# VERBAL IRONY IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE REVISITED

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*Abstract: The aim of the present paper is twofold. On the one hand, it intends to review and critically analyze the theoretical incursions into the concept of verbal irony in general that a number of remarkable linguists have attempted so far. On the other hand, it strives to break with a certain tendency of tackling verbal irony in situations which are either more or less constructed or perhaps still anchored in the realm of the written discourse and, conversely, attempts to explore the manifestations of verbal irony in the political discourse, highlighting the extent to and the manner in which real-life political discourse resorts to the usage of verbal irony in the arena of political debates.*

***Keywords: verbal irony, political discourse, relevance, speech acts, Cooperative Principle***

**Introduction:**

As I am writing this article, the British political arena is in the turmoil of what has been described by analysts and the media as one of the most unpredictable elections in modern history. With the two leading political parties, the Conservatives and the Labour Party, accounting for approximately 33% of the votes each according to the latest polls, Cameron and Miliband are struggling to attract whatever there is left of the so-called 'floating' and 'shy' voters in a final attempt to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, build whatever favourable political alliances necessary, and form Her Majesty's Government. The range of verbal instruments and the degree of subtlety used by the "political animals as articulate mammals" (Chilton 1) vary from counteracting, persuading, and negotiating to manipulating and even insulting. However, what the British politicians in particular seem to have always excelled at is the use of irony. In fact, so refined has become the art of using irony in the British culture in general and the British political discourse in particular – whether we speak of parliamentary debate, interviews or public addresses – that the typical description of the term as "the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite […]" (The New Oxford Dictionary of English 965) is no longer satisfactory and needs reconsidering.

**Verbal irony revisited:**

Over the years, irony has been approached from a number of different perspectives relevant to the field of linguistics: from the semantic and cognitive linguistics to the socio-pragmatic aspects (Dynel 537), covering a wide variety of discourse types, the most productive of which seems to be the oral ones. Indeed, whether we refer to everyday personal and professional inte-



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raction or to public discourse types such as interviews, adverts, political debates, etc. irony has provided researchers of all kinds with a virtually inexhaustible corpus of linguistic data, giving rise to a number of alternative approaches to the subject matter. Of these, Wilson and Sperber's echo-mention approach developed in the mid 90's and revised in 2007 in a seminal article entitled "On Verbal Irony", Clark and Gerrig's Pretense Theory of Irony, and Herbert L. Colston's article "On Necessary conditions for Verbal Irony Comprehension" seem to capture and accomodate in their theoretical framework both some of the typical and the atypical instances of irony. However, perhaps as further proof of the complexity of the issue, none of the above - or any other approaches that have not been mentioned here - seem to have been able to explain or provide coverage for all the linguistic phenomena associated with irony so far. In what follows I will attempt a short critical analysis of the above-mentioned theories as well as try to accommodate irony in a more comprehensive Gricean framework, i.e. one in which irony emerges not only as a result of flouting the Quality maxim, but also the Quantity, Manner and Relevance ones as well, perhaps even several of them at the same time.

In Grice's traditional description, verbal irony can be roughly described as a type of implicature emerging from flouting the quality maxim which makes specific reference to the truthfulness of the utterance (53). While it may be true that most instances of irony in everyday communication may be described as such and assuming that intentional failures to observe the Quality maxim do not make the object of a pragmatic approach, at least two objections may be voiced. Firstly, as Wilson and Sperber remark, irony emerges not only as a result of flouting the quality maxim but of other maxims as well (50), which I will discuss later on in this article. This being said, one cannot help wondering what it is that helps the participants in an instance of communication distinguish between implicature and irony. This particular issue has already been discussed in a number of studies with different perspectives bringing up different features of irony serving specific theoretical purposes.

The Echo-Mention theory, as it is known, essentially rejects Grice's definition of irony as expressing the opposite, negation or reversal of what is actually said. Instead, the common feature of all ironical utterances is the attitude – most probably one of disapproval - expressed by the speaker to create a specific effect in the hearer. In other words, an utterance such as "You can tell he's upset" produced on seeing an angry person manifest himself publicly does not produce an effect of irony by means of a contradiction between propositional content and intended meaning, but rather by virtue of the fact that it says less than what is meant, thereby conveying an attitude of disapproval (36). While the afore-mentioned example seems to be quite a reasonable one in terms of authenticity and reasonable frequency in real-life interaction, it is clearly not the case of other examples employed by the authors. For example, "He deliberately provoked controversy" and "He deliberately mispronounced 'controversy'" (39) are clearly a type of situational constructs that are most probably unlikely to occur in everyday communication, although they obviously reflect the use-mention distinction which produces the effect of irony intended by the second speaker by means of echoing the first.



