Christian Burgers, Margot van Mulken and Peter Jan Schellens

The use of co-textual irony markers in written discourse

Abstract: Authors of written texts may mark the use of verbal irony in a variety of ways. One possibility for doing so is the use of so-called co-textual markers of irony (i.e., support strategies that open up a non-serious frame). This study aims to classify and categorize these co-textual irony markers. A content analysis of 2,042 co-textual utterances of irony across four text genres (advertisements, newspaper columns, book and film reviews, and letters to the editor) shows that three categories of support strategies could be identified: other ironic utterances, tropes and mood markers. The use of irony support strategies was positively related to the genre of newspaper columns: columns used more ironic utterances and tropes as irony support strategies than the other genres in the corpus.

Keywords: verbal irony, natural discourse, irony support strategies, co-textual markers

1 Introduction

When classicist Brooks Otis (1965) discussed the poems of the Roman poet Propertius, he had problems in evaluating them. One of the reasons was that Propertius’ poems did not meet the expectations that the Roman poet created: “There is irony where we should expect seriousness; seriousness where we should expect irony” (Otis 1965: 1). In other words, Otis stated that, at one point, the text set out to create an ironic expectation that it failed to meet, while, at another point, the text set out a serious expectation that it failed to meet as well. The poems of
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Propertius featured a number of co-textual elements that set up Otis’ expectation of the use of irony. A question that Otis did not go into was how exactly the poems of Propertius built up this ironic expectation. What co-textual elements can specifically be used to set up an expectation of irony?

In studies on the use of irony, elements that alert the reader to a possible use of irony are called irony markers. These irony markers are usually defined as metacommunicative clues that can “alert the reader to the fact that a sentence is ironical” (Attardo 2000a: 7). In this study, an utterance is ironical when it is “an evaluative utterance, the valence of which is implicitly reversed between the literal and intended evaluation” (Burgers et al. 2011). Various scholars have identified many different types of irony markers that an author can use to mark such an utterance (e.g., Attardo 2000a; Kreuz 1996; Muecke 1978; Seto 1998). In written communication, these markers can roughly be classified into four different categories: (1) tropes, such as hyperboles (e.g., Kreuz and Roberts 1995) and rhetorical questions (e.g., Muecke 1978), (2) schematic markers such as repetition (e.g., Muecke 1978) and a change of register (e.g., Haiman 1998), (3) morpho-syntactic markers such as exclamations (e.g., Seto 1998) and tag questions (e.g., Kreuz 1996) and (4) typographic markers such as quotation marks (e.g., Attardo 2001) and emoticons (e.g., Kreuz 1996; for a more detailed explanation, see Burgers et al. 2012).

The inclusion of one or more of these irony markers into an ironic utterance may make it easier to perceive the utterance as ironic than an ironic utterance without irony markers (cf. Kreuz and Roberts 1995). In other words, an ironic utterance that is marked with a hyperbole may be easier to identify as ironic than an ironic utterance that is not marked at all. In the discussion of irony markers, scholars have focused on elements in the ironic utterance itself. Of course, a text with an ironic utterance usually contains more utterances than that particular ironic utterance alone. These other utterances (i.e., the other utterances of the text with the exception of the utterance under discussion) are typically referred to as the co-text of the utterance under discussion (Attardo 2000a). To the best of our knowledge, the identification and categorization of these co-textual irony markers have received scant scholarly attention. The question that is addressed in this paper is thus whether the co-text can also serve to alert a reader to the fact that a sentence is ironical.

In humor studies, co-textual elements that alert a reader to the use of humor are referred to as support strategies (Hay 2001). For irony, such a support strategy can help to put a reader into an “ironic” frame in which (s)he may come to expect the eventual use of irony (e.g. Partington 2007). In other words, an irony support strategy can help to create a so-called “ironic environment” (Utsumi 2000) in which the use of irony is almost expected by default. While the notion of support
strategies is relatively unexplored in irony studies, it is familiar to the field of humor studies, where it is also discussed in terms of *humor support strategies* and *frames* (e.g., Hay 2001; Ritchie 2005). Irony and humor are related to a certain degree. Irony has a number of discourse goals, one of which is to be humorous (e.g., Gibbs 2000; Roberts and Kreuz 1994). Besides the use of humor, irony may also have other discourse goals such as diminishing (e.g., Dews and Winner 1995) or enhancing criticism (e.g., Matthews et al. 2006). At the same time, not all humorous utterances are ironic. Irony is only one of the techniques that speakers can use to evoke a sense of humor; other humor techniques for instance include slapstick and clownish humor (e.g., Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004; Catanescu and Tom 2001). Because of the close connection between irony and humor, it may be possible to extend some findings from the field of humor studies to the field of irony studies.

Hay (2001) distinguishes a number of humor support strategies in conversation, i.e., strategies that people in a conversation can use to acknowledge humor. One of these strategies is simply to “contribute more humor” (Hay 2001: 60–62), which means that a humorous frame is maintained and elaborated upon after a first humorous remark. Hay (2001) purports that this contribution of humor by other speakers in a conversation makes humor more salient and strengthens its recognition. Irony may work in a similar way, both in spoken and written communication. If an author of a written text adds more ironic utterances to that text, irony comprehension may be facilitated. In other words, an ironic utterance that was preceded by other ironic utterances may be easier to recognize as ironic than the first ironic utterance in a text.

