

Say not to Say:
New perspectives on miscommunication
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8 **The Risks and Rewards of Ironic Communication**

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Abstract: This paper explores the risks and reward of ironic communication. We argue that irony can not be characterized simply as having positive or negative social impact, but can serve multiple communicative purposes, depending on the social context and aims of the conversational participants. Irony may either distance, or bond, speakers and listeners. Contrary to the standard view, understanding irony does not require that people analyze what speakers literally say before deriving their intended meanings. But interpreting irony may require listeners to recognize the second-order, metarepresentational beliefs of speakers. Finally, irony may be a special form of figurative language in the pleasures it affords speakers and listeners.

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8.1 The risks and rewards of ironic communication

Irony is a frequently employed form of figurative language that offers speakers many risks and potentially great rewards. When people utter ironic remarks, they assume that others have some ability to infer speakers' communicative intentions. For example, Mary is upset with her husband John for failing to assist in the housecleaning and says to him while he sits idly on the couch "Well, you're a big help around here." Mary's remark indirectly conveys her belief that John should be helping with the housecleaning, as well as her annoyance with John for his failure. Speaking ironically in this situation enables Mary to convey complex propositional and interpersonal meanings in a compact manner. Of course, Mary risks John misunderstanding her, because of her nonliteral utterance (i.e., John may take Mary's utterance on face value as a compliment). Moreover, even if John recognizes Mary's nonliteral intentions, Mary risks offending John by adopting a caustic, hostile attitude in expressing her beliefs sarcastically.

The above example illustrates some of the risks and rewards associated with ironic communication. Our goal in this chapter is to explore the unique pragmatic characteristics of irony. We describe why speakers use irony, what listeners typically understand, and misunderstand, when encountering ironic language, how irony is understood, and why irony is particularly useful in conveying both humorous and hostile attitudes in everyday communication. In addition, we claim that people sometimes interpret speakers' messages ironically even when this meaning was never intended.

8.2 Irony may distance speakers from listeners

Consider again the case where Mary says to her husband "Well, you're a big help around here." Many scholars argue that sarcastic irony, such as seen in this example, is especially negative in distancing speakers from listeners (ref). Under this view, Mary's utterance is seen as more negative and hostile than if she stated her complaint more directly, as in "I wish you would help me," or "You're not helping me."

Qualitative observation suggests that people do, in fact, sometimes use irony for hostile purposes that distances them from their listeners. Various studies indicate that verbal aggression through sarcasm is directly linked to people's feelings of anger and loss of self-esteem [1, 2]. Some individuals may be more prone than others to angry feelings when hearing sarcasm [3]. Thus, people possessing temperaments viewed as "guardian" (i.e., melancholic, depressive, industrious, traditional) have the greatest propensity to react angrily to sarcasm, followed by "idealists" (i.e., inspired, religious, receptive, friendly), "artisans" (i.e., sanguine, innovative, aesthetic, changeable), and "rationals" (i.e., skeptical, curious, theoretic, tough-minded), respectively. There is some data, from a study examining sarcasm in one workplace setting (staff members at a hospital), that provides partial support for this hypothesis [3]. Thus, sarcastic irony appears to have negative effects on some social relationships, and is especially hurtful to some individuals. A tragic instance of the negative impact sarcasm can have was the shooting deaths of 13 high-school students by two alienated male teenagers in Columbine, Colorado in 1999. These two adolescents had for years been the object of their classmates' frequent teasing and sarcastic comments.

Not all scholars view irony as distancing speakers from listeners. These researchers claim that irony works to mute the negative impact of speakers' meanings [4, 5]. For instance, Mary's sarcastic utterance may be less offensive to her husband than if she stated

her complaint directly. Irony, in this view, softens the potentially negative impact of what a speaker intends to communicate. Allcorn formulated a list of typical aggressive behaviors in the workplace and observed that sarcasm is an acceptable method for expressing anger, at least in some situations (and compared to lesser condoned behaviors such as bullying, slander, and physical violence) [6]. Sarcasm is favored in the modern workplace because the serious risks associated with such verbal behavior appear minimal insofar as speakers' comments may be subtle, and even humorous.

