The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Irony

Using Douglas Adams’ The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy *in the Swedish upper secondary English 5 classroom to teach irony in English communication.*

Author: Simon Torffvit
Supervisor: Claes Lindskog
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Abstract

In this paper, I explore how Douglas Adams' comedic 1979 science-fiction novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* could be used to improve English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' understanding of irony. Specifically, the study is based on criteria for the English 5 course in Swedish upper secondary school and is performed using a combined theoretical framework of Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson's principle of relevance and Paul Grice's maxims of conversation. This essay suggests that even non-verbal irony, such as dramatic irony, cosmic irony or other situational irony, can fit into these frameworks. The theories are used to analyze excerpts from the novel's prologue and dialogue accompanied by a section for analyzing the cosmic irony of the novel. The results show that *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is a useful and plentiful source of irony. Characters such as the protagonist Arthur and the supporting character Marvin are written to consistently produce verbal irony by flouting the maxim of Quality. The author also flouts the maxim of Relation in his portrayal of situational, dramatic and cosmic irony. Since the novel additionally tackles complex philosophical and ethical issues in an ironic and humorous way, the novel is a given fit for the English 5 course by fulfilling several content criteria from the Swedish National Agency for Education.

Keywords: irony, humor, principle of relevance, literature teaching, English as a Foreign Language, maxims of conversation, close reading, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

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Introduction

According to a 2015 study by Fjällström and Kokkola, Swedish students analyzing an English literary text struggled with understanding verbal irony. The authors also quoted an older study, by Bouton from 1999, which showed that learners in general struggle with understanding irony in a foreign language because it “relies on shared contextual knowledge” (as cited by Fjällström & Kokkola, 2015, p. 405). This is especially problematic since one study from 2000 has shown that around 8% of all recorded conversational turns amongst friendly American native speakers were ironic, demonstrating how widespread it truly is (Gibbs, 2000). Fjällström and Kokkola echoed this by pointing out that irony is widespread in English fiction as well, even aimed at children (2014, p. 405). The authors responded to this with a call to action: This area needs “overt education” (p. 408) for students to identify and understand, especially since it ties into the ability of a language speaker to imagine other people’s inner lives. As a result, irony is a necessary component for foreign language learning to improve theory of mind and fluency in the target language.

The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) expects teachers to educate their students with such a level of awareness and linguistic understanding in mind. For upper secondary school teaching, the curriculum states that the main purpose for education is to encourage each student to discover their own individuality and—through that—enable them to contribute their best to society in responsible liberty (Skolverket, 2021a, p. 5). It further stresses the importance of students being taught to empathize with other people and understand their perspectives (p. 5). The English subject syllabus highlights how the English language can be used to accomplish this by exposing the students to new perspectives and a greater understanding of other people’s lives (Skolverket, 2021b, p. 1). It also states that it should feature subject matters which are tied to current and ethical issues and are related to the

students' own lives, opinions and experiences (p. 2). One of the curriculum's overarching goals to achieve this is to teach the students to seek out literature as a source of not just knowledge but also introspection and happiness (Skolverket, 2021a, p. 11).

When reading the specific linguistic expectations of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in Swedish upper secondary school, it is easy to see the value of teaching irony as a tool of communication. In their first year, EFL-learners are to be taught strategies for picking up details and reaching conclusions about content and meaning of spoken and written English, for example literature (Skolverket, 2021b, p. 2). On a sentence level, they are supposed to understand how variation, adaption, structure and context is created through words and phrases (p. 3). Furthermore, an aim of the subject is that students be able to understand nuance, implicit or explicit references and subtexts in meeting with the language (Skolverket, 2021c, p. 9).

Aim of the Study

The curriculum requires all teaching to be based on research and experience (Skolverket, 2021a, p. 5). With regard to this, the aim of the study is to provide research for improving EFL-learners' understanding of irony in English communication, in this case through a sample novel. The research question for this essay is:

- How can Douglas Adams' 1979 novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* be used in the Swedish upper secondary English 5 classroom to teach learners to understand irony in English communication?

Naturally, to answer this question, one must first analyze the novel to discover how it actually uses irony, before one can then discuss the pedagogical implications of this. The analysis will be done through a close reading of the novel using a theoretical framework based on Paul

Grice's *maxims of conversation* seen through the lens of Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson's *principle of relevance*.

It is important to note that this study and its results will be written to be applicable to the 15–16-year-old students of the English 5 course of Swedish upper secondary school, in accordance with the previously presented course criteria from Skolverket. One reason for this specification is that Bjarkadóttir (2009) found that Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*-novels, which I consider to be of a similar language level and genre as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, were perfectly suited for Icelandic EFL-learners aged 15-16. Another reason is that Davies (2020), author of the foreword to the 2020 edition of the novel, claimed that his class of 15–16-year-olds felt that "Douglas Adams was writing for *us*" (p. ix). This does not mean that the novel is not suitable for other demographics, nor does it mean that the results will not be applicable to other courses or levels of education, but it is toward English 5 that they are tailored.

