

---

Figurative speech: pointing a poisoned arrow at the heart of semantics

Author(s): Stephen Barker

Source: *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, Vol. 174, No. 1, Special Issue: GO FIGURE (January 2017), pp. 123-140

Published by: Springer Nature

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26002645>

Accessed: 01-07-2024 19:03 +00:00

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Springer Nature* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*

## Figurative speech: pointing a poisoned arrow at the heart of semantics

Stephen Barker<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 18 January 2016  
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2016

**Abstract** I argue that figurative speech, and irony in particular, presents a deep challenge to the orthodox view about sentence content. The standard view is that sentence contents are, at their core, propositional contents: truth-conditional contents. Moreover, the only component of a sentence's content that embeds in compound sentences, like belief reports or conditionals, is the propositional content. I argue that a careful analysis of irony shows this view cannot be maintained. Irony is a purely pragmatic form of content that embeds in compound sentences. The standard view cannot account for this fact. I sketch out a speech-act theoretic framework that can. But in accepting this alternative framework we are giving up on the whole idea of an autonomous semantics.

**Keywords** Figurative speech · Semantics · Truth-conditions · Propositions · Irony · Embedding · Speech acts · Pretence · Belief · Belief attributions · Thought

Figurative language presents a deep challenge to the semantic paradigm, the orthodox view about sentence content, or so I shall argue. The specific form of figurative language I use to demonstrate this is irony. Here's the contention. According to the semantic paradigm, sentence contents are, at their core, propositional contents: truth-conditional contents. Strip a sentence of its illocutionary force, and one finds a proposition—a truth-conditional content. Moreover, the only component of a sentence's content that embeds in compound sentences, like belief-reports or conditionals, is the propositional content. Hence, an embedded sentence *S* is only ever performed in a *propositional act*, that is, an act of uttering

---

✉ Stephen Barker  
Stephen.barker@nottingham.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> University of Nottingham, Nottingham, England, UK

*S* encoding a proposition, with no other speech-act aspect to the utterance of *S*. Pragmatic factors may enter into the business of *S*'s getting to encode a proposition, but the truth-condition itself is a purely representational matter of reference, satisfaction, and truth-conditions. Call this the propositional content principle—*PCP*. *PCP* is central to the dominant semantic paradigm. I will argue that reflection on irony provides strong grounds for rejecting *PCP*. Moreover, the idea that meaning is to be theorized through a theory of truth-conditions is seriously challenged. Indeed, the very idea of a *proposition* is under threat.

## 1 Irony: Semantic or pragmatic?

Let's begin with irony. The essence of irony is that a speaker *U* engages in an *act of pretence* that is a ridiculing portrayal of a cognitive state. Take Max who thinks George is extremely dim. In one of his sarcastic outbursts, Max utters:

(1) George is a real genius.

In uttering (1), on its ironic reading, Max is expressing a derisory attitude towards anyone thinking George is a genius, and communicating that the opposite holds regarding George—he is very dim. I propose that we can capture the essence of what's going on with this utterance of (1) with the following encapsulation, where *P* is the literal said-content of *S*:

***Ironic-Act:*** *U* utters *S* pretending to believe/assert that *P* so as to give a ridiculing-portrayal of someone believing/asserting *P*.

This is not a general treatment of irony, since irony can involve uses of non-declarative sentences and pretence with respect to non-assertoric speech acts, like questions. I leave such cases aside here.

Irony is a pretending to do one thing to achieve something else. Although it's not generally conventionalised—that would be contrary to its nature—this does not bar it from being illocutionary, which is to say, it is a complete, self-standing move in the conversational game. Irony then is a specific kind of illocutionary act.<sup>1</sup> As such, it is a recognised form of play—particularly, play with language. If *U* engages in this kind of ridiculing-portrayal of someone asserting/believing *P*, we can infer that *U* has the attitude ***Irony*** (*i*) and therefore that *U* believes ***Irony*** (*ii*)—where [*Invert-P*] is the content that is *opposite*, in the obvious sense, of *P*:

***Irony:*** (*i*) a ridiculing attitude to a person who believes that *P*; (*ii*) [*Invert-P*].

That is, we can think of ***Irony*** (*i*)–(*ii*) as being *conversationally implicated*.

Irony is a *doing* that isn't a propositional act. Nor is it an assertion. For example, we should reject the following idea:

<sup>1</sup> This view is developed and defended in Barker (2004) and Barker and Popa-Wyatt (2015). See also Popa-Wyatt (2014).

Ironic utterance of *S* is an assertion that (i) believing *P* is absurd and (ii) [Invert-*P*].<sup>2</sup>

There is clear evidence that this assertoric conception of irony is wrong. Take a conversational fragment like the following—below there are two possible responses by Sam, to Max's sarcastic utterance:

Max: Here's George, the walking brain.

Sam<sup>1</sup>: OK! It's absurd to think George is a genius: he's the very opposite of one. But we shouldn't be sarcastic.

Sam<sup>2</sup>: OK! George is *a real genius*. But we shouldn't be sarcastic.

Sam<sup>1</sup>'s utterance is fine, but Sam<sup>2</sup>'s is pragmatically defective. There is something Sam<sup>2</sup> is doing in performing the speech-act he executes with (1) that does not fit with his commentary. So Sam<sup>1</sup> and Sam<sup>2</sup> must be producing different kinds of speech acts. The difference is this. Sam<sup>1</sup> is merely stating correctness conditions, *Irony* (i)–(ii) for ironic use of (1), whereas Sam<sup>2</sup> is undertaking an actual performance of it, which is biting in its caricature. Sam<sup>2</sup> is engaged in parody, and so expressing *Irony* (i)–(ii), not stating that these conditions obtain.

