

Performance, Irony and Viewpoint in Language

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Irony and drama

At least since the German Romantics, people have been observing that there seems to be a particular kinship between irony and the theatre. The idea that irony criterially involves some special kind of performance has an even longer history. The etymological roots of irony go back to the stock character of the *eirôn* of ancient Greek comedy, and from there to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he presents the Socrates of Plato's dialogues as a paradigm example of the type. The *history* of irony is thus intertwined with the history of theatre and performance, but in modern discussions there has often also been the intimation that the *nature* of irony and the *nature* of theatre are especially well fitted to one another.

D. C. Muecke, for instance, observed 'a strong link between irony and drama or the theater' (1969: 40) and argued that 'irony achieves its most striking effects in the theater' (45). G. G. Sedgwick, in his book *Of Irony, Especially in Drama*, proposed that 'the very theater itself ... is a sort of ironic convention' ([1935] 2003: 37). Some modern critics have even suggested that irony and drama may be in some fundamental way impossible to disentangle. In his *Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke claimed that drama and irony have a shared 'essence' (517) based in a common logic of dialectic and strategic moments of reversal.

Dramatic irony is the most obviously 'dramatic' sort of irony, and a common observation about irony and drama is that the relationship between actor, character and audience that is inherent to the scene of theatrical performance both invites and enhances dramatic ironies. But, as Manfred Pfister (1988: 55–6) has noted, 'It would be wrong to equate dramatic irony with irony in drama since the latter encompasses an extremely broad spectrum of ironic structures.' It would be equally wrong to suggest that critics' claims for a special relationship between irony and the theatre have

stopped at dramatic irony. Other sorts of irony often come in for the same analysis, and this general association has become such a commonplace that it appears in what must be nearly its maximally distilled form in the teaching supplement to Edwin Wilson's widely assigned introductory textbook *The Theatre Experience* (now in its thirteenth edition), as follows:

Irony: Condition that is the reverse of what we have expected; also, a verbal expression whose intended implication is the opposite of its literal sense. Irony is a device particularly suited to theatre and found in virtually all drama.¹

There is something about the theatre that makes it seem be a fertile setting for ironies in general, and something about irony that seems distinctively theatrical.

We might wonder whether this kinship in fact springs from one source or from many. Different elements of the theatrical scene seem to contribute variously to quite different sorts of ironic effects. On the one hand, there is the impression produced by the fact that characters we see being performed in some sense do not 'know' that they are 'only' being acted, which gives every staged act a certain element of dramatic irony: audiences always know something important about characters' situations that the characters do not. On the other hand, the fact that acting is a kind of sustained *pretence* lends these same acts a potential ironic knowingness of the sort associated with ironic understatement, Socratic irony or sarcasm. Meanwhile, the physical distance between audience and actors, in which viewers often literally sit in judgement from 'on high', invites a sense of ironic detachment.

Is this multivalenced affiliation between the theatre and the diverse phenomena that have been called 'irony' primarily an accident of historical contingency? Or are there some shared cognitive underpinnings that might help to illuminate and confirm this intuitively evident affinity? The cognitive sciences have largely limited their work on irony to the territory occupied by sarcasm and its close relations – but the kinds of phenomena that have historically interested scholars of literature in general and the theatre in particular show us that this limitation has been truly limiting. I suggest that more attention to the literary and theatrical can help approaches to irony in the cognitive sciences be richer and more complete, while research from cognitive linguistics can also help to explain how and why these observations should hold true.

The most common way of thinking about irony in psychology, linguistics and computer science is as a sort of operation on an underlying sentiment or proposition. A great deal of research in this area is focused on the issue of how sarcasm can be 'decoded' to reveal this underlying intended meaning. But irony, broadly considered, is better described as a way of *construing* an

expressed proposition or an observed scene. Acts of ironic understanding in general, including verbal, dramatic and situational ironies, all involve a type of dynamic reconstrual in which attention ‘zooms out’ from one mental space (the ironized) to a higher viewpoint from which the original is reassessed (the ironic). As we’ll see, this way of looking at irony can illuminate the cognitive underpinnings of situational and dramatic ironies as well as verbal irony, and the theatrical qualities they all share.

