

Approaching irony in corpora

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1. The problem of irony

1.1 *In pluribus unum?*

What actually is irony? We all usually recognize an ironic utterance when we come across one, but explaining why we do that and how irony works is not easy. The English lexeme “irony” is polysemic (cf. *OED*), covering among others the figure-of-speech sense, irony of situation and Socratic irony (pretense, dissimulation). Conversational irony is also a very varied phenomenon: its force ranges from comic irony to more offensive sarcasm (Leech 1983: 143) and it can be realized in many different surface forms, which means that practically any utterance (depending on the context) can be used for the purpose of irony. This makes it interesting, but also hard to grasp, in particular for corpus linguists.

It has long been realized that the traditional definition of irony as an utterance “in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used” (*OED*) is inappropriate for characterizing, let alone explaining, the concept. Let me illustrate this with some examples taken from Sperber/Wilson (1981: 300), set in the context of two people caught in a downpour, one of them producing one of the following utterances:

- (1) What lovely weather.
- (2) It seems to be raining.
- (3) I'm glad we didn't bother to bring an umbrella.
- (4) Did you remember to water the flowers?

Only (1) and (3) can be seen to express a meaning opposite to the one really intended *or* to the actual state of affairs (itself an important distinction). However, (2) and (4) in their literal sense are highly irrelevant remarks in the given context and thus force an ironic interpretation.¹ But their literal meaning is not thereby cancelled, demonstrating that irony is not a clear example of non-literal language (such as metaphor). (2) achieves its inappropriateness both by stating the blindingly obvious and by doing it through understatement. In fact, irony is parasitic on other rhetorical means, also using hyperbole, rhetorical questions, metaphors, paradoxes, shifts of register/style (e.g. excessive politeness) etc. for its effect (Barbe 1995, Leech 1983: 82). Thus, these phenomena can serve as irony signals in the same way as facial expressions, intonation, laughing etc. sometimes do. Yet irony signals themselves are not constitutive of irony (Lapp 1992: 29): utterances without any such clear signals can be ironic (cf. 4), while utterances containing them can be absolutely serious. Some (few?) instances of irony, however, signal themselves rather clearly by virtue of being lexicalised, e.g. *a fine friend* (called common irony by Barbe). Moreover, ironic inconsistency can formally manifest itself on several levels, being inherent in one word only (cf. *lovely* in (1)), in the whole statement/utterance (cf. (4)), and/or in the general incompatibility of statement and context (cf. Barbe 1995: 29).

Both the speaker's and the hearer's perspective have to be taken into account in a discussion of ironic utterances. On the one hand, ironic intention is part of the speaker meaning, but the hearer has to recognize the irony for it to be successful. It is important to keep these two aspects apart, because of the fact of unintentional irony (Barbe 1995: 78, Hamamoto 1998: 262), which is inferred by the hearer. It may be that this inference is connected to the irony-of-situation meaning.

I will not answer here the question posed at the beginning (which would be most daring after such a brief discussion!), but what seems to apply to all instances of irony is that it points to some inconsistency or incongruity which the hearer is expected to notice, this inconsistency being located either on the level of the utterance or on the level of both utterance and situation (Barbe 1995: 16). This inconsistency can and often does, but need not, consist in an opposition between the literal and some other meaning. All in all, irony may be seen as a polysemous concept, with a range of more or less prototypical realizations and various meanings or functions.

1.2 *The importance of being ironic*

People must be using irony for some purpose that cannot be served equally well by non-ironic expressions. There must be a clear gain through surplus meaning to outweigh the riskiness of the strategy (namely that the irony, and thus the real force of the utterance, may not be understood).

¹ I will ignore Sperber/Wilson's interpretation of these examples as echoic for the moment.

Basically, irony is or transports an attitude, in the majority of cases a negative one. Ironic utterances are (proto)typically used to convey some criticism on the part of the speaker (Levinson 1983: 161), if in an indirect way. Dews et al. (1995) have experimentally uncovered the following reasons for selecting irony: (i) to be funny, (ii) to soften the edge of an insult, (iii) to show oneself in control of one's emotions, and (iv) to avoid damaging one's relationship with the addressee. While (ii)-(iv) all perform face-saving functions for either the speaker, or the hearer, or both, (i) highlights the strong connection of irony to humour in general (cf. Attardo 1994: 7 for a placement of irony within the semantic field of humour). Of course, jocular language can also be seen in face, i.e. politeness, contexts (cf. Brown/Levinson 1987). However, I think the underlying connection between (i) and the other functions is rather to be found in the aggressive element inherent in humour and laughter, which links up with the FTA implicit in (ii)-(iv). Thus, a certain balance between aggression and social control seems to be the hallmark of irony. Depending on the cultural context, the general balance will be tilted more towards one or the other of these poles. Sarcasm, which has to be seen as a type of irony, sacrifices social control for effective aggressive attack – indicating that restricting irony's function to face-saving might not be appropriate.

