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### On irony and negation

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## On Irony and Negation

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In this article, irony is viewed as a mode of indirect negation. Based on this view, interpreting irony does not involve canceling the indirectly negated message and replacing it with the implicated one (as contended by, e.g., Clark & Gerrig, 1984; Grice, 1975). Rather, irony understanding involves processing both the negated and implicated messages, so that the difference between them may be computed. This view thus differs from the view which assumes that irony involves *only one interpretation* (e.g., Gibbs, 1986a; Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Wilson & Sperber, 1992). Holding that irony activates both the literal/explicit and the ironic/implicated meanings predicts that irony will be more difficult to understand than a nonironic use of the same utterance. Reanalysis of previous findings (Gibbs, 1986a) evinces that irony takes longer to process than nonironic use of the same utterance. Though irony is more difficult to understand than nonironic language, speakers apply this mode for *certain communicative goals* that are unattainable by direct negation. Direct negation may be vague, it may be face-threatening, and in certain contexts, it may be dull. But, what is more important, it cannot point to the occasionally more desirable state of affairs indicated by the affirmative (literal) phrasing of the ironic utterance.

Based on the traditional view, irony is a figure of speech that communicates the opposite of what is said. By saying “What a lovely party!” in the middle of a lousy party, the speaker communicates “what a lousy party.” According to Grice (1975), this involves a breach of the maxim of quality. The overt violation makes the addressee cancel the *surface-literal meaning* and generate an implicature in quest for the speaker’s intention. On this view, then, irony is more difficult to understand than nonironic language. It involves a two-stage processing: The addressee first realizes a norm is breached, because literally the ironic utterance is unacceptable. As a result, an alternative interpretation is generated which is compatible with the speaker’s implied intention.

According to more recent research (Jorgensen, Miller, & Sperber, 1984; Sperber, 1984; Sperber & Wilson, 1981, 1986; Wilson & Sperber, 1992), irony does

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not involve a double (literal and figurative) deciphering procedure. Rather, it has one meaning: It is "a variety of echoic interpretative use, in which the communicator dissociates herself from the opinion echoed with accompanying ridicule or scorn" (Wilson & Sperber, 1992, p. 75). By saying "What a lovely party!" the speaker echoes a specific or an imaginary opinion suggesting that it is absurd to hold such an opinion. On this view, irony does not involve a two-stage processing and is as easy to understand as literal language. It has only one interpretation. It projects an attitude of disapproval.<sup>1</sup>

In an attempt to criticize the echoic view of irony, Clark and Gerrig (1984) proposed to view the ironist as "pretending to be an injudicious person speaking to an uninitiated audience; the speaker intends the addressee of the irony to discover the pretense and thereby see his or her attitude toward the speaker, the audience, and the utterance" (p. 121). By saying "What a lovely party!" in the middle of a lousy party, the ironist assumes the identity of another speaker addressing a gullible audience. The present addressee, however, is supposed to take delight in recognizing both the pretense and the intended attitude of ridicule toward the pretending speaker, the audience, and the utterance. Though pretense theory claims to be more general than echoic mention theory, showing that the latter is not necessary, both theories view verbal irony as involving only that meaning which is not stated (Sperber, 1984).

The view of irony I present here suggests that irony is a form of negation<sup>2</sup> that does not make use of an explicit negation marker. An affirmative (more often than negative) expression is used to implicate that a specific state of affairs is different or far from the taken-for-granted, expected (or more desirable) state of affairs<sup>3</sup> explicitly indicated by the same affirmative expression.<sup>4</sup> Such a view

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<sup>1</sup>Elaborating on the echoic approach, Myers (1990) interprets the use of echoic expressions (in writing) as a device of getting across double intention: "the ironic writer intends that readers recognize a **different** intention" (p. 421) from the original writer's. In his view, irony is a result of an interaction among the ironic writer, the ironized writer, and the reader. The latter responds to the build up of shared assumptions necessitated by irony and perceives the intention shift (see also Booth, 1974) which is intended to reveal the taken-for-granted assumptions of the ironized writer. The view that irony projects the ironist's attitude and is evaluative in function has also been forwarded by Winner (1988). For Winner (1988), irony serves to "reveal the ironist's attitude about the world," and "this attitude is almost always negative" (pp. vii, 8).

<sup>2</sup>For a similar view of irony as a form of negation see Martin (1992).

<sup>3</sup>For a similar view of irony as alluding to expectations see Gibbs and O'Brien (1991) and Martin (1992).

<sup>4</sup>Also, see Chen (1990) and Winner (1988). "In ironic statements the relation between what is said and meant is a relation of opposition between a positive and a negative tone" (Winner, 1988, p. 9). Although this is the case in most common forms of irony, the opposite is practiced as well: A negative statement is intended to generate a positive one: for example, "'Why don't you take your time getting the ball?' meaning 'Hurry up and get the ball'" (Gibbs, 1986b), or "'I see you got your usual low score' when the addressee has, as usual, received a high test score" (Cutler, 1974, cited in Winner, 1988, p. 26). Such ironies convey additional overtones of negative meaning, called *sarcasm*: They make explicit a negative rather than a positive state of affairs. The reason why ironies tend to be

suggests that irony does not cancel the indirectly negated message as suggested by the traditional and pretense accounts. Nor does it necessarily implicate its opposite as contended by the traditional view. Rather, it entertains both the explicit and implicated messages so that the dissimilarity between them may be computed. By saying "What a lovely party!" in the middle of a lousy party, the ironist points out that the party fails (standard) expectations and is far from being lovely. In the act of processing the utterance, then, the surface meaning is involved. The product is, therefore, an interpretation close to "how far it is from being the expected lovely party."

The view that irony is a form of indirect negation is partly compatible with the traditional theories (e.g., Grice, 1975) which hold that irony involves a breach of a communicative norm and triggers the generation of an implicature. On this view, processing irony must be more effort consuming than processing nonironic language (as argued later). However, the question that arises is what motivates such a linguistic choice: Why would a speaker choose to negate indirectly and make the addressee invest relatively more effort in interpreting the message? What specific goals are being aimed at that will not be accomplished by a straightforward negation? To be able to evaluate the kind of negation exercised by ironical expressions and the effects an indirect negation rather than a direct one might have, let us first review the properties of direct negation relevant to the study of irony.