Varieties of irony and the linguistic tradition

The word ‘irony’ has, over centuries of use, come to name a strikingly diverse but tantalizingly connected array of phenomena, including sarcasm, cosmic ironies and a certain kind of peculiarly sophisticated or detached attitude, as in the ironic enjoyment of camp (cf. Sontag 1964), with many others between. These flavours of irony are so varied that it is not immediately clear that it is correct to treat them as a single class, though their shared name at the very least tempts us to do so. Research in the cognitive sciences has largely elected to take a very narrow construal of irony – but we can and will do better.

One striking shared feature of all these sorts of irony, although not one that is immediately self-evidently relevant to the theatrical connection, is the juxtaposition of contradictory or incompatible ideas. Not all oppositions are ironic, but all ironies involve opposition. *Situational* or *cosmic ironies*, for example, hinge on the contrast of the actual consequences of some action with its intended results and the means by which they were pursued. Canonical situational ironies feature an act meant to produce some circumstance which instead directly prevents it, or else an act meant to prevent some circumstance but which instead, worse still, brings it about – like stepping to the side to avoid wetting your shoes in a puddle, only to fall into a pond – or a stark contrast between the expectation produced by a set of circumstances and its actual consequence, as epigrammatically captured in Coleridge’s ‘water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink’.

Dramatic ironies arise from contrasts between a character’s limited knowledge of his situation and the reader’s or viewer’s greater understanding. Irony can also refer to a particular sensibility rooted in contradiction; the German Romantics specialized in one such approach and often cast irony as the defining feature of the artistic mind. *Romantic irony* is, as Anne Mellor puts it, ‘both a philosophical conception of the universe and an artistic program’ (1980: 187) – the appreciation of the irreconcilable conflicts of various contradictions in life and philosophy, and a willingness to suspend

judgement and resist collapsing the indeterminate or paradoxical. And although they are quite different from Romantic irony, phenomena including camp, kitsch or other sorts of ironic – as opposed to ‘earnest’ or ‘sincere’ – enjoyment of objects, aesthetics or activities would also fall into this broad category, in which ‘irony’ serves to characterize not a piece of discourse or an event, but a mode of appreciation.

Work on irony in the cognitive sciences, linguistics and philosophy of language (e.g. Sperber and Wilson 1981 and 1998; Clark and Gerrig 1984; Kreuz and Glucksberg 1989) has in the meantime come to focus almost exclusively on *verbal irony*: those times when a speaker seems in some sense to say the opposite of what she means, or, as John Haiman (1998) puts it, ‘conveys the metamessage “I don’t mean this”’. The canonical unifying quality of verbal ironies is that they can apparently be ‘decoded’ if you recognize that the speaker’s actual position and the speaker’s ostensible position do not match. In this view, the verbal ironist has a ‘true’ underlying position to be understood, and failing to recognize the irony will result in a serious misinterpretation of the ironist’s remarks.

So, for instance, it is a mistake to think that the annoyed commuter who says ‘Oh, that’s just *great*’ when a passing bus drives through a puddle and splashes her with dirty water is, in fact, expressing delight at this turn of events. To understand the irony you have to decode it, uncovering the fact that she is really expressing annoyance. But situational and dramatic ironies don’t have the same kind of coded meaning that verbal ironies do. Failing to recognize the ironies of Oedipus is different from missing the ironic part of a sarcastic remark. In a dramatic irony, there’s something to observe (or fail to observe), but nothing to *decode*. You’re missing something, certainly, if you don’t notice the discrepancies that make a scene or situation ironic, but your interpretation isn’t back to front as it is in the case of the classic missed verbal irony.

The issue of misidentifying verbal ironies – failures of decoding – is at front and centre of many current empirical research programmes on irony, especially in natural language processing. The aim of many of these computational projects (e.g. Littman and Mey 1991; Utsumi 1996; Tepperman, Traum and Narayanan 2006) is to provide a way around the kind of interpretive errors associated with verbal irony and to provide tools for ‘detecting’ sarcasm when it occurs. Eager clients for such tools include companies who hope to get a sense of public sentiment about their products and services, government agencies monitoring ‘chatter’ online, and anyone else interested in pursuing automatic sentiment analysis. The point is to avoid, as one paper puts it, ‘misinterpreting sarcastic statements as literal’ (Riloff et al. 2013: 1) by identifying circumstances in which, for example, ‘words ...

have a strong polarity but are used sarcastically, which means that the opposite polarity was intended'. Linguists working in this area have generally pursued a more broadly descriptive project, but the typical objective there still has been to identify the features that make an ironic utterance ironic, and to explain how language users recognize and decode those ironies.

