



ELSEVIER

Journal of Pragmatics 35 (2003) 1387–1411

---

---

journal of  
**PRAGMATICS**

---

---

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

# Responding to irony in different contexts: on cognition in conversation

Helga Kotthoff

*Freiburg University of Education, German Department, Kunzenweg 21, 79117 Freiburg, Germany*

Received 1 June 2001; received in revised form 8 November 2002

---

## Abstract

My article deals with responses to irony in two different contexts. As an interaction analyst, I am interested in what interlocutors do with the ironic in the co-construction of the ongoing conversational sequence. Many reactions to an ironic act reveal that, in irony, a gap in evaluative perspective is communicated as the most central information. The said represents a perspective which is combined with a counter-perspective—the intended. Listeners can in principle react to both perspectives. Reacting to the said continues the play with clashing perspectives and confirms the gap. I combine data analytic methods from interactional sociolinguistics with questions from cognition theory. I shall point out how an interaction analysis of different responses to an ironic act contributes to the development of irony theory. A look at two data sets (informal dinner conversations among friends, and pro and con TV debates) provides interesting differences in responses to irony. From the format of the responses, we can often (though not always) access the processing of irony. If there are responses to the literal meaning, this does not necessarily indicate that the listener was not able to bridge the ironic gap (as former theories of irony have suggested), but most often that both the implicated and the literal message are processed. The data confirm that there are definitely different types of responses to irony: from responses to the literal level of the ironic act, to the implicated, mixed, or ambiguous reactions, to just laughter. The data further confirm that the different types of responses to irony create different activity types. Responses to the literally said (the dictum) develop a humorous discourse type of joint teasing; they cultivate the clash of perspectives and are frequent in dinner table conversations among friends. In the context of pro and con debates, responses within the group differ in accordance with the line of arguing. Here, responses to the implicatum are more frequent; they recontextualize the serious debate.

© 2003 Published by Elsevier Science B.V.

*Keywords:* Irony; Ironic gap; Teasing; Contextualization; Perspective; Conversational sequencing

---

*E-mail address:* kotthoff@ph-freiburg.de (H. Kotthoff).

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I intend to contribute to a neglected area of irony research, the reception of irony in contexts of face-to-face interaction. I would like to show that the reception of irony in different conversational contexts can give us insights into the way irony is processed. I cast a critical glance at cognition-oriented irony research which works with data from lab settings. The greatest differences between lab situations and natural conversations are that in the former, the irony recipients (a) are not affected by the ironic act, and (b) have no opportunity to continue the interaction and thus to shape and co-construct it. As to the latter, I have reasons to think that the way an addressee is affected by the ironic act influences her or his response. I discuss irony in two different contexts: in private conversations among close acquaintances, and in pro and con television discussions. I will show that in private conversations (where friendly irony is displayed), people react more to what is said in the ironic act, while in television discussions of controversial issues, they react more to what is meant by the (critical) ironic act. Previous irony research has underestimated the fact that people normally can react to both levels of meaning: to what is said and to what is implicated, and thereby shape the meaning of the emergent conversational sequence.

In particular, the double responses (to the dictum and the implicatum), which are present in both data sets, suggest furthermore that both levels of expression are recognized. This again indicates that irony is a special case of communicating a gap between the two levels of dictum and implicatum. This gap has to do with an evaluative contrast.

Let us first take a short glance at the long history of irony theory. In antiquity, ironists were viewed, on the one hand, as deceivers, hypocrites, and self-righteous pretenders and, on the other hand, as sensitive, modest persons who employ understatement. In his *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian classifies irony as a trope, a figure of speech.

Irony, however, is a type of allegory in which the opposite is expressed. The Romans call it “*illusio*” (mocking). One recognizes this either from the tone in which it is spoken, or from the person affected, or from the nature of the subject; for if something contradicts what is said, it is clear that the speech wishes to say something different. (VII, 6, 54, my translation)

In irony, Quintilian maintains, building upon Cicero’s comments on irony, the speaker states the opposite of what he means and at the same time communicates that the stated message is not the one intended. In the further history of the concept, this aspect of ‘*dissimulatio*’<sup>1</sup> was emphasized more strongly (Lapp, 1992: 22). Lapp summarizes the ancient concept of irony as follows (1992: 24):

---

<sup>1</sup> *Dissimulatio* = consciously pretending, or pretending to be dumb in such a way that the other will detect it on his own.

1. What is said is the opposite of what is meant.
2. One says something other than what one thinks.
3. Criticism through false praise, praise through apparent criticism.
4. Every type of making fun and ridicule.

Quintilian emphasized points 1 and 3.

Later debates have focused on the motive for the irony, the specific quality of the contrast expressed in irony, its recognizability and the necessity of irony signals being present. Weinrich (in his ‘Linguistics of the lie’; 1961) postulated the latter. In contrast, most researchers assume that indicators of a prosodic, mimical, kinetic, or purely contextual nature are usually present. They emphasize, however, that there are no signals which point exclusively to irony, but rather that there are distancing procedures which, among other things, can block a direct understanding of the message and suggest an ironic or sarcastic interpretation (Haiman, 1990). I propose to treat these distancing procedures as ‘contextualization cues’ in the sense of Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1976) and Gumperz (1982).

The question of motivation is answered in quite different ways. Many linguists regard irony as an aggressive form of communication (see the overview by Lapp, 1992). Brown and Levinson (1987), Barbe (1995), and Dews et al. (1995) have maintained, to the contrary, that an ironic critique is less face-threatening than a direct one. They thus view politeness as a motive for using irony. I regard as unfounded not only the general statement that irony is aggressive, but also the claim that it is always more polite, compared to other speech activities.<sup>2</sup> Above all, these assertions do not clarify what is specific about irony: viz., to indicate the presence of an opposition: a gap between what is said and what is meant as the primary message.

## 2. On what level do we find the opposition that is specific to irony?

The view that in irony, the said and the meant form an opposition is commonplace. But the question is: on which level should this opposition be located: that of semantics, of speech acts, or of evaluation? Recently, the relationship between the said and the meant has been conceptualized as belonging to the opposition between positive and negative evaluation. Authors such as Elstermann (1991) and Hartung (1998) have emphasized that this specific opposition is located not simply on the level of the proposition or illocution, but rather on the level of evaluation—a view to which I subscribe. The concept of evaluation has been summarized by Hartung (1998) as follows:

1. An evaluation is a mental activity in which a person assigns an object a value on a continuous scale between the poles of positive and negative. The object can be any given entity: object, action, utterance, event, person, etc.
2. An evaluation is done from a perspective which takes specific attributes as

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion in my review of Barbe (1995; Kotthoff, 1997)

relevant and assigns them a normative value. It is based on a comparison between the concrete object and a mental standard consisting of the relevant attributes, their normative value, and their weighting.

3. Between the individual components of object, evaluation aspect, and standard there are conventional relationships, which develop from the practical activities in which the object is integrated. Without this evaluation knowledge, neither joint activity nor communication would be possible.

Evaluations can be communicated as predicates, or by certain formulations (choice of words, prosody, mimicry, repetition, syntactical (in)completion, pre-supposition, etc.). Hartung concludes that ironic utterances are perceived as negative evaluations, supposedly directed against the person who is associated with the object of the evaluation (which is not necessarily the addressee). However, irony is not always a form of negative evaluation: rather, it is a way of communicating an *evaluation gap*. Thus, irony can very well express positive evaluations by stating them negatively, as when (in my data from dinner conversations) the following remark is laughingly made by a guest as a comment on a sumptuous menu: “Once again something simple out of a can”. As evaluation, this message is negative, but it makes everybody laugh. The hostess/cook replies: “I certainly do know how to open cans”. The background knowledge to which the ironic remark alludes is that this hostess often invites people to “something small”. Normally, the dinner she then offers is quite elaborate and extensive; she is known to be a good cook. The implicatum accordingly consists of something like: “Once again, such a wonderful meal that you announced much too modestly”—a positive evaluation. The hostess reacts to the level of wording, thereby continuing the sequence as ironic. The implicatum of her ironic reply is something like: “I know a lot more than to open a can”. Among close friends, irony very often alludes to group knowledge, just as it is the case here. According to Hartung (1998), irony allows us to re-affirm the in-group relations among friends, because both the ironist, his/her addressee, and the public rely on shared knowledge about a joint interaction history.

