

**"Verbal Irony in Shakespeare's Dramatic Works:
Production and Comprehension of Ironic Utterances"
(Abstract)**

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The proposed paper deals with ironic utterances in Shakespeare's plays which are analogous to real-life instances of verbal irony, so that it may be fruitful to look at them in terms developed by cognitive theory, a theory which has dealt widely with the phenomenon of irony (Gibbs/Colston 2007), but has hardly ever been applied to the use of irony in literature. Looking at irony from the point of view of cognition, two basic aspects can be distinguished, the production and the comprehension of irony. These two aspects are inseparably connected. The ironist designs his utterance in such a way that the hearer is challenged to decode it as ironic, a challenge to which s/he may rise or fail to rise. This paper argues that the cognitive centre of ironic communication is the comprehension – or cognition – of irony, the conditions for which are, however, provided by the ironist's message and its context. For the analysis of ironic speech-acts current theories such as the pretense theory of irony (Clerk/Gerrig 1984), the concept of irony as "echoic mention" (Wilson/Sperber 1992) and the allusional pretense theory (Kumon-Nakurama/Glucksberg/Brown 1995) will be discussed. As to irony cognition, Gibbs' investigation of the psycholinguistics of sarcasm (1986), the salience concept of Giora/Fein and the investigation of obligatory processing of literal meaning of Schwoebel/Dews/Winner Srinivas (2000) will be adduced.

The paper will not be restricted to simple and straightforward examples. There will, rather, be emphasis on complex cases, which are of a wider significance for the discussion of cognition in ironic utterances, not only in literature, but also in non-literary discourse. A test case will be Antony's famous statement "And Brutus is an honourable man" in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which has frequently been quoted as a supreme example of irony, but is, in fact, not to be understood as irony by the orator's hearers on stage. It is the speaker's intention to entangle the audience in a cognitive dissonance, which they cannot penetrate and from which they can ultimately only rid themselves by resorting to violence. Where then does the much-acclaimed irony in Antony's speech reside? Similarly intriguing examples are to be found in ironic dialogues in Shakespeare's comedies, especially in those in which female characters expose their male interlocutors to irony and sarcasm by pretending not to understand their figurative love-talk or, rather, to understand it only at the level of literalness.

Raymond W. Gibbs, Herbert L. Colston, *Irony in Language and Thought: A Cognitive Science Reader*. New York, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007.

Joel Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance: Fifty Years of a Classic Theory*. Los Angeles etc.: Sage Publ., 2007.