

Sarcasm in Conversational Action

Elisabeth Camp

Department of Philosophy
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
elisabeth.camp@rutgers.edu

Sarcasm is a paradigmatically pragmatic phenomenon: the most obvious case of meaning something other than what you say. It is also a pragmatically important and puzzlingly complex phenomenon. It is a key tool for joking, nudging and shaming one another into conversational alignment, but it often seems to underwrite a kind of communicative bluff: it enables speakers to make a conversational move without shouldering commensurate conversational liability. Further, its communicative effects range from stiletto-sharp clarity ('You sure know a lot.') to infuriatingly amorphous evocation ('How old did you say you were?'). I argue that we can analyze a wide range of sarcastic utterances in traditional terms of 'meaning inversion' if we take a broader view of meaning than philosophers and linguists have traditionally done. Different species of sarcasm take different aspects of meaning as targets for inversion, producing systematically distinct conversational effects.