Background

The background and previous research concerning this essay is here split into three different sub-topics. The first concerns the novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the second deals with the theoretical perspectives of irony and the third covers previous research on irony as a central problem for nonnative speakers of English.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Douglas Adams' 1979 novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was in 2003 ranked by the British Broadcasting Corporation as the United Kingdom's fourth best-loved novel based on a public poll of around 750 000 votes (BBC, 2003). It had begun as a radio play on BBC Radio 4 in 1978 and was, according to Robertson Salas (2011), especially suitable for novelization due to the originality of the narrative, the simplicity of the original medium and Adams' own passion for improvement (p. 20). The American National Public Radio called the franchise "iconic", having spawned a TV-series, a movie, games, theater productions and comic books in addition to countless merchandise (Tien, 2021). And while the novel makes plenty of specific references to life in the British 1970s, Bundell (2019) wrote for Nature that many themes of the novel are still highly relevant today. These include environmentalism, the rise of artificial intelligence and growing existentialist fears as modern scientific advances uncover more and more of the true complexities of the universe. These are areas which are also still frequently the subjects of discussion in modern classrooms.

On the subject of literature reading in the EFL-classroom in Sweden, Thyberg (2012) surveyed Swedish upper secondary school teenagers about their reading preferences and habits as part of her doctoral thesis. The questionnaire revealed that Swedish teenagers enjoy being aesthetically receptive to Anglo-American popular culture in its original English form. This voluntary

pursuit, she hypothesizes, “may be a condition for achieving proficiency” (p. 15). Additionally, when asked about what books the surveyed students would recommend for literature studies, the results showed that many of them wished to read more about philosophical issues of human nature as well as humor specifically (p. 306). These requests for humorous and philosophical literature were more often than not actually *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* itself. One student recommended the novel because it “treats philosophical issues in a very funny way” (p. 392). In another answer, from a top student, this novel was their only recommendation. They claimed that it is one of few books which “makes you reflect about both yourself and the book” and cleverly combines this with humor. As an example, the student wrote that one of the novel’s core mantras, “Don’t Panic”, resonated with them as a deep and healthy message to live by. Another top student echoed this exact sentiment by also recommending the novel because it inspired them to lead a less stressful attitude toward life (p. 391).

The aspects of the novel which some praise are also the subjects of criticism from others. One such quirk is the narrative’s tendency to abruptly shift the focus of the story between characters and events while assigning no more importance to one over the other. As outlined by Woodford (1999), the novel’s writing has generally been regarded by critics as a deliberate, absurdist subversion of the science fiction genre (p. 136). While frustrating for some readers, others revere this as insightful satire which speaks to the value humans place in meaning and the search for purpose (p. 137). Mousley (2009) wrote that the novel represents the modernist tendency to disenchant the world and belittle philosophers of the meaning of life as inflated and self-absorbed fools (p. 136). This mockery can be seen as a satirical attack on traditional philosophy, but Mousley argued that it also represents a privatization of purpose. The untenable question of *our purpose* falls away in favor of the more individualistic search for *my purpose* (p. 136).

The novel connects not just philosophy and humor, but also ties these into irony. Attardo (2002) argued that while irony is generally regarded as being distinct from humor, it still falls “under

the technical sense of humor" (p. 160). In fact, both humor and irony are said to elicit the same types of responses from the audience, often being laughter, playing along or failure to understand (p. 176). In this manner, the humor and irony of the novel are often directly connected, if not synonymous. Bjertner (2007) wrote about how this irony tied into philosophy and gave the example that the slogan "Don't Panic" creates a reassuring "deceitful illusion of simplicity" for the reader (p. 14). The irony of the novel as a whole is said to be multi-layered and centered around miscommunication to demonstrate to the reader that there is no meaning or truth to life (p. 32). Opdahl (2013) wrote that Adams uses ironical absurdity as an expression and simplification of complex human emotions and perceptions of life (p. 1). This is in turn used to portray anxiety in a manner which is relatable and soothing to the reader (p. 6). As such, there is much to unpack when discussing the usefulness of irony in the novel and in English communication.

Irony

Irony as a term has been described as being "plagued by definitional problems" (Attardo, 2002, p. 160). Nonetheless, it is widely recognized that one can often separate *verbal irony* from *non-verbal irony*. Verbal irony refers to the irony used in direct communication, through ironic statements. Non-verbal irony can in turn be split into multiple more specific, branching types. Relevant for this analysis is the categorization of *situational irony* and *dramatic irony*, but it is also worth discussing a specific subtype of situational irony called *cosmic irony*, which is especially prominent in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

This essay mainly concerns established theoretical frameworks for verbal irony. However, in this essay, I do make the case that dramatic and situational irony can fit into these frameworks. But before that reasoning can be explored further, a brief chronological overview of the theory behind verbal irony is necessary.

Verbal Irony

Verbal irony itself has been the subject of a hot debate within the field of communication research for a long time. And while the matter is far from settled even today, some authors and their frameworks have stood out and reached some level of widespread acceptance.

The oldest of these came from Grice's 1967 lecture and 1975 essay "Logic and Conversation". Later featured in his 1989 book *Studies in the Way of Words,* the essay outlined four main maxims, or laws, of conversation called *Quantity*, *Quality*, *Relation* and *Manner* (Grice, 1989/1991, p. 26). These are actually more accurately regarded as categories of maxims, and there are more specific rules to be found within these. To begin with Quantity, the rules are to "Make your contribution as informative as is required" and "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required" (p. 26). For Quality, the rules are to not say "what you believe to be false" or "that for which you lack adequate evidence" (p. 27). Relation only has the one rule of "Be relevant" whereas Manner has the four rules of "Avoid obscurity of expression", "Avoid ambiguity", "Be brief" and "Be orderly" (p. 27).

