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| M.Phil Thesis |
| An Evaluative Review of the Pragmatics of Verbal Irony |
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**Abstract**

What is verbal irony? How is it successfully interpreted? Why should speakers risk employing it when, logically speaking, indirect speech should only harm their chances of being correctly understood? Beginning with the work of Grice, and moving onwards to cover Direct Access Theory, Graded Salience Hypothesis, Relevance Theory and the Echoic, Pretence and Mental Space approaches to irony, the capacity of various pragmatic theories to accurately represent irony will be assessed and tested from both theoretical and cognitive evidential standpoints. Additionally, potential strategic benefits of irony which have thus far been ignored by pragmatic studies will be presented, and the potential of politeness theories to inform future study of these alternative goals will be evaluated. The study will conclude by drawing together theoretic and evidential trends in the research presented and will offer an indication of the pragmatic features of irony on which future studies may seek to focus.

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# 1. Introduction

I wish he’d been killed in that crash. Well, I do. I wish he’d been killed…and decapitated, and that the next series of *Top Gear* had been presented by Jeremy Clarkson, James May and Richard Hammond’s severed head on a stick…I wish, I wish his head had come off, and rolled along the track, and all shards of metal had gone in his eyes and blinded him…and then I, then I wish his head had rolled into a still-burning pool of motor oil but there was just enough sentience left in his spinal column for him to go ‘Ooh, that’s hot’ and then die.

(Lee 2012: 56-61)

Not really. I don’t really think that. Right? And what I was doing there, as everyone here in this room now understands, just in case there’s anyone from the *Mail on Sunday* watching this, is I was using an exaggerated form of the rhetoric and the implied values of *Top Gear* to satirise the rhetoric and implied values of *Top Gear*. And it is a shame to have to break character and explain that. But hopefully it will save you a long, tedious exchange of emails.

(Lee 2012: 63)

These quotes are taken from the stand-up comedian Stewart Lee’s 2009 tour *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One* and are a suitable starting point for this study because they highlight that when speakers use verbal irony they take the risk of being misunderstood and that therefore for verbal irony to be a logical mode of speech it must offer the speaker potential advantages which go beyond those offered by verbal irony’s literal equivalent. Coming to an understanding of how Lee’s use of verbal irony operates - from why he chooses to employ verbal irony, to the methods he chooses to enact it and the way that different audiences will interpret it - requires a complex contextual framework which I will argue has yet to be satisfactorily presented by any pragmatic study. This deficit in understanding is due to the lack of appreciation for the true complexity of verbal irony, including a failure to recognise the benefits ironic speech provides speakers and which leads to a failure to explain why irony is a *rational* mode of discourse. In aid of this claim at the end of each chapter the synthetic and conventional verbal ironies which complement the theoretical aspects of the study will be counterbalanced by an analysis of the examples of complex non-conventional verbal irony provided in Stewart Lee’s *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One*. These examples will show that verbal irony cannot be properly described by pragmatics unless more research is devoted to complex and non-conventional verbal irony employed by speakers who are operating outside of Grice’s Cooperative Principle. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this thesis to produce such a framework in full, the groundwork for future ventures in this area will be laid via an evaluative analysis of different pragmatic approaches to verbal irony, the merits of which will be judged on both theoretic and evidential grounds. Similarities and connections between different approaches will be drawn and a baseline for how to pragmatically approach the concept of verbal irony will be offered.

This task will begin with an opening definition of verbal irony, in which the traditional view of verbal irony (as a trope which implicates the opposite of the literal utterance) is argued to be an inaccurate representation of the many different forms which verbal irony can take. These comments having been made, Chapter 2 will begin my assessment of pragmatic approaches to verbal irony, focusing on Grice’s pragmatics (Grice 1967a; 1967b; 1968; 1969; 1981). It will be argued that the Gricean approach to verbal irony fails in three respects: firstly, it underestimates the variety of forms verbal irony can take and thus fails to reliably define verbal irony via an appeal to the Maxim of Quality; and secondly, it fails to recognise the non-cooperative motivations behind verbal irony and thus is fundamentally limited in the forms of verbal irony it can depict; finally, it will be argued that Grice’s work presents verbal irony as a cognitively expensive mode of discourse without offering an explanation of what benefits this increased cognitive processing might bring, and so depicts verbal irony as an irrational speech choice.

To test the cognitive criticisms of Grice’s work Chapter 3 will examine in detail a variety of cognitive studies and compare the evidence they provide to the predictions of both Grice’s pragmatics, and a different approach which appears to bypass the criticism that irony is cognitively inefficient: the Direct Access Theory proposed by Gibbs (1986; 1994). It will be concluded that neither Gricean pragmatics nor the Direct Access approach provide an accurate depiction of how verbal irony is cognitively processed. Instead it will be suggested that the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora 1995; 1997; 2003) offers a more suitable approach to the cognition of verbal irony.

The inability of the Direct Access Theory to evade the criticisms noted in Chapter 2 means that there are insurmountable flaws in the Gricean approach to verbal irony. Chapter 4 discusses an alternative pragmatic model: Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1987; 1990; 1995; 1998; 2002; 2004). The theoretic basis of this approach will be analysed and defended against certain criticisms, the theory will then be compared to the cognitive evidence presented in Chapter 3 and be found to not match recent findings. To resolve this problem a union between the principles suggested by Relevance Theory and those put forward by the Graded Salience Hypothesis will be suggested. It will be argued that a Relevance Theoretic/Graded Salience approach both accurately matches the findings from cognitive studies and provides a more suitable pragmatic framework than was offered by Grice. Chapter 4 will also assess how verbal irony in particular can operate under Relevance Theory via a comparison between the Echoic Mention (Sperber and Wilson 1981b; Sperber 1984; Sperber and Wilson 1995; Wilson 2006), Pretence (Clark and Gerrig 1984; Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg 1995; Cros 2001; Currie 2006) and Mental Space (Utsumi 2000; Coulson 2005; Kihara 2005; Ritchie 2005) approaches to defining irony. Similarities between these approaches will be identified and it will be summarised that, provided similar adaptations to those suggested to Relevance Theory can be made to it, the Echoic Mention Theory offers the best way of explaining the interpretation of ironic remarks.

Chapter 5 offers a means of analysing verbal irony from speaker perspectives rather than the traditional hearer/interpretation style of approach. The chapter presents several potential benefits ironic speech provides the speaker and argues for the presence of alternative speaker strategies of irony which have yet to be recognised by pragmatic study. Without the inclusion of this type of information future pragmatic studies will be unable to show that in certain situations verbal irony is a *more effective* and thus *more logical* mode of speech than its literal equivalent. As a result they will be unable to move beyond the criticisms levelled at Gricean pragmatics in Chapter 2.

Since no pragmatic study has attempted to represent the strategies of ironic speakers, Chapter 6 searches for an analogue for irony strategies in pragmatic studies of politeness, including both the maxim-based approach (Lakoff 1973; 1989; Leech 1983), and the face-based approach (Brown and Levinson 1987). These approaches will be compared, and those elements which hold potential for modelling the strategies of ironic speakers will be identified. Whilst it will be concluded that Brown and Levinson offer a better route to representing speaker strategy in pragmatic terms it will be concluded that none of the politeness studies are greatly suitable to representing the strategies of ironic speakers. Nevertheless the theories analysed in this chapter do identify key features that will need to be included in any future attempt to pragmatically model why speakers choose irony.

Finally, Chapter 7 presents the conclusion of my thesis, in which the various arguments and conclusions made in prior chapters are drawn together to present my proposal of the best way to approach verbal irony from a pragmatic standpoint. This will be offered as the basis for any future research on the subject of verbal irony, and suggestions for areas of study will be put forward.

However, before beginning my analysis of how pragmatics should approach verbal irony, it is necessary to define the concept of verbal irony itself.

## 1.1 Definitions of Verbal Irony

Traditional definitions of verbal irony describe it as form of rhetorical trope akin to metaphor and metonymy, in that it involves a substitution of the literal utterance with an implied figurative meaning (see Leigh 1994; McQuarrie and Mick 2003; Van Enschot, Hoeken and Van Mulken 2006). To interpret a trope the interpreter should first comprehend the speaker’s literal meaning, and then, due to some form of cue, reinterpret this to understand the speaker’s figurative meaning. In the case of verbal irony this substitution process involves the reversal of the literal meaning to its binary opposite. The oldest known definition of irony as a form of rhetorical strategy is in *Rhetoric to Alexander*, ascribed to Anaximenes of Lampsacus in the 4th century BC. Here verbal irony is described as either praising by blaming, or alternatively blaming by praising (Knox 1989: 22). The reversal at the heart of this description was carried forward in other classical approaches: Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* IX, II: 44) defines verbal irony in terms of the fact that ‘we understand something opposite of what was actually said’; DuMarsais claims that ‘in irony, one seeks to convey the opposite of what one actually says’ (*Des Tropes,* in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 207); In Samuel Johnson’s dictionary ‘irony is a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words’ (Johnson, quoted in Sperber and Wilson 1992: 54).

The classic interpretation has passed virtually unchanged into linguistic study. Searle (1979) and Grice (1989) improve the traditional account by explaining what triggers the reinterpretation of the literal utterance, but they rigidly adhere to the traditional account by maintaining that verbal irony operates via negation: Grice sees verbal irony as a rhetorical figure which holds a different meaning than it literally expresses and states that this meaning ‘must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one (s)he [the speaker] purports to be putting forward’ (1989: 22); Searle considers verbal irony to be an indirect form of speech which is so inappropriate to the current discourse that: ‘the hearer is compelled to reinterpret it in such a way as to render it appropriate, and the most natural way to interpret it is as meaning the *opposite* of its literal form’ (1979: 113). In their attempts to model verbal irony as a method of politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987: 222) also rely on verbal irony as negation, characterising irony as ‘saying the opposite of what the speaker means’. Even several studies which have questioned the validity of verbal irony as a trope have maintained a view of verbal irony as negation: Levin (1982: 116-118) distinguishes between verbal irony the trope (which occurs when irony applies to only a word) and verbal irony the figure of thought (which applies when irony targets an entire sentence), yet characterises each form as either antonymy (for the trope) or negation (for the figure of thought); Haverkate (1990: 83-85) expands the capacity of verbal irony by arguing it can target either a word or a proposition, but also maintains that its relationship to either is one of negation. More recent examples of rhetoric studies adopting this approach can be found in Corbett and Connors (1999: 405), Leigh (1994: 19) and McQuarrie and Mick (1996: 431), whilst the linguistic models proposed by Martin (1992), Seto (1998), Attardo (2000), and Colston (2002) all defend to some extent the traditional notion of verbal irony being characterised as negation, contradiction or reversal of meaning.

Some forms of verbal irony intuitively fit this model – sarcasm for instance appears to involve a simple mapping from literal to figurative meaning in which the literal meaning is reversed. Sarcasm is one of the more explicit forms of verbal irony, as shown in the following exchange from *The Simpsons,* in which a town council of the smartest Springfieldians descends into mutual acrimony. The character Comic Book Guy expresses his disregard to another council member, the crazy inventor Professor Frink, by dismissing his new invention (the sarcasm detector) with apparently record levels of sarcasm:

‘**Lindsay Naegle:** Do I detect a hint of sarcasm?  
(*The sarcasm detector starts beeping.*)  
**Professor Frink**: Are you kidding? This baby is off the charts!  
**Comic Book Guy**: Ooh! A sarcasm detector! That's a REALLY useful invention!  
(*The sarcasm detect or explodes.*)’

(‘They saved Lisa’s brain’, *The Simpsons*, 1999)

Camp (2012: 2) points out that sarcasm can act either on a term or clause within a sentence, or on the entire sentence itself, and proposes a subdivision of sarcasm titled - ‘Like-prefix sarcasm.’ It is widely acknowledged that speakers can highlight their use of irony via intonation, hyperbole and physical cues - presumably to compensate for verbal irony’s comparatively high failure rate as a means of communication. Whilst in certain cases prefacing a sarcastic remark with ‘like…’ or ‘sure…’ etc. is part of this signalling process, at other times it radically changes how the sarcasm functions (for a fuller discussion, see Camp and Hawthorne 2008.) In such instances the prefix alters the target of the sarcastic reversal process from a single expression or clause to ‘something very close to the ‘contrary’ of the bare sentence’s focal content’ (Camp 2012: 15): the ironic utterance ‘I’m taking a break from this great game’ implies that the speaker is taking a break because the game is far from great; the ironic utterance ‘like I’m taking a break from this great game’ means the speaker is not going to stop because the game is great. Nevertheless, this difference noted, sarcasm appears to accord with the traditional view of irony – ‘Like-prefix sarcasm’ simply moves the reversal from an element of the sentence to the entirety of the sentence.

However even in the relatively straightforward category of sarcasm there is reason to doubt traditional definition. Most traditional views of sarcasm have linked its negation of the literal to a strong critical stance on behalf of the user: ‘What is essential to sarcasm is that it is overt irony *intentionally used by the speaker as a form of verbal aggression*’ (Haimann 1998: 20 emphasis in original). However, whilst the word itself derives from the Greek sarkasmos, which in turn derives from the verb sarkazsein - meaning ‘to tear the flesh’, not all examples of sarcasm can be characterised as fiercely negative. Instead, Toplak and Katz (2000: 1483) argue that the following stimuli affect the presence and degree of sarcasm: ‘exaggeration, nature of the speaker, relationship of speaker to victim, severity of the criticism, and whether or not the criticism is being made in private or in front of an audience.’ For example a parent who disciplines a child by sending them to tidy their room but then finds them playing a videogame rather than tidying up might say ‘I see you have been hard at work’. Whilst the parent’s attitude in this situation is *critical* it is hardly an act of *verbal aggression*. This example is indication that we should recognise that sarcasm can be implemented in a variety of ways – as nagging or resigned grumbling; as exasperation, as begging or pleading and even as a quite gentle form of humour. For instance, if I hear a thin friend complaining about putting on a small amount of weight I could say ‘Yes, you’re a blimp’. This use of language is clearly sarcastic, my meaning is that my friend is not as large and round as a blimp, but is intended not as an act of verbal aggression but rather as *complimenting* my friend’s physique. This comment might be categorised as banter, which McDonald (1999: 487) identifies as a kind of positive sarcasm, otherwise known as teasing, or mocking someone gently. For example, ‘Alan is such a selfish guy; he spends all of his time helping the homeless and never wants to go clubbing with us’, highlights not Alan’s negative qualities but his kindness and altruism.

The universal negativity of sarcasm was also questioned by Dauphin (2000) who performed a study on 30 students and found that,

every male, except one, viewed sarcasm as light-hearted humor…Males expressed more tolerance of this type of verbal aggression [and] did not view sarcasm as a form of aggression…None of them viewed sarcasm as a negative thing… males generally said they would not be emotionally hurt by sarcasm and would not care if a good friend of the same sex made a sarcastic remark to them.

In a different field (medicine) Ruvelson (1988) makes the case for ‘empathetic sarcasm’ arguing that well-timed, prudently ventured sarcastic comments directed at persons in the patients’ lives, including the therapist, can hold therapeutic benefits.

These studies highlight that traditional analysis has ignored the capacity for contextual elements to radically modify how verbal irony functions. Whilst sarcasm conforms to the reversal aspects of traditional definitions of verbal irony, it is much more than a tool for criticism, and a full understanding of sarcasm requires an understanding of social context:

The speaker or author's rhetorical goal may be anything from gentle humor, intended to produce a mutual laugh and so establish rapport between speaker and hearer, to corrosive derision meant to insult the audience or reduce a target to a smoking ruin. What is attempted or achieved (the speech act or illocutionary dimension of the utterance) depends, as always, on the variables of the rhetorical situation, and on how the device and its detection contribute to those variables.

(Fahnestock 2011: 115)

Discrepancies regarding speaker attitude aside, we may wish to retain the sub-category of sarcasm as reversing the literal utterance, but there are other forms of utterance which intuitively seem ironic and do not operate in this way.

The first of these occurs in cases of ironic metaphor. Popa (2010: 1) uses the ‘He’s a real number-cruncher’ about a total innumerate in maths. Popa claims that ‘in such cases both logically and psychologically, the metaphor is prior to irony…the phenomenon is then one of ironic metaphor, which puts a metaphorical meaning to ironic use, rather than an irony used metaphorically.’ In examples of ironic metaphor the target reversal of the irony is not the literal meaning but the figurative meaning – a phenomenon which invalidates the traditional claim that irony is tied solely to the literal utterance. Furthermore this phenomenon is by no means restricted to ironic uses of metaphor: Camp (2012: 10) shows that verbal irony can target not just the literal utterance (or even a literal utterance enriched by context), but also ‘the *implicatures* that a sincere utterance would have generated’ and that ‘often enough the implicature is the irony’s *only* target’. This can be seen in the utterance ‘You sure know a lot’ which can operate not only on the literal level (i.e. you don’t know a lot) but also on the level of implicature (i.e. that knowing a lot is not valuable). In this example the reversal aspect of verbal irony targets societal notions produced in connection to implicature rather than specific aspects of the literal utterance.

Worse still for traditional definitions of irony are the examples provided by Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995) who present a class of ironic utterance which target not the literal utterance, nor any implicature resultant from the literal utterance, but rather the entire speech act itself. If we return to the earlier example of a parent using irony to chide a child for not tidying their room, we can imagine an alternative example such as ‘Thanks for cleaning up’. This utterance is intuitively an example of irony, but it is not the case that the parent is intending to say ‘Thank you for not cleaning up’, nor ‘Not-Thank you for cleaning up’, nor any other contrary position. Instead the parent is pretending that the child has cleaned up the room and is echoing a remark that they might have made in such a situation. The fact that the room is not clean is highlighted by the division between the reality presented in the utterance and the reality of the child’s room. Admittedly there is still a reversal in this irony, but it is enacted upon the level of presented realities rather than presented utterances: the speaker has presented one reality in her utterance which is in conflict with actual reality and in interpreting the utterance hearers will contrast the spoken reality with actual reality and notice the contrariness of their relationship.

Whilst the example above contains reversal, the introduction of comparative realities presented by Kumon-Nakamura et al. call into question the specification of irony as always involving reversal, since some forms of rhetorical irony need not diametrically oppose the current discourse situation. In relation to this Giora et al. (2005) show that irony is graded rather than binary by comparing the following examples, where 2.5d is the non-ironic literal end of the scale:

(2.5a) Max is exceptionally bright.

(2.5b) Max is not exceptionally bright.

(2.5c) Max is not bright.

**(2.5d) Max is stupid**

(Giora et al. 2005: 86).

2.5a, 2.5b and 2.5c cannot all be described as inversions of the actual discourse situation (2.5d), since they mean different things and will likely result in differing responses from those that hear them. 2.5a is the most oppositional and seems likely to be enacted using heavy sarcasm, in contrast 2.5b and 2.5c seem neither as diametrically opposed to 2.5d or as verbally aggressive as 2.5a. Despite not sharing the same reversal of the literal utterance 2.5a, 2.5b and 2.5c all seem to some degree ironic. What the examples do share is a presentation in the utterance of two versions of reality – one where Max is stupid (reality) and one where he is to some degree not-stupid (as presented in the literal utterance). The realities are contrasted and the negative related feature of the actual reality (i.e. Max’s stupidity) is highlighted. This suggests that a more accurate definition of verbal irony should focus on a graded contrast of realities put forward by the literal utterance rather than a binary opposition between literal and figurative meaning. If we expand our understanding of verbal irony to include a reversal or contrast between realities rather than a reversal or contrast of specific meaning we are able to include other forms of speech which seem similar to irony but are not usually included in traditional descriptions of the form – namely ironic understatement and ironic overstatement.

Ironic understatements occur when speakers underplay an aspect of the literal utterance and by doing so *strengthen* rather than *negate* its meaning. Whilst under the traditional view of verbal irony this utterance would not qualify as ironic, the identification of contrasting realities offered above intuitively captures how this form of speech operates, as shown in the following example ‘Tim Henman is not the most charismatic tennis player in the world.’ (Wilson 2006: 2). The alternate reality proposed by Wilson’s example is rather weak – a stronger, more oppositional form would convert Tim Henman’s lack of charisma into Tim Henman possessing the most charisma in tennis, which is obviously not the speaker’s intent. However the weakness in contrast presented in this example is intentional, and serves to exaggerate the state of affairs in actual reality (i.e. enhance Tim Henman’s lack of charisma). This is because ironic understatement operates as self-aware mode of speech – it relies on the interpreter understanding how oppositional irony normally works (i.e. via two greatly contrasting realities) and presents a reality only slightly different from our own in order to make the interpreter revise their view of the subject matter (i.e. by making the contrast greater) and in this case altering their conception of Tim Henman from slightly uncharismatic to extremely uncharismatic.

In relation to ironic understatement are the obtuse sentence structures presented in litotes such as – ‘Lionel Messi is not a bad footballer’ which, when expressed ironically, should be correctly interpreted not as ‘Lionel Messi is not a good footballer’, nor as the literal ‘Lionel Messi is not bad (i.e. good) at football’, but rather ‘Lionel Messi is a fantastic footballer’. The contrasting realities of this litotes revolve around the absurdity of describing one of the best footballers in the world as only ‘not bad’, and result in the correct interpretation emphasising just how good at football Messi is.

Ironic overstatement is a similar process in certain respects, but involves an exaggeration of the literal utterance which exposes it as ridiculous when compared to how things actually are. Bredin (Bredin 1997: 7) provides the following example: ‘The hotel room costs a thousand dollars a night. Of course, for that you get a half bottle of Australian champagne *and* your breakfast thrown in.’ This is clearly not a case of ironic understatement, for that would take the form of ‘the hotel room is *only* a thousand dollars a night’: instead the irony stems from the overvaluing of the champagne and breakfast. However this overvaluing is clearly ludicrous and the attempt to posit a reality in which these objects compensate for the cost of the room serves to reveal just how overpriced the hotel actually is.

In summary, the traditional definitions of verbal irony provided by both classical rhetoric and the linguistic approaches of Grice, Searle, Brown and Levinson etc. are insufficient to describe the many types of speech which seem intuitively ironic. That these speech types deserve to be placed together under one heading is due to the intrinsic similarities in the way they operate. Whilst the forms of irony shown in this section do not have to rely on a reversal of the literal utterance they do all present two conflicting realities – one formed by the literal utterance and one by the non-literal meaning of the utterance. That verbal irony’s capacity for forms other than negation was ignored is likely the result of the kind of examples that were being examined - an exclusive focus on assertive cases of verbal irony makes it appear natural to treat verbal irony as communicating the contrary of the proposition literally expressed. However, this model breaks down dramatically when applied to irony directed at illocutionary acts other than assertion: since most illocutionary acts don’t have plausible ‘opposites’ they cannot be reformed with the same force directed at a logically reversed proposition. Instead of *opposition* it is preferable to think of *grades of irony* in which sarcasm represents the strongest reversal and the literal equivalent the weakest reversal (i.e. zero reversal), with other forms of irony such as understatement and overstatement somewhere between the two.

Some claim that, because of the many forms verbal irony can take, it should no longer be viewed as a figure of speech with any consistent relationship to meaning transmission (see Sperber and Wilson 1981b; Sperber 1984; Clark and Gerrig 1984). These critics argue that tying irony to meaning transmission is what creates problems for pragmatic theories such as Grice’s, as such a move makes irony out to be a mysteriously inefficient means for communicating content that could more easily be expressed literally (Wilson 2006: 1724). These views will be explored in Chapter 2, and echo my comments at the start of this section regarding the need to establish irony as a rational mode of discourse.

# 2. Gricean Pragmatics and Verbal Irony

Chapter 2 explores in more detail Grice’s pragmatics (Grice 1967a; 1967b; 1968; 1969; 1981), and how his proposals apply to verbal irony. The chapter will begin with an identification of the basic concepts of Grice’s work and an argument will be made that his description of the pragmatic processing of verbal irony is flawed. This flaw will be shown to be related to both Grice’s maxims and his Cooperative Principle. It will be summarised that certain aspects of Grice’s pragmatics preclude a satisfactory representation of complex and non-conventional forms of verbal irony.

## 2.1 Gricean Pragmatics

Grice’s model begins with the supposition that discourse is a cooperative activity. To represent this he formulates the Cooperative Principle of Conversation – ‘Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged’ (Grice 1967a: 26). To specify the accepted purposes and direction of discourse Grice then posits the following maxims which represent the expectations of normal discourse participants entering a normal discourse:

Maxim of Quality: Make your contribution true; do not convey what you believe false or unjustified.

Maxim of Quantity: Be as informative as required.

Maxim of Relevance: Make your contribution relevant to the purposes of the exchange.

Maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous; so avoid obscurity and ambiguity, and strive for brevity and order.

