Subjectivity out of irony

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Abstract

Subjectivity plays an important role in how meaning is created and construed. It concerns the expression of self and the representation of a speaker’s perspective or point of view in the interaction with somebody else. The subjectivity explored in this article concerns mainly one special form of self-awareness insofar as it is related to irony. The argument of this article will be carried out in three steps: We first will deal with the main linguistic theories regarding irony. This will lead us to the conclusion that irony — at least in some cases — involves a form of non-propositional knowledge that needs to be identified and captured for irony. In a second step, we will describe this type of non-propositional knowledge, in particular distinguishing it from propositional knowledge. The discussion of non-propositional knowledge as one marker of subjectivity will then lead us to discuss irony — beyond its semantic utterances — as a personal disposition. When we call utterances ironic we are referring to them as linguistic constructs and we deal with the respective content of their declarative statements, technically speaking, the proposition. In this contribution we are interested in showing how ironic utterances lead back to a personal disposition. This move back should enrich, in some respects and to a certain extent, our understanding of ironic utterances.

Keywords: irony; subjectivity; interpersonal communication; deixis; intentionality; Sperber and Wilson.

1. Irony in linguistic (pragmatic) theories

Within the study of language and language use, classical works on irony before the twentieth century focused on the Aristotelian idea that irony is an ‘antiphrastic’ literary figure, where the speaker says A when s/he
intends to convey B, and where B implies non-A. Unsurprisingly, a number of classical works on irony in speech communication can be found in studies concerned with literature and rhetoric (in the sense of ‘style’, ‘ability to use the resources of the language’), where stylistic effects were attributed to irony. Old dictionaries and encyclopedias make subtle distinctions between irony and related figures (sarcasm, etc.). But still, at this early stage, some psychological or, as we would say, ‘attitudinal’ parameters are central to the definition of these figures. As an example, for the French pedagogue Jullien, in the volume dedicated to ‘grammar’ of his ‘complete course of education for ladies’ (Cours complet d’éducation pour les filles) published in 1849, irony is, as expected, defined as a phrasal figure by means of which one communicates the contrary of what is said. But, more interestingly, he explains that irony is used for some effects such as to ‘hurt a person’ (in particular with sarcasm, which he calls a ‘cruel’ irony), to ‘fake’ an attitude in order to subtly communicate the opposite one, to despise, etc. (Jullien 1849: 114–116). In other words, if we take this book as an appropriate document for standard thinking in the nineteenth century — and it appears that if standard views of irony in the nineteenth century were interested in types rather than in theory, and were not putting to question the idea that irony is an ‘antiphrastic figure’ — it was already attributing psychological effects to ironical utterances. However such thinking did not explain precisely why one uses a ‘figure’ like irony instead of saying things non-ironically, i.e., it does not explain why an ironic utterance can be identified as such by a hearer and not as just a mistake, nor why and under which conditions false utterances can trigger the psychological effects they list.

A turning point in the study of irony and related figures from a linguistic point of view arose when the notion of subjectivity was integrated as a parameter for the analysis of linguistic forms; the study of figures of speech became then a concern for linguistics, since linguistics became, more generally, concerned with more than just the ‘linguistic system.’ In the Continental world, this point of departure is marked by the works of Charles Bally and of Emile Benveniste (1966, 1974).

The Swiss linguist Charles Bally was the first to systematically introduce a notion of subject-specificity in linguistics when he founded the approach of language-use he called stylistics (see notably Bally 1926, 1941, and 1965). He distinguished between the dictum — what we could call today the ‘propositional content’ — and the modus, corresponding to the way the dictum is presented. Given that the same conceptual meaning — or propositional content — can be conveyed in various formats, Bally assumes that the formatting of propositions is the main indication of subjectivity in language. He thus analyzes through this distinction not only
obvious cases of modality but a number of other effects produced by the
specific choice of a wording by the speaker. The more influential French
linguist Emile Benveniste considered that the speaker’s identity is shaped
through interaction; a standpoint that opened up in the Continental trad-
tion the integration into linguistic description of Freudian concepts to do
with the ‘self.’ Irony has, of course, a special place in this picture, directly
linked to the speaker’s relation to the interlocutor.

As for speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), irony is a violation
of the classical sincerity conditions; however, being ironic does not neces-
sarily mean being insincere, since the actual communicated content is
made accessible through the utterance, however inadequate the sentence
itself is with regard to this actual communicated content. Without any ap-
peal to subjectivity, Grice (1975) says that an ironic utterance is an explo-
itiation of the maxim of quality, which is made manifest through voic-
ing, intonation, gestures, etc., in order to communicate a conversational
implicature corresponding to the contrary of the propositional content.
In that sense, irony overtly violates one of the conventions on which con-
versation regularly relies; this is a point worthy of attention, and we will
return to it at the end of the paper.

