**Embedded irony, speech-acts,**

**and the semantics/pragmatics distinction**

In this paper I will give a unified theory of simple and embedded irony drawing on the theory of speech acts. I argue that both unembedded and embedded ironic utterances involve, as a core speech-act, what Barker (2004) calls a ‘proto-act.’ That’s an act in which a speaker ‘advertises’ ironic-speech-act intentions, but which is neutral as to whether the speaker has the intentions, or communicates her possession of them. In the unembedded utterance, the speaker has the intentions she signals, whereas in the embedded case, she lacks them. This framework also explains the distinction between truth-conditional content and non-truth-conditional content independently of embeddability, explaining thereby how irony embeds as a non-truth-conditional form of meaning. I suggest this view (a) helps us understand what is wrong with restricting embeddability and compositionality to truth-conditional content, as is currently assumed in the debates on the semantics/pragmatics distinction; and (b) enables us to appreciate the virtues of a theory that explains compositionality in terms of speech-acts structure.

**1 The problem**

A problem for those accepting the semantics/pragmatics distinction is to identify where semantics ends and pragmatic inference begins. The distinction arises because declarative sentences have two types of content or meaning. Following Grice (1971/89) we refer to these as *said-content* and unsaid or *implicated-content*. By defining these two types of content we determine where the distinction is drawn. Their relationship, with respect to an utterance of a sentence S, is as follows:[[1]](#footnote-1)

**G1**: For a sentence S, thesaid-content of an utterance U*S* of that sentence results from *composing* together the linguistic meanings of the words in *S* using semantic rules. This process can include pragmatic factors. The result is an expression of the utterance’s said-content as a truth-evaluable proposition.[[2]](#footnote-2) By contrast U*S*’simplicated-content results from *inference* applied to its said-content*.* This inference takes as its premises the fact of U*S*, its said-content, the context, and interpretive principles.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**G2**: Although both said-content and implicated-content can bear truth-values, U*S* is true iff U*S*’s said-content is true. The truth-conditions of U*S*’s implicature are irrelevant towhether U*S* itself is true or false. So an utterance may be true (false) when what it implicates is false (true).

Since the said-content of U*S* is commonly referred to as its truth-conditional content, its implicature is by contrast commonly referred to as its non-truth-conditional content.[[4]](#footnote-4) Additionally if *S*’s implicature is false, an utterance of *S* is not judged as false but merely conversationally infelicitous. Implicatures therefore contribute to the *felicity*-conditions of the utterance rather than to its truth-conditions.

A live question in deciding where to draw the line between said-content and implicated-content is *how much* and *what kind* of pragmatic inference should be allowed to intrude into the determination of said-content. Indexicalists and minimalists (henceforth ‘semanticists’) defend ‘*weak*’ pragmatic intrusion.[[5]](#footnote-5) By contrast contextualists (henceforth ‘pragmaticists’) advocate ‘*strong*’ intrusion. In weak intrusion the pragmatic inferences are made (and constrained) using the semantic rules that compose the semantic contents of individual words (relative to the context) via the syntactic structure of the sentence. This allows limited pragmatics while retaining a classical *semantic compositionality*. Strong intrusion, by contrast, allows ‘free’ pragmatic inference unconstrained by semantic rules. Examples of such free pragmatic inference are enrichment and modulation. This richer *pragmatic compositionality* operates on pragmatically enriched and/or modulated contents of the words in *S* in addition to their semantic content. The inference process is like that for implicatures except that it is applied only to individual words or phrases within the utterance rather than to the utterance as a whole.[[6]](#footnote-6)

So both parties allow some pragmatic intrusion into the determination of said content.[[7]](#footnote-7) Critically, however, they both disallow global pragmatic inference leading to an implicature to intrude. The purpose of this exclusion for both parties is to maintain a purely compositional explanation of said-content. Said-content is thus both truth-conditional and compositional. Following Clapp (2012: 301), we can therefore define said-content in terms of *truth-conditional compositionality* (henceforth TCC):

**Truth-Conditional Compositionality**:

1. A language L is truth-conditionally compositional iff for all declarative sentences *S* of L, the truth-conditions of an utterance U*S* are a function of the semantic content of the words in *S* (relative to context), and optionally their pragmatically enriched and/or modulated content, and the logical form (LF) of *S*.
2. For any utterance U*S1* of a sentence *S1*, where *S1* is a compound sentence taking as a part a declarative sentence *S2*, the truth-conditions of that compound sentence *S1* = *O(…S2…)*—where *S2 embeds* in logical/sentential operator *O* (i.e. falls under the scope of *O)*—are a function of *S2*’s truth-conditions (relative to context) as defined in (a), and the LF of *O(…S2…)*.

(a) specifies the truth-conditions of an utterance U*S*; (b) specifies the compositional determination of those truth-conditions if U*S* is a compound utterance. In this paper we refer to content as being embedded in an operator *O* if it contributes to the truth-conditions of the compound sentence created by that operator. Since said-content and implicated-content have separate truth-conditions, TCC prohibits implicatures from embedding:

**Insensitivity**: In the compositional determination of the content of a compound utterance *O(…S…)*, a logical/sentential operator having *S* as an argument is insensitive to *S*’s implicatures and uses *only* *S*’s said-content.

TCC and Insensitivity are broadly accepted. Together they allow us to precisely draw the distinction between said and implicated-content. Said-content embeds because it is truth-conditional. Implicated-content does not embed because it is non-truth-conditional.

The starting point for this paper is that ironic utterances challenge this neat way of drawing the said/implicated distinction. Take a simple ironic utterance such as (1):

(1) Bill turned out to be such a fine friend.

This is explained by Grice (1975/89) as an implicature. But this simple ironic statement can form part of a larger utterance (2):

(2) If Bill turned out to be such a fine friend, he shouldn’t be trusted.

If the antecedent is implicature, and if TCC and Insensitivity are correct how can it enter into the compositionally-determined content of the conditional in (2)? Clearly that would contradict Insensitivity and TCC. This is the problem of embedded irony. It’s an example of a larger and familiar class of ‘embedded implicatures’ first raised by Cohen (1970) as a challenge to Grice’s theory of implicatures. Cohen argued that when an implicature embeds in an operator, it is better understood as a compositional constituent of said-content. How should this problem be dealt with in the case of embedded irony?

It is reasonable to try to preserve TCC and Insensitivity in the face of this problem. One way would be to deny that embedded irony is implicature and include it into said-content. But this stretches the notion of said-content (§4-5) to the point where the distinction has little value (§6). A second route is to try to preserve TCC by giving up Insensitivity. In this case irony embeds as implicature (§7). This leaves us with two types of content, and also with compositionality, but compositionality is now polluted with the pragmatic inference required to support implicature. Finally one could give up both TCC and Insensitivity. In this paper I advocate this and show how to achieve it by adopting a compositionality of speech-acts—where sentence-level speech-acts are built up out of sub-sentential speech-acts irrespective of whether they are vehicles of content that is non-truth-conditional (§8). In particular I suggest solving the embedding problem by employing Barker’s (2004) notion of a ‘proto speech-act.’ That’s an act in which a speaker ‘advertises’ ironic-speech-act intentions, but which is neutral as to whether the speaker has the intentions, or communicates her possession of them. This provides a unified explanation in that both embedded and unembedded irony share the same speech-act structure—an ironic proto-act—understood as involving a non-truth-conditional form of meaning. In the unembedded utterance, the speaker has the intentions she signals, whereas in the embedded case, she lacks them. I now proceed by discussing examples of embedded irony (§2) and the challenge they pose for Grice (§3).

**2 Data**

Levinson (2000), Barker (2004), and Camp (2012) have briefly discussed that irony embeds in conditionals, epistemic modals, and ‘since’/’because’ constructions. Here I extend their data, focusing on whether both ironic content and attitude embed. By embedding I mean that an aspect of meaning—say, m1 for ironic content or m2 for ironic attitude—functions as the argument upon which sentential operators operate to form compound utterances. (For now, I make abstraction of what type of content m1 and m2 are):

**Embedding**: If an ironically used sentence *S* means m1 and m2, then *S* embeds in the scope of an operator *O* to form a compound sentence *O*(…*S*…), if—and only if—*O* takes as argument either m1 or m2, or both, mapping them onto the overall content of the compound sentence *O*(…*m1/m2*…).

2.1 Embedding ironic content

As Levinson (2000) and Camp (2012) observe, irony can occur naturally within the scope of antecedents of conditionals:[[8]](#footnote-8)

(3) a. If Jon is such a genius, then don’t appoint him.

b. If he’s so generous and considerate, why did you ask his help?

c. If you come to me with one more inspired idea like that, then you’re out of here.

d. If Alice is so brilliant, then she’ll be the perfect dupe for our little plan.

e. If Jane is as thrilled with our plan as Bill was, then we’re really in trouble.

f. [Sun shining] If it continues to rain like this, I’ll come to England more often.

Irony embeds in the sense that on the natural interpretation of (3a-e), the content which ‘if …(then)’ operates on is the ironic, rather than the literal, content of the antecedent; otherwise the conditionals are odd. Thus, utterances of (3a-e) make a substantive claim when they are taken to express a connection between an ironic antecedent and consequent. Importantly, the connection holds at the level of the speech-acts performed by the antecedent and consequent. Thus, at least the consequent may be used to perform other illocutionary acts than assertive act: e.g. an order in (3a) or a question in (3b). (For now, speech-acts are understood intuitively; I discuss their intentional structure in §8.)

Haegeman (2003, 2005) discusses evidence that so-called *premise*-conditionals as (4a) express a connection at the level of speech-acts. She argues that the illocutionary force of the speech-act in the antecedent remains independent of the illocutionary force of the speech-act in the consequent. This contrast with *event*-*conditionals* as (4b) where the event of the antecedent is integrated in the event of the consequent:[[9]](#footnote-9)

(4) a. If it is going to rain this afternoon [*as you say*], why don’t we just stay at home and watch a video?

b. If it rains we’ll all get terribly wet and miserable.

Thus, antecedents of premise-conditionals can be used to allude to speech-acts made by others (as shown by the echoic reading: ‘*as you say*’), and which can be used as a *discourse premise* for the speech-act in the consequent.

I contend something similar goes on in embedded irony. The speaker may echo or allude to someone else’s ironic speech-act (the antecedents in (3a-e) can easily be interpreted echoically ‘*as you suggest*,’ or ‘*as you ironically put it*’), and this alluded speech-act may serve as a premise for another speech-act in the consequent. Camp (2012: 612) explains such allusion as an anaphoric device. Anaphoric expressions such as ‘so,’ ‘such,’ ‘like that’[[10]](#footnote-10) serve to anchor the evaluation the speaker pretends to endorse to some genuine evaluation made manifest in the context—by either previous ironic or corresponding literal claims made by others or simply by background knowledge that warrants the opposite evaluation from the one the speaker pretends to express.

While anaphora helps make the ironic speech-act more salient by anchoring it to the common ground, it is not, *pace* Camp, necessary of embedded irony.[[11]](#footnote-11) A speaker may well utter (3) in the absence of previous ironic claims by merely stipulating the permissibility of an ironic speech-act rather than really performing one. This is common in scenarios in which the speaker concedes or grants something for the sake of conversation in order to explore what follows from it: Let’s suppose an ironic claim were true, what then? This explains why the speaker is not committed to being ironic but is so merely *hypothetically*. That is, by embedding irony in a conditional she is not primarily concerned with expressing irony but rather with determining what else is permissible to say or do given the accepted permissibility of an ironic speech-act.

Irony may also embed in the consequent of conditionals as (5a), or in both antecedent and consequent as in (5b). The ironic speech-act in the consequent is *conditional* upon the antecedent speech-act (which is ironic in (5b)):

(5) a. If Fred failed his physics exam for the 9th time, he must be a real genius.

b. If he’s so successful with women, he must be a real charmer.