But of course not all verbal ironies can be decoded in such a straightforward manner. Gibbs (1986) raises the example of a person who exclaims, with ridiculing aversion, 'I love people who signal' after another driver moves into her lane without signalling. Should we conclude that the speaker hates people who use their turn signals properly? No. Does she love people who don't signal? No again; in fact, she may truly adore people who use their turn signals. The sarcasm inheres in the fact that she has chosen this supremely inappropriate moment to say it: it involves a complex of both verbal and situational discrepancies. Another tricky related form is what the humourist Damon Runyon called 'kidding on the square' (1907): a remark framed as a joke but also meant as a real criticism or jab. Kidding on the square is the weapon of the court jester, a way of getting away with telling dangerous truths under cover of facetiousness. This kind of insincerity qualifies as verbal irony under Haiman's definition – it certainly conveys 'the metamessage "I don't mean this"' – but its viability depends critically on being less than entirely straightforward to decode.

These linguistic accounts also don't have much to say about what makes *situations* ironic, only what makes *people* and *utterances* ironic or sarcastic. This constraint seriously limits their utility for literary and theatrical analysis. The linguist Deirdre Wilson (2006: 1725) takes the view that these apparent limitations are only to be expected, given the fundamentally heterogenous nature of 'irony': 'There is no reason to assume that all these phenomena work in the same way, or that we should be trying to develop a single general theory of irony *tout court* ... in other words, irony is not a natural kind.'

This is a reasonable position for a linguist to take, but if we hope to account specifically for the features that verbal irony *does* share with other kinds of irony, we will need to look elsewhere. A better theory of the cognitive and linguistic foundations of irony should ideally explain something about whether and in what way verbal irony relates to other kinds of irony, as well as why irony is sometimes very difficult to pin down. Irony is not always stable and it is not always easy to identify. The ability to recognize sarcasm, for example, appears relatively late in development; children typically can't identify sarcastic remarks reliably at all until about age eight, and it takes a few years more before most can do it reliably in the absence of the strong prosodic cues of a conventionally sarcastic 'tone' (Capelli, Nakagawa and Madden 1990). Even adults very often disagree about the ironic status of a

given situation or remark, and they think their intentions are much more transparent than they really are (Keysar 1994 and 2000).

In addition to the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, one element that seems potentially to unite the various sorts of irony is the presence of some kind of complex viewpoint on a single situation. This is the quality that H. W. Fowler (1926) described as the ‘double audience’ that distinguishes irony from other sorts of incongruity. The viewpoint account (Tobin and Israel 2012) proposes that this intuitive connection reflects a genuine, shared underlying conceptual structure. In other words, we can connect the sentence-level and discourse-level semantics of verbal ironies with situational and dramatic ironies by thinking about irony as a viewpoint phenomenon. By bringing cognitive approaches together with a fuller and richer idea of what irony might consist of, and when it happens, we can not only gain insight into the riddle that opened this chapter – why is there something about the theatre that seems to be particularly amenable to ironies of all kinds? – but also get a better understanding of some of the trickier kinds of sarcasm that have tripped up earlier linguistic and computational approaches.

Irony as a viewpoint phenomenon

Linguists have appreciated for a long time that many kinds of language are inherently ‘viewpointed’.² For example, all languages include expressions like *tomorrow*, *later*, *upstairs*, *here*, *this*, *sir*, *you* and *come in*, which incorporate a particular vantage in space, time or social position (among other possibilities) into their meaning. And more recently, work on mental simulation in neuroscience (Barsalou 1999; Bergen and Chang 2005; Barsalou 2010; Bergen 2012) has expanded our understanding of perspective taking in language. Viewpoint turns out to be relevant not only to words that manifestly refer to the spatial, temporal or evaluative perspective of individual language users, but potentially to every aspect of meaning construction in language. Even an apparently viewpoint-neutral sentence like *Marie kicked the football* prompts us to generate inherently viewpointed motor and perceptual simulations of the described events. This means that language users are continually engaged in taking up perspectives other than those of their own personal and immediate experience.