In more concrete terms, ironic utterances can take the following forms. A very common form is saying something positive to express a negative attitude, i.e. to voice some criticism. Opposite meaning is not the only method for encoding ironic criticism, however (cf. the examples above). On the other hand, there are also ironic compliments (Dews et al. 1995: 348), in which a negative statement is used to express a positive value judgement (praise-by-blame). This makes the (supposed) compliment at the very least ambivalent, as it colours it with some negative touch (e.g. envy); some kind of unexpressed criticism is hidden within the compliment. Ironic utterances can be directed at (i.e. take as their victim) the hearer(s), some third (absent) party, the speaker him-/herself or the general situation. The latter case seems to favour the humorous function of irony. Speaker-directed irony can be seen as a means of emotional release.

1.3 Theoretical treatments of irony

This is not the place to go into detail about theories of irony, but some points should be mentioned briefly. Most modern theories have tried to move away (more or less successfully) from traditional rhetoric's characterization of irony as meaning something different to what is said, in particular the opposite of what is said (i.e. substitution theories) (cf. Lapp 1992).

Pragmatic treatments promise to be the most successful approaches, as irony is after all a conversational phenomenon constituting meaning in context and in interaction. Grice (1975: 312) described irony as flouting the first maxim of Quality, thereby producing the intended meaning by conversational implicature. Sperber/Wilson (1981), finding fault with Grice's approach, propose the interpretation of ironic utterances as echoic mentions of previous propositions, adding the speaker's evaluation of the latter. The sources of the echo are extremely varied and thus vague – actual utterances, thoughts, opinions, real or imagined sources etc. (Sperber/Wilson 1981: 310) – presenting a problem for the usefulness of the theory in the analysis of real data (and also of its explanatory power). The pretense theory of irony (Clark/Gerrig 1984) assumes that the ironic speaker is pretending to be someone else who might hold the opinion expressed in the ironic utterance, mocking both the opinion and the person it is attributed to. Both of the latter theories foreground the attitude of and evaluations made by the speaker (the psychological aspect), which is certainly very important for irony. As hinted at above, irony has also been seen in the context of politeness in language. Brown/Levinson (1987:221ff) list irony as one of their off-record strategies, giving it a face-saving function. Leech (1983) even proposes an Irony Principle (“If you must cause offence, at least do so in a way which doesn't overtly conflict with the P[oliteness]P[rinciple], but allows the hearer to arrive at the offensive point of your remark indirectly, by way of implicature”, p. 82), which helps to avoid open conflict and thus rescues the Politeness Principle on a different level. The last two theories emphasize more the social functions of irony.

Analysing irony in pragmatic terms of course presupposes the existence of data, which leads us to the next problem.

2. The problem of data

What strikes one when looking through many publications on irony is, on the one hand, the lack or rarity of authentic data, and, on the other, the little linguistic context given for the cited examples.

Data found in the literature generally falls into three classes:

- (i) Invented instances of ironic utterances, based on the researcher's intuition of what are good examples of irony. This is especially common in approaches in some way connected to the Gricean paradigm.
- (ii) Experimental data: psychological/psycholinguistic results concerning the processing, understanding and evaluation of irony. Experiments are usually based on invented examples, cf. (i).
- (iii) Authentic data sampled by tape recording or, in some cases, taken down as notes by the author.

Each of these has its problems. As we have seen above, irony is a rather multi-faceted phenomenon and it is not likely that one researcher would come up with a sufficient range of ironic instances to mirror real-life variety. Individual differences of irony perception, or ironic preferences, will also play a role here. Thus, approach (i) is rather narrow and may not be adequate for supporting a comprehensive theory of irony. In so far as (ii) is based on data of the first kind, it shares the problems mentioned above. However, the resulting experimental data is certainly very important and not invalidated by its restricted basis. The third approach, in particular if pursued within a conversation analysis context, seems much better fitted to capture the concept of irony in all its variety. The problems here are that this method might not produce enough data (in terms of sheer frequency) and that the resulting data might not have a wide enough range (especially in the sociolinguistic sense). The latter concern is based on the fact that one will usually ask friends and (good) acquaintances for permission to make tape recordings (i.e. people of the researcher's own social and educational background)² and, potentially more disturbing, one might subconsciously prefer to approach those people who have a certain reputation for irony (to increase the likelihood of sufficient data).

The second problem is the question of the contextual embedding of the examples cited in the literature. This is a serious problem, in view of the strong contextual dependence of irony. A short, one-to-two sentence long description of the larger extralinguistic context is usually given. As to the linguistic context, it is often only the ironic utterance as such that is provided; where there is more, it is usually the preceding utterance which triggers the ironic retort. The larger conversational context, in particular the response to the ironic utterance³, is notably absent. As important functions of irony include criticism on the one hand and getting the criticism across in a face-saving manner on the other, the response would seem to be an important part of the data. Furthermore, a larger preceding context might be interesting with respect to the echoic-mention theory, at least in so far as the echo can relate to an actual utterance not too far removed in time.