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In their turn, Clark and Gerrig also argue that the echo-mention theory is rather unsatisfactory in revealing certain features of irony in a transparent manner, in particular the asymmetry of affect, the existence of two potential victims of irony, and the use of the ironic tone of voice which is the equivalent – the authors argue – of a caricature or an exaggeration in the tone of voice used by the speaker (27). Instead, they develop on Grice's theory attaching the so-called 'pretense' element to it:

> In being ironic, the theory goes, a speaker is pretending to be an injudicious person speaking to an uninitiated audience; the speaker intends the addressees of the irony to discover the pretense and thereby see his or her attitude toward the speaker, the audience, and the utterance. The pretense theory we argue, is superior to the mention theory of irony proposed by Sperber and Wilson (25).

As convenient as this newly emerging theory may seem, it is still unclear to the reader whether the speaker is only 'pretending' to be an unscrupulous participant in an instance of communication - as Clark and Gerrig remark – or he can really be described as such. In other words, does the speaker use irony in order to put himself in a more advantageous position - a 'power' position as one may call it - or is there a more subtle reason attached to using irony?

In attempting to answer this question, Laura Alba Juez uses Leech's Principle of Politeness and Brown and Levinson's developments on it to account for irony occurring by flouting all of the maxims in Grice's Cooperative Principle. According to the latter, irony may be regarded as an 'off-the-record' act of communication since the speaker's intentions are not immediately evident. Hence, Juez argues, irony becomes a strategy used in the act of communication to avoid a potential Face Threatening Act (25) and thus offer the interlocutor the chance to use his reply as a face-saving one. Nevertheless, Juez's paper seems to be unsatisfactory at least in two respects: on the one hand, the author does not develop on this particular issue to further support this assumption which has proven particularly productive over the years; on the other hand, the thesis that irony emerges not only as a result of flouting all of Grice's maxims, but also while not flouting any maxims at all is not supported by examples and discussed in detail. As a matter of fact, so deprived is this research paper of them that it is unclear for the reader how it is that the author has reached the above-mentioned conclusion apart from an occasional mention in an end note that there has been further research on the subject matter.

Finally, Colston warns that the reception and decoding of verbal irony cannot depend exclusively on one instrument. Instead, he suggests two such toolkits, one of which he identifies as the allusion to violated expectations, and the other as pragmatic insincerity. While the former refers to instances when the speaker refers to expectations, statements, desires which a current state of things does not allow (98-99) or to the rules imposed by generally accepted norms, etc.; pragmatic insincerity, on the other hand, is used "to account for comments that are not insincere on a propositional level, but that instead are insincere on a speech level" (101). In other words, in this case, irony emerges not as a result of an opposition between what is actually said and what is



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meant – a situation described as semantic insincerity – but rather as an insincere illocutionary force (idem).

The second objection to Grice's traditional description of irony is that it does not make it clear why it is used anyway since both the speaker and the listener are aware of its occurrence – the former because he intends to express it, the latter since he is expected to decode it. In fact, Wilson and Sperber argue that failure to detect irony is not such an uncommon occurrence even with more sophisticated audiences. The authors embed their theory of irony in their much-acclaimed Theory of Relevance to explain how this is possible:

> Relevance […] is a matter of contextual effect and processing effort. On the effect side, it is the interest of hearers that speakers offer the most relevant information they have. However, speakers have their own legitimate aims, and as a result may choose to offer some other information which is less than maximally relevant. […] On the effort side, there may be different ways of achieving the intended effects, all equally easy for the speaker to produce, but requiring different amounts of processing effort from the hearer (48).

