

Modal particles in ironic utterances: A common-ground approach to pretended surprise in verbal irony*

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Abstract

This study contributes to theorizing about the semantic characteristics of verbal irony. Specifically, we investigate the function of the modal particles *ja* (lit. ‘yes’) and *aber* (lit. ‘but’) that often occur in ironic utterances in German, cf. *Das war aber ein aufregender Film* (‘That was PRT a thrilling movie’). Our main claim is that modal particles are used in ironic utterances to reflect the speaker’s intention to pretend surprise and produce a mockery effect by manifesting the utterance as an echo. Modal particles require some mutual knowledge to be contained in the common ground, and we link this notion to the interplay between echoic mention and pretense in interpreting an utterance as ironic. In an empirical approach to our claim, we report on results from an online questionnaire study, in which we test whether the presence of a modal particle leads to a higher perception of pretense in ironic reactions. While the data generally confirm our prediction, we found that only *aber* affects pretense perception but not *ja*, which can be explained by the former’s contrastive nature. The view we pursue implies that attitudinal content is a graded feature and that such a notion is applicable to surprise and pretense involved in verbal irony.

Keywords: *verbal irony, modal particle, mirativity, common ground*

1 Introduction

An ironic utterance articulates an assertion that denotes an alternative to the expression’s literal meaning. Consider the example in (1) from German, uttered ironically.

- [After a boring movie]
(1) *Das war aber ein aufregender Film.*
that was PRT a thrilling movie
‘That was a thrilling movie.’

Typically, an ironic interpretation of an utterance interacts with an incongruity between what is said and some element of the context or situation at hand (Ka-

* We wish to thank two anonymous reviewers and the Editor for insightful and useful comments. We are also grateful to the participants of the Wuppertaler Linguistisches Forum (WLF, June 2022) for a fruitful discussion. In addition, we thank Laney Lorentz for technical support.

pogianni 2016). A key characteristic of verbal irony is that, by using an expression ironically, the speaker produces an evaluative comment reflecting beliefs towards the corresponding denotatum (Dews et al. 1995; Wilson 2006), i.e., the movie in question in the example in (1). The attitude conveyed with the sentence in (1), when uttered ironically, is negative, commonly referred to as ironic criticism. Ironic utterances in German often contain modal expressions like *aber* (lit. ‘but’), *ja* (lit. ‘yes’) or *wirklich* (‘really’). These assist in interpreting an utterance as ironic, which – especially in written language – is more difficult to understand in out-of-the-blue contexts, i.e., contexts that do not point back to previous linguistic material, if such an expression is not present. It is an open question what the function of modal particles is in ironic utterances and how their meaning contributes to the meaning of an ironic utterance. Modal particles typically require some mutual knowledge to be contained in the common ground shared between the interlocutors. But what exactly is the nature of that knowledge (or proposition) in a case where something is said ironically, i.e., when an alternative is meant to what is said literally?

We focus on the particles *aber* and *ja* in the present study. The core of our analysis is that they are used in ironic utterances like (1) in German to reflect the speaker’s intention to pretend (or “simulate”) positive surprise and produce a mockery effect by manifesting the utterance as an echo, that is, as an utterance that reproduces a certain assumption or statement. In a nutshell, modal particles with a mirative interpretation in ironic utterances mark, based on mutual knowledge, the simulation of a non-true proposition as true and, at the same time, signal the corresponding common-ground update to be surprising. In an empirical approach to this claim, we report on results from an online questionnaire study. Our prediction is that the presence of a modal particle leads to a higher perception of pretense in ironic reactions, which we reason to be rooted in the construal of ironic utterances of the above type as involving the pretense of surprise.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In Section 2, the key meaning features of ironic utterances are characterized and related to the theoretical notions of echo and pretense, which are central in an account of verbal irony. In Section 3, we address modal particles with a mirative interpretation and analyze their semantic effect in ironic utterances based on the notions of echo and pretense. In Section 4, we report on data from an experimental study conducted to test whether the presence of modal particles leads to a higher perception of pretense in ironic utterances. Section 5 concludes our investigation.

