

# VERBAL IRONY AS INVECTIVE IN ARISTOPHANES<sup>1</sup>

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**Summary:** This paper offers a first approach to verbal irony in Aristophanes' comedies as a linguistic resource of humour and invective. The purpose is twofold: firstly, to examine irony markers in order to explain their use in context and, secondly, to identify patterns of comic invective in passages in which verbal irony comes into play.

## Introduction

In his study focusing on Greek and Roman literature, Koster (1980: 39) defines invective as a structured literary form whose aim is to use all appropriate means to publicly discredit an individual in the context of the values and norms prevailing at the time. It is common to associate invective with direct, very forceful, unkind and often rude criticism (*Cambridge Dictionary*) and especially with insult. Indeed, direct insults in the form of swear words are included amongst the many mechanisms of invective identified by Koster (1980: 104). However, there are other, less direct forms of insult and the author highlights the use of parody or of figures of thought, such as irony, a figure of mitigation or understatement, which is used to soften the expression. The latter is the one of particular interest in this paper and, as we shall see, it is closely related to the former.

Establishing a definition of irony has been approached from many different perspectives.<sup>2</sup> Traditional semantics has interpreted irony as a

1 This study has been conducted as part of the research project "Indirect speech acts and interaction in Ancient Greek" (PID2021-122489NB-I00).

2 For a brief state of the art, see Fornieles 2023.

phenomenon that functions thanks to the cognitive relations of antonymy. Through the prism of rhetoric,<sup>3</sup> irony is a figure of thought in which a speaker – by means of words or prosodic elements, such as tone of voice or intonation – implies the opposite of what he or she is thinking.<sup>4</sup> From the point of view of pragmatics, irony is closely related to the situational context, the intention of the speaker, and the interpretation of the interlocutor. Irony has generated an extensive literature, and different variants of it are usually distinguished, such as tragic irony, situational irony, temporal irony and verbal irony. The latter is of most interest to us here, and has been defined by Burgers *et al.* (2011: 190), amongst others, as “an utterance with a literal evaluation that is implicitly contrary to its intended evaluation.”

Irony has also been understood as a very useful device when a speaker wants to express surprise by verbally pointing out the contrast between what was expected to happen and what actually happened (Gibbs 1986; Colston & Keller 1998). This perspective is very interesting for the study

- 3 Ancient rhetoricians dealt with irony. In his *Ars Rhetorica*, Anaximenes explains that irony consists in saying something that one pretends not to say or naming things with the opposite words. In Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (1379b), irony is referred to as a sign of disdain. However, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1127a and 1127b) it is presented as a form of expressing modesty (often feigned), since Aristotle claims that the ironist denies what belongs to him or downplays it. This offers a positive image of ironists, since – from Aristotle's point of view – they have a pleasant character and minimise their virtues to avoid ostentation. Hermogenes is the rhetorician who offers a definition closest to the specific needs of the genre we are concerned with here. He approaches irony (cf. Hermog. *Id.* 365) as a form of expression of *severity* which, based on the fact of saying the opposite of what one thinks, serves to make reproaches and often also aims at mockery. This fits in very well with comedy. In the Latin rhetorical tradition, Cicero and Quintilian break with the conception based on contraries by semantic opposition and associate it with dissimulation (*dissimulatio*).
- 4 In terms of expressing the opposite, Aristotle also mentions (Arist. *Poet.* 1261a25) ἀμφιβολία, although this alludes rather to a semantic ambiguity, a term that the speaker uses with a double meaning. The traditional definition of irony based on rhetorical parameters as the action of saying the opposite of what one thinks has received numerous criticisms based, above all, on the fact that the concept of ‘contradiction’ is insufficient to unify all ironic phenomena. See, for instance, Kaufer 1981; Haverkate 1985 and 1990: 81; and Torres Sánchez 1999: 6.

of texts such as those examined in this work, since the surprise factor is a common technique used by the poet to provoke a comic effect.

Although not always used for such purposes,<sup>5</sup> irony tends to be associated with mockery, contempt and criticism. For this reason, it is often associated with inciting negative effects in the interlocutor and is therefore a powerful tool in contexts of invective. In this sense, the interest that irony has aroused in studies of verbal (im)politeness is particularly relevant.

Some scholars have considered irony as a prototypical politeness strategy. However, there are also those who argue that it is a truly effective weapon for expressing impolite utterances that appear to be polite. In this regard, Culpeper 1996<sup>6</sup> refers to it as ‘sarcasm’<sup>7</sup> and defines it as the use of strategies of politeness that are obviously insincere in the service of social disharmony. Therefore, according to Culpeper, we are dealing with a mechanism of *mock politeness*.<sup>8</sup> The speaker pretends to be polite by using specific linguistic politeness devices but is really criticizing and even humiliating his interlocutor.