Further confirmation of irony's not being assertion is that judging ironic utterances *true* or *false* doesn't seem to work. Take:

Max: George is *a real genius*.

Sam: That's false. He's very smart.

There is a sense in which Sam's utterance is not quite connected with Max's utterance. We can see that Max is probably committed to the claim that George is very stupid. And we might suppose this is what Sam is referring to with 'that'. But Max didn't say that George is stupid. If so, it is hard to see how Sam's claim about falsity applies to Max's actual speech-act. In which case, it seems untenable to claim that Max is performing an assertion.

The view I propose then is that irony is an illocutionary act involving dramatisation, with an essential pretence component—it's not an assertion. This wouldn't necessarily be bad for the semantic paradigm I sketched in the introduction, except for the following fact. Ironic content *embeds*. Let's demonstrate this first then worry about what it means. Take the following belief/thought report:

(2) Max believes/thinks that George is a real genius.

(2) could be taken with a wide-scope reading: someone is being ironic about Max's *believing/thinking* a certain content. Let's leave that reading aside and focus on another, narrow-scope reading. Suppose Max is well-known for his irony. He frequently makes claims in the ironic mode expressing derision about George's intellectual capacities. So, we can say—with mock-dramatic stress on *a real genius*: *Max thinks that George is a real genius*.

Evidence for this narrow-scope reading is given by the fact that the person uttering (2)—call her Fran—doesn't have to have the attitude or inverted-content

<sup>2</sup> See Camp (2012) for a version of this view, viz, that irony is a component of propositional content.

belief characteristic of someone being ironic about George. The following is a perfectly fine piece of conversation:

Sam: Max is really underwhelmed by George.

Fran: Yeah. Max thinks he's a real genius. Little does he know: George *is* a real genius.

Fran's last utterance is a non-ironic claim that George is indeed cognitively gifted. So, on this reading, neither the attitude nor the inverted content *projects*. Neither is a commitment of the whole utterance. Here irony doesn't have wide scope but is embedded.

Another case of ironic content embedding is in conditionals. Take this conversational fragment:

(3) Max: I get the feeling that George is a real genius.

Sam: So do I. If he is, then we ought to allow his genius to shine, by getting him to lick those stamps.

Fran: Oh, he's a genius, alright. Such a mind! Break out the stamps!

Max's utterance itself provides an instance of embedding. The feeling that Max is getting, to put it literally, is that George is deeply dim. But consider Sam's utterance. It looks like irony has narrow scope both in antecedent and consequent. One might attempt to treat this as wide-scope, so that the whole conditional is ironic. But a wide-scope hypothesis is unsustainable. First, it does not fit in with continuation of Max's utterance, and Sam's echoing of it, where the irony clearly focuses on the sentence (1), *George is a real genius*. Secondly, if Sam's whole conditional utterance is ironic, then his speech act must be a ridiculing portrayal of an absurd belief whose content is the conditional he utters taken literally. But what's the absurdity of that conditional on a literal reading? If the conditional is material implication, then it's fairly obviously true, since the antecedent is very likely false. As some kind of non-material implication, it is at best a puzzling claim. Moreover, it's not clear what the inverted content is meant to be. Is it that George is a genius, but licking stamps is deeply intellectually demanding? Clearly, the setting is not there for a wide-scope reading. Thirdly, the wide-scope reading is not consistent with Fran's follow up. This looks like *modus ponens*. Fran is drawing the implications from Sam's conditional. That fits in perfectly with narrow-scope reading. But what exactly is Fran up to if Sam's utterance has a wide-scope reading? If the inverted content of Sam's utterance is—that Fred is a genius, and licking stamps is difficult stuff—then her utterance makes no sense.

Another hypothesis about the irony of Sam's conditional is that the conditional is not ironic as such, but what's ironic is the implication—carried by a normal supposition that George is literally a real genius—of George's genius being a live epistemic possibility. The irony is that it's clearly the opposite of a live possibility. This hypothesis has some plausibility. It may be that some conditionals are produced with this kind of irony. But this idea does not fit with the present case, since it won't explain the relation to Max's and Fran's utterances, which depends on the antecedent of Sam's conditional being ironic. Moreover, it does not fit with another utterance that Sam might have made:

(4) So do I. If he is, then we better start panicking.

In this case, the consequent is not ironic at all. The conditional roughly conveys: *If Fred is a real genius—that is a complete moron—then we are in a serious situation.* The idea that the whole utterance is non-ironic—we are just being ironic about the implication that the question of George's genius is an open one—cannot be right. Rather the conditional seems to express an implication from the correctness of the ironic-embedded content in the antecedent to the correctness of the literal content of the consequent.

It looks like ironic content can embed. But here's the nub of the issue. Irony, qua illocutionary act, cannot embed. First, it seems obvious that illocutionary acts cannot embed in belief reports and conditionals. If the ironic act embedded in our cases above, then its conversational implicatures, *Irony* (i)–(ii), would be present as commitments of the whole utterance. But U uttering (2) on the narrow reading lacks such commitments, and similarly for the conditionals in (3)/(4). Nevertheless, ironic content in some form embeds. How does the semantic paradigm, with its commitment to *PCP*—as outlined above—deal with this?

## 2 The embedding challenge for semantics

There is a range of hypotheses that might be proposed. I briefly review them here, but none work, but it is good to clarify the space of options available—see Barker and Popa-Wyatt (2015) for more discussion. I begin with quotation:

*Quotation:* Let's say the apparently embedded sentences with ironic content are not really embedded at all. Rather, they are in quotes: not used, merely mentioned. In which case, how should we think of Sam's conditional in (3)? It must really be a metalinguistic claim like this:

(5) If it is correct to say, 'he is', literally meaning that George is a real genius, but with an ironic interpretation, then it is correct to say 'We ought to let that genius shine', literally meaning we ought to let that genius shine, with an ironic interpretation.

