

SUMMARY OF PHD THESIS

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IRONICAL STANCE: A sociocognitive approach to verbal irony considering semantic-pragmatic interface

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1. Introduction: The aims of the dissertation

My dissertation has dual purpose. On one hand, I intend to describe and explain the phenomenon of irony in pragmatic frames. On the other hand, I intend to provide a more general model of language use (including both production and processing) through the description of the figure in question, but that goes beyond the phenomenon of irony. My aim is to provide a model which shows the special features of irony against other figures. I use the term figure in the sense, that it includes the notion of trope as well, which approach is not alien to the pragmatic traditions (Nemesi 2009). This approach is warranted by the fact, that for instance according to Quintilian, irony can be considered a trope and a figure (figure of thought) at the same time. This way these two types of irony can be handled under one roof. The main objectives of the dissertation can be captured in the following main research questions that can be divided into further subquestions. (1) The first question that needs to be answered is what theoretical dilemmas we can find in the pragmatic literature considering irony research (Komlósi 2007-8), which question is mapped in section 2 of my dissertation. Since pragmatic literature is quite diversified considering the phenomenon of irony, my main focus stays on the neo- and post-Gricean pragmatic theories, which understand pragmatics as a component (Németh T. 2006). Their main concern is concentrated on the division of labour between semantics and pragmatics in the emerging meaning of the utterance. After the comparison and evaluation of the views on adult ironical language use in the pragmatic literature comes (2) my second question to answer, namely whether the developmental and evolutionary turn that emerged in pragmatics as an effect of the research on developmental and cognitive psychology, philosophy and evolutionary anthropology (Chomsky 1977, 2000, 2004, Tomasello 1999, 2003, 2008, Donald 1991, Sperber–Wilson 1986/1995, Wilson Sperber 2012, Origg–Sperber 2000, Sperber et al. 2010, and Gergely–Csibra 2005, Csibra 2010), can help to solve or eliminate the dilemmas in question. As a result of this developmental and evolutionary turn, by now a new field of pragmatic research has emerged, which is called developmental pragmatics (Komlósi in press). In this cognitive frame, the components necessary to understand irony are those pragmatic abilities whose developmental and evolutionary aspects are in the focus of my attention. (3) My third question is whether what theoretical benefit neurolinguistic experiments on irony (see for instance Pexman–Glenwright 2007) can bring for the pragmatic theories and irony research. To challenge my second and third question is necessary, because the answer to the first one is that the above viewed pragmatic theories on their own cannot account for the phenomenon of irony. In the neo- and post-Gricean frames, where the primary focus is on the distinction between the

conventional and the implicated meaning, we cannot find a proper solution to the problem. Thus it is reasonable to change the theoretical perspective, which also makes it possible to expand the corpus with other kinds of data – other than the ones found in the pragmatic literature, which cover only some cases of irony –, and to bring other aspects of irony interpretation into spotlight. When ‘stimuli-complexes’ with a prototypical structure are present on a certain degree, they trigger ironical interpretation. (4) My fourth question concerns how this observation fits the cognitive developmental and evolutionary frame. It also concerns that how these two together model the production and interpretation of the ironical utterance. (5) Accordingly, my fifth question targets the stimuli that encourage ironical interpretation concerning the different levels of language and gestures. My fourth and fifth questions are hard to separate in practice, since to find these stimuli, I already have to think within the developmental and evolutionary frame. I attempt to explicate these stimuli in section 6 by setting up the model of *ironical stance* (cf. intentional stance (Dennett 1987) and pedagogical stance (Gergely–Csibra (2005)) which says, that to recognize the linguistic and gestural stimuli, the language user needs their sociocognitive abilities to reach a certain level and complexity.