Let us now look at an example. In the following passage, despite describing Demosthenes in a positive light (χρηστός) Aeschines is disparaging him (Aeschin. 2.36):

5 It is also possible to find passages in which, by resorting to irony, the speaker’s words do not exclusively have a negative intention. In terms of verbal politeness, irony can sometimes also have a positive effect on the speaker’s *face*. Thus, irony is a device that humiliates the interlocutor but also reinforces the speaker’s *face*. There are also situations in which irony is used as a means of flattery. On other occasions, irony can be used both to criticize and to praise the speaker. This example given by Alba Juez 1995: 11 is illustrative: “Suppose that I have a friend who is not very self-confident and after an examination he says: ‘I’m going to fail this exam. I did it all wrong’. After some days I meet him, and he tells me that he has passed the exam with a very good mark. Then I could ironically say: ‘Oh, yes, you have failed, you did it all wrong, you are a very bad student.’ In this particular context I would be criticizing and praising my friend at the same time.”

6 See also Culpeper 2015.

7 It is very difficult to pinpoint the boundary between irony and sarcasm (cf., e.g. Kreuz 2020: 26–29, who defines sarcasm as a type of verbal irony). Those who have tried to make a distinction argue that sarcasm, as opposed to the feigned mockery implied by irony, aims at a biting and cruel offence.

8 See also, amongst others, Lachenicht 1990; Jorgensen 1996; and Bousfield 2008.

Ἐπειδὴ δ' ἔφ' ἡμῶν αὐτῶν ἐγενόμεθα, σφόδρα πάνυ σκυθρωπάσας ὁ **χρηστός οὔτοσί Δημοσθένης**, ἀπολωλεκέναι με ἔφη τὴν πόλιν καὶ τοὺς συμμάχους.

Now when we were by ourselves, **our worthy colleague Demosthenes** put on an exceedingly sour face and declared that I had ruined the city and the allies.<sup>9</sup>

The audience picks up on the irony in this attack thanks, amongst other things, to their shared knowledge and the extralinguistic context. Aeschines and Demosthenes are rivals, and the audience is aware of this. It is therefore obvious that Aeschines is not of the opinion that Demosthenes is a noble, good and serviceable man (χρηστός), but quite the contrary. Verbal or linguistic context is also essential for the correct interpretation of the ironic utterance. The use of οὔτοσί with an adjective with positive connotations (χρηστός) but uttered in a mocking tone can only be understood in terms of irony. Moreover, as Serafim rightly points out in his analysis of this passage,<sup>10</sup> here Aeschines attempts to reveal Demosthenes' true character by describing his face as extremely grim (σφόδρα σκυθρωπάσας). This would indicate he is a cruel and violent character, far removed from what would be expected of a χρηστός man.

The studies I have carried out so far on the speeches reflecting the confrontation between Aeschines and Demosthenes<sup>11</sup> seem to indicate that irony does not mitigate the violence of the verbal attacks but quite the contrary. The ironist enhances or intensifies the negative and violent effect of such attacks. However, in the following pages I focus on Aris-

9 Translation taken from Adams 1919.

10 See Serafim 2022: 130.

11 Cf. Fornieles 2022, 2024 and forthcoming. In these papers, I conclude that irony is a device of impoliteness, but it is important to remember in these cases that the speaker's intention is always to belittle and discredit his opponent.

tophanes' comedy, a different genre in which another pragmatic phenomenon must be considered. I am referring to humour, a powerful tool of social and political criticism.<sup>12</sup>

### Verbal irony and humour

In pragmatic terms, humour is explained as “the replacement of an activated semantic frame by a new one, which is unexpected.”<sup>13</sup> It has also been understood as the overlapping of two semantic frames that are inherently opposed, which justifies its contrastive character.<sup>14</sup>

Although it is generally accepted that irony and humour are two different pragmatic phenomena, they are closely related. According to studies that focus on the history of the concept of irony,<sup>15</sup> it would have initially been linked to humour and mockery. Ballart (1994: 40) has even placed the origin of verbal irony in Greek comedy. He argues that irony originates in the stereotypical duel between the naivety of the victim (ἀλαζών, a presumptuous fool) and the dissimulation of the ironist (εἴρων,<sup>16</sup> a character who pretends to agree with his opponent to drag him into absurdity with the complicity of the audience).

Wolfsdorf has linked irony in Aristophanes' comedies to dissimulation<sup>17</sup> but also to lying and argues that it is a cunning and devious dissimulation by which the ironist shows himself to be kind, good, or simply innocent but is in fact selfish and harmful. Thus, the speaker succeeds in disarming his interlocutor with words and defeating him. In terms of verbal politeness, he or she would be saving his *face*.<sup>18</sup>

12 On comic invective in general see the papers included in Papaioannou & Serafim 2021. Amongst these, Konstantakos' contribution focuses on Aristophanes' *Wasps*.

