Journal of Experimental Psychology: General
1995, Vol. 124, No. 1, 3-21


0096-3445/95/$3.00

# How About Another Piece of Pie: The Allusional Pretense Theory of Discourse Irony

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The allusional pretense theory claims that ironic remarks have their effects by alluding to a failed expectation. In normal conversation, this is accomplished by violating pragmatic rules of discourse, usually the maxim of sincerity. Such violations simultaneously draw a listener's attention to the failed expectation and express the speaker's attitude (normally but not necessarily negative) toward the failed expectation. Using a variety of utterance types, 3 experiments tested the theory. The first experiment, using 4 speech act types, showed that both insincerity and allusion were perceived far more frequently in ironically intended utterances than in literally intended ones. The second experiment demonstrated that the negative attitudes frequently expressed with ironic utterances are a function of the relative frequency of positive versus negative expectations and not an intrinsic characteristic of discourse irony per se. The third experiment found that over-polite requests are more likely to be used ironically than under-polite ones, presumably because the former can serve a speaker's politeness considerations while simultaneously conveying both an intended request and the speaker's attitude. It was concluded that irony is used primarily to express a speaker's attitude toward the referent of the ironic utterance, while simultaneously fulfilling other goals as well, such as to be humorous, to make a situation less face threatening, and to serve politeness considerations.



In a recent novel by a contemporary novelist, a woman enters a police station and asks the guard at the desk where she can find a certain police detective. The guard telephones for the information, and the following interchange is then described:

> " 'Three five one,' the guard repeated slowly. 'Third floor. Think you can make it on your own?'
> 'Just about, I should think, thank you very much.'
> Her attempt at irony did not make the slightest impression on the man's fatuous complacency. You couldn't beat them at their own game, of course." (Didbin, 1988, p. 249)

Three distinct instances of discourse irony are described here. The woman's answer "just about" is irony in the form of understatement. Her expression of gratitude "thank you very much" is irony in the form of over-politeness. And, as indicated by her observation that one couldn't beat them at their own game, the guard's initial question "think you can make it on your own?" is irony in the form of an insincere question: The guard does not really expect an answer to his question. Instead, his utterance is intended as an ironic barb.

What is interesting about these three clear instances of discourse irony is that not one of them is accounted for by any of the theories of irony that have been proposed thus far (cf. Grice, 1975, 1978; Jorgensen, Miller, & Sperber, 1984; Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989; Sperber & Wilson, 1981, 1986). In this article we will review those theories, in particular those that have been submitted to empirical test. We then present a new theory of discourse irony that is intended to account for the entire range of ironic utterance types, along with some experimental tests of the theory.

Why do people use ironic expressions, and how are ironic expressions recognized? We can distinguish between two general kinds of irony: situational irony and discourse irony. Situations are ironic when an expectation is violated or otherwise invalidated in specific ways (Lucariello, 1994; Muecke, 1969). O. Henry's short story, *The Gift of the Magi,* (Porter, 1912) contains a classic example of situational irony. An impoverished husband and wife each make sacrifices that render one another's gifts useless. He sells his gold pocket-watch to buy her a tortoise-shell brooch for her hair; she cuts off her hair and sells it so that she can buy a gold fob for his watch. The double irony lies in the particular way that their expectations were foiled. Note that it is the specific connection between what a person does and the violated expectation that produces the irony in this case. If, for example, someone had decided to trade in his pocket-watch for a wristwatch and then received a watch fob as a gift, we would not necessarily characterize the situation as ironic. As Lucariello pointed out, unexpectedness is a central property of ironic events. Such events can be referred to

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We are grateful for the financial support provided by the Public Health Service Grant HD25826. The research reported here was performed as a doctoral dissertation submitted to Princeton University by Sachi Kumon-Nakamura.

We thank Roger Kreuz for providing us with materials, and Boaz Keysar, Susan Fussell, Phillip Johnson-Laird, Deanna Manfredi, Matthew McGlone, and Deborah Prentice for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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literally (e.g., "You bought a watch fob for me . . . how ironic!"), or they can serve as an occasion for ironic remarks (e.g., "What a wonderful gift . . . just what I needed!").

Just as situational irony does not necessitate ironic language, ironic language does not require situational irony. Like situational irony, however, ironic language also involves failed expectations of one kind or another. Consider a situation in which two people approach a door. The first person to reach the door opens it and lets it swing shut behind her. The second person, carrying a heavy box, says, (1) "Don't hold the door open; I'll just say 'open sesame.'" or (2) "Thanks for holding the door." Both (1) and (2) are ironic.[1] Each expresses the speaker's displeasure or disapproval at having a door slammed in her face, and each is patently insincere. Further, both utterances allude to the expectation that doors will be held open for people who are burdened and cannot open doors for themselves. And, like our opening examples, both utterances also pose serious problems for the traditional pragmatic theory of discourse irony.

According to pragmatic theory (Grice, 1975, 1978; Searle, 1979), participants in conversation implicitly observe the cooperative principle, which includes following the maxims to be truthful and to be relevant in conversation. When a speaker says something that is obviously false, such as "What lovely weather" during a downpour, a listener must reject the literal meaning as the intended meaning and infer that the speaker means the opposite of what was said. This account is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it fails to provide the motivation for saying the opposite of what one means. Second, it is not clear that expressions such as (1) and (2) above are literally the opposite of what was intended. What, for example, might be the opposite of "Thanks for holding the door?" Because the notion of opposite meanings is applicable only to declarative assertions—assertions that can be judged as either true or false—the traditional pragmatic theory fails to account for the ironic uses of other types of expressions, such as requests, offers, or expressions of thanks, among others. The pragmatic theory also fails in those cases where the assertion is true but is nonetheless intended ironically, as when an annoyed listener says "You sure know a lot" to someone who is arrogantly and offensively showing off knowledge.

More recent accounts of irony abandon the concept of opposite meaning and focus instead on the concept of echoing. When using irony, a speaker is said to echo either someone's thoughts or feelings, or conventional wisdom, expectations, or preferences. Sperber and Wilson (1981, 1986), for example, proposed that irony involves echoic interpretation. When someone utters "what lovely weather" during a rainstorm, the intent is not to inform anyone about the state of the weather, but instead to express an attitude. The attitude is expressed in this case by echoing conventional preference for good weather. Sperber and Wilson also suggested that irony is generally used to express disapproval. For example, expressions such as "what terrible weather" uttered when the weather is actually gorgeous would normally be considered anomalous because there is no prior expectation or preference that the weather should be terrible. However, saying "what terrible weather" on a beautiful day can communicate irony when both speaker and listener share knowledge of a relevant antecedent event, such as someone's faulty prediction that the weather would be terrible (Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989). In such cases, the irony can serve to remind the listener of that prediction and thus call attention to the discrepancy between what was expected and the actual state of affairs. More generally, Kreuz and Glucksberg proposed that irony is used to remind of antecedent events, social norms, or shared expectations in order to call attention to a discrepancy between what is and what should have been.

Calling attention to a discrepancy between what is and what should have been implies that an important function of discourse irony is to express negative attitudes, often disappointment. However, although people generally do use irony to express negative attitudes such as disappointment, negativity may not be an intrinsic property of the ironic form. Kreuz and Long (1991) and Long and Kreuz (1991) have argued that irony can be used to accomplish a variety of communication goals. In one of their studies, subjects listed the goals that could be fulfilled by using irony in discourse. The most frequently listed goal was to emphasize a point, followed by to be humorous; being derogatory was the third most frequently listed goal. Other goals, in order of frequency, were to express emotion, to alleviate personal/social discomfort, to provoke a reaction, to get attention, to manage the conversation, and to dissemble. Because the relative frequency of these goals depends upon the sample of items chosen for the experiment, these frequency data need not reflect relative frequency of use in natural settings. However, these data clearly indicate that expressing a negative attitude is not a necessary property of irony.

What are the necessary properties of irony in discourse? The echo theories, outlined above, claim that irony must always echo some prior event or expectation. In cases such as a faulty weather prediction, echoing seems an apt term for the speaker's utterance. In many other cases, it is not immediately apparent that the speaker is echoing any specific utterance or even any specific unspoken thought. This problem is apparent when we consider the various ways that irony can be expressed. In addition to the counterfactual assertive, irony can be communicated in at least four other ways: (a) true assertions, such as "You sure know a lot" to someone who is arrogantly showing off their knowledge; (b) questions, such as "How old did you say you were?" to someone acting inappropriately for their age; (c) offerings, such as "How about another small slice of pizza?" to someone who has just gobbled up the whole pie; (d) over-polite requests, such as "Would you mind very much if I asked

[1] Some of the expressions that we examine are examples of ironic sarcasm, whereas others are ironic but not sarcastic. Sarcastic irony is used to express a negative attitude as well as to insult or hurt to some degree. Nonsarcastic irony can be used to express either negative or positive attitudes, but in neither case is intended to hurt or insult any particular person. We deal with both types of irony in this paper.

you to consider cleaning up your room some time this year?" to an inconsiderate and slovenly housemate.

With the possible exception of (a), which could be construed as an echoic interpretation of the offensive person's view of himself or herself, the question, offering, and request examples do not seem to be echoic, although in rare instances they could be. Instead, they seem to be allusive: All four examples allude to expectations or norms that have been violated. The allusion can be direct, as in utterances that explicitly echo a prior utterance, or they can be indirect, as in examples (b)–(d) above. Because echoic utterances can be subsumed under the more general rubric of allusion, we propose that echoic interpretation is not a necessary property of discourse irony. Instead, the more general claim is that an allusion to some prior prediction, expectation, preference, or norm is a necessary property of discourse irony. More specifically, a necessary property of discourse irony is an allusion to some prediction, expectation, preference, or norm that has been violated. Thus, the allusional function of irony is not simply a type of topical reference or cohesion, but refers specifically to a discrepancy between what is expected (what should be) and what actually is.

A second characteristic of discourse irony is also apparent in these as well as other examples, namely, insincerity. In the paradigmatic case where people use a counterfactual assertion in order to communicate irony, the speaker does not sincerely intend to inform the listener about a state of the world. Saying that the weather is wonderful when in fact it is terrible is an insincere description of the weather. In such cases, people can be insincere by uttering a false statement. However, people can also be insincere yet utter a true statement. Saying "you know a lot," as in example (a) above, is true, but is also insincere as a compliment. The speaker in this case expresses a negative attitude toward the recipient of the remark. Example (b) above also involves insincerity. The speaker asks a question, but does not want to know the answer, presumably because the answer is already known. Instead, the speaker asks the question in order to rebuke the addressee. Similarly, in offering more pizza to a glutton who has polished off everything in sight, one neither wants nor expects the offer to be accepted, and so it is an insincere offer. Finally, using over-polite language when asking someone to do something that should have been done as a matter of routine also involves insincerity. The person making the request does not intend the excessive politeness, but instead uses over-polite language in order to express an attitude of irritation toward the recipient of the request. We suggest that all ironically intended utterances involve *pragmatic insincerity,* in that they violate one or more of the felicity conditions for well-formed speech acts.

Felicity conditions were originally described by Austin (1962), and then elaborated on by Searle (1969, 1979), as conditions that every utterance should satisfy in order to be a well-formed, smoothly functioning speech act. Felicity conditions concern (a) the propositional content of an utterance, (b) the status of both the speaker and the hearer of the utterance, (c) the sincerity of the psychological state expressed or implied by the utterance, and (d) the perception of the speaker's sincerity by the hearer. Pragmatic insincerity occurs when a speaker is perceived as intentionally violating felicity conditions for at least one of these aspects of an utterance. For example, declarative assertions should be true, compliments should be true and taken as compliments rather than rebukes, questions should be asked only when an answer is desired, offers should be made only when acceptance is desirable, and politeness levels should be appropriate to the situation. Whenever conventions such as these are violated, a speaker may be perceived as being intentionally insincere.

