century, relativistic and non-committal in relation to the nature of 'true' reality. It is saying something in a way that activates an endless series of subversive interpretations (Muecke, 1970:31).

Turner says irony is

a variation in intention with no corresponding indication in the grammatical form of the language (Turner, 1973:139).

It is a pragmatic question.

Diagramatically, the coding and decoding operations involved in any socio-cultural context, in terms of the use and recognition of irony, can be seen as follows

\[
\text{Irony} \quad \text{Ironist} \buildrel > \over \rightarrow \quad \text{real meaning} \buildrel > \over \rightarrow \quad \text{interpretation} \buildrel > \over \rightarrow \quad \text{\langle text \rangle} \quad \text{\langle audience \rangle} \quad \text{\langle interpreter \rangle}
\]

(Muecke, 1970:41)

Irony then implies an intender and is to be interpreted, via a series of clues. The interpreter's role is that of interpreting meaning as a process. Basil Hatim's (1992) concept of dynamic meaning change is relevant here. In the exchange

A) My brother's fitting a new type of carburettor to his old Ford.
B) Really, how interesting.

the meaning of interesting undergoes a dynamic process of change: it can be bent to mean anything along the cline that goes from 'extremely fascinating' to 'totally tedious'.

Wayne Booth in his 1974 book on the rhetoric of irony proposes a 4-step procedure for the interpretation of irony:

1) The reader realizes a statement is nonsense.
2) He is faced with the alternatives that the writer is mad or means something different.
3) He decides on the writer's knowledge, beliefs, etc.
4) He constructs a meaning (Booth, 1974)
This is Sperber and Wilson's (1981) second degree interpretation. The listener or reader has a series of expectations (in Gricean (1975) terms) regarding the relevance, information value, reality, coherence and consistency of his interlocutor's message. A series of presuppositions may be temporarily confused by equivocation, intentional ambiguity or implication:

there are many interesting ways of making a point
(Nilsen & Nilsen 1978:215)

as the Nilsens' say. But the automatic investigation of meaning is usually sufficient to guarantee that the illocutionary intention is understood.

But from these rather abstract approaches, let us see how it is that writers can create ironic rhetoric. Muecke is helpful by providing the wherewithal for forming a typology. He identifies a series of devices for creating ironic comment, ways of being ironic, which go beyond the mere 'saying the opposite of what one means'. He cites

1) antiphrastic praise eg., Congratulations on being bottom of the class!
2) hyperbole, which sets up what is to be attacked eg., I see you've astonished the world with your maths results.
3) understatement, which in fact works in a similar way eg., Your marks were not exactly encouraging or Wealth is not without its advantages and the case to the contrary, although it has often been made, has never proved widely persuasive (J.K. Galbraith)
4) preterition, that is the ironic pretence of not mentioning something. The classic example is that of the reporter asking Abraham Lincoln's widow "But apart from that, Mrs Lincoln, did you enjoy the play?"
5) the intaglio method eg., I am of course too stupid to understand you, but..., a sort of embedded let-out clause.
6) innuendo, for example copying someone's style, such as aping the royal 'we' and 'one' eg., We have toothache today; it so depresses one.
7) analogy eg., The Human Zoo
8) the ingenu method eg., Did God kill him to make him good?
(Muecke, 1970)

This list is by no means exhaustive, but suffices to show that the simple definition of irony as consisting of 'opposite meaning' tropes is not practically helpful. Indeed, the list can be extended, particularly in terms of journalistic practice. Irony may be simply a vehicle for humour, often identical to humour in the use of word play and so on. The tabloid newspapers wield this device ad nauseam.

It may simply consist in whole or in part of exaggeration as opposed to hyperbole, or it may pose incongruent situations rather than impossible ones. It may serve the purpose of expressing more or less hidden contempt, particularly
at a political level. It can be used to point out a paradox rather than contain the paradox itself, or it may just provide a useful device to satisfy a writer's desire to be flippant over a serious subject. As Muecke points out, it restores the balance when life is being taken too seriously or vice versa.