### 2.1. *Irony as echo?*

One answer to the question of why people use irony is that given by Sperber and Wilson (1981), who state that an additional comment is expressed in irony. Stempel (1976) assumes that the ironic speaker relies on his/her partner’s assumptions for the opposition potential of irony. That is: if a mother says to her son, when he comes home dirty: “You are really a hero”, she is attributing to her son the assumption that he may find himself heroic, whereas she holds the opposite view.

Drawing on the Freudian situation of telling a ‘dirty’ joke, many irony analysts operate with a three-person interaction model (Groeben and Scheele, 1984; Stempel, 1976): The first person (speaker) explicitly refers in an affirming manner to a second person (addressee), whom he in reality attacks through an implicit denial of the affirmation, thereby exposing the latter vis-a-vis a third person (another hearer). Researchers often speak of exposing and ridiculing the object of irony (Stempel, 1976); however, irony does not necessarily imply ridicule.

Sperber and Wilson (1981), Sperber (1984), and Wilson and Sperber (1992) view irony as the prototypical speech act which does not ‘use’ the literal meaning to transmit a message, but rather ‘mentions’ it (transmits it as an ‘echo’), at the same time expressing a specific attitude toward it. Accordingly, irony is a variety of implicit echoic interpretive use, in which the communicator dissociates him/herself from the opinion echoed by communicating a re-evaluation of the said. Though reasonable at first glance, Wilson and Sperber’s limitation of irony to interpretive use is, however, not acceptable; vice versa, not all forms of echoic uses are ironic. In 1981, Sperber and Wilson assumed that the ironic utterance “what a lovely party”, made at a very boring gathering, alluded to the already expressed expectation of a hearer who had expected a lovely party, while the ironist shows that this expectation was not fulfilled at all. In their 1992 paper, the authors expand their concept of irony as ‘echo’ and ‘mention’ to apply to every attribution of a position to someone from which the speaker distances him/herself. Here, the authors come very close to Stempel’s concept of irony (although they seemingly do not know his work): they simply stipulate that the ironic utterance could be attributed to anybody (whether present or not).

In Kotthoff (1998b, 2000), I argue against conceptualizing irony as a prototypical case of mentioned speech (to be exact: of quasi-citation, that is, of un-introduced, citation-like speech). Double voicing through un-introduced quasi-citation, and the complex conversational inferencing needed to find out what was actually meant, are not limited to irony, however: they also occur in many other forms of polyphonic communication (in the Bakhtinian sense, 1981), above all, in conversational parody, which is quite often a feature of reported speech (Kotthoff, 1998b, 2000).<sup>3</sup> While for me, irony is just one case of ‘staged intertextuality’, for Sperber and Wilson it seems to be the only case, or at least the prototypical one.

Researchers in interactional sociolinguistics have shown that we always contextualize our utterances in a specific way in order to control conversational inferencing (Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1994). It is not enough to just distinguish ‘bona fide’ and ‘non bona fide’ communication (Raskin, 1985). Rather, it is necessary to go into the details of formatting talk in such a way that a specific understanding is obtained. Contextualization research starts from the assumption that we always conversationally create the frames (or contexts) we act in. For humor research, this approach has been carried out by Davies (1986, 2002), Norrick (1993), and Kotthoff (1998a). Along very similar lines, Clift (1999) proposes to base the study of irony on Goffman’s concept of ‘footing’.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2. *Do we only process what is meant in perceiving irony?*

In addition to asking what makes the ironic opposition specific, it is also important to ask whether the intended, the said, or both levels are processed. For Wilson and Sperber

<sup>3</sup> On double voicing in reported speech, see Günthner (1996b) and Couper-Kuhlen (1998).

<sup>4</sup> In his chapter on “footing”, Goffman (1981) analyzed the participant structure of dialogues, assigning them different degrees of responsibility for the message. His approach has some overlaps with Bakhtin’s concept of dialogic polyphony.

(1992: 75), only the level of what is meant, counts: “It is a variety of echoic interpretive use, in which the communicator dissociates herself from the opinion echoed with accompanying ridicule or scorn”. ‘What a lovely party!’ echoes a specific or imagined meaning, and simultaneously conveys that this meaning is absurd: this message is proclaimed as the most relevant one. In contrast to this, Giora (1995), Giora and Kotthoff (1998), Kotthoff (1998a), and Giora and Fein (1999a, b) assume that irony does not erase what is said (the implicitly contrasted message), but rather that it communicates the difference between the dictum and the implicatum as being the most relevant information.

I consider the special achievement of irony to be its ability to signal a contrast in evaluation. An attitude is attributed to the addressee (or a third person) from which the ironist wishes to contrastively distance him/herself. The gap between the said and the meant is conveyed as constituting the most relevant message.

### 2.3. *Empirical research on irony*

Irony has seldom been studied in live interaction. The majority of the literature reviewed in Lapp (1992) and Hartung (1998) uses artificial examples and works with isolated individual activities (often taken from literary texts). Not even Barbe (1995) systematically takes into account responses to the ironic act. Empirical studies have been done by Engeler (1980), Giora and Gur (in press), Groeben and Scheele (1984), Groeben et al. (1985), Groeben (1986), Rundquist (1990), Schütte (1991), Barbe (1995), Hartung (1998), and Clift (1999). Among these, only Hartung, Giora and Gur, and Clift systematically analyze the reactions of the addressee to the ironic act; so far, theirs are the only studies of conversational irony in context. As we will see below, how irony is processed can often be inferred from the responses to it; the latter co-construct the sequence.

Groeben and his colleagues combined a speech-act framework with psychological approaches to situational and personal conditions of irony. Analyzing questionnaires involving situational conditions and effects of irony, the authors found the following types of irony: defensive irony, protective irony, critical irony, friendly irony, and arrogant irony. The study showed that ironic acts are perceived quite differently by addressees, depending on general social interpretations (such as friendly, helpful, or critical intentions).

In a few cases, these authors were able to show, on the basis of observations, how the high creativity potential of the ironic utterances made these everyday examples much more creative (and funny!) than the invented ones used in lab studies (often limited to saying ‘nice weather today’ on a stormy day). Here is an example from a natural context (Groeben and Scheele, 1984: 36; my translation):

A teacher calls on a student who, despite a warning, has continued to talk to his neighbor and asks him what he has just said; the student, who has no idea, answers: “Well, uh, ...”. The teacher retorts: “Correct so far”.

We can classify this example under the rubric ‘critical’. Such comments require a ‘bisociation’ typical of humor (the student cannot be wrong up to this point because he has said nothing/the teacher does not expect more to come).

