Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 7 (56) No. 1 - 2014

(Un)detecting irony. Analysing responses to irony in three different discursive contexts

Stanca MĂDA[1], Răzvan SĂFTOIU[2]

Far from being restricted to a simple ironic comment, expressing the opposite of the literal meaning or voicing a duplicitous type of communication, irony appears as a complex phenomenon, in which the assumptions, the focal event, the intentionality, and the strategic choices made by the participants become intertwined with the context. The present article approaches irony from a contextual perspective, in an attempt to show how the various contexts affect speaker's choices and how the presence or the absence of the interlocutor may interfere in interpreting an ironic comment.

Key-words: *irony, "fencing game" model, ironic comment, contextual constraints, functions.*

1. Preliminary considerations on terminology

From a rhetorical perspective, irony is seen as an antiphrasis, a statement that expresses, in a particular context, the opposite of the literal meaning. Ironic communication involves a semantic inversion between the (primary) literal meaning and (implied) non-literal meaning.

Etymologically, the word *irony* comes from the Greek είρώυεία and describes "the quality of a person to pretend otherwise". The word comes from είρώυ, "the one who asks a question pretending to be naive or to know less than (s)he actually does". The Semitic[3] root of the Greek word derives from the Acadian term *erewum* (hiding/ covering), irony becoming a means of avoiding the direct impact of a word or an explicit phrase. With this meaning, irony used in common language is not necessarily linked to the rhetoric concept of semantic inversion, but it is rather a means of underscoring the reality of a fact by the apparent concealment of the truth. "The function of irony [...] is to introduce, in a hidden manner, a negative, disparaging or mocking appreciation at an event or a person" (DŞL).

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, stanca.mada@unitbv.ro
[2] Transilvania University of Braşov, razvan.saftoiu@unitbv.ro
[3] North Semitic population which conquered the Sumerians in the 2050s BC.Ch and ruled Mesopotamia. Capital Akkad (Accadì) was located somewhere on the Euphrates River. Its language is the oldest Semitic language of wide circulation.

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

Far from being a mere rhetorical figure or a purely linguistic issue, irony brings to front important communicative issues about the proper interpretation of its implied meaning. From the perspective of communication, irony uses strategically the phrases *as if/ as though* that allow speakers to avoid evaluation by true/ false and suspension of judgement parameters. Irony ensures effective protection of interpersonal relationships, leaving open the ways of interpretation and negotiation of meaning in interaction.

Considered as duplicitous communication (cf. Anolli, Infantino, Ciceri 2001), irony provides an opportunity to broaden the psychological space available to speakers. Through an ironic remark, the speaker may say something or, conversely, may hide behind the shield provided by opaque meaning of the expression; the speaker may at any time withdraw the ironic meaning, taking refuge in the literal meaning of the utterance. In any case, the ironic value is left to the interlocutor, who can interpret the utterance according to his own values and communicative intentions.

Irony covers a wide range of communicative processes. There are studies about sarcastic irony, when the speaker blames his interlocutor by using sanctimonious literal phrases (i.e. *blame by praise*). Other studies noted kind irony that praises by critical expression (i.e. *praise by blame*). „Socratic" irony is an elegant, ingenious and extremely polite form for discussions and debates. Mocking irony reduces tension in conflict situations. All these forms are derived from the same communicative foundation, as Muecke (1970) pointed out: "Irony is the art of being clear without being obvious". Clarity does not require communicative transparency, but it assumes that an ironic comment can be decoded by means of language, using phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic analysis. Communicative meaning, however, remains opaque because of its semantic indeterminacy. In this sense, irony is neither "obvious" nor transparent.

2. Theoretical perspectives on irony

Offering a rationalist theory meant to explain irony, Grice (1975: 41-58) argues that irony lies in „saying p and intending non-p". It follows a semantic distance between what is said and what the utterance actually means. In other words, ironic utterances violate the maxim of quality ("Do not say anything that you think is false or that you do not have sufficient evidence"), thus triggering a conversational implicature. Searle (1979) goes further and considers irony is a logical negation of the literal interpretation of an utterance. The speaker uses irony in order to produce a perlocutionary effect on the interlocutor, by removing his expectations (generated by the literal meaning of an utterance). Rodríguez Rosique (2013) considers that one may talk about an ironic utterance when (a) it reflects the opposite of what is said or when (b) it reflects something different to what is said. In interpretation (a), it means that irony is brought about by the *direct infringement* of the maxim of quality, while if it is interpretation (b), it means that irony is brought about by an *inversion* of the standard inferences that the infringement would normally trigger.

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

Fish (1983) gives special importance to interpretation in ironic communication. Both literal and ironic interpretations are possible and they come from inferences. There is no hint nor ambiguity, no univocity nor equivocity; the ironic dilemma is transferred onto the interlocutor's competence, because irony is not an indirect communicative strategy, but a direct, straightforward and clear strategy. The rationalist model starts from dual logic: on the one hand, there is the logic of language, which takes into account the literal meaning (sentence meaning), and the logic of conversation, which takes into account the rules used by speakers to agree on the "hidden" message (utterance meaning). The distinction implies an additive process in analyzing an ironic utterance: first, one analyzes what is said and then what is meant, thus decoding the ironic meaning of an utterance.