2 Semantic–pragmatic features of ironic utterances

As has often been claimed in the literature, verbal irony, when compared to direct criticism or hostility, has a face-saving function, which is achieved through adding an aspect of wit in a conversational exchange; see, for example,

Dews & Winner (1999) or Giora (1995). Dews et al. (1995: 297) state that speakers choose ironic utterances over literal language in order “to [...] soften the edge of an insult [and] to show themselves to be in control of their emotions”. As an explanation for the communicative effect produced by an ironic utterance, a moment of mockery has been argued to be a key component of ironic utterances; see, e.g., Wilson (2013). In the following, we assume that it is this mocking component that is the source of the attitudinal content involved in ironic utterances. With certain ironic utterances, the mockery takes the form of pretended surprise. To signal the pretended surprise interpretation in German, we will claim, modal particles with a mirative reading are often used in such instances of ironic utterances.

2.1 Non-literal and attitudinal content of ironic utterances

Verbal irony comes in many different forms. A common definition holds that an ironic utterance articulates a meaning that is an alternative to the expression’s literal meaning; see, e.g., Grice (1989). In the present study, we focus on ironic utterances that contain non-literally used lexical material¹ and exclude from the analysis other types such as ironic enthusiasm (e.g., *Oh, yay, he crashed my brand new car!*) or ironic rhetoric questions (*How old did you say you were?*), where irony operates on the illocutionary level.

An ironic interpretation of an utterance interacts with an incongruity between what is said and some element of the context or situation at hand. Consider the example in (2), which, when uttered ironically, asserts that the bar in question is not buzzing with people, that is, a meaning that deviates from the sentence’s literal meaning.

- (2) [At a deserted late-night bar]
This place is buzzing with people!

Drawing on Kaplan’s (1999) distinction between descriptive and expressive content, we consider the negated² version of the semantic content of (2) to represent the descriptive content of the sentence. We presume that, while the locution of (2) suggests that the bar in question is buzzing with people, the opposite meaning is intended as the assertion, producing an update of the common ground with the corresponding proposition, implying that the bar is not buzzing with people.

The non-literalness of the meaning of the expression is a central characteristic of ironic and sarcastic language; see, e.g., Sperber & Wilson (1981). A

¹ A common device to indicate non-literal, ironic uses of expressions are scare quotes; see, e.g., Predelli (2003), Schlechtweg & Härtl (2023).

² For an approach that analyzes verbal irony to involve a form of (indirect) negation, see Giora (1995).

second element typically found in ironic utterances is the speaker's intention to produce an evaluative comment reflecting beliefs concerning an entity's value or significance, using criteria governed by a set of cultural standards, see, for example, Wilson & Sperber (1992). We consider this content to represent expressive content, i.e., content that is non-truth-conditional and not at issue (Härtl & Bürger 2021; Potts 2005, 2007). Consider the example in (3), uttered ironically.

- (3) [After an ambivalent performance]
Well, that lead singer really delivered every note in place!

With this utterance, the speaker communicates that the singer did not hit every note of the musical piece in question. At the same time, the speaker produces an evaluative comment that articulates a negative attitude towards the corresponding denotatum, that is, the lead singer's performance. Ironically presented assertions conventionally express an evaluation, which is not the case with their negated, non-ironic equivalents. Hence, considering the following examples, we assume that only (4)a), uttered ironically, conventionally implicates the speaker's evaluation that the soloist sang poorly but not the non-ironic counterpart in (4)b), which is used to describe a fact.

- [After a performance out of tune]
(4) a. That soloist sang every note in tune!
b. That soloist did not sing every note in tune!

The speaker's evaluative attitude expressed with an ironic utterance is typically negative, referred to as ironic criticism, but it can also be positive (ironic praise); see, e.g., Dews & Winner (1999), Kreuz & Link (2002). The latter type is illustrated in the following example.

- (5) [Tom received an A grade]
That is such a bad grade, Tom!

When uttering (5) ironically, the speaker literally says something negative in order to express something positive. Wilson (2013) argues that ironic praise is subject to stronger use restrictions than ironic criticism, which is often considered the default in verbal irony; see also Wilson & Sperber (1992). The standard of verbal irony to involve a negative attitudinal polarity has been explained by means of a normative bias (Kreuz & Glucksberg 1989). Due to this normative bias, which describes people's general aspiration to fulfill social norms rather than defy them, an ironically praising utterance must refer to a preceding assertion, event, situation, etc., while ironic criticism can be used without such a specific reference point. Thus, ironic praise standardly requires an echo of or allusion to some explicit previous statement, while ironic criticism does not require such an anchor point; see also Dews & Winner (1999).