The Gricean idea — as well as the background idea that irony is an
‘antiphrastic’ figure in general — was seriously opposed first by Sperber
they showed the defects of the Gricean way of dealing with irony, and
where they made substantial propositions to solve them (see also Sperber
and Wilson 1995). They notably opposed the classical (and thus the Gri-
cean) view precisely with the worries we expressed before: neither the
classical approach nor the Gricean version of it explains the exact kind
of meaning conveyed by ironical utterances, nor the way an utterance is
identified as ironical. An example they give is a situation taking place in a
car, with a passenger saying to the driver ‘attention!’ when there is in fact
no danger. In such a case, the conventions of speech should, along the
Gricean lines, end up with the driver concluding that the utterance was
in fact ironical and meant ‘go on, there is no danger.’ Sperber and Wilson
rightly conclude that this explanation is intuitively inaccurate since it
wouldn’t come to the mind of a passenger to shout ‘attention’ in order
to simply communicate that there is no danger. They take this as a hint
that there is something else taking place in ironical uses of language that
must further be explained. They also show examples where the utterance
is not simply ‘false,’ therefore contradicting the classical ‘antiphrastic’
view. In particular, they quote an example from Voltaire’s Candide where
the two kings of two countries at war are described celebrating at the
same time their ‘victory’ after the battle. Since irony is not simply an
antiphrastic device, it implies another parameter. What they propose is a	hreefold explanatory device. First, they suggest that the ironical use is
hypothesized by the hearer on the basis of the irrelevance of the literal in-
terpretation when confronted to the contextual facts mutually manifest to
the speaker and the hearer (for example, if it’s raining when someone says
‘Good weather for a walk!’). Second — a very important point — Sperber
and Wilson suggest that an ironical utterance is a metarepresentational
one, in the particular sense that it is a representation (as any utterance is)
of another representation, as quotations are, for instance, whereas stan-
dard utterances are representations of (true or desirable) facts. This falls
quite well within the common intuition that irony creates a sort of imagi-
nary ‘scene’ where someone is represented and targeted as ridiculous (the
person, real or imaginary, who would actually say the considered utter-
ance non–ironically, whatever the circumstances, makes the propositional
content obviously wrong). This metarepresentational standpoint is there-
fore directly related to a specific — metarepresentational — ability of the
mind. For Sperber and Wilson, irony is a case of ‘mention’ (since the
speaker mentions a speech or thought attributed to someone else) and
not a case of ‘description.’ Third, they introduce the idea that an ironic
utterance implicitly conveys a propositional attitude that corresponds,
roughly, to the proposition being considered ridiculous by the speaker.
This attitude is counted in the theory as the key to the reward, or effect,
for the supplementary cognitive effort needed to achieve relevance on the
basis of an utterance that is obviously false. In this respect, irony com-
pares with other types of literally meaningless utterances, either by virtue
of their logical form, or by virtue of their redundancy with mutually
known information. For instance, tautological utterances are supple-
mented pragmatically with various kinds of enrichments (not attitude)
that give sense to them in a given situation (as when Men are men is
used to mean Your husband is as boring as all other members of the cate-
gory). Still, for instance, a trivial piece of information like Nice weather
can be enriched in various ways in order to make some sense of it that
would be labelled relevant by the interpretive system. This propositional
attitude is the necessary pragmatic enrichment that, in the end, distin-
guishes irony from 1) other types of erroneous utterances and 2) of other
types of metarepresentational utterances.

French linguist Oswald Ducrot (1984) developed his own theory of
irony that draws upon Benveniste’s ideas through what he calls (after the
works of Voloshinov) polyphony. His idea is that one utterance can give
access to several competing meanings, with regard to which the speaker
communicates his/her commitment or rejection. Ducrot’s analysis re-
quires a split of the ‘speaker’ into several subjective instances; in this
respect, Ducrot is in line with Benveniste’s view of the (Freudian or not) self as constructed by interaction, a view also held by contemporary approaches in Conversation Analysis. Ducrot, provocatively, rejects the idea that the speaking subject should be considered a unique individual and proposes to split the speaker into the Locutor as such (as being an actor of discourse), the Speaker-as-a-being-in-the-world (the human person), and one or several polyphonic Enunciators, i.e., existing or non-existing instances (which are not defined in the theory) represented, or, as Ducrot puts it, ‘put on stage’ by the utterance. As far as irony is concerned, Ducrot says that the Locutor represents an Enunciator responsible for the literal meaning and, by means of making the concerned utterance in the context, is in contradiction with the Enunciator (and, indeed, makes fool of the Enunciator), an idea that recalls some psychoanalytic concepts such as the dubbing of the self into several dialectical instances. Ducrot says that the Enunciator targeted by the ironical utterance can be a given individual, including the speaker at some past time, or an imaginary individual (just as Sperber and Wilson suggest as well).

On the epistemological side, Sperber and Wilson have over Ducrot the advantage of elegance and simplicity, plus the fact that they don’t need problematic objects like ‘Enunciators’ in their explanation of irony. However, one point can be considered more intuitively sound in Ducrot’s version. For Sperber and Wilson, the speaker’s attitude has scope over a proposition and not over an individual. Even though for them it is clear that the speaker can express a judgment on an individual by means of irony, this happens only through the mediation of some propositional attitude. Ducrot, by contrast, includes straightforwardly, as a necessary parameter of irony, that someone, real or fake, is targeted as responsible for the ridiculous utterance. In other words, subjectivities are more directly invoked in Ducrot’s model than in Sperber and Wilson’s one. This probably does not save Ducrot from the above criticism, but raises a more fundamental question: should irony be viewed as targeting a propositional representation or a person? We think it is the latter.