Ironic text is expressive, and the reasons for being ironical may be rhetorical, personal, political and so on. Candace Lang brings in Kierkegaard in describing irony:

(Since) "truth demands identity (between essence and phenomenon)" irony is always potentially a form of falsehood or duplicity, though in most cases the figure of speech is correctly interpreted by the hearer and thus "cancels itself". Nevertheless because irony is not immediately and directly understood by everyone "it travels in an exclusive incognito, as it were, and looks down from its exalted station with compassion on ordinary pedestrian speech."

(Lang, 1988:25)

However, Peter Newmark says of irony, and his main concern (like mine) is being able to adequately translate it, that

when it is subtle, it can easily be overlooked (Newmark, 1993:132)

It is the adequation of sign to meaning, though the signifier is not bound by the signified: the speaker is 'negatively free' as Kierkegaard puts it. It is an 'illicit' use of language and as such has at various times been laid open to charges of immorality, perversity and insanity, charges that may not be wholly inappropriate today, as may transpire now that we turn our attention to the use of irony in journalism.

Various dichotomies can be identified and compared in terms of different types of newspaper, not the least of which being the political split between the basically left-wing and basically right-wing press. But first, other divides such as those between the quality and the popular press in Britain and between British and American journalism are revealing. Irony is in fact present in all these subgenres.

Looking at the British quality press, a glance at The Guardian of March 2nd, 1993, throws up a number of examples of different types of use of irony.

History was made last night

is the hyperbolic opening to the first editorial on a fairly mundane parliamentary debate. The second editorial on American street violence opts instead for understatement:

...killing, it seems, is merely what you are used to.

In a later article the incongruous, indeed humorous, element comes to the fore:
It was as if Fidel Castro had been invited to give a brisk lecture on the market economy to the Confederation of British Industry.

Compare this highly unlikely, though not impossible, scenario with the following soundbite, quoting Sir Norman Fowler's opinion of John Smith, the Labour leader:

He is the man who has turned sloth into an art form.

The surface meaning is nonsense but not exactly the opposite of what Fowler means. Similarly, The Guardian quotes the Tory M.P. Julian Critchley:

The chances must be that a Liberal will be elected, the kind who devotes himself to pavement politics, wears El Alamein shorts at weekends, and on polling day a jacket bearing half a hundred badges each espousing some unspeakable cause.

There is exaggeration here, but only a brief lapse into hyperbole with the half a hundred badges. Finally a light-hearted dig at Prince Charles descends into gratuitous word-play. In the wake of the 'Squidgy' tapes, Charles opted to retire from first class polo and earned this headline:

Aussies chuckle, as Chuck chucks his chukkas.

Thus it can be seen that a quality newspaper like The Guardian makes liberal use of irony in many guises. Similarly, a quality weekly such as The Economist, much farther to the right politically than The Guardian, makes extensive use of the device: indeed, it is one of the hallmarks of this widely read publication. However, in this case, the kind of irony used also provides an insight into the approach of fairly right-of-centre journalism. The kind of outrageous remarks typical of Auberon Waugh in the decidedly conservative Telegraph (of which more later) are avoided but reading between the lines of an apparently 'longue-in-cheek' remark like:

Despite the foreigners who infest the place, there has always been a lot to be said for 'abroad'.

it can be appreciated that some readers might take a smug satisfaction from seeing this kind of sentiment expressed. The question also arises, of course, as to whether this is ironic or not - Does the writer intend the opposite? Is it humourous? Intuitively I feel that in statements of this type there is definitely something ironic, either within or about or around them, depending possibly on how much depth one wishes to read into them.

Later in the same edition (February 27th, 1993) we see the observable type of irony mentioned earlier set out in print - the pointing out of the paradox.
Why should ex-communist state managers, who did such a dreadful job of running the Ukrainian economy under the old regime, get first call on the best property?

