

Oxford English Dictionary | The definitive record of the English language

irony, *n.*

Pronunciation: /'aɪərəni/

Forms: In early use often in Latin form **ironia**.

Etymology: < Latin *īronīa* (Cicero), < Greek *εἰρωνεία*...

1.

a. A figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt.

1502 [see sense 3].

1533 T. MORE *Debellacyon Salem & Bizance* i. v. f. xxviii^v, When he calleth one self noughty lad, both a shrewd boy and a good sonne, the tone in the proper symple speche, the tother by the fygure of ironye or antiphrasys.

?1541 COVERDALE *Confutacion Standish* sig. bij^v, Now is ironia as much to saie as a mockage, derision.

1589 G. PUTTENHAM *Arte Eng. Poesie* III. xviii. 157 By the figure *Ironia*, which we call the *drye mock*.

1617 F. MORYSON *Itinerary* i. 160 Your quip..that you were ashamed to write to mee for your rude stile. Very good, I finde the Irony.

1620 T. MIDDLETON & W. ROWLEY *World Tost* sig. C2, By his Needle he vnderstands *Ironia*, That with one eye lookes two wayes at once.

1788 F. D'ARBLAY *Diary* 13 Feb. (1842) IV. 103 He believed Irony the ablest weapon of oratory.

a1831 R. WHATELY *Rhetoric* in *Encycl. Metrop.* I. 265/1 Aristotle mentions..*Eironeia*, which in his time was commonly employed to signify, not according to the modern use of 'Irony, saying the *contrary* to what is meant', but, what later writers usually express by *Litotes*, i.e. 'saying *less* than is meant'.

1837 MACAULAY *Ld. Bacon* in *Ess.* (1887) 428 A drayman, in a passion, calls out, 'You are a pretty fellow', without suspecting that he is uttering irony.

1876 J. WEISS *Wit, Humor, & Shakespeare* ii. 44 It is irony when Lowell, speaking of Dante's intimacy with the Scriptures, adds, 'They do even a scholar no harm'.

b. with *an* and *pl*. An instance of this; an ironical utterance or expression.

1551 BP. S. GARDINER *Explic. Catholique Fayth* f. 22, He spake it by an Ironie or skorne.

1623 BP. J. HALL *Contempl.* VII. O.T. XIX. 295 Ironies deny strongest in affirming.

- 1656 E. REYNER *Rules Govt. Tongue* 227 An Irony is a nipping jeast, or a speech that hath the honey of pleasantnesse in its mouth, and a sting of rebuke in its taile.
- 1706 tr. J. B. Morvan de Bellegarde *Refl. upon Ridicule* 229 Subtil and delicate Ironies.
- 1738 W. WARBURTON *Divine Legation Moses* I. Ded. 9 A thorough Irony addressed to some hot Bigots.
- 1894 W. J. DAWSON *Making of Manhood* 29 Smart sneers and barbed ironies at the expense of every movement which seeks to meliorate the common lot.

2. fig. A condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things. (In French *ironie du sort*.)

- a1657 G. DANIEL *Trinarchodia: Henry V* cxcviii, in *Poems* (1878) IV. 150 Yet here: (and 'tis the Ironie of Warre Where Arrowes forme the Argument,) he best Acquitts himselfe, who doth a Horse præfer To his proud Rider.
- 1833 THIRLWALL in *Philol. Museum* 2 483 (*title*) On the Irony of Sophocles.
- 1833 THIRLWALL in *Philol. Museum* 2 493 The contrast between man with his hopes, fears, wishes, and undertakings, and a dark, inflexible fate, affords abundant room for the exhibition of tragic irony.
- 1860 W. COLLINS *Woman in White* III. xi. 413 The irony of circumstances holds no mortal catastrophe in respect.
- 1878 J. MORLEY *Carlyle* 194 With no eye for..the irony of their fate.
- 1884 *Nonconformist & Independent* 6 Nov. (Lit. Suppl.) 1/1 The irony of time is wonderful.
- 1894 T. HARDY (*title*) Life's little ironies.

3. In etymological sense: Dissimulation, pretence; esp. in reference to the dissimulation of ignorance practised by Socrates as a means of confuting an adversary (**Socratic irony**).

- 1502 tr. *Ordynarye of Crysten Men* (de Worde) IV. xxii. sig. ff.iii, To saye of hymselfe ony thyng of his feblesse and necessarytes, or of his synnes..to ye ende that a man be renommed and reputed humble abiecte & grete thyng in merytes and deuocyons before god..suche synne is named yronie, not that the whiche is of grammare, by the whiche a man sayth one and gyueth to vnderstonde the contrary.
- 1655 T. STANLEY *Hist. Philos.* I. III. 5 The whole confirmation of the cause, even the whole life seems to carry an Irony, such was the life of Socrates, who was for that reason called..one that personates an unlearned man, and is an admirer of others as wise.
- 1848 H. ROGERS *Ess.* I. vi. 318 The irony of Socrates..may be not unfittingly expressed by saying, that it is a *logical masked battery*.
- 1860 R. W. EMERSON *Considerations in Conduct of Life* 222 Like Socrates, with his famous irony; like Bacon, with life-long dissimulation.

ADDITIONS SERIES 1993-7

spec. in *Theatr.* (freq. as **dramatic or tragic irony**), the incongruity created when the (tragic) significance of a character's speech or actions is revealed to the audience but unknown to the character concerned; the literary device so used, orig. in Greek tragedy; also *transf.*

- 1907 W. RALEIGH *Shakespeare* 229/2 (Index), Irony, dramatic.
- 1942 PARTRIDGE *Usage & Abusage* 167/2 Dramatic irony is that which consists in a situation—not in words;..when the audience..perceives a crux..that the characters concerned do not.
- 1957 *Encycl. Brit.* XII. 683/2 In tragedy, what is called 'tragic irony' is the device of making a character use words which mean one thing to him and another to those acquainted with the real issue.
- 1978 P. HOWARD *Weasel Words* xxiv. 99 Producers of..pantomimes still use this sort of dramatic irony visually.

irony, n.

Second edition, 1989; online version November 2010. <<http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/99565>>; accessed 07 February 2011. Earlier version first published in *New English Dictionary*, 1900.

Oxford University Press

Copyright © 2010 Oxford University Press . All rights reserved.

Your access is brought to you by:
San Diego State University