According to Gibbs, Buchalter, Moise, Farrar (1993), interpreting a comment as ironic is done immediately, automatically, without additional cognitive effort, because it does not require a conscious control, nor a complex algorithm. Speakers are interested in the real meaning of an ironic remark and immediately receive it, which depends not on the utterance itself, but on the specific situational context, which allows a correct decoding of the utterance. More recently, Attardo (2013) takes into account the research in the neuro-psychology of humour and concludes that recognition and processing of incongruity (of scripts) must be subconscious. What is more, how hearers understand irony – whether as a deliberate conscious intention or a subconscious intention of the speaker – is a performance problem.

As a form of communication that is meant to create certain effects on the interlocutor, without observing the formal rules of language use or the truth of the statement, irony has also been analyzed in the so-called Machiavellian perspective (Anolli, Infantino and Ciceri 2001). According to their view, attention should be moved from the linguistic analysis to the interactive process involved in ironic communication. Irony can be an effective means to "disorient" the interlocutor by moving from the serious mode to the joking mode. Ironic effects are generated by hints and alteration of expectations that is specific to a certain situation, at a certain level of conventionalization (e.g. after failure, one expects criticism, not praise). Ironic communication is based on a disagreement between the response and the usual script of the situation. Understanding irony as process is done at two levels: the perception of disagreement with the facts and understanding the ironic value of an utterance as a solution to settle the disagreement. Efficiency of ironic communication becomes inversely proportional to its explicit signalling; in fact, the more subtle, more implicit irony is, the more effectively irony reaches its target.

Irony as echoic achievement is Sperber and Wilson's theory (1992), which points to irony as a means of evoking thoughts, actions, attitudes and feelings of an interlocutor. By means of an ironic comment, the speaker produces an echoic utterance of what the speaker has said or done previously, expressing at the same time a pejorative or humorous attitude to the thought, action or person referred to in the utterance. Irony becomes a kind of indirect quotation, used to evoke a fact or

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

words in a way that can mislead those who do not have the actual information. Although it mentions the interactive aspects of an ironic exchange, and it also takes into account the situational context, Sperber and Wilson's echoic theory keeps the idea that ironic communication has a dual nature, since the ironic meaning is still considered an additional meaning, which is added to the literal meaning.

The theatrical perspective (cf. Anolli, Infantino and Ciceri 2001) goes back to the etymological interpretation of irony as pretense. Havertake (1990) speaks of a "transparent pretense", because the speaker makes an utterance and he pretends to believe it, but at the same time he signals through paralinguistic means, that his utterance is pretense. Similarly, the concept of irony as simulation, proposed by Clark and Gerrig (1984) argues for the theatrical perspective. The ironist does not use an ironic utterance to reveal a fact, but simulates and creates a kind of complicity with his interlocutor, who recognizes this simulation. This should be based on shared knowledge between the two parties. Ironic commentary can be decoded according to the interlocutor's competence to use shared knowledge and the particular data of the situational context. Ironic communication is an enigma only for those who cannot understand it. It becomes an exclusion strategy meant to distinguish between those who should understand and those who should not understand more than the literal meaning of an utterance.

3. The "fencing game" model of irony

In the theoretical model proposed by Anolli, Infantino and Ciceri (2001), attention is focused not only on the linguistic level of irony, but especially on the ironic situation, described as a "class of interactive episodes where an ironic comment appears as the best possible solution between interlocutors, given some constraints and communicative opportunities" (Anolli, Infantino and Ciceri 2001: 151).

Seen as a "fencing game" in which the two adversaries "do not hold a massive sword, but a sharp foil", irony appears from a functional perspective as a flexible phenomenon and people use it as a mask in order to avoid censorship in a culturally and socially accepted way, meant to secure private space and leave open the possibility of renegotiating meanings. Irony becomes one of the "relational strategies" (Dindia 1994) meant to create and maintain interpersonal relationships by adapting the repertoire of verbal and nonverbal actions of a person to a given situation in order to be effective, but also to respect social constraints.

This model is sequentially organized and it takes into account the whole ironic script, while the flexibility and interdependence of communicative moves allow progressive adjustments of meaning "understood as agreement and synchrony" (Anolli, Infantino and Ciceri 2001: 152). The ironic communicative situation is governed by a predictable, well-knit script, consisting of four steps: assumptions, focal event, dialogic comment and ironic effect.

