# Viewpoint in Language

*A Multimodal Perspective*

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# 1    Irony as a viewpoint phenomenon

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## 1.1    A curious example

In *Jesus Is Magic*, a concert film of her off-Broadway stand-up comedy routine, Sarah Silverman (2005) tells a joke:

(1)    "Everybody blames the Jews for killing Christ, and then the Jews try to pass it off on the Romans. I'm one of the few people that believe it was the blacks."

The audience seems to have no trouble identifying this utterance as a kind of ironic joke, in which the comedian is presenting an absurd or offensive position in order to mock it, rather than simply asserting it. In order to appreciate the joke, her audience must understand it as performing more than one speech act at once. At the most superficial level, there is the act performed by Silverman's cheerfully narrow-minded, unflappable onstage persona, who is presenting her novel theory about the death of Christ. This ostensible act alludes to at least two other (sets of) speech acts: first, the centuries-old anti-Semitic trope that "Jews killed Jesus," and second, Lenny Bruce's famous jokes skewering that claim (catalogued in Bruce 1963: 155). For example:

(2)    "Yes, we did it. I did it. My family. I found a note in my basement: 'We killed him – signed, Morty.'"

Where the joke in (2) is a fairly straightforward example of verbal irony, however, (1) seems to involve something more complicated and perhaps even problematic. This joke is not quite like its predecessor. Something about it leads commentators to wonder if laughing makes the audience complicit in "the cheap thrill of public racism" (Anderson 2005), even though it is also clear that Silverman does not really believe that "the blacks" killed Christ.

While the structure and context of the joke invite the audience to join the comedian in the contemplation of something from an ironic distance, the actual object of Silverman's ironizing is unclear. The victims of Bruce's irony are real anti-Semites, but there is no such real-life bigot who believes that "the blacks" killed Jesus. The absence of any obvious viewpoint one could share

with the speaker, or any obvious way of figuring out where her viewpoint might really be, generates interpretive tension. Part of Silverman's edgy appeal rests on the difficulty of decoding her ironic intentions. Is the joke on racists, on the audience, on political comedy?

This off-kilter experience seems to us to be exactly the point of the joke. It is a concise example of what Wayne Booth (1974) called "unstable irony": an irony that offers no final interpretation that is not subject to the prospect of further ironic undermining. We would like to explicate the processes of meaning construction that make this joke both ironic and unsettling. While pretense is involved in this performance (cf Clark and Gerrig 1984; Kreuz and Glucksberg 1989; Clark 1996), and so is a sort of echoic mention (cf Sperber and Wilson 1981) of the original anti-Semitic remark, neither of these factors is self-evidently the source of the unstable ironic effect itself.

## 1.2    Isn't it ironic?

Irony is a puzzling thing. It has been a source of wonder for scholars in many traditions, from German Romantics to psycholinguists and Alanis Morrisette (the popular singer who famously asked, "Isn't it ironic?"). But since the beginning of the Modern era, the variety of phenomena called "irony" by rhetoricians, literary scholars, and the public in general has proliferated (Knox 1961), so it is worth considering whether all these phenomena really have anything of substance in common at all.

Within the cognitive sciences, it is common (Sperber and Wilson 1981, 1998; Clark and Gerrig 1984; Kreuz and Glucksberg 1989) to restrict studies of irony to "verbal irony," of which sarcasm is the paradigm case. These accounts tend to focus on the problem of how these kinds of ironic utterances are recognized; the basic goal is to identify the necessary features for an ironic utterance and the cognitive mechanisms that enable hearers to identify and interpret such utterances. Literary studies tend to come at irony from the opposite direction. Rather than considering readers' "successful" interpretations of any given ironic statement, literary accounts often seek to tease out more and more ironies surrounding a text, and to point out how these ironies make it difficult or impossible to pin down stable meanings (Empson 1947; Colebrook 2004).

We suggest that these concerns are in fact complementary, and that literary and linguistic theories of irony have much to gain from one another. There are two major issues that we feel have been somewhat neglected in linguistic theories of irony. First, "irony" is the name of not one thing, but a whole range of phenomena. Our account builds on theories that treat irony as a form of echoic mention (Sperber and Wilson 1981, 1998) or pretense (Clark and Gerrig 1984; Kreuz and Glucksberg 1989), but applies to a broader range of literary and cultural phenomena, including classical cases like Swift's "Modest Proposal";

cosmic and dramatic ironies; multilayered ironies of the sort found in Borges; irony as a kind of sensibility, as in Romantic irony and camp; and the existence of entire ironic genres, such as the pseudo-scholarly articles produced by fans of Arthur Conan Doyle, which operate under the conceit that Sherlock Holmes was a genuine historical figure.

It is possible that these different senses of irony are only related by a chain of historical associations, and do not form a natural type. Still, almost as long as there have been formal discussions of irony, it has been treated as a phenomenon with many guises. Even Quintilian, whose definition of irony as a trope in which one says the opposite of what one means is often presented as the canonical, overly simplistic "classical view" of the form, in fact described irony as something that could be expressed over the course of extended, discursive "figures of thought," as well as through simple anaphrasis (Butler 1921).

Rather than presenting an account of verbal irony alone, then, theorists should consider whether verbal irony and other phenomena sometimes called "ironic" do, in fact, have anything significant in common. The production and interpretation of sarcastic utterances may well rely on similar cognitive mechanisms to those that underlie the performance and appreciation of dramatic, situational, and Socratic irony.

Intuitively, what seems to unite the various sorts of irony is the existence of some kind of complex viewpoint on a single situation, the quality that Fowler (1926) described as the "double audience" that distinguishes irony from mere incongruity. Our account suggests that this intuitive connection reflects genuine, shared, underlying conceptual structure.