A first co-textual marker that may help a reader to get into an “ironic frame” is thus the use of multiple ironic utterances in one text. Let us illustrate this with an example in which, for reader convenience, ironic utterances are printed in boldface. In a column in the Dutch newspaper *Metro*, columnist Ebru Umar discusses a dialogue between a reporter from another newspaper and herself. The other reporter asks Umar whether she really has the liberty to write whatever she wants in her column in *Metro*. Umar responds:

(1) (a) **Nee, ik word gecensureerd bij Metro, nou goed.**
No I am being censored at Metro, all right.

‘No, I am being censored at Metro, all right.’

(b) **Sterker nog, ik schrijf mijn columns niet zelf,**
Stronger even, I write my columns not self,

‘To put it even stronger, I do not write my columns myself,’

(c) **ze zetten voor de gein mijn naam erboven en een**
they put jokingly my name above and a
In utterances (1a)–(1c), Umar is ironic. The constant use of irony may help a reader to start expecting irony. In other words, it may be easier for a reader to perceive utterance (1c) as ironic, because it has been preceded by ironic utterances (1a) and (1b) than to perceive utterance (1a) as ironic, which has not been preceded by an ironic utterance.

While Hay (2001: 62) claims that humor is often supported with the same type of humor (e.g., irony is used in response to irony) or by reacting with laughter, humor may also be supported by a switch in humor styles. The same may be true for irony. Even though irony may be preceded by another ironic utterance, an author could also use different co-textual strategies to try to attract a reader’s attention. It is possible that an author for instance uses hyperbole in a non-ironic utterance to achieve this goal. In this way, an author can already “announce” an ironic utterance by means of a non-ironic utterance. A good example of this latter strategy can be seen in the opening lines of a review of the DVD version of the film Must love dogs:

(2) (a) Sarah Nolan ([Diane] Lane) is kleuterleidster
    Sarah Nolan ([Diane] Lane) is kindergarten teacher.
    ‘Sarah Nolan ([Diane] Lane) is a kindergarten teacher.’
(b) in Hollywood code een kanjer van een hint dat
    in Hollywood code a giant of a clue that
    ‘In Hollywood code, a gigantic clue that’
(c) deze dame de onbaatzuchtigheid zelve is
    this woman the selflessness self is
    ‘this woman is selflessness incarnate’.
(d) maar toch staat ze er alleen voor.
    but nevertheless stands she there alone for.
    ‘but she is on her own nevertheless.’

1 All examples are translated from Dutch by the first author. Ironic utterances are printed in bold face throughout examples in this paper.
(e) Haar vent heeft Sarah ingeruild voor een jonger
Her boyfriend has Sarah traded in for a younger
exemplaar.
‘Her boyfriend traded Sarah in for a younger wife’ (literally: specimen).

(f) [Sarah is] de veertig inmiddels gepasseerd,
[Sarah is] the forty already passed,
‘[Sarah is] already over forty years of age,’

(g) Haar onmogelijk aimabele zussen willen dat
Her impossible amiable sisters want that
‘Her impossibly amiable sisters want that’

(h) Sarah weer onder de mannen komt.
Sarah again amongst the men comes
‘Sarah to start dating new men.’

(i) Dus zetten ze een advertentie op een datingwebsite.
So put they an advertisement on a dating website
‘So they put an advertisement on a dating website.’

(j) Zal het lukken om de man van haar dromen
Will it succeed to the man of her dreams
tevinden?
to find?
‘Will she succeed in finding the man of her dreams?’ (Anonymous 2006).

In utterance (2j), the author poses the question that is the central premise of the romantic comedy Must love dogs. On a literal level, this question may be interpreted as an evaluative statement that is intended to raise interest in seeing the film; the reader may feel suspense whether Sarah’s search for Mr. Right has a happy ending or not. However, in the rest of the review, the reviewer makes it obvious that this particular film confirms to every convention of the romantic comedy genre, which makes it obvious that Sarah will find her true love before the movie’s end. On an ironic level, then, utterance (2j) confirms one of the stereotypes of the romantic comedy genre, which implies that the reader does not have to wonder about the outcome of Sarah’s search for the perfect guy. This means that, in an ironic reading, the reader should not feel any suspense about the movie’s outcome. Ironic utterance (2j) is marked with a rhetorical question.

Although (2j) contains an irony marker, utterances (2a)–(2i) may already have led a reader to expect irony. Words such as “Hollywood code”, “a gigantic clue” and the “impossibly amiable sisters” may have led a reader to believe that something was going on. This alertness may help a reader to get into a frame that
anticipates an ironic utterance that eventually comes in (2j). In this way, the co-
text may help to facilitate an ironic reading. The question of which co-textual
markers can be employed to do so has received little attention from scholars. The
first research question of this study is thus:

RQ1. Which co-textual irony markers can be identified in written discourse?

