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# Academics vs. American scriptwriters vs. academics: A battle over the etic and emic “sarcasm” and “irony” labels



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## ABSTRACT

The primary goal of this paper is to tease out the concepts denoted by the etic and emic labels “irony” and “sarcasm” (i.e. as they are viewed by linguists, and lay language users, here, primarily of American English). Several species of irony are elucidated, most importantly the rhetorical figure and situational irony. The author critically examines various competing academic (etic) approaches, some inspired by emic use, and the thorny relationship between the two focal notions, that is sarcasm and the rhetorical figure of irony. In the light of the different provenance of the two terms “irony” and “sarcasm” (originally operating as emic labels) and the original applications of the two linguistic tools they denote, the perspective advocated here is that sarcasm and irony should be deemed distinct phenomena, which may co-occur, yielding “sarcastic irony”. The empirical study conducted on the basis of transcripts of the discourse of the American television series “House” adduces evidence that generally corroborates the previous findings on the focal emic (meta) pragmatic labels, which are partly not compatible with the preferred etic labels: in emic usage, “sarcasm” typically indicates the presence of the stylistic figure, whereas “irony” is usually reserved for situational irony. Interestingly, in the discourse of the television series, the “irony” label tends to be employed creatively for humorous purposes.

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House: *I was being sarcastic.*

Arlene: *No, you weren't.*

House: *Right, because people who are talking can't tell if they're being sarcastic.*

Arlene: *That doesn't make any sense. Of course they can. But you weren't.*

Season 7, Episode 11

## 1. Introduction

There is an ongoing academic debate in linguistics on the definitions of, and the thorny relationship between, *irony* and *sarcasm*. One of the reasons why irony and sarcasm are associated (and mistaken for each other) may be that they tend to bring about humorous effects and are frequently seen as categories of conversational humour. It is thus hardly surprising that “irony” and “sarcasm” should reverberate across the interdisciplinary literature on humour. It needs to be stressed,

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nonetheless, that neither irony nor sarcasm is inherently humorous and both need to meet a few conditions to display humorous potential (see Dynel, 2013a, 2014 for discussion and references).

Clear differentiation between sarcasm and irony, it is here believed, is necessary, even if problematic. Brown (1980: 111) warns that sarcasm “is not a discrete logical or linguistic phenomenon.” Indeed, even though it seems to have some intrinsic characteristics, “sarcasm” has fuzzy boundaries and escapes clear-cut linguistic definitions. It is a folk notion associated with popular (sometimes vulgar) language use. By contrast, irony is a clearly delineated rhetorical figure known since ancient times as a rhetorical tool used in elevated formal speeches. However, this figure does pose definitional problems given its complexity and internal diversity, which shows in the many competitive scholarly approaches. Nonetheless, such a commonsensical distinction between irony and sarcasm is not ubiquitously supported. As depicted in the academic literature in English (the lingua franca of academic discourse), the relationship between the rhetorical figure of irony and sarcasm is not unequivocal. First and foremost, a mismatch is observed between *emic* (language users’) and *etic* (researchers’) views.

The emic vs. etic distinction (for an overview, see Eelen, 2001; Haugh, 2012) is credited to Pike (1967) in anthropological linguistics. Essentially, as defined here, an emic unit is an item or system isolated and frequently named by *insiders*, that is participants in a given culture (Pike, 1990), whilst etic units are judged and dubbed by *outsiders*, here academics (Harris, 1990). The differentiation between emic and etic approaches is commonly used in anthropology, folklore studies and socio-behavioural sciences. In linguistics, it has been very popular in (im)politeness studies, for example, where the notion of *metalinguistic* or *metapragmatic labels* (which convey language users’ evaluations of language use, see Section 4) has taken on great importance. This strand of research ties in with the classical view that scholars can investigate “the nature of X by discovering how we use the word ‘X’ and related words” (Bergmann, 1964: 177), “by exploring the ways in which the concept is manifested in [lay] uses of the words expressing that concept” (Black, 1975: 14–15).

