

Modal particles in ironic utterances: A common ground approach to pretended surprise in verbal irony

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Verbal irony

(1) *Well, this is great weather!*



⇒ Ironic utterances in German often contain **modal particles** (MP)

(2) *Das ist **ja** ein tolles Wetter.*

‘that is **PRT** (*lit.* ‘yes’) a great weather’

(3) *Das ist **aber** ein geräumiges Apartment.*

‘that is **PRT** (*lit.* ‘but’) a spacious apartment’



MPs mark the proposition's relation to the **common ground** (CG)

→ How can this be modelled for ironic utterances?

MPs support mirative readings in certain contexts

→ MPs in ironic utterances are used to indicate a (**pretended**) **surprise**

Empirical evidence?

→ Experimental study testing utterances w/ and w/o MPs



1. Semantic and pragmatic features of ironic utterances
2. Modal particles in ironic utterances
3. Experimental study
4. Conclusion

Semantic and pragmatic features

Contents of ironic utterances



1. Ironic utterances express an alternative to the literal meaning

(1) *This place is buzzing with people!*

Descriptive content: \neg [[*this place is buzzing with people*]]

2. Ironic utterances convey an evaluative comment

(2) *Well, that lead singer really delivered every note in place!*

Expressive content: speaker's negative attitude towards the singing

Attitude often negative (ironic criticism) but can also be positive (ir. praise)

(3) *That is such a bad grade, Tom!* [after receiving an A grade]

Echo and pretense



Ironic utterances are **echoic** (e.g., Wilson 2006)

Echo of a specific previous utterance

(1) *That travel agent has chosen a truly “grand hotel” for us!*

Echo of a norm or common assumption

(2) *What “lovely” wheather for a picnic!*

Wilson & Sperber (1992)

Attitudinal component → Speaker dissociates themselves from the thought by delivering the echo in the form of **mockery**

Pretense and pretended surprise



An ironic utterance is **pretense** (e.g., Clark & Gerrig 1984)

- Speaker pretends to be an **uninformed** person
- Speaker **simulates a speech act**
- Speaker intends the addressee to **see through** the pretense
- Requires **shared CG**

Subset of ironic utterances involve pretenses of speech acts

One type is where the speaker pretends to be **surprised**

Modal particles



German MPs *ja* (lit. ‘yes’) and *aber* (lit. ‘but’) require a **background proposition** to be accessible in the CG (e.g., Zimmermann 2011)

The CG update can be pragmatically construed as **exceeding expectation**

→ surprise reading of the MP

In ironic utterances with a MP, the background proposition provides the content of the utterance’s **echoic** component

→ background proposition = echo in ironic utterances



Non-ironic *ja* marks p as true and uncontroversial (Karagjosova 2003)

(1) *Das ist ja ein tolles Wetter.*

[uttered when it's raining]

'that is PRT a great weather'

→ p is not true. Speaker pretends p to be true and uncontroversial.

Non-ironic *aber* marks p as true and unexpected¹ (Diewald & Fischer 1998)

(2) *Das ist aber ein geräumiges Apartment.*

[uttered in a tiny apartment]

'that is PRT a spacious apartment'

→ p is not true. Speaker pretends p to be true and unexpected.

¹ I.e., speaker expects $\neg p$.



Certain ironic utterances are **pretenses** of speech acts

One type: pretense (mocking) of a **surprise**

MPs assist the mock surprise reading

ja → *S* pretends *p* to be true and uncontroversial

aber → *S* pretends *p* to be true and unexpected

Experimental study



Ironic utterances with a MP involve the pretense of a surprise

H_A Ironic utterances containing a MP are perceived as **more pretended** than those without a MP

H_B *aber* gives rise to a **higher** pretense rating than *ja*

Method: Online questionnaire (SoSci)

Participants: N = 50 (42 f, 7 m , 1 d, aged between 20 - 30)



Material

48 scenarios: context followed by a reaction uttered by a partaker

Independent variables

Utterance: ironic – non-ironic

Particle: *ja* – *aber* – none

Attitude: positive – negative



Dependent variable: *How pretended is X's reaction?*

Marie und Sebastian kommen mit ihrem Kind aus der Kinderarztpraxis. Die beiden hatten gehört, dass die Praxis besonders gut und der Kinderarzt freundlich im Umgang sei. Marie findet aber, dass sich der Kinderarzt abfällig verhalten hat.

Marie zu Sebastian: „Das war ja ein respektvolles Verhalten.“

Wie gespielt ist Maries Reaktion?



Marie und Sebastian kommen mit ihrem Kind aus der Kinderarztpraxis. Die beiden hatten gehört, dass die Praxis besonders gut und der Kinderarzt freundlich im Umgang sei. Marie findet aber, dass der Kinderarzt sich abfällig verhalten hat.

(‘Marie and Sebastian are leaving the pediatrician office with their child. They both had heard that the office was really good and that the pediatrician was friendly to deal with. However, Marie thinks that the pediatrician behaved disparagingly.’)

Marie zu Sebastian: „**Das war ja ein respektvolles Verhalten.**“

(Marie to Sebastian: that was PRT a respectful behavior (‘That was respectful behavior.’))



Ironic vs. non-ironic

Ironic	Non-ironic	
4.68	1.22	$p < .0001$

Ironic vs. non-ironic × Particle vs. no particle

	Particle	No particle	
Ironic	4.76	4.61	$p = .008$
Non-ironic	1.27	1.17	<i>n.s.</i>

(no interaction)

H_A ✓ (partly)



For *ja*

	<i>ja</i>	No particle	
Ironic	4.72	4.61	<i>n.s.</i>
Non-ironic	1.3	1.18	<i>n.s.</i>

For *aber*

	<i>aber</i>	No particle	
Ironic	4.80	4.61	<i>p = .002</i>
Non-ironic	1.25	1.18	<i>n.s.</i>

H_B ✓ (partly)

Conclusion



Ironic utterances are **echoic**

A subset of ironic utterances involve the **pretense of a surprise**

Modal particles in ironic utterances assist a mock surprise reading

Ironic utterances echo (mock) propositions **shared in the CG**

Study: Ironic utterances with a MP are perceived **as more pretended**

Study: *aber* is **is better suited** to simulate a surprise about something that is staged as exceeding expectation

Support for the assumption that ironic utterances require a background proposition **contrary** to what the utterance asserts

Thank you.



All sources can be found here:

Härtl, Holden & Tatjana Bürger (2021) 'Well, that's just great!' – An empirically based analysis of non-literal and attitudinal content of ironic utterances. *Folia Linguistica* (Online First: June 2021).

Thimm, Jana-Maria (2021) *The Function of Modal Particles in Verbal Irony – An Empirically Based Analysis*. State examination thesis. Universität Kassel.