The second issue is an apparent paradox. On the one hand, irony is difficult. The ability to understand it comes relatively late in cognitive development, and even adults frequently misinterpret it, so much so that the potential for misunderstanding appears to be a defining feature of the figure. But irony is also ubiquitous. It is a commonplace of cultural criticism that certain strata of Western culture can no longer be sincere, only "post-ironic." Literature, of course, has long depended on irony for tragic or comedic effect, but irony also fills the emails we send (with newly invented typographic effects to signal one's lack of sincerity), the music we listen to, even the clothes we wear and the food we eat – think of urbane adults who wear My Little Pony shirts or serve Moon Pies at their weddings. We are incapable, it seems, of resisting the ironic urge.

In light of these facts, a theory of irony ideally ought to explain how verbal irony relates to other kinds of irony, as well as why irony is both sometimes very hard to understand and sometimes very hard to control, allowing for apparently endless layering in certain contexts.

Drawing on work in Mental Spaces Theory (Fauconnier 1985, 1997) and Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1999), we argue that irony is fundamentally a viewpoint effect in which a conceptualization is simultaneously accessed

from multiple perspectives. Acts of ironic understanding in general, including verbal, dramatic, and situational ironies, involve a type of dynamic reconstrual in which attention "zooms out" from the focused content of a mental space to a higher viewpoint from which the original Viewpoint Space is reassessed. In this interpretive process, a meaning is accessed from one viewpoint (the ironized) and then, simultaneously or a little later, re-accessed from a higher viewpoint (the ironic).

## 1.3    Various views of verbal irony

Figurative language in general poses a fundamental problem for a theory of utterance interpretation – how is it that a speaker can say one thing, mean something else, and yet hope to be understood?

The unifying quality of so-called "verbal ironies" (as opposed, for instance, to dramatic ironies) is that typically they can be "decoded" by understanding that the speaker's actual position and the speaker's sarcastically adopted position differ in crucial ways. Sarcasm is the paradigm case of concise verbal irony. Swift's *Modest Proposal* is the classic extended example. Swift's narrator proposes that Irish babies should be bred and slaughtered as meat for human consumption. The successful interpreter understands that the implied Swift himself proposes no such thing; instead he is presenting a savage and satirical criticism of the cruelty of the English landlord class.

We consider traditional distinctions between different rhetorical figures theoretically justified so long as they involve distinct cognitive strategies. In this light, what actually counts as an instance of verbal irony depends in part on how one understands the phenomenon to work.

A classical view, going back at least to Cicero and Quintilian, is that an ironic utterance is one that means the opposite of what it says: as Johnson put it in his dictionary, irony is "a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words" (1755: 1134). Neither Johnson nor Quintilian is fully explicit as to just what sorts of meanings should count as contrary here, but the most common assumption seems to be that an ironic meaning should be the polar contrary of the expressed meaning – for example, saying *He's a fine friend* to mean "He's a lousy friend," or *Rotten meat! How delightful!* to mean "Rotten meat! How disgusting!"

The problem with this account is that there are many utterances that intuitively count as ironic, but in which the speaker does not mean anything like the opposite of what he says. Thus Gibbs (1986) cites the example of a disgruntled driver who exclaims, "I love people who signal," after another driver turns into his lane without signaling. Clearly, the speaker here does not mean that he hates people who signal, nor that he loves people who do not signal. The proposition that the speaker has expressed is in fact just what the speaker believes – the

irony here is not in what the speaker says, but rather in the fact that he should choose this occasion to say it.

Approaches based on echoic mention, such as Sperber and Wilson (1981), assimilate verbal irony to the broader phenomenon of the use/mention distinction. The basic idea is that a speaker, in producing an ironic utterance, mentions an expressed proposition rather than using it. This theory is often misunderstood as implying that irony always involves some sort of literal echo or quotation of a previous utterance. However, the claim is only that the speaker presents an expressed proposition as the kind of thing one might say. The thought being echoed may not have been expressed in an utterance; it may not be attributable to any specific person, but merely to a type of person, or people in general; it may be merely a cultural aspiration or norm (Wilson and Sperber 1992: 60). Echoed thoughts may be a reflection of actual utterances, or of hopes, desires, attributed thoughts, or cultural norms.

One advantage of this approach is that it offers a neat explanation of why verbal irony is easier when it takes the form of a positive comment on a manifestly negative situation (e.g. *Brilliant!* as a comment on a boneheaded action, or *Lovely weather!* as a comment on a sudden downpour) than in the opposite case, when it takes the form of a negative comment on a positive situation (*What a jerk!* of someone who has been very helpful, *What an idiot!* of a Nobel Prize winner, or *What foul weather!* said on a sunny day). According to the echoic mention account, the former examples work in almost any context, because they echo positive cultural norms; the latter only work where there is some accessible prior utterance or expectation that they can echo:

(3)    Peter: The weather is going to turn foul. I have a nasty feeling about that picnic.
       [Peter and Mary go to the picnic planned with their friends. The sun shines.]
       Mary: Pretty foul weather, all right!

While the theory has a number of virtues, and does seem to describe an important variety of ironic utterances, it remains open to criticism. It is not clear that echoic mention is always a necessary condition for irony. It is difficult to see how the irony in a satire like *A Modest Proposal*, for example, is predicated sheerly on echoic mention: there is no cultural norm, prior utterance, or expectation for eating Irish babies being echoed here. Nor is echoic mention by itself sufficient to explain irony. Giora (1995: 248) points out that utterances like (4b) are both echoic and disparaging, but not ironic, while utterances like (5b) are indeed ironic.

(4a)    Dina: I missed the last news broadcast. What did the Prime Minister say about the Palestinians?

(4b)    Mira (with ridiculing aversion): That we should deport them.

(5a)    Dina: I missed the last news broadcast. What did the Prime Minister say about the Palestinians?

(5b)    Mira: That we should host them in 5-star hotels in Lebanon.