2.2 Echoic mention and pretense in ironic utterances

Ironic utterances have been analyzed as instances of echoic language (see Wilson 2006; Wilson & Sperber 1992), that is, as utterances that reproduce certain assumptions or statements. By using echoic language ironically, the speaker makes reference to states of affairs that are, based on mutually shared knowledge, expected or desired but that are not the case (Gibbs & Colston 2007). The echoic component of verbal irony is closely linked to the notion of mentioning an expression, i.e., using an expression metalinguistically. In their echoic mention theory, Sperber & Wilson (1981) argue that ironic utterances are used to express an attitude towards the utterance itself, thus giving rise to an implicature aiming at substituting the expression's literal meaning with the implicated meaning.

An ironic utterance can echo a specific previous remark or echo an assumption about a general norm. Consider the examples in (6), in which scare quotes are used around the respective ironically mentioned materials.

- [Arriving at a small Bed & Breakfast]
- (6) a. That travel agent has chosen a truly “grand hotel” for us!
[When it's raining heavily]
- b. What “lovely” weather for a picnic!

With the ironic utterance in (6)a), presumably quoting the travel agent, the speaker echoes a previous reference to a certain denotatum as *grand hotel* for something that would better be described as *Bed & Breakfast*. Under this reading, (6)a) echoes a specific remark. In contrast, an ironic utterance like (6)b) quotes a general assumption about a norm, which, in this case, is the norm that the weather should be lovely when going on a picnic. In both cases, a negative attitude is expressed towards the corresponding denotata, that is, the accommodation facilities and the weather, respectively. We follow Wilson & Sperber (1992) here, who argue that the attitudinal meaning is produced as the speaker dissociates themselves from the thought they are echoing by delivering the echo in the form of mockery. Similarly, Wilson (2013: 41) maintains that a speaker using verbal irony is “echoing a thought [that] she attributes to an individual, a group, or to people in general, and expressing a mocking, scornful or contemptuous attitude to this thought”.

Another element that has been identified to play a role in the comprehension of verbal irony is pretense. Clark & Gerrig (1984) argue that with an ironic utterance the speaker pretends to be an uninformed person, that is, they act as if they were unaware of actual circumstances, with the intention for the addressee to see through this pretense. By using an utterance ironically, a speaker simulates a speech act and, thus, produces an attitudinal comment towards the corresponding assertion (Currie 2006). In the examples in (6) above, such an

analysis implies that the speaker acts as if they actually believed that the accommodation is a grand hotel and that the weather is lovely, respectively, and intend the addressee to identify the corresponding speech acts as pretense. An important element in Clark & Gerrig's analysis is the assumption that speaker and addressee must share a certain common ground for an ironic utterance to be comprehended as such (Clark & Gerrig 1984: 124).

Echoic mention and pretense analyses of verbal irony share certain characteristics (cf. Attardo 2000, Wilson 2013), the component of mockery being one of them. Both echo and pretense can be seen as the basis of the mockery effect ironic utterances create. An utterance communicating a certain statement's echo produced by a speaker evidently pretending the assertion to be true will give rise to the implicature that the utterance is intended to mock. Crucially, however, the two notions have been shown not to be identical; see, for example, Wilson (2006) and Declercq (2017) for analyses of cases of (ironic-)echoic language that do not involve pretense. We follow this view and assume that while ironic utterances are typically echoic and used as reminders of a thought, only a subset of ironic utterances involves pretenses of speech acts. This perspective is in line with integrated accounts that combine both echoic mention as well as pretense as complementary notions in their analysis of verbal irony (Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995; Popa-Wyatt 2014).

One such type of verbal irony that involves the pretense of a speech act, we assume, is ironically delivered surprise as instantiated, for example, in ironically uttered exclamations like *What a pleasant day!*. Surprise is a reaction to something that exceeds expectation. Pretended surprise can be seen as a means of exaggeration, which has been argued to have an amplifying effect that increases the gap between what is said and what is meant and, therefore, makes an utterance easier to be understood in a non-literal way (Colston & Keller 1998, Kreuz 2020).

