3. THE LITERAL-FIGURATIVE DISTINCTION
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1. Introduction

Standard assumption of approaches based on a literal-figurative distinction
Literal speech is the norm; figurative utterances are systematic departures from the norm.

Illustration: Grice on figurative utterances (Grice 1989: 34)
The speaker **blatantly violates** the 1st Quality maxim (*Do not say what you believe to be false*) in order to **implicate** a related true proposition:

1a. Susan is a butterfly. (*metaphor*)
1b. Susan is like a butterfly. (*related simile or comparison*)
2a. (*of a friend who has gossiped behind our back*) You can always count on Jane. (*irony*)
2b. You can't always count on Jane. (*contrary or contradictory of what was said*)
3a. The road is so hot you could fry an egg on it. (*hyperbole*)
3b. The road is very hot. (*weakening of what was said*)
4a. He was a little intoxicated. (*understatement*)
4b. He was very drunk. (*strengthening of what was said*)

Problems with this approach (Wilson & Sperber 2002/2012)
5a. It doesn't explain why just these figures should arise in culture after culture.
5b. It suggests a 'literal first' approach to comprehension, which is now generally rejected.
5c. It suggests a list of figurative implicature types – a retreat to a code-like account.

Relevance theory's approach
6a. Aims to show that there is no sharp literal-figurative distinction
6b. Treats metaphor and irony as arising naturally, spontaneously and universally, and involving no special interpretive mechanisms not required for ordinary 'literal' utterances.

Today's aim: To look at metaphor and irony from this perspective.

2. Metaphor and lexical pragmatics

Claims shared (to different degrees) by current approaches to lexical pragmatics
7a. Lexical interpretation generally involves construction of **ad hoc (unlexicalised) concepts** based on interaction among encoded concepts, context and pragmatic principles.
7b. The result may be either a **narrowing** or a **broadening** of the encoded lexical meaning.
7c. Narrowing and broadening may combine, and there is a gradient of cases of broadening between **literal use**, **approximation**, **category extension, hyperbole** and **metaphor**. This opens up the possibility of a unitary account of lexical-pragmatic processes.
7d. Narrowing and broadening contribute to the **truth-conditional content** of an utterance (what is asserted, or explicated) as well as to what is implicated.
7e. This introduces a degree of **indeterminacy** at the level of truth-conditional content.
7f. As a result, pragmatics has to depart significantly from standard Gricean accounts (e.g. no **maxim of truthfulness**, no **literal-figurative distinction**, no notion of **what is said**).

Varieties of lexical-pragmatic process

Lexical narrowing (conveying a more specific sense, with a **narrower** denotation)
8a. I have a *temperature.* (TEMPERATURE*: 'higher than normal temperature')
8b. Churchill was a *man.* (MAN*: 'typical man', 'ideal man')
8c. Buying a house is easy if you've got *money.* (MONEY*: 'a suitable amount of money')

Lexical broadening (conveying a **more general** sense, with a **broader** denotation

Approximation: a word with a strict sense is loosely used (Lasersohn 1999)
9a. The bottle is *empty.* (EMPTY*: 'empty or almost empty')
9b. Edinburgh is *north* of London. (NORTH*: 'roughly north')
9c. This policy will *bankrupt* the farmers. (BANKRUPT*: 'leave with little or no money')

Category extension: a salient category member is used to represent the broader category
10a. I need a *Kleenex.* (KLEENEX*: 'disposable tissue')
10b. Sunbeds are the new *cigarettes.* (CIGARETTE*: 'dangerous addiction')
10c. Federer is the next *Sampras.*   (SAMPRAS*: 'gifted, dominant tennis player')

Hyperbole: more radical broadening than approximation
11a. Bill is a *giant.* (GIANT*: 'very tall')
11b. Bill is *as tall as a house.* (TALL AS A HOUSE*: 'taller than expected', 'very tall')
11c. This room is *roasting.* (ROASTING*: 'very hot')