13 Rodríguez Rosique & Provencio Garrigós 2012: 251.

14 See Raskin 1985 or Attardo 1994 and 2001.

15 See, for instance, Schoentjes 2003 and Jankélevitch 1982.

16 See Gil Fernández 1995: 25. Εἴρων is first attested in Aristophanes' *Clouds* as opposed to the ἀλαζών (cf. Ar. *Nub.* 449).

17 See also Luarsabishvili 2019.

18 As I have explained in previous publications, the concept of *face* (created by Goffman 1967) was taken and developed by Brown & Levinson 1987. Broadly speaking, every

### Irony markers in Aristophanes' comic invective

Ancient Greek has linguistic mechanisms (amongst others, markers of evidentiality, superlatives, diminutives, repetitions, puns, rhetorical questions or lexical-semantic markers) that allow us to identify ironic utterances. These irony markers provide us with many clues. However, for an ironic utterance to be interpreted correctly, a certain shared knowledge between speaker and audience is necessary.

The following pages aim to offer a first approach to verbal irony as a mechanism of invective in Aristophanic comedy. To do so, I will look at some of these irony markers to explain them in context and to identify some patterns of comic invective.

Attacks may be carried out in the private sphere, in relationships between friends or family members, which seems to reflect a more emotional or personal invective. The initial passages place us in the prologue of *Clouds*. Strepsiades, ruined, laments and refers to his son Phidippides in these terms (Ar. *Nub.* 8-10):

ἀλλ' οὐδ' ὁ χρηστός οὐτοσί νεανίας  
ἐγείρεται τῆς νυκτός, ἀλλὰ πέρδεται  
ἐν πέντε σισύραις ἐγκεκορδυλημένος.

Neither does **this excellent youth** awake through the night; but takes his ease, wrapped up in five blankets.<sup>19</sup>

Χρηστός is a generic term for praise<sup>20</sup> but Strepsiades utters it ironically to describe Phidippides, for he is not 'excellent' but a useless and lazy young man. In truth, his son has led him into debt because of his excessive love of horses. Such ironic expressions are very common in Greek

individual has two *faces*, a positive one (the need to be appreciated in the community to which he or she belongs) and a negative one (the need to preserve his or her privacy).

19 Greek texts are taken from Wilson's 2007 edition of the comedies of Aristophanes except for *Birds* (from Henderson 2000). Translations of *Clouds* are borrowed from Hickie 1853.

20 *LSJ* and Olson 2021: 64.

oratory.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the passage is reminiscent of the example given in the introduction, where Aeschines refers to Demosthenes in the same terms (ὁ χρηστός οὗτος Δημοσθένης).

Shortly afterwards, Strepsiades curses having married his wife, the mother of his son. He alludes to her with another adjective with positive connotations (ἀγαθός) in a clearly mocking way to emphasize his bitterness against his wife's pretensions (Ar. *Nub.* 59-65):<sup>22</sup>

ὅτι τῶν παχειῶν ἐνετίθεις θρυαλλίδων.  
 μετὰ ταῦθ', ὅπως νῶν ἐγένεθ' υἱὸς οὗτοςί,  
 ἐμοί τε δὴ καὶ τῇ γυναικὶ τὰγαθῇ,  
 περὶ τούνοματος δὴ ντεῦθεν ἐλοιδορούμεθα·  
 ἢ μὲν γὰρ ἵππον προσετίθει πρὸς τούνομα,  
 Ξάνθιππον ἢ Χαίριππον ἢ Καλλιππίδην,  
 ἐγὼ δὲ τοῦ πάππου τίθέμην Φειδωνίδην.

After this, when this son was born to us, to me, forsooth, and **to my excellent wife**, we squabbled then about the name: for she was for adding *hippos* to the name, Xanthippus, or Charippus, or Callipides; but I was for giving him the name of his grandfather, Phidonides.

In the prologue of *Birds*, two friends, Peisetaerus and Euelpides are walking through a rocky spot. Each of them is holding a bird that is supposed to show them where Tereus, the hoopoe, is. Suddenly, they meet one of Tereus' servants (also a bird) and the three of them get scared. The birds carried by both friends fly away (Ar. *Av.* 86-91):

Ευ. οἷμοι κακοδαίμων, χῶ κολοιός μοῖχεται  
 ὑπὸ τοῦ δέους.  
 Πε. ὦ δειλότατον σὺ θηρίον,  
 δείσας ἀφῆκας τὸν κολοιόν.  
 Ευ. εἶπέ μοι,  
 σὺ δὲ τὴν κορώνην οὐκ ἀφῆκας καταπεσών;  
 Πε. μὰ Δί' οὐκ ἔγωγε.

21 Dover 1968: 93.

22 Dover 1968: 101.

Ευ. ποῦ γάρ ἐστ’;

Πε. ἀπέπτατο.

