

# *Irony and metarepresentation*\*

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## **Abstract**

This paper considers how two recent accounts of verbal irony – the pretence account and the echoic account – can explain a range of experimental results on the nature of irony and the differences between irony and metaphor. Of particular interest is the fact that irony comprehension correlates with success in standard second-order false-belief tasks, and therefore requires a higher order of metarepresentational ability than metaphor comprehension. I consider two interpretations of what these tasks reveal – the standard mindreading account and a more recent epistemic account proposed by Mascaro and Sperber (2007, in press), and argue that the data on irony comprehension tend to support the epistemic rather than the mindreading account.

## **1 Introduction**

There is now quite a lot of evidence from the developmental and neuropsychological literature that performance on different types of pragmatic task correlates with performance on different orders of standard false-belief test such as the Sally-Anne task or the Smarties task. Much of this research is inspired by a classic paper by Francesca Happé (1993), which suggests that comprehension of ironical utterances (e.g. “It’s a lovely day,” said in a downpour) goes with success in second-order false-belief tests, while comprehension of metaphorical utterances (e.g. “His head is made out of wood”) goes with success in first order false-belief tests, and some pragmatic tasks involving similes or synonyms can be successfully performed by hearers who do not pass standard false-belief tests at all. These results have been refined and extended in many later studies. How are such correlations to be explained?

A common line of explanation starts from two assumptions: that pragmatic interpretation is an exercise in mindreading, and that performance on standard false-belief tasks reveals orders of mindreading ability. Given these assumptions, the reported correlations suggest that different types of pragmatic task call for

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different orders of mindreading ability, and the challenge for pragmatic theory is to explain why this is so.

A striking illustration of how this approach might help to choose between competing theories of irony is given in Happé (1993). As Happé points out, traditional accounts of figurative utterances treat metaphor and irony in closely similar ways, whereas relevance theory (e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1995, Carston 2002), which treats metaphorical utterances as expressing a thought about a state of affairs and ironical utterances as expressing a thought about another thought, directly predicts that irony requires a higher order of mindreading ability than metaphor. If standard false-belief tasks reveal orders of mindreading ability, the fact that irony comprehension goes with success in second-order false-belief tasks disconfirms traditional treatments of irony and supports the relevance theory account.

But the assumption that standard false-belief tasks directly test orders of mindreading ability is debatable at best. Since performing these tasks involves not only mindreading but also logical, linguistic and executive functioning abilities, failure does not automatically show that underlying mindreading abilities are impaired (Surian & Leslie 1999; Bloom & German 2000). Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence that infants as young as 13-15 months can track the false beliefs of others in implicit non-verbal versions of the Sally-Anne task, whereas children do not normally succeed in explicit verbal versions until around the age of four (Onishi & Baillargeon 2005; Southgate, Senju & Csibra 2007; Surian, Caldi & Sperber 2007).

Further evidence that failure in standard false-belief tests need not indicate lack of underlying mindreading ability comes from the fact that children are heavily engaged in overt communication well below the age of four (Bloom 2000, 2002; Tomasello & Haberl 2003; Southgate, van Maanen & Csibra 2007; Liszkowski, Carpenter & Tomasello 2008; Tomasello 2008). On the assumption that overt communication is itself an exercise in mindreading, this not only confirms that children have well-developed mindreading abilities long before they pass standard first-order false-belief tests, but also reveals a certain tension between the two assumptions on which this common line of explanation is based (that overt communication is an exercise in mindreading, and that performance on standard false-belief tasks reveals orders of mindreading ability). Since the first assumption is fundamental to modern pragmatics (Grice 1967, 1989; Bach & Harnish 1979; Davis 1991; Sperber & Wilson 1995; Carston 2002), I will focus here on the implications for pragmatics of recent attempts to rethink the second.

If standard false-belief tasks do not directly test orders of mindreading ability, what do they reveal? In a series of recent papers, Dan Sperber and his colleagues have argued that the mindreading ability is only one of several metarepresentational abilities available to humans (Sperber 2000a, 2001; Sperber & Wilson 2002; Mascaro & Sperber 2007, in press; Sperber et al. 2008; Mercier & Sperber in press). Another is the specifically metacommunicative ability to infer speakers'

intentions from their utterances and other overt communicative acts (Sperber 2000a; Wilson 2000; Sperber & Wilson 2002). A third is the metalogical or argumentative ability to think about propositions in the abstract and assess their truth or falsity, evidential status and logical relations to other propositions. According to Sperber and his colleagues, this third type of metarepresentational ability plays a central role in enabling speakers to formulate persuasive arguments, and hearers to defend themselves against mistakes and deliberate deception by communicators (Sperber 2001; Mascaro & Sperber 2007, *in press*; Sperber et al. 2008; Mercier & Sperber *in press*). As a result, they suggest, it is likely to undergo rapid development once the child is heavily engaged in verbal communication, and may offer a better explanation of performance on standard false-belief tests than more traditional mindreading accounts (Mascaro & Sperber 2007, *in press*).

On Mascaro and Sperber's account, what standard false-belief tasks reveal is not orders of mindreading ability but orders of metalogical or argumentative ability. If this proposal is correct, it casts doubt on one of the assumptions underlying the common line of explanation for the reported correlations between performance on pragmatic tasks and standard false-belief tests, and suggests the need for an alternative account. More generally, the proposal that humans have several distinct metarepresentational abilities raises a new challenge for pragmatic theory: how do these abilities interact in the development, functioning and breakdown of communication and comprehension? For several reasons, irony seems a particularly appropriate test case for exploring these issues. In the first place, the correlation between irony comprehension and success in second-order false belief tests is relatively robust. In the second place, the common line of explanation for this correlation has been seen as providing evidence against traditional accounts of irony and in favour of the relevance theory account, which now needs to be reassessed. Finally, there are several competing accounts of irony, and a range of data revealing further differences between irony and metaphor which also need to be explained.<sup>1</sup> By taking irony as a test case, I will therefore be able not only to consider alternative explanations for the reported correlations between performance on pragmatic tasks and standard-false belief tasks, but also to contribute to an ongoing pragmatic debate.

The paper is organised as follows. In section 2, I look briefly at the types of metarepresentational ability discussed by Sperber and his colleagues, and illustrate the reported correlations between performance on pragmatic tasks and standard false belief tasks. In section 3, I show how traditional accounts of figurative utterances approach metaphor and irony in closely similar ways, and survey some features of irony, and differences between metaphor and irony, which are not explained on these accounts. In section 4, I outline three recent approaches to irony that seem to offer more promising explanations: the pretence account of Clark and

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will focus on the analysis of irony. For recent relevance theory accounts of metaphor, see Wilson & Carston (2007) and Sperber & Wilson (2008).

Gerrig (1984), Sperber and Wilson's echoic-attributive account (e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1981, 1990, 1995, 1998) and various hybrid 'attributive-pretence' accounts which combine elements of both echoing and pretence (e.g. Recanati 2000, 2007; Currie 2006, in press). In section 5, I compare these accounts by considering what light they shed on the nature of irony and the reported differences between irony and metaphor, and discuss how they might be tested. In section 6, I return to the correlations between performance on different types of pragmatic task and different orders of standard false-belief test, and suggest an alternative to the common 'mindreading' account of how these correlations are to be explained.

## 2 Metarepresentation and false-belief tests

### 2.1 Three types of metarepresentational ability

A metarepresentational ability is an ability to represent and think about representations (for a variety of approaches, see Sperber 2000b). Of particular interest to pragmatics is the ability to represent and think about representations with a conceptual content, such as utterances and thoughts. The various strands of research on metarepresentation differ in the types of representation involved and the use to which they are put. Sperber (2000a, 2001) distinguishes three main types of metarepresentational ability, linked to three different types of representation: thoughts, utterances and propositions.

The best-known type of metarepresentational ability is the *mindreading* (or *metapsychological*) ability to represent and think about one's own thoughts and those of others. To take a standard illustration, if a child sees a ball being moved from a box to a basket, having formed the thought in (1), he might go on, by observing his companions, to form thoughts of the type in (2):

- (1) The ball is in the basket.
- (2)
  - a. Sally thinks the ball is in the basket.
  - b. Sally thinks the ball is in the box.
  - c. Anne thinks Sally thinks the ball is in the basket.
  - d. Anne thinks Sally thinks the ball is in the box.

Here, (1) is a regular representation of a state of affairs, and (2a-d) are metarepresentations of thoughts the child attributes to Sally or Anne. In entertaining (1), the child is thinking directly about a state of affairs; in entertaining (2a-d), he is thinking about thoughts attributed to Sally or Anne.

There is now a substantial body of work on how this mindreading ability develops and how it may break down (Astington et al. 1988; Surian & Leslie 1999; Wellman, Cross & Watson 2001; Sodian 2004; Matsui et al. 2006, in press.). It may be present to varying degrees. Thus, performance on standard false-belief tests is generally seen as evidence that people differ in their ability to attribute to others

beliefs that are incompatible with their own. A child who believes (1) and entirely lacks this ability would be limited to the metarepresentations in (2a) and (2c); a child with the ability to attribute first-order false beliefs would be able to form metarepresentations such as (2b), and one with the ability to attribute second-order false beliefs would be able to form metarepresentations such as (2d). As noted above, there is a growing body of evidence that the ability to infer the mental states of others, including the ability to track their first-order false beliefs, is present in infants as early as 13-15 months. However, the ability to report or reflect on the output of these spontaneous inferences may develop much later, as indicated by performance on standard false-belief tests.

A second type of metarepresentational ability is the *pragmatic* (or *metacommunicative*) ability to represent and think about utterances and other overt communicative acts. As noted above, a fundamental assumption of modern pragmatics is that utterance comprehension is a variety of mindreading, which starts from a metarepresentation of an attributed utterance and ends with the metarepresentation of a *communicator's meaning*. A communicator's meaning is a complex mental state which is analysable as a pair of layered intentions: the *informative intention* (i.e. the intention to inform an audience of something) and the *communicative intention* (i.e. the intention to inform an audience of one's informative intention) (Sperber & Wilson 1995: chapter 1, sections 10-12). Thus, suppose that Mary says (3) to Peter, intending to inform him that Bill drives well:

(3) Bill drives well.

On this account, recognising Mary's informative intention involves constructing a second-order metarepresentation such as (4a), and recognising her communicative intention involves constructing a fourth-order metarepresentation such as (4b) (see Sperber 1994):

(4) a. Mary intends me to believe that Bill drives well.  
 b. Mary intends me to believe that she intends me to believe that Bill drives well.

