

Sarcasm and the Postmodern Sensibility

"Is the pundit you looking for, not so?"

The taxi driver said, "Nah. We come all the way from Port of Spain just for the scenery." (Naipaul 1959:8)

Whatever our social or psychological purposes in being sarcastic, from a purely linguistic or grammatical point of view, we are doing two things at once: we are communicating an ostensible message to our listeners but at the same time we are framing this message with a commentary or metamessage that says something like "I don't mean this: in fact, I mean the exact opposite." This metamessage makes sarcasm seem like a very abstract and quintessentially "linguistic" activity, for when we engage in it, we are using language to talk not about the world but about itself. Moreover, as there are many other devices available for performing the act of denial or committing verbal aggression, it seems like a needlessly roundabout way of performing this task.

Accordingly, we should not be surprised to find that sarcasm correlates with some other kinds of "sophistication" or to find that it is far from universal even among human beings. If language is what defines humanity, then irony and sarcasm may conceivably define a "higher" or "more decadent" type of culture or personality or at least a geographically and temporally restricted use of language to perform verbal aggression or other kinds of work. This idea has occurred to a number of observers of contemporary American culture.

A recent article in *Spy* magazine, for example, announces that the familiar mimed "air quotes" sign of the second and third digits of both hands that says "we're not serious" is "the quintessential *contemporary* gesture" (emphasis

added) and attributes this to the influence of (somewhat mysteriously) television: "To get the joke, all you had to do was what you had always done best—*watch a lot of TV*" (Rudnick & Andersen 1989:40). Alienation and shallowness of affect are perceived as the exclusive moral preserve of the generation of Americans born between 1961 and 1981: "There's our 'attitude,' a coolness, a detachment. There's the way we dress—'mock' turtlenecks, way-too-big suits. And the way we speak: ironic, flip, uncommitted, a question mark at the end of every other sentence" (Nancy Smith, "25 and Pending," *Washington Post*, cited in Howe & Strauss 1993:181). In a perceptive undergraduate essay, Molly Test (1989) notes that irony on TV is so pervasive that its *absence*, as in the style of Dale Cooper, the lead character in *Twin Peaks*, sets off alarms:

Dale Cooper . . . speaks in such a serious unaffected way that we cannot possibly take it seriously. The American audience is so used to television being light and totally affected that when a character doesn't crack a joke every five minutes, it commands attention. Cooper's rational honest form of talk is virtually nonexistent in real life as well and therefore absurd. He utters banalities with conviction (e.g., "You can't let personal feelings interfere with your work"; "mind, body, and spirit are up to the task") and describes, rather than expresses his emotions (e.g., "I have violated my professional code and now Audrey is paying the price").

In fact, in addition to the weird and surreal Dale Cooper, two currently accepted types embody the exotic virtues of speaking banalities with conviction in postmodern America: latter-day "fools in Christ" like the saintly Forrest Gump in Roger Zemeckis's popular film and innocent aliens who fall to earth like John Carpenter's extraterrestrial in *Starman*. If we need negative evidence for the ubiquity of irony today, the conception of the noble savages on whom we project its absence (morons and extraterrestrials) should provide some.

In his magisterial typology of games in human cultures, Roger Caillois (1967:164) suggests that we can interpret a culture from the kinds of games it plays the most, and there is no reason not to extend this insight to verbal games. F. Muecke (1969) suggests that irony is associated with a specific—Western?—worldview, which Susan Sontag, in a famous essay, called the camp sensibility. She restricted it to "affluent societies" and dated its origin in the West to the early eighteenth century (Sontag 1966a:280, 289). The essence of camp for Sontag is of "life in quotes."

Hardly an event or a relationship is possible which does not seem to the hip and sophisticated camper to be an implicit allusion to or, much worse, a trite repetition of some other event or relationship. Every response seems to be a quote of something already played out. The relevant postmodernist slogan (as Rudnick and Andersen 1989 very insightfully point out) is "it's been done." The hipster looks on life like the Grandmaster looks on chess, where dozens of opening combinations of moves are so familiar, so congealed by countless repetitions, that they have actually sprouted proper names (Ruy Lopez, Sicilian, etc.) and where many tournament games are quotes of some previously

recorded game up to (in some cases) the twentieth move or beyond; and the deeper the players are steeped in chess lore, the more aware they are that what they are doing is very often not original.

