

# *On verbal irony and types of echoing*

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the different types of echoing used in actual examples of verbal irony. The examples all contain an appositional structure, indicating an equivalence relation. This contributes to the ironical interpretation, and especially to recognizing the victim of the irony. I will argue, first, that syntactic structure may be a clue to indirect meaning; second, that echoic mention may play a role even when the echoed beliefs are only implied; and third, that violations of Gricean maxims of truthfulness and informativeness are more a clue to the presence of irony than an essential part of the analysis.

## **1 Introduction**

In contrast with traditional accounts of irony in terms of untruthfulness, and particularly with Grice's proposal to view irony as a case of violating conversational maxims of quality (Grice 1975, 1978), relevance theorists suggested more than twenty years ago that irony should be viewed as a case of echoic mention, and that recognition of an ironical utterance as a case of mention is crucial to its interpretation. (Sperber & Wilson 1981: 309).

Sperber & Wilson argue that "there are echoic mentions of many different degrees and types. Some are immediate echoes, and others delayed; some have their source in actual utterances, others in thoughts or opinions; some have a real source, others an imagined one; some are traceable back to a particular individual, whereas others have a vaguer origin." (ibid: 309-310). That is, an ironical effect may arise even when the utterance is a delayed echo of a thought or belief of an assumed, imagined or extremely vague originator.

A significant aspect of ironical utterances is that they often have some kind of 'victim' or 'target,' at whom the irony is directed. Picking out the victim of the irony plays a major role in interpreting the speaker's meaning in ironical utterances. Relevance theorists explicitly refer to the victim of the irony: "The analysis of irony as a type of mention makes it possible to predict which ironical utterances will have a particular victim, and who that victim will be." (ibid: 314). The echoic mention approach to irony provides an answer to the question of whom the speaker's attitude is directed towards: The speaker generally distances herself from the originator of the echoic utterance, whether she is a particular speaker of a given

utterance, or the general public, holding the accepted view (Weizman, 2000: 239). Holdcroft (1983: 497) also argues that the precise target may not be known; though it seems that provided one can see that there could be one, the irony is graspable. Irony only becomes totally elusive when one cannot identify the target in any terms at all.

The aim of this paper is to look at some actual examples of verbal irony and to examine the different types of echoing they show. The utterances share a syntactic property: They all contain an appositional structure, which, I will argue, is involved in the overall process of interpreting the whole utterance, and especially in recognizing the victim of the irony. In some of these utterances the originator is not specific, is vague or even imagined, and in some of them what is echoed are beliefs or opinions that go far back in time. Sometimes, the echoed beliefs are only implied.

The ironical utterances to be discussed appeared in Hebrew newspaper articles by a well-known columnist, Doron Rosenblum, published in the years 1988-1991 in the weekend supplement of the *Hadashot* daily, and reprinted in a collection of his articles, *Israeli Blues*, published in 1996.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Analyzing verbal irony

The analysis I would like to propose in this section will be based on the following assumptions:

- A. In all the following examples there is an echoic mention (or more generally, echoic interpretation) of some kind.<sup>2</sup>
- B. In all the examples there is an appositional structure, which evokes expectations of semantic relations of equivalence or identity.
- C. The interpretation of the speaker's meaning in these cases must rely on understanding the implicated meaning of both the echoic mention and the identity relations underlying the syntactic structure.

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1 Examples of this kind may be easily found in the writings of other Hebrew authors, although it is of course a matter of personal preference of the author. The use of apposition to create an ironical utterance appears in other languages as well.

2 The term 'echoic mention' was used by Sperber & Wilson in the 1981 paper, but they abandoned it in their book *Relevance* (Sperber & Wilson 1986) in favor of the more general term 'echoic interpretation', which refers to "the use of a propositional form to represent not itself but some other propositional form it more or less closely resembles." (See Sperber & Wilson 1986, notes to first edition, footnote 25, pp. 289-290.)