Ευ. οὐκ ἄρ’ ἀφῆκας; ὦγάθ’, ὡς ἀνδρεῖος εἶ.

[EUELPIDES] Oh! my god! it was sheer fear that made me lose my jay.

[PEISETAERUS] **Ah! you big coward!** were you so frightened that you let go your jay? [EUELPIDES] And did you not lose your crow, when you fell sprawling on the ground? Tell me that. [PEISETAERUS] Not at all. [EUELPIDES] Where is it, then? [PEISETAERUS] It flew away. [EUELPIDES] And you did not let it go? **Oh! you brave fellow!**<sup>23</sup>

Irony is easily identifiable in the attribution of the adjective ἀνδρεῖος to Peisetaerus, since he has been as cowardly (δειλός) as Peisetaerus had reproached Euelpides for being. Euelpides intention is to mock his friend.

Diminutives used in an ironic sense are also a common device in Aristophanes’ comedies. Strepsiades addresses Socrates in *Clouds* thus (Ar. *Nub.* 743-47):<sup>24</sup>

Σω. ἔχ’ ἀτρέμα· κἄν ἀπορῆς τι τῶν νοημάτων,

ἀφείς ἄπελθε, κἄτα τῇ γνώμῃ πάλιν

κίνησον αὐθις αὐτὸ καὶ ζυγώθρισον.

Στ. ὦ Σωκρατίδιον φίλτατον.

Σω. τί, ὦ γέρον;

Στ. ἔχω τόκου γνώμην ἀποστερητικήν.

[SOCRATES] Keep quiet; and if you be puzzled in any one of your conceptions, leave it and go; and then set your mind in motion again, and lock it up. [STREPSIADES] **O dearest little Socrates!** [SOCRATES] What, old man? [STREPSIADES] I have got a device for cheating them of the interest.

The use of diminutives in appellatives is a sign of affection and trust between speaker and interlocutor. However, Strepsiades does not trust Socrates and does not use the diminutive to express affection. Instead,

<sup>23</sup> Translations of *Birds* are taken from O’Neill 1938.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. also Ar. *Nub.* 223.



he clearly intends to mock him through his use of irony.<sup>25</sup> The lexicon also favours the ironic interpretation, and the superlative φίλτατον is to be understood in the same sense. The philosopher is not dear to Strepsiadēs either, although he calls him ‘dearest’ (φίλτατον).

As we can see, the presence of several irony markers in the same passage is frequent and it is not easy to discern which of them triggers the irony. The same is true in the following example from *Acharnians*. Dicaeopolis, who has gone to borrow Telephus’ beggar disguise from Euripides, speaks to the poet, who complains of being disturbed, in the following way (Ar. *Ach.* 457-79):

Ευ. ἄπελθέ νύν μοι.  
 Δι. μάλλά μοι δὸς ἔν μόνον,  
 κοτυλίσκιον τὸ χεῖλος ἀποκεκρουμένον.  
 Ευ. φθείρου λαβὼν τόδ’ ἴσθ’ ὀχληρὸς ὦν δόμοις.  
 Δι. οὐπω μὰ Δί’ οἴσθ’ οἱ αὐτὸς ἐργάζει κακά.  
 ἀλλ’, ὦ γλυκύτατ’ Εὐριπίδη, τουτὶ μόνον  
 δός μοι, χυτρίδιον σπογγίῳ βεβυσμένον.  
 Ευ. ὦνθρωπ’, ἀφαιρήσει με τὴν τραγωδίαν·  
 ἄπελθε ταυτηνὶ λαβὼν.  
 Δι. ἀπέρχομαι.  
 καίτοι τί δράσω; δεῖ γὰρ ἑνός, οὗ μὴ τυχὼν  
 ἀπόλωλ’. ἄκουσον, ὦ γλυκύτατ’ Εὐριπίδη·  
 τουτὶ λαβὼν ἄπειμι κοῦ πρόσειμ’ ἔτι·  
 εἰς τὸ σπυρίδιον ἰσχνά μοι φυλλεῖα δός.  
 Ευ. ἀπολεῖς μ’. ἰδού σοι. φροῦδά μοι τὰ δράματα.  
 Δι. ἀλλ’ οὐκέτ’, ἀλλ’ ἄπειμι. καὶ γὰρ εἰμ’ ἄγαν  
 ὀχληρὸς, οὐ δοκῶν με κοιράνους στυγεῖν.  
 οἴμοι κακοδαίμων, ὡς ἀπόλωλ’. ἐπελαθόμην  
 ἐν ᾧπέρ ἐστι πάντα μοι τὰ πράγματα.  
**Εὐριπίδιον, ὦ γλυκύτατον καὶ φίλτατον,**  
 κάκιστ’ ἀπολοίμην, εἴ τί σ’ αἰτήσαιμ’ ἔτι,  
 πλὴν ἔν μόνον, τουτὶ μόνον, τουτὶ μόνον·  
 σκάνδικά μοι δὸς μητρόθεν δεδεγμένος.