Basically, I think the most promising approach would be a mixture of several approaches, combining data collection and psycholinguistic methods (experiments, questionnaires).⁴ A clear emphasis should be placed on a large amount and a wide range of authentic data, however. While the researcher's own recordings and field notes are valuable (partly because of better access to contextual knowledge), it would be a shame to ignore the opportunity offered by corpora to broaden our picture of irony in use, with regard both to the possible variety of ironic expressions and to the social spread of users of irony.

3. Irony and corpora

In 1996 McEnery/Wilson (98f) stated that there had been relatively little corpus-based research in pragmatics and discourse analysis so far, something which seems to me still to hold true today. This is doubtless due to the fact that corpus-linguistic methods and pragmatic problems do not on the whole meet easily: it is hard to have the computer automatically search and find a phenomenon that does not have a (range of) corresponding surface structure(s). Irony is no exception here: as stated above, almost any utterance can be used ironically and there are no unambiguous irony markers. Nevertheless it is possible to find irony in corpora and some methods together with their results will be presented below.

As I am interested in irony as a (mostly) conversational phenomenon, I will restrict myself to spoken corpus data here. I will draw on the spoken part of the *BNC*, the *Wellington Spoken Corpus* (WSC) and the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* (SBC, part of ICE-USA)⁵ in order to cover several varieties of English.

² The largest-scale study that I am aware of in this respect is Hartung (1998) on irony in conversational German. He used tape recordings of 14 conversations with a total length of 18.5 hours, which yielded the amazing amount of 302 instances of irony.

The recorded participants were all young adults with a middle-class background and university education (ibid. p. 63-69).

³ Sometimes this is added in the explanation in the surrounding text.

⁴ It might also be a good idea to feed authentic examples into these experimental methods.

⁵ A partial pre-publication distributed by the Linguistic Data Consortium. The WSC is published on the ICAME CD.

3.1 “Explicit” irony

The expression “explicit irony” is taken from Barbe (1995), who uses it to describe phrases such as “it is ironic that ...” when employed by writers (of letters to the editor, in her data) to comment on some fact or course of events. She hypothesizes that these uses are based on the writers’ understanding of implicit irony (ibid. 142) and thus can help find out about people’s concept of irony. This might in fact be so, and looking for expressions including terms like *ironic* in spoken contexts might also lead one to situations where irony is actually being employed. The presence of such a metacomment might even mean that something in the communication is going ‘wrong’, which is potentially interesting, as understanding irony can be a problem. Thus I looked for the following words in the spoken corpora: *irony/ies, ironic, ironical, ironically, sarcasm, sarcastic, sarcastically*. While the SBC yielded no instances⁶, there were 11 in the WSC and 114 in the BNC, on the whole more from the *irony*-field than from the *sarcasm*-field. *Irony, ironical* and *ironically* are most commonly used in the irony-of-situation meaning similar to Barbe’s examples and as in (5):

- (5) The problem is, of course, that we <pause> **the irony is that** we are now in a period where we have a much bigger potential workforce who we are not employing as we might. (BNC KRE)

This is a sense that seems to be rather salient in an English, or at least British, context. In contrast to Barbe, however, I doubt whether that particular usage tells us anything much about people’s understanding of verbal irony. Occurrences where people comment on verbal irony are therefore potentially more enlightening. (6) is about the inappropriateness of irony in some situations or with some kinds of people, here by a café manager (AU) to her customers.

- (6) BY: <[>i don’t <.>see</.> well you say you’re nice to them i can’t<[/><{/> imagine you being nasty with them <latch>
AU: well short or abrupt or something or just not NICE not smiling <.,>
BY: <O>exhales</O> yeah <.> i suppose it’s times like that you just <.>even</.> **you can’t even be ironic with them** can you you <.>can’t</.> <latch>
AU: yeah <latch>
BY: you can’t even <.>say</.> <latch>
AU: *oh well there’s <[><[/>SO much work to do</[>*
BY: <[><[laughs>god i’m grumpy today you<[/><{/> can’t even say</laughs> <.> <[><[>that’s all</[> (WSC dpc207)

I am not quite sure whether the third statement after the ironic instance (italicised) is intended as an example of an ironic remark. An instance similar to (6) is presented by a lecturer who had to restrain her “sarcastic tongue” because her “students cannot handle it because it’s a different kind of situation there are different vulnerabilities going on in that situation so i had to learn to challenge students in ways that were constructive” (WSC mul030). If she was talking about school students, especially very young ones, that would not be surprising, but she seems in fact to be talking about university students. Another instance clearly mentions the criticising function of irony or sarcasm:

- (7) DA: it’s taken quite a long time to get there but they seem to be heading in the right direction at least i like to think that a **couple of sarcastic references** er from various people of this university actually helped them along the right way **pointed out the errors of their ways** i <.>the</.> i think they’ve been getting it from quite a number of different sides actually (WSC dgz064)

In contrast to *ironic(ally), sarcastic(ally)* was found in contexts where verbal irony was actually present or talked about. This might indicate that sarcasm (being more aggressive) is the more salient type of irony and that as a consequence the word might be extended to cover all forms of irony, including the less critical ones. The examples could lead one to the latter conclusion, as the comments referred to often do not sound very aggressive. *Sarcastic* is used to report other people’s use of irony (8) or to (meta)comment on one’s own use of it, as in (9), where it refers to an incongruity between a statement and the actual state of affairs.

- (8) There was as much in the loft as there was on the whole first floor. <pause> My the boss said a few things under his breath, came down the steps and we went back into the van. Cos we had to repack it you see because it was going to take a-- it was going to take probably not <pause> it was going to go right to the end with this lot on. So up it went higher. <pause> Not the six foot he’d thought, seven or eight foot we went up and started to pack away again. **A little bit sarcastically my boss said er to the owners** There’s nothing else that we haven’t seen is there? <laugh>. <pause> Well have you seen the gar--? Well your wife said there w-- Oh well you’d better come and have a look, you see. (BNC KNC)

⁶ This is not surprising, as it is very small with only 14 conversations.

- (9) Ken (...) By the way er we may er be gratified to know that erm <pause> thankfully Labour lost the ninety eight seven election but in, in it's manifesto in nineteen eighty seven Labour proposed annual elections in local government.
 PS000 Hm.
 Ken don't <pause> recall, well **in fact I'm being sarcastic** because I know for a, we know that it wasn't in the <voice quality: laughing> manifesto <end of voice quality> for nineteen ninety two. <pause> What the impact of annual elections for local government would be on turn out is difficult to say. I suspect disastrous. (BNC F7T)

Cases of (potential) misunderstanding are another environment for *sarcastic*, as is visible in (10), where a statement is first taken as ironic by the hearer (cf. unintentional irony), but then the misunderstanding is cleared up.

- (10) Caroline <pause> Don't walk away cos I'm connected to you. Okay we're going to <-|> <unclear> canteen <-|>.
 Lyne <-|> You know what you have to <-|> do.
 Caroline And <unclear> food. Lucy's looking very nice in a very nice skirt today. <laugh>
 Lyne **You being sarcastic?**
 Caroline No I <unclear> she's looking very nice in a nice skirt. No I like it so I said it.
 Lyne Oh. (BNC KP3)

Caroline's supposed ironic statement in fact contains possible irony markers that might have led Lyne to that interpretation, namely the great positive emphasis (twice *very nice*) and the laugh following her statement. If Caroline is honest in her denial, this is an example of irony markers being present in non-ironic statements. Of course, Lyne may also have used mutual knowledge (Caroline's usual assessment of Lucy, previous talks about Lucy) in reaching her conclusion; however, this is not accessible via the corpus data. Note that this is an example where missing following context might enforce an ironic meaning that is not there.

Finally, a rather unfortunate fact has to be mentioned. It is often the case in the BNC (as in (11)) that <unclear>-markup precedes or follows (or both) the mention of irony/sarcasm, so that it is impossible to put any sensible interpretation on these instances.⁷ (11) seems to present a harmless, jocular context between friends, in that case contrasting with the offensive meaning of *sarcastic*.

- (11) Cassie Erm <pause> what is this tape? <pause> Have you got band practice tonight then Dan?
 PS6U1 <unclear>
 Cassie <laugh> <pause> **Don't be sarcastic with me matey.**
 PS6U1 Give me a kiss.
 Cassie Are you alright?
 PS6U1 Yeah, think so. <laugh> (BNC KP4)

3.2 Commonly used ironic expressions

Certain words/expressions are more likely to occur in ironic remarks than others. Kreuz/Roberts (1995: 25), for example, have drawn up a "random irony generator" consisting of hyperbolic combinations of adverbs such as *absolutely, certainly, perfectly, really* with "extreme positive adjectives" like *adorable, brilliant, gorgeous, magnificent, the best ... in my life* etc. If one randomly asks native speakers for their intuition on which words are often used ironically, they suggest expressions like *great, how funny, big deal, haha, you don't say* etc. - again positive terms in the majority. Seto (1998: 244ff), who assumes that a semantic reversal from an overdose of positive meaning to the negative opposite is taking place, also lists some linguistic devices that are typical of irony: single words such as *genius, or miracle*, modifiers/intensifiers (*real, nice, such*), superlatives, exclamations, focus topicalisation and excessive politeness. These examples obviously reflect the most typical or most easily noticed type of irony, that of blame by praise/saying something positive to convey criticism. The examples just mentioned partly overlap with Barbe's (1995: 22ff) concept of "common irony" for phrases which always, even out of context, induce an ironic interpretation, e.g. *real winner, fine friend, likely*. In contrast, "nonce irony" (ibid. 18ff) represents original creative instances of irony which are not in habitual use. The existence of such commonly used ironic expressions of course makes it possible to search for these in corpora, using the examples found in the literature, examples provided by asking native speakers, and words/phrase marked as potentially ironic in dictionaries. An *OED* search turned up the following as labelled "frequently ironic/sarcastic" or the like:

- (12) ironic: *that's a laugh, knight in shining armour, what's the big idea?, Great British people, it's a great life, mein Herr, Merrie England(er), outpost, prop (up), go/pass etc. to one's reward, royal, sage, sir, sweetness and light, I will thank you*

⁷ This problem also applies to examples of the type discussed in 3.2.

to do so-and-so, elegant variation, to have a good etc. war, in his/her etc. wisdom, wise guy, wonders will never cease, yet (clause-final), favour
 sarcastic: *erudite, fine gentleman, firm (n.), genteel, martyr, merciful, oh-so, pain, sacred*

I decided to do pilot searches using some of the terms mentioned above, concentrating mainly on the overly positive ones. From the OED list I only checked clause-final *yet* and *oh(-)so*, as most of the others did not seem very relevant for spoken contexts. None of these two has yielded any ironic results so far, though there are so many instances in the BNC that I would not want to be definite on this point at the moment. The often quoted *fine friend* also yielded no instances in any of the corpora; there were a few possibly ironic examples, such as *doing a fine job* (BNC KCN), *be on (sic) fine form* (BNC KDA), but on the whole the corpus evidence has not pointed to an ironic specialization of *fine* so far.

Let me now discuss a few of the examples found. (13) is taken from a conversation between Susan and Anne (colleagues) about the state of the Royal family and the way they are treated by the press. It is an example of word level irony (*great*), which is supported by its context, the conglomerate of positive (and somewhat belittling) descriptive terms, the short form of the name and the superfluous information about Philip's marital status. The irony, which has a benevolent mocking character (and is after all not directed at anybody present in the situation), lies in the incongruity between the epithet and the general public evaluation of Prince Philip.

- (13) Susan: ... but this Royal Family, I E the, the Royal Family with which I grew up and Anne did were *really sweet nice little* Windsors who behaved themselves <-> and that was what was, went into our psychic and there was the odd crack about **Phil the Great** *who's the Queen's husband*, you know and how he perhaps had an eye for the ladies, but there was never any photographs of him being <unclear> or any evidence that it might have gone further than that (BNC J40)

In contrast, (14) represents a more confrontational form of irony, with 12-year-old Paul criticizing his parents, Kevin and Ruth, for not being very helpful. Several features contribute to the ironic effect: individual positive words (*fantastic, great, lot*), the exclamation, and the focus topicalization (cf. Seto 1998). Paul's mother is not impressed by the criticism and Paul loses the ensuing short argument.

- (14) Kevin You might get an extra merit mark <-> if you do an extra session. <->
 Ruth <-> I don't really know. <->
 Paul I don't!
 Ruth I don't really know.
 Paul **Oh fantastic! That's a great lot of <-> help you are.** <->
 Ruth <-> It'll do <-> you good to do G. <pause>
 Paul It won't do me good to do pipsqueak questions. <pause>
 Ruth If they're pipsqueak why are you asking me?
 Paul I'm not <pause dur=23> Two A three. Two A means two times two is four. (BNC KD0)

In (15), with the same participants as (14), a quasi lexicalised ironic expression is used, i.e. an example of common irony (Barbe 1995). Evaluative *big deal* is practically not used in a positive sense any more. Such specialization (and/or overuse) can weaken the ironic force of the utterance (which might be increased again by repetition, an irony marker, cf. *big, big deal* in BNC KPV). While the criticism here is probably not very strong, it leads (after the comment by third party Kevin) to a first, unfortunately <unclear> response, and then to a justificatory response by the "victim" of irony, Paul.

- (15) Ruth Well they'll have to be equal prizes wouldn't they?
 Paul I've got it! <pause> Whichever team wins <pause> th-- the cha-- children can give out the Christmas presents.
 Ruth What Christmas presents?
 Paul Those presents up there.
 Ruth **Big deal!**
 Kevin *Can't fool you.*
 Paul <-> <unclear> <->
 Ruth <-> Well I've <-> never <unclear> <-> <unclear> prize <->
 Paul <-> *It's only <-> <pause> it's only fun*, I mean what are you gonna give them? <pause dur=11> The team that wins <-> gets their presents. <-> (BNC KD0)

The next two examples have exclamatory structure (what a ..., cf. also how ...), which is also a common ironic device. The whole formulation of the utterance in (16) contributes to the ironic effect (especially brave, let loose) as does the situational inappropriateness: nowadays, it tends to be the press that is let loose on other people, and the trustees of the Tyneside Cinema Board are probably rather "harmless" people, more likely to be attacked by the press than the other way round. The trustees apparently do not fancy the task required of them very much, and Peter (the chief executive) thus feels it necessary to make conciliatory remarks in response.

