Irony in Talk Among Friends

Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr.

Department of Psychology
University of California, Santa Cruz

This article reports the findings of a single study examining irony in talk among friends. Sixty-two 10-min conversations between college students and their friends were recorded and analyzed. Five main types of irony were found: jocularity, sarcasm, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, and understatements. These different forms of ironic language were part of 8% of all conversational turns. Analysis of these utterances revealed varying linguistic and social patterns and suggested several constraints on how and why people achieve ironic meaning. The implications of this conclusion for psychological theories of irony are discussed.

The 19th century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once wrote that “As philosophers claim that no true philosophy is possible without doubt, by the same token, one may claim that no authentic human life is possible without irony” (Kierkegaard, 1965, p. 378). Kierkegaard’s comment holds true as much now as it did over 100 years ago, especially in this postmodern age where irony is often seen as the master trope, replacing metaphor as the king of all figurative language. A brief look at both everyday speech and various written texts illustrates the prominence of different forms of irony in the ways people talk about themselves, their addressees, and the world around them.

Consider the following exchange between two college students. This conversation occurred in their apartment and focused on some visitors who were staying with them at the invitation of another roommate:

METAPHOR AND SYMBOL, 15(1&2), 5–27
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Requests for reprints should be sent to Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., University of California, Santa Cruz, Department of Psychology, Santa Cruz, CA  95064. E-mail: gibbs@cats.ucsc.edu
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) 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: Uh huh.
Anne: I just welcome them so much, you know, ask them if they want anything to drink or eat (laughs).

This conversation reveals how irony may be one of our most powerful weapons in everyday speech. Anne and Dana each employ different forms of ironic language (e.g., sarcasm, jocularity, 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). Moreover, none of these speakers’ ironic meanings can be easily derived by simply assuming the opposite of what they literally said.

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. For example, some theorists maintain 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 (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 1992). By contrast, pretense, not echoic mention, is seen as the key to irony by other researchers (Clark, 1996; Clark & Gerrig, 1984). 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. Other researchers argue 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 (Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989). 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 ut-
tances 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 (Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, & Brown, 1995). Some scholars have alternatively proposed that irony is special because it mutes the usually negative meaning communicated by an ironic statement (Dews, Kaplan, & Winner, 1995) and appears less rude, especially when expressing trivial criticism (Jorgensen, 1996), although other research suggests that irony can be more critical in many situations than literal statements (Colston, 1997b). Finally, various scholars suggest that different forms of irony often have different communicative functions (Kreuz, Long, & Church, 1991; Lee & Katz, 1998; Roberts & Kreuz, 1994) and evoke different emotional responses in listeners (Leggitt & Gibbs, in press).

These competing ideas about irony may not be mutually exclusive, as each proposal may contribute to a comprehensive theory of ironic language use. Sociolinguistic studies, in fact, suggest that ironic talk can serve multiple communicative purposes, each requiring different psychological mechanisms. For instance, some forms of irony are affiliative, whereas others are sources of estrangement between individuals (Coser, 1959; Seckman & Couch, 1989). Irony is routinely used in the ongoing flow of conversation between group members to affirm their solidarity by directing comments at individuals who are not group members and not deemed worthy of group membership. Some forms of irony, like sarcasm, may promote group solidarity, indicate the boundaries of acceptable behavior, and “reign in” normative transgressions (Ducharme, 1994). Sarcasm, in particular, is often used to vent frustration when an individual finds some situation or object offensive or sees a group’s normative standards violated. A good illustration of this venting is seen in the aforementioned conversation between the two roommates. Sarcastic comments may also be self-directed and thus affirm the speaker’s allegiance to the group and the prescribed behavioral norms.

Most studies of irony generally assume that sarcasm is the most typical instance of ironic discourse. The psycholinguistic literature has traditionally studied irony as cases where speakers utter sarcastic comments with negative, critical intent. But a good deal of ironic language enables speakers to bond together through their disparagement of some other person (e.g., the conversation between Anne and Dana) or a speaker’s mockful teasing of the addressee. Consider the following conversation between a group of college students, which took place outside a campus coffee shop:

Kayla: How are you doing?
Cherie: Um … good. We’re going to study Latin but the coffee shop is just packed.
David: It’s rockin’.
Sarah: … study Latin … Latin language?
Kayla: It’s wet out here.
Sarah: You guys are taking Latin? (laughs).
Cherie: Yeah … (laughs).
Kayla: (whiny tone of voice) But that’s a dead language (everyone laughs).
I’m just kidding. Is that not what everyone tells you?
Cherie: It’s true and we don’t really know how to pronounce everything.
David: It’s really hard.
Cherie: Yeah, but it’s only a year-long program.
David: So, you’re fluent in Latin after a year (everyone laughs).
Kayla: Right … right.
David: It’s true (everyone laughs).
Sarah: You read all those ancient texts, that’s cool (laughs).
Cherie: Why you guys dissin’ on Latin?
David: (mocking tone) What, wo-ah, you’re dissin’ my Latin.
Kayla: Actually, Latin helps because, doesn’t it, it helps with etymology, it helps with words, breaking words down.
David: Totally … yeah, yeah, she got it … yeah.
Cherie: Structure, parts of speech, yeah.
David: I’m a changed person since the last couple of weeks of Latin.