Whereas by embedding irony in conditionals the speaker presents herself as *not* committed to being ironic, she seemingly undertakes a more assertive commitment by embedding irony in factives such as ‘since’/’because’ constructions:[[12]](#footnote-12)

(6) a. Because he’s been such a fine friend, I’ve struck him off my list.

b. Since you’ve already made so many scintillating points this evening, I think you

should let someone else voice their opinion.

Irony may also embed in disjunction, quantifiers, epistemic modals, and negation. For reasons of space I only mention some examples:[[13]](#footnote-13)

(7) a. Either he’s going to make another scintillating point or he will shut up.

b. [A. Did the project get funded?]

B. Well, everyone contributed such outstanding ideas, and we are out of the competition now.

c. I am sure that the cat likes having its tail pulled.

d. He’s not a real genius, he’s a genuinely good philosopher!

So far we’ve seen that ironic content can be taken as argument by a variety of operators and mapped onto the overall content of compound utterances. What about ironic attitude?

2.2 Embedding ironic attitude

Embedding of ironic attitude is more difficult to discern since it isn’t clear what sort of meaning ironic attitude is, if it is a meaning at all. Two influential theories of irony—pretence[[14]](#footnote-14) and echoic theories[[15]](#footnote-15)—reduce ironic meaning to expression of evaluative attitudes while denying that any ironic inverted content is communicated. Both pretence and echoic theorists agree that ironic attitude is an attitude (typically derogatory) about a thought/perspective *P* evoked by the utterance, but they disagree about how such evocation is effected. Echoic theorists take the speaker to *echo* someone else’s thought/utterance the content of which is similar to the utterance content, and present it as an object of ridicule. On the other hand, pretence theorists take the speaker to *pretend* to adopt a limited/defective perspective that evokes a suitably related perspective, which she suggests is similarly limited/defective. For current purposes, I am not concerned with these disagreements. Rather, I’ll try to flesh out what sort of content ironic attitude is in order to test the predictions from pretence and echoic theories regarding what exactly embeds when irony embeds.

At a first approximation, ironic attitude is a matter of expressing a mental state—a mental state that is more like affect or evaluative judgement rather than belief.[[16]](#footnote-16) In this sense, expressing an attitude is not like conveying a determinate meaning by which the speaker intends that the audience entertain a proposition with a determinate truth-evaluable content. Surely she wants her ironic attitude recognized but this is not of itself a matter of saying or implicating *that* she has that attitude. Rather, she *shows* she has that attitude.

Following certain expressivist talk about moral attitudes, ironic attitude may be qualified as expressing a *commitment* to having a certain disapproving attitude.[[17]](#footnote-17) Following Potts’ (2005; 2007) analysis of expressives such as pejoratives and slurs, this commitment may further be qualified as ‘*speaker-oriented*’ in the sense that the attitude remains attached to the speaker’s perspective, in particular under say/attitude reports.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, as Potts allows that such commitment is *perspective-dependent*—in the sense that the evaluation may be shifted from the speaker’s perspective to another’s perspective—we may argue that the commitment to the ironic attitude may sometimes be relativized to the beliefs/attitudes of another agent. Consider Ann uttering (8) in a context in which it is manifest that Paul deceived John:

(8) John believes Paul is such a good friend.

There are at least three natural interpretations of (8). First, on an interpretation in which John has talked about Paul sarcastically, both the ironic content and attitude are naturally ascribed to John, irrespective of what Ann believes about Paul. In this sense, both ironic content *and* attitude embed within the belief-report. However, secondly, on an interpretation in which John detests Paul but has not said anything sarcastic about him, and Ann is known as notoriously ironic, the ironic content is ascribed as a belief to John whereas the attitude is ascribed to Ann. In this sense, we say, the ironic content embeds but the ironic attitude projects out to become the reporter’s attitude. Thirdly, on an interpretation in which Ann knows, but John doesn’t know, that Paul has cheated on John, both the ironic content and attitude are ascribed to Ann. That is, Ann is ironic both about Paul being thought to be a fine friend and about John for being foolish to believe that. In this case, neither the ironic content nor the attitude embeds; they both project out. Interestingly, whereas in regular irony the thought being mocked is always tacitly attributed, here it is explicitly attributed to John.

The possibility of shifting the speaker-oriented commitment suggests that the ironic attitude sometimes embeds along with the ironic content when they are both ascribed to the reportee. Other times the attitude projects out along with the ironic content when they are both ascribed to the reporter. In this case, both the ironic content and attitude are communicated as part of the whole belief-report rather than part of that-clause. Other times, the ironic content and attitude may come apart. This variability may be explained by the fact that belief-reports are sensitive to attitudes. However, other operators are seem also sensitive to the ironic attitude (paraphrased in brackets) such as the conditional in (9):

(9) If Jon is such a genius[*which would be such a ridiculous to think/say*]*,* why did you appoint him then?

The question makes sense if the speaker thinks that Jon is incompetent and she’s also mocking anyone who would think he is clever. Critically, the ironic attitude does not embed alone, but rather as part of a unitary speech-act that includes both ironic content and attitude. In this sense, *both* ironic content and attitude embed: they are communicated hypothetically and they both enter into the commitments of the whole conditional.

If this is correct, then expressivists who claim that irony involves only expression of attitude and no ironic inverted content have difficulties explaining what exactly embeds when irony embeds. Even though they might insist that in unembedded cases the expression of ironic attitude is sufficient, in embedded cases at least it is reasonable to allow that an ironic content is communicated as well, along with a correlative attitude. Now, in order to explain how ironic content and attitude are related, one may take inspiration from the analysis of expressives.[[19]](#footnote-19) On a standard analysis, a pejorative like ‘*Jim is a pom*’ expresses a descriptive content—Jim is English—and an expressive meaning—disapproval of English.[[20]](#footnote-20) Similarly, one might argue that ironic attitude is like an *expressive meaning* about a descriptive content it takes as target. Thus, ironic utterances (whether embedded or not) express a *dual-content*: a primary (descriptive) content *P*—where *P* may be an echoed or pretend thought—and a secondary (attitudinal) content—*It would be ridiculous to think* *P*. Whereas this proposal explains the role of attitude, I argue that ironic content falls naturally from this since one finds P ridiculous when typically one thinks not-P or something in that vicinity.

That completes a quick survey showing that both ironic content and attitude embed in various operators. From now on I’ll focus on ironic content as a minimum basis for irony to embed, and bring in considerations about attitude when relevant.

**3 The challenge and theoretical landscape**

What does this data tell us about whether ironic content is said-content or implicated-content? Since the question has been little discussed in the recent debates on the semantics/pragmatics distinction even for simple irony, it is important to understand whether unemebedded irony is said- or implicated-content. I start with the standard Gricean account that explains irony as implicature, discuss some problems for it and possible amendments, and examine whether it can accommodate embedded irony.

3.1 Irony *qua* implicature

Grice (1975/89: 34; 53-4; 120) explains irony by employing the same explanatory tools as for implicature. A typical instance is ‘Bill is such a fine friend’ (after Bill’s bad deed is found out). Grice suggests that the hearer may reason in the following way so as to derive the speaker meaning. Since what shesaid is manifestly false—she does not believe it—, and she clearly knows that I know that what she has said is false, and it is not her intention to trick me into believing something false, she must therefore intend that I interpret her as meaningsomething other than what she said. ‘This must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one [s]he purports to be putting forward’ which Grice later characterises as a matter of ‘*making as if to say*’ (ibid.: 52). So she must have intended that I infer that she intends to convey this contradictory proposition. What she means, therefore, is that Bill is not a fine friend.

Despite its inherent plausibility, this explanation is problematic as a general account of irony. First, it doesn’t describe adequately all the examples. As Camp (2012) points out, irony may a variety of other scopes than what is (made-as-if) said. For instance, it may take a local scope over a word or phrase, as in so-called lexical irony/sarcasm in (10a),[[21]](#footnote-21) and a presupposition in (10b) that the man has rescued the relevant city from ruin to suggest that he wasn’t of much help.[[22]](#footnote-22)

(10) a. Jones, this murderer, this thief, this crook, is indeed *an honorable fellow*!

b. The man *who rescued this city from ruin* is now planning to run for mayor.

Such cases are problematic since for Grice implicatures arise by virtue of saying a complete utterance, not from a word or phrase within it. Some such cases might be explained semantically (see §4).

Grice’s account is too narrow to explain so-called *illocutionary irony* which takes global scope over the overall illocutionary and perlocutionary effects that would be undertaken by a sincere speech-act. E.g. by asking (11a) to someone who is not a child but behaves like one, the speaker suggests the person is behaving immaturely. Similarly, by prompting a neurotic driver in (11b) she is mocking his inept behaviour:[[23]](#footnote-23)

(11) a. How old did you say you were?

b. Don’t forget to use your indicator!

Camp (2012: 598) objects these cases are problematic for Grice since it is difficult to find a plausible ‘opposite’ or ‘contrary’ to illocutionary acts, ‘let alone ones that can be analyzed as the same force directed at a logically related proposition.’ The ironic point, however, is not about the illocutionary force *itself*—here a question or injunction—but rather about the implications that would follow from a certain act/behaviour that would make the pretend speech-act appropriate (say, that the addressee would be a small child, or that he would be forgetful and needs constant reminding to signal). Such cases are nicely explained by appealing to echo or pretence (see §2.2). Both may be used to bring to the foreground a situation in which the question or the injunction would be appropriate, but which in the current context is inappropriate. By drawing such a contrast the speaker draws attention to how the actual situation fails live up the expectations raised by the situation put forward.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Grice’s account is also too narrow to explain irony which takes scope over the implicature that a sincere utterance would have generated. Consider (12) from Bredin (1997):

(12) The hotel room costs a thousand dollars a night. Of course, for that you get half a bottle of Australian champagne *and* your breakfast thrown in.

The irony is not about what is said, since the speaker *does* assert that you get a half a bottle of Australian champagne andserved breakfast for the room. But in saying that she also implicates that you get good value for your thousand dollars; it is only the implicature she wants to suggest that is ridiculous, thereby conveying that the cost of the room is an appalling waste of money. This is problematic since Grice needs to explain how an ironic implicature can be derived from another implicature of the utterance rather than from what is said by it.

Similar problems arise when irony targets pragmatic interpretations of the utterance such as metaphoric interpretation as in (13), since Grice explains metaphor via implicature:

(13) You are the cream in my coffee.

Such cases raise the question of a determinate order of calculating the implicatures, and Grice (1989: 34) provides no explanation as to why and how the metaphoric implicature has priority over the ironic implicature.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Given the variety of kinds of meanings that irony can take scope over, Grice’s implicature account is not a promising unified theory of irony. Camp (2012: 589) explains this variety via a general operation of *meaning inversion*. This has the advantage of achieving descriptive uniformity. However, since the general operation must recruit a different mechanism to invert each kind of meaning a unified explanation is still out of reach. (In §8 I’ll argue that a speech-act theory has the resources to provide a unified explanation.)

Secondly, not only Grice’s account cannot describe all the cases, it arguably does not explain them adequately. Wilson & Sperber (2002) object that since nothing is said with irony—speakers do not mean what they say—the implicature cannot get off the ground. This objection assumes that to say that p is to assert that p, whereas there is a weaker sense of understanding ‘say that p’ that does not involve asserting but merely expressing a proposition with no commitment to its truth.[[26]](#footnote-26) Grice concedes this when he explains ironic implicature as a matter of *making-as-if-to-say* something and conveying something *different*.