We will try now to sustain this global view on irony through a number of arguments before we address more crucial points about irony and subjectivity. First, we notice that natural languages is typically associated with ironic adjectives that talk about attitudes one can have over individuals, not over abstract objects like representations or propositions. For example, despite the fact that irony has informational properties such as incongruity, it is a fact that someone can be hated for icy or cold irony, for vicious irony, etc. In French, one finds typically ironic mordante (biting irony) or ironic glaciale (icy irony). A quick survey signals similar types of typical combinations in other languages (pungente ironia in Italian, for
example). Interestingly, these adjectives, when used to qualify an attitude, apply categorial restrictions to the complements towards which the attitude is directed: they allow animated individuals but combine with difficulty with objects such as representations. In other words, it looks natural that one is icy towards another individual, or biting, or vicious, but rather bizarre that one harbors such attitudes towards words or paintings or towards any other types of abstract objects. In other words, it looks intuitively sound that one is icy towards another individual, or biting, or vicious, but rather bizarre that one harbors such attitudes towards words or paintings or towards any other types of abstract objects. In other words, it looks intuitively sound that irony has to do with particular mental states, attitudes, which are directed towards some individual, and not towards a proposition (although one may wish to maintain that the attitude can target the individual only through a proposition). Actually, one could propose a slightly more fine-grained analysis of irony where not only there is an attitude shown over a proposition, by means of which an attitude is shown towards an individual, but through a ‘propositional attitude’ i.e. not the fact that the proposition is ‘ridiculous’ but simply that it is ‘false.’ Besides this, what is typically ridiculous is an individual, not a representation (therefore not an utterance, not even a thought) by itself. In the same view, we think it’s worth taking into consideration the intuition that when an ironic attitude is attributed to an abstract object, an effect of personalization is — still intuitively speaking — obtained, as in irony of fate, where fate is represented as having an ironic intention.

Second, irony is not simply a non-literal utterance conveying implicitly some other information that could be spelled out without loss. As a matter of fact, an ironical utterance cannot be ‘translated’ in a full-fledged propositional format (Saussure in press). Reformulation (2) of (1) simply loses the ironical content, although it conserves the informational substance:

(1) What nice weather for a walk! (when it’s raining).
(2) It is raining and you said the weather would be nice, therefore you are ridiculous.

It conforms to our opinion that irony involves a non-propositional content, dealing with emotions or attitudes, and which needs to be identified and captured by a hearer for irony to exist at all.

Third, there are some examples of ironical utterances where the literal utterance is not true; still, some components of it are indeed asserted by the speaker. This happens in a number of situations, such as the following. Suppose there is some negotiation going on between A and B; A puts forward fallacious arguments, bluffs, and lies; and as a consequence of these fallacious arguments, B accepts in the end an unfair deal. Suppose now A tells the story to his business partner C, and C says to A, with admiration:
(3) You’re really a bad guy!

In such a case, not only is it both true and false at the same time that A is a bad guy, but, we think, it is asserted that A is at the same time bad and good. A is bad with respect to the conventional standards of morality, because he made use of unfair arguments. But A is good with respect to his skills in promoting the interests of the company.

This case seems to us particularly interesting, and we will develop this point later in this paper: in a way, in (3) the fact that A did not follow the ‘good’ behavior — say, the conventions, that hold in a neutral, global setting — is evaluated as ‘good’ in a particular setting, here the situation of (economic) antagonism or war. Therefore, it seems to us that (3) deals not only with truth and falsity, as many ironic utterances do, but also with a complex thought involving opposing concepts at the same time but at different levels of understanding: bad with respect to X implies good with respect to Y. At first sight, an analysis of (3) as metarepresentational could seem questionable, since the speaker seems to think ‘sincerely’ that A is a ‘bad’ guy, simply implicating that A is therefore a good guy. Now it is also true that (3), in this setting, is not interpreted as simply ‘sincere’: the speaker should be disapprobative, not congratulating as he is in our example. It suffices to think that C, saying (3), is also raising his finger and moving it back and forth like a mother does when a kid behaves badly to see that, clearly, some instance is ‘put on the stage’ by C, and ‘quoted’ in (3). (3) is still completely metarepresentational.

