On the Discourse of Satire
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Volume 2

On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a stylistic model of satirical humour

by Paul Simpson
On the Discourse of Satire
Towards a stylistic model of satirical humour

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I suppose it would be accurate to say that the “idea” for this book arose out of an experience during a university seminar which took place, alarmingly, over two decades ago. I was then still a fresh-faced and follically-unchallenged undergraduate reading a degree in literature and linguistics, and the episode in question occurred during the week when we were “doing” that (in)famous Anglo-Irish writer, Jonathan Swift. Swift of course cannot be “done” without some reference to his famous skit, the “Modest Proposal”, in which an unassuming persona urges the eating of children in order to solve the problem of Irish overpopulation. A programme advocating the lessening by cannibalism of “the number of Papists among us” proved to be as contentious a hot potato, so to speak, in the Northern Ireland of the late nineteen seventies as it no doubt was in eighteenth century Dublin. As to Swift’s ironic purpose in the skit, everyone, bar one student, reached a satirical interpretation. Unusually for an otherwise parochial undergraduate community, the student who “didn’t get it” happened to have been born and raised several thousand miles away from Northern Ireland. His objection to Swift was resolutely framed: the proposal was “disgusting” and that if this was the best Ireland could do literary-wise, then it was a very poor show. The tutor’s riposte to this was perhaps the predictable one. But Swift didn’t really mean it, it was literature, it was, well, ironic. To which the student replied, with inexorable logic, that of course he meant it because he said it. And so it went on, as an ever widening interpretive chasm pushed the two positions further and further apart. Some twenty five years later – such it seems is the necessary gestation period for my academic output these days – I came to the idea of a project which explored the interpretative chasm between the two positions taken up in that seminar. No-one was wrong in that interchange, although no-one was completely right either; both arguments could be sustained with some degree of validity. Quite why such a duality of interpretation is possible, and what that says about the particular form of discourse that is satirical humour, is one of the main preoccupations of this monograph.
The book comes principally out of the academic tradition of modern stylistics. That simply means that it applies to text a variety of models of language, linguistics and pragmatics. While that tradition reflects best the type of methods used and the sorts of analytic frameworks applied, this study departs from much other stylistic work in that its principal emphasis is neither specifically, nor necessarily, on literary discourse. The emphasis is, rather, on satire’s status as a culturally situated discursive practice. This direction has not been taken because of any antipathy towards “classical” literature or towards the practice of literary criticism. It is simply that satire’s “everydayness” as a vibrant and dynamic form of verbal humour has been significantly neglected in terms of the amount of attention it has received within the academe. It is indeed a central argument of this book that a “non-literary stylistics” of satire is much needed, simply because continued interest over the decades in canonically literary examples has tended to draw a veil over the day-to-day functions of satire in contemporary social and discourse contexts. That said, it is hoped that the broad design of the model proposed is sufficiently watertight theoretically to be applied across to the canon of classical satire, although such a study is of course well beyond the remit of the present project.

Writing about humour can be a strange and somewhat disorientating business. Humour is glued into social, cultural and even national contexts, so writing a monograph which hopefully draws an international readership forces one to tread a fine line when “unpacking” humour texts; a fine line that is between, on the one hand, stating the obvious in the explication of humorous material, or, on the other, risking losing readers because the topically and culturally situated references within those texts have not been made sufficiently transparent. In this book, although the data derives primarily from humour practices in Britain, Ireland and the USA, the theoretical model advanced is designed to have generalised application. In the design of that model I hope to have contextualised sufficiently the data so as to make it accessible without insulting the intelligence of my readers. But please forgive me if I do.

Another thing about writing about humour, a fact brought home to me midway through this project, is that while humorous texts become progressively less amusing the more one pays attention to them, research on humour concomitantly starts to seem very strange indeed. I was struck particularly by one well-intentioned experimental study, written many years ago, on the impact of conflict on the basic humour mechanism. Victims of war-induced trauma had flashed before them a series of cards containing “jokes”, to which their responses were noted. As it turned out, the war veterans really didn’t find the experience very funny at all; in any case, the jokes themselves are “clas-
sified” and now rest with the relevant Department of Defence of the august international power from which the research stemmed. By dint of curious co-incidence, around the time of the publication of that article, an episode from the renowned Monty Python television series featured a sketch where someone had discovered a joke so funny that it had the power to wipe out entire armies. So potent was this joke that parts of it had to be shown on cards by individual soldiers in relay so as not to endanger the troops on one’s own side. After spending so much time on humour research, I frankly cannot tell which of the two scenarios, the academic study or the Python comedy sketch, is the more bizarre.

