

## 6 “You're a Real Genius!”: Irony as a Miscommunication Design

Luigi ANOLLI, Maria Giaele INFANTINO, Rita CICERI

**Abstract:** In a standard (rhetoric) perspective ironic communication is considered a semantic inversion between the literal (primary) meaning and the nonliteral (implicated) one. Nevertheless, in common use irony is not necessarily bound to the rhetoric concept of semantic inversion. Rather, it can be defined as an alteration of a reference aiming at stressing the reality of a fact by means of the apparent dissimulation of its true nature.

In a communicative perspective, irony aims to get an effective protection of interpersonal relationships, so as to leave wide ranges of freedom for managing both meanings and interaction.

The point of view herein followed concerns irony as a paradigmatic expression of *miscommunication*, since it is a *chance* in widening the psychological space available to the communicators. Irony as miscommunication fits rather well the MaCHT framework proposed by Anolli. In fact, by means of an ironic remark, the speaker can lay the responsibility of the ironic value of the utterance on the intention ascription of the interlocutor.

In particular, the present chapter intends to sketch out a new theoretical perspective of ironic communication as miscommunication, by proposing the *fencing game* (or *irony situation*) model. Here irony is not considered only as a comment or remark at a linguistic level but also as a complex communicative interaction between interlocutors, depending on contextual constraints and opportunities.

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## 6.1 Introduction

According to the standard (rhetoric) perspective, proposed, among others, by Booth [1], Lausberg [2], Olbrechts-Tyteca [3], and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca [4], irony is an *antiphrasis*, that is, an utterance expressing the opposite of its literal meaning. In fact, ironic communication consists in a semantic inversion between the literal (primary) meaning and the nonliteral (implicated) one. It is the classic witticism toward someone who has failed an exam: “You’re a real genius!”. Usually, the witticism is uttered in a particular intonation, as we will see below.

The Greek etymology of the word “irony”, εἰρωνεία, means *pretence*, and it comes from εἰρων (the one who makes a question pretending to be naive or less knowing than he/she is), which is opposite to ἀληθευτικός, meaning “true”, “overt”. The Semitic root of the Greek word is derived from the Accadic term *erewum*, “covering”, by means of which irony appears as a device to avoid the direct impact of an explicit word. In this sense, in common use irony is not necessarily bound to the rhetoric concept of semantic inversion. Rather, it can be defined as an alteration of a reference aiming at stressing the reality of a fact by means of the apparent dissimulation of its true nature.

Anyway, to reduce irony to a mere rhetoric figure or a linguistic ruse involves not seizing its communicative significance due to the psychological web of its implicit meanings. In fact, in a communicative perspective, irony springs out as a strategic “*as if*”, both by escaping the alternative of truth vs. falsehood, and by suspending the subsequent parameters of judgement. It aims to get an effective protection of interpersonal relationships, so as to leave wide ranges of freedom for managing both meanings and interaction.

The point of view herein followed concerns irony as a paradigmatic expression of *miscommunication*, since it is a *chance* in widening the psychological space available to the communicators. Irony as miscommunication fits rather well the MaCHT framework advanced by Anolli (Chapter 1, this volume). In fact, by means of an ironic remark, the speaker may say and not say; he/she may shield him-/herself behind the opaque meaning of the ironic utterance; he/she can always withdraw the ironic meaning by taking refuge in the linguistic expression. In any case, he/she can lay the responsibility of the ironic value of the utterance on the intention ascription of the interlocutor.

Along this line of thought, the present chapter intends to sketch out a new theoretical perspective of ironic communication as miscommunication, by proposing the *fencing game* (or *irony situation*) model. Here irony is not considered only as a comment or remark at a linguistic level but also as a complex communicative interaction between interlocutors, depending on contextual constraints and opportunities. In the ironic script the two opponents will be considered as using not a massive sword but a sharp foil.

In order to make plain our assumptions, in the first section of the chapter we will propose some considerations about the irony family and most recent opinions of the present theoretical perspectives about irony; in the second section we will examine the main psychological functions of speakers resorting to irony communication; in the last one, we will tackle the “fencing game” model according to the miscommunication framework, underlining some possible advantages of this proposal.

## 6.2 The irony family

First of all, it is useful to consider that irony is not a fixed and narrow phenomenon, but a family of communicative processes. On one side, there is *sarcastic irony*, through which the speaker blames his/her interlocutor by means of literally praising words (*blame by praise*). In this way, he/she does not usually intend to soften a heavy expression of criticism, but to condemn the interlocutor without emoting him-/herself, by humiliating him/her through sarcasm and coldness. On the other side, there is *kind irony*, which consists in praising the other one by means of literally critical and offensive utterance (*praise by blame*). In such a way the speaker may mitigate the excess and euphoria of direct and explicit praise that may sometimes produce embarrassment in the interlocutor.

The more frequent use of sarcastic rather than kind irony in Western culture can be explained resorting to the *asymmetry of the affect* hypothesis, advanced by Kreuz and Roberts [5], according to which the essential nature of irony would consist in the intention to attack. Kind irony, as an affiliation strategy, should not have the same relevance as sarcastic irony.

Other forms of irony should be explained. The so-called “*Socratic irony*”, as an elegant, ingenious, polite, urban way of communication, is convenient for discussing, and debating fashions and dogmas without unbalancing nor compromising. “*Bantering irony*”, instead, is like wit and serves to reduce the drama of a potentially tense or conflicting situation.

Among these forms there exists a certain “*air of family*”, as Wittgenstein [6] should say: in fact, they are based in a similar way on common communicative ground. As Muecke [7, 8] has pointed out trenchantly, *irony is the art of being clear without being evident*. The clearness of the ironic utterance does not in any way involve communicative transparency. In this case “clearness” means that an ironic comment can be linguistically decoded by resorting to standard linguistic operations such as phonological, lexical, and syntactic operations. However, its communicative meaning remains opaque because of its semantic indeterminacy and obliqueness. In this sense irony is neither “evident” nor transparent.

It is an obvious instance of miscommunication according to the MaCHT model proposed by Anolli (Chapter 1, this volume). Ironic miscommunication consists in a mask that conceals what one thinks or feels, but it is a mask that, in some regards, reveals what it hides, and, in other regards, hides what it reveals.

Therefore, an ironic speaker is not a deceitful one. Unlike the lie, where words and utterances are “deceptive”, irony is found underneath a disguise of *pretence*. In fact, while in deceptive communication a speaker deliberately omits or fabricates some significant conditions of truth and reality by concealing his/her intention, as, among others, Anolli, Balconi and Ciceri have pointed out (Chapter 4, this volume), pretence communication instead clearly cohabits with reality, and exhibits its “not being true”, by winking at what is hidden behind the mask of untruth, as it is shown by Mizzau [9].

## 6.3 The theoretical perspectives

Since ancient times irony has been a classical subject of study because of its intriguing communicative value and its theoretical challenge. In fact, irony is a paradigmatic instance of figurative language, since in a standard ironic exchange a speaker conveys (and the addressee interprets) a communicative meaning which is the opposite to what is said. In

modern times several theoretical perspectives have aimed at explaining this complex communicative phenomenon.

### 6.3.1 *The rationalistic theory*

Grice [10] has proposed a *rationalistic theory* for explaining irony, by formalizing the standard framework of antiphrasis. The ironic utterance consists in “*saying p intending not-p*”, and then involves a semantic gap between what is said and what is meant. Given these conditions, irony represents a violation of the maxim of Quality (“Do not say anything you believe to be false or for which you lack adequate evidence”). Therefore, it is the outcome of a conversational implicature.