Collectively, the above rules all combine to form what Grice called the *Cooperative Principle*. He defined this principle as "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." (pp. 26-27). It is when one can safely assume that one's conversational partner abides by this principle that many inferences can be made behind the spoken words, so called *implicatures* (p. 24), which lie at the core of verbal irony. This verbal irony, Grice explained, is a flouting of the maxim of Quality: an intentional untruth spoken with the intent of being interpreted as such (p. 34).

Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) took these concepts and developed them into a newer approach (p. vii). Rather than human cognition trying to communicate thoughts directly, as

previously understood, they proposed that human cognition is instead geared toward communicating much information with little effort, distilling language down to a *principle of relevance* (p. 50). They acknowledge that this principle can be compared to the cooperative principle but contend that it is far from the same. While the cooperative principle distinguishes clearly between explicit and implicit communication, the principle of relevance treats them as a unified whole (pp. 162-163). The distinction of implicit communication from the explicit is at the core of the cooperative principle, where implicatures are said to occur when the maxims are flouted with the intent of achieving a particular effect. Sperber and Wilson argue that while this often holds true for conversation, there are still exceptions, such as the deliberate withholding of a secret someone would benefit from being told (pp. 161-162). The principle of relevance, in contrast, is a generalization about how we communicate which is said to apply "without exception", since everything we say or do not say is relevant to what we communicate, whether we want it to or not (p. 162).

On the subject of irony, Sperber and Wilson use their principle of relevance to reject the previous definition—to imply the opposite of what one says—as being counterproductive. Instead, they suggest that irony is more echoic in nature than that, whereby the speaker repeats an utterance or value held by another while simultaneously conveying their own attitude toward it through tone and context (pp. 240-241). This is something that Grice would later approach with his own reasoning in *Studies in the Way of Words*. There, Grice admitted that something was missing in his original explanation of irony (1989/1991, p. 53). He proceeded to add to this account that instances of irony are connected to specific feelings which are conveyed through tone, for example contempt or amusement (p. 54), echoing Sperber and Wilson's conclusion.

It is important to acknowledge that research into verbal irony did not end with Sperber and Wilson. In fact, even their definition has been criticized for being too accepting of a "dual nature" of irony through its echoic interpretation (Anolli et al., 2002, p. 152). There are other

theoretical frameworks that have appeared since, such as the *fencing game model* presented by Anolli et al. (p. 136). I have opted not to use this model, since it is not as universally established and recognized as Grice's maxims of conversation or Sperber and Wilson's principle of relevance. However, I did elect to use their definition of *sarcasm*, which they call a type of irony where "the speaker blames his/her interlocutor by means of literally praising words" (p. 137). The purpose of this is not for the speaker to soften the blow of the criticism, they explain, but rather to deliver it without emoting themselves.

One might question the notion of combining the principle of relevance with the maxims which form the basis of the cooperative principle, but I argue that they should not be regarded as mutually incompatible. Instead, and as is the case for this essay, the principle of relevance should be considered to be an evolution of the cooperative principle. While Sperber and Wilson do accuse the maxims of often being arbitrary reconstructions of "untypical examples of implicature", they concede that they are interesting, adopted by most pragmatists and more explicit and systematic than other reconstructions (1986/1995, pp. 36-37). For this reason, I have used a theoretical framework with relevance over cooperation at the center, since it considers more aspects of communication, in combination with Grice's maxims, since their adaptability and pedagogical distinctions make instances of irony easier to exemplify and digest.

Non-verbal Irony

The irony which is not typically tied to verbal communication is commonly divided into either situational or dramatic irony. Situational irony can be defined as what Tyson (2006) described as an "event undermined by the context in which it occurs", often resulting in a "complexity of meaning" (p. 139). This refers to, much like the term suggests, a situation in which its actual outcome contradicts its expected outcome. And if one took a fatalistic approach to such irony,

one would touch upon the meaning of the term cosmic irony, which Abrams (1999) called a context where “a deity, or else fate, is represented as though deliberately manipulating events so as to lead the protagonist to false hopes, only to frustrate and mock them” (p. 137). This cosmic irony, as mentioned previously, is especially thematic in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* and worthy of analysis.

Dramatic irony, on the other hand, is more closely related to literary genres such as tragedies. Abrams defined it as when the audience or reader is aware of how inappropriately a character is unknowingly acting due to an ignorance of circumstances which the audience or reader is privy to (1999, pp. 136-137). Tyson chose to define the genre as “the real world seen through a tragic lens” where protagonists fail, suffer and never attain happiness (2006, p. 221). This can be immediately compared to *satire*, which Tyson similarly defined as “the real world seen through a comic lens” and where “human frailty is mocked, sometimes with biting, merciless humor” (p. 221). But while *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* is filled with satire as well as irony, often indistinguishable, I have restricted my analysis to only focus on the use of irony for the scope of this essay.