We can doubt, however, that Sam's conditional is a metalinguistic claim about ironic interpretation of quoted material. First, Sam might lack any explicit concept of irony, but still be ironic. If so, he would be unable to utter (5) but apparently able to affirm his conditional in (3). Secondly, one might chide Sam for being nasty towards George in uttering his conditional—it still carries the sting of ridicule that attends independent ironic utterance. But one cannot accuse someone of being nasty or sarcastic in uttering (5). It is simply a commentary on the correctness conditions for ironic utterance.

That we are engaged in direct quotation and so only mentioning ironic sentences in cases of embedding is not tenable. Let's consider approaches that assume that the ironic sentences embedded are *used*. Some proposals are:

*Force-Cancellation*: (1) is performed in a kind of illocutionary act, but its force is *cancelled* somehow. That is why there is no conversational implicature of *Irony* (i)–(ii). However, the concept of force cancellation is far from clear.<sup>3</sup> If force cancellation means force is absent, then what is the content of (1) embedded? All the semantic theorist can say is that (1)'s content is simply its literal truth-conditions, which, we have already argued, cannot contain ironic content.

*Indicating Illocutionary-Act*: Let us say that (1) embeds but that utterance of (1) *indicates* an ironic illocutionary-act type—of the kind that is normally produced by ironic use of (1)—but (1) embedded is not a tokening of this illocutionary type. Moreover, the illocutionary-act type indicated is the content of (1) when embedded. One problem with this idea is that it is mysterious what *indicating* is. It can't be any of the following for the reasons given in each case:

- (a) Is it *expressing* or *exemplifying* a type? No. The speaker is not tokening the illocutionary type with (1) in (2);
- (b) Is it *expressing a mental state*? No. The illocutionary-act type is not a mental state that can be expressed;
- (c) Is *indicating* the relation that a sentence has to the proposition it encodes through linguistic meaning and context? No. That does not apply in this case;
- (d) Is it *representing/signalling* how things are? No. If it were, (1) in (2) would be true/correct if and only if the illocutionary-act type *indicated* existed. But that's not the case;
- (e) Is it *referring*? No. Sentences don't ever, apparently, function like referring terms.

As this brief survey shows, it's a complete mystery what *indicating* is. One might propose that the relation between (1) and the illocutionary-act type is a primitive one. But how can there be a new fundamental relation between a sentence and an illocutionary-act type?

The other problem with this approach is that even if we could make sense of *indicating*, we have to ask what Sam's conditional conveys given that it's antecedent and consequent indicate illocutionary acts. It seems all we can say is that it has the content of (5) above. In other words, it's a metalinguistic commentary about use of certain acts. But we have already rejected that Sam's utterance is going that. I conclude that the indicating approach fails.

We have looked at a range of proposals about how the semantic paradigm might explain embedding of ironic content. We have not met with success. The problem is that the semantic paradigm gives us two basic choices about what embedded ironic content could be: it's either an illocutionary act or a propositional content. But we need to break out of this dichotomy in some principled way to explain something like embedded irony. That means *PCP* is under pressure. As I argue in the next section, there is even more pressure to be brought to bear on *PCP*.

<sup>3</sup> See Hanks (2007) for an attempt to make sense of this idea.

### 3 Puzzles of content and act

*PCP* is linked to the idea that sentences encode contents, propositions, and the latter are the objects of belief and thought. However, we have noted that irony embeds in the content-clauses of belief/thought attributions—see our discussion of (2). But how can someone's ironic thought really be a proposition, given that the content of the ironic-sentence (1)—the content of the belief ascribed—cannot be propositional—as we argued above? One answer is the hypothesis that what's believed is the pair of propositions corresponding to the commitments, *Ironic* (i)–(ii), that is the inverted content [*Invert-P*] and the proposition that believing *P* is ridiculous. In short, one believes/thinks something ironic by believing the correctness conditions for an ironic utterance. This does not look like a maintainable view. First, if this were the content of the belief, reported in (2), then it would be a truth-apt belief. It would be true if and only if these correctness conditions obtained. But intuitively, the belief reported in (2) isn't true- or false-apt. The second reason is more complicated.

Take ironic Max. Let's suppose that in fact ironic Max rarely if ever makes public ironic statements. Nevertheless his thoughts are deeply ironic. His sub-vocalisations, which constantly attend his conscious life, are a stream of inner speech in the ironic mode. So, as George enters the room, Max thinks: *Here's the genius again. What brilliance will he stun us with today? I can't wait.* Indeed, Max's feelings of rage and resentment directed towards George—who has a higher position in the office than him—are intimately connected to these inner voicings. We cannot see this real-time thinking as merely Max entertaining the propositions that are the correctness conditions for ironic utterances. After all, there is no emotional value in entering metalinguistic beliefs. Max's resentment is deeply coloured by the mocking stance of his irony.

Rather, the more plausible view is that Max's real-time thinking involves producing inner illocutionary acts, including ironic ones. You might wonder how one can produce inner ironic acts. How can we have pretence in a purely imagined speech-act? But there is no real problem. A thinker can in thinking, intentionally engage in the inner behaviour—producing of imagined speech—of someone thinking, literally, that *P*, but lack the intention, aiming instead to give an inner dramatisation—with exaggerated imagined voice-tone—of someone parodying a believer, or assertor, that *P*. The dramatisation is for the thinker alone and carried out privately. The thinker is both producer and consumer of the thought. All are exercises of the imagination.

We have some grounds for holding then that our folk concept of thinking must just be that of episodes of inner speech, the production of imagined sentences. So ironic Max thinks with inner speech, both inner assertions and inner ironic acts. But if real-time thinking in this sense involves acts, surely objects of beliefs are inseparable from such acts. How can objects of belief, the entities believed, be something else, the specific, non-acts, we call propositions? It is doubtful that objects of belief and thoughts could have such radically distinct natures.

