ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Rhetorical Irony: Problems And Possibilities

It might perhaps be prudent not to attempt any formal definitions.

Since, however, Erich Heller, in his *Ironic German*, has already quite adequately not defined irony, there would be little point in not defining it all over again.(D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*)

At the 1998 International Conference on Argument, Ziegelmeuller and Parson proposed a perspective on what constituted linguistically sound arguments. After a tortured explanation they came to the conclusion that

A linguistically sound argument:

(1) conforms to the traditional field invariant standards of inductive and deductive argument,

(2) is based upon data appropriate to the audience and field, and

(3) is expressed in language that enhances the evocative and ethical force of argument. (Ziegelmueller and Parson, 1998)

What was not developed thoroughly was the third observation. The division of lexis and logos has remained part of our tradition, and the dominance of logos in that relationship should not be surprising. Whether borrowing from Aristotle, whose view of the validity of arguments is determined by a mathematical account of validity, or from Stephen Toulmin, who substituted the jurisprudential for the mathematical model, logos still dominates the approach to argument. Chaim Perelman argues that formal systems of logic, dependent on mathematical reasoning, seem to be unrelated to rational evidence. While the formal logician is free to combine symbols with artificial language, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca propose the need for a new look at argumentation – a new rhetoric (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 3-9).

While the problems of language in argument have been tackled by any number of scholars, the approach of Kenneth Burke may be effective in discerning the "language that enhances the evocative and ethical force of argument." He

suggests that we re-examine the nature of tropes more broadly than their initial literary context. In a summary section of *The Grammar of Motives*, "Four Master Tropes," Burke develops four "literal" or "realistic" applications of these tropes:

For metaphor we could substitute perspective;

For metonymy we could substitute reduction;

For synecdoche we could substitute representation;

For irony we could substitute dialectic.

(Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 503)

The purpose of the 2002 Parson and Ziegelmueller paper was to explore one of these tropes, metaphor, and how it applies to argument. It argued that lexis is a necessary part of argument. Second, it argued that the first born child of the relationship between lexis and logos has been the metaphor, which should be accorded some proprietary rights in the consideration of argument. (Parson and Ziegelmueller, 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to explore another progeny, irony, a rhetorical strategy which has some import in Burke's thinking. It might be argued, with Burke's penchant to create hierarchies, that irony may be his transcendent trope, especially since he substitutes for it another of his key terms, dialectic.

Several clues might fortress our interpretation. In Burke's classic essay "A Definition of Man," he finds four ways to elaborate his approach to humans as symbol users. They are "inventors of the negative," "separated by their natural conditions by units of their own making," "driven by the spirit of hierarchy," and "rotten with perfection." Only one of Burke descriptions of human symbol using is clearly ironic – Burke's description of "perfect rottenness."

In Kenneth Burke's book, *Permanence and Change* (which features irony in its title, by substituting "and" for the more typical "or" relation between permanence and change), he develops the concept of Perspective by Incongruity, whereby one takes the opposite view. "These are historical perspectives, which Spengler acquires by taking a word usually applied to one setting and transferring its use to another setting. It is a 'perspective by incongruity,' since he established it by violating the 'proprieties' of the word in its previous linkages." (Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 90). Burke links the concept to Veblen's term "trained incapacity" in which the associations with training usually suggest the opposite, capacity. In both cases, we have examples of irony. Insofar as "perspective by incongruity" is key to understanding Burke, irony becomes a typical Burke

strategy of exposition.

One final example might solidify our case. In *Attitudes toward History*, Burke suggests perspectives on life drawn from poetic categories, categories of acceptance or rejection. Among categories of acceptance he develops tragedy and comedy, and then differentiates them on the basis of attitude. While both warn against the dangers of pride, comedy "shifts its emphasis from crime to stupidity." (Burke, *Attitudes toward History*, 41).