Wilson, together with Cave in *Reading Beyond the Code: Literature and Relevance Theory* (2018/2020), claimed explicitly that situational and dramatic irony do not fall within the domain of communication theory (p. 11). On this point, when it relates to narrative fiction, I disagree. After all, the principle of relevance is said to include all communication “without exception” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995, p. 162). And it has been argued, for example by Sell (2000), that literature writing and reading is in fact communication “in a full sense” because it involves two parties working together with the aim of efficiently transferring information (p. 2). Ergo, even situational and dramatic irony fall under the umbrella of the principle of relevance. This is the logic which I have chosen to abide by in my analysis of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

If verbal irony is associated with the maxim of Quality, then the matter remains of where situational and dramatic irony would fit in among the Gricean maxims. While this alone could be a topic for another essay, it is demonstrated later in the analysis that the maxim most suitable for them appears to be the maxim of Relation, with its rule of being relevant. Situational irony in narration undermines the reader's expected outcome. Likewise, dramatic irony presents information to the reader which would lead them to expect a certain outcome but withholds it from the characters and pushes them toward a different, more tragic outcome. In both cases, the author of the narration has communicated to the reader information which appears irrelevant to the plot's sequence of events. Yet, on a more implicit level, the reader's expectations are relevant for the emotional impact of the outcome, and that would be the author's intention when flouting the maxim. These ironies are therefore the result of implicatures made by the author purposefully infringing on the maxim of Relation.

Irony for EFL-learners

Conversational implicatures of English have long proven challenging for EFL-learners to grasp. On verbal irony specifically, Bouton has published research demonstrating some of these difficulties faced by foreign language learners. He published a pilot study in 1994 which concluded that even after explicit instruction, irony remained a difficult matter for non-native speakers to understand, despite measurable progress (pp. 100-101). Bouton later published another study in 1999 which reiterated such difficulties, with the given reason for these being that irony "relies on shared contextual knowledge" which non-native speakers do not as easily possess (as cited by Fjällström & Kokkola, 2015, p. 405).

As for Swedish EFL-learners, the landscape concerning research on how they read irony is quite barren, with the exception of the mentioned study by Fjällström and Kokkola (2015). They primarily wanted to test the theory that young readers of literature find it difficult to resist

empathizing with focalized characters, which was revealed not to be the case (pp. 394, 408). Instead, the study found that these students struggled with understanding irony. The irony of the study's material was specifically humorous verbal irony, which many students had demonstrated a literal interpretation of. Out of a total of 35 students, 11 had chosen to analyze a character who at times spoke ironically. Out of these 11 students, 7 appeared to take these ironic statements at face value. Of course, it is worth noting that the 35 subjects yield an unreliably small sample size, with 11 being even more so. Fjällström and Kokkola themselves also acknowledge that it is possible that the subjects actually did understand the irony, but instead failed to demonstrate this comprehension (p. 407). Regardless, the notion that EFL-learners struggle with irony does have support internationally, as evidenced by Bouton, and it is still a necessary tool of communication which should be taught.

There is plenty of research demonstrating why it is important for EFL-learners to be able to recognize irony. For example, Gibbs published a study in 2000 which had examined 62 conversations, around 10 minutes in length each, between college students and their friends. The results found that various forms of verbal irony made up around 8 percent of all conversational turns. Similarly, Whalen et al. (2013) studied how internet blogs made use of verbal irony and concluded that it was found in around 73% of all 349 sampled blog entries, averaging more than two ironic statements per entry (pp. 563-564). This can be combined with Fjällström and Kokkola's own observation that despite common assumptions of irony's absence from fiction for young readers, it is actually frequently found in literature even for very young children (2015, p. 405). This all points to the frequency of irony, especially verbal, in all forms of English communication. Thus, there is an inescapable need for language learners to practice the skill of recognizing and understanding irony in English.

Methodology

For this essay, the irony of a contemporary literature novel was analyzed using the method known as a close reading. In this section, the material of the study is discussed first followed by a more detailed outline of the method.

Material

The core material for this essay is as established the novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, written by Douglas Adams and first published in 1979. Only this original novel was used and not any of the subsequent entries into the series. This is because the original novel is a self-contained story on its own and to ask the students of an English 5 classroom to read more than that would be needlessly time-consuming with diminishing returns.

As the core material of this essay, it is important contextualize the novel using the criteria for literature in Skolverket's documents. The subject syllabus of English only distinguishes the ages of literary works by whether they were published before or after the middle of the 20th century (Skolverket, 2021c, p. 16), where *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* would fall into the latter category. While the discussion of classic versus contemporary works in the classroom has been controversial since the 1980's (Thyberg, 2012, p. 7), the syllabus does not demonstrate any preference between the two categories. In English 6 and 7, the teacher is required to include content from both whereas the criteria for English 5 makes no distinction beyond "literature and other fiction" (Skolverket, 2021b, pp. 2, 6, 8). As to the geographical origin of this fiction, the syllabus does not require anything beyond it being from "areas where English is spoken" (p. 2). The novel, being British, therefore fulfills these requirements presented by Skolverket.

Method

The analysis of the irony in the novel was done through the aforementioned method of close reading. Brummett (2019) writes that a *reading* "is an attempt to find *reasonable* or *plausible*" meanings that are socially shared (pp. 6-7). A *close reading* then is a more mindful and disciplined method of reading that seeks a deeper understanding, often in line with specific criticisms or critical analyses (p. 8). The critical analysis in this case is a hybrid theoretical framework combining the principle of relevance on a general level with the maxims of conversation on a detailed level. With my theoretical framework in mind, I closely read the novel and noted down any instances which I considered to be useful or isolated examples of irony. These excerpts were copied into a separate document and labeled after the types of irony they best exemplified, including situational, dramatic, verbal and cosmic irony. After the reading, the excerpts I felt were the most pedagogical and representative made into the analysis for further scrutiny.