Sarcastic exchanges such as seen here have been called “humorous aggression,” “humorous derision,” “banter,” “jocularity” (Coser, 1959; Pogrebin & Poole, 1989; Seckman & Couch, 1989; Slugoski & Turnbull, 1988), or “teasing” (Drew, 1987). Empirical studies show that teasing frequently occurs in talk between parents and children (Dunn & Brown, 1994; Reddy, 1991), friends (Drew, 1987; Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oeming, & Monach, 1998; Mooney, Cresser, & Blatchford, 1991), romantic partners (Baxter, 1992), and even psychotherapists and clients (Ruvelson, 1988). Teasing and jocularity offer gentler, indirect ways of pointing out people’s deviation from social standards and is central to socialization practices between parents and children, friends, and romantic partners. Teasing also allows individuals to enhance their bonds through the indirect expression of affection, shared laughter, and the messages that the act of teasing communicates—namely, that the individuals are close enough to tease without harming the relationship (Baxter, 1992). Although teasing can have a dark side, in which people begin to outright bully one another, teasing generally allows individuals to learn about, negotiate, and assume social identities.

This brief discussion about the diverse ways that irony can be used in conversation poses an important challenge for cognitive science theories of irony. Is it necessarily the case that a single theory will account for the multiple forms and functions of irony in ordinary speech? One of the difficulties in forming hypotheses about ironic language understanding is the continued failure to recognize the diversity of ways that irony is used in conversation. This article reports the findings of an exploratory study on irony in talk among friends. There are numerous experimental studies on different aspects of irony comprehension (see Gibbs,
1994; Katz, 1996a, for reviews) and many theories of ironic language use (Gibbs, 1994). Yet there are few systematic, quantitative investigations of the ways irony is used in ordinary conversation. My goal was to examine the ways people use ironic language and to show how this work constrains contemporary theoretical accounts of irony in cognitive science.

I collected and analyzed, with the assistance of many others, sixty-two 5- to 10-min conversations between college students and their friends in natural environments. My first interest was to discover how often students use irony when talking with one another. The only quantitative analysis of irony in speech, which focused on a single, extended conversation among adults in their 20s and 30s, revealed that irony is used in 7% of all conversational turns (Tannen, 1984). Although my analysis is limited to young adults speaking in familiar, often intimate, circumstances, my initial expectation was that irony would not be a rare occurrence and should be found in almost every conversation studied.

I did not analyze the nonironic utterances in the students’ conversations. In principle, this would have been good to do, especially to compare people’s use and reactions to irony against nonironic speech. But it does not make much sense to lump together all the nonironic utterances because there are many types of language subsumed here, including metaphor, metonymy, various idioms, and a wide range of utterances that might be referred to as “literal.” Although most psycholinguistic studies compare people’s interpretation of ironic and literal utterances in the same contexts, the reality of ordinary conversations makes these kinds of comparisons difficult to systematically investigate.

A second aim was to examine the different forms of irony used in these conversations. As noted earlier, most psycholinguistic studies assume that sarcastic remarks (e.g., “You’re a fine friend,” meaning “You’re a bad friend”) are the norm in ironic discourse. Yet my expectations were, following the empirical studies from psychology and sociolinguistics, that the most frequent form of irony would be where students spoke in a jocular, mocking, or teasing manner. Sarcasm with the intent to severely criticize something or somebody should be less frequent than jocularity, even in these conversations where speakers should feel fairly free to criticize others. At the same time, other forms of irony should also occur with some frequency, such as hyperbole, rhetorical questions, and understatement. Although a few studies have examined these related forms of irony (Colston, 1997a; Colston & Keller, 1998; Kreuz, 1996; Kreuz & Roberts, 1995), no study has investigated how frequently each type of irony is found in ordinary conversation (see Kreuz, Roberts, Johnson, & Bertus, 1996, for one analysis of some aspects of irony in written discourse). My general interest here was to discover patterns of ironic language use in conveying different propositional and affective meaning.

A third concern was to discover how frequently men and women use different forms of irony. For example, are men more sarcastic in their speech than women? Some research shows that men tend to be more aggressive than women in their style
of speaking (Harris & Knight-Bohnhoff, 1996), but does this extend to irony? Are women more playful when speaking and tease more than men do? Finally, do men and women address their various ironic comments to each other differentially?

My fourth interest concerned the topics of irony. Do people speak ironically more about specific topics, more about people who are absent as opposed to present, more about things previously said in the conversation, and do speakers ever direct ironic comments at themselves? Several scholars have commented that irony, as opposed to metaphor, is especially useful for indirectly commenting on human topics (Katz, 1996b). In fact, the presence of an identifiable person who serves as the victim of irony, sarcasm, or both is seen as one important heuristic in the interpretation of irony (Katz, 1996b; Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989). The data presented in this article should provide some additional information on the idea that irony mostly focuses on human topics.

The next attributes of irony analyzed were whether speakers’ remarks were echoic, involved pretense, and employed specific intonational cues. There are several debates, as suggested earlier, over whether irony is best characterized as instances of echoic mention or pretense. I have previously argued that neither view necessarily captures all aspects of irony (Gibbs, 1994), and this study provides a test of that idea. Nonetheless, my expectation was that a significant portion of speakers’ utterances would be based on pretense, and echoic mention to a lesser extent. I was especially interested to see whether this pattern for pretense and echoic mention varied across different forms of irony. Echoic mention may be more prevalent in jocularity than in sarcasm because people often repeat what others say when teasing them. Related to this concern was the analysis of the particular tone of voice speakers used when uttering their different ironic comments. There is debate over whether ironic language necessarily includes a special tone of voice (e.g., nasalization, slow speaking rate, exaggerated stress on certain words) with some scholars arguing that this prosodic cue is essential to inferring what speakers mean (Cutler, 1974; Grice, 1989), and others suggesting that these properties are not obligatory (Gibbs, 1986a, 1986b, 1994; Kreuz, 1996; Kreuz & Roberts, 1995). The data collected here allowed me to distinguish between these competing claims.

