

## 12 | Layering

People sometimes appear to say one thing when they are actually doing something quite different. Take this exchange between a husband and wife about his tutoring sessions (4.1.129):

Ken: and I'm cheap, - - -  
Margaret: I've always felt that about you, .  
Ken: oh shut up,  
( - - laughs) fifteen bob a lesson at home, -

When Margaret says “I’ve always felt that about you,” she isn’t really, actually, or literally asserting that she always felt Ken was cheap, a *serious* use of her utterance. She is only acting *as if* she were making that assertion in order to tease him, a so-called *nonserious* use of her utterance (Austin, 1962).<sup>1</sup> Nonserious language is the stuff of novels, plays, movies, stories, and jokes, as well as teasing, irony, sarcasm, overstatement, and understatement. Life is hard to imagine without it, yet it has been slighted in most theories of language use.

Common to all nonserious actions is a phenomenon I am calling *layering*. When Margaret merely pretends to assert that she always thought Ken was cheap, she is taking actions at two layers. On the surface, she is making the assertion, a nonserious action. Yet beneath the

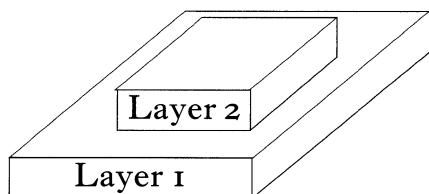
<sup>1</sup> Nonserious language use has been excluded from traditional philosophical, linguistic, and psychological accounts of language. A good example is Austin (1962, p. 22): “Language in such circumstances [e.g., play acting, practice] is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use... All this we are *excluding* from consideration” (Austin’s emphases). The term *nonserious* belies the serious intent behind Margaret’s tease, but captures the notion of pre-tense, so I will retain it.

surface, she is pretending to assert this and, by means of the pretense, teasing him for being so cheap. These are serious actions. All nonserious actions are created in the course of serious actions. But how does Margaret get Ken to see that her assertion isn't serious? How does she manage to tease him about his stinginess? Nonserious language warrants a serious analysis.

### **Layers of actions**

It is San Francisco in 1952, and two ten-year-olds named Alan and Beth are playing a game of make-believe in Alan's back yard. From a book they have read, they decide to be Wild Bill and Calamity Jane, living in Deadwood, Dakota Territory, during the gold rush of 1876. They designate a pile of dirt in the corner of the yard as placer diggings and an old kitchen plate as a gold pan, and they pan for gold. Soon they find a few nuggets (small stones), go off to Saloon Number Ten (the patio), sit down at a poker table (a picnic table), and play a few hands with an invisible deck of cards. After a while Beth is called home, and their game ends.

Alan and Beth's game is an example of layered actions. At *layer 1*, Alan and Beth are playing make-believe in Alan's back yard in San Francisco in 1952. Simultaneously at *layer 2*, they are two people panning for gold and playing poker in Deadwood in 1876. The actions in layer 1 are serious, what Alan and Beth are really, or actually, or seriously doing. The actions in layer 2 are nonserious because Alan and Beth aren't *really* named Wild Bill and Calamity Jane, and they aren't *really* panning for gold or playing poker. The actions in layer 2 are created out of whole cloth as a joint pretense. Metaphorically, the layers look like this (Chapter 1):



Layer 1 is the base or foundation, and layer 2 is like a theatrical stage created on top of it. More layers can be added recursively.<sup>2</sup>

What are these two layers of actions, and where do they come from? The analysis I offer is derived from three sources, with additions of my own. One is Erving Goffman's frame analysis, itself derived from Gregory Bateson's observations about play in humans and animals (Bateson 1972; Goffman, 1974). Another is Kendall Walton's arguments for make-believe as the basis for fiction (Walton, 1973, 1976, 1978, 1983, 1990).<sup>3</sup> The third is Bertram Bruce's analysis of levels in written fiction and the relation between authors and readers (Bruce, 1981). My analysis is an attempt to capture the spirit of the three sources, although it differs from all three.

#### DOMAINS OF ACTION

Alan and Beth's game is a game of imagination – becoming Wild Bill and Calamity Jane, panning for gold, playing poker. But Alan and Beth must coordinate their imaginings. If Alan imagined he was a future astronaut on Mars while Beth imagined she was Elizabeth I in sixteenth-century England, that just wouldn't do. Their game is a *joint activity*, and just as they are playing together in San Francisco, they must imagine themselves together in Deadwood.

Alan and Beth's actions take place in two worlds, or *domains of action*. Each domain is characterized by its participants, their roles, the place, the time, the relevant features of the situation, the possible actions, and other such things, as here:

<sup>2</sup> Layering is sometimes treated as a form of embedding, with layer 2 embedded within layer 1. In this view, Wild Bill and Calamity Jane's world would be embedded within Alan and Beth's daily activities in San Francisco in 1952. Although this metaphor is useful for some purposes, it can be misleading. To say that one clause (e.g., *that he left*) is embedded within another (e.g., *Veronica said that he left*) is to claim that the first clause is a proper part of the second. But layer 2 is not a proper part of layer 1 in this sense. Wild Bill and Calamity Jane are not part of the 1952 San Francisco scene, nor are any other elements of domain 2. This is just one of the reasons I prefer the metaphor of layering.

<sup>3</sup> See also Searle (1975b).

	<b>Domain 1</b>	<b>Domain 2</b>
<b>Participants</b>	Alan Beth	Wild Bill Calamity Jane
<b>Roles</b>	players at make-believe	partners in placer mining
<b>Place</b>	San Francisco	Deadwood, Dakota Territory
<b>Time</b>	May 1, 1952	around 1876
<b>Features</b>	pile of dirt plate patio picnic table etc.	pile of gold ore gold pan Saloon Number Ten poker table etc.
<b>Actions</b>	sifting dirt on plate finding pebble etc.	panning for gold finding gold nugget etc.

Each domain is in principle a complete world, though only some of its elements are specified. Alan and Beth would assume Calamity Jane had parents even if they had never thought about it.

Actions take place in both domains, often based on the same behavior. Take this exchange:

Beth: Let's play gold rush.  
 Alan: Okay, Beth, I'll be Wild Bill.  
 Beth: And I'll be Calamity Jane.

Although Alan and Beth do things to establish domain 2, their actions are in domain 1. Next consider this series of events:

Alan puts dirt on the old plate and swishes it around, revealing a small pebble.  
 He picks it out.  
 Alan: Look, Calamity Jane, I've found a gold nugget.  
 Beth: We're rich.

Here, events take place in both domains. Some, indeed, are simply different construals of the same behavior in the two domains, as here:

Domain 1: Alan picks a pebble out of the dirt.  
 Domain 2: Wild Bill picks a gold nugget out of the placer ore.

In domain 1, Alan's behavior is construed as an action by Alan, and in domain 2, as an action by Wild Bill. Other things have distinct construals in the two domains as well; for example, the plate in domain 1 is a gold pan in domain 2.

Many states and events in domain 2, then, *correspond to* states and events in domain 1. Alan and Beth jointly pretend that “Alan picking a pebble out of the dirt” is to be taken to be “Wild Bill picking a nugget out of the ore.” We can think of the interpretation of elements in domain 2 as determined by a tacit *correspondence function C(2)* that maps elements of domain 2 into elements of domain 1 (where “=” means “is to be taken to be”):

**C(2).** Alan = Wild Bill; Beth = Calamity Jane; here = in and around Deadwood; now = 1876; this dirt = placer ore; pebbles in this dirt = gold nuggets; this action = panning for gold; this action = playing poker; etc.

The idea is that domain 2 depends on domain 1, but not vice versa. Domain 2 is created by Alan and Beth’s joint interpretation, as represented by C(2), whereas domain 1 depends directly on what Alan and Beth take to be the case in San Francisco in 1952. It is by picking a pebble out of the dirt that Alan creates the action of Wild Bill picking a nugget out of the ore. The reverse is impossible.