Throughout this analysis, I have consistently referred to and discussed not just my theoretical framework but also the pedagogical context which the intended conclusions are for. It could therefore perhaps be more accurately described as a mixed analysis and discussion. These pedagogical discussions are then summarized in a subsequent section which presents the points made in the analysis as a clear and instructional review of the results. This, in turn, is naturally followed by a proper conclusion which directly addresses the main question of how *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* can be used in the English 5 classroom to teach learners irony in English communication. This conclusion also features some suggestions for future research.

Analysis

In this mixed analysis and discussion of the irony in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, I have chosen to separate it into three sections for added structure. First, the prologue is centered on, both as an introduction to the novel but also as an example of the narrator's situational and dramatic irony. Following this, the dialogue is then focused on as an extensive source of strictly verbal irony. Lastly, this is succeeded by a delving into the cosmic irony of the novel, which deserved its own section due to its ties to the central themes of the narrative.

The Prologue

The novel begins with a brief prologue introducing the Earth and humanity to an imagined uninformed reader. It calls our location in the galaxy "unfashionable", our sun "unregarded", our planet "utterly insignificant" and our species "amazingly primitive" and "unhappy for pretty much of the time" (Adams, 1979/2020, p. 1). This prologue is rife with what could more accurately be described as satire than irony since it uses humor to make a point of how unhappy and cosmically irrelevant human society is. However, if one chooses to examine it in the context of the tragedy which is to come, one could argue that this is also reflective of dramatic irony.

The prologue continues by stating that a girl sitting in a café finally realized the key to goodness and happiness in the world, but that a "terrible, stupid catastrophe" struck right before she could tell anyone. It is then revealed that this novel is not about her at all, but rather that "it is the story of that terrible, stupid catastrophe and some of its consequences" (p. 2). This is ironic. Keeping in mind Sperber and Wilson's theory of relevance as well as Grice's maxim of Relation, the inclusion of this girl is irrelevant to the main plot and therefore flouts these principles. This can also be said to relate to what Tyson (2006) called an "event undermined by the context in which it occurs" resulting in a "complexity of meaning" (p. 139). The girl

represents a wholly different perspective on an event at the center of the novel which complicates the meaning of said event. In this case, the complication relates specifically to what degree the Earth and its people should be mourned. At first, the Earth's people were dismissed as uninteresting and unhappy, followed by the reveal of a potential solution to this which is then abruptly shut down as irrelevant after all.

There is one more thing from this prologue which is worth addressing in terms of irony. The latter half of the prologue introduces the titular guide to hitchhiking through the galaxy, a book declared as preferred over official galactic encyclopedias and more controversial than philosophical works questioning God. One major reason for this popularity is said to be that "*it has the words* DON'T PANIC *inscribed in large friendly letters on its cover*" (p. 2). The way this mantra is introduced and presented here is itself rather ironic. The motto is capitalized, highlighted (non-italicized) and the lettering is described as "large". By all these accounts—combined with the context in which the advice "don't panic" is usually calmly uttered—the way this phrase is presented here is more unnerving than friendly, and yet it is regarded in the novel and by the narrator as the latter.

Analyzing the above example in terms of the principle of relevance and the maxims of conversation is difficult, because it exemplifies the true intricacy found within the separation of the author from the narrator as well as the reader from the narratee. For the author to tell the reader that the large words "DON'T PANIC" are friendly can be an intentional untruth spoken to convey humor and irony. That would be a flouting of the maxim of Quality, in accordance with Grice's typical definition of irony. But, on the other hand, the narrator here is all-knowing and declares this as an absolute fact, which the implied recipient of the narration in the form of the narratee is forced to accept as truth. The seemingly unnecessary inclusion of this convoluted description of the mantra can then be accused of being irrelevant, which would render it a flouting of the maxim of Relation. One could also argue that the way it is presented to the

reader—that is, not the irony itself but how the communicator conveys it—goes against the rules of "Avoid obscurity of expression" and "Avoid ambiguity" found under the maxim of Manner (Grice, 1991, p. 27). As such, one could already at this point conclude that irony in fiction can flout other maxims than Quality, namely Relation, and the way it is presented can additionally skirt the maxim of Manner.

This delving into the prologue is an example of the kind of analysis one may perform on the situational and dramatic irony of the novel. In terms of verbal irony however, a better and more pedagogical source for examples is found in the dialogue. It is also more representative of natural conversation between speakers and it is how Grice, Sperber and Wilson as well as most pragmatists have chosen to exemplify irony in their works.

