WINK WINK, NUDGE NUDGE?

Visual Indicators of Communicative Irony in Comics

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In this article, I set out to investigate how comics employ visuals in ironic communication. I aim to contribute to debates on the nature and success of visual irony indicators. I will argue that comics are a suitable medium for successful ironic communication, exactly because they "give images and text equal ontological priority".[1] This argument problematizes some aspects of the commonly accepted intuition that visual media are poorly equipped to convey communicative irony.[2] I agree with both John Kennedy and Gregory Currie that irony in pictures is rare because it is difficult (in this article, I leave it open why this is so), but I disagree with both that this has anything to do with the nature and success of visual irony indicators.[3] I will refute Kennedy's claim that "[verbal] irony is often accompanied by a special tone of voice, but alas, no manner of portrayal has yet been invented that is the tip-off for pictorial irony. *New Yorker* cartoons are often ironic, but their irony lives in a caption's fit to the picture."[4] By contrast, through theoretical

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[1] Wartenberg 2014, p. 101.

[2] See Currie 2010, p. 168; Hutcheon 1994, p. 148; Burgers et al. 2013a, p.293.

[3] Kennedy 2008, p. 458; Currie 2011, p. 167.

[4] Kennedy 2008, p. 458 (cited in Burgers et al 2013a, p. 294).

investigation complemented by an analysis of the satirical cartoon *This Modern World*, I will explain how a comic's visual aesthetic can play a crucial role in ironic communication, comparable to the function of the so-called 'ironic tone of voice'. By arguing that visual indicators of irony can significantly add to the success of ironic communication, I will also examine Currie's claim that if a picture does succeed in using visuals to aid its ironic communication, "[t]hese indicators tend to make irony overt, blunting its effect."[5] I will claim that while some irony markers blunt ironic communication, others don't.

It should be noted that Currie's remarks on the failure of irony indicators follow directly from his position that communicative irony necessarily depends on an act of pretence. Currie considers irony indicators to be "pretence-indicators" that express "ironic intent."[6] Understanding irony as pretence, Currie argues that it works best if the communicator does not need to signal the pretence (which is exactly what irony indicators do, on his account).[7] I will refute Currie's position that irony indicators necessarily signal pretence, but it is beyond the scope and aims of this article to take a side in the debate on whether or not irony either involves pretence, as Currie claims (based on ideas by Kendal Walton), or whether it involves echoic use, in the technical sense specified by the relevance theory of Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber.[8] Currie is right to stress that the theories are genuine rivals that ultimately offer fundamentally different accounts of how communicative irony is generated, but he also openly acknowledges that he follows Wilson and Sperber's proposal in many ways.[9] Crucially, I would argue, the pretence and echoic theories share the same phenomenology of communicative irony, i.e. they offer the same description of its surface behaviour,

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[5] Kennedy 2008, p. 458 (cited in Burgers et al 2013a, p. 294).

[6] Currie 2011, p. 167; p. 155.

[7] Currie 2011, p. 167.

[8] Walton 1990; Wilson and Sperber 2012.

[9] Currie 2011, p. 19; p. 161.

even if they disagree about how that behaviour is generated. More specifically, both theories consider communicative irony a dissociative evaluative attitude towards a viewpoint attributed to a certain target.[10] Technically, it is true that Currie would deny that irony is necessarily attributive in the sense defined by Wilson and Sperber, while they would deny that irony necessarily involves a target. However, though the accounts do indeed differ in this technically relevant way, there is no phenomenological difference between dissociating from a viewpoint attributed to somebody, as Wilson and Sperber claim, and targeting that viewpoint, as Currie claims.[11] In this respect, I will argue that visual indicators of irony in comics can add to the success of ironic communication exactly by marking this dissociative evaluative stance. My specific intervention about visual irony indicators is therefore theoretically compatible with both the pretence and echoic accounts of communicative irony (which I consider, at the moment, to be equally strong theories of communicative irony[12]).

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[10] Currie 2008, p. 9–10; Wilson 2013, p. 47; 2006, p. 1736.

[11] For an acknowledgement of these similarities, see Currie 2006, p. 118, note 16; 2010, p. 154/p. 157, note 20.