Metaphor: more radical broadening than hyperbole (often combined with narrowing)
12a. Caroline is a *princess.* (PRINCESS*: 'spoiled, indulged, used to special treatment')
12b. (*Said of George W. Bush allegedly wiping his glasses on a woman's shirt during Jay Leno's TV show*): We're all human *Kleenex* to him. (KLEENEX*: 'disposable object')
12c. The agenda isn't *written in stone.* (WRITTEN IN STONE*: 'difficult to change')

The continuum of cases of broadening
13a. That film *made me sick.* (literal, approximate, hyperbole, metaphor)
13b. The water is *boiling.* (literal, approximate, hyperbole, metaphor)
13c. The audience *slept* through the lecture. (literal, approximate, hyperbole, metaphor)

Mechanism involved in narrowing and/or broadening
14a. Encoded concepts (e.g. TEMPERATURE, KLEENEX) activate a range of **potential implications**.
14b. Some of these are also activated by the context.
14c. The hearer **follows a path of least effort** in deriving implications, and stops when he has enough to satisfy his **expectations of relevance.**
14d. The 'ad hoc' concept is derived by 'backward inference' in the course of the mutual adjustment process in order to warrant the implications derived (e.g. TEMPERATURE*: 'a temperature *such that* these implications follow').

Evidence for fast, spontaneous ad hoc concept construction during comprehension

Neologisms (Clark & Clark 1979, Clark & Gerrig 1983)
15a. The boy *porched* the newspaper. (PORCHED*: 'threw into the porch')
15b. She *wristed* the ball over the net. (WRISTED*: 'used her wrist')

General comments: 'ad hoc concept construction' may be
16a. a **spontaneous, one-off** process, used once and then forgotten;
16b. **regularly and frequently** used, by a few people or a group, which may, over time,
16c. **stabilise in a community** and give rise to an **extra sense**. (Lyons 1977).
16d. a unified account should shed light on processes of lexical change, polysemy, etc.

Constraints on interpretation
17a. The implications must be **properly warranted** by the explicit content.
17b. This may require **retroactive adjustment** (broadening/narrowing) of the encoded concepts, to create **ad hoc concepts** (TEMPERATURE*, KLEENEX*) which carry these implications.
17c. Although narrowing yields a 'literal' interpretation while broadening does not, they are arrived at in exactly the same way, using the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic.

3. Questioning the boundaries between literal and figurative

Central claim: Utterances on the literal-loose-metaphorical continuum are all interpreted in the same way, using the **relevance-guided comprehension heuristic.**

Case A: Approximation and hyperbole (Wilson & Sperber 2002/2012)
These are often seen as working quite differently (for Lewis, hyperbole has an encoded figurative meaning, while approximation involves lowered 'standards of precision'). Relevance theory claims they work the same, and 'approximation'/'hyperbole' are not useful theoretical terms.

18a. This steak is *raw.*
18b. The injection will be *painless.*
18c. The country is *flat.*

Case B: Hyperbole and metaphor (Sperber & Wilson 2008/2012)
A standard view is that hyperbole involves a quantitative change on a single dimension and metaphor involves a change in properties. But there are many borderline cases. Relevance theory claims they work in the same way, and 'hyperbole'/'metaphor' are not useful theoretical terms.

19a. John is a *giant.*
19b. Sue finished the race in *the blink of an eye.*
19c. I have a *truckload* of essays to mark.

Another view is that metaphor involves both narrowing and broadening (e.g. PRINCESS* applies to spoiled, indulged people, and not all princesses fall in this category), whereas hyperbole involves only broadening. But some 'metaphors' involve only broadening too:

20. *Comment on Bush wiping glasses on someone's shirt:* We're all human Kleenex to him.

(20) would generally be classified as a metaphor, though it involves only **broadening** (to DISPOSABLE OBJECT) and no **narrowing** (all Kleenex are disposable objects).