The Dialogue

Bjertner argued that the irony of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was centered around miscommunication (2007, p. 32). When analyzing the dialogue, this becomes particularly evident since most of its irony is verbal and comes from misunderstandings between characters. Consider the following introductory excerpt: Arthur Dent is trying to defend his house from demolition when he is visited by his close friend Ford Prefect, who is in fact a disguised alien researcher from the star system Betelgeuse:

> "Ford! Hello, how are you?"
>
> "Fine," said Ford, "look, are you busy?"
>
> "Am I *busy*?" exclaimed Arthur, "Well. I've just got all these bulldozers and things to lie in front of because they'll knock my house down if I don't, but other than that… well, no not especially, why?"
>
> They don't have sarcasm on Betelgeuse, and Ford Prefect often failed to notice it unless he was concentrating. He said, "Good, is there anywhere we can talk?" (p. 11)

In this exchange, the ironic statement is Arthur claiming that he is "not especially" busy after providing ample reason for why he actually is. The narrator calls this sarcasm, which can be compared to Anolli's definition of sarcasm as the speaker condemning the interlocutor through "literally praising words" (Anolli et al., 2002, p. 137). While not "praise" per se, I would still argue it fits here since Arthur not being busy are still words which Ford would like to hear.

The narrator then goes on to explain how Ford takes this statement literally to mean that Arthur is available for conversation, which is why this excerpt is a perfect pedagogical example to introduce verbal irony. A learner of English may relate to Ford Prefect here by feeling disconnected from the intricacies of the English language and verbal culture. It also occurs early in the story and the narrator helpfully spells it out to the reader that Arthur was being sarcastic and that this was misinterpreted by Ford. As will be demonstrated by later excerpts, this is not always the case. Later on, ironic communications like this one continue to occur but without such explanations, meaning that the reader is presumed to notice the irony on their own. This also mimics the real world, where irony in conversation occurs frequently and there is no narrator to explain it to the listener. To get to that point of understanding, it is therefore pedagogical to begin with an example where an explanation is provided in the prose by the author himself.

This brings me to how one would explain this exchange in terms of the maxims of conversation and principle of relevance. Arthur's ironic statement is a typical representation of a flouting of the maxim of Quality since he is intentionally saying what he believes to be false. As to the purpose of such irony, Grice wrote the suggestion that "a contemptuous or amused tone, when conjoined with a remark which is blatantly false, conventionally indicates that the remark is to be taken in reverse" (Grice, 1991, p. 54). So, Arthur means to say that he is actually busy. But one can then ask the question, both to oneself and in the classroom, why Arthur is not clearer

by simply saying that outright. One might wonder what coded message Arthur is actually trying to convey by choosing to use irony over clarity in this manner.

This is where Sperber and Wilson's development of Grice's theories are useful, as they elaborated on this specific subject of interest. As explained, they treat the explicit and implicit as a unified whole, including the layers of irony. Verbal irony becomes a cognitively effective method of echoing someone else's held value while simultaneously conveying one's own attitude toward it in the same statement. To apply it to the presented example directly, one could say that Arthur is communicating his displeasure at how someone could possibly wonder if he is busy when he is quite clearly and visibly trying to protect his home from destruction. He is criticizing the notion of him being considered by anyone as not busy under these circumstances. By using irony, he conveys this attitude with brevity and in a manner which is less confrontational than declaring it outright.

Naturally, as is evident by the reply, Ford fails to read this deeply into Arthur's statement and attaches himself to its literal meaning. The narrator explains that due to Ford's alien origins, it would actually require more cognitive processing for him to understand this coded message than if it was spoken more earnestly instead. This is almost ironic in itself, since Sperber and Wilson's argument was that irony is used by humans in communication specifically because it saves cognitive processing by conveying a feeling toward something while repeating what that something is at the same time.

This failure to read into a statement and instead take it literally is a recurring source of humor in the novel. It applies to ironic statements, as exemplified previously, but also other conversational rituals like greetings or phrases such as "We don't want to shoot you" (p. 172). The latter most would understand carries the implicature *...but we will if we have to*, but in the

novel, it is taken literally: "'Hey, they're shooting at us,' said Arthur, crouching in a tight ball. 'I thought they said they didn't want to do that.'" (p. 172)

Similarly, the character of Ford Prefect accuses human conversation of being counterproductive:

> One of the things Ford Prefect had always found hardest to understand about humans was their habit of continually stating and repeating the very very obvious, as in *It's a nice day*, *You're very tall*, or *Oh dear you seem to have fallen down a thirty-foot well, are you all right?* (p. 42)

This represents an inexperience with reading into the implicatures of conversational rituals. Presumably, irony is included in this as well considering that its echoic nature also often means "repeating the very very obvious" (p. 42). An example of irony being used in this way comes a few pages later, when Arthur's annoyance with Ford has been building for quite some time. The reason for this is because they find themselves in increasingly dangerous situations but only Arthur seems to be fazed by it, in contrast to a frustratingly relaxed demeanor held by Ford. Eventually an argument breaks out, which is then broken up by Ford hearing footsteps:

> "What was that noise?" hissed Ford.
>
> "It was me shouting," shouted Arthur.
>
> "No! Shut up!" said Ford, "I think we're in trouble."
>
> "*You* think we're in trouble!" (pp. 54-55)

Like before, this verbal irony represents Arthur letting Ford know what he thinks about the stated observation. By putting emphasis on *you*, as demonstrated in the author's use of italics, Arthur is implying that he is upset by the fact that Ford only now thinks they're in trouble when Arthur has been trying to make his concern known for some time before. Ford does not reply to this, and it is by the previous explanation not a stretch to assume that Ford is dismissing the

statement as another case of humans repeating the obvious. This is why Ford is such a useful character for the purpose of teaching irony, since he provides such pedagogical examples of what happens when someone fails to read into it. This leaves the teacher with an opportunity in the classroom to explore what went wrong and ask the students to analyze what Arthur was trying to say.