Such a hypothesis was shared also by Searle [11], who identified irony as a logical denial of the literal interpretation. The actor resorts to irony for producing perlocutory effects on the interlocutor, by not fulfilling his/her models of expectation. According to this theoretical perspective, irony is generated by the conflict between the actor’s subjective attitude (intention) and the attitude and expectations which are generated by the literal expression of an utterance.

In this way, Fish [12] attributes particular importance to the ironic communication interpretation. Both literal and ironic interpretations of an ironic utterance are possible and come from a process of *inference*. There is neither univocal nor equivocal irony: the dilemma is loosed at the level of the interlocutor’s competence, because irony is an indirect but clear communicative strategy. Irony is neither allusion nor ambiguousness nor even equivocality.

The rationalistic perspective is still anchored to the linguistic design of ironic communication. In this way, it considers irony only as a violation (albeit apparent) of the Gricean maxim of Quality, based on truthfulness, without considering the interactive and contextual aspects of ironic communication. Crudely put, Grice [10] proposed a dual logic: the *logic of language* which applies to literal meaning (sentence meaning), and the *logic of conversation* which applies to the rules that people use to infer (or “implicate”) what a speaker intends to convey (utterance meaning). In the ironic communication an interlocutor begins with the literal meaning of a sentence and ends with an utterance meaning by making an appropriate implicature.

But such a distinction is not unproblematic, and the concept of “literal meaning” has recently become a subject of theoretical revision by a few scientists, like Anolli (Chapter 1, this volume), Gibbs [13], and Glucksberg [14]. Literal meaning involves the idea of words as “meaning containers”, independent of any use and contextual constraints. But, as Gibbs [13] has clearly pointed out, “the literal meaning of any word or sentence is almost impossible to determine” (p. 47).

In the interpretation of an ironic comment we do not need to proceed in an additive way, analyzing first what is said (literal meaning or sentence meaning), and then what is meant (ironic meaning or utterance meaning). According to Gibbs, Buchalter, Moise, and Farrar [15], and Lakoff and Johnson [16], the interpretation of a comment as ironic is immediate, and it happens automatically, without any additional cognitive effort, since it does not require conscious control nor a complex computation. What people are interested in is the actual meaning of an ironic utterance pronounced by a speaker. They want to see and grasp his/her communicative intention at once, and, as Anolli has underlined (Chapter 1, this volume), communication and miscommunication design follow the same cognitive processes, and the utterance meaning depends on specific and contingent features of a certain situation.

### 6.3.2 *The Machiavellian perspective*

Irony has also been considered from a *Machiavellian perspective* as a communicative form aiming at creating a set of effects on one's interlocutor, without considering or respecting the formal rules of language or the truthfulness of the message. According to this perspective, attention moves from the analysis of the linguistic design to the interactive processes which are involved in ironic communication: in fact, irony can be an effective device for disorienting one's interlocutors and for taking them unawares. A typical change of "pace" (*footing*, as Goffman should say) is required, by passing from seriousness to joking, from the descriptive utterance to the ironic one, so as to produce surprise and amazement.

Within this framework irony should not consist in the violation of the Gricean maxim of Quality; rather, it should imply a transgression of one's interlocutor's contextual expectations, and should involve a careful interpretation to value shrewdly the "allowed" contradiction within the ironic comment, to use the expression proposed by Mizzau [17]. According to the *allusional pretence* theory, advanced by Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg and Brown [18], ironic effects are generated by allusions to an unfulfilled expectation that was forecast at a conventional level (after a terrible blunder, one expects no appreciation but criticism).

In particular, ironic communication is based on a condition of incongruity that is generated by a lack of consistency with an expected script. As Deckers and Buttram suggest [19], the understanding of irony takes place by means of a two-levels process: a) the perception of incongruity with the situation; b) the outcome of the ironic value of an utterance as a solution for the perceived inconsistency. In this sense, the effectiveness of ironic communication is inversely proportional to the presence of explicit signals, and the more subtle and implicit it is, the more effectively it hits the mark.

According to this Machiavellian perspective, irony is a useful device for disorienting interlocutors, by avoiding one's own responsibility for what is uttered. Other people are to be mocked, to be looked down upon, and to be subtly depreciated. In fact, because of its intrinsic ambiguity, irony as miscommunication can be a device for softening and confusing the borders of sense, and for scorning others. On one side, this feature is an advantage, because the ironist enjoys many more degrees of freedom than when he/she uses an explicit utterance, when the menace for one's personal image is so high that people need a kind of relational shield for not losing face. On the other side, instead, irony can be used as a weapon to amaze one's interlocutors and to exercise power on them, as Messman and Canary [20], and Mizzau [21] have underlined.

But the Machiavellian viewpoint of irony stresses a pessimistic (and partial) conception of the human being, in line with Hobbes's statement: *homo homini lupus*. As a consequence, irony becomes mainly (if not only) a matter of ruse and nastiness. It seems to be a reductive perspective which considers irony as a means to overwhelm and injure. On the contrary, it concerns a wide range of expressions and forms, as we have seen in the irony family.

### 6.3.3 *The echoic theory*

In turn, Sperber and Wilson [22, 23, 24] have underlined other psychological aspects of

ironic communication as a way of re-proposing and evoking one's interlocutor's thoughts, actions, attitudes and feelings. Thanks to the ironic comment, the speaker produces an utterance echoing what his/her interlocutor previously said or did, as well as expressing his/her own either disparaging or humorous attitude. In particular, according to the *echoic theory*, irony is a kind of indirect quotation used by people for echoing something in a misleading fashion.

Consequently, on one side, ironic communication is an *implicit mention* (echo) of what one's interlocutor said or did; on the other one, it is a way of showing one's attitude toward the thought or the action that the ironic comment refers to, or even toward one's interlocutor. In this sense, irony can refer to a specific subject, as well as to a category of people, or even to a social norm or a cultural trend. In ironic communication implicitness works as a *substitution* of literal sense. When someone says "Today is a gorgeous day!", while outside there is pouring rain, the implicit meaning of "hideous day" substitutes the literal sense.

According to Sperber and Wilson, ironic communication consists in "making people impose one idea on another idea". If someone asks "Did you remember to water the flowers?", after days of rain, he/she echoes and comments the interlocutors' anxiety to keep the flowers watered. In this perspective, the interlocutor realizes that the speaker produces a comment about the expression itself rather than the meaning of the expression.

Within the echoic perspective the so-called *tongue-in-cheek* phenomenon is involved, as Almansi [25, 26] has explicitly indicated. It consists of an ironic background comment to the interlocutor's utterances. It is a continuous, shrewd and subtle comment, which is typical of the Anglo-Saxon culture. Similarly, within the perspective of irony as a mention, there is the *quotational model* too, proposed by Kerbrat-Orecchioni [27], Kreuz [28], and Kreuz and Glucksberg [29]. Irony should be a "quotation" of what happened. By means of such a mechanism, ironic communication implies an attitude of distance from the literal sense of an utterance, so as to provoke a doubling.

The echoic theory, although it has pointed out the interactive aspects of the ironic exchange and has taken into consideration contextual conditions, runs the risk of accepting a dual nature of ironic communication, like the rationalistic theory proposed by Grice. In this framework ironic meaning seems to be an "extra-meaning", added to the literal one.