The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that all people are *necessarily* mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations in which
they must act as fools, that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic cycle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy. The audience, from its vantage point, sees the operation of errors that the characters of the play cannot see; thus seeing from two angles at once, it is chastened by dramatic irony (Burke, *Attitudes toward History*, 41).

In fact, Burke's hope is for the comic frame to be the ultimate corrective. "The comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*" (Burke, *Attitudes toward History*, 171). It is thus easy to see how comedy functions and how irony (even irony of perception) offers a key. Irony then is a key concept for Burke but it is a charitable irony; it is not meant to attack, but to create identification. Burke's analysis of Falstaff illustrates how irony creates such identification:
Falstaff would not simply rob a man, from without. He identifies himself with the victim of a theft; he represents the victim. He would not crudely steal a purse, rather, he joins forces with the owner of the purse – and it is only when the harsh realities of this imperfect world have imposed a brutally divisive clarity upon the situation, that Falstaff is left holding the purse (Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 515).

Irony then, even in theft, becomes a basis of identification. "True irony," Burke says, "humble irony, is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him" (Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 514). Such a position puts Burke closer to some of the theories of romantic irony. So Burke clearly develops irony as a master trope. However irony is not always seen as a "comic corrective," nor an invitation to

consubstantiality.

The problem of irony and the dangers in its uses is certainly not a new one. Classical positions warned of its effects, but not with a single voice. Aristotle, for example, says little about irony in the *Rhetoric*, with but three references: "He mentions it as a method of concluding, as a type of style, and as an alternative better than buffoonery" (Karstetter, 184). His attitude seems more positive than negative, however, perhaps in deference to Socrates and his use of irony.

The Socratic use of irony has elicited its share of differing comments. "Socrates self-depreciation clearly satirizes his opponent, but what does it do to Socrates, who is the subject of the discussion?" (Knox, 53). Norman Knox raises a good question, and it directs our attention to Socrates' attitude. David Holdcroft comments that Socrates is ironical but that "his attitude is purely destructive – as Kierkegaard would say, 'extremely negative'" (Holdcroft, 510). In fact in his analysis of Plato's *The Apology*, especially the questioning of Euthytphro, Socrates has no belief that his questions could actually be answered. Kierkegaard then comments:

One may ask a question for the purpose of obtaining an answer containing the desired content, so that the more one questions, the deeper and more meaningful becomes the answer; or one may ask a question, not in the interest of obtaining an answer, but to suck out the apparent content with a question and leave only an emptiness remaining. (Kierkegaard, 73).

Kierkegaard believes it was the latter which Socrates practiced. Socrates' attitude did not commit him to share, to adhere to the talk. Holdcroft comments that "it is hardly surprising that, as he reports in *The Apology,* his questioning of others made him many enemies." Such questioning then "can be at the same time both subversive, destructive, and infuriating" (Holdcroft, 511). However the notion of Socratic irony has been linked, inevitably, to such questioning.

While Aristotle raised the quality of irony, the term *eiron* had been considered one of abuse, "suggesting a sly, low fellow," and this negative view of irony was echoed by Demosthenes and Theophrastus who thought of it as a "deceptive self-depreciation which could be and often was affected to escape responsibility" (Karstetter, 163). Although it is mentioned in Greek and Roman rhetorical works, it is not featured as a rhetorical strategy. It is probably Quintilian who establishes irony as the saying the opposite of what is meant.

One problem beyond the scope of this paper is the nature and genre of irony. The

types of possible irony have grown like Topsy. Knox comments, "Some traditional terms, such as 'verbal irony,' 'dramatic irony,' 'cosmic irony,' isolate the field of observation; others such as 'tragic irony,' 'satiric irony,' 'philosophical irony,' isolate one aspect" (Knox, 53). To these we may add such possible genre as situational irony, possible disciplinary ironies, such as historical irony and religious irony, and the focus of this paper, rhetorical irony. To separate these overlapping genre, however, is the subject of quite a different paper. Our focus is on rhetorical irony, and it presents sufficient problems. In his article, "Towards a Theory of Rhetorical Irony," Allan Karstetter offers several conceptualizations of irony:

To generalize, rhetoricians have conceptualized irony in the following ways:

(1) something said while pretending not to be saying it,

(2) something said to be the contrary of what is meant,

(3) a form of wit,

(4) blame-by-praise and praise-by-blame, and

(5) indirect argument. These categories overlap greatly, and many subtler distinctions have been made; these five, however, encompass the predominant recurrent themes. (Karstetter, 164)

1. *Irony And The Enthymeme*
The purpose of this essay is to examine the possibilities and problems in the rhetorical use of irony. It will consider those in terms of
(a) the audience
(b) the topic
(c) the ironist and
(d) the occasion.

However, closely related to these topics is an underlying consideration of irony: its enthymematic nature. Irony as a creation of a new reality is a joint project between rhetor and the audience involved. Lloyd Bitzer's now famous definition of the enthymeme fits the process of understanding irony. Bitzer comments:

The enthymeme is a syllogism based on probabilities, signs, and examples, whose function is rhetorical persuasion. Its successful construction is accomplished through the joint efforts of speaker and audience, and this is its essential character (Bitzer, 408).

Thus the ironic is a joint effort, for it must understand the discourse at one level, and then transfer the meaning to yet another level. At its simplest it may reverse

the meaning: I know the speaker favors the bill when he attacks it. The complexity of the enthymeme becomes apparent when one considers the possible steps in understanding an ironic enthymeme. Wayne Booth suggests there are four steps.

(1) The literal meaning must be rejected;
(2) "Alternative interpretations or explanations are tried out, – or rather, in the usual case of quick recognition, come flooding in";
(3) "A decision must therefore be made about the author's knowledge or beliefs"; and
(4) "We can finally choose a new meaning or cluster of meanings with which we can rest secure" (Booth, 12-13).

While irony is a joint effort, it is a complex effort. And, if successful there are rewards – for the audience which chooses the new meanings, and for the rhetor who caused these meanings to happen. Once the irony is uncovered, its use will be rewarded by an audience which prides itself on its own imagination. As Richard Moran comments when discussing the metaphor:

Such imaginative activity on the part of the audience contributes directly to the rhetorician's aim of persuasiveness. ... But the crucial advantage here is not simply the surplus value obtained by having others work for you, but rather the miraculous fact that shifting the imaginative labor onto the audience makes the ideas thereby produced infinitely more valuable rhetorically than they would be as products of the explicit assertions of the speaker (Moran, 396).

Similarly, an audience may reward a speaker who engages in the ironic, so long as that audience understands the irony and shares that view of the ironic. In such a case the rhetor has increased identification with that audience. Discussing Kenneth Burke's use of dramatic irony, Don Burks comments that Burke believes that "dramatic irony motivates the audience to become collaborators who supply interpretations, and thus get to be *participants* in the play rather than mere *witnesses to* the play" (Burks, 256). Rhetorical irony would invite the same participation.

Wayne Booth suggests another vision of increased identification when irony succeeds:

"Looked at more closely, even the most simple-minded irony, when it succeeds, reveals in both participants a kind of meeting with other minds that contradicts a great deal that gets said about who we are and whether we can know each other"

(Booth, 13).

After examining rhetorical irony throughout history, Karstetter comments that audience perception of irony can be "a powerfully motivating force." He concludes with a radical hypothesis:

The introduction of irony is not only possible in all argumentative circumstances, but may actually be one of the most effective rhetorical tools in almost any circumstance. (Karstetter, 177-8. Italics in original)

No doubt, irony can motivate and create greater identification with an audience who will reward the rhetor. Commenting that the reader must be sensitive to irony, Wayne Booth suggests that the reader "may rejoice in this requirement, as I do, and seek out occasions for ironic interpretation, or he may try to avoid ironists and read only authors who speak 'straight' (Booth, 1). Still, one must view Karstetter's hypothesis with great caution and begin to specify the problems of using irony with an audience.

