Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 7 (56) No. 1 - 2014

Irony – A *pretense* passage from ancient to modern times

Stanca MĂDA

If parody alone can adequately render the reality of our times,
only irony offers us the freedom and detachment that
are the essential condition of responsible analysis and action.
Theodore Ziolkowski[1]

The Greek etymology of the word "irony", ειρωνεια, means *pretence*, and it comes from ειρων (the one who makes a question pretending to be naive or less knowing than he/she is). The Semitic root of the Greek word is derived from the Accadic term *erewum*, "covering", by means of which irony appears as a device to avoid the direct impact of an explicit word. In general terms, irony is found underneath a disguise of *pretence.*

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

In a communicative perspective, irony aims to get an effective protection of interpersonal relationships, so as to leave wide ranges of freedom for managing both meanings and interaction. Irony is not considered only as a comment or remark at a linguistic level but also as a complex communicative interaction between interlocutors, depending on contextual constraints and opportunities.

Irony may take many forms. On one side, there is *sarcastic irony*, through which the speaker blames his/her interlocutor by means of literally praising words. On the other side, there is *kind irony*, which consists in praising the other one by means of literally critical and offensive utterance. The so-called "*Socratic irony*", as an elegant, ingenious, polite, urban way of communication, is convenient for discussing, and debating fashions and dogmas without unbalancing nor compromising. "*Bantering irony*", instead, is like wit and serves to reduce the drama of a potentially tense or conflicting situation.

These forms are based on common communicative ground. Muecke in *Irony* (1970) has pointed out trenchantly that irony is the *art of being clear without being evident*. An ironic comment can be linguistically decoded by resorting to standard

[1] In the Foreword of a 1969 edtion of The Glass Bead Game (1943) by Hermann Hesse

BDD-A18384 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:49 UTC)

linguistic operations such as phonological, lexical, and syntactic operations. However, its communicative meaning remains opaque because of its semantic indeterminacy and obliqueness. In this sense irony is neither "evident" nor transparent.

In literature, classical irony has its origins in Ancient Greek drama, being used both in comedies and in tragedies. In tragic irony, the words and actions of the characters contradict the real situation, which the spectators fully realize. Cosmic irony (the irony of fate) stems from the notion that the gods are amusing themselves by toying with the minds of mortals with deliberate ironic intent. Closely connected with situational irony, it arises from sharp contrasts between reality and human ideals, or between human intentions and actual results. Romantic irony, defined by Schlegel in his „Athenaeums"- Fragments (1797–1798) as an attitude of detached scepticism adopted by an author towards his or her work, typically manifesting in literary self-consciousness and self-reflection, has as modern outcome the concept of metafiction.

In the present issue of the *Bulletin of Transilvania University of Braşov. Series IV – Philology and Cultural Studies*, the articles on *Irony* are divided into the following sections: Linguistics, Literature, Cultural studies, and Review articles. Irony is approached from various perspectives, ranging across literary and cultural studies, linguistics as well as other disciplines in the humanities. Contributions are written in English or French.

BDD-A18384 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:49 UTC)