To sum up, we view ironic utterances as instances of echoic language used to produce a mockery effect. Certain ironic utterances, like ironic surprise, involve the pretense of a speech act. For an utterance to be identified as ironic, speaker and addressee must share a certain common ground.

3 Modal particles in ironic utterances

A wide range of cues has been identified that are used to signal verbal irony. In the non-verbal domain, various studies have investigated features like facial expression, voice quality or pitch accent as potential factors playing a role in the comprehension of irony; see, e.g., Attardo et al. (2003) or Rockwell (2000). Another non-verbal cue to signal irony are scare quotes (materialized as air quotes in the gestural mode), which are used to indicate a specific speaker modality implying a reservation with respect to the semantic appropriateness of the expression in quotes (Meibauer 2007, Predelli 2003).

The lexical inventory used to indicate irony involves certain modifiers and particles as well as expressive lexical material. The modifier *so-called*, for instance, as in *The so-called “grand hotel” turned out to be a small Bed & Breakfast*, can adopt a distancing function and is semantically related to privative modifiers (*pretended, fake*) in such contexts. With this use of a modifier, the speaker questions the semantic appropriateness of the head noun’s label, thus producing an ironic interpretation of the expression (Härtl 2018).

3.1 Mirativity in ironic utterances

Ironic utterances of the type in (7) and (8) are inclined to involve modal particles like *ja* (lit. ‘yes’) or *aber* (lit. ‘but’) in German. These noticeably assist in interpreting an utterance as ironic, which – ignoring intonational or non-verbal features here – is more difficult to construe in out-of-the-blue contexts if such an expression is not present. Consider the following examples.

- [After some bad news]
- (7) *Das sind ja tolle Neuigkeiten.*
 that are PRT great news
 ‘That is really great news!’
- [In a tiny apartment]
- (8) *Na, das ist aber eine geräumige Wohnung.*
 PRT that is PRT a spacious apartment
 ‘Well, that is a spacious apartment!’

Notice that our claim is not that sentences of this type cannot trigger ironic interpretations without the corresponding particles. Without them, however, the ironic interpretation is palpable to a lesser degree, particularly in the written mode. Utterances like (7) or (8) convey an expressive meaning and adopt an exclamative function. We claim that the expressivity is rooted in a mirative reading of these sentences, i.e., a reading that articulates the speaker’s surprise. Crucially, with ironically interpreted sentences of this sort, the speaker’s surprise is pretended. Thus, a speaker ironically uttering a sentence like (7) or (8) intends to simulate (positive) surprise and pretends that the assertion’s content exceeds their expectation.

We follow accounts that argue that particles expressing mirativity³ do not trigger the surprise reading by virtue of their lexical meaning. Instead, we assume that these particles assist in the construal of surprise pragmatically; see Zimmermann (2011: 2027). In its lexical, non-mirative meaning, *ja*, for example, marks a proposition *p* uttered at time *t_u* as true and uncontroversial. It links

³ We stay agnostic regarding the question whether mirativity should be considered an independent linguistic category or not. See, e.g., Hengeveld & Olbertz (2012) for discussion.

the utterance's content to some pretext as a reference point and instructs the addressee to retrieve p , not currently being considered, from the shared common ground (Karagjosova 2003; Repp 2013). *Ja* may also be used to introduce information that is new to the addressee. In this case, the state of affairs corresponding to p needs to be accessible to the addressee and be able to be confirmed by them (see Kraus 2018 as cited in Kroll & Roberts 2019: 45). Importantly, under certain speaker-related conditions, the common-ground update to be induced by the retrieval of p is expressed as exceeding expectation (Rett 2011). In such cases, the particle assists in a surprise reading of the utterance.⁴

3.2 Mirative particles and the background proposition

An ironic reading of a sentence gives rise to an alternative interpretation of what the proposition p expresses literally. Thus, *ja*, as used in (7) above, does not mark p as true at t_u . Instead, we assume, it is used to simulate that the proposition is true at t_u .

