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Differences in use and function of verbal irony between real and fictional discourse: (mis)interpretation and irony blindness

Abstract

This paper presents a contrastive approach to the presence of two distinct types of verbal irony in real (natural, unscripted) versus fictional (scripted) discourse, with a special focus on irony blindness, i.e. the inability to recognize ironic utterances. Irony strategies are categorized into two general types, based on the relationship between the expressed and the intended meaning (Type 1: meaning reversal and Type 2: meaning replacement). First, the differences between these two types are discussed in terms of use, interpretation, and misinterpretation. It is found that the first type of irony strongly prevails in natural discourse, while the second type is considerably more present in fictional discourse than it is in natural discourse. At the same time, the first type of irony appears to be more at risk of misinterpretation in natural discourse, as opposed to the second type, which seems to be a safer (even though less frequently selected) option. These findings are then further analyzed in light of the discussion concerning fictional (comedic, in particular) irony blindness and the construction and role of the irony blind characters. Interestingly, the causes of fictional irony blindness are found to correlate more strongly with the (more humorous) misinterpretation of the second type of irony.

Keywords: irony types, (mis)interpretation, irony blindness, natural discourse, fictional discourse

1. Introduction

Verbal irony (henceforth irony[1]), is usually treated as a unified phenomenon and any differences among the particular strategies that speakers employ in order to achieve it are not investigated (Attardo 2000, Wilson and Sperber 1992; Clark and Gerrig 1984, inter alia). However, in the light of recent studies (Kapogianni 2011a, 2013; Partington 2011; Dynel 2013a, 2013b), the necessity arises to examine and categorise irony strategies, a line of research which is bound to reveal crucial differences at a pragmatic (discourse), cognitive, and cultural levels.

In terms of methodology, being able to capture the full range of irony strategies requires a definition of the phenomenon that does not restrict its breadth by equating it with one single linguistic/rhetorical device. For example, the widely discussed definition of irony as "echoic mention" (Wilson and Sperber 1992, Wilson 2006) may work very well when describing one specific rhetorical device that achieves irony (example (1) below) but it fails to capture other devices (strategies) that are equally effective at conveying the ironic intention of the speaker (examples (2)-(4)). Similarly, considering irony as the opposite of what is said (Grice 1978) or even an act of indirect negation (Giora 1995) restricts the phenomenon to cases where there is a clear relationship of semantic opposition between the expressed and the implicated meaning. Examples (1)-(4) illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon and can be used to support the argument that single-strategy definitions (i.e. definitions that treat one single rhetorical device as

the essence of the phenomenon) can be a cause of limitations to its full and adequate examination.

(1)   Yesterday, Mary said to John "It's going to be a nice day for a picnic tomorrow, let's have a picnic!". They prepared food and packed their picnic basket, but today it's been raining heavily since early in the morning. John turns to Mary and says:
Nice day for a picnic!
(2)   *No, I'm not* annoyed at you for stealing my lunch and letting me starve for the rest of the day.
(3)   This party is amazing!
(4)   Mary: Tom says he is the best student in the class.
John: And I am the White Witch of Narnia!

Example (1) is a clear case of echoic mention, since John echoes Mary's previous utterance. The speakers in (2), (3), and (4), however, do not (or, at least, not necessarily) mention or allude to any previous statements or ideas. Example (2) is a strategy that includes explicit negation, where the ironic meaning is reached by removing (negating) this negation: "I am (very) annoyed at you for stealing my lunch". Example (3) is also a case of (indirect) negation or, to use a more general term, meaning reversal. Here, depending on the context, the example may or may not be the result of echoic mention: the speaker may allude to a previous utterance or idea, but this is not necessary for the interpretation of the irony, which primarily relies on the contrast between what is said and the situational context of the utterance. Finally, example (4) is neither a case of meaning reversal nor a case of echoic mention: the intended meaning is not "I am not the White Witch of Narnia", but rather "*Tom's claim is impossible*", and neither is this echoing another utterance[2]. Therefore, the examination of these examples leads to two important observations: (a) there are multiple irony strategies, which can be completely diverse or even overlap (e.g. an echoic reading of (3)), and (b) any definitional attempt should not be strategy-specific, but schematic enough to encompass all possible strategies.

With the above observations in mind, and in place of a definition, it is worth adopting a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the presence of irony:
   i.   Background contrast: An ironic utterance is preceded by some (underlying) contrast in the context/situation. This can be a clash of ideas, beliefs, or ideals (speaker's beliefs versus hearer's beliefs, ideal conditions versus reality, etc.).
   ii. Incompatibility between what is said and some element of the context at hand: This condition broadens the usual observation that ironic statements are counterfactual. An ironically intended utterance can express something which is not necessarily counterfactual but is strongly incompatible with the conversational expectations (see discussion on example (8)). Of course, in cases such as (4), the obvious counterfactuality is only part of the incongruous character of the utterance, the most important part being its inappropriateness for the given context.
   iii. Speaker's evaluative attitude (cf. Grice 1978): In all cases of irony, the speaker's main intention is to express some sort of evaluation. This is usually, but not necessarily, negative: in examples (1)-(3) the speaker criticises something about the current situation (weather, act of stealing, party), while in example (4) the speaker criticises the target's (Tom's) belief.