The "postmodern" attitude that there is no new thing (including, notably, postmodernism itself) under the sun—and that this is somehow regrettable—is older than hip; it is older even than Ecclesiastes and has been held by all manners of people at various times. Indeed, a random assembly of some of the notable quotations to this effect (with a little help from Bartlett) might itself serve as a small object lesson on the ubiquity of recycling.

My first citation is attributed to Khakheperessenb, an Egyptian scribe of circa 2000 B.C.: "Would I had phrases that are not known, utterances that are strange, in new language that has not been used, free from repetition, not an utterance which has grown stale, which men of old have spoken" (cited in Lentricchia, 1980:318).

The Roman playwright Terence (190–159 B.C.) defends himself from charges of plagiarism in the prologue to *The Eunuch* (161 B.C.) (Duckworth 1961:255): "In fact, nothing is said that has not been said before." He is self-consciously cited by Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* ([1621] 1932:25): "We can say nothing but what hath been said . . . of that which I have is stolen from others."

Cicero (106–43 B.C.) in the *De divinatione* (45 B.C.) (Baiter & Keyser 1864:206) puts a twist on it: "There is nothing so ridiculous but some philosopher has already said it." These are words repeated almost verbatim albeit without attribution by Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* ([1637] 1912: 13–4): "No opinion, however absurd or incredible, can be imagined which has not been maintained by some one of the philosophers."

Jean de la Bruyère (1645–1696) in his *Des ouvrages de l'esprit* ([1688] 1951:65) acknowledges that originality is only possible in style, not content: "Everything has been said, and we come more than seven thousand years too late—seven thousand years since there have been men who have been thinking—to say anything which has not been said already."

Muecke (1969:125) cites Goethe's diaries: "The world is now so old, so many eminent men have lived and thought for thousands of years, that there is little new to be discovered or expressed." The literary critics speak of the poet's "horror of finding himself to be only a copy or a replica" (Bloom 1973:80) or assert that "when the pop song moans that there is no new way of saying that I am in love or that her eyes are full of stars, it touches one of the main nerves in Western literature. . . . Such was the acquisitive reach of Hellenic and Hebraic articulation that genuine additions and new finds have been rare" (Steiner 1975:23).

The most recent echoer of Khakheperessenb's eloquent despair in my informal collection is David Peters, a fast-food worker of the Bart Simpson generation: "So many things have already happened in the world that we can't possibly come up with anything else. So why even live?" (Howe & Strauss 1993:87). Curiously, Muecke (who calls this Ecclesiastical there-is-no-new-thing-under-

the-sun attitude a "closed ideology") believes that irony flourishes only in times when the opposite attitude is predominant: "General irony, in its subjective aspect, is itself an 'open ideology' phenomenon" (ibid.:127).

Marx's trenchant observation that history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce, may be closer to the mark. Indeed, Muecke himself is keenly aware of repetition and staleness of a model as among the indispensable preconditions for successful parody of that model.

One consequence of a jaded perception, I would stress, is that the hip ironic speaker is forever self-conscious and skeptical, particularly of his or her own originality and sincerity. If what I say has been very likely said before, then not only am I that most recognizably pitiful and contemptible of all kids on the playground, a *copycat*, but surely my sincerity in saying it is suspect. Like an actor on a stage, I am painfully conscious of merely repeating someone else's lines, playing a role. If I live in such a world, then possibly the only means I have available to express my superiority to the clichés which I find myself constantly spouting, to be cool, is to utter them as parody, that is, sarcastically.

A man cannot tell a woman "I love you madly" because "he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland." So to stake a slim claim to some originality, he says instead, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." (I owe this example to Enright 1986:159, who, appropriately, is himself echoing Eco 1984:39.)

Brackman (1967:63) provides a wonderful example of the same preemptive strategy:

At a large New York advertising agency, communication through hackneyed Madison Avenue-ese has become a source of embarrassment. Certain executives—usually the oldest and highest ranking—will use a chestnut unself-consciously; e.g., "Why don't we put it out on the back stoop and see if the cat licks it up?" Others employ such expressions only reluctantly, making it clear that they know a trite saying when they use one: "Why don't we put it out on the back stoop and see if the cat licks it up, as the cliché goes." Yet the phrase "as the cliché goes" has achieved such currency around the agency that a third echelon of junior executives has come to recognize it as a cliché. Still too lazy or unimaginative to break away into a fresh image, they simply incorporate this further self-consciousness: "Why don't we put it out on the back stoop, as the cliché goes, as the cliché goes."