To what extent were the students’ ironic comments perceived as mocking, critical, or humorous? Once again, the answer to this question depends on the type of ironic statement produced. As illustrated in the two conversations described earlier, much of students’ irony is nonserious and jocular (e.g., the conversation about studying Latin). Yet even with humorous ironic remarks (e.g., the exchange about the visitors), there is an undertone of negativity and criticism toward the topic (or topics; e.g., the guests and the roommate who invited them). In some cases, then, ironic comments can be both humorous and negative, precisely because people find amusement in disliked targets being disparaged (Graesser, Long, & Mio, 1989). On other occasions, the implied criticism is more lighthearted or teasing and works to bring speakers and listeners closer together. I evaluated each utter-
ance as to whether it was viewed as negative, mocking, and/or humorous. Although some theorists claim that irony works to mute criticism, in some cases, especially for sarcasm, the speakers’ comments may be seen as very negative. Not surprisingly, how critical or humorous an utterance is depends on whether it was jocular, sarcastic, a rhetorical question, a hyperbole, or an understatement.

The final analysis concerned addressees’ responses to irony. My first interest here was to examine whether addressees gave any behavioral indication that they understood the speakers’ ironic messages. My expectation was that listeners would respond to what speakers say by laughing, especially when they hear jocularity, or, most notably, they may say something ironic in return. I was specifically interested to determine to what extent students would engage in ironic banter in which each person jabs one another with an ironic or teasing remark, perhaps in the attempt to “top” one another in playful verbal battle. In this way, speaker and listener actively collaborate to create ironic scenes in which each participant plays a specific role. As the conversations described earlier clearly indicate, addressees will respond to more humorous ironic comments by speaking ironically themselves. Students may respond ironically more so when these statements are viewed as jocular or teasing than when the comments are sarcastic and more negative.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 149 undergraduate students and their friends from the University of California, Santa Cruz community. The youngest was 19 and the oldest was 38. Most of the participants were in their early 20s. The sex of these participants is described in detail later.

Material

Sixty-two 10-min conversations were tape-recorded by 62 students in an undergraduate class on interpersonal communication at the University of California, Santa Cruz. These conversations took place in a variety of places, including student dormitories, apartments, houses, and various places nearby these locations. Several conversations occurred in more public settings, such as restaurants, coffee shops, and the university library.

Students from the class were simply asked to tape-record a single conversation that occurred between their friends or roommates. The tape recorder was clearly visible, and all participants in the conversations were aware that the recordings were intended for analysis as part of a class project. However, no mention was made of the
interest in irony. Although the students doing the tape-recording participated in some of the conversations collected and analyzed, they did not speak sarcastically nor did they attempt to elicit irony, sarcasm, or both in any way. It is difficult to know to what extent the presence of the tape recorder might have influenced the participants’ speech. Many sociolinguists have argued and observed that the data collected from situations where participants knew that they were being tape-recorded accurately reflect participants’ ordinary social relationships and speech styles (Tannen, 1984). Conversational participants in this study appeared, according to the students in the class doing the tape-recording, to soon forget about the presence of the tape recorder as they were swept up into the flow of conversation.

Transcription of the Tapes

After the 62 conversations were collected, each student from the class transcribed his or her tape according to fairly standard sociolinguistic conventions, which included attention to changes of speaker, back-channel responses, parenthetical remarks, interruptions, hesitations, false starts, and basic intonational features (Tannen, 1984). I oversaw the 62 students as they worked on their transcriptions, but it is clear that there was a good deal of variance in how accurately students completed their transcriptions. Some of this variability was due to differences in the quality of the tape recordings. At the very least, though, the 62 transcripts reflected who said what and how addressees and overhearers may have verbally reacted in turn.

Classification of the Utterances

The practical problem of distinguishing between ironic and nonironic language, and between different forms of irony (e.g., sarcasm, jocularity, hyperbole, etc.) is very difficult to solve. As Tannen noted in her own analysis of irony in a dinner conversation, “Clearly, there is some subjectivity involved in classifying utterances as ironic or not ironic” (Tannen, 1984, p. 130). For this study, it was immediately clear that speakers used a variety of ironic forms in talking with their friends. Thus, people did not just speak sarcastically (as is too often assumed in psycholinguistic studies to be the ideal form of irony). In fact, people were more likely at first glance to use jocularity with humorous intent than to use sarcasm with more hostile intent.

Examination of the corpus suggested that there were, at least, five main forms of irony: (a) jocularity, where speakers teased one another in humorous ways; (b) sarcasm, where speakers spoke positively to convey a more negative intent; (c) rhetorical questions, where speakers literally asked a question that implied either a humorous or critical assertion; (d) hyperbole, where speakers expressed their nonliteral meaning by exaggerating the reality of the situation; and (e) understate-
ment, where speakers conveyed their ironic messages by stating far less than was obviously the case. Each form of irony minimally reflected the idea of a speaker providing some contrast between expectation and reality (Gibbs, 1994).

