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The Pragmatics of Irony and Banter

Edited by Manuel JOBERT and Sandrine SORLIN

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Manuel Jobert and Sandrine Sorlin's collection of articles started off as a tribute to Geoffrey Leech, who was among the first to connect irony and banter in his 1983 *Principles of Pragmatics* and later in his 2014 *Pragmatics of Politeness*. But as Jobert and Sorlin make it clear in their introduction, the book soon took off in another direction, as not every researcher in the field considers it helpful to analyze both notions conjointly. *The Pragmatics of Irony and Banter* then mainly tackles the issue of irony, while three articles (and the introduction) address the issue of banter, either for its own sake or in conjunction with irony. The collection of articles, published in the John Benjamins' "Linguistic Approaches to Literature" series, is not, however, just another book on irony, as its focus is not so much on how irony (or banter) is processed, but rather on its (their) discursive function(s).

The Pragmatics of Irony and Banter is divided into two parts entitled "Theoretical and empirical revisiting of irony (and banter)" and "Irony and banter from 17th and 19th century literature to contemporary discourse." Interestingly, Jobert and Sorlin's introduction is both an introduction to the volume as a whole (in the sense that it ends with the required summary of the contents) and the first article of the first part in its own right (in that it "revisits" the literature on irony and banter). Relying on Partington's 2007 and Dynel's 2014 articles, Jobert and Sorlin show how an ironical statement does not merely imply the opposite of its propositional content (which is the classical definition of the trope), but invites its addressees to "reverse the apparent (good or understated) evaluation" involved in the propositional content while winning them over (5). Logically enough, they then emphasize how irony is characterized in the literature by an inherent polyphony, which Sperber and Wilson (1981, 1992) analyze in terms of echoic mention, Ducrot (1980, 2010) and Kerbrat-Orrechioni (1980) in terms of dual argumentative paths, and Kumon-Nakamura et al. (2007) in terms of allusion. Some researchers disagree, though, on the fact that the echo or its variations are central to irony: Clark and Gerrig (1984) highlight the role of pretense (the utterer just pretending to say what s/he is saying); Attardo (2000) adds another maxim to Grice's four maxims of conversation to account for irony, "Be appropriate," as he feels that irony derives from contextually relevant, but inappropriate utterances. Simpson's 2011 unifying definition goes back to the central idea of paradox and explains how there can be a gap between what is said and what is meant, or between what is known and a discursive context (8). Jobert and Sorlin finally mention Dews et al.'s 2007 focus on the pragmatic function of irony, that is to say saving face and being funny (8). This shift to pragmatics and politeness theory makes it possible for them to direct their attention towards banter, which paradoxically relies on the idea of (superficially) attacking faces while (actually) saving faces, and promoting camaraderie (Leech 2014) and/or in-group membership (Holmes 2000). Banter has been much less studied than irony (probably in part because it is supposed to be a typically English trait—and thus is not as widespread as irony), and its definition is not self-evident: interaction and reciprocity seem to be a crucial element of banter (Labov 1972, Dynel 2008), as well as mock impoliteness (Leech 1983, 2014). Chapters 6, 8 and 10, which examine how banter operates and is used in specific contexts, are consequently a welcome addition to the study of banter.

In chapter 2, entitled “Irony in a theory of textual meaning,” Lesley Jeffries’s ambition is to make sense of the various usages of the term irony for different phenomena (verbal irony, situational irony and even dramatic irony). She posits, like Simpson (2011) and others, that incongruity lies at the core of the concept of irony, and that irony does not result from clashes at the basic linguistic level (which only produce puns and ambiguity) but from clashes occurring between different points of her analytical framework, “textual meaning,” i.e., between text and text, text and interpersonal meaning, text and situation, etc. She illustrates her typological model with examples collected from diverse literary works, the web and the literature on irony, and distinguishes irony from sarcasm, paradox and hypocrisy.