2. *To Ironize Or Not To Ironize*

The relationship of irony to an audience has been discussed thoroughly and intelligently by David Kaufer in 1977. His concept of audience bifurcation is useful:

Writers who have considered the general relationship between the ironist and his audience exhibit a curious disparity. Some people note that relationship is marked by association and sympathy; others find it characteristically antipathetic and aloof. (Kaufer, 94)

We have indicated the rewards available to the rhetor whose irony creates a relationship, creates identification "marked by association and sympathy." But we must now turn to the "dark side" of irony and indicate where things can go terribly wrong.

It has been typical to describe irony as "reversing" the meaning of the rhetor, that irony is a study of opposites. And for many examples this may turn out to be true. An audience believing a speaker is being ironic may replace the message with its opposite; it may be the most logical thing to do. However, irony presents a more complex problem, and is not limited to reversal of meaning. One can argue the view is that irony simply "diverges" from its generally accepted meanings. There are options other than reversal. Muecke comments that "opposition may take the

form of contradiction, incongruity, or incompatibility" (Muecke, 19-20). Such a comment supports Burke's position on the irony of perspective by incongruity. Jonathan Titler declares that the ironist is detached, and "the resultant meaning is not necessarily the opposite of what the words might convey in a different context; it is merely other. And the literal meaning is not totally rejected or negated but rather partially effaced, allowing both literarily and figurative meanings to co-exist in suspension. The single meaning then of the ironical locution, then, has a forked, ramified quality" (Titler, 34). But which fork to take? Irony, in his interpretation, becomes a matter of degree rather than a matter of total reversal. It would take a sophisticated, or cognitively complex, audience to distinguish the degree of ironic difference.

An ironist deceives. A metaphor commonly associated with deception is that the ironist puts on a mask. Thus the "true" face of the ironist is not available.The rhetor disguises the "real position" and one who engages in disguise is not totally trustworthy. An audience may know the rhetor well enough to discern when the mask appears and when it is taken off. However the audience knowledge of the speaker is crucial for irony to be effective. Deception is still part of the act. As John Vignaux Smyth comments in the introduction to his study of philosophical irony of Sterne, Kierkegaard and Barthes, "Most or all irony, as I take it, has some relation to deception: an ironic discourse does not 'mean what it says' or 'what it appears to mean.'" (Smyth, 2) Unless a speaker has prior relationship with an audience, irony does not become an effective rhetorical tool; in fact it can become the reverse. The rhetor may lose the trust of the audience, and the credibility of the message may be sabotaged.

So irony is not invited by every audience. It may not be invited by most audiences. Mark Twain's comment in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* seems appropriate here:
But irony was not for those people; their mental vision was not focused for it. They read those playful trifles in the solidest earnest, and decided without hesitancy that if there had been any doubt that Dave Wilson was a pudd'nhead – which there hadn't – this revelation removed that doubt for good and all.

There may be those audiences whose "mental vision was not focused" for irony. Even Aristotle makes a strange comment on irony in the *Ethics*: the proud man, he says, "must speak and act openly; for he is free of speech because he is contemptuous, and he is given to telling the truth, except when he speaks in irony to the vulgar." (Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1124b 25).

Some recent evidence from social science research has described information processing in terms of cognitive complexity. Some auditors are more cognitively complex; that is, they are able to bring more linguistic interpretations to any rhetorical event. Others are more cognitively simple, and bring less interpretation. Irony may be prized by the cognitively complex, but it is likely to be either not understood or disliked by the less cognitively complex.

