

Verbal irony and the semantics-pragmatics interface: Theoretical considerations and empirical data

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Verbal irony

What a sunny day!

- 'the day is not sunny'
- 'the speaker does not like the weather'



How do these meanings arise? What is their informational status?

How do ironic utterances differ from non-ironic utterances?



1. **Semantic and pragmatic features of ironic utterances**
2. **At-issueness of ironic contents**
 - 2.1 Study 1: *So-called X*
 - 2.2 Study 2: *Well, that was a really great performance!*
3. **Markers of verbal irony**
 - 3.1 Study 3: Modal particles
 - 3.2 Study 4: Quotation marks
4. **Conclusion**

Semantic and pragmatic features

Contents of ironic utterances



1. An alternative to the literal meaning is expressed

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



Descriptive content: [[*this place is not 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]

Contents of ironic utterances



Ironic *so-called* X

Donald J. Trump 
@realDonaldTrump 

The opinion of this **so-called judge**, which essentially takes law-enforcement away from our country, is ridiculous and will be overturned!

RETWEETS 33.901 GEFÄLLT 161.198

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72 Tsd. 34 Tsd. 161 Tsd.

X is called by the name *judge*
("previous name use")

Descriptive:
X is not a *judge*

Expressive:
Trump does not like *X*



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” weather 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



Ironic utterance often involve **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 common ground** (!)

Pretense of a surprise: *What “lovely” weather for a picnic!*

→ Ironically uttered exclamation

→ Pretends that the weather exceeds expectation

At-issueness: *So-called X*



‘Erik gave Maria jewellery as a present for Christmas and she instantly put on the so-called pearls.’



Two types of rejections

At-issue rejection: *That is not true – these are real pearls!* 😊

Not-at-issue rejection: *Wait a second – these are real pearls!* 😊



Task: Scaled choice of rejection form (at-issue vs. not-at-issue)

1 Non-literal Meaning of X

A: Erik hat Maria zum ersten Mal Schmuck zu Weihnachten geschenkt und sie hat die sogenannten Perlen auch gleich anprobiert.

Das stimmt nicht, das waren schon echte Perlen.

Wart mal, das waren schon echte Perlen.

2 Negative Evaluation

That's not true / Wait a sec, they were actually pretty nice.

3 Previous Name Use

That's not true / Wait a sec, nobody had called them that.



Task: Scaled choice of rejection form (direct vs. indirect)

Control 1 AI content rejection (main clause)

A: Gestern ist unter uns jemand neues eingezogen und ich glaube, dass der neue Mieter Musiker ist.



Das stimmt nicht, er ist
Schauspieler.



.



.



.



Moment, er ist
Schauspieler.

Control 2 NAI content rejection (appositive)

A: Gestern ist unter uns jemand neues eingezogen und ich vermute, dass der neue Mieter, ein Musiker, aus Hamburg kommt.



Das ist nicht wahr, er
ist Schauspieler.



.



.