Here we encounter the idea that the content of Max's thought cannot be separated from the acts performed. The mental acts are not mere inner vehicles of some content separate from the acts. In other words, taking irony seriously requires

rejecting the idea of sentence contents as essentially a matter of truth-conditions. The tendency of semantic theorists is a reductive one: the concept of content distilled in the idea of truth-conditions is the master concept. All content must be equated with it. Irony upsets this idea with the apparent fact that content believed or thought is inseparably tied to a kind of act.

You may wonder how the act in which *S* is uttered is *S*'s content. Surely, the act *has a content* and cannot *be a content*. But consider illocutionary forces. They are kinds of acts. But within the semantic paradigm, they are considered to be contents. If forces can be considered to be contents, then so can some other kind of act. Of course, we don't yet have a clear idea of the kind of act that might be in play—a theory will be given below—but for now the idea that content is inseparable from act should not strike us as untenable.

If we allow that objects of belief/thought are sometime acts, do we want to say that they are sometimes propositions? This would not be an entirely happy outcome for it would mean that belief was a hybrid state, sometimes having an act as its object and sometimes a proposition. The presence of ironic content as an object of belief suggests the more general view: the objects of belief are acts. Indeed, general consideration of non-truth-conditional forms of content, such as *conventional implicature*, already suggest this as the right kind of view (see Barker 2003, 2007b, 2014).

One might object that we need propositions as objects of belief for those beliefs that are truth-apt, beliefs get to be truth-apt because their objects, propositions are truth-apt. But, in fact, this explanation of truth-aptness of truth-apt beliefs in terms of their having propositional objects is problematic. Consider desires. It seems reasonable to say that some desires have a proposition as their object. For example, the desire that the world improve has the proposition *<the world will improve>* as its object. But desires are not truth-apt. If so, an attitude's having a proposition as its object cannot determine that the attitude is truth-apt. So, it cannot be that truth-apt beliefs inherit their truth-aptness from their objects.

How are then those truth-apt beliefs that are truth-apt? We cannot invoke the so-called *direction of fit* theory, according to which beliefs in general, have a direction of fit—they are meant to fit reality, as opposed to desires, which are such that reality should fit them. Direction of fit is meant to be a characteristic of all beliefs, so assumes that they are all truth-apt.<sup>4</sup> But they are not. For consider the beliefs and thoughts that ironic Max has. His ironic beliefs are not truth-apt since ironic content is not truth-apt content. If so, the state of belief, as such, cannot be one sufficient for truth-aptness. Propositions qua representational entities cannot explain why beliefs are truth-apt nor can any supposed property of direction of fit. So we are left with a puzzle about belief as a state that can come in truth-apt forms and non-truth-apt forms.

Let's add one more puzzling fact to the mix. According to the semantic paradigm a declarative sentence encodes a proposition in virtue of its linguistic meaning, reference assignment and pragmatic modification—which may condition which propositions is expressed. These are all present in (1), on its ironic reading. It seems

<sup>4</sup> Direction of fit is an interesting metaphor, but actually spelling out what it amounts to has not yet been achieved—see Sobel and Copp (2001).

they better be, since (1) has a literal meaning which is employed in the irony. But here's the problem. (1) is not truth-apt. First, we have seen that attributions of truth or falsity to (1) are not appropriate. Secondly, the truth-conditions associated with the literal content of the sentence (1) are clearly not present in the embedded sentence. Take the case of belief attribution (2). If the embedded sentence (1) encodes the proposition (literal content) *<George is a real genius>*, then why doesn't the attribution (2) assign this as part of what Max believes? After all, it is part of the truth-conditions of the content sentence (1), assuming the encoding story. Similar comments hold for Sam's conditionals.

It seems we must conclude that on an ironic reading, (1)'s literal truth-conditions are cancelled and so no longer part of (1)'s content. That means—given the semantic paradigm's idea of sentences encoding propositions—that (1) no longer encodes a proposition. How would the semantic paradigm make sense of this ceasing to encode a proposition, given the usual mechanisms indicated above for encoding propositions? Even if something could be said, and we could explain how (1) fails to encode a proposition, this would not be a good outcome for the semantic paradigm. That's because (1) better encode a proposition insofar as its literal content plays a role in the ironic content. For the ironic content works through a literal content being expressed by (1), since it is the pretence act that works in terms of this very content.

In short, the semantic paradigm faces a dilemma: (1) must encode a proposition, since literal content plays a role the ironic interpretation of (1), but (1) cannot encode a proposition since (1) is not truth-apt. One way out might be to suggest that (1) does encode a proposition but it's not truth-apt because of some over-riding pragmatic use-factor on truth-aptness is violated by the ironic interpretation of (1). But I doubt there is any neat way of capturing the idea.<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion, the semantic paradigm faces a number of problems with accounting for irony, which challenge *PCP* and related theses. First, there is embedding requires postulating something that is neither a propositional act nor illocutionary act. Secondly, there are the issues we have uncovered in this section: objects of belief cannot be propositions, truth-aptness of truth-apt beliefs cannot be explained by propositions, act and content seem to go together, and finally, the dilemma just articulated concerning (1), which implies that the literal content of a declarative sentence cannot be propositional content.

Irony seriously places the basic commitments of semantics as its usually practiced are under stress. In itself, this would move no committed semanticist to seek any alternative to their program. I don't present the arguments here with that aim. I am merely interested in displaying what taking figurative language like irony seriously may entail. What picture of language would cope with the data with have uncovered? That's what I turn to next.

