

## The borderline between irony and sarcasm

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### Abstract

It is the claim in this article that the definition of both irony and sarcasm involves a violation of one or more Gricean maxims, an allusion to a currently highly accessible thought, dissociation, irresponsibility, ridicule, and critique. The difference between irony and sarcasm is that the speaker who is being ironic addresses the utterance to a hearer whose thought is being alluded to or echoed, in order to inform him or her that the thought is untenable. Sarcasm is not uttered for information to the author of an untenable thought, but as scorn of the principal of the sarcasm to the bystanders. However, in the analysis of some (almost) authentic examples, it will be shown that real examples are much more complicated and can only be analysed with a sophisticated framework that includes the theory of presupposition failure.

### 1. An example

At the Danish general election on June 18, 2015, the centre-left Social-democrats won 47 seats, and among the right-wing parties, the Danish People's party (*Dansk Folkeparti*, DF, led by Kristian Thulesen Dahl) won 37 seats, *Venstre* (V) 34, *Liberal Alliance* (LA) 13, and the Conservatives (K) 6. The next day, 90 members (out of 179 total) pointed at the leader of *Venstre* as a “royal investigator”, whose job it is to investigate the possibilities of forming a government. In this situation Jens Rohde, a politician from V (who left the party 6 months later), wrote the following on Facebook:

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Sten Vikner, Henrik Jørgensen & Elly van Gelderen (eds.): *Let us have articles betwixt us – Papers in Historical and Comparative Linguistics in Honour of Johanna L. Wood*.  
Dept. of English, School of Communication & Culture, Aarhus University,  
pp. 421-438, © The author(s), 2016.

- (1) Jeg synes at V, K og LA skulle enes om at gøre Kristian til kongelig undersøger :-). Det kunne være spektakulært.  
*I think that V, K and LA should agree to make Kristian royal investigator. :-) It could be spectacular.*  
 [where "Kristian" refers to Kristian Thulesen Dahl, who is head of a party different from Jens Rohde's own party]

Some minutes later, Frede Jensen commented on Facebook:

- (2) Jeg har stemt på dig ved de seneste EU-valg - men det er slut nu. Jeg finder en anden og mere loyal venstremand til næste valg. Du er partiskadelig.  
*I voted for you at the latest EU-elections - but I will not do so again. I'll find another more loyal politician from your party at the next election. You are a danger to your own party.*

As reported at *DR tekst TV*, Jens Rohde replied in the following way:

- (3) ROHDE: FORSTÅR INGEN IRONI?  
 Det skal 'tydeligvis' forstås ironisk, når Venstres Eu-parlamentariker Jens Rohde foreslår, at Thulesen Dahl (DF) burde være kongelig undersøger i stedet for hans egen formand, Lars Løkke Rasmussen.  
 - Enhver kan da se, at det er for at udstille absurditeten i, at Folketingets største parti vil stå udenfor regering. Ironi kan forekomme, siger Jens Rohde.  
*ROHDE: DOESN'T ANYONE UNDERSTAND IRONY?*  
*It is 'obviously' to be understood ironically when EU-parliamentarian Jens Rohde suggests that Thulesen Dahl (DF) ought to be the royal investigator instead of his own political leader, Lars Løkke Rasmussen.*  
 - Anyone can surely see that this was said in order to underline the absurdity of the largest party in parliament not wanting to be part of the government. Irony may occur, says Jens Rohde.

Is (1) an example of irony as claimed by its author in (3)? Or is it an example of sarcasm? What are the criteria for determining whether something should be understood as irony, sarcasm or some other figure of speech? This is what this paper is about.

## 2. Dictionary definitions

The two notions of 'irony' and 'sarcasm' are sometimes used as synonyms, but they do not have exactly the same meaning. By *irony* I will only mean verbal irony, not romantic irony, tragic irony, cosmic irony or Socratic irony, notions that all have their specific meanings differentiated from, but related to, verbal irony. These distinctions will not be dealt with here.

The notions of 'irony' and 'sarcasm' are defined in the following way in three different dictionaries:

- (4) **Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary.** 1987, London: HarperCollins.

**Irony** is a form of humour, or an indirect way of conveying meaning, in which you say something in such a way that people realize that you are joking or that you really mean the opposite of what you say. E.G. *She said with slight irony. 'Bravo'.*

**Sarcasm** is speech or writing which actually means the opposite of what it seems to say and which is *usually* intended to mock or insult someone. E.G. *'Oh yeah,' said Jenny with broad sarcasm, 'I notice how you hate doing well in exams.'*

- (5) **Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English.** 1981. Harlow: Longman.

