

TALKING ABOUT *FREEDOM*

Figurative tropes on the *Marginal Revolution* blog

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Abstract – The present paper looks into social engineering and social positioning on the *Marginal Revolution* blog (2012 to present), hosted by economists Tyler Cowen and Alex Tabarrok at the Marginal Revolution University. The focus is on the socio-pragmatic effects (Colston 2015) for speakers of verbal irony and figurative tropes like hyperbole – which rely on contrast – metaphor and metonymy – which rely on comparison – and other, less represented tropes. As a follow-up to Cacchiani (2019), we concentrate on the discourse around the cultural keyword (Williams 2015/1976) *freedom*. Qualitative data analysis suggests that core to active participants make recourse to figurative tropes for a number of effects. Their goal is to control and communicate specialized knowledge, argue their opinions, align or disagree with discussants within the blogging community, and ultimately reinforce their credibility. More particularly, verbal irony and related tropes do not appear to be a feature of posts about questions that are clearly critical in economics. On the other hand, they are found in conversation starters that address smaller questions, quirks, and apparently unimportant anecdotes and events of the day, and can readily emerge in the comments, as the thread unfolds. As regards socio-pragmatic effects, when present, figurative tropes appear to serve the purposes of emotion expression and elicitation, rather than cater for the personality-related needs of the interlocutors or express downright aggression.

Keywords: blogs; economics; figurative tropes; pragmatic effects; verbal irony.

1. Introduction

Working along the lines of research in the extended participatory framework (Herring, Stein, Virtanen 2013; Jenkins *et al.* 2006) of the Web, we understand blogging as social action, meant to communicate knowledge, as well as personal and community perspectives. In this context, the present paper concentrates on the socio-pragmatic effects of verbal irony and other figurative tropes on the *Marginal Revolution*¹ blog (henceforth, MR) – primarily a scholarly blog (Puschmann 2013):

MR began in August of 2003 and there have been new posts daily since that time. In numerous reviews and ratings over the years Marginal Revolution has

¹ <https://marginalrevolution.com/> (1.7.2023).

consistently been ranked as the best or one of the best economic blogs on the web, but it is more (and less) than that, also representing the quirks of its authors.²

The blog is hosted on the Marginal Revolution University integrated platform³ by Professor Tyler Cowen and his co-author, Professor Alex Tabarrok, of George Mason University. Their stated purpose is to foster debate about economics as a tool to understand facts and “take small steps toward a much better world”. Specifically, examples for analysis were manually selected from a small collection of posts and associated comments about the cultural keyword (Williams 2015/1976) *freedom*.⁴ As a follow-up to Cacchiani (2019), the paper continues discussion about verbal irony and related figurative tropes within topic-centric (Puschmann 2013) blogging communities (Schmidt 2007). Our research question is one about their particular socio-pragmatic effects: How do figurative tropes affect the ways in which relatively active ratified participants negotiate and control specialized knowledge and domain expertise, their role, position, status and personal credibility (Petitat 2004)?

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a brief introduction to figurative tropes and socio-pragmatic effects (Colston 2015, 2017). Section 3.1 is a qualitative study of naming strategies, while Section 3.2 concentrates on posts and comments about *freedom*. The chapter closes with some final remarks in the Conclusions.

2. Figurative tropes and socio-pragmatic effects

2.1. Figurative tropes

This section provides working definitions of the most common tropes found in our data, as stand-alone figures, anomalous figures with embedded subtypes, or blurred/mixed figures. In accordance with Colston’s (2015, pp. 110-143) extensive critical review of the issue, we argue that understanding figurative tropes and the meanings they convey involves shared common ground, or knowledge and conceptual structures that are shared between S(peaker) and H(earer) – including recent co-experience, community membership, the particular context, and mechanisms for deriving salient meaning (e.g., conventionality, familiarity, frequency, prototypicality).

² <https://marginalrevolution.com/about> (1.7.2023)

³ <https://www.mruniversity.com> (1.7.2023).

⁴ The Marginal Revolution blog was last accessed on July 1 2023. The examples under scrutiny were retrieved from blog posts and comments published between 2012 and the first six months of 2023.

A first set of figures comprises *customized and standard idioms*, *proverbs* and *aphorisms* – which depend heavily on their fixedness and basis in the particular culture for their comprehension (Colston 2015, p. 130).

With *verbal irony*, shared common ground enables H to compute differences between the particular utterance *u* and the ironic interpretation (Colston 2015, p. 108) via *relevant inappropriateness* – where relevance and inappropriateness are not coextensive. That is, an utterance *u* is ironical if

1. *u* is contextually inappropriate.
2. *u* is (at the same time) relevant.
3. *u* is construed as having been uttered intentionally and with awareness of the contextual inappropriateness by S.
4. S intends that (part of) his or her audience recognizes points 1 to 3.
5. Unless H construes *u* as being unintentional irony, in which case 3 to 4 do not apply. (Attardo 2007 [1993], p. 159)

Another figure that relies on contrast is *hyperbole*, in that S states something counterfactual to the actual referent situation:

1. S finds an event/situation of greater/lesser magnitude than is normal, or the event/situation clashes with his/her expectations and desires.
2. In *u*, S attempts to make the violation more prominent. S points out the discrepancy to H by inflating its actual magnitude, in line with the psychological principle whereby larger things are more noticeable than smaller things.