Such is the nature of research into humour. An editorial comment made many years ago in the first issue of the journal *Humor* points to a central dilemma in humour research; namely, that hoping to derive amusement from an academic study of humour is akin to hoping to enjoy gastronomically the recipe for delicious meal. Well, the present book offers a fairly largish menu, comprising several courses, of a very particular type of cuisine. I can only hope that this “food for thought” does not spoil your further enjoyment of the meal.
Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1

Introduction

There is no more dangerous symptom than a temptation to write about wit and humour. It indicates the total loss of both.

George Bernard Shaw

1.1 Satire as humorous discourse

This is a book about satire. To be more specific, it is a book which develops, tests and attempts to justify a theoretical model for the study of satirical discourse. The book’s emphasis on satire as discourse is significant insofar as it seeks to incorporate other associated areas of study such as “satirical technique”, “the satirical text”, or “the language of satire”. In keeping with contemporary definitions, discourse is understood here in the first instance as a level of language organisation that supersedes that of the sentence and in the second as a type of meaning potential that arises out of the interaction between text and context. Notions like “satirical technique” and “the language of satire” are thus subsumed within this higher-order framework of discourse. By exploring specifically “the discourse of satire”, this book seeks to position this type of verbal (and pictorial) humour against a dynamic, interactive framework of actions and beliefs. Satirical texts are understood as utterances which are inextricably bound up with context of situation, with participants in discourse and with frameworks of knowledge. The book’s key rationale is therefore to capture the special discoursal and pragmatic features that characterise this pervasive and popular form of contemporary humorous discourse; it is, in this respect, as much concerned with “how” satire means as it is with “what” satire means.

It is a simple and straightforward assumption of this book, as of work in humorology generally, that humour is basically a good thing. Skill in the delivery of humour, in whatever its precise style or genre, is a prized asset in human societies and cultures. Wherever the particular academic vantage point may be situated, scholarly research on humour consistently affirms its importance as a solidary mechanism in the day-to-day experiences of ordinary people and its
capacity to help bond, galvanise and sustain human relationships. The possession of a good sense of humour is also much coveted, evidence for which is certainly easy to come by. The “personal ads” and “lonely hearts” columns that proliferate in our newspapers and colour supplements ask that a prospective partner possess a “GSOH” (Good Sense Of Humour); so de rigeur is this stipulation that the quality sought can be captured by abbreviation. The obverse, that a future soul mate possess “No Sense Of Humour”, is, in the present author’s of course limited experience of the genre, nowhere to be found in the small ads.

The scholarly literature constantly emphasises the absolutely central place that humour, and its sometime attendant respiratory convulsion, laughter, occupies in everyday spoken and written social interaction. The emphasis across the discipline is resolute and unwavering, irrespective of whether it stems from linguistics and language studies (Nash 1985), from sociology (Mulkay 1988), from politics (Basu 1999), from philosophy (Morreall 1987), from psychology (Goldstein & McGhee 1972) or from clinical psychotherapy (Fry & Salameh 1987). Humour accomplishes many things: it relieves embarrassment; it signals aggression; it displays courage in adversity; it serves as a coping mechanism; it functions as an instrument of social influence; it rehearses and redesigns the categories and concepts of serious discourse. Because it is perceived as play, humour also offers a “way out” in discourse because it allows a humorist to take back what he or she says: “it was only a joke” is one oft-voiced disclaimer (Kane et al. 1977: 13). Given this highly variegated function, humour is, as Miller notes, a “very difficult subject to talk about, and it is an even more difficult subject to be scientific about” (J. Miller 1988: 6). It is also a feature of humour that its use is circumscribed with respect to context, so, perhaps to state the obvious, not every discourse context “allows” humour and not all humorous material is suitable for every discourse context. Aside from this issue of taboo, there are occasionally certain wider, cultural restrictions on humorous communication. Bauman’s study of the speech of seventeenth-century Quakers notes how their “plain style” stemmed both from a requirement always to tell the truth and from a biblical injunction against idle words (Bauman 1983: 54–55). Implicit to these strictures is a distrust of verbal humour as a form of “idle” or “untruthful” talk, although one can only speculate on how this restriction was encoded, if at all, into the day to day language practices of this speech community.

