

Ironic Metaphor Interpretation*

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This paper examines the mechanisms involved in the interpretation of utterances that are both metaphorical and ironical. For example, when uttering ‘He’s a real number-cruncher’ about a total illiterate in maths, the speaker uses a metaphor with an ironic intent. I argue that in such cases both logically and psychologically, the metaphor is prior to irony. I hold that the phenomenon is then one of *ironic metaphor*, which puts a metaphorical meaning to ironic use, rather than an irony used metaphorically (§1). This result is then used to argue for the claim that in metaphor, it is metaphorical, not literal, meaning that determines the utterance’s truth conditions. Gricean accounts, which exclude metaphorical meaning from truth conditional content and rely entirely on conversational implicature, are seen to be unsatisfactory. Five contextualist arguments are briefly discussed to the conclusion that metaphorical content is part of truth-conditional content, rather than implicated (§2).

1. Metaphor’s Priority Over Irony

1.1 When Does Metaphor Combine With Irony?

Although metaphor and irony have typically been studied independently,¹ very little attention has been paid to the constraints the two figurative meanings put on the interpretation of each another when they combine. The cases I am concerned with in this paper are illustrated below.

- (1) a. You are the cream in my coffee. (Grice 1989)
- b. She is the Taj Mahal. (Bezuidenhout 2001)
- c. Shamir is a towering figure. (Stern 2000)
- d. What delicate lacework! (Stern 2000)

While each of the utterances in (1) may be used metaphorically to convey, respectively, that the hearer is the most precious thing in the speaker’s life, that the woman in question is very attractive, that Shamir is a powerful politician, and that someone’s calligraphy is beautiful—they may also be used ironically without loss of these metaphorical meanings. So used, (1a) conveys that the hearer has fallen short of the speaker’s affection; (1b) that the woman in question is far from being attractive; (1c) that Shamir is not taken seriously or respected among his peers; and (1d) that someone’s handwriting is illegible.

In these latter cases, how should we describe the utterance? Is it an ironic metaphor, or a metaphorical irony? This question concerns the logical order of interpretation as well as the temporal order in the actual psychological processing. Do we first interpret the utterance metaphorically and

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¹ Katz & Pexman (1997), comparing the preferred use of metaphor or irony with respect to the speaker’s occupation, found that, for example, cab/truck drivers, students, political critics, and mechanics are more likely to use irony, whereas salesmen, scientists, lawyers, and cooks are viewed as using metaphor more often than irony.

only then determine its ironic interpretation? Or do we first determine the ironic interpretation and then interpret it metaphorically? Either way, is the actual order of processing merely contingent, or is there some *logical* reason why the order could not be different?

The challenge of interpreting such cases is that of establishing the order of interpretation that would allow the two figures to intermingle in a way that leads to the creation of a new compound figure. The aim of this paper is to spell out the constraints the two figures put on the interpretation of each other, more precisely how they interact and adjust one to another so as to yield the intended compound meaning. Existing approaches to metaphor and irony focus only on their specific nature and their underlying mechanisms of interpretation when used in isolation. But when two figures combine, they illuminate further constraints such approaches must respect, as well as raising a host of questions that are of independent interest.

1.2 Metaphor Priority Thesis

Let us refer to the logical and psychological theses that in ironic metaphor, the metaphor is prior to the irony as the *metaphor priority thesis* (henceforth MPT). Whereas a psychological thesis pertains to claims about the psychological order in which a given interpretation might go, a logical thesis pertains to claims about logical constraints that impose an order on the logical structuring of contents, such that some contents must usually work as *input* for inferring further contents. In the case of ironic metaphors, the two theses become as follows. Logical MPT predicts that metaphorical content must work as *input* to ironical content, such that irony builds on metaphor, rendering it subservient to an ironic communicative goal. Psychological MPT relies on empirical evidence to the effect that metaphorical meaning is processed generally quicker (and is less complex) than ironical meaning, thus suggesting a processing order in which metaphor is prior to irony.

Grice (1989:34) appears to advocate logical MPT, when he claims that in (1a) the hearer has to reach first the metaphor ‘You are my pride and joy,’ and then calculate an ironic interpretation ‘You are my bane,’ on the basis of metaphor. Unfortunately, however, he does not give an argument for this claim. Nor does he explain how the passage from metaphorical to ironical meaning is negotiated. I aim to remedy this omission, as well as suggesting tentative empirical hypotheses that this is the psychological order in which the two figures are computed.

As a general strategy I distinguish weak from strong versions of both logical and psychological MPT, depending on whether some or all cases are covered.

- (2) **Weak MPT:** in *some* cases of ironic metaphor, the metaphor is/has to be computed first.
Strong MPT: in *all* cases of ironic metaphor, the metaphor is/has to be computed first.

So we are left with four versions of MPT. The weakest is weak psychological MPT. The strongest is strong logical MPT.

1.2.1 Psychological MPT

It is often claimed that irony operates *globally* on propositional contents to determine new contents.² But at least sometimes metaphor operates *locally* on expressions (before the whole utterance is computed).³ Since local operations work prior to global operations, this seems to support

² Starting with rhetoric, and then Gricean tradition, irony is widely viewed as operating on the propositional content of the utterance to yield a conversational implicature, typically the opposite of that content.

³ For various arguments of locality based on the idea that metaphor is computed at word-level prior to the literal interpretation of the whole utterance, see Récanati (2004), Stern (2000), Carston (2002), Sperber & Wilson (2008).

(weak) psychological MPT. In those cases in which the metaphoric interpretation is local, the irony comes into play only after all interpretations involving words have been calculated.