Other types of contrast effects can be created by *understatements* – which “typically present referent events in terms that are lesser in magnitude, quantity, and prevalence than is actually the case; [...] the perception of the referent events [may] shift accordingly” (Colston 1997, in Colston 2015, p. 35).

Finally, as far as comparison, similarity and contiguity are concerned, *metaphor* and *simile* involve linguistic juxtaposition, or the ability to symbolically connect targets and vehicles (Colston 2015, p. 41), based on conceptual mappings “from a propositional or image-schematic model in one domain to a corresponding structure in another domain” (Lakoff 1987, pp. 113-114). *Metonymy* aligns elements within one domain, with *synecdoche* exemplifying the shift from whole to parts.

2.2. Pragmatic effects

We use the term *pragmatic effect* to refer to the “additional complex meaning [...] accomplished by a speaker’s use of figurative language” Colston (2015, p. 5). Whereas some figures tend to exclusively associate with particular functions, others have been shown to produce a larger set of effects. The

other way round, we can identify general pragmatic effects, or more global pragmatic effects that are germane to most if not all figures (Section 2.2.1), and effects that are specific to single figures and figure families (Section 2.2.2).

Very broadly, Verbal Irony and Hyperbole are used for Persuasion, for Meaning Enhancement and for Highlighting Discrepancies. Verbal Irony and Understatement can manage face issues and minimize face-threats (Sperber, Wilson 1986), for Social Engineering and Politeness, as they downgrade the strength and type of negativity expressed. Tension Reduction and Catalyzation effects can also enhance the degree of social interaction and Alignment, minimize cognitive dissonance and reinforce community membership. Conversely, when used to convey (strong) negative emotions, Rhetorical Questions, Hyperbole and Verbal Irony can achieve Impoliteness.

2.2.1. General pragmatic effects

General pragmatic effects comprise Ingratiation, Mastery, Persuasion, Social Engineering, Catalyzation, and Efficiency (Colston 2015, p. 66-71).

Ingratiation is an oblique compliment that, if successful, increases intimacy, appreciation, camaraderie. The bonding mechanism works as follows:

1. S displays his assumption that H is able to interpret the figurative utterance.
2. H understands the figurative utterance as intended and appreciates S's assumption about H's ability to achieve that rich interpretation, possibly in a privileged exchange that leaves out other people in the context of utterance. (Colston 2015, p. 67)

Mastery is another general pragmatic effect. It refers to S's capacity to use all levels of sophisticated figurative language to master (i.e. display control of) the situation. (Colston 2015, p. 67). Briefly, mastery refers to the ways in which figurative language can achieve social positioning for S.

Third, *Persuasion* refers to the ability of figurative language to "provide some kind of meaning enhancement in a typically relatively compact package" (Colston 2015, pp. 67-68), e.g., meaning enrichment in metaphors, or highlighting discrepancies between expectations and reality in hyperbole.⁵

Social Engineering is closely related to, and often undistinguishable from, mastery display. The term "[covers] a wide range of social positioning

⁵ *Figurative Outing* refers to the opposite effect: figurative language may backfire, and H effectively sabotage S's attempts at achieving positive pragmatic effects (Colston 2015, p. 68).

maneuvers, [... which] allow speakers to engineer, to a point, the social status of the people around them” (Colston 2015, p. 69).

Catalyzation refers to the role that figurative language can have in inviting, lubricating, or invigorating conversation. It can interact with ingratiation and invoke H’s deeper understandings, enable shared meaning, and reveal attitudes toward relevant content.

Efficiency is a feature of all figurative language, which enables speakers to rapidly pack and readily concentrate much meaning in a relatively compact format. (Colston 2015, p. 70).

2.2.2. Pragmatic effects specific to single figures or figure families

Unlike general effects, *specific pragmatic effects* are initiated only by individual figures, figure families and forms. The term applies to Expressing Negativity, Enhancing Meaning, Highlighting Discrepancies, Objectification, Identification, Humor, Emotion Expression/Elicitation, Extollation, Politeness and Impoliteness, Tension Reduction, Machiavellianism. Their presence and strength vary with the figure’s context (social, semantic and other contexts), and with any accompanying pragmatic effect (Colston 2015, pp. 71-85).

Expressing Negativity, as in complaints, derision, condemnation, etc., is one of the most frequent pragmatic effects. While it can be accomplished by many figures, it appears to be one of the dominant effects carried out by aggressive forms of *verbal irony* (e.g. sarcasm), *hyperboles* that signal disappointed expectations, and *synecdoches*, which can debase a person by aligning them with one of their lesser or related attributes (Colston 2015, p. 72).

Another pragmatic effect is *Enhancing Meaning*. While all figures enhance semantic meaning in various ways, *metaphors* are especially strong at concisely conveying rich semantic and schematic meaning. They can readily achieve all pragmatic effects and blend with other figures.

Highlighting Discrepancies, we have seen, is mainly the job of *verbal irony* figures and of *hyperbole* (Section 2.1).

Objectification is achieved, among others, by relatively *fixed* culture-dependent expressions, such as *idioms*, *proverbs* and *aphorisms*. It is closely related to *Extollation* (i.e. praising certain virtues) and can add to Persuasion. Both *fixed expressions* and culturally-embedded *contextual expressions* can variously contribute to *Identification*, or alignment.