#### 6.3.4 *The theatrical perspective*

Finally, according to a *theatrical perspective*, ironic communication has even been interpreted as a *pretence*, since it is based on a "social pact" allowing the apparent untruth to "clearly cohabit with reality". Within such a framework, pretence exhibits its "not being true" by winking at what is hidden behind the mask of untruth. Haverkate [30] speaks about "*transparent pretence*", since the speaker says something in which he/she pretends to believe, and, at the same time, he/she signals such a pretence by means of paralinguistic indexes.

Likewise, the concept of irony as *simulation*, proposed by Clark and Gerrig [31] in their "pretence theory", can be included within this theatrical perspective. The ironist does not in fact resort to an utterance to reveal his/her inner contradictions; on the contrary, he/she pretends to use it, and creates a sort of complicity with his/her addressee, who acknowledges the presence of such a simulation.

Let us take the subsequent situation. A says: "It was a wonderful dinner with a lot of Italian and French cheese!". This utterance can be interpreted as serious praise by B (a stranger), but not by C, who, like A, knows that D, their friend, is allergic to cheese.

Therefore, the utterance acquires an ironic and sarcastic value toward D. Within such a situation, C is an “initiate” so he can understand the whole sense of A’s ironic comment.

In this sense, ironic communication is rather close to *parody*, as it involves the mechanism of antinomy, which is an antithesis between two terms so as to produce an ironic effect as Hutcheon [32, 33] sketched out. An essential constraint of parody is given by understanding the action (or character) that is the object of the parody. The parodist re-frames the antecedent (action or real subject) within a new picture, by a structural overlapping of texts. In this way, on one side, parody frees itself from the seriousness or authority of the situation (or character) which it mocks; on the other one, while ridiculing, parody revives it by referring to it.

However, both irony and parody, like a theatrical performance, imply a sort of *complicity* between author and addressee, because they call for sharing communicative levels (primary vs. secondary). In this regard, an ironic comment includes the chance to select the addressee in accordance with his/her competence, the sharing of a specific background of knowledge, and reference to a defined context.

Ironic communication consists in an enigma only for people who cannot understand it. In fact, it creates a condition of *communicative triangulation*, by which participants are raised to a higher level of knowledge, so as to generate an *inner circle* and banish people who cannot understand, as Attardo points out (Chapter 7, this volume). According to the theatrical perspective, underlined, among others, by Creusere [34] and Mizzau [17], ironic communication can be used as a strategy for excluding, that is, selecting those who should understand (as they know the assumptions) from the ones who should be prevented from understanding more than a literal sense.

From the state-of-the-art knowledge, herein summed up, it emerges that the different theoretical models hitherto elaborated enable us to understand many deep aspects of ironic communication both at a linguistic layer and an interactive one. However, they have not been analyzed as a sequence of actions between the participants in a communicative exchange, since irony is patterned in a script-like structure. In particular, the ironic remark has not been examined as the outcome of an intentions game between communicators: on one side, the production of ironic intention by the speaker and, on the other one, the recovery and ascription of this intention to him/her by the addressee. The unavoidable gap between these two positions helps to explain the success (or unsuccess) and effectiveness (or less) of the ironic exchange in the light of the miscommunication framework. These two aspects are basic in the “fencing game” model, as we will see in section 5; but first it is worth examining the psychological functions of irony as a fundamental premise to better understand ironic interaction.

#### **6.4 What purpose does irony serve?**

As we said above, ironic communication is miscommunication as an *oblique communication*. In fact, on one side, *it shows what it hides*, while, on the other one, *it conceals what it says*. In this sense, irony is “*say in order not to say*”. By means of an ironic comment, the ironist can remain “opaque” and impervious to the interlocutor on a relational level, though he/she is not silent. In fact, ironic miscommunication is a kind of *semantic mask*, by means of which it is possible to soften and fuzz the borders of meaning in order to improve the negotiation processes in a given situation.

In this sense, from the perspective of Bakhtin [35], ironic comment may be seen as an emblematic instance of *discursive dialogism*, according to which the word is not semantically univocal (monosemic), but it possesses “more voices” (polysemic). Its interpretation assumes different forms in terms of both its “position” within the discourse and its relation to the “focusing” game, in which some of its features are in the foreground and others are veiled. Paradoxically, in irony the foregrounded mask plays a background role during the exchange between the ironist and his/her interlocutor, as it is shown by Bakhtin [35] and Levinson [36]. As a consequence, irony carries out and satisfies different psychological functions, as Anolli, Ciceri and Infantino (in press a) have underlined.

#### 6.4.1 *Ironic communication as a sign of respect for conventions (how to evade censure in a culturally correct way)*

“Where the lion’s skin will not reach, it must be patched with the fox’s”, the wise Greek strategist Lysander sentenced, according to Plutarch. A similar metaphor appears again in the works of Baltasar Gracián y Morales, a seventeenth century Spanish writer, as well as in Niccolò Machiavelli’s essays of diplomacy during the Italian Renaissance.

This maxim describes the situation in which one realizes that a direct and impulsive expression is unsuitable for the interactive context, especially in face-threatening situations like conflict. Hence, it is not a matter of chance that its original version was uttered by Lysander, an expert in military planning. By extending this metaphor to everyday communication, an effective communicative interaction is enhanced by ironic comment in a subtle and diplomatic way, so that a speaker might achieve his/her aims in agreement with the “unwritten rules” of civilized behavior: the Latin concept of *urbanitas*, as Anolli and Infantino [37], and Infantino [38] have pointed out. Irony is a really effective strategy for “hitting the mark” in an indirect way, without violating the norms required by one’s own cultural background.

Irony as miscommunication arises from the need both to respect social standards, and to avoid other people’s censure, without abandoning, however, those topics that would otherwise be unacceptable. *Ironic speakers accept the cultural norms and, at the same time, violate them*, remaining within the limits of social acceptability: they do not have to suppress their thoughts or their feelings. Therefore, ironic communication finds its edge in those cultures (like the Anglo-Saxon one) where self-control is very important and where it is thus a very positive thing to be able to keep coolly detached from events, without emotional arousal. In this way, a speaker can use irony to hide the expression of his/her emotions and safeguard his/her personal experience. In particular, English humor responds to these cultural expectations and standards, involving the ability to “stay in one’s place”. In English culture, where one talks about emotions in preference to showing them, as Lutz [39] has observed, irony becomes not only a device to keep at a distance from emotions and “de-emotionalize” oneself, but also a way of showing consideration for the interlocutor’s feelings (without saying everything one feels or thinks about the other), in order to be polite and be cognizant of the situation, as Wierzbicka [40] has pointed out.

For instance, a speaker named Peter, if his colleague John arrives late at an important business meeting, may utter an ironic remark by saying: “Congratulations, John! You are so punctual this morning!”. In fact, John’s delay irritated Peter, who decides to use sarcastic irony rather than direct blame, because he knows that the formal context forces him to address John by using indirect communication, without, however, avoiding criticism of his behavior, which is in contrast with social acceptability.

By extending the metaphor of theatrical pretence to social life, and by applying the

MaCHT perspective, the ironist can well be described as an *able director of his/her own image*, as Rutelli [41] has proposed, who can manage interpersonal relationships by veiling and unveiling him-/herself with moderation. In fact, according to Dolitsky [42, 43], human beings are like actors playing their part in a “dramatic” and “carnival-like” society. In this regard, a social interpretation of Diderot’s paradox of acting is feasible: the mask of irony as miscommunication allows one to express the duplicity between being and appearing, as well as their paradoxical unification within the ironist’s consistency with the character he interprets.

