

# **-IRONY AND THE OTHER OFF RECORD STRATEGIES WITHIN POLITENESS THEORY -**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The present paper is part of a more complete study of the phenomenon of VERBAL IRONY within the framework of Politeness theory as presented by Brown and Levinson in their book *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use* (1987, first published 1978). The possibility of combining an off record strategy such as irony with on record strategies has already been considered (Alba Juez, 1994a). In the present paper some examples are presented which illustrate the combination of verbal irony with the other off record strategies set out in the theory by Brown and Levinson. It is taken for granted that the reader is familiar with Politeness Theory, and hence many concepts are not explained or defined herein.

In previous papers (Alba Juez 1994a and b) I have tried to show the richness and versatility of the phenomenon of verbal irony, seen from the viewpoint of Politeness Theory. In particular, it was maintained that irony is not just a simple off record strategy and that it can be used in combination with on record strategies (in spite of what Brown and Levinson say). Some exam-

ples were given to support this hypothesis (in Alba Juez, 1994a), which showed that irony does not always fit perfectly within off record strategies, since they exhibit a clear use of Positive and/or Negative Politenes (both strategies placed within the on record superstrategy by Brown and Levinson). One of the examples presented is precisely one given by Brown and Levinson as an illustration for a strategy within Positive Politeness ("Joke"), but that I believe is also a clear instance of what I call "Positive Irony" (irony used to convey praise).<sup>1</sup>

How about lending me this old heap of junk? (1987: 124)

Here the speaker refers to the hearer's new Cadillac, and the irony is used in a joke in order to praise the car, since it is evident that the car is not old, but new and expensive. In the same paper I attempted to define irony within the framework of the theory, and I called it a "tentative" definition because I agree with Enright (1988) in that irony is so rich and elusive a concept that it is very difficult to define. Booth (1974) very wittily remarks that "its very spirit and value are violated by the effort to be clear about it" (1974: ix). The evidence of the numerous examples in our corpus showed that when a speaker is being ironical he is not always trying to convey "the opposite of the proposition or of the literal meaning of the utterance," as the traditional approaches define irony; nor is he always "echoing" some previous utterance or thought, as Sperber and Wilson state in their theory (1981, 1984, 1986 and 1992), nor is he always "pretending," as Clark and Gerrig state (1984). The ironic speaker may be doing all, some or none of these things and still be ironic.<sup>2</sup> The tentative definition was then, the following:

Irony is a strategy<sup>3</sup> used by a speaker or writer, which is intended to criticise or to praise in an indirect, off record way, but which can occur in combination with some typically on record strategies as well. Sometimes, but not always, it is intended to mean the opposite of its literal meaning. In many cases it reveals an echoic mention, but in many others its variety and richness go beyond all this. It generally shows or expresses some kind of contradiction (which can be realised at different levels). (Alba 1994a: 10)

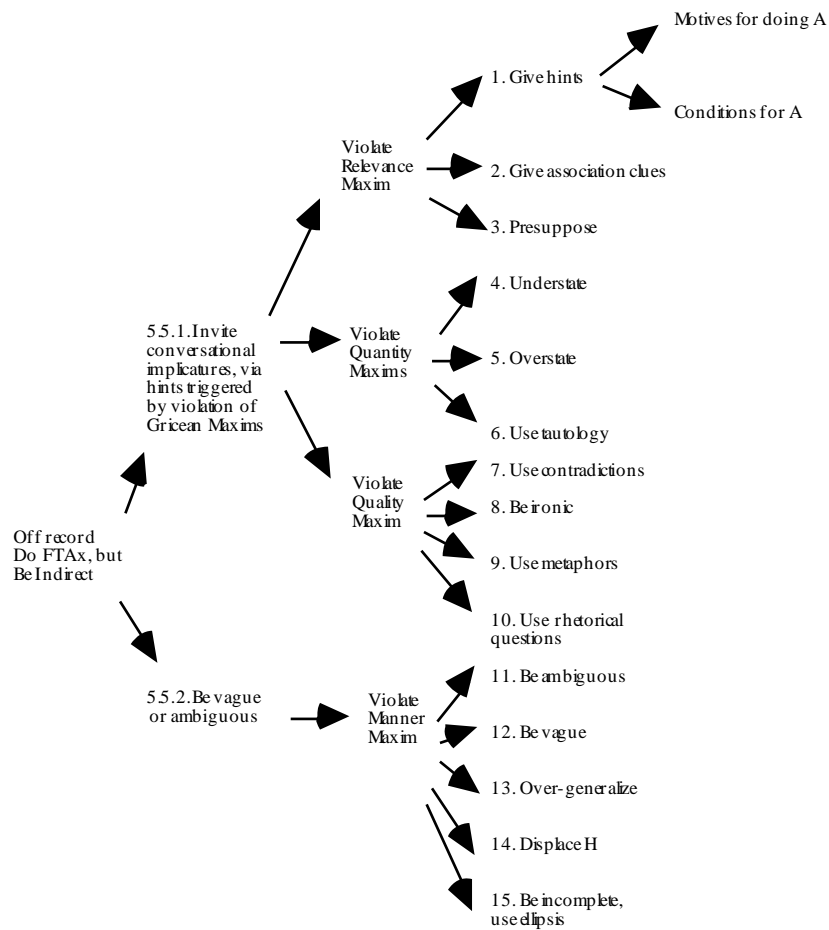
Later on I have found examples of verbal irony in which the speaker or writer is neither criticising nor praising, which led me to the conclusion that there is also a kind of "neutral" irony, as illustrated by the following example