The definition of the term irony strategy, as it emerges from this discussion, can be given as follows: it is a rhetorical device that employs a range of linguistic (pragmatic) features in order to express the speaker's ironic intention. The various irony strategies are not just different means to the same end. It is reasonable to suppose that strategy selection is influenced by different factors and serves different purposes.The present discussion employs a typological classification of irony strategies, based on linguistic pragmatic criteria, and highlights a variety of factors that influence their choice and interpretation. Section 2 presents the typology of irony strategies and explains the central hypothesis of this paper, namely a correlation between the idiosyncratic characteristics of each irony type (mainly meaning derivation and humor) and its use and (mis)interpretation in different discourse contexts. The hypothesized correlation is first investigated in terms of irony type frequency in real (unscripted) versus fictional (scripted) discourse (section 3). Then, the discussion focuses on cases of misinterpretation and the issue of irony blindness and, in particular, its representation through comedic characters. More specifically, section 4 aims to explain: (a) how the idiosyncratic characteristics of the two irony types affect their risk of misinterpretation in real versus fictional discourse, and (b) how irony types are exploited in the comedic portrayal of irony blindness.

2. Typological approach of irony strategies

The theoretical framework for the present discussion is that of (Neo-) Gricean pragmatics, with the distinction between expressed and intended meaning playing a central role. The typological approach suggested in this section is based on two pragmatic criteria, in the form of the following questions: (a) Is there some semantic relationship between the expressed and the intended meaning? (b) What sort of reasoning underlies the derivation of the intended meaning? The second part of this section (2.2) is concerned with the factors that influence the interpretation of irony types, leading to predictions about its contexts of use.

2.1. Irony types

Applying the aforementioned criteria to the variety of irony strategies leads to their classification into two main types[3]: the first one, also being the most typical and commonly discussed, can be termed as meaning reversal (Type 1), and the second one, in which there is no semantic relationship between the expressed and the intended meaning, can be termed as meaning replacement (Type 2). The latter is also characterised by its close proximity to surrealist humor, which is why it can also be described as "surrealistic irony" (Kapogianni 2011a). The following examples (5-9) present a variety of strategies that can be classified under each general type (the first line provides the expressed meaning and the second line the intended meaning, i.e. the ironic implicature):
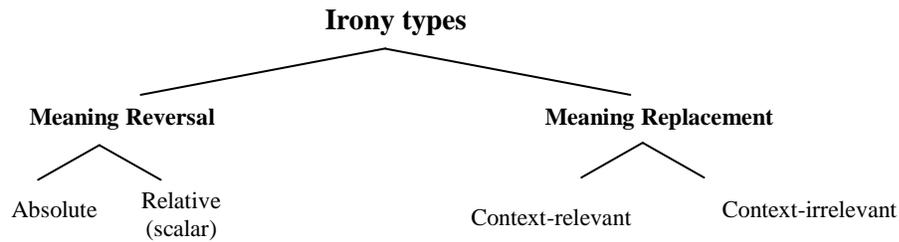
(5)   I love having to mark all these essays!
          +> I hate having to mark all these essays.
(6) a. There is a bit of a drizzle.
          +> The rain is really heavy.
     b. At 30 km/h, I'm approaching the speed of light!
          +> 30km/h is a really slow speed.

(7)   A: Was I speeding?
        B: No, you were standing still. It's the scenery that's been whizzing by at 90 mph.
        +> You already know the answer / Your question is unnecessary.
(8)   A: I am going to the airport.
        B: Why, what's in the airport?
        A: Airplanes!
        +> Your question is annoying (I refuse to give you an informative answer).
(9)   Mary: Tom says he is the best student in the class.
        John: And I am the White Witch of Narnia!
        +> Tom's statement is invalid.

Examples (5-6) can be classified under the meaning reversal type of irony (Type 1) and this is because a semantic relationship between (some element of) the expressed and the intended meaning can be detected. Example (5) is a typical case of opposition, where the ironically intended meaning is an antonym of the expressed meaning. Examples (6a) and (6b) also illustrate the process of meaning reversal, although not through a direct and absolute opposition as in (5), but rather through reversal on a scale: the hearer needs to consider an ad hoc scale from "bit of drizzle" to "heavy rain" and one from "really slow speed" to "speed of light" in order to get to the intended meaning of the speaker. Therefore, the general strategy of reversal can be further distinguished into absolute and scalar.

    Moving on to the second general type of irony (Type 2 – meaning replacement), the main characteristic of which is the lack of semantic relationship between what is expressed and what is intended, it can be observed that the intended proposition (always some sort of negative evaluation towards a previous utterance – henceforth target utterance) completely replaces the expressed proposition. In example (7), where a car driver has just been stopped by a police officer (speaker A is the driver, and speaker B the police officer), speaker B responds to speaker A in a way that is not irrelevant to the question but is obviously counterfactual, his main intention being to express a negative attitude towards the driver's redundant question. Example (8) is very interesting because it illustrates the strong element of incompatibility on which this type of irony relies, even when there is no obvious counterfactuality. In this example, speaker A intends to criticize speaker B's nosy question by responding in a completely uninformative manner, which contradicts the expectations related to the adjacency pair "question-(informative) answer". As in the other examples of this type, the intended meaning is not any sort of reversal of the expressed meaning, but, instead a negative evaluation of the target utterance (question). Finally, in (9), repeating an example that was presented earlier (in (4)), a different subtype of this general irony type (meaning replacement) is illustrated: the irrelevant and counterfactual statement. This statement is not in any way related to the context, but it is used as a juxtaposition (usually of a similar structure) to the target utterance (in this example, Tom's reported statement that he is the best in class). By a juxtaposing the two statements, it emerges that the original must be as flawed as the one that carries the ironic intent.