25 On the use of diminutives in relation to the specific pragmatic aims of the speakers, see Meluzzi 2017.

Εὐ. ἀνὴρ ὕβριζει· κλῆε πηκτὰ δωμάτων.

[EURIPIDES] Leave me in peace. [DICAEOPOLIS] Just one thing more, but one, a little tankard with a broken rim. [EURIPIDES] Here. Now be off. You trouble us; begone. [DICAEOPOLIS] You know not yet what ill you do yourself. **Sweet, dear Euripides**, but one thing more, give me a little pitcher, plugged with sponge. [EURIPIDES] Fellow, you're taking the whole tragedy. Here, take it and begone. [DICAEOPOLIS] I'm going now. And yet! There's one thing more, which if I get not I'm ruined. **Sweetest, best Euripides**. With this I'll go, and never come again. Give me some withered leaves to fill my basket. [EURIPIDES] You'll slay me! Here! My plays are disappearing. [DICAEOPOLIS] Enough! I go. Too troublesome by far am I, not witting that the chieftains hate me! Good Heavens! I'm ruined. I had clean forgotten. The thing whereon my whole success depends. **My own Euripides, my best and sweetest**, perdition seize me if I ask aught else save this one thing, this only, only this, give me some chervil, borrowing from your mother. [EURIPIDES] The man insults us. Shut the palace up.<sup>26</sup>

The parody is more than evident. Dicaeopolis mocks Euripides and addresses him ironically with the superlative of the adjective γλυκύς ('sweet'), which has nothing to do with the sour character depicted by the playwright. He repeats it up to three times and, on the final occasion, he also uses the diminutive Εὐριπίδιον with a clear ironic and comic intention. As in the case of Strepsiades and Socrates, Dicaeopolis has no confidence in Euripides, and diminutives are not used as an expression of affection either. The poet is not dear to Dicaeopolis either, even though he calls him 'my best' (φίλτατον) and 'sweetest' (γλυκύτατον). Both superlatives exaggerate the mockery and emphasize the contempt that Dicaeopolis really feels towards Euripides. The end of the passage is the finishing touch of the mockery, as the public knows that Aristophanes often makes jokes about Euripides' mother by calling her a greengrocer. Finally, Euripides himself clarifies the intention behind Dicaeopolis' words, as he claims that he is insulting him and his mother.

26 Translation taken from Rogers 1930.

As we can see from the examples, the presence of lexical-semantic markers (almost always adjectives with a positive connotation used with a negative intention) makes it easier to identify ironic utterances. In this respect, some of the most interesting terms in Aristophanes' comedies are the adjective σοφός and its derivatives.<sup>27</sup> Let us now focus on the *agon* between Aeschylus and Euripides in *Frogs*. As Dover points out<sup>28</sup> the contest is an ἀγὼν σοφίας (Ar. *Ran.* 882), a competition between two wise men (σοφοῖν ἀνδροῖν, Ar. *Ran.* 896) to decide who is wiser (ὁπότερος εἴη τὴν τέχνην σοφώτερος, Ar. *Ran.* 780). The winner is Aeschylus and in his valediction to Pluto, he lays claim to supremacy in σοφία by saying: 'But you hand over my throne to Sophocles to guard and preserve, if I ever come here again. For him I judge to be second in talent' (τοῦτον γὰρ ἐγὼ / σοφίᾳ κρίνω δεύτερον εἶναι, Ar. *Ran.* 1516-19). I agree with Dover that 'wise' (as well as 'clever' or 'sage') is an appropriate translation of σοφός, but that does not mean that it should always be understood literally. Σοφός can also be used ironically,<sup>29</sup> as in the following example (Ar. *Ran.* 1151-57):

Δι. λέγ' ἕτερον αὐτῷ· σὺ δ' ἐπιτήρει τὸ βλάβος.

Αι. “σωτήρ γενοῦ μοι σύμμαχος τ' αἰτουμένω.

ἦκω γὰρ εἰς γῆν τήνδε καὶ κατέρχομαι.”

Ευ. δις ταῦτόν ἡμῖν εἶπεν ὁ σοφὸς Αἰσχύλος.

Δι. πῶς δις;

Ευ. σκόπει τὸ ῥῆμ'· ἐγὼ δέ σοι φράσω.

“ἦκω γὰρ εἰς γῆν,” φησί, “καὶ κατέρχομαι”

“ἦκω” δὲ ταῦτόν ἐστι τῷ “κατέρχομαι”.

[DIONYSUS] Recite him another one, and you watch for the mistake.