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

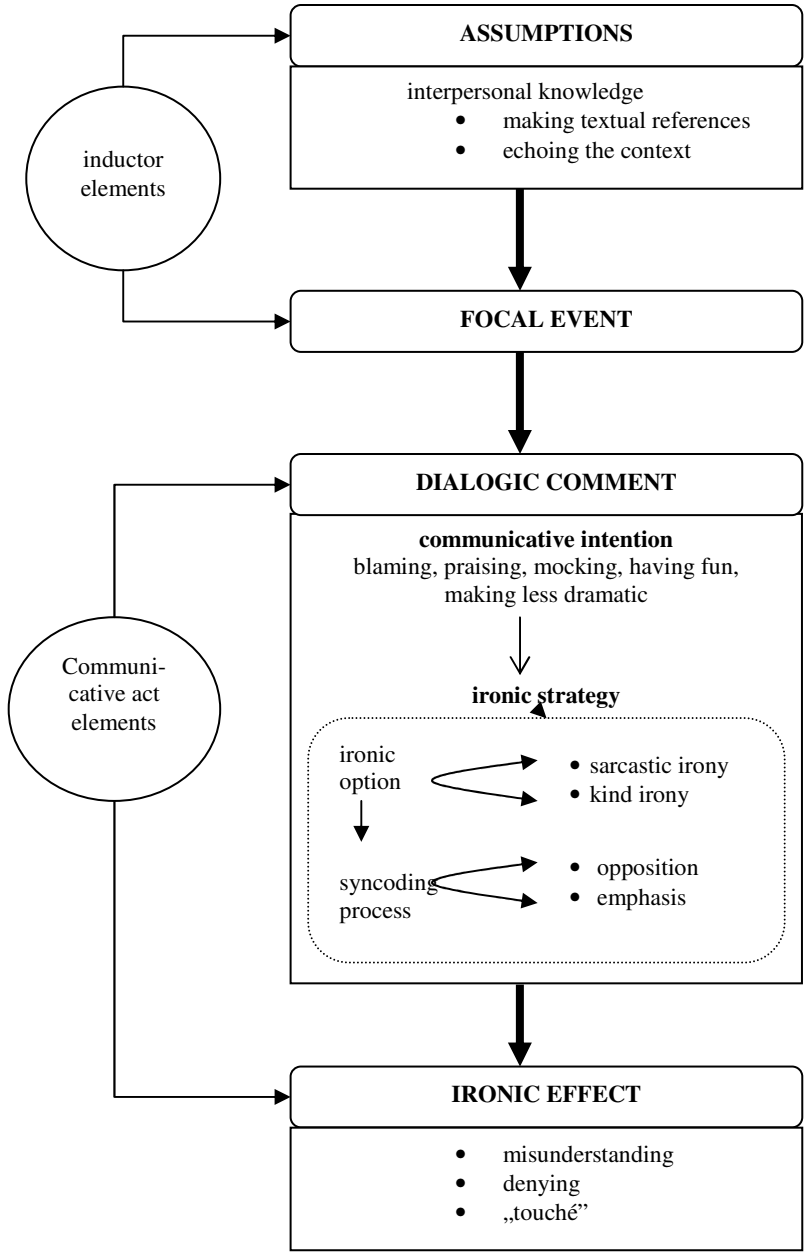


Figure 1. The articulation of the ironic script in the "fencing game" model of irony (cf. Anolli, Infantino şi Ciceri 2001)

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

Assumptions are part of common knowledge (i.e. beliefs, habits of communication, cultural standards, etc.) to which the speaker alludes in his ironic remark. Assumptions may be textual (what was said before the current utterance) or contextual (a range of rules and expectations – invariably positive).

The focal event is the trigger of the ironic utterance (e.g. mental associations and ideas, choice of tropes, idiomatic expressions, proverbs and references to the appropriate contextual situation as well as socio-cultural standards). Simultaneously, the speaker chooses the intonation and non-verbal means that will accompany his commentary. Assumptions and the focal event make up the "inductor element", that announces the ironic communicative act. The inductor elements are independent of speakers, but it is important that they observe and use them as the subject of their verbal interaction.

The third phase of the ironic script is the dialogic comment – it is irony as an expression of clear communicative intentions from the speaker. He can criticize, praise, joke, ridicule, etc. Utterance production requires making a choice between different types of ironic communication (sarcastic, kind, mocking, Socratic etc.) and between linguistic models, prosody, mimic as well as gestures. The ironic utterance is a global act of communication (Anolli, Infantino and Ciceri 2001: 157), a complex unit of various signalling systems (linguistic, paralinguistic, mimic and gesticulation), each contributing to the coherent articulation of the ironic utterance and fulfilment of speaker's communicative intent.

The ironic effect, resulting from the commentary, is the manner in which an utterance is interpreted by the interlocutor. He decides whether to assign ironic meaning to the utterance or to ignore it. In the "fencing game" model, Anolli, Infantino and Ciceri (2001, 158) describe three possible countermoves so that the ironic comment is interpreted differently:

1) *misunderstanding* – when, for various reasons (noise, physical or cognitive disability, etc.), the addressee does not grasp the meaning of irony. Interpretation is limited to the linguistic input, without taking into account the semantic aspects brought about by the paralinguistic levels.

