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## Book review

**Irony in Language Use and Communication, Angeliki Athanasiadou, Herbert L. Colston. John Benjamins, Amsterdam (2017). 282 pp., ISBN 9789027209856, EUR 95,00 (hardback)**

Angeliki Athanasiadou and Herbert L. Colston's edited volume entitled *Irony in Language Use and Communication* heralds the two scholars' new John Benjamins book series *Figurative Thought and Language*. This series offers a platform for multifarious studies on classical figures of speech (most importantly: metaphor, metonymy, irony, hyperbole and meiosis), as well as other language phenomena which are rooted in non-literal language use, such as idioms and proverbs (cf. the editors' description on the series' John Benjamins website). The book series is meant to bring together discussions on these different manifestations of what the authors dub "figuration". The diversified studies can be conducted from various angles across academic disciplines (cognitive linguistics, neurolinguistics, pragmatics, philosophy and psychology). Irrespective of what its title may suggest, this first volume in the series presents mainly cognitively oriented studies on irony, but it does offer insights into the pragmatics of irony, which is what this review will primarily concentrate on.

The book is divided into four parts. Part I is entitled "Interdisciplinary perspectives on irony" but comprises three chapters devoted to different categories of irony, viewed from cognitive and psychological perspectives. Part II entitled "Irony, thought and (media) communication" is composed of three chapters, one of which, in fact, aims to develop a theoretical "model" of irony, while the other two examine publically available language data. Part III, "Approaches to verbal irony," presents three theoretical cognitive studies, two of which address the figure of irony in the context of other figures (hyperbole and metonymy), whilst the third one develops a cognitive account of the figure at hand. Part IV, "Approaches to studying irony," actually reports the findings of two cognitive experiments and offers a meta-analysis of select socio-psychological experimental studies. This diversity of the chapters in the edited volume is consequent upon not only the different topics and specific approaches but also the authors' various understandings of the terms "sarcasm" and "irony".

"Irony" is a polysemous term that encompasses a number of distinct phenomena going beyond figurative language use, which the chapters in the edited volume indicate, whether explicitly or only tacitly. Apart from being a stylistic/rhetorical figure, and hence an important instance of figurative language use, "irony" can be understood in a few other ways (see e.g. Fowler, 1965; Beckson and Ganz, 1989; Haverkate, 1990; Kreuz and Roberts, 1993; Dynel, 2017). These other species of irony include *Socratic irony* (a rhetorical technique based on feigning naiveté and ignorance) and *situational irony* (the state of affairs or events which flies in the face of what has been or could have been expected, see e.g. Fowler, 1965; Muecke, 1969; Littman and Mey, 1991; Lucariello, 1994; Shelley, 2001), together with what may be regarded as its two subtypes: *cosmic irony* or *irony of fate*, i.e. situational irony not controlled by human beings (e.g. Haverkate, 1990), and *dramatic irony*, i.e. a situation when one individual has the knowledge that another individual, such as a character in a fictional work, does not have (see Lucariello, 1994).

A few authors have previously tried to account for the figure of irony and situational irony jointly in their theorisations (e.g. Currie, 2006; Simpson, 2011). Also, some common features have been detected across select kinds of irony, such as "breaking the pattern of expectation of the person faced with the ironic utterance or event" (Haverkate, 1990: 79) or the bisociative mechanism of evaluation reversal (Partington, 2006). In a similar vein, in his essay, Colston discusses contrast and contradiction, defined in cognitive terms as "contradictory schemas", that can be found in both verbal and situational irony, as reflected by the author's selection of previous accounts. These different contrast effects can pertain to various dimensions, such as defeated expectations vs reality, or utterance form vs meaning (for an overview and further references, see Dynel, 2013a). Similarly, in their chapter, Gibbs and Samermit address the cognitive foundations of the emergence of many different phenomena that fall under the "irony" moniker. They focus on human experience (e.g. bodily violations) and complex understanding of the world, suggesting that the common denominator between the different instances they label "irony" is "bicoherent thought" (cf. Shelley, 2001).

On a more general plane, adopting a philosophical perspective, Willison tries to argue in favour of benefits of an "ecumenical" (as opposed to "restrictivist") approach to irony that would capture both verbal irony (in its various understandings) and situational irony, across modes, or what he calls "media". While the author makes a few relevant points (e.g. about the misguided tendency to distinguish irony from non-irony based on premises similar to an exercise of an

“archer’s who, having shot her arrow, paints a target around wherever it lands” (p.73)), I am not sure whether the readers will be convinced of the need for one account of “verbal irony [that] should render perspicuous (or, at least, not obscure) its continuity with other recognizable types of irony (dramatic and situational irony, for example)” (p. 70). Coming from a pragmatic perspective, I am also not sure whether any all-encompassing account is really tenable and even necessary. After all, we do not need one definition of, or one approach to, disparate concepts such as a “woman’s breast”, “chicken breast”, “chimney breast” and “breast pocket”.

Whilst generalisations argued for in the three chapters may show intellectual value, each of the main species of irony (mainly the rhetorical figure and situational irony) ultimately deserves independent investigation inasmuch as it is an essentially distinct phenomenon that poses different theoretical and empirical problems. The figure of irony (which may indeed be transmitted through various modes and channels) is the most significant species from a linguistic point of view. Recent theoretical pragmatic discussions of the figure are ecumenical in the sense that they recognise a number of salient forms that this figure can take (see [Kapogianni, 2011](#); [Camp, 2012](#); [Dynel, 2013b, 2018a](#)).

