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## Type of evaluation and marking of irony: The role of perceived complexity and comprehension

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reports on two experiments which demonstrate that textual characteristics of irony (type of ironic evaluation and irony markers – e.g., hyperbole, quotation marks) can influence comprehension, perceived complexity and attitudes towards the utterance and text. Results of experiment 1 show that explicitly evaluative irony is perceived as less complex and is more appreciated than implicitly evaluative irony. In experiment 2, irony markers were found to increase comprehension, reduce perceived complexity and make attitudes towards the utterance more positive. Both experiments also demonstrate that the influence of irony on attitudes depends on comprehension and complexity; if irony is understood or perceived as relatively easy, it is better liked than when it is not understood or perceived as relatively difficult.

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### 1. Introduction

People often use verbal irony in their communications. Around 8% of turns in conversations between friends (Gibbs, 2000) and 7.4% of e-mails sent to friends contain irony (Whalen et al., 2009). However, one of irony's characteristics is that some people understand the irony (the so-called group of "wolves", Gibbs and Izett, 2005), while other people fail to do so (the so-called group of "sheep", Gibbs and Izett, 2005). The riskiness that irony goes undetected has led American authorities to declare American airports as "no-irony zones", effectively prohibiting the use of irony when talking to airport officials (Phelan, 2009).

An important issue for ironic speakers is assessing the possibility that their ironic utterance is understood. Many experimental studies focus on processes that predict when and how irony is understood (e.g., Gibbs, 1986; Giora et al., 1998; Schwoebel et al., 2000 and many others). These studies have typically used so-called "textoids" (experimenter-generated texts) as their stimulus materials. Recently, many scholars have argued that these studies should be supplemented with studies on the effects of irony in real-life contexts (e.g., Katz, 2009; Kotthoff, 2003). We take up on that challenge and present two experiments on two different textual characteristics that may influence irony comprehension.

Ironic utterances have two types of textual characteristics: irony factors and irony markers (Attardo et al., 2003). Irony factors are elements that utterances need to have in order to qualify as ironic. If an irony factor is removed from an utterance, this utterance is no longer ironic (Attardo et al., 2003). In contrast, irony markers are meta-communicative clues that can "alert the reader to the fact that an utterance is ironic" (Attardo, 2000a:7). We focus on the effects of an irony factor (the type of evaluation of the ironic utterance, experiment 1) and of irony markers (experiment 2).

Many authors consider the fact that irony always includes an evaluation as a central aspect of irony (e.g., Attardo, 2000b; Kotthoff, 2003; Sperber and Wilson, 1995). Even though all ironic utterances are evaluative, this evaluation can come in

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different types. In many cases, an ironic utterance can be solved by reversing an evaluative term in that utterance. If somebody for instance says “Great weather” during a downpour, an addressee can solve the irony by replacing the word “great” with its semantic opposite, which makes these examples explicitly evaluative. In other cases, however, irony is implicitly evaluative which means that an evaluative term needs to be inferred (cf. Wilson and Sperber’s 1992 example of “Oh, Tuscany in May”). The first experiment investigates whether explicitly evaluative ironic utterances (“Great weather”) are easier to understand than implicitly evaluative ironic utterances (“Oh, Tuscany in May”).

Additionally, irony markers such as quotation marks, hyperboles, or emoticons are often identified as important textual characteristics that help to predict irony comprehension (cf. Attardo, 2000a; Kreuz, 1996; Muecke, 1978; Seto, 1998). Experiment 2 investigates whether these irony markers indeed increase comprehension. Besides, this experiment also investigates if these irony markers can be stacked. Is an ironic utterance with three irony markers easier to understand than an ironic utterance with one irony marker?

Even when irony complexity can be reduced, the use of irony remains a risky strategy. Therefore, speakers employ irony because they expect to achieve communicative goals that would have been difficult to reach if they uttered the same remark literally. Irony’s communicative goals include evoking humor (e.g., Roberts and Kreuz, 1994), diminishing (e.g., Dews and Winner, 1995) or enhancing critique (e.g., Bowes and Katz, 2011), being polite (e.g., Slugoski and Turnbull, 1988), being rude (e.g., Colston, 2005) and evoking a feeling of social solidarity between sender and addressee (e.g., Van Mulken et al., 2011). Reaching these communicative goals includes changing respondents’ affective states which may lead to a change in attitudes. Irony can indeed be used as a persuasive strategy aiming to favorably change the addressee’s attitude towards a product, person or issue (cf. Gibbs and Izett, 2005; Lagerwerf, 2007). As such a communicative strategy, irony is sometimes successful and sometimes unsuccessful. We also investigate whether irony’s success or failure in positively changing attitudes depends on the way in which the irony is formulated.