Insincerity thus may be a necessary condition for discourse irony, but it is certainly not a sufficient condition. When a speaker is perceived as lying, for example, irony would not be communicated. The insincerity must be at the pragmatic, not at the substantive, level. In addition to pragmatic insincerity, ironic utterances must also allude to some prior expectation, norm, or convention that has been violated in one way or another. These two prerequisites for ironically intended utterances are not inconsistent with the echo theories discussed above, but instead are more general statements of those theories. Because the hypothesis involves both allusion and pragmatic insincerity, we will refer to it as the allusional pretense theory of irony.[2]

The theory makes two major claims:

1. Ironic utterances are intended to be allusive in that they are intended to call the listener's attention to some expectation that has been violated in some way. Ironic remarks that are echoic accomplish this kind of allusion by either explicitly or implicitly echoing some prior utterance or some prior thought (cf. Jorgensen et al., 1984; Sperber & Wilson, 1981, 1986), but we propose that echoing or echoic interpretation are not the only ways that allusion to unfulfilled expectations is accomplished in ordinary discourse.

2. Pragmatic insincerity is a criterial feature of ironic utterances. The standard pragmatic theory (Grice, 1975, 1978; Searle, 1979) considered only one type of insincerity, semantic or propositional insincerity, namely, uttering false assertions. In standard pragmatic theory, a necessary condition for verbal irony is saying the opposite of what one means, in short, making a counterfactual statement. This formulation is too restrictive because there are a variety of utterance types that cannot be counterfactual because the criterion of truth is simply not applicable. Among such utterance types are compliments, questions, and requests. Such utterance types are neither true nor false, but they can be sincere or insincere. The construct of pragmatic insincerity rather than truth is thus the more general because it is the more inclusive.

Echo and reminder theories, although not explicitly limited to utterances that can be either true or false, have

[2] We use the term *pretense* to refer to pragmatic insincerity. The same term was used by Clark and Gerrig (1984) to refer to an ironist who is "pretending to be an injudicious person speaking to an uninitiated audience" (p. 121). Their use of the pretense concept is confined to the use of propositions, in the tradition of Grice (1975). If such pretense is extended to the full range of speech acts, it becomes equivalent to our concept of pragmatic insincerity.

nevertheless been exclusively focused on this one utterance type, assertives. With respect to these theories, the allusional pretense theory claims to be the more general and inclusive.

We report three experiments that examine some of the empirical implications of the allusional pretense theory. Experiment 1 examines whether people perceive both allusion to failed expectations and insincerity in ironically intended utterances.

Experiment 2 addresses the issue of asymmetry in irony. Generally, irony can be communicated by using positive statements in the context of negative events, as when one says "thank you very much" to someone who has just stepped on one's toes. Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989) demonstrated that irony could be communicated by using negative statements in the context of positive events, provided that the ironist could allude to an explicit antecedent event, such as saying "what terrible weather" on a beautiful day to refer to a faulty forecast of rain. In Experiment 2 we extend this finding to the case where there are implicit rather than explicit antecedent conditions: (a) when people's expectations are negative and are then disconfirmed by a positive event, and (b) when there are expectations of appropriate quantity that are disconfirmed in either direction. The reminder theory of Kreuz and Glucksberg was limited to explicit antecedent events that people could be reminded of. The allusional pretense theory makes the more general claim that reminding per se is not a necessary condition for irony. Instead, calling attention to any expectation that has been violated is the more general condition for interpreting an utterance as ironic.

Experiment 3 examines another asymmetry in discourse irony, the use of over-polite requests rather than under-polite requests to communicate irony. As indicated above, Grice's (1975) pragmatic theory did not address this issue at all, focusing exclusively on assertions that could be judged either true or false. As such, it does not address the ironic use of requests. The echo and reminder theories also do not address the issue of why over- rather than under-polite requests communicate irony. The allusional pretense theory accounts for this asymmetry in terms of the joint operation of allusion to a violated expectation and the intentional use of pragmatic insincerity.

## Experiment 1: Pragmatic Insincerity and Allusional Function

According to the allusional pretense theory, utterances will be perceived as ironic if they are perceived as insincere and if they are also perceived as alluding to a discrepancy between an expectation and reality. Because the theory was developed to account for counterfactual assertions and for the entire range of ironic forms, this experiment sampled a variety of utterance types from four major speech act categories: assertives, directives, commissives, and expressives. Assertives are utterances that purport to describe some state of the world. Examples of the kinds of assertives that we sampled are:

i. Counterfactual statements.

a. Positive surface form, such as "This certainly is beautiful weather" when the weather is actually terrible.

b. Negative surface form, such as "You certainly don't know how to cook!" addressed to a cook who had claimed incompetence in the kitchen yet had prepared a superb dinner.

c. Neutral surface form, such as "This is a long paper!" addressed to someone who had written a very short paper.

ii. True statements, such as "You sure know a lot" addressed to someone who is indeed knowledgeable but is being obnoxious about it.

Directives are statements that are intended to get someone to do something. The directives that we sampled included (a) questions, such as "How old are you?" addressed to an adult who is behaving childishly; and (b) over-polite requests, such as "I'm sorry to bother you but I'm just wondering if it is at all possible for you to maybe consider turning the music down a little bit?" addressed to a noisy neighbor late at night.

Commissives are statements that commit the speaker to an action, such as an offering. An example would be to say "Would you like to have another small slice of pizza?" to someone who has eaten a large pizza by himself. Expressives are statements that directly communicate a speaker's feelings, such as "Thank you for your concern" addressed to someone who has shown no concern at all.

Experiment 1a served as a pilot study and pretest for the materials of Experiment 1b. Participants in Experiment 1a were given a set of stories to read and asked to describe speakers' intentions in uttering potentially ironic statements and also to judge the degree of irony intended by speakers. Experiment 1a also served as a preliminary test of whether utterances perceived as ironic were also perceived as alluding to a failed expectation and as insincere. Experiment 1b tested these hypotheses directly, using the materials provided by Experiment 1a.

### Experiment 1a: Does Irony Involve Allusion and Insincerity?

#### *Method*

*Participants.* Thirty undergraduate students at Princeton University participated in this study for pay. All were native English speakers, and none had participated in a similar experiment before.

*Materials and design.* Fifty-two short stories were written in which two or three people have a brief interaction and at the end one of them makes a remark to another. Some of the stories were adapted from Gibbs (1986), Jorgensen et al. (1984), Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989), and Kreuz and Long (1991); the rest were prepared specifically for this study. Of the 52 stories, 26 were nonliteral. Twenty-two of the nonliteral stories contained a critical sentence that was potentially ironic, 2 contained a remark with a metaphoric intention, and 2 contained a conventional indirect request. The stories with metaphors and conventional indirect requests were included as fillers and also as checks to ensure that

participants did not perceive just any nonliteral utterance as ironic, insincere, or allusive.

Of the 22 irony stories, 10 contained assertives (four positive counterfactual statements, two negative counterfactual statements, one neutral counterfactual statement, and three factual statements), 9 contained directives (four requests and five questions), 1 contained a commissive (offering), and 2 contained expressives (thanking). We chose this set of items because we wanted a diverse sample of ironic utterance types. The remaining 26 stories were literal. Table 1 presents an example of an irony story and a literal story with the same critical utterance. The stories had a mean length of 67 words.

Two sets of booklets were constructed, each of which contained 13 nonliteral stories (11 with potentially ironic remarks, 1 with a metaphoric remark, and 1 with a conventional indirect request) and 13 literal stories. Story type (literal vs. nonliteral) was counterbalanced between the two sets such that the literal and the nonliteral versions of the same story did not appear together in one set. The presentation order of the stories was randomized for each booklet.

*Procedure.* Participants were tested individually and were randomly assigned to one of the two sets of booklets. Participants began the experiment by reading the following instructions printed on the first page of their booklets:

> "I am interested in how people use language to communicate ideas to one another. As you know, people can accomplish this in a variety of ways. In the following pages you will read a number of short stories. In each story, two or three characters will have a brief interaction, and at the end, one of the characters will say something to another character.
>
> For each short story, there will be two questions about the character's final remark. Please answer those questions in a few sentences. After answering the questions, please judge how ironic the character's final remark (shown in bold type) seems to you, if at all. There will be a rating scale on which to indicate your judgment. The scale will be 1 to 7, where 1 means 'not at all ironic,' 4 means 'somewhat ironic,' and 7 means 'definitely ironic.'
>
> Before you begin, please look over a few of the stories. This will give you a general feel for the types of stories you will be seeing. If you occasionally find yourself unsure about your response, just use your best judgment. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers: I am simply interested in your intuitions. Please be sure to provide answers and ratings for all the stories. Thank you very much for your participation."

The participants then read the stories and answered three questions for each story: (a) "What do you think [the character] is trying to get across?" (b) "Why do you think [the character] said '[the critical utterance]' in order to convey what you mentioned above?" and (c) "How would you rate [the character's] final comment? Please circle the number that corresponds to your choice." Participants answered by indicating their responses on the 7-point scale described above. The participants took about 35 min to complete the booklets.

### *Results and Discussion*

The primary purpose of this pilot study was to obtain items to be used in Experiment 1b, thus our initial concern was with the irony ratings for items in ironic and nonironic story contexts. Our criterion for considering an item as suitably ironic was whether or not it was rated as significantly more ironic in ironic contexts than in literal contexts. Only one item failed to meet this criterion, a true assertive, and so it was dropped from the sample of irony items. Excluding the two metaphor and two indirect request stories, the mean irony ratings for the remaining literal and nonliteral irony stories were 2.35 and 5.61, respectively. This difference is reliable, $t(21) = 11.11$, $p < .001$. With respect to utterance types, one might have expected that assertives would receive the highest irony ratings because they have been the focus of virtually all prior studies of irony and have generally been considered prototypical of ironic utterances. This was not the case. The mean irony rating for assertives was 5.95, not reliably different from the mean irony rating of 5.36 for the other utterance types combined. Indeed, the highest mean irony rating (6.10) was given to expressives (insincere thanks), with directives (mean rating = 5.14) and commissives (mean rating = 5.87) in between. In any case, these differences among utterance types are not reliable.

We turn now to the responses for each story as a function of story context—literal vs. nonliteral. The responses for each story were compiled and rated by two independent judges for how explicitly the factors of interest appeared. The responses were examined in terms of the following: (a) explicit mention of the speaker being insincere (e.g., the speaker didn't mean what was said or the speaker intended the opposite of what was literally said) and (2) explicit mention that the utterance was allusive (e.g., the speaker was trying to draw the listener's attention to some aspect of the situation). The responses were also examined in terms of what attitude was explicitly expressed: positive, negative, or neutral. For example, funny, witty, humorous, compliment,

Table 1
*Examples of Stories Used for Experiment 1*

| Knowledgeable Danny |
|---|
| *Irony version* |
| During the precept, Danny was dominating the discussion. He certainly seemed to be familiar with the subject, but he was obnoxious in the way he showed off his knowledge. Jesse, one of Danny's classmates, said, "You sure know a lot." |
| *Literal version* |
| Danny was helping Jesse with his calculus homework. Jesse was very bad at calculus and he had no clue about what he was supposed to do. However, Danny explained, starting from the basics, and finally Jesse managed to finish his homework. Jesse said to Danny, "Thank you. You sure know a lot." |

*Note.* Subjects were asked to judge how ironic the character's final remark seemed to them.

light-hearted, and so forth were considered to indicate positive attitudes; anger, annoyance, irritation, and so forth indicated negative attitudes. When no specific attitude was mentioned, it was scored as neutral. Although not blind to the hypotheses, the judges were blind to the story contexts as well as to the type of target sentence (ironic and literal) when coding responses.