The first conversation mentioned earlier between Anne and Dana illustrates three of the five types of irony. Many of Anne’s statements are clearly sarcastic, as when she says in reference to the visitors that “I would just love to have them here more often” and “they totally lightened up my mood.” Anne’s rhetorical question “Isn’t it so nice to have guests here?” expresses her negative attitude toward the guests. Her comment “They bring in the most wonderful guests in the world and they can totally relate to us” is a nice example of hyperbole, as is “I was like the happiest person on earth.”

The second conversation provides several examples of jocularity, such as when David in a mocking tone echoes with ironic intent Cherie’s previous comment by saying, “What, wo-ah, you’re dissin’ my Latin.” Understatement is seen in other conversations, as when one student ironically commented, “James was just a bit late with his rent,” when, in fact, James was quite tardy in paying his rent that month.

The classification of the individual utterances in the 62 conversations took place in three steps. First, each student who tape-recorded and transcribed a conversation analyzed the utterances in their transcription to find ironic utterances. They then classified each ironic utterance as reflecting one of the five types of irony mentioned earlier. Following this, each student determined for each utterance the sex of the speaker, who the addressee was, the location in which the utterance was made, the topic of the utterance, whether the utterance was critical of someone or something, whether the utterance echoed some previously mentioned statement or belief, whether the utterance involved pretense, whether the utterance mocked someone or something, whether the utterance was viewed by someone in the conversation as humorous, whether the utterance was spoken in a special tone of voice, and how the addressee responded to the ironic utterance.

In the second part of the coding process, once the students made their classifications for their own transcript, each student traded his or her transcript with another student, and they both examined the classifications together. Cases where disagreements could not be resolved were marked. At this point in the process, 314 individual utterances across the 62 conversations were identified as jocular, sarcastic, rhetorical questions, hyperbole, or understatement.

The third step involved me going over all the transcripts and utterances and providing my own independent analysis. Because of my disagreement over the specific classification of 25 utterances, including whether or not these were at all ironic, the final corpus of ironic expressions contained 289 utterances. This corpus of 289 instances of irony probably underestimates the true level of ironic speech in these conversations given that three judges (two students and myself) had to agree on whether an individual utterance was ironic or not, as well as belonging to a particular category of irony, and classified along the various dimensions noted earlier.
There was one additional analysis that I did myself. After examining the jocular and sarcastic utterances, I determined the extent to which each one stated something positive to convey a negative ironic meaning (e.g., “You’re a fine friend,” meaning “You are a bad friend”), as opposed to the opposite (e.g., “You’re a bad friend,” meaning “You are a good friend”).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On average, there were 4.7 instances of irony per taped conversation, ranging from a low of 1 ironic remark in one conversation up to a high of 20 ironic comments in another. A count of the different conversational turns in the 62 conversations roughly shows that about 8% of the turns were ironic. This was about the same as found in Tannen’s (1984) analysis of a conversation among adult friends (in their 20s and 30s).

Analysis of the 289 utterances revealed 145 cases of jocularity (50%), 80 cases of sarcasm (28%), 34 instances of hyperbole (12%), 24 rhetorical questions (8%), and 6 cases of understatement (2%). Table 1 presents the mean proportions for each question for each type of irony. I repeat many aspects of these data in my discussion later, but include the results in tabular form to make for easy cross-category comparisons. The analyses of the five types of irony along several dimensions are presented later.

Jocularity

Speakers/addressees. Forty-eight percent of the speakers of jocularity were men, and 52% were women. Forty-two percent of the addressees were men, whereas 58% were women. Fifty-eight of the conversations containing jocularity also included overhearers. Overall, these data revealed no specific differences in the prominence of jocularity between men and women.

Topics. Thirty-two percent of the jocularity concerned something in this physical situation of the speakers and listeners (e.g., events occurring when the participants were making dinner together). Twenty-seven percent of the jocularity concerned something specific about the addressees (i.e., something they had done, were doing, or some aspect of their personality). Fourteen percent concerned some person(s) not present in the conversation. Nine percent of these remarks related to the speaker him- or herself. Nine percent of these remarks concerned some previous utterance in the conversation. Six percent referred to some past event (e.g., something that happened to the speaker or listeners before the conversation oc-
Finally, only 3% of the jocularity concerned an overhearer (e.g., a conversational participant who was not the addressee).

These data provide strong support to the idea that irony primarily refers to human events, concerns, or both. Each of the aforementioned categories reflects different aspects of individual people (e.g., their personalities or specific characteristics) or people’s involvement with particular objects or environments. Very few of the jocular comments referred to nonhuman events, and when they did, such as when a speaker sarcastically said, “This is a terrible salad,” the utter-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Mean Proportion for Each Type of Analysis for Each Type of Irony</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jocularity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaker</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Addressee</td>
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<td>.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.58</td>
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<td>Male and female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
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<td>Situation</td>
<td>.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past event</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Addressee</td>
<td>.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaker</td>
<td>.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other person</td>
<td>.14</td>
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<td>Other comment</td>
<td>.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overhearer</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Echo</td>
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<td>Pretense</td>
<td>.58</td>
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<td>Addressee response</td>
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<td>Ironic</td>
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<td>Literal</td>
<td>.22</td>
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<td>Laughter only</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missed sarcasm</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Changed topic</td>
<td>.29</td>
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ances were indirectly intended as comments about other relevant people (e.g., the person who made the salad).