    To sum up, the meaning replacement type of irony makes use of an incompatible, often counterfactual and even surrealistic meaning in order to convey criticism against the target statement or idea. The ironic utterance can be either relevant to the context while also being incompatible (incongruous) and inappropriate (7 and 8), or it can be contextually irrelevant and in an obvious juxtaposition to the target (evaluated) utterance. Figure 1 summarizes the main types and subtypes of irony presented above.

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                              Irony types


        Meaning Reversal                        Meaning Replacement


     Absolute      Relative                Context-relevant      Context-irrelevant
                   (scalar)
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Figure 1 Main types and subtypes of irony (based on pragmatic criteria)

2.2. Comparison of the two general irony types

The two general irony types (meaning reversal and meaning replacement) exhibit some considerable differences, primarily in terms of meaning derivation and, additionally, in terms of humor.

The first main observation is that the nature of incongruity between the utterance and its context is different for the two irony types. For the meaning reversal type, the hearers need to recognize the fact that the utterance is untrue for the given context in order to be led to some sort of semantically opposed meaning, either by direct opposition or by ad hoc scalar reversal. For the meaning replacement type, on the other hand, the hearers have to consider the strong incompatibility between the utterance and context, as well as its juxtaposition to the target utterance, while resorting to a syllogism such as "If the [target] utterance is *valid/sensible/appropriate, then the speaker's utterance is also valid/sensible/appropriate. The speaker's utterance is blatantly invalid/absurd/inappropriate and, therefore, so is the target* utterance". In other words, in order to understand the intended meaning in this type of irony, interlocutors make use of an implicit "if-then" conditional. The antecedent includes a hypothetical positive evaluation of the target utterance (e.g. "if statement x is reasonable", "if idea y makes sense" etc), while the consequent (apodosis) would include the same positive evaluation about the ironist's utterance ("what the speaker said is reasonable/makes sense"). The consequent is immediately taken as false by virtue of the inappropriateness or counterfactuality of the ironist's utterance, which leads to the conclusion that the antecedent must also be false and, therefore, any evaluation of the target utterance must be negative.

The above is also related to the observation that the contrast between a context and its "mirror" (i.e. the actual context of a Type 1 ironic utterance and the context for which the literal meaning of the utterance would be appropriate) is less strong, or, sometimes, less obvious than the contrast between two incongruous or completely unrelated contexts (i.e. the actual context of a Type 2 ironic utterance and the context for which the literal meaning of the utterance would be appropriate).

Another feature that distinguishes the two types is their relationship with humor. The type of meaning replacement (which can often be characterized as "surrealist irony", especially in the cases where the utterance is completely unrelated to the given context) is almost always perceived as humorous, whereas the judgments vary when the first type of meaning reversal is

concerned, depending on the context. These observations tie in with the very nature of the meaning replacement type, which relies on the same incongruity resolution process as all of verbal humor.

Given the above discussion, three central predictions can be made in relation to the use and function of the different types of irony across different discourse contexts: (a) the less striking contrast between appropriate and actual context will make the meaning reversal type more prone to misinterpretation, (b) the humorous nature of the meaning replacement type will enhance its use in humorous contexts, and (c) – given (a) and (b) – misinterpretation of the meaning replacement type, being more unexpected and simultaneously more humorous, will be prevalent in fictional contexts, especially when the humor revolves around a character's inability to see the irony. These hypotheses will be tested and discussed in the remainder of the paper.

3. Frequency observations

In order to have a basis of comparison between the two kinds of discourse that are contrasted in this paper, this section presents some evidence concerning the presence of the two general types of irony in real (natural) and fictional (scripted) discourse. The discussed data come from a variety of natural and scripted sources. The examples were collected from Modern Greek as well as English sources. The former were considered particularly interesting since the phenomenon of irony has not been studied extensively in Modern Greek (exceptions: Faraklou 1998, 2000; Tsakona 2011). The choice to present frequency data in separate tables for Greek and English, was made solely on the principle that each collection of examples relied on a different variety of sources. Any cross-linguistic and cross-cultural considerations were thus not part of the scope of this paper. It is, however, recognized that some interesting comparisons can be drawn on the basis of the overall greater frequency of the second irony type strategies in the Greek data, which is something to be addressed by further research.

Data collection employed a variety of methods, depending on the particularities of the source and on the use of the definitional approach that focuses on a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions (section 1). Table 1 presents information about the sources of Greek and English data (the abbreviations next to each source were used for coding purposes).

Natural discourse		
Source	Greek	English
Talk shows (TSh)	✓	
Instant messaging (IM)	✓	
Forums (F)	✓	✓
"Karatheodoris" data-base recordings[4] (KR)	✓	
Twitter (T)		✓
Scripted discourse		
TV series / Movies (TS/M)	✓	✓
Comic books (CB)	✓	

Table 1 Sources of collected data (natural vs. scripted discourse)

Table 2 shows the number of ironic instances collected from each Greek source. Some of the collected ironic utterances contained more than one ironic sentences, which were coded and counted as separate instances (units).

Natural discourse		Scripted discourse	
Source	Instances	**Source**	Instances
TSh	32	**TS/M**	45
IM	8	**CB**	6
F	10		
KR	11		
TOTAL	61		51

Table 2 Quantity of collected examples - Greek

As shown in Table 2, a total of 61 instances was collected from the four sources of natural discourse, and 51 instances were collected from the two sources of fictional discourse. Table 3 presents the observed frequency of the meaning reversal (Type 1) versus meaning replacement (Type 2) irony types in each of the two types of discourse.