In this way, as interactionist scholars like Bakhtin [35], Ducrot [44], Goffman [45, 46], and Mizzau [21, 17] have underlined, the ironist succeeds in respecting the “unwritten laws” of polite behavior which call for both self-control and socially-correct moves. Irony is the resource used by the artful man while waiting for the right moment to carry out his performance on the stage of society.

#### 6.4.2 *Ironic communication as a border of reserve (how to safeguard personal space)*

According to Allemann [47], Barthes [48], and Goffman [45, 46], irony can be used not only as a device to evade social censure, but also as a planned action aiming at maintaining dignity, restraint, and demeanor, as well as one’s own *privacy*. An intriguing image is provided by Barthes’ [48] metaphor of the “dark glasses”, according to which in ironic communication attention is shifted from the informative function to the metacommunicative one. In fact, after crying, people do not wear their dark glasses to conceal the fact that they have cried. Rather, people put them on in order to disguise the distressing expression of pain, i.e., their swollen red eyes. The dark glasses are an “allusive mask”, aimed at preserving one’s own dignity and demeanor: they hint at the pain whose embarrassing effect they cover. People wearing their dark glasses metacommunicate: they intend to communicate that, though suffering, they do not want to exhibit their own pain. Therefore, the dark glasses, at the same time, make the ironist an actor and a witness of him-/herself and of others. They are useful for protecting both personal space and privacy.

Irony as miscommunication can be described once again by means of a metaphor: that of the *sacred fence*, symbolic boundary, or even *magic circle*, which makes the ironist “intangible” and “unapproachable” in the interpersonal game. In fact, irony has often been considered as connected to the talented wise man, who succeeds in observing things from a distance, avoiding unbalancing and compromising himself. Just like Socrates, the prototypical ironist, people performing an ironic communication can calm passions as well as debating dogmas, as Bergson [49], Jankélévitch [50], Jouhandeau [51], Kierkegaard [52], and Pirandello [53] have pointed out.

This intention not to be explicitly aggressive arises from the words Mary says ironically to Lawrence, her husband, who has tried to repair an old armchair, with the usual lack of success: “You’re so genial, Lawrence! Since our marriage, your cleverness has always fascinated me!”. In this case Mary chose to be ironic rather than direct because she does not want to start an open conflict with Lawrence. Conversely, Paula jokes with her brother, who has just got a high mark in his mathematics exam, saying “You were right, Andrew. As usual, you are an idiot!”. The girl comments ironically on Andrew’s success, because her brother was scared and pessimistic before the exam.

In both the above-mentioned cases, irony is planned to reduce tension and defuse dramatic situations (both in conflict and in cooperation), mitigating their emotional arousal. In this regard, irony is a useful device for maintaining or for re-establishing

symmetry within relationships, in agreement with Brown and Levinson's [54] model of politeness, as a strategy that interlocutors use for preserving their personal image mutually.

#### 6.4.3 *Ironic communication as a relational ambiguity (how to re-negotiate interaction)*

The ironist, skilled in the art of skimming and lingering, just like the mythological Janus Bifrons, has two faces: one which laughs at the weeping of the other. In this way, it is possible to define irony as a "*Janus-faced*" communication. The paradox about ironic communication is that, *if you want to be understood clearly, you have to be misunderstood*. In fact, the ironic comment is like a skin that alludes to the hidden content at the very moment in which it conceals that content.

Therefore, ironic miscommunication can be used as an ambivalent strategy, a "*tongue in cheek*" producing puzzlement and disorientation in the interlocutors, as Almansi [25, 26] has underlined. In fact, the "Janus-faced" nature of ironic miscommunication allows people, on one side, to calm their passions, while on the other one, to shift in their own favor the fuzzy borders between the different possible (and legitimate) interpretations of their comment.

The ironist benefits both from the "*effectiveness of the word*" and the "*innocence of silence*", to use the incisive expression of Ducrot [44]. For this reason, we can speak about *pragmatic polysemy* in ironic communication. In fact, by means of a systematic process of "meaning negotiation", in an ironic utterance speakers convey a communicative intention which allows the interlocutor to interpret it with different meanings. On this subject, some scholars, like Bakhtin [35], Dolitsky [42, 43], Ducrot [44], Merleau-Ponty [55], and Mizzau [17], talk of ambiguity and a sort of "semantic three-dimensionality" in irony because of its indirect nature.

Irony as miscommunication is a complex communicative outcome in which different signaling systems interact at the same time. In particular, in the standard ironic comment, linguistic segments are combined in a specific paralinguistic (or supra-segmental) frame. The apparent opposition between these two signaling patterns generates the ironic meaning perceived by the addressee. On some other special occasions, when there are strong contextual constraints and clues, linguistic inputs are sufficient alone to create the ironic meaning. But, as Anolli has pointed out proposing the MaCHT perspective (Chapter 1, this volume), each signaling system has a different weight and significance in determining communicative efficacy of irony. Therefore, we can foresee an extended range of graded and fuzzy variation between linguistic units and paralinguistic patterns, so that, in some (exceptional) cases, the ironic value of an utterance is totally evident, and in other cases (the majority) it is less evident, to the point of arriving at an undecidable balance between a plain descriptive comment and a truly ironic one.

The basic ambiguity of irony allows one to negotiate and re-negotiate the meanings of an ironic comment. In this way, the ironist is not constrained to undertake *responsibility* for his/her words. Consequently, according to Jorgensen [56] he has neither to compromise his/her image nor to lose face. Thus, responsibility for the appraisal of ironic value of an utterance moves from the ironist to the addressee. It is up to the latter to recover and attribute an ironic meaning and intention to the utterance of the former. In particular, the ironic sense of a comment is effective when it is not only intentionalized by the ironist, but also "re-intentionalized" by the addressee, as Anolli (Chapter 1, this

volume), and Anolli and Ciceri [57] have pointed out.

This property of irony (being a skilful device to assure oneself of many more degrees of freedom than an explicit utterance does), arises from the ironic remark Anthony addresses to his friend Hillary. The lady goes to a cocktail party wearing a hideous dress and Anthony says: "Hillary! You're so beautiful: just like Sharon Stone!". "What do you mean?!", George, Hillary's husband, intervenes, irritated by Anthony's sarcastic attitude. "Hillary is gorgeous, tonight! I was just paying your wife a compliment...", Anthony pretends not to have been sarcastic, as if the meaning of his comment depended only on the linguistic input. In this dialogue the sense of the utterance is the subject of a skillful negotiation between them, because the semantic ambiguity of the ironic remark allows Anthony not to take full responsibility for his innuendo.

As a useful outcome of ironic miscommunication, speakers have the chance and opportunity to calibrate the *weight of the indirect meaning* of their speech. An indirect expression of one's thoughts, desires and feelings cannot only hide one's real intention, but it can also define it and re-draw the limits of social interaction between interlocutors. First of all, according to the "*tinge hypothesis*", proposed by Brown and Levinson [54], Dews, Kaplan and Winner [58], and Dews and Winner [59, 60], irony should express less condemnation and less approval than a direct utterance does (*mitigation of the intended meaning*). A criticism ironically made is apparently lighter and less offensive than an open insult; similarly, ironic praise is less positive than an explicit form. There is a kind of "*regression to the center*", in which, on the one hand, the exultation is lessened, and, on the other, the aggressive charge is attenuated, as Giora [61], and Glucksberg [62] have clearly underlined.