The first example is taken from a text called *A Short History of the Labor Party*, the veteran party that ruled Israel consecutively from the establishment of the state in 1948 until 1977, and since then intermittently. The text gives an ironical description of the party's history and the crises it underwent:

(1) In the forties and fifties, there was a proliferation throughout Israel of *titans* – creatures having an average height of 1.60 meters, with a Slavic accent and open collars, who were sustained by the drinking of tea, and who expressed themselves mainly by means of writing notes. (*Hadashot*, 23.11.1991).<sup>3</sup>

“Titans” (Hebrew *nefilim*) is a biblical word for mythological giants, and is metaphorically used to indicate “great men,” “spiritual giants.” In this context, it is an echoic mention of a soubriquet which was actually used for those 40s and 50s leaders, who were considered “giants” due to their intellectual abilities, high moral standards, principled adherence to ideology and eloquence. This opinion or evaluation was shared by many. So while the source of the original utterance here is not specific, it is not imaginary either.

The description proposed by the author is of course a caricature, but each part of this caricature has some kind of a “core of truth”: Most of the members of that generation were immigrants from Eastern Europe, who were quite short, especially in comparison to immigrants from Germany. The “drinking of tea” and “writing of notes” are also two real features that over the years became the butt of numerous jokes. Drinking tea was often presented as the main activity carried out by the bureaucrats in the institutions under the control of the ruling party, becoming a symbol of their laziness and lack of efficiency. The system of communication by means of notes symbolizes in Israel the biased operation of government bureaucracies that favored those close to the government.

Nevertheless, there are a number of places in this example where a certain degree of untruthfulness can be identified. While it may be possible that the average height of these people was indeed generally diminutive, the preciseness of the description of “an average height of 1.60 meters” cannot be accepted as real. The phrases “sustained by the drinking of tea” and “expressed themselves mainly by means of writing notes” may also be viewed as strictly untruthful. “Sustained by drinking tea” seems to imply that this was their main source of sustenance, and

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3 The translation of examples of this type into English may evoke a feeling of excess from the point of view of the linguistic means creating the irony. This type of excess has been described as characteristic of op-ed articles in the daily Hebrew press, and as culture specific, at least in comparison to French (Weizman, 1984a, 1984b, 1986).

from the phrase “expressed themselves mainly by means of writing notes,” it may be understood that this was their main form of communication.

But in the nature of a caricature, the reader can see through the exaggerated description and identify this “core of truth” (otherwise it would not be funny). The consequence, I believe, is an utterance that is at the same time both true and untrue.

As to the echoic mention here: Although the original use of the word “titans” in the political context is interpreted metaphorically, the author does everything he can to preclude a metaphorical reading: Words such as “proliferated,” “creatures” and “sustained” are generally used to describe animals or other nonhuman creatures from a physical or zoological point of view. The effect is that of a physical description, which rules out a metaphorical interpretation.

Now, in which way does this affect the interpretation of this whole utterance?

As noted above, appositional structure normally indicates a semantic relation of equivalence or identity. Thus, the apposition in example (1) can be read as follows:

- (1) a. *Titans are creatures having an average height of 1.60 meters.*

The untruthfulness of this statement is dear for every reader who knows the encyclopedic meaning of “Titans.” A metaphorical reading is a reasonable and accessible possibility, but, as I said, is implicitly ruled out by the author.

However, the appositional structure in this case enables another reading, which reverses the equivalence relations:

- (1) b. *Those creatures having an average height of 1.60 meters were titans.*

And this reading may be interpreted as a case of echoic use:

- (1) c. *Those creatures having an average height of 1.60 meters were **called** “titans.”*

This kind of interpretation focuses specifically on the word “titans” as an echoic mention. It serves as a clue for identifying the victim of the irony. According to this account, the irony is directed primarily at the speaker of the original utterance currently being echoed: Anyone who used this soubriquet, including the “titans” themselves, who didn’t reject it. The caricature is designed to imply that the kind of belief that underlies it is ridiculous.