from Pascal's Letters, quoted by Enright (1988) as being the best known of Pascal's ironies: it comes towards the end of Pascal's letter XVI, when he explains apologetically that "the letter is longer than usual only because he didn't have the time to make it shorter" (1988: 11). I am, then, still working on a better and all-embracing definition of irony, which I hope to complete at the end of my research. As can be deduced, the findings of this research have hitherto caused my disagreement with Brown and Levinson in their attempt to define irony, for they consider only the authors that have defined irony as *always* conveying criticism (1987: 262-3).

It has also been shown (in Alba Juez, 1994b) that when a speaker is ironic he can violate not only the Maxim of Quality (as stated by the theory) but also the other Gricean Maxims as well. Verbal irony goes beyond "meaning the opposite of what is said," and many times we are ironic and at the same time we are telling the truth, as can be illustrated by a speaker who says: "I love people with good manners" to a person who has obviously shown bad manners to him. It is true that "he loves people with good manners," but at the same time he is implicating that the other person did not have a proper behaviour, and that is what makes the utterance ironic. Leech (1983) also shows to a certain extent that not only the Quality Maxim can be violated when being ironic.<sup>4</sup>

In the present paper, the main objective is now to show —by means of examples taken from spoken and written discourse— how irony (an off record strategy) can co-occur with the other off record strategies presented by Brown and Levinson in their theory. These strategies are illustrated in the chart reproduced on the following page (Brown and Levinson 1987: 214).

Brown and Levinson explain that "a communicative act is done off record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act" (1987: 211). This is, then, an ideal strategy to use when the speaker wants to avoid responsibility for doing a Face Threatening Act (FTA). The clue to the correct interpretation of off record FTAs lies in the making of some inferences which will allow the addressee to understand what was in fact intended by the speaker. The off record speaker/writer, then, invites conversational implicatures by flouting, in some way, the Gricean Maxims of Communication. Though irony occupies a very definite position in the chart, as a substrategy violating the Quality Maxim, it seems (from the evidence of the examples found) that it can move upwards or downwards in the list of substrategies.



(Brown and Levinson 1987: 214).

## **2. IRONY + OTHER OFF RECORD STRATEGIES**

### **2.1. Strategies violating the Relevance Maxim**

"Give association clues" is off record strategy n° 2 in the chart shown on the previous page, distinct and separate from strategy n° 8 ("Be ironic"). But a speaker can be ironic by giving association clues, although it does not follow that all the times we use association clues we intend to be ironic. In the following passage written by Bertrand Russell, the author gives association clues to the reader, who —by making comparisons— will be led to the conclusion that Professors of Philosophy and dictators are lunatics. This strategy constitutes, at the same time, an indirect, ironic criticism:

Men who allow their love of power to give them a distorted view of the world are to be found in every asylum: one man will think he is the Governor of the Bank of England, another will think he is the King, and yet another will think he is God. Highly similar delusions, if expressed by educated men in obscure language, lead to professorships of Philosophy; and if expressed by emotional men in eloquent language, lead to dictatorships. (1958:25)

### **2.2. Strategies violating the Quantity Maxim**

It has been observed that irony can also be conveyed by means of understatement (a way of generating implicatures by saying less than is required) or overstatements ( a way of generating implicatures by saying more than necessary, i.e., exaggerating or choosing a point on a scale which is higher than is warranted by the actual state of affairs). These are strategies 4 and 5 (violating the quantity maxim) in the off record chart. In the following excerpt from a dialogue from the London Lund Corpus of English Conversation, the speakers (two academics) are criticising the temperamental nature of the Head of Department. They have previously said that he is a moody person and that one day he has great arguments with someone about

something and the next day he expounds that person's views as his own with great conviction, never admitting he had been wrong. B understates by hedging on the amount of criticism he is willing to make with such expressions as "a bit" or "in a way," which, together with their laughter (and the falling-rising intonation given to key words) also allow for an ironic interpretation:

