Finding Irony:

An Introduction of the Verbal Irony Procedure (VIP)

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Abstract

This article introduces the Verbal Irony Procedure (VIP), a first systematic method for identifying irony in natural discourse. The first section discusses previous operationalizations of irony and demonstrates that these are not explicit about which criteria were used to separate irony from non-irony. The second section argues why irony can be defined as an "utterance with a literal evaluation that is implicitly contrary to its intended evaluation". This section also explains why ironic utterances can be placed on an evaluation scale. In the third section, clauses are proposed as a good unit of analysis when looking at irony in natural discourse. The different steps of the VIP are then introduced in the fourth section and subsequently applied in a sample analysis of a natural text in the fifth section. The sixth section discusses a reliability analysis of the VIP protocol. The article ends with an outlook on how future research on verbal irony might benefit from applying the VIP.

Key words: verbal irony, irony detection, corpus analysis, natural discourse

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The movie THE PINK PANTHER STRIKES AGAIN (1976, dir. Blake Edwards) is advertised in its trailer in an ironic way. The bumbling inspector Clouseau (played by Peter Sellers) is introduced by a voice-over who uses the words "Never before have his senses been sharper" (whilst Clouseau opens a fridge, the contents of which fall on to the floor) and "his tactics trickier" (whilst Clouseau effectively disarms himself; Edwards, 1999 [1976]). The use of the rhetorical technique of verbal irony divides the trailer's audience into two; people who understand the irony (and see that Clouseau is actually incompetent) and people who do not (cf. Gibbs & Izett, 2005).

Starting in the 19th century with French author Alcanter de Brahm, various people have proposed a 'solution' to the 'problem' that irony sometimes goes undetected by introducing a new punctuation mark to signal verbal irony. This proposal has received much just criticism (Booth, 1974; Muecke, 1969). Indeed, when irony is explicitly labeled as irony, many of irony's communicative effects may be lost. Unsurprisingly, various 'irony signs' did not catch on.

In recent years, many scholars have concerned themselves with the ways in which verbal irony is understood (e.g., Gibbs, 1986; Giora, Fein & Schwartz, 1998). These studies have yielded valuable insights into the ways in which irony is comprehended, but provide little information on how irony can actually be located in natural discourse. In order to fully understand how irony can be used, it is important to study examples of irony in natural discourse (cf., Kreuz & Caucci, 2007).

In dealing with natural examples of a particular stylistic phenomenon such as irony – and by engaging in corpus research – a crucial question considers the ways in which important

concepts are operationalized and measured. For metaphor identification, much progress is made with the introduction of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP; Pragglejaz Group, 2007) and its revised and improved version MIPVU (Steen, Dorst, Hermann, Kaal, Krennmayr & Pasma, 2010). For irony, however, such a systematic identification procedure has not yet been developed. Therefore, this paper introduces the Verbal Irony Procedure (VIP), a first systematic method for identifying irony in natural discourse.

The need for an irony identification procedure

Before the VIP can be introduced, it is important to analyze how scholars have identified irony in discourse in previous studies. In the corpus-analytic literature on irony, four different types of operationalizations can be observed, all of which have a number of drawbacks[1]. A first group of studies has operationalized irony by using the so-called "standard definition of irony" (i.e., saying the opposite of what you mean; Behler, 1998) and let a coder apply it to the data[2]. Eisterhold, Attardo and Boxer (2006, p. 1246) exemplify this strategy. After the authors collected a corpus of texts that they believed to possibly include irony, "[a]n outside rater first read through the entire corpus and determined which sequences were ironical/sarcastic, based on a folk definition of irony/sarcasm; no training was provided". Eisterhold et al. (2006) give no information on how this rater's observations could be checked. It is unclear how the rater used and applied the definition of irony to the data, which criteria were used to separate irony from non-irony or how ironic utterances were counted. In order to provide more reliable and valid results, these aspects should be made explicit.

A second group of studies (e.g., Barbe, 1993; Claridge 2001; Lucariello, 1994; Partington, 2007; Shelley, 2001) looks for irony in large text corpora by looking for collocations with the word "irony" or one of its derivates (e.g., ironic, ironical, ironically). This approach has two

downsides. Firstly, the word "irony" can mean different things to different people (cf. Gibbs & Colston, 2007). This means that an utterance that one speaker calls "ironic" may not necessarily adhere to the definition of irony that a researcher has. And secondly, this method yields few natural examples of verbal irony, because verbal irony is seldom explicitly acknowledged. Instead, this method helps to find examples that can be labeled as situational irony[3]. Consider the following example from the Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad,* in which Gerlach Cerfontaine, chairman of Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam at that time, talks about the level of security at his airport. Cerfontaine was forced to take on this issue, because Alberto Stegeman, a reporter for the Dutch TV channel SBS6, had made an undercover documentary in which he showed how he had evaded security measures at the airport.

> In the TV show *Pauw & Witteman*[4] on November 27, he [i.e., Cerfontaine] invited SBS6 reporter Alberto Stegeman to take a look and see for himself that everything was all right now. Ironically enough, Stegeman was already at Schiphol Airport that very night, only without an invitation. There, he determined again that security was still very poor (Van Joolen, 2008, p. 3)[5].

In situational irony, as can be seen in the Schiphol example, the irony is in a situation that fails to meet certain expectations (cf. Lucariello, 1994; Shelley, 2001). In the case of the Schiphol example, a difference can be observed between Cerfontaine's claim that security at Schiphol Airport is robust, and Stegeman's actions that show that, at the exact same time, security measures are not good at all.

A third group of corpus studies identifies irony by the reaction it evokes. Since irony often involves humor, a number of studies using oral data only considered to include utterances

as ironic when they were followed by (canned) laughter (e.g., Partington, 2007; Pelsmaekers & Van Besien, 2002). A downside to this approach is that it can only be used in analyses of audio or audio-visual recordings. In analyzing irony from different modalities (e.g., written speech or a transcript of only the words), this method cannot be used. A second, more pressing, problem with this analysis is that it may overlook many instances of verbal irony. Many authors agree that humor is only one of the communicative goals of irony (cf. Gibbs, 2000; Roberts & Kreuz, 1994). At the same time, not all humorous utterances are ironic; irony can also be considered a subset of humor (e.g., Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004; Catanescu & Tom, 2001).