Humor is obtained by many kinds of figurative language. It is a pragmatic effect germane to intentional and unintentional *irony*. Similarly to irony, humor relies on a set of knowledge resources. Most notably, from bottom to top: Language; Narrative Strategy, which may place irony at various points along the textual vector; Target, i.e. the ‘victim’ of irony;

Situation or the overall macro-script serving as the background for the events described in the utterance; Script Opposition and Overlap; and Logical Mechanisms for modelling incongruities and their resolutions (Attardo 2017).

Other pragmatic effects that are produced by many kinds of figurative language are *Emotion Expression* and *Elicitation*. Take *synecdoche*, which may express S's negative attitude towards the referent; or *hyperbole* and *verbal irony*, which can reveal surprise as well as negative emotions; and *metaphor*, which may express and elicit all sorts of emotions.

Politeness may contribute to general pragmatic effects such as Social Engineering and Ingratiation. It is also used to downgrade Expressing Negativity, and is typically obtained by figures that show consideration for the addressee, e.g. *euphemisms* and *indirect requests* (Colston 2015, pp. 77-78). Conversely, figures like *verbal irony* and *ironic restatements*, *rhetorical questions* and *indirectness* can be used to withhold Politeness and convey *Impoliteness*, at the service of Expressing Negativity and more subtle effects (e.g. manipulating a person's behavior or scolding them) (Colston 2015, pp. 78-81).

Importantly, profanities and *dysphemisms*, Humor, and general social bonding mechanisms such as Ingratiation or Catalyzation can help obtain *Tension Reduction*, thus breaking down excessive formality (Colston 2015, p. 81). A completely different effect is *Machiavellianism*, which puts the Hearer at a disadvantage, and may arise when S is deliberately deceptive (as known to the Overhearer), but H is not aware of his/her duplicity; or, S's utterance is deliberately vague and no clarification is given to assist with the current interpretation.

3. Social positioning on MR

After having looked at figurative tropes and pragmatic effects, our attention can now be turned towards figurative tropes as mechanisms for social maneuvering on MR.

MR is a heterogeneous community (Mauranen 2013) of scholarly experts, professionals and enthusiasts, commenters and lay spectators. They interact towards the community joint enterprise, to share and debate domain expertise and context-specific information (Puschmann, Mahrt 2012), for a multiplicity of purposes. For instance, reinforcing authority/credibility and enhancing visibility (Luzón 2012), furthering research (Kuteeva 2016), and/or disseminating knowledge (Cacchiani 2019). Scholarly communication comes under public scrutiny (Puschmann 2015: 'context collapse').

On MR, mutual engagement and relative interactional (a)symmetry vary significantly. As it turns out, a relatively small core group are actively engaged discussants and commenters, but most community members are

passive or legitimate peripheral participants (Lave, Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). Also, of all discussants, Tyler Cowen and Alex Tabarrok have a privileged role: on the footing side, they are the authors, principals and animators; on the participation side, they address ratified participants and bystanders (other registered bloggers) as well as overhearers (unregistered readers) (Goffman 1974, 1981). They keep the blog running, select topics and start discussion (Cacchiani 2019). Accordingly, this section concentrates on the multiple ways in which core members and (relatively) active discussants use verbal irony and other figurative tropes for general and specific pragmatic effects, in order to influence and shape what is believed to be collectively known, interlocutors' roles, status, credibility (Petitat 2004), and social positioning (Colston 2015).

3.1. Naming strategies and figurative tropes

MR is “integrated into the entrenched ecosystem of the scientific community” (Kjellberg 2010, in Puschmann, Mahrt 2012, p. 174). Core/active discussants are (highly) established and (well) known peers that engage in internal and external scholarly communication. Though with varying degrees of transparency, full names (1), given names, short forms and/or initials (2) make real identities easily identifiable – among experts, at least.

- (1) *Richard Berger, Ian Maitland* (business professor), *(Not That) Bill O'Reilly* (i.e., not Bill O'Reilly, the best-selling author and now disgraced political commentator, but most likely William O'Reilly, lecturer in history) (from Cacchiani 2019)
- (2) *Cliff, Dan, Derek, Luis, Ricardo* (for Ricardo Hausman), *Alan W* (given name + initial), *byomtov* (Bernard Yomtov); *JWatts* (addressed as *Joan* by other bloggers); *CG* (adapted from Cacchiani 2019)

Shifting between nickname/pseudonym and name strongly reflects the close link between real and online social communities. E.g., *Super Destroyer* (5) is also addressed as *Steven* by other users.

Less established community members may want to use pseudonyms to hide their offline identities. Active discussants, however, may use pseudonyms for other reasons. For instance, to signal their likings and opinions, e.g. *Thiago Ribeiro* or *Art Deco* (3). Another example is overstatement in names that express what the persona sees as highly desirable attributes. Consider metonymy in *JK Brown* and *Thor* (4), which epitomize strength, a yearning for radical change and a desire to speak out loud, via antonomasia.

- (3) *Thiago Ribeiro* (Brazilian football player); *Art Deco* (art movement)

- (4) *JK Brown* (Quentin Tarantino movie, leading role, and leading blacksploitation action movie actress Pam Grier); *Thor* (hammer-wielding god, super-hero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Marvel movie series, and leading actor Chris Hemsworth) (Cacchiani 2019)

Similar examples are descriptive names such as *A Black Man* (expressing ethnicity) and *Woke* (for a user that is especially alert to racial prejudice, sexual discrimination and social inequalities in general) (5). In a slightly different manner, *Lord Action*, *Super Destroyer* and *The God of Thunder* (6) express the bloggers' belief in strong action plans, and possibly overstate his/her commitment and status within the blogging community, via recourse to the extremely high degree (*Super*), to honorifics and the expression of social roles (*Lord*), and to the highest element in the hierarchical metaphor system known as The Great Chain of Being (*God*) (Lakoff 1987).

