

Sarcasm, Pretense, and The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction*forthcoming, *Noûs*

Traditional theories of sarcasm treat it as a case of speakers meaning the opposite of what they say. Recently, ‘expressivists’ have argued that sarcasm is not a type of speaker meaning at all, but merely the expression of a dissociative attitude toward an evoked thought or perspective. I argue that we should analyze sarcasm in terms of meaning inversion, as the traditional theory does; but that we need to construe ‘meaning’ more broadly, to include illocutionary force and evaluative attitudes. I distinguish four subclasses of sarcasm, individuated in terms of the target of inversion. Two of these classes interact with conventionally-encoded, compositional meaning in a way that raises radical challenges for a standard implicature analysis.

§1: Introduction

The standard view of sarcasm or verbal irony, articulated by Quintilian roughly two millennia ago, is as speech in which “we understand something which is the opposite of what is actually said” (95/1920, 401). On this view, sarcasm is a paradigmatically pragmatic phenomenon, a quick, simple proof that speaker meaning and sentence meaning can come apart. For instance, Robyn Carston (2002, 15), calls verbal irony “the textbook case” in which “what is meant by the speaker” is “not part of what her linguistic string means.” We also have a widely accepted pragmatic explanation of how sarcasm works. According to the standard Gricean reconstruction, in speaking sarcastically a speaker *A* exploits a mutually shared assumption that he could not plausibly have meant what he said. “So,” Grice says,

unless *A*’s utterance is entirely pointless, *A* must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward. This must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward (1975/1989a, 34).

Because this explanation employs the same basic explanatory tools and form of analysis as Gricean explanations of typical conversational implicatures, sarcasm seems to fit nicely into Grice’s overall theoretical picture. Indeed, this view is so widely accepted that it rarely comes in for sustained investigation in recent discussions about the relation between semantics, pragmatics, and ‘what is said’.

Despite its storied pedigree and inherent plausibility, the standard view is vulnerable to attack from two very different directions. On the one hand, *semanticism* argues that sarcasm is semantically

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encoded at the level of logical form by an operator which ‘inverts’ the literal meaning of the word or clause to which it applies. On the other hand, *expressivism* denies that sarcasm or verbal irony is a matter of meaning at all, arguing instead that it is fundamentally a perlocutionary act: the expression of scorn toward the proposition literally expressed or toward something closely related, such as the sort of person who would sincerely utter that sentence.

I will argue that although these two challengers locate sarcasm at opposing ends on the spectrum of meaning, they each get something importantly right. At the same time, by insisting that sarcasm always works in just one way, they both fail to explain the full range of data. An adequate explanation requires a more subtle and expansive understanding, not merely of sarcasm, but of the interaction between conventionally-encoded meaning and contextual exploitation, and indeed of meaning more generally. I offer a preliminary presentation of the semanticist and expressivist views in §1 and §2. In §3 I show that each of these extreme views suffers from irremediable failures. I present a synthetic account in §4, and identify four major subclasses of sarcasm, before drawing some conclusions for the broader theory of meaning in §5.

§1: Semanticism

The semantic analysis of sarcasm begins from a general methodological bias in favor of semantic analyses. A significant group of linguists and philosophers believe that semantics should provide the most systematic, encompassing account possible of utterances’ intuitive truth-conditions. Thus, Jason Stanley (2000, 391) advocates the thesis that “all effects of extra-linguistic context on the truth-conditions of an assertion are traceable to elements in the actual syntactic structure of the sentence uttered.” At the least, King and Stanley (2005, 160) write,

Before claiming that a set of intuitions cannot be due to semantic interpretation, theorists need to have investigated all of the semantic options. For...claims about what can only be derived pragmatically may very well be vitiated by subsequent syntactic and semantic investigation.

And Michael Glanzberg (2005, 38) warns us that “the first moral of focus is that the appearance of being merely pragmatic can drastically deceive.” To ‘relegate’ any linguistic phenomenon to pragmatic status at the outset, on this view, is to adopt a prematurely defeatist attitude about the scope of semantics.

The semanticist challenger applies this general methodological bias to sarcasm by noting that it appears to display three important marks of semantic status. First, it seems to be *conventional*, in the sense of involving a specific operation on meaning which language users learn to recognize and deploy. Second, it is tightly *constrained* by sentence meaning, in a way that metaphorical meaning, for instance, is not. It’s true that the relation between literal and sarcastic meaning is not just one of simple negation (Fogelin 1988): the typical sarcastic meaning of an utterance of

(1) Your plan sounds *fantastic*,

is not merely that the plan is not fantastic, but that it's terrible. But the relation between the two meanings is still quite controlled: intuitively, the sarcastic meaning is in some sense the “contrary” or “opposite” of the literal one. Third, sarcasm is highly *systematic* in its application: nearly any sentence can be uttered sarcastically in some context, with results that are largely predictable without much information about the specific conversational context. Indeed, one can often identify an utterance as sarcastic and discern its intended meaning in the absence of any contextual information, simply given the tone in which it is uttered. In all these respects – conventionality, constraint, and systematicity – sarcasm contrasts with other familiar cases of pragmatic meaning, such as Grice's (1975/1989a) letter of recommendation.

If we wanted to reflect these features in our syntax, a plausible option would be to postulate a “sarcasm operator”, SARC. This might be represented in surface form by an intonational contour involving heavy stress, slow rate, and nasalization (Haiman 1998, Rockwell 2000). Semantically, it could take as input a word or sentential clause and return the most salient from among a contextually-determined set of “contrary” items of the same syntactic type. Despite its *prima facie* implausibility, eminences such as Grice (1989b, 53), Bach and Harnish (1979, 33), Zwicky and Sadock (1978), and Potts (2005, 212) have all at least toyed with an analysis along these lines. For instance, Bach and Harnish write,

If...there is an intonational clue to the sarcastic reading, it seems that such an utterance *means* the opposite of what it means without the change of intonation, and so the speaker may well have *said* that Mac was a scoundrel (or whatever). We see no reason to deny that there are characteristic sarcastic intonation contours with semantic effects.

A semantic rule along the lines of SARC isn't significantly more complex than those that have been proposed to deal with quantifier domain restriction (Stanley and Szabo 2000), indicative and subjunctive conditionals (King and Stanley 2005), focus (Rooth 1996, Glanzberg 2005), and even metaphor (Stern 2000, Leezenberg 2001). By postulating only one new syntactic item, SARC avoids introducing significant lexical ambiguity. If we include intonation as a criterion for individuating surface forms – as we need to do already, to deal with the truth-conditional effects of focus – then SARC would not introduce additional structural ambiguity. But even if we allowed that not every sarcastic utterance has an explicit intonational marker,¹ and hence that every surface form is semantically ambiguous

¹ People do seem to associate a distinctive tone with sarcasm – roughly, slow rate, exaggeratedly modulated stress, and nasalization – in the sense that this is the tone they typically adopt if explicitly asked to utter a sentence “sarcastically,” or if they read out a passage one of whose sentences is clearly intended sarcastically (Haiman 1998, Rockwell 2000). However, there is also evidence that this tone may be simply an instantiation of a more general expression of negative emotion. Nor does it appear to be the tone that speakers actually employ when they use sarcasm in the course of normal conversation: Bryant and Fox Tree (2005, 2002; cf. also Attardo et al 2003) found that “dripping” sarcasm is higher-pitched, involves less amplitude variability, and exhibits no difference in duration in comparison with literal utterances. Finally, only some sarcasm is ‘dripping’: Gibbs (2000, 18) found that 24% of

between sarcastic and sincere readings, the resulting theory of meaning wouldn't necessarily be less parsimonious overall than that offered by a standard pragmatic analysis. On either view, the basic interpretive steps are the same: the hearer must decide whether the utterance is sincere or sarcastic; and if the latter, determine the appropriate meaning by applying a sarcasm-specific operation of contrariety. Thus, the classic argument against positing additional semantic meanings – Grice's "Modified Occam's Razor" – gets only a weak grip here.

In addition to a general methodological bias in favor of semantic analyses and the apparent tractability of a semantic model, it also seems that we can marshal two more specific arguments for semanticism. The first is that at least in many circumstances, it is possible to report sarcastic meaning with indirect quotation, as in

(1_{IQ}) Bethany said that my plan sounds *fantastic*.

Such a report is likely to be misleading or infelicitous unless it mimics the original sneering tone; but this is just what the semanticist would predict, if tone is a conventional guide to the presence of SARC at LF. Indeed, the inappropriateness of a report like (1_{IQ}) without a sneering tone seems to cut against the standard pragmatic analysis: on that analysis, an unaccented utterance of (1_{IQ}) reports precisely what the original speaker *did* say; it's just that she said it in order to communicate something else.²

The motivation for employing disquotational reports as evidence for semantic status is that a primary task of semantics is to explain the intuitive truth-conditions of 'what is said,' where it is assumed that ordinary reports of 'what is said' are at least a *prima facie* guide to what actually *is* said. Although considerable attention has recently been paid to the implications for semantic theorizing of felicitous indirect reports that *don't* directly echo the speaker's words, and to the fact that disquotational reports containing semantically context-sensitive terms are blocked in relevantly differing contexts (e.g. Cappelen and Lepore 1997, 2005), it is generally assumed that *if* an indirect report in a distinct context which repeats the same words as the original utterance *is* felicitous, then the intuitively reported content is semantic.

sarcastic utterances were uttered without any special intonation. According to Bryant and Fox Tree (2005), "dripping" sarcasm is identifiable as such using either prosodic cues alone (with lexical information eliminated through acoustic processing) or lexical information alone (in written form), while "dry" sarcasm was identifiable only given both prosodic cues and lexical information. Some speakers, of course, relish appearing sincere to a naïve audience, relying entirely on the violation of contextual assumptions to clue the sophisticated hearer in to their communicative intent.

² In my (2007), I argue that 'say'-reports are ambiguous between locutionary and illocutionary reports. A locutionary interpretation of (1_{IQ}) without any special intonation would be felicitous if the speaker cancelled the possibility of an illocutionary interpretation by adding a clause, as in:

($1_{IQ}'$) Bethany said that my plan sounds fantastic, but she didn't mean it – she was being sarcastic.

However, many theorists take 'say'-reports to be (univocally) illocutionary reports; this is the interpretation I attribute to the proponents of both semantic and pragmatic analyses of sarcasm in the text.

The second specific argument for semanticism is that in many cases, sarcastic interpretations can be embedded within more complex constructions. This strongly suggests that sarcasm can enter into the compositional process. And for many semantically-oriented theorists, compositionally-generated content is intimately, even definitionally, connected with semantic content. Such theorists (e.g. King and Stanley 2005, Stanley 2000, Szabo 2001) allow “weak” pragmatic effects – the “saturation” of conventionally context-sensitive expressions – to enter into composition, but deny that “strong” pragmatic effects can affect ‘what is said’. Instead, they maintain that in all cases where the intuitive truth-conditions of a speaker’s utterance differ from the truth-conditions we would expect to be delivered by semantic composition, a more sophisticated theory will reveal semantic context-sensitivity, thereby showing that the pragmatic effects in question are ‘weak’ after all.

