Title: Satire as a genre.

Abstract

Many scholars have claimed that satire is a genre. At the same time, however, it is also widely acknowledged that satire has changed over the centuries, that it has taken various forms and that it still appears in a variety of other genres. Far from being a drawback in identifying satire as a genre, I will claim that variability is a natural property of genres if the latter are conceived of as dynamic cognitive categories that emerge out of a complex interplay of heterogeneous factors which cluster differently under the effect of different contextual and cotextual attractors. I will assume that, in satire, these factors include a range of linguistic and rhetorical devices which interact in different ways to dynamically bring about specifically intended effects. I will further claim that understanding satire is a context-sensitive complex process which implies setting up and maintaining multiple mental representations, and drawing pragmatic inferences.

Keywords: satire, genre, pragmatic inferences, complex systems, emergence.

1. The complexities of satire

Dictionaries of rhetoric and stylistic, as well as essays on literary criticism, almost unanimously define satire as a genre. A general consensus on satire as a literary genre was established in the 1950s and 1960s. A number of notable books, including Northop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism (1957), contributed to the view that satire is a rhetorical and moral art (as actually anticipated by John Dryden’s Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire, 1693), designed to attack vice or folly by using wit, exaggeration or ridicule to persuade the readers that something or someone is to be blamed with reference to some moral standard. However, the analysis of individual satirical authors and texts, along with the recognition of the very many forms satire can take, soon brought to the fore its complexities and ambiguities, thus challenging the certainties of the 1960s and questioning traditional categories such as formal unity and referentiality. The doubt was gradually insinuated that satires cannot be gathered under one generic heading and explained through a single theoretical frame. As Alastair Fowler noted, satire is “the most problematic mode to the taxonomist, since it appears never to have corresponded to any one kind” (Fowler 1982, quoted in Griffin 2015: 3); (see also Griffin 1994: 4 “… satires are unruly, various, open to ‘whatever men do’,… satire often seems a ‘mode’ or a ‘procedure’ more than a single genre” ). The debate is still open, with opinions ranging from Simpson’s 2003 “Satire is not a genre of discourse but a discursive practice that does things to and with genres of discourse” (p.76) to less committed definitions which characterize satire as a “form”, a “technique”, an “expression”, a “tone”, a “spirit”, a “mode” or just the “use of” wit along with a list of other literary and rhetorical devices. (Indeed, if we look at the present collocations in the Internet, “spirit” appears to be the most frequently associated term in contemporary usages of “satire”: the query “satirical genre” retrieves something like 4,870,000 results, “satiric(al) tone” 4,240,000, “satiric(al) mode” 8,110,000, and “satiric(al) spirit” 9,170,000 (see also Kathleen Kuyper 2012 “When satire is spoken of today […] there is usually no sense of formal specification whatever. One has in mind a work imbued with the satiric spirit – a spirit that appears (whether as mockery, raillery, ridicule, or formalized invective) in the literatures or folklore of all peoples, early and late, preliterate and civilized.” (Kuyper 2012: 169).)

We might hypothesize that the reasons for this fluctuation lie in the distinction between literary and non literary satire. Within the domain of literature, satire seems easier to identify as a genre defined by some thematic constants and a restricted number of putatively homogeneous (albeit culturally and historically defined) formal features, whereas non literary satire appears to be more elusive and protean, permeating
other genres and taking several forms. In practice, however, this assumption turns out to be hard to maintain theoretically considering that, firstly, it relies in turn on another distinction, the one between literature and non literature, which would itself call for an explanation; secondly, it entails a view of genre as a category of which satire sometimes is a fully representative member and other times is only a feature. Moreover, neither literary nor non-literary satires seem to have fixed or invariable forms (all the more so, if looked at diachronically), even though it is sometimes the case that the forms they take are not independent of the contents they convey. The point that should be made therefore is, first and foremost, how to conceive of genres in order to understand if and up to what extent satire can nowadays be considered a genre.

2. The complexities of genre

Stam 2000 summarizes the conundrums of defining genres theoretically as follows:

“A number of perennial doubts plague genre theory. Are genres really ‘out there’ in the world, or are they merely the constructions of analysts? Is there a finite taxonomy of genres or are they in principle infinite? Are genres timeless Platonic essences or ephemeral, time-bound entities? Are genres culture-bound or transcultural? Should genres analysis be descriptive or prescriptive?” (Stam 2000: 14)

Over the years, these questions have received several answers, either explicitly or implicitly. Traditional classifications of genres as taxonomic categories are based on the general assumption that texts can be grouped on the basis of shared structural and thematic properties. One way of conceiving these is in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Although theoretically attractive, this view clashes with several empirical observations: genres are not discrete entities, they often overlap, there are mixed or hybrid genres. Apparently distinctive features often turn out not to be unique of one genre, and texts often exhibit characteristics of more than one genre. Moreover, texts may conventionally be assigned to one genre in one culture or in one epoch and to another genre in a different culture and age. The standard commonplace notion of genre reflects the objectivist view of categories as metaphorical containers with clearcut boundaries. This is a view that cognitive linguists have largely criticised, replacing attempts at finding rules of categorial inclusion and exclusion with the observation that a text may be a member of a genre to various degrees, that the distribution and the number of features makes it a more or less typical representative of that genre, and that some texts are better representatives of a genre than others. A prototypicality view based on the research of Eleanor Rosch and her colleagues on human categorization (Rosch 1973) therefore seems to offer a better account of the fuzzy nature of genres. Within this model, the structure of genres should no longer be viewed as an inverted tree branching downward from an upper node representing a single general category to smaller and more particular nodes identifying subcategories. Genres are no longer arranged hierarchically: the prototypicality based cognitive hypothesis has them organized around a basic middle level and developing radially, upwards or downwards, at different degrees of granularity. In Mark Turner’s words:

“Given the cognitive scientific study of the nature of categories, we should not be surprised to find effects of the basic level in genre categories, or prototype effects in genre categories, or metaphoric members of a genre category, or radial categories within our conception of a given genre, or a gradient from the categorical to the analogical in the ways literary works are connected, or (perhaps most obviously) family resemblance as a creator of genres, and so on.” (Turner 1994: 150)
The critical point seems to remain that an incredible number of heterogeneous variables can be selected, ordered and variously combined to identify a genre. Steen himself (Steen 2011) notes that genres can be conceptualized in different ways, ranging from the document used for communicative purpose (e.g. videogame, film, instruction manual, textbook) to the situation of interaction (e.g. talk show, political rally, doctor-patient meeting). Moreover, although we have labels for a large number of genres and subgenres in many media, there are also many putative genres and subgenres for which we either lack a name or lack a consensus on a name. Still, in everyday life, and in research groups, people do categorize texts, and sometimes there seem to be no limits in genre creation for specific purposes.

In this regard, Chandler 1997 notices: “How we define a genre depends on our purposes”[…] “if we are studying the way in which genres frame the reader’s interpretation of a text, then we would do well to focus on how readers identify genres rather than on theoretical distinctions” (Chandler 1997: 3).

People seem to have repertoires of genres even if “it is debatable to what extent most of us would be able to formulate explicit rules for the textual genres we use routinely: much of our genre knowledge is likely to be tacit” (Chandler 1997: 3).

In fact, what people have in mind is often a subjective interpretive paradigm based on individual perceptions of similarities (“family resemblances” in Wittgenstein’s sense). Nonetheless, assigning a text to a genre seems to be a crucial point in text interpretation, because genres act as organizing patterns and as such they are able to set up expectations, posit constraints, and orientate the reader in understanding not only the contents but also the attitudes and assumptions which are necessary to make sense of the text.

Cognitively, patterns perform a key function in reducing complexity and, in this sense, genres are powerful mental instruments.

2.1. Genres and text types: the text linguistics approach

Before concentrating on the cognitive nature of genres, another important tradition of research must be mentioned when dealing with text categorization, namely the one established by text linguistics in terms of text typologies.

Largely inspired by the need to account for variation in language use (e.g. register) or in the use of language in specific situations (patient-doctor interaction, telephone conversation, etc.), and partly urged by the practical needs of corpus linguistics, the notion of “text type”, and the related typologies, have been elaborated as an alternative (sometimes an integration) to literary genres, i.e. paying greater attention to non-literary texts and authentic speech than to literary texts. Several typologies have been proposed, hinging on different criteria and parameters and building on the observation that a basic distinction needs to be made between a global text type on the one hand, and, on the other, a specific realization of it in an empirical text (see Fludernik 2000). Some typologies have enjoyed a longstanding success: among them, Werlich 1976, Longacre 1983, Virtanen 1992, and Fludernik 2000. One of the most articulated typologies was provided by Biber 1988, 1989 on a linguistic basis. Rather than assuming that some sets of features are defined on a priori functional grounds, Biber identifies, by a multivariate quantitative method, sets of syntactic and lexical features that cooccur frequently in a text, and develops a typology based on these “dimensions of variation” noticing that “no single dimension of variation is adequate in itself to account for the range of linguistic variation in a language; rather, a multidimensional analysis is required”, and that “dimensions are continuous scales of variation rather than dichothomous distinctions” (Biber 1989: 6-7).

This implies that the types identified are actually prototypes with “core” texts based on the cluster areas of markedly high density and peripheral exemplars as secondary groupings based on less dense clusterings. The application of the statistical criteria proposed, however, brings about “surprising results”; as Biber remarks, this is a sign that “The theoretical bases of genres are independent from those of text types.” (Biber 1989: 38-9)
Indeed, in the literature the difference between genres and text types is often blurred and confusion is enhanced by use of both “genre” and “text type” in different fields to refer to a number of distinct phenomena for a variety of different purposes (see Virtanen 1992, Fludernik 1996). As a consequence, the typologies which are currently available all appear to solve some problems but leave others unsolved, among which are, primarily, the issue of hybridization and related multifunctionality: texts rarely belong uniquely to one type and consequently can fulfill more than one function. This observation strongly suggests that assignment of a text to either a type or a genre is a complex task that cannot be performed on entirely homogenous criteria. Rather, as we will see, it involves a complex inferential process that presupposes in turn a complex mental apparatus operating at different levels of text organization and on different scales of delicacy.

2.2. Genres and pragmatic competence

An important contribution in this direction is provided by Elly Ifantidou 2011, who argues that genre recognition is based on a pragmatic competence to be understood in terms of pragmatic awareness and metacognitive abilities. Pragmatic awareness is defined as “the ability to identify pragmatically inferred effects in the form of implicated conclusions, e.g. irony, humour, ridicule, contempt, high-esteem, favouring, incriminating, hostile attitudes conveyed by authors”; metapragmatic awareness as “the ability to reflect on and explicate (describe by metalinguistic discourse) the link between linguistic indexes and pragmatic effects retrieved by readers” (Ifantidou 2011: 327). Within this perspective, she claims, “genres can be analysed as pragmatic texts hosting a restricted number of linguistic markers used by readers as indexes of an open-ended array of implicatures” (ib.: 327). In other words, readers are expected not only to be able to identify key linguistic markers but to interpret them as pieces of evidence for the inferential retrieval of the writer’s attitudes. Genre recognition is consequently to be seen as the outcome of a dynamic process of continuous assessment of the relevance of specific linguistic markers to the identification of the writer’s attitudes, a process that relies on different interpretive mechanisms acting at different levels of granularity. In fact, a crucial point made by Ifantidou is that pragmatic awareness comes in layers of cognitive complexity: it is the cumulative assessment of sentence-lower-level and sequence-of-sentences higher-level that “synthesize into the attitude conveyed by the writer” (ib.: 333).