At this point it is still not possible for the reader to determine what the means are by which the hearer manages to decode a type of irony that has emerged as a result of the speaker's flouting the maxim of relevance which is precisely the one that gives the addressee access to the background context and assumptions triggering the inferences. In other words, by blocking access to background information, the speaker deprives the hearer of the only key the latter has at his disposal to unlock the meaning of this particular type of irony. Nevertheless, Wilson and Sperber argue that, by virtue of the nature of communication, there is basically no point in the speaker's making an effort to claim the hearer's attention unless there is a message to communicate:

> Hence, to communicate is to imply that the stimulus used (for example, the utterance) is worth the audience's attention. Any utterance addressed to someone automatically conveys a presumption of its own relevance. This fact, we call the *principle of relevance*" (idem).

In other words, irony in this case emerges by virtue of the nature of any act of communication whose existence crucially depends on the speaker's having a message to convey.

In a nutshell, irony is a linguistic phenomenon that cannot be accounted for by one single theory. In fact, as it has already become evident from the present study, the more varied the perspectives on the subject matter, the higher the chances to obtain a well-rounded picture of this incredibly complex phenomenon under all its aspects.

Instances of verbal irony in political discourse



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Up to this point, the theoretical insights and their pitfalls as concerns the concept of irony in pragmatics have been analysed. In this part of the paper, various instances of irony occurring in the political discourse will be examined from the point of view of their type, depending on which maxim(s) of the Cooperative Principle they flout, what the contextual factors that contribute to them are and how the audience identifies them as such and attempts to respond to them. In doing this, I have relied heavily on recorded parliamentary sessions that have been made public by the British Parliament site via You Tube, as well as on a much acclaimed documentary featuring the country's former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

On November 27th 1990, following her resignation, Margaret Thatcher participated in a Questions to the Prime Minister session in the House of Commons. Within the first minute of the session, one of her Conservative colleagues congratulated the Iron Lady as follows:

> Mr. Speaker, Sir, if this is to be the last occasion on which my Right Honourable friend answers questions from that dispatch box, may I express the appreciation of this side of the House [*members of the opposition begin to show signs of unrest while the Tories approve in anticipation*] and, hopefully, the whole House [*protests from the opposition; Speaker calls for order in the House*], for the skill, command and courtesy with which she has dealt with questions over the last eleven years from that dispatch box.

The irony in this introductory piece of discourse is evident and even enhanced by other MPs' reaction, which seems to be common practice in the House. It may be described as consisting of two distinct parts: the former acts as a presupposition, thus "the appreciation of this side of the House" meaning that 1. there is also another side of the House and implicating that 2. perhaps that other side is less eager or unwilling to express their appreciation. Since presuppositions are used to render utterances optimally relevant and since this particular presupposition observes the rule of logical truthfulness, it may be argued that the Relevance maxim is not violated and, consequently, there is no instance of irony in the above-quoted discourse. However, the presupposition (1) here is in fact a means of hinting at the opposition who clearly do not wish to congratulate the PM on her performance. These being said, it follows that the Relevance maxim is still flouted by means of the conversational implicature (2). What is more, the speaker does not stop here, but wishes to make sure that his irony has been interpreted as such and chooses to reinforce his opinion that, hopefully, the whole House wishes to congratulate the former PM, thereby overgeneralizing a state of affairs and violating the maxim of Manner which requires the speaker to be perspicuous.

Earlier on, when she was still in the office, Margaret Thatcher herself made use of irony when she referred to her fellow male cabinets as "the not so grand grandees" in response to their calling her "that woman" (Margaret Thatcher – The Downing Street Years, episode 1). At that time, i.e. the late 70's and the early to mid 80's, politics was still the playground of male representatives with very few women to have ever participated in the political debate. "The not so grand grandees" is therefore quite meaningful in the context described above, which Thatcher



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used to hint at her 'inferior' social status both as a woman and as the daughter of a grocer by referring to the higher social birth status of her cabinets. By using hint, the speaker flouts the maxim of Relevance, in a similar manner as in the example analysed previously. Looking further into the phrase, one also notices the use of contradiction which flouts the maxim of Quality. Finally, the use of two words - one of which derives from the other - creates an echoing effect which, according to Wilson and Sperber, is the source of many an instances of irony. In this particular case, it is used to point at the inability of her colleagues whose refusal to reform the economic system and readiness to embrace compromise at all times exasperated Thatcher.