**irony** - a way of speaking which expresses by its manner the opposite of what the words say: *The irony in his words was unmistakable.*

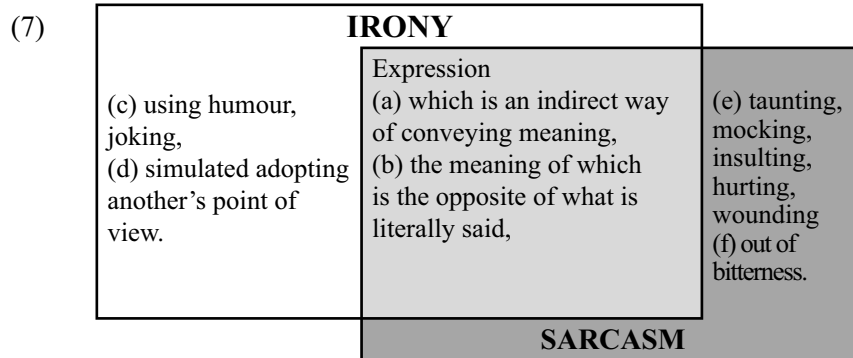
**sarcasm** - speaking or writing which tries to hurt someone's feelings, esp by expressions which clearly mean the opposite to what is felt. *'Thank you for bringing back my bicycle so quickly; you've only had it six months,' he said with heavy sarcasm.*

- (6) *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. 1982. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**irony** - Expression of one's meaning by language of opposite or different tendency, esp. simulated adoption of another's point of view or laudatory tone for purpose of ridicule ...

**sarcasm** - Bitter or wounding remark, taunt, esp. one ironically worded; language consisting of, faculty of uttering, use of, such remarks.

This means that two features of their definitions are common to both concepts: (a) the expression is an indirect way of conveying meaning, and (b) the communicated meaning is the opposite of what is literally said. Two features of each concept differentiate between irony and sarcasm, viz. the ironic speaker is (c) joking or using humour, and (d) simulating adoption of another's point of view; whereas the sarcastic speaker is (e) mocking, insulting, hurting or wounding someone, and (f) speaks out of bitterness.



These lexicon definitions allow us to distinguish the following two examples.

- (8) A teacher to a student who comes late to his class without apologising: "I hope you will excuse us for starting the class on time."
- (9) Thank you for bringing back my bicycle so quickly; you've only had it for six months.

(8) is here taken to be an example of irony because (a) it indirectly conveys something like (b) the message that the student should apologise for being late, (c) because it itself is an excuse, which is not serious, but joking, and (d) because it simulates adopting the student's point of view. (9) on the other hand is an example of sarcasm because (a) it indirectly conveys something like (b) the message that the addressee should have brought back the bicycle more quickly, and (e) it is telling him off (f) out of bitterness. But it is not clear what it is in the form of the utterance or in its context that differs in the two examples. In this paper, I will try to make a pragmatic description of the differences and to draw the line between irony and sarcasm more clearly.

### **3. The indirect communication**

The first problem to be investigated is how it is signalled that the message of an ironic or sarcastic utterance is conveyed indirectly. What is the indication of the indirectness of the message, as Birkelund & Nølke (2013), Nølke (2013) and Birkelund (2013) call it? If people just directly say the opposite of what they intend to communicate, nothing but misunderstanding will be the result. If you mean 'Turn left' and say: 'Turn right', you are not ironic, but stupid. But if in our discussion, I have maintained that we should turn right to get to the tower we want to visit, and when approaching it we realize that it is very obviously on the left-hand side of the road, you could say':

(10) OK, turn right!

That would be ironically or sarcastically uttered.

In (10), there are two indications that the message is conveyed indirectly, namely inappropriateness and simulation. The simulation is that your sentence is a sort of an repetition, a quotation, or an echo of what I have just said, and the inappropriateness in this case is the fact that it is not possible under the circumstances to make a right turn at all.