	Natural		Scripted	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Type1	50	82%	15	29.4%
Type2	11	18%	36	70.6%
Total	61		51	

Table 3 Irony types in natural versus scripted data - Greek

These results show a great prevalence of the meaning reversal type in natural data. They also show the reverse picture in the case of scripted data, which creates a rather striking contrast between the two types of discourse. The contrast was milder in the case of English data, but the distribution of the meaning replacement type was still very uneven between natural and scripted discourse, even if the meaning reversal type prevailed in both (data presented in Table 5 below).

Table 4 shows the overall amount of collected irony instances from each English source.

Natural discourse		Scripted discourse	
Source	Instances	**Source**	Instances
F	33	**TS/M**	70
T	32		
TOTAL	65		70

Table 4 Quantity of collected examples – English

Table 5 shows the presence of each irony type in real versus scripted discourse contexts. As noted earlier, the difference is less striking than in the Greek data, with the meaning replacement (Type 2) type remaining less frequent than the meaning reversal (Type 1) type across discourse contexts. However, the most important observation, here, is the considerably higher percentage of the meaning replacement in scripted as opposed to real discourse.

	Real		Scripted	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Type1	58	89.2%	48	68.6%
Type2	7	10.8%	22	31.4%
Total	65		70	

Table 5 Irony types in natural versus scripted data – English

Overall, the first irony type (meaning reversal), which is generally considered as the most typical one, is also used more frequently overall, or, at least, in the less demanding/less innovative contexts which are mostly associated with natural discourse. The prevalence of the second type (meaning replacement) within scripted data for the Greek collection is a very interesting observation, which leads to the conclusion that the humorous character of this type makes it more preferable in fictional (comedic) contexts. The English evidence does not contradict this observation, in the sense that there is still a considerable percentage of the second type of irony found in fictional discourse, even if this is not enough to surpass the prevalent presence of the first type of irony. As stated earlier, further crosslinguistic and crosscultural research is needed in order to account for this asymmetry between the two languages, for which, as far as this paper and this particular collection of data are concerned, no further claims can be made at this point, due to the important variation among the types of sources that were used for each language.

4. Irony misinterpretation – irony blindness

Irony blindness can be defined in opposition to circumstantial misinterpretation: while the former is a characteristic of the recipient (addressee, (over)hearer, viewer), the latter is influenced by factors such as the contextual circumstances and their ability to reinforce or obscure the ironic meaning, as well as the irony strategy itself, which may be more or less prone to misinterpretation. This section looks at both circumstantial misinterpretation and fictional irony blindness and their different manifestations. Furthermore, the present discussion aims at drawing parallels between the factors that affect successful irony interpretation at a circumstantial level and the causes of fictional irony blindness.

4.1. Circumstantial misinterpretation

The distinctions drawn between the different types of irony (section 2) can play an important role in the analysis of the causes of circumstantial misinterpretation of ironic utterances. This is the aim of section 4.1.2, which focuses on a collection of misinterpreted ironies. Before the causes of circumstantial misinterpretation are discussed, it is worth highlighting the distinction between ignoring (missing) and misunderstanding an ironically intended utterance.

4.1.1. Missing versus misunderstanding. Ideally, a comprehensive examination of irony misinterpretation would include both cases of overtly misunderstanding the irony and covertly missing the irony, i.e. the recipient remaining unresponsive, being unaware of the presence of irony. However, the case of covertly missing the irony is not easy (if not impossible) to detect. This is because a lack of response may equally mean either silent/implicit appreciation or failure of recognition (Kotthoff 2003). A caveat when studying misinterpretation is, therefore, the fact

that it is only explicit misunderstandings that are recorded in conversation, while numerous cases of failure of recognition of the phenomenon remain under the radar.

In the case of overt misinterpretation, the (recorded) response considers the literal meaning of the ironically intended utterance to be part of the common ground and continues the discussion in a way that reveals the misunderstanding. The ironist may then choose a way of repairing the misinterpretation, usually by (a) explicitly declaring the previous utterance ironic ("I meant it *ironically", "I was being sarcastic*), (b) spelling out the intended meaning of the previous utterance ("*I didn't mean x, I meant y*"), or (c) retaining the ironic framework, but with an irony strategy that is more obvious than the previous one.

As far as the case of covertly missing the irony is concerned, a further comparison between real and fictional discourse can be made: in real discourse, the hearer is either completely unaware of the irony or chooses not to respond, due to not being certain about the ironic interpretation and for fear of loosing face; in fictional discourse, on the other hand, the ironic utterance is often the punch line that marks the end of a scene, and the reason there are no recorded responses is that they are not part of the script. It is only when the misinterpretation becomes the focus of the humorous script that it becomes explicit and, therefore, available for analysis.

4.1.2. Type-related causes of misinterpretation. Instances of irony misinterpretation in the medium of asynchronous Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) were collected and analysed. Asynchronous CMC is text-based communication, conducted through networked computers (e-mail, message boards, comment sections etc., see Herring 2003). This medium was preferred because, aside from the advantage of the body of on-line texts functioning as a searchable corpus, it is fertile ground for misinterpretations, since the lack of extralinguistic cues makes the interpretation of irony dependent on linguistic and contextual information only. As research by Hancock (2004) revealed, contrary to what would be expected from the lack of extralinguistic cues and the consequent risk of miscommunication, irony is not avoided in CMC, but it rather tends to be used to a greater extent than in face-to-face communication.