<sup>5</sup> Part of the problem is that sentences on the semantic paradigm get to be truth-apt because they encode propositions which are truth-apt. How can this transference of truth-aptness from the proposition to the sentence that encodes it be blocked, if truth-aptness of a sentence just means that the proposition encoded is truth-apt? There is no way that something so straightforward can be blocked.

#### 4 Truth-aptness and assertion without propositions

The picture I want to sketch begins with an alternative understanding of illocutionary acts, and in particular assertion. The project is to define assertion, embedding, ironic interpretation, truth-aptness, and belief/thought without propositions or propositional acts, and so without the sense/force distinction. The approach I sketch is grounded in an expressive approach to assertion that defines the core features of assertion independently of any propositional act or propositional attitude. Structurally we can represent this approach, which I call a *language-agency approach*—because it emphasizes language activity—distinguishing it from orthodox semantics, in the table below:

	Standard View	Language-Agency (LA)
Act	(Secondary) Truth-apt Assertion: Production of $S$ manifesting $M\langle P \rangle$	(Primary) Truth-apt assertion: Production of $S$ defending $\Pi$
State	(Primary) Truth-apt mental state $M\langle P \rangle$ prior to assertion	$\Pi$ -states = Functionally diverse representational states. $\Pi$ -states are not belief-states nor truth-apt

The standard view is that assertions inherit their truth-aptness from the mental state  $M\langle P \rangle$  that they are the outward manifestations of. So, an assertion is an act manifesting a propositional attitude  $M\langle P \rangle$ , inheriting its truth-aptness from the truth-aptness of the prior state  $M\langle P \rangle$ . The latter may be a belief state or a knowledge state. *LA* rejects this picture. Assertions are not *analysed* as expressions of prior propositional attitudes. In making this remark I am not denying that assertions are linked to beliefs. It's just that belief is not invoked to explain what assertion is. Instead, the language-agency view (*LA*) proposes a concept of assertion, reminiscent in some respects of Brandom's (1983) conception, which invokes reason or what I call *dialectical engagement*.

According to *LA*, the characterising intention of assertion involves *defending* a mental state, where defence is, very roughly, a disposition to provide reasons for possessing the state. Assertions are truth-apt illocutionary acts because they are acts whose purpose is to display dispositions to provide reasons for possessing mental states. Their truth-aptness is essentially tied to their being defensive acts in this sense. It's not the mental state defended in the utterance that is truth-apt—which then bestows truth-aptness on the utterance. Rather it's the fact that the utterance is produced *with the purpose of defending the state* that is the truth-apt thing. Truth-aptness arises with the defensive or dialectical stance.

What are the mental states defended in assertions? I have called them  $\Pi$ -states, for want of a better term. I use this bland term because the mental states that play an explanatory role in assertion are not familiar folk psychological states. I propose, for the purposes of this paper, that  $\Pi$ -states are representational states of language agents in the way that desires are, but they are not truth-apt, since representational

contents are not truth-apt or truth-apt-bestowing as such.<sup>6</sup> Although like motivational states in this respect,  $\Pi$ -states are not motivational states as such.  $\Pi$ -states come in kinds. Some are motivational states. Some are not. For example, assertions that are evaluative involve expressing defence of motivational  $\Pi$ -states—see Barker 2014. Non-evaluative assertions don't involve such  $\Pi$ -states. In the case of non-evaluative assertions, say about middle-sized material objects, the  $\Pi$ -states in the agent are linked to perceptions—perceptions are the canonical inputs for the  $\Pi$ -states in these cases. In other words, perceptions can be causes of specific kinds of  $\Pi$ -states in agents, but the  $\Pi$ -states, although representational, are not truth-apt nor are they beliefs.

In short, the basic proposal in the language-agency view is that we give up the idea that the mental antecedents of assertion must already be truth-apt mental entities— $M(P)$ . The  $\Pi$ -states defended in assertions, to repeat, are not the source of the truth-aptness of assertions. It's the act of uttering words with the purpose of defending a  $\Pi$ -state that is the truth-apt thing. If one just expresses a  $\Pi$ -state without manifesting a defensive stance with respect to it, one is not engaged in assertion and so not engaged in producing a truth-apt speech-act. For example, an order is the paradigm of a speech-act in which a speaker merely expresses a motivational  $\Pi$ -state—about an audience undertaking some action. The purpose of the order is not to defend the state. Hence the order is not a truth-apt illocutionary act.

Let me emphasize that there is no denial here that all illocutionary acts are open to criticism about the states expressed in such acts. So anyone producing an illocutionary act, be it assertion, order, question, conventional implicature, and so on, can be held to account for that act, and asked to provide reasons. The idea summed up in *Language-Agency* in the table above is that the characterising feature of assertions is that they, and they alone, are the illocutionary acts where the purpose of utterance is to defend a  $\Pi$ -state. That's why assertions are the truth-apt illocutionary acts.

We need to say something briefly about reason. The  $\Pi$ -states in any individual's cognitive system form a vast network of interconnecting states, which are linked to the world, ultimately though perceptual and motivational systems.  $\Pi$ -states can also be derived through the processes that underlie what we call testimony and reason. A given  $\Pi$ -state has a *tree* associated with it, which corresponds to what on the surface level of folk psychology we call *reasons*. The main thesis is this:

Assertion is an act of producing a sentence  $S$ , where the purpose of producing  $S$  is to *express* possession of disposition to display reasons for a given  $\Pi$ -state,  $\Psi$ , where the disposition is manifested through patterns of utterance that *express*  $\Pi$ -states in the tree for  $\Psi$ .