The simulation is best explained by Goffmann's (1981: 144) distinction between three functions of the role of the speaker, viz. the function as animator, as author and as principal (in the legalistic sense). Normally the same person has all three functions, but in (10), the speaker is only the animator of the utterance, not the author of it, and not at all responsible for the speech act. In (8), the teacher is both the animator and the author, but she is not the responsible principal because it is inappropriate in the situation to apologise. In (9), the speaker is the animator and also the author because he

is not quoting anyone, but he still does not take responsibility of the literal meaning of *quickly* and *only*. What they presuppose is in contradiction with *six months*, and consequently the speaker does not take responsibility for the communicative function of *Thank you*. So in irony and sarcasm, the speaker only simulates and does not take responsibility for the speech act which the sentence is a literal expression of. The inappropriateness separates the function of principal from the functions of animator and author. It is this simulation that Sperber & Wilson (1995:239-241) describe as the utterance ‘being an echo of a thought’.

The inappropriateness can be of many sorts. In (8), the inappropriateness is that the interrupted teacher is apologising to the interrupting student, and in (9), it is the contradiction between six months and the presuppositions of *so quickly* and *only*. In (10), it is the infelicity of the directive speech act that is inappropriate (because the requested right turn could not be carried out). In other examples, it is said to be the manner, the tone, the voice or style that is improper. On a screen, the humorous distance can be marked by a smiley or an emoticon as in (1) above. Notice that when something is inappropriate, it is not just unexpected, but also breaking the norms:

- (11) Da Umberto Eco i juni 2015 i en alder af 83 år blev udnævnt til æresdoktor i Lodz i Polen, blev han spurgt om temaet for hans næste bog. Han svarede, at det som regel tog ham seks-otte år at skrive en roman, ”så det får I at vide, hvis I da ellers lever til den tid.”

*When 83-year-old Umberto Eco in June of 2015 was appointed honorary doctor in Lodz, Poland, he was asked about the theme of his next book. He answered that it normally took six to eight years for him to write a novel, ”so you will learn, provided that you are still alive then”.*

Frederik Stjernfelt: ”Æresdoktoren og det videnskabelige testamente”  
*Weekendavisen* #24, June 12, 2015, *Bøger*, page 6.

In (11) *provided that you are alive at that time* is a modified echo of the thoughts of the audience, viz. that 83-year-old Umberto Eco would not be alive in eight years, and is for that reason a very humorous remark, but not irony (nor sarcasm), because there is no breach or violation of any norm. It is just unexpected.

What signals or indicates irony, is not a single feature of an utterance like linguistic form, context, situation, paralinguistic phenomena, common knowledge or genre or discourse type (Nølke 2013), but always a sort of inconsistency or clash between two features of the same utterance. It is the claim of this article that what makes an ironic utterance inconsistent or inappropriate can be pinned down to its being a breach or violation of one or more of the four Gricean maxims (Grice 1967:27):

- (12) **Maxim of Quality:** Try to make your contribution one that is true! Do not say what you believe to be false! Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence!

**Maxim of Quantity:** Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)! Do not make your contribution more informative than is required!

**Maxim of Relation:** Be Relevant!

**Maxim of Manner:** Be perspicuous! Avoid ambiguity of expression! Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)! Be orderly!

There is no breach of any maxim in (11); whereas (8) is a violation of the maxim of relevance, (9) of the maxim of quality, and (10) of the maxim of relevance.

#### **4. Utterance, presupposition and implicature**

In a pragmatic analysis of an utterance it is necessary to distinguish between (a) what is said (its explicature, the literal meaning of the linguistic form), (b) what is taken for granted although it is not explicitly stated, because it is presupposed by the form of the uttered sentence (its presuppositions), and (c) what is implicated in the situation by uttering the utterance (the text) in the situation (its implicature). What is communicated by implicature in irony and sarcasm is the negation of the relevant parts of what is presupposed. The distinctions are shown in (13):

- (13) Example (8) repeated from above:

A teacher to a student who comes late to his class without apologising: "I hope you will excuse us for starting the class on time."

- U** The **utterance** is: *I hope you will excuse us for starting the class on time.*
- E** The **explicature** is: 'The speaking teacher excuses that she and the other students have started the lesson as scheduled, not waiting for the latecomer'.
- P** Some of the **presuppositions** to which the linguistic form is an allusion, viz. those that are triggered by the word *excuse*, are: 'it is to be expected that a teacher waits until the latecomers have arrived' and 'it is wrong for a teacher to start on time'.
- I** The **implicature**, which is generated by the inappropriateness of the teacher's misplaced apology, dissociates her from the presupposition of the sentence, and communicates that the presupposed value judgement of the utterance is wrong: 'it is wrong that it is wrong for the teacher to start on time', and hence 'students and teachers should be in class on time'.