Experimental studies presents a mixed picture of irony's effects on interpersonal relationships. Some studies suggest that irony does minimize the potentially negative impact of speakers' messages [4]. Yet other studies seem to demonstrate the opposite in that irony appears to enhance the negativity of a comment [7, 8]. For instance, some work indicates that the positive direct semantic meaning of a speaker's ironic utterance (e.g., "How pleasing") enhances the degree of criticism perceived in a speaker's message, relative to more direct literal commentary (e.g., "How disgusting"). This enhancement seems to be brought about by a contrast effect, in which the referent situation looks worse when juxtaposed with the ironic remark, again relative to the literal comment. This causing of a shift toward the negative then carries the speaker greater criticism.

It also appears that this seeming discrepancy in the literature can be accounted for by subtle contrast and assimilation effects [9]. Some ironic remarks make a referent situation appear positive relative to the situation being seen in isolation or when a literal remark is made about it. Other ironic remarks shift the perceived quality of the situation to the negative as described above. These different shifts are caused by assimilation and contrast effects respectively, and affect the degree of speaker criticism accordingly.

8.3 Irony may bond speakers and listeners

Speaking ironically may have special rewards, because it allows people to communicate "off-record" [10, 11]. Off-record speaking strategies enable speakers to deny their covert communicative intentions if questioned by someone else. Thus, in the above brief scene, Mary could possibly deny aspects of what John understood from her sarcastic comment if John complained or raised questions about what she meant.

But speaking "off-record" using irony has other rewards for both speakers and listeners, beyond allowing speakers to deny the implications of what they say. Consider the following exchange between two college students [12]. This conversation occurred in their apartment, and focused on some visitors who were staying with them at the invitation of another roommate:

Anne: "By the way, were our wonderful guests still here when you came out and ate lunch?"

Dana: "I had a sandwich and ..."

Anne: "Isn't it so nice to have guests here?"

Dana: "Totally!" Anne: "I just love it, you know, our housemates. They bring in the most wonderful guests in the world and they can totally relate to us."

Dana: "Yes, they do."

Anne: (laughs) "Like I would just love to have them here more often" (laughs) "I so I can cook for them, I can prepare" (laughs)

Dana: "to make them feel welcome."

Anne: "Yeah, isn't this great, Dana? Like today I was feeling all depressed and I came

out and I saw the guests and they totally lightened up my mood. I was like the happiest person on earth." Dana: "unhuh"

Anne: "I just welcome them so much, you know, ask them if they want anything to drink or eat" (laughs)

Anne and Dana's conversation reveals the intense joy that speakers of irony often share. Each person employs different forms of ironic language (e.g., sarcasm, jocular, rhetorical questions, hyperbole) to indirectly convey their mutual displeasure about the people staying as guests in their apartment. Much of the irony here is humorous, despite its implied criticism of the visitors (and the roommate who invited them). Both speakers are tightly linked in their beliefs and attitudes (i.e., their "common ground"), and this allows them to pretend that they enjoy their roommate's visitors when this is obviously untrue. In this case, then, irony serves as a mark of intimacy between speakers and listeners, and brings them even closer together.

How often do speakers use irony for hostile or humorous purposes? There are surprisingly few studies on the amount and kind of irony that people use in ordinary conversation. But one detailed analysis of over 60 ten-minute conversations between college students in public and private settings showed the diversity of ironic language [12]. This corpus revealed 789 different ironic statements as students made ironic remarks 8% of the time. This fact alone shows that irony is not a specific rhetorical device only to be used in unusual circumstances. Yet this analysis of students' ironic utterances demonstrated that irony is not a single category of figurative language, but includes a variety of types, each of which is motivated by slightly different cognitive, linguistic, and social factors, and conveys somewhat different pragmatic meaning. People comfortably use various forms of irony to convey a wide range of both blatant and subtle interpersonal meanings.

For instance, students used jocular (i.e., "I would just love to have them here more often"), where speakers addressed one another in humorous ways 50% of the time; they used sarcasm (e.g., "I would just love to have them here more often"), where speakers spoke positively to convey a more negative intent, 28% of the time; they used hyperbole (e.g., "They bring in the most wonderful guests in the world and they can totally relate to us"), where speakers express their nonliteral meaning by exaggerating the reality of the situation, 12% of the time; rhetorical questions (e.g., "Isn't it so nice to have guests here?"), where speakers literally ask a question that implied either a humorous or critical assertion, 8% of the time; and understatements (e.g., "James was just a bit late with his rent"), where speakers conveyed their ironic meanings by stating far less than was obviously the case, 2% of the time.