As a whole, *making-as-if-to-say* is a weak form of ‘saying.’ The speaker knowingly says something she doesn’t believe: she does not assert anything but merely pretends or play-says something. However, the ‘saying’ falling under the scope of pretence can be understood strongly as asserting,[[27]](#footnote-27) so that the assertion counts as a pretend assertion. I contend that pretend acts may nonetheless be used to convey ironic implicatures. Grice’s account of irony can thus be generalized with two clauses:

1. nothing is asserted (or illocuted): the speaker only pretends to assert or perform illocutionary acts;
2. implicatures are carried by pretend assertions or pretend illocutionary acts (as well as by assertions and sincere illocutionary acts).

Recanati (2004: 71) concedes such a generalization when he argues that ironic content is a ‘secondary meaning’ (i.e. implicature) arising from pretend assertion.

‘What the speaker does in the ironical case is merely to *pretend* to assert the content of her utterance. Still, there is an element of indirectness here, and we can maintain that irony also possesses a secondary character. By pretending to assert something, the speaker conveys something else, just as, in the other types of cases, by asserting something the speaker conveys something else. 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: 77) further argues that pretence enters into the primary meaning (i.e. said-content including illocutionary force), which thereby consists of two layered acts. One is what I call bare pretence to F as it is common to any act of pretence. This involves displaying the speech-act structure of F (with its content and force) and signalling that it is non-serious. The other is an ironical act of staging the performance of F. This *is* actually performed and is responsible for the ironic content. Recanati (p.c.) suggests that the ironic content is part of the interpretation of the ironic act of pretence—i.e. part of the primary illocutionary commitments or what is asserted, ordered, etc.

This suggests the possibility that ironic content might be asserted rather than implicated. But before ruling out an implicature account of irony it is important to understand what kinds of commitments are undertaken with assertion and with implicature, respectively.

3.2. Is irony asserted or implicated?

An argument often made to motivate an implicature proposal of irony invokes a *deniability* property that irony shares with implicatures (Camp 2012). Because implicatures are deniable but not assertion, then if one can reasonably deny having been ironic this is a good reason to think that irony is implicated.

An ironic speaker can deny she was ironic, or at least attempt to do so, because she says something she doesn’t mean and means something she doesn’t say. In this way, she avoids committing oneself ‘openly’ and ‘overtly’ to the ironic content—where Camp (2012: 608) defines ‘open’ and ‘overt’ commitment aa characteristic of assertion. This is correct but is not enough to explain why irony and implicature more generally lack the ‘openness’ and ‘overtness’ characteristic of assertion.

One way to make this suggestion more precise is to look at norms of assertion. Depending on whether one’s favourite story of assertion requires justified belief or knowledge or truth of the asserted content,[[28]](#footnote-28) it follows that ironic content is not asserted because the speaker hasn’t got justified belief or knowledge or truth of the ironic content. But this does not seem right. The speaker may well believe that the ironic content is true and she may be justified in believing it, and yet not assert it. Thus, norms of assertions don’t seem to illuminate the distinctive nature of implicature that makes it a case of non-assertion.

Following Barker (2011; p.c.), I contend a better way of understanding what distinguishes assertion from implicature is in terms of their epistemic grounding. Barker explains assertion in terms of *defending*:

‘Assertion is an act in which U [the speaker] utters a sentence and thereby *defends* a mental state Π. To defend a mental state Π is to manifest through a symbolic act, like uttering a sentence, epistemic authority for Π. Manifestation means that an audience can interpret the speaker as taking on epistemic authority. Epistemic authority is being disposed to offer (what U takes to be) sufficient reasons for Π.’

One defends a mental state—say, a belief P—by producing a sentence that is (partly) caused by a disposition to defend P. Defending P is to manifest epistemic authority in the sense of being disposed to provide reasons for P, if asked to. In contrast, one expresses *non*-defensively Q by producing a sentence that is (partly) caused by a disposition not to defend Q—say, by justifying one’s acceptance of Q. P is asserted because it is expressed defensively, whereas Q is implicated because it is expressed non-defensively.

This explains nicely why implicated-content is deniable. A speaker expressing Q *non-*defensively can reject commitment to Q because she manifested she is not disposed to provide reasons for Q. More precisely, she has conveyed Q not by putting it on the table as open for dispute and showing she is ready to stand by it, as assertions are. Rather, she implicates Q by way of departing from the meaning of the utterance itself, and drawing on contextual information that she presumes the hearer is able to infer. In this way, there is nothing in the utterance itself that ties the speaker to have meant what she merely implicated. The responsibility for endowing the utterance with an implicature Q sits with the hearer, and the speaker is in her right to deny any liability for it. For this reason it is unnatural to take issue with implicated-content, as we witness with Grice’s professorial reference letter:

(14) To whom it may concern: John’s handwriting is excellent and his attendance at departmental events is punctual. Yours, etc.’

Were the professor challenged, he may disavow the implicature that John is unfit for the job, precisely because he has only expressed it non-defensively. This is possible because by denying the implicature the professor can fall back on what he expressed defensively: namely what he asserted—that John’s writing is excellent and he’s punctual. But because this is an implausible statement to make in a recommendation letter, the denial sounds disingenuous.

Similarly, denial in irony is disingenuous because nothing is asserted so it is difficult to fall back on something that can be reasonably presented as defensively expressed.[[29]](#footnote-29) Other ingredients are also important, as Camp (2012: 605) explains:

‘The speaker *pretends* to make an assertion or other a speech-act, but she thereby genuinely *presupposes* some standard of evaluation, and also *implicates* that this standard has been violated and that she feels negatively about its violation.[…] In these cases, the speaker attempts to manipulate the common ground without making a move that is itself recorded on the conversational scoreboard. If the hearer does acknowledge both that a presupposed expectation has been violated, and the legitimacy of the speaker’s displeasure at its violation, then the perspective which underwrites this negative evaluation gains tacit acceptance without the speaker’s ever explicitly articulating or defending it.’

I contend that all three ingredients—implicature, pretence, and presupposition—concur to explaining why irony is a matter of non-defensive expressing whereby the speaker is not disposed to provide reasons for neither. By pretending P the speaker is clearly not defending P: she does not believe P and shows thereby she is not committed to P. Pretence is used to draw attention to whom might believe P—which are taken as the target of irony. Camp suggests that by pretending P the speaker presupposes a normative evaluative scale. Furthermore, by pretending to endorse a high value on that scale, the speaker implicates that she in fact believes an ironic inverted content Q at the opposite end of the scale.

I’d like to expand a bit more on the role of presupposition and argue that presupposition does a more important job than just alluding to a normative scale. To be sure, it is a pragmatic presupposition in Stalnaker’s (1974) sense that need not be triggered by lexical devices but which plays a crucial role in updating the context as common ground. Context, in this sense, is an information state, the presumed common knowledge of the participants of the conversation that is taking place in the context. For example, by uttering ‘*Lovely weather*’ when it rains cats and dogs, or ‘*Fine fellow*’ about a dubious fellow, the speaker reverts the order of salience so to speak. That is, what is background or taken for granted (or which can be reasonably accommodated)—say, rubbish weather, dubious fellow—is brought into the foreground to draw a contrast with the semantic interpretation of the utterance—say, lovely weather, fine fellow. This can be explained in terms of the notion of presupposition—i.e. in the sense that the speaker *makes as if* the ironic content Q is already accepted (or at least easily accommodated) in the common ground. In this sense, Q is expressed non-defensively. But the speaker may wish further to mock those who might entertain P. She does so by drawing attention to the contrast between what others think, say P, and what she thinks, say Q. The attitude that it would be ridiculous to think P is therefore also non-defensively expressed.

If these considerations are correct, this suggests that ironic content is more like implicature rather than assertion. It is a non-truth-conditional content because it is non-defensively expressed. Therefore, talk of deniability in irony is better replaced by talk of non-defensibility. In §8 I’ll suggest replacing the said/implicated distinction with defensive vs. non-defensive expressing.

3.3 Embedded irony *qua* ‘embedded implicature’

If the implicature story is still a good story of unembedded irony, how can it be extended to embedded irony in a unified way? Consider (15):

(15) If Bill is such a fine friend, he shouldn’t be trusted.

To show that irony embeds the Gricean must allow that it is the ironic implicature of the antecedent that embeds in the sense that ‘if…then’ picks up on the implicature and maps it onto the overall content of the conditional. This contradicts *Insensitivity* and ultimately TCC. Should then the Gricean deny that embedded irony is implicature?

In response, she might try to accommodate embedded irony as implicature of the *whole* compound utterance.[[30]](#footnote-30) On this proposal, a speaker of (15) says (or makes-as-if-to-say) something obviously false as in (L) (literal interpretation)—she does not believe what the sentence expresses literally—but implicates something true as in (G) (global implicature).

(L) If Bill is such a fine friend he shouldn’t be trusted.

(G) If Bill is a lousy friend, then he should not be trusted.

What the speaker implicates by (15) is a conditional—which is to say that she can mean and be justified in believing the conditional without believing that Bill is a lousy friend. But this conditional has the proposition implicated by ‘Bill is such a fine friend’ as its antecedent.

This requires an explanation of how an implicature of a sentence-part enters into the implicature of the whole compound. Bearing in mind that we wish to account for diverse types of embedding, and moreover for deeper embeddings, the putative L/G implicature calculation suggests we would need a general theory of implicature calculation over complex sentences that includes sub-calculations that are parallel to the implicature calculations of the parts. But the most straightforward suggestion for achieving this is to propose that implicatures of compound utterances are calculated by first decomposing the utterance into sentences-parts and applying Gricean reasoning to the parts separately. In this way, the Gricean can explain that an ironic implicature (A) is calculated within the scope of the antecedent and is then incorporated into (G).

(A) Bill is a lousy friend.

This is a radical extension of a theory of implicature. It involves a compositional method for calculating the implicature of compound utterances ((G) in our case) from implicatures of the parts ((A) in our case), together with other truth-conditional contents (such as the said-content of the conditional’s consequent).[[31]](#footnote-31) Until such an explanation is defended, I suggest the Gricean needs to bite the bullet for embedded irony and accept that ironic implicature embeds *qua implicature*. But how can he explain that operators such as ‘if…then’ are picking up on and semantically processing the ironic implicature of the antecedent while holding onto Insensitivity? Furthermore, how can she explain that the ironic implicature enters, in its quality of implicature, into the overall content of the conditional, while holding onto TCC?

3.4 Tackling the challenge

Something must go. One strategy endeavours to preserve TCC and Insensitivity by denying that embedded irony is implicature and including it into said-content. Another strategy maintains that embedded irony is non-truth-conditional but a different compositionality is needed so it can draw on non-truth-conditional content as inputs.

The first strategy is a dominant explanation in the literature on ‘embedded implicatures,’[[32]](#footnote-32) in particular scalar implicature. Apart from a minority of scholars who treat scalar as a global implicature,[[33]](#footnote-33) the majority of scholars treat it as form of semantic or pragmatic meaning that enters compositionally into the truth-conditions. Whereas the former group proposes more sophisticated Gricean machinery, the latter group has developed more sophisticated ways of explaining pragmatic intrusion into said-content. The latter explanation has been developed by two major approaches corresponding to what we discussed in §1 in terms of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ pragmatic intrusion. One syntactico-semantic approach explains scalar implicatures as rich semantic meanings resulting from a projection from lexicon or syntax. These rich semantic contents are factored in locally in the course of determining truth-conditions.[[34]](#footnote-34) By contrast, a pragmatic approach explains scalar implicatures as resulting from free pragmatic-enrichments that are derived locally and feed into compositionality.[[35]](#footnote-35)

I’ll take these two approaches as the starting point for my reflection on how to solve the puzzle from embedded irony. In the next two sections, I’ll explore two hypotheses for developing a truth-conditional strategy that seeks to preserve TCC by denying that embedded irony is an implicature and including it into said-content. H1 explains away the implicature semantically as a ‘weak’ pragmatic effect mandated by the complex underlying syntactic structure (§4). H2 explains away the implicature as ‘strong’ pragmatic effect that freely affects the truth-conditions (§5). I’ll argue that on both hypotheses the notion of said-content is stretched to the point where the said/implicated distinction has little value (§6). Another strategy is to try to preserve TCC by giving up Insensitivity. This corresponds to a Gricean rejoinder, H3, explaining that irony embeds as implicature (§7). This preserves the said/implicated distinction but compositionality is now polluted with the pragmatic inference required to support implicature. Finally, I suggest giving up both TCC and Insensitivity and adopting a compositionality of speech-acts, as proposed by Barker (2004), which can draw on non-truth-conditional contents as inputs (§8). Using his approach I show how irony embeds as a speech-act made with a non-defensive stance characteristic of non-truth-conditional content.