The full correspondence function C(2) doesn’t get established in a single stroke, but by coordination over time. Parts are established by explicit agreement. “I’ll be Wild Bill, and you be Calamity Jane.” “Okay.” Other parts are established implicitly. “Look, I’ve found a gold nugget!” Alan says of the pebble he discovers in the dirt. Other parts are established by unplanned states and events in domain 1. When Beth finds a larger pebble in the dirt, it starts to rain, and a neighbor’s dog barks, these events are given natural interpretations in domain 2 – that Beth has a larger nugget, that it is beginning to rain in Deadwood, or that a coyote is yelping. Many other aspects are taken for granted as consistent with everything else they have established. Some aspects may be disputed. Beth: “This nugget is on my claim.” Alan: “No, it’s on mine.” C(2) isn’t established all at once, or by a single method, or unambiguously. And like any construal, it takes Alan and Beth’s coordination, and that isn’t always successful.

Access to domains 1 and 2 is asymmetrical. The participants in 1 have access to elements of 2, but the participants in 2 have no access to the elements of 1. Alan and Beth create Wild Bill, Calamity Jane, and their world by their actions in domain 1. They know all they want to know about domain 2. Wild Bill and Calamity Jane, however, know nothing about Alan and Beth. At least, that is the pretense. Wild Bill, as Wild Bill, couldn’t say, “I’m going back to being Alan.” A log cabin stipulated to appear in domain 2 cannot cause a corresponding object to appear in

domain 1. Interruptions too are asymmetrical. When Alan says, “Beth, your dad is here,” Alan and Beth interrupt, or suspend, activities in layer 2 to return to layer 1. The reverse is impossible.

#### MEANING, IMAGINATION, AND APPRECIATION

Layering is essential to the use and interpretation of utterances. Let us consider two utterances by Alan:

1. Alan: Beth, your dad is here now, so I guess you have to go.
2. Alan: Look here, Calamity Jane, now you and I both have nuggets.

Although Alan uses the deictic terms “I,” “you,” “here,” and “now” in both utterances, in 1 he is referring to Alan, Beth, San Francisco, and 1952, and in 2, he is referring to Wild Bill, Calamity Jane, Deadwood, and 1876. He intends the deictic terms in 1 to be interpreted in domain 1, and those in 2 to be interpreted in domain 2. We can represent the four main deictic elements of each utterance in what I will call a *deictic frame*:<sup>4</sup>

<b>&lt;layer,</b>	<b>I,</b>	<b>you,</b>	<b>here,</b>	<b>now&gt;</b>
<1,	Alan,	Beth,	San Francisco,	1952>
<2,	Wild Bill,	Calamity Jane,	Deadwood,	1876>

Utterances 1 and 2 are to be interpreted with different deictic frames.

Viewed another way, utterance 2 differs from utterance 1 in the speaker whose meaning is being expressed. Recall that speaker’s meaning is that which fits Grice’s formula “In doing *s*, S means that *p*.” In uttering “Beth, your dad is here now,” Alan means that Beth’s father is there, so 1 represents what Alan means for Beth. In 2, however, if we took Alan literally, we would infer: In uttering “Look here, Calamity Jane, now you and I both have nuggets,” Alan means that now he and Beth both have nuggets. But this isn’t right. Instead, we must say: In uttering that sentence, Wild Bill means that now he and Calamity Jane both have nuggets. Utterance 2 represents what Wild Bill (“I”) means for Calamity Jane (“you”). These examples illustrate an essential principle of layering:

*Principle of layered meaning.* The speaker who means what is expressed in an utterance, and the addressee for whom it is meant, belong to the highest current layer of action.

If you know the highest current layer of action, you can identify the deictic frame – e.g., the speaker who means what is expressed and his or her

<sup>4</sup> For a related notion, see Karl Bühler’s (1982) concept of *origo*.

addressee. On the other hand, if you can figure out who means what for whom in an utterance, you can identify the highest current layer of action. The principle works both ways.

The principle of layered meaning is essential for interpreting talk in layered actions. When Alan says, “Look here, Calamity Jane, now you and I both have nuggets,” Beth would be mistaken if she thought he, *qua* Alan, meant that he and she, *qua* Beth, both now have nuggets. Beth tacitly recognizes that Wild Bill means this for Calamity Jane. An over-hearer with no inkling of the joint pretense could get it wrong. Listeners, whoever they are, must distinguish appearance from reality in speaker’s meaning, and that requires the principle of layered meaning.

Layers differ in the processes they require of the primary participants. When Alan utters “Look, Calamity Jane, I’ve found a gold nugget,” he is getting Beth to imagine him as Wild Bill taking the next turn in a conversation with Calamity Jane. Yet he also wants her to appreciate why he is getting her to do this. He is advancing their game. He is trying to help them simulate imaginary experiences. That is, we must distinguish between *imagining* actions in layer 2 and *appreciating* actions in layer 1. The principles I propose are these:

*Principle of imagination.* In layered actions, the primary participants are intended to imagine what is happening in the highest current layer of action.

*Principle of appreciation.* In layered actions, the primary participants are intended to appreciate the instigator’s purposes and techniques in creating the highest current layer of action.

Alan and Beth are to imagine Wild Bill and Calamity Jane’s world and, while doing that, appreciate their choices in creating that world.

#### SUMMARY

Let us gather up the properties of layering to come out of Alan and Beth’s game of make-believe. The first properties all deal with the *duality* of layering:

Relation	Layering is an asymmetric relation between joint actions in two domains.
Domains	Each domain is specified, principally, by its participants, roles, time, place, surroundings, and possible events.
Deixis	The joint actions in the two layers have distinct deictic frames.
Simultaneity	The two domains are present, or current, at the same time.
Recursion	Layering is recursive.

The next properties deal with the asymmetry between two adjacent layers, a primary layer 1 (with its primary participants) and a derivative layer 2:

Mapping	The primary participants jointly develop a correspondence function $C(2)$ that maps entities of domain 2 into entities of domain 1.
Perspective	The primary participants may construe any entity (an object, state, or event) one way in domain 1 and, simultaneously, another way in domain 2.
Causality	Many entities in domain 2 are caused by the occurrence of the corresponding entities in domain 1, but not vice versa.
Access	The participants in layer 1 have informational access to entities in domain 2, but not vice versa.
Speaker's meaning	When there are two layers, the speaker who means what is expressed by a signal, and the addressee for whom it is meant, belong to layer 2.
Imagination	When there are two layers, the primary participants are to imagine the actions in layer 2, and appreciate the actions in layer 1.

Since layering is recursive, the primary and secondary domains are numbered 1 and 2, and further recursions have higher numbers. These properties may or may not be necessary to all layering.

In Alan and Beth's game of make-believe, layer 2 was created by joint pretense, but layers can be created in other ways too. Let us represent layers in a shorthand, as illustrated for Alan and Beth's two layers:

- Layer 2 Wild Bill and Calamity Jane are doing things in Deadwood in 1876.
- Layer 1 Alan and Beth jointly pretend in San Francisco in 1952 that the events in layer 2 are taking place.

The first statement describes the actions in layer 2, and the second describes how these actions are created in layer 1. As we will discover, the verb in layer 1, here *jointly pretend*, can change from one type of layering to the next.

### Stories

Layering is a feature of all types of stories – from jokes and anecdotes to novels, plays, and operas. When you tell a friend a joke, for example, you describe an episode that didn't actually happen. You get your friend to join you in imagining the fictional world, the secondary domain, in which the events you describe actually happened. The two of you create that world as a joint pretense. All fiction requires a joint pretense.

## STORIES IN CONVERSATION

Let us return to a joke discussed in Chapter 10. Here is Sam's preface, a few lines of Sam's joke, and Reynard's response:

Sam: let me tell you a story, - - -  
 2[a girl went into a chemist's shop, and asked for, . contraceptive  
 tablets, - -  
 so he said 3[well I've got . all kinds, and . all prices, what do you  
 want,]3  
 ...  
 3[you may well have a baby,]3 - - ]2

Reynard: Sam, . you're a wicked fellow, - that's very nice

With "Let me tell you a story," Sam asks Reynard to join in setting up the pretense that the episode he is about to describe actually happened. He then describes the episode as if it were real, beginning with "A girl went into a chemist's shop..." and ending with "you may well have a baby." Sam and Reynard leave the world of the joke when Reynard shows his appreciation with "Sam, you're a wicked fellow."