But why is it ridiculous? The author gives two reasons for this. The first is related to their height, and therefore leaves the reader on the physical level. Another reason is provided by the reference to the “drinking of tea” and “communicating by notes.” This description implies that these people do not deserve this soubriquet

because of their behaviour, leading the reader to the metaphorical level. Thus, the interpretation of “titans” remains somehow undetermined; as a metaphorical reading it is obvious and highly accessible, due to background knowledge, while at the same time, a literal reading is explicitly suggested by the style or the co-text.

Let me present another example, which comes from the same text about the Labor party as example (1):

(2) It came then as no surprise that the third congress convened in an atmosphere of crisis, threats of resignation and an appeal for *a complete overhaul of the party* (in other words, changing the type of letter designating the name of the party). (*Hadashot*, 23.11.1991).

“A complete overhaul” (Hebrew *shidud maarachot*) is another ancient, uncommon and high-register expression which was used by the first generation of Israeli politicians in their speeches. Here again, the originator is vague but not imaginary. This expression is easily associated with a particular genre used by a particular kind of speakers and speeches.

The appositional structure may be read as:

(2) a. *A complete overhaul of the party means changing the type of letter designating the name of the party.*

That is, “a complete overhaul” is claimed to be equivalent to “changing the type of letter designating the name of the party.” However, from the reader’s knowledge of political script conventions, she knows that changing the type of letter designating the name of the party is not something that can be considered “a complete overhaul.” On the contrary, changing the type of letter designating the name of the party is a trivial act lacking any significance, and does not reflect any real change.

Again, however, another reading of the appositional structure is possible:

(2) b. *Changing the type of letter designating the name of the party is a complete overhaul of the party.*

Since no one can seriously believe that changing the type of letter amounts to a complete overhaul, this claim can alternatively be interpreted as follows:

(2) c. *Changing the type of letter designating the name of the party was **called** (by someone) “a complete overhaul.”*

Thus, the use of apposition has the role of focusing on the phrase “a complete overhaul” as an echoic mention of a genre-specific phrase. Note that this particular

example mentions “an appeal for a complete overhaul,” that is, there is an explicit reference to the original utterance that is echoed.

According to this account, the irony seems to be directed at those leaders whose ability to use flowery language is far more impressive than their ability to bring about a real change when needed. Given that changing the type of letter representing the name of the movement is not something that can be considered “a complete overhaul,” even a formulation such as, “There was a call to undertake a complete overhaul, but they made do with changing the type of letter representing the name of the party” would elicit ridicule and scorn towards cowards not willing to dare make real and perhaps painful changes. Criticism or reservation is implied, among other things, by the use of concession and the words “but” and “made do.” However, this wording is quite different from that in example (2). Thus the syntactic structure seems to serve as a major clue to the speaker’s meaning as it helps the reader to pick out an originator of the echoed utterance as a possible victim of the irony.

The third example comes from a text that provides an ironical description of television programming on Jewish holidays. The author is describing a festive talk show of the type one might expect to see on the eve of a holiday:

(3) Also on the program: A veteran educator in a kibbutz will *discuss* the strictness of the members of the First Aliya in matters related to the Passover dietary laws and the scalding of vessels to make them kosher for Passover in the courtyard of Deganya (in other words, the guest will reply in the negative to the host’s question on this subject). (*Hadashot*, 4.4.1991).

“The Passover dietary laws and the scalding of vessels” are Jewish religious customs related to an ancient Jewish holiday. The “members of the First Aliya” were Jews who immigrated to Israel from Eastern Europe in the early 1920s. These Jews distanced themselves considerably from the Jewish religion and its customs. The kibbutzim during this period did not carry out any traditional religious acts such as the “scalding of vessels,” and there was no strictness whatever concerning the “Passover dietary laws.” Consequently, the untruthfulness of the utterance is apparent primarily from the use of the definite noun “the strictness,” which carries an existential presupposition – that this kind of strictness did indeed exist. However, if the guest “replies in the negative to the host’s question on this subject,” it means that there was no such strictness. This is incompatible with the existential presupposition, which consequently creates a mismatch.

