

## The critical problem of cynical irony

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# **The critical problem of cynical irony: *meaning what you say* and ideologies of class and gender**

## **Abstract**

Critical theorists such as Slavoj Žižek have for some years discussed the ideological significance of cynical or 'blank' irony in fairly general terms. Less attention has been paid to the practical implications of such irony for critical semiotic analysis. With this in mind, this paper discusses the problems that sexist and 'classist' jokes – specifically jokes about 'chavs' – pose for the critical analyst. On the one hand, they seem to be saying deeply ideological things. On the other, their ironic nature means that they evade the claim that they are really saying, asserting, *meaning* anything. There is a kind of blank irony which can be identified in all kinds of contemporary semiotic practice and is therefore an important phenomenon for critical analysts to get to grips with. The paper attempts to get to grips with it by outlining some semiotic clues to blank irony, and, more importantly, by suggesting some ways in which we might try to bring a critical perspective to bear in cases of cynical irony.

## **Keywords**

irony, critical discourse analysis, class

## 1 Introduction

This article is about the problem that ironic humour poses for specifically *critical* approaches to communication, such as critical linguistics (Fowler 1996), critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1995) and critical social semiotics (Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen 2003). The problem is that on the one hand the critical investigation of people's semiotic practice involves identifying problems in the kinds of things that people say about the world (in whatever mode of communication they 'say' them). It involves asking normative questions of forms of representation, often understood as ideologies or as Discourses. Or at least it involves highlighting the contingencies of naturalised or 'common sense' ways of talking about the world. But, on the other hand, we often encounter practices in which people seem to take an ironic, even cynical stance towards the things they say (e.g. Bewes 1997; Jameson 1998). They seem to know that what they are saying is ideological, or that it is a contingent, historically formed way of talking. And yet they say it anyway (Žižek 1989). They may say the kinds of things that invite critique while at the same time raising uncertainties about whether they sincerely *mean* these things. In such cases, it looks like our critique is pre-empted, nullified before we begin, and the questions arise: How do we bring a critical perspective to bear? *Can* we bring a critical perspective to bear?

The specific case that I use to explore this problem is that of 'chav humour' in contemporary Britain. This is a kind of ironic humour that takes as its object the stereotypical figure of the 'chav'.<sup>1</sup> I will give a slightly more extensive account of the stereotyping of 'chavs' below, but, at the moment, it is enough to say, first, that it is essentially a contemporary manifestation of long-running stereotypes of the 'undeserving poor' (Hayward and Yar 2006; Morris 1994), and, second, that talk of 'chavs', especially in public discourse, is overwhelmingly humorous in orientation. This is extreme class stereotyping. But it is also 'ironic'. Here, for instance, are some jokes taken from *The Little Book of Chav Jokes* (2006a):

(1) What's the best way to sober up a chav?

Stop his benefits

(2) What's the best thing a chav can give up for lent?

Breathing

(3) What do you call a chavette with two brain cells?

Pregnant

It does not take a great deal of interpretative sophistication to see the class stereotyping and the sexism in such examples. It is there loud and clear. It is very much the point of the jokes. But this ironic obviousness is precisely what causes problems for the critical interpretation. To respond to one of these jokes by saying 'that's terrible' or 'that's sexist' is to some extent to fail to 'get it'. *Of course it looks sexist. That's the point. But it's ironic.* But, from a critical point of view, we surely still want to be able to say 'no, that's sexist'.

A useful way to cast this problem is to use the familiar distinction between Discourse and Genre (following, e.g. Fairclough 2003). As critical researchers, we might wish to critique talk of 'chavs' in terms of Discourse, that is, in terms of its descriptive or representational relationship to the world. We might ask what is being asserted about the world in talk about 'chavs'. But, in the case of irony, any straightforward account, or critique, of Discourse is

pre-empted by the specifics of Genre, by the kind of thing that is *being done*. It is by now very well established that representing the world is but one of the many things that language does (e.g. Austin 1962; Halliday 1978). Not all Genres have equal commitment to Discourse. And ironic communication, if we can call it a Genre, is certainly not easily understood in terms of clear assertions about the world. (Again, that is its point.)

As critical researchers, how do we respond to this? On the one hand, if we ignore this ironic Genre, then we run the risk of missing the point, failing to not only 'get' the joke, but also failing to grasp the nature of the linguistic activity that is taking place. Perhaps we even commit Austin's 'descriptive fallacy' (1962, 3), by assuming that we can always understand communication in terms of straightforward representation. But, on the other, if we accept the irony, then we run the risk of ignoring the Discourse, the fact that what is being said is so thoroughly ideologically objectionable. To have any critical purchase at all, we need a way out of this.

