

A cognitive-pragmatic account of axiological neutrality in ironic constructions.

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ABSTRACT

The constructional element of irony has been noted by Veale (2012) and Veale & Hao (2010), who claim that ironic interpretation can be triggered by conventionalized constructions that bear a high ironic potential, as is the case of ‘about as X as Y’ (*About as fun as watching paint dry*). In inferential pragmatics, Attardo (2000) identifies ‘indices of irony’ (e.g. agreement markers such as ‘yeah’, ‘right’, ‘sure’), which, in our view, can be regarded as contributing factors or constraints on the characterization of potentially ironic constructions. The present paper addresses the constructional dimension of irony, with special emphasis on the axiological element of potentially ironic constructions, and it explains implicational constructions and attitudinal and denotational figures of speech in relation to irony. Axiology relates to the positive or negative evaluation of the various elements of an utterance and is based on its explicit content and its additional meaning implications. For instance, in the example mentioned above, the axiological load of the construction depends largely on the meaning implications of the monotonous and uneventful activity of observing paint dry. The heavy attitudinal element of irony makes this figure of speech a particularly fertile ground for the study of axiological neutrality and non-neutrality. The present paper provides a preliminary approach to the strategies that serve the purpose of triggering the ironic interpretation of utterances.

Keywords: irony, potentially ironic constructions, axiological neutrality, implicational construction, attitudinal and denotational figures of speech.

I. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, irony has sparked the curiosity of scholars developing their work in a broad range of disciplines. The result has been a varied and multifaceted body of academic work that has addressed a number of aspects of this phenomenon, ranging from its literary use to its implementation in natural language processing systems within artificial intelligence. Within linguistics, especially in pragmatics, much of the work has been supported by psycholinguistic research, which has provided experimental evidence that is consistent with linguistic claims (Sperber & Wilson, 1981, 1995; Clark & Gerrig, 1984; Wilson & Sperber, 2012; Athanasiadou, 2017a&b; Barnden, 2017). Additionally, Cognitive Linguistics, specifically Blending Theory (cf. Coulson, 2005; Tobin & Israel, 2012) and cognitive modeling (cf. Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez & Lozano, 2021; Lozano & Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2022), have addressed the study of the cognitive mechanisms that underlie ironic production and interpretation.

A substantial amount of the scholarly work produced within the fields of literary theory, pragmatics, and rhetoric has focused on the impact that socio-cultural variables have on ironic communication, which has been assumed to be mostly inferential. The present study departs from this previous work in emphasizing the need to pay greater attention to the constructional aspects of irony, which have been largely ignored by the tradition. As a starting point, studies

such as those carried out by Muecke (1970) and Attardo (2000) have noted the existence of conventional linguistic and paralinguistic resources that point to the likely or even certain presence of irony in an utterance. These resources, respectively labelled by both as ‘ironic markers’ and ‘ironic indices’, serve the purpose of facilitating the identification of an ironic statement as such. One example of such indices is prosody. An exaggerated prosody is more likely to draw the hearer’s attention to a potentially ironic meaning. Similarly, extra-clausal agreement adverbs such as ‘yeah’, ‘right’, ‘sure’, and ‘absolutely’ direct the hearer towards ironic interpretation by signaling the speaker’s dissociation from the content of the utterance to which they apply.

Goldberg (1995, 2006) defines constructions as form-meaning pairings that, at a cognitive level, lay the non-inferential groundwork for meaning representation. It can be argued that ironic markers or indices have a constructional nature, since they are conventional and they are frequently associated with ironic meaning. An example can be found in the potentially ironic constructional pattern ‘about as X as Y’ (Veale, 2012) (e.g. *About as easy as trying to sleep the night before Christmas as a child*), where the variables X and Y provide the points of contrast that trigger ironic interpretation.