Instances of irony misinterpretation were detected through a search for "repair phrases" such as "I was being ironic", "I meant it ironically", "I was not serious/(only) kidding", "*You didn't get the irony*" and their variations in tense.[5] These statements were used as search terms on internet search engines. A total of 50 dialogues containing misinterpreted ironies were collected, both in Greek and English, in parallel to the non-contrastive two-language nature of the corpus of ironic examples described in section 3, which did not provide enough instances of misinterpretation, making the separate collection of misinterpreted examples necessary. Here, I will not report on any quantitative indications, but I will focus on the qualitative findings of the analysis of this collection of examples.

The body of misinterpreted utterances can clearly be divided into three categories of ironic sub-strategies: (a) meaning reversal (Type 1) ironies that include a relative/subjective (evaluative) term, (b) meaning reversal ironies that include an echoed opinion, that is, in fact, the opinion that the ironist intends to criticise, (c) a very limited number of instances of meaning replacement (Type 2) irony of the context-relevant subtype.

In the first category of misinterpreted examples, the central element is some case of subjective judgment expressed via the use of adjectives, adverbs and various evaluative expressions (e.g cheap/expensive, fast/slow, fortunately/unfortunately, etc.). The misinterpretation of these is justified by the lack of sufficient contextual and common ground information available to the

addressee/reader. Given the usual anonymity and/or lack of personal relationship between interlocutors in CMC, it is understandable why addressees have considered the ironic utterance as the ironist's plausible literal contribution. The presence of misinterpreted ironies that use the echoic mention strategy is also easily justifiable, considering that an echoed phrase is usually likely to be uttered (by someone with the same ideas as the ironist's target) in the same context. Gibbs (2012: 16) also points out the necessity of recognizing the source of the echo as a common precondition for the correct interpretation of echoic ironies, which is something that is not always possible. Finally, it is worth noting that the small number of instances of misinterpreted meaning replacement (Type 2) ironies, are contextually relevant (as opposed to context-irrelevant utterances) and the addressee justifies them as a mistake/miscalculation or ignorance on the part of the speaker.

This categorisation of misinterpreted ironies concurs with what can be seen as part of the wider categorisation of implicit meaning misinterpretation proposed by Yus (1999). He recognises three major factors of miscommunication at the level of the implicit: the lack of necessary contextual assumptions (which cause a "puzzled understanding"), the erroneous use of alternative contextual assumptions, and the hearer considering it unnecessary to search for a meaning other than the explicit (both of which lead to "an alternate understanding"). Yus (1999: 512) considers the misinterpretation of irony as a consequence of the third factor. However, it is clear from this analysis that accepting the explicit meaning as the intended one is a direct consequence of the (combination of) the other two factors: a lack of necessary background assumptions, established common ground, and indications of the speaker's intentions.

The second irony type (meaning replacement) stands out in this analysis, not only because of the lack of evidence of misinterpretation for two of its substrategies, but also because of the fact that the necessary factors for their understanding do not coincide with the aforementioned factors that mostly affect the first type of irony: when it comes to necessary background assumptions, these come from non-situational general world knowledge (and are therefore less likely to be missing), as for the search for cues regarding the ironist's insincerity/lack of seriousness, these are usually obvious due to the strong incongruity and/or counterfactuality of the statements of this irony type.

On the whole, despite some common generalisations, there seem to be different causes of misunderstanding for the two general types of irony, which employ different strategies (e.g. the highly context dependent strategy of echoic mention employed by the first) and rely on different types of assumptions (e.g. assumptions about the beliefs of the speaker in the case of meaning reversal versus assumptions that come from world knowledge in the case of meaning replacement).

4.2. Irony blindness in fictional discourse
In reality, the inability of detecting irony is usually considered a symptom of pragmatic language impairment (PLI), which, in turn, is linked to poor Theory of Mind (Happé 1993). Although the status of PLI as either an independent impairment or a correlate of other disorders is frequently debated, a strong link between PLI and Autism Spectrum Disorders can be identified (Bishop 2000). This means that the real-life profile of an irony blind individual would be of clinical nature. Although characters with PLI and related disorders (especially Autism Spectrum Disorders and Asperger Syndrome in particular) are frequently portrayed in fiction, it is interesting to note that there is a large category of non-clinical (or, at least, undiagnosed)

characters who exhibit some of the characteristics of these impairments, usually intensified and exploited in a comical way. It is the latter category of characters that this section focuses on, under the assumption that irony-blindness is an instrument of humorous fictional discourse.

This section attempts to bring together and shed more light on the observations highlighted in all previous sections: (a) the difference in interpretation process between the two main irony types (Type 1 – meaning reversal and Type 2 – meaning replacement); (b) the strong imbalance in the distribution of Type 2 irony between real and fictional discourse contexts (with the particular irony type being considerably more frequent in fictional discourse), and (c) the type-specific causes of irony misinterpretation. In order to achieve this goal, we need analyze the functions of Type 2 irony in fictional discourse and examine its link to the irony blind character.

4.2.1. Categories of irony blind characters (some case studies). The aim of discussing a selection of representative irony blind characters from different fictional texts is not to provide an exhaustive list, but rather to investigate some causes of irony blindness that extend further than the realistic and diagnosed representation of PLI (and related disorders) individuals. Typically, comic characters are found in the comedy genre, but they can also be found in different (and mixed) genres, where they fulfil the purpose of "comic relief".