**4 Against H1: SARC-operator**

H1 accommodates the ironic implicature as part of said-content by appealing to a semanticist methodology of postulating covert operators at LF in order to explain ‘weak’ pragmatic effects on truth-conditions.[[36]](#footnote-36) Camp (2012: 591) applies this methodology for the first time to irony. She postulates a covert ‘sarcasm-operator’ (henceforth SARC) at LF that is realized at surface level by a conventional ironic/sarcastic intonation involving heavy stress, slow rate, and nasalization (cf. Rockwell 2000). Semantically, SARC-operator works by taking as input the literal meaning of a word or clause, and returning an ironic inverted content. This explains straightforwardly cases of lexical irony as in (16):

(16) a. Your *fine* friendis here.

b. Get your *witty*, *sophisticated* friends out of here now, before they cause any more damage.

In these cases, it is more reasonable to explain the ironic content as part and parcel of what is asserted and ordered, respectively, rather than what is implicated by saying something false with the whole utterance. This is so because without the ironic content as part of the speaker’s assertion or order (16a) would be misleading and (16b) somewhat incongruous.

SARC-analysis arguably delivers this result because it explains how ironic content can be determined in the process of determining truth-conditions. It does so by assuming the following. First, irony is a multi-channelled phenomenon such that a contrast is established early on between the semantic interpretation of the utterance and the intonation or gestures that accompany the utterance.[[37]](#footnote-37) Secondly, this contrast is encoded by SARC-operator in the form of the following semantic rule:

**SARC**: For any ϕ—where ϕ is an expression, a clause, or a whole sentence—SARC-operator is a function that maps the literal meaning of ϕ onto a set of relevant alternatives or contraries to ϕ that are contextually-determined.

Thirdly, we can specify the function of SARC by distinguishing the pragmatic processes it recruits in two stages. First, pre-semantically, pragmatics is used to disambiguate the right LF by assigning the scope of SARC and scanning for a contextually-determined set of contraries or alternative candidates of the same syntactic type as ϕ. Secondly, post-semantically, pragmatics is used to determine the most salient ‘contrary’ candidate as the semantic contribution of ϕ (relative to context). The resulting contrary or inverted content is factored in locally into the compositional process in the course of determining truth-conditions. SARC-analysis therefore explains how the ironic content contributes to the said-content (or the primary illocutionary commitments) whether the irony is embedded or not.

Despite its appeal, SARC-analysis has several problems. Not all cases of irony involve inversion, especially when irony takes global scope as we discussed in §3.1. For example, when the irony targets the entire speech-act, i.e. including its illocutionary/perlocutionary effects as in (11) and (12). Furthermore, even when the irony is local, it isn’t always possible to decide which inverted or contrary content is relevant on a given occasion. This is a matter that can only be decided by considering speaker’s intentions, rather than merely a semantic rule. Stern (2000: 236) who otherwise explains metaphor semantically in a sophisticated based on the existence of a covert Mthat-operator, objects that ironic meaning can be determined by virtue of a semantic rule:

‘We have no context-independent formula for deciding in a given case whether the contrary is the contradictory or a polar opposite or some contrary midway on the continuum from the mere contradictory to the polar opposite.’

Also, even if SARC-analysis has some plausibility for lexical irony (whether embedded or not) as Camp (2012) concedes, its appeal is diminished when we consider more complex cases. Camp (2012: 613) acknowleges that SARC-analysis has difficulties explaining Levinson’s example in (17a) in which the irony does not just target ‘rain’ or ‘this.’ Rather, the entire proposition expressed by the antecedent is inverted:

(17) [Sun shining] If it continues to rain like this, I’ll come to England more often.

SARC-analysis has further difficulties when applied to cases in which irony targets pragmatic interpretations of the utterance, such as metaphor, implicatures (see §3.1), or attitudes (‘*O wonderful! When devils tell the truth!*’[[38]](#footnote-38)). Such cases require a determinate order of interpretation. But since SARC-operator involves a semantic operation, and semantics goes prior to pragmatics, then the inversion that is predicted is an inversion of the literal interpretation rather than an inversion of the pragmatic interpretation in question.

More dramatically, SARC-analysis makes wrong predictions even in cases in which it seems most suited for—*viz*. lexical irony. SARC-analysis should be able to explain how the ironic content is preserved under logical inference. Thus, if SARC is a semantic operator, and SARC[X is a genius] entails X is a moron, then we ought to find the following: If SARC[X is a genius], X is a moron. However, the following is a bit odd: If he is such a genius, he is a moron. Whether or not semanticists are willing to propose such an explanation of irony, for the reasons above I suggest H1 be therefore rejected.

**5 Against H2: pragmatic enrichment**

We might then turn to a pragmatic explanation, H2, that the ironic implicature is part of said-content. This hypothesis can be developed within a contextualist methodology that allows a considerable amount of ‘free’ pragmatic processes to enrich said-content (see §1).

Recanati (2000: ch. 17; 2007; 2010: ch. 8) explains irony in terms of free pragmatic enrichment deployed via a mechanismof *context-shifting pretence*. He distinguishes two kinds of irony depending on the type of context-shifting pretence involved:

(18) a. ‘*Quine’* has not finished writing his paper.

b. [downpouring] What a lovely weather!

(18a) involves a partial or ‘*locutionary pretence*’ which affects a locutionary act of reference to the famous philosopher, while the rest of the utterance is asserted sincerely. The speaker pretends to refer to Quine and thereby (partially) shifts the current context *k* to a pretend context *k’*, say, James’ belief world who wrongly believes that McPherson *is* Quine. As a result, the speaker asserts that McPherson hasn’t finished his paper, while mocking James for his deviant use of the name. The context-shift though pragmatically motivated, takes place *pre-semantically*—i.e. by shifting the *character* of ‘Quine’ onto a metalinguistic character ‘the person named “Quine”’ with respect to James’ deviant use. However, it is only the referent McPherson that is contributed to the truth-conditions. The fact that James is thinking (wrongly) of McPherson as being Quine, which the speaker wishes to mock don’t enter into truth-conditions, though they are crucial to establish the ironic point.

Recanati (2000: 247) suggests generalizing this explanation to cases of ‘*illocutionary pretence*’ as in (18b) in which the pretence affects the illocutionary commitments undertaken by the *whole* utterance. The speaker pretends to assert that the weather is lovely, and thereby shifts the context *k* from a non-serious assertion to a pretend context *k’* in which another speaker made (might make) a sincere assertion of the sort. In this way, by drawing attention to how ridiculous such an assertion is in the actual context *k*, the speaker suggests how ridiculous it would of anyone who would make such assertion in *k*. Insofar as the pretence takes scope over the entire, it is more difficult to say what is contributed to truth-conditions as a result of context-shifting. One possibility is to say that the attribution of a thoughtto someone else who might make such an assertion becomes part of what the speaker communicates with (18b), thereby signalling that the thought put forward by the utterance is not a thought of her own.

That irony is a matter of thought-attribution and attitude-expression is a central claim of the echoic theory of irony (see §2.2), though it’s not very clear what type of contribution they are taken to make. A useful parallel may be drawn with parentheticals and attitudinal adverbials, or metalinguistic devices more generally, which have received considerable attention within relevance-theoretic framework.[[39]](#footnote-39) On this view, a parenthetical utterance such as ‘Paul finished his paper, I suppose/presume/assume,’ is taken to express *multiple propositions*: (i) Paul finished his paper; (ii) and the speaker has a weak degree of conviction or is lacking in evidence about (i). Both propositions have their own truth-conditions, but the truth-conditions of the utterance are determined by the truth-conditions of the most relevant proposition—here (ii), which captures speaker’s primary intention. *Ditto* for attitudinal adverbials.[[40]](#footnote-40) On this analysis then, the speaker’s commitment or attitude is seen as affecting the utterance’s truth-conditions.

By the same token, irony can be seen as involving two embedded higher-order explicatures, one commenting on the other. One specifies the *attributed thought*—that someone else, say *X*, says/thinks *P*.[[41]](#footnote-41) The other indicates the speaker’s commitment (of disapproval) towards the attributed thought—‘It is (would be) mockable/ridiculous of *X* to say/think *P*.’ Wilson (p.c.) acknowledges that irony has truth-conditional effects, but it is unclear which of the two higher-order explicatures affects truth-conditions. The attitude is clearly what makes an ironic utterance relevant, but as discussed in §2.2 the attitude is not truth-apt, so in that sense it cannot affect truth-conditions. On the other hand, we could see the attributed-thought as contributing to truth-conditions in the sense that the speaker is communicating that she dissociates herself from the thought put forward by her utterance.

How does this analysis apply to embedded irony? Consider the following:

(19) a.If Sue goes out with *one* *fine friend of yours*, she will be miserable all night.

b. [downpouring] Because *the weather turned out so wonderful*, we better stay at home and watch old, boring TV.

(19a) seems easily explained by partial/locutionary pretence. The speaker pretends to refer to a salient friend of the addressee (say, Pete), thereby (partially) shifting the context *k* to a pretend context *k’* in which the addressee (wrongly) thinks of Pete as kind and considerate. As a result, she communicates that if Sue goes out with Pete she will be miserable, while mocking the addressee for thinking that Pete is good company. Thus, only the referent Pete is contributed to the truth-conditions of the antecedent, while on a par with (18a), Recanati might insist, both the attributed-thought and the speaker’s mockery of it merely establish the ironic point of the antecedent. But if the antecedent does not include the particular ‘mode of thinking’ of Pete—namely, that the addressee thinks he’s enjoyable but which the speaker finds utterly ridiculous, there is no way of explaining the connection between the antecedent and consequent (why Sue would be miserable going out with Pete). Furthermore, even if the attributed-thought that Pete is a so-called ‘fine friend’ is incorporated into the truth-conditions of the antecedent, this still doesn’t explain what grounds the consequent. What is needed, I suggest, is that the consequent be able to pick up on a property of Pete being a lousy friend. But how is such a pragmatic enrichment of ‘fine’ to ‘lousy’ explained?

Recanati (p.c.) suggests that by assuming with Frege that general terms refer to properties, we may contend that the reference of ‘fine’ is the property of being lousy due to a context-shift (just as the reference of ‘Quine’ is taken to be McPherson). So by appropriately shifting the context, a general term can refer to the opposite property. But what is the kind of context-shift Recanati has in mind so that it can deliver an inverted content? Following Lewis (1980), context can shift selectively by shifting independently either of the following parameters—language, situation of utterance, and circumstance of evaluation. Thus, one may argue that what is shifted in (19a) is the circumstance of evaluation with respect to which the extension of the description ‘one fine friend of yours’ is determined. Accordingly, the description is first interpreted with respect to the situation of utterance (to fix the value of the indexical ‘yours’) and then is evaluated not with respect to the actual world but with respect to the addressee’s belief-world. Insofar as in the addressee’s belief-world ‘fine’ means what we call ‘lousy,’ then context-shifting seems to provide a way of picking up the property of being ‘lousy’ in the actual world. In this way, the ironic inverted content is accommodated as part of the truth-conditions of the antecedent, and it is this enriched content that is taken as premise for the conditional’s consequent.