[12] Victories have been claimed on both sides, but I do not think that anybody really has the upper hand at the moment. As far as I'm concerned, Wilson and Sperber (2012, p. 32) have not been able to develop real counterarguments to Currie's proposal that would invalidate it, and have only been able to argue that their proposal is "more parsimonious". On the other hand, Currie's (2008, p. 22–23; 2011, p. 159–161) most prominent counterargument, that the echoic theory cannot adequately distinguish between irony and sneering, seems to pass the buck and begs the question what sneering is. Moreover, it fails to offer reasons why (some) sneering could not also be ironic. In the future, I think the debate could be moved forward by looking for clear instances of irony that only one of the two theories can adequately explain. In this respect, issues to do with irony in fiction could be interesting to pursue, in particular concerning ironic narrators and characters (i.e. narrators and characters who express viewpoints from which it is clear that the implied author dissociates her- or himself, for instance in satire).

1   Indicators of Irony: Wink Wink, Nudge Nudge, or Marking Stance?

Visual signals of ironic communication have already been subject to scholarly discussion (most notably in aesthetics, linguistics, and literary studies). Yet, as will follow from my discussion, the issues surrounding the role of visuals in ironic communication have not yet been resolved in a satisfactory manner. Linguistic research into the signals of ironic communication typically follows Salvatore Attardo's distinction between irony factors and irony markers.[13] According to Attardo, contrary to irony factors, which are constitutive in generating ironic meaning and therefore indispensable to ironic communication, irony markers are optional devices that by themselves do not constitute ironic meaning but only serve to signal the presence of ironic communication.[14] In Attardo's theoretical framework, ironic communication does not depend on the presence of irony indicators (they are indeed wholly absent in the so-called deadpan delivery of irony[15]). Nonetheless, since irony is an indirect form of communication, irony markers facilitate interpretation and, especially, minimise the risk of misinterpretation (as irony that goes undetected risks offending, aggravating, confusing, etc.).[16] Irony markers are used to trigger the recognition of ironic communication through a cognitive inferential process as identified by Roger J. Kreuz and Richard M. Roberts, governed by a heuristic which operates on the basic rule of thumb that *"if marker 'X' is present in an act of communication, that act of communication is likely to be ironic"*.[17] Such a heuristic is probabilistic and therefore fallible, for something that acts as an irony indicator in one context does not necessarily do so in

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[13] See Burgers et al. 2012a, p. 231; 2012b, p. 292; Attardo 2000.

[14] Attardo 2000, p. 7.

[15] Attardo et al. 2003, p. 244.

[16] Burgers et al. 2011, p. 189; Attardo 2000, p.15.

[17] Kreuz and Roberts 1995.

another. Hyperbole often acts as a marker of ironic communication, but, of course, does not necessarily signal irony.[18] We might therefore wonder, if "nothing is an irony signal in and of itself", as Linda Hutcheon claims, what then are these devices that sometimes signal irony and sometimes do not?[19]

Perhaps the most familiar irony marker is the so-called ironic tone of voice, which can (but does not have to) accompany ironic utterances. Crucially, based on experimental evidence, Gregory A. Bryant and Jean E. Fox Tree have established that an ironic tone of voice understood as "some particular consistent prosodic (i.e., pitch, loudness, and duration) pattern with a distinct perceptual correlate"[20] does not exist as such. Still, according to Salvatore Attardo, Jodi Eisterhold, Jennifer Hay, and Isabella Poggi, it is not wholly incorrect to keep referring to an ironic tone of voice, but this exists only "as a contrastive, not a substantive feature".[21] Attardo and colleagues argue that the ironic tone of voice is nothing other than random intentional patterns that contrast with the expected intonation to signal that 'something is the matter'. It is then up to the audience to infer that irony is intended. A similar position is taken by Currie, who considers the function of irony markers as "saying (or doing anything equivalent to saying) 'I'm being ironic'".[22] However, there is also an alternative position. Although Wilson and Sperber agree with Attardo and colleagues (and Currie) that irony markers are optional devices that signal the presence of irony, they do consider the ironic tone of voice to be a substantive feature, "optionally used to convey the attitudes characteristic of irony".[23] There is indeed a theoretical consensus that ironic communication

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[18] Burgers et al. 2012b, pp. 295–296; Hutcheon 1994, pp. 149–150; Burgers et al 2011, p. 305.