Alternate approaches based on pretense (Clark and Gerrig 1984; Clark 1996; also Kreuz and Glucksberg 1989; Kumon-Nakamura *et al.* 1995) can handle both of these cases. These accounts propose that verbal irony occurs when the speaker pretends to some attitude that she does not really feel and expects her audience to recognize that it is a pretense. Swift's *Modest Proposal* thus can be explained as follows: the author is pretending an attitude, that of sincerely proposing that Irish children be slaughtered and sold as meat for human consumption. The pretense theory can also explain the lack of irony in (4), by pointing out that Mira is in no way pretending to hold a view or to perform a role that is not her own. Mira really does believe that the Prime Minister said that the Palestinians should be deported.

However, just as there are many kinds of mention that are not ironic, there are many forms of non-ironic pretense. Further, as pointed out by Sperber (1984), there is something unsatisfying, at the very least, about the pretense account when it comes to ironic utterances that are manifestly self-contradictory, as in (6), which is a perfectly well-formed piece of sarcasm, but not a very coherent act of pretense.

(6)    Oh, yes, how right you are; this disgusting state of affairs is just delightful.

Since the 1980s, a number of hybrid accounts have been proposed. Giora (1995) suggests a modification of the Gricean pragmatic analysis of irony, in which she argues that irony is a kind of *indirect negation* produced by an apparent violation of the cooperative requirements for discourse coherence, specifically produced by a clash between the most salient meaning of an utterance and the degree of informativeness that is appropriate for that utterance, given its discourse context. An ironic utterance thus highlights the difference between an actual state of affairs and some implicated message about a more desirable state of affairs. Attardo (2000) also takes a neo-Gricean view of irony, explaining it as a case of *relevant inappropriateness*: if an utterance is both inappropriate and relevant to the context, it will count as ironic.

However, some examples that are handled fairly straightforwardly by other approaches turn out to be problematic for these theories. The condition of relevant inappropriateness covers many cases that do not seem to qualify as irony, such as polite understatements. Meanwhile, so-called "purely echoic" cases, like the ironic "Pretty foul weather, all right!" in (3), do not conjure up a more desirable state of affairs, as predicted by the indirect negation account, and indeed Giora (2003) argues that these cases represent a fundamentally different phenomenon than the kinds of sarcasm explained by her theory. This

is a reasonable line to take on the issue, but since our project in this chapter is to account for the features that verbal irony does share with other kinds of irony, it means that these theories will not be sufficient for our purposes.

## 1.4    Irony as a viewpoint phenomenon

The most common way of thinking about irony is as an operation on a focused proposition. We suggest that irony is instead an operation on the way a focused proposition is accessed and viewed: it is a way of *construing* an expressed proposition or an observed scene. That is, ironic utterances, like ironic situations, are distinguished by the sort of interpretive process they evoke. In particular, we claim that the interpretation of irony involves three key elements:

1. a layered configuration of mental spaces;
2. a shift in attention from an inner to an outer layer – a "zooming-out";
3. a dynamic blended construal of an event from two distinct viewpoints.

We see these elements as essential not only to the appreciation of verbal irony, but also to the experience of situational ironies, ironic sensibilities, and structural ironies that are built up over the course of an extended narrative.

In speaking here of irony as an interpretive process, we seek to highlight the dynamic and unsettling nature of the ironic experience, but we do not wish thereby to suggest that there is only one way this experience can be achieved. Canonically, perhaps, the elements of an ironic interpretation are built online – the interpreter starting with a view that proves somehow inadequate (the ironized view), and then adjusting to a new, more satisfying (ironic) viewpoint. In practice, however, readers and interlocutors may approach the act of interpretation with an ironic attitude right from the start, deploying an ironic mental space configuration as a default mode of understanding, as, for example, in that peculiarly sophisticated attitude that takes pleasure in the enjoyment of camp (cf Sontag 1964), or in the simultaneous appreciation of several mutually exclusive explanations of the world that Schlegel described as the ironic sensibility of Romanticism.

A precise articulation of this proposal will depend on a few technical details of Mental Spaces Theory. First, every mental space configuration canonically includes a Base, a Viewpoint, an Event, and a Focus, although a single space can serve as more than one of these at the same time (Cutrer 1994; Fauconnier 1997). The Base Space serves as the subjectively construed Ground of interpretation. The Viewpoint Space is the space from which conceptual content is accessed. The space in Focus is the space on which attention is concentrated. The Event Space is the one in which an event takes place.

Mental spaces also have *status* with relation to other spaces. These relative statuses can be hierarchical: mental spaces can be embedded within other mental spaces. They can be temporal: a space can be figured as past with respect to
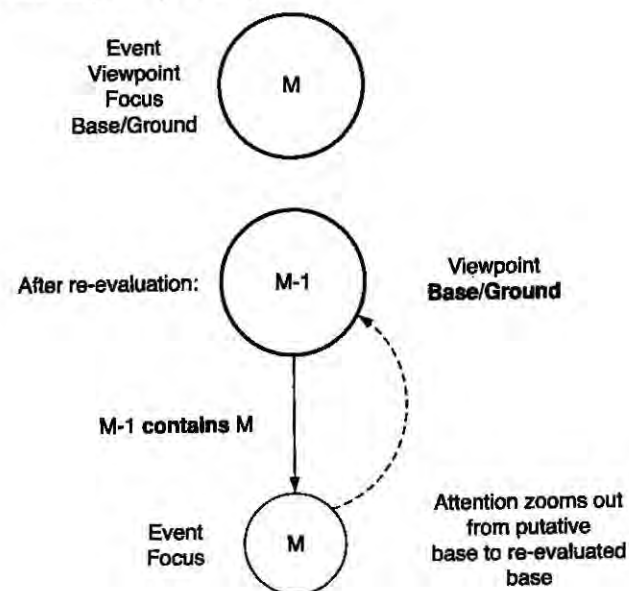
Figure 1.1

one space and present with respect to another. They can also be epistemic: one space can have the status of fact with respect to another space, for example, or prediction.