The explanation for metaphor's priority seems to lie in the different mechanisms of interpretation that irony and metaphor require. If they were similar in nature, we would expect more freedom, and hence the possibility of inverting the order of interpretation. Clearly, however, metaphors and ironies call on different interpretive resources: hearers make use of their knowledge of conceptual domains to understand metaphors, whereas they employ metarepresentational abilities to infer speakers' beliefs about others' beliefs or the so-called 'theory of mind' (ToM). Comparing the interpretation of metaphor and irony, Winner & Garner (1979/93:442) suggest that the relation between metalinguistic awareness and interpretive understanding differs in the two cases. Whereas with metaphor it is possible to recognize the utterance as metaphorical, although sometimes being unsure about the exact content of speaker's meaning, recognizing the utterance as being ironical ensures grasping the ironical content:

[In metaphor] it is as if the listener said, "I know the speaker is being metaphorical, but I do not know what [s]he is getting at." In the case of irony, once one recognizes that the speaker is being ironical, there is a click of comprehension and the speaker's meaning is grasped. It is difficult to imagine thinking, 'I know the speaker is being ironical but I just don't know what [s]he means.' Rather, one is more likely to think, 'Oh, *now* I understand. He was being ironical!'

Such considerations seem to block the adoption of the strong psychological MPT from the mere argument of the locality of metaphor, since irony might sometimes be computed locally. Irony may arise locally, for example, when the underlying contrast between the utterance content is what is expected in the circumstances is highly salient, and moreover when the target that bears the most ironical weight occurs at the beginning of the utterance.⁴ To illustrate, consider (3) said looking at and referring to an old woman.

(3) *The fountain of youth* is getting her pension.

Given the salient information that the woman in question, who was known as a beauty, became old and decrepit, we might expect an utterance of (3) to be immediately recognized as ironical, that is, upon processing the definite description 'fountain of youth.' If irony is claimed to be computed locally in this sense, the question of a priority order is then difficult to adjudicate since it leaves room for the possibility that irony is prior to metaphor. But it is not certain that we do compute irony first, even though we might recognize an ironical intention locally, since the contrast upon which irony relies is between a purported metaphorical claim and how things really are. Thus, to understand what

The argument proposed by relevance theorists follows from a claim about the continuity from literal/loose uses to metaphoric and hyperbolic uses. They treat metaphor as operating in the same way as literal, loose and hyperbolic interpretations: a pragmatic adjustment involves accessing a relevant subset of the information (logical and encyclopaedic) made available by the lexical concept and using it to inferentially construct the intended ("ad hoc") concept—i.e. a concept whose extension is narrower or broader than that of the lexical concept. What makes the resulting interpretation intuitively literal, approximate, hyperbolic, or metaphorical, is the particular set of encyclopaedic assumptions actually selected in making the utterance relevant in the expected way. The concept conveyed by a metaphor, or hyperbole, draws on a broadening of the lexical concept (or a combination of broadening and narrowing), as part of the mutual adjustment mechanism between explicit content and implicatures (see Wilson & Carston (2007)).

⁴ A local analysis of irony would justify a semantic account of sarcasm, say, in terms of a SARC-operator at the logical form, whose function is to invert the truth conditional content of a word's literal semantic content. For a rejection of such an account see Camp (forth.). Gibbs (1994) provides empirical evidence to the effect that in rich contexts, or in contexts with an explicit echo, the ironical meaning is directly accessed.

the irony is about, hearers have to have understood that the description ‘fountain of youth’ refers to a salient woman that is metaphorically described as being young, vivacious, alert, etc. Only after the metaphorical content is computed can it be ironically interpreted to convey that such a metaphorical description is ridiculous in the circumstances. This result could not be reached on an irony-first approach, since there is no clear ironic content derived the literal meaning, such that when reinterpreted metaphorically yields the intended compound meaning. So even when the irony seems to be locally *recognised*, determining the full ironical content requires having computed the metaphorical content. Hence, irony necessarily builds on the metaphorical content, supporting MPT.

Of course, claims of locality or globality should be settled empirically. The psychological literature has focused mainly on the comparison in comprehension time between metaphor and irony processing and their respective literal counterparts, suggesting that metaphors are (generally) processed as quickly as literal counterparts,⁵ and ironies take (generally) longer than their literal counterparts.⁶ If we take such results at face value, this seems to support a *weak* psychological MPT to the effect that metaphor is expected to be (generally) processed quicker than irony.

Very few empirical studies test the processing order in ironic metaphors, so as to establish a strong psychological MPT, i.e. that in *all* cases of ironic metaphor, the metaphor *is* computed before irony. Colston & Gibbs’ (2002) study is relevant in that in comparing metaphor/irony compounds (‘He’s really sharp!’) with simple ironies (‘He’s really smart!’), they found that the compounds take longer to process than simple ironies. They explain the increased difficulty in terms of an ambiguity about whether the utterance is used metaphorically, ironically, or both.⁷ An interesting line of inquiry they suggested as a way of testing the processing underlying ironic metaphors is to compare the number of metarepresentations involved in such cases with those involved in simple ironies.⁸ A first hypothesis they propose is that the metarepresentational inferences involved in understanding ironic metaphors are *fewer* than those involved in understanding simple ironies. This result is explained by metaphor’s capacity for muting the ironical meaning, thereby enhancing metaphoric effects and attenuating the speaker’s critical attitude, which is characteristic of irony.⁹ While I agree with their intuition, it remains unclear why and how the layers of metarepresentations are reduced in such

⁵ Ortony et al., 1978; Gildea & Glucksberg, 1983; Gerrig & Healey, 1983; Gibbs, 1994; Glucksberg, 2001.

⁶ Results from Giora & Fein (1999), Dews & Winner (1999); Fillik & Moxey (in press) converge on the suggestion that irony might take longer to process, the additional time being taken by the processing of the literal meaning (either before if the irony is unfamiliar, or in parallel if the irony is familiar). Different results are, however, reported from a direct-access view of irony suggesting that irony is processed *directly* in rich, supportive contexts, with no contextual incompatible interpretive phase (Gibbs, 1986, 1994; Katz et al. 2004). Further studies suggest that when echoic elements are present and explicit, this facilitates considerably the understanding of irony (Jorgensen et al., 1984; Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989; Keenan & Quigley, 1999).

⁷ Giora (2003) also found that familiar metaphors take longer to understand in ironic contexts rather than in non-ironic ones. She (2008:155) suggests that such the increased difficulty might be due to irony’s novelty: even though the metaphor used is familiar, using it ironically renders the irony unfamiliar requiring more processing effort.

