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Wolves, Confederates, and the Happy Few: The Influence of Comprehension, Agreement, and Group Membership on the Attitude Toward Irony

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Comprehension is an important factor in the functioning of irony. Readers who are unaware of the irony in an utterance are “sheep,” whereas readers who understand the irony are “wolves” (Gibbs & Izett, 2005). Factors that may impact on the attitude toward irony not only include comprehension, but agreement (agreeing with the position taken in the utterance or not) and group membership (belonging to the target of the irony or not) as well. In an experiment, participants were asked to evaluate either ironic prejudices against women or ironic prejudices against

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men. The attitude toward the utterance and text is more positive when participants recognize the ironic intention, agree with the statement, and are not the members of the targeted group. These results imply that studies into the pragmatic effects of verbal irony should consider these 3 factors.

Picture the following scenario: In the public library of a small town, two attendants are sitting at computers connected to the Internet. Pete is an adolescent who is addicted to real-time gaming. He is seated next to Marion, a middle-aged woman in a wheelchair. Suddenly, Marion addresses Pete and asks him whether he could help her to find the “at” sign. “I’m sending an e-mail to my grandson,” Marion proudly says, “but apparently, this keyboard lacks the appropriate key.” Pete frowns, is annoyed by Marion’s inaptitude, but stands up to help her. He points at the correct key. “I’m glad seniors are doing so well with computers!” he says ironically. “My, my, you’re a real whiz granny!”

How the verbal irony used by Pete is evaluated may depend on several factors. First of all, it is crucial that Pete’s intended meaning is understood: Instead of complimenting Marion, he is in fact ridiculing her by mocking the digital illiterateness of elderly people. If Marion does not take up on this intended meaning, she may mistake the irony for a compliment. Irony comprehension has been thoroughly investigated during the last decades. In psycholinguistics, much research on verbal irony has focused on the ways in which an ironic utterance is comprehended. Studies into irony comprehension have yielded valuable insights into the ways in which language is processed (e.g., see, among many others, Attardo, 2000; Gibbs, 1986; Giora, 2003). However, these studies provide little information to the question of why irony is actually used as a discourse strategy.

Other scholars focused on the affective and social goals of irony. These scholars have observed a number of reasons a speaker can have for employing irony, including being humorous (e.g., Roberts & Kreuz, 1994), being polite (e.g., Slu-goski & Turnbull, 1988), diminishing or enhancing criticism (e.g., Dews, Kaplan, & Winner, 1995, and Colston, 1997, respectively), being rude (e.g., Colston, 2005), and establishing intimacy (cf. Horton, 2007) while excluding others (Gerrig & Gibbs, 1988). The difference in goals may have implications for the reception of irony in discourse. Scholars have shown that these goals influence irony comprehension and the attribution of intent (for an overview, see Katz, 2005).

Comprehension is an important aspect of irony that can be directly deduced from definitions of irony. In the last 30 years, irony has been defined in a number of ways (for an overview, see Attardo, 2000). For instance, Clark and Gerrig’s (1984) pretense theory claimed that ironic speakers typically adopt two identities: They pretend to be someone else in the literal interpretation of their statements from which they distance themselves in the ironic interpretation of the same statements. This ambivalence allows the speakers to share common ground with the listeners who catch up on the double reading. At the same time, it also isolates

the “victims” of irony—those who did not catch up on the ironic pretense. Irony splits the audience into addressees who understand the irony and addressees who are unaware of the ironic intention. Gibbs and Izett (2005) labeled the first type of addressees as “wolves” and the latter type of addressees as “sheep.”

Kaufer (1977) stressed that there is another difference in audiences of the ironist besides that between wolves and sheep. This second difference is between addressees who agree with the ironist’s intended meaning and those who do not. Gibbs and Izett (2005) proposed to call addressees who endorse the intended meaning of the irony “confederates” and addressees who disagree “victims.” These two groups are not identical to wolves and sheep because understanding what the ironist intends to say and agreeing with it are distinct aspects of communication. Let us suppose that in the scenario mentioned earlier, a third character is present: a senior citizen called Brandon. He overhears the conversation between Pete and Marion and understands that Pete is, in fact, ridiculing Marion. However, he thoroughly disagrees with Pete’s statement: In his opinion, it is difficult for senior citizens like Marion and himself to keep up with all technical innovations of contemporary society. He feels that Marion should, in fact, be praised for trying to keep up with the times and trying to learn how to use computers, although she still has problems with the technology. In the scenario cited earlier, Brandon understands the sarcasm in Pete’s remark, which qualifies him as a wolf. At the same time, he does not agree with the intended meaning, which would make him both a wolf and a victim.

