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# 7      **Humor and Irony in Interaction: From Mode Adoption to Failure of Detection**

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**Abstract.** A fundamental definitional problem is examined for humor and irony: in neither case can the subclasses of these phenomena be kept distinct. This indeterminacy is reduced to the indeterminacy of indirect speech and implicature, on which irony entirely and humor, at least largely, rely. The “performance” of humor and irony is investigated by examining the motivations for Ss to use irony and the responses that Hs produce to it, which range from mode adoption to ignoring it (deliberately or not).

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## 7.1 Definition of the object of study

The study of humor, irony, and other playful forms is plagued by definitional problems (see for example [1, p. 162-163]). Often, authors will expend significant energy explaining and justifying complex terminological distinctions that are bound to crumble at the first close examination. The impossibility of defining the subcategories of a broad class of *humorous phenomena* has been established; see Attardo [2, ch. 1] for discussion and review of the literature. This state of affairs is probably motivated by the fact that terms such as *humor*, *irony*, *sarcasm*, *funny*, *laughable*, *ridiculous*, etc., are folk-concepts, with fuzzy boundaries, if any.<sup>i</sup> Lexicographic studies have shown that the semantic field of what has been broadly defined as “humor” is very rich in closely related, barely distinguishable terms; e.g., [3]; for a review, see [2, p. 2-10], and [4].

Those involved in the academic study of humor have decided to adopt the generic term *humor* as an umbrella term encompassing programmatically all the semantic field of humor and humorous forms. Irony is generally seen as distinct from humor, but the same definitional problems exist with its close neighbor, *sarcasm*, cf. [5, p. 795] for discussion; see also [6]. Irony would however fall under the technical sense of “humor.”

While there clearly exists humor that is not ironical and there are ironies that are not perceived as funny, the issue is not as simple as the intersection of two distinct sets of facts.

While the former claim is fairly obvious, the latter may be in need of argument. Consider a case of very aggressive sarcasm; it seems unlikely that it would be perceived as funny, by the target, as it lacks playfulness. Note that I am merely claiming that it would not be *perceived* as funny, not that it would not necessarily *be* funny.<sup>ii</sup>

A prime example is the following:

*58-year-old English professor teaching Writing about Biography. A student orally answered a question incorrectly.*

*Professor:* Now that was brilliant.

*Student:* At least I tried... (the student immediately became defensive, while the rest of the class snickered to themselves.)

in which the student obviously attends seriously to the ironical meaning, while the rest of the class seems to be at least mildly amused by the incident. Needless to say, we are here merely exemplifying the old adage that comedy is tragedy that happens to someone other than ourselves. Yet, for all its trite aspect, this example emphasizes the significant point that the *perception* of humor is not the same as the decoding of it.

Let us move to humor, where Hay [8] has introduced a sophisticated four-level model of humor appreciation, each stage of which presupposes the one to its left:

recognition → understanding → appreciation → agreement

In other words, for H to understand a joke, or any other humorous instance, H must have recognized it as such. Consider the following example of humorous insult [9, p. 46]:

*Meena:* I'm the only person in this room who freestyled at nationals and came second in the women's division

*Dan:* let's face it Meena always comes second

*Meena*: yeah i know that's cause Sue Willis always beats me + except at distance

*Dan*: we were actually making sexual innuendos well I was

(Here and elsewhere, I have respected the typographical conventions of the original. The + indicates a short pause.)

It is clear that Meena is completely oblivious to the sexual innuendo (“come second”) and therefore cannot understand the humor, let alone appreciate it or agree with it.

The step between understanding and appreciation is particularly interesting in this context. Consider again an example [9, p. 39] in which the players are discussing how to call the player with the least desirable position, in this case, Lisa. To be noted is the fact that Meena is a political science PhD student and that Chris' remark is directed at her:

*Chris*: why don't we call it something REALLY bad like + pols student

*Meena*: hey you mother fucker

*Dan*: [to Lisa]: yeah you're a POLS STUDENT

*Lisa*: I AM though

*Chris*: [draws breath in mock horror]

*Barney*: well that's done it

*Dan*: accidental faux pas + oh no

Note how after Lisa brings up the fact that she is potentially offended by the playful suggestion that being a political science student is *worse* than being an “asshole” or a “scumbag,” (two terms discussed in the previous segment not reproduced here) both Chris and Dan, who have made the potentially offensive joke, and also Barney, who had no part in the incident, comment in various ways on the inappropriateness of the joke. This corresponds effectively to the “that's not funny” paradox in which someone claims that something is not funny, thus displaying evidence that something was recognized as funny [10, p. 58-59]. Note, however, that this example refutes the idea that the claim of unfunny can only come from a person in a position of power.

We will therefore have to distinguish between a humor competence [11], which corresponds with the capacity to recognize and understand humor, and a humor performance, which is the capacity/desire to appreciate it (and possibly to agree with it). Humor performance corresponds to “humor competence” which is opposed to “joke competence” [12]. This move is controversial (cf. [13, p. 39]; [2, p. 197]) in humor research, but commonplace in cognitive science (e.g., [14]).

Humor competence is the capacity of a speaker to process semantically a given text and to locate a set of relationships among its components, such that he/she would identify the text (or part of it) as humorous in an ideal situation. This humor competence is analogous and in fact part of the semantic competence of speakers: being able to recognize a sentence as funny is a skill equivalent (but not identical, of course), for example, to being able to recognize a sentence as synonymous with another sentence.

Humor performance is, on the contrary, the actual encounter of two speakers (not necessarily physically copresent), in a given actual place and time, i.e., in a given context. In its simplest prototypical form, speaker A says something and speaker B processes the text (what A said) and, having recognized the humor, reacts by laughing. This picture will have to be complicated later, but for the time being let us note that in order for speaker B to perceive the humor, he/she must, at the very least, have understood A (the cases in which B laughs at A for not being meaningful, etc. are irrelevant). Moreover, B must have

recognized A's intention to be funny, and must have evaluated the situation as appropriate for such a behavior.<sup>iii</sup> The issues around the recognition of S's intention(s) are bound to become one of the central points of contention of the theory of irony and humor. Already, studies have started investigating the issues of metarepresentations necessary in irony [15] and even of the “theory of mind” necessary to process irony and humor, especially in brain damaged patients [14, 16, 17, 18].