2) *denying* – when the addressee, although he understood the ironic meaning, chooses to ignore it and keep to the literal meaning. This countermove is at the same time a pretense move, behind which the recipient attempts to neutralize the ironic meaning, becoming intangible and clearly showing unwillingness to get involved in arguments and/ or conflicts. This strategy may be linked to politeness theories, since the addressee wants to save the speaker's face by not getting involved in a (potentially) conflict situation.

3) *touché* – when the ironic meaning reaches its target and the addressee acknowledges and admits that he was "touched": he may be amused (if kind irony was used) or may retort (if sarcastic irony was used).

The "fencing game" model shows that irony occurs naturally in communication. The model presented by Anolli, Infantino and Ciceri has the merit of being economical: it removes all that is not necessary and unifies the linguistic structure, socio-cultural conditionings, non-verbal means and a semantic whole.

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

2. Functions of irony in various communicative contexts

In what follows, we will use the "fencing game" model and analyze ironic comments occurring in three different communicative contexts in order to account for the adaptability of this theoretical model to various contextual constraints and to observe which communicative functions are associated to each type of interaction. The data were selected from a corpus of small talk (Săftoiu 2009), consisting of interactions among students and/ or family members, from a corpus of workplace interactions (Gheorghe, Măda, Săftoiu 2009, Măda 2009), collected in various Romanian workplaces between 2007 and 2009, and from posters, published in British printed and online media.

2.1. Irony in friendly encounters

The first context in which irony occurs frequently is in interpersonal encounters among friends and/ or family members. In the fragment below, A (aged 22) and B (aged 19) are sisters and they both are students at a local college, in different years of study. They are at home and are talking about books to read for their study programmes, and their mother (participant C) overhears the conversation.

(1)

63 A: şi-ţi place? îţi plac astea? îţi dai seama că dacă o citesc p-asta:
and do you like it? do you like these? you realize that if I read thi:s

→ 64 B: păi citeşte-o ia uite ce-ai aicea o termini pân' la anu?
well read it, look what you've got here. can you finish it by next year?

→ 65 A: ai fată c-o termin cum să n-o termin o termin.
come on, you girl, I'll finish it, how come I don't finish, I'll finish it.

→ 66 C: o termini? păi ia uite ce mai e aici
you'll finish it? well, look what's here

67 A: păi eu nu trebuie s-o citesc să iau [din
well, I don't have to read it, just to get [*from*

68 B: [să selectezi
[*to select*

69 A: să selectez din text
to select from the text

70 B: păi trebuie să ai o idee despre ea.
well, you must have an idea about it.

(Săftoiu 2009: 47)

In the beginning of the extract (line 63), A initiates a new topic: talking about a book she needs to read for one of her courses. She covertly marks the large amount of time she will have to spend on reading the book by paralinguistic means, i.e. vowel

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

extention (*if I read thi:s*). In line 64, B starts with a hesitation (*well*), making it clear that she will not be sympathetic with her sister (see the use of the imperative: *read it*) and the two sisters seem to be disaligning about the topic when B asks the question: *can you finish it by next year?*

It is clear that B does not expect an answer, but she is ironical. When uttering *can you finish it by next year?*, the speaker starts from the general assumption that a book should be read in a reasonable amount of time, not within one year. What triggers the ironic commentary is the mental association between the activity (reading a book) and the time spent doing this (one year). The utterance is decoded as ironic by A in line 65, when she indirectly acknowledges that she was "touched", her negative face was threatened and starts redressive action in three steps: first, she rejects the utterance (*come on, you girl, I'll finish it*), then she reformulates the ironic commentary in the form of a rhetorical question that includes the opposite of what B said (*how come I don't finish*) and in the end she repeats she will complete the action (*I'll finish it*).

It is now (line 66) when the mother intervenes questioning her daughter's ability to fulfil the action: *you'll finish it?* Under the guise of asking a question to make sure her daughter will read the book, C is ironical and marks her statement with hesitation (*well, look what's here*). B admits the ironic commentary and employs redressive action by giving more explanations about what she actually needs to do: *I don't have to read it, just to select from the text*.

Taking into account the theory of irony reception (cf. Kotthoff, 2003: 1393-1407), we can say that B recognized the inappropriateness of the utterances (*can you finish it by next year?* and *you'll finish it?*) in this particular context and reacted to the implied meaning that questioned her ability to complete a task: reading a book by a certain deadline.

In studies on ironical utterances (Clift 1999, Attardo 2001, Kotthoff 2003) and their use in friendly encounters, authors have come to the conclusion that familiarity may determine the incidence of ironical utterances. In other words, speakers who have long interactional history are less likely to be ironical to a stranger than to someone whom they know (very) well. Since irony has a highly aggressive potential, because it is construed as a face threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1987), it is more dangerous to engage in irony with a stranger. Clift (1999) and Kotthoff (2003) have also argued that allusions are easier to process among people who are familiar with one another. This idea may be further exemplified by looking at example (2), a fragment from a conversation among friends. It is also worth mentioning that D is a family member of A and C's, he is their uncle. One of the participants is talking about an unfortunate experience he had while singing at church, because the heat had not been turned on due to high costs of the gas bill.