**Echo, pretense, and tone of voice.** Fifty percent of these remarks echoed a previous utterance, whereas 58% involved the speaker adopting pretense. Twenty-eight percent of the jocular remarks involved both echoic mention and pretense, whereas 21% involved neither. These data immediately reveal that all instances of irony are not characterized by echoic mention or pretense, contrary to several psychological/linguistic proposals about irony. Sixty-seven percent of the jocularity was uttered in what judges viewed were special tones of voice. Most of these instances were delivered with heavy stress on particular words, or exaggerated rhythm. About half of the jocularity with special intonation actually mimicked the addressee or some other person (real or imagined). Although it is clear that speakers can communicate their jocular statements without using any unusual intonation, a significant number of these achieved their effects in part due to these varying voice patterns.

**Mockery, criticism, and humor.** Eighty-one percent of the remarks were judged as mocking some person, object, or event. Of these instances of mockery, 8% were self-directed (e.g., said by the speaker about the speaker). At the same time, only 28% of these utterances were seen as being critical. Twenty-seven of the jocular remarks were seen as both mocking and critical. Finally, 84% of these utterances were viewed as humorous by at least one of the conversational participants (more on this later). The data show that jocularity very frequently mocks some other person, object, or event in a playful manner, even if this mockery is not necessarily viewed in a negative or critical light. This suggests one way in which the teasing associated with jocularity differs from the teasing done when one person bullies another, often with negative, critical import.

**Addressee responses.** Thirty-two percent of the time, addressees responded to jocularity by saying something ironic in return. The fact that almost one-third of all responses (including nonverbal ones) to jocularity were ironic in some form illustrates the playful nature of these conversations between friends. The students often created ironic routines or scenes and eagerly engaged as actors in these temporary roles. This finding also demonstrates the collaborative nature of irony, at least to the extent that speakers and addressees tacitly coordinate to stage ironic scenes. Twenty-two percent of the responses to jocularity were literal remarks that clearly indicated some understanding of the first speaker’s ironic intent. Twelve percent of the responses were simple laughter without any other linguistic utterance. This, too, reflects something of addressees’ understanding of original
speakers’ playful, ironic intentions when using jocularity. Five percent of the responses indicated that the addressee clearly missed the speaker’s ironic intent (e.g., when the addressee responded as if the speaker were serious). Although it is difficult to know what a reasonable baselines for understanding any utterance may be, a misunderstanding rate of 5% suggests that using irony, even playfully, has its risks. However, there may be occasions when speakers explicitly used irony to communicate some attitude or idea without feeling responsible for what is expressed if an addressee complains about what was stated. Finally, 29% of the time, addressees ignored the jocularity or changed the subject right away.

Asymmetry. My own analysis of the jocular utterances showed that only 9% presented a positive statement to indirectly convey a negative message (e.g., “So you’re fluent in Latin after a year”), whereas 28% presented negative statements to convey positive messages (e.g., “Dumb bitch!” said to someone who just solved a difficult problem, or “I’m not all that good in the sack, anyways, so you’re not missing out on much” when the speaker was known to be a good lover). This difference was statistically significant, $z = 2.0, p < .05$. Sixty-two percent of the jocular utterances were either difficult to classify as being positive/negative or negative/positive, or simply expressed an ironic meaning not via literal opposition. This latter finding shows that theories of irony based on listeners simply assuming the opposite of what a speaker says (Grice, 1989; Searle, 1979) do not come close to capturing the richness of ironic language use, at least in terms of teasing, jocularity, or both.

Sarcasm

Speakers/addressees. Sixty-four percent of the sarcastic remarks were spoken by men, and 36% by women. This pattern differs from that seen with jocularity, where there was a near equal balance between men and women speakers, $\chi^2(1) = 6.6, p < .05$. One might speculate that men are more likely to speak sarcastically than are women because of the hostile, aggressive content of most sarcastic remarks. In fact, one study in Norway found that men included a “sarcastic” speech style as a positive part of their social self-image, whereas women include a “funny” social style as positive (Svebak, 1975). Beyond this, 45% of the addressees of sarcasm were men, and 51% were women. Four percent of the sarcastic remarks were clearly intended for both male and female addressees. Finally, 35% of the sarcastic utterances were spoken to addressees with other overhearers present.

Topics. Thirty-one percent of the sarcasm concerned something about the present situation, and 21% concerned something about the addressees. Thirteen percent
concerned some person(s) not present in the conversation. Eight percent of these remarks related to the speaker him- or herself. Eleven percent of these remarks concerned some previous utterance in the present conversation. Fourteen percent referred to some past event. Finally, only 3% of the sarcasm concerned an overhearer. These data show that sarcasm, like jocularity, is primarily focused on human concerns.

**Echo, pretense, and tone of voice.** Only 26% of sarcastic remarks echoed previous utterances, whereas 63% percent involved the speaker adopting pretense, a significant difference, $z = 4.58, p < .001$. These data differ, then, from that found with jocularity, where echoic mention and pretense were nearly equal in frequency. Eighteen percent of the sarcastic remarks were judged to involve both echoic mention and pretense, whereas 24% involved neither of these two factors. The lower frequency of echoic mention for sarcasm than for jocularity may be attributed to the repetitions of what another speaker says when teasing that person. The results again show that at least some aspects of irony need not depend on echoic mention or pretense. Seventy-six percent of the sarcasm was uttered in what judges viewed as special intonation patterns. As was seen for the jocularity, most of these instances were delivered with heavy stress on particular words, or exaggerated rhythm. But far fewer of the sarcastic remarks (only 4 out of 80) were uttered with special intonation where the speaker mimicked the addressee or some other person (real or imagined).