Irony is not necessarily a matter of uttering a false proposition. What seems to remain necessary for irony is the presence of an implicit propositional attitude of disagreement, communicating that the speaker thinks that, in such a context, this particular sentence would be ridiculous if uttered sincerely. The person targeted as ridiculous in the case of (3) is the imaginary individual who would condemn A’s attitude sincerely. Here, that person is obeying the common principles of morality and of conventional expectations. Later in this paper, we will suggest that irony in fact always involve some discrepancy with standard conventions, and we will suggest that this is precisely one of the keys to subjectivity in irony. This leads us back to the question of what is central to irony. We would like to observe in this respect that irony is not a ‘stand-alone’ phenomenon, clearly separated from all other phenomena of speech. Notably, free indirect speech utterances can present a very high similarity, at least intuitively, with ironical utterances, or call very strongly for ironical effects. An example of free indirect speech like (4) can bear a strong ironical load:

(4) I met John this morning. You know him: he can’t bear it anymore, his wife is a nightmare, his job is a pain, and all that kind of thing.
If (4) is intended to mean that the propositions he can’t bear it any more, his wife is a nightmare, and his job is a pain, literally or not, onto what John actually expressed this morning, then we are looking at a case of free indirect speech, thus a metarepresentation of the content to which the speaker does not commit. Just like irony. And, indeed, here the quotes look ironic. Irony can be absent of free indirect speech (attitudes like compassion can exist in free indirect speech). But since irony is implicitly metarepresentational, then it could well be analyzed as a specific case of reported speech or thought, or ‘alleged’ reported speech, a case where the speaker conveys an attitude of the type P is ridiculous. In this respect, irony looks closer than ever to things like implicit quotation, or, as stated before, implicit metarepresentation.

What shall we do, then, with utterances that would be called, intuitively, ‘ironical,’ but that at first glance do not seem to involve an ironical propositional attitude? Let us briefly look at (5), uttered by an interviewer provoking a job applicant with a dose of humor:

(5) I guess you are a laid-back person, as Australians are.

Here, the most important features of irony seem not to be met: the speaker does not seem to provide a metarepresentation of someone uttering the proposition, and it seems that there isn’t any ironical propositional attitude. In other words, the author simply seems to commit himself to a proposition, to the extent authorized by the modalities, and nothing else. Of course, this utterance could be completely ironic in a marked context, for example when it’s mutually manifest that the speaker fakes, or quotes, a judgment that is obviously ridiculous with regard to other mutually manifest information, meaning that, of course, the designated person is anything but a laid-back person.

Yet besides this possibility, if a certain tone, or even a gesture, accompanies this utterance, the inference of an attitude closely related to irony can be drawn. It is enough for this to happen that it is mutually manifest that the speaker should not say this according to the standard conventions in the particular setting. In the formal setting of a job interview, the speaker, afterwards, would probably admit that he was, in one way or another, being ironic when uttering (5). Actually, a contrast between what should be said and what is said can, according to the setting, give rise to an ironic effect. Here, in the context, it is clear that the speaker does not agree to the full meaning of laid-back person, since that is obviously exaggerated. However, we would like to emphasize the fact that in such a case, the speaker, by the obvious discrepancy between what should be said and what is said, communicates that he is taking some distance with the actual propositional content of his utterance: he does not commit
himself to the propositional content *in extenso*. Thus, an explanation of this effect could be that the speaker, precisely, metarepresents the thought (or speech) of a fictitious individual who would completely endorse the propositional content of the utterance. In this respect, (5) belongs to a category that is closely related to free indirect speech and irony: it is just another type of metarepresentation; say, hyperbolic. But it need not to be hyperbolic. It is enough that anything in the context makes obvious that the speaker does not express his point of view for this kind of effect to arise; understatements are likewise. In the end, everything leads us to think that there is indeed an ironic component in (5). This component is based on the fact that (5) is said while it is mutually manifest that the speaker cannot plausibly tell here his real thoughts about the hearer. An argument for this analysis is that the setting of a job interview constrains the hearer to avoid an offended reaction, therefore, the hearer assumes that there is an ironic component, on the basis of which is triggered the provocative effect that is automatically felt here.

Two observations need however to be added about (5). First, it is noticeable that in this case, it is still possible for the hearer to suppose that the speaker believes in P at a lower degree (in a weak sense), depending upon other accessible information at the hearer’s disposal. Second, the idea that the propositional content of (5) is presented together with an attitude needs to be questioned. If it is a consequence of the process of understanding of (5), in the aforementioned context, that the speaker does not believe (in the strong sense) what he says, then it is unavoidable that (5) will be understood together with a propositional attitude of rejection. This attitude however doesn’t follow the scheme of a clear-cut distinction: it is subject to degrees. The degree to which the attitude of rejection holds towards the proposition should be directly determined by the difference between the degree to which (5) is actually thought by the hearer as believed (lower sense) by the speaker, and the higher degree of belief (stronger sense) that expresses (5) in itself.

Maybe this attitude should be more fine-grained than ‘ridiculousness’ or ‘rejection.’ If we admit a notion of degree for the strength of the ironic attitude, it is likely that the analysis should end up with attitudes labelled like ‘ridiculous to degree n.’ This task is not the focus of this paper. What we want to stress here is that irony has to do with *difference* between expected forms and actually realized forms, that it is about *metarepresenting* a thought with a degree of non-commitment to what is said, which is understood as an ironic attitude. There are strong ironies, where the whole of a sentence embedded in an implicit quotation is made ridiculous in the context, and there are cases like (5), where the quotation is actually about a specific lexical item (here laid-back), which we would like to call weak ironies.
Looking at all these cases, we can see how the interpretive process goes: the meaning is obtained by the speaker by supplementing information (such as metarepresentation and propositional attitude) to the actual material on the basis of contextual constraints, either the factual elements of the deictic situation of speech (if it’s raining, in (1)) or the conventional framework that holds in this particular deictic situation of speech, as in (3). But all these elements do not suffice to explain the ironic effect. If we explain all this to a person who has no idea whatsoever about irony, that person will have some knowledge about irony but will probably not be capable of experiencing irony or, therefore, to understand exactly what irony is. The reason for this was expressed before: an ironic utterance cannot be translated into a full-fledged proposition without loosing its ironic component. The conclusion we drew from this was that irony is fundamentally a matter of non-propositional content.