[19] Hutcheon 1994, p. 152.

[20] Bryant and Fox Tree 2005, p. 257.

[21] Attardo et al 2003, pp. 252.

[22] Currie 2011, p. 167.

[23] Currie 2010, p. 160; Wilson and Sperber 2012, p. 123; p. 143.

involves expressing (dissociative[24]) evaluative attitudes towards propositional content attributed to a target.[25] In this respect, Christian Burgers, Margot van Mulken, and Peter Jan Schellens argue that irony markers mark stance (the standpoint of language users towards expressed propositional content) and therefore act as stance markers (which frame the interpretation of that propositional content).[26] Stance markers are not contrastive features, but substantial ones. Like irony indicators, they include devices that are non-linguistic (such as facial expressions), paralinguistic (such as pitch), lexical (such as adjectives), and grammatical (such as adverbials).[27]

It follows that there are two competing visions on the nature and function of irony markers: (1) that they are and operate like nudges and winks, which express something that is the equivalent to saying "I'm not communicating straightforwardly"; or (2) that they are and operate like stance markers, which signal the attitudinal stance conveyed by communicative irony. The position that irony markers are substantive features that mark stance is not in principle incompatible with the empirical evidence of Bryant and Fox Tree that there is no consistent prosodic pattern associated with verbal irony. First of all, Bryant and Fox Tree operate on the assumption that the ironic tone of voice should be a singular prosodic pattern that is wholly distinguishable from other affective prosodic patterns, such as "an angry tone of voice".[28] However, communicative irony consists of a range of related attitudinal stances which all convey an essentially negative value judgement towards attributed propositional content (ranging from reinforcing, playful, ludic, oppositional, assailing, etc.

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[24] So-called 'positive irony' does exist, but nonetheless also always involves dissociation of some kind. See Dynel 2013, p. 425 and Currie 2006, p. 123.

[25] Hutcheon 1994, p. 35; Burgers et al 2011, p. 194; Sperber and Wilson 2012, p. 125; Dynel 2013, p. 407; Currie 2010, p. 154.

[26] Biber et al 1999, p. 966; Burgers et al 2011, p. 305; Biber et al 1999, p. 971.

[27] Biber et al 1999, p. 966.

[28] Bryant and Fox Tree 2005, p. 262.

in affective charge[29]). So there would not be one ironic tone of voice but multiple tones that incorporate the various affective charges associated with ironic communication. Second, a device that marks ironic communication in one context does not necessarily do so in another context; there is no enduring ontological link between the materiality of the stance marker and the stance it signals. In this respect, devices that can function as stance markers typically also have other functions besides marking stance.[30]

2 Stance in Pictures

The issue of stance in pictures, and particularly comics, has been addressed by Patrick Maynard. According to Maynard, canonic theories of visual depiction cannot (adequately) account for the fact that images, like language, can signal stance. These canonic theories fail to acknowledge that looking at depictions is wholly different to looking at actual things, because depictions are characterised by mental descriptions. On a traditional understanding, comics are "'distortions' of a canon of realism" because they do not typically aim to approximate the perception of real-world objects.[31] By contrast, it is exactly because of "their notorious 'impurity'" that Maynard considers comics to be a pathway to better understanding how depictions are characterised by mental descriptions. Maynard suggests understanding depictions, like all artworks, as *artifacts, rather than natural or accidental occurrences: that is, they are made by people for certain purposes*.[32] These purposes⸺or useful and functional aspects in terms of intentions, aims, meaning, etc.⸺are defined as an artefact's affordances, which are understood in relation to the shared perceptions of a certain interpretative community. According to Maynard, "we seek out features of depictions, unlike

[29] Hutcheon 1994, p. 45.

[30] Biber et al 1999, p. 978.

[31] Maynard 2014, pp. 108–115.