Of course, co-textual markers of irony may be closely related to irony markers in
the ironic utterance. Co-textual markers such as “gigantic clue” (utterance 2b) or
“impossibly amiable sisters” (utterance 2g) can be labeled as hyperbole. This
means that the irony marker of hyperbole (cf. Kreuz and Roberts 1995) could be
extended to the domain of co-textual markers. However, this is not the case for all
irony markers: it is, for instance, difficult to imagine quotation marks as markers
of irony in an utterance other than the ironic utterance in which they are used. At
the same time, it is possible that co-textual markers exist that are not used as
markers in the ironic utterance. These new co-textual irony markers should
also be identified. The analysis of co-textual irony markers thus needs a broad
approach, which enables us to identify as many co-textual markers as possible.
Only when these co-textual irony markers have been identified, is it possible to
analyze how often they are used in written discourse. The second research ques-
tion is then:

RQ2. How often are different types of co-textual irony markers used in written
discourse?

Previous content analyses focus on irony in one specific discourse situation
such as conversations (e.g., Gibbs 2000), blogs (Whalen et al., in press) or e-mail
correspondence (Whalen et al. 2009). Whalen et al. (2009) argue that nonliteral
language such as irony may be used differently in different modalities and genres.
This may only seem logical: various genres come with their own characteristics
and expectations (e.g., Biber 1993; Steen 1999). This assumption was confirmed
by Burgers et al. (2012) who showed that irony is indeed used differently in differ-
ent genres. However, few other studies have explicitly addressed this possible
genre difference in the use of irony. So, for co-textual markers of irony, it may also
be possible that they are used differently in one particular genre from co-textual
markers of irony in another genre. The third research question of this study is
then:

RQ3. Are co-textual markers of irony used differently across various written
genres?
2 Method

2.1 Identification of irony

A corpus of Dutch texts from various genres (e.g., advertisements, columns, book and film reviews, and letters to the editor) that included ironic utterances was compiled. Irony was identified in these texts with the use of the Verbal Irony Procedure (VIP; see Burgers et al. 2011). Even though the identification of irony is important, it is not our primary goal in this paper and, for an extensive explanation of the identification of ironic utterances, we refer to Burgers et al. (2011). For reader convenience, we give a short summary here.

In the VIP, irony is defined as “an evaluative utterance, the valence of which is implicitly reversed between the literal and intended evaluation” (see Burgers et al. 2011). After comparing various theoretical frameworks about irony, Burgers et al. (2011) found that various irony theorists agree on five aspects about irony.

Firstly, an ironic utterance should always convey an evaluation of some sort (e.g., Attardo 2000b; Grice 1978; Partington 2007; Sperber and Wilson 1995). Following Hunston (2004: 157) an evaluative meaning is defined as “the indication that something is good or bad”. This evaluation can be explicitly mentioned in the ironic utterance (e.g., “Fantastic weather, eh”, uttered in a downpour) or can remain implicit (e.g., “Yes, the sun is shining”, uttered in a downpour). Only when the speaker infers that the latter utterance conveys an evaluation about the weather, is it possible to interpret it as ironic. A second characteristic is that an ironic utterance is always made about an object (e.g., Cros 2001; Kotthoff 2003). The term “object” should be interpreted broadly, as the object can for instance be an actual object, a person or a general expectation or norm. Thirdly, an ironic utterance is based on incongruence (e.g., Attardo 2000a; 2000b), which means that an ironic utterance cannot literally fit the co-text. In irony, this incongruence takes a specific form; the valence of the literal (positive or negative) should be opposite to the valence of the intended evaluation (negative or positive; e.g., Kreuz 1996; Matthews et al. 2006). Finally, the intended evaluation of an ironic utterance should be appropriate given the context in which the utterance was made (e.g., Attardo 2000a; 2000b; Giora 1995).

Based on these five characteristics of irony, the VIP consists out of four steps. Coders first read through the entire text to get a general sense of its meaning and the position taken by the text’s author. Coders then looked at each individual clause and determined whether it was descriptive or evaluative. If the utterance is evaluative, the third step of the VIP entails that coders determine if...
the literal evaluation is congruent with the co-text or not. If the literal evaluation is incongruent with the co-text, a coder can proceed to the fourth step, which determines if the literal evaluation can be contrasted with an intended evaluation about the same object. When a plausible reading can be found in which the valence of the intended (ironic) evaluation (negative or positive) is in the opposite domain from the literal evaluation (positive or negative), the utterance is considered ironic.

2.2 Materials

From a larger corpus of 213 contemporary texts, sixty texts were selected using randomized stratified sampling. Fifteen texts were randomly selected from four genres (advertisement, column, book and film review, and letter to editor). This sub sample thus consisted out of 60 texts with a total of 180 ironic utterances. Excluding these ironic utterances, the sample consisted of 2,042 co-textual utterances that could possibly present co-textual irony markers. These utterances were subsequently coded in the way described in section 2.3. All texts were originally written in Dutch.

2.3 Procedure and reliability

Two different methods were used to analyze the use of multiple ironic utterances and the use of other co-textual irony markers. The analysis of the use of multiple ironic utterances was relatively straightforward. Using the VIP, ironic utterances in the corpus were already identified (cf. Burgers et al. 2012). With these codings, it is easy to know how many (if any) ironic utterances precede a specific ironic utterance in a specific text.

For the other co-textual analysis, a coding instruction was made. Since it was hypothesized that not every irony marker in the ironic utterance could also serve as a co-textual irony marker and that co-textual irony markers might exist that could not be found in the ironic utterance, it was decided to use an open instruction to identify the co-textual markers.

