

## *Irony and the Dogma of Force and Sense*

Steve Barker (Nottingham) and Mihaela Popa-Wyatt (Barcelona)

Central to modern semantics is Frege's distinction between *force* and *sense*. According to that distinction the content of an illocutionary act—a self-standing utterance of a sentence *S*—can be divided into two components. One is the *proposition P* that *S*'s linguistic meaning and context associates with it. The other is *S*'s *illocutionary force*. Illocutionary forces are usually analysed as communicative intentions with which *S* is uttered. If the force is assertoric, then the speaker intends that her audience believe *P*, or some such condition. If the force is *commissive*—that characteristic of orders and requests—the speaker intends that the audience see to it that it is true. And so on.

The force/sense distinction—designate it *Force/Sense*—is associated with another thesis. This is the truth-conditional embedding principle:

*TC-Embedding*: If a sentence *S* is embedded in a compound sentence (...*S*...), then the speech act performed with *S* is a *propositional act*: an act that involves uttering *S* with a propositional (true/false-assessable) content and no other content.

*Force/Sense* implies *TC-Embedding*, given plausible background assumptions and the fact that forces don't seem to embed.

Despite their venerated status, we dispute both *Force/Sense* and *TC-Embedding*. We think linguistic phenomena across the board show both are wrong. However, in this paper, we restrict ourselves to figurative speech and irony in particular. We argue that irony embeds in compound sentences. This fact seriously challenges *TC-Embedding* and thus *Force/Sense*. We examine a range of responses, but the overall picture is a negative one. Theorists need to go back to the drawing board about the nature of illocutionary acts.

1. Consider irony. Suppose Max has a very low opinion of George's talents. In one of his sarcastic outbursts, Max utters:

(1) George is a real genius,

Clearly, Max is expressing a derisory attitude about anyone thinking George is a genius, and communicating that the opposite holds regarding George. We now generalize. Let *[Invert-P]* denote the state of affairs that is the *opposite* of the state of affairs expressed by a sentence *P*. In irony the speaker U utters a sentence *S*, and, amongst other things does the following:

- Irony:** (i) Expresses ridicule of a person who believes that *P*, for some contextually given *P*.  
(ii) Expresses belief that the *[Invert-P]* is the case.

Typically, though not always, the content *P* is the literal said-content of *S*. Max's utterance of (1) is a case of this. However, if the irony involves questions, orders, and so forth it won't be the case. We don't consider those instances here.

Is irony a pragmatic phenomenon—something in the realm of force and conversational practice—or a semantic phenomenon—something to do with truth-conditions? Answering this question must take into account the following fact: irony embeds. Here's a case, one of many instances:

(2) Max believes that George is a real genius.

We think this has at least two readings. One is that in which irony has wide scope. On this reading, the speaker U expresses a ridiculing attitude towards anyone believing that Max believes George is a genius. On this reading, typically, the speaker U will stress, in a mock dramatic way, the word *believes*. U might also have used the intensifier, *so*, as in: *Max so believes that George is a genius*.

The other reading of (2) that we consider is narrow scope, where, apparently, the ironic content is restricted to the content-clause. Suppose Max is well known for his irony. He frequently makes claims in the ironic mode in particular, with derision about George's intellectual capacities. So, we can say: *Max believes that George is **a real genius***. Here the mock-dramatic stress is applied to *a real genius*.

That irony doesn't have wide-scope on this second reading is evidenced by the fact that the person uttering (2), call her Tan, doesn't have to have the attitude or the inverted-content belief characteristic of someone being ironic about George. For example, the following is a perfectly fine piece of conversation:

Ted: Max is really underwhelmed by George.

Tan: Yeah. Max thinks he's a real genius. Little does he know: George *is* a real genius.

Tan's last utterance is a non-ironic claim that George is indeed cognitively gifted. So, on this reading, neither the attitude nor the inverted content *projects*. Neither is a commitment of the whole utterance. Here irony does not have wide scope.

Note that belief reports are not the only place in which ironic content embeds. It can also embed in other kinds of compounds, for example, conditionals. Take this conversation:

(3) Tan: I get the feeling that George is a real genius.

Sam: So do I. If he is, then we ought to let that genius shine, by getting him to lick these stamps.

Tan's utterance itself provides an instance of embedding. But consider Sam's utterance. It looks like irony has narrow scope both in antecedent and consequent. One might attempt to treat this as wide-scope, so that the whole conditional is ironic. But a wide-scope hypothesis is unsustainable. First, it does not fit in with continuation of Tan's utterance, and Sam's echoing of it, where the irony clearly focuses on the sentence (1), *George is a real genius*.