A final group of studies have operationalized irony by looking at pattern deviations (Louw, 1993; Kohvakka, 1996). Louw's analysis focuses on what he calls "semantic prosodies". He suggests looking up words in large text corpora to see what connotations these words have. Louw's example is the word "utterly". When considering connotations in the Cobuild corpus, Louw (1993) finds that most phrases use "utterly" with a negative connotation. Only a few collocates use "utterly" with a positive connotation. After examining these collocates, Louw (1993, p. 164) concludes that each carries a "fairly obvious ironic intention". With this analysis, Louw (1993) shows that irony may be discovered with collocates; irony may carry other connotations than non-ironic utterances. In addition to Louw (1993), Kohvakka (1996) also looks at pattern deviations, but does so from a different perspective. She analyzes a number of texts from the perspective of argumentation theory. In this analysis, she considers words or utterances as ironic when they do not support the conclusion of a text. Instead, when these words or utterances only support the conclusion when they are ironically interpreted, she considers the utterances to be ironic.

The studies of Louw (1993) and Kohvakka (1996) demonstrate that irony can indeed be seen as a deviation from a certain pattern, be it semantic or argumentative. However, this method

does not make clear which elements distinguish an ironic utterance from other utterances that deviate from patterns such as a hyperbole or an understatement. In order to clearly distinguish irony from non-irony, a method of analysis is needed that is both clear on what exactly constitutes an ironic utterance and helps in distinguishing between irony and non-irony. In the first part of this article, we present an account of irony that integrates views on irony from different perspectives, leading up to an operational definition of verbal irony. The second part of the article introduces the Verbal Irony Procedure (VIP) that helps to distinguish between irony and non-irony. This second part also includes a sample analysis of one particular text using the VIP as well as results from a larger reliability analysis.

Defining verbal irony

The definition of verbal irony is a problem that has struck irony theorists at various times. Recently, Gibbs and Colston (2007, p. 584) argued that the definition of irony is still a "problem that surfaces in the irony literature". In this paper, therefore, we take a different approach to the definition problem of verbal irony, compared to the ways in which irony has traditionally been defined. Instead of coming up with a new definition of irony, we chose to compare various definitions of irony and define irony by the commonalities of these theories. In this comparison, we found that the theories of verbal irony agree on four aspects of verbal irony; (1) irony is implicit, (2) irony is evaluative, and it is possible to (3) distinguish between a non-ironic and an ironic reading of the same utterance, (4) between which a certain type of opposition may be observed. Of course, an ironic utterance is also usually directed at someone or something; its target[6].

First of all, irony is always indirect; a message is not explicitly signaled as irony (cf., Grice, 1978; Giora, 1995, among many others). It is exactly this characteristic that prompted a

number of people to propose an "irony punctuation mark" and that explains why the identification of verbal irony by means of looking for the word "irony" does not yield many results; an ironic interpretation of a text can always be denied.

Secondly, various authors have observed that irony should always include an evaluation of some sort (cf. Attardo, 2000a; Kotthoff, 2003; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Clark and Gerrig (1984, p. 122) specifically claim that irony is typically used to ridicule somebody. In their view, irony contains a negative intended evaluation. Other authors (e.g., Attardo, 2000a; Gibbs, 1986; Kreuz, 1996) believe that irony can also have a positive intended evaluation, although this kind of irony is used less frequently. Nevertheless, they all agree that irony contains *some* form of evaluation.

It is also always possible to distinguish between a non-ironic and an ironic reading of the same utterance. Traditionally, this distinction has been defined as a difference between a literal and intended meaning of the utterance (e.g., Grice, 1975; 1978). Other scholars tend to use different terms such as source (i.e., utterance used literally) and echo (i.e., utterance used ironically) (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), a pretended and "real" meaning (Clark & Gerrig, 1984) or a difference between various *mental spaces* (e.g., Coulson, 2005; Kihara, 2005).

Finally, these different non-ironic and ironic readings of the same utterance all have an important thing in common; a contrast between these two readings can be observed. In the standard definition of verbal irony (e.g., Grice, 1975), the readings are said to be "opposites". Wilson and Sperber (1992) have demonstrated that the non-ironic and ironic readings are not necessarily opposites. Nevertheless, a discrepancy between the two readings can still be observed. Therefore, it may be concluded that the non-ironic and ironic readings are contraries rather than opposites. This implies that a reversal of evaluation between the literal and intended (ironic) evaluation can be observed.

Based on these commonalities between the various theories of irony, we define irony as "an utterance with a literal evaluation that is implicitly contrary to its intended evaluation". In other words, irony is treated as an implicature with a reversal of evaluation (see also Kawakami, 1984, 1988, summarized in Hamamoto, 1998; Partington, 2007; Seto, 1998). If an utterance is read ironically, the valence of the evaluation implied in the literal utterance is reversed in the ironic reading. This means that irony works on a pragmatic level. Therefore, when identifying irony, a first (literal) interpretation should be discarded in favor of an (implicit) ironic interpretation. These interpretations can be placed on a scale of evaluation[7], which contains both positive and negative evaluations with a zero point in between. An utterance is ironic when one interpretation is in one domain of the scale (positive or negative) and the other on the other side of the zero point (negative or positive). Let's clarify this with an example. Figure 1 shows a Dutch advertisement for the computer magazine *Computer Idee*, in which the ironic utterance is printed in bold face. The caption reads:

Shameful!

Now only 1 Euro.

Computer Idee, is not difficult about computers (our translation)[8].

The advertisement's caption (Shameful) can be qualified as an ironic utterance. In Dutch, the word "shameful" has a negative meaning, which conflicts with general knowledge that an advertisement usually conveys something positive about the advertised product, service and/ or the company. Indeed, the reader should infer that the (apparent) discount on the computer magazine's price is something to celebrate. If these meanings are placed on a scale of evaluation,

we get Figure 2; whilst the literal meaning (outrageous) conveys a negative attitude towards the discounted price, the ironic meaning shows a positive attitude towards the lower price[9].

Unit of analysis

Having defined irony as an implicit reversal of evaluation, it is important to select a proper unit of analysis (Steen, 2007, pp. 82-85). If a unit of analysis is well chosen, different observations can be well compared. In other words, a division of a text into units of analysis facilitates a comparison and closer analysis of different ironic utterances. This type of unit of analysis is usually referred to as a "recording/coding unit" (Krippendorff, 2004, pp. 99-101).

Typically, Krippendorff (2004, p. 100) recommends using units of analysis that are "the smallest units that bear all the information needed in the analysis." When analyzing irony, single words – the smallest unit of information in discourse (Krippendorff, 2004) – generally do not bear all the information needed. First of all, the selection of a unit of analysis that goes beyond the single word is warranted by the nature of verbal irony itself. In irony, a reversal of evaluation does not take place at the single-word level (e.g., good vs. bad), but rather at the level of evaluation (see e.g., Kotthoff, 2003). Therefore, the previous paragraph defined irony at the level of evaluative propositions. Besides, Low and Cameron (2002, p. 85) stress the importance of incorporating so-called "multi-word units" into units of analysis. They claim that language users do not look at words in isolation, but that they make "considerable use of multi-word units". This implies that the unit of analysis should also be extended beyond the single word to the level of an evaluative proposition.