This paper attempts to shed some new light on the issues revolving around humor, irony, and other “humorous” modes by briefly reviewing what is known about these modes, drawing from research in linguistics, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics, and moreover drawing on a number of studies that have not usually been tied to these modes (such as teasing and jocular abuse) to try to outline a general account of the domain of humor (in its broad technical sense) that is no longer limited exclusively to data coming from jokes.

We will deal in some detail with the vagaries of humor performance in the second part of this paper, on the reception of humor and irony. For the time being, we will instead turn to the semantics (and pragmatics) of humor and irony. The following considerations should be seen as a very short summary of some of the central issues in the field but not as a full treatment of said issues, which can be found in [5, 19], for irony, and [2], for humor.

## **7.2 Competence**

### *7.2.1 Humor*

Humor consists of two facets, a semantic and a pragmatic one. These two aspects are intermingled in reality and are presented separately merely for ease of exposition.

#### *7.2.1.1 Semantics of Humor*

Linguistic research of humor has coalesced around a variant of the incongruity theories of humor, known as the Semantic-Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) [11], later extended in the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) [20]. This is not the place to go into detail in these theories (see [2, 21] for discussion and references) but we can limit ourselves to the fact that humor is seen semantically as an antonymic opposition between two scripts/frames that are compatible entirely or in part with the text. The details of the implementation of the theory would take us too far afield, and we can only refer the reader to the published discussions of the theory. Let us stress however the formal (or at least, semi-formal) character of the theory, which operates starting with a straightforward semantic analysis and builds the analysis of the humor from this foundation in a non-intuitive manner.

#### *7.2.1.2 Pragmatics of Humor*

Pragmatically, humor is seen as a violation of Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP). There is a reasonably large literature on the subject, summarized in [22, 2]. It should be noted that humor is a real violation, not a flout or a mentioned violation (cf. [22] for discussion) since the CP is violated without the intention to let H arrive at an implicature. Humor differs from other modes of communication that involve violations of the CP, such as lying, in that its purpose (amusement) is largely approved of socially and that significant amounts of humor are incorporated in everyday conversations, exchanges, etc. Therefore, humor is

not seen as an antagonistic mode of communication (such as lying) but rather as part and parcel of communication. This should not obfuscate the fact that humor as a mode is non-cooperative (in the sense that S must violate the CP; this is not to say that people cannot cooperate to tell jokes or be funny).

### 7.2.2 *Irony*

Irony is a purely pragmatic phenomenon, without semantic counterpart. What this means is that the semantics of an ironical sentence and of a non-ironical sentence are indistinguishable.

Naturally, in context, an ironical sentence will acquire (inferentially) a meaning that is minimally different and in fact in most cases opposed to that which the sentence would have in a “neutral” context. Contrast this with humor, as exemplified by jokes, in which very frequently the two opposed senses are present *in* the text (albeit not necessarily so). Thus, the tradition of focusing on the semantics of humor. Humor (jokes) and irony do not differ radically under this aspect, but merely as a matter of degree. Jokes tend to have a richer semantics than irony, which relies almost exclusively on inferential activation of scripts/frames.

#### 7.2.2.1 *Pragmatics of irony*

The traditional view of irony as a trope, involving the processing of the text, the rejection of its literal meaning in favor of a different, often opposite, meaning (the two-stages theory) has been challenged [23]. This view, supported by some readings of relevance-theoretic work on irony as mention/representation [24, 25, 26], suggested that the ironical meaning was arrived at directly, without first accessing the literal meaning (direct access, one stage theory). Crucial experimental evidence revolves around processing times: if irony involves an extra step (two stages vs. one), this extra processing should be reflected in processing times. The data reported in Gibbs [23] argue forcefully that irony is processed just as fast as non-ironical statements.

However, more recent evidence has contradicted this view [27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32]. Similar conclusions in the processing of familiar and unfamiliar proverbs (which have more or less set meanings) had already been found [33].

Despite the differences about the number of stages involved in the processing of irony, most theories converge around a broad notion of contrast or incongruity between the actual situation and the expectations and/or utterance of S. Colston and O’Brien [34, p. 1563] identify as the central component of irony contrast between the “literal” and the figurative meaning, or “between assertion and reality.” Significantly, they use the general term “incongruity” to cover all the various formulations which they gather under the “contrast” heading “incongruity between a remark’s assertion and reality” [34]. On the role of contrast in irony, see also [35, 36, 7]. Gibbs [37, p. 13] quotes “contrast between expectation and reality” ; (cf. also [23, p. 397] “incongruity”). My own proposal of “inappropriateness” [5] can probably also be reduced to this broad concept, but has the advantage of being formulated in much more formal(izable) terms (i.e., in terms of mismatch of presuppositions). The issue of whether incongruity and inappropriateness are interchangeable is in need of discussion. As we have said, irony is pragmatic (i.e., is derived mostly via implicatures and inferences).

This raises the question of how to distinguish it from other non-ironical types of indirect speech. We turn now to this complex issue.

### 7.2.2.2 *On the epistemological status of irony, humor, and indirect speech at large*

I have come to believe that the same definitional impossibility within the broad category of humorous phenomena is to be found in the broad category of indirect speech, of which irony is a type. Essentially, all implicature is governed by the same inappropriateness – relevance dynamics that lie at the bottom of the traditional/Gricean view of implicature (and hence, irony) as a flout of the CP (i.e., a violation that is redeemed by ulterior upholding).

The obvious question then is: If irony is to be described as the mechanism of noticing contextual inappropriateness and calculating via relevance the intended meaning, and so are implicatures in general, what distinguishes irony from other forms of implicature? The answer is nothing, textually speaking.<sup>iv</sup> In order to explain this mildly counterintuitive claim, we need to back up a little and describe the mechanism whereby implicatures, which are at the core of indirect speech, are calculated. We start with a situation that is widely assumed, but is in fact problematic. I deal with these issues in [38]. For the time being, we can accept the traditional formulation. S utters *u* in context *C* meaning *p* (the situation is a sextuple *S, H, C, u, p, p'*).

Now, *u* is inappropriate in context *C* (i.e., there is a mismatch between the presuppositions embodied in the representation of *C* that *S* and *H* share in common ground and the presuppositions of *u*; see [5] for discussion of inappropriateness) and *H* detects this inappropriateness. Furthermore, he/she does not attribute it to random noise or to the incapacity of *S* (e.g., *S* is a child, or impaired in his/her speech behavior, etc.). In order to explain and make sense of *S*'s inappropriateness in *u*, *H* enters a largely adductive process whereby he/she “guesses” what *S* is implicating (*p'*) by taking into account *u/p*, *C*, and the CP.