Embedded sarcasm is a fairly commonplace and flexible phenomenon, as the following examples attest:³

- (2) Since you’ve already made so many scintillating points this evening, I think you should let someone else voice their opinion.
- (3) Because George has turned out to be such a diplomat, we’ve decided to transfer him to Payroll, where he’ll do less damage.
- (4) Because he’s been such a fine friend, I’ve struck him off my list.
- (5) If Jane is as thrilled with our plan as Bill was, then we’re really in trouble.
- (6) If Alice is so brilliant, then she’ll be the perfect dupe for our little plan.
- (7) If you come to me with one more inspired idea like that, then you’re out of here.
- (8) If you manage to generate one more half-baked, inconsequential idea like that, then you’ll get tenure for sure.
- (9) [Sun shining] If it continues to rain like this, I’ll come to England more often.⁴

Utterances like these are not particularly strained or forced, and don’t depend upon highly specific conversational contexts. I’ve offered a fair number to suggest that they don’t exploit any single construction. Thus, we cannot simply dismiss such cases as inherently infelicitous, inappropriately artificial, or utterly unusual.

Although King and Stanley (2005) are strong proponents of a semanticist methodology, they do not endorse semanticism about sarcasm: to the contrary, they assume that in non-literal speech, speakers

³ Two classes of cases need to be set aside. First, there are utterances in which the entire sentence, or at least the consequent, is sarcastic, as in

- (i) If you want a tasty, healthy, gourmet meal, then you should head over to KFC.
- (ii) If he’s been rejected by four women in a month, then he must be a real charmer.

Second, there may be metalinguistic constructions, such as

- (iii) He’s not a *real genius*, he’s a genuinely good philosopher!

uttered in response to a free-standing sarcastic utterance of the antecedent. The possibility of metalinguistic negation can’t show anything about semantic content *per se*, because it is “a device for objecting to a previous utterance on any grounds whatever, including the... implicata it potentially induces, its morphology, its style or register, or its phonetic realization” (Horn 1989, 363).

⁴ Examples (4) and (9) are from in Levinson 2000, 210; (4) is originally due to Ivan Sag.

“knowingly express false propositions and thereby communicate true ones” (2005, 159). My claim is that their general arguments in favor of semanticism, combined with the specific behavior displayed by sarcasm, suggest that they themselves might be succumbing to precisely the sort of prejudicial assumption about what can and cannot count as semantic that they warn us against. To show that sarcasm is not a semantic phenomenon, we need principled tests and detailed arguments, not mere intuition.

§2: Expressivism

The view I call *expressivism* adopts the opposite tack from semanticism, advocating the radical exclusion of sarcasm or verbal irony from the realm of meaning, much as Davidson (1978) did for metaphor. (A terminological note: so far I have been talking about ‘sarcasm’, but both expressivists and traditional implicature theorists like Grice discuss ‘verbal irony’. Among those who employ both terms, there is considerable diversity of opinion about their relation. In §4, I will argue that sarcasm is a species of verbal irony; here, I follow the expressivists’ talk of ‘verbal irony’, where its denotation at least largely overlaps with that of ‘sarcasm’.)

Where both the standard pragmatic analysis and its radical semanticist cousin treat sarcasm as a figure of speech that substitutes one propositional meaning for another, theorists like Sperber and Wilson (1981) and Clark and Gerrig (1984) argue that verbal irony “involves only one meaning: the literal one” (Sperber 1984, 130). Treating irony as a form of meaning substitution, they claim, makes it out to be a mysteriously inefficient means for communicating content that could more easily be expressed literally (Wilson 2006, 1724). Instead, we should recognize that irony is in a different line of business altogether from assertion: it *expresses* a “dissociative attitude” toward the proposition literally expressed, or toward the sort of perspective that would lead a person to utter that sentence sincerely.

This general expressivist line has been implemented in two main ways. On the one hand, Sperber and Wilson (1981, Wilson and Sperber 1992, Sperber 1994, Wilson 2006) argue that irony *echoes* or *mentions* a proposition, in order to present it as an object of ridicule. (In later versions, they relax the notion of echoing to include as potential targets not just propositions, but utterances and even moral and cultural norms.) On the other hand, Clark and Gerrig (1984; see also Kreuz and Glucksberg 1989; Walton 1990, 222-224; Kumon-Nakamura et al 1995; Recanati 2004; Currie 2006, 2010) argue that the ironic speaker *pretends* to make an assertion or other speech act, in order to mock the perspective from which it would be taken seriously.

Although proponents of the echoic and pretense views have spilled considerable ink debating their relative merits, the differences are largely irrelevant for current purposes. (I’ll return to the details a bit in §4.) For now, the crucial point is that both views claim that in speaking ironically, a speaker does not undertake a genuine illocutionary speech act; rather, she mentions or pretends or ‘makes as if to say’

something, in order to express an evaluative attitude toward an associated thought or a perspective, and thereby draw attention to some discrepancy between how things are and how they should be.

There are two main arguments for expressivism. The first is that not just any sentence can be understood ironically in just any context, even if it is uttered with a dripping intonation. As Grice himself (1967/89b:53-4) notes, the speaker must also be interpretable as expressing an evaluative attitude:

A and B are walking down the street, and they both see a car with a shattered window. B says, *Look, that car has all its windows intact*. A is baffled. B says, *You didn't catch on; I was in an ironical way drawing your attention to the broken window*. The absurdity of this exchange is I think to be explained by the fact that irony is intimately connected with the expression of a feeling, attitude, or evaluation. I cannot say something ironically unless what I say is intended to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt.

The connection to a critical attitude, and specifically contempt, is bolstered by the observation that the intonational contour associated with irony is at least closely related to the expression of scorn or contempt. However, Wilson (2006, 1727) argues that something more specific is required than just a critical attitude:

When some hooligan breaks my car window, I may well feel critical of him (or his behaviour). However, in normal circumstances, I could not rationally attempt to convey this feeling by saying, in an ironical tone of voice, *Look, my car has all its windows intact*.

Wilson suggests that the speaker also must be echoing, in order to criticize, some previous thought. For instance, Grice's ironic statement would become felicitous if uttered in light of a previous exchange about vandalism, where one party claimed that cars in the neighborhood are generally in excellent condition.

Wilson, and expressivists more generally, are right to draw attention to the crucial role that both evaluative attitudes and evoked thoughts play in verbal irony. But this doesn't establish their core negative claim: that irony does not involve the inversion of meaning in a traditional sense of the term. Implicature theorists can address this first argument by adding two further clauses to their analysis: a presupposition that someone else endorses the content she has made as if to say, and an implicature that the speaker evaluates this content negatively. Likewise, a semanticist might claim that Sarc triggers a presupposition that someone has endorsed the embedded content, and that it delivers a two-pronged value: the contrary of the embedded content, and a negative evaluation of it. Semanticists who reject the inclusion of non-truth-conditional features within semantics might treat the negative evaluation in question as a conventional implicature, as several theorists have done for slurs (e.g. Williamson 2009).

The second expressivist argument aims specifically to establish the negative claim that irony is not a matter of the speaker's meaning the opposite of what she says, as the implicature model claims (and *a fortiori*, not a matter of semantic inversion either). The general point is that the target of an ironic attitude is often something at the level of the overall effects that would be generated by a sincere utterance, rather than of the uttered sentence's semantic value or the asserted content. Insofar as irony

targets something which is itself the result of the full panoply of pragmatic interpretation, the argument goes, it cannot be treated as a case of meaning inversion in any straightforward sense. This general argument takes several more specific forms, only some of which have been developed by expressivists themselves.

First, as several theorists have noted,⁵ metaphors can be ironic, as in

(10) The fountain of youth is plying his charms to the little goslings.

(11) The master tailor has stitched an elegant new suit, which he plans to debut for us at the gala ball.

Thus, (10) might be used to claim that a salient older professor who is overly concerned about appearing youthful is attempting to convince some incoming graduate students to study with him; while (11) might be used to describe a famous philosopher who intends to announce an implausible new view at the APA.

If we assume that metaphorical meaning is not itself semantic, as most theorists do, then accommodating these utterances within a semantic analysis of irony or sarcasm would require that SARC first operates on the conventionally encoded word or phrase, and that its output is then interpreted metaphorically. But this is highly implausible. Metaphorical interpretation is a function of the particular expressions uttered, and not just of the propositional content literally encoded by the uttered sentence.

For instance,

(12) Tonya Harding is the bead of raw sweat in a field of dainty perspirers.

communicates something very different, or becomes uninterpretable, if we substitute ‘perspiration’ for ‘sweat’ and ‘sweating people’ for ‘perspirers’ (Stern 2002, 222). Thus, at the very least the semanticist must require that SARC and metaphorical interpretation operate in parallel on the sentence’s constituent expressions, and then combine somehow to produce a unified interpretation. But there is little independent evidence that irony really is sensitive to the particular word or phrase uttered, as opposed to its semantic content; in particular, we don’t appear to get cases of substitution failure for irony analogous to that for (12). And intuitively, in utterances that combine irony and metaphor, like (10) and (11), irony operates on the contents delivered by metaphorical interpretation.⁶ This doesn’t yet establish that irony is not semantic: SARC could operate on a lexically-encoded MTHAT operator of the sort postulated by Stern (2000). But adopting this position would significantly raise the intuitive cost of semanticism.⁷

An alternative explanation for the fact that irony can pick up on metaphorical meaning treats metaphor as contributing to ‘what is said’, where this is understood in contextualist terms, as content determined through pragmatic enrichment and modulation, and models irony as the ‘contrary’ of ‘what is said’ (e.g. Bezuidenhout 2001, 161). This alternative is undermined by the fact that irony can also target

⁵ Stern (2000, 235), Bach and Harnish (1979, 70), Bezuidenhout (2001, 161), Camp (2006a, 291).

⁶ See Popa (2009, ch. 9) for extensive discussion of the order of interpretation in combined metaphor and irony, including discussion of psycholinguistic evidence.

⁷ See my (2005) for criticism of Stern’s view of metaphor.

the implicatures that a sincere utterance would have generated. Indeed, often enough the implicature is the irony's only target. For instance, an ironic utterance of

(13) You sure know a lot.

need not take issue with the proposition that the addressee is knowledgeable; rather, the speaker's scorn may be directed exclusively at the pretended implicature that this is admirable. Similarly, an ironic utterance of

(14) The hotel room costs a thousand dollars a night. Of course, for that you get a half bottle of Australian champagne *and* your breakfast thrown in. (Bredin 1997, 7)

targets just the implicature that the room's apparently high expense is significantly offset by the half bottle of Australian champagne and breakfast; the sentence meaning is itself presented 'straight'.

Likewise, in the most likely interpretation of the following exchange, with B's utterance employing an artificially cheery tone,

(15) *A*: I'm sorry Aunt Louisa is such a bother.

B: Oh, she never stays for more than a month at a time, and she always confines her three cats to the upper two floors of our house.