The paper is structured as follows. I first provide a little more information on the stereotype of the 'chav' itself. I then discuss what I mean by irony, and contrast the kind of irony prevalent in contemporary discourse – which I call, following Jameson (1998), 'blank' irony – with two other forms of irony, namely 'sarcasm' and 'satire'.<sup>ii</sup> I then turn my attention to 'chav' discourse itself and outline those phenomena that lead me to the interpretation that discourse on 'chavs' actually is ironic in the first place. Finally, I return to the central concern of the paper and propose some possible critical responses to this blank irony: (1) we simply give up on critique; (2) we ignore the irony and address earnestly what is literally said; (3) we focus on the irony as Genre itself. None of these is entirely satisfactory but each, I think, has some merit and raises suggestive further questions.

## 2 'Chavs'

The figure of the 'chav' came to the fore early in the first decade of the Twenty-First Century as a stereotype of working-class, usually young, men and women. The word itself entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2004 defined as 'a young person of a type characterized by brash and loutish behaviour and the wearing of designer-style clothes (esp. sportswear); usually with connotations of a low social status', and announced as Oxford University Press's first ever word of the year. This paper is not intended as a comprehensive account of discourse on 'chavs' (see e.g. Hayward and Yar 2006; Moran 2006), but there are a few points about the 'chav' that it will be useful to make at this stage:

1. 'Chav' is a stereotype of *other people*. It is very rarely used in self-identification. Early in Grace Dent's teen novel *Diary of a Chav*, our eponymous 'chav' writes 'I really hope they stop calling [our school] 'Superchav Academy' soon ... WE'RE NOT ALL CHAVS RIGHT? ... Me and Carrie AREN'T anyway. Uma Brunton-Fletcher down the road is a bit' (2007: 4-5). This nicely illustrates a point that can be taken from sociological research on young people's talk about class; 'chav' is used by youngsters at various social positions to talk about those that they perceive as being 'below' them. It is not used by these young people to identify themselves (e.g. Maxwell and Aggleton 2010; Nayak 2006).<sup>iii</sup>
2. Aside from the word 'chav' itself, there is little new about discourse on 'chavs'. Much of what is said about 'chavs' echoes well-established stereotypes of the 'feckless' or 'undeserving' poor, or the 'underclass'. Key features of this representation, as outlined by Levitas (2005: 21) are that: '[i]t presents the underclass ... as culturally distinct from the "mainstream"'; '[i]t focuses on the behaviour of the poor rather than

the structure of the whole society'; and '[i]t is a gendered discourse, about idle, criminal young men and single mothers' (see especially Tyler 2008 on this final point).

3. Discourse on 'chavs', at least in public, is generally 'light-hearted' and ironic. Television characters most often identified as 'chavs' are comedy sketch characters, such as Vicky Pollard from *Little Britain* (BBC 2003-2006) and the 'chav pilots' from *The Armstrong and Miller Show* (BBC 2007-2010). It has given rise to 'humour' books such as *The Little Book of Chavs*, *The Little Book of Chavspeak*, *The Little Book of Chav Jokes*, *The Chav Guide to Life* (Bok, 2004a; 2004b; 2006a, 2006b) and *Chav! A User's Guide to Britain's New Ruling Class* (Wallace and Spanner, 2004), and a popular series of teenage novels, *Diary of a Chav* (Dent, 2007a; 2007b; 2007c). As part of a larger research project into uses of the word between 2004 and 2008, I collected a corpus of over two hundred newspaper articles using the word. None of these articles could be seen as a traditional serious or 'hard' news story. Much more typical were weekend personal columns, television reviews, magazine features and similar light-hearted 'soft' items.

It is the conjunction points two and three that is most significant to this paper. Discourse on 'chavs' belongs to a long-running tendency towards the stereotyping of the poor in British society. The kinds of things that are said about 'chavs', even when not as extreme as the jokes presented in the introduction of this paper, are close to those said about the 'underclass', or about people considered 'common'. And yet, it all seems to be so thoroughly ironic.

### 3 Blank irony

I take irony to be a phenomenon whereby something is said or written in such a way as to self-consciously invite scepticism about whether what has been said or written is really what is meant. It is a kind of semiotic practice which seems to say without sincerely *meaning*, or which at least raises doubts about sincerity. This is clearly not the only way in which irony could be understood (see e.g. Muecke 1982, 8-13). It is a conception of irony that Colebrook calls 'modern irony'. Something seems to be being said, but in such a way as to raise doubts about whether the speaker (or the writer) really *means* to assert what they say. Such irony raises, but does not answer, the question; 'Is what is said what is *meant*?' (2000, 21). To look back to the 'chav' jokes that I presented in my introduction above, the writers of *The Little Book of Chav Jokes* do not really mean that 'chavs' should give up breathing for lent, or at least the fact that it is an ironic joke means that to 'get it' is to act as if they don't. But equally, what such irony does *not* do is to actively express the opposite of the 'literal' meaning of what is said (c.f. Grice 1975): We are unlikely to think that the 'chav' joke writer means that it is *particularly* important for 'chavs' to carry on breathing.