[32] Maynard 2014, pp. 114–116.

those of real scenes, for their representational affordances, attempting to make sense of them in terms of purposes, of why they were put or left there".[33] A particular stance can be among a depiction's representational affordances. Maynard does refute that a stance, like irony, is an enduring feature of particular lines, shapes, colours or entire drawing styles, relative to a specific interpretative community.[34] The affordances of particular depictive elements, like those that cue affordances of ironic stance, vary across different contexts.

3 Case Studies

I now wish to unpack the theoretical argument about ironic stance markers presented above by analysing two comics, one of which communicates ironically while the other does not. I originally started thinking about the issue of visual irony indicators in comics after I stumbled upon Gord Hill's *The Anti-Capitalist Resistance Comic Book* in a Waterstone's in Brussels. At first, the title struck me as too hyperbolic to be taken at face value—after all, this comic was on sale in a multinational book chain, immediately calling into question all claims of anti-capitalist resistance. Moreover, I had grown accustomed to reflexive critique that uses irony to distance itself from its inevitable complicity in the discourses and practices it critiques (in this case, capitalism) in order to avoid naivety or hypocrisy.[35] However, whereas the verbal hyperbole in *The Anti-Capitalist Resistance Comic Book*'s title initially struck me as an

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[33] Maynard 2014, pp. 117–118.

[34] Take the *claire ligne* style originally developed by *Tintin*'s Hergé (with its characteristic linearity, precision, homogeneous colouring, absence of shadows, uniform layout, and clear exposition). In its original use, it was understood to support a patriarchal ideology, but used by Joost Swarte to portray the gritty realities of the 1970s, it is typically understood as signalling ironic distance (Mazur and Danner 2014, p. 145); Maynard 2014, p. 116.

[35] Hutcheon 1989, p. 4.

indicator of irony, I soon corrected this hypothesis as I looked for similar affordances but could not find them. In particular, the visual aesthetic of *The Anti-Capitalist Resistance Comic Book* cued affordances of confident force rather than ironic distance.[36] Through a punk D.I.Y. aesthetic with elements reminiscent of folk art, Hill's drawing style transgresses conventions of fine drawing in favour of an aesthetic that looks deliberately unrefined, rough, and simple.[37] These crude black-and-white drawings not only allow for easy distribution through simple photocopying (for example, at the anti-globalist manifestations that Hill describes in his comic), but also evoke an attitude of staunch militancy that is wholly incompatible with ironic communication. It is not that such a deliberately unsophisticated drawing style could not cue ironic affordances in another context. Quite often, deliberate crudeness and apparent lack of technical competence do indeed signal ironic communication in comics (Matt Feazell's *Cynicalman* springs to mind). Yet, especially when taking into consideration the content of *The Anti-Capitalist Resistance Comic Book*, the only plausible affordances of its crude black lines are those that support a militant stance incompatible with irony.

So what role can visuals play in comics that do communicate ironically, such as Tom Tomorrow's *This Modern World*? In his weekly satirical comic strip, Dan Perkins (who uses the pseudonym Tom Tomorrow) develops a complex ironic stance on American and global politics. From a clearly progressive position, Perkins typically critiques a set of related standpoints on a given situation that has had political impact that week. These standpoints are attributed to targets, who are very often represented in the comic (either directly, as themselves, or indirectly, through the likes of conservative dimwit

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[36] Consequently, claiming to resist capitalism while being on sale in a multinational bookstore, the comic was the butt of a situational irony that made its intended message of critique look a bit naïve. For an excellent distinction between situational and communicative irony, see Currie 2011, p. 149–151.

[37] Thanks to Fred Francis for pointing out the former aspects of Hill's drawing style and to Jonathan Friday for drawing my attention to the latter.