Viewpoint in language may of course also be deployed in service of much more complex representations. We can speak and think of other places and times; we can produce counterfactual conditionals; we can represent the speech and thoughts of others (including imagined others); we can embed perspectives within other perspectives, layer them or blend them in a host

of fleeting or extended modes of discourse presentation. We do this sort of thing naturally and continually, but as the configurations of embedded perspectives we try to keep in mind gets more complicated, keeping track of their relationships to one another can become very computationally intensive. This interplay between our aptitude for perspective taking with language and its relative complexity can explain quite a lot about irony, how it works and when it tends to happen.

Here is where cognitive linguistics can offer some useful tools to help unify our understanding. The Mental Spaces framework, first proposed by Gilles Fauconnier (1985) and further developed in Fauconnier and Turner's (2000 and 2002) theory of conceptual blending, provides a productive way to represent these viewpoint configurations. Mental spaces are a model of the small, local representations people construct in their minds as they think and talk. In this framework, language is not a true or false representation of the world, but fundamentally a *prompt* for cognitive experience. Any expression is likely to be compatible with many different mental space configurations. The meanings we construct in response to or in the course of producing a given bit of discourse are not only structured by what is said but also may be resolved in part by general pragmatic considerations such as relevance, and in part by our personal predilections, store of background knowledge and other idiosyncratic elements that may be particular to our personality and state of mind in the moment. And because a given mental space is always connected to some cognizer, mental spaces necessarily include viewpoints.

Situational, dramatic and verbal ironies all involve a particular kind of interpretive experience or attitude that comes from a doubled viewpoint, a sense that one has 'stepped back' or zoomed out from one viewpoint to another, more sophisticated view, from which one can gaze, smugly or sympathetically, down upon the original. Wayne Booth describes the experience in this way:

The process is in some respects more like a leap or climb to a higher level than like scratching a surface or plunging deeper. The movement is always toward an obscured point that is intended as wiser, wittier, more compassionate, subtler, truer, more moral, or at least less obviously vulnerable to further irony. (Booth 1974: 36)

This experience of irony can arise when an expressed proposition conflicts with the content of a focused space in a way that leads the conceptualizer to adjust her entire mental space configuration. In order to be counted as ironic, an expressed proposition in some focused space must conflict with the content of an implicit or presupposed proposition in a higher viewpoint, as illustrated in Figure 1.

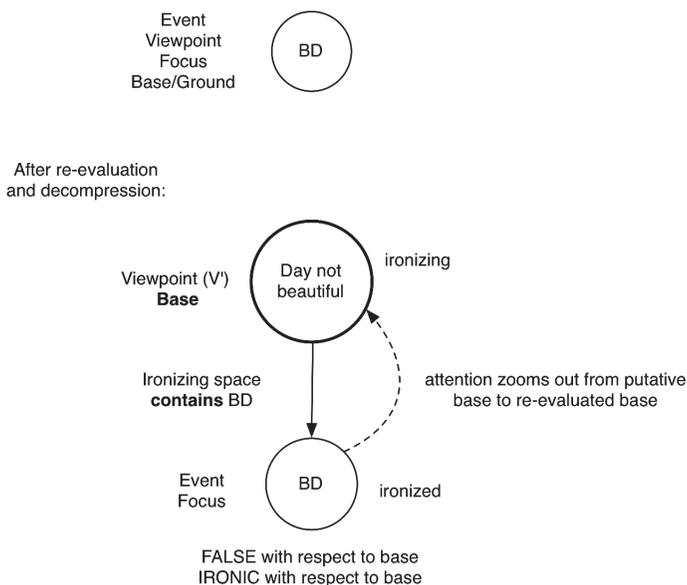


Figure 1 ‘What a beautiful day’

What you’re looking at here is the relationship between two different mental space *networks* or *configurations* representing different construals of the remark ‘What a beautiful day’. A little technical terminology: every mental space network canonically includes a Base, a Focus, an Event and a Viewpoint. Sometimes more than one of these roles may be filled by a single space at the same time; sometimes not (Cutrer 1994; Fauconnier 1985). In any case, ‘Base’ refers to the space that is serving as the subjectively construed ground or basis of interpretation: home base. The ‘Focus’ space is the space on which attention is currently concentrated. The ‘Event’ space is the one in which a given event is taking place, and the ‘Viewpoint’ space is the space from which other spaces are assessed.