It is well established that irony is more than just saying one thing and meaning the opposite (Sperber and Wilson 1981). It involves what we might see as degrees of detachment. On one end of the scale we might have the situation of classic **sarcastic** irony, whereby something is said to mean the opposite. As listeners, readers or analysts, in such cases, we can be fairly sure that the person does not mean what they say, that they are not being sincere in what is said. In fact we might think them pretty sincere in meaning the opposite. Somewhere slightly closer to sincere, non-ironic discourse, we have the situation of what we might call **satiric** irony. In such cases, again, we can be fairly sure that the speaker does not mean what they say. There is a clear critical evaluation of what is 'literally' said. It is

parodied, made fun of, negatively evaluated. But, we can be less sure about what – positively – the speaker does mean. Colebrook’s ‘modern irony’ is less detached again than satire. It is **blank** irony as famously described by Jameson (1998: 5). This is a ‘neutral’ ironic practice. Ironic, but without ‘the satirical impulse’. What is being said is perhaps not meant – we can’t be sure – but neither is it actively criticised. It is this final kind of irony that is most relevant to discourse on ‘chavs’, and which causes the kinds of problems for critique that I outlined in the introduction above.

For Colebrook and Jameson, blank irony is not simply a pragmatic behaviour, or a kind of speech act. It is not just a thing that people sometimes do with language which needs explanation within a relatively decontextualised account of language itself (see Farrow 1998 for a critical review of such attempts by linguists). For these writers, irony is a *cultural* phenomenon, something that happens in a particular time period, among people who live particular kinds of lives. Linda Hutcheon calls it a ‘discursive practice’ (1994). Jameson’s account of this ‘blank irony’ is also a ‘critical’ one in the (restricted) sense that it connects a semiotic practice – blank irony – to broader social and economic changes (Fairclough 1995, Ch1). In his classic account of postmodern culture,<sup>iv</sup> ‘blank irony’ is related to a situation in which society fragments, such that all ways of using language come to look contingent and the idea of a ‘normal’, truthful form of representation appears to be an impossibility. This is a kind of Tower of Babel account of the fragmentation of ways of talking in the last hundred years or so, whereby Discourses, Styles, Genres become relativized, all seen as equally ‘fair game’ for ironic appropriation; ‘the very possibility of any linguistic norm in terms of which one could ridicule private languages and idiosyncratic styles would vanish’ (1998, 5)

So Jameson relates blank irony to its cultural context, but his critical perspective is less forceful in normative terms. He tells us that such blank irony exists, that it can be understood in terms of broader societal tendencies, but he has little to say about why it matters in a normative sense. Why should we care? How does such irony actually affect people’s lives? Perhaps the clearest voice on this question is the author David Foster Wallace, who also sees irony in cultural-temporal terms, but with a clear sense of what it feels like to live with blank irony. Writing about the United States in the early 1990s, ‘irony tyrannizes us’, he tells us, since it is ‘impossible to pin down’. ‘[T]oday’s irony ends up saying’:

“How very *banal* to ask what I mean.” Anyone with the heretical gall to ask an ironist what he actually stands for ends up looking like a hysteric or a prig. And therein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony ...: the ability to interdict the *question* without attending to its *content* is tyranny

Foster Wallace 1993, 184

For Foster Wallace, the oppression of irony resides in its evasiveness. Implicit in his account is a kind of Aristotelian or Habermasian argument that to live healthy public lives, we need to be able to say what we mean about the world, and we need to be able to recognise other people as saying things – and actually *meaning* them – too. The absolute fragmentation that Jameson outlines and which becomes ‘Institutionalised irony’, as Foster Wallace puts it, threatens this. It ignores ‘content’, and in so doing it undermines the public and political significance of that old-fashioned representational function of language.

The discussion above might look like a needlessly abstract lead-in to an account of irony in ‘chav’ humour. Terry Eagleton writes that frameworks of discourse analysis are guilty of ‘sometimes solemnly labouring the obvious, wheeling up the big guns of linguistic analysis to despatch the inconsiderable gnat of a dirty joke’ (1991, 196). And perhaps he is right. But

Foster Wallace's arguments, in particular, articulate well the difficulty that we face in developing a critical account of 'chav' humour. We can't simply dismiss them as 'dirty jokes' partly because they seem to be symptomatic of the kind of blank irony that Foster Wallace finds so problematic and so pervasive, and partly because, as researchers interested in representation, we have yet to work out how to deal with the meaning of 'dirty jokes' in any case. How do we deal with this – very public – saying without (necessarily) meaning?