However, even if Recanati might explain that ironic content makes a truth-conditional contribution to the whole conditional, he would firmly resist the idea that ironic attitude enters into the truth-conditions of the antecedent for the simple reason that attitude is non-truth-apt (see §2.2). In this sense, he would have to deny that ironic attitude embeds. But if the attitude does not embed, the only sense we can make of it is that it scopes out from the antecedent to be communicated by the whole conditional,[[42]](#footnote-42) contrary to what I argued in §2.2.

Be that as it may. Until a more detailed explanation is forthcoming about how both ironic content and attitude embed because they contributes to the antecedent’s said-content, H2 hasn’t made a decisive case that irony should be treated truth-conditionally.

**6 Slippery slope**

H1 and H2 reflect different methodologies of explaining intrusive pragmatic effects into truth-conditions, though they are united in their motivation of preserving TCC. Thus, however big or small the intrusive pragmatic effects are stipulated to be, one way of testing whether they fall with said-content or rather with implicated-content is to look at embedding facts. As discussed in §1, the motivation for this lies in the fact that operators work truth-conditionally; so insofar as they pick only on truth-conditional inputs which are compositionally fed into the overall content of compound utterances, TCC is neatly preserved. In this section, I want to examine the consequences from appealing to this argument in deciding whether embedded irony is said-content or implicated-content.

Since Cohen (1970), many have been attracted in the embedding data as a way of adjudicating in a principled way whether some pragmatically-implied meaning is said or implicated. To this effect, Recanati (1993: 271) proposes *Scope Principle*:

‘A pragmatically determined aspect of meaning is part of what is said (and, therefore, not a conversational implicature) if—and perhaps only if—it falls within the scope of logical operators such as negation and conditionals.’

I address only the ‘if’ part and for convenience formulate it as the *embedding criterion of said-content* (**ECSC**). Since I’m concerned only with its application to ‘embedded implicatures’ the type of content *c* that is tested is a putative implicature:

**ECSC** If *c* of *S* embeds in an operator *O*, then *c* is a compositional constituent of *S*’s said-content (i.e. not an implicature of it), thereby entering into the said-content of *O(…S…)*.

We may distinguish a strong and a weak version of ECSC depending on the status of *c* of *S* when *S* is unembedded:

**Strong ECSC**:As for **ECSC**, and *c* is also part of said-content of *S*.[[43]](#footnote-43)

**Weak ECSC**: As for **ECSC**, but *c* may be an implicature of *S*.[[44]](#footnote-44)

To the extent that any version of ECSC is plausible, it follows that irony is either an implicature when unembedded but part of said-content when it is embedded (Weak ECSC), or it is not an implicature at all, not even when unembedded (Strong ECSC).

Weak ECSC has difficulties in explaining intuitions of validity. The problem is that an argument as in (20) seems an obvious case of *modus ponens* which would be naturally judged as a valid argument:

(20) a. If Bill is such a fine friend, he shouldn’t be trusted.

b. Bill is such a fine friend.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

c. Bill shouldn’t be trusted.

However, the ironic content in (20b) has a different propositional status than the antecedent of the proposition expressed by (20a): The former is implicature whereas the latter is part of said-content. The conclusion therefore shouldn’t go through, on pain of committing a fallacy of equivocation.[[45]](#footnote-45) Strong ECSC can easily explain the intuitions of validity in (20) since in both premises the ironic content (embedded or not) is predicted to be part of said-content.

This line of argument has played out a lot in explaining many cases of ‘embedded implicatures’ as intruding into the said-content. However, I want to draw attention that such argument applied to embedded irony may lead to a slippery slope. Namely, if a particularized implicature such as irony is incorporated into said-content because it embeds, then other particularized implicatures that are found to embed should also be incorporated into said-content. Recanati (2004: 39-40) seems to make this move when arguing that Grice’s paradigmatic case of particularized implicature in (21b) is explained away in terms of a pragmatically modulated meaning of ‘garage’ (‘garage that is open and sells petrol’), which contributes to the said-content of both (21a) and (21c):[[46]](#footnote-46)

(21) a. [to someone out of petrol] There is a garage around the corner.

b. The garage is presumably open and sells petrol.

c. If *there is a garage around the corner*, then we’ll make it in time to the airport.

If this move is permitted, where do we stop? If particularized implicatures are incorporated into said-content because they embed, where do we draw the line between said-content and implicated-content? In the absence of principled criteria, the said/implicated distinction is in danger of being dissolved.[[47]](#footnote-47) I suggest, *pace* Recanati, that the embedding criterion is therefore not a reliable criterion for explaining said-content.

**7 A good start: H3—Irony embeds *qua* implicature**

By giving up the embedding criterion, the Gricean may propose H3 that ironic implicature embeds *qua* *implicature*. This is motivated on the basis of evidence from other implicatures embedding *qua* implicatures.[[48]](#footnote-48) Discussing embedded generalized implicatures Green (1998: 77) formulates:

***Embedded implicature hypothesis***

‘If assertion of a sentence S conveys the implicatum [implicature] that p with nearly universal regularity, then when S is embedded the content that is usually understood to be embedded for semantic purposes is the proposition (S & p).’

Barker (2003) shows that the conventional implicatures in (22i-ii) carried by ‘even’ in (22a) embed *qua* implicatures when (22a) occurs in the scope of the conditional in (22b):

(22) a. *Even* granny got drunk.

1. Granny is a surprising instance of drunkenness relative to the class of individuals C (C is fixed by context).
2. Other individuals in C got drunk.

b. If *even* granny got drunk, it must have been a wild party.

The consequent in (22b) depends not only on the said-content of the antecedent—granny got drunk—but crucially on the conventional implicatures carried by it—namely, the speaker’s subjective probability state about the likelihood of granny getting drunk. Barker argues that the embedded conventional implicatures remain *implicatures* in that they leave unaffected the said-content of the antecedent, rather than being incorporated as part of it.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Simons (2010) suggests that relevance-implicatures embed *qua* implicatures. Consider (23b) in which B’s reply is relevant only if she is taken to implicate that she will use the car she borrows to drive to the party:

(23) A: How will you get to the party?

B: If I can’t borrow a car, I’ll take the bus and walk from the bus station.

Simons explains this as a *local* *implicature* that involves employing Gricean reasoning at the antecedent level—i.e. by reasoning about what the speaker has expressed by the antecedent and how this implicature contributes to the relevance of the whole conditional.

Generalizing the above cases, it becomes attractive for the Gricean to argue that irony embeds *qua* implicature—that is, that it need not be converted as a compositional part of the said-content. This requires, however, an extension of Grice’s account of implicature, first to explain how an implicature is calculated *locally* within the scope of operators, and secondly how it is fed *compositionally* into the overall content of the compound utterance. Griceans trying to accommodate embedded implicatures *qua* implicatures have focused on the first calculation problem, not really engaging with the second, more crucial, compositionality problem. This is regrettable since the challenge from embedded implicatures is that of explaining how implicatures of parts enter compositionally into the content of the whole.

Be that as it may! For what is worth, the calculation problem grapples with Grice’s dictum that implicatures arise globally by virtue of performing full-blown speech-acts with complete utterances. So, the argument goes, no implicatures can be licensed locally from embedded sentences such as antecedents of conditional, disjuncts, or that-clauses in belief-reports, because embedded sentences are not asserted nor used to perform full-blown speech-acts.[[50]](#footnote-50) One may respond to this problem in one of the following ways.

One proposal is that ‘saying’ is understood weakly as expressing a proposition with no commitment to its truth. One ‘says’ (though not asserts) something by the antecedent of a conditional by virtue of uttering the *whole* conditional, and may implicate something else.[[51]](#footnote-51) This proposal can be motivated by relaxing also the notion of implicature so that implicatures need not be pragmatic implications only of full-blown speech-acts or linguistic acts for that matter. It is not difficult to show that implicatures may arise from sub-sentential acts or certain gestures. In cases of embedded implicatures it is sufficient for the hearer to reason about the conversational point the speaker is trying to make with an embedded sentence, and what contribution it makes to the whole. This may be benefit from the fact that embedded sentences are conceptually independent and can fulfil various functions within the discourse (Simons 2010: 142).[[52]](#footnote-52) In this way, hearers may employ Gricean reasoning locally and derive an implicature at the level of the antecedent of a conditional. In the case of embedded irony, the proposal may be fleshed out by arguing that embedded sentences are used to make a pretend assertion which can license locally an ironic implicature.

Another proposal is to understand ‘saying’ strongly as asserting. Thus, one ‘asserts’ something by the antecedent of a conditional, and may implicate something else. But this is not a self-standing, categorical, assertion made by a complete utterance: it is rather a local assertion. Mackie (1973) and Stalnaker (1974), among others, analyse conditionals as composed of two local speech-acts: a supposition that *P* and an assertion that Q within the scope of that supposition. Stalnaker argues that this is *not* the same as asserting the material conditional which amounts to asserting a conditional proposition, as truth-conditional accounts of conditionals hold. Rather, it is a distinctive speech-act involving two propositions, the ones expressed by the antecedent and consequent: It is making a *conditional assertion*. However, Stalnaker (2011: 231) treats conditional assertion having the same effect on the context as categorical assertion as:

‘First, one adds the content of the antecedent, temporarily, to the context; that is, one sets aside the possibilities in the context set in which the supposition is false. … Then the content of the consequent is treated like the content of a categorical assertion: one eliminates, from this temporary or derived context those possible situations that are incompatible with the content of the consequent.’[[53]](#footnote-53)

In this framework, the Gricean may argue that irony embedded in antecedents of conditionals is an implicature arising locally from a supposition-act within the scope of the antecedent, which in turn offers the basis for making a conditional assertion in the consequent. Conversely, when irony is embedded in consequents of conditional, the implicature is derived from the conditional assertion of the consequent. However, the Gricean might want to insist that the embedded ironic implicature is *not* a full-blown implicature (it is not really communicated), but is rather merely conveyed hypothetically and conditionally, respectively. In order to explain the specific type of commitment that comes associated with a given embedded ironic implicature, it is important to understand what kind of commitments are associated with suppositional or conditional assertion, and more generally weak illocutionary acts such as supposition, suggesting, submitting for approval, and this is what is missing from the local speech-acts framework. (I offer an explanation in §8.)

Finally, in order to motivate a local implicature account the Gricean might bring in processing considerations. Following Bach (1995) and O’Rourke (2003), she may argue that what started as a particularized implicature became with time generalized and conventionalized into a heuristic for detecting irony and building the ironic meaning along the way as the utterance unfolds.[[54]](#footnote-54) In this way, she can explain that ironic implicatures may easily be assigned to embedded sentences because the implicature involves some form of short-circuited inference. This is appealing, but the explanation may be confined to cases of conventionalized irony, since the more elaborated, creative, cases admittedly don’t involve a short-circuited inference (see §4).

Whichever of the above solutions holds, the following is true. The embedded sentence is a pretend assertion. Therefore its said content is not asserted. Therefore its said-content cannot contribute to the overall content of the compound sentence. Only its implicated content contributes to the overall content. But the Gricean cannot explain how this implicated content contributes while also accepting TCC. The upshot is that if we want to maintain that irony is non-truth-conditional we must find a compositional function that can take non-truth-conditional content as input. While various proposals have been discussed by others,[[55]](#footnote-55) I propose compositionality of speech-acts as a way to achieve this. Following this I argue that irony embeds as a speech-act.

**8 For H4: Irony embeds as a complex speech-act**

To provide a more general and explanatory account of embedded irony I build on Barker’s (2004) speech-acts theoretic approach. In Barker’s framework, meaning is analysed in terms of act-types such as illocutionary acts (assertions, questions, commands) as well as referring and predicating acts at the sub-sentential level. Barker explains the basic structure of these act-types as comprising two intentions: a *representational* intention—to represent state of affairs in the world; and a *communicative* intention—to communicate the represented state of affairs to an audience.