2. The structure and results of the dissertation

2.1. A critical historical review

Following Introduction, in section 2 of the dissertation I discuss the theoretical dilemmas concerning irony research in the pragmatic literature. The purpose of this section is to provide a critical historical review, and introduce the reader into the academic discourse about irony. Accordingly, I investigate and compare the phenomena discussed under the label *irony* in the different pragmatic theories, and in Quintilian’s rhetorical theory. Further purpose of the section is to show the possibility to integrate Quintilian’s rhetorical theory with some of the pragmatic theories, and to reveal the inadequacies, that predict the necessary shift to another theoretical frame, and the reasonableness of the *ironical stance* model. It can be said, that in the literature the different approaches consider irony mostly as a figure, an implicature, a second-order conversational or politeness principle, or an indirect negation form. Nonetheless I am not interested to overview the whole historical development of the concept irony, and I do not deal with the philosophical and literary relatedness of irony, neither (cf. Colebrook 2005, Tátrai 2008). The dissertation is about verbal irony, so it does not cope with situational irony, the irony of fate or the cases of dramatic irony (cf. Gibbs–Colston 2007).

2.2. The prototypical notion of irony

After the critical overview of the theories, the introduction of a new model seems to be justified from semantic-pragmatic perspective. This new model considers irony an operation of category change, perspective change, and perspective raise, which urges metapragmatic vigilance. The deep investigation to the relation between irony and opposition makes it clear (Komlósi 2012) that the ironical utterance (i) is a deviation, a category change, and a perspective change, (ii) it has a close connection to double negation, neg-raised negation, ambiguity, and (iii) hyperbole, litotes, as well as the pure and joint forms of irony. In section 3 I reason for understanding irony as validating both semantic and pragmatic considerations, fitting into the neo-Gricean traditions, but different from any definition so far. My conception fits neo-Gricean traditions, since I grasp the emerging of ironical meaning the way, that my focus stays on the relation between the conventional (semantic) and non-conventional (pragmatic) meanings. Moreover, from this point of view we can reason that irony is on its own (without any other figures joining to it) is a cognitive operation that draws attention to the differences between things and perspectives, and it is not about opposition. It points out not quantitative, but qualitative differences. Although irony does create a difference between two things/viewpoints, and draws attention to this difference, I still consider it as a perspective change, perspective raise, and an operation that urges metapragmatic vigilance. The difference between the neo-Gricean tradition's irony view and the one I suggest is that mine does not focus only on the relation between conventional and non-conventional meanings, but also on the sociocognitive operations behind the use of ironical utterances. I make explicit those sociocognitive abilities necessary to it in section 6, but sections 3.4 and 3.5 prepare that in advance. The prototypical definition of irony given in section 3 is to be more elaborated in the neo-Gricean frame by the suggested differentiation of irony and stimuli indicating irony in section 4. Although the differentiation can be discovered in this frame as well, in relevance theoretic frames it can be better understood with the help of differentiating between stimuli indicating communicative intention, informative intention and ironical intention (section 6.3.3). This frame is compatible with the cooperative model of human communication, which is used for the description of the sociocognitive abilities and processes necessary to understand irony (Tomasello 2008, section 6.3). By integrating these two we can unfold a more complete communication definition which counts not only with the cognitive benefits of communication, but the social benefits of it as well.

2.3. The ironical stance (sociocognitive skills)

Despite the prototypical definition suggested in section 3, several unanswered question stays that cannot be discussed adequately in the neo-Gricean frame. In section 5 I introduce the theories that serve as starting point for developmental pragmatic research to see whether that the developmental and evolutionary turn embedding the neo-Gricean semantic-pragmatic division of labour into a sociocognitive frame can be useful to resolve our dilemmas. Its necessity can be seen from the critical historical overview in section 2, and the prototypical definition of irony set up afterward (section 3). Developmental and evolutionary psychological approaches define the sociocognitive conditions of the production and interpretation of prototypical irony. These sociocognitive conditions are human-specific, in their absence people are not able to produce and interpret ironical utterances (Tomasello 1999, Csibra 2011, Gergely–Csibra 2005). This theory, namely the ironical stance model has two big component, as Figure 1 shows. I introduce this model in section 6.