A far more recent Questions to the Prime Minister session in the House of Commons, which took place on March 25th 2015 right before this year's elections, has proved an equally rich source of irony – this time the protagonist being David Cameron. At the beginning of the session, Ann McKechin of the Labour party addressed the following question to the Prime Minister:

> Mr. Speaker may I join the Prime Minister in expressing sympathies to all families affected by yesterday's tragedy. In 2014 the number of people working on zero-hour contracts increased by 19%, the secured borrowings rose by 9% and the percentage of living in relative poverty was at the highest levels since 2001.Will the PM agree that, under his watch, the future of our young people is only getting darker?

In this particular case, McKechin's intervention may seem to be an accusation rather than a piece of irony directed at the Prime Minister. However, with so much well-researched data preceding the question proper, the latter is skillfully turned into a rhetorical question, i.e. one which does not invite an answer proper but rather requires explanations for a given state of affairs. Hence, the maxim of Quality is thus violated, giving rise to this particular instance of irony. The reason for which I find this particular contribution even more interesting is a certain tendency on the part of the MP to over-generalize the data in the question whereas the part preceding it tends to be rather well-documented and fully informative. Therefore, I will also argue, that the maxim of Manner has also been flouted although the violation of the Quality maxim takes precedence.

In replying McKechin, Cameron uses irony in a far more subtle manner:

> What has happened under my watch is that there are 174.000 more people employed in Scotland! Zero-hours contracts account for one in fifty jobs and it is this government that has outlawed exclusivity in zero-hours contracts after 13 years of inaction from the party opposite! In her own constituency, the claim account has fallen by 32% since the election! That is evidence that our economic plan is working in Scotland as throughout the rest of the United Kingdom!

Indeed, except from the instance of irony used in the first part of his answer, which results from echoing his political opponent's words, Cameron prefers to use facts rather than accuse the op-



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position without proof. However, to such an extent does he use facts that his discourse tends to become slightly over-informative thereby violating the maxim of Quantity and creating an effect of contradiction between what he argues his government has achieved and what the previous one failed to. Thus, his entire reply to the Scottish MP is in fact irony that manifests in a more subtle way than in the case of his interlocutor.

On the other hand, in the same session, the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition, Ed Miliband, confronted each other in what turned out to be a display of irony, part of which I include in the transcript below:

> E.D.: […] Mr. Speaker, on Monday, the Prime Minister announced his retirement plans [*laughter in the House including Cameron*] … and he said it was because he believed in giving straight answers to straight questions. Now, after five years of Prime Minister's questions that was music to my ears, Mr. Speaker. So here's a straight question: will he rule out our rise in VAT? [*Opposition acclaims*]
> D.C.: In 43 days' time I plan to arrange his retirement, Mr. Speaker! But he's right: straight answers deserve straight questions, and the answer's 'Yes!' [*Acclaim from the Tories, protests from the opposition*]

Judging by the reaction of the parliament when the Speaker announces Ed Miliband's turn to ask questions as well as by the acclaim on both sides of the House of Commons, the confrontation between the two political leaders competing for the position of Prime Minister is a much expected one. As a result, irony occurs in its most evident forms: in Miliband's case as a figure of speech flouting the maxim of Quality ("…the PM announced his retirement plan"), and in Cameron's case by echoing his interlocutor's words, both of which prove to be extremely humorous to the audience. In addition to that, Cameron produces the required answer to his opponent's question, only that it is unexpectedly short, unconvincing and certainly far less informative than Miliband and the rest of the MPs would have liked it to be. Hence, Cameron is yet again ironic in his discourse, this time by virtue of his using too little, rather than too much information – as in the previous example.

**Conclusions:**

As it has been explained and exemplified, irony is a multifaceted linguistic phenomenon. This reflects in the multitude of theories that have emerged over the time, in the amount of research that has been conducted and in the huge variety of perspectives on the subject matter. Therefore, it is impossible to accommodate all the linguistic phenomena associated with irony in one comprehensive theory, thereby reducing it to one particular perspective.

As far as the discourse type that I have selected for the purpose of this research paper is concerned, it has turned out to provide a much more fertile ground for study than written discourse or ready-made examples designed to suit the purpose of a particular theoretical approach. In saying that, I'm referring in particular to the irony types which occur in political discourse -



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sometimes several of them at the same time that seldom manifest to the same degree – and tend at times to be extremely elusive when the researcher attempts to fit them into a well-established pattern.

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