### NEGATION

Because this study proposes to view irony as indirect negation, it is essential to consider the differences between negating an utterance directly and indirectly. This section reviews those effects of direct negation that indirect negation avoids. Consider first the scalar interpretation of direct negation, which indirect negation shuns. For example, on the scale of "hot > warm > neither warm nor cool > cool," *not hot* means *less than hot* rather than *cold* (Horn, 1989). Along these lines, direct negation can be taken to have a weak reading whereby only one value in a set is negated while the rest is affirmed (see also Horn, 1989, and references cited therein). Note that this type of negation can be compared to the (classical) negation of a statement which cancels the assertion but retains the presupposition(s). In a way, the explicitly negated expression functions as the central member of the set whose negation allows for the less central members to take over. Note further that under such interpretation, it is not the distant marginal member that is invoked but rather an approximate similar one (for a similar view see also Bald, 1971). Given ordinary intonation, "not a witch" excludes "an angel"—its di-

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expressed in positive rather than negative utterances lies, I believe, in the attempt to shun the unpleasant effect of negativity, and in the fact that negating an affirmative statement is easier than negating a negative one (e.g., Clark, 1974).



logical marker and are more difficult to acquire and process than their unmarked affirmative counterparts (e.g., Clark, 1974; Clark & Clark, 1977, cited in Horn, 1989; Just & Carpenter, 1971). Psychologically, they are considered "prohibitive." They have an "unpleasant hedonic value" (Wason & Jones, 1963, p. 307) associated with them. Irony, being an inexplicit negation, avoids this unpleasant value.

Direct negation is further limited, where irony is not. Hedged statements, intensified statements, approximations (see also Horn, 1989), and (novel and rich) metaphors cannot be directly denied via negation as attested by the ill-formed versions (a) as opposed to the well-formed versions (b) of Examples 4 through 7. However, indirectly denied via an ironic reading, Examples 4 through 7 are well-formed and can be viewed as implicating a different interpretation from what is meant by their nonironic reading.

- (4) He is sort of silly.  
 (a) I don't think so. \*He is not sort of silly.  
 (b) He is not silly.
- (5) She is rather annoyed.  
 (a) I don't think so. \*She is not rather annoyed.  
 (b) She is not annoyed.
- (6) She is very very proud of her daughter.  
 (a) I don't think so. \*She is not very very proud of her daughter.  
 (b) She is not (very) proud of her daughter.
- (7) She is a flower.  
 (a) I don't think so. \*She is not a flower  
 (b) She is not that beautiful.

Another aspect of negation that is somewhat unusual for direct negation (Jespersen, 1924, as cited in Horn, 1989) yet is widely practiced by indirect negation, is the exceptionally "more than" interpretation of direct negation as in Example 8.

- (8) Pat doesn't have 3 kids, she has 4.

As we shall see later, ironic utterances may implicate a *more than* interpretation as easily as a *less than* or *opposite* interpretation. As an indirect form of negation, however, irony seems less vague than direct negation.

### IRONY APPROPRIATENESS

The conditions on irony appropriateness proposed here suggest that irony involves a breach of a norm (though not the Gricean quality maxim, as will be clarified later). Such an approach is akin to the traditional view in terms of



processing explanation. It assumes a two-stage deciphering procedure whereby both the literal and the ironic meanings are computed. However, it departs from the traditional view in that it further assumes that the literal meaning is not dismissed, having been processed. Upon this view, the product or implicature of irony is not the opposite of what is said, but is a less distant, more mitigated interpretation (for the difference between processing and product, see Gibbs, 1992).

To be able to handle the grammar of irony, it is necessary, first, to consider the conditions for the well-formedness of ordinary, nonironic discourse and contrast them with the conditions for irony well-formedness. I formulated the conditions for discourse well-formedness in previous works (Giora, 1985a, 1985b, 1988), and will briefly recapitulate them here for convenience.

### **Conditions for Discourse Well-Formedness**

A discourse is well-formed if and only if it meets the following conditions:

1. It conforms to the relevance requirement in that all its messages are conceived of as related to a discourse topic. The discourse topic is a generalization preferably made explicit and placed in the beginning of the discourse. It functions as a reference point relative to which all oncoming messages are assessed and stored (as specified in Giora, 1985a, 1985b, following Grice, 1975).
2. It conforms to the graded informativeness condition which requires that each proposition be more (or at least not less) informative than the one that precedes it. A message is considered informative to the extent that it has properties unshared by the previous message which in turn allow it to reduce possibilities by half (as specified in Giora, 1988, following Grice, 1975, and along the lines suggested by Shannon, 1951, and Attneave, 1959, *inter alia*).
3. It marks any deviation from relevance and graded informativeness with an explicit semantic connector such as "by the way" or "after all" (Ariel, 1990; Giora, 1985a).

### **Conditions for Irony Well-Formedness**

Given the conditions for text well-formedness, an ironic text is well-formed if and only if it meets the following conditions:

1. It conforms to the relevance requirement in that it introduces information about an accessible discourse topic;
2. It violates the graded informativeness requirement by introducing a least-probable message, either too or less informative than required in the given context (the marked informativeness requirement)<sup>7</sup>;

<sup>7</sup>For lack of a better concept, I take expressions of attitude as well as assertions to be or to contribute information. Under this analysis, expressives (e.g., "Thank you" or "Congratulations!")

3. It makes the addressee evoke an unmarked interpretation (i.e., the implicature) comparable with the marked message whereby the difference between them becomes perceivable (the incancellability condition).

Thus, irony differs from nonirony in that it makes use of a highly improbable message (conforming to the marked informativeness requirement) to evoke a less marked, more probable interpretation. It is this condition that accounts for the flavor of humor that accompanies the implied criticism or disillusionment. The humorous effect is a result of introducing to the discourse a surprising message that still bears relevance to the topic under discussion (see also Giora, 1991, for an account of jokes).

Furthermore, being a form of negation that does not make use of an explicit negation marker, the marked utterance is not canceled (the incancellability condition) as proposed by the traditional account. Rather, it is used to implicate that a specific state of affairs is far from or very much unlike the expected/desired state of affairs indicated by the comparison.

This view of irony takes an interactionist stance and rejects both the substitution (e.g., the traditional and pretense accounts) and the echoic view. According to the substitution view of irony (e.g., Clark & Gerrig, 1984; Grice, 1975), the implicated meaning is to substitute for what is said. The echoic theory (Jorgensen et al., 1984; Sperber, 1984; Wilson & Sperber, 1992) also rejects the assumption that an ironic utterance simultaneously involves two layers of meaning. By contrast, I argue that ironical utterances involve both what is said and what is meant (i.e., implicated). I argue that the two meanings are activated so as to spell out the difference or contrast between them (see also Bartlett, 1985, cited in Walker, 1991). In this respect, I also disagree with Winner (1988), who takes the so-called "literal meaning" to be canceled: "The two meanings diverge because the speaker does not mean what he says and means *only* [italics added] what he implies" (p. 6).