#### 4 Semiotics of blank irony

What I intend to do now is to establish some of the semiotic clues that the kind of irony outlined above actually does exist in discourse about 'chavs'. I do so with reference to a collection of texts about 'chavs' taken from the list of 'chav' humour books outlined above. One point that needs making at the outset of this section is that there can be no definitive 'sign' or set of signs that categorically index irony. This is a point made by Colebrook (2000), following Davidson's comments on the impossibility of a sign for sincerity (1984). Irony relies on the existence of uncertainty about a language user's sincerity. The consequence of this for a semiotic account of irony is that any attempt to provide a definitive list of the resources of irony would be misguided. It would be a mistake to assume that we could identify a more categorical list of clues to irony than is available to people involved in actual ironic communication.

On the other hand, though, it might sometimes be useful to language users to index, with varying degrees of explicitness, their ironic intentions, and, in such cases, we can think about what resources they might use to do this. Much linguistic work on irony focuses on identifying such resources, and in his classic study of literary irony, Wayne Booth, outlines a number of 'clues to irony' (1974, 49-75). I will refer to such existing work in my account below. What are the semiotic features that indicate to readers that so much discourse on 'chavs' is to be taken as ironic? I suggest that we can usefully attend to the following:

1. **Metasemiotic marking** - resources which, with varying degrees of explicitness, reflexively 'mark' the discourse as ironic
2. **Echoes** - self-conscious echoing or mimicry of existing semiotic stereotypes.
3. **Stereotypic unreasonableness** - the deployment of a 'coding orientation' which evades questions of realism or accuracy in being obviously overblown

##### 4.1 Metasemiotic marking

Quite obviously, we might sometimes be explicitly told that some text or stretch of discourse is ironic (Booth 1974, 53-55).<sup>v</sup> There is considerable interest in contemporary sociolinguistics in the ways in which people reflexively mark their discourse as being of particular kinds (Agha 2007; Jaworski et al 2004). The ironic humour of 'chav' discourse is metasemiotically marked in a number of ways.

The books are marked by their cartoonish design (on which more below), in some cases by their titles (*The Little Book of Chav Jokes*), and by instructions to stockists such as 'file under humour'. They may also be presented in the 'humour' section of book and gift shops. And, given the distribution of the word 'chav' in public discourse more generally – it might be argued that the word itself carries with it a comedic prosody of some kind. When we read the word 'chav', we are unlikely to think that we are in for any kind of 'serious' discourse. Further, not all ironic discourse about 'chavs' comes in identifiable 'jokes' of the kind presented in the introduction. But where they do, we might also see this joke form itself as a kind of metasemiotic marking. This is roughly how it was understood by Freud (2002). Freud

thought that the generic semiotic form of the joke was simply a kind of trigger which let us know that we can 'let go'. We do not find the clever wordplay funny in itself, but it does nonetheless work as a trigger to tell us that it is ok to laugh, to forget our inhibitions. These inhibitions, he thought, might be psychological or they might be social. We might feel that there exists some social authority that prevents us from expressing some feeling or point of view. The joke form allows us to put this authority to one side. Freud would not put it exactly like this, but it is a kind of metasemiotic indicator that it is acceptable to laugh at the unacceptable, to not take what is 'said' seriously.

As an example, take the following jokes from *The Little Book of Chav Jokes* (Bok 2006a):

**(4)** What do you call it when a chavette has an abortion?

Crime prevention

**(5)** Where does a chavette go to lose weight?

The abortion clinic.

What is being said here - if we take things literally - is clearly unacceptable. In (5), there is a fairly extreme case of the gendering of 'chav' discourse - 'chavettes' are good at having babies, but they don't much care about them.<sup>vi</sup> However, the joke form acts as a clue that we are not to take things seriously.

Importantly, though, the metasemiotic marking associated with 'chav' discourse does not show signs of reflexive critique. That is, though we are likely to read these jokes as being ironic, we are unlikely to see them as satirising or criticising what is literally said.

#### 4.2 Echoes

We recognise irony, Sperber and Wilson suggest, when we see some discourse as an 'echoic mention' of existing discourse (1981). Rather than 'using' language to say something about the world, ironists are just 'mentioning' the language, echoing things already said. This is why, Sperber and Wilson suggest, so much irony makes use of stereotypical expressions or recognisable norms (1981: 312). These things are easy to 'echo' and are easily recognised as 'echoic'. There are problems with the point of view as an account of *all* irony certainly (see Toolan 1996: 207-220), and it has to be acknowledged that, even where we do see a relationship between echoic mention and irony, we might just as easily identify the existence of echoic mention on the basis of ironic insincerity in the first place, rather than the other way round. But, nonetheless, there *does* seem to be such a relationship between at least some irony and the echoing of other voices. And, specifically in discourse on 'chavs' this is often the case.