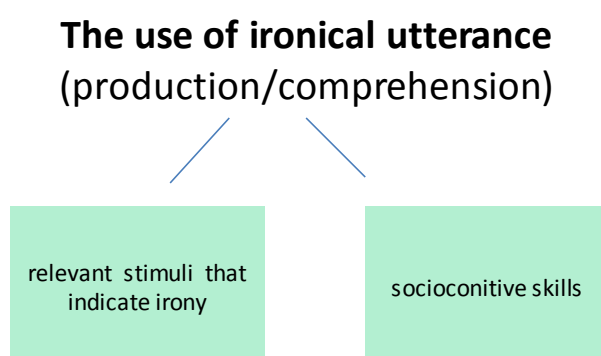


Figure 1.: The use of ironical utterance

In section 6 from the components of making explicit the ironical utterance and to recognizing it, I start with the discussion of the necessary sociocognitive abilities, then in section 6.3 I outline what stimuli coming from the different linguistic levels to indicate that an utterance is ironical. The main sociocognitive abilities and mechanisms based on the developmental and evolutionary literature are the following: intentional stance, the ability of identification, joint attentional frame, and social bio-feedback. The social bio-feedback model (Gergely–Watson

1999) accounts for the evolution of the ironical stance, which model not only makes it possible, but also strengthen the ironical production and interpretation. In many cases even the adult language user needs verification if they have understood irony right.

2.4 The stimuli indicating irony

In the second big unit of section 6, section 6.3 introduces the stimuli indicating irony, to which the theoretical background was provided by Sperber–Wilson’s modified definition of ostensive-inferential communication (Németh T. 2013). It has become clear how irony can be separated from the ostensive stimuli that make irony manifest. First I bring examples for when the informative and communicative intentions relating irony are present, and when they are not, and then I present the stimuli linked to the different linguistic levels, and the stimuli coming from gestures (see Table 1 below). Last but not least it is important to mention that in agreement with others (see Bryant 2010), irony has no exclusive cue. Rather the joint presence of the different multimodal stimuli draw attention to the informative intention aiming at ironical content. According to Bryant and Gibbs (2008) there are stronger as well as weaker cues of irony, and they complete each other. For instance if the contextual cue is weaker, then the speaker will apply a stronger prosodic cue (contrast), or if the cue coming from the physical context is weaker, than the speaker will use e. g. a hyperbole (Komlósi 2014).

linguistic levels		contrast	
pragmatic	utterance	→ ←	context
semantic-pragmatic	concrete	→ ←	abstract
semantic-pragmatic	unit before the add-on	→ ←	unit plus the add-on
morpho-pragmatic	word	→ ←	morpheme
morpho-pragmatic	superlative morpheme	→ ←	context
prosodic	relative to the speech rate of the previous unit	→ ←	lower speech rate at the ironical unit
prosodic	pitch of the previous unit	→ ← contrast relative to the participants	the pitch of the ironical unit

3. Conclusion

I have started my dissertation with a critical historical overview, which revealed the theoretical dilemmas irony research has in the pragmatic literature that had been originally rooted in the philosophical traditions, and then supported by a cognitive background later. This set the course to investigate along the concepts opposition and contrary as essential features of irony. Explanations for irony used other concepts as well, such as irony principle, failed expectations, indirect negation, and inappropriateness (section 2.3). When an explanation highlights on the relation between irony, negation, and opposition, then it basically focuses on the cognitive operation, which is performed by irony. In section 3 I pointed out that the cognitive operation performed by irony is the perspective change and the perspective raise (see 3.4 and 6.3.1.2) that urges the receiver to be metapragmatically vigilant.

The prototypical definition of irony:

- (i) With an ironical utterance the speaker urges the hearer to be metapragmatically vigilant and directs their attention to the differentness of and differences between the said meaning and at least one (or possibly more) implicated meaning(s), upholding the ambiguity of pragmatic meaning.
- (ii) This operation is a category change from the point of view of the utterance, and a perspective change and perspective raise from that of the Speaker and Hearer.
- (iii) The intent of the Speaker is to urge the Hearer to change and raise the perspective and become metapragmatically vigilant.

