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978-1-009-23454-2 — Verbal Irony Processing
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1 Introduction: Is It Ironic?

In 1995, Canadian singer Alanis Morissette released the album *Jagged Little Pill*. Among the tracks on the album was a song titled *Ironic*, in which the lyrics recounted a series of events such as rain occurring on a wedding day, an elderly person winning the lottery and then dying, or being stuck in traffic when one was already late. The song's refrain (*And isn't it ironic . . . don't you think?*) has been vociferously answered by many a listener with a resounding *no!* over the years since the song's release. The reason for this response was that many listeners and critics felt that some or all of the situations depicted in the song were not actually ironic. Instead, they felt these situations would be better described as coincidental or simply unfortunate. Taking the criticism in stride, Morissette has publicly admitted that she and her producer did not carefully check whether each and every example in the song conformed to the definition of irony, resulting in an unfortunate irony that a song about irony did not actually contain examples of irony. In 2015, Morissette appeared on *The Late Late Show with James Corden* in the USA and performed an updated version of *Ironic* with lyrics taking into account updates in technology and social media since 1995. One line from the new rendition, "It's liking singing *Ironic*, when there are no ironies," further spoke to Morissette's admission that the original version of the song included examples of nonironic situations.

As such, the debate over the examples in *Ironic* has become seemingly as well known as the song itself. Indeed, on the *Wikipedia* entry for *Ironic*, the first main section of the entry contains a subsection titled *linguistic dispute*, which summarizes the debate regarding the song's examples and doubles down on the claim that some examples in the song are not actually ironic (Wikipedia, 2022). The rationale used by the author(s) of the *Wikipedia* article is that some of the examples in the song do not adhere to the definition of irony as provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). The definition cited from the OED is as follows: "A state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what was or might be expected; an outcome cruelly, humorously, or strangely at odds with assumptions or expectations" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022).

Others have come to Morissette's defense, claiming that the lyrics of *Ironic* depict ironic events. In a 2014 article published by the online magazine *Salon*, author Michael Reid Roberts pointed to the same OED definition cited by *Wikipedia* to argue that each of the situations described in the song were indeed ironic because the examples used in the song are all examples of what is known as situational irony (Roberts, 2014). Roberts further drew from literary sources

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to emphasize that there are many different types of irony, and that each example in *Ironic* can be assigned to one of these types of irony.

So, who is right? Are the legions of comedians, talk show hosts, and layperson critics who have lambasted Morissette for misuse of the term wrong? Is the OED definition of irony deficit in its ability to categorize events as ironic or nonironic? Does the OED even possess the authority to put forth a definition of irony for which examples can be judged? And what about the range of literary definitions Roberts (2014) draws from – are they wrong?

It turns out that the public debate over Morissette's use of the term *ironic* bears a similarity to the academic scholarship surrounding irony. In particular, arriving at a precise definition of irony has sparked a considerable amount of academic debate across disciplinary boundaries. And, intertwined with that debate rests the psycholinguistic research which has sought to uncover how people process and comprehend ironic meaning. Over the past decades, a combination of pragmatic theory and empirical investigation via psycholinguistic methods has provided insight into the nature of irony. However, unlike the Morissette song, most of this research has been focused specifically on ironic language – verbal irony.

It is necessary at this point to clarify the distinction between *verbal* irony and *situational* irony. The song *Ironic* includes examples of situational irony, depicting events or contexts which defy the expectations of those experiencing the event, typically to the experiencers' detriment (Lucariello, 1994; Shelley, 2001). Verbal irony instead refers to ironic communication, whether that be in speech or writing, and may also manifest as sarcasm, hyperbole, ironic praise, ironic criticism, and more (Colston, 2017). However, the distinction between situational and verbal irony is mostly a matter of framing. With a few adjustments, all of the ironic situations in *Ironic* could garner ironic statements *about* the situation depicted in the song: *What lovely weather for a wedding* (It's like rain on your wedding day); *He sure is lucky!* (Dying a day after winning the lottery), and so on. As will become evident throughout this Element, irony (whether verbal or situational) relies on a contrast between situation and expectations. That being said, the bulk of psycholinguistic research has focused primarily on verbal irony, and thus all subsequent mentions of irony in this Element will refer to verbal irony.

