

## Book review

**Athanasiadou, Angeliki & Colston, Herbert L. (eds.) (2020). *The Diversity of Irony*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.**

Among all different types of figurative speech, irony has been notoriously hard to pin down. It comes up in a variety of forms, typically cued with distinctive prosody and facial expressions, while often being interspersed with other figures, such as metaphor, hyperbole, understatement, and jocularity. Its functions are equally varied, ranging from verbal aggression to a face-saving strategy recruited in linguistic interaction. In pragmatics, irony has long been viewed as a purely pragmatic phenomenon, an exemplar case of utterance meaning that is anchored in speaker's intentions, and it only rests upon the hearer to infer it. This, again, comes in different variants, spanning from the Gricean view of irony as a conversational implicature through the more recent approaches based on pretence and echoic mention.

Amidst this diversity, is there a way to capture the full range of irony? Evidently, the long-standing view of irony as juxtaposition between the literal and the speaker-intended meaning does not suffice. The volume at hand sets out to chart the diverse territory of irony but with an eye to what unites its various manifestations across the board. As the editors Angeliki Athanasiadou and Herbert L. Colston claim in the Introduction, their focus is on “the unitary nature of the varieties of ‘ironies’” (p. 9). By means of a metaphor, they parallel irony to a kitchen knife, whose main function (dividing a whole into segments) serves a multitude of different purposes, which are distinct but often complement one another: cutting, chopping, slicing, peeling, mincing, etc. The standard pragmatic account would focus on the knife user and their intention while using the knife.

But Athanasiadou and Colston wish to take the study of irony a step further: in their view, irony pertains not only to communication but also to thought; it's part of embodied cognition, and therefore any commonalities in its diversity need to be sought also in this direction. For this purpose, the volume brings together twelve chapters, which are also diverse in their scope, divided into three parts: *Diversity across Figures* (Part I); *Diversity across Languages* (Part II); and *Diversity across Media* (Part III). The diversity of irony is equally reflected in the wide array of analytic tools and methods used by the authors: semantics and pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis, theoretical investigations alongside case studies, corpus data, and experimental methods.

The chapters in Part I are concerned with how irony relates to other figures, especially metaphor and hyperbole, but also with encoded and default meaning. The first chapter is by John Barnden and is titled “Uniting irony, hyperbole and metaphor in an affect-centred, pretence-based framework.” Barnden takes a unitary perspective to metaphor, irony, and hyperbole, a view that goes back to Grice but has been largely dismissed in post-Gricean pragmatics. The upshot of his argument is that the meaning of all three figures inheres in an imaginary setup that accommodates different types of pretence. He goes on to argue that “the pretence is to be elaborated as much as necessary for the communicative purposes at hand” (p. 49). Crucially, what unites all three figures is the expression of an affective meaning of some

sort. Barnden details the premises of an inclusive, all-encompassing framework, which, although still “highly incomplete” (p. 19), sows the seeds for future research.

In the next chapter, “How defaultness affects text production: Resonating with default interpretations of negative sarcasm,” Rachel Giora, Shir Givoni and Israella Becker are concerned with a category of utterances that are interpreted sarcastically by default, e.g. “She is not the most candid person I know”, meaning “She is dishonest.” Previous research has established the defaultness of these interpretations on the basis of both experimental and corpus-based studies. If this idea is on the right track, such utterances are expected to resonate with their linguistic context. It is precisely this hypothesis that the authors set out to test with the use of a corpus-based experiment. Indeed, their findings confirm that such utterances appear in contextual environments that align with their default sarcastic interpretation rather than with their non-default literal interpretation, in line with the Defaultness Hypothesis. The pairing of a particular type of utterance with a specific, non-literal interpretation (which seems to be the case even across languages) raises the possibility of a construction in the sense of Construction Grammar.

A constructional approach to irony is taken in the next chapter, “Irony in constructions,” by Angeliki Athanasiadou. The author focuses specifically on parenthetical elliptical *if*-clauses, such as *if any*, *if anything*, *if anywhere*, *if at all*, *if ever*, *if a little* + adjective or adverb, and *if I may*, suggesting that they either trigger irony evocation or intensify it. The metacommunicative function of these *if*-clauses can be explained, according to the author, on the grounds of the conditional construction alongside the particular semantic frames involved in each and every utterance. Athanasiadou’s approach straightforwardly challenges the standard account that treats irony solely in terms of pragmatic inferencing. Constructions and frames thus appear as analytic tools that apply not only to metaphor, as already noted in the literature, but also to irony. Clearly, this line of research has far-reaching implications for the study of irony and figurative language at large.

The next two chapters in this part of the volume engage with the relationship of irony with other figures. In “Hyperbolic figures,” Michaela Popa-Wyatt is concerned with how hyperbole is mixed with metaphor and irony. The author considers these figurative compounds to be essentially different from others, especially ironic metaphor, in that hyperbole serves to intensify the interpretative effect of metaphor and irony, respectively. The essence of hyperbole, as Popa-Wyatt argues, is the expression of emphasis that makes salient a contrast between how things hold in the world and how they were expected, hoped, or desired by the speaker. It is this emphatic function that is added to metaphor and irony. While Popa-Wyatt does not deny that hyperbole stands as a figure in its own right, she highlights its versatility in mixing with other figures. In the case of metaphor, in particular, it is likely, as Barnden also notes, that it is inherently hyperbolic, especially in the form of equations (e.g. “My job is a jail”) rather than in predicate-argument constructions (e.g. “Prices are climbing up”).