First, there is an echoing of established genres, such as the dictionary (e.g. *The Little Book of Chavspeak*, Bok 2004b) and the I-Spy Guide (e.g. 'Chav Spotting' in *Chav! A User's Guide*, Wallace and Spanner 2004). Second, there is an echoing of the supposed 'voice', or at least point of view, of 'chavs' themselves, for example in the Chav Prayer, a chav's-eye pastiche of the Lord's prayer which begins, 'Our Giro who art in Job Centre...' (Bok 2006b). But it is a third kind of echoing that is most critically problematic. This is the echoing of class stereotypes themselves. Writers on 'chavs' echo existing stereotypic representations of the language, tastes, behaviour of working class people. I have suggested elsewhere that the specifically linguistic stereotype of 'chavspeak' is echoic in this sense (Author 2012). Extremely well-established sociolinguistic stereotypes, such as 'H-dropping', are deployed in



stylisations of 'chav speak'. What matters about these forms is not that they have any particular relationship to actually-existing talk, but that they are recognisable class stereotypes. They echo stereotypes that we already know, and are well used to.

(6) 'ave

Verb

Chav speak contraction of the English 'have'.

Bok 2004b

The same could be said of the discourse itself which represents 'chavs'. Nothing new is being said. And I suggest that this is not simply a reflection of a continuing strand of class prejudice in British social life, but also a blankly ironic echoing of these stereotypes. The following, to give one example, is a list of 'chav likes' from *The Chav Guide to Life* (Bok 2006b: 99). It is difficult to see this as anything other than a list of well-established, recognised stereotypes to do with the supposed criminality and hedonism of the 'undeserving' poor:

(7) Maccy D's, Drinking, Clubbing, Shagging, Smashing Phone Boxes, Drugs, Smoking, Racing Novas, Joyriding, Getting stoned, Spitting, Lying, Acting hard

To be clear, my argument here is that a key part of what is being echoed or stylised here are existing stereotypic representations. They are not being critically echoed, or satirised, but blankly reproduced. This echoing is not simply pastiche of what critical discourse analysts would call Style, but also of Discourse (see e.g. Fairclough 2003). That is, it is not only forms of presentation or identification that are knowingly recycled, but also ways of *representing*. 'Chav' discourse is an ironic recycling of ways of talking *about* the social world.

#### 4.3 Stereotypic unreasonableness

Discourse about 'chavs' is also characterised by an obviously unreasonable degree of certainty about what 'chavs' are like and how they behave (see Toolan 1996: 215 on unreasonableness as a clue to irony). This is clearest to see in the cartoonish images of 'chavs' that are used on the covers and inside 'chav' humour books. Such cartoonish images make use of a 'coding orientation' (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 163-166) by which viewers are invited to think about the images as stereotyped abstractions rather than as nuanced, naturalistic images. Their decontextualisation and their bright, unmodulated colours and simple lines tell us to treat these as cartoonish stereotypes, rather than as the kinds of image about which we can ask questions of literal truth or accuracy. And the same can be said of the language used to write about 'chavs'. It is a language which foregrounds its own certainty about the nature of the 'chav', largely through the use of indicators of high epistemic modality. Such resources include adverbs indicating usuality, as in the following example (from Wallace and Spanner's 2004 *Chav!*, as are examples 9-13):

(8) there is always at least one fight on the [wedding] day and it usually involves a drunken brawl between the male members of the bride's family versus those from the groom's family. Or, if the bride and groom are from the same family, which is often the case, old family grievances are aired, usually resulting in one almighty punch-up!

And descriptions of 'chav' behaviour in a rule-like manner using conditional subordinate clauses:

(9) If a chav is indoors then the TV is going to be on.

**(11)** If a chav should ever miss an episode of [Eastenders], they must promise to 'watch it on Sunday' or will be forever banished from the chav community.

**(12)** If a Chav can get by on the dole, s/he will.

On occasion, anaphoric nouns are used that refer back to earlier formulations of 'chav' behaviour as 'rule[s]':

**(13)** Kebab shop owners are usually in the front line for this kind of treatment in the post-pub world and will usually suffer if England has been beaten. The exception to this rule is if the chav happens to live in a multicultural community, in which case they are likely to be confronted by a lot of non-Brits who are much bigger than they are.