Abduction is a kind of inference [40] that follows the form:

D is a collection of data (facts, observations, givens)  
H explains D (would, if true, explain D)  
No other hypothesis can explain D as well as H does  
Therefore, H is probably true [41, p. 5]

Let us provide an example of the adductive process, which has been unduly neglected in the literature on implicature. Consider the following example:

*S and H are sitting in a room. The phone rings.*

S: “I am not here.”

*S*'s utterance is clearly inappropriate, as it violates the maxim of quality (it is obviously false).

Since *S* is assumed to be competent, *H* reasons as follows: if I make the hypothesis that *S* is violating the CP to implicate that *S* wants me to behave as if *S* were not in the room, and more specifically, since the ringing phone is now extremely salient in our common ground, that *S* does not want to talk to people over the phone at this time, then *S*'s behavior is explained, and since I have no better hypothesis to explain this behavior, I conclude that my hypothesis must be correct and that is what *S* meant.

The significant fact, for our present discussion of adductive inferencing, is that it is non-monotonic,<sup>v</sup> unlike deductive logic. Furthermore, since no restriction is put on the nature of the explanatory hypothesis postulated in the second step of the adductive process, there is no way to constrain abduction. Each adductive process is essentially open

to an infinite number of possible explanations, from which one (or a few) are selected on the basis of contextual relevance and appropriateness (so, the hypothesis that S does not wish to speak on the phone fits the available facts, whereas the hypothesis that S is undergoing an out of body experience doesn't or does so to a lesser degree).

This is significant, because it means that the adductive processes of implicature generate an infinite number of more or less plausible, interesting, significant, etc., implicatures in a given situation (S, H, C, *u*, *p*). Much has been made of the indeterminate character of ironical meaning (*p'*) [42] and the intuition is both correct and deep, especially in its connection to what Sperber and Wilson call "loose talk." We are now in the position to integrate the indeterminacy of irony, loose talk, indirect speech at large, and such non-cooperative (deceptive) modes as humor and lying into a broad explanation: all indirect, non-literal discourse is based largely or in part, on adductive, hence, non-monotonic and open-ended, inferential processes. Therefore, all these modes derive their indeterminacy from the indeterminacy of abduction (i.e., we can never be sure that a given meaning is exactly what was implicated, ours is a best guess).

Furthermore, we can make another significant step, and note that since the meaning of *p'* is undetermined, significant leeway is given to its interpretation and eventual classification by H.

Consider the following example:

*A is the 80-year-old grandmother of B, a 30-year-old female. B had just run up over a curb driving out of a store.*

*A: They just built that while you were in the store.*

*B: I know.*

It seems clear that A is being ironical, as *p* ("They just built that while you were in the store.") is patently false. But is A being funny? Is A teasing B? Is A exaggerating? Is A being metaphorical? The answer is probably a little of all of the above, as A may be humorously teasing B about her lack of attention (or of driving skills) by wildly exaggerating the speed with which a curb could have been built and by metonymically having running over a curb stand for being distracted/driving poorly. Any attempt at disentangling this cluster of implicatures would be quixotic, as the completely non-committal answer of B seems to imply (although there is no way to know what B actually meant; we only can infer that B is playing along with A, i.e., she is mode-adopting, see below).

Thus, returning to the question of the distinction between irony and indirect discourse, we conclude that there isn't one. Irony is just one of the many expressive goals that can be achieved through indirectness in context, by the speakers. In this sense I am in complete agreement with Kreuz [44, p. 104] "the job of the listener is to recover the discourse goals of the speaker and not to identify some rhetorical label like *irony* or *understatement*." It is probably both the existence of folk-taxonomies that distinguish between, say, irony and exaggeration, and the fragmented way in which the domain of indirect speech has been examined that has led to the loss of perspective whereby phenomena such as irony, understatement, teasing, etc., have been seen as existing outside of the intentions of the speakers and the contexts in which their utterances take place. Significantly, recent studies have started investigating less clear-cut modes than plain irony.

Gibbs [23] dealt with hyperbole and understatement in his chapter on irony. Gibbs' [37] study of naturally occurring data, examines, under the heading of irony, jocularity (i.e.,

teasing), sarcasm (negative irony), rhetorical questions, hyperbole, and understatement. Colston and Keller [45] show that exaggeration and understatement can be explained as degrees of contrast and that exaggeration expresses surprise more readily because one can exaggerate more or less open-endedly. Colston and O'Brien [34] have shown that understatement (meiosis) and irony can be reduced to the same pragmatic factors (contrast, see above). Katz and Pexman [46] and Pexman *et al.* [47] have shown that metaphorical statements are interpreted as ironical if certain contextual factors obtain, such as knowledge of S's occupation. (Certain professions are apparently seen as irony-prone, which is expected for comedians, but perhaps less so for cab-drivers).

### 7.2.2.3 *On the relationship between humor and irony*

We finally turn to a vexing question, for which we are far from being able to provide a definitive answer: how do humor and irony correlate? Dews *et al.* [48, p. 348] speculate that the element of surprise “yielded by the disparity between what is said and what is meant” may trigger humor. Colston and associates (see above) have argued that contrast/incongruity is at the root of irony and other forms of figurative language. Giora [49, p. 256-257] argues that humor and irony share some basic mechanisms. Namely, they both violate the “graded informativeness requirement,” but they do so differently: a joke goes from an unmarked meaning to a marked one, while irony does the opposite. It is unnecessary to review the extensive literature on the role of incongruity in humor in this context (see [2, 50] for reviews). It remains to be seen if the incongruity of humor can be reduced to the contrast of irony, and vice versa. Moreover, it is not clear if such notions as inappropriateness, insincerity, etc., reduce “cleanly” to contrast.

Also, if irony is a form of indirect negation [49] and humor is based (in part) on local antonymy [11, 50], it follows that both humor and irony include negation as a significant constituent of the phenomenon. However, Colston [35, p. 1563] argues that “contradiction” is not necessarily involved.