This article suggests to change the denominations of the groups put forward by Gibbs and Izett (2005) because the term *victim* may be somewhat conflated. Not only is there a chance that the notion of victim is confused with the target of the irony, but wolves who correctly perceive the irony in an utterance and refuse to go along with the ironist’s position can hardly be called victims; they simply disagree. Therefore, this article proposes to distinguish between an ironic speaker’s confederates and non-confederates instead of between confederates and victims. Confederates are readers who agree with what they assume to be the correct interpretation of the speaker’s message. Note that the qualification of confederate is independent from the comprehension of the ironic utterance. A confederate can agree with the intended but also with the unintended meaning of the speaker. If a confederate is unaware of the irony of the utterance, he is a sheep, but he may agree with the contrary of what the speaker intended: He agrees with the unintended meaning. In the example cited earlier, Marion is a sheep confederate. She really thinks that Pete is serious in complimenting her computer skills and is pleased about that. In contrast, Brandon is a wolf non-confederate because he understands what Pete intends to communicate, but disagrees with Pete’s intended meaning.

Employing irony, therefore, divides the audience into at least four groups: wolves confederates, wolves non-confederates, sheep confederates, and sheep

non-confederates. Kaufer (1977), as well as Gibbs and Izett (2005), pointed to the existence of this quadrant; but, to our knowledge, its implications have never been put to the test. What are the implications for the attitude toward irony, for instance, if an addressee belongs to one of these four groups? This article hypothesizes that, in general, wolves confederates have a more positive attitude toward the utterance, text, and speaker than the other three groups in the quadrant.

There is, however, yet another dimension that may impact on the attitude toward irony. Suppose that in the library scenario Pete was not alone, but accompanied by his friend Simon, with whom he usually plays together. In fact, by using irony, Pete did not only address his remark to Marion, but even more to Simon, presuming exclusive understanding between the both of them. Pete and Simon may think that they share a mutual understanding in masking an insult as a compliment at the detriment of Marion, and the fact that they think that they belong to a small elite of understanders may enhance their appreciation of irony.

An ironic utterance is usually directed at a person or a group of persons: its target. Although this is no necessary condition (Glenwright & Pexman, 2010) because irony may also be targeted at an object or at no person in particular, irony is often directed at a target person. Various scholars have pointed out that the identification of the target may be crucial in the understanding of irony (e.g., Gibbs, 2000; Livnat, 2004). Several studies have demonstrated that the relationship between an ironic speaker and the target of the irony may influence the ease with which an ironic utterance is processed (e.g., Kreuz, 1996; Kreuz, Kassler, Coppentrath, & McLain Allen, 1999; Kreuz & Link, 2002; Pexman & Zvaigzne, 2004).

Belonging to the target group or not may also have consequences for the attitude toward irony. Jorgensen (1996) and Cros (2001) found that irony serves to build a solidary relationship between speaker and addressee. In addition, Weizman (2001) claimed that a reason to use irony in order to attack a third party is to create feelings of intimacy. Irony allows speakers to “go off-record” (Brown & Levinson 1987) and leave it to the addressees to take up on the ironic intent. They may feel included in the tacit communicative situation created by the speaker. While establishing intimacy, irony at the same time helps to exclude others. An addressee’s feeling of being “in the know” may be enhanced if it is apparent that other addressees are not aware of the ironic intent of the message. The awareness that the ironic speakers and addressees who understand the irony belong to a special inner circle may add to the social rewards irony can have.

Ironists may target an outgroup, which could allow ingroup members to bond with the ironist. The ironist may also target the members of the group to which addressees belong, which could mean that they may feel like an outcast. Katz and Lee (1993) showed that perspective plays a considerable role in the processing of irony: A privileged audience proved to be more apt in recognizing the authorial intent of irony. Moreover, it is probable that evaluations that

concern the same group to which one belongs are influenced by an “egocentric perspective” (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004; Keysar 1994). Epley et al. and Keysar showed that the comprehension and the attribution of ironic intention were influenced by egocentric biases, such as possessing privileged knowledge, when participants were invited to attribute the perception of sarcasm to uninformed addressees. Readers tended to confuse their own knowledge about the ironic intentions of the speaker with the innocence of bystanders that could not possibly be in the know. Group membership, such as young versus old, male versus female, and nationality or cultural background may also function as such an egocentric bias: People may tend to adopt the perspective of the group to which they belong and to be solidary with that group, and this may then affect the attitude toward irony. If an addressee belongs to the group that is not the target of the irony, pleasurable feelings may occur, which may lead to a better appreciation of the irony: The addressee belongs to the ingroup. On the other hand, if participants belong to the same group as the target of the irony, the attitude toward the utterance, the text, and the speaker may be more negative than when participants belong to the other party: They belong to the outgroup.