(Grice 1967: 26)

These maxims are posited to explain how hearers infer meaning. If Alan asks ‘Can you come to my party next week?’ and Bob replies ‘I’m working on Friday’ then it is intuitive that Alan will interpret this to mean that Bob cannot attend. Grice argues that this is due to the Cooperative Principle of Conversation and, in this specific example, the maxim of Relevance. Alan assumes that Bob will cooperate with him to move the discourse forward in an efficient manner, and given that the discourse revolves around Alan’s question this requires Bob to provide an answer. Thus, even though Bob’s answer is not explicitly tied to Alan’s question (the party may be on Thursday night for instance), Alan will presume that Bob is cooperating in the discourse and will reinterpret Bob’s seemingly irrelevant answer to accomplish this. This will result in Alan understanding Bob to mean ‘No, I cannot attend your party’.

Grice states that the understanding of verbal irony stems from a recognition that the maxim of Quality has been flouted by the speaker. This recognition triggers an implicature, which results in the listener deriving an interpretation consistent with the Cooperative Principle. Grice explains that the implicatures generated by ironic speech indicate the opposite of the literal content, as shown in the following:

(1) Bob was a real workaholic.

In the instance above Alan is talking to Carl about Bob, whom he recently fired for poor productivity (Carl is aware of why Bob was fired). Upon hearing (1) Carl will become aware that Alan has uttered a blatant falsehood –

1. ‘Workaholics’ do not get fired for low productivity
2. Bob was fired for low productivity

Therefore,

C. Bob cannot be a workaholic.

By saying something obviously untrue Alan has violated the maxim of Quality, and, rather than presume that Alan is speaking irrationally, Carl will search for a possible implicature of (1) that can preserve Alan’s commitment to the Cooperative Principle. Gricean pragmatics concludes that the audience of such an utterance would implicate that;

1. (1) is an ironic utterance,
2. (1) implies that ‘Bob was not a workaholic’.

Section 1.1 however indicated that this binary view of verbal irony is invalid and for this reason pragmatic theories that rely on an appeal to the maxim of Quality alone are only suitable for understanding a very narrow and specific form of verbal irony (sarcasm focused on the literal utterance). Instead, as Alba-Juez (1995a) indicates, far from only being tied to only the maxim of Quality, irony interacts with every Gricean maxim.

## 2.2 Verbal Irony and the Maxim of Quantity

Grice’s maxim of Quantity tells us that cooperative speakers should make their contributions as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange. Whilst this obviously includes the specification to not provide a deficit of information, it also means that cooperative speakers will not provide an overabundance of information. All but the most simple of verbal ironies specified in Section 1.1 can be considered to flout this maxim. In cases of ironic understatement the speaker flouts the maxim of Quantity by only providing part of their judgement. Moreover, if a speaker uses ironic understatement to criticise, for example by referring to a meal as ‘not the best thing I’ve ever tasted’, then their utterance is better described as flouting the maxim of Quantity than the maxim of Quality: strictly speaking it is not the case that their utterance is untrue – the meal being awful means that it is likely not the best that they have tasted – rather than outright lying, they are guilty of omitting the full information of their judgement. The same process would be true of an ironic understatement intended to compliment something – for example ‘I guess it’s OK’ to describe a fabulous meal – only here the information being omitted is positive rather than negative.

Ironic litotes also interact with this maxim but, where ironic understatement flouts the maxim due to a lack of provided information, litotes provide an excess of information. This is because they require the interpreter to reverse a negative statement rather than understand its simple positive equivalent, thus ‘X is not bad’ could have been more simply stated as ‘X is great’. An argument could be made that all verbal irony flouts this maxim because it requires the interpreter to reverse or re-interpret the literal utterance - Brown and Levinson follow this train of thought when they comment that,

In a sense all conversational implicatures violate the Quantity Maxim ('Say as much as and no more than is required'), since by being indirect the speaker is inevitably saying something less than or something different from what he actually intends to convey. By saying less (that is providing less information) than is required or by saying more than is required, S invites H to consider why.

(Brown and Levinson 1987: 217)

As will be shown in Chapter 3, attempts to bypass this criticism by claiming that certain forms of irony can be directly accessed without extra processing (via direct access approaches), have proven to be mistaken. However, even if these attempts had proven successful, they would still struggle to explain why litotes such as ‘X is not bad’ are not stated in their more simplistic ironic form ‘X is awful’.

Ironic metaphors provide another category of irony in which too much information is supplied, since they present an additional judgement regarding the source of the metaphor. For instance if a speaker struggling with a broken down car were to respond to a late or insufficient offer of help with the comment ‘my knight in shining armour’ then they are supplying extra information via their assertion that ‘knights in shining armour’ are synonymous with help. Similarly if I were to use an ironic metaphor linking an ugly person to something beautiful such as the Taj Mahal, then I am providing extra and unnecessary information regarding my attitude to the Taj Mahal.

Bredin’s example - ‘The hotel room costs a thousand dollars a night. Of course, for that you get a half bottle of Australian champagne *and* your breakfast thrown in.’ (Bredin 1997: 7) also flouts the maxim of Quantity by providing too much information, but in a slightly different way. This statement makes its point about the overly pricy nature of the hotel in the first sentence; the latter information is extraneous to this point and actually risks the statement being misinterpreted by attempting to further exaggerate the unfair pricing of the hotel by saying that the $1000 a night only gets you half a bottle of champagne and breakfast.

## 2.3 Verbal Irony and the Maxim of Manner

The maxim of Manner states that in order to achieve efficient communication we should be perspicuous, avoid obscurity and ambiguity, be brief and be orderly. Intuitively many of the more complex forms of verbal irony involve a flouting of this maxim. All forms of understatement are necessarily ambiguous because they do not specify the speaker’s precise judgement and all forms of ironic overstatement flout the maxim because the extra information they provide exaggerates the speakers meaning. Ironic metaphors run the risk of being obscure and litotes are hardly orderly or brief. However the problem in Grice’s account is not just that it misses the capacity for these forms of irony to flout the maxim of Manner. Rather it ignores the fact that being obscure and ambiguous may be *the goal* of ironic speech.

Though Section 1.1 argued that viewing irony as only verbal aggression oversimplified the case, it is true that irony can often be used in a critical fashion. In these instances the obscurity and ambiguity of the irony act as a possible defence mechanism: if the target of the ironic utterance reacts in an unexpected way, showing more anger perhaps than the speaker anticipated then the speaker can argue that they misunderstood his actual meaning. This is what Barbe (1995) highlights as irony’s capacity to act as a ‘face-saving device’. Barbe encourages us to comprehend the distinction between what has been called implicit irony and explicit irony; the difference between saying something ironically (implicit irony) vs. prefacing the same comment with ‘it is ironic that’, ‘ironically’, ‘in an ironic example of’ etc. (explicit irony). To use an explicit irony is to make a clear criticism, or to make obvious the speakers negative attitude. By contrast implicit irony retains the potential for saving face since it retains ambiguity and obscurity. Brown and Levinson adopt a similar position towards irony in their Politeness Theory (1987) which will be covered in detail in Chapter 6.

Obscurity can impact irony in other ways as well. Simpson (2003) highlights that satire, which often involves a heavy use of irony, is

A triad embodying three discursive subject positions which are subject to constant shift and (re)negotiation. These are the *satirist* (the producer of the text), *the satiree* (an addressee, whether reader, viewer or listener), and the *satirised* (the target attacked or critiqued in the satirical discourse).

(Simpson 2003: 8)

The goal of the satire is to ratify two of these positions (satirist and satiree) and ex-collude the other. Successful satire draws the satiree closer to the satirist, unsuccessful satire risks pushing the satiree closer to the satirised. Whilst the success of a satire will result in a re-negotiation of positions, it seems intuitive that satire has more chance of succeeding if the satiree feels that the satirist is a member of their social group. Byrne (1997) for example argues that emphasizing similarity to others in the group is a common technique to build relationships, whilst Hogg and Terry (2000) provide evidence that newcomers to social groups (the position of the satirist relative to the satiree) have an increased chance of eliciting help from the group they are seeking to join if they show the group members that they share a common social category. Part of this similarity is likely to be linguistic, it has been observed that individuals have more chance of successfully integrating themselves into a group whether at work (Miller and Jablin 1991) or online (Preece et al. 2004) if they learn the linguistic practises of the group beforehand. This is likely to include obscure group specific language, whether as slang or as technical terms - Burke et al. (2010) provide the following example:

[the new poster] makes the identity-based membership claim that she is a breast cancer survivor, by describing her diagnosis and using group-specific language (e.g., ‘mammogram,’ ‘my radiologist,’ and ‘cluster Micro’s’). By doing so, she shows that she is not only similar to others in the group in having this diagnosis, but knows their vernacular. Both these strategies suggest that she is worthy of the group’s attention.

(Burke et al. 2010: 11)

Combining this research with Simpson’s model shows that satirists may stand a better chance of success at moving potential satirees closer to the position taken by the satirist if they use obscure group specific language employed by the satirees. There is no reason to assume that this process will not also be in play during ironic remarks. For example during a discourse between self-confessed geeks one member could ironically remark ‘I’m not a geek, I’m a level 14 Warlock’. In this utterance the group specific term ‘level 14 Warlock’, referencing the stereotypically geeky pastime of roleplaying (e.g. *Dungeons and Dragons*), makes clear that the user is speaking ironically and is, like the other discourse participants, aware of his status as a geek.

## 2.4 Verbal Irony and the Maxim of Relevance

The maxim of Relevance tells speakers to make their contribution relevant to the current purposes of the discourse. As was seen in the opening example of this section if a speaker says something that is not explicitly relevant, he invites the hearer to search for an interpretation of possible relevance. Brown and Levinson (1978) argue that following the maxim includes such behaviour as giving hints or associative clues. However, whilst they identify certain forms of speech that break this maxim, neither they nor Grice discuss irony as one of these. Against this view Colston (2000) shows that irony can function via a flouting of the Relevance Maxim in cases akin to Kumon-Nakumura et al.’s (1995) examples of rhetorical irony. Colston uses the example of a speaker seeing someone fail to use their turn signal and saying ‘I just love when people use their turn signals’. This utterance does not flout the maxim of Quality because it is true – the speaker does, at the very least, *like it* when people use their turn signals. Instead the irony of this utterance is highlighted via a flouting of the maxim of Relevance – comments about people using their turn signals are irrelevant when observing people not using their turn signals. It could be argued that this remark is still relevant because the situation at hand is about the use of turn signals in general and thus relevance does not have to be restrained to comments about non-turn-signal users. However such an approach threatens to destroy the usefulness of this maxim entirely: Sperber and Wilson (1981a: 121) adopt this line of thought to argue that the Relevance Maxim is never violated, because ‘relevance may be achieved by expressing irrelevant assumptions, as long as this expressive behavior is in itself relevant’. If this is the case the relevance of the ironic utterance lies in the information it gives about the speaker's attitude towards the ‘attributed thought’ (for in Sperber and Wilson’s opinion ironic utterances are always cases of echoic use of attributed thoughts). As such, communicators could not violate the principle of relevance even if they wanted to. Bearing this in mind, it is questionable as to whether the maxim of Relevance should be included in pragmatics at all.

## 2.5 Verbal Irony and the Cooperative Principle

The analysis above indicates that ironical utterances can flout not only the maxim of Quality but every Gricean maxim. Contrary to Grice’s account it does not seem to be the case that verbal irony violates the maxim of Quality in any particular or reliable way. Instead, ironic speech is able to flout several maxims, both alongside the maxim of Quality and not, without impacting on their status as ironic events. It is fair to say that verbal irony is a more complex phenomenon than proposed by Grice’s approach, and that speakers are able to employ it via a wide variety of different techniques resulting in a wide variety of different outcomes. Moreover the failure of traditional pragmatic accounts in relation to verbal irony goes beyond a simple misclassification: a deeper flaw is apparent in the way that Gricean pragmatics presumes discourse conditions to be cooperative and based around an exchange of information rather than more socially directed goals. This forces Grice to ignore cases of verbal irony which do not have the exchange of information as their primary purpose. As a result the Gricean pragmatic framework can never properly represent verbal irony as a social phenomenon whose use is often not primarily designed to convey either literal information or conversational implicature. This allegation that Grice’s work is asocial is not a new one, Steiner (1975: 32) writes that,

It may be that the agonistic functions of speech inside an economically and socially divided community outweigh the functions of genuine communication ... Languages conceal and internalize more, perhaps than they convey outwardly. Social classes, racial ghettoes speak at, rather than to each other.

This argument has been supported by more recent work which suggests that power relations commonly interfere with discourse and thus that cooperation cannot be presumed (Sarangi and Slembrouk 1992). Goatly (1994: 151) provides a similar comment, stating that unless pragmatic studies can remove themselves from the Gricean reliance on discourse as a cooperative process then they will always be 'irredeemably asocial’.

In respect to this it is enlightening to return to the text with which I began this thesis – Stewart Lee’s *If you Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One*. In the introductory text to the transcript of this show Lee describes his intentions as entirely uncooperative:

What could I do to make a new stand-up show difficult and alienating enough to guarantee that any TV viewers coming along for the first time were sufficiently bamboozled and bewildered…how could I shake them off, bore them, annoy them, but still pull them in for the final reel?

(Lee 2012: 5)

The ‘final reel’ to which Lee refers is the closing portion of his act in which the implied message of his show (i.e. the satirical or ironic subtext) is made clear. Lee reveals in the introduction to the transcript that his act is intended to have a deeper meaning: ‘What kind of comedian are you? What does being a comedian mean? What can we talk about?’ (Lee 2012: 7). Lee poses these questions via a series of comedic observations that often involve a use of irony, though not always as explicitly as the *Top Gear* segment which introduced this paper. His goal is to reach a conclusion in which he threatens to sincerely play ‘Galway Girl’ on the guitar:

Yeah, its tense now, isn’t it? There’s arguably a worse atmosphere here now I’ve said I’m going to sing a song than it was when I said that I wanted Richard Hammond to be decapitated. And it’s interesting, that, ‘cause there’s a lot of largely spurious articles these days about what is the last taboo in stand-up. Is it jokes about race, is it jokes about rape? Er, it isn’t. In my experience doing this for five months, the last taboo in stand-up is a man trying to do something sincerely and well. People hate it.

(Lee 2012: 89)

Lee elaborates on this point in the footnotes of the transcript:

I suppose, having circumvented this idea of what kind of comic I wanted to be, this is what it boiled down to, and it seems broadly applicable. Can any of us stand beside what we do with any degree of pride...Have we anything, artistically, personally, worth saying?

(Lee 2012: 89)

If transmitting this conclusion was Lee’s goal throughout the entirety of his act, then he has gone about reaching it and communicating it to the audience in an extremely inefficient way that flouts all of Grice’s maxims: he uses irony which flouts the maxim of Quality; the extended nature of the act compared to the statement provided above flouts the maxim of Quantity; many segments of his act are ambiguous and obscure and so flout the maxim of Manner; others are not directly relevant to his underlying meaning and so may flout the maxim of Relevance. More importantly, Lee admits to not being cooperative (thus flouting the Cooperative Principle entirely) by ‘circumventing’ the point of his act until the last moment. Under Grice’s framework we do not seem to be able to describe these actions as anything other than irrational: Lee has risked his material being misunderstood, and has actively tried to be uncooperative in the discourse for no apparent gain. His meaning would have been more simply and efficiently transmitted by presenting it as he does in the footnotes of the transcript of his act.

The Lee example is emblematic of the weaknesses in Grice’s account, and reveals the value of expanding the pragmatic study of verbal irony to include longer and more complex forms. These examples of verbal irony show that Grice fails to provide an explanation of *why* a rational speaker should decide to employ irony and in fact Grice’s model provides only disincentives to employing ironic speech. This goes against evidence which shows that irony is prevalent in everyday discourse (Schwoebel et al. 2000; Gibbs 2000). If the primary goal of discourse is the exchange of information, whether in the form of the literal utterance or in the form of conversational implicatures, then why should a speaker risk using an ironic process which can involve a variety of reversals, weakenings and strengthenings, and so risk failing to transmit their intended meaning. This argument can be stated in cognitive terms by appealing to the relative cognitive cost of irony processing (for the basis of this cognitive-pragmatic approach see Gibbs 1994; Sperber and Wilson 1995; Giora 1995) If ironic meaning is the result of a falsification of the sentence’s literal meaning via contextual cues then, in order to understand an ironic utterance, it is first necessary to understand the literal utterance. Gricean pragmatics hypothesises that a listener first computes literal meaning, then tests this meaning against the context of the discourse. If the interpreter notices incongruities between the meaning of the literal utterance and the cooperative principle then the literal utterance may be reprocessed in search of an ironic interpretation. This process is likely to be cognitively costly since it requires a series of complex inferential judgements, yet Grice’s work gives no reason as to why forcing this process on interpreters is a logical discourse choice: Why should speakers place undue cognitive pressure on their discourse participants when the information they intend to convey could just as well have been literally expressed? The simple answer must be that their utterance could *not* have been ‘just as well expressed’ and that therefore there must be certain advantages that irony gives speakers which literal language does not. The potential advantages of irony will be explored in Chapter 5, but before these are approached the work of post-Gricean pragmatists will be analysed to assess whether the flaws identified in Grice’s account are still unresolved.

## 2.6 Summary

In summary, Grice’s attempts to categorise and explain the concept of irony are inherently limited. Not only does he incorrectly categorise irony, he also fails to recognise that irony is sometimes an intentionally uncooperative form of discourse directed towards the speaker’s personal goals rather than cooperative meaning transmission. Thus Gricean pragmatics provides little explanation of irony as a strategy of discourse and leaves it as an inefficient, cognitively costly and thus irrational form of discourse. The personal experience of readers combined with the recorded prevalence of irony in everyday discourse should provide indication that this cannot be the case. The following chapter will assess whether the accusation that Grice’s work presents irony as irrational can be avoided via appeals which claim that irony is in fact no more difficult to understand than literal utterances, and that ironic speakers are therefore not placing undue cognitive requirements on their audience.

# 3. Post-Gricean Pragmatics and Irony

Chapter 3 examines in closer detail the cognitive problems identified in Chapter 2. This will focus on a review of two competing theories which offer alternative approaches to figurative language comprehension – The Direct Access Theory (Gibbs 1986; 1994) and the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora 1995; 1997; 2003). The predictions of the two theories will be tested against evidence from a wide variety of cognitive studies. The conclusion will be made that of the two approaches the Graded Salience Hypothesis is more accurate in its predictions, and should therefore be used as the cognitive processing model for future studies of irony.

## 3.1 Direct Access Theory

Several post-Gricean pragmatic theories have attempted to deal with the inadequacies highlighted in Chapter 2 by arguing that understanding verbal irony does not involve increased processing costs, and that therefore it does not necessarily reduce the efficiency of information transmission. Direct Access Theory (or Figurative First Theory) assumes that contextual information interacts with lexical processes very early on and that the interpretation of both literal and figurative language operate via the same mechanisms: ‘understanding irony does not necessarily require special cognitive processes beyond those used to comprehend literal speech’ (Gibbs 1994: 437). Put simply, if the context of a situation supports an ironic interpretation of an utterance *more* than it supports a literal interpretation of an utterance, then the ironic interpretation will be accessed directly - without any appeal to the utterance’s literal aspect: ‘people need not first analyse the literal, pragmatic-free meaning of an utterance before determining its figurative, implicated interpretation’ (Gibbs 1994: 421). This allows for a pragmatic theory of verbal irony which bypasses the pitfalls of the literal vs. ironic opposition - if it is not the case that irony requires a greater cognitive effort on the part of the interpreter then pragmatic accounts are not required to provide a reason as to why irony should be employed in favour of the literal form.

The Direct Access view is based on reading time paradigms whose basic assumption is that sentence reading times reflect cognitive processing and thus that if verbal irony processing requires greater cognitive resources then this should be reflected in longer reading times. Gibbs (1986) reported that when reading times for sentences with the same surface form (‘You are a fine friend’) were compared in ironic (somebody not being a good friend) and non-ironic (somebody being a good friend) contexts, there were no differences. Furthermore, in situations in which irony echoed a prior remark, reading times for ironic comments were faster than for the literal equivalent. Similar reading time studies by Ivanko and Pexman (2003) found that conventional ironies were processed at the same speed as the literal equivalent. However Ivanko and Pexman also reported longer reading times for non-conventional ironies, echoing Giora et al. (1998), who found that reaction times to probe words related to the literal interpretation were faster than those related to the ironic interpretation. Giora, et al. concluded that this provided evidence of delayed processing for ironic statements, with longer sentence reading times for target sentences presented in irony-biasing than literal-biasing contexts (this conclusion is also supported by evidence from Dews and Winner 1999; Schwoebel et al. 2000).

The above studies all operate via reading paradigms in which the time taken to read ironic sentences is compared to the time taken to read their literal equivalent. The hypothesis of all these studies is that longer reading times indicate increased levels of cognitive processing. However reading paradigms have been criticised for not allowing ‘precise analysis of the time-course over which processing difficulty is experienced.’ (Filik and Moxey 2010: 423). This is particularly important to the claims of the Direct Access Theory because it specifies that irony processing should occur early on in the cognitive process, and thus it is, to a certain extent, uninformative to only examine total reading times. Therefore despite the evidence against Direct Access provided by the majority of reading paradigm studies it is still possible that the basic claims of Direct Access are correct. Greater precision is offered by event-related potential (ERP) studies which stimulate individuals with specific sensory information and then monitor the electrical responses of the individual’s brain. Balconi and Amenta (2010: 98) claim that these studies ‘measure brain activity with high temporal resolution’ which makes them useful for experiments ‘aimed at investigating the time course of language (literal and figurative) processing’.

ERP studies related to language comprehension focus on a number of components, mainly the N400 and the P600 components. N400 is thought to be a function of lexical-semantic and pragmatic information processing on the word, sentence and discourse level. Words that are expected by the semantic structure of the preceding utterance create smaller N400 activity than semantically less expected words (Kutas and Hillyard 1984). Similarly, small N400 amplitudes have been reported for words contextually constrained either on the word level (Chwilla et al. 1995) or sentence level (Kutas and Federmeier 2000; Kutas et al. 2006).

P600 is also thought to be linked to semantic understanding, but on a wider level of syntactic integration that governs structural reanalysis processing of interpreted utterances (Friederici et al. 2001). High P600 activity has been observed in relation to semantically correct sentences which contain an unexpected semantic reversal (Kolk et al. 2003; van Herten, et al. 2005), as well as pragmatically incongruous sentences (Kuperberg et al. 2003). P600 effects have also been reported in connection with thematic role violations in which actors do something unexpected (Kuperberg et al. 2003; Hoeks et al. 2004; Nieuwland and Van Berkum 2005) which may indicate that P600 is linked to mentalisation processes regarding so-called ‘theory of mind’ - the ability to view the actions of others as goal directed consequences of their internal desires. The standard pragmatic view would predict N400 activation due to the incongruity between the literal and figurative meanings of the utterance, and P600 activity due to the reanalysis of the literal meaning in relation to the ironic implicatures. In contrast the Direct Access Theory hypothesises no extra cognitive cost and no revision process and so therefore predicts neither N400 nor P600 activity.

A number of cognitive studies (Coulson and Van Petton 2002; Tartter et al. 2002; Balconi and Tutino 2007) focusing on metaphor and idiom have found evidence of greater N400 amplitude in response to figurative sentences compared to literal ones, which suggests that these forms of figurative language do hold a higher processing cost as specified by traditional pragmatic theory. However the evidence of N400 activity regarding irony is less conclusive. Both Katz et al. (2004), and Cornejo et al. (2007) point to evidence of N400 activity to argue that the processing cost of irony is higher than the processing cost of literal statements, however Balconi and Amenta (2007; 2009), and Regel (2009) reported contrary findings. Additionally the N400 activity shown by Cornejo was found in tests related to holistic understanding (i.e. concerning the plausibility of the utterance) rather than semantic understanding. As such it does not provide the same support for the traditional view as Katz et al. Many of these studies found that irony interpretation correlated with P600 activity (Cornejo et al. 2007; Balconi and Amenta 2009; Regel 2009).

In relation to irony the consensus that these studies provide supports neither Grice’s pragmatic view nor Direct Access Theory: firstly, in studies focusing on irony (rather than metaphor) there has been no consistent evidence of the N400 activity that should entail if Grice’s explanation of irony is correct; and secondly, whilst these findings support the Direct Access Theory of interpretation, the consistent presence of P600 activity does not, and suggests that even cases of irony that do not appear to require increased cognitive processing on the level of semantic meaning do nevertheless involve a reanalysis of language not predicted by the Direct Access Theory. Even the findings of Katz et al. which appear to be the best ERP support for Direct Access, find similar late activation costs to P600 in the form of P900 events.