One reason for thinking that the pragmatic ability is distinct from the general mindreading ability is that very young children engage spontaneously in overt communication despite the complexity of the metarepresentations involved (Bloom 2000; Southgate, van Maanen & Csibra 2007; Liszkowski, Carpenter & Tomasello 2008; Tomasello 2008; Southgate, Chevallier & Csibra in press).<sup>2</sup> It seems plausible to assume that the pragmatic ability, like the mindreading ability, may be

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<sup>2</sup> An alternative line of investigation takes the metarepresentational complexity of full-fledged Gricean communication as evidence that it cannot be present in children, but must develop later (see e.g. Breheny 2006).

present to different degrees,<sup>3</sup> and that the capacity to evaluate the outputs of spontaneous comprehension may come much later.

A third type of metarepresentational ability discussed by Sperber (2000a, 2001) is the *argumentative* (or *metalogical*) ability to metarepresent propositions in the abstract and assess their truth or falsity, evidential status and relations to other propositions. In a series of recent papers, Sperber and his colleagues have investigated various aspects of this ability, which they see as contributing to a more general capacity for *epistemic vigilance*: the capacity to defend oneself against mistakes or deliberate deception by communicators. Mascaro and Sperber (in press) suggest that this capacity would be particularly useful in evaluating the output of spontaneous comprehension in order to decide whether or not to believe what one is being told. Returning to the utterance in (3) (“Bill drives well”), on this account, it is Peter’s pragmatic ability that enables him to understand Mary’s assertion, but his capacity for epistemic vigilance that enables him to assess its factual plausibility and her trustworthiness as a communicator, and thus accept or reject her claim. One of Mascaro and Sperber’s suggestions is that performance on standard first-order false-belief tests may be better explained by appeal to the developing capacity for epistemic vigilance than by the common mindreading account.

If this line of argument is correct, it seems clear that the mindreading, pragmatic and metalogical abilities are likely to interact in quite complex ways, and that a full explanation of the reported correlations between performance on pragmatic tasks and standard false-belief tests may need to appeal to all three. In the next subsection, I will look briefly at some of these reported correlations, starting with Happé’s classic results suggesting that irony comprehension requires a higher order of metarepresentational ability than metaphor comprehension. In sections 3-5, I will compare some competing theories of irony, before returning in section 6 to the relation between pragmatic processes, metarepresentational abilities and performance on standard false-belief tasks.

## 2.2 Pragmatic tasks and false-belief tasks

Happé (1993) tested metaphor and irony comprehension in typically developing children and young people with autism, using stories such as the following:

David is helping his mother make a cake. She leaves him to add the eggs to the flour and sugar. But silly David doesn’t break the eggs first – he just puts them in the bowl, shells and all. What a silly thing to do! When mother comes back and sees what David has done, she says:

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Sperber and Wilson (1995: chapter 1, section 12) argue that the communicative intention does not have to be recognised as long as it is fulfilled (i.e. as long as the informative intention is recognised and becomes part of the common ground).

“Your head is made out of wood!”

Q1: *What does David’s mother mean? Does she mean that David is clever or silly?*

Just then father comes in. He sees what David has done and he says:

“What a clever boy you are, David!”

Q2: *What does David’s father mean? Does he mean David is clever, or silly?*

The stories were interrupted at two points with comprehension questions: Question 1 tests the comprehension of metaphor and Question 2 tests the comprehension of irony. Participants also took standard first- and second-order false-belief tests, and a significant correlation emerged: participants who passed no false-belief tests understood neither metaphorical nor ironical utterances; those who passed only first-order false belief tests understood some metaphorical but no ironical utterances, and those who passed both first-order and second-order false-belief tests understood both metaphorical and ironical utterances. Thus, metaphor comprehension correlates with success in first-order false-belief tests and irony comprehension with success in second-order false-belief tests.

Happé also tested young people with autism on three types of sentence completion task involving the choice of an appropriate word from a list of options. One task involved the choice of an appropriate synonym, as in (5), a second the choice of an appropriate simile, as in (6), and a third the choice of an appropriate metaphor, as in (7):

- (5) Jane was so pale and quiet. She really was ...  
[lovely, unwell, energetic, ancient, generous]
- (6) Caroline was so embarrassed. Her face was like ...  
[a brick wall, dresses, daggers, a beetroot]
- (7) Michael was so cold. His nose really was ...  
[a fox, a hat, a safe harbour, an icicle, a swan]

Again, participants took standard false-belief tests and a significant correlation emerged: while some participants who passed no false-belief tests could produce appropriate similes and synonyms, only those who passed first-order false-belief tests could produce appropriate metaphors. These results again suggest that metaphor comprehension goes with success in standard first-order false-belief tests, while some pragmatic tasks involving synonyms or similes can be performed by people who do not pass standard false-belief tests at all.

Happé’s interpretation of her results relied on the assumption that standard-false belief tasks reveal orders of mindreading ability. On her account, certain types of synonymy and simile can be understood by people with no mindreading ability,

simply by decoding the literal meaning of the sentence uttered; figurative utterances, by contrast, necessarily involve going beyond the literal meaning to look for the speaker's intentions, and therefore involve some mindreading ability. In explaining why irony requires a higher order of mindreading ability than metaphor, she relied on the relevance theory account of figurative utterances, which treats metaphor as expressing a thought about a state of affairs and irony as expressing a thought about another thought. On the assumption that standard false-belief tasks test orders of mindreading ability, these results confirm the relevance theory account of figurative utterances and disconfirm traditional accounts.

One problem with this interpretation of Happé's results is its prediction that only those who pass standard explicit first-order false-belief tests should be able to go beyond the decoded sentence meaning to look for the speaker's meaning. However, there is a growing body of evidence that children can recognise a communicator's referential intention (in non-verbal acts such as pointing and verbal tasks such as word learning) long before they pass standard false-belief tests (Baldwin 1993; Bloom 2000; Tomasello, Carpenter & Liszkowski 2007). Moreover, most utterances contain referential expressions (e.g. pronouns) and are also lexically or syntactically ambiguous; as a result, they cannot be understood without going beyond the decoded sentence meaning to look for the speaker's meaning. If children were unable to disambiguate or assign reference before they pass standard first-order false-belief tests, they would be unable to understand most utterances until around the age of four. Yet children seem to disambiguate and assign reference spontaneously in at least some cases much earlier than this (Campbell & Bowe 1983; Baldwin 1993; Mazzocco 1999; Doherty 2000, 2004).

In later work, Happé and Loth (2002) show that three- to five-year old children can not only track a speaker's referential intentions in word learning, but also take account of a speaker's false belief while doing so, and succeed in this implicit version of the Sally-Anne task significantly earlier than they pass standard explicit versions. In one of Happé and Loth's experiments, the child sees the experimenter place two novel objects in different boxes and leave the room. An accomplice then switches the objects in her absence. When the experimenter returns, she indicates one box to the child without looking inside and says "Here's a modi." Later, the child is asked to pick out a "modi" from a set containing both novel objects. To pass the test, the child has to realise that the experimenter intended to name the object she left in that box, rather than the one that is now there. The results showed that the children found it significantly easier to identify the intended object than to pass standard explicit versions of the false-belief test. More recently, Southgate, Chevallier and Csibra (in press) have shown that 17-month-old infants can take account of a speaker's false-beliefs not only in word learning, but also in reference resolution (assigning reference to the pronoun 'it'), long before they would be able to pass standard false-belief tests. These results tend to undermine the standard 'mindreading' explanation of the correlations between performance on pragmatic

tasks and standard false-belief tests, and suggest the need for an alternative account.

This need is reinforced by the fact that some apparently robust correlations between performance on pragmatic tasks and standard false-belief tests have no obvious mindreading explanation. To take just one illustration, Doherty and Perner (1998) tested children aged three to five years, whose vocabularies had been shown to contain pairs of synonyms such as ‘bunny’/‘rabbit’, ‘cup’/‘mug’, ‘woman’/‘lady’, on their ability to produce and understand both members of the pair. In one task, a child who has described a picture of a rabbit using one member of the pair is asked to help a puppet produce an alternative description using the other member, or to judge whether a puppet has correctly described it using the other member. The children also took standard first-order false-belief tests, and a clear correlation emerged: of 118 participants, 52 passed both the false-belief and synonymy tasks, and 48 failed both false-belief and synonymy tasks. Doherty and Perner (1998: 296-7) comment:

Understanding of synonymy, whether measured through production or judgement, is highly correlated with false belief understanding, even after the effects of verbal mental age and performance on control tasks are controlled for.

The fact that these results have no obvious explanation in mindreading terms makes it worth considering alternative possibilities. Similar experiments using a homonymy task were carried out by Doherty (2000, 2004), with comparable results.

Whatever the correct interpretation of Happé’s results, the correlation she found between irony comprehension and success in second-order false-belief tests has proved fairly robust, and has been confirmed in a variety of conditions including autism, Asperger’s syndrome, schizophrenia and right-hemisphere damage (Smith & Tsimpli 1995; Winner et al. 1998; McDonald 1999, 2000; Dennis et al. 2001; Langdon, Davies & Coltheart 2002; Adachi et al. 2004; MacKay & Shaw 2004; Brüne 2005; Shamay-Tsoory et al. 2005; Wang et al. 2006; Chevallier 2009). It is also worth noting that further studies have shown a strong correlation between irony comprehension and the ability to cope with lies and deliberate deception (Winner & Leekam 1991; Sullivan, Winner & Hopfield 1995; Winner et al. 1998). By contrast, later studies suggest that, if anything, the degree of metarepresentational ability required for metaphor comprehension should be revised downwards: while some metaphors presuppose the ability to pass standard first-order false belief tests, others are understood by people who do not pass standard false-belief tests at all (Giora et al. 2000; Langdon, Davies & Coltheart 2002; Martin & McDonald 2004; Norbury 2005; Mo et al. 2008). I will return to these points in section 6, after reviewing some approaches to irony.

### 3 Traditional approaches to metaphor and irony

#### 3.1 The classical and Gricean accounts of figurative utterances

Here are some typical examples of verbal irony:

- (8) *Mary (after a boring party)*: That was fun.
- (9) I left my bag in the restaurant, and someone kindly walked off with it.
- (10) *Sue (to someone who has done her a disservice)*: I can't thank you enough.
- (11) *The Sound of Music* is not the most intellectually challenging film I've ever seen.

In each case, the point of the irony is to indicate that a proposition the speaker might otherwise be taken to endorse (that the party was fun, the person who took her bag behaved kindly, Sue is more grateful than she can say, and there are more intellectually challenging films than *The Sound of Music*) is ludicrously false, under-informative or irrelevant. A hearer who fails to notice this will have misunderstood, and a speaker who doubts his ability to recognise it using background knowledge alone can provide additional clues (e.g. an ironical tone of voice, a wry facial expression, a resigned shrug, a weary shake of the head). The ability to understand simple forms of irony is generally present from around the age of six or seven (Winner 1988; Capelli et al. 1990; Creusere 1999, 2000; Keenan & Quigley 1999; Nakassis & Snedeker 2002, Pexman & Glenwright 2007), and, as noted above, is often impaired in autism, schizophrenia and certain forms of right hemisphere damage. One of the goals of pragmatics is to describe this ability and thus explain how irony is understood.