Such resources suggest a predictability to chav behaviour, that readers can know with some certainty what 'chavs' will do. But there is a point about this modality worth considering. Clauses with such explicit markers of epistemic modality as identified here might be understood as *less* epistemically certain than clauses without any markers at all. A 'bare' declarative is read as certain, and to add any markers of modality to this, however strong, might be to raise the question of how certain we are that this is true (Lyons 1977, 808-9). Following this analysis, the use of such resources is likely to diminish the sense of certainty about 'chav' behaviour, not strengthen it. However, rather than jeopardising my argument, I think that this in fact leads to a more subtle understanding of the use of markers of epistemic modality. This discourse is not oriented towards truth itself but towards stereotyping, and it seems likely that this is what these markers serve to indicate – they serve to say both 'these are very predictable people that we are describing' and also 'we are being stereotypical about them'. In this sense then, they are markers of a meta-modality; not of how certain we should be about these facts, but of how certain the authors wish to *appear* to be about them. They are, then, indicators of reflexive awareness of stereotyping as much as they are indicators of stereotyping itself.

The cartoonish abstraction is not only a knowing exaggeration of stereotypes of 'chavs', but of the text producers' own attitudes towards 'chavs'. Take for example, this joke:

**(14)** Two chavs jump off a cliff: who hits the ground first?

Who cares?

Bok 2006a: 35

Here it is at least in part the sheer unreasonableness of not caring about another human being 'hit[ting] the ground' that indicates irony. Not the unreasonable certainty about 'chav' behaviour, but the unreasonable callousness. A similar unreasonableness is striking in the above abortion-related jokes (4, 5), or in the outrageous misogyny of a joke like:

**(15)** How do you stop a chavette from smoking?

Slow down and use a lubricant.

Bok 2006a: 109

In this joke - and many others like it - there is a clearly gendered representation of the 'chavette' as a sexual object. This is nothing new in stereotypic representations of working class women. To 'get' the joke we have to recognise that the reason the 'chavette' is smoking is because someone - 'you' - is having violent sex with her. But with the extremity of this indicates that it is (probably) not to be taken seriously.

What allows all of this stereotypic unreasonableness to contribute to blank irony, rather than acting as satiric irony is, I think, the fact that there is nothing anywhere else in discourse on 'chavs' to contradict these unreasonable claims. Incongruities with things said elsewhere or the kinds of 'conflicts' or 'clashes' that Booth discusses (1974) simply do not arise. In the case of *Chav! A User's Guide*, we even find an 'About the Authors' section in which we are told that one of the authors 'connects' with Sigourney Weaver in the film *Aliens* 'as he tries to locate the queen chav's nest so that he can get rid of her eggs and call her a bitch' (2006, 256). A consequence of this lack of satiric intention is that though it is clear that to 'get' these 'chav' humour books is to engage with them ironically, and that this might involve some *scepticism* about sincerity, it is also clear that this is not the same as categorically *not* meaning what is said.<sup>vii</sup>

## 5 Critique of blank irony

In the above I have sought to describe what the irony in discourse on 'chavs' looks like. I now want to discuss what a critical response to this *might* be. This returns us to the problem posed in the introduction. What kind of useful critical intervention can be made of a semiotic practice that critiques itself, and which seems – though we can't be sure – to know that it is repeating objectionable stereotypes without care?

### 5.1 Give up

I have suggested that we cannot take the irony of 'chav' discourse to imply that its producers actually do not mean what they say. But we can take it as casting doubt upon sincerity, and as evading the kinds of language games associated with 'sincere' communication. Indeed, for Michael Billig (2001), the function of racist jokes as used by the Ku Klux Klan is not to say things that the Klan members do not mean – they are explicitly and avowedly racist people – but to say things that they (probably) do mean, while at the same time 'mocking restraints' on doing so. If this is also the case with the 'chav' jokes, and with such objectionable irony more generally, then perhaps the first critical strategy that we should consider is simply giving up. That is, if we really do think that the producers of the 'chav' jokes mean what they are saying, and yet don't care, we might have to admit, however important we think it is to take a critical approach to communication, that there are more useful places to expend our efforts. These people, we might reasonably think, are beyond the pale. Indeed, it is a point worth recognising in general that pointing out to someone that their discourse is stereotypical, 'classist', sexist or otherwise ideological is not necessarily going to give them any reason to stop saying what they say. It might very well be the case that rather than having an ideological point of view work through them and implicitly structuring their representations of the world, they have actually found a point of view that they like, and are committing to it. They *want* to be sexist. In which case, it is likely to be of little use to point to the sexism in their discourse.