1.1 What Is Verbal Irony?

Pretend you are watching a movie in a theater with one of your close friends. While watching the movie, an audience member in front of you begins using

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their smartphone to send text messages and check their social media accounts. The brightness of their phone screen and noise from the audio notifications is causing a distraction, and many people are casting dirty looks toward the phone user. Becoming annoyed, your friend leans toward you and says: “I sure love it when people turn off their phones during a movie!”

How would you interpret the meaning of your friend’s utterance? On the surface, the friend’s statement adheres with the syntactic constraints of the English language and is semantically acceptable. There is also little reason to think your friend is telling a lie or does not truly believe the statement which they have just uttered. Yet, something about this statement implies your friend might be hinting at some other meaning beyond what they have said. In order to figure out what your friend might truly mean, there are a number of other factors which you may consider. The first is the contrast between the contextual situation and your friend’s utterance – why would your friend state their preference for silenced phones when another patron was so obviously violating that preference? To answer this question, you might try to emulate your friend’s perspective or point of view – asking yourself why they would make a statement to inform you of their preference in the first place. Your analysis might suggest that your friend is attempting to convey not only semantic but also pragmatic or attitudinal meaning. You might also notice something about the way your friend spoke the utterance – did they use a particular tone of voice or emphasize certain words? You then might also consider what you know about your friend – their personality, their occupation, and the rate they normally use sarcasm. Crucially, you would likely complete your assessment of this situation almost automatically, without exerting conscious control over the integration of the linguistic, pragmatic, and contextual information available. Your final consideration of some or all of these factors (and potentially others) may then lead you to the conclusion that your friend is being ironic, specifically as a means to make clear their disapproval for the other person’s use of a cell phone during a movie.

As it turns out, your fictional friend is employing verbal irony. Many explanations of verbal irony rely upon an oppositional contrast between what is said and what is meant, usually to the extent that a speaker is thought to *not* agree with what they are stating (e.g., exclaiming *what lovely weather* during a hailstorm). This oppositional clash can be positive, such as when a seemingly negative comment is made to provide a compliment or positive assessment (e.g., one person stating to their friend *you are so selfish* after learning their friend volunteers at an animal shelter). Perhaps more prototypically, verbal irony can be negative, such as when a seemingly positive comment is made as a means to provide criticism, commonly

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referred to a sarcasm (e.g., a disgruntled airline passenger stating *what great service!* after finding that their luggage has been lost). However, not all examples of verbal irony need demonstrate a clearly oppositional contrast, which is why I have specifically chosen to use the aforementioned cell phone example as a means to foreground the contrast between what is said and aspects of the surrounding context. Surely, your fictional friend prefers for people to *not* use their cell phone during a movie, and by stating this preference in light of a clear violation of this preference, a tension between what is said and *what is occurring* becomes salient. The true meaning of your friend's utterance then takes on a range of possibilities, most of which hinge upon a clear disapproval for the actions of the cell phone using patron.

Because verbal irony triggers a contrast between what is said and what is meant, verbal irony can be defined as a type of *figurative language*. At its core, figurative language is " . . . speech where speakers mean something other than what they say" (Gibbs & Colston, 2012, p. 1). As such, verbal irony is in the company of other types of figurative language such as metaphor, metonymy, idioms, proverbs, and more. In all instances of figurative language, there is some degree of departure between the surface level meaning of an utterance and the actual intended (figurative) meaning of the speaker. Many psycholinguistic (and other) studies of figurative language tend to describe this difference as a contrast between the *literal* and *figurative* meanings of an utterance. Yet, as pointed out by Gibbs and Colston (2012), this definition of figurative language quickly collapses under scrutiny. Other types of nonfigurative language (including so-called literal language) also involve departures between what is said and what is meant, and as such trying to distinguish the figurative from the nonfigurative may ultimately be futile (Gibbs & Colston, 2012). Instead, it may be more fruitful to investigate the specific ways people create and resolve the difference between what is said and what is meant for specific types of (figurative) language.