These theoretical remarks point to the necessity of a paradigm shift in the study of genre: in order to overcome the risks of extreme subjectivism and the nihilism of objectivism (ex. “satire has no ontological existence” (Simpson 2003: 154)), more attention should be paid to the dynamics of genre construction out of the interactions of what is said (either explicitly or implicitly) by the text, from the lower to the upper levels of its organization, and to the inferential processes that enable the interpretation of such interactions as structured patterns and cognitive schemas.

2.3. Genres as cognitive constructs

Several recent studies have actually argued that “we can consider genre as a cognitive construct and hence that it is the flexibility of the human mind that allows us to deal with the almost infinite variety associated with genre forms manifested in discourse” (Stukker, Spooren and Steen 2016: 1)

In Steen’s view, “genre is [...] a complex knowledge schema that individual language users have at their disposal to engage in discourse” (Steen 2011: 25). However, his theoretical approach presupposes a distinction between “genre events” and “genre knowledge” which is not without problems. In conceiving of genre events as the individual experiences of a genre (i.e. as individual action patterns involving knowledge of the world, conventions of communication and expectations regarding appropriate language
use) and of genre knowledge as the type of knowledge which may be abstracted from the observation of thousands of genre events, the circularity is evident.

A clear endorsement of the cognitivist approach to genre is Stukker, Sporen and Steen 2016: “we need to expand Swales’ (1990: 58) well-known definition of genre as ‘a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes recognized by the expert members of the discourse community, shaping the schematic structure of the discourse and constraining choices of content and style’ to consider genre as the multi-faceted, multidimensional and dynamic concept it appears to be, including linguistic, social, and content-related knowledge and is somehow stored in cognition”. (Stukker, Sporen and Steen 2016: 1)

As the general idea that genres should be viewed as cognitive constructs is gradually gaining ground in the literature, with individual contributions providing evidence of the ways members of a discourse community recognize, maintain and employ them, the questions that come to the fore become: how is genre knowledge represented in the mind (what is its architecture)? how is the mind equipped to deal with the dynamics of genre production and recognition? and which theoretical paradigms are able to systematically account for genre as a cognitive dynamic concept?

In what follows, I will try to provide evidence that may hopefully shed some light on these questions looking at them through the lens of satire. I will first claim that satire is difficult to define and understand as a genre if we move from the (traditional) assumption that it can be identified by a more or less closed set of features; then, I will argue that satire can be considered a genre if genres are conceived as dynamic cognitive categories that emerge out of a complex interplay of factors clustering differently under the effect of different contextual and cotextual attractors (see Beckner et al. 2009, Bertuccelli Papi 2003, Gibbs and Colston 2012). I will assume that, in satire, these factors include a wide range of linguistic and rhetorical devices which may merge or interact in different ways to dynamically bring about specifically intended effects. I will further claim that, cognitively, understanding satire is a context-sensitive complex process which implies setting up and maintaining multiple mental representations, identifying the clash between explicit and implicit meanings, assessing overt and covert attitudes (Bertuccelli Papi 2015), and drawing pragmatic inferences which cumulate up to the authorial intentions (Pfaff and Gibbs 1997). In order to give empirical substance to my theoretical claims, I will finally analyse a text which represents a specific form of satire, namely satirical news.

3. The big family of satire

A notion of genre based on a more or less closed set of features makes it difficult to distinguish satire from a host of modes of writing which are often mentioned as members of a big family with which satire has some intuitive resemblances. Picking up members from a number of sparse definitions in dictionaries and thesauri, the big family is assumed to include: parody, burlesque, mockery, spoof, lampoon, caricature, derision, ridicule, joke, teasing, deception, trick, humour, pasticcio, travesty, masquerade (irony and sarcasm are sometimes also included). Several scholars have striven to draw fine distinctions between some of these. By way of example, I will report below two studies on the distinction between satire and parody which will be functional to my argument.

3.1. Keeping satire distinct from parody.

In an attempt to severe apart parody and satire as two significantly overlapping genres, Kreutz e Roberts 1993 first distinguished satire and parody from irony. They argued that parody and satire are literary genres, whereas irony is not - it is a rhetoric device which can be used by several literary genres: satire and
parody do not necessarily require irony. That parody and satire appear to be partially overlapping, however, is due to the fact that they share some features of irony, namely pretense (P), echoic mention (EM) and the maintenance of multiple mental representations (MMR). In particular, it is claimed that pretense is important for satire, echoic mention is important for parody, and maintenance of the “dual” representations is necessary for both satire and parody. Thus, satire is characterized by P and MMR, parody by EM and MMR, and both are independent of irony. However, the authors note that satire and parody do not overlap but can coexist as satirical parodies, or parodic satires, but no explanation is provided for this phenomenon which apparently contradicts the possibility of drawing a neat and clean picture.

