Explaining irony

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1. Traditional approaches to irony

Here are some typical examples of verbal irony:

(1)   *Mary (after a boring party)*: That was fun.

(2)   I left my bag in the restaurant, and someone kindly walked off with it.

(3)   *Sue (to someone who has done her a disservice)*: I can't thank you

enough.

In each case, the point of the irony is to indicate that a proposition the speaker might otherwise be taken to endorse (that the party was fun, the person who took her bag behaved kindly, or Sue is more grateful than she can say) is ludicrously inadequate (here, because of its falsity).[1] A hearer who fails to recognise this will have misunderstood the speaker's ironical intention. A speaker who doubts her hearer's ability to recognise this intention using background knowledge alone can provide additional cues (e.g. an ironical tone of voice, a wry facial expression, a resigned shrug, a weary shake of the head). The ability to understand simple forms of irony is thought to be present from around the age of six or seven,[2] and to be impaired in a variety of conditions including autism, Asperger's syndrome, schizophrenia and certain forms of right hemisphere damage.[3] One of the goals of pragmatics is to describe this ability and thus explain how irony is understood.

In classical rhetoric, verbal irony is analysed as a trope: an utterance with a figurative meaning that departs from its literal meaning in one of several standard ways. In metaphor, as in (4), the figurative meaning is a related simile or comparison; in hyperbole, as in (5), it is a weakening of the literal meaning; in meiosis (understatement), as in (6), it is a weakening of the literal meaning; and in irony, as in (7), it is the contrary or contradictory of the literal meaning:

(4)   a.   Susan is a wild rose.

        b.   Susan is like a wild rose.

(5)   a.   The road is so hot you could fry an egg on it.

        b.   The road is very hot.

(6)   a.   He was a little intoxicated.

        b.   He was very drunk.

(7)   a.   You're a fine friend.

        b.   You're not a fine friend/You're a terrible friend.

Many of these definitions have become part of Western scholarly and folk linguistics and can be found in any dictionary. To turn them into an explanatory theory, one would need an account of the function fulfilled by using a literal meaning in order to convey a figurative meaning and a cognitively plausible procedure for deriving figurative meanings from literal ones. Classical rhetoric did not provide either of these, but then its aim was not to provide an explanatory theory of tropes but an informal user's manual.

Grice's brief discussion of tropes (Grice 1967/1989: 34) reanalyses the figurative meanings in (4b)–(7b) as conversational implicatures triggered by

blatant violation of his first Quality maxim ('Do not say what you believe to be false'). On this account, the ironical utterances in (1)–(3) above might implicate (8)–(10):

(8)   That party was no fun.

(9)   Someone unkindly stole my bag.

(10)   I can't thank you at all.

Grice's account of tropes shares with the classical account the assumption that metaphor and irony, hyperbole and meiosis are cut to the same pattern. Both accounts treat (4)–(7) as violating a maxim, norm or convention of literal truthfulness, and both see their figurative meanings (or implicatures) as regular departures from their literal meanings, derivable from these literal meanings by some procedures for meaning substitution. To the extent that these accounts have implications for the processing of figurative utterances, they suggest that metaphor and irony should involve similar processes, show similar developmental patterns and break down in similar ways.

This traditional approach to figurative utterances is now increasingly questioned. On the descriptive level, Grice's account is generally taken to imply a two-stage processing model in which the literal meaning of an utterance has to be tested and rejected before a figurative interpretation is considered. And indeed, it is hard to see how the hearer could recognise an utterance as a *blatant* violation of Grice's maxim of truthfulness without first constructing and rejecting a literal interpretation. However, experimental studies of both metaphor and irony suggest that some figurative interpretations

take no more effort to construct than literal interpretations, contrary to the predictions of the 'literal–first' model.[4]

On the theoretical level, the most fundamental drawback of the traditional approach is that it offers no clear explanation of why metaphor and irony should exist at all. In Grice's framework, figurative utterances such as (4a)–(7a) convey no more than could have been conveyed by uttering their strictly literal counterparts (4b)-(7b). Yet their interpretation necessarily involves rejection of the literal meaning (in Grice's terms, what the speaker has 'said or made as if to say') and construction of an appropriate implicature. On this account, metaphor and irony should cost more to process than their literal counterparts, but yield no extra benefit, which makes their use irrational and a waste of effort. In later work, Grice acknowledges that his account of irony is insufficiently explanatory (although he does not seem to have had similar worries about his parallel accounts of other tropes), and mentions some further features of irony which may be seen as intended to supplement his account or to point in the direction of an alternative account.

From Classical antiquity to Gricean pragmatics, there has been a rich literature in linguistics, rhetoric and literary studies on the nature and uses of irony. With the exception of the Romantics (whose important contribution has been on the critical rather than the descriptive side), all this literature accepts the basic tenet of the Classical approach, that irony consists first and foremost in a reversal of meaning, merely elaborating on this tenet by adding subtle observations, apt illustrations and interesting questions.

Our paper 'Les ironies comme mentions' (1978), published in English as 'Irony and the use–mention distinction' (1981) proposed a radical departure

from this basic tenet. We argued that irony consists in echoing a thought (e.g. a belief, an intention, a norm-based expectation) attributed to an individual, a group, or to people in general, and expressing a mocking, sceptical or critical attitude to this thought. On this approach, an ironical utterance typically implies that the speaker believes the opposite of what was said, but this is neither the meaning nor the point of the utterance. When Mary in (1) says, after a boring party, 'That was fun,' she is neither asserting literally that the party was fun nor asserting 'ironically' that the party was boring. Rather, she is expressing an attitude of scorn towards (say) the general expectation among the guests that the party would be fun. This approach was experimentally tested by Julia Jorgensen, George Miller and Dan Sperber in 'Test of the mention theory of irony' (1984), which provided a new paradigm for experimental research on irony.[5]

Under the direct or indirect influence of these two papers, much of the work now done on irony turns its back on the Classical approach and is based on the view that what irony essentially communicates is neither the proposition literally expressed nor the opposite of that proposition, but an attitude to this proposition and to those who might hold or have held it. For instance, with many interesting experiments and observations, Roger J. Kreuz and Sam Glucksberg (1989) proposed an 'echoic reminder theory of verbal irony' which adds to ours the idea that an ironical utterance has to *remind* the hearer of the thought it echoes (we would argue that this is indeed quite generally, although not necessarily, the case). By far the most influential variation of our account, and also the most critical one, is the 'pretence theory

of irony' proposed as an alternative to the echoic theory by Clark and Gerrig (1984) in a response to Jorgensen, Miller and Sperber.

Both echoic and pretence accounts reject the basic claim of the classical and standard Gricean accounts, that the hallmark of irony is to communicate the opposite of the literal meaning. Both offer a rationale for irony, and both treat ironical utterances such as (1)–(3) as intended to draw attention to some discrepancy between a description of the world that the speaker is apparently putting forward and the way things actually are. Perhaps for this reason, the two approaches are sometimes seen as empirically or theoretically indistinguishable: several hybrid versions incorporating elements of both have been produced, and the boundaries between them have become increasingly blurred. We will argue, however, that the two accounts differ, and that the echoic account is preferable.