Sam's joke has three layers. The beginnings and ends of layers 2 and 3 are marked with numbered brackets such as  $_2[$  and  $]_2$ . When Sam says "Let me tell you a story," there is only one layer. But with "A girl went into a chemist's shop," he and Reynard create a second layer:

- Layer 2 A reporter is telling a reportee that a girl went into a chemist's shop.
- Layer 1 Sam and Reynard jointly pretend that the actions in layer 2 are taking place.

The joint pretense is that Sam is a reporter, and Reynard is his reportee, and that the reporter is telling the reportee about an actual happening in the chemist's shop. When the reporter uses direct quotation, "well I've got all kinds and all prices, what do you want," he creates yet another layer (Chapter 6):

- Layer 3 The chemist is telling the girl he's got all kinds and all prices.
- Layer 2 A reporter is demonstrating for a reportee the events in layer 3.
- Layer 1 Sam and Reynard jointly pretend that the actions in layer 2 are taking place.

Jokes display all the properties of layering. For "A girl went into a chemist's shop," we can identify two concurrent layers: Sam and Reynard's world (domain 1), and the world of reporter and reportee (domain 2). There is a correspondence function with at least two

elements: Sam = reporter, Reynard = reportee. These elements are each viewed under two perspectives: In domain 1, the two men are construed as Sam and Reynard, and in domain 2, as the reporter and reportee. As for causality, it is Sam and Reynard's actions that create layer 2, and while Sam and Reynard (in domain 1) have access to the happenings in domain 2, the reporter and reportee (in domain 2) have no access to the elements of domain 1. And there is recursion when the reporter creates domain 3 by demonstrating what the chemist said.

Sam and Reynard must keep track of this structure to establish who means what in each utterance. Here are the deictic frames, <layer, speaker, addressee, place, time>, for three selected utterances:

Let me tell you a story.	<1, Sam, Reynard, London, 1964>
A girl went into a chemist's shop.	<2, reporter, reportee, Britain, before 1>
I've got all kinds and all prices.	<3, chemist, girl, Britain, before 2>

Reynard must see that with "Let me tell you a story" Sam means something for Reynard, that with "A girl went into a chemist's shop" the reporter means something for the reportee, and that with "I've got all kinds and all prices" the chemist means something for the girl. Reynard can see that only if he and Sam coordinate. Sam does his part by announcing the story ("Let me tell you a story"), marking each quotation (with "he said" or a change in intonation), marking the punch line (with story final intonation), and using other such devices. It is remarkable how smoothly Sam and Reynard move from one layer to the next.

Jokes are only one type of layered story in conversation. There are also new stories, retellings of old stories, parables, and what-if narratives ("What if we do this. We go downtown," etc.) All of these have a layered structure much like Sam's joke.

#### NOVELS

Stories are the foundation of many genres of literature – novels, short stories, plays, operas, skits, parodies, satires – and layering takes much the same form in these as in conversation. Let us take the classic first line of Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*: "Call me Ishmael." With it, Melville invites us to join him in the pretense that the words are those of a man called Ishmael speaking to certain "landsmen" in the early 1800s. It has the deictic frame <2, Ishmael, landsmen, Boston, early 1800s>. We are to form two layers:

- Layer 2 Ishmael is asking his landsmen audience to call him Ishmael.
- Layer 1 Melville and readers jointly pretend that the events in layer 2 are taking place.

We continue to hold this joint pretense as Ishmael tells about Captain Ahab and his obsession with a great white whale. Later, when Ishmael quotes Queequeg “Who-e debel you?” we create still another layer:

- Layer 3 Queequeg is asking Ishmael who he is.
- Layer 2 Ishmael is demonstrating to his audience the event in layer 3.
- Layer 1 Melville and readers jointly pretend that the events in layer 2 are taking place.

Novels differ from conversational stories in several ways. Readers are normally far removed from authors in both space and time, and that has consequences. Writing in the 1850s, Melville made certain assumptions about his readers’ knowledge and attitudes that are no longer true. And when we set up layer 2 as a joint pretense, we do so not because of an announcement like Sam’s “Let me tell you a story,” but because we know the literary conventions for novels. (We might have come to the same recognition on evidence internal to the book.) And in novels, we rarely see utterances at layer 1. The only one in *Moby Dick* is Melville’s dedication: “In token of my admiration for his genius this book is dedicated to Nathaniel Hawthorne,” which has the deictic frame <1, Melville, readers, Pittsfield Massachusetts, 1851>.

According to some literary theorists (e.g., Booth, 1983; Chatman, 1978), the actual author must also be distinguished from the implied author.<sup>5</sup> Melville, for example, may have intended to look like an ordinary adventure story writer, whereas his real motives were very different. If so, *Moby Dick* has three layers:

- Layer 3 Ishmael is telling certain landsmen an autobiographical story.
- Layer 2 The implied Melville and his implied readers jointly pretend that the events in layer 3 are taking place.
- Layer 1 The actual Melville and his actual readers jointly pretend that the events in layer 2 are taking place.

For many novels, the added layer 2 is crucial for understanding the author’s tone, irony, symbolism, and other rhetorical effects.

<sup>5</sup> Booth (1961, p. 70): “As he writes, [the actual author] creates not simply an ideal, impersonal ‘man in general’ but an implied version of ‘himself’ that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men’s works.”

Novelists sometimes take pleasure in piling one layer upon another, yet we take them in stride. In Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, the first narrator quotes a story told to him by Douglas, who quotes a story told to him by a governess, who in turn quotes a child named Miles as saying "I took it." At that point, the novella has six layers:

- Layer 6 Miles is telling the governess that he took a letter.
- Layer 5 Governess is demonstrating for Douglas the events in layer 6.
- Layer 4 Douglas is demonstrating for narrator the events in layer 5.
- Layer 3 Narrator is demonstrating for fireside audience the events in layer 4.
- Layer 2 Implied James and implied readers jointly pretend that the events in layer 3 are taking place.
- Layer 1 Actual James and actual readers jointly pretend that the events in layer 2 are taking place.

There is similar multiple recursion in Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle* and many other literary works (Bruce, 1981).

Not only do novels create layer upon layer of actions, but these layers can be placed on further layers. Suppose that in 1921 in Edinburgh a schoolmaster begins reading *Moby Dick* aloud to his pupils and says "Call me Ishmael." For this utterance, we need to add a third layer to our original two layers (ignoring the distinction between actual and implied author):

- Layer 3 Ishmael is asking his landsmen addressees to call him Ishmael.
- Layer 2 Melville and his readers jointly pretend that the events in layer 3 are taking place.
- Layer 1 Schoolmaster delivers to his pupils the wording of layer 2.

The schoolmaster's pupils must be alert to all three layers. They would be mistaken if they thought either Melville or the schoolmaster wanted to be called Ishmael. Layers are not a fancy bit of analysis. They are essential to interpreting the actions taking place.

#### DRAMAS

Plays, movies, operas, and television sitcoms have added complications. Suppose we read Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. It begins with a faceless, fictional narrator describing the scene: "Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot." Soon the narrator quotes Estragon, "Nothing to be done." In this utterance, we have three layers (again collapsing the two layers of authors):

- Layer 3 Estragon is telling Vladimir there's nothing to be done.
- Layer 2 Narrator is demonstrating for readers the event in layer 3.

- Layer 1** Beckett and we readers jointly pretend that the events in layer 2 are taking place.

We read the play much as we read a novel, and the layers for Estragon's comment are much like those for Queequeg's question.