Table 2 presents the proportions of responses that included explicit mention of insincerity, allusion, and attitude. The percentages of agreement between the two judges for their scoring of insincerity, allusion, and attitude were 95.6%, 94.7%, and 97.9%, respectively. For the stories with potentially ironic utterances, participants explicitly mentioned that the speaker (a) did not sincerely intend what was said 69% of the time and (b) was trying to draw the listener's attention to some aspect of the situation 36% of the time. In contrast, for the literal counterparts of these stories, insincerity was mentioned only 4% of the time and allusion 11% of the time. One-way analyses of variance[3] revealed that the proportions of reported insincerity and allusion were significantly higher for irony stories than for their corresponding literal stories: for insincerity, $F_1$ (1, 29) = 493.72, $MS_e$ = .01, $p < .001$; $F_2$ (1, 21) = 86.61, $MS_e$ = .05, $p < .001$; for allusion, $F_1$ (1, 29) = 69.16, $MS_e$ = .02, $p < .001$; $F_2$ (1, 21) = 26.50, $MS_e$ = .03, $p < .001$. These data confirm our expectation that participants would perceive insincerity and allusion more often in ironic utterances than in literal ones.

With respect to attitudes, positive attitudes were explicitly mentioned 11% of the time for irony stories and 23% for literal stories, whereas negative attitudes were explicitly mentioned 18% of the time for irony stories and 6% for literal stories. These data were subjected to a 2 (Story type: Literal vs. Irony) × 2 (Attitude type: Positive vs. Negative) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA). The $F$ values for the main effect of story type were less than 1.0. The main effect of attitude was reliable when participants was treated as a random factor, $F$ (1, 29) = 6.32, $MS_e$ = .01, $p < .02$, but not with items as a random factor. More importantly, the interaction of story type with attitude was reliable, $F_1$ (1, 29) = 52.48, $MS_e$ = .01, $p < .001$, and $F_2$ (1, 21) = 5.60, $MS_e$ = .06, $p < .05$. For literal stories, more positive attitudes were expressed than negative ones, whereas the reverse was true for the irony stories. Although speakers may use either literal or ironic expressions to express attitudes, irony seems to be used more frequently to express a negative attitude, whereas the reverse seems to be true for literally intended utterances.

Table 2
*Proportion of Responses With Explicit Mention of Insincerity, Allusion, and Speaker's Attitude*

| Story type | Insincerity | Allusion | Attitude | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Pos. | Neg. | Neut. |
| Irony | .69 | .36 | .11 | .18 | .71 |
| Literal | .04 | .11 | .23 | .06 | .71 |
| Metaphor | 0 | .03 | .13 | .10 | .77 |
| Literal | 0 | .06 | .27 | .07 | .66 |
| Indirect request | 0 | .03 | .03 | 0 | .97 |
| Literal | 0 | .26 | .03 | 0 | .97 |

*Note.* Pos. = positive; Neg. = negative; Neut. = neutral.

Among the nonliteral stories, participants never indicated that speakers in the metaphor and the indirect request stories were being insincere in any way. Similarly, participants rarely indicated that speakers in the metaphor or the indirect request stories were trying to draw the listener's attention to some aspect of the situation. These data suggest that the participants' responses to the irony stories were not just responses to nonliteral language per se, but instead were specific to ironic intentions. Although the data for metaphoric expressions and indirect requests cannot be generalized because of the small number of items (two stories each), they do provide an important manipulation check for nonliteral language in this pilot study. All four of the nonironic but nonliteral expressions were described by a majority of the participants as "sincere," "honest," "direct," "genuine," "exactly what the speaker means," and so forth. These responses contrast sharply with those for ironically intended utterances, which were largely characterized as insincere. These data strongly suggest that what makes an expression ironic is not whether it is nonliteral, but rather whether it is intended sincerely.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from a comparison between ironic and literal uses of expressions such as "You sure know a lot." When this was uttered in a literal context, a majority of participants indicated that not only did the speaker sincerely mean that the person was knowledgeable, but also that the speaker sincerely admired the person. In contrast, when the same sentence was uttered in an ironic context, many participants indicated that the speaker was annoyed by the obnoxiousness of the person while at the same time admitting that the person was knowledgeable.

Another example of insincerity at the pragmatic level can be seen in the use of over-polite requests. Participants frequently pointed out that the speaker was being overly polite (such as "He acted as polite as possible, yet it wasn't sincere"), while acknowledging a real desire for the listener to fulfill the request. Although the speaker is sincerely making a request, he or she does not sincerely intend to express respect toward the listener. These observations suggest that the kind of insincerity involved in ironic utterances is not at the semantic or propositional level, but rather is at the pragmatic level.

Utterances in everyday discourse thus can simultaneously convey the propositional contents of an utterance along with the speaker's communicative intention(s), such as to convey appreciation, admiration, approval, criticism, respect, sympathy, anger, and so forth. What makes an utterance ironic is not merely whether or not a speaker sincerely means what is literally said at the propositional level, but rather whether or not a speaker sincerely intends to convey the pragmatic

[3] Here and throughout the article, analyses were computed, when appropriate, with both subjects and items as random factors. The $F$ values for subjects will be denoted by $F_1$, for items by $F_2$.

communicative intention(s) that the utterance would ordinarily convey.

In addition to pragmatic insincerity, the allusive function of ironic utterances is also important. Allusion was mentioned about one third of the time. Considering that the only responses scored as referring to allusion were those that explicitly stated that the utterance drew the listener's attention to some aspect of the situation that violated an expectation, this is a reasonably high rate. Examples of responses that were judged as explicitly mentioning the allusive function of utterances are "... she [the speaker] mentions the opposite to draw attention to how ugly it really is" as a comment on "This certainly is beautiful weather"; "To bring Bill's attention to the late hour" for "What time is it now?"; and "She's tactfully getting Vicky to notice her speed" for "Aren't you going too slow?" uttered when the driver is speeding.

The results of Experiment 1a, then, are compatible with the hypothesis that utterances convey irony when they are perceived as pragmatically insincere and as alluding to some failed expectation or norm. To test these hypotheses more specifically, we used a more constrained experimental task to assess the degree to which pragmatic insincerity and allusion are perceived in ironically intended utterances. By using a more constrained experimental task, we hope to have a more sensitive test of the hypothesis that pragmatic insincerity and allusion to an expectation are criterial features of ironic utterances. Accordingly, an independent group of participants was asked to read both ironically intended and literally intended utterances in contexts and to indicate directly (a) whether speakers were sincerely trying to convey the pragmatic communicative intention of the critical utterance in each story and (b) whether the critical utterances drew listeners' attention to certain expectations.

## Experiment 1b: Ironic Insincerity and Allusional Function

### Method

*Participants.* Thirty Princeton undergraduates participated for pay. All were native English speakers, and none had previously participated in an experiment involving irony.

*Materials and task.* Seventeen nonliteral stories, all rated as being ironic in Experiment 1a, and their literal story counterparts were used as materials. For each story, two statements were generated to correspond with the two conditions, allusion and pretense (or pragmatic insincerity). The statements for each story were derived from participants' responses in Experiment 1a, based on the felicity conditions of each critical utterance. For example, the following statements were provided for the story shown in Table 1: "Jesse is trying to draw Danny's attention to the way Danny's acting" and "Jesse is sincerely admiring Danny for his knowledge." Participants were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with each of these statements. An analogous set of two statements each was provided for the irony and literal versions of each story.

*Design and procedure.* Two sets of booklets were constructed. One contained eight irony stories and nine literal stories, and the other contained eight literal stories and nine irony stories. Story type (literal vs. irony) was the only factor in this design and was counterbalanced between the two sets such that the same critical sentence never appeared twice in one set. The presentation order of the stories was randomized for each booklet.

Participants were tested individually and were randomly assigned to one of the two booklets. Participants were given instructions that were identical, except for the second paragraph, to the instructions given for Experiment 1a. The second paragraph of those instructions was replaced with the following:

> "For each short story, two statements about the character's final remark (shown in bold type) will be provided. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each statement. Next, please rate the character's final comment in terms of the following three aspects: (1) whether the remark is negative or positive; (2) whether the remark is derogatory or not; and (3) whether the remark is humorous or not. There will be rating scales on which to indicate your judgment."

The 7-point scales provided were (a) how positive or negative is [the character]'s final remark, with 1 indicating extremely negative and 7 indicating extremely positive; (b) how derogatory is [the character]'s final remark, with 1 not at all derogatory; and (c) how humorous is [the character]'s final remark, with 1 not at all humorous.

### Results and Discussion

The mean proportions of agreement with each statement for the irony and literal stories are shown in Figure 1. For the irony stories, participants perceived allusion 97% of the time, compared with 56% of the time in the literal stories. In contrast, participants agreed that speakers were sincere 4% of the time in irony stories, compared with 87% of the time in literal stories. A 2 × 2 (Story Type: Irony vs. Literal × Statement Type: Allusional vs. Sincere) repeated measures

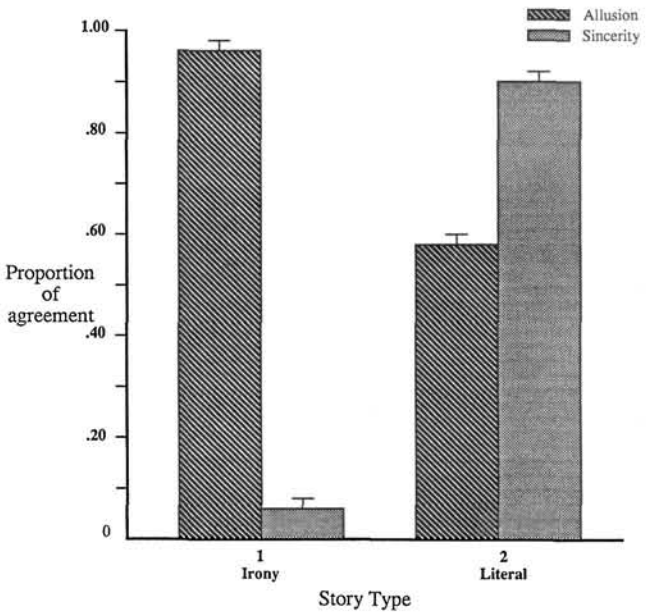


*Figure 1.* Mean proportion of subjects agreeing that (1) speakers intended to allude to some expectations and that (2) speakers intended to make the utterances sincerely.

ANOVA applied to these data yielded a main effect of story type, $F_1$ (1, 29) = 99.50, $MS_e$ = .013, $p < .001$ and $F_2$ (1, 16) = 19.20, $MS_e$ = .04, $p < .001$, as well as a main effect of statement type, $F_1$ (1, 29) = 209.66, $MS_e$ = 0.01, $p < .001$ and $F_2$ (1, 16) = 54.00, $MS_e$ = .03, $p < .001$. The finding of primary interest is the reliable interaction between the two factors, $F_1$ (1, 29) = 775.83, $MS_e$ = 0.02, $p < .001$ and $F_2$ (1, 16) = 246.89, $MS_e$ = .03, $p < .001$. This interaction reflects the agreement among participants that the critical utterance alludes to some expectation more frequently for irony stories than for literal stories, whereas the speaker is almost never sincere in irony stories but is sincere in most literal stories.