Biff or aliens from the planet Glox, whose reasoning is otherworldly flawed). The visual representation of these characters seems to contribute significantly to the success of ironic communication in *This Modern World*. A parody of futuristic advertisements found in 1950s magazines (most notably *Life*), the visual aesthetic of *This Modern World* combines a clip-art style of depiction with an anachronistically old-fashioned vision of the future.[38] Perkins's characters have old-fashioned hairdos and are typically repeated in (almost) identical clip-art poses throughout the multi-panel sequence of the comic strip. At first, it may seem that the futuristically anachronous clip-art representation of the characters is best explained as a permanent sense of incongruity, acting as a wink or nudge to the audience that something is up. However, a reading that understands the visual aesthetic of *This Modern World* as a strictly contrastive feature ignores its important substantive features in cueing affordances compatible with its negative ironic judgement. The anachronous clip-art representation of the characters, belonging to what Burgers and colleagues call the comic's mise-en-scène, provides them with a distinct simpleminded quality and vague air of stupidity, while the almost identical repetition of these characters in various panels, belonging to the comic's 'cinematography', lends them a robotic and mechanical quality, suggesting they are incapable of independent and critical thought.[39] These visual features cue clear affordances that the propositional content attributed to these characters should be evaluated negatively. That these features belong both to the mise en scène (who and what is depicted) as well as the cinematography (how it is depicted) problematizes the claim by

[38] Perkins 2003, p. 2.

[39] Burgers et al. 2013a, p. 300–301.

Burgers and colleagues that typically only elements belonging to the former but not the latter act as visual irony indicators.[40]

So far, it may seem as if irony markers do not function very differently to other stance markers in depictions that cue affordances of mental description, such as staunch militancy. Nonetheless, there is a distinct difference between the types of stance signalled in *The Anti-Capitalist Resistance Comic Book* and *This Modern World*. Whereas staunch militancy is a stance expressed towards propositional content, irony is a stance expressed towards attributed or targeted propositional content. In this respect, perhaps the most significant role of *This Modern World*'s visual aesthetic lies exactly in helping us to determine the scope of its ironic attribution. It is certainly the case that Perkins's futuristically anachronous clip-art style of depiction (deliberately) provides his depicted targets with negative qualities consistent with an ironic evaluation of the propositional content attributed to them.[41] At the same time, though, characters in *This Modern World* who are not explicitly negatively evaluated are also represented in Perkins's futuristically anachronous clip-art style. The visual aesthetic of *This Modern World* cues affordances that these characters too are targeted by the overall irony of the satirical comic strip—and in an important sense they are. Whether it is Sparky the Wonder Penguin™ or somebody else who voices the position of progressive reason in *This Modern World*, they typically act as 'straight men' who set up the ironic punchlines by being hopelessly naïve in appealing to reason in a socio-political environment that is obviously absurd. The affordances of *This*

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[40] Burgers et al. 2013a, p. 308. Neither do the visual elements discussed in *This Modern World* operate as what Burgers and colleagues identify as 'visual markers' (i.e. images that illustrate the literal meaning of the utterance, thus revealing its absurdity) or as 'visually incongruent images' (i.e. images that illustrate the incongruence with the literal evaluation of the utterance). It follows from my discussion that the visuals of *This Modern World* do not act in the exact same way as the visual cues to verbal irony described by Burgers and colleagues.

[41] Rall 2002, pp. 30–31. Perkins has acknowledged that he deliberately manipulates the representation of certain characters to make them look stupid, evil, dull, etc.

Modern World's visual aesthetic support a scope of ironic attribution that extends to 'this modern world' in its totality, including those who have to bear its absurdity; in other words, Perkins's socio-political environment, including those who sympathise with his progressive position. The ironic stance of *This Modern World* encompasses a complex affective range that is characterised by scorn, ridicule, despair, anger, and even hope. It is not that the features of *This Modern World*'s visual aesthetic are enduringly linked to this affectively complex ironic stance, but rather that they cue affordances that sustain this particular interpretation in this particular context. In this respect, even though Perkins self-describes himself as a particularly "verbose"[42] cartoonist and his comic strip thrives on verbal irony, the visuals of *This Modern World* nonetheless play a crucial role in its ironic communication, which adds significantly to the success and enjoyment of the satirical comic strip.

4   Conclusion

The visual aesthetic of *This Modern World*'s problematizes some aspects of the common assumption that visual media are particularly poorly equipped to communicate ironically. Clearly, the ironic tip-offs of *This Modern World* do not consist solely in its captions or text-balloons, but form an integral part of the affordances cued by its visual aesthetic. The important function of visuals in the ironic communication of *This Modern World* further problematizes the conception that irony markers are mere optional devices that signal ironic communication so that it will not be missed.[43] Although the ironic message of *This Modern World* is strictly speaking not

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[42] Perkins 2003, p. 1.