After having the ironical stance model revealed, it must be clear that when the different pragmatic models talk about irony principle, expectations, and inappropriateness, then these features belong to the social aspects of the ironical utterance, the social and the communicative functions of irony. Giora (1995) and Attardo (2000) call these functions the conditions of discourse well-formedness, which conditions concern information-convey (sections 2.3.4 and 2.3.5), although it leaves the question untouched why we use ironical utterances. One deficiency of Grice's implicature theory, that it does not account for the purpose and benefit of exploiting implicatures. Even though this question leads us far, it cannot be neglected. However to examine the cognitive and social aspects in a coherent frame, we should choose a developmental one from the pragmatical and cognitive

psychological theories, as I have argued for it in section 5. The prototypical definition of irony focuses on the cognitive aspects of irony, so it is justified to take the communicative and social functions of the utterance into consideration in order to get a more complete explanation for how irony works and for what purpose it can be used for. Two factors need to be clarified to it, as we can see in Figure 1 above. One of them contains the stimuli/cues that make the ironical intention mutually manifest for both the speaker and the hearer. The reason for its necessity is explicated in section 4, and then in section 6 I analyze the possible stimuli in more detail (see 6.3.3). The other factor is built up from those complex sociocognitive abilities that make the use of ironical utterances and its cultural learning possible. I place them all in such a sociocognitive frame and cooperative communication model that contain both prelinguistic gesture usage and that parallel with language use, and it can also account for getting separated from referentiality up to the formation of common ground. In this frame I present and explain how the processing and production of irony can be learnt and transmitted culturally. The basic motivation for irony can be caught in terms of social ambition to rationalize an utterance that seemingly contradicts reality. Irony works not just due to the greater cognitive effect that can be achieved by its use, but rather because of its social benefits. Thus it seems reasonable to complement Sperber–Wilson’s (1986/1995) theory with social parameters based on Tomasello’s works (for instance 2008) on the basis on I suppose a long-term social benefit of using ironical utterances. Leech (1983) also writes about the connection between this long-term social benefit and using ironical utterances, but his work is hard to fit any cognitive frame. In my dissertation I give the following definition about how irony works concerning ironical communicative language use.

The definition of ironical ostensive-inferential communication:

The communicator produces a special stimulus indicating irony by which she makes it mutually manifest to herself and audience that she intends, by means of this special stimulus indicating irony, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumption {I} in order to bring her social intentions to her audience’s attention.

Informative intention oriented towards irony:

The communicator makes a set of assumptions including irony {I} manifest or more manifest to her communicative partner in order to bring her social intentions to her partner’s attention (Komlósi 2014: 231).

Communicative intention oriented towards irony:

The communicator makes it mutually manifest to herself and her communicative partner, that she has a special informative intention that conveys irony in order to bring her social intentions to her partner's attention (Komlósi 2014: 231).

The social intention expressed by irony:

The communicator makes it manifest or more manifest to her communicative partner that she would like to bring her social intentions to her partner's attention with the help of making mutually manifest her communicative intention to herself and her communicative partner by bringing a set of assumptions including irony {I} to her partner's attention.

It must be obvious from the definitions above that the social intentions are more fundamental than the informative intention. Social intentions stimulate the other two. Deviation and differentness can be interpreted within the set of assumptions including irony {I}. The stimuli indicating irony and urging metapragmatic vigilance can be implemented into the communication frame introduced above. The developmental studies with their theoretical focal points and their main concepts are introduced and confronted in section 5, and then in section 6 I explicate them in more detail in relation to the *ironical stance model*. The detailed introduction of the developmental studies are justified, since the pragmatic models dealing with irony have a very different theoretical background, although they use a terminology alike. It was not my purpose to present the developmental irony research studies, albeit I referred to them, as they mostly work within the neo-Gricean or relevance theoretical frames which study adult language use, so they do not provide any new perspective. These investigations focus largely on the age when the first signs of irony production and processing can be detected. I found the findings of Pexman and Glenwright (2007) outstanding, since they strongly emphasize and also confirm by neurological data the importance of the social maturity of the brain in the recognition of irony. This strongly support my hypothesis that, building on Gergely and Csibra's (2009) pedagogical stance theory, the learnability and development of ironical stance depend a lot on a supportive social environment. I found that my theory is supported by Gergely and Watson's (1999) so-called social bio-feedback mechanism that the authors described in terms of the infants' emotional development. A similar mechanism can be assumed concerning verbal behavior acquisition. It is also

supported by Tomasello's (1999) theoretical approach, that language and signaling are not due to the appearance of a special apparatus, but it is enabled by the special alignment of already existing, more general sociocognitive abilities.

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