The incancellability of the marked interpretation is confirmed by recent research into the relative aggressiveness of ironic statements. Kaplan, Levy, Rosenblatt, Gardner, and Winner (1987, cited in Winner, 1988, and replicated in Dews & Winner, 1995) found that ratings for ironic compliments (where a negative utterance evokes a positive one) were as negative as those for ironic insults (where a positive utterance evokes a negative one). Thus, an ironic insult such as "You are going to look great," said to someone wearing garish clothes for a school photograph, was rated as aggressive as "You really have no dancing talent at all," said to someone who has just given a successful performance. These attest to the interaction obtaining between the two interpretations: "An attack becomes *less negative* if phrased in a form of irony; and praise becomes *less positive* if phrased in the form of irony" (Kaplan, Levy, et al., 1987, cited in Winner, 1988, p. 156).

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are transformed into assertions ("I thank you for . . ." or "I congratulate you on . . .") and are treated as adding information in terms of the speaker's attitude.

To examine the conditions for irony appropriateness, consider a situation in which I have the right of way, but the other driver does not let me proceed. Instead of cursing him or condemning him or telling him how impolite he is, which, under the circumstances, are probable responses, I utter the following:

(9) Thank you!

Under the circumstances, I comply with the relevance requirement by responding to an accessible (nonverbal) discourse topic—the other driver’s behavior. I further comply with the marked informativeness condition of irony well-formedness in that I contribute most unlikely or highly improbable information to the discourse. By thanking a rude person, I reduce more than half of the possible responses. This highly marked information evokes the unmarked, more expected/accessible interpretation, that which is close to condemnation, without canceling the less probable one, that of thanking (in accordance with the incancellability condition). The result is that the addressee realizes the extent to which his behavior falls short of expectations (made explicit in my statement of gratitude).

Example 9 falls within the *less than* interpretation of negation. Thus, by saying “thank you,” the speaker intends to communicate a (far) “less than thanking” message. However, negation can also have a *more than* interpretation. This is illustrated in Examples 10 and 11.

(10) I think the washing hasn’t dried.

When said on a very rainy day, Example 10 is highly improbable (in accordance with the marked informativeness condition) and invokes a stronger *more than* interpretation in the form of “I am sure the washing hasn’t dried.” This serves to highlight the difference between a more desirable state of affairs, in which there is some doubt about the washing (expressed by the explicit statement), and the more unfortunate state of affairs, in which “the washing must be soaked through” (in accordance with the incancellability condition).

Similarly, the utterances in Example 11 are relevant to the discourse topic, but they contribute less information than necessary suggesting that the speakers hardly know the person in question while in fact they know him all too well.

(11) “Do you know any G.M.?” my friend asks.  
“Rings a bell,” I reply.

Given that the person in question is well known to the speakers, both messages are highly improbable (as required by the marked informativeness condition). They indicate that the explicit state of affairs, in which the person discussed is hardly familiar, is much more desirable than the one implicated, in which that person is all too well known (in accordance with the incancellability condition).

The conditions of irony appropriateness can also explain the difference found between verbal irony and ironic situations. Examining the difference between intentional and unintentional irony, Gibbs and O'Brien (1991) observed that the reading time for unintended ironical statements was significantly shorter than that for intended ironies. Given the theory of irony presented here, the difference between Example 12, where irony is intended, and Example 13, where it is not (Gibbs & O'Brien's examples), is explainable in terms of the markedness informativeness condition.

- (12) John and Bill were taking a statistics class together. Before the final exam, they decided to cooperate during the test. So they worked out a system so they could secretly share answers. After the exam John and Bill were really pleased with themselves. They thought they were pretty clever for beating the system. Later that night, a friend happened to ask them if they ever tried to cheat. John and Bill looked at each other and laughed, then John said, "I would never be involved in any cheating."
- (13) John and Bill were taking a statistics class together. They studied hard together, but John was clearly better prepared than Bill. During the exam, Bill panicked and started to copy answers from John. John didn't see Bill do this and so didn't know he was actually helping Bill. John took the school's honor code very seriously. Later that night, a friend happened to ask them if they ever tried to cheat. John and Bill looked at each other, then John said, "I would never be involved in any cheating."

In Example 12, in which the irony is intended, the final comment is highly surprising in accordance with the marked informativeness requirement. The same comment in Example 13, in which the irony is not intended, is predictable in accordance with the graded informativeness requirement. The processing time difference then should not be surprising. Processing an expected message takes less time than processing an unexpected one. Or, put differently, processing an ironic utterance takes longer than processing the same utterance when used nonironically, as will be shown later.

That irony need not violate the quality maxim (Grice, 1975) has been made clear by, for example, Sperber and Wilson (1981). Consider, for instance, Gibbs and O'Brien's (1991) example in which a mother says "I love children who keep their rooms clean" upon seeing her son's messy room (p. 527). To account for this irony, there is no need to assume a breach of quality, because the mother expresses a statement she believes in. Nor would the echoic or pretense accounts work here, because the speaker does not dissociate herself from the opinion echoed. Neither does she pretend to be talking to a gullible audience. However, the conditions of irony well-formedness proposed here can account for the irony here. The speaker introduces to the discourse a marked/improbable message (in accordance with the marked informativeness condition) which indicates the extent to which her son's behavior has fallen short of expectations (made explicit in her statement).

### A Critique of the Echoic View of Irony

At this stage, I will try to show that the echoic view of irony is too narrow to account for the variety of ironies. Recall that for Wilson and Sperber (1992) irony is “a variety of echoic interpretative use, in which the communicator dissociates herself from the opinion echoed with accompanying ridicule or scorn” (p. 75). However, that irony need not necessarily be echoic has been shown by, for example, Clark and Gerrig (1984) and Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989), and can be seen from Examples 10 and 11, which need not be attributed to another speaker. I will, therefore, try to show that it is not sufficient either.

To see that an echoic utterance accompanied by ridicule need not result in irony, consider the utterance in Example 14b, which is echoic in terms of Wilson and Sperber’s (1992) definition, but is neither humorous nor ironic because it fails to comply with the marked informativeness condition postulated earlier.

- (14a) DINA: I missed the last news broadcast. What did the Prime Minister say about the Palestinians?  
 (14b) MIRA (with ridiculing aversion): That we should deport them.