Let me focus on the verb “discuss,” which seems to be of special importance here. The relevant background knowledge required here concerns the type of

discussions held on these television programs, the type of interviewees generally invited to appear on them and the various roles filled by the participants in the dialogue. This involves background knowledge about the conventions of television interviews. According to this knowledge, a discussion of the customs on holidays or the days preceding them is legitimate and relevant. It is also possible that an interviewee would talk about places or times when the customs were not upheld. Nevertheless, to “reply in the negative” to a question does not imply a discussion, and in a television interview, it is not a satisfying response from the point of view of the amount of information an interviewee is expected to provide on a specific subject. The use of the verb “discuss” expresses this clearly: A “discussion” of something usually implies more than simply a “reply in the negative.” Or in other words, “to reply in the negative” cannot be considered a “discussion” of something.

Accordingly, the appositional relationship in this utterance can also be considered untruthful, although even less explicitly so than in examples (1)-(2):

- (3) a. *Discussing (a subject) means replying in the negative to the host’s question on this subject.*

Again, we may suggest the reversed reading of (3b), which in turn may imply (3c):

- (3) b. *Replying in the negative to the host’s question on a particular subject means discussing this subject.*

- (3) c. *Replying in the negative to the host’s question on a particular subject is **considered** (by someone) to be a discussion of this subject.*

In this case, the feeling of echoing is relatively weak: The source is imagined and the origin is vague. There is no way to directly point to a particular utterance echoed here. What is echoed is a belief allegedly held by someone.

In order to understand who the victim of the irony is, the reader must consider who would believe that “to reply in the negative” implies a “discussion” of a subject. Since it is very difficult to point to someone who actually believes this, the victim may be someone whose actions *imply* this kind of a belief: the people who are apparently responsible for this type of program – editors, producers and perhaps also interviewers. The fact that they invite people to the studio who have nothing interesting to say on the relevant subject implies that they have an odd and ridiculous idea of the concept of “discussing.” The victim might also be the viewer of the program who does not sense this incongruity and who is willing to believe that by giving a negative response, the guest has met the expectations that he will “discuss” something.

This example demonstrates the importance of taking a closer look at syntactic structure. As we have seen, a feeling of untruthfulness already arises when interpreting the first part of the sentence, where there is a dissonance between the definite noun “the strictness” and the extra-linguistic knowledge held by the reader. But this clue is not enough to tell us who the victim of the irony is. The addition of the apposition not only bolsters the ironical effect, but also, and more importantly, points to the victim and enables the reader to uncover the speaker’s meaning.

Example (4) is taken from a text which is an imaginary monologue coming from a member of the Labor party, an assistant to Shimon Peres. Peres is a senior politician, a former prime minister, a man with numerous achievements, but also failures. His public image in Israel is that of someone who would do anything to become a member of the government and get a senior post. The imaginary speaker is one of his associates ostensibly speaking after the party’s defeat in the elections:

(4) When that didn’t help, we, Shimon and I, used this *tried and true, cold and calculated political trick* – to fall on our knees at Shamir’s feet, to kiss his boots and cry and beg that Shimon be allowed to enter the government even as the assistant deputy minister for the Diaspora and the Jewish people. (*Hadashot*, 18.11.1988).

Because in this case the entire text is presented in direct speech, the issue of echoing requires a special explanation. The reader clearly understands that this is an imaginary monologue, invented by the author. However, the feeling of echoing is evoked nonetheless. Some of the statements sound familiar and similar things have already happened in the history of Israeli politics. Vague past statements from politicians representing foolish and mistaken acts as if they were calculated political moves echo in the ears of the reader.