When taking the objections against single words into account, a clause is a logical choice to select as the unit of analysis, because clauses can be considered the "basic level of linguistic encoding" (Horne, Frid & Roll, 2005, p. 4; see also Hunston, 2000). In the previous paragraph,

irony was shown to be a pragmatic phenomenon at the level of the evaluative proposition. In order to make sure that only one proposition is included per unit of analysis, we propose to divide texts for irony analysis into "finite clauses" (e.g., Levelt, 1998). Every unit of analysis can thus contain "one and only one tensed or finite verb" (Levelt, 1998, p. 257). As a result, every main and sub clause should be counted as a separate unit of analysis. When a unit is marked as ironic, this would mean that the entire clause is considered ironic. Utterances that do not have a tensed or finite verb (e.g., exclamations like "Cheers!" or headers) should be counted as separate elliptic propositions (see e.g., Giora, 1995, pp. 244-245) and thus as separate units of analysis.

In order to show how a text for irony analysis can be divided into units of analysis, we present an analysis of the opening two sentences of a Dutch DVD review that will be discussed into more detail later.

"Sarah Nolan ([Diane] Lane) is a kindergarten teacher – in Hollywood code a gigantic clue that this woman is selflessness incarnate – but she is on her own nevertheless. Her boyfriend traded Sarah, already over forty years of age, in for a younger specimen" (Anon., 2006).

When we divide these two sentences into units of analysis, we get six clauses:

[1] Sarah Nolan ([Diane] Lane) is a kindergarten teacher

[2] [Utterance 1 is] in Hollywood code a gigantic clue that [Utterance 3]

[3] this woman is selflessness incarnate

[4] but she is on her own nevertheless.

[5] Her boyfriend traded Sarah [sub Utterance 6] in for a younger specimen.

[6] [Sarah is] already over forty years of age

The example demonstrated above shows that every subordinate clause was taken and selected as a different unit of analysis. We see for instance that the sub-clause referring to the Hollywood code has been further subdivided into two different clauses and that clause [3] is subordinate to clause [2]. In the same way, we see that [6] is subordinate to [5] and that the two 'parts' of [5] that in the original text were separated from each other by [6] have been put together to count as one unit. Finally, some utterances need to be supplemented to form a correct clause, such as utterances [2] and [6].

The Verbal Irony Procedure (VIP)

After the texts are divided into units of analysis, the Verbal Irony Procedure (VIP) can be applied to the data. This procedure runs as follows:

1. <u>Read the entire text</u>.

o First, coders read the entire text to generally understand what stance the author of the text takes[10].

It is important to read the entire text first to get a sense of what message this text wants to bring across. This information may help a coder to determine which utterances (literally) do not fit its co-text (i.e., all other utterances from the same text excluding the utterance under consideration; Attardo, 2000b, p. 9) or context (i.e., background information; Attardo, 2000b, p. 10).

2. Description or evaluation?

o Coders re-read individual paragraphs of the text and then look at the different utterances (units of analysis) in that particular paragraph.

o For every utterance, coders argue whether it is purely descriptive, evaluative or is descriptive with an evaluative association. In case the clause is purely descriptive (and does not have an evaluative association), it is not considered ironic.

o In case the utterance is evaluative or has an evaluative association, this utterance may be ironic.

It has become clear that an ironic utterance always conveys some form of evaluation. Consequently, utterances without an evaluation (i.e., purely descriptive utterances) should be marked as non-ironic and discarded for further analysis. In some cases, coders may believe that – even though an utterance seems descriptive at face value – it also feels evaluative. In other words, a seemingly descriptive utterance has an evaluative association. In that case, coders should leave this utterance in as a possibly ironic utterance. An example of a descriptive utterance with an evaluative association is an exclamation like "Ah, Tuscany in May!" (Wilson & Sperber, 1992). Even though none of the individual words contain an evaluation that can be reversed in an ironic reading, the utterance itself can be seen as evaluative. Other examples of evaluative associations can be found in the sample analysis in the following section.

3. Does the literal evaluation fit the (co-)text?

o In case the utterance is evaluative or has an evaluative association, coders determine what the (literal) evaluation is.

o   After paraphrasing the literal evaluation of the evaluative clause, coders determine if this

   literal evaluation fits the co-text. If this is the case, the clause is not ironic.

The attribution of verbal irony to a text is something that is implicit. In order to see if an

utterance is ironic, it is important to make the literal evaluation explicit to see if it fits the co-text.

If this is the case, it is likely that the author of the text really means this literal evaluation. This

implies that the utterance in question is not ironic. In contrast, literal evaluations that do not fit

the co-text are an indication that an utterance may be ironic.

4.   Can the literal evaluation be contrasted with a contrary intended evaluation about the same

object?

o   If the literal evaluation does not fit the co-text, the clause is possibly ironic. Coders have to

   construct a scale of evaluation as presented earlier.

o   If the utterance is evaluative, this scale can be constructed with the use of certain terms from

   the utterance itself. If the utterance has an evaluative association, it is up to the coder to

   design the scale with the evaluation identified earlier.

o   The scale of evaluation should have two important characteristics: (1) the scale should

   include a subdivision between a positive and a negative 'domain' and (2) the literal

   evaluation has to be placed in the negative or the positive domain.

o   Both the literal and the intended evaluation have to refer to the same object. This object can

   be a person, a physical object (e.g., a chair), but also a state of affairs (e.g., the weather), an

   event or a previous utterance.

o   If a plausible reading can be found in which the intended (ironic) evaluation (negative or

   positive) is in the other domain than the literal evaluation (positive or negative), the utterance

   is considered ironic.

Finally, coders have to construct a scale of evaluation as presented in the previous section. Since

irony always involves two contrary evaluations (literal and intended), coders have to see whether

they could construct an evaluation scale with a positive and a negative domain. In other words,

coders have to think about the object of evaluation and construct a scale related to the evaluation

of this object. In the case of Wilson and Sperber's (1992) example of "Oh Tuscany in May"

discussed earlier, the object of evaluation is the weather in Tuscany in May. Possible evaluations

of the weather in this Italian region can range from very negative to very positive. In between

these negative and positive evaluations, a zero-point (neither negative nor positive) can be found.

If an utterance is ironic, the literal evaluation is in one domain (positive or negative) and the

intended evaluation is in the other domain (negative or positive). This means that the neutral

zero-point of the evaluation scale has to be crossed to get from the literal to the intended

evaluation in order for an utterance to count as ironic. For instance, in case of Wilson and

Sperber's (1992) example of "Oh Tuscany in May", the literal evaluation of the weather in

Tuscany in May is positive, while the intended evaluation of the weather in Tuscany in May is

negative. Figure 3 gives a schematic overview of the coding procedure of the VIP.