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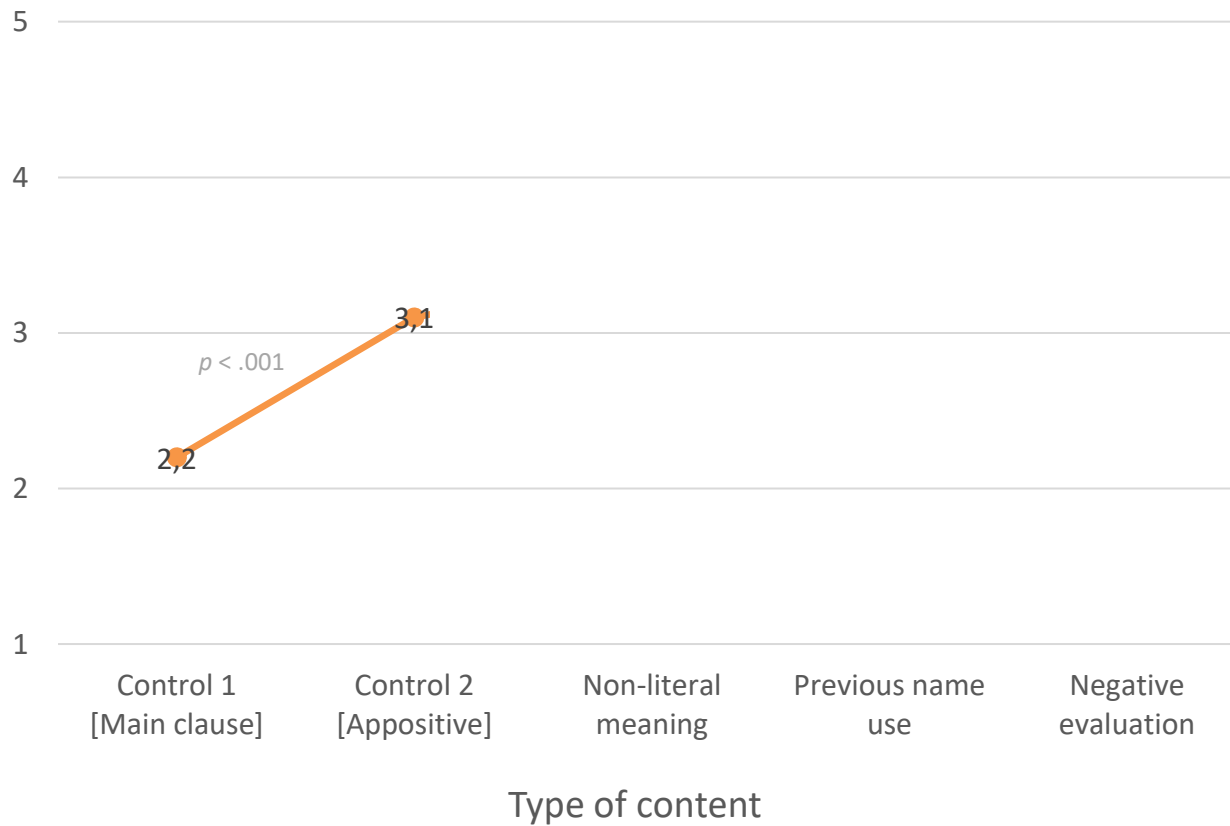
Wart mal, er ist
Schauspieler.



Online survey (N = 56)

Average choice of direct vs. indirect answers

Wait a sec



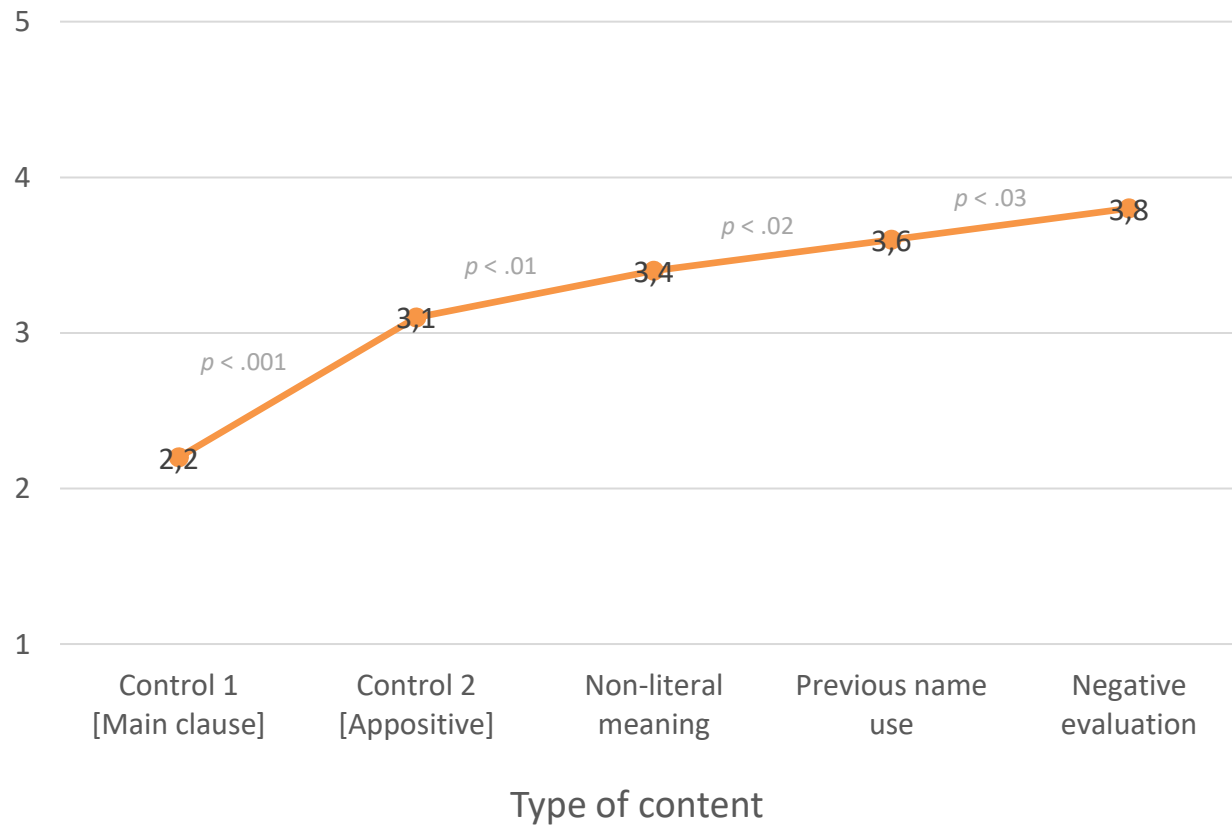
That's not true



Online survey (N = 56)