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

(2)

12 B: după aia m-am dus la BISERICĂ <J, P să mă-ntalnesc cu voi>
after that I went to CHURCH <J, P to meet you guys>
13 A: da↑
yeah↑
14 C: care voi?
who's you?
15 A: cu grupu nu↑
with the gang, right↑
16 B: cu grupu da grupu# super.
with the gang yeah the gang# super.
17 D: <OF şi cum a fost?>
<OF and how was it?>
18 B: a fost frumos↓ da'# a fost un FRIG # <L vai de capu' [meu>↓
it was nice↓ but# it was SO cold# <L oh my [God>↓
19 A: [a ieşit bine cu unele excepţii↓
[it all went well with some exceptions↓
20 C: da' de ce nu v-a dat [căldură?
but why? they didn't turn on the [heat?
21 B: [am cântat.
[we sang.
22+A: cu unele CONTRAEXEMPLE. ştim noi de ce↑
with some COUNTERexamples. we know why↑
23+C: da' DE CE nu v-a dat CĂLDURĂ.
but WHY didn't they turn on the HEAT.
24 B: <L nu ne-a dat căldură pentru că SE PLĂTEŞTE MULT FACTURA>
<L they didn't turn on the heat because the costs are high>
25 A: n-au dat [drumu' deocamdată ştii↓
they haven't turned [it on yet you know↓
26+B: [factura de gaze
[the gas bill
→ 27 D: şi enoriaşii au o căldură sufletească aşa#
and parishioners have such warmth in their souls#
→ 28 A: degajată în general↓
that they generally release↓
→ 29 C: <@ 'ai măi nicuşor mă↓>
<@ come on, you Nicuşor, man↓>
→ 30 B: da: păi d-aia se- ne încălzim aşa SUFLET la su-
yea:h well that's why the- we get so warm HEART to hea-

(Săftoiu 2009: 62-63)

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

Up to line 27, D only had a quick intervention (line 17) asking B how things went when he met his friends. It is interesting to note that this question turned into a conversation trigger, which allowed B to introduce a sub-topic of their current interaction: the lack of heat in the church (*it was nice↓ but# it was SO cold# <$_L$ oh my* [*God*>↓). The new topic is further developed by A, B and C, with A trying several times to change it (lines 19 and 22) and make B give further details about what really happened there. It seems that A had access to other pieces of information, overtly marking this in line 22: *we know why*↑. When one usually pretends to know something and leaves it open to the audience, he uses pronoun *we* with an inclusive meaning (*you*, the source of information, and *me*). This time, the speaker was not successful in turning this into a topic of the conversation, but it was D who started an ironic commentary: *and parishioners have such warmth in their souls*. Apparently, the utterance is not marked as ironic, but it is a comment with a double meaning: on the one hand, people who go to church are passionate about religion (*warmth*$_1$), on the other, when it is cold outside/ inside a building, one can keep warm if people get together closer and embrace each other (*warmth*$_2$). It is the second meaning that gets in contrast with what is actually happening in a church: while taking part at the religious service or singing in the church choir, people should display proper behaviour and not get closer each other to keep warm. Although she was not the actual target of the ironic commentary, C immediately recognizes it (line 29) and 'sanctions' it with laughter: <$_@$ *come on, you Nicuşor, man*↓>. It is obvious that C realized that there exists a second proposition implied by the speaker, and she reacted by laughter (cf. Eisterhold, Attardo, Boxer 2006). In line 30, B uptakes the ironic commentary and further dwells on it, in a humorous manner (*yea:h well that's why the- we get so warm HEART to hea-*) indirectly recognizing that he was "touched" by it. The *touché* is made obvious when B abruptly ends pronoun "they" and changes it into first person plural "we", presenting the action as if he had taken part in it.

2.2. Irony in professional encounters

In workplace interaction, irony needs to be treated carefully, due to its face threatening act (FTA) potential. For instance, Cristi, head of human resources, comes into the office of his assistant, Marius, who was late for the meeting that was supposed to start at ten o'clock. Marius is very busy working at his computer and does not observe that Cristi wants to talk to him.

(3)

CRISTI:	Scuză-mă că te deranjez în toiul distracţiei, dar a trecut de zece.
	Sorry to bother you in the middle of the fun, but it's after ten.
MARIUS:	(râzând) Ce mai distracţie!
	(laughing) Some fun!

(Măda 2009: 133)

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

Following Anolli, Infantino and Ciceri's model (2001), the assumptions related to the communicative context in example (3) include obeying a specific rule of conduct, namely being present at the time and place set for a meeting. The focal event which triggers the ironic comment resides in Marius violating this rule. Instead of directly criticizing Marius for being late for the meeting, Cristi is mocking at him in the form of a pretended apology. He uses the verb *to bother* which describes an intrusion of his interlocutor's space. The word *fun* is also in contrast with the circumstances in which Cristi found Marius and makes the latter reinterpret the comment in an ironic key. Marius seizes the irony and admits *touché*, laughs at the idea that working is fun.