Conversely, according to other scholars, like Almansi [24], Colston [63], and Sperber and Wilson [23, 24], ironic criticism is used to emphasize condemnation rather than to dilute it: thanks to irony it should be possible to achieve one's aims in a more pointed and controlled way, intensifying the meaning of an utterance (*enhancement of the intended meaning*).

Because of a cool detachment from emotions, irony may be used as a device for wounding someone in a much more cutting way than a direct criticism oriented in the same direction. In fact, an explicit insult can be produced in a moment of rage, as a consequence of the speaker's mood in the contingent condition. Alternatively, an ironic insult can arise from a cold calculation, so as to express, besides blame, even the ironist's intention of not losing his/her self-control in showing the interlocutor's lack of success [56].

Similarly, within a context of praise, irony is feasible when the speakers know each other very well. Therefore, as Oring [64] points out, irony can arouse much more familiarity and fondness between them than direct praise can do. Such a phenomenon is evident in the apotropaic formula, e.g. the Italian "in bocca al lupo" (literally, "in the mouth of the wolf"), or the English "break your leg", whose origin can be found in ancient Roman traditions, for instance in the so-called "Carmina Triumphalia" in which the soldiers joked about their leader's victory in order to avoid any mischance which might be caused by arrogance [38].

Actually, more recent studies, carried out by Anolli, Ciceri and Infantino [65, 66], Gibbs [13, 67], Lee and Katz [68] and Leggitt and Gibbs [69] go beyond this antithesis, and attribute manifold functions to ironic communication: it can be used now as a defense, then as a particularly stinging attack, or again simply to reduce the tension of emotionally heavy situations.

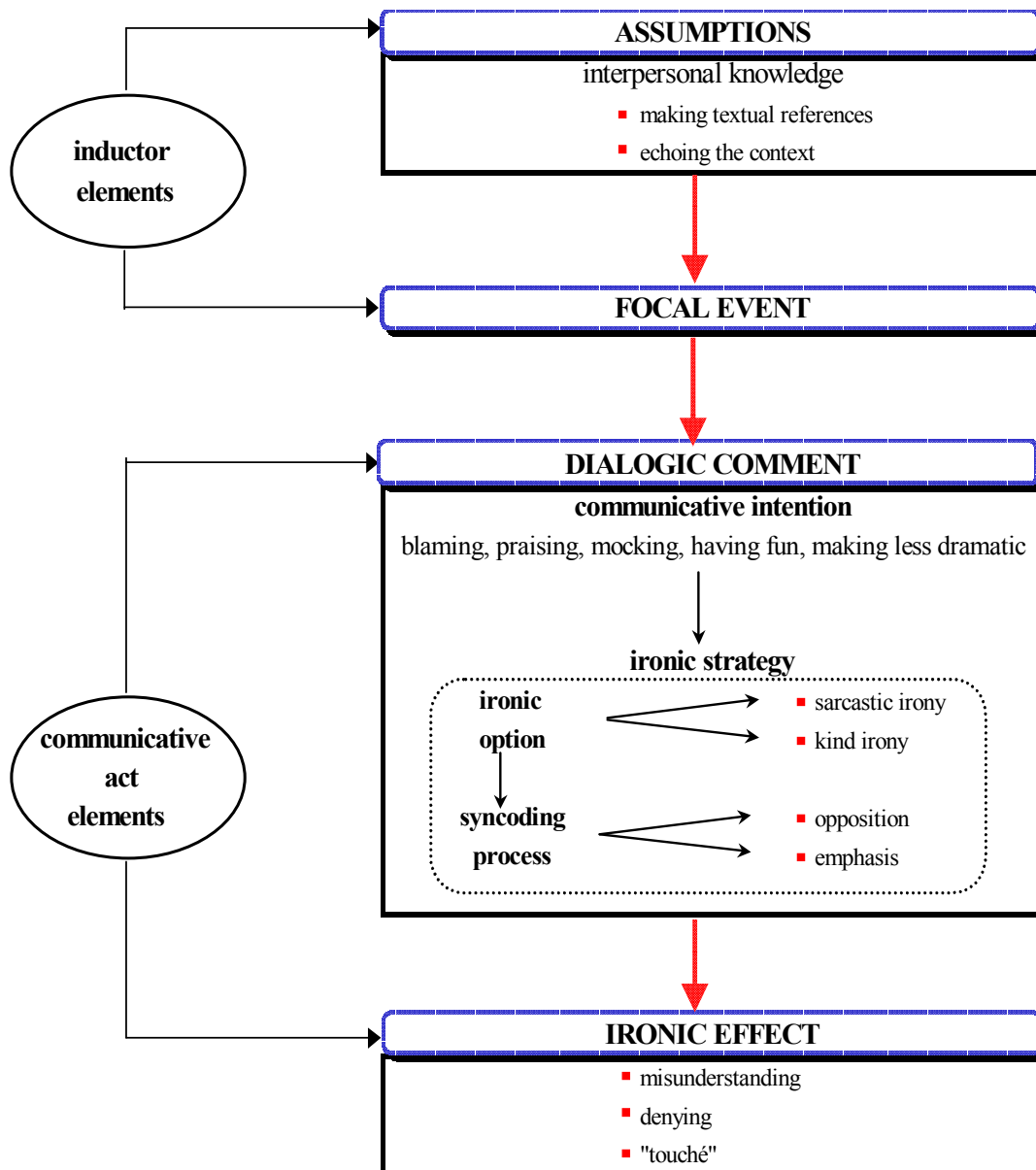
## 6.5 The “fencing game” model of irony

From these recent studies that intend to go beyond the antithesis between irony as a mitigation and irony as an enhancement, so as to illustrate the flexibility of irony in the process of the creation of meaning, the “fencing game” model of irony as miscommunication has been proposed by Anolli, Ciceri and Infantino [65, 66, 70]. According to this framework, attention is focused not only on the linguistic level of irony but more especially on the irony situation, intended as a class of interactive episodes in which an ironic comment is generated as the best local solution between communicators given certain contextual constraints and opportunities. Within this perspective irony is seen as a suitable outcome embodied in the plot of communicative moves, since both speaker and addressee are engaged in the irony production as Bavelas, Black, Chovil, and Mullet [71] sketched out.

Both war and theater metaphors fit the “fencing game” model, as emerges from the two psychological perspectives on which it is based on. In fact, the interlocutors play the part of two opponents holding not a massive and cumbersome sword, but a quick sharp foil. From a functional point of view, referring to the *socio-interactionist framework*, proposed, among others scholars, by Goffman [46], irony is a flexible phenomenon that people use like a mask in order to evade censure in a socially correct way, to safeguard their private space, and to re-negotiate meanings (theater metaphor). In this way it is easier for speakers to manage the interaction and irony may be included in what Dindia [72, 73] defines as “relational strategies”, that is, the creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationship by adapting one’s own repertoire of verbal and nonverbal actions to the situation with a definite aim, in order to be effective while respecting social standards. Planning relationship maintenance, trying hard to preserve it, and metacommunicating to get suitable interactive accommodation are the main strategies that promote the upkeep of desired relational situations.