Schütte (1991) treats irony in general as a form of humorous communication. In a professional context of orchestra musicians, irony is found to represent a subversive means of denouncing a perspective or expectation attributed to a powerful partner. The partner's perspective is thereby implicitly rejected. By means of irony, the institutional power structure in the orchestra may be circumvented, e.g., the orchestra director could be indirectly attacked or criticized. In contrast, making sarcastic remarks turned out to be the exclusive right of the conductor, the person with highest status, who occasionally evaluates the performances of musicians in this way. Schütte views irony in a professional context as a social procedure for avoiding conflict and securing cooperation despite divergent interests and expectations. Schütte (1991), Hartung (1998), and Kotthoff (1998a,b) have shown that irony is very often woven into complex humorous sequences.<sup>5</sup>

The processing of irony has usually been studied in laboratory situations, in which subjects were given dialogues to read and questions to answer (Gibbs, 1986; Gibbs and O'Brien, 1991). In various reading-time studies, these authors concluded that the 'standard pragmatic model', such as the approaches due to Grice and Searle, does not satisfactorily explain the process of generating meaning. The standard pragmatic model offers a three-step procedure consisting of understanding the literal meaning, recognizing its inappropriateness in the current context, and finally generating a suitable meaning. However, processing irony in this way would take more time than processing literal utterances—something which is not borne out by the experiments. The authors draw the conclusion that irony is not understood by taking the roundabout route of processing the said, but that it, in the appropriate context, is grasped relatively directly (for a different view, see Colston and Gibbs, 2002). What interests us here is the question of whether, in fact, normal understanding only concerns the intended.

### 3. Irony in private conversations and television discussions

First of all, we must realize that simply understanding irony and reacting to it are two different things. While cognitive psychologists (like Gibbs) and psycholinguists (like Giora) test for comprehension, as interaction analysts we are interested in *responses* to irony, in what is done with the ironic in the co-construction of the whole conversational sequence.

#### 3.1. Responses to irony in dinner table conversations

Here, I will place particular weight on the way the reception of irony co-creates the specific quality of the ongoing conversational sequence. Before I demonstrate this in transcripts of talk, I will construct an example of a dialogue between A and

---

<sup>5</sup> However, not all irony is humorous. Especially the highly standardized and critical sorts of irony lack the surprise dimension typical of humorous discourse. Irony and humour overlap to a great extent, but are not coterminous.

B. A is handing out glasses to guests and gives B a kitschy glass with a horrible pink foot.<sup>6</sup> A says to B: “You get the most beautiful glass”. Among B’s possible responses are the following:

1. B: You are always so nice to me. (Response to the said)
2. B: Is that ever ugly! (Response to the meant)
3. B: Quite charming ... Isn’t that ugly! (Mixed response)
4. B Thanks. (Ambiguous response)
5. B: HAHAHA (laughter)

Response 1 refers to what is positively *said* in the ironic act, and is received as such. One can easily imagine further comments continuing the irony, e.g., “We both have the same excellent taste”. Obviously, reactions to what is said in irony have the potential to lead to playful discourse (teasing). The response to the said shows that this potential is activated, but it does not change the discourse frame: on the contrary, the irony is reframed.<sup>7</sup> Response 2 refers to what is *meant* by the ironic act. In this standard reaction, the frame switches back to ordinary discourse. Response 3 contains both types of reaction. As to response 4, it is not clear whether and how the irony was perceived, as the reaction is ambiguous. It could simply refer to the act of passing the glass, but it could also express an ironic stance to what is said. Response 5 responds only to the humor inherent in the ironic act.

### 3.1.1. Responses to the said

In conversations with several participants, we often find mixed and complex responses by various conversational participants; the result is longer sequences. Example (1) below in addition contains various responses to what had been said in a preceding ironic act.

#### (1) (Conversation 14, Episode 6)

David (D), Ernst (E), Inge (I), Johannes (J), Katharina (K), Maria (M), Rudolph (R), several (s)

- 1 M: Du hasch grad son opulentes [Sozialleben.  
 2 R: [(? ?)  
 3 D: total. total was los grad, weil ich nämlich initiativ  
 4 geworden bin [jetzt.  
 5 M: [HAHAHAHAHAHA  
 6 K: [hab ich schoHn erzäHhlt. HAHA[HAHAHA  
 7 s: [HAHA =  
 8 s: HAHAHAHAHAHA[HAHAHAHA  
 9 E: [was sagt er, er freut sich schon auf  
 10 Weihnachten und Silvester.

<sup>6</sup> A similar example is found in Hartung (1998).

<sup>7</sup> I use the term ‘frame’ in Goffman’s (1974) sense, which comes close to Gumperz’s (1982) notion of context.



- 11 a: HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA[AAAAAAAAA  
 12 E: [munkelt man. munkelt man.  
 13 D: ich hab angeregt *entweder. oder.* hab ich angeregt.  
 14 s: HEHEHEHEHEHEHE  
 15 K: wenn nichts los sei, Weihnachten und Silvester, dann  
 16 würde er (-) verreisen. hat er gesagt. [dann fliegt er  
 17 D: [mhm dann flieg ich.  
 18 E: indie Karibik. Karibik. HEHEHE[HEHEHE  
 19 s: [HA[HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA  
 20 M: [HEHEHEHEHE
- 1 M: You are having such a rich [social life lately.  
 2 R: [(? ?)  
 3 D: a lot. a lot is going on lately, because I  
 4 have taken the initiative [now.  
 5 M: [HAHAHAHAHAHA  
 6 K: [I told you already. HAHA[HAHAHA  
 7 s: [HAHA =  
 8 s: HAAAAAAAAAAAA [HAHAHAHA  
 9 E: [what is he saying, he is already looking forward to  
 10 Christmas and New Years.  
 11 a: HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA[AAAAAAAAA  
 12 E: [the rumors are. the rumors  
 13 D: I have suggested either. *or.* I have suggested.  
 14 s: HEHEHEHEHEHEHE  
 15 K: if nothing is happening, Christmas and the New Year's,  
 16 then he would (-) take a trip. he said. [then he flies  
 17 D: [uhm then I fly.  
 18 E: to the Caribbean. Caribbean. HEHEHE[HEHEHE  
 19 s: [HA[HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA  
 20 M: [HEHEHEHEHE

The meal at which Maria makes this ironic remark to David happened at Katharina and David's apartment. Maria comments to David on his "rich social life". David normally prefers to enjoy his peace and quiet. Recently, however, he has participated in two social gatherings (Christmas and New Year's), which took place at his house (something he would otherwise have avoided). Maria's formulation is marked ("rich") and highly exaggerated. In her irony, Maria assigns David a 'perspective' in which he himself would find his social life 'rich'.<sup>8</sup> Doing this, she implicitly distances herself from this evaluation, thus indicating a *gap*. David likewise ironically reacts to what Maria says and thus (sort of) confirms the existence of this *gap* (3/4).

In this connection, I want to maintain, first, that David is not reacting to the implicatum of the irony, but rather to the dictum: in reacting to what is said, one enters the playful frame which can recreate friendly irony.

<sup>8</sup> On perspectivation in discourse, see Graumann (1989) and Sandig (1996). In Kotthoff (1998b), an irony theory is presented which works with the concept of perspectivation.

Next, the question is what is ironic about David's response. First of all, the expression "have taken the initiative" is borrowed from Maria and David's girlfriend Katharina; the latter immediately provides an affirmative reaction and laughs (6). Maria laughs, too, since she knows how Katharina and David negotiate the "social life" topic. She knows that Katharina's opinion that David does not take enough "initiative" (Maria thinks so, too) is not shared by David himself. David's self-directed irony thus draws its potential from Maria's and Katharina's attitudes.

One also has to know that David did not take any "initiative" at all: he has only graciously submitted to his fate, since it was Katharina who had planned the parties, and David, living with Katharina, could hardly avoid them. The others present also know about David's and Katharina's differing levels of sociability.

In lines 7 and 8, several persons laugh. David's response is a classical example of echoic irony (Sperber and Wilson, 1981; Sperber, 1984). In lines 9 and 10, Ernst ironically alludes to "Christmas" and "New Year's", which further expands the ironic frame and the teasing. The shared knowledge is that Katharina had invited many people for Christmas and New Year's Eve, including those present, and that David had manifestly expressed his displeasure about this. So everyone laughs at the ironic joke that he was already looking forward to "Christmas" and "New Year's", for which supposedly big parties are being planned. At the time of conversation, it was already clear that it was David's expressed wish that there would be no such parties this year.