The same mechanism of recognizing and sanctioning one's own mistakes appears in self-deprecating ironic comments. A worker in the production department is describing to a co-worker the possible reaction of the head of the line when finding out about the mistake she had made.

(4)

RODICA: O să mă facă cu ou şi cu oţet...Ras, tuns, frezat şi pus pe bigudiuri... O să mă pupe şefa când aude...
I'll be given so hot... Shaved, cut, milled and put on curlers... I'll get a kiss from my boss when he hears about it...

(Măda 2009: 137)

The consequences of someone's mistakes are easier overlooked when the person is willing to admit it. In example (4), self-directed irony is used for protecting oneself against others' criticism.

In interactions, the speaker is adjusting the intended power of his ironic comment to the social status of the participants, the situational context, and the data offered by both verbal and nonverbal clues. In professional contexts, irony and humour may be the only socially acceptable means of criticizing the opinion of a superior. Whether more experienced or in a position of power, one would accept to be the target of an ironic comment, if the appearances were saved. In order to protect oneself from the possible implications of a FTA in the form of an ironic comment, the interlocutor may avoid admitting *touché* and prefer pretending that the comment was a *misunderstanding* or even *denying* the recognition of a threatening effect.

(5)

Context: During a board meeting, Carol, the head of a department in a multinational company, realizes that one of his tasks was overdue, the deadline being December 31st the previous year. Ina, the general manager, is trying to negotiate a new deadline, and Carol makes a counterproposal. Irina is Ina's assistant manager.

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

1 CAROL: la sfârşitul anului trebuia să fie gata
by the end of the year it was supposed to be ready
2 INA: e depăşit termenul…la sfârşitul lui februarie
it's overdue... by the end of February
3 IRINA: sfârşitul lui februarie
the end of February
→ 4 CAROL: 29
on 29th
5 INA: anul ăsta nu are 29
this year doesn't have 29th
→ 6 CAROL: 31 da? 31.
31st right? 31st

(Gheorghe, Măda, Săftoiu 2009: 173)

In order to set a new deadline, Ina proposes the end of February (line 2). The exact date of new deadline proposed by Carol (in line 4) is inexistent in the calendar. When Ina notices the discrepancy (line 5), Carol is purposefully reiterating another non-existent date (line 6). Thus, he is trying to postpone indefinitely the unresolved task in an ironic manner, asking for confirmation and self-ratifying the proposed date. The comment may be interpreted as irony meant to contest the opinion and authority of his superior (Ina).

A direct speech act may be, most often, inappropriate in the context of conflict situations, when a person's negative face is threatened. Irony serves communicative interaction in a subtle, diplomatic way, so that the speaker can achieve his purpose, in accordance with the unwritten rules of civilized behaviour.

Irony may be a truly effective strategy meant to "hit" indirectly without violating the norms imposed by a particular cultural background. In some situations, censorship of civilized behaviour prohibits several topics, which may be made possible by adopting an ironic behaviour and, at the same time, by observing social norms. Ironists recognise social norms, but at the same time they violate these norms within acceptable limits. In example (3), Cristi was bothered by Marius's lateness. He decided to use sarcastic irony instead of bitter criticism out of respect for conveniences. The formal context specific to professional encounters is forcing Cristi to use an indirect speech act, without diverting from his communicative intention.

2.3. Irony in the media

As opposed to the first two discursive instances – everyday talk between friends or family members and professional encounters, which are highly interactional – in media communication, the general characteristic is precisely the lack of feedback

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

from the receivers of the message. Therefore, the message should bear all the necessary clues for its correct interpretation. This section of the article looks at how irony is rendered in this communicative context.

A particular case of conveying meaning in media discourse is by means of both image and language, in posters. The examples are part of a media campaign, developed by the British newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Huffington Post,* in January 2013. The campaign resulted as a reaction to the concern expressed by a few British officials about the impact the removal of work restrictions in UK for both Romanians and Bulgarians would have on the local workforce, social services, health system and housing conditions, starting from January 2014.

Under the slogan "Don't come to Britain! It's full!" the various British posters were designed by readers and then posted on *The Guardian* web page in an attempt to deter immigrants from coming to United Kingdom.

(6)[4]



Don't come to Britain, it's full… of alcopops, asbestos, bad housing, bishops, the British, chavs, *Closer* magazine, corrupt politicians, cuts, the Daily Mail, dodgy scientists, dogging, drugs with stupid names, drunks, dying bees, dying trees, the EDL, England, fascists, fat-necked imbeciles (…) We hate ourselves – we'll probably hate you too.

The text in the poster may be interpreted literally by an occasional reader of *The Guardian.* For a regular reader, the intertextual reference with the title of the current campaign is a clue for interpreting the poster in an ironic key. Though self-deprecating in essence, the assumptions and the focal events leading to the ironic comment in the poster determine the reader to interpret the text as irony directed towards the immigrants who need to be aware of the shortcomings of living in the UK.