B does sincerely assert the utterance's semantic content; only the implicature that such visits are no imposition is ironic. And in

(16) Would you mind very much if I asked you to consider cleaning up your room some time this year?⁸

only the *manner* of speech is ironic, along with the correlative implicature that the request is supererogatory.⁹

The fact that irony can be directed at implicatures radically compromises the theoretical attractiveness of a semanticist analysis: including implicatures like those in (13) through (16) within the scope of semantic composition would effectively trivialize the operative notion of compositionality and radically compromise the system's simplicity and predictability.¹⁰ A similar objection applies to a standard implicature model. Even those who depart from Grice's strict understanding of 'what is said' as closely tied to "the particular meanings of the elements of [the sentence uttered], their order, and their syntactic character" (Grice 1975/1989a, 87), and who permit strong pragmatic intrusion into 'what is

⁸ Examples (13) and (16) are from Kumon-Nakamura et al (1995); cf. also Martin (1992, 88).

⁹ In this respect, (16) patterns with the metaphorical examples (10) and (11), where the irony also targets just the mode of presentation. Finally, note that irony can target just an utterance's presuppositions: an ironic utterance of

(iv) The man who rescued this city from certain ruin is now planning to run for mayor.
might claim sincerely that a certain individual *X* is planning to run for mayor, while expressing a derogatory attitude toward the presupposed claim, that *X* rescued the relevant city from ruin. I return to irony targeting presuppositions in §3.2.

¹⁰ Note in particular that the implicatures in (13) through (16) are highly particularized, unlike the scalar implicatures that theorists like Chierchia (2004) and Sauerland (2004) have argued are marked within the grammar.

said’, still distinguish sharply between ‘what is said’ and implicatures of the sort operative in (13) through (16). Thus, they are committed to denying that the speaker in these cases means the opposite of what she says – indeed, the whole point is that the speaker *does* mean what she says, since the irony targets the implicature alone.

A final class of examples, offered by Kumon-Nakamura et al (1995), pose a still more radical challenge for any model of meaning inversion, and the most direct support for expressivism. In these cases, the speaker’s irony is directed at the entire speech act that would be expressed by a sincere utterance. The most decisive examples involve ironic questions, orders, and expressives. For instance, by uttering

(17) Thanks for holding the door.

the speaker doesn’t thank the hearer for *not* holding the door, or for any other ‘contrary’ proposition. Rather, she pretends that he has held the door and deserves thanks for doing so, where this pretense then draws attention to the fact that he rudely allowed the door to shut. Similarly, by uttering

(18) How old did you say you were?

to someone acting childish and immature, or

(19) Could I entice you to eat another small slice of pizza?

to someone who has gobbled up the bulk of the pie, the speaker doesn’t sincerely ask any question at all; instead, she pretends to ask a question in order to point out the addressee’s rudeness or immaturity.

Philosophers and linguists tend to focus almost exclusively on assertion; often enough, this restriction is not just innocuous, but positively useful. But it also makes it easy to neglect the role of illocutionary force. The illocutionary force most plausibly “contrary” to assertion is denial; and it is natural to think of denial as the assertion of the original proposition’s negation. Similarly, it is natural to think of irony as the implicature of the opposite of the proposition literally expressed. This model of irony breaks down dramatically when applied to illocutionary forces other than assertion, however. Most speech act types don’t have plausible contraries, let alone ones that can be analyzed as the same force directed at a logically related proposition. As a result, ironic speech acts other than assertion typically cannot be analyzed in exclusively propositional terms.

Beyond supporting the expressivists’ core negative claim, examples like (17) through (19) also provide strong evidence for their positive view. Intuitively, these examples do involve the speaker pretending to make a certain speech act in order to draw attention to some disparity between the circumstances in which that speech act would be appropriate and the circumstances as they actually are, and thereby to disparage some aspect of the current circumstances. Thus, they clearly combine the two crucial features posited by expressivists: pretense or echoing, and the expression of a dissociative attitude.

§3: Against Expressivism

In §1, I offered an argument for semanticism, which was primarily an argument from possibility: sarcasm appears to be susceptible to a semantic analysis, and we should prefer semantic analyses where possible. In §2, I offered an argument for expressivism, which was primarily an argument from impossibility: key cases of irony can't plausibly be modeled as the inversion of semantic, assertive, or even propositional content, but are amenable to an expressivist treatment. Given the two arguments' respective structures, the most natural option would seem to be to incorporate the relatively simple cases that motivated the standard implicature view and its semantic variant within the expressivist model. In this section, I argue that this is not possible. In §4, I argue that even so, we can still provide a unified analysis of sarcasm if we broaden the operative notion of meaning in an independently motivated way.¹¹

3.1 *Narrowly-Focused Sarcasm*

The fundamental problem for an expressivist account of sarcasm is something we've already encountered in the positive argument for expressivism: sarcasm is often restricted in its scope to just one element within the overall speech act. Although implicature-directed cases like (13) through (16) show that irony can operate at the level of a pretended speech act and not just semantic or assertive content, they also demonstrate that irony is compatible with the speaker's genuinely committing herself to some content by her utterance. Expressivists have never explained how their model can handle this feature of these examples. But there is another, even more problematic class of cases for them: those in which just a word or phrase is sarcastic.

Expressivists have addressed some cases of this sort, such as

(20) Jones, this murderer, this thief, this crook, is indeed an honorable fellow!

where the embedded appositive phrase presents the speaker's sincere description (Sperber 1984, 133),¹² or

(21) As I reached the bank at closing time, the bank clerk helpfully shut the door in my face,

where the entire utterance except for the adjective 'helpfully' is sincere (Wilson 2006, 1736). In effect, they claim that these cases consist of two distinct utterances, one sincere and one sarcastic, woven together. However, this bifurcating analysis does not cover the cases of embedded sarcasm discussed in §1, where the sarcasm contributes an inverted meaning to the compositional determination of a propositional content which is itself put forward with genuine force. Unlike (20) and (21), cases like

¹¹ In this section, I revert to talking about 'sarcasm' instead of 'verbal irony'; I discuss the relation between the two terms in §4.

¹² Sperber (1984) originally cited this example to argue against a pretense view, on the ground that there is no overall speech act which a speaker could coherently pretend to undertake, while an echoic view can allow that just some constituents are mentioned or echoed. Currie (2006, 124) responded that a pretense account can permit speakers to move in and out of pretended and genuine speech, something that Wilson (2006) now concedes.

- (3) Because George has turned out to be such a diplomat, we've decided to transfer him to Payroll, where he can do less damage.
- (4) If Jane is as thrilled with our plan as Bill was, then we're really in trouble.
- (5) If Alice is so brilliant, then she'll be the perfect dupe for our little plan.

become uninterpretable if the sarcastic material is deleted from the sincere utterance.¹³

None of this is to deny that something importantly echoic, allusional, or pretending is operative in these embedded cases, along with the expression of an evaluative attitude. But by itself, this is compatible with the possibility that the echoing or pretense ultimately contributes an inverted meaning to the compositional determination of a genuinely asserted content. The actualization of this possibility in embedded sarcasm falsifies the negative expressivist claim that there is no such meaning inversion.

3.2: 'Like'-Prefixed Sarcasm

The second class of cases constitute a still clearer counterexample to the negative expressivist claim. In many dialects of American English, there is a form of explicit sarcasm, which prefixes the relevant sentence with 'Like' or 'As if' and employs a sneering tone, as in

- (22) Like that's a good idea.

This use isn't just a crazy invention of contemporary American adolescents: it's also found in (at least) German, as *als ob* ("as if"), in Russian, as *mozno podumat* ("It is possible to think"), and in French, as *si tu crois* ("if you think") (Haiman 1998). In many cases, like (22), sarcastic utterances with and without 'Like' feel like stylistic variants: 'Like' seems like just one more way, along with hyperbole and dripping tone, for a speaker to provide explicit cues to her sarcastic intent. In other cases, though, sarcastic utterances prefixed with 'Like' display marked, systematic differences from bare sarcasm. (For a fuller

¹³ Perhaps, given that the echoic theory models irony as a form of mention akin to quotation, proponents of that view might argue that the relevant expressions here are both used and mentioned, analogous to

(v) I'll have you know that 'that lying S.O.B.' is my father, and I'd ask you to treat him with more respect. The difficulty is that in cases of mixed use-mention in indirect quotation, like (ii), the speaker echoes, while possibly distancing herself from, someone else's preferred mode of presentation, but while preserving the intended reference. In cases of embedded sarcasm like (3) through (6), by contrast, the relevant expressions contribute a 'contrary' property from their conventionally-encoded referent. Thus, in (3) George is claimed to be a blunderbuss; and in (5), Jane (and Bill) are claimed to be highly critical of the plan.

Unlike Sperber and Wilson, Currie (2006, 113, fn. 6) does acknowledge that sarcasm genuinely embeds within complex constructions; he points toward Blackburn's and Gibbard's work on expressivism in ethics as a solution. The problem with this response is that the sarcastic expressions in examples like (6) through (9) don't merely express a brute pro- or con-attitude, akin to 'Boo!' or 'To-be-done'; they contribute a specific blend of description and evaluation which is related to their conventional meaning in a determinate, predictable way. To accommodate this fact, the expressivist must be willing to offer an expressivist analysis of all 'thick' terms. Currie doesn't appear to advocate expressivism as a general solution to the problem of evaluative terms – and of course there are serious problems for analyses like Blackburn's and Gibbard's (for recent discussion, see Schroeder 2008). But if Currie were willing to adopt expressivism as a general solution, then this would undermine the central expressivist claim about sarcasm: that it accomplishes something different in kind from ordinary talk. If expressivism is warranted for sarcastic uses of expressions like 'diplomat', 'thrilled' and 'brilliant', then it should also be adopted for those expressions' conventional meanings, since the two are inverses of one another.

discussion, see Camp and Hawthorne 2008.) First, sarcastic ‘Like’ is only felicitous when combined with declarative sentences. Thus, none of (17) through (19) can be prefixed with ‘Like’. Nor can utterances containing explicit indicators of illocutionary force, such as

(23) Frankly, she’s a genius. Honestly, we should hire her immediately.

even though illocutionary adverbs like ‘frankly’ and ‘honestly’ are often employed to heighten bare sarcasm.

Second, ‘Like’ is syntactically restricted to the initial position of the sentence in which it occurs, and it must take scope over the entire sentence that follows: ‘Like’-prefixed sarcasm cannot target a single expression, or even a sentential clause within a more complex sentence. Third, typical utterances of sentences containing sarcastic ‘Like’ carry explicit illocutionary force, serving to commit the speaker to something very close to the ‘contrary’ of the bare sentence’s focal content. These two features combine to produce marked differences in interpretation. For instance, where the most natural interpretation of

(24) Your fine friend is here.

claims that the relevant individual is present but scorns his quality as a friend, the same sentence prefixed with ‘Like’ or ‘As if’ unavoidably commits the speaker to denying that the person in question is present. Similarly, where the sarcasm in a bare utterance of

(25) The man who rescued this city from ruin is now planning to run for mayor.

might be restricted just to the presuppositions triggered by the descriptive material, an utterance of the same sentence prefixed with ‘Like’ definitely commits the speaker to denying that a salient individual *X* is planning to run for mayor. Indeed, it is most natural to hear the speaker of (25) as assuming that *X* did rescue the city from ruin, so that the sarcasm is restricted to just the sentence’s focal material and not its presuppositions.