The closeness of parody and satire also emerged in Kuyper’s proposal of a perceptual theory of satire (Kuyper 1984). Kuyper claimed that satire is neither a matter of form nor of function: “the real nature of satire lies in the perceiver” (Kuyper 1984: 467). The question then becomes: What must a perceiver P perceive in order to interpret it as a satire? The answer suggested is that an act or an artifact can be perceived as a satire if and only if three conditions are met:

“An act or artifact a is a satire if a perceiver P thinks on perceiving a that the creator C’ whom P infers to have created a intended:

1. That P’s perception of a should change P’s view of some state of affairs S; and
2. That there should be a similarity of form between a and some antecedent set of acts or artifacts a’; and
3. That the similarity between a and a’ should be humourous” (p. 463)

Supposing further that each condition is a binary feature of satire, eight possible classes of entities can be identified by combining the three features:

[+1,+2,+3] the class of satires as already defined
[-1, +2,+3] the class of parodies which are not also satires
[-1, +2, -3] the class of imitation of form (which are not parodies), e.g. an exercise for a young Composer producing a fugue in the style of Bach
[+1,+2, -3] the class of non humorous didactic imitations, e.g. sermons
[+1,-2,+3] the class of non-imitative humorous and didactic acts, e.g. some teacher’s admonitions to students
[-1,-2, +3] the class of non-imitative jokes
[+1,-2, -3] the class of unfunny and unimitative instructions, e.g. the Road Code read for the first time
[-1,-2, -3] the universe of all other acts”. (Kuyper 1984: 469)

In spite of such attempts to pin it down, the distinction between parody and satire seems to be continually blurred. Simpson 2003 remarks that the presence of a dialectic component which would be obligatory in satire but not in parody has been widely assumed as a key disambiguating criterion. However, this is undermined by the observation that also some parodies may have a strong oppositional force: indeed, some parodies may be so aggressive as to destroy the original text. A parodic text that, beyond allusion to an original text, displays a strong oppositional quality seems therefore to shift towards satire. Not even reference to the kind of mental activities and type of knowledge involved in understanding satire and parodies seems to be a solution: “Certainly there is no evidence that parody, when compared to satire, is any less complex in terms of the conceptual and inferencing skills it demands” (Simpson 2003:122).

3.1.1. Satirical parody

The existence of intersections such as satirical parodies or satirical news (see below, §4.2) proves that genres are not watertight categories: texts have properties and features which interpreters seem to “combine” differently to produce different sorts of categorizations.
Tsiplakous and Floros 2013 analyse the two texts below as examples of a “fable” and a “joke” that stands in a “parodic subversive relationship to the original” (p. 126). In their view, text types are only modes of textual organization which are associated with conventional functions, whereas genres are tokens of text types and can be seen as dynamic mental codifications of situational parameters which aid in the retrieval of the text’s “ultimate force”. A vast array of linguistic features of the two texts point to their belonging to the narrative text type, while the moral in the fable and the punch line in the joke are almost univocal indexicals of the respective genres, whose ultimate forces are assumed to be, respectively, admonition for edification purposes and entertainment. I am not going to discuss the theoretical claims put forward by the authors concerning the relationship between genre and text type (based on a parallel with speech act theory, and thus evoking a distinction between illocutionary force and intended perlocutionary effects as part of a higher order intentionality which deserves in my opinion serious consideration). What I would like to question here, instead, is the putative nature of the second text as a parodic joke aiming to entertain the reader.

“The ant and the grasshopper


In a field one summer’s day, a Grasshopper was hopping about, chirping and singing to its heart’s content. An Ant passed by, bearing along with great toil, an ear of corn he was taking to the nest.

"Why not come and chat with me", said the Grasshopper, “instead of toiling and moiling in that way?”

“I am helping to lay up food for the winter”, said the Ant, “and recommend you to do the same.”

“Why bother about winter?” said the Grasshopper, “we have got plenty of food at present.”

But the Ant went on its way and continued its toil. When the winter came, the Grasshopper had no food, and found itself dying of hunger, while it saw the Ants distributing every day corn and grain from the stores they had collected in the summer. Then the Grasshopper knew: IT IS BETTER TO PREPARE FOR THE DAYS OF NECESSITY.

The Joke


The ant works hard in the withering heat all summer long, building his house and laying up supplies for the winter. The grasshopper thinks he’s a fool and laughs and dances and plays the summer away.

Comes winter. The shivering grasshopper calls a press conference and demands to know why the ant should be allowed to be warm and well fed while others are cold and starving.

BBC, CNN and NDTV show up to provide pictures of the shivering grasshopper next to a video of the ant in his comfortable home with a table filled with food.

The world is stunned by the sharp contrast. How can this be that the poor grasshopper is allowed to suffer so?

Amnesty International and Koffi Annan criticize the Government for not upholding the fundamental rights of the grasshopper. The Internet is flooded with online petitions seeking support to the grasshopper. Finally, the Judicial Committee drafts the Prevention of Terrorism Against Grasshoppers Act (POTAGA), with effect from the beginning of the winter.

The ant is fined for failing to comply with POTAGA and, having nothing left to pay for his retroactive taxes, his home is confiscated by the government and handed over to the grasshopper in a ceremony covered by BBC, CNN and NDTV.

Bush calls it “a triumph of justice...” (Tsiplakous and Floros 2013: 127-28)

The way I perceive it, the latter text is not a joke: despite its humourous character, its “ultimate force” transcends entertainment. Nor is it simply a parody: beyond its capability of reminding us of the original fable, it has an “ultimate force” that goes beyond admonition for edification purpose. However, in my perception, neither “forces” are cancelled: rather, both coexist with a reading of the text as satire. How can we account for this range of variability in interpretation? And where does the latter satirical reading come from? Let me tackle the second question first (The answer to the first one is in the next section).
Certainly the subject matter counts as one factor – a morality issue is at stake; certainly poking fun at important socio-political institutions is another key factor. The surreal quality of the situation described cannot be ignored either. And we cannot deny that humour is another component of the text which is frequently found in satire. Indeed, Simpson 2003 grounds satire in the overall context of comic discourse, stating that satire is a “pervasive and popular form of contemporary humourous discourse” (Simpson 2003:1).