In rhetorical and literary studies as well as folk linguistics, the term 'irony' has been applied to a broad range of loosely related phenomena, not all of which fall squarely within the domain of pragmatics defined as a theory of overt communication and comprehension. Of those that do, some are clearly forms of echoic use, others do indeed involve pretence, while others have no more in common with (1)–(3) than the evocation of a discrepancy between representation and reality. It should not be taken for granted that all these phenomena work in the same way, or that in developing a theory of 'irony', we should aim to capture the very broad and vague extension of the common meaning of the term. Rather, we should aim to identify mechanisms and see what phenomena they explain. The existence of pretence in speech is uncontroversial, and so is the fact that it can be put to ironical use. We want to

argue that echoing is also a common mechanism, distinct from pretence, and that not only can it be put to ironical use, but that it also explains typical properties of verbal irony such as the ironical tone of voice or the normative aspect of much irony. In particular, we will argue that typical cases of verbal irony such as (1)–(3) are best analysed as cases of echoic allusion, and not of pretence.

2. Three puzzling features of irony

From the classical point of view, irony presents three puzzling features that have often been noted and that an adequate theory should explain:

Attitude in irony and metaphor

In Lecture 3 of the *William James Lectures*, Grice discusses a possible counterexample to the brief analysis of irony introduced in Lecture 2:

> A and B are walking down the street, and they both see a car with a shattered window. B says, *Look, that car has all its windows intact.* A is baffled. B says, *You didn't catch on; I was in an ironical way drawing your attention to the broken window.* (Grice 1967/1989: 53)

B's utterance meets all of Grice's conditions for irony – the speaker 'says or makes as if to say' something blatantly false, intending to implicate the opposite – but it would not normally be understood as ironical. What is missing from the Gricean account? Grice suggests that what is missing may be the fact that irony involves the expression of a 'hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt' (ibid.: 53). However, he makes no attempt to integrate this suggestion into his earlier account.

Grice was not, of course, the first to note that irony expresses a characteristic attitude. By contrast, metaphor does not. Neither the role of attitude in irony nor the fact that irony and metaphor differ in this respect has a straightforward explanation in the classical or Gricean accounts, which treat both metaphor and irony as departures from a convention, norm or maxim of literal truthfulness. Why should one departure involve the expression of a characteristic attitude and the other not?

Normative bias

There is a widely noted normative bias in the uses of irony. The most common use of irony is to point out that situations, events or performances do not live up to some norm-based expectation. Its main use is to criticise or to complain. Only in special circumstances is irony used to praise, or to point out that some proposition lacking in normative content is false. This bias is unexplained on the classical or Gricean accounts.

To illustrate: when someone is being clumsy, it is always possible to say ironically, 'How graceful', but when someone is being graceful, it takes special circumstances to be able to say ironically, 'How clumsy'. Such negative ironical comments are only appropriate when some prior doubt about the performance has been entertained or expressed. To say ironically of an odd number 'This is an even number' is appropriate only when an even number had been expected.

This normative bias was experimentally confirmed by Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989) using alternative versions of stories such as the following, with the italicised sentence either present or absent:

Nancy and her friend Jane were planning a trip to the beach.

'It's probably going to rain tomorrow', said Jane, who worked for a local

TV station as a meteorologist.

The next day was a warm and sunny one.

As she looked out of the window, Nancy said, 'This certainly is awful

weather.'

The results showed that participants were more likely to judge the ironical

comment appropriate when it was preceded by the explicit prediction that the

weather would be awful. By contrast, in positive versions such as the

following, the ironical comment was judged equally appropriate whether or

not the italicised sentence was present:

Nancy and her friend Jane were planning a trip to the beach.

'The weather should be nice tomorrow', said Jane, who worked for a local

TV station as a meteorologist.

The next day was a cold and stormy one.

As she looked out of the window, Nancy said, 'This certainly is beautiful

weather.'

The ironical tone of voice

A further difference which is unexplained on the classical or Gricean accounts

is that irony, but not metaphor, has a characteristic tone of voice. Not all

ironical utterances use this tone of voice, but those that do help the audience

recognise their ironical intent (see Bryant and Fox-Tree 2005). The 'ironical

tone of voice' is characterised by a flat or deadpan intonation, slower tempo,

lower pitch level and greater intensity than are found in the corresponding literal utterances (Ackerman 1983; Rockwell 2000; Bryant and Fox-Tree 2005), and is generally seen as a cue to the speaker's mocking, sneering or contemptuous attitude. Thus, Rockwell (2000: 485) treats the vocal cues to sarcasm – a subtype of irony which she defines as 'a sharply mocking or contemptuous ironic remark intended to wound another' – as closely related to those for contempt or disgust, and suggests that they may be the prosodic counterparts of facial expressions such as 'a sneer, rolling eyes, or deadpan expression.' Since not all vocal or facial expressions of mockery, contempt or disgust are perceived as ironical, the challenge for pragmatics is explain what makes some such expressions of attitude ironical, while others are not.

It might be thought that the negative tenor of the ironical tone of voice merely reflects the fact that irony is more often used to blame than to praise, but this cannot be the case. The ironical tone of voice has a negative tenor whether irony is used to blame or to praise (or so it seems: the issue has not been properly investigated). Thus, if in appropriate circumstances one were to praise a graceful performance by saying in an ironical tone of voice, 'How clumsy!' the tone used would not be substantially different from the one used in criticising a clumsy performance by saying, 'How graceful!'

3. The echoic account of irony

In any genuinely linguistic act of communication,[6] an utterance is used to represent a thought of the speaker's that it resembles in content (Sperber and Wilson 1995: chapter 4, section 7). In ordinary *descriptive* uses of language, this thought is about an actual or possible state of affairs. In *attributive* uses, it

is not directly about a state of affairs, but about another thought that it resembles in content, which the speaker attributes to some source other than herself at the current time.[7] Different varieties of attributive use achieve relevance in different ways. We define *echoic use* as a subtype of attributive use in which the speaker's primary intention is not to provide information about the content of an attributed thought, but to convey her own attitude or reaction to that thought. Thus, to claim that verbal irony is a subtype of echoic use is to claim, on the one hand, that it is necessarily attributive, and, on the other, that it necessarily involves the expression of a certain type of attitude to the attributed thought.

The best-studied cases of attributive use are indirect reports of speech and thought, illustrated by the italicised expressions in (11)–(13):

(11) a. John phoned his wife and told her that *the train was about to leave*.

b. He was hoping that *they would have a quiet evening alone*.

(12) a. An announcement came over the loudspeaker. *All the trains were delayed*.

b. The passengers were angry. *When would they ever get home*?

(13) a, *Would the trains ever run on time,* the passengers were wondering.

b. *His evening was now ruined*, John feared.