Finally, mental spaces are also potential objects of joint attention, as speakers and hearers try to coordinate their mental representations and share attention to various aspects of those representations. Conceptualizers can shift their attention within mental space configurations, moving their viewpoint from space to space.

In these terms, then, we propose that irony is a figure of attention flow consisting of three minimal steps:

1. The presentation of a proposition $p$ in a Focus Space F from a Viewpoint Space V (where F and V may, but need not be identical).
2. The assessment of some conflict or incongruity between $p$ and some set of assumptions that are accessible in the context of $p$.
3. The reconstrual of F, V, and $p$ from a higher Viewpoint Space, V', in a way that resolves any inconsistencies.

The effect of this process is that an ironic utterance presents a proposition almost simultaneously from at least two distinct points of view: an ironized viewpoint (V) and an ironic viewpoint (V').

The basic ironic configuration, illustrated very schematically in Figure 1.1, involves a perceived incompatibility between a profiled Event and some set of
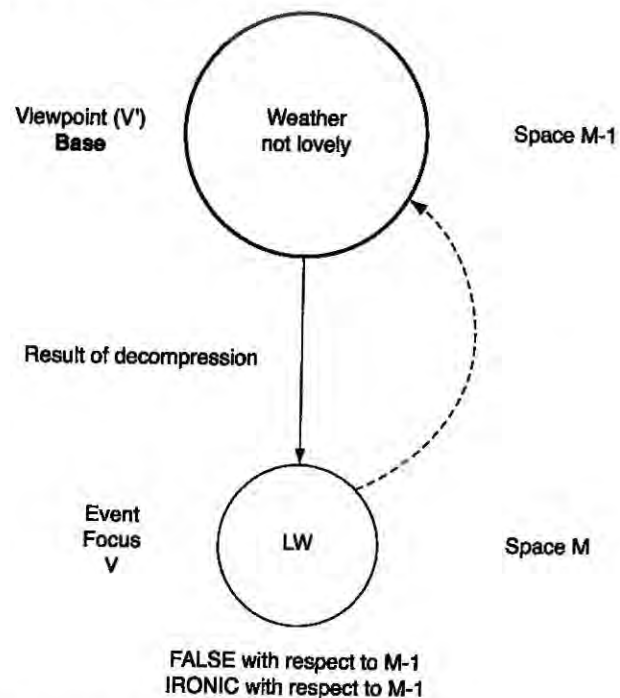
Figure 1.2

tacit assumptions about the common ground. Verbal irony involves a mental space configuration in which what is said (i.e. what is manifestly communicated in a speech act) is somehow incongruent with the conditions of its own utterance. In order to resolve this incongruity, the interpreter must effectively reconceptualize the context of utterance, thus prompting the construction of a new viewpoint from a new, re-evaluated Base (M-1), which contains the original Event Space (M).

Figure 1.2 illustrates how this works with a relatively straightforward sarcastic utterance: "Lovely weather," said in response to a sudden downpour. Here, the utterance *Lovely weather* sets up space M, containing the proposition that the weather (presumably the weather at hand, of which speaker and hearer share awareness in their common ground) is lovely.

Normally, space M might be understood as a factual belief space, representing the speaker's current view of reality, but in this case the reality of the situation is plainly at odds with the expressed proposition. The ironic interpretation arises when a hearer both recognizes this incongruity and thereby recognizes that the expressed viewpoint of the utterance is not in fact that of the speaker. This

recognition may be achieved by pragmatic inferencing alone, in which case a hearer may first consider and then reject a literal interpretation, or it may be facilitated by paralinguistic cues involving facial expressions or tone of voice, in which case it may be virtually immediate.[1]

Either way, the result is a mental space configuration in which the expressed viewpoint and the speaker viewpoint are somehow disentangled. This disentangling requires a second Base Space, M-1, which serves as a kind of higher ground from which space M can be reconsidered. In Figure 1.2, the solid arrow marks the status of M as subordinate to M-1, while the dashed arrow represents the flow of attention zooming out from M to the new higher ground. Because the irony here is intentional and is recognized as such, speaker and hearer share this conception of the entire ironic configuration. M retains an associated viewpoint, V, which speaker and hearer "look down on" from their shared ironic viewpoint, V'. The zoom-out effect of irony is a form of alienation from this lower-level viewpoint and from those who hold it; this is the reason that irony often has a victim.

Again, it is worth emphasizing that in our view irony does not require an interpreter to first entertain and then reject a literal interpretation, but may come more or less instantaneously in a pre-compiled, complex space configuration. But whether an irony is built online or pre-compiled as part of an ironic sensibility, the experience consists of the simultaneous apprehension of two incompatible viewpoints, one of which is rejected and in effect looked down on. The difference between these two ways of experiencing irony is roughly analogous to the distinction drawn by Langacker (1987: 144–5) between the two ways of construing an event that unfolds in time, either by scanning the stages of the event sequentially in processing time or by imagining the event all at once, with a summary scanning of its subparts.

This account is compatible with the "distancing" viewpoint configuration described by Vandelanotte (this volume), in which certain examples of indirect speech and thought serve to report or present another person's discourse, while keeping the deictic center of person, place, and time all firmly with the current speaker. The claim is that this kind of speech and thought representation involves mental space evocation (Dancygier and Sweetser 2000, 2005) rather than embedding – that is, it requires the interpreter to look for an appropriate space, accessible within the current discourse configuration, rather than having to create an all-new, embedded space. Such cases are thus echoic, in the sense of Sperber and Wilson (1981), but they are not always, or even usually, ironic.

They can be, though. Vandelanotte observes that the effect of these kinds of utterances is distancing, because of the unexpected confluence of contextual signals that indicate that there are two speech situations in play – both the current and the reported – without any explicit linguistic indication of this complexity. Moreover, different versions of this configuration can invoke more or

less associative or dissociative attitudes between current and reported speaker. Vandelanotte connects more dissociative configurations with the expression of literary irony and sarcasm, which is just the way we see it as well.