Average choice of direct vs. indirect answers

Wait a sec



That's not true



➤ We conclude graded at-issueness for ironic *so-called X*:

‘non-literal meaning’ > ‘previous name use’ > ‘negative evaluation’

Well, that was a really great performance!



‘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:

At-issue rejection: *That’s not true – I found it quite good actually.*

Not-at-issue rejection: *Wait a minute – I found it quite good actually.*

Task: Scaled choice of rejection form (at-issue vs. not-at-issue)

1 Ironic Negative Evaluation (NegEval)

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 Opernsänger beeindruckend wären. Tim findet aber, dass der Sopran eine sehr schlechte Performance abgeliefert hat.

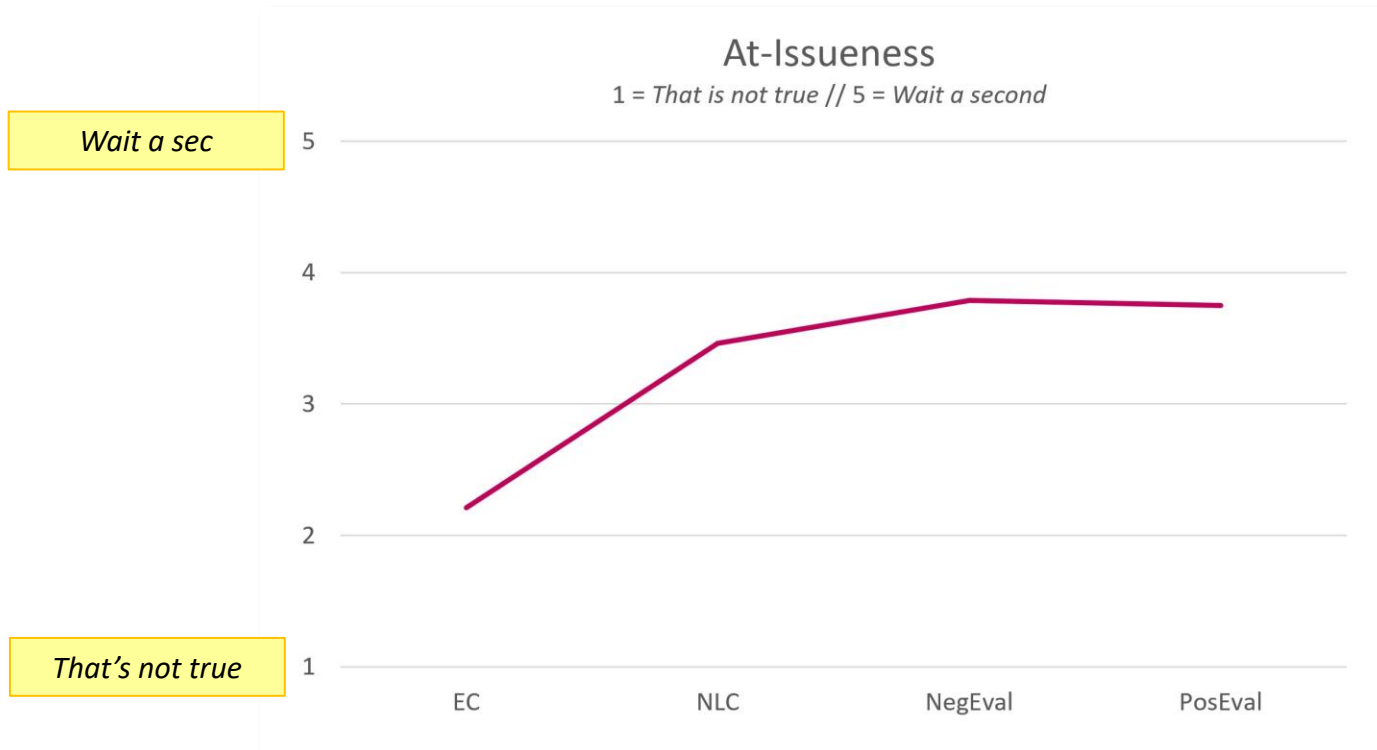
Tim: „Na, das war ja wirklich eine tolle Performance...“