In American English, which is the focus of attention here as the source of the emic labels, “sarcasm” is commonly used to denote the rhetorical figure of irony (Nunberg, 2001; Attardo et al., 2003). As Attardo (2013: 40) puts it, “the meaning of the word ‘sarcasm’ has taken over the meaning previously occupied by the word ‘irony’. ‘Irony’ has shifted to mean something unfortunate.” In this vein, Jones and Wilson (1987) report that language users have a tendency to overuse and abuse “irony” when referring to any odd events. This shows also in the famous song “Ironic” by Alanis Morissette (see Simpson, 2011). On the whole, there is an ongoing debate among language users about whether it is valid to refer to a situation as “ironic” when it involves something odd or unfortunate.<sup>1</sup> Be that as it may, in opposition to (many) researchers, laypeople “seem to perceive sarcasm as a linguistic device (i.e., something people do) and irony as a matter of fate (i.e., unexpected or surprising events that happen to people” (Creusere, 1999: 219; see also Kreuz and Glucksberg, 1989; Creusere, 2000). In a nutshell, the authors claim (likely, having American English in mind) that in popular parlance, that is in emic usage, “ironic” is used to mean “coincidental”, whilst “sarcasm” is a label applied to utterances based on the rhetorical figure of irony. As will be shown here, this may manifest itself also in the discourse of contemporary films and television series created by scriptwriters, who are also lay language users, with fictional characters being their mouthpieces.

The label “sarcasm” used with reference to the rhetorical figure of irony has become prevalent also in the academic literature, admittedly under the influence of everyday American English. Consequently, the scope of irony called “sarcasm” is broadened. On the other hand, very frequently, the label “irony” is used in a lax manner with regard to conversational humour, such as teasing, which involves overt untruthfulness typical of irony but does not exhibit its second key attribute, namely evaluative implicature (for an overview, see Dynel, 2014). Wilson (2016) rightly observes that a great proportion of the experimental research relies on broadened notions of irony, which leads to an important question concerning the rationale for the distinction between genuine cases of verbal irony and cases which do not constitute irony in a technical sense. Whilst the labels as such may be of secondary importance, what poses a real problem is the situation when the concepts of irony and sarcasm are (unwittingly) merged by scholars. This problem already exists, as evidenced by the many examples reverberating across the academic literature which the authors depict as irony but which do not pass the known tests for irony, i.e. they do not meet the necessary conditions (see e.g. Kapogianni, 2011, 2016b; Dynel, 2013b, 2014).

As Taylor (2015a: 131) aptly observes, the elusiveness of the distinction between irony and sarcasm “represents a substantial challenge to research because it is not easy to distinguish exactly what construct a given paper is reporting on.” Very frequently, researchers refer to the previous literature without recognising the fact that the quoted authors’ understandings of irony and/or sarcasm are markedly different from their own. This has a bearing on the findings, which can sound contradictory, as is the case with the interpersonal consequences of irony (see Dynel, 2016a) or the denotation of irony (see Dynel, 2014). Terminological rigidity and the clarity of etic labels in academic writings are crucial for the epistemology of academic analyses (see Eelen, 2001). Thus, lay notions should not be elevated to status of technical terms and applied without much consideration (Haugh, 2016). If they are, this may lead to misconceptions about irony and/or sarcasm lying at the heart of otherwise insightful investigations. All that being said, popular parlance may become the topic of scholarly research. The analysis of emic/lay labels facilitates the recognition of language users’ understandings of chosen linguistic phenomena, insofar as these labels may be indicative of metalinguistic use.

The primary objective of this article, which represents the field of pragmatics (broadly understood) is to investigate the constructs of “irony” and “sarcasm” from the etic perspective, notably as they are conceptualised and dubbed in the linguistic literature (within pragmatics and beyond) written in English, as well as from the emic perspective, with American English in

<sup>1</sup> e.g. <http://www.metrotimes.com/Blogs/archives/2016/05/10/alanis-morissette-admits-theres-nothing-ironic-in-ironic>.

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