In sum, we propose to incorporate these three factors (comprehension, agreement, and group membership) into what we call the *ironic spectrum*. The three factors may be related to the attitude toward irony (see Figure 1). In our opinion, the ironic spectrum is characterized by distinct pragmatic roles that may influence irony reception, and these roles can be decisive in the attitude of the receiver toward the utterance, the text, and the speaker. The ironic spectrum, thus, refers to the discourse situation that occurs when one of the participants uses verbal irony: Members in the audience can take different stands toward an utterance that can be interpreted ironically. Moreover, the awareness of other people taking other roles in that same spectrum may also influence the attitude toward irony.

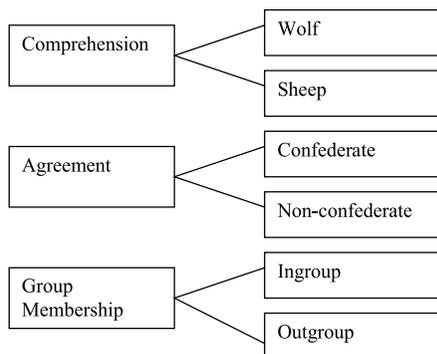


FIGURE 1 Eight positions in the ironic spectrum.

Excluding others can have pragmatic effects: The message may be substantially better liked than literal communication because the contrast leads to a humorous effect, and the indirectness of the message allows the addressee to convey that he or she is esteemed intelligent enough to decipher the correct intended message. Our hypothesis is, thus, that the attitude toward the ironic utterance is most positive with wolves confederates who mock others.

The exclusion of others can also be connected to a sense of enhanced solidarity. Solidarity typically increases when the number of excluded people is larger. In an advertising context, Stern (1989) sustained that irony may be used as an effective strategy: Irony uplifts status-seekers by allowing them to feel pride in getting the message, as well as the product. Some people may find it rewarding to know that they belong to the happy few because they are part of a select number of individuals who are smart enough to understand the irony. The smaller and more exclusive that number of select individuals, the more positive the attitude will be. We would then expect a positive correlation between exclusiveness of understanding, on the one hand, and the attitude toward the ironic utterance, text, and speaker, on the other hand.

Research in the processing of figurative language has shown that the attitude toward rhetorical figures can also be influenced by the perceived complexity of the utterance (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996; Van Mulken, Van Enschot, & Hoeken, 2005). If participants feel that an utterance that contains a rhetorical figure is too difficult to understand, they consider the utterance to be less pleasurable. In an experiment in which they asked participants to rate unexpected modifications to a familiar expression, Giora et al. (2004) also found that pleasure is correlated with perceived complexity (operationalized as familiarity). The attitude toward an ironic utterance may follow similar lines: The evaluation of the utterance, text, and speaker may be more influenced by perceived complexity than by the actual comprehension. For a receiver to evaluate an utterance, it may be less important whether receivers have *actually* correctly understood the utterance than whether they *think* they have understood the utterance. Therefore, we include perceived complexity as a control predictor that will negatively impact on the attitude toward irony.

HYPOTHESES

- H1: The attitude toward the utterance, the text, and the speaker is more positive when readers are wolves, confederates, and ingroup members (readers that do not belong to the target group of the ironic expression) than when they are either sheep, non-confederates, or belong to the same group as the target of the irony (outgroup members).

- H2: Exclusiveness of understanding positively impacts on the attitude toward the utterance, the text, and the speaker.
- H3: Perceived complexity impacts negatively on the attitude toward the utterance, the text, and the speaker.

METHOD

Material

Based on a recent Dutch publication on prejudices toward men and women (Hertzer & Wolfrum, 2003), a set of 28 stimuli were composed and pilot-tested by a jury of eight judges for understandability. Because we wanted our stimuli to divide the audience into wolves and sheep, we needed vignettes that were neither too difficult nor too easy to comprehend. Stimuli that were considered as too difficult (i.e., not recognized as ironic by 80% of the members of the jury) or too easy to understand (i.e., recognized by more than 50% of the jury) were removed from the set. Twelve vignettes remained: six prejudices against men and six prejudices against women. All vignettes discussed everyday situations, contained common Dutch prejudices against either men or women, and ended with a statement of one of the characters in the vignette. This statement ironically targeted either all men in general or all women in general.