Anna:

„Das ist nicht wahr, ich fand sie eigentlich ganz gut.“

„Wart mal, ich fand sie eigentlich ganz gut.“

- 2 Ironic Positive Evaluation (PosEval): ... – *I found it quite bad actually.*
- 3 Ironic Non-literal Content (NLC) ... – *the water is pretty cold.*
- 4 Non-ironic Entailed Content (EC) ... – *that salad is not vegetarian.*



- Non-ironic content (EC) more at-issue than non-literal ironic content (NLC)
- NLC is more at-issue than Evaluative Content (Eval)
- NegEval = PosEval



- We conclude graded at-issueness for ironic utterances:

‘non-ironic content’ > ‘non-literal ironic content’ > ‘ironic evaluation’

- Open question: Is faultless disagreement a confounding variable?

Irony markers: Modal particles



Ironic utterances in German often contain modal particles (MP)

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

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

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

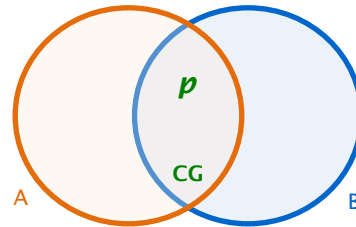
‘that is **PRT** (*lit.* ‘but’) a spacious apartment’

Hypothesis:

MPs are used in ironic utterances to support a **pretend surprise** reading



German MPs *ja* (lit. ‘yes’) and *aber* (lit. ‘but’) require a **background proposition** (p) 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 $\neg p$.



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)



Independent variables

Utterance: ironic – non-ironic

Particle: *ja* – *aber* – none

Attitude: positive – negative

Task: *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?





How pretended is X's reaction?

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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.’))



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 ✓



- Modal particles in ironic utterances assist a mock surprise reading
- Ironic utterances with a MP are perceived as more pretended
- *aber* is better suited to simulate a surprise about something that is staged as exceeding expectation

Quotation marks

Scare quotes and verbal irony



SCs signal the speaker's reservation w.r.t. the semantic appropriateness of the expression in quotation marks (e.g., Predelli 2003).

- (1) a. *Kim believes in the “theory” that the Earth has the shape of a disk.*
b. *We hope that the “generous” lady fulfills her dreams with her money.*

Research questions:

Do SCs help processing a sentence as ironic?

When do SCs function as irony marker – right on the fly or only “later”?

... that *the “generous” lady fulfills her dreams with her money*

Reading time experiment



Context

Yesterday, a young woman won the jackpot of this month's lottery. She decided to donate sixteen cents of the thirty million dollars to cancer research.

Button press
(Reading time)

Critical sentence
(ironic, literal, unrelated)

We all hope that

Button press and
Reading time 1

the "generous" lady

Button press and
Reading time 2

uses the rest of the money to fulfill her own dreams.

Button press and
Reading time 3

Rating question

How well does the final sentence of the story (the one that was revealed step by step) fit to the preceding part of the story? Please use the scale below and give a rating from 1 to 6.

1 = Fits extremely well
6 = Fits extremely badly

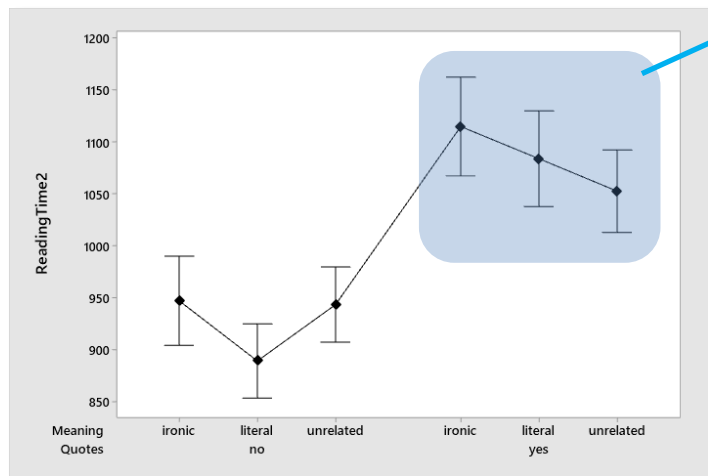
1 2 3 4 5 6

[Selection of the rating value plus rating time]