- (9) $\llbracket ja \rrbracket(p)_{\text{ironic}} = p$ is not true at t_u and speaker simulates p to be true at t_u

Both *ja* and *aber* require a background proposition to be accessible in the common ground (Fischer 2007).⁵ In contrast to *ja*, however, *aber* has been argued to point to presupposed content contrary to what is expressed in the utterance at hand. According to Diewald & Fischer (1998), *aber* adds a meaning component that points to a disparity between the speaker's expectation and the actual reality perceived by the speaker. In other words, the use of *aber* indicates that the speaker assumes a certain proposition to be given but that the current situation departs from that (Diewald & Fischer 1998: 82; see also Abraham 2017).

- (10) $\llbracket aber \rrbracket(p)_{\text{ironic}} = p$ is not true at t_u and speaker simulates that p is true at t_u , and that they did not expect p to be true at t_u

Considering the non-ironic interpretation of the example in (8) above, this assumption implies that the speaker did not expect the apartment to be spacious, which, however, the speaker observes not to be the case, given the current situation. The interpretation supports a surprise reading of the sentence, typically

⁴ The surprise component is typically realized with exclamative intonation in oral language. We presume that the surprise readings of the utterances in question also arise in the written mode.

⁵ This background proposition is not necessarily mentioned explicitly in the pretext; cf. Section 2.2.

realized as an exclamative.⁶ With the ironic reading of the sentence, an alternative interpretation emerges, where the speaker, as we claim, communicates a staged feeling of surprise, thus implicating that they are observing the apartment to be the opposite of spacious. At the same time, the surprise is manifested by the speaker with the intention for the addressee to see through the pretense and to construe the utterance as a form of mockery.

3.3 Mockery and evaluative attitude

The question is still open as to what content the mockery in ironic utterances containing mirative particles is based on. As stated above, both *ja* and *aber* in their relevant interpretations require a background proposition to be accessible in the common ground. The background proposition refers to states of affairs that are expected based on knowledge shared in the common ground by the interlocutors. Our claim is that it is this background proposition that is echoed in ironic utterances of the type in (7) or (8). Crucially, as the echo is delivered in the form of mockery, the speaker signals a dissociation from the content of the proposition, giving rise, thus, to the implicature of an evaluative attitude the speaker has towards the corresponding denotation.

$$(11) \quad \llbracket ja / aber \rrbracket(p)_{\text{ironic}} \rightarrow \text{ECHO}(u, p) \ \& \ \text{EVALUATE}(s, p)$$

(11) says that, with an ironic utterance u containing *ja* or *aber*, the corresponding utterance u reproduces proposition p as an echo, which gives rise to the implicature that speaker s expresses an evaluation of p .

3.4 Hypothesized effect of mirative particles in ironic utterances

We view ironic utterances articulating the speaker's surprise as instances of pretense. Modal particles (*ja*, *aber*) with a mirative interpretation assist in the reading of a staged (positive or negative) feeling of surprise and the utterance's interpretation as ironic. In ironic utterances of this type (cf. the examples in (7) & (8) above), the speaker echoes a background proposition shared in the common ground. The echo is delivered in the form of mockery, which implicates the speaker's evaluative attitude towards the expression's denotation. Based on these assumptions, we can formulate hypotheses as to what effects modal particles have in ironic utterances. The empirical perspective pursued here implies that the attitudinality of verbal irony is a gradual feature and, thus, present to certain degrees in an utterance (cf. Härtl & Seeliger 2019). The notion is motivated by experimental results as reported in Smith & Hall (2011), who

⁶ As it is not in the scope of the current study, we leave open the question whether the surprise reading of the particle is restricted to certain sentence types. For an analysis of sentence type restrictions for modal particles as the result of an interaction between the particle and specific grammatical constructions, we refer the reader to Alm et al. (2018).

found substantial heterogeneity among projective meanings (i.e., meanings like presuppositions that “project” through, for instance, negation or interrogation) with respect to their projective strengths.

Reflecting the perception of pretended surprise, we hypothesize ironic utterances containing a modal particle (*ja* or *aber*) to be perceived as more pretended than ironic utterances not containing a particle. No such difference is expected for non-ironic utterances.

- (12) H_A: Ironic utterances containing a modal particle are perceived as more pretended than ironic utterances without a particle. No such difference is expected for non-ironic utterances.

Second, based on the assumption that *aber* but not *ja* points to presupposed content contrary to what is expressed in the utterance, a stronger pretense effect can be conjectured for ironic utterances containing *aber* as compared to ironic utterances containing *ja*.