The connection between irony and humor at the perlocutionary level is fairly commonsensical and is borne out, for example, by empirical results obtained by Kreuz *et al.* [51, p. 153-154] who report that, among the goals listed by speakers in ironical utterances, being funny or witty and to play or be silly were listed much more frequently than in the case of non-ironical utterances. Along the same lines, Dews *et al.* [48, p. 363] and Kumon-Nakamura *et al.* [52, p. 10] show that ironical statements are rated as funnier than literal ones.

Toplak and Katz [53] also find that sarcastic speakers are seen as funny. On the connections between humor and irony, see also [44, p. 104; 37, p. 24; 54; 55, p. 40-41].

Unfortunately, despite the literature mentioned above, little research has spanned both humor and irony (see for example my own culpable exclusion of irony [2]). The linguistics of humor has much to contribute to the discussion, since it seems to have a much more formalized/algorithmic definition of oppositeness than current theories of irony (cf. [50], for discussion).

## 7.3 Performance

We have seen that the situation of indirect speech can be described as a sextuple  $S, H, C, u, p, p'$  and the type of indirect speech (metaphor, irony, exaggeration, understatement, etc.) is determined by the relationship between  $p$  and  $p'$ , as well as by other salient aspects

of C. We now turn to the performance (as opposed to competence, not as in theatrical performance) of irony and humor (although we focus on irony in what follows, for simplicity). We have established that the relevant situation is that S says something with a certain intention (or that H reads said intention in what S said).<sup>vi</sup> We can ask two distinct questions: why is S acting thus? and what does H do? The next section will address these issues in turn.

### 7.3.1 *Why use irony and humor?*

In [2, p. 322-330], I classified various functions of humor. The list bears repeating, to compare it with the list of functions of irony [19].

- *Social management*: this involves all the in- and out-group functions of humor, including but not limited to mediation, social control, establishing solidarity, play, etc.
- *Decommitment*, i.e., the possibility of “taking back” something by claiming that one was “just kidding.”
- *Defunctionalization*; i.e., the loss of “meaningfulness” that is observed, for example in puns, but in general in ludic uses of language.

Among the secondary functions are the transmission of information and the testing function that have been claimed to exist in humor (see [2, p. 330] for references). In the following section, I review the uses of irony, following [19], which are perhaps less well known than those of humor.

#### - *Group affiliation*

Irony may serve two opposed purposes: an inclusive and an exclusive one. On the one hand, irony builds in-group solidarity through shared play; on the other hand, it can be used to express a negative judgment about someone [56, p. 414]. Lakoff [57, p. 173] notes that “irony makes use of presumptive homogeneity and reinforces it: understanding irony communicates ‘You and I are the same.’” In other words, shared irony serves to create an in-group feeling. Irony can also be used to exclude [55, p. 95-97; 53].

#### - *Sophistication*

One of irony's purposes seems to be that of showing off S's detachment and hence superiority to/from the situation and S's ability to “play” with language (saying one thing, while meaning another). Dews *et al.* [48, p. 347] show that speakers use irony to “show themselves to be in control of their emotions.” An ironical utterance connotes its being ironical (and indirect), and hence its being sophisticated and requiring some mental dexterity to process it. Being associated with humor adds yet another prized connotation to irony, at least in Western society: being able to make other people laugh is a positive trait (obviously, within certain limits).

#### - *Evaluation*

Grice [59, p. 53] notes that irony is “intimately connected with the expression of a feeling, attitude, or evaluation.” Sperber & Wilson [42, p. 239] and many others have claimed that the attitude expressed by irony is always negative. Others maintain that a positive irony is also possible [5, 52]. Dews *et al.* [48, p. 349] note that irony does mute both the negative effect of ironical criticism and the positive effect of ironical praise (see also [60, p. 15]). This muting function would then be the point of using irony. The muting

function of irony has been called into question [61, 53].

- *Politeness*

There has been much discussion about the use of irony as a tool for politeness [62]. It seems that actually irony itself is aggressive (hence, a FTA), but admittedly less damaging of face than overt aggression. Furthermore, irony offers the option of retractability (see below), which also contributes to its use toward politeness.

- *Persuasive aspect*

Carston [63, p. 30] notes that irony is a powerful rhetorical tool because it presupposes the truth of the presupposed proposition to be self-evident. Kreuz *et al.* [51, p. 161] note that irony is memorable. Giora [49] sees irony as a highly informative utterance. All of these aspects of ironical utterances can be used persuasively.

- *Retractability*

Berrendonner [64, p. 238] claims that irony, because it allows one to state something and its opposite at the same time, allows S to avoid any sanctions that may follow from stating directly what he/she thinks. From this perspective, irony allows S to take a non-committal attitude towards what he/she is saying.

### 7.3.1.1 *On the uses of humor and irony*

The functions of humor and irony seem to be largely overlapping. Let us note the striking similarities between the two lists: retractability is listed in both cases, and so is social management (in- and out- group functions). Humor is certainly a tool for politeness, cf. the “repair” function of humor [2, p. 324]. Obviously the association with humor of irony, noted above, is a common factor between the two lists, as is the mental dexterity aspect. As far as the differences go, humor does not seem to have the persuasive aspect hypothesized for irony, nor the evaluative one, although, of course, evaluative humor is possible.

Nonetheless, listing increasingly disparate and elaborate functions of humor (and irony, see below) is of course very interesting empirically, as documentation of a given use of humor, but essentially a theoretically vacuous task, since humor (and irony) can be used to convey any meaning and hence for any social function which could be accomplished linguistically otherwise. Consider for example that humor and irony can be used both to exclude from and to include in a group, or that both humor and irony can be used to be polite and to offend.

Having reviewed some, but by no means all, of the functions of irony and humor, we are facing the general question (originally intended for irony, but that can be expanded to humor as well):

*“why a speaker who could, by hypothesis, have expressed [his/] her intended message directly should decide instead to say the opposite of what [he/] she meant [?]”* [42, p. 240].

The answer to this question is that people are willing to take on extra processing costs and the risk of being misunderstood because of a number of social and rhetorical functions that being ironical or funny affords. Moreover, to hedge their bets, so to speak, speakers will signal with a number of markers their ironical intent to make sure that no

misunderstanding takes place.

These markers have been reviewed in [19, 65, 66, 67]. Some of the central motivations to use irony are discussed briefly in what follows; a more detailed discussion can be found in [19]. Markers of humor have been generally neglected in the literature, with the exception of laughter.