The coding process consisted of two rounds of coding. For the first round, coders – two MA students in Business Communication at Radboud University Nijmegen – were given instructions that informed them what the purpose of a co-textual irony marker was (i.e., to put the reader in an ironic frame). They were subsequently asked to identify and label co-textual irony markers. Coders were
instructed to be as specific as possible about what they considered as a co-textual irony marker. They were also asked to indicate why they considered something as a co-textual irony marker. In the second round, coders were confronted with the coding and motivation of another rater for cases in which they disagreed. They could indicate whether they stood by their own interpretation, agreed with the other rater’s observation, considered both their interpretations as valid or – after a second look – would opt for a different coding altogether.

After the first round of coding, Cohen’s Kappa was low (κ = .06; slight agreement, Landis and Koch 1977). After the second round, the score for Cohen’s Kappa increased to .84, which can be qualified as “almost perfect” (Landis and Koch 1977: 3). The first author made the final decision about the group of cases coders disagreed about after the second round of coding (i.e., 63 out of 2,042 utterances or 3.1% of utterances). Based on the argumentation given by the two coders, the first author then classified the identified co-textual markers into categories.

3 Results

3.1 Qualitative results

The first research question deals with the identification of types of co-textual irony markers. In this content analysis, a total of 169 utterances with co-textual irony markers (or 8.3% of all co-textual utterances) was identified. Based on the argumentation provided by the coders, the first author classified the co-textual markers of irony in non-ironic utterances into two main categories; tropes and mood markers. The category of tropes contains some of the same tropes that other scholars have identified as markers in the ironic utterances: metaphor (e.g., Ritchie 2005), hyperbole (e.g., Kreuz and Roberts 1995; Muecke 1978), understatement (e.g., Muecke 1978; Seto 1998) and rhetorical question (e.g., Barbe 1995; Muecke 1978). The category of mood markers contains one marker that was also mentioned in the literature as a marker in the ironic utterance (a change of register; see Haiman 1998; Leech 1983) and two new co-textual markers (cynicism and the use of humor).

Examples of both metaphors and understatements as co-textual irony markers can be found in a column in which the author narrates his visit to the doctor. The author starts out by explaining why he went to see his physician, after which he talks about the doctor’s sense of humor:
(3) (a) Omdat ik me gisteren, na het ontwaken, bepaald
Because I myself yesterday after the waking certainly
gen geen R. Ritsma of L. Armstrong voelde
no R. Ritsma or L. Armstrong felt
‘Yesterday, since I certainly did not feel like a R. Ritsma or L. Armstrong2
after waking up.’

(b) – in mijn borstkas leek een techno rave party te zijn
– in my chest seemed a techno rave party to have
begonnen
started
‘– a techno rave party seemed to have started in my chest’

(c) met meer “heart beats per minute” dan me lief waren –
with more “heart beats per minute” than me cared
‘with more “heart beats per minute” than I cared for –’

(d) liet ik me doormeten.
let I myself inspected
‘I got a medical inspection.’

(e) Mijn huisarts is een flegmaticus met een bijzonder gevoel voor
My GP is a stoic with a special sense for
humor. […]
humor. […]
‘My GP is a stoic with a special sense of humor.’ […]

(f) Als een samoeraikrijger me morgen met zijn zwaard een been
If a samurai warrior me tomorrow with his sword a leg
zou afkappen,
would chop off,
‘If a samurai warrior were to chop off my leg with his sword tomorrow,’

(g) dan zou mijn huisarts, na een blik op de stomp
then would my GP, after a look at the stump
iets kunnen zeggen in de trant van:
something could say in the like of:
‘my GP, after looking at the stump, would say something like:

2 Rintje Ritsma was an extremely skilled athlete: he is a famous Dutch speed skater who won
multiple European and World titles. At the time this column was published in March 2006,
Lance Armstrong was considered to be an extremely skilled racing cyclist, because he won the
Tour de France seven times in a row between 1999 and 2005.

However, because of the report published by the US anti-doping authorities (USADA) in
October 2012 in which Armstrong was accused of using doping and the subsequent UCI
decision to strip Armstrong of his wins (including his seven Tour de France victories), Armstrong
has become a more controversial figure in cycling history now.
(h) “Dat wordt dit jaar geen Kennedymars,
That will be this year no Kennedy march,
That will be no Kennedy march\(^3\) this year,

(i) vrees ik.”
fear I
I am afraid.”

(j) Ik mag dat wel. [. . .]
I like that really. [. . .]
‘I really like that.’

(k) We kijken samen naar het bolletje in de meter
We look together at the little ball in the meter
‘Together, we look at the little ball in the meter’

(l) dat naar een niveau kruipt dat niet echt past bij een
to a level crawls that not really fits with a
R. Ritsma.
R. Ritsma.
‘that crawls to a level not really fitting for a R. Ritsma.’ (Van de Beek 2006).