- (13) H_B: Ironic utterances containing *aber* are perceived as more pretended than ironic utterances containing *ja*.

We are also interested in the interplay between mirativity and the polarity of the ironic utterance, manifested as either ironic criticism or ironic praise.⁷ Our hypothesis here is the null hypothesis (H_C). Last, we hypothesize a main effect for ironic utterances to be perceived as more pretended than non-ironic utterances (H_D). To test our hypotheses, we devised a rating study, which we will now present.

⁷ With the type of ironic utterance under discussion here, ironic criticism materializes as pretended positive surprise (cf. *This is a spacious apartment!*) and ironic praise as pretended negative surprise (cf. *This is a tiny apartment!*).

4 Experimental study

4.1 Method

4.1.1 Participants

Fifty German native speakers participated in an online survey (42 females, seven males, one diverse, <20 $N = 10$, 20–30 $N = 39$, >40 $N = 1$).⁸ Participants were not paid.

4.1.2 Material and design

To clarify the effects of modal particles in ironic utterances, i.e., enhancing the staged surprise reading and its ironic interpretation, three different variables were tested based on the hypotheses. These variables were (i) the utterance type, meaning the utterance was either ironic (IRO) or non-ironic (NON-IRO); (ii) the utterance contained either the particle (PRT) *ja* (JA), *aber* (ABER) or no particle (NO-PRT); and (iii) the context of the item was either positive (POS) or (NEG), giving rise to either ironic criticism or ironic praise. Overall, these three variables led to 12 different conditions, which were represented by either three or six items. In total, 48 experimental items were shown to the participants. In addition, 11 content questions were randomly presented to ensure that items were completely comprehended. Participants had to answer these questions with ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

The entire experiment was conducted in German. While designing the items, certain aspects concerning verbal irony and modal particles had to be considered, i.e., the sentence type and the fact that the utterances needed to express the attitude towards and discrepancy between expectations and outcome as clearly as possible, to guarantee the ironic reading. Lastly, as the expectations which were suggested in the items could either be positive or negative, negative expectations had to be established in such a way that the participants would still consider taking part in the event to be plausible, as people would usually refrain from such an event. Generally, the experimental items followed a consistent structure in which a certain event was presented and two individuals established specific positive or negative expectations. Then a statement was made by one of the two interlocutors expressing the actual evaluation

⁸ The majority of participants were recruited from an introductory linguistics course and were not familiar with the topic. The factor of gender does not play a role in our study. For a discussion of how gender may affect the use of verbal irony, see Colston & Lee (2004).

of the event. Finally, the critical utterance was given. The following three experimental items exemplify the different variables that were used in the study.

- (14) Marie und Sebastian kommen mit ihrem Kind aus der Kinderarztpraxis. Die beiden hatten gehört, dass die Praxis besonders gut und der Kinderarzt freundlich im Umgang sei. Marie findet aber, dass sich der Kinderarzt abfällig verhalten hat.

‘Marie and Sebastian are leaving the pediatrician’s office with their child. They both had heard that the office was really good and that the pediatrician was friendly to deal with. However, Anna thinks that the pediatrician behaved disparagingly.’

Marie zu Sebastian: Das war *ja* ein respektvolles
 Marie to Sebastian: that was PRT a respectful
 Verhalten.
 behavior
 ‘That was respectful behavior.’

- (15) Ben und Sina kommen von ihrer Wandertour. Ihre Route war im Informationsflyer für Fortgeschrittene gekennzeichnet und gerade der letzte Abschnitt der Route wurde als besonders schwer bezeichnet. Ben findet aber, dass die Route einfach war.

‘Ben and Sina are heading back from their hiking tour. In the leaflet, their trail was marked for advanced hikers and the last part was said to be extremely difficult. However, Ben thinks that the trail was easy.’

Ben zu Sina: Das war *aber* eine anstrengende
 Ben to Sina: that was PRT an exhausting
 Route.
 trail
 ‘That was an exhausting trail.’

- (16) Sascha und Annika kommen aus einem Aquarium. In der Stadt wurde auf großen Plakaten die Anzahl der vielen verschiedenen Arten beworben. Das Aquarium soll vor allem einen großen Unterwassertunnel haben. Sascha findet aber, dass es nur einen kleinen Unterwassertunnel gab.