It is worth starting this discussion with literal-minded characters and specifically the, now iconic, literal-minded Sheldon Cooper (The Big Bang Theory – CBS, 2007). It is often speculated that Sheldon, an exceptionally intelligent theoretical physicist with a notorious difficulty with social interaction and in understanding nonliteral/idiomatic language, suffers from Asperger Syndrome (or some other type of High Functioning Autism). This, however, has never been confirmed on the show. On the contrary, its creators have stated that they have deliberately left Sheldon undiagnosed, or even cleared from a diagnosable disorder (one of his most characteristic quotes being "I am not crazy, my mother had me tested"), in order to relieve the other characters and the audience from any guilt related to laughing at his expense.[6] Sheldon's relationship to irony (or "sarcasm" – see note 1) is presented to evolve during the show: in earlier episodes he is completely incapable of recognizing it, being in need of a "sarcasm sign", while in later episodes he achieves a few successful guesses regarding the presence of sarcasm and even attempts his (less successful) version of it[7]. Examples (10a, 10b, 10c) below demonstrate Sheldon's relationship to irony and, more specifically, its second type (meaning replacement).

(10) a. Sheldon: I have to say, I slept splendidly. Granted, not long, but just deeply and well.
Leonard: I'm not surprised. A well known folk cure for insomnia is to break into your neighbour's apartment and clean.
Sheldon: Sarcasm?
Leonard: You think?

b. Sheldon: Granted, my methods may have been somewhat unorthodox, but I think the end result will be a measurable enhancement of Penny's quality of life.
Leonard: You know what, you've convinced me, maybe tonight we should sneak in and shampoo her carpet.
Sheldon: You don't think that crosses a line?

c. Leonard: Yes! For God's sake, Sheldon, do I have to hold up a sarcasm sign every time I open my mouth?
Sheldon: You have a sarcasm sign?

In these examples, all taken from the same dialogue, but analysed separately since they constitute three different occurrences of irony, Sheldon shows uncertainty (10a) and then misinterpretation (10b,10c) of examples of the second type of irony (meaning replacement). All examples fall within the category of context-relevant incongruous response (driven by the context, but obviously counterfactual). As seen in section 3, this subtype of irony can be misinterpreted in real discourse, but the likelihood of this happening is very low compared to the first type of irony, especially in the cases where the counterfactuality or inappropriateness is blatant (as in the present examples). What is also exemplified, here, is the heavy use of the second irony type in discourse, especially within the choice of retaining the ironic framework (multiple occurrences of the same type of irony within the same scene). Sheldon exemplifies the category of literal-minded comic characters, who are likely to miss not only irony but also other types of nonliteral language, even conventionalized ones (idioms). Other examples of this type of character are Peggy Parish's children's book character Amelia Bedelia (ongoing series since 1963), as well as, from the Greek corpus of examples, the character of Armodios from the series "An ipirxes tha se xoriza" (Literal translation "If you existed, I'd break up with you", Mega channel, 2007), who exhibits extreme literal-mindedness to the extent of taking literally even the most common idioms.

The second category of irony blind comedy character is the one who ignores basic common world-knowledge facts. Characters representing this category are also expected to miss ironies of the second type rather than the first one, since, as explained in section 2, this type relies upon general / world knowledge rather than situational knowledge. These characters are not literal-minded, they are aware of the mechanisms of irony and the only reason they miss it is their lack of common knowledge that would help them detect the inappropriateness or counterfactuality of statements that carry the second irony type. One such character comes from the Greek comedy "Sto para pente" (Idiom translation "In the nick of time", Mega channel, 2005): the character Dalia is a reclusive billionaire who has spent most of her adult life hiding in her mansion with no access to the outside world (being especially ignorant of the daily life of the middle and lower-class). In the following example she demonstrates ignorance of a commonly known type of sketch-based theatre, with a very long history in modern Greece.

(11) Fotis: Pezete mia epitheorisi
             "They re staging an epitheorisi[8]"
       Dalia: Ti ergo?
             "What play?"
       Fotis: 'Stis nu-du tin porta oso thelis vroda' kati tetio…
             " 'Fall on N-D's deaf ears' [idiomatic expression/ pun, referring to the then ruling political party New Democracy] or something"
       Dalia: Ti ipothesi exi?
             "What's the story line?"
       Spiros: Esthimatiko! EPITHEORISI su leei!
             "(It's a) romance! He says [it's an] Epitheorisi[intonational focus]!"
       Dalia: [in blank expression] Ah.

The ironic expression of Type 2, here, (based on the improbability of play of the epitheorisi genre being a romance) is followed by an intonationally stressed (focus) repetition of the genre

name, to provide the character with a further clue about the irony. However, she responds with a confused facial expression, which makes it clear that she completely missed both the irony strategy and the speaker's intended meaning. Her lack of understanding is also accentuated by the fact that, before the dialogue moves on, another character remarks "She still doesn't get it". Dalia's character is very often seen missing or misunderstanding ironic remarks directed at her, making this one of her main comedic strengths.

A similar but distinct category of irony blind character is the naïve character. A typical example would be Baldrick, Blackader's faithful servant in the TV comedy of the same name (Blackadder, 1983, BBC1). Baldrick appears to be of lower intellect but also forever willing to trust his master's judgment and plans. In the following example, it becomes apparent that Baldrick's blind trust extends to the point of believing a completely outrageous and incongruous response.

(12) Blackadder: Crisis Baldrick, Crisis! No marriage, no money, more bills! For the first time in my life I've decided to follow a suggestion of yours. Saddle Prince George's horse.
Baldrick: Oh sir, you're not going to become a highwayman, are you?
Blackadder: No I'm auditioning for the part of Arnold the bat in Sheridon's new comedy.
Baldrick : Oh that's alright then.
Blackadder : Baldrick, have you no idea what irony is?
Baldrick : Yeah! It's like goldy and bronzy, only it's made of iron.