Sample analysis

In order to show how texts can be analyzed with the VIP, this article presents a sample analysis

of a text; an anonymous DVD review of the romantic comedy film *MUST LOVE DOGS* (2005,

dir. Gary David Goldberg) published in the Dutch newspaper *Sp!ts* (Anon. 2006). The first step

of the VIP requires a coder to read the entire text before he or she starts coding. Therefore, the complete text, with numbers separating utterances, is reproduced below:

[1] Must Love Dogs

[2] Sarah Nolan ([Diane] Lane) is a kindergarten teacher − [3] in Hollywood code a gigantic clue that [4] this woman is selflessness incarnate − [5] but she is on her own nevertheless. [6] Her boyfriend traded Sarah, [7] already over forty years of age, [6, continued] in for a younger specimen. [8] Her impossibly amiable sisters want that [9] Sarah starts meeting new men. [10] So they put an advertisement on a dating web site. [11] Will she succeed in finding the man of her dreams? [12] Sarah meets a lot of losers of course. [13] One of her digital don juans already starts crying within two minutes of date [14] and another one turns out to be her very own father (Christopher Plummer). [15] Hilarious of course, such blind dates from hell. [16] With the crybaby, Sarah even goes on a second date. [17] A normal person in the most prevailing mood of swooning would not even believe that. [18] On the DVD, a number of bloopers and some deleted scenes are added, [19] but that does not really make Must Love Dogs a must-see either. [20] The movie is so cramped with dull clichés that [21] even Cusack, [22] one of the most gifted actors for this particular genre, [21, continued] drowns in sugariness. [23] Just ignore this tearjerker.

[24] Ratings:

[25] Movie: 4 [out of 10]

[26] Extras: 6 [out of 10][11]

The text of the MUST LOVE DOGS review is analyzed below with the use of the VIP. Descriptive utterances (i.e., [1], [2], [5], [9], [10], [14], [18] and [24]) are not discussed. In order to convenience readers, ironic utterances are printed in boldface in the discussion below.

3. in Hollywood code a gigantic clue

This utterance contains an evaluation about the large size of a clue in the so-called "Hollywood code", a supposed set of conventions to which Hollywood films adhere. The author seems to believe that this clue (i.e., kindergarten teachers are selfless people) is firmly rooted in Hollywood's conventions. The rest of the text also informs the coder that the reviewer believes that *MUST LOVE DOGS* is a standard romantic comedy from Hollywood. As such, the literal evaluation is congruent with the co-text. Therefore, utterance [3] is non-ironic.

4. that this woman is selflessness incarnate

Like utterance [3], utterance [4] contains an evaluation. In this evaluation, Sarah's character is literally seen as "selflessness incarnate". At first, it is difficult to see whether the reviewer would really mean this evaluation. It is a hyperbole that may be used to mock Sarah or the film, and as such may be ironic. In order to solve this problem, a scale of evaluation about Sarah's character was drawn (Figure 4). The utterance literally says that Sarah is selflessness incarnate; it literally evaluates Sarah's character positively. A reversal of evaluation (i.e., a negative evaluation of Sarah's character) would be odd in this particular review; the reviewer wants to convey that the film's characters are so positive that they become unbelievable (see also utterance [8]). Therefore, no plausible reading can be found in which the intended evaluation of Nolan's character is negative. Instead, the reviewer claims that Sarah is relatively selfless; this change in

evaluation does not involve crossing the zero-point of the scale. In other words, utterance [4] contains a non-ironic hyperbole.

6. Her boyfriend traded Sarah [sub 7] in for a younger specimen.

Utterance [6] could be described as evaluative, because the words "traded in" as well as "specimen" show a negative evaluation of the behavior of Sarah's former boyfriend, even though it is unclear who makes the specific negative assessment. In this case, the literal evaluation is congruent with the co-text. Utterance [6] is non-ironic.

7. already over forty years of age

It is possible to argue that the word "already" makes utterance [7] evaluative. However, in this case, the literal evaluation is congruent with the co-text as well. It is true that Sarah is older than forty years of age. Consequently, this utterance is non-ironic.

8. Her impossibly amiable sisters want that [utterance 9].

This utterance is evaluative as well, because of the phrase "impossibly amiable". The word impossible explicitly negates amiable, which implies that, literally, the author considers it improbable that somebody in real life is as amiable as Sarah's sisters. This seems to be one of the points of critique of this reviewer on the film *MUST LOVE DOGS* (see also utterance 4). Therefore, the literal evaluation is congruent with the co-text; the utterance is non-ironic.

11. Will she succeed in finding the man of her dreams?

On the surface, this utterance seems descriptive. The author poses the question that is central to the plot (or might even sum up the plot) of the romantic comedy *Must Love Dogs*. On face value,

this question would thus simply include a description of the movie's main premise. The answer to the question, however, is implicitly evaluative; the film makers hoped that a potential viewer would find the outcome of this plot interesting enough to consider watching the film. This adds an evaluative connotation to utterance [11].

After reading the entire text, it also seems as if a literal use of this question is incongruent with the co-text. Previous utterances already gave a number of clues that *Must Love Dogs* completely adheres to genre conventions of the romantic comedy (e.g., the Hollywood code). Any reader who has seen a fair share of romantic comedies already knows the movie's ending without having seen it; of course Sarah will find her true love. Therefore, utterance [11] should be interpreted as a rhetorical question; the reader as well as the critic knows the answer. Since the reviewer does not intend [11] as a literal, but as a rhetorical question, utterance [11] can be interpreted as an evaluative statement about the movie's plot. This implies that the construction of an evaluation scale is warranted (Figure 5). In a literal evaluation (i.e., the question were to be asked in earnest), the plot's outcome is uncertain. A potential viewer might want to know the answer, the plot would have been unpredictable and the movie captivating; a positive evaluation of the film. However, after reading the entire text, it becomes clear that the movie is reviewed negatively; an evaluation in which the valence of the literal claim is reversed, is congruent with the text. Indeed, the reviewer implies that the audience immediately knows how the film ends. This implies the plot is very predictable, which makes for a boring film. In this analysis, the zero point is crossed between the literal and intended evaluation (see Figure 5). This utterance is ironic.

12. Sarah meets a lot of losers of course.

This utterance is evaluative. The "of course" demonstrates that the critic finds it expectable that Sarah should meet many losers before finding her true love. In this case, the literal evaluation is congruent with the co-text; [12] also belongs to the standard ingredients of a romantic comedy from Hollywood. This utterance is therefore non-ironic.