These data indicate that perceived allusion and speaker insincerity differentiate ironically intended utterances from literal ones. The rather high proportion of participants perceiving allusion in literal utterances (.56) is not inconsistent with this conclusion because literal utterances, too, can allude to what has been said previously (e.g., when a lecture was boring and someone says "It was tedious, wasn't it?"). The important finding is that allusion is almost invariably perceived in ironically intended utterances, supporting the hypothesis that allusion is central to irony. The hypothesis concerning sincerity was also supported. Virtually all ironically intended utterances were perceived as insincere, whereas the majority of these same utterances in literally intended contexts were perceived as sincere. As predicted, then, ironic utterances were characterized as both allusive and insincere.

With respect to the degree to which ironic and literal utterances were positive or negative, derogatory, and humorous, the ratings are consistent with the view in the literature. Ironically intended utterances were rated as more negative, more derogatory, and more humorous than were those same utterances when literally intended. The mean ratings on these scales for ironic and literal utterances are shown in Table 3. These data were analyzed using a repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA)—with participants as a random variable—with the three rating scales (positive–negative, derogatory–not derogatory, and humorous–not humorous) as dependent variables and the two story types (irony vs. literal) as independent variables. The analysis yielded reliable effects for rating scale, story type, and the interaction of rating scale and story type, $F$ (2, 40) = 7.30, $MS_e$ = 1.22, $p < .002 < .01$, $F$ (1, 20) = 31.98, $MS_e$ = .40, $p < .001$, and $F$ (2, 40) = 28.49, $MS_e$ = 1.96, $p < .001$, respectively. These effects are interpreted via univariate ANOVAS as reported below.

Table 3
*Mean Ratings on Positive-Negative, Derogatory, and Humorous Scales (SDs)*

| | Scale | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Story type | Positive-Negative | Derogatory | Humorous |
| Ironic | 2.33 (0.98) | 4.52 (1.23) | 3.77 (1.08) |
| Literal | 4.76 (1.37) | 1.88 (0.90) | 1.88 (0.89) |

*Note.* On a 7-point scale: 1 = *extremely negative*, 7 = *extremely positive.*

A repeated measures ANOVA reveals that ironic utterances were rated as less positive than literal utterances. Ironically intended utterances received a mean rating of 2.33, whereas these same utterances in literal contexts received a mean rating of 4.76, $F_1$ (1, 29) = 523.81, $MS_e$ = 0.17, $p < .001$ and $F_2$ (1, 16) = 24.40, $MS_e$ = 2.05, $p < .001$. Ironic utterances ($M$ = 4.52) were also rated as more derogatory than literal utterances ($M$ = 1.88), $F_1$ (1, 29) = 178.11, $MS_e$ = 0.56, $p < .001$ and $F_2$ (1, 16) = 40.08, $MS_e$ = 1.47, $p < .001$. Finally, ironic utterances ($M$ = 3.77) were rated as more humorous than literal utterances ($M$ = 1.88), $F_1$ (1, 29) = 86.93, $MS_e$ = 0.61, $p < .001$ and $F_2$ (1, 16) = 56.36, $MS_e$ = 0.53, $p < .001$. It is worth noting that on all three scales ironically intended utterances were rated as more extreme than were those same utterances in literal contexts. The positive–negative rating for literal utterances was close to 4.0, the neutral point of the scale, and close to the neutral points of the other two scales, where a rating of 1.0 indicated not at all derogatory/humorous. These data support the long-standing view that irony is used to express a negative or positive attitude or intention (i.e., when a speaker is not affectively neutral about a topic).

As expected, the derogatory ratings and positive–negative ratings were correlated (the more positive, the less derogatory; $r = -.62$, $p < .001$), suggesting that participants were using the scales appropriately. There was no reliable correlation between positive–negative ratings and humorousness ratings, but we did obtain a reliable correlation between the derogatory ratings and the humorous ratings, $r$ = .58, $p < .001$, suggesting that people tend to be humorous when being derogatory. To the extent that humor is intended, irony may serve multiple goals: expressing attitudes (generally negative) and derision, as well as humor.

The relative degrees of speaker attitudes obtained in this study, of course, are entirely a function of the materials that we used, and thus we cannot generalize to natural discourse situations. To the extent that our sample is representative of irony in natural settings, the data strongly suggest that irony involves pragmatic insincerity and allusion to some expectations, and that speakers' attitudes expressed in irony can include negativity, derision, and humor.

## Experiment 2: Implicit Social Norms and the Asymmetry of Discourse Irony

Theorists of irony agree that a major purpose for using ironic expressions is to communicate an ironist's attitude rather than to communicate specific propositional content. In principle, there are no restrictions to the kinds of attitudes that an ironist can express. Nevertheless, Sperber and Wilson contend that "irony is primarily designed to ridicule. . ." (1981, p. 241). The traditional pragmatic theory also claimed that the most usual purpose of irony is to express a negative, derogatory feeling, attitude, or evaluation. The asymmetry in how counterfactual statements can

be used ironically reflects the generalization that negative attitudes are the default condition. People can almost always express irony by using a positive assertion, such as "This is a terrific performance" when in fact the performance in question is terrible. The reverse, using a negative statement such as "This is a terrible performance" when the performance is actually quite good, seems anomalous.

Sperber and Wilson (1981) suggest that the asymmetry of irony may be attributable to the general prevalence of positive norms and expectations. If norms and expectations are usually positive, then most failed expectations would be negative events, making insincere positive statements generally appropriate for expressing irony. This hypothesis implies that if an expectation were to be negative, then a negative statement in the context of a positive event that disconfirmed that expectation would convey irony. Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989) confirmed this hypothesis for sarcastic irony. They reasoned that if an explicit negative expectation is available to both a speaker and a listener, then a negative statement uttered in a positive context could convey irony. When explicit negative expectations were provided, as when someone had incorrectly predicted rain and the day turned out to be sunny, then negative statements were perceived appropriately as ironic, such as "what terrible weather" uttered on a gorgeous day.

Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989) restricted their analysis to explicit antecedents, consistent with their notion of echoic reminding. The allusional pretense theory posits the more general mechanism of allusion, which can be accomplished via an explicit reminder, or via implicit reference to shared norms or expectations. If allusions can be made without explicit echoing or reminding, then explicit negative antecedents should not be necessary for negative utterances to communicate irony. All that should be necessary is any deviation from an expectation or norm, whether that expectation be explicit or implicit. To test this hypothesis, we used two kinds of situations. The first involved situations where expectations were negative, such as the state of subway cars in New York City. People generally expect New York subways to be dirty, so if one encounters a clean train, the remark "New York subways are certainly dirty" should communicate irony. The second kind of situation involves expectations of appropriate quantity. In such situations a remark about a departure from expectation in either direction (too much or too little) should communicate irony. If a term paper, for example, were too short, then the comment "what a long paper" should communicate irony, and vice versa.

In both of these kinds of situations, there should be no asymmetry. Where specific expectations are negative, negative remarks in positive contexts should be able to communicate irony. Furthermore, because positive norms and expectations are the general default condition, positive remarks in negative contexts should also communicate irony even when specific expectations are negative, as in the New York subway situation. If the subways are in fact dirty, then saying "New York subways are certainly clean" should communicate irony on the basis of the general norm that passenger trains should be clean. Similarly, deviations from an appropriate quantity in either direction should not produce asymmetry: A remark about any deviation from expectation should be able to communicate irony. Experiment 2 tests these predictions in the context of situations for which people have negative expectations and for situations involving expectations of appropriate quantity.

## Method

*Participants.* Forty Princeton undergraduates participated in the study for pay. An additional 26 students provided normative ratings (see below). All were native English speakers, and none had participated earlier in any related studies.

*Materials.* We first prepared a set of 10 candidate statements that we judged to express negative expectations that people would generally hold (e.g., "The air in Los Angeles is dirty"). We also prepared a set of 10 candidate statements about appropriate quantity (e.g., "A room's temperature should not be too hot, nor too cold"). Twenty filler statements were added to this set of 20 candidate experimental items, and 26 Princeton undergraduate students rated the extent to which they agreed with each statement, using a 7-point scale. The candidate statements that received mean agreement ratings of 5.0 or higher were selected for use in this experiment: nine statements of negative expectations and seven of appropriate medium quantity.

Sixteen pairs of test sentences were then presented in test booklets as follows. Half of the sentences were either negative statements, such as "New York subways are certainly dirty," or statements about too much quantity vis-à-vis a norm, such as "What a long concert that was!" The other half of the test sentences were direct opposites of the corresponding sentences: that is, either positive statements, such as "New York subways are certainly clean," or statements about too little quantity vis-à-vis a norm, such as "What a short concert that was!" For each pair of these test sentences, two kinds of contexts were constructed: positive or negative contexts (or, for those statements about quantity expectations, too-much or too-little). Examples of these contexts are shown in Table 4.

For the Positive-Negative contrast, four types of short stories were generated by factorially crossing Context Type (Positive or Negative) with Sentence Type (Positive or Negative). Similarly, four types of short stories were generated for the Too-Much/Too-Little contrast, by factorially crossing Context Type (Too-Much or Too-Little) with Sentence Type (Too-Much or Too-Little). Sixty-four short stories (four combinations for each of 16 story frames) were thus generated altogether. The stories had a mean length of six lines.

*Design and procedure.* A 2 × 2 within-participants design was used. The factors Context Type (Positive vs. Negative or Too-Much vs. Too-Little) and Sentence Type (Positive vs. Negative or Too-Much vs. Too-Little) yielded four story types. Four sets of booklets were constructed, each containing 16 stories. The booklets were counterbalanced for type of story (Context Type × Sentence Type) with each story appearing only once in a booklet. The presentation order of the stories was randomized for each booklet.

Forty participants were randomly assigned to one of four sets of booklets. They were instructed to rate how ironic/sarcastic, if at all, the character's final remark seemed to them. Seven-point rating scales were provided for each story, where 1 indicated "Not at all ironic/sarcastic," 4 indicated "Moderately ironic/sarcastic," and 7 indicated "Extremely ironic/sarcastic."

Table 4
*Examples of Story Contexts and Target Sentences in Experiment 2*

| Story about a negative expectation: New York subway |
|---|
| Positive context |
| Pamela and Emily were visiting New York City for the first time. They took a subway and found it was sparkling clean. Surprisingly, they also found no graffiti at all on the train. As they were leaving the platform, Pamela whispered to Emily,<br>"New York subways are certainly clean!" (*Positive statement*)<br>Or<br>"New York subways are certainly dirty!" (*Negative statement*) |
| Negative context |
| Pamela and Emily were visiting New York City for the first time. They took a subway and found it was terribly dirty. They also found graffiti written all over the train. As they were leaving the platform, Pamela whispered to Emily,<br>"New York subways are certainly clean!" (*Positive statement*)<br>Or<br>"New York subways are certainly dirty!" (*Negative statement*) |
| **Story about an appropriate medium quantity expectation: The term paper** |
| Too-Much Context |
| Greg was enrolled in psychology 200 this semester, along with several humanities courses. Although all of them required term papers, he put special effort into the psychology paper, because he enjoyed that class so much. Greg found an interesting topic and did a lot of library research. Despite the fact that the paper was to be between 15 to 20 pages in length, his paper turned out to be more than 50 pages. He tried to cut it down, but he couldn't. Feeling terrible, he submitted it to his instructor, Matt. As he flipped through the long paper, Matt commented,<br>"This is a very long paper!" (*Too-Much Statement*)<br>Or<br>"This is a very short paper!" (*Too-Little Statement*) |
| Too-Little Context |
| Greg was enrolled in psychology 200 this semester, along with several humanities courses. To his dismay, all of them required term papers. The night before the psychology paper was due, Greg was still thinking about the topic. By the morning, he managed to write five pages, despite the fact that the paper was to be between 15 to 20 pages in length. Feeling terrible, he submitted it to his instructor, Matt. As he flipped through the short paper, Matt commented,<br>"This is a very long paper!" (*Too-Much Statement*)<br>Or<br>"This is a very short paper!" (*Too-Little Statement*) |

*Note.* Subjects were asked to rate how ironic/sarcastic the character's final remark seemed to them.