Arthur is not the only source of verbal irony in the novel. Another is Marvin, who is a hyper-intelligent robot suffering from depression. Due to this depression, Marvin often mocks the other characters to show his dislike of their pursuits and desires, which he feels are pointless. Like Ford, he also questions the conversational rituals of humans and at times takes them literally. But since he is hyper-intelligent, he presumably does it ironically for the sake of ridicule. For example, when asked "What's up", he replies that he does not know because he has never been there (p. 179).

The only explicit mentions of *irony* or *ironic*, of which there are three in the entire novel, are found exclusively in the context of Marvin. The first of these occurs when he is showing his dislike of the positivity a spaceship's doors are programmed to give off:

> "Ghastly," continued Marvin, "it all is. Absolutely ghastly. Just don't even talk about it. Look at this door," he said stepping through it. The irony circuits cut in to his voice modulator as he mimicked the style of the sales brochure. "*All the doors in this spaceship have a cheerful and sunny disposition. It is their pleasure to open for you, and their satisfaction to close again with the knowledge of a job well done*."
>
> [...]
>
> Marvin regarded it with cold loathing whilst his logic circuits chattered with disgust and tinkered with the concept of directing physical violence against it. (p. 81)

Here, again, the narrator is being pedagogical and clear in their explanation of the character's true feelings in contrast to what they are saying. It is also a clear demonstration of the echoic nature of irony. Marvin is using irony to quote a brochure's description of the doors while using the "irony circuits" of his "voice modulator" to simultaneously convey his "cold loathing" and "disgust" of it.

The other two mentions of irony are in the second half of the novel when Marvin is humming for the purpose of mocking the other characters' sense of dramatic purpose at discovering a long-lost planet of treasure. The first time, when the planet has just been revealed to the characters, the author writes "Marvin was humming [a low ghostly music] ironically because he hated humans so much" (p. 101). The second time happens when they have descended onto the planet's surface and are about to proceed into the interior. One character delivers a speech about the significance of this venture, to which "Marvin started his ironical humming again" (p. 119). This is also something which could be analyzed further, especially in a classroom setting. Is Marvin echoing a value held by another by humming ghostly music? What would the students say that he is trying to convey by doing so ironically? From my analysis, I would say that since ghostly music is typically associated with the dramatic, serious and ominous, Marvin is making fun of the fact that the characters consider this planet to be those things. One could further argue that he is trying to point out the absurdity in them being apprehensive of a danger they voluntarily put themselves in. From his perspective of nihilistic depression, Marvin sees all pursuits of purpose as vain and unfulfilling. For the characters around him to then choose an arbitrary purpose which scares them must seem especially foolish and inviting of mockery.

The verbal irony found in the novel's dialogue can then be typically said to manifest itself as fairly conventional sarcasm. A character is flouting the maxim of Quality when they are echoing others' values while conveying their own negative feelings toward it. The characters who most

often do it, Arthur and Marvin, are fairly cynical and represent outsiders being dragged along with the plot against their will. As such, the little power they wield mainly comes out in the form of the scorn and mockery they can deliver through their wit and words. The verbal irony, I have found, is an accurate representation of the kind found in real conversation between speakers of English. The added layer of humor which the novel coats it in should serve English 5 students well as a means of making the demonstration easily digestible and entertaining.

Cosmic Irony

On the subject of mocking human purpose, it is important to address another facet of irony which is highly present in the novel: cosmic irony. Whereas the verbal irony is often tied to misunderstandings and conveying mockery, the cosmic irony of the novel is tied to the fruitless pursuit of purpose. There are countless examples of this in the novel. 5th dimensional aliens are said to construct a supercomputer to find the ultimate answer to life, the universe and everything which after 7.5 million years of calculations conclude that it is 42. The 5th dimensional aliens then construct an even more powerful supercomputer to make sense of this answer, which calculates for 10 million years only to be destroyed when there are 5 minutes left. This supercomputer was actually our planet, Earth, which was destroyed to make room for an intergalactic highway. This intergalactic highway was then rendered obsolete the very same day because a better means of travel was unveiled at the same time. And in the end, the 5th dimensional beings decide to just make up an explanation of what 42 means and run away with their reward for the task.

In the midst of all of that, individuals are left searching for a purpose which they will never find. There is one section of the novel which explains it quite well. It comes when one of the designers of the Earth, an old man named Slartibartfast, has just explained to Arthur that his home planet was this computer all along.

> “You know,” said Arthur thoughtfully, “all this explains a lot of things. All through my life I’ve had this strange unaccountable feeling that something was going on in the world, something big, even sinister, and no one would tell me what it was.”
>
> “No,” said the old man, “that’s just perfectly normal paranoia. Everyone in the Universe has that.”
>
> “Everyone?” said Arthur. “Well, if everyone has that perhaps it means something! Perhaps somewhere outside the Universe we know…”
>
> “Maybe. Who cares?” said Slartibartfast before Arthur got too excited. “Perhaps I’m old and tired,” he continued, “but I always think that the chances of finding out what really is going on are so absurdly remote that the only thing to do is to say hang the sense of it and just keep yourself occupied. Look at me: I design coastlines. I got an award for Norway.” (pp. 160-161)

Arthur finally believed to have found a purpose in life but was immediately shut down and told it means nothing. Then he is told that even if it did mean something, he would never know it anyway. And this comes from one of the people who created the Earth, who humanity would revere as Gods of creation.