13. One of her digital don juans already starts crying within two minutes of date

Like utterance [12], utterance [13] contains an evaluative connotation. Although [13] may only seem a description of the actions of one of the suitors, it contains an evaluation as well. The word "don juan" refers to a male person who can either be described as a "womanizer" or as a romantic ideal. This literal evaluation is incongruent with the co-text, because the suitors were described in the previous utterance as "losers". An evaluation scale can be constructed about this specific suitor (Figure 6). Since a man who cries after two minutes cannot be seen as a romantic ideal, an evaluation in which the valence of the literal evaluation is reversed is congruent with the text. This makes [13] ironic.

15. Hilarious of course, such blind dates from hell.

This utterance contains an evaluation, because the author literally claims that the blind dates from the movie are hilarious, which would be a positive attribute for a romantic comedy. However, when looking at the description of the two blind dates – her own father and a guy who cries after two minutes – this literal evaluation seems to be incongruent with the co-text. After constructing the scale of Figure 7, a reversal of the valence of the literal evaluation seems more probable in this context; these dates are not hilarious at all. This means that [15] is ironic.

16. With the crybaby, Sarah even goes on a second date.

This utterance is one of the most difficult cases in this text to judge. On the surface, this utterance seems like a description of an event in the movie. In the narrative world of the film, this event may have been intended as a probable event. One word, however, puts an evaluative spin to this utterance; the word "even". With this word, the author expresses his or her disbelief that Sarah would go out with the crybaby on a second date. This disbelief is meant literally; the utterance is non-ironic[12].

17. A normal person in the most prevailing mood of swooning would not even believe that.

The utterance contains an evaluation (i.e., the event described in [16] is unbelievable). This evaluation is literally congruent with the rest of the text; the author seems to endorse that the film is unbelievable, which means that [17] is non-ironic. Other utterances which evaluate the film negatively in a similar way (and whose literal evaluation is thus congruent with the text) include utterances [20], [21], [23], [25] and [26]. These are not discussed further.

19. but that does not really make Must Love Dogs a must-see either.

Utterance [19] contains an evaluation (Must Love Dogs is not really a must-see). The literal evaluation of [19] is difficult to determine, because it includes a negation. In other words, is the literal evaluation of "not really a must-see" positive or negative? In dealing with this issue, it was decided that the literal evaluation would be determined based on the presence or absence of a modifier. If a modifier was absent (e.g., not a must-see), the negation was interpreted as a negation of the "main word" (in this case: the noun "must-see"). Therefore, if the text were "not a must-see", the literal evaluation would have been interpreted as negative. If a modifier is present,

however (as in the case of this utterance; "not *really* a must-see), a negation is interpreted as a negation of this particular modifier; the movie is *not really* a must-see, which means it is still a little bit of a must-see.

The literal evaluation is incongruent with the rest of the text, because the author describes the film rather negative. After constructing a scale of evaluation (see Figure 8), it seems that an intended negative interpretation of this utterance is more probable than a literal positive interpretation. This makes [19] ironic.

This example shows that two coders who use the VIP may not necessarily come to the same interpretation of utterances. In this example, we interpreted the negation as a negation of the modifier and the literal evaluation as positive. Since an ironic interpretation of the Dutch expression "not really a …" is conventionalized and almost always means "really not a ….", another coder may interpret the literal evaluation of this utterance as negative and the utterance as non-ironic. An advantage of the VIP is that it becomes clear why these interpretations differ, enabling coders to specifically argue why they interpret a specific utterance as ironic (or not).

22. one of the most gifted actors for this particular genre

This utterance evaluates Cusack's performance in other romantic comedies. Although he may "drown in sugariness" in this particular film (see utterance 21), his acting in other romantic comedies is favorably reviewed. This means that this utterance is literally incongruent with the text as well; even though his performance in MUST LOVE DOGS is poor, Cusack remains one of the best actors to cast in a romantic comedy.

The Verbal Irony Procedure in practice

The sample analysis discussed in the previous section shows how the VIP can be applied to a natural text. A second step for the procedure is to demonstrate its intercoder reliability when different coders independently apply the procedure to a corpus of texts (cf. Krippendorff, 2004). In order to test for intercoder reliability of the VIP, we compiled a corpus that consisted of 50 texts. These texts were film reviews of mainstream American films that were released in the Netherlands between 2009 and 2011. All texts were originally written in Dutch.

To allow for a wide variety of possible writing styles, we collected 25 film reviews that were written by citizen journalists (i.e., journalists who write film reviews without getting paid to do so) and 25 film reviews that were written by professional journalists. The film reviews written by citizen journalists came from the Dutch web site www.filmkeuze.nl. The film reviews written by professional journalists were taken from the Dutch web site www.cinema.nl, which is a web site that is affiliated with the *Volkskrant*, a Dutch national newspaper. To further increase the variety in writing styles, it was decided to have a maximum of eight texts for each individual author.

On the filmkeuze.nl web site, the citizen journalist's final verdict was given in a grade, which could vary from 1 (extremely poor movie) to 10 (absolutely fantastic movie). On the cinema.nl web site, this verdict was given in the form of stars ranging from 1 star (extremely poor movie) to 5 stars (absolutely fantastic movie). Studies on irony in usage have demonstrated the asymmetry of irony (e.g., Gibbs, 1986; Kreuz & Link, 2002): these authors show that irony is used more often in situations in which the speaker intends to give a negative evaluation than in situations where the speaker wants to give a positive evaluation. In order to increase the likelihood of finding irony, we decided to only include reviews that evaluated the movie badly. This means that reviews from the filmkeuze.nl web site were included when the amateur

journalist gave a grade of 5 or lower. Reviews from the cinema.nl web site were included if a film was awarded one or two stars.

After the corpus was collected, a research assistant divided each text into simple clauses (the unit of analysis). This research assistant did not participate in the actual coding process. Then, the corpus was delivered back to two coders (the first and second author of this paper) who independently coded each utterance with the use of the VIP. Since the corpus was relatively large and included a total of 1,152 clauses, coders spread out the coding over several sessions over several days. Each session lasted for a maximum time of two hours. To increase the validity of this coding process, the coders (who are employed at two different Dutch universities) had no contact with each other from the start to the end of the reliability coding.

Results of the reliability analysis show that coders had a substantial agreement ($\kappa = .67$, Landis & Koch, 1977). To be more specific, the two coders agreed on 97.3% of the total corpus (which consisted of 1,152 utterances). Taken together, our reliability scores are good and indicate that irony identification can be done reliably with the use of the Verbal Irony Procedure.

