

## PART I

# Introduction

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# 1 Irony and Thought: The State of the Art

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Irony is historically considered to be a specific “figure of speech” in which a speaker or writer says something, but aims to communicate the opposite of what is literally stated. A classic example of irony is when a speaker utters “You sure are in a pleasant mood today” to a listener who was just acting in a rather unpleasant manner (i.e., a sarcastic remark suggesting “You are not in a pleasant mood today”). Ironic language is closely related to, and may serve as a superordinate concept for a range of more specific figures, including sarcasm (e.g., “You sure are in a pleasant mood today”), jocularly (e.g., “You’re such a total failure” said to someone who just successfully achieved an important goal), hyperbole (e.g., “Mary owns a million pairs of shoes”), understatement (e.g., “John is a bit tipsy” when John is very intoxicated), and rhetorical questions (e.g., “Isn’t it sunny outside?” implying not a question, but an assertion that it is very sunny outside), as well as satire, parody, and hypocrisy.

We typically celebrate metaphor as the “master trope,” but the prevalence of irony in many facets of human life suggests that it is far more ingrained in human thought and communication than previously acknowledged in scholarly writings on figurative thought and language. Irony is too often, in our view, assumed to be a form of unserious detachment (Lasch, 1979). Rhetoricians, linguists, philosophers, literary theorists, and psychologists, over many hundreds of years, have explored the ways in which ironic figures function to communicate a wide range of pragmatic messages within a vast number of spoken and textual domains, including political debates and speeches, interpersonal conversations between friends and foes, humor monologues and exchanges, scholarly expositions, and workplace interactions, among many others. Irony is also evident in many nonlinguistic domains, including paintings, photographs, film, music, as well as certain bodily behaviors (e.g., hand gestures, facial displays, ironic applause). At the same time, irony is a concept that can be applied to many real-life situations, which people sometimes call out as “ironic” (e.g., “That’s ironic!”) or situational irony. The results of many irony studies throughout history demonstrates that irony is not only a rhetorical device, but represents a fundamental mode of thought, similar to the way in which metaphor is both a linguistic figure and a significant feature of human cognition.

The nineteenth-century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once famously wrote, “no genuinely human life is possible without irony” (Kierkegaard, 1992: 326).

Irony may automatically arise in our thoughts and language for many personal and social reasons. As the philosopher Jonathan Lear also observed, irony “opens up opportunities to pierce illusions.”<sup>1</sup> One of the main benefits of ironic thinking and expression in both verbal and nonverbal contexts is its capacity to “shake things up,” or to open people to disruption that sometimes leads to novel visions of what may be truthful. Our experiences of irony, including those that arise within our private thoughts, provide moments of clarity that may lead to valuable forms of self-knowledge. We must still recognize that ironic disruptions come at a cost for those people caught up in its powerful grip. Yet each of us has a capacity for irony that may be individually realized as ironic experience given a host of personal, linguistic, social/cultural, and historical factors.

Despite the significant attention to irony, both within and outside of academic circles, there has been no single volume that conveys the broad range of topics and ideas devoted to the scholarly literature on irony. Irony scholars sometimes express radically different beliefs about what defines irony, whether it plays a positive role in communication, and to what degree verbal and non-verbal ironic displays truly reflect fundamental, and perhaps universal, thinking processes. This volume presents different views on both the pleasures and the pitfalls of irony in human life. The time is ripe for a handbook that attempts to address some of these debates and the broad interest in the various ways in which irony is manifested in human life.

*The Cambridge Handbook of Irony and Thought* brings together a group of leading irony scholars, coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, to establish the very first collected statements on the relationship between irony and thought. The breadth of work on irony is such that many individual irony scholars often are unaware of research and studies from people working in different academic disciplines, or even within their own fields (e.g., the research on irony in both Psychology and Linguistics are each individually diverse enough so that many important findings and ideas are not known to other people in these disciplines). One purpose of this volume is to establish a greater sense of community among irony students and scholars.

This volume is organized into six parts, but almost every chapter touches on several of the topics listed in each part. For this reason, the grouping provided below is rather general and somewhat overlapping.

After this introduction, Part II presents “The Scope of Irony” in which the chapters generally outline the breadth of topics and theoretical debates over irony and its diverse functions in human life.