Later, a seemingly ironic comment which might be described as flippant appears in an article on infrastructures.

Britain has decent roads, good telecommunications - and lots of golf courses.

The flippancy (or lack of it) lies in the ears of the listener: it is Schegloff's shared intentionality or negotiation of meaning. But to those who do not share the intentionality, the comment sounds ironic in the context. Again a whole range of ironic devices emerges within a random series of articles observed in The Economist.

But how does all this mark out The Guardian's or The Economist's use of irony from, for example, a popular newspaper such as The Sun's? The gratuitous wordplay, so typical of the tabloids, has already been mentioned, but other methods are adopted. An editorial in The Sun on Sunday shopping consisted of five sentences, four type fonts, exaggerated alliteration and irony. The tabloids hit hard by using irony unsubtly to (over)make their point. This leader began:

It is perfectly legal to buy a guidebook from Buckingham Palace on a Sunday. But heaven forbid if you want to buy a Bible in Bolton, Birmingham or Braintree.

But the most widespread use of irony in the tabloids is in fact the reporting of observable irony at the beginning of articles. Just as the punning headline in cubital letters, the heart-rending photograph or the 'daring' use of taboo terms attract the readers' attention, the ironic build-up that starts immediately thereafter keeps that attention from wandering. In another recent edition of The Sun, no fewer than eighteen articles began with an ironic comment in the first sentence. For example:

The British couple thrown into an Arab jail for adultery were re-united yesterday - but banned from showing any affection.

Shoppers were furious yesterday when supermarkets opened but refused to sell nearly half their goods.

Three folk from the London organisation 'People Unlimited' - whose members say they are immortal - have died.

This, of course, is a cheap use of irony, a forced use designed to create suspense and interest and is usually unmasked within a few sentences, by which time the article is usually at or approaching an end. It does, however, show how
effective it can be as a device and how much this has been recognised in the
more unscrupulous avenues of journalism.

So much for the quality/popular divide. The style of *The Economist* article,
illustrated previously, is also interesting if compared to the style of an American
equivalent such as *Time* or *Newsweek*, both popular international news and
features magazines. In a previous article ("Text Analysis and British/American
Text" (Booth, 1974) Journalism in 'Perspectives', Vol. 16 No. 2, Rome, 1990)
I examined the difference between the approaches of *The Economist* and *Time* to
the same news items. One of the findings was that the former (like the handful
of other British publications of its type) was much more given to the use of
irony in all the guises alluded to above than its American counterpart, which
takes a more straightforward, even solemn, approach to imparting information
and opinions.

But apart from the quality/popular and British/American differences, the
dichotomy that initially seemed most interesting from the analytical point of
view, that is the different use of irony employed by the left and right wing
press, has proved rather difficult to pin down. The presupposition that the left
would be more solemn and committed and thus would allow itself little room
for ironic play has not been borne out, although the right's predilection for
occasional outrageous outbursts of haughty, high-handed, even heartless irony
can be observed. Mention was made earlier of the controversial Auberon Waugh
column, where the outspoken nephew of the great novelist Evelyn Waugh
expresses his unashamedly right-wing views via the vehicle of, at times
extreme, irony. His comments consequently arouse a mixture of anger,
admiration, indignation, amusement, etc., among his readers. He even finds it
possible to be ironic about the war in Bosnia:

> The whole of Europe must expect to be bombarded with dangerous
> projectiles while Mr. and Mrs. Clinton's boys valiantly try to work
> out where eastern Bosnia might be.

This would tie in with Muecke's contention that

at the level of newspaper reporting, irony is likely to be used when
there is a very small margin between success and failure in a matter of
great moment (Muecke, 1970:31).

Waugh, however, has been a great deal more controversial than this: his
criticism of the closing of Bartholomew's Hospital in London was fed by
architectural, not humanitarian concerns:

> Illness is a temporary phenomenon, but ugly buildings torment us the
> whole time.