Something quite different happens when we see *Waiting for Godot* in a theater. Suppose we go to its premier English performance by the Arts Theatre Company, with Estragon and Vladimir played by Woodthorpe and Daneman.<sup>6</sup> Layer 1 now has us and the theater company as direct participants. As Jorge Luis Borges noted in an essay on Shakespeare, the actor "on a stage plays at being another before a gathering of people who play at taking him for that other person." But when Woodthorpe delivers the line "Nothing to be done," he and we don't accomplish that joint pretense alone. We are helped by the company and all of its theatrical tricks, from the direction to the scenery. Also, we are no longer aware of Beckett's narrator, although we do keep track of Beckett the playwright. One plausible analysis for "Nothing to be done" goes like this:

- Layer 3** Estragon is telling Vladimir there's nothing to be done.  
**Layer 2** Beckett, actors, theater company, and theatergoers jointly pretend that the events in layer 3 are taking place.  
**Layer 1** Woodthorpe, theater company, and theatergoers jointly realize layer 2.

"Nothing to be done" represents what Estragon means for Vladimir, not what Woodthorpe means for Daneman or what Beckett means for the theatergoers. Estragon's action has been determined by both Beckett's script and Woodthorpe's realization of it. And we assume Beckett had some purpose in including the action at this point in the play, a purpose we are to appreciate, however dimly. We would have made very different assumptions if we thought the actors were improvising their lines.

Layering takes analogous forms in movies, television sitcoms, soap operas, radio plays, and even songs. In Franz Schubert's song "The Erlking" ("Erlkönig"), the baritone tells a story (by Goethe) with musical accompaniment (by Schubert). At layer 1, the baritone enacts for us layer 2, in which he and Schubert realize for us layer 3, in which we and Goethe jointly pretend that at layer 4 a narrator is telling an audience a true story about an elf king. Schubert's music deepens the emotions of the story. Just as "The Erlking" is like a narrated story, Mozart's opera

<sup>6</sup> The first production was held in the Arts Theatre in London in 1955 with Peter Woodthorpe and Paul Daneman playing Estragon and Vladimir.

*Don Giovanni* is like a play. It too needs separate layers to represent the performers and us, Mozart and us, the librettist Da Ponte and us, and the characters in the play.

#### IMAGINATION AND APPRECIATION

In stories, novels, and plays, we don't give all of the layers the same attention. Nor should we. As we read *Moby Dick*, we get engrossed in the world of Ishmael, Queequeg, Ahab, and the white whale (layer 2), and that is how Melville wanted it. As the novelist John Gardner (1983, p. 132) put it, "The writer's intent is that the reader fall through the printed page into the scene represented." Melville didn't want us engrossed, as we read, in his choice of words, actions, and characterizations (layer 1). These he wanted us to appreciate only once we had taken in Ishmael's world. Here again, we must distinguish imagination, which Gardner called "controlled dreaming," from appreciation.

Novels, plays, and stories are judged in part by how well they enable us to imagine the highest current layer – how well they transport us into the worlds of the stories. If an adventure story is good, we imagine its world so vividly that it is like a movie running off in our heads. We get so engrossed that we forget we are sitting in a chair, turning pages, and staying up too late. The same goes for a good play and a good movie.

Experiencing a story in imagination has surprising consequences. One is what Richard Gerrig (1989a, 1989b, 1993) called *anomalous suspense*. Ordinarily, suspense is a state in which we "lack knowledge about some sufficiently important target outcome (p. 79)." Yet when we read a suspense story for a second time, or when we read an account of a well-known historical event (for Americans, say, the assassination of President Lincoln), we often feel suspense even though we know precisely how the story turns out. We somehow get so thoroughly engrossed in our current imagining that we isolate ourselves from prior knowledge about the story. From the outside, the suspense seems anomalous, but in our imagination, it seems real.

Suspense is just one of many emotions we create in the process of imagining (see Walton, 1978). Novels, from pulp to the classics, are classified into genres largely by emotions they get us to experience. Mysteries evoke suspense, fear. Adventure stories evoke excitement, fear, anger. Horror stories evoke horror, loathing, fear. Romances lead to light sexual excitement, and pornography, to base erotic arousal. Satires evoke amusement. Movies belong to similar genres. We are as likely to

cry at fictions in sad movies as at realities in daily life. Somehow, through the process of imagination, we experience emotions as if they were real. Such is the power of imagination.

The techniques by which novelists, playwrights, and film directors help us create these imaginings vary enormously. In novels, it is effective writing, and the best novelists have their secrets (e.g., see Gardner, 1983). In plays and movies, it is both an effective script and a skillful production. Good actors know how to get into character and help us imagine the actions, thoughts, and emotions of their characters. Good directors know how to place these characters and actions in readily imagined scenes and happenings. Nothing undermines a movie or play as quickly as bad acting, bad direction, or bad dialogue. Fostering our imagination is at the heart of literary art, and that makes it as much a subject for students of literature as for students of language.

Yet appreciation is also essential to most genres. Novelists, playwrights, and film directors want us to recognize *why* they are doing what they are doing. They may be trying to instruct, amuse, offer moral lessons, give insights into nature, or evoke an exciting experience. Some novelists and playwrights interrupt the highest current layer to make these purposes explicit. Classical Greek playwrights use a chorus to do that, Shakespeare uses a narrator to introduce his plays, and Bertolt Brecht uses voice-overs and narrators to comment on what is happening on stage.

To repeat, each layer is created and dealt with differently. The topmost layer (e.g., Ishmael's world) is the most explicit, representing what one person (Ishmael) means for others (certain contemporary landsmen) in that domain. In dealing with it, the primary participants (we and Melville) imagine those people taking those actions. The lower layers (e.g., Melville's world) are usually more obscure, more difficult to appreciate. Imagining the topmost layer is what immediately engrosses us, yet it is often our appreciation of the lower layers that make us understand what we have imagined.

Imagination and appreciation have long been recognized in literature. From the beginning, writers, playwrights, and musicians have exploited layering to achieve a wide range of rhetorical effects. Literary theorists have offered sophisticated, detailed analyses of those effects, and it is to them that we must turn for a more refined theory of layering, imagination, and appreciation in literary genres. My suggestions here are only a start, but no account of language use can really be complete without one.

### **Staged communicative acts**

In stories, layering comes in extended stretches of language use, but there is also layering in single communicative acts. Recall the exchange between the husband and wife about the husband's tutoring:

Ken: and I'm cheap, - - -  
 Margaret: **I've always felt that about you.**, .  
 Ken: oh shut up,  
       ( - - laughs) fifteen bob a lesson at home, -

Margaret is only *pretending* to claim she always thought Ken was cheap, and Ken shows that he recognizes this with his brisk comeback and laugh. Margaret's action has two layers:

- Layer 2 Implied Margaret claims she always thought implied Ken was cheap.
- Layer 1 Margaret and Ken jointly pretend that the event in layer 2 is taking place.

In creating the joint pretense, Margaret demonstrates a hypothetical situation (in layer 2) that blatantly contrasts with the actual situation (in layer 1). She intends Ken to appreciate why she is highlighting the contrast and see she is making fun of him.

Acts like this are what I will call *staged communicative acts*. The idea is that the speaker, say Ann, stages for Bob a brief improvised scene in which an implied Ann (like an implied author) performs a sincere communicative act toward an implied Bob. As playwright, Ann expects Bob both to imagine the scene and to appreciate her purpose in staging it. Let us denote implied A and implied B by  $A_i$  and  $B_i$ . A staged communicative act by A toward B has several properties:

1. *Joint pretense*. A engages B in a joint pretense.
2. *Communicative act*. The joint pretense is that  $A_i$  is performing a sincere communicative act toward  $B_i$ .
3. *Correspondence*. A is to be taken as  $A_i$ , and B as  $B_i$ .
4. *Contrast*. A intends A and B to mutually appreciate the salient contrasts between the demonstrated and actual situations.
5. *Deniability*. If asked, A would deny meaning for B what  $A_i$  means for  $B_i$ .

Property 1 distinguishes staged from insincere acts. If Margaret had pretended by herself to make a sincere claim, her statement would be described as a lie, and a tease is different from a lie. Property 2 distinguishes staged acts from extended stories and jokes. Property 3 distinguishes staged acts from joint pretenses in which the primary partici-

pants play no roles. Property 4 expresses the purpose of staging a communicative act. And property 5 distinguishes staged from ostensible acts, a point I will take up later.

Staged communicative acts constitute a large family of actions that are common in conversation: irony, sarcasm, teasing, overstatement, understatement, rhetorical questions, and their relatives. They also occur in literature, but it is useful to start with conversation where we can examine the entire staging.