In order to proceed further, we need now to turn to the notion of non-propositional knowledge, which will be our link to the notion of subjectivity.

2. Propositional knowledge versus non-propositional knowledge

Ironic utterances show something more about the subject, the individual who utters the ironic statement; more precisely, it shows something about the particular way the subject holds in a particular way this ‘opinion.’ Ironic utterances, whenever they are not intended as simply ornamental figures, do not say a lot the utterance itself, but about the way the subject refers to the content of his utterance. More than other utterances, an ironic one makes it intuitively evident that a specific subject refers in a particular way to a certain proposition. The utterance refers back to the specific way in which the subject stands to what he had said, knows about that which he had said.

This brings us to the concept of ‘subjectivity.’ Among linguists, the notion subjectivity concerns, for example, expression of self and the representation of a speaker’s — or, more generally, a locutionary agent’s — perspective or point of view in discourse (cf. for example Stein and Wright 1995, besides references quoted in the above section). But there are many approaches to subjectivity. Among other professional researchers on language the word subject and its derivative subjectivity tend to evoke a grammatical association: subject as distinct from direct object, for example. In some contexts, subjectivity contrasts with objectivity in suggesting something ‘soft,’ unverifiable, even suspicious. Indeed, it has been observed (Lyons 1982: 101) that the notion of subjectivity plays var-
ious roles in European languages. While the English ‘subjectivity’ has recently assumed — by virtue of its opposition with a positivistic interpretation of ‘objectivity’ — a somehow pejorative connotation, the French ‘subjectivité’ and the German ‘Subjektivität’ do not necessarily carry this pejorative connotation of unreliability and failure to correspond with the facts. In the following, we’ll deal with ‘subjectivity’ as far as it concerns the mind or the consciousness of oneself with respect to the world; thus we need not here consider anything inherited from psychoanalysis, nor the idea that subjectivity would be somehow ‘magical’ and therefore escaping analysis (an idea that often legitimates vague and metaphorical explanations of subjectivity in some frameworks). Subjectivity plays an important role in how meaning is created and construed. It concerns the expression of self and the representation of a speaker’s perspective or point of view in interaction with somebody else; it constitutes one special form of self-awareness insofar as it is related to basic perceptions and attitudes. In this respect, subjectivity leads back to the way in which the subject holds a certain opinion, belief, etc., about objects, how s/he knows about them. In sum, subjectivity is a capacity of the human being to know in a certain way, which is not made by a set of ‘assumptions,’ facts about himself (through, in particular, proprioceptive abilities, that is, capacities to be aware of the position of my legs, of the attitude of my face, etc.) and facts about the outer world (through, in particular, perceptive abilities). Some say that perception and proprioception are inputs for awareness of the concerned facts, they are not themselves these facts; others say that there is nothing else than perception itself; we will not enter this debate since it would take us too far from our main points, but the first attitude seems to us the most reasonable one.

Now, whoever is interested in the general structure of knowledge will be first inevitably confronted with the fact that knowledge always has to do with how something is known about something. This fundamental pre-supposition can be expanded to include the fact that knowing has an object different from itself, at least formally. In other words, the content of knowledge is necessarily different from its object. An additional distinction of knowledge is connected with this initial approach to the subject: whoever wants to know about the structure and possible contents of knowledge will be referred to the domain of sentences. Here, knowledge (along with its contents) seems to be objectifiable in a form that can be grasped like an object. The methodological advantages of the coupling of knowledge with a linguistic entity, such as a statement, are easy to perceive. Namely, a statement, as a linguistic entity, can always be objectified and identified with no special difficulty. With the help of a sign system, statements are observable and evident. The advantages of that can
be clearly seen by thinking of a comparable situation in which someone tries to answer the question of the structures of knowledge not on the basis of statements but, on the basic of, for instance, the phenomena of consciousness. These phenomena can not be objectified and identified in the same way as propositional statements. As such, thus, they cannot be communicated to anyone else through propositional statements. So, a person is never quite sure whether the other partner involved in the discussion is really oriented to the same thing as s/he him/herself is. It is only in the domain of statements that knowledge seems to be tangible, like an object: it is expected of anyone who claims to know something that s/he can present and communicate the contents of that knowledge in the form of statements. This certainly applies not only to philosophy, but just as well to every other positive science: here, especially, nothing that cannot be represented and communicated in the form of statements is recognized as a possible insight and admitted for discussion. For in the positive approach to sciences, sentences and statements form the pivot of all understanding.