⁸ Testing the difference in metaphor and irony comprehension in autistic patients, Happé (1993) found an asymmetry in their processing: metaphor is interpreted via 1st-order ToM [The speaker believes that (*P*)], while irony requires 2nd-order ToM [The speaker believes that [someone else believes that (*P*)]]. Whatever the reality about metaphor is, there is overwhelming evidence that for understanding irony subjects need to think about the thoughts the speaker is thinking of. This is vital for distinguishing irony from mistakes or deception (see Winner (1988)).

⁹ If the point the speaker of an ironic metaphor aims to achieve is primarily ironical, we may wonder why she bothers to use a metaphor. One explanation is that in using a metaphor (usually a positive one) with an ironic intent, speakers make the contrast between the positive referent and the negative situation less vivid, thereby attenuating the threatening attitude that ironies usually convey. The metaphor seems to ensure a buffer zone for the ironical contrast to be diffused, creating a space for metaphoric effects to resonate. If a sensitive hearer argues with, or questions, her ironic attitude, the speaker may retreat behind this buffer by claiming that she merely meant to be metaphorical.

compounds, even if we might concede that the metarepresentation associated with metaphor is somewhat less strong.

A second hypothesis following from Happé's findings that metaphor requires 1st-order ToM and irony 2nd-order ToM is to say that the processing of metaphor/irony compounds requires more metarepresentations as compared to simple ironies. On the assumption that metaphor does require a 1st-order ToM, the number of metarepresentations involved in understanding ironic metaphor might go up to three layers, which may be represented as: *{The speaker believes that [X believes that (X believes that ((P))]}*. As with simple ironies, to understand ironic metaphors hearers have to think of what thoughts, other than her own, the speaker is thinking of, for example that she is echoing that someone else is thinking of a given state of affairs. Whereas the state of affairs to which the person being echoed is thinking of is presented in literal terms in simple irony, in ironic metaphor it is presented in metaphorical terms. Now, if Happé is right that to understand metaphors hearers have to think that the speaker is thinking of a state of affairs, it follows that in cases of ironic metaphor the metarepresentation associated with the metaphor is added to the 2nd-order metarepresentation deployed to understand that the speaker is putting forward someone else's thought/claim, which is a metaphorical thought/claim. This possibility easily explains that processing ironic metaphors should take longer than simple ironies. It is, however, empirically suspect, given that the comprehension time ratings for metaphor suggest that it is generally processed as easily as literal speech.

A third hypothesis, which I favour, is to say that understanding ironic metaphor requires the *same* amount of metarepresentational inferences as processing simple ironies. Adding a metaphor to a speaker's ironic utterance should not complicate the metarepresentations the hearer has to infer. The fact that the hearer has to think about the speaker's thoughts about another's thoughts to understand (simple) irony (thus requiring 2nd-order ToM), or about her thoughts about someone else's metaphorical thoughts to understand ironic metaphor should not increase the number of metarepresentational inferences. That amounts to saying that someone else's metaphorical thought that is echoed or pretended in ironic metaphors makes the same contribution as any literal thought of an actual/potential state of affairs, since both contribute to the utterance's truth-conditional content. If this hypothesis is plausible, it suggests that it is someone else's metaphorical thought that is being ironized, further suggesting that the metaphor is part of the metarepresentation that is needed to understand the irony. This seems to support strong psychological MPT.

If metaphor/irony compounds do not involve more metarepresentations than simple ironies, why do they take longer to process? Colston & Gibbs (2002) suggest that the additional processing time is due to a combination of different processing modes which might produce an interference between a descriptive mode for metaphor and an interpretive mode for irony, as compared to a single processing mode involved in irony. This is indeed what we would predict from a relevance-theoretic perspective, which holds that metaphor is understood descriptively (to represent a possible/actual state of affairs), while irony is understood interpretively (to (meta)represent another representation—a possible/actual utterance/thought—that it resembles in content). The prediction is that combining different processing modes, as is needed in ironic metaphors, increases the effort necessary to understand what speakers mean more than in understanding simple ironies, where only one processing mode is required.

Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the two processing modes specific to metaphor and irony are not only different but they somehow *interfere* with one another. I conjecture that the kind of mesh underlying ironic metaphors is different from the one underlying sarcastic indirect requests, such as (4a), where the speaker is both making an indirect request and being sarcastic about it. Testing comprehension times for such sarcastic indirect requests, Gibbs (1986a) found that processing (4a) is faster than processing the corresponding direct request in (4b) or the literal counterpart in (4c).

- (4) a. Why don't you take your time to wash the dishes?
 b. Hurry up and wash the dishes.
 c. Please wash the dishes.

Gibbs explains the easiness in grasping a sarcastic indirect request by arguing that both sarcasm and indirect request are indirect meanings, and therefore don't interfere one with another. That is an interesting line of thought, although it is not very obvious how it applies to cases of ironic metaphors, unless suggesting that one meaning is direct and the other is indirect, thus somehow interfering one with another. But how do we distinguish which one is direct and which is indirect?

I shall argue in Section 2 that it is the metaphor that might be considered as a *direct* meaning in the sense that it contributes to the utterance's truth-conditional content, whereas irony is held to be indirect in that it is merely implied. This difference, together with the assumption that metaphor is typically processed locally and irony is typically processed globally, seems to suggest that when metaphorical and ironical meanings are combined, they might interfere, thus slowing down the processing. Still, another possible explanation of the additional processing involved in understanding ironic metaphors might be related to the quality of the metaphoric interpretation. For example, in those cases in which the metaphoric interpretation is indeterminate and open-ended, given that the metaphor is computed first, the whole interpretation of the ironic metaphor is delayed and indeterminate because the hearer might just be uncertain about the exact metaphorical content that is ironically intended.

1.2.2 Weak Logical MPT

Whereas psychological MPT predicts, on the basis of empirical evidence, that ironic metaphors are, as a matter of fact, understood by first processing the metaphor and then the irony, logical MPT is rather concerned with establishing logical constraints that explain why the order of interpretation should go this way rather than another way. First, I will consider whether there any evidence for weak logical MPT, to the effect that in *some* cases of ironic metaphor, the metaphor *has to* be prior to irony. My strategy is to look at the difficulties for the reversed, irony-first, order of interpretation and argue from this to the conclusion that the order of interpretation must go the other way, that is, metaphor-first approach.