Conclusion and discussion

This paper introduced an operationalization of irony that can be used in corpus research. Based on an operational definition of verbal irony as an "utterance with a literal evaluation that is implicitly contrary to its intended evaluation", the Verbal Irony Procedure (VIP) was introduced. This procedure can be used to discriminate between ironic and non-ironic utterances. A sample analysis of one text showed how the method could help in determining which utterances could be considered ironic and which not. It has to be noted that the VIP does not claim to give the one, "correct" interpretation of an utterance in claiming which utterances are ironic and which not. It may well be possible that other coders would disagree on some of the more difficult cases that

were labeled as irony in the previous section. Instead, the VIP helps in explicating the steps in deciding why certain utterances were labeled as ironic and others were not. Like the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP; Pragglejaz Group, 2007) and its revised version MIPVU (Steen et al., 2010) did for metaphor studies, this detailed procedure opens up the coding process of verbal irony to rigorous empirical scrutiny. The VIP can make the intersubjectivity – inherent to the attribution of irony – explicit. If coders disagree on the labeling of a specific utterance as ironic, it not only becomes clear *that* they disagree, but also *why* they disagree; the VIP requires coders to break down the labeling of ironic utterances into a number of steps, making it easier to see when and why interpretations start to diverge.

Moreover, the reliability analysis shows that two independent raters can work with the VIP and identify irony in a large set of texts with a very substantial certainty. In view of the fact that we are dealing with interpretive data, and that the recognition of irony can differ across readings, we interpret these data as good.

It should be noted that it is not our goal with the VIP to present irony as a unified category of speech. Instead, ironic utterances can take various shapes and forms (Gibbs, 2000). The sample analysis of the MUST LOVE DOGS text shows that the VIP can be used to identify ironic utterances in various forms that include ironic metaphors (utterance 13), ironic hyperboles (utterance 15), ironic understatements (utterance 19) and ironic rhetorical questions (utterance 11). Following Whalen, Pexman and Gil (2009), we also contend that not every metaphor, hyperbole or understatement is automatically ironic; instead the VIP can help to differentiate between ironic and non-ironic forms of rhetorical speech (compare for instance utterance 15 with utterance 4, where a hyperbole is used either ironically or non-ironically).

With the use of the VIP, valuable new insights can be gained in terms of irony in usage, which can help to illustrate the ways in which irony can be used in discourse. So even though

verbal irony remains implicit, the VIP explicates the decisions made in determining whether an utterance is ironic or not. In that way, it makes the attribution of verbal irony explicit, thus effectively making proposals for 'irony punctuation marks' obsolete.

Notes

[1] Some corpus studies on verbal irony provide no information at all on how irony was operationalized (cf. Cros 2001; Weizman 2001). These studies were excluded from this overview.

[2] It should be noted that most studies that used this strategy considered themselves with counting different tropes, often in the context of one particular genre (e.g., Catanescu & Tom, 2001; Kreuz, Roberts, Johnson & Bertus, 1996; Leigh, 1994; Srinawat, 2005). The aim of these studies was usually to identify the frequency with which certain tropes were used in the genre under discussion. Although these studies often consider a large number of tropes, little information was given on how each individual trope is identified and counted.

[3] Nevertheless, this way of searching can actually generate some examples of verbal irony, cf. Claridge (2001, pp. 137-138). Kreuz and Caucci (2007) used slightly different strings to look for examples of irony and sarcasm (e.g., said sarcastically). However, they did so to make experimental materials and not to conduct a corpus study. Besides, a problem still remains that this strategy may not yield *many* ironic utterances in a corpus.

[4] *Pauw & Witteman* is a Dutch daily talk show, whose hosts are called Jeroen Pauw and Paul Witteman.

[5] The original Dutch text is as follows:

> Hij nodigde op 27 november in het programma Pauw & Witteman SBS6-verslaggever Alberto Stegeman uit
> een kijkje te komen nemen en zelf te zien dat de boel op orde was. Diezelfde avond was Stegeman ironisch
> genoeg al op Schiphol, alleen zonder invitatie. Daar stelde hij opnieuw vast dat de beveiliging nog altijd niet
> deugde.

[6] Of course, not all ironic utterances are about the same target. Cros (2001, pp. 202-203) distinguishes three types of targets. She says that an ironic speaker can target (1) him or herself, (2) the receiver or (3) a third party (i.e., somebody different from sender and receiver).

[7] For other studies on irony using scales, see e.g., Kawakami (1984, 1988; summarized in Hamamoto, 1998: 263-269), Giora et al (2005) and Partington (2007). For other studies that see evaluation as a scalar phenomenon, see e.g. Martin and White (2005) and Lemke (1998).

[8] All originally Dutch examples were translated by the first author.

[9] Since irony is defined on an evaluative level, our definition is also able to handle more implicit examples of irony. For instance, one of the key tests for any definition of irony is the classic utterance "I love people who signal" in the context where a driver is ironically criticized by a passenger for turning without signaling (first introduced by Myers Roy, 1978, pp. 17-18 and later quoted by many authors including Gibbs, 1986 and Coulson, 2005). On an evaluation scale, the literal interpretation of the utterance gives a positive evaluation about signaling. However, given the absence of signaling persons in the discourse situation, the intended evaluation can only be interpreted as a negative evaluation of the driver (which means that the zero point has been crossed).

[10] Please note that, in a small subset of cases, coders may end up finding that the entire text is ironic (e.g., the famous example of Jonathan Swift's essay *A Modest Proposal* or some texts found on the web site of the *Onion*).

[11] The original Dutch text is as follows:

[1] Must Love Dogs

[2] Sarah Nolan ([Diane] Lane) is kleuterleidster – [3] in Hollywoodcode een kanjer van een hint dat [4] deze dame de onbaatzuchtigheid zelve is – [5] maar toch staat ze er alleen voor. [6] Haar vent heeft Sarah, [7] de veertig inmiddels gepasseerd, [6, continued] ingeruild voor een jonger exemplaar. [8] Haar onmogelijk aimabele zussen willen dat [9] Sarah weer onder de mannen komt. [10] Dus zetten ze een advertentie op een datingwebsite. [11] Zal het lukken om de man van haar dromen te vinden? [12] Sarah komt uiteraard een hoop losers tegen. [13] Een van haar digitale don juans barst na twee minuten date al in huilen uit [14] en een ander blijkt haar bloedeigen vader (Christopher Plummer) te zijn. [15] Lachen natuurlijk, zulke blind dates uit de hel. [16] Met de huilebalk gaat Sarah nota bene een tweede keer uit. [17] Dat gelooft een normaal mens zelfs in de meest overheersende zwijmelbui toch

niet. [18] Op de DVD zijn een paar bloopers en wat weggesneden scènes toegevoegd, [19] maar ook dat maakt Must Love Dogs niet echt een aanrader. [20] De film zit zo boordevol flauwe clichés dat [21] zelfs Cusack, [22] een van de meest begaafde acteurs voor dit genre, [21, continued] verzuipt in de zoetsappigheid. [23] Negeren dus, dit draakje.

