

**Figurative Thought and Language**

# **Irony in Language Use and Communication**

EDITED BY  
Angeliki Athanasiadou  
and Herbert L. Colston

**1**

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The volume provides original research and analyses of the multi-faceted conceptual and verbal process(es) of irony. Key topics explored include interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches to the study of irony. Collectively, the papers examine irony from psychology, embodiment studies, philosophy, cognitive linguistics, the connection and impact of irony on culture and (media) communication, different approaches to verbal irony and others – ultimately attempting to model the mechanisms underlying ironic forms and the psycholinguistic motivations for their investigation. The comprehensive treatment of these issues is fundamental for future research on irony and related phenomena, particularly on questions of its usage, the diversity and/or unity of irony and ultimately the interrelationships between figurative thought and language.



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Athanasiadou & Colston

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## Irony in Language Use and Communication



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## **Volume 1**

*Irony in Language Use and Communication*

Edited by Angeliki Athanasiadou and Herbert L. Colston

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## Foreword

This volume was inspired by a theme session on irony held at the 2015 meeting of the International Cognitive Linguistics Conference in Newcastle, UK. Contributors were solicited from several central disciplines in irony studies including Linguistics, Psychology, Philosophy, and Computer Science, among others. Presentations and discussions were then held on a variety of irony topics such as approaches and methods of studying irony, connections between ironic thought and communication, commonalities between verbal and situational irony, irony in constructions, irony as a form of metonymy, cognitive operations underlying ironic forms, among many other issues.

Irony remains somewhat in the background of figuration studies relative to figures like metaphor and metonymy. Remediating this situation was an initial motivation for the theme session. A second goal was to expand upon most prior approaches coming from largely compartmentalized perspectives. For instance, irony has attracted the attention of fields from anthropology through zoology. Yet, scholars in these disciplines relatively rarely cross boundaries. They instead conduct and communicate their questions, ideas, explanations, and findings to fellow scholars within the same field of study.

Silo-ing of this sort might make sense to a degree – the exact prosody of ironic indirect questions, for instance, might not be of much interest to a semiotician studying cartoon irony. A psychologist interested in live ironic performance (i.e., a speaker spontaneously mocking a famous person just viewed on television) may also be less than overly concerned with verbal irony misinterpretation over social media.

But much is to be gained when disciplines interact. Psychologists studying verbal irony can benefit through attention to linguistic categories and principles (e.g., typological differences between languages and how they affect attention and information sequencing). Linguists can be aided by considerations of memory issues in information processing (e.g., primacy and recency effects). Both of these disciplines can benefit by theoretical input from philosophy and enriched descriptions of ironic practices from semiotics, anthropology or other disciplines.

The volume contains enriched chapters as well as an introduction by the editors, where we attempted to glean trends emerging from the works included. We also offer suggestions for future directions of research.

We would like to thank all the authors for their contributions and commend them on their participation in the internal reviewing process; each author read and commented on chapters within their section. We would also like to thank the external anonymous reviewers, who read and commented insightfully on all chapters in the volume. Grateful thanks are also due to Esther Roth, Acquisition Editor at Benjamins who provided guidance and assistance whenever necessary.

Given the ubiquity, richness, variety and complexity of irony, across all of its manifestations, we hope this volume will catalyze even further intradisciplinary study into the intriguing human phenomenon and we are confident the volume will inspire readers interested in the study of irony and will furthermore contribute to the development of this multifaceted conceptual process.

Angeliki Athanasiadou & Herbert L. Colston

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# Introduction

## The irony of irony

Herbert L. Colston and Angeliki Athanasiadou

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### Overview and contents

The figure of irony is a multi-faceted conceptual process that functions and is expressed in a variety of ways. Its multi-facetedness can immediately be detected in its diachronic origins: Socratic irony, dramatic irony, irony of fate – each involving features that influenced more recent approaches to the study of irony in linguistics, psycholinguistics and the philosophy of language.