The term *express* in this formulation just means that the state is a causal antecedent of the production of symbols. So, if one asserts *This cake is tasty*, one utterance—be

<sup>6</sup> In more developed versions of the proto-act account we drop the assumption that  $\Pi$ -states are representational at all (see Barker 2004, 2007b). Representation has no explanatory role. This takes us beyond our current concerns.

it private or public utterance—is an effect, given procedures for language production—of possession of a disposition to display reasons for possessing a given  $\Pi$ -state, roughly, a gustatory preference state. Reasons are manifested through utterances, like saying, the cake's has a lemon flavour with sponge texture, thereby expressing an underlying  $\Pi$ -state in the tree of the gustatory preference state. One is not asserting that one has this state. The states are not what the sentences are about. The sentence expresses such states.

The truth-aptness of assertions is explained by the fact that they express defence of  $\Pi$ -states. The function of the truth-predicate, at least in its basic uses, is simply to express a disposition to defend the  $\Pi$ -state of a certain sentence. Truth dovetails with defence. Our idea of a truth-apt sentence is any sentence that can be directly put to use in an assertion, where *directly* means without further interpretation. (We shall refine this idea below.) Ironic-illocutionary acts are not truth-apt, since they are not utterances produced with the purpose of defending  $\Pi$ -states. They are utterances whose overall purpose is to give mocking portrayals of cognitive states.

## 5 Proto-illocutionary acts

This account of assertion does not invoke propositions. So now you may wonder how we deal with embedded sentences. The standard idea is to carve off some content separate from the assertion, something purely non-assertoric. That gives rise to the idea of a proposition and *PCP*. We are rejecting that conception here. What's the alternative? The basic contention is that utterance of sentences *S* and *R* in compounds like *if S, R* or *either S or R*, or *O believes that S*, represent instances of what I call *dialectical play*. Play is an integral part of any use of symbolic system. You might say play is pretence. But the mere label pretence does not do justice to the idea of dialectical play.

Here's a sketch of a theory with its application to speech acts—see Barker (2004) for more details. In play, one presents oneself as doing something, *A*, but in fact, isn't really doing that thing, and indeed, communicates that one lacks the intentions that accompany *A*-ing. Presenting oneself as *A*-ing can initially be thought of as intentionally engaging in a behaviour characteristic of someone who intends to *A*. So, if I present myself as threatening someone, then I may bare my teeth and growl taking up a fighting stance. These are behaviours characteristic of someone who intends to threaten someone. I undertake these acts, baring teeth and snarling, but lack the intention to threaten. Indeed, I communicate that I lack the intention, viz., I am not serious. This communication will be done through some cue. For example, I might wink at the same time as engaging in the snarling. The wink is a communicative act. Or context might do it for me. For example, nothing precedes my snarling behaviours that is consistent with an intention to seriously threaten someone.

If there is play then, typically, the speaker engaging in the presenting-an-intention-to-threaten—let's call this a *proto-threat*—has some goal. For example the goal of the proto-threat might be to amuse or instruct someone about the nature of threats in general. In other words, I engage in the proto-threat with the aim of

achieving some goal, but the goal is not to threaten someone, but rather, say, to instruct or amuse. The proto-threat only works, as a presentation of threatening behaviour, because the proto-threat is there in actual serious threats. In other words, in threatening someone, I perform a proto-threat—I intentionally engage in behaviours characteristic of someone intending to instil fear of violence in someone—and communicate I am serious. In playing, I perform a proto-threat and communicate that I am not serious—I lack the intention I present myself as having. Proto-threats are the common act behind both serious threats and pretend threats. Proto-threats are neutral: they can be serious or playful.

Serious threats—one intends to produce real fear in one's audience—can be sincere or insincere. In the case of a sincere threat, one really intends one's audience to fear violence, and really does have the intention to carry out the violence. In an insincere threat, one really intends one's audience to fear violence, but one does not have the intention to carry out the violence. In a pretence (play act) threat, however, one lacks the intention to instil fear of violence in one's audience, and lacks the intention to carry out the violence corresponding to the proto-act. Insincerity and play are distinct things. However, whether the serious threat is sincere or insincere, real or play, proto-threats are present. The proto-act is the kernel act.

All acts involving communication involve proto-acting. Speech-acts are just one kind of act linked to communicative action. What we have said about threats applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to illocutionary acts. There is no fundamental difference. The basic acts we perform with illocutionary acts are proto-illocutionary acts. We can characterise these acts as acts in which one produces utterance presenting oneself as having certain expressive aims—depending on the kind of illocutionary act—communicating that one has such aims.

Let's apply the proto-act approach to assertion. We proposed that in assertions speakers express defensive stances with respect to  $\Pi$ -states. In which case on the proto-act view:

***Assertion (Proto-Act):***

- (i) U utters *S* intentionally engaging in the behaviour of someone defending a  $\Pi$ -state,  $\Psi$ .
- (ii) U communicates that she has the intention in (i).

Component (i) is the proto-assertion. (ii) is the communication of the intention advertised in (i). The specific  $\Pi$ -state,  $\Psi$ , is one that the speaker's cognitive system associates with the sentence *S*, though systematic, non-*ad hoc* procedures based on the compositional structure of *S*. This association is the basis of U's understanding of the literal content of *S*. A general question at this point is how to understand communication. This is a sticky business, which I won't dwell on here—see Barker (2007b) for an account. In making an assertion, U presents herself as having the intention to defend a  $\Pi$ -state—she engages in the behaviour of characteristic of a speaker with such an intention—and communicates she, in fact, has this intention. The behaviour in question is to utter *S*. If the speaker is sincere, she has the intention she communicates herself as having. If insincere, she lacks the intention she communicates herself as having.

There is no pretence in sincere literal assertion of simple sentences. We proposed in §1 that irony involves an act of pretence. Where there is linguistic pretence there is proto-acting. We can analyse an ironic act in terms of proto-act structure in these terms:

***Ironic-Act (Proto-act)***: U utters *S* and intentionally:

- (i) engages in a behaviour characteristic of someone defending a  $\Pi$ -state  $\Psi$ ;
- (ii) engages in a behaviour characteristic of someone who lacks the intention presented in (i) but who performs (i) with the intention of parodying a belief state.
- (iii) communicates that she has the intention to parody presented in (ii).