Gregory Currie’s chapter, “Kinds of Irony: A General Theory,” offers a “conceptual geography” of the ways irony is expressed and understood through several representations of irony, as seen, for example, in fiction and film. Currie draws the careful distinction between cases where an event is represented as being ironic without the event itself being ironic (e.g., a film scene may be constructed

1 [www.hup.harvard.edu/features/irony-and-humanity/](http://www.hup.harvard.edu/features/irony-and-humanity/).

to express irony without the scene itself necessarily being an example of situational irony). Dramatic irony, for example, often succeeds because of our knowing something that the characters in the portrayal do not. But the characters' lack of knowledge is only a pointer to the irony, and is not what actually constitutes the irony. Many so-called instances of verbal irony are "expressive," but not really "communicative," because they express an ironic state of mind without a speaker specifically aiming to communicate irony. Currie's chapter dives into many of these complexities, which are too often ignored in theoretical discussions and explications of irony. His overarching aim is to raise our awareness about what should be counted as irony and what "should be abandoned as the product of an inflated vocabulary."

Irony is a complex phenomenon that may rely on several different forms of thought which are routinely relied on in verbal and nonverbal communication. Francisco José Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez's chapter, "Irony and Cognitive Operations," outlines his theory of the "cognitive operations" that underlie the possible production and understanding of ironic meaning. These cognitive operations (e.g., strengthening and mitigation, expansion and reduction) are critical in the expression and interpretation of many figures of speech (e.g., metaphor, metonymy) and may provide the basis for a more general theory of meaning construction. Mendoza Ibáñez focuses primarily in this chapter, however, on ironic echoing, which allows speakers to pretend to be in agreement with some previously stated utterance or presumed thought. He considers many of the formal complexities of ironic echoing to demonstrate their varying, often subtle, communicative effects. His analysis also suggests how attention to cognitive operations may provide the theoretical basis for unifying verbal and situational irony.

We experience irony in various ways other than through language. The chapter by Gibbs, Samermit, and Karzmark, "The Varieties of Ironic Experience," describes how irony often emerges in different modalities of human expression (e.g., talk, gesture, bodily posture, music, photography, dance, art). People's conscious realizations that something is irony do not completely capture many unconscious ironic conceptualizations, including acts that are unintentionally ironic. People also discern ironic situations and sometimes call these out for others to attend to and engage in divergent nonverbal ironic performances, all of which illustrate the importance of bodily experience in ironic thinking, language, and action. Gibbs et al. specifically argue that irony is as much an appraisal process through which people deal with incompatibilities in their varied experiences (i.e., the appraisal theory of irony), as it is a particular type of meaning product. People may not simply possess a single conception of irony that is applicable to all situations in the same way. Individuals may differ, for example, in whether they view two contrasting events as being just correlated as opposed to having some causal relationship with one another. The varied ways we think about, and emotionally react to, contrasts between expectations and unfolding realities leads to a family resemblance of both unconscious and conscious realizations of irony.

Part III explores “Irony’s Impact” by describing some of the complex ways irony affects both personal and social life.

Herb Colston’s chapter, “Irony as Social Work: Opposition, Expectation Violation, and Contrast,” argues that irony in language emerges as an exquisite form of social work, through the operations of opposition, expectation violation, and contrast. Among all the different and varied figurative forms, irony may be particularly well suited in helping us form a sense-of-self that aligns with other people’s expectations, connects with other people, and manages our positions in social networks and hierarchies. Verbal irony’s oppositionality can lead to an expression of a violation of expectations on a speaker’s part through various methods (e.g., echo, pretense, allusional pretense, salience, contrast). But irony does more by providing speakers with a way to express their attitudes about different situations (e.g., agreeing or disagreeing with some other person’s attitude). Hearing irony may also help people form attitudes about ironic speakers (e.g., finding the use of sarcasm as funny, clever, boorish). Thinking of irony as social work highlights the utility of this figure in delicately dealing with a wide range of interpersonal circumstances in everyday life.

Claire Colebrook’s chapter, “Rorty, Irony and Neoliberalism,” discusses the philosopher Richard Rorty’s influential writings on the contingent nature of ironic thinking and expression. Rorty argued that irony does not reveal foundational truths, but is employed to help us “depict the world through multiple points of view.” Irony provides a way of individually recreating the world for ourselves rather than offering a special device to demystify assumptions about reality that somehow exists outside of language. Rorty’s claim that writers such as Proust, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Derrida are ironists given their questions about the stories and vocabularies we inhabit. Literature is especially useful for creating spaces for irony as sites for creative, nonjudgmental, self-examination. But philosophy is also a kind of playful ironic writing that helps us to create useful redescriptions of the world and our roles in it. Colebrook emphasizes that Rorty rejected the idea that irony is just a trope in which one thing is said and another is meant. Irony is, instead, “the very opposite of searching for essences,” which is why it is so important for understanding liberalism with its emphasis on the “politics of tolerance, anti-foundationalism, and freedom of speech.”