An alternative means of assessing the claims of the Direct Access and standard pragmatic views is via clinical neuropsychology studies focusing on those suffering from various cognitive impairments. These studies show that after damage to right-hemisphere regions the ability to comprehend figurative language is often impaired, whereas the ability to understand literal language is not (Brownell 1988; Brownell et al. 1990; Giora et al. 2000; Kaplan et al. 1990). This runs counter to the claims of Direct Access that irony processing does not require cognitive processes over and above those used to understand literal meaning. Winner et al. (1998) report that right-hemisphere damage impacts irony recognition in cases where subjects are required to identify states of mutual knowledge between characters, a further indication of the link between irony recognition and ‘theory of mind’ modules. This line of thought has been followed by studies investigating frontal lobe damage (Bibby and McDonald 2005; Channon, et al. 2005) which conclude that interpreting irony requires the ability to make subtle conversational implicatures and to complement these with a mentalising process representing the inner desires of other actors.

Whilst the studies cited above offer unique insight into language processing activities which have to function without certain cognitive structures, the amount of contextual factors and variance in degrees of impairment limit the amount of accuracy they offer. A more precise source of information is likely to be found in brain mapping studies which use functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) tools to detect changes in regional cerebral blood flow which are thought to reflect enhanced activation in different areas in the brain. Several of these studies reveal that the underlying cognitive mechanisms of irony interpretation are not the same as those that govern the interpretation of literal meaning. Whereas the left hemisphere is dominant for the majority of literal language construction, increased right hemisphere activity has been shown in response to processing figurative language, including both metaphor (Ahrens et al. 2007; Mashal et al. 2005; Mashal et al. 2007; Shibata et al. 2007) and irony (McDonald 2000; Eviatar and Just 2006). In a meta-analysis of such studies Borhn et al. conclude that whilst

conditions requiring exclusively literal language processing did not activate any selective regions in most of the cases… significant clusters of activation for metaphor conditions were mostly lateralized to the left hemisphere (LH)…[and that] Irony/sarcasm processing was correlated with activations in midline structures such as the medFG, ACC and cuneus/precuneus.

(Borhn et al. 2012: 2680)

The divide between literal and figurative processing supports the standard pragmatic perspective, but there is also evidence of a division in processing between irony and other forms of figurative language such as metaphor which runs counter to the traditional view and gives credence to the arguments of critics such as Sperber and Wilson (1981), whose claim regarding the insufficiency of defining irony as analogous to metaphor I referenced in Section 1.1. This view will be dealt with more thoroughly in the next chapter, but whilst discussing the evidence of brain mapping it is worth pointing out that Sperber and Wilson’s argument (i.e. irony differs from metaphor because it involves a relationship between the thoughts of the speaker and the thoughts of someone else) seems to be supported by these findings (for similar arguments regarding irony see also Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995). Borhn et al. take a similar line of thought to Sperber and Wilson, positing that the difference in brain activity between metaphor and irony is due to the fact that, whilst metaphor involves mainly analytical semantic processes, irony is based around the meta-representation of more than one reality and so involves the activation of meta-representational theory of mind modules. This is supported by Uchiyama et al. (2006) who correlated ironic interpretation with brain activity in areas associated with mentalising processes (i.e. theorising about why others act the way they do by interpreting their behaviours in terms of intentional mental states). Indeed, an underlying theme of all these studies is that irony recognition relies on more than pure language comprehension processes and instead involves such factors as prosodic evaluation based on voice and facial/body language, the ability of the interpreter to flexibly incorporate contextual elements and emotional assessment of the speaker - all of which are involved in theory of mind calculations.

## 3.2 Graded Salience Hypothesis

The evidence suggests that we should reject the hypothesis of both Grice’s pragmatics (Grice 1967a; 1967b; 1968; 1969; 1981) and the Direct Access Theory. A better fit for recent cognitive evidence is the Graded Salience Hypothesis proposed by Giora (1995; 1997; 2003) which argues that meaning should be thought of as salient and non-salient rather than literal and non-literal. According to this view ironic utterances have two aspects - literal meaning and figurative meaning - each of which holds a different degree of salience. In order to be salient, utterances have to be coded in the mental lexicon and must be prominent due to their conventionality, frequency of exposure, experiential familiarity, or proto-typicality. According to the Graded Salience Hypothesis, initial processing of lexical information is an encapsulated and graded process in which salient meanings of words or expressions are retrieved from the mental lexicon (Giora 2003). During initial processing, contextual information is processed in parallel but neither interacts with lexical processes, nor inhibits salient meanings when contextually incompatible (Peleg et al. 2001; Giora 2002). If the salience of the figurative meaning is less than the salience of the literal meaning (i.e. in non-conventional ironic utterances) then the figurative meaning will only be constructed after the literal meaning has been constructed, and only as the result of extra inferential processes and strong contextual support. By contrast if the figurative meaning is more salient than the literal meaning it will be accessed first, regardless of how divergent it is from the literal utterance. Furthermore, this process will not require extra cognitive processing, since the processing of figurative sentences only diverges from that of literal sentences during later phases of processing as a result of accessed salient meanings being unable to integrate with accessed contextual information.

Early evidence for the Graded Salience Hypothesis was found in the reading paradigm studies focused on Direct Access. Whilst these studies provided support for the Direct Access Theory in regards to conventional irony, they diverged from it in regards to non-conventional language (see Giora et al. 1998; Dews and Winner 1999; Schwoebel et al. 2000; Ivanko and Pexman 2003). Giora has continued to use this model of research in support of the Graded Salience Hypothesis, finding evidence that during initial processing salient meanings are accessed regardless of contextual information and that in cases of non-conventional irony this necessitates reprocessing of the utterance (Giora and Fein 1999). Giora et al. (2007) focused specifically on assessing the ability of contextual cues to effect processing speed by presenting subjects with a series of speakers, one of whom spoke only ironically. If contextual cues affect the processing of figurative meaning then it would be expected that interpreters of the ironic speaker would grow accustomed to the ironic context this speaker created, and that they would therefore process his ironic remarks faster than those from speakers who provided a mix of ironic and literal comments. However the findings of this experiment showed no significant change on processing time.

The Graded Salience Hypothesis is supported by some ERP studies – the lack of N400 activation is to be expected in cases of conventional ironies, since the cognitive process will be the same as that for literal interpretation. Regel (2009) however provides evidence of a lack of N400 activation in novel ironies which runs counter to the predictions of the theory. Better support is found in the consistent appearance of P600 activation, since P600 amplitude represents late inclusion of contextual information, and the cognitive processes by which the interpreter decides whether to construct non-salient meanings. Unfortunately for studies of irony the majority of ERP experiments that have investigated whether conventionality affects processing focus on metaphor, which the brain imaging studies referred to in Section 3.1 indicate may rely on alternative cognitive structures. Nevertheless, the Graded Salience Hypothesis may draw limited support from research on novel metaphor which confirms the Graded Salience Hypothesis’ prediction that conventional metaphor introduced in contextually suggestive situations will carry reduced N400 activity (Arzouan et al. 2007). Further evidence in favour of a Graded Salience approach can be found in brain imaging studies that indicate that the processing of novel language relies on right-hemisphere activity and that the processing of familiar language does not (Bottini et al. 1994; Mashal et al. 2007; Schmidt et al. 2007; Borhn et al. 2012). However, once again the focus of these studies is on metaphor rather than irony, and thus their value may be limited by the potential cognitive differences between metaphor and irony - Giora et al. (2000) investigated lesion damage to the brain and found that whilst damage to the right-hemisphere was specifically associated with deficits in comprehending sarcasm patients suffering from right-hemisphere damage were less impaired in processing metaphors relative to irony. As has been stated, a likely divide in the cognitive architecture of metaphor and irony recognition regards the requirement of irony interpreters to use theory of mind elements of the brain; the extent to which this might impact on the conventional/non-conventional divide in irony is unclear.

## 3.3 Summary

Given the large amount of cognitive studies summarised in the preceding sections, an overview of the evidential trends may be useful. The evidence from a variety of cognitive sources, whilst not conclusive, indicates that the Graded Salience Hypothesis provides the most accurate predictions regarding the cognitive cost of irony processing. Many studies show no N400 activity in regards to conventional irony recognition (indicating that it is not difficult for users to semantically process non-literal meaning) and of those that do show N400 activity one is concerned with global holistic understanding rather than the semantic understanding to which the three pragmatic approaches relate. Furthermore several studies of metaphor show an N400 difference between conventional and non-conventional language use. The consistent evidence of P600 is evidence of late decision-making processing in line with the predictions of the Graded Salience Hypothesis regarding the activation of contextually influenced interpretations. This consistent evidence of late activation, combined with neuropsychological and brain imaging information invalidates the claims of the Direct Access Theory.

The validity of the Graded Salience Hypothesis and the findings of the various cognitive studies which support it present the following implications for a pragmatic understanding of irony. Firstly, by revealing that irony is not cognitively processed in the same way as literal language these findings reaffirm the basic pragmatic idea of implicatures. However they run against the traditional pragmatic account by indicating that irony is different from other nonliteral forms of language such as metaphor. More importantly, whilst the validation of the Graded Salience Hypothesis allows for a pragmatics in which irony holds a reduced cognitive cost (particularly on the semantic level), it appears that the interpretation of all irony (non-conventional irony in particular) still requires a higher cognitive effort directed at using contextual features and theory of mind to disambiguate between meanings. This means that the accusations levelled at Grice in Section 2.5 (that his framework makes irony an irrational mode of discourse) cannot be bypassed: by speaking ironically speakers are placing a higher cognitive requirement on their audience and Grice’s pragmatics provides no logical reason for speakers to do this.

A good example of the type of cognitive processing posited by the Graded Salience Hypothesis can be found if we return to the non-conventional irony provided by Stewart Lee’s *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One*. In his commentary, Lee writes that his entrance onto the stage in this act was designed to ‘ape the rock-and-roll mood established by a whole generation of trim-buttocked, knock-kneed, thirty-something, *Roadshow*-spawned comedians, but make it look absurd...people no longer even wonder whether it’s appropriate for a comedian to enter like a rock star’ (Lee 2012: 19). To accomplish this he purposefully allows too much dry ice to billow onto the stage, so that he subsequently has to exit the stage and let the dry-ice abate before restarting the performance:

Thank you very much. Thank you, thank you. Er…I’m Stewart Lee. Now, er, later on… *[Stew notices that the dry ice has billowed upwards and is obscuring much of the stage]* What the…Oh, that hasn’t worked, has it?...What normally happens is, it’s down there and I come on, I come through, and there’s all fast music and lights, and I come through it. It’s like, er, one of these, er, young Russell comics that they have now, would have that…I’ll go off and I’ll just start the...I’ll just start without this, er…

(Lee 2012: 21)

Whilst the stage effects are non-verbal, the processing of this section is analogous to that of non-conventional ironic discourse, and it is intuitive that recovering Lee’s implicit meaning (i.e. regarding whether such an entrance is appropriate for a comedian) requires both contextual referencing and complex theory of mind attributions, which are activated only after literal processing has been accomplished: the audience first interprets the smoke as a standard entrance and then notices that something has gone wrong; at this point, provided they draw the correct contextual information and make the correct theory of mind attributions, they will interpret that Lee has intentionally messed up the opening and is in fact communicating a figurative meaning – that the conventional modern comedian’s opening is overblown and pompous. In this particular case, the contextual information required to trigger the ironic interpretation is mainly related to knowledge of Lee’s prior comedic sets, including for instance that he does not usually enter the stage in this way, and that he operates within a different set of comedic conventions from the mainstream comedians whose opening is being parodied. Of particular importance to this is the phrase ‘young Russell comics’ which the audience has to correctly interpret refers to younger, more mainstream comedians such as Russell Brand and Russell Howard. In his commentary Lee reveals that this remark is ‘basically how my semi-fictional gran…would understand stand-up comedy in 2009’ (Lee 2012: 21). Lee has used this semi-fictional gran in previous acts to comment on political correctness, and it is possible that audience members highly familiar with Lee’s work could pick up on this inter-textual echo and thereby understand that Lee is not acting sincerely. Theory of mind attributions will be important to a correct interpretation of this segment because they will allow the audience to move from a realisation that Lee’s mistake was pre-planned to the correct attribution of his satirical target: Lee must have pre-planned the mistake for a reason; perhaps he chose to do this because it would be funny in and of itself but, given the confluence of contextual features, a fact that Lee (as a comedian) will likely have been aware of, it is more likely that he views the genre of comedy associated with this style of entrance in a certain way; given the farcical nature of the opening this evaluation is likely to be negative; thus Lee is likely trying to communicate a negative evaluative attitude towards the type of comedy which he is mimicking.

Returning to an assessment of Grice’s pragmatics, the lack of N400 activity regarding conventional irony indicates that the literal aspect of an utterance does not always have to be constructed prior to ironic meaning construction, and thus reduces yet further the value of the maxims Grice proposes: whilst Grice’s maxims may still allow us to define, after the fact, instances of irony via an appeal as to which maxim was flouted, it appears that the majority of the time this process is not reflected in the act of interpretation, and so does not provide a cognitively predictive framework. The explanatory deficiencies of Grice’s Cooperative Principle combined with the inability to define irony in relation to any one particular maxim, and the lack of accurate predictions regarding the cognitive processing of irony mean that Grice’s framework is fundamentally unsuitable to the study of irony. The following chapter will assess an alternative pragmatic theory which does away with many features of Grice’s account, namely Relevance Theory, as proposed by Sperber and Wilson (Sperber and Wilson 1987; 1990; 1992; 1995; 1998; 2002; 2003; 2004; Wilson 1995).

# 4. Relevance Theory

Chapter 4 assesses whether Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1987; 1990; 1992; 1995; 1998; 2002; 2003; 2004; Wilson 1995) is a suitable framework for studying irony. The chapter will begin by analysing the pragmatic principles proposed by Relevance Theory and will then use a similar cognitive approach to that of Chapter 3 to assess whether these principles accurately reflect what is currently known about the cognitive processing of irony. It will be argued that in its current form Relevance Theory is not compatible with the findings of recent cognitive studies, and a potential remedy to this problem will be suggested. The final part of the chapter will be devoted to an investigation of how indirect speech such as irony can be pragmatically represented within the bounds of Relevance Theory by examining three approaches to how hearers interpret irony: the Echoic Mention Theory (Sperber 1984, Sperber and Wilson 1981b; 1995; Wilson 2006), the Pretence Theory (Clark and Gerrig 1984; Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995; Cros 2001; Currie 2006) and the Mental Space Theory (Utsumi 2000; Coulson 2005; Kihara 2005; Ritchie 2005). Underlying similarities will be drawn between the three approaches to argue for several key features of irony that should be included in future research. Of the three approaches it will be judged that, with slight modifications to scope and provided that it operates within the mechanics of Relevance Theory, the Echoic Mention Theory is the most suitable representation of how irony is interpreted.

## 4.1 Relevance Theory Analysed

Relevance Theory is a suitable alternative to Gricean pragmatics (Grice 1967a; 1967b; 1968; 1969; 1981) because it removes many of the features Chapter 2 criticised as explanatorily insufficient, including

the need for a Co-operative Principle and maxims, the focus on pragmatic processes which contribute to implicatures rather than to explicit, truth-conditional content, the role of deliberate maxim violation in utterance interpretation, and the treatment of figurative utterances as deviations from a maxim or convention of truthfulness.

(Sperber and Wilson 2004: 607)

In place of these features Sperber and Wilson argue that the expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise enough to guide the hearer towards the speaker’s meaning, and predictable enough for speakers to model their utterances with the knowledge that hearers are likely to interpret them in a certain way. Relevance Theory argues that the search for relevant information ‘is a basic feature of human cognition’ (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 190), support for this is provided by Henderson (2003; 2007) and Henderson et al. (2009), who show that visual search patterns are determined not by *visual salience* i.e. intensity, color, and edge orientation, generated in a bottom-up manner but by *cognitive relevance* i.e. the selection of fixation sites is based on cognitive knowledge structures in memory (see also Henderson et al. 1999; Itti and Koch 2000; Parkhurst et al. 2002 and Torralba 2003).

The ‘expectations of relevance’ which Relevance Theory highlights indicate that it recognises the fundamental necessity that hypotheses of intention (i.e. theory of mind attributions) play in interpretation. Whilst this aspect of discourse was included in Grice’s work (interpreters expect the speaker to abide by Gricean Maxims and the Cooperative Principle) Relevance Theory continues in its liberation of Grice’s model by giving primacy to case-by-case, interpreter driven constructions of speaker intentions/expected linguistic strategies: once a discourse has begun theory of mind hypotheses are driven not by general principles such as those laid down by Grice, but by user generated expectations of relevance specifically attuned to the content of the discourse already interpreted. This alteration is codified in Relevance Theory by the replacement of Grice’s Cooperative Principle with The Communicative Principle of Relevance: ‘Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance.’ Optimal relevance being defined as follows:

An ostensive stimulus is optimally relevant to an audience iff:

a. It is relevant enough to be worth the audience’s processing effort;

b. It is the most relevant one compatible with communicator’s abilities and preferences.

(Sperber and Wilson 1995: 185)

The most significant portion of these points in relation to irony is clause b – which allows for speakers to leave out relevant information, or information that might convey their intentions more economically, if the inclusion of such information goes against their desires or ability. In contrast to this Grice’s Principle of Communication presumes the communicator’s willingness to provide any information required, and thus it cannot represent cases of discourse dedicated to uncooperative social goals. The difference between these two approaches can be exposed via the example of silent discourse responses. It is desirable in such cases to divide between those examples in which a discourse participant is unable to respond (perhaps because they do not understand the language of the speaker or are otherwise verbally impaired) and cases in which their lack of response *is itself an act of communication*. For example, a teacher asks a student a complex question to which to he responds with silence. In such situations we want to be able to interpret the student’s lack of response as either 1) the student does know the answer but was not paying attention and so did not hear the question, or 2) the student does not know the answer to the question, and intends to communicate this through silence. Given the presumption of relevance and the definition of optimal relevance above this is possible in the relevance-theoretic framework. In Grice’s framework on the other hand, the student’s willingness to provide required literal information (i.e. telling the teacher they do not know by speaking) is taken for granted, and thus Gricean pragmatics cannot differentiate between wilful silences and unable silences. This aspect of Relevance Theory holds potential benefits for irony, as wilful silences might take the form of ironic silences. Ironic silences commonly occur when a discourse participant says something completely stupid which is thus unworthy of response: common comedic examples of ironic silence often involve background noise such as the chirping of crickets or the sound of wind accompanied by rolling tumbleweed to highlight the lack of engagement by the speaker’s audience. The irony of the silence is in regard to the notion of discourse itself – the contrast in reality presented is between discourse as expected (i.e. a responding utterance) and discourse as given (i.e. silence). Within the categories presented in Section 1.1 ironic silence can probably be considered a sub-class of ironic understatement - ironic understatement is characterised by a lack of required information, ironic silences provide an extreme lack of information.

More significantly, clause b of the Principle of Optimal Relevance allows Relevance Theory to handle the separation in processing between speaker and audience that is key to the phenomenon of irony. Whereas the Communicative Principle of Relevance allows for speakers to modify their utterance in light of their preferences – and thereby not commit to providing maximal relevance or efficiency of communicative meaning Sperber and Wilson maintain that interpreters are obligated to certain efficiency-based principles, as shown in the Relevance-Theoretic Comprehension Procedure:

a. Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.

b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied.

(Sperber and Wilson 2002: 3)

This principle is important to Relevance Theory as it defends it against claims that Sperber and Wilson are putting too high a cognitive demand on interpreters. Furthermore it seems intuitively correct that whilst goal-directed speech is a common phenomenon, goal-directed interpretation (where that goal is something other than ‘understand the speaker’s meaning’) is a deviation from the norm. Even in cases in which we seek to understand a speaker with a critical attitude – perhaps by searching for elements of their statement we can disprove/contradict – it seems a necessary precursor to first understand their meaning. Cases in which this does not occur are those in which it feels normal to say that the interpreter was not listening, or was listening poorly.

The divide between The Communicative Principle of Relevance and The Relevance-Theoretic Comprehension Procedure provide a means of mechanically detailing the breakdown of communication when ironic utterances are misunderstood. We can list the options here as follows;

CPR = Communicative Principle of Relevance

RTCP = Relevance-Theoretic Comprehension Procedure

1. The communicator failed to provide a stimulus relevant enough to be worth the audience’s processing effort = failure of CPR (clause a).
2. The communicator lacked the ability to communicate ironically = failure of CPR (clause b).
3. The communicators’ preference in communication was such that it produced suboptimal levels of relevance and so was not correctly interpreted by the audience = failure of CPR (clause b).
4. The interpreter failed to follow the path of least-effort and so drew conclusion from sub-optimal sources of relevance = failure of RTCP (clause a).
5. The interpreter drew from too many sources of relevance and so became confused = failure of RTCP (clause b).

Point 1 represents a basic failure of communication – since any utterance intended to communicate meaning is *a priori* worthy of processing by the audience (otherwise they are not an audience). Point 2 represents a failure to transmit irony based on cognitive incapacity – for example a misunderstanding of how the form works. Point 3 is where the majority of breakdowns are likely to occur from the CPR side and represents examples in which the speakers’ preferences get in the way of the audience’s understanding – e.g. from being too longwinded or technical in their language, or from trying to be too subtle and complex in their irony. In these cases the speaker may be too interested in social benefits (such as being seen to be clever or intelligent) and in their desire to reach these goals made their remarks sub-optimally relevant (strategies for irony are covered extensively in Chapter 5). Point 4 represents cases in which the audience listened poorly and do not engage with the utterance as required and point 5 mirrors point 3 but from an audience perspective – they have gone about the task of interpreting in an obtuse way. This is not to claim that there is necessarily a clear divide between these points – for example a failure of CPR (clause a) could contribute to a failure of RTCP (clause a). Nevertheless the relationship between the principles holds the potential to help codify and explain the breakdown of irony at a basic level.

Of final benefit to studies of irony are the several subtasks that the Relevance-Theoretic Comprehension Procedure entails:

a. Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content (in relevance-theoretic terms, explicatures) via decoding, disambiguation, reference resolution, and other pragmatic enrichment processes.

b. Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual assumptions (in relevance-theoretic terms, implicated premises).

c. Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual implications (in relevance-theoretic terms, implicated conclusions).

(Sperber and Wilson 2002: 18)

These tasks explain how the comprehension of intention functions, but, unlike Grice’s maxims, the Relevance-Theoretic Comprehension Procedure only impacts on comprehension, not creation. As such, it does not fall into the same problems as Grice’s account with regard to the creation of ironic speech – a procedure which obviously does not follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects.

To properly understand any of these claims it is of course necessary to understand what makes certain interpretations relevant? To which the short answer is potentially anything. Sperber and Wilson are keen to emphasise that relevant stimuli occur both inside and outside the utterance, and are produced by not only the content of the utterance, but also by both those external contextual factors occurring *during* the discourse, and those external contextual factors retained in the interpreter’s memory from *prior discourse* events. Certainly the encoded meaning of the utterance is an important piece of information in interpreting speaker intention and thus speaker meaning, but it is intuitive that there must also be a means of evaluating this information in light of other evidence, and that some of this evidence will be extra-linguistic information drawn from any number of different sources. For example, the very act of beginning communication is also an act of transmitting intentional information regardless of the literal content of the utterance – it communicates that the speaker desires to communicate. Other such extra-linguistic information sources include not only information available to the interpreter of the utterance (i.e. contextual cues, prior knowledge of the speaker/past utterances, general knowledge/cultural schema etc.) but also information that the interpreter hypothesises is available to other discourse participants (i.e. theory of mind judgements describing how other people are likely to perceive the world). Relevance Theory refers to the information available to the interpreter as *manifest information* (Carston 2002: 410)*,* and refers to information available to all discourse participants as *mutually manifest*.

To represent the means by which users sort through this information Sperber and Wilson characterize relevance in terms of effect and information as follows:

(a) Everything else being equal, the greater the cognitive effect achieved by the processing of a given piece of information, the greater its relevance for the individual who processes it.

(b) Everything else being equal, the greater the effort involved in the processing of a given piece of information, the lesser its relevance for the individual who processes it.

We claim that humans automatically aim at maximal relevance, i.e. maximal cognitive effect for minimal processing effort. This is the most general factor which determines the course of human information.