B 11 \*((but . ^that 'is only :n\atural#))\*  
 A 11 a ^ra\*ther 'weak ch\aracter#  
 A 11 ^d\oesn't it#  
 B 11 ^m\ay'be#  
 B 20 \*((untranscribable murmur))\*  
 A 11 \*^not 'quite b\ig e'nough#  
 A 11 to ^go\* and 'say l\ook old 'chap#  
 A 11 ^y\ou were r\ight# -  
 A 11 or per^haps not \_even \_big e \_nough \_to .  
 A 11 r\ecog'nize#  
 B 11 I ^got the im:pr\ession#  
 B 11 that he ^didn't !r\ecog'nize it# .  
 A 11 ^n\o#  
 A 11 \*^pr\obably#\*  
 B 12 \*^that '[@:]([m]))\* - he ^just di!g\ested the  
 B 12 'id/eas#  
 B 11 and ^then \_came \_out with \_them \_quite  
 B 11 spont\_aneously and without re!fl\ection#  
 B 21 \*((but it's a)) ^bit\*  
 A 11 \*^[\m]#\*  
 B 11 d/\ifficult#  
 B 11 in a ^w\ay# -  
 B 11 that a ^person could be "!\s\o unre"fl/ective#  
 B 11 as ^not to \_r/\ealize#  
 B 11 that he'd ^ch\anged his m/ind#  
 B 20 \*(- laughs)\*  
 A 11 \*^[\m]#\*

(Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: S.1.6)

An example of irony conveyed by means of an exaggeration (i.e., overstatement) can be observed in the following chunk of dialogue (taken from the scripts of the well known T.V. series "The Golden Girls"). The irony is found in Dorothy's reply to Blanche's comment that her boyfriend is younger than she is (implicating that she's lying and consequently that Dirk is much younger):

*Blanche:* I've decided I can handle this relationship. I'm going out with Dirk Saturday night.

*Dorothy:* Was it ever in doubt?

*Blanche:* Momentarily. This is strictly off the record, but Dirk is nearly five years younger than I am.

*Dorothy:* In what, Blanche? Dog years?

*The Golden Girls* (1991:65)

### 2.3. Strategies violating the Quality Maxim

"Use contradictions" (strategy n°7) belongs in the same group as "Be ironic" (i.e. strategies violating the Quality Maxim) and it seems that both work together more often than not. Although not all contradictions are ironic, it appears to be a fact that in all ironies a contradiction of some kind is implied. In prototypical ironies, i.e. those meaning "the opposite," contradictions are more obvious, but in the less prototypical cases, there always seems to be a contradiction of some sort. In the words of D. J. Enright: "Affirm and deny in one sentence, and you too can be a romantic ironist" (1988: 15).

Consider the case in which a teacher is angry at her students' behaviour (they are talking and not paying attention to her explanations) and so she says in a loud voice, with annoyance, "May I continue with my explanations?" or "Would you allow me to carry on? She is being ironical by asking for permission (and using negative politeness) to go ahead, but implicating that she should not be doing this, since she is the teacher and in general, in such a situation, it is the students who should be asking for permission to talk. Then the irony does not lie in the opposite of the literal meaning of the utterance, but in the *contradiction of speech acts*. That is, she should not be asking them for permission, in fact she has the power to perform an order or command, but she changes the speech act ironically to indirectly criticise the students' behaviour.

Ironical effects can also be achieved by means of a metaphor (strategy n°9). For example, one could ironically criticize a singer one considers to be bad by saying: "He's a nightingale!" Similarly, in the following dialogue from the aforementioned London Lund Corpus, A refers ironically to the Board of the Faculty as a "Supreme Soviet" (a metaphor that is hedged by the particle "sort of"), after some mild criticisms concerning academic structure and its bureaucracy:

B 21 3thought that you were on this [@m] -  
 A 11 3^n\o# -  
 B 11 3^faculty board repre:s\entative ((2 to 3 sylls#  
 B 11 3what^ever you c\all it#)) .  
 A 11 3no [dh @] it's ^{c\alled} . board of the  
 A 11 3f\aculty# \*-.\*  
 B 11 3\*^[=mhm]#\*  
 A 11 3you ^s=ee#  
 A 11 3we ^we . are members of the :faculty of \arts  
 A 11 3{\*of\* the uni^v/ersity}# -  
 B 11 3\*((^y/es#))\*  
 A 11 3^but . [dhi] . !faculty of \arts# .  
 A 11 3^has . [@:] a sort of - su!preme s\oviet# .  
 A 21 3\*.\* . which is  
 B 11 3\*^[mhm]#\*  
 A 11 3called the ""b\oard of the \_faculty#  
 B 11 3^y\es#

(Svartvik and Quirk 1980: 1.2)

Rhetorical questions (strategy n° 10) can also be mixed with irony as can be appreciated in the following passage taken from the fictional diaries of a Cabinet Minister corresponding to the BBC T.V. series *Yes Minister* (published as *The Complete "Yes Minister"*). In this passage the Minister's wife ironically complains about the fact that her husband and his political adviser are together most of the time. She then makes use of some rhetorical questions:

The phone rang. I grabbed it. It was Frank Weisel, my special political adviser, saying that he was on his way over. I told Annie, who wasn't pleased.