Utterance (3l) is ironic. Literally, it says that the level of the ball in the meter fits
the level of an athlete like Rintje Ritsma for a little bit. The author, however, writes
as if to imply that the level of the ball in the meter does not fit an athlete like
Ritsma at all. This ironic utterance refers back to utterances (3a)–(3d) in which
the author discussed his reasons for going to the doctor. In this opening frag-
ment, the reader’s attention can be drawn by a comparison between the author
and two famous athletes (Ritsma and Armstrong) and by the metaphorical way in
which the author writes about his heart condition. Instead of literally talking
about his heart, the author metaphorically discusses a “techno rave party in [his]
chest” (utterance 3b) with too many “heart beats per minute” (utterance 3c), thus
comparing his heart beat with the beat of techno rave music. This metaphor may
already attract the reader’s attention and set up an expectation for other tropes to
follow.

Ironic utterance (3l) uses an understatement as an irony marker. Utterances
(3h) and (3i) also contain understatements. In these utterances, the doctor re-
sponds in an extremely understated way to the hypothetical situation in which
the author’s leg is cut off by saying that this would mean that the author would

\(^3\) The Kennedy march is a march in which contestants have to walk for eighty kilometers in the
time span of eighty hours.
have to skip participation in a long walking event for at least a year. These non-
ironic understatements can prepare the reader for the ironic understatement that
is to follow in (3l).

Another trope that can serve as a co-textual marker is hyperbole, an example
of which can be seen in a column about the Dutch soccer team’s chances in the
World Cup in Germany in 2006. In contrast to other Dutch pundits, this specific
author does not see the Dutch team as a favorite to win the title. His main argu-
ment is that most players of the Dutch national team were either substitutes at
their clubs or injured. Writing about attacking midfielder Arjen Robben, the col-
umnist observes:

(4) (a) Arjen Robben is de helft van de tijd geblesseerd
Arjen Robben is the half of the time injured
‘Arjen Robben is injured half of the time’
(b) en een groot deel van de andere helft geschorst.
and a large part of the other half suspended.
‘and suspended for a large part of the remaining half.’
(c) Over hem hoeven we ons überhaupt geen zorgen te maken.
About him need we us really no worries to make.
‘About him, we should not worry at all.’ (Kok 2006).

Utterance (4c) is ironic, because Robben’s condition is a reason to worry for the
Dutch team. Utterances (4a) and (4b) already “announce” this ironic utterance,
because they both contain hyperboles. Although it may be true that Robben is
an injury-prone player and is relatively often suspended in comparison to other
players, the claims in (4a) and (4b) are an exaggeration of this situation. In this
way, the reader may already be “prepared” for the ironic utterance that follows in
(4c).

A final trope that was found as a co-textual marker in a non-ironic utterance
was the rhetorical question. An example of a rhetorical question that functions as
a co-textual irony marker can be seen in utterance (5c). This is an extract from a
TV review in which two TV programs are compared. In the first part, the reviewer
talks about a documentary in which an Italian colonel unfolds his theory that
Julius Caesar and Jesus Christ were actually the same person. The reviewer dis-
cusses one of the colonel’s arguments in support of his thesis, which is that both
men consciously accepted and embraced their imminent deaths. In the second
part of the extract, the reviewer discusses the news event about the alleged sui-
icide of former Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic in his prison cell in The Hague.

(5) (a) De zojuist vergoddelijkte vriend van het volk [i.e., Caesar],
The recently deified friend of the people [i.e., Caesar],
verraden door die farizeeërs van een aristocraten,
betrayed by those pharisees of an aristocrats,
zou zo grotere kans op onsterfelijkheid maken,
would in this way bigger chance at immortality make,
‘The recently deified friend of the people [i.e., Caesar], betrayed by those pharisees of aristocrats, would thus stand a better chance on immortality,’

(b) luidde volgens de kolonel Caesars redenering.
was according to the colonel Caesar’s argument.
‘which was Caesar’s argument according to the colonel.’

(c) Hoor ik daar echo’s van de stiekeme zelfmoord en het
Hear I there echoes of the sneaky suicide and the
bewuste streven naar heiligverklaring van Slobodan Milosevic?
conscious pursuit of canonization by Slobodan Milosevic?
‘Do I hear echoes of the sneaky suicide and conscious pursuit of canonization by Slobodan Milosevic?’

(d) Goed werk overigens van Gerri Eickhof in het NOS
Good job by the way by Gerri Eickhof in the NOS
Journaal
News
‘Good job by the way from Gerri Eickhof in the Eight O’Clock News.’

(e) die sprak met de burgemeester van Milosevic’ geboorteplaats
who talked to the mayor of Milosevic’ birthplace
Pozarevac
Pozarevac
‘who talked to the mayor of Milosevic’ birthplace Pozarevac’

(f) zodat we nu weten
so that we now know
‘so that we now know’

(g) hoe je die naam hoort uit te spreken:
how you that name should pronounce:
‘how that name should be pronounced:’

(h) klinkt als Pózzurrewutsj.
sounds like Pózzurrewutsj
‘sounds like Pózzurrewutsj.’ (Beerekamp 2006).
In the extract from the review, the rhetorical question in utterance (5c) connects the parts about the murder of Caesar and the coverage of Milosevic’s suicide in the Eight O’Clock News. The rhetorical question also introduces both a change in style and a change in topic between utterances (5a)–(5b) on the one hand and utterances (5d)–(5h) on the other. While the first two utterances are descriptive and present the colonel’s case, the second five utterances demonstrate the reviewer’s ironic attitude towards Eickhof’s coverage of the Milosevic case. The rhetorical question thus not only connects the two parts of the review, but also helps to alert the reader to the change in style (and thus to the irony) that is to follow.