**Mockery, criticism, and humor.** Ninety percent of the remarks were judged as mocking some person, object, or event. Of these instances of mockery, 5% were self-directed (e.g., said by the speaker about the speaker). Fifty-four percent of these utterances were seen as being critical, which is a significant increase from the 28% seen in the jocular statements, $z = 3.85, p < .001$. Forty-six percent of the sarcastic comments were judged as both mocking and critical, a significant increase over that found for jocularity, $z = 3.0, p < .01$. Finally, 74% of these sarcastic utterances were viewed as humorous by at least one of the conversational participants. A very informal analysis suggested that a greater number of the sarcastic comments were viewed as being humorous to the speakers and overhearers than to the addressees, compared to what was obtained in the analysis of the jocular statements.

**Addressee responses.** Thirty-three percent of the time, addressees responded to sarcasm by saying something ironic in return. The fact that almost one-third of all responses (including nonverbal ones) to sarcasm were ironic in some form illustrates how the friends tacitly collaborated to create ironic routines or scenes in the conversations, even if, in some cases, the routine was less than completely playful. In addition, 23% of the responses to sarcasm were literal remarks that clearly indicated some understanding of the first speaker’s ironic intent. Thirteen percent of the responses were simple laughter without any other linguistic ut-
terance. This, too, reflects the addressee’s understanding of some of the original speakers’ playful, ironic intent when using sarcasm. Four percent of the responses indicated that the addressee clearly missed the speaker’s sarcastic intent, a rate similar to the misunderstandings found for jocularity. Finally, 29% of the time, addressees ignored the sarcasm or changed the subject right away. Overall, this analysis of the addressees’ responses to sarcasm reflects the same pattern of data seen in the jocularity data.

Asymmetry. My analysis of the sarcastic statements indicated that 69% presented positive utterances to indirectly convey a negative message (e.g., “You’re just so damn smart,” meaning “You’re not very bright”), whereas 15% presented negative statements to convey positive messages (e.g., “Everyone should abandon their children,” meaning “People need to take care of their children”), a reliable difference, $z = 6.6, p < .001$. Seventeen percent of the sarcastic remarks were either difficult to classify as being positive/negative or negative/positive, or simply expressed an ironic meaning not via opposition. Thus, literal opposition theories of irony fail to account for all aspects of sarcasm.

Hyperbole

Speakers/addressees. Forty-one percent of the hyperbolic remarks were spoken by men, and 59% by women. This pattern differed from that seen with sarcasm, where more men than women spoke sarcastically, $\chi^2(1) = 7.11, p < .01$. Thirty-eight percent of the addressees were men, and 47% were women. Fifteen percent of the hyperbolic remarks were clearly intended for both male and female addressees. Finally, 68% of the hyperboles were spoken to addressees with other overhearers present.

Topics. Forty-four percent of the hyperboles concerned something about the present situation, 15% of the hyperboles concerned something about the addressees, 21% concerned some person(s) not present in the conversation, 8% of these remarks related to the speaker him- or herself, 15% of these remarks concerned some previous utterance in the present conversation, and 6% referred to some past event. Again, very few of the remarks addressed nonhuman concerns.

Echo, pretense, and tone of voice. Only 29% of hyperboles echoed a previous utterance, whereas 62% involved the speaker adopting pretense, a difference that is significant, $z = 2.72, p < .025$. Twenty-six percent of the hyperboles involved both echoic mention and pretense, and 35% involved neither of these factors. These data, once more, show that at least some aspects of irony need not
depend on echoic mention or pretense. Forty-seven percent of the hyperboles were uttered in what judges viewed were special voices. This finding is significantly lower than the proportion of jocular or sarcastic utterances spoken with a special tone of voice, $z = 2.46$ and $2.93$, respectively, with both $p < .05$.

**Mockery, criticism, and humor.** Seventy-six percent of the hyperboles were judged as mocking some person, object, or event. None of these instances of mockery were self-directed (e.g., said by the speaker about the speaker). Only 24% of the hyperboles were seen as being critical, which is also a significant decrease from the 54% found for sarcasm, $z = 5.60$, $p < .001$, but is close to the 28% of critical remarks found for jocular statements. Eighteen percent of the hyperboles were judged as both mocking and critical. Finally, 74% of the hyperboles were viewed as humorous by at least one of the conversational participants.

**Addressee responses.** Twenty-one percent of the time, addressees responded to hyperbole by saying something ironic in return, 38% of the responses to hyperbole were literal remarks that clearly indicated some understanding of the first speaker’s ironic intent, and 21% of the responses were simple laughter without any other linguistic utterance. None of the responses indicated that the addressee clearly missed the speaker’s ironic intent. Finally, 21% of the time, addressees ignored the hyperbole or changed the subject right away.

**Rhetorical Questions**

**Speakers/addressees.** Forty-six percent of the rhetorical questions were spoken by men, and 54% by women. Forty-two percent of the addressees were men, and 36% were women. Twenty-five percent of the rhetorical questions were clearly intended for both male and female addressees. Finally, 46% of the rhetorical questions were spoken to addressees with other overhearers present.