In (11a), use of the verb 'told' unambiguously indicates that the following clause is an indirect report of speech; in (11b), use of the verb 'hope' unambiguously indicates that the following clause is an indirect report of

thought. By contrast, utterances such as (12a)–(12b) are *tacitly* attributive: the audience is left to infer that the thoughts they represent are being attributed to some source other than the speaker (e.g. the railway authorities in (12a), the passengers in (12b)). The examples in (13a)–(13b) are intermediate cases, which are similar in style to the tacit reports in (12), but with a parenthetical indication that the reported information is being attributed to some other source.[8]

Indirect reports such as (11)–(13) are primarily intended to inform the audience about the content of an attributed thought. Although the speaker may incidentally indicate her own reaction to that thought, this is not the main point of the utterance, on which most of its relevance depends. By contrast, some attributive uses of language are primarily intended to achieve relevance by showing that the speaker has in mind a certain thought held by others (or by herself at another time) and wants to convey her attitude or reaction to it. These are what we call *echoic uses* of language.

The most easily recognisable cases of echoic use are those that convey the speaker's attitude or reaction to a thought overtly expressed in an immediately preceding utterance. Consider Sue's possible responses in (15) to Jack's announcement in (14) that he has finished a paper he's been working on all year:

(14)   *Jack:*   I've finally finished my paper.

(15)   a.   *Sue (happily): You've finished your paper*! Let's celebrate!

        b.   *Sue (cautiously): You've finished your paper*. Really completely finished?

      c.   *Sue (dismissively): You've finished your paper*. How often have

           I heard you say that?

Here it is easy to see that Sue is not intending to inform Jack about the content of a thought he has only just expressed,[9] but to convey her own attitude or reaction to it. In (15a), she indicates that she accepts it as true and is thinking about its consequences; in (15b), she reserves judgement about whether it is true, and in (15c), she indicates that she does not believe it at all.

In other cases, echoic utterances convey the speaker's attitude not to immediately preceding utterances but to more distant utterances, or to tacitly attributed but unexpressed thoughts. And indeed, Sue could utter (15a)–(15c) echoically when Jack arrives home after e-mailing the good news from the office, or walks in saying nothing but waving a sheaf of papers and carrying a bottle of champagne.

The attitudes which can be conveyed in an echoic utterance range from acceptance and endorsement of the attributed thought, as in (15a), through various shades of doubt or scepticism, as in (15b), to outright rejection, as in (15c). The central claim of the echoic account is that what distinguishes verbal irony from other varieties of echoic use is that the attitudes conveyed are drawn from the *dissociative* range: the speaker rejects a tacitly attributed thought as ludicrously false (or blatantly inadequate in other ways). Dissociative attitudes themselves vary quite widely, falling anywhere on a spectrum from amused tolerance through various shades of resignation or disappointment to contempt, disgust, outrage or scorn. The attitudes prototypical of verbal irony are generally seen as coming from the milder, or

more controlled, part of the range. However, there is no cut off point between dissociative attitudes that are prototypically ironical and those that are not.[10]

Before applying this account to some examples, it is worth pointing out two features of attributive utterances in general which are also found in echoic utterances. First, attributive utterances (including tacit indirect reports) can be used to inform the hearer about the content not only of thoughts or utterances attributed to a particular individual on a particular occasion, but of those attributed to certain types of people, or to people in general. These may have their roots in culturally-defined social, moral or aesthetic norms, or general human hopes or aspirations. For instance, (16) attributes a thought to common wisdom:

(16)   They say a glass of wine is good for you.

We should therefore expect to find echoic utterances (including ironical utterances) conveying the speaker's attitude or reaction to thoughts of this kind, and we do:

(17)   a.   *Sue (pointing to Jack, who is more cheerful after drinking some wine)*: As they say, a glass of wine is good for you!

        b.   *Sue (pointing to Jack, who is rather boisterous after drinking some wine)*: As they say, a glass of wine is good for you!

        c.   *Sue (pointing to Jack, who has become a total nuisance after drinking some wine)*: As they say, a glass of wine is good for you!

In (17a)–(17c), the same widely shared view is echoed – approvingly in (17a), sceptically in (17b) and ironically in (17c).

Second, an indirect report need not be identical in content to the attributed utterance or thought, but should merely resemble it closely enough (i.e., preserve enough of its logical or contextual implications) to inform the hearer about relevant aspects of its content. In different circumstances, the most appropriate indirect report may be a summary, paraphrase or elaboration of the original, or may merely pick out an implication or implicature which the speaker regards as particularly worthy of the hearer's attention. We should therefore expect to find echoic utterances (including ironical utterances) which are not identical in content to the original utterance or thought, but merely resemble it to some degree, and we do. Suppose, for instance, that Bill has made a long speech about himself. Sue might report what he said as in (18), giving only its gist, and she might do so ironically, indicating by her tone of voice that she dissociates herself from what Bill was trying to convey.

(18)   *Jack*: What did Bill say?

        Sue: He is a genius!

There is one respect in which an echoic utterance can depart even further from the content of the original than the corresponding indirect report. A thought can be analysed as consisting of a proposition entertained with a certain propositional attitude. In reporting a thought, the speaker must provide the audience with enough information not only about its propositional content, but also about the associated attitude (was it a *belief,* a *wish,* a *fantasy,* a *hope,* a *suspicion,* a norm-based expectation about how people *ought* to behave,

etc.?). In tacit indirect reports such as (12a)–(12b), if the hearer is not in a position to infer this attitudinal information for himself, it is typically provided in a parenthetical comment, as in (13a)–(13b). In an echoic utterance, by contrast, since the main aim is not to provide information about the attributed thought, the speaker may be able to convey her reaction to it by endorsing or dissociating herself from a proposition that was only a constituent of the original. Thus, if Peter had been *hoping* for lovely weather and it turns out to be pouring with rain, Mary might say, echoically, 'The weather is lovely', in either an approving or a contemptuous tone of voice, in order to show how well- or ill-founded his hopes have turned out to be. Similarly, if our aesthetic norms imply that any given performance *ought* to be graceful, we can say, echoically, 'How graceful', in either an approving or a contemptuous tone of voice, in order to show how well or badly that particular performance lived up to the norm. In these cases, the assertive propositional attitude expressed in the ironical utterance differs from the optative or normative propositional attitude of the people whose thought is being echoed.

Here is how the typical examples of irony in (1)–(3) might be analysed on this account. In (1) ('That was fun') Mary might be dissociating herself from the propositional content of specific thoughts or utterances about the party (predictions or reassurances from her friends that it would be worth going to, or her own hopes, desires, expectations or fantasies about how the party would go). In that case, her utterance might communicate that the predictions or reassurances of her friends, and her own hopes, desires, expectations or fantasies, were ridiculously ill-founded. Alternatively, she might be dissociating herself from an application (to this particular party) of a

widely shared normative representation of how parties are *supposed* to go. In that case, her utterance might communicate that this particular party has fallen ridiculously short of acceptable standards. In other circumstances, she could have used (1) echoically to endorse the propositional content of the same attributed utterances or thoughts, communicating that her friends' reassurances were true, her hopes, desires, expectations or fantasies about the party were fulfilled, or that the party lived up to the normative expectation that it *ought* to be fun.