These observations show that ‘Like’-prefixed sarcasm involves a specific form of meaning inversion, exhibiting precisely the sorts of robust, systematic constraints on implementation that standardly motivate semantic and syntactic analyses. Indeed, sarcastic ‘Like’ does something else that’s even more distinctively semantic: it licenses Negative Polarity Items (NPIs). NPIs are expressions, like ‘ever’, ‘any’, ‘yet’, ‘lift a finger’ and ‘budge an inch’, which are syntactically restricted to environments with certain inferential properties. Thus, NPIs occur happily in simple sentences containing the determiner ‘No’, but cannot occur when ‘No’ is replaced by ‘Some’:

(26) No dog has ever bothered me. / No dog has any courage.

(27) #Some dog has ever bothered me. / #Some dog has any courage.

There are many NPI licensers, and it’s a matter of significant controversy what distinctive property they all share. One important trait displayed by many licensers is downward monotonicity (Ladusaw 1979): from the truth of sentences like those in (26), one can infer the truth of a more restrictive claim, as in

(28) No yellow dog has ever bothered me. / No yellow dog has any courage.

This can't be the whole story about NPI licensing, not least because antecedents of conditionals and questions also license NPIs, but aren't downward entailing in any straightforward sense (Fauconnier 1978, Heim 1984, Progovac 1994, Zwarts 1995). Further, the relevant notion of 'entailment' seems to be closer to contextually-justified inference than to semantic entailment (Linebarger 1987, Krifka 1995, Israel 1996, von Stechow 1999). The precise characterization and explanation of these licensing environments thus remains a matter of heated dispute, although several theorists have focused on a connection with scalar implicature (e.g. Kadmon and Ladman 1993, Israel 2001, Chierchia 2004), which we'll return to in §4.

The remarkable fact about 'Like'-prefixed sarcasm is that it clearly and consistently licenses NPIs where bare sarcasm does not. Thus,

(29) {Like/As if} I was going to give him any money.

is perfectly fine, on a par with

(30) It's not true that I was going to give him any money. / I wasn't going to give him any money.

while

(31) # I was going to give him any money.

is terrible, even with a drizzling scornful intonation. This pattern generalizes quite freely: 'Like' licenses all NPIs, including 'strong' NPIs like 'yet' and 'lift a finger', which require not just that their licenser be downward monotonic, but also anti-additive¹⁴:

(32) {Like/As if/It's not true that} anyone cares about her silly problems.

(33) {Like/As if} they're ever going to find the real killer.

(34) {Like/As if} those guys believe a word they say.

(35) {Like/As if} I've talked to George in weeks.

(36) {Like/As if} that relationship is going to last long.

(37) {Like/As if} James has ever lifted a finger to help anyone besides himself.

(38) {Like/As if} I give a damn if I ever hear a single word from you again.

All of these sentences are good, while even dripping utterances of their bare counterparts are bad.¹⁵

NPI licensing is standardly taken to provide compelling proof against wholesale semantic skepticism, because it seems so obvious that a predictive explanation of the observed syntactic behavior

¹⁴ In the sense of Zwarts (1995): for anti-additive functions, a disjunction in their scope is equivalent to a wide-scope conjunction, so that "Nobody ate or drank" entails "Nobody ate and nobody drank."

¹⁵ Indeed, bare sarcastic utterances happily include *positive* polarity items, like 'awfully' or 'insanely':

(vi) We're feeling awfully chipper this morning, aren't we?

(vii) If you're insanely wealthy the way I am, you can afford to splurge on an extra can of Dinty Moore now and then.

One reader reports hearing at least some bare sarcastic utterances as marginally acceptable if uttered with a very heavy tone and implied reference to prior discourse; but even for them the contrast between NPIs in bare and 'Like'-prefixed sarcasm remains quite dramatic.

depends upon the inferential properties of the relevant constructions, such as downward-entailingness. Even if those inferential properties do involve significant pragmatic enrichment, it is still generally true that even very overt pragmatic support doesn't suffice to license NPIs: there must nearly always be an appropriate lexical trigger which encodes the crucial – if difficult-to-characterize – semantic property.¹⁶ I'll return in §4.3 to a fuller discussion of 'Like'. For now, it should be clear that a purely expressivist analysis cannot explain the determinate inversions of meaning displayed by both narrowly-focused sarcasm and sarcastic 'Like'. Further, it should be clear that both narrowly-focused sarcasm and sarcastic 'Like' demonstrate that sarcastic meaning interacts with semantic meaning in a more intimate way than the standard implicature view can allow, and indeed in a way that strongly supports some version of semanticism.

§4: What is Sarcasm, Anyway?

How should we reconcile the disparate phenomena surveyed thus far? One option would be to conclude that the theorists discussed in §1 and §2 are simply talking past one another: the traditional theorist is right that sarcasm involves the inversion of meaning, sometimes semantic and sometimes pragmatic, while the expressivist is right that irony proper involves expressing one's distance from an evoked thought or perspective. Although I think a kind of divide-and-conquer strategy is called for, I believe such a radical bifurcation is at best stipulative, and at worst obscurantist. Sarcasm and verbal

¹⁶ Horn (2001, 2009) argues that the orthodox assumption that overt licensing is always required must be weakened significantly. He provides some examples of NPI licensing in sarcastic or ironic contexts, some of which involve 'Like' and 'As if', but others of which do not:

(viii) Fat chance I'd ever open *any* attachment that didn't come from one of my clients.

(ix) A fat lot of good THAT *ever* did anyone.

(x) Small thanks you get for THAT, *either*.

Given the extreme flexibility of NPI licensing within 'Like'-prefixed sarcasm, and the extreme marginality of their bare counterparts, I believe that examples (v) through (vii) show that the expressions employed – 'Fat chance', 'Fat lot of good' – are conventionally 'negative' in the relevant sense. (Note that another conventional expression of sarcasm, 'Way to X', does not license NPIs, however.)

Horn also offers examples of what he calls "Flaubert licensing" – NPI licensing without an explicit trigger, so-called because it is a kind of negation that, like "God in the deist universe and the author in the Flaubertian novel," is "everywhere present yet nowhere visible" (Horn 2001, 176):

(xi) San Francisco is beating *anyone* these days as often as the Atlantic City Seagulls beat the Harlem Globetrotters.

(xii) The tone [of Germaine Greer's attack on manufacturers of vaginal deodorants] wasn't light-hearted, which might have justified touching the subject *at all*.

Flaubert licensing poses a more direct challenge to the requirement of overt licensing. However, the range of cases which permit Flaubert licensing are still quite restricted (notably, they all still involve a negative or 'exhaustative' content as their primary communicative point; see §4.3 below); in general, even flagrant pragmatic signaling of a 'negative' or otherwise downward-entailing proposition does not suffice to license NPIs.

irony clearly do differ in some respects: sarcasm is usually thought to be more pointed and blatant than sophisticated cases of verbal irony such as Mercutio's wry comment on his fatal wound:¹⁷

(40) No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man. (*Romeo and Juliet* III.1.66-67)

At the same time, there is also wide agreement that the two phenomena are closely related. Many people use the terms nearly interchangeably. More importantly, expressivists have taken themselves to be showing that traditional theorists like Quintillian and Grice are wrong in their analysis of a relatively unified and encompassing class of utterances, one which treats as paradigmatic utterances like

(1) Your plan sounds fantastic.
(41) He's a fine friend.¹⁸

Merely imposing different labels does nothing to elucidate how the various phenomena actually work, and threatens to distract us from a close examination of their similarities and differences.

Although we should expect some vague and ragged boundaries, I think we can develop a surprisingly systematic and substantive topography of the overall terrain if we begin by characterizing the genus of verbal irony, and then home in on sarcasm as a potentially more restricted class, within which we can distinguish four distinct subspecies. In the end, I believe an analysis of sarcasm in terms of meaning inversion can explain all of the examples discussed by traditional theorists and expressivists – so long as we are prepared to construe 'meaning' more broadly than just semantic meaning or 'what is said', or even just propositional content. One might think that such a broad construal of 'meaning' rescues the traditional view of sarcasm as meaning inversion by a mere terminological sleight of hand. On the contrary, I believe that the fact that the wide range of targets which sarcasm exploits and inverts points up something we need to recognize on independent grounds: that speakers' communicative purposes and intentions often encompass more than just the exchange of information.

The best characterization of the broad genus of verbal irony, I believe, derives from Kumon-Nakamura et al's (1995) "allusional pretense" theory. Their view consists of two claims, each generalizing the core commitment of the two main expressivist rivals. First, ironic utterances are *allusive*, in the sense of "call[ing] the listener's attention to some expectation that has been violated in some way";

¹⁷ As a first pass at a more detailed characterization of these differences, Quintillian's (42/1921, 401) characterization seems basically apt:

[T]he trope [that is, sarcasm] is franker in its meaning, and, despite the fact that it implies something other than it says, makes no pretence about it. For the context as a rule is perfectly clear, as, for example, in the following passage from the Catilinarian orations. 'Rejected by him, you migrated to your boon-companion, that excellent gentleman Metellus.' In this case the irony lies in two words, and is therefore a specially concise form of trope. But in the figurative form of irony [that is, verbal irony] the speaker disguises his entire meaning, the disguise being apparent rather than confessed.

¹⁸ For instance, Wilson (2006, 1732) denies that (what she calls) verbal irony constitutes a natural kind, because it shades off into other phenomena such as indirect quotation. But she still assumes that there is a unified phenomenon, which the echoic theory explains, and which includes all of the cases discussed in §§1 and 3.

where this violation of expectation itself entails “a discrepancy between what is expected (what should be) and what actually is” (Kumon-Nakamura et al 1995, 5). Typically, a speaker draws attention to this discrepancy in order to communicate a negative evaluation of the actual circumstances, but as Kumon-Nakamura et al note, the expressed attitude may also be positive.¹⁹ Second, ironic utterances involve *pretense*, in the sense that the speech act is presented as not genuine or sincere. Specifically, Kumon-Nakamura et al claim that irony involves “pragmatic insincerity” – the manifest violation of a felicity condition on successful utterance – rather than “insincerity at the substantive level,” as occurs with lying.

I believe this view is basically correct, as far as it goes. The fundamental problem with expressivism lies in the negative claim that irony *doesn't* involve a speaker's meaning the opposite of what she says, or more generally any kind of meaning inversion. To their credit, Kumon-Nakamura et al remain fairly neutral about this negative claim; however, they also remain studiously silent about how meaning inversion might work. I believe the negative claim applies at most to those cases of verbal irony that are not instances of sarcasm, and that we should identify sarcasm with the large (and possibly exhaustive) subclass of verbal irony that does involve meaning inversion. Further, I propose that we can develop a satisfying analysis of sarcasm by modifying each component of Kumon-Nakamura et al's model.

Consider first their notion of allusion. In effect, allusion is a form of conspicuous presupposition: presenting an assumption as if it belongs to the conversational common ground, and thereby raising it to prominence in the current context. The use of conspicuous presupposition lends irony and sarcasm much of their rhetorical force: rather than explicitly endorsing or criticizing the alluded-to assumption, or even explicitly claiming that someone – themselves, the hearer, or some third party – endorses it, the speaker simply acts as if that party does endorse it, and thereby makes it part of the common ground that it is so endorsed, unless the hearer actively refuses to accommodate.