### 7.3.2 Responses to irony

We turn now to responses to irony. It is clear from the characterization of the ironical situation as S, H, C,  $u$ ,  $p$ ,  $p'$  that H may or may not catch on to S's saying  $p$  while meaning  $p'$ . Now, if H realizes the existence of  $p'$ , then he/she may attend to the meaning of  $p'$  (however indeterminate), while obviously if he/she does not realize that there exists a second proposition implied by S, he/she obviously cannot attend to it. The options of H are as follows:

- react to  $p$  (the said)
- react to  $p'$  (the implied)
- laugh
- not react (e.g., change the topic, be silent, etc.)

Note how laughter and lack of reaction are ambiguous, in that H does not have to have understood  $p'$  (or even  $p$ , for that matter) in order to react thusly.

So is the reaction to  $p$ , since H may have understood  $p'$ , but decided to attend to  $p$  anyway (i.e., to take the irony literally). If H has not understood  $p'$ , then obviously that option is not available to him/her.

Thus, we can come to a first conclusion: observation of the reactions of H (or of the audience) tells us very little, since the only non-ambiguous observable behavior of H is his/her reaction to  $p'$ . All other behaviors do not tell us whether he/she is even aware of the existence of  $p'$ . In general, this is going to be one of the main problems of a theory of the audience's reaction to S's linguistic behavior, and namely the fact that vastly different psychological states may result in exactly the same observable behavior.

### 7.3.3 Ironic Mode Adoption

We will begin by discussing the differences between uptake and mode adoption and as a result present a first definition of "mode adoption." We will develop a more detailed mental space approach to mode adoption in the next section. To start out we need to discuss briefly the Austinian notion of *uptake* [68, p. 117] and its differences from *taking up* and ultimately of *mode adoption*.

Uptake is the recognition of the intention of S and therefore of the illocutionary force of S's  $u$ . The recognition of an utterance as, say, a promise, is obviously based on its (literal) meaning and the context in which it occurs. Recognition of the illocutionary force of an utterance implies no action beyond the mental effort involved in the recognition itself. Taking up involves some other action on H's part; minimally a display of assent, more generally a more or less explicit agreement to perform some mutually recognized activity.

Mode adoption, on the other hand, is essentially an acceptance on H's part of a possible world, as defined by S, which differs from  $W_r$ , i.e., the world that S and H mutually know

as “reality” in some respect. By acceptance, I mean the agreement to operate, at least momentarily, within that possible world (I am using here “possible world” and “mental space” as interchangeable terms).

Taking up involves perlocution and is the more general category. Mode adoption is a specific kind of taking up that involves recognition of illocutionary force and then, rather than the acceptance of the illocutionary force (commitment to perform an activity), the performance of another speech act having the same type of inferential path, but not necessarily the same illocutionary force; responding with a promise to a promise is not mode adoption:

*A:* Tomorrow, I will wash your car.

*B:* I will buy you a pizza.

Let us define differently what mode adoption is: if H is presented with an utterance  $u$  by S, which means (“literally”)  $p$  and implies  $q$  and H has available the mode adoption strategy, then H has mode adopted  $u$  (or S) if H utters  $u'$  which implies  $q'$  and  $q$  and  $q'$  belong to the same mode (irony, metaphor, etc.). In other words, H mode adopts S's  $u$  if he/she answers with an utterance that is in the same mode (uses the same type of implicature as) the utterance by S.

I would like to introduce another term, alongside “mode adoption;” namely, “mode factivity” to indicate the propriety of an utterance to allow mode adoption to H, since by uttering an ironical, metaphorical, etc., utterance, S opens the possibility for H to reply in the same mode.

Consider the following example from Kotthoff which illustrates ironical mode adoption [69, p. 12]. The extract, of which I reproduce only the translation, comes from a dinner conversation at David's home. He is known for “prefer[ring] a quiet life” and for letting his wife take care of his social life. The “opulent social life” that Maria (one of the guests) mentions is in reality the fact that David attended two dinners at his own home.

*Maria:* You are having such an opulent social life these days.

*David:* a lot. a lot has been going on lately, because I have taken the initiative now.

Thus, we see that David, being teased ironically about his lack of social life, reacts by being ironically self-deprecating [69, p. 12-13]. The following example displays mode adoption in playful insulting. The data comes from Hay [9, p. 51]:

*Meena:* i even made notes about what we were doing last time

*Dan:* good you can read them out for the people who weren't here

*Barney:* i was here last time and I still don't remember

*Dan:* OK + for the people who weren't here and the congenitally STUPID

*Barney:* yeah + never want to be excluded from something

### 7.3.3.1 *Not all implicatures trigger mode adoption*

An important point that needs to be highlighted is that mode factivity is not a general property of implicatures. Mode adoption is not the same thing as responding with the same maxim-flouting triggered implicature [21].

The difference is that mode adoption does not require the establishment of the flouting at each step: studies of metaphors have found within metaphorical discourse emergent properties (i.e., aspects of the metaphor that do not follow from either of the domains involved in the metaphor). It follows that once one has entered a metaphorical mode, one is free to pursue it within the internal coherence of that mental space (MS),<sup>vii</sup> to the point where one can develop novel aspects of meaning [71]. Also, with mode adoption, floutings carry over across discourse boundaries (e.g., turns).

So, we can legitimately ask the question: what causes the mode factive properties of irony, metaphor, make believe, fiction, etc.? I believe that the answer lies in the peculiar pragmatic presuppositions triggered to accommodate the incompatibility between the presuppositions of *u* and those shared by the audience in *C*. On these issues see [21].

### 7.3.3.2 *A cognitive/mental spatial account*

Simply put, H, when faced with a non-mode factive implicature, derives the necessary implicatures that allow him/her to preserve the belief that *S* is CP-compliant within a MS.

When faced with a mode factive utterance, H is forced to open a new mental space that allows H to avoid having to reject *u* as ill-formed and then proceeds as in the non-mode factive case.

In other words, when H encounters, say, a scalar implicature in *u* he checks the MS labeled “reality”(C), finds an interpretation of *u* that is compatible with it, and moves on. When H encounters an ironical (metaphorical, etc.) utterance, he/she finds that reality cannot accommodate *u*, and therefore is forced to construct an ironical MS (I) that allows him/her to process *u*.