None of these factors would separately account for the satirical quality of this text, though. Rather, the latter seems to emerge from their interrelations not only at a propositional level but also at some deeper level where attitudes and intentions are inferred. It is from these interrelations that the further force of the text as denunciation of the ills of a society emerge. Within this perspective, interpreting it as a mere joke is certainly reductive but not wrong, and the same with the parodic reading: depending on what inferences we draw or do not draw, and on which factors we foreground or background, we attract the text to one or the other of the three possible poles of its interpretation.

4. Genres as emergent patterns

While it is undeniable that most satires are characterized by the formal and functional features that a vast literature has identified while simultaneously pointing to its elusive nature, it is its protean, adaptive, quality which, to me, makes satire interesting in discussions on genres. In fact, satire acts as a kind of litmus test highlighting the complexities of genre recognition and pointing to the necessity to abandon the search for categorial distinctions and to adopt instead a cognitive dynamic approach to genre, as argued in recent studies.

It is my persuasion, and a hypothesis that I will support in the next section of my paper, that the only principled way to account for stability and variability in genres, and consequently in the categorization of satire as a genre, is to adopt a cognitive pragmatic approach rooted in a complexity view of language and cognition. This general framework, which is able to explain the nature of genres as emergent structures, is also capable of systematically accounting for the cognitive dynamics of genre recognition as the outcome of complex inferential processes triggered by multiple factors functioning as attractors in genre interpretation.

4.1. Languages as Complex Systems

Given the multidisciplinary (or better, “transdisciplinary”, cf. Larssen-Freeman 2011) nature of research on complex systems, there is as yet neither a generally shared definition of complexity nor a single metrics for measuring it. However, the notion of complexity has steadily gained ground as a key concept for setting up conceptual frameworks from which new answers can be found to the physical, biological, and social questions for which other scientific approaches have provided unsatisfactory solutions. The formal study of complexity, originated in the fields of mathematics, physics, computer science and meteorology, has developed in other fields in partially differing fashions under the names of complex adaptive systems theory, dynamical systems theory and chaos theory, depending on the research focuses of individual disciplinary approaches. Despite terminological and methodological divergencies, however, complex systems theories share the following basic assumptions:

1. A complex system is a system, that is a set of interconnected relations, composed of many parts, at many different scales.
Connections among the components of the system are non-linear; consequently, the global behaviour and properties of the system are more than (and different from) the sum of the properties and behaviour of its individual components. Fine scale behaviour may affect large scale behaviours: a small perturbation in one part of the system may cause large effects within the system.

Complex systems are dynamic and adaptive: they are not static, they change over time, reacting to interactions among the components and with the environment, and reaching states of relative stability and equilibrium at certain times under the effect of some attractors.

Complex systems exhibit patterns, behaviours and properties that “emerge” from nonlinear interactions, dependencies and relationships; no individual component of the system is responsible for the emergent global behaviour and properties of the system.

Complex systems may be nested: each component may be a complex system itself.

Complex systems are self-organised.

Phenomena exhibiting properties of complex systems have been shown to exist in every branch of science: the climate, flocking birds, ant colonies, market fluctuations, plant cells, eco-systems, the human brain are well-known examples which have been widely described as evidence that the interactions are more important than the individual components in making a system complex.

In linguistics, beyond the studies in second language acquisition (cf. Larsen-Freeman 1997, 2011, Ellis and Larsen-Freeman 2006, Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008, Baicchi 2015), few studies have actually elaborated a fully-fledged complexity view of language. Several contributions, however, have highlighted specific aspects of language as significant evidence of the nature of language as a complex adaptive system.

To mention only a few (for a more comprehensive overview, see Baicchi 2015), Merlini Barbaresi 2003 includes a collection of studies on complexity issues related to text comprehension; Bertuccelli Papi 2003 explicitly supports the view of languages as complex dynamic systems within which different types of structures act as organizers in order to make it possible for cognition to handle the huge amount of information involved in the communicative process; and Bertuccelli Papi and Lenci 2007 put forward a hypothesis on the nature of the lexicon as a complex system in which words act at the same time as cues of mental representations, triggers of ad hoc conceptual constructions, and anchors which hinder meanings from verging on the border of chaos. The self-organizational property of language as a complex adaptive system, and of linguistic patterns as emergent structures, as illustrated by Hopper 1988 with respect to grammar and language change, has been articulated by Becker et al. 2009 as follows:

“Linguistic patterns are not preordained by God, genes, school curriculum, or other human policy. Instead, they are emergent – synchronic patterns of linguistic organization at numerous levels (phonology, lexis, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse, genre, [emphasis mine] etc.), dynamic patterns of usage, diachronic patterns of language change (linguistic cycles of grammaticalization, pidginization, creolization, etc.), ontogenetic developmental patterns in child language acquisition, global geopolitical patterns of language growth and decline, dominance and loss, and so forth. We cannot understand these phenomena unless we understand their interplay” (Beckner et al. 2009, p. 18)

The role of complex systems theory in cognitive science, has been underlined by Gibbs and Colston 2012 in their study of figurative meaning:

“there is no single default theory of how human beings always experience figurative meaning. People’s figurative behaviors may be better characterized as the in-the-moment outcomes of dynamical processes where all sources of constraint interact to give rise to an emergent product... The psycholinguistic and neuroscientific literatures clearly demonstrate the importance of people, language, task, and measurement tool as critical variables in explaining people’s use and interpretation of figurative language. Dynamical theories of human cognition possess the flexibility to account for the complex interactions among these different variables.” (Gibbs and Colston 2012:335)
and has more recently been explored by Jordan, J.S. et al. 2015. Within the theoretical perspective of complex systems theories, where texts can be seen as microsystems in which the features of languages as complex systems are actualized (see Bertuccelli Papi 2003), genre categorization can be interpreted as a function of the parameters which organize and connect the conceptual material, and of the resulting interrelations. More specifically, genres may be seen as emergent patterns resulting from interactions among several components of the text, each of them a parameter potentially subject to quantitative and qualitative variability, but none of them individually responsible for the emergence of the pattern. There is no ideal representative feature of a genre: it is the interconnections among them that lead to the final interpretation of a text as belonging to a particular genre. Even a small change in one of the parameters may lead to the shift from one genre to another (from satire to parody, for example), because the perturbation makes the connections undergo a process of restructuring that may trigger a global reassessment of the text generic categorization. The literature on satire has shown that an immense variety of linguistic, literary and rhetorical devices are available to the satirist, but the final interpretation of a text as a satire is not the linear sum of those devices. Understanding that a text is a satire involves more than their identification and cumulation. In what follows I will argue that it involves a complex set of pragmatic inferences involving attitudes and assumptions that globally design the cognitive pattern of the text. The kind of pragmatic inferences I have in mind are relevance driven inferences. Below, I will substantiate my claim with the analysis of a text which is a piece of satirical news.

4.2 Satirical news or news satire?

Despite the difference in the functional dynamism of the two phrases “satirical news” and “news satire”, and of the related presuppositions, they are used here interchangeably to designate articles which mimic the format typical of mainstream journalism and qualify as satire for the inferrable attitudes related to both the contents of the articles and to the ways of doing journalism about them. However, admittedly, the two conceptual domains do not overlap perfectly: “satirical news” is first of all a piece of news which has a satirical intent, while “news satire” is first of all a satire which either is presented in the form of a piece of news or has some piece of news as its object. I assume that, as with satirical parodies, the blend of the two concepts is once more indicative of the nature of satire as a dynamic adaptive genre. News satire dates back to the rise of journalism itself; nowadays, it is particularly popular on the web, with websites like the British Private Eye and the American The Onion. The article I will analyse below is drawn from the latter.

4.2.1. “Poverty-stricken Africans receive desperately needed Bibles”

This article appeared in The Onion 42:11, 2006. The title consists of three complex concepts which set up a conflictual scenario. The thematic part of the title (poverty-stricken Africans) sets up a mental space including the encyclopedic information potentially available for each of the concepts: poverty-stricken, Africans. The pivotal predicate “receive”, in turn, sets up an argument schema in which the object, qualified by “desperately needed”, makes some of the information more relevant. Specifically, it selects, or ignites, so to say, a subset of the information attached to “Africans” and “poverty-stricken”, thus creating a second mental space for the set of expectations regarding the thematic section of the title. These expectations are that the poverty-stricken Africans will probably receive desperately needed “help”, “money”, “food”, “medicine” and similar. When the word “Bibles” arrives, it is most likely that an incongruity is perceived by the reader (especially after the qualifier “desperately needed”), and a competing scenario is consequently set up, possibly the result of a frame shift (see Ritchie 2005). Assuming that the principle of Relevance is active (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995), the expectations are suspended and the new concept, which apparently collides with them, activates another mental space including a set of temporary connections.
potentially compatible with the theme in order to bridge the gap between what was expected and what is actually said. What kind of information may be included in this new space? The new space, centred on the concept of “Bible”, will probably include a subset of the encyclopaedic information conventionally attached to the concept, presumably concerning the relevance of the Bibles within the context of poverty-stricken people (“religious comfort” may be a candidate, “spiritual nourishment” may be another one). The clash between the expectations set up by the first part of the title and the unexpected mention of the Bible is not enough to actually make the title itself ironic/sarcastic or able to unequivocally announce satire. Nevertheless, it is sufficient to make it potentially ironic/sarcastic. Thus, the title provides the reader with two potential kinds of inferences which might prime different kinds of emotional reaction - from indignation and harsh criticism to indulgence based on the interpretation of the Bible as capable of bringing religious comfort, pity and mercy. But the actual inferences as to the global communicative meanings conveyed are suspended.

My hypothesis is that, going on reading the text, a frame is constructed wherein some inferences are inhibited whereas others are strengthened. At the beginning, the concept “poverty-stricken”, attracts information such as “famine-stricken” and “humanitarian-relief operations” and “one of the largest and most aggressive grassroots fundraising drives” thus setting up a frame which supports inferences as to the positive engagement of the mission. The second frame, centred upon the notion of “desperately needed Bibles” captures the information “urgently needed Bibles”, “the Bibles they have hoped for”, “Christian ministry”, “mission”, “the word of our Lord Jesus Christ” and "Those who were hungry, hunger no more, for the Word brings life". This is reminiscent of the hunger for God’s Word in the Gospel of John: “Sir,” they said, “give us this bread at all times.” Jesus answered, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to Me will never hunger, and whoever believes in Me will never thirst” (John 6:35) "). Such information supports inferences as to the spiritual comfort the Bibles may have brought.