In addition to problems with irony and the audience, there may be simply occasions when irony seems inappropriate. One must search diligently to find examples of the "irony in the funeral oration." Burke discusses Shakespeare's funeral oration for Caesar, and illustrates the problem of how irony may move us from eulogy to dislogy:

Of course, where the interests of an audience are strongly bound to the contrary assumption, too obvious a use of /_irony_/ would cause the audience rather to recoil. Thus in Julius Caesar, Mark Antony cautiously begins his speech to the mob by use of the expression 'honourable men' as a 'eulogistic appelative' for murderers of Caesar. And only gradually, by the ambiguities of irony to bridge the transition, does he dare convert it into the dyslogistic. Had he begun by using dislogistic tonalities, he would have turned the mob against himself. (Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 618-9)

Burke's comment that the move from eulogy to dislogy takes subtle and repeated uses of irony may highlight the difficulties of using irony within this genre of discourse. It has been observed that if one studies carefully the oration of Henry Kissinger at the funeral of Richard Nixon one can discover irony; but the speaker would surely deny such a possible interpretation, even with a smile. Irony may not fit some types of discourse.

For any number of reasons the relationship between an ironist and an audience may not succeed. A speaker may develop a position he means to be taken ironically and it is not. For an audience which favors the position taken, but does not understand the argument as ironic, the speaker has lost identification with the audience. And for that part of the audience which is not sure whether or not the speaker is being ironic, the rhetoric is unlikely to be effective.

In contrast, if the rhetor acquires a reputation as an ironist, the audience may see everything as ironic, even when it is not. Wayne Booth's comment about audience self-delusion is telling:

Once they have learned to suspect a given speaker, they are tempted to suspect

every statement he makes. To them, there seem to be no clear signposts telling them where to stop, and soon the master of subtle shifts is reduced to a monotonous sneering drawl. The main – and sometimes the only – objection to such imaginative re-creations is that they diminish the works they are intended to illuminate. On the ground cleared by his demolition the reader erects monuments to his own ingenuity. (Booth,185).

Thus even when an audience knows that a rhetor indulges in irony, the results may be in jeopardy. Some may find "irony hunting" like "treasure hunting" in the writings of Mark Twain. In constructing monuments to their "own ingenuity," and perhaps even rewarding the rhetor with praise (when we reward ourselves for our ingenuity, we will in turn reward the speaker). Meanwhile the message will be lost.

So the probabilities of problems with irony begin to outnumber the possibilities of its success. Woody Hayes, a famous former Ohio State University football coach, once commented in discussing the difficulties with the forward pass that three things could happen, two of them bad: a pass could be caught be a teammate, a pass could be dropped, or a pass could be caught by the opponent. Analogously, we might say that irony might
(a) create greater identification with an audience,
(b) irritate an audience, and/or
(c) confuse an audience. But in this particular "pass play," all three things could happen by the single use of irony with an audience. An audience is not likely to be uniform in its understanding and appreciation of irony.

Politicians, especially American politicians, perhaps sensing these problems, run from irony with speed. Ironists, just as the ancients argued, do not always "speak straight" or " speak what they mean" and really cannot be trusted. Probably the best national political American campaigner who used irony was Adlai Stevenson, twice unelected candidate for President. Irony is a dangerous thing, so you rarely find it intentionally used by American politicians. It is verbal innocence rather than linguistic strategy when you hear a politician tell you, "George W. Bush is the best President we have."

But what of Karstetter's claim that "irony is not only possible in all argumentative circumstances, but may actually be one of the most effective rhetorical tools in almost any circumstance"? We suspect as a hypothesis it may need some

additional testing, but we can begin to specify circumstances when irony may be effective, though its use be limited. Irony may be effective when

(a) The rhetor has used irony before and this is known to the audience

(b) The topic admits readily of irony

(c) The occasion invites the possible use of irony

(d) The audience is of sufficient cognitive complexity to recognize irony

(e) The audience is of sufficient sophistication to appreciate irony

(f) The audience is not composed of "irony hunters" who find irony everywhere

(g) The rhetor is comfortable both putting on and taking off the mask

(h) The rhetor is not running for an American political office

So irony, then, has some dangers attached to it, especially when the irony is contained in oral discourse, where the audience must make an almost instantaneous decision as to whether or not the speaker is being ironic.Written irony might be approached in a more relaxed manner since it can be reread and reviewed. When irony is effective in oral discourse it can create complete identification with an audience.