[24] Rapportcijfers:

[25] Film: 4

[26] Extra's: 6

[12] In order to provide a full picture of this utterance, the meaning of *nota bene*, the Dutch word that was translated with even, was looked up in the authorative Dutch dictionary *Van Dale* (version 1.2 Network). The lemma for *nota bene* indicates that it literally means something like "pay attention". However, Van Dale claims that *nota bene* is always used as a so-called "irony marker", a clue that a writer can give to his readers that he is being ironic. For this utterance, the Van Dale dictionary seems to be mistaken; *nota bene* (or even) should be interpreted literally.

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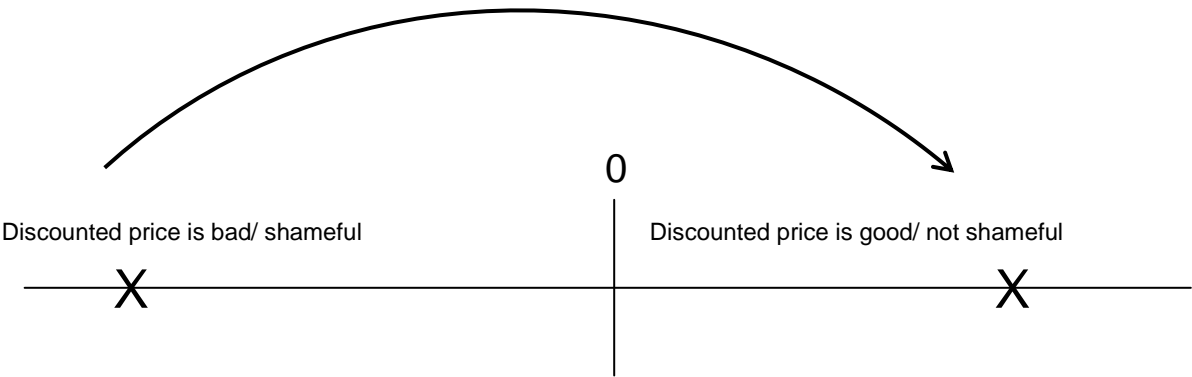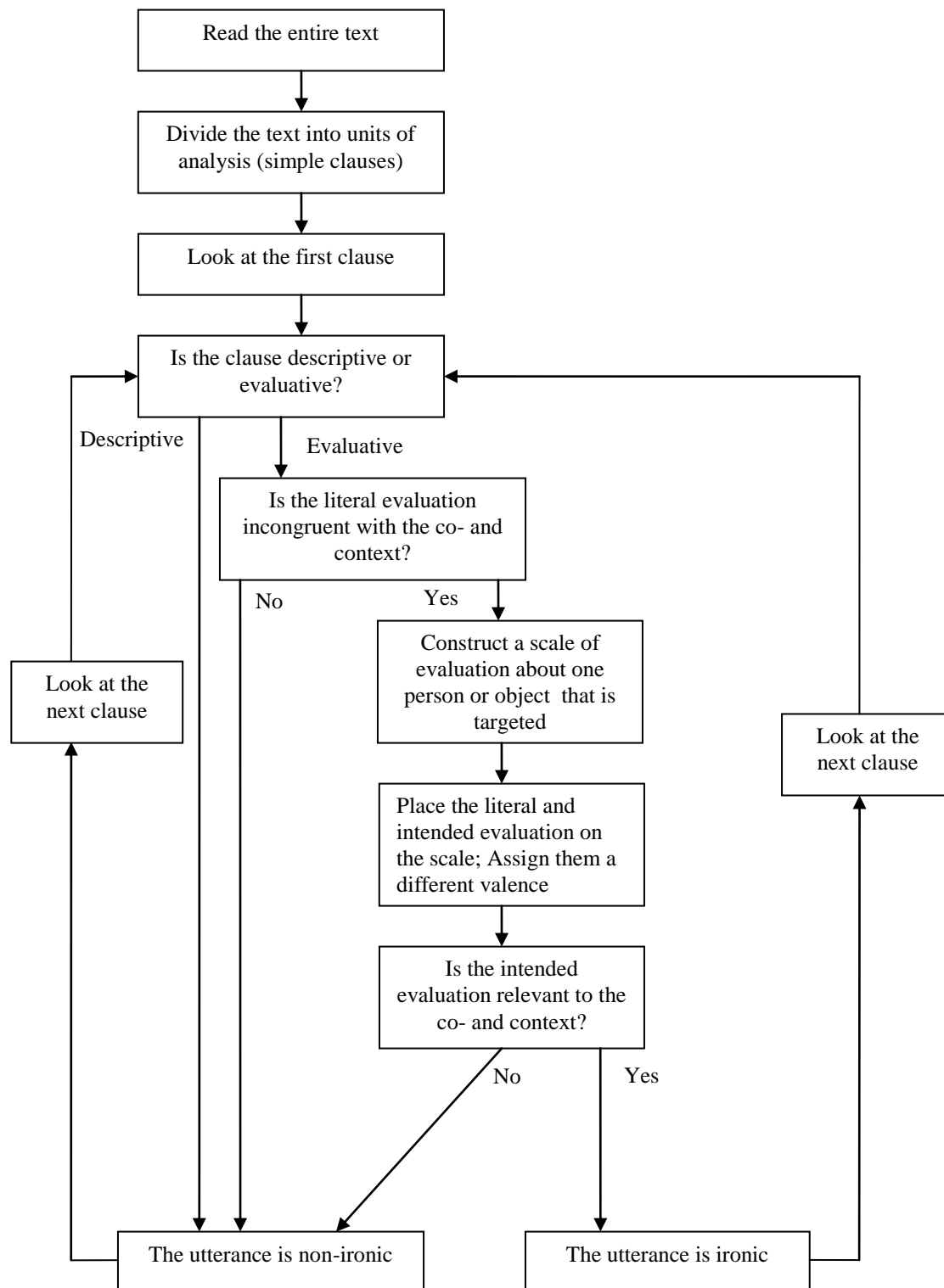
Figure 1. Advertisement for *Computer Idee*