[43] Several scholars who do not explicitly follow Attardo's distinction between irony factors and irony markers nonetheless consider irony indicators as optional devices needed only if background knowledge alone does not suffice to signal ironic communication, most notably Currie 2010, p. 160; and Wilson and Sperber 2012, p. 123.

constituted by Perkins's futuristically anachronous style of depiction, the visuals do more than simply signal the presence of irony. Operating as stance markers, they cue affordances that substantiate the negative evaluative stance conveyed by ironic communication. Since these ironic stance markers clearly add to the success and enjoyment of ironic communication such as *This Modern World*, the claim that the presence of visual irony markers tends to blunt ironic communication should be reconsidered. Although it is regularly claimed that the presence of irony markers blunts all ironic communication (not just visual communication), it is often overlooked that there are two different types of irony markers with two different functions, as helpfully suggested by Hutcheon.[44] I have defended the position that irony markers in *This Modern World* operate as stance markers, and therefore function differently to winks or nudges. Nonetheless, winks and nudges themselves can also operate as markers of irony. On the one hand, Hutcheon argues there are markers with a meta-ironic function, which signal that an act of communication is ironic, while on the other hand there are markers with a structural function, which help to structure the ironic meaning.[45] Whereas stance markers have a structural function in strengthening irony's "evaluative edge",[46] meta-ironic markers indeed only seem to function as an extra signal of ironic communication for those who might have missed it the first time—and are thus used to signal the presence of ironic communication that is not expected to

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[44] For an overview, see Hutcheon 1994, p. 145; p. 148.

[45] Hutcheon 1994, p. 148. It should be noted that Hutcheon herself does not equate the category of irony markers with the structural function of stance markers. She does not mention the concept stance, but roots her understanding of irony markers in her general theory of communicative irony. Her discussion of irony markers is consequently influenced by the idiosyncrasies of her general theory, with which I do not always agree. Nonetheless, I do think she is accurate in the basic distinction she makes between markers with a meta-ironic function and markers with a structural function.

[46] Hutcheon 1994, p. 148.

be very successful on its own. In this regard, Currie's claim that the presence of irony indicators in pictures "make[s] impossible the straight-faced performance that best suits the ironic mode" should be developed by introducing a distinction between markers with a meta-ironic function and markers with a structural function.[47]

A final word remains to be said on irony and pretence, since Currie's position on irony markers is part of his general pretence theory of communicative irony. Importantly, should communicative irony depend on pretence, the evaluative judgement conveyed by ironic communication would necessarily fall outside of the scope of that pretence (contrary to a claim of Burgers and colleagues). According to Burgers and colleagues:

> a marker may not so much mark an irony as alert a reader to the fact that the author takes some kind of position. Since the author also made it apparent that *he does not hold that position in earnest*, it is up to the reader to decode that message. In other words, markers may not mark irony *per se*, but rather alert the reader to the evaluative position in the utterance.[48]

Although I am sympathetic to the proposal introduced by Burgers and colleagues that irony markers can function as stance markers, I disagree that irony markers are stance markers because they mark an evaluative position, which is not held in earnest, towards propositional content. According to Currie, "[i]n speaking or picturing or merely acting ironically one expresses, via an act of pretending, an attitude towards something."[49] In other words, the negative evaluative stance expressed by communicative irony is realised *via* an act of pretence, but is itself held in earnest. The function of irony markers as stance markers, as I have described it, is therefore not theoretically incompatible with Currie's pretence account of communicative irony. I also grant the argument that visual ironic communication may in principle also include cues that

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47 Currie 2011, p. 167.

48 Burgers et al. 2012a, p. 239; my emphasis.

49 Currie 2010, p. 154.

have a meta-ironic function, which do tend to blunt ironic communication. At the same time, the conclusion that meta-ironic markers blunt ironic communication does not exclusively follow from the premise that these are in fact pretence-indicators (and that irony necessarily depends on pretence). Therefore, while this article defends the successful role of visuals in ironic communication, it suspends judgement on the issue of whether or not irony necessarily involves pretence.

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