From a structural perspective, instead, referring to the *planning communication theory*, elaborated by Berger [74], Bratman [75], Cohen and Levesque [76], Greene [77, 78] and Monge and Kalman [79], irony can be described as a planned attitude, strategically aimed at achieving specific intentions (defined as mental dispositions which are oriented toward future actions), and as a direction of practical reasoning. Within this perspective, as Monge and Kalman [79] have pointed out, communicative interaction is ruled by sequentiality (i.e., a chain of actions), simultaneity (i.e., a certain communicative pattern at a given time), and synchronicity (i.e., a simultaneous coordination of communicative processes). This chain of events embodies a sequence of actions aimed at striking the antagonist in an elegant but “stinging” fashion while observing social rules and cultural standards. It is organized with reference to a script composed of several phases, as shown in Figure 6.1.

Among others, as Anolli (Chapter 1, this volume) has pointed out, communication and miscommunication, ironic communication included, are regulated by a complex web of meanings and intentions in the speaker’s and addressee’s exchanges. This web is characterized by mutual interdependent moves calling for adjustments and progressive modifications in terms of tuning and interactive synchrony. In the irony situation the speaker’s intention of saying something that sound ironic, that could be sarcastic or “Socratic” or else witty, is as important as the addressee’s competence of recovery and ascription of an ironic meaning and intention to what the speaker has just said. As Grosz and Sidner [80], and Waldron [81] say, we have to go beyond the bare recognition of intentions.



**Figure 6.1.** The articulation of the ironic script in the “fencing game” model of irony (it is a partially modified version of the figure that appeared in Anolli, Ciceri, & Infantino, 2000)

In such a way, irony as a “fencing game”, rather than a simple utterance or comment, consists of a communicative situation which is ruled by a *script* that is predictable and well articulated. Four steps are foreseen: the *assumptions*, the *focal event* (the stirring up object of irony), the *dialogic comment* (the ironic utterance that the speaker expresses by alluding to the assumptions), and the *ironic effect*, depending on the addressee’s feedback.

We will describe these four phases by explaining them with an example in everyday life. The frame of the example is given by an exam situation that takes place in a university, where three students (Cassie, Dan, and Bob) interact between each other. The exam is oral and is considered one of the most difficult. Both Cassie and Dan have to sit their exam, while Bob intends only to listen to his university mates’ exam. Before the test takes place, Cassie and Dan express their moods, while Bob, after his pals’ exam results, will express his comment.

*Assumptions* - The *assumptions* which constitute the first phase of the irony situation, mainly consist of the mutual relational background, i.e., a store of shared systems of beliefs and meanings, interactive patterns, and cultural standards. In fact, in order to perform irony effectively, interlocutors have to share a common knowledge which they should allude to in their ironic remark.

Assumptions can be both textual and contextual. In fact, while speaking ironically, people can make reference (echo) to previously uttered expressions, as well as exclusively to social norms [23, 24]. The textual assumptions concern previously uttered words which interlocutors know: substantially, they pertain to a precise utterance that will be the object of the ironic remark. The contextual assumptions, instead, refer to an extensive range of social rules and expectations, which are invariably positive. Of course, while an ironic remark grounded on textual assumptions will be more circumscribed and will imply a profound acquaintance between the interlocutors, contextual assumptions allow even a more generic mutual knowledge, because the allusion regards more widely shared knowledge.

In the example, both textual and contextual assumptions can be individuated. Cassie is very nervous before she takes her oral exam of comparative literature, that is considered one of the most difficult. Therefore, she repeats to Bob: "I'll fail, yeah, this time will be wrong, I feel it!". Dan, instead, is arrogant as usual: he is sure of getting a high mark, although he did not study very much. "To get a high mark it's enough to beat about the bush, as usual! It will be nothing for me to pass the exam!", Dan exclaims, laughing. Both Cassie's and Dan remarks might constitute the textual assumptions for developing the ironic script. Besides, in the above-mentioned example, there is a clear influence of social standards which are invariably positive. If a student gets a good remark, he/she fulfills the social expectations of accomplishment and success.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning the so-called "asymmetry of affect" phenomenon, according to which there is a divergence between the use of sarcastic irony (i.e., blame by praise), and kind irony (i.e., praise by blame), as Kreuz and Glucksberg [29] have suggested. In fact, sarcastic irony echoes the Western culture's standards of success, which the irony target cannot fulfill. Conversely, kind irony arises from the opposite process, with a less obvious outcome. Therefore, in order to be better explained, it usually needs a textual reference, i.e., a mention of previously uttered words, or, at least, a private knowledge shared by interlocutors (in the specific case, Cassie's habitual anxiety).

*Focal event* - The assumptions constitute the background for the *focal event*, i.e., the input that triggers the ironic comment. This event triggers the process of planning and preparation for the ironic utterance. It gives rise in the speaker to appropriate mental and ideative associations, such as suitable metaphors and rhetorical figures, idiomatic expressions and proverbs, contextual references, as well as cultural stereotypes. At the same time, he/she has to choose the prosodic intonation of voice.

Together with the assumptions, the focal event forms the inductor element and the antecedent of ironic communication. The event can take place independently of the communicators; but it is important that they note it and make it the subject of their communicative interaction.

In the above-mentioned example, the focal event is the exam itself when it takes place, involving the students' results. Cassie, despite her fear, gets a high mark, while Dan, notwithstanding both his arrogance and pride, fails his exam.

*Dialogic comment* - The third phase of the irony situation (or script) is the *dialogic*

*comment*, i.e., the ironic utterance, as the expression of a definite communicative intention by the speaker. In fact, by means of the ironic comment, he/she is able to blame, to praise, to mock, to amuse, to play the game of “hide-and-seeK” and so on. The production of the speaker’s intention requires an option among different kinds of ironic communication (such as sarcastic irony, kind irony, bantering irony, Socratic irony and the like). At the same time, he/she has to proceed to a selection of linguistic unit, prosodic intonation of voice, face mimic, and gesture pattern.

Within the “fencing game” perspective, the ironic utterance is a global act of communication and it is the unitary outcome of different signaling systems. In it linguistic (segmental) inputs are combined with paralinguistic (supra-segmental) patterns, face expressions, and gestures. Each of these aspects contributes effectively, each for its part, to produce the ironic meaning of an utterance said by a given speaker in a certain situation. They converge to produce an ironic comment that is coherent in itself, even if complex and articulated, since it displays a determinate communicative intention. Differently said, irony is a “multi-modular” communicative act.

Therefore, as Anolli has pointed out (Chapter 1, this volume), irony, like other communication forms, is the result of a semantic synchrony process, in which the different signaling systems are combined and unified in an interdependent way. It is likely that such a process might be regulated by a “central communicative processor”. In any case, for irony, we have a specific “*contrastive semantic synchrony*”, since the paralinguistic pattern appears to be in contrast to the linguistic input. With the linguistic unit speakers convey a certain meaning obtained by a pure linguistic encoding; with the paralinguistic pattern they convey an alternative (in most cases, opposite) meaning. The synchronic combination of these signs systems generates the ironic meaning, which is not to be grasped as an addition of “linguistic meaning plus paralinguistic (and nonverbal) meaning”, but it is to be intended as the unitary outcome of the simultaneous convergence of these communicative signs.

As an effect of this semantic articulation, speakers can arrange and graduate in the best possible way their communicative intention in order to produce an ironic utterance in the manner most suitable to the contextual conditions. In this way irony cannot be considered as a homogeneous communicative process, but as a flexible and effective strategy, planned in a graded manner, referring to a certain interlocutor, given a determinate situation. The gradation of ironic intention by the speaker is a really useful device to manage locally semantic value and strength of speech.