In this exchange, Example 14b is echoic in that it simultaneously expresses the speaker’s attitude or reaction to what was said or thought. However, no irony results. Though the utterance in Example 14b allows for both the original and the current speaker’s attitudes to get through, the message itself is not markedly informative as required by the marked informativeness condition. Example 15b, on the other hand, is ironic.

- (15a) DINA: I missed the last news broadcast. What did the Prime Minister say about the Palestinians?  
 (15b) MIRA: That we should host them in 5 star hotels in Lebanon.

Example 15b is ironic because, apart from conforming to the relevance requirement, as does Example 14b, it also conforms to the marked informativeness condition of well-formed irony, which Example 14b does not. Unlike Example 14b which contributes probable information to the discourse, Example 15b is highly improbable, reducing possibilities such as Example 14b and others. As noted earlier, markedly informative messages are surprising, which explains their humorous effect. In addition, Example 15b evokes an unmarked interpretation that brings out the contrast between the two readings (in accordance with the incancellability condition).

A reanalysis of an echoic example cited in Wilson and Sperber (1992), however, suggests that echoic ironies comply with the view of irony proposed here. The following example is said in a rainy rush-hour jam in London (which echoes somebody else’s view of London):

- (16) When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.  
(Boswell, 1934, p. 66)

The ironical statement in Example 16 conforms to the conditions for irony postulated here. The speaker of Example 16 obeys the relevance requirement by introducing information about an accessible discourse topic, that is, London on an unpleasant rainy day. In accordance with the marked informativeness requirement, the information introduced is markedly informative because it is least predictable. The marked information—the vision of London as a place of utmost joy—is weighed against the invoked, unmarked, more probable view of London as a tiresome place. Processing the contrast between the two interpretations (in accordance with the incancellability condition) results in the implicature that the speaker expresses a disappointment in London. The echoic view of irony, then, is too narrow: It cannot handle nonechoic ironies (e.g., Examples 10 and 11). By contrast, the view of irony proposed here can handle both echoic and nonechoic ironies.

I suspect that both echoic and pretense theories attribute ironies to another persona, because the explicit message is so improbable (in accordance with the marked informativeness requirement) that it is not deemed attributable to the speaker herself. Similarly, for Grice (1975), the improbability of the message (required by the marked informativeness condition) is viewed as intended or apparent insincerity. To avoid such analysis, the speakers of both the echoic and pretense theories are taken to echo someone different than themselves.

### THE TIME COURSE OF UNDERSTANDING IRONY

The view of irony proposed here predicts that an utterance used ironically will be more difficult to understand than when used nonironically. This view of irony is not at all popular in current research. Overall, verbal irony has not been found to take longer to process than nonironic statements (e.g., Gibbs, 1986a, 1986b). Gibbs (1986a) and Gibbs and O'Brien (1991) therefore conclude that irony is not more difficult to understand than nonironic expressions, and that irony does not violate any communicative norm. Rosenblatt, Swinney, Gardner, and Winner (1987, cited in Winner, 1988) further showed that ironic intonation facilitated understanding of ironic statements to the extent that ironic utterances in sarcastic intonation were understood faster than literal statements. Where no intonation cue was given, ironic and literal utterances were processed just as rapidly. This tendency was shown also for children, though it did not reach significance. It should be noted, however, that items that were not understood were excluded from analysis. The question that immediately arises is which utterances were more difficult to understand?

To defend my approach, I have chosen to focus on one study that deserves a close inspection for being both very central to and representative of the current

research on nonliteral language. Gibbs (1986a) attempts to show that “it is misleading to suppose that in understanding nonliteral language one type of meaning (literal) is automatically determined before the other (nonliteral)” (p. 4), as can be deduced from more traditional accounts of irony. Gibbs, therefore, embraces the more recent echoic account of irony (e.g., Sperber & Wilson, 1981) which does not assume a breach of norms and a resultant double meaning (literal and nonliteral) that makes processing more difficult.

Gibbs (1986a) conducted a number of experiments which he suggests support this view. I will try to show that it is possible to interpret his findings in a different way so that they support the theory of irony under discussion here. To do this, I will first show that the common practice of comparing irony with its literal “counterpart” is problematic. The literal replacement is not informative enough and results in discourse inappropriateness. I will then show that comparing ironic and nonironic uses of the same utterance in an appropriate context reveals that irony takes longer to process than nonironic language.

Let me start with a critical analysis of the texts used in Gibbs’s experiments. Note, particularly, the texts used for Experiment 1 (e.g., Examples 17 and 18), though my criticism holds for most of the texts used. Gibbs tested the naturalness of the various versions and showed that ratings for the four story types do not significantly vary. However, the theory of discourse well-formedness proposed here predicts that the versions ending with the literal or nonsarcastic target sentences must be less appropriate because they do not meet the graded informativeness requirement. For an illustration, consider Example 17.

- (17) Harry was building an addition to his house. He was working real hard putting in the foundation. His younger brother was supposed to help, but he never showed up. At the end of a long day, Harry’s brother finally appeared. Harry said to his brother:  
 [Sarcastic target] “You are a big help.”  
 [Nonsarcastic target] “You are not helping me.”

In terms of discourse well-formedness, the ironic version (with the sarcastic target) in Example 17 is more appropriate than its counterpart nonironic version (with the nonsarcastic target) because the ironic ending is highly informative, whereas the nonironic version is informatively redundant and states the obvious. Findings indeed show that the nonironic version took significantly longer to read. Gibbs, however, considers this result supportive of his view that sarcasm, or irony, is not more difficult to understand than literal language, but he cannot account for the fact that it is sometimes even easier to understand.

Consider the difference between the literal and compliment target sentences in Example 18. Given my theory of discourse well-formedness, the version with the acknowledgment/compliment target sentence is more appropriate than its literal counterpart. The acknowledgment meets the graded informativeness requirement adding some information about the speaker’s feelings or attitudes. The literal

counterpart, on the other hand, is a redundant description of the obvious state of affairs. This, too, is reflected in the reading time difference: "Subjects took longer to read literal sentences than acknowledgements" (Gibbs, 1986a, p. 6).

- (18) Greg was having trouble with calculus. He had a big exam coming up and he was in trouble. Fortunately, his roommate tutored him on some of the basics. When they were done, Greg felt he'd learned a lot. "Well" he said to his roommate,  
 [Literal target] "You are a big help."  
 [Compliment target] "Thanks for your help."

