



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

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Observation



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'

Objective



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

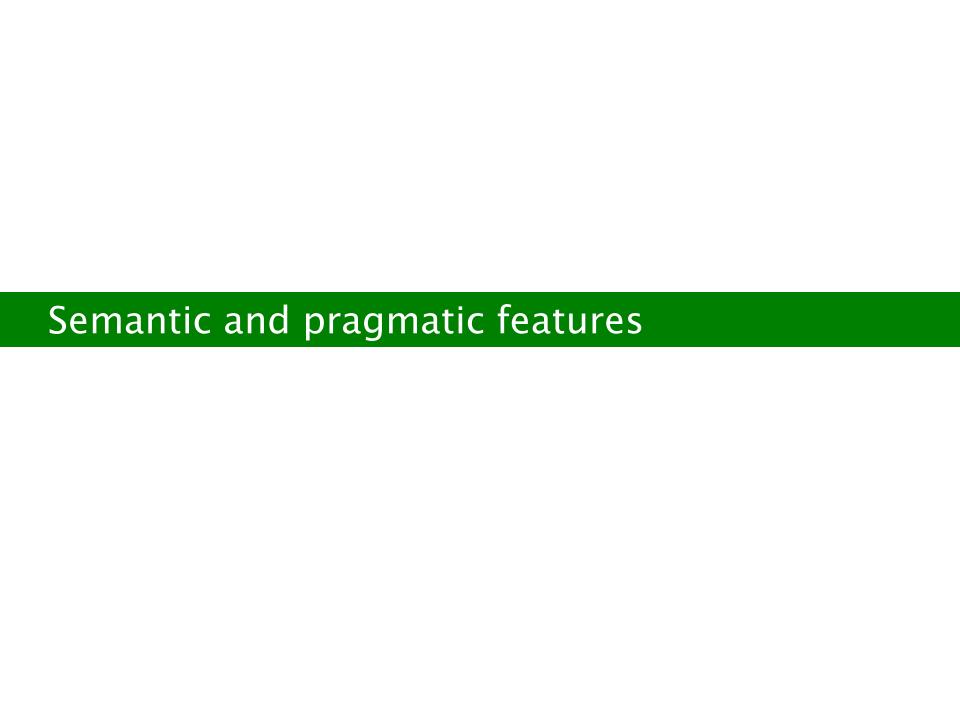
Empirical evidence?

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

Road map



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



Contents of ironic utterances



- 1. Ironic utterances express an alternative to the literal meaning
 - (1) This place is buzzing with people!

Descriptive content: — [[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 \rightarrow Speaker dissociates themselves from the thought by delivering the echo in the form of **mockery**