In classical rhetoric, verbal irony is analysed as a trope: an utterance with a figurative meaning that departs from its literal meaning in one of several standard ways. In metaphor, as in (12), the figurative meaning is a related simile or comparison; in hyperbole, as in (13), it is a weakening of the literal meaning, in understatement, as in (14), it is a strengthening of the literal meaning, and in irony, as in (15), it is the contrary or contradictory of the literal meaning:

- (12) a. Susan is a wild rose.  
b. Susan is like a wild rose.
- (13) a. The road is so hot you could fry an egg on it.  
b. The road is very hot.
- (14) a. He was a little intoxicated.  
b. He was very drunk.
- (15) a. You're a fine friend.  
b. You're not a fine friend/You're a terrible friend.

Grice's brief discussion of tropes (Grice 1989: 34) reanalyses the figurative meanings in (12b)-(15b) as conversational implicatures triggered by blatant violation of the first maxim of Quality ("Do not say what you believe to be false"). On this account, the ironical utterances in (8)-(11) above might be seen as implicating (16)-(19):

- (16) That party was no fun.
- (17) Someone unkindly stole my bag.
- (18) I can't thank you at all.
- (19) *The Sound of Music* is far from being an intellectually challenging film.

Grice's account of tropes shares with the classical account the assumption that metaphor, irony, hyperbole and understatement are cut to the same pattern. Both accounts treat (12)-(15) as violating a maxim, norm or convention of literal truthfulness, and both see their figurative meanings (or implicatures) as derivable from their literal meanings by a few standardised procedures of meaning substitution. To the extent that these accounts have implications for the processing of figurative utterances, they suggest that metaphor and irony should be processed on similar lines, show similar developmental patterns and break down in similar ways. The fact that irony calls for a higher degree of metarepresentational ability than metaphor is unexpected on both accounts.

Grice's approach to figurative utterances is now increasingly questioned. A fundamental theoretical drawback is that it does not explain why metaphor and irony exist at all. In Grice's framework, figurative utterances such as (12a)-(15a) convey no more than could have been conveyed by uttering their strictly literal counterparts (12b)-(15b). Yet their interpretation necessarily involves rejection of the literal meaning (in Grice's terms, what the speaker has "said or made as if to say") and construction of an appropriate implicature. In this framework, then, metaphor and irony cost more to process than their literal counterparts, but yield no extra benefit, and this makes their use irrational and a waste of effort.

On the descriptive level, Grice's account is generally seen as implying a two-stage processing model in which the literal meaning of an utterance has to be tested and rejected before a figurative interpretation is considered. And indeed, it is hard to see how the hearer could recognise an utterance as a *blatant* violation of Grice's maxim of truthfulness ("Do not say what you believe to be false") without first constructing and rejecting a literal interpretation. However, experimental studies of both metaphor and irony suggest that some figurative interpretations take no more effort to construct than literal interpretations, contrary to the predictions of the "literal-first" model (Gibbs 1986, 1994; Dews & Winner 1999; Schwoebel et al. 2000; Giora 2003; Glucksberg 2001).

In the next sub-section, I will introduce a range of data illustrating further features of irony, and differences between metaphor and irony, which provide evidence against the Gricean account and motivate the search for an alternative

approach. In section 4, I will outline three alternative accounts, and in section 5, I will consider what light they shed on the data to be explained.

### **3.2 Data to be explained**

#### *Grice's counterexample*

Grice's brief analysis of irony was introduced in Lecture 2 of the *William James Lectures* (Grice 1967, 1989: 34). In Lecture 3, he discusses a possible counterexample which meets all his conditions for irony – the speaker “says or makes as if to say” something blatantly false, intending to implicate the opposite – but would not normally be understood as ironical.

A and B are walking down the street, and they both see a car with a shattered window. B says, *Look, that car has all its windows intact*. A is baffled. B says, *You didn't catch on; I was in an ironical way drawing your attention to the broken window*. (Grice 1989: 53)

The fact that no irony is perceivable even though all Grice's conditions are met shows that something crucial is missing from his account. Grice suggests that what is missing may be the fact that irony involves the expression of a “hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt” (ibid.: 53). Although it is true that irony involves the expression of a characteristic attitude, Grice makes no attempt to integrate this proposal into his earlier account, and it would need considerable fleshing out in order to solve the problem raised by Grice's counterexample. After all, someone who asserts that a car with a shattered window has all its windows intact would be no less worthy of indignation or contempt than someone who asserts that the weather is lovely when it's pouring with rain. So why is one utterance readily perceived as ironical while the other is not?

#### *The mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude*

An obvious difference between metaphor and irony is that irony, but not metaphor, involves the expression of a characteristic attitude. This difference is unexplained by the classical and Gricean accounts, which treat both metaphor and irony as departures from a convention, norm or maxim of literal truthfulness. Why should one departure involve the expression of a characteristic attitude while the other does not?

#### *The ironical tone of voice*

A further difference that is unexplained on the classical or Gricean accounts is that irony, but not metaphor, has a characteristic tone of voice. The “ironical tone of voice” is characterised by a flat or deadpan intonation, slower tempo, lower pitch level and greater intensity than are found in the corresponding literal utterances

(Ackerman 1983; Rockwell 2000; Bryant & Fox-Tree 2005),<sup>4</sup> and is generally seen as a cue to the speaker's mocking, sneering or contemptuous attitude. Thus, Rockwell (2000: 485) treats the vocal cues to sarcasm – a subtype of irony which she defines as “a sharply mocking or contemptuous ironic remark intended to wound another” – as closely related to those for contempt or disgust, and suggests that they may be the prosodic counterparts of facial expressions such as “a sneer, rolling eyes, or deadpan expression.” Since not all vocal or facial expressions of mockery, contempt or disgust are perceived as ironical, the challenge for pragmatics is explain what makes some such expressions of attitude ironical, while others are not.

#### *Further cues to irony*

Further cues to irony include the presence of an incongruity or inconsistency in the utterance itself, or between the utterance and the context (Capelli et al. 1990; Gerrig & Goldvarg 2000; Nakassis & Snedeker 2002). This may be made more salient by adding an element of exaggeration or hyperbole (Kreuz & Roberts 1995; Colston & O'Brien 2000a). Thus, though all of (20)-(21) could be ironically used, the irony should be more easily perceivable in the hyperbolic (20a) or the incongruous (21a) than in (20b) or (21b), which might have been plausibly intended as literal assertions:

- (20) a. That was *the most wonderful meal I've ever had*.  
 b. That was a good meal.
- (21) a. I asked a stranger for help, but he *kindly* told me to get lost.  
 b. I asked a stranger for help, but he *kindly* said he was too busy.

When such incongruities or exaggerations are present, the challenge for the hearer is to decide whether the utterance was intended as ironical, or whether the speaker is mistaken, lying or using a regular non-ironical hyperbole (Sullivan, Winner & Hopfield 1995; Winner et al. 1998). As Creusere (2000) notes, children who misunderstand irony most commonly take it as a lie.

#### *Asymmetry of affect*

There is a widely noted asymmetry in the uses of irony which is unexplained on the classical or Gricean accounts. When someone is being clumsy, it is always possible to say ironically, “How graceful”, but when someone is being graceful, it is not always possible to say ironically, “How clumsy”. Such negative ironical comments are only appropriate when some prior doubt about the performance has been entertained or expressed. This asymmetry was experimentally confirmed by Kreuz

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<sup>4</sup> Bryant & Fox-Tree (2005) provide acoustic and experimental evidence that the ironical tone of voice is optional: there is no distinct set of vocal cues associated with all and only ironical utterances.

and Glucksberg (1989) using alternative versions of stories such as the following, with the italicised sentence either present or absent:

Nancy and her friend Jane were planning a trip to the beach.

*“It’s probably going to rain tomorrow”, said Jane, who worked for a local TV station as a meteorologist.*

The next day was a warm and sunny one.

As she looked out of the window, Nancy said, “This certainly is awful weather.”

The results showed that participants were significantly more likely to judge the ironical comment appropriate when it was preceded by the explicit prediction that the weather would be awful. By contrast, in positive versions such as the following, the ironical comment was judged equally appropriate whether or not the italicised sentence was present:

Nancy and her friend Jane were planning a trip to the beach.

*“The weather should be nice tomorrow”, said Jane, who worked for a local TV station as a meteorologist.*

The next day was a cold and stormy one.

As she looked out of the window, Nancy said, “This certainly is beautiful weather.”

*“To speak ironically”*

Grice (1989: 54) pointed out a further difference between metaphor and irony that is unexplained on his account. Although a metaphorical utterance can be prefaced with the phrase *To speak metaphorically*, an ironical utterance cannot be prefaced with the phrase *To speak ironically*. Grice suggested that this difference might be explained on the assumption that irony is a type of pretence:

To be ironical is, among other things, to pretend (as the etymology suggests), and while one wants the pretence to be recognised as such, to announce it as a pretence would spoil the effect. (Grice 1989: 54)

The suggestion was taken up by Clark and Gerrig (1984) and has been elaborated in a variety of more recent pretence-based accounts. According to these accounts, the speaker of an ironical utterance is not performing a genuine speech act but merely pretending to perform one, while expecting her audience to see through the pretence and recognise the sceptical, mocking or contemptuous attitude behind it (Clark & Gerrig 1984; Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg & Brown 1985; Walton 1990; Recanati 2000, 2004, 2007; Currie 2006, in press).

*Facilitation by prior utterances*

The main alternative to pretence accounts of irony is the *echoic* account proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1981) and elaborated in Sperber & Wilson (1990, 1995, 1998), Wilson & Sperber (1992) and Wilson (2006). According to this account, the point of irony is not to commit the speaker to the truth of the proposition expressed but, on the contrary, to express a certain type of derisory or dissociative attitude to a thought with a similar content that she attributes to some source other than herself at the current time. In other words, the speaker in irony is not expressing her own thoughts, but *echoing* a thought she attributes to someone else, and expressing her mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude to that thought.

Some of the earliest experiments on irony (Jorgensen, Miller & Sperber 1984) confirmed a prediction of the echoic account: that irony should be more easily understood when the thought the speaker is echoing is made more salient by being overtly expressed in a previous utterance. This prediction has been confirmed in several later studies. For instance, participants in an experiment by Keenan and Quigley (1999) were divided into two groups, each of which heard a version of stories such as the following, containing one or other of the two italicised sentences:

One night, Lucy was going to a party. Lucy was all dressed up in her new party dress, ready to go, but she didn't have her party shoes on. Lucy didn't want to run upstairs with her nice dress on, so she called to her brother Linus who was upstairs reading. She yelled, "Linus, please bring me my nice red party shoes! [*I want to look pretty for the party/I have to hurry or I'll be late.*]" So Linus, who was still reading his book, went to Lucy's closet and by mistake, he picked up Lucy's dirty old running shoes. When he went downstairs to hand them to Lucy, she looked at them and said, "Oh great. Now I'll really look pretty."