Besides these tropes that may work as co-textual irony markers, coders also distinguished several mood markers that may alert the reader to the possibility of an ironic utterance. The first of these mood markers is a change of register. An example can be observed in a column in which Dutch author Arnon Grunberg talks about his experience during a hazing by a Dutch student union in a log cabin in the French Alps:

(6) (a) De laatste avond van mijn verblijf werd ik met matras en al omgedraaid.
The last evening of my stay was I with mattress and all turned.
‘The last evening of my stay, I was turned over with mattress and all.’
(b) Vervolgens namen vijf academici plaats op dat matras.
Thereupon seated five academics place on that mattress.
‘Thereupon, five academics seated themselves upon that mattress.’
(c) Voor de goede orde, ik lag eronder.
For the good order, I lay under it.
‘For the record, I lay under it.’
(d) In een plasje smeltwater.
In a puddle melt water.
‘In a puddle of melt water.’
(e) En er werd een vrolijk liedje gezongen.
And there was a cheerful song sung.
‘And a cheerful song was sung’.
(f) Dat heet “keren”.
That called “turning”.
‘That is called “turning”’. 
(g) Ik heb ontdekt
I have discovered
‘I have discovered’
(h) wat saamhorigheid is
   what solidarity is
   ‘what solidarity is’

(i) en nu ik weet
    and now I know
    ‘and now I know’

(j) wat het is
    what it is
    ‘what it is’

(k) ga ik er voorlopig mee door.
    persist I it for the time being with ---- (part of persist)
    ‘I will persist with it for the time being.’

(l) Dit mag worden opgevat als waarschuwing
    This can be considered as warning.
    ‘This can be considered as a warning.’ (Grunberg 2006).

Utterance (6k) makes an ironic comment about Grunberg’s planned behavior. He literally claims that he will continue the type of behavior he has learnt from the academics for some time to come. However, Grunberg writes as if to imply that he is appalled by the students’ view on acceptable group behavior and will not act in the same way. This contradiction between learning acceptable behavior and the reality of Grunberg’s hazing is also found in utterance (6b). In this utterance, a difference can be observed between the normal use of the word “academic” (i.e., a respectable person of higher education) and the words “to seat yourself” (a high style register) and the reality of the academics’ childish behavior in the “turning” of Grunberg. This clash between the two registers may already alert a reader to the eventual use of an ironic utterance in (6k).

A second mood marker is the use of cynicism. A cynical utterance is pejorative and critical towards others (Yoos 1985). This co-textual irony marker is not mentioned as an irony marker in the literature. An example can be found in a letter to the editor, in which the author dissociates herself from a previous letter written by a Mr. Verboon, who in turn opposed a plan by Dutch actress Carice van Houten. Verboon reacted to Van Houten’s plan to look for a sperm donor in case she was still single in a couple of years and wanted to have a child. Verboon objected, arguing that Van Houten was hatching an evil plot to kill all males and start an era of global female domination for the duration of a thousand years. Verboon concluded that he at least would not be willing to donate his sperm to Van Houten. In response to Verboon’s letter, this author claims:
The fragment starts with two ironic utterances that disqualify Verboon’s arguments. The author then goes on by giving the reader another clue that she is ironic by means of the cynical utterance (7c). In this utterance, the author implicitly refers to the fact that men have seen and used women as objects for many years. This cynicism about gender relations then sets the stage for another ironic utterance in (7e). The cynical co-textual utterance may thus help in alerting a reader to the author’s ironic intent.

The final mood marker is also not mentioned in the irony literature, but is listed as one of Hay’s (2001) humor support strategies: it is the use of humor techniques to signal the use of irony. This means that the author makes a joke or a funny (unrealistic) remark to set the stage for an ironic remark to follow. An example can be seen in a column about World Cup soccer in which the author talks about the situation of the German national team.
(b) “Schoppen jullie wel hard genoeg tegen de bal?”
   “Kick you well hard enough against the ball?”
   “Well, do you kick the ball hard enough?”
(c) zal ze gevraagd hebben.
   might she asked have.
   ‘she might have asked.’
(d) Het mooie was dat
    The beautiful was that
   ‘The great thing was that’
(e) Klinsmann, met de hoed in de hand, naar Merkel ging.
    Klinsmann, with the hat in the hand, to Merkel went.
   ‘Klinsmann, hat in hand, went to Merkel.’
(f) In zo’n land worden zulke belangrijke problemen tenminste
    In such a country are those important problems at least
    meteen op het hoogste niveau behandeld.
    immediately at the highest level treated.
   ‘In such a country, at least, such important problems are immediately
    treated at the highest level.’ (Abrahams 2006).

Utterance (8f) is ironic, because the author writes as if to imply that the achievements of a soccer team are not something that the Chancellor of Germany should be concerned about. Instead, this author suggests that the Chancellor ought to worry about matters of real national importance. This ironic utterance is almost introduced by the ludicrous question the columnist attributes to Merkel in (8b). This question sets up a humorous frame, because the question is stupid. At the same time, it also shows that it is absurd that Klinsmann should apparently listen to and work with Merkel’s ideas about soccer tactics. Even though Merkel has many good and distinguishing qualities, the columnist writes as if to imply that Merkel knows nothing about coaching a soccer team. As such, the humorous question already “announces” that the author may use irony.