#### IRONY AND SARCASM

Irony is common in face-to-face conversation.<sup>7</sup> Let us begin with an example analyzed by Linda Coates (1992). Two strangers – call them Susan and Ellen – were videotaped in a session arranged by Coates as they discussed several topics, one of which was to plan a meal of foods they hate. In this example, they are discussing who they would invite to it. They have already agreed on foods to include, and Ellen has said who she would invite. The example starts when Susan remembers someone she could invite:

1. Susan: Ahh. Okay. Th- the sergeant that I know who was really nasty. He didn't want any women on his course so he did his best to get them off. [At "on" Susan begins nodding to mean "you understand the situation" and at "so" Ellen begins a face of disapproval of the sergeant.]
2. Ellen: Ah. Okay. [At "okay," Ellen begins nodding]
3. Susan: **Yes to thank him for all of his help in training.** [Over "thank" Susan raises her brow to signal "not really"; over "of his help in" she raises her brow to signal "unhelpful"; at the end, she laughs and smiles in humor. Meanwhile, over "of his help in train—" **Ellen smiles to signal understanding.**]
4. Susan: Yeah. Yeah. [Over "yeah yeah" Susan smiles in acknowledgment, and Ellen smiles to signal understanding.]
5. Susan: Okay. [At "okay" Susan picks up card on table to signal they should move on to next topic.]

When Susan says, "Yes to thank him for all of his help in training," she isn't really inviting the sergeant to thank him. Nor is Ellen serious in endorsing Susan's apparent suggestion. Both Susan and Ellen are being ironic in saying what they say.

<sup>7</sup> By irony, I mean what is sometimes called *verbal* or *discourse irony* and not *situational irony*, although the two are related (Fowler, 1965; Gibbs, 1994; Lucariello, 1994).

How do Susan and Ellen achieve this? As Coates argued, the full episode can be divided into four phases:

1. *Calibration.* The participants agree to a shared viewpoint or understanding of a topic. This is what Susan and Ellen do in utterances 1 and 2. The shared viewpoint needs to be clear for the next phase to succeed.
2. *Delivery.* The ironist delivers the utterance that is to be understood ironically. This is what Susan does in 3. But she does more than speak. She signals with her eyebrows that “thank” and “help” aren’t to be taken seriously, and with her laugh and smile that the entire suggestion is a joke.
3. *Acknowledgment.* The participants let each other know that the irony has been understood. Susan and Ellen do this in 3 and 4 with two exchanges of smiles.
4. *Closure.* The participants signal to each other that the ironic episode has ended and that serious discussion is resuming. This Susan does in 5 and Ellen goes along.

In the large sample of cases videotaped by Coates, 84 percent of them had explicit calibration phases, all had delivery phases, 92 percent had at least one form of acknowledgment (like nodding or smiling), and 84 percent signaled the closure with a discourse shift marker like “so” or “anyway.” What is remarkable in Coates’ data, then, is how closely the two participants coordinate in setting up, carrying off, and closing these episodes.

But what is irony? What are Susan and Ellen trying to do with their actions? One traditional answer is *mere inversion*. When Susan says “To thank him for all of his help in training,” she simply means the opposite of what she appears to mean. Ellen is to see that she couldn’t want to thank the sergeant for his help – he’s nasty and sexist – so she must mean the opposite. But this account isn’t complete. Why did Susan use inversion here and not elsewhere? And why did Ellen go along with the inversion? Worse, many instances of irony and sarcasm don’t entail inversion. Mere inversion offers no answers.

Another answer, offered by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1981),<sup>8</sup> is that irony is *echoic mention*. The idea is this. When speakers say something ironic, they aren’t using their sentences in the normal way. They are merely *mentioning* those sentences. In particular, they are mentioning, or echoing, earlier uses of the same sentences as a way of expressing an attitude such as contempt or ridicule. According to the echoic mention theory, when Susan says “To thank him for all of his help

<sup>8</sup> See also Jorgensen, Miller, and Sperber (1984) and Sperber and Wilson (1986).

in training,” she is echoing an earlier utterance in order to show her ridicule or contempt for what it expresses.

The echoic mention theory is unsatisfactory too, and that is easy to see in the example. Because Susan and Ellen were strangers before their conversation, all that Ellen knows about the sergeant is what Susan has just told her – that he “was really nasty” and “didn’t want any women on his course.” There was no previous talk about thanking the sergeant for his help – nothing to echo – yet Susan is clearly heard as being ironic. The echoic mention, Sperber and Wilson argued, needn’t be of a particular utterance, but merely of “popular wisdom or received opinions.” It is difficult to see what popular wisdom or received opinions Susan might be echoing. Although some cases of irony allude to previous events, many do not. One of the most celebrated examples of irony is Jonathan Swift’s 1729 essay “A Modest Proposal” in which he lays out, methodically and with dead seriousness, a proposal to use starving Irish children as food for the rich. It is implausible to say that anyone had ever uttered the entire essay before or that dining on Irish children was ever a part of popular wisdom or received opinion. Surely, Swift’s irony works precisely because the “modest proposal” is so absurd that it could never have been entertained seriously. There was never anything like it to echo.

Another problem is with the technical notion of mentioning, which comes from traditional theories of quotation. The idea is that in quoting a sentence, one is not *using* the sentence, but merely *mentioning* it, as when I say “‘Morris is here’ contains three words.” But quotation is really a type of demonstration (Chapter 6), and demonstrating is a type of joint pretense (Clark and Gerrig, 1990). Any account of mentioning must appeal to joint pretense anyway.

Irony is better viewed as joint pretense (Clark and Gerrig, 1984).<sup>9</sup> As Grice (1978, p. 124) noted, “irony is intimately connected with the expression of a feeling, attitude, or evaluation. I cannot say something ironically unless what I say is intended to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt.” He went on: “To be ironical is, among other things, to pretend (as the etymology suggests), and while one wants the pretense to be recognized as such, to announce it as a pretense would spoil the effect.” What is the pretense?

<sup>9</sup> For related views, see Gibbs (1986a, 1994), Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989), Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, and Brown (1995).

An intuitively satisfying answer was offered by Fowler (1965, pp. 305–306) in his *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*:

Irony is a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsiders' incomprehension. [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.

Combine Fowler's and Grice's suggestions and we have the *pretense theory of irony*.

Let us return to Susan's ironic statement, "To thank him for all of his help in training." In saying this, Susan and Ellen stage a brief scene in layer 2:

- Layer 2 Implied Susan tells implied Ellen that she wants to thank the sergeant for all of his help.
- Layer 1 Susan and Ellen jointly pretend that the event in layer 2 is taking place.

Susan invites Ellen (in layer 1) to imagine a particular scene (scene 2) in which the sergeant has been so helpful that Susan will thank him by inviting him to a nice meal. In the actual world, they know they are inviting the nasty and sexist sergeant to a disgusting meal (scene 1). So in creating layer 2, Susan has highlighted several contrasts between the two scenes:

- Scene 2 Susan is inviting the sergeant to a *nice* meal to *thank* him for being so *helpful*.
- Scene 1 Susan is inviting the sergeant to a *disgusting* meal to *chasten* him for being so *nasty and sexist*.

Actual Susan and actual Ellen (in layer 1) appreciate these contrasts, and, as Fowler noted, take delight in the secret intimacy (or "inner circle") they set up with them. What are they delighted at? At their recognition that the sergeant would think he was being thanked when actually he was getting his just deserts.

In the pretense theory, then, irony has two layers. A and B are at layer 1, and their implied counterparts Ai and Bi are at layer 2:

- Layer 2 Ai is performing a serious communicative act for Bi.
- Layer 1 A and B jointly pretend that the event in layer 2 is taking place.