Baldrick not only misses the particular irony, which is another example of the second type, but also confirms Blackadder's (and the audience's) suspicion that he has not even heard of the trope. The difference between the naïve irony blind character and the one who ignores world knowledge, is that the former's inability to capture the phenomenon is (additionally to any world knowledge deficits) an inability to suspect the interlocutor of insincerity.

Of course, it is possible that the boundaries between these categories of irony blind characters are blurred. For example, Joey, the character from the American TV sitcom "Friends" (1994, NBC) occasionally shows signs of both naivety and ignorance, often being presented as a character who misses the jokes made at his expense. For example, in the episode "The one with the fake Monica", Joey interprets his friend's ironic suggestion for the stage name "Joe/Joseph Stalin" as a serious one, going as far as to officially adopt it before finding out who the historic Joseph Stalin was.

Although the presented categorization concerns the fictional irony blind characters encountered during this investigation (which mostly focused on comic irony blind characters in movies and TV), further categories could be added after a more detailed examination across fictional discourse genres. It must be added that in the case of surreal/absurdist comedy, characters can be completely blind to obviously counterfactual or contextually incompatible remarks for no apparent reason. One such example is an episode of the long-running American cartoon South Park (1997, Comedy Central) where a whole town becomes incapable of recognizing one character's increasingly absurd ironic remarks, taking them as serious suggestions and ending up with a completely nonsensical new sport (Episode "Sarcastaball"). In examples such as this one, irony blindness adds up to an absurdist style of humor and is only explained as "poetic/dramatic license".

On the whole, the main causes of irony misinterpretation detected in the discussion of section 4.1.2 are also present in the cases of fictional irony blindness. We only looked at non-clinical

irony blind characters, which is the majority, if not the entirety of comic irony blind characters[9]. In this group, the causes of irony blindness seem to be either an extreme or overly exaggerated version of the occasional misunderstanding causes encountered in real discourse (lack of common knowledge, or inability to interpret the speaker's intentions), or a highly stereotyped case of literal-mindedness, detached from any realistic symptomatology. In either case, it becomes apparent that, as indicated by the frequency study in section 3, it is the second irony type that is preferred in fictional discourse, for stronger comedic effect, and particularly in relation to the irony blind characters and their idiosyncratic characteristics.

4.2.2. The author-character-audience triangle. The question of the relationship between the principles and conventions of real discourse and their fictional counterparts is a long debated one. In order to complete the present analysis, it is necessary to refer to the special circumstances that underlie fictional discourse and the dynamics among the triad author-character-audience.

Searle's (1975) early attempt to examine fictional discourse as a Speech Act of the author has been met with strong criticism (Culpeper 2001; Wood 2012) and it has since given rise to the realization that this type of discourse can only be analyzed through a double-level model, which has to include the in-script layer of communication between characters and the outer layer of communication between the writer and audience (see also Dynel 2011).

The intentions of the author(s) are to be taken into consideration within the framework of the genre to which their work belongs (Wood 2012). Even though the analysis of authorial intent is often considered independent from the perception of the text, the perspective of the present study makes it necessary to adopt the two-level schema "addresser-message-addressee" (Figure 2, adapted from Culpeper 2001:39)
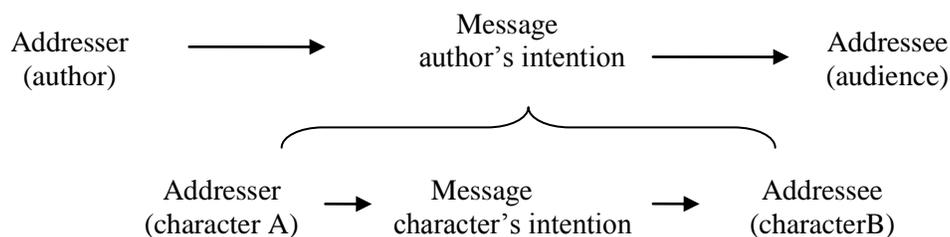
Figure 2 Dual Addresser-Addressee schema

Using this schema, we can discuss the case of irony blind characters, like the ones exemplified in the previous section. In the corresponding settings, it is clear that irony blindness serves the purposes of comedy (either within the genre of comedy itself, or as comic relief in a mixed genre). This means that the main intentions of the author(s) are to evoke comic situations, laughter, and even mock the comic irony blind character. This has some important implications for the characterisation of the irony blind character. If we follow the distinction between "flat" and "round" characters (Culpeper 2001), the former being more predictable, stereotyped, and rather one-dimensional, we would have to consider the comedic portrayal and exploitation of irony blindness as a characteristic pertaining to character flatness (especially since it is a

characteristic that oversimplifies a complicated real-life condition). Note, however, that this does not condemn the character to a permanent state of flatness, since it only concerns the specific irony-related property, which serves a certain function and may well be somewhat independent from the character's overall identity and behaviour. The nature of the humor derived from irony blindness is usually along the lines of a punchline (see examples in previous section), which is why it can be considered a self-contained unit, or a "running gag", which does not directly influence the plot. An irony blind character may thus have a dual nature: that of an otherwise realistically portrayed individual, and that of the instrument of the comedic device of misunderstanding and frame-breaker (Eco 1984).

The audience, from their part, approach the text with a pre-existing disposition towards the character, towards the scripted situation, and towards the genre, which means that, upon identifying (and stereotyping) a character as comically irony-blind, they expect them to demonstrate the same behaviour on different occasions and they also anticipate the humorous nature of the occurring misunderstandings. Of course, stereotypes and social schemata are more effortlessly used when interpreting fictional characters, since the act of stereotyping does not bear the same negative connotations that it does in the case of judging real individuals. In other words, fictional characters, and especially comic ones, cannot avoid some caricaturization, even if this happens on a scale of humanization, i.e. within a mixture of realistic (humanizing – see Culpeper 2002) and unidimentional characteristics.

