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Irony in the Political: Young people's use of irony in a political text conversation in a net community

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Abstract

The net community[1] as a public place expresses current society while creating conditions and providing a framework for societal development and young people's participation, living and understanding of the wider society. Today young people spend much time on the Internet, specifically in the social media[2], and everyday political conversations are minimally researched. My research deals with young people's conversation in net communities and how these conversations look, and the opportunities this creates for the growth of political citizens: What potential relevance may these opportunities have when young people are faced with existentially controversial and vital issues (about sustainable development)? The question for this paper is limited to a small part of this broader context concerning everyday political conversations in the light of irony. According to previous research, irony is a multifaceted and ambiguous phenomenon and the social media offer new expressions for irony. What does this mean for the text conversation? Irony is shown to be, through an initial observation, a rhetorical resource that visualises adversaries and pushes the conversation forward. My intention is, through a rhetorically oriented discourse analysis, to understand irony by identifying different types of irony and discuss possible implications: How does the use of irony look? What are its consequences for the conversation and the growth of political citizens? The theoretical entrance for this leans on the idea of the political. First I will present the concept of irony; secondly, theoretical and methodological inputs; thirdly, a description of the empirical data and how irony is identified; and finally, I present some preliminary results and conclusions.

Key words: the political, social media, net community, irony, text conversation, discourse analysis, rhetoric

Irony

> That's the way to earn money. More short-term profit, sell all state-owned companies so we get quick money, suck up every damn fish from the sea!

The concept, phenomenon or strategy of irony is complex, elusive and context-dependent (Clift 1999; Egan 1997/2005; Szerszynski 2007). The general approach to irony is to view ironic statements as the opposite of their literal meaning (Potter 1996; Clift 1999; Egan

1997/2005) and this literal meaning echoes an expectation that has been violated. The expectation could e.g. rest upon common norms, values, knowledge or earlier expectations built up through the conversation. In this paper irony is viewed as a rhetorical expression, simultaneously constituted of an evaluative content. Irony can be a powerful resource for young people's political interest, for those who hold lower positions of power in society (Reverby 2008; Stratton 2009). Irony can therefore be used to challenge the prevailing policy. This also means that irony can be ideologically charged, a product of interest and strategies. Irony becomes 'an approach to discourse which treats it not as literal but as a product of interest or strategy' (Potter 1996, p.107). In this paper, irony is used as an analytical concept in order to understand its characteristics, process, types and its consequences. Irony therefore bears a strong political dimension and this could be contextualised with the idea of *the political*.

The political

The political is a constitutive dimension of human society that determinates coexistence (Mouffe 1993/2005). It is the ontological condition for humans integrated in all societal levels and forces humans to make choices between conflicting options (Mouffe 2008). This means that the political is a part of human organisation where every ethical, moral, religious, economic or technical controversy could be transformed to a political one if the controversy is strong enough to group humans into friends and enemies or, at best, political adversaries (Mouffe 1993/2005). In contrast, *politics* refers to the institutions and practices through which human coexistence is arranged. Politics creates order in the controversial context that the political offers (Mouffe 2008). Ruitenberg (2009) believes that the antagonistic dimension of the political is linked to the hegemonic nature of social interaction and the differences that exist concerning how the organisation of the society should be made. These differences could be seen as an expression of plurality, and within a radical view of democracy this points to a notion of something politically shared, a coherent *shared what*. According to Ljunggren (1996) this means a self-imposed will, by certain agreements for public conversations, to set limits for acceptable and non-acceptable political claims. Radical democracy becomes a political framework for political adversaries' public conversation. The *shared what* of Swedish youngsters, their will, adversaries and certain agreements can emerge differently in the public sphere – the net community is a place where this can be studied.