To illustrate, consider the case in which the sentence in (1d) repeated below as (5) is used to convey that a doctor's indecipherable scrawl is illegible.

- (5) What delicate lacework! (Stern 2000)

If irony has priority over metaphor, it seems difficult to pin down an appropriate contrary to the literal term,¹⁰ which when interpreted metaphorically yields the intended interpretation. At least in some cases, therefore, there is a conceptual difficulty underlying the irony-first approach, since there is no rational route to the literal term's opposite, without first retrieving the metaphor. As Stern (2000:236) observes:

The element of the context that is most relevant to determine the appropriate contrary [of the literal term] at this first stage is information related to the feature in terms of which the expression will then be interpreted metaphorically at the second stage. So, to select an ironic contrary, it is necessary to have some knowledge already of the metaphorical interpretation of the expression.

¹⁰ Irony has far richer meanings than the contrary of what is said by the utterance. For simplicity, I rely on this traditional view here.

As Stern explains, the difficulty in finding the relevant ironic contrary independent of the metaphorical meaning is due to a difficulty in finding “a literal (ironic) contrary of the original expression, which, under its subsequent metaphoric interpretation, will express a feature contrary to the feature metaphorically expressed by the original expression” (ibid.). Thus, the objection to irony-first approach is that it is difficult to find the contrary of the metaphorical expression, before understanding that expression metaphorically.

Building on Stern’s objection, I argue that an irony-first approach gives the wrong predictions in the majority of cases. For the sake of argument, suppose that an irony-first order of interpretation is available for (5). This can be represented in two stages: a simple irony which can be represented via a negation operator as in (6a), and the resulting content is further reinterpreted by locally modulating the literal meaning ‘lacework’ into a metaphorical meaning as in (6b).¹¹

- (6) a. That’s NOT delicate lacework.
 b. That’s NOT *beautiful/crafted handwriting*.

There are two problems with this explanation, however. Firstly, an irony-first order of interpretation misses its target in the sense that it doesn’t apply to the intended reference, here the doctor’s handwriting. Apart from yielding a banal literal truth (that the handwriting in question is not delicate lacework), the ironical content realized as *negation* is too weak. As such, it leaves open the computation of irrelevant contrasts (e.g. a piece of embroidery, tapestry, etc.), thus hindering the possibility of connecting with the intended reference. There is the danger that in a context in which it is highly salient that some expensive curtains have just been ripped to shreds, the utterance in (5) might be taken as a simple irony, the interpretation wrongly stopping at the first stage, since there is no need to go further reinterpreting the ironical content metaphorically.

The second, more general, problem is a matter of scope. It rests on the two following assumptions. Irony operates globally taking wide-scope on the propositional contents (even in cases where irony might be recognised locally), so as to determine new contents (typically by reversing the literal content of the sentence uttered). But metaphor operates sometimes locally, that is, it takes sub-sentential scope, by pragmatically adjusting the literal meaning of a word/expression. Since local operations work prior to global operations, this suggests that the scope operated by metaphor ought to have been effected before the irony takes scope on the whole sentence. This supports a weak logical MPT on which the order of interpretation is of the form *IronyMetaphor* <P> rather than *MetaphorIrony* <P>.¹²

1.2.3 Strong Logical MPT

Is there any evidence for strong logical MPT, that in *all* cases of ironic metaphor, the metaphor *has to* be computed first? Bezuidenhout (2001) defends a strong logical MPT, arguing that in all cases of ironic metaphor it is impossible for irony to work as a springboard for metaphor. In

¹¹ Relevance-theorists advocates (Bezuidenhout 2001; Carston 2002; Wearing 2006; Récanati 2004; Sperber & Wilson 2008) defend a so-called direct view of metaphor on which metaphor is hold to be understood via a local pragmatic process of modulation or broadening the lexical meaning of the word used metaphorically.

¹² Even if we consider the possibility that irony is local (e.g. ‘delicate’ is used ironically), it seems that the irony-first construal ‘That lacework is NOT *delicate*’ which is then interpreted metaphorically ‘That doctor’s handwriting is NOT delicate’ does not give, however, the intended reading, i.e. that one and the same element (‘lacework’) is interpreted both metaphorically and ironically.

contrast, Stern (2000) defends only a weak logical MPT, by making provision for an irony-first approach in cases where a highly conventional metaphor is used ironically. For example, he argues that in cases such (1c), repeated here as (7), uttered about a politician who is not well respected, either order of interpretation may do.

(7) Shamir is a towering figure.

Stern's argument for the indeterminate order of interpretation is conditioned upon the metaphor's conventionality. It is because the metaphorical meaning 'person of significant importance' is conventionalized as one of the lexicalized meanings of 'towering figure,' that is, it is automatically retrieved without inferring it from the literal content of the utterance, that the metaphorical content can be easily retrieved either before or after the irony. It can be easily retrievable in either position. Clearly, if it is retrieved before the irony then the situation is just like *simple irony*, since the metaphorical processing involved would be just another form of lexical meaning retrieval. But if it is retrieved after the irony, there is no justification for delaying a lexical (metaphorical) retrieval until after the ironical content is computed, say, automatically selecting social unimportance from the ironical content of diminutive stature.¹³

Even so, Stern is right in pointing out that an irony-first approach is sometimes possible. When this is possible is, however, different from the motivation Stern gave us. In my view, it isn't because metaphor is conventional that irony may come first in the order of interpretation, but rather because *irony* is conventional so that its conventionalized meaning is readily accessible.

To illustrate, consider (8) uttered by a financial reporter talking about the economic crisis, while pointing out that the stock market has just gone down drastically.

(8) It's a sunny day today, isn't it.

The reporter is both ironical and metaphorical. Given that the irony is highly entrenched, on an irony-first approach, it is arguably computed first as referring to terrible weather as in (9a), and then reinterpreted metaphorically as pertaining to the economic disaster as in (9b).

(9) a. The weather is terrible today.
b. The economic news is bad today.

