
Not the case in verbal irony: An experimental study on the type of denial in ironic interpretation

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Verbal irony involves expressing a meaning opposite to the literal interpretation, typically through contrast and contextual cues. Consider (1), uttered after a colleague earning over €100,000 contributes only one euro to a farewell gift. The statement conveys the opposite of generosity, reinforced by scare quotes.

(1) Wow, that was really “generous”!

This study investigates the form of denial underlying verbal irony, leaving aside factors such as echoing or pretense (Wilson 2006). While one view holds that irony entails an underlying negation – a mental rejection of the literal meaning (‘not X’; Giora 1995) – others treat it as a pragmatic mismatch (Attardo 2000) or as invoking conventionalized lexical opposites such as *generous* – *stingy* (Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995).

To examine what kind of “not-the-case” relation best captures irony, we report on an empirical study on German data. Participants read a short context followed by an ironic utterance (e.g., *Wow, das war wirklich „großzügig“!*) and then rate how well several variants corresponded to the original ironic utterance: (a) *nicht großzügig* (propositional negation), (b) *unangemessen* (pragmatic mismatch), (c) *geizig* (lexical opposite), or (d) an incongruent filler (*staubig*). Ratings are given on a 5-point Likert scale for correspondence to the original utterance.

Preliminary results indicate that ironic utterances align most strongly with propositional negation, suggesting that irony predominantly instantiates indirect denial. We discuss these findings in relation to classifications of negation and the interaction between evaluative and propositional meaning in irony. This approach refines the analysis of indirectness and layered interpretation, clarifying how ironic meaning operates across descriptive and attitudinal levels.

References: • Attardo, S. (2000). Irony as relevant inappropriateness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32(6), 793–826. • Curcó, C. (2000). Irony: Negation, echo, and metarepresentation. *Lingua*, 110, 257–280. • Giora, R. (1995). On irony and negation. *Discourse Processes*, 19, 239–264. • Kumon-Nakamura, S., Glucksberg, S., & M. Brown (1995). How about another piece of pie: The allusional pretense theory of discourse irony. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 124(1), 3–21. • Wilson, D. (2006). The pragmatics of verbal irony: Echo or pretence? *Lingua*, 116, 1722–1743.