## *Results and Discussion*

We present the data and analyses for the negative and the quantity expectations separately.

*Negative expectations.* As expected, the mean irony ratings for counterfactual statements were higher than for true statements, 5.6 and 2.2, respectively. More interesting, negative statements in positive contexts were rated as quite ironic (5.0 on a scale where 4.0 indicates moderately ironic and 7.0 is maximally ironic). As predicted, when a negative expectation is disconfirmed (e.g., New York subways turn out to be clean), then the negative statement "New York subways are certainly dirty" can allude to that expectation and communicate irony. Also as predicted, because the default condition is a positive expectation, a positive statement such as "New York subways are certainly clean" can also communicate irony when the subways are in fact dirty. The mean irony ratings as a function of statement and context polarity are shown in Figure 2. A 2 × 2 repeated measures ANOVA was applied to these data.

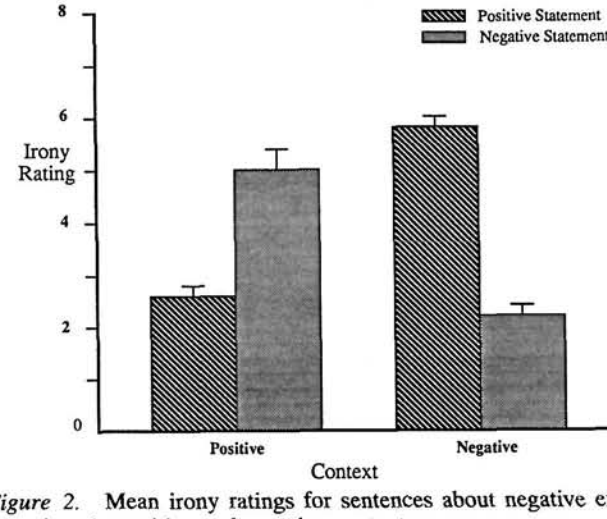


*Figure 2.* Mean irony ratings for sentences about negative expectations in positive and negative contexts.

There was no main effect of context, $F_1$ (1, 39) = 1.52, $MS_e$ = .66, $p > .05$; $F_2$ (1, 8) = 1.36, $MS_e$ = .27, $p > .05$. The main effect of sentence polarity was reliable. Positive statements were rated as more ironic than negative, regardless of context polarity, $F_1$ (1, 39) = 35.40, $MS_e$ = 1.04, $p < .001$ and $F_2$ (1, 8) = 8.48, $MS_e$ = .80, $p < .02$, indicating that positive statements, in general, are rated as more ironic than negative statements. More important, the interaction between sentence and context polarities was also highly reliable, $F_1$ (1, 39) = 231.33, $MS_e$ = 1.92, $p < .001$ and $F_2$ (1, 8) = 221.37, $MS_e$ = .46, $p < .001$, reflecting the higher irony ratings for counterfactual over factual statements.

A $t$ test with items as a random factor revealed that the difference between the mean irony ratings for positive and negative statements in positive contexts (2.53 vs. 5.02) was highly reliable, $t(8) = 10.27$, $p < .001$. This result confirms the hypothesis that when there is a negative expectation, a negative statement uttered in a positive context can be used ironically without an explicit negative antecedent.

When the context was negative, positive statements were more likely to be used ironically than negative statements, $t(8) = 21.07$, $p < .001$, despite the existence of specific but implicit negative expectations. This result confirms the prediction that, even when there are specific negative expectations, counterfactual positive statements can still be used ironically because of general positive expectations or norms such as "things should be kept clean." Corresponding $t$ tests with participants as a random factor yielded equivalent results.

Taken together, these results support the implicit social norm hypothesis. Ironic expressions can generally allude to implicit social norms and expectations. Therefore, when negative expectations are available, negative statements regarding positive situations can be used ironically. Positive statements regarding negative situations can be used ironically whether or not there exists a specific negative expectation, because positive statements can always allude to general positive expectations or norms.

Over and above the implicit social norm hypothesis, these data also support the allusional pretense theory. Counterfactual statements convey irony more than do factual statements, supporting the notion that pragmatic insincerity is a necessary condition for irony. And, although the default condition is that positive statements can always be used ironically, negative statements can also be used ironically when implicit expectations or norms are negative, supporting the claim that allusion is also a necessary condition for communicating irony.

*Quantity expectations.* As expected, insincere remarks about quantity were judged as more ironic than sincere remarks. Insincere remarks (e.g., commenting on how short a paper was when it was patently too long and vice versa) received a mean irony rating of 6.22, whereas sincere remarks received a mean rating of 1.72. Also as expected, the direction of deviation from expectation made no difference: insincere comments about too much were rated as ironic as insincere comments about too little, mean ratings 6.05 and 6.38, respectively. These data are shown in Figure 3. A 2 × 2 repeated measures ANOVA applied to these data revealed no main effects for either context (deviation from expectation in one direction vs. the other) or statement type (too-much vs. too-little). For the context contrast, $F_1$ (1, 39) = 1.50, $MS_e$ = .88, $p > .05$ and $F_2$ (1, 6) = 3.22, $MS_e$ = .05, $p > .05$. For the statement contrast, both $F$ values were less than 1. There was, as expected, a reliable interaction between context and statement type, reflecting the higher irony ratings for insincere statements, $F_1$ (1, 39) = 1022.44, $MS_e$ = .79, $p < .001$ and $F_2$ (1, 8) = 5487.10, $MS_e$ = .03, $p < .001$. Too-much statements were perceived as ironic only when they were uttered in Too-little contexts, and Too-little statements were interpreted as ironic only when they were uttered in Too-much contexts.

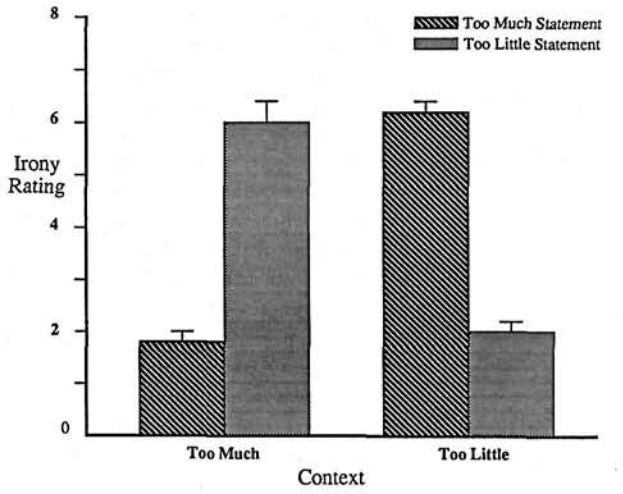


*Figure 3.* Mean irony ratings for sentences about medium quantity expectations in Too-Much and Too-Little contexts.

These data provide further support for the hypothesis that any violation of norms or expectations can be alluded to ironically and that such allusions communicate irony when they are insincere. In the case of assertives in general, positive counterfactual statements serve this purpose, but negative counterfactual statements require either explicit or implicit negative expectations. In the case of comments about quantity, counterfactuals work in the same way, but there is no default condition vis-à-vis exceeding or falling short of a norm or expectation. The necessary condition is simply any deviation from an expectation, combined with an insincere allusion to that expectation.

## Experiment 3: Using Over-Polite Requests to Communicate Irony

There are two kinds of public self-image, or "face," that members of a society want to claim for themselves (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). One is the image of being desirable and acceptable to others, and the other is the image of one's actions being unimpeded by others. The use of irony, either sarcastic or nonsarcastic, may serve to

maintain one's own face, as well as the face of others, particularly when things have gone awry or are unexpected and when commenting directly on such situations may be face threatening. Brown and Levinson argue that when a person, assumed to be a rational agent, has to engage in a potentially face-threatening act, such as giving a negative evaluation, or mentioning an embarrassing or unpleasant topic, that person would try to use some strategy to minimize the threat. Irony is one of the available strategies.

Although ironic expressions are often used to avoid being directly face threatening, they can still be used to insult others. When an utterance is accompanied with cues that suggest irony, such as obvious insincerity, a listener will interpret the utterance ironically. The speaker's face-threatening communicative intention then becomes apparent and the utterance can be insulting. However, because the speaker did not commit to any particular intention to insult, at least on the surface, the speaker can always offer the defense that no impolite act was committed. Being excessively polite could have this effect, that is, to insult a listener without making the speaker appear to be rude (cf. Becker, Kimmel, and Bevill, 1989; Blum-Kulka, 1987; Holtgraves, 1986). Ironic expressions could thus allow a speaker to maintain outer face, while effectively conveying a negative attitude.

A common occasion for using irony in this way is when one has to make a request when no request should have been necessary in the first place. Consider a situation in which a college student, Jill, had asked her roommate to keep the windows closed because she was often cold. Her roommate, however, is forgetful and does not fulfill the request. This situation provides an occasion for irony: An expectation has been disconfirmed, and Jill is now disappointed and perhaps annoyed or irritated. She now has at least two intentions to communicate: (a) her disappointment and irritation that her earlier request had been ignored and (b) a repeated request that the windows be kept closed. She can communicate both of these intentions simultaneously by using an over-polite request such as "Would you mind if I asked you to keep the windows closed, please?" Such unexpectedly over-polite utterances are often interpreted as ironic. Interestingly, unexpectedly under-polite requests that could communicate the same two intentions of expressing irritation and repeating a request are likely to be interpreted as rude, but not ironic (Becker et al., 1989; Blum-Kulka, 1987; Holtgraves, 1986).

Why should over-polite utterances communicate irony more than under-polite utterances? Both over-polite and under-polite utterances can allude to a failed expectation or norm, but only over-polite utterances are likely to be perceived as insincere. When a speaker is unexpectedly over-polite, listeners may well doubt the speaker's sincerity in being so polite. In contrast, when a speaker is under-polite, listeners are quite likely to perceive intentional or unintentional rudeness, but not insincerity. A speaker's choice of politeness level should thus be guided by the intentions to be communicated and also by politeness considerations. If speakers wish to avoid being rude, then they should avoid direct confrontations. If, at the same time, a speaker wishes to express irritation, then it can be done by being over-polite. If insincerity is perceived by an addressee, then irony should be communicated, and the addressee would understand both the intended request and the speaker's displeasure. If insincerity is not perceived, then the speaker avoids being considered rude but still succeeds in conveying a request. Experiment 3 examines the relations between perceived insincerity, rudeness, insultingness, and irony, using comprehension and rating measures.