In the last few years, other researchers have proposed accounts of irony within Mental Spaces Theory. These theories have generally focused on verbal irony, and have claimed that the underlying structure of sarcasm depends crucially on counterfactual thinking. Coulson (2005: 136) argues that in "sarcastic language, the listener is confronted with a blend that she must unpack into two input spaces: an *expected reaction space* and a *counterfactual trigger space*." Kihara (2005: 236) similarly suggests that "ironical remarks have their effects by referring to a counterfactual mental space of expectation without any distinct space builders." We find these accounts appealing in many ways, but note that there are good reasons not to pin an account of irony too tightly to counterfactuality. Kumon-Nakamura *et al.* (1995), among others, point out that there are many kinds of insincerity that are not counterfactual, but are perceived as ironic, such as statements like, "You sure know a lot," directed to someone who is indeed knowledgeable, but being an obnoxious show-off about it.

In our account, irony involves a special kind of viewing arrangement – a view of a Viewpoint in a complex mental space configuration. Like Coulson, we thus see irony as involving a kind of a blend; however, in our account, the blending takes place not in the Focus Space where a proposition is expressed, but rather in the Viewpoint from which an expressed proposition is accessed. The experience involves the same propositional content being accessed simultaneously from two incompatible viewpoints, one of which encompasses the other. This is what makes irony different from the experience of simply being in two minds about something. The ironic effect itself appears to arise from the way a whole construal (including an expressed proposition in focus from some viewpoint) itself becomes an object of construal. This is similar to what happens in the cases of mental space alignment that Vandelanotte (this volume) describes, in which "the represented speaker's discourse ends up submerged in that of the current speaker."

What happens with the experience of irony, then, is an adjustment from this blend to a new Viewpoint (zooming out) that is construed as both separate and superordinate: in Haiman's (1998: 80) terms, distinguishing "the difference between a behaving and a scrutinizing self." This viewpoint adjustment is a kind of decompression (Fauconnier and Turner 2002).

This account has several merits. It generalizes insights of previous theories of verbal irony to handle other kinds of ironic effects, and it allows for a more articulated treatment of layered ironies and ironies that seem to violate the logic of stacked levels. Irony can arise wherever a discourse structure provides a multilevel network of mental spaces. Where verbal irony involves a mismatch between what a speaker says and some set of mutually manifest

assumptions in the common ground, cosmic irony involves a mismatch between facts and expectations at the level of an event itself, and dramatic irony involves a mismatch between facts at the event level and beliefs at a higher narrative level.

It also suggests that there is a reason why some genres seem particularly to lend themselves to irony. The ironizing viewpoint constitutes a new common ground between the interpreter and some implicit or explicit interlocutor, or fellow-observer. This higher ground may be constructed in the process of interpretation, but it may also be already established by the discourse situation in which the irony occurs. Narrative fiction, for example, comes with a (usually overt) narrator, who is understood as distinct from, if sometimes closely aligned with, an implied author.

## 1.5    A stable structural irony: Huck Finn reverts to his wicked ways

As we have seen, of the phenomena commonly described as "ironic," verbal irony is by far the most frequently discussed in the cognitive science and linguistics literature. Verbal ironies are intentional, and understanding them relies at least in part on recognizing a difference between what is said and the proposition and attitude that the speaker intends to convey.

Cosmic or situational irony, by contrast, is perpetrated by the universe, rather than by a speaker. It arises from twists of fate in which hopes and expectations are overturned in some fundamental way. To die of thirst surrounded by water, or to lose the thing you love best through the very actions that you take in order to preserve it, is to be the victim of a cosmic irony. To be subject to such an irony is perhaps poignant, but also absurd, or at least faintly ridiculous. There is a sense that destiny has conspired to play a joke on the irony's unhappy target, as if fate, the universe, or some other omniscient agent were in some way the author of the irony.

The complex viewpoint involved in appreciating cosmic irony arises not from a conflict between an expressed proposition and the real communicative intentions of its utterer, but between something like the apparent "intentions" of the universe and the futile original intentions or expectations of the irony's victim, so that the former make a mockery of the latter. Appreciating the irony in such a circumstance requires a certain amount of detachment: again, it calls for the interpreter to take a particular view of a viewpoint. In taking one's own circumstances to be ironic, one must momentarily step outside oneself, to indulge in a perhaps rueful or bitter chuckle at one's own expense.

A similar process underlies the interpretation of stable dramatic and structural ironies – the kinds of irony that play a central role in *Tristram Shandy*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Mansfield Park*, or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. A stable irony (Booth 1974) is one that can be grasped in one go, without the prospect of

an infinite regress of further ironic undermining. In these cases, the particular disparity is between what a narrating character or persona *takes herself to mean* and the deeper or higher significance that the implied author seems to intend the reader to understand. As in verbal irony, these texts say one thing and mean another, but here the double meaning arises from the presentation of a character whose account of events is clearly unreliable in some way. She is untrustworthy or naive; some failing that the implied author of the text recognizes and does not share impairs her judgment: prejudice, perhaps, or limited perspicacity, or personal interest.

In interpreting these ironies, the reader can make use of an already established detached or superior Viewpoint, or decompress a blend, to make an ironizing Viewpoint/Ground newly available. For example, the moment in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* when Huck decides to help Jim, even though he believes that doing so is a sin, involves a sustained clash between the focalizing viewpoint and what the reader takes to be the case, prompting the reader to zoom out to the higher ground associated with the implied author. Here is the passage in question (Twain 2008 [1884]: 143):

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking – thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the *only* one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll *go* to hell" – and tore it up.

It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.

Huck is a victim of this irony, although not in the same way as the object of a satire is its victim. Here, the effect is sympathetic, even poignant; Huck is a victim of his own ironic circumstances, and both reader and implied author see that irony, crediting Huck with additional virtue thereby. Huck's conviction that his decision is damnable makes its true laudability all the more evident.