The originator of the statement is also somewhat vague, and consequently, so is the identity of the victim of the irony. According to the analysis suggested here, the victim is the one who believes, or claims, that the identity relationship in the appositional structure is real, that is that to fall on one’s knees, etc. is a cold and calculated political trick. This type of interpretation is directed at the politicians who represent their foolish acts and those of their colleagues as calculated political moves.

Since it is highly implausible that someone would believe something like (4a), the interpretation may be as suggested in (4b):

(4) a. *To fall on one’s knees at the prime minister’s feet, to kiss his boots and cry and beg is a cold and calculated political trick.*

- (4) b. *To fall on one's knees at the prime minister's feet, to kiss his boots and cry and beg was **represented** (by someone) as a cold and calculated political trick.*

Based on background knowledge about political life, the reader knows that to “fall on one's knees” and “kiss his boots” are not things that can be considered a “cold and calculated political trick.” That is, the claimed equivalence relationship is understood as false.

If we take seriously Grice's proposal that irony is a case of violation of conversational maxims of quality, we should argue that in example (4), part of the ironical effect is also achieved by violations of the maxim of quantity. The list of adjectives “tried and true, cold and calculated;” the list of verbs in “to fall on our knees at Shamir's feet, to kiss his boots and cry and beg,” together with their semantic value which fails to match the political script, are exaggerated formulations hinting that this is not the speaker's real meaning. The following phrase is also noteworthy: “assistant deputy minister for the Diaspora and the Jewish people” is not a real function that in fact exists in the Israeli governmental structure. If such a ministry were to be formed, it would be a marginal one lacking in any real influence. The reduction in importance of the job is emphasized if we note that what is involved here is not the job of a minister or even a deputy minister, but only the job of “assistant deputy minister.” This excessive use of modifiers actually diminishes the importance of the position. Or, to put it more generally, exaggerated verbiage and precise formulation diminish the importance of the content.

The author uses a similar strategy in example (2) in the phrase “changing the type of letter representing the name of the movement.” The irony in the utterance would have been created even if changing the name of the movement had been involved: This is not a genuine change either. However, with the phrase “changing the type of letter representing the name of the movement,” the author adds verbiage that further diminishes the importance of the change, thus enhancing the irony and aiding in revealing it. Thus, the violation of the maxim of quantity can also create an ironical interpretation. In relevance theory, this effect may be seen as a result of the increased processing effort added by the verbiage, together with the lack of contribution to cognitive effects.<sup>4</sup>

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4 This type of clue appears in other places in Rosenblum's writing too. For example, in the context of the peace process with Egypt, there ultimately remained a small tract of land whose fate was determined only at a relatively late stage. On this tract of land stood a hotel, the ownership of which was discussed in the context of the peace agreement. Rosenblum describes the problem in this way: “And then too, the small but fateful issue will remain unchanged concerning the ownership of the second armchair from the left in the lobby of the Sonesta hotel

### 3 Conclusions

The detailed analysis that has been proposed in this paper leads to a number of possible conclusions:

- A. Syntactic structure may serve as a clue to indirect meaning. Pointing to the specific syntactic knowledge used for interpreting ironical utterances may enrich the discussion and elaborate the description of the interpretation process.
- B. As shown especially by example (3), an ironical effect may be created by echoic mention (or more generally, echoic interpretation) even when the echoed beliefs are only implied.
- C. There is an undoubtedly close connection between irony and untruthfulness. But according to the analysis of the metaphor in example (1), the role untruthfulness plays in ironical utterances may be much more complex than that suggested by Grice (1975): It may serve mainly as a clue to the presence of irony, rather than an essential part of the analysis.
- D. As shown by examples (2) and (4), violation of the maxims of quantity (or their equivalent in the relevance-theoretic framework) may also serve as a clue to ironical interpretation.

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[...]” (Koteret Rashit, 22.1.1986). The presentation of the issue of ownership of the land as if it were merely a matter of the ownership of a particular armchair is an ironical description that uses excessive verbiage to reduce the importance of the issue and to express criticism.

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