As a consequence, it is useful to foresee a *family of ironic voices*, among which the speaker can choose the most appropriate one to express his/her communicative intention. In fact, experimental researches, carried out, among others, by Anolli, Ciceri and Infantino [66], Cutler [82], Fónagy [83], Haverkate [30], Kreuz and Roberts [5], have verified the existence of a range of supra-segmental profiles that qualify irony communication as opposed to normal speech. The irony voice is generally characterized by a combination of high and changeable pitch, strong energy and a slower rate of articulation, which provokes an emphatic lengthening of syllables. In irony there is a caricatured stress of the supra-segmental features, in which irony is a device to “play with the voice” [82].

It is employed not in a normal way but in a “studied” one, though spontaneous and natural. It is both a “premeditated” and “affected” voice by means of which the speaker intends to assign a special intentional value to the supra-segmental pattern. In fact, he/she can resort to different paralinguistic profiles and adapt his/her prosodic intonation according to his/her communicative intention and the interaction with the interlocutor in a given situation. As Gibbs [67] has pointed out, he/she can adjust the level of emphasis of

the ironic comment according to the intensity with which he/she means to affect his/her interlocutor.

Herein, as Infantino [84] suggests, it is worth taking into account two dimensions: *context and empathy*. In the first one the two endpoints consist of *conflict* and *cooperation*; in the other one, the two endpoints are represented by *involvement* and *estrangement*. In both conflict and cooperation contexts according to the degree of empathic involvement with his/her partner, a speaker can appraise the weight of the indirect speech, choosing whether to strengthen his/her own intention or, instead, to weaken it. In the first case, when he/she wants to reinforce his/her intention indirectly, he/she can resort to a scornful voice to carry sharp blame or to a tender voice to express affectionate praise. In the second one, when he/she intends to minimize his/her comment, he/she can employ a bantering voice to express both criticism and commendation.

Going into this matter thoroughly, the bantering voice, both kind and sarcastic, represents an effective device to cope with the inducing event, tingeing and mitigating the situation through an empathic estrangement. By means of a bantering voice a speaker can weaken his/her communicative intention in a compliant way without exposing him/herself openly: for instance, he/she can censure a certain behavior of the interlocutor without attacking him/her, or, on the contrary, he/she can praise the addressee without exalting him/her and without putting him/her in an awkward situation (*attenuation condition*).

However, a speaker can also strengthen his/her intention by means of an ironic comment (*intensification condition*). In a conflict context, for instance, he/she can profoundly offend the partner by resorting to a sarcastic comment pronounced in a scornful voice (that is, a low and monotone pitch, a slow rhythm and a stressed articulation of words) in a cold way, without showing an apparent emotional arousal [54, 18]. Likewise, in a cooperation context a speaker can praise the partner by means of an ironic utterance pronounced with a tender voice in order not to exhibit verbally his/her own emotion for reasons of discretion.

Referring to the example, after Cassie's and Dan's exams, it was Bob who uttered the ironic comment addressing both of them with a remark in agreement with their performances. Bob tells Cassie, after her success: "My goodness, Cassie! What a ghastly figure! You're right: you are a real flop". Bob's words echo Cassie's admission of fear, contradicted by the result. In order to express his appreciation of Cassie, Bob chose the strategy of kind irony: in fact, he praised her with words of blame.

In spite of his own arrogant declarations, Dan, instead, failed. Bob comments the fact by echoing both his self-confidence and the social expectation of success. "Congratulations! As usual, you're a great winner!". Of course, in this case, Bob chose the strategy of sarcastic irony, through which he blamed Dan by words of praise. Resorting to the semantic synchrony process, Bob could praise Cassie ironically by using vocal tenderness combined with linguistic input expressing reproach. Conversely, he could blame Dan ironically by employing a scornful voice associated with a linguistic unit conveying praise.

*Ironic effect* - The last phase of the irony situation, according to the "fencing game" model, consists in the *ironic effect*, i.e., the communicative output of the ironic comment, the manner in which the utterance is interpreted by the interlocutor. This outcome depends neither on the ironist nor on the actual ironic value of the utterance, but on the addressee and on the way in which he/she ascribes an ironic meaning to the speaker's utterance.

In this process, as, Anolli, among other scientists, has pointed out (Chapter 1, this volume), the addressee can choose between different possible interpretations. This

plurality of interpretations is a useful device in the hands of the addressee to recognize and ascribe an ironic intention to the speaker's utterance. In this way he/she has to take his/her communicative responsibility, since he/she can calibrate the communicative interaction with the ironist him-/herself. Ascription of an ironic intention is an open field, and the addressee is allowed a broad space to justify his/her interpretative choice.

In any case, according to the "fencing game" model, the subsequent possible *countermoves* are likely to happen in ironic interaction.

- (a) *Misunderstanding* – Misunderstanding consists in the failure to give the speaker's utterance an intention that is different from its linguistic decoding, so that the ironic meaning is not grasped by the addressee. Substantially, misunderstanding takes place when the utterance meaning is limited to the linguistic input, without taking into consideration semantic aspects conveyed by the paralinguistic pattern. Such a failure might depend on the speaker's lack of communicative competence, when he/she, for instance, resorts to a weak variation of supra-segmental profile. It might also depend on the inability of the addressee to grasp the ironic intent of the speaker, due to a physical or cognitive interference (for instance, a noise or a lack of attention) or for some another reason.
- (b) *Denying* – Denying consists in the fact that the interlocutor, though clearly grasping the ironic sense of the speaker's comment, pretends not to understand it out of convenience and interpersonal opportunity. In this situation he/she prefers to confine his/her understanding to the linguistic input as far as its conventional and standard meaning, canceling information linked to the paralinguistic pattern. As a consequence, this countermove represents a "pretence", in which the addressee tries to neutralize the ironic sense of speech and to become "unreachable". In fact, in certain situations it is better and more suitable to be considered "ignorant" (or even "dull") than to be offended, because in this last case one has to defend one's own dignity. One does not always feel like having an argument or, even worse, a conflict with other people.
- (c) *Touché* – When the ironic meaning of a comment hits the target, the addressee can recognize it and admit he/she has been struck. Either the witticism amused him/her or the shrewdness of the indirect attack wounded him/her. He/she may answer with a smile in the case of kind irony, or he/she may counterattack by retorting in his/her turn in the case of sarcastic irony.

Modeling irony as a "fencing game", giving it a time sequence, can have a different sense according to the degree of the speakers' empathic involvement, as well as constraints and opportunities of the context of use (*contextual multiplicity*). Within a context of conflict or of cooperation, the speaker, in accordance with the degree of empathic involvement with the interlocutor, can calibrate what can be taken for granted. According to the situation, he/she can choose to emphasize the ironic intention or to mitigate it, by means of different vocal strategies. A scornful voice passing sharp blame and a tender voice passing gentle praise will emphasize the intention; alternatively, both criticism and approval will converge into a bantering voice, with the intention of playing down the effect. In particular, as Anolli, Ciceri and Infantino [66] have verified, a bantering voice can be defined as either kind or sarcastic, depending on how much the intention to mitigate leads to the softening of praise or blame.

Referring to the example, Bob's ironic comment toward Cassie's and Dan's exams can generate different effects. Assuming that both Cassie and Dan realized that Bob was

present during their exam so as to know the results, they understood the meaning of his wisecrack. Anyway, they can choose between two options: admitting they understand (*touché*), or, instead, pretending not to understand (denying). Therefore, although in other cases misunderstanding can be a possible outcome of an ironic comment even for the addressee (e.g., when the addressee is not aware that the speaker knows the facts constituting the focal event, or when the interlocutors do not share a stable background of knowledge), in the above-mentioned example the effect of misunderstanding can take place outside the ironist-ironized's "inner circle". In fact, other students, passing by them without knowing the facts, can not attribute an ironic meaning to Bob's utterances, so they are limited to a superficial level of communication.