Although the conversations analyzed in this study may not be representative of all situations, irony is clearly, often employed for jocular, humorous purposes that bond speakers and listeners closer together. Speakers engage in pretend acts where they adopt different persona to communicate complex interpersonal meanings. Listeners do not always pick up on speakers' ironic messages (about 4% addressees' subsequent utterances suggest that they may have failed to comprehend speaker's ironic meanings). This reflects one of the downsides of ironic communication.

Yet addressees frequently responded to speakers' ironic statements by saying something ironic in return (as shown nicely in the above conversation between roommates). This averaged from 21 percent to 33 percent across the five types of irony. Speakers of irony share ironic views of people and events that are jointly extended, and celebrated, upon as the conversation unfolds. This data is consistent with the claim that people use different

forms of irony in various discourse situation because they conceptualize situations in ironic terms [13, 14]. Under this perspective, the reasons for speaking ironically are not solely located in trying to convey specific nuances of meaning, but because people view situations ironically and their ironic talks reflects this figurative mode of thought. To the extent that speakers and listeners share a similar ironic construal of events, their understanding of what speakers ironically imply by what they say will be greatly facilitated.

8.4 How is irony understood?

In recent years, psychologists, linguists, and philosophers have proposed various theories to explain how people use and understand irony. These theories focus on widely different cognitive, linguistic, and social aspects of ironic language use, even though each theory claims to provide a single umbrella for capturing the essence of irony.

The classic pragmatic theory of Grice and Searle maintains that listeners first analyze the literal meanings of speakers' utterances, see these meanings as contextually inappropriate, and then derive the correct nonliteral interpretation given the cooperative principle or the rules of speech acts [15, 16]. A speaker's tone of voice supposedly provides an important cue to listeners in inferring ironic meaning.

A different theory holds that irony is a type of echoic mention, in which speakers echo, or repeat, a previously stated utterance or belief, which in context is recognized as conveying ironic meaning [17, 18]. Readers, in fact, find it easier to process and judge the ironic meanings of utterances when they echo or paraphrase some earlier statement or commonly-held belief [19, 20].

Another proposal suggests that pretense is the key to irony [21, 22]. Under this view, speakers of irony pretend to be some other person or persona and pretend also to be speaking, in some cases, to some person other than the listener. Pretense is not unique to irony. Many forms of indirect, figurative language, including hyperbole, understatement, and certain indirect requests, may communicate their meanings effectively because listeners recognize the nature of a speaker's pretense [13].

A fourth possibility holds that ironic utterances mostly accomplish their communicative intent by reminding listeners of some antecedent event, even if not all such reminders are echoic or refer to actual or implied utterances [23]. Many ironic remarks merely remind listeners of the attitudes and expectations that they might share with speakers. The allusional pretense theory combines features of both the echoic mention and pretense view by proposing that ironic utterances convey pragmatic meaning by alluding to failed expectations, which is usually achieved by violating the maxim that speakers should be sincere in what they say [24].

One problem with empirical studies of irony understanding is that they mostly address a single factor in support of the authors' primary hypothesis. Few studies systematically explore the above theories within a single set of experiments. This difficulty is certainly understandable because the different theory characterize dissimilar aspects of ironic language.

But one study analyzed how the 60 student conversations to see whether there were differences in the degree to which the speakers' ironic utterances involved echo, pretense, or were spoken in a special tone of voice [12]. This analysis revealed that people using sarcasm and hyperbole adopted pretense much more so than they echoed a previous statement, while speakers of jocularity employed pretense and echo mention with near

equal frequency. An important difference across the various types of irony concerned asymmetry. For jocular utterances, speakers more frequently presented a negative statement to convey a positive message than they spoke positively to express negative meaning. On the other hand, a far greater number of sarcastic utterances were stated positively to convey negative messages than the reverse. Speakers often used various special tones of voices with each type ironic utterance, especially with sarcasm, jocularly, and rhetorical questions. It was difficult to determine whether there was a specific intonation pattern associated with each type of irony, and in some cases, speakers did not appear to state their ironic messages using any special tone of voice. Other experimental research suggests that some intonation patterns may be useful in people's communicating ironic messages [25, 26].