Two reasons were considered to focus our stimuli on gender prejudices. First, a number of studies showed that the working of irony can be illustrated with gender differences (e.g., Colston, 2005; Colston & Lee, 2004). Besides, the gender difference makes it easy to determine whether the reader belongs to the ingroup or to the outgroup of the irony used in the vignette. Respondents who saw an ironic text about their own gender (i.e., men reading ironic texts with prejudices about men or women reading ironic texts with prejudices about women) were considered to belong to the outgroup of the irony; after all, they were ironically targeted in the vignette. Respondents who saw an ironic text about the other gender (i.e., men reading ironic texts with prejudices about women or women reading ironic texts with prejudices about men) were considered to belong to the ingroup because they were not the target of the irony in the vignette.

Two sets of stimuli were made: a set with prejudices against women and a set with prejudices against men. Each set contained six vignettes with ironic utterances and three vignettes without ironic utterances. The texts had a length of three to five sentences. Examples 1 and 2 illustrate the vignettes in the two conditions. In Example 1, a female speaker makes a prejudicial comment about men. Example 2 features a male speaker who verbalizes a prejudice against women. The original stimuli and questionnaire were administered in Dutch:

1. Love goes through the stomach: Richard promises Lisa to cook her dinner for her anniversary. Proudly, Richard presents instant soup for starters. The next course, a fried egg, is a complete fiasco, but it is baptized “scrambled eggs” on the spot. Afterwards, when Richard is complacently doing the dishes, Lisa says in a soothing voice: “Now, how can they say that men can’t cook?”
2. A head for math: Janine has to go to Berlin for her job and has to pick up a colleague in Hamburg on the way. She looks for the distance on the Internet, and finds the following math problem: 410 plus 270 kilometers. “This almost totals up to 1,000 kilometers!” she screams to her boyfriend Barry. “Then you’re almost in Southern France!” Barry looks at her and says: “Women are so skilled in math.”

Participants

In all, 132 respondents participated, and they were all students at Radboud University Nijmegen (the Netherlands); 34 male respondents and 34 female respondents read the version with prejudices against men, and 31 men and 33 women read the version with prejudices against women. The average age of respondents was 21.25 years (range = 18–28 years).

Procedure and Instrumentation

Participants read the vignette and subsequently completed a six-item questionnaire that required them to answer open questions and to rate their perceived complexity and attitude toward the ironic utterance, the text, and the speaker on 7-point Likert scales. They indicated their agreement with the speaker by answering a yes–no question.

Comprehension was measured by means of an open question in which participants were invited to rephrase the final sentence into their own words. The answers to the open question were all rated by Bram van der Plas; and, on the basis of the verbalization of the final utterance, it was determined whether the respondent had understood the irony (and could be considered a wolf) or had overseen the irony (and could be considered a sheep). This led to the creation of a new variable called *comprehension*. If, on the basis of the verbalization of the ironic utterance, it was unclear whether the respondent had or had not understood the irony, this value remained uncoded. Of the 792 cases, 450 cases were classified as wolves (56.8%), 187 as sheep (23.6%), and 155 as unclear (19.6%). Unclear cases were not included in the analysis.

The many unclear cases can be explained by the rigorous coding scheme that was applied: Only if the answer of a respondent could be attributed indisputably

to one of the two categories was it included in the analysis. Sometimes, it was impossible to decide whether a respondent had actually understood the irony in the utterance because of ambiguity or lack of clarity in the answer. For example, as a response to the “love goes through the stomach” scenario, one participant wrote: “By this utterance Lisa meant to say that men are apt to do the dishes.” The respondent might have used irony in his or her response to the ironic utterance, but he or she might also have been sincere. Sometimes it was impossible to say whether the respondent had understood the utterance (e.g., “Is this sarcasm?”). These cases were excluded from the analysis. Twenty percent of the answers were also coded by Margot van Mulken, and intercoder agreement was almost perfect ($\kappa = .88$; Landis & Koch, 1977).

Attitude toward the utterance was measured with the following items: “To my opinion, the final utterance is well chosen,” and “To my opinion, the final utterance is funny.” The reliability of these scales was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$). Attitude toward the text was measured with the items “attractive” and “appealing.” Again, reliability was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$). The attitude toward the speaker was measured as follows: “My overall evaluation of [name of the speaker] is positive.”

Exclusiveness of understanding was also measured with a 7-point Likert scale: “I think many people will understand the final utterance in this text,” ranging from 1 (*I totally disagree*) to 7 (*I totally agree*). Perceived complexity of the text was measured with the items “easy to understand” and “clear.” Cronbach’s alpha was again high (.87). These three items were reverse-scored.