A workable formal taxonomy of humour, accounting for its many different discourse functions, is admittedly not easy to find. This in turn has implications for how satire might be located and classified within a global framework of humorous discourse. Ziv does offer a useful starting point, however, in his
study of that most elusive of discourse practices, humour in married life. He proposes five key humour functions: the aggressive, the sexual, the social, the defensive and the intellectual (Ziv 1988: 225; see also Ziv 1984). Of these categories, the sexual function, where laughing about sex is seen as a way of dealing with the topic in a socially acceptable way, is probably better classed as a subcategory of the defensive mode, given that that function accommodates the use of humour to deal with a whole range of “anxiogenic” or difficult topics. It is the remaining three functions which appear to be most directly relevant to satirical discourse. The aggressive function always ridicules or makes fun of a victim, allowing the non-victim a feeling of superiority. The social function can serve to reinforce intra- and inter-group bonds, strengthening the cohesiveness of interpersonal relations. The intellectual function, which is based on absurdities, word play and nonsense, provides pleasure in “the temporary freedom from strict rules and rationality” (Ziv 1988: 225).

Ziv’s classification, like many comparable taxonomies in humorology, assumes that the functions are relatively discrete and anticipates that a particular type of humour normally manifests in a specific function. What is significant about satire is that it synthesises at least three functions and carries them out simultaneously. The precise means by which satire performs this “multi-functionality” will be justified thoroughly over the course of the book, but it is worth making a few more informal observations here. Satire clearly has an aggressive function. It singles out an object of attack; in fact, it cannot, strictly speaking, be satire unless it demonstrates this capacity. Satire also has a social function, in the terms of Ziv’s model, because inter-group bonds, in particular, are consolidated in “successful” satire. Yet it also has, perhaps in greater or lesser degree depending on the particular satire, an intellectual function because it relies upon linguistic creativity which extends the full resources of the system of language. Compared to “racist humour” where the aggressive function dominates (Davies 1988), “coping humour” where the social function dominates (Henman 2001) or “absurdist humour” where the intellectual function (arguably) dominates (Simpson 1998), satire simply cannot readily be assigned a single discourse function.

Even when satire is mapped onto other taxonomies of basic humour functions, the same multi-functional characterisation emerges. Take for example Basu’s classification, which renders down the basic humour mechanism into three functions: as “lubrication”, “friction” or “glue” (Basu 1999: 391). Humour acts as a social lubricant, venturing ice-breaking goodwill and demonstrating an ability to laugh. Humour may also act as “a fine-grained social sandpaper”, because comedy makes frankness less threatening and conveys criticism less
contentiously. Thirdly, humour can act as a social glue in that this rhetorical skill can relax and entertain, and can incline one towards empathy with others (Basu 1999: 390–394). There is again good cause for aligning satire with all three functions, as the glue, lubricant and sandpaper engendered by a particular kind of discourse phenomenon. And as will be argued at length throughout this book, satire is a preeminent form of humour which, when successful, accomplishes simultaneously a number of humour functions. It is odd, in the light of these remarks, that satire is so rarely the object of scrutiny either in the broader tradition of humorology or within that narrower tradition of linguistic research on verbal humour. True, satire has received a great deal of attention in literary criticism, as chapter three of this book demonstrates, but in comparison with specifically focussed humorological studies of jokes, witticisms, puns, humorous anecdotes and narratives, its coverage has at best been marginal. This is indeed strange given that, as will be argued below and passim, satire is as much a common part of everyday spoken and written interaction as any of the other easily recognisable humour practices.

The term *satire* is itself a curious and rather elusive one, perhaps fitting of its enigmatic position in the broad inventory of humour types. Scholars seem unsure about the precise etymology of the word but it seems most likely that it emerged as a blend of two unrelated words, *satyr* and *satura*. The former refers to the Satyr, to what Carpenter calls the “boozy, randy half-goats, half-men of Greek mythology” (Carpenter 2000: 91). The latter, from the Latin expression *lanx satura*, describes a platter of mixed fruits offered to the deities at festival time (see further Hendrickson 1927: 46–60; Clark 1991: 51; Draitser 1994: 101). The term “satyr”, with a meaning roughly approximating the contemporary sense of the term, was allegedly first used in the English language in 1509 in Barclay’s prologue to *The Ship of Fools* (Campbell 1971: 85), although much writing before that period had of course been satirical in all but name.