Are over-polite requests perceived as insincere and ironic? According to the allusional pretense theory of irony, over-polite requests should communicate irony, whereas under-polite requests should not. One reason for this asymmetry is that the former would be perceived as insincere, but the latter would not. Both under- and over-polite requests should communicate a request and should also communicate the speaker's displeasure, but the under-polite request, because it is perceived as sincerely under-polite, should also be perceived as rude. In contrast, over-polite requests avoid a direct confrontation, but do communicate a speaker's displeasure and so could be perceived as insulting, but not rude.

To test these hypotheses, we asked participants to read short stories in which a protagonist is annoyed or irritated and then makes a request that is over-polite, appropriately polite, or under-polite. The participants then rated the extent to which the request was (a) sincerely polite/impolite, (b) ironic, (c) rude, and (d) insulting to the addressee. Table 5 provides an example of the stories that were used.

We expected that over-polite requests would be rated as more ironic than either appropriately polite or under-polite requests. More specifically, over-polite requests that are judged to be insincerely over-polite should be rated as more

Table 5
*Example of the Materials Used in Experiment 3*

| |
|---|
| Jill asked her roommate to keep the windows of their room closed, explaining that she was often cold. Jill had to repeat this request several times. Still, her roommate left the windows open again. Jill says to her roommate, |
| Over-polite |
| "Would you mind if I asked you to keep the windows closed, please?" |
| Appropriately polite |
| "Would you keep the windows closed?" |
| Under-polite |
| "Keep the windows closed." |

ironic than their corresponding under-polite requests, but they should be just as insulting as under-polite requests. Over-polite requests that are perceived as sincere should be perceived as no more ironic than their corresponding appropriately polite or under-polite requests. Finally, over-polite requests, whether perceived as ironic or not, should be less rude than their under-polite counterparts.

## Method

*Participants.* Forty-five Princeton undergraduates participated in this study for pay. All were native English speakers, and none had participated in any other experiments involving irony. Thirty of these participants participated in the experiment proper; the other 15 provided ratings of materials for the experiment.

*Materials.* The experimental design required requests at three levels of politeness: over-, appropriately, and under-polite. Fifteen participants were given a booklet of 18 stories. Each story involved an annoyed protagonist and was followed by five different forms of requests. The participants were asked to rate each request form in terms of its politeness level. A 7-point scale, where −3 indicated "under-polite," 0 indicated "appropriate," and 3 indicated "over-polite," was provided for each request form. The five forms of requests were (a) an imperative, such as "Keep the windows closed," (b) an imperative 'please,' such as "Please keep the windows closed," (c) a conventional indirect request, such as "Would you keep the windows closed?" (d) an elaborated indirect request, such as "Would you mind if I asked you to keep the windows closed, please?" and (e) a hint, such as "You have opened the windows again." The presentation orders of the stories were randomized for each participant, but the presentation order of the five request forms were kept constant for all the stories.

Mean politeness ratings were calculated for each request form of each story. For each story, three request forms—the most over-polite, the most under-polite, and the most appropriately polite—were selected, according to their mean politeness ratings. When there were more than two request forms that received the same politeness rating, one of them was randomly chosen.

For all of the stories, elaborated indirect requests were the most over-polite, with a mean rating of 1.48. For the appropriately polite requests, imperatives plus 'please' were chosen for eight stories, conventional indirect requests were chosen for nine stories, and hints were chosen for one of the stories. The mean rating for this politeness level was −0.18. For the least polite (under-polite) requests, imperatives were chosen for 15 stories and hints were chosen for 3 stories. The mean rating for this request form was −1.62.

The ratings procedure described above provided the materials for Experiment 3: 18 short stories in which a speaker makes a request of another person who has irritated or annoyed that speaker. The critical request sentences were at one of three levels of politeness, as described above. Three sets of booklets with instructions and the 18 stories were constructed. Level of politeness was the only factor in the experimental design, and requests at each level were counterbalanced such that the same story appeared only once in each booklet. In addition, presentation order of the stories was randomized for each booklet.

*Procedure.* Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three booklets and were then individually tested. Each participant read the following instructions printed on the booklet's first page:

> "I am interested in how people use language to communicate ideas to one another. As you know, people can accomplish this in a variety of ways. People can be more or less polite in a conversation. Sometimes, people will use irony or sarcasm to get a point across. People will even be rude or insulting on occasion—sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally.
>
> In the following pages you will read a number of short stories. In each story, two characters have a brief interaction, and at the end, one of the characters says something to the other character.
>
> I would like you to rate the character's final remark (shown in bold type) with respect to the following four aspects: (a) how sincerely you think the character intends to be polite or impolite; (b) how ironic/sarcastic the character's remark sounds; (c) how rude/ill-mannered you think the character is; and (d) how insulting you think the character's remark is. The four scales on which you should indicate your ratings will be given with each story.
>
> Before you begin, please look over a few of the stories. This will give you a general feel for the types of stories you will be seeing. If you occasionally find yourself unsure about your rating, just use your best judgment. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers: I am simply interested in your intuitions. Please be sure to provide a rating for all the stories. Thank you very much for your participation."

The participants then read the stories and provided their ratings. The first scale was for the speaker's sincerity to be polite or impolite: For stories with appropriately polite and over-polite requests, participants were asked "Do you think [the character] intends to be polite?" and for the stories with an under-polite request, "Do you think [the character] intends to be impolite?" The second question was "How ironic/sarcastic do you think [the character's] request sounds?" and the third was "How rude or ill-mannered do you think [the character] is?" The participants indicated their ratings on a 7-point scale, where 1 meant "not at all," 4 meant "not sure," and 7 meant "very much." The last question was "How insulting do you think [the character]'s remark is?" The participants again indicated their ratings on a 7-point scale, where 1 meant "not at all insulting," 4 meant "neutral," and 7 meant "very much insulting." Participants took about 25 min to complete the booklets.

## Results and Discussion

Table 6 presents the mean ratings of irony, sincerity, rudeness, and insultingness as a function of politeness level.

Table 6
*Mean Ratings of Sincerity, Degree of Irony, Rudeness, and Insultingness as a Function of Politeness Level (SDs)*

| Rating scale | Politeness level | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Over-polite | Appropriate | Under-polite |
| Irony | 3.85 | 2.23 | 1.98 |
| | (1.27) | (0.91) | (0.89) |
| Rudeness | 2.31 | 2.33 | 4.49 |
| | (1.30) | (0.98) | (0.76) |
| Insultingness | 3.50 | 3.04 | 4.17 |
| | (0.87) | (0.77) | (0.76) |
| Sincerity | 4.22 | 4.81 | 4.15 |
| | (1.20) | (1.05) | (1.05) |

*Note.* Politeness based on a 7-point scale: 1 = *not polite at all*, 4 = *unsure*, 7 = *very polite.* Insultingness based on a 7-point scale: 1 = *not at all insulting*, 4 = *neutral*, 7 = *very insulting.*

A repeated measures multivariate ANOVA—with participants as a random variable—and the four rating scales (irony, sincerity, rudeness, and insult) as dependent variables and three levels of politeness (over-, appropriately, and under-) as independent variables yielded reliable effects for Rating Scale, Politeness Level, and the interaction of Rating Scale × Politeness Level, $F$ (3, 27) = 28.46, $F$ (2, 28) = 22.52, and $F$ (6, 24) = 35.01, respectively, $p$'s < .001. These effects are interpreted via univariate ANOVAS as follows:

The mean irony ratings were 3.85 for over-polite requests, 2.23 for appropriately polite requests, and 1.98 for under-polite requests. A repeated measures ANOVA yielded a reliable effect of politeness level, $F_1$ (2, 58) = 40.16, $MS_e$ = .77, $p$ < .001 and $F_2$ (2, 34) = 21.71, $MS_e$ = .86, $p$ < .001. Post-hoc single degree-of-difference contrast analyses showed that over-polite requests were rated reliably more ironic than appropriately polite ones, $F_1$ (1, 29) = 42.72, $MS_e$ = 1.84, $p$ < .001 and $F_2$ (1, 17) = 19.25, $MS_e$ = 2.44, $p$ < .001, and more ironic than under-polite requests, $F_1$ (1, 29) = 48.03, $MS_e$ = 2.19, $p$ < .001, and $F_2$ (1, 17) = 31.89, $MS_e$ = 1.98, $p$ < .001. As expected, appropriately polite and under-polite requests did not differ in perceived irony, $F_1$ (1, 29) = 3.29, $MS_e$ = .60, $p$ > .05 and $F_2$ (1, 17) = 1.67, $MS_e$ = .71, $p$ > .05. These results indicate that over-polite requests were more likely to be taken ironically than either appropriately polite or under-polite requests.

As expected, under-polite requests were rated as most rude, with a mean rating of 4.62, compared to mean ratings of 2.31 and 2.39 for over-polite and appropriately polite requests, respectively. These differences were reliable, with participants as a random variable, as indicated by a main effect of politeness level, $F$ (2, 58) = 94.36, $MS_e$ = 1.09, $p$ < .001. Post-hoc single degree-of-difference contrast analyses indicated that under-polite requests were rated as reliably more rude than either appropriately polite or over-polite requests, $F$ (1, 29) = 125.92, $MS_e$ = 4.75, $p$ < .001 and $F$ (1, 29) = 129.89, $MS_e$ = 4.95, $p$ < .001, respectively, whereas ratings for the latter two politeness levels did not differ from one another ($F$ < 1). These data are consistent with the hypothesis that over-polite requests can communicate irony without the risk of appearing rude.

However, the mean rudeness ratings of the over-polite requests may have been artifactually depressed because, overall, the irony ratings were fairly low (3.85 on a 7-point scale where 4.0 is the midpoint and was labeled as "not sure" vis-à-vis ironic). To address this problem, the over-polite items were divided into two categories, those with mean irony ratings 4.0 and higher and those with ratings below 4.0. This procedure yielded 10 stories in which an over-polite request was rated as ironic and 8 in which an over-polite request was rated as not ironic. The mean rudeness ratings for high- and low-irony stories as a function of politeness level are presented in Table 7 (along with insultingness ratings, as discussed below).

As expected, under-polite requests were considered more rude than either their over- or appropriately polite counterparts, with a mean rating of 4.10 compared with ratings of 2.51 and 2.14, respectively. A two-way repeated measures ANOVA of these data—with participants as a random variable—revealed a main effect of politeness level, $F$ (2, 28) = 94.36, $MS_e$ = 1.10, $p$ < .001. Contrast analyses showed that under-polite requests differed reliably from over-polite and appropriate requests, $F$ (1, 29) = 129.89, $MS_e$ = 4.95, $p$ < .001 and $F$ = 125.92, $MS_e$ = 4.75, $p$ < .001, respectively, whereas over-polite and appropriate requests did not differ reliably ($F$ < 1).

Table 7a
*Mean Rudeness Ratings as a Function of Irony and Politeness Levels (SDs)*

| Irony level | Politeness level | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Over-polite | Appropriate | Under-polite |
| High | 2.51 | 2.14 | 4.10 |
| | (0.51) | (0.41) | (0.95) |
| | $n$ = 10 | $n$ = 10 | $n$ = 10 |
| Low | 2.05 | 2.61 | 4.98 |
| | (0.38) | (1.03) | (0.68) |
| | $n$ = 8 | $n$ = 8 | $n$ = 8 |

*Note.* $n$ denotes number of stories in each cell;

Table 7b
*Mean Insultingness Ratings as a Function of Irony and Politeness Levels (SDs)*

| Irony level | Politeness level | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Over-polite | Appropriate | Under-polite |
| High | 4.02 | 2.90 | 4.08 |
| | (0.72) | (0.53) | (0.82) |
| | $n$ = 10 | $n$ = 10 | $n$ = 10 |
| Low | 2.85 | 3.26 | 4.31 |
| | (0.86) | (1.20) | (0.98) |
| | $n$ = 8 | $n$ = 8 | $n$ = 8 |

*Note.* $n$ denotes number of stories in each cell.