[AESCHYLUS] “Be now, I pray, my ally and savior, for I've come back to this land and return”. [EURIPIDES] The **sage Aeschylus** has told us the same thing twice. [DIONYSUS] How twice? [EURIPIDES] Look at

27 On this family of words, see Cavallero 2006.

28 See Dover 1993: 12.

29 See Slater 1954: 195.

the expression, and I'll show you. "I've come back to this land", he says, "and return"; but "coming back to" is the same as "returning".<sup>30</sup>

Euripides does not intend to praise Aeschylus, but to criticize him by using a lexicon that implies a positive evaluation, as is the case with other adjectives such as χρηστός, καλός or δεξιός. In other words, he is insulting him in a very polite way. Shortly beforehand, Euripides had also mocked Aeschylus' skill by criticizing the obscurity of his prologues despite referring to him as a δεξιός poet (Ar. Ran. 1119-22):

καὶ μὴν ἐπ' αὐτοὺς τοὺς προλόγους σου τρέψομαι,  
ὅπως τὸ πρῶτον τῆς τραγωδίας μέρος  
πρώτιστον αὐτοῦ βασανιῶ τοῦ δεξιοῦ.  
ἄσαφής γὰρ ἦν ἐν τῇ φράσει τῶν πραγμάτων.

Well then I'll turn me to your prologues now. Beginning first to test the first beginning of **this fine poet's plays**. Why he's obscure even in the enunciation of the facts.

In this case the invective does not occur within the family or amongst friends (real or pretended), but as part of a public confrontation staged by Aristophanes between the two poets in *Frogs*. The *agon* resembles a trial and there is much at stake. As in forensic speeches, the speaker's purpose is to convince those who are judging (in this case Dionysus) to vote in his favour. The verdict will largely depend on the contestant's skills in oratory, and it is very common for the speakers (in this case the poets) to attack their opponent's *face* and try to save their own *face*. It is therefore not unusual for the speaker to pretend to be polite when he or she really means to be impolite (*mock politeness*). Euripides' intention is thus to discredit his opponent (Aeschylus), to mock him without openly insulting him (which would be a threat to his own *face*), to undermine his

30 Translations of *Frogs* are borrowed from Henderson 2002.

*ethos*<sup>31</sup> and to ridicule him by presenting a comic caricature that causes the audience to laugh.

Another pattern of comic invective that can be identified in the speaker's use of irony is to attack the socio-economic status of others. Let us now place ourselves in *Wealth*. Chremylus talks to an old woman who has been abandoned by her now-wealthy young lover and laments the terrible injustices she has suffered (Ar. *Plut.* 974-1005):

Χρ. οὐκ οὖν ἐρεῖς ἀνύσσασα τὸν κνισμὸν τίνα;  
 Γρ. ἄκουέ νυν. ἦν μοί τι μεῖράκιον φίλον,  
 πενιχρὸν μὲν, ἄλλως δ' εὐπρόσωπον καὶ καλὸν  
 καὶ **χρηστόν**. εἰ γάρ του δεηθείην ἐγώ,  
 ἅπαντ' ἐποίει κοσμίως μοι καὶ καλῶς·  
 ἐγὼ δ' ἐκείνῳ πάντ' ἄν ἀνθυπηρέτουν.  
 Χρ. τί δ' ἦν ὅ τι σου μάλιστ' ἐδεῖθ' ἐκάστοτε;  
 Γρ. **οὐ πολλά**· καὶ γὰρ ἐκνομίως **μ' ἡσχύνετο**.  
 ἀλλ' ἀργυρίου δραχμάς ἄν ᾗτησ' εἴκοσιν  
 εἰς ἱμάτιον, ὁκτὼ δ' ἄν εἰς ὑποδήματα·  
 καὶ ταῖς ἀδελφαῖς ἀγοράσαι χιτῶνιον  
 ἐκέλευσεν ἄν τῇ μητρί θ' ἱματίδιον·  
 πυρῶν τ' ἄν ἐδεήθη μεδίμνων τεττάρων.  
 Χρ. **οὐ πολλά** τοίνυν, μὰ τὸν Ἀπόλλω, ταῦτά γε  
 εἴρηκας, ἀλλὰ **δῆλον** ὅτι **σ' ἡσχύνετο**.  
 Γρ. καὶ ταῦτα τοίνυν οὐχ ἔνεκεν μισητίας  
 αἰτεῖν μ' ἔφασκεν, ἀλλὰ φιλίας οὕνεκα,  
 ἵνα τοῦμόν ἱμάτιον φορῶν μεμνητό μου.  
 Χρ. λέγεις ἐρῶντ' ἄνθρωπον ἐκνομιώτατα.  
 Γρ. ἀλλ' οὐχὶ νῦν ὁ βδελυρὸς ἔτι τὸν νοῦν ἔχει  
 τὸν αὐτόν, ἀλλὰ πολὺ μεθέστηκεν πάννυ.  
 ἔμοῦ γὰρ αὐτῷ τὸν πλακοῦντα τουτονὶ  
 καὶ τᾶλλα τὰπὶ τοῦ πίνακος τραγήματα  
 ἐπόντα πεμψάσης ὑπειπούσης θ' ὅτι

31 This is a very common technique in oratory. An example like the one given here can be seen in Dem. 19.126, where Demosthenes mocks Aeschines by referring to him as ὁ σοφὸς καὶ δεινὸς οὗτος καὶ εὐφωνος. On negative *ethopoia* in Attic oratory, see Serafim 2020: 92-111.