A and B play the roles of Ai and Bi at layer 2, so the correspondence func-

tion C(2) specifies (among other things): A = Ai; B = Bi. They take delight in their recognition of the contrast between the two layers. Indeed, A and B often make fun of their characters by speaking in mock, exaggerated, or caricatured voices. They also take delight as A lets B show how sophisticated, knowledgeable, or savvy she is in catching on to A's pretense. An exaggerated performance by A helps B do that, and an exaggerated performance by B helps her show that she has caught on.<sup>10</sup>

Staged communicative acts that are classified as irony cluster around several attitudes. The point of an ironic act is generally to call attention to an *unexpected incongruity* between what might have been (scene 2) and what is (scene 1). It is common for speakers to comment on unexpected situations, especially negative ones, by “alluding” to what is normal or expected or by “echoing” “popular wisdom or received opinions” (Gibbs, 1994; Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995; Sperber and Wilson, 1981; Wilson and Sperber, 1992). Here is a standard though contrived illustration:

Utterances	A: <b>“What a gorgeous day!”</b> B: <b>“Yes, isn’t it!”</b>
Actual situation	There is heavy rain, when A and B had expected a nice day.
Staged situation	The day is gorgeous, and A and B are ecstatic about it.
Contrast	The weather is not at all what A and B expected.
Attitude	A and B are unhappy that the weather is not as expected.

Staged acts tend to be called ironic whenever, as Grice said, they “reflect a hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt.”

“Sarcasm,” Fowler (1965, p. 535) noted, “does not necessarily involve irony, and irony has often no touch of sarcasm...The essence of sarcasm is the intention of giving pain by (ironical or other) bitter words.” So when sarcasm does involve irony, it works much the same as irony. A and B jointly pretend that implied A is performing a serious communicative act to implied B. It is just that the point is to cause B pain. Here is an example from a cartoon (Haiman, 1990):

Husband, at TV: That’s over twelve hours of continuous football action!  
Wife, deadpan: **Whoopee.**

<sup>10</sup> Grice (1978, p. 125) argued: “If speaking ironically has to be, or at least to appear to be, the expression of a certain sort of feeling or attitude, then a tone suitable to such a feeling or attitude seems to be mandatory, at any rate for the least sophisticated examples.”

On the surface, the wife appears to agree with her husband, but she is betrayed by her monotone. She is staging a scene in which she exclaims “Whoopee!” The husband is to appreciate the contrast between her staged enthusiasm and her actual indifference. As John Haiman (1990) noted, sarcasm is often explicitly marked with a sneering or contemptuous tone, a monotone (“Whoopee”), an exaggerated intonation (“You poor baby!” or “My heart bleeds for you” in feigned compassion), or a singsong. With sarcasm as with irony, what speakers stage is less high drama than melodrama.

#### TEASING

A tease is a staged communicative act designed to make fun of or playfully mock the addressee. Teasing is sometimes hard to tell from irony or sarcasm, suggesting already that it is a member of the same family. Some teasing is good-humored, and the person teased responds in the same fictional domain as the teaser. In this example, Gerald has just bought a brand-new sports car (Drew, 1987):

Gerald: Hi how are you  
 Martha: Well, you're late as usual  
 Gerald: eheh eheh eheh eheh  
**Lee:** **What's the matter couldn't you get your car started?**  
**Gerald:** **hehh That's right. I had to get it pushed, eheh eheh eheh**

Lee pretends he is seriously asking Gerald whether he could get his car started. Gerald shows he appreciates the pretense (“hehh”) by staging a response “That's right. I had to get it pushed” as if Lee's question were serious. Lee's utterance has two layers:

Layer 2 Implied Lee asks implied Gerald whether he could get his car started.  
 Layer 1 Lee and Gerald jointly pretend that the event in layer 2 is taking place.

For the tease to work, Gerald must recognize layer 2 and appreciate Lee's reasons for creating it. Gerald's response, in line with the pretense, has two layers as well.

How does teasing work? One answer has been offered by Paul Drew (1987) for teases that receive serious responses. In this example (p. 227),<sup>11</sup> “Larry has been mildly complaining about a function he and

<sup>11</sup> In this notation, “hhh” indicates audible breathing, “(0.5)” indicates pause length in seconds, and “=” indicates that the two adjacent turns are “latched” together with no pause between them.

Alice have to go to that evening and which he knows starts at seven o'clock":

- Alice: Uh::: Hey try and get home at a decent hour 'cause
- Larry: Yeh I be home by ni:ne,
- Alice: No:(.) get home pretty early okay? (0.5)
- Alice: Please,
- Larry:** **Well I can leave right now if you want,=**
- Alice: =No::, hhh
- Larry: khh-hh
- Alice: ih:::hh So:, (0.3) Okay?

After Alice nags Larry about getting home early, he stages an offer to "leave right now if you want"; his utterance has two layers. Alice responds to the offer as if it had been a serious offer ("No::"); her utterance has only one layer. Yet she and Larry mutually establish that she has recognized his pretense when the two of them exchange laughs. Here, then, is a joint pretense, although Alice doesn't respond in a joint pretense.

What is A doing in teasing B? According to Drew, A's tease is a reaction to B's earlier behavior. In Drew's collection of examples, the recipients were always overdoing something – bragging, extolling another person's virtues, complaining in outrage, going on about something, telling a far-fetched story, being overly self-deprecating, or playing innocent. Alice was overdoing her concern about Larry getting home on time. What A does in teasing B is pretend to take B's overdone action one step further. The purpose is to get B to see how overblown his or her action was to evoke such a reaction. Larry creates scene 2, which he intends to be compared with the actual scene 1:

**Scene 2** Implied Alice is so anxious that implied Larry be home early *that implied Larry is offering to leave right now.*

**Scene 1** Alice is *quite* anxious that Larry be home early.

Alice is to appreciate the contrast and, thereby, see that Larry is criticizing her for being overly anxious. It is the criticism that Alice defends herself against with her response.

Teases are staged the same way as irony and sarcasm. A and B jointly pretend that Ai is performing a serious communicative act for Bi. The correspondence function C(2) specifies: A = Ai; B = Bi. The staged act is a normal reaction to something B has overdone, showing B's action

to be worthy of ridicule, and A intends B to appreciate this.<sup>12</sup> Like irony, teases get introduced into the conversation sequentially and interactively. And as in irony, A and B are to imagine the events in layer 2 and yet appreciate A's reasons at layer 1 for creating those events.

Not all teasing takes this form. Another form is the *put-on*, as in this example (Philips, 1975):

Several students are working together at a table where a microphone has been placed. One student turns from the group and calls out to the teacher, "Mr. Smith, Charlie's foolin' with the mike." Charlie says, "I am not." The teacher looks up when summoned, but doesn't respond, turning back to his paper work. In this case, Charlie hadn't touched the microphone.

When the first student, let's name him Ben, calls out to Mr. Smith, he is trying to put him on about a classroom infraction by Charlie. What is different here is the participants in the staging. Ben is pretending to tell Mr. Smith about the infraction, but Mr. Smith isn't in on the pretense—at least not at first. Only Charlie is. Ben's put-on has these two layers:

Layer 2 Implied Ben, incensed, tells Smith that implied Charlie is fooling with the mike.

Layer 1 Ben and Charlie jointly pretend that the event in layer 2 is taking place.

The victim of the put-on (here, Mr. Smith) is expected to catch on only later, to the delight of the instigator (Ben) and the others in the know (Charlie). In this example, Ben is putting Mr. Smith on and, simultaneously, teasing Charlie, getting him into trouble. Teasing and put-ons may take a variety of forms, but they all involve layering and an appreciation of that layering.<sup>13</sup>

#### OVERSTATEMENT, UNDERSTATEMENT, AND RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

Overstatement and understatement – hyperbole and meiosis – are stagings in which the speaker pretends to use an expression that is exaggerated or understated in some way. Here is an example of overstatement (2.22b.658):

<sup>12</sup> Drew (p. 232): "Teases are designed to make it very apparent what they are up to—that they are not intended as real or sincere proposals—by being constructed as very obviously exaggerated versions of some action etc.; and/or by being in direct contrast to something they both know or one has just told the other."

<sup>13</sup> For a related phenomenon, see Labov's (1972) "Rules for ritual insults."

Ann: my room at the moment is covered have you seen it since it was covered  
in **millions** of little pots, all growing pips and seeds and things,  
Betty: no

Ann isn't claiming to have literally millions of little pots in her room, but only more pots than expected. She is using *millions* in overstatement.