Paul Simpson’s chapter, “Irony and Its Consequences in the Public Sphere,” explores the social, political, and legal implications of irony use. People do not simply employ irony for the sake of expressing ironical meanings alone, but also use irony, especially in public spheres, to communicate a variety of pragmatic, or perlocutionary, messages. Many verbal ironies convey meanings that are strategically negotiated to affect different social, political, and legal outcomes. Irony often has significant, concrete consequences in real-life discourse contexts. Simpson presents various attested examples to exemplify how irony may be differently enacted in private and public spheres of communication, but can also be readily transferred, and sometimes transformed, from private conversations to larger public discussions. He appeals to critical discourse analysis

as one possible approach to uncovering the social work that irony often accomplishes (e.g., power and ideology), and outlines some of the perils and pitfalls of irony in different discourse contexts (e.g., public sports conversations, legal discourse, politics, twitter). Simpson ends with a fascinating exploration of whether irony may be “the last refuge of the scoundrel,” a place inhabited by some politicians who appear to use irony as an option in any difficult situation where they must “apologize-or-deny-or-ironize.”

Part IV describes contemporary research findings on “Irony in Linguistic Communication.”

Angeliki Athanasiadou’s chapter, “Constructions in Verbal Irony Production: The Case of Rhetorical Questions,” describes the contribution that grammatical constructions may have in detecting ironic intent in discourse. Constructions are very flexible devices that can be “manipulated” by speakers for specific communicative purposes, including instances where people “play” with or even “violate” the rules of grammar. Her specific focus on rhetorical questions (e.g., “How about another piece of pie?” said to someone who has already eaten more than his share of the pie) reveals how irony allows speakers to present alternatives that balance between accepting and rejecting a particular frame, or understanding of some situation. Rhetorical questions can both appear to accept some frame (e.g., the addressee is invited to have another piece of pie) and cancel or negate it (e.g., the addressee should not have another piece of pie given how much he has already eaten), which together often sets the stage for intense awareness of irony. Rhetorical questions (e.g., “How can I stand this stupid world without a mobile phone?”) also have diplomatic functions, because they allow people to express one socially accepted frame (e.g., mobile phones are necessary) while also challenging this belief through the evocation of irony (e.g., mobile phones are annoying, yet addictive).

How people read and interpret ironical language is the subject of Salvatore Attardo’s chapter, “Tracking the Ironic Eye: Eye Tracking Studies on Irony and Sarcasm.” Tracking people’s rapid eye movements as they read can be an informative measure of the underlying cognitive and linguistic processes operating during online written language comprehension. Attardo introduces some of the technologies employed in measuring eye movements during reading and suggests why these assessments can provide critical insights into how irony interpretation rapidly unfolds word by word as one reads. He reviews various experimental studies on irony and sarcasm understanding that provide explicit empirical tests of different theories of irony (e.g., multistate models, graded salience, parallel-constraint models, predictive processing models). He also explores what the study of eye tracking reveals about the influence of contextual factors and individual differences in irony interpretation, as well as the phenomenon known as “gaze aversion” when listeners momentarily look away from speakers’ faces when hearing ironic language. Attardo closes his chapter with an important discussion of the sometimes-contentious relations between psycholinguistic experiments and philosophical arguments on the ways people use and interpret irony in discourse.

The versatility of irony is evident in the variety of ways and places in which it is used. Francisco Yus' chapter, "Inferring Irony Online," considers some of the complexities of ironic language on the internet (e.g., social media, messaging apps). Yus views irony as being associated with making a reference to some state of affairs that can be criticized or mocked, and which communicates a speaker's attitudes toward that situation, including others who adopt a similar point of view. He embraces a "Relevance Theory" perspective (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) to emphasize the prominence of echoic mention (i.e., direct echoes of previous utterances, real or imaginary attributed thoughts, norms, common-sense assumptions and expectations) as a key source of pragmatic information when determining an ironic speaker's dissociative attitude. Most importantly, Yus details the range of contextual information that enables successful irony use, even in situations where individuals do not share the same immediate physical space. This information includes widely held encyclopedic background knowledge, speaker-specific encyclopedic knowledge, previous utterances within a particular discourse, speakers' nonverbal behaviors (e.g., tone of voice, gestures, facial displays), particular linguistic cues (e.g., conventional markers of irony), and information from the current physical setting. These different sources of contextual information are combined in specific ways to enable ironic meaning interpretation when people are not physically co-present (e.g., when posting messages or writing emails on the internet).