An analogous analysis of the insultingness ratings revealed the expected pattern of results. Over-polite requests that were considered ironic were rated as insulting as their under-polite counterparts, with mean ratings of 4.0 and 4.1, respectively. Over-polite requests that were not considered to be ironic were not rated as insulting at all. The mean rating of 2.88 for nonironic over-polite requests is not reliably different from the insultingness rating for appropriately polite requests, 3.27. A two-way repeated measures ANOVA applied to these data, again with participants as a random variable, revealed that under-polite requests differed reliably from the other two forms of request, $F$ (2, 58) = 14.67, $MS_e$ = 1.36, $p$ < .001, whereas there was no effect of level of irony ($p$ < .20). However, there was a reliable interaction between irony level and insultingness, $F$ (2, 58) = 8.63, $MS_e$ = 1.13, $p$ < .001, reflecting the high insultingness rating of over-polite requests that were perceived as ironic (3.96), as compared with the low insultingness ratings of such requests that were not perceived as ironic (2.88). These results, along with the rudeness results, support the notion that communicating irony via ove--politeness serves to communicate negative attitudes without appearing rude. At the same time, when over-politeness

is not perceived as ironic, then neither rudeness nor insult is perceived, permitting a speaker to avoid losing face.

We now turn to the relationship between pragmatic insincerity and irony. Over-polite utterances, according to our hypothesis, should be considered as ironic whenever the speaker is perceived as being insincere, that is, did not intend to be as polite as the utterance might suggest. We have already noted that the overall ratings of irony were rather low, below the scale midpoint of 4.0 (see Table 6). In order to assess whether perceived insincerity is related to perceived irony, we partitioned each request type into two categories, those that received mean insincerity ratings of 4.0 or greater and those that received mean ratings of less than 4.0 (the scale midpoint, where 1.0 is maximally sincere and 7.0 is maximally insincere). Twelve over-polite stories, 16 appropriately polite stories, and 11 under-polite stories were rated as sincere, and 6 over-polite stories, 2 appropriately polite stories, and 7 under-polite stories were rated as insincere. Accordingly, only participant analyses were performed on these data because of the unequal *n*s in each cell, as well as the few items in some cells (e.g., only two appropriately polite stories were rated as insincere).

Over-polite requests that were rated as insincerely polite received a mean irony rating of 5.2, whereas over-polite requests that were seen as sincerely polite were not rated as ironic, with a mean rating of 3.0 (see Figure 4). In contrast, under-polite requests were not rated as ironic, whether they were rated as sincere or not (2.2 and 1.8, respectively). Appropriately polite requests were rated as not ironic, whether sincere or not (2.4 and 2.1, respectively).

A 3 × 2 repeated measures ANOVA of these data, with participants as a random variable, confirmed these interpretations. There was a main effect of politeness level, $F$ (2, 58) = 34.77, $MS_e$ = 2.32, $p < .001$, and of sincerity, $F$ (1, 29) = 9.41, $MS_e$ = 1.15, $p < .005$, as well as a reliable interaction between sincerity and politeness level, $F$ (2, 58) = 21.56, $MS_e$ = 1.42, $p < .001$. A single degree-of-difference contrast analysis revealed that over-polite requests differed reliably from appropriately and under-polite forms, $F$ (1, 29) = 53.43, $MS_e$ = 10.3, $p < .001$. In addition, the difference between insincere and sincere appropriately polite requests was also reliable, $F$ (1, 29) = 9.41, $MS_e$ = 6.92, $p < .005$.

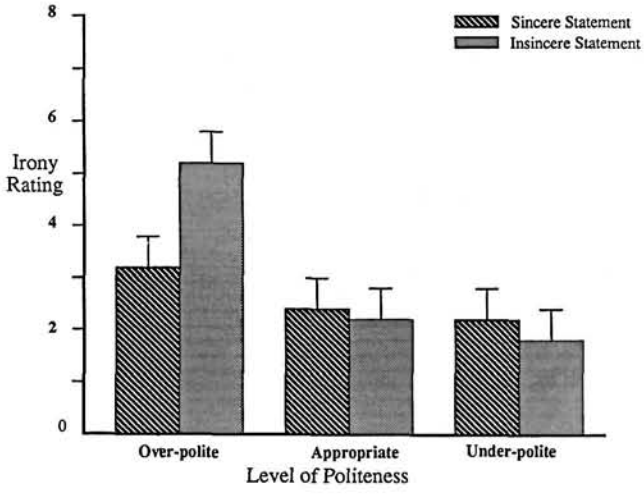


*Figure 4.* Mean irony ratings as a function of politeness level and perceived sincerity.

One puzzling question remains: Why were the insincere under-polite requests not perceived as ironic? Although we have no data with which to directly address this question, we can offer a plausible hypothesis. Recall that participants were asked to rate the degree to which over-polite and appropriately polite requests were intended as polite. In contrast, for under-polite requests, participants rated the degree to which the speaker "intends to be impolite." One possibility is that for over-polite and appropriately polite requests, participants rated pragmatic insincerity, the degree to which speakers were pretending to be polite. For under-polite requests, participants could have based their ratings on the degree to which speakers were seen as intentionally being rude. If impolite requests are rated as sincere, then this carries the clear implication that the speaker intended to be rude. Conversely, if impolite requests are rated as insincere, then this would imply that the speaker was unintentionally rude. In other words, participants may have viewed under-polite requests as unintentional rudeness, essentially a kind of social gaffe. This, of course, is quite different from the pragmatic insincerity that is involved when someone pretends to be polite. The rudeness and insultingness ratings for over- and under-polite requests are consistent with this interpretation: Under-polite requests were rated as much ruder than over-polite requests. At the same time, insincere and hence ironic over-polite requests were rated as insulting as under-polite requests. On this interpretation, speakers may very well intend to be insulting, but it would be rare for speakers to intend to be rude.

Although this account seems plausible and consistent with the data and with our general account of irony, additional data are needed to settle the question. The overall pattern of results, however, do support the allusional pretense theory. Irony was perceived when speakers were perceived as both allusive and pragmatically insincere, namely, when using over-polite and appropriately polite requests that were perceived as insincerely polite. The relations between perceived insincerity, irony, rudeness, and insultingness are also consistent with the notion that irony can be used to serve politeness considerations. Ironic utterances were perceived as insulting but not rude, in contrast to under-polite utterances that were seen as nonironic, and not only insulting, but also rude.

This interpretation is consistent with the results of a correlational analysis of the rating data. The intercorrelations among politeness levels and scale ratings are presented in Table 8. As would be expected, irony ratings and politeness levels were positively related: the more polite, the greater the degree of rated irony. Also as expected, irony and sincerity were negatively correlated: the less sincere, the greater the degree of rated irony. Irony was significantly related to rudeness, but the strength of this relation was rather low ($r$ = .12). The relation between irony and insult-

Table 8
*Intercorrelation of Politeness Levels and Scale Ratings*

| | Irony | Sincerity | Rudeness | Insultingness |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Politeness | .37*** | .01 | −.49*** | −.14*** |
| Irony | — | −.54*** | .12** | .48*** |
| Sincerity | | — | −.23*** | −.41*** |
| Rudeness | | | — | .58*** |

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

ingness was much stronger ($r = .48$): the greater the degree of rated insultingness, the higher the irony ratings.

The results of a multiple regression analysis with irony as the dependent variable confirmed the interpretation offered above. Consistent with the allusional pretense theory, politeness level, sincerity, and insultingness were reliable predictors of irony ($p < .001$ in all three cases). Also, as should be expected from our hypothesis that irony can serve politeness considerations, rudeness and irony were not reliably related to one another when politeness level and sincerity are partialed out.

The overall pattern of results is thus consistent with the allusional pretense theory and clearly supports the argument that perceived pragmatic insincerity is a necessary condition for irony. Over-polite requests that were perceived as sincere were not seen as ironic, whereas those that were perceived as insincerely polite were seen as ironic. That ironic utterances were perceived as insulting but not rude supports the suggestion that irony can be used to communicate negative affect and even to insult others while still protecting the speaker's face, thus serving politeness considerations.

## General Discussion

The allusional pretense theory provides a coherent account of conversational irony. Utterances that allude to a failed expectation and that are pragmatically insincere can communicate irony. The strong claim is that these two conditions are necessary if irony is to be perceived. This is a significant extension and elaboration of prior theories of discourse irony. First, the mechanism of allusion replaces the narrower mechanisms of echoic mention (Sperber & Wilson, 1981), echoic interpretation (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), and echoic reminder (Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989) because these are, by definition, special cases of allusion. Second, the concept of pragmatic insincerity extends the theory of discourse irony to speech acts other than assertives, to include such utterance types as offers, requests, and questions, among others (see below).

Consider, first, the concept of echoic mention. Sperber and Wilson (1981) pointed out the distinction between use and mention in the context of irony. An expression is used when it retains its illocutionary force, such as the request "Open the window for me, would you?" An expression is mentioned when it refers to its former illocutionary act, such as the retort "'Open the window for me, would you?' Just whom do you think you are talking to?" Sperber and Wilson (1981) argued that it is possible to mention not only words and sentences but also their meanings. Consider the following exchange between George and Mary.

George: "Wouldn't a cool breeze feel nice?"

Mary: "'Wouldn't a cool breeze feel nice?' I guess you expect me to open the window for you. Well expect again!"

In the first part of Mary's retort, she echoes or mentions George's comment about a breeze, which she interpreted as an indirect request to open a window. In the second part of her retort, she echoes or mentions what she believes is George's intended meaning. Sperber and Wilson (1981) referred to this kind of mention of a meaning or proposition as echoic mention and then argued that ironic utterances are cases of echoic mention. By repeating (echoing) what was said, the ironist does not intend to inform the listener of the contents of the utterance, but rather to show that she had heard and understood the utterance and is now expressing her attitude toward the proposition she is echoing. Empirical support for this specific hypothesis was provided in an experiment reported by Jorgensen et al. (1984). To account for instances of irony where there is no specific utterance to be echoed, there are various types and degrees of implicit mention that are considered echoic, as when a speaker can echo what may have been implied, or even popular wisdom or opinion such as widely shared social norms.

Sperber and Wilson (1981) had originally argued that all ironic utterances can be interpreted as cases of echoic mention. They later acknowledged that "the notion of mention does not really stretch to cover the full range of cases [of ironic utterances] we are now proposing to handle" (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 264). They abandoned the concept of mention in favor of the more general concept of interpretation, with mention now a special case of interpretation. In echoic interpretation theory, Sperber and Wilson argued that every utterance is an interpretive expression of a thought of the ironist and that irony involves an interpretive relation between the ironist's thought and the ironist's interpretation of another's thoughts or utterances. By interpreting another person's thought or a popular wisdom, the ironist informs the hearer that he or she has in mind what was said and has a certain attitude toward it.

The act of echoing, be it via mention or interpretation, is necessarily an act of allusion. By alluding to someone else's explicit or implicit thoughts, beliefs, or actions, a speaker can call a listener's attention to those thoughts, beliefs, or actions. Similarly, Kreuz and Glucksberg's (1989) concept of echoic reminder is also necessarily a special case of allusion. Kreuz and Glucksberg argued that echoic interpretation theories did not address the issue of why an ironist says something different from what is really meant in the first place. They proposed that ironists use echoic mention or interpretation as a way of reminding a listener of a failed expectation or norm and also pointed out that such reminding can be accomplished without necessarily echoing a prior utterance or thought. Ironic utterances are used to remind a listener of antecedent events, social norms, or shared expectations, as well as of a discrepancy between what is and what should be. By reminding listeners of such a discrepancy, the ironist expresses his or her attitude toward that discrepancy.