### 1.1. Irony factors and markers

The definition of verbal irony is strongly debated in the irony literature (e.g., Clark and Gerrig, 1984; Giora, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 1992). While authors disagree on various characteristics of ironic utterances, they do agree that a definition of irony should at least include a difference in evaluative valence between a literal and an intended meaning of the irony (see Burgers et al., 2011; Partington, 2007). If somebody for instance ironically exclaims “Great weather, eh?” during a downpour, this speaker actually aims to convey a contrary evaluation: the weather is not great at all.

Experimental evidence on irony comprehension is mixed. In some cases, irony is just as easy to understand as literal language (Ivanko and Pexman, 2003). In most cases, however, irony is more difficult to comprehend than literal language (see Giora, 2003; Schwoebel et al., 2000 and many others). In these experiments, scholars typically contrast an ironic with a non-ironic (literal) utterance. However, some ironic utterances may be more difficult to comprehend than other ironic utterances. In other words, ironic utterances may differ in complexity.

Studies on elements that influence irony comprehension typically focus on contextual factors. For instance, irony is more expected from men than from women (e.g., Colston and Lee, 2004; Katz et al., 2004) and less expected from people with serious jobs (e.g., doctors or judges) than from people with non-serious jobs (e.g., comedians or cab drivers; cf. Katz and Pexman, 1997). Background knowledge (e.g., Averbek and Hample, 2008) and a person’s cultural background may also influence the way in which irony is used (e.g., Dress et al., 2008).

Although scholars have demonstrated the importance of context in irony comprehension, the influence of textual characteristics (irony factors and markers) has received less empirical attention. This is particularly the case for irony factors. The one irony factor that has attracted much scholarly attention is related to the difference between ironic praise (e.g., “That’s a good grade”, uttered when somebody received a D–) and ironic blame (e.g., “That’s a bad grade”, uttered when somebody received an A+). Various empirical studies show that ironic praise is easier to comprehend than ironic blame (cf. Gibbs, 1986; Jorgensen et al., 1984; Kreuz and Link, 2002).

Other irony factors may also influence irony comprehension. Besides the difference between ironic praise and blame, another irony factor that can influence comprehension is the type of evaluation of the irony (cf. Bosco and Bucciarelli, 2008; Kohvakka, 1996; Partington, 2007). The irony factor of the type of evaluation refers to the evaluative proposition which is inherent to verbal irony. As mentioned earlier, irony always involves a difference in evaluative valence (cf. Burgers et al., 2011; Partington, 2007). However, this evaluation may differ between ironic utterances. In some ironic utterances, this evaluation is made explicit (e.g., “Great weather”, uttered in a downpour, which has the evaluative term “great”): these are explicitly evaluative ironic utterances. In other ironic utterances, this evaluation is more covert and it is “up to the audience to recognize a good – or bad – thing when they see it” (Partington, 2007:1553–1554). One example is Wilson and Sperber’s (1992) utterance “Oh, Tuscany in May”. In this example, the irony is uttered by a speaker who was invited to a summer cottage in Tuscany in May, because the weather in May would always be good. When this speaker arrived in Tuscany, the weather was horrible, which prompted him to produce the ironic utterance. This utterance is ironic, even though it does not contain an evaluative word: it is up to the addressee to infer that the utterance is actually meant as evaluative. These ironic utterances are implicitly evaluative.

Bosco and Bucciarelli (2008) examined the ways in which children responded to explicitly evaluative (which they call “simple ironies”) and implicitly evaluative ironic utterances (which they call “complex ironies”). In an experiment, children were read a small story that ended in either an explicitly or implicitly evaluative ironic utterance. These children understood explicitly evaluative irony better than implicitly evaluative irony (Bosco and Bucciarelli, 2008). The question remains

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