As predicted by the theory of discourse well-formedness presented here, there are only two well-formed text versions: the versions ending with relatively informative messages, that is, the sarcastic and the acknowledgment targets. By contrast, the versions ending with the literal and nonsarcastic target sentences are less appropriate. This difference in text appropriateness is further attested to by recognition scores and confidence ratings (Gibbs's Experiment 4). Subjects recognized sarcastic remarks better than any other nonsarcastic target sentence. They were also much more confident in their recognition judgements for ironies than for all other nonironic target sentences. However, the only other comparison that reached significance indicates that subjects were more confident in their recognition judgments for acknowledgments than for nonsarcastic remarks.

This difference in text appropriateness, by itself, would not have been that crucial were it not suggestive of the impossibility of weighing ironic utterances against either their nonliteral implicated meaning or their literal uninformative uses. Gibbs however, verified the hypothesis that ironic language is not more difficult to understand than literal language on the basis of such comparisons. I therefore suggest that the crucial test of ease of processing for literal and nonliteral language be examined by measuring the difference between a literal and a nonliteral use of the same utterance in appropriate contexts. Gibbs's findings allow for such a comparison. His findings, indeed, evince that an utterance used ironically is more difficult to understand than when used nonironically.

Consider, for instance, the alternatives in Examples 17 and 18. To weigh different uses (literal vs. nonliteral) of the same (or almost the same) utterance, the sarcastic target sentence in Example 17 should be weighed against the compliment/acknowledgment target sentence in Example 18. "You are a big help," the sarcastic target sentence in Example 17, is thanking ironically,<sup>8</sup> whereas "Thanks for your help," the compliment sentence in Example 18, is thanking literally. I therefore expect the compliment sentence in Example 18 to be understood faster than the sarcastic target sentence in Example 17. Results indeed show that the ironic use takes longer to process than the literal use of the same

<sup>8</sup>That "you are a big help" is thanking ironically is clear also from the equivalent ironical distractor Gibbs (1986a) devised for this utterance in Experiment 4: "Thanks for your help" (p. 10).



sentence: "Acknowledgement targets . . . took less time to process than sarcastic remarks" (Gibbs, 1986a, p. 6).

Experiment 3 repeats the same findings. Consider the difference between sarcastic remarks in normative texts and the literal uses of the same sentences in nonnormative texts in Examples 19 and 20, respectively (from Gibbs, 1986a, p. 9).

- (19) Billy and Joe were long-time pals. But one time when Billy was away on a business trip, Joe slept with Billy's wife, Lynn. When Billy found out about it afterwards, he was upset. He confronted Joe and said to him:  
[Sarcastic target] "You are a fine friend."  
[Nonsarcastic target] "You are a terrible friend."
- (20) Billy and Joe were long-time pals. One time Billy was in desperate need of money. His car had broken down and he needed \$300 to fix it. So, he asked Joe for a loan. Joe said he could lend Billy the money. This made Billy happy and he said to Joe:  
[Sarcastic target] "You are a terrible friend."  
[Nonsarcastic target] "You are a fine friend."

As predicted by the theory of irony well-formedness proposed here, subjects took longer to read sarcastic remarks (in normative texts such as Example 19) than to read nonsarcastic uses of the same sentences when presented in other (nonnormative) texts (such as Example 20). Similarly, subjects took longer to read sarcastic remarks (in nonnormative texts such as Example 20) than to read nonsarcastic uses of the same sentences when presented in other (normative) texts (such as Example 19). I should note in passing that the nonsarcastic targets in both story types sound like acknowledgment/condemnation statements. These findings, then, support the traditional view which predicts that irony should be more difficult to understand than nonironic language.

Gibbs (1986a) explains this by suggesting that "positively intended evaluative remarks are processed more quickly than negatively evaluative remarks" (p. 6). "Literally saying something nice about someone is understood more rapidly than sarcastically saying something nice and more rapidly than saying something negative, whether literally or sarcastically" (p. 9). But, Gibbs's findings further evince that literally saying something negative about someone is more rapidly understood than sarcastically saying something negative about someone (i.e., saying a positively intended remark). Therefore, the first explanation does not hold. A better explanation would be the one that suggests that sarcasm takes longer to understand than literal language. Sarcasm is more difficult to understand than literal use of the same language probably because it involves the interference of the (surface) literal meaning of the ironical utterances. For now, however, it is important to acknowledge the fact that Gibbs's findings may serve to support the traditional view that expects irony to be more difficult to understand than literal language.

Another measure of ease of processing applied by Gibbs in the same experiment involved subjects' paraphrase judgments of the target sentences tested. Results show that it took subjects longer to make paraphrase judgments for all the nonsarcastic target sentences than for the sarcastic remarks. Though Gibbs considers this supportive of the relative ease of processing for ironic language, I take these findings to attest to the double meaning of sarcasm. If an utterance involves a double meaning, it seems rather easy to make a given implicit meaning explicit or recognize it. Nonambiguous utterances, on the other hand, do not have a ready-made extra meaning at their disposal. Probably, every paraphrase is a much worse version of the original.

Further evidence from combined (paraphrase judgment and target sentence) reaction time suggests that sarcasm is more difficult to understand than the literal use of the same remark. Adding the paraphrase judgment reaction time to the target sentence reaction time reveals that subjects were faster at reading and making paraphrase judgments for the acknowledgment sentences than for the sarcastic ones. Not surprisingly though, the literal and nonsarcastic versions (which make up the less appropriate story types) were highest in combined reaction time. Taken together, then, the data from each of the three measures of comprehension in Gibbs's Experiment 1 and the findings reported in Gibbs and O'Brien (1991; about intended and unintended ironies) give reason to question the claim that people understand sarcastic utterances without having to process their surface literal meaning.

The second experiment Gibbs conducted aimed at supporting the view that sarcasm (or irony) is echoic. And, indeed, subjects took longer to read non-echoic ironic utterances than echoic ones and rated them lower in sarcasm than echoic ironies. However, it is also possible to interpret these findings differently so that they support the traditional view of irony. First, contrary to Sperber and Wilson's (1981, 1986) view, subjects' ratings suggest that irony is not necessarily echoic. But, more importantly, subjects' processing time further attests to the interference of the literal meaning with the nonliteral one. Echoic ironies are understood faster because, having been mentioned and processed earlier in the discourse, their literal meaning does not require that much processing. Nonechoic utterances, being newly mentioned, do not contain that accessible information. Therefore, they take longer to process: Their literal and nonliteral meanings get activated. Gibbs's Experiment 2, then, can be taken to attest that irony need not necessarily be echoic, and that the idea that the literal meaning of an ironic utterance is activated as well is not altogether unthinkable.