Using Barker’s formal pragmatic framework, I suggest solving the problem of embedding irony by invoking a core speech-act which Barker calls *proto-act*—or *proto-assertion* in its prototypical form—by which a speaker ‘advertises’ certain speech-act intentions but signals that she lacks them. I show how this framework explains the distinction between truth-conditional content and non-truth-conditional content independently of embeddability, and argue that irony embeds a non-truth-conditional meaning. This approach is promising, I think, because it allows for an embeddable speech-act, the proto-act, which is not a propositional-act in the sense of Searle (1969), or a locutionary act in the sense of Austin (1962), that is, an act which is a vehicle of content that is truth-conditional. Proto-acts are not vehicles of content that is truth-conditional, as such. Hence, this gives us more flexibility in understanding language.

8.1. Proto-assertion and compositionality of speech-acts

Proto-assertion is best introduced through contrasting sincere and insincere assertion. With sincere assertion a speaker (henceforth U) utters a sentence and intends thereby to represent a fact. With insincere assertion U goes through the motions of intending to represent a fact through an utterance but lacks the intention. However, she does *not* intend the audience to recognize that she lacks the intention. Proto-assertion is alike both sincere and insincere assertion in that all have a similar core speech-act structure whereby U goes through the motions of intending to represent a fact through an utterance by ‘advertising’ that she has the intention. With sincere assertion U has the intention she signals[[56]](#footnote-56) whereas with insincere assertion and proto-assertion she lacks it. However, unlike insincere assertion, with proto-assertion U intends that the audience *does* recognize that she lacks the intention. In this sense, interpretations of proto-acts involve a type of pretence: U acts as if she has certain speech-act intentions but signals that she lacks them. As Barker (2011) writes:

‘To proto-assert is to *present oneself as having,* or *advertise*, defence of Π-property. To advertise is to intentionally engage in a behaviour characteristic of a speaker who, given she wants to defend a certain Π-property, utters a sentence S. It does not follow from the fact that she so utters S, advertising the defensive stance, that she actually has it, or that she intends her audience to believe that she has it.’

Proto-assertion has the same grounding architecture as assertion—i.e. in the sense that U defends a mental state Π by manifesting epistemic authority for Π and showing she is disposed to provide reasons for Π (see §2). The only difference is in their *doxastic base*—namely, with assertion U *has* the state; with proto-assertion she *doesn’t*. Barker insists that the mental property Π *itself* is a state that is not capable of being judged true or false but is rather a pre-doxastic state. It is only the *act of defending* Π that is truth-apt—as when making an assertion and undertaking to defend Π. What is truth-apt is the *disposition to defend* the mental state Π, not the mental state in itself. Proto-assertion is thus used to express *pre-truth-apt* mental states, which become truth-apt states only when they are associated with *defense* as in assertions. In such cases Barker says the proto-assertion of (an indicative) sentence *S* (written as A(S)pro) receives a *doxastic base* (written A(S)pro/dox).

A proto-act is a core speech-act that is neutral as to whether U has the intentions she signals, or communicates her possession of them. U merely *advertises* or presents herself to have a mental state Π, and as such this core speech-act structure can be used to fulfil a wide variety of communicative purposes. U may go on to defend Π as in order to make an assertion. U may also use a proto-assertion in order to make non-literal assertions. In such cases, Barker says that the proto-assertion receives a *mode of interpretation*: e.g. metaphor, irony, and loose interpretations. For example, by uttering ‘Juliet is the sun’ U performs a metaphorical assertion via the following structure:

1. U performs A(Juliet is the sun)pro advertising to defend the belief that Juliet is the sun (as defended in a literal assertion of ‘Juliet is the sun’) but lacks the belief;
2. U advertises to defend the belief that a fact obtains for which the content of A(Juliet is the sun)pro supplies a ‘model.’[[57]](#footnote-57)
3. U has the defensive stance in (ii).

The proto-assertion in (i) receives a metaphoric interpretation in (ii) (A(S)pro/M), which in turn receives a doxastic base in (iii) (A(S)pro/M/dox). The metaphorical content is asserted when U has the outermost intention (iii). The interpretation in (ii) is merely a metaphoric proto-act by which U ‘advertises’ metaphoric-speech-act intentions, but is neutral as to whether  
U has the intentions, or communicates her possession of them. This neutrality makes it suitable to use proto-acts for other purposes than what they are designed to express insofar as they can compose with other acts or interpretation of them to construct more complex speech-acts. It is in this sense that we understand a speech-act compositionality whereby speech-acts are highly structured and can have as sub-structure other speech-acts.

For example, a metaphoric proto-act can be used by ironic metaphoric utterances, such as Grice’s example ‘*You are the cream in my coffee*’ (see §3.1). Grice agrees that metaphor comes first, but does not explain why and how the metaphor implicature has priority over the ironic implicature. On the present analysis, the metaphor-priority is explained in terms of the order in which speech-acts are structured and the fact that the speaker communicates the outermost ironic intention.[[58]](#footnote-58) Very briefly, the structure includes (i)-(ii) as above whereby U makes a metaphoric proto-act—i.e. advertising to defend that the addressee is her pride and joy. This metaphoric act is in turn used ironically—roughly advertising the belief that the addressee is far from being her pride and joy, as I’ll explain below. The metaphoric ironic proto-act (A(S)pro/M//I) may further receive a doxastic base when U has the outermost ironic intention (A(S)pro/M//I/dox). However, the same speech-act structure A(S)pro/M//I may be used when the ironic metaphor is embedded in a conditional—‘*If I’m the cream in your coffee, then you better pack your things and get lost*’*—*whereby U signals she lacks the ironic intention. Similarly, when metaphor is embedded—‘*If Juliet is the sun, Romeo will love her forever*’—U uses the metaphoric proto-act in (i)-(ii) not to make an assertion but rather a supposition (A(S)pro/M/S), as I’ll explain below.

8.2 Is irony defended or non-defended?

Irony may then analysed as involving the use of a proto-act by which a speaker advertises ironic-speech-act intentions, but which is neutral as to whether the speaker has the intentions, or communicates her possession of them. I’ll argue, however, that irony does *not* involve the speech-act structure of an act of assertion which Barker (2004: 51-53) spells out as below:

**SARCASTIC ASSERTION**: U asserts sarcastically that P by uttering S iff

1. U performs A(S)pro but lacks the advertised intentions;
2. U advertises intentions (*a*) to represent her belief that a complex of the form <Q>, contrary to the one of the form <P>, obtains; and (*b*) to defend the state in (a);
3. U has the intention (ii*b*).

The proto-assertion in (i) is used to make an ironic proto-act (A(S)pro/I) in (ii)—i.e. by which U advertises to defend a belief <Q> contrary to the belief <P> she advertises in (i). The ironic content is asserted when U *has* the outermost intention in (iii) (A(S)pro/I/dox).[[59]](#footnote-59)

I disagree that irony is used to make assertions. However, more recently Barker (2011; p.c.) motivates the distinction between truth-conditional content and non-truth-conditional content as a distinction between defensive and non-defensive expressing. As I argued in §3.2, by using an ironic utterance U advertises to defend <P> not to defend <P> but to draw attention to how <P> contrasts with <Q>. And because U makes as if <Q> is accepted (or can be reasonably accommodated) in the common ground, she thereby shows how ridiculous <P> is. Thus, <Q> is expressed non-defensively insofar as U indicates she is not disposed to defend <Q> by providing reasons for it. I argue the speech-act structure of an ironic utterance ‘*Fred is so smart*’ is as below:

1. U performs A(Fred is so smart)pro advertising to defend the belief that Fred is smart (as defended in a literal assertion of ‘Fred is so smart’);
2. U advertises non-defensively the belief that Fred is so dumb, expressing a negative attitude towards those who believe (i);
3. U has the intention (ii).

How do the ironic proto-act and its doxastic base get evaluated? Barker (2004; p.c.) suggests that a speech-act is *permissible* if it is allowed or accepted in a conversational game. A proto-assertion A(S)pro is accepted—it is permissible—if U’s performance of A(S)pro is deemed to fulfill a useful purpose in the conversation. Purposes differ according to the content of A(S)pro and its interpretation. Thus, when U performs A(S)pro U presents herself as committed to the truth of S, that the presuppositions of S are satisfied, that S is informative, and the terms in S are used felicitously, etc. Barker calls these contents to which U presents herself as committed *proto-commitments* or *p*-*commitments*. In making an assertion A(S)pro/dox U intends that the p-commitments of the proto-assertion A(S)pro are believed and the assertion A(S)pro/dox is permissible just in case these are taken to be believed.

In the case of irony, in performing an ironic proto-act A(S)pro/I, U performs A(S)pro presenting herself as having the p-commitments characteristic of tokens of A(S)pro—in particular that S is true. However, given the ironic interpretation of the whole proto-act, U does not intend that all the p-commitments of A(S)pro be believed for the ironic speech-act as a *whole* (A(S)pro/I/dox) to be permissible. Rather, she intends that only the p-commitments of *A(S)pro/I* be believed—the relevant ones being that the opposite of S is true and U has a negative attitude towards those who believe S true.[[60]](#footnote-60) In other words, U expresses a contrary belief and a correlative ironic attitude non-defensively by manifesting she is not disposed to provide reasons for them, if asked to. In short, irony is a non-truth-condition contributing form of meaning.

8.3 Conditionals and irony embedded in conditionals

How does this analysis extend to embedded irony? I focus here on irony embedded in indicatives conditionals *If P, Q*, by drawing on Barker’s (1995; 2004; p.c.) suppositional theory of conditionals. Whereas assertions are typically advertised as based on beliefs, conditionals involve not just U’s beliefs but crucially U’s *supposition* of P. Barker defends a non-truth-conditional account of conditionals whereby conditionals are held to express a connection between two proto-acts. U uses the antecedent to perform a proto-assertion which receives a suppositional interpretation (A(P)pro/S or for simplicity A(if P)). U uses the consequent to perform a proto-assertion which receives a conditional interpretation (A(P)pro/C or for simplicity A(Q)). U expresses by the whole conditional a relation between a suppositional proto-act and a conditional proto-act. I discuss the structure of each in turn.

By uttering ‘if P’ U performs an act of supposition by which she acts as if P were believed rather than actually expressing P. Typically, she doesn’t know whether P or not-P, so the purpose of the supposition is to *stipulate the permissibility* of performing a proto-assertion A(P)pro. The suppositional proto-act has the following structure:

i) U performs A(P)pro

ii) U stipulates the permissibility of A(P)pro with the aim of simulating rather than expressing a belief that P.

A supposition is always introduced given a certain conversational setting C at a time t. We can understand this setting as a set K of speech-acts and proto-assertions that are permissible or accepted in C at t (see §8.2). Namely, by U stipulating the permissibility of a proto-act A(P)pro in K, P is accepted in K.[[61]](#footnote-61) However, this act of stipulation by itself only ensures that P is true is *accepted suppositionally* in K, rather than that P is true *tout court*. In other words, it is only the p-commitment of the proto-act A(if P) that is accepted in K, rather than P itself. This indicates that U does not intend to be taken as committed to P being true, but rather committed to ‘if P.’ Thus, K is updated with the acceptance of A(if P) to *K + A(if P)*. By making a conditional U is not concerned with expressing P by itself, but rather with determining what other acts are permissible, given the accepted permissibility of P.

Indeed, the acceptance of a suppositional act A(if P) offers support for U to perform other proto-assertions based on it, for example a proto-assertion of Q in the consequent (A(Q)pro).[[62]](#footnote-62) That is, A(Q)pro is accepted as permissible in the scope of the supposition of P, thereby updating K to K + A(if P). More specifically, the accepted permissibility of A(Q)pro is rendered permissible by the permissibility of A(if P), and other beliefs and suppositions accepted in K at t. In other words, A(Q)pro receives a conditional interpretation (A(Q)), indicating that the permissibility of A(Q)pro is *conditional* on the permissibility of A(if P). The conditional proto-act has the following structure:

i) U performs A(Q)pro

ii) U signals the permissibility of A(Q)pro as grounded on A(if P) in K + A(if P).