Nonetheless, at times the left might seem equally capable of vicious irony;
the archetypal establishment-bashing broadsheet 'Private Eye' is often irreverent
to the point of being libellous. One is reminded of the infamous front cover of this magazine the week that President Verwoerd was assassinated in South Africa. The photograph showed a group of Africans quite obviously celebrating some festivity. The caption read *A Nation Mourns*. But it must be said that whatever left-wing leanings *The Eye* has, it is very much a question of 'the establishment knocking the establishment', when one considers the founders and contributors (practically all public school and Oxbridge).

So while, in effect, little meaningful distinction can be made between, say, the *Guardian*'s and the *Telegraph*'s use of irony (Auberon Waugh apart), perhaps within the pages of serious left-leaning publications such as the *New Statesman and Society* a slightly different pattern can be seen. The expectation was that the further left one went, the more 'serious' the writing would become. The *New Statesman* uses irony but it is becoming more inward-looking, more intense. Consider the following (6th August, 1993):

> Only five years after the Labour Party Young Socialists section was effectively shut down for being riddled with Militant supporters and being too bolshie in general...

The irony may be directed at people who believed non-militants to be militants or at the fact that it is illogical to expect young socialists not to be Bolshie. In either case the intense nature of the criticism is clarified a little further on where the writer informs us:

Ian Howarth, National Youth Officer at Walworth Road, is open-minded as to whether the new name will contain the word 'socialist' - despite the S-word having attracted the wrong sort of person in the past.

The fact that differences in language use between the right and left can be identified is in fact borne out by the *New Statesman* which discusses the use of the word 'accountability' in its 6th August, 1993 edition, saying that the language of the left has been purloined by the right on the occasion of the B.B.C. executive Marmaduke Hussey's adopting Tony Benn's catchwords.

Moving to even more deeply committed publications such as *Socialist Worker or Marxism Today*, the level of 'fun' irony drops again, but this is also true of correspondingly extreme right-wing journalism such as *Spearhead* and the publications of the National Front. Quoting Basil Hatim again, in describing language used in a specific context, he refers to

> a small social occasion enshrined in language (a genrelet)

a concept that nicely fits the use of irony in journalism. However, the inferring of meaning on the part of the receiver/reader is also dependent on the 'sign' that emanates from the particular 'social occasion' - the pragmatic/semiotic message. The well-known political stance of a newspaper, a more or less informed impression of the general readership, a knowledge of the personalities who write for the public, all these aspects form part of the 'sign' that assists the reader in
his interpretation of the message. In simple terms, what you expect is what you get and this works round in a circle to condition the output of the writers. And it would seem, in the final analysis, that it is this that determines the amount and type of irony found in a publication, more than the political stance of that paper per se.

Lang's (1988:195) identification of three aspects of irony is useful here in forming an interim conclusion as to the use of irony in journalism. Irony is a many splendoured thing but Lang sees three main aspects: irony is firstly a form of discourse, and this can be studied analytically in order, for example, to make the kind of distinctions discussed between the popular and quality and British/American press. Secondly it is a mode of being - a subject relates to others and to itself; hence the interpersonal concerns so crucial to a newspaper's circulation. Finally it is a critical stance and, with the exception of the most extreme publications which eschew everything except manic diatribe, most newspapers use it mercilessly in this capacity.

Finally, what practical applications can these observations have? Firstly, the understanding of the pragmatic-semiotic content of such material is very important for translation studies (and this is the author's particular interest). The importance lies primarily in avoiding mixing the genrelets isolated during the discussion. The form of discourse, the mode of being and the critical stance all change as one moves along the popular/quality, British/American or left/right clines, and while no dogmatic claims to rigidly distinct typologies can be made, an awareness of edges, however blurred, may prove to be useful knowledge.

References