One implication of the Gibbs findings is that no single theory of irony is currently capable of accounting for the diversity of ways in which ironic language is understood [12]. This conclusion should not be terribly surprising given the pragmatic and linguistic complexity of irony. There is even an additional pragmatic factor in irony understanding that scholars are now beginning to recognize and study. As described above, pretense is an important, but not necessary, element in people's successful use of irony. For example, in the conversation between the two college students, Anne at one point says "Isn't it so nice to have guests here?" Anne's rhetorical question only pretends to convey her agreement with the implied assertion. Dana immediately extends the pretense by responding "Totally," which prompts Anne to continue "I just love it, you know, our housemates. They bring in the most wonderful guests in the world and they can totally relate to us." Each of these statements are instances of "staged communicative acts" [21, 27]. The college students' scenario is staged in the sense that the Anne, creates for her listener, Dana, a brief improvised scene in which an implied Anne (one actor in the scene) asks a question of an implied Dana (the other actor in the scene). When Dana continues the pretense, she assume the role of co-author of the hypothetical scenario by making an assertion in which an implied Dana performs a sincere utterance within the play, as it were, for an implied Anne. As co-authors of this hypothetical scenario, both Anne and Dana wish for each other to imagine the scene and to appreciate their pretense in staging it.

It appears, then, that pretense is fundamental to the teasing, and jocular irony that Anne and Dana communicate. By engaging in pretense, Anne and Dana enable themselves to conceptualize of the visiting guests in a nonserious manner, despite their displeasure with these guests, which should, even if momentarily, help defuse the potentially emotional issue of how annoyed each of them are with the guests. When Anne alludes to, or echoes, some attributed utterance or thought of another person, she creates a representation of a representation (i.e., a second-order belief). By alluding to these implied beliefs, Anne and Dana must recognize the second-order nature of the beliefs if they are to understand what each other intends to communicate. Metarepresentational reasoning of this sort is a special characteristic of ironic communication. Second-order inferences about speakers' intentions do not simply refer to the traditional idea that irony conveys messages that are opposite of what is literally said (see [13] for a critique of this traditional view). Instead, inferring second-order inferences involves recognition of a thought about an attributed thought.

Do listeners infer complex metarepresentations when understanding irony? Colston and Gibbs examined the cognitive processing and the resulting meaning products associated with understanding statements that conveyed ironic, metaphoric, or metaphoric irony in slightly different discourse situations [28]. Participants read stories ending with simple statements, such as "This one's really sharp" that, depending on the context, conveyed

either ironic (e.g., talking about a dull pair of scissors) or metaphoric (e.g., talking about a smart student) meaning. For the ironic context, the teacher's comment "This one's really sharp" reflects her critical attitude toward the idea that the scissors in question might have once been sharp, and considered so. Understanding that the teacher is alluding to some attributed thought or utterance of another individual (a second-order belief), demands that listeners draw a complex metarepresentational inference. Several scholars now contend that irony and metaphor differ precisely because irony comprehension requires such metarepresentational reasoning in the way that metaphor does not [29, 30]. We hypothesized that ironic meaning would be more difficult to interpret than metaphoric meaning because of the second-order inferences needed when irony is used.

A first study showed that readers take longer to comprehend these statements when used as ironies than when conveyed metaphor. A second study probed people's conscious understandings of the different inferences that constitute part of listeners' metarepresentational understandings of irony. The results showed that people recognized irony as involving more pretense, more allusion to someone's prior beliefs, more reference to a speaker's multiple beliefs, and more mockery of someone's prior beliefs, than was the case when people read metaphor. These data are overall consistent with previous suggestions that irony understanding requires more complex metarepresentational inferences than does interpreting metaphor [29, 30, 13, 14, 31]. Irony understanding specifically demands that listeners draw a second-order inference about a speaker's beliefs in a way that it is not necessary when interpreting metaphor.