Overstatement is clearly akin to teasing and irony. Ann and Betty, her partner, briefly create two layers:

Layer 2 Implied Ann tells implied Betty that what her room is covered with is millions of little pots.  
Layer 1 Ann and Betty jointly pretend that the event in layer 2 is taking place.

Ann wants Betty to imagine scene 2 and appreciate the contrast with scene 1:

Scene 2 The room is covered with *millions* of little pots.  
Scene 1 The room is covered with, say, *fifty* little pots.

Her purpose is to emphasize just how many little pots there are for the size of her room. As in other stagings, C(2) specifies among other things that A = Ai and B = Bi. Understatement is subject to a similar analysis.

Rhetorical questions are also staged communicative acts. Take this piece of conversation (1.12.1364):

Betty: well you see her grandchildren, don't go to see her,  
Calvin: m  
Betty: so **why should it matter**, I mean I might have hundreds of them,  
and yet,  
Donald: yeah  
Betty: they probably would never come to see me,

When Betty says "Why should it matter?" she is pretending to ask why it should matter (to the grandmother what happens around her). She doesn't really want an answer – it is so obvious it isn't needed. Indeed, she goes on to her next utterance without leaving space for an answer. The purpose is clear. At level 2, implied Betty is seriously asking implied Calvin and Donald why it should matter. At level 1, the three of them jointly pretend that she is doing that. They are to imagine Betty asking the question and them answering and, through the contrast with the actual situation, appreciate how obvious its answer is.

Staged communicative acts, then, come in many forms – irony, sarcasm, teasing, overstatement, understatement, rhetorical questions, and others. In each case, A engages B (and perhaps others) in staging a brief

scene that blatantly contrasts with the current situation. A intends B to appreciate why A has drawn attention to these contrasts. In irony and sarcasm, it is to point out how unexpected or unwanted the current situation is, or how naive, innocent, or silly certain people are, and thereby to derogate them. In one type of teasing, it is to point out how B has overdone something and thereby to ridicule that action. In overstatement, it is to increase the degree of one feature of the current situation. And in rhetorical questions, it is to point out the obviousness of a current issue. Staged communicative acts are remarkably useful.

### **Ostensible communicative acts**

Some apparent communicative acts have a built-in ambivalence. Suppose Irene asks Jake what he thinks of her new dress, he says "I like it," and she replies "Oh, thanks." Irene has put Jake in an awkward position, and the two of them recognize this. She has asked him to comment on her dress, and, to be polite, he can't very well say he doesn't like it. If he doesn't like it very much, he might say "I like it," but without the appropriate enthusiasm or elaboration. He expects Irene to appreciate that he is only *ostensibly* saying he likes it. What he is actually doing is showing her, not that he likes her dress, but that he holds her in high enough regard to put on a show of liking it. Here we have what Ellen Isaacs and I (1990) have called an ostensible compliment and its ostensible acceptance.

*Ostensible communicative acts* deserve attention because they help us better understand what it means to make a polite gesture. Polite gestures (like Jake's compliment) are paradoxical. They are performed only for politeness' sake – they are not to be taken seriously – and yet they work. How is that possible? To begin, let us consider ostensible invitations, as described in an investigation by Isaacs and myself (1990).

### **OSTENSIBLE INVITATIONS**

Two Stanford University students, Ross and Cathy, have a date to study one evening, but Ross has a problem. Some old friends of his from Southern California have called to say they are arriving at Stanford that evening and want him to go to a basketball game at Berkeley, about an hour away, and he has accepted. He telephones Cathy, describes the circumstances, explains he is going to the game, and says:

- Ross: Do you want to come?
- Cathy: That's all right. I'll pass.
- Ross: Okay.

As Ross and Cathy each later explained, they recognized that Ross was inviting Cathy only to be polite. He didn't honestly want her to accept, and recognizing this, she didn't. With this maneuver they were both satisfied. On the surface, he had given her the chance to go along and she had declined. At the same time, but below the surface, he showed her that he still cared for her, and she showed him that she understood that. The date dissolved without public rancor or loss of face.

Ostensible invitations have properties that can be accounted for if we assume they have two layers. Ross' utterance has these two layers:

Layer 2 Implied Ross is sincerely inviting implied Cathy to go to the game.

Layer 1 Ross and Cathy jointly pretend that the event in layer 2 is taking place.

Ross intends Cathy to imagine him sincerely making the invitation. This way she will also imagine how much he values her company: He regards her highly enough to invite her along. All this is at layer 2. Ross also intends Cathy to appreciate why he is making the pretense. He is putting on public display an act that shows how highly he regards her. Yet he intends her to see that he doesn't really want her to go along, and to be polite she should decline. So Ross gets Cathy to appreciate that he doesn't want her to go, yet avoids putting that on record, which would lead to loss of face. What he puts on record instead is a display of his regard for her.

Ostensible acts have the same properties as staged acts, but with several differences. If A ostensibly invites B to event E, the invitation has these properties:

1. *Joint pretense.* A engages B in a joint pretense. (Ross and Cathy mutually recognize that Ross is making a pretense.)
2. *Communicative act.* The joint pretense is that Ai is sincerely inviting Bi to E. (Ross and Cathy's joint pretense is that he is sincerely inviting her to go to the game.)
3. *Correspondence.* A is to be taken as Ai, and B as Bi. (In their pretense, Ross is to be taken as implied Ross, and Cathy as implied Cathy.)
4. *Contrast.* A intends A and B to mutually recognize certain contrasts between the demonstrated and actual situations and to see A's reason for highlighting them. (Ross wants Cathy to compare what *could be*, that he really wants her to go, with what is, that he doesn't actually want her to go. She will then see that he would like to have been with her *if circumstances had been different*—that he still enjoyed and wanted her company.)
5. *Ambivalence.* If asked, A couldn't sincerely say he wanted B to go to event E, nor could he sincerely say he didn't. (Ross couldn't honestly say "Yes, I

really want you to come," because he didn't really want Cathy to go. Yet he also couldn't admit to her publicly that he didn't want her to come, for that would imply he didn't regard her highly enough to invite her.)

6. *Collusion.* A expects B to respond to the pretense appropriate to A's wishes. (If Cathy is cooperative, she will decline Ross' invitation.)

It is properties 5 and 6, ambivalence and collusion, that distinguish ostensible from staged acts. If Ross had been sarcastic in asking "Do you want to come?" he would deny he really wanted Cathy to go, and she might respond with equal sarcasm, "Yeah, I just love hanging out with the guys." What makes the invitation ostensible is that he wouldn't deny either that he really wanted Cathy to go, or that he didn't. He displays *ambivalence*. And he wants her to respond by *colluding* with him, by pretending to take the invitation seriously and declining, which she does. Ostensible invitations project ostensible responses.

For ostensible invitations to work, people must engineer the situation to make the ostensibility of the invitations clear. Suppose, again, that A ostensibly invites B to event E. Isaacs and I found that people try to arrange the circumstances in at least these ways:

1. A makes B's presence at E implausible. "I know you are too busy, but..."
2. A extends his or her invitation to B only after B has solicited it.
3. A doesn't motivate the invitation beyond simple social courtesy.
4. A doesn't insist or persist on the invitation – for example, after B has politely declined the first time.
5. A is vague about the arrangements for event E. "Let's have lunch sometime."
6. A hedges the invitation with such expressions as "well," "I guess," "maybe," and "if you want."
7. A delivers the invitation with inappropriate cues – flatter intonation, hesitations, rapid speaking – any sign to show that he or she isn't fully committed to the invitation.

Precisely how A engineers the invitation depends on the circumstances. If it is obvious that B can't attend E, A is free to be as enthusiastic as he or she wants – to show appreciation for B.