While the whole utterance in (1) is echoic, only the word 'kindly' is echoically used in (2) ('I left my bag in the restaurant, and someone kindly walked off with it'). The speaker is asserting that she left her bag in the restaurant and that someone took it, but dissociating herself from the proposition that this person behaved kindly. Here, there is a clear divergence between the echoic and Gricean accounts. On the Gricean account, the speaker of (2) is expressing the blatant falsehood that someone kindly stole her bag, and implicating the opposite (i.e. that someone unkindly stole her bag). On the echoic account, the speaker of (2) cannot be seen as ironically dissociating herself from the thought that someone kindly stole her bag, because no rational person would entertain such a thought in the first place. By contrast, it is quite reasonable to *hope* or *wish* that whoever finds a lost bag will behave kindly, and the idea that we should treat each other kindly is part of a widely shared normative representation of how people *ought* to behave. By echoing this widely shared representation, the speaker of (2) might communicate that her hopes or desires were ridiculously unrealistic, or that the person who found her bag fell laughably short of acceptable standards of behaviour.

Similarly, Sue's utterance in (3) ('I can't thank you enough') might be understood as ironically echoing a specific hope or wish of Sue's that the addressee's behaviour would be worthy of gratitude, or a particular application (to the addressee's behaviour) of a widely-shared normative representation of how people ought to behave.

A distinctive prediction of the echoic theory of irony is that it cannot work unless the audience can attribute to specific people, or to people in general, a thought that the ironical utterance can be taken to echo. The earliest experiments on irony based on the relevance theory approach (Jorgensen, Miller and Sperber 1984) were designed to test precisely this prediction of the echoic account – and they did confirm it, as did several later studies. For instance, participants in an experiment by Keenan and Quigley (1999) were divided into two groups, each of which heard a version of stories such as the following, containing one or other of the two italicised sentences:

One night, Lucy was going to a party. Lucy was all dressed up in her new party dress, ready to go, but she didn't have her party shoes on. Lucy didn't want to run upstairs with her nice dress on, so she called to her brother Linus who was upstairs reading. She yelled, 'Linus, please bring me my nice red party shoes! [*I want to look pretty for the party/I have to hurry or I'll be late.*]' So Linus, who was still reading his book, went to Lucy's closet and by mistake, he picked up Lucy's dirty old running shoes. When he went downstairs to hand them to Lucy, she looked at them and said, 'Oh great. Now I'll really look pretty.'

The two groups were then tested on their understanding of Lucy's final comment 'Now I'll really look pretty'. The results showed that participants who heard the version containing the earlier related utterance 'I want to look pretty for the party' understood Lucy's final comment as ironical significantly more often than those who heard the version containing the earlier unrelated utterance 'I have to hurry or I'll be late'. In other words, irony is easier to recognise when the echoic nature of the utterance is made more salient.

In a different kind of test of the echoic account, Happé (1993) investigated metaphor and irony comprehension in typically developing children and young people with autism, using stories such as the following:

David is helping his mother make a cake. She leaves him to add the eggs to the flour and sugar. But silly David doesn't break the eggs first – he just puts them in the bowl, shells and all. What a silly thing to do! When mother comes back and sees what David has done, she says:

'Your head is made out of wood!'

Q1: *What does David's mother mean? Does she mean that David is clever or silly?*

Just then father comes in. He sees what David has done and he says:

'What a clever boy you are, David!

Q2: *What does David's father mean? Does he mean David is clever, or silly?*

The stories were interrupted at two points with comprehension questions: Question 1 tests the comprehension of metaphor and Question 2 tests the comprehension of irony. Participants also took standard first- and second-

order false-belief tests, and a significant correlation emerged: participants who passed no false-belief tests understood neither metaphorical nor ironical utterances; those who passed only first-order false belief tests understood some metaphorical but no ironical utterances, and those who passed both first-order and second-order false-belief tests understood both metaphorical and ironical utterances. Thus, metaphor comprehension correlates with success in first-order false-belief tasks and irony comprehension with success in second-order false-belief tasks.

Happé's interpretation of her results relied on the assumption that standard false-belief tasks reveal orders of mindreading ability, from which it would follow that irony requires a higher order of mindreading ability than metaphor. However, recent work with versions of the false-belief task adapted to infants has shown that infants are already able to attribute false beliefs.[11] This suggests that the standard false-belief task (which children pass only at around the age of four) does not provide adequate evidence on the developmental origins of this ability. Still, the relative complexity of different standard false-belief tasks (whether they are first-order or second-order) remains a good indicator of participants' metaprepresentational proficiency. Hence Happé's results do confirm the relevance theory account of figurative utterances, which treats metaphor as expressing a thought about a state of affairs and irony as expressing a thought about another thought, and hence as requiring a higher-order of metarepresentational abilities. [12]

4. Pretence accounts of irony

In their discussion of Jorgensen, Miller and Sperber (1984), Clark and Gerrig (1984) did not try to defend the classical view of irony.[13] Instead, they offered a novel account which in fact had much in common with the echoic account. The main idea behind Clark and Gerrig's account, and most current pretence accounts of irony, is that the speaker of an ironical utterance is not herself performing a speech act (e.g. making an assertion or asking a question) but pretending to perform one, in order to convey a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude to the speech act itself, or to anyone who would perform it or take it seriously. This idea has been fleshed out in various ways, often within broader theories of mimesis or simulation (see e.g. Clark and Gerrig 1990; Walton 1990; Recanati 2000, 2004a; Currie 2002). Our concern here is not with these broader theories, which provide valuable insights into the nature of pretence, but only with the claim that irony necessarily involves pretence, or that the ability to understand pretence is the key to understanding typical cases of irony such as (1)–(3) above.

Although Grice's account of irony is very much in line with the classical approach, he is sometimes credited, in particular by Clark and Gerrig (1984), with an early version of the pretence account. On the one hand, he treated all figurative utterances as cases of 'saying or making as if to say', where 'making as if to say' has obvious connections with pretence. On the other hand, he suggested that an otherwise unexplained difference between metaphor and irony – that whereas a metaphorical utterance can be prefaced with the phrase *To speak metaphorically,* an ironical utterance cannot be prefaced with the phrase *To speak ironically* – might be explained on the assumption that irony is a type of pretence:

To be ironical is, among other things, to pretend (as the etymology

suggests), and while one wants the pretence to be recognised as such, to

announce it as a pretence would spoil the effect. (Grice 1967/1989: 54)

Grice's two points could be reconciled on the assumption that he thought there

were several different varieties of 'making as if to say', with irony – but not

metaphor – belonging to a sub-variety that amounted to pretence (Grice

1967/1989: 34, 53–54, 120). Recanati (2004a: 71) interprets Grice along these

lines, and appears to endorse a similar version of the pretence account:

Suppose the speaker says *Paul really is a fine friend* in a situation in which

just the opposite is known to be the case. The speaker does not really say,

or at least she does not assert, what she 'makes as if to say' (Grice's

phrase). Something is lacking here, namely the force of a serious assertion.