Pretense and pretended surprise

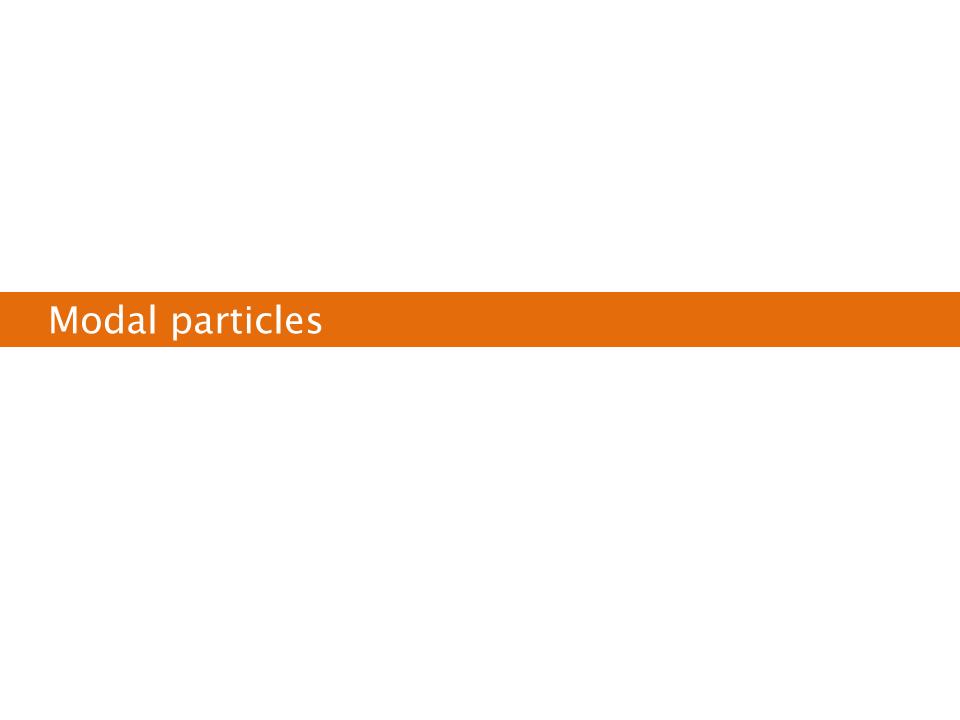


An ironic utterance is **pretense** (e.g., Clark & Gerrig 1984)

- 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 and the CG



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

ja and *aber* 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'
- $\rightarrow p$ is not true. Speaker pretends p to be true and uncontroversial.

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

- (2) Das ist aber ein geräumiges Apartment. [uttered in a tiny apartment] 'that is PRT a spacious apartment'
- $\rightarrow p$ is not true. Speaker pretends p to be true and unexpected.

¹ I.e., speaker expects $\neg p$.

Interim summary



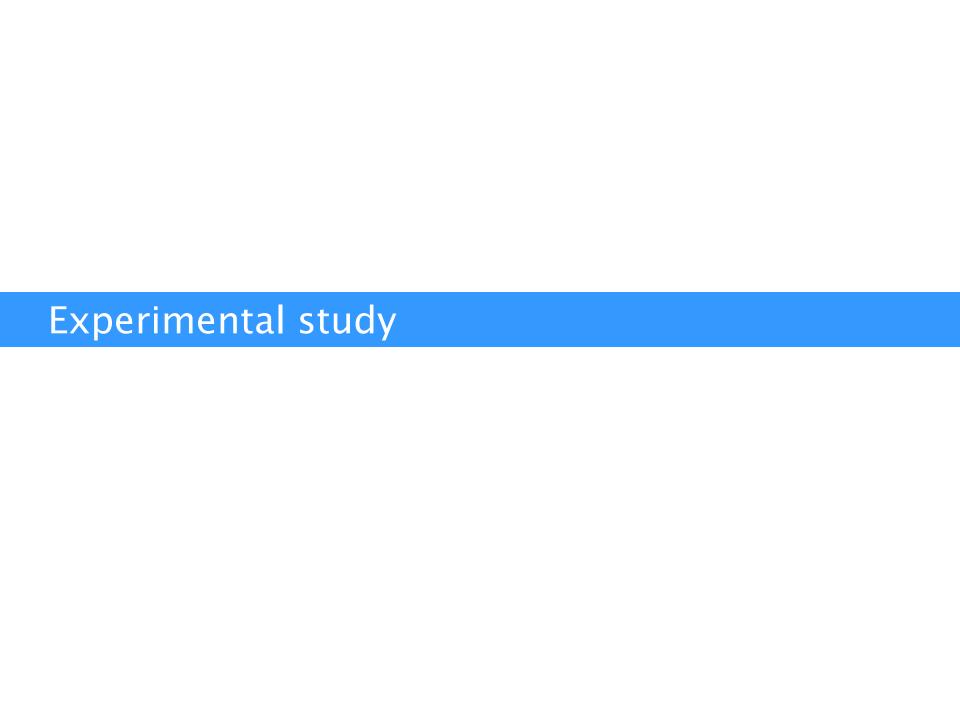
Certain ironic utterances are **pretenses** of speech acts

One type: pretense (mocking) of a surprise

MPs assist the mock surprise reading

 $ja \rightarrow S$ pretends p to be true and uncontroversial

 $aber \rightarrow S$ pretends p to be true and unexpected



Hypotheses



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 & variables



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

Material & variables



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?				
0	0	0	0	0
gar nicht gespielt				total gespielt

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('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.'))

Results



Ironic vs. non-ironic

Ironic	Non-ironic	
4.68	1.22	<i>p</i> < .0001

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

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

(no interaction)

Results



For *ja*

	ja	No particle	
Ironic	4.72	4.61	n.s.
Non-ironic	1.3	1.18	n.s.

For *aber*

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

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.

References



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.