Ingroup membership was determined on the basis of the gender of the participant and the version of prejudices he or she had read. Men reading prejudices against men and women reading prejudices against women were coded as “out-group,” and women reading prejudices against men and men reading prejudices against women were coded as “ingroup.” The questionnaire was distributed in a between-subject design.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the statistical program R (Version 2.9.1, Package LanguageR; Vienna, Austria). Multilevel analyses were used with participants and vignettes as crossed-random variables.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the mean scores on attitude broken down for comprehension, agreement, and group membership. We analyzed the dependent variables *attitude toward the utterance*, *attitude toward the text*, and *attitude toward the speaker* by

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Attitude Toward the Utterance,
Attitude Toward the Text, and Attitude Toward the Speaker as a Function of
Comprehension, Agreement, and Group Membership in Relation to the Target

Comprehension	Agreement	Group Membership	Attitude						
			Toward the Utterance			Toward the Text		Toward the Speaker	
			n	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Sheep	Disagreement	Ingroup	64	2.71	1.44	3.09	1.42	3.09	1.40
		Outgroup	55	3.25	1.24	3.15	1.37	3.05	1.34
	Agreement	Ingroup	23	4.20	1.39	3.43	1.40	4.22	1.24
		Outgroup	34	4.85	1.10	3.91	1.45	4.26	1.48
Wolf	Disagreement	Ingroup	157	3.22	1.49	3.50	1.54	3.48	1.44
		Outgroup	81	2.91	1.53	2.91	1.50	2.96	1.57
	Agreement	Ingroup	65	4.92	1.29	4.45	1.53	4.88	1.21
		Outgroup	44	4.83	1.26	4.33	1.28	4.23	1.43

Note. The scores range from 1 (*very negative attitude*) to 7 (*very positive attitude*).

means of multilevel models, with *participant* and *scenario* as crossed-random variables (see Tables 2, 3, & 4). Our main predictors were comprehension, agreement, group membership, exclusiveness of understanding, and perceived complexity.

Table 2 shows the model that had the *attitude toward the utterance* as a dependent variable. The utterance was better liked when readers were confederates than when they were non-confederates, $F(1, 596) = 193.37, p < .001 (B = 1.41)$. In addition, a negative relation was found between perceived complexity and the attitude toward the utterance, $F(1, 596) = 27.95, p < .001 (B = -0.11)$. The more difficult an utterance was perceived, the less it was liked. Contrary to expectations, exclusiveness of understanding negatively correlated with the attitude toward the utterance, $F(1, 596) = 30.03, p < .001 (B = -0.18)$. The larger the respondents estimated the group of people that would also understand the utterance in the way they did, the more they liked the utterance. Finally, an interaction was found between comprehension and group membership, $F(1, 596) = 12.61, p < .001 (B = -0.85)$. When readers were wolves, they liked the utterance better when they belonged to the ingroup (i.e., the utterance targeted the group to which they did not belong). When readers were sheep, they preferred the utterance that targeted the group to which they did belong (they belonged to the outgroup of the original ironic utterance). For instance, in the “head for math” vignette, if a respondent would really believe that the speaker meant that women are good at math, this respondent was a sheep. If this respondent was a

TABLE 2
Fixed Effects Estimates and Variance–Covariance Estimates for Models
of the Predictors of Attitude Toward the Utterance

<i>Parameter</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
Fixed effects				
Intercept	3.49 (0.11)	3.04 (0.16)	2.62 (0.27)	2.37 (0.28)
Comprehension		0.07 (0.12)	−0.10 (0.12)	0.36 (0.19)
Agreement		1.58 (0.12)**	1.34 (0.12)**	1.41 (0.30)**
Group membership		−0.03 (0.17)	0.02 (0.17)	0.64 (0.27)
Perceived difficulty			−0.11 (0.04)***	−0.11 (0.04)***
Exclusiveness of understanding			−0.20 (0.04)*	−0.18 (0.04)***
Comprehension × Agreement				−0.14 (0.35)
Comprehension × Group Membership				−0.85 (0.27)***
Agreement × Group Membership				−0.16 (0.40)
Comprehension × Agreement × Group Membership				0.19 (0.48)
Random parameters (+SD)				
Respondent	0.80 (0.89)	0.65 (0.81)	0.63 (0.65)	0.64 (0.80)
Vignette	0.05 (0.21)	0.01 (0.11)	0.01 (0.24)	0.01 (0.08)
Evaluation				
−2 log likelihood	2,774	2,124	2,034	2,024
χ^2_{deviance}		656.91***	100.27***	12.89*
df_{deviance}		3	2	4

Note. Standard errors of the estimates are in parentheses, unless otherwise noted.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

woman, and therefore belonged to the outgroup, this respondent would generally be more positive about the utterance than when the respondent was a man.