‘Sascha and Annika are leaving the aquarium. In the city, the billboards had advertised the vast number of different species there. The aquarium was said to have a famous big underwater tunnel. However, Sascha thinks there was only a small underwater tunnel.’

Sascha zu Annika: Das war ein kurzer
 Sascha to Annika: that was a short
 Unterwassertunnel.
 underwater tunnel
 ‘That was a short underwater tunnel.’

(14) and (15) are both examples of the irony condition (IRO). The item in (14) tests the condition with the particle *ja* (JA) and ironic criticism (POS). The item in (15), on the other hand, tests the particle *aber* (ABER) and ironic praise (NEG). The experimental item (16) is not ironic (NON-IRO), contains no particle (NO-PRT) and represents a positive event (POS). Participants were asked to rate how pretended they estimate the reaction to be. To measure the pretense, participants were given a 5-point Likert scale, where the value 1 on the left meant the utterance was perceived as not pretended at all (*gar nicht gespielt*) and 5 on the right meant the utterance was perceived as totally pretended (*völlig gespielt*). Additionally, a bar emphasized the rating scale to visualize the rating points between the two extremes.

Based on our hypotheses, we expected the participants to rate ironic items including a particle as more pretended, leaning towards the right side of the scale. According to hypothesis H_B, ironic items including the particle *aber* should show a higher pretense value than ironic items including *ja*. For non-ironic items, we expected no difference and therefore, mainly values on the left-hand side. Moreover, we expected ironic utterances that resembled ironic criticism not to be rated differently than ironic praise, in line with hypothesis H_C.

As all the items are similarly structured, the items had to be pseudo-randomized to guarantee conditions would not be presented repetitively. Therefore, all items were divided into three groups, which contained 16 items each. Only one item of each condition would be presented except for the items with no particle (NO-PRT). The reason for this was the need for an equal number of items with and without particle, as we examined two different particles in the study. Accordingly, items with the condition NO-PRT occurred twice in each group. The 16 items of each group were then randomized. All three randomized groups were subsequently shown to the participants, while ensuring that no similar items would occur back-to-back.

4.1.2 Procedure

In an online questionnaire on the platform SoSci Survey,⁹ participants were asked to evaluate 48 experimental items. Every participant received the same questionnaire. Prior to the study, participants had to answer filter questions to be allowed to further partake in the survey. An explanation was given (in Ger-

⁹ www.soscisurvey.de

man) about the procedure of the study: the participants had to classify utterances with respect to a certain reaction they contain. It was mentioned that ironic utterances would be included. It was also explained that ironic utterances express the opposite of what they say literally and that ironic utterances typically involve a moment of pretense, which can be an expression of pretended surprise. It was also mentioned that surprise is often expressed using words like *ja* ('yes') or *aber* ('but'). In addition, the participants were informed they had to answer content questions in between items. The experiment began with two instructional items and an explanation of the rating scale. The first instructional item showed an example of ironic criticism, containing the particle *ja*, while the second item was non-ironic and contained the particle *aber*. Afterwards, participants had a short training period, including two items. The first item showed an ironic utterance, while the second did not. Neither item contained a particle. It was suggested to the participants that the ironic utterance would be perceived as more pretended, and therefore a value on the right would be more likely to be chosen, and that the non-ironic utterance would be considered neutral, and therefore a value on the left would be more likely to be chosen. This was followed by a content question concerning the content of the second item. Afterwards the actual experimental trial began with a non-ironic (NON-IRO) item, containing no particle (NO-PRT) and with a positive context (POS).

4.2 Results

The statistical analysis was conducted using the Minitab® software package (Minitab, LLC. 2020. Minitab 19). A repeated-measures variance analysis (General Linear Model) by subject was conducted for the dependent variable (Rating). The independent variables were included as fixed (within-subject) factors. The factor Subject was treated as random. Table 1 summarizes the mean ratings for each condition.