The form of knowledge described thus far (that is representable and communicable in statements) is generally called propositional knowledge in philosophical discussions. Whoever has propositional knowledge knows something about something. In regard to an object, he knows that something is definitely the case. Propositional knowledge always refers to an identifiable object of knowledge. Furthermore, since it can be embodied in a linguistic entity in the form of a statement, propositional knowledge is always able to be communicated to others.

In order to describe how ironical utterances give information about the personality itself of the speaker, one has to clarify how background capacities of the speaker or non-propositional knowledge is indeed knowledge. Certainly, it is not easy to clarify its uniqueness in comparison with other forms of knowledge. Non-propositional knowledge has been reintroduced into the current philosophical discussion — and over and beyond it — particularly by Gilbert Ryle. Ryle first introduced a distinction between knowledge in the sense of ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’ in his book *The Concept of Mind* (1986 [1949]: 25–61). In his formulation, knowing-how (or, as it is also sometimes called, ‘embodied knowledge’) is a characteristic of the expert: someone who acts, makes judgments, and so forth without explicitly reflecting on the principles or rules involved in this activity. The expert thus acts without having a systematic theory about his or her actions; s/he just performs them skillfully without deliberation or focused attention. Knowing that, by contrast, involves full consciously accessible knowledge that can be articulated. It is characteristic of a person who is learning a skill through explicit instruction, recitation...
of rules, attention to his/her movements, etc. While such declarative knowledge may be needed for the acquisition of skills, the argument goes, it is no longer necessary for practicing those skills once the novice has become an expert. Indeed it does appear, as Polanyi (1974 [1958]) argued, that when we acquire a skill, we acquire a corresponding understanding that defies full articulation.

One may liken the special feature of this form of knowledge to the experience of a physician, craftsman or businessman. In this sense, experience means knowledge that does not easily lend itself to objectification. In contrast to propositional knowledge, the type of knowledge represented by experience does not have an identifiable object of knowledge; on the contrary, it is related to a field of knowledge or, in other words, it is domain-specific. The person who possesses experience has thereby, conjoined, the ability to move about in the applicable field with certainty and to adequately react to all situations with which s/he comes into contact. Traditionally, this type of knowledge has always been relegated to the categorical types of dispositions. Dispositions cannot be pinned down directly: although evident in their effects, they are never totally manifested by any of them.

We can thus distinguish between non-propositional knowledge and the propositional type of knowledge by pointing out to the fact that the former does not represent simply the sum total of the knowledge of a certain area. Experience is rather a practical familiarity with things which fall into its area. Whoever possesses experience has the ability to move about in a certain field of knowledge. The degree of experience manifests itself in the ability of its bearer to rightly discern things in this area. The specific familiarity that one possesses with regard to functional things manifests itself in the ability to deal with them in an adequate way.

In this perspective, still another characteristic of non-propositional knowledge must be taken into consideration. Whereas ‘knowing that’ hardly divulges anything about the bearer, non-propositional knowledge is acutely dependent on its bearer. Because of its dispositional structure, ‘knowing how’ is a form of knowledge that can exist only to the extent that its bearer identifies him/herself with it. One can never dissociate oneself from it in the same way as one can dissociate oneself from one’s own statement and its contents. To be sure, propositional knowledge also remains dependent on a possible conveyor, but such a conveyor need not be defined individually. Therefore one can talk about a sentence, its contents and its structure without having to speak about the individual expressing the sentence. By contrast, it is certainly not possible to speak about certain experience without, at the same time, taking into account the authority who is the possessor of this experience.
A further difference between the propositional and non-propositional forms of knowledge seems to lie in communicability. Propositional knowledge is embodied in a linguistic expression and, in this form, can be always communicated to others. More precisely, the hearer can always raise a plausible hypothesis about the proposition(s) the speaker intends to convey by means of the linguistic stimulus. Nothing comparable applies to experiential knowledge. For experience cannot be simply transferred from one person to another; one can only acquire it by oneself. Experiential knowledge incorporates the process of acquisition as its indispensable part. In order to acquire propositional knowledge, it is always possible to extract subtasks and to delegate their completion to others. The operation of modern institutionalized science is based on this possibility. However, experience cannot be delegated. Although assistance and guidance can save the learner detours and dead ends, the specific efforts required in order to gain an experience cannot be spared by guidance and assistance.

The previous description of non-propositional knowledge had been described on the basis of experience, but could be equally applied to other forms of non-propositional knowledge such as abilities, talents or discernment. Summarizing, it concerns (1) knowledge that, in the strict sense, can be neither fully objectified nor (2) communicated, that is fully embedded into a semantic structure; which (3) does not directly intend its object and defy, therefore, the category of error; which, as a (4) dispositional characteristic, is always related to the authority of the bearer and is thus able to reveal reality to its possessor in an non-comparable way. As to the last point, it should be emphasized that human familiarity with the world is attained only in a limited measure by understanding true statements about it.