Note that given my analysis of irony [5], combined with the presupposition float principle, we know why the presuppositions in I do not float up to M (the base mental space shared by *S* and H): since under the model of irony [5], an ironical utterance is pragmatically inappropriate to its context, and inappropriateness is defined as having one or more presuppositions which are incompatible with the presuppositions held in the context of the utterance by its participants, it follows that by the second clause of the presupposition float principle the ironical presuppositions are blocked from floating up into M because they are opposite to some of those in M.

This phenomenon is of some significance, since it is at the root of irony recognition on H's part. Faced with the realization that one or several of the presuppositions in *u* fail to float upwards in M, H has to conclude that the space I is ironical (or belongs to some other indirect type of speech). This opens up the option to either access the space (mode adoption) or reject it. There have been a few promising studies of H's reactions to irony, to which we turn presently.

### 7.3.4 *What do Hs react to?*

Drew's [72, p. 219] influential study of teasing analyzes a corpus of 50 naturally-occurring teasing incidents. He outlines a continuum of reactions to teases (“mocking but playful jibes”) ranging from the totally serious reaction to acceptance, laughter and playing along. The continuum can be summarized as follows:

- Totally serious reaction
- Ignoring the tease

- Serious reaction, followed by laughter
- Laughter followed by serious reaction
- Laughter, acceptance of the tease, followed by serious reaction
- Laughter, acceptance of the tease, playing along

In Drew's [72] data, only three instances of the last case, which corresponds to mode adoption in my terminology, were recorded. Extrapolating from Drew's data, this would correspond to 6% of the data, a figure strikingly close to that in the Nelms [39] corpus (see below). Drew [72, p. 230] notes that in general the targets of the teases, even if they laughed or treated the tease playfully, they went "on seriously to reject and correct the suggestion made in the tease."

As far as the semantics of the teasing, Drew notes that a vast majority of his examples are characterized by exaggerations and contrast.

Hay's [9, p. 32-34] work on "jocular abuse" (i.e., playful insults) is based on 15 hours of conversations among the players of role-playing game. All players knew one another, obviously, but shared different degrees of intimacy. In the transcriptions of her data, Hay finds 133 instances of jocular abuse (multiple occurrences of the same abuse are counted as one instance). An interesting conclusion is that "the overwhelming majority of abuse involved someone who was fully integrated in the group" [9, p. 38]. We will return to this fact. As far as the reactions to jocular abuse are concerned, Hay's [9, p. 50] results can be summed up in the chart below. I aggregate her data, which are divided by gender (see Table 7.1).

Note that the total number of reactions (109) is lower than the 133 recorded instances, as Hay notes that in some cases the victim was not in a position to respond. Note also that, in this case, retaliation corresponds to mode adoption, whereas objecting is clearly a refusal to play along. Conversely, agreeing with the abuser is also mode adoption. So, if we add up the cases of retaliation and those of agreement, we get 22 instances of mode adoption, i.e., 20.2% of the data, with 77.8% (i.e., more than three quarters of the cases) of serious response and/or refusal to play along.

**Table 7.1** Reactions to jocular abuse in Hay's study.

<i>Retaliate</i>	<i>Ignore</i>	<i>Object</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Correct</i>
15	41	61	7	13
13.8%	37.6%	56%	6.4%	11.9%

Kotthoff's [73] study is based on a corpus of 30 hours of dinner conversations among friends and 20 hours of TV discussions. Kotthoff categorizes the responses as addressing the said (i.e., playing along with the irony), addressing the implied meaning (i.e., responding seriously), mixed (i.e., addressing both the said and the implied meanings), ambiguous responses (which are unclear in that respect), and simple laughter.

From her data, it is clear that Hs by no means react exclusively to the second sense (the ironical import), nor do they "play along." In fact, a mere 50% of turns play along with the irony (mode adopt) in the more friendly and informal context of the conversations. When we turn to the more formal TV debates, only *one* instance of mode adoption is recorded,

showing that Hs lean toward a serious consideration of the implicated sense in the formal environment.

To be noted also the relatively high incidence of laughter (a neutral response, which acknowledges the irony, but does not commit to any reaction).

**Table 7.2** Results of Kotthoff's study

	<i>Said</i>	<i>import</i>	<i>mixed</i>	<i>ambig.</i>	<i>laugh</i>	<i>Tot.</i>
Dinner	26	4	10	5	6	51
TV	1	14	2	5	2	24

It should also be noted that the significant variable seems to be the friendly nature of the dinner conversations: in a friendly environment the sum of the mode adopting (reacting to the said) and mixed turns makes up about 60% of the reactions to irony. However, in the formal setting, the same combination (said + mixed) amounts to only one response in eight.

Averaging between the two sets of data is probably meaningless, but gives us roughly one reaction in two as mode adoption.

Gibbs [37] reports a study which looks at irony (construed fairly broadly) over a corpus of 289 ironical utterances collected in transcriptions of taped conversations. Interestingly, the overall incidence of irony (8%) is strikingly similar to the 10% figure found in Tannen [74]. The percentages of responses to the ironical utterances are indicated in Table 7.3.

With the exception of understatement ironies (which however make up a very small part of the corpus, and one that seems twice or three times as likely to be missed by Hs) as many Hs react by ignoring the irony than those who react by mode adoption.

**Table 7.3** Reactions to irony in Gibbs' study

<i>topic</i>	<i>Jocularity</i>	<i>Sarcasm</i>	<i>Hyperbole</i>	<i>Rhet. Quest</i>	<i>Understat.</i>
Ironic	.32	.33	.21	.21	.33
Literal	.22	.23	.38	.21	.33
Laughter	.12	.13	.21	.25	.17
Missed	.05	.04	.00	.09	.17
Change	.29	.29	.21	.33	.00

In Nelms *et al.* [39] we find a significantly different pattern of responses: 92.3% (336 out of 364 instances of irony/sarcasm) are single turn, i.e., H does not respond ironically, while there are only 25 instances of sarcastic responses (about 6.8 %), and only three are three turn sarcastic exchanges (i.e., S is sarcastic again after H has responded sarcastically). Moreover, 14 out of the 25 sarcastic responses consist of holophrastic "Yeah" thus believing the dispreferred status of sarcastic responses. It is notable that no

example of countersarcasm occurred in the corpus. Countersarcasm is a sarcastic response that unlike ironical assent (“Yeah”) “counterattacks” so to speak, by being sarcastic against S. A cartoon example is reported by Yus [75, p. 133]: a man is sitting on a bridge with a large rock tied to his leg. A passer-by arrives, sees him and says “Christ! You're not going to throw yourself into the Thames, are you?” The would-be suicide replies: “No! I always sit perched on a bridge with a 20 pound rock tied around my leg, now piss off! I don't need any good samaritan garbage. Thanks!” In the last frame, the passer-by replies: “No! I was going to tell you, your rope is to [sic] long and the tides [sic] gone out.”