Ostensible invitations are risky – which is one of their virtues. When Ross asks Cathy "Do you want to come?" when he doesn't want her to, he faces several risks. First, she may misconstrue his invitation as sincere. If she does, she may accept it. Or she may resent being invited to a basketball game with the guys, something Ross knows she wouldn't enjoy. If Ross has engineered it right, these risks should be slight. At least, they

should be smaller than the potential benefits of letting her know he still appreciates her. Or second, Cathy may choose not to collude in her response and put it on record that he doesn't want her to go: "Oh, you don't really want me to go." If this happens, Ross has a ready reply, "But of course I do – that's why I invited you," and he is committed to taking her. In short, A prefers the risks of misconstrual to the benefits of indirection, and has a clear defense against any implied slight.

#### OTHER OSTENSIBLE COMMUNICATIVE ACTS

Many joint projects besides invitations and their acceptances are also ostensible. Greetings, for example, often consist of ostensible questions and answers, as in this example (3.1c.1030):

Detch: \*good morning\*  
 Morris: \*good morning Miss\* Detch how are you  
 Detch: \*\*fine thank you\*\*  
 Morris: \*\*would you like to\*\* take the comfortable chair

When Morris says, "How are you?" he is ostensibly asking Miss Detch how she is, and with "Fine" she is ostensibly answering that question. Morris would be surprised and disappointed if Detch really did say how she was, and she recognizes this (Sacks, 1975).

Morris and Detch make clear the ostensibility of their actions in several ways. When Detch says "thank you," it isn't for Morris' question. Rather, it is for Morris showing he cares enough to display a concern about her health. And Morris considers his display to be all that is needed. He doesn't even wait for Detch's answer before starting the next utterance. So with the exchange "How are you?" "Fine thank you," Morris and Detch imagine an exchange in which a concerned Morris asks Detch about her health, and she tells him sincerely that it is fine. They appreciate that Morris' purpose is to display a personal concern as a preliminary to their talk, and hers is to display a healthy person ready to enter that talk.

Congratulations and apologies can also be ostensible. When the loser of a game congratulates the winner, the congratulations and its acceptance are usually recognized as ostensible. The loser isn't honestly happy that the winner won, and the winner recognizes this. Or when a child is required by a mother or school teacher to apologize to another child for some wrong, that apology and its acceptance are ordinarily ostensible as well. The first child, apologizing under protest, isn't really sorry, and the

second child recognizes this. These congratulations and apologies are heard not as insincere but as ostensible. The loser and the child, by asking their partners to imagine the real congratulations and apology, display a sincere regard for the recipients or the system they belong to.

Ostensible projects like this work in two ways. First, the participants agree on idealized communicative acts – what their current joint project would be if the circumstances were ideal. That in itself shows a certain mutual respect. Ross and Cathy, for example, jointly create a picture in which he sincerely invites her to go along to the game, and she sincerely declines. Second, in creating these idealized acts, the participants jointly avoid putting on record troublesome issues that might otherwise come up. Ross and Cathy avoid discussing why he would rather go out with the guys than with her.

#### POLITE GESTURES

Most ostensible acts are designed to deal with politeness. Recall how people manage face (Chapter 10). They try to maintain both their *self-worth*, to be respected by others, and their *autonomy*, to be unimpeded by others. Ostensible acts help maintain both. When the participants create idealized ostensible acts, like Ross and Cathy's invitation and declination, they deal with self-worth. They display a mutually respectful exchange in a situation that otherwise threatens to reveal the opposite. And when they keep troublesome issues off record, they also deal with autonomy. They avoid discussing the issues explicitly.

These properties suggest a deeper explanation for the politeness of the pre-requests we saw in Chapter 10. Recall this exchange:

Clark: Do you know where Goldberg's Grocery is?  
 Verona: Yes, it's just around the corner.

In my utterance, I framed the social situation as one in which I was uncertain whether Verona knew where Goldberg's Grocery was, and she was to tell me if she did. In response, she took up the situation as I framed it and answered "yes." Then, without prompting, she went on to tell me the information I wanted ("it's around the corner"). The situation I framed was preparatory to asking Verona where the store was. She saw that and offered me that information.

The question and its first answer can profitably be viewed as ostensible communicative acts. If Verona didn't know where Goldberg's Grocery was, it would be embarrassing to ask her. To avoid that embar-

rassment, I pretended to ask her only *whether* she knew, and she colluded with me by saying “Yes.” Yet she appreciated why I initiated the ostensible question, recognizing that I wanted to find Goldberg’s Grocery. So she took up that proposed joint project as well and said, “It’s just around the corner.” She pretended with me that I was asking her a question, and she colluded with me in answering it. If she had asked me “Did you really want to know if I knew?” I couldn’t honestly have said “Yes, I did.” Nor could I have admitted “No, I didn’t,” for that would have implied I didn’t care whether I embarrassed her or not.

Recall that many pre-requests (like “Can you?” “Could you?” “Do you know?” “Will you?” “Would you?”) are highly conventional, addressing generic obstacles, and are to be taken as *pro forma*. But what does it mean to be “*pro forma*”? Take this example from a telephone call to a local shop (Clark, 1979):

Susan: Could you tell me what time you close tonight?  
 Manager: Six o'clock.

Susan pretends that perhaps the manager “couldn’t” tell her what time they close. The manager recognizes her reasons for the pretense because he gives her the time wanted. But he doesn’t collude with her by saying “Yes” first. He takes the pretense to be *pro forma* and not in need of acknowledgment. Still, he could have answered “yes.” In another study (Munro, 1977), when people were asked face to face “Could you tell me what time it is?” 45 percent of them said “Yes” before giving the time.

Even though “Could you tell me?” is *pro forma*, it still has a point. The manager can maintain his self-worth and autonomy simply by recognizing Susan’s pretense: She has taken the pains to offer him an out, and even if it is a merely ostensible out, that is still deferential. “Could you tell me what time you close?” is judged as more polite than “What time do you close?” (Clark and Schunk, 1980). The manager also realizes that Susan has offered him the option of being polite in return. All he has to do is answer her ostensible question first with “yes,” and that is face-saving for her to do too. Indeed, for *pro forma* pre-requests like “Could you tell me?” the response “Yes, we close at six” is judged to be more polite than “We close at six” (Chapter 10).

Ostensible communicative acts like these are often called rituals, habits, mere gestures, and even mindless actions, but the pejorative labels don’t do them justice. On closer examination, they turn out to be subtle and effective tools for managing self-worth and autonomy.

### Conclusions

In the simplest layering, people perform two joint actions simultaneously. The actions in layer 1 take place in one domain, and those in layer 2 take place in a second domain jointly created by the participants in the first domain. The best examples come from joint pretense. Alan and Beth, in urban San Francisco in 1952, make believe they are Wild Bill and Calamity Jane in the Deadwood gold rush of 1876. When Alan picks up a pebble in San Francisco (layer 1), he and Beth construe his behavior simultaneously as Wild Bill picking up a gold nugget in Deadwood (layer 2).

In joint activities, people use layering when they want to contrast some hypothetical world with the current, real world. With layering, they don't describe the hypothetical world: They demonstrate it. They and their audience imagine the new world without actually having to enter it. They simulate experience at a distance. People exploit these properties for a range of purposes.

Layering is essential to stories. Storytellers and their audiences work together to create elaborate happenings in hypothetical domains, jointly pretending that the happenings are actually taking place. In plays and movies, actors and their audiences jointly create performances with much the same pretense. The primary participants in all these examples are to imagine what is happening in the story world and yet appreciate why the author and actors are creating them.

Speakers also stage individual communicative acts to get addressees to appreciate certain contrasts between the staged and actual situations. With irony, the point is to comment on an unexpected anomaly. With sarcasm, it is to wound the addressee. With one type of teasing, it is to comment on something the addressee has overdone. With hyperbole, it is to stress the extent of some attribute, and with meiosis, to underplay its extent.

A subtler form of layering is found in ostensible communicative acts. In an ostensible invitation, the speaker and addressee jointly pretend that the speaker is inviting the addressee to some event. The two of them recognize that the invitation isn't to be taken seriously, and that the addressee is to collude with the speaker. The point of the speaker's pretense is to show appreciation for the addressee and to keep the half-heartedness of the invitation off record. Ostensible acts – thanks, apologies, congratulations, questions about one's health – are broadly useful in managing face, in keeping social relations equitable.