The present study focuses on the constructional dimension of irony and pays special attention to the axiological element of potentially ironic constructions. Axiology in language relates to the positive or negative evaluation of sentential elements. Normally, axiology is polarized, but it can also be gradual. By default, a potentially ironic construction has a negative axiology since it conveys the speaker’s skepticism toward a state of affairs. However, the specification of constructional variables, the speaker’s world knowledge, and the context play an important role in the final ironic interpretation of an utterance based on a potentially ironic construction. For instance, the axiology of the expression *As useful as buying one shoe* depends on our ability to evaluate, on the basis of world knowledge, the logic behind buying one single shoe instead of a pair.

In light of this, there is a need to specify the conditions for formal linguistic resources to be regarded as potentially ironic, while considering the role of axiology in facilitating ironic interpretation. Thus, the present paper aims at providing answers to the following questions: (1) what are the constructional elements that constrain the production and interpretation of irony?; (2) how do they interact?; and (3) what is the role of axiology in relation to them? Based on previous preliminary explorations, this paper (i) outlines the basic principles regulating the use of irony-conveying constructional mechanisms, and (ii) studies their ironic potential in terms of their axiological neutrality and non-neutrality.

II. ON IRONY AND ITS CONSTRUCTIONAL ELEMENT

This section assumes that ironic meaning can be captured by cognitively entrenched form-meaning pairings, whose meaning part, which is attitudinal in essence, expresses the speaker’s dissociation from a previously-held assumption. As is explained in more detail in subsection 1 below, the attitudinal component of irony is adjusted inferentially according to textual and contextual factors. Consequently, the resulting interpretation of the linguistic realization of an ironic construction is not just given by the construction itself. We have identified two factors that shape the way ironic constructions are built: (i) the speaker’s intuitive awareness of the communicative role played by the two contrasting elements of verbal irony, and (ii) the speaker’s ability to shape and then use formal linguistic clues, which provide access to a fixed range of meaning implications. By way of illustration, let us look at the following sentences:

- (1) What is the dog doing?

What is the dog doing in the street?
What is the dog doing in the street without a leash?
What is the dog doing in the street without a leash when there is so much traffic?

As noted in Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (2015: 265), the more we elaborate sentences of this kind, the clearer the implication becomes that the speaker does not lack the information that he or she appears to request. A higher degree of elaboration involves a greater degree of knowledge, and therefore, a lesser likelihood that the speaker may not have the information in question.

In line with this observation, the question addressed in this section is how the attitudinal element in irony is connected to the formal constructional layouts (i.e. the formal patterns that bear a high potential to convey ironic meaning). The following sections will provide an overview of irony as a linguistic phenomenon (subsection 1), explain the distinction between denotational and attitudinal figures of speech (subsection 2), and address the role of implicational constructions in irony (subsection 3). The aim of the subsections in II is to account for the features of irony that regulate its constructional uses.

1. A note on irony

Before delving into the explanation of the constructional element of irony, it is convenient to outline the main theoretical principles that define the phenomenon in question. The approach taken here has been dealt with in detail in Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez & Lozano (2021) and Lozano & Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (2022). Let us briefly summarize the aspects of this previous work that are relevant for the present study.

Initially, Grice (1975) defined irony as a flouting of the Maxim of Quality of the Cooperative Principle. Additionally, Grice considered that the ironic speaker “must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward” (Grice, 1975: 53). In line with this idea, Clark & Gerrig (1984) developed Pretense Theory, structured around Grice’s claim that irony is built around an act of pretense. Essentially, according to the pretense account of irony, when we use this figure of speech, the ironic speaker pretends to be an ill-informed person speaking to an ignorant hearer. However, the speaker’s real aim is for the addressee to discover the speaker’s pretense and consequently, their attitude towards the speaker, the hearer, and the content of the utterance. Nevertheless, one problem with the pretense account is that other figurative uses of language can also be considered pretense acts. This is the case of hyperbole (e.g. *This suitcase weights a ton*), or that of metaphor (e.g. *Her eyes are diamonds in the sky*). In both cases, the speaker pretends to believe in impossible events or situations. Pretense is, however, a common denominator in all acts of verbal irony since the speaker never tells a literal truth but something someone else believes to be the case.