εἰς ἐσπέραν ἥξοιμι—

Χρ. τί σ' ἔδρασ'; εἰπέ μοι.

Γρ. ἄμητα προσαπέπεμψεν ἡμῖν τουτονί,  
ἐφ' ᾧ τ' ἐκέῖσε μηδέποτε μ' ἐλθεῖν ἔτι,  
καὶ πρὸς ἐπὶ τούτοις εἶπεν ἀποπέμπων ὅτι  
“πάλαι ποτ' ἦσαν ἄλκιμοι Μιλήσιοι.”

Χρ. **δῆλον** ὅτι τοὺς τρόπους τις **οὐ μοχθηρὸς** ἦν.

ἔπειτα πλουτῶν οὐκέθ' ἴδεται φακῇ.

[CHREMYLUS] Just what sort of banging are you talking about? [OLD WOMAN] Listen to this. I had a boyfriend, penniless but very good looking, fine, and **honest** Whenever I asked him a favor, he accommodated me in fine fashion, and I did him all the same services. [CHREMYLUS] What did he typically want from you? [OLD WOMAN] **Not much; he was extraordinarily modest.** He'd request twenty silver drachmas for a coat, and eight for a pair of shoes; and he'd want me to buy little dresses for his sisters, and a little wrap for his mother; and he'd need four bushels of grain. [CHREMYLUS] **That's certainly not very much. I agree; he was clearly being modest.** [OLD WOMAN] And he'd stress that his reason for asking was not greed but affection: when he was wearing that coat he would think of me. [CHREMYLUS] There was a fellow extraordinarily in love. [OLD WOMAN] But nowadays that shunk hasn't got the same attitude; he's completely changed his tune. You see, when I sent him this pie and the other munchies on the tray here, with a message that I'd visit him this evening— [CHREMYLUS] What did he do, I'd like to know? [OLD WOMAN] He sent it all back, along with this cheesecake, on condition that I never visit him again, and on top of that he added “One upon a time the Milesians were formidable”. [CHREMYLUS] He **obviously** wasn't a person of shiftless character. Now that he's rich, he's lost his taste for lentil soup; before that poverty made him eat anything.<sup>32</sup>

The old woman describes her lover as a handsome (εὐπρόσωπον), good (καλόν) and honest (χρηστόν) young man. However, although she claims that the young man did not ask for much (οὐ πολλά) and that he was a

32 Translation taken from Henderson 2002.

modest man who respected her (μ' ἡσχύνετο), it seems feasible that he was taking advantage of her by asking for too much money (almost double the price) to buy a cloak and a pair of shoes.<sup>33</sup> To mock the woman, Chremylus echoes her words – which in Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory is explained as an echo utterance – by assuring her that he did not, in fact, ask much of her (οὐ πολλὰ τοίνυν) and that he respected her (δῆλον ὅτι σ' ἡσχύνετο). Irony is used here to ridicule the utterance echoed and, consequently, belittle the speaker.<sup>34</sup>

The use of the evidential δῆλον on two occasions should also be noted. Δῆλον is an expression of epistemic modality with which the speaker expresses absolute certainty. However, Chremylus' intention here is not to state that he is certain that the young man is not a miserable man (οὐ μοχθηρός), but quite the opposite. He intends, on the one hand, to belittle him and, on the other, to laugh at the woman.

Attacks on the social position of the interlocutor are often related to his or her profession, as Peisetaerus exemplifies here (Ar. Av. 1420-26):

Συ. πτερῶν πτερῶν δεῖ μὴ πύθῃ τὸ δεύτερον.  
 Πε. μῶν εὐθὺ Πελληνῆς πέτεσθαι διανοεῖ;  
 Συ. μὰ Δί', ἀλλὰ κλητὴρ εἰμι νησιωτικὸς  
 καὶ συκοφάντης—  
 Πε. ὦ μακάριε τῆς τέχνης.  
 Συ. καὶ πραγματοδίφης. εἴτα δέομαι πτερὰ λαβῶν  
 κύκλω περισοβεῖν τὰς πόλεις καλούμενος.

