**Irony**

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Irony, like many terms that come from the everyday use of language, has many different meanings. For instance, irony may either refer to a verbal phenomenon or a state of affairs in the world. The latter is called “situational irony.” An example of situational irony would be a rescuer heroically saving someone from drowning only to find out that the rescued person was their worst enemy. Situational irony need not be entirely different from verbal irony, as shown by Cameron Shelley, yet it will not be discussed here any further.

Even if we limit our perspective only to verbal irony, there are still many different meanings related to it. Socratic irony is a technique used by Socrates to lead his interlocutors to a better understanding of an argument. Romantic irony is a playful attitude of the author toward his/her text, often related to metafiction. It is similar to Postmodern irony, which is the destabilizing of the text in the very process of producing it, thus making it clear that one’s fictional tale is in fact a fiction. Søren Kierkegaard even uses the term irony to describe an esthetic experience that can lead to a religious one.

It is just as difficult to distinguish irony from the related phenomenon of sarcasm. Sarcasm is taken to be an aggressive form of irony. Some authors have claimed that a clear-cut distinction is impossible, while others point out differences between the two concepts, such as the fact that irony may be involuntary while sarcasm is not. Moreover, irony may be positive, i.e., non-critical, while sarcasm is not. An example of positive irony (termed “ironic praise”) would be “A little known writer from Stratford-upon-Avon, by the name of Shakespeare.” To complicate matters, in contemporary American usage, among young speakers, “sarcasm” has taken over the meaning of “irony,” which is now used to mean something upsetting (in a sense unrelated to humor). It is also not clear if all irony is humorous (for a comprehensive review, see the study by Hidalgo-Downing and Iglesias Recuero).

Etymologically, the term “irony” comes from the Greek “eironeia”, meaning “dissimulation” or “concealing.” Lane ascribes to Aristotle the first use of the term “irony” in the modern sense. In this sense, irony is taken to be a rhetorical figure (a trope, a figure of speech) used by speakers to mean the opposite of what is said. This definition is fraught with problems. First and foremost, the speaker may be ironical without necessarily intending the opposite of what s/he says. For example, upon saying “he has made such a good job of discrediting himself”, the speaker does not intend to convey the opposite (“he has made such a bad job of discrediting himself”). Besides, understatements, overstatements, and hyperboles may also be used for irony.

Considerable effort has also gone into the study of the markers of irony and/or sarcasm. Surprisingly, the ironical tone of voice was taken for granted by many scholars and much of the literature until the second millennium was dedicated to specifying what the prosodic features of the ironical tone of voice were. However, considerable confusion exists in these studies, whose findings are often contradictory. For example, both a flat contour and a raising intonation have been claimed to mark irony. Lower pitch and “exaggerated” pitch have similarly been indicated as markers, and so have heavy stress, beat clashes, and exaggerated intonational patterns. Nasalization and slower speech have also been suggested. Facial expressions have also been described as marking irony, including raised or lowered eyebrows, wide open or squinting eyes, winking, nodding, lip tightening, smiling, a “blank face”, mismatch between prosody and face, and gaze aversion. Salvatore Attardo and colleagues, and Gregory Bryant and Jean Fox-Tree have argued that an identifiable ironical tone of voice does not exist and that there are only differential markings (e.g., incongruity relative to context).

The relationship between the stated and the intended message in irony has been described by Rachel Giora, besides opposition, as indirect negation, contrast, or inappropriateness to context, etc. All of which, however, seem to share the assumption that the two senses need to be somehow different and at odds with each other.

The mechanisms whereby irony is produced and perceived have likewise been the subject of much contention. Irony has been considered as a rhetorical figure, as an implicature, a speech act, an echoic mention, a pretense, a reminder, a nonsalient interpretation, and as a tinge (i.e., the two meanings blend into each other). This list is not exhaustive.

Processing-wise, however, these views can be divided into two broad camps. At one end is the one stage, direct access model, which assumes that a rich and informative context may have immediate effects so that sarcastic irony interpretation is seamless. At the other end is the two-stage model, which assumes that salient (coded and prominent) meanings and literal or salience-based interpretations may not be by-passed, affecting, therefore, processing difficulties when inappropriate. The next section will be dedicated primarily to discussing these two approaches.