- (16) Peter <pause> Er it will be at ten. Ten till two or something like that. It's also very good if board members can attend to er <pause> not merely to support the staff er and to celebrate the event but also, if necessary, to talk to the press or to <pause> er engage er with guests and so on and so forth. Er it would be much appreciated if you were able to attend. <pause>
 Roger Any other other business?
 Colin **What a brave person you are to let a board of trustees loose on the press.**
 Peter Well we we we'll have an army of people to stand by you and <-> guide you and <->
 PS000 <-> <laugh> <->
 Peter nudge you should you say anything. (BNC F7A)

In (17), a conversation between two young women, the exclamation form is combined with word level irony and an imitated accent, which is additionally intended to mock the absent victim of the irony. AL's irony sounds somewhat bitter, as she has apparently been criticized before for not doing well certain sales behaviour that the American is boasting of.

- (17) AL: no i was talking to this guy um who's from knox
 BQ: <[1]><O>laughs</O></[1]><[1]> <[2]><laughs>yeah</laughs></[2]></[2]> mhm
 AL: um mark and he's um living in wellington for the summer cos he's being a lawyer
 BQ: oh yeah
 AL: working as a summer law clerk lucky bastard anyway he um he used to work at tauranga mcdonald's and like he was a crew trainer and assistant this and worked his way up you know <with pseudo American accent>wow **what a hero**</with pseudo American accent> and um he said that he used <>to</> cos i was talking about that suggestive selling you know how they always used to tell me off for not being suggestive <laughs>enough</laughs> and um he said he used to go to people um when they bought like a small coke he'd say um would you like a twenty four pack of chicken mcnugets with that or would you like eight big macs and four cheeseburgers with that <O>laughs</O> and just take the piss which i think is really good <O>laughs</O> (WSC DPF028)

Searches for particular terms were often not successful with respect to these terms themselves being used ironically, but turned up other ironic material in their vicinity, thus broadening the scope of findings. In a House of Commons debate a certain Wilson MP produces the following statement (18), which makes a very ironic impression. The irony lies on the utterance and the contextual level, with the speaker alluding to irony of situation, namely the absurd fact that while attempts at reducing regulations are being pursued, new ones are being passed all the time. Through his choice of words and register (*great enthusiasm, diving, anxious, merrily getting on with it*) Wilson is also poking gentle fun at his colleagues.

- (18) Wilson <unclear> here was that er we're debating banks and banking regulations <pause> building soc-- soc-- society orders, auditors regulations and financial services rules. Madam Deputy Speaker I didn't mention <pause> those <pause> at all in the speech I gave last week which was so warmly received by the house. <pause> **Here are all my colleagues rushing upstairs with great enthusiasm, diving into the committee room, anxious to get on to curb the ever growing number of rules and regulations and whilst they're upstairs merrily getting on with it, here we are downstairs passing more <pause> things which we say we don't want to do.**
 PS000 Will the honourable member give way?
 Wilson Yes. (BNC JSF)

The next example is interesting, as it sounds to me like a good example of the echoic-mention theory. The bold-faced statement by Ian might be taken to echo what people (parents?, teachers?) said about himself and Edmund in their youth, and which in the meantime has been proved wrong (cf. the italicised statements further down). Ian is therefore criticizing (albeit in a good-humoured way) those people who did not believe in their abilities in the past through the contrast between beliefs and the actual state of affairs, while also putting himself in a good light. The absence of any linguistic indicators of irony in this ironic utterance is noticeable, with the accompanying laughter⁸ the only sign of a non-serious intention.

- (19) Ian <-> Yeah. <-> Well i-- i-- I always say that er it always comes a surprise that I was good at anything. And I always think back to the er the time I think Edmund and I were sitting in the back garden here <pause> and deciding that we'd go off and join the paratroopers
 Noel <-> <laugh> <->
 Enid <-> Really? <->
 Ian <voice quality: laughing> **because we weren't going to get <end of voice quality> any O levels.**
 Enid Oh!
 Ian And that was <voice quality: laughing> **about all we were good for** <end of voice quality>.
 Enid <laugh> I'm <-> sorry. <->
 Noel <-> <unclear> <->
 Enid How funny. <-> *But in fact you did get your O levels didn't you?* <->

⁸ It is striking how often mark-up for laughing is present around ironic utterances. This might be a further way of looking for irony.