In Socratic irony the philosopher pretended to be ignorant and by means of questions aimed for the truth. The pretense theory of irony also draws on this method employed by Socrates. In dramatic irony, whether a tragedy or comedy, pretense, an inherent feature of drama, is involved in the roles of the characters who act as if they don't know what the playwright and the audience know. In irony of fate, an instance of situational irony, speakers are victims of unknown or supernatural forces that play with their minds (see Athanasiadou, 2017).

In all three irony types an incongruity is present between two major component parts (e.g., what the actor versus the audience knows) and victimization holds typically for one of the two parts. The degree and nature of this incongruity, for instance between nonfigurative and intended meaning in verbal irony, is the central and most discussed feature of irony. The incongruity can take the form of opposition, contradiction, contrast, contraindicatedness, etc. This gradation of incongruity has also given rise to semantic-pragmatic approaches to the study of irony. In fact, irony has long been treated as a pragmatic phenomenon. In the Cognitive Linguistics framework irony has been treated by the mechanism of mental spaces (Kihara, 2005; Palinkas, 2014; Tobin & Israel, 2012) and as a cognitive operation (Ruiz de Mendoza & Galera, 2014).

The figure of irony has also been treated from the point of view of its expression – as when a speaker echoes or just mentions what has been or might have been said for a number of pragmatic functions. This expressive characteristic led

to the formulation of another theory of verbal irony in addition to pretense, that of the family of echoic accounts. By this approach, a speaker does not really *use* but rather *mentions* an utterance, typically again to serve some pragmatic goals (i.e., to show that what should have happened didn't happen). This particular approach has gone through a number of iterations including echo, echoic mention and echoic reminder (see Gibbs & Colston, 2007, for a review).

In terms of irony and other closely related figures like sarcasm, some studies equate irony with sarcasm where others distinguish the two. The underpinning to this dissociation is that a distinctive line between irony and sarcasm is not always easy to practically draw. The difficulty is due to speakers' intentions with respect to criticism actually falling along a continuum – a speaker may criticize harshly or lightly, or anywhere in between (or a speaker could even use irony to praise (Pexman & Olineck, 2002).

Humor is another aspect that contributes to ironic expressions. In its extreme degree irony together with humor can become an instance of satire. Irony and parody are also closely related and concomitantly connected with humor. The exact nature of the irony-humor connection is complex, however, as indeed is the variety of types of humor associated with irony (e.g., mirth versus aggressive humor), (Gibbs, Bryant & Colston, 2015).

An associated type of irony related to the verbal form is situational irony – or the irony inherent in some state of affairs – not necessarily involving a speaker or other person making an expression. Both irony types are discussed in the literatures that address verbal and situational irony although verbal irony studies greatly outnumber works addressing the situational form. What may underlie or connect these forms of irony remains unclear.

The multi-faceted aspect of irony is also present in its comparison to and combination with other figures. Verbal irony may combine with metaphor, metonymy, simile, hyperbole, understatement or other figures. Verbal irony is also often combined with understatement, hyperbole, and other forms of ironic expression not constrained to language (e.g., pastiche, parody, satire, etc.). One question in such combinations is which figure(s) play(s) the primary role in the contribution of meaning and which figure(s) is/are supportive in this? A common question regarding comparisons is where are the limits to irony?

The chapters in this volume represent some of the cutting edge empirical research and theoretical developments on the issues above as well as others within the diverse and complex phenomenon of irony. Although many of the included works touch on both unpublished data and new theoretical developments, as well as several other related issues, they've nonetheless been organized according to their primary contribution. Four interrelated but separable sections emerged. The first Part (**Interdisciplinary perspectives on irony**) brings some new ideas on irony



from Psychology, Embodiment Studies, Cognitive Science and Philosophy, in consideration of irony across its many forms. Potential connections between the forms of irony as well as among other core properties of socio-cognitive systems are discussed. The second Part (**Irony, thought and [media] communication**) considers irony in authentic data, and emphasizes connections between ironic thought and ironic communication. Part III focuses on verbal irony (**Approaches to verbal irony**), along with its connections to other figurative forms and how to best model the cognitive operations underlying processing and communication with ironic forms. The final Part assesses various approaches and methods of studying irony (**Approaches to studying irony**). Different issues in this regard include means by which to study irony's on-line processing with respect to the waxing and waning of various involved or relevant meanings. Relative advantages and disadvantages of experimental approaches emphasizing control and generalizability versus more observational or corpora based work that emphasizes authenticity, complexity and nuance are also discussed. New findings based on complex eye-tracking methodology are also provided.