Irony depends on the availability or construction of a new Viewpoint space from which one can re-access a formerly in-focus space and its associated viewpoint at the same time. This zooming out both provides the experience of ironic ‘distance’ and, often by tapping into features of the existing discourse situation, can produce a sense of complicity between the interpreter and some real or imaginary interlocutor. It also captures the sense that many ironies produce of distinguishing between what John Haiman (1998: 80) calls ‘the difference between a behaving and a scrutinizing self’.

Figure 1 illustrates a simple zoom-out scenario for a classic example of verbal irony. ‘What a beautiful day,’ says one person to another, as dismal rain pours down. In achieving an ironic understanding of this statement, the hearer constructs two spaces: a Focus space with the proposition that the weather is beautiful, and a new ironic Viewpoint, which is distinguished from an ordinary observation that the weather is, in fact, not beautiful, by being set up as a higher-level view of the pretended or represented view that the weather is praiseworthy. This viewpoint space represents a new ground and a new potential common ground for communication between the interpreter and some real or imaginary interlocutor.

One nice thing about this approach is that it gives us a way of talking about verbal ironies that connects up with existing accounts of a wide variety of non-ironic elements of language, including verb tense and aspect (Cutrer 1994), conditional constructions (Dancygier and Sweetser 2005), conjunctions (Langacker 2008), co-reference and anaphora (van Hoek 1997) and more. At the same time, it also extends to varieties of irony that go well beyond the examples that are most frequently considered in the cognitive science and linguistics literature.

For example, the zoomed-out viewpoint approach can help to explain the unsettling and unstable nature of many ironies, as well as the related fact that people can and do sometimes reject a putative ironist’s own characterization of the ironic status of her remarks, as described by the cultural commentator Lindy West in 2012:

There’s been a lot of talk these last couple of weeks about ‘hipster racism’ or ‘ironic racism’ – or, as I like to call it, racism. It’s, you know, introducing your black friend as ‘my black friend’ – as a joke!!! – to show everybody how totally not preoccupied you are with your black friend’s blackness. ... Sure, you can’t say racist things anymore, but you can *pretend to say them!* Which, it turns out, is pretty much the exact same thing.

In this case, an irony is not missed but vetoed. The experience of irony involves the rejection of the content of a focused mental space and a reconstrual of an original viewpoint space as the new focus. But participants in a discourse may or may not endorse that reconstrual. In the instance of the misfiring ironies described by West, unsympathetic hearers hold the ironist responsible for at least some of the positions associated with the remarks the ironist hoped would be taken as not her own. This doesn’t mean, however, that the intended irony simply disappears. An important part of the interpretive experience described here arises from the sense that the ‘ironic racist’ has attempted to

align herself with the hearer in a high-level ironizing view, while the hearer declines to accord the would-be ironist the position she would claim for herself. Something related happens in the case of kidding on the square, in which the ironist actually intends for her putative ironic stance to be rejected by her audience – and yet the resulting construal doesn't (and isn't intended to) collapse to mere sincerity.

What's going on here is that the appreciation of any verbal irony prompts the hearer to decompress the usually invisible blend of expressed viewpoint and speaker viewpoint. In some cases, this may involve first entertaining and then rejecting the literal or sincere interpretation, but the ironic construal can also arise more or less instantaneously. Facial expressions and tone of voice can provide immediate cues for ironic interpretations. People can also 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 the peculiarly sophisticated attitude which takes pleasure in the enjoyment of camp or in the simultaneous appreciation of several mutually exclusive explanations of the world that Schlegel described as the ironic sensibility of Romanticism. In any case, whether an ironic construal is built *à la minute* or pre-compiled as part of an ironic sensibility, the experience consists in the apprehension of two incompatible viewpoints, one of which is rejected and in effect looked down upon. Attention flows from lower to higher. The higher-level common ground from which one views the ironized viewpoint can also already be latent in the discourse situation or genre in which the irony is presented. Novels, for example, often come with a narrator, who is distinct from (though potentially very closely aligned with) the author. Theatre does even more.

Situational ironies and beyond

Irony can arise anywhere that our understanding of a discourse situation provides a multilevel network of mental spaces. Figure 2 illustrates how the viewpoint account extends to cosmic irony.