The Net community as a contrast to formal education

A civic culture, e.g. the Net community, is both strong and vulnerable: 'It generates the normative and cultural resources required for a functioning democracy, yet it sits precariously in the face of political and economic power. It can be shaped by citizens but can also shape them' (Dahlgren 2000, p.335). Young people's possibilities to grow as political citizens are dependent on places where young people live their daily lives. Education is a

public place where young people are given opportunities to grow as political citizens but education is also a limitation in this growth. In light of limitations and opportunities the Net community seems to give other possibilities than education to grow as political citizens. The question is what we, as researchers and teachers, can learn from the everyday political processes in the social media and their relation to education because we have, according to Frazer, a problem: 'Politics poses a problem for education because, it seems, to educate people politically is to educate them out of ethics' (2007, p.253). Within a broader context, the problem of young people's political growth could be viewed as a lack of interest in political concerns according to Mouffe (1993/2005, 2008), which is a consequence of a consensual and neoliberal established society – people are becoming less interested in politics and voter turnout drops. This lack of interest is also described and dealt with in different ways in several other studies (e.g. Putnam 2000; Pfaff 2009) but is however hard to find in the Net community: quite the opposite could be argued. Ruitenberg (2009) nevertheless argues that 'a political or civic education is required that enables people to act as political adversaries, both individually and, more importantly, as members of a group' (p.275). But, is this necessary if the political adversaries thrive in the social media? In relation to a recently published study about young Swedes and their way of viewing and using the Internet these questions could be interesting. The study shows that there is a broad gap between Internet use in the home and Internet use in the school. This is so even if the opportunities to use the Internet in the home and school are similar (almost 100% have access to the Internet). The study also shows that approximately ¾ of young Swedes in the age span of 12-25 are members of one or several net communities (Findahl 2010).

Frazer (2007) argues that 'we need politics, because in human societies as such there is conflict. Conflict is why magic, or religious power, or markets, won't do' (p.258-259). To be able to act politically there must be opportunities for people to identify themselves with collective structures that offer a self-image that could be valued. According to Mouffe (2008) the political discourse must offer political programs and identification possibilities that could help people to understand what is happening and give hope for the future. Partly, the social media perform this function – to offer identification and hope for the future – because 'the Internet's primary function is as a social meeting place' (Lövlie 2006, p.4). But, as Frazer notes:

> Sadly, though, participation in decision making in school is often patchy and ineffective. Children and students are frequently frustrated by consultative committees and the like, and oppressed by head teachers and other authorities' decisiveness. So school, with its playground and its classroom representatives and its citizenship days, can be an object lesson in how awful and petty and useless politics is (2007, p.260).

Could it be that the Net community becomes the place where young people can make their voice heard, to be recognised as full members of society? Biesta & Lawy (2006) speak about citizenship-as-achievement, which is 'founded upon the assumption that citizenship is a status that individuals can achieve' (p.42). The pupil is considered as a "not yet" citizen and

becomes excluded from parts of the public sphere. Education is viewed as a linear and unproblematic process that is about fostering the "right" citizen. The opposite is citizenship-as-practice where the pupil is seen as already a citizen and an active participant of the public sphere. The educational process is then experienced-based and built upon genuine participation and inclusion. Citizenship-as-practice is a strong characteristic of the net community as a public place. The Net community as a public place for the growth of political citizens (and its potential relation to education) is barely investigated, which calls for further research.

The political everyday life – social media as a context

The everyday political dimensions are relatively unexplored. It is in the flow of everyday life that the political "unfolds at the level of subjective experience" which is constituted by 'small-scale, often individual, decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and are difficult to capture using the traditional tools with which political participation is measured' (Bakardjieva 2009, p.92). Different approaches to the field of "everyday politics" are all attempts to catch 'the political significance of those "fuzzy or ambigous phenomena, grounded in civil society and the lifeworld"' (Livingstone 2005, p.32 i Bakardjieva 2009, p.92). The main idea of this research is to look for 'germs and projections on the political and public world' (Bakardjieva 2009, p.92) in the private and everyday life quarters. There is a 'significant lack of empirical research on the relevance of youth cultural styles for political learning and socialization' according to Pfaff (2009, p.168). This can be explained by the fact that the research conducted in this area has been adult-centered. This means that youth-specific expressions and views in the field of politics have been excluded: 'The research on the political socialization of the young has always been normative; successful socialization up to now has been seen as the perpetuation of values and practices consistent with the existing political system' (Pfaff 2009, p.169). The assumption behind the relevance of empirical research into this area therefore builds on an idea that everyday thinking and conversation in youth's different cultural and everyday life spheres has importance for democratic politics. This can be defined as *the politics of everyday life*, a socially constituted context where political questions are handled and lived. Social media build on genuine participation and can be used as a democratic resource. The content in social media is held up and produced by the participants – it gives the political everyday conversation possibilities to flourish. Social media is therefore an example of the political everyday life, in which European youngsters spend a lot of time (Findahl & Zimic 2008; Findahl 2010). To investigate the politics of everyday life in net communities discourse analysis is used.