The idea that ironic communication depends on metarepresentational makes sense given that speakers often echo or allude to others' beliefs when making ironic utterances. Misunderstanding a speaker's ironic remark often is due to listeners' failure to recognize the second-order nature of a person's belief given what that individual has just said. This problem is one of the great risks in ironic communication. On the other hand, correctly recognizing the second-order belief inherent in any ironic remark gives rise to rich, nuanced meaning that often has great rewards for speakers and listeners.

8.5 The pleasures of irony

One finding from the Gibbs study, reported above, was that speakers of sarcasm were significantly more critical and mocking of others than were speakers of jocular humor, hyperbole, and rhetorical questions [12]. Almost all the ironic utterances, with the exception of understatements, were viewed as humorous. Most notably, there appears to be a strong association between an ironic utterance mocking someone or something and it being viewed as humorous. One of the advantages of irony is that it allows speakers to mock others, especially third parties that may not be present. The conversation between the college students, Anne and Dana, who mocked the visiting guests, is a prime example of how people use irony to mock others and enjoy doing so.

Another example of how irony mocks absent third parties is seen in the following advertisement. This ad, sponsored by the California Department of Health Services, played in May 1998 on California radio stations. The radio spot is spoken in the voice of a 60-year old man in a very sincere tone:

"We the Tobacco Industry, would like to take this opportunity to thank you, the young people of America, who continue to smoke our cigarettes despite Surgeon General warnings that smoking causes lung cancer, emphysema, and heart disease. Your

ignorance is astounding, and should be applauded. Our tobacco products kill 420,000 of your parents and grandparents every year. And yet, you've stuck by us. That kind of blind allegiance is hard to find. In fact, 3,000 of you start smoking everyday because we tobacco folks tell you it's cool." (Starts to get carried away).

"Remember, you're rebels! Individuals! And besides, you impressionable little kids are makin' us tobacco guys rich!! Heck, we're billionaires!!" (Clears throat/Composes himself).

"In conclusion, we the tobacco conglomerates of America, owe a debt of gratitude to all teens for their continued support of our tobacco products despite the unfortunate disease and death they cause. Thank you for your understanding. Thank you for smoking. Yours truly, The Tobacco Industry."

The goal of this advertisement is clearly to make teenagers aware of the persuasive techniques employed by the Tobacco industry to seduce youth to start smoking cigarettes. Irony is particularly useful here for its rhetorical powers to gain listeners' attention, to mock the Tobacco industry for its underhanded methods, and thereby bond listeners with the implicit narrator (i.e., the California Health Department). Of course, listeners have varying reactions to this radio message. Many people, especially non-smokers who decry the way the tobacco industry seduces children to smoke, see great humor in the speaker's irony (e.g., "That kind of blind allegiance is hard to find"). Undoubtedly, smokers, and perhaps most teenagers, may feel differently about this message. But no matter how one responds emotionally, the irony here seems more effective in getting listeners' attention, and making them react in a different manner than would be the case if the speaker pleaded his case using literal speech.

This relationship between irony and humor arises from people's shared recognition of a contrast and/or contradiction between diverse sets of beliefs. Although there is much debate concerning the viability of the various theories put forth to explain humor, there is nevertheless agreement that propositional, expectational, or other forms of discontinuity, which often manifest themselves in the form of contrasts or contradictions, provide the basis for many instances of humor. Many theories of situational irony agree that contrast and/or contradiction is a necessary condition for irony (see [32] and [14] for reviews on verbal and situational irony respectively; see also [33] for a discussion of the necessity of an "ironic environment").

Empirical research has provided evidence for the importance of contrast in the relationship between verbal irony and humor. For instance, one study presented people with written scenarios and statements of verbal irony, that were created to portray a range of levels of contrast between what was described in the scenarios and what was stated by the speakers [34]. Thus, a situation may first be described as being moderately negative:

"Rene and her housemate Jeff went grocery shopping for a big party they were having. They wheeled a cart packed full of food up to the checkout to find out that Jeff, who was supposed to have paid, hadn't bought any money."

A speaker in the scenario would then comment about the situation with an utterance that was moderately positive, such as Rene saying to Jeff, "Well, this presents us with a great situation." These utterances were referred to as "verbal irony". Other scenarios presented the moderately negative situations with comments made by speakers that were only slightly negative, such as "Well, this presents us with a slight dilemma." These kinds of comments were called "understatement". Still other scenarios, again with moderately

negative situations, were presented with comments that were consistent with this degree of negativity, such as "Well, this presents us with a big dilemma." These comments were considered "literal".