In line 13, David seriously reports on his preference. From line 15 on, Katharina ironically links David's distaste for a "rich social life" with his equally familiar dislike of travel. David intensifies the teasing with self-directed irony (17), as in fact he vehemently objects to flying. Ernst then further exaggerates this by indicating a travel goal (the Caribbean), which David himself has recently ridiculed, when Ernst took a flight to this very region. Again people laugh; David is teased and teases back. Interwoven in this complex scene are irony, self-irony, and playful attack. David, the target of the irony, also participates in the ridiculing (e.g., in line 17; here, he demonstrates the ability to laugh at himself).

People talk about David in the third person, which is typical of teasing (Günthner, 1996a; Strahle, 1993). The speakers communicate extensive knowledge of one another and teasingly confirm themselves as in-group members. Actual differences can be dealt with playfully and marked as such; they are thereby also accepted.

### 3.1.2. *Combined responses*

Combined responses are common not only in my corpus of dinner table conversations, but also in the television debates to be discussed below (however, there are also differences, as we will see). Many examples from the dinner conversations can be characterized as forms of friendly-playful irony (just as was the case for those mentioned above). Thus, for example, ironic predicates are employed (e.g., "orderly" for a nearly unfurnished room or "healthy" for a dessert that is not too tasty), which also have negative connotations ('too little furniture' 'does not taste good'). Example (2) shows such a combined response:

## (2) (Conversation 12, episode 2)

Annette (A), Bernd (B)

Bernd shows the guests his new apartment.

A: seHEhr übersichtlich. doch. schön üHÜbersichtlich. HE

B: ja:::HA SO kann mans auch sagen. also bald steht  
hiern größerer Tisch...

A: veHRy orderly. really. Neat and orderly. HE

B: yeah:::HA THAT is one way to put it. well soon there will be  
a large kind of table here. . .

Annette laughingly says something to Bernd which is generally positive in its connotations, but which in this context does not necessarily have a positive meaning. Her positive evaluation (from Bernd's point of view) of the relatively empty apartment communicates a *gap*: she herself finds the apartment too empty. The laughter (integrated in the words of both speakers) contextualizes the ironic contrast between these phrases as funny. Bernd responds both to the dictum and to the implicatum; he accepts the positive wording by "yeah ... HA that is one way to put it" (reacting to the said), and then explains what must still be done in the apartment: "soon there will be a large kind of table here ..." (reacting to the implicatum). The wording "orderly" (*übersichtlich*) intertextually alludes to a sketch by the German comedian Loriot. Loriot and a girlfriend have ordered a *nouvelle cuisine* dish and receive a plate with a small piece of fish and two pea pods. They then comment: "very orderly". Annette uses a quasi-quotation here (an echoic irony in the sense of Sperber and Wilson).

## 3.1.3. Ambiguous responses

In the next episode, Sylvia expresses a very specific wish for a drink. Fritz does not have this drink and reacts ironically to her wish. This irony would have to be interpreted, according to Brown and Levinson, as off-record politeness. The irony is, however, made clear gradually and thereby transferred from the off-record into the on-record domain. Example (3) below shows an ambiguous response.

## (3) (Conversation 9, episode 3)

Anton (A), Beate (B), Fritz (F), Helena (H), Kilian (K), Sylvia (S)

1 S: ICH will, (-) en Orangensaft mit Mineralwasser.

2 K: obs hier Orangensaft gibt?

3 (2.0)

4 F: wie wärs mit Pfirs Pfirsich Maracuja?

5 K: aber ich trink doch [einen Wein.

6 F: [aus unserer REICHhaltigen Bar.

7 S: SEHR gut.

8 K: [HAHAHA

- 9 F: [HAHAHA ich glaub Du spinnst.  
 10 H: HAAAAHA  
 11 S: (? ?)  
 12 F: also, O-Saft hab ich noch. aber Mineralwasser,  
 13 S: DANN mit Wasser gemischt. DANN misch ich selber.
- 1 S: I would like, (-) an orange juice with mineral water.  
 2 K: is there any orange juice?  
 3 (2.0)  
 4 F: how about pea- peach maracuja?  
 5 K: but I could have [wine.  
 6 F: [from our WELL-stocked bar.  
 7 S: VERY well.  
 8 K: [HAHAHA  
 9 F: [HAHAHA you must be out of your mind.  
 10 H: HAAAAHA  
 11 S: (? ?)  
 12 F: well, I have o-juice. but mineral water,  
 13 S: THEN mixed with water. THEN I will mix it myself.

Sylvia very directly expresses her wish for a specific mixed drink. Kilian, the other invited friend, expresses doubt as to its availability. Then the host, Fritz, asks whether an even more unusual drink (“peach maracuja”) would be acceptable. Independently of this dialogue, Kilian makes his own drink request, and Fritz adds a characterization of the place where he plans to get the drink (“our well-stocked bar”). Fritz lives in a student co-op and it is consequently quite obvious that they do not have a “well-stocked bar”. (At this point, it becomes clear that Fritz had already reacted ironically in line 4).

In line 7, Sylvia welcomes the suggestion. We cannot infer from her *very well* whether she welcomes the proposed drink or whether her remark is placed in a playful frame; it is ambiguous. Kilian and Fritz laugh. At least Kilian has grasped the subtle irony in Fritz’s words; possibly also Sylvia is playing along (however, this is not clear). When Fritz laughingly says “you must be out of your mind”, it becomes fully apparent that he has reacted ironically to her request, thus defining it as excessive. Fritz himself makes sure that his irony will be gradually recognized for what it is. Helena also laughs. Then Fritz states seriously what kinds of drinks he has, and Sylvia accepts a different beverage already before he has completed his statement.

When Fritz, in line 4, proposes an exotic drink combination in the context of a student household, he implies that Sylvia’s first wish has been excessive. His ironic remark adopts her perspective and assigns it a negative evaluation (see below). His rejection in line 9 is highly implicit, but certainly no more polite than rejecting the request for a drink by suggesting another one. A more polite way of turning down this request would have involved an expression of great regret (‘I am terribly sorry’, etc.). The laughter introducing his reply “you must be out of your mind” contextualizes this impoliteness as not unfriendly. (Helena also laughs in response). In

the given context, it is clear that Fritz's remark further indexes the unusualness of Sylvia's request.

Let us examine a last scene from the dinner conversation corpus.

#### 3.1.4. *Laughter as a response*

Example (4) shows laughter as response to irony and as repartee to what had been said ironically by another participant. After practice, a judo group has gathered to share beer and pretzels. Of the members, Gisela was in charge of arranging the pretzels. Normally, in South Germany, pretzels are buttered; there is, however, hardly any butter on the pretzels at hand. Helmut teasingly claims that Gisela bought butter for sixty pretzels, which would mean that they have far too much butter for the twenty pretzels they are about to eat. Obviously, the contrary is the case. In line 42, Helmut's ironic act starts out by creating a fiction as if Gisela had bought too much butter. Gisela laughs.

(4)

All (a), Gisela (G), Helmut (H), Nadine (N)

42 H: und für sechzig Butter gekauft hier.  
 43 G: HA[HAHAHA  
 44 H: [wo wir doch sowieso alle gesagt haben,  
 45 wir WOLLN nich soviel Butter.  
 46 a: HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA  
 47 N: die is dein Problem (? ?) HEHE  
 48 G: HAHAAHAHAHA  
 49 H: ha is doch wahr. [soviel BUTTer das is doch  
 50 wirklich nich gesund.

