

Theorizing Sarcasm

*hē hēlājītabōdhisattva vacasām kim vistarais tōyadhē
nāsti tvatsadrśaḥ paraḥ parahitādhānē grhītavrataḥ
tṛṣyatpānthajanōpakāraghaṭanāvaimukhyalabdhāyaśō-
bhāraprōdvahanē karōṣi kṛpayā sāhāyakam yan marōḥ
atra **vīparītalakṣaṇayā** vācyavaiparītyapratītiḥ.*

“Ocean! I don’t need to say very much.
You have easily outdone the Buddha himself.
You have taken on the vow of helping others,
and there is nobody else like you.
Out of compassion, you helped out the Desert,
so that he wouldn’t have to bear alone the reputation
for refusing to render any assistance to thirsty travelers.”

Here the contrary of what is expressed is understood through

targeting the contrary.

(Ruyyaka’s *Alaṅkārasarvasva*, pp. 142–143,
Janaki ed. — ex. of *vyājastuti*)

A crash course in **targeting** (*lakṣaṇā*)

[following Mukula Bhaṭṭa]

- The primary meaning is **blocked** (*bādhita-*).
 - The blocking can be based on grammatical or pragmatic impossibility; for Mukula it is the latter.
- Another meaning that is **connected to it** (*sambaddha-*) is understood instead.
- There is some **reason** for the use of the secondary (“targeted”) meaning, if it is not totally conventional (*rūḍha-*).

A crash course in **targeting** (*lakṣaṇā*)

[following Bhartṛmitra]

- **Contrariety** (*vaiparītyam*) is one of the possible “connections” between a primary and secondary meaning.
 - Alongside (in one list) contact, proximity, inherence, and a link to an action.
 - Mukula’s example is *bhadramukha* “gentle sir” when what is meant is the opposite.
 - This seems like a bad example to me, if we think about the contexts in which *bhadramukha* might be so used and what it could possibly mean, primarily and secondarily, to the people involved in the exchange.

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Targeting and Implicature

- In these cases **targeting** (*lakṣaṇā*) resembles Gricean **implicature**.
 - The idea is that a speaker will **deliberately** say something untrue (a special case of “flouting” the Cooperative Principle) so that the addressee will recognize its falsity and understand the opposite.
 - There remain a lot of questions about how sarcasm works in Grice’s account (which even he had to modify).

*upakṛtaṁ bahu tatra kim ucyatē sujanatā prathitā bhavatā param
vidadhad īdrśam ēva sadā sakhē sukhitam āsva tataḥ śaradāṁ śatam
ētaḍ apakāriṇaṁ prati **viparītalakṣaṇayā** kaścīd vakti.*

“You’ve really helped a lot. What can I say?
You’ve spread your reputation far and wide.
For that, friend, I hope you live happily
for a hundred years, always doing things like this.”

Someone says this to someone who has offended them by way of
targeting the contrary.

(Mammaṭa’s *Kāvyaprakāśa*,
p. 38, Parikh ed.;
Śabdavyāpāravicāra, p. 4)

A crash course in **suggestion** (*vyañjanā*)

[following Ānandavardhana]

- A different meaning from the literal meaning is conveyed through suggestion.
- The literal meaning may or may not be totally occluded (*atyantatiraskṛta-*).
 - In cases where the literal and suggested meaning are contrary or contradictory, the former *is* totally occluded.

A crash course in **suggestion** (*vyañjanā*)

[following Ānandavardhana]

- Sometimes what is suggested is “subordinate” to something else = **subordinate suggestion** (*guṇībhūtavyaṅgya-*).
- According to Abhinavagupta this is *always* the case when the suggested meaning is conveyed in a relatively obvious way, e.g., through *tone* of voice (*kāku-*).

*āma asaïo ōrama païvvaē ṇa tue maliṇiaṁ sīlaṁ
kiṁ uṇa jaṇassa jāa vva candilaṁ taṁ ṇa kāmēmō*

“Oh yea? *I’m* unfaithful? Give it up, faithful wife.
You’ve never ruined your conduct?
But unlike *somebody’s* wife,
I’m not hot for the barber.”

(Ānandavardhana’s *Dhvanyālōka*, KSS ed.
p. 479 ~ *Sattasaī*, Weber ed., no. 417)

- For Abhinavagupta, sarcasm (when accompanied by a sarcastic tone) is always **subordinate suggestion**, and never **targeting the contrary**.
 - Essentially the tone helps the listener understand the intended meaning **directly**, without going through the intermediate stage of attempting to understand the literal meaning. Hence there is no “blockage” of the literal meaning.
 - **Targeting** (including **targeting the contrary**) should work only in cases where the listener can understand a *prima facie* literal meaning.
 - But this brings sarcasm very close to suggestion properly speaking, distinguished from the latter only by the degree of obviousness.

*sāhentī sahi suhaam̐ khaṇē khaṇē dummiāsi majjhakaē
sabbhāvaṇēhakaraṇijjasarisaam̐ dāva viraīam̐ tumaē*

“Friend, you go to such trouble,
constantly talking to that handsome man for my sake.
You’ve done exactly
what your good character and love call for.”