Secondly, if Sam's whole conditional utterance is ironic, then his speech act must be a ridiculing portrayal of an absurd belief whose content is the conditional he utters taken literally. But what's the absurdity of that conditional on a literal reading? If the conditional is material implication, then it is fairly obviously true, since the antecedent is very likely false. As some kind of non-material implication, it is at best a puzzling claim. Moreover, it's not clear what the inverted content is meant to be. Is it that George is a genius, but licking stamps is deeply intellectually demanding? Clearly, the setting is not there for a wide-scope reading.

Thirdly, a wide-scope reading is not consistent with the following continuation of the conversation:

(4) Fran: Oh, he is, alright. Such a mind! We should really allow him to display that genius. Break out the stamps!

This looks like *modus ponens*. Fran is drawing the implications from Sam's conditional in (3). That fits in perfectly with narrow-scope reading. But exactly what Fran is up to if Sam's utterance has a wide-scope reading? If the inverted content of Sam's utterance is that Fred is a genius, and licking stamps is difficult stuff then her utterance makes no sense.

It looks like narrow-scope readings are the right ones in the cases above. So ironic content can embed in compound sentences. How can the *Force/Sense* theorist explain this?

2. One proposal is that irony is a component of propositional content. Camp (2012) exemplifies this view. For her, irony is an operator, like negation. Call it *Sarc(S)*. Camp's actual view is that *Sarc* is captured as follows:

***Sarc1***: '*Sarc(S)*' is true iff [Invert-*P*] obtains.

This treatment of irony ignores the attitude. But retaining Camp's *Sarc*-operator conception, we can incorporate it in this way:

***Sarc2***: '*Sarc(S)*' is true iff (i) believing *S* is absurd and (ii) [Invert-*P*] obtains.

If either of these views is right, the embedding of irony presents us with no more of a problem than does the embedding of negations or conjunctions.

We might leave matters there. Unfortunately, we cannot, because there is abundant evidence against the *Sarc*-operator conception. Consider the following conversational fragment, with two possible responses by Sam, to Tan's sarcasm:

Tan: Here's George, the walking brain.

Sam<sup>1</sup>: OK! It's absurd to think George is a genius: he's the very opposite of one. But we shouldn't be nasty about it.

Sam<sup>2</sup>: OK! George is *a real genius*. But we shouldn't be nasty about it.

Sam<sup>1</sup> chides Tan for her sarcastic cruelty. He admits both that it is ridiculous to believe George is a genius, and affirms the inverted content. Sam<sup>1</sup> expresses both commitments of *Irony (i)-(ii)*. Nevertheless Sam<sup>1</sup>'s utterance is felicitous. In contrast, Sam<sup>2</sup>'s utterance is infelicitous. There is a kind of pragmatic contradiction present. Something Sam<sup>2</sup> is doing in using the ironic sentence (1) does not fit with his commentary.

The *Sarc*-operator view cannot explain this, since, for the *Sarc*-operator view, Sam<sup>1</sup>'s utterance is identical in content to Sam<sup>2</sup>'s. Camp might object that her *Sarc*-operator view is only meant to apply to embedded irony, so does not apply to self-standing ironic utterances. But this is not a tenable response. If a sentence with a propositional content can embed, then it can potentially be asserted. So, Sam<sup>2</sup>'s utterances ought to have a *Sarc*-operator-reading. If so, on that reading it should be fine. But Sam<sup>2</sup>'s utterance is simply infelicitous, *tout court*.

We can conclude from this case that irony cannot be *stating* that *Irony (i)-(ii)* hold, *pace* Camp. Irony must be a kind of *doing* that is not simply a *stating*. It is a rhetorical form after all. We think this means irony involves the speaker dramatising something, in a ridiculing way, thereby *expressing*, but not *stating*, *Irony (i)-(ii)*. Since it is dramatic, irony must involve pretence. U pretends to assert *S* to give us a ridiculing portrayal of someone believing *P*.<sup>1</sup> That is why Sam<sup>2</sup>'s utterance is infelicitous: he is doing the thing—ridiculing-portrayal—he says we should not be doing. Sam<sup>1</sup>, however, is merely stating that a certain belief is ridiculous and affirming the inverted content. Sam<sup>1</sup> is not engaging in ridicule. But ridicule is required for irony.