Chapter 3 deconstructs, as the title indicates, “the myth of positively evaluative irony.” Marta Dynel starts with the well-documented premise that irony implies some form of evaluation (as well as “overt untruthfulness,” 43), and convincingly argues that it does not imply all kinds of evaluation though. While some authors assert that there can be what Dynel calls positively evaluative irony (“a negative expression implicating a positive intended meaning,” 43) alongside negatively evaluative irony (“a positive expression implicating a negative intended meaning,” 43), she contends that methodological problems such as inadequate choices of examples (which were often fabricated) led authors to reach the wrong conclusion that there is such a thing as positively evaluative irony. Such utterances are, rather, instances of humorous teasing (47). Dynel further explains that the only case when negative expressions can be said to convey positive evaluations and be interpreted as ironic is when there is actually a central implicit negative evaluation concerning a prior utterance (51). The exclamation “How clumsy!” can be interpreted as conveying an implicit compliment if and only if the interlocutor first said s/he was clumsy in the first place—the exclamation being, in effect, a negative evaluation of that comment, more than a positive evaluation of the person in question. Even if Dynel does not say so in so many words, her demonstration ultimately implies that banter (which is dressed in negative words, but is meant to convey a positive evaluation or at least comradeship) cannot be interpreted as being ironic—but “just” humorous.

In chapter 4, Olivier Simonin identifies three types of verbal irony. A thorough review of the literature enables him to distinguish, first, what is called oppositional or contrastive irony (a type of irony which relies on the idea that there is a gap between the actual state of affairs and the desired state of affairs—the two not necessarily being polar opposites) from echoic / impersonation irony (which relies on both pretense theory and echoic mention theory). After discussing in depth Leech’s 1983 and 2014 pragmatic analyses of irony (and his definition of irony as mock politeness), Simonin then claims that instead of considering that irony can be defined solely as mock politeness, irony-as-mock-politeness or polirudeness should be considered to be a third type of irony.

Chapter 5 by Dan McIntyre examines Louw’s 1993 claim that “deviation from conventionalised semantic prosodies can be indicative of irony” (81). Unlike Louw, McIntyre uses the concept of semantic prosody to refer to the discourse function of a unit of meaning, that is to say the reasons why units of meaning are conventionally used, and semantic preference to refer to collocational patterns. He then argues how analyzing high-frequency collocates and their conventional discursive functions can help determine whether an utterance can be interpreted as ironic or not—any disruption of the prevailing semantic prosodies suggesting that the utterer may be ironic. Of course, other factors can help identify ironical clashes of expectations, as McIntyre’s study of a sketch from *Beyond the Fringe* demonstrates.

Part II starts with two articles on irony and/or banter and how they (re)structure the places ascribed to, and relationships between, characters, narrator, author and reader in 17th and 19th century literature (Congreve’s plays and Thackeray’s novels). In chapter 6, Natalie Mandon

explains how the term “banter” was used in the 17th century—in the sense of (sometimes ironically) “causing offense”—and then examines the relationship between skilled (“bantering”) and unskilled (“bantered”) speakers in Congreve’s plays. In chapter 7, Jacqueline Fromonot identifies the speaker’s strategy in creating irony (which he directs at himself or others, whether directly or indirectly) and the hearer’s reception of these ironical utterances. She stresses the risks of misinterpreting or overlooking irony and, as a result, the importance of guiding the reader and flagging irony.

In chapter 8, Linda Pillière addresses the question of banter in the television show *Pointless* (BBC, 2009). Relying on Lecercle’s ALTER model, she compellingly studies the verbal interactions of several episodes to reveal how the various speakers use banter (each in turn) to attribute specific places to their interlocutors, and enhance their own or their interlocutors’ self-image in the process.

In the following chapter, Jan Chovanec makes a qualitative analysis of ironic first-order comments to Czech online newspaper articles about the Austrian government’s 2015 decision to build a fence to secure the country’s borders against the influx of migrants. He conclusively shows how such comments target the proponents of the official discourse and ultimately aim at building group solidarity, while seemingly denigrating the in-group.

The final chapter of the book, by Sandrine Sorlin, analyzes the promotional video for the 2014 *Monty Python Live (Mostly)* show, in which banter and irony are given pride of place. She identifies the several functions of the ironic statements of the video (some of which are expressed on a bantering mode), including mocking previous or potential critiques aimed at Mick Jagger himself or Monty Python, hence fostering solidarity with the troupe and enhancing their self-image.

The readers of *The Pragmatics of Irony and Banter* will appreciate editors Jobert and Sorlin’s discrete but welcome interventions, and namely their efforts to show the many potential connections between the various chapters (as they aptly insert references to other chapters when they feel the reader would benefit from reading them conjointly). The fact that various theoretical angles and discursive contexts are represented makes for a very engaging collected volume, which provides much food for thought and will, no doubt, trigger further research in the field of irony, sarcasm, banter and humor.

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