This is arguably possible only in cases where the irony is conventional, and it is marked by ironic intonation. This suggests a weak logical MPT, to the effect that metaphor is *generally* logically prior to irony, but in a minority of cases this needn't be so.

Pace such cases, I argue that in the majority of cases a metaphor-first order of interpretation is the most explanatory approach. I want now to consider some implications from logical MPT, and suggest that the order in which metaphor and irony are interpreted brings something more beyond the speaker meaning *qua*-content drawing on the composition of metaphor and irony. A first claim is that

¹³ An analogous argument comes from the ironic use of idioms. For instance, a quasi-metaphorical idiom *don't give up the ship* used to communicate that one should persevere in the face of adversity, when it is used in the context of someone giving up, it functions ironically, but only if it is first understood as metaphor for perseverance. Similarly, the idiom *burying the hatchet* refers to declaring an end to hostilities, but when it is used in the context of someone NOT making the peace, it will function ironically. Other examples of this sort are *locking the barn door after the cows have fled*, *striking gold*, *it's a gold mine*, etc. Thanks to Sam Glucksberg for suggesting the parallel with idioms and the examples. The important point with idioms used ironically is that they reveal the necessity of appealing to their original metaphorical meaning/image in the first place (which got conventionalised), and on which the ironical meaning can then be built so as to serve ironic conversational uses of the idiom.

the correct standard interpretation of an ironic metaphor, such as (1c)—‘Shamir is a towering figure’ uttered about an infatuated politician—is closer to that of the associated simple irony in (10a) than it is to that of the associated simple (negated) metaphor in (10b).

(10)	a.	Utterance	He is important
		Ironical meaning	He is <i>not</i> important
	b.	Utterance	He is not a towering figure
		Metaphorical meaning	He is not <i>important</i>

Although (10a) and (10b) seem to deliver similar outputs, only the associated irony in (10a) captures the speaker’s attitude of contempt towards the politician’s inflated opinion about his important career. Such attitude is absent in the associated negated metaphor in (10b). It is also lacking when the positive metaphor is used ironically, since the ironic attitude targets the literal content pertaining to Shamir’s shortness rather than to his social importance.

That cases of ironic metaphor are closer to irony rather than to metaphor suggests a further claim that this result is correctly predicted by a metaphor-first approach as in (11), but is not correctly predicted by an irony-first approach as in (12).

(11) *Metaphor-first approach*

Utterance	He is a towering figure
Metaphor:	He is <i>important</i>
Irony:	He is <i>not important</i>

(12) *Irony-first approach*

Utterance	He is a towering figure
Irony:	He is <i>not</i> a towering figure (He is short/diminutive)
Metaphor:	He is <i>not important</i>

Although the two approaches seem to deliver the same content as output, I suggest that there is something more than speaker meaning *qua* content that makes the difference between them, and this is given precisely by the order the two figurative meanings in which are processed.¹⁴ On an irony-first approach, there is arguably no way of capturing the speaker’s critical attitude towards the politician’s inflated opinion about his important career, which takes on the metaphorical sense of important career, rather than the literal sense of his impressive height.

More importantly, on an irony-first approach the hearer loses the delight of the intended irony, which is that of dramatizing upon the metaphorical, rather than the literal content. Depending on the theoretical stance on irony, the speaker of an ironic metaphor may be seen as either pretending to say something metaphorically, or as echoing someone else’s metaphorical claim, with a view of drawing the hearer’s attention to the contrast that such claim creates in the context, and thereby mocking those who might sincerely assent to such a claim. It is only on a metaphor-first approach that the target of the ironical attitude is correctly predicted, more specifically a metaphorical claim which is merely pretended or echoed. Since the ironic interpretation is conditioned upon the metaphorical one as the content of the pretence, or the relevant echo that needs to be recognized, the

¹⁴ To sharpen the point, suppose there is a language, say Schminenglish, in which an ambiguous sentence has two meanings, *p* and *not-p*. Now, if Jim is using the sentence with the meaning *p* ironically then he would have meant *not-p*. But his partner does not disambiguate correctly and understands him as having meant *not-p*, as it were literally. Although he arrived at the same content *not-p*, he missed the irony because he did not follow the route indicated by the ironical use.

resulting compound meaning arises as an implicature that is grounded in the metaphorical meaning. This captures the intuition that what speakers are ironic about is precisely the metaphorical content.

2. Metaphor and What Is Said

I will now consider what implications MPT has on the interpretation of metaphor and its relationship with what is said or the utterance's truth-conditions. On Grice's account, the metaphor interpretation is indirect in the sense that speakers express one thing but mean another. It arises from a blatant violation of the first maxim of Quality ("Do not say what you believe to be false"), and is arrived at by first calculating the proposition literally expressed, which, given its conversational inappropriateness, leads the hearer to implicatures. However, having argued that in ironic metaphor, the metaphor is processed first, we must now ask whether in such cases, the metaphor is processed directly, that is, as part of what is said, or indirectly, that is, as implicature. I shall argue that it is processed directly. I first suggest that Bezuidenhout's (2001) claim that it is a consequence of MPT that metaphorical content is part of what is said does not follow, and then discuss five standard arguments for the conclusion that metaphorical meaning does contribute to an enriched content corresponding to *what is said*.¹⁵

2.1 The Argument from MPT

The lesson from MPT was that in cases of ironic metaphors, the irony arises as an implicature that is grounded in the metaphorical, rather than the literal content. A similar conclusion is reached by Bezuidenhout (2001) who argues that the metaphoric interpretation in such cases must be launched from the utterance itself and not from a pragmatic interpretation that is indirectly arrived at, for example from irony, indirect request, or any other implicature. The claim is that it is the metaphor that serves as a springboard for launching the irony, and not the other way around. This gives rise to the following procedure of interpretation in (13):

- (13) a metaphoric interpretation *P* is first generated from the particular expressions employed in a sentence *S*;
P is then interpreted ironically, producing interpretation *Q*;
Q can in turn generate a further implicature *R*.

For example, to successfully interpret the utterance in (1b), repeated below as (14), the expression *Taj Mahal* must first be interpreted metaphorically that the woman in question is attractive and sophisticated, and then interpreted ironically that the woman in question is unattractive and boring.