(Sperber and Wilson 1990: 140)

In addition, they note that

The most important type of cognitive effect achieved by processing an input in a context is a contextual implication, a conclusion deducible from the input and the context together, but from neither input nor context alone… Other types of cognitive effect include the strengthening, revision or abandonment of available assumptions…According to Relevance Theory, an input is relevant to an individual when, and only when, its processing yields such positive cognitive effects.

(Sperber and Wilson 1990: 143)

These aspects of Relevance Theory are important since they act as a counter to the allegation that, by allowing potentially anything to be defined as relevant, Relevance Theory becomes too liberal and far reaching: theories without limits are untestable and thus by predicting everything they in effect predict nothing. Sperber and Wilson bypass this criticism by grounding Relevance Theory with the prediction that interpreters aim for maximal relevance and will model their final interpretation on only the most optimally relevant information. In this way Relevance Theory, though potentially predicative of any interpretation, is in fact self-limiting: theoretically any utterance can be optimally relevant but in practical terms we should expect that a wide variety of terms will be highly unlikely to be found to be optimally relevant in any given case. This means that Relevance Theory will struggle to describe certain extreme attributions of relevance as optimal, and if these attributions can be shown to be commonplace Relevance Theory will have been invalidated.

A simple example of this in relation to irony is as follows: Alan (in the middle of a downpour) says ‘What wonderful weather we are enjoying.’ Those listening to Alan’s remark will examine the environment (context) for relevant information. Upon finding that it is raining they will likely conclude that either: 1) Alan enjoys the rain, 2) Alan does not enjoy the rain but is speaking ironically or 3) Alan is acting irrationally (i.e. is not aware that it is raining). The interpreter’s understanding of Alan’s remark will be shaped by contextual information from their immediate surroundings (such as the extent to which it is raining) and from their previous interactions with Alan: does he like rain; does he often speak ironically; has he been acting irrationally etc. Relevant information will be that which allows the audience to understand Alan’s meaning. If the audience of Alan’s utterance have never met Alan before and so have no context-specific information regarding him they will revert to context-general information about what most people are like. Relevance Theory does not rule out other more obscure interpretations, such as Alan is speaking in an obscure code, but it does posit that such interpretations are highly unlikely to be optimally relevant. Supposing that Alan is proto-typical in his attitudes towards weather the most optimally relevant interpretation of his remark will be the ironic reading presented in option 2.

Intuitively, relevance is not just an all-or-none matter but is able to impact upon cognition to differing degrees. Thus whilst there is no shortage of potential inputs which might have at least some relevance for us, we cannot attend to them all. In response to this, Relevance Theory claims that what makes an input worth picking out from the mass of competing stimuli is not just that it is relevant, but that it is *more relevant* than any alternative input available to us at that time, as specified by the concept of optimal relevance. Against this viewpoint we could ask how one might know *a priori* what inputs will achieve ‘maximal relevance’. This is the necessary claim of Relevance Theory, for if participants in a discourse cannot establish how relevant an input is without first analysing that input then, due to the wide array of potential inputs, the relevance theorist will have placed an enormous cognitive requirement on the search for ‘maximal relevance’. However this criticism can be countered by the introduction of a relevance tagging system which categorises inputs from a similar background with likely degrees of relevance. Introducing such a mechanism means that relevance must be a somewhat learned phenomenon, evidence of which can be found in brain imaging studies: Ting Wang et al. (2006) found that children and adults process irony differently, with adult brain activity occurring in areas of the brain associated with facial expressions and child brain activity centred on prefrontal regions associated with theory of mind processing. They concluded that whilst children needed to use complex inferential processes connecting the literal utterance to theory of mind valuations, adults could refer to simpler non-verbal indicators. This supports a version of Relevance Theory in which users adapt to language by learning which sort of contextual cues are likely to provide high degrees of relevance.

According to Relevance Theory the goal of discourse is to use the positive cognitive effects garnered according to the processes above to create a mutual cognitive environment:*‘*a cognitive environment which is shared by a group of individuals and in which it is manifest to those individuals that they share it with each other’ (Carston 2002: 410). *Prima facie* this may seem to be vulnerable to the same criticisms levelled at Grice’s Cooperative Principle, namely that it fails to represent uncooperative aspects of discourse. However the creation of a mutual cognitive environment does not necessitate social cooperation, because a mutual cognitive environment is aimed at increasing shared discourse assumptions rather than shared meaning. This allows for uncooperative mutual cognitive spaces in which each speaker is trying to allow only personally advantageous mutual assumptions to occur. The importance of the mutual cognitive environment is such that Sperber and Wilson see communication ‘as a matter of enlarging mutual cognitive environments, not of duplicating thoughts’ (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 193). On first glance this seems a radical argument - claiming that communication does not function via duplication of information but rather by a process of similarity. However, such a claim is a necessary product of Relevance Theory’s total embrace of contextual factors and is key to the entire relevance model, thus it is not only Sperber and Wilson who argue in favour of it:

An utterance, like any ostensive stimulus, usually licenses not a single interpretation, but any one of a number of interpretations with very similar import; provided the addressee recovers one of these, comprehension is successful, that is, it is good enough.

(Carston 2000: 825)

This facet of Relevance Theory has brought criticism from those who feel that the unmodified transmission of information from one discourse participant to another must be retained at the heart of any theory of language (Larson and Segal 1995; Cappelen and Lepore 2005; 2006a; 2006b; Montminy 2006). The basic argument of these critics is as follows: if language interpretation is dependent on contextual cues, then why should we have intuitions about understanding our fellow discourse participants, and furthermore, how would all of the complex group behaviours that rely on precise meaning transmission take place? If a manager tells his employees that a meeting is organised for 10:00am the following day, then it does not seem to be the case that those employees interpret that as meaning ‘the meeting will take place at roughly 10:00am’. Instead it seems that the manager’s audience both understand the precise meaning of his utterance, and leave the discourse with an intuitive feeling of having understood the precise meaning of his utterance. Critics of Relevance Theory’s contextual bias (for example Borg 2004; 2007; Cappelen and Lepore 2005; 2006a) argue that the only way to explain this ability is to assume that minimal propositions are conveyed directly and consistently by language, across different contexts. This cannot happen via an appeal to similar meaning transmission. However, his is an invalid criticism of Relevance Theory, and reveals an ignorance of the perspective from which Sperber and Wilson’s work operates. In contrast to the critics of Relevance Theory’s contextual bias, who operate from a third-person omniscient perspective and attempt to abstractly and objectively assign truth values to utterances, Relevance Theory operates from a first-person perspective, and only offers judgement on how language users conduct themselves during discourse. From a first-person viewpoint it is impossible to make omniscient assessments of truthfulness because we cannot read another person’s mind. All that Relevance Theory claims is that discourse participants use the evidence provided to make the best effort they can at accurately modelling the thoughts of the speaker whose remark they are interpreting. Relevance Theory is built to take into account failures of language as well as successes and more importantly to treat these judgements as *valid and truthful from the interpreter’s perspective* until new information makes them re-evaluate their interpretation. To use an example conceived by Wedgwood, an interpreter in Relevance Theory does not claim to himself:

‘I reckon that interpretation q is reasonably similar to the intended interpretation p and therefore communication has been successful’. Rather, he says to himself, ‘Having employed the best means necessary, I calculate that the speaker must have intended to communicate q’— even if an omniscient third party might be able to identify that the speaker really intended to communicate the similar proposition p.

(Wedgwood 2007: 10)

In this respect language success is not defined as the successful transmission of one discourse participant’s meaning to the other, but rather as the enlargement of the discourse cognitive environment. As long as an exchange results in the participants having more assumptions about their cognitive environment – including with respect to theory of mind evaluations about one another – then the discourse will be successful. This view may seem problematic in the sense that it characterises nearly all discourse as successful, but this can be remedied by adopting a scaled or graded attitude to success. In fact it is intuitive that many instances in discourse end with one party feeling that they did not totally understand the other – in other words that the discourse they just participated in was only partially successful. In contrast, rare are the occasions when one leaves a discourse feeling that one understood nothing – even in cases of unintelligible discourse one might still draw the valuable conclusion ‘the speaker is foreign’ or ‘the speaker is mad’ or ‘the speaker is unable to communicate with me’. Similarly we can unintentionally report that someone believes X when they in fact believe Y if we misinterpreted some of their prior remarks whilst still maintaining the utmost sincerity in our reporting. Finally, it is an exaggeration to claim that because Relevance Theory is not focused on duplication it denies that duplication can ever happen. Wedgwood argues that

Individual relevance theorists might well vary over just how reliable they believe linguistic communication to be, but Relevance Theory is at heart an attempt to explain just how commonly addressees do seem to recover intended propositional meanings…Hence Relevance Theory in effect presupposes that, by almost any deﬁnition, content is regularly shared to a signiﬁcant extent.

(Wedgwood 2007: 9-10)

In terms of the study of irony, far from being a failing, the capacity for Relevance Theory to adapt itself to different failure rates of language is part of what makes Relevance Theory a suitable pragmatic framework.

## 4.2 Relevance Theory Tested

Having investigated the basic functions and principles of Relevance Theory I will now assess whether the conclusions that these principles entail are supported by the evidence shown in Sections 3.1 and 3.2. At first glance much of the evidence presented in these sections seems problematic for Relevance Theory. As we have seen, in contrast to the standard and repeating set of maxims and principles proposed in Grice’s pragmatics, Sperber and Wilson assume that the context (the set of contextual assumptions) ‘is generally not fixed in advance: it has to be constructed as part of the interpretation process’ (Sperber and Wilson 1992: 3). Whilst this was presented as an advantage in Section 4.1 as it allowed Relevance Theory to deal with non-cooperative forms of discourse, Sperber and Wilson’s argument predicts that the cognitive processes for literal and figurative discourse should be the same: interpreting non-literal language need not involve a contextually inappropriate (e. g., literal) stage at all, since comprehension should involve only the optimally relevant meaning as determined by the contextual bias of the discourse situation. Non-literal language should therefore take no longer to process than literal language, nor should it engender any special cognitive processes (Sperber and Wilson (1995: 239). This line of reasoning brings Relevance Theory into accordance with a Direct Access Theory of meaning, a view which section 3.1 showed to be in conflict with evidence from cognitive studies.

This problem extends beyond ERP studies to other approaches which seem initially supportive of Relevance Theory. Rubio-Fernandez (2005) uses on-line word-recognition tasks to show patterns of conceptual priming across time which reveal concept loosening and narrowing as posited by Relevance Theory. However Rubio-Fernandez’s study also presented evidence that some conceptual correlates are so closely associated to a particular content word that they will remain active during interpretation regardless of their contextual irrelevance. For instance, in the case of understanding a metaphorical use of ‘John is a cactus’, she found that the concept PLANT, a superordinate of CACTUS, remains active even after the metaphorical interpretation (for which it is irrelevant) has been recovered. This seems to be an example of salience of meaning which the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora 1995; 1997; 2003) predicts will not be totally overridden by contextual factors and will remain in negotiation with the eventually chosen interpretation, and goes against the basic assumption of Relevance Theory that context can totally override literal meaning.

With this evidence in mind the question now becomes whether Relevance Theory can be adapted to make use of the predictions of the Graded Salience Hypothesis and the cognitive evidence that supports it. If salience of meaning can be included in the definition of relevance then the Graded Salience Hypothesis can be maintained and Relevance Theory can consider any evidence that supports Graded Salience Hypothesis to also support itself. If it cannot, Relevance Theory risks being invalidated by recent cognitive findings. Returning to the definition of salience we find that salient terms are those that are 1) coded in the mental lexicon and 2) reinforced by virtue of their conventionality, frequency of exposure, experiential familiarity, or proto-typicality. The adoption of this within Relevance Theory should not be complicated, for *a priori* those terms which are proto-typical and frequently used will have a higher chance of being relevant than those which are not, as ventured in my proposal that sources of relevance may be pre-tagged with likelihood of relevance valuations. Once this is recognised it is easy to see why relevant/salient meanings are both more relevant and easier to access, thus the Relevance-Theoretic Comprehension Procedure, which states that comprehension should follow a path of least effort in accessing interpretations and aim for optimal relevance, can be maintained.

However it could still be argued that Relevance Theory is incompatible with the Graded Salience Hypothesis since Relevance Theory posits that context impacts at all levels of the interpretation process. As such another alteration to the theory is required to adapt to findings such as Keysar et al. (1998), who show that retrieving contextually appropriate referents is cognitively more difficult when there is a more accessible referent that could be intended by the speaker *regardless* of the contextual appropriateness of the more accessible referent*.* Giora (1998) suggests that this is possible by dividing between direct (context-sensitive) aspects of interpretation and autonomous (context-insensitive) aspects of interpretation. Relevance Theory must be adapted to recognise that the Principle of Relevance does not affect initial access, but instead acts as a secondary process of interpretation following the initial stage. In respect to this Yus (2003) presents an argument in relation to Echoic Mention and humour which shows that relevance is compatible with two-stage models of processing such as the Graded Salience Hypothesis. Under a two-stage framework if the most accessible interpretation is consistent with the Principle of Relevance, no revision is required. However, if it is not, it is adjusted and redressed.

This complementary approach in regards to the Graded Salience Hypothesis can also be extended to production of meaning. Horton and Keysar (1996) argue for an Initial Design stage of language production which is not amenable to change under time pressure, followed by a Monitoring and Adjustment stage which is. This approach uses the same combined Graded Salience Hypothesis/Relevance Theory approach as Giora recommended: the Initial Design stage will be formed by information that is available to the speaker (as in Graded Salience Hypothesis), whilst later stages relate (mostly) to information that might be relevant to the addressee (according to the processes specified by Relevance Theory). Additionally Horton and Keysar show that the Principle of Relevance can be used as a mechanism via which speakers monitor and adjust their utterances during discourse.

If Relevance Theory can adopt these recommendations then it has little to fear from the evidence of cognitive studies – on the contrary, a series of ERP studies related to scalar implicature give credence to Sperber and Wilson’s work. Scalar implicatures occur when a speaker expressing a less informative proposition fails to meet the hearer’s expectations of relevance and thus impels the interpreter to produce further implicatures. As such they test the mechanics of Relevance Theory by revealing situations in which interpreters are required to search for relevance. If Relevance Theory is correct then we should assume that more complicated searches for relevance will require increased cognitive activity and increased processing time. To be more precise, it should be expected that this cognitive activity will present itself in the latter stages of understanding, since the readjustment of cognitive resources to search for relevance will only occur if an initial, low cognitive effort interpretation has been rejected. Additionally Relevance Theory will predict that this search for further relevance and alternative implicature should not be universal, since different individuals are likely to use different contextual information to reach different conclusions.

Scalar implicatures result in one of two possible interpretations as shown in the following example:

Peter: Do you like Woody Allen’s films?

Jane: I like some of them.

(Carston and Powell 2006: 293)

It is intuitive that Jane intends to communicate that she does not like all of Woody Allen’s films, and perhaps even that she only likes a few of them. However there is no logical incompatibility in the above statement with the proposition the Jane likes many or even all of Woody Allen’s films (since all must logically include some). To understand the meaning of Jane’s remark it is necessary for Peter to use contextual information ignored in his initial processing of the utterance to decide which implicature is most relevant. In certain cases this process will involve the negation of the un-uttered but more informative proposition – these will be interpreted as instances of ironic understatement.

Noveck and Posada (2003) present an ERP study which strongly supports the predictions of Relevance Theory regarding scalar implicature. The study presented 19 test subjects with sentences designed to produce scalar implicature. Of these subjects 7 believed sentences such as ‘some elephants have trunks’ to be true (indicating a literal response) whilst 12 thought they were false (i.e. they interpreted the remark as the scalar implicature ‘not all elephants have trunks’). The evidence of different approaches shown by this study supports earlier work by Noveck (2001), who showed that those who judged under-informative sentences to be false took signiﬁcantly longer to do so than those who judged them to be true. The ERP data showed a comparative lack of activity in response to under-informed sentences when compared to patently untrue sentences such as ‘some crows have radios’ leading Noveck and Posada to conclude that scalar implicatures are part of a late arriving, eﬀort-demanding decision process (similarly supportive cognitive evidence can be found in Katsos et al. 2005).

Just as in regards to ERP studies, versions of Relevance Theory which prioritise uniform cognitive processes for both literal and figurative utterances fall foul of modern brain imaging studies. However this flaw should not prove fatal, since Sperber and Wilson indicate that they are open to the idea that indirect forms of language may involve separate cognition processes:

Let us assume that, in interpreting an utterance, the hearer starts with a small initial context left over, say, from his processing of the previous utterance: he computes the contextual effects of the utterance in that initial context; if these are not enough to make the utterance worth his attention, he expands the context, obtaining further effects, and repeats the processes until he has enough effects to make the utterance optimally relevant in the way that the speaker could manifestly have foreseen.

(Sperber and Wilson 1992: 7)

As was shown in my comments regarding the combination of Relevance Theory with Graded Salience Hypothesis, adapting Relevance Theory to take into account new cognitive evidence is not difficult, and simply requires Relevance Theory to recognise that the mechanics it hypothesises are used in a two-stage model. If this is done Relevance Theory can find support from brain imaging studies due to the importance it places on theory of mind judgements for interpreting complex forms of language: to understand relevance it is necessary to theorise about why a speaker said X not Y and so on, and so Relevance Theory matches the brain imaging studies examined in Section 3.1 which reveal heightened brain activity in supposed theory of mind modules, as well as studies which note a lack of high-level linguistic capability in individuals with right-hemisphere brain damage.

Additionally Sperber and Wilson’s (1995: 275) argument that ‘irony involves a higher order of meta-representational ability than metaphor’ (because whereas metaphorical utterances express a thought about a state of affairs, ironic utterances express a thought about another thought) seems to be borne out in clinical studies which use false-belief tasks to investigate mentally impaired subjects such as those suffering from autism. These individuals are thought to have a specific and characteristic impairment in their ability to attribute mental states, i.e. a lack of theory of mind. According to Relevance Theory autistic people should have specific difficulties with the use of language for complex and indirect forms of communication.Happé (1993) finds that the predictions of Relevance Theory in regards to the degree of theory of mind necessary for understanding simile, metaphor and irony were all confirmed, and argues that ‘Relevance Theory allows us to reason from the now well-known work showing a deficit in autistic subjects’ theory of mind to the well-documented autistic communication handicap’(Happé 1993: 115). Happé also found that in a comparison of autistic subjects of the same age and ability, those who were able to pass first-order theory of mind tasks were able to complete and comprehend metaphors, whilst only those capable of passing second-order theory of mind tasks (i.e. theorising about how one actor is itself internally theorising about another actor) were also able to comprehend irony (similar results are shown by Langdon et al. 2002).

A criticism of these findings comes from theorists who point out that some infants as young as 14 or 15 months have been found to display sensitivity to people's mistaken false-belief-based behaviour in certain tasks (Onishi and Baillargeon 2005; Surian et al. 2007), despite false-belief tasks failing to show similar capabilities in children under 3-4 years of age (Wellman et al. 2001). The difference between the experimental paradigms is the requirement of older children to verbalise their responses which has led critics of false-belief tasks to claim that they are evidence not of theory of mind deficits but of the incapability of subjects to make meta-linguistic judgments about hypothetical situations (Tompkins et al. 2006, 2008). Whilst the criticism of this experiment’s suitability is not a direct threat to the validity of Relevance Theory, false-belief tasks are often used to test subjects with cognitive impairment, and many of these studies support the predictions that Relevance Theory makes.

In response to the flaws present in false-belief tasks Weed et al. (2010) conducted tests on right-hemisphere-damaged subjects by using a set of short, animated sequences involving moving geometric shapes with anthropomorphic features (a concept first introduced by Abell et al. 2000). These allow them to test theory of mind evaluations without requiring subjects to understand/verbalise complex linguistic structures. Weed et al. conclude that, whilst the new paradigm needs refinement, the results suggest that the earlier conclusions made from false-belief tests (that irony interpretation differs from metaphor in that it requires theory of mind capabilities) still hold true.

A final source of support for Relevance Theory can be found in an entirely different field - Information Science. White (2007; 2009) argues that the basic principle of relevance (‘Relevance = cognitive effects / processing effort’ Goatly 1994: 139) has an objective analogue in information science: ‘the tf\*idf (term frequency, inverse document frequency) formula used to weight indexing terms in document retrieval’ (White 2009: 653). In simple terms tf\*idf is a function which weighs information according to context - if a piece of data has a high degree of specificity to a given context then it is weighted higher than comparative data which is only vaguely related to the given context. White proposes that Relevance Theory explains why tf\*idf has succeeded fairly well over the years in real-world document retrieval and why computer scientists like it – because tf\*idf is related to relevance and relevance is an attractive property to real-world users who are used to sifting through contextual sources via an appeal to relevance. For example, when applied to the target ‘Information needs’ tf\*idf ranked co-occurring descriptors thus:



(White 2009: 658)

White argues that ‘If one imagines a card-sorting task in which subjects were asked to put in two piles (without further ranking) these 30 descriptors according to their relevance to the concept of ‘‘Information Needs,’’ it is hard to believe that the consensus [provided by tf\*idf] would not resemble the outcome [provided by the test subjects]’ (White 2009: 657). White’s arguments are significant because they act as a defence against criticisms of Relevance Theory which argue that, due to its reliance on contextual features, it cannot be used to accurately predict what interpretations users will draw. In future, the kind of comparative study which White’s argument allows could provide strong evidence for the validity of Sperber and Wilson’s work in non-cognitive experiments which will be able to be conducted without advanced brain imaging tools. If tf\*idf produces optimally relevant terms and test groups produce similar rankings to tf\*idf, then there is good reason to assume that interpreters sort through data according to the principles of the tf\*idf / relevance theoretic equations.

In summary, so long as Relevance Theory is able to adapt itself to certain new information emerging from cognitive studies then the evidence provided in this section can be said to validate many of the theory’s claims. Given the underlying similarities between relevant terms and salient terms this adaptation should not be difficult, and comments from Sperber and Wilson indicate that they are open to alternative cognitive models. In addition to support from cognitive sources a Graded Salience/Relevance Theoretic approach could also draw support from evidence provided by White’s work in Information Science. White’s work is also significant because it holds the potential to open the testing of Relevance Theory to non-cognitive studies, thereby allowing the claims of Relevance Theory to be tested thoroughly by researchers from a wide range of disciplines.

## 4.3 The Relevance of Verbal Irony – Echoic Mention Theory

Even if Relevance Theory is modified to encompass the suggestions of the Graded Salience Hypothesis, it could still be improved via the addition of a specific mechanism to explain how hearers arrive at ironic interpretations. In particular, Relevance Theory needs to explain what triggers ironic interpretations, and how hearers process a speaker’s ironic meaning as relevant.

Sperber and Wilson (1981; 1984; 1995; 2005) argue in favour of viewing irony as an echoic phenomenon, making the argument that ironic interpretations are accessed during the search for relevance because they echo a prior remark or implicit view. Remarks which are referred to multiple times in a discourse are likely to be more relevant than those which have not been referred to often, and thus will be easier to access. They will therefore provide more cognitive information for less cognitive effort and stand a better chance of being viewed as optimally relevant. Echoic Mention Theory treats irony as a type of echoic allusion to an attributed utterance or thought: ‘An utterance may be interpretively used to (meta)represent another utterance or thought that it resembles in content’ (Sperber and Wilson 2004: 621). In the case of irony the speaker does not use the proposition expressed by her utterance in order to represent a thought of her own, but rather echoes a thought or utterance she tacitly attributes to someone else. Early evidence that irony is processed as echoic was provided by Jorgensen et al. (1984) who showed that irony is easier to understand when there is an explicit prior utterance of the ironic remark that hearers can posit the speaker is echoing. In order to pass as echoic, an utterance should both repeat another utterance on a meta-level and be relevant by showing the speaker’s opinion about this earlier utterance (Sperber and Wilson 2002: 271). Sperber and Wilson clarify this with the following example:

(2.6) Peter: That was a fantastic party.

(2.7a) Mary: [happily] Fantastic.

b. [puzzled] Fantastic?