42 H: and bought butter for sixty here.  
 43 G: HA[HAHAHA  
 44 H: [even though we all said anyway,  
 45 we DON'T want so much butter.  
 46 a: HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA  
 47 N: that is your problem (? ?) HEHE  
 48 G: HAHAAHAHAHA  
 49 H: ha it's really true. [so much BUTTer that is  
 50 really not healthy.

In line 44/45, Helmut further intensifies the irony by claiming that everyone had said that they “don't want so much butter”. Helmut ironically pretends to disagree with the supposedly large amount of butter made available. In reality, he objects to the fact that there is almost no butter on the pretzels. As the person responsible for the pretzels and the butter, Gisela is the chief addressee of Helmut's irony. She laughs, and the rest of the group laughs with her in line 46. Nadine reacts on the level of Helmut's ironical reply by saying “That is your problem”—which, in this context, means: “You are too fat, and therefore butter is a problem for you”. Gisela in

particular, the victim of Helmut's irony, laughs at Nadine's response. Nadine's response is again ironic, since she reacts to what is being said, not to what is meant. In line 49, Helmut reaffirms what Gisela has just said: "so much butter is really not healthy".

### 3.1.5. *Irony and teasing*

The ironic utterances examined here all occur in the context of friendly relationships. No wonder, then, that very often, in responding to the ironic act, a teasing sequence is constructed. Teasing plays an important role in informal talk among friends. As Straehle (1993) has pointed out, we normally tease people we know quite well. Since teasing is a communicative activity that combines "bonding and biting" (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997), people seem to prefer to tease those with whom they feel secure enough to practice 'playful biting'.

All such activities are humorous, because each time the ironic act sets a playful key, which is then reaffirmed. Nevertheless differences of opinion are definitely being communicated, but they are kept socially acceptable. Teasing reveals a lot about the communicative construction of friendship<sup>9</sup>, which is apparently not entirely oriented toward displaying harmony. Friends have to find strategies that can help them deal with their mutual differences. Friendly irony and teasing seem to be a very productive way of communicating such differences (e.g., standards of sociability, attitudes towards traveling, or just different situational expectations, such as the need for furniture in a room, the drinks one can expect to get, the amount of butter needed on pretzels, and so on). Irony always marks a deviation from the normal standard, which it, at the same time, implicitly creates. Hence, the evaluation gap which is always constructed in irony, integrates the gap separating the normal from the not-normal.

Thirty hours of dinner table conversation exchanges, containing 51 ironic sequences, were transcribed and examined.<sup>10</sup> In the following, I present a quantitative summary of the responses to irony in this dinner conversation corpus:

Responses to the said: 26  
 Responses to the implicated: 4  
 Mixed reactions by the addressee of the irony: 10  
 Ambiguous reactions: 5  
 Laughter only: 6

Half of the responses in this corpus refer to the level of the said and, as we have seen, turn into playful teasing sequences. Reactions to the implicatum, as we will see in the next section, do not develop a playful key, but instead, continue on a serious note.

<sup>9</sup> Studying irony and teasing among friends generally requires a combination of interaction analysis and ethnography. Only knowledge of the group enables us to decide whether or not the teasing has harmed the friendship. In many cultures, either po-faced or amused reactions to teasing are preferred (Drew, 1987). We must assume that the victim of a teasing may react with laughter locally, only to later on possibly express a feeling of being hurt. Therefore, the conversation analytic structures of local production are too limiting when we analyze the construction of social relationships.

<sup>10</sup> The sequences contain only clear cases of irony, that is, such as communicate an evaluation gap.

### 3.2. Irony in television debates

Quite another situation occurs in television debates. I have examined 20 h of the Austrian TV program ‘Club II’ and found 24 examples. Club II discussions were held every Tuesday evening, and were transmitted live and open-ended. They are topic-centered and organized around controversies on political, cultural, and social subjects. Interestingly, in public debates, there seems to be less irony than in private conversations, even though irony is traditionally attributed more to the public domain.

#### 3.2.1. Responses to the implicatum

Since the discussions are contentious, irony plays a role here within the staging of the controversy. Here, we find the critical type of irony which so often inappropriately is viewed as the prototype. Let’s look at the data. One discussion turns around the joys and dangers of riding a motorcycle. Active motorbikers are present, who defend the sport in every regard. The other party features people who would prefer to restrict biking for reasons of excessive noise and danger. The moderator, Gerd, has already stated that he is more on the side of the critics and regards the sport as dangerous. The active motorcycle enthusiast, Theo, encourages him to at least try it.

(5) (TV-Discussion on motorbiking)

Dolly (D), Ell (E), Gerd (G), Fiona (F), Theo (T), Rudi (R), several (s)

1 T: fahrn Sie doch mal im Sommer. jetzt ist ja Sommerclub.

2 G: ja, ich hab eh nicht vor die PeHnsiHon zu eHerleHEben.

3 s: HEHEHE[HE

4 T: [aber ich bitte Sie. schauns eh eh ich bin doch auch kein Verrückter.

1 T: ...do take a trip in the summer. now we’re having the summer club.

2 G: yes, I do not intend to liHEve unHEtil reHETirement.

3 s: HEHEHE[HE

4 T: [but I beg your pardon. look here uh uh I really am not crazy either.

In these ‘summer clubs’, excursions are being organized. Theo suggests that Gerd participates in one of them. Gerd agrees ironically: he does not intend anyway to live long enough to make it until retirement. The implicatum here is this: instead of enjoying the ride, he fears he could suffer a fatal accident. The people who share his opinion laugh. Theo and the other bikers do not share in the laughter. Theo employs two independent starter formulas which are very popular in Austrian German (*aber ich bitte Sie. schauns* – “but I beg your pardon. look here”). Then he reacts to the implicatum that all bikers drive so crazily that they will not survive to retirement. After two further hesitation signals, he starts to defend himself against the implicatum: “I really am not crazy either”.

According to the graded salience hypothesis (Giora, 1997), it should be more difficult to process irony than direct forms of speech. This hypothesis would be confirmed if we can show that responses to the implicatum are more difficult to process than those to the said. We see in example (6) that Theo takes time to react. First, the laughter sequence offers him time to formulate a response, and then he starts hesitatingly. In the TV data, in four of the cases, others laugh before the addressee of the irony reacts.

In this TV-context, when someone reacts to the implicatum, the response is either somewhat delayed, or otherwise a simple reversal occurs, as when a pro-motorcycle speaker portrays the sport as erotic. Ell, a professor, presents some shocking accident statistics, to which Fiona, a psychologist, reacts in an ironic fashion.

(6)

1 Fiona: das ist ja<sup>11</sup> die Erotik. HEHE

2 Rudi: das ist nicht die Erotik.

1 Fiona: that is what we know is erotic. HEHE

2 Rudi: that is not what is erotic.

With her irony, Fiona joins Ell's line of arguing. They both belong to the anti-motorcycling party. Thus, her irony has two different addressees: she allies with the contra group and she mocks the pro group. Normally, we would not think that a high accident rate makes a sport erotic. One can, however, very well portray danger psychologically as an erotic feature. The irony in Fiona's response lies in the local context, which relates the erotic to the accidents. The active motorbiker, Rudi, immediately states that this is not the eroticism they experience in motorbiking. A simple countering of the type 'It is X' in response to 'It is not X' apparently is easy to manage, even under the stressful conditions of a pro and con TV-debate. Alternatively, starters and other 'fillers' provide the time needed to produce an adequate reaction.

In another discussion, where the topic is whether there is any liberalism in the Austrian People's Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ, an ultra-conservative political party, which at the time was led by Jörg Haider), critics of the party portray the anti-liberal activities of Haider and other FPÖ politicians. Discussant Reiderer (R), a political scientist, criticizes the FPÖ's drawing on anti-liberal politicians like Schober as ancestors. Mölzer (M), an FPÖ official, asks (in lines 7 and 8) whether Reiderer then would be ready to deny that Schober was a liberal. Reiderer then repeats some facts about Schober's role in the historical movement of the thirties, referred to as 'Austro-fascism' this leads to the ironic statement: "a fine liberal, I can only say to that":

---

<sup>11</sup> The modal particle "ja" cannot be directly translated into English. Modal particles have no lexical meaning, but influence the semantics of the whole phrase. The particle "ja" adds a consensual flavor to the whole utterance.