The ostensible viewpoint in this passage lies squarely with the narrator, Huck. But the reader knows, through information built up over the course of the novel, that the perspective implicated in statements like *how near I come to being lost and going to hell* is more complex. Here, Huck is re-enacting discourse and professing beliefs that properly belong to someone else – to the pious and small-minded Miss Douglas, to the prevailing views of white Southern society that surround him – and the distance between Huck's true convictions and the beliefs that he echoes is made increasingly explicit over the course of this passage. So far, this state of affairs looks strikingly like the examples of dissociative, ironic DIST discussed in Vandelanotte (this volume). However, in this case, the putative speaker is patently unaware of the distance between the two positions. This is not a verbal irony that can be ascribed to the speaker himself. Something else is going on.

This kind of structural irony involves much the same kind of interpretive work as verbal irony, but with an additional layer. Something is said. The reader who enjoys the irony then appreciates that an attitude is being conveyed that differs from what is being said, but that the intention behind this double articulation cannot be ascribed to the putative speaker. To resolve the clash of perspectives, the reader must take recourse to a higher level of the discourse situation, as illustrated in Figure 1.3. The normally latent perspective of the implied author is recruited to provide a viewpoint from which the subjective narrating viewpoint can be newly construed as an object of conceptualization. The "I" of the higher Viewpoint Space looks upon, rather than participating in, the vexed viewpoint represented by the "I" of Huck's Ground.

Ordinarily, readers are not continually consciously aware of the implied author as they proceed through a text, and the more successful a piece of fiction, the more fully immersed readers are in the deictic frame associated with the current speaker. That is, much of the time when we are reading a narrated fiction, we are inhabiting a blend in which the narrator *is* the (one and only) speaker of the narrative.

In the blend, the narrator partakes of all the aspects of the speaker role distinguished by Goffman (1981) – he is the *animator*, the person who does the uttering, the *author* or composer of the utterance, and the *principal* whose position is established by the words that are uttered. Appreciating a structural irony requires a decompression of this blend. The new construal involves a fresh awareness that both narrative viewpoint and the role of *current speaker*
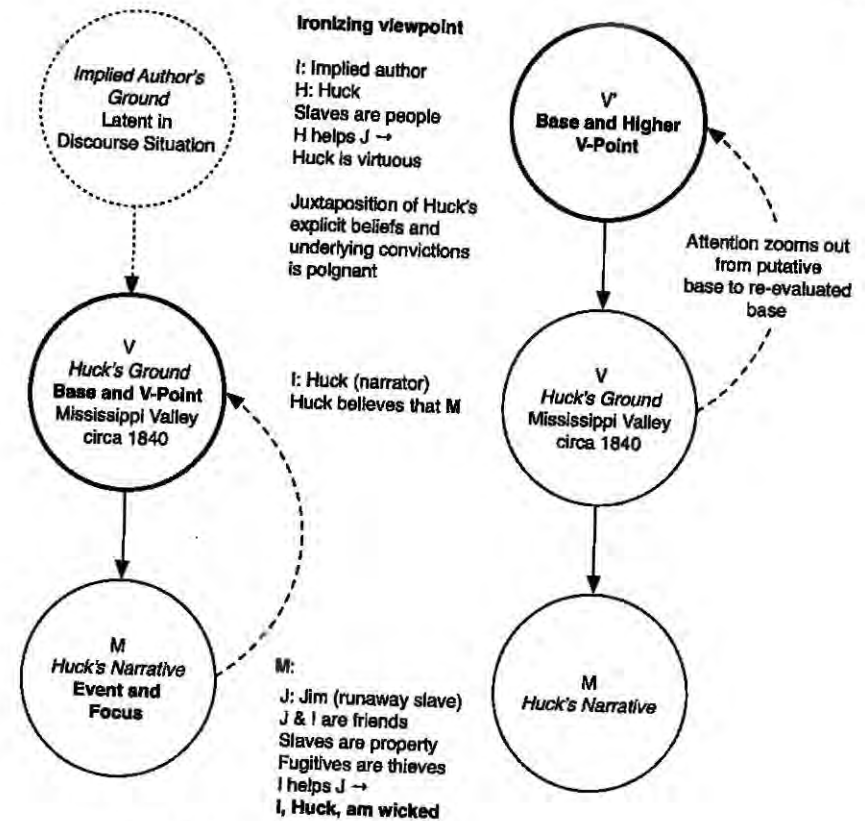
Figure 1.3

are complex. This decompression of the conflated authorial and narrating viewpoints activates, or reintroduces, a higher-level Base Space identified with the discourse situation and viewpoint of the implied author.

From this perspective, the ironizing reader can appreciate that what Huck takes himself to mean – indeed, what he takes himself to believe – is at odds with the true significance of his actions and motivations, and that this inconsistency is in itself significant and intentional. The discrepancy between Huck's presentation of his own situation, including his own discourse situation, and what the reader is given to understand the true situation to be generates a structural irony. In recognizing the source of this discrepancy, readers shift Viewpoint and Ground to a more distant perspective, creating a sense of both ironic distance and complicity with the implied author.

## 1.6    Instabilities

Just as not all ironies are verbal, neither are all ironies resolvable. The viewpoint account of irony can also handle unstable ironies, "in which the truth asserted or implied is that no stable reconstruction can be made out of the ruins revealed through the irony" (Booth 1974: 240); "ironies that will turn into infinities if pursued" (ibid.: 246). Sarah Silverman's routine, described in the introduction and recapitulated in (7), induces one kind of unstable irony.

(7)    "Everybody blames the Jews for killing Christ, and then the Jews try to pass it off on the Romans. I'm one of the few people that believe it was the blacks."