3.2 Quantitative results

The second research question is concerned with the frequency with which the various types of co-textual irony markers are used in written discourse. Table 1 demonstrates that many texts contained more than one ironic utterance; two-thirds of the ironic utterances in the sample served to mark at least one other ironic utterance. This analysis shows that many texts with irony contain more than one ironic utterance, which may imply that irony is often used to announce
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Table 1: Occurrence of categories of co-textual irony markers (ironic utterance that precede the irony, tropes and mood markers) per genre (advertisements, columns, book and film reviews, and letters to the editor).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-textual marker</th>
<th>Advertisements</th>
<th>Column</th>
<th>Book/film review</th>
<th>Letter to the editor</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irony preceding the irony</td>
<td>8 (34.8%)&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>54 (80.6%)</td>
<td>46 (73.0%)</td>
<td>12 (44.4%)&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>120 (66.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tropes as co-textual markers:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Metaphor</td>
<td>2 (2.8%)</td>
<td>40 (4.1%)&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>25 (2.7%)</td>
<td>6 (2.6%)</td>
<td>73 (3.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Hyperbole</td>
<td>1 (1.4%)</td>
<td>33 (3.4%)</td>
<td>20 (2.2%)</td>
<td>5 (2.2%)</td>
<td>59 (2.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Understatement</td>
<td>1 (1.4%)</td>
<td>4 (0.4%)</td>
<td>3 (0.3%)</td>
<td>1 (0.4%)</td>
<td>9 (0.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Rhetorical Question</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (&lt;.01%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mood markers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mood markers</th>
<th>Advertisements</th>
<th>Column</th>
<th>Book/film review</th>
<th>Letter to the editor</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>– Change of register</td>
<td>8 (11.3%)</td>
<td>33 (3.4%)</td>
<td>41 (4.4%)</td>
<td>14 (6.1%)</td>
<td>96 (4.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Cynicism</td>
<td>4 (5.6%)</td>
<td>15 (1.5%)</td>
<td>12 (1.3%)</td>
<td>7 (3.1%)</td>
<td>38 (1.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Humor</td>
<td>2 (2.8%)</td>
<td>7 (0.7%)</td>
<td>5 (0.5%)</td>
<td>3 (1.3%)</td>
<td>17 (0.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages in the row of “irony preceding the irony” indicate the percentage of ironic utterances that are preceded by at least one other ironic utterance. Percentage in the rows for tropes and mood markers indicate relative use of a particular co-textual irony marker divided by the total number of co-textual utterances in a particular genre.

<sup>a</sup> = The frequency of the use of ironic utterances that precede the irony in this genre was lower than the frequency of the use of ironic utterances that precede the irony in the genre of columns, <sup>b</sup> = The frequency of the use of this category of co-textual irony markers was higher than might be expected on the basis of row and column totals (i.e., standardized residual > 1.96).

Table 1 also reveals that hyperbole is the trope that is used most often as a co-textual marker in a non-ironic utterance (59 times). The other three tropes are used as a co-textual irony marker in less than 1 percent of all co-textual utterances: understatements are used 9 times, metaphors are used 4 times and a rhetorical question is used only once. Humor is the mood marker that is used most often (41 times), followed by a change of register (38 times). Cynicism is the mood irony marker that is used the least often (17 times).

The third research question is concerned with the relationship between genre and the various co-textual irony markers. A relationship between genre and ironic utterances that serve as a co-textual marker for other ironic utterance was found ($F [3,56] = 4.29, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .19$). A Bonferonni post-hoc test showed that irony in advertisements ($p < .05$) and irony in letters to the editor ($p < .05$) were both marked less often by other ironic utterances than irony in newspaper columns.
Another relationship was found between genre and the choice of tropes or mood markers ($\chi^2 [3] = 8.38, p < .05$, Cramer’s $V = .22$, exact method). An inspection of the residuals showed that tropes are used more often in columns than expected. No statistical tests were performed on the types of co-textual irony markers, because their occurrences were – generally – very low; none of the types of co-textual markers was found in more than 5 per cent of co-textual utterances.

4 Conclusion and discussion

This paper dealt with co-textual markers of verbal irony. These co-textual irony markers alert a reader to the fact that a next utterance may be ironic; they bring the reader in an ironic frame. As such, a co-textual irony marker may set up a frame of expectation of an ironic utterance.

The first research question dealt with types of co-textual irony markers that could be identified. Co-textual irony markers could be classified into three categories. Firstly, ironic utterances themselves may serve as a co-textual irony marker, because they may prepare a reader for more ironic utterances to follow. Besides these other ironic utterances, non-ironic utterances may serve as a co-textual marker of verbal irony as well. One category of co-textual markers in non-ironic utterances that was identified is the category of tropes, which includes metaphors, hyperboles, understatements and rhetorical questions. The second category that was identified consists of mood markers: a change of register, cynicism and humor.