Whatever its linguistic origins, it is a key point of departure for this book, affirmed constantly throughout forthcoming chapters, that satirical discourse suffuses the general humour resources of modern societies and cultures. It is not an alien form of humour, not something remote from everyday social interaction, but is as much part of the communicative competence of adult participants as puns, jokes and funny stories. While satire may be relatively complexly ordered and structured, that complexity does not place it beyond the ken of ordinary participants in discourse. Although justification for this point will, again, be offered as the book progresses, here is an informal illustration of what I have in mind. The series of excerpts below are taken from *Radio Times* magazine (web), a weekly British publication which lists televi-
sion schedules for all terrestrial and satellite broadcasts. The excerpts have been culled from the two pages which cover the programming schedule for a single evening. That evening has no special significance other than to underscore just how routine and unexceptional is the place of satire in ordinary mainstream television viewing.

9.00 (BBC 2) New series. The Friday Night Armistice. The acclaimed comedy show returns, aiming its incisive and topical brand of satire against a wide range of public targets . . .

10.00 (Film Four) Primary Colors. American political satire that follows an idealistic first-time aide as he manages the election campaign of a presidential candidate.

10.20 (BBC 1; N. Ireland only) Two Weddings and a Ceasefire. Radio Ulster’s comedy troupe, the Hole in the Wall Gang, present this satirical comic tale . . .

11.05 (Sky Premier 3) Fight Club. This visceral satire stars Brad Pitt as a bare-knuckle moralist.

(Radio Times magazine; listing for 9/01/2000, my emphasis)

What is remarkable about this pattern is that the concept “satire” is not only clearly well within the interpretative compass of the several million television viewers who read this magazine, but that it is also amenable to subclassification in terms of the particular humour function it serves. Witness, for example, how premodifying elements are used narrow down the scope of reference of a particular satire: Sky Premier’s satire is “visceral”, BBC2’s is “incisive” and Film Four’s “political”. Aside from the general recognition of satirical topicality, other insightful indicators of the popular conceptualisation of satire draw out its aggressive (viz. “incisive”) function. Also highlighted is satire’s capacity to manifest in different genres of discourse: the BBC2 “comedy show” format is clearly differentiated from the narrative format of BBC1’s “comic tale”, for example. True, its boundaries may be blurred and the term may possibly be over-used, but satire is clearly a concept that has some real currency in everyday usage.

Furthermore, it is especially important to the rationale of this book, as will argued in detail later, that the discourse of satire be wrested away from existing academic studies of “classical” satire and, by imputation, from qualitative judgments about what constitutes “good” or “bad” satire. Rather, satire should be viewed as a familiar part of the territory of everyday humour practices. It is of course very difficult to assess what proportion of this more generalised praxis is
made up by satire. In the context of the television listings exercise above, a poll conducted by Market and Opinion Research International (MORI, web) indicates that comedy is the preference of 32% of all television viewers in the UK, so it is feasible to suggest, as the admittedly informal evidence above indicates, that a solid component of this comprises satirically-oriented humour. Moreover, there is no reason to think that this type of humour preference would not be replicated in televisual cultures around the world.

A final question, perhaps the most challenging, concerns the sorts of theoretical issues that satirical humour poses for the discourse analyst. What, in other words, does an analysis of the discourse of satire involve? Consider in this respect the following short example, Text A. This (complete) text is the first of a number of examples developed across the book to be taken from the British satirical magazine *Private Eye* (see below §1.3, for further details). I make no particular claims in advance of this somewhat unprepossessing little text other than to say that it is satirical and that it is, at the time of writing, topical. The impetus for the text, for the record, comes from the satirist’s perception of the poor performance of the British Labour party since its election to power in 1997.