On the other hand, Relevance Theory argues that irony is based on echoic mention, that is, in the total or partial repetition of a previous utterance or thought from which the speaker feels dissociated (Wilson & Sperber, 2012). Critics of this approach have pointed out a variety of factors, mainly the apparent absence of echoic mention in some cases of irony (e.g. Hamamoto, 1998; Seto, 1998). However, further developments of Relevance Theory have addressed these claims by pointing out that echoes may not be explicit, but also implicit, and that thoughts may also be attributed.

Despite being competing accounts, some scholars (e.g. Popa-Wyatt, 2014; Garmendia, 2018) have noted that the echoic and the pretense approaches to irony are not only compatible but also complementary to each other. There are indeed analytically productive elements in both approaches that can be combined. A possible synthesis of both approaches can be found in the cognitive-linguistic proposal made by Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez & Lozano (2021).

According to this approach, verbal irony involves a clash between an echoed set of expectations that someone regards as highly likely or certain to occur, with which the speaker pretends to agree, and attested reality. This clash reveals the speaker's attitude towards the content of the utterance. In this approach, the relevance-theoretic notion of 'echo' is expanded to that of 'echoing', which is regarded as the cognitive operation that results in echoic mention (Lozano & Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2022). In this framework, affirmation adverbs, such as 'yeah', 'right', or 'sure', can be used by themselves or in combination with a full or partial echo to express pretended agreement. For example, the utterance *Your bag is not that heavy after all* can be questioned by simply saying *Yeah, sure*, with vowel lengthening and falling intonation, or by adding an echo, whether full (*Yeah, sure, my bag is not that heavy after all*) or partial (*Yeah, sure, not that heavy*). In this last case, the partial echo serves a focal prominence function that results in a more emphatic ironic attitude (cf. Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2017: 184).

The inferential activity underlying ironic meaning derivation is based on a reasoning schema where an initial belief is counter-evidenced by its opposite. The speaker expects this counterevidence to be manifest to the hearer, who is additionally expected to cancel the initial belief and replace it by the right assumption. A more detailed description of this process can be found in Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez & Lozano (2021).

2. Denotational and attitudinal figures of speech

The use of figurative language is strongly inferential. However, as is the case with implicational constructions, ironic meaning inferences may be associated conventionally with specific form patterns that give rise to constructions with various degrees of ironic potential. Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (2020) distinguishes between two types of figures of speech: denotational and attitudinal. The former figures have a re-construal function, as is the case of metaphor, metonymy, simile, paradox, and oxymoron. The main function of the latter is to convey speaker's attitude, as is the case of hyperbole and irony. By way of illustration, let us compare metaphor and hyperbole. In metaphor we may treat goals as if they were destinations (*We are getting closer to our goal*), quantity as if it were height (*Temperatures are rising*), affection as if it were warmth (*He is a warm person*), and so on. To some extent, hyperbole follows a comparable reasoning pattern. For example, in *This suitcase weighs a ton* we reason about a heavy suitcase as if it were a one-ton suitcase. However, hyperbole brings into the reasoning pattern a non-denotational dimension that becomes fundamental to its meaning. The 'as if' reasoning is not as much about the object itself as about how the speaker feels about the object. An excessively heavy suitcase is a nuisance. In terms of 'as if' reasoning, the real suitcase bothers the speaker as much as an imaginary one-ton suitcase. The exaggeration ingredient gears interpretation into the non-denotational realm while enhancing its impact.

Irony, like hyperbole, is also a matter of attitudinal meaning. Broadly speaking, the central meaning implication in irony is that of showing dissociation from a state of affairs someone else believes to be true. This dissociation is parametrized contextually in the form of skepticism, mockery, wryness, etc. (Wilson & Sperber, 2012). Ironic meaning can be produced inferentially by offering the hearer a representation of an attested situation or a representation of a previous utterance or thought. Let us imagine an echoic expression with ironic potential. Alicia and Carla have made plans to travel together to Mallorca in the summer, where the likelihood to have sunny weather is very high. However, unfortunately, a cold front causes unpredictably heavy rains, ruining their trip. When they are about to board the plane back home, the skies clear and the sun starts to shine. With ironic disappointment, Carla remarks: *Well, the perfect sunny holiday in Spain!* This expression is doubly ironic. The first irony can be found in the clash between what Carla says and the weather reality of their holiday. The second one arises from the fact that the only day with sunny weather is their departure day, which means

they can no longer enjoy the sunshine. This second layer, which is built on the first one, intensifies the impact of the ironic utterance by means of inferential mechanisms.