Summed up, we think the right view about irony in essence is this:

***Ironic-Act***: U utters *S* pretending to believe/assert that *P* so as to give a ridiculing-portrayal of someone believing/asserting that *P*.

Given ***Ironic-Act***, irony is a *doing* that isn't a propositional act or assertion. Should we call it an illocutionary act? Irony is a recognised form of play—particularly, play with language. It

---

<sup>1</sup> For discussion of the pretence view see Barker (2004) and Currie (2006). See also Wilson (2006) and Popa-Wyatt (2014) for related discussion.

is a pretending to do one thing to achieve something else. Although it is not generally conventionalised—that would be contrary to its nature—that does not bar it from being illocutionary, which is to say, a complete, self-standing move in the conversational game.

We think the essence of irony is that U engages in a pretence act that is a ridiculing portrayal of a cognitive state. What about the *expressing* of ***Irony*** (i)-(ii)? We think it is best to treat this as *conversational implicature*. If U engages in this kind of ridiculing-portrayal of someone asserting/believing *S*, we can infer that U has the attitude ***Irony*** (i) and therefore that U believes ***Irony*** (ii).

3. Having argued that irony is an illocutionary act, we face again the embedding problem. Irony, qua illocutionary act, cannot embed. If an ironic illocutionary act were embedded in (2) or in the antecedent of Sam's (3), then why would the conversational implicatures of ***Irony*** (i)-(ii) not arise in these contexts? U uttering (2) on the narrow reading lacks such commitments, and similarly for the conditional in (3). If so, how does the *Force/Sense* theorist make sense of these cases?

One response to the embedding problem is to reject the assumption, made so far, that the embedded sentences bearing ironic content are being *used*. Perhaps they are quoted and so only mentioned. So, our examples of embedded irony are only claims about quoted sentences on ironic readings. If so, no issue of embedded content need be addressed.

This quotation view is untenable. First, it is doubtful that the terms in our embedded ironic sentences are not used. Take this variation on (2):

(5) Max thinks that our friend over there, George, is a real genius, you know, Einstein incarnate with bells and whistles.

The attributor, Tan, provides editorial comment on Max's belief content in a way that clearly indicates that the terms in the content-clause are being used—for example, making them accessible to relations of co-reference. This is not consistent with the hypothesis that the content-clause material is merely mentioned. Similarly, the anaphoric relations in the

exchange of Tan, Sam, and Fran, in (3) and (4), are difficult to handle on a quotational hypothesis.

Furthermore, what is the content of Sam's conditional in (3) on the quotational view? It must be a metalinguistic claim, like this:

(6) If it is correct to say, 'he is', literally meaning that George is a real genius, but with an ironic interpretation, then it is correct to say 'We ought to let that genius shine', literally meaning we ought to let that genius shine, with an ironic interpretation.

But is Sam's conditional a metalinguistic claim about ironic interpretation of quoted material? We think not. One might accuse Sam for being nasty towards George in uttering the conditional in (3)—it still carries the sting of ridicule that attends independent ironic utterance. But one cannot accuse someone of being nasty in uttering (6). It is simply a commentary on the correctness conditions for ironic utterance.

The quotation hypothesis is not plausible. Another idea is that the embedded ironic sentences are performed in a kind of illocutionary act, but the force is *cancelled* somehow. That is why there is no conversational implicature of *Irony (i)-(ii)*. However, force cancellation is an obscure idea. If force cancellation means force is absent, what then is the content of (1) embedded?<sup>2</sup> There is only the propositional act, which, we have already argued, cannot contain ironic content.

The force-cancellation idea must also deal with the fact that the ironic force of a self-standing ironic use of (1) is *signalled*, in some sense, by voice stress. This is just as, for example, the imperatival mood signals commissive force. But now consider the embedding of the ironic sentence. The ironic force is absent, but the voice-stress that signals ironic force is present. The voice-stress signals that something is the case—there is ironic force—but there is no ironic force enacted. So why is utterance of, say, (1) in (2) not defective, since there is signalling that something is the case, but it isn't the case? One might propose that the

---

<sup>2</sup> See Hanks (2007) for an attempt to make sense of the idea.

signalling itself is cancelled, due to the embedding of (1). But if that is so, how is there any ironic content at all in the embedded sentence?