On this analysis, conditionals indicate permissibility relations between proto-acts. The permissibility of a proto-act, together with the acceptance of other assertions or suppositions in K, implies that others proto-acts are permissible. This is the sense in which by uttering a conditional U does not assert either the antecedent or the consequent, but rather indicates a connection between the suppositional proto-act of the antecedent and the conditional proto-act of the consequent.[[63]](#footnote-63)

How does this analysis of conditionals apply to embedded irony? Consider (24):

(24) If Fred is such a smart broker, we better withdraw all our shares from him.

The conditional has the following structure:

*Suppose*: *Proto-act*: A(Fred is such a smart broker)pro.

*stipulate as permissible* *Ironic-proto-act*: U advertises non-defensively that Fred is a bad broker, mocking those who think he is good.

*follows as permissible* *Proto-act*: A(We better withdraw all our shares...)pro

Irony embeds in the antecedent of (24) as an ironic proto-act in the sense that U advertises ironic-speech-act intentions, but signals she lacks them. More specifically, U advertises non-defensively a contrary belief to the one she advertises by proto-asserting that Fred is a smart broker, together with an ironic mocking attitude towards who would defend that Fred is smart (see §8.2). However, U does not use this ironic proto-act to express that she *has* such a contrary belief/attitude, as in unembedded irony. Rather, U uses the ironic proto-act with the purpose of merely stipulating the permissibility of an ironic act, which thus receives a suppositional interpretation. It is the suppositional acceptance of this ironic proto-act, together with other background accepted proto-assertions and suppositions in K, that enables the permissibility of the proto-act performed by the consequent.

This analysis can easily extend to conditionals where irony is embedded both in antecedent and consequent, as in (25):

(25) If Fred is such a smart broker, we really ought to give him all our money to invest.

The conditional has the following structure—where the structure of the ironic proto-act of the antecedent is identical to the one in (24):

*Suppose*: (i/a) *Proto-act*: A(Fred is such a smart broker)pro.

*stipulate as permissible* (ii/a) *Ironic-proto-act*: U advertises non-defensively that Fred is a bad broker, mocking those who think he is good.

*follows as permissible* (i/c) *Proto-act*: A(We ought to give him all our money...)pro

(ii/c) *Ironic-proto-act*: U advertises non-defensively that we ought not give him all our money, mocking those who think this is a smart thing to do.

In addition, the stipulation of the permissibility of the ironic proto-act in the antecedent entails that another ironic proto-act (of the consequent) is permissible in the scope of that supposition. The conditional thus indicates a dependency relation between the permissibility of two ironic proto-acts: a suppositional ironic proto-act performed by the antecedent and a conditional ironic proto-act performed by the consequent. The analysis can easily extend to other compounds that involve specific relations between the proto-acts performed by the embedded sentences.

8.4 Virtues

The proposal developed above has several virtues. The speech-act provides a unified account of both ironic content and attitude, in contrast to implicature accounts, which focus on content and expressivist accounts, which focus on attitude-expression. Further, it goes beyond Camp’s (2012) proposal to unify the variety of ironic cases with a meaning inversion operation. To achieve this Camp has to recruit different mechanisms to explain the different kinds of meaning inverted. A speech act analysis, by contrast, uses a single mechanism to cover all the problematic cases discussed in §3.1. To illustrate this, consider that cases of lexical irony – which Camp explains semantically – can instead be explained by employing Barker’s notion of sub-sentential speech-acts such as acts of reference or predication. For example, by uttering ‘*He’s a real genius*,’ U makes as if *predicating* of someone that he is a genius, but conveys the opposite.

Secondly, in contrast to Camp who explains unembedded irony via implicature (e.g. cases such as propositional irony) and embedded irony semantically, the analysis proposed here explains in a unified way that irony is a non-truth-conditional form of meaning in both embedded and unembedded cases. It sides with Grice in thinking that irony is not a matter of assertion, but it offers a different explanation than the implicature explanation for why irony is a non-truth-condition contributing form of meaning. Namely, it explains the distinction between truth-conditional content and non-truth-conditional content in terms of their epistemic grounding—that is, the kind of commitment that speakers undertake with assertion and implicature, respectively. Truth-conditional content is explained in terms of defensive expressing whereby the speaker shows she is disposed to provide reasons for the mental state she presents herself as having, if asked to. In contrast, non-truth-conditional content such as irony and implicatures more generally is explained in terms of non-defensive expressing whereby the speaker manifests she has a contrary belief and attitude to the one she advertises, but in a way that doesn’t call for justifying her accepting them.

Further, I argued that this non-truth-conditional form of meaning is what it embeds when irony embeds. This is problematic for the Gricean since even if she finds a way of explaining how irony embed *qua* implicature (§7), she still cannot explain how an implicature of the part feeds compositionally into the overall content of compound utterances, while also holding onto TCC. However, neither of the truth-conditional alternative accounts that try to preserve TCC by denying that embedded irony is implicature and accommodating it as a compositional constituent of said-content, offer a clean solution. The SARC-operator analysis and the free enrichment analysis put pressure on said-content (§4-5), threatening to dissolve the said/implicated distinction. More generally, I argued that embedding facts do not offer a principled basis for distinguishing truth-conditional content from non-truth-conditional content (§6), since irony embeds and yet is non-truth-conditional content. By maintaining that irony remains a non-truth-conditional even when embedded, our analysis does not threaten the said/implicated distinction. Furthermore, it demotes the embedding problem and the compositionality problem from being so threatening as they are held to be in the current debates on the semantics/pragmatics distinction.

On the proposal defended here, the embedding problem is solved by appealing to Barker’s notion of proto-act, such that irony embeds as an ironic proto-act by which a speaker advertises ironic-speech-act intentions, but which is neutral as to whether the speaker has the intentions, or communicates her possession of them. In unembedded cases, the speaker has the intentions she signals, whereas in embedded cases, she lacks them. Thus, embedding is explained by virtue of the common speech-act structure that both embedded and unembedded irony share. The non-defensive expressing characteristic of non-truth-conditional meaning is built in this speech-act structure, whether this structure is used to make a full-blown ironic speech-act as when the speaker has the intention, or whether the speech-act structure is embedded, say, in a conditional when the speaker signals she lacks the intention. This explains why by embedding irony the speaker is not really concerned with communicating irony *per se*, but rather with determining what other speech-acts are permissible given the accepted permissibility of an ironic proto-act. Thus, by embedding irony in the antecedent of a conditional U presents herself as hypothetically ironic; by embedding it in the consequent of a conditional U presents herself as conditionally ironic. These hypothetical and conditional commitments are explained in terms of the ironic proto-act receiving a further suppositional or conditional interpretation.

Embedding is after all a matter of connecting proto-acts with logical/sentential operators to form more complex proto-acts, rather than a defining feature of truth-conditionality as it is currently used in the debates on the semantics/pragmatics distinction. Similarly, compositionality need not be restricted to operate only truth-conditional inputs, as commonly assumed, but it can be explained by virtue of the speech-acts being highly structured in the sense that they can have as sub-structure other speech-acts. Assuming speech-act compositionality, we can explain straightforwardly why non-truth-apt speech-acts can embed, and enter as such into the more complex speech-acts. This is because in uttering logical compounds such as *If P, then Q* or *either R or S* the embedded sentences, though unasserted, are in fact performed under proto-assertions insofar as U advertises defensive purposes which she lacks. That is, the particular tokened sentences *P, Q, R* and *S*, embedded in the logical compoundsare not uttered with the purpose of defending a mental state. The speaker may be disposed to defend the mental states concerned when the sentences are used to perform self-standing speech-acts, but when they are embedded she is not concerned with undertaking to defend those mental states here and then. Rather, she is concerned with showing how proto-acts are connected together as part of more complex speech-act, as when performed by a whole conditional, a disjunction, etc.

**9 Conclusions**

I argued that irony embeds as a complex speech-act that is a non-truth-conditional. This poses a threat to a common way of drawing the said/implicated distinction whereby only truth-conditional is taken to embed. I showed there is no incentive for explaining irony truth-conditionally since this puts considerable pressure on said-content, threatening to dissolve the said/implicated distinction. Even if Griceans might have a way out explaining that irony embeds *qua* implicature, this puts pressure on the truth-conditional compositionality they favour. Recognition that non-truth-conditional content such as irony can embed means recognizing the limitations of the standard conception of compositionality and that only truth-conditional contents of sentences are relevant to the logical relations between sentences. On the speech-act proposal defended here, embedding and compositionality are easily explained in terms of speech-act structure such that even speech-acts that involve a non-truth-conditional contributing form of meaning can embed and compose with other speech-acts into more complex speech-acts.

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1. The said/implicated distinction may be approached from a distinction between a metaphysical and an epistemological determination of content. The *metaphysical* determination is concerned with the determination of meaning by the speaker’s communicative intentions. The *epistemological* determination is concerned with the kinds of information and processes hearers use in ascertaining the speaker’s meaning. Bach (2005) and Neale (2005) among others, insist that methodological flaws arise from conflating the two kinds of determination. Although in setting up the terrain I’ll focus on the epistemological question, as current philosophical positions explain the semantics/pragmatics distinction, the proposal I defend focuses on the kinds of commitments that speakers undertake when saying or implicating something—where commitments are understood in terms of the intentional structure of speech-acts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Throughout this paper I’ll use the term ‘said-content’ to refer to the proposition the speaker communicates or asserts. For simplicity, I’ll use of ‘said-content’ also to cover the illocutionary force in non-declarative utterances and refer to it as the ‘primary illocutionary commitments.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. From now on I’ll use ‘implicature’ as a shorthand for Grice’s conversational particularized implicatures unless otherwise specified. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Following convention I will in the remainder of the paper refer to *S*’s said-content as *S*’s truth-conditional content, or more simply truth-conditional content, and *S*’s implicated-content as S’s non-truth-conditional content, or more simply as non-truth-conditional content. Implicatures do, of course, have their own truth conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Grice is a semanticist: he restricts the pragmatic contribution to said-content to reference resolution and disambiguation. Indexicalists such as Stanley (2000), Stanley & Szabo (2000), King & Stanley (2005), and minimalists such as Cappelan & Lepore (2005) and Borg (2004) restrict the scope of semantics to delivering a minimal proposition corresponding to the truth-conditions of *sentences* and which may or may not be what the speaker communicated. Indexicalists and minimalists disagree about the range of context-sensitive expressions that are responsible for this minimal propositinon, but for current purposes this difference is not important. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Recanati (2004, 2010), Carston (2002), Bezuidenhout (2002) restrict the scope of semantics to delivering a sub-propositional conceptual template—roughly, the logical form (LF), and make room for a pragmatically richer domain responsible for delivering the truth-conditions of *utterances*—known as *truth-conditional pragmatics*. By allowing ‘free’ pragmatic processes, such as free enrichment, lexical broadening, and reference deference, to intrude into truth-conditions, pragmaticits advocate an *enriched said-content*—often referred to as ‘explicature,’ ‘impliciture,’ ‘primary meaning,’ ‘at-issue content’ or ‘intuitive truth-conditions’ which they take to correspond to ordinary speakers’ intuitions about what is being *said* and which can judge as being true. As a shorthand I’ll use ‘truth-conditions’ to refer to the intuitive truth-conditions of the utterance. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Semanticists think that compositionality is doomed if free pragmatic processes are allowed into said-content, whereas pragmaticists think that no theoretically useful notion of said-content is attained by restricting compositionality to semantically-constrained processes. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. (3c-e) are from Camp (2012); (3f) from Levinson (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Haegeman discerns important semantic/pragmatic differences in terms of different places where the connection between antecedent and consequent is syntactically attached. The type of contribution the conditional makes determines (i) its internal shape/size (allowing/disallowing markers of force etc.) and (ii) its attachment site, roughly CP if it is force-oriented, and IP/VP if it is event-oriented. An event-conditional is merged with the IP-domain (inflectional heads including time, mood, aspect) of the associated matrix clause, but their CP domain lacks the functional projection ‘Force’, which encodes illocutionary force. They also lack topicalisation and focalisation, both of which are dependent on Force. In contrast, premise-conditional has ‘Force’ and is merged with the associated CP (complementizer or subordinate that-clause). Thus, it is not c-commanded by the subject NP of the associated clause. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Expressions as ‘so’ and ‘such a’ may also function as intensifiers (e.g. ‘really’) exaggerating that the property/quality targeted ironically fails with respect to an evoked desirability class. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Other devices that help establish an anaphoric link with claims accepted in the common ground are presuppositions—e.g. triggered by expressions such as ‘continue,’ ‘another,’ ‘one more,’ ‘already,’ ‘yet.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. (5a) is from Levinson (2000); (5b) from Camp (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. (6c-d) are from Camp (2012). Note that the negation in (6d) is used metalinguistically in the sense that it can object to formal properties of the embedded sentence, including implicatures of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Currie 2006; Recanati 2007; Walton 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Sperber & Wilson 1981, 1992; Sperber 1984; Wilson & Sperber 1998; Wilson 2006, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Expressivists like Blackburn (1988) and Gibbard (2003), among others, analyse moral statements such as ‘Stealing is wrong’ as a matter of expressing moral attitudes such as disapproval, which involves expressing mental states that are more like desires rather than beliefs in the sense that they have a mind-to-world orientation that makes them not truth-apt. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Richard (ms.) argues that a commitment to moral attitudes involves the following: (i) showing that one’s attitude is grounded in reasons that justify one’s holding that attitude; (ii) inviting others to adopt a similar attitude by looking into those reasons that motivated the attitude in the first place; and (iii) if the commitment to the attitude is misplaced, the attitude should be dropped. These conditions are more relaxed in that irony need not involve epistemic justification by showing reasons for neither for the ironic content nor for the ironic attitude. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The attitude cannot be reported in indirect speech as part of what the original speaker (reportee) has said, but remains anchored to the reporter’s stance. Suppose Bob utters (a) and his utterance is reported with (b).