The pattern of responses to irony/sarcasm found in the Nelms *et al.* [39] study is reproduced below. (Some utterances had multiple reactions). Kinesic responses include rolling the eyes, shaking the head in disbelief, squinting, blushing, giving a dirty look, etc.

**Table 7.4** Reactions to sarcasm in Nelms' study

<i>Non-sarcastic</i>	<i>Sarcastic</i>	<i>Laughter</i>	<i>No response</i>	<i>Smile</i>	<i>Kinesic</i>
336	28	142	52	24	29

Most work on conversation analysis has stressed the cooperative, playful, construction of ironies in group settings [76, 69]. Gibbs [37, p. 25] comes down on the side of the conversation analysts: “addressees responded to a speaker's irony by saying something ironic in return [to a large degree],” although he seems to believe that this is a novel finding. In contrast, Nelms *et al.* [39] sees evidence of the Least Disruption Principle, postulated in Attardo [77] independently of irony, which claims that violations of the CP should be kept to a strict minimum and therefore that ironical utterances should not be responded to with irony.

Supporting this view is Hay's [8] claim that irony does not require humor support. Humor support is defined as signs of appreciation, acknowledgement, sympathy, etc., that follow instances of humor. One form of humor support is to offer other humor.

It is clearly too early to determine which position is more correct, especially when quantitative studies on naturalistic data are a mere handful. A long-term study in this direction is currently underway [78]. However, we may speculate that the differences in the results may be due to the differences in the corpora. Kotthoff's data show clearly that more formal situations result in less irony and in less mode adoption. Gibbs' data were recorded in conversations between friends and roommates [37, p. 11] whereas Nelms' data were collected in a broader range of situations and participants, ranging from family members to strangers. It seems probable the irony is a practice one is more likely to engage in with people one is intimate with than with strangers.

Consider these independent, but converging sources: in Kotthoff's data, both the number of ironical turns and especially the mode adoptions drop significantly when the data switch from a friendly environment to a formal setting. In Hay's data, jocular abuse is largely limited to those persons that are well integrated in the group. Jorgensen [79] showed that sarcasm is more common with intimates.

Furthermore, another dimension which needs to be accounted for is the degree of aggression of the ironical utterance. Gibbs [37] does not report degree of aggression, but he reports which utterances were seen as “critical”: half of the sarcastic utterances were seen as critical, whereas about 25% of the other categories were classified as such (once

more with the exception of understatements, which were never seen as critical). Complete data on aggression in the Nelms corpus are not available yet, but a sample of 60 randomly selected cases was ranked for aggression by 20 judges. The rankings show that on average the samples were seldom considered very aggressive or aggressive, but that a majority of cases were considered slightly aggressive. In general, the sample shows a tendency toward not being very aggressive.

However, our data also clearly show some aggression. It seems that aggression in sarcasm/irony has a “bulge” distribution [80, chart 7.1].

If these tentative data can be trusted, we can speculate that both factors are significant for the production and reception of humor and that therefore there exists a threshold of familiarity, below which humorous exchanges tend to be avoided.

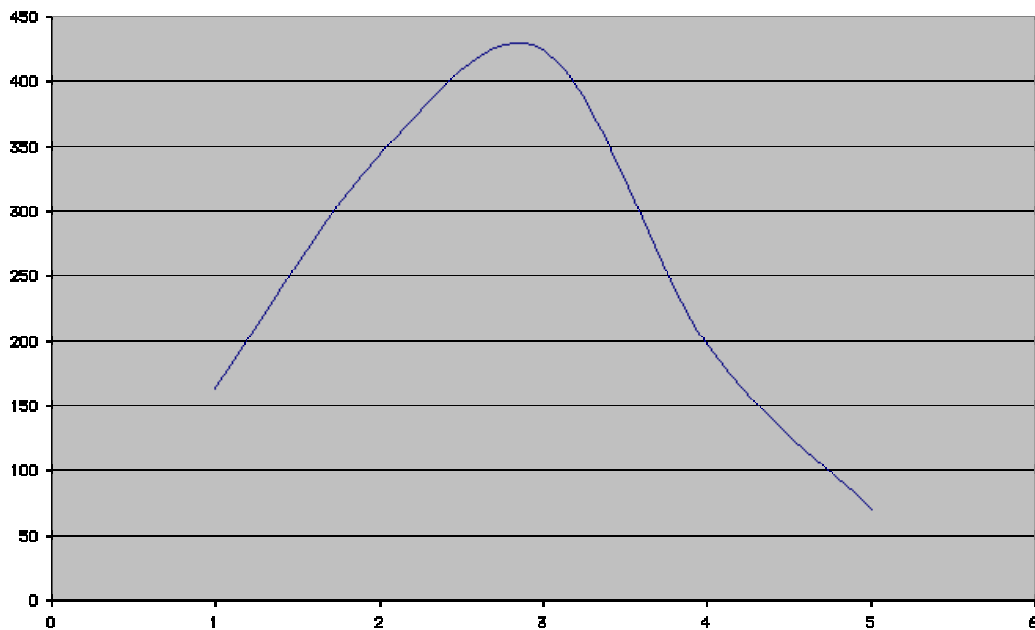


Chart 7.1 Bulge Distribution of Aggression

Perhaps also the familiarity dimension exhibits a bulge, in which case the “humorous space” would be structured as a blob, the outcome of the intersection of the two bulges, orthogonally placed. Attardo [78] will investigate this hypothesis. For the time being, the hypothesis was tested by having two independent judges rate the 60 samples for familiarity, using the following scale:

- Strangers
- Acquaintances (e.g., classroom interactions, between teacher and students)
- Close acquaintances, familiar (e.g., coworkers)
- Friends
- Relatives, married couples

The resulting scatter plot having aggression on the x axis and familiarity on the y axis, according to the judges, is reproduced in chart 7.2. The results seem to support the

threshold hypothesis. Needless to say, a more sophisticated research tool is necessary, for example, eliciting familiarity rankings directly from the participants, thus avoiding the mediated rankings of the judges.