… What the speaker does in the ironical case is merely to *pretend* to assert

the content of her utterance. …By pretending to say of Paul that he is a fine

friend in a situation in which just the opposite is obviously true, the speaker

manages to communicate that Paul is everything but a fine friend. She

shows, by her utterance, how inappropriate it would be to ascribe to Paul

the property of being a fine friend.

In discussing the following example from Jorgensen, Miller and

Sperber (1984), Clark and Gerrig (1984) put forward a more elaborate version

of the pretence account:

(19)   Trust the Weather Bureau! See what lovely weather it is: rain, rain,

        rain.

Jorgensen et al. had treated 'See what lovely weather it is' in (19) as an

ironical echo of the weather forecaster's prediction. Clark and Gerrig (1984:

122) treat it as a type of pretence:

> With *See what lovely weather it is*, the speaker is pretending to be an
>
> unseeing person, perhaps a weather forecaster, exclaiming to an unknowing
>
> audience how beautiful the weather is. She intends the addressee to see
>
> through the pretense – in such rain she obviously could not be making the
>
> exclamation on her own behalf – and to see that she is thereby ridiculing
>
> the sort of person who would make such an exclamation (e.g. the weather
>
> forecaster), the sort of person who would accept it, and the exclamation
>
> itself.

According to this version of the pretence account, understanding irony

involves the ability to recognise that the speaker is pretending to perform a

speech act and simultaneously expressing a certain type of (mocking,

sceptical, contemptuous) attitude to the speech act itself, or to anyone who

would perform it or take it seriously.

       As it stands, however, this version of the pretence account does not

solve the problem raised by Grice's counterexample (see section 2) in which

the speaker points to a car with a broken window and says, 'Look, that car has

all its windows intact'. As noted above, Grice's comment that irony involves

the expression of a hostile or derogatory attitude does not really solve the

problem. In the first place, not all expressions of a hostile or derogatory attitude are ironical, and in the second place, someone who seriously asserted that a car with an obviously broken window had all its windows intact would be no less worthy of ridicule or contempt than someone who seriously asserted that the weather is lovely when it's pouring with rain, or that Paul is a fine friend when he's patently not. So why does the irony fall flat in one case and not in the others?

According to the echoic account, what is missing from both the Gricean account and simpler versions of the pretence account is the idea that for irony to succeed, the object of the characteristic attitude must be a thought that the speaker is tacitly *attributing* to some actual person or type of person (or to people in general). As Sperber (1984: 131) stressed in his reply to Clark and Gerrig,

> Absurdity of propositions per se is irrelevant. The absurdity, or even the mere inappropriateness, of human thoughts, on the other hand, is often worth remarking on, making fun of, being ironic about. In other words, in order to be successfully ironic, the meaning mentioned must recognisably echo a thought that has been, is being, or might be entertained or expressed by someone.

On this view, what makes 'See what lovely weather it is' in (19) above a successful case of verbal irony is not the fact that it would be ridiculous or inappropriate to assert it in the pouring rain, but the fact that some recognisable person or type of person (or people in general) has entertained (as a prediction or as a mere hope) the thought that the weather would be good,

and, with hindsight, the inappropriateness of that thought is worth remarking on. Similarly, what would make the utterance 'Look, that car has all its windows intact' a successful case of verbal irony would be the fact that some recognisable person or type of person has entertained, is entertaining or might entertain or express a thought with a similar content whose inappropriateness or inadequacy would be worth remarking on. This is the main idea behind the echoic account. Unless the pretence account is extended to include the idea that irony is tacitly attributive, it is hard to see how it can handle counterexamples such as Grice's at all.

5. Hybrid attributive–pretence accounts

In fact, the general idea behind the echoic account – that irony is necessarily attributive – has been quite widely accepted, even if particular aspects of it have been criticised (and occasionally misconstrued).[14] Several pretence theorists share the intuition that irony is tacitly attributive, but also maintain that irony involves the simulation or imitation of a (real or imagined) speech act, and is therefore a case of pretence. Attributive–pretence accounts differ from the versions of the pretence account discussed in the last section by claiming that irony is necessarily attributive, and from the echoic accounts discussed in this section by claiming that irony also necessarily involves pretence. We now outline the main features of some of these accounts and highlight their differences from the echoic account.

Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg and Brown (1995) propose an 'allusional pretence' account of irony which involves elements of both attribution and pretence. The attributive element is introduced through the

requirement that an ironical utterance must 'allude to some prior expectation, norm or convention that has been violated in one way or another' (ibid: 61).[15] The pretence element is introduced to deal with a variety of ironical utterances which Kumon-Nakamura et al. see as allusive but not properly echoic. These include ironical assertions such as (20), questions such as (21), offers such as (22), and requests, such as (23):

(20)   *To someone arrogantly showing off their knowledge:* You sure know a lot.

(21)   *To someone acting inappropriately for their age:* How old did you say you were?

(22)   *To someone who has just gobbled the whole pie:* How about another small slice of pizza?

(23)   *To an inconsiderate and slovenly housemate:* Would you mind very much if I asked you to consider cleaning up your room some time this year?

For Kumon-Nakamura et al., a crucial feature of these utterances is their *pragmatic insincerity*: the speaker 'makes as if' to perform a certain speech act while intentionally violating one of its sincerity conditions (e.g. the condition on questions that one should want to know the answer, or on offers that the offer is being made in good faith). While acknowledging that (20) might be seen as echoing the arrogant person's conception of himself, Kumon-Nakamura et al. claim that no such treatment is possible for (21)–(23).[16]

Kendall Walton (1990: 222–3) also treats irony as involving both attribution and pretence. After noting some of the parallels between verbal

irony and free indirect discourse (see note 8 above), he comments that the
speaker of an ironical utterance is not simply reporting the tacitly attributed
beliefs or assertions, but is 'pretending to endorse the ideas she attributes.'
Thus,

> To speak ironically is to mimic or mock those one disagrees with,
> fictionally to assert what they do or might assert. Irony is sarcasm. One
> shows what it is like to make certain claims, hoping thereby to demonstrate
> how absurd or ridiculous it is to do so.