3. Implicational constructions

Cognitive Linguistics understands grammar as a *repertoire* of constructions that relate to one another through meaning extension and inheritance mechanisms that give rise to a variety of constructional groupings called families (cf. Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez et al., 2017). In this context, constructions are typically defined as cognitively entrenched and socially conventional form-meaning/function pairings (Goldberg, 1995, 2006), where meaning motivates form and form is the expression of meaning (Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2013).

Implicational constructions can be defined as form-meaning associations which cognitively entrench and socially conventionalize meaning implications that convey subjective attitudinal meaning (Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2015). One example can be found in the construction ‘What’s X doing Y?’, studied by Kay & Fillmore (1999), which conveys the meaning that the speaker is annoyed by the situation described in the construction. This construction has two variables, X and Y. Y is realized by using a gerund whose function is to specify the generic action of doing (e.g. *What is your dog doing peeing in your bathtub?*). Here, the Y variable is saturated by any number of circumstantial complements that outline the conditions for the action in X to take place. If we modify the above-mentioned example into *What is your dog doing in your bathroom?*, Y is complemented by an expression of location, which provides the hearer with sufficient information to infer that the speaker already knows what the dog is doing. The guiding principle underlying the meaning of this construction is based on the fact that providing a detailed elaboration of Y is used by speakers to reveal their knowledge of the answer to their own question. Since it is not logical to ask a question whose answer is already known, a plausible inference is that the speaker is drawing our attention to a specific aspect of the situation to trigger an inference about how the speaker feels about such a situation.

Another instance of implicational construction is ‘That’s rather X (isn’t it?)’ (*That’s a rather strong accusation, isn’t it?*). This construction profiles the undesirability of the state of affairs designated by the expression from the speaker’s point of view. The tag, ‘isn’t it’, reflects the speaker’s search for confirmation, and is fully consistent with this entrenched meaning implication. This kind of construction is based on attitudinal scenarios that capture the speaker’s emotional response to events or situations.

In sum, figurative language is heavily inferential. However, in implicational constructions, meaning inferences can be conventionally associated with specific formal patterns that result in figurative language constructions. Given its attitudinal nature, irony is particularly fertile ground for implicational constructions. For example, if we change the example above to *That’s a rather mild accusation, isn’t it?*, in a context where the speaker has been accused of being a racist, the utterance takes on ironic meaning. The X variable (‘mild’) provides a point of contrast with the attested situation (the accusation of racism).

III. AXIOLOGY in ironic constructions

Axiology relates to the positive or negative evaluation of the various elements of an utterance. Since utterances result from the activation or coactivation of constructional configurations, it follows that constructions can have an inherent axiology. The axiology of a construction is based on its explicit content and its additional meaning implications. For instance, in the expression *about as fun as watching paint dry*, which realizes the construction ‘About as X as Y’, the axiological load largely depends on the meaning implications of

observing paint drying, which is a monotonous and uneventful activity. Given the heavy attitudinal load of irony, examining its axiological component sheds light on the formal mechanisms that trigger the clash between the speaker's expectations and attested reality, on the one hand, and the attitudinal component, on the other hand. Conveying skepticism towards a state of affairs involves a reversal of expectations, which is, furthermore, socially impolite (Lozano & Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2022). The following subsections will explain axiological neutrality and non-neutrality and how it becomes manifest in ironic constructions.