- (14) She is the Taj Mahal.

The ironical content computed in a second stage interpretation might possibly launch a further implicature of refusal to go out with the woman in question.

Such a procedure of interpretation is revealing about the metaphor's status. More specifically, using the criterion that when a content launches implicatures it belongs to what is said by the utterance, Bezuidenhout (2001) argues that it is a consequence of how ironic metaphor is interpreted that the metaphorical meaning contributes to what is said rather than to what is implicated. However,

¹⁵ 'What is said' is here understood not in the Gricean/neo-Gricean sense (involving the semantic content of the sentence, plus disambiguation and reference assignment) but in terms of what speakers *do/assert* in uttering their words, whereby saying involves the direct expression of the speaker's intended meaning.

Camp (2006) observes that Bezuidenhout's criterion of *what is said* is unreliable. She argues that both sarcasm and conversational implicature can launch further implicatures, but they do not count as what is said. For example, when Bill asks Alice whom they should invite for dinner, and Alice responds sarcastically, as in (15a), meaning (15b), Alice further implicates (15c).

- (15) a. Well, Jane is always so utterly charming.
 b. Jane is not an enjoyable person to have at dinner.
 c. Under no condition should Jane be invited to dinner.

Camp's point is a strong one. Clearly, (15c) is implicated by the sarcastic content (15b). The latter is not something the speaker says/asserts, however. Ironic content is not something that is said by the utterance. (15b) is merely implied by the speaker.¹⁶

While Camp's point against Bezuidenhout's suggestion that MPT entails that metaphor is part of what is said must be conceded, I think she is wrong to argue that the criterion of implicatures launching further implicatures is evidence in favour of a Gricean view of metaphor as conversational implicature. In pushing forward the idea that "an implicature can be launched from *P* whenever the speaker's intention for *U* to be interpreted as *P* is sufficiently obvious, even though *P* is itself an implicature," Camp (2006:291) suggests that metaphor can fit this scheme. It can launch ironic implicatures while still being itself an implicature.

This argument is unwarranted, though. Although Camp importantly shows that some of the contents that launch implicatures are mere implicatures themselves, this is not true of metaphorical content. The reason we communicate information indirectly, via implicatures, is because we do not want to commit ourselves to the claim we merely suggest by them. Were we challenged we could easily retreat behind the literal meaning, because we did not assert the indirect meaning, committing ourselves to it. While this is typical of irony, it is not so of metaphor, particularly in the case of conversational metaphors. I will next discuss five standard contextualist arguments to argue that metaphor is indeed part of what is said.

2.2 Five Contextualist Arguments for Metaphor's Directness

The first and second of these arguments are semantic. They concern the embeddability of metaphors within logical/propositional operators and the use of metaphors to make assertions. The third and fourth arguments make use of speakers'/hearers' intuitions about the metaphorical content being communicated as part of what speakers communicate directly and explicitly. The fifth argument draws on empirical evidence about metaphor processing suggesting that metaphor processing is similar to that of literal speech.

2.2.1 Embedded Metaphors

Metaphors can embed both within the scope of logical operators (negation, counterfactuals, modals), and within the scope of propositional attitude operators (belief/speech reports). For

¹⁶ Camp suggests that the conditions in which implicatures can launch further implicatures are as follows. "In order for an implicature *Q* to be launched from an interpretation *P* of an utterance *U*, the speaker's intention for *U* to be interpreted as *P* has to be *open* and *obvious*, and not merely insinuated." Although the ironic content is not part of what is said, sarcasm can meet this requirement because it is a "well-established [route] for communicating something by an utterance other than its conventional meaning." However, this criterion is unsatisfactory: the distinction between implicatures that are "open and obvious" and implicatures that are merely "insinuated" is unclear.

example, in (16), the expression used metaphorically (*the sun*) is embedded in Mercutio's report of Romeo's utterance:

(16) Romeo believes/(said) that Juliet *is the sun*.

Here, Mercutio is not attributing to Romeo the belief that Juliet is the real sun, but rather a belief provided by the metaphorical content that Juliet is beautiful, nurturing, and worthy of worship.

That metaphorical content can be embedded in this way poses a problem for Grice's view that metaphorical content is conversationally implicated, since conversational implicatures are not embeddable within the scope of logical or propositional attitude operators. As Wearing (2006:313) observes, if metaphor were computed as an implicature, it would be triggered by sub-parts ('the sun') of certain complex sentences which are not independently said/asserted by the speaker; only the complex sentence, here the belief-clause, is said/asserted.¹⁷ Grice's account cannot accommodate this fact, since on his account the metaphor as conversational implicature is the product of a conflict between what is said and the conversational maxims. Because the metaphorical content is embedded in (16), it is, so to speak, implicated by something that is *not* said/asserted.

2.2.2 Truth-Aptness: Metaphorical Assertions

Bergmann (1982) is one of the first to give an account of the assertive use of metaphor. She distinguishes a concept of "pregnancy" of metaphor, which is typical of poetic metaphors that are rich and open-ended,¹⁸ from that of efficacy in asserting a specific proposition, which is typical of conversational metaphors, and argues that in the latter case the contents of metaphorical assertions, or their truth values, are no different in kind from those of literal assertions. They differ, not in the content of what is said, but only in the *manner* of saying it, where she defines manner as "the systematic relation between the words used and the content of the illocutionary act" (1982:233).

Bergmann (1982:234) further argues that the speaker's intention with a metaphorical assertion is to assert, not the proposition literally expressed by the sentence, but the content of what is communicated "as a direct function of salient characteristics associated with (at least) part of the expression—rather than of the literal meaning of that part." Independently of her conception of what the salient characteristics are and how they are selected, her main point that metaphorical content is quite a thin suggests that is rather part of the utterance content, rather than what the speaker implicates by it. A speaker who makes a metaphorical assertion does not intend to assert *everything* that can be "read into" the metaphor, but only a specific part (the rest of the potential metaphorical readings are treated in terms of relevance-theory's notion of weak implicatures).