It seems to me that this same "anxiety of influence," this same very Western terror of losing face through inadvertent sententiousness and uttering nothing but other people's shopworn clichés, is what motivates not only Bloom's "poet" and Brackman's adman but also the air quotes in one of Rudnick and Andersen's vivid examples from "The Irony Epidemic": "Bob tells his co-workers with a grin that he's got to get home to—raise hands, insert air quotes here—'the little woman' or to 'the wife and kids' as if his wife and daughter didn't really exist, as if he's still 'a wild and crazy guy.'" It's not that Bob thinks they don't exist. More probably, Bob, like Khakheperessenb or Brackman's Madison Avenue

junior executives, is acutely aware that many of his phrases are necessarily prefabricated, and he does not want to be thought uncool. The ultimate in uncoolness is to be unaware of one's own lack of originality.

It is tempting to follow Sontag, Muecke, Brackman, or Rudnick and Andersen and speculate that sarcasm as an institution allows us to distinguish the sensibility of our own culture from others and look for other correlates (like TV and other mass media) which favor its presence. Neil Postman speaks of the "immunization and therefore indifference to reality itself that may be generated by [the mass media] . . . [as] life . . . becomes a stylized, edited media event, and it is not inconceivable that in the completeness of our immersion in media, we come to prefer media life to reality itself" (Postman 1987:428). And if sarcasm is motivated at all by anxiety of influence, then a host of observers have pointed out that our Anglo-American or "Western" cult of cool (basically a self-consciously phobic anxiety of influence) is not shared, apparently, by speakers of Japanese, Javanese, Maninka, Malagasy, Turkish, Arabic, or Greek, to name only a few (cf. the useful collection of articles in Coulmas 1981). I myself, in an earlier article (Haiman 1989a:165-6), speculated that sarcasm seems to be unknown among the Hua, a group of New Guinea Highlanders.

But sarcasm is not even specifically linguistic, nor is it specific to mass mediated culture; the metamessage that (in some sense) "this isn't for real" is one of the features which defines artworks, games, rituals, and drama wherever they occur, and these are surely not limited to TV cultures. The folklore of both theater and games reflects our understanding of the distinction between what it is now fashionable, following Tom Wolfe, to call the *reel* and *real* worlds and their mutual autonomy (cf. Caillois 1967; Huizinga 1955; Mead 1934; Piaget 1951; Szasz 1965). Whatever happens in the reel world, "the show must go on"; and whatever happens in the real world, "it's only a game." As Caillois puts it (1967:37): "Il y a un espace de jeu: . . . rien de ce qui se passe à l'extérieur de la frontière idéale n'entre en ligne de compte" (There is a playing field: . . . nothing that happens outside of it is of any account).

It could be argued that games, rituals, drama, and possibly art in general are all essentially linguistic manifestations, inasmuch as they are cultural institutions which would be inconceivable without human language, and are in fact parasitic growths or superstructure that could only be constructed on that foundation. In fact, students of human culture have at times suggested that just as subgroups of human beings are defined precisely by the games they play (Caillois), human beings as a whole are defined precisely by their penchant for playing games at all. The thesis of Johan Huizinga's classic *Homo Ludens*, then, is no different from the more familiar definition of human beings as animals with language. But even Huizinga's (universalizing) claim may be insufficiently general, because (unlike language) play is not even specifically a human invention.

Although the practice of sarcasm is no more universal than is any other cultural institution (and in fact varies from person to person, as we know), gamelike behaviors are by no means even restricted to human beings. Merlin Donald (1991) attributes play and games to a putatively prelinguistic *Homo erectus*,

but even this speculation is overly conservative. As Gregory Bateson observed in a famous essay of 1956, the metamessage "this is play" is a crucial part of communication among puppies, otters, and other mammals, and their ability to make this known is what allows them to engage without injury in pretend fights. More recent research confirms that all warm-blooded animals exhibit play behavior of some kind (cf. Smith 1984). So, although there is undoubtedly cultural, as well as personal, variation in the penchant for sarcasm, I have given up on trying to assign different sarcasm quotients to languages and cultures.

What is the payoff that makes people engage in sarcasm? What are the specific metamessages which accompany ironic, sarcastic, playful, or nonserious utterances? How are these metamessages spelled out in natural languages? These are the questions I will deal with here. I believe that answering or even approaching them will bring us surprisingly close to the essence of language, even while it will show us deep parallels between language and other kinds of behavior.

The following chapters will treat irony as an ever-incipient (but never realized) grammatical category like the future tense or the subjunctive mood and will enumerate some of the specific cues or grammatical markers which broadcast the metamessage "I mean the opposite of what my words are saying" and similar messages.