Unstable ironies set up zoom-out configurations in which the potential views of viewpoints threaten to proliferate uncontrollably. Silverman's unsettling humor invites the interpreter to vacillate among these proliferating viewpoints, while also recognizing that the author of the irony intended this unsteady view: the interpreter must take a view of the fluctuating view of a viewpoint. This interpretive process involves a mental space configuration like the one illustrated in Figure 1.4.

The joke sets up a speaker's reality space, S1, and three belief spaces: M1, M2, and M3. The punchline, *I'm one of the few people that believe it was the blacks*, provokes a clash that seems at first blush to be a classic verbal irony. Just as with the "Lovely weather" example, an assertion that would ordinarily count as an expressed belief of the speaker appears under utterance conditions that conflict with this interpretation.

The surprise makes the audience laugh, and the recognition of the inappropriateness prompts hearers to decompress the blend of expressed viewpoint and speaker viewpoint, zooming out to a new Base Space. This is S2, the "Real Sarah Silverman" space. S1 retains its associated viewpoint, that of the Sarah Silverman persona, which the comedian and the audience can look down on together from a shared ironic viewpoint. So far, so sarcastic.

However, while the irony here may be what Booth (1974) calls "locally" stable, its status with respect to the larger discourse is less clear. When someone looks at the rain and says "Lovely weather!" in disgusted tones, there is no worry that she will turn out to have really meant that the weather was indeed lovely.

Similarly, nothing in the discourse context or our background knowledge suggests that we need to worry that it is actually the case that Sarah Silverman truly believes that black people were responsible for the death of Jesus. At the same time, her intended message does not seem to be straightforwardly sarcastic. The point is not to covertly express something like, "As *if* black people killed Jesus! Can you believe the kind of bozo who would think such a thing?" There is no such bozo.
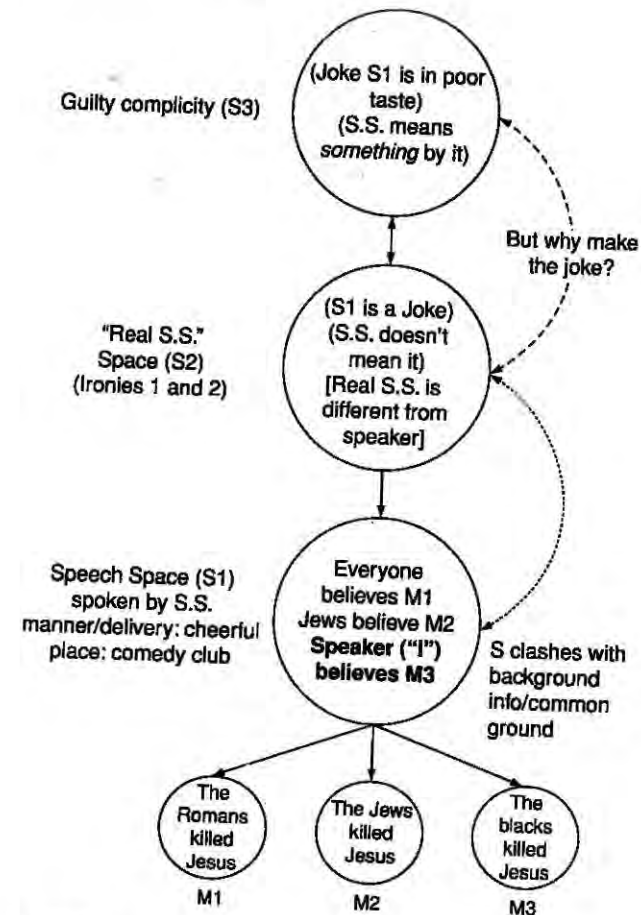
Figure 1.4

The intended message, indeed, is not clear. If irony typically involves something like relevant inappropriateness, one might well wonder what the relevance of this inappropriate statement might be. In other words: why make the joke? Why use the offensively marked noun phrase "the blacks"? And why should the audience take pleasure in it? This doubt about the motivations of a speaker and hearer who partake of the viewpoint in S2 motivates a fresh zooming out to a new critical view of a viewpoint in S3. But there is no way to be sure of a correct final interpretation.

If we take the instability to be intentional, speaker and hearer share this conception of the entire ironic configuration, and Silverman counts as an

especially masterful ironizer. If we do not take it to be intentional, we end up with a similar mental space configuration, but a very different opinion of Silverman, because the zoom-out effect is a form of alienation from the lower-level viewpoint and from those who hold it. In that case, the reconstrual is not one of complicity but of estrangement. At this point, we have the option of stabilizing the irony by rejecting the joke. But as long as we allow the possibility that the performance is ironic and that the joke is funny, audience and speaker alike are implicated in the viewpoints of both S2 and S3, and the ultimate stance remains indeterminate, as indicated by the double-headed dashed line in Figure 1.4.

Ambiguous ironic intentions like Silverman's are not the only possible source of ironic instability, and we would like, finally, to discuss the structurally unstable irony generated by the short story "Borges and I" (Borges 1967 [1964]). This story presents a situation in which, by virtue of their expression, the thoughts and characteristics of Borges become those of the public persona "Borges." Thus everything the narrator tells us about the relationship between Borges and "Borges" accrues not to Borges but to "Borges," and the more Borges tries to express this irony, the worse it gets:

The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to . . . I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship; I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me.

. . . Years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs to games with time and infinity, but now those games belong to Borges and I will have to think up something else. Thus is my life a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him.

I do not know which of us has written this page.

If ever there was an irony that would "turn into infinities if pursued," this is it. The basic situational irony takes as its ingredients an experiencer (A), a situation, and an expectation. In the Focus/Event Space, A acts with intention to bring about some result $p$. In the higher Viewpoint Space, A's action brings about $\sim p$. "Borges and I" invokes a similar causal structure and combines it with a potentially infinite regress of ironic reconstruals.