3. Where does the reflection on non-propositional knowledge meet the question of irony?

As stated earlier, the term ‘subjectivity’ can mean something like the quality or condition of viewing things exclusively through the medium of one’s own mind or individuality (cf. Oxford English Dictionary). For example, in talking about films or novels we often employ such expressions as ‘from our point of view.’ This is one way to introduce subjectivity. Subjectivity here has something to do with our special idiosyncratic ‘perceiving’ and also, perhaps, with ‘emotions.’ In this way we refer to someone’s perception: it is clear that the term is not used to describe primarily what the film is about — a particular character, topic or theme, but rather to describe in some way how the film presents itself to us.
The aforementioned description of non-propositional knowledge leads us back to the question of how ironic utterances can be understood as a semantic representation of mental processes or, more precisely, of a specific attitude. At this point, we are not interested in irony as merely a rhetorical technique that allows speakers to express something in an indirect way that could have also been expressed in a direct way. Instead, we are only interested in showing that ironic speech should not be understood exclusively from its semantic reference to the utterance. One should also consider the speaker’s intention as well as the effects s/he wants to produce on the side of the addressee. S/he who chooses irony as a specific form of utterance does not want to communicate by means of a specific content, but through the medium or form of his/her speech. It is through ironic speech that somebody refers by verbal means to something that literally could not be expressed, but that, however, has its own logic. Irony seems to be a proper means by which one refers to certain logic that does not follow the structure of a verbal argument, and, consequently, cannot be communicated by means of entire sentences. Whoever uses or understands irony in this way refers always to sensible elements in the situation of speech that cannot be fully verbalized. With regard to the impossibility of fully verbalizing some crucial contents of ironical utterances, irony can be comparable to metaphors: when trying to translate metaphor into a literal form, one ends up with a form that carries less meaning than the metaphorical utterance.

The meaning and the function of a non-propositional knowledge, indissolubly linked with the one knowing, is exemplified in the person of Plato’s Socrates. One paradigmatic example for his irony is Socrates’ token that he knows that he does not know anything. This sentence is ironic insofar as it doesn’t harmonize with the knowledge that Socrates demonstrates in many dialogues with other people. However, if one would consider as a kind of knowledge only that which has been verbally expressed, Socrates indeed seems to be a person with rather scarce knowledge. There are only very few statements concerning some specific knowledge that he utters. And he usually never maintains or proclaims to know things. His knowledge would have to be considered quite modest indeed if it were to be judged by the number of sentences that he endorsed as accurate. When he admits his ignorance, he is not using irony of the trivial type, which means the opposite of the wording expressed. The knowledge that sets Socrates apart from all his dialogue partners is not at all the type that can be represented and expressed as assertions. Rather, it is a kind of ability that proves itself able to deal with assertions, to examine them in relation to their obvious and concealed prerequisites and to refer them back to their author. This knowledge can neither be disassociated from
the person nor can it be objectified. It is manifested in a capacity for theoretical and practical discernment by which it is characterized, far exceeding all its rivals.

4. Irony and the technique of deictic messages

Irony, at least in the broad sense in which this term had been introduced previously, has much to do with subjectivity, itself having much to do with the deictic situation of speech in its various aspects (physical, but also conventional). Language is equipped with numerous devices dealing with the situation of speech, in particular indexical (or deictic) expressions. Whereas the Anglo-Saxon approach to indexicality focuses on referential problems (Perry 1979, 2000; Kaplan 1989; Castaneda 1967), the French tradition has theorized deictic expressions through the idea that they carry a very particular part of meaning that is lost when reformulating things non-deictically; this very part of meaning is about subjectivity. This idea, of course, has also roots in the works of Bühler (1990 [1934]). Benveniste expanded his linguistic theory to a global theory of subjectivity in interaction: through reference to the situation of speech, the hearer and the speaker constitute themselves as ‘subjectivities’ (this time with some psychoanalytical load in the meaning of ‘subjectivity’). More evidently, it is the case that the situation of face-to-face interaction in a particular situation is the typical place where phatic communication is at work; it is nothing new to suggest that deictic expressions have also a phatic function in many circumstances. The phatic part of communication taking place is, as with irony, non-propositional: ‘phatic’ cannot be reduced to a full-fledged adequate ‘translation’ of the phatic component.

With the term phatic communication, a technique of deictic messages, we refer to all those features of a verbal argument by which it becomes understandable for the addressee, except in its semantic representation. Among such features we count here are the form, material and circumstances under which the verbal entity is uttered.

Nowadays we are inclined to elaborate the chances that the externalization of language and knowledge offers us. We are accustomed to start our analysis from the verbal forms. The advantage of this proceeding is evident: It allows us to fix and determine knowledge and insights of verbal forms even if the bearer of this utterance or the speaker is not present. One might compare the underlying attitude with that of a mathematician: Whoever analyses logical forms of verbal arguments behaves in a similar way as a mathematician does with countable units and figures.
In contrast to all those direct communications, phatic components do not have any predicative structure. Predicative assertions always underlie truth conditions, they are necessarily true or false. Phatic components, instead, usually do not have any predicative structure. The same holds about parts of the meanings of indexicals, as argued in Saussure (forthcoming). Utterances, besides describing a fact, can show something, imitate something, or give semiotic access to something different. But these utterances never do so by showing something as something. Consequently, they do not refer to the principle of truth. One can show somebody else a certain thing (imitating, for example, how a certain protagonist in a movie is walking), and one might also not show it. But it is impossible to show somebody doing something ‘wrong.’ This is only possible insofar as the one doing so is inducing the addressee to certain inferences. Phatic or deictic messages, and other types of messages anchored in the deictic situation, cannot be affirmed or declined; one can only say, whether they have been done or not. Of course, one might also speak about these ‘deictic messages,’ but doing so one needs a direct form of communication. However, these direct forms do not change at all the categorical structure of the ‘deictic messages.’