## Part I. Interdisciplinary perspectives on irony

H. Colston. "Irony performance and perception: What underlies verbal, situational and other ironies?"

R. Gibbs and P. Samermit. "How does irony arise in experience?"

R. Willison. "In defense of an ecumenical approach to irony"

The Colston and Gibbs chapters discuss different forms of connection among types of irony beyond the verbal. They also discuss potential underpinnings of these connections.

**Colston** considers irony as a potential instance of a perfect storm in our tendency to think categorically and schematically (e.g., when categories that people develop and maintain cognitively clash in blatantly contradictory ways).

This contradiction is evidenced in a recent news story where American actress Carrie Fisher died in her 60s on December 27th, 2016, followed by the death of her actress/singer/dancer mother Debbie Reynolds in her 80s the very next day. This mother-daughter pair were renowned for their complex loving and supportive, yet also competitive and jealous relationship, evidenced in the semi-autobiographical book by Fisher, *Postcards from the Edge* (Fisher, 1987) and the popular synonymous film (Calley & Nichols, 1990). Part of Fisher's motivation in creating these works was a combined cathartic and humorous attempt to capture and express the angst of feeling frequently upstaged by one's parent – the expression itself perhaps also



a move at upstaging. It's ironic then (on multiple levels) that Fisher's final act in life, her death, was then subsequently upstaged, at least interpretably, by the death of Reynolds the following day – a purported act of upstaging that by definition cannot be requited.

Verbal irony is then argued to be potentially viewed as the *creation* of such contradictory categories by an ironic speaker (e.g., the uttered and accordingly conjured surface statement by the speaker [a situation is positive and the speaker is happy – as in saying, “fine”] is contradictory to the genuine situation and authentic speaker attitude conveyed by the comment [the situation is *not* positive and the speaker is *unhappy*]).

The potential that irony in its many forms may ultimately derive from the characteristic of bilateral symmetry in the human body is also speculated upon.

The **Gibbs and Samermit** chapter briefly discusses a theory from humor studies termed benign violation and its potential for underlying humor and irony. The chapter notes how this humor theory (from Peter McGraw) is related to the embodied experienced quality of irony and humor.

These different ideas in the Colston and Gibbs & Samermit chapters about potential unifying sources of the varieties of irony line up interestingly. *Benign violation* is an insight into how often people couple the experience of a positive and negative thing together (e.g., terror and delight) to enable playing the two off one another (surfing, to put it metaphorically, over the two emotions while they're kept in balance). The experience of a benign violation can also often break down, for instance when we lose the balance between the two oppositional emotional experiences and the subjective feeling tips toward one emotion or the other (the child who gets enormous joy out of playing “gonna getcha” even to the point of begging for more of the game, or if the “getter's” mock aggression is a bit too strong the child bursts into tears and the game collapses). Relatedly, the connection between irony and humor is already well known and documented, if not fully understood. But this linking of the two via benign violation adds to the idea that irony is something deeply embodied, both cognitively and emotionally.

Colston's consideration of what it means to have a *bilateral symmetrical body* and to also be bipedal, reveals a pattern similar to that of benign violations. Balance, in the sense of actual physical standing, is achieved by equating the forces of our opposing bodily halves (each fighting gravity with one leg). Moving from sitting to standing, as well as locomotion, are also achievable by careful alternating balance between the two halves of our bodies. So very basic neural motor programs for standing balancing, walking, running, tipping back and forth from one leg to the other side-to-side sumo wrestler style, and others all have at their core the similar kind of balancing between two oppositional things also found in balancing between