Recanati (2007: 223–27) treats both irony and free indirect speech as
tacitly attributive varieties of mimicry or pretence:

> The act of assertion is precisely what the speaker does *not* perform when
> she says that *p* ironically: rather, she plays someone else's part and mimics
> an act of assertion accomplished by that person. She does so not by
> pretending that that person is speaking [17]… but by herself endorsing the
> function of speaker and saying that *p*, while (i) not taking responsibility for
> what is being said, and (ii) implicitly ascribing that responsibility to
> someone else, namely the person whose act of assertion is being mimicked.
> (Recanati 2007: 226)

Currie's (2006: 116) version of the pretence account can also be
understood as incorporating a tacitly attributive element. According to Currie,
in irony, 'one pretends to be doing something which one is not doing:
speaking seriously and assertively, seriously asking a question, seriously

expressing distaste', in order to target 'a restrictive or otherwise defective view of the world':

> … what matters is that the ironist's utterance be an indication that he or she is pretending to have a limited or otherwise defective perspective, point of view or stance, F, and in doing so puts us in mind of some perspective, point of view or stance, G (which may be identical to F or merely resemble it) which is the target of the ironic comment. (ibid: 118)

Assuming that the 'restrictive or otherwise defective view of the world' is tacitly attributed to some person or type of person (or people in general), Currie's version of the pretence account can be seen as incorporating the claim that irony is tacitly attributive. And indeed, he comments in a footnote:

> Perhaps it would be more strictly true to say that the target is some one person's really having that perspective, or some tendency on the part of a group of persons, or persons in general, to have or be attracted to having that perspective. These are refinements that do not, in themselves, divide me from the echoic theorists, and so I do not emphasise them.[18] (Currie 2006: 118)

According to the pretence accounts discussed in this section, the speaker of an ironical utterance is pretending to perform a speech act while simultaneously expressing a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude to an attributed utterance or thought. This approach to irony raises three immediate questions: what is the object of the speaker's mocking, sceptical or

contemptuous attitude, what actual or imagined speech act is being simulated, and how is the attribution achieved?

It is tempting to assume that a pretence theorist could answer all three questions, and simultaneously account for the parallels between irony and free indirect reports, by treating irony as involving the imitation of an actual (or at least a plausibly attributable) speech act, which would also be the object of the characteristic attitude expressed in irony. On this approach, if the weather forecaster makes the announcement in (24), Mary might be seen as imitating this speech act in order to report it, as in (25), or to express her own mocking, sceptical or critical attitude to it, as in (26):

(24)   *Weather forecaster:* It will be lovely weather today.

(25)   *Mary*: Guess what I've just heard. *The weather is going to be lovely today*.

(26)   *Mary* [*in the pouring rain*]: *The weather is really lovely today*.

A pretence account of this type would not only explain the attributive nature of (25) and (26), but also capture the intuition that the object of the ironical attitude conveyed in (26) is the speech act the weather forecaster performed; it would thus appear to offer a genuine alternative to the echoic account.

However, there are several problems with this assumption. In the first place – as most pretence theorists recognise – the object of the ironical attitude need not be a speech act, but may be merely a thought that has not been overtly expressed in an utterance. While it makes sense to talk of mimicking, imitating or pretending to perform a public speech act, it makes no clear sense to talk of mimicking, imitating or pretending to perform a private thought.

Pretence accounts of free indirect reports of thought run into a similar problem. According to Recanati (2007), these might be handled by broadening the notion of assertion to cover both public speech acts and private judgements, so that a speaker who reports either can be described as mimicking an 'act of assertion'. But this is a purely terminological proposal, and does not solve the problem of how a piece of public behaviour can mimic a private thought. By contrast, the notion of echoic attributive use outlined in section 3 above, which is based on resemblances in content rather than in behaviour and which therefore need not involve imitation, applies straightforwardly to any representation with a conceptual content, whether this is a public representation that can indeed be imitated or a mental representation that cannot.

A second problem with the claim that ironical utterances are imitations of actual (or plausibly attributable) speech acts is that even when there is an actual prior speech act that the ironical speaker can be seen as echoing, the ironical utterance need not preserve the illocutionary force of the original. Thus, Mary might ironically echo the weather forecaster's announcement in (24) ('It will be lovely weather today') by saying to her companion,

(27) a. Isn't it lovely weather?

b. What lovely weather we're having today!

c. Let's enjoy this lovely weather.

These utterances resemble the original in propositional content, but not in illocutionary force, and it is hard to see how Mary could be seen as imitating the speech act that the weather forecaster performed; if she is pretending to

perform any speech act in (27a), it is a question rather than an assertion. Or recall the experimental scenario in section 3 above, where Lucy asks Linus to bring her nice red party shoes. According to the pretence account, when Lucy says, ironically, 'Now I'll really look pretty', she is pretending to assert that she will really look pretty. However, the actual utterance that she is ironically echoing was 'I want to look pretty tonight', and this expresses a desire or wish, rather than a belief or judgement, that she will look pretty tonight. The point is quite general, and shows that even when the object of the speaker's ironical attitude is an actual speech act (e.g. the weather forecaster's assertion in (24)), this speech act cannot be identified with the one the speaker is pretending to perform.

A pretence theorist might propose to handle these cases by claiming that ironical utterances are imitations, if not of actual speech acts, at least of speech acts that some actual person or type of person had envisaged. For instance, when Lucy says, ironically, 'Now I'll really look pretty', she might be seen as pretending to make an assertion that she had hoped to be able to make herself, or imagined others making about her, and expressing a mocking or contemptuous attitude to the thoughts in which its performance was anticipated. And indeed, as mentioned above (note 16), ironical utterances such as the over-polite request in (23) above ('Would you mind very much if I asked you to consider cleaning up your room some time this year?') are plausibly seen as echoing thoughts about future utterances. However, the claim that *all* ironical utterances which attribute thoughts (as opposed to actual or plausibly attributable speech acts) should be analysed on similar lines has two counterintuitive consequences. In the first place, it excludes ironical

reflections on the failure of private hopes, wishes or fantasies that no-one would have dreamed of expressing. In the second place, it predicts that, when the primary object of irony is the inadequacy of some thought, it has to be a thought about future speech acts. Both consequences are quite implausible.

All this suggests that an adequate attributive–pretence account of irony should incorporate two distinct mechanisms, which can operate independently of each other. The first is a pretence mechanism, based on resemblances in public behaviour, which enables the speaker to perform an imaginary speech act without being committed to its illocutionary force. The second is an attributive mechanism of the type proposed in the echoic account, based on resemblances in conceptual content. In ironical utterances, the two mechanisms would combine, allowing the speaker to attribute to some actual person or type of person (or people in general) a thought similar in content to the imaginary speech act that she is pretending to perform, and to express a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude to this attributed thought. The resulting predictions would coincide with those of the echoic account, but would involve two distinct mechanisms where the echoic account has only one. Which raises the following question: if the attributive–pretence account makes the same predictions as the echoic account, wouldn't it be more parsimonious to bypass the pretence element entirely and go directly to the echoic account?

6. Explaining the puzzling features of irony

To conclude, let us see how the echoic and pretence accounts of irony explain the three features of irony which are puzzling from the perspective of traditional theories.

The ironical attitude

From the classical point of view, the fact that irony expresses an attitude while metaphor does not is puzzling. Why should the use of an expression to convey a figurative rather than a literal meaning come with an attitude in one case and not the other? From the relevance theory point of view, what irony conveys is not a figurative meaning but an attitude, the speaker's attitude to an attributed thought. Ironical attitudes are drawn from the dissociative range: the speaker distances herself from the attributed thought as ludicrously false, under-informative or irrelevant. Notice that mockery and contempt are attitudes which can be expressed not only to thoughts, but also to people, objects, events, and so on. On the echoic account, what distinguishes the ironical attitude is its object. Irony is directly targeted at attributed thoughts, and may be indirectly targeted, particularly in sarcasm, at the people, or type of people, who entertain such thoughts or take them seriously. On the echoic account, the ironical attitude is not a puzzling feature added to a specific kind of trope, it is constitutive of irony.