**c. [scornfully] Fantastic!**

(Sperber and Wilson 2002: 271)

Sperber and Wilson argue that 2.7a, 2.7b and 2.7c are all examples of echoic use. In order to understand Mary’s utterances, Peter should not only recognize that she paraphrases a part of his earlier utterance (2.6), but also gives her opinion about utterance (2.6). In utterance (2.7a), Mary agrees with Peter that the party was fantastic. In utterance (2.7b), she is surprised by his judgment and questions the positive judgment about the party. In utterance (2.7c), Mary shows Peter that she does not agree with him and that she did not consider the party as fantastic at all. Of all these remarks however, only 2.7c is ironic. Sperber and Wilson argue that this is because only 2.7c displays a negative attitude towards the utterance about which the speaker gives her meaning. However as was indicated in Section 1.1 it is not necessary to tie ironic meaning to negativity in this way: Holdcroft (1983: 496) claims that irony does not involve necessarily a negative attitude and can be ‘playful and affectionate’ (see also Brown 1980: 114; Mao 1991: 179-189; Haverkate 1990: 90; Glucksberg 1995: 53). Brown (1980: 114) provides the example of a stockbroker calling for the third time to announce unexpected dividends: ‘Sorry to keep bothering you like this.’ This comment is intuitively ironic and presumably references times when the stockbroker has bothered his clients, but the comment does not display a negative critical attitude – the stockbroker is very happy to be calling and likely thinks that the previous times he has said ‘sorry to keep bothering you’ have been validated by the windfall he has secured his client. Rather than relying on a negative critical appraisal, the irony in Brown’s stockbroker example stems from the paradoxical presentation of two different realities it presents. The first of these is tied to the literal utterance but is not representative of the speaker’s current beliefs (and so carries reduced contextual relevance) and the other which is not tied to the literal utterance but does represent the speaker’s inner world view. As such, whilst Echoic Mention is correct to characterise that by echoing prior remarks speakers disassociate themselves from the echoed utterance it is incorrect to presume that this entails criticism. Instead the goal of the disassociation is to make clear the difference between the two realities presented.

This mischaracterisation aside, the core of the Echoic Mention approach to irony is correct: if we return to the different forms of irony expressed in Section 1.1, we can see that they can all be thought of as echoic. The cases of sarcasm presented are clearly echoic, in the first example Comic Book Guy can clearly be interpreted as ironically echoing what Professor Frink might have been sincerely saying to himself when he invented the sarcasm detector:

‘**Lindsay Nagel:** Do I detect a hint of sarcasm?  
(*The sarcasm detector starts beeping.*)  
**Professor Frink**: Are you kidding? This baby is off the charts!  
**Comic Book Guy**: Ooh! A sarcasm detector! That's a REALLY useful invention!  
(*The sarcasm detector explodes.*)’

The litotes presented (‘Lionel Messi is not a bad footballer’) could be a case of echoing an actual prior utterance, or, more likely, echoing a hypothetical utterance by someone ignorant of just how good at football Lionel Messi is. This would explain why the correct interpretation of this litotes is an exaggeration rather than an inversion. Sperber and Wilson include in their conception of Echoic Mention the possibility that users echo hypothetical sources:

There are echoic mentions of many different degrees and types. Some are immediate echoes, and others delayed; some have their source in actual utterances, others in thoughts and opinions; some have a real source, others an imagined one; some are traceable back to a particular individual, whereas others have a vaguer origin.

(Sperber and Wilson 1981: 310)

To bypass allegations of imprecision Sperber and Wilson define their version of echo according to three parameters: firstly, an utterance must be recognisable as echoic by an interpreter; secondly, the interpreter must identify a source of the opinion echoed; and finally, they must recognise the speaker’s negative/disapproving attitude to the opinion echoed (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 240). I have already objected to the requirements specified in the third parameter and so suggest that this be modified to reflect simply a dissociative and evaluative attitude.

Despite these qualifications the great variety of possible echoes allowed by the Echoic Mention approach has drawn criticism from a variety of sources (Clark and Gerrig 1984; Attardo 2000; Stanley 2005). Attardo (2000: 805) claims that the concept of echo leads to an ‘infinite regression’ of possible interpretations: since an echo can be implicit, any utterance could theoretically be an echo of another utterance, a thought or a norm. Similarly, Stanley argues that every mention will be echoic because every remark will in some way resemble another remark. However whilst this criticism damages approaches to irony which seek to define in absolute terms that irony is reliant on echo, it does not damage the application of Echoic Mention to the principles of Relevance Theory. In fact these criticisms are similar to those presented in Section 4.1 which viewed Relevance Theory as entailing a complete loss of meaning transmission. It was pointed out in relation to these arguments that Relevance Theory proceeds from a deictically centred standpoint which seeks to make truth evaluations in relative terms rather than absolute ones, and as such has a different approach to defining right and wrong interpretations. The same applies to critics who refer to Echoic Mention as infinitely regressive. They miss the point that, within the scope of Relevance Theory, it is not a problem for any remark to be able to be interpreted as irony, since the perspective of users generating interpretations is not the same as the interpretations generated from omniscient and objective definition. Thus, an overabundance of echoes is actually a benefit for Relevance Theory because it reflects the potential for users to incorrectly interpret a comment as ironic and still themselves consider their interpretation to be ‘valid’. This is part of what a user centred theory should seek to represent: given the correct context it is correct to assume that any utterance could be interpreted as ironic.

In addition, just as the proliferation of ever less ‘similar’ meanings allowed by Relevance Theory’s approach can be controlled by the very mechanics the theory posits, so too can the seemingly infinite possible echoes allowed by Echoic Mention. It is true that any utterance can be considered echoic of something, but it is intuitive that some of the echoes will be more relevant than others, and so will be accessed by users before comparatively less relevant obscure echoes. This will give these echoes a greater weight in terms of information gained vs. processing effort, and the most optimal of these comparatively easy to access Echoic Mentions will satisfy the user’s search for relevance. This means that the problems posited by the infinite regression criticism will likely never be encountered by users of the Echoic Mention process, only by observers analysing definitions of irony from an asocial, relevance-free perspective.

Critics who use this argument also accuse the Echoic Mention Theory of circular reasoning:

Schaffer argues that Sperber and Wilson ‘use the presence of mention to identify irony and irony to identify the presence of mention’ (1982: 16). However if we reserve the Echoic Mention Theory to describe how irony operates *within the bounds* *of Relevance Theory* this problem disappears. Irony can be objectively and a-socially defined as a paradoxical presentation of two realities, Echoic Mention is simply the way that these two realities are cognitively processed by interpreters in search of relevance.

These limiting factors on Echoic Mention accepted, the value of Echoic Mention in showing how indirect forms of irony such as ironic metaphor, ironic rhetorical remarks, ironic understatement and ironic overstatement are interpreted by discourse participants as relevant becomes clear. When conventional metaphor is used ironically the Echoic Mention Theory seems intuitively correct – the figurative meaning being used is one used commonly by other people in the speaker’s language community. Uses of non-conventional ironic metaphor will likely be less relevant, unless they echo a specific remark made by other discourse participants. As noted earlier, Relevance Theory needs to be adapted to reflect the difficulty of processing non-conventional metaphors by adopting the salience aspect proposed by the Graded Salience Hypothesis. The Echoic Mention Theory of irony is also able to explain those instances of irony which target the speech act itself, such as ‘thanks for cleaning up’ to someone who has not cleaned up, or ‘isn’t it nice when people hold the door’ to someone who has let the door shut in the speaker’s face. Once again it seems intuitive that these forms of speech draw attention to the division between the realities they represent by inverting the speaking role that the speaker presents. If we refer to the actual speaker in the actual reality, as Speaker1 and the alternate speaker in the alternate reality as Speaker2, we can see that in the examples above Speaker1 echoes the views of the hypothetical Speaker2 who is present in a reality where rooms are tidy and people hold the door.

In the case of ironic understatement, it is likely that the utterance achieves relevance by echoing someone who is trying to be polite and express a positive opinion about something that does not deserve it. Sperber and Wilson’s (2006: 2) ‘Tim Henman is not the most charismatic tennis player in the world’ can be understood as echoing a Tim Henman fan trying desperately to not admit that their favoured player is dull. By appealing to echo users can differentiate between people who are using ironic understatement to make clear just how bad they think something is and people like the Henman fan above who are just trying to stay positive. The different interpretations will rely on contextual information users draw about the speaker and their attitude toward Henman. If they consider it to be negative then an ironic reading becomes more relevant. Similarly Bredin’s (1997: 7) example of overstatement (‘The hotel room costs a thousand dollars a night. Of course, for that you get a half bottle of Australian champagne *and* your breakfast thrown in’) seems to be referencing the words of the hotel brochure or travel agent who has desperately overvalued aspects of the holiday to justify what they know to be an outrageous room price.

## 4.4 The Pretence Theory of Irony

An alternative to the Echoic Mention Theory of irony is Pretence Theory (Clark and Gerrig 1984; Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995; Cros 2001; Currie 2006). In contrast to echoic irony, the central idea behind Pretence accounts of irony is that the speaker is not him/herself performing a speech act such as making an assertion or asking a question, but is instead only pretending to perform it, all the while expecting their audience to see through the pretence and recognise the critical or mocking attitude behind it. The key difference between the two theories, which can at first glance appear to be both practically and theoretically indistinguishable, is found in the perspective taken by the speaker. Whilst in the Echoic Model of irony the speaker effectively inhabits the persona of the person they are echoing, the Pretence account maintains the singularity of speech by arguing that the speaker is still understood as him/herself – though as him/herself taking an obviously false stance in regards to their literal utterance.

The Pretence Theory is built from some of Grice’s later comments in regards to irony in which he used the phrase ‘making as if to say’ (Grice 1989: 120). Recanati interprets Grice along these lines:

Suppose the speaker says Paul really is a ﬁne friend in a situation in which just the opposite is known to be the case. The speaker does not really say, or at least she does not assert, what she ‘‘makes as if to say’’ (Grice’s phrase). Something is lacking here, namely the force of a serious assertion. . . . What the speaker does in the ironical case is merely to pretend to assert the content of her utterance. . . . By pretending to say of Paul that he is a ﬁne friend in a situation in which just the opposite is obviously true, the speaker manages to communicate that Paul is everything but a ﬁne friend. She shows, by her utterance, how inappropriate it would be to ascribe to Paul the property of being a ﬁne friend.

(Recanati 2004: 71)

According to Clark and Gerrig a speaker S, speaks ironically when:

1. S speaks to an audience A
2. In doing so S pretends to be S\* saying something patently uninformed or injudicious to an audience A\* which is taken in by the utterance; they should, as a part of the pretence, be seen as assenting to what is said, or at least of giving it a degree of consideration it does not deserve;
3. Where A is intended to understand the pretence in (ii)

(Clark and Gerrig 1984: 122)

Thus the pretence in Pretence Theory is that one is giving serious consideration to a ridiculous premise. Note that audience A\* can either be real or only potential – irony occurs both when there are two audiences (one ‘in on the joke’ and the other not) and when there is only one audience, the other only implied. This is in some ways similar to the Echoic Theory’s capacity to echo abstract views and statements that are not attributable to a specific person.

The Pretence account of irony is particularly useful to longer forms of irony: Clark and Gerrig (1984: 123) use Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* as an example. In this essay, Swift ironically proposes to solve the economic problems in Ireland by serving poor Irish children as food to the rich. The Pretence Theory argues that Swift pretends to speak as a member of the English ruling class to an English audience rather than echoing a typical English ruling class voice. The suitability of pretence to this account is due to the duration of the irony – echoes are not conventionally thought of as long and complex texts. However for the purposes of this study, which seeks to explain everyday uses of irony, the advantages that the Pretence account offers in regards to extended and complex forms of satire are negligible. Additionally, even though the Pretence Theory can handle texts that are completely ironic such as Swift’s essay very well, it is more difficult to apply to short and relatively easy forms of irony. Suppose that a speaker look out of their window on a rainy day and ironically exclaimed ‘Great weather!’ The Pretence Theory has to explain this utterance by saying that the speaker is pretending to be an incompetent weather forecaster (see Clark and Gerrig 1984). However it seems overly complex to posit that for such a simple example of irony a speaker develops an entire character whose position they then adopt. For simple irony the Echoic Mention Theory seems more suitable.

Some Pretence theorists have tried to adapt the notion of pretence towards a ‘pretence of being’ rather than a ‘pretence of doing’ (Currie 2006: 117) – but is this not exactly what the Echoic Model suggests? Currie presents a view of pretence irony in which:

what matters is that the ironist’s utterance be an indication that he or she is pretending to have a limited or otherwise defective perspective, point of view, or stance, F, and in doing so puts us in mind of some perspective, point of view or stance, G (which may be identical to F or merely resemble it) which is the target of the ironic comment.

(Currie 2006: 114)

However, returning to my arguments against the irrationality of irony in the Gricean model, why should a speaker wishing to target stance G bother to construct a similar stance F merely to point other discourse participants in G’s direction? Why not simply echo stance G in such a way that your anti-G attitude is implicated. Such ‘pretence of being’ adds an unnecessary and complex level of cognitive effort to the construction and interpretation of irony and returns to us the problems that plagued Grice’s description of irony: what reason would a speaker have for proceeding in such a patently irrational manner?

A second point against the Pretence account is its insertion of an audience which comes as a result of clauses (i) and (iii) in their definition of irony. As Currie points out, the ironist’s intention must include the desire to communicate with an audience, and to make it clear to that audience that their utterance is a case of pretence (Currie 2006: 114). This aspect of the Pretence account conflicts with situations in which an ironic speaker intends that no audience will be able to read his irony – either in cases where no audience is present (i.e. I drop a glass whilst cleaning and say to myself ‘fantastic’) or, as Currie imagines ‘a defeated prisoner may have to keep the irony in his confession to himself’ (Currie 2006: 116). The reliance on cooperative communication is a holdover from Gricean Pragmatics and, as was shown in Section 2.5, holds back the ability of pragmatic theory to account for certain discourse situations.

That irony is an act of expression rather than necessarily of communication is better captured by the Echoic Theory – in which I simply express a view I *attribute* to someone else – than in the Pretence Theory which, as we have seen, requires me to make clear that I am only *pretending* to express. It is questionable whether it is even possible to pretend to express during an utterance – clearly I can pretend to assert but how would it be possible to pretend to express? Such a pretence would have to involve some form of expression and as such could not be an act of pretence.

In addition to adding an unnecessary audience requirement, Pretence Theory also excludes an important qualifier that irony must have a target. The statement 2+2=5 is ‘patently uninformed’, and could easily be stated in such a way as to make an audience clearly understand that the speaker was only using a pretence, but it is difficult to define a situation in which it could be ironic without reverting to the sort of analysis put forward by the echoic theory. For example, if I stated that ‘Yes, and 2+2=5’ whilst in discourse with some highly educated mathematician whose argument I am not following, my remark could clearly take on an ironic tone. In this example I would be echoing an imagined remark which I am tacitly attributing to a similar sort of person – i.e. a math expert so far above my level of understanding that he is able to make 2+2=5. In summary, whilst *prima facie* the Echoic Mention and Pretence Theory offer similar routes to relevance, the Pretence account is invalidated by certain ironic situations and as such offers less to a relevance-theoretic account of irony than the Echoic Mention approach.

## 4.5 The Mental Space Theory of Irony

A more recent approach to the problem of what triggers ironic interpretations has been to focus on the way irony presents a paradox of two conflicting realities, and to argue that this must involve the manipulation of differing mental spaces. The Mental Space approach to cognition (Fauconnier 1990; 1994) argues that comprehension of events or concepts requires speakers to construct multiple models of the same object in different mental spaces, so that the properties of the object in question can be examined and compared in different contexts. Mental spaces are made up of partial representations of the entities and relationships under consideration, as perceived by the interpreter (for example using remembered properties/relationships or using imagined properties and relationships). Coulson and Oakley (2005) summarise this as involving a comparison between one mental space that represents the way things are and another that represents the way they are not. The comparisons between different mental spaces are referred to as ‘mappings’ or ‘mental space connections’ (Coulson and Oakley 2005: 1515). Mappings track concepts ranging from simple identity attributions to more complex attributions of relationships between entities, similarities between different mental spaces, role-valuations and other pragmatic information.

Kihara (2005: 517-518) uses mental spaces to define irony as the presentation of different domains of discourse within the same utterance, and argues that the interpretation of irony is triggered by the failure of the ironic utterance to meet the interpreter’s discourse expectations. For Kihara irony involves two mental spaces: first, the actual situation of the discourse (initial reality space) and second, the speaker’s desired/expected situation (mental space of expectation). Irony occurs when the speaker implicitly alludes to the failure of the initial reality space to match the mental space of expectation. Similar approaches can be found in Ritchie (2005: 282-284) who connects irony to the concept of culturally expected frames and situations which undermine them (culturally unexpected frames) and Utsumi (2000) who, whilst not speaking in terms of conflicting mental spaces, argues for an ‘ironic environment’ (2000: 1783) which is triggered by the failed expectations of the speaker.

Coulson (2005) also uses mental spaces, but places irony in the theory of conceptual blending. Conceptual blending posits a particular kind of mental space, the blended space, in which speakers explicitly bring incompatible information together in order to generate inferences that can be projected to other spaces (Fauconnier and Turner 1998; 2002; Coulson and Oakley 2000; 2005). In this approach the interpretation of certain utterances requires the construction of blended cognitive information that comprises two elements: the multiple inputs provided by contrasting mental spaces; and an emergent form of meaning that develops from the combination of this partial structure within the blended space.

An example of conceptual blending can be seen in the following utterance, taken from a blog post on the fan-run Manchester United news site *Stretty News*:

For all intents and purposes, if [Michael] Carrick was Italian, Spanish or German, he would be in their sides; he is in the mould of the Pirlo’s, Alonso’s and Schweinstieger type player of which we lavish so much praise, yet naive and ignorant that we have one of these players ourselves. It is a travesty therefore that managers, fans and the media have neglected and ridiculed his ability and purpose, unaware that Carrick offers England a genuine chance of success, because his style suits the continental and international game.

The interpretation of this comment requires readers to create one mental space representing English football, in which footballing attributes such as physicality, tackling and passion are lauded and an alternative mental space representing foreign (Italian, Spanish and German) football in which passing, intelligence and positioning are praised. Within each of these spaces the object (Michael Carrick) will be examined and the relationships and values that its introduction entails will be noted and compared. In the conceptual blending space this partial data (i.e. how the object Michael Carrick interacts with the English football space and how the object [foreign] Michael Carrick interacts with the foreign football space) will be combined to produce the evaluation that other, more successful footballing countries, are successful because they prioritise more valuable attributes than the English game, and it is this incorrect prioritisation that holds both Michael Carrick (in terms of recognition) and English football (in terms of success) back.

Coulson, like Kihara, Ritchie and Utsumi, claims that irony interpretation operates via an opposition between two spaces: an expected reaction space, and a counterfactual trigger space (i.e. the reality which does not meet expectations), but argues for the introduction of a conceptual blending space in which the partial information from the other mental spaces is combined to produce the speaker’s implied meaning. It could be hypothesised that a three-pronged representation of reality would require more cognitive resources than a two pronged presentation, but since we are not at a stage where such judgements can be empirically measured it is hard to predict just how much more cognitively difficult it would be, and therefore the two approaches cannot be differentiated via an appeal to empirical data.

The Mental Space approach is best suited to forms of irony in which an entire alternate discourse is alluded to, for example the untidy room and holding of the door examples presented earlier. Indeed this approach may be seen as advantageous compared to Echoic Mention as the irony clearly targets the entire situation rather than just the echoed utterance. It could also be argued that this approach is suitable to ironic use of metaphor since the metaphor itself will create a separate mental space in which vehicle and tenor are combined. However all of the mental space approaches described above tie irony to not just a clash of presented realities but specifically a clash between an expected reality and a disappointing alternative. Whilst this is appealing for cases of irony which target entire situations, it does not seem suitable to many other forms of ironic speech. If I take my brother (who doesn’t like football) to a football match and afterwards ask him what he thought about it he could express his negative attitude by ironically saying ‘Yeah it was great, you totally converted me’. This is clearly a sarcastic comment used to express ‘It was terrible, you have not converted me’. However such an ironic comment would have been produced not by my brother’s failed expectations of the football match, but by his validated expectations that he would not enjoy it. It could be argued that the failed expectation in this example is a failed expectation regarding my attitude (i.e. a hope that I did not enjoy the football match and have changed my opinions) but it cannot realistically be posited that this was his expectation – it is better characterised as a hope. Similar examples can be provided by ironic understatement – ‘Tim Henman is not the most charismatic tennis player’ does not stem from an expectation that he would be charismatic so much as it presents an echo of someone trying to defend the supposedly indefensible. At the same time not every implicit reference to an unfulfilled expectation may be an example of irony. To return to the example of my brother at a football match, imagine that he had gone through a miraculous change of opinion and said ‘You should have taken me sooner’. This utterance implicitly refers to a failed expectation – he wishes I had taken him sooner because his expectation that the football match would be boring was not met – but the utterance is not intended to be taken as ironic.

A reliance on violated expectations limits the application of the Mental Space Theory, and suggests that its principles may be better reformed alongside Relevance Theory. In such a model the unmet expectations would be altered to fit the interpreter’s perspective rather than the speaker’s, thus making the unmet expectation one of speaker relevance. The other aspects of the theory could then be maintained as valuable comments regarding the objective nature of irony – that it involves a comparative and evaluative contrast between different mental spaces/realities. These aspects can be introduced into Echoic Mention by simply positing that interpreters construct and examine mental spaces which they build around the source to which the echo is attributed.

## 4.6 Summary

To conclude, the following aspects can be drawn from the three approaches to irony presented in this section. Firstly, irony functions via a presentation of two realities, one of which is presented by the literal utterance and the other of which is figuratively implied; secondly, in presenting these realities the speaker offers an evaluative judgement on one of them (the target of the irony); and thirdly, interpreters must have some method of a) recognising a possible implicit meaning and b) choosing the implicit meaning over the literal meaning.

Given the weaknesses of the Pretence account and the Mental Space approach to irony it seems sound to assume that, from an interpretive perspective, irony functions as an Echoic Mention operating within the mechanics of Relevance Theory. This form of irony will be implicit, and will target a specific utterance from either a real or prototypical source to present two opposing versions of reality – one in which the speaker sincerely believes the utterance he is echoing and one in which he does not. Because of the opposition between these sources the irony will present an evaluative attitude towards the echoed utterance and its source, enhanced by the dissociative aspect of the echoing process. The interpretation of the ironic utterance will be triggered by the failure of the speaker’s literal utterance to provide an easy route to optimum relevance. The search for a relevant echo will be guided by the same process which evaluated the literal utterance, and will result in the interpreter locating the most optimally relevant echo source and examining the mental space from which they believe this source to be drawn.

Once again, the processes identified above can be observed by analysing the complex ironies offered by Stewart Lee in *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One.* The example discussed at the end of Chapter 3 for instance involves the Echoic Mention of the style of new rock-and-roll comedians in order to express a negative evaluative judgement upon them. The literal utterance/reality of the opening to Lee’s performance is effectively a statement that Lee desires to join the mainstream comedy of the ‘young Russell comics’, but has failed at the first hurdle by messing up his bombastic, rock-and-roll entrance. However this is an ironic statement and the true, non-literal meaning of Lee’s opening poses the question of ‘whether it’s appropriate for a comedian to enter like a rock star’ (Lee 2012: 19). The Echoic Mention of this irony is to a proto-typical rather than specific source, and to understand it audience members need to recognise the style of the introduction as relevant. As was suggested in my analysis in Chapter 3 this will be easiest for audience members who are able to draw on contextual information about both the conventions of modern comedy (so that they can identify the echo) and the style of comedy that Lee traditionally uses (i.e. not the mainstream-style entrance which he is using in this act). The combination of the uncharacteristic nature of the opening, the uncharacteristic ‘failure’ of the opening (Lee is a veteran comic and has been touring his act for five months) and the identification that the opening echoes a prototypical comedy source of which Lee is not a member will produce an optimally relevant interpretation that Lee’s failure is intentional and that his literal claims to wanting to be part of the mainstream comedy group are insincere. This interpretation will likely be more optimally relevant than competing interpretations (e.g. that Lee is being sincere in his utterance, or that the failed entrance was not ‘staged’) because such interpretations would not match Lee’s previous actions as an accomplished, alternative comedian, and thus would seem less relevant to what interpreters posit (using theory of mind attributions) as Lee’s inner mental views. The Echoic Mention will similarly be less relevant if viewed as echoing Lee’s previous performances because it is not his usual style of entrance and so shares few relevant similarities with his past actions. By constructing a mental space around the echo interpreters will be able to use theory of mind evaluations to construct how Lee perceives this mental space and thus access the entirety of his figurative meaning.

To a certain extent Lee’s entire performance can be viewed as an act of ironic overstatement: Lee often makes use of hyperbolic and overstated irony when constructing his act, for example in the *Top Gear* segment reproduced in Chapter 1. In respect to this it is significant that Lee admits to echoing a prior version of himself when he performs:

It's similar in lots of ways, but the politics and the morality is exaggerated, he's more like the absolutist I was as a teenager. He's different enough that I'm aware of getting fed up of him when I'm doing the same show for a long time or going through a phase of writing. I'm sick of what he thinks, how he talks, how pleased with himself he is.