Hyperbole is also at the core of the next chapter, “Denying the salient contrast: Speaker’s attitude in hyperbole,” however, here it is construed in terms of exaggeration rather than emphatic use of language. The author, Graham Watling, argues that hyperbolic meanings are contingent on a salient contrast relative to a scalar evaluation that reflects the speaker’s attitude. The notion of a salient contrast has been established as an explanatory mechanism for the assertive meaning (i.e. the speaker’s intended message) of quantity-based hyperboles, but Watling extends it to cases that deal with qualities and frequencies. In so doing, he addresses a number of important issues, such as the conventionalisation of hyperbolic utterances, and the communication of affect, all being connected to the speaker’s subjective attitude. Although Watling’s contribution does not directly address irony, his approach has implications that may be worth exploring in the future.

The second part of the volume contains contributions related to the usage of irony across languages. In an attempt to explore irony in languages other than English, Patrawat Samermit and Apinan Samermit shift the focus to Thai. Their chapter, “Thai irony as an indirect relational tool to save face in social interactions,” examines the use of irony in a naturally occurring discourse setting, namely a Thai cooking TV show. The gist of this chapter is that irony, broadly construed, is a communicative tool that attenuates verbal aggression while ensuring affiliation and social cohesion among speech participants, in accordance with the prominence of saving face in Thai culture. When comparing their findings to English, the authors conclude that the use of irony is subject to significant variation across languages and cultures. Such a perspective can certainly advance our understanding of irony and this chapter is a step forward in this direction.

The following chapter, by Andreas Musolff and Sing Tsun Derek Wong, is focused on THE NATION IS A BODY metaphor and how its linguistic manifestations may give rise to critical, ironic, or sarcastic interpretations. In “*England is an appendix; Corrupt officials are like hairs on a nation’s arm: Sarcasm, irony and self-irony in figurative political discourse,*” the authors examine the interplay of metaphor, sarcasm, and irony across different types of data: journalistic texts, and responses to a metaphor interpretation task from English and Chinese L1 speakers. Taken together, the data under examination suggest that metaphorical scenarios, each one being related to a different body part, carry over a critical evaluation, which can further engender ironic or sarcastic interpretations. This view promises to open up a dialogue between metaphorical framing and echoic accounts of irony.

The last chapter in this section, “Grammatical emphasis and irony in Spanish,” takes issue with the view that intensification and emphasis can encode irony. Focusing on Spanish, Victoria Escandell-Vidal and Manuel Leonetti hypothesise that certain grammatical resources, such as exclamative syntax, polarity focus structures, and marked word order, can favour, but not encode, an ironic interpretation through intensification and emphasis. The authors report on a survey in which informants had to choose between a literal and an ironic interpretation, as well as in-between cases (“seldom ironic,” “it depends on the context,” and “often ironic”). Their findings confirm their hypothesis that even in the absence of contextual cues “the more emphatic a sentence, the greater likelihood that it can receive an ironic interpretation” (p. 206). They interpret this pattern as facilitating an ironic interpretation, in line with the account of irony as echoic mention.

The last part of the volume consists of chapters that approach the diversity of irony across modalities, the first one referring to a visual cue on the speaker’s face: eye rolling. In his contribution, “Eye-rolling, irony and embodiment,” Herbert L. Colston sketches the different embodied underpinnings of eye-rolling while acknowledging its complexity as a marker of verbal irony when accompanying speech, as well as a stand-alone display of disapproval. Colston views eye rolling as “a deeply embodied, multiply-determined experiential, and expressive communicative system” (p. 213). On the basis of evidence from an experiment, he confirms that upward gaze aversion expresses a greater degree of disapproval, compared to gaze aversion towards other directions. While this finding finds firm ground on the avoidance motivation for negativity, Colston outlines a number of open, and most interesting, questions to be further explored as to how eye-rolling is coupled with verbal irony.

An embodied perspective into irony is undertaken also in the following chapter, “Experimental investigations of irony as a viewpoint phenomenon” by Vera Tobin. Building on her view of irony as “a matter of construal” (p. 239), Tobin presumes that verbal irony should align with congruent embodied viewpoint arrangements available in the visible scene. To test this hypothesis, she presents an experimental study with variations on the form “*I love/I hate + neutral complement*” (e.g. “Obviously, I hate the idea”), paired with images with one-, two- and three-person scenes. The experimental findings offer preliminary evidence in favour of her

hypothesis, thus suggesting that irony is anchored in embodied experience. Finally, the observation that ironic interpretations are more frequent in scenes with two speech participants, rather than three or one, corroborates irony as a genuinely interactional phenomenon.