But if this leads us to give up on critique, then it does so only under the assumption that the people to whom our critique is addressed are the producers of the discourse itself. Perhaps our critique is also useful as a kind of 'consciousness-raising'<sup>viii</sup> exercise for those who are not so thoroughly committed to the ideologies that we identify – people such as ourselves, our colleagues, our students, most members of that thing 'the general public'. I think that this is the case, and for this reason, would hesitate to suggest giving up on critique. But I also think that we do face closely related questions that are particularly felt in the critique of irony, but have much more general applications for critical researchers: (1) we probably need to think much more about who the audience of our critical work is – *who* are we writing our

critiques for and *why*? And (2) we also have to recognise that a lot of the critique that we engage in is already going on ‘out there’ (Jones 2007) – very few people who I have read these ‘chav’ jokes to have found them funny. And I do not think that it is just down to my delivery. I am not sure what the answer to these questions is, and think that thinking them through may be of some benefit in a great deal of critical research.

### 5.2 Ignore the irony – take the Discourse literally

Another possibility is that we simply ignore the irony, and view such discourse as straightforwardly assertive. We could just act as if the ‘chav’ jokers really do mean what they say and respond by playing the established language games of critique. This would mean asking questions of representation, and perhaps especially – though not all critical researchers would agree with this – of *truth*. It was precisely this kind of earnest attachment to assertion that David Foster Wallace thought might be typical of a new generation of post-ironic critical writers. These, Foster Wallace thought, would be ‘some weird bunch of “anti-rebels”’:

These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. ... The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “How banal”.

Foster Wallace 1993: 192-3

In a sense, what Foster Wallace is advocating here is similar to the established critical method of ‘defamiliarisation’, a practice that always involved a kind of forced naivety, an acting as you don’t know what’s going on (when really you do). But, rather than defamiliarising ourselves from straightforward ‘common sense’, we would be defamiliarising ourselves from the ironic practice of detachment itself. Indeed, once we have recognised the kind of cynical irony involved in ‘chav’ jokes, it is hard to imagine how we can continue to take them at their word in any other way. However, in taking this approach we would clearly be adopting a kind of ‘cynical distance’ ourselves. To be one of Foster Wallace’s earnest anti-rebels, we have to take an ironic stance on irony itself. *I know that you are joking, but I am going to act as if you mean it*. This may be a useful disarming strategy, perhaps. But I am undecided on whether this is not just going to get us into more ironic trouble. To play the role of the anti-rebel might be a helpful critical ploy if a friend of ours tells a sexist joke. But it is much harder to imagine that we could take such an approach as the base of a school of academic critique, let alone any kind of positive political movement.

### 5.4 Focus on the Genre

Another possibility is that we focus on the irony itself, and concern ourselves less with trying to work out exactly what the ironists are saying about the world. This involves focusing on cynical irony as a Genre, or a kind of semiotic activity, and thinking about what the causes and effects of this activity itself might be. Jameson, as outlined in Section 3 above, provides an account of the causes, and Foster Wallace of the effects. Both of these writers, I suggested, are ‘critical’ in these useful ways. They allow us to see irony as a cultural tendency which exists in relation to other aspects of social life, and also to think about how it might affect social life. However, it would be misleading to understand this ‘chav’ humour – or any other specific ironic practice – *only* in terms of the more general practice of irony, and to ignore what kinds of things are actually being said ironically. The irony matters especially here because of what (if we take it literally) it is *about*. Britain, at the peak of ‘chav’

discourse, was a more unequal place than it had been for generations (Stewart and Hills 2005). Studies were suggesting that it was increasingly geographically segregated along economic lines (Dorling et al 2007). The public spaces in which people from different backgrounds might interact were being privatised, gentrified and instrumentalised (Minton 2012). Old forms of gendered class disgust were being felt, and exploited, for example in television comedies like *Little Britain* (Skeggs 2005, Tyler 2008). Class and gender were *important* things to talk about. But they were also very *difficult* things to talk about. The irony itself might be understood – perhaps tentatively – as a response to this, a kind of cynical resignation to a world of inequality which changing the ways in which we talk is likely to do little about. In such a situation, if there is little hope in talking earnestly or straightforwardly about these things, why not repeat stereotypes? Of course, cynical resignation of this kind may mean laughing along with the ideologues.

So, focusing on the ironic practice itself allows us to appreciate the specifics of ironic discourse – its ‘cynical detachment’ as Žižek (1989) would have it – but we also need to retain some concern for what is being talked about, even if it is precisely the ‘aboutness’ of irony which is difficult to grasp. It is important, therefore, that we attend both to what the irony is about (the question of Discourse, with the attendant risk that we look ‘banal’) *and* to what the irony does (the question of Genre). The fact that what it does is to make our very questions of ‘aboutness’ hard to ask certainly makes this a difficult task. In the long term, this requires more thought, more attempts at critique, and perhaps some questioning of theoretical categories such as Discourse and Genre themselves. What I hope to have done here is to highlight the problem, and some possible ways of dealing with it.

