

Ironic utterances involve **two contents** (e.g., Sperber & Wilson 1981; Giora 1995; Dews & Winner 1999).

(1) [At an empty bar] *This place is buzzing with people!*

- **non-literal**, descriptive content ('place isn't buzzing with people')
- **attitudinal**, expressive content ('place is lame')

The attitudinal content can be **negative**, see (1), or **positive**:

(2) [Tom received an A grade] *This is such a bad grade, Tom!*

At-issueness of contents

At-issue (AI) content answers the question under discussion, e.g., Potts (2005); Tonhauser (2012). AI content can be rejected directly, see (3b).

- (3) a. *Kim lives in Paris.*
b. *That is not true – Kim lives in Berlin!*

Not-at-issue (NAI) content can be rejected by means of discourse-interrupting phrases, see (4b), but not directly, see (4b').

- (4) a. *Kim, who lives in Paris, is a writer.*
b. *Wait a second – Kim lives in Berlin!*
b.' *??That is not true – Kim lives in Berlin!*

Ironic contents are not at issue – but to different degrees

- Ironically asserted content figures as an implicature in a conversation
- Speaker attitude does not contribute debatable content to the Common Ground
- At-issueness can be considered a graded notion (Härtl & Seeliger 2019)

Research questions

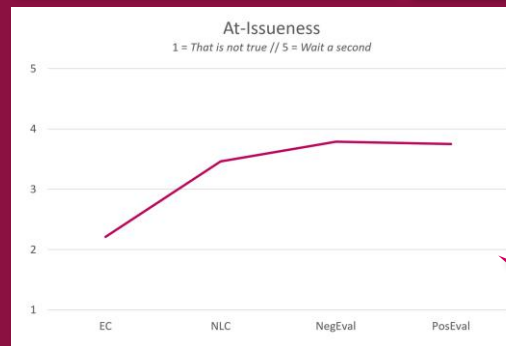
- Is non-literal, ironic content (**NLC**) less at issue than non-ironic, literal content (**EC**)?
- Is non-literal, ironic content more at issue than the utterance's attitudinal content (Eval)?
- Is positive attitudinal content (**PosEval**) more at issue than negative attitudinal content (**NegEval**)?

Rating study

- 10 x 4 dialogues in German
- Variations of rejections
- 5-point Likert scale
- 62 participants
- 1 x 4 repeated-measures variance analysis (GLM)

Sample item (NegEval)

'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.'



Tim: 'Well, that was a really great performance ...'
Anna:
[1] 'That's not true, I found it quite good actually.'
[5] 'Wait a second, I found it quite good actually.'

EC more at issue than NLC
NLC more at issue than Eval
NegEval = PosEval

Discussion

Ironic contents do not answer the question under discussion directly. The attitudinal content of an ironic remark is expressive and non-truth-conditional, In contrast, the utterances' non-literal content is descriptive content and "only" not truth-conditional. This explains why NLC is more at issue than Eval content.

Conclusion

The results of the current study can be used to argue that the content of verbal irony is difficult to reject directly and be treated as at issue. Further, our findings support the notion of at-issueness as a graded criterion.

Dews, Sh. & E. Winner (1999) Obligatory processing of literal and nonliteral meanings in verbal irony. *Journal of Pragmatics* 31, 1579-1599.

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Potts, C. (2007) The expressive dimension. *Theoretical Linguistics*, 33(2), 165-197.

Sperber, D., & D. Wilson (1981) Irony and the use-mention distinction. In Cole, P. (ed.) *Radical Pragmatics* (pp. 295-318). Academic Press, Inc.

Tonhauser, J. (2012) Diagnosing (Not-)At-Issue Content. In Greene, H. (ed.) *Proceedings of Semantics of Under-represented Languages of the Americas* (pp. 239-254). UMass.