Participants read these scenarios and gave ratings on the degree of contrast between the comments and their referent situations, and assessments of the humor in the comments. Both measures revealed a predictive relationship between the degree of contrast set up in the comments/situations, and the particular measure. As the manipulated contrast increased, so did the rated degree of contrast and humor. As the manipulated contrast increased, so did the rated degree of contrast and humor. Thus, there appears to be a direct, and linear, relationship between the amount of contrast perceived as present between a remark and its referent situation, and the amount of humor taken from that instance of commentary.

Another study replicated this general finding [35]. Participants read moderately negative situations, such as "Fred is really looking forward to a relaxing day at the beach with his girlfriend. He picks her up, but then his car runs out of gas on an empty road on the way to the beach. He then remembers that his brother used the car the day before and probably didn't buy gas. Fred tells this to his girlfriend and says ..." At this point, participants saw either a literal remark (e.g., "This is just terrible"), a hyperbolic comment (e.g., "This is the worst luck ever"), or an ironic comment (e.g., "This is just wonderful"), and again rated the degree of contrast between the scenario and statement and the amount of humor in the final comment. Ironic comments were rated as having the most contrast and the most humor, followed by hyperbolic comments and then literal comments.

Another study extended this general finding even further with a comparison between weak and strong forms of irony [35]. This study also more clearly established that the degree of contrast was the causal factor in rated differences in the humorousness of the final comments. Participants were presented with a moderately negative situation, such as "Sheila was looking forward to her boyfriend Walter's visit. When Walter arrived, he was in a terrible mood and was snapping and yelling at Sheila and her housemates. Sheila turned to him and says...: At this point, participants read and gave contrast and humor ratings for either a literal comment (e.g., "Aren't you in a bad mood?"), a weakly ironic remark (e.g., "Aren't you in an agreeable mood?"), or a strong ironic comment (e.g., "Aren't you in a magnificent mood?"). These "weak" and "strong" ironic comments respectively contained moderately positive terms (e.g., agreeable, good, pleased, etc.), and more extremely positive terms (e.g., magnificent, absolutely brilliant, more happy than anyone, etc.).

For the analysis, the comments were divided into two groups based upon a different set of ratings given by a separate group of participants. These participants read each weak irony and strong irony term for each item and rated how similar/different their meanings were. Based upon these ratings, we created two groups of items. One group contained the half of the items for which the weak irony and strong irony versions were least different. The other group contained the items for which the weak and strong irony versions were most different. We then conducted analyses comparing literal, weak irony, and strong irony separately for these two halves of the items. For the items in which the weak and strong ironic version were rated as being least different from one another, contrast and humor ratings by the main In all of the analyses, both kinds of irony were rated as having greater contrast and humor than literal comments.

Thus, again, as contrast between statement and scenario increases, so does readers' perceptions of irony as humorous. This pattern holds for remarks that present no contrast (literal), slight contrast (understatement), moderate contrast (hyperbole), somewhat

stronger moderate contrasts (weak irony), even stronger contrasts (irony) and relatively extreme contrasts (strong irony).

Other studies investigated the role of contrast in provoking humorous reactions to auditorially produced irony [36]. In this study, people listened to a series of short, tape-recorded stories that described negative situations, such as: "Your sister Jenny and you are watching a television program where a man who was just about to propose to his girlfriend drops the engagement ring down the toilet. Jenny leans over to you and says ..."

One of the characters in the story then made a comment, such as "How romantic."

Contrast was operationally defined in this study as the degree of positivity present in the comments, which was manipulated in two ways. First, half of the comments contained words with positive meanings (e.g., "How romantic"), where the other half used words with negative meanings (e.g., "How disgusting"). Secondly, half of the comments were spoken with positive intonation (e.g., the actors who created the items on the tape were instructed to speak as if they felt very positively, but to then read the words used for the particular utterance), where the other half were spoken with negative intonation (e.g., the actors were instructed to speak as if they felt very negatively). These two different ways of manipulating the degree of contrast in the utterances each independently worked to enhance the amount of humor perceived in the comments.