Figure 2. Desirability of the discounted price of *Computer Idee*

0

Discounted price is bad/ shameful

Discounted price is good/ not shameful

Figure 3. Coding scheme of verbal irony procedure (VIP)

```
                        ┌─────────────────────────┐
                        │    Read the entire text   │
                        └────────────┬────────────┘
                                     ▼
                        ┌─────────────────────────┐
                        │  Divide the text into units of │
                        │   analysis (simple clauses)    │
                        └────────────┬────────────┘
                                     ▼
                        ┌─────────────────────────┐
                        │    Look at the first clause    │
                        └────────────┬────────────┘
                                     ▼
                        ┌─────────────────────────┐
            ┌──────────►│  Is the clause descriptive or  │◄──────────────┐
            │           │        evaluative?             │               │
            │           └────────────┬────────────┘               │
            │  Descriptive       │  Evaluative                          │
            │                     ▼                                      │
            │       ┌─────────────────────────┐                   │
            │       │  Is the literal evaluation     │                   │
            │       │  incongruent with the co- and  │                   │
            │       │          context?              │                   │
            │       └────┬──────────────┬──┘                   │
            │         No │          Yes │                          │
            │            │              ▼                          │
            │            │    ┌─────────────────────┐        │
     ┌──────┴──────┐     │    │  Construct a scale of      │        │
     │  Look at the │     │    │  evaluation about one      │        │
     │  next clause │     │    │  person or object that is  │   ┌────┴─────┐
     └──────┬──────┘     │    │          targeted          │   │ Look at the│
            ▲            │    └──────────┬──────────┘   │ next clause│
            │            │               ▼                  └────┬─────┘
            │            │    ┌─────────────────────┐        ▲
            │            │    │  Place the literal and     │        │
            │            │    │  intended evaluation on    │        │
            │            │    │  the scale; Assign them a  │        │
            │            │    │  different valence         │        │
            │            │    └──────────┬──────────┘        │
            │            │               ▼                       │
            │            │    ┌─────────────────────┐        │
            │            │    │  Is the intended           │        │
            │            │    │  evaluation relevant to the│        │
            │            │    │  co- and context?          │        │
            │            │    └────┬──────────────┬┘        │
            │            │      No │          Yes │            │
            │            │         │              ▼            │
            │            ▼         ▼        ┌───────────────┐
     ┌──────┴──────────────────────────┐   │  The utterance is  │
     │   The utterance is non-ironic     │   │      ironic        ├──┘
     └───────────────────────────────┘   └───────────────┘
```

Figure 4. Evaluation of Sarah Nolan's character: Non-ironic hyperbole

0

Sarah is selflessness incarnate   Sarah is quite selfless   Sarah is very self-centered

X   X

Scale 2: Evaluation of Sarah Nolan's character: Non-ironic hyperbole

Figure 5. Evaluation of the plot of MUST LOVE DOGS

Outcome of plot uncertain → film is captivating   Outcome of plot predictable → film is boring
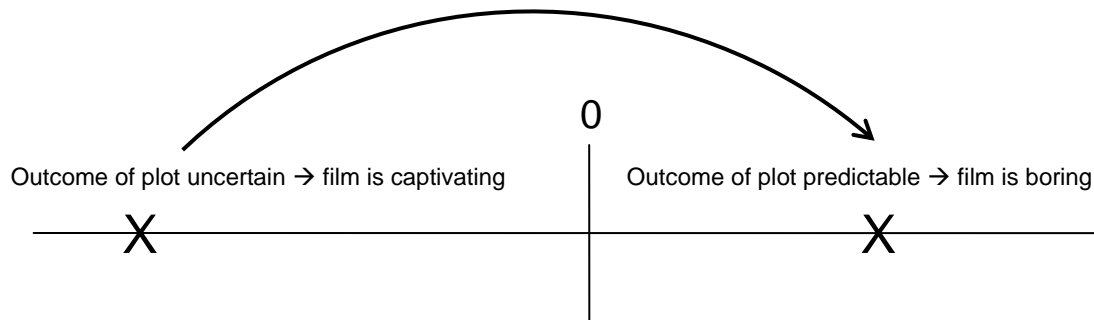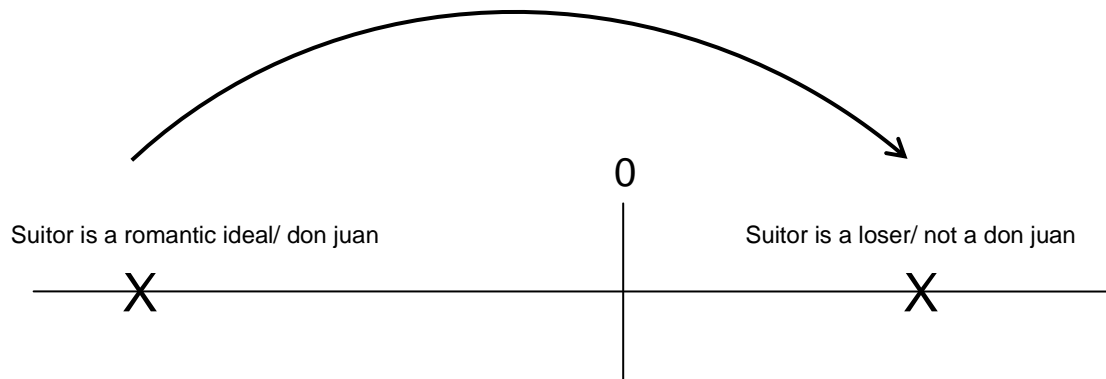
0

Figure 6. Evaluation of the suitor

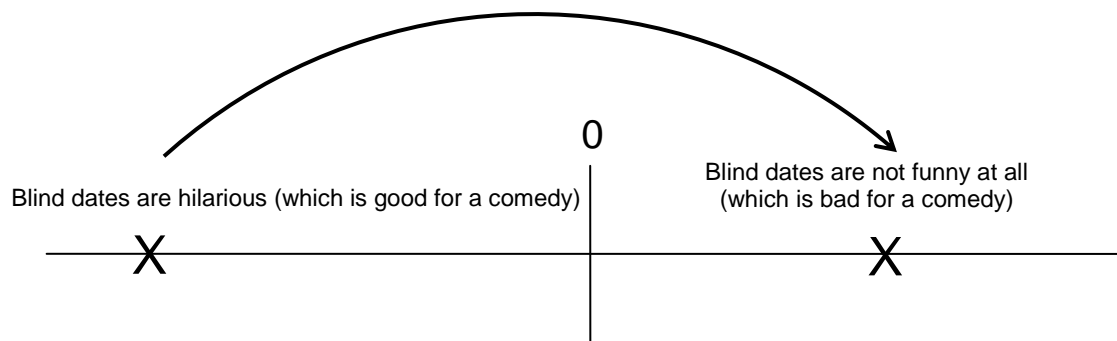*Figure 7.* Evaluation about the comic nature of the dates

Figure 8. Evaluation about the quality of the film MUST LOVE DOGS

0

MUST LOVE DOGS is a film you may want to see | MUST LOVE DOGS is a film you should not see at all