Case C: Category extension and metaphor (Sperber & Wilson 2008/2012)
These are sometimes distinguished, sometimes not. One view is that category extension involves defining/central properties ('Hoover': VACUUM CLEANER) and metaphor less central ones ('butterfly': PRETTY/DELICATE/FLIGHTY). But there are borderline cases, and they work the same:

21a. Henry was proud of his *mane*. ('mane' - hair on the head/neck of lion/horse - central)
21b. Keep your *paws* off me.   ('paws' - animal equivalent of hands/feet - central)

Case D: Literal and 'figurative' narrowing
Some narrowings are traditionally treated as figurative, while others are seen as 'literal'. But they all involve the same narrowing process – one to a stereotype and one to an ideal:

22a. Churchill was a *man*. ('typical man', 'ideal man')
22b. *at Wimbledon:* The audience want to see a match. ('tennis match', 'good tennis match')

Note: We are not trying to provide a theory of 'metaphor' ('metaphor is not a natural kind'). This account applies only to those metaphorical uses that fall within the scope of a theory of lexical pragmatics: i.e. lexical and maybe phrasal metaphors. It is not meant to deal with 'extended metaphors', allegory or symbolism.

Allegory and symbolism
In literary studies, allegory is a **narrative device** where in talking about one object/event you're really talking about another (e.g. 'When you walk through a storm, hold your head up high')

According to classical rhetoric, allegory is a **stylistic figure,** typically an 'extended metaphor':

23a. "What I marvel at and complain of is this, that there should exist any man so set on destroying his enemy as to *scuttle the ship on which he himself is sailing*." (Cicero)
23b. 'to fight hand to hand', 'to attack the throat', 'to let blood' are all allegorical (Quintilian)

Allegorical 'sayings':
24a. You can't put the toothpaste back in the tube.
24b. No use crying over spilt milk.

For discussion of some of these cases, see Carston 2010, Carston & Wearing 2012.

4. Poetic effects

Poetic effects: These arise when relevance is mainly achieved through a wide array of **weak implications** which are also **weakly implicated.** (Sperber & Wilson 2008, Pilkington 2000)

Strength of implications:
Contextual implications vary in strength. A weak implication is a **weakly evidenced** conclusion. If the hearer adopts it, he must take some of the responsibility himself.

Strength of implicatures:
Depends on how obvious ('manifest') it is that the speaker intends a **specific implicature** to be derived in constructing an overall (relevant-enough) interpretation.

Typical situation in which poetic effects are achieved:
25a. There is a wide range of potential implications, and the communicator has good reason to think enough of these are true or probably true to make the utterance worth processing
25b. She does not know which these are (so they are **weak implications**)

25c. She is neither able nor particularly anxious to anticipate which of them the audience will consider and accept (so they are **weak implicatures**).

A metaphor with a poetic touch:
26. *Woman to uncouth suitor*: Keep your paws off me!

paws activates a wide array of **weak implications** having to do with clumsiness, bestiality, etc., some of which the speaker must have foreseen and anticipated. Hence they are **weak implicatures. (**But main relevance lies in the explicit request that the hearer remove his PAWS*.)

Metaphors are particularly apt for conveying poetic effects (Carl Sandburg, 'Fog'):
      The fog comes
      on little cat feet.

on little cat feet activates weak implications involving silence, smoothness, stealth. These in turn activate a wider array of implications, which may be strengthened by what follows (involving a type of movement, its implications for atmosphere, mood, sense of place, etc.).

Implications of this account of metaphor
27a. Both literal and metaphorical utterances may achieve poetic effects.
27b. Neither literal nor metaphorical language is intrinsically harder to process
27c. **But** the closer we get to the metaphor end of the continuum, the wider the array of potential implications, and the greater the likelihood that relevance will be achieved by a wide array of weakly implicated weak implications, i.e. by poetic effects.

5. Explaining irony

Some typical examples of verbal irony
28. *Mary (after a boring party)*: That was fun.
29. *Sue (to someone who has gossiped behind her back)*: You're a fine friend.

Gricean account: Irony involves blatant violation of the maxim of truthfulness, designed to implicate the contrary or contradictory of what the speaker 'said or made as if to say'.

Problems with Gricean account: Not explanatory; makes false processing predictions.