- (5) *A Black Man; Woke*
 (6) *Lord Action; Super Destroyer; The God of Thunder*

Given that the blog's mission is to promote progress and equality, posing as alert to inequalities, keen on changing the world and able to appreciate beauty and excellence amounts to an attempt at improving personal status, while contributing to identification and alignment, which are social bonding mechanisms (Colston 2015).

Descriptive names like *Troll Me* and *Quantitative Sneezing* (7) provide bloggers with an equally high degree of perceived anonymity while playing with different types of verbal irony.

- (7) *Troll Me; Quantitative Sneezing* (Cacchiani 2019)

With *Troll Me*, an overstatement (Cacchiani 2019), the blogger poses as a snobbish expert who takes a high standing within a community that s/he appears to challenge. Verbal irony ultimately mitigates the potential for aggression and opposition. The user appears to express negativity, promote impoliteness and encourage face-threatening behaviors by inciting others to try their best at intentionally angering and frustrating him/her (Oxford English Dictionary, OED: TROLL, v. draft additions March 2006). Yet, in keeping with conventions in the offline academic community, on MR peers only share and debate issues frankly, without engaging in such malpractice. In this context, promoting what runs contrary to shared values and accepted social conventions realizes an insincere speech act and, for that matter, is understood as an instance an ironic inversion that shades into corrective irony. *Troll Me*'s ability to challenge and control online malpractice is likely to command admiration among core participants within the blogging community – which is key to reinforcing associative affiliation and

promoting Troll Me's status.

Quantitative Sneezing is a slightly different example, where metaphor, metonymy and verbal irony mix up with understatement, for efficiency and meaning enhancement. As extensively argued in Cacchiani (2019), this improbable word combination is a ludic instance of highly incongruous and inappropriate self-doubting and self-deprecating irony. It encourages us to construe the blogging persona as a non-expert that is willing to learn and understand. The blogger has a positively playful and pleasantly humorous take on his/her own patently limited expertise. This cannot be the case, given that active MR participation minimally requires intermediary to advanced knowledge of models and theories that underlie discussion of the issues presented. Quantitative Sneezing positions himself/herself as marginal and marginalized while acknowledging the superiority of other community members. S/he appears to be less than s/he might actually be. As a matter of fact, the name describes the blogger as not up to the task: s/he would be only able to use some sort of quantitative data analysis (and certainly not inferential statistics) to prove or disprove little 'sneezes'. 'Sneezes' can be interpreted metaphorically as unimportant claims and pet theories, or useless research on obscure and bizarre topics that are given more effort than they are worth. Additionally, they can be interpreted metonymically as a form of personal synecdoche, from which we infer self-deprecation. The pragmatic effect of this form of self-doubting is ingratiating, which is intended to act as a bonding mechanism and promote associative affiliation, for social engineering and positioning within the blogging community.

3.2. Figurative tropes in MR threads

This section provides a qualitative investigation into the uses and functions of figurative tropes and verbal irony in posts (Section 3.2.1) and comments (Section 3.2.2) around the word *freedom*.

3.2.1. Figurative tropes in MR posts

Generally, posts on critical questions – such as freedom of religion, economic freedom, diversity and economic growth – require discussants to be conversant with state-of-the-art models and theories. Verbal irony, hyperbole and the expression of (strong) emotions are off-the-mark. As a way of illustration, consider (8) and (9), which provide extracts from research articles and clearly align with the conventions for the genre (Bondi 2021).

- (8) *The relationship between religious, civil, and economic freedoms*
by Tyler Cowen May 20, 2021 at 12:52 am in Data Source Economics Law
Political Science Religion
From [Christos Makridis](#):

This paper studies the relationship between religious liberty and economic freedom. First, three new facts emerge: (a) religious liberty has increased since 1960, but has slipped substantially over the past decade; (b) the countries that experienced the largest declines in religious liberty tend to have greater economic freedom, especially property rights; (c) changes in religious liberty are associated with changes in the allocation of time to religious activities. Second, using a combination of vector autoregressions and dynamic panel methods, improvements in religious liberty tend to precede economic freedom. Finally, increases in religious liberty have a wide array of spillovers that are important determinants of economic freedom and explain the direction of causality. Countries cannot have long-run economic prosperity and freedom without actively allowing for and promoting religious liberty.

Via the excellent [Kevin Lewis](#).

(9) ***Does Diversity Reduce Freedom or Growth?***

by [Alex Tabarrok](#) October 16, 2016 at 7:22 am in Economics Political Science Religion

The founding father of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, credits ‘social discipline’ for the phenomenal economic rise of his country (Sen, 1999). Countries such as Singapore apparently demonstrate that autocratic measures are probably necessary, particularly in culturally fractionalized societies for creating the social stability necessary for economic growth (Colletta et al., 2001). Such thinking informs the so-called “Asian model” (Diamond, 2008). [...] This paper addresses the question of whether or not social diversity hampers the adoption of sound economic policies, including institutions that promote property rights and the rule of law. We also examine whether democracy conditions diversity’s effect on sound economic management, defined as economic freedom, because the index of economic freedom is strongly associated with higher growth and is endorsed by proponents of the ‘diversity deficit’ argument (Easterly, 2006a).