The ironic act involves a kind of layering of proto-acts. First there is the literal proto-act (i). Then there is its incorporation in an ironic proto-act (ii). Then there is the communicative intention. The communicative intention pertains to the outermost proto-act, and the intention presented in that act, namely the intention to provide a ridiculing portrayal.

How does U perform the ironic proto-act? They engage in a behaviour characteristic of a speaker who is intending to parody a belief state. This is exaggerated voice-stress. So, uttering (1) with voice stress is a behaviour characteristic of a speaker intending to assert that George is a real genius, but doing it with exaggerated voice stress that is incongruous with what's manifest about George is a behaviour characteristic of an ironic speaker.<sup>7</sup>

What then of embedding? In whatever context, any meaningful utterance of a sentence involves performance of a proto-act. Embedded declarative sentences are always performed in proto-assertions, which appear in the context of what I called *dialectical play*. Uttering a sentence *S* in a larger sentence such as a conditional leads to a communication that U lacks the communicative intention associated with illocutionary act performance of the sentence—that is, (ii) of ***Assertion*** or (iii) of ***Ironic-Act***. The surrounding sentences are rather like the wink that we do when we perform a proto-threat but don't want our audience to believe that we have the threatening intention. So, the flanking of sentences with 'either ...or...', 'if..., then...', or 'O believes that ...' are verbal winks. The verbal winks indicate that a play context is present. So in embedding a declarative sentence on a literal interpretation, the speaker only performs ***Assertion*** (i), or, if the sentence is ironic, U only performs ***Ironic-Act*** (i)–(ii) above. Note that on this view, constructions like 'if...,...' or 'O believes that' are speech-act operators, not propositional operators. They operate on proto-illocutionary acts.

With the embedding an ironic-proto-act there is no communication of standard implicatures ***Irony*** (i)–(ii)—see §1 above. Take Sam's conditional in (3), where both antecedent and consequent sentences are uttered in proto-ironic acts,

<sup>7</sup> An objection to this framework is that it involves attributing complex intentions to speakers, which are unrealistic. This is an issue. However, it is possible to provide a treatment of proto-acts without investment in complex intentional structures, by providing a theory of the speech-act habits and underlying causal structures. This theory in terms of language dispositions is in fact the deeper theory but cannot be described here for reasons of space. See Barker (2004, 2007b) for outlines.

presenting intentions to parody. In uttering these sentences, there is no commitment to the attitudes and beliefs—such as *Irony* (i)–(ii)—that attend performing self-standing ironic-illocutionary acts. Nevertheless, the sentences are not in quotes. They are being used and so there is manifested a preparedness to use them in illocutionary acts, say, if the consequent is discharged through modus ponens. In that respect, the utterance differs entirely from the merely metalinguistic sentence (5), which involves no mockery at all.

What does Sam convey with the whole conditional in (3)? The answer is a complex commitment of this kind:

The characteristic commitments—*Irony* (i)–(ii)—of performing the antecedent proto-assertion as an ironic illocutionary act are such that they *entail*—given accepted background information—the commitments of performing as an illocutionary act the consequent proto-act.

In rough terms, the conditional *expresses* a metalinguistic commitment about relationships between correctness conditions of embedded proto-acts deployed as illocutionary acts. The speaker is not stating that this relationship holds.<sup>8</sup> This commitment of the whole conditions generates an obligation: if, at a later time, the speaker, or anyone else accepting the conditional, were to perform an act of irony with (1), then she would be committed to *Irony* (i)–(ii) and so, would be committed to performing the consequent proto-illocutionary act as an illocutionary act. In short, the commitment expressed by the whole conditional obligates one to perform an inference amounting to modus ponens, or rather, a more general principle than modus ponens, one that concerns not merely truth-preservation but a broader principle to do with correctness conditions.

## 6 Truth-aptness, belief, and thought

In the language-agency (*LA*) account of illocutionary acts I have given, sentences embedded in compounds are uttered in proto-acts. The proto-act, be it proto-assertion or proto-ironic-act is not propositional—it's not, nor has it, a truth-conditional content. The  $\Pi$ -state, even assuming it has representational content, is not a truth-bearer—as we have seen representation is not truth-apt as such. So the *LA* account rejects the force-sense distinction, since illocutionary acts don't divide into a propositional, truth-apt content, and a pragmatic operation on that content (see Barker 2007a for more discussion of this point). We can now consider the general question of truth-aptness. We proposed above that assertions are the truth-apt illocutionary acts because they are the acts whose purpose is to express defence of  $\Pi$ -states. We want to say that some declarative sentences, though not all, embedded in logical compounds are truth-apt. Embedded sentences are not asserted.

<sup>8</sup> I hold that indicative *if*-sentences merely conventionally implicate conditions regarding antecedent and consequent speech-acts—see Barker (2004).

So, how do we account for the truth-aptness of embedded, non-asserted sentences? The right answer is along these lines.