Even though the reader presumptively already perceives some situational irony in funding the mission through local charitable events such as “bake-offs, barbecues, and pie-eating contests” and in finding corporate sponsors like “Applebee’s and Church’s Fried Chicken”, it is only in the fifth paragraph, in my opinion, that the ambiguity of a potentially positive interpretation of the second scenario dissolves. We are informed that “Niger, ranked as the second-poorest nation on Earth, is experiencing its worst famine in more than 20 years, as a brutal drought last year was followed by a plague of crop-destroying locusts. An estimated 3.5 million of Niger’s 12 million people are currently at risk of starvation”. This changes the epistemic context or cognitive environment against which the rest of the text will be processed in the search for its relevance. Indeed, the inference licenced by the clash is sufficient to break the spell or illusion that what these people actually need is the spiritual nourishment of the Bible. This is all the more the case when we learn that the Bibles they sent to Africa were "handcrafted, genuine leather—best money can buy", “Bibles superior to the ones they use in their own church services”, with “ornately embossed spine”. These are richly decorated objects, as material goods which are totally useless in a situation depicted in the following words: “Disease, starvation, and lack of shelter are day-to-day realities in Niger”. As we read on, we perceive that a harsh criticism is being levelled at someone for either being foolish or dishonest. While we are possibly amused at unveiling the author’s tricky strategy woven so far, indignation is mounting: food, water, medicines is what should be sent to a country thus plagued, not fine Bibles. Also considering “the nation’s 18 percent literacy rate”.

Within this frame of mind, it makes sense to consider the names themselves “Christina” (executive director of the Living Light Ministries of Lubbock, TX) and “Kostic” (the 61-year-old missionary) as ironic allusions to “Christ” and “costs”. The two are definitely to be blamed for organizing a so-called “humanitarian operation” in the name of Christ (evoked in Christina), paying attention to money and costs ( “we spent so much”, “we couldn’t afford ground transportation”, “the missionaries purchased the best
vehicle they could find”) more than to what the people actually needed. Even the microlevel of the names’ morphology thus contributes to the set of inferences that pervade the text all the way through, up to its macrostructure. The critical attitude extends to their behaviour (Don Kostic laughs), to their words (“You couldn’t get the smell of freshly baked, vitamin-fortified bread out of it if your life depended on it”, “It can be so hard being away from the comfort of our homes and our loving families”), and to their incapacity to understand (“And when we opened up the back of the truck and they saw that it was full of Bibles... Grown men and women wept in front of their children. That’s how moved they were by the Holy Spirit.”).

The final emphasis on “spiritual sustenance” as opposed to the “poor comforts” of “the things of this world” unveils the deep mechanism upon which the satirical reading gets constructed. Beyond the many scattered ironies, the mechanisms hinges upon the clash between spirituality and materiality in a reversal of values whereby the material poverty of the Nigerians is assumed to be healed by the spiritual richness of the Word of God. However, the spiritual richness predicated is actually replaced by material richness: the representatives of the spiritual world turn out to be materialists, the humanitarian organizations lose sight of their mission, and consequently the poverty of the Nigerians is left unsolved. The final message we perceive is therefore not so much that Bibles can not bring comfort to poverty-stricken Africans, or that missionaries cannot help them, but rather that the people who could actually bring them relief exploit their sufferings to their ends. Pretending to send them spiritual nourishment, they deceive the Africans by sending them useless gifts. I assume it can be largely agreed that the ultimate point of the satire turns out to be a harsh, bitter criticism of the economic interests that intertwine with the ideals of humanitarian missions poking fun at religious beliefs and deceiving poor people (the actual degree of harshness perceived by the reader may depend on the reader’s involvement linked to personal values and beliefs: see Pfaff and Gibbs 1997, Fife 2016).

4.2.2. Inferences

Where do these attitudes and feelings come from? In our view, they come from a web of local and global pragmatic inferences which concern not only what is said but also the attitudes associated with it. This holds in primis for ironies.

Relevance theorists have pointed out the crucial role of attitudes in irony comprehension. Wilson and Sperber 2012 claim that two factors are necessary to understand irony: a) recognition of the utterance as echoing some other utterance, thought, norm or opinion; b) recognition that the speaker’s attitude towards the echoed component belongs to the range of dissociative attitudes: the speaker rejects a tacitly attributed thought as ludicrously false (or blatantly inadequate in other ways). (Wilson and Sperber 2012:136). What is communicated by an ironic utterance is therefore not only the reversal of the literal proposition but an attitude towards the literal proposition and to those who might hold it. Yus 2016 has extended the range of meanings communicated by irony to emotions and non propositional components of the utterance. Bertuccelli Papi 2018 has pushed the argument further showing that irony comprehension relies on a complex interaction of different kinds of attitudes which emerge from local and global inferences occurring all over the text.

Ironies are not, however, the only components of our text which are capable of bringing negative attitudes into the picture. At a macrolevel, the juxtaposition of objective information of a journalistic type (ex. “Niger, ranked as the second-poorest nation on Earth, is experiencing its worst famine in more than 20 years, as a brutal drought last year was followed by a plague of crop-destroying locusts. An estimated 3.5 million of Niger’s 12 million people are currently at risk of starvation.”) in between more allusive sections
also triggers inferences as to the relevance of the preceding and following information within a context thus profiled. This is most likely meant to arouse further negative attitudes.

In fact, another point could be made as to the possibility that the satire extends to the genre “newspaper article” itself. A criticism is simultaneously levelled by the author towards newspaper articles and their way of doing journalism on sensitive topics such as this. Attitudes towards the content push interpretation of the genre towards satire while attitudes towards the type of text push it towards parody. Again, depending on which parameter we select, the text can be assigned to either or both genres. These parameters then act as attractors in complex systems theory. As Gibbs and Colston 2012 remark, “Every system has multiple attractors shaping behaviour at any one time. This ensemble of attractors represent transient areas of stability, of varying degrees, which emerge through self-organizing dynamical interactions of the system’s components”. (Gibbs and Colston 2012: 336; see also Jordan et al. 2015)

5. Conclusions

Let me summarize the points I have made in connection with the classification of satire as a genre:

1. Genres are the product of our mind’s pattern finding ability. Understanding a text as an instance of a particular genre is largely a matter of pragmatic inferences.