The two groups were then tested on their understanding of Lucy's final comment "Now I'll really look pretty". The results showed that participants who heard the version containing the earlier related utterance "I want to look pretty for the party" understood Lucy's final comment as ironical significantly more often than those who heard the version containing the earlier unrelated utterance "I have to hurry or I'll be late". In other words, irony is easier to recognise when the echoic nature of the utterance is made more salient.

Both echoic and pretence accounts are improvements on the classical and Gricean accounts. Both reject the traditional view of irony as a matter of saying one thing and meaning the opposite; both suggest a rationale for irony, and both treat verbal irony as typically involving the expression of a characteristic mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude. Each account has been seen as shedding light on important aspects of irony, and there have been several attempts to construct hybrid

attributive-pretence accounts which combine the virtues of both.<sup>5</sup> In the next section, I will look in more detail at some of these accounts; in the following section, I will consider what light they shed on the nature of irony and the differences between metaphor and irony outlined in this section.

## 4 Explaining irony: pretence and echoic use.

### 4.1 Pretence accounts

The main idea behind most current pretence accounts of irony is that the speaker of an ironical utterance is not herself performing a speech act (e.g. making an assertion or asking a question) but pretending to perform one, in order to convey a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude to the speech act itself, or to anyone who would perform it or take it seriously. This idea has been fleshed out in various ways, often within broader theories of mimesis or simulation (see e.g. Clark & Gerrig 1990; Walton 1990; Recanati 2000, 2004; Currie 2002). My concern here is not with these broader theories, which provide valuable insights into the nature of pretence, but only with the claim that irony necessarily involves pretence, or that the ability to understand pretence is the key to understanding typical cases of irony such as (8)-(11) above.

Grice himself is sometimes credited with an early version of the pretence account. On the one hand, he treats all figurative utterances as cases of “saying or making as if to say”, where “making as if to say” has obvious connections with pretence. On the other hand, as noted above, in explaining the differences in appropriateness between the phrases *To speak ironically* and *To speak metaphorically*, he suggests that irony, but not metaphor, is a type of pretence. The two proposals could be reconciled on the assumption that Grice thought there were several different varieties of “making as if to say”, with irony – but not metaphor – belonging to a sub-variety that amounted to pretence (Grice 1989: 34, 53-54, 120). Recanati (2004: 71) interprets Grice along these lines, and appears to endorse a similar version of the pretence account:

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

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<sup>5</sup> For discussion and survey of further approaches to irony, see Colston & Gibbs (2007) and Gibbs & Colston (2007).

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.

In discussing the following example from Jorgensen, Miller & Sperber (1984), Clark and Gerrig (1984) put forward a more elaborate version of the pretence account:

(22) Trust the Weather Bureau! See what lovely weather it is: rain, rain, rain.

Jorgensen et al. had treated “See what lovely weather it is” in (22) as an ironical echo of the weather forecaster’s prediction. Clark and Gerrig (1984: 122) treat it as a type of pretence:

With *See what lovely weather it is*, the speaker is pretending to be an unseeing person, perhaps a weather forecaster, exclaiming to an unknowing audience how beautiful the weather is. She intends the addressee to see through the pretense – in such rain she obviously could not be making the exclamation on her own behalf – and to see that she is thereby ridiculing the sort of person who would make such an exclamation (e.g. the weather forecaster), the sort of person who would accept it, and the exclamation itself.

According to this version of the pretence account, understanding irony involves the ability to recognise that the speaker is pretending to perform a speech act and simultaneously expressing a certain type of (mocking, sceptical, contemptuous) attitude to the speech act itself, or to anyone who would perform it or take it seriously.

As it stands, however, this version of the pretence account does not solve the problem raised by *Grice’s counterexample*, in which the speaker points to a car with a broken window and says, “Look, that car has all its windows intact”. As noted above, Grice’s comment that irony involves the expression of a hostile or derogatory attitude does not really solve the problem. In the first place, not all expressions of a hostile or derogatory attitude are ironical, and in the second place, someone who seriously asserted that a car with an obviously broken window had all its windows intact would be no less worthy of ridicule or contempt than someone who seriously asserted that the weather is lovely when it’s pouring with rain, or that Paul is a fine friend when he’s patently not. So why does the irony fall flat in one case and not in the others?

According to the echoic account, what is missing from both the Gricean account and simpler versions of the pretence account is the idea that for irony to succeed, the object of the characteristic attitude must be a thought that the speaker is tacitly

*attributing* to some actual person or type of person (or to people in general). As Sperber (1984: 131) puts it in his reply to Clark and Gerrig,

Absurdity of propositions per se is irrelevant. The absurdity, or even the mere inappropriateness, of human thoughts, on the other hand, is often worth remarking on, making fun of, being ironic about. In other words, in order to be successfully ironic, the meaning mentioned must recognisably echo a thought that has been, is being, or might be entertained or expressed by someone.

On this view, what makes “See what lovely weather it is” in (22) above a successful case of verbal irony is not that it would be ridiculous or inappropriate to assert it in the pouring rain, but that some recognisable person or type of person (or people in general) has entertained, is entertaining or might entertain or express a thought with a similar content whose inappropriateness or inadequacy is worth remarking on. Similarly, what would make the utterance “Look, that car has all its windows intact” a successful case of verbal irony would be the fact that some recognisable person or type of person has entertained, is entertaining or might entertain or express a thought with a similar content whose inappropriateness or inadequacy would be worth remarking on.<sup>6</sup> This is the main idea behind the echoic account. Unless the pretence account is extended to include the idea that irony is tacitly attributive, it is hard to see how it can handle Grice’s counterexample at all.

#### 4.2 The echoic account

The echoic account shares with most post-Gricean accounts the assumption that irony necessarily involves the expression of a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude. It differs from the pretence accounts discussed in the last section on three main points. First, it denies that irony necessarily involves pretence. Second, it takes the primary object of irony to be not a real or imagined speech act (or the type of person who would perform it or take it seriously) but a thought, which need not have been overtly expressed in an utterance at all. And third, it claims that the speaker must be not merely considering this thought in the abstract, but *attributing* it to some actual person or type of person (or to humans in general). The idea that irony is necessarily attributive in this sense is now quite widely accepted by pretence theorists, and various hybrid attributive-pretence accounts have been proposed. In this subsection, I will outline the echoic account; in the next, I will outline the main assumptions of some of these hybrid accounts.

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<sup>6</sup> A scenario in which this utterance could succeed as irony is given in section 5.2.

In any genuine act of linguistic communication,<sup>7</sup> an utterance is used to represent a thought of the speaker's that it resembles in content (Sperber & Wilson 1995: sections 2, 7). In ordinary *descriptive* uses of language (e.g. an utterance of (1) above ("The ball is in the basket")), this thought is about an actual or possible state of affairs. In *attributive* uses (e.g. an utterance of (2a) above ("John thinks the ball is in the basket")), it is not directly about a state of affairs, but about another thought that it resembles in content, which the speaker attributes to some source other than herself at the current time.<sup>8</sup> Different varieties of attributive use are intended to achieve relevance in different ways. Sperber and Wilson (1981, 1995: 238-9) define *echoic use* as a subtype of attributive use in which the speaker's primary intention is not to provide information about the content of an attributed thought, but to convey her own attitude or reaction to it. Thus, to claim that verbal irony is a subtype of echoic use is to claim, on the one hand, that it is necessarily attributive, and, on the other, that it necessarily involves the expression of a certain type of attitude to the attributed thought. Here, I will briefly introduce the notions of attributive and echoic use, and show how they can help to analyse the typical cases of irony in (8)-(11) above.

The best-studied cases of attributive use are indirect reports of speech and thought, illustrated by the italicised expressions in (23)-(25):

- (23) a. John phoned his wife and told her that *the train was about to leave*.  
 b. He was hoping that *they would have a quiet evening alone*.
- (24) a. An announcement came over the loudspeaker. *All the trains were delayed*.  
 b. The passengers were angry. *Would they ever get home?*
- (25) a, *Would the trains ever run on time*, the passengers were wondering.  
 b. *His evening was ruined*, John feared.

In (23a), use of the verb 'told' unambiguously indicates that the following clause is an indirect report of speech; in (23b), use of the verb 'hope' unambiguously indicates that the following clause is an indirect report of thought. By contrast, utterances such as (24a)-(24b) are *tacitly* attributive: the audience is left to infer that the thoughts they represent are being attributed to some source other than the speaker (e.g. the railway authorities in (24a), the passengers in (24b)). The examples in (25a)-(25b) are intermediate cases, which are presented in the free indirect style, but with a parenthetical indication that the reported information is being attributed to some other source (on free indirect style, see McHale 1978; Banfield 1982; Sternberg 1982; Fludernik 1993; Blakemore 2009).

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<sup>7</sup> That is, any act of communication in which the linguistically encoded meaning makes an essential contribution to the content of what is communicated.

<sup>8</sup> Attributive use is one of several subvarieties of a more general category of *interpretive use*; for discussion see Sperber & Wilson (1995), Sperber (1997), Wilson (2000).

Indirect reports such as (23)-(25) are primarily intended to inform the audience about the content of an attributed thought. Although the speaker may incidentally indicate her own reaction to that thought, this is not the main point of the utterance, on which most of its relevance depends. By contrast, some attributive uses of language are primarily intended to achieve relevance by showing that the speaker has a certain thought in mind and wants to convey her own attitude or reaction to it. These are what Sperber and Wilson call *echoic uses* of language. Echoic use is thus a subtype of attributive use, and we would expect to find parallels between echoic utterances and other types of attributive use. In particular, if indirect reports in general are not cases of pretence, then echoic utterances should not be seen as involving pretence.

The most easily recognisable cases of echoic use are those that convey the speaker's attitude or reaction to a thought overtly expressed in an immediately preceding utterance. Consider Sue's possible responses in (27) to Jack's announcement in (26) that he has finished a paper he's been working on all year:

- (26) *Jack*: I've finally finished my paper.  
 (27) a. *Sue (happily)*: *You've finished your paper!* Let's celebrate!  
       b. *Sue (cautiously)*: *You've finished your paper.* Really completely finished?  
       c. *Sue (dismissively)*: *You've finished your paper.* How often have I heard you say that?

Here, it is easy to see that Sue is not intending to inform Jack about the content of a thought he has only just expressed, but to convey her own attitude or reaction to it. In (27a), she indicates that she accepts it as true and is thinking about its consequences; in (27b), she reserves judgement about whether it is true, and in (27c), she indicates that she does not believe it at all. Although these cases are particularly easy to recognise, given the parallels between echoic use and other types of attributive use, we would expect to find echoic utterances conveying the speaker's attitude not only to immediately preceding utterances but to more distant utterances, or to tacitly attributed but unexpressed thoughts. And indeed, Sue could utter (27a)-(27c) echoically when Jack arrives home after e-mailing the good news from the office, or walks in saying nothing but waving a sheaf of papers and carrying a bottle of champagne.