In the most canonical cases of sarcasm and irony, the speaker combines presupposition and pretense to implicate an emphatic evaluative attitude without genuinely undertaking any primary, positive speech act. In effect, in these cases the speaker attempts to manipulate the common ground without making a move that is itself recorded on the conversational scorecard. If the hearer does implicitly acknowledge both that some expectation has been violated, and the legitimacy of the speaker's proffered attitude toward its violation, then the perspective which underwrites that attitude gains tacit acceptance without the speaker's ever having to explicitly articulate or defend it. (This is perhaps one reason that sarcasm is deployed so frequently in high school and other contexts of high social anxiety.) This package of presupposition, pretense, and implicature thus carries significant rhetorical advantages, when it works.

¹⁹ More generally, Gibbs (2000, 18) found that while 90% of sarcastic utterances involved mocking, only 54% were critical, and only 69% made a negative point by saying something apparently positive.

However, as we'll see, it also constitutes a kind of communicative bluff, insofar as the hearer can refuse to accommodate the presupposition, can insist on construing the pretended utterance as sincere, or can ignore the implicature entirely. Such a bluff is particularly risky when the relationship between speaker and hearer is antagonistic, as is often the case in sarcastic exchanges.²⁰

Kumon-Nakamura et al present allusion as a single criterion, but in tailoring their view to fit sarcasm, it will be useful to separate it into two distinct factors: appealing to an established expectation, and drawing attention to its violation.²¹ First, in place of Kumon-Nakamura et al's general appeal to an "expectation," I propose that sarcasm always alludes to or evokes a *normative scale*, according to which some quality, person, fact, or situation *X* is valorized, and others comparatively disvalued, in some ranked order.²² Second, in place of their criterion of drawing attention to a violation of this expectation, I propose that sarcasm always involves some sort of *inversion* of the evoked scale. In the canonical case, the speaker pretends to treat some situation, person, or feature *Y* as falling at the extreme top of the scale, and thereby communicates that *Y* lies at or very near the bottom. In the case of positive sarcasm, the situation is reversed. In either case, inversion of an evoked scale implements rather than replaces the more general criterion of expectation-violation: it is precisely because *Y* so flagrantly departs from the expected normative value exemplified by *X*, either positive or negative, that it warrants being assigned the contrary value.

The third modification to their view centers on the role of insincerity or pretense. One of the great virtues of Kumon-Nakamura et al's paper was to bring attention to non-assertional irony, thereby undermining the assumption that irony could always be analyzed in propositional terms. In establishing this point, they also cited ironic examples that do involve assertion, such as

(16) You sure know a lot.

where the speaker is genuinely committed to the literally encoded content. However, they failed to note the full significance of such examples: sarcastic insincerity can be precisely targeted, and is compatible with sincerity about other aspects of the speech act. Indeed, as we have seen, the target of the insincerity can itself contribute to the compositional construction of a genuinely committal speech act.

²⁰ The possibility of a hearer's refusing to accommodate the speaker's proffered presuppositions and implicatures points up another deep problem with expressivism. An expressivist analysis of irony as merely 'drawing attention to' a discrepancy between expectation and reality suffers from a precisely parallel failure as Davidson's analysis of metaphor as merely 'drawing attention to' a similarity between two situations: it cannot explain the fact that ironic and metaphorical utterances can be genuinely informative, in the sense of making a (potentially false) claim about something the hearer isn't already aware of but merely failing to notice. For further discussion on difficulties for 'juxtaposition' theories of metaphor, see my (2006b).

²¹ It is worth noting that both ironic and sarcastic utterances can draw attention to, and call into question, either of these two factors, with distinct rhetorical effects in either case.

²² The most familiar scales are semantic, in the sense that they impose this ordering by entailment; but as we'll see, scales can also be generated pragmatically, via contextually salient assumptions (Horn 1989). Thus, a scale may be implicitly operative even if no expression within the embedded sentence directly entails a quantitative ordering.

Putting these three modifications to Kumon-Nakamura et al's view together with a modified version of the core traditional claim of meaning inversion, we arrive at four core features of sarcastic utterances: they *presuppose* a *normative scale*; they *pretend* to undertake (or at least, *evoke*) one commitment with respect to this scale; and they thereby communicate some sort of *inversion* of this pretended or evoked commitment. To make systematic sense of the full range of examples, we need to distinguish different four subclasses of sarcasm, individuated in terms of the target of the sarcastic pretense. The pretense in *perlocutionary sarcasm* encompasses the entire speech act that would have been undertaken by a sincere utterance; *propositional sarcasm* targets some proposition associated with a sincere assertion; *'Like'-prefixed sarcasm* targets the focal content of an embedded declarative sentence; and *lexical sarcasm* targets just a single expression or phrase. I discuss each class in turn.

4.1: Perlocutionary Sarcasm

Kumon-Nakamura et al's non-assertional examples are the clearest cases of sarcasm whose scope encompasses the entire perlocutionary act that a sincere utterance of the relevant sentence would have undertaken, including especially the expression of evaluative attitudes:

- (17) Thanks for holding the door.
- (18) How old did you say you were?
- (19) Could I entice you to eat another small slice of pizza?

These are the cases for which a pretense account seems most apt: the speaker 'makes as if' to undertake a certain speech act *A*, where *A* would be appropriate in some counterfactual situation *X* that contrasts with the current situation *Y*. They are also the cases most likely to shade off into non-sarcastic verbal irony, where attention is drawn to a violated expectation without any specific inversion of content or attitude being communicated. Nonetheless, I think normative scales and inversion still play an important role in all of the examples discussed, insofar as there isn't merely some sort of disparity or other between the evoked counterfactual situation *X* and the actual circumstances *Y*; rather, the two situations occupy opposite extremes of an evoked scale, and the speaker's drawing attention to their disparity serves to communicate that *Y* lies at the opposite end from *X*. For instance, in (17) the speaker pretends to undertake an utterance which would be appropriate if the addressee had held the door, where door-holding ranks high on a scale of politeness. This pretense draws attention to the disparity between the evoked situation and the actual one, and thereby communicates the speaker's evaluation of the addressee's actual behavior as rude. Likewise, in (19), the speaker pretends to ask a question which would be appropriate in a situation where the addressee was behaving maturely for his age, and by

drawing attention to the disparity between this situation and the actual one, expresses her evaluation of the addressee's behavior as immature.²³

A similarly encompassing pretense occurs in

(13) You sure know a lot,

with the crucial complication that the speaker does genuinely assert the sentence's conventionally-encoded content.²⁴ The pretense is restricted to the implicature that this is a compliment, where its complimentary status depends on an associated scale of personal virtues. The speaker pretends to presuppose that knowledge ranks high on this scale, but her dripping tone expresses skepticism toward this presupposition and thereby implicates that other virtues (politeness, practicality, interest in doing more 'normal' things like hanging out) rank more highly, and hence that the addressee is foolish for showing off an ability that doesn't really matter. The end result is that the pretended compliment is inverted into an insult.

The same fundamental dynamic also operates in a case of positive sarcasm like

(42) Poor you, lying on the beach sipping daiquiris, without even any grading to distract you from the endless tumbling of the waves.

As in (13), the speaker of (42) does genuinely commit herself to the uttered sentence's primary content – in this case, to the claim that the addressee is (or will be) on an oceanside vacation. Her insincerity is directed toward the evaluative attitude expressed by the initial apostrophe: that the addressee is to be pitied for being in those circumstances. This pretended negative evaluation evokes a scale of activities from onerous to enjoyable, she pretends is inverted, so that grading is treated as a great pleasure and sipping daiquiris a terrible chore. The speaker's pretense that the scale is inverted teasingly implicates her genuine envy of the addressee's doing something that really ranks high in enjoyment.

By focusing on pretense about the expression of an attitude located on an evoked evaluative scale, I believe we can treat all perlocutionary cases of sarcasm in terms of inversion. The insight that illocutionary acts other than assertion lack well-defined opposites but can be used sarcastically undermines the traditional model of sarcasm as inverting propositional content or a constituent thereof, as does the expressivist's emphasis on the essential role played by evaluative attitudes. But neither of these points rules out a broader appeal to meaning inversion, so long as we understand 'meaning' in broader, but still fundamentally Gricean terms: as the communication of some commitment on the speaker's part, one which may be partly or entirely evaluative or emotional rather than purely truth-conditional.

²³ Likewise, in Mercutio's punning comment (40), he pretends that death is a positive goal which the wound will facilitate, in order to wryly implicate that it is a highly negative outcome.

²⁴ At least, on Kumon-Nakamura et al's imagined interpretation; we can also imagine a context in which the speaker communicates that the addressee does not possess much knowledge; this would then be a case of propositional sarcasm, discussed below in §4.2.

Speakers regularly undertake such commitments in ordinary conversation, exploiting both conventional and rational interpretive mechanisms in all the usual ways, and specifically by relying on the hearer's recognition of the speaker's intention that her utterance be interpreted as committing her to having the relevant attitude. An adequate theory of meaning, and not just a theory of sarcasm, needs to explain this.

4.2: Propositional Sarcasm

Moving in from the broadest level of discourse toward a more narrowly semantic focus, we next encounter cases where the sarcasm's scope is directed toward some proposition to which a sincere utterance would have committed the speaker, as in:

- (2) If you want a tasty, healthy, gourmet meal, then you should head on over to KFC.
- (43) He's a fine friend.

In the simplest case, the speaker pretends to assert the proposition *P* that is fixed by semantic composition plus lexically-focused pragmatic processes – roughly, what contextualists identify as 'what is said'.²⁵ As before, *P* evokes a situation at one extreme of an evaluative scale. But here, by pretending to assert *P*, the speaker simply implicates the contrary of *P*, *Q*, where this is often simply *P*'s negation.

These cases best fit the traditional implicature model, on which speakers of sarcastic utterances 'mean the opposite of what they say'. And indeed, the sense in which a speaker means something in these cases is merely by implicature, and not assertion. Assertion is an act of overt illocutionary commitment, a matter of placing oneself on the conversational record as committed to a certain attitude or content (Lewis 1979, Brandom 1983). A speaker employing propositional sarcasm does not come out and overtly commit herself to the inverted content *Q*. Rather, she makes her belief in *Q* manifest, though a communicative bluff that combines pretense, presupposition, and implicature, and that often avoids any genuine primary assertion.

The claim that the speaker does not assert *Q* is supported by the fact that a flat-footed hearer can call the speaker's bluff by responding as if she really did mean *P*. For instance, a hearer *H* might respond to a sarcastic utterance of

- (1) Your plan sounds fantastic.

with something like

- (44) Since you're so enthusiastic, let's have you present the plan to the Dean at next week's meeting.

²⁵ As discussed in §1, various theorists have exploited the interaction between sarcasm and metaphor to suggest that metaphor belongs within 'what is said' or even semantic content. In fact, metaphorical utterances used sarcastically seem to behave in two distinct ways. On the one hand, the metaphorical mode of description can determine a pragmatically-enriched content which is 'made as if to be said', and which is then inverted, as in 'She's the Taj Mahal', used to communicate that the woman referred to is not attractive (Bezuidenhout 2001, 161). On the other hand, the sarcasm may target only the metaphorical mode of description itself, as in (13) and (14). These cases seem more akin to the perlocutionary sarcasm discussed in §4.1. I return to the interaction between metaphor and sarcasm briefly in fn. 44, and hope to discuss it more extensively in future work.