(Lee, quoted in Saner 2011: 1)

However because Lee makes heavy use of the ironic overstatement which characterises the *Top Gear* example the views of the absolutist teenager which Lee echoes are not inverted but simply reduced: the audience can laugh at the echoic source for his overblown desire for Richard Hammond to die, whilst still agreeing with his dislike of *Top Gear*. This shows how irony and the echoes via which it is employed are able to take several positions in relation to the literal utterance: sometimes negating it; sometimes enhancing it; and at other times reducing it.

# 5. Verbal Irony and Speaker Strategy

My previous arguments have concluded that if pragmatic studies limit the purpose of a speaker’s utterance to the transmission of linguistic information then they will be forced to characterise irony as an inefficient and cognitively costly means of discourse. It has been argued that, since this characterisation is intuitively incorrect, pragmatic studies of irony need to be modified to include the alternative benefits which irony provides a speaker over and above the advantages presented by literal speech. Chapter 5 is devoted to an exploration of what these benefits might be, and can be considered a model of the kind of speaker goals which future pragmatic studies will need to include if they are to fully describe both *how* and *why* speakers use irony.

## 5.1 The Ubiquity of Verbal Irony

Gibbs (2000) investigated the prevalence of irony in average and everyday discourse by investigating sixty-two conversations between friends and searching for evidence of ironic speech - which he defined as jocularity, sarcasm, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, and understatements. Whilst his terms do not precisely match the definitions of irony presented in pragmatic studies all of Gibbs’ categories involve a discrepancy between what is stated and what is actually the case, and so his conclusion that ‘these different forms of ironic language were part of 8% of all conversational turns’ should be taken as good evidence for the prevalence of irony in speech (for more on the prevalence of irony see Tannen 1984).

Interestingly, Gibbs’ findings reinforce the argument that it is a mistake to characterize irony as negative and oppositional, or indeed to assume that sarcasm is the most commonly found form of irony: ‘Analysis of the 289 utterances revealed 145 cases of jocularity (50%), 80 cases of sarcasm (28%), 34 instances of hyperbole (12%), 24 rhetorical questions (8%), and 6 cases of understatement (2%)’ (Gibbs 2000: 14). Gibbs defined jocularity as ‘where speakers teased one another in humorous ways’ in contrast to the negative evaluations presented in sarcasm. This fits McDonald’s (1999: 487) conception of banter presented in Section 1.1.

The prevalence of irony in normal conversations identified by Tannen (1984) and Gibbs (2000) indicates that irony is not an isolated phenomenon, and instead forms part of people’s everyday speech. The following sections will explore what motivates speakers to turn to irony as a mode of speech by presenting six possible benefits which irony can give to those who use it.

## 5.2 Verbal Irony as Humour

An obvious goal of irony is to be humorous, both for the positive social factors humour brings to discourse and for the speaker’s personal enjoyment. Kreuz et al. (1991) found that observers were almost seven times more likely to endorse the discourse goal ‘to be funny or witty’ as an attribute of ironic statements in comparison to equivalent literal statements. Similar links between irony and humour are shown by Roberts and Kreuz (1994) and Gibbs (2000) who found that almost all the ironic utterances covered in his study, with the exception of understatements, were viewed as humorous. The link between irony and humour is likely due to irony’s presentation of contrasting realities: Colston and O’Brien (2000) presented subjects with examples of verbal irony which involved differing levels of contrast between what was literally stated and what was implied. Participants read these scenarios and gave ratings on the degree of contrast between the comments and their referent situations, and assessments of the humour in the comments. Colston and O’Brien found that as the manipulated contrast increased so did the subject’s rating of the scenario as humorous. They concluded that there appears to be a direct and linear relationship between the amount of contrast perceived as present between a remark and its referent situation, and the amount of humour the remark produces.

Both humour and irony are eminently social phenomena: Ziv (2010: 11) points out that ‘a man can sometimes laugh when he is on his own, if he recalls something or is a witness to a situation that seems funny to him. As a rule, however, people tend to share humorous experiences together with their friends.’ Similarly whilst we have recognised instances in which irony is produced with no audience in mind, the majority of irony is verbalised towards an audience. Also in support of this point, Gibbs (2000: 22) found that irony was usually centered on a social topic: ‘the topic of each utterance type was invariably focused on some, usually immediate, human concern, most often having to do with the conversational participants or some person or event known to the participants.’ Ziv explores the functions that humour fulfils for the individual in the group, and concludes that humour can be used as a key for opening up interpersonal relations and can ensure entry into new social groups. In regards to this, Ziv focuses on child social groups and the role of ‘the clown’ (Ziv 2010: 12) who performs three social functions: firstly, he creates an atmosphere of enjoyment; secondly, he reflects the views of the group regarding external factors; and finally, he acts as a tester of boundaries and taboos (thereby receiving punishment in the place of other group members). Ziv also ties humour to politeness as it forms a way of saying things indirectly. This particularly applies to irony, as will be shown in Section 5.6.

When used within a group, humour can act as a social bond: Romero (2005) shows that humour creates a positive mental state that serves as a social lubricant, and that therefore humour facilitates more efficient and effective social processes. Romero summarises that in humorous situations social processes require less energy and effort to establish successful social bonds. Humour has also been shown to be an important contributor to group productivity because of its positive effect on group communication (Duncan 1982), group creativity (O’Quin and Derks 1997), and group stress reduction (Morreall 1991). The social benefits of humour are likely to apply to situations which match Romero and Cruthirds’s (2006) definition of ‘organizational humour’: humour that produces positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group or organization. This will presumably limit the social benefits listed above to irony which does not express a strong negative evaluation towards its target, particularly if that target is part of the immediate social situation.

For forms of irony which do not match Romero and Cruthird’s organizational humour, other benefits may apply. Meyer (2000) proposes incongruity humour which functions via an incongruity between bodies of knowledge and the subsequent resolution of the incongruity by the recipient. Meyer argues that this form of humour will aid in incongruity problem solving by granting an exaggerated reward (laughter) when the problem is resolved. Older approaches to humour such as Superiority Theory (LaFave et al. 1976; Ziv 1984) have postulated that humour can be used to attack people. This theory of humour is more related to aggressive variants of irony and allows the user to reinforce their social power and subjugate discourse minorities. In relation to this Gibbs found that ‘there appears to be a strong association between an ironic utterance mocking someone or something and it being viewed as humorous.’ (Gibbs 2000: 18).

Of course an intuitive benefit of humour is simply that it feels good to laugh. Ehrenreich (2006) compares laughter to the euphoric states experienced by performers in communal music making, dancers in group performance and even worshippers during certain religious rituals. Comparatively little biological research has explored this benefit, but Dunbar et al. (2011) argue that laughter releases endorphins which engender feeling of happiness. Interestingly the evidence for this release comes from data showing that laughter significantly increases the laugher’s pain thresholds. Because of this they source the pleasure of laughter as a physical rather than intellectual phenomenon: ‘Most of the phenomena that trigger endorphin release involve physical exercise (running, circuit-training, rowing, etc.) or other forms of pressure on the body surface). In the case of laughter, we assume that the functional mechanism is the muscular exertion involved in sustained laughter’ (Dunbar et al.: 1165).

## 5.3 Verbal Irony as Status Elevation

Friedman (2011), surveyed festival goers at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and found that high status individuals (those with ‘high cultural capital’ (HCC)) preferred comedy they characterized as ‘clever, ambiguous and experimental’ (2011: 359). As was shown in the discussion of Grice’s maxims, irony is clearly ambiguous and, based on its requirements to construct two opposing world views (an approach also supported in the Mental Space approaches to irony detailed in Section 4.5), it seems fair to argue that it can also be both clever and experimental. Significantly, the desire to pursue clever, ambiguous and experimental comedy was not solely driven by the interviewee’s appreciation of the comic material. Instead their appreciation was often bound to the knowledge that professing an admiration for such comedy marked them as high-status individuals: in describing the satirical show *Brass Eye,* an interviewee stated that,

If you sat a *Daily Mail* reader or a *Sun* reader in front of *Brass Eye* . . . well certainly I think there’s something in people that is so scared of the badness that they can’t come on the journey.

(Friedman 2011: 360)

An even clearer example of comedy’s link to status was shown by Dale who explained why he liked Stewart Lee as follows:

To be perfectly honest he makes me feel like I’m in an in-crowd of comedy nerds. It is almost like sitting an exam. You go in and you know you’re going to be challenged, you know a few people in the audience won’t get him. Overall it makes you feel a bit smug, and it’s an awful thing to say, but you look down on the people who don’t get him.

(Friedman 2011: 360)

Friedman links these attitudes to what he describes as the ‘disinterested aesthetic’ (drawn from Bourdieu 1984: 32) – a particular way of looking at the arts in which emotional objectivity and knowledge of artistic conventions is prized. Such an attitude is normally the reserve of high status individuals who are schooled in this method of criticism from an early age. Friedman claims that ‘many HCC respondents travelled as far as to reject what is considered the natural physiological reflex mechanism of comedy: laughter’ (2011: 361) quoting the following interview response as an example: ‘I don’t think laughter is integral. It’s really irrelevant for me personally. I suppose you’re taking in the artistic value rather than it just purely making you laugh’ (2011: 361).

The disinterested aesthetic and the comedians referenced in these interviews are strongly linked to the concept of irony: the writers of *Brass Eye* required the viewer to be knowledgeable about the conventions of TV/Tabloid news that they were satirizing; Stewart Lee requires his audiences to be knowledgeable in the conventions of stand-up comedy to fully appreciate his material. In more abstract terms, the link between irony and the disinterested aesthetic is due to the fact that the literal aspect of the utterance is disconnected, and thus disinterested, from/with reality. Walker (1990: 24) argues that irony ‘engages the intellect rather than the emotions’, whilst Austin-Smith (1990: 51) characterizes it as sitting ‘on the cutting edge of not caring’. Gibbs and Izzett (2005: 134) argue that irony is ‘inherently elitist in setting apart an elite (who understands and employs irony) from the masses (those who neither understand nor use irony)’. The identification of employment of irony here is key, and supports my intuition that speakers who admire high-profile irony users such as the comedians/satirists identified in Friedman’s survey will seek to imitate their actions in order to gain support from the high-status individuals who admit preference for this type of comedy. Even if the individual in question does not like the form of comedy identified in Friedman’s research, they may still be aware of its link to high status communities and thus use it to curry favour with comparatively powerful individuals. In summary if, as Friedman indicates, irony is emblematic of the comedy valued by high-status individuals, then it will make sense for discourse participants seeking to impress these individuals to employ irony (for research showing how appeals to similarity aid in social bonding see Section 2.3).

However there are certain studies which appear to contradict the link between disinterested comedy such as irony and high status backgrounds. Katz and Pexman (1997) provide evidence that the interpretation of irony is tied to an implicit grading of speaker backgrounds according to the likelihood that speakers from these backgrounds will use irony. This link between a preference for irony use and social background is similar to Friedman’s findings, though it must be noted that whilst Friedman was investigating preference for professional comedy, Katz and Pexman investigated everyday forms of verbal irony. However whereas Friedman found a link between ironic comedy and high status individuals both Katz and Pexman (1997) and Pexman and Olineck (2002) show that backgrounds which subjects ranked as highly likely to use irony are mostly low status, low education roles (army sergeant, cab driver, factory worker, police officer, and truck driver.) Pexman and Olineck reported that ‘the most sarcastic occupations tended to be those with lower perceived education levels and that education level was strongly associated with social status’ (2002: 217). A way of reconciling these opposing findings – on the one hand high status individuals appear to have a preference for irony and on the other irony interpretation is aided when hearers know that the speaker is from a low education/low status background – can be found if we return to the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora 1995; 1997; 2003). The Graded Salience Hypothesis shows that irony can be divided into conventional and non-conventional forms and that of these the non-conventional forms will be more cognitively difficult to process. The question of whether irony is linked to high status or low status backgrounds should thus be reframed as an investigation about the backgrounds linked to conventional irony and the backgrounds linked to non-conventional irony.

Bearing this in mind an important division between the two studies can be noted. Katz and Pexman (1997) investigate comparatively simple and conventional forms of irony which although they involve metaphor, form direct opposites to the literal utterance. Thus ‘Children are precious gems’ is interpreted ironically as children are not precious gems. In contrast the subjects of Friedman’s survey highlighted the complexity and ambiguity of the comics they admired. In particular the interviewee highlighting *Brass Eye* seems to be making clear that what is appealing about the show is its non-conventionality. *Brass Eye* satirized many topics, from the Troubles in Northern Ireland to the war on drugs. However it is most famous for its episode satirizing media sensationalism and fear-mongering regarding paedophilia (*Paedogeddon*)*.* This episode follows the standard model of Morris’ work on *Brass Eye* and *The Day Today* - a co-opting of media language and presentation coupled with large amounts of ironic overstatement which nevertheless people within the media industry fail to identify as insincere. In doing so Morris exposes the fundamental lack of research done by many media outlets that care more about getting their face on the television than they do about truthfully informing the general public. Thus, a supposed series of public safety announcements from minor celebrities sees figures such as Gary Lineker and Phil Collins endorsing a spoof charity, Nonce Sense. Phil Collins even goes as far as to say ‘I’m talking Nonce Sense’ without realising the irony of his statement. DJ Neil ‘Doctor’ Fox told viewers that ‘paedophiles have more genes in common with crabs than they do with you and me…Now that is scientific fact — there's no real evidence for it — but it *is* scientific fact’. Whilst by using the voices of the above celebrities *Paedogeddon* targeted celebrity led media campaigns in general, the duping of other celebrities directly targeted the voice of news media. Both TV presenter Phillipa Forester, whose background as a presenter on the BBC science and technology show *Tomorrow’s World* might have marked her as technologically knowledgeable in the eyes of the public*,* and ITN reporter Nicholas Owen, to whom viewers are likely to attribute some form of trusted journalist status, were duped into reporting that a new computer program HOECS (which they were even told was pronounced ‘hoax’) was allowing paedophiles to abuse children over the internet by feeling them through their computer monitors. Labour MP Syd Rapson said paedophiles were using ‘an area of internet the size of Ireland’.

The ironies presented in *Brass Eye* are complex because they do more than simply target celebrities or media outlets and state that ‘these people are wrong’. Instead the irony present in *Paedogeddon* deconstructs the very nature of the medium within which the figures it targets operate: in arguing why the ‘participants’ in *Brass Eye* fell for Morris’s ruse, Will Self comments that

They aren't real people any more they're hyperreal. They've made the Faustian pact of being that oxymoronic incarnation, 'television personalities’…Morris' elision of 'real' and 'unreal' is…at the very core of his attack on television itself. What Morris realises is that television isn't a 'medium' in any meaningful sense at all. Rather it's a skein of different media imprisoned in a bogus proscenium.

(Self 1997: 1)

In this sense the irony of *Brass Eye* creates a satirical subtext which can be described as a deconstruction of the supposed medium of the discourse itself. Significantly, Self uses similar terms to those surveyed by Friedman to appraise Morris’ worth as ‘an artist who has grown and reached the height of his powers’ and ‘a brilliant character actor acting the part of a brilliant character actor … this man is a true television artist’. This analysis of *Brass Eye* reinforces the idea that the form of irony valued by those Friedman interviewed is more complex and non-conventional than the irony presented in Katz and Pexman’s work.

The same non-conventional tendencies can be found in the work of Stewart Lee. Whilst Lee is not as openly satirical as Morris, he nevertheless uses irony to engage in an analysis of the medium he is working in – in this case a deconstruction of what comedy actually involves. In the example from *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One* which introduced this thesis Lee attacks non-pc shows such as *Top Gear*, who defend their non-pc comments by claiming that ‘it’s only a joke’:

I wish he’d been killed in that crash. Well, I do. I wish he’d been killed…and decapitated, and that the next series of *Top Gear* had been presented by Jeremy Clarkson, James May and Richard Hammond’s severed head on a stick…I wish, I wish his head had come off, and rolled along the track, and all shards of metal had gone in his eyes and blinded him…and then I, then I wish his head had rolled into a still-burning pool of motor oil but there was just enough sentience left in his spinal column for him to go ‘Ooh, that’s hot’ and then die…Not really. I don’t really think that. Right? And what I was doing there, as everyone here in this room now understands, just in case there’s anyone from the *Mail on Sunday* watching this, is I was using an exaggerated form of the rhetoric and the implied values of *Top Gear* to satirise the rhetoric and implied values of *Top Gear*. And it is a shame to have to break character and explain that.

(Lee 2012: 56-63)

What is non-conventional about this example is the openness of Lee’s revelation that he is speaking ironically and only echoing the language used by the Top Gear presenters. Lee openly exposes the conceits of stand-up comedy by admitting that his attack on *Top Gear* was an insincere attack performed ‘in character’. As such, whilst the target of his satire is obviously the likes of Clarkson who think that ‘it was just a joke’ is a suitable defence, this passage also deconstructs the medium of stand-up comedy in a similarly non-conventional and transgressive way to that of *Brass Eye*.

Though in the *Top Gear* exampleLee is open here about the implicit echo to which he is referring there are other cases in which his ironic echoes are much less direct. In a short set performed at the insect/music festival *Pestival 2009* Lee uses satire to expose a different set of comedic conventions – those that are devoted to modelling one’s material for a specific crowd. Lee begins his act by stating that

I’ve been asked to come here and do stand-up tonight. And I was reluctant because, as you can imagine, it’s difficult to know how to pitch it. It’s difficult to know how many of you are here because you are fans of insects, and how many of you are here because you are Resonance FM listeners, and thus fans of improvised and experimental music, and whether there is any crossover between them.

(Lee 2010: 344)

Lee exposes the ridiculousness of specifically dividing audiences in this way, ironically echoing the views of a (fictional) comedy organiser Miss B. Nicholls by reciting her correspondence with him. The letters detail the expectations the organisers have of Lee’s act, for instance that ‘we require your humorous material on the night to deal with insects and insects only’, and the penalties if Lee fails to comply: ‘straying into any other areas of subject material will be considered a breach of contract, and if such a breach of contract occurs we intend to prosecute you within the full force of the law’ (Lee 2010: 346). The Miss Nicholls character represents establishment comedy and establishment comedy commissioners. Her desire is to control the comedic output of those whom she hires; both in subject matter and style. This is despite her evident lack of humour, and, more important to the context of Lee’s act, her lack of understanding about how humour functions (she thinks that comedy is restricted simple setup and punch-line jokes). This desire to control also extends to the audience, and her pigeon-holing of the *Pestival* audience into those who will only enjoy simplistic insect-based humour. Thus, just as Brass Eye co-opts voices from within the medium of television entertainment to criticise and deconstruct the medium of television entertainment, Lee co-opts a voice from the world of comedy production to deconstruct the principles via which that world operates.

In summary then both *Brass Eye* and Stewart Lee present complex non-conventional uses of irony that can be created by both extreme overstatements during satirical attacks on popular opinion and by satirical texts which attack the very medium by which they are transmitted. This explains why, whilst simple forms of irony are connected by interpreters with low-status/education background, high-status interpreters state a preference for comedians/satirists like Lee and Morris. Gibbs and Izzett (2005) indicate that people who admire irony will attempt to employ it in their own forms of speech, and thus it can be predicted that if users are able to construct complex, non-conventional forms of irony then they will gain the approval of high status interpreters and thus raise their social standing.

## 5.4 Verbal Irony as Social Bonding

A major benefit that irony provides users is the ability to manipulate social situations to their advantage in a greater way than equivalent literal forms of speech. This capacity of irony can take two forms: firstly, irony can be employed as a strategy for strengthening bonds between the user and the audience; and secondly, irony can be employed as a strategy to weaken bonds between the speaker (and implicitly those that wish to associate with the speaker) and the target of the irony.

In respect to the first aspect of this strategy, Gibbs reported that ‘Thirty-two percent of the time, addressees responded to jocularity by saying something ironic in return’ (2000: 16) and that ‘Thirty-three percent of the time, addressees responded to sarcasm by saying something ironic in return’ (2000: 18). He characterized this behaviour as the discourse participants creating ironic routines and argued that this demonstrates the collaborative power of irony. Gibbs and Colston (2002: 189) referencing the findings of Gibbs (2000) argue that ‘irony is clearly often employed for jocular, humorous purposes that bond speakers and listeners closer together.’ In this sense irony users are able to create ad hoc communities in which other discourse participants are encouraged to share the speaker’s values. The construction of shared-value environments links back to the studies highlighted in Section 2.3: Byrne (1997) argued that users looking to strengthen social bonds seek to emphasize their similarity to the social group. Similarly Hogg and Terry indicate that individuals trying to join a social group eavesdrop on members of that group in order to learn how they might make themselves seem similar (See also Miller and Jablin 1991; Preece et al. 2004; Burke et al. 2010). Gibbs’ research indicates that a use of irony can create a shared ironic space in which similar viewpoints and linguistic practices can be shared.

However there is also a less communal way in which irony can be used to manipulate social bonds. The second aspect of this strategy is a result of irony’s potential to target other discourse members or other social groups/individuals that the discourse members are aware of. This strategy can be viewed as strengthening social bonds in the group by uniting them against the target of the irony. Irony’s necessity for a target is comparable to satire’s need for a target and the triadic structure Simpson identified. This was touched on in Section 2.3 but deserves a fuller analysis here. Simpson argues that satirical discourse involves three positions, as depicted below,

(Simpson 2003: 86)

Within this framework he argues that,

the bonds between the subject positions in satirical discourse can be renegotiated and redefined. The relationship is such that ‘successful’ satire, in keeping with the general principle of humour delivery and reception, tends to ‘shorten’ the connection between positions A and B, thereby bringing these discursive positions closer together… A successful satirical discourse event, given its aggressive function, also distances both parties from the target of humour, thereby lengthening the bonds between position C and the other two positions.

(Simpson 2003: 87)

If we apply this scheme to irony we can see that similar relationships might exist. The speaker (ironist) is related to both his audience (the ironees) and the target of his irony (the ironised). Successful irony will be those uses of irony which gain support from the rest of the social group, perhaps because they believe the remark to be humorous, but ideally because they will agree with the evaluative attitude which the speaker’s irony poses towards its target.

Simpson’s view is similar to the argument proposed by Gibbs (1999) and Gibbs and Izzett (2005), who suggest that the audience of an ironic utterance can be divided into two camps: those who recognise the use of irony (wolves) and those that do not (sheep). The wolf group can in turn be sub-divided into those who agree with the irony (confederates) and those that do not (victims). The goal of aggressive irony can be conceptualised as maximising the number of wolf confederates in the discourse, a result which Gibbs and Izzett predict will increase the social solidity of this group. Gibbs and Izzet’s terms are useful for they allow us to divide between uses of irony in which the target is intended to understand that they are being attacked (wolf victims) and uses of irony in which the target is not intended to be aware they are being attacked (sheep victims). In this latter case, the speaker exposes a contrast between those ‘in on the joke’ and those unaware of it, and thus strengthens the social bonds of those that do understand whilst weakening their link to the uncomprehending target (Gibbs 1999). Overall, Gibbs and Izzett offer basically the same strategy for irony as Simpson does for satire – they both allow the speaker to move certain discourse participants closer to themselves and away from the target of the irony/satire.

This capacity of irony to manipulate social bonds having been recognised, there is still the question of why irony is *more effective* at this discourse goal than its literal equivalent: if I want to attack another discourse participant why not do it directly by simply stating my criticism and encouraging others in the group to agree with me? Gibbs and Izzett hint that a possible reason to use irony against unwitting targets is to expose their lack of knowledge in comparison with the speaker’s audience. Alternatively, under the Echoic Mention Theory it is possible that by repeating the specific voice of the victim of the satire irony strengthens the criticism it presents. Additionally it may be that by presenting a comparatively unusual form of speech irony users are able to make their statements stand out and garner more attention from their audience. Finally it is possible that irony is simply a more persuasive form of argument than its equivalent literal utterance, and thus that interpreters of irony stand a better chance of being converted to the speaker’s position than interpreters of literal statements. Since this facet of irony can also be asocial (i.e. used towards entirely intellectual goals) it merits being analysed under a separate heading.