See Schlechtweg & Härtl (to appear)



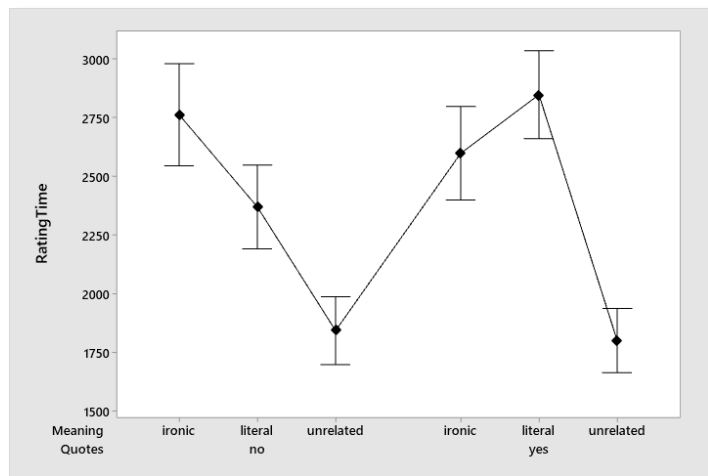
RT Noun Phrase



With quotes
(no difference between meanings)

→ Quotes delay processing across the board

RT Sentence Rest

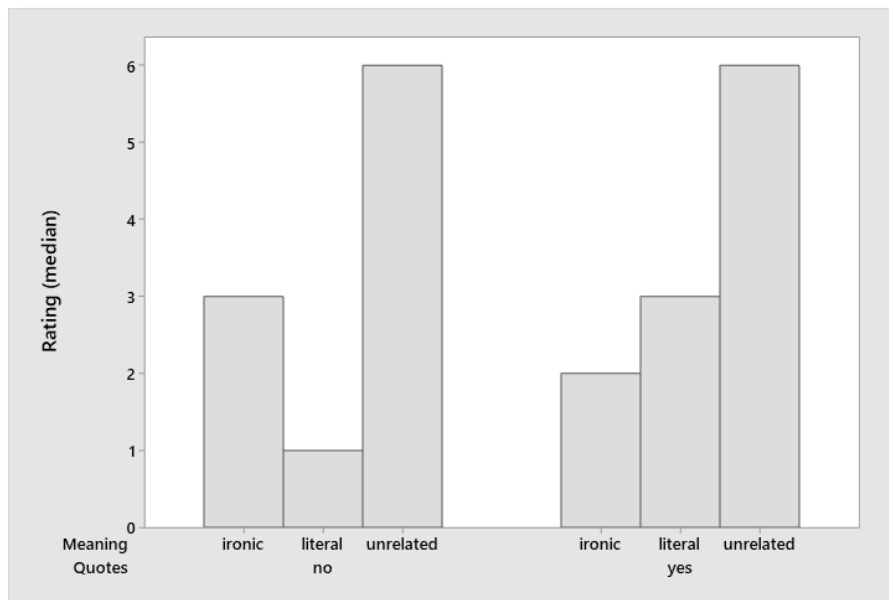


→ ironic content processed more quickly w/ than w/o quotes

→ ironic content w/o quotes is read significantly more slowly than literal content w/o quotes



Rating question
& time



→ ironic utterances fit better to the preceding context w/ than w/o quotes

→ judgements tend to be faster for ironic utterances w/ quotes than w/o quotes (*n.s.*)

- SCs affect processing of ironic sentences
- They do so in later time windows and not “on the fly”
- Supports a pragmatic view of scare quotation

Conclusion



- Ironic utterances are analyzed best in terms of echo and pretense
- Ironic utterances are less at-issue than literal utterances
- Ironic expressive content is less at-issue than ironic non-literal content
- Markers like modal particles and scare quotes support and / or affect irony comprehension

Thank you.





Reported data and 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*, 55.2, 361-387.

Härtl, Holden & Heiko Seeliger (2019) Is a so-called "beach" a beach? An empirically based analysis of secondary content induced by ironic name use. In: Daniel Gutzmann & Katharina Turgay (eds.) *Secondary Content – The Semantics and Pragmatics of Side Issues* (= Current Research in the Semantics / Pragmatics Interface series 37). Leiden: Brill, 200-221.

Härtl, Holden & Jana-Maria Thimm (2022) Modal particles in ironic utterances: A common-ground approach to pretended surprise in verbal irony. Under review.

Schlechtweg, Marcel & Holden Härtl (2022) Quotation marks and the processing of irony in English: Evidence from a reading time study. To appear in *Linguistics*.

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