Unlike the heterogeneous figure of irony, situational irony is not a verbal phenomenon that merits equal linguistic attention even though it is often indicated verbally by language users as “irony” (epitomised by – at least some of – the lines in Alanis Morissette’s song *Ironic* see [Simpson, 2011](#), Colston in the reviewed volume). This labelling has become the topic of metapragmatic analyses (see e.g. [Taylor, 2016](#); [Dynel, 2017](#)), which bring into focus the problem of merging lay and academic “irony” and “sarcasm” labels. One of the consequences of this practice is that, in academic parlance, the scope of “irony” is often extended to cover verbalisations that involve humour but not the figure of irony (see Gibbs and Samermit’s chapter). What is often subsumed under the category of irony exhibits humour-oriented untruthfulness, being a matter of “joking”, but does not really display the widely recognised hallmarks of the figure of irony per se (which may, but does not need to, be humorous), the central one being the communication of implicated evaluative meaning (see [Dynel, 2013a, 2018a](#) for discussion and references). However, following a rather broad understanding of irony, in her chapter, Batoréo considers (rather controversially) puns in two canned jokes as instances of irony based – presumably – on the assumption that similar to irony proper, the literal ambiguities in puns (originating in polysemy or homonymy) can carry humour and some implicit message.

Besides the different species of “irony” and the irony–humour interface, the problem of the relationship between irony and sarcasm looms large. Sarcasm, according to the word’s etymology, may – and perhaps even should – be understood as a broader term pertaining to all manner of witty jibes, which do not need to involve irony at all, as Barden rightly observes in his chapter. However, mirroring everyday language use, the label “sarcasm” is very often deployed with reference to the figure of irony taken as a whole, or to its subtype that aims to virulently criticise the target of ironically communicated evaluation (for detailed discussion and references, see [Taylor, 2016](#); [Dynel, 2018a](#)). This sarcasm-as-irony labelling shows also across the chapters in the present volume (see e.g. Katz’s and Giora et al.’s contributions), whilst the idea of negative evaluation seems central to Musolf’s chapter. The author aims to discuss a corpus of sarcastic and ironic follow-ups on a conventionally metaphorical (idiomatic) political slogan (concerning Britain being “at the heart of Europe”). He sets out by making some kind of distinction between sarcasm (which he regards as a rhetorical figure) and irony, and bringing up the issue of irony–metaphor merging, a topic that has recently attracted more focused attention ([Popa, 2009](#); [Stern, 2000](#); [Camp, 2012](#); [Dynel, 2016](#)). However, the few examples provided in the chapter represent non-ironic sarcasm, in the form of distortions of, or allusions to, the original positively evaluative metaphor, imposing onto it an alternative nondefault negative interpretation (e.g. “If Mr Major wanted to be at the heart of Europe, it was, presumably, as a blood clot”).

Importantly, while sarcasm always has some meanness to it, the figure of irony must communicate negative evaluation, which can show different degrees and bring about various interpersonal effects, both positive and negative (see [Dynel, 2018a](#)). Thus, all irony communicates negative evaluation even if it should optionally communicate positive evaluation too ([Garmendia, 2010](#); [Dynel, 2018a, 2018b](#)). This is tacitly confirmed by an example provided in the reviewed volume by Burgers and Steen (who, however, do endorse the well-entrenched view that irony can be strictly positive): someone exclaims “Bad shot!” when a soccer player “known for missing easy chances suddenly scores an incredible goal” (p. 96). This exclamation would make little sense if the player were not infamous for his ineptness. Thus, what the ironic speaker is doing is indeed evaluating the shot positively but, at the same time, critically commenting on the hearer’s (and speaker’s, depending on the context) faulty expectations of the player’s regular performance. Any alleged examples of irony devoid of this echo and negatively evaluated referent cannot be classified as irony; if they are well-formed and empirically plausible at all, they qualify as non-ironic humour (e.g. teasing or jocularly) (see [Dynel, 2018a](#) for discussion and references).

The understanding of the forms and functions of the figure of irony has an immense impact on experimental studies, which are often based on fabricated examples rather than natural language data. This problem of lack of ecological validity of examples is the point of departure for Katz’s chapter. In the light of a survey of a selection of previous studies, the author proposes a few methodological solutions to ensure the validity of experimental findings. Indeed, the choice of experimental data can skew experimental findings, which tend to be contradictory, as reflected, for instance, by the ongoing debate on the (im)politeness effects of irony (see [Dynel, 2018a](#)). Importantly, authors need to corroborate the irony status of their experimental data by referring to existing verification methods.

In their chapter, Burgers and Steen give an overview of some of the previously recognised features of the figure of irony, which they bill as a “3D-model” that refers to the language, thought and communication dimensions. They rightly observe the advantage of regarding the reversal of evaluation ([Partington, 2007](#)) as a thought process rather than a linguistic factor, which pre-empts the need to perform meaning opposition, an operation that can be problematic indeed (e.g. saying “Thank you”

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