Hills (1997), Stern (2000), and Bezuidenhout (2001) make similar claims that metaphorical sentences can be used to make assertions (or other speech acts that presuppose assertion), and that metaphorical utterances in declarative mood are bearers of truth value. Such a view follows from a certain conversational practice of using metaphors directly to express propositions that may be asserted or denied (or deployed with any other illocutionary force). As Stern (2000:304) argues,

the distinction between the metaphorical and the literal [...] is a distinction between two kinds of interpretations or uses of language, not between kinds of truth, or between the circumstances in which what is said is true or false. Metaphors no less than literal utterances of sentences can

¹⁷ Bach (2001) distinguishes between an illocutionary act of *stating/asserting* (i.e. doing something by saying it), and a locutionary act, independent of speakers' communicative intention.

¹⁸ Metaphors' rich effects, in particular non-propositional ones, are the reason why Davidson (1978) rejects the idea that metaphors are compatible with assertions.

therefore be actually true—just in case their interpretation, or what they are used to say, is true in the circumstances in which they are uttered.

More specifically, when a metaphorical speaker utters a metaphor, she wishes not only to call hearers' attention to some similarity, but she aims to say/assert something true about a state of affairs.¹⁹ For example, when Romeo utters "Juliet is the sun," he says/asserts that Juliet has a specific property, for example that she's important in his life, thereby representing himself as believing it to be true, or at least defending it as true. The property he believes to be true of Juliet is a property metaphorically expressed, which needs to be included in the utterance (truth conditional) content, as it is this precise property that makes his utterance metaphorically true.²⁰ Then his assertion is open to truth/falsity evaluation, and can be further agreed with or denied.

2.2.3 Responses to and Reports of Metaphorical Utterances

The fact that metaphorical content is asserted creates the conditions for it to be available for explicit responses in conversation. Since speakers/hearers take it to be what speakers intuitively say/assert, hearers may explicitly respond by taking up the speaker's very words, agreeing with or denying the speaker's metaphorical content. In particular, hearers may affirm, deny, question or elaborate on the metaphorical content expressed by the speaker's original utterance. As Hills (1997), Bezuidenhout (2001), and Wearing (2006) argue, hearers respond to metaphorical content as if it is what is said/asserted, rather than as something implicated; otherwise, such responses, as in (17) (from Bezuidenhout 2001:157), would be infelicitous.

- (17) A: Bill's a bulldozer.
 B: That's true. We want someone who'll stand up to the administration and get things for our department.
 C: I disagree that he's a bulldozer; that exterior hides someone who's basically insecure. But, either way, Bill wouldn't make a good chair.

A, B and C are talking of the possibility of appointing Bill as head of department. The coherence of the exchange is ensured by the fact that all agree that the literally expressed proposition is false and that it is a metaphorical content that is the topic of conversation. By asserting that Bill is a bulldozer, A communicates explicitly, as opposed to implicating, that she thinks that Bill has a determined will and that he is a formidable person when pursuing his causes. B agrees with this metaphorical content, and reinforces explicitly the psychological dimension in which A is assessing Bill by making a claim about what characteristics are desirable in a head of department. In contrast, C denies this metaphorical content, arguing that in fact Bill's domineering behaviour betrays his inner insecurity.

Since hearers can express their judgment of whether they think the metaphorical content is correct or not by replying 'That's true/false,' it follows that the metaphorical content contributes to *what is said* by the utterance rather than to what is implicated by it. For we respond 'That's true/false' only to *what is said* by an utterance. If the metaphorical content 'genuinely tough guy' of

¹⁹ Metaphors have the potential of representing not what the words themselves represent, but what the speaker intends to represent in a direct/explicit way by choosing the relevant bits of the world-knowledge that are to fix the correct interpretation in a given context. In the same way as with literal communication, when using metaphors we strive to fit our words to the world, i.e. to represent something in the world (in a metaphorical way) by adjusting our words so as to include instances that wouldn't have normally fallen under their strict literal meanings.

²⁰ As Hintikka & Sandu (1994:157) argue, metaphorical truth is no different from literal truth: "the truth conditions of statements containing a metaphoric expression are the same as normal truth conditions, given the nonliteral meaning of that expression."

A's assertion were merely implicated, then responses of the kind B and C make, such as "Yes, he is" or "No, he's not," would be infelicitous. As Wearing (2006:312) observes, "one can't agree that Mr. X has no philosophical talent by saying 'Yes, that's right,' in response to Grice's example of the letter of recommendation, 'Mr. X is always punctual and has nice handwriting.'" In contrast, if that same content were uttered in declarative mood metaphorically, i.e. as what the speaker expresses directly and takes responsibility for, such responses would be perfectly natural.

Against this, Camp (2006) claims that the openness to dialectical dispute about instantiating the defence of a certain mental state with a metaphor is an insurmountable problem for the view that metaphorical content is part of what the speaker said/asserted. Camp suggests that the indefensibility of the intended metaphorical content in the face of a literalist challenge—that a metaphorical speaker cannot retort "That's not what I said," and should retract her original utterance, ceding that the literal interpretation is a possible interpretation of her words—is evidence that such content is a poor candidate for what is said. In her view, this alleged vulnerability to literalist challenge is a sign of the commitment the metaphorical speaker has undertaken with her utterance, namely as beholding to a set of linguistic norms which require her to justify her utterance in the face of such challenges. While anyone would take the insistence upon a literal interpretation as uncooperative, or conversationally inapt (as it happens in a conversation with an autistic person), and would respond to the challenge by clarifying one's intended meaning (literally paraphrasing it, or giving a more accessible metaphorical content), Camp thinks that an interpretive indulgence "playing along" with the metaphor, or clarifying it, are impossible because the speaker has less authority to defend her metaphorical claim than with strict literal meaning. Whereas literal speakers, using ambiguity or graded adjectives, are not vulnerable to the same sort of challenge, in that they can accept the literal consequences a hearer may bring up, or deny that they follow from what they said, a metaphorical speaker cannot do so without sacrificing her claim to linguistic competence with the words used. This follows, in Camp's view, from a "normative priority" of literal over non-literal/metaphorical meaning, and it is this difference between them which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for metaphorical meaning to be part of utterance content.