1. Axiologically non-neutral constructions

We define axiologically non-neutral constructions as those that are inherently positive or negative. Let us take the syntactic pattern 'I love things that X', which is formed by a relatively fixed part ('I love things that') and a variable element (X). This pattern is used to make a generic statement about what the speaker likes, as in the following example: *I love things that make me smile*. By changing X, we may turn this pattern into one that expresses dislike, as is the case of *I love things that make me want to die*. Interestingly, the pattern that contains a positive clause can easily change meaning if replaced by something that is admittedly undesirable (e.g. wanting to die). This potential for polysemy endows the construction with ironic potential (*I love things that make me throw up; I love things that give me the creeps; I love things that scare me*). This means that 'I love things that X' is a potentially ironic construction as long as the X variable fulfills the axiological condition of being undesirable. In this regard, it should also be noted that an ironic effect might also be achieved by using the axiologically positive variant of the construction, provided that the attested situation supplies the points of contrast, as is the case of *I love things that make me feel useful* when the speaker has just been fired. Additionally, similar communicative purposes may be achieved by using similar inferential mechanisms: *Isn't it nice to feel useful?; I definitely like it when people make me feel useful*, etc.

Let us then consider the constructional patterns 'X just like(s) / love(s) / adore(s) Y', and 'How I love / like / adore X'. Evaluative verbs such as 'like' or 'love' can be used to show more or less intense liking towards something, which is especially relevant when it comes to analyzing potentially ironic constructions, since any verbal irony, by showing dissociation, involves the expression of an attitude. In 'How I love / like / adore X', the X variable can be presented as positive through textual clues or on the basis of the context. However, if the variable is felt to be negative, it will take a turn towards ironic meaning. An instance can be found in the utterance *How I like a good home-made roast dinner*. In this example, the default positive meaning that the speaker likes home-made roast dinners arises as a result of the meaning implications of eating a roast dinner. However, the expression can become ironic if the X variable is felt to be negative (i.e. if the speaker does not like roast dinners). This means that the ironic potential of 'How I love X' is higher than for other expressions that are axiologically more neutral.

In the case of the construction 'X just like(s) / love(s) / adore(s) Y', where Y is a dislikeable state of affairs, we find an echoic sentence that makes reference to what the hearer thinks of X. For instance, the utterance *My mum just loves the way I spend my weekends bungee-jumping* echoes the hearer's belief about the pleasure of bungee-jumping. However, this echo clashes with X's opinion that bungee-jumping is a dangerous activity. The adverb 'just' is key to this construction since, from a syntactic perspective, it is an optional clausal element. However, it works as an emphasizer conveying exactness thereby increasing the axiological intensity brought about by the use of the verb 'love'. In the example above, the echoic implication is that the speaker's mother exactly likes her child's habit of bungee-

jumping on weekends, while the opposite is the case. ‘Just’ therefore acts as a facilitator of the ironic reading of the construction.

2. Axiologically neutral constructions

An axiologically neutral construction is one that is not inherently positive or negative, but that can acquire either value contextually. Axiologically neutral expressions use other linguistic mechanisms to acquire ironic value. For instance, let us take the following statement: *My neighbor owns a video store*. In principle, this statement is not evaluative; it simply provides information about the type of business the speaker’s neighbor owns. However, let us imagine a situation where Lou and Pauline are having a conversation about how they fail to understand how some of the businesses in their city can be profitable. Lou, who has been suspicious about her neighbor’s video store then says: *Well, my neighbor owns a video store...* Given that the statement is uttered in 2023, when almost all video stores have been replaced by streaming platforms such as Netflix or HBO, there is little chance that a video store is a profitable business unless some side activity is carried out there. In this case, the statement takes on a negative load based on the meaning implications that arise from the point of contrast provided by the context. The use of ‘well’ points to the speaker’s reservations regarding the veracity of the statement. Now, let us take another example. Imagine that the statement *My neighbor owns a video store* is uttered by Pauline as a reply to Lou’s question about what her neighbor does for a living. Later on, they find out that, to their surprise, Pauline’s neighbor has been found guilty of trafficking with drugs and has been using his video store as a business base. Lou remembers Pauline’s statement and repeats it: *I see, your neighbor owns a video store!* This newly discovered situation contrasts with the content of Pauline’s initial statement, which is then echoed and given evaluative overtones. The irony involved in the statement results from Pauline’s skepticism towards the veracity of the original content. By adding the extra-clausal constituent ‘I see’, the speaker is adding pragmatic value to the utterance and pointing to its intended ironic meaning. It shows that Lou is now aware of the truth about Pauline’s neighbor’s business.