Faced with such a response, the original speaker *S* must either acquiesce by accepting the onerous assignment, or else disavow her earlier utterance by saying something like, “I didn’t really mean *P*; I was being sarcastic. I really think *Q*.” A response like (44) is certainly uncharitable, insofar as it deliberately ignores *S*’s manifest interpretive intentions. But a lack of charity is not yet a violation of the Cooperative Principle; it is simply an insistence on “working to rule.” The speaker makes herself vulnerable to this lack of charity precisely because she says something she doesn’t mean, and means something she doesn’t say. Sarcastic utterances like (1) have a rhetorical structure similar to that of Grice’s (1975/1989a) letter of recommendation for a job teaching philosophy:

(45) To whom it may concern: John’s handwriting is excellent and his attendance at departmental events is punctual. Yours, etc.

In both cases, the speaker makes her primary communicative intention manifest to an adequately perceptive hearer, but in a way that avoids explicit commitment to the communicated content *Q*, and hence that retains deniability. That is, such speakers can object to later reports of them as having asserted or claimed *Q* – although it would be fair to report them in more general terms as having indicated their belief in *Q*. The difference between (1) and (45) is that the writer of (45) does mean what he does say, while the speaker of (1) does not; and it is precisely this difference that forces the speaker of (1), faced with an aggressively uncharitable response like (44), to disavow the content what she said itself in a way that the writer of (45) would not.

Deniability is a valuable commodity in political discourse and other contexts involving antagonistic interlocutors. Irony and sarcasm are particularly rhetorically useful because they enable speakers to communicate negative attitudes while preserving deniability (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986, Winner et al 1988). And notably, deniability persists even when the speaker’s sarcastic intent is overtly manifested in a dripping intonation; indeed, Rockwell (2000, 485) claims that we should expect reliance on nonverbal cues like tone in precisely those situations where speakers want to communicate negative messages while protecting themselves from negative consequences. When the speaker’s assertion itself is merely pretended, however, as in (1), then deniability brings considerable risk.

Sarcasm contrasts sharply here with metaphor, which does have genuine illocutionary force. Here too, the fact that the speaker does not mean what she says makes her vulnerable to a flat-footedly literal response (Camp 2006a). And here too, the fact that the speaker does not explicitly say what she means allows her some leeway about the precise content of her claim. However, in contrast both to sarcasm and to utterances which merely juxtapose the two subjects that a metaphor ‘yokes’ together, the speaker of a metaphor cannot deny that she committed herself to some content or other by her utterance – *even* if her main perlocutionary aim is to invite the hearer into a non-propositional perspective on the subject (Camp 2009). Thus, while expressivists about sarcasm and metaphor are right to emphasize that

these figures of speech engage in something other than just the communication of propositions, they seriously misconstrue the communicative role that figurative utterances actually play. Further, because both expressivists and implicature theorists neglect the fine-grained conversational consequences of sarcasm and metaphor, they miss out on the important differences between them.

So far, I've focused on cases of propositional sarcasm which target the assertive content that a sincere utterance would have had. As with perlocutionary sarcasm, there are also cases of propositional sarcasm where the speaker sincerely commits herself to the uttered sentence's conventionally-associated content and force, and directs her sarcasm exclusively at an associated presupposition or implicature. In §4.1, I classified examples like (13) and (42) as perlocutionary, insofar as the speaker pretends to undertake one perlocutionary act (complimenting, expressing pity) in order to accomplish something close to its opposite (insulting, expressing envy). A sarcastic utterance like *B*'s in (15) also targets the implicature that would be generated by a fully sincere utterance, but here the effect is more narrowly propositional:

(15) *A*: I'm sorry Aunt Louisa is such a bother.

B: Oh, she never stays for more than a month at a time, and she always confines her three cats to the upper two floors of our house.

In (15), *B* evokes a scale of ease and burdensomeness of guests and pretends to implicate that Aunt Louisa's described actions place her at the easy end of the scale, but thereby implicates the contrary proposition, that her visits are not at all easy, and indeed quite burdensome.²⁶

4.3: 'Like'-prefixed Sarcasm

The third important class of sarcasm is 'Like'-prefixed sarcasm. Where bare propositional sarcasm is quite flexible in which of the various propositions associated with the utterance it can target – focal content, presupposition, or implicature – 'Like'-prefixed sarcasm always targets only the focal content of a declarative sentence, as determined by the composition of the constituent expressions' conventional meanings plus lexically-focused pragmatic processes.²⁷ And where bare propositional

²⁶ Similarly, in

(iv) The man who rescued this city from ruin is now planning to run for mayor. (repeated from fn. 7), the speaker's sarcasm targets the pretended presupposition that the city was in danger and that the salient man saved it, thereby implicating that he didn't do much to help the city (or even harmed it), and perhaps that the city wasn't really in much danger to start with. Presuppositional cases like (iv) suggest that propositional sarcasm can sometimes occur with speech acts other than assertion, as in

(iv') Do you think that the man who rescued this city from certain ruin might be planning to run for mayor? These examples are still cases of propositional sarcasm, insofar as they implicate the negation or contrary of some proposition associated with the utterance.

²⁷ Notably, this includes some but not all cases of metaphor. Thus, (xiii), with the metaphor restricted to the NP, seems to be fine:

(xiii) Like the fountain of youth has managed to convert anyone to his bizarre doctrines in years.

sarcasm generates only an implicature that the speaker is committed to the inverted content, utterances containing ‘Like’ actively commit the speaker to denying that focal content, in a way that undermines deniability. Thus, flat-footedly sincere replies along the lines of (46) are ruled out, and speakers cannot object to later reports of them as having committed themselves to the denial of that content. For instance, a speaker who uttered

(35) Like I’ve talked to George in weeks.

could be reported as having denied speaking with George recently; while even a speaker who employed a heavily sneering tone to utter

(46) Oh, I talk with George all the time.

could object to such a report.

Given that speakers employing ‘Like’-prefixed sarcasm do undertake primary illocutionary acts and not just implicatures, and given that sarcastic ‘Like’ only combines with declarative sentences, it might seem natural to analyze sarcastic ‘Like’ and ‘As if’ as forms of sentential negation, perhaps as simply elliptical for ‘It’s not like/as if’. This would support the intuition that in many cases, such as

(22) Like that’s a good idea,

the insertion of ‘Like’ appears to function as a stylistic variant on bare sarcasm. It would also represent a clear, if partial, triumph for a semanticist analysis, on which SARC simply inverts propositional contents. However, in Camp and Hawthorne 2008, we argue that the distinctive behavior of ‘Like’-prefixed sarcasm is better captured by analyzing ‘Like’ in illocutionary terms. More specifically, we propose that ‘Like’ encodes a function from propositions to illocutionary act types with the force of denial.²⁸ This model explains most of the distinctive syntactic constraints displayed by ‘Like’: its restriction to declarative sentences; its prohibition from the consequents of conditionals; and its incompatibility with illocutionary adverbs like ‘luckily’ or ‘unfortunately’. It also has a better explanation for the infelicity of replying to ‘Like’-prefixed utterances with ‘That’s true/false’, and of substituting ‘Like’-prefixed sentences for ‘It’s not true that/ It’s not like P’ in response to previous utterances. Finally, it can explain the infelicity of reporting speaker’s beliefs with demonstratives which are anaphoric on ‘Like’-prefixed

As does (xiv), where the metaphor resides in the VP:

(xiv) Like I’d ever make the beast with two backs with him.

But (xv) is quite marginal, at least to my ear:

(xv) Like I’d ever go out with that Taj Mahal.

I hope to return to the interaction between sarcasm and metaphor in future work.

²⁸ For this analysis to be plausible, it is essential to acknowledge that no linguistic expression has the magical property of engendering a commitment for its utterer simply in virtue of tokening the expression – as Frege (1918) and Davidson (1979) point out, actors, journalists engaged in quotation and court recorders all token expressions without actually undertaking the concomitant illocutionary acts. However, as Mitchell Green (1997, 2000) has argued, it is possible for an expression or construction to have an illocutionary-act *type* as its semantic value, in the sense that *if* one does undertake an outright commitment to a sentence containing that expression or construction, *then* one thereby undertakes an illocutionary act of the relevant type.

sentences, as in

(47) Like Alan has any money. She believes that.

On our account, such reports are ruled out because the referent of the demonstrative is an illocutionary act and not a propositional content, as would be required to secure an appropriate object of belief.

‘Like’-prefixed sarcasm is undeniably a variety of sarcasm, and it undeniably involves the inversion of meaning in a strong, if surprising, sense of the term. However, it is considerably less obvious that it exhibits the other three features I have proposed: the *presupposition* of a *normative scale* and the *pretense* of undertaking one commitment in order to communicate its inverse. As we might expect, the conventionalization of sarcasm in an explicit marker does bring significant changes; but I think we can still discern a significant connection to all four of our core features.

We shouldn’t expect ‘Like’-prefixed sarcastic utterances to be pretended, or “pragmatically insincere,” in the same way that other sarcastic utterances are, given their explicit use of a conventional marker and their concomitant lack of deniability. However, a hint of pretense or insincerity remains in the fact that the speaker avoids an active illocutionary commitment to the focal content’s negation. Further, it is notable that cross-linguistically, the lexical items which encode this sarcastic operator always have an independent function either of echoing someone else’s utterance or thought, or of presenting a situation as counterfactual. Thus, sarcastic ‘Like’ is closely connected to the quasi-quotative use of ‘Like’, as in

(48) She was like, you are so totally embarrassing me right now.

which often mimics performative elements of a mentioned utterance in addition to reporting its propositional content, and which is frequently used to present unspoken thoughts.²⁹ Similarly, American English employs ‘As if’ as an alternative to sarcastic ‘Like’, while German employs *als ob* (“as if”), Russian has *mozžno podumat* (“It is possible to think”), and French uses *si tu crois* (“if you think”). In their non-sarcastic applications, these expressions all serve to evoke a set of circumstances or an epistemic attitude as presupposed but not actual or actually warranted. Thus, all of these expressions at least have some significant connection to echoing or evoking an alternative, if not to pretense *per se*.

The connection to a presupposed normative scale might seem even harder to discern, and its absence even more damning for a unified analysis of sarcasm. In particular, where bare sarcasm frequently and easily employs intensifiers like ‘very’ and ‘such a’ to push the targeted content toward the extreme end of an evoked scale, ‘Like’ often combines only uneasily with such intensifiers. Thus,

(22) Like that’s a good idea.

sounds considerably better than

²⁹ Though related, the two uses of ‘Like’ are clearly distinct: only sarcastic ‘Like’ can freely intersubstitute with ‘As if,’ and the quasi-quotative use can be applied to non-declarative sentences.

(49) Like that's a brilliant idea.

even though the bare sarcastic counterpart of (49) would be at least as if not more natural than the bare counterpart of (22). This suggests that 'Like' does not function, as bare sarcasm does, to invert an extreme scalar value into its contrary. Worse, the contents of many 'Like'-prefixed sentences, such as

(50) Like she's coming to your party.

lack any obvious connection to an evaluative scale at all.