Speakers can allude to an expectation or norm by explicitly echoing a prior utterance or by echoing someone's implicit thoughts, but speakers can also allude to expectations or norms without necessarily echoing anything. Similarly, a speaker can allude to an expectation or norm by reminding someone of that expectation or norm. However, a speaker can also make such allusions without reminding at all: There are certainly cases where both speaker and addressee are fully aware of a failed expectation, and thus no reminding is necessary (or even possible, given that the target of the allusion is already in mind). Thus, echoic mention, interpretation, and reminding are, by definition, special cases of allusion, where a listener's attention is directed toward some prior event or expectation. Restricting a theory of irony to allusion via echoic interpretation or reminding severely is unnecessarily restrictive because such a theory cannot account for the range of ironic utterance types that we have explored in the experiments reported here.

Similarly, the concept of pragmatic insincerity is a generalization of one particular condition for irony, that is, saying the opposite of what is meant. Saying the opposite of what is meant is an appropriate if imprecise way to characterize counterfactual assertions, as when someone says "what lovely weather" when it is raining. However, as we noted earlier, the notion of opposite meaning is not applicable to such speech acts as thanking, requesting, offering, or questioning. Pragmatic insincerity, of course, includes the kind of semantic or propositional insincerity that is involved when speakers use counterfactual assertions (cf. Grice, 1975, 1978), but it also includes any other type of utterance where a speaker intends something other than what is usually intended by use of a particular utterance form. Thus, a pragmatically insincere utterance from any of the five major speech act categories may, if it is used to allude to a failed expectation or norm, convey irony.

Recall that there are five such major speech act categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. We consider examples of each of these speech act categories to illustrate the utility of the allusional pretense theory, where the two principles—allusion and pragmatic insincerity—help to account for the major phenomenon of irony in conversation.



### *Assertives*

*Positive counterfactuals.* When an utterance has the surface form of an assertion, then a counterfactual statement such as saying "what great weather" when it is raining will communicate irony. Such statements allude to the failed expectation of good weather and violate a felicity condition for assertives, namely, that people should not assert something that they believe to be untrue.

*Negative counterfactuals.* Positive counterfactual statements can generally be used to express irony, whereas negative counterfactual statements cannot. For example, saying "what terrible weather" on a fine sunny day would most likely be taken as anomalous. According to the allusional pretense theory, such statements fail to communicate irony because there is no norm or expectation that can be alluded to. However, if there is an explicit antecedent that can be alluded to, such as a failed prediction of bad weather, then such negative statements do communicate irony (Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989). Furthermore, when people's expectations about a state of affairs are negative, explicit antecedents are not necessary for negative statements to communicate irony. As we found in Experiment 2, negative counterfactuals that alluded to negative expectations are understood as ironic, such as, saying "New York subways are certainly dirty" in the context of encountering a clean subway train. Such statements communicate irony because they are both allusive and pragmatically insincere.

*Counterfactuals about norm violations.* When there is an expectation of appropriate amount or quantity, then a counterfactual assertion about a deviation from the norm can communicate irony, as shown in Experiment 2. If, for example, a student's paper is shorter than expected, then saying "this is a long paper" communicates irony. Similarly, if the paper were longer than expected, then saying "this is a short paper" also communicates irony.

*True assertions.* True assertions, when pragmatically insincere, can also communicate irony. Assertions can be used to express attitudes, and when the attitude expressed is counter to the surface form of the assertion, then the assertion can be interpreted as ironic. Consider the utterance "You sure know a lot." This may be a true assertion, but when uttered to someone who is obnoxiously showing off their knowledge, it may be viewed as an insincere compliment and so communicate a negative attitude toward that person via sarcastic irony (Experiment 1). Similarly, when a driver comments "I just love people who signal when turning" when the car ahead abruptly turns left, irony is communicated via the joint operation of allusion and pragmatic insincerity. The speaker in this case alludes to the social norm that drivers should signal before turning and is simultaneously being insincere by pretending to compliment the errant driver for something that wasn't done, namely, signaling. This last case has been problematic for both the traditional pragmatic theory and the more recent echo theories because none of these theories recognized the central roles of allusion and pragmatic insincerity.

### *Other Speech Acts That Communicate Irony*

*Directives.* Directives are statements that are intended to prompt someone to do something. These include questions such as "How old are you?" A speaker is insincere in asking such a question when no answer is really desired. When a pragmatically insincere question also alludes to a failed expectation or norm, then irony can be communicated. As we found in Experiment 1, when this question is uttered in the context of someone not acting his age, then the utterance is perceived as ironic because it alludes to the norm of people acting their age, and it is pragmatically insincere in that the speaker has no interest in the listener's exact age.

Requests are another type of directive, and these too can

communicate irony when they allude to a failed expectation and convey pragmatic insincerity. One way to be pragmatically insincere is to be overly polite and so violate the felicity condition that requests should be made at an appropriate level of politeness. As we found in Experiment 3, over-polite requests in contexts where a speaker has been disappointed or when a norm has been violated can convey irony. For example, when a parent says "Would you mind if I asked you perhaps to consider turning off the TV?" to a teenager who is watching a very loud television program while the parent is trying to concentrate on an important piece of work, irony would be conveyed. Under-polite requests, in contrast, do not convey irony, but instead convey rudeness, even when the speaker is seen as not intending to be impolite, but has instead committed a social gaffe.

*Commissives.* Commissives are utterances that commit a speaker to some action. These include promises, resolutions, and offers. Here too, the combination of allusion and pragmatic insincerity jointly permit irony to be communicated. For example, two of the felicity conditions for making an offer are (a) the person making the offer intends and expects that the offer will be accepted and (b) he or she is also prepared to fulfill the offer. When, however, a norm or expectation has been violated, as when someone has eaten an entire pizza and left nothing for anyone else, an offer of another slice of pizza simultaneously alludes to the norm violation and is pragmatically insincere. In such circumstances, irony is communicated (Experiment 1).

*Expressives.* Expressives are utterances that explicitly communicate a speaker's feelings. When expressives allude to a norm or expectation that has been violated and are pragmatically insincere, then they can communicate irony, usually sarcastic irony. Saying "thanks a lot" when someone has just stepped on your toes is a common everyday example, as is "thank you for your concern" when someone has shown no concern at all (Experiment 1).

*Declarations.* Declarations are utterances that, simply by being uttered, accomplish something. For example, when a religious or legal official says "I now pronounce you man and wife," the utterance itself accomplishes the act of marrying. Although we did not sample any utterances from this speech act category, ironic uses of declarations can readily be accommodated in terms of the allusional pretense theory. When a declaration alludes to a violated norm or expectation and when it violates the felicity condition that a declaration can only be made by someone with the authority to make it, then a declaration may communicate irony. Consider, for example, a situation in which a young man ostentatiously throws his coat on the ground to permit the young woman that he's with to avoid getting her shoes wet. A bystander who then says "I dub thee Sir Galahad" would communicate irony because the statement (a) alludes to the act itself which, in contemporary society, is excessively polite and gallant and (b) is pragmatically insincere in that the speaker does not have the authority to confer knighthood on anyone.

In each of the cases that we considered, allusion to a discrepancy between what should be and what actually is, combined with pragmatic insincerity, were important and perhaps necessary conditions for communicating irony. They are, however, not sufficient. In addition to these two factors, a number of other conditions must be satisfied if irony is to be communicated. An exhaustive enumeration of such conditions is beyond the scope of this paper, but two can be suggested. The first is the communication of the speaker's attitude toward the object of the ironic remark. In every case that we have considered so far, the speaker seemed to care one way or another about the failed expectation. If the speaker in fact doesn't care, and is perceived as not caring, then irony should not be communicated. For example, someone might comment "That's a real shiny pebble" upon picking up a dull stone on the beach, after a conversation in which both speaker and listener had mentioned that there were many shiny pebbles on that particular beach. Unless anyone cared about whether or not they had correctly anticipated shiny pebbles, or whether the pebbles on the beach were shiny or not, the remark would not be perceived as ironic, even though it alluded to their prior expectation and was also pragmatically insincere.

The example suggests a second precondition for irony. As Clark and Gerrig (1984) pointed out in their critique of echoic mention theory, participants in a conversation must share the failed expectation or the violated norm. Otherwise, irony would not be perceived even when a speaker might intend it. For example, when a speaker has the expectation that New York subways would be dirty and says "New York subways are certainly dirty" upon entering a clean subway car, irony would be communicated only if the listener shared that expectation. If the listener had not expected the subway to be dirty, then the remark about dirty subways would appear odd, not ironic.

What do ironic utterances accomplish by alluding to a disconfirmed expectation or violated norm? One purpose would be to bring such events into linguistic co-presence. Clark and Marshall (1981) argued that mutual knowledge is an important element in conversation. Participants in a conversation must explicitly or implicitly agree upon what they have in common (mutual knowledge) and what they do not. Mutual knowledge can be established in several ways, including community membership (e.g., everyone in the military knows who the commander-in-chief is) and physical co-presence (e.g., everyone on the beach at this moment knows that the sun is hidden behind clouds). Mutual knowledge can also be established by linguistic co-presence. When a teacher says "I expected this paper to be no more than 10 pages" to a student who has just turned in a 50-page opus, mutual knowledge of the teacher's expectation is established directly. When, in contrast, a teacher says "This sure is a short paper," an allusion is being made regarding the expected appropriate length of the paper. In so doing, the ironist indirectly brings the expectation into linguistic co-presence for the two people involved. Note that the expectation alluded to should have already been available in the listener's mind, whether or not the listener is aware of it when the ironist alludes to that expectation. By the allusion, the expectation that was available to both speaker and listener becomes accessible and manifest to them. Because it is now manifest to the speaker and listener, the speaker

can convey his or her attitude toward the expectation and the discrepancy between the expectation and reality. The process of establishing mutual knowledge during discourse itself is not, of course, specific to irony. What is specific is that a disconfirmed thought, expectation, or norm is brought into linguistic co-presence.

Because irony is but one means of establishing mutual knowledge, what specifically motivates people to be ironic? There is general agreement that irony is used to express attitudes (Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989; Muecke, 1969; Sperber & Wilson, 1981). These attitudes are usually negative, but not necessarily so (as the results of Experiment 1 suggest). In addition to this primary function, which can be served by a variety of communicative devices other than irony, ironic utterances seem uniquely suited to those situations that occasion the use of irony in the first place, namely, situations where something has unexpectedly gone awry (Lucariello, 1994). In such situations, people may experience discomfort, uneasiness, perhaps embarrassment, and perhaps disappointment.

Speaking ironically in such situations would be a face-saving way to express one's feelings about what has gone awry, whether the situation is mildly comical or the stuff of tragedy. As the writer Luc Sante said in a recent essay on the epidemic of gunshot-related deaths in America, "There is no defense against freakish tragedy, only the kind of internal preparation—equal parts fatalism, imagination, humor and an understanding of probability ... available to [humans]" (1993, p. 27). Irony provides one way to deal interpersonally with situations that threaten social relations by providing a way to express (usually) negative attitudes with humor, with imagination, yet still with some point.

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Received June 24, 1994
Accepted July 29, 1994 ■