Another proposal about how (1) embeds is that (1) *indicates* an ironic illocutionary-act type—of the kind that is normally produced by ironic use of (1)—although (1) is not a tokening of that type. The *indicated* illocutionary-act type is the content of (1) when embedded. Of course, this idea involves giving up *TC-embedding*, because we are now denying that only propositional acts are performed by embedded sentences. The approach faces a serious question. How does a sentence, which normally encodes a proposition with a force, do something completely different when embedded, viz., *indicate* an illocutionary-act type? It must be that some feature of the embedded sentence is responsible for this *indicating*. Since voice-stressing is the canonical form for carrying ironic meaning, we might suppose that in the case of (1) it is voice-stress that carries the signal of an ironic act-type. In other words:

***Ironic-Act Indication:*** ‘George is such a genius’ + Voice-stress *indicates* an ironic illocutionary act-type.

We have doubts that voice-stress, which unembedded is part of a dramatic act of an echoic kind, could, embedded, do something completely different—namely, *indicate* an illocutionary-act type.

What adds to this concern is that it is utterly mysterious what *indicating* is. It is not *expressing* or *exemplifying* an act-type, since the speaker is not tokening the illocutionary type. It isn’t *expressing a mental state*, since the illocutionary act-type is not a mental state. It is not the relation that a sentence has to the proposition it encodes through linguistic meaning and context. Nor is *indicating* representing how things are, since, then, (1) embedded would be true/correct if and only if the illocutionary-act type *indicated* existed. *Indicating* isn’t *signalling* in the sense that mood might be said to signal force since, again, that’s very close to representing how things are. Nor could indicating be referring. Sentences don’t ever, apparently, function like referring terms.



The term *indicating* does not designate indicating in any intuitive sense, nor does it correspond to any familiar theoretical notion. One might propose that the relation between (1) and the illocutionary-act type is a primitive one. But we think, metaphysically speaking, there can be no new kind of relation between a sentence and an illocutionary-act type. The *indicating* approach isn't an option.

Finally, one might propose that the ironic sentences are performed in pretence acts. So, Sam, in uttering the antecedent of his conditional is pretending to perform an ironic act. What embeds is the pretend ironic-act. But this just puts off the problem. Now we have to contend with the embedding of a pretence act, which will present us with many of the issues that the embedding of irony does anyway.

4. To conclude, we don't see how, retaining *Force/Sense*, we can deal with the problem of embedding of ironic content. First, given that non-truth-conditional content threatens to intrude into compound sentences it looks like both *TC-Embedding* and *Force/Sense* are threatened, since we cannot cut up illocutionary acts into two packets of meaning, a force and then a pure propositional content. Secondly, the idea that objects of belief are propositions, force-stripped entities, looks like it is under pressure. We can look to other modes of figurative speech, and see very similar results. We are not, we submit, just looking at an isolated phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

What is the alternative picture? We cannot describe one here, but we think that what is required is fundamentally rethinking illocutionary facts, sentence content, and objects of belief.<sup>4</sup> It may be that *Force/Sense* and *TC-Embedding* are commitments of a paradigm ripe for overthrowing.

## **References**

- Barker, S. J., 2003. Truth and conventional implicature. *Mind* 112: 1-33.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2004. *Renewing Meaning*. Oxford: OUP.

---

<sup>3</sup> The embedding of *conventional implicature*—literal, but non-truth-conditional content—is another phenomenon that challenges *Force/Sense* and *TC-Embedding* in a very similar way. See Barker (2003).

<sup>4</sup> See Barker (2004, 2007) for the sketch of an alternative.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 2007. Semantics Beyond the Distinction between Sense and Force. In *Illocutions, Institutions and Intentionality: Essays on Themes from the Philosophy of John Searle* (ed.) Savvas Tsohatzidis (Oxford University Press): 190-2011.
- Camp, E. 2012. Sarcasm, pretence, and the semantics-pragmatics distinction. *Noûs* 46: 587-634.
- Currie, G. 2006. Why irony is pretence. In Nichols S. (Eds.), *The Architecture of the Imagination* (Oxford University Press): 111-133.
- Hanks, P. 2007. The Content-Force Distinction. *Philosophical Studies* 134:141–164.
- Popa-Wyatt, M. 2014. Pretence and echo: towards an integrated account of verbal irony. *International Review of Pragmatics*, Vol. 6 (1): 127-168.
- Sperber, Deirdre and Deirdre Wilson. 1995. *Relevance. Communication and cognition*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wilson, D. 2006. The pragmatics of verbal irony: echo or pretence? *Lingua*, 116, 1722-1743.