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The use of co-textual irony markers in written discourse

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Article in press. Please quote as:

Burgers, C., Van Mulken, M., & Schellens, P. J. (in press). The use of co-textual irony markers in written discourse. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*.

Abstract

Authors of written texts may mark the use of verbal irony in a variety of ways. One possibility to do 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

Article in Press

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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 (1965) stated that, at one point, the text set out to create an ironic expectation that it failed to meet, whilst, at another point, the text set out a serious expectation that it failed to meet as well. The poems of Propertius featured a number of co-textual elements that set up Otis' (1965) expectation of the use of irony. A question that Otis (1965) 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 2010). 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 & 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 2010).

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 & 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. Whilst 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 & Kreuz 1994). Besides the use of humor, irony may also have other discourse goals such as diminishing (e.g.,

Dews & Winner 1995) or enhancing criticism (e.g., Matthews, Hancock & Dunham 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 & Valkenburg 2004; Catanescu & 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’s 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.**
- (b.) **Sterker nog, ik schrijf mijn columns niet zelf,**
- (c.) **ze zetten voor de gein mijn naam erboven en een fotootje ernaast.**

- (d.) Dûh.
 - (e.) Natuurlijk mag ik schrijven wat ik wil.
- (1)
- (a.) **No, I am being censored at Metro, all right!**
 - (b.) **To put it even stronger, I do not write my columns myself,**
 - (c.) **they jokingly put my name above it and my photo beneath it.**
 - (d.) Dah.
 - (e.) Of course I can write whatever I want¹.

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.

Whilst 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 is 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 a 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 DVD review of the film *MUST LOVE DOGS*. The opening lines of this DVD review ran:

- (2)
- (a.) Sarah Nolan ([Diane] Lane) is kleuterleidster
 - (b.) in Hollywoodcode een kanjer van een hint dat
 - (c.) deze dame de onbaatzuchtigheid zelve is
 - (d.) maar toch staat ze er alleen voor.

- (e.) Haar vent heeft Sarah ingeruild voor een jonger exemplaar.
 - (f.) [Sarah is] de veertig inmiddels gepasseerd,
 - (h.) Haar onmogelijk aimabele zussen willen dat
 - (h.) Sarah weer onder de mannen komt.
 - (i.) Dus zetten ze een advertentie op een datingwebsite.
 - (j.) **Zal het lukken om de man van haar dromen te vinden?**
- (2)
- (a.) Sarah Nolan ([Diane] Lane) is a kindergarten teacher
 - (b.) in Hollywood code a gigantic clue that
 - (c.) this woman is selflessness incarnate
 - (d.) but she is on her own nevertheless.
 - (e.) Her boyfriend traded Sarah in for a younger wife (literally: specimen).
 - (f.) [Sarah is] already over forty years of age
 - (g.) Her impossibly amiable sisters want that
 - (h.) Sarah starts dating new men.
 - (i.) So they put an advertisement on a dating web site.
 - (j.) **Will she succeed in finding the man of her dreams?**

In utterance (2j), the author poses the question that it 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 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 hyperboles. This means that the irony marker of hyperboles (cf. Kreuz & 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 another utterance 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 question 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) or e-mail correspondence (Whalen, Pexman & Gil 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). However, few studies have explicitly addressed this possible genre difference in the use of irony. It may well be that co-textual markers of irony in one particular genre are used differently 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, Van Mulken & Schellens under review). 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. (under review). 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 2010). After comparing

various theoretical frameworks about irony, Burgers (2010) 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 & 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 shines”, 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 out of 2,042 utterances that were coded for the presence or absence of co-textual irony markers other than the use of multiple ironic utterances per text. 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 2010). 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 an instruction that informed them what the purpose of a co-textual irony marker was (i.e., to get 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 on cases on which they disagreed. They could indicate whether they stayed with 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 ($\kappa = .06$; slight agreement, Landis & Koch 1977). After the second round, the score for Cohen's Kappa increased to .84, which can be qualified as "almost perfect" (Landis & 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 & 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 about 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 geen R. Ritsma of L. Armstrong voelde
(b.) – in mijn borstkas leek een techno rave party te zijn begonnen
(c.) met meer 'heartbeats per minute' dan me lief waren –
(d.) liet ik me doormeten.
(e.) Mijn huisarts is een flegmaticus met een bijzonder gevoel voor humor. [...]
(f.) Als een samoeraikrijger me morgen met zijn zwaard een been zou afkappen,
(g.) dan zou mijn huisarts, na een blik op de stomp iets kunnen zeggen in de trant van:
(h.) “Dat wordt dit jaar geen Kennedymars,
(i.) vrees ik”.
(j.) Ik mag dat wel. [...]
(k.) We kijken samen naar het bolletje in de meter
(l.) **dat naar een niveau kruipt dat niet echt past bij een R. Ritsma.**
- (3) (a.) Yesterday, since I did not feel like a R. Ritsma or L. Armstrong² after waking up –
(b.) – a techno rave party seemed to have started in my chest
(c.) with more ‘heart beats per minute’ than I cared for –
(d.) I got a medical inspection.