## (7) (TV discussion on liberalism)

Mölzer (M), Reiterer (R), others.

- 1 R: als der Herr Steger an liberalen Ahnherrn suchen wollte,  
 2 M: mhm mhm  
 3 R: auf wen hat er zurückgegriffen? auf den alten Schober.  
 4 M: mhm  
 5 R: auf den alten [Schober, der autoritärer  
 6 M: [also dem sprechen Sie den Liberalismus  
 7 auch ab.  
 8 R: der autoritärer Bundespolizei eh Direktor in Wien war,  
 9 der kurzfristig eh im Austro also unmittelbar in der  
 10 Überleitung zum Austrofaschismus Bundeskanzler war,  
 11 (H) der also genau die Büttelarbeit für den  
 12 Austrofaschismus eigentlich geleistet hat.  
 13 a schöner Liberaler. kann ich da nur sagen.  
 14 M: also das sehn wir aus unserem Geschichtsverständnis  
 15 anders, da gilt Schober also schon als an sich DAS  
 16 Beispiel eines Nationalliberalen in [der  
 österreichischen Geschichte.
- 1 R: when Mr. Steger wanted to find liberal ancestors  
 2 M: mhm mhm  
 3 R: whom did he look back to? to old Schober.  
 4 M: mhm  
 5 R: to old [Schober, the authoritarian  
 6 M: [thus you deny liberalism  
 7 to him too.  
 8 R: who was the authoritarian Federal police uh chief in Vienna,  
 9 who for a short time was uh in the Austro- I mean immediately  
 up to and in the  
 10 transition to the Austro-fascist period was Federal Chancellor,  
 11 (H) the very man who thus did the police work for  
 12 Austro-fascism actually.  
 13 a fine liberal. I must say.  
 14 M: well in our understanding of history we see this  
 15 differently, for us Schober is thus indeed THE  
 16 example of a national liberal in Austrian history.

The evaluation ‘a fine X’ (‘a fine friend you are’, etc.) can be seen as a standardized ironic wording. The reinforcement ‘I must say’ signals that the preceding predicate is meant ironically. The FPÖ representative, Mölzer, responds to the implicatum by stating: ‘well in our understanding of history we see this differently’. (A reaction to the dictum could have been an affirmation in the form of ‘Yes, Schober was a fine liberal’).

In the television corpus, there are fourteen reactions to the implicatum—more than half of the responses. Such responses seem appropriate if one understands the response as a critique of speaker’s position. Interestingly, we also find many examples

there of inappropriate responses, implying that the rubric ‘ambiguous reactions’ is differently realized in both corpora. (Compare that in the dinner conversation corpus, the ambiguous responses are always coherent, even though it may be hard to determine whether they are more coherent with the dictum or with the implicatum).

### 3.2.2. *Ambiguous or incoherent responses*

Ambiguous reactions are those to which we cannot assign a specific meaning, as it is unclear to what aspects of the previous comments they react. Also in this category belong a number of entirely unrelated, hence incoherent reactions. In the case of these responses, it is not evident whether we have to do with irony, and if yes, how the irony was processed.

The following example stems from a debate on the imprisoned Viennese action artist Otto Mühl. Mühl had led a commune in which very controversial social experiments were performed. The panel included an art professor (Oswald Oberhuber) and an art critic (Regina Wyrwoll), who both defended Mühl; moreover an ethics professor (Robert Prantner) and three former commune members (Nikolaus Helbich, Wencke Mühleisen, and Nadja Reyne), who all criticized him. Prantner’s first contribution is very ironic. He presented it immediately after Wencke Mühleisen gave a very critical report on life in the commune.

#### (8) (TV-Discussion VII)

Mühleisen (M), Oberhuber (O), Prantner (P), several (s)

- 1 P: Frau Wencke Mühleisen hat mich jetzt davon eh davor bewahrt,  
 2 doch in ihrer realistischen Erinnerung,  
 3 in lyrischer Nostalgie und fast Reue zu schwelgen,  
 4 nicht den gleichen Weg zu diesem vielleicht doch  
 5 großen Otto gefunden zu haben. eh ich [verstehe  
 6 s: [HEHEHEHEHE  
 7 P: den Herrn Kollegen, der ein berühmter  
 8 eine berühmte Persönlichkeit in der europäischen  
 Kunstszene ist,  
 9 aber sein Tiroler Herz vielleicht doch nicht ganz  
 verleugnen kann,  
 10 wenn er auch von zersetzenden Problemen oder Elementen  
 bei Künstlern spricht.  
 11 das spricht für Sie.  
 12 M: HEHEHE  
 13 P: ich verstehe aber weder Sie Herr Kollege Oberhuber,  
 [noch viele andere  
 14 O: [des hab ich jetzt net ganz gemeint. muß i dann  
 antworten darauf.

- 1 P: Ms. Wencke Mühleisen has just prevented me in uh, from  
 2 actually by her realistic reminiscences,  
 3 from wallowing in lyric nostalgia and near-regret,  
 4 from not having found the same path to this perhaps after all

- 5 great Otto. eh I [understand  
 6 s: [HEHEHEHEHE  
 7 P: my colleague, who is a famous  
 8 a famous figure on the European art scene,  
 9 but perhaps cannot entirely deny his Tyrolean heart,  
 10 when he also speaks of the destructive problems or features of artists.  
 11 that speaks well for you.  
 12 M: HEHEHE  
 13 P: but I understand neither you dear colleague Oberhuber,  
 [nor many others  
 14 O: [I did not really mean that. must I then  
 reply to this.

It is perfectly clear that even without Ms. Mühleisen's remarks, Professor Prantner would not have wallowed in regret that he had not found his way to the great Otto, since he regards the great Otto as a criminal. Interestingly, the two persons present who take the position of acknowledging Mühl, do not react to this critical irony at all; in contrast, the three panelists who also hold critical attitudes toward Mühl laugh in line 6. When the targets of his irony do not react, Prantler addresses Professor Oberhuber directly. His remark: "[he] is a famous figure . . . , but perhaps cannot entirely deny his Tyrolean heart" is also critically ironic. The implication is that of a contradiction: fame makes people cruel. Oberhuber reacts in a vaguely corrective manner (it is clear that he did not imply this) and asks the moderator whether he has to answer. Prantler, however, has already continued and Oberhuber cannot answer at all.

In this case, the response to the irony is very late and unclear. It is evident, however, that Prantler is insinuating that for Oberhuber, artistry and heart are a contradiction (just as it is the case for the latter's friend Mühl). It is also clear that Oberhuber himself does not subscribe to this contradiction. Oberhuber's reaction in line 14 is therefore redundant and no one reacts to it.

It seems to be more difficult to respond to critical irony, as Oberhuber's lack of reaction to Prantler's irony in line 11 shows. While the laughter of Mühl's critics may be taken as an indication that they indeed understood the irony, it is not clear from his reaction whether Oberhuber got it. Most likely, he simply did not understand the irony.

Other examples of critical irony also display responses which are not really appropriate to irony. They indicate that the target of the irony either has not understood the irony, or does not want to understand it, or is unable to react quickly. Thus, in example (9), a book by Volker Elis Pilgrim (a participant in the discussion) is the subject of the debate. The author claims that fatherless sons who are overprotected by their mother could later become dangerous, especially in positions of power (for example, as politicians). All the guests on the show disagree with this claim. A psychologist, Riess, asks what mothers should do when there is no father. Christian Enzensberger, the philologist, answers ironically that they should try to keep their sons from becoming politicians, and rather encourage them to be poets.