To uncover the role that presupposition and evaluative scales do play in 'Like'-prefixed sarcasm, it is useful to return to the most surprising feature of sarcastic 'Like': its licensing NPIs. A variety of theorists have argued that polarity items are intimately connected to scales, and that NPI licensors in particular are "scale reversing" contexts. More specifically, although the details of their accounts differ considerably, Kadmon and Landman (1993), Israel (1996, 2001) and Chierchia (2004, 2009) have all argued that NPI licensing involves 'emphatic exhaustification': the emphatic presentation of content in a way that rules out all of its alternatives along some scale. Canonical 'minimizing' NPIs, like 'any' and 'a wink', denote a maximally minimal quantity. As a result, in positive contexts they make extremely weak, irrelevantly trivial statements. But embedded in 'scale reversing' contexts like negation, they produce extremely strong statements, by ruling out the possibility that any alternatives higher on the scale might obtain.

By themselves, these observations don't get us very far in the analysis of 'Like': even if NPIs do evoke scales, the evoked scale need not be a normative one; and many sentences embedded under 'Like' don't contain NPIs at all. However, I want to suggest that 'Like' itself serves as an operator of 'emphatic exhaustification': it expresses a strong evaluative attitude which locates the embedded content at the extreme end of a scale. More specifically, the speaker's use of 'Like' in (50) doesn't merely deny the content expressed by the embedded sentence: it expresses the speaker's evaluation of that content as falling at the low end of the scale of epistemic probability, and thereby 'exhausts' or rules out the assignment of any higher epistemic value to it.³⁰ Moreover, the scale of epistemic probability is clearly presupposed. An utterance of (50), like denials more generally, only makes sense against the background of a presupposition that someone – the addressee or some other salient party – endorses at least the probability, if not the actuality, of the described situation. Indeed, the role of presupposition in 'Like'-prefixed sarcasm is considerably more robust and constrained than in bare sarcasm. For instance,

(51) Nice cool day today, huh?

³⁰ Note that bare sarcasm can also target epistemic probability as its evaluative scale, as in:

(xvi) {I'm sure/surely} he's been talking to George a lot these days.

In contrast, I hear a sarcastic utterance of the embedded sentence, without any epistemic modifier, as only marginally acceptable. On my view, this is because the contents of the embedded sentence are evaluatively neutral and so lack an appropriate normative scale to target, an absence which the addition an expression of epistemic certainty remedies.

could be uttered sarcastically as the start to a conversation where it is manifest that weather is uncomfortably hot and sticky. But its ‘Like’-prefixed counterpart,

(51’) Like it’s a nice cool day today,

is infelicitous as an initial remark, even if the embedded content is clearly and relevantly false. (51’) becomes felicitous, though, if uttered in light of a previous claim to the contrary, or of a claim that directly entails its contrary, say that the weather has been pleasant for the past month. This contrast between the behavior of bare and ‘Like’-prefixed sarcasm strongly suggests that where bare sarcasm merely requires some general evocation of an established normative value, ‘Like’-prefixed sarcasm presupposes the specific epistemic endorsement of a particular propositional content. This presupposed endorsement constitutes a positive evaluation on the scale of epistemic probability; ‘Like’ inverts this endorsement by expressing scorn toward the possibility of assigning the focal content of the embedded sentence to anywhere but the bottom of the scale.

This analysis of ‘Like’ as an emphatic expression of minimal epistemic probability also solves the conundrum that (22) sounds considerably better than (49). If ‘Like’ simply inverted a scale evoked by the embedded sentence, then (49) should be a more emphatic statement than (22), and so more effective as a sarcastic remark. I’ll suggest in §4.4 that this is precisely how lexical sarcasm operates. But as we’ve now seen, it is not how ‘Like’ works; instead, ‘Like’ denies a maximally wide range of possibilities by assigning the embedded content the lowest possible epistemic probability. And since most ideas fall far short of brilliance, even the most emphatic denial that an idea is brilliant doesn’t deny much. By contrast, denying that an idea is even *good* automatically denies the possibility that it might have any greater merit. Our analysis thus predicts that, as an emphatic expression of denial, and not an expression of either internal or external negation, ‘Like’ should combine more effectively with the weaker than the stronger positive evaluation.³¹

Thus, we have identified some version of all four core features in sarcastic ‘Like’ after all: utterances employing sarcastic ‘Like’ *presuppose a normative scale*, specifically by *evoking* a previous commitment with respect to a scale of epistemic probability; and they thereby communicate an emphatic *denial* of this commitment, by locating the relevant content at the bottom of the scale of probabilities. The element of “pragmatic insincerity” is considerably weakened, as we should expect given that ‘Like’ is an explicit, conventionalized marker for sarcasm; but a connection to it remains in the appeal to an

³¹ Incidentally, this also suggests that the bare counterparts of (25) and (51) function quite differently: that the bare version of (25) is an instance of propositional sarcasm, while (51)’s bare counterpart is lexical. This analysis is supported by the observation that sarcastic utterances of the two bare counterparts will tend to take different intonational contours, with the focal emphasis coming on the initial demonstrative in the bare version of (25), and on the evaluative adjective in the bare version of (51).

evoked possibility, and in fact that ‘Like’ merely denies the content in question rather than explicitly committing the speaker to its negation.

4.4: *Lexical Sarcasm*

The final variety of sarcasm to consider is lexical sarcasm, as in

- (3) Because George has turned out to be such a diplomat, we’ve decided to transfer him to Payroll, where he’ll do less damage.

In these cases, the speaker undertakes an overall speech act with a standardly-associated illocutionary force, whose content is a compositional function of the standard meanings of its constituent terms plus local, lexically-focused pragmatic processes. The notable feature in these cases, of course, is that the operative ‘local processes’ include inverting the meaning of at least one expression.

Lexical sarcasm sounds most natural when it targets expressions which denote the extreme end of a conventionally-associated, normatively-loaded scale – expressions like ‘brilliant’, ‘inspired’, ‘genius’, ‘diplomat’, and ‘thrilled’ – so that the sarcastic inversion contributes a value at the scale’s other end. However, the mere presence of an evaluative scale is not itself sufficient to make lexical sarcasm felicitous: for instance, an utterance of

- (52) If David is a real genius, then he won’t get better than a C in organic chemistry.

sounds bizarre in the absence of a specific supporting context, even with sneering emphasis on ‘real genius’. The additional requirement, as we might expect, seems to be a form of allusion or presupposition. It is especially notable in this context that many, if not all cases of lexical sarcasm employ explicitly allusive or comparative expressions, such as ‘so’, ‘such a’, or ‘like that’ – and indeed, (52) becomes much better if ‘real genius’ is replaced with ‘such a’. These allusive expressions serve to anchor the evaluation expressed by the targeted expression to some genuine evaluation, in one of two ways. Either they allude to some particular, mutually recognized features(s) in the world which clearly warrants the opposite evaluation from the one the speaker pretends to express, as in (3). Or else they allude to a previous, genuine evaluation of the same subject with the opposite valence from the one the speaker now pretends to express, as in

- (6) If Alice is so brilliant, then she’ll be the perfect dupe for our little plan,

which is most felicitous if another conversational participant has just described Alice’s various intellectual blunders.³²

³² The allusion operative in this second class differs from those we have discussed so far, in that instead of the speaker pretending to conform to an evoked expectation in order to draw attention to its actual violation, here the speaker pretends to express the contrary of the evoked expectation, in order to uphold it. Even here, though, I suspect that there must still be at least a hinted allusion to someone’s genuinely subscribing to the evaluation the

Because the speaker of an utterance containing lexical sarcasm does genuinely undertake a speech act with assertive force, it should not be surprising that these are the only cases of sarcasm that underwrite indirect reports like

(1_{IQ}) Bethany said that my plan sounds *fantastic*.

The speaker in these cases doesn't merely implicate the contrary of what she says or implicates, or even actively deny it. Rather, she actively asserts *Q*, where *Q* involves the inversion of one element of the uttered sentence's compositional, conventionally-determined content; as a result, she cannot easily deny a report like (1_{IQ}), or even an analogous report with 'claimed' substituting for 'said'. Flat-footedly literal responses along the lines of (44) are also ruled out, because there is no coherent pretended speech act which the hearer could insist on construing the speaker as having sincerely undertaken. At the same time, lexical sarcasm still imposes significant constraints on felicitous reports – constraints that are not exhibited by fully literal speech, including speech containing conventionally context-sensitive expressions. Reports like (1_{IQ}) are indirect insofar as they permit the substitution of co-referring indexical expressions and synonyms, including for the targeted expression:

(3_{IQ}) Bethany said that because I'm so *diplomatic*, they're going to transfer me to Payroll, where I won't be able to do as much harm to their precious reputation.

However, the targeted expression needs to be replicated fairly closely, including an intonational contour that is if anything more exaggerated. Perhaps, then, a more accurate analysis of reports like (1_{IQ}) and (3_{IQ}) is that they are largely indirect, but that the sarcastic expression is directly quoted. A full analysis would require a more developed, and more nuanced, theory of mixed quotation than most theorists (including myself) have on offer.

It would be very tidy if lexical sarcasm were also the only type of sarcasm that embeds. As we've seen, 'Like'-prefixed sarcasm is syntactically prohibited from embedding, as is perlocutionary sarcasm involving non-declarative sentences. And clear examples of embedded propositional sarcasm are generally difficult to construct. However, they do seem to be possible, as in Stephen Levinson's example:

(9) [Sun shining] If it continues to rain like this, I'll come to England more often.

Although one could insist that the sarcasm in (9) is restricted to 'rain', this seems implausible.³³ Insofar as sarcasm is a fundamentally something that speakers *do*, and specifically a matter of evoking

speaker merely pretends to express: in (6), for instance, there is a suggestion that Alice is an ideal dupe because she believes herself to be smarter than she really is.

³³ It is easier to generate cases where the sarcasm targets the mode of expression, but not the content, of the entire embedded clause:

(xvii) If Her Majesty has completed her disquisition on my many and fulsome merits, we should stop blocking traffic and get out of the intersection.

Much like the metaphorical examples (10) and (11), the speaker in (xvii) employs expressions that could be used to pick out the intended referent from within an evoked perspective which the speaker mocks. In this respect it is more

presupposed evaluative attitudes in order to communicate some inversion of them, we should expect speakers to exploit any means at their disposal to accomplish this. So long as the speaker's communicative intentions are sufficiently clear, and so long as the speaker's overall utterance presents a coherent set of attitudes, sarcasm can pick up on and target any aspect of the utterance. Embedded sarcasm increases the need for clarity about the speaker's interpretive intentions, given that the embedded portion must make a coherent, determinate contribution to the composition of a larger whole. Thus, it is no accident that (9) relies so heavily on highly established stereotypes and immediately salient features. By contrast, lexical sarcasm gains more freedom by denoting extreme values on conventionally-associated, well-defined, normatively-laden scales.