    a. Bill won’t shut his *damn* mouth.

    b. Bob says that Bill won’t shut his *damn* mouth.

    The reporter in (b) cannot be taken to ascribe the attitude to Bob, unless she is directly quoting Bob. Rather, she expresses her own attitude of annoyance towards Bill’s loquacity. In that sense, the attitude projects out towards the reporter. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The terrain is however very unsettled with respect to whether attitudes are better explained as a matter of the semantics of the words used or as a matter of implicature: Hornsby 2001; Potts 2005; Saka 2007; Green 2007; Richard 2008; Hom 2008; Williamson 2009; McReady 2010; Predelli 2013; Camp forth. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Potts (2005), among others, qualifies analyses expressives as conventional implicature. In (2007) he formalises the analysis in terms of *expressive indices* that encode the degree of expressivity and the orientation of the expressive. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. I leave aside subtle differences between sarcasm and irony (see Haiman 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. (10a) is from Sperber (1994); (10b) from Camp (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. (11a) is from Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995); (11b) from Wilson (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Grice could however say that an implicature is also involved as an inversion to the implications arising from the targeted behaviour had it had been appropriate (‘Don’t act like a child!,’ ‘Really no need to signal all the time’). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Stern (2000), Bezuidenhout (2001), Popa (2009), Camp (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Another problem is that even when saying is equated with asserting, the inference from ‘S did not mean that p’ to ‘S did not say that p’ is fallacious. This is shown by slips of the tongue. Someone who utters ‘Smith is an entomologist’ has said that Smith is an insect scientist even if what he meant is that Smith is an etymologist. Thus, uttering ‘Jane is such a genius’ ironically counts as saying that Jane is very much a genius for the same reason that uttering ‘Smith is an entomologist’ counts as saying that Smith is an insect scientist. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Think of actors who may be taken to ‘assert’ on the stage what their character ‘asserts’ though they don’t assert anything themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Williamson (1986), Brandom (1983), among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. This is not to say that speakers don’t *attempt* denying irony, though this may involve some ‘sneaky’ pretence. They would have to pretend they didn’t mean the ironic implicated-content (which they did!), and also to pretend that they mean what they say (which they don’t!). Denial of irony is more reasonable when when irony is covert—i.e. the speaker hasn’t made her ironic intention fully publically manifest as her communicative intention (at least not those intimately familiar with her beliefs). For example, one may utter (ironically) ‘Wonderful talk!’ but insist ‘I mean it’ (‘I am not ironic’)—and as a hearer we wonder ‘Was she ironic or not?.’ Denial may just about work in such cases because the speaker’s intention is not reflexive—i.e. she intends that her ironic intention be itself *not* recognized by the audience as her communicative intention. But this then doesn’t count as irony but rather as deliberate ambiguity between literal and ironic. *Pace* Camp, denying irony is like what Bach & Harnish (1979: 191) call ‘devious acts’ such as innuendo, deliberate ambiguity, and sneaky presupposition, insofar as the covert irony is not a case of speaker’s meaning with reflexive structure. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. This suggestion is compatible with truth-conditional accounts of conditionals that take their truth-conditions to be given by material implication and specify the connection between antecedent and consequent as conversational implicature (Grice 1989; Lewis (1976). Other truth-conditional accounts explain the connection as part of the truth-conditions of conditionals: consequentialism (Strawson 1968); possible world semantics (Kratzer 1986); radical contextualism (Bjornsson 2011). Jackson (1987) defends a dual-content view: conditionals have the truth-conditions of material implication plus a conventional implicature about conditional probability. In contrast, non-truth-conditionalists deny that conditionals have any useful truth-conditions, and take them to express mental properties such as subjective probabilities (Adams 1965, Belnap 1970, Edgington 1995, Barker 1995, Saka 2007). I am sympathetic to the latter view and discuss the structure of conditionals more in details in §8. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Note that it would be wrong for the Gricean to insist that (A) projects out to become an implicature of the whole conditional. This means that the speaker communicates (A) as part of what she communicates by the whole conditional. But this does not seem right. The speaker does not *communicate* (A): she merely considers what will happen *if* (A) holds. Therefore, (A) does not project. Even if it did project out, it wouldn’t provide an account of the calculation of (G). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. E.g. embedding of generalized implicatures (Levinson 2000; Carston 2004), epistemic modality (Papafragou 2006), evidential and sentential adverbials (Ifantidou-Trouki 2000), and metaphor (Camp 2012; Wearing forth.). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Sauerland 2004; Rooij and Schultz 2004; Russell 2006; Geurts 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Chierchia et al. forth., and previous developments referenced therein. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Carston 1998; Breheny & Katsos 2005; Noveck & Sperber 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. This suggestion parallels the explanation proposed to handle domain quantification (Stanley & Szabó 2000), indicative and subjunctive conditionals (King & Stanley 2005), metaphor (Stern 2000; Leezenberg 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Grice (1989: 53) acknowledges the important role of intonation: ‘[irony involves] first, a familiarity with the practice of using a sentence, which would standardly mean that *p*, in order to convey that not-*p* […], and second, an ironical tone in which such utterances are made, and which (perhaps) conventionally signifies that they are to be taken in reverse.’ Bach & Harnish (1979: 33) also suggest that irony sometimes might have semantic effects. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Shakeaspeare’s *Richard III*. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ifantidou (2000; 2002); Carston (2002); Noh (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. In relevance-theoretic terms, (i) is a basic explicature and (ii) is a higher-order explicature expressing the speaker’s degree of commitment about (i). Cf. Sperber & Wilson (1995); Wilson (2000); Carston (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. By attributing *P* to someone else, the speaker suspends her belief that *P*. In contrast, with parentheticals and attitudinal expressions the speaker still possesses the belief that *P*—qualifying it with different strength of commitment (presuming, assuming, guessing), or affective attitudes (sadness, happiness). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. This is paradigmatic of slurs whereby the attitude typically remains attached to the speaker-perspective in the sense that it is communicated by the whole compound utterance, however embedded the slur is. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Cf. Recanati (1989, 1993), Wilson (1975, 1991), Carston (1988, 2002, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Cf. Levinson (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Weak ECSC is empirically unattractive because it predicts different processing mechanisms: when embedded, the ironic content contributes to said-content, but it is merely implicated when unembedded. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Garcia-Carpintero (2001: 113) suggests that the implicature is inherited when the sentence occurs in the scope of a conditional antecedent or negation since the compounds are not falsiﬁed by the falsity of the embedded sentence. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Recanati (1993: 270-1) expresses reservations that his *Scope Principle* is sufficient alone, urging to be used in conjunction with his *Availability Principle—*‘What is said must be intuitively accessible to the conversational participants’ (2004: 20). The availability constraint is important to appreciate whether the embedded content is *identical* to the corresponding unembedded content. But if intuitions are needed to determine whether the said-content is the same in both cases, then the availability criterion has already elucidated whether the content in question is said-content or not, and no job is left for embedding criterion to settle. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Grice (1989: 375) is willing to concede that ‘it certainly does not seem reasonable to subscribe to an absolute ban on the possibility that an embedding locution may govern the standard nonconventional implicatum rather than the conventional import of the embedded sentence.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. This contrasts with Bach’s (1999) treatment of conventional implicatures as part of said-content. See also Sperber & Wilson 1995; Carston 2002; Blakemore 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. The initial argument is by Anscombe & Ducrot (1974), cited and discussed by Recanati (2003: 99-101). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Walker (1975: 151) uses this strategy to explain that embedded ‘and’-implicatures are still implicatures. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Evidence for such conceptual independence is given by the fact that hearers can respond to the antecedent content independently of the whole conditional. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. This is compatible with Stalnaker’s conception of pragmatic presupposition whereby if-clauses are held to introduce a proposition that is provisionally treated as given and which can then function as a pragmatic presupposition for later utterances. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. O’Rourke (2003) shows that particularized implicatures such as ‘and’-implicatures may be assigned quickly to embedded sentences by virtue of pre-packaged associations forged by their regular conjunction with lexical terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Clapp (2010), Szabo (2010), Pagin & Westerståhl (2012), Ludlow (2013), among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. It is intentions-possession that determines meanings rather than speech-acts proper. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. This is an oversimplification of the mechanisms through which a model is supplied; I’m only concerned to illustrate the structure of the metaphoric speeech-act. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. For detailed logical and psychological arguments for metaphor-first order of interpretation: Popa (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. By separating advertised-intentions from possession-intentions, the analysis can distinguish between sincere irony when U possesses the outermost intention, and insincere irony when she doesn’t. Examples of the latter are when U utters ironically that Jane is a real genius, when she thinks Jane is rather smart. We say the ironic prot-act is not doxastically grounded. Similarly, when irony is embedded since U is not committed to being ironic. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Given that speech-acts are highly structured, Barker argues the p-commitments of A(S)pro are often not inherited by the complex act A(S)pro/X, for whatever interpretation X. If dox is added, as in A(S)pro/X/dox, this means the p-commitment of A(S)pro/X are believed, it does not indicate that those of A(S)pro by itself are believed. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Acceptance is neutral between belief, supposition and acceptance based on both supposition and belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. The consequent may be used to perform other proto-acts than proto-assertion, such as prot-question, proto-order, etc. that are conditional on the supposition performed by the antecedent. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Barker explains these proto-acts in terms of conventional implicature: ‘If P’ conventionally implicates the permissibility of a suppositional proto-act A(if P), and by connecting ‘If P’ to ‘Q’ it conventionally implicates the permissibility of a conditional proto-act A(Q). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)