Condition		Mean rating
IRO		4.7
	NO-PRT	4.6
	PRT	4.8
	ABER	4.8
	JA	4.7
NON-IRO		1.2
	NO-PRT	1.2
	PRT	1.3
	ABER	1.3
	JA	1.3

Table 1: Mean ratings (rounded) for the individual conditions

The analysis revealed a highly significant difference, $F(1,49) = 2838.95$, $p < .0001$, for the mean ratings of ironic (IRO) and non-ironic (NON-IRO) utterances, i.e., ironic utterances were rated to be more pretended than non-ironic ones. The rating differences between all other relevant conditions are comparatively small, but not negligible. The analysis showed that ironic utterances containing a particle (PRT) were rated as more pretended ($F(1,49) = 7.06$, $p = .008$) than the ones which did not include a particle (NO-PRT). In a planned *post-hoc* comparison (Fisher LSD), the latter effect was found to be significant only for ironic utterances ($p < .05$) but not for non-ironic utterances. However, the interaction between utterance type (IRO / NON-IRO) \times particle (PRT / NO-PRT) failed to reach statistical significance. Importantly, only ironic utterances (IRO) containing the particle *aber* (ABER) were rated as more pretended ($F(1,49) = 10.04$, $p = .002$) in comparison to ironic utterances (IRO) without a particle (NO-PRT). No such difference was found for ironic utterances containing *ja* (JA) in comparison to ironic utterances without a particle. Last, the difference between ironic criticism (NEG) and ironic praise (POS) was not significant.

4.3 Discussion

The results clearly reveal that ironic utterances were perceived as more pretended than non-ironic utterances. This leads us to accept hypothesis H_D . Furthermore, the results lead us to accept hypothesis H_A . As ironic utterances containing a modal particle were indeed perceived as more pretended than the ones without, it can be assumed that modal particles do play a role in enhancing the discrepancy between two propositions. Especially the modal particle *aber*, in confirmation of our hypothesis H_B , seems to enhance this effect, due to its primary function of signaling a discrepancy between two propositions. The modal

particle *ja*, however, primarily reminds the hearer of an accessible proposition instead of contrasting it, which we assume to be the reason why there was no effect for *ja*. We interpret these results as support for the assumption that ironic utterances of the type under discussion require a background proposition contrary to what the utterance asserts and that *aber* is better suited to simulate surprise about something that is staged as exceeding expectation. Additionally, the results showed no significant difference between ironic criticism and ironic praise. Even though ironic criticism might be more common than ironic praise (cf. Section 2.1 above) the perception of pretense associated with either seems to be identical.

5 Conclusion

Our main claim is that, while ironic utterances are typically echoic and require a background proposition, only a subset of them involves the pretense of a speech act. An instance is the pretense of an expression of surprise. We further reasoned that modal particles occur in ironic utterances of this type to assist in this mock surprise reading. Our experimental data support this view. Ironic utterances containing a modal particle are perceived as more pretended than ironic utterances without a particle. The effect is realized mainly with ironic utterances containing the particle *aber* ('but'). We conclude that *aber* is better suited to simulate surprise about something that is staged as exceeding expectation. Our explanation is that, while both *ja* and *aber* require a background proposition to be accessible in the common ground, *aber* points to presupposed content contrary to what is expressed in the utterance at hand and is connected to an exclamative component.

With an ironic utterance, the speaker typically expresses attitudinal content. We argued that the source of an ironic utterance's attitudinality is the mocking component ironic utterances involve, i.e., the mocking of surprise in our case. The attitudinal meaning is produced as the speaker dissociates themselves from the thought they are echoing by delivering the echo in the form of mockery. Attitudinal content is part of the expressive dimension of language, and the view we pursued here implies that attitudinality is a gradual feature and therefore present to certain degrees in an utterance. In addition, we distinguish our findings from studies that do not implement the notion of pretense in their analyses and that view ironic utterances of the type under discussion here as instances of non-pretended negative surprise (e.g., Colston & Keller 1998). Such a view entails that the particle in fact scopes over the negated content of the utterances and not their (staged) positive content. We think future research might aim to further explore the difference between pretended surprise and non-pretended surprise.

In our study, we abstracted away from other linguistic factors inducing irony and mirativity, such as intonation. Thus, we must leave the question open

whether participants silently read target sentences with the required exclamative prosody that would support the surprise interpretation of the utterances in oral language. While we cannot exclude that the absence of prosody affects our data, we suppose, however, that ironic interpretations are generally available in written texts and that modal particles provide an anchor for detecting ironic readings in the written mode.

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