**Experimental findings**

Context-based approaches such as the direct access view (championed by Raymond Gibbs) and constraints satisfaction models (proposed by John Campbell and Albert Katz and Penny Pexman and colleagues) are prevalent in the field of sarcasm processing. These theories maintain that, in a context rich enough in supportive information and cues, a sarcastic utterance is anticipated. Giving rise to such anticipation should facilitate sarcasm interpretation immediately. Thus, contextual constraints such as information about speaker’s occupation (as in Pexman and colleagues), a failed expectation on the part of the protagonist (as in Gibbs; and Campbell and Katz), and the involvement of negations, negative emotions, and a victim should affect sarcasm interpretation immediately. Campbell and Katz reveal, however, that none of the above is deemed a necessary condition.

In contrast, lexicon-based models assume that lexical processes are unconditional and cannot be preempted by contextual information to the contrary. Consequently, processing may initially involve salient but contextually incompatible meanings, regardless of degree of non-literalness (*The graded salience hypothesis,* proposed by Rachel Giora).

Other two-stage approaches such as *The literal first model* by Paul Grice and John Searle, including *The least disruption principle view* by Salvatore Attardo and Jodi Eisterhold and colleagues also assume an obligatory processing stage which is attributed to literally-based interpretations – interpretations based on the literal meaning of the utterance components, which, in the case of sarcastic irony, are contextually incompatible. *Relevance Theory* (proposed and developed by Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson; and Robyn Carston) also assumes the involvement in processing of “what is said”, towards which the ironic speaker projects an attitude of dissociation and ridicule.

The involvement of such incompatible interpretations, whether literal or non-literal, may affect complex interpretation processes. It should be noted that the idea of “literal” meaning itself has been subjected to substantive discussion and is eschewed by some scholars.

Indeed, with the exception of Raymond Gibbs’ study of sarcastic indirect requests, findings do not attest to the temporal priority of sarcastic interpretations over salience-based or literal-based interpretations, nor have they demonstrated equivalent processing routes for both sarcastic and salience-based (often literal) interpretations. Instead, findings demonstrate that sarcasm interpretation is more effortful than salience-based interpretation.

In a study by Rachel Giora and colleagues, as anticipated by John Campbell and Albert Katz, frustrated expectation on its own did not give rise to an expectation for an ironic utterance; nor did it facilitate sarcasm comprehension compared to a context featuring a realized expectation. In contrast, in both contexts, sarcastic targets took longer to read than in a context featuring no expectation.

But even when contexts were, in effect, shown to induce an expectation for a sarcastic utterance, sarcastic interpretation was not facilitated immediately. Rather, most of the findings in the field show that initially, interpretation of sarcastic irony involves activating its contextually incompatible, salience-based (often literal) interpretation first.

For instance, in the study by Rachel Giora and colleagues, dialogic contexts were shown to induce an expectation for a sarcastic irony by involving a sarcastic speaker in dialogue mid position who participants expected to utter another sarcastic utterance in dialogue final position. Regardless, such contextual expectation neither facilitated the anticipated sarcastic utterances nor slowed down processing of their salience-based counterparts. Instead, reading times of the same utterances intended sarcastically were slower compared to reading times of these utterances when intended literally.

These findings were also replicated when expectation was manipulated by the experimental design which exclusively exposed participants to story contexts ending in a sarcastic irony. Specifically, in these experiments, response times to sarcastically related probes were always longer than those to salience-based related probes, which were always activated initially, regardless of length of processing times allowed (750, 1000 ms) and contextual misfit. This pattern of results was the same for the control design, which did not manipulate an expectation for a sarcastic utterance, but rather exposed participants to an equal number of items ending either in a sarcastic or in a salience-based utterance. That is, in both conditions, participants’ response times to probes related to the sarcastic interpretation always lagged behind and were slower than those to the (contextually incompatible) salience-based probes. Such results do not support the context-based approaches. Instead, they are consistent with the lexicon-based approaches and with the view that assigns to salience-based literal interpretation a role in sarcastic irony interpretation by involving initially a misleading phase. (On irony as intended to be beguiling, see e.g., Herbert Clark and Richard Gerrig; and Douglas Muecke).