Text A

**PRODUCT RECALL**

**New Labour™**

Placed on market 1 May 1997

The manufacturers of the above product wish it to be known that a large number of faults have developed in the New Labour™. Under certain circumstances, the New Labour will bend, buckle and fall to bits, rendering it wholly useless. Customers are advised that the New Labour cannot in any circumstances be returned, and that no claims for compensation will be considered.
It would inappropriate to try to develop any sort of rigorous analysis of Text A in advance of the development of the theoretical model itself, so more detailed scrutiny of this example will be held over to a more appropriate slot in Chapter 5 of this book. However, it might be worthwhile to try to isolate some of the research questions this unassuming text raises. Here are just a few of those questions:

- What does this text do in and with discourse? In other words, what general lexico-grammatical and linguistic-stylistic operations underpin A’s composition as text?
- What other discourses are present in Text A? In other words, to what extent does this text echo, subsume or distort other genres, registers and styles of discourse?
- What in the text’s design and reception makes it critical? In other words, what collaborative inferencing strategies, for instance, need to be brought into play so that an addressee derives a critical message from the text?
- What assumptions does the producer(s) of the text make about the addressee? In other words, what a priori calculations have been made about, on the one hand, the addressee’s cultural and encyclopaedic knowledge, and, on the other, their knowledge of contemporary events and current affairs?
- What is the “shelf life” of this particular text? In other words, and related to the previous question, what are the contextual constraints, in terms of place and time, that enable its success as a piece of satirical discourse?
- What happens if the text does not work? In other words, what are the repercussions in discourse for the success or failure of a satirical text and for the interactive relationships between the participants in that discourse event?

Although not addressed any further here, these are precisely the sorts of questions that frame the broad aims and scope of this book. What needs to established more clearly now, as a corollary of these research questions, is a better picture of the composition and rationale of the proposed model of satire. To this effect, the following section offers a thumbnail sketch, in outline only, of the main tenets of the model of satire proposed in the book.

1.2 The model: In brief, and in abstract

To give a global picture both of the type of research paradigm adopted and of the general academic direction taken in this book, it is worth setting out in
abstract terms the core rationale of the analytic model that will be developed, applied, and reviewed across the following chapters. The theoretical assumptions which underpin the categories and principles highlighted are, of course, defended and justified in relevant places throughout the book, as are the particular research traditions which have inspired each component in the analytic apparatus.

The model operates from the premise that satire is a discursive practice. That is to say, satire functions as a higher-order discourse, in the Foucaultian sense; higher than what systemic-functional and other linguists classify as genre or register, and certainly higher than what literary-critics traditionally mean by the term “genre of literature”. Satire requires a genus, which is a derivation in a particular culture, in a system of institutions and in the frameworks of belief and knowledge which envelop and embrace these institutions. It also requires an impetus, which emanates from a perceived disapprobation, by the satirist, of some aspect of a potential satirical target.

As a discursive practice, satire is configured as a triad embodying three discursive subject positions which are subject to constant shift and (re)negotiation. These are the satirist (the producer of the text), the satiree (an addressee, whether reader, viewer or listener) and the satirised (the target attacked or critiqued in the satirical discourse). Two of these three participants, the satirist and the satiree, are ratified within the discursive event. The third entity, the target, is ex-colluded and is not normally an “invited participant” in the discursive exchange, even though the target is what provides the initial impetus for satire. The non-ratified, ex-colluded discourse participant that constitutes a satirical target may be an individual person, an episode involving human agents, an aspect of more fixed or stable experience or existence, or even, crucially, another discursive practice. The interactive bonds between the three subject positions in satire are, moreover, open to redefinition in the context of particular satirical humour events. Whereas satire which is successfully “taken up” may draw closer the satirist and satiree, a failed or “misfired” satire tends to stabilise and reshape the relationships in the triad by serving on the one hand to distance the satirist from the satiree, and on the other, by drawing together the satiree and the satirised target. To this extent, a certain amount of calculated interactive risk attaches to the creation and dissemination of satirical discourse.