This cosmic irony, I again would argue, is tied to Relation. If all of it is pointless, why is it relevant to include? What is the narrator trying to tell the narratee? And what is Douglas Adams trying to tell you? Why reveal the purpose of the Earth if it results in nothing? Why explain to us why the Earth was destroyed if the explanation is immediately rendered obsolete? Why give us the answer to life, the universe and everything but never the context needed to understand it? It is an intentional flouting of the conversational rule “Be relevant” for the sake of mocking the endless and fruitless search of meaning for being endless and fruitless. In doing so, Adams is effectively using the maxim as a tool to convey thought-provoking humor to the reader.

As Bjertner and Opdahl suggest, there is a comfort and reassurance in how Adams coats this existentialism in absurdity and irony. This is found in the curious use of the phrase “DON’T PANIC” as well as the words of Slartibartfast above: “the only thing to do is to say hang the sense of it and just keep yourself occupied”. What is assuring about this is that the reader is shown that there is some freedom in ignorance and that they are not alone if they are struggling with existential anxiety. After all, this is depicting one of the Earth’s creators as dealing with the exact same struggle as a lonely Earthly being would. This illustrates the importance of understanding irony for its ability to take the complex and distill it down to something which is more relevant and easier for the individual to process.

Pedagogic Discussion

As demonstrated in the analysis, there is plenty to unpack when discussing the irony found in Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Aside from a typical discussion around the narrative and characters, a teacher can on the one hand choose to dedicate lessons to discussing the practical usages of irony, mostly the verbal irony in direct conversation as found in the novel's sarcastic and humorous dialogue. On the other hand, a teacher could also choose to dedicate lessons to discussing how the irony, mostly the situational and dramatic irony, ties into the central themes of the novel such as absurdity and existentialism. Personally, and to make the most of the material, I recommend a teacher do both. That way, the teacher will be efficient with the content and fulfill more aims of the upper secondary school curriculum and English syllabus.

Presenting the novel's usage of irony as a function of verbal communication can be done using pedagogical frameworks such as Grice's maxims and Sperber and Wilson's principle of relevance. As evidenced and exemplified by this essay, the teacher can take excerpts from the novel and ask the students to discuss what is being said, both explicitly and then implicitly. The teacher may even ask the students to themselves analyze the irony with reference to the frameworks. They could be encouraged to explore how verbal irony flouts the maxim of Quality and situational irony flouts the maxim of Relation. Even if they only scratch the surface of communication theory, such discussions would certainly fulfill the English 5 syllabus' criteria of teaching students to understand the implicatures found in the variation, adaptation and structure of English communication (Skolverket, 2021b, p. 2). They would also meet with the nuances found in the explicit and implicit references and subtexts of the language (Skolverket, 2021c, p. 9). Lastly, doing this also fulfills the requirement of teaching them strategies for

picking up details and making conclusions about the content and meaning of written English, in this case using literature (Skolverket, 2021b, p. 2).

To tie into the upper secondary school curriculum's goals of promoting students' individuality and their usage of literature as a source of happiness and introspection (Skolverket, 2021a, pp. 5, 11), the teacher should take their students on a journey into the novel's themes of existentialism and seeking a purpose in life. A teacher could suitably transition into this by encouraging their students to analyze the dramatic, situational and cosmic irony of the novel. This would enable the students to explore the absurdity found in the novel, which on the surface appears nonsensical for the sake of it, but on deeper levels has much to say about human ambition and anxiety. This is backed up by previous research besides this one, and such relatable philosophy is also a sought-after discussion in the classroom by students themselves as evidenced in the answers to Thyberg's questionnaire. It would allow students to reflect deeply on their own thoughts and experiences as they relate to these philosophical issues (Skolverket, 2021b, p. 2). Adding on to this, it might also be worth it for a teacher to connect these debates to other matters such as the topics of environmentalism and artificial intelligence, which can be understood more deeply when taken in conjunction with the irony of the novel. These are areas in which the novel can be said to have been ahead of its time in and would today fit in well with the illumination of current issues which is a criterion for the syllabus of English 5 (p. 2).

Conclusion

From the analysis it is now hard to dismiss the pedagogical potential of the irony found in Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. This has been made especially clear in relation to Skolverket's criteria and aims for the English 5 course of upper secondary school. To fulfill the requirements for teaching the nuance and implicatures of English conversation, the verbal irony of the novel's dialogue can be used. To address the aims of ethical discussion and philosophical introspection, the cosmic irony of the novel's existentialism can be used. Additionally, other aspects of the novel can be used to evoke current issues such as environmentalism and artificial intelligence.

This essay has utilized the frameworks of Paul Grice's maxims of conversation in tandem with Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson's principle of relevance to analyze and explain the irony of the novel for pedagogical purposes. On one hand, it found that the verbal irony of the novel typically flouted the maxim of Quality, in accordance with Grice's own theory. On the other hand, the dramatic and situational irony typically flouted the maxim of Relevance instead since it often involved the deliberate inclusion of seemingly irrelevant perspectives to create a complexity of meaning. Future researchers may choose to analyze the novel's irony using a different framework, put aside irony and analyze another communicative aspect of the novel or apply this essay's methodology to another work entirely.

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