The echoic account suggests that what is missing from Grice's scenario of the car with a broken window is some evidence that the utterance *Look, that car has all its windows intact* is being echoically used to dissociate the speaker from an attributed thought. In the absence of such a thought, there is no object

to which the speaker could be expressing an ironical attitude, and hence no irony. Now add to the scenario the assumption that as we walk down the street, I have been worrying about whether it is safe to leave my car there overnight and you have been trying to reassure me that cars are perfectly safe in the area. At that point, we come across a car with a broken window. Then my utterance, *Look, that car has all its windows intact* could be seen as ironically echoing your assurances in order to indicate how ill-founded they have turned out to be. No irony without an ironical attitude, no ironical attitude without an echoed attributed thought as its object.

How do pretence accounts of irony handle the ironical attitude? In general, pretending goes quite naturally with the expression of an attitude towards the kind of act one is pretending to perform or the kind of people who would perform such acts. One can pretend to be Superman and, in doing so, express one's admiration for Superman. One can also pretend to be a drunkard and, in doing so, make fun of drunkards. However, this is parody, not irony. Can the actions imitated in pretence be proper objects of a specifically ironical attitude? In non-attributive versions of the pretence account of irony, the object of the mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude must be either a speech act that the speaker is pretending to perform or the type of person who would perform it. When this pretend speech act imitates an actual speech act, then there is a target for irony. 'What a lovely day!', says Peter one morning. 'What a *lovely* day!', says Mary when the rain starts, both parodying Peter and expressing an ironical attitude to the content of his utterance. In many cases, however, the pretend speech act does not have a real-life counterpart, and is unlikely ever to have one. Most utterances of 'What a lovely day!' said in the

pouring rain do not parody any actual utterance. If they are pretences, it is not at all obvious what is the point of the pretence, what its target is, and hence what makes it ironical. What is the point of expressing a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude to a speech act that no one has performed and that, in many cases, no reasonable person would perform? On this version of the pretence account, many typical cases of irony have no real target.

Hybrid attributive–pretence account may of course borrow the echoic explanation of the ironic attitude, but they do not add anything to it.

Normative bias

Why should irony be most commonly used to blame or complain? This puzzling fact was described and discussed at length in classical rhetoric, but never properly explained. From the perspective of the echoic account, it has a simple and compelling explanation. Norms, in the sense of socially shared ideas about how things should be, are always available to be ironically echoed when they are not satisfied. People should be polite, smart, handsome, actions should achieve their goal, the weather should be good, the prices should be low, and so on. So, when these norms are not satisfied, utterances such as 'She is so polite!', 'That was smart!', 'What a handsome man!', 'Well done!', 'Nice weather!' 'This is cheap!' and so on are readily understood as ironical because they echo a norm-based expectation that should have been met.

On the other hand, it takes special circumstances to be able to say ironically 'She is so impolite!' when someone is being polite, 'Horrible weather!' when the sun is shining, or 'This is an even number' when talking about an odd number. For irony to succeed in these cases, the thought that the

person in question might behave impolitely, that the weather would be horrible, or that the number was odd must have been entertained or, even better, expressed. Only then is there some identifiable thought that can be ironically echoed.

It is quite possible, on the other hand, to pretend to perform a speech act without imitating and targeting any actual speech act. If irony were achievable simply by performing such a pretend speech act with a mocking attitude, as claimed by non-attributive versions of the pretence account, nothing in the mechanism of irony so understood would explain this normative bias. Hybrid attributive–pretence accounts may again borrow the echoic explanation of the normative bias, but it is the echoic element, not the pretence element of such accounts that is doing the explanatory work.

The ironical tone of voice

The echoic account offers a straightforward explanation of why there is an ironical tone of voice but no corresponding metaphorical tone of voice. The ironical tone of voice, we suggest, is a natural cue to the particular type of mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude that the speaker intends to convey to the thought being echoed. Since metaphor is not echoic and does not involve the expression of a characteristic attitude, there is no reason why we should expect to find a corresponding metaphorical tone of voice.

The pretence account also makes a clear prediction about the tone of voice used in irony. If the speaker is pretending to make an assertion, we would expect her to maintain the pretence by mimicking the tone of voice that

someone actually making the assertion did, or would. use. This is just what Clark and Gerrig (1984: 122) propose:

> In pretense or make-believe, people generally leave their own voices behind for new ones. An actor playing Othello assumes a voice appropriate to Othello. An ironist pretending to be S' might assume a voice appropriate to S'. To convey an attitude about S', however, the ironist will generally exaggerate, or caricature, S''s voice, as when an ironist affects a heavily conspiratorial tone of voice in telling a well-known piece of gossip. … With pretense, there is a natural account of the ironic tone of voice.

Notice, though, that this is not the 'ironical tone of voice' discussed in much of the literature, which takes for granted that the ironical speaker does not leave her own voice behind, but may instead use a tone of voice designed to reflect her own mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude. Rockwell's (2000: 485) comment that the vocal cues to sarcasm are closely related to those for contempt or disgust fits well with the claim of the echoic account that the 'ironical tone of voice' is simply the tone of voice optionally used to convey the attitudes characteristic of irony. This tone directly expresses the speaker's own ironical attitude, and is therefore quite incompatible with exaggeratedly imitating or caricaturing the tone of the person the ironist is pretending to be.

Although what Clark and Gerrig describe is not what is commonly recognised as the 'ironical tone of voice', and is indeed incompatible with it, they are right to point out that many examples discussed in the literature on irony could be uttered in an exaggerated imitation of the tone that someone

genuinely performing the associated speech act might use. In fact, the tone of voice Clark and Gerrig describe is parodic rather than ironic, where parody is related to direct quotation as irony is related to indirect quotation. Parody does indeed exploit resemblances in behaviour: the speaker simulates a speech act, mimicking the tone of voice, form of words, etc. that someone genuinely performing that speech act might use. Moreover, parody can be used to express an ironical attitude to the thought expressed by the utterance being imitated. So, yes, there are cases where pretence and irony are combined, but far from being prototypical cases of irony, they are characterised by a tone of voice quite distinct from the ironical tone of voice (which itself, as noted above, is only an optional feature of irony).

There is an easily perceptible difference between ironic and parodic tones of voice. Suppose that Bill keeps saying, 'Sally is such a nice person', whereas Judy totally disagrees. Judy might express a derogatory attitude to Bill's judgement of Sally in two superficially similar, but quite perceptibly different, ways. She might imitate Bill and repeat, 'Sally is such a nice person!' with an exaggerated tone of enthusiasm. Or she might utter the same sentence, but with a tone of contempt, so that there is a contradiction between the literal content of what she says and the tone in which she says it. The first tone of voice is indeed one of pretence and mockery. The second is the true ironical tone of voice (Sperber 1984).