Gibbs's Experiment 3 attempts to further support the echoic mention theory by testing normative versus nonnormative contexts and their effect on irony processing. The theory predicts that a positive irony, which echoes the norm of saying nice things ("you are a fine friend" meaning "you are a terrible friend"), will be easier to process than a negative irony ("you are a terrible friend" meaning "you are a fine friend"). Indeed, subjects took longer to process negative ironies than

positive ironies. Furthermore, these ironies took longer to process than nonironic utterances in the same type of text. These findings may indicate that it is easier to process echoic than nonechoic irony. However, they could also be explained differently. On the view that irony is an implicit negation, a negative irony is more difficult to understand than a positive one because it involves double negation. For Gibbs, however, the fact that nonechoic ironies take longer to process than their literal "counterparts" must be a problem. He must admit that understanding nonechoic irony involves computing the literal surface meaning as well.

Recall, further, that these findings evince that subjects took longer to read sarcastic remarks (in normative texts) than literal uses of the same sentences when presented in other (nonnormative) texts. These findings echo previous findings (cf. Gibbs's Experiment 1) where acknowledgments (nonironic uses of sentences) were easier to process than their ironic uses. These findings clearly support the theory of irony proposed here. All in all, then, reinterpretation of the findings of the three experiments (1–3) that tested irony understanding suggests that ironic language is more difficult to understand than literal language.

Gibbs's Experiments 4 and 5 tested memory for sarcasm on the assumption that sarcasm involves echoing norms and has a special role in "relating speakers and hearers by the mention of a previously stated belief or attitude" (Gibbs, 1986a, p. 10) that makes them more memorable. My theory also predicts a better recall for irony, but on a different assumption. A marked message, particularly a humorous one, is more memorable than unmarked or redundant information (see also Kreuz, Long, & Church, 1991, for evidence that humor improves recall of ironic statements). Results show that ironic utterances are recalled better than any nonironic ones.

Gibbs's Experiment 5 showed that echoic irony was recalled better than nonechoic irony. His Experiment 6 intended to show that irony that echoes a "social norm" (saying something positive like "you are a fine friend" meaning "you are a terrible friend") is recalled better than negative irony (where "you are a terrible friend" means "you are a fine friend"). Though the findings show that positive ironies are remembered better than any other alternative tested, they further confirm that, in general, positive utterances are recalled better than negative ones. That positive ironies are remembered better than negative ones is not surprising for another reason: Because negative ironies involve a double negation, they might be more difficult to understand.

In sum, reinterpretation of the findings presented by Gibbs (1986a) can be taken to support the traditional view that ironical language is more difficult to understand than literal language. This is particularly true if literal and nonliteral uses of the same utterance are compared for ease of processing. The so-called literal "equivalent," with which ironic language is usually compared, might not be the right counterpart, because it usually involves explicit negation (which is more difficult to understand and prohibitive) and is pragmatically inappropriate because it is uninformative. But, apart from showing that the literal and non-

literal uses of the same utterance differ in terms of processing, there is enough evidence to suggest that some forms of irony (i.e., negative irony) are more difficult to process than even their literal “counterparts.”

Further evidence of the relative difficulty of understanding irony comes from developmental studies. Research into children’s understanding of irony shows that particularly preschool children but even children up to the age of 11 years have difficulties understanding ironic utterances. Several studies (Ackerman, 1981; Demorest, Meyer, Phelps, Gardner, & Winner, 1984; Silberstein, Gardner, & Winner, 1983; Winner, Windmueller, Rosenblatt, Bosco, & Best, 1987) demonstrate the difficulties children have in recognizing intentional falsehood such as irony and deception and support Winner’s (1988) claim that “children fail to realize that the meaning the speaker intends to convey diverges from what he says” (p. 139). According to Winner, children tend to misunderstand irony because they fail the first step of recognizing it. It seems that recognizing irony is the most difficult stage in irony comprehension, and that facilitating recognition by intonation may significantly improve irony comprehension (as attested by Rosenblatt et al., 1987). This, however, has been disconfirmed by Winner et al. (1987).

Indeed, irony is comparatively rare in children’s fiction (Wall, 1991). Young readers, Wall notes, may lack the experience “to see beyond the obvious, and may therefore accept the presentation of the story, and the characters, at face value” (p. 111). But, even in adult fiction,

irony always offers the possibility of misunderstanding. . . . Sarcasm may contain internal inconsistencies which make its purport quite obvious and prevent it from being real except in one way, but for a sentence to be properly ironic it must be possible to imagine some group of readers taking it quite literally. (Culler, 1975, p. 154)

In fact, irony is not always easy for adults to recognize, and even experts on irony may fail this first crucial step (e.g., Booth, 1974). Consider the notorious misunderstanding of Swift’s ironic intent in *Modest Proposal*, which was taken at face value, and in *Gulliver’s Travels*, which was met with the response “I hardly believe any of this.” Consider further Hamlet’s lines (“Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats / Will not debate the question of this straw”; IV, iv, lines 25–26), which appear so inappropriate for Hamlet as to be suggested that they be transferred to someone else. However, they make perfect sense if seen as ironic.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>They also tie up later with:

Rightly to be great  
is not to stir without great argument  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw  
When honor’s at the stake. (*Hamlet*, IV, iv, lines 53–56)

I am grateful to Aarne Neeme for the example and the comment.

Thus, irony may be difficult to understand not just because the ironist flouts the graded informativeness requirement, but because the addressee fails to recognize the overt violation of the norm.

### IRONY, JOKE, METAPHOR, AND AMBIGUITY

In the Irony Appropriateness section, irony was distinguished from well-formed nonironic discourse in that it was shown to deviate from the graded informativeness requirement: Irony contributes to the discourse information that is highly marked/improbable. However, it is not enough to distinguish irony from the standard nonironic discourse. It is also necessary to show that irony differs from similar utterances such as jokes, metaphors, and other ambiguous discourses. In this section, I briefly review the well-formedness conditions for some forms of other witty or ambiguous discourses so as to distinguish them from irony. Consider first the difference between irony and joke.

#### Conditions for Joke Well-Formedness

The conditions for joke well-formedness proposed in Giora (1991; see also references therein) suggest that a (semantic) joke is well-formed if and only if it meets the following conditions:

1. It obeys the relevance requirement (as specified earlier),
2. It violates the graded informativeness requirement (as specified earlier) in that it ends in a markedly informative message (the marked informativeness requirement), and
3. It causes the addressee to cancel the first unmarked interpretation upon processing the second marked one (the cancellability condition).

