

# Other attempts to convey irony in writing

It could be argued that language and communication are fully realized only in the rich environment of in-person interactions. As the anthropologist and linguist Leonard Bloomfield put it, “Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by visible marks.” And writing isn’t even very good at its appointed task of recording language.

When we speak face-to-face, our meaning doesn’t just lie in the choice of words, but also in our tone of voice, intonation, gestures, posture, and facial expressions. We can also rely on the knowledge and experience we share with the other person. So, writing will always have a hard time capturing the full meaning of direct use of language.

Last month, the Monitor’s copy desk editor Casey Fedde discussed the various attempts to convey irony and sarcasm in written text. As she pointed out, none of the punctuation marks proposed over



IN A WORD  
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several centuries caught on.

Other ways of indicating facetiousness in writing are used only sporadically. H.L. Mencken recommended the use of a special typeface, slanted the opposite way of italics. In some of the geekier communities on the internet, one can find the use of “end sarcasm tags” borrowed

from HTML code: `</sarcasm>`. People who are adept at deploying emoji might find use for the upside-down smiley emoji. Another method used in both writing and speech is the delayed “... NOT!”

Ultimately, there is something unsatisfying about all of this earnest marking of unearnestness. In their influential work on the pretense theory of irony, psychologists Herbert Clark and Richard Gerrig explained that the essence of irony is that it is intentionally ambiguous. They cite Fowler’s Dictionary of Modern English Usage, which says of irony that it “may be defined as the use of words intended

to convey one meaning to the uninitiated part of the audience and another to the initiated, the delight of it lying in the secret intimacy set up between the latter and the speaker.”

When we draw attention to the fact that we’re speaking ironically, we are robbing the rhetorical move of its full force. Jonathan Swift’s satirical essay “A Modest Proposal” would hardly have packed as much of a punch if it had been presented as anything but serious and sincere. It is no accident that deadpan delivery is one of the most admired abilities in comedic acting.

Perhaps the problem is that once we are removed from face-to-face conversation with people we know, it is just too risky to be playful. Maybe the best policy is to just stay serious all the time ... NOT!

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