While this study offers the first empirically driven classification of co-textual irony markers, many scholars have identified irony markers in the ironic utterance itself (cf. Attardo 2000b; Kreuz 1996; Muecke 1978; Seto 1998). These irony markers in the ironic utterance could be classified into four different categories: (1) tropes, (2) schematic, (3) morpho-syntactic and (4) typographic irony markers. The co-textual irony markers that were found in the non-ironic utterances included both irony markers that could be found in the ironic utterance itself (metaphor, hyperbole, understatement, rhetorical questions and a change of register) as well as markers that are exclusive to the domain of co-textual irony markers (cynicism and humor). Irony markers that were identified in the ironic utterance itself in earlier research as well as in the co-text in this study are irony markers from the categories of tropes and schematic markers. This analysis thus indicates that irony markers from the categories of morpho-syntactic (e.g., exclamations, tag questions) and typographic markers (e.g., quotation marks, emoticons) may not be used as co-textual markers of irony.
This paper presents the first exploratory results on the issue of co-textual markers of verbal irony. The existence of the types of co-textual markers should be confirmed in other studies that use texts from another cultural background, from different modalities (e.g., spoken communication) and from other genres (e.g., literary narratives).

The second research question focused on the frequency with which the various co-textual markers were used. Ironic utterances that precede irony, hyperbole, cynicism and humor occur relatively often, while metaphors, understatements and rhetorical questions are hardly used. The high usage of hyperbole is similar to the relatively high use of hyperbole as a marker in the ironic utterance. These findings confirm earlier research that found a close connection between hyperbole and the use of irony (e.g., Kreuz and Roberts 1995).

The third research question dealt with the relationship between co-textual irony markers and genre. Results show that ironic utterances are found more often as a co-textual irony marker in newspaper columns than in advertisements or letters to the editor. In addition, columns are also more strongly associated with tropes than with mood markers. This implies that various genres may differ in the ways in which they use verbal irony.

The present study used a content analysis to identify co-textual irony markers. Since markers are, by definition, supposed to signal irony, these co-textual markers may aid irony comprehension. To see whether ordinary language users actually use these co-textual markers as cues in interpreting ironic utterances, more research is needed. Future research could examine experimentally whether the inclusion of a co-textual marker could indeed facilitate irony processing.

Since the identification of co-textual markers of irony has received scant attention in the irony literature, the results of this study should be seen as explorative. In previous research, the notion of the “co-text” has been defined as the other utterances of the text with the exception of the utterance under discussion (cf. Attardo 2000a). This implies that any utterance preceding the ironic utterance could possibly contain a co-textual marker of irony. A crucial question is, of course, how far one can go back in the text to let a possible co-textual marker open up an ironic frame. To answer this question, more information is needed on how readers process written irony in complete texts. Once more insight into irony processing in natural texts is gained, our definition of co-text and markers may be amended.

This study may also have implications for processing models of irony. In the literature, three competing models of irony comprehension are distinguished that have different predictions regarding the role of co-textual information in irony processing. The direct access view is a model of irony comprehension that predicts that co- and context are important factors in irony processing (e.g., Gibbs
The claims of the direct access view are also supported by various empirical studies (e.g., Gibbs 1986; Ivanko and Pexman 2003). These studies show that whether literal utterances are processed faster than ironic utterances or not depends on the co- and context. Competing models of irony comprehension (e.g., the Standard Pragmatic Model: Attardo 2000b and the Graded Salience Hypothesis: Giora 2003) place less emphasis on the concept of context in irony comprehension.

As of yet, few experimental studies have been conducted that actually look at the role of co-textual markers on irony processing. Those studies that have been conducted found mixed results. Giora et al. (2007) found that an increase in the number of ironic utterances preceding an ironic utterance did not reduce processing time of ironic utterances. In contrast, Hodiamont et al. (2010) show that ironic utterances that were preceded by other ironic utterances were processed faster than ironic utterances that were not preceded by other ironic utterances.

When comparing these studies, it should be noted that they firstly look at the use of irony in different communicative situations. While Giora et al. (2007) considered the use of irony in spoken interaction, Hodiamont et al. (2010) investigated the use of irony in written book, film and movie reviews. Secondly, many studies that look at co- and context operationalize these concepts differently, which makes it also difficult to compare theoretical hypotheses and empirical results. The identification of co-textual irony markers makes the ways in which co-text may facilitate irony processing more explicit which may inspire future research on the role of co-text in irony processing.

Future research may also help to refine the classification and more categories may be found. One way to do this is to look at other aspects of “co-text”. In this paper, co-text was defined as the other utterances of a text excluding the ironic utterance under discussion. In that way, co-text was seen as a purely verbal matter. In genres such as commercial advertising, it is plausible that the visual co-text (i.e., the image) may help the comprehension of ironic utterances as well. Both Attardo et al. (2003) and Rockwell (2001) have shown that specific facial expressions may make it easier to recognize irony in spoken, dialogic interaction. This implies that images in written genres such as commercial advertising may also help in creating an ironic expectation (see also Burgers et al. 2013). Future research may thus also seek to identify these possible visual markers of irony in written genres.

This study makes a first contribution in the identification of co-textual markers of verbal irony. These co-textual markers may set up an expectation for irony, thus starting an “ironic environment” (Utsumi 2000). In this way, authors of written communication can help their readers in identifying ironic utterances.
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