... Using several measures of diversity, we find that higher levels of ethno-linguistic and cultural fractionalization are conditioned positively on higher economic growth by an index of economic freedom, which is often heralded as a good measure of sound economic management. High diversity in turn is associated with higher levels of economic freedom. We do not find any evidence to suggest that high diversity hampers change towards greater economic freedom and institutions supporting liberal policies.

Paper [here](#). The data is a panel from 116 countries covering 1980-2012 so this doesn’t rule out a negative long-run effect but it is prima facie evidence that diversity need not reduce freedom or growth.

The shift from scholarly journal to other kinds of internal communication, however, may come with recourse to figurative tropes that can express or elicit emotion, as in (10), about the online publication of videos from an academic conference.

(10) ***Videos from the Stanford academic freedom conference***

by **Tyler Cowen** November 16, 2022 at 3:14 am in Education

[Here they are](#), so many figures well-known to MR readers. [The Peter Thiel talk](#) was quite *interesting*, you can think of it as his concessions to *Greta*, with a new twist on the great stagnation and its causes. [My ten-minute talk is in here](#), following Niall Ferguson and John Cochrane, and it *was my favorite* of the conference (*not always the case*). *I had great fun trolling Steven Pinker, most*

of all. [italics, SC]

As can be seen, self-deprecation is used for social maneuvering and mutual positioning at multiple points in the post. First, projecting a positive self-image is framed within the highly positive appraisal of *interesting* contributions to the Stanford academic freedom conference by named presenters that are regularly discussed on the blog, and are blog participants (*so many figures known to MR readers*). Somewhat jocularly, the expression of self-esteem is mitigated by (*not always the case*) in *My ... talk ... was my favourite (not always the case)*. Mentioning *Greta* (Thurnberg) enables the animator to metonymically refer to the values and beliefs she stands for – which is a way to establish and reinforce common ground and promote identification and alignment. The immediately following combination of verbal irony and hyperbole – *I had great fun trolling Steven Pinker, most of all* – can also be seen as a way to encourage alignment with Steven Pinker’s values, and kindle readers’ interest. Yet again, this is a form of self-deprecating irony and humor. The author is actually being excessively modest and belittling himself. Altogether, Tyler Cowen is socially engineering his position and the position of other commenters within the blogging community. Hyperbole and verbal irony contribute to meaning enhancement and persuasion. One related intended effect is to express and elicit highly positive emotional reactions and value judgments. As an academic (super-)peer, Tyler Cowen cannot have engaged in deliberately antagonistic behaviors against Steven Pinker, to the extent of badgering him. More simply, he stood a chance to debate topics with Steven Pinker, Harvard University academic, New York Times columnist, and best-selling author of non-fiction that Tyler Cowen reveres, comments and reviews regularly on MR.

Verbal irony is also a feature of posts that address smaller questions, anecdotes and events of the day. They serve as good conversation starters that can arouse and satisfy the curiosity of experts and lay bloggers and occasional readers alike. For instance, how Brexit might affect freedom of movement for British hounds in (11a). Other posts involve establishing some kind of common ground with the readers, e.g. (12a), about freedom to do business with first ladies. Crucially, such small issues show great potential for applying theories and methods to bigger practical problems and debating critical issues as the post unfolds. For instance, the risk of importing rabies and pests from abroad in (11b), a comment to (11a), or debating segregation, law and order, and the effects over time of the Civil Rights Act in (12b), in the thread from (12a).

(11a) *I’m so American, I can’t even tell if this British speech is parody*
by Tyler Cowen June 20, 2020 at 1:00 am in Law Travel

Here is the story, the speech appears in a box in the corner:

A Brexiteer Tory MP has urged the government to let his dogs keep their freedom of movement rights after Britain leaves the EU.

Bob Stewart, the MP for Beckenham, said his “French-speaking” hounds crossed the Channel regularly on their EU “pet passports”.

Millions of Britons are set to lose the ability to live and work freely on the continent at the end of the year as a result of the UK’s departure from the bloc.

I am an advocate of canine cosmopolitanism, rather than canine nationalism. Is everyone?

Speaking in French, Mr Gove added: “We always defend the rights of dogs.”

Is that true? Under the previous pre-Brexit regime, a pet passport was sufficient. But now:

Under the worst case-scenario of a no-deal Brexit, taking a pet to the EU will likely require a four-month advanced process that includes microchipping, a rabies vaccination, a blood test and a three-month wait to travel after the blood test.

Developing... [italics, SC]

(11b) ***I’m so American, I can’t even tell if this British speech is parody***

by Tyler Cowen June 20, 2020 at 1:00 am in Law Travel

[...]

Tim Worstall, June 20, 2020, at 5:50 am

As Dzlodzaya says, not parody. Rather, a light and rather English way of making a more serious point. English dogs going to the Continent has never been much of a problem. But as an island, and long rabies free, Britain long had restrictions upon dogs – any animal that can carry rabies actually – coming the other way. The decline of rabies as an edamic (sic) disease, better vaccines and so on, mean that it’s possible to gain that “pet passport” to show that it’s vaccinated and so gains free movement.