[4] http://www.theguardian.com/uk/gallery/2013/jan/29/immigration-britain-ministers-gallery #/?picture=403153246&index=14, accessed on May 20, 2014

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

Another ironic strategy is adopted by the authors of the adverts in *The Huffington Post*. Aware of the fact that "any adverts focussing on denigrating Britain would also have to counteract the £500,000 spent on convincing people to come to Britain ahead of the Olympics" ('Anti-British Ads' Could Target Immigrants From Romania And Bulgaria, in *Huffington Post*), the journalists mirror the original posters (example 7) with the anti-British posters (examples 8 and 9), in an ironic manner, based on both intertextuality and resemblance of the images.

(7)[5]



Heritage is Great Britain. Three of the top five museums and galleries in the world.



Countryside is Great Britain. Some of the world's most inspiring landscapes.

The Great Britain campaign encouraged people to visit the United Kingdom, while the anti-British campaign of the Church Action on Poverty brought out their new version of the ad.

(8)[6]



The gap between rich and poor is greater now than at any time in the past 50 years.

The irony of the situation is given by the contradicting discursive movements. Though intended to foreigners wishing to emigrate to the United Kingdom, the anti-British campaign used self-irony and self-pity to portrait the country in a less-

[5] http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/01/28/immigration-romania-bulgaria-eu-_n_2564911.html, accessed on May 20, 2014

[6] http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/01/28/immigration-romania-bulgaria-eu n_256491 1.html, accessed on May 20, 2014

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

inviting target country than the original Great Britain campaign. The situation is pointed out by the journalists in the same ironic manner: "Anti-British adverts have appeared abroad before, though never pioneered by our own sceptred isle."[7] Even more intriguing are the posters which employ both self-irony and irony directed towards a different target.

(9)[8]



Government isn't Great Britain.
We're ashamed of him.
Romanians and Bulgarians welcome.

The message in example (8) is directed both towards the government *Government isn't Great Britain. We're ashamed of him* and towards the alleged immigrants *Romanians and Bulgarians welcome*, though the ironic touch is directed only towards the latter. The government may be the object of fierce criticism, but the focus of the sarcastic irony is obviously the would-be immigrants.

By making use of irony and humour, journalists attempt to gain readership. They are carefully building the assumptions and describing the focal event in order to make sure that the witticism of the ironic comment is fully depicted by the readers. Ingeniously enough, they let the hearer no room for any misinterpretation of the message, as in the model put forward by Anolli, Infantino, and Ciceri (2001). They do not give to the target of their irony the possibility to save face by denying or taking the message literally. The fencing game is no longer fair.

3. By way of conclusions. What is irony good for?

One of the most interesting functions of irony is that of protecting the personal space of both the ironist and the target. Thus, irony is used as a means of maintaining dignity, personal attitude and privacy. Irony can be described as a symbolic fencing, as a magic circle which makes the ironist seem "untouchable", "unapproachable" in the dialogic game of interpersonal communication. The ironist creates himself the

[7] http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/01/28/immigration-romania-bulgaria-eun_ 256491 1.html, accessed on May 20, 2014

[8] http://www.theguardian.com/uk/gallery/2013/jan/29/immigration-britain-ministers-gallery #/?picture=403154877&index=10, accessed on May 20, 2014

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

aura of a wise person, who sees things from a distance, without involving or compromising. Like Socrates, the prototypical ironist, irony can be used to calm passions or to get involved in tough debates. Both in conflict situations and in cooperative communication, irony reduces tension, limiting emotional expression.

The "fencing game model" of irony was successfully traced along instances of friendly and family encounters as well as in professional contexts. In friendly dialogues, the speaker and the hearer have a long interactional history, they share a considerable amount of knowledge and close social relationships which allow them to detect ironic comments. In our analysis, the usual reaction to irony was laughter (sometimes accompanied by smile), which is more likely to appear among people who know each other well (cf. Clift 1999, Kotthoff 2003, Eisterhold, Attardo, Boxer 2006). This finding is also in line with Anolli, Infantino and Ciceri's comments (2001) on hearers' reaction after being "touched" by the ironic comment: (s)he reacts in a humorous manner, i.e. jokes and laughs about it. These are forms of re-establishing balance once irony, a face threatening act, has been detected.

In professional dialogues, workplace relationships are built within socially and culturally accepted norms, in a highly controlled context. Self-control and detachment from events or emotions allow professionals to use irony as a means of distancing, and respect for the feelings of the other party – in the spirit of politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987).

In media texts, irony as a miscommunication design (Anolli, Infantino, and Ciceri 2001) is no longer appropriate. The context restrictions are very harsh and the journalists need to build the ironic comment strictly at the language level. Without having the opportunity to re-negotiate meaning in order to make sure the message is fully understood by the readers, the journalists need to hint at the socio-cultural context, by means of intertextuality, parody, and mockery. The ironic meaning is perceived by the audience, in the absence of the addressee, who has no opportunity to react. The irony remains suspended between the two instances from the "fencing game" model, because one of the parties is left out of the media communicative process. In the absence of the addressee, the interactional feature of irony is no longer recognised. But the intention, the strategic approach and the linguistic means sharpen in order to leave little or no room for misinterpretation.