Finally, one remaining issue, which would have to be covered by a separate study, has to do with the coherence of characters in serialised texts with multiple authors (e.g. multiple season sitcoms, such as "The Big Bang Theory"). Even though we proceed to characterisation assuming a somewhat unified behaviour of the irony blind hero, in reality, the character emerges as the sum of behaviours on different, more and less realistic/consistent contexts, which have been created by different authors (who may have slightly varying perceptions of the character). It is not uncommon for the audience of long-running serials to complain that a hero is acting "out of character", demonstrating a divergence between the authors' and the audience's perception of some aspect of the hero's character.

5. Conclusion

This paper attempted to tackle a variety of questions that concern the division between two general types of irony and the correspondences between the inherent characteristics of each type and their presence and function across natural and fictional discourse.

The two types of discourse (real-natural-unscripted and fictional-scripted) investigated in this paper exhibit a number of different properties. On the one hand, real discourse is guided by communication principles which are expected to prioritise rhetorical effectiveness over rhetorical innovation, while, at the same time, spontaneity entails the lack of elaborate forward planning in the choice and formulation of irony strategies. These characteristics explain the prevalence of the simpler and more typical irony strategies that correspond to the meaning reversal type within real discourse. On the other hand, fictional discourse operates on two different levels and combines a number of more complicated goals: the goal of the author(s) is to induce specific feelings in the audience (in the case of comedy discourse, which was the focus here, this goal entails humor, laughter, and entertainment), the goal of the fictional character (especially the ironist) is to make a strong rhetorical point, while the role of the fictional irony blind character is to accentuate the humorous situation by misinterpreting (usually obvious) irony. This therefore justifies why the

second irony type – meaning replacement – is much more frequent in fictional discourse than real discourse, since it is better suited for fitting the multiple purposes of the former.

We saw that the impairment of fictional and comedic irony blind characters (not diagnosed with a real-life pragmatic language impairment) can be attributed to an exaggerated version of regular sources of irony misunderstandings: literal-mindedness, lack of world knowledge, and naivety. It also became apparent that these three sources of irony blindness are mostly linked to the misunderstanding of the meaning replacement type of irony, which would normally be considered more obvious. Its strong humorous nature, however, is what makes it a suitable candidate for fictional misinterpretations that aim at the creation of humor and the accentuation of the peculiarities of the irony blind characters.

Overall, we provided evidence for the hypothesis that the meaning reversal type of irony is both more frequent and more prone to misinterpretation in natural discourse, while the humorous nature of the meaning replacement type encourages its use in humorous contexts. Fictional humorous contexts proved to be a more fitting environment for the use of the meaning replacement type of irony, especially when irony blind characters are present. Of course, the crucial division into the two types of verbal irony is still in need of further investigation from multiple perspectives (cross-linguistic/cross-cultural, typical/atypical processing).

Notes

1 The term "sarcasm" is often used interchangeably with the term "verbal irony". In the present analysis, sarcasm is taken to only partially overlap with irony: it can be a particularly bitter form of irony, with a specific person-target (see also Leech 1984: 143-144), but it can also exist independently from verbal irony (non-ironic sarcasm). It is worth noting, however, that in everyday use (especially in American English) the word sarcasm is predominantly used to mean "verbal irony" (as opposed to situational/ cosmic/ dramatic irony).
2 Note that the ironic utterance here is a novel irony and, although it is a variation of more conventionalized expressions such as "I am the Queen of England", "I am the Queen of Romania", it cannot be seen as resonating any of them in an echoic manner.
3 Kapogianni (2013) compiled a diverse corpus of irony instances, c. 20,000 words, using a methodology that allowed mutual feedback between raw data and definitional criteria. These were complemented by a critical account of the examples presented and discussed in the relevant literature (see also Kapogianni 2011b).
4 This is part of the project "Investigation of the conversational narratives produced by youths of Patras, Greece" funded by the research committee of the University of Patras, Greece (K. Karatheodoris, 2425). I am grateful to Dr. Argiris Archakis, research project coordinator, for providing me permission of use.
5 The equivalents in Greek were: "ironika to ipa/enousa" (I said/meant it ironically), "ironevome" (I am being ironic), "den epiases/katalaves tin ironia" (You did not get/understand the irony), "plaka ekana" (I was joking), "den to ipa sovara" (I did not say it seriously), and their variations in tense. Of course, the results from search phrases that did not explicitly contain the word "irony" and its derivatives were checked on the basis of the established criteria for irony in order to determine whether the misinterpreted utterance was indeed ironic.
6 See http://www.nj.com/entertainment/tv/index.ssf/2009/08 /reader_mail_does_sheldon_from.html -accessed July 2013.
7 E.g. Season 2, Episode 23, "The monopolar expedition". Note the use of his famous catchphrase "Bazinga!" when feeling the need to mark non-serious speech.
8 Epitheorisi: "Modern Greek popular revue with skits and songs that satirize current social and political mores" [Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance]. In later years it is considered a "lower" form of theatre, often associated with bad taste, low production quality, bad writing, and predictable or dull humor.
9 An exception could be Abed, a character from the American sitcom "Community" (2009, NBC), who explicitly mentions being diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome. However, despite some problems with irony intonation and unsuccessful uses, Abed is presented as having exceptionally good meta-pragmatic intuitions and emotion-reading skills which prevent him from being categorised as irony blind.

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