The model that had the *attitude toward the text* as a dependent variable can be found in Table 3. When readers were wolves, they liked the text better than readers that were sheep, $F(1, 596) = 5.67, p = .02 (B = 0.44)$. In addition, confederates had a more positive attitude toward the text than non-confederates, $F(1, 596) = 54.43, p < .001 (B = 0.50)$. Again, perceived complexity was negatively related to the dependent variable, $F(1, 596) = 20.83, p < .001 (B = -0.18)$. The easier the utterance was perceived, the more the text was liked. Exclusiveness of understanding was also negatively related to the attitude toward the text, $F(1, 596) = 38.77, p < .001 (B = -0.11)$. If a reader thought that she

TABLE 3
Fixed Effects Estimates and Variance–Covariance Estimates for Models
of the Predictors of Attitude Toward the Text

<i>Parameter</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
Fixed effects				
Intercept	3.43 (0.12)	3.18 (0.18)	3.29 (0.26)	3.11 (0.28)
Comprehension		0.29 (0.12)*	0.16 (0.11)*	0.44 (0.17)*
Agreement		0.79 (0.11)**	0.55 (0.11)**	0.50 (0.26)**
Group membership		−0.34 (0.21)	−0.28 (0.21)	0.27 (0.28)
Perceived difficulty			−0.19 (0.04)**	−0.18 (0.04)**
Exclusiveness of understanding			−0.12 (0.033)**	−0.11 (0.033)**
Comprehension × Agreement				0.09 (0.30)
Comprehension × Group Membership				−0.71 (0.24)**
Agreement × Group Membership				−0.34 (0.36)
Comprehension × Agreement × Group Membership				0.38 (0.43)
Random parameters (+SD)				
Respondent	1.10 (1.05)	1.12 (1.06)	1.18 (1.09)	1.18 (1.09)
Vignette	0.05 (0.22)	0.03 (0.17)	0.01 (0.10)	0.01 (0.10)
Evaluation				
−2 log likelihood	2,578	2,052	1,956	1,948
χ^2_{deviance}		532.53**	106.29**	11.86*
df_{deviance}		3	2	4

Note. Standard errors of the estimates are in parentheses, unless otherwise noted.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

or he was with many co-understanders, she or he liked the text better. Finally, an interaction was found between comprehension and group membership, $F(1, 596) = 9.12, p < .001 (B = -0.72)$. Wolves liked the text better when they belonged to the ingroup, whereas sheep liked the text better when they belonged to the outgroup.

Because including interactions did not improve the fit for the model for *attitude toward the speaker*, another type of model produced the best fit (see Table 4): Non-confederates generally had a more negative attitude toward the speaker than confederates, $F(1, 600) = 95.38 p < .001 (B = 0.98)$. Readers that belonged to the ingroup liked the speaker better than readers that belonged to the outgroup, $F(1, 600) = 6.63 p = .001 (B = -0.36)$. Perceived complexity

TABLE 4
Fixed Effects Estimates and Variance–Covariance Estimates for Models
of the Predictors of Attitude Toward the Speaker

<i>Parameter</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
Fixed effects				
Intercept	3.53 (0.12)	3.27 (0.17)	2.74 (0.28)	2.62 (0.30)
Comprehension		0.16 (0.14)	0.02 (0.14)	0.22 (0.21)
Agreement		1.22 (0.13)**	0.98 (0.13)**	0.92 (0.32)***
Group membership		−0.40 (0.15)**	−0.36 (0.15)**	−0.05 (0.27)***
Perceived difficulty			−0.07 (0.05)***	0.07 (0.04)***
Exclusiveness of understanding			−0.20 (0.04)***	−0.19 (0.04)***
Comprehension × Agreement				0.15 (0.37)
Comprehension × Group Membership				−0.36 (0.43)*
Agreement × Group Membership				0.08 (0.43)
Comprehension × Agreement × Group Membership				−0.38 (0.51)
Random parameters (+SD)				
Respondent	0.53 (0.72)	0.40 (0.63)	0.42 (0.65)	0.43 (0.66)
Vignette	0.10 (0.32)	0.06 (0.26)	0.06 (0.25)	0.06 (0.25)
Evaluation				
−2 log likelihood	2,742	2,171	2,086	2,084
χ^2_{deviance}		578.36***	93.05***	4.90
df_{deviance}		3	2	4