In terms of its linguistic properties, a satirical text functions through the instantiation of a discoursal prime. A prime activates a putative or real anterior discourse event, mediated intersemiotically, which may be, but is not restricted to, another specific text, or another genre or register of discourse. The prime is in this sense an “echoic” utterance to the extent that it is predicated on
someone else’s discourse, but over which ironic distance is placed through the repositioning of the ostensible speaking source of the text. The constitution of the prime as echoic discourse is one of the three principal ironic phases in the creation of a satirical text. The prime, however, needs to be supplemented with another, key device that operates within the satirical text. This is a text-internal dialectic. The dialectic is so-named because it functions as an antithesis which, in the Popperian sense, induces a collision of ideas or appeals to a line of reasoning that falls outside the straightforward. Both the prime and dialectic components are abstract constituents, best thought of as elements of structure or as structural slots in discourse. It follows then that the prime and dialectic elements of structure are expounded by specific features of the discourse of satirical texts, some of which are sketched below. Whereas the textual exponent activated by the prime is interpreted through a framework of general knowledge, the dialectic is accessed through a framework of knowledge of typical text structures, such that a schism or fracture occurs between these two frameworks. This oppositional relationship, between the prime and dialectic elements of structure, is what constitutes the second ironic phase in satire. It is the presence of both prime and dialectic, the interpretation of which is reliant on access to different types of knowledge resource, which, within the modest terms of the present study, constitutes a core principle of satirical discourse.

In the model proposed, satirical method refers to the linguistic means used by a satirist to create both prime and dialectic elements of structure in a piece of satire. Method is thus grounded in palpable discoursal operations that can be accommodated within frameworks of stylistics and pragmatics. Several of the compositional techniques used in satire can be captured by analogy with the terms metonymy and metaphor. The umbrella category of metonymic satirical method embraces stylistic techniques that sustain a collision in-text that stays within the same conceptual domain; exponents of which include saturation (the device of “inflation” in discourse), attenuated focalisation (the device of “deflation” in discourse) and negation (the device of inverting positive polarity in discourse). Metaphoric method embraces a more generalised set of cross-generic mapping techniques which includes, but is not restricted to, the strategies of combination, merging and interdiscursivity. Although useful as an analytic tool, the metonymic-metaphoric distinction is ultimately a continuum on which is arranged a series of interconnected and overlapping textual procedures. Further to its method of composition, satire is also conceptualised as a type of macro-structure of discourse into which a variety of narrower techniques of verbal (and visual) humour may be factored. Connections between the features of discourse that expound the prime, on the one hand, and the
dialectic on the other, are often established, embellished and sustained by puns and other forms of verbal word-play. These bivalent lexico-grammatical devices, that help bind together the two (colliding) elements of textual patterning, are referred to as *stylistic hooks*.

Whereas the model of satire postulates that both prime and dialectic elements be present in a text, it further stipulates that the lack of congruence between these elements be recognised by a reader or listener. In other words, it is the dissonance between the domains of prime and dialectic which creates an interpretative pragmatic framework for satire and brings about the style-shift necessary to place the reader-listener on a *satirical footing*. Furthermore, it is argued that satirical “uptake” depends to a great extent on the interplay between what Habermas terms *universal validity claims*. Satirical uptake requires a special configuration of the three principal claims of sincerity, appropriateness and truth. Specifically, the recognition of a non-isotopy or disjunction between prime and dialectic elements serves to rescind the validity claim of sincerity, an action which resonates across the interpretation of the other two claims. This results in a configuration for “successful’ satire which comprises a suspension of the claim to truth, a ratification of the claim to appropriateness and a recognition of a rescinded claim to sincerity. The relationship of the satirist and satiree to the validity claims is developed through the mnemonic of the three “Rs”: one subject position raises a particular claim while the other recognises it, with the claim ultimately redeemed across both positions. The model of the three Rs also extends to negatively framed participation in discourse: one subject position may choose not to raise a particular claim, another may not recognise a particular claim and the claim may not be redeemed across both positions. In this respect, and importantly, the pragmatic validity claim model thus serves to explain satirical “misfire” as well as other more indeterminate consequences in discourse. Various scenarios are detailed to this effect, where the rescinding or non-redemption of certain claims impacts upon general interactive outcomes. Ultimately, irony must be conferred upon a satirical text, and this is what constitutes the third ironic phase of satirical discourse.

The model, as outlined here in abstract and in brief, makes little reference to the idea of “satirical intent” or to “satirical purpose”. Doing so would presuppose to some extent that satire works through the recovery of a satirical “meaning” which has been deliberately placed in a text and over which an author has a degree of control. The model also, perhaps a little more contentiously, has little to say about the “ideology” of the satirist. Doing so would presuppose that the sociopolitical orientation of a satirist can be read directly off a satirical work. These are just two of many such presuppositions that, while com-
monly accepted in many studies of satire, will not be advanced in the present project. Quite why they will not be advanced is a matter best resolved in the main body of the book, where all of the principal tenets and categories of the model sketched here will be defined, justified and illustrated.