But, of course, the paperwork for this is subsumed in all the other agreements with the EU. No one’s quite got around to sorting it out as yet. And it’s really a domestic UK issue anyway.

As to “free movement” in the other sense, no one is about to insist upon visas to visit either way. It’s the “right” to live and work that is under discussion. The difference between a visa and a work permit that is. Noth (sic) can be described as free movement but only the second is “free movement” when discussing Brexit.

(12a) ***Freedom of association for me but not for thee***

by Tyler Cowen November 23, 2016 at 3:42 am in Law, Philosophy, Political Science

Last week, *fashion designer Sophie Theallet* announced she would *refuse to sell or donate clothes to the next first lady, Melania Trump*.

Here is more from Veronique de Rugy. [italics, SC]

(12b) ***Freedom of association for me but not for thee***

by Tyler Cowen November 23, 2016 at 3:42 am in Law, Philosophy, Political Science

[...]

Art Deco, November 23, 2016, at 11:36 am

Are you against the Civil Rights Act then?

The initial purpose was to break a culture of insult against a poor and politically patient social stratum. It has proved metastatic. Keep in mind that the regime in the Southern United States between 1877 and 1971 was not libertarian. State law required segregation in various venues. Also, segregation was not the most problematic component of the ancien regime in the South. The condition of the police and the courts was.

Ricardo, November 23, 2016, at 1:56 pm

“Keep in mind that the regime in the Southern United States between 1877 and 1971 was not libertarian. State law required segregation in various venues.”

Your timing is off. See Gavin Wright’s research on the topic. Excerpt:

“The starting point for understanding conflict over public accommodations is the proposition that racial segregation was fundamentally a calculated business policy by profit-seeking firms. Segregation in such facilities as lunch counters, restaurants, and hotels was rarely required by law, and when statutes or municipal ordinances did exist, enforcement was generally at the discretion of proprietors. Indeed, as of the 1960s many municipal segregation laws had been repealed, since by that time federal courts firmly supported the principle that state-enforced racial discrimination was unconstitutional.”

<http://web.stanford.edu/~write/papers/ParadoxR.pdf>

As far as (11a) is concerned, the post combines equal portions of humor, self-doubting and self-deprecation with forms of aggressive verbal irony, which verges on derision and criticism. At a closer look, it is evident that irony, humor and objectification in a contextual expression, interact within the title – *I’m so American, I can’t even tell if this British speech is parody* – to express negative evaluation and wage criticism against the UK Parliament, align, identify and bond with bloggers, and ultimately engineer roles and relationships within the community. In the spirit of MR’s mission statement, the animator condemns and criticizes what appear to be situationally inappropriate and incongruent questions and answers at question time. Brexit and UK parliament responsibilities serve as a background to target the observed incongruency between expected important questions and the House of Lords’ key responsibilities (i.e. Brexit’s implications for UK citizens wishing to work and live in the EU), and actual daft questions and answers about the free movement of Bob Stewart’s “*French-speaking hounds*” (a highly incongruent word-combination) across the EU, their pet visas and pet passports: [*He urged*] *the government to let his dogs keep their freedom of movement rights after Britain leaves the EU*. Mr Gove replies, *speaking French*, that the government *always defends the rights of dogs* – where *always* is used to obtain hyperbole. This exchange is deemed a *parody* in the post title, vis-à-vis what should be actual government business. Negative evaluation is conveyed by shuffling around humans and animals on the Great Chain of Being (Lakoff 1987), and from exclusively claiming mobility rights and cosmopolitanism for the hounds of nationalist MPs *Bob Stewart* and *Mr Gove*, who have been championing Brexit for people. Also, rather contradictorily, why should Mr Gove, a Brexiteer, sponsor Brexit and rather

contradictorily speak French in the UK parliament? Mastery display contributes to the overall effect, along with incongruous word combinations in the post (*I am an advocate of canine cosmopolitanism, rather than canine nationalism*), where contrasting of *canine* versus *human* and *cosmolitanism* versus *nationalism* encourages irony resolution via script opposition and overlap. Last, based on the assumption of shared opinions, the final question *Is everyone?* further reinforces expressing and eliciting negative emotions, while also encouraging identification within the community.

Let us now consider (12a): a fashion designer's refusal to sell or donate clothes to Melania Trump – most likely the next First Lady in line at the time of publication of the post – is presented against the background of discussion about freedom of association. As extensively argued in Cacchiani (2019), the post shows forms of congruent and incongruent irony (Attardo 2017). Humor based on script opposition and overlap emerges from bringing together the noble banner of equality and fundamental human rights (*Freedom of association for me and for thee*) and what may be seen as unimportant aspects of human life (*sell[ing] or donat[ing] clothes to ... Melania Trump*).

Association is an incongruent item. *Freedom of expressive association* is recognized as a human right and is protected under the First Amendment to the American Constitution. It includes freedom of speech, right to assemble, and free exercise of religion, including the right to wear religious clothing. However, the text addresses issues related to 'freedom to business associate', i.e. freedom to enter into an agreement with an entity, while consenting to the confidentiality clause.

Another marker of verbal irony is *for me but not for thee*. Congruent irony is based on paronymy in *me* and *thee*. On another level, the animator remodels a precept from Genesis, xii, v. 8: *Let there be no strife between me and thee*, to express opposite meanings: what originally highlighted a condition of liberty as empathy and care, turns out to describe adversary antagonism and conflict. Just as extollation of liberty and peace in *no strife between me and thee* (i.e. 'everybody') turns into its opposite in *freedom for me but not for thee*, which excludes good for others, their shifting referents are fashion designer Sophie Theallet and the then future First Lady of the United States, Melania Trump.