Irony is an art, and the ironist is an artist. But not all rhetors are artists, nor do all audiences understand and appreciate art. C.W. Muecke put it well: "The art of the ironist is most like the arts of the wit and the raconteur; and not only because irony runs the same risks of failure through being too laboured or too subtle, too brief or too long drawn out, mistimed in the telling or ill-adapted to audience or occasion" (Muecke, 15). Arguing with irony is using a two-edged sword: like Burke's comment on the metaphor, you can use it and you can be used by it. Yet irony is a very sharp sword and the ironist is easily cut while using it. Perhaps Karstetter's claim that irony can be used in almost all circumstances must be viewed with appropriate irony.

REFERENCES

Anderson, D and W. Sharrock (1983). "Irony as a Methodological Theory: A Sketch of Four Sociological Variations." *Poetics Today*, 4, 565-79.

Auden, W. (1949)."The Ironic Hero." *Horizon*, 20, 86-94.

Booth, W. (1974). *A Rhetoric of Irony.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bitzer, L. (1959). "Aristotle's Enthymeme Revisited." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 45, 399-408.

Burke, K. (1984). *Attitudes Toward History.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Burke, K. (1969). *A Grammar of Motives.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Burke, K. (1984). *Permanence and Change*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Burke, D. (1985). "Dramatic Irony, Collaboration, and Kenneth Burke's Theory of Form." *Pre/Text* 6, 255-73.

Cooper, L. Trans. (2000). *The Rhetoric of Aristotle.* New York: Pearson Company.

Enright, D. (1986). *The Alluring Problem*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Holdcroft, D. (1976). "Forms of Indirect Communication: An Outline." *Philosophy and Rhetoric,* 9, 147-61

Holdcroft, D. (1983). "Irony as a Trope, and Irony as Discourse." *Poetics Today*, 4, 493-511.

Karstetter, A. (1964). "Toward a Theory of Rhetorical Irony." Speech Monographs, 31, 162-78.

Kaufer, D.and C. Neuwith (1982). "Foregrounding Norms and Ironic communication." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 68, 28-36.

Kaufer, D. (1977). "Irony and Rhetorical Strategy." *Philosophy and Rhetoric,* 10, 90-110.

Kaufer, D. (1981)."Ironic Evaluations." *Communication Monographs,* 48, 25-38.

Kierkegaard, S. (1966). *The Concept of Irony: With Constant Reference to Socrates*. London: Metheun & Co. Ltd.

Knox, N. (1961). *The Word Irony and its Context, 1500-1755.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Knox, N. (1972)."On the Classification of Ironies." *Modern Philology,* 70, 53-62.

Moran, R. (1996). "Artifice and Persuasion: The Work of Metaphor in the Rhetoric," in A.O. Rorty, ed, *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Muecke, D. (1969). *The Compass of Irony.* London: Methuen & Co, Ltd.

Parson, D. and G. Ziegelmueller. (2002). "Linguistically Sound Arguments: Part II: Eloquence and Argument." *Paper Presented at the 2002 ISSA Conference on Argumentation.* Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Perelman, C. and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969). *The New Rhetoric.* South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press.

Ross, W. (1941). Nichomachean Ethics. In R. McKeon, Ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle.* New York: Random House.

Smythe, J. (1986). *A Question of Eros: Irony in Sterne, Kierkegaard and Barthes.* Tallahassee: Florida State University Press.

Tittler, J. (1985). "Approximately Irony." *Modern Language Studies,* 15, 32-46.

Twain, M. (1999). Pudd'nhead Wilson. Toronto: Dover Publications.

Ziegelmueller, G. and D. Parson. "Linguistically Sound Arguments." *Paper presented at the 1998 ISSA Conference on Argumentation*. Amsterdam, the Netherlands.