The first condition of joke well-formedness guarantees the relevance of the last interpretation to the discourse topic. The second condition requires that the joke end with a markedly informative, hardly probable constituent. From this condition it follows that, informatively, the joke does not progress gradually from the least- to the most-informative marked discourse constituent. Rather, the passage from the least- to the most-informative message is abrupt and surprising.<sup>10</sup>

Like irony, the structuring of jokes deviates from the norm of the standard informative discourse. However, it also differs from irony. Although both joke and irony breach the graded informativeness requirement, the direction of the breach is different. Jokes necessitate a shift from an unmarked to a marked

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<sup>10</sup>The relevance requirement controls the marked informativeness requirement and determines the amount of surprise appropriate for a joke. It is not necessarily the most surprising message that is the funniest, as shown by Nerhardt (1975) and Graesser et al. (1989).

interpretation of an ambiguous message, whereas in irony, it is the marked constituent that is made explicit so that a less marked interpretation is generated. Moreover, in irony the two interpretations are maintained so that the difference between them may be computed, but in jokes the unmarked interpretation is canceled so that no comparison is called for (the cancellability condition). However, both are humorous due to the breach of the graded informativeness requirement.

To illustrate the difference between a joke and an ironical utterance, consider Freud's joke dealt with in Giora (1991):

- (21) "Did you take a bath?" a man asked his friend who has just returned from a resort place.  
 "Why," his friend replied, "is there any missing?"

Example 21 conforms to the requirements of joke well-formedness. Given the set of things that can be done in a resort place, "taking a bath" is an unmarked member. Stealing one, however, is not. Rather, the interpretation evoked by the punchline of "stealing baths" is extremely improbable/marked in accordance with the marked informativeness condition.<sup>11</sup> However, the difference between the unmarked and marked interpretation is not brought out to be computed. Rather, the unmarked meaning of the ambiguous constituent is abandoned.

### Conditions for Metaphor Well-Formedness

Some metaphors also seem to have something in common with irony and jokes. A metaphorical utterance is appropriate if and only if it meets these conditions:

1. It obeys the relevance requirement,
2. It violates the graded informativeness requirement in that it contributes to the discourse a highly improbable, markedly informative message (the marked informativeness requirement), and
3. It causes the addressee to entertain two different interpretations in search for (novel) similarities.

Metaphor then differs from irony only along the third condition. Whereas irony measures the difference between the marked and unmarked (implicated) message (the incancellability condition), metaphors generate similarities. Thus, to interpret a metaphorical expression, for example, "rage is like a volcano," is to construct an ad hoc category of which the two concepts compared are members. The common features that result from the comparison consist of both their salient

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<sup>11</sup>A reply such as "in fact I did, I took a mud bath" would conform to the graded informativeness requirement because such information is predictable within the category of "things to be done in a resort place." For a discussion of the notions of graded and marked informativeness, see Giora (1988, 1991).

and nonsalient properties, for example, "erupt unexpectedly and violently" (Shen, 1992, p. 780).

This difference between metaphor comprehension and irony processing, which contrasts a search for similarities with spelling out differences, suggests that irony must be more difficult to understand than metaphor because irony involves some negativity. Indeed, although preschool children do not demonstrate irony comprehension (e.g., Winner, 1988), they understand metaphor even at the age of 3 years (e.g., Gardner, 1974; Gentner, 1977; Vosniadou & Ortony, 1986).

Other ambiguous texts differ from irony in that they do not conform to the marked informativeness requirement. Puns and other ambiguities entertain two equally probable readings. Consider the pun inscribed on a sign post at an airport (discussed in Giora, 1991):

(22) Don't leave without a good buy.

Here, the ambiguity between "a goodbye" and "a good buy" is entertained for the purpose of computing the association between the two readings of the message (probably in terms of both cause and effect and similarity). Despite the difference between the two interpretations, they are equally probable and accessible given the discourse topic (leaving an airport).

As for oxymoron, the poetic oxymoron is close to metaphor in both semantic structure and processing (Shen, 1987). But, even the nonpoetic oxymoron (e.g., "a feminine male") meets the marked informativeness requirements. Given a certain discourse topic, to introduce an antonym predicate about it would seem quite surprising because the expectation (according to the relevance requirement) is to add similar rather than nonsimilar information. However, like metaphors, but unlike ironies, the marked information is intended to establish similarities.

Irony is thus different from some jokes, metaphors, and other ambiguous utterances. Whereas irony maintains ambiguity to spell out the difference between similarities, metaphor and oxymoron make the processor compute similarities between two different things.<sup>12</sup> Jokes differ from irony in that they dispense with one of the meanings thereby canceling ambiguity. Puns, on the other hand, though ambiguous, do not introduce highly marked information to the discourse. Besides, like metaphors, they focus on computing similarities rather than differences.

### THE FUNCTIONS OF IRONY

It is in order now to address the question of motivation posed at the beginning of this article. If irony indirectly negates, what is accomplished by indirect negation

<sup>12</sup>For a similar view see, Winner (1988): "At the heart of metaphor is the relation of similarity; at the heart of irony is the relation of opposition" (p. 9).

that is not to be accomplished by direct negation? First, irony has a communicative function. Recall that the unmarked/predictable information, the implicated meaning of an ironic utterance, sounds dull and almost uninformative. Given theories of discourse well-formedness (e.g., Giora, 1988; Grice, 1975), we should refrain from such linguistic behavior (unless we want to achieve a certain goal). Irony, by contrast, is markedly informative if not witty. For illustration, consider evidence reported in Kreuz et al. (1991) for the larger number of communicative goals for ironic as opposed to literal scenarios. Or, consider the following criticism (Examples 23 and 24), which, if expressed directly, would sound like old information, given the long standing feminist complaint about inequality in the Israeli army and in the film community.

- (23) This week we read in the papers about Rose Ashkenazi, a daughter of a family that emigrated from the country, who, last week, became one of the only two combat pilots in Britain. . . . The fact that the Ashkenazis chose to materialize their potential in Britain really saddens our Zionist heart, but mostly we grieve over Rose herself, the courageous pilot.