- (e.) My doctor is a stoic with a special sense of humor. [...]
- (f.) If a samurai warrior were to chop off my leg with a sword tomorrow,
- (g.) my doctor, after looking at the stump, would say something like:
- (h.) “That will be no Kennedy march³ this year,
- (i.) I am afraid’.
- (j.) I like that. [...]
- (k.) Together, we look at the little ball in the meter,
- (l.) that crawls to a level that does not really fit a R. Ritsma**

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 fragment, the reader’s attention can be drawn by a comparison between the author and two famous athletes (Ritsma and Armstrong) and by the metaphoric 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 responds 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 have to skip participation in a long walking march 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 argument is that most players of the Dutch national team were either substitutes at their clubs or injured. About attacking midfielder Arjen Robben, the columnist observes:

- (4) (a.) Arjen Robben is de helft van de tijd geblesseerd
(b.) en een groot deel van de andere helft geschorst.
(c.) **Over hem hoeven we ons überhaupt geen zorgen te maken.**
- (4) (a.) Arjen Robben is injured half of the time
(b.) and suspended for a large part of the remaining half.
(c.) **About him, we should not worry at all.**

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 discusses 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 suicide 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], verraden door die farizeeërs van een aristocraten, zou zo grotere kans op onsterfelijkheid maken, (b.) luidde volgens de kolonel Caesars redenering. (c.) Hoor ik daar echo's van de stiekeme zelfmoord en het bewuste streven naar heiligverklaring van Slobodan Milosevic? (d.) **Goed werk overigens van Gerri Eickhof in het NOS Journaal** (e.) die sprak met de burgemeester van Milosevic' geboorteplaats Pozarevac (f.) **zodat we nu weten** (g.) hoe je die naam hoort uit te spreken: (h.) **klinkt als Pózzurrewutsj.**
- (5) (a.) 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.) which was Caesar's argument according to the colonel. (c.) Do I hear echoes of the sneaky suicide and conscious pursuit of canonization by Slobodan Milosevic? (d.) **Great job by the way from Gerri Eickhof in the Eight O'Clock News,** (e.) Who talked to the mayor of Milosevic's birthplace Pozarevac (f.) **so that we now know** (g.) how that name should be pronounced: (h.) **sounds like Pózzurrewutsj.**

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. Whilst the first two utterances are descriptive and present the colonel's case, the second five utterances contain 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 a 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.
(b.) Vervolgens namen vijf academici plaats op dat matras.
(c.) Voor de goede orde, ik lag eronder.
(d.) In een plasje smeltwater.
(e.) En er werd een vrolijk liedje gezongen.
(f.) Dat heet 'keren'.
(g.) Ik heb ontdekt
(h.) wat saamhorigheid is
(i.) en nu ik weet
(j.) wat het is
(k.) ga ik er voorlopig mee door.
(l.) Dit mag worden opgevat als waarschuwing.
- (6) (a.) The last evening of my stay, I was turned over with mattress and all.
(b.) Thereupon, five academics seated themselves upon that mattress.
(c.) For the record, I was under it.
(d.) In a puddle of melt water.
(e.) And a cheerful song was sung.

- (f.) This is called ‘turning’.
- (g.) I discovered
- (h.) what solidarity is
- (i.) and now I know
- (j.) what it is,
- (k.) I will persist with it for the time being.**
- (l.) This can be considered as a warning.

Utterance (6k) makes an ironic comment about Grunberg’s planned behavior for the coming time. 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 of Dutch actress Carice van Houten. Verboon reacted to Van Houten’s plan to look for a sperm donor in case she would still be single in a couple of years and would want 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:

- (7) (a.) **Goed zo meneer Verboon,**
(b.) **heel verstandig dat u zich hier tegen roert.**
(c.) Het schijnt verschrikkelijk te zijn om als een object gezien en gebruikt te worden door een macht
(d.) die daartoe geweld gebruikt.
(e.) **Maar denkt u dat duizend jaar voldoende is?**
- (7) (a.) **Well done, Mr. Verboon,**
(b.) **very clever that you rebel against this.**
(c.) It appears to be terrible to be seen and used as an object by an authority
(d.) that uses force to this end.
(e.) **But do you think that a thousand years is enough?**

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 the World Cup soccer in which the author talks about the situation regarding the German national team