Consequence of abandoning Gricean account: In the experimental literature, 'irony' is now loosely applied to a range of disparate phenomena that have little in common with (28)-(29).

Goal of theories of irony: to identify **mechanisms** and see what range of phenomena they explain – starting with the mechanisms crucially used in interpreting (28) and (29).

Sperber & Wilson's echoic account (Sperber & Wilson 1981 … Wilson & Sperber 2012)
The ironical speaker **echoes** a thought (a belief, a hope, a norm-based expectation) attributed to an individual, group, or people in general, expressing a mocking/critical **attitude** to that thought.

Jorgensen, Miller & Sperber (1984) confirmed the prediction that irony is more easily understood when its echoic nature is made more salient, leading to a new line of experiments.

Most recent accounts are variants of, or reactions to, the echoic account ('echoic reminder' account', 'pretence' accounts, 'as if' account, 'allusional pretence' account, etc.). All are big improvements on traditional accounts, but few attempts have been made to prise them apart.

Central claim
Echoing and pretence are **distinct mechanisms** (which may occasionally combine), and it is echoing, not pretence, that explains the distinctive features of irony (Wilson & Sperber 2012).

6. <u>**Three puzzling features of irony not explained by traditional accounts**</u>

A: Attitude in irony and metaphor
Grice's counterexample to his own account
'A and B are walking down the street, and they both see a car with a shattered window. B says, *Look, that car has all its windows intact.* A is baffled. B says, *You didn't catch on; I was in an ironical way drawing your attention to the broken window.*' (Grice 1967/1989: 53)

This meets all Grice's conditions for irony: it is a blatant violation of the maxim of truthfulness, intended to convey the opposite, but would not normally be understood as ironical.

Grice's comment: Irony involves a '**hostile or derogatory judgment** or a **feeling such as indignation or contempt'**. In other words, irony involves a characteristic (mocking, sceptical or critical) **attitude**. *Question:* What is the object of the attitude -- a person, situation or a thought?

B: Normative bias
The most common use of irony is to criticise or complain when an event, situation or performance does not live up to some norm-based expectation, as in (30a). Only in special circumstances is it used to praise, or point out that some non-normative proposition is false.

30a. *(on a rainy day):* The weather is lovely!   (positive ironical comment)
30b. *(on a sunny day):* ?The weather is awful. (negative ironical comment)

Kreuz & Glucksberg (1989) confirmed that negative ironical comments like (30b) are more easily understood when someone has predicted that the weather would be awful. By contrast, positive ironical comments like (30a) are understood equally well even if no-one has predicted that the weather would lovely. (cf. Hancock, Dunham & Purdy (2000): the bias is already present at 6.)

C: The ironical tone of voice
Irony has a characteristic tone of voice, described as 'the vocal counterpart of a mocking, sneering or contemptuous facial expression': it features a **flat or deadpan intonation**, **slower tempo**, **lower pitch level** and **greater intensity** than the corresponding literal utterances .

Developmental data: Keenan & Quigley (1999) tested 6-, 8- and 10-year olds using stories such as the following, containing one or other of the italicised sentences. Half the children heard Lucy's final utterance with sarcastic intonation, and the other half with neutral intonation.

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

Sarcastic intonation significantly increased irony comprehension in both versions, and in all 3 groups. With neutral intonation, the children performed significantly better in the version with *I want to look pretty for the party* (which Lucy's ironical utterance could be seen as echoing).

Interesting sidelight: It is occasionally noted in the experimental literature that irony may also involve a quite different tone of voice. This difference is not explained or investigated:

Several types of intonation can be used to express sarcasm…: A person may use a monotonic intonation (e.g., saying "won-der-ful" in an exaggerated monotone to reply to an addressee who tells you about a mandatory meeting at 8.00 p.m. when you have a tennis match scheduled) or an intonation that conveys excessive enthusiasm (e.g., using an overly enthusiastic tone of voice to say, "Hey, you should drive faster!" to someone going 60 miles an hour when the speed limit is 30). (Laval & Bert-Erboul 2005)

Question: How are these puzzling features explained by **echoic** or **pretence** accounts?