Usually, in a normal conversation these deictic messages are not a part of what the speaker intends to say. But in written texts, these deictic elements could become an important part of the narration itself. Leaving language proper aside for a minute: answers can be given in a written text, implicitly, by the very action it presents. Once again a reference to Plato, although we might study several other authors of literary or philosophical texts (the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard would be another good example) who used these means intentionally. What usually happens in Platonic dialogues and what constitutes their dramatic or mimetic quality is that the most that is told to the reader about the figure of Socrates is given by Socrates’ actions. Of course, in many dialogues we learn about Socrates by explicit statements of his dialogue partners. But this is not to be compared with all what we learn about his experience and procedural knowledge that can be communicated only by means of these ‘deictic messages.’ Socrates’ ability to guide a conversation, bringing his partners into an aporetic situation — this kind of knowledge could never be completely verbalized.

5. Conclusion: Irony as a form departing from expected forms

At this stage, we can come back to the intuitions we presented at the end of section 1. The approaches of irony we mentioned in the first section do
not say much about the link between irony and convention, even though
Grice considers irony as a kind of non-respect of the convention he names
‘maxim of quality,’ although he doesn’t go very far on this point. In fact,
we suggest that ironic utterances are such either because they depart from
a certain linguistic convention (such as ‘say what you believe is true’),
either by intentional flows upon the expected properly applied convention
or by misapplying certain convention to a given situation in which it is
not proper according to standards.

We find it notable that one can speak about irony in music (e.g., in
some pieces by Haydn) in the sense that the composer intentionally mis-
uses a given stylistic convention. For instance, he may use folk elements
in a minuet, although the minuet was a most aristocratic and elevated
type of dance. Or he may write a very aristocratic minuet but form cross-
rhythms at a given point that would cause a mismatch of dance-steps of
the elevated dancers if the minuet was really danced. It is interesting that
several authors have pointed to the fact that this sort of irony in music
allows the composer to expose his subjectivity because in this way he dis-
tances himself from conventions, instead of having his personality hidden
behind the strict respect of conventions (see Agawu and Mirka 2008).
This is close to the Romantic ideal of the author with a strong emphasis
upon subjectivity (all this issue has plenty to do with the concept of joke
in the aesthetics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century). It is
highly interesting that the birth of subjectivity at the beginning of the
nineteenth century was really out of irony, as we say in our title.

Transposing this kind of irony onto language, one could say that the
irony of a given utterance — in addition to being about propositions and
persons — can be about conventions of a given language per se. We
mean, in particular, stylistic conventions of language use specific to cer-
tain circles or certain situations (e.g., scientific language, journalist jarg-
on, dialect, teenager slang, and so forth). By using a bit of slang or dia-
lect during a conference paper, the speaker may call forth an ironic effect
as an example of irony not about any person but either about the situa-
tion of a conference panel or of the topic he discusses.

This discussion of non-propositional knowledge as one marker of sub-
jectivity leads us naturally to discuss irony — beyond its semantic content
— as a personal ‘disposition.’ In other words, at this point of our argu-
ment we would take the step of showing how, by an ironic use of conven-
tion, the speaker detaches him- or herself from a given convention in
order to show that, although informed about it and accepting it as a so-
cial contract, s/he is not in a relation of full dependency, or ‘identical’
with a social contract but — as an individual — has his/her own particu-
lar position in front of it. In this perspective, irony is not an expertise in
some particular skill or ability (e.g., an ability to use convention) but an
ability of moving around in reality as such, that is to say, in his/her
understanding of reality, in his/her position in front of reality in its
totality or taken in its particular segment. Irony, in this respect, is one
of the most important resources the human being has to show a kind of
independence, a kind of creative freedom, thanks to which s/he escapes
from the norm, which is always expected, by default, to be applied.

Note

1. One can already see an incipient clear indication of the difficulty of adequately grasping
the uniqueness of this non-propositional knowledge by observing the German transla-
tor’s dilemma of how to express these terms in German. While ‘knowing that’ or ‘to
know that’ can be assigned to what we call propositional knowledge (expressed simply
as ‘knowledge’ by Ryle’s translator), there is no appropriate expression for ‘knowing
how’ or ‘to know how.’ Therefore, when referring to this form of knowledge, the Ger-
man translation speaks of ‘ability.’ Perhaps the translator was thinking of Ludwig Witt-
genstein who, in his Philosophical Investigations, found that the semantics of the word
‘know’ was obviously closely related to the semantics of words like ‘can,’ ‘be able to,’
‘be capable of’ (1960: 356). In his examination of Greek texts, Bruno Snell (1924: 83)
had already noted that the expression episteme (as well as the verb epistamai) is not
merely knowledge about a fact or a certain circumstance, but rather describes the under-
standing that an activity makes possible.

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