As these examples illustrate, the attitudes that can be conveyed in an echoic utterance range from acceptance and endorsement of the attributed thought through various shades of doubt or scepticism to outright rejection. The central claim of the echoic account is that what distinguishes verbal irony from other varieties of echoic use is that the attitudes conveyed are drawn from the *dissociative* range: the speaker rejects a tacitly attributed thought as ludicrously false, under-informative or inappropriate. Dissociative attitudes themselves vary quite widely, falling anywhere on a spectrum from amused tolerance through various shades of resignation or disappointment to contempt, disgust, outrage or scorn. The attitudes

characteristic of verbal irony are generally seen as coming from the milder, or more controlled, part of the range. However, there may be no sharp cut off point between dissociative attitudes that are clearly ironical and those that are not.

Before applying this account to some examples, it is worth pointing out two further parallels between echoic utterances and attributive utterances in general. First, attributive utterances (including tacit indirect reports) can be used to inform the hearer not only about the content of thoughts or utterances attributed to a particular individual on a particular occasion, but about what certain types of people, or people in general, say or think. We would therefore expect to find echoic utterances (including ironical utterances) conveying the speaker's attitude or reaction to thoughts which are not tied to a particular individual, time and place, but are widely entertained or expressed by a certain group of people (or people in general), and which are, as it were, endemic in that group. These include culturally-defined social, moral or aesthetic norms and general human hopes or aspirations, whose implications for particular situations are always available for ironical echoing.<sup>9</sup>

Second, an indirect report need not be identical in content to the attributed utterance or thought, but should merely resemble it closely enough (i.e., preserve enough of its logical or contextual implications) to inform the hearer about relevant aspects of its content. In different circumstances, the most appropriate indirect report may be a summary, paraphrase or elaboration of the original, or may merely pick out an implication or implicature which the speaker regards as particularly worthy of the hearer's attention. We should therefore expect to find echoic utterances (including ironical utterances) which are not identical in content to the original utterance or thought, but merely resemble it to some degree. This is a general feature of metarepresentation, whether of utterances or of thoughts.

In fact, there is one respect in which echoic utterances can depart even further from the content of the original than the corresponding free indirect reports. A thought can be analysed as consisting of a proposition entertained with a certain propositional attitude. In reporting a thought, the speaker must provide the audience with enough information not only about its propositional content, but also about the associated attitude (was it a *belief*, a *wish*, a *fantasy*, a *hope*, a *suspicion*, an expectation about how people *ought* to behave, etc.?). In free indirect reports, attitudinal information is typically provided in a parenthetical comment, as in (25a)-(25b) above, if the hearer is not in a position to infer it for himself. In an echoic utterance, by contrast, since the main aim is not to provide information about the attributed thought, the speaker may be able to convey her reaction to it by endorsing or dissociating herself from a proposition that was only a constituent of the original. Thus, if Peter had been *hoping* for lovely weather and it turns out to be pouring with rain, Mary might say, echoically, "The weather is lovely", in either an approving or a contemptuous tone of voice, in order to show how well- or ill-

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<sup>9</sup> On cultural representations and their role in individual psychology, see Sperber (1996).

founded his hopes have turned out to be. Similarly, if our aesthetic norms imply that any given performance *ought* to be graceful, we can say, echoically, “How graceful”, in either an approving or a contemptuous tone of voice, in order to show how well or badly that particular performance lived up to the norm.

Here is how the typical examples of irony in (8)-(11) might be analysed on this account. In (8) (“That was fun”) Mary might be dissociating herself from the propositional content of specific thoughts or utterances about the party (predictions or reassurances from her friends that it would be worth going to, or her own hopes, desires, expectations or fantasies about how the party would go). In that case, her utterance might communicate that the predictions or reassurances of her friends, and her own hopes, desires, expectations or fantasies, were ridiculously ill-founded. Alternatively, she might be dissociating herself from an implication (for this particular party) of a widely shared normative representation of how parties are *supposed* to go. In that case, her utterance might communicate that this particular party has fallen ridiculously short of acceptable standards. In other circumstances, she could have used (8) echoically to endorse the propositional content of the same attributed utterances or thoughts, communicating that her friends’ reassurances were true, her hopes, desires, expectations or fantasies about the party were fulfilled, or that the party lived up to the general expectation that parties ought to be fun.

While the whole utterance in (8) is echoic, only the word “kindly” is echoically used in (9) (“I left my bag in the restaurant, and someone kindly walked off with it”). The speaker is asserting that she left her bag in the restaurant and that someone took it, but dissociating herself from the proposition that this person behaved kindly. Here, the echoic account differs from the standard Gricean account. On the Gricean account, the speaker of (9) is expressing the blatant falsehood that someone kindly stole her bag, and implicating the opposite (i.e. that someone unkindly stole her bag). On the echoic account, the speaker of (9) cannot be seen as ironically dissociating herself from the thought that someone kindly stole her bag, because no rational person would entertain such a thought in the first place. By contrast, it is quite reasonable to *hope* or *wish* that whoever finds a lost bag will behave kindly, and the idea that we should treat each other kindly is part of a widely shared normative representation of how people ought to behave. By dissociating herself from a particular implication of this widely shared representation, the speaker of (9) might communicate that her hopes or desires were ridiculously unrealistic, or that the person who found her bag fell laughably short of acceptable standards of behaviour.

Similarly, Sue’s utterance in (10) (“I can’t thank you enough”) might be understood as ironically echoing a specific hope or wish of Sue’s that the addressee’s behaviour would be worthy of gratitude, or a particular implication of a more general normative representation of how people ought to behave. By the same token, “See what lovely weather it is” in (22) above (“Trust the Weather Bureau! See what lovely weather it is: rain, rain, rain”), which Clark and Gerrig treat as a

case of pretence, could be seen as ironically echoing a specific weather forecaster's predictions, a specific hope or wish of the speaker's that the weather would be lovely, or a particular implication of the more general human hope for lovely weather.

Ironical understatements such as (11) ("The Sound of Music is not the most intellectually challenging film I've ever seen") also present a problem for Grice's account of figurative utterances, since they could be well be true, and cannot therefore be treated as blatant violations of the first Quality maxim ("Do not say what you believe to be false").<sup>10</sup> According to the echoic account, a thought can be judged inadequate or inappropriate (and therefore suitable for ironical echoing) not only because it is false, but because it is grossly under-informative or irrelevant. The thought that there are more intellectually challenging films than *The Sound of Music* could only be regarded as genuinely informative or relevant by someone whose evaluation of the film, or grasp of what it takes to be an intellectually challenging film, is seriously awry. The speaker of (11) can be seen as dissociating herself from thoughts with a similar content (here exaggerated for effect) which she attributes to anyone prepared to defend the film as more than lightweight entertainment.

The general idea behind the echoic account – that irony is necessarily attributive – has been quite widely accepted, although particular aspects of it have been criticised (and occasionally misconstrued).<sup>11</sup> Several pretence theorists share the intuition that irony is tacitly attributive, but also maintain that irony involves the simulation or imitation of a (real or imagined) speech act, and is therefore a case of pretence. Attributive-pretence accounts differ from the versions of the pretence account discussed in section 4.1 by claiming that irony is necessarily attributive, and from the echoic accounts discussed in section 4.2 by claiming that irony also necessarily involves pretence. In the next subsection, I will outline the main features of some of these accounts and highlight their differences from the echoic account; in section 5, I will compare these accounts by considering how they explain the data outlined in section 3.2 above.

### 4.3 Hybrid attributive-pretence accounts

Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg and Brown (1995) propose an "allusional pretence" account of irony which involves elements of both attribution and pretence. The attributive element is introduced through the requirement that an ironical utterance must "allude to some prior expectation, norm or convention that has been violated in one way or another" (ibid: 61). The pretence element is introduced to deal with a

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<sup>10</sup> On the comparative effects of irony and understatement, see Colston & O'Brien (2002b)

<sup>11</sup> For critical discussion of the echoic account and responses to some objections, see Clark & Gerrig (1984), Sperber (1984), Giora (1995); Hamamoto (1998), Yamanashi (1998), Seto (1998), Sperber & Wilson (1998), Curcó (2000); Currie (2006, in press) and Wilson (2006).

variety of ironical utterances which Kumon-Nakamura et al. see as allusive but not properly echoic. These include ironical assertions such as (28), questions such as (29), offers such as (30), and requests, such as (31):

- (28) *To someone arrogantly showing off their knowledge:* You sure know a lot.  
 (29) *To someone acting inappropriately for their age:* How old did you say you were?  
 (30) *To someone who has just gobbled the whole pie:* How about another small slice of pizza?  
 (31) *To an inconsiderate and slovenly housemate:* Would you mind very much if I asked you to consider cleaning up your room some time this year?

For Kumon-Nakamura et al., a crucial feature of these utterances is their *pragmatic insincerity*: the speaker “makes as if” to perform a certain speech act while intentionally violating one of its sincerity conditions (e.g. the condition on questions that one should want to know the answer, or on offers that the offer is being made in good faith). While acknowledging that (28) might be seen as echoing the arrogant person’s conception of himself, Kumon-Nakamura et al. claim that no such treatment is possible for (29)-(31).<sup>12</sup>

Kendall Walton (1990: 222-3) also treats irony as involving both attribution and pretence. After noting some of the parallels between verbal irony and free indirect discourse, he comments that the speaker of an ironical utterance is not simply reporting the tacitly attributed beliefs or assertions, but is “pretending to endorse the ideas she attributes.” Thus,

To speak ironically is to mimic or mock those one disagrees with, fictionally to assert what they do or might assert. Irony is sarcasm. One shows what it is like to make certain claims, hoping thereby to demonstrate how absurd or ridiculous it is to do so.