How children learn to produce and understand irony is the subject of Penny M. Pexman's chapter, "Irony and Thought: Developmental Insights." Children do not usually understand irony very well until age 6 or so, a developmental process that continues to unfold throughout childhood. Pexman explores how children's developing cognitive and linguistic skills (e.g., theory of mind abilities, specific language skills, executive functions related to metarepresentational reasoning, emotion recognition, and epistemic vigilance) are critical to their becoming competent in understanding irony. Research on adults' irony understanding suggests that part of children's irony abilities may be explained via the parallel-constraint-satisfaction (PCS) theory that demonstrates how language, quite generally, is comprehended via the online integration of multiple discourse and sociocultural cues. Pexman discusses new findings from studies that may offer greater precision in detailing exactly how both children and adults detect and combine various cues in a predictive manner to quickly infer the complexities of ironic messages. She also sketches out several concrete directions for future experimental studies to better understand when and how children understand irony.

The sound of people's voices when speaking to others is sometimes a clue to their possible ironic intent. Gregory A. Bryant's chapter, "Vocal Strategies in Verbal Irony," presents an overview of some of the specific vocal strategies employed when people express ironic meaning. Speakers signal their ironic intentions through local and global features of prosody, along with vocal impressions (e.g., spectral information that depicts a different person or

imagined agent), laughter, and other nonverbal vocalizations. Experimental studies demonstrated that these vocal strategies are key indices for listeners when they infer that speakers convey irony, including sarcasm, through their talk. Bryant describes the evolutionary roots of these different vocalizations (e.g., the desire for play) and argues how vocal strategies are an important element in how people coordinate and cooperate during verbal interaction. He emphasizes that different vocal strategies are not fixed, but vary in different situations to create a wide range of contextually appropriate pragmatic messages that others may readily interpret.

We typically believe that irony is a completely human affair, but there have been interesting attempts to create computational models of irony use and understanding. Tony Veale's chapter, "Great Expectations and EPIC Fails: A Computational Perspective on Irony and Sarcasm," presents an overview of some of these models, especially as implemented as conversational agents. One of the beauties, and major challenges of computer modeling is that it forces researchers to make concrete decisions on how best to implement some linguistic observation or theoretical idea (e.g., how to create a workable model of echoic mention, pretense, or what is meant by incongruity). Veale presents his EPIC model in which an expectation (E) predicts a property (P) of an instance (I) of concept (C) that can get upended by an ironic utterance. This model provides a quantifiable view of what it means for an ironic utterance to achieve its desired effect on an audience. The success of an ironic utterance hinges on its capacity to highlight the failure of a reasonable expectation. The effectiveness of this computational model was partly assessed by obtaining human judgments about the meaning and quality of different ironic utterances in varying contexts that are suggestive of different expectations. In this way, Veale's work offers insights as to how engineering solutions may be very informative about the ways irony functions in human communication.

Part V looks at "Irony, Affect, and Related Figures."

Marta Dynel's chapter, "Irony and Humor," examines the complicated relationship between irony and humor, primarily from the perspective of neo-Gricean pragmatics (e.g., an ironic utterance flouts/overtly violates the maxim of Quality). Not all irony is humorous, of course, in part because of the highly polysemous nature of irony. In this light, it is important to distinguish irony that is humorous from irony that is related to sarcasm, teasing, parody, and even playfulness. Dynel offers a formal test by which one may determine what forms of humor may be specifically viewed as "irony." She also describes some of the reasons why irony sometimes expresses humor, focusing on the importance of contrast and incongruity in judgments of ironic humor, but extending this emphasis to include surprise, absurdity, and creativity as key facets of humorous irony. Even blindness to irony can elicit humorous responses in some interpersonal situations. Dynel's chapter also considers some of the intricacies in the way speakers use humorous irony to position themselves in various interactions with others.



Ironic language often conveys and elicits intense emotions. Ruth Filik's chapter, "Emotional Reactions to Sarcasm," describes much of the relevant experimental research on the ways people emotionally react to sarcastic messages (e.g., "You're so strong" when the person is actually rather weak). She considers some of the communicative reasons why people employ sarcasm in their speech, including possible affective messages they may wish to express (e.g., do sarcastic remarks mute or enhance the implied negative criticism about some person or topic?). But she then details some of the experimental studies examining people's immediate, online, emotional reactions to sarcasm. These studies employed eye tracking and event-related brain potentials (ERPs) measures to examine people's anticipated emotional responses to story characters who were presented with either ironic (e.g., "You're so strong") or literal (e.g., "You're so weak") criticisms. The results suggest that readers initially anticipated a hurt response to ironic criticism, but eventually found it easier to integrate a hurt response following literal criticism (i.e., a "two-stage model" of emotional responses). But there are important individual differences in the ways people respond to sarcasm, not surprisingly. For example, autistic individuals do not exhibit the same type of two-stage model found earlier and generally did not distinguish between ironic and literal criticisms (yet still gave evidence of tracking characters' emotions). Older adults also exhibit reduced abilities to understand and emotionally respond to sarcastic utterances. There are also significant variations in the ways people from different cultures use, interpret, and emotionally respond to sarcasm (e.g., people in the United Kingdom report using sarcasm more so than people in China). Filik considers several important implications of the experimental work for theories of sarcasm/irony and generally notes that their socioemotional functions are a big part of people's understandings and experiences of sarcasm in discourse.