As will be argued, verbal irony tends to include some sort of contradiction between the *situation* and an utterance as a means to guide the hearer toward resolving the difference between what is said and what is meant. The exact mechanisms behind this process are what have attracted particular attention from psycholinguistics. However, explanations of verbal irony processing and comprehension emerged initially from pragmatics, likely because ironic meaning is largely a pragmatic phenomenon. As such, in order to understand the psycholinguistic research into verbal irony processing, it is necessary to first review the pragmatic definitions of verbal irony because they have left an indelible mark on the field.

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1.2 The Standard Pragmatic Model of Verbal Irony

Early theoretical models of verbal irony suggested that the figurative meaning of an ironic utterance is the direct opposite of what was said. The rationale for this view is drawn from what is now referred to as the *standard pragmatic model* (SPM). The core arguments of the SPM can be found in Grice's work on conversational implicature (Grice, 1975, 1978, 1989), in which a distinction is made between what is said and what is meant. From this view, a hearer will consider first the surface level meaning of an utterance, assess that meaning against norms of conversation (such as Gricean maxims of conversation), and only then integrate pragmatic knowledge in order to fully understand what is meant (in this case, irony). Because Grice described the intended meaning of irony to be the negation or the reverse of what was said, the SPM would thus predict that when a listener encounters an ironic phrase, the listener must first interpret the literal meaning of an utterance, reject the meaning, and then consider the opposite meaning to be the ironic meaning (Gibbs, 1986b; Giora, 2003; Wilson & Sperber, 1992).

The definition of ironic meaning put forth by Grice was unable to withstand a number of subsequent theoretical arguments and empirical evidence from research studies. One of the main reasons for an initial rejection of the Gricean definition was that many examples of nonoppositional irony could be invented or had been observed. For example, consider the fictional friend's utterance – the opposite meaning would be something approximate to the friend stating that they do *not* enjoy it when people turn off their smartphones during a movie. However, all evidence would suggest otherwise (i.e., the friend clearly *does* prefer for phones to be off), and thus the ironic meaning behind the friend's utterance is something else. Clearly then, a definition of irony had to be more than the opposite of the surface, literal meaning. As such, a lineage of verbal irony definitions has been offered as a means to explain the full range of ironic expressions. Looking back from the present, these subsequent definitions of verbal irony all shared the same goal of producing the most parsimonious definition which could account for all instances and types of verbal irony. A good overview of many of these theories can be found in Gibbs and Colston (2007), which contains a discussion of the theories as well as reprints of the original articles associated with the theories. What follows is a brief summary of some of these theories and models.

1.3 Reactions to the SPM: Broadening the Definition of Verbal Irony

One early alternative to the SPM drew from relevance theory to describe the relationship between an ironic utterance and its meaning as one of *use-mention*

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(Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Wilson & Sperber, 1992). From this point of view, an ironic utterance *echoes* or reflects some specific utterance or an implicit belief while also channeling a disapproving attitude. Applied to the movie example, the friend's utterance could be said to echo the implicit belief held in many cultures that movie theater patrons should not use cell phones during a movie. The echoic view of irony thus applies to a larger number of ironic utterances, such as those which are more than stating the opposite of what one believes. The use-mention theory was also more flexible because the ironic echo can refer to almost any sort of preexisting belief or value, implied or explicit.

