

Classical Rhetoric and Cognition III: *Irony*

Hello and welcome to this video series about “Classical Rhetoric and Cognition”! My name is Silvio Bär, and I am a Professor of Ancient Greek at the University of Oslo. The goal of this video series is to explain traditional concepts of classical (Greek and Roman) rhetoric in light of modern cognitive science.

In this video, I am going to talk about *irony*. – Irony is something we are all familiar with: we use irony and we understand irony; but still, we may find it difficult to give a clear definition of what irony actually is. Therefore, let’s start with an example:

Imagine a child drops a staple of dishes and smashes all the plates into pieces, and the child’s parent comments on the incident by saying: “Fantastic, you’re a real genius!” This would be a typical case of irony, because the parent very obviously meant the exact opposite of what he or she said.

However, the ironic remark only works if the child actually understands the real message: the child must understand the discrepancy between what was said and what was meant. Small children normally don’t understand irony yet, so, depending on the age of the child, this parent may achieve the opposite of what was intended: the child may really feel like a genius and may in the future smash more plates on purpose!

So, we can define “irony” as follows: Irony is a way of intentionally stating the opposite of what is actually meant, with the intention that the true meaning should be understood. If the receiver of an ironic message doesn’t understand the irony, then it is pointless.

Examples like the one just presented are based on a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. This type of irony is called verbal irony. In contrast, there is also “situational irony”, where the discrepancy lies not on the verbal level, but on the level of action.

But let’s turn to the ancient roots of the word and the concept of “irony”! The word “irony” comes from Ancient Greek: “Eironeia”! “Eironeia” is normally translated as “dissimulation”, “understatement”, or “mock-modesty”.

As a concept, “eironeia” has its place in ancient rhetoric: The Roman Quintilian, author of the treatise “The Institutes of Oratory”, mentions that irony can be recognized by the tone and by the body language of its speaker. So, Quintilian makes it clear that although irony happens on a verbal level, also non-verbal signs decide whether the ironic undertone of a message is understood.

Now, we can of course not travel back in time and listen to the speeches of Demosthenes and Cicero to figure out how they conveyed irony, but we can read their speeches and try to detect traces of irony there. And indeed, particularly the speeches by the Roman orator Cicero are often full of irony.

I just quote one example, from the speech “On the Consular Provinces”. In this speech, Cicero accuses his enemy, the politician and general Aulus Gabinius, of corruptibility. And in this context, Cicero calls Gabinius “our outstanding general”.

Because of all the heavy accusations that Cicero has raised against Gabinius, it is abundantly clear that he means the exact opposite of what he’s saying and that he considers Gabinius to be anything but an “outstanding general”; and of course he expects his audience to notice the discrepancy between what he says and what he means.

But what is, actually, the rhetorical effect of irony? Surely, there is a certain cultural aspect to the use of irony: certain cultures and nations (like for example the British) have a reputation for using irony more excessively than others. But the fact that already two thousands years ago, Cicero used irony in his speeches fairly often suggests that irony must have a rhetorical effect that is cross-cultural.

Cognitive science has come up with some answers to this question. For one, cognitive studies have confirmed what Quintilian already claimed, namely, that the understanding of irony does not only work through verbal means, but that it equally depends on non-verbal clues.

For another, brain researchers have also found that irony activates a network of more and different brain regions as compared to what a statement does that is purely factual and non-ironic. What’s more, irony also activates brain regions that are specifically responsible for emotional reactions.

So, seen from this angle, it is self-evident why irony would be used in speeches and what the rhetorical effect of irony is. After all, rhetoric is the art of persuasion; and how could persuasion be better achieved than by an appeal to our emotions?

To be sure, Quintilian and Cicero knew nothing about brain research, and they could not test the effect of their rhetorical figures in a laboratory. But, they could test the rhetorical effect of their speeches in practice, and it seems that they had a pretty good idea about the effects of irony.