[SYCOPHANT] Ask no questions. I want wings and wings I must have.  
 [PEISETAERUS] Do you want to fly straight to Pellene? [SYCOPHANT]  
 I? Why, I am an accuser of the islands, a sycophant... [PEISETAERUS]  
**A fine trade, truly! (ὦ μακάριε τῆς τέχνης)** [SYCOPHANT] ... a

33 See Sommerstein 2001: 200: "In the early 380s a cheap but respectable cloak might cost about 11 drachmas and a pair of shoes about 3½ drachmas. If the Young Man was taking as much advantage as he dared of his mistress's besotted state, it is not implausible that he might ask for roughly double these sums so as to be able to buy top-quality goods."

34 See Sperber & Wilson 1981.

hatcher of lawsuits. Hence I have great need of wings to prowling round the cities and drag them before justice.

Peisetaerus obviously does not think that being a sycophant is a good occupation, even if he refers to it in positive terms. He is mocking his interlocutor, and irony is easily recognizable to the spectators, for they know from the prologue that the comic hero, fed up with denunciations, left Athens to build a city free of those who made life in Athens very difficult.

The attack on menial jobs is another pattern of comic invective in which irony plays an interesting role. In *Knights*, Demosthenes derides the Sausage-seller thus (Ar. *Eq.* 240-41):

οὗτος, τί φεύγεις; οὐ μὲν εἷς; ὦ γεννάδα  
ἀλλαντοπῶλα, μὴ προδῶς τὰ πράγματα.

What! are you for running away? Come, come, stand firm, **bold Sausage-seller**, do not betray us.

The irony marker this time is an oxymoron.<sup>35</sup> No matter how dignified his job may be, it is not characterized by the nobility and generosity that the adjective γεννάδας denotes ('noble', 'generous'). In fact, Aristophanes attributes this same adjective in *Assemblywomen*<sup>36</sup> to Myronides, a highly successful general during the Persian invasions and into the mid-450s.

Finally, I present a passage in which irony is used to discredit a statesman. In *Assemblywoman* Praxagora is asked what would happen if Cephalus (a distinguished orator who ran a pottery business) confronted her in an abusive manner. She is clear about this. If the man insults her, she will answer him with another insult (Ar. *Ec.* 249-54):

35 Similar examples can be found in other corpora. Cf., e.g., Hom. *Od.* 17.375, where Antinous refers to the swineherd Eumaeus as a 'notorious swineherd' (ὦ ἀρίγνωτε συβῶτα) or Dem. 18.129, where Demosthenes ridicules Aeschines calling him a "consummate bit-part actor" (τριταγωνιστὴν ἄκρον).

36 Cf. Ar. *Eccl.* 303-4: ἀλλ' οὐχί, Μυρωνίδης / ὅτ' ἦρχεν ὁ γεννάδας. Henderson 2002: 281 translates "Never in the good old days, with noble Myronides in charge."



Πρ. φήσω παραφρονεῖν αὐτόν.  
 Γυ<sup>α</sup>. ἀλλὰ τοῦτό γε ἴσασι πάντες.  
 Πρ. ἀλλὰ καὶ μελαγχολᾷν.  
 Γυ<sup>α</sup>. α. καὶ τοῦτ' ἴσασιν.  
 Πρ. ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ τρύβλια  
 κακῶς κεραμεύειν, τὴν δὲ πόλιν εὖ καὶ καλῶς.

[PRAXAGORA] I'll say he's crazy. [FIRST WOMAN] But everyone knows that. [PRAXAGORA] Well, I'll say he's a dangerous psychopath. [FIRST WOMAN] Everyone knows that too. [PRAXAGORA] **Then I'll say that a man who makes such crummy crockery will do a terrific job making the city go to pot.**<sup>37</sup>

### Some concluding remarks

The previous pages have offered a first approach to the use of irony as a mechanism of invective in Aristophanes' comedy. To this end, some markers of verbal irony have been examined in order to explain how they work and to identify some patterns of comic invective.

As I have demonstrated, it is the lexicon – usually adjectives with positive connotations used with a negative intention (to criticize, to discredit, to insult, to ridicule, etc.) – that allows us to recognize ironic utterances most easily. However, there are other irony markers in contexts of invective, such as oxymoron, evidentials, diminutives, superlatives, repetitions and echo utterances. Many of these contribute towards exaggerating the mockery or verbal attack and all are resources also used by the poet to provoke laughter. The combination of several of these markers of irony is very frequent and it is not always possible to discern which triggers the irony. In this sense, both the linguistic and extralinguistic context is fundamental, as it provides the necessary clues for the utterances to be interpreted as ironic.

From the examples examined we can see that in Aristophanes' comedies attacks involving irony can take place both in the public sphere (an

37 Translation taken from Henderson 2002.

invective more oriented to attack the opponent and undermine his *ethos*) and in the private sphere (a more emotional type of invective). In all these cases, the ironist intends to show his superiority over his or her interlocutor, and mock him or her and insult, discredit, ridicule or criticize his or her character or behaviour.

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