Recanati (2007: 223-227) treats both irony and free indirect speech as tacitly attributive varieties of mimicry or pretence:

The act of assertion is precisely what the speaker does *not* perform when she says that *p* ironically: rather, she plays someone else’s part and mimics an act of assertion accomplished by that person. She does so not

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<sup>12</sup> On the assumptions of the echoic account, the utterances (29)-(31) could also be seen as echoic. According to Sperber and Wilson (1981: 311-312) over-polite requests such as (31) are ironical echoes of the sort of deferential utterance that (it is implied) the hearer sees as his due. Sarcastic offers such as (30) could be analysed as ironically echoing the sort of utterance a good host is expected to produce, or that a guest who thinks his greed has not been noticed might be expecting to hear; and so on.

by pretending that that person is speaking<sup>13</sup>... but by herself endorsing the function of speaker and saying that *p*, while (i) not taking responsibility for what is being said, and (ii) implicitly ascribing that responsibility to someone else, namely the person whose act of assertion is being mimicked. (Recanati 2007: 226)

Currie's (2006: 116) version of the pretence account can also be understood as incorporating a tacitly attributive element. According to Currie, in irony, "one pretends to be doing something which one is not doing: speaking seriously and assertively, seriously asking a question, seriously expressing distaste", in order to target "a restrictive or otherwise defective view of the world":

... 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. (ibid: 118)

Assuming that the "restrictive or otherwise defective view of the world" is tacitly attributed to some person or type of person (or people in general), Currie's version of the pretence account can be seen as incorporating the claim that irony is tacitly attributive. And indeed, he comments in a footnote:

Perhaps it would be more strictly true to say that the target is some one person's really having that perspective, or some tendency on the part of a group of persons, or persons in general, to have or be attracted to having that perspective. These are refinements that do not, in themselves, divide me from the echoic theorists, and so I do not emphasise them.<sup>14</sup> (Currie 2006: 118)

According to the pretence accounts discussed in this subsection, the speaker of an ironical utterance is pretending to perform a speech act while simultaneously expressing a mocking, sceptical or critical attitude to an attributed utterance or thought. Pretence involves imitation or simulation. To pretend to drink a glass of water is to behave in a way that resembles in relevant respects an actual or imagined act of drinking a glass of water, to pretend to assert that it's a lovely day

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<sup>13</sup> That is, not by directly quoting the speaker.

<sup>14</sup> In later work, Currie (in press) suggests that the "restrictive or defective view of the world" which is the target of the irony need not actually be attributed to anyone. For reasons of space, I will leave discussion of Currie's reservations about the echoic account to another time, but I think most of them can be satisfactorily answered, and have tried to address some of them in presenting the echoic account in section 4.2 above.

is to behave in a way that resembles in relevant respects an actual or imagined act of asserting that it's a lovely day, and so on. This approach to irony raises three immediate questions: what is the object of the speaker's mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude, what actual or imagined speech act is being simulated, and how is the attribution achieved?

It is tempting to assume that a pretence theorist could answer all three questions, and simultaneously account for the parallels between irony and free indirect reports, by treating both irony and free indirect reports as involving the imitation of an actual (or at least a plausibly attributable) speech act, which would also be the object of the characteristic attitude expressed in irony. On this approach, if the weather forecaster makes the announcement in (32), Mary might be seen as imitating this speech act in order to report it, as in (33), or to express her own mocking, sceptical or critical attitude to it, as in (34):

(32) *Weather forecaster*: It will be lovely weather today.

(33) *Mary*: Guess what I've just heard. *The weather is going to be lovely today.*

(34) *Mary [in the pouring rain]*: *The weather is really lovely today.*

A pretence account of this type would not only explain the attributive nature of (33) and (34), but also capture the intuition that the object of the ironical attitude conveyed in (34) is to the speech act the weather forecaster performed; it would thus appear to offer a genuine alternative to the echoic account.

However, there are several problems with this assumption. In the first place – as most pretence theorists recognise – the object of the ironical attitude need not be a speech act, but may be merely a thought that has not been overtly expressed in an utterance. While it makes sense to talk of mimicking, imitating or pretending to perform a public speech act, it makes no sense to talk of mimicking, imitating or pretending to perform a private thought. Pretence accounts of free indirect reports of thought run into a similar problem. According to Recanati (2007), these might be handled by broadening the notion of assertion to cover both public speech acts and private judgements, so that a speaker who reports either can be described as mimicking an “act of assertion”. But this is a purely terminological proposal, and does not solve the problem of how a piece of public behaviour can mimic a private thought. By contrast, the notion of echoic attributive use outlined in section 4.2, which is based on resemblances in content rather than in behaviour, applies straightforwardly to any representation with a conceptual content, whether or not it has been overtly expressed.

A second problem with the claim that ironical utterances are imitations of actual (or plausibly attributable) speech acts is that even when there is an actual prior speech act that the ironical speaker can be seen as echoing, the ironical utterance need not preserve the illocutionary force of the original. Thus, Mary might ironically echo the weather forecaster's announcement in (32) (“It will be lovely weather today”) by saying to her companion,

- (35) a. Isn't it lovely weather?  
 b. What lovely weather we're having today!  
 c. Let's enjoy this lovely weather.

These utterances resemble the original in propositional content, but not in illocutionary force, and it is hard to see how Mary could be seen as imitating the speech act that the weather forecaster performed; if she is pretending to perform any speech act in (35a), it is a question rather than an assertion. Or recall the experimental scenario in section 3.2 above in which Lucy asks Linus to bring her nice red party shoes. According to the pretence account, when Lucy says, ironically, "Now I'll really look pretty", she is pretending to assert that she will really look pretty. However, the actual utterance that she is ironically echoing was "I want to look pretty tonight", and this expresses a desire or wish, rather than a belief or judgement, that she will look pretty tonight. The point is quite general, and shows that even when the object of the speaker's ironical attitude is an actual speech act (e.g. the weather forecaster's assertion in (32)), this speech act cannot be identified with the one the speaker is pretending to perform.

A pretence theorist might propose to handle these cases by claiming that ironical utterances are imitations, if not of actual speech acts, at least of speech acts that some actual person or type of person had envisaged. For instance, when Lucy says "Now I'll really look pretty", she might be seen as pretending to make an assertion that she had hoped to be able to make herself, or imagined others making about her, and expressing a mocking or contemptuous attitude to the thoughts in which its performance was anticipated. And indeed, as noted above (Fn 12), ironical utterances such as the over-polite request in (31) above ("Would you mind very much if I asked you to consider cleaning up your room some time this year?") are plausibly seen as echoing thoughts about future utterances. However, the claim that *all* ironical utterances which attribute thoughts (as opposed to actual or plausibly attributable speech acts) should be analysed on similar lines has two counterintuitive consequences. In the first place, it excludes ironical reflections on the failure of private hopes, wishes or fantasies that no-one would have dreamed of expressing – which seems implausible. In the second place, it predicts that the primary object of irony is not the inadequacy of human thoughts in general, but only the inadequacy of thoughts about future speech acts. This is a heavy price to pay for a pretence theory which aims to account simultaneously for the attributive nature of irony, the object of the ironical attitude and the mechanism by which this object is identified.

All this suggests that an adequate attributive-pretence account of irony should incorporate two distinct mechanisms, which can operate independently of each other. The first is a pretence mechanism, based on resemblances in public behaviour, which enables the speaker to perform an imaginary speech act without being committed to its illocutionary force. The second is an attributive mechanism

of the type proposed in the echoic account, based on resemblances in conceptual content. In ironical utterances, the two mechanisms would combine, allowing the speaker to attribute to some actual person or type of person (or people in general) a thought similar in content to the imaginary speech act that she is pretending to perform, and to express a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude to this attributed thought. The resulting predictions would coincide with those of the echoic account, but would involve two distinct mechanisms where the echoic account has only one. Which raises the following question: if the attributive-pretence account makes the same predictions as the echoic account, wouldn't it be simpler to bypass the pretence element entirely and go directly to the echoic account?

In the next section, I will consider how the echoic and pretence accounts might explain some of the features of irony outlined in section 3.2 above. I will argue that although certain 'parodic' forms of irony can indeed be seen as involving pretence or simulation, pretence is not a necessary feature of irony, and prototypical cases of irony such as (8)-(11) above involve echoic use without any element of pretence.

## 5 Explaining the data

### 5.1 The pretence account

Non-attributive versions of the pretence account cannot handle the types of case which involve an echoic or attributive element. These include *Grice's counterexample*, *Asymmetry of affect* and *Facilitation by prior utterances*; I will discuss their treatment by the echoic and attributive-pretence accounts in subsections 5.2 and 5.3.

#### *The mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude*

In non-attributive versions of the pretence account, the object of the mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude must be either the imaginary speech act the speaker is imitating or the type of person who would perform it. But few rational people would assert that the weather is lovely when it's pouring with rain, or that Paul is a fine friend when he's patently not, and there is little point in expressing a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude to a speech act that no reasonable person would perform.

#### *"To speak ironically"*

As noted above, Grice suggests a plausible pretence-based account of the differences in appropriateness of the phrases *To speak ironically* and *To speak metaphorically*. In his view, irony is a type of pretence, and "while one wants the pretence to be recognised as such, to announce it as a pretence would spoil the effect" (Grice 1989: 54). Here, the pretence account offers a genuine explanation.

Since the echoic account denies that verbal irony necessarily involves pretence, it must provide an alternative account.

*The ironical tone of voice*

The pretence account makes a clear prediction about the tone of voice used in irony. If the speaker is pretending to make an assertion, we would expect her to maintain the pretence by mimicking the tone of voice that someone actually making the assertion would use. This is just what Clark and Gerrig (1984: 122) propose:

In pretense or make-believe, people generally leave their own voices behind for new ones. An actor playing Othello assumes a voice appropriate to Othello. An ironist pretending to be S' might assume a voice appropriate to S'. To convey an attitude about S', however, the ironist will generally exaggerate, or caricature, S''s voice, as when an ironist affects a heavily conspiratorial tone of voice in telling a well-known piece of gossip. ... With pretense, there is a natural account of the ironic tone of voice.

Notice, though, that this is not the “ironical tone of voice” discussed in much of the literature, which takes for granted that the ironical speaker does not leave her own voice behind, but can rather choose a tone of voice designed to reflect her own mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude. Rockwell’s (2000: 485) comment that the vocal cues to sarcasm are closely related to those for contempt or disgust fits well with the claim of the echoic account that the “ironical tone of voice” is simply the tone of voice used to convey the attitudes characteristic of irony; however, it seems incompatible with the view that irony is a type of pretence.

Although what Clark and Gerrig describe is not what is generally recognised as the “ironical tone of voice”, they are right to point out that many examples discussed in the literature on irony could be uttered in an exaggerated imitation of the tone of voice that someone genuinely performing the associated speech act might use. Sperber (1984: 135) suggests that the tone of voice Clark and Gerrig describe is parodic rather than ironic, where parody is related to direct quotation as irony is related to indirect quotation. Parody does indeed exploit resemblances in behaviour: the speaker simulates a speech act, mimicking the tone of voice, form of words, etc. that someone genuinely performing that speech act might use. Moreover, parody, like irony, can be used to express a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude to an actual or plausibly attributable utterance. As Sperber puts it,

Imagine that Bill keeps saying, “Sally is such a nice person”, and that Judy totally disagrees. Judy might express a derogatory attitude to Bill’s judgement on Sally in two superficially similar, but quite perceptibly

different, ways. She might imitate Bill and say herself, “Sally is such a nice person!” with an exaggerated tone of enthusiasm or even worship. Or she might utter the same sentence but with a tone of contempt, so that there will be a contradiction between the literal content of what she says and the tone in which she says it. The first tone of voice is indeed one of pretence and mockery. The second tone of voice is the ironic tone, the nuances of which have been described by rhetoricians since classical antiquity.