Claim: The echoic account straightforwardly explains all these features. Non-echoic versions of the pretence account do not explain them at all. In hybrid echoic-pretence accounts, it is the echoic mechanism, not the pretence mechanism, that is doing all the work.

7. <u>The echoic account</u>

Central claim of the echoic account:
The main point of irony is to express the speaker's own **dissociative** (e.g. mocking, sceptical or critical) **attitude** to a thought **similar in content** to the one expressed in her utterance, which she **attributes** to some source other than herself at the current time.

Source: may be a specific person, a type of person, or humans in general.
Thought: may be an unexpressed **belief, hope, wish, norm-based expectation,** etc.
Similar in content: may be an **exaggeration, paraphrase** or **implication** of the original.
Dissociative attitude: one among many possible attitudes to **attributed thoughts**:

31. *Jack:* I've finally finished my paper.
32a. *Sue (happily)* You've finished your paper! Let's celebrate.
32b. *Sue (cautiously):* You've finished your paper? Really completely finished?
32c. *Sue (dismissively):* You've finished your paper. How often have I heard you say that?

Prediction of the echoic account:
Irony comprehension involves the ability (a) to understand an utterance as **echoic**; (b) to recognise the speaker's **dissociative attitude** to the attributed thought. No echoing, no irony.

How the echoic account explains the puzzling features of irony

A: Irony and attitude. The echoic account claim that irony crucially involves the expression of a characteristic (**dissociative**) attitude, and specifies that this attitude is directly to an **attributed thought,** and indirectly to the specific people, or types of people, who entertain that thought.

Explaining Grice's counterexample
The echoic account predicts that the remark *Look, that car has all its windows intact,* said of a car with a broken window, will be understood as ironical as long as it can be recognised as echoic and

dissociative. For instance, I am worried about leaving my car in the street overnight and you have been trying to reassure me. My utterance ironically echoes your reassurances.

B. **Normative bias.**
Norms are culturally defined, commonly known, and always available for echoing; so it is always possible to say ironically *How graceful* when someone is clumsy. By contrast, it is only possible to say *How clumsy* when someone is graceful if prior doubts or fears have been expressed, which can then be ironically echoed. This explains Kreuz & Glucksberg's results.

C. **The ironical tone of voice.** This is an optional cue to the speaker's particular dissociative attitude to the attributed thought. (On the other tone of voice, see below.)

8. Pretence accounts

Central claim of pretence accounts: In irony, the speaker is not herself performing a speech act (e.g. making an assertion or asking a question), but **pretending** to perform one, and simultaneously expressing her own **mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude** to the speech act itself, and/or to anyone who would perform it or take it seriously.

Recanati on irony and pretence
'Suppose the speaker says *Paul really is a fine friend* in a situation in which just the opposite is known to be the case. The speaker does not really say, or at least she does not assert, what she "makes as if to say" (Grice's phrase). Something is lacking here, namely the force of a serious assertion. … What the speaker does in the ironical case is merely to *pretend* to assert the content of her utterance. …By pretending to say of Paul that he is a fine friend in a situation in which just the opposite is obviously true, the speaker manages to communicate that Paul is everything but a fine friend. She shows, by her utterance, how inappropriate it would be to ascribe to Paul the property of being a fine friend.' (Recanati, 2004: 71)

Problem: One can pretend to say anything at all, so why can't a speaker produce **any** obviously false or inappropriate utterance and claim to be ironical? (cf *Grice's counterexample*)

Solution: Hybrid echoic pretence accounts, which combine both attribution and pretence.

Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg & Brown's 'allusional pretence' account (1995/2007):
33a. Irony involves performing a **pragmatically insincere** speech act (i.e. **pretence**)
33b. Irony involves **allusion** to (i.e. **echoing**) a violated **expectation, norm or convention**

Recanati's echoic pretence account
The act of assertion is precisely what the speaker does *not* perform when she says that *p* ironically: rather, she plays someone else's part and mimics an act of assertion accomplished by that person. She does so not by pretending that that person is speaking … but by herself endorsing the function of speaker and saying that *p*, while (i) not taking responsibility for what is being said, and (ii) implicitly ascribing that responsibility to someone else, namely the person whose act of assertion is being mimicked. (Recanati 2007: 226)

Question for hybrid attributive-pretence accounts:
Do echoic/attributive use and pretence involve **two distinct mechanisms,** or only a single one**?**

Hypothesis A (Recanati)**:** The notion of pretence **explains** how attributive use is possible at all. The only way to reports an utterance is by imitating or mimicking it.

Problems with Hypothesis A
34a. It is hard to see how **reported thought** can involve imitation or pretence.
34b. It is hard to see echoic **endorsement** or **questions** (cf 32a, 32b) as cases of pretence.
34c. When there *is* a prior utterance to imitate (cf 32b, or Lucy's *I want to look pretty for the party*) the ironical utterance may express a different propositional attitude. The speaker is **echoing** that utterance, while performing/simulating her own (**real or imaginary**) speech act.

Hypothesis B: Echoic use and pretence involve **two distinct mechanisms.** These occasionally combine in 'parodic' forms of irony, where the speaker (a) simulates an **imaginary** speech act **and** (b) expresses a dissociative attitude to an **attributed thought with a similar content.**

Regular vs parodic irony (Sperber 1984):
Imagine that Bill keeps saying, 'Sally is such a nice person', and that Judy totally disagrees. Judy might express a derogatory attitude to Bill's judgement on Sally in two superficially similar, but quite perceptibly different, ways. She might imitate Bill and say herself, 'Sally is such a nice person!' with an exaggerated tone of enthusiasm or even worship. Or she might utter the same sentence but with a tone of contempt, so that there will be a contradiction between the literal content of what she says and the tone in which she says it. The first tone of voice is indeed one of pretence and mockery. The second tone of voice is the ironic tone, the nuances of which have been described by rhetoricians since classical antiquity.

Prediction: The distinct tones of voice used in regular and 'parodic' irony are linked to different mechanisms: regular irony involves echoing alone, 'parodic' irony both echoing and pretence.

How pretence accounts explain the three puzzling features of irony
35a. Non-echoic accounts don't explain them at all.
35b. Hybrid echoic-pretence accounts can use the explanation offered by the echoic account, but don't add anything to it, and give no evidence that pretence is needed at all.

A: The ironical attitude
36a. Irony involves more than combining pretence with mockery. What impressionists do is parody, not irony. The ironical attitude is to a **proposition,** not a person.
36b. 'Parodic' irony does imitate and dissociate the speaker from the content of an actual speech act. But most irony has no real-life counterpart (and is unlikely ever to have one).

B. Normative bias
If irony **could** be achieved simply by performing a pretend speech act with a mocking attitude, nothing in the mechanism of irony would explain Kreuz & Glucksberg's results.

C. The ironical tone of voice
The pretence account makes a clear prediction about the ironical tone of voice. If the speaker is pretending to make an assertion, she should maintain the pretence by mimicking the tone of voice that someone actually making the assertion did, or would, use. This is just what Clark and Gerrig (1984: 122) propose:

In pretense or make-believe, people generally leave their own voices behind for new ones. An actor playing Othello assumes a voice appropriate to Othello. An ironist pretending to be S' might assume a voice appropriate to S'. … With pretense, there is a natural account of the ironic tone of voice.

However, this is not the regular ironical tone of voice, but a 'parodic' tone of voice, where the speaker is indeed pretending to be someone else. So cases where pretence and echoing combine, far from being prototypical cases of irony, involve a quite distinct tone of voice.

Conclusions:
37a. The echoic and pretence accounts make distinct predictions which are worth testing.
37b. To choose between echoic and echoic pretence accounts, we need to test for pretence.
37c. The distinct tones of voice used in regular and 'parodic' irony may help here.
37d. For a critique of Gibbs (2000), Leggitt & Gibbs (2000), see Wilson (in press).

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