## **6 Conclusion**

The significance the kind of ‘cynical detachment’ associated with irony is certainly not news to critical theory taken generally. We can see this in the 1980s writings of Rorty, Jameson or Žižek. But critical approaches to linguistics, discourse analysis and semiotics have so far had little to say on the matter. This is particularly problematic because those working in these fields are likely to confront ironic practices fairly regularly, and yet are likely to find little in the way of theoretical support when they do. Against this background, the aim of this paper has been to specify the problems that blank irony in particular causes for critical approaches to communication, to provide a case study of a kind of discourse in which it seems to exist, and to suggest, fairly tentatively, some ways in which we might face up to this problem. My intention has been to cast these final suggestions in ways which leave them fairly open in two senses: first, in that I hope they are open for further discussion and critique; and second, in that I hope that they are open enough to be applicable to ironic practices well beyond ‘chav’ discourse itself.

As a final plea for generalizability, many of the issues discussed here touch on quite fundamental theoretical issues in critical approaches to communication. Such issues include the distinction between Discourse and Genre, the question of whether and how it matters if people ‘mean what they say’, and the question of who we are writing our critiques for. These are difficult issues not only in the case of irony, but also in relation to cynical tendencies in other fields of life such as advertising and political communication. Thinking about irony, I would suggest, is therefore a useful way of reflecting on some of the implicit conceptions of language and communication that we adopt in our critical analyses, precisely because it raises problems of the kind discussed in this paper.

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<sup>i</sup> Throughout this paper, I use the word 'chav' with 'scare-quotes'. This is to indicate that I do not take there to be any real world thing called a 'chav'. The 'chav' is a stereotype.

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<sup>ii</sup> A distinction that I will not really address is that between humorous forms of irony and other forms of irony. There are certainly distinctions to be drawn there, but the focus of this paper will be on forms of irony that are also intended to be humorous. Conversely, probably not all humour is ironic in the sense in which I am using the term. But there is a significant enough overlap between irony and humour for it to be worth thinking about this ironic humour.

<sup>iii</sup> I am often asked whether 'chav' has not been reappropriated in the way that some other negative stereotype labels have been. I see little evidence that it has. There were certainly some attempts at this, such as the British tabloid newspaper *The Sun* running a 'Proud to be a Chav' campaign in late 2004 (following a spike in media attention when the word was named OUP's 'word of the year'). The campaign, as far as I can tell, was unsuccessful. It ended within a week, and *The Sun's* use of the 'chav' was certainly never so celebratory again. In all, I would say that, while there were some attempts here and there at reappropriation, it would be very hard to make the case that 'chav' has undergone the standard reappropriation process.

<sup>iv</sup> Some may have noticed that while Colebrook calls such irony 'modern irony', Jameson seems to identify it with postmodernism. Actually, Jameson's identification is slightly more ambivalent than this. 'Pastiche' a particular kind of blank irony is typical of postmodernity, but blank irony itself is a modern phenomenon. Further discussion of exactly what conditions such irony is typical of, and its historical genealogy would be fascinating, but such issues cannot be explored here in any depth.

<sup>v</sup> As Booth points out, though, there is always the possibility that such 'straightforward warnings in the author's own voice' are themselves ironic, and not to be taken literally.

<sup>vi</sup> There are clearly also here normative presuppositions about the significance of abortion itself. Note also here the morphology of 'chavette', which works in some discourse on 'chavs' (but not all) to distinguish the ostensible characteristics of the female 'chav(ette)' - promiscuity, ugliness, bad parenting - from those of the male 'chav' - violence, drug use, criminality. This gender distinction is well-established in discourse on the 'underclass' and 'undeserving poor'.

<sup>vii</sup> I once gave a talk to a group of British Sixth Formers about representations of 'chavs'. After showing some cartoon drawings, I said '... but real life is not like a cartoon'. To which one of the students shouted back 'yes it is'. Laughs all round. Undoubtedly, there are layers of irony in the student's comment itself. But it raises an important point to which I will return, which is that irony is not a categorical, all or nothing phenomenon. There is always the possibility that the ironist also means it.

<sup>viii</sup> This of course makes the entirely contingent assumption that people need their consciousness raised when it comes to this kind of thing. I think that the success of shows like *Little Britain* suggests that some people do, even if few are likely to find the more violent 'chav' jokes funny. But this is nonetheless a contingent assumption, and the questions of



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who our critiques are for and what role they play in broader political contests are very real ones.