

'Well, that's just great!' – An empirically based analysis of non-literal and attitudinal content of ironic utterances

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While there is a large body of literature on the informational status of attitudinal content that is literal, e.g., Carrus (2017); Potts (2007), analyses of non-literal attitudinal content as involved, for instance, in verbal irony is sparse. Consider the example in (1), uttered ironically.

(1) [*After breaking a plate*] Well, that's just great!

The utterance asserts the opposite of the expression's literal meaning. The non-literalness of the expression's descriptive content is a central characteristic of ironic and sarcastic language, see, e.g., Sperber & Wilson (1981). From a semantic viewpoint, verbal irony has been analyzed to involve a form of (indirect) negation, see Giora (1995). A second component of verbal irony involves an evaluation by the speaker, see, among others, Dews & Winner (1999); Kreuz & Glucksberg (1989), which materializes as ironic criticism in the example: By saying something positive, the speaker conveys a negative attitude towards the corresponding denotatum, that is, the plate's broken state. Ironic criticism is commonly considered the default mode, as opposed to ironic praise (saying something negative to convey a positive attitude), which has been argued to be more marked and subject to stronger use restrictions, see Wilson (2013).

The present paper aims at determining how the two meaning components of ironic utterances blend into the spectrum between primary and secondary content, that is, the spectrum between at-issue and not-at-issue content, see, among others, Fintel (2004); Tonhauser (2012). At-issue content addresses the question under discussion in a conversational exchange and is responsive to a direct negation like *No, that is not true*, whereas not-at-issue content can only be indirectly rejected by means of a discourse-interrupting protest (e.g., *Wait a second ...*). Consider the example in (2), again uttered ironically, and note the contrast between the direct and the indirect rejection in (3) and (4).

(2) [*After a questionable performance*] That lead singer really hit every note.

(3) ??No, that is not true, the performance was flawless.

(4) Wait a second, the performance was flawless.

We report on results from two rating studies conducted in German in which the appropriateness of direct or indirect rejections following ironic and non-ironic content embedded in small dialogues was examined. Participants were instructed to rate which of the two rejections "fits the context better and sounds more natural" (5-point scale; 1 = direct rejection / at issue, 5 = indirect / not at issue). In the first study, see Härtl & Seeliger (2019), using 20 utterance-rejection pairs (participants $n = 55$), the distancing modifier *sogenannt* ('so-called' as in *The so-called beach was a thin strip of black volcanic grit*) was employed to signal a non-literal, ironic use of the head noun, i.e., *beach*. The results indicate that the non-literalness of the noun's meaning in constructions of this sort is treated as less at issue than literal (entailed) content but as more at issue than the speaker's attitude to evaluate the head's denotatum negatively.

In a follow-up study, participants ($n = 62$) rated rejections of ironic and non-ironic contents contained in an utterance's predicate complex, presented in small dialogues ($n = 40$) following a context (context sentences – utterance speaker A – rejection speaker B, see the example stimulus in (5) below). The results of the variance analysis (Generalized Linear Mixed Model) again indicate that non-literal, ironic content (NLC) is treated as less at issue than literal content (EC) but as more at issue than ironic attitudinal content (Eval), see Figure 1. Further, no difference was observed between attitudinal content manifested as ironic criticism (NegEval) and content manifested as ironic praise (PosEval). We interpret these effects to be rooted in the specific pragmatic status of ironic contents, which figure as implicatures in a conversational exchange and, thus, are less prone to directly contribute to the question under discussion. Our findings support the notion of at-issueness as a graded criterion and can be used to argue that verbal irony in general, due to its expressive nature, is difficult to reject directly and, thus, be treated as at issue in a discourse.

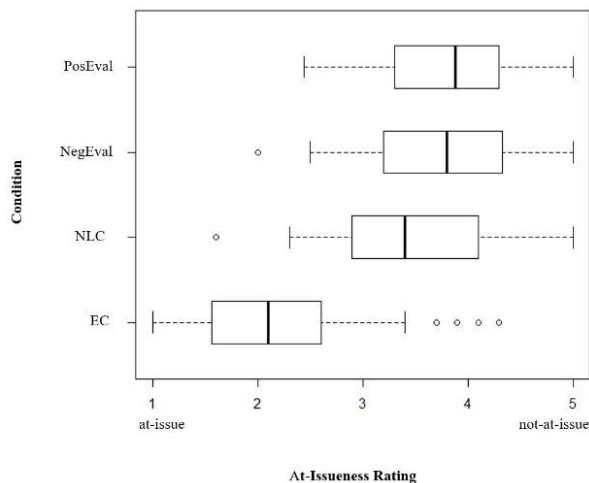
Example stimulus (condition: NegEval)

- (5) Tim und Anna kommen aus der Oper. Die beiden haben morgens noch in der Zeitung gelesen, dass die Aufführung, für die sie Karten reserviert hatten, gut sei und vor allem die Opersänger beeindruckend wären. Tim findet aber, dass der Sopran eine sehr schlechte Performance abgeliefert hat.

‘Tim and Anna leave the opera. In the morning, both of them read in the newspaper that the performance for which they had reserved tickets was good and that the opera singers in particular were impressive. However, Tim finds that the soprano has delivered a very bad performance.’

- a. Tim: *Na, das war ja wirklich eine tolle Performance ...*
PRT, that was PRT PRT a great performance
‘Well, that was a really great performance ...’
- b. Anna: *Das ist nicht wahr, ich fand sie eigentlich ganz gut.*
‘That’s not true, I found it quite good actually.’
- b.’ Anna: *Wart mal, ich fand sie eigentlich ganz gut.*
‘Wait, I found it quite good actually.’

Figure 1: Median ratings across conditions



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