Overall, language mastery and objectification are used for building common ground and encouraging identification. Other effects are persuasion, efficiency and meaning enhancement. The targets of verbal irony are both the situation itself and Melania Trump. The immaterial question is whether or not a fashion designer (as it were, 'freedom to business associate') is deemed to affect Melania's 'freedom of expression'. As a last note, we wish to add that the point at issue is not immaterial for Melania: earlier in Donald Trump's presidential campaign trail Melania had been branded *The Silent Partner*; yet,

her ability to ‘make a statement’ in public appearances has proven to be limited to ‘visual communication’, or wearing the dress to impress. Derision expression is produced assuming minimalist mechanisms, or a less-than-entirety personal reference to Melania’s freedom of expression, reduced to a small part of the referent (designer clothing).

3.2.2. *Figurative tropes in MR comments*

Ratified participants on MR are mutually accountable. They share expertise, exchange views and argue the pros and cons, merits and demerits of specific policies, models, etc., in a matter-of-fact way (13).

(13) *I’m so American, I can’t even tell if this British speech is parody*

by Tyler Cowen June 20, 2020 at 1:00 am in Law Travel

[...]

Dzoldzaya, June 20, 2020 at 04:33:58

As an Englishman, I can inform you that it’s not parody – he’s concerned with the issue, but feels able to make jokes like ‘French-speaking dogs’, because he’s addressing a member of his own party. Questions by ruling party members in parliament are often used to ‘set up’ a speech by the PM/person taking questions, and are generally congenial and non-confrontational.

dearieme, June 20, 2020, at 11:01:36

‘French-speaking dogs’ may even have involved an allusion to the old joke about why you must never buy a collie from a Welshman.

[...]

Following offline academic conventions, objections and disagreement are negotiated via objective arguments grounded in survey evidence, facts, the law, models and theories adopted in the relevant literature – in other words arguments that provide objective evidence and justification for the propositional content of the claim (14). On these grounds, core/active participants can afford to be frank. For example, Soap McTavish’s rebuttal (*Not true in Israel*) vis-à-vis PHinton’s understatement (*Not sure it’s much different*).

(14) *The Causal Effect of Economic Freedom on Female Employment & Education*

by Tyler Cowen April 3, 2023 at 2:18 pm in Data Source, Economics

[...]

Soap McTavish, April 3, 2023 at 9:36 pm

Not true in Israel.

PHinton, April 3, 2023 at 10:14 pm

Not sure it’s much different. geektime.com (first search result) says women in high-tech in Israel is 33.4%, including tech positions and other positions such as marketing and sales. [italics, S.C.]

this (sic) year, MSFT is 34% women globally according to company data. The US figure is probably higher for the US.

There is no need to show consideration for the personality-related needs of other commenters and peers. Consider Erik's rebuttal to Troll Me (15: *Yes it does*), which conveys dissonance and disagreement. What cannot go unnoticed is that Erik does not bother to argue his position in any way. Unsubstantiated claims, however, do not work towards reinforcing the blogger's credibility.

(15) *Freedom of association for me but not for thee*

by Tyler Cowen November 23, 2016 at 3:42 am in Law, Philosophy, Political Science

[...]

Troll Me, November 23, 2016, at 3:03 pm

A rights based society does not allow identifiable subgroups to be discriminated against.

Erik, November 25, 2016, at 8:39 am)

Yes it does. [italics, S.C.]

Though rare, hyperbole in extreme case formulations (*nonsense* and *anyone with eyes to see*) can be used to reinforce the expression of negativity and highlight discrepancies, as in (16), where evidence for the strong claim is provided via reference to shared common ground (*as the history of the Jim Crow shows*).

(16) *Freedom of association for me but not for thee*

by Tyler Cowen November 23, 2016 at 3:42 am in Law, Philosophy, Political Science

[...]

byomtov, November 25, 2016, at 9:18 am

Ian Maitland: But it illustrates why rational business people can be expected to oppose discrimination – because it is not in their rational self-interest. I am not prettifying their motives, just noting the predictable results of markets. Oppose discrimination – because it is not in their rational self.

*Nonsense. What it proves is that **sometimes** business people find it in their interests to oppose discrimination. And sometimes they don't, as the history of the Jim Crow shows quite clearly to anyone with eyes to see.* [bold in the original; italics, S.C.]

One final point concerns verbal irony, which can be used to express negativity and stealthily avoid the appearance of negativity (Colston 2015, p. 77), as in (17) and (18). In (17), John Smith uses irony to land a criticism on Thiago Ribeiro (*A rare insightful point*); expressing negativity is then reinforced via a combination of irony, mastery display and objectification in a customized expression (*Some are born gay, some are born Melania*), based on *Some are born great* – in turn originating in the lines *Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them*.

(Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, II, V, 149-150). As regards (18), Woke's comment is the target of irony and the object of criticism in *The Other Jim's* apparently incongruent (Attardo 2017) reaction (*no worries here*) to what is hyperbolically described as Woke's highest achievement in the thread (*Woke has peaked*).