The intended message of an ironic utterance is not just the opposite of the propositional content of it, i.e. the negation of the sentence uttered, eg. 'I don't hope that you excuse us for starting the lesson on time', or 'I hope that you don't excuse us for starting the lesson on time'. The intended message generated by the irony is a negation of the presupposed value judgement of the alluded utterance, eg: negation of 'it is wrong for a teacher to start on time'. The ironic point is not descriptive, but evaluative and normative. Irony is thus defined in the following way:

- (14) Verbal irony is an utterance by which someone says something, which
- a. because of a breach of one or more the Gricean maxims
  - b. is marked as an allusion to a currently highly accessible thought,
  - c. which the speaker dissociates herself from
  - d. and which she in this way, without responsibility, ridicules and criticises



If the thought is attributed to the listener, it is standard irony (or sarcasm); if it is attributed to the speaker herself (or rather to her previous self), it is self-irony. Allusion is a figure of speech, in which one refers covertly or indirectly to an object or circumstance known from an external context. It is left to the audience to make the connection. It is what Sperber & Wilson (1995) call an echo. The difference between irony and sarcasm is the following: If the echoed and modified thought is only attributed to the listener as animator or perhaps author, but not as a principal, it is irony; if it is attributed to the listener as a responsible principal of the thought, the utterance is sarcastic. Irony goes for the ball, sarcasm for the (responsible) player. The addressee of an ironic utterance is the author of the thought alluded to, but the addressee of a sarcastic utterance is primarily bystanders and only secondarily the speaker of the thought echoed, the person who is the target of the mocking.

- (15) The speaker who is being **ironic** addresses the utterance to a hearer whose thought is being alluded to or echoed, in order to inform him or her that the thought is untenable. **Sarcasm** is not uttered for information to the author of an untenable thought, but as scorn of the principal of the sarcasm to the bystanders.

### 5. Theory of presupposition failure

The difference between irony and sarcasm is proposed to be a difference between (a) informing the author of the alluded thought that it is untenable, and (b) scorning the responsible principal of such an untenable thought in front of some bystanders. But how can we define the difference between informing and scorning linguistically? I propose that the theory of presupposition failure, proposed by Peter Harder and Christian Kock (1976) will yield the necessary tools.

They introduce a notation of the mutual assumptions of the speaker and hearer in an communicative event involving presuppositions.  $S^+$  is a notation of the situation in which the presupposition in question belongs to the background assumptions of the speaker,  $+H$  that it belongs to the background assumptions of the hearer;  $S^-$  and  $-H$  designates that the presupposition does not belong to the background assumptions of speaker and hearer respectively.  $SH^\pm$  indicates the speaker's assumption as to whether the presupposition belongs to the background of the hearer,  $\pm HS$  the hearers assumption as to whether the presupposition belongs to the background of the speaker. And so on.

By this notation several speech phenomena can be defined: sincerity, mistakes, one up-ness, communicative balance, solidarity, rhetorical behaviour, bullying, deception, suspicion and achieved communication, and the standard situation involving achieved communication. What the speaker by her choice of form presupposes belongs in the standard situation to the background assumptions of both the speaker and the listener, and they both know that without any mistakes. It will have a notation as in (16) (Harder & Kock 1976, with changes in notation similar to the ones made in Togeby 1993:664):

- |      |        |        |                    |
|------|--------|--------|--------------------|
| (16) | S +    | + H    | level 1            |
|      | SH +   | + HS   | level 2            |
|      | SHS +  | + HSH  | level 3            |
|      | SHSH + | + HSHS | level 4            |
|      |        |        | standard situation |

In the case of namedropping the situation is different. If I say:

- (17) I got the idea that irony is an example of presupposition failure from Peter and Christian.