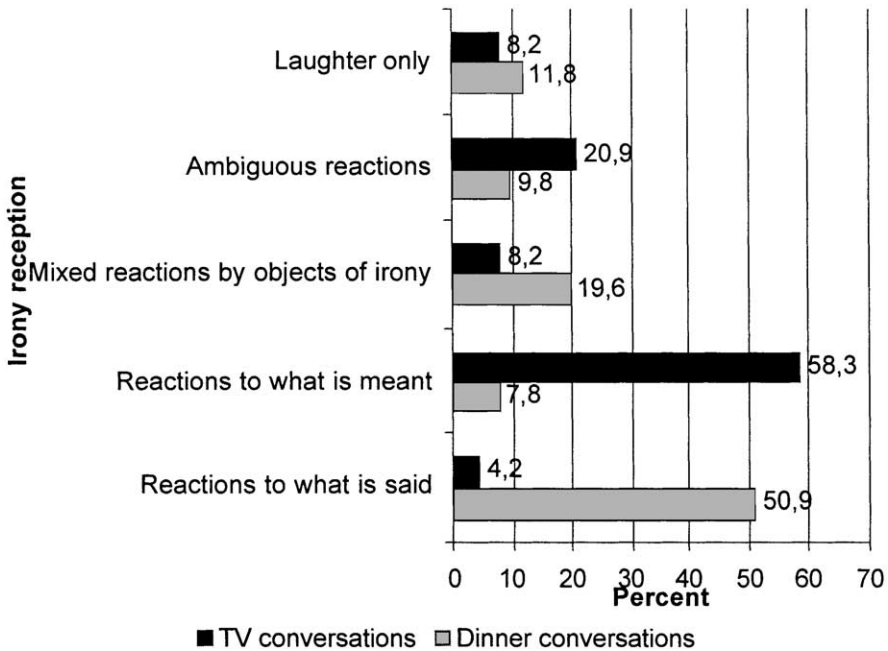


Fig. 1. Reception of irony in various contexts.

response in line 17 is not fully coherent, because he ignores Enzensberger's ironic simplification. The suggestion to eliminate the problem of overaggressive boys by advising them to choose harmless professions implicitly attacks Pilgrim's theory. Pilgrim's rebuttal in lines 17/18 is only locally coherent: it neither responds to the dictum nor to the implicatum; in line 19, Enzensberger corrects his statement.

It turns out that in pro and con TV debates, a different type of irony, namely critical irony, dominates, compared with what is the case in meetings among friends; the two types of irony provoke different reactions.

#### 4. Conclusion: interpretation of the differences

Compare the following findings:

*30 hours of dinner conversations, 51 ironical sequences*

Responses to the said: 26

Responses to the meant: 4

Mixed responses of the addressee: 10

Ambiguous reactions: 5

Laughter only: 6

*20 hours of TV debates, 24 ironical sequences*

Responses to the said: 1

Responses to the meant: 14

Mixed responses of the addressee: 2

Ambiguous responses: 5

Laughter only: 2

What apparently distinguishes these two corpora is the difference in reactions to the said and to the implicated under the different circumstances (see Fig. 1). In informal situations among friends, the preferred strategy is to continue in the humorous key and respond to the said. Mixed reactions and laughter-only are also responses along these lines. In contrast, in the TV corpus, the level of the said plays no important role in reactions to irony. In these public discussions, which are framed as pro and con debates, irony is heard as critical, and humorous potentials are not attended to. Given that in the TV data, the salient meaning has not been addressed, we have no evidence that it has been processed at all. But neither do we have evidence to the contrary. On the whole, findings show that reactions to irony seem to be more difficult in a frame of public competition, perhaps because it involves addressing the implicated, that which is non-salient, i.e., not coded in the mental lexicon.

This study of responses to irony supports a basic claim of interaction research, namely that listening is not just listening; rather, it is 'listening for speaking' as Goodwin (1995) and also Clark (1996) have pointed out. This dimension of reception in context can hardly be studied under laboratory conditions.

Another basic claim of contextualization research also has gained support, namely that conversational inferencing is an ongoing process which works with assumptions that are continually readjusted. This also means that ironic activities are always interpreted in connection with the ongoing conversation, not as isolated acts. Among close friends, they tend to be understood in a playful frame, to be expanded through mutual responses. Under conditions of public competition, responding to irony seems to be more difficult. Here one's own face must be defended. In a controversy, a much stronger pressure to act is involved than is the case in informal talk.

In conclusion, my data show that, in irony, in principle both levels of the utterance are processed, not just the implicated (let alone chiefly the implicated). The dinner table conversations suggest that the salient meaning is indeed accessible; the TV data suggest that the less salient meaning is less easily accessed, but still retrievable.

The data further support another hypothesis, namely that, besides the pragmatics of irony, a meta-pragmatics<sup>12</sup> is of great importance in guiding the overall evaluation of the ongoing interaction on the level of relationship management. On this level, it is decided whether the irony is more supportive/friendly or competitive/

<sup>12</sup> On differentiating between pragmatics and metapragmatics, see Verschueren (1995). Metapragmatics is concerned with how societal interpretation frameworks, influence the identity construction of speakers in discourse. Without going into details here, it should be noted that, in irony, more is at stake than comprehending the ironic act. An assessment of the relationship between ironist, object, and public plays an important role. Metapragmatics goes beyond the textual level.

aggressive. In the latter case, the reaction to irony becomes indeed more difficult. Irony thus performs quite different things in different contexts. It can communicate “bonding and biting”, that is, a positive management of social differences. But it can also make it more difficult for an opponent to react.

### Transcription conventions

(-)	one hyphen indicates a short pause
(- -)	two hyphens indicate a longer pause (less than half a second)
(0.5)	pause of half a second; long pauses are measured in half seconds
(? what ?)	indicates uncertain transcription
(? ?)	indicates an unintelligible utterance
..[. .	
..[.... .	indicates overlap or interruption
=	latching on to an utterance without interruption
HAHAHA	laughter
HEHEHE	slight laughter
gooHd	integrated laughter
(H)	audible exhalation
(‘H)	audible inhalation
?	rising intonation
.	falling intonation
,	continuing intonation
:	indicates lengthening
° blabla°	lower amplitude and pitch
COME ON	emphatic stress (pitch and volume shift)
↑	high onset of pitch
((sits down))	nonverbal actions or comments

### References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail M., 1981. *The dialogic imagination*. C. Emerson, M. Holquist, eds., Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Barbe, Katharina, 1995. *Irony in Context*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Boxer, Diana, Cortés-Conde, Florencia, 1997. From bonding to biting: conversational joking and identity display. *Journal of Pragmatics* 27, 275–294.
- Brown, Penelope, Levinson, Stephen, 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Clark, Herbert H, 1996. *Using Language*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Colston, Herb L., Gibbs, Raymond W. Jr., 2002. Are irony and metaphor understood differently? *Metaphor and Symbol* 17, 57–80.
- Clift, Rebecca, 1999. Irony in conversation. *Language in Society* 28, 523–553.
- Cook-Gumperz, Jenny, Gumperz, John, 1976. Context in children’s Speech. *Papers on Language and Context*. Working Papers No. 46. Berkeley, CA: Language Behavior Research Laboratory.
- Cook-Gumperz, Jenny, Gumperz, John, 1994. The politics of conversation: conversational inference in discussion. In: A. D. Grimshaw, Ed., *What’s going on Here? Complementary Studies of Professional talk*, 373–395. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