To die of thirst surrounded by water is to be the victim of a cosmic irony. It is a state of affairs that is tragic, but also absurd, perhaps even faintly ridiculous. To appreciate the irony in such a circumstance requires a certain amount of detachment, a measure of decompression. To take one's own circumstances to be ironic, one must momentarily step outside oneself. Something has happened that might, or could, or should lead to a particular expectation about what would happen. The viewpoint associated with that

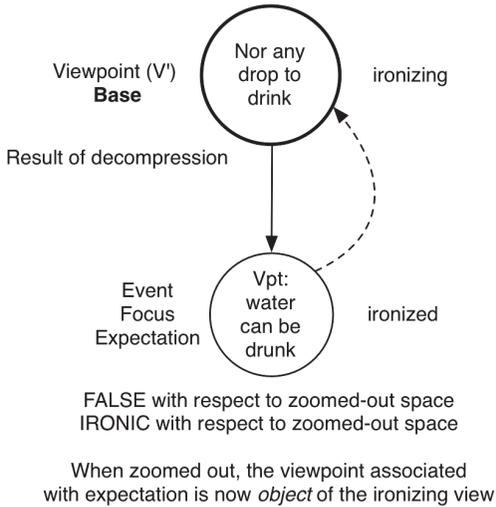


Figure 2 A cosmic irony.

expectation – the self who might foolishly think that the last thing to worry about with all this water should be dying of thirst – is the ironized viewpoint, seen from a distance by the ironizing viewpoint.

Dramatic irony, meanwhile, involves a mismatch between facts at the event level and beliefs at a higher narrative level, as illustrated in Figure 3. This example is from Sophocles' *Electra*, as translated and analysed in Sedgewick's *Of Irony: Especially in Drama* ([1935] 2003: 40–2). Here, Clytemnestra's son Orestes has returned in secret from his exile, and sends his attendant, a tutor, to the palace to announce that he is dead. Queen Clytemnestra – but not the members of the audience, who even if they do not already know the story, have seen Orestes set this plan in motion – is deceived. She makes no attempt to hide her delight as she responds, concluding, 'I am freed this day from fear ... now, I say, for all / Her menaces, my days shall pass in peace.' The horrified Electra begs Clytemnestra to curb her exultations, but the queen will have none of it. Sedgewick describes the irony that unfolds in this scene:

Two opposing courses of action have converged under the spectator's eyes. Clytemnestra's will, purpose, line of action – whatever you like to call it – has long been in conflict (and still is) with the will of her vengeful son. But that any conflict exists any longer, let alone that it means her life – of this the queen is mainly ignorant. Indeed, she exults in a sense of security that she has not felt since she murdered

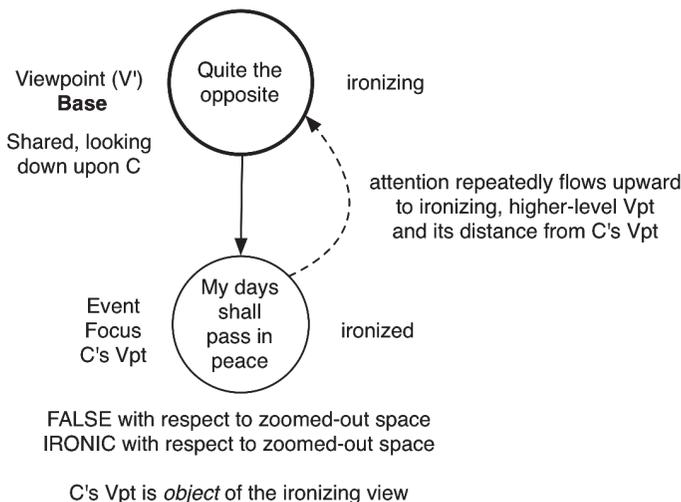


Figure 3 'My days shall pass in peace'.

Agamemnon. Her slayer is at hand, and she is welcoming his spy. This is the really *dramatic* ambiguity which the Greek audience certainly perceived and which the Greek dramatists delighted to embody in double-edged speech. (41)

Here the issue is not one of splitting a single perspective into an experiencing and a perceiving self, but of attention flow from a lower- to a higher-level viewpoint. With nearly every line in this episode, the viewer is made increasingly aware of the great distance between the perspective of the character Clytemnestra, on the one hand, and the higher viewpoint shared by almost everyone else (Electra is still in the dark, but will soon be relieved of her ignorance), on the other: our fellow audience members, Orestes, Pylades, the tutor, the playwright who wrote these words, the actors who perform them ... all share here together the ironizing view of her ironized viewpoint. The fact that the tutor remains on stage through this scene, listening in and looking on exultantly, sharpens the *ironic frisson*. The ironizing viewpoint is literally in view, and this is not incidental: it in fact (as Sedgewick and others have noted) serves actively to heighten and compound the ironic effect. The tutor embodies this ironizing viewpoint. He gives the audience a perspective that is continually visible on stage, from which the scene is ironic. As viewers, we don't have to hold that perspective in mind, because it is right in front of us.