In the chapter “Faces of sarcasm: Exploring raised eyebrows with sarcasm in French political debates,” Sabina Tabacaru focuses on so-called “gestural triggers” (p. 261) that serve as pragmatic markers in linguistic interaction, allowing speakers to make their intention known to the hearer. Tabacaru is specifically concerned with the role of raised eyebrows as cues for sarcastic intent. Her analysis is based on data from the 2017 French presidential elections debate, a discourse domain that is interactional *par excellence*, enacting speech that, although spontaneous, is crafted and delivered with careful deliberateness. Tabacaru’s approach echoes a Gricean account of utterance meaning as speaker-intended but with a fresh eye that treats meaning-making as a complex of multimodal cues.

Finally, a multimodal account of irony is found also in the volume’s closing chapter, “A pilot study on the diversity in irony production and irony perception”, in which Hannah Leykum reports some preliminary findings on the production and perception of irony. Not surprisingly, she finds out that irony production co-occurs with eyebrow raising (in agreement with Tabacaru) and frowning, but not with smiling. At the level of perception, it seems that both normal-hearing and cochlear-implant listeners reach the highest recognition rates when utterances are presented with both visual and auditory stimuli, followed by the solely auditory utterances. Thus, Leykum’s pilot study sets the stage for future work on how listeners with impaired hearing abilities are capable of grasping ironic utterances.

While building on the long-standing and prolific research on irony in pragmatics, the volume at hand takes it a step further. It develops a strand already established in the relevant literature, namely the close ties between irony and other types of figurative speech such as metaphor, hyperbole, and (to a lesser extent) jocularly. While distinct, different figures seem to converge, individually but also jointly, in terms of the types of meanings they give rise to, all being somehow related to affect. In this respect, the volume adds new insights with respect to how irony, and figurative speech at large, is likely to communicate affective meanings. As Tobin puts it, irony may be “a sort of affective conspiracy” (p. 249). But the affective mutuality afforded by irony is also diverse: it spans from surprise and mirativity to mocking and/or critical attitudes (in the form of sarcastic comments) through affiliation and rapport. Clearly, affect cuts across modalities, with non-verbal markers (prosody, tone of voice, facial expressions) serving as cues for the expression of affect. Could affect be a thread that unites verbal irony with such non-verbal cues? This is a question that awaits to be further explored.

Perhaps all approaches to irony, however diverse, would agree that it accommodates a dissociative attitude on the part of the speaker; a type of meaning that is far richer than the “opposite of what is said” as it was originally held in pragmatics. But how this is formulated and, moreover, how it should be modelled is still an open issue. The volume takes into account the well-established pragmatic accounts of irony in terms of pretence and echoic use of language. However, it also breaks new ground, suggesting novel ways to treat irony that are not necessarily antagonistic to the existing ones. A common theme recurs, in different ways, in the volume: irony can be, at least to some extent, encoded in expressions that go far beyond “stock phrases” such as “*Yeah, right*” and “*Good luck with that*” (as noted by Tobin, p. 240). This line of research, which clearly counters the standard account of irony in Gricean and post-Gricean terms, comes in a variety of views that differ significantly in scope and theoretical standing: as constructional meaning (Athanasidou); as a default interpretation (Giora, Givoni and Becker); and as an interpretive bias modulated by syntactic marking (Escandell-Vidal and Leonetti). This idea perhaps extends also to pairings of particular visual cues with the expression of irony. For instance, Colston’s analysis of eye rolling as an expressive tool, used to convey the speaker’s attitude towards the proposition expressed, raises the possibility of a multimodal construction,

which is recruited to pursue discourse goals related to facework. The same holds also for the association of verbal irony with particular viewpoint arrangements among interactants, as argued by Tobin. Such a multimodal perspective opens a window on the embodiment of irony. Could embodiment be a thread that unites all manifestations of verbal and non-verbal irony? If anything, a new territory is opened up, promising to yield novel and interesting insights in the future.

The volume is by no means exhaustive in examining irony; after all, that would be a non-realistic goal. With verbal irony being in the spotlight, other types, such as cosmic irony and dramatic irony, had to be left out. Whether there is a way to encompass all forms of irony under one category remains to be seen. Although partly addressed by Samermit and Samermit in the volume, cross-linguistic variation in the use of irony is yet another issue that seeks to be further developed. More studies are needed, comparing authentic linguistic data from different languages, as well as from different discourse contexts. Variation includes non-verbal cues too, such as prosody (as noted by Leykum) and perhaps facial expressions, which both seem to diverge across languages. As Tobin suggests, big sets of multimodal data of language use can offer invaluable insights in the future. Finally, another line of inquiry worth exploring relates to irony in the absence of language, for instance in image-only political cartoons or internet memes, as well as in the visual arts.

To conclude, the chapters that make up this volume can be seen as recipes on how the irony-knife is used to serve different purposes. While some draw on traditional cuisine, others experiment with fusion gastronomy. In any case, the volume at hand makes a significant contribution to the study of irony and is hoped to inspire more gastronomical, and tasty, endeavours in the future.

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