In a number of follow-up studies by Ofer Fein, Menahem Yeari, and Rachel Giora, in which contextual strength was reinforced by multiplying sarcastic cues, these results were nonetheless replicated. (A review of the results was published by Rachel Giora in 2011). Dialogues similar to those used in a 2007 study by Rachel Giora and colleagues were strengthened by making explicit the sarcastic (and nonsarcastic) intent. Regardless of strength of context, reinforcing contextual expectation for an ironic utterance in the sarcastically biased context by multiplying explicitly supportive cues, pattern of results obtained from reading times and lexical decisions to related and unrelated probes did not change. They showed that reading times of target utterances were always longer following sarcastically than salience-based biased dialogues. Additionally, with the exception of one delay (1500 ms in which differences were not significant), sarcastically related probes (at 750 and 2000 ms delays) took longer to respond to compared to salience-based related probes.

In addition, strengthening the contextual bias (manipulated in the 2007 study by Rachel Giora and colleagues), by adding explicit information about the study which was investigating sarcasm interpretation and by allowing longer processing times, did not affect the pattern of results obtained earlier. Despite employing multiple constraints, sarcasm was not facilitated. Instead, only incompatible salience-based interpretations were made available initially in both conditions.

Similarly, in the study by Penny Pexman and colleagues, in addition to biasing targets toward the sarcastic reading, contexts also included a speaker of a high-irony occupation. Results, however, showed that sarcastic interpretation took longer to process compared to contexts inviting a metaphorical or a neutral reading of the target. Findings in a study by Herbert Colston and Raymond Gibbs also showed that utterances (*This one's really sharp)*,whose key word (*sharp*) has both a salientliteral and a salient metaphorical meaning, took longer to read when embedded in sarcastically than in metaphorically biasing contexts.

Such results demonstrate that contextual effects do not operate immediately and do not facilitate contextually compatible sarcastic interpretations initially or exclusively. This is true even when contexts are shown to induce an expectation for a sarcastic utterance, whose interpretation is nonetheless taxing, involving initially a salience-based contextually incompatible interpretation. This inescapable interpretation, activated on account of its relative accessibility, is hard to inhibit or even reject as an aftermath, probably because it is functional in constructing the ironic interpretation from which it differs. No wonder marking it is often necessary, especially when written language is concerned, as in the study by Juanita Whalen and colleagues. When it is not, it faces the risk of being taken at face value (as was the case of e.g., Swift’s *A modest proposal*).

**Corpus-based findings**

If sarcasm involves activating its salience-based (often literal) interpretation, addressees and even the speakers themselves may resonate with it: elaborate on it, respond to it, or echo it in one way or another. (On resonance and resonance and sarcasm, see the works of John Du Bois, and Rachel Giora; and on mode adoption, see Whalen and Pexman’s works). The result is an environment reflecting contextually incompatible interpretations of sarcastic utterances.

Corpus-based studies of spoken interactions indeed provide support for the view that salience-based albeit incompatible interpretations are made available to interlocutors and are therefore prevalent in the environment of sarcastic irony. For instance, Helga Kotthoff looked at dinner-table conversations among friends, where resonating with the salience-based but incompatible interpretations of the (German) sarcastic remarks was the norm; resonating with the nonsalient compatible interpretation occurred significantly less frequently. The reverse, however, prevailed among interlocutors who were adversaries participating in TV talk-shows. Rachel Giora and Inbal Gur studied an hour long conversation between 5 friends, showing that 75% of the (Hebrew) sarcastic remarks were responded to via reference to their salience-based albeit incompatible interpretation.

Looking at how people talk and write, Alan Partington reveals that irony is found to be frequently associated with the deautomatization of familiar collocations and to involve an evaluative component. Interestingly, according to Partington, explicit irony (i.e., marked by a lexicalized marker) is generally non-humorous compared to implicit (unmarked) irony whose humorous effect is appreciated.

**Conclusions**

Both lab results and natural data attest to the tenuousness of context effects, failing both to facilitate sarcasm interpretation immediately and to inhibit salience-based but contextually inappropriate interpretations. These salience-based interpretations are, therefore, allowed to play a role in shaping both the complexity of the interpretation process and the natural environment of their utterances. Such findings argue against context-based approaches such as *direct access view* and constraints satisfaction models; and are in favor of lexicon-based approaches such as *the least disruption principle*, *the graded salience hypothesis*, *the literal first model*.

**See Also:** Politeness; Humor Markers; Verbal Humor;

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