- Couper-Kuhlen, Elizabeth, 1998. Coherent voicing. On prosody in conversational reported speech. In List-Arbeitspapier Nr. 1, Fachgruppe Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Konstanz.
- Davies, Catherine E., 1986. Joint Joking. Improvisational humorous episodes in conversation. *Berkeley Linguistic Society* 10, 360–371.
- Davies, Catherine E. How English-learners joke with native speakers: An interactional sociolinguistic perspective on humor as collaborative discourse across cultures. *Journal of Pragmatics*, this issue, doi: 10.1016/S0378-2166(02)00181-9.
- Dews, Shelly, Joan Kaplan, Winner, Ellen, 1995. Why not say it directly? The social functions of irony. *Discourse processes* 19, 347–367.
- Drew, Paul, 1987. Po-faced receipts of teases. *Linguistics* 25, 219–253.
- Engeler, Urs Paul, 1980. Sprachwissenschaftliche Untersuchung zur ironischen Rede. Dissertation Universität Zürich.
- Elstermann, Mechthild, 1991. Über verschiedene Arten indirekten Kommunizierens. In: Hartung, Wolf-dietrich (Ed.), *Kommunikation und Wissen. Annäherungen an ein interdisziplinäres Forschungsgebiet*. Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, pp. 296–313.
- Freud, Sigmund, 1985. *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*. Fischer, Frankfurt (1905).
- Gibbs, Raymond, 1986. On the psycholinguistics of sarcasm. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 115, 3–15.
- Gibbs, Raymond, O'Brien, Jennifer, 1991. Psychological aspects of irony understanding. *Journal of Pragmatics* 16, 523–530.
- Giora, Rachel, 1995. On irony and negation. *Discourse processes* 19, 239–265.
- Giora, Rachel, 1997. Understanding figurative literallanguage: the graded salience hypothesis. *Cognitive Linguistics* 7, 183–206.
- Giora, Rachel. *On our Mind: Salience, Context and Figurative Language*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Giora, Rachel, Helga Kotthoff, 1998. Report on the research project The graded salience hypothesis of irony. Lion Foundation. University of Tel Aviv/University of Konstanz.
- Giora, Rachel, Ofer, Fein, 1999a. Irony: context and salience. *Metaphor and Symbol* 14, 241–257.
- Giora, Rachel, Ofer, Fein, 1999b. Irony interpretation: the graded salience hypothesis. *HUMOR* 12, 425–436.
- Giora, Rachel, Gur, Inbal. Irony in conversation: salience and context effects. In: Nerlich, B. (Ed.), *Polysemy* (in press) Walter de Gruyter, Berlin.
- Goffman, Erving, 1974. *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Harper & Row, New York.
- Goffman, Erving, 1981. *Forms of Talk*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Goodwin, Charles, 1995. Sentence construction within interaction. In: Quasthoff, U. (Ed.), *Aspects of Oral Communication*. de Gruyter, Berlin and New York, pp. 198–220.
- Graumann, Carl F., 1989. Perspective setting and taking in verbal interaction. In: Dietrich, R., Graumann, C.F. (Eds.), *Language Processing in Social Context*. North Holland, Amsterdam, pp. 95–122.
- Groeben, Norbert, 1986. Ironie als spielerischer Kommunikationstyp? Situationsbedingungen und Wirkungen ironischer Sprechakte. In: Werner, Kallmeyer (Ed.), *Kommunikationstypologie*. Schwann, Düsseldorf, pp. 172–192.
- Groeben, Norbert Scheele, Brigitte, 1984. *Produktion und Rezeption von Ironie. Bd. 1: Pragmalinguistische Beschreibung und psycholinguistische Erklärungshypothesen*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Groeben, Norbert, Hanne Seemann, Drinkmann Arno, 1985. *Produktion und Rezeption von Ironie. Bd. II: Empirische Untersuchungen zu Bedingungen und Wirkungen ironischer Sprechakte*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Günthner, Susanne, 1996a. Zwischen Scherz und Schmerz. Frotzelaktivitäten im Alltag. In: Kotthoff, H. (Ed.), *Scherzkommunikation. Beiträge aus der Empirischen Gesprächsforschung*. Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen, pp. 81–109.
- Günthner, Susanne, 1996b. The contextualization of affect in reported dialogue. In: Niemeyer, S., Dirven, R. (Eds.), *The Language of Emotions*. Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 247–277.
- Gumperz, John, 1982. *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Haiman, John, 1990. Sarcasm as theater. *Cognitive Linguistics* 1, 181–205.



- Hartung, Martin, 1998. *Ironie in der Gesprochenen Sprache. Eine Gesprächsanalytische Untersuchung*. Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen.
- Kotthoff, Helga, 1996. Impoliteness and conversational joking: On relational politics. *Folia Linguistica* 30/3-4, 299–327.
- Kotthoff, Helga, 1997. Review of Katharina Barbe: *Irony in context*. *Studies in Language* 21, 703–706.
- Kotthoff, Helga, 1998. *Spaß Verstehen. Zur Pragmatik von Konversationellem Humor*. Niemeyer, Tübingen.
- Kotthoff, Helga, 1998b. Irony, quotation, and other forms of staged intertextuality. In *LIST-Working Paper Nr. 7*. University of Konstanz. (2002 In: C. Graumann and W. Kallmeyer, Eds., *Perspectivity in discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins), 201–233.
- Kotthoff, Helga, 2000. Konversationelle Parodie. Über komische Intertextualität in der Alltagskommunikation. *Germanistische Linguistik* 153, 159–186.
- Lapp, Edgar, 1992. *Linguistik der Ironie*. Narr, Tübingen.
- Norrick, Neal R., 1993. *Conversational Joking. Humor in Everyday Talk*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.
- Quintilianus, Marcus Fabius, 1975. *Institutiones oratoriae*, hg. und übersetzt von Helmut Rahn. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt.
- Raskin, Victor, 1985. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour*. D. Reidel, Dordrecht.
- Rundquist, Suellen, 1990. Indirectness in conversation: flouting Grice's maxims at dinner. *Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistic Society* 16, 509–518.
- Sandig, Barbara, 1996. Sprachliche Perspektivierung und perspektivierende Stile. *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 102, 36–63.
- Schütte, Wilfried, 1991. *Scherzkommunikation unter Orchestermusikern*. Niemeyer, Tübingen.
- Sperber, Dan, 1984. Verbal irony: pretense or echoic mention. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 113, 130–136.
- Sperber, Dan, Wilson, Deirdre, 1981. Irony and the use/mention distinction. In: Cole, P. (Ed.), *Radical Pragmatics*. Academic Press, New York and London, pp. 295–318.
- Stempel, Wolf-Dieter, 1976. Ironie als sprechhandlung. In: Preisendanz, W., Warning, R. (Eds.), *Das Komische*. Wilhelm Fink, Munich, pp. 205–237.
- Straehle, Carolyn A., 1993. "Samuel?" "Yes, Dear?": Teasing and conversational rapport. In: Tannen Ed, D. (Ed.), *Framing in Discourse*. Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, pp. 210–229.
- Verschueren, Jef, 1995. Metapragmatics. In: Verschueren, J., Östman, J.-O., Blommaert, J. (Eds.), *Handbook of pragmatics*. Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 367–371.
- Weinrich, Harald, 1961. *Linguistik der Lüge*. Schneider, Heidelberg.
- Wilson, Deirdre, Sperber, Dan, 1992. On Verbal Irony. *Lingua* 87, 53–76.

**Helga Kotthoff** is Professor of German linguistics and language teaching at Freiburg University of Education in Germany. She has worked in the fields of Applied, General, and Germanic linguistics—basically on questions of interaction analysis, gender studies, sociolinguistics, and cultural studies. She received her doctoral degree in General Linguistics in 1988 from the University of Konstanz, Germany. Her current research includes interactional sociolinguistics, the linguistics of German, conversational humor and irony, gender and communication, and intercultural communication conflicts.