5. Implications and Conclusions

Although sarcasm has received considerably less attention from philosophers of language than metaphor, it arguably presents more interesting challenges for them. (I believe that metaphor holds more important lessons for philosophers of mind, though). The traditional implicature model, its upstart semanticist cousin, and its expressivist adversary all assume an overly simplified model of meaning and communication, which prevents them from capturing the nuanced interactions between conventional meaning and speaker exploitation, and between the determination of truth-conditions and the expression of attitudes, that sarcasm exploits. I hope to have developed a more adequate, unified, and comprehensive account of sarcasm. In this section, I want to articulate three main lessons from our investigation of sarcasm for the broader theory of meaning.

The first major lesson is that neither semantics nor the general theory of meaning can concern themselves solely with the determination of propositional, truth-conditional content – or rather, that if they insist on so restricting themselves, then they must be supplemented with parallel, systematic and intimately interacting theories of attitude expression and illocutionary force. The semanticist, the implicature theorist, and the expressivist all analyze 'what is said', and often also 'what is meant', in exclusively truth-conditional terms. But sarcasm, like many other uses of language, intertwines the communication of information with the expression of, and exhortation to, evaluative attitudes. The exclusion of norms and emotions from the realm of meaning becomes increasingly unpalatable as the range of cases widens to include not just sarcasm and metaphor, but also sincere uses of epithets and thick terms, which are evaluatively-laden as a matter of convention.

Sarcastic 'Like' and perlocutionary sarcasm introduce the additional complexity of illocutionary force into this mix. Both the robust syntactic constraints displayed by 'Like' and its distinctive rhetorical

akin to perlocutionary sarcasm, with only the phrase "many and fulsome merits" contributing a genuinely inverted content.

effects suggest that it conventionally expresses a speech act type of denial, distinct from the assertion of negation. Many theorists, most prominently Frege (1918) and Geach (1965), have held that treating denial as something other than the assertion of negation is at best “a futile complication,” and more likely the road to logical perdition.³⁴ While Frege and Geach are certainly right that there are formidable challenges to assimilating denial and other speech acts within the scope of logical inference, it is remarkable that sarcastic ‘Like’ cannot occur within the scope of conditionals. More generally, there is growing awareness of other complex linguistic structures, such as appositive phrases, epithets, and slurs, which display robust ‘wide-scope’ behavior and which often concern illocutionary force and attitude expression instead of (or in addition to) truth conditions (e.g. Green 2000, Potts 2005, Williamson 2009).

The second major lesson provided by sarcasm is that semantics cannot be sharply encapsulated from pragmatics, even by allowing much more weak pragmatic ‘intrusion’ than we might have expected.³⁵ King and Stanley (2005) argue valiantly that all apparent cases of strong intrusion into the compositional determination of the primary speech act can be traced back to conventionally-encoded context-sensitivity. This view has some hope of succeeding when it comes to scalar implicatures and other generalized implicatures associated with the use of specific expressions, such as ‘and’:

(53) If he pulled the switch and the bomb detonated, then he’s responsible for the deaths; but if the bomb detonated and he pulled the switch, then he’s blameless.

But the sheer number and variety of types of embedded material makes this a daunting task, to say the least. Various scholars have noticed that metaphor also embeds quite easily:

(54) If you appoint a little Chomsky, all the sociolinguists will resign. (Levinson 2000, 210)

(55) If music be the food of love, play on. (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* I.i.1-3; Hills, p.c.)

So does loose use:

(56) If they send me another raw steak, I’m going to ask to speak with the manager.

and deferred reference:

(57) If the ham sandwich pulls a runner, Bill can chase him down.

We can now add sarcasm to this list.

King and Stanley offer no explanation of embedded metaphor, sarcasm, loose use, or deferred reference, and summarily dismiss Levinson’s examples of embedded ‘manner implicatures’ as “straightforwardly unconvincing” (2005, 153, fn. 53). However, the ordinary speakers I’ve consulted all find the examples I’ve cited to be perfectly acceptable.

³⁴ Analogously, the dominant strand of theorizing about NPI licensing, deriving from Ladusaw (1979), treats it in terms of truth-conditional entailments, leaving unexplained, for instance, the fact that questions license NPIs. Horn (2001, 2009) and Israel (2001) suggest that the best analysis of NPI licensing will focus on the utterance’s illocutionary and rhetorical force rather than its narrowly inferential properties.

³⁵ On the other hand, Glanzberg turns out to be right in warning that “the appearance of being merely pragmatic can drastically deceive”, insofar as one variety of sarcasm – sarcastic ‘Like’ – is undeniably semantic.

Semanticists like King, Stanley, and Szabó thus face a stark choice. On the one hand, they can hold on to the view that all of these apparent cases of strong intrusion are really generated at LF as part of the conventionally-driven compositional process. This is at least somewhat plausible for the case of lexical sarcasm, given the conventionality (in the sense of involving a specific, learned operation on meaning), constraint, and systematicity of sarcastic inversion that we used to motivate a semanticist analysis in §1 – although the attractiveness of this model has now been tempered significantly by the observation that neither perlocutionary nor propositional sarcasm can be analyzed semantically. There is also some (though I believe, less) plausibility to modeling metaphor semantically, as Stern (2000) and Leezenberg (2001) have done. But loose use and deferred reference display much less, if any, such systematicity. Postulating LF representations for all of these possible uses would effectively trivialize the notion of conventional composition while dramatically increasing postulated ambiguity and undermining the predictive power that motivated a methodological bias for semantic analyses in the first place.

On the other hand, semanticists can allow strong intrusion into the compositional process. Grice himself eventually chose the latter option, at least for generalized implicatures:

It certainly does not seem reasonable to subscribe to an absolute ban on the possibility that an embedding locution may govern the standard nonconventional implicatum rather than the conventional import of the embedded sentence (1989c, 375).

However, I think it's fair to say that the range of cases in which an embedding locution governs something other than conventionally-encoded meaning is much wider than the 'standard' implicata that Grice envisioned.

The admission of strong intrusion into composition might seem like a clear triumph for contextualists, since most theorists who have drawn attention to strong intrusion have done so in order to argue for a permissive, contextualist notion of 'what is said' (e.g. Travis 2000, Bezuidenhout 2001, Recanati 2003). However, even the most permissive contextualists want 'what is said' to be intuitively tied to the modulation or enrichment of lexical meaning, and regularly claim that only the enriched or modulated meaning has any psychological reality.³⁶ And sarcasm does not intuitively belong within what is said: on the contrary, it's a commonplace, and not a rarefied theoretical postulate, that a sarcastic speaker means the opposite of what they say. Indeed, those who argue for including metaphor within 'what is said' or semantics often do so by contrasting metaphor with irony (e.g. Bezuidenhout 2001); Stern (2000, 233) says that we are not "even tempted to posit an ironic meaning in the utterance in addition to the ordinary literal meanings of the words used." In my (2006a), I argue that ordinary intuitions and practices actually support excluding metaphor from 'what is said'. But lexical sarcasm

³⁶ Recanati (2003, 301, fn. 3) conjectures that all local pragmatic processes are unreflective.

demonstrates even more clearly that non-encoded processes can help to determine the content of the speaker's primary speech act without intuitively belonging to 'what is said'.

The idea that speakers can use particular expressions to mean something other than their conventional meaning is not new, of course. Among others, Clark (1983) discusses "nonce" word use; Crimmins (1998) claims that "Fregean" uses of names depend upon "semantic pretense"; and Hills (1997, 147) argues that we need to acknowledge metaphorical meanings as "full participants in the familiar recursive rigmarole of compositional semantics." In a related vein, Kripke (1977) and Davidson (1986) discuss unintentional divergences between a word's conventional meaning and what a speaker uses it to mean. To avoid bogging down in a terminological quagmire, I suggest that we abandon the fight over 'what is said', which is ambiguous in ordinary speech (Camp 2007). Instead, we should distinguish four classes of commitments that individuals regularly undertake in making an utterance, all of which deserve to be called 'meaning', and which include commitments to evaluative and emotional attitudes as well as truth-conditional beliefs:

- '*what is locuted*'³⁷: what is delivered by composition of conventionally-encoded meaning, including disambiguation and fixing values for conventionally context-sensitive terms; also including the contribution of illocutionary-act-types, but without entailing genuine illocutionary commitment.
- '*what is asserted/asked/requested*': the speaker's primary illocutionary act, subject to local, non-encoded modifications in meaning, including metaphor and lexical sarcasm.
- '*what is implicated*': speaker's commitments communicated via global, rational interpretive processes which operate on what has been (pretended to be) asserted, asked, or suggested.
- '*what is perlocuted*': further effects, including especially directing attention and non-propositional perspectival effects, which the speaker intends to produce in the hearer by way of his recognizing her reflexive communicative intentions.

Speakers and hearers display their implicit sensitivity to – and often enough, a nuanced explicit awareness of – all four levels of meaning in ordinary discourse. In particular, the ordinary use of sarcasm and metaphor underscore the important, and importantly different, roles played by both 'what is locuted' and 'what is asserted'. On the one hand, in both sorts of figurative speech, ordinary speakers defer to the authority of 'what is locuted' in the face of uncharitable, non-accommodating responses, and recognize the deniability of what is not actually locuted. On the other hand, both lexical sarcasm and metaphor contribute to determining 'what is asserted'; and perlocutionary, propositional, and 'Like'-prefixed sarcasm all operate on a content of 'what is merely pretended to be asserted,' which is itself determined by strong, local, non-encoded modifications to meaning, including metaphor.

³⁷ David Braun proposes this term in his (ms.).

Given this four-part taxonomy, the choice of whether to classify lexical sarcasm, and more generally all cases in which an expression takes on a new “compositional value” (Recanati 2003, 318), as semantic or pragmatic may also be largely terminological. Everyone should agree that in these cases, the speaker’s use of the word diverges from conventional meaning in such a way that ‘what is locuted’ comes apart from ‘what is asserted/asked/suggested’. If by “semantics” one means whatever contributes compositionally to the commitments that are intuitively involved in what is asserted/asked/suggested, then “semantic pretense” itself counts as semantic, and not just as pretence about semantics. By contrast, if by “semantics” one means the contents that are determined by the composition of a sentence’s constituents’ conventional meanings, as most theorists do, then semantic pretense in general, and lexical sarcasm in particular, should be treated as a cases of strong pragmatic intrusion into semantic composition.

The third and final lesson from sarcasm is in a way the inverse of the first two. Although an investigation of sarcasm helps to bring out just how intimate the interactions are among content, attitude, and force, and between conventional meaning and contextual exploitation, it also reveals that these interactions depend upon rich, systematic structures, with genuine constraints on all sides. Not just anything goes. In a deep sense, sarcasm is something that speakers *do* with their utterances, and in this sense is a fundamentally pragmatic affair. It is also a fairly unified phenomenon, displaying four core features: it *presupposes a normative scale*; it *pretends* to undertake (or at least, evokes) one commitment with respect to this scale; and it thereby communicates an *inversion* of this pretended commitment. But this general operation can take a variety of fairly precise ‘scopes’, with distinctive, robust consequences in each case. ‘Like’-prefixed sarcasm in particular produces remarkably well-defined syntactic, semantic, and illocutionary effects. Thus, what we might have expected to be a case study in the erosion of conventional, compositional meaning in the face of multivalent pragmatic manipulation actually demonstrates that semantics does not always wither away upon closer inspection into syntax plus pragmatics.

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