The action that gives rise to Borges' dilemma – presenting himself in writing – and the articulation of that dilemma are one and the same. As a result, the ordinary zoom-out construal involved in appreciating a situational irony gives rise each time to a new dilemma and a new need to construct a higher-level Viewpoint/Ground. The irony can never be resolved. This
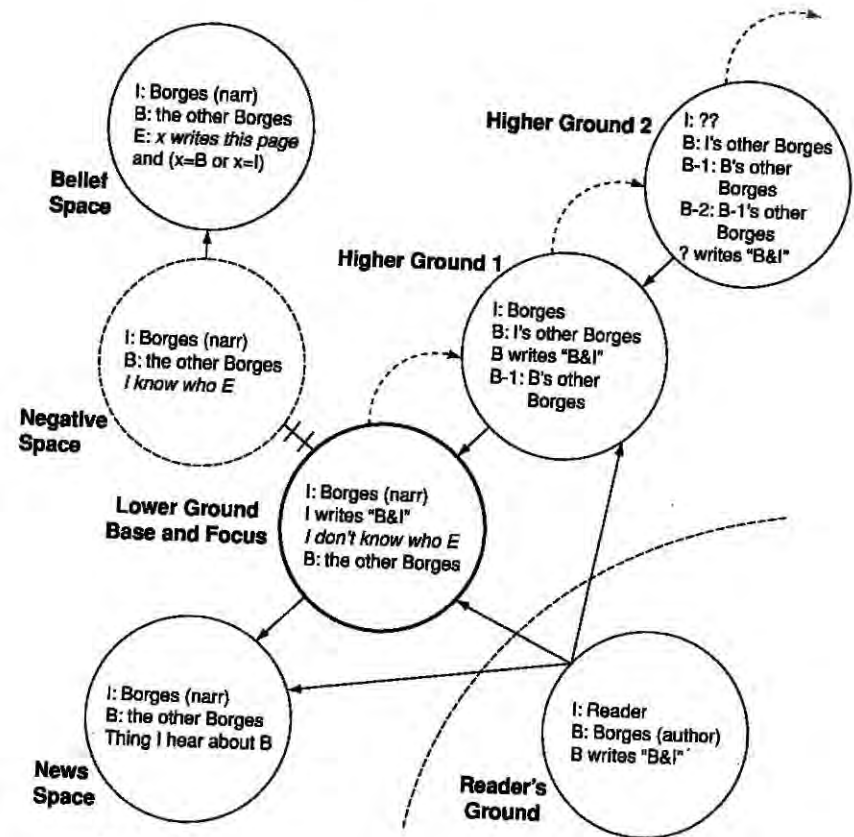
Figure 1.5

viewpoint configuration generates the *mise en abyme*, or infinite regress, that for many postmodern scholars characterizes the very height of ironicity: irony as a potent, rapidly proliferating, perhaps even uncontrollable, means by which stable meaning is undermined and made permanently uncertain.

We would note, as well, that constructing this kind of ironic construal unavoidably involves active and conscious interpretive labor. Interpreting a canonical sarcastic utterance in a context where conventional discourse goals support that interpretation is relatively rapid and automatic for adults (see, for example, Kreuz and Link 2002). In novel and complex cases like these, however, noticeable introspection and explicit puzzling over the speaker's "genuine" intentions are required before the full unsettling instability emerges.

## 1.7    Conclusion

Irony in all its forms is a figure of subjectivity. More precisely, it is a figure of *desubjectification*: the process whereby conceptual contents that are first construed subjectively are reconstrued as an object of conceptualization. The possibility for irony is, in effect, a natural consequence of the narrative mind: irony arises from the fact that any situation we encounter is subject to interpretation both as something that happens and as something that is represented. However, irony's operation is constrained by the high costs it puts on processing and a consequent need for highly ritualized discourse contexts (cf Haiman 1998).

Our approach complements existing theories of irony by viewing it as a variety of interpretive experience, and by focusing on the close – and, we argue, natural – relations between different sorts of verbal, situational, and structural ironies, to show why irony is difficult, why it is unsettling, why it typically has a victim, and why it is subject to proliferation in certain discourse contexts.

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# 2    Subjectivity and upwards projection in mental space structure

*Lilian Ferrari and Eve Sweetser*

## 2.1    A Mental Space approach to subjectivity

This chapter proposes an analysis of historical processes of meaning *subjectification*, in terms of viewpoint relations in a dynamic network of mental spaces. We argue that defining subjectification in terms of mental space structure allows added precision both in identifying subjective aspects of meaning and in assessing *degrees* of subjectivity – and hence in accurately describing directions of meaning change. We shall begin by giving our definition, in the context of the extensive scholarship on subjectification, and continue with examination of particular cases.

Linguists' understanding of viewpoint has been advanced by, among other things, almost thirty years of research on subjectivity and subjectification. Traugott (1982, 1989, 1995), Langacker (1987, 1990, 1991), Hopper and Traugott (1993), Traugott and Dasher (2002), and others have in different ways used these words to define the relationship between the referential meaning of a word and the understanding of the speech setting – the speaker's and hearer's physical setting, beliefs, and interaction. Research also points (Sweetser 1990; Dancygier and Sweetser 2005; Sanders *et al.* 2009) to a cline of subjectivity between these aspects of the speech setting: the physical setting is more "objective" than the speaker's and hearer's mental states and interaction. Traugott has proposed the generalization that meanings can move towards greater subjectivity, but not towards decreased subjectivity. Relatively high subjectivity is present in grammatical meaning domains such as tense (time relative to the Speaker and Addressee's Now), epistemic modality (reference to the Speaker's reasoning processes), and (in)definiteness marking (reference to informational accessibility by Addressee, as assessed by the Speaker in context).

Langacker has defined subjectivity as *implicit* (or relatively *unprofiled*) reference to the Speaker, Hearer, and generally to the Ground (S, H, and their physical and temporal discourse setting); Traugott's examples of subjectification also clearly involve added meaning of this implicit kind. A meaning such as tense would be subjective by Langacker's definition, since the primary