Note. Standard errors of the estimates are in parentheses, unless otherwise noted.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

was again negatively related to the dependent variable, $F(1, 600) = 15.96$, $p < .001$ ($B = -0.007$), which means that the more difficult an utterance was perceived, the less the speaker was liked. Finally, exclusiveness of understanding was negatively related to the attitude toward the speaker, $F(1, 600) = 26.97$, $p < .001$ ($B = -0.20$). This implies that the more readers thought the group of co-understanders was small, the less they liked the speaker. Note, however, that in the model that most resembles the models for attitude toward the utterance and the text (see Model 4 in Table 4), the interaction between comprehension and group membership was also significant, $F(1, 596) = 3.79$, $p = .05$ ($B = -0.36$); and, for wolves, showed a similar pattern to the interactions between these variables on the attitudes toward the utterance and text.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

To test the propositions of Kaufer (1977) and Gibbs and Izett (2005), the impact of comprehension and agreement on the attitude toward ironic utterances was investigated. Group membership was added as a third dimension of interest. We predicted that these factors would impact on the attitude toward the utterance, text, and speaker. We indeed found that being a wolf, agreeing with the utterance, and understanding that one does not belong to the target group was positively related to the attitude toward the utterance and the text.

With regard to the attitude toward the speaker, irony comprehension does not seem to play a role: Agreeing with the speaker and being a member of the ingroup (i.e., not the group that is ironically targeted) are the important factors. The fact that comprehension does not seem to play a role in the attitude toward the speaker may tentatively be explained as follows: Apparently, readers tend to like persons that discuss the other gender, regardless of understanding the gist of the utterance.

Contrary to expectations, our predictions with regard to the inner circle of the happy few had to be refuted. Exclusiveness of understanding negatively contributes to the attitude toward the utterance. Pleasure is greater when the receiver believes the group of co-understanders is large. It appears that wolves believe that other people will also be wolves. Apparently, readers are unable to inhibit their own comprehension knowledge and think that because they understood the utterance, so would lots of other people. This result would, thus, fit the egocentric perspective as described by Keysar (1994) and Epley et al. (2004). This egocentric perspective suggests that people find it difficult to assess the perspectives of others without taking their own perspective into account (Epley et al., 2004). In other words, when readers understand a specific utterance, they may assume that other people would do the same. If this egocentric perspective is confirmed (i.e., other people are assumed to hold the same opinions as the reader), readers may hold more positive attitudes than when the egocentric perspective is not confirmed (i.e., other people are assumed to hold a different opinion from the reader). This hypothesis about the egocentric perspective warrants further empirical research.

As expected, perceived complexity was negatively related to the attitude toward the utterance, text, and speaker. However, some scholars found evidence for a relation between complexity and attitude toward the utterance or text that resembled an inverted U-curve (McQuarrie & Mick, 2003; Van Enschot, Hoeken, & Van Mulken, 2008; Van Mulken et al., 2005). This means that a moderately complex utterance or text is appreciated best. If an utterance or text is too easy or too complex, appreciation decreases. Future research may, therefore, also take very easy and very complex utterances or texts into consideration to explore this hypothesis in full (see also Burgers, 2010).

Our analyses have shown that comprehension, agreement, and group membership—three roles in the ironic spectrum—play a considerable part in the attitude toward the utterance and the text. Kaufer's (1977) proposal, to include agreement in the analysis of pragmatic effects of irony, proves to be a wise one: The attitude toward the utterance and the text is most positive in the quadrant that combines wolves with confederates. It was also demonstrated that group membership is an important factor in the attitude toward the utterance and the text: If a reader understands that someone belonging to the outgroup is mocked in the ironic utterance, he or she appreciates this more than when someone belonging to the ingroup is targeted.

In this article, only irony targeted at members of a group to which the reader either belongs or not was considered. Some scholars prefer to call this type of irony *sarcasm* (cf. Glenwright & Pexman, 2010; Lee & Katz, 1998). Of course, irony can also be targeted at speakers themselves because speakers can make ironic remarks at their own expense (e.g., Cros, 2001; Kotthoff, 2003). In doing so, speakers make themselves the target of their own ironic remarks. Self-directed irony may be interpreted as making fun of oneself, and can be considered as a type of politeness (a face-saving strategy; Brown & Levinson, 1987). It is also possible that no specific person is targeted, but that a situation is ironized. This type of irony allows a speaker to express a critical attitude with humor without being personal. It appears that speaker attitude for this type of irony is less negative than for statements that target a person (cf. Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989).