- (8) (a.) waar bondscoach Klinsmann op het matje is geroepen door een bezorgde Angela Merkel.
- (b.) “Schoppen jullie wel hard genoeg tegen de bal?”
- (c.) zal ze gevraagd hebben.
- (d.) Het mooie was dat
- (e.) Klinsmann, met de hoed in de hand, naar Merkel ging.
- (f.) **In zo'n land worden zulke belangrijke problemen tenminste meteen op het hoogste niveau behandeld.**
- (8) (a.) where national coach Klinsmann was called to account by a concerned Angela Merkel.
- (b.) “Well, do you kick the ball hard enough?”
- (c.) she might have asked.
- (d.) The great thing was that
- (e.) Klinsmann, hat in hand, went to Merkel.
- (f.) **In such a country at least, such important problems are immediately treated at the highest level.**

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 really important matters of 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 had 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 have more than one ironic utterance, which may imply that irony is often used to announce another ironic utterance. Table 1 also reveals that a 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 ($\chi^2(3) = 8.38, p < .05, \text{Cramer's } V = .22, \text{ exact method}$). 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.

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).

Co-textual marker	Advertisements	Column	Book/ film review	Letter to the editor	Total
Irony preceding the irony	8 (34.8%) ^a	54 (80.6%)	46 (73.0%)	12 (44.4%) ^a	120 (66.7%)
Tropes as co-textual markers:	2 (2.8 %)	40 (4.1 %) ^b	25 (2.7 %)	6 (2.6 %)	73 (3.3 %)
- Metaphor	0 (0 %)	3 (0.3 %)	1 (0.1 %)	0 (0 %)	4 (0.2 %)
- Hyperbole	1 (1.4 %)	33 (3.4 %)	20 (2.2 %)	5 (2.2 %)	59 (2.7 %)
- Understatement	1 (1.4 %)	4 (0.4 %)	3 (0.3 %)	1 (0.4 %)	9 (0.4 %)
- Rhetorical Question	0 (0 %)	0 (0%)	1 (0.1 %)	0 (0%)	1 (< .01%)
Mood markers	8 (11.3 %)	33 (3.4 %)	41 (4.4 %)	14 (6.1 %)	96 (4.4 %)
- Change of register	4 (5.6 %)	15 (1.5 %)	12 (1.3 %)	7 (3.1 %)	38 (1.7%)
- Cynicism	2 (2.8%)	7 (0.7 %)	5 (0.5 %)	3 (1.3 %)	17 (0.8 %)
- Humor	2 (2.8%)	11 (1.1 %)	24 (2.6 %)	4 (1.8 %)	41 (1.9 %)

Note: Percentages in the row of “irony preceding the irony” indicate the percentage of ironic utterances that are preceded by at least one 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.

^a = *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,* ^b = *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).*

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 that more ironic utterances might follow. Besides these other ironic utterances, non-ironic utterances may serve as a co-textual marker of verbal irony as well. A first 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.

Whilst 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 co-textual 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 the irony, hyperboles, cynicism and humor are used relatively often, whilst metaphors, understatements and rhetorical questions are hardly used. The high usage of hyperboles is similar to the relatively high use of hyperboles as markers in the ironic utterance. These findings confirm earlier research that found a close connection between hyperbole and the use of irony (e.g., Kreuz & 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 columns than in advertisements or letters to the editor. In addition, columns are also more associated with tropes than with the 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 – by definition – are supposed to signal irony, these co-textual markers may aid irony comprehension. To see if ordinary language users actually use these co-textual markers as cues in interpreting ironic utterances, more research is needed. This future research could experimentally examine 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 “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 can 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 1994). The claims of the direct access view are also supported by various empirical studies (e.g., Gibbs 1986; Ivanko & Pexman 2003). These studies show that it depends on the co- and context whether literal utterances are processed faster than ironic utterances or not. 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 that precede an ironic utterance did not reduce processing time of ironic utterances. In contrast, Hodiament, Burgers and Van Mulken (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. Whilst Giora et al. (2007) considered the use of irony in spoken interaction, Hodiament 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, Eisterhold, Hay & Poggi (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. 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.

Notes

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* This paper is part of Christian Burgers' doctoral dissertation at Radboud University Nijmegen (the Netherlands). The authors would like to thank Karin Fikkers and Bram van der Plas for their valuable help with the coding process of this study.

¹ All examples are translated from Dutch by the first author. Ironic utterances are printed in bold face throughout examples in this paper.

² Rintje Ritsma and Lance Armstrong are two extremely skilled athletes. Ritsma is a famous Dutch speed skater who won multiple European and World titles. Armstrong is a racing cyclist who won the *Tour de France* seven times in a row between 1999 and 2005.

³ The Kennedy march is a march in which contestants have to walk for eighty kilometers in the time span of eighty hours.

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