## 5.5 Verbal Irony as Persuasion

Haverkate (1990) supports the capacity for irony to act as a persuasive device and uses a speech act analysis of irony to argue that ironic speakers produce certain perlocutionary effects on their listeners, the primary ones being to break patterns of expectations. This view is also supported by evidence from Gibbs and Izzett (2005), who argue that the extra attention involved in resolving the discrepancy between what is said and what is intended results in the interpreter being more likely to accept the proposition of the ironic statement. Indeed, much of the strength of irony as a persuasive device is due to the contrast principle which Gibbs and Izzett (2005: 138) describe thus, ‘if the second item presented is distinctly different from the first, we will perceive it as being more different than it actually is.’ This assertion is supported by Stern (1990: 1) who examines irony in relation to advertising and concludes that, ‘Irony is characterized by a blend of pleasure and persuasion in messages that ‘teach by delight.’ It is the basis of advertisements using humor to convey social and intellectual rewards to elite audiences.’ Whaley and Holloway (1996) argue that irony is an effective strategy in intellectual debates, a theory supported by the analysis of rebuttal strategies performed by Colston and Gibbs (1998). Whaley and Wagner (2000) provide an interesting addendum to this feature of irony, pointing out that whilst irony may be intellectually persuasive it does not always make the user well liked. This is an important point and will require studies of ironic utterances to differentiate between the user’s desire to increase the rhetorical power of their argument and their desire to curry favour with other discourse participants.

As was seen in my discussion of the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora 1995; 1997; 2003) and the Direct Access view (Gibbs 1986; 1994) the cognitive evidence for this view is limited to novel/original ironies. It must be recognised however that these theories are only concerned with the immediate understanding of the ironic utterance and make no conclusions in respect of the capacity for irony to produce cognitive dissonance after the utterance has been understood. If ironic utterances are able to make interpreters hold two cognitively dissonant concepts in their minds (i.e. what was expected and what is) they will likely try to reduce the discomfort of the dissonance by either rejecting one concept or adding cognitions to bridge the dissonant concepts. Thus irony can provide a tool for speakers who wish to engender a decision making process in their audience by placing the audience in a cognitively uncomfortably environment. Glasser and Ettema (1993: 324) observe this when they state that ‘irony is an aggressively intellectual exercise that fuses fact and value, requiring us to construct alternative hierarchies and choose among them. Aronson et al. (1991) explored this capacity of irony in relation to HIV transmission by asking two groups of students to film a video about the benefits of safe sex and the dangers of unprotected sex. After filming, one of the groups was asked to recollect instances from their past which did not conform to the instructions in the video they had just produced, thereby making them recognise the hypocritical nature of their production. The students who the researchers confronted (i.e. those who were placed in a state of cognitive dissonance by the irony of their actions) ended up purchasing more condoms after the study ended than those students who were not confronted. Moreover, the retention rate of safe sex was higher in the confronted group than the non-confronted group.

## 5.6 Verbal Irony as Politeness

Traditionally irony has been considered by pragmatic studies to be a method of modifying insulting or critical remarks as a form of politeness/impoliteness (Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson 1987). Dews et al.’s (1995) findings support the view that irony can provide social benefits to the speaker by acting as a way to reduce the impact of critical comments.

In Experiment 1, participants read short stories that end with either a literal or an ironic insult. Ironic insults are rated as less critical than literal insults, and the ironic speaker is rated as less annoyed than the literal speaker. In addition, the speaker-target relationship is affected less negatively when the insult is delivered ironically rather than literally. These results are obtained regardless of whether the addressee or a third person is the target of the remark and regardless of whether the story characters know one another or have just met.

(Dews et al. 1995: 1)

Gibbs (2000: 24) supports this view, stating that ‘Even the more critical sarcastic comments were often viewed as critical only 50% of the time, with close to 75% of all sarcastic remarks being viewed as humorous.’

Dews et al. also found that irony can have social drawbacks when used in conjunction with praise,

In Experiment 2, participants read similar short stories that end with either a literal or ironic compliment. Results mirror those of Experiment 1. Ironic compliments are rated as less praising than literal compliments, and the ironic speaker is rated as less pleased than the literal speaker. The speaker-target relationship is affected less positively when the compliment is ironic than when it is literal. As in Experiment 1, these results are obtained regardless of addressee or familiarity of the story characters.

(Dews et al. 1995: 1)

Dews et al. (1995: 347) refer to this strategy as the ‘Tinge Hypothesis’. They conclude that speakers choose irony over literal language ‘in order to be funny, to soften the edge of an insult, to show themselves to be in control of their emotions, and to avoid damaging their relationship with the addressee.’ This approach is reminiscent of Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory (1987), which proposes that politeness functions by negating threats to speaker face. As such Tinge Theory provides reason to suppose that the mechanics posited by pragmatic theories of politeness such as Brown and Levinson’s work will be transferable to the study of irony. The potential for this pragmatic cross-pollination will be examined in detail in Chapter 6.

However Tinge Theory is not unanimously supported: Leggitt and Gibbs (2000) found that speakers who made sarcastic statements were perceived as feeling more angry, disgusted, and scornful than speakers who made non-sarcastic statements, whilst Toplak and Katz (2000) reported that speakers who used a sarcastic criticism were perceived as being more verbally aggressive and offensive than speakers who used a literal criticism. The discrepancy between these studies may be a consequence of the many variables surrounding irony. As I have discussed throughout, irony is a highly complex phenomenon which can be enacted in a large variety of ways, and the interpretation of which is shaped by a large number of factors. Getting a reliable base-line example of irony between these studies is therefore very difficult. Pexman and Olinek (2002, see also Pexman and Zvaigzne 2004) argue that the difference in the findings presented above is due to the perspective taken by subjects when evaluating the ironic utterances. They show that when speaker intent is assessed, irony is viewed as more critical than the literal equivalent, but that when asked to evaluate the general social impression created by the remark, subjects perceive irony as a less critical strategy than the equivalent literal statement. Thus it is necessary to note a division between irony strongly directed at a lone discourse participant and irony used in a group of discourse participants.

## 5.7 Verbal Irony as a Personal Style

As has been noted throughout this study one of the greatest problems in pragmatically justifying the use of irony is the relatively low success rate of ironic speech compared to literal speech. Gibbs (2000: 15) found that for his categories of Jocularity, Sarcasm, Hyperbole, Rhetorical Question and Understatement the respective failure rates of the ironic utterance were .05, .04, .00, .09, and .12. Irony carries a greater risk and therefore, to justify its use, it must carry a greater reward than literal speech provides. I have already covered several social benefits that irony can bring, but research on ERP brain events by Regel et al. (2010) offers an alternative benefit specifically tied to the failure rate irony suffers from: that successful uses of irony (i.e. ironic utterances that are recognised as ironic) increase the chance that future uses of irony will also be successful.

Regel et al.’s experiment involved comparing a more ironic speaker with a more literal speaker:

Short discourses were created in which two particular speakers interacted with other interlocutors, and who could be expected to comment on described events in a different way, i.e. either ironically or literally. In these discourses, one of the speakers makes frequent use of irony, and consequently appears to be highly ironic; the other speaker appears to be rather sincere by using irony quite rarely.’

(Regel et al. 2010: 123)

The experiment consisted of two sessions: in the first session, speaker 1 (the non-ironic speaker) used irony 30% of the time and speaker 2 (the ironic speaker) used irony 70% of the time; in the second session both speakers used irony 50% of the time. After each test the subjects were asked to evaluate which speaker had been more ironic, or if both had been equally ironic. In the first test ‘78% (SD 0.42) of the participants correctly perceived the ironic speaker as being very ironic, 15% (SD 0.36) estimated the non-ironic speaker as the more ironic one, and 5% (SD 0.22) felt neither speaker was more ironic.’ This result supports the view that irony carries a failure rate, though the test was not designed to specify precisely how high the failure rate for each ironic utterance was. In the second test, where a correct attribution of irony would have rated the speakers as equally ironic, ‘Only 25% (SD 0.44) of the participants correctly noticed that neither speaker was more ironic than the other. Forty-four percent (SD 0.50) still perceived the ironic speaker as the more ironic one, and 33% (SD 0.47) considered the non-ironic speaker as highly ironic in the second session.’

The results of the ERP showed that,

a large P600 occurred for irony by the ironic speaker, but not for irony by the non-ironic speaker. Thus, the irony-related P600 seen for the second session appeared to be modulated by prior pragmatic information about each speaker’s communicative style in using irony.

(Regel et al. 2010: 124)

The P600 ERP has been shown by previous studies (Coulson et al. 1998; Hagoort et al. 1999; Hagoort 2007) to increase in relation to semantic information and stimulus probability – i.e. hearer expectations of discourse. As well as the comparatively late information processing of P600 activity the study also found evidence of P200 ERP activity, revealing that, due to prior knowledge of speaker conduct, ‘An impact on initial phases of processing was found as early as 200 ms, which indicates that pragmatic information about two particular speakers had an early influence on the processing of sentence final words’ (Regel et al. 2010: 132). The goal of ‘irony as an elevator of social status’ might be summarized as the goal of ‘being understood as a person who uses irony’. Regel et al. reveal that ‘being understood as a person who uses irony’ is also beneficial on the level of discourse expectations and therefore the very success rate of the speech act itself.

## 5.8 Summary

Irony presents several potential benefits for those who employ it, ranging from *social* features which can manipulate group dynamics and the perception of the speaker by other discourse members, to *asocial* persuasion strategies devoted solely to improving the force of a speaker’s argument and *self-focused* benefits borne out in the personal pleasures users may feel when producing irony. These benefits provide an opening step for pragmatic studies of irony that wish to explain why speakers choose to employ ironic rather than literal language. Introducing these strategies into a pragmatic framework will not be an easy task, for it is possible that the suitability of irony in respect to each different discourse goal will depend on different contextual factors. Moreover it is possible that the discourse goals highlighted so far may overlap (for example irony as humour may provide benefits regarding social bonding), and so pragmatic studies which appeal to these goals may need to develop a method of distinguishing the primary goal of the utterance from overlapping secondary considerations. Additionally the divide between conventional and non-conventional irony noted in previous chapters will require an analogous treatment in regards to speaker strategy for, as my assessment of Stewart Lee and *Brass Eye* indicates*,* conventional and non-conventional irony appear to be suitable to different discourse goals. However without the inclusion of these speaker strategies the increased cognitive processing irony requires from interpreters and the risk of miscommunicating inherent to ironic modes of speech, results in pragmatic depictions of irony that are in danger of presenting it as an irrational method of discourse.

# 6. The Pragmatics of Speaker Strategy

The mechanics of how irony relates to the strategies posited by Chapter 5 are an under-studied aspect of pragmatics and there is a lack of any prior research into how pragmatics might model and explain how these strategies impact the construction of ironic utterances. Pragmatic studies of politeness however have had to deal with similar issues regarding speaker strategy, and it is therefore informative to see how they have approached the problem of integrating these concerns into a pragmatic framework. Chapter 6 examines whether politeness models are a) a sufficient representation of speaker strategy and b) conducive to the representation of ironic speech strategy. Two approaches to pragmatically representing the politeness strategies of speakers will be analysed. The first of these proposes that additional maxims are needed to represent speaker strategy, and so is referred to as maxim-based (Lakoff 1973; 1989; Leech 1983; Gu 1990; Kasper 1990; Thomas 1995; O’driscoll 1996). The second proposes that pragmatics include a reference to speaker face, and so is referred to as face-based (Brown and Levinson 1978; 1987). Section 5.6 shows that irony can be involved as a strategy of politeness, and politeness in general is a comparable mode of speech to ironic communication because, like irony, it can be enacted in a variety of ways (as formality, as deference, as indirectness, as appropriateness, as etiquette, and tact; see Fraser 1990; Kasper 1990; Meier 1995; Thomas 1995) and on a variety of levels (for example on lexical levels, syntactic levels and behavioural levels such as choice of tone and body language). The following sections will focus on the pragmatic frameworks proposed by Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987) but first I will assess those theories which view politeness not as overt speaker strategy but simply as sub-consciously acknowledged socio-linguistic conventions.

## 6.1 Is Politeness a Speaker Strategy?

*Prima facie* politeness should be an act of linguistic strategy, since it involves modifying one’s speech to gain certain social advantages, or perhaps to avoid social disadvantages. Nevertheless to be relevant to my arguments regarding irony we must be able to conceive of politeness as an *overt* speaker strategy and it is here where potential problems emerge. Does politeness involve internal calculations on the part of the speaker regarding the benefits that being polite will provide, or is politeness simply a societal imposition on speech which goes unanalysed by the speaker? The latter view has been supported by several critics: for Lakoff (1975: 53) ‘to be polite is saying the socially correct thing’; for Adegbija (1989: 58) politeness occurs when one ‘speaks or behaves in a way that is socially and culturally acceptable and pleasant to the hearer’; for Nwoye (1992: 310) ‘being polite is ... conforming to socially agreed codes of good conduct’; for Watts et al. (1992: 2) politeness ‘help[s] us to achieve effective social living’; and for Ide (1993: 7) politeness is behaviour ‘without friction.’

Fraser and Nolen (1981) are typical of this view, since although they acknowledge Gricean principles of pragmatics (Grice 1967a; 1967b; 1968; 1969; 1981) such as the Cooperative Principle, and Brown and Levinson’s use of *face*, they are keen to move politeness away from overt speaker calculations into the more general realm of implicit social conduct. Fraser and Nolen begin with the recognition that all parties in discourse enter the discourse with preconceived notions about the initial set of rights and obligations that will determine, at least for the preliminary stages, what the participants can expect from the other(s). The simplest and most unalterable of these obligations come from basic conventions of language - intelligible speech, turn taking, not ignoring other discourse participants and so on. More complex, and thus more susceptible to change, are those conditions imposed by social convention – for example speaking very quietly whilst in a library. It is on this level that the politeness structures of various societies will be enforced, whether this takes the form of a simple ‘please’ or ‘thank you’, or the more complex recognitions of status required in some societies. Finally we must recognize the degree to which past familiarity, and prior experience of discourse between participants is able to shape the expectations of discourse. These features will be determined by the relevant status, power and role of speakers, as well as the context in which the discourse takes place. Fraser and Nolen summarise the above as the Conversational Contract, and argue that politeness is simply those actions which adhere to it. Since the Conversational Contract is a tacit agreement rather than an overt decision by each discourse participant, and because many features of the Conversational Contract are created by the society in which the discourse participants exist rather than solely by the discourse participants themselves, Fraser and Nolen view politeness as the default speaker setting rather than an overt act of speaker strategy: rational discourse participants are aware that they are to act within the negotiated constraints and generally do so without overt consideration.

Another argument against the importance of speaker strategy in politeness highlights the importance of social indexing or discernment. Kasper (1990: 196) argues that politeness is not just a strategic device employed to perform ‘linguistic action in order to reach specific communicative goals... [but also a matter of] social indexing.’ Similar critiques come from researchers working with Far Eastern languages, particularly Chinese and Japanese. Authors working with the Japanese language argue that in Japanese culture the individual is more concerned with abiding by prescribed norms of behaviour than with maximizing personal benefit: Ide (1989: 223) argues for a view of politeness as a system that operates ‘independently of the current goal a speaker intends to achieve’; Mao (1994: 467) claims that in Japan to be polite is to ‘recognize each other’s social position and to convey such a recognition through the proper linguistic means’. The common strand running through these studies is that the self-oriented characterization of language strategy proposed by Western theories can be problematic in non-Western cultures where ‘self is not valued nearly as much’ (Ji 2000: 1060). These studies show that it is necessary to divide politeness into discernment politeness (non-strategized politeness governed/guided by societal constraints, concerned with not breaking societal codes) and volitional politeness (strategized user governed/guided politeness, concerned with maximising personal benefit). Thus, in referring to Chinese culture, Gu (1990: 242) contrasts ‘normative politeness’ with ‘instrumental politeness’, drawing on the distinction between discernment politeness and volitional politeness respectively and emphasizing the normative nature of politeness in Chinese society.

The above studies clearly show that politeness as a speaker strategy is not entirely based around overt strategic planning, but is instead sometimes governed by ‘intergroup restraints on speech that are independent of the speaker’s individual rational intentions’ (Janney and Arndt 1993: 18). Therefore, in any analysis of the strategies of discourse it will be necessary to first establish the conventions of discourse within which the discourse event plays out. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to presume that the above studies remove the importance of recognizing speaker strategy entirely. The decision of the speaker to operate via these strategies must remain an overt choice, and can still be considered a rational, goal driven strategy in the long term for if a speaker wants to advance in a society he must make himself a member of that society and therefore must willingly constrain himself. Thus any speech act which is in concordance with societal speech conventions will carry the implicit message that the speaker desires to remain a member of that society, (with the added coda that this desire may be the result of either whole-hearted support or a fear of reprisals for leaving the society). Furthermore there is clearly still space for volitional politeness to be analysed, and the processes via which this aspect of politeness are explained still hold potential in regards to explaining the pragmatics of irony.

Bearing this in mind, we should be wary of dividing the two concepts of discernment politeness and volitional politeness entirely. O’Driscoll (1996: 17) argues that the two types of politeness are interconnected – ‘two halves of the spectrum which allows more... [or] less linguistic choice respectively in the enactment of politeness, more (volitional)... [or] less (discernment) negotiation of the roles of the participants and their relationship’. Ji (2000) develops a similar argument, claiming that discernment and volitional politeness differ only in weight and importance from situation to situation. In such a system both aspects of politeness work together to achieve smooth communication, but are different in their focus: in the discernment aspect the focus is placed on the socially prescribed norm; while in the volitional aspect the focus is on the speaker’s intention. O’Driscoll and Ji hint that there is still space for a universal system of politeness, and thus that similar work might be applied to studying irony – where an analogous interdependence might be found between the societal constraints on speech and the individual’s strategy regarding the employment of irony.

In summary, whilst certain aspects of politeness (deference, social indexing etc.) do not represent overt linguistic strategies, there is still a large aspect of polite speech which involves the individual speaker internally calculating the best way to speak. Thus, although the following attempts of pragmatic theorists to explain the linguistic strategy of politeness should not be viewed as universally explaining the entirety of the politeness process, there are still enough aspects of polite speech open to overt individual choice for their findings to be applicable towards analogous attempts to represent the strategies of irony in a pragmatic framework. The most significant pragmatic politeness theories have built upon the models laid out by Leech (1983), who viewed politeness as generating new conversational maxims, and Brown and Levinson (1987), who explained politeness via the concept of face. These theories will now be considered, and their applicability to pragmatic studies of irony evaluated.

## 6.2 The Maxim-Based Approach to Pragmatic Politeness

The maxim-based approach represents the work of Lakoff (1973; 1989), Leech (1983), Kasper (1994), Gu (1990), O’Driscoll (1996), Thomas (1995) and others who explain the social strategies of speakers via the introduction of new conversational maxims. For Lakoff and Leech this meant the introduction of the Politeness Principle, a maxim which operates alongside Grice’s original Cooperative Principle, and serves primarily ‘to reduce friction in personal interaction’ (Lakoff 1989: 101). Leech’s Politeness Principle proceeds as follows: ‘Other things being equal, minimize the expression of beliefs which are unfavorable to the hearer and at the same time (but less important) maximize the expression of beliefs which are favorable to the hearer’ (Fraser 1990: 225). The Politeness Principle operates via the following sub-maxims:

Tact Maxim: Minimize hearer costs; maximize hearer benefit; do not put others in a position where they have to break the Tact Maxim.

Generosity Maxim: Minimize your own benefit; maximize your hearer's benefit.

Approbation Maxim: Minimize hearer dispraise; maximize hearer praise.

Modesty Maxim: Minimize self-praise; maximize self-dispraise.

Agreement Maxim: Minimize disagreement between yourself and others; maximize agreement between yourself and others.

Sympathy Maxim: Minimize antipathy between yourself and others; maximize sympathy between yourself and others.

Furthermore, Leech argues that each of these maxims are governed by a set of scales (for the sake of brevity only the scales of the ‘Tact Maxim’ will be described).

Cost-Benefit Scale: Represents the cost or benefit of an act to the speaker and hearer.

Optionality Scale: Represents the relevant illocutions, ordered by the amount of choice which the speaker permits the hearer.

Indirectness Scale: Represents the relevant illocutions, ordered in terms of hearer 'work' to infer speaker intention.

Authority Scale: Represents the relative right for speaker to impose wishes on the hearer.

Social Scale: Represents the degree of familiarity between the speaker and hearer.

These scales impact the Tact Maxim as follows: As the social costs to the hearer increase, the hearer authority relative to the speaker increases, and the social distance between speaker and hearer increases, so too will the need for the speaker to speak indirectly, and grant the hearer optionality in their response.

Leech goes on to differentiate between relative and absolute politeness. Relative politeness refers to situational modifications of speech, i.e. those aspects of speech which are the product of speaker performance, whilst absolute politeness refers to the inherent qualities of the speaker’s mode. Leech uses the concept of absolute politeness to make the claim for inherently polite/impolite illocutions - ordering for instance is described as an inherently impolite mode of speech. This aspect of Leech’s work has drawn significant criticism, as will be detailed at the end of this section.

Can Leech’s maxims interact with the speech strategies of irony? Leech certainly viewed them as compatible, hence his attempt to formulate an ‘Irony Principle’: ‘if you must cause offence, at least do so in a way which doesn’t overly conflict with the Politeness Principle, but allows the hearer to arrive at the offensive point of your remark indirectly, by way of implicature’ (1983: 82). However Leech’s view of irony only includes its relation towards politeness rather than other social goals and it views irony as a completely negative concept only designed to cause offence - ‘the IP, by enabling us to bypass politeness, promotes the antisocial use of language’ (1983: 142). As was shown in Section 1.1 this is a short-sighted view of irony – indeed Leech’s principle might better be described as the principle of sarcasm. Even in this iteration though, the lack of recognition of the other pro-social goals and abilities of irony (even as sarcasm) would remain. Clearly a different approach is needed.

In regard to the politeness strategies noted in Section 6.1, Leech’s Irony Principle and Politeness Principle may be sufficient: provided that a means can be devised to distinguish between irony that enhances criticism and irony that mutes it, irony could take its place as one of the forms of indirectness/optionality mentioned as affecting the tact maxim for instance. Incorporating the other goals of ironic speakers however requires a larger change, and would likely require the introduction of alternative principles representing different speech goals, each with their own alternative set of sub-maxims and scales. A ‘Persuasion Principle’ might proceed as follows:

All things being equal, maximise through form and presentation the rhetorical force of one’s utterances, and minimise the capacity for contrary response from other discourse participants.

Such a principle would need to have sub-maxims related to such aspects as politeness/civility and these could be governed by scales which involved a representation of social position, relative speaker authority etc. much as Leech identifies. Irony could then appear as the outcome of the interplay between different maxims and scales regarding who the speaker is, what they are arguing for and against whom they are arguing. The above is a simplistic account but it provides an idea of how irony could function under maxim-based frameworks.

My analysis of Leech has required a condensation of his work that does not aid in reducing its apparent complexity, but it is nevertheless fair to characterise Leech’s approach to politeness as highly theoretical. Critics of Leech’s framework argue that it gets lost in detail and that it is thus too theoretical, too rigid and too removed from linguistic reality to be able to account for actual language usage (Watts et al. 1992). Furthermore, any adaption of Leech’s model will require the production of new maxims to describe new social situations: Gu (1990) for example, formulates the self-denigrating maxim and the address maxim. There thus seems to be no clear-cut way of restricting the number of maxims that Leech’s framework presents, and for this reason Jucker (1988: 377) characterises the theory as more of an ‘ad hoc ... and open ended taxonomy’ than a linguistic model. The problem of maxim-proliferation will only be exacerbated by the introduction of irony. We have seen that there are several speech strategies associated with irony, and that given the many forms irony can take it is likely that the same speech goal may be reached using one of several different forms of irony. Furthermore it is correct to assume that the social setting, including the language conventions on which Leech focused, will differ from user to user. Indeed the idea of analysing even a short and simple conversation via reference to speaker maxims alone becomes a frighteningly laborious and complex task. In a rigorous account each utterance would have to be dealt with and arguments made about why a specific value is being given for each scale.

Oddly, Leech can also be criticised for not producing enough theoretical material: whilst he produces a plethora of maxims, scales and motivations to explain politeness, Leech fails to provide any additional information about how the maxims are to be applied, what scales are available at different times, how they are to be formulated, what their dimensions are, and to when and to what degree different contextual factors come into effect.

Similarly troublesome are Leech’s conclusions about inherently polite/impolite forms of speech. It is difficult to see how irony would fit into such a view – given that irony can be both positive and negative (i.e. an ironic compliment or an ironic insult). To quote Fraser (1990: 223) ‘sentences are not ipso facto polite, nor are languages more or less polite. It is only speakers who are polite, and then only if their utterances reflect an adherence to the obligations they carry in that particular conversation.’ Fraser’s remarks have led Leech to re-evaluate the terms of his argument: Leech (2005) uses Semantic Politeness and Pragmatic Politeness in place of Absolute Politeness and Relative Politeness. This is designed to capture the notion that semantically some utterances are conventionally considered to be polite/impolite. Culpeper (2005: 41) notes that, whilst it is true that it is speakers rather than sentences who are polite/impolite, the sentences ‘Hello how are you?’ and ‘You fucking cunt!’ are conventionally viewed across many cultures as holding different politeness values, and that it is natural for pragmatic theories of language to reflect this. Bousfield (2008) refers to this as pragmalinguisticallymodified language,

some lexico-syntactic forms are conventionally held to be im/polite across multiple regularly occurring well known (to the interactants) discourses and discourse contacts and, as such their enactment produces the pragmatic effects that the participants conventionally believe or understand it to hold.