It's a pity they did not remain here, the Ashkenazis, since if they had, Rose would have developed a much less dangerous career, and a more charming one. How dare she think that to fly a combat aircraft is more fortunate than serving coffee to a (male) pilot? Why didn't her parents think of the possibility that if they had remained here, their Rose would have never been asked to endanger her life, but would have instead said "yes Sir," "no Sir," "instant (coffee) or black (coffee)?" Isn't it a pity? (Linor, 1993)

- (24) Just how far have women risen in the film community? According to Michelle Pfeiffer, who was at a Woman in Film luncheon recently in Los Angeles, the United States, it has actually been a very good year for women.

Her tongue firmly in cheek, she said that Demi Moore was sold to Robert Redford for US\$ 1 million in the movie *Indecent Proposal*. . . . Uma Thurman went for US\$ 40,000 to Robert De Niro in the recent movie, *Mad Dog and Glory*. "Just 3 years ago, in *Pretty Woman*, Richard Gere bought Julia Roberts for—what was it? US\$ 3,000? I'd say women have had real progress," quips Pfeiffer. (*The Straits Times*, 1993)

Apart from being less informative than irony, explicit negation is somewhat limited and at times vague (cf. Examples 1–8). For example, a negation of the first example "What a lovely party!" with a negation marker may evoke graded interpretation in the form of Example 25. Such negation might stand in contrast to what is implicated by ironical indirect negation, because irony does not have a graded interpretation (e.g., Example 26).

- (25) The party is not lovely, but it's not lousy either.  
but it's not far from it.

- (26) What a lovely party!  
The party is far from being lovely.



Not less significant is the fact that indirect negation shuns the “prohibitive” effect of negation. Psychologically, it allows the speaker to refrain from explicitly negative utterances that might have unpleasant effect. Like Leech (1983), Chen (1990), and Myers (1990), and along the lines suggested by Brown and Levinson (1978), I consider irony “a politeness strategy” which enables the speaker to negate (i.e., deny, contradict, disagree, suggest the contrary, the opposite, a *less than* interpretation, etc.) by using an affirmative expression. Consider the difference between “Thank you!” as opposed to its negative paraphrasing “Damn you!” The latter might even be responded to with violence. But, even less aggressive negation in the form of “I disagree with . . .” or “the party is lousy/not lovely” is a face threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Indeed, a study by Kaplan, Levy, et al. (1987) reported in Winner (1988) of the relative aggressiveness of ironic utterances versus their literal counterpart revealed that direct negative statements or insults are perceived, by both adults and children, as more aggressive than their ironic counterparts.

Furthermore, the “opposition” given rise to by irony is less straightforward than when a negation is explicit. At worst, the speaker can even deny (on false pretense, of course) having expressed a negative attitude (because the speaker has not been explicit about it). No wonder irony has become a critical tool of nondominant or dissident groups by means of which they may indirectly slash those in power and question norms.

Women’s protest writing is a case in point. Consider “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin (1899/1976), which is about the kind of feelings prohibited for women. It is about a woman’s anger (with “that powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature,” p. 199), and about the sense of liberation from the shackles of a “good” marriage. It should be noted that the heroine gains access to these feelings when she learns about her husband’s “death.” However, upon realizing she has been misinformed, she dies of a heart attack. The doctors’ diagnosis is that “She died of heart disease—of joy that kills” (p. 200). This irony may deceive those who refuse to accept the fact that some women would rather die than lose their freedom through marriage. The hedged criticism, however, did not spare Kate Chopin the rod, and her books were banned.

Consider, further, the irony (italicized) in Example 27, which appeared in a Singaporean English daily while the country was debating the dismissal of an opposition member from the National University of Singapore for “misusing” his research funds. The column in which it appeared, “Off-the-Record,” is somewhat humorous. The article indirectly and humorously criticizes the political atmosphere in Singapore created by the government, without taking any risk of doing so above the board.

- (27) The Puggol ward, in Cheng San GRC, is right next to the opposition territory of Hougang, a fact not lost on Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong last Sunday.

While on his community visit to the ward, he met his old Raffles Institution schoolmate Koh Kong Song, 52.

When Mr. Koh told the PM he was living in one of the flats nearby, Mr. Goh asked: "On the right side, or the wrong side?"

"The right side," replied Mr. Koh.

*Well, they do say it's important to be politically correct these days.* ("Off the Record," 1993)

But, above all, direct negation cannot spell out the difference between the two interpretations of the same utterance which allows the speaker to express frustration or even anger (see also Martin, 1992). The text in Example 27 is illustrative. It implicates the gap between a more positive meaning of "politically correct" and a less desirable interpretation of it as conformism to governmental ideology. The gap is a cause for lament.

## CONCLUSIONS

The view of irony as indirect negation is akin to the traditional account of irony (e.g., Grice, 1975). It suggests that irony is a figure of speech that involves a breach of a norm. Irony violates the graded informative requirement (Giora, 1988) and triggers a double-stage processing procedure. It makes the addressee process the surface meaning while generating the implicature. However, viewing irony as indirect negation differs from the traditional account in that it suggests that irony does not necessarily implicate its opposite. Rather, instead of canceling the indirectly negated message and replacing it with another one (cf. Clark & Gerrig, 1984; Grice, 1975), I have argued that irony retains both the explicit and implicated messages so that the difference between them may be computed. This account suggests that the surface meaning of an ironic utterance is involved in both the processing and implicature of the utterance. It further suggests that the implicated message is more attenuated or mitigated than the "opposite of what is said."

Such a view of irony further suggests that irony is more difficult to process than literal language. In this sense, it constitutes a drastic departure from the echoic view (e.g., Jorgensen et al. 1984; Sperber, 1984; Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Wilson & Sperber, 1992) which assumes that irony has only one interpretation and involves processing only one meaning. The echoic-mention theory assumes that irony does not involve a two-stage procedure, because no norm is violated and therefore no implicature is generated. As a result, irony is as easy to understand as nonironic language.

To attest to the relative difficulty of processing irony versus nonironic use of the same utterance, I have reanalyzed previous findings. I have shown that Gibbs's (1986a) study can be taken to support the view that understanding an ironic utterance is more difficult than understanding its nonironic use. Such a view has recently gained support (Dews & Winner, 1994). Though these findings

may attest to the involvement of the surface meaning in the act of processing nonliteral utterances, more evidence is needed to support the more general assumption that the product or implicature of irony retains its surface meaning as well.

Though irony is more difficult to understand than nonironic language, speakers apply this mode for certain communicative goals which are unattainable by direct negation. Direct negation may be vague, it may be face-threatening, and in certain contexts, it may be dull. But, what is more important, it cannot point to a (usually) more desirable state of affairs indicated by the affirmative phrasing of the utterance.

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