(Mammaṭa’s *Kāvyaprakāśa*, Parikh ed., p. 12)

- Abhinavagupta (and Ruyyaka following him) would see **targeting** and **suggestion** as mutually exclusive options for conveying a non-literal meaning.
- In Mammaṭa's analysis, however, there is both **targeting** and **suggestion** in this verse.
 - **Targeting** conveys the opposite of the literal meaning: “you have acted like my enemy by getting my lover to have sex with you”
 - **Suggestion** reveals the perlocutionary act of revealing the infidelity of the speaker's lover.
 - [The “obligatory suggestibility” of perlocutionary acts is a general feature of Mammaṭa's analysis]

*niḥśēṣacyutacandanaṃ stanataṭaṃ nirmṛṣṭarāgō 'dharō
nētrē dūram anañjanē pulakitā tanvī tavēyaṃ tanuḥ
mithyāvādinī dūti bāndhavajanasyājñātapīḍāgamē
vāpīṃ snātum itō gatāsi na punas tasyādhamasyāntikam*

“All the sandal paste has fallen from your chest.

The rouge is wiped off your lips.

The kohl is gone from your eyes, and there are goosebumps
all over your slender body.

You're lying. I sent you to deliver a message,
and without even realizing the pain
you would cause your good friend,
you just went to bathe in the tank.

You didn't even go near that jerk.”

(Mammaṭa's *Kāvyaprakāśa*, Parikh ed., p. 9)

- This is Mammaṭa's first example of *dhvani*-, suggestive poetry.
- But unlike the previous verse, he explicitly says that what we understand through **suggestion** is “you really *did* go near that jerk.”
- Where did **targeting** go? Is there scope for it here at all?

- In his commentary, **Ruyyaka** says that there is no **targeting** in this verse at all.
 - That is because the literal meaning “can be made sense of by some explanation or another.”
 - By contrast, in cases of **targeting** (“Friend, you go to such trouble”), the literal meaning cannot be salvaged.
 - This distinction is somewhat circular: what is the *explanation* based on?

In his commentary, **Gōvinda Ṭhakkura** improves on Ruyyaka's account by tying the *explanation* to the addressee's (~ reader's) current knowledge of the situation.

*tathā ca yatra sakhyādēḥ prasādyā kāmukādisambhōgaḥ pramāṇāntarēṇa
śrōtuḥ pratītim upagatas tatra mukhyārthabādhād astu lakṣaṇā.*

Accordingly, when the friend's relationship with speaker's lover, for example, comes to be known by the listener through some other means of knowledge, then and only then can there be **targeting** as a consequence of blocking the primary meaning.

In his commentary, **Gōvinda Ṭhakkura** improves on Ruyyaka's account by tying the *explanation* to the addressee's (~ reader's) current knowledge of the situation.

[...] *ata ēva ca yatra sakhyādēs tādṛśatvaṃ na pramāṇāntarēṇāvagataṃ
tatra na sāhentī ity ādau viparītalakṣaṇā, vyaṅgyārthapratītir vā.*

[...] And for this very reason, if it is not understood on the basis of some other source of knowledge that the friend (for example) is like that, then in those cases, like “Friend, you go to such trouble,” we have neither **targeting the contrary** nor the understanding of a **suggested** meaning.

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vāpīṁ snātum ity ādau tu bādhānavatārē 'py adhamapadārthaparyālōcanayā yathōktaṁ vyaṅgyaṁ pratiyata ēvēty ēvaṁ prādhānyam adhamapadasya.

In the case of “you just went to bathe in the tank,” by contrast, although there is similarly no opportunity for the literal meaning to be blocked, the **suggested** meaning as described above is understood by taking the meaning of the word ‘jerk’ into account. And that’s why the word ‘jerk’ is the most important word in this verse.

- Gōvinda Ṭhakkura's comments help us to understand why “You just went to bathe in the tank” is a much more complex and interesting verse than the other examples.
- Among many other features of the verse (the ambiguous signs of sex, etc.) the *same word*, “that jerk” (*adhama-*) ends up conveying, in sequence, two connected meanings, and the verse is thus **self-controverting**:
 - Literal: “fuck him”
 - Suggested: “fuck you”

(Following the gloss of a similar verse provided by Yigal Bronner in our Mammaṭa reading group)

Final questions

- Can sarcasm and irony be understood as either **targeting the contrary** or, relatedly, as conversational implicatures?
- How do we characterize the “blocking” of a primary meaning that this analysis entails?
- How do we characterize the “relation” between the primary and secondary meaning in these cases?

Final questions

- Can we extend the account of “self-controverting meanings” implicit in Ruyyaka’s and Gōvinda Ṭhakkura’s discussions?
 - Those are cases where the **primary/literal** meaning actually contains a “clue” for understanding a **secondary/nonliteral** meaning.
- When we take the reader/addressee’s knowledge into account, what exactly is provided by the proposition, statement, or utterance (*vākyamahimnā* as some people say), and what is provided by “other sources of knowledge” (*pramāṇāntarēṇa*)?