"Why doesn't he just move in?" she asked bitterly.  
 Sometimes I just don't understand her. I patiently explained to her that, as my political adviser, I depend on Frank more than anyone.  
 "Then why don't you marry him?" she asked. "I now pronounce you man and political adviser. Whom politics has joined let no wife put asunder. (Lynn and Jay 1989: 11-12)

Besides the ironic rhetorical questions, there is a sardonic echoic irony in reproducing the performative act of marrying.

## 2.4. Strategies violating the Manner Maxim

Being ambiguous (strategy n° 11 violating the Manner Maxim) is also characteristic of most ironies (if not of all). Likewise, one may be vague or may overgeneralize (strategies 12 and 13) when being ironic. The examples given by Brown and Levinson (in the aforementioned book) illustrating these two strategies could also be interpreted as ironical in some particular situations. Example n° 81 (in which the speaker is vague) could in a given context be taken as an indirect criticism and reproach (for example, uttered by a wife who is tired of her husband's addiction to alcohol):

(81) Looks like someone may have had too much to drink. (1987: 226)

Similarly, example 86 (illustrating over-generalization) could be used ironically to implicate "you're not mature" and/or "you should help me":

(86) Mature people sometimes help do the dishes. (1987: 226)

It is also possible to ironically "displace H" (strategy n° 14). Brown and Levinson describe this strategy as one in which the speaker goes off record as to who the target for his FTA is, or he may pretend to address the FTA to someone whom it would not threaten, and hope that the real target will see that the FTA is aimed at him. This seems to be the case in the following scene from "The Golden Girls," in which Blanche, Dorothy and Rose are in a demonstration, and Dorothy criticises Rose's speech in an ironical way. They do not speak directly to Rose, though she can hear them:

*Rose: (into megaphone)* All creatures must learn to coexist. Back where I come from, they do. That's why the brown bear and the field

mouse can share their lives and live in harmony. 'Course, they can't mate or the mice would explode. You know what I mean.

*Dorothy: (to Blanche)* I think Rose needs to work on her metaphors. (1991: 95)

In many cases, more than two of these strategies can work together, as can be seen from an analysis of many of the examples given. In the following passage there is a combination of irony, overgeneralization, giving association clues and being vague and ambiguous (Sophia's final remark is an indirect criticism towards Martha's decision to commit suicide):

*Sophia:* I don't care if you are paying for dinner. What you want to do is crazy.

*Martha:* It's time to go, Sophia. I don't want to see another Monday. I don't want to wait and end up going like Lydia. I'm going to decide when it's over.

*Sophia:* I always thought somebody named God did that.

*The Golden Girls* (1991: 113)

### 3. CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this analysis of the above examples will have illustrated some of the many strategies an ironic speaker/writer has at his disposal, and will have helped to clarify the concept of verbal irony by showing that it is not an isolated strategy, separate and completely distinct from the other strategies. In a previous paper (Alba Juez 1994a) it was shown that it can combine very well with on record strategies, and in the present one I have tried to show how it can also work together and co-occur with the other off record strategies considered by Brown and Levinson in Politeness Theory. Thus we have seen that the use of one strategy does not exclude the use of another at the same time, and in particular, that an ironic speaker/writer can make use of a lot of resources in order to make his/her point.<sup>a</sup>

### NOTES

1. Though many authors only consider irony as an aggressive weapon, there are many others who have also considered the possibility of its use with a praising intention, namely, Pelc (1971), who calls it "anti-irony", King and Crerar (1969), Haverkate (1988), Holdcroft (1983).
2. A more detailed discussion of these aspects is given in chapter 2 of my Doctoral Thesis (forthcoming). I do not consider it necessary to go further in the discussion of previous definitions for the purposes of this paper.
3. The concept of strategy is not defined by Brown and Levinson in the aforementioned book, but I understand it as an attempt from part of the speaker to reach (by means of various linguistic procedures) a given communicative aim.
4. Leech's position and viewpoint with respect to irony is analysed in a more complete way in Chapter 6 of the aforementioned thesis.

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