Rhetoric and discourse analysis

Discourse analysis takes the action and rhetorical oriented character of the text conversation into account (Potter 1996; Wetherell 2001; Wahl 2006; Billig 2001). It is performed on the

operational level – how something is said and what this constructs. The language activities in the text conversation under study are regarded as constructions which constitute reality – language is a social practice. Descriptions are therefore inextricably woven with that described – language is action, active and creative (Wooffitt 2005). Those descriptions are constituted in and by language, a text, symbol and pictorial based one. When a description is claimed to be correct, which is frequently done in the text conversation, it is a matter of practical and rhetorical work. The text conversation is studied in relation to this "work" (Potter 1996; Billig 2001), where rhetoric is defined as language activity, a discursive practice (Rosengren 2008) and 'a pervasive feature of the way people interact and arrive at understanding' (Potter 1996, p.106). By taking the discursive practice into consideration I therefore recognise that descriptions create preconditions for the conversation.

What is a text conversation?

Text is a symbolic expression which constitutes some kind of coherent whole where words, sound and visual element are concluded (Sveningsson 2003). Text conversation is a subnet of symbols in the greater net – Internet. Text conversation is a product of today's method of communicating. Communication in the social media is a fusion of *text* and *conversation* because the activities tend to blur the boundaries of an everyday auditory comprehension of text-based conversations and other communicative activities. Text conversations are graphically constituted as text; the conversation is made in and as text.

Identifying Irony

There are various ways of analysing and identifying irony. A recurring feature is that irony shows inequality and gaps between different evaluative perspectives and interests, between expectations and reality, between is and ought, or between the ideal and the actual (Clift 1999; Stratton 2009; McCarthy & Carter 2004; Szerszynski 2007). The specific potential of irony is to signal contrasting values: 'The gap between the said and the meant is conveyed as constituting the most relevant message' (Kotthoff 2003, p.1392). To determine if a description is ironic or not I study the whole situation, and what impact statements may have for the further discussion. Different responses to the statements can range from 'the literal level of the ironic act, to the implicated, mixed, or ambiguous reactions, to laughter … different types of responses to irony create different activity types' (Kotthoff 2003, p.1387). In order to identify a description or situation as ironic, I have developed a number of criteria based on Szerszynski (2007) and Clift (1999) which should be fully or partially met in the situation which is created in the text conversation. The text conversation and its created and framed context should show:
- at least two different meanings that valuate each other
- value-contradiction or absurdity between expressed meanings
- a positioning characteristic, an outside observer perspective from a higher moral ground

- norm and conditional changes through e.g. extreme or impossible descriptions
- doubt and certainty
- a taking of position, different from that previously claimed

By characterising irony as a framed valuation it becomes possible to show how 'it is achieved, and to what it achieves' (Clift 1999, p.546). Those values have a broad lifespan, from hostile to sympathetic, and its 'evaluations are often responses to perceived behavioural transgression. Such evaluations strongly implicate a certain category of response, namely agreement or disagreement' (Clift 1999, p.546). Clift notes that 'irony emerges from the placement of the turn itself … The irony does not necessarily lodge in the articulation of the utterance itself' (Clift 1999, p.546). Clift means that irony is commonly used 'in positions where evaluations are expectable', which the text conversation is a clear example of, but that 'the apparent evaluations they deliver, on the level of inside meaning, are anything but ironic' (1999, p.546-547). It is the gap and its relation to the object, the conversational issue, that's at stake in the ironic description. Politically this means that the ironic description can be helpful in revealing the political and ideological concerns that are at stake in the situation. To be able to identify irony, you need a situation to identify it within. This leads us to the place where the text conversation takes place.

Empirical data

It could be a problem to select empirical data because there are multiple net communities and an infinite number of text conversations to choose from. In this section I clarify the basis on which my selection is made.

The net community in which the text conversation has been selected is:
- aimed at young people in the age range of 13-26 years, the median value in the text conversation is 17, range: 14-26
- open: not explicitly based on political, metaphysical or ideological convictions
- of semi-public nature: possibilities to be a lurker.