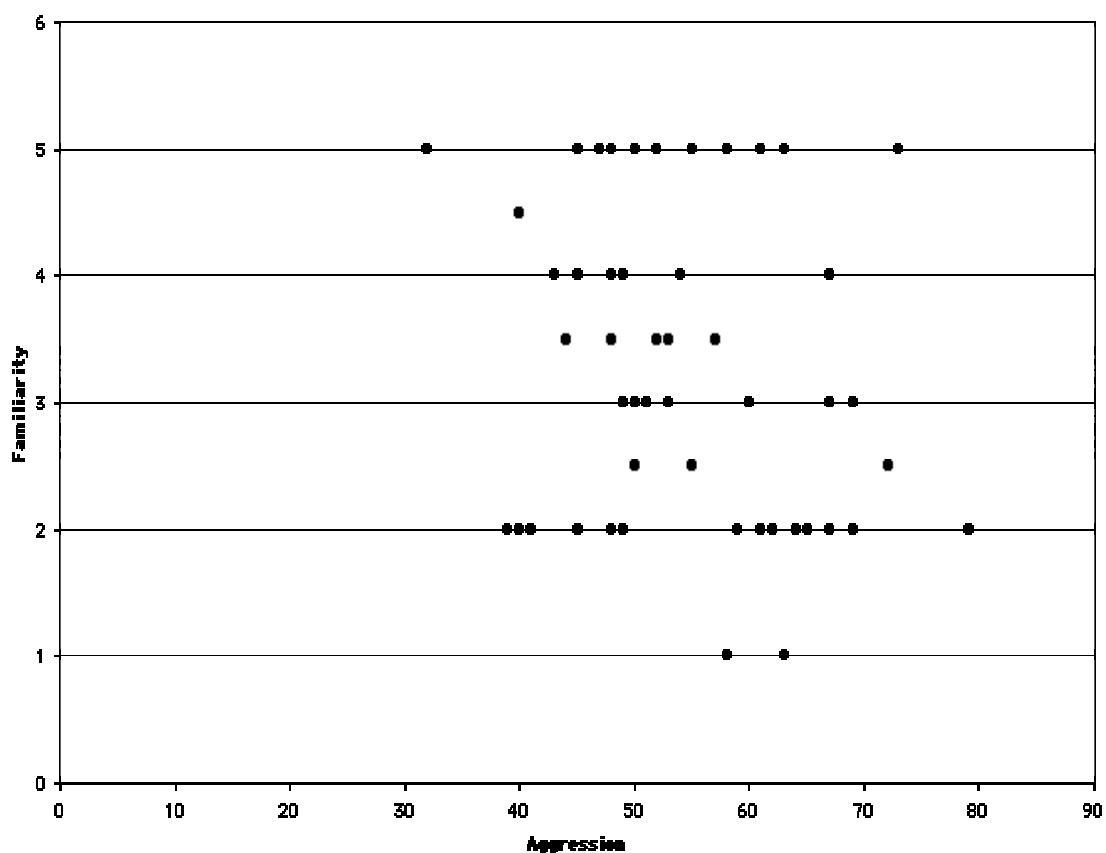


Chart 7.2 Scatter Plot of Familiarity (Y axis) and Aggression (X Axis)

### 7.3.5 Reactions to humor

After reviewing the recent research on the reactions to irony, we now turn in conclusion to the reactions to humor, where we find that there have been few studies of H's reactions to non-ironical humor. In general, laughter has been the object of sustained attention as well as silence (i.e., ignoring the humor); see Attardo [2, p. 307-311] for references. The discourse analysis of humor has focused mostly on successful exchanges in which the hearers laugh or respond with more humor [76, 8, 12], i.e., Hs mode-adopt. Some studies [81] have been concerned with performance (in the theatrical sense) of humor and touch upon audience reaction. Very little attention has been given to failed attempts at humor. Theoretically, there should be little difference between irony and humor in the different possibilities of reaction, since H can ignore the humor, take it literally (this is called "suppression of the violation" [22, p. 553], laugh, or mode adopt, just like with irony.

This concludes our discussion of the performance aspect of humor and irony. Needless to say, it is clear that in many ways these first early conclusions are merely hinting at a much richer and rewarding field that is in dire need of further investigation.

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## 7.5 Notes

<sup>i</sup> See for example the prototype theory of irony in Utsumi [7], in which irony is a function of three variables. The problematic aspects of Utsumi's proposal cannot be discussed in this context, unfortunately.

<sup>ii</sup> I am suggesting essentially that all irony is potentially, but not necessarily actually, humorous. This is because irony shares both the script oppositeness and overlapping requirement of humor; see below.

<sup>iii</sup> There are numerous issues which we cannot address in this context: the intentionality of the humor may be distributed across the participants, i.e., the hearer may be the only person intending the exchange to be funny, as in so-called "unintentional humor" (and this analysis itself is not without its controversial aspects), the judgements as to the meaning of the text, the appropriateness of joking, the speakers' intentions, etc. need not occur sequentially and/or consciously, or even at all in routine situations in which expectations are set. I could go on...

<sup>iv</sup> Pragmatically, of course, there is a residual violation of the maxim of manner, even after the ironical implicature has been derived. I deal briefly with this issue in Attardo [21] and in Nelms *et al.* [39].

<sup>v</sup> i.e., essentially probabilistic, based on the best available evidence and subject to revision. Cf. Levesque [43].

<sup>vi</sup> It should be noted that we are restricting ourselves for simplicity to verbalized humor/irony. There exist situational humor and irony which can probably be reduced to the present formulations. We will not deal with these in this context, but see Shelley [58] on situational irony, and references therein.

<sup>vii</sup> The notion of MS was introduced in Fauconnier [70]. This is not the place to discuss this idea, but see [70], [71]. Very briefly we can characterize a mental space as an abstract domain to which information is "relativized" ([70: 38]). Thus S may believe he/she is a human being and a lion (metaphorically, or in a dream) without contradiction, by relativizing the contradictory information to two MSs. Fauconnier proposes also a principle of presuppositional projection, called *presupposition float* which may be stated as "a presupposition floats up until it meets itself or its opposite" ([70: 61]).

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