These pragmatic effects of irony certainly deserve to be investigated, and it is proposed to differentiate further between various types of targets in future research. Our vignettes may be rewritten so that the speakers mock themselves, which enables it to evaluate the effect of self-directed irony versus irony directed at no particular victim versus irony directed at ingroup or outgroup members. In this vein, it might be possible to contrast the politeness aspect (self-directed irony) with the intimacy aspect (irony directed at group members vs. irony directed at a situation).

It was also shown that comprehension, agreement, and group membership have a considerable influence on pragmatic factors such as attitudes toward the utterance, text, and speaker. This implies that, in future research into the working of irony, researchers may take these factors into account because it might be the case that readers who agree with the ironic statement, or who do not belong to the target group in the statement, process irony faster.

Contrary to our expectations about exclusiveness of understanding, respondents believe that if they are able to understand a message that they appreciate, others will probably do the same. The more they appreciate it, the more they think that other people understand the message in the same way. Our intuitions about the happy few remain ungrounded. Results indicate that advertising

strategies that wish to use irony to include a “knowing” group and that hope to increase appreciation by the suggestion of the exclusion of others may not be well-grounded (cf. Hoeken, Swanepoel, Saal, & Jansen, 2009; Stern, 1989).

This study focused on important dimensions in the attitude toward irony and on three dimensions in the ironic spectrum, in particular. We are aware, however, that the attitude toward irony can be influenced by still other factors. We have not focused on the specific goals an ironist may have and how this influences irony evaluation. It is only logical that knowledge of the ironist’s discourse goals influences irony perception. A speaker using irony to be polite may be better liked than a speaker who wishes to insult. Therefore, valence of the illocutionary force of the ironic utterance may also be considered as a dimension in the ironic spectrum that deserves to be included in future analyses. The discourse context is another factor that may influence the attitude toward irony. Hancock (2004), for instance, showed that verbal irony occurs more often, and for different purposes, in genres of computer-mediated communication than in face-to-face communication. Katz and Lee (1993) showed that social knowledge and conventions, as well as social occupations, influence the perception of irony. These factors also deserve to be included into the ironic spectrum.

Although this study has demonstrated that comprehension plays a considerable part in the attitude toward irony, a question still remains which factors actually influence irony comprehension. For instance, ironic utterances might differ in complexity, due to the presence of irony markers (e.g., Attardo, 2000; Seto, 1998) that serve as a cue to the ironic interpretation. Kreuz and Roberts (1995) experimentally showed this for the irony markers of hyperbole and tone of voice. Ironic statements with a hyperbole or an ironic tone of voice were more easily perceived as ironic than ironic statements without such a marker. However, both Seto and Attardo identified a whole list of other irony markers that have not yet been experimentally investigated. Another factor that may influence the complexity of irony is the explicitness of an ironic evaluation (e.g., Bosco & Bucciarelli, 2008; Kohvakka, 1996). For example, in the library scenario, Pete could have overtly pointed at the “at” sign at Marion’s keyboard, and could have said, “You’re really the greatest expert in computers I know.” Although this utterance is less polite than the original utterance, the explicit ironic evaluation may have reduced the number of sheep considerably. In sum, ironic utterances come in all shapes and sizes, and these shapes and sizes may very well influence the processing, but also the pragmatic effects, of irony (Burgers, 2010).

There are several caveats to our findings. A paper-and-pencil experiment and a sample of students were used. Our participants estimated their own perception of complexity. Besides, it was possible to determine whether they had actually understood the irony. However, it was not possible to determine how much effort it had cost the respondent to come to their interpretation. An online technique, such as self-paced reading or eye tracking, could help to indicate whether

reading was really facilitated or inhibited. Exclusiveness of understanding was operationalized by asking the respondents to estimate the group of persons who would also understand the utterance. The relation between attitude and belonging to an inner circle of understanders was tested fairly implicitly. Respondents were not explicitly asked whether their appreciation of the utterance would increase if they knew that the group of co-understanders was rather small. In future research, this connection may be examined more explicitly.

This article has shown that the ironic spectrum involves at least eight positions that matter in view of the evaluation of the utterance, text, and speaker. These factors deserve to be included in the pragmatic study of irony as dependent variables (cf. Giora, Federman, Kehat, & Sabah, 2005; Lagerwerf, 2007). In discourse situations, it not only matters whether a respondent understands the utterance, but also what attitude this respondent has with regard to the utterance.

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