Ian <-|> So I remember <unclear> *well I got a handful* <-|>
 Enid Yes I <-|> remember <-|>
 Ian <-|> <unclear> <-|>
 Enid Mm.
 Noel *And Edmund got a BA.* (BNC KC0)

My last example is an instance of self-directed irony, i.e. the speaker ‘criticizing’ himself, here in the presence of others. The speaker at a church funds meeting makes a little grammatical mistake and proceeds to apologize for this in a very marked fashion, with hyperbole and borrowings from the religious register. Of course, the remark is rather jocular, but statements of this kind can function as a sort of preventive self-defence, pre-empting criticism from others. This might also be a case of Dews et al.’s function of the speaker showing himself to be in control (cf. 1.2 above), not of his emotions but of the social situation after a faux pas.

- (20) F87PS000 (...) Moderator I’ve asked for this new clause to come in immediately after seven because of what in accepting seven we’ve just done. (...) Now let me read the words for the s-- benefit of those who don’t have them <pause> add new section eight and rem-- renumber eight urge his majesty’s government to give continuing and careful concern to the many situations in which lack of financial resources are still causing elderly people grave hardship. Having read that **I immediately repent me in dust and ashes for having committed a dreadful grammatical error.** I was so caught up in my plurals or situations in hardship that I didn’t notice that the subject in more senses than one is a singular lack, and the verb should be is and not are, therefore I must ask the indulgence of the general assembly to change the verb. (BNC F87)

3.3 Unusual collocations

Louw (1993: 163) has argued that violations of semantic prosodies point either to the presence of irony or to the suspicion that the author might be insincere. One of his examples is “bent on self-improvement” (David Lodge), contrasting with the fact that its usual collocates are overwhelmingly unpleasant or outright negative (e.g. mischief, resigning, destroying) (ibid. 164ff).⁹ Thus, instances of unusual collocations might be another way to unearth irony in corpora. However, Louw also points to problems posed by this approach, namely that semantic prosodies might be difficult to access through human intuition and, therefore, not that easy to look for and find in corpora (172f). This is a valid point, as I found out all too readily. There are not that many terms with clear prosodies that immediately spring to mind. Commit is one such clear example, as it has in one of its uses (transitive and without following to) a wonderfully unambiguous negative semantic prosody, being followed by such words as suicide, *crime, atrocity, adultery, offence, arson, robbery*¹⁰ etc. One might then assume that if it occurred with a positively evaluated object (such as *favour*), this might in fact produce irony. However, none of the spoken corpora yielded any unusual combinations for this word. Another search with *set in* and *set about*, for which Sinclair (1991: 74ff) had found rather clear patterns, was also unsuccessful.

I then decided on a slightly more systematic, though still random, approach. I checked through the entries of the BBI Dictionary beginning with the letters f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m (random choice) to find promising candidates for a corpus search. Most searches (e.g. *honour* (v.), *hark, flood* (v.), *frugal, languish, loyal, interlude, forgive*) did not yield any results¹¹, either because the semantic prosodies were not pronounced/unambiguous enough in the first place or because there were no violations. However, there were a few successful, or at least interesting, hits such as the following example:

- (21) Maggie I’m gonna borrow your husband a minute <-|> <unclear> sit on the floor. <-|>
 Betty <-|> Alright. Just watch him cos he’s <-|> **liable to be a bit amorous.** <laugh>
 Maggie <-|> Right Dave? <-|>
 PS000 <-|> <unclear> chuck you out <unclear> <-|>
 Betty <-|> Oh dear dear dear. <-|> (BNC KBE)

To be liable to is an expression with a tendency to combine with words denoting unpleasant/disagreeable things or actions and it also has a legalistic touch. Among the nouns prominently collocating with *liable* are *bye-law, servitude, disqualification, negligence, damages, indictment, debts, defendant, prosecution, flooding* etc. Others collocates include *criminally, disciplinary, legally, penal* and so on. *A bit amorous* is certainly the odd one out in this list, and the whole utterance above is certainly humorous, perhaps also ironic. Betty makes this statement about her husband (David) in the presence of her daughter (Sally) and her friends (Rose, Julie, Maggie). If irony

⁹ This effect seems to be similar to register or stylistic clashes, which can also produce irony. However, I do not think that the result of a semantic clash need always be ironic or insincere; it might just be a general humorous effect, which I would also see as a more likely interpretation of the Lodge passage in question.

¹⁰ Those were among the first 13 items of a collocates listing (based on mutual information) for *commit* done on the whole BNC.

¹¹ These searches were only done with the BNC, because it is the only one big enough to yield viable collocation data.

is involved here the victim is David, who does not react to it (unless the unattributed, and unfortunately mostly unclear PS000 utterance is by him). David is described in the BNC text header as a disabled unemployed man at the age of 55, while Maggie (who wants to ‘borrow’ him) is a 32-year-old shop assistant. The incongruity between their respective ages might play a role here for an ultimate interpretation of this exchange.