When a parodic utterance is used to convey a derogatory attitude to an attributed thought, it could indeed be appropriately described as a case of ironical pretence. By contrast, use of the flat, deadpan “ironical tone of voice” described in the literature would instantly betray the pretence and make it pointless. If Grice’s comment that “while one wants the pretence to be recognised as such, to announce it as a pretence would spoil the effect” adequately explains why an ironical utterance cannot be prefaced with the phrase *To speak ironically*, it also seems to exclude use of the flat, deadpan “ironical tone of voice”.

## 5. 2 The echoic account

### *Grice’s counterexample*

The echoic account suggests that what is missing from Grice’s scenario of the car with a broken window is some evidence that the utterance “Look, that car has all its windows intact” is being echoically used to dissociate the speaker from an attributed thought. Let’s add to the scenario the assumption that as we walk down the street, I have been worrying about the safety of leaving my car there overnight and you have been trying to reassure me. At that point, we come across a car with a broken window. Then my utterance, “Look, that car has all its windows intact” could be seen as ironically echoing your assurances in order to indicate how ill-founded they have turned out to be. This confirms the link between irony and echoic attributive use.

### *The mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude*

According to the echoic account, the main point of any echoic utterance is to convey the speaker’s attitude or reaction to an attributed thought. What makes an echoic utterance ironical is that the attitude conveyed is drawn from the dissociative range: the speaker distances herself from the attributed thought as ludicrously false, under-informative or irrelevant. Notice that mockery and contempt are attitudes that can be expressed not only to representations with a conceptual content, but also to people, objects, events, and so on. On the echoic account, what distinguishes the type of attitude expressed in irony is that its object is primarily an attributed thought, and only secondarily the people, or type of people, who would entertain it or take it seriously.

*The ironical tone of voice*

The echoic account sheds light on the ironical tone of voice, and explains why there is no corresponding metaphorical tone of voice. According to the echoic account, the ironical tone of voice is a natural cue to the particular type of mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude that the speaker intends to convey. Since metaphor is not echoic and does not involve the expression of a characteristic attitude, there is no reason to expect to find a corresponding metaphorical tone of voice. Thus, what looks like an arbitrary difference from the standpoint of the classical or Gricean accounts falls out naturally from the echoic account.

*Further cues to irony*

If the point of irony is to indicate that the speaker regards an attributed thought as ludicrously false, under-informative or irrelevant, a natural way of making the intended attitude more salient would be to add an element of incongruity or exaggeration to the ironical utterance. What makes this possible is that metarepresentation in general is based on resemblance rather than identity in content, so that the proposition expressed need not be identical in content to the attributed thought, but need only resemble it in relevant respects.

*Asymmetry of affect*

The echoic account also explains the asymmetry in the uses of irony which makes it easier to say “How graceful!” of someone behaving clumsily than to say “How clumsy!” of someone being graceful. As Sperber and Wilson (1981: 312) put it,

Standards or rules of behaviour are culturally defined, commonly known, and frequently invoked; they are thus always available for echoic mention. On the other hand, critical judgements are particular to a given individual or occasion, and are thus only occasionally available for mention. Hence, it is always possible to say of a failure, *That was a great success*, since it is normal to hope for the success of a given course of action. However, to say of a success *That was a failure* without the irony falling flat, the speaker must be able to refer back to prior doubts or fears, which he can then echo ironically.

There is a widely shared aesthetic norm which implies that any given performance ought to be graceful. As a result, it is always possible to say “How graceful!” of performance that falls short of the norm. By contrast, there is no widely shared norm which implies that any given performance ought to be clumsy. As a result, when Peter walks gracefully up to receive his prize and Mary says “How clumsy!”, she must be echoing either specific worries about this particular performance that one of them has raised, or more general fears or worries about his behaviour that Peter is in the habit of expressing.

*Facilitation by earlier utterances*

The echoic account predicts that the speaker's ironical attitude will be easier to recognise when its object is made more salient by being expressed in a preceding utterance. As noted above (section 3.2), this prediction, first tested by Jorgensen, Miller and Sperber (1984), has been confirmed in several later studies (e.g. Keenan and Quigley 1999; Creusere 2000; Gerrig & Goldvarg 2000; Colston & Gibbs 2002). It is hard to see how these results could be explained by a non-attributive account.

*"To speak ironically"*

Since the echoic account claims that regular (non-parodic) irony does not involve pretence, it must provide some alternative to Grice's explanation for the inappropriateness of prefacing an ironical utterance with the phrase *To speak ironically*.<sup>15</sup> An alternative account might start from the observation that most of the effects of irony depend on the fact that the speaker is *tacitly* expressing a dissociative attitude to a *tacitly* attributed thought; thus, the addition of any overt linguistic clues are likely to diminish its effects (Wilson 2006). Then the inappropriateness of prefacing an ironical utterance with the phrase *To speak ironically* might be linked to the inappropriateness of prefacing an angry utterance with the phrase *To speak crossly*, or a despairing utterance with the phrase *To speak despairingly* (notice that neither of these last two examples is a case of pretence). Moreover, one of the important effects of irony is to create a sense of complicity or superiority with those who share the speaker's attitude closely enough to recognise it without having it spelled out. This effect would be destroyed by the addition of explicit linguistic cues.

**5.3 Hybrid attributive-pretence accounts**

An attributive-pretence account of the type outlined at the end of section 4.3 could in principle draw on all the explanations offered by both echoic and non-attributive pretence accounts. By treating irony as a type of pretence, it could pursue both Grice's pretence-based explanation of the inappropriateness of the phrase *To speak ironically* and the alternative echoic account sketched above. By treating irony as involving the expression of a characteristic attitude to an attributed thought, it could appeal to the echoic account of *Grice's counterexample, Asymmetry of affect, Facilitation by prior utterances* and *Cues to irony*. And by treating irony as

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<sup>15</sup> Something is missing from Grice's account, in any case, since it does not explain why a hyperbole cannot be appropriately prefaced with the phrase *To speak hyperbolically* (or *To exaggerate*). Hyperbole is more closely related to metaphor than to hyperbole, and it is unlikely that Grice would have wanted to treat it as necessarily involving pretence.

involving both attribution and pretence, it might aim to shed light on both the tone of voice used in parodic irony and the regular *Ironical tone of voice*.

Currie (2006) suggests that both parodic and regular ironical tones of voice can be accommodated within a pretence account using a notion of *scope of pretence*. In both cases, he claims, the ironical speaker is pretending to perform a speech act; however, in parodic irony, the accompanying (exaggeratedly sincere) tone of voice falls within the scope of the pretence, while in regular irony, the derogatory tone of voice falls outside the scope of the pretence, and is intended to reflect the actual speaker's views. One problem with this proposal is that it seems incompatible with the intuition underlying Grice's explanation of why it is inappropriate to say *To speak ironically*: that "while one wants the pretence to be recognised as such, to announce it as a pretence would spoil the effect". Sperber (1984: 135), who shares Grice's intuition, sees the very existence of the "ironical tone of voice" as incompatible with pretence accounts:

Not only is there no natural account of the true ironic tone of voice, but the very existence of that tone constitutes strong evidence against pretence theory. Indeed, this tone, when it is used, makes any pretence impossible. There is no audience, real or imaginary, that would fail to perceive the derogatory attitude and hence the ironic intent it conveys. Therefore, ironies spoken in an ironic tone of voice fall outside the scope of pretence theory!

If there were no alternative to the pretence account, some way of reconciling these intuitions would have to be found. However, there is an alternative: to treat parodic irony as a type of pretence and regular irony as a type of echoic use with no element of pretence.

The key differences between the echoic and attributive-pretence accounts might be summed up as follows. According to the echoic account, irony necessarily involves the expression of a dissociative attitude to an attributed thought. In prototypical cases such as (8)-(11) above, the vehicle for irony is an echoic use of language: an utterance which does not explicitly express a thought of the speaker's, but is used to indicate that the speaker has in mind an attributed thought with a similar content, and wants to convey her attitude to it (which in the case of irony is drawn from the dissociative range). In a further class of cases, the vehicle for irony may be a parodic utterance: an imitation of a real or imagined utterance which tacitly conveys a mocking or scornful attitude to a thought with a similar content attributed to some source other than the speaker at the current time. While parodic irony exploits resemblances in behaviour, and could be seen as falling under some version of the pretence account, echoic utterances exploit resemblances in content without any element of pretence.

According to the attributive-pretence account, irony necessarily involves both attribution and pretence. In both parodic and regular irony, the speaker is seen as

imitating a real or imagined speech act and tacitly conveying a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude to a thought with a similar content that she attributes to some source other than herself at the current time. The key differences between the two accounts are thus that the echoic account claims, and the pretence account denies, that regular and parodic irony involve distinct interpretive mechanisms (echoic use and attributive pretence, respectively), and that the pretence account claims, while the echoic account denies, that prototypical cases of irony such as (8)-(11), uttered in a neutral or ironical tone of voice, necessarily involve an element of pretence. Here it is worth noting that the echoic account on its own explains the full range of features of regular irony and differences between metaphor and irony outlined in section 3.2, and that most or all of the explanatory burden in attributive-pretence accounts of regular irony is carried by the attributive element – which is shared with the echoic account – and not the element of pretence. Thus, the pretence element in attributive-pretence accounts of regular irony adds to the complexity of the theory but yields no corresponding benefit.

#### 5.4 Testing the accounts

An obvious way of testing these accounts would be to look for similarities and differences in the development, production and processing of parodic utterances – which both sides agree are cases of pretence – and regular cases of irony, which are in dispute. It seems plausible that the production and comprehension of parodic utterances might develop earlier than the production and comprehension of echoic utterances, and break down in different ways. By contrast, if regular and parodic irony showed similar patterns of development and breakdown, or if the neural mechanisms involved in the production or interpretation of pretence were activated by both regular and parodic irony, this would tend to support the pretence account.

A second type of evidence would be linguistic. According to the echoic account, ironical utterances should pattern with other types of echoic utterance. Consider Sue's possible responses in (37b)-(37c) to Jack's announcement in (36):

- (36) *Jack*: I've brought champagne for supper.  
 (37) a. *Sue (puzzled)*: You've brought champagne for supper? Real champagne?  
 b. *Sue (happily)*: You've brought champagne for supper. I'm thrilled.  
 c. *Sue (sarcastically)*: You've brought champagne for supper. You mean someone gave you some fizzy wine.