Hyperbole is a trope with close relations to irony and is the focus of John Barnden's chapter, "Irony, Exaggeration and Hyperbole: No Embargo on the Cargo!" People use hyperbole to overly exaggerate the reality of some situation, which implicitly communicates their attitudes toward that topic or event. Barnden specifically argues that hyperbole is another example of "irony-as-affect-expression" in which a hyperbolic statement such as "Peter has millions of pets" is not an exaggeration about the number of pets Peter owns, but instead exaggerates the discrepancy between what some person believes about Peter's pets and the number of pets Peter really owns. In this manner, hyperbole increases the intensity of "the affect cargo" (e.g., the speaker's affective purpose in saying "Peter has millions of pets") beyond that of the cargo (e.g., the actual number of Peter's pets), which could have been expressed by a nonexaggerating utterance (e.g., "Peter has many pets"). Barnden considers several types of "affect types in ironic cargo," including contempt, bitterness, criticism, teasing, as well as annoyance, disappointment, regret, relief, and gladness. More generally, irony, including hyperbole, offers far more potential for expressing complex affective states than does nonirony. Irony and hyperbole do not necessarily reflect on any defect in the target (e.g., the actual

number of pets Peter owns), but comments on the discrepancy between some expectation and some present reality.

Laura Neuhaus' chapter, "Irony and Its Overlap with Hyperbole and Understatement," examines the possibility that hyperbole and understatement are distinct notions and not necessarily under the superordinate concept of irony. Hyperbole relates to exaggeration or overstatement, while understatements are viewed as scalar shifts that are quite the opposite of hyperbole (i.e., presenting something as less significant than it is). She examines empirical evidence on the discourse goals associated with irony, hyperbole and understatement to suggest that irony is frequently a part of hyperbole and understatement (e.g., to achieve the goals of contrast, expectations, and indeterminacy), but can exist on its own (e.g., to achieve the goal of an ironic attitude through evaluation accounts, negative-attitude accounts, and dissociative-attitude accounts). Both hyperbole and understatement are also evaluative, but not necessarily in an ironic way. Most generally, understatement and hyperbole may share common mechanisms with irony, yet are still important rhetorical figures in their own right.

Christian Burgers' chapter, "Irony and Satire," examines the conceptual relations between irony and satire. Many forms of satire, usually seen as containing elements of judgment, play, laughter, and aggression, may be considered discourse-level irony (i.e., satire is more evident in stretches of discourse, rather than in single utterances). Burgers illustrates this important point, as well as how satire expresses implied criticism, through consideration of several instances of television comedy programs, literature, internet news, and political commentaries. Satire may be differently explained by several prominent theories of irony (e.g., Gricean, pretense, echoic mention), each of which reveals the discourse-level nature of satirical communication through appeal to conditions of truth, fictive interactions, and dissociative attitudes. Burgers' chapter describes various experimental studies looking at the impact that satirical language has on people's attitudes toward different topics. As in all cases of irony, whether satire is successful in communicating speakers' beliefs depends on a variety of situational (e.g., the specific media) and personal factors (e.g., who is the speaker, the addressee, overhearers, and their particular prior beliefs about some topic). Burgers closes with an appeal for the study of satire in different cultures. Even though satire may be a global phenomenon, how it is specifically employed in different cultures, and for different personal and social reasons, is very much a topic for future research.

Hypocrisy is also closely related to irony (i.e., a disparity of word and deed) and Cameron Shelley's chapter, "Hypocrisy and Situational Irony," advances his claim that hypocrisy is really a form of situational irony, especially as it relates to moral judgments (e.g., not practicing what you preach). He reviews past theories in philosophy and psychology (e.g., moral hypocrisy and cognitive dissonance) that offer insights into how people detect hypocrisy in others and even excuse it in themselves. But he goes on to outline his "bicoherence theory of situational irony" in which a situation is judged as "ironic" when it displays