The next example, which concerns *verge* (n.), was found incidentally during a search for *marriage*. Just like *liable*, *verge* has a rather negative semantic prosody, combining with collocates such as *extinction*, *bankruptcy*, *starvation*, *tears*, *collapse*, *nervous (breakdown)*, *death*, *war* etc., with *retirement* being the only noun among the first 50 collocates that can take on a positive or a negative evaluation. The phrase *on the verge of marriage* then at the very least seems somewhat unusual.

- (22) Liz Yes. I mean, I know it’s hard <pause> it’s hard doing <pause> <-> erm <->
 PS000 <-> Yes! <-> <laugh>
 PS000 And she wasn’t going to marry, she never really considered marrying Rivers did she? <-> It said she was **on the verge of marriage**. <->
 PS000 <-> I heard she <unclear>. <->
 PS000 She was <-> almost <->
 PS000 <-> Er <->
 PS000 <-> hypnotized <->
 Liz <-> Yeah. <-> (BNC K60)

However, the phrasing seems to produce neither humour nor irony in this instance. Another problem here is that it is a kind of quote occurring in the context of a literature lecture/discussion (with the lecturer, Liz, and two other (unknown) participants), so that one would have to take into consideration how the phrase is used and intended in the original literary work. At any rate, this is not a truly conversational example for a collocational clash.

The medium might in fact play an important role. Most of Louw’s examples are taken from the written language, and it could be that unusual collocations intended to transport a special meaning and attitude are more common in carefully drafted written language. My last example is taken from an academic book publication.

- (23) When Tikhon was placed under house arrest in June 1922, one of these movements, the Living Church, was given numerous concessions by the regime, and at first looked set to take over the role and some of the property of the Orthodox. Trotsky went so far as to call the agreement “an ecclesiastical NEP”, implying a similar **tolerance** to that **meted out** to “kulaks” or to Nepmen, but this was a superficial and short-sighted judgement redolent with propaganda. The year 1922 in fact marked the start of the regime’s long-term siege of the Church. (BNC A64)

The combination of *tolerance* and *mete out*, whose most prominent collocates are *punishment*, *treatment*, *justice* (the last two especially in their negative instantiations), certainly leads to an ironic effect, used for the prototypical function of criticism.

4. Evaluation and outlook

The above investigation has shown that it is possible to find instances of irony in corpora, and, what is more, instances of a very varied kind. The examples presented above do in fact all express an attitude, in many cases a somewhat negative or the prototypical critical one. They range in force from being humorous (e.g. (13)) to conveying confrontational criticism (e.g. (14)). The examples exhibit the diverse targets of ironic utterances: at the speaker him-/herself (20), at the situation as such (18), at the/a present addressee as the victim (14, 16, 21?), and at an absent victim (13, 17, 19). Formally, the irony is realized at the word level (13), at utterance level (16) or in a certain incongruity between the content utterance and the situation (19). Thus, the variety of irony treated in the literature can be illustrated with authentic corpus material. Moreover, the ironic instances found also show a nice social spread. They occurred both in informal contexts (family, friends, e.g. (14), (19), (21)) and in more formal ones (institutional settings, e.g. (18), (20)), with work-related contexts perhaps in the middle (13, 16). Irony is produced in the examples by people of different ages (from their teens (14) to their seventies (19)), and from different spheres of life (teachers, students, production workers, shop assistants, chief executives, housewives, civil servants). While basic sociolinguistic information is available in some corpora (relatively informative in the BNC, less so in the WSC), much contextual information that would be useful for the interpretation of irony is missing (e.g. details about personal relationships, mutual knowledge etc.). The cotext of the examples can be useful in this respect, however (cf. (19)).

All three approaches pursued here are useful to a certain extent. Searching for explicit irony can give information about people’s understanding of irony and it can even find conversations with

(supposedly) ironic remarks. It is a restricted approach, however, as the frequency of such instances is rather limited. The collocational method is probably the most complicated and also the least promising. At any rate, it is hard to pursue as long as no more is known about semantic prosodies than is the case at present. The best way seems to be to look for instances of irony identified by native speakers and dictionaries, hoping that this will also turn up unexpected examples – because it has to be admitted that this approach contains the danger of finding only what one was looking for in the first place, i.e. a circular approach. The method has to be fine-tuned of course, e.g. by using a comprehensive dictionary database (the *OED* in its present edition might not have been the best choice here) and employing native speaker intuitions in a more systematic way by collecting them via a structured questionnaire technique. The size of the corpus used is also very important. The examples quoted above are almost all from the BNC, with just a few from the WSC and none at all from the SBC. The WSC proves that careful searching can make use of a one-million-word corpus for investigating irony, but anything below that (cf. SBC) is pushing the researcher's luck.

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