As noted above, a puzzling feature of the ironical tone of voice is that its tenor is always negative, irrespective of whether the literal content of the utterance is positive or negative or whether the irony is used to praise or to blame. Thus, the tone of voice is the same when someone says, ironically,

'How graceful' in order to criticise a clumsy performance or 'How clumsy' in order to praise a graceful performance that the addressee had said would be clumsy. Indeed, the same negative tone of voice can be used when the literal content of an ironical utterance entirely lacks normative content, as when someone says, ironically, 'This is an even number' about an odd number that the addressee had said would be even. From a pretence point of view, this constancy of tone, whatever the literal tenor of the utterance, whatever the speaker's critical or laudatory intent, would be quite hard to explain. The echoic account, on the other hand, straightforwardly predicts this feature: the tone of voice expresses the relationship of the ironist to the thought she is echoing. In all cases, whether the literal content was positive or negative, and whether the intention is to praise or to blame, the ironist is adopting a negative attitude to the thought she echoes.

As before, hybrid attributive–pretence accounts can borrow from the echoic account explanations for features that are puzzling on a purely pretence account. Thus, Currie (2006) suggests that both parodic and regular ironical tones of voice can be accommodated within a pretence account using a notion of *scope of pretence.* In both cases, he claims, the ironical speaker is pretending to perform a speech act; in parodic irony, however, the accompanying (exaggeratedly sincere) tone of voice falls within the scope of the pretence, whereas in regular irony, the derogatory tone of voice falls outside the scope of the pretence, and is intended to reflect the actual speaker's views. Indeed, but what is explained by such a diluted pretence account that is not already explained in the echoic account? It seems to us that the pretence

element in attributive–pretence accounts of irony adds to the complexity of the theory without yielding any corresponding benefit.

7. Conclusion

Sometime a scholarly problem does get resolved. We believe that the echoic account of irony which we proposed some thirty years ago explains, at least in broad outline, what irony is and how it functions, and resolves the puzzles that classical approaches could only describe. Much work has been inspired or otherwise stimulated by our proposal, many subtle observations have been made, many interesting experiments performed. We believe that this work has been successful in explaining aspects of irony when it has drawn from the echoic account and enriched it, but not otherwise. Aren't we modest?

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[1] Falsity is not the only kind of inadequacy that may be indicated by irony: ironical questions are neither true nor false and ironical understatements are typically true, but both are inadequate because of their blatant irrelevance when taken at face value.

[2] See e.g. Winner (1988); Capelli et al. (1990); Happé (1993); Sullivan et al. (1995); Creusere (1999, 2000); Keenan and Quigley (1999); Dennis et al. (2001); Nakassis and Snedeker (2002); Pexman and Glenwright (2007).

[3] See e.g. Smith and Tsimpli (1995); Winner et al. (1998); McDonald (1999, 2000); Dennis et al. (2001); Giora et al. (2000); Langdon, Davies and Coltheart (2002); Adachi et al. (2004); MacKay and Shaw (2004); Brüne (2005); Shamay-Tsoory et al. (2005); Wang et al. (2006); Chevallier (2009), Chevallier et al. (in press).

[4] See e.g. Gibbs (1986, 1994a); Dews and Winner (1999); Schwoebel et al. (2000); Giora (2003); Glucksberg (2001).

[5] A terminological point: In those early days of relevance theory, we used 'mention' (in an extended sense of the term) to describe what we would later call 'interpretive use' (of which attributive uses are a subtype – see section 3 below). In the first edition of *Relevance* (1986a), we gave up this use of 'mention' and have talked since then of the 'echoic' theory of irony.

[6] That is, any act of communication in which the linguistically encoded meaning makes an essential contribution to the content of what is communicated.

[7] Attributive use is one of several sub-varieties of a more general category of *interpretive* use; see Sperber and Wilson (1995); Sperber (1997, 2000a); Wilson (2000, 2006).

[8] The tacit reports in (12) and (13) display some features typical of free indirect discourse (e.g. lack of subordination, shifted tense and reference, use of 'now' with past-tense verbs, etc.), See e.g. McHale (1978); Banfield (1982); Sternberg (1982a); Fludernik (1993); Mey (1999); Blakemore (2009).

[9] Moreover, in echoing Jack's utterance, Sue is obviously not trying to *remind* Jack of what he has just said. This is why we do not agree with Kreuz and Gluscksberg's (1989) view that an ironical echo always has the function of a reminder.

[10] For further exposition of the echoic account, see Sperber and Wilson (1990, 1995); Wilson and Sperber (1992); Sperber and Wilson (1998b); Wilson (2006).

[11] See e.g. Onishi and Baillargeon (2005); Surian, Caldi and Sperber (2007); Southgate, Chevallier and Csibra (2010).

[12] The correlation Happé found between irony comprehension and success in second-order false-belief tests has proved fairly robust, and has been confirmed in a variety of conditions (see note above 2). By contrast, later studies suggest that, if anything, the orders of ability

required for metaphor comprehension should be revised downwards: while some metaphors presuppose the ability to pass standard first-order false belief tests, others are understood by people who do not pass standard false-belief tests at all (Giora et al. 2000; Langdon, Davies and Coltheart 2002; Martin and McDonald 2004; Norbury 2005; Mo et al. 2008).

[13] Clark and Gerrig, drawing on the etymology of the Greek word *eironeia*, do, however, suggest that the idea of pretence is present in classical theories. Still, the fact is that in both classical rhetoric and Grice's account, irony serves to convey the opposite of the literal meaning of the utterance, and evocations of pretence are mere marginal subtleties.

[14] For critical discussion of the echoic account and responses to some objections, see Clark and Gerrig (1984); Sperber (1984); Giora (1995); Hamamoto (1998); Yamanashi (1998); Seto (1998); Sperber and Wilson (1998b); Curcó (2000); Currie (2006, 2008); Wilson (2006); Colston and Gibbs (2007).

[15] As shown in section 3, according to the echoic account, as long as the 'allusion' is based on resemblance in content, this would be enough to make the utterance echoic.

[16] Even on the narrow interpretation used by Kumon-Nakamura et al., the utterances (21)–(23) could also be seen as echoic. We have argued (Sperber and Wilson 1981: 311–312), that over-polite requests such as (23) can be ironical echoes of the sort of deferential utterance that (it is implied) the hearer sees as his due. Sarcastic offers such as (22) can be seen as ironically echoing the sort of utterance a good host is expected to produce, or that a guest who thinks his greed has not been noticed might be expecting to hear; and so on.

[17] That is, not by directly quoting the speaker.

[18] In later work, Currie (2008) suggests that the 'restrictive or defective view of the world' which is the target of the irony need not actually be attributed to anyone. For reasons of space, we will leave discussion of Currie's reservations about the echoic account to another time.