Concerning the addressees' reaction, there can be different outcomes. First of all, one should underline the fact that a denying strategy may be a crafty countermove by means of which one can avoid the "face-threatening" effect of the ironic remark; therefore, it is more consistent with sarcastic than with kind irony. Dan can reply to Bob's ironic blame by saying: "You're right, Bob. As usual, I'm the number one. Simply, this time the professor was envious because I was more brilliant than him". Less effectively, Cassie can reply to Bob's ironic blame by saying: "Yes, I'm a failure. This time I was lucky; but I remain a loser". On the other hand, analyzing the possible reactions as "*touché*", Cassie can reply to Bob's ironic praise by saying: "Bob, you're my wittiest friend! I'm so happy! At last I have passed this difficult exam!". In this way, she admits Bob's irony has made her happy. Instead, Dan can say: "Stop being sarcastic, Dan: this time it went wrong; but don't delude yourself. Next time I'll be brilliant once more".

## 6.6 Conclusions

The "fencing game" model we outlined herein tackles irony as a miscommunication phenomenon according to the MaCHT framework sketched out by Anolli (Chapter 1, this volume). Irony miscommunication is to be considered as a chance, since it consists in saying without saying. This "say not to say" is in the hands of both the communicators, so that the ironic meaning arises at the end of the communicative exchange, when both of them have shared and participated in building the ironic interaction.

Within this perspective irony is taken into account as a powerful device for playing communicative meaning and intention in a round-about way and tangentially. It is a kind of metacommunication because of the plurality of semantic interpretations and it depends on the communicative responsibility of interlocutors to choose a certain route of sense instead of another one. In any case, irony offers the opportunity to switch quickly and effectively from a given route of meaning to another, so that one can always save face. By resorting to an ironic utterance you can always fall on your feet.

Moreover, the "fencing game" model of irony allows us to tackle some problematic aspects that we have seen in the previous section about theoretical perspectives on irony. First of all, we have to face the subject of semantic inversion in the ironic utterance which carries with it the problem of distinction between the literal and the figurative meaning as it is shown by Booth [1], Grice [10], and Knox [85]. The "fencing game" model goes beyond this perspective, because it describes irony as a complex pragmatic phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to a mere rhetorical point of view. Irony is neither a "strange" nor an exceptional phenomenon deviating from the communicative standards in a given culture. On the contrary, it is an integral part of everyday communication, and it is processed as fast as non ironic statements. Gibbs [86] has correctly pointed out that irony

comprehension does not require a supplementary cognitive effort, as if it were the outcome of a twofold processing: first understanding the literal meaning and then the figurative meaning. When irony comprehension requires more time in its elaboration, it might depend on a lack of contextual references, and not on a previous rejection of the literal meaning, as Colston and Gibbs [87], and Gibbs and Colston (Chapter 8, this volume) have underlined. According to this framework, irony is a merely pragmatic phenomenon, as it is derived via standard inferences (Attardo, Chapter 7, this volume).

Secondly, the “fencing game” model of irony is related to the theories referring to both the significance of irony in the context, and the echo to social beliefs, proposed by Attardo [88], Creusere [34], Giora and Fein [89], Kerbrat-Orecchioni [27], Kreuz [28], and Sperber and Wilson [23, 24]. In fact, in ironic meaning-making, cultural and contextual assumptions take priority over textual input, which is absorbed and included by the former. However, textual input can function as linguistic hints, especially when they echo a previous utterance or interactive exchange in an explicit way, and, in such a situation, they may favour the appearance of ironic sense.

Given its nature, irony is a metacommunicative comment on what is happening in a certain communicative interaction. In this way, communicators can stand at a distance in a communicative exchange, and they can play a role of pretence, as if they were in a theatrical setting, in line with the perspective sustained by Clark and Gerrig [31], Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg and Brown [18]. Also for the “fencing game” model irony contains pretence aspects, but carried out in an everyday communication. The ironist can play the part of the critic, or jester or else humorist and so on. Therefore, irony is not necessarily a ruse, a Machiavellian weapon. On the contrary, it is a natural way of communicating that pervades language, by allowing people to express themselves with effectiveness and vivacity. Of course, most often, although not always and not necessarily, the irony voice takes a specific prosodic profile which signals the emergence of the irony intention by the speaker. In particular, “theatricalism” concerns the supra-segmental profile of irony, and not its pragmatic usage, which is however fairly frequent, as recent researches carried out by Gibbs [67] and Infantino [84], have empirically documented. Such research has verified a considerable presence of ironic comments (around 8%) within everyday conversation, especially among friends.

Concerning the management of the semantic field and communication emotional intensity [26, 54, 63, 58, 59, 60], the “fencing game” model points out the manifold nature of the ironic remark as a communicative act. We can underline its *communicative convenience* as miscommunication. This opportunity is given by the possibility at times to soften the intensity of the communicative intention, or to strengthen it, thanks to the semantic synchrony process, which combines verbal and nonverbal elements together in a unitary route of meaning. In such a way, the “fencing game” model is consistent with those recent theories, proposed by Gibbs [13, 67], Lee and Katz [68], and Leggitt and Gibbs [69], which attribute manifold functions to ironic communication (sometimes as a defence, then as a particularly stinging attack, occasionally as a mere witticism).

Summing up, the “fencing game” model may offer some advantages in the study of irony. First of all, we can mention its economic value because it rejects what is useless. In fact, according to this model linguistic input and nonverbal signals, social and cultural conditions are put together and synthesized in a unitary semantic pattern. In ironic communication speakers show their communicative competence by using successfully linguistic and extra-linguistic expressions which effectively express their intentions in an indirect way.

The “fencing game” model also involves a combination and amalgamation between

implicit and explicit levels, by producing a liaison between referential and inferential competence. Thanks to such a combination, the ironist has to interpret a kind of “role-playing” in the interaction with his/her interlocutor. If one had to reduce communication to an explicit and transparent exchange of messages, the result would be a naive communication, typical of Dostoevsky’s [90] “idiot”, who is neither stupid nor foolish, but naive. He/she lives detached from the world, oblivious of the moves and pretences played out in the “shadow world” of interpersonal relationships, incapable even of lying. From this point of view, an “idiot” would be outside the constraints of civilized society that others are subjected to, free from the conditioning of social rules. His/her language would be characterized by sincerity, simplicity, essentiality and transparency; maybe a paradigmatic instance of Grice’s maxims [10].

Irony is substantially a paradigmatic kind of miscommunication as a *complex communicative act*. It involves a plurality of the semantic and intentional levels of an utterance pronounced by the speaker, without compromising his/her own face and leaving the addressee with the responsibility of choosing a certain route of sense among different options. In this manner, the ironist holds an inviolable position, because he/she can always switch from the communicative meaning to the linguistic input, and vice versa. In some way, the ironist is impervious in his/her position. Irony as miscommunication, in line with the MaCHT framework (see Anolli, Chapter 1, this volume), assumes the shape of a complex and kaleidoscopic communicative resource. According to the occasion, it can be employed in order to stress or to weaken derived meanings. Within social relationships, the ironist, director of his/her own image, can adjust communicative patterns for (un)masking him/herself to others, as well as trying to reduce the risk of being “wrapped around the other’s finger”.

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