Criteria for *the text conversation*:
- content and title of the thread defines the conversation as political
- asynchronous: members can read and write messages at different times which means that there is room for reflection before new posts are made. This creates space for ease and peacefulness, the participants don't need to act and be visually active all the time (cf. von Wright 2007).

Discursive conditions of the text conversation, which has the subject name *Right or Left?*, are constantly changing. These conditions are subject for discussion, reconstructed by the participants in the ongoing discussions. An example of the discursive conditions for text conversations is acceptance of the general rules. You may for example not violate Swedish law or carry out activities that may seem offensive (e.g. Hate speech). In each discussion, there are moderators who 'manage' the rules and are themselves involved in the discussion.

The text conversation is shown to contain political questions in a broad sense, such as: democracy, education, poverty, labour, economic breakdown, pollution, consumption and social responsibility. The text conversation is extensive in text and time. The interval of analysis ranges from February 2008 to February 2010.

Preliminary results

Five types of irony are identified. *Irony as sarcasm* and *Irony as rhetorical questioning* stand out the most. The first I will deal with more extensively and the other four are mentioned briefly at the end.

Irony as sarcasm implies a direct devaluation and undermining of the descriptions and interests. The irony is characterised by scorn, malice, provocations and taunts in order to highlight other 'better' descriptions. The following is an example that deals with capital and market dominance specified in terms of demand and social safety nets:

> Description A: Många efterfrågar att fattiga tas hand om, och är därav villiga att indirekt eller direkt investera arbete i att uppfylla denna efterfrågan.
>
> (Many demand that poor should be taken care of, and they are therefore willing to indirectly or directly invest work to meet this demand)
>
> Description B: Ja jävlar i det, vi kan ju lägga ner socialen och hela skiten. Den Osynliga Handen kommer automatiskt och obegripligt att fixa bostad åt alla som är hemlösa nu bara vi inför marknadshyror.
>
> (Yes damn it, we can close the social welfare office and the whole shit. The Invisible Hand will automatically and incomprehensibly get homes for everyone who is homeless now, we will just introduce market rents)

There is also a more personally oriented level of sarcasm, one directly addressing the individual, a so-called personal attack, which can contribute to a greater degree of antagonism in the conversation.

Irony as rhetorical questioning includes questions with associated descriptions pointing at different types (such as moral and ideological convictions) of silliness in the description. The other three are: *Irony as storytelling* which means a longer ironic narrative and exposition that shows a lack of logic and strange conclusions; *Irony as lack of knowledge* demonstrates direct factual errors, distorted perception, or lack of experience; finally, *Irony as humour*, answers to a humorous use of irony that contributes to a joyful, humorous and 'easy' conversation.

Conclusion

This text conversation contains different types of irony which contribute to making *conflicting* perspectives visible. Irony then serves as a rhetorical and *political* resource because different types of irony and its consequences show a polarising character. This entails that ideological views and norms are made visible. Overall, irony proves to give fuel to the democratic conversation. Irony then characterises the text conversation and works as a partly contradictory resource – it creates both *confusion* and ambiguity while highlighting differences, and clarifies the contradictions which have been constituted. Irony contributes to a common basis for *understanding* the situation. The conversation is *antagonistic* and institutionally conditioned, expressing a sort of democracy which provides the framework for what is considered acceptable. The conversation could therefore be understood as *agonistic*[3] and seems to give the participants opportunities to make their voices heard in the public sphere. The use of irony seems to play a role in creating conditions and possibilities for the growth of political citizens. The results of the analysis can be used to partially understand the conditions and opportunities for political democracy in net communities, but are by no means comprehensive – this calls for further research.

Notes

[1]
A place on the Internet where there is opportunity for members to take part in a variety of activities (e.g. chat and discussion forums). There are several variants of net communities: large and small; international, national, local; open, semi-public, closed.

[2]
Denotes activities that combine technology, social networking and user-generated content. Social media can be described as a democratisation of information and communication processes based on participants' activities.

[3]
Antagonism is a we/they-relationship (friend/enemy) who do not share a common basis. Agonism means instead that the parties, whether there is any rational solution to disputes or not, acknowledge their opponents as legitimate. The parties in this way belong to the same political shared what and participates in a common symbolic place where conflicts can thrive. The task for democracy is then to transform antagonism to agonism. (Mouffe 2008)

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