I think this sort of normativity is misplaced, however. In the realm of intentions and actions, no norm of language can force one to be strictly literal when a contextual meaning, rather than the literal one, is already established as the topic of conversation. It is the consistency with the intended contextual meaning set in place by the initial speaker that explains the coherence of the reply in (18) (from Lang's *Human Desire*):

- (18) Vicky: I'm *chained*.
 Jeff: No you're not. You're not tied to him. You can leave him and we get married.
 Vicky: I can't. I am *chained*.

Clearly, Vicky's initial remark talking about her marriage is metaphorical, and anyone who doesn't see that is either misrepresenting her or misunderstanding her. In effect, Jeff's reply acknowledges her metaphorical meaning, the content of which he takes to be that of being tied to her husband by the bondage of marriage. He denies it, suggesting that she is free to do whatever she likes with her life. As it happens, Vicky was metaphorical, but she didn't give enough evidence of the sort of constraints that tie her to her husband, namely an incriminating letter her husband made her write and then kept. Under this interpretation, the metaphorical content is one that draws on a much closer resemblance to a literal claim of being forced/constrained against one's will, but still it isn't a literal content of being confined in real chains.

This seems to suggest that in natural conversational contexts participants are not beholden by any normativity of the literal over the non-literal. The literal meaning plays a role in guiding the construction of the intended meaning, but once a contextual meaning is accepted as intended, there is

no other role for the literal meaning to play. In rational, charitable, and efficient communication we are held responsible only with respect to the mental states we present ourselves as defending, and not with respect to the strict rules of language. The purpose of communication is to exploit those rules of language so as to communicate rich, varied thoughts with a scarceness of linguistic resources.²¹ This may be the case even in high-stake contexts, like courtrooms, in which Camp thinks that the literal meaning should be (and is) the norm. In court a case turns on *information*. Consequently, it is the content which, for example, witnesses assert that matters, not their manner of saying it. Metaphors are not any obstacle to speaking truthfully. Unclarity is hardly the preserve of the non-literal, and if the judge is discontent with the imprecision of a witness' metaphorical assertions, she may be asked to clarify what she meant. She would be under no obligation to retract her metaphorical utterance, however. A prosecution witness who is asked to judge the defendant's character might assert "He's the Devil." In so doing she does not risk violating the oath that requires her to speak the truth merely because she speaks metaphorically.

2.2.4 Availability Criterion

Récanati (2004) posits the Availability Criterion to distinguish primary processes (corresponding to what is said) from secondary processes (corresponding to conversational implicatures), arguing that only the secondary processes are *available* to hearers. It follows from the Availability Criterion that since the processes involved in the interpretation of many conversational metaphors, such as "The ATM *swallowed* my credit card," are not consciously available to hearers, that the metaphorical content contributes to what is said. Récanati argues that this is so because the modulation process of loosening that is responsible for the metaphoric interpretation of the expression 'swallow' operates locally, before the literal sentence meaning is computed. Even in more complex cases of creative metaphors, such as "The ATM swallowed my credit card, chewed for a while and then spat it out," where hearers might become aware of some discrepancy between literal and metaphorical meanings, yielding some sort of duality, Récanati insists that hearers are still unaware of the connection between the two meanings. He calls such duality "internal," because hearers are aware of it only insofar as they are aware of the output of what is said by the utterance.

Camp (2006) objects to Récanati's solution, arguing that the notion of an internal duality supports a Gricean view of metaphor as conversational implicature. While agreeing with Camp's intuition, Récanati's argument holds good. The point is that even in complex cases where hearers become aware of a certain discrepancy between literal and metaphorical meanings, the fact remains, Récanati argues, that their awareness is quite different from the kind of awareness that is involved in paradigmatic cases of conversational implicatures, since they are aware of neither the sub-personal machinery, nor of any *inferential* link from the primary to the secondary meaning.

2.2.5 Psycholinguistic Evidence

Two kinds of empirical study, one regarding the neural processes involved in metaphor interpretation, the other regarding comprehension times, suggest that metaphor comprehension is *direct*, in the sense that it comes first in the order of interpretation. First, Coulson & van Petten (2002) question a sharp distinction between literal and metaphoric interpretation on the grounds that both sorts of interpretation engage similar brain processes. Secondly, Gibbs (1994), Gibbs & Tendahl

²¹ An exception may be made in cases where we agree to engage in word-play, where instead of continuing on the metaphorical meaning established, we pick up a literal interpretation although we perfectly understood the intended metaphorical meaning.

(2006), and Glucksberg (2001) found no difference in the times taken to interpret literal and comparable metaphorical utterances.²²

Such findings suggest that contextual processes penetrate the lexical ones early on, fine-tuning appropriate contextual meanings so that the interpretation is effortless and seamless. In many cases, the metaphorical meaning is accessed straight away without activating a literal interpretation of the whole utterance and then rejecting it. In conversational metaphors, speakers directly express their metaphorical thoughts, and hearers are not ordinarily aware of the distinction between literal and metaphorical meanings, even though the latter is grounded in the former.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that the interpretation of cases in which metaphor and irony are combined requires a determined order of interpretation so as to reach the intended compound meaning, and that the most explanatory approach is a metaphor-first order of interpretation on which metaphor is computed prior to irony (MPT). I distinguished between a logical MPT and a psychological MPT. Whereas the logical thesis is concerned with how contents are logically structured such that they work as input for other contents, the psychological thesis is concerned with the psychological order in which the two figurative meanings are processed. Logical MPT holds that the irony necessarily builds on the metaphorical, rather than the literal content, if it is to be properly inferentially grounded. More specifically, the ironical meaning arises as an implicature that is grounded in metaphorical content. Psychological MPT relies on empirical evidence to the effect that metaphorical meaning is processed generally quicker (and is less complex than irony), which suggests that in cases of ironic metaphor, the metaphor is, as a matter of fact, processed prior to irony.

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²² Once the mechanisms involved in Grice's account of metaphor are taken to be psychologically real, of course, the account predicts that metaphor comprehension takes no longer than literal interpretation, and is not optional, i.e. in that it occurs only when the latter is anomalous.

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