1.3 About this book

Over the course of the forthcoming chapters, all of the principal tenets of the suggested model of satirical discourse will be illustrated through the analysis of text. As signalled earlier, the principal source of the examples used for the more extended analyses, accounting for roughly two-thirds of that material, is the controversial British satirical publication, *Private Eye* magazine (web). Wherever necessary in these analyses, explanations will be provided for a relevant feature of context or a significant topical allusion so that readers unfamiliar with the narrower cultural reference points will still be able to disambiguate the basic humour mechanism. That said, most of the texts analysed tend towards generalised satirical reference, and wherever possible examples which function within a more restricted cultural backdrop have been avoided. As with all studies of contemporary humour, however, the problem is how to reinvigorate textual material that has been dislocated from its original time and place of production, a dislocation which manifests in what Nash calls “instances of red-hot topicality gone stone-cold” (1985:xii). Contemporary political satire is by its very nature ephemeral. In that respect, all one can really do by way of analysis is to try to restore, through sufficient contextualisation, at least some of the immediacy and immanence of the text’s original context of use.

Given its prominence in the data covered in the book, it is worth offering some general observations on the background to *Private Eye* magazine. Carpenter’s excellent history of the “satire boom” of 1960s Britain makes the pertinent observation that *Private Eye* is the only serious “satirical format” to have survived intact from that period to the present day (Carpenter 2000:2, 155–169). The first issue of *Private Eye* was published on the 25th of October 1961, in an initial print run estimated at 500 copies. The design of the journal was to alter markedly over its first few issues, with only the fourth instalment settling down into the broad style and format which characterises the contemporary publication. That fourth issue was the first to carry real, as opposed to joke, advertising. It also established a pattern for the front cover of the magazine by placing, under the *Private Eye* masthead, a photograph reflecting an area of public or media interest from the relevant period.
at the suggestion of the late comedian Peter Cook (Carpenter 2000: 166), that photograph was “doctored” by the addition of a spoof banner heading and by the superimposition onto the photograph of (ironic) speech bubbles. Almost all Private Eye covers since then have employed this format (and see further Chapters 6 and 8).

Now in its fifth decade of publication, and enjoying a circulation in excess of 200,000 copies (Barendt et al. 1997: 152), this fortnightly magazine balances humour with more serious investigative journalism. The humorous element is developed mainly through the material positioned in the central section of the periodical, referred to in-house as the “funny pages”. This material takes the form of jokes, spoofs and short squibs, verbal or visual, which often number several to the page; Text A, for example, was one of several individual texts that were incorporated onto the same page. These short skits may be directed towards a variety of satirical targets – individuals, episodes, practices – all is fair game in the satirical purview of Private Eye magazine.

The emphasis on Private Eye is not to suggest for a moment that this publication is the only viable source for satirical data. Many other suitable candidates for analysis present themselves. In the USA, The Onion (web) is a weekly satirical publication which has much in common with the format and content of Private Eye, right down to its spoof front page and its blend of humorous text with investigative journalism. To this extent, there are good grounds for a future comparative study of the type of satire developed in each publication. Another contender for inclusion in a project such as this is Britain’s venerable Punch magazine. In spite of its historical pedigree, this once famous satirical publication, whose early political cartoons continue to draw serious academic scrutiny, has tended to fall from public favour in recent years. At the time of writing, Punch is owned by business tycoon Mohammed Al Fayed, a proprietor who certainly believes in a “hands-on” approach to running a humorous magazine. Opposite the regular advertisement for his London department store is the owner’s own centre page editorial, entitled “The Thoughts of Chairman Mo”, in which Al Fayed communes with his readership on matters all and sundry. That editorial’s subtitle describes the magazine’s owner as “the angel behind Punch”, an astonishing piece of solipsism which is delivered without any suggestion of irony. It is axiomatic to the present study that satirical discourse inheres in a complex matrix of ironic phases, the upshot of which is that discourse without irony, of which Punch in its contemporary manifestation is a clear example, simply cannot be satire.

So Private Eye it is then, at least as far as the dominant exemplar of satirical discourse in this book is concerned. However, use of this source is not intended