I have presupposed that my relationship with Peter Harder and Christian Kock is so intimate that I can call them by their first names, and this is true because we were fellow students (notation S+). But in fact it will not be appropriate for many of my readers (-H). Here I commit a PRESUPPOSITION FAILURE because I presuppose something that is not part of your background assumptions. I know that you are not that intimate with them (SH-), which means that I show NON-SOLIDARITY with you; I only made this formulation to IMPRESS you, which is an example of NAMEDROPPING. You might of course know Peter, Christian and I once were fellow students (+HS), but if you don't (-HS), you will think that I am bluffing, and in that you make a mistake and then you are ONE-DOWN. I assume you don't know that it is a mistake (SHS-), and that is what you assume about me (-HSHS). You know that I don't believe that you could address them with their first name (-HSH), and I know that (SHSH-). This situation can be described as (18):

- (18)        S +   -H  
               SH -   -HS  
               SHS -   -HSH  
               SHSH -   -HSHS  
               intentional, aborted, sincere namedropping

Many of Harder & Kock's presuppositions failures are illustrated in (19):

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>(19)</p> <p>S -    H</p> <p>SH    HS</p> <p>SHS +   HSH</p> <p>SHSH    HSHS</p> <p>deception: different<br/>       S-marks on level 1 &amp;<br/>       3 or on level 2 &amp; 4</p> | <p>S -    H</p> <p>SH    + HS</p> <p>SHS +   HSH</p> <p>SHSH    + HSHS</p> <p>achieved deception: H<br/>       mistaken as expected by S</p> |
|---|--|

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>S -   - H</p> <p>SH -   - HS</p> <p>SHS +   - HSH</p> <p>SHSH +   + HSHS</p> <p>abortive deception:<br/>       S is mistaken; H<br/>       suspicious</p> | <p>S    - H</p> <p>SH    HS</p> <p>SHS    + HSH</p> <p>SHSH    HSHS</p> <p>suspicion: different<br/>       H-marks on level 1 &amp; 3 or<br/>       on level 2 &amp; 4</p> |
|--|--|

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>S -    H</p> <p>SH    HS</p> <p>SHS    HSH</p> <p>SHSH    HSHS</p> <p>S is insincere</p> | <p>S +   - H</p> <p>SH -   + HS</p> <p>SHS +   - HSH</p> <p>SHSH -   + HSHS</p> <p>bullying</p> |
|---|---|

<p>S - H SH + HS</p> <p>S is one up, H is mistaken</p>	<p>S + H SH - HS</p> <p>S is one up, H is mistaken</p>
<p>S + H SH - HS</p> <p>S is mistaken, H is one up</p>	<p>S H SH + HS SHS - HSH</p> <p>S is mistaken, H is one up</p>
<p>S + SH -</p> <p>ordinary humouring non-solidarity of S</p>	<p>S - SH +</p> <p>ordinary humouring non-solidarity of S</p>
<p>balance = no mistakes</p>	<p>S - - H SH - - HS SHS - - HSH SHSH - - HSHS</p> <p>play, cynicism, make believe</p>
<p>S - H SH HS SHS - HSH SHSH HSHS</p> <p>rhetorical behaviour</p>	<p>S - H SH - HS SHS - HSH SHSH - HSHS</p> <p>achieved irony</p>

S – H	S – + H
SH – HS	SH + – HS
SHS – HSH	SHS – + HSH
SHSH + HSHS	SHSH + – HSHS
aborted irony, taken as deception	making fun of

By means of this framework, it is possible to give precise definitions of irony and sarcasm. They share, if achieved, the features: insincerity (S-), intentionality (SHS-), solidarity (no H-mistakes), no deception (-HS & -HSHS). The difference is that the ironic speaker does not take the hearer to be responsible for the presupposed value judgement that she dissociates herself from, but takes him to be only animator or perhaps author (-H & SH-). This holds for example (8) *I hope you will excuse us for starting the class on time.* In cases of sarcasm, on the other hand, the hearer is insulted exactly because he believes in the thought which is being ridiculed (+H) deliberately by S (SH+ & SHS-). These features holds for example (9) *Thank you for bringing back my bicycle so quickly; you've only had it for six months.*

(20)

S – H
SH – HS
SHS – HSH
SHSH – HSHS
achieved irony or sarcasm

S – – H	S – + H
SH – – HS	SH + – HS
SHS – – HSH	SHS – + HSH
SHSH – – HSHS	SHSH + – HSHS
irony = play	sarcasm = making fun of

### 6. Analysis of (almost) authentic examples

The examples (8)-(10) were constructed in so far as their situational context was invented in order to fit the category. In this section some authentic examples will be analysed in the proposed framework.