**Topics.** Thirty-eight percent of the rhetorical questions concerned something about the present situation, 29% of the rhetorical questions concerned something about the addressees, 17% concerned some person(s) not present in the conversation, 4% of the rhetorical questions related to the speaker him- or herself, 8% of these remarks concerned some previous utterance in the present conversation, and 4% referred to some past event.
**Echo, pretense, and tone of voice.** Only 25% of rhetorical questions echoed a previous utterance, whereas 42% involved the speaker adopting pretense, a nonsignificant difference. Eight percent of the rhetorical questions involved both echoic mention and pretense, whereas 41% involved neither of these factors. These data, once more, show that at least some aspects of irony need not depend on echoic mention or pretense. Sixty-seven percent of the rhetorical questions were uttered in what judges viewed were special intonational patterns.

**Mockery, criticism, and humor.** Seventy-five percent of the rhetorical questions were judged as mocking some person, object, or event. Eight percent of these instances of mockery were self-directed (e.g., said by the speaker about the speaker). Only 25% of hyperboles were seen as being critical, which is a significant decrease from the 54% found for sarcasm, \( z = 6.11, p < .001 \). Twenty-nine percent of the rhetorical questions were viewed as both mocking and critical. Finally, 79% of the rhetorical questions were viewed as humorous by at least one of the conversational participants.

**Addressee responses.** Twenty-one percent of the time, addressees responded to rhetorical questions by saying something ironic in return. Twenty-one percent of the responses to rhetorical questions were literal remarks that clearly indicated some understanding of the first speaker’s ironic intent. Twenty-five percent of the responses were simple laughter without any other linguistic utterance. None of the responses indicated that the addressee clearly missed the speaker’s ironic intent. Finally, 33% of the time, addressees ignored the hyperbole or changed the subject right away.

Understatements

**Speakers/addressees.** Eighty-three percent of the understatements were made by men, and 17% by women. Sixty-seven percent of the addressees were men, and 33% were women. Finally, 50% of the understatements were spoken to addressees with other overhearers present.

**Topics.** Fifty percent of the statements referred to past events. Thirty-three percent of the understatements concerned something about the present situation. Seventeen percent concerned some person(s) not present in the conversation. None of the understatements concerned something about the addressees.
Echo, pretense, and tone of voice. None of the understatements echoed a previous utterance, whereas 50% involved the speaker adopting pretense. These data, once more, show that at least some aspects of irony need not depend on echoic mention or pretense. Fifty percent of the understatements were uttered in what judges viewed were special voices.

Mockery, criticism, and humor. Fifty percent of the understatements were judged as mocking some person, object, or event. None of the understatements were seen as being critical, which is also a significant decrease from the percentages seen for the other types of irony. Finally, 33% of the understatements were viewed as humorous by at least one of the conversational participants.

Addressee responses. Thirty-three percent of the time, addressees responded to understatements by saying something ironic in return. Thirty-three percent of the responses to understatements were literal remarks that clearly indicated some understanding of the first speaker’s ironic intent. Seventeen percent of the responses were simple laughter without any other linguistic utterance. Seventeen percent of the responses indicated that the addressee clearly missed the speaker’s ironic intent (a high proportion, but based on only one error).

Summary of Analyses Across Different Types of Irony

I have selectively reported some of the most notable differences that arise across the analyses of the five main types of irony. For the most part, the statistical tests reported earlier were those that related to specific empirical hypotheses. This section briefly summarizes these findings as they relate to the specific aims of the study outlined in the introduction. Because of the small number of understatements, I have excluded these in what follows.

First, the most frequent type of irony found in this corpus was jocularity, followed by sarcasm, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, and understatements. Second, the most notable sex difference in the use of irony was that men spoke more sarcastically than did women, as opposed to women using hyperbole more so than men, while there were no significant differences in the patterns of men and women using jocularity and rhetorical questions. Third, the topics mentioned in speakers’ ironic utterances did not change noticeably across the five types of irony. In each case, the topic of each utterance type was invariably focused on some, usually immediate, human concern, most often having to do with the conversational participants or some person or event known to the participants.
There were differences in the degree to which the speakers’ ironic utterances involved echo, involved pretense, or were spoken in a special tone of voice. The main differences here were that people using sarcasm and hyperbole adopted pretense much more so than they echoed a previous statement, whereas speakers of jocularity employed pretense and echo mention with near equal frequency. Speakers often used various special tones of voices with each type of ironic utterance, especially with sarcasm, jocularity, and rhetorical questions.

Overall, speakers of sarcasm were significantly more critical and mocking of others than were speakers of jocularity, hyperbole, and rhetorical questions. Almost all of the ironic utterances, with the exception of understatements, were viewed as humorous. Most notably here, there appears to be a strong association between an ironic utterance mocking someone or something and it being viewed as humorous.

Another interesting finding was that addressees frequently responded to speakers’ ironic statements by saying something ironic in return. This averaged from 21% to 33% across the five types of irony. There were fairly consistent numbers of addressees laughing in response to the five types of irony, ranging from 12% to 25%.