The ambiguity of irony leaves room for the negotiation and re-negotiation of the meaning of an ironic utterance, thus helping the participants choose between the three possible ways of reaction. When admitting *touché*, the target forces the ironist to take responsibility for his words and the ironic meaning serves its purpose. When misunderstanding is employed, the speakers may not agree on the communicative intent of the utterance. In case of denying, the intention of the speaker is not recognized as a specific communicative intent by the addressee, thus saving appearances and face.

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

References

Anolli, Luigi, Maria Giale Infantino, Rita Ciceri. 2001. "You're a Real Genius! : Irony as a Miscommunication Design". In *Say Not to Say: New Perspectives on Miscommunication*. Ed. by Luigi Anolli, Rita Ciceri, Giuseppe Riva, 135-158. Amsterdam: IOS Press.

Attardo, Salvatore. 2001. "Humor, irony and their communication: from mode adoption to failure of detection". In *Say Not to Say: New Perspectives on Miscommunication*. Ed. by Anolli, Luigi, Rita Ciceri, Giuseppe Riva, 159-179. Amsterdam: IOS Press.

Attardo, Salvatore. 2013. "Intentionality and irony". In *Irony and Humor: From pragmatics to discourse*. Ed. by Ruiz Gurillo, Leonor and M. Belén Alvarado Ortega, 39-58. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Clark, Herbert H. and Richard J. Gerrig. 1984. "On the Pretense Theory of Irony". *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 113(1): 121-126.

Clift, Rebecca. 1999. "Irony in conversation". *Language in Society* 28: 523-553.

Dindia, Kathryn. 1994. "The intrapersonal – interpersonal dialectical process of self-disclosure". In *Dynamics of relationships. Understanding relationship processes*, vol. 4. Ed. by Steve Duck, 27-57. London, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

DSL – Bidu-Vrânceanu, Angela, Cristina Călăraşu, Liliana Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, Mihaela Mancaş, Gabriela Pană Dindelegan. 2001. *Dicţionar de ştiinţe ale limbii*. Bucureşti: Nemira.

Eisterhold Jodi, Salvatore Attardo, Diana Boxer. 2006. "Reactions to irony in discourse: evidence for the least disruption principle". *Journal of Pragmatics* 38: 1239-1256.

Fish, Stanley. 1983. "Is there a text in this class?" *Helikon* 29: 246-247.

Haverkate, Henk. 1990. "A Speech Act Analysis of Irony". *Journal of Pragmatics* 14: 77-109.

Gheorghe Mihaela, Stanca Măda, Răzvan Săftoiu. 2009. *Comunicarea la locul de muncă. Corpus de interacţiuni verbale în mediul profesional românesc*. Braşov: Editura Universităţii „Transilvania" din Braşov.

Gibbs, Raymond W., Darin L. Buchalter, Jessica F. Moise, William T. Farrar. 1993. "Literal meaning and figurative language". *Discourse Processes* 16: 387-403.

Grice, H. Paul. 1975. "Logic and conversation". In *Syntax and Semantics.* vol. 3, *Speech Acts.* Ed. by Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan, 41-58. New York: Academic Press.

Kotthoff, Helga. 2003. "Responding to irony in different contexts: on cognition in conversation". *Journal of Pragmatics* 35: 1387-1411.

Măda, Stanca. 2009. *Comunicarea în mediul profesional românesc.* Braşov: Editura Universităţii „Transilvania" din Braşov.

Muecke, Douglas Colin. 1970. *Irony. Critical Idiom Series*. London: Methuen.

Rodríguez Rosique, Susana. 2013. "The power of inversion". In *Irony and Humor: From pragmatics to discourse*. Ed. by Ruiz Gurillo, Leonor and M. Belén Alvarado Ortega, 17-38. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Săftoiu, Răzvan. 2009. *CORTES – Corpus de texte pentru seminarul de Limba română contemporană (Pragmatica)*. Ploieşti: Editura Universităţii Petrol-Gaze din Ploieşti.

Searle, John R. 1979. *Expression and meaning. Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sperber, Dan and Deidre Wilson. 1986. *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)

About the authors

Stanca Măda is a Senior Lecturer at *Transilvania* University of Braşov where she teaches a range of courses in applied linguistics and communication from first year to MA level. Her primary research interest is the area of professional communication, and she has published in the areas of constructing identity and workplace culture, managerial communication, the role and functions of communication in workplace meetings, humour, irony and negotiation in various workplace contexts. Most recently her research has tracked the strategies used by journalists in online media communication.

Răzvan Săftoiu is an Associate Professor at *Transilvania* University of Braşov. He teaches courses in pragmatics, applied linguistics, communication and discourse analysis. He received national and international research grants at the University of Bucharest (2001-2003), State University of New York at Albany (2005-2006), *Transilvania* University of Braşov (2007-2010), published articles and reviews in Romanian and international peer reviewed journals.

BDD-A18386 © 2014 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:14 UTC)