We have observed two types of ironic facilitators. On the one hand, the last example about the video store featured a pointer to irony (‘I see’) that makes reference to the speaker’s capacity to understand whether the statement is true or false by using the metaphor UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING. Similar ironic facilitators include ‘It’s clear that X’, ‘Evidently X’, ‘Therefore X’, ‘You see, X’. ‘These facilitators point to the contrast between the statement and the attested situation. On the other hand, the use of agreement-showing or affirmative adverbial expressions such as ‘yeah’, ‘sure’, ‘right’ more broadly act as pretended agreement markers by pointing to the ironic echo. Their work as irony facilitators is carried out by strengthening the expression of pretended agreement rather than pointing to the attested situation, as can be observed in the variant of the previous example *Yeah, right, your neighbor owns a video store!* In this case, the two agreement adverbs cooperate with echoic mention to produce an almost unmistakable case of ironic utterance. These facilitators are at times accompanied by non-verbal expressive devices, as is the case of head-nods, which reinforce the idea of pretended agreement; on other occasions, these devices enhance the attitudinal component of the utterance, as is the case of wry facial expression or a mocking voice tone.

IV. CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided evidence in favor of the constructional dimension of irony, which needs to be taken into account alongside the traditional inferential approach to this figure of speech. Speakers can use linguistic resources to afford conventionally stable access to ironic

meaning. This means that there exist constructional strategies that serve the purpose of triggering the ironic interpretation of utterances. These strategies require detailed examination. The present chapter has offered a preliminary approach in this regard.

The distinction between denotational and attitudinal figures of speech sheds light on the evaluative component of irony, which is aimed at the expression of emotion rather than at reconstruing meaning, as is the case of metaphor. Constructions capturing attitudinal figurative meaning are related to implicational constructions, which cognitively entrench and socially conventionalize speaker's attitude. Ironic interpretation very often relies on socially conventionalized opinions and is based on attitudinal scenarios that capture the ironist's emotional response to situations or events.

Constructions that have the capacity of affording access to ironic meaning can be axiologically neutral or non-neutral. When the fixed part of the construction is positive and the variables are implicitly or explicitly negative, their formal patterns present a higher ironic potential, since they provide points of contrast between the content of the statement and attested reality. On the other hand, when the fixed part is axiologically neutral, evidential expressions may be used to facilitate the ironic interpretation of meaning, as long as they point to a clash between the situation and the echoed expression. Nevertheless, other irony-facilitating devices, labeled 'indices of irony' or 'ironic markers' in the scholarly literature, can work by expressing pretended agreement, a function of irony which is often achieved through echoic expressions.

As opposed to agreement markers, which, in being extra-clausal elements, are more versatile in their placement, irony-conveying constructions have more elaborate fixed parts and their use is more constrained. This greater degree of formal elaboration also correlates with a higher ironic potential. One example, studied in the present paper, is the construction 'about as X as Y'. In this construction, the ironic meaning arises when (X), which is generally positive, is contradicted by comparing the situation that it qualifies to an absurd (often hyperbolic) situation, which is depicted in Y. This situation is seen as negative. The X part thus echoes someone's falsely positive evaluation of a situation that is manifestly negative from the speaker's perspective. To evidence its negative nature the speaker constructs an analogy between the real situation (which is to be derived from the context) and the absurd depiction provided by Y.

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VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding for the research on which this chapter is based has been provided by Spanish Ministry of Science, and Innovation, State Research Agency, project no. PID2020-118349GB-I00.