(17) ***Freedom of association for me but not for thee***

by Tyler Cowen November 23, 2016 at 3:42 am in Law, Philosophy, Political Science

[...]

Thiago Ribeiro: And can Melania Trump be something other than Melania Trump? Isn't she what nature and society have done to her? (November 23, 2016, at 5:45 am)

The Original Other Jim, November 23, 2016, at 7:25 am

A rare insightful point by Thiago. Some are born gay, some are born Melania.

[italics, S.C.]

(18) ***Forbidden Questions***

by Alex Tabarrok, October 25, 2022 at 7:25 am in Current Affairs, Science

[...]

A policy of deliberate ignorance has corrupted top scientific institutions in the West. It's been an open secret for years that prestigious journals will often reject submissions that offend prevailing political orthodoxies—

[...]

John Smith, October 25, 2022, at 7:37 am

Woke has peaked... no worries here. Amirite TC? [italics, S.C.]

4. Conclusions

This paper focused on the socio-pragmatic effects of verbal irony and other figurative tropes for ratified participants on MR. Admittedly, further investigation into the issue would be required. Nevertheless, based on the discussion in Sections 2 and 3, we can bring some major points home.

Insofar as the blog is highly integrated into the entrenched ecosystem of the scientific community, the online and offline worlds are strongly intertwined and mutually constructed. Offline status, roles and relationships affect online identity and communication styles; the other way round, engineering relative status and position of online discussants while reinforcing their credibility within the blogging community has a bearing on shaping real identities. Consequently, as far as online naming strategies are concerned, it is no surprise that several bloggers use given name, family name, initials, or diverse combinations thereof for their blogging identities. Yet, descriptive names are also used to express participants' quirks and likings (3: *Thiago Ribeiro*, *Art Deco*), or world views and perspectives that demonstrate alignment with other discussants and community values (5: *A*

Black Man, Woke; 6: *Lord Action, Super Destroyer, The God of Thunder*). This is where figurative tropes are found to mix up and interact. For instance, names for relatively active participants like *JKBrown* and *Thor* (4) overstate and realize meaning enhancement via metonymy. Another example is *Troll Me* (7), where verbal irony and overstatement interact to magnify blogger's status within the community. The other way round, *Quantitative Sneezing* (7) makes recourse to irony and understatement for ingratiation: s/he is not a regular to online debates, and describes himself/herself as marginal and marginalized on MR.

No doubt, online naming can hide offline identities. Yet, shifts between signature names and names used to address bloggers in online conversations demonstrate offline familiarity with the real name-bearer, as well as close interaction between online and offline worlds. E.g. *Joan* for *JWatts* (2), and *Steven* for *Super Destroyer* (6). Membership within the offline academic community guarantees immediate identification of the referent.

We have been focusing on posts and comments published by the animators, as well as comments by relatively active to core participants within the blogging community. (For more on the discursive strategies adopted by relatively less active commenters, see Cacchiani 2019.) As regards social engineering and positioning in the discourse around *freedom*, several factors were shown to affect selection and use of figurative tropes.

Setting aside individual communication styles, we should minimally draw a line between animators' posts and other messages within the thread. Within posts, we must consider domain, topic and genre. When animators publish parts of academic research papers on critical issues, the conventions for the genre are remediated for online (8-9). Yet, other posts may depart significantly from academic prose, move towards the informal end of the orality spectrum, and use figurative tropes (verbal irony and, to a lesser extent, hyperbole, metonymy and metaphor) for a number of general effects (ingratiation, mastery and efficiency, social engineering and catalyzation) and specific purposes (from expressing negativity to aligning and identifying with other discussants). For example, when mentioning his obsession with Steven Pinker (10), Tyler Cowen uses figurative tropes to represent a peculiarity of his character and behavior, for ingratiation and identification, meaning enhancement and persuasion. Figurative tropes are also used with unimportant questions and events of the day, to attract attention (11a, 12a). Both examples rely heavily on mastery display and meaning enhancement for effect. In (11a), freedom to sell and/or wear designer clothes starts discussion about segregation and the Civil Rights Act (11b); in (12a), free canine movement starts discussion on environmental policies (12b) and freedom of movement, a human rights concept.

Turning to the comments, my results suggest that, when present,

figurative tropes are not used to cater for the personality-related needs of the interlocutors, nor to express downright aggression. Commenters are not interested in realizing pragmatic effects such as extollation and politeness, nor impoliteness, tension reduction, and machiavellianism. Figurative tropes appear to serve the purposes of emotion expression and elicitation. Importantly, MR conventions require credible participants to share and debate issues frankly. This explains short rebuttals like *Yet it does* (15), and relatively aggressive forms of verbal irony (i.e. sarcasm) that stealthily convey negativity (17: *A rare insightful point by Thiago. Some are born gay, some are born Melania*). Which is to say, we do not expect discussants to downgrade disagreement with their peers. However, MR conventions also require that credible bloggers argue their standpoint using methods, theories and facts – which is consistent with conventions in the offline academic world. Hence, core discussants are found to express strong disagreement and non-alignment (e.g. using hyperbole which highlights discrepancies and contrast, and expresses negativity), while also providing evidence and pursuing alignment and identification with part of the community (e.g. via contextual expressions, for objectification), as in (16): *Nonsense. What it proves is that [...] sometimes business people [...] oppose discrimination. And sometimes they don't, as the history of the Jim Crow shows quite clearly to anyone with eyes to see.*

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