The results showed that semantically positive comments were rated as funnier than semantically negative utterances. Phonetically positive comments were also judged to be funnier than phonetically negative ones. Similar to written irony, people find more humorous pleasure in spoken irony when these statements expressed greater contrast. The pleasure people take from irony is one of the great rewards found in verbal interaction.

But ironic pleasures are also found when people encounter non-linguistic stimuli. In one study investigating peoples' interpretations of imagistic irony, experimental participants were shown a series of images that depicted ironic meanings [37]. The ironic images were derived from a variety of sources, primarily newspapers and magazines, and were selected if they depicted irony without the use of dialogue (e.g., a drawing of a tire service & repair truck stranded with a flat tire). Text was allowed, but only if it was just a contribution to the description of a scene (e.g., a label on the truck, "Al's Tire Company"). If text was spoken or otherwise involved, then the image was not used.

The participants in the study viewed the images in a booklet, and then gave ratings on a variety of factors concerning the images. One group of participants first read a textual description of each image prior to viewing that image (e.g., "A tire-delivery truck"). These participants were instructed to first read the description, then to imagine what the image would look like based upon the description, then to turn the page and look at the image, and finally to rate how different the actual image was from what they had imagined it to be. The attempt here was to measure the degree to which the images contrasted with people's prior expectations. A separate group of participants viewed the images alone, without textual descriptions, and rated the humorousness of each image. Statistical analysis found that these two measures were significantly correlated. As the difference between expectations and the actual images increased, or put differently, as a form of contrast increased, so did the degree of humor interpreted from the images.

These studies demonstrate the importance of contrast in people's experience of pleasure with ironic messages. Such a relationship may arise again because contrast appears to be a common underpinning of humor and irony. Discontinuity is often noted as a common denominator of humor, and contrast is once prevalent form of discontinuity. Thus, irony may be experienced as pleasurable because both the irony and the humor present situations that are discontinuous with expectations.

8.6 Inferring irony where it may not exist

The prominence of irony in both thought and language gives rise to some interesting case of miscommunication. People often interpret what others say as irony even though this meaning was never intended. Consider an excerpt from the online publication "Slate" on February, 4 2001, titled "The Perils of Irony. No, Really." This article addressed the controversy over a popular television show and how some American youths interpreted part of it as ironic.

"'Jackass' is the name of a show on MTV in which a guy named Johnny Knoxville and his cohorts perform a variety of gross-out stunts and pranks. For example, in an episode that aired last month, Knoxville put on a fire-resistant outfit. This outfit was also covered with steaks. Knoxville was tossed onto a barbecue, sprayed with lighter fluid, and burned. Of course, he had the fire-resistant suit on, so he wasn't injured. A 13-year-old boy who subsequently attempted the same thing, without the special suit, was injured and is reportedly in the hospital with severe burns on his legs.

"Now Sen. Joseph Lieberman has written a public letter to Viacom (MTV's parent) attacking the "exploitative and degrading" show. Among other things, he complains that while there is a don't-try-this-at-home disclaimer at the beginning of Jackass, the warning is "self-mocking and trivializes the seriousness of the stunts' potential consequences."

"According to a 'Variety' story the disclaimer MTV runs is this: "The following show features stunts performed by professionals and/or total idiots under very strict control and supervision. MTV and the producers insist that neither you nor anyone else attempt to re-create or perform anything you have seen on this show." Apparently it's that phrase "and/or total idiots" that sends up, and thus nullifies, the rest of the language around it. It's a classic example of ironic distancing, a sort of disclaimer within the disclaimer."

The author of this article went on to say "It's hard to read such a disclaimer, however straight the wording, and not smirk or even snicker. But that's not the fault of irony."

This example of TV watchers, especially adolescents, misunderstanding a warning as being ironic is not farfetched. Listeners and readers often debate with themselves whether some linguistic statement was really intended ironically. Moreover, in a time when ironic modes of thought pervade public consciousness, and influence many aspects of popular culture, it is almost surprising to see people speak literally! Such a phenomenon is illustrated in the following excerpt taken from a popular cartoon, "The Simpsons":

Homer is appearing as a cannon-ball-in-the-stomach freak in the sideshow part of the Hullapalooza Tour (obviously taken from the once popular Lollapalooza Concert Tour). The announcer introduces him on the stage as a marvel of nature, one of the greatest acts ever. One teen says something on the order of, "Yeah right, greatest act ever." A second teen asks something like, "Did you really mean that, man, or are you just being sarcastic?", to which the first teen replies, "I dunno, man. I can't tell anymore."