All of this suggests that irony is fundamentally a matter of how we move around within a particular complex viewpoint configuration. Certain discourse genres provide these sorts of complex viewpoints as a matter of course. Narrative prose, for example, typically establishes several viewpoint layers to which assertions and evaluations may be ascribed – those of characters, narrators, implied authors – and so an irony-ready arrangement is in some sense always ready and waiting to be exploited. In the theatrical context, the viewpoint complexities are physically embodied all around us.

One important element of blending theory is the idea that integration networks very often serve to *compress* information and relationships in the blend: from many elements to few, from diffuse to compact, from between-space relations to within-space relations. The viewpoint account suggests that irony is fundamentally a figure of decompression. More specifically, it is a figure of *desubjectification* – a process in which conceptual contents that are first construed implicitly, as part of the conceptualizer's own perspective, are unpacked and reconstrued as an object of conceptualization 'on stage', seen from the outside. The possibility for irony thus arises naturally from the theatrical mind. However, it also makes high demands on mental processing and, as a result, it typically requires highly ritualized discourse contexts (Haiman 1998).

Thinking is sometimes complex and difficult, and working memory – our ability to keep multiple things in mind at once – is always limited. Because of these limits, demanding tasks that require complex manipulations of conceptual structure generally pose what Edwin Hutchins (2005: 1557) has called 'the problem of conceptual stability'. If we can offload some cognitive labour or inherit it ready-made, allowing us to keep some aspects of a complex network of ideas stable while we attend to others, we can do more complex work with the same working memory. One way to increase conceptual stability is through shared cultural models: the rituals, conventions, institutions and related conceptual and behavioural frames that our culture provides to organize experience. We can also gain conceptual stability by associating conceptual structures with material structures. Physical and cultural structures 'anchor' our thinking and provide scaffolding for complex cognitive work. In the *Electra* example, the tutor is an anchor for the ironic viewpoint on the scene. Furthermore, as Barbara Dancygier describes elsewhere in this volume, the stage itself is a material anchor for the conceptual distinction between real world and storyworld. The physical separation of stage and auditorium (or equivalent) anchors the conceptual separation between the characters and events of the play and the audience who watches them at a safe distance. Indeed, the entire material apparatus of the canonical theatrical setting is ready-made to anchor the experience

of ironic interpretation, by physically instantiating the view-of-a-viewpoint configuration that irony invokes.

No wonder irony and the theatre should seem ideally fitted to one another, then. But there's more – once we understand irony as a viewpoint phenomenon and the elements of the theatrical scene as crucial anchors for an ironic viewing stance, the relevance of *acting* to irony also becomes clear. Theatre offers highly salient, always perceptible examples of compressed (but readily decompressible) different viewpoints physically embodied in actors performing roles on stage.³ As Muecke (1969: 41) observed, while we may know that Hamlet is in some objective sense no more or less 'unaware' of being in Shakespeare's play than 'the daughters of Leucippus are unaware of being in Reubens' painting of their abduction', the actual effect for viewers is quite different: 'Because the Hamlets we see are embodied in actual men whom we see moving and hear talking, it is very easy to think of them as being unaware of their status as actors.' But why should this be, and what does this effect have to do with irony? We can now see that it happens because the usually invisible compression of expressed viewpoint and experienced viewpoint – the same compression that is pulled apart in irony – is continually and visibly manifest in the scene.

The stage, the audience, the actors in their roles, conventions of dramatic structure: all of these help to supply, ready-to-mind, the zoom-out conceptual configuration common to all irony. The theatre makes an apt setting for ironies not just because it is historically or metaphorically linked to irony, but because it supplies a culturally entrenched, embodied context that directly supports the particular kind of complex and cognitively demanding perspective taking that irony invokes. It provides both a material and a cultural anchor for ironic decompression.