2. Thus understood, genres need not be pure or unchangeable. Hybridization and multifunctionality are intrinsic properties of texts as much as regularity and stability. If we move from the assumption that texts are dynamic microsystems in which the general features of complex adaptive macrosystems are instantiated, these properties, that seem either contradictory or capable of undermining the possibility of categorizing and thereby threatening the interpretability of texts, take on a different status. The categorization process itself turns into a dynamic process naturally subject to external constraints and open to variability. However, the variability is neither limitless nor chaotic. Instead, it reaches stages of balance and stability under the effect of contextual or cotextual attractors.

3. Assignment of a text to a genre may vary depending on the parameters upon which we select to focus following a background/foreground dynamics. Texts may be assigned to more than one genre. Assignment of a text to a genre is not a “yes or no” process and does not depend on exclusively linguistic or exclusively pragmatic factors but on a complex interaction of parameters and cognitive representations. More specifically, endorsing Paltridge’s remark that “what typifies a genre at discourse level is not dependent on the presence of any one particular aspect of discourse structure in isolation, but on the interaction and co-occurrence of a number of aspects of discourse structure” (Paltridge 1995: 403) we have hypothesized that assignment of a text to a genre is an inferential task carried out on the basis of the mind’s continuous assessment of the attitudes and intentions of the writer.

4. If set against the background of these assumptions, satire can be considered a genre and, within this framework, the potential counterarguments linked to satire’s mutability turn out to be consistent with its generic nature.

ANNEX

Poverty-Stricken Africans Receive Desperately Needed Bibles
MARADI, NIGER—More than 60,000 urgently needed Bibles arrived to allay suffering throughout the famine-stricken nation of Niger Friday, in one of the largest humanitarian-relief operations ever attempted by a Christian ministry. Africans gather in hopes of receiving the Bibles they have hoped for.

"Come rejoice, and feast upon the word of Our Lord, Jesus Christ," said Christina Clarkson, executive director of the Living Light Ministries of Lubbock, TX. "Those who were hungry, hunger no more, for the Word brings life."

An exuberant Clarkson said the Bible drop was the culmination of one of the largest and most aggressive grassroots fundraising drives ever undertaken by the organization, which was able to fund the mission largely through local charitable events, such as bake-offs, barbecues, and pie-eating contests.

"We absolutely would not be here today if it were not for the amazing generosity of the people back home," Clarkson said. "People everywhere opened up their hearts and checkbooks to us and said, 'Dig in.'"

Niger, ranked as the second-poorest nation on Earth, is experiencing its worst famine in more than 20 years, as a brutal drought last year was followed by a plague of crop-destroying locusts. An estimated 3.5 million of Niger's 12 million people are currently at risk of starvation.

"That's why it was so important for this mission to happen right now," said Clarkson. "So many people here are suffering. Disease, starvation, and lack of shelter are day-to-day realities in Niger. But once they hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and accept Him as their Lord and Savior—once they really take Him into their hearts—then they will see what poor comforts are the things of this world."

Due to the tireless efforts of Clarkson and other members of the congregation, the ministry was able to provide the needy with Bibles superior to the ones they use in their own church services.

"Handcrafted, genuine leather—best money can buy," said 61-year-old missionary Don Kostic as he ran his hand along the book's ornately embossed spine. "It's like my wife back home says: Nothing is too good for people who are ready to receive the Living Word of Christ."

Although the fundraising efforts were unprecedented, congregation members said Living Light would never have succeeded had they not obtained the generous support of an array of corporate sponsors, including Applebee's and Church's Fried Chicken.

"We spent so much money just to get here," Kostic continued. "After we had all the Bibles engraved, we still had to charter the plane. When we landed in Niamey, we could barely even afford ground transportation."

Undaunted, the missionaries purchased the best vehicle they could find, which turned out to be a used bread truck. "That old thing!" recalled Kostic, laughing. "We must've scrubbed it down a hundred times. You couldn't get the smell of freshly baked, vitamin-fortified bread out of it if your life depended on it."

Reaction among Niger residents has been mixed. Moussa Yaouli, a 35-year-old farmer, was particularly interested to learn more about the doctrine of transubstantiation, which Living Light personnel told him involved the eating of wafers. "It is said to be a big wafer. I am sure it will feed many of my children."

Though "spiritually gratified" by their work, many of the missionaries spoke about the difficulties of working in an impoverished country.

"It can be so hard being away from the comfort of our homes and our loving families," Clarkson confided. "I will admit, there have been times when I prayed, 'Lord, just help me get through this mission and get me back to Texas!' But when we rolled into town and people started running after the truck with those big smiles on their faces, I couldn't help but smile back."

Clarkson added: "And when we opened up the back of the truck and they saw that it was full of Bibles... Grown men and women wept in front of their children. That's how moved they were by the Holy Spirit. That's how I know it's all been worth it."
Clarkson said her mission will succeed in bringing the people of Niger "the spiritual sustenance they've been deprived of," despite such obstacles as the nation's 18 percent literacy rate. "You say you're suffering. I say, let the good Lord do the suffering for you," she said. "You say you're exhibiting the deleterious effects of severe dehydration and chronic malnutrition. And I say that no matter what ails you, the Holy Bible is the best medicine there is."

References