Thus, the prevalence of irony in contemporary thought pushes people to view events/speech/writing/art as ironic, even when these may not always be originally intended to convey ironic meaning.

There are times when listeners recognize some statement as ironic, even though they also understand that a speaker did not intend for what was said to be taken in this way. Gibbs, O'Brien, and Doolittle investigated people's understanding of irony that was

unintended [38]. Consider the following two situations:

John and Bill were taking a statistics class together. Before the final exam, they decided to cooperate during the test. So they worked out a system so they could secretly share answers. After the exam John and Bill were really pleased with themselves. They thought they were pretty clever for beating the system. Later that night, a friend happened to ask them if they ever tried to cheat. John and Bill looked at each other and laughed, then John said, "I would never be involved in any cheating."

John and Bill were taking a statistics class together. They studied hard together, but John was clearly better prepared than Bill. During the exam, Bill panicked and started to copy answers from John. John didn't see Bill do this and so didn't know he was actually helping Bill. John took the school's honor code very seriously. Later than night, a friend happened to ask them if they ever tried to cheat. John and Bill looked at each other, then John said, "I would never be involved in any cheating."

Both of these situations end with the identical statement that in each case is understood as verbal irony. The speaker in the first story specifically intends for his audience to understand what is said as ironic, but the speaker in the second situation does not intend for his utterance to be understood ironically. In the second story, only the addressees and overhearers see the irony in what the speaker actually says. It is quite possible for people to understand a speaker's utterance as irony even though the speaker did not intend the utterance to be understood as irony.

Several experimental studies show that people understand utterances in stories like the second one above as having ironic meaning even if the speaker did not intend for the utterance to be understood in this way [38]. In fact, readers rated the final statements in the unintentional stories as being more ironic than were the final statements in intentionally ironic stories. Thus, although irony often reflects speakers' communicative goals to identify aspects of ironic situations, speakers may unintentionally create irony by what they say.

These studies on understanding unintentional irony demonstrates an important point about cognitive processes in ordinary language interpretation. People not only can misunderstand a speaker's communicative intentions, they can also consciously recognize, in some cases, that the meaning they have inferred diverges from what speakers intended to convey. The fact that people can both understand what a speaker meant and some other unintentional meaning suggests that some aspects of understanding unintended meanings are connected to people's interpretations of what speaker's meant to communicate. In the irony studies just described, people may have specifically drawn "unauthorized" inferences by virtue of first recognizing the speaker's communicative meaning in context.

8.7 Conclusion

Irony can be a risky way to communicate one's meanings. During the last ten years, there have been tremendous debates among public intellectuals over the "age of irony" that we all appear to live in. Speakers, writers, artists, and others have taken irony to new heights in highlighting some of the many contrasts, and the failure of reality to meet our expectations. we see in everyday life. Countless controversies have risen over whether or not someone's communicative, and artistic, intentions should best be understood seriously or ironically. We all risk that our ironic intentions may sometimes be misunderstood.

To give one example, in February 2001, there is an argument in contemporary music circles about the rap artist Eminem who often expresses violent, homophobic, and

misogynist beliefs in his lyrics. Eminem has been nominated for a prestigious "Grammy" award and his recent album has sold many millions of copies. Critics claim that his lyrics are deeply offensive, but Eminem responds that his lyrics are "just a joke" and that his real fans "don't take them seriously." Yet many people argue in turn that whatever irony the rapper intends in his songs are not clearly understood as such by most of his fans. Others maintain that Eminem's cry that his lyrics are ironic is only an after the fact defense of his originally hateful intentions.

Determining whether anyone's speech is ironic can be tricky business. Debates about irony in public discourse will likely always be part of the struggle for certainty in meaning. But despite the many risks that ironic messages entail, it is equally clear that irony has tremendous rewards and benefits interpersonal communication. People use irony to evoke complex social meanings and to bond themselves with others, often celebrating shared beliefs in a humorous way.

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