Finally, 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.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The research reported here illustrates some of the important complexities in ironic talk among friends. My study departs from traditional sociolinguistic and ethnographic analyses in that I have collected a large number of conversations and systematically analyzed these along a number of quantifiable dimensions. Although my conclusions are restricted to how college students speak to one another in the late 1990s, it seems clear that the present findings reveal the prominence of irony in interpersonal communication. Speaking ironically 8% of the time demonstrates that irony is not a specific rhetorical device only to be used in unusual circumstances. People comfortably use various forms of irony (i.e., jocularity, sarcasm, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, and understatement) to convey a wide range of both blatant and subtle interpersonal meanings.

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 meanings. My analysis of the college student corpus did not even distinguish irony from sarcasm, hyperboles, understatement, and so on, but sees irony as a more general category under
which various subtypes of irony exist. Most notably, I’ve emphasized the crucial role that jocularity (or ironic banter or teasing) plays in ordinary language use. All five types of irony studied here mocked other people or objects to a high degree, especially sarcasm. Yet all five forms of irony were viewed as being quite humorous to at least some of the addressees and overhearers, with jocular utterances overall being the most often humorous. Sarcastic remarks were seen as more critical and somewhat more mocking than are jocularity, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, and understatements. The fact that judges did not see the nonsarcastic remarks as being all that critical illustrates the playful nature of many aspects of irony, where speakers tease one another without the intention to seriously harm or criticize. Even the more critical sarcastic comments were often viewed as critical only 50% of the time, with close to 75% of all sarcastic remarks being viewed as humorous. Sarcastic remarks also exhibited a distinctive asymmetry in that these are far more often stated by men than are the other forms of irony. The five types of irony considered here are clearly used to address human concerns and, thus, possibly differ from metaphor in that metaphorical utterances refer to a wide range of human and nonhuman events and issues (Katz, 1996b).

One of the debates in psycholinguistics over the best theory for irony understanding centers on the importance of echoic mention, pretense, and allusional reminders (and pretense) in conveying ironic meaning. The data presented here do not provide a clear solution to which of these perspectives best accounts for ironic language use. My results strongly indicate that not all ironic utterances rely on echoic mention or pretense, with some ironic expressions having nothing to do with either of these factors. There are differences among the five types of irony such that jocular remarks involve significantly greater degrees of echoic mention than do the other forms of irony, while pretense, overall, is seen as more important for irony than is echoic mention. Kumon-Nakamura et al.’s (1995) allusional pretense theory may provide the more comprehensive theoretical umbrella under which to fit the diverse forms of ironic language use revealed in these conversations among friends. In particular, the two main conditions for irony, according to the allusional-pretense view, that ironic language calls attention to some expectation that has been violated and critically involves pragmatic insincerity, may handle a variety of cases, ranging from light-hearted teasing to negative sarcastic remarks. I was not able to look closely in any systematic way at the different ways that the 289 ironic utterances alluded to failed expectations and were reflective of pragmatic insincerity precisely because it is almost impossible from the outside to know with any certainty what conversational participants mutually believe or know. Yet it seems clear that almost every ironic utterance in the corpus examined here alluded to speakers’ and listeners’ expectations and indirectly conveyed speaker’s attitudes through some form of pragmatic insincerity. One tentative step toward finding more convincing evidence in favor of this idea, in addition to the laboratory data presented by Kumon-Nakamura et al., is to actually interview conversational participants about what they said, specifically
looking for information as to their own understandings of the groups’ expectations when each ironic utterance was stated.

Although speakers need not convey their ironic messages in a special tone of voice, the speaker’s intonation is often seen as an important clue to ironic meaning. One difficulty with this conclusion is that there appears not to be a single pattern of prosodic cues when people speak ironically. Certain words are sometimes stressed, and there often is an exaggerated emphasis, occasionally accompanied by a slowing down of the speaking rate, for certain phrases, especially for sarcasm. But the wide variety of prosodic cues noted by judges in this study suggests that no single pattern accounts for all uses where people believed that an ironic utterance was spoken in a special tone of voice. Moreover, my own belief is that listeners will often perceive that a speaker’s ironic message was stated with special prosodic cues, but that judgment may often be determined after the listener has understood what is said as having ironic meaning. Nonironic utterances may conceivably share similar intonational qualities with some ironic remarks, yet people tend not to see these as particularly special given that the speaker’s message is not ironic. This observation suggests that future work needs to examine the exact role that intonational cues play in listener’s online processing of ironic messages. As Gibbs (1986a, 1986b), for one, showed, people can easily understand sarcastic comments without special intonational cues. This does not deny that tone of voice is one of a set of heuristics that listeners may use to infer ironic meaning (Kreuz, 1996). But exactly how this works, and how important tone of voice is for comprehending irony, as compared to literal utterances stated in the same tone of voice, are questions for future research.

Perhaps the most interesting findings from this project were the large degree to which addressees responded to a speaker’s irony by saying something ironic in return. This result has not been previously noted, but suggests how irony is as much a state of mind jointly created by speakers and listeners, as it is a special kind of figurative language. The give-and-take nature of irony also illustrates the importance of collaboration and coordination in psychological models of speaking and listening (Clark, 1996). Yet people’s conceptual understanding of various people, events, and objects as being ironic (Gibbs, 1994; Lucariello, 1994) underlies a great part of why speakers choose to express their beliefs and attitudes via different forms of ironic language. These ironic conceptualizations are often part of speakers’ and listeners’ common ground such that people will create ironic routines to exploit, and indeed celebrate, their mutual recognition of life’s ironies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Albert Katz and Herbert Colston for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.
REFERENCES