A number of additional pragmatic models of verbal irony have since been put forth. The *pretense* view of irony claimed to be able to explain an even wider number of examples. From this view, an ironic speaker takes on the role of a naïve commentator as a means to signal their true ironic intentions (Clark & Gerrig, 1984). A subsequent view, called the *allusional pretense theory*, argued that the range of ironic examples covered by the use-mention and pretense theories could all be explained by describing irony as a combination of being insincere while alluding to failed expectations, which in turn expresses the speaker's attitude toward the violation (Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995). A later view described verbal irony as *relevant inappropriateness* (Attardo, 2000). As the name suggests, Attardo claimed that verbal irony can be explained as an utterance that is relevant yet also inappropriate in a particular context. From this view, the test for whether some utterance is inappropriate or not is based on contextual factors. Finally, a later conceptualization of verbal irony put forth the idea that verbal irony is fundamentally a *clash* between what is said and what the speaker intends to communicate (Garmendia, 2014). Garmendia (2014) argued that all examples of verbal irony contain such a clash and thus this description was more encompassing than the prior theories covered in this section.

1.4 A Parsimonious Definition of Verbal Irony

The review in Section 1.3 is merely a glimpse yet should make clear a general pattern in the development of theories and definitions of irony. Pragmatic theory has played a strong role, and a general tendency has been for scholars to describe cases or examples of irony which some prior or competing theory is (in their minds) unable to account for. A more recent handbook definition of verbal irony offered by Herbert Colston weds these theories into a parsimonious and encompassing definition of verbal irony: "Verbal irony thus bears the characteristic of a linguistic creation by a speaker or writer, that somehow expresses some proposition, stance, attitude, description, etc.,

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concerning objective reality, that is somehow contrary to that reality". (Colston, 2017, p. 236)

This definition is thus specific enough to distinguish verbal irony from other forms of figurative language, but also broad enough to include a range of different types of verbal irony. This raises an additional challenge associated with defining verbal irony – there are a number of different types of verbal irony, such as sarcasm, rhetorical questions, hyperbole, understatement, ironic praise, ironic criticism, and more (Gibbs & Colston, 2012). The thorniest among these is the relationship between sarcasm and verbal irony (Kreuz, 2020). Sarcasm is usually seen as a negative, hurtful form of verbal irony (Colston, 2017), but otherwise seems to bear the same characteristics of verbal irony, causing many researchers and laypersons to conflate the two terms (Kreuz, 2020). It is beyond the scope of this work to make an argument either way on this debate, but it is worthwhile to note that many psycholinguistic studies of verbal irony processing and comprehension have used examples of sarcasm in their stimuli.

2 Enter Psycholinguistics: Early Studies of Verbal Irony Processing

Section 1 defined verbal irony and described some of the early pragmatic theories put forth as a means to explain how hearers and readers understand verbal irony. Each of the definitions provided in Section 1 stipulated that an ironic utterance creates a type of contradiction within the context it is made, and thus a hearer or reader needs to cognitively reconcile that contradiction using other available information in order to understand the ironic meaning. As such, it is generally agreed that understanding ironic meaning is a metarepresentational process, which means that irony is a type of inference made in light of the utterance and combined pragmatic and situational knowledge (Gibbs & Colston, 2012). However, the psycholinguistic mechanisms of this inferential process are less agreed upon, which has led to a large number of psycholinguistic studies investigating this process.

One reason for initial interest in using psycholinguistic methods to test models of verbal irony processing can be attributed to the SPM. Recall that based on Gricean conversational maxims, the SPM stipulated that the literal meaning of an ironic utterance would be interpreted first, before a hearer could obtain the ironic meaning. The SPM has thus been referred to as a two-stage (Attardo, 2000; Gibbs & Colston, 2007) or as a literal-first model (Bezuidenhout & Cutting, 2002) of verbal irony processing. The influence of the SPM on subsequent psycholinguistic research cannot be understated and has contributed to one of the most central research questions associated with

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