

Uniting Irony, Metaphor and Hyperbole in a Pretence-Based, Affect-Centred Framework

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The talk will outline a detailed model of (some of) the cognitive processing involved in the understanding of verbal irony, hyperbole and metaphor. The model does not just deal with those three types of language consistently, but with intimate combinations of them. This is important as irony and metaphor often have a hyperbolic quality and metaphors can be used ironically.

The model unites some previously existing approaches. It has largely been developed from the author's own ATT-Meta model of metaphor understanding, which has been partially realized as an AI system. ATT-Meta is based on the idea, developed by some other authors as well, that not-entirely-conventional metaphorical utterances describe pretences—fictional, often highly unrealistic scenarios—from which information about situations actually being described is extracted by mappings. The types of pretence, mapping, inferencing, etc. in ATT-Meta have been straightforwardly extended to handle ironical utterances as well, yielding a version of the well-known pretence-based approach to irony. To handle hyperbole the model incorporates insights from the hyperbole model of Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza, which can also be considered to be pretence-based. In all this, it should be noted that the type of “pretence” in question is of a transparent, non-deceptive sort, much like the pretence involved in staging a drama.

The model provides a systematic and unified treatment of otherwise difficult and varied types of example. As part of this it involves giving a more central role to, and giving more detailed account of, a non-scalar, *fictively elaborating* type of hyperbole than has previously been given. An example of fictive elaboration hyperbole in irony is when someone says “Yeah sure, what a genius Peter is, with his five Noble prizes” when someone has misguidedly claimed Peter is very clever, but not made any claim about Nobel prizes, so they are an elaboration invented by the speaker. The model also systematically encompasses *attitude wrapped* irony, as when someone ironically says, in response to a driver not signaling before turning, either “I really like it when drivers signal” or “I really like it when drivers don't signal.” The model accounts for an experimentally revealed difference of sarcastic intensity between these two forms of utterance, and for differences from more straightforward ironies like “Such fine signalling.”

A central theme in research on metaphoric, ironic and hyperbolic language has been the affective (emotional, evaluative, etc.) messages of such language. The presented model respects this in a particularly strong way: it takes the propositional message to be (partly) derived from, and therefore often less fundamental than, the affective message, contrary to the predominant flavour of other approaches. For instance, according to the model, when someone ironically says “What wonderful weather,” the hearer does not simply invert “wonderful” to get some negative intensity describable as, say, “terrible”, and then infers the speaker's affective intensity partly on this basis; rather, from a variety of clues, lexical and otherwise, the hearer guesses the speaker's affective intensity, and from this and other information guesses how bad she is claiming the weather is. This approach avoids the dubious assumption that terms like “wonderful” convey values that have clear, agreed opposites.

The talk will illustrate these capabilities of the model, together with its handling of some types of irony/metaphor combination, using examples from the research literature and from encountered discourse.