(Bousfield (2008: 54)

Hence why, under most circumstances, ‘You fucking cunt!’ will be taken as an impolite statement, but under special circumstances in which the lexico-syntactic forms are conventionally understood to be different it may not. This aspect of Leech’s work is reminiscent of the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora 1995; 1997; 2003) with its delineation of conventional and non-conventional irony, and under Leech’s new proposals irony could be thought of as conventionalized irony and placed alongside the conventions of semantic politeness.

To conclude this commentary on Leech’s approach to irony, it must be summarized that, due to the flaws of an entirely maxim-based approach, it is better to look at Leech’s theory as identifying areas of interest for the pragmatic analysis of irony rather than as a framework to be used in its entirety. In particular Leech’s sub-maxims and scales indicate important areas of study such as the degree to which social power, social distance, indirectness and optionality change the way that discourse participants speak. These areas of interest extend beyond politeness and will likely be involved in the other irony-related speech goals highlighted in Chapter 5. Furthermore Leech’s later clarification of semantic and pragmatic politeness can aid in the representation of the divide between conventional and non-conventional irony, since his terms depict the analogous societal conventions of politeness. Evidence that Leech’s work holds application outside of his own maxim-based approach is provided by Terkourafi (2007: 344) who points out that semantic and pragmatic politeness can extend to other pragmatic frameworks such as Brown and Levinson’s face-based approach: ‘some linguistic expressions (conventionalised ones) do face-work more frequently and therefore more economically than others’.

## 6.3 The Face-Based Approach to Pragmatic Politeness

Brown and Levinson (1987: 5) were among those who criticised Leech’s model for its proliferation of maxims: ‘every discernible pattern of language used does not, *eo ipso,* require a maxim or principle to produce it’. Instead, they focus on the retention of Grice’s core maxims and aim to provide an explanation of how rational speakers interact with them:

at the heart of Grice's proposals…there is a working assumption by conversationalists of the rational and efficient nature of talk. It is against that assumption that polite ways of talking show up as deviations, requiring rational explanations on the part of the recipient, who finds in considerations of politeness reasons for the speaker's apparent irrationality or inefficiency.

(Brown and Levinson 1987: 4)

The above indicates that Brown and Levinson seek much the same attribution of reason and rationality for politeness that this study has called for in relation to irony. Indeed, references to politeness in Brown and Levinson’s comment could easily be replaced with references to irony without altering the thrust of their argument.

In order to explain the actions of rational speakers Brown and Levinson turn to the concept of ‘model agents’ (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61-62) - rational human beings who think strategically about language use and are conscious of their utterances. The desires of model agents are described in relation to ‘face’ (the individual’s self-esteem), which Brown and Levinson characterise as a culturally elaborated ‘public self-image, that every member [of a society] wants to claim for himself.’ Model agents are referred to as having both positive face, ‘the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others’ and negative face, ‘the want of every 'competent adult member' that his action be unimpeded by others.’ Alba-Juez (1995a) indicates that face can be used to study irony as politeness via an analysis of ironic politeness as threatening either positive or negative face. However there have yet to be any attempts to use face to explain irony as humour, irony as social elevation or any of the other goals described in Chapter 5. This is unfortunate, since *prima facie* the concept of face holds explanatory usefulness in regards to some of these goals: social elevation will result in a higher status for the user and thus greater values in both positive and negative face – high status speakers are normally given what they want and are usually unimpeded in their pursuits; face will also be useful in describing social bonds, as it is intuitive that the positive and negative face of users increases in tight-knit social groupings; persuasion can be described as the act of increasing face in regards to single propositions rather than wider social issues; and increasing the chances of future irony success will allow the speaker to increase their negative face – as future speech acts will be less likely to be impeded by misunderstandings. Humour too can be considered the result of positive/negative face interactions since it is pleasurable to the user, and thus is one of his wants, and its enactment is due to the hearer’s negative face freedom of action. However positive and negative face are not useful concepts in terms of indicating methods of humour and why a speaker would choose irony. That face is not applicable to the personal aspects of humour is unsurprising – it is after all a concept concerned with representing outer-self social relations rather than inner-self concerns. As such, face is a much more useful notion for describing social speaker goals.

Face is an active phenomenon and during any discourse it can be maintained, enhanced or degraded. Discourse participants are aware that it is generally in everyone's best interest to maintain each other's face, and thus often operate in such a way that others are made aware that this is one's intention. Brown and Levinson point out that linguistic politeness itself constitutes a message – that the speaker values the face of other discourse participants, and that the failure to be seen to speak politely constitutes the opposite, thus a sub-goal of politeness is ‘being interpreted as a polite speaker’. This mirrors two of the speech strategies I pinpointed in Chapter 5: firstly, the goal of ‘being interpreted as an ironic speaker’ that uses irony to elevate the social status of the user; and secondly, ‘the goal of being interpreted as an ironic speaker’ who uses irony to strengthen the success rates of future ironic utterances. This similarity suggests that many of the underlying principles between different speech strategies may be the same, a finding that supports the claim that it is better to search for consistent underlying principles than to create a separate taxonomy of maxims, sub maxims and scales for each form of discourse.

Attacks on face are referred to by Brown and Levinson as Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) and their use in discourse is governed by the following proposition, where S represents speaker and H hearer: ‘Unless S’s want to do an FTA with maximum efficiency…is greater than S’s want to preserve H’s (or S’s) face to any degree then S will want to minimize the face threat of the FTA’ (Brown and Levinson 1987: 60). In order to properly understand this proposition it is necessary to formulate differing degrees of FTAs. This feature is analogous to Leech’s work on conversational scales, but is presented in a tighter and more mechanical fashion which does not encourage the mass proliferation of maxims, sub-maxims and scales. Brown and Levinson introduce three variables (measured on a scale of 1 to n, with n being a relatively small number) to calculate what they refer to as the ‘weight’ (W) of the FTA (x) : Firstly, the social distance (D) between S and H - representing the closeness of S and H, and the degree to which H is accepting of imposition. Secondly, the power (P) of S relative to H – representing the potential power that S is able to hold over H. In certain situations this may be a negative value, indicating that H is more powerful than S. Finally, the relative ranking (R) of the imposition which makes up the FTA in the cultural context. These factors match those I suggested we draw from Leech’s work, and thus give further credence to the argument that representing any speaker strategy, whether regarding humour, social elevation, politeness or any other the other goals identified in Chapter 5, will have to include a representation of social power relations and linguistic conventions. From these factors Brown and Levinson construct the following formula:

Wx = D (S, H) + P (H, S) + Rx

(Brown and Levinson 1987: 76)

Thus the weight of an FTA will increase if: 1) the social distance between the discourse participants is great; 2) the hearer holds a significant amount of power over the speaker and; 3) the expression used is ranked by the hearer’s culture as a large imposition.

Apart from the obviously simple example of irony as politeness, adapting Brown and Levinson’s equation to the goals of irony identified in Chapter 5 is less straightforward than an adaptation of Leech’s system: the principles of social distance, relative power and relative ranking are set up to specifically reflect politeness rather than speech strategies in general. As such it is more informative to investigate how each of these principles might separately affect the pragmatic study of irony than to attempt to formulate an ‘irony equation’.

Social distance will likely have the most weight regarding the strategies of social bonding, since it will direct the degree to which social bonding might be desired (or feasible) and the amount of social bonding necessary to bring S closer to H. It will also impact the goal of social elevation, since it will represent the potential effectiveness of irony as a social elevator. It is intuitive that for socially close discourse participants H’s prior background knowledge of S will make it more difficult for S to radically move himself closer to high-status groups. In contrast, when talking to socially distant discourse participants S is working with a ‘clean slate’ and can thus more effectively manipulate the way other discourse participants view him.

Relative power will likely impact politeness strategies in the manner specified by Brown and Levinson, but it is also likely to affect the kind of persuasion strategies S might employ – for example if H is much more powerful than S, S might veer away from using irony as a rhetorical strategy due to the negative social implications specified by Whaley and Wagner (2000). Relative power might also heavily impact on the desire of S to elevate their social status – if H holds a relatively powerful position then having H viewing S as being a member of high-status groups is likely to be more desirable. Attribution of equal relative power might also be an indication of the success chance of using irony to strengthen social bonds – whilst as indicated previously S will desire a powerful H to view him/her favourably, unequal relative power levels might make strengthening social bonds more difficult since it will likely reflect that S and H are part of different social groups from different backgrounds.

Relative ranking is a more difficult concept to apply to irony, since it is designed to reflect inherent impositions in ordering/complimenting that do not apply to irony. Instead a reformulation of Brown and Levinson’s work would use relative ranking to represent the divide between conventional and non-conventional irony. Non-conventional irony is necessary to elevate social status and is likely to increase the effectiveness of persuasion. In contrast conventional irony presents benefits for speakers attempting to strengthen certain social bonds and may, due to its conventionality be tied to the use of irony as politeness. Furthermore, as the form of irony with the highest success rate it will form a reliable starting block for the goal of using irony to increase the success of future irony. Once S has established himself as an ironic speaker using conventional irony then he can move onto the production of more difficult to interpret non-conventional ironies with an increased chance of being correctly understood.

Whilst their work provides certain advantages for studying irony, Brown and Levinson’s theory would require major adaptation to model the speech strategies highlighted in Chapter 5. For instance, their work is designed to represent strategies which are impacted by other discourse participants so it struggles to provide a full representation of the goal ‘irony as humour’ since this goal has the capacity to be self-directed. Furthermore, the importance of relative ranking and relative social distance highlighted by Brown and Levinson would be insufficient to any study of irony. As was shown in the sections on social elevation and social bonds, in the analysis of irony, in addition to the relative positions of discourse participants, it is valuable to know in more objective terms the backgrounds of S and H. Brown and Levinson’s attempt to reduce all factors of conversation to a mathematical formula is an ambitious one, and much of the criticism directed at their work has revolved around picking holes in their equation. Spencer-Oatey (1996) points out that

The precise meaning of many of the terms that the authors use often remains unclear…for example distance/closeness could potentially refer to one or more of the following: frequency of contact, length of acquaintance, amount of self-disclosure and the amount or type of effect.

(Spencer-Oatey 1996: 5)

An example of this ambiguity is in relation to the relative power clause of the equation - P (H, S). Relative power is problematic because it can derive from a variety of sources. In some situations it will be the result of class systems, for example H is a member of a royal family and S is not, whilst in others it might be because H is eloquent/intelligent and influential, in yet more situations it might be attributable to physical power or the ability of H to do S harm. Brown and Levinson do not provide theoretical mechanics of how each of these factors result in valuations of relative power. Presumably the threat of physical harm is present in all situations but is normally reduced by the unlikelihood of H to choose physical harm as a strategy. Thus (P (H, S)) requires sub-equations detailing (A) the capacity for H to cause physical harm, and (B) the likelihood of H choosing physical harm as a strategy. A would then be multiplied by B (which might move into a value lower than 1 and thus reduce A) before being fed into the equation for relative power alongside the other features mentioned above. This level of detail is not available in any version of Brown and Levinson’s work.

Fraser (1990: 231) also questions the mechanical veracity of Brown and Levinson’s equation, asking whether ‘a Wx value of 5, for example, has the same significance for determining the strategy to be used, independent of what values of D, P, and R were summed to arrive at this value.’ Furthermore Holtgraves and Yang point out that the formula is inherently flawed because,

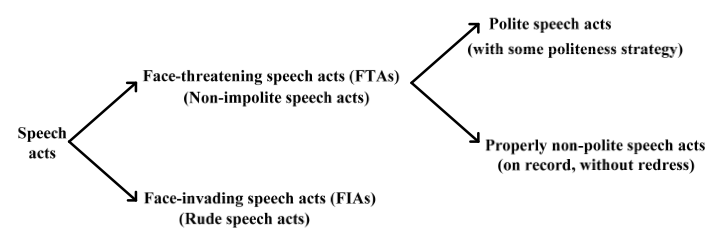
when any of the three interpersonal variables reaches a particularly high level, the effects of the remaining variables drop out completely. For example if an interactant has committed an extremely offensive act or intends to ask an extremely large favour he or she will be polite regardless of the closeness of the relationship with the other person.

(Holtgraves and Yang 1992: 252)

The weaknesses in Brown and Levinson’s formula affect much more than just the weight of various FTAs. Much of Brown and Levinson’s subsequent work presented a hierarchy of politeness strategies which were determined by the weight of an FTA. If the weight formula that Brown and Levinson present is shown to be flawed then so too does any attempt to explain speaker strategy via an appeal to the weight of FTAs. Instead, as was indicated in my attempts to use Brown and Levinson’s work to assess the speech strategies of irony, it is preferable to view their formula as figurative – presenting areas of study related to social discourse goals rather than specifying in precise terms how much threat to face an utterance poses.

Even taking this figurative view of their work into account though, a larger problem plagues Brown and Levinson’s proposals – a potential mischaracterisation of FTAs themselves. Alba-Juez (1995b) notes that the starting point of Brown and Levinson’s divide between acts that threaten face and those that do not is misconceived because every speech act holds the potential to go wrong/be misinterpreted and thus gain the status of an FTA. There are thus no utterances that do not threaten face to some degree. When I speak I expose myself to others and thus threaten my own positive face I also always commit myself to what I say to some degree and thus threaten my own negative face. Similarly I always impose my valuations upon others and in that way threaten their positive face. I also impede their freedom by making them listen to me and therefore threaten their negative face. This attack can be rebuffed by the introduction of FTA thresholds, but we once again encounter the problem of specifying how the mechanics of Brown and Levinson’s theory function.

Instead Gil (2012) suggests we divide between ‘non-impolite speech acts’ which always threaten face and ‘rude speech acts’ which act as invasions of face as shown below.



(Gil 2012: 400)

Gil’s work is interesting because, in addition to recognizing the universality of threats to face, he presents an additional classification of FIAs which may correspond to certain types of ironic speech: ‘irony’ could be defined as the pragmatic effect of some type of reprobation that threatens intrinsically someone’s positive face. Similarly, ‘sarcasm’ could be interpreted as a strong reprobation by which some individual’s positive face is, intrinsically, being invaded.

Brown and Levinson’s account should be praised for narrowing down several underlying principles of discourse, in particular speaker face, social distance and relative power. In addition, the case can be made that their positing of relative ranking can be adapted to represent the linguistic conventions of different societies. Furthermore, their attempt to specify a single equation for politeness, whilst ultimately insufficient, provides indication that pragmatics can deal with speaker strategy without having to resort to a vast array of highly situational maxims. On the less positive side, their attempts at demarcating speaker strategy according to the weight of various FTAs has proved flawed, though the spirit of Gil’s subsequent introduction of FIAs is worth retaining.

## 6.4 Summary

Whilst neither of the theories examined in this chapter have proved wholly conducive to modeling the speaker strategies presented in Chapter 5 they nevertheless present valuable information about what features will need to be included in a pragmatic framework of the speech strategies of irony. In particular, these studies highlight the need for the pragmatics of speaker strategy to include aspects such as relative power, social distance, local cultural concerns and so on. Indeed, both of the theories analysed in the preceding sections benefit from a figurative approach which does not expect the various formulae and scales they produce to operate with any great deal of accuracy. However, despite the flaws in the mechanics of both approaches I would argue that the more concise methodology of Brown and Levinson should be the model for pragmatic representations of alternative speaker strategies. Whilst Brown and Levinson’s equations need to be refined and cannot currently produce the accurate weighting of FTAs they desire they do at least hold the potential for a unified theory of speaker strategy which will not collapse under its own theoretical weight by producing individual maxims for every individual type of discourse. Finally, both approaches to politeness should be further investigated to assess whether the methods they provide to rank the cultural impositions of impolite utterances, whether as specified by Brown and Levinson’s formula or as the divide between Semantic and Pragmatic politeness offered by Leech, can be adapted to distinguish between conventional and non-conventional forms of irony.

The applicability of some of these examples to the study of irony can be illustrated with a final example from *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian Please Ask for One,* in which the relative power and social distance features common to both approaches will be used to explain the effects of Lee’s style of delivery and provide a rationale for his method of performance. Each of the examples of irony drawn from Lee’s act has targeted a different social group – mainstream comedians in his entrance, *Top Gear* presenters in the *Top Gear* section and comedy commissioners in the segment drawn from *Pestival*. Simpson’s (2003) arguments regarding satire and the Superiority Theory of humour offered by Lafave et al. (1976) and Ziv (1984) predict that the negative evaluations that Lee’s act offers towards these groups should position Lee himself as superior to them. However, a closer examination of Lee’s comedy reveals that the opposite is true: instead of positioning himself as powerful and superior Lee deliberately takes steps that reduce his standing in the eyes of the audience, and so reduce his power relative to the targets of his irony. Lee revealed one method he uses as self-deprecation in an interview with Richard Bacon: ‘on stage I can normally fabricate something like it’s going badly or let someone in the audience get the better of me’ (Bacon 2011). In *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian*, *Please Ask for One* self-defacement occurs through a foregrounding of Lee’s slightly overweight, dishevelled appearance and through his self-confessed E-list celebrity status:

I needn’t have worried [about being recognised] cause the viewing figures [for *Stewart Lee’s Comedy Vehicle*] were actually so low that I was less likely to be recognised as me than I was to hear someone go, ‘Oh, look Terry Christian’s let himself go.’ ‘Oh, look, Morrissey’s let himself go.’ ‘Oh, look, Ray Liotta’s let himself go.’ ‘Oh, look, Todd Carty’s let himself go.’

(Lee 2012: 41)

An analysis employing the principles of power-relation and social distance reveals that the self-deprecation which Lee tries to build into his performance is likely to elevate the position of the targets of his satire and make them seem more monolithic, powerful and oppressive than they actually are. This may serve to increase the persuasive strength of his attacks since audience members who agree with Lee but do not normally feel marginalised by the targets of his irony will feel an increased need to counteract the views espoused by these newly powerful social groups. Simultaneously Lee is able to reduce the social distance between himself and those in the audience who agree with his views by claiming that they belong together in a minority group. This is an inversion of the standard irony attack strategy which operates by singling out the *target* as the minority, with the speaker and those who agree with him taking the position of a dominant majority group. Once again, as with my previous analysis of Lee’s act, even the brief example of complex, non-conventional irony he presents is able to reveal *unexplored reasons* as to why speakers use irony and *unexplored methods* in how they employ it.

# 7. Conclusion

This study has been limited to an evaluative review of pragmatic studies of irony to date, and has sought only to draw conclusions from modern research in an attempt to advise future studies of which pragmatic approaches to adopt in the future. It has been shown that traditional pragmatics is an unsuitable method of approach, matching neither the many varied uses of irony detailed in Chapter 1, or the evidence in regards to cognitive processing shown in Chapter 3. In its place a two-pronged approach of Graded Salience Hypothesis and Relevance Theory has been called for. If these two approaches to the pragmatics of figurative language can be merged then a lengthy gap in regards to the pragmatics of irony will have been bridged. Under such a framework a specific treatment of irony could be presented via an Echoic Mention approach. However it has also been argued that a full representation of irony requires recognition of the many types of speaker strategy highlighted in Chapter 5. Evidence that this is possible within the bounds of pragmatics was proffered in Chapter 6 which examined studies of politeness. However, whilst the two politeness theories covered highlight features which should be included in a pragmatic representation of irony, neither is currently able to adopt irony into their framework. The creation of an alternative irony framework which adopts the elements of social relations identified in these theories and applies them to the speech goals proposed in Chapter 5 would be both a large and valuable venture.

Given the varied information presented up to this point, what definition of irony, and what definition of ironic discourse should future research use as its basis? Firstly it must be realised that irony cannot be defined solely by appeals to the literal utterance, or by approaches which constrain irony as only oppositional. Such a view ignores the potential of irony to act on implied meaning, or the entire discourse act itself, in ways which go beyond simple reversal. Irony is better viewed as a discourse phenomenon which presents two conflicting realities and offers up an evaluative attitude towards them. One of these realities is formed by the literal utterance, and represents a state of non-actual affairs. The other is formed from the speaker’s figurative, implied meaning, much like the Mental Space approach to irony suggests, and corresponds to the actual reality of the discourse situation. Within the bounds of Relevance Theory it is likely that the literal utterance is interpreted as an echo from the non-actual reality, and that part of the speaker’s evaluative stance towards this reality will necessarily be formed by the dissociative element inherent in Echoic Mention. This utterance will be sourced from a person either real or proto-typical in the view the ironist expresses. The ironic interpretation will be propelled by failed expectations of relevance on behalf of the interpreters. Nevertheless the cognitive evidence suggests that this will not allow users to bypass an interpretation of the literal utterance, and thus that rather than accessing a single reality presented by an ironic utterance, interpreters appreciate both during the comprehension process. The two aspects of the ironic utterance thus remain in negotiation, thereby likely increasing the contrasts between the two.

Cognitively speaking, the evidence from a variety of studies suggests that irony processing places a higher cognitive demand on interpreters than its literal equivalent. This cost normally occurs late in processing, indicating that contextual evaluations of the utterance and theory of mind judgements are being made. If the ironic utterance is non-conventional, additional processing connected to integrating semantic incongruity should be expected. Brain areas devoted to an understanding of irony are different from the areas used to interpret both literal utterances and other figurative language such as metaphor. This is due to the involvement of theory of mind modules, and reinforces the claim that any full study of irony should seek to represent the judgements interpreters make about theory of mind. Some of these theory of mind attributions will likely mirror the strategies proposed in Chapter 5 - for example a hearer interpreting a speakers remarks as an attempt to be persuasive or an attempt to be polite. Finally, the cognitive evidence highlights the importance of adopting a Graded Salience approach to irony. Indeed irony appears to be doubly graded: firstly by its conventionality; and secondly, in its contrariness in relation to the literal utterance.

Future pragmatic studies of irony can use the view of irony presented above to focus on several areas which need further clarification. Some of these areas regard the testing of the theories judged to be most accurate in this study, for instance a non-cognitive investigation of Relevance Theory via White’s proposals (see Chapter 4), and a more thorough investigation of what makes an ironic utterance conventional/non-conventional so that the Graded Salience Hypothesis can be more thoroughly tested. Similarly the brain mapping data pointing to a division between irony and other indirect speech forms needs to be confirmed, perhaps via the introduction of a division between conventional and non-conventional figurative language. Of further interest would be relating studies of understatement and overstatement to irony, thereby testing whether these forms, which I have suggested operate via the same abstract mechanism, are similar in cognitive terms. The pragmatic study of irony will benefit from evidence sourced from a variety of areas, such as cognitive science, observational studies of everyday discourse, and even from seemingly unrelated disciplines such as information science (as shown by White 2007; 2009).

From a theoretic standpoint the two largest obstacles standing in the way of a pragmatic theory of irony are 1) the need to merge the principles of Relevance Theory and Graded Salience Hypothesis together and 2) the need to model speaker strategy in relation to irony. Of these the first problem seems the smaller and, in respect to this, methods of combining the two approaches by limiting Relevance Theory to late activation cognitive processes were suggested in Chapter 4. The second problem is larger and requires a full mapping of the factors involved in social discourse events. There is likely to be overlap in this respect to the theories of politeness covered in Chapter 6, however additional information regarding humour and, once again, the difference between conventional/non-conventional speech needs to be taken into account. Other, comparatively minor revisions suggested by this study are: firstly, the introduction of a relevance tagging system into the mechanics of Relevance Theory to represent how interpreters cut down the cognitive effort of relevance searches by making predictions about relevance before examining information sources; and secondly amendments to the Echoic Mention theory of irony to encompass the cognitive processing of mental spaces as proposed by the Mental Space theories of irony analysed in Section 4.5.

To conclude, and briefly restate the main argument of this thesis, future pragmatic studies should adopt a Relevance Theoretic approach to irony which examines the interpretation of irony using Echoic Mention Theory under the two-stage model suggested by the Graded Salience Hypothesis. Additionally pragmatic studies of politeness should look to include speaker strategies such as those identified in Chapter 5, for which the features and principles identified in Chapter 6 may be used as a baseline. If these features can be established in the pragmatics of irony then the field will be a step closer to being able to explain the full ironic process. To refer a final time to the words of Stewart Lee: taking such an approach to irony holds the potential to save future studies ‘a long, tedious exchange of emails’.

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