The first example is a strip from the Doonesbury cartoon, Trudeau (2013:194) The examples are found in the remarks of the characters in the story in which the situation is already described, i.e. in the earlier strips. The relation between the cartoonist, Garry B. Trudeau, and us, the readers, will not be analysed here. The remark that is analysed is the question *All three?*

(21)



The situation told in earlier strips is the following: The husband Rick is an unemployed journalist, and his wife Joanie is a journalist too, but she has just been hired as member of the campaign staff of a female politician,

who is the one who speaking on TV in the first two pictures. Alex is their grandchild who has helped her grandmother and who is probably making a congratulation call in the last picture.

Rick's utterance *All three* is an allusion to Joanie's remark *I wrote those three words*. It is a violation of both the maxims of quantity and quality, to presuppose that he doubts that she has written so many, and to presuppose that it is a lot for a journalist to have written and had published as much as three words. By this inappropriateness, he dissociates himself from the value judgement that three words are many, and without responsibility, he ridicules and criticises her proudness of having written the words. Perhaps he is at bit envious too.

The relevant presupposition is that it is a great effort for a journalist to have written three words. And it is this value judgement that he dissociates himself from by asking the impudent question. He does not have the presupposition as his background assumptions (S-), and he does not think that she has it either (SH-), as she in fact has (+H). He is mistaken. And so is she, because she does not realize that he is insincere (+HS). He attempts to be ironic, and acts accordingly, but she is totally naïve and happy. So his remark is intended as irony or sarcasm, but it is not achieved because of her naivety. It is also relevant that there isn't any audience or bystanders in front of whom he could make sarcastic fun of her. In a way, aborted irony is not irony at all, because irony is defined as a perlocutionary act of sharing mind sets and value judgements. Only if it is achieved is it irony according to the definition.

(22) The presupposition: 'three words are many for a journalist':

S – + H	S is insincere, rhetorical
SH – + HS	both S and H are mistaken
SHS – + HSH	both S and H are mistaken
SHSH – + HSHS	both S and H are mistaken
	intentional, aborted, irony

And now we are in a position to see how this definition of irony can account for example (1), which is a real authentic example which furthermore has even been called irony by its own speaker.

- (1) Jeg synes at V, K og LA skulle enes om at gøre Kristian til kongelig undersøger :-). Det kunne være spektakulært.  
*I think that V, K and LA should agree to make Kristian royal investigator. :-) It could be spectacular.*

The story behind (1) is that all four right-wing parties (V, K, LA and DF) pointed to the leader of *Venstre*, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, as the royal investigator. In other words, even though DF won three seats more than V in the parliament, the leader of DF insisted that Lars Løkke Rasmussen, the leader of a smaller party, should be appointed as royal investigator. Because of the fact that DF is not mentioned in (1), it is presupposed that the (right-wing) party with the most seats should lead the negotiations. This is what Jens Rohde has as his background assumptions (S+), and he thinks that all his readers will agree (SH+).

His statement is modified in two ways: There is a smiley, :-), which signals joking, and the statement is marked as subjunctive by being in the past tense although it deals with future events. He did not write:

- (23) Jeg synes at V, K og LA skal enes om at gøre Kristian til kongelig undersøger. Det vil blive spektakulært.  
*I think that V, K and LA shall agree to make Kristian royal investigator. It will be spectacular.*

The past tense is normally understood as signalling a hypothesis or counterfactuality, i.e. that the situation described is not real but only imagined, and so the unreality is a presupposition of the remark too. And also this presupposition is put forward by Rhode as in the standard situation: (S+, SH+, SHS+, SHSH+)

What happens on Facebook is that Frede Jensen misunderstands (1) as (23), and consequently thinks that Rohde really wants Kristian Thulesen-Dahl to be prime minister, and regards Rohde as a traitor (-H, +HS, -HSH, +HSHS). In this schema, Frede Jensen makes one mistake (SH+ & -HSH), and Rohde gets into trouble because he makes two mistakes: (-H & SH+ and -HSH & SHSH+). He escapes by claiming that it was irony, and that he didn't mean what Frede Jensen thought he meant.

But it was not irony. It was put forward as a hypothesis saying: 'If we did such and such, it would be spectacular and show the hypocrisy of DF, but we won't do it.' It was a counterfactive hypothesis. It is interesting



that Rohde afterwards expounds it as irony with a very imprecise reference: *Ironi kan forekomme* 'Irony may occur'. He did not outright say *It was irony*. I think that he knows that it was not ironic (S-), but that it will make him escape from the incriminating remark because the readers will believe that it was (+H & SH+).

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