We can say generally (and very roughly) that if U judges *S* true then, U defends a disposition to assert *S*.<sup>9</sup> If that is right, then the theory of truth-aptness is very simple: What's required for *S* to be truth-apt is that *S* be the right kind of sentence to be used, directly in assertion, without any further tampering or interpretation. What are the sentences that meet this condition? The answer is sentences uttered in acts whose outermost-presented intention is that of defending a  $\Pi$ -state. They are sentences uttered in proto-acts that need only the addition of a communicative intention to turn them into assertions. In other words:

**Truth-Aptness:** Truth-apt sentences are sentences performed in acts whose overall form is that of a proto-assertion.

As long as *S* is uttered in a proto-act that is overall a proto-assertion, complex or simple, then *S* is truth-apt. This account implies that assertions are truth-apt, but also embedded declaratives that are used on their literal meanings. This explains why sentences on ironic interpretations are not truth-apt. They are uttered in acts whose overall form is not a proto-assertion, but something else: presenting an intention to parody. This proposal explains the internal connection between truth-aptness and assertion. The truth-apt sentences are not the asserted sentences, but the sentences that are uttered in, overall, proto-assertions, and so involve presentation of intentions that are the intentions characteristic of assertion.

Note that **Truth-Aptness** does not imply that a proto-assertion in itself is truth-apt. In uttering (1) on its ironic meaning, we perform a proto-assertion—on a literal interpretation. But that proto-assertion of *George is such a genius* is in turn subject to an interpretation—deployment in a more encompassing proto-act—the ironic one described above. The sentence (1) so understood is not then a sentence that can be used, directly, without further interpretative tampering, to make an assertion. You cannot just add a communicative intention to derive an assertion. If so, it's not a truth-apt sentence, which is what we want.

This theory allows us to explain why (1), on its ironic use, nevertheless, has a literal content component—embedded in the irony—even though it's not truth-apt. The literal proto-assertion is embedded in a non-defensive proto-act—so its presentation of a defensive intention is not the outermost presented intention. So mere addition of a communicative intention to (1) on its proto-ironic interpretation, won't get you an assertion, it will get you an ironic-illocutionary act. Hence it's not truth-apt.

Consider now beliefs. On the language-agency (*LA*) approach, objects of belief and thought are proto-illocutionary acts types. As we have seen, beliefs are not essentially truth-apt states. Some beliefs are, such as beliefs that, literally, George is a genius. But others are not, such as ironic beliefs. On the *LA* approach, beliefs, insofar as they are truth-apt, are simply dispositions to make judgements: to perform sincere, clearheaded assertions (internally/externally). *Sincere* and *clearheaded*

<sup>9</sup> This basic idea needs much more elaboration—see Barker (2007b, 2014).

means that the thinker really has the  $\Pi$ -states lying behind the utterances. The objects of such beliefs are proto-assertions. The belief state is a disposition to token instances of the proto-act as an assertion. We don't have to accept the standard view that beliefs are essentially truth-apt. Max's ironic belief is not truth-apt. That belief is a disposition to perform, in a sincere clearheaded way, the ironic proto-act. Because the act is an ironic one, the belief is not truth-apt.

This leads to a general classificatory question. What class of proto-illocutionary acts are the objects of belief? The answer is, very roughly, those proto-illocutionary acts that can enter fully into discourse. Brandom (1983) took entering into the game of giving and taking reasons to be a mark of assertion. I think he is wrong there. But one might take the spirit of his idea to apply to the class of proto-acts that can be objects of belief. What can be believed is that which can launch inference. We have seen that ironic-utterances can be the basis for inference, for example, they can be supposed. This is why they can be believed. Note all proto-illocutionary acts have this feature—you cannot suppose orders or questions. Naturally enough this treatment of objects of belief has to explain operations like supposition. We cannot undertake that task here.

## 7 Concluding words

In the language-agency approach I have sketched, there is no sense/force distinction and no propositional act. There are different illocutionary act types, but the difference is at the level of the kinds of  $\Pi$ -states expressed, and whether they involve defence or not. We have retained the idea of representational content, but it does not play the role of that propositional content plays in the semantic paradigm. The difference between an embedded sentence and non-embedded sentence is not a difference of absence of force—embedded—and presence of force—self-standing. There is no force, if by *force* we mean pragmatic operation on propositions (see again Barker 2007a). We have obviously given up *PCP*, the idea that embedded sentences are uttered in propositional acts. Propositions have disappeared from the conceptual landscape.

The language-agency framework developed here excludes the whole idea of a separate enterprise called 'semantics', that plots the structure of truth-conditional content. Naturally enough, those wedded to the semantics in this sense won't be moved. However, my purpose has been merely to display what one might have to do if one takes irony (and figurative speech) seriously.

**Acknowledgments** I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for funding research leading to this paper. I also thank two anonymous referees for comments on this paper.

## References

- Barker, S. J. (2003). Truth and conventional implicature. *Mind*, *112*, 1–33.  
 Barker, S. J. (2004). *Renewing meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Barker, S. J. (2007a). Semantics beyond the distinction between sense and force. In Savvas Tsohatzidis (Ed.), *Illocutions, institutions and intentionality: Essays on themes from the philosophy of John Searle* (pp. 190–2011). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barker, S. J., (2007b). Global expressivism. Online book manuscript. <http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/696/1/BOOKGE.pdf>.
- Barker, S. J. (2014). Pure versus hybrid expressivism and the enigma of conventional implicature. In Guy Fletcher & Mike Ridge (Eds.), *Having it both ways: Hybrid theories and modern metaethics* (pp. 206–230). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barker, S. L., & Popa-Wyatt, M. (2015). Irony and the dogma of sense and force. *Analysis*, 75, 9–16.
- Brandt, R. (1983). Asserting. *Noûs*, 17, 637–650.
- Camp, E. (2012). Sarcasm, pretence, and the semantics-pragmatics distinction. *Noûs*, 46, 587–634.
- Hanks, P. (2007). The content-force distinction. *Philosophical Studies*, 134, 141–164.
- Popa-Wyatt, M. (2014). Pretence and echo: Towards an integrated account of verbal irony. *International Review of Pragmatics*, 6(1), 127–168.
- Sobel, D., & Copp, D. (2001). Against direction of fit accounts of belief and desire. *Analysis*, 61, 44–51.