This course is focused on recent literature on verbal irony—what it is, how it works, and what its relevance to broader theoretical work on language, communication, and thought might be.

Verbal irony is one of the most common varieties of non-literal communication, and it has long been distinguished and discussed (for example, Aristotle (Rhetoric III: 1404b-1411b) and Cicero (De Oratore, Bk. II: passim) both discuss the phenomenon). Unlike its more glamorous cousin metaphor, though, there is relatively little work in the canon on its nature and workings. It is not hard to find entire volumes written on metaphor, premised on vague, sweeping claims such as: “Metaphor is not simply an ornamental aspect of language, but a fundamental scheme by which people conceptualize the world and their own activities” (Gibbs & Colston 2006: 3). In stark contrast: “It is curious ... how little attention has been paid, by linguists, philosophers, and literary theorists, to the nature of verbal irony. ... [W]hile there are many illuminating discussions of particular literary examples, the nature of verbal irony is generally taken for granted.” (Sperber & Wilson 1992: 55)

However, the philosophy of language (along with overlapping areas across the humanities and within the cognitive sciences) has progressed to the point at which it has begun to significantly engage with (such non-standard outliers as) verbal irony. There have been multiple theories of irony developed in recent decades, and there is a growing body of literature dedicated to identifying and evaluating their respective strengths and weaknesses. This course will acquaint the student with this literature, and its connections with overlapping research from across the humanities and cognitive sciences.

Course Workload:

Unusual Timing:
Due to unusual circumstances, this class will not meet at all in the month of September, but will be entirely conducted over nine weeks, between the week which begins Monday 2 October and the last day of classes Friday 1 December. The class will meet for 4-5 hours per week during this period. The schedule will be set in due course, taking into account student needs and preferences.

Some of the Core Literature from which we will start:
Grice, H.P. (1975) “Logic and Conversation”.