(37a) is an echoic question in which Sue attributes a thought to Jack and expresses her own questioning attitude to it. This is not a case of irony, since Sue is not dissociating herself from the attributed thought as false, under-informative or irrelevant. Still, according to the echoic account the echoic utterances in (37a) and (37b) are closely related to the ironical utterance in (37c), the main difference between them being in the type of attitude conveyed. According to the pretence

account, by contrast, since echoic questions and echoic endorsements cannot be seen as cases of pretence, they should be processed in significantly different ways from ironical utterances. Although the similarities and differences between ironical utterances and free indirect reports have received some attention (e.g. Recanati 2000, 2007; Blakemore 2009), the similarities and differences between ironical utterances and other types of echoic utterance have been much less studied, and might contribute usefully to the debate on pretence vs echoic accounts (see Blakemore 1994; Noh 1998, 2001; Recanati 2000).

## 6 Irony, metarepresentational abilities and standard false-belief tests

I began this paper by drawing attention to two features of irony widely reported in the literature: that irony comprehension goes with success in standard second-order false-belief tests while metaphor comprehension does not, and that irony comprehension develops later than metaphor comprehension. Having shown how the pretence and echoic accounts might explain a variety of other features of irony, I will end by considering their implications for the relation between irony, metarepresentational abilities and standard false-belief tests.

The correlation between irony comprehension and success in second-order false-belief tasks does not entail that irony itself is necessarily attributive or echoic.<sup>16</sup> However, since children produce and understand elementary non-verbal acts of pretence long before they pass standard first-order false-belief tests, the correlation presents a particular challenge for non-attributive versions of the pretence account. A possible solution suggested by Currie (2006: 128) is that an extra layer of metarepresentation may be required “in the specific case where the pretence is that one is making an assertion”. Discussing Happé’s (1993) scenario in which David puts the eggs in the cake shells and all and his father says “What a clever boy you are”, Currie comments:

The question asked is “What does David’s father mean?” And the children can be expected to get the right answer if they understand that, while David’s father may have seemed to think that David is clever, he is really only pretending to think this. They are required to grasp the thought that *David’s father pretends that [he thinks that (David is clever)]*. This would require second order mind reading skills.

The idea behind this suggestion is presumably that in metaphor and story-telling – which are understood much earlier – the speaker is not *pretending to think that P*, but at most *pretending that P*. A consequence of this proposal is that irony comprehension should require the same degree of metarepresentational ability as

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<sup>16</sup> For an alternative line of investigation, see work by Winner (1988) and her colleagues.

comprehension of non-ironical “pretend assertions” (e.g. the father of a small child in a hiding game says loudly, in an exaggeratedly baffled tone, “Susie’s not in *this* room. I’ll go and look next door”, when it’s mutually manifest to both of them that she’s under the table), which should also correlate with success in standard second-order false-belief tests; this prediction could in principle be tested.

The echoic account predicts that ironical utterances will be understood in similar ways to other types of echoic utterance. Echoic utterances in general can be described as communicating “a thought about a thought”. However, this claim can be understood in several ways, and is therefore compatible with several different explanations for the correlation between irony comprehension and success in second-order false belief tasks. On one interpretation – the one that fits best with the common ‘mindreading’ account of the correlations – irony communicates a thought about a thought (and therefore requires an extra layer of metarepresentational ability) because it is tacitly *attributive*: that is, the speaker is attributing a thought to some source other than herself at the current time. On this account, we would expect comprehension of other types of tacitly attributive utterance, including the tacit indirect reports in (24a) (“All the trains were delayed.”) and (24b) (“Would they ever get home?”) to correlate with success in second-order false belief tests. On a narrower interpretation, irony communicates a thought about a thought (and therefore requires an extra layer of metarepresentational ability) because it is not simply attributive but *echoic*: that is, the speaker is tacitly conveying her own *attitude* to an attributed thought. On this account we would expect comprehension of other types of echoic utterance to correlate with success in second-order false-belief tests, whereas comprehension of tacit indirect reports would not. On a still narrower interpretation, irony communicates a thought about a thought (and therefore requires an extra layer of metarepresentational ability) because it is not simply echoic, but expresses a particular *type* of (dissociative) attitude. This account allows for the possibility that ironical echoic utterances (e.g. (37c) (“You’ve brought champagne for supper. You mean someone gave you some fizzy wine”)) call for a higher order of metarepresentational ability than non-ironical echoic utterances (e.g. (37a) (“You’ve brought champagne for supper? Real champagne?”), which conveys a puzzled rather than a properly dissociative attitude).<sup>17</sup>

Some evidence that might help to choose between these possibilities comes from a further feature of irony noted above (section 2.2): that irony comprehension correlates with the ability to cope with lies and deliberate deception, which also goes with success in standard second-order false-belief tasks. According to Mascaro and Sperber (2007, in press), the ability to cope with lies and deliberate

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<sup>17</sup> On this last account, ironical echoic questions (i.e. those that clearly dissociate the speaker from the attributed thought, as in, “You’ve brought champagne for supper? Don’t make me laugh”) should require an extra layer of metarepresentational ability, and thus pattern differently from non-ironical echoic questions.

deception has both an epistemic and a mindreading component, which develop at different rates. The epistemic component involves the ability to assess communicated information as true or false and draw inferences from this assessment. This ability, which is present from around the age of four and helps to protect the child against accidental mistakes on the part of communicators, was found to be a precursor to success in standard first-order false-belief tasks. The second component is the mindreading capacity to recognise a deliberate lie as an assertion which is not only false, but *intentionally false*. This starts to develop from the age of four, but is not fully reliable until around the age of six,

Given the parallels between irony comprehension and the ability to cope with deliberate lies, it seems reasonable to assume that irony comprehension also has both an epistemic and a mindreading component. Irony and deliberate lies are related in the following way. In deliberate lies, the speaker expresses a proposition she regards as false (or epistemically unsound), intending to conceal from the audience her opinion of its epistemic status. In irony, by contrast, the speaker expresses a proposition she regards as false (or epistemically unsound), intending to share with the audience, via the expression of a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude, her opinion of its epistemic status. Thus, an attitude which is intentionally concealed in deliberate lies is intentionally communicated in irony. This analysis would account for the correlations between irony comprehension, the ability to cope with deliberate lies, and success in standard second-order false-belief tests, and would also help to explain why children who misunderstand irony most commonly take it as a lie (Creusere 1999).

In this new picture, success in standard first-order false-belief tests also has both mindreading and epistemic components: it involves the mindreading ability to attribute thoughts to others and the metalogical ability to assess potential thoughts as true or false and draw appropriate inferences. If we accept the evidence that much younger children already have well-developed mindreading abilities, it seems reasonable to assume that what standard first-order false-belief tasks directly reveal it is not in general the state of the mindreading ability (which has been present all along), but the current state of development of the metalogical ability.<sup>18</sup> By the same arguments, success in standard second-order false-belief tests should also have both a mindreading and an epistemic component: it would involve not only the mindreading ability to attribute thoughts about thoughts, but also the metalogical ability to assess the truth or falsity of thoughts about thoughts, and draw appropriate inferences. And by parallel arguments, it seems reasonable to assume that what accounts for the delay in passing standard second-order false-belief tests is not so much the extra layer of mindreading involved as the extra complexity of assessing the truth or falsity of thoughts about thoughts.

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<sup>18</sup> Success in standard false-belief tasks is generally seen as presupposing the executive ability to inhibit alternative more accessible hypotheses (e.g. Leslie, Friedman & German 2004). The metalogical ability might have a role to play in choosing which hypotheses to reject.

The difference between the old and new pictures can be seen in terms of the distinction between understanding and believing. Pragmatic processes are geared to *understanding* utterances. As Mascaro and Sperber describe it, the capacity for epistemic vigilance is geared to deciding whether or not to *believe* what you are being told. According to the common line of explanation, standard false-belief tasks test the mindreading ability required for understanding utterances. According to the new picture, standard false belief tasks test the capacity for epistemic vigilance required for deciding whether or not to believe what you are being told. Irony is a particularly interesting test case in this respect, since it not only exploits the epistemic or metalinguistic abilities required for filtering out false or misleading information, but brings them within the scope of the communicator's intentions. Irony comprehension should therefore involve an interaction among all three metarepresentational abilities: the pragmatic ability, the mindreading ability, and the capacity for epistemic vigilance.

What are the more general implications of this picture for the reported correlations between performance on pragmatic tasks and on standard false-belief tests? The hypothesis it suggests is that what should correlate with success in standard first-order false-belief tests is not the pragmatic ability to go beyond the encoded sentence meaning to look for the speaker's meaning, but the epistemic ability to evaluate the output of spontaneous comprehension in deciding whether or not to believe what one is being told. This might help to make sense of a number of reported correlations between performance on pragmatic tasks and standard false-belief tests that have no obvious explanation in terms of orders of mindreading ability.

To take just one example, Doherty and Perner (1998) and Doherty (2000) report a strong correlation between performance on standard false-belief tests and pragmatic tasks involving the production and comprehension of synonyms and homonyms (see section 2.2 above). It is not obvious how this correlation could be explained in mindreading terms. Doherty (2000) interprets his results as more revealing of metalinguistic than mindreading abilities, and notes that his homonymy task may shed light on the difficulties in disambiguation sometimes encountered by typically developing children in selecting the less frequent sense of a homonym or homophone (Campbell & Bowe 1983; Beveridge & Marsh 1991). Similar difficulties with disambiguation have been reported in people with autism or Asperger's syndrome (Happé 1997; Jolliffe & Baron Cohen 1999; Lopez & Leekam 2003; Norbury 2005), where they are sometimes seen as linked to an inability to take contextual information into account. An alternative possibility that might be worth exploring is that a further factor affecting performance on this type of disambiguation task is the epistemic ability to evaluate the output of spontaneous comprehension and consider alternative interpretations if necessary. The development of this ability may coincide with the move from a stage in pragmatic

development that Sperber (1994) calls “Naïve Optimism” to the stage he calls “Cautious Optimism”.<sup>19</sup>

So, returning to the question raised earlier in this paper, what light might this new picture shed on the correlations between irony comprehension and success in second-order false-belief tasks? One obvious consequence of the move from a mindreading explanation of success in standard false-belief tests to an epistemic vigilance account is to shift the focus of attention from the attributive nature of ironical utterances to the nature of the attitude conveyed. Ironical utterances, I have argued, are not only attributive but dissociative: the speaker expresses a dissociative attitude to the attributed thought, indicating that it is false, under-informative or irrelevant. But this is precisely the sort of property of communicated meanings that the capacity for epistemic vigilance is designed to pick out. And in that case, the epistemic vigilance account suggests a new explanation for the correlation between irony comprehension and success in second-order false-belief tests, which might be worth exploring further.

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<sup>19</sup> As argued above (section 2.2), very young children must be able to disambiguate and assign reference spontaneously in order to understand utterances at all. What may come with the move from Naïve Optimism to Cautious Optimism is the ability to evaluate the output of spontaneous comprehension (which has already undergone tentative disambiguation, reference resolution, etc.) and consider alternative interpretations if necessary. Thus, the output of spontaneous comprehension may